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# “You Don’t Belong in Nashville!”: Politics, Country Music, and the Reception of Robert Altman’s *Nashville*

DAN BLIM

## Abstract

Robert Altman’s film *Nashville* (1975) generated a prodigious amount of press commentary following its release. Early on, critics praised the film, but a disappointing box office led many to assume a split between big-city liberal audiences and small-town conservative audiences. Subsequent press coverage connected this divide to both the film’s politics and its use and portrayal of country music, as political pundits, music critics, country music stars, and general audiences weighed in. This essay situates the reception of the film within a shifting country music industry, which was growing increasingly aligned with the Republican Party and increasingly suspicious of new artists. Altman’s overtly liberal political opinions, and his unusual decision to have the cast, along with music supervisor Richard Baskin—novices to country music—compose the songs, alienated him from the Nashville country music industry. Janet Staiger’s theorization of “talk” provides a compelling framework, as the film served as a flashpoint to argue political truths about the nation post-Watergate and to define country music’s evolving authenticity in a commercializing marketplace.

The opening scene of Robert Altman’s 1975 film *Nashville* ends with fictional country music legend Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) storming out of a recording session. As he leaves, he glares at the pianist and sounds off, “You get your hair cut! You don’t belong in Nashville.” Altman then cuts to a giant sign announcing “Welcome to Nashville,” accompanied by peppy, patriotic marching band music. The moment is one of many that satirize the country music industry within the film, and it echoes a real-life event from a few years earlier. The Byrds, a California-based psychedelic folk rock band that covered songs by Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, appeared at the Grand Ole Opry in 1968 to promote their first venture into country rock, *Sweethearts of the Rodeo*. Despite their sincerity, the performance was a disaster. The crowd booed them throughout their performance for their reputation as long-haired hippies, and Opry management was furious about their deviation from an approved set list of Merle Haggard covers. Jocelyn Neal sums up the performance as signaling that “country music represents more than just sound. . . . [T]he country audience rejected the Byrds as inauthentic, regardless of the sound of their music.”<sup>1</sup>

While the Byrds’ performance was a brief footnote in Opry history, the arrival of *Nashville* into theaters was anything but. Throughout the summer of 1975, the film was a cultural touchstone, as discussions of it filled newspapers across the country. Debates about the film quickly spilled over from movie criticism into news commentary, political punditry, music criticism, and even letters to the editor. So strong

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 238, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2224075>.

was its presence in the media that *New York Times* literary columnist John Leonard was prompted to comment a full three months after the film opened, “writing articles about ‘Nashville’ and writing articles about the articles that have been written about ‘Nashville’ is almost a light industry.”<sup>2</sup>

*Nashville* appears to have captured the zeitgeist of a post-Watergate America on the cusp of the bicentennial. It is an ensemble piece that follows the lives of twenty-four characters in Nashville—musicians, aspiring musicians, politicians, tourists, and townspeople—set against the backdrop of a fictional (and never-seen) third-party candidate’s presidential campaign. With so many characters, the plot is meandering and not particularly easy to summarize, but much of the film centers on the fictional country music stars and the organization of a political rally for the presidential candidate, who hopes to attract top musical talent to perform at the rally. The various characters reflect both the aspirational American dream of success and various political tensions of the Nixon era, including greed, misogyny, anti-war sentiment, and the dissolution of the family. The film culminates at the rally, where reigning country music star Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley) is assassinated.

The film amassed a large amount of critical support, and with several major Oscar nominations and critics’ awards, a Criterion Collection release, and a spot on the American Film Institute’s revised “100 Movies” list, *Nashville* is now widely considered a canonic work from one of Hollywood’s principal auteurs. Not only has it attracted the attention of film scholars, but its prominent use of country music has also yielded attention from musicologists. Much of this scholarship has focused on the film’s deconstructive view of the “authenticity” of country music. David Brackett observes that the rise of country music in film in the 1970s is frequently tied to “tropes related to the idea of ‘authenticity’ as a ‘truth-to-self’ that is connected to the white (usually male) working class” within the film narrative.<sup>3</sup> But in his brief treatment of *Nashville*, Brackett problematizes “authenticity” by suggesting the film “implies that clear examples of ‘truth’ might not exist anymore,” and divides the country genre into three categories—sincere, sincere yet commercial, and corny—that hint that country music was not universally authentic.<sup>4</sup> Diane Pecknold and Barbara Ching both reach a similar conclusion in their studies of *Nashville*. Pecknold argues that the film “insists on the overpowering presence of commerce” in American life and offers an “uncomfortably astute portrait of the audience and its self-conscious participation in country’s commercial enterprise.”<sup>5</sup> Ching takes an even more critical look at commercialism, commenting that *Nashville* “mourns America’s enslavement to commercial interests” and showcases how the songs’ lyrical appeals to patriotism, God, and love ring hollow in the characters and narrative.<sup>6</sup> All three scholars to varying degrees suggest that Altman takes a cynical, if perceptive, look at the country music industry and the nation—a perspective shared by many critics and commentators at the time.

In this essay, I reframe the discussion of authenticity around musical definitions of “real country music” and political definitions of a “real America,” both in flux during the 1970s and both borne out through contemporaneous commentary on the film. In *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film*

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<sup>2</sup> John Leonard, “The Literary Scene: Macdonaldizing,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1975, 40.

<sup>3</sup> David Brackett, “Banjos, Biopics, and Compilation Scores: The Movies Go Country,” *American Music* 19, no. 3 (2001): 249, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3052474>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 263–4.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2007), 230, 234, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390305>.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ching, “Sounding the American Heart: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Contemporary American Film” in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 205, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822380986-009>.

*Reception*, Janet Staiger encourages scholars to examine what she calls “talk”: “after the movie . . . ‘talk’ continues to process the text, reworking it for the use of the spectator. Part of that spectatorial use seems clearly to be personal, but other use values are social.”<sup>7</sup> As political pundits, music critics, Nashville musicians, and citizens weighed in on the film’s underperformance at the box office, the quality of the score, and its political commentary for months, talking about *Nashville* was both personal and social, articulating beliefs that extended far beyond the quality of the film itself. By listening to this talk, I argue that *Nashville* offers a rich source for understanding not just Altman’s perspective but the broader ideologies surrounding country music in the 1970s.

While *Nashville*’s success as an iconic film from an important director has undoubtedly prompted much of the work on it, I want to especially comment upon its failures. First, its failure at the box office tapped into cultural divides between left and right, and between urban and rural Americans. Second, the failure of the original score, composed largely by novice songwriter Richard Baskin, to replicate country music effectively suggests divergent views of country music inside and outside the music industry in the 1970s. As people made the case for whether the songs were good, terrible, or even properly considered “country music” at all, they drew on aspects of sound, lyrics, image, and demographics. Viewed in tandem, these political and musical debates about *Nashville* enrich our understanding of how country music evolved as both a genre and a potent social symbol during the 1970s.

## Country Music and Conservative Politics

The 1960s were a decade of social unrest, and the rising popularity of country music in the 1970s has been largely framed as a backlash to the 1960s. Bill Malone and David Strickland note that:

Country music’s commercial revival and national surge of popularity in the 1960s and ‘70s were marked by an accompanying identification with national purpose and definition. . . . In its most extreme form, the equating of “country music” and “Americanism” was shown during the mainstream or “middle” American backlash against the upheaval of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

Turned off by rock’s revolutionary sentiment, anti-war messaging, and sexual and drug-inspired hedonism, country fans embraced the music’s appeal to stability, tradition, and patriotism. These values also accompanied a political shift rightward into the 1970s.

The alignment between country music and politics was partly a calculated political strategy. In 1968, George Wallace openly courted country musicians, and managed to draw a sizable percentage of the vote from the South, which was just beginning to abandon its staunch Democratic alliance. Richard Nixon continued this, hosting Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard at the White House, and in 1972 designated October as Country Music Month. Country music stars reciprocated. Tex Ritter made and narrated *Thank You, Mr. President*, an album of Nixon’s speeches, and campaigned for Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.<sup>9</sup> The Grand Ole Opry even invited Nixon to speak and lead a performance of “God Bless America” on the piano at the opening of their new building in 1974. Nixon’s speech at the Opry articulated the genre’s alignment with conservative values: “It relates to those experiences that mean so much to America. It talks

<sup>7</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Vivian Green Fryd, “‘The Sad Twang of Mountain Voices’: Thomas Hart Benton’s *Sources of Country Music*” in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-tonk Bars*, ed. Cecilia Tichi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 264, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smn6t.17>.

about family, it talks about religion, the faith in God that is so important to our country and particularly to our family life.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the strongest bond forged between country music and conservative politics concerned the topic of patriotic sentiment and the support of America’s involvement in Vietnam. Nixon himself remarked on the popularity of country music among Vietnam veterans he had spoken to, no doubt a reflection of the working class demographic of many in the army at the time, and affirmed country music’s commitment to patriotism.<sup>11</sup> At a time when a number of folk and rock songs were critical of the war, country music crafted songs of support like Merle Haggard’s “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” Johnny Cash’s “Ragged Old Flag,” Dave Dudley’s “Tell Them What We’re Fighting For,” and Stonewall Jackson’s “The Minute Men Are Turning in Their Graves.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Haggard released “The Fightin’ Side of Me” as a follow-up to his anthem to conservative values, “Okie From Muskogee,” a song that, perhaps parodically, captured a certain perspective that Haggard insisted was not his own. “The Fightin’ Side of Me” was not Haggard’s first choice—rather, he wanted to record “Irma Jackson,” a tale of an interracial romance doomed by public prejudice. But Haggard recalled that Ken Nelson, Capitol Records’ head of country music, took the rare step of intervening, telling him, “I don’t think the world is ready for this yet.”<sup>13</sup> Given the success of “Okie From Muskogee,” which turned Haggard into an icon of conservative values, Capitol and Haggard saw commercial potential in appealing to a conservative audience, and furthered this image with “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” cementing his stardom in this vein.

That conservative audience was expanding as White suburban Americans across the country embraced country music as part of a shift of social values aligning with the Republican Party in the 1970s, a trend Bruce J. Schulman calls “redneck chic.” Although many of these fans were not Southern or working class, Schulman cites country music’s appeal via its “populist, conservative political philosophy. Without overt racial messages, they expressed subtle antiblack or anticity sentiments, usually directed against welfare programs.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this growing conservatism and its embrace of country music likely led Altman to conceive of Nashville and country music as a stand-in for the Nixon-era United States in the first place, and framed many of the encounters of the film as a division between “liberal” Hollywood and “conservative” Nashville.

Recently, scholars have sought to complicate this narrative of conservative alignment. Alex Macaulay finds a fruitful example in Kris Kristofferson. Tracing Kristofferson’s rise and fall, Macaulay concludes that Kristofferson’s success rested on a perceived authenticity in his songs, and that those song topics offered working-class perspectives that resonated with both liberal and conservative audiences.<sup>15</sup> A broader study of leftist viewpoints in country music comes from *The Honky Tonk on the Left*, a collection of essays spanning from the 1920s to the twenty-first century. In his introduction, Mark Allan Jackson notes that the 1970s was

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<sup>10</sup> The American Presidency Project, “Remarks at the Grand Ole Opry House, Nashville, Tennessee,” accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-grand-ole-opry-house-nashville-tennessee>.

<sup>11</sup> A 1970 survey by the Pulse Corporation found that a large majority of the country music audience held unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and had lower levels of education. See Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco Jr., “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority” in *The Sounds of Social Change*, ed. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1972), 48–50.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive catalog of the country music response to the Vietnam War, see Don Cusic, *Discovering Country Music* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 96–98.

<sup>13</sup> David Cantwell, *Merle Haggard: The Running Kind* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 163, <https://doi.org/10.7560/717718>.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Alex Macaulay and Phil Blank, “Going Up and Coming Down: Kris Kristofferson, Authenticity, and Country Music’s ‘New Breed,’” *Southern Cultures* 25, no. 2 (2019): 78–103, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2019.0018>.

“perhaps the most politicized era in country music.”<sup>16</sup> After chronicling the rise of this politicization, he remarks, “Too often, commentators on both the right and the left have not accurately represented the entirety of political/social attitudes found in this music culture. . . . For throughout its existence, country music has expressed a pronounced progressive viewpoint.”<sup>17</sup> The collection illuminates several trends in the 1970s, including Jackson’s own look at Loretta Lynn’s feminism, Ted Olson’s examination of O. B. McClinton’s work as an African-American country singer, and Nadine Hubbs’s class-conscious examination of liberal viewpoints in David Allen Coe, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and others.

These critiques of country music’s political leanings are compelling, yet they raise the question of why *Nashville*’s box office disappointment was so broadly understood at the time as confirming a political division around country music. In other words, if Kristofferson, Lynn, Cash, and others could bridge this divide so successfully, why couldn’t the film? Indeed, while most authors have examined the contradictions raised by successful country artists, *Nashville* offers a compelling case study that illuminates both the power of this political narrative of country music in the public imagination and the limits of writing country music while remaining outside of it in New Hollywood. What makes *Nashville* particularly useful is that, while the film is complex and even contradictory in its political messages, strong critiques of its oversimplified score colored its political reception.

### *Nashville*’s Politicized Reception

The controversy around *Nashville* began even before the film opened. *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael, an ardent fan of Altman’s, published a rave review of the film on March 3, 1975, based on a three-hour rough cut; the film would not open in New York until June 11. Kael, whose praise had salvaged *The Long Goodbye*, had been invited to a screening, presumably to build buzz for the film, since Paramount may have wanted to avoid a flop.<sup>18</sup> Other critics assailed this move as unprofessional, even those who would later praise the film itself.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to Altman, Bruce Williamson confided that he and Judith Crist, who had both attended the viewing with Kael, had felt they had received no implied permission to review what they had seen.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, he had spoken with Bob Manning at the *Atlantic Monthly*, who “was decisively put off, frankly, by the premature review from Pauline, which made him fearful that ‘a bunch of people’ might now write about the film before they could get anything in print.”<sup>21</sup>

Following Kael’s controversial review, critical buzz for the film built and expectations were high. Country music pictures like *Payday* had been successful, and United Artists hoped to capitalize on the trend,

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Allan Jackson, “Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music,” in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3t5qf4>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Stuart, *The Nashville Chronicles: The Making of Robert Altman’s Masterpiece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent Canby, “Film View: On Reviewing Films Before They’re Finished,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1975, X17.

<sup>20</sup> While Altman never says he granted permission, he dismisses the criticism of Kael, saying that the rough cut was nearly identical to the film itself, with only a few songs that were cut. Kael’s decision was also due to her being off that summer, preferring to issue a premature review than to risk saying nothing and letting Penelope Gilliatt review the film. See Connie Byrne and William O. Lopez, “Nashville” in *Robert Altman: Interviews*, ed. David Sterritt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Bruce Williamson to Robert Altman, March 11, 1975, Box 51, Robert Altman Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

asking Altman to direct one in exchange for financing *Thieves Like Us*.<sup>22</sup> Following the latter's box office failure, Paramount acquired *Nashville* and projected that the film would make \$30 million.<sup>23</sup> In previews of the summer season, critics frequently referred to the film as a benchmark against which other films would be measured. Critics further predicted that it would salvage Altman's reputation, and prematurely began referring to him as "one of Hollywood's hottest directors" or the "most highly praised director presently working."<sup>24</sup> Altman's own expectations were similarly high, stating "I think it's going to take all the money in the world. But then I'm pretty naive about commercial success."<sup>25</sup> Buzz was high enough for Paramount chairman Barry Diller to say that he and ABC had struck a deal to "without question . . . recut [*Nashville*] into six to eight hours for television."<sup>26</sup>

However, this eight-hour version never materialized, presumably because the film never fulfilled the high box office predictions. Indeed, overhype was widely feared as an obstacle to success. At the end of the year, Vincent Canby noted his unease at critical raves of any sort, even those he agreed with, and cited his own critical praise as the primary reason behind *Nashville's* disappointing box office.<sup>27</sup> The expectations may have simply been too high for the film to meet. Altman, too, had mixed feelings about all the critical raves. In an interview, he explains that he feared "review overkill" would hurt the film's chances in smaller towns.<sup>28</sup> As the film opened in wider release, *Nashville* experienced backlash from some critics, and the debates began to discuss the film not as a masterpiece, but as a failure, shifting from the film to the film's performance.

To explain this shift, critics found an even more resonant trope than Altman's past performance: a geographic and political divide between big city liberals and Middle-America conservatives. Gene Siskel forecasted this very problem, as he was ambivalent about *Nashville's* chances for success: "'Nashville' is a film made by a cult director that nevertheless has generated enough publicity to gain an audience in Middle America. . . . My guess is that many of them will find it too long and its story too disjointed" and it "may not rack up a significant dollar gross outside the big cities."<sup>29</sup>

Box office records somewhat confirm this transition from masterpiece to failure. The film's domestic release made almost \$9.5 million, an undeniable profit for the \$2.2 million film, and secured Altman's reputation enough for five more films.<sup>30</sup> *Nashville* opened in New York City on June 11, in an unprecedented double-booking at the 291-seat Cinema II and 412-seat Baronet Theater, taking in over \$50,000 each of its first three weeks.<sup>31</sup> A limited release in thirteen theaters in twelve cities followed on July 2; sales for the first weeks in these cities tended to hold strong, even breaking house records.<sup>32</sup> On July 23, *Nashville* expanded to forty-three cities, after which the film climbed up to a two-week high at #6 at the

<sup>22</sup> Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 39. A letter to Altman from Don Carpenter on July 19, 1975, alleges that many people believed Altman had ripped off *Payday* for explicitly commercial reasons, although *Payday* was not regarded as a commercial success. Box 51, Robert Altman Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 299.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Donnelly, "Cinematic View of Life from the Bottom Half of the Double Bill," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1975, 135; Stephen Farber, "Let Us Now Praise—Not Overpraise—Robert Altman," *New York Times*, September 29, 1974, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Sally Quinn, "You Either Love or Hate Altman," *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1975, P30.

<sup>26</sup> Katrine Ames and William J. Cook, "Godfather III," *Newsweek*, July 21, 1975, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent Canby, "Scorsese's Disturbing 'Taxi Driver,'" *New York Times*, February 15, 1976, D1.

<sup>28</sup> "'Intelligentsia' Not Needed for Director's Viewpoint," *Victoria Advocate*, June 29, 1975, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Gene Siskel, "'Jaws' breaks thru with bite," *Chicago Tribune*, July 13, 1975, E2.

<sup>30</sup> David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 96.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 284; "'Nashville' Gross Tops \$55,000 in 2nd Wk," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 30, 1975, 15. All box office data is gathered from *Variety*.

<sup>32</sup> Siskel, "'Jaws' breaks thru."

box office, taking in \$729,370 in the last two weeks of July.<sup>33</sup> The film’s widest release came on August 6 in 233 theaters, but the box office intake actually dropped that week, and continued to decline steadily, giving some credibility to the charge that the film failed in smaller cities. One story from Boxoffice confirms the lack of draw in smaller towns: “Ernest Hoffman, city and Arizona district manager for Plitt Intermountain Theatres, expressed disappointment and surprise over” *Nashville’s* performance, noting it “[has] been big in other cities, but [it] did not draw in Arizona, neither here [in Tucson] nor in Phoenix.”<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, what can be uncovered of the reception partially confirms this split as well. Critics across the country weighed in, although the film had detractors in large cities as well as ardent supporters in smaller cities. In addition to critical responses, some evidence of moviegoer responses can be gleaned from newspapers. One glimpse at the film’s performance in the southwest comes from El Paso, where critic Joan Quarm observed that audiences “failed to react to what Altman tells us of America.”<sup>35</sup> Letters to the editor also offer a look at reception. Roland Bartlett of the St. John’s Military School in Salina, Kansas, praised the acting and craft but condemned the movie as “neither entertainment nor a depiction of American culture. Someone told me that I didn’t like ‘Nashville’ because I didn’t understand it. That may well be, but there seem to be some filmmakers and critics who don’t understand America.”<sup>36</sup> Bartlett’s affiliation with both a small Midwestern town and the military appears to confirm the critical attitude of conservative America toward the film. But detractors also appeared in coastal cities; Teresa McNeil of Santa Cruz, California, felt the film made fun of “women, blacks, Southerners, country music, foreigners . . . everything but white ‘liberal’ intellectuals.”<sup>37</sup> Finally, Norma Diamond of Ann Arbor, Michigan, reacted to the idea that the film was only well received in the big cities: “I didn’t hear anybody snickering out here in Middle America. The audience I saw it with was empathizing and hurting.”<sup>38</sup> While a college town like Ann Arbor may not be indicative of more conservative middle America, her letter nevertheless acknowledges an awareness of this political division and an effort to counter it.

Despite evidence to the contrary, however, the urban/rural narrative dominated the media surrounding *Nashville*. Moreover, this geographic division was strengthened as it was mapped onto a similar political division between liberal (urban) and conservative (rural) points of view as political commentators began to weigh in on the film. *New York Times* editor Tom Wicker waded in shortly after the film opened, carefully dissecting the film as “a two-and-a half hour cascade of minutely detailed vulgarity, greed, deceit, cruelty, barely contained hysteria, and the frantic lack of root and grace into which American life has been driven by its own heedless vitality.”<sup>39</sup> Conservative columnists such as George Will, Joseph Kraft, and Patrick Buchanan seized on this as a chance to defend America from its harshest Hollywood and New York liberal critics. All three characterized Altman’s depiction as not representative of Americans, but whereas film critics like Rex Reed and Gary Tischler were content to dismiss the city of Nashville as a poor metaphor for America, these columnists saw Nashville as quintessentially American and criticized Altman for his glib

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<sup>33</sup> “‘Nashville’ Nearing Gross of \$2 Million.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 4, 1975, 8. Reports on box office records are found in Aaron Gold, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1975, B2; Siskel, “‘Jaws’ breaks thru”; and Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 299.

<sup>34</sup> Micheline Keating, “Tucson Exhibitors Compare Differences in Film Fans,” *Boxoffice*, December 8, 1975, W5.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Quarm, “Profound ‘Nashville.’” *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 23, 1975, Sec. Showtime 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald B. Bartlett, “Film makers fail to understand,” *Salina Journal*, September 19, 1975, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Theresa McNeil, “Stereotypes of ‘Nashville,’” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1975, R2.

<sup>38</sup> Norma Diamond, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, August 24, 1975, 101. This is likely Norma Diamond, the Marxist and feminist anthropologist who taught at the University of Michigan.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Wicker, “‘Nashville’—Dark Perceptions in a Country-Music Comedy,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1975, D1.



distortions of it.<sup>40</sup> Will's comments express disgust at the laziness of Altman's metaphors, while Buchanan is more direct in his attacks, charging that Nashville is

a quintessentially American city; and the country music for which it is famous a particularly American invention. . . . [But] Altman's "Nashville" is of course not Nashville U.S.A. And it is not America. It is a slander on America; it is a nation that lives only in the jaundiced eyes of men like Robert Altman and the artistic and intellectual community that endorses and applauds what he is saying about the United States. There is a film needed in the Bicentennial year, truer to life. It is about a thoroly [sic] jaded artistic and intellectual community, which has grown rich and gains its amusement by mocking the good society and system which guarantees the freedom it so regularly abuses."<sup>41</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, these sentiments were sometimes echoed by more moderate and liberal columnists, such as Jack Mabley of the *Chicago Tribune*, who liked the film but dismissed it as a metaphor for America:

The moviemakers don't know what life in America is all about, because they live in a freaky world of their own. They shun the company of average people who hold normal jobs and rent apartments or buy homes in the suburbs and raise kids and pay for orthodontia and coach Little League and don't cheat on their spouses. I lived on one block in a suburb for 20 years and there wasn't a single divorce in all that time. As far as I know, every wife was faithful to her husband and vice versa. We had a small parade around the block every Fourth of July and occasional backyard cookouts.<sup>42</sup>

Altman's interest in *Nashville* was colored by politics from its inception. When he visited the town of Nashville along with screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury, Altman refused to leave the hotel where he sat, riveted, watching the Watergate hearings.<sup>43</sup> Tewkesbury also recalls that Altman wanted the film to be about something bigger than country music, and eventually the two began to talk politics.<sup>44</sup> However, in interviews on the subject of politics, Altman remains cagey about the film's political message. He frequently stressed that the film was his own personal vision of America and downplayed the idea that he was trying to make a statement, although the difference between a "vision" and a "statement" is left unclarified.<sup>45</sup> In one article, he explained he "wanted to do 'Nashville' to study our myths and our heroes and our hypocrisy."<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, he laid out his message as a direct metaphor between politics and show business, saying he decided to set the film in Nashville because he saw the city as:

the new Hollywood, where people are tuned in by instant stars, instant music and instant politicians. . . . Nashville's musical scene offers youngsters the instant success without commitment . . . and that's what we have today in politics—instant-success politicians who just keep blaring repetitive words. And we aren't listening, just as, after a while, we don't even hear the lyrics of a Nashville song."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> George F. Will, "A Metaphor for America?" *Washington Post*, June 30, 1975, A23; Joseph Kraft, "'Nashville' Tars Majority with Flaws of Few," *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1975, D7; Patrick Buchanan, "'Nashville' is slander on celluloid," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1975, A3. Buchanan, Kraft, and many other critics of the film's politics do praise the film as art, Buchanan even recommending it not be overlooked at the Academy Awards. Gary Tischler, "A country-music vision of America," *Daily Review* (Hayward, CA), July 25, 1975, 49.

<sup>41</sup> Buchanan, "'Nashville' is slander."

<sup>42</sup> Jack Mabley, "'Nashville' freaks not on our block," *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1975, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell Zuckoff, *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 276.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>45</sup> Harry Haun, "Altman Country—M\*A\*S\*Hville Comes to Nashville," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1974, P50.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Gardner, "Altman Surveys 'Nashville' and Sees 'Instant' America," *New York Times*, June 13, 1975, 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Altman’s attitude here is critical of politicians, and more crucially, dismissive of the country music industry, a crucial factor in the score’s reception, detailed later in this essay.

Though many film critics discussed the film’s political message, reading their reviews makes it clear that there was not just disagreement about the veracity of the message, but also disagreement about what the message actually was. Many critics who were sympathetic to Altman found an indictment of America. Some found a political parable, including Scott Powers, who saw the film as a direct comment on Nixon’s politics of deceit, and Ruth McCormick, who wrote, “Obviously no Nixon-Reagan conservative will like the film,” citing “the death of the American dream” made manifest by “a political and economic system that is falling apart.”<sup>48</sup> *The Wall Street Journal’s* Joy Gould Boyum read the film as a broader critique of “politics as the ultimate pop experience” dominated by money and stardom rather than ideas.<sup>49</sup>

Others saw a critique of social, rather than political, behavior. Joan Quarm lamented that *Nashville* was a film “not merely about success and failure, but about human attitudes and patterns. Nobody is happy”—a sentiment echoed in Martin Kasindorf’s review, noting that “nobody connects.”<sup>50</sup> Calvin Fentress, however, found a more hopeful message, labeling Altman an “affectionate satirist” who portrays “our energy, intelligence and creativity, our humor, optimism and love—and he revels in our diversity” while also showing how individuals are “glad-handed, crowd-controlled and media-saturated into an audience of zombies by interchangeable performers and politicians.”<sup>51</sup> Even questions of feminism divided reviewers. John Malone harshly criticized the film as “celluloid rape.”<sup>52</sup> But as Ruth McCormick recounted in her defense of the film, “When another feminist objected that in the film women are the victims, she answered that that’s a pretty accurate portrayal of what goes on every day and noted that women in the film, as well as the blacks [sic], come off not only more sympathetic, but generally stronger, than the white men.”<sup>53</sup>

With so many characters and plot lines, the film is complex, even messy, in its treatment of characters and themes. In other words, *Nashville* offered not so much a clear vision of a director but a kind of mirror, allowing both fans and detractors of the film to expound on problems they saw in both America and its critics. Perhaps this would be unremarkable—*Nashville* is hardly the first film to divide audiences—but the decision to center the film on country music and its audiences in this moment hit a cultural flashpoint. This is most evident in how critics discussed Altman’s attitude toward the characters on screen. David Sterritt felt it balanced cynicism with “a great love for the very people it chuckles so mirthfully at.”<sup>54</sup> Vincent Canby concurred that “‘Nashville’ doesn’t make easy fun of these people. It doesn’t patronize them. Along with their foolishness, it sees their gallantry.” Yet others vehemently disagreed, including Bob Greene, who called the film “nothing more than a series of cheap smirks, cruel parodies, and mean, sneering stereotypes” displaying a “terrible lack of respect for people” and claiming that “a view that says Americans outside the

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<sup>48</sup> Scott I. Powers, “‘Nashville’ Brings Flaws of America to Cinema 7,” *Times Record* (Troy, NY), July 24, 1975, 22; Ruth McCormick, “In Defense of Nashville,” *Cinéaste*, Fall 1975, 23, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Joy Gould Boyum, “Just Plain Populist Folks,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 1975, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Quarm, “Profound ‘Nashville’”; Martin Kasindorf, “Altman’s Opryland Epic,” *Newsweek*, June 30, 1975, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin Fentress, “Altman’s Bicentennial Happening,” *The New Leader*, August 4, 1975, 22.

<sup>52</sup> John Malone, “Let Us Not Praise ‘Nashville’s’ Failures,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 1975, 83.

<sup>53</sup> McCormick, “In Defense of Nashville.”

<sup>54</sup> Vincent Canby, “A Satire, a Melodrama, A Celebration,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1975, D1; Pauline Kael, *Reeling* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1976), 446; Scott Beaven, “‘Nashville,’ ‘Hearts and Minds’ Demolish Myths,” *Albuquerque Journal*, August 10, 1975, D-5; David Sterritt, “Altman’s ‘Nashville’ a meaningful microcosm,” *Advocate* (Newark, OH), August 2, 1975, 9. See also Tom Fruehling, “‘Nashville’: Unusual Slice of Life,” *The Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 7, 1975, 37A.

big cities are to be pitied and mocked and clucked at precisely feeds on the prejudices of urban dwellers who want to believe that the rest of the country is deprived and inferior.”<sup>55</sup>

As the polarized and politicized debate over *Nashville* grew, attention turned to the film’s use of country music. In particular, two aspects of its score captured much of the attention. First was the quality of the music itself and the question of whether it was “good” country music. Second, the authorship of the songs by music director Richard Baskin along with members of the cast called into question whether it was “real” country music. In my discussion below, the second of these questions resonated deeply within an industry facing its own challenges to the definition of country music.

### Assessing *Nashville*’s Score

Perhaps the most damning moment in the reception of *Nashville* was its opening in Nashville itself on August 8, 1975. While the editors of Nashville’s two main papers, Eugene Wyatt of the *Tennessean* and Bill Hance of the *Banner*, debated the film’s merits in the local paper (Wyatt liked the film, Hance did not), much of the nationally syndicated coverage focused instead on the harsh reactions to the film by Nashville’s singing stars, who largely reviled the music in the film. Minnie Pearl called the music “terrible,” Ronnie Milsap found it “very disappointing. . . . It certainly wasn’t the Nashville sound I know,” and Lynn Anderson was “*personally affronted*” by it.<sup>56</sup>

The music had not drawn complaints from film reviewers. Some enjoyed the songs: Christene C. Meyers appreciated the “variety of country melodies—simple, earthy, sincere.”<sup>57</sup> Yet others appreciated the music not because it was good, but because it was bad. Micheline Keating called the music “great even when it is intentionally awful,” adding, “And you don’t have to be a country fan to appreciate the uses made of it.”<sup>58</sup> But country fans—especially stars and music critics—did not appreciate the film’s score or its apparent satire. Quite the opposite: they criticized its shortcomings, and those in the industry felt it was a condescendingly bad joke at their expense.

The score’s problems stemmed at least partly from Altman’s decision to hire a young, inexperienced music director, Richard Baskin, to write and supervise much of the film’s score. Such a move was unusual; most films with country music used either a compilation score, like *Five Easy Pieces*’ use of Tammy Wynette songs, or hired established country songwriters, like *Payday* and *W. W. and the Dixie Dancekings*, which respectively featured songs by Shel Silverstein and Jerry Reed (Reed was even cast in the film). Early plans for *Nashville*’s score, in fact, called for a standard compilation score, using diegetic sources for country standards by Tammy Wynette, Merle Haggard, and Roy Acuff.<sup>59</sup> By June 1974, though, most of these had disappeared from the script, replaced by a number of newer songs written by the film’s eventual stars Ronee Blakley, Henry Gibson, and Keith Carradine, along with Baskin. The decision may have also been motivated by finances: a *Variety* report details that the music budget for the film was only \$50,000, which may indicate that pressure to keep costs down may have prevented paying royalties on the music.<sup>60</sup>

The final score synthesizes these two impulses by featuring occasional references to existing music.

<sup>55</sup> Bob Greene, “But Don’t Give Him ‘Nashville,’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 12, 1975, A19.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Toepfer, “Nashville Stars on ‘Nashville,’” *Family Weekly*, December 28, 1975, 4; “Country Music Stars Put Down ‘Nashville,’” *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 9, 1975, 9A.

<sup>57</sup> Christene C. Meyers, “‘Nashville,’ a slice of life,” *The Billings Gazette*, October 17, 1975, 5-D.

<sup>58</sup> Micheline Keating, “‘Nashville—A Colorful Tapestry,’” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, August 7, 1975, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 37, 78.

<sup>60</sup> Meyer, “‘Nashville’ Cost \$2,200,000.”

While songs by Baskin and the film’s stars are featured most prominently, several standards are woven into the score, including a nondiegetic bluegrass performance of “John Hardy” as everyone leaves the airport, a performance by jazz violinist Vassar Clement of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” the opening of the Opry Scene with “Sugarfoot Rag,” and two performances by Barbara Jean, who sings “In the Garden” in the hospital chapel and Jimmie Rodgers’s “Blue Yodel #1” seemingly spontaneously as she leaves the hospital. Altman also peppers the score with several local musicians, seen performing what is likely their own music—the Misty Mountain Boys’ performance of the up-tempo bluegrass number “Old Man Mississippi” is intercut with the Smokey Mountain Laurels performing Blakley’s Carter Family-esque religious number “Down to the River.” Finally, an obscure but overtly political rock song, “Trouble in the U.S.A.,” is used non-diegetically to open the political rally scene.

Despite these fleeting references, Altman appears to have taken pains to remove all other references to real-life country music stars. In the June 1974 script, Norman (David Arkin), the chauffeur, is shown giving a tour of Nashville in which Haven Hamilton’s house is positioned alongside Roy Acuff’s and Johnny Cash’s.<sup>61</sup> Altman and Tewkesbury have never discussed this change, but Altman did say he wanted the film to be about “something bigger,” a microcosm of America, suggesting that an entirely fictional Nashville might suit this metaphor better. Nevertheless, comparisons to the real town of Nashville were inevitable, and country stars could not help but compare the filmic representation to the songs and industry they knew so well.

What Nashville stars objected to most strenuously was the fact that country music outsiders wrote the score—and wrote it ineptly. Roy Clark opined, “I sorta resented the songs. It was quite evident that they were written by non-country songwriters.”<sup>62</sup> And Loretta Lynn quipped, “if they wanted country music, they could have had the real thing. All they had to do was ask me.”<sup>63</sup> Both Clark and Lynn were highly respected and successful country stars, perhaps the consummate insiders in 1970s Nashville. Clark was doubtless visible as the host of the highly popular syndicated TV show *Hee-Haw*, and both had won multiple awards from the Country Music Awards and the Academy of Country Music in the early 1970s. Interestingly, actress Ronee Blakley, who composed a number of the songs, was not completely unknown; two of the songs in the film, “Dues” and “Bluebird,” were written for Blakley’s self-titled 1972 debut album. The album was released by Elektra Records, a New York-based label that specialized in rock and folk artists, including Judy Collins, Phil Ochs, and The Doors. While the album largely flew under the radar, it did receive some positive attention: *Variety* listed “Bluebird” under “Top Singles of the Week” on May 24, 1972, though labels it “folk-styled” rather than country, perhaps reflecting the expectations of the label, and *Billboard* listed it under its “FM Action” column in June 1972, noting that it was getting airplay in Toronto and Hartford, not cities with a strong connection to country music.<sup>64</sup> If Blakley had more songwriting experience than Baskin, it was still not representative of classic country, and the film’s positioning her as a Loretta Lynn-type Queen of Country Music likely invited comparisons and found her novice songwriting lacking—arguably Clark was correct in considering her a “non-country songwriter,” as the press had similarly characterized her music as folk.

Elsewhere, Lynn, recognizably the inspiration behind the character Barbara Jean, stated she would not see the movie, but still took offense at her portrayal as relayed by those who did: “I don’t care if they have

<sup>61</sup> Box 54, Robert Altman Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<sup>62</sup> Toepfer, “Nashville Stars.”

<sup>63</sup> George Vecsey, “Nashville Has Mixed Feelings on ‘Nashville,’” *New York Times*, August 10, 1975, 41.

<sup>64</sup> “Top Singles of the Week,” *Variety*, May 24, 1972, 52; “FM Action,” *Billboard*, June 3, 1972, 51.

me kinda crazy, because I am. I don't care if they have me goin' in and out of hospitals, because I do. But when I hear they're cartin' my dead body off and havin' an unknown take my place—*that I don't like!*"<sup>65</sup> Lynn did not object to the characterization of herself or depictions of the industry and its strains on the star—depictions of struggle and hardship are central to country stars' mythology—but rather she objected to her musical persona, her seeming replaceability with an unknown novice, the "instant success" mentioned by Altman. She did not object, notably, to her persona being played by Ronee Blakley, who was in fact a relative unknown in the music industry. Similarly, in the scene in question, the character who replaces Barbara Jean on stage was the unknown aspiring singer Albuquerque, played by Barbara Harris. Harris was an accomplished singer, having won a Tony Award for *The Apple Tree* in 1967 with previous nominations for *From the Second City* and *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, making her one of the most established singers in the cast, and one of the few to draw praise from critics. Given Harris's rousing performance at the film's conclusion, it is hard to take her statement as a complaint about Harris. Rather, when coupled with her pointed comment at not being asked to provide the music, Lynn's statement reads more broadly as an indictment of outsiders "taking their place" writing the score. The "unknown" here, I suspect, is not just Albuquerque, but also Baskin, whose country music score failed to live up to the standards Lynn and others bore.

The attributes of the score that Nashville stars found "terrible" were largely unspecified, although Roy Clark distinguished, "I liked the *music*, but I didn't think much of the lyrics."<sup>66</sup> In fact, the lyrics are the only aspects singled out in these reports. The *New York Times* noted the "insider's reaction" to the music, noting that audiences "giggled at the banal lyrics ("Cause Jimmy's been wishing that I'd take him fishing . . .")."<sup>67</sup> An Associated Press story similarly reported that "the Nashville audience laughed at the lyrics of songs performed in the film, calling them exaggerated spoofs of country music."<sup>68</sup>

Several music critics agreed with the criticisms and went further in delineating why. *New York Times* critic John Rockwell called the songs "decent . . . and they are decently performed," but not "anywhere nearly as good as the best country music," citing a lack of confidence in the amateur performers. He predicted that fans would find the film and its songs "patronizing."<sup>69</sup> Bruce Cook was even harsher, calling the songs "remarkably crude and tendentious." Cook criticizes in particular the overt politicizing in Hamilton's songs, and eviscerates Connie White's (Karen Black) songs: "The rhymes of these are weak and obvious; the lyrics are as stale as last month's bread; and the tunes are no more than clichéd phrases strung together." Cook also asserts that Henry Gibson, Karen Black, and Timothy Brown are inept singers, praising only the work of Keith Carradine, Barbara Harris (a Tony Award winner), and Ronee Blakley (a novice professional singer).<sup>70</sup>

I am largely in agreement with the critics here. Baskin understood country music to a degree: he emphasizes tonic, dominant, and subdominant harmonies, uses common song forms, and occasionally employs stepwise modulations before later verses, a hallmark of many 1970s songs. In one song, "One, I Love You," Baskin was actually sued for its undeniable melodic and harmonic similarities to "Pack Up Your

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<sup>65</sup> Toepfer, "Nashville Stars."

<sup>66</sup> Toepfer, "Nashville Stars."

<sup>67</sup> Vecsey, "Nashville Has Mixed Feelings."

<sup>68</sup> "Country Music Stars Put Down 'Nashville.'"

<sup>69</sup> John Rockwell, "The Pop Life: It's Country Music, But the Best It Isn't," *New York Times*, June 13, 1975, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce Cook, "Patronizing the Nashville Sound," *New Leader*, July 21, 1975, 29.

Sorrows” by folk singers Richard and Mimi Fariña.<sup>71</sup> The accompaniments were done by professional musicians, and so retain a level of authenticity in both instrumentation and performance style. Listeners can prominently hear elements common to Nashville songs, including steel guitar and the “slip-note” style of piano playing pioneered in the 1950s by Floyd Cramer. Yet the performances were recorded live, which meant they lacked the polished recording effects common to songs of classic country, such as reverb, backup singers, and string orchestras.

Cook’s critique of the singers also rings true, not only for their mediocre skills, but also for their style. Although Gayle Sherwood Magee has convincingly argued that the cast members were not musical amateurs, as was frequently claimed, they were experienced largely in genres other than country music.<sup>72</sup> With the exception of Blakley, none of the performers prominently feature twang, a feature Jocelyn Neal notes “meant being grounded, authentic, rural, honest, and empathetic, with an ear grounded in country music’s past.”<sup>73</sup> Many of the vocal types heard in the film were idiosyncratic for the country music of the time. Male country stars like Conway Twitty and Merle Haggard often had a low, gravelly, and resonant voice; Henry Gibson and Timothy Brown have thinner and higher voices. Henry Gibson, in particular, frequently sings in a wobbly tone, with short, clipped phrases that undercut his character’s pompous confidence. Women like Loretta Lynn, Donna Fargo, and Tammy Wynette employ emotive vocal breaks and a more forward, nasal, and powerful style. Karen Black’s performance has a certain power and brightness in her tone, although her vibrato is more warbly and unsteady than many stars heard in Nashville at the time. Black and Brown also occasionally struggle to hit some of their notes, demonstrating the amateurism with which they were often labeled.

“One, I Love You,” a duet between Haven Hamilton and Barbara Jean, similarly exhibits Baskin’s limitations in songwriting. The entire song uses just three chords—not atypical, but every phrase of the verse cadences to the tonic, with IV and V chords only added briefly for harmonic motion. The melody of the verse is delivered in almost straight eighth notes, with a limited range, repeatedly emphasizing 3 and 1. The limited harmonic motion, melodic motion, and rhythmic repetitiveness combine to give the song a stiff quality. And while Blakley, a singer, gives some rhythmic flexibility in her performance, shaping phrases more naturally, Gibson’s performance largely sticks to the rhythms as written, adding to his stiffness. Moreover, he sings the initial upbeat nearly on the downbeat, leading to an awkward, rushed delivery in the first line. But as above, the song’s most glaring aspect is the lyrics. As with many of the songs in the film, the broad themes are redolent of country music—the redemptive power of love—but the elementary rhymes like “I love you” / “I’m thinking of you” and “I miss you” / “I want to kiss you” give the song an amateurish quality. Most centrally, the song lacks a clear working-class perspective; lines like “When I feel my life vanishing like waves upon the sand / With nothing to replace it but invention,” are overly poetic and complicated constructions, rather than the more direct sentiments or clever turns of phrase found in country songs.

Certainly, music supervisor Richard Baskin and Altman were not attempting to write terrible songs, but whether they intended the songs to be parodic or serious is difficult to establish, due to contradictory

<sup>71</sup> Box 52, Robert Altman Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In fact, the song was mistakenly attributed as “Pack Up Your Sorrows.” See Meyers, “‘Nashville,’ a slice of life.”

<sup>72</sup> Gayle Sherwood Magee, *Robert Altman’s Soundtracks: Film, Music, and Sound from M\*A\*S\*H to A Prairie Home Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199915965.001.0001>.

<sup>73</sup> Jocelyn R. Neal, “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199985227.003.0003>.

statements. In one article, Baskin takes the songs seriously, insisting that songs must “work as entertainment” as well as “say something special about the character.”<sup>74</sup> Yet in an oral history conducted much later, Baskin admits he knew nothing about country music.<sup>75</sup> This inexperience explains his reductive attitudes in another interview, claiming: “We’ve all been exposed to country music just by living in this country. . . . There are certain things you find in most country songs. A lot of them are waltzes and they deal with the same themes—a man’s country or family or problems or religion. I just stayed in those areas in putting the music together for the film.”<sup>76</sup> Altman’s comments also suggest a dismissive, or perhaps parodic, approach. Already noted above were his critical comments that Nashville, like politics, offered “instant success” and blared repetitive words, suggesting a lack of talent.<sup>77</sup> In a note dated February 12, 2000, Altman reflected, “We weren’t trying to write “great” songs. We aimed to meet the spectrum of songs coming out of the Nashville scene in 1974 when the film was made. Some of the songs were silly, some terrible, some well written and some not, some were extraordinary . . . we were trying to create our own take on the indigenous music of Nashville.”<sup>78</sup> Baskin took a similarly noncommittal approach, saying they created the character of Haven Hamilton to “hit the music right down the middle so that the audience could go either way with it.”<sup>79</sup> For those inclined to see the parodic potential in country music, this attitude appears to have worked, but for those inside the country music industry, this attitude was insulting and the score equally so.

### The Politics of Scoring *Nashville*

Baskin in particular singled out the patriotic ballad “200 Years” as “meant to be the ultimate B record.”<sup>80</sup> The simple drums and banjo accompaniment—unusual within the score—invites comparisons with Stonewall Jackson’s wartime anthem “The Minute Men Are Turning in Their Graves” (1966), or more recently, Johnny Cash’s song “Ragged Old Flag,” released the year before *Nashville*. The banjo is, of course, iconic to country music, and the drums usher in the pro-military theme of the song (a sentiment that overlaps with both Jackson’s and Cash’s songs). The first two verses of “200 Years” encapsulate a particular conservative ethos of patriotism still redolent in country music today—connections to Anglo-American colonial heritage, military service, religious faith, and family. Similarly, the refrain “We must be doing something right to last 200 years” indicates a pro-US perspective, common to anti-protest country songs of the era. The music alternates mostly between dominant and subdominant harmonies, common in country music, with repeated use of a b7 that suggests a modal folk influence. The bridge turns to the minor, reflecting on struggles—the Great Depression, Dust Bowl droughts, and tornados—that anchor the song in the US heartland and a working-class identity. There is, perhaps, a slight critique at the end of the bridge when Hamilton sings “How far we’ve got to go,” although the song pointedly does not reflect on any current strife, per se. If the first verses nostalgically reflect on the history of the nation, the final verse faces the future with hard work, grit, and determination: “It’s been hard work, but every time we get into a fix / Let’s think of what our children face in 2076/ It’s up to us to pave the way with our blood and sweat and tears.” After

<sup>74</sup> Frank Meyer, “Nashville’ Cost \$2,200,000, Music Budget Only \$50,000,” *Variety*, June 11, 1975, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Zuckoff, *Robert Altman*, 282.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Gardner.

<sup>78</sup> Box 55, Robert Altman Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Campbell, “Community Dislikes Movie,” *The Times* (Burlington, NC), June 28, 1975, 7A.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Hilburn, “Nashville Takes Dim View of ‘Nashville,’” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1975, D1.

the final verse, the refrain repeats and Hamilton holds the last note, the tonic, supported with a grandiose musical tag, a bVI–bVII–I cadence, giving an over-the-top attitude to the song.

“200 Years” may in fact be one of the most closely modeled songs in the score, albeit in a specific genre. My hunch is that the many who heard the song as parodic did so not on the basis of the song being bad per se, but by the hyper-political nature of the song. If the film, broadly speaking, was read as critical of America, then the placement of a jingoistic country song at the start of the film portrays country music cynically, as unwaveringly patriotic and overlooking the problems in the United States that the film depicts. Moreover, the whole scene is constructed to undercut the song’s message. While the patriotic sentiment is communal, “we must be doing something right,” the images fracture that community using glass and dividers in the studio to fragment and enclose the characters (Example 1). And while the lyrics emphasize working-class values and sacrifice, Hamilton emerges as an egotistical performer. After the first take, he kicks Opal (Geraldine Chaplin), the BBC reporter, out of the studio, then asks to hear “a little more Haven” in the next take. As I describe in the opening of this essay, he then kicks out Frog (Richard Baskin), the pianist, ostensibly for making a mistake, but he follows up, chastising him, “You get your hair cut, you don’t belong in Nashville.” From that line, Altman cuts to a giant sign that reads “Welcome to Nashville.” The juxtaposition is pointedly ironic, suggesting that Nashville is hypocritical in its welcome and, more specifically, that the music industry is especially unwelcoming to long-haired countercultural types. The moment is especially meaningful, since the pianist is played by none other than the film’s music supervisor Richard Baskin, while Altman intended Opal’s character as a stand-in for himself, thus essentially showing Nashville kicking out the film crew in the opening scene.<sup>81</sup>



**Example 1:** Fractured community in the opening scene of *Nashville*

The tension in the scene between Hamilton and Baskin and Altman’s stand-ins was inspired by real-life political tensions. On August 9, 1974, Nixon resigned from office, and the crew of the film cheered as they watched Nixon depart. But the town did not share their feelings. Henry Gibson recalled, “That town was in tears. If ever there were loyalists, they were in Nashville.”<sup>82</sup> That evening, the film crew shot the Grand Ole Opry sequence. Roy Acuff, who had reportedly always maintained a certain coldness with the

<sup>81</sup> Stuart, *Nashville Chronicles*, 63–64.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.



crew and kept his distance, broke into tears and yelled at the crew that evening, “Look at what you’ve done to our president!” before retreating to his dressing room and playing his fiddle.<sup>83</sup> Given these experiences, it seems quite clear that country music’s alignment with conservative patriotism is highlighted and satirized right at the start with “200 Years.”

If this moment crystallized a political division between Nashville and Hollywood, it was no doubt strengthened by Altman’s reputation as a countercultural iconoclast. Inside Hollywood, he was known for clashing with studio heads, but in the popular media, he was frequently depicted as drinking, doping, and womanizing his way through making a film.<sup>84</sup> Those last two conform to the stereotypical hippie image Merle Haggard famously sang about in “Okie from Muskogee.” Moreover, *Nashville* was not Altman’s first political film. Indeed, critics have described Altman’s approach to genre—the war film (*M\*A\*S\*H*), the western (*McCabe & Mrs. Miller*), and the film noir (*The Long Goodbye*)—as having a political bent through symbolizing and satirizing American myths.<sup>85</sup> And while many critics applauded *M\*A\*S\*H* as a critique of the Vietnam War with its mixture of black comedy and gore, Roger Greenspun lamented the irreverence toward religion, calling it the “first major American movie openly to ridicule belief in God—not phony belief; real belief.”<sup>86</sup> Such critiques resonated strongly with the charges against *Nashville*’s ideology.

In this light, it is possible that some of the criticism directed at Altman and Baskin by Nashville musicians was politically motivated—a point I will return to at the close of this section. But it is even more likely that Altman likely received the criticism of the film’s score through a political lens, as if the only reason they dismissed it was because of political disagreement. Faced with this criticism, Altman claimed, “I think it probably got a little too close to the truth.”<sup>87</sup> While this quote may read defensively, there was perhaps a grain of truth in it. Lynn Anderson, amid her criticisms, said, “Parts of the movie were painfully true—realistic to the point of hurting people,” suggesting some of the depictions were accurate, while emphasizing the pain she and others felt, ascribing an almost cruel behavior to the filmmakers.<sup>88</sup> Taken together, these comments underscore a tension that goes beyond a debate over musical quality to assert a more ideological divide between Altman and the country music industry, no doubt heightened by the political climate.

Altman’s and Baskin’s politicized perception of country music appears to have governed some of the lyric writing of song beyond the bombastic jingoism of “200 Years.” “For the Sake of the Children,” sung at the Opry by Haven Hamilton, is a classic ballad in which a man ends an affair. Gibson’s vocal limitations are on display here, producing a warbling, unsteady tone and short, clipped phrases. But Baskin’s lyrics are also limited. The song is from the perspective of a man ending an affair, prompted by thinking of his children: “‘Cause Jimmy’s been wishin’ that I’d take him fishin’ / His little league pitchin’ is somethin’ to see / And Cathy’s thirteen now, she’s my little queen now / And I’ve got to see who her beau’s gonna be.” The lyrics touch upon wholesome images of small-town life—fishing and little league—and the antiquated term “beau” inflects a Southern, conservative touch. These images echo Jack Mabley’s critique of the film’s politics: “I lived on one block in a suburb for 20 years and there wasn’t a single divorce in all that time. As

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 205. In fact, a year earlier when the Watergate scandal broke, Altman insisted Joan Tewkesbury rewrite the screenplay to comment more directly upon it. See *A Conversation about Screenwriting with Joan Tewkesbury* (Chicago: Columbia College, 1975), 8.

<sup>84</sup> Aljean Harmetz, “The 15th Man Who Was Asked to Direct ‘M\*A\*S\*H’ (And Did) Makes a Peculiar Western” *New York Times*, June 20, 1971, SM10.

<sup>85</sup> Zuckoff, *Robert Altman*, 230–1.

<sup>86</sup> Roger Greenspun, “‘M\*A\*S\*H’ Film Blends Atheism, Gore, Humor,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1970, 26.

<sup>87</sup> Matt Yancey, “Music City, U.S.A., Opinions Differ On ‘Nashville’ Film,” *Lawton Constitution*, August 4, 1975, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Toepfer, “Nashville Stars.”

far as I know, every wife was faithful to her husband and vice versa. We had a small parade around the block every Fourth of July and occasional backyard cookouts.” Mabley’s vision is one and the same as Hamilton’s, a vision Mabley felt Altman ridiculed in the film. And although, *pace* Mabley, cheating and divorce were indeed common topics of country songs, those songs took a smart, wry approach (like Loretta Lynn’s 1973 hit “Rated X”) or a wistful one (like George Jones’s 1970 “Tell Me My Lying Eyes Are Wrong” or Tammy Wynette’s 1968 hit “I Don’t Wanna Play House”), but not the moralizing tone of “For the Sake of the Children.” Indeed, the overall message of the song reflects not country songs but the rhetoric of family values, which Seth Dowland locates as taking root among conservative evangelicals in the mid-1970s.<sup>89</sup> Baskin, I suspect, may have in fact modeled the song on the conservative political rhetoric around divorce, rather than on the more observational approach of country songs.

If *Haven Hamilton* comes across parodically as sanctimonious as the archetypal Southern conservative in these two early numbers, the left’s countercultural icon Tom (Keith Carradine), a member of a Peter, Paul, and Mary-esque folk trio, emerges no less narcissistic. Early on, his leftward political alignment is established when he asks a soldier if he’s killed anyone today. Political and personal tensions break up the trio, suggesting the disillusionment of the 1960s ethos. Later in the film, Tom performs the song “I’m Easy.” The song reads as an authentic and sincere search for love and commitment through lyrics like “It’s not my way to take your hand if I’m not sure” and “Please stop pulling at my sleeve if you’re just playing.” Carradine sings the first verse looking down, as if shy and guarded, the sense of pain amplified by the frequent use of dissonances in the guitar accompaniment.

Yet the sincerity is just an act, as Tom is not the guarded, sincere protagonist of the song but a womanizer throughout the film. Before the performance, he dedicates it to “someone special who just might be here tonight.” The camera cuts between three women Tom has slept with—bandmate Mary (Cristina Raines), Opal, L.A. Joan (Shelley Duvall)—and Linnea (Lily Tomlin), a married woman Tom has doggedly pursued and is attempting to bed through this performance (Example 2). In a later scene, after Tom and Linnea have slept together, Altman shows a close-up of a tape player that plays a recording of “I’m Easy” as Linnea and Tom talk in bed. Once the song stops, emphasized with a shot of the tape player stopping, Linnea puts on her clothes and leaves (Example 3). The implication is that Tom’s song is a manufactured, literally mechanical, siren song, undercutting the musical affect of singer-songwriter authenticity. The left’s music is no less hypocritical and manufactured than the right’s.

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<sup>89</sup> Seth Dowland, “‘Family Values’ and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” *Church History* 78, no. 3 (2009), 606–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640709990448>.

**Example 2:** (A) Tom Frank (Keith Carradine) sings “I’m Easy” as (B) Mary (Cristina Raines), (C) Opal (Geraldine Chaplin), (D) L.A. Joan (Shelley Duvall), and (E) Linnea Reese (Lily Tomlin) watch.



Example 2a



Example 2b



Example 2c



Example 2d



Example 2e

**Example 3:** (A) A recording of “I’m Easy” plays in Tom’s room as (B-C) he and Linnea talk after sex. (D) A close-up of the recording stopping is followed by (E) Linnea’s exit.



Example 3a



Example 3b



Example 3c



Example 3d



Example 3e

Unlike the many comments on Altman’s smug condescension toward country singers, little was remarked upon in the press about his satirizing the left. I would suggest that this is at least partly due to the musical quality of “I’m Easy,” composed and sung by Carradine. “I’m Easy” displays a sophistication lacking in the country songs—the song went on to win an Oscar for Best Song and became a minor hit for Carradine. Whereas the lack of quality in the country songs elicited complaints, the effectiveness of “I’m Easy” may have shielded Tom from similar critiques. The song opens with a pungent minor second in the guitar of scale degrees 4 and 3, introducing a 4–3–1 vamp over the tonic. The vamp shifts in the next bar to 3–1–7, then #4–3–1, giving it a restless and yearning quality, ascending to scale degrees 5 and 6, as the vocals enter. Although the ii–V–I chord progression is standard, the predominance of sevenths in the accompaniment lends a poignance that mirrors the bittersweet lyrics that detail uncertainty and reluctance to love: “It’s not my way to love you just when no one’s lookin’ / It’s not my way to take your hand if I’m not sure / It’s not my way to let you see what’s goin’ on inside of me.” The chorus of the song offers hope, as Tom admits that he is “easy” and willing if she asks him, and the music responds with a hopeful rising harmonic sequence: I–ii–iii–IV–I, accompanied by guitar arpeggiations free of the pungent dissonances. Unlike the country songs, the lyrics exhibit a plainspoken poetry fitting a folk-rock love song, and the repeated “It’s not my way” at the start of each line of the first verse is a sophisticated technique. Despite the film’s treatment of Tom, the authenticity of the folk-rock song and Carradine’s performance made Tom appear authentic, even empathetic, rather than a caricature singing bad music.

To return to the question of whether politics left Nashville stars more guarded about a score written by a country music outsider, I should acknowledge the ways in which the country music industry was changing, and how politics amplified tensions inside the industry. To be clear, country stars never adduced politics in their criticisms, and this is not to say that their reactions were solely political or a hidden agenda—that would be oversimplified, and would ignore the musical and lyrical shortcomings of the score. Rather, changes to the industry reflected a climate marked by both musical and political tensions, which suggests their negative reaction may have been fueled by these changes.

Nashville’s music industry had been booming, and the city no longer simply revolved around the Opry, which had in fact moved out of the city and into the suburbs due to urban decay, thereby affirming country music’s rising status for White, middle-class audiences. The country music industry was rapidly shifting and commercializing, with an influx of new singers from the pop music industry, such as John Denver, Kenny Rogers, and Olivia Newton-John, who lacked many of the sonic markers of more traditional

country music. This was hardly a new experience for the genre, but this time the pop-style country music proved more contentious. Tensions between traditions were strong enough, Richard A. Peterson reports, that some vanguards of the older style established the Academy of Country Entertainers in 1974 “to establish a definition of country music that would exclude the cultural carpetbaggers coming from the field of popular music.”<sup>90</sup> Baskin, an outsider with no country music bona fides, might easily be viewed this way, as a “cultural carpetbagger.”

The most public display of this stylistic animosity came in October 1975, at the Country Music Awards, when the previous year’s winner of Artist of the Year, Charlie Rich, burned the envelope in protest upon announcing that year’s winner, John Denver, on stage. The previous year, Olivia Newton-John’s win of Female Vocalist of the Year had been the start of a shift; before, the awards had been exclusively dominated by established musicians like Charlie Rich, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, and Tammy Wynette. Denver’s hit song that year, “Back Home Again,” contrasts with, say, the Nashville Sound of Rich’s previous winner, “Behind Closed Doors” from two years earlier. Whereas Rich employs a prominent steel guitar background vocals, especially on the chorus, and approaches the song with a relaxed beat aided by the vocal scoops and piano grace notes, Denver’s music is more dominated more by acoustic guitar and features a prominent synthesized string section and his distinctively clear tenor voice cuts across.

To be sure, the songs in *Nashville* do not sound like Denver, nor does Baskin’s score equal the songwriting talent of Denver. But where Altman and Denver do align is in their liberal politics. Denver’s politics were evident on his debut album, *Rhymes and Reasons*, which featured renditions of “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” the song he wrote popularized by folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary, and “I Wish I Knew How It Felt to Be Free,” a song associated with the civil rights activism of Nina Simone. Even more pointed are “The Ballad of Spiro Agnew,” whose entire text is “I’ll sing you a song of Spiro Agnew / And all the things he’s done,” and “The Ballad of Richard Nixon,” literally four damning seconds of silence. Rich’s response, like *Nashville*’s critics, may have been principally musically motivated, but Denver was also politically estranged from the conservatism of country music, and that political layer nevertheless amplified it.

It is worth highlighting that most of the stars interviewed by the press surrounding *Nashville*’s opening were members of the older vanguard, a vanguard that sometimes reacted suspiciously and hostilely toward this new wave of country stars. Nevertheless, the changing Nashville industry caught the attention of some reviewers when considering Altman’s take. When *New York Times* music critic Henry Edwards chimed in, he chastised not Altman but country music “purists” as out of touch with the modern Nashville:

Country music purists who feel that Robert Altman’s film “Nashville” conveys an inaccurate picture of the world’s country music capital are likely also to maintain that the two recent country ballads which have both become national hits—Jessi Colter’s plaintive “I’m Not Lisa” and Freddy Fender’s lugubrious rendition of “Before the Next Teardrop Falls”—are hardly country music at all.<sup>91</sup>

In another review, Patrick Anderson writes, “When you tour the Nashville music world today, as I did recently, you are really touring several overlapping worlds that do not always exist in perfect harmony.”<sup>92</sup> Of course, Altman’s *Nashville* was hardly documentary and all but ignored these changing trends. And though these reviews do not directly praise the film’s score, their citing of these changes as context for *Nashville*

<sup>90</sup> Richard A. Peterson, “The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music,” *Social Research* 45, no. 2 (1978), 292.

<sup>91</sup> Rockwell; Henry Edwards, “Recording View,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1975, 112.

<sup>92</sup> Patrick Anderson, “The Real Nashville,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1975, 171.

suggests that Altman’s film was in some ways rooted in truths about Nashville not always acknowledged in the press, and aligns the film with newer artists by suggesting that Altman’s Nashville similarly could not exist in perfect harmony with the real city; its vision of Nashville, and more broadly of the US, clashed with many at a time when both were hotly contested.

Altman’s countercultural image may have been an especially sore point for conservative country music fans, who either perceived or simply assumed a condescension inherent in his decision to tackle country music in a film. This can be seen in some of the more pointed claims that position Altman, and the film’s supporters, as purposefully antagonistic in their views of country music. Matt Yancey reported that musicians, including some in the film, went beyond disliking the music and labeled it “an inaccurate slur on country music and its people.”<sup>93</sup> Lynn Anderson remarked, “The movie was filled with a lot of cheap shots. . . . The producer, writer and director obviously had a preconceived notion that Nashville and all it stood for was trash.”<sup>94</sup> Jeanne Pruett reacted similarly, drawing an even sharper distinction between Nashville insiders and outsiders: “I thought it was hokey from start to finish. I can see how they might like it in New York. They think we’re a bunch of hayseeds to begin with.”<sup>95</sup> These comments evince a distrust not simply of outsiders, but paints a stark geographic and political division between Nashville and New York City—and by extension, similar views of liberal Hollywood. Pruett’s take resonates with other humorous digs at New York, like Buck Owens’s 1970 song “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City (If They Gave Me the Whole Dang Town),” whose chorus paints the contrast in cultural terms by declaring “Sodom and Gomorrah was tame to what I found.” Seeing the film through this skeptical lens, Pruett and others found confirmation of their assumptions of Altman’s attitudes, and hearing Baskin’s take on country music seems to have offered all the evidence required.

## Conclusion

In her book *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs investigates the ways in which country music has long subverted cultural stereotypes of racism and homophobia. In her first chapter, Hubbs examines what it means to listen to “anything but country,” exploring how country music is adduced by educated, middle-class people in recent political arguments, and thus “remains tethered to a certain kind of social subject . . . stigmatized by ignorance.”<sup>96</sup> She concludes the chapter by asserting, “Country music is a flashpoint . . . for some hearers the sound of working people, small-town America, and an idealized simpler time, while for others it is the sound of closed-mindedness, racism, sexism, and homophobia.”<sup>97</sup> *Nashville* was similarly no less of a flashpoint, forecasting the very kinds of divisions Hubbs describes. While the film’s political content contributed to its polarized reception, its score did a remarkable amount of work cementing those cultural divisions between big cities and small towns, between the critics and cinephiles and mainstream audiences, and between country music insiders and outsiders.

*Nashville* arrived at a time when both US political culture and country music were changing, and its reception underscored the extent to which the two were intertwined in 1975. The reception of the score mapped easily onto the reception of the film and its political messages. Politics also appears to have shaped

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<sup>93</sup> Yancey, “Music City, U.S.A.”

<sup>94</sup> Toepfer, “Nashville Stars.”

<sup>95</sup> “Country Music Stars Put Down ‘Nashville.’”

<sup>96</sup> Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 24, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520280656.001.0001>.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



the way Altman and Baskin conceived of country music and composed the film's original score. And the criticism of the score not only invoked its own stereotypes of big city liberals' condescension, it echoed broader tensions about the shifts within the country music industry, which was both finding new audiences within a conservative suburban middle class and finding new stars—not uncontroversially—with ties to liberal politics. But whereas the success of artists like Kris Kristofferson and John Denver has prompted scholars to re-evaluate the political assumptions of country music in the 1970s, the failure of *Nashville* with audiences and country music stars further helps chart the complexity of country music's cultural status and understand the rise of country music's still-present stereotypical espousal of conservative politics. Displeasure with the score and its depictions of the country music industry and displeasure with the film's political messages frequently went hand-in-hand.

As Hubbs's work prompts scholars to interrogate the history of country music's cultural status, scholars should consider failures more carefully as useful sites for understanding the genre's boundaries. Country music may have been hotly contested in the 1970s, but *Nashville* was still rejected by music critics and knowledgeable stars and musicians as not country music. A similar probe can be found in Chelsea Burns's insightful analysis of Bobby Womack's *BW Goes C&W*, released the following year. Burns examines how Womack's refusal to remove sonic and visual markers of his Black identity likely doomed the project, resulting in "an album that is unapologetically black and, at least partly as a result, not entirely 'country.'"<sup>98</sup> While *Nashville* did not fail due to its racial or genre crossing, as Womack did, Burns's conclusions resonate more broadly. Namely, *Nashville*'s score illuminates the difference between what country music sounded like to two outsiders, Altman and Baskin, and to insiders, who heavily criticized the score. Their critiques, coupled with Altman's and Baskin's comments, yield a more nuanced definition of country music, understood both sonically and culturally.

Often, failures are quickly forgotten, leaving scholars only to speculate on why—if they are discovered at all. Fortunately, given its high profile, *Nashville*'s musical failure was hardly obscure, generating a wealth of writing that documented and analyzed that failure in the public sphere. On occasion, some are given a reassessment, often with a triumphant narrative of simply being ahead of one's time. *Nashville* has indeed seen a resurgence in the twenty-first century, earning the #59 spot on the AFI's 100 Movies list in 2007 (after being omitted on their original 1997 list) and a Criterion Collection release in 2013. With its commentary on country music and politics, *Nashville* certainly remains prescient in an age where country music has once again intertwined with politics, noticeably after 9/11 and when vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in 2008 suggested that small towns were "real America."<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, *Nashville* offers a testament to the power of considering failures not just ahead of their time, but as reflections of their time as well.

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<sup>98</sup> Chelsea Burns, "The Racial Limitations of Country-Soul Crossover in Bobby Womack's *BW Goes C&W*, 1976," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 32, no. 2 (2020), 121, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.2.112>.

<sup>99</sup> Nate Silver, "'Real' America looks different to Palin, Obama," *FiveThirtyEight*, last modified October 18, 2008, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/real-america-looks-different-to-palin/>.

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