

# **Change Is Coming: The Movement Toward Diversity in Country Music for Black Artists**

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*Country music has historically been dominated by Caucasian artists since the birth of the genre in the early 1900s. Over the years, very few African American artists have managed to break through the color barrier of the genre and find sustained success. In recent years, however, the number of black country artists securing major label record deals and experiencing chart success has significantly increased. Many African American artists are finding a foothold in the genre and building noteworthy careers. This paper explores the historical context of black artists within Nashville's country music genre, the evolution of the country market and current black artists within the genre, and how walls are finally breaking down for African American artists to find commercial success and sustainable careers.*

*Keywords: country artists of color, African American artists, black country artists, segregation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Country music has historically been dominated by Caucasian artists since the birth of the genre in the early 1900s. Over the years, very few African American artists have managed to break through the color barrier of the genre and find sustained success. In recent years, however, the number of black country artists securing major label record deals and experiencing chart success has significantly increased. Many African American artists are finding a foothold in the genre and building noteworthy careers. This paper explores the historical context of black artists within Nashville's country music genre, the evolution of the country market and current black artists within the genre, and how walls are finally breaking down for African American artists to find commercial success and sustainable careers.

## **ARTISTS OF COLOR IN COUNTRY MUSIC**

Despite the fact that country music might not even exist if black artists had not served as a source and inspiration in its beginnings as a genre, very few successful black country artists have found sustained success through the years (Cantwell, 2019). Notable black artists have been few and far between since country music came to prominence. From DeFord Bailey to Charley Pride to Cleve Francis, a few African American country artists found success while others inspired new generations despite their lack of success. Due to trails that were blazed by artists of the past and a shift in the demographic of country music listeners,

current artists of color are increasingly finding footholds in today's country market (Jones, 2022). To understand this phenomenon, one must first examine the historical context of black artists within the country music genre, including how those artists influenced and inspired the current generation and opened doors to the more diverse country music market that we have today.

## **Historical Black Country Artists**

### *DeFord Bailey*

One of the major contributors to the rise of the country music genre is the Grand Ole Opry based in Nashville. From its beginnings at the Ryman Auditorium and the dawn of radio at WSM, to the worldwide presence the organization enjoys today, many artists were discovered and found success through the Opry's weekly radio shows. Early pioneers of the Grand Ole Opry included country legends such as Uncle Dave Macon, Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe (Snethen, 2009). While most of the early Opry pioneers were Caucasians, one such early Opry legend was none other than black harmonica player DeFord Bailey, known as the harmonica wizard (Jones, 1990). Bailey was born into a farming family in Smith County, Tennessee (Jones, 1990). He contracted polio at a young age which stunted his growth and limited his ability to work on the farm (Snethen, 2009). In his spare time, Bailey taught himself harmonica by listening to trains and the animals he heard on the farm (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). He attributed his unique playing style to the locomotives he witnessed as a child (Snethen, 2009). As a teen, Bailey was encouraged by family and friends to enter harmonica contests, in which he had some success (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). As a result, professionals in the music industry began to become aware of his talent (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.).

After being noticed by string band leader Humphrey Bate, Bailey was asked to perform on the radio show *WSM Barn Dance*, which later became the Grand Ole Opry (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). Bailey became a regular performer on the radio show throughout the 1930s and 1940s and was also a frequent performer on the Grand Ole Opry tours throughout the southern and midwestern United States during this time (Snethen, 2009). The success he found on the Grand Ole Opry led to the first commercial songs he recorded in Nashville (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). As a result, DeFord Bailey is credited with playing on the first major recording session in 1928 for Victor Records in Nashville, the city that would later become known as "Music City" (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). His popularity on the Grand Ole Opry brought him fame that stretched far across the nation wherever the WSM signal could be received (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.).

Despite his success, Bailey's career was not without challenges, many of which were due to the color of his skin. Roy Acuff claimed that he brought Bailey on tour with him to increase ticket sales because people would rather see the harmonica wizard than himself (Jones, 1990). Although Bailey's presence on tour helped sell tickets, his pay was not the same as the other white performers, regardless of most fans coming specifically to see his harmonica playing (Parler, 2020). Bailey received only \$5 per show while white performers received a percentage of ticket sales (Jones, 1990). While on tour, Bailey regularly experienced racism due to the segregation laws of the South (Jones, 1990). He was popular with the fans but had issues with hotels and restaurants, sometimes being forced to pretend to be a baggage handler for white artists so he could get inside a hotel room for the night (Snethen, 2009).

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with his skin color, Bailey did not seem bitter. He advocated for the reconciliation of whites and blacks and rarely discussed the inequalities of segregation (Parler, 2020). Bailey was a regular star on the Opry until 1941 (Parler, 2020). That year, the Opry boycotted the songs of writers affiliated with the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) from being performed on the radio show (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). Bailey's well-known songs fell under the ASCAP umbrella, so he was told not to perform those songs and instead to only play Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) songs during his performances (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). WSM had become associated with BMI instead of ASCAP when broadcasters decided to create their own performing rights society in response to what they viewed as high license fees charged by ASCAP for plays on the radio (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). Bailey refused to play BMI songs and played his well-known hits instead (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). He believed that the fans wanted to hear the songs that had made him famous (Parler, 2020). This rebellion caused him to be fired from the show, and sadly, racist caricatures of Bailey were circulated by Opry personnel (Parler, 2020). After his career with the Grand Ole Opry ended, Bailey opened a shoeshine

business that he ran for many years (Wolfe & Morton, n.d.). Years later, as racial tensions eased, he returned to the Opry to play on several occasions and was heralded as a trailblazer for black country artists (Parler, 2020). Following a meaningful career full of highs and lows, DeFord Bailey passed away in 1982 and was posthumously inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005 at the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual CMA Awards (Parler, 2020).

### *Charley Pride*

Another black artist to find considerable success within the country music genre was Mississippian Charley Pride. He was only the second black artist to ever perform on the Grand Ole Opry, where DeFord Bailey had held a regular performance slot (Boone, 2020). After a brief career in the Negro professional baseball leagues, Pride decided to pursue a career as a country music artist (“Charley Pride,” 2020). In 1966, Pride’s music made it to RCA Records head Chet Atkins, who signed him and released his first single, “Snakes Crawl at Night,” which, unfortunately, did not fare well on the charts (“Charley Pride,” 2020). It was not until his third single, “Just Between You And Me,” that Pride found stardom by reaching number nine on the United States country charts and earning him a Grammy Award (“Charley Pride,” 2020).

Similar to DeFord Bailey, Charley Pride’s rise to fame and success came with major challenges in breaking through the color barrier in the country music genre. Many of the genre’s gatekeepers were hesitant about promoting a black artist (Boone, 2020). Even though Atkins and RCA Records believed in Pride’s music, the company did not include his photograph in the early promotional materials for his singles for fear of losing airplay simply because of the color of his skin (Boone, 2020). Even after Pride had scored multiple hits, some radio stations still refused to play his songs on the air. On one occasion during a concert in Detroit, when Pride was introduced to perform, the applause stopped when he walked on stage as the audience realized that he was black (Boone, 2020). Despite the challenges, Pride handled such instances with a sense of humor that seemed to win over crowds and doubters. He told the story of how white country artist Webb Pierce told him that it was good to have him in *their* music, to which Pride quipped back that it was *his* music, too (Cantwell, 2019). The country music market has historically shown a sense of camaraderie, where even though artists are competitors, they band together for mutual benefit (Hodges, 2022). This was true in Pride’s career. As his career gained traction, many white country stars of the era came to Pride’s aid, including Willie Nelson’s supportive gesture of kissing him on stage and white artist Faron Young telling a radio station manager that if he would not play Charley Pride music, then he should not play Faron Young music either (Boone, 2020).

Overcoming these challenges, Charley Pride went on to have a career that spanned decades. He enjoyed 52 Top 10 *Billboard* country singles and 29 number-one songs (Boone, 2020). One of the most recognizable Pride classics is “Kiss An Angel Good Morning,” which was a *Billboard* hit in 1971 (“Charley Pride,” 2020). Pride was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2000 and received a Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2017 (Stiernberg, 2020). Sadly, he passed away from complications related to COVID-19 in late 2020 (“Charley Pride,” 2020). His music and career have inspired countless artists of color to pursue careers in the country music genre through the years, showing them that it is possible to achieve their country music dreams. Despite Pride’s success and paving the way for other artists, forty years passed before another black artist, Darius Rucker, finally topped the *Billboard* country charts again (Cantwell, 2019).

### *Linda Martell*

In 1969, Linda Martell achieved a major milestone when she became the first African American woman to perform on the Grand Ole Opry stage (Stiernberg, 2020). A South Carolina native, Martell grew up singing in church and was part of a family singing group called The Anglos with her sister and cousin (Morenz, 2020). She was discovered by William Duke Rayner, the owner of a South Carolina furniture store, who then introduced her to his friend Shelby Singleton, Jr., of Mercury Records (Morenz, 2020). Singleton signed her to his label and asked her to pursue the country music genre as opposed to her usual style of rhythm and blues (R&B) and gospel (Morenz, 2020). Martell agreed but took offense when she realized that the name of Singleton’s country label was Plantation Records (Morenz, 2020). She believed

she was being singled out because of her race, but whether that was actually the case is debatable (Morenz, 2020). Some argue that the label's name was just a coincidence since the label had been active for years and its most successful artist, Jeannie C. Riley, was white (Morenz, 2020). Riley had previously released one of the biggest country hits of the 1960s with her song, "Harper Valley P.T.A.," on Plantation Records (Morenz, 2020). Martell's debut album, *Color Me Country*, was released in 1970, and the title track reached number 22 on the *Billboard* country chart (The Associated Press, 2021). The song was the biggest hit of her career, which lasted only five years until she ultimately left the country music genre (The Associated Press, 2021). She cited the industry's racism as the reason for her stepping away from country music (Morenz, 2020). Martell recalled having racial slurs hurled at her during performances, other performances being canceled when venues found out she was black, and a television producer telling her to pronounce words a certain way to cater to the station's mainly white audience (The Associated Press, 2021). In her later years, she recalled the experience, "No matter how good your performance was, no matter how well your record was doing, the color of the skin stopped you from working in a lot of great places" (The Associated Press, 2021, para. 6). In 2021, CMT awarded Martell with its Equal Play Award (The Associated Press, 2021).

### *Ray Charles*

Another black artist who made a significant impact in the country genre was piano player Ray Charles. Originally from Florida, Charles, who became blind at the age of six, grew up listening to country music and said that he rarely missed a week of the Grand Ole Opry on the radio (Lewis, 2001). Unlike Charley Pride, Charles did not begin his career as a country artist or even strive, initially, to be a country star. He was mainly known as an R&B singer, which is where he found most of his career success (Lydon, 2004). His superstar status as an R&B singer, however, allowed him the luxury to record and release music in multiple genres, including jazz, pop, and country, throughout his career (Lewis, 2001). Charles recorded numerous country albums between 1962 and 1985 (Glanton, 1998). By his own admission, he was not trying to make a lot of money in country music but rather wanted to try his hand at the style, since he had been a country music fan most of his life (Lewis, 2001). When asked why he was recording country music, he said, "Country music is a lot like blues. It's simple, honest. I love that real country sound, in itself, the pureness of it. We should never let this sound, the sound of the hills and mountains -slip away" (Lewis, 2001, para. 33). Charles' country albums mainly consisted of his covers of other popular country songs. The albums achieved sales success but did not make much of a mark on the *Billboard* country singles charts (Lewis, 2001). His foray into the genre led him to be nominated as the "Most Promising Newcomer" of the Country Music Association in 1983, many years after he decided to record his first country album (Glanton, 1998). He achieved eight hits on the *Billboard* country charts over the years (Lydon, 2004). His most successful country release was "Seven Spanish Angels," a duet with Willie Nelson, that spent 12 weeks on the charts and reached number one in 1985 (Lydon, 2004).

The stardom that Ray Charles had achieved before he ever tried to enter the country music genre meant that he had already hurdled over some of the barriers that others had experienced as black artists in country music. He did, however, experience the same racism in the South as DeFord Bailey and Charley Pride when touring with his early R&B music (Lydon, 2004). While his R&B career was taking off, he found himself playing many segregated dance halls throughout the southern United States (Lydon, 2004). In one instance, a fan named Silas Norman sent Charles a telegram describing the conditions of the dance hall he would be playing (Lydon, 2004). The telegram said that only whites are allowed on the dance floor, and blacks could be spectators but they had to be in a separate auditorium (Lydon, 2004). Charles became increasingly frustrated with such conditions at multiple venues where he was playing and ultimately drew a line, backing out of the tour and deciding he was not going to play any more segregated venues. He was then sued by the tour's promoter. Charles lost the lawsuit and had to pay a fine of \$757 for breach of contract (Lydon, 2004). As an established star before entering the country music genre, Charles was able to take a stand against racism that many struggling black artists were not financially able to take. Ray Charles' and Charley Pride's achievements proved the doubters wrong and

showed that black artists could be successful in the country genre despite the racism and segregation of the South in the 1960s and 70s.

### *Big Al Downing*

Piano player Big Al Downing was another black artist to traverse the choppy country music waters. Born in Oklahoma, Downing's early success came as a rockabilly artist, where he was voted into that genre's Hall of Fame (Gilbert, 2005). He claimed that the similarities in the styles of rockabilly and country music made his musical transition a natural progression (Gilbert, 2005). Downing's career high point was when he signed with Warner Brothers Records in 1978 (Harrington, 1998). He enjoyed 15 charting songs during the 1970s and 80s (Gilbert, 2005). His best chart success was with his hit song, "Mr. Jones," which hit the Top 20 on *Billboard's* country charts in 1978 (Stiernberg, 2020).

Downing experienced racism issues, similar to DeFord Bailey, in his early career. He was not allowed to stay in certain hotels or eat in certain restaurants while on tour (Gilbert, 2005). There were even incidents when he was forced to eat in his car because a restaurant would not let him inside due to the color of his skin (Gilbert, 2005). When asked in interviews how he withstood such hatred, he said that he did it for the music (Gilbert, 2005). Downing went on to be the only black artist since Charley Pride to have three Top 20 singles (Harrington, 1998). Despite the three charting singles, Warner Brothers doubted the long-term success of Downing and refused to finance an entire album ("Big Al Downing," n.d.). He became disgruntled and left the label to release his music on independent labels going forward ("Big Al Downing," n.d.). However, he failed to achieve the same type of success with the independents that he enjoyed with Warner Brothers. Downing continued to release music throughout his later years and was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame (Gilbert, 2005). In 2003, he released his final musical material before passing away in 2005 at the age of 65 (Gilbert, 2005).

### *Cleve Francis*

After Charley Pride's success, very few artists of color attempted a foray into the mainstream country music genre during the 1980s. It was not until the early 1990s that Cleveland (Cleve) Francis, an African American cardiologist from Alexandria, Virginia, attempted to follow in Pride's footsteps (Yahr, 2022). Francis was known to have an incredible singing voice in his immediate circle (Yahr, 2022). In addition to his day job, he released music locally and performed at Alexandria venues (Yahr, 2022). His music caught the ear of Nashville music industry executives who, along with his friends, urged him to pursue a record deal in the country music genre (Yahr, 2022). Francis' demo tape eventually landed in front of executive Jimmy Bowen, who signed Francis to Liberty Records in 1991 (Bernstein, 2020). Dubbed as the "country music doctor" in the label's marketing plans, Liberty released Francis' debut album, *Tourist in Paradise*, in early 1992 (Yahr, 2022). While releasing a total of three albums with Liberty Records, his music never achieved notable chart success (Yahr, 2022).

During his major label career, Francis did not claim to experience racism, but he encountered similar challenges to Charley Pride in the label's marketing efforts geared toward white consumers. Driven to overcome the ingrained perception that country music was for white people from the South, Francis recounted the following during an interview:

People ask me, how did you get involved in country music as a black person? What's ironic about it is a lot of the white guys who were singing country music were from New Jersey or New York. They'd just come to town, put a cowboy hat on, and all of a sudden, you become country. It was a costume. Why couldn't we do that? (Bernstein, 2022, para. 8)

Upon his graduation from the Medical College of Virginia in 1978, Francis was one of only 100 black cardiologists in the United States (Yahr, 2022). Recalling his own experience as a young black doctor trying to get a job in the medical industry, Francis recognized that aspiring black artists needed some form of support and community (Bernstein, 2022). At the time, research showed that 24 percent of black adults listened to country music and that there was a bona fide market for artists who looked like him (Yahr, 2022).

Acknowledging that his lack of commercial success could be attributed as much to his age and a youth movement in country music at the time as to the color of his skin, Francis did not blame racism for his failure to attain superstar status (Harrington, 1998).

With a desire to increase the number of black country artists in the market and leave a positive impact on these artists, Francis spearheaded the creation of the Black Country Music Association (BCMA) in 1995 (Bernstein, 2020). The organization's mission was to educate the public about the history of black artists in country music and provide a space for current black artists to band together in support of each other (Bernstein, 2020). The BCMA was headed by local Nashville African American performer Frankie Staton, and the organization thrived for 10 years with regular showcases at Douglas Corner, The Bluebird Café, and The Sutler (Bernstein, 2020). Many successful white artists of the era, including Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, George Jones, and Tammy Wynette served as mentors for the BCMA, displaying what Hodges (2022) described as the camaraderie shown in the Nashville music community. Warner Brothers even partnered with the BCMA and released a box set, *From Where I Stand*, that chronicled the contributions of black artists to the genre of country music (Bernstein, 2020). While the BCMA dissolved in the early 2000s, the organization's influence can still be felt today in the community of artists of color that it spawned and supported. Francis' recognition of the challenges faced by black artists in the historically white genre of country music and his efforts to support artists of color have had a tremendous impact on today's market.

### *Trini Triggs*

The 1990s saw the rise of Garth Brooks and what was known as the hat-act era in country music (Lane, 2012). Just like the decades before, the '90s were dominated by white male artists (Glanton, 1998). One black artist that rose through the ranks, however, was Louisiana native Trini Triggs, who signed to Curb Records in the late 1990s and released his debut album in 1998 (Stiernberg, 2020). With a Texas swing style, Triggs' music was produced by Nashville hitmaker Chuck Howard ("Rimes' Producer...", 2003). Curb Records' general manager at the time, Dennis Hannon, said he believed that country music listeners were colorblind, did not care about the race of their favorite country artists, and only wanted songs and music to which they could personally connect (Glanton, 1998). Hannon's goal was to open the door to having more African American country artists in the genre. Despite Hannon's and Curb Records' belief, funding, and marketing efforts, Triggs barely reached the *Billboard* country charts (Glanton, 1998). He had only four songs break the Top 40, the most popular of which was "Horse to Mexico" (Morris, 2020). While Trini Triggs gained much publicity for his stint as a black artist in country music, his career never translated into a major radio hit or prominent album sales.

### *Cowboy Troy*

As Trini Triggs' career was fading just after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, country superstar Tim McGraw decided to pursue the country music genre's African American listening audience. In 2004, he collaborated with the rapper, Nelly, to create the single, "Over And Over," which became a hit on both the country and pop charts (Morris, 2020). This success led the way for new black artists to pursue the country genre and include elements of rap music. Cowboy Troy made a brief splash with his infusion of rap and country music he called "hick hop" (Stiernberg, 2020). He was a member of the entourage of the country duo Big & Rich, which was known as the "Music Mafia" (Morris, 2020). On the heels of the success of Big & Rich, the duo tried to help Troy by putting him in their music videos and singing background vocals on his debut and only charting single, "I Play Chicken With The Train" (Stiernberg, 2020). While Troy failed to achieve prolonged stardom, his style of music and his influence led to more major country artists teaming up with successful rap artists to collaborate (Stiernberg, 2020). He helped bring more diversity to the country genre than ever before.

### *Final Observations on Historical Black Country Artists*

The examination of the careers of black country artists since the genre's inception approximately 100 years ago reveals two main barriers. The first barrier experienced by such artists was the racism and segregation exemplified by the southern United States in the mid-1900s. DeFord Bailey and Charley Pride

found their way to success by focusing on their talent and utilizing the support from the camaraderie displayed in their network of other artists. Instead of fighting through the market's racial challenges, other artists of color either left the mainstream market completely, like Linda Martell, or tried to be successful independently, like Big Al Downing. It is important to note that this first barrier of racism and segregation that black artists experienced mid-century seems to have lessened as the genre entered the 1990s.

The second barrier that was experienced by African American artists was the major record labels' misguided perception of the make-up and demographic of country music listeners and concertgoers. Historically, major labels believed that the country music audience was primarily white (Boone, 2020). The idea that country music's demographic of consumers might be more than just one race or gender was not a priority to marketers. In the early 1990s, the realization that 24 percent of country music listeners were black led some record label executives to pursue that portion of the demographic (Yahr, 2022). Liberty Records' head Jimmy Bowen, with Cleve Francis, and Curb Records' general manager Dennis Hannon, with Trini Triggs, realized that racial tensions had also eased to the point that black artists could be successful in the market if they had the right music or image (Glanton, 1998). Bowen attributed the lack of success of Francis to the fact that he was in his mid-40s, was not a hat-act in the hat-act era, and that most other artists at that time were in their 20s (Harrington, 1998). Hannon's view of Triggs' failure was not because he was black, but rather that he did not have a song that translated to the listening audience (Glanton, 1998). Neither label head considered racism as a factor in the failure of their artist. While ultimately unsuccessful, Francis and Triggs helped to open the minds of those in the industry that black artists could succeed in the market because black people do, in fact, listen to country music.

Circumventing the barrier of the perception that country music listeners were mostly white required a creative workaround, which came in the form of Cowboy Troy and Tim McGraw. Troy's form of country music called "hick hop" incorporated elements of rap into his country songs (Stiernberg, 2020). The idea that country music listeners might also like rap music and rap listeners might like country music began to emerge. Taking advantage of that mindset, country superstar Tim McGraw's collaboration with Nelly was the first notable hit crossing the boundary of the two genres (Stiernberg, 2020). As the country music genre entered the 2000s, the stage was set for more opportunities for black artists. The two main barriers had not disappeared entirely, but the hurdles did not seem as high. Country music had shown that it could appeal to more than white audiences alone. As the obstacles subsided, organizations like Francis' BCMA, along with successful white country artists, helped to foster a community where aspiring African American artists could take advantage of the changing perception of the make-up of the country music listening audience.

## **Present-Day Country Artists of Color**

### *Darius Rucker*

After considering the multitude of obstacles faced by black country artists historically, one can better appreciate the significance of the current state of the industry. Currently, one of the most successful black country artists is Darius Rucker, who was born on May 13, 1966, and raised by a single mom in a small apartment in Charleston, South Carolina ("Darius Rucker Biography," n.d.). Music was always an important part of Rucker's life as he grew up listening to his mom's R&B albums and singing at church and in school choirs ("Darius Rucker Biography," n.d.). He attended college at the University of South Carolina where he met fellow musicians and started the band famously known as Hootie & the Blowfish in 1989 ("Darius Rucker," 2018). Hootie & the Blowfish exploded, with their first album reaching number one on the *Billboard 200*, becoming certified 21 times platinum, and being recognized as the 19<sup>th</sup> best-selling album of all time ("Darius Rucker," n.d.). The band followed its first album with many other chart-topping hits before deciding to take a break in 2008 ("Darius Rucker Biography," n.d.). Rucker then signed a solo artist record deal and released his debut country album later in 2008 ("Darius Rucker," 2018). The album's lead single, "Don't Think I Don't Think About It," climbed to number one on the country charts ("Darius Rucker Biography," n.d.). Rucker's number-one single was the first time that a black artist had held that spot since Charley Pride's "Night Games" in 1983 ("Darius Rucker Biography," n.d.).

Rucker followed up his first number-one single with two more number-one country singles, making him the first solo artist to have his first three country singles reach number one since Wynonna in 1992

("Darius Rucker," 2018). He also won the Country Music Association's "New Artist of the Year" Award in 2009, making him the first African American to ever do so ("Darius Rucker," 2018). The only other black artist to win a CMA Award was Charley Pride, who won "Entertainer of the Year" in 1971 and then "Male Vocalist of the Year" in 1971 and 1972 ("Darius Rucker," 2018). Rucker became a member of the Grand Ole Opry on October 16, 2012, and in early 2014, won a Grammy Award for "Best Country Solo Performance" for his song, "Wagon Wheel," that was certified eight times platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) (Wick, 2021). He was only the third African American recording artist, following Charley Pride and the Pointer Sisters, to win a vocal performance Grammy in the category of country music ("Darius Rucker," 2018). Rucker's success in country music is limitless, and he is poised to continue paving the way for other black artists to find success in the genre.

### *Blanco Brown*

A native of Georgia, Bennie Amey, III, professionally known as Blanco Brown, was born on March 24, 1985 ("Blanco Brown," n.d.). Brown grew up in poverty in Atlanta in what he described as "the hood" (Despres, 2022). Prior to becoming a recording artist, he worked behind the scenes as a producer and songwriter, collaborating with acts like Pitbull and Fergie (Erlewine, n.d.). After many achievements as a producer and songwriter, Brown signed as a solo recording artist to Broken Bow Records in 2018 (Erlewine, n.d.). Influenced most by artists like Johnny Cash and Outkast, Brown is known for his unique sound that blurs the lines between country and hip-hop music, which he has coined "TrailerTrap" (Bosch, 2019). In 2019, Brown's viral hit, "The Git Up," was certified 11 times platinum across three countries and claimed the number-one spot on the *Billboard Hot Country Songs* chart for 12 weeks ("Blanco Brown," n.d.). *Billboard* named Brown the number one "Top New Country Artist" for 2019 and recognized him as one of its "7 Country Acts to Watch in 2019" ("Blanco Brown," n.d.). Brown earned his first number-one hit on country radio with his collaboration, "Just The Way," with Parmalee, which became iHeartCountry's most-played song in 2021 ("Blanco Brown," n.d.). Brown has openly stated that his skin color is not what makes him successful or unsuccessful in a genre historically dominated by white artists; rather, Brown recognizes that Nashville sets the bar high for artists ("Blanco Brown," n.d.). Just as older black artists found collaboration opportunities and did not blame racism for challenges faced, Brown is forging his own path in the genre with the support of those who have gone before him.

### *Jimmie Allen*

Another black artist who moved to Nashville with stars in his eyes after seeing others like Cleve Francis chase their dreams is Jimmie Allen. Born on June 18, 1985, and a native of Milton, Delaware, Allen's dream of working in the entertainment business started at a very young age ("Jimmie Allen," 2009). By the age of seven, he had written his first song, and by sixth grade, he had started a band and sang in his church choir ("Jimmie Allen," 2009). During high school, he found a knack for musical theater, starring in presentations of *Footloose*, *Grease*, and *Peter Pan* ("Jimmie Allen," 2009). Allen moved to Nashville in 2007 with \$21 in his bank account and a heart for country music ("Jimmie Allen," 2009). Allen had a rough start in Nashville, spending several months living in his car, before landing a publishing deal and working as a songwriter (Erlewine, n.d.). He auditioned for *America's Got Talent*, where he failed to make the cut, and then auditioned for *American Idol*, where he made it to the Hollywood portion of the show (Erlewine, n.d.). Finally, after years in Nashville, he signed to BBR Music Group's Stoney Creek Records, which released his debut album and launched his career with two consecutive number-one hits entitled "Best Shot" and "Make Me Want To" ("Jimmie Allen: About," n.d.). Allen was nominated for Male Artist of the Year at the 57<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy of Country Music Awards, which he co-hosted with Dolly Parton and Gabby Barrett ("Jimmie Allen: About," n.d.). He was also nominated for Best New Artist at the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy Awards ("Jimmie Allen: About," n.d.). Allen appeared on the 30<sup>th</sup> season of *Dancing with the Stars* and became the first black solo act to win New Male Artist of the Year at the Academy of Country Music Awards (Erlewine, n.d.). In February 2022, Allen headlined his first tour, the *Down Home Tour 2022*, and later in 2022 appeared as special guest on Carrie Underwood's *The Denim & Rhinestones Tour* on all 43 United States arena dates ("Jimmie Allen: About," n.d.). Looking at how far he has come since



moving to Nashville, Allen is a shining example for younger black artists with limited means to have the courage to pursue their dreams.

### *Lil Nas X*

As discussed, not every black country artist started out as a traditional country musician, and Lil Nas X is another illustration of this. Lil Nas X was born as Montero Lamar Hill on April 9, 1999, in Lithia Springs, Georgia (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). His parents separated when he was six years old, and he and his siblings moved to Atlanta to live with their mom and great-grandmother in an unsafe public-housing project (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). Four years later, Nas and his older brother moved in with their father and stepmother outside Atlanta (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). Nas studied computer science at the University of West Georgia, but his yearning to write songs and create music caused him to drop out of school to focus on music full-time (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022).

On July 24, 2018, Nas released his debut mixtape and then, on December 2, 2018, his life changed (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). While living with his sister, Nas purchased a beat online for \$30 and created his own country-trap song, “Old Town Road” (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). Country-trap is a genre of music known for its mixture of country and hip hop. He posted the song on SoundCloud, and it spread to other websites, going viral on TikTok (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). By March 2019, “Old Town Road” was on three *Billboard* charts: the Hot 100, Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs, and Hot Country Songs (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). *Billboard* removed the song from the Hot Country Songs chart, which sparked immediate controversy related to whether the song was dropped because of Nas’ race (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). *Billboard* denied this accusation (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). The song reached number one on the *Billboard Hot 100* and set a record, staying on the chart for 19 weeks (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). “Old Town Road” reached new heights on April 5, 2019, when Nas released a remix with country artist Billy Ray Cyrus, whom Nas knew from his role on the hit Disney television show, *Hannah Montana* (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022).

Once “Old Town Road” went viral, Columbia Records signed Nas to a record deal in March 2019 (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). In January 2020, Nas won Grammy Awards for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance and Best Music Video for “Old Town Road” (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). In May 2021, he even performed two songs on *Saturday Night Live* (“Lil Nas X: Biography,” 2022). Following “Old Town Road,” his recent non-country releases have also achieved success as he continues to maintain ties to the Nashville music market and inspire others like him to break down walls.

### *Mickey Guyton*

Like others who have gone before her, Mickey Guyton has garnered fame while experiencing barriers in the world of country music. Hailing from Arlington, Texas, Candace Mycale Guyton was born on June 17, 1983, and began singing in church at a young age (Alexander, 2021). Her biggest musical influences are Dolly Parton, Cece Winans, Whitney Houston, and LeAnn Rimes (“Mickey Guyton: About,” n.d.). After high school, Guyton moved to California in 2001 to attend Santa Monica College and pursue a music career (Collar, n.d.). In 2011, Guyton moved to Nashville and signed with Capital Records Nashville after auditioning with a Patty Loveless song (Alexander, 2021). Guyton’s recording, “Better Than You Left Me,” made it to the Top 40 in 2015 (Alexander, 2021). Later in 2016, she was nominated for New Female Vocalist at the Academy of Country Music Awards and performed during CMT’s *Next Women of Country* (Alexander, 2021). Guyton’s long-awaited debut full-length album was released in September 2021 and reached number 47 on *Billboard’s Top Country Albums* chart (Collar, n.d.). The album included two hit singles, “Black Like Me” and “What Are You Gonna Tell Her” (Collar, n.d.). “Black Like Me” was nominated as Best Country Solo Performance at the 2021 Grammy Awards, where Guyton performed the hit single, and that same year, she became the first African American woman to host the Academy of Country Music Awards (Alexander, 2021). In 2022, Guyton sang the National Anthem at the Super Bowl (Segarra, 2022). Guyton’s career has not been without its share of racism, however. She has discussed her experiences of fans waving confederate flags at her shows and having racial slurs thrown at her while on stage (Segarra, 2022). While Guyton has prevailed over those issues and secured her own foothold in

country music, she has not shied away from opportunities to use her own voice to help other black artists. In an interview with *USA Today*, Guyton remarked:

I realized that it was not enough to just see one Black person every 15-25, 30 years make it. We need to see a sea of people of color (and) Black people make it in this industry. That is how you truly find change. As much change as we're seeing come forward, there's still so much work to be done, and it's a lot of weight to put on your shoulders, especially when you just wanna sing country music and put out cool songs like everybody else. (Segarra, 2022, para. 12)

### *Kane Brown*

Like Mickey Guyton, Kane Allen Brown has also been vocal about his experiences as a black artist in country music. Brown was born on October 21, 1993, to a white mother and African American father in Chattanooga, Tennessee (Alexander, 2021). His father was absent, and he and his mother lived throughout Tennessee and Georgia, sometimes experiencing homelessness (Alexander, 2021). Brown loved music from an early age and started listening to R&B but fell in love with country music by the time he was in high school (Alexander, 2021). Brown won a talent contest as a junior in high school, singing Chris Young's "Gettin' You Home (The Black Dress Song)" (Collar, n.d.). Although he experienced racial slurs while performing country music, Brown pursued his dream and released his first single, "Don't Go City On Me," in 2014 (Alexander, 2021). By 2016, Brown signed a recording contract with RCA and debuted his first album by the end of that year, which included the hit single, "What Ifs" (Alexander, 2021). In October 2017, he was the first artist to have simultaneous number one songs on all five main *Billboard* country charts (Alexander, 2021). Despite his accomplishments, in early 2018, Brown tweeted that some songwriters in Nashville refused to write with him because he is black (Watts, 2018). This sparked a public conversation that resulted in Larry Gatlin of The Gatlin Brothers inviting Brown to schedule a writing appointment (Watts, 2018).

Riding the wave of success, Brown's second album, *Experiment*, was released in late 2018 and became his first number-one album on the *Billboard 200* all-genre chart, making him the only male country artist in 25 years since Garth Brooks to debut at the top of the *Billboard 200* (Alexander, 2021). Two number-one singles, "Heaven" and "Lose It," followed (Alexander, 2021). "Heaven" made Brown the first black artist to have his debut single reach number one on country radio (Alexander, 2021). The second album spawned two more number-one singles with "Good As You" and "Homesick" (Collar, n.d.). Brown followed up with an EP, *Mixtape, Vol. 1*, in 2020 and another album, *Different Man*, in 2022, all including chart-topping hits like "Cool Again" and "One Mississippi" (Collar, n.d.). With a proven track record of hits under his belt, Brown would be hard-pressed to find any Nashville songwriter who would not want to write with him in 2023.

### *Tiera Kennedy*

Yet another black country artist who has had the path to Nashville smoothed by similar artists before her is Tiera Kennedy. Hailing from Birmingham, Alabama, Kennedy was born on January 5, 1998 (edailybuzz.com, 2022). She attended college for one year and then dropped out to move with her family to Nashville to pursue music full time (Lorge, 2021). Kennedy landed a role on *USA Network's* show, *Real Country*, where she earned the support of Shania Twain and won the competition for that episode (Lorge, 2021). In 2020, she became a member of CMT's *Next Women of Country* and signed a publishing deal as the flagship writer of hit songwriter Nicolle Galyon's female-focused company, Songs & Daughters, in partnership with Big Loud Publishing and Warner Chappell Music (Lorge, 2021). In addition, Kennedy launched her own show on Apple Country Music called *The Tiera Show* (Lorge, 2021). Kennedy has independently released a self-titled EP that showcases her country and R&B influences, writing all five of the songs on the EP and featuring Breland as a guest artist on the song entitled "Miles" (Lorge, 2021). As her star continues to rise, Kennedy hopes to inspire other female black artists and has said:

I would get messages from black female country artists like, ‘I love country music, but I don’t really know how to get into it.’ Over the past year, those messages have changed to, ‘I am moving to Nashville. I am gonna do this.’ It is nice to be that sounding board for them. (Duncan, 2021, para. 5)

### *Shy Carter*

Similar to Ray Charles and other black artists who saw multi-genre success, Shy Carter started his career in areas of the music business outside of the country music genre. Born Blake Carter in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1984, to a black father and white mother, Shy Carter was given a keyboard by his uncle when he was 11 years old and started making beats and writing songs (Kawashima, 2021). Carter fell in love with many different styles of music and grew up watching his father play music at home and in church (Kawashima, 2021). He attended college in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and after graduation, signed a development and production deal with Nelly, working with R&B and rap acts (Hudak, 2020). Throughout the late 2000s and 2010s, Carter lived in Los Angeles and also had a property outside of Nashville, while writing and appearing on chart-topping hits for a wide variety of artists, including Keith Urban’s “God Whispered Your Name,” Rob Thomas’ “Someday,” Sugarland’s “Stuck Like Glue,” Charlie Puth’s “One Call Away,” Kane Brown’s “Heaven” and “Good As You,” Tim McGraw’s “Way Down,” and songs recorded by Meghan Trainor, Jason Derulo, Billy Currington, Jamie Foxx, Citizen Way, Faith Hill, and Chris Janson (Thomas, n.d.). In 2015, Carter released a single, “Bring It Back,” as a solo artist on RCA Records (Thomas, n.d.). Carter moved to Nashville in 2017, later signed to Warner Music Nashville, and released his debut EP, *The Rest Of Us*, in 2021, which displays his unique style with inspiration from country, pop, rock, and hip-hop music (Kawashima, 2021).

### *Brittney Spencer*

With influences from outside the country music genre like her African American counterparts, musical powerhouse Brittney Spencer is another new name in Nashville who is making waves. Born September 8, 1988, Brittney Spencer did not have the typical southern upbringing of many of her musical peers (Zisman, 2021). She grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and began singing in her church choir around the age of three years old (Zisman, 2021). Her father and uncle were singers, and she was exposed to pop, hip-hop, R&B, and country music at an early age (Zisman, 2021). Her biggest musical influences were The Chicks, Taylor Swift, Shania Twain, John Mayer, Norah Jones, Beyonce, Britney Spears, and India Arie (Zisman, 2021). After serving as a music minister at an African Methodist Episcopal church, her career as a performing professional artist began around 2006, and she attended college at Middle Tennessee State University, graduating with a degree in public relations in the music business (Dowling, 2021). Spencer posted her cover of The Highwomen’s “Crowded Table” on social media, which went viral and led to an invitation from the group to tour with them (Cottom, 2022). Spencer’s versatile voice has allowed her to perform as a touring background singer for Carrie Underwood and Christopher Cross (Dowling, 2021). She is a self-proclaimed “country-alternative” artist and has a sound all her own (Zisman, 2021, para. 10). After releasing her first EP, *Compassion*, in 2020, Spencer was named to CMT’s *Next Women of Country* in 2021 (Zisman, 2021). Later, in 2022, Spencer signed a record deal with Elektra and recorded a live, three-track EP at Blackbird Studio in Nashville (“Brittney Spencer announces signing,” 2022). She has performed with Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit and Reba McEntire, and has opened for Willie Nelson, Megan Thee Stallion, Maren Morris, and Brandi Carlile, among others (“Brittney Spencer announces signing,” 2022). Not surprisingly, Spencer’s achievements have come with challenges, too. In a *Billboard* interview, Spencer remarked, “Being a Black singer/songwriter in Nashville right now feels both hopeful and unpredictable” (Dowling, 2021, para. 4).

### *Breland*

Similar to Brittney Spencer’s musical influences within her own family, Daniel Breland was born into a very musical family of gospel singers on July 18, 1995, in Burlington, New Jersey (Thomas, n.d.). Some of his biggest musical influences were Prince, Rascal Flatts, Stevie Wonder, Keith Urban, Drake, Nelly,

and Justin Bieber (Thomas, n.d.). He attended college at Georgetown University, studying marketing and management, and then relocated to Atlanta (Thomas, n.d.). After signing a record deal with Atlantic, his debut single, “My Truck,” was released in December 2019 and went viral, climbing the charts and accumulating millions of streams (Thomas, n.d.). Breland released his self-titled EP in 2020, which consisted of classic country sounds intertwined with elements of rap, soul, R&B, gospel, and electronic music, and then teamed up with Thomas Rhett in 2022 for “Praise The Lord,” a gospel-inspired single that reached number 21 on the *Billboard Country Songs* chart (Thomas, n.d.). His full-length album, *Cross Country*, was released on September 9, 2022, including the title track duet with Mickey Guyton (Thomas, n.d.). Although Breland has reached breakthrough success in country music, he has also excelled as a songwriter in other genres, writing 10 of the 22 songs on R&B star Trey Songz’ eighth studio album in 2020 entitled *Back Home* (Dowling, 2021). Breland has acknowledged:

Country music is a genre of storytelling and everyone has a story to tell but I think a lot of black people feel like they are only welcome to tell those stories through hip-hop and R&B because country music has not welcomed them and what I want to do is help make this space feel safer and more inclusive in such a way that there are other outlets for artists and creatives to tell their stories. Poole, C. (2022, para. 14)

### **Final Observations on Present-Day Country Artists of Color**

A remarkable change has taken place in country music over the last 20 years. We have seen black artists go from being unable to walk on stage without fear of being cancelled due to the color of their skin to consistently breaking records in the country music genre and diversifying this important industry like never before. Country artists like Darius Rucker have collected awards from the RIAA, CMA, and The Recording Academy, among others, as Lil Nas shattered the charts with “Old Town Road.” Jimmie Allen, Kane Brown, and Mickey Guyton have earned the respect of their fans, as well as key industry stakeholders, and continue to blaze their own trails with a spirit of collaboration with other artists. Newcomers like Tiera Kennedy, Brittney Spencer, and Breland have been supported by their industry peers while receiving public support from fans and demonstrating a commitment to likewise support artists who will follow in their footsteps. With their unique styles and influences outside the country music genre, Blanco Brown and Shy Carter have shown that crossing over into country music is an attainable goal and that hit songs have no boundaries. While the Nashville music scene continues to be a work in progress, the industry is hopeful that the sky is the limit in terms of success for black country artists.

### **CONCLUSION**

The historical examination of black artists in country music from the beginnings of the genre through the present day reveals exciting positive movement toward diversity for African Americans in country music. The formal segregation that DeFord Bailey, Charley Pride, and Ray Charles experienced has all but disappeared over time, and most artists are no longer prevented from playing venues or getting radio airplay because of the color of their skin. With the number of black artists in the country genre today like Darius Rucker, Jimmie Allen, Mickey Guyton, and Kane Brown having tremendous success, the country genre has taken steps toward leveling the playing field for all of its artists, both black and white. Sadly, however, some of today’s artists have continued to see racism play out first-hand, such as Kane Brown receiving racial slurs, and Mickey Guyton seeing confederate flags displayed at her shows. Although residual issues exist from the bygone era, country music featuring black artists resonates well with country music consumers. In fact, the first number one *Billboard* country song of 2023 was Jimmie Allen’s “Down Home” (“Jimmie Allen heads into 2023,” 2023).

Despite the fact that there are more successful black artists in country music than ever before, very few black artists exist within the genre compared to white artists. One would hope that there are no longer tangible factors barring African American artists from entering the country market or being successful. Similar to Blanco Brown’s experience of growing up in poverty and not initially having the resources to

pursue his dreams of becoming a country star, some artists are unable to pursue a career in country music because of financial constraints and limitations, but such issues are not unique to only African American artists (Despres, 2022).

Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best when he stated, “So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream” (AOL editors, 2017, para. 16). Trailblazers like Charley Pride and Ray Charles paved the way for others like Darius Rucker and Kane Brown, and it is up to the current industry leaders, both business leaders at record labels and creative leaders like other artists, to support up-and-coming black artists and encourage continued growth. The country music industry has taken tremendous strides toward accepting and celebrating black artists in the genre, and the possibilities are endless with respect to how African American artists will continue to shape the genre fifty years from now. The welcomed movement toward diversity in country music has enabled African American artists to make their dreams a reality.

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