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STORYTELLERS: STORIES WITHIN SONGS

By
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

Advisor: Professor Virginia Chavis

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ABSTRACT

Carly Amber Phillips: Storytellers: Stories Within Songs
(Under the direction of Virginia Chavis)

Stories are an important aspect of all cultures, whether modern or ancient. History is passed on through stories, and lessons are learned. Some allow us to explore new dimensions beyond the scope of our own experiences, while others emphasize aspects of our life. Stories can take on a non-traditional format, such as the lyrics of songs. Few genres of music have been able to tell stories as genuine and sincere as those of classical country musicians. This genre of music is important because many of its artists tell stories that parallel the life and history of my family. On a personal level, I felt that it was important that the stories as well as the artist be acknowledged.

In order to place appropriate emphasis on the artist as well as their stories, I produced a body of work, which consisted of a series of ten posters to promote the artists, and ten books, which contain the lyrics of several of their songs. It was important to place the songs in book format to emphasize the stories. The posters were not created to market the artists, but rather to pay tribute to their achievements. This body of work would be most appropriately displayed in a museum setting, such as the Country Music Hall of Fame.

The posters place appropriate emphasis on the artist, while acknowledging the importance of stories in their music. They also give the viewer an idea of some of the main types of stories being told within their music. The books force the viewer to focus on the actual stories instead of the music as a whole.

Like design, music is one of the few art forms that many people in western culture are exposed to on a daily basis. It is an integral part of modern day life. Some people may connect with a certain artist or a certain type of music because of the meaning behind the lyrics. Using lyrics, artists have a way to communicate their thoughts, beliefs, and stories.

Stories have a significant impact on every culture, whether new or old. History, traditions and lessons are all passed on through stories. The varieties of stories found in music are endless because each artist is a unique individual with his/her own thoughts and stories. Due to this infinite variety, it is almost certain that there is a song and story, which each individual can connect.

Storytelling is a prominent aspect of the music of classic country artists. While artists in other genres tell stories, many classical country artists, such as Johnny Cash and Charlie Daniels, actually compose their songs in story-line format. They have main characters, a plot, and a setting. Many do not even have a chorus. This unique story-line format is partly why I chose to focus on this particular genre of music. The stories themselves also played a major role in my decision. They remind me of stories that my parents and grandparents have told me as I have grown up, both in content and form.

The end product of my Thesis Exhibition is a series of ten posters and ten booklets containing the lyrics of several songs popularized by each of the ten artists portrayed in the posters. This body of work was not produced to market the artists, but rather to pay homage them. It was produced to be displayed in a museum setting such as the Country Music Hall of Fame. While there were many possibilities and many products I could have produced for this exhibition, posters and booklets seemed the most appropriate, because the posters provided a way to advertise the artists, while the booklets focused the viewer's attention on the stories within the songs.

The artists included in my thesis exhibition were true performers. During their lifetime, they performed numerous times at large venues such as the Ryman Auditorium and the Grand Ole Opry. Most of these artists are older than myself, and many are deceased. Their music was popular during a period of time when society was not as media oriented as it is today. Posters were a main part if not the primary aspect of their advertising and marketing. The Ryman Auditorium and Grand Ole Opry still employ the active use of posters as promotional devices. This brings back a sense of nostalgia to these particular venues. Modern society has mostly diverted its efforts solely to mass media. Not only do posters seem appropriate for this particular subject, but as a designer, they are my favorite product to produce. I feel that with posters, designers have more artistic freedom. Though still a form of marketing, they can also be a form of art. People collect posters and often hang them in their homes as pieces of artwork.

The booklets, on the other hand, allowed me to not only focus the viewer's attention to the message of the story being told in the song, but also allowed me to arrange the story in the form of a book. By doing this, I was able to further emphasize the importance of the message. The emphasis of the story in this form is important because many people do not pay attention to the message, even though they may be able to accurately sing each verse of the song. Many people simply enjoy the beat, rhythm and general sound of the music.

Section I: Stories

Stories have played a major role in my life, especially my childhood. My mother, a teacher, instilled the importance of reading in me at an early age. I enjoyed hearing the stories of strangers and far-away lands, but the stories that fascinated me the most were those told by my family about their lives and experiences. They often used these stories to teach me valuable life lessons. As I grew up, I developed an interest in music and noticed that many of my family's stories are notably similar to the stories told within their favorite songs.

Marty Robbins, like myself, was also inspired greatly by the stories told by his family, most notably his grandfather. The stories that his grandfather told were mostly tales of the adventures and outlaws of the old west. A direct connection can be established between his grandfather's stories and his music due to the fact that most of his songs also tell stories of the old west (Means, 2007).

Though, I share similar influences as Marty Robbins, the stories of my family are less about fictional and more biographical. My grandparents were born in the 1920s and grew up during the Great Depression. Like most people of that era, they had very little. I remember both my grandmother and grandfather telling stories about this difficult time. My grandmother's story that I remember the most took place during this time.

It was during the Depression, and everyone was struggling. One day a family that was real bad off came by with five children and asked my mama if she could take one. They couldn't feed them. My mama had three kids of her own, but she took one of the girls, Annette. It wasn't legal, but she's my sister and I don't see her as anything else.

It is a lesson of caring and compassion that I'll never forget. Like my grandmother, my grandfather also has many stories that he likes to share with me with an underlying lesson. There is one that he feels most important and tells often. He wants me to understand what I have and be grateful.

No one had much, and work was hard, hard to find. You took any job you could Get. You never asked the man what he was paying because you were afraid he wouldn't hire you. You were just glad to have a job. I remember working all week, hard work, for just 25 cents. Them was hard times.

Both of the stories remind me of Johnny Cash's song, "Hard Times". Like my grandparents, Cash urges the listener to be thankful, and never forget the struggles and trials of others and of the past.

Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears

While we sup sorrow with the poor

There's a song that will linger forever in our ears

Oh, hard times come again no more.

'Tis the song, the sign of the weary

Hard times, hard times, come again no more

Many days have you lingered all around my cabin door

Oh hard times, come again no more... (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

After the Great Depression and World War II, my grandfather began his career as a truck driver hauling loads throughout the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Traveling became the main focus of his life, and though he often complained about the tiring hours, he loved his job. He recently retired at the age of eighty-two. Through his extensive travels, he has memorized many of the major highways and interstates within these states. Since I enrolled at the University of Mississippi he has given me accounts of all his travels in this area. He enjoys referring to his collection of maps and teaching me all of the possible routes between my home and Oxford. The lyrics of "Ten Ton Load", by Hank Williams Jr., epitomizes my grandfather.

My grandmother was a very lively lady and had more children than she was able to take care of. My father often had to care for his younger brothers and sisters with little supervision. They lived off of each other's hand-me-downs. He was one of the oldest children, so there were few clothes to be passed down. My father often tells me that he hated going to school because unlike other children, he never had shoes to wear until winter.

I used to leave the house for school and then go hide in the woods. Ronnie (his brother) would bring me lunch. Usually someone would come find me and make me go. One day I had to go to school in just a jacket because I didn't have a shirt to wear. It was summer and hot. They all told me to just take off my jacket if I was hot. I was embarrassed to say anything so I just sat there sweating. I never went back. That was in eighth grade."

Loretta Lynn shares a remarkably similar story to that of my father. Both thoroughly understand poverty to a degree in which basic needs cannot be met. Lynn tells this story in several songs, but never as directly as in "Coal Miner's Daughter."

In the summertime we didn't have shoes to wear
But in the wintertime we'd get a brand new pair
From a mail order catalog
Money made from sellin' a hog (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

After quitting school, my father stopped caring about the opinions that others had of him, and grew his hair out past his shoulders. He went to work full time, and experimented with several different jobs before settling as a dry wall hanger and finisher. It was hard work, but he was able to be completely independent. Self-reliance has always been very important to my father, and he has little respect for people who depend on others. Charlie Daniel's song "Long Haired Country Boy," reminds me of my father, not only in appearance, but also in mindset and lifestyle.

And I ain't got no money

But I damn sure got it made

'Cause I ain't askin' nobody for nothin'

If I can't get it on my own

If you don't like the way I'm livin'

You just leave this long-haired country boy alone (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

As I grew older, the stories I was exposed to became less censored. Recently, I learned that my grandfather had had an affair just before I was born. I was completely disillusioned because it shattered my whole concept of marriage and what it was supposed to be. It immediately brought to my memory the sad, lonely songs of Patsy Cline, most notably, "How Can I Face Tomorrow," as I thought of my grandmother.

How can I face tomorrow

When I know I'm losin' you

The dreams we shared

Have all been torn apart (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

It was a family secret that was never meant to be exposed, and has never since been mentioned. Though I think differently of marriage and my grandfather, it is easier to pretend that it did not happen, like the rest of my family.

During this past Christmas, my grandfather was drinking eggnog and Jack Daniels, his first drink in about twenty years, and began telling stories of his younger days. The drink brought back memories.

When I was young, we didn't have nowhere to go on Saturdays, so we just went to somebody's house. You had to ask around that Friday to find out where the dance was at this weekend. Them boys liked to get into fights at those dances. I stayed out of those. They'd pull out a knife and cut you. A lot of boys got hurt.

When I hear Ernest Tubb's song, "Tennessee Saturday Night," I imagine my grandfather, in his prime, drunk and unruly.

When they really get together there's a lot of fun
They all know the other fella packs a gun
Everybody does his best and acts just right
'Cause it's gonna be a funeral if you start a fight
They struggle and they shuffle till the broad daylight
Yes they all go native on Saturday night (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

While my grandfather used alcohol for a good time, my father used it for other reasons. After leading a life of unimaginable hardships, he went through a period, which he relied more and more heavily on alcohol, causing problems within my immediate family. Hank Williams Sr., Willie Nelson, and Merle Haggard have all dealt with similar issues throughout their lives. Hank Williams eventually died from his lifestyle, and Merle Haggard ended up in prison (Carter, Haggard, 1999), (Rapp, 2008). Many of their songs tell stories of alcohol dependency, but Merle Haggard's song "The Bottle Let Me Down" relates to my father the most.

I've always had a bottle I could turn to
And lately I've been turning everyday
But the wine don't take effect the way it used to
And I'm hurtin' in an old familiar way (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

As with many people, dependency on alcohol only made things better for a short time, and made them worse in the long run. He never knew when to quit, which is similar to Willie Nelson's song, "Crazy Old Soldier."

And the bottles are ten thousand strong
You'd think I'd give up as many times as I've been hit
But like a crazy old soldier
I just don't know when to quit (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

He eventually realized that he was losing everything valuable to him and ended his reliance on alcohol. When I was younger, I did not understand the mindset a person has who would feel the need to turn to alcohol. As I grow up, however, I am beginning to understand how the trials of life could drive a person to alcohol. Life is hard and unfair, and sometimes it seems impossible to get by. Sometimes it just hurts. Johnny Cash's most recent hit song was "Hurt," originally written and recorded by Trent Reznor. Personally, I believe no song describes the ache and hurt of life as accurately as this one.

I hurt myself today
To see if I still feel
I focus on the pain
The only thing that's real...

What have I become?
My sweetest friend
Everyone I know
Goes away in the end

And you could have it all

My empire of dirt

I will let you down

I will make you hurt

If I could start again

A million miles away

I would keep myself

I would find a way (Lyrics on Demand, 2008)

Section II: Style

The posters that I produced have a style similar to that of a small letterpress printing company called The Hatch Show Print Shop. Hatch Show Print was founded by the Hatch Family: William H. Hatch and his sons, Herbert Hatch and Charles Hatch. This print shop originally opened in Wisconsin, but soon relocated to its current home in Nashville, Tennessee. Today, Hatch is one of the oldest working letterpress print shops in the United States (Hatch History).

Though not printed using a letterpress, the style of my posters appropriately references the style commonly associated with Hatch Show Print posters. The text is a sans-serif typeface called Headline. It can easily be stacked to form blocks similar to the type commonly found in letterpress printed posters. Though the position and layout of the font varies from poster to poster, they are still similar enough to maintain a sense of consistency. To further reference the Hatch Show Print style, I also decided to limit my color palette by choosing three analogous colors for each poster.

Though consistent with the posters produced, the booklets have a slightly different appearance. By creating the booklets, not only was I able to further emphasize the story, but I was also able to explore a different style and method of design. Instead of strictly using vector illustrations, I chose to utilize photographs to create compositions, which would effectively illustrate the story told in each song.

All of the compositions included within the booklets are collages of two or more photographs and a texture. Most of the photographs used were converted to monotoes, duotones, and tritones, which allowed me to portray the mood of each song. In several of the booklet pages, I was also able to incorporate vector illustrations within the photograph collages. By doing this, I was able to create consistency between the posters and the books. Consistency was also achieved by using the same typeface, *Headline*, throughout the books as well as the posters.

Though different in subject matter and concept, much of the inspiration for my posters came from the posters of Jason Munn, the owner and primary designer for a design firm in Oakland, California called, The Small Stakes. This design firm opened in 2003 and primarily produces posters, many of which have appeared in several design publications including *Step*, *Communication Arts*, and *Print*. The style that Jason Munn uses is primarily centered on vector illustrations. His illustrations consist of a limited palate of colors (The Small Stakes, 2005-2008). Observing the various posters produced by The Small Stakes, helped me solve color issues within my own illustrations.

Another source of inspiration for my posters was a design firm called, Invisible Creature. It is a grammy-nominated firm located in Seattle, Washington, which focuses primarily on marketing and promotion of musicians. Invisible Creature was founded by two brothers: Don and Ryan Clark. Though Invisible Creature focuses on a different genre of music and different concepts, their techniques greatly inspired me.

Their posters do not consist of one specific technique, but several. The technique that interested me most was the combination of manipulated photographs with vector illustrations. Using this technique allows them to create a balance of smooth, clean texture verses rough, grainy texture. The two textures compliment each other because they contrast one another. I was able to incorporate this technique into the books that I produced. I have a great deal of respect for this design firm because of the importance of illustration in their work (Invisible Creature, 2006).

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Section III: Illustration

Illustration is an important and consistent aspect of the majority of my designs. I believe that design is too often based solely around manipulated photography. It also provides me with a deeper connection to my designs, which is important to me as a designer.

Each artist rendered on the posters is my own vector illustration. I created each based on a photograph reference of the artist using the design program, *Adobe Illustrator*. I chose to work with three shades on each face: a dark, middle, and light shade. The white areas of the face were left as the white of the paper. Using only three shades not only allowed me to reference the style of *Hatch Show Print*, but it also allowed me to create a great amount of detail without being overly complex. By using three colors, I was also able to create dimension within the faces of each artist. Flat planes were drawn and then layered on top of one another according to their shade. I chose not to blend the three colors together because it allowed me to maintain a more graphic style.

The colors used for each artist were chosen to reflect the mood of many of their songs. Most of the colors that were chosen for this poster series are warm colors, though there were some exceptions. As a graphic designer, I have learned both through class and my own personal experience that people tend to respond more to warm colors (myself included).

Each artist portrait presented its own unique challenge. The older musicians have many wrinkles, which proved to be very difficult and time consuming to illustrate. Facial hair also proved to be a big challenge, and took a while to accurately render. After much trial and error, I was finally able to master the ability to illustrate facial hair. Though the older artists were significantly more difficult to illustrate, I enjoyed the challenge.

I was pleased with the amount of detail I was able to render within each face. The amount of detail that was accomplished contributed to the amount of depth and realism of the portrait.

The exhibition was well received by the audience in attendance. The posters were mounted on foam core and attached to stretcher frames, which allowed them to protrude two inches from the wall. They were hung on a side wall in a line which stretched across the entire length of the room. Spotlights were set to illuminate each individual poster, creating a dramatic effect. The books were placed on pedestals between the corresponding posters. Viewers were able to observe the posters while handling and browsing through the books.

By producing this body of work, I was able to give appropriate emphasis to the artists, as well as, the stories within each of their songs. The posters mainly emphasized the artists, while giving the viewer a general idea of the main content of the musician's songs. The books provided appropriate emphasis to the stories told within the songs. The style and colors used accurately portrayed the mood relevant to each artist and their style of music. By completing this body of work, I not only successfully produced a series of pieces worthy of exhibition, but I also explored new styles and further developed my skills as a graphic designer.

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