

"Sometimes I Live in the Country, Sometimes I Live in Town":

Discourses of Authenticity, Cultural Capital, and the Rural/Urban Dichotomy in
Alternative Country Music.

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ABSTRACT

Alternative country (or alt.country) offers to its listeners a complex juxtaposition of punk and country aesthetics and sentiments, rendering music that is considered to be a heartfelt, rustic, and authentic alternative to mainstream popular music. This suggests an expansive genre style, with ever-shifting musical parameters, as well as potential for negotiation regarding the genre's seminal artists. Thus, alt.country is primarily understood and organised in relation to the lofty concept of authenticity, usually prior to musical or lyrical considerations. The genre therefore offers an illuminating approach to considering the socially constructed and negotiated demarcations of genre. Although genre is often perceived to be unmovable and absolute, every announcement of a genre and its associated performance works to change the fabric of the genre itself. Despite this, genre facilitates common expectations between audience members, offering a shortcut to understanding particular musical events and their relation to one another. The appearance of authenticity is a cornerstone of the alt.country genre. Genuine characteristics, lived experience, and emotion are highly valued within the alt.country subculture. Authenticity too is dependent on changing social conceptions of the term and what it actually means to be 'authentic'. Attempts by *No Depression*, the genre's coalescing magazine, to guide the audience's perceptions of authenticity are frequent, but not always successful, supporting the assertion that individuals have their own socially-informed and nuanced understanding of the concept.

Notions of authenticity contribute to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Alt.country possesses its own world view, characteristics and knowledge which are valuable and exchangeable within this setting. There too exists a visible hierarchy. Within the genre, a knowledge of a wide array of music (country or otherwise), dressing in the right clothes and generally appearing unkempt, unpolished and unprofessional all results in high amounts of cultural

capital. Musicians and the audience alike must play into and contribute to these values to be given the right to be part of this community. Traditionally within popular music, the critic has acted as an intermediary, between the music and the listener, communicating the specificities of cultural capital and the music's value (or otherwise). Their vast and superior musical knowledge (capital) places them in this respected position. *No Depression's* critics though must put this traditional dynamic aside, instead adopting a self-effacing, unprofessional tone, thus contributing to the genre's characteristics to subsequently retain respect and continue to have authority within this subculture.

Alt.country functions as a self-knowing community. The music maintains a preoccupation with both American ruralities, and the vices and people that bind them to everyday urban life. Rural geographies and the glorious escape to the country is portrayed as an absolute point of freedom, offering what they currently lack. This ignores the often harsh realities of rural sustenance. The appeal of this music to the audience is similarly located. Physical escape to the country is not practical (and often not wanted), so these desires are played out as a fantasy within alt.country and its lyrical tropes. It offers emotional resonance for its audience, making the genre highly affective, despite both the audience's and musicians' urban realities. These contradictions suggest the underlying complexities of making ironic yet emotionally connected music in the postmodern age. It is acknowledged that authenticity is produced and constructed, yet alt.country can still provide a sense of comfort, solace, and escape.

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INTRODUCTION

Alternative country (often shortened and stylised to alt.country) offers a genre defined less by stylistic and musical characteristics than by its authenticity, or what can be thought of as that lofty, laboured, and genuine feeling attached to music of this genre. In defining alt.country most scholars tend to celebrate the genre's hybrid or fluid nature (Smithers 177), as well as its sometimes-paradoxical aspects, such as the tension between commerce and authenticity (Fox and Ching 1-27). Many of alt. country's gatekeepers have celebrated the genre's sonically diverse nature. As Alden and Blackstock write, *No Depression* and the magazine's catchall tagline, "A magazine about alt.country, (whatever that is)" has served to be the best explanation of the genre, as it encompasses what the genre is or might yet become (vii). This shows the difficulty for scholars in defining a genre that is constantly in a state of flux and redefinition. Discussions of alt.country and authenticity's central role in its definition are situated within the wider field of genre. Although Richard Peterson argues that alt.country is at least partially defined by its audience (55, and Beal: 244), it relies on this concept to organise the music. While all genre boundaries are fundamentally fragmentary, overlapping, and in an ongoing state of renewal and consolidation, relying on authenticity as a pillar in the genre's definition further complicates this process. Authenticity itself is vague, owing to its changing personal and societal definitions. Here, it accounts for the grit, toughness, and lived emotional experience, which renders the music more meaningful. Given the musical disparities exhibited by artists equally indicative of the alt.country genre, the expression of authenticity and a sense of genuineness exhibited by the artists is a prerequisite of the genre and currently defines alt.country.

Thus, like all genres, alt.country is dependent on social definitions and understandings to make it intelligible. As will be shown, genre is nothing if not a socially negotiated process. Genre emphasises the idea of rules and theories of categorisation, which works to place music within a system of organisation

according to its sonic characteristics. It also denotes certain expectations to its audience. Fabian Holt's work makes notions of structure and control explicit (12). Similarly, Franco Fabbri defines it as a "set of socially accepted rules that a given community has agreed on" (1). In Fabbri's definition, issues of gatekeepers and power are present. Although genre is hegemonic and complex, discussions of these aspects of the concept are rare in academia, with issues of social and cultural identity currently at the fore in relation to genre (Lena and Peterson 698). Regardless, the genre of alt.country is defined, understood, and organised by individual conceptions of authenticity, influenced by social understandings. Authenticity and genre represent an unusual symbiotic relationship. Both concepts are subject to the individual defining particular cultural products in relation to others, or through negation. Authenticity or feeling distinguishes some genres from others. An artificial feeling is widely accepted by pop or electronica in a way that it wouldn't be for folk music.

Evidently, the ability to distinguish genres from others requires knowledge as well as sufficient lived personal and sensory experience, thus it is also relational. These value-based judgments evoke the importance of distinctions, what can also be thought of as the capacity to differentiate between cultural objects. Thus, it is a relational process, which is deeply indebted to socially constructed and repeated conventions of genre categories. Within cultural fields, discussion on the process of distinction strongly alludes to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. His concept of cultural capital (or the knowledge that is thought of as valuable and exchangeable within a field) assists in the process of determining genres, with the mobilisation of both distinction and cultural capital acting as tools of relational definition. Cultural capital works to show what is valued within the field (thus, working to define it somewhat), with those possessing the required cultural capital offered the opportunity to succeed within the field. These figures usually represent the key figures or gatekeepers of the field (DJs, musicians and journalists, for example) and are given considerable power to display this knowledge and influence the norms and values of a field.

Within alt.country, these figures arguably possess a more profound importance in settling the ever-negotiated set of genre boundaries, which again are in a process of constant renewal or redefinition.

Historically, journalists have been considered an important node in this determinacy, as they were on the forefront of industry news and events and through this could work to direct taste, ensuring popularity (or otherwise). The fragmentary landscape of both popular music and the popular music press today (due to the rise in niche cultures and the internet as an important source of information on popular music) makes this insistence and maintenance of the illusion of authority increasingly difficult. The extent to which this can still be seen today will be discussed with reference to those occupying powerful and influential positions in alt.country. *No Depression* represents the genre's seminal magazine and as such should contain the potential to exert considerable power on the patterns of taste of the magazine's readers. However, quantitative analysis (itself a powerful and underutilised tool in the study and analysis of popular music) strongly suggests that this is not always the case, as readers often have individual perceptions of the genre and its canonical artists that are verified through personal and social experience and other communal forms of dialogue.

No Depression magazine demonstrates both the influence of journalists on the genre as well as revealing its core aesthetic and ideological values. Conducting discursive and quantitative analyses of the magazine will demonstrate how issues of authenticity present within the genre interact with individual and communal conceptions of cultural capital. Both the musicians and audience require a large amount of cultural capital and knowledge (both personal and musical) to produce or determine authenticity in relation to this genre. Through this, the performance of genre is also evident. Alt.country, as represented by *No Depression*, lacks a highly defined set of instruments or a distinct way of playing them, with value in the magazine and the genre instead being placed on the music as a vehicle for creative and emotive expression. This is also reflected at a

compositional level in the choice of photos and illustrations used. This echoes Renee Dechert's analysis of alt.country album covers, which she says generally lack a professional compositional quality and are frequently out of focus, and lack balance, but this again speaks to the sense of amateurism that is valued by the genre. Here, the musicians are arguably adhering to the expected performance of the genre in a general sense, but the precise nature of this performance will always rework the genre on some level, working with or in opposition to the accepted rules that this community has agreed upon. This works to denaturalise the discourse that is common when speaking about genres being bound to specific aesthetic formulas.

While the landscape of its integral artists may be (and is) endlessly debated, the purpose and affect of the music remains largely agreed upon. Moving on from our understanding of authenticity, the genre goes one step further, offering individuals a mode of understanding their own position in postmodern life and thus represents a self-aware, postmodern authenticity. Alt.country, through its dark, negative, and longing lyrical tropes and love of vintage instruments and recording equipment appears to represent a search for and return to the mythical rural home, which will offer salvation and benediction. However, the unrealities of this have also begun to be acknowledged within the genre, itself a product of the postmodern predicament. Leading on from the aestheticisation of postmodernism society, international audiences usually have little to no actual experience with the rural tropes and the physical situations or locations addressed in alt.country music, regardless of this they respond nostalgically (and thus appropriately).

The first chapter of this thesis will complicate the notion of the concept of genre, considering it not as arbitrary category in which music, films, books, and other cultural products are simply "added to", but as a negotiated, dynamic process in which the inclusion of cultural products fundamentally transforms the genre space. Genres as a relational experience rather than a stable category will

then be discussed in relation to the work of John Frow and Franco Fabbri. The genre of alt.country will be introduced here, primarily as a case study of these issues, providing basic but important building blocks to the following discussion. Realising that authenticity is a fundamental determinant of alt.country, the second chapter will discuss authenticity both as a ‘feeling’ and as a scholarly concept. In the third chapter, the focus moves from what is authentic to *who* is authentic, with an outline of the history of the critic and an analysis of *No Depression* providing a platform to consider Bourdieu’s often referenced concepts of cultural capital and distinction. Through this, the more specific values of alt.country will then be determined. Finally, alt.country’s place within the postmodern age and mindset will be located, suggesting how the genre might function for an audience, who, though they recognise the inherent constructedness of authenticity and alt.country’s affect, continue to find comfort and solace in the community and the music.

CHAPTER ONE: CONCEPTIONS OF (THE) GENRE

GENRE

Firstly this study requires a workable definition of the concept of genre in order to situate the disparate musical events collectively known “alt.country” and how they can be considered as a genre. This will serve a dual function, demonstrating this thesis’ musical scope, as well as highlighting the ways in which the genre and its associated ideas are formalised by writers and understood in culture more generally. The function of genre is to organise expectations and delineate boundaries. Genre emphasises the idea of rules and theories of categorisation, which work to place music within a system of organisation according to its sonic characteristics. This system then connotes certain expectations to its audience. Franco Fabbri, an Italian musicologist, states that a musical genre is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” (A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 1). Fabbri determines a set of five non-hierarchical, overlapping criteria which can be applied to any musical event/s to determine if they are a genre. The first criterion is formal and technical rules, which Fabbri says accounts for both compositional rules and the way in which the genre offers a particular outlook which manifests in the music (A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 3). The second criterion is semiotic rules, or as Fabbri writes, the “relation between the expression of a musical event and its content” (A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 4). Related to this, are the behavioural rules. Wearing the same clothes and talking in a similar way to the audience is valued here (4). Next are the social and ideological rules. In alt.country, this manifests itself in required musical knowledge, such as the traditional country narrative and being able to evaluate a performer’s authenticity (or otherwise). Lastly, are the economic rules, accounting for the relationship between the music and the economy that creates and sustains it. Fabbri says that this is often subject to ideological concealment (A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 5). As we will see later, is the

case with alt.country. The nuances of Fabbri's criteria will be demonstrated implicitly in my work. Using alt.country as a case study, his framework will show how musical and ideological rules are established and formalised by musical events to establish a new genre, whose aesthetics are agreed upon by the community surrounding it.

Fabian Holt has also written on genre, although in a slightly later time period. Rather than establishing a set of wide, universal rules that a new set of musical events can be put through to determine if it is a genre, in *Genre in Popular Music* Holt stresses the need to assess determine genres on a case by case basis. As such, his work comprises of case studies of particular American genres, such as country music and jazz. Fabbri has criticised this approach, as Holt's work appears to be offering a history of popular music in America, rather than a critical commentary on the concept ('Genre in Popular Music- Review' 490-2). It also does little to progress the theory surrounding genre. There is also not sufficient reference to Fabbri's work on genre, which is considered influential on the field. Fabbri has criticised it for not offering a broad enough framework, instead suggesting that work on genre should offer an overarching scheme to understanding genre. This is an obvious allusion to his own work, which offers this, but is sparingly used in Holt's work. While Fabbri is more useful theoretically, Holt's use of case studies does remain relevant to my own work.

While there exists an obvious tension between the two authors, there are a few points of contact, pertaining to the sociality of genres and the role of discourse in 'making' genres. Discourse is productive, especially in relation to genres. Naming a genre and then collecting artists that are representative of that genre, is productive. Holt says, "Discourse plays a major role in genre making. A genre category can only be established if the music has a name. Naming a music is a way of recognising its existence and distinguishing it from others. It makes music comprehensible and contributes to an artists' meaning" (3). There is agreement on this from wider literature on the topic (Negus, Borthwick and

Moy, for example), thus it is not surprising that it is also a view that these two authors share. Additionally, Holt describes music as “deeply social” (2), with his study of music scenes and communities emphasising this. His case studies work to reveal then the sociality of music and the importance of collective feeling in determining and understanding genre, which acts a nice counterpoint to Fabbri’s theoretical base. Many others also emphasise the social life of genre. Lena and Peterson, for example stress that a genre will change precisely because of its relationship to a community. John Frow too, looking at the way in which particular cultural knowledges work to inflect the experience of genre, says it is a subjective process. “Genre takes place at the interplay of readings and of the social force they carry.” He adds that this reading, while individual, takes place on a collective level and in relation to other demographic factors (139). In contrast to the unmovable demarcations that the idea of ‘genre’ traditionally evokes, genres are fluid and changeable. As Lena and Peterson write ‘boundary work is ongoing’ (698). This appears to be a product of genre’s subjective nature however many writers fail to overtly account for this link.

Genres are also relational. Speaking to Frow’s point about cultural and communal knowledge, genres are conceived, defined, and understood through their relationship to or aesthetic and ideological difference from other genres. Fabian Holt argues that, “A piece of music is created and heard in the context of others”, adding that musical genres are necessarily exclusionary (3). Fabbri agrees stating, “A new genre is not born in an empty space but in a musical system that is already structured” (‘A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications’ 6), relying on the history of genres to give this new musical event meaning. While he is discussing the new genre’s place within the larger system of popular music on a mainly stylistic level, it can also easily be applied to an individuals’ understanding of popular music. A new genre will be defined and discussed through its relation to other genres or preceding musical events and what is already known. Think, for example of discourse that is common when discussing new music, “it sounds like this” or “it reminds me of that” are usual ways in

which the unfamiliar is understood and talked about. Thus, elements of cultural capital are also crucial to these discussions. Frow suggests that it is integral to being part of that community “Part of what it means to be a member of the culture is knowing the difference and knowing how to talk about the difference” (51). This is in line with Frith’s assertion that music criticism is primarily about knowing and knowledge. “Music criticism itself is about creating a ‘knowing community’ and creating a superiority” (*Performing Rites* 67). Thus talking about music is powerful. “Discourse plays a major role in genre making . . . Naming a music is a way of recognising its existence and distinguishing it from others. It makes music comprehensible and contributes to an artists’ meaning” (Holt 3). Largely, Holt and Fabbri’s respective work act as a nice counterpoint to one another, making them useful to this thesis. Holt emphasises the contextual element of any genre and its relationship with other genres in more explicit (and accessible) terms than Fabbri. As will be evident, alt.country is nothing if not relational. The emotional resonance, irony, and above all, power comes from its evocation and relation to other music and historical contexts, thus Fabbri’s framework will take prominence in my work.

Complicating this further is John Frow’s assertion that genre itself is pronounced and performed, rather than independently exhibiting the qualities of a particular form. This has an enunciative function, working as an integral way in which difference and a genre’s demarcations are sustained. Thus, when the boundaries of a particular genre are initially agreed upon, subsequent performances will either reaffirm the genre’s arbitrary boundaries or adjust them slightly. Following Frow’s argument, these relational differences identified by the audience and industry are sustained primarily and importantly by the cultural producers themselves, through the performative and enunciative qualities of genre. He says, “Texts are performances of genre rather than reproductions of a class to which they belong...” (3), also suggesting that genres are reflexive, “texts are thought to use or to perform the genres by which they are shaped” (25). This is an important consideration when discussing musical genres. It may seem

relatively banal but signalling that you are of a genre and whatever performance this carries with it, will inevitably shift and morph that particular genre to varying degrees. It also shifts the audience's understanding of that genre, either reaffirming what they thought about this particular form, or tweaking it through an unexpected performance. Even when it may look (and sounds) like a reproduction of genre, it is a performance of it (albeit one which is strongly in line with expectations), which has been repeated and accepted time and time again. This invocation of performance of genres or the performed aspect of particular identities obviously alludes to the concept of performativity, especially in Judith Butler's sense, which has limited usefulness for this wider piece of work, but here I specifically intend it to mean that the performance of a particular musical genre extends the idea of what that genre is, in an endlessly aggregated and negotiated process.

ALT.COUNTRY

These rules and criteria highlighted by Fabbri will be evident in the following discussion of alt.country, demonstrating it follows some rules very closely, but is more ambiguous on others. The equivocal nature of alt.country specifically is evident first and foremost in regards to definitions of the genre. While alt.country appears to be in a constant state of flux and redefinition, scholars often define it as an obvious mixing of the disparate styles of alternative or punk and country (Peterson and Beal 234). However, specific ways in which these styles are mixed or combined are absent from these definitions, leaving the genre aesthetically ambiguous. Richard Peterson and Bruce Beal's assertion that, "Acceptance among alt.country fans involves a commitment to reviving and melding earlier forms of music that are defined as spontaneous and homemade" (238) also maintains the genre's vagueness.

This ambiguity is perhaps central to the genre's appeal. As Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock write of *No Depression* and the magazine's catchall tagline,

“A magazine about alt. country, (whatever that is)” has served to be the best explanation of the genre, as it encompasses what the genre is or might yet become” (vii). Gillian Turnbull states that some alt.country fans see it as, “country music that doesn’t get played on the radio” (124). This definition though is not sufficient; it ignores alt.country’s success on indie-oriented stations and American college radio. It also neglects the wider de-emphasis of radio in the current mediascape (blogs and magazines ‘make’ taste in a much more telling way in these kind of peripherally-located scenes than the radio does). But Turnbull’s quote does highlight an important facet of the genre. Alt.country tends to value its imagined perpetually unpopular state, struggling for legitimacy in the mainstream, which is possibly reflective of the country tradition the genre draws on. Thus its absence on mainstream radio is both a comfortable and expected occurrence. This rhetoric is echoed by other genres. Hibbett says, “The musical category of “indie rock” is not just as an aesthetic genre but also a method of social differentiation as well as a marketing tool” (55). Drawing on Bourdieu, he then adds that it relies on both its lack of popularity and specialised knowledge to be fully appreciated (55). Despite the reality of economic success and popularity, the imagining as a ‘musical underdog’ persists.

Imagining it as ever unpopular also gives the genre a clear ideological outlook or disposition, but leaves aesthetics of the genre vague. It is understandably value-based. Some even celebrate this fluidity or lack of aesthetic boundaries as being integral to the genre (Smithers 177, Simkin 192). Others suggest that paradoxical aspects, such as the tension between commerce and authenticity, add to the genre’s appeal (Fox and Ching 1-27). These definitions suggest that there is agreement surrounding the sonic disparities of alt.country and the way in which this actually works to help define the genre. As the above conceptions (and Fabbri and Holt’s work) suggest, genres are largely understood by their stylistic similarities or differences to other genres. Alt.country is an example of this, as it is primarily understood through its relationship to punk and country. Fabbri suggests that many of the rules that define a new genre are

already found elsewhere (‘A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications’ 6). This chapter attests to this, situating alt.country’s place within the musical system, concentrating on borrowing and reappropriation of rules from other genres.

Music is situated in relation to other recognisable musical frameworks. As has already been suggested, alt.country is generally understood as a combination, melding or juxtaposition of two main musical styles; punk and country, especially when seen solely through the lens of the music press. Emphasising these aspects, David Goodman offers a concise definition: “the “No Depression” sound is an alternation between or a juxtaposition of grinding punk, country rock and acoustic rock: a focus on the darker side of small town life: and a heightened social/political consciousness” (qtd. in Peterson and Beal 235). Use of a highly specified set of instruments is also important to determining an artist’s place in the genre (Cohen 28-9). Don Cusic, who has written extensively on early country music and country musicians, speaking in the documentary *Lost Highway: The Story of Country Music*, describes it as mixed heritage of punk and country, but also emphasises the emotional capacity of the genre. Stating it is “as much about the outsider attitude as it is about the style of music” that worked to incorporate younger musicians’ experiences, making the genre contemporary and pertinent. Given his knowledge in this area of popular music, he is well placed to comment on current country music trends and alt.country. As these views highlight, defining a new genre simply in relation to its musical influences and other music events is problematic, as genres will always allude to one another. However it does begin to create a sustainable framework which can be built upon and understood.

Alt.country is also a good demonstration of a relationally defined genre. The name, alt.country is signalling its proximity to the genres of alternative, punk, and country, while also representing itself as a distinctly separate event, owing in a large part to the stylised version of the name. But as mentioned

before, knowledge of all these other genres is required to contribute to alt.country. In this sense, it borrows meaning from these genres and reworks it into its own event. All genres do this, to an extent, but it is more pronounced within alt.country, owing to its aesthetics.

...Because these vocal particularities draw on past traditions and performers, alt-country, and many roots musics, are by definition intertextual genres. The layering of multiple influences, ideas, and references often limits “originality” in alt-country and helps to reveal its somewhat chaotic and multifaceted nature (Turnbull 129).

This speaks to Frow’s assertion that genres are both intertextual and relational. Negation is also important here, as distance or proximity can also be signalled by qualities the music does *not* demonstrate. Alt.country separates itself from traditional country, largely by qualities it doesn’t represent or aspects that are represented very differently, such as lyrical preoccupations, instrumental differences or changes in musical form. This also insists on alt.country’s higher form of authenticity over and above traditional Nashville country, for example, which is integral to defining the genre. What is the primary consideration here is the highly specified degree of cultural capital required to render all these factors meaningful, as alt.country relies on the history of popular music more than most genres, owing in a large part to its emphasis on tradition. Thus experiencing country and punk music separately gives would-be listeners expectations of the new genre, which, Fabbri sees as the function of genre; making it understandable within an already defined musical space.

As definitions of alt.country suggest, an inventory of musical characteristics only does some of the work in adequately encapsulating the genre. The genre remains aesthetically vague, relying on emotional connectivity and affect. When discussing the genre in 1997, Peterson and Beal emphasised the ambiguity of the term throughout their paper, but largely attributed this to the fact that it was a ‘new’ genre. However Turnbull recently (2010) expresses similar sentiments, suggesting that this ambiguity has continued and is actually

now more pronounced. Alt.country has become an increasingly broad label, “often being used to account for anything not considered mainstream country” (Turnbull 126). She also emphasises that the genre displays a widely accepted “anything-goes” attitude while, at the same time, members of the community are easily able to identify what is not alt-country (127-8), thus it is contradictorily highly defined by members of the alt.country community. Hibbett suggests that there is a similar sense of constant construction about the genre indie as well (58). Peterson and Beal state, “...alternative country is more a congeries of music that fans find sound good together and express much the same sentiments”(238). Because of the lack of aesthetic cohesion, it is highly defined by the audience in terms of the conceptions of authenticity they see displayed by the artists. This is an integral aspect which will be addressed in more detail in a later chapter of this thesis.

ALT.COUNTRY’S ‘MYTH OF ORIGIN’

Peterson and Beal placed a high degree of importance on the myth of origin in their study. It has some points of contact with Fabbri’s criteria, such as the reliance on formal and technical rules and behavioural rules, but is by no means as exhaustive. This section will draw widely on both works, to show how alt.country began to be thought of as a genre, in regards to its antecedents, and the borrowing of sonic characteristics through which expectations of the ‘new’ genre began to be formulated. Many cite Uncle Tupelo and the surrounding scene at the beginning of the 1990s as kick-starting or formally organising alt.country into what Fabbri would deem an understandable and comprehensible ‘genre’. Uncle Tupelo were also important as they were comprised of main songwriters Jeff Tweedy (now of Wilco) and Jay Farrar (now of Son Volt). These members subsequently had a significant impact on the trajectory of the genre. As *All Music Guide* writes “by fusing the simplicity and honesty of country music with the bracing fury of punk, they kick-started a revolution which reverberated throughout the American underground” (“Alternative Country”). Uncle Tupelo’s

perceived natural and spontaneous combination of country instruments, song structures, and rural imagery with punk sentiments and a DIY spirit, combined with an attitude that seems to take the best (or should we say worst) parts of each genre offered, has subsequently been celebrated elsewhere as the formal beginnings of alt.country. Pitchfork, in their cursory treatment of the genre, consider that Uncle Tupelo, “more or less created the genre” (Deusner ‘The South Shall Rise Again’ 135). Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching suggest that Uncle Tupelo “conveyed a sense of escape from postmodern alienation and an irreligious angst...” (2). As Fabbri writes, “Following the success of a single musical event, these innovations are used as a model and become a rule” (A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 7). In many ways Uncle Tupelo acted as a shortcut regarding aesthetics and attitudes that newer artists were in turn expected to emulate.

In relation to the alt.country movement of the 1990s, most scholars and critics point to Uncle Tupelo and Whiskeytown as sparking the musical genre (Fox and Ching 2; Smithers 175). However Dechert’s Whiskeytown (another seminal band in alt.country’s resurgence in the 1990s) review notes that Adams does not consider himself a fan of counterparts Uncle Tupelo, and disputes the two bands’ aesthetic similarities (‘Strangers Almanac 127-8). This undermines the myth of origin. Some romanticise the combination of punk and country, exemplified by these bands, as an original and organic process. Aaron Smithers suggests this is done as a way to distinguish the genre (175). By borrowing from punk it gives the genre a myriad of authentic signifiers to draw on to make the alt. country movement both familiar and marketable (175). It also constructs a common-sense type of lineage that is deemed to be authentic from both a punk standpoint and a country one. However Diane Pecknold writes that, “in spite of its oppositional aesthetic, alt. country has followed a relatively predictable path that mirrors quite closely the early development of mainstream country” (29). Similarly, *All Music Guide* states that despite the genre’s rebellious rhetoric, the genre, and its key figures of the 1990s were actually relatively traditional as the

music was a reaction to Nashville's pursuit of the youth audience ("Alternative Country"). This further challenges the romantic myth of origin by citing the popularity of mainstream country artists in the early 1990s, suggesting that mainstream artists cultivated the audience's desire for a raw, rougher version of the music they were hearing on the radio, with alt. country being the answer to that.

However, this is not unusual. All genres attempt to construct a myth of origin that extends the genre's rhetoric. In alt.country's case, it concentrates on spontaneity and the communicative qualities of the music. A combination of punk and country led to a music that they felt accurately encapsulated and accounted for problems and issues that were specific to that time. Romanticising the genre's formation, Michael Grimshaw states that the music acted as a source of cultural legitimisation in a post-grunge musical landscape, which otherwise seemed focussed on what the members of the alt.country community saw as the emotional empty and manufactured genres of hip-hop and dance (97). This also follows Fabbri's notion of genre formation. "The important thing is that, almost always following the success of a single musical event, these innovations are used as a model and become a rule" ('A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications 7). The genre requires a band to act as a template. Uncle Tupelo's musical elements, appreciation and extension of tradition and rebellious attitudes, for example, provided a model for many bands to follow later in the 1990s, even if the genre itself had many other influences and antecedents.

Despite the myth of origin rhetoric present in discourse surrounding the genre, alt.country also outwardly appreciates the music's antecedents or those who progressed the genre prior to its formal inception. In order for an artist to be of the genre, a knowledge and respect of these seminal artists is required to be explicitly expressed (this would be defined by Fabbri as a behavioural rule). The genre itself is historically based, both musically and ideologically (Peterson and Beal 236), thus, a reliance on past artists is not surprising. The impact and

importance of country rock is often demonstrated by music scholars. In reference to Gram Parsons' influence on the genre, Grimshaw states, "In the 1990s, 'Gram Parsons' increasingly became the name 'to drop' and the source to attribute for musicians attempting to state their 'roots' and 'authenticity'"... (97). He said that by identifying these musical roots, it worked to legitimise the modern form and align it with previous music traditions.

The role of another legend, Hank Williams speaks volumes about the trajectory of alt.country and popular music, more generally. Most of Hank Williams' recording career occurred in the 1940s, when his craft of writing and performing tales of lost love, drinking and hard luck were honed. His lifestyle became the benchmark for any would-be hard country performer, owing in part to his ultimately legend-making death in the back of a Cadillac in 1952. Time has since mythologised Hank and heightened the perceived importance of his life and body of work. However, as Barbara Ching writes "No one person, even Hank Williams, can possibly live all the things that he wrote about" (15). She adds that Williams was key in cementing the long suffering, born-to-lose persona that is expecting in country music today (15). He also is why country music relies so heavily on authenticity and integrity. Graeme Smith states that Williams' influence is wide, acting as inspiration not only musical style but also performance and attitude (134). Peterson agrees. "In his work and in his ways Hank Williams personified country music authenticity and was a model for those who followed' (173). Thus Williams understandably acts as a starting point for virtually all discussions regarding alt.country's earlier influences. Many other writers echo the importance of Hank Williams' persona on alt.country music (Escott 70; Lindholm 31), somewhat undermining the spontaneous and modern myth of origin and instead reasserting Fabbri and Holt's idea of relational music cultures.

Popular intertexts referenced by alt.country artists are widespread, but displaying an appreciation of Gram Parsons, Neil Young, the Carter Family

(known for their harmonious Appalachian folk songs from the 1920s and 1930s, such as ‘No Depression in Heaven’, from which alt.country’s seminal publication takes its name) and especially Hank Williams, act as the minimum reference points for artists staking a claim in the alt.country genre. Knowledge and a professed love for punk’s seminal artists, such as Black Flag, Fugazi, and the Clash is also deemed valuable within this subculture. Alt.country artists sometimes convey this appreciation through the press, however musical quotations of these artists (Neil Young-esque guitar solos in Wilco’s *A Ghost is Born* (2004) and Van Zandt’s syntactical and rhythmic evocation of Dylan’s free association method, in ‘Fare Thee Well, Miss Carousel’ (*Townes Van Zandt*, 1969, for example) is also popular. Theodore Gracyk states that all genres display a history that contributes the music’s meaning. “For both musicians and audience, the construction of meaningful identity demands a historical perspective on the music as a dialogue with the past, not just the present scene” (35). An appreciation of the past is important to the identity of the musician situated in the present. A knowledge and familiarity with earlier artists and their work on the part of both producers and consumers is integral in finding enjoyment and pleasure in the genre (this idea will be discussed at length in the following chapter). This also undermines both the idea of the myth of origin and the validity of discussing a new genre simply in terms of the ‘new’.

Perceived originality is often an important and desirable quality for a musical artist attempting to speak for a particular subculture. In many genres it is even expected that conventions will be challenged and rules broken within the genre (progressive rock, for example). Alt.country does not appear to value attributes of originality in quite the same way as many genres. Peterson says that more generally, authenticity and thus alt.country relies on two competing tensions. Authenticity “centres on being *believable* relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being *original*, that is not being an imitation of the model” (220). This is demonstrated well by the way in which alt.country usually follows the country standard pattern, the melody is often simple,

formulaic and expected. The narratives of the songs too are borrowed from country, as are the lyrical preoccupations, which deal with a limited and highly specified set of “issues”. The way in which these elements are combined and the rebellious character of the musicians is often where much of the originality is located. However, this in itself is a cliché, adding to this tense relationship.

One of the most popular forms of acknowledging an artist’s influence on the genre is through covers of their songs. This shows the band or artist’s appreciation of their influence on their own music, and by accenting it with their own musical style, sometimes works to signal the trajectory of the genre. Examples of these covers include Steve Earle’s album, *Townes* (2009), an album of Van Zandt cover songs, Whiskeytown’s cover of Gram Parsons’ ‘Luxury Liner’ (*Strangers Almanac* 2008) Billy Bragg and Wilco’s album, *Mermaid Avenue* (1998), featuring unreleased Woody Guthrie songs and poems, and Mumford and Sons’ cover of Old Crow Medicine Shows’ ‘Wagon Wheel’, which was broadcast on the BBC (*Radio Two Sessions*, 2010). The last example is also important as it is one of the first examples of the genre referencing itself, perhaps signalling a more recent break in tradition. As Gracyk states, “musicians project an identity by situating themselves in relation to other musicians” (35). Covers then remain popular in alt.country, showing a respectful “tip of the hat” to the artist and suggesting remnants of the Tin Pan Alley country tradition. This highlights the importance of tradition and fundamental knowledge that is required in order to move the genre forward. More widely, this can be seen as a trope of the genre. It is also represented at the level of lyrics and emotional points of connection found in alt.country music. These elements are all bound to the search for and maintenance of authenticity or carving out an authentic place within popular culture.

This relationship with tradition suggests alt.country has similarities to the genre of the blues, which also organises itself around a limited range of lyrical motifs, scales and particular keys, restricting the potential for overzealous

reworkings of the genre. This means that the sound has changed little over the last 100 years. The same could be argued for country (and possibly alt.country in its limited history). The genre also maintains a love for vintage recording equipment and a passion for the old way of ‘doing things’ - another connection to alt.country, and country more generally. Again, like blues, the potentially formulaic structure of alt.country songs offers to the audience further insight to the artist, allowed for a high degree of emotional connectedness. It can be suggested that alt.country offers an effective (and affective) vehicle for expression precisely because of its lack of originality. Because the musical structure or elements are often taken for granted or familiar, the concentration instead turns to the lyrics, the story, and the delivery (which can vary widely from artist to artist), which is characteristically emotionally arduous. The role of covers in alt.country music gives an interesting view of this situation.

As well as the genre’s reliance on emotion, antecedents, and country music’s trajectory, punk aesthetics are also highly influential in understandings of the genre. This is especially evident in relation to the music press, despite the pitfalls of defining genre solely in relation to other genres, as has been outlined above. Reasoning for this perhaps lies with the fact that punk represents music that many journalists and musicians grew up listening to, thus it was influential and formative. Many are quick and eager to highlight its importance to unexpected genres and its continued relevance. Peterson and Beal express a similar idea,

The myth of origin has appeal beyond its simplicity and linear development because it mirrors the taste trajectory of many of alternative country’s devotees. Nurtured as teens in the protest and despair of punk and grunge, they gravitated with ease to the “no depression” escape from contemporary urban problems through embracing the supposedly simpler problems and joys of imagined past small town and rural ways of life (236).

This suggests that the use of punk devices is often romanticised because of the appeal it has to alt.country fans. Apart from direct covers of punk songs, such as Ryan Adams' live cover of Black Flag ('Nervous Breakdown' *Rise Above*, 2002) and Middle Brother and Justin Townes Earle's respective covers of The Replacements ('Portland' *Middle Brother* 2011, 'Can't Hardly Wait' *Midnight at the Movies* 2009), the musical influence of punk is harder to find. It is more adequately expressed at the level of the Do-It-Yourself ethic or a more general punk sentiment present within the genre.

In the case of alt.country, punk musical aesthetics are less overtly displayed than the country ones. Country's musical influence is certainly overarching. Demonstration of punk's influence on the genre rarely accounts for more than wearing a Black Flag or The Clash T-shirt on stage or paying lip service to a highly defined set of punk artists. However, in the case of many alt.country artists, punk's values remain of the utmost importance and are most often displayed at the level of sentiment or through a demonstration of the punk ethos. Creative control, artists who display authenticity, and a for love-not-profit stance (and alt.country's more general anti-commercial appearance) are all highly valued within the alt.country subculture. In this way it aligns itself, quite directly, with the early alternative rock and punk subcultures. This allows artists such as Emmylou Harris, Lucinda Williams, Vic Chestnut, or Gillian Welch, who demonstrate a high level of creative control and the Do-It-Yourself ethic in regards to recording, touring, and promotion to be identified and included within the alt.country genre.

Another element which binds these artists is their disdain for today's polished and squeaky clean country music Mecca; Nashville. This idea began to gain prominence in the 1970s when 'hard country' or outlaw country artists of sometimes disparate music styles found themselves within a like-minded community. Their distaste for the products of Nashville remained their commonality. As *All Music Guide* suggests,

the Outlaws didn't play by Nashville's rules. They didn't change their music to fit the heavily produced, pop-oriented Nashville sound, nor did they go out of their way to fit into the accepted conventions of country music. Instead, they created an edgy form of hardcore country that was influenced by rock & roll, folk, and blues" ("Outlaw Country").

Outlaw country or honky-tonk (hardcore country, as Ching calls it) were operating at the margins, positioning (and defining itself) as decisively anti-Nashville, in a similar position in which alt.country sits today. Barbara Ching suggests that alt.country and its musicians could be today's hardcore country artists (133). Thus their rebellious sound and sense of unease, which is often violently expressed is not a new sentiment. They are borrowing values and a mindset belonging to a past tradition.

Alt.country artists too construct a binary, between their music and the artificial products of Nashville. This works to define their own work as much as the Nashville music they are staunchly opposed to. Alt.country artists often reference Nashville ironically. Middle Brothers' song of the same name states, "I'm gonna send this song Nashville and sell my soul to a whole new crowd" (*Middle Brother* 2011) exemplifying this troubled relationship. This rhetoric is echoed in criticism on the genre. Peterson and Beal state, "While alternative country is down home, unblinking, heart-felt, and a personal authentic expression, Nashville country is a plastic product" (234). They then go on to describe the problems and contentions in naming alt.country. However, all gatekeepers agreed that the genre was decisively "not from Nashville" (234). Others also highlight this distinction. Graeme Smith suggests that the collective disdain for Nashville is the one quality that holds together the disparate alternative country community (109). Like Honky-Tonk and Outlaw country before them, the genre is offering an alternative to Nashville, with ideas of authenticity, sincerity, anti-commercialism, and musicianship (which they see as lacking in Nashville country), found in abundance in this genre. Despite the continued variety, disparity, and sometimes contradictory nature of alt.country,

the artists remain groupable in relation to the above ideals, with its opposition to Nashville being important node in producing and maintaining the genre's definition.

Genre is considered to be fundamentally overlapping and fluid. John Frow's work has usefully made this explicit, suggesting that genres are pronounced and performed, rather than being a static category. Despite this, genre conveniently offers shortcuts and understandings to the audience. Musical events are contextualised through repetition and accepted convention. Alt.country offers a good example of this. The genre has undergone many changes since its resurgence in the early 1990s, although these are largely confined to the genre's aesthetics, rather than its core values. The genre allows for a wide range of music artists to be included, from country, folk, and blues to hard rock and punk, providing they represent values and a worldview that is in line with the current conceptions of the genre. These qualities have been outlined above but generally place value on authenticity, genuineness, and a 'for love, not profit' attitude, alluding to the importance of an anti-commercial stance to the genre. Despite this, authenticity is not synonymous with originality; covers and musical quotations are an accepted and perhaps even celebrated aspect of alt.country, evoking the required knowledge of musical history and the past to distinguish the genre.

CHAPTER TWO- AUTHENTICITY AND ITS DIALOGUE WITH DISCOURSES OF RUSTICITY AND THE RURAL

Identifying key elements of authenticity will act as an introduction to the scholarly commentary and debate around the term. By addressing it primarily in relation to its use within popular music discourse and looking beyond the internalised, common-sense and emotive evocations of the concept, it is possible to determine what is at stake when it is a pillar in alt.country's definition. It also signals the importance of maintaining authenticity, in a commercial sense, which has been discussed widely by Richard Peterson in relation to country music (1997). Further aspects of relevance to alt.country, such as authenticity's relationship with rural tropes will also be examined in this chapter, as it points to possible reasons for the assumed poignancy, popularity, and relevance for the predominantly urban, international audience and suggests its importance to later discussions on postmodernity. I will then outline the arguments around the demands for authentic culture, suggesting that authenticity (and in many respects alt.country) is able to adjust to the current needs of society. My discussion is heavily influenced by Charles Lindholm's comprehensive study of authenticity, in which he charts the rise in the need to be authentic and its increasing value in modern society. This raises pertinent issues surrounding the use of the term in relation to popular music

Authenticity works to account for the sense of genuineness or truth which is expressed in culture in a natural or common-sense way. However, it is important to emphasise that this assertion, like all cultural products are constructions incapable of getting access to "the real", despite the insistence that this is precisely what authenticity is representing. Authenticity's power lies in its largely unquestioned nature and its generally accepted communicative qualities. As David Pattie says, "The discourse and term of authenticity is internalised to the everyday vocabulary of musicians, audiences and academics" (6). The desire for and value of authentic culture remains largely unquestioned,

thus the concept carries weight within modern culture. This is despite the constructed nature or mediation present in any text. Peterson suggests,

Authenticity in a living art form can have a number of meanings, but as we have seen, in popular culture, where experts and authorities do not have control the particulars of the word's meaning, the definition centres on being *believable* relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being *original*, that is not being an imitation of the model (220).

While there are opposing aspects to the term, authenticity remains persuasive and powerful. This is owed in part to its ability to change relative to history or to the current desires of society.

Authenticity is often understood through equally ambiguous buzzwords, adding to the confusion surrounding the concept. John Connell and Chris Gibson state, "Authenticity remains an intangible concept. Essentialist perspectives construct authenticity in relation to concepts such as 'spontaneity' ('live'), 'grassroots' and 'of the people', in oppositions to their antithesis: 'manipulation', 'standardisation', 'mass', and commercial'...." (27). Carolyn Stevens in relation to the authenticity in Japanese music determines the importance of emotion, stating authenticity represents the "human warmth" felt within popular music (101). All these descriptors point to an essence or a particular character present in authentic culture that is immediately presented without mediation. This phenomenon is also importantly considered to be absent elsewhere in culture. Johan Fornäs argues that authenticity as a general characteristic of representation concerns "how the textual structures are constructed to present themselves as related to the subjects that created them" (qtd in. Weisethanunet and Lindberg 274). This definition emphasises authorship, a truthful representation of a cultural producer and the sense of direct contact or communication between producer and the audience, perceived to be operating outside of commercial constraints. As Stevens writes, "[a]uthenticity is spontaneously performed, directly perceived, and there is direct human interaction between performer and audience..." (125). However, this is

problematic, as it is inevitably constructed. While in recent years there has been increasing debate surrounding the term, there remains a lack of a formal understanding of the concept and a reliance on the emotional and affective qualities of authentic culture.

As has already been noted, there are many aesthetic differences between the varying artists who are all equally indicative of the alt.country genre (such as Lucinda Williams, The Avett Brothers, The Jayhawks, Ryan Adams, Uncle Tupelo, and the Drive-by Truckers), however the genre remains organised, comprehensible and cohesive. The genre does what it is supposed to do; it organises and creates (or more importantly delimits) expectations. Over and above instruments, vocal styles, and other common markers such as production values (which can vary widely between alt.country artists), what binds these artists and signals their recognisability as a collective is that they all internalise and display authenticity or a sense of sincerity to the audience. It is often expressed through a combination of traditions, or more specifically for Fox and Ching, family traditions, lyrics, instrumentation, references to vices or hard living and struggle, an attitude of rebellion, and a knowledge and respect of the country tradition (as well as a willingness to experiment and extend it) (10). This acts as a primary factor in determining if an artist belongs to the alt.country genre. However defining a genre in relation to this elusive, transient, and perhaps even contradictory term always takes work to assert and reassert itself (Peterson 223), thus it is problematic.

Authenticity's role in culture is also dynamic. The instability and vagaries of the term mean that it can be adjusted and negotiated to the current demands of society. Pattie and Peterson both assert that this adds to the concept's power and unquestioned nature in rock musics. As Lindholm stresses, the way in which the concept has been used historically changes with and through cultural development. It also carries with it different meanings across cultural fields (art discourse and in relation to travel are two examples that Lindholm offers).

However it maintains meaning across varying contexts. In this way, it is an intensely *useable* concept and a shortcut to the values of sincerity it evokes. Peterson's work highlights the importance of authenticity to the country music genre, emphasising that authenticity's seemingly natural or common-sensical relationship with country music is historically rooted. Indeed, as Robert Gardner suggests, "...The performance of authenticity is often a rhetorical accomplishment, guided by the needs, wants, and desires of their audiences" (136), thus it is also changeable.

Historically speaking, the American country music genre was never really 'pure', as it borrowed instruments and songwriting traditions from the first-wave of Irish and English migrants (Escott 12), meaning that much of the discourse highlighting authentic culture as the 'genuine article' is undermined by the cultural borrowing and appropriation evident in this particular example (the problematic nature of discussing genres in relation to a single source has also been discussed earlier in relation to the flawed 'myth of origin' concept). Nevertheless, country music has functioned as a fundamental agent in the production and dissemination of core values which seem to be in a constant state of decline, signalling a reliance between country music and authenticity. As already discussed, authenticity is often defined by equally slippery and expansive synonyms that can add to misunderstandings surrounding the concept. One of the stable characteristics emphasised by many is that it is socially constructed, thus demonstrates an ability to shift, change and restructure itself in relation to current societal demands, adding another dimension of ambiguity to the term.

There is another way in which notions of authenticity are commonly discussed. That is, in terms of negation. As will be immediately obvious, this is a discursive and social construction, but the debates do bear some relevance to alt.country. A common mode for understanding the precise characteristics of authentic culture is through negation or identifying the concept through the qualities that it does not exhibit. Frith goes as far to say that "[A]uthenticity

must be defined against artifice; the terms only make sense in opposition to one another” (*Music for Pleasure* 98). Naming a cultural product as ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine’ inevitably involves cultural capital. Interestingly, Fox and Ching suggest that binaries represented by the music offer some of its appeal. The tension between the border of country and alt.country “also functions as a law of attraction” (17). In regards to authenticity, posturing, a rehearsed or fake nature or being contrived all describes its binary. An evocation of the descriptions of the authentic then calls to mind its opposite in equal measure and adds to the definition of both (this will be discussed in relation to the urban/rural dichotomy in the next chapter as this is also relevant to alt.country). Bourdieu raises a similar idea in relation to social identity which he says “is defined and asserted through difference” (*Distinction* 167). Meaning that in a more general sense, our ideas of ourselves are defined relationally. Belonging to a group with common beliefs and communally felt ideas of authenticity and its opposite are integral to sustaining its definition.

Frith’s important work on Bruce Springsteen’s seemingly unquestioned authenticity in the 1980s claims, “[M]usic cannot be true or false, it can only refer to conventions of truth or falsity” (*Music for Pleasure* 100). Fox’s work extended this and was concerned with how notions of being true or false are discursively constructed in country music (53). This is certainly an important consideration. For Frith, the realities of authenticity were immaterial, what is important is that the feeling of authenticity is maintained. Similarly Peterson suggests that country music relies on two contradictory ideas, originality and authenticity, which are played out simultaneously (1), meaning that to be successful, artists cannot present themselves directly, rather they are required to project a persona that is thought to be their true self, although it is relying on the history of the genre and those who have come before them to inform their ‘authentic’ identities. This prompts the importance of the audience’s definition of an authentic character, especially relating to fans’ perceptions of performers and binaries constructed in regards to various genres. Allan Moore says

authenticity is primarily a matter of interpretation on behalf of the audience. Likewise, Gardner's suggestion that authenticity is guided or determined by the needs of the audience (136) relates to a feeling of truth, determined by the audience, rather than truth itself.

AUTHENTICITY AND THE HABITUS

Allan Moore's recent and enlightening discussion on authenticity formalises many of the above concerns. He disassembles the term in depth and I will draw heavily on his discussion here. He offers a variety of ways in which the term can be thought about, beyond the emotive terms it evokes which often pervades discussion of the term (as noted above). It also invokes Bourdieu's conception of the habitus, which can be defined as "an objective relationship between two objectivities, [that] enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition" (*Distinction* 95). Thus, if we return to the Bruce Springsteen example above, the genuineness and sense of authenticity an individual feels in relation to this figure will be dependent on their upbringing and place within society and culture.

Through Allan Moore's emphasis on performance, he suggests that certain musical signposts or markers cannot guarantee authenticity; rather it is dependent on the individual's place within history and culture (their habitus). Moore suggests then authenticity is "ascribed, not inscribed" (210). This denaturalises the common-sense values often associated with "authentic culture". Moore's conceptions of authenticity acts as useful in escaping the essentialist arguments surrounding particular sounds, instruments and genres and their perceived authenticity above others, when they are stylistically very different. These ideas will be formalised and extended in the discursive analysis of *No*

Depression in a later chapter of this thesis.

Moore sets out three types of overlapping authenticities. First-person authenticity represents the attempts of the performer to convey the integrity of the music. This conception emphasises ideas of connection, intimacy and, importantly for Moore, physicality. It also accounts for the audience's awareness of the performer's integrity, understanding it as a direct emotional expression of the artist. Second-person authenticity refers to the way in which music is defined by others and how these labels group music and make it understandable. As Pattie writes, it is the ways in which "music is used by a listening group as a way of authenticating its own experience to its audience" (10). This relates to ideas of identities and how individuals situate themselves and find a place within music (A. Moore 219). It is also the most common way authenticity is addressed. Finally, third-person authenticity is said to exist when there is agreement between the performer and the audience on the agreed style of music being performed and that it is in line with expectations and previous experiences of that genre. It relates to legitimacy and having the right to speak for a particular community because of the relationship with the pre-existing musical traditions (A. Moore 215). This last factor assumes particular relevance for alt.country, however they are all important. What is initially noticeable and pertinent to my own discussion is that all Moore's conceptions of authenticity suggest a dialogue between audience and performer.

This relational or communal element of the concept, discussed by Moore, is also largely agreed upon elsewhere and adds to the concept's overriding sense of belonging. Lindholm suggests that authenticity is understood as the unity that comes from belonging to a group that it felt to be real and sincere (1). Stevens heralds that authenticity is a practice of "direct human interaction between performer and audience" (125). This sense of intimacy and immediacy are integral markers of authenticity, specifically in relation to rock music discourse (A. Moore 211). Authenticity is primarily demonstrated through performance.

Musicians displaying authenticity are involved in a performance that persuades the audience of their sincerity. Again, raising issues of believability and constructedness.

...Genuineness, spontaneity, immediacy, etc- are all qualities associated with performance. To be said to exist, they have to be demonstrated; they have to become clearly visible to the audience. The paradox contained within this formulation is not that an audience accepts as real that which is patently unreal; rather it is that an audience accepts reality, or authenticity, as performance, without necessarily accepting that its status as performance invalidates it as a true expression of a star's authentic self" (Dyer 133).

There is general agreement among scholars that the concept is socially constructed, or at least socially negotiated (Connell and Gibson 28; Gardner 139; Peterson), thus it is inherently subjective and also concepts of it will inevitably change over time.

Alt.country relies on authenticity and the audience's perception of these values, more than many genres. While musical genres act as shortcuts and guide expectations, they only do some of the work in accounting for the whole overarching aesthetics and ideology of the genre and its purpose. Stating that alt.country is a mix of punk and country is insufficient as it excludes many other folk or bluegrass bands with a decisively rebellious (and thus alt.country) spirit. Old Crow Medicine Show, which are widely celebrated by the genre's audience and gatekeepers (primarily the music press) are exemplary of this exact issue. Thus, while genre-bound shortcuts such as displaying country and punk characteristics and acting as an antithesis to Nashville's commercialism, play a vital role in alt.country's definition, the internalisation of authentic values and a true-to-life persona are more indicative of the genre to the audience. Peterson and Beal's work demonstrated that these values-based judgements were important in the genre's initial definition, but my research will extend this, suggesting it is

equally important in maintaining the genre or redefining its place in the musical landscape today.

AUTHENTICITY AND MODERNISM

While it feels like popular music's desire for authenticity is a reaction to a decisively modern 'lack' felt within culture, the concept actually possesses more of a history. The context in which the need for authenticity began to be articulated or expressed as a desirable quality in the experience of culture emphasises that it was a reactionary measure, or a means of adjustment to living in a modern industrialist society. The search for authentic culture related to negotiating or carving out a place within culture for the self. Lindholm's work describes how authenticity is related to the perceived decay of modern society (2008). He traces the emergence of the concept and the need to be authentic as developing concurrently with the experience of modernity in the sixteenth century. An individual's changing role in society, the pursuit of wealth and power, de-emphasising the unquestionable power of the church, and the decline of face-to-face contact all brought about a void, or a sense of alienation and meaninglessness, which many individuals sought to fill with "authentic" culture (3). He traces this idea through a range of media and cultural products, demonstrating the nuances, but more importantly the similarities between these and the reliance on the 'feel' of culture and the seemingly genuine qualities of these, in modern society.

The need to fill the void that accompanied urbanisation and modernisation is echoed by many other scholars of varied fields. The idea of depthlessness that runs through Fredric Jameson's work on postmodernism certainly speaks to this idea. It suggested that culture is always attempted to be filled or added to, but it is incapable of maintaining it, thus the search for authentic culture is never-ending, with the characteristics constantly changing (this will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis). Similarly, while Moore's work

recognises the incapability of authentic culture in the postmodern age, he also says that postmodernity is precisely why we desire that which is authentic. In this case then, the past offers to the producer and a consumer a cultural resource. As Raymond Williams writes,

It is significant, for example, that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernisation, development. In what is then a tension, a present experienced as tension, we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses, which it might be better to face in its own terms (297).

The rural and authentic (which are interchangeable and often represent synonyms of one another) offer stable and understandable tools of representation, which can be mobilised as a useful way to begin to understand the changing present.

RUSTICITY AND THE HOME

The general shift from rural societies to urban ones and the unknown element of this lived experience suggest possible reasons for the need for ‘authentic’ culture. This is addressed by Lindholm’s work (and others). As he writes, the search of authenticity can also be seen as a product of the movements of individuals from a rural environment to an urban one. Because of this “people were no longer quite sure where they belonged, what their futures held for them, or who their neighbours were” (Lindholm 3). In this sense, rural culture offered a stable reference point, which individuals could continue to define themselves through, despite the changing world around them. It also offered a sense of belonging and somewhere to inhabit, even if it was imagined. Authentic culture and the practice of romantically ‘looking back’ understandably provided a source of comfort in

familiarity for newly urbanised individuals.

Many of these arguments pertaining to authenticity as a response to a newly urbanised society are mirrored in Raymond Williams' contestations surrounding the pervasive presence of rurality and the countryside in English literature. Williams says this desire to 'go back' has always been a priority in culture. In his book *The Country and The City*, he suggests that while modern society is now geographically and ideologically distant from its rural roots, there remains an ingrained representation of the rural experience that both reader and writer maintain a nostalgic longing for or an emotional closeness to. This is despite (or perhaps because of) their lack of direct experience with the environment described (2). The myth of simplicity and happiness as being an unquestionable presence in rural life disregards the often harsh reality of the experience, with shrinking crop prices, poor-yielding seasons, and hard labour more representative of rural life. Countries and cities, as places are themselves quite varied, however common associations about them both do persist, which lends the words' their power. "Rural space is often represented as a 'natural' or pure environment in opposition to the pace and activity of the city. As such, the countryside is often seen as a refuge from the oppressive aspects of city life" (Valentine 250). They are also both changeable "historical realities" (Williams 289), as Williams clearly shows. Both words carry with them a variety of signifiers pertaining to labour, imagined life, freedom, capitalism, and family that authentic culture often attempts to invoke.

Despite this acknowledgement, the idealised version of the countryside has almost always been used in culture. Williams gives an example from 1500 (40). Citing the associated idea of innocence (46), these persistent rural tropes Williams sees in English literature occurred for many of the same reasons to why authentic culture is often sought. It was a point of escapism to a simpler time, demonstrating it is not specific to American or postmodern culture. In relation to country music, "Country's ongoing invocation of "tradition" and its link to

everyday, rural, working and middle-class life is, and has been, a key aspect of its construction of meaning and authenticity (Hill 'Out of the Barn and into a Home' 173-4). Thus, the desire for authentic rural tropes and geographic references is not a new or unusual experience, but it is integral to maintaining the sincerity of the genre.

Like Lindholm, Williams posits that the rural representations are seen as an antidote to the alienation of 'modern' life, acting as a shortcut to an understandable and familiar culture. However, this actually adds to the sense of confusion felt within culture. As Williams writes, "Clearly the contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society" (289). As Williams describes, authentic rural culture represents the past, as this is the place that we want to return to. It is simple and understandable. This sits in opposition to the urban environment which is representative of the future.

However, this is not a modern idea, especially not in country music. Within the genre, this idea of returning to a mythic imaginary has always been present. "While [A.P.] Carter looked forward in anticipation to a glorious time after death, alternative country artists typically look back nostalgically to an imagined small-town life of the 1940s" (Peterson and Beal 235), suggesting that, at least for the country artist, there is no 'perfect' time, only representations of these times that persist. It also evokes Eric Hobsbawm's writing on the invention of tradition. Although he discusses it in a nationhood sense, it is a useful way to frame the idea of belonging. He says, "Invented traditions...is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (4), thus the referencing to past traditions is considered valid, if only because for its repetition. The concept of the invention of tradition and Peterson's idea of fabricating authenticity and memory speak to each other, as both are socially agreed upon forms of repetition. Hobsbawm suggests that modern movements seek continuity with the past while Peterson

says that country music is involved in a similar project. Regardless, the time that country artists are searching for in whatever form is characterised by its unattainability in the present. The Carter Family's songs also represent that the time that these alt.country artists are yearning for is equally imperfect. However, returning to and revisiting representations of that which we already know and that evokes feelings of familiarity and safety does seem logical within the framework offered by the postmodernity.

The concept of authenticity and the music that defines itself through this quality is rendered understandable, a fixed reference point in an increasingly uncertain age. Although our place and home always changes, "this mythic American *home* is fixed and unchanging, belonging where it always and forever has belonged and will belong –in nature" (Livingstone 22). As the final chapter of this thesis will demonstrate, the fixed nature of the mythic home is frequently evoked by alt.country artists. Contradictorily, it is stable but also historically responsive. This emotional attachment to music and culture that appears to demonstrate sincerity is favoured, especially when simultaneously evoking a seemingly strong and solid rural ideal.

A similar binary is at play in regards to the urban/rural dichotomy. The evocation of one will equally describe or call to mind its other. Ben Child discusses a comparable idea, concentrating on the rhetoric of place and displacement in Bob Dylan's work. This deals with how tensions between the rural and urban are manifested in relation to his work, suggesting it is a common motif. He suggests that it may be more complicated than a rejection of the urban for the utopian rural. As Child suggests, "[s]tories like these reveal less about the character of the city or the country than they do about a deeper existential malaise" (206). Ideas surrounding both the binaries of the authentic/artificial and rural/urban can only exist with and through their relationship with their opposing values, as has been previously suggested. Although Child suggests a complication. "... [T]he country and the city are engaged in a dialogue that

makes it impossible to code the forms definitively one way or another” (208), thus a reliance on these binaries persists. This signals the instability of authenticity as a defining characteristic of a genre, as it is constantly shifting and reorganising itself in relation to itself and other values and ideas.

Authenticity’s transient and fluid qualities are at the forefront of defining the concept, despite efforts from many to pin it down and account for physical and emotion manifestations of it. Moore has offered the most complex coverage of the concept’s relation to these issues to date. He continues to emphasise the personal and emotive nature of authenticity, signalling its continued importance to the concept’s definition. The high degree of currency authenticity possesses suggests the desire for “real” music, culture, and relationships that are reflective of true experiences has not waned. This works in partnership with the extensive and pervasive rural, rustic, country-based discourses that circulate within the genre, endlessly referenced with little (if any) concrete basis. However, as Williams, Lindholm, and Hobsbawm reminds us, the act of inference is much more powerful than what is physically being discussed as ‘real’ or ‘true-to-life’, thus maintaining the artists’ authenticity through their imagined rural lives. As I will argue in following chapters, despite the unrealities and incapability of gaining access to the real, the audience continues to feel they are privy to something true and meaningful, which is lacking elsewhere in culture. The unreality and artificialness of the present causes individuals to evoke a rural, mythic home that Williams notes we may not have had direct experience with. This contradiction is lived and constantly being reproduced by both producers and consumers of authentic culture and is integral to the aesthetic appeal and commercial power of alt.country.

CHAPTER THREE: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND ALT.COUNTRY

Alt.country and its main definer, authenticity has an explicit relationship with cultural capital and distinction. As is clear from the previous chapter, being 'genuine' or 'real' relies on a lived experience, which culminates in authority and status within the alt.country scene. Here Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital will be introduced and used as a primary tool of analysis to determine what knowledge and experiences are deemed valuable within and to this subculture. The extension to subcultural capital will be offered through Sarah Thornton's work. Under-researched in this dynamic between popular music, authenticity, and cultural capital is the role of the music press. The forms of authenticity and cultural capital that critics may bestow on particular artists will be discussed here, first from a historical point, then framed by a case study of *No Depression*. Discursive analysis of alt.country's coalescing magazine will highlight the ways knowledge and authenticity is asserted and can direct the trajectory of the genre, exhibiting a dependency on collective authenticity and a belief in what is communally felt. After first establishing that *No Depression* functions as an integral gatekeeper of alt.country, later analysis will show that attempts from them to steer the trajectory of genre though widespread and frequent is not always accepted by the genre's community. Individual conceptions of authenticity, affect and their personal experience are also influential qualities.

BOURDIEU AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has long been established as one of the leading thinkers regarding social structures and how taste reproduces cultural and critical power. Importantly he recognises how and why these patterns are reproduced and thus, retain their power. He places an emphasis on education, suggesting that cultural learning as well as class can (and does) dictate our predispositions in fundamental ways, which his study sought to illuminate. In cultural studies, his

work is oft-referenced without a second thought; he has virtually defined the critical field in which patterns of taste can be considered. His framework, which at times echoes Marx and at others invokes Kant and Durkheim, offers inroads for many scholars to critically engage with and extend his work, which they continue to do today. Many concepts established in his seminal study *Distinction* (1984(2000)) have become integral tools for studying the media and its formulation and social effects. One such concept is that of cultural capital. This concept refers the knowledge that can be considered valuable, transferable or exchangeable within a particular sociocultural arena or field. It is anything (outside of economic capital) that lends an individual or group status and reverence. Hesmondhalgh suggests that, “Being able to acquire the cultural capital needed to enter into these taste communities requires being fluent, essentially in a rarefied language, as well as having knowledge of particular aesthetic hierarchies” (‘Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre’ 59). While Bourdieu concentrates on education as being a primary and accurate determinant of cultural capital and key way in which we acquire these languages and hierarchies that Hesmondhalgh discusses, he is careful to avoid saying that a high quality education alone is sufficient to explain the acquisition of cultural capital (*Distinction* 46). A high education and economic status does not always equate with a high amount of acquired cultural capital, which is gained through our “social trajectory” (*The Field of Cultural Production* 6). Consider subcultures, for example. Formal education holds a low amount of cultural capital (if any) within these cultures generally. Cultural education, or what you know or who you know, takes precedence over formal learned knowledge. Despite this change in focus, Bourdieu’s ideas have continuing relevance.

Recently, Bourdieu’s ideas that have found the most traction within cultural studies relate to social structures within which the processes of taste and cultural appreciation take place. What Bourdieu’s work keenly illuminated (albeit in a densely scholarly way) is that accruing cultural capital does not ‘just happen’, but it is best seen as a project that takes work. Bourdieu compares

cultural capital to a suntan or a trim physique (possible alluding to its face value or ‘for appearance’s sake’ quality of cultural capital itself). As Bourdieu writes, “The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost” (‘Education, Culture, Economy, and Society’ 48). This also presupposes a general worth to the project; the accumulation of cultural capital is worth all this work because it offers the individual a degree of status. Bourdieu also alludes to its transitory state, or as a project that requires constant effort.

Capital, which in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. And the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (‘Education, Culture, Economy, and Society’ 46).

Bourdieu largely ignores the economics of cultural capital and how this effort can be turned into some sort of reward. Garnham and Williams (and Thornton) discuss its convertibility into economic capital, stating that those who have the most capital also have the ability to do this. However, even disregarding the overt link, those with the high sufficient cultural capital have *access*; to greater opportunities and job prospects, which will eventually become economically significant. Through this economic freedom, individuals often develop a taste for ‘the finer things in life’ or a more refined taste than their middle or working class counterparts. The concentration on this aspect of Bourdieu’s work (his preoccupation with the allegoric potential of social class) has waned somewhat from scholarly attention. Writers using Bourdieu’s work now tend to avoid these types of (sometimes stereotypical) generalities and focus instead on the more fruitful aspects of his discussion, such as the reproduction of these structures

and the reasons behind this, through the lenses of gender or ethnicity and how that may inflect these structures.

DISTINCTION

While cultural capital is used as an allegory for knowledge and experience that is valuable and exchangeable within a field, it might be more appropriate in the subcultural setting to mobilise the idea of distinction. Distinction is precisely useful when attempting to understand the dynamics of knowledge within a field, because it accounts for what *is* and *isn't* valuable and the ability to know and articulate the difference. This is then used in society to point to specific qualities about individuals. More specifically Bourdieu writes,

There are thus as many fields of preferences as there are fields of possibles. Each of these works- drinks (mineral waters, wines and aperitifs) or automobiles, newspapers or holiday resorts, design or furnishings of house or garden, not to mention political programmes- provides the small number of distinctive features, which functioning as a system of differences, differential deviations, allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed almost as completely through the most complex and refined expressive systems available in the legitimate arts: and it can be seen that the total field of these fields offers well-nigh inexhaustible possibilities for the pursuit of distinction” (*Distinction* 223).

Distinction can be thought of as a personal social asset, like cultural capital, that asserts an individuals’ right to be somewhere or with someone. Bourdieu uses the word distinction to talk about defining one thing from another and determining what is fundamentally valuable (‘Education, Culture, Economy, and Society’ 49). This happens on a cultural/linguistic level too. Garnham and Williams describe this form of categorisation as having social and linguistic consequences. “In English as in French the double meaning of that word, both as a categorical and a social term precisely mirrors the function of symbolic power (214). Thornton, recognising that cultural capital is key to this project, describes “Cultural capital

as the “lynchpin” in a system of distinction relating to cultural and social hierarchies (10).

The ability to distinguish or to recognise high taste or culture is what Kauppo describes as an “unchanging foundation”, which enables individuals to attribute particular characteristic or values to others (104). The aesthetics or cultural artefacts that are actually valued may change but the values (and what people believe this taste stands in for) remain relatively fixed. Therefore, social distinction (and one’s ability to recognise value in culture) can be metonymic for other sociocultural and political factors. Think, for example, of the personal values we place (perhaps somewhat stereotypically) on individuals who enjoy foreign cinema. They conjure up artfulness and culture, adventure, and perhaps an inquisitive nature and a concern with the politics and histories of other nations. These assumptions are made without taking into account the nature of the content of these individual films. These allegorical processes happen constantly through the framework of distinction in a largely unconscious way. Related to this is Bourdieu’s claim that taste is generally a project of negation: “Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation” (*Distinction* 49). Thus individuals or groups are assessed on these factors and what their tastes or cultural preoccupations may tell us about their wider preferences and dispositions.

A CRITIQUE OF BOURDIEU’S WORK

While Bourdieu’s theory of cultural practice and taste are at times central to studies of culture, some weaknesses of his work must be kept in mind. Despite what Garnham and Williams state in 1980 was an initially mixed and fragmented reaction (209), as a product of almost 20 years of research it remains invaluable and there has been a wide amount of consensus and consolidation regarding the

value of his work. Another consideration that has been noted by Thornton and others is that Bourdieu's work is a product of his own habitus. His work is influenced by his position in a society. As being a scholarly, educated, French white male carries with it particular ways of seeing which inevitably work to inflect his writing, both in terms of his object of study and his critical engagement with interview data. These constraints must be kept in mind with any research, as we all bring individual subjectivities and understandings to the analysis of cultural work. But as Bourdieu's object study is in the personal areas of taste and culture itself, these issues are magnified.

The economic aspect of Bourdieu's work must also be considered critically. As Garnham and Williams suggest, he is too deterministic with his cultural and economic contentions (222). Certainly, in modern, post-industrial and equalitarian society, there is a common belief that individuals are not as tightly bound to their social class as Bourdieu's work suggests and that there is some room for economic and cultural advancement. Distinction and cultural capital's convertibility in to economic capital was not fully appreciated by Bourdieu. Garnham and Williams raise this point in their critique of Bourdieu, and Thornton expands upon it, stating that converting it is what those with the most cultural capital do; they convert it in to economic capital through their high esteem in the particular field. Therefore, while it may not happen often, those without a higher education or the hereditary genealogy that Bourdieu outlines may still come to enjoy a status of high economic and cultural capital. Subcultural writings on the concept have also put economics to one side, suggesting that knowledge and power within a scene is more valuable than economic worth. This is an aspect that Bourdieu did not consider, but heavily informs this thesis.

The concepts of distinction and cultural capital are specific and formalised products of Bourdieu's own habitus. This is partially the reason that Sarah Thornton extended his work and developed the concept. Thornton is a Canadian sociologist who wrote about taste, hierarchy and rituals in the nineties

British dance culture scene. Through this research, she developed the idea of ‘subcultural capital’. Though not much of a leap conceptually (it bears all the same characteristics as Bourdieu’s concept but has a slightly tilted social focus), it is useful to determine who has power and influence in particular contexts, and the reasons owing to this power. Mobilising and extending Bourdieu’s work seems relevant among what Thornton calls “taste cultures” (3), because of the similarities it bears to Bourdieu’s object of study. The loci of her study, within the realms of popular music appear to be an obvious choice, because of the notions of membership, associated activities and behaviours that are required within any music scene, as all genres rely on cultural capital to make themselves understandable and distinct.

Because of this, there always exists an obvious hierarchy which works to structure the field (both in Bourdieu’s work and Thornton’s study of dance music cultures). As Thornton writes,

Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts, and well-assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition ‘white label’ twelve-inches and the like). Just like cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation, subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know,’ using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles (11-12).

Following Bourdieu, she states that all of this must be displayed as if it is second nature. “Both cultural capital and subcultural capital put a premium on the ‘second nature’ of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard” (203). Ryan Moore agrees, stating that the knowledge must appear effortlessly acquired, but also, more importantly for our discussion, “cannot appear to have been acquired through the mainstream media or other outlets of the culture industry” (232). Here, the expectation is of

instinctive knowledge, despite the fact that mainstream media is primarily where knowledge about popular music and other cultural forms is gleamed.

While the similarities between cultural capital and its subcultural counterpart are obvious, it is useful for the purposes of this work to expound on its specific characteristics. The concept of subcultural capital values a hierarchy that is relevant to the particular scene. In other words, any subcultural field is reliant on knowledge. But more important is how this knowledge is distributed.

Because the appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally (although they have the appearance of innateness), these products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic, and, functioning as cultural capital (objectified or internalized), they yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them, and a profit in legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists, in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be” (Bourdieu *Distinction* 225).

The structure of subcultural fields relies on the fact that some know more than others and that this information and knowledge is fundamentally uneven or scarce. This hierarchy means that people with the most (and most valuable) knowledge may function as tastemakers, either directly or indirectly, working to guide taste for themselves but more importantly for those who possess less relevant knowledge, or subcultural capital than themselves. What both Bourdieu and Thornton have made clear in their work is that knowledge and knowing has consequences in relation to cultural and subcultural capital.

As already identified, the cultural (and subcultural) capital dynamic relies on particular knowledge to be possessed. Perhaps even more importantly to subcultural capital, where one is required to up to date and ‘trendy’, is the off-hand delivery of this knowledge, which may be specificities regarding recordings, personnel, geographical references, or record labels, which must be delivered

casually and without effort. Distinction plays a role here as it assists in guiding relevancy. It also helps an individual determine what information is relevant. As Thornton writes, cultural (or subcultural) capital is the lynchpin of distinction. It also offers rationale for the hierarchy that exists within any popular music subculture. Some people or groups have acquired a higher amount of subcultural capital than others and as such usually represent the tastemakers of that particular scene.

Importantly for Ryan Moore, subcultural capital is also subject to liquidation. Following Bourdieu's view that the acquisition of cultural capital is an ongoing project, so too is the effort to maintain it. Speaking of the San Diego mid-nineties post-grunge music scene, he charts how subcultural capital dispersed when artists 'sold out' and commercial interests worked to co-opt the scene, which was eventually incorporated into the mainstream (2005). Moore argues that all the cultural capital that was acquired in that scene is no longer relevant, due to the mainstream status of the music, and because of this, is liquidated. This changeability of subcultural capital is worth elaborating on because it is under emphasised elsewhere. It takes constant effort and work to remain relevance within a scene, which also stresses distinction's defining role within subcultures. Bourdieu's work has asserted that being in a society itself is about aligning oneself with particular tastes (and values). This act of distinction allows subcultures and fields to be set apart from one another. These distinctions may also be where the appeal lies for their members.

While Thornton's work on subcultural capital is very similar to Bourdieu's concept, there are some important nuances, which work to adjust her focus slightly. Others have also given interesting and important insights to popular music that could not have happened by simply mobilising Bourdieu's theory alone. Thornton's work concerns itself with gender, rather than economics, owing mainly to her object of study. As she suggests, "The assertion of subcultural distinction relies, in part, on a fantasy of classlessness" (204),

adding that roles within many subcultures (her object of study included) are typically gendered. This move away from economics and high culture mirrors a shift within popular cultural studies generally. Many have criticised Bourdieu's elitist tastes. Hesmondhalgh says that many academics see a hierarchy between high and low culture as an inadequate way to understand culture ('Audience and Everyday Aesthetics' 511). As this is Bourdieu's position, a serious consideration of popular music would be difficult without developing or extending his theory.

WHAT IS ITS RELEVANCE FOR ALT.COUNTRY?

Bearing in mind previous discussion regarding the formulation of alt.country, the genre's relation (and dependence) on the Bourdieu-influenced concept of subcultural capital (and distinction) should be quite obvious. Stevie Simkin suggests, "Authenticity is less an objectively measurable property than it is a token of cultural capital" (194). This is owing to the genre's lack of formal boundaries and stylistic or aesthetic solidification. It relies on the dual Bourdieuan concepts of cultural capital and distinction to remain understandable and relevant. Fox and Ching state, "While notoriously resistant to defining the genre, those who produce and promote the music resort to a discourse of cultural capital, evoking notions of discernment, art, and authenticity to distinguish this music from mere "products" of the mainstream music industry" (8). Through this, the tastemakers of the scene take precedence in guiding patterns of taste, relying on a discourse of authenticity to distinguish the genre from others. Subcultural capital's application to scenes and subcultures makes it more relevant for our discussion here. This will be expanded upon and then a case study will be offered. While it is tempting to say that alt.country is primarily concerned with the acquisition and display of adequate cultural capital, what is more pertinent to this thesis is Bourdieu's idea of distinction, as the act of knowing and understanding what is inherently valuable takes primary importance.

Within the alt.country subculture, there is information or activities that are valued by the scene, largely taking its cues from punk and country, which worked to influence it. As Lindholm writes, the idea of cultural capital represents a sort of social contract between the performer and the audience. "...Successful country artists cannot be wholly manufactured in the recording studio; they must play live music and entertain audiences in person. They have to go on tour, give revealing and intimate interviews to fan magazines, and make themselves readily available to their fans" (36). In alt.country, cultural capital can take either the embodied or objectified form (Bourdieu also discusses institutionalised cultural capital, which takes the form of education or degrees, but there appears to be no subcultural equivalent). Examples of embodied cultural capital within alt.country include, knowing personal details (emotional or familial details) about the musicians, a knowledge of the history of American country and folk musics, an appreciation among fans and musicians alike of traditional values. Somewhat paradoxically, vices and a depressed disposition also carry weight within this field. This all works to make this highly intertextual and reflexive genre more engaging. Those who can 'spot the reference' hold a larger amount of cultural capital here.

There are also many examples of objectified cultural capital (which initially seems at odds with the genre's self identified anti-commercial stance). For musicians, this can again take the form of dress or equipment. Vintage, aged, simple, and usually American crafted instruments (such as Fender or artisan guitar and amplification) are valued. This, in turn, is recognised by audience members with sufficient cultural capital. In relation to the members of this scene, they demonstrate differing amounts of cultural capital through ownership of records, merchandise, and their personal dress sense. Despite the music industry generally moving towards a digital format, the emphasis in alt.country remains on the physical object with releases on vinyl, special, limited, and tour editions almost considered norm within the scene.

Distinction is then required to make all this knowledge and information meaningful, both individually and collectively. There is no use or relevance in owning a rare Whiskeytown record, if the significance of the object is never realised. The key detail here is being able to talk about objects, events, and people in way that asserts your knowledge and is transferable within the subculture. The ability to converse, discuss opinions and views on alt.country artists is a key way in which cultural capital is displayed. It is also integral to externalising distinction and reinforcing your place within the scene. In this sense, as much as it is a project about asserting your knowledge, it also feeds into narratives of identification and identity formation. As Simkin writes,

In the absence of objective reasons for differentiation, the turn to country becomes what Cash called “A way of talking about choices- a way to look, a group to belong to, a kind of music to call [one’s] own”: an exercise in what Bourdieu calls “distinction”, an attempt to amass what Thornton calls “subcultural capital” (67).

Listening to and engaging with popular music is always a choice, and is usually a stylised and ideological decision that listeners are drawn to because of musical, aesthetic, and ideological factors; things that they think make this music both distinctive and works allegorically to assert their own difference. What Bourdieu’s work here can account for is lifestyle factors that inevitably inform this choice. And, as we will see in a later chapter, alt.country has a revelatory function for the musicians as much as it does the audience, which contributes to the pleasure found in the genre.

JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE: A CASE STUDY

Alt.country musician and revivalist Justin Townes Earle exemplifies all of these issues well. His music is a combination of country, gospel, blues, and folk with a distinct raw punk edge. But he embodies and objectifies the character and persona of the alt.country spirit, showing the characteristics of alt.country as well as any of the other loosely collected artists. It is however the cultural capital

to make his music meaningful, understandable, and ultimately more enjoyable that I wish to concentrate on here. He offers a workable case study of the embodiment and objectification of cultural capital, and what knowledge is valued within the subculture, on both the production and consumption sides of the equation. The issues surrounding reproduction will also be addressed, as I alluded to alt.country's troubled relationship with this previously.

Continuing from the previous discussion surrounding the specifics of embodied and objectified cultural capital within alt.country, Justin Townes Earle offers some particularly telling characteristics of these qualities. Again, institutionalised cultural capital will be put to one side, but it is crucial to consider that a *lack* of institutionalised cultural capital is valued here. Embodied cultural capital is accumulated over time and requires considerable effort and individual investment (hence its uneven distribution). While this bears similarity to the 'hard labour' rhetoric addressed in his lyrics, it is more accurately expressed in interviews when alt.country artists discuss the energy and effort it took to write a particular song or album. As Justin Townes Earle exemplifies:

"I'm a cocktail napkin writer," he says. "I tend to have five or six songs going at once, especially when I'm working on a record. It helps with the continuity." He writes with the big picture in mind: how the album will play, how the songs will complement one another and form a narrative. "I wrote *Harlem River Blues* in sequence. I had the song 'Rogers Park' already, so I put that at the end and write towards it. It's like a thesis: You have a hard beginning, middle, and end, and only the most important information is necessary" (Deusner 'The Son Also Rises' 2).

This evokes Bourdieu's requirement of the personal cost of cultural capital. Songwriting here is represented as a particularly arduous task, but a necessary one. It also shows physical investment and the embodiment qualities of the genre.

Specifically with Justin Townes Earle this narrative of embodiment is usually depicted through the dual lenses of the family and drug abuse. His songs frequently address the trouble of living in his father's shadow ('Mama's Eyes', for example). His father, Steve Earle has been a foundational and creative member of the country revival since the 1970s. Indeed, Bourdieu suggests that family connections are a determining factor in cultural capital. There have been many instances when fame and popularity in the country scene is owed largely (or completely) to family lineage. Peterson even suggests that, "... being able to show a family heritage in country music is perhaps the strongest asset among authenticity claims" (219). This is certainly the case with Justin Townes Earle, starting in his father Steve Earle's backing band and graduating to a solo career, almost every press article on Justin Townes Earle mentions his father and his music, working to validate Justin Townes Earle's output, through association. A photo shoot taken for *American Songwriter* strongly suggested that, by feeding off each other, they both possess high amounts of embodied cultural capital that is valued within the scene. Related to hereditary factors is Justin Townes Earle's name itself. His debt to his father is obvious in the form of the surname. But 'Townes' is an embodiment of the genre and a pertinent reference to musical history. Of course referencing Townes Van Zandt (one of country's most troubled and influential songwriters) places Justin Townes Earle within a musical history that his songs must ultimately align with. In a live recording he says, "... Speaking of drinking too much, the late great Townes Van Zandt once said that you cannot do a set without a blues. . .", he then proceeds to play a Lightnin' Hopkins' song, dedicating it to Van Zandt (*Live at the Newport Folk Festival*, 2011). This demonstrates that he has been influenced by Townes Van Zandt, in terms of music and the expected trajectory of a country musician.

Obvious allusions to drugs, alcohol, women, and other vices are a common and respected factor in alt.country (in this way it is similar to psychedelic rock). Embodiment of the genre in this regard comes from following the line of respected musicians that have come before them, such as Hank

Williams, Townes Van Zandt, Gram Parsons, and Waylon Jennings (interestingly, these struggles with vices are specifically gendered). Justin Townes Earle has written many songs about his own addiction (“Slippin’ and Slidin’”, for example (*Harlem River Blues* 2010)) and has been very candid in the magazine interviews, working to ensure a high degree of cultural capital and authenticity.

I shot heroin and smoked crack for years,” he says, “and you know who that hurt? That hurt me. We do damage to the people around us with our drug problems, but we don’t ever hurt anybody more than we hurt ourselves. I think junkies forget that, and I think that’s what kills them most of the time. I’m the one who has to live with the fact that my liver’s f***ed up at 29 years old and I’m probably going to have a heart attack when I’m in my mid thirties. That’s why I tend to be pretty cavalier about it. It’s my problem, and I deal with it myself. Other people like to make my problems their problems, but that’s their f***ing choice” (Duesner ‘The Son Also Rises’ 3).

He is also revelatory in live performances, divulging personal details about his childhood and his past.

I like to drink. . .A lot. I like to drink in the morning. I prefer vodka straight. I know a lot of people like beer, but that just doesn’t work fast enough. I also like to do cocaine, and a lot of it. And I like to do that in the morning too. I also like to eat painkillers. A shit load of painkillers. And you can see this being a problem. . . (*Live at the Newport Folk Festival*, 2011).

Also evident in this performance is the yelps and cheers of approval from the crowd, taking pleasure in this persona, which Renee Dechert says musicians cultivate in order to generate appeal (‘Recorded Music and Rhetorical Analysis 49).

Objectified cultural capital is material objects that through use and recognition bestow cultural capital onto the user. If we return to Justin Townes

Earle's on-stage persona, it offers a good example of that. As we have already mentioned, alt.country musicians require particular instruments, in order to objectify the required cultural capital. Earle's 'beat up' guitar and simple range of accessories (a capo and a harmonica) objectify the familiar narrative of struggle and poverty that surrounds the country/blues musician, as well as the enduring importance of their music fundamentally demonstrating a 'lack'. Typically alt.country musicians do not have sophisticated, high technology instruments or recording devices and what they do have is widely used within the genre. His supporting musicians, a double bassist and a fiddler player speaks to the traditional blues set up, and again is a good example of this objectification.

Following Dechert's assertion of the musicians' constructed persona, Justin Townes Earle also represents his character through costume. Earle's physical presence and on-stage posturing is reminiscent of the outlaw country artists. His suits, shirts, wide-brimmed hats, and technique of leaning down towards the microphone are all reminiscent and obvious invocations to the legend of Hank Williams, owing partly to their similar build. Here the hard country narrative discussed by Peterson is both embodied and objectified by Earle to accrue cultural capital in a way that is relevant and enjoyable to his intended audience. As Gracyk writes, this isn't uncommon.

Musicians project an identity by situating themselves in relation to other musicians. Listeners derive meanings and value from popular music by contributing cultural capital to the process-which seems to imply that their own identity as members of a certain audience depends on the ability of others to employ cultural capital situating them properly (35). Thus, it is an important process for both the audience and the musicians. These forms (and especially embodied cultural capital) speak to the authenticity of the performer. This is the overarching rhetoric of the genre. Embodiment takes a conscious, personal effort and by extension, a commitment to the field to accrue and maintain. It must also be considered genuine to be accepted and transferable within the field. Again, with the objectified cultural capital, correct use of the

‘right’ objects is placed in high esteem, which in the case of alt.country involves a backward-looking technique to making music in the current context.

REPRODUCTION

Alt.country, as a highly intertextual genre represents an unusual nexus of authenticity, reproduction, and tradition. In order to be deemed authentic within the subculture, a sound knowledge of tradition and what has come before is needed. Moreover, if typical alt.country musicians extend or develop their sound too much, they are deemed to be “sell outs”. A thin line between copying and reproduction is frequently treaded. Musicians are required to respect traditions while simultaneously exploring some new sounds. Justin Townes Earle effectively acts as an intertext. Visually evoking his father and Hank Williams and sonically alluding to Townes Van Zandt, Bruce Springsteen, or Buddy Holly (depending on the song). To know and recognise these musical references and his stylistic (fashion and showmanship-wise) resemblance to Hank Williams, requires a wide knowledge of music and history, not just of country music. This contributes to the discourses of alt.country fans as music lovers themselves, demonstrating an appreciation of “all” music. This shows the need for the ‘right’ kind of cultural capital and distinction to render it relevant. But importantly, this needs to be recognised by the audience and by the critics to have any power. “For alt-country, the method of appropriation and use of past styles is perfectly acceptable for an audience seeking some sort of link to a perceived authentic experience of past performers, rural life, or hard living” (Turnbull 140). Indeed it may be a more useful resource for these groups as they take pleasure in knowing and displaying their capital than it is to Earle, who is in a relative position of power, whose cultural capital (at least for the moment) is not being called in to question.

This case study of (sub)cultural capital and its relationship with alt.country (especially in relation to production) illuminates many of the

elements of cultural capital or knowledge that alt.country (and country) music concerns itself with and values. There is also a highly personalised aspect of alt.country, which I am attempting to account for in mobilising Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. But as Frith and Hesmondhalgh have reminded us, the experience of popular music is nothing if not a personal one. Within alt.country, highly specified personal details are divulged in an informal way (in magazine articles, through performances, or by using the typical country music tool of the conversational interlude) that are subsequently valued by audience and other musicians. This is due to a few hard living musicians (Hank Williams and Gram Parsons, primarily) creating particular expectations within the field, but even their stories of hard living and debauchery have been exaggerated over the years. However, what is fundamental is that this information would not be valued similarly elsewhere. But it is transferable and exchangeable within this subculture.

Both Bourdieu and Thornton's work on cultural capital speaks to the concept of authenticity. In alt.country a high degree of authenticity on behalf of the artists will (always) equate with a high degree of cultural capital. This is owing in part to the highly self-referential aspects of the genre. Thus, depending on a musician's place within the industry (speaking from a commercial/artistic standpoint here), they will get the right to speak for a community. The opposite is also true. If an individual displays a low amount of authenticity, it is likely that they have a limited amount of cultural capital, which is not valued by the genre. Though there is an effort from gatekeepers to determine these issues collectively, authenticity is largely dependent on an individual's habitus or their place within culture and history (which varies from person to person).

General rules about which artists display the highest amount of cultural capital can be largely agreed upon, but never guaranteed. An example of this is the British band Mumford and Sons. The English press largely agree they are part of the new wave of English alt.country artists, along with Lightspeed Champion and Noah and the Whale. Many members of this subculture have

argued against this (on the *No Depression* forum, for example), especially after their appearance on the Grammy Awards with Bob Dylan and the Avett Brothers. This attempt to assert a particular type of narrative onto Mumford and Sons, bringing them ‘into the fold’ through the rhetoric of music, community, and authority, largely failed. As we will see, because of the high experiential reliance and emotive qualities of the genre, musicians, journalists, and other gatekeepers often have less power than they think in canonising alt.country. While there are efforts to guide opinion from *No Depression*, conceptions of alt.country remain mostly individual, relying on an individuals’ habitus and particularly their cultural context to make it meaningful. As such the magazine has made a concerted effort when discussing alt. country to speak personally and to represent ‘the people’, an unusual technique within the mainstream music press.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MUSIC PRESS AND A CASE STUDY OF *NO DEPRESSION*

The music press acts as a primary instrument in the articulation and dissemination of values and knowledge that renders popular music a unique entity. The music critic favours artists and releases which represent cultural value, acting as integral tastemakers for the audience. The music critic offers an example of cultural capital in action, as critics both bestow cultural capital on artists and usually possess a large amount of it themselves. This chapter will give both Bourdieu and Thornton's work discussed in the previous chapter a different focus. After charting the history of both the music press and the music critic, alt.country and its seminal publication, *No Depression* magazine, will be introduced to comment on the dynamic between music critics, their readers and authenticity, suggesting that while critics are still influential tastemakers due largely to their respected position within the scene, individuals' perception of the genre will be inflected by their own understandings.

THE MUSIC PRESS: THE CRITIC AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN THE ART FORM AND THE PRACTICE OF LISTENING

The cultural work done by the critic is central to any discussion of popular music and its relationship to Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and distinction. The music critic's main function is to make music understandable. They also facilitate the comprehension of art and sounds through words, utilising their acquired knowledge. Thus it is a project in the display of distinction (or cultural capital), as they determine who or what is valued through creating and maintaining "aesthetic hierarchies" (Hesmondhalgh 'Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre' 59), which, due to their position of symbolic cultural power, are generally uncontested. They are instrumental in constructing and maintaining what have already been identified as arbitrary genre boundaries. Others agree that the critic is primarily a fan of music

(Atton 53 and Frith *Performing Rites* 167). While this is true, their superior and specialised knowledge is mobilised to create and sustain popular opinion. They are fundamental gatekeepers of the elusive quality of authenticity and through this have historically placed value (or otherwise) upon music. What also needs to be acknowledged is the constraints of this cultural work. We should be careful not to overstate the critic's influence on wider society, as reading and engaging with music criticism is a highly specified and concentrated activity. This is despite Frith's contestation that rock critics' opinions will eventually trickle down in to wider society: "Music papers, indeed, are important even for those people who don't buy them- their readers act as the opinion leaders, the rock interpreters, the ideological gatekeepers for everyone else" (*Sound Effects* 165). Kembrew McLeod's suggestion that in today's mediascape the critic acts as a modern version of Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual is an assertion I wish to elaborate on here, as it is integral to complicating the notion of the music critic and determining their capacity to direct opinion today. The music critic as organic intellectual arguably directs and negotiates tastes, through the demonstration of superior knowledge.

Despite this history and their parallel position to developments and trends in popular music, the critic is underrepresented (and perhaps more concerningly undervalued) in academic discourse. Scholarly treatment of popular music instead usually focuses on issues of identity, social change or globalisation, in the form of micro-level case studies, which are then mobilised to draw wider conclusions, usually without considering the fundamental role of critic in these developments. In his exhaustive bibliography of music criticism, B. Lee Cooper includes very few works from the 21st century, despite his bibliography's recent published date (2010). The majority of seminal work on the subject was published either in the 1970s, much of which by Robert Christgau, when the form was being established, or in the 1990s. However *Popular Music and Society's* special issue on the topic (2010) suggests that it is again becoming an

interesting and fashionable topic. The tension between the traditional print press and the new internet-based forms offers potential rationale for this.

The critic has a largely axiomatic position within the musical landscape that is formative of genres or scenes. As Roy Shuker suggests it is not until recently that the music critic has begun to receive any kind of prominence in this regard (*Understanding Popular Music Culture* 83). Frith though acknowledged that the critic is necessary, with an important role in teaching the public values and how to listen (*Performing Rites* 64-7). This echoes more recent suggestions of the critic as an organic intellectual (Powers and McLeod, for example). Putting this aside, the absence of the critic from scholarly work could begin to be accounted for by a tension between the critics and cultural academics. Their treatment of popular culture is similar, their work insists on the seriousness and inherent value of popular culture, perhaps in such a way as they feel that it is not necessary to acknowledge the theoretical space of one another. Work that has concentrated on the critic tends to consolidate around the issue of authenticity (Weisenhaunet and Lindberg, McLeod, McLeese, and Frith, for example). In much of this work, the critic acts as both a pillar of authenticity and importantly is required to maintain authenticity themselves. As Weisenhaunet and Lindberg suggest, their work will only maintain respect if their motives for writing are considered to be for the love of music, rather than for the financial reward or notoriety. Here the dynamics of authenticity mirror that of popular music itself.

While this is indeed an important element to understanding the critic and is fundamental to my later discussion on *No Depression*, the point I wish to draw out here is the critic's role in consolidating genres, subgenres, and scenes, which functions primarily due to their authentic, thus trusted, opinion and their position as an organic intellectual. Their role assisting to formalise a scene is less emphasised in academic writing, but it is often suggested or implied. Brennan notes the role of the music critic in genre labelling (225) and creating a buzz (228). Another aspect often neglected in academic accounts is the idea that music

criticism on one level represents creative expression and opinion, but on the other represents labour. As much as they enjoy it, the rock critic writes for employment or reward (either financial or for cultural capital), which is set against the undeniable backdrop of the commercial journalistic system. Other critics seen to operate outside this commercial frame, such as contributors to fanzines and blogs, are also defined by commercial choices, in regards to advertisements, coverage or by their distinctly anti-commercial stance. In the following discussion, the music critic and their function will be historically located as this informs their function today. Then the music critic will be problematised, mobilising Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual and considering the industry's commercial imperatives. The purpose of this is to illuminate the nexus at which the critic operates; between commercialism, knowledge, and authenticity. This has an important role in determining who and what is important for each genre. As my further analysis will address, it is even more important for niche, community-based genres such as alt.country, as demonstrated through *No Depression* and its critics.

The role of the critic is fundamentally straightforward. They provide information about artists, genres, albums, singles, and live events and present it to their readers in a dynamic, engaged, personal, and authentic manner. Most often through this, readers learn other information or facts about the artist or the state of popular music more generally, that is illuminated by the critic. Ian Inglis notes that "for consumers of popular music, a significant part of our knowledge and information has traditionally come (at least initially) less from direct experience and more through the mediated opinion and interpretations offered by the press (431). Additionally patterns of taste seem to settle around (or because of) them. Frith suggests that music papers (and by extension, the critics that write for these papers) are important, even for the people that don't read them, because their readers, following the lead of the critics, act as opinion leaders. Thus, music critics are what Frith calls "ideological gatekeepers for everyone else" (*Sound Effects* 165). Indeed, music publications and criticism have a

formative role in directing the genre towards particular aesthetic characteristics through favouritism, positive reviews or simply through the quantity of coverage.

An important (and I would consider under-emphasised) part of this equation is an acknowledgement of the autonomy of their readers. Engaging with music criticism is a choice and a way to spend leisure time, which works to put the critics' influence in perspective. An interesting stance on precisely these issues is offered by Kembrew McLeod, who places emphasis on the patterns of discourse, suggesting that the practice of criticism is more important than the content of it. "It is the *cumulative effect* of this patterned discourse – not the influence of a particular critic or piece of writing – that is most important in my analysis of rock criticism" (56). A similar sentiment is echoed by one of the most well-known music critics, Lester Bangs. In a personal interview, he questions the critics' credentials and thus their ability to influence wider popular culture.

I think everybody's a critic, to the extent that when you go into a record store and you decide to buy this one over that one, you're being a rock critic. I don't have any more credentials than anyone else. What I would say for myself is everybody knows my prejudices. I'm not God and just because I write something doesn't make it wrong or right, and I think that being a rock critic a lot of times—the impetus for me and a lot of people I knew was that we really love rock 'n' roll and wanted to talk about it. . .

(‘Everyone’s a Rock Critic: The Lost Lester Bangs Interview’).

This is in line with Shuker's suggestion that, "there is general agreement that music critics don't exercise as much influence on consumers as say, literary or drama critics (*Understanding Popular Music Culture* 95). Music critics' assessments are only understood by those who were already going to buy the album, already actively involved in that particular scene or as Shuker suggests are limited financially (*Understanding Popular Music Culture* 95). Relating to the efficacy and influence of music critics, Frith says, "As a particular type of gatekeeper, rock critics play a significant role in shaping the representation of

artists for an admittedly small, but influential, population, as well as establishing an artist's place in music history. . ." (qtd. in McLeod 47). Additionally, I will argue that rock critics function as a modern manifestation of Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals', who articulate the ideas held by the society of which they are a part. Importantly, various observers agree that the critic acts in a gatekeeping capacity, directing and guiding opinion.

Frith interestingly suggests that music criticism is about knowledge and knowing. This is an aspect of his work I wish to expand upon here as it encompasses many relevant aspects for this discussion. Critics work to create a knowing and knowable community based on exclusion and performance, echoing Bourdieu's work on distinction and previous discussion on genre. Music criticism is about creating a 'knowing community' and creating a superiority (Frith *Performing Rites* 67). This is in terms of a hierarchy of artists and releases, an assumed superiority between the critic and reader/listener, and a knowledge of previous music and of the cultural history more generally. Furthermore, both reader and critic are aware of their predefined roles and the dynamics of this appeal to knowledge; either the acquisition of knowledge or display of it.

Within the popular music field, the critic occupies a position of power, owing largely to their knowledge about popular culture, combined with their ability to structure and organise their knowledge in such a way that is informative to its audience, enjoyable to read and is often metonymical of other political/social/cultural issues. As Frith writes, "the critic is, in this respect, a fan (most rock writers start in fanzines, most are, indeed, collectors), with a mission to preserve a perceived quality of sound, to save musicians for themselves, to define the ideal musical experience for musicians to measure themselves against" (*Performing Rites* 67). There is a link between the musician and the audience, there is taste and capital required to decode music, with the critic acting as the intermediary. Furthermore, the listener is aware of this relationship, precisely because the act of engaging with music criticism is active. As mentioned

previously, one seeks out criticism, it is never just simply there and as such this activity is always negotiated by the readers. “Rock criticism, in short makes arguments about audiences as well as about sounds, about the way in which music works as a social event” (*Performing Rites* 68). Here, knowledge is almost entirely bound to the politics of cultural capital. As Don McLeese suggests, not possessing the adequate cultural references might prevent aspiring journalists from entering the field of music criticism altogether (436). The critic’s knowledge is the fundamental reason why they are employed and often paid for their critical output, but it is also from this that a respect and appreciation of their opinion is acknowledged.

The music critic is a primary gatekeeper and key organisational figure within popular music discourse. Through their coverage and writing, they determine and guide consumer taste (the ideological ramifications of this will be discussed later in reference to Gramsci’s work on the organic intellectual). Their gatekeeping role is fundamentally expressed through their work, signalling or suggesting what is or will be popular, definitive, well-liked, and what shows artistic merit (and what ambiguous terms like “artistic merit” and “authenticity” actually mean). Their right to signal future popularity and success is predicated on their superior knowledge that readers recognise, yielding power within this context. Identifying and heralding “good” music through positive reviews and coverage, and panning (or ignoring) those which they do not see as valuable, shows both the critics’ fundamental role and how they *make* taste. As Shuker states, music is not simply the subject of the magazines and their features, “they are also purveyors of style and taste” (*Popular Music: The Key Concepts* 224). The difficulty comes when the magazines “continue to maintain their more traditional function of contributing to the construction of audiences as consumers” (*Popular Music: The Key Concepts* 224). This is a difficulty that will be expanded upon later. Importantly, “The critic became necessary as an expert, as someone who could explain the music to the public, teach it how to listen. The music/listener gap was taken for granted and the critic was by definition on the

artist's side, champion of the new and the difficult" (Frith *Performing Rites* 64-5). Thus the critic is an intermediary between the art form and the practice of listening.

A HISTORY OF THE CRITIC

Historically, the popular music critic has functioned in a different way. While the classical music critic operated in a capacity comparable to modern criticism by the late 19th century, offering personal opinions, perspectives, and sometimes speaking outside the frame of the music on which they were providing a critique, popular music looked very different for much of the 20th century. Music publications offered little criticism or insight into artists or releases; the content was solely informational. As Frith states, in the 1950s the circulation of music publications grew, as both those directly involved in the industry and music fans wanted to find out more information about the industry. However, "Such publications provided no perspective on the music they covered; they had no developed critical position. . ." (Frith *Sound Effects* 167). The British and American popular music press have developed concurrently, largely in a response to the commercial success of pop and rock in the 1950s, but tend to maintain different foci. McLeod, discussing Toynbee's work argues that the rationale for this lies partly in government policy. Britain has maintained two nationally distributed weekly music publications since the 1950s, *Melody Maker* and *NME*, (*NME* is still published weekly while *Melody Maker* ceased publication in 2000). Historically, these papers were highly influential in directing opinion and providing information about new artists and releases, partly owing to the BBC's dissemination of new music. "Because of the BBC's role as the monopoly radio provider in Britain, the promotional/filtering function of US Top 40 radio was taken up by these British 'inkies'" (Toynbee qtd. in McLeod: 48).

Much of what we expect the function of music criticism to be and to do for us came from other genres and from early fanzines, whose rhetoric and ideas permeated popular discourse. Shuker states, “A major part of the historical development of music criticism was in jazz and the blues, where critics established some of the norms which later shaped the field more generally. Subsequently, other genres established their own body of work and associated key publications” (*Popular Music: The Key Concepts* 223). This important role of the music publication will be revisited in relation to *No Depression* and what can be seen to be the publication’s determining role in directing and influencing the genre. Jazz writers also influenced the perceived social function of the critic. As Devon Powers writes, “. . . Early writers about rock music were concerned with far more than aesthetics, using their writing to voice social commentary – following the lead of jazz critics who were similarly engaged with that genre the decade before – that would reveal important themes about rock and society” (539-40).

Additionally, Frith suggests that fanzines and the underground press of the 1960s and their emotional and sociological responses to popular music later became the requirement for all press and music criticism (*Sound Effects* 169). However, he is careful not to overstate their influence and recognises publication-specificity.

NME (like *Creem* in America) tends towards sociological responses to rock, valuing music for its effects on an audience rather than its creators’ intentions or skills; the meaning of rock consumption for *NME* writers lies not in the goods themselves, in their properties as music or art, but in their consumers’ participation in a particular form of culture. *Rolling Stone* (and *Melody Maker* in Britain) make, more clearly, an artistic response to music: music is valued for its complexity, musicians for their intensity of feeling (*Sound Effects* 172).

On the other hand, the underground press represents music on their terms. As Atton says, “Fanzines choose their subjects – and their terms by which they

identify and classify and make sense of those subjects – from an ideological perspective that enables the music and musicians to be organized aesthetically by audiences as a coherent set of pleasures” (524). However, it could also be suggested that the underground press presents a more cultural and aesthetic absolute, which easily finds a niche audience. For these publications then, popular music commentary and relevance to its readership provides a means to remain afloat, commercially. The constraints of this will be discussed momentarily.

THE MUSIC CRITIC: ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL?

As already has been asserted, music critics work to cultivate taste for a small group. As McLeod says, “Rock critics play a significant role in shaping the representations of artists for an admittedly small, but influential, population, as well as establishing an artist’s place in music history” (47). However within the niche culture in which their work disseminates and settles in, they possess a great deal of influence. Here we are reminded of earlier discussion that the critic primarily preaches to the converted. This particular form of influence needs to be accounted for ideologically. Italian cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘organic intellectuals’ can be mobilised here to begin to account for the music critics’ usefulness and their role in wider society. Gramsci says that,

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (77).

Thus every group indicates individuals (formally or informally) who are the gatekeepers that do significant cultural work for the masses. Their work to guide public opinion on cultural issues is taken seriously, or at least appreciated, and often represents the beginning of a dialogue about these issues. This work suggests that music critics operate on a higher plane than the rest of society,

owing to their ability to think, luminate, write, and communicate with wider society. This speaks directly to the intersection of the critic, cultural capital, and popular music, yet it is a point rarely discussed. McLeod raised it in his work on North American music criticism, but left this useful point to germinate in his introduction in favour of discussing issues of music criticism and gender. Devon Powers has also discussed the concept recently, arguing that rock critics, especially those based in New York in the 1960s, should be reimagined as modern public intellectuals (2010). More common is the function of the organic intellectual within the field of the media, more generally, such as Park's treatment (2006), but its interaction with popular music is still largely undefined.

Through Gramsci's work, organic or public intellectuals are largely seen to act as amplification to the publically held opinion or voice. As Powers writes, rock criticism has historically functioned in this capacity,

Through use of rock criticism as a medium by which to tackle the collective questions that lay in the social, cultural, political, and economic transformations of the American 1960s, youthful rock critics engendered a vibrant discussion, both among themselves as well as with their readership, which countered the widespread demonisation of mass culture that the older generation levied (535).

Thus, it bears a very close resemblance to the role of the tradition role of the public intellectual. As Edward Said suggests,

Many people still feel the need to look at the writer-intellectual as someone who ought to be listened to as a guide to the confusing present, and also as a leader of a faction, tendency, or group vying for more power and influence. The Gramscian provenance of both these ideas about the role of an intellectual is evident (20).

Drawing on Gramsci's work, I argue that the concept of the public intellectual allows the critic to be invested with more political, cultural, and emotive power than the academy has given to them before. Considering the critic within this frame accounts for the ways in which their work directs taste and helps

individuals to form opinions about culture, and as such represents an important facet of life. Critics are integral to organising cultural life and leisure time. This position as a cultural intermediary expects them to maintain influence outside the realm of popular music and contribute to other forms of discourse. However, there are restrictions to consider. The idea of preaching to the converted seems to permeate work on public intellectuals (Park 120). This alludes to the limited amount of influence public intellectuals have generally; it is highly confined to their social group. The precise reason the critics can make taste is because they occupy a similar position, with their opinion already respected by this very limited group of people.

As should be obvious from this discussion, the function of music criticism and its formative role in and on musical discourse is an appreciated but under-researched element of the history of popular music. Its influential role is usually ignored to make space for discussions of aesthetics or the cultural industries and their relation to popular music. However, music journalism itself demonstrates many of the constraints, limitations and possibilities that make its study illuminating. As the music critic operates within the journalistic field, they are subject to similar pressures, in relation to time and resource constraints, as print news journalists are. Perhaps more interesting is the aspect of their careers that Don McLeese's work illuminates. His article importantly emphasises the economic pressures and constraints which may be reflected in the final product. This is important to bear in mind, especially when considering the critic as an organic intellectual. The critic is usually represented within popular culture as a noble, lofty, mysterious, and desirable figure (McLeese notes these sorts of qualities are used to describe the vocation by those of his students who are aspiring music critics (436-8)). But there are many factors that will inevitably influence their final output. Their ability to act in the full capacity of directing opinion and taste may be impinged by both time and resource pressures, as well as the publication's commercial (and possibly political) affiliations. The publication's audience will also need to be taken into account. In a commercial

environment, the editor largely sees the critic function to write for the audience and sustain the reader's attention. As Frith writes of *Rolling Stone*'s readership, it had a commercial appeal due to its mostly male, white and well-off readership, which was a demographic that interested record companies (*Sound Effects* 171). Thus, in the editors' eyes, the critic has a fundamental role in maintaining this. What then needs to be assessed as we consider the role of the music critic in generating and bestowing authenticity, credibility, and respect to artists in *No Depression* magazine is how the critic may be able to operate as a conflation of both a commercial capacity and a lofty organic intellectual one.

A CASE STUDY OF *NO DEPRESSION*

No Depression (ND) magazine was born out of a peer-to-peer message board, comprised of a collection of individuals who appeared to display a common interest in left-of-centre country music. As Peterson and Beal write of this period "As stated on Postcard2 (P2) the leading List Serve devoted to the genre, alternative country consists primarily of "those groups that have followed the pioneering insurgent country band, Uncle Tupelo, by mixing indie-rock aggression with country twang" (235). The move from a web-based community to a print magazine in 1995 appeared to be an obvious choice. The magazine offered a key way to monetise its popularity, with the magazine being a popular medium at the time of its inception. *ND*, in its print form became the seminal magazine for alt.country news and information, especially following the demise of *Country Music* magazine in 2003. Following this, the contributors to the critics' poll suggest that, "*No Depression* had become - quite by default, by accident - one of the last places where serious criticism of country might regularly be published". *ND* offered an interesting collection of new artists, as well as older, more established musicians and nostalgic accounts of the past, identifying their personal experience through interviews and a concentration on reissues, attesting to the fact that the past also inflects the present in this magazine. These qualities contextualise both the music and the genre in relation to

the past, identifying the cultural history and context in which this music occurs. As Gracyk writes, “for both musicians and audience, the construction of meaningful identity demands a historical perspective on the music as a dialogue with the past, not just the present scene” (35). In this way, the magazine heavily took its cues from the genre.

As the magazine’s editors suggest, *ND*’s aim was to cover “good” music with enduring merit (Alden and Blackstock viii). However, much like the genre itself, they always kept the parameters wide and vague, allowing (and encouraging) disparate artists such as popular artists like Mandy Moore and Kasey Chambers, clean-cut country artists Lyle Lovett and indie darlings such as the Shins and Sufjan Stevens to be featured within the pages of the magazine throughout its print run. In fact, it seems that this diversity offered the primary enjoyment and entertainment that came from the publication. As the editors of *ND* state, it is not their responsibility to compartmentalise music.

We are not biologists. It is not our purpose to identify, quantify, and codify a subgenus called alt-country, or to limit ourselves to its study. . . It *is* our purpose to write and assign articles about artists whose work is of enduring merit. And, yes, those artists have some tangential relationship (at least to our ears) to whatever country music may have been - even to what it may be now (viii).

However, what is assumed through this coverage is that all artists and releases that are featured in the pages are fundamentally valued and ‘tell us’ something about the genre. In this way it is an incredibly selective and editorialised version of music history and of the genre.

Because of this, alt.country through the lens of *ND* becomes a synonym for “good” music that appears to operate outside of the mainstream, that doesn’t fit neatly into other established and formalised genre boundaries (and certainly the journalist’s assertions would also stress this point). The magazine prided itself on its wide-ranging and non-dismissive taste. Much like the genre, which

Ching and Fox say, was initially resistant to label itself as ‘alt. country’ (8). Notions of distinction and value become important here. This is where cultural capital also enters the equation, helping to define both the magazine and the genre. The correct tools of evaluation are needed to know what ‘good’ music in this cultural environment is. Through the reliance on the characteristics defined previously; family, instrumentation, history, previous output, emotional depositions and other cultural factors, the magazine’s writers determine which particular artists are useful and valuable to the genre. The magazine and its journalists are similarly reliant on cultural capital. As Hans Weisethanunet and Ulf Lindberg suggest “The idea of “authenticity”—sometimes verbalized in terms like “integrity,” “honesty,” “sincerity,” “credibility,” “genuineness,” and “truthfulness”—is central not only in writings on (pop, rock, and classical) musical value and significance, but also in recurring debates about the role of music journalism” (465). Acting as an intermediary between the music event and the audience and assisting them to make it understandable, writers are required to acquire and retain a high amount of esteem and respect (cultural capital). The magazine did this within the genre through its writers operating in an ever-changing nexus of professionalism, perceived amateurism, and a postured anti-commercialist stance.

This represents a very specific kind of authenticity, primarily related to the status and pleasure that is rendered by having the correct cultural capital and tools of distinction to make this information meaningful. It is useful to both the producer (commercially) and the consumer (culturally). An overview of *ND* demonstrates the current manifestations of authenticity, specifically in regard to alt.country and how the representation of this concept changed over time. In the music press, the concept of authenticity is intertwined with the genre. The broad collection of artists deemed to be indicative of alt.country do not necessarily share musical qualities, but they do share an emotional resonance, genuine sentiment and behaviour which is required of the scene. Regardless of the specifics of this intersection, its function can be seen as an attempt to obscure

the commercial realities of the magazine, the enterprise, and the genre more broadly. The manifestations of this obscurity evident in the magazine and website illuminates a wider issue that the genre also struggles with; maintaining and reproducing authenticity within a capitalist framework in a way that continually makes sense and is relevant to the audience (both old and new).

OPERATING AT A NEXUS OF PROFESSIONALISM, PERCEIVED AMATEURISM, AND ANTI-COMMERCIALISM

ND represents an intersection of three main factors; professionalism, perceived amateurism, and commerciality. The magazine in both its print and online formats appears eager to represent itself as being ‘of the people’ and for the fans. The indeterminate nature of its online content is an example of this. Professional contributors or writers from the print run are combined with fans and amateur writers, who all upload content and articles to the website, lending it an egalitarian atmosphere, allowing readers to judge writing on its merits and opinion, rather than because of reputation or perceived authority. This contributes to Peterson and Beal’s argument that the genre demonstrates a consumption-based aesthetic rather than an artist-based one (243-4). Therefore, the genre is largely what the audience make it (as has been discussed in the previous section). Although there are attempts from *ND* to guide or direct the audiences’ opinions and views, as the following analysis of *ND*’s entire print run shows, this is not always successful. I will posit that this is because of the precarious position in which the magazine sat. Though it was a commercial magazine, it had a distinct Do-It-Yourself (DIY) attitude in an attempt to keep its authority within the scene. After elaborating on this aesthetic through analysis of the magazine, the degree to which *ND* could have been considered as similar to a fanzine will be addressed, showing its anti-commercialist sentiments and aesthetics.

Certainly the magazine through featuring advertisements, promotional content, and the use of international printing and distribution outlets represented a professional and highly organised enterprise. However, in order to retain popularity and their cultural capital, the appearance of amateurism and an anti-capitalist stance was needed. Following traditional country music, its alternative counterpart shot from the hip, with slickness and professionalism being cast aside and replaced with expression, emotion and spontaneity. The readers of *ND* expected similar outlooks to be represented in the bi-monthly. Drawing on Davis Machin's (2010) tools of analysis and Renee Dechert's work on alt.country album covers ('Recorded Music and Rhetorical Analysis'), an assessment of the magazine's aesthetics gives the impression of the magazine that has been quickly and unprofessionally put together. Although it was a highly organised, a haphazard, disorganised aesthetic, and rebellious spirit characterised the magazine. The colour palette, consisting of a reliance on neutral tones evokes rural and rustic occupations, thematically similar to the music it represents. The tone of the magazine is dark and isolated, suggested by its colour palette as well as the photographs that are used. The photographs and images themselves are often black and white and have a grainy or mysterious quality. The heavy use of simple and large bulks of plain black and white text in a utility font is reminiscent of a newspaper or a community newsletter. It employs a comparatively small font for a magazine, which becomes even smaller in the reviews section. Here the concentration is on the publication's ability (and responsibility) to relay information that will benefit its readers, which is again reminiscent of a community newsletter.

Machin suggests an aesthetic rather than musical approach to genre and argues that aesthetics may offer clues to musical expectations. This is certainly the case with *ND*, as the magazine's aesthetics almost directly correspond with its musical equivalent. This is best expressed by the two most visually evident aspects of the magazine, the *ND* logo and the photos used throughout the magazine. The logo brings with it many associations or connotations about the

magazine and the genre more generally. Remaining relatively unchanged throughout the entire print run, the logo, usually in red or black, and all capital letters, has a heavy angular dark feeling, showing the tough, rebellious spirit of the magazine. As does the weathered, rustic feeling of the typeface. Although, the letters do not join or touch, they are very condensed, perhaps echoing the closeness and proximity of the genre itself and those within the scene. The logo's staunchness represents the unchangeable nature of the value of the music. The artists featured within the magazine's pages may change, but the inherent value of their music does not.

In relation to photographs, many promotion shots of artists are amateur-feeling, unfocused, and lacked a composed feel, such as the Old 97s cover photos on issue 21 which features a third of empty, black space and featured only the heads and torsos of the musicians. Photos can also often be uncomfortably and unprofessionally intimate, exemplified by Willie Nelson's cover on issue 53 or Lyle Lovett's cover on issue 47. In all these cases the artist is in the foreground and has the highest degree of salience. Throughout the pages of the magazine too, the artist and the photos are placed in a position that demands the reader's attention, working to put the focus squarely on the artist and those who make the music. However, it also works to make it quite image-focused, which the genre, although highly stylistically defined, does its best to try to avoid, at least rhetorically.

NO DEPRESSSION AS A FANZINE

Set against this background, it is possible to see *ND* functioning, or at least exhibiting, many significant characteristics of a fanzine. Through echoing this medium it gives it more weight as an instrument around which the genre can consolidate itself. Paradoxically through this, it can also contribute to the magazine's commercial success. Drawing heavily on Chris Atton's work on the fanzine, *Bucketfull of Brains (BoB)*, I wish to outline some of the fanzine's

qualities that *ND* represents (or wishes to be represent). Then, more importantly, ask why this may be the case. It must be recognised that fanzines are usually for love, not profit and that they choose their own subjects, in a way that it not influenced by commercial or political pressures. In relation to *ND*, their range of featured artists is broad and malleable, as is their treatment of them, but at the same time is rigidly ideologically defined. Atton's case study of *BoB* frequently recognised the role of the reader in the fanzine equation. '*BoB*'s genre-culture is socially constructed through aesthetic arguments that appear to be shared equally by writers, musicians, and readers" (530). I argue this is common in *ND* too, but is constantly being redefined or clarified, through encouragement from the magazine itself by interpellating and involving the readers directly, which is rare in the commercial publication landscape. Letters to the editor ("box full of letters") are heavily publicised and also voice dissent, disagreement, and challenges, especially in relation to the critics poll (perhaps this is why it was finally spilt between readers' and critics' poll in 2003), with this debate being encouraged and promoted by the magazine. This is reminiscent of a "democratic conversation" (Atton). As already discussed, the online environment offers a more telling example of the democratic conversation, where all contributors, editors, past contributors to *ND* and fans are all recognised equally.

Returning to the aesthetics of the magazine, *ND* follows the genre and employs what looks to be a Do-It-Yourself aesthetic; what Atton calls the "anti-design aesthetic" (518). It does not overtly appear to be clearly stylised, but through this it is actually highly defined. Following that the musicians of the scene need to dress and act as their fans do (Peterson and Beal 238), so too do *ND*'s journalists, whose work is to create the 'norm' and consolidate the scene. Their writing, though articulate still does not feel as if it has a professional polish to it. They are also generally self-effacing and lack conviction or trust in their own opinion. In the 2004 poll, they also don't seem to want to acknowledge their position of relative power and influence and instead take a disparaging tone. "Blame us, we voted", is attached to the end with a list of the critics ("The

Second Annual No Depression Critics' Poll”) This works to nullify their power through irony and self-deprecation. The magazine itself seems to have an uneasy relationship with music criticism. In the poll of 2007 for example, after the critics’ poll, it states, “But our readers insist these are really the top 50 albums of 2007” (“The Fifth Annual No Depression Critics' Poll”), perhaps recognising that the audience rather than the journalist does retain the power and influence of the music’s trajectory. While in reality the journalist represents a tastemaker of this scene and potentially has a lot of power to exert on the scene, it mustn’t feel as if they do. They often write in uncomplicated, conversational prose (promoting a dialogue between themselves and the reader, which will be expanded upon later), often tangential, detailing personal anecdotes. In order to retain their cultural capital and thus their privileged position within the scene, they must not be seen to operate at a position of power (in order to retain it). This all works to nullify their position and power as a critic. However, this is precisely why they are powerful and may give them additional influence within the scene.

This dynamic encourages the already prominent personal and conversational tones of the magazine’s writing. Rather than seriously and professionally considering music developments and releases, the writing of *ND* is at times awkwardly personal and rationale for these lists are always personally assessed. As Alden writes,

I will remember 2002 for the birth of my daughter, and the near death of my only brother, not for any grand musical revelations. That sentence may explain why I have felt myself turning inward this year, and why I have been so enormously pleased with small musical pleasures that have come my way” (“The Second Annual No Depression Critics' Poll”).

The concentration here is on this is the affect and emotion, rather than considering the artists critically and on criteria of musical skill and quality. Taking cues from the genre itself, the journalists seem both revelatory and self-deprecating and attempt to avoid having a watertight authority as a critic. They do not occupy the lofty space which the critic traditionally does in

other magazines. This ultimately gives them cultural capital and weight within this scene. The personality that is injected in to the magazine then lends the writing a conversational tone, which suggests that, at least in this setting, the purpose of the writing is to encourage dialogue and discussion, rather than handing down lofty assessment, isolated from its cultural context that may influence the music. A prime (and unusual) example of this is *ND*'s lack of a rating system for reviewed albums. Traditionally, releases are given a rating out of 5, 10 or a percentage, indicating how 'good' it is. Reissues within this context are also 'reviewed', sometimes considering its impact and successful and wider influence. However, these are absent from *ND*. There is no shortcut to cultural capital. In order for fans to be in the know, they must read the whole review and formulate some of their own ideas. This elludes more to a conversation between friends discussing a new release than it does a traditional dynamic of power. The reviews instead encourage a degree of engagement and (usually) require the audience to have sufficient cultural capital to recognise particular cultural references made by the reviewer. The end of year list is the only time in which releases are ranked and even then, as identified above, it is cloaked in the personal stories and cultural capital and as such would still not be relevant (or perhaps comprehensible) to the general public.

The DIY aesthetic and personal conversational tone works to negate the commercial imperatives of the magazine, although they were actually doing it to turn a profit. This works to put the journalist and audience on the same plane, stressing the 'for the love of music' ideology that runs through both the magazine and genre. It also emphasises the idea of community among the fans, undermining the organic intellectuals thesis in some respects. Like the genre, the magazine tends to act as if it is anti-commercialist; however their relationship to capitalism works to define the genre and magazine as much as many of its other characteristics. The magazine creates an audience for surprisingly specific advertisements, for banjos, harmonicas and other country instruments, *ND* merchandise, or advertisements for new album releases (Bloodshot Records and

Lost Highway Records are both highly featured). Although the audience would not like to think this and the critic would never allude to this, or address them as crassly as a 'consumer', there is no distinction between the content and advertisements and, given their aesthetic similarities, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference. Through this, any advertisement in *ND* acts as if it has been condoned by the gatekeepers of the magazine, giving it a high amount of credibility.

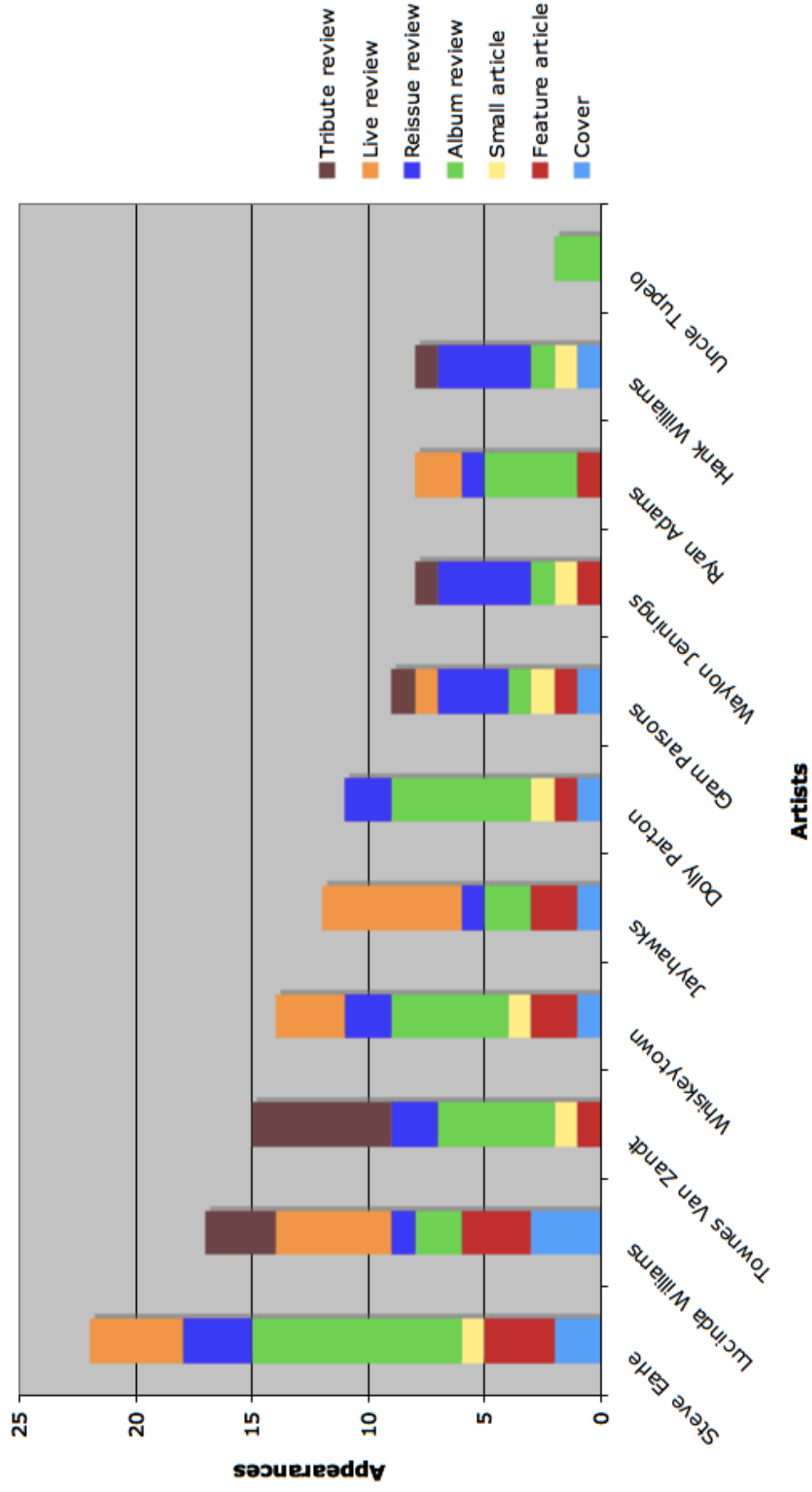
The *ND* website demonstrates a similar attitude towards commerciality. At the bottom right hand side of the site's homepage there is an advertisement for Amazon. This advertisement also features a search box for the Amazon site, above which it says, "When you shop at Amazon please support No Depression by entering through this search box" and "we make a percentage of every purchase". Here, they are being opaque about what they are selling you and how they are doing it, emphasising that it is a communal effort to remain operational. While *ND* remain vague, by not releasing the amount that goes to *ND*, it stills feels like the readers are privy to their commercial secrets (or lack of them). To continue to provide this service, there is an idea that everyone must work together. Again, this seems like a rebellious way to gain advertising revenue. It is also a little more insidious than that. *ND* is actually lending Amazon some cultural capital. The album/band featured in the banner at the top of the page also has a logo for Amazon, denoting that it is available on that website. Through the combination of these elements Amazon is then seen as authentic by the readers, viewed as a website that, by association, is interested in the sustainability and development of this musical community.

ANALYSIS OF *NO DEPRESSION*'S COVERAGE

A case study of who has been featured in the entire print run of the magazine and in what frequency is useful here as it suggests not only what music and aesthetics are valued, but can also begin to highlight more vague characteristics of the genre,

such as ideologies, emotion, values, and dispositions which are valued by the magazine. Here I will begin by offering a quantitative analysis of the magazine's entire print run. Due to constraints of time, "coverage" was defined as significant features, smaller features, album reviews, reissue reviews, live reviews or tribute concert reviews. While this does not account for all the coverage that an artist may receive (they may be mentioned in the letters to the editor page, or in reference to other artists or in other album reviews), it does begin offer a picture of the magazine and who it sees as significant. The artists chosen for analysis were either artists who are generally seen to be emblematic of the genre in popular music histories (such as Gram Parsons and Uncle Tupelo) or their excessive coverage was evident in an initial assessment of *ND*. Quantitative analysis methods such as this are rare in discussions of popular music, with qualitative methods favoured to more accurately account questions of emotion and effect. While it cannot be used in isolation, in this context, quantitative analysis acts as a useful starting point to begin to ask some more pertinent qualitative questions of the data.

Appearances of artists in *No Depression*, sorted by type



As the graph demonstrates, those who are valued by the genre and are seen as integral to keeping it relevant or moving it forward, are heavily and consistently featured. Gram Parsons had 11 appearances, mostly reissue reviews and reviews of tribute shows, which featured established or newcoming alt.country artists performing his songs, demonstrating his enduring relevance and the importance of newer artists recognising him as such. Through this, he moved from a rock casualty to a lauded and respected figure of the genre. Of the other musicians who are also dead, Hank Williams, who many assert to be fundamental to the scene, had six appearances, mainly consisting of reissue reviews and tribute concerts. Waylon Jennings had seven appearances, with roughly the same distribution as Hank Williams, but includes an obituary, following his death in 2002.

Surprisingly, Uncle Tupelo had only two appearances, despite *ND* taking its name from their cover of the Carter Family song, 'No Depression in Heaven'. This could be due to the fact that they broke up before the beginning of the magazine (Uncle Tupelo broke up in 1994, with *ND* first going to print in 1995). While they are seen, along with Whiskeytown, as developing the genre, Uncle Tupelo's relevance is not formalised through features or reissues reviews, thus it could be argued that they were not canonised in this setting. *ND* instead focussed on comparable, young and similarly geographically located bands; Whiskeytown and The Jayhawks. Both these bands appeared on early covers of the magazine, with Whiskeytown collating 16 significant appearances and The Jayhawks getting 12. Whiskeytown's coverage makes them quantitatively one of the magazine's most covered bands. It is made up mainly of a collection of reviews (both live and album reviews), bearing in mind that they were recording and touring for most of *ND*'s print run. This suggests that these artists were offered as the template, stylistically and ideologically, of the genre. Similarly, Dolly Parton had nine appearances. Interestingly in regards to the distribution of this coverage, there are no live reviews (which is often concentrated on in the magazine), instead the

focus is on her new releases and reissues. Here she is an ironic touchstone, for a genre that makes it understandable through irony and pastiche (Fox and Ching).

Even more prominent is Lucinda Williams and Steve Earle's esteemed place within the magazine. Both are the only artists who have each appeared on the cover twice. Additionally, Williams had 17 appearances (the highest) and Earle had had 13. Rationale for this could be that they both exemplify the life and values of a typical alt.country artist and its fans. Earle's coverage is mainly in new releases and live reviews. He is portrayed as a creative artist, constantly reinventing himself within the alt. country frame, which is subsequently valued. His early career, well-documented friendship with Townes Van Zandt, and his own troubles with drugs and alcohol have also worked to mythologise him in the same way as it has for dead artists, with his current material still featured and reviewed because of this mythical status, even though the later music may not be similar to the earlier work. He was also on one of the earliest covers (issue 3), setting up what is important to the genre from the outset. Lucinda Williams also demonstrates some exemplary qualities. Features on Williams represent her as well-spoken and candid about her rural childhood. She has also been in many live tribute concerts for canonised artists that have been reviewed here (Gram Parsons and Van Zandt, for example), demonstrating the obvious respect she has and the influence that they have played in her music. Her collaboration with many other artists (some of which have been reviewed in the magazine) suggests an individual playing 'music for music's sake', not for commercial reward (despite an incredibly successful album), which is a valued ideology here.

JOURNALISTS AND INFLUENCE

The end of year critics' poll offers a telling and overt example of the critic's attempt to exert influence on the magazine's reader. Through the personal and detailed narrative, outlined above, critics chart and rank their albums of the year. Mainly established artists are featured (such as Wilco, Alison Krauss, Lucinda

Williams, and Steve Earle) arguably through convention as much as because of artistic merit. Although emerging artists also make their way high into the end of year list. Through this coverage, it alludes to norms, conventions, narratives, and styles that are heralded by and stereotypical of the genre. It should be obvious that this argument relates, quite directly, to cultural capital. Through the artists that are covered year to year, it is possible to see trends emerging as particular artists, or artists with stylistic similarities are featured annually. One could take this to be representative of the genre, however when combined with data from 2008's poll, which also included a reader's choice poll, interesting trends emerge regarding who is integral to the genre. However these trends should not be overstated as the critics and readers poll overlapped more than half the time, which for a magazine of diverse coverage such as this, is both significant and surprising. What also needs to be kept in mind is that this is not a complete and systematic survey of taste, but instead is a snapshot of self-selecting individuals who submitted their choices to *ND* voluntarily.

While the similarities between the critic and reader are certainly well-documented by the magazine, what I want to concentrate on is the differences. Here, it shows that the highly praised and heavily featured artists are not blindly accepted by the audience or readers. Instead there is some evidence of negotiation, with the journalists still generally occupying a position of power and respect. The critic does place a hand in guiding the audience (or those who choose to read the publication) and navigating them through a densely populated musical field, by stressing an artist's relevance or authenticity (as is the case with these polls). Disregarding these artists' position in the list, interesting conclusions can begin to be made about the disparity of taste between readers and the critics. These 23 different releases, considered among the best of 2008 respectively, can begin to allude to marked differences between the critic and the reader. The readers' poll tends to contain many more artists who could be considered stereotypical of alt.country (they are either solo artists and feature the required instruments and the requisite sombre tones or are a loud band made by a collection

country ‘misfits’ and have a distinct loud punk edge). Jesse Malin, Ryan Bingham and Jason Isbell, Son Volt are examples that appear on the readers’ list and not on the critics’ one. The critics on the other hand have ventured further outside the “alt.country” scope, with diverse artists such as Amy Winehouse, Feist, The Shins, and Jens Lekman featured solely on the critics’ poll. The artists featured only on the readers’ list tend to have a younger median age. With Son Volt and John Prine representing among the oldest artists of the readers’ alone choice. There appears to be a disparity between definitions of both cultural capital and of alt.country between the audience and the critics. Critics seem to suggest that any music, regardless of genre or commercial success is worthy of attention in the magazine, providing that the music has enduring merit and an emotional capacity, whereas the readers favouring the grittier, lesser known, specifically country-influenced niche artists as being emblematic of the genre.

Three artists that I wish to concentrate on, Miranda Lambert, Loudon Wainwright, and the Shins, were all featured on the covers of *ND* in 2007. This shows the magazine’s direct and overt attempts to bring their musical disparities into the frame of the genre and herald them among the best artists of that particular year. Although there are very obvious attempts to bring them in to the fold and narrative of the genre and align them with the values of the genre and the magazine, this is not always successful. This is demonstrated by their absence from the readers’ poll in 2008. I now wish to demonstrate this with an analysis of the content of the feature article on each of these artists, all from 2007. Starting with Miranda Lambert who finished at 20th in the critic’s poll. Her cover (in issue 69) is gritty, black and white, unfocused, unprofessional, and ill-composed. Its framing from below the musician puts Lambert in a position of power and through echoing the dynamics of live performance, suggests that playing intimate, raw, energetic live shows is important to this particular artist. The caption, which reads, “country’s new alternative” heavily stakes her claim within the current movement and suggests her importance in the future. The feature article within the same magazine is similarly future-focused. Her right to

be there is expressed through the promise of the music she will make in the future and how she will develop as a songwriter. The fact that she is only 23 is ruminated on. This is also suggested by her past, which is frequently addressed in the article. The narrative follows her life of music, and details how she started playing music at the age of the three (59) and honed her craft through performing at school fairs, a negotiated form of ‘paying your dues’, which is so important in this context. She also demonstrates a knowledge of the right collection of artists, collaborating with Gillian Welch and David Rawlings (59) and stating that she is influenced by Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris (62). Thus, while her music may not be aligned with what is traditionally considered “alt.country”, the journalist, Barry Mazor, attempts to bring her in to the fold through employing a personal, emotional narrative throughout the article and highlighting her musical influences.

Second is Loudon Wainwright III. His album finished 25th on the critics’ 2007 poll. The feature in issue 70 aligns Wainwright with many valued characteristics of alt.country and through this tends to validate his place in the poll. As Wainwright is 61 at the time of the article, his continued relevance and influence needs to be established. The article begins with stating how much filmmaker Judd Apatow appreciates his music. At the time of writing, Apatow occupied a high position in popular culture. Journalist John Milward appears to be trying to help Wainwright capitalise on this popularity. Although very different musically, here they employ a similar technique used with Lambert to historicise, contextualise and personalise the artist. With Wainwright, they go back as far as possible, (“Born in 1946”) (69) and progress from there. From beginning to write songs in grade school to detailing all of his three marriages and his relationships with his children. This suggests that this current release is the culmination of all of these personal events. Wainwright has obviously recorded many diverse and critically acclaimed albums through his career, but there is an insistence in this article that despite his age, this album lives up to them and his

previous personal success. This is reinforced by being included so high on the end of year critics' poll.

Finally, the Shins who finished at number 19 on the 2007 critics' poll. Instead of historicising and personalising the musicians, the concentration here seems to be letting the audience know that they have paid their dues and have the right to be there. On the cover, Shins' front man James Mercer is featured against the background of a bustling city (possibly New York's Times Square) and he looks worried and scared. When combined with the title of the feature article ("Little Big Band") this could be relating to their new-found commercial success and how it is negotiated within the context of the mainstream media (indeed, this is what a significant portion of the article talks about). As the article states, "The Shins may well be the first *ND* cover that your adolescent niece in the suburbs has heard of and cares about. As well she should" (Reighley 69). They are successful and popular but despite this should still be considered within the *ND* frame because they care about music (both their music and significant music of others). They are depicted as a band dedicated to the songwriting process, constantly writing on tour (70). The feature also contains many specific details about the writing and recording process. They also have the right influences, as throughout the article diverse influences such as the Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Kinks, Gram Parsons (important for *ND*), My Bloody Valentine and the Ronettes are name dropped, demonstrating the importance of not only enjoying music, but enjoying the *right* music, the right artists, and knowing when it is appropriate to mention them. Although they have found a wide commercial success, they can still be considered a valuable band by *ND*, due to their influences and paying their dues through years of independently releasing albums and touring. As bassist James Hernandez explains, "We were all from Albuquerque, and our vision was maybe we can put out a record and play around town." Save some dough, buy a van, do some cross-country touring. Nothing big. "Just be a working band" (69). Again, their unambitious attitude about being in a band and their idea of success helps to legitimate them and allow them to still be

considered as an alt.country band by *ND*'s journalists. But their absence from the readers' poll suggests that this isn't the case with the audience.

While these are the values of the genre that the journalists ensure these artists (and all artists featured) represent, they aren't always accepted by the audience. While the 2007 critics' and readers' poll demonstrates that there is crossover and agreement more than half the time, there is still room for negotiation between the critic and the audience. The analysis of the feature coverage in the 2007 of Miranda Lambert, Loudon Wainwright, and the Shins demonstrates that even though there can be a consistent, concentrated and serious effort on behalf of the journalists to affirm that artists have the sufficient cultural capital and musical references to be representative of the genre, this is never blindly accepted by the audience. Instead it undergoes a process of cultural negotiation in relation to their own understandings and contexts, which work to inflect their perception.

While the end of year polls are useful in offering a snapshot of taste, quantitative analysis will always be an important tool, as it concentrates on consistency and quantity of coverage. It illuminates which artists are placed upon a pedestal and are considered to be fundamental building blocks to giving the genre meaning. The most heavily featured artists quantitatively are Lucinda Williams and Steve Earle. Both the musical and ideological qualities of these artists are valued by the genre, at least through the lens of *ND*. In *ND*'s coverage of Williams and Earle, the emotive quality of their music is widely and frequently considered, as is their ever-changing sound, which acts as a vehicle to express what the journalist sees as their complex and changeable temperament and personal situation. These artists are considered to be in a perpetual state of development; constantly travelling and developing or learning as artists. They are also seen as serious and prolific songwriters, releasing many albums and collaborating with many other artists, which sees them as contributing to the fabric of the genre. Through this they are represented as "battlers", working hard,

seemingly without commercial reward (the economical aspect is never discussed in interviews). While they have both received critical and commercial respect, this is selectively discussed by *ND*, to be able to keep them in line with the desired narrative. Their outlooks and ideological concerns are also considered valuable here, which can be seen through their treatment in the magazine. Here the difficult and tough life, troubled childhood and adolescence, drug and alcohol problems, and personal relationships troubles is seen as a prerequisite for writing a desirable song, that can resonant emotionally with the readers and critics alike, despite (or perhaps because of) the audience's own lack of contact with these lifestyles directly. Given this pervasive coverage, their troubles are seen as the norm, creating an expectation of future artists, which now continues to be expressed on the website.

Quantitative analysis of the print run of alt.country's seminal publication *ND* offers an unusual entry point to a discussion of the intersection of aesthetics and cultural capital. By adopting a DIY aesthetic, which is reflected in the genre itself, *ND* gave itself more authority within the scene. When combined with the journalists' self-effacing tone, authority was presented in a non-threatening way, which could then be accepted by the audience. However analysis has determined that this does not guarantee acceptance within the scene. The readers of *ND* appear to read these articles and reviews with their own definitions or conceptions of the genre in mind. Because of this, there is always room for negotiation. Quantitatively highly featured artists, such as Lucinda Williams and Steve Earle, show that valuing songwriting as a craft, tropes of life as an unending journey and problems with drugs, alcohol and other forms of rebellion are consistently valued by the magazine and its audience. The 2007 end of year poll, shows that this is a common mode for the both the journalists and the audience to understanding alt.country's authenticity. The next chapter will extend on the reasoning for this pseudo-rebellious spirit and the need for revelatory autobiography, considered through the lens of postmodernism.

CHAPTER FIVE: ALT.COUNTRY, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CITY

As quantitative and discursive analysis of *No Depression* has shown, the issues and contradictions present in the genre of alt.country also appear to be directly reflected (and in many circumstances even produced) through the magazine itself. The genre values a sense of history, coupled with the assumption that the best times are inevitably located in the past. However, the music is far more dynamic than that and it is a deeply contradictory genre. These contradictions include the rural preoccupations, despite the writers' and the audience's mostly urban reality and the genre's surprisingly strong relationship with 'new' technology, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other forms of social media. The communicative qualities of these technologies have been harnessed to extend the rhetoric of the genre. The *No Depression* website offers an example of a form of personal, intimate communication, and a point of connection that until recently was found only in the music, interviews, and live performances. This has rendered their relation to all of the above more emotive and powerful, through the rhetoric and discourses of personal connection. Another contradiction (and a theme that has inevitably been running through this thesis) is the relation between the genre, postmodernism, and the city. My discussion will largely draw on Fredric Jameson's idea on 'depthlessness' and nostalgic cinema to determine the form and function of alt.country's inherent nostalgia for the audience. The loci of alt.country songs themselves appear to be shifting, from a rural setting to an urban one, reflecting the concrete, daily experiences of both the musicians and audience. *No Depression* too reflects this, in both content and style. Alt.country has always been in a strong dialogue with geography. Its 'heart' still appears to be in the country, but the 'country' as an idea is becoming more distant and vague and musicians seem to have accepted the unattainability of rural life. Musicians and *No Depression* continually contribute to the emptiness of rural signifiers and conflate this with urban experiences, to express the confusion of postmodernity.

ALT.COUNTRY'S PREOCCUPATIONS WITH THE PAST AND RURALITY

Alt.country has a stylistic and ideological preoccupation with rurality and the countryside. Its dependent relationship on rural tropes and a dialogue with the past is so pervasive it represents the genre's underlying logic. The unattainability of these realities to today's urban-based audience yields a consistent longing and lack, reflected in the music, which appears to be representative of postmodernism's ills, and more specifically Jameson's idea of 'depthlessness' (which will be discussed in a following section). This is primarily evident in the lyrics. Alt.country songs are often bleak and disparaging narratives of imagined rural hardship and of lost love, longing, and nostalgia, set against the backdrop of a desolate (usually) American rural landscape. Although the artists may be musically disparate, they deal with similar themes, rendering a similar function. Gillian Welch's music, for instance, deals primarily in rural tropes, especially in *Time (The Revelator)* (2001). So, even when it references highways and rock and roll, the rural location, with its ills and hard times is preferable to living elsewhere. The American rural landscape is understood as a lofty and spiritual place that offers both salvation and absolution. As Deer Tick suggest in 'Straight into a Storm', "I went out west and I'm going to get this body clean" (*Born on This Day* 2009). Similar to this, Uncle Tupelo's 'Slate' asks, "When I choke keep the flies away" other references to the wind and earth, heavy loads and empty space in this album, all strongly suggest a rural environment (*Anodyne* 1993). Simplicity and a return to the basic needs of country life is also emphasised in alt.country, regardless of the direct experience of this. The Avett Brothers' album *A Carolina Jubilee* (2003) is referencing an older and distinctly rural form of fun and socialisation. Similarly, Ryan Adams' 'Oh my Sweet Carolina' is yearning for simplicity of a rural life the narrator is travelling through, while also longing for the lover from earlier times, which is located within this rural imagining. Particular geographies achieve a lofty and revered status. As Adams sings, "Oh the sweetest winds blow in the south" (*Heartbreaker* 2000). Through this,

alt.country is taking its cues from traditional country, which Geoff Mann writes; prominently features, "...rural life, work and everyday working-class life (especially contrasted with that of the affluent) . . . family life and 'values', the southern US, youthful rebellion, Christianity, alcohol, death, humour, and nostalgia (81)". Peterson and Beal recognise the importance of this rural imagining to both the audience and the musicians, stating;

Taken together, alt.country music uses diverse musical styles and straight-forward lyrics to confront modernity's alienation as expressed in the language of love, death, religion and working-class identity. Songs about recapturing one aspect of another of the audience's fictive, idealised past are rooted in real work's imagery and in highly personal sagas of adventure and suffering. Life seen through the lens of an alt.country lyric is a series of failed relationship and late-night rebellions with violent and often deadly outcomes. Except for the line of self-deprecating comedic songs, this is not upbeat music (239).

It is unsurprising that a genre relying so much on cultivating and maintaining authenticity draws on such stable and genuine signifiers, offered by rural life. These images are already so rooted with emotion and meaning and as such rely on imagined connection rather than direct experience or personal memory, which can be problematic.

This rural imagining, though it is consciously cultivated, remains a highly authentic device, which is recognised and appreciated by the audience. This is despite (or as will be suggested later, because of) the musicians and audience almost invariably occupy the urban environment. As Ching and Creed's work suggests, rurality has become increasingly socially constructed as 'we' move further and further from that point of reference (1997), while referencing an ever-depleting stock of 'pure' essence, these rural signifiers remain powerful. This rhetoric and longing carries with it a history;

Historian Harvey Green writes about a trend he calls "historical yearning". He states that from around 1915 to 1945 the people of the

Unites States and other Western societies assumed “that they had arrived at the pinnacle of history as a result of Darwinian natural selection among nations and peoples.” To avoid the linear process of change that would inevitably lead to decay followed by destruction, as it had in other societies throughout history, people felt a longing to circumvent an uncertain future by engaging in various expression of retrospective reflection upon a more naively rural time (Livingstone 20).

Similarly, Fox and Ching have argued that the time was right for alt.country, as it accurately and poignantly captured a distinctly postmodern malaise (1-27).

Demonstrations of these rural motifs can be as banal as dress or linguistic choices, but through repetition, the connotations they carry remain powerful. As Ching writes, “. . . people live the rural/urban distinction through mundane cultural activities such as their selection of music (country versus rap) and their choice of clothing (cowboy boots versus wing tips). . .” (3). Typical country dress (spurs, cowboy shirt, boots, and weathered jeans, for example), signify many modes of cultural and historical understandings, which works to bring those who don the dress into the country narrative and contributes to their identity within this context. Rural motifs and tropes appear to represent an authenticity and lived “realness” that is lacking elsewhere in culture.

Rurality, which usually goes in partnership with a simpler time located in the past, is represented through songs’ lyrics and instrumentation (which is usually simple and can range from the traditional rock set up to incorporating traditional folk instruments such as banjo, fiddle, or harmonica). Additionally, the singer is seen to function as a symbol of rurality. Not just in dress, but more importantly, in a musical sense, in their vocal delivery and performance. They demonstrate what Roland Barthes calls a “grain” in their voice and character. Their delivery sounds laboured, with a sense of struggle attached to it, which helps the audience to identify with the musician. Barthes describes the grain as the body in the voice (188). This relates highly to authenticity and genuineness. It is perceived that there cannot be body in the voice without direct personal

experience of hardships, and thus cannot be postured or manufactured. Barthes argues the grain is that impossible to define quality or essence (185) of the singer and the subsequent dynamic between them and their captive audience. It is also a scarce quality, similar to authenticity. This grain helps us to respond to artists. Mann recognised the relation between the grain and authenticity and its importance of country music.

These qualities are related to what Barthes (1977, 184), in his famous essay 'The grain of the voice', calls 'patinated'. He uses the term to describe the way in which sung sounds are 'given the wear of a language that had been living, functioning and working for ages past'. It seems to me that the hegemony of the southern accent in country music is partly due to the desire for such textured, grounded vocal qualities - this is about 'authenticity', about coming from someplace 'real', talking to 'real' people about 'real life' (81).

While we be fairly certain that Ryan Adams wasn't actually in the cotton fields in which he sings about in 'Magnolia Mountain' ("We burned the cotton fields down in the valley And ended up with nothing but scars") (*Cold Roses* 2005), the emotional affect remains. The delivery is laboured and difficult (as Ryan Adams says of his time in Whiskeytown, "I had trouble singing it, my heart was totally broken" (Dechert 'Strangers Almanac' 127)), which culminates in a longing for the simpler times of the past. Although in alt.country, the past is usually represented as brimming with heartbreak, hard labour, and poverty, it is still desirable to the current condition. Again, we must be reminded that this is not unique to this current historical period, as Williams writes, the myth of the happier has always been used (40).

Because of this relationship with rurality, alt.country as a genre appears to be perpetually located in the past. The genre is backward looking in several senses. The songs are set in and focus on what has come before, and are almost all located in rural settings, or in past versions of the rural. Laments of lost love and better times in the past are concentrated on and there is never the prospect of

a 'brighter future'. This is curious, especially when combined with The Carter Family and their seminal song, 'No Depression in Heaven', future focus and its influence on the genre. Alt.country instead never looks forward to the future, and it is instead kept ambiguous. As Van Sickel writes of country, "When the world outside the home is mentioned, there is normally a worldview on display that is morally unambiguous and nostalgic for a (perhaps fictional) simpler past in which people's lives were somehow better" (329). Following this, the alt.country musician cannot be successful in the present, but are instead mythologised and thus commercially successful after their death or the breakup of the band (providing this happens in a way that is required of the scene). This dynamic also works to limit an artists' commercial success.

The past acts as a fruitful and instrumental resource for artists attempting to stake a claim at the authenticity of the scene. More than many other genres, artists are put into a continuum and understood by their relationship and similarity to other older musicians. Wearing your influences on your sleeve is not derogatory like it would be in many other genres. Current artists, such as Justin Townes Earle or Lucinda Williams borrow heavily from the past, which works to give their present selves meaning. As Van Sickel writes "...The promise of country tradition has been that it is a totality in which its earlier moment live in a musical dialogue or dialectic with the present. . ." (174). Owing in a large part to the narrative of "the greats" of alt.country (Gram Parsons, Townes Van Zandt and Hank Williams, for example) their trajectory has become a template for subsequent artists, giving weight and expectations to how present musicians must act. Because of the "live fast, die young" mantra, artists cannot be both commercially successful and popular in the present tense. The present must be a struggle in order to have cultural capital and authenticity within the alt.country scene. Respect, fame and commercial success is often bestowed on to the artist in relation to their past and posthumously. Gram Parsons can be considered the archetype of this. Meyers says, "Gram Parsons' death and subsequent slow-

building legend have generated all sorts of classically American obsessions” (xiii).

Similarly *No Depression* has an awkward and dependent relationship with the past. Given that it is no longer published in print form, the website offers yet another point of nostalgic memory, which extends the rhetoric of the genre. In alt.country, as with traditional country, time and society is ultimately seen as being in a constant state of decline, as Mann states, “The narratives of loss these songs relate take to several forms in country music, but in general, they valorise things like a return to ‘simplicity’, moral clarity, social stability and cohesion, small-scale community and a ‘slow pace’, honesty, loyalty, tradition - all of which are usually framed as in decline (87). Individuals are then left clinging to pieces of authentic culture and music wherever they can. “Buy a piece of our history before it’s all gone”, the website suggests of the magazine. Temperance is recognised here first and foremost, with the scarcity of these goods (much like authenticity itself) highlighted. On closer analysis, the website is also largely about preserving what has come before. The archives section offers every feature, review and article from the magazine, which has been digitised and is available for free. Fans and members of the community can upload their own content (photos, reviews, writing), which can be seen as an attempt to document ‘history’ and negate the problematic aspects of time and memory, as it is now preserved within the frame of *No Depression*. The website then promotes a very specific type of community-led contribution, advancing the bond within the alt.country community. It also exhibits some of the future-focused characteristics previously discussed in relation to the mythologisation of the artists. Thus it is a complicated genre, in which the present is not able to be viewed in optimistic terms.

Alt.country is highly defined by its postmodern position, although its rural preoccupation works to obscure this somewhat. While relying on the past for emotion, affect, and as a prerequisite to write revelatory and engaged songs, the genre is not without a sense of irony (Ching and Fox). Owing to its punk

influences, the genre too relies on the aesthetic of “pastiche”. Ryan Adams offers a good example of this. His Facebook page has very little aesthetic or stylistic cohesion to it. He references cultural products such as *Moonlighting*, *Star Wars*, Iron Maiden, Kiss, Motorhead, and Bob Dylan, leaving few clues about the substance and form of his own work. While the audience realises that the elements of irony and pastiche work to undermine the complete seriousness of alt.country, it nevertheless remains an affective genre. The passion, emotion and community it engenders offers a point of escape that is so often represented in the music and a temporary forgetting of the modern malaise facilitated through the imaginary nostalgia for an inexperienced ideal of a simpler, rural time. Again, what is important to bear in mind is that this imagining is not related individually to alt.country or this time period, specifically. As Richard Peterson writes, “From the outset, country music was seen as rustic alternative to urban modernity” (55), giving perspective to current events. Additionally, as Astrid Franke writes, postmodernity and its emotional and authentic traits are not seen as opposites of one another;

...An awareness of clichés and a willing acceptance of a genre's conventions are not contradictory modes of reception. We seem at times so obsessed with the idea that all realities are historically, discursively, and strategically constructed, that we cannot imagine any attitude between the extremes of complete immersion in an illusion and utter "critical" detachment. Yet, it is certainly possible and not even unusual to suspend disbelief willingly and assume a "reality" for the time being, knowing full well its constructed nature. In that case, the awareness of a cliché does not necessarily ridicule or demystify the discourse quoted, nor does it have to undo the complicity between reader, writer, and text (406).

Thus, alt.country still occupies a lofty, emotive, and authentic imaginary for the audience who absorb meaning from these texts, and as we will see, use it to help mobilise themselves within their everyday experiences.

JAMESON, HAYES, AND “DEPTHLESSNESS”

Fredric Jameson's writing on the cultural logic and processes associated with postmodernism are widely respected within academia. His vast survey is, at points, overwhelming in its detail. As such I wish to focus on one concept in particular, which bears an important and illuminating relevance for my particular research. As Jameson writes, postmodernism can generally be isolated to the period following World War II, and is marked by a loss of a sense of location, history and depth. A general lack of stability in once fixed categories and qualities renders previously unchangeable realities not only malleable and fluid, but as I will argue, partially individually determined. From this perspective Jameson offers the idea of “depthlessness” (6) which is brought about by postmodernity and its surrounding culture.

The exposition will take up in turn the following constitutive features of the postmodern: a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary “theory” and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality whose “schizophrenic” structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone- which I will call “intensities”- which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system; and, after a brief account of postmodernist mutations in the lived experience of built space itself, some reflections on the missions of political art in the bewildering new world space of late or multinational capital (6).

For Jameson, depthlessness is a key marker of postmodernity, as it carries with it the uncertainty and discontinuities characteristic of postmodernity itself. Through this there comes a resounding emphasis on style, pastiche, and the

aestheticisation of culture. Jameson suggests individuals attempt to fill this space or 'lack' with meaning gleamed from the very same cultural products contributing to the lack felt within postmodern culture, although the audience realises the sense of parody and the incapability to effectively access "authentic" culture within this. In this way, it echoes Lindholm's work on authenticity as a coping mechanism for the alienating experience of modernity. However, what is different here is that both cultural producers and consumers possess an awareness of culture and emotions it renders as inherently constructed.

Mobilising Jameson, David Hayes' case study offers a useful illustration of these issues. Concentrating on teenage record collectors at the beginning of the 21st century, he examines the practices of collecting, listening, and talking about vinyl as an activity deeply indebted and defined by the postmodern age. He suggests that the search for authenticity that his interview subjects believe to be found in music of the past was also about a search for autonomy and individuality. As Hayes suggests, "Their shared practice also enables them to counteract two of postmodernism's core tenets: our collective nostalgia for seemingly simpler times and one of its attendant correlates, a perceived loss of agency" ("Take Those Old Records off the Shelf": Youth and Music Consumption in the Postmodern Age" 53). This practice is highly related to a nostalgia for the vagaries of "better" times, which are unquestionably located in the past. He draws parallels here between his work and Jameson's writing on nostalgia films.

According to the responses of the eight pro-vinyl youngsters, their decidedly retrogressive tastes and shared method of accessing and experiencing music reflected more than a mere dissatisfaction with contemporary youth culture. I argue that their practices, like the appetite for nostalgia films posited by Jameson, are responses to a postmodern malaise brought about by consumer capitalism. Faced with a constant barrage of new music produced for (and marketed at) their demography, these young people attempt to mark themselves as different by rejecting

widespread practices of consumption maintained by the music industry's capitalistic framework. In its place, they attempt to construct alternative practices and attitudes that imply a deeper appreciation of music perceived as being distinct from the mechanisms of commerce regulating their peers' listening experiences. These re-inscriptions of consumer identity are ever present in the narratives of my research subjects, most of whom are highly aware of their complex—and often contradictory—understandings of music and the affectivity it engenders (“Take Those Old Records off the Shelf”: Youth and Music Consumption in the Postmodern Age” 58).

However, this position is fraught, as Hayes states that their romantic attitude towards the recordings impinges on their ability to critique the music, thus it may be about the intent or affect more than the stylistic quality. Also, these practices, while potentially subversive still operate in and are defined by both the capitalist system and the surrounding postmodern framework. Similar arguments can be made of alt.country. The need for a dichotomous authentic culture which uses or reworks older practices which Hayes is discussing remains highly relevant and important for this discussion.

ALT.COUNTRY AND THE INTERNET

Alt.country relies on the multiple points of connection offered by the internet to consolidate the often geographically disparate community of listeners. The “No Depression” group began as a peer to peer list (P2P) catering for a group of individuals who began to see a new and distinct movement emerging. The group provided a means to document these developments and to discuss the genre's boundaries, with individuals possessing the required cultural capital of the scene. Indeed, many have recognised the power of the internet in contributing to the development of a subculture in a way that mirrors traditional person-to-person development. J. Patrick Williams' work looks at the role the internet now plays as a site of negotiation in constituting membership to a subculture, discussed it in

relation to straightedge. Similarly to alt.country, it is a globally diffused subculture, which utilises the internet to promote a discourse surrounding the subculture's qualities and defining characteristics. He says that the internet is a form of education and information about subcultures (176). Despite this though, he also recognises the limits to internet-based subcultural membership;

Despite the postmodernist assertion that people increasingly find themselves in a world where mediated realities have gained primacy over substantive ones (e.g., Baudrillard 1988), it was evident that many music straight-edgers were unwilling to accept the idea that computer-mediated subcultural space was as valid as a face-to-face scene. Like jazz musicians (Becker 1997), rappers (McLeod 1999), gamers (Williams 2006), and other subculturalists, music-straight-edgers “talked” about their subcultural selves in essentialist terms, creating boundaries between themselves and those who claimed a straightedge identity online, whom they considered poseurs or wannabes. Ironically, this was true despite the fact that *all* the straight-edgers I studied were interacting in a computer-mediated context (189).

Therefore, limits exist to what the internet can provide and facilitate subculturally. Returning to alt.country, there is an assumption that contributing online also means individuals contribute to a physical, local scene. This is certainly the case on the *No Depression* website, where the emphasis remains on documenting live events through reviews, photos and amateur video, attesting to the fact that “I was there”. As Peterson and Beal state, the original No Depression P2P group dealt with similar themes. What also needs to be recognised for this example is the time period. Given that it was in the late 1990s and personal internet was still a new and relatively foreign technology, frequent and consistent participation in this P2P interestingly assumes a capacity and proficiency in adopting new technologies, which initially seems to undermine the nostalgic and backward-looking qualities of the genre. However, this is a

relationship we see repeated in other important alt.country outlets.

Similar sentiments are found on the *No Depression* website. While the website was active and updated during the majority of the magazine's print run, the move to an online-only publication in 2008 is noteworthy for a number of reasons. At least rhetorically, the magazine seems reluctant to embrace new technology and instead appears to remain with the "tried and true" methods (the magazine always provided a postal address for letters to the editor and to send cheques for subscription renewals, for example). However, in its own small way, the decision was incisive. *No Depression*'s editors recognised the decline of the print medium relatively early and shifted their resources to redeveloping their website, thus making it more attractive to advertisers. Similar to its print form, the website still offers very specific advertisements, for instrument stores and artists, for example. The online store (selling print magazines and *No Depression* merchandise) offers another key way to monetise the enterprise. There is also a call for donations on the home page, which an individual sees every time they visit the site. This has both anti-commercial and anti-populist connotations. It suggests that they do not receive any commercial help and are instead providing a public service, which is fundamentally valuable and needs to be supported.

Alt.country music has always adopted a backward-looking quality while incorporating new techniques and processes into their music, which is then negotiated by the traditional country history narrative. What needs to be considered is that new recording techniques played a primary role in the dissemination of country music initially (Escott). Today, musicians' wide use of Twitter, Facebook, and other instruments of social networking offers an updated version of this, as it is about the same qualities; access and availability. It also functions to extend the personal and emotive rhetoric of the genre, working to involve the audience directly. Returning to Ryan Adams, he is active on both Twitter and Facebook, using both as a point of connection, information, education, and dialogue between himself and his fans. His Facebook page

included a countdown of his top 10 albums of 2011, with individual comments attached to each entry, and also included many YouTube videos and links to artists' websites promoting bands that he was currently enjoying. His Twitter account functions similarly. Justin Townes Earle's twitter account is more concerned with updates from his personal life (such as, 'Nashville you have to stop tearing down our old buildings! f**king out of town assholes!' and 'I forget how much fun it is to go bowling!'), music and recording-related posts (such as, 'People think I use loops all the time, and I just want everyone to know that I barely know how to use a computer much less backing tracks' and 'Work starts tomorrow on the new record folks. I will be up all night!'), witty banter and personal in jokes (such as 'Rock like a god, shop like a girl'). These posts all mimic conversational techniques and exchanges that may have been possible earlier in his career, but they now take place online.

These instruments of social networking also promote upcoming shows. Other Facebook pages, such as Wilco's and the Avett Brothers' let followers know passwords for presales before others, meaning they are literally "in the know". It also emphasises the importance of seeing these artists live and offer additional specific and emotive forms of connection, which mirrors the relationship an audience or fan might have with a small local-based band. As Marjorie Kirby states in her article on internet-based country music communities;

The ritual exchange of information online allows fans a feeling of community between themselves and between them and the performer, facilitating a belief in a commonality, although they are dispersed geographically and disparate in needs and experiences. An electronic place in which to 'gather' enables a direct link between fans, and even makes possible a direct connection between fans and performers. The link benefits not only the fans, but also the performer and the record company, in that it provides a connection to a central focus of the performer and the producer, the marketplace. However, an online

community is subject to the interpersonal dynamics of any face-to-face community, as well as the communicative and social effects of possible anonymity (91).

Again, a high degree of technological proficiency is assumed or expected of the audience, which initially appears at odds and paradoxical with the “down home”, traditional tropes of the genre. However it is negotiated and understood through the lens of what is valued more widely by the genre and because of this is accepted. As the earlier Justin Townes Earle example represents, he is too confused by ‘new’ technology to incorporate it in to his music, thus he is ‘stuck’ playing music the old fashioned way, but he is using a new medium and form of communication to let people know and debate this fact, which itself is intensely contradictory. But also lets us know a lot about him and the genre. Additionally it alludes to the qualities that the audience values, in relation to Earle and the genre itself.

Although they are using technology, it is arguably used to recreate an earlier time, when it was possible to speak person-to-person with the artist. As Jeffrey Smith says, “One way urbanites deal with the “evils” of living in urban centres is by incorporating non-urban practices into their daily lives” (432). As well as evoking the dynamic between a fan and a musician at a bar, it is also evoking idealised rural practices, of ‘knowing your neighbours’ and being able to have a conversation and discuss the nuances of life. In the alt.country context, this sense of connection also works to make their music more emotive, as the audience, through these technologies, feels closer to the source and perhaps knows the roots of this authenticity. Although it initially feels to be a contradiction between alt.country’s tropes and the adoption of new technology, it is at least a contradiction that is enjoyed by both the producer and consumer, as they extend and contribute to it primarily facilitated by the genre’s gatekeepers. It is also an element promoted by the gatekeepers themselves. Magazine articles, blog posts, and listeners alike enjoy this contradiction. As Justin Townes Earle says in *American Songwriter*, “I used to carry little

notepads with me and now I use the notepad on my iPhone. I wrote every song on *Harlem River Blues* on the notepad on my iPhone” (Adams). Again it suggests that the ironic, self-reflective facets of alt.country are primary (and underemphasised) elements of the genre. It promotes many important aspects of the genre. The rhetoric of connection, a disillusion of distance, personality, emotion, and affect are all desirable within this frame. New technologies have actually provided a way for both the musicians and fans to accurately, quickly and frequently communicate in a mode that contributes to both the authenticity and cultural capital of the audience, while also maintaining that they are aware of the genre’s paradoxical and ironic aspects. These are desirable within this genre and give the audience a new frame within which to regard these techniques, which is not as fearful as it possibly could be without these modes of understanding.

ALT.COUNTRY, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CITY

Alt.country demonstrates many examples of lending a rural understanding to urban geographies. What happens then is a remapping of postmodern life, offering a way for individuals to understand themselves (both individually and collectively), in relation to this urban experience through rural imaginings. This works to combat Jameson’s idea of depthlessness that punctuates today’s experience. Through media and culture, which themselves are products of this postmodern position, individuals discover ways to feel at home and at ease in the city. This is most accurately illustrated by two aspects of the alt.country song; the desirability of the ‘pure’ rural life, with the sense of nostalgia it entails being superimposed on to urban geographies, and the changing setting of the alt.country song itself; shifting from a rural imaginary to an urban reality.

The music draws on an imagined rural past to lend the music a sense of authenticity and toughness. Interestingly, the past experiences described in song are usually not the singer’s own, but are imagined or borrowed. Regardless, delivery and narrative insist on a personal investment in it. As Peterson and Beal

suggest, “Unlike rock, the setting of the song is rural or small town, with prosaic life problems being invoked to express a nostalgia for or a romantic identification with the past. Unlike country music, the past is often not the singer’s past but a romantic embrace of the positions of the downtrodden people of the past” (237), evoking the sense of pastiche and its enduring emotional affect present in the genre. It doesn’t represent lived experience, but an imagined one. Because of its base and the subject matter this imagining *feels* authentic, even though the audience, through their postmodernist position and understanding, know that it is not.

This relates to nostalgia, which Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer’s work suggest becomes more abstract over time. As Fred Davis writes “The audience too, without necessary having any immediate or “real” reason for feeling nostalgic, will upon seeing or hearing this material respond nostalgically since it too has through long associating exposure assimilated the aesthetic code that evokes the emotion” (83). Given the tropes of country songs, this is a very pronounced quality. Abstract nostalgia is more accurately accounted for in Middleton’s work on the blues, but given the popularity and resurgence in both these styles recent, bears relevance for this discussion here. Middleton asks;

...What exactly is the object of nostalgia in blues? *Loss* is the genre’s core topos, usually *a propos* of love or a lover. But this is widely understood as a metonym for a broader loss – a ‘defiant discontent’ (Abbe Niles, in Handy 1926, p. 40) or a ‘state of being as well as a way of suffering’ in the words of Alan Lomax, who acutely links this both to alienation and racial terror in the Deep South in the early twentieth century and, more broadly, to the rootlessness of modern life (Lomax 1993, pp. ix–x, 472) (57).

Suggesting that nostalgia, rootlessness, and the alienation of modern life are postmodern specificities is a mistake, as it has been the subject of country songs since the time of the Carter Family and as such is one of the genre’s defining characteristics.

...The 300 songs that the original Carter Family recorded between 1927 and 1941 make a compelling statement. Urbanization was already a fact of life. Kids were leaving the farms and they weren't coming back. The past wasn't a rural idyll, but that didn't stop people yearning for it. The Carter Family's collected works seem almost a lament for a paradise lost (Escott 22).

It feels like alt.country's subject matter directly mirrors A.P. Carter's concerns, again undermining the contention that this feeling is a new or distinctly modern phenomenon, as it has a history.

Like authenticity, country music relies on various dichotomies (real/artificial, urban/rural, and authentic/manufactured, for example). Defining one of these works to give equal definition to its opposite. Rural life is represented or imagined in the country as pure and inherently good. As I have already discussed in reference to Williams, this denies the often tough reality of rural subsistence. It also equally defines the urban environment as cold, unknown, and evil. As Blair and Hyatt suggest, "Most country songs exaggerate and idealise the characteristics and pleasures of the country home" (76). Because of the persistence image of purity, it is inherently desirable. "While Carter looked forward in anticipation to a glorious time after death, alternative country artists typically look back nostalgically to an imagined small-town life of the 1940s" (Peterson and Beal 235). Thus, this 'time' in whatever form is unattainable in the present. The representation of this time from the Carter Family's work also shows that the time that these alt.country artists are yearning for is also imperfect. However, it is the practice of imagining which remains important. As *American Songwriter* have remarked of Justin Townes Earle's "South Georgia Sugar Babe" it's about a man who wants to be somewhere that he is not. It presents a dissatisfied picture of a man with no concrete demands or options, but rather a vague and ongoing dissatisfaction with how things are now (Deusner 'Town & Country: The Geography of Justin Townes Earle'). Equally,

the song suggests that there is no way out of this logic.

Alt.country, for both the musician and audience provides a way to live an alternative reality without making changes to the lived experience. This is punctuated by the lack of responsibility on behalf of the narrator and the absence of consequences in alt.country songs themselves. The songs all suggest that freedom comes from drinking, smoking, and other illicit activities. The bar frequently offers a place of comfort and anonymity. As Ryan Adams sings in 'Avenues', "All the sweethearts of the world are out dancing at the places where me and my friends go to hide our faces" (Whiskeytown *Strangers Almanac* 2008). "Dancing with the Women at the Bar" is invested in a similar rhetoric (Whiskeytown *Strangers Almanac* 2008). Elsewhere, Deer Tick propose that the bar will provide a solution, "I don't care if I'm the one to blame, let's all go to the bar" ('Let's all go to the bar' *Divine Providence* 2011). Violence (such as in 'Frankie's Gun' by The Felice Brothers (*The Felice Brothers* 2008)) and a lack of commitment in a relationship are also treated with a similar blasé attitude. "You're quite a woman, but I don't want to be your man", sing the Old 97's in 'Stoned' (*Hitchhike to Rhyme* 1994). Commitment, responsibly and a life of stability are not valued in these songs, as they also suggest an unlived life, in which individuals are financially or socially tied down. However, this is a lived reality for the audience and many of the musicians. As Lindholm has described though, despite the evocation of freedom, the life of musician is relatively monotonous.

Thus, the rural subject matter works to define the genre's songs. Traditionally, the rural environment was longed for and nostalgically embraced, but there now seems an acceptance of the unattainability of this as a lived reality. Emerging from postmodern theory, the 'rural' can now be considered a largely metaphorical place, as "Postmodern social theory's stable reference point has always been the city; it unquestioningly posits an urbanized subject without considering the extent to which a subject is constructed by its conceptual

opposition to the rustic” (Ching and Creed: 7). Although alt.country specifically relies on its claims to an “authentic but disappearing rural past” (Hill ‘Out of the Barn and into a Home’ 2), the wider country music community recognised this and has moved from a rural focus to an urban one. Hill says, “Despite country music’s overwhelming reliance on rural tropes, by the late 1960 and early 1970s the generally positive presentation of rural life was starting to give way to an awareness that their fan base was not attached to the actual spaces and lifestyles of the country itself” (‘Country Music's Construction of a New Urban Identity in the 1960s’ 218-9). Therefore, this contradiction has been both lived and negotiated for some time in country music. This is a process currently being negotiated in alt.country, while the contradictory elements and facets of irony, pastiche, and other postmodern understandings continue to lend shape to the genre.

“SOMETIMES I LIVE IN THE COUNTRY, SOMETIMES I LIVE IN TOWN” (‘IRENE GOODNIGHT’ DEER TICK *BORN ON THIS DAY* 2009): THE CHANGING FOCUS OF THE ALT.COUNTRY SONG.

Alt.country is primarily defined and understood by its similarities and differences from traditional country. One of the marked differences is the location of both the speaker and narrative in modern alt.country. Traditional country is usually located in the rural space; that is either where the narrator is located now or where they desire to return to. As Carolyn Livingstone writes, in early country songs, “rural life is natural and urban life is unnatural” (22).

Additionally, specific references to United States’ geography or locations are based on and extend more mythological understandings of those places (Hayes ‘US Geography in Popular Music’ 87). It deals in the mythological, rather than the specific. Leading from these traditional country musics, early forms of alt.country largely dealt in ruralities (such as Whiskeytown and Uncle Tupelo, for example). However, there is now evidence that alt.country is adjusting this rural understanding, superimposing it onto urban environments to address and

negotiate fundamentally modern issues and concerns, which primarily arise from inhabiting a city. What can now be seen is a move from discussing urbanity's dichotomous relationship with rurality to attaching rural methods and tropes to assisting in understanding urban environments. As *American Songwriter* suggest of Justin Townes Earle's music.

Even though he spent more time on the road than at home, songwriting was a means of keeping his connection to New York City, which is evident in "Working for the MTA," another stand-out on *Harlem River Blues*. Set in the Metro Transit Authority tunnels connecting the five boroughs, it's not your typical country-music train song, although the endless tracks evoke the same sense of loneliness and pathos – only this time in literal darkness (Duesner, 'The Geography of Justin Townes Earle's Songs').

Ryan Adams also employs a similar technique, working again to make the experience of living in the city (again, it is New York) understandable. "I always pause if I can on Fifth Avenue, look uptown with my head in the stars, Somewhere the buildings give way to sunlight, give way to east and west Central Park" ('Cobwebs' *Cardinology* 2008). As well as nostalgically addressing imagined rural experiences of the past, alt.country is punctuated by its abilities to attach rural understandings and modes to urban environments.

However this journey from rural to urban changes the country song somewhat. The idea that country songs can simply be "transplanted" into the city without undergoing a fundamental change to its structure is misleading (Hill 'Country Music's Construction of a New Urban Identity in the 1960s' 301). Thus there exists a tension, between these two competing understandings, which contributes to alt.country's character. Forman suggests that rap music is defined by its "topophilia (love of place) or topophobia (fear of place) of others" (78). So too is country music. Richard Elliott demonstrates this well in relation to Bob Dylan's music. Many songs pine for rural life or the comforts of the country home, but the pull of travel and movement often appears too great. Travel from

the country to the city also has negative connotations, which makes such fruitful lyrical material. "...People who leave for the big city are bound to be lonely, even if they don't express such loneliness... Straying from country values and becoming absorbed in urban life (i.e., becoming 'citified' as urbanization sweeps the country), also leads to the breakdown of the home and subsequent loneliness" (Blair and Hyatt 76). A good example of this is Justin Townes Earle's "'Yuma'", the title track from his 2007 debut EP. As Duesner writes, "It is presumably about a small town in central Kentucky, but Earle sings it from the point of view of a young man. Despairing of busy, purposeless urban life, he yearns for the comforts and consolations of home in this quiet acoustic ballad, which ends in suicide—a freeing rather than a damning last act" ('The Geography of Justin Townes Earle's Songs'). Thus in the same way that Ching and Creed discuss "recreational hunters and avid gardeners"(4), country music and participating in country music communities allows a connectedness to these bygone rural narratives while operating day to day in the city. As the lyrics in the title to this section suggest (which are themselves borrowed from a Leadbelly song), the lived environment now gives potential *choice* to the listener. Incorporating alt.country music into their daily lives can offer a sense of escape to the country while inhabiting and contributing to a city. It can also offer alternative geographies or understanding to cities and how we may live in them. Country music, more generally offers the chance to think about the tensions represented by urban life and your place within it.

Thus, alt.country and its primary concerns can be harnessed by the audience and musicians alike to confront the potentially alienating experience of urban living and postmodernity. The music and its surrounding communities offer a point of connection and belonging, which works to offset the potentially alienating affects of the modern malaise many, (such as Elliott and Hayes) have discussed in relation to postmodern popular music and living in a city. This is largely due to its nostalgic qualities. Batcho suggests that nostalgia "may facilitate or be facilitated by the sense of connectedness to others. Nostalgia

promotes psychological well-being by countering alienation and strengthening community” (Batcho 363). As the Avett Brothers sing in ‘The Travelling Song’, “He’s a city boy singing country tunes, I’m a country boy with city blues” (*A Carolina Jubilee* 2003), promoting a connectedness to others who identify themselves similarly. As Richard Elliott has suggested, the qualities and connections between place, displacement, and memory are key ingredients of postmodernity (250), thus it relates to Jameson’s concept of depthlessness and acts as a coping mechanism. Similar to the teenage record collectors Hayes discussed, alt.country feels authentic, genuine, and lends the audience a sense of individuality. Postmodernism posits that everything is cursory, so alt.country fans cling to genre that at least postures towards emotional complexity.

CONCLUSION

Alt.country's reliance on authenticity and cultural capital alerts us to the perceived redemptive qualities that this music has for its urban-based audience. Though listeners recognise the perpetually constructed or molded quality that the 'grain' in alt.country possesses, it is placed to one side as the music offers its audience a way to understand living in a city, potentially rendering it into a meaningful and emotional experience. This is done primarily through borrowing easily understood rural signifiers, such as the farm or the American rural bar and injecting it with relevant meaning. Recently, what we have increasingly seen is an overlap. Country's rural understandings are being superimposed onto urban environments to make them safe and livable. By evoking the common rural ideas of seclusion, love, and solitude individuals find in this music that which is lacking in postmodern urban society.

How these qualities and aesthetics become emblematic of the genre is a complex and endlessly negotiated process. Genre itself is in an ongoing state of social construction, which only becomes accepted through repetition. This can be seen with alt.country. Following the success of a pocket of similarly-minded bands in the early 90s, their mix of punk and country and rebellious attitude became the (very loose) template for later bands adopting this style. However, this is a vague conception, leaving the genre to be defined by the more elusive quality of authenticity. This concept- itself a product of modernism- values genuineness and sincerity over the dichotomous qualities of superficial and fakery. As such it is extremely subjective, making defining a genre through it difficult. This is where music critics act as an importance node in the acceptance process, as they guide the audience's understandings, acting as an intermediary between music and the practice of listening. Identifying cultural capital as integral to this process, and alt.country more generally, a case study of Justin Townes Earle was offered to illustrate what knowledge is valued in this field. This was extended to an analysis of the entire print run of *No Depression* magazine, which

demonstrated direct and obvious attempts by the magazines' critics to influence the aesthetics of the genre, primarily by highlighting what they saw as artists with seminal importance to the genre. But this was not always accepted by the audience. Instead individuals bring their own perceptions of the authenticity and the genre, which works to inflect the trajectory of alt.country.

Recently, the writing and interest specifically surrounding alt.country has grown. There now exists an expanding field of passionate academics (best represented by *Old Roots New Routes*) addressing fundamental issues of authenticity, value, and enjoyment in scholarly terms. However, there are additional facets requiring further exploration. These include the suggestion that alt.country may represent a zeitgeist with what, in hindsight, can be seen to have a distinct beginning and end. It could be considered that the authenticity, emotion, and sentimental longing exhibited by these musicians are specific to a time and place. *No Depression*'s move from print to an online-only format is also telling. While financial factors were the primary concern, it also shows that there is a shift in what needs to be chronicled and where. The digitisation undergone by *No Depression* represents both permanency and the end of an era, as alt.country largely deals with feelings of immediacy, ritual, and rebellion, which are not adequately accounted for by its online format. Additionally, the seminal bands of alt.country have since moved on, musically and ideologically. Wilco and Ryan Adams for example, no longer compose music that is classified or marketed as alt.country. Despite this, dedicated fans, writers, and musicians continue to contribute to the dense fabric of this genre, making it an interesting point of study and consideration. The nexus of issues it represents, namely authenticity, the rural/urban dichotomy, and cultural capital alert the listeners to the ironic and contradictory elements of the music, but it continues to be a source of comfort and solace regardless.

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