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Loretta Lynn: Writin' Life

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Abstract

The release of Loretta Lynn's 2004 album *Van Leer Rose* welcomed back after 33 years one of the premier feminist voices in recorded music. The songs that Loretta wrote in 60s and early 70s were some of the most controversial and politically charged to hit the airwaves. They encompassed a microcosm of issues that rural women were facing including the changing sexual roles of women, ideas on marriage, the ravages of war and substance abuse. This textual analysis looks at the 94 songs that Loretta wrote and co-wrote between the years 1960 to 1972 (the year which she stopped writing), as well as the music of Van Leer Rose. By looking at Lynn's writing, we begin to understand the viewpoints of this trailblazing artist and how she reflected her life and the social times in her music. It is a testament to her that these works remain as timely and as politically charged today as they did 40 years ago.

Introduction

The release of Loretta Lynn's 2004 album *Van Lear Rose* created a stir among the recording industry. The successful collaboration of a traditional country artist with a young, alternative rock musician, Jack White of the White Stripes, was seen not only as a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stagnant music scene, but also as the rebirth of one of country music's most popular performers. More importantly, Lynn's comeback was seen as the return of one of the feistiest and most socially conscious writers in all of popular music.

Until she stopped writing music in 1972, Lynn was one of country music's most ardent feminist voices. Discussing such topics as war, alcoholism, marriage, sexuality and the sexual revolution, Lynn wrote from the perspective of common rural women and the issues they faced in the volatile 1960s. Never one to shy away from a controversial subject, she translated the complexity of the changing social landscape into simple, honest, easy-to-understand lyrics that gave rural women around the country an emancipated strong voice in the public sphere. So successful was her message of female empowerment that her influence is still felt today by such artists as Oklahoma's Carrie Underwood and Kansas's Martina McBride, who have themselves copied Lynn's "take charge" lyrical approach.

Lynn's writing is a reflection of her upbringing and determination. Thanks to the song "Coal Miner's Daughter" and the accompanying book and movie, Lynn's story is well known in mainstream American popular culture. Born in extreme poverty in the mountainous eastern

Kentucky area region of Van Leer to a coal miner, Lynn endured the hardships of the depression as well as a post-World War II economic boom that seemingly failed to reach hills of Kentucky. The oldest daughter of eight, Lynn's schooling was sporadic, and by her own admission, her willful personality made any formal education difficult. She married Oliver (Doolittle) Lynn at 14, was a mother of four at 18 and a grandmother by 29. With very little money to support their family and job prospects outside the coal mining industry dim, Doolittle moved the family to Washington State to work as a logger, and encouraged his wife to sing before audiences to help augment the family income. Loretta took up songwriting in order to enable her to better compete with new artists and, perhaps, to add a female perspective to her music (men wrote most of the county songs at that time). "The way I started writing those songs, I went down to the candy store and bought a copy of *Country Song Roundup*, the magazine with the words to the hit songs," said Lynn in 1976. "I figured it looked so simple in these books that, since everyone else was writing songs, I might as well, too" (Lynn, *Coal Miners Daughter*, 109¹).

Lynn's eventual nationwide introduction in 1960 signaled a coming gender shift within country music, as a group of women suddenly found themselves competing with men for position on the music charts. In 1961, the year that Lynn began recording with Decca, Kitty Wells, Patsy Cline, Wanda Jackson, and Skeeter Davis all hit the Top 10 on a regular basis with a variety of heartbreak songs. While the songs these women sang adhered to the hegemonic male power structure of the time, (i.e. girl heartbroken because her man treated her bad) they were increasingly being written from a woman's perspective by the female singers themselves like Jackson and Davis (Bufwack and Oermann, 232²).

Lynn took a more rebellious approach to her songwriting, using her rural Kentucky surroundings and upbringing to translate what was happening socially in the U.S. in the late 1950s early 1960s. "Most of my songs were from the woman's point of view," related Lynn. "There's plenty of songs about how women would stand by their men and give them plenty of loving when they walk through the door, and that's fine. But what about the man's responsibility? I feel there's better ways to handle a woman than whipping her into line and I make that point clear in my songs" (Bufwack and Oermann, 309³).

The point of view expressed in Lynn's songs resonated strongly with women around the country in such places as the Great Plains and Midwest as she bemoaned such issues as infidelity, gender inequality, and poverty. Whether she was lamenting a male dominated society ("Rated X," 1971), fighting unwanted sexual advances ("You Wanna Give Me a Lift," 1970), dealing with an overseas lover fighting in Vietnam ("Dear Uncle Sam," 1966) or her right to use birth control ("The Pill," 1972), Lynn caught the imagination of a society in the midst of a major societal transition and the popularity of her music made her one of the rare country artists to cross over into popular culture.

The analysis of popular music and lyrics by an artist or group offers serious insight into the social history of a particular era, and toward that goal, there has been surprisingly little scholarship. At the height of Lynn's popularity, very few social scientists were examining the lyrical content of artists, let alone, the works of country and western writers. As Russell (1970⁴) has suggested, music overall has been an overlooked source of cultural and human values that should be further explored in order to understand the social dynamics of a particular era. Since 1970, a few researchers have begun to look seriously at the lyrical content of popular music, such as Branscomb, who examined the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen, concluding that regardless of

intent, Springsteen still affected the social culture around him. (Brandscomb, 29⁵) Lebold, for example, looks at writings of Bob Dylan summarizing that “lyrical personae” that Dylan created in songs allows him to construct or deconstruct the image of himself as he sees fit, fictionalizing his own biography (Lebold, 57⁶). In similar fashion, Lynn used her songs to present an image that creates a dramatic biography designed to attract specific audiences. By looking at Lynn’s writing we begin to understand the viewpoints of this trailblazing artist and how she reflected her life and the social times in her music.

Additionally some scholars have written about Lynn’s persona in popular culture. Fox’s essay on gender and authenticity in country music looked at Lynn as author of her own biography solidifying the control she had over her own persona (Fox, 252⁷) This study is a unique textual analysis on the 94 songs written (or partially written) by Lynn between 1960 and 1972, as well as the new material on *Van Leer Rose* in an attempt to understand and communicate the changing social fabric of the day.⁸

Loretta Lynn’s Emergence into Country Music, 1960-1965

Interpersonal relationships have always been a favorite theme among country songwriters. Music historian Bill C. Malone reflected that country music “mirrors the social mores of a broad stratum of people, thus both reflecting and shaping their values. Country music is a manner of viewing or reflecting life” (359-361⁹). Though a variety of female characters are common to the songs of Loretta Lynn, most of her writing finds her placed in a traditional relationship narrative. As a young wife and mother, Lynn’s world revolved around her tempestuous relationship with her husband Doolittle. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the conflict in this relationship would inspire the bulk of her written material.

Loretta Lynn began recording her own songs in 1960 at a time when women in the U.S. achieved vast cultural advancements. According to Cork and D’Abo, Alfred Kinsey’s extensive study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953, as well as Ashley Montague’s *The Natural Superiority of Women* that same year, set the stage for a re-examination of female image that would translate into popular culture. The prosperity of the 1960s created a culture of “young urbanites” and “new singles” that “served to facilitate the quest for a spouse, its contours made it more of a sexual than a marriage market” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 304¹⁰). While the young female urbanites were experiencing a profound shift in cultural dynamic, change was slow to come to rural women.

Until 1960 the domain of country/western music (as it was called in those days) was almost completely dominated by men. Only Nashville’s Kitty Wells managed to make any lasting impact on the *Billboard* charts.¹¹ Dubbed the “Queen of Country Music,” Wells was the first successful female voice heard on radios after World War II. Her first hit, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” spent six-weeks on top of the *Billboard* Country and Western charts in the summer of 1952, a first for any woman (Whitburn, 1996¹²). An answer song to Hank Thompson’s 1952 hit, “The Wild Side of Life,” which inferred women would rather drink and party than be in committed relationships, Wells fought back at men, declaring that they, and not women, were responsible for many social ills. But after “Honky Tonk Angels,” Wells retreated into the role of the mistreated housewife in her songs and did so for the duration of her career.

Fox notes that the martyred housewife was a common role for female characters in country music of the era, noting that women represented the embodiment of the home and were responsible for the protection of that institution in that genre of music (p. 244¹³). A happily married mother of three, Wells was content to give women a voice, but not to the extent of alienating the male country establishment. Wells did not write any of her hits, preferring instead to relay the views of the era's male dominated fraternity of popular songwriters. Hits such as "Making Believe" (1955), "Mommy for a Day" (1959), "Heartbreak USA" (1961), and "Will Your Lawyer Talk to God" (1962), reinforced the conservative nature of society in the 1950s and early 60s. Although female artists were now more commonplace, Wells was nonetheless subjected to the dominant male-oriented culture of country music, and guilt became the only weapon that she could use in her songs. The lyrics she sang never placed her on an equal level with men, and religious and social shame was her only tool for dealing with philandering spouses.

It was in this social environment that Loretta Lynn first began songwriting. It is perhaps not surprising that her initial works were as traditional and naïve as anything coming out of Nashville. Lynn's first 12 songs, recorded in February 1960, ran the gamut between traditional and autobiographical themes. She reflected her roots in "My Life Story" ("Well, I was borned in ole Kentucky, in them hills where folks are lucky, and its paradise to me") as well as her love for her mother in "My Angel Mother" ("Mother, that's sweetest name of them all. You're an angel on earth, to me you're worth, more than anything else in this world.") Each of these songs finds Lynn applying an optimistic lens to her economically impoverished upbringing, which many outsiders would likely consider horrific.

The bulk of the other songs from her initial sessions are love and heartbreak songs. For example, "Whispering Sea" (1960) tells the story of a girl who pours her heart out to the ocean ("I sat down by the sea, and it whispered to me, it brought back an ole love affair that used to be.") while "Blue Steel" (1960) finds Lynn running for cover to the local honky-tonk to drown her sorrows after a particularly bad love affair ("Well, I ordered up just one more drink, I thought would ease my mind, but I found out it didn't help for a lovesick heart that's blind.") Ironically, for such maudlin material, Lynn sings these songs with gusto and excitement of a new recording artist.

Loretta Lynn was seemingly bound to be the sassy, confrontational voice for women from her earliest days, although she gradually worked her way into that role. "Honky Tonk Girl" was recorded in February 1960 and became her first chart success. As Lynn (2002¹⁴) explained, "I got the idea for it from watching a woman I used to pick strawberries with cry in her beer over the father of her nine kids. He'd left her for another woman. She sat in that same booth every night in this bar I played, and drank her beer and cried (Lynn, *Still Woman Enough* 72¹⁵)." Lynn takes this scenario and injects a sad self-loathing to it ("I just can't make a right, with all of my wrongs. Every evening of my life seems so long. I'm sorry and ashamed for everything you see, losing him has made a fool of me.") For one of very few times in her career, Lynn wrote a song in which a male controlled her emotions, yet had found her voice as a songwriter who was willing to reflect a female perspective in a dominant male culture through her lyrics.

Lynn's tenure as an unknown upstart in country music did not last long. Once forced to visit rural radio stations with her husband to personally promote her records, "Honky Tonk Girl" became a Top 20 hit in the summer of 1960 and propelled her into regional fame (Whitburn,

193¹⁶) Nashville's popular Wilburn Brothers adopted Lynn and gave her regional exposure as a performer in their show. Moreover, the Wilburns also owned one of Nashville's premiere publishing companies. Signing her to a writing contract, the Wilburns took her to Decca Records producer Owen Bradley, who saw potential in Lynn's writing. Decca was a prominent recording firm for country artists, and the label would provide the upstart musician's debut to national audiences (Bufwack and Oermann, 309¹⁷).

Lynn's initial Decca recordings were really more traditional in terms of content. Her first session in 1961 included two of her own compositions, including "I Walked Away from The Wreck," a standard, clunky ballad that equates a negative relationship with a car accident ("I saw the danger ahead but I paid no mind, for it seemed such harmless fun at the start, too fast a crowd, too much wine, too much playin round"). The other song, "The Girl that I Am Now," finds a cheating Lynn wondering if her boyfriend will forgive her for an indiscretion. Here she bears the guilt for an illicit affair, somewhat violating the standards for female characters in country songs ("If he knew what I had done would he still feel just the same. Or would he feel the way I do, guilty and ashamed"). Though the lyrics specify her guilt, Lynn nonetheless sings from a perspective of freedom and responsibility. She knows what she did was wrong but in the end, she exhibited free choice, and effectively illustrated that her music was breaking away from traditional molds.

Lynn's sole 1962 session yielded two songs that show her grappling with her own strong views as opposed to the male dominated industry. "A World of Forgotten People" was originally meant to tell the story of a mental patient whom Lynn befriended in her early days when residents in mental institutions were among the audiences on her performance circuit. It ended up being a typical love song in the early 1960s style. "I made it a love song about myself," related Lynn in her autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*. "I didn't think country people wanted to hear a song about a lonely mental patient all cooped up in a hospital" (107¹⁸). The dominant lyrics from "Forgotten People" ("Now I find out I was wrong. Too late I'm all alone, Alone in a world of broken hearts"), as well as those from the other song "A Hundred Proof Heartache," which tells the tale of woman whose spouse cared more for alcohol and partying than her, were really more typical of the female songs coming out of Nashville at the time.

In 1963, the women's movement on the national level was exploding. Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* using the famous phrase: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (Frieden, 18¹⁹). In a much more fun and flippant manner, Helen Gurley Brown wrote *Sex and the Single Girl*, which gave young women the proverbial new choice of the 1960s: "You may marry or you may not. In today's world that is no longer the big question for you" (Brown, 227²⁰). While these sentiments may have been true for women in urban settings, rural women were still finding themselves bound by traditional, conservative mores. The popular female songs of 1963 reflect this standard, whether it was Kitty Wells who was "Cold and Lonely" because her lover left her, or Patsy Cline lamenting about her "Faded Love."

But as women in the rebellious culture of 1963 began to find their voice, so did Loretta Lynn, as she wasted little time in breaking country music's grip on tradition. In 1963, she wrote "Where Were You," a song where Lynn declared her independence from a long term relationship, by putting the blame squarely on the shoulders of her absent spouse ("The lonely hours were just too much for me, with only tears to keep me company. That's what destroyed the love that we once knew. Stop and think when it happened, where were you"). A year later, Lynn used the

same approach with “You’ve Made Me What I Am,”²¹ where she focused guilt on her lover’s inattention, which explained her resorting to drinking and partying. Going one step further than the earlier “Where Were You,” she takes some responsibility for her own demise (“You say that I’m no angel, oh I know it much too well, how can you look into my eyes and ask me why I fell, you know that I still love you and I let you drag me down, I’d be ashamed if I were you, you made me what I am”), affirming that while her lover was to blame for her fallen status, she alone made the conscious decision to fall.

Lynn’s newfound independence and social lectures continued with two songs penned for a later 1964 session. “When Lonely Hits Your Heart” again chronicles her fall from respectability due to a broken a heart (“Here I am a’doin’ things I said I’d never do, but that’s before my baby said we’re thru. It was on that tragic day, the hurtin got its start. That’s how it is when lonely hits your heart”). The other song of the session, “It Just Looks that Way,” shows Lynn trying to show the world she doesn’t care that her lover has left her (“He thinks he left me lonesome and hurtin every day, oh but I’m not cryin’, it just looks that way”). While neither song represents empowerment—indeed, the lyrics seem to represent a backward step toward the weak, victim mentality of the female songs of the 1950s and early 60s—these songs do speak out from a woman’s perspective, and, perhaps, represent some trepidation on Lynn’s part about stepping too far outside the cultural mainstream. But the songs are not really autobiographical—something that would soon become so characteristic of Lynn’s writing— which explains why these works seem to lose their originality.

By 1965, Loretta Lynn was one of the top female country artists in North America. She had recorded eight Top 20 hits in a three-year span. Ironically, she wrote none of those hits, and her own songs were relegated to the backside of her 45 rpm hits. Yet, her biggest hits up to the time (“Wine, Women and Song,” 1963, and “Happy Birthday,” 1964) were written from a liberated perspective, bemoaning the perils of being married to a philandering spouse.²² Although she did not write these songs, she nonetheless began to solidify her image as a tough, take-no-nonsense figure who demanded respect, a quality that more or less fashioned her uniqueness among Nashville stars of the era.

Loretta Lynn and Liberation: 1965-1972

But from a social perspective, Lynn’s writing style was beginning to fit in with the times. In 1965, her writings began to mirror the gender shift in society and match her tough public persona. “Two Steps Forward” is a feisty narrative in which Lynn has had enough of a no-win relationship, expressed in lyrics that became symbolic of her repertoire (“Well, my clothes are packed and I’m headin for the door. Don’t look for me back cause I won’t be back no more. Well I might think of ya now and then, but don’t hold your breath cause I don’t know when. Two steps forward and six steps back again”). With ultra-simplistic musical accompaniment, little more than simple percussion and an electric guitar, she expresses disdain for Southern class culture in “Night Girl,” where she portrays herself as a poor woman who is being courted by a wealthy man who only wants sex. Though poor, she is steadfastly proud in this song and she refuses to be used, her economic status notwithstanding (“I guess you think I’ll be your poor girl prize. Who’ll never fit into your social world. But if your to good for me in your own eyes, then I can’t see why I should be your night girl”). While neither song was chosen as the A-side of a single release, their occasional airplay and acceptance by her fans gave Lynn the confidence to break into new territories with her music.

By the end of 1965, Lynn would not only be writing her own top hits, she would also be breaking down gender barriers and honestly discussing important issues that were occurring in the U.S. “Dear Uncle Sam,” her first penned top-five hit, looks at young women whose lives had been torn by the Vietnam War. The lyrics feature a grief-stricken woman writing a letter to the government, trying to balance her patriotism with her bereavement over missing her soldier/lover (“Don’t misunderstand. I know he’s fighting for our land. I really love my country but I also love my man. He proudly wears the colors of the ole red, white, and blue. While I wear a heartache, since he left me for you”). The song represents an abrupt departure from country music’s traditional unabashed patriotism in time of war, and the lyrics represented her ambivalence about the Viet Nam conflict. Reportedly, Lynn had been asked by her husband to write a song about the war, and she replied, “I don’t want to write about war. I don’t have nothin’ good to write about war.” In turn, Dolittle reportedly responded, “If you don’t like it, tell it (Guterman,12²³).” Lynn’s suspicions of the war are confirmed at the end of the song as she opens up a telegram declaring her lover dead. Ironically, for all the imbedded negativity about the war, the song was embraced by socially conservative country music disc jockeys.²⁴

Another song from the “Dear Uncle Sam” 1965 recording session was an even bigger hit, “You Ain’t Women Enough,” which tells the traditional story of a woman verbally and physically confronting her husband’s mistress. While country music’s traditional jilted females used guilt—including God, children and social scorn—as their psychological weapons of choice, Lynn threatens actual force in this song. Facing the cocky “other woman,” she pulls no punches in expressing herself (“Women like you they’re a dime a dozen. You can buy em anywhere. For you to get to him, I’ll have to move over and I’m gonna stand right here. It’ll be over my dead body, so get out while you can. Cause you ain’t women enough to take my man”). The threat of physical violence to women who got too close to her spouse became a common ploy for Lynn’s writing. In 1968, “Fist City” also warned of actual physical assault if threatened (“If you don’t wanna’ go to fist city you better detour round my town. Cause I’ll grab you by the hair the head and lift you off the ground”). Audiences loved these violent dramas and pushed the songs to the top of the charts, apparently admiring Lynn’s implied worldview of men as fundamentally weak-willed (and perhaps, not very smart).

Spurred on by the success of “You Ain’t Woman Enough” in 1966, Lynn devoted the next two years to writing songs about the dynamics between men and women. Taking a strong, independent approach, she warred against the hypocrisy of male hegemony in such songs as “Don’t Come Home A’Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ on Your Mind)” in 1966, which became her first number one hit. The story concerns a woman who’s had enough of her husband coming home after a long night of partying and demanding sex. The song wisely walks a narrow line between the traditional and modern as Lynn still somewhat casts herself as a victim (“many a nights I stayed at home and cried dear all alone”), but takes the first steps toward emancipation (“Don’t come a’drinkin’ with lovin’ on your mind. Just stay out there on the town and see what you can find. Cause if you want that kind of love well ya don’t need none o mine”). Lynn becomes more militant in a 1967 hit “Bargain Basement Dress,” where a husband comes home drunk with a cheap dress, which he presents as an appeasement gift to makeup for his being out all night. Lynn’s female character is in no mood to even consider accepting his guilt-laden present (“I wouldn’t wear that dress to a dogfight, if the fight was free. And a bargain basement dress ain’t enough to get your arms around me”). In addition, she eschews the notion that men have the right to do what they want because they are the prime money earners (“They say when a man

works hard all week he deserves to play or rest. Well honey that ain't right, so get outta my sight, with that bargain basement dress").

The notion that men have a right to more freedom over women is a constant subject for Lynn's rebellious lyrics. In fact, her songs constantly demand equality. In the 1968 hit "Your Squaw is on the Warpath," she playfully uses her Native American heritage to demonstrate her unwillingness to put up with unfair domestic situation ("Well your pet name for me is squaw. When you come a'drinkin' and can barely crawl and all that lovin on me won't make things right. Well, ya leave me at home to keep the teepee clean, six papooses to break and wean but your squaw is on the warpath tonight"). In "Love Whatcha Got at Home," a song recorded in 1969, she literally orders her husband to behave ("Well you say you're a red hot papa and the lover of the town. Don't you think it's just about time ole mama cooled ya down. Get them courtin clothes back off and don't let it take you long. 'Cause tonight big boy you're gonna stay right here and love whatcha got at home").

Loretta Lynn's interplay between males and females was one of the major differences between her and the day's notable female writers and composers, such as Lynn Anderson, Tammy Wynette and Connie Smith, whose songs often subjugated women to men. Lynn's would have none of that in her songs. If a situation was untenable, Lynn saw no problem with her female characters leaving a relationship in search of another, more equitable partnership. In 1968, she wrote "I'm Shootin' for Tomorrow," where she grew tired of her cold, absent husband ("used to keep the homefires a'burnin' but I let 'em all go out. So don't hand me the crooked line because we done been down that route. Now this ole house is gettin cold and I'm going where the climate's hot, I'm shootin' for tomorrow cause today's already shot"). "The Big Ole Hurt," recorded in 1967, and "You Didn't Like my Lovin'" from 1968, continued the theme with Lynn happily finding joy in the arms of another man who appreciated her. Lynn's lyrics in these songs carefully cast women as happily accepting the traditional role of wife and mother, but also immediately ready to leave such relationships if taken advantage of or emotionally abused.

As society continued to change in the late 1960s, Loretta Lynn's songs continued to reflect female emancipation from old cultural mores. Society was more "sexualized" (D'Emilio and Freedman, 327²⁵), as evidenced by the increased use of female contraceptives. But as Alexander Sanger, grandson of Margaret Sanger, points out, the use of hormonal contraception may "have led to an increase in sexually transmitted diseases, which can cause infertility, premature death and bad birth outcomes (Sanger, 200²⁶). These conflicting ideas were playing out within the confines in the music Lynn was writing. While many of these songs continued the trend of looking at interpersonal relationships, they increasingly began to showcase Lynn's worldview, which evolved with the changing times.

For example, Lynn handled the often-avoided subject of divorce in her 1971 hit, "Rated X," where she laments that fact that women who've been divorced are subject to unfair social scrutiny ("the women all look at you like you're bad, the men all hope you are"). She criticizes society's penchant for materialism in the 1969 hit "Let's Get Back Down to Earth" ("Well this ole world is getting' worse an worse everyday, people livin above their heads and makin bills they cannot pay"), and in "Five Fingers Left" in 1969, she talks about the state of friendships in a changing society ("Friends are few and far between, believe me I should know. And a real good way a findin' out is to let no money show"). Lynn also seems to rebel at such materialism by exploring her country heritage in the autobiographical "Coal Miners Daughter" in 1969, and

“You’re Lookin’ at Country” in 1970. These songs showcase an almost nostalgic return to simpler times yet with the underlying dichotomy of someone from poor, rural background making sense of the new lifestyle brought on by economic success.

In 1970, as the sexualization of society increased, Helen Gurley Brown released *Sex and the New Single Girl*, a book that espoused many of the values of her earlier work, but she also suggested that things had changed since 1962: “Okay, a single girl was sexy then and she is sexy now. What has changed for her in eight years?” asked Brown. “Well, she’s talking more openly about sex and admitting more freely to herself and friends and even to those improbable people, her parents, that she has a sex life.” Brown credits this change to the popularity of the pill and its “sure way to keep from getting pregnant (Brown 12²⁷)” and also commented that “the Women’s Liberation Movement is swinging along beautifully (13²⁸).”

In the same year though, however, Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch* announcing that the book was “part of the second feminist wave” in which things were not swinging quite as beautifully as Brown suggested (Greer, 3²⁹). Greer revealed that the sexual revolution did not necessarily leave women “happier” as Brown stated, or feeling free at all:³⁰ “Any women who goes to bed with a man for the first time knows that she runs the risk of being treated with contempt. Her chosen loves may leave or may turn his back on her immediately after his orgasm and fall, or pretend to, asleep; he may be laconic or brisk in the morning: he may not call again. She hopes that he will not discuss her disparagingly with her friends,” (Greer 252³¹). The second wave feminists appeared to be in full swing by the time *The Female Eunuch* appeared on bookshelves. In 1968, the legendary “bra burning” protest of the Miss America pageant took place in Atlantic City and the offices of *Ladies Home Journal* magazine were also picketed by feminists for “perpetuating myths about women”.³² Under the leadership of author Betty Friedan, the National Organization of Women was founded and soon other feminist organizations to fight for improved “women’s rights” soon followed (Greer 236³³).

All of this discussion within the social sphere was having an indirect effect on Lynn’s writing. One area she began to explore during the late 1960s and early 1970s was female sexuality. In “I Know How” in 1969, she proudly exclaims that she knows exactly how to please her man. In the hands of a more traditional artist such as Tammy Wynette, the song could have been considered exploitative. But when sung by Lynn, the lyrics become a source of empowerment (“I know how to hold him when he needs holdin’ and I know how to kiss him when he needs kissin’. I understand his every wish and his every wish is mine. Yes, he knows I love to love him and I know how, yeah, I know how”). In 1970, “You Wanna Give me a Lift” finds a womanizer attempting to seduce Lynn, only to be repelled by her strong will (“I’m a little bit warm but that don’t mean I’m on fire”). The song also portrays the male character as a substance abuser who attempts to use a drug in the seduction process, something that the female rejects (“That happy pill you’re takin you say is a little weak. And you wanna give me one so you say I won’t go to sleep. Well, your hands are getting friendly but I know exactly where they are. You wanna give me a lift but this ole gal ain’t going that far”).

The most controversial song in Lynn’s sexual empowerment repertoire is 1972’s “The Pill.”³⁴ Using a rooster and a hen as metaphor, Lynn proudly exclaims her excitement that she doesn’t have to worry about getting pregnant anymore (“This ole maternity dress I’ve got is going in the garbage. The clothes I’m wearing from now on won’t take up so much yardage”). More importantly, she realizes that she’s gotten the short shrift in the relationship and makes it known

that she plans on living her life on her own accord (“This chicken’s done tore up her nest and I’m ready to make a deal and you can’t afford to turn it down cause you know I’ve got the pill”). The song lyrics, while fun and full of homespun references, are extremely powerful, a culmination of the equality that Lynn has always preached for in her lyrics. Ironically, the song was recorded a full year after Lynn had stopped writing songs. What should have been the beginning of an exciting period of exploration with Lynn as navigator, instead signaled the end of era as she abruptly quit writing and recording her own material in 1971.³⁵

Conclusion: The “Van Leer Rose” Lives On

Loretta Lynn’s 2004 release *Van Leer Rose* combines reflections from her earlier career with a new, raw sound. Influenced by producer Jack White’s garage-rock aesthetic, the album may be the most unique product that Lynn has released in her career. Not only was it Lynn’s first release in decades; it is also the only album in which she wrote or co-wrote every song. While the album’s production is distinctively loose and rambunctious, the content is reminiscent of Lynn’s work 30 years ago. It simultaneously reflects her reverence for family and rural traditions, while providing a generous dose of her feisty spirit and passion for confronting women’s issues.

For example, the title track “Van Leer Rose” is a reflective song that exalts her father’s love for her mother in the classic Loretta Lynn coal mining setting. Songs like “High on a Mountaintop,” “This Old House,” and “God Makes No Mistakes” have a familiar country/gospel sound to them, and adhere to country music’s more traditional conservative ideals. But the album also finds Lynn in the familiar role as the tough, empowered woman. In “Family Tree,” Lynn confronts her husband’s mistress by taking her children to meet the other woman. She goes back to her tough, vindictive, and autonomous self in “Mrs. Leroy Brown,” where she uses physical power to confront her husband’s mistress (“the big ole blonde that thinks she’s a movie star”), who she knocks unconscious. Then, she confronts husband Leroy and tells him just who paid for the big pink limo that drove her to the bar (“I just drew all your money out of the bank today. Honey, you don’t have no mo”). In “Women’s Prison,” the protagonist is sentenced to death for shooting and killing her husband after finding out about an affair. The character expresses no regret for murdering her husband, and she takes the penalty willingly (“For love I’ve killed my darlin’, and for love I’ll lose my life”). The woman in this song is strong enough to dispense justice, and strong enough to accept the ultimate punishment for her crime without regret.

Loretta Lynn is a vanguard in popular music. As one of the premier, feminist writers in a conservative genre, she has given women not only a voice but also, a perspective. What set Lynn apart from many of her contemporaries was the unlikely fusion between her accepted image as a simple country girl with her influence as a navigator, helping rural women understand and accept the social trends happening throughout the country. This study sought to reinforce this by examining the lyrics of songs she wrote.

Lynn’s contribution to popular culture is a work in progress. The success for *Van Leer Rose* (2005) has proven that there is still strong resonance with the issues she brings out in her songs and the female audience. This success has re-energized Lynn, the songwriter, who plans to continue writing for future projects. Whether this future material taps into the social consciousness of society will bear out in future research. Additional research should also begin to examine Lynn’s writings along side other feminists artists in other genres such as Joni

Mitchell, Carole King or Patti Smith and how they mirror social issues and how they are communicated to their perspective audiences. Attention should also be paid to the country male counterparts of the day with regard to issues such as gender interaction.

By focusing on those subjects that affect everyday life, whether it was the birth control pill, raising children or dealing with relationships, Lynn always tried to find simple, yet strong words to get her point across. She strove for equality in a time when many rural women were at the bottom of the power spectrum. Lynn's lyrics bear this out. Her songs contain words of rebellion, anger, fear, and animosity. Yet, they also contain joy, love, exultation, freedom and, yes, even a love of tradition. They are not the musings of someone who dreams of a perfect society but of someone who must live and navigate within the confines of the existing one. For Lynn, it was about dealing with day-to-day issues. As she said: "If you put out a song that isn't life, nobody's gonna care for it. Because if nobody is livin' that life, how you gonna' sell a record if it's just ring around the rosy? You gotta' put your whole heart into a song. And that's what I did with every song that I wrote. (ABC News site³⁶)

End Notes: Shipka, Danny. "Loretta Lynn: Writin' Life." [Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy](#) (5.4, 2010).

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2. Bufwack, Mary and Robert Oermann. *Finding Her Voice: The Illustrated History of Women in Country Music*. New York, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1993. [\[back\]](#)
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4. Russell, T. *Blacks, Whites and Blues*. New York, New York: Stein and Daily 1970. [\[back\]](#)
5. Branscomb, H. Eric. *Literacy and a Popular Medium: The Lyrics of Bruce Springsteen*. *Journal of Popular Culture*; Summer 93, Vo. 27 Issue 1, p29-42. [\[back\]](#)
6. Lebold, Christopher. *Oral Tradition*, Volume 22, Number 1 (November 2007), pp. 57-70. [\[back\]](#)
7. Fox, Pamela "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography" *American Quarterly* 50.2 (1998): 234-267. [\[back\]](#)
8. Consequently, it does not include many of the songs that are closely associated with Lynn but not expressly written by her. While hits such as "Wine, Women and Song" (1963), "Happy Birthday" (1964), "Woman of the World" (1968) and "One's On the Way" (1971) are important, they are not a reflection of her writing, and are thus not the focus of this article. [\[back\]](#)
9. Malone Bill C., *County Music USA*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 1968. [\[back\]](#)
10. D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1997. [\[back\]](#)
11. Others female C & W artists like Jean Shepard, Goldie Hill and Wanda Jackson did have sporadic chart success in the 1950s but none to the level of Wells. [\[back\]](#)
12. Whitburn, Joel. *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits*. New York New York: Billboard Books. 1996. [\[back\]](#)
13. Fox, Pamela "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography" *American Quarterly* 50.2 (1998): 234-267. [\[back\]](#)
14. Lynn, Loretta. *Still Woman Enough*. New York New York: Hyperion Books, 2002. [\[back\]](#)
15. Lynn, Loretta. *Still Woman Enough*. New York New York: Hyperion Books, 2002. [\[back\]](#)
16. Whitburn, Joel. *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits*. New York New York: Billboard Books. 1996. [\[back\]](#)
17. Bufwack, Mary and Robert Oermann. *Finding Her Voice: The Illustrated History of Women in Country Music*. New York, New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1993. [\[back\]](#)
18. Lynn, Loretta. *Coal Miners Daughter*. New York New York: Warner Brothers Books, 1976. [\[back\]](#)
19. Frieden, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, New York, New York: WW. Norton Comp, 1963. [\[back\]](#)
20. Brown, Helen Gurley. *Sex and the Single Girl*. New York, New York: Random House, 1962. [\[back\]](#)

- [21.](#) The songs original writing credit on 45 rpm and the album *Songs From My Heart* (DL 74620) went to Oliver Doolittle, Lynn's husband. It was common practice in 50s and 60s to give song credit to a family member in order to spread the tax liability or as a personal gift. Since the release, Lynn has taken ownership of the song as her own. [\[back\]](#)
- [22.](#) This isn't to construe that these songs were written solely by men. Betty Sue Perry contributed the top-20 hits *The Other Women* (1963) and *Wine, Women and Song* (1963) to Lynn. It must be said though that her other 6 hits were written by men. [\[back\]](#)
- [23.](#) Guterman, Jimmy. *Honky Tonk Girl: The Loretta Lynn Collection*. Los Angeles, California: MCA/Universal Music, 1994. [\[back\]](#)
- [24.](#) Lynn has always had a love/hate relationship with male radio disc jockeys. In her autobiography she accuses them of being fearful that some of her songs such as *The Pill* (1972) would challenge men's way of thinking. (Lynn, 90). [\[back\]](#)
- [25.](#) D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1997. [\[back\]](#)
- [26.](#) Sanger, A. (2004) *Beyond Choice: Reproductive Freedom in the 21st Century*, New York: Public Affairs. [\[back\]](#)
- [27.](#) Brown, Helen Gurley. *Sex and the New Single Girl*. New York, New York: Random House, 1970. [\[back\]](#)
- [28.](#) Brown, Helen Gurley. *Sex and the New Single Girl*. New York, New York: Random House, 1970. [\[back\]](#)
- [29.](#) Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970. [\[back\]](#)
- [30.](#) In 1970, Brown frequently referred to the world for young women being much "happier" than in 1960. She also claimed that there were more good jobs for young women and a greater degree of drug use. [\[back\]](#)
- [31.](#) Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970. [\[back\]](#)
- [32.](#) Banner claims, as do other media scholars that although many media reported the women burning the bras at the protests, they actually only threw them into a giant container rejecting conformity, but the container was not lit on fire. The concept of angry "bra burning" feminists was one that conservatives often used. p. 234. [\[back\]](#)
- [33.](#) Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970. [\[back\]](#)
- [34.](#) When the song was released in 1975 it was without credit to Lynn. This was due to the contract dispute with the Wilburn Brothers. Recent releases of the song include 3 other writers including her husband, Doolittle. [\[back\]](#)
- [35.](#) There are many reasons why Lynn quit recording her own material at the top of her career. Her touring schedule by 1971 not only included stops around the U.S. but in Europe as well. Demands for television and personal appearances were increasing. Most importantly, she believed her lifetime contract with the Wilburns kept her growing professionally. When told that she would have to honor the contract, Lynn in true rebellious fashion simply stopped writing. [\[back\]](#)
- [36.](#) Author unknown. ABC News website. March 11, 2007. <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/Voices/story?id=2960166> Accessed on March 1, 2008. [\[back\]](#)

Loretta Lynn Discography: © All Songs Sure-Fire Music Inc. Producer: Don Grashy (songs 1-12); Owen Bradley (13-95), Jack White (96-105). All Songs recorded in Nashville except 1-12 (recorded in Los Angeles). Date denotes recording date. * Unreleased songs

I'm a Honky Tonk Girl 2-60, Whispering Sea 2-60, Blue Steel 2-60, My Love 2-60, New Rainbow 2-60, Stop 2-60, Heartaches meet Mr. Blues 2-60, The Darkest Day 2-60, My Angel Mother 2-60, My Life Story 2-60, Gonna Pack My Troubles 2-60, Darling Don't 2-60 *

The Girl I am Now 9-8-61, I Walked Away from the Wreck 9-8-61,

World of Forgotten People 2-5-62, A Hundred Proof Heartache 2-5-62

Where Were You 1-9-63

This Haunted House 2-26-64, You've Made Me What I am 2-26-64, When Lonely Hits your Heart 10-14-64, It Just Looks that Way 10-14-64,

We're Not Kids Anymore (with Ernest Tubb) 1-19-65, Farther to Go 3-4-65, Two Steps Forward 3-4-65, Night Girl 3-65, Love's Been Here and Gone 3-65, Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven 6-8-65, That's Where I Learned to Pray 6-7-65, Dear Uncle Sam 11-11-65, You Ain't Woman Enough 11-11-65

Looks Whose Lonely 12-66, A Man I Hardly Know 1-13-66, God Gave Me A Heart to Forgive 1-13-66, Keep Your Change 3-22-66, Country Christmas 7-7-66, It Was Seem Like Christmas 7-7-66, To Heck with Ole Santa Clause 7-13-66, I Won't Decorate Your Christmas Tree 7-13-66, Don't Come Home A'Drinkin (With Lovin on your Mind) 10-5-66, Love is Right Here (with Ernest Tubb) 12-21-66

The Big Ole Hurt 1-18-67, I'll Sure Come A'Long Way Down 1-18-67, Bargain Basement Dress 4-19-67, What Kind of Girl 4-20-67, Slowly Killing Me 4-20-67, Who Says God is Dead 6-28-67, Standing Room Only 6-28-67, I'm a Getting Ready to Go 6-29-67, Mama, Why? 6-29-67

Fist City 1-9-68, I'm Shootin For Tomorrow 1-68, You Didn't Like my Lovin 1-68, I'm A Honky Tonk Girl (2nd Version) 5-9-68, Let Me Go You're Hurting Me 5-9-68, Your Squaw is On the Warpath 8-30-68, Sneakin In 11-18-68, L-O-V-E, Love 11-18-68, He's Somewhere Between Me and You 11-68

If We Put Our Heads Together (with Ernest Tubb) 2-18-69, When I Reach the Bottom 5-69, Big Sister, Little Sister 5-69, The Only Time I Hurt 5-69, One Little Reason 5-14-69, I'm One Man's Woman 5-14-69, I'm Lonesome for Trouble Tonight 5-14-69, You Wouldn't Know an Angel 5-14-69, What's Bottle Done to My Baby 5-28-69, To Make a Man 5-28-69, Coal Miners Daughter 11-1-69, You Wanna Give me Lift 11-1-69, Wings Upon Your Horns 11-1-69, Drive you Out of My Mind 11-1-69, I'm Bound to Lose Control 11-2-69 *, Journey to the End of my World 11-2-69, I'm Dynamite 11-2-69, Let's Get Back Down to Earth 11-2-69, Love Whatcha Got at Home 11-69, Deep as your Pockets 12-22-69, Crazy Out of My Mind 12-22-69, Any One, Any Worse, Any Where 12-22-69, What Makes Me Tick 12-22-69, I Know How 12-23-69, Close My Eyes 12-28-69, From Now On 12-28-69, The One you Need 12-28-69, Five Fingers Left 12-28-69

I Pray My Way Out of Trouble 4-70, If I Ever Love Again 4-9-70, Don't Tell You're Sorry (with Conway Twitty) 11-11-70, I Wanna Be Free 11-25-70, You're Looking at Country 11-25-70

Rated X 8-24-71

I Miss You More Today 1-20-72, The Pill 12-21-72

Red, White and Blue 1-30-75

Van Lear Rose 2004, Miss Being Mrs. 2004, Portland, Oregon 2004, Little Red Shoes 2004, This Old House 2004, The Story of My Life (2nd version) 2004, Trouble on the Line 2004, Family Tree 2004, Have Mercy 2004, High on a Mountain Top 2004, Mrs. Leroy Brown 2004, Woman's Prison 2004

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