**‘In the Round’: The Circular Heritage of Country Music**

*Abstract*

Heritage is always in the process of becoming—whether a building through alteration, redesign or destruction and rebuild, or a cultural tradition through new renderings. The heritage of country music is no different, yet has rarely been addressed, surprisingly, given its clear references to more conventional meanings of heritage, and specifically its origins and re-acquaintance with tradition. Here, key relationships within country music are explored and assessed through musical composition, alongside ethnographic and geographic discussion of its core elements: its origins in the folk music of the British Isles, manifestations in North America, and presentation to audiences and its cultural significance on both sides of the Atlantic. Exploring these themes reveals a heritage in circular conversation, with British country music adding its voice to the ongoing song “in the round.”

Keywords: Country music, intangible heritage, place, geography, musicology

# Introduction: Into the Circle

Imagine a song sung in the round. It begins with one voice, then another and another until the room is filled with a cascading circle of sound. Every voice enters the song in turn, singing variations on a theme. Different voices, at different times, all in harmony. As cultural historian George Lipsitz describes it, ‘music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word’ (1990, 99). Like a song sung in the round, or even the storytelling of a songwriters round, music is a never-ending circular conversation.

On a typical Tuesday night in York, England in May 2017, as part of fieldwork for this study, one of us (AS) witnesses this circular conversation first-hand (Figure 1). At the Barbican theatre, concertgoers are in jeans, floral shirts, leather boots, spring dresses, and plaid shirts, while others wear the standard collared shirts, crewneck sweaters, and blazers of the archetypal “British uniform.” There are middle-aged couples, groups of 20-something friends, teenagers with their parents, and retirees. This diverse group has one thing in common: to see Ward Thomas, the twin-sister duo who, through their delicate harmonies and strong story songs, have become one of the most popular acts in British country music.

During the show, Catherine and Lizzy Ward Thomas introduce “I Believe in You,” and ask for our help singing it, inviting us to join the conversation. Each goes to opposite edges of the stage, splitting the audience down the middle. Catherine starts with the left side, singing in an endless loop, “You’re on your way/yeah you’re …”. On the right side, Lizzy gives the melody for the same line, and we wait for the signal to jump in with the first group. Over the top of it all, Catherine and Lizzy sing the highest melody line, producing a soaring acapella three-part harmony that lifts the whole room.

Figure 1: Ward Thomas harmonising on stage (Source: Author).

Singing in the round, audience and performer identity blurs. Music enables both the artist and the audience to be present in a way that allows ‘integration of what is routinely kept separate—the individual and the social, the mind and the body, change and stillness, the different and the same, the already past and the still to come’ (Frith 1996, 157). These are the perfect conditions to form meaningful relationships between people and their wider world. Forming these relationships creates heritage. In the round—as in heritage—past, present, and future are entwined.

Like a song in the round, this paper argues that the heritage of country music is itself a round. It examines the circular connections within the history and the heritage of country music in order to explain its contemporary popularity in Britain. We ask: How deep is the transatlantic connection between North American country and British folk and country? How and why is country music spreading in the UK? And how has country music manifested as heritage? Examining country music through migration and identity, including its historic roots as a musical form in the folk songs of the British Isles, can help explain country’s ongoing popularity in the UK—perhaps British audiences recognising their own heritage through the prism of modern country. Fitting in with recent studies of music and geography, it uses heritage to explain how a genre like country—seemingly so tied to “place”—can travel and resonate with different audiences.

 This study is thus an examination of country music’s ongoing circular conversation from one side of the Atlantic to another. It traces the circular heritage in four ways: first, historically, by following the history of British and Celtic migration; second, musically, by analysing British folk, American country, and British country as primary text; third, geographically, by mapping the British country music scene; and fourth, by looking at this contemporary return in action through ethnographic snapshots in the introduction and conclusion.

# Verse: Intellectual Context

Despite its rich historiography, comparatively few works exist on country music in the field of heritage studies or conservation (but see Baker and Huber 2013; Martin 2015; Bauder 2016). This section presents an ‘opening verse’, a critical examination of the diverse scholarship relating to music and place, situating this study of country music, geography, and heritage within the collective scholastic song.

## Music, Geography, and Heritage

‘The map sings,’ Alan Lomax once said (1963, xv). Lomax and his fellow folklorists were among the first academics to explore the relationship between music and geography (Sharp 1909; Bronson and Child 1959; Lomax and Lomax 1938; Lomax 1963, 1968). Later, geographers began critically examining the interplay between music and place, beyond the folklorists’ approach of merely preserving lyrics and melodies of “old time” music (see Ford and Henderson 1974; Carney 1979; Carney 1998). The early “song collectors,” however, provide important source material. For example, this study uses the so-called ‘Child Ballads’ (Bronson and Child 1959) to compare and contrast British folk music with American and British country.

Also influential for this study were a second generation of scholars who further developed approaches in geomusicology (Kong 1995; Gumprecht 1998) and 1990s sociologists and historians who analysed music and geography to better understand the complex inner-workings of culture (Frith 1983, 1996; Lipsitz 1990, 1994; Swiss et. al. 1998; Bennett 2000). Leyshon et al’s *The Place of Music* (1998) and Connell and Gibson’s *Sound Tracks* (2003) set the intellectual agenda for the field in Britain and Australia since which time other geographers have further explored music and globalisation, urban design, and the nation-state (Bennet and Peterson 2004; Biddle and Knights 2007; Krims 2007). Together, all have demonstrated what Leyshon et al. previously argued: that, ‘[T]o consider the place of music is not to reduce music to its location, to ground it down to some geographic baseline, but to allow a purchase on the rich aesthetic, cultural, economic, and political geographies of musical language’ (1995, 425).

 With the development of critical heritage studies (eg. Harrison 2012), the examination of music and place became increasingly distinct. Analyses of popular music heritage emerged that employed a unique blend of anthropological and archaeological styles (Lashua, Cohen, and Schofield 2010; Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011 and 2016; Graves-Brown 2012), while wrestling with questions of significance, value, tangibility, intangibility, designation, and preservation. Papers recently published together provide a conceptual framework for music heritage (Brandellero and Janssen 2014; Darrell 2014; Cohen and Roberts 2014; Roberts 2014; Schofield 2014) and have laid foundations for significant anthologies which further explored its principal themes (Whiteley et al. 2007; Lashua et al. 2014; Cohen et al. 2015; Baker 2015). Yet these anthologies included only two papers about country music—one analysing the construction of Nashville as the “capital” of country and the other about a DIY country music museum in Australia (Pecknold 2014; Brennan 2015). Therefore, although country music has received critical heritage attention (Baker and Huber 2013; Martin 2015; Bauder 2016), gaps remain, including its relationship to migration, cultural diversity and identity. This study intends to probe the British and American roots and migratory routes of country music, and in doing so, determine if the heart of country music’s transatlantic appeal lies in this shared musical heritage.

In their broadest sense, the respective fields of heritage and popular music studies are each well-developed, yet characterized by scholars increasingly avoiding what they consider over-done conventional tangible heritage formats—including the protection or official recognition of buildings, birthplaces, tourist sites—in favour of an approach built on the principles of ‘enacted culture’ (eg. Brandellero and Janssen 2014, 237; Roberts 2014, 272), as something given prominence through practice (and often local practice) in the form of community-led initiatives that focus on what local or ‘heritage’ (after Council of Europe 2009, 212) communities want, and what they value, irrespective of any official and authorised viewpoint (eg. Smith 2006). The growth of community-led approaches to heritage is well documented and widespread (eg. Smith and Waterton 2009; Waterton and Smith 2010; Gould 2018), while in popular music studies a similar trend is evident, for example in Liverpool where the increasingly authorised view of a city dominated by a single band from the 1960s (The Beatles) is being replaced (or at least complemented) by counter-narratives that focus on contemporary music making amongst the city’s harder-to-reach neighbourhoods (eg. Lashua *et al*. 2010). These are significant developments, but as we have seen, they are less well developed for country music, and specifically its relationship with and origins in migration and identity—the primary focus of this study.

## Country Music

Country music’s autonomous intellectual discourse began with a special issue of the Journal of American Folklore dedicated to “hillbilly music” (1965), followed by Bill Malone’s landmark book *Country Music, U.S.A.* (1968), and further studies which examined country as the folk music of the American Southern working class (Gritzner 1978, Malone 1979). This first generation of country music scholarship coincided with the Country Music Association’s establishment of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, whose role as a centralised institution further raised the profile of the genre. Together, these developments created the standard narrative of country music—and, in turn, its geography. While the early scholarship emphasised the relationship between music and place, this relationship played out within constraints. The ‘square’ outline of the story stayed the same: emigrants brought fiddles and ballads with them across the ocean to Appalachia, where the music remained on front porches until the advent of radio, when it became commercialised through shows such as the Grand Ole Opry, eventually bringing us to Nashville (Malone 1968, 1979; Escott 2003; Kingsbury and Nash 2006).

This narrative has long served as an ‘authorised discourse’ within country music scholarship (Smith 2006). Yet scholars have now begun pushing the boundaries of these authorised narratives by addressing questions of race and ‘whiteness’ (Mann 2008; Manuel 2008; Pecknold 2012), class consciousness (Fox 1997; La Chapelle 2007), authenticity and iconography (Peterson 1997; Harkins 2004), subgenres such as bluegrass and ‘hard’ country (Cantwell 1984; Ching 2001; Peterson 2004), through Celtic cultural ties (Ritchie and Orr 2014), and country music’s built environment (Williams and Morrisey 2000; Hill 2011; Pecknold 2015; Hanson and Salo 2016). Most importantly for this study, a handful of scholars have begun to look at country music outside the Southern US (Cohen 2007, 71-94; Furmanovsky 2008; Murphy 2014; Bossius 2017), including a significant number in Australia (Smith 2005; Baker and Huber 2013; Brennan 2015; Bauder 2015; Martin 2015) where, most significantly, Baker and Huber critically appraised the authorised discourse that dictates Tamworth as being the country music capital of Australia, and both Martin and Bauder grappled with questions of national identity and authenticity in Australian country music.

 This paper adds to the attempts of these other scholars to avoid ‘squar[ing] a complicated historical circle’ (Manuel 2008, 421). It contributes perspectives from heritage studies, and probes the Celtic connection at play in Britain’s contemporary reception of country. Despite its relative lack of heritage scholarship, country music is one of the most naturally heritage-minded music genres—concerned with lineages, inheritance, roots, and finding caretakers for its past. To use Baker and Huber’s phrase, it is a “ready-made memory culture” (2013, 224). Country music scholarship has danced around the concept of heritage, alluding to “nostalgia” and “tradition” without critically analysing heritage concepts such as tangibility/intangibility and cultural memory, meaning, or significance (notable exceptions in Australia include Baker and Huber 2013; Bauder 2015). Mainstream country music has never critically examined its own authorised discourse —a discourse present in its standard narrative, but also present in alternative narratives that enshrine certain artists as having more heritage value than others (see Dawidoff 1997; Ching 2001). This highlights the central tension in country music scholarship, between critically analysing country music and over-intellectualising it. This study attempts to walk that line.

# Pre-Chorus: Methodology

The triad of methodologies used for this research reflects the three central questions of the study: How deep is the transatlantic connection between North American country and British folk and country? How is country music spreading in the UK? And how has country music manifested as heritage? The methodologies attempt to fill gaps in music heritage scholarship, supplemented with original sources such as song lyrics, radio shows, documentaries, mainstream journalism, and secondary literature.

The first method, musicology, will analyse music and sound as a primary text. Because analysing music itself is surprisingly rare in the field of music heritage, two models of good practice have been found outside the discipline: the investigation of American and British ballads by folklorists Ritchie and Orr (2014), and the table system of comparing country music subgenres by country music scholar Richard Peterson (Peterson 2004, 94-95). Similarly, Cantwell’s examination of the roots of bluegrass represents a rare case of a cultural studies scholar incorporating music theory into an analysis (Cantwell 2003, 115-142).

Creating musicological categories and criteria for this study’s comparative analysis involved undertaking a qualitative survey of 100 British traditional songs, 100 American country songs, and 100 British country songs. To ensure that each category of songs selected for comparison was universally judged to be essential listening by both academic and public audiences, this study used the first 100 ‘Child Ballads’ to represent British traditional folk music (Bronson and Child 1959), *Rolling Stone’s* list of the “100 Greatest Country Songs of All Time” (2014) to represent American country and, to represent British country, 100 songs across nine albums by British Country Music Association award-winning or regularly charting musicians based on airplay on BBC’s *Bob Harris Country* and *Another Country with Ricky Ross* between January 2017 and August 2018 (see bibliography). Once the chosen songs and artists were grouped together, they were broken down into their constituent parts (lyrics, instrumentation, structure), qualitatively coded, and analysed (Figures 2 and 3). The “Musical Analysis” section includes statistical analysis using Pearson’s chi-squared test to evaluate the significance of any differences identified within the data categories. In short, the chi-squared test determines how likely it is that observed differences between data sets arose by chance. The significance level used was 5%. Where statistical significance was found, the Cramér coefficient of association test was used to determine the strength of the association.

The second method, mapping, makes reference to the geohumanities, notably Ward’s GIS analysis of Grateful Dead concerts (2015), Lashua et al’s examination of Liverpool venues (2010), and Laing’s concept of ‘gigographies’ (Laing 2010). Mapping will help visualise country music’s transatlantic connection by showing the growth and extent of the contemporary country music scene in the UK including venues, festivals, radio shows, and tours, informing answers to the first and second research questions: the depths of the transatlantic roots of country music, and how it is spreading in the UK.

Mapping music explores alternative narratives, in the face of the authorised discourse (Lashua et al. 2010, 131) —in this case, the idea that country music is solely an American phenomenon. Mapping cultural, historical, and geographical qualitative data uncovers a more complete picture of the ‘musicscape’ (Lashua 2015, 46). Musicological and geographical methods complement each other, logically filling in the blanks to create a picture of country music’s place, past and present.

The third and final method, ethnography, involves participant observation at concerts by Ward Thomas and The Shires. Ward Thomas and The Shires were selected as the most popular, the most active, the most frequently played British country acts on BBC Radio shows, and with the largest fan base. Attending their concerts was helpful in better understanding grassroots British country identity and any connection to American country. The two snapshots of “in the round” moments at each concert in the introduction and conclusion reinforce the circular theme of the study and give a strong sense of national musical identity.

The chosen narrative style of the concert ethnography replicates the model used elsewhere (Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Murphy 2014; Bauder 2015), and responds to Cohen’s and Kong’s calls for more biographical ethnographic narratives of live music (Cohen 1993; Kong 1995). This narrative-ethnography style of presentation has both the emotional, storytelling benefits of traditional narrative and the analytical benefits of ‘thick description’ (see Ryle in Geertz 1973). Traditional narrative conjures a time and place for a reader, while thick description analyses the context in order to understand the actions of strangers, the motivations behind them, and their meaning (Geertz 1973, 27). The analysis in thick description, paired with narrative, help separate moments of honest, participatory ‘enacted culture’ (Roberts 2014, 272) from moments of orchestrated authorised discourse during fieldwork. Equally influential during concert fieldwork were: Small’s idea of music as an action verb in the form of participatory ‘musicking’ (1998), Rossmanith’s concept of audience-performer meaning making (2009), and Gritzner’s rejection of oversimplifying country in ethnographic observation (1978).

# Chorus: The Transatlantic Conversation

It is a long-established view that country music has its roots in the folk songs of the British Isles. Bill Malone says on the very first page of *Country Music, U.S.A* that, ‘hillbilly music . . . developed out of the reservoir of folksongs and ballads brought to North America by the Anglo-Celtic immigrants’ (1968, 3). Folklorist Alan Lomax remarked that ‘Southern mountain folk-music is more British than anything one can find in Great Britain; it is truly Scots-Irish-English,’ while noting elsewhere that mountain-music’s close cousin, frontier cowboy songs, followed ‘the gallantry, the grace, and the song heritage of their English ancestors’ (Lomax and Lomax 1938, xviii; Lomax 1960, 155; see also Cantwell 2003, 130). The companion book to the BBC documentary series *Lost Highway: The Story of Country Music* mentions ‘the connection between traditional British music and American country music’ in its foreword noting that, ‘on a stiflingly humid night in Tennessee, it’s still possible to attend a back-porch bluegrass jam and hear a jig or hornpipe that crossed from a chilly island several hundred years earlier’ (Escott 2003, 9-10). And yet, it later contradicts itself, stating in the conclusion:

Country music is the sound of Americans making music for Americans. Jazz and blues had parochial origins, but erased cultural barriers to become worldwide currencies. Country music has not. In fact, it might be at its best when it’s specific to the United States. (Escott 2003, 173).

The tension hangs in the air, the question unsaid: how can something owe its foundational history and heritage to another country, yet only be allowed to be American?

 These tensions arise because the British connection is only the first sentence of the story (Cohen 2007 and Ritchie and Orr 2014 being exceptions to this), after which most authors move on to the standard American account of the genre. Since the current objective is to retrace country music’s historical circle, the most widely accepted narrative bears close examination, as does the British/Celtic connection.

 The 18th and 19th centuries opened the floodgates of emigration from the British Isles to North America. Emigrants came primarily from the Scottish Highlands and Islands, Ireland’s Ulster region, and to a lesser extent the Lowlands and elsewhere in England (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 94). This migration was especially hard on the Ulster Scots, nomads fiercely loyal to their communities who had settled in Northern Ireland after being uprooted from Scotland just a handful of generations before (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 69-74). Over two centuries, “push” and “pull” factors naturally ebbed and flowed from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Johnny Cash’s ancestors were amongst one of the earlier waves, leaving Fife and sailing from Glasgow to Massachusetts in 1667 (Cash 1997, 3). Flat-picker and singer Doc Watson’s ancestors were driven from Scotland to North Carolina much later, in the early 19th century, when landlords rented out their farmland for more lucrative sheep-grazing (Dawidoff 1997, 152-153). Some emigrants were forced to leave and others chose freely; some fell victim to the Clearances and the enclosure movement, some to the changing economy of sheep and kelp farming, some to poverty and famine, some to religious persecution (Richards 1982; Adams and Somerville 1993; Hunter 1995; Devine 2011). All, however, left the home they knew for the promise of something better.

 When they left, they did not leave everything behind. From Georgia to Nova Scotia, new immigrants brought a melancholy for their old lives and lost landscape. The new physical environment closely resembled the one they had left behind—as Doc Watson’s ancestors discovered in North Carolina, which ‘with its profusion of oak and chestnut forests, wildflower-covered hillsides, and steep rocky crags, look[ed] a lot like the Highlands’ (Dawidoff 1997, 153). They carried the things that could bring them comfort and courage in their new home. The Scots brought a taste for whisky, and a heritage of illegally distilling “moonshine”—still a staple in country music (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 86-7). The Irish brought their “Come-All-Ye” songs, while the Scots-Irish Ulstermen transported their ‘gritty, determined . . . hard-working, [and] sentimental’ outlook on life (Lomax and Lomax 1938, xviii; Ritchie and Orr 2014, 142). Fiddles, widespread and extremely portable, also made the trip. Each emigrant region had its own style that found a new home in North America: Perthshire’s classic Scottish “driven bow” and drone notes, Northeast Scotland’s strathspeys, Shetland’s triplets and slow airs, the Border’s hornpipes, and Northern Ireland’s short bow strokes (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 29). The familiar strains of the fiddle-filled gatherings carried over from Old World to New, and the good-time tradition of the ceilidh eventually morphed into the front-porch picking and “in the round” sessions of country music today (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 78). The songs exchanged in these immigrant circles were ballads—not slow-tempo love songs in the modern sense of the word, but passed-down songs that told stories ‘with concise but dramatic clarity’ (Kingsbury and Nash 2006, 15). The Scottish and Irish diaspora brought their taste for story songs and their characteristic ‘spirit of music making and revelry’ everywhere they went (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 78). As Scottish singer-songwriter Alan Reid explains, ‘the immigrant, as a rule, clings more to the homeland and to culture and music than the person who’s surrounded by it all the time’ (in Ritchie and Orr 2014, 149). Immigrants’ lives were forever characterised by farewell.

 As the freshness of the farewell faded, the music and culture grew, flourished, and inevitably evolved. During the religious Great Awakening that swept across settlements in the 18th and 19th centuries, Anglo-Celtic immigrants met a surprising kindred musical spirit along rural roads and at tent revivals: African-Americans (Malone 1968, 16-18, 27-30; Cantwell 2003, 123). As Lomax put it, ‘The wonderful tunesmiths of Ireland and Scotland felt a friendly rivalry with a people who could make every hour of the day into a rhythmic event’ (2003, 334). Robert Cantwell describes the musical result:

If in the Old South, with its pervasive Irish and Scots-Irish settlement, there occurred on the folk level an energetic interchange and fusion of black and white song, it is perhaps because between the two traditions there were strong musical affinities, reinforced by a social system that discriminated against both groups. The African love of cross-rhythm found a home . . . in off-beat accentuation, which was in the gait of Scots song and was a favourite device of Irish fiddlers; African gapped scales and modalities found an echo in those of the Gaelic tradition; folk singers from both parts of the world delighted . . . in high pitches, a declamatory style, vocal tension and ornament, and improvisation. (Cantwell 2003, 120).

This black and white musical conversation spurred on the next stage of country music’s development (Manuel 2008; Mann 2008). So too did the Civil War and westward expansion, both putting eastern seaboard immigrants on the move again, creating new cultural enclaves in Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and on past the Rockies (Lomax and Lomax 1938, xviii). As Johnny Cash tells it, ‘Sherman’s troops stripped and burned [my great-grandfather’s] Georgia plantation, so he moved his family farther west, homesteading across the Mississippi in Arkansas’ (Cash 1997, 4). The musical migration continued, spreading west beyond the boundaries of Appalachia and the eastern seaboard.

 Most narratives pick up at this point in the story, when recorded country music emerges for the first time as a commercial music form in Atlanta in the 1920s (e.g. Peterson 1997). Narratives then follow the music as it is carried to California by 1930s dust-bowl refugees (La Chapelle 2007), as bluegrass, western swing, and the image of the Hollywood cowboy surface in the 1940s (Peterson 1997; Cantwell 2003), as the recording industry consolidates in Nashville’s Music Row in the 1950s (Pecknold 2007; Hill 2011), as the Nashville Sound rivals Bakersfield twang in California and Outlaw country in Austin in the 1960s and 1970s (Ching 2001), and as waves of neo-traditionalism, alt-country, and Americana alternate with pop and “bro” country from the 1980s to the present day (Escott 2003; Kingsbury and Nash 2006; Rich Hall’s Countrier Than You 2017).

What is often lost along this timeline is the wider and deeper historical migratory context that influenced the music deeply. Without it, the story becomes a rote recounting of dates, place-names, and major stars. Thinking about country music from a heritage perspective—emphasising roots, origins, changes over time, values and significance—can deepen our understanding of how the music has come to be the way it is, even in the commercial era, and why people continue to respond to it positively. A heritage perspective reveals a broader picture, allowing us to make connections.

National borders are arbitrary when dealing with something as complex as music and place. Following state lines instead of migratory flow, the narrative ignores the fact that there are self-sufficient country music scenes in Canada and Australia, and satellite scenes in places as far afield as Sweden and Japan (Bossius 2017; Furmanovsky 2008). And country music has found a flourishing home in Britain, where a scene has been developing since at least the 1950s (Cohen 2007, 74).

# Instrumental Break: Musical Analysis

Tracing musical similarities in songs from UK folk, US country, and UK country can help measure this migratory flow of heritage. This section will focus on the country-music conversation in three areas: lyrical themes, instrumentation, and structure (Figure 2). Drawing from a dataset of traditional and country songs, the aim is to highlight any similarities and differences that can act as evidence to help operationalize shared music heritage.

Figure 2: The circular conversation visualised. For each subgenre, n=100; for the instrumentation section of UK traditional, “(100)” notes that while no original recordings exist, based on historical written sources and contemporary recordings one can estimate up to 100 of the songs contained the above instrumental elements. (Source: Author; public domain basemap data from Natural Earth, for song data see above and Bibliography).

***Lyrical themes***

In the storytelling tradition of country music, lyrics are the most important part of a song (Malone 1968, 12). According to Gritzner, ‘the true soul of country is found in its rough-hewn lyricism, its directness and simplicity, and its refreshing lack . . . of pretense’ (1978, 859). Some scholars are cynical about country music’s loyalty to “real-life” lyrical themes of family, community, tradition, and rural experience, arguing that these themes grew out of migrants’ search for comfort during the waves of early 20th century urbanisation and industrialisation (Pecknold 2014, 22). In doing so, scholars relegate country music to songs ‘in the key of nostalgia’ (Fox 2004, 91, in Mann 2008, 87), oversimplifying it, and leaving us no closer to understanding why country resonates with contemporary British audiences.

Far from being generic sentimental nostalgia, country deals directly with the ‘tensions, conflicts, and contradictions’ inherent in everyday life (Lewis 1991, 105). When Hank Williams sings, “As I wonder where you are/I’m so lonesome I could cry” or Dolly Parton sings, “We both know I’m not what you need/but I will always love you,” we believe them and their lived experience. The music handles loss, desire, joy and pain (Fox 1997, 111). Each song is like the flip of a coin—‘hedonism and puritanism, machismo and sentimentality, sin and guilt’ (Malone 2004, 122). Country music speaks in a deeply melancholic voice with that unmistakable high lonesome sound (Cantwell 2003, 115, 129). Here the Celtic connection is clear.

Out of the sample of songs analysed for this study—100 of each genre for a total of 300—67 UK traditional songs, 56 US country, and 48 UK country songs expressed loneliness or melancholy. Immigrants brought their ear for a melancholic farewell with them, both as lived experience and inherited predilection. Traditional lyrics make it clear that, ‘the Scots and Irish have made an art of the farewell song’ (Ritchie and Orr 2014, 99; see also Dawidoff 1997, 155). That deep-seated melancholy stayed with them in their new lives, perhaps becoming the root emotion of country music’s lonesomeness. As American folk musician John Cohen muses: ‘How can you justify a lonesome sound? A sound is not lonesome! Yeah, the longing [of the immigrant] or the acceptance of the fact that life didn’t work out, or it didn’t work out the way it was described, as it was supposed to work out’ (in Ritchie and Orr 2014, 186). In this way, ‘country [music] calls the Celts’ (*Eddie Goes Country*, BBC Radio 4, 24 Nov 2012). A poignant, lonely thread pervades the refrains, “My bonnie lies over the ocean/my bonnie lies over the sea/won’t you bring back my bonnie to me” from “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” (trad.), “Well you know I’m a sailor, and tomorrow we sail/...Oh the longer the waiting, the sweeter the kiss/...the next time I hold you I’m not letting go/Will you wait for me darlin’, I need to know” from Josh Turner’s “The Longer the Waiting” (2007) and, “Your boat would sail away, never to return/I gave you to the water/And she claimed you for her own/I will wait my love/Till they carry me away/I, I, Iona” from The Wandering Hearts’ “Iona” (2018). Looking at the pervasive melancholic tone of the dataset songs, a circular emotional pattern connecting all three genres seems evident.

Beyond expressing melancholy, the lyrics of the three genres in the dataset have strong narratives. The legacy of storytelling in country music likely could be an inheritance from the ballads of the British Isles—82 of the UK traditional songs emphasized storytelling, as did 66 of the US country and 84 of the UK country songs. British traditional ballads told direct, dramatic stories in a conversational tone, much like a modern-day country song (Lomax 1960, 168-195; Dawidoff 1997, 196). A ballad like “Barbara Allen” (trad.), which tells the story of a man who dies of unrequited love, echoes through the George Jones country classic “He Stopped Loving Her Today” (1980), with a similarly surprising, heart-breaking, and morbid twist. When comparing lyrics like, “He turned his pale face to the wall/And death was on him dwellin’/‘Adieu, adieu, my kind friends all/Be kind to Barbara Allen” with, “He stopped lovin’ her today/They placed a wreath upon his door/And soon they’ll carry him away/He stopped lovin’ her today,” the resemblance is uncanny (Lomax 1960, 183). Although stories of death are more common in British traditional music (see Child 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, etc.), US or UK country musicians sing about heartbreak and loss in other forms: “I fall to pieces/Each time someone speaks your name (speaks your name)/I fall to pieces/Time only adds to the flame” (“I Fall to Pieces,” Patsy Cline, 1961); or, “All the time I wasted on the things we never were/Or the way her hand was in your hand/Like I wanted mine to be/Or standing in the brand new dress I bought/'Cause I thought it was gonna be me” (“Thought It Was Gonna Be Me,” Catherine McGrath, 2018). What American and British country did inherit, and all of the study’s survey songs share, is a dedication to recording lived experience, and letting emotions drive the narrative of those experiences.

The three genres do not share just the sad songs. Songs in the sample also tended to convey place identity and geographic imagery (31 UK trad./30 US country/15 UK country), inspire a good time (21/23/31), and discuss religion and spirituality (8/5/4). The light-hearted, defiant fun of Old World jigs and reels (Child 3, 19, 33, 38) lives on in contemporary songs: “If you've got the money, I've got the time/We'll go honky tonkin' and we'll have a time/We'll make all the night spots, dance, drink beer and wine” (Lefty Frizzell, 1950) and, “First time that I saw you/Your beauty blinded me/Didn’t think it could get any better/But the front was all I’d seen/...It’s great to see you comin’, but man I sure love to watch you leave” (Gary Quinn, 2013) and all other country songs showcasing rakish, winking humor and a lively beat.

Place identity and geography is another common lyrical theme. The imprisoned knight in “The Fair Flower of Northumberland sings about home: “So soon as I come in faire Scotland/Thou shalt be a lady of castles and towers/And sit like a queen in princely bowers/When I am at home in faire Scotland” (Child 9), while the Celtic place identity in Child 99 makes it “an agreeable piece of Scottish self-congratulation” (Bronson and Child 1959, 484). Southern geography is similarly celebrated in Alan Jackson’s lyrics: “‘I don’t know about that accent son, just where did you come from?’/Where I come from/It's cornbread and chicken/Where I come from a lotta front porch pickin'” and “Born the middle son of a farmer/And a small town southern man/Like his daddy's daddy before him/Brought up workin' on the land” (“Where I Come From,” 2000; “Small Town Southern Man,” 2008). The Shires sing about their own home: “I'm made in England/And I'm proud to be/From this little island/It's more than home to me/Rainy days and milk in my tea/Is good enough for me” and, ‘We can build our own Nashville/Underneath these grey skies/And people will come, they'll come from far and wide/They'll leave their village greens and their big cities behind” (“Made In England” and “Nashville Grey Skies,” 2015). All three genres tend to describe in detail their respective pride for their home places and how that home *is* their identity. In “Big City” (1982), Merle Haggard sings, “I’m tired of this dirty old city/ . . . Turn me loose, set me free/Somewhere in the middle of Montana.” Ward Thomas long for their own version of Montana Big-Sky country in “Where the Sky Is” (2016), when they sing, “Take my hand and we’ll run to the countryside/Find somewhere the air is clean and the water’s wide/Feel at home as the clouds roll on and set the sunlight free/Look, the sky is right where it should be.” Haggard and Ward Thomas elevate nature and the rural life as closer to “real” life. Songs in the dataset commonly used geographic imagery to this effect. Overall, lyrical evidence from the sample continues to point out thematic similarities across the genres, suggesting common emotional/historical roots and heritage.

To give one final example of lyrics in a live setting: during the Ward Thomas concert discussed in the introduction, the band sang songs like “A Town Called Ugley,” a high-energy, honky-tonk story about getting lost and stuck in traffic in Essex, harmonising the line, “I swear we drove past the Old King’s Head [Pub] 25 times or more,” describing a universally relatable situation in nationally specific terms. Ward Thomas have said in the past that, ‘our songs are all about our own experiences here in the UK . . . we weren’t trying to write songs about trucks and cowboys’ (Deek 2015). Yet, at the same time, their lyrics have been able to tap into the ordinary trials and tribulations of everyday life—describing the universal with the specific, like any good country song. At the concert, “A Town Called Ugley” closed in a crescendo: “A bloody town/A cotton-pickin’ town/Called Ug-leeeey!” The juxtaposition—the stereotypically Southern “cotton-pickin’” and the wholeheartedly British “bloody”—in the final line captures the shared themes and distinct identity in both US and UK country lyrics. This is the transatlantic conversation in miniature.

Under each heading, these observations are clearly borne out in the statistical analysis, the chi-squared test showing no significant differences between lyrical content. It is the commonalities that are more significant.

***Instrumentation***

On both sides of the Atlantic, stringed instruments dominate, whether they are old-time Gibson mandolins or electric Telecaster guitars. Ninety-nine of the US country songs surveyed were played on stringed instruments, as were 91 of the UK country songs (although no original recordings of the UK traditional songs in the sample exist, history tells us the vast majority would have featured stringed instruments as well as their characteristic triplets, turns, drone notes, and slides). The fiddle, as mentioned before, made an ideal travel companion for people emigrating from the British Isles. It became the staple of country bands, joined later in the 19th century by banjo and acoustic guitar (Malone 1968, 13). Played together, these instruments produced something greater than the sum of its parts: the “twang” of country music instrumentation. Music historian Geoff Mann provides a useful explanation of what makes the twang so distinctive:

Roughly, it refers . . . to the short sustain and dynamic resonance of instruments like the banjo, mandolin or dobro, the sounds of which are distinguished by an abrupt, relatively sharp initiation when plucked, which is followed by a quick, usually slightly ascending, muting. (Mann 2008, 78-79).

Country’s twang is one of the most inalienable parts of the genre, and could be seen as a descendant of the flourishes commonly used in British folk music. The ‘happy Scots snap’ note on the fiddle echoes the ‘short sustain and dynamic resonance’ of a twanged note on a steel guitar (Cantwell 2003, 124; Mann 2008, 79). More Celtic connections presented themselves during data analysis. Intricate harmonies in country songs, like those crafted by American artists the Everly Brothers, Lady Antebellum, the Dixie Chicks, and Alabama, as well as British artists Ward Thomas, Wildwood Kin, The Wandering Hearts and The Shires, have a distinct Celtic air about them. During a tour of America in the 1890s, Czech composer Anton Dvorák recalled hearing songs with ‘unusual and subtle harmonies, the like of which I have found in no other songs but those of old Scotland and Ireland’ (1895, 433). Perhaps these are the harmonies that live on in contemporary country music.

Instrumental ornamentation common in Scottish and Irish folk music, such as triplets, turns, and grace notes, also colour American and British country music. The ba-ba-baaa of a Scottish-style driven bow is the classic fiddle introduction to many traditional honky-tonk-style ballads, including “Crazy Arms” (1956) by Ray Price and “Murder on Music Row” (2000) by George Strait and Alan Jackson. The melody in the instrumental break in Travis Tritt’s “A Great Day to Be Alive” (2000) is driven by Celtic triplets, turns, hammer-ons, pull-offs, and slides, as is the chorus in the Shires’s “Tonight” (2015), in which the whoa-oa-OA-oa refrain is itself a lilting triplet. Similarly, “Somebody to Love” (2015) by Kacey Musgraves contains perhaps the best contemporary example of a haunting, emotive drone-note opening measure.

Drone notes are most commonly used by bagpipes, one instrument that is conspicuously absent from American and British country music, seemingly unable to make the transatlantic jump like fiddles, guitars, pianos, and mandolins. However, it is still present in different forms. A fifth string was added to the banjo in the early 19th century ‘to create a drone effect reminiscent of the Scottish fiddle and bagpipe traditions,’ and its cousin, the lap steel guitar, relies on slides and grace notes just as bagpipes do (Malone 1968, 13; Motherway 2013, 44). Some have even compared country artists’ melancholy singing style to the instrument. As writer Nicholas Dawidoff wrote of George Jones’s performance of “A Good Year for the Roses” (1970): ‘The vocal effect is like a human bagpipe—the slow release of a slow, mournful sound’ (1997, 206). British and American folk and country artists not only draw from the same well of musical vocabulary for their lyrical themes; their instrumental landscape is also familiar terrain.

As with lyrical content, there is no significant difference in instrumentation between the genres. The commonalities are once again the most obvious conclusion emerging from the analysis, clearly implying connectivity rather than difference.

***Song structure***

One final area for comparison is song structure. Traditional ballads from Britain tend to follow simple verse structure (“Barbara Allen,” “The House Carpenter”), occasionally with a short refrain (“The Farmer’s Curst Wife,” “The Two Sisters”) (Lomax 1960, 182-184, 187). US country, and by extension British country, inherited the idea that verses tell the story, and the refrain drives home the message (Neal 1998, 324-327). This evolution towards refrains is reflected in the spread between simple verse (48 UK trad./13 US Country/0 UK Country), simple verse with refrain (38/22/20), and verse-chorus (11/61/78) in the dataset’s songs.

Unlike in the previous two categorisations, here the differences are statistically significant (*χ2 = 148.739, d.f. = 6, P < 0.01*), showing a moderate association (*φ = 0.498*) . Specifically, UK Country was less likely to use simple verse than would be expected. Further, UK country was more likely to use a verse-chorus structure. UK traditional was more likely to use a simple verse structure, verse with refrain or verse-refrain-bridge, but much less likely to use a verse-chorus structure than expected. US country was more likely to use a verse-chorus structure similar to UK country, however they were closer to the expected count for using a simple verse. For clarity, these observations are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Bar chart showing significance tests for music structure between US Country, UK Country and UK Traditional music (prepared by Callum Scott).

The songs also often share scale structure. Major and minor pentatonic scales and Mixolydian and Dorian mode tonalities give Scottish and Irish traditional music its distinctive sound (Motherway 2013, 44). This ear for particular melodies was passed down to US country music, reinforced by the African-American tradition. Robert Cantwell breaks this Afro-Gaelic relationship down: ‘the Mixolydian mode shares the blues’ flattened seventh, and when mountain or bluegrass musicians work in the Mixolydian, as in “Little Maggie,” they frequently add a flat third, tinting with blues the Celtic twilight of the Mixolydian’ (2003, 121). The Mixolydian’s minor-in-a-major sound, along with major and minor pentatonic scales, continue to dominate country songs on both sides of the Atlantic today.

***Summary***

Analysing lyrical themes, instrumentation, and song structure, has suggested deep-seated similarities between the genres, serving as an operationalization of shared heritage between them. It has also highlighted some significant differences, specifically in terms of structure. Retracing country music’s history has suggested that these relationships are beyond coincidence, but rather products of an ongoing historical and musical conversation.

# Bridge: The British Country Music Scene

‘Country music,’ says Tichi, ‘is an Alice-in-Wonderland experience. Once down the rabbit hole, an entire world awaits’ (1994, x). The British country music scene is no exception (Figure 4). From time to time, British country music enters the mainstream—for instance when the Shires or Ward Thomas top the charts or BBC Northern Ireland greenlights a show like Keepin’ Er Country (2016). The scene exists, it is blossoming, but no one appears to know why. An examination of recent news articles and documentaries reveals that existing explanations for country music’s growth in Britain are extremely unsatisfactory (Nashville UK 2014; McVeigh 2015; Guarino 2016; Savage 2016; The Shires: New Country 2017; Kay 2018; Verrico 2018; BBC Radio 1 2018; see also Fox 1997, 116; Tichi 1994, 2). They run the gamut from generically vague (country music expresses universal values and its authenticity can speak for everyone) to media-centric (the popularity of the *Nashville* television series) to reductionist (British people find country music exotic and simply enjoy dressing up and “playing cowboy”) to pop-focused (country used to be old-fashioned, but now it has “gotten with the times,” and as genre walls break down, country enjoys crossover success and pop collaborations) to cynical (globalisation, streaming, and expanding youth markets). These moments when UK country breaks through into the mainstream press only hint at the robustness of the British country music world—one that is filled with radio shows, homegrown artists, concerts, specialised venues, festivals, television shows and documentaries, professional organisations, and online fan communities.

Radio is often the first introduction to the country music circle. Tuning in on a Thursday evening, BBC 2 listeners hear the long-running Bob Harris Country show, while at other times in the week their neighbours in Scotland and Northern Ireland hear Another Country with Ricky Ross, The Hugo Duncan Show, and Ralph MacLean Country. Unhindered by the unavailability of limitless BBC airtime, a handful of digital radio shows also cater to the UK country audience: Chris Country, BCMI Radio, and UKCountryRadio.com. Almost 50 years ago, Bill Malone noted that in the history of country music, ‘radio remain[s] the most important means of country-music dissemination . . . in the form of disc jockey programs’ (1968, 35). Just as WSB Atlanta, WLS Chicago, WSM Nashville and others did in the United States, radio is bringing country music to the national stage in the United Kingdom (Peterson 1997, 12; Harkins 2004, 73-74; see also discussion of role of radio in the 1950s Liverpool country scene in Cohen 2007, 73-74).

The influence of radio in the British country scene was undeniable during the concert fieldwork for this study. During their opening set for Ward Thomas, Wildwood Kin introduced a cover of “Helplessly Hoping,” saying they added it to their repertoire for a session they did for Bob Harris as a nod to his years as a 1970s rock broadcaster. The audience murmured approval at the mention of Bob Harris, a clear example of the autonomy of the British scene: “Bob Harris” means nothing to American country fans, yet the mere mention of his name in the UK means instant credibility for an artist. “Bob Harris” is nationally specific cultural currency. In the British country music scene, Bob Harris, Ricky Ross, and comrades are what Connell and Gibson would classify as ‘gatekeepers’ (2003, 8). They are the ones who break new artists, publicise upcoming concert dates, take calls from curious listeners, and most importantly, provide a place for UK country fans to gather.

Festivals and concerts provide another gathering place (Schofield 2000, 144-148; Connell and Gibson 2012; Ward 2015). As Connell and Gibson describe, ‘live music creates local scenes and a sense of identity for those who are there: a social link between performer and audience, which reinforces the link between music and place’ (2003, 280; see also Martin 2015, Bauder 2016). In the British country music scene, regular tours by American and British artists at mainstream venues are complemented by a network of more than 200 smaller, specialised country music venues. National tours and local clubs are supplemented by large annual festivals and award shows. These include Country2Country (C2C), Buckles and Boots, Summertyne Americana Festival, Maverick Festival, Harvest Festival, Country Music Week, and the British Country Music Association Awards. American country artist Darius Rucker recalls: ‘… playin’ the first C2C [in London in 2012]. . . it keeps growin’ and growin’. Back in Nashville everybody talks about how they want to come play C2C because they keep hearin’ how great the crowds are . . . It’s grown so much, you know now it’s three cities . . . I cannot believe how much it’s grown in five years. I mean, it’s a legitimate, true country music festival here in Europe, and that’s huge’ (interviewed on Bob Harris Country, 11 March 2017).

Audiences in the British country music scene also seem to have their own identity. As Chase Bryant commented during C2C: ‘The fans here are so radical about the music . . . They accept what we do and they make us feel at home, and they’re also not the grabby kind of people, they’re very much “Hey man, great show! Have a great night!” . . . [They] respect us as people . . . They listen to the song—they’re not listening with their eyes here, they’re listening with their ears . . . The way that they breathe it in, take it all in’ (interviewed on Radio 2 Country, 12 March 2017). Echoing him, Brandy Clark said that, ‘I wish I could take the fans here and bottle them up. There’s a different appreciation for music over here’ (interviewed on Another Country with Ricky Ross, 27 April 2015). Live music events, and the communal heritage they create through shared experience, are alive and well in the British country music scene.

When it is time to reflect on those experiences, many country fans in Britain turn to country’s online community. Forums like British Country Music Community, which boasts more than 10,000 threads and almost 4,000 registered users, blogs like Nashville Over Here, Your Life in a Song, and Brits In Boots, magazines like Cross Country, Lyric Magazine, and Country Music, directories like All British Country and UK Country Events, and official associations like the British Country Music Association and its Hall of Fame page all serve as spaces for fans and musicians to learn more about the history of British country, locate live venues, talk about their favourite artists and gigs, and share new finds. Country music’s virtual presence in Britain strengthens its sense of self, reminiscent of what has been established in the international “alt.country” movement (Lee and Peterson 2004).

 Mapping how British country music is geographically and virtually experienced by fans has helped further operationalize its heritage, and provided a picture of how heritage has manifested “in the round” on the ground. The evidence is in the activity.

Figure 4: The British country music scene visualised (Source: Author; public domain basemap data from Natural Earth; Venue data from British Country Music Community 2017; Note: complete data from Scotland and Ireland not available).

# Coda: In the Round, Revisited

At the Summertyne Americana Festival, beside the River Tyne in Gateshead across from the grey skyline of Newcastle, the 2017 headline act the Shires finishes the Friday-night show (Figure 5). In a quiet moment between songs, singer Crissie Rhodes looks out at the full-capacity crowd and says: “We wanted to say thank you to each and every one of you for coming. It’s amazing to see you all here, all because you love country music. It’s also been amazing to see the growth of country music here in this country in the last four years [when the Shires started out].” They end, like Ward Thomas, with a song in the round.

 Up on their feet, half the audience sings the “whoa-o-ooo-o-oas” of the refrain from “Tonight” while the other half drives it forward with the harmony line “you’re mine/I’m yours,” just like twin locomotives. Round and round it goes, an all-consuming, never-ending circular conversation. And it keeps going—when the Shires take their bows and leave the stage, after the cheering has subsided, the audience revives the round by themselves. Singing the parts and keeping time by clapping, the audience shares a collective moment. The conversation has gained a life of its own. When the round succeeds in calling the Shires back out for an encore, they play us a song that not only encapsulates the point of this study but also incorporates its every theme—music, geography, history, place, and belonging.

Figure 5: The Shires onstage at Sage Gateshead (Source: Author).

Ben Earle, the guitarist and harmony vocalist, takes a sip of his beer and muses, “It feels appropriate that I’m drinking a pint right now.” He takes a breath and starts to introduce the song “Made in England”: “We’re so proud of where we come from. Are you guys proud of our country?” Everyone in the audience cheers. Ben nods in approval, “Yes, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.” The audience senses a story coming, and becomes quiet. Gesturing to Crissie, Ben begins: “We went to Nashville last year, and it was both our first time to America. Being there, and especially being in the South, it was a bit of a shock, a bit surprising—a lot of things, but most of all, everyone is so patriotic there. We flew back and landed in Heathrow and wrote this song. We wanted to celebrate being British.” By now, everyone is smiling. Ben adds: “We called it “Made in England” because “British” didn’t sound good in a song.” Everyone laughs. They sing symbols of Britishness: “There's nothing like a Friday night fish and chips/Sitting out there in our coats, on a cold pebble beach” and “I only want a beer/If it’s poured in a pint.” The audience is rapt, nodding and smiling with each one. Then they reach the chorus: “Cause I'm made in England/And I'm proud to be/From this little island/It's more than home to me/Yes, I'm made in England/Nowhere I'd rather be/Rainy days and milk in my tea/It's good enough for me.” The instrumentation is clearly country, the tone is classically humble, but the lyrics are unabashedly British. In three minutes, the Shires summed up the point of this paper: that British country music has its own sense of self, place, and heritage.

Repeatedly throughout this research, British fans of country music have expressed their instinctive attachment to it. At the same time, the attachment is so little understood (Finnegan 1989; Cohen 2007). Historically, British country music has been ‘ridiculed by outsiders to the scene . . . partly due to the music’s associations with cowboys, which some found amusing; [and] partly because it so overtly embraced its North American influences and thus regarded by some as “second-hand”’ (Cohen 2007, 78). British country music, however, is not an imitation, but a genuine, national emotional expression.

Music, mapping, and participant observation have shown that the historical and musical connection between British folk music, North American country music, and British country music runs deep, the spread of country music in the UK constitutes a robust national music scene, and country music is manifesting as heritage equally in the UK as in the US. The circular conversation is British country music’s heritage—in the historical sense, the musical sense, the geographic sense, and the communal sense.

Country music’s circular conversation is just one part of the diasporic web of popular music heritage. This study is a first attempt to trace the influences, connections, inheritances and the everyday social and cultural practices of one small part of a global web. As the British scene continues to develop, there will be more musical source material to draw upon, each homegrown UK country act further developing the British voice, adding to country music’s ongoing metaphorical session in the round. Music heritage, and its memory work, is always unfinished. Like heritage, country music is ‘shared property,’ something that is ‘preserved as it is changed’ (Peterson 1997, 233). In the tradition of a song in the round, no one has the last word.

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