

# “I just threw my last bottle at the jukebox...”: male brooding, bathos and recorded interiority in country music’s classic period

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“Tonight in a bar alone I’m sitting,” begins a Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys song from 1947, “apart from the laughter and the cheer. While scenes from the past drift before me, I’m watching the bubbles in my beer.”

“As I sit here tonight the jukebox playing / the tune about the wild side of life...” sang Kitty Wells in 1952.

“The jukebox is playing a honky tonk song / ‘one more’, I keep saying, ‘then I’ll go home.’ That’s George Jones, 1964.

It is a recurring conceit of post war country music: The singer is in a bar, trapped by alcoholic befuddlement and an addictively compelling jukebox, full of songs which seem to directly address their melancholy condition. Such songs often oscillate between hedonistic jubilation and existential despair, between conviviality and suicidal isolation. We might call it “barstool confessional” or “honky tonk soliloquy”. There are literally hundreds – maybe thousands of these and nearly everyone who recorded country in the 1950s and 60s did at least *some* songs in this vein.

Some cognates: Ernest Tubb’s canonical “Walking the floor over you” or Hank Williams’s “Your Cheating Heart”. Songs of tormented insomnia, which in the Williams song morphs into a kind of curse: “You’ll walk the floor the way I do...your cheating heart will tell on you.” The setting in both songs is emphatically domestic, but there’s that same architectural “trappedness” as in the barroom songs. There’s a few thousand of these out there as well. Let’s call them, “Kitchen table confessional.”

Lonely rooms, bleak houses, cheap hotels, miserable barrooms. Sometimes you get them all in one song, as in Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Another place another time”, which critic music historian Nick Tosches declared to be the best country song of the entire 1960s, or Johnny Paycheck’s “Motel Time Again,” (in which the singer stumbles from a bar at closing time to a nightmarishly drab motel room).

It is worth considering the larger popular music recording context at the time this corpus of country songs emerged. An obvious counterpart is found in Frank Sinatra’s 1950s Capitol albums, which also dwelt on that figure of the worldly heartbroken guy in the bar, musing disconsolately to no one in particular – the signal example being “One for my baby” on *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely*.



Production on those Sinatra songs is stripped back, the sonic textures open, and the dynamics low key – so markedly different from the then reigning boisterous New York pop production aesthetic of Mitch Miller.

Yet for all that Sinatra does not for a moment dispense with the fundamental staging conventions of early to mid twentieth century mass market popular music. The Sinatra sides retain a fundamental theatricality. The perfectly sculpted strings, the oh-so-deft production balance, the crystalline vocal capture, and EQ-ing, all bespeak an aesthetic of apollonian polish. The often bluesily-inflected, open textured accompaniment might reference a small bar combo, after hours, but the performance posture is one of elaborately wrought casualness, as synecdochised in the relationship between voice and orchestration.

The *new* thing that Sinatra brings is a downbeat, anti-heroic posture, the admission of being, tonight at least, one of life's losers. But the elaborate offhandedness itself bespeaks a new kind of cool masculinist heroism. It seems to me to be a very post war pose: Sure, I'm suffering, but I'm not making a big deal of this. It is as though Ernest Hemingway finally made it to tin pan alley. But although the mood bespeaks raffish intimacy, this is nonetheless this is highly capitalized recording artistry.

But listen to say George Jones singing "You're still on my mind". Here there is no particular enactment of cinematic and theatrical gestural or sartorial codes. Not to say it's not *performed*, or that it's not performative, or self aware. But it's not "actorly" in that fifties-Sinatra way. Jones's mode of almost "documentary" vernacularity has since that time become so central to popular music as to be near invisible. But back then it posed a blunt confrontation to the postures of faux detachment.

Or consider Willie Nelson's obscure "What a way to live" (1960), with its stream of consciousness lyric "A jukebox playing loud, a face among the crowd, so much like hers it makes my heart stand still". Both songs enact an almost Joycean interiority, set as they are in a boozy, rowdy spaces. But their spaces are not at all like the Sinatra barroom. With Sinatra there's always a clearly implied proscenium: we're witnessing a flawless performance of subjectivity, of masculinist melodrama. (Which was backed up by a carefully constructed *look*: Sinatra's trademark slouch, the tie loosened, the hat pushed back on the head etc.) With Nelson, Jones et al, it's as though the song is unfolding *inside* consciousness, the listener's, the singer's. Not a performance of affect, of its trappings, but the experience, the manifesting of affect. The difference between third person and first person.

Let's leave the morose guy in the bar for a moment, and take a look at where he lives. In Willie Nelson's bizarre "Hello Walls" – a career making hit for Faron Young -- the singer is in his lonely apartment, chatting with the furniture. The lyrics bespeak psychotic breakdown, or a stoned, drunken deludedness. But the swinging, danceable Texas shuffle and offhanded, almost conversational vocal delivery subvert that whole posture. This is a dance tune, maybe not wildly abandoned, but decidedly lively. We'll come back to that odd split, solitary despair and the call to the dance floor.

As George Jones moved from Texas honky tonker to Nashville superstar, he was increasingly supplied with songs expressly written to or about his famously dysfunctional celebrity home life. In "A good year for the roses", 1971 the dazed narrator wanders around the house recently deserted by his partner, uttering good neighbour banalities, soliloquizing domestic notes-to-self: "the lawn could stand another mowing..." and so on. His masterwork in *this* idiom is perhaps "Things have gone to pieces", a detailed inventory of a domestic life falling apart. "Somebody threw a baseball through my window, and the arm fell off my favourite chair..."

That posture of abandoned suburban domesticity, both banal and surrealistically nightmarish develops as a staple of C&W through the 1960s and 70s. Jerry Lee Lewis offers "Another Place, Another Time" (1968), "She even woke me up to say goodbye" (1970), or "She still comes round (to love what's left of me)," (1968), standouts among many.

The late 60s produced ever more extreme lyrical stagings of actual and virtual confinement, culminating perhaps in Eddie Noack's "Psycho" (1968) or Porter Wagoner's "The Rubber Room" (1971) – both of them more noir than psychedelic. (We might note the very short distance between these and Nick Cave's entire early-mid oeuvre.)

The brooding inwardness of the idiom found more scandalous expressions too: for example Johnny Paycheck's "Pardon me I've got someone to kill" (1966) is droll, but delivered without particular irony. The singer here is politely excusing himself at the bar – he has to go off now and kill his ex, her lover and then himself. Willie Nelson's crossover hit concept album of 1975, *Redheaded Stranger* also centres on a jealousy murder, although the elliptical storytelling and radically minimalist production arguably throws the whole authorial position into question, making the song a kind of adult western (an equivalent say of John Ford's *The Searchers*). Is it affirming or denouncing the violence, or is it simply 'daring to go there' at all, in admitting the unspoken homicidal potentials in the putatively monogamous love relationship, and thereby undercutting the blithely heteronormative assertions then dominant in pop and country? Charlie Rich's "Sittin' and Thinkin'" (1961) and even Lefty Frizzell's classic

of 1950, “I Love You a Thousand Ways” both seem to narrate the remorseful aftermath of some drunken, violent outburst, the singer now in jail, promising to do better in future.

That trajectory of simmering introspection tending to violence bred its own sub-corpus of near-parody and self-mockery. In the 1970s, late-period honky tonker Moe Bandy put out a string of barstool confessional songs, never far from self mockery (“I just threw my last bottle at the jukebox,” he sings, after being triggered by a cheatin’ song.)

George Jones himself perhaps marked the end of the cycle with his wonderful, “The King is gone (and so are you),” which opens with the line “Last night I broke the seal on a Jim Beam decanter that looked like Elvis, soaked the label off a Flintstones jellybean jar...” It’s got all the elements: mean drunkenness, a nightmarish kitchen – except it’s all farce: when the brawl finally breaks out it’s among Elvis, Fred Flintstone and the singer. It’s a direct antidote to the bathos commonplace to the idiom Jones himself had so championed.

In the 1970s barstool confessional came in for a degree of wider critical approbation, particularly from the more roots-aware *Rolling Stones*, *Creem*, *NME* writers, including John Morthland, Nick Tosches and Greil Marcus. Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris, Dylan, many others helped bring the idiom to international rock audiences. When Elvis Costello covered “A Good Year for the Roses” in 1981 many fans assumed he’d written it. Although the irony seems pretty near the surface, Costello had the nous to sing it straight-faced.

Now, newer critiques of these song types almost voice themselves. The male-entitlement, and self indulgence, and the particular conceit that his alcoholism is somehow the woman’s fault, and besides, it’s sort of lovable, even admirable in an outlawish, “good ol’ boy” way – none of it seems innocent any more. Given growing articulations of how male entitlement and intimate partner violence plays out, it is impossible to see those brooding songs in the same way.

So have those particular strands of honky tonk been rendered obsolete or anathema by cultural shift, or shown up for the acrid misogyny they always embodied, and which a generation of *Rolling Stone* writers were gulled into celebrating?

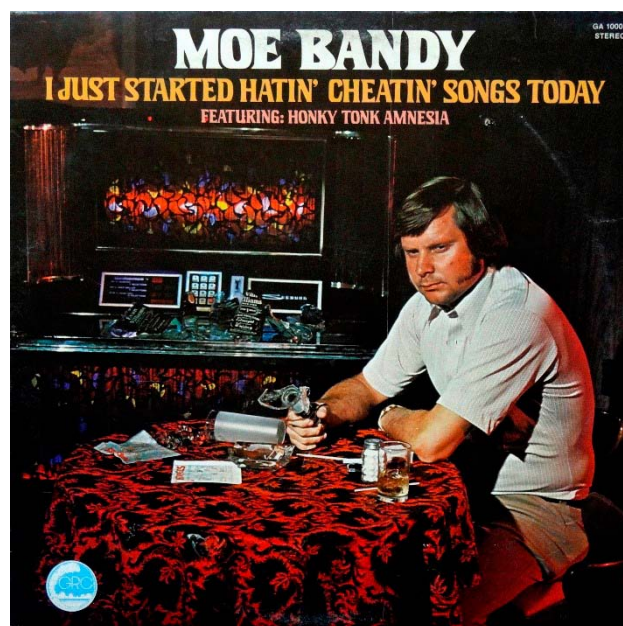
I’ve got a definitive answer: yes. And no. In defence, those strands, and their champions were always mostly marginal to the larger industry, as the late David Sanjek so well argued a few years ago in a conference paper (never published, as far as I can tell) about Johnny Paycheck, Gary Stewart and Johnny Cash.

Stewart in particular bears closer attention. John Morthland’s comments from nearly 40 years ago on Gary Stewart’s album *Out of Hand* (1975) might apply to much of the barstool confessional oeuvre: “Stewart portrays the barrooms,” he says, “as the fool’s court of last resort...[so] much of his best work has comic book overtones. ... [But] the men in his songs are often vulnerable and unashamed of it ... and ... don’t use that vulnerability as a tool for manipulation. They usually take responsibility for their own mistakes without getting overbearingly maudlin about it. The women here are usually friends as well as lovers, the men and women meet on equal terms...” (Morthland, 392)

That meeting of adult self-determining equals, seeking temporary solace together from harsh circumstances, from a life of cultural and economic disenfranchisement, although counter to the liberatory rhetoric of 60s and 70s rock still stands up pretty well.

There’s an obscure single by Bill Mack (1957), “Million Miles Away”, a plodding echoic slapback narration of domestic stasis: the singer is staring at his beloved across the table. She’s “here, but million miles away”. There’s no plot development, no resolution, no threats, no pleading, no decisions made. It’s a pure atemporal dwelling in ennui. The production may be 1950s rockabilly but the mood is of isolation and defeat. Life’s B side.

Up until and even into the 1970s the recordings I’ve been talking about were largely – mostly – intended for the jukebox trade. Those singles were successful to the extent that they could induce customers in taverns to drop coins into the slot. Two important corollaries: they were dance music. Those subtle, loping shuffles, surpris-





ingly hard to play (witness how many slumming rock bands make a hash of it) – countered the bathos and self-involvement with an immediate, real-time call to movement. Their success depended on how well they got people to their feet, on the embodied joy they were able to foster. The bathos came later: when the famously, many might say syrupy Billy Sherril Nashville production sound took the idiom more into an album and radio form. The piercing guitar, droll vocals, pulsing shuffles gave way to emotional grand guignol, perhaps nearer the habitus of daytime television melodrama than small band tavern music.

While the lyrics of the “Bubbles in My Beer” (1947) are about unrelieved failure and self-disgust, the music is driving, danceable western swing, dotted with joyous take-off solos and flighty obbligato, and featuring a deadpan vocal that implicitly complicates Cindy Walker’s lyrics with a huge “Yeah, so what?”

Those driving feels and ironic vocals of early Willie Nelson, Kitty Wells and George Jones offer

their listeners any number of affective positions: melancholy, certainly, but also a bracing self-satire – an ingredient almost entirely absent from Sinatra-styled pop male baritones-in-the-bar. Whereas the focus of the Sinatra is nearly entirely inward, the offhand rendering of emotional pain in say Ernest Tubb and Willie Nelson bespeak an outward-directedness, the metalingual framing being something like, “you all know what I’m talking about, right? I realise *my* personal pain isn’t really more special or particular than yours, so let’s not make too big a deal of it. Why not dance?” The affect is solitary by definition, but exists collectively, and that “sharedness” is acknowledged as part of the actual narration.

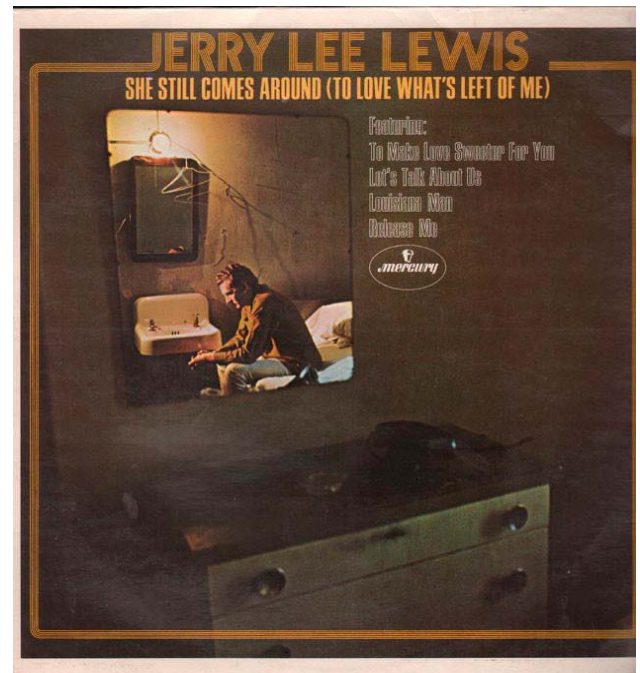
I’m interested in just how many country records begin with the “I”, the narrating persona announcing that he or she is in a bar, listening to a jukebox – maybe spellbound by a song, maybe hating it. The actual singer is occupying the role of listener, captivated by a song on the jukebox. But the song describing the setting is itself a jukebox single. Maybe it’s *this* very song, in fact, narrating its own auditorship. As though we’re in an Escher painting. Or a Borges story. The auditor is part of the *mise en scene*, apprehending a staged narration, in which there’s an auditor, listening to this very recording. Has any other art form achieved such “pre-postmodern” breaking of the fourth wall, such impossible, circling-back-in-on-itself reflexivity? An almost total dissolution of the proscenium? There’s an Onie Wheeler song called “Jump right out of this jukebox” where the singer wishes he could do that, somehow get out of the jukebox and dance with the pretty girl listening to it.

It doesn’t seem accidental. I suspect those professional country songwriters like Leon Payne, Cindy Walker, Willie Nelson, Jerry Chestnut, Harlan Howard and many others knew *exactly* what they were doing: supplying material for a steadily lucrative jukebox trade, songs which repeatedly reminded punters of that music’s own delivery system.

All those first person songs about being tormented, held hostage by that jukebox in the corner, like “Mister, please don’t play A-11!”, or “The meanest jukebox in town,” made solid commercial sense: continually reminding actual listeners that they can simply go over right now and put another coin in the slot. Records which urge their customers to keep buying the product. Like late night TV ads. Or those coin-in-the-slot first cousins, the pinball and the poker machine.

There’s historical interest in music forms and art forms which emerge, and could only have emerged in league with new technologies and distribution infrastructures (the feature film, the three minute pop song etc). These déclassé riddles of postwar country, purpose built for that particular delivery system, sometimes end up offering a unique exploration of subjectivity and audio technology, a site-specific one at that. In effect they were asking what actually is the primary stage for consciousness and embodied presence? Exploring the riddles and instabilities of lonely crowd, inner-outer space consciousness, of shared, transpersonal affect that the music replay technology sets up? (Are there any songs yet about streaming audio?)

These days the barroom loser, domestic failure mode is less an entire brand identity, more a position a singer might slip into, for a one song: a moment, a subject position temporarily but deeply inhabited. As such it’s proven a compelling song type for queerers and upsetters of country stereotypes: Mary Gauthier, Nancy Griffin, K. D.



Lang, Laura Cantrell, Casey Chambers, and my current favourites, Sarah Shook and the Disarmers, (“Drinking water tonight ‘cause I drank all the whisky this morning...”)

Kitty Wells’ “It wasn’t God who made honky tonk angels”(1952) remains one of the most defining and most critically enduring expressions of the broader song corpus I’m talking about. The homely but louche opening line “As I sit here tonight the jukebox playing that tune about the wild side of life” enacts everything in the style that seems worthy of retaining: in-moment, in-place, real time narration, a lack of coyness, a proto-feminist pushing back against a misogynistic stereotype, a matter-of-fact acceptance that love and sexual relationships are complex and largely painful, the plainly spoken subject position (1950s “respectable” woman unapologetically in a bar, digging the jukebox), and an unfussed, impossible self reflexivity – *this* song, ie Kitty’s account of listening to a song playing on a jukebox, could be describing us, listening to Wells, singing this song. Her song nearly is the song she herself is listening to. The song is her. The song is you.



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## Playlist:

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6V11Pg8wP81qPmwd8tGw0b?si=FCIjmUjoTfK3KUA6Qsae\\_w](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6V11Pg8wP81qPmwd8tGw0b?si=FCIjmUjoTfK3KUA6Qsae_w)