



THE SACRED AND PROFANE IN COUNTRY MUSIC: MYTH AND REALITY

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Abstract

The Sacred and Profane represents a basic narrative, a myth, and a reality common in all cultures. The Sacred and Profane particularly manifests itself in the Evangelical Protestant Christian culture of the U.S. South. Country Music developed with deep roots in the U.S. South. The metaphorically and literally important 1927 Bristol Sessions, the *Big Bang of Country Music*, reflected the Sacred and Profane dichotomy in the music and the personae of The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, *The Father of Country Music*. This discussion extends the Sacred and Profane discussion to contemporary Country Music songs since the 1957 development of *The Nashville Sound*. Into the third decade of the twenty-first century artists from Keith Urban, Jelly Roll, and Megan Moroney to Luke Combs and Morgan Wallen reference the tensions between the Sacred and the Profane. The discussion links authenticity, existentialism, historical memory, and the Sacred and Profane from their seemingly separate origins to form a myth with a very real presence and substance in Country Music.

Keywords

Sacred, Profane, Christian culture, Dichotomy, Music

Introduction

In early October 2023 *Country Top 40* host Fitz stated that “church and country music go together like peanut butter and jelly.” Such a statement on a nationally syndicated radio program points to the long standing, deeply embedded link between Evangelical Protestantism and the commercial form of roots music that became known as Country Music. This link between Evangelical Protestantism and Country Music became identified with the 1927 Bristol Sessions conducted under the auspices of Ralph Peer on the Tennessee side of State Street in Bristol Tennessee/Virginia. Known by the metaphor as the “The Big Bang of Country Music” suggests a mythological immaculate conception to the birth of Country Music’s and its life cycle. There is no such thing as the immaculate conception of cultural ideas and forms, but Nolan Porterfield’s metaphor contains more than a germ of truth. Previous recording sessions notwithstanding, the recording of The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, much less The Stoneman Family and others, provide The Bristol Sessions an undeniable gravitas in the creation of a cultural form commodity known as Country Music. Besides recording during The Big Bang of The Bristol Sessions, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers conceptually carry with their iconic success additional cultural meanings deeply embedded in the culture of Country Music.

The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers often receive symbolic recognition in terms of two polarities associated with all cultures, but particularly salient in the context of The U.S. South and Evangelical Protestantism. Jimmie Rodgers often receives symbolic recognition as representing the Profane. The Carter Family often receives symbolic recognition as representing the Sacred. The dichotomy of the Sacred and the Profane includes related

concepts such as heaven and hell, Saturday night temptations and sin followed by Sunday church attendance, saved and lost, good and evil, and variants thereof. The Sacred and Profane dichotomy fits both Country Music artists as well as their song content. The Sacred and Profane dichotomy not only manifested itself throughout the early period 1921-1957 ending with the transition to the Nashville Sound but continues to exist into the third decade of the 21st Century. (Williams, Akenson, and Smith, 2023) Thus, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Likers *S-A-V-E-D* and Keith Urban's *God Whispered Your Name* manifest the Sacred and Profane references common to Evangelical Christianity. Deeply embedded in everyday life, Country Music and the Sacred and Profane with substantive roots in Evangelical Protestantism maybe be described as "part of the air that we breathe—and on which we may not consciously focus, but which often bears great affective and social power. (Tipton, 2023).

This discussion, then, focuses on the mythological and real Sacred and Profane dichotomy in Country Music. Emphasis will be placed on the years post 1957, the date commonly associated with the development of *The Nashville Sound*. Songs selected from the "Sacred and Profane Roots Music U.S.A." Facebook page will be analyzed using the Sacred and Profane dichotomy. Seemingly unrelated concepts such as authenticity, existentialism, and historical memory will also come into play. It will be advanced that these four concepts though seemingly unrelated function together to form a Sacred and Profane mythic dichotomy ever present in contemporary Country Music.

The Sacred and the Profane

From its crystallization in the 1920s highlighted by the 1927 Bristol Sessions, the "Big Bang of Country Music," a cultural hearth emerged as "The Fertile Crescent of Country Music" strongly associated with the U.S. South. (Peterson and Davis, 1975) The commercial product that became known as Country Music did not only exist in the U.S. South any more than the Big Bang metaphor completely described an immaculate conception of Country Music in the 1927 Bristol Sessions. Yet, the role of southern culture and its strong connection to Protestant Evangelical Christianity cannot be dismissed as a tired trope. Flannery O'Connor's description of *The Christ Haunted South* provides a degree of intensity not matched elsewhere. The emphasis upon salvation through accepting Jesus Christ as personal savior resonates deeply into the 21st century.

The appeal of Conservative Evangelical Christianity continues despite weakened denominational ties after World War 2. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination in the United States continues to lose membership at an alarming rate. SBC membership shows decline for two decades yet is the largest Protestant denomination with some 13.2 million members. Baptisms continue to decline (Smith 2023). The SBC also struggles to deal with the demons of racism and sexual assault and cannot find its way to allow congregations with women ministers to remain in the fold. (Adams, 2023) Such issues also resonate with the intense Evangelical community outside the South for which issues of race, and gender identity manifest themselves frequently and intensely including on the national political scene.

The post Christian age, secularism, the Death of God, and Liberation Theology have exerted their influences on popular culture in the U.S. and elsewhere. Yet, Country Music continues to include Sacred and Profane content well into the third decade of the twenty-first century. This is indicative of the dichotomy of the Sacred and the Profane and its entrenchment in the South, an area that historian C. Vann Woodward believed to have a sense of "defeat, pessimism, and irony not present in most of American culture" (Blaser, 1985).

Similarly, a variety of secular concepts work together with the Sacred and Profane dichotomy to reinforce its continued presence. Authenticity, existentialism, and historical memory combine with the Sacred and Profane to create what Michael Apple refers to as decentered unity. (Apple, 2005). Existentialism, authenticity and historical memory all function autonomously within their cultural and intellectual orbits. Yet combined, the four conceptual universes further advance the complexity and the validity of the deeply embedded mythological and real dimensions of Country Music.

Throughout its evolution, Country Music exhibits an existential meaning is a fundamental foundation upon which the genre has been constructed. The search for the *real*, for experiential and spiritual truth, has driven country music artists since the beginning. Being real is central to the ethos of Country Music. Implicit in this idea are concepts such as what it means to be authentic in music and personal choice; the existentialist idea of distinctive individuality and responsibility is a powerful motif in Country Music. To the committed devotee of the genre, these ideas can exist in a semi-sacred and religious space where the sacred is viewed as reality (Eliade, 1959). Likewise, (Durkeheim, 1965) believief religious belief systems classified things as real and unreal, sacred and profane.

Authenticity is an abstract concept. Yet authenticity plays a concrete role in the lives of Country Music arts, fans, scholars, journalists, and music industry professionals. Authenticity "is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially-agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered (Peterson, 1997). Peterson further noted that authenticity as it relates to Country Music is "continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the

evolving image.” Authenticity does not remain static, but it is continually renewed. Layers of authenticity are continually added to create a narrative of authenticity for the present, one which speaks to an idea of cultural change. What would be considered artistically authentic by the middle of the twenty-first century might be very different from notions of 1950s authenticity. From its core cultural hearth of the U.S. South, Country Music continues to extend its reach with a world-wide presence. Authenticity is created and agreed upon over time. Roots music of all genres, and especially early Country Music, speak to an idealized and romanticized past, a past in which security and stability are deemed real, at least for as long as the performance lasts.

Historical Memory and authenticity interact with the Sacred and Profane as well as the existential. Historical Memory of an idealized and misremembered past drives personal, national, and cultural identities. The Culture Wars of the twenty-first century swirl around memories of a Confederate past, gender, and race. National consciousness allows for the communication of ideas that bind people together by creating narratives that reinforce collective cultural myth, especially through the use of art such as painting, literature, poetry, and music. Art is a powerful cultural bonding agent and can transmit national mythology in spoken and unspoken forms. Akenson (2020) pointed out that tenor John McCormack’s “The Old House” appealed to Irish immigrants in North America despite being about the very things that prompted their migration for a better life. In Country Music, lyrics and themes common to the audience’s lived experience translate powerful cultural myths and truths to the audience. Kits, cats, sacks and wives, the Sacred and Profane and its supporting concepts form a seamless core for Country Music. The power of concepts derived from Evangelical Christianity live on as will be seen in the discussion of specific contemporary Country Music songs.

The Sacred and Profane: Post 1957 Into The 21st Century

The Nashville Sound emerged in 1957 and may be described as evolutionary or revolutionary depending on the analytic framework applied. From an evolutionary perspective The Nashville Sound represents an ongoing dynamic as Country Music, continued its long history of interacting with varied genres, ethnic, and racial groups. Thus, the Blues structure of Jimmie Rodgers’ Blue Yodel #1 “T for Texas” and Rodgers’ cultural interaction as a young boy in Meridian, Mississippi working as a water boy with African American gandy dancers makes sense. The same could be mentioned for Luke Comb’s 2023 chart topping “Fast Car” by African American singer songwriter Tracy Chapman. (Bernstein, 2023)

From a revolutionary perspective, the work of Chet Atkins and others brought a smoother, more popular music influence with backup singers, orchestral violin string sections, and less nasal singing. It produced a new sound, appealed to a broader urban audience, and changed the direction of Country Music. Yet another analytical perspective would be to apply Richard Peterson’s “Hard Core, Soft Shell” continuum to The Nashville Sound impact as but an ongoing tension within Country Music that could easily explain the sudden “New Traditionalist” wave of performers such as Ricky Skaggs and Randy Travis in the 1980s. Even the much-maligned Bro Country onslaught of the 2010s can be attributed to the logical extension of The Nashville Sound and willingness of the Country Music industry to attempt to adapt to external market pressures.

The tension between the Sacred and Profane—or at least between church and cheating—is contained in Tom T Hall’s 1969 “Margie’s at The Lincoln Park Inn,” recorded by Bobby Bare. The narrator describes the conflict between being a loyal husband and father and cheating with Margie who is at the Lincoln Park Inn. Husband and father has been repairing his boy’s bike, talking to a preacher, and promising his wife that he would no longer cheat on her. This despite thinking about Margie at the inn and fixating on her phone number. By the end of the song, it’s night-time, and the husband is still caught between being faithful and meeting Margie. “I’m almost out of cigarettes and Margie’s at the Lincoln Park Inn” perhaps suggests he might go to the inn to buy cigarettes and meet Margie. The Sacred and Profane tension dominates.

This discussion now focuses on five of the most recent manifestations of the Evangelical Protestant Sacred and Profane Dichotomy. Here in the third decade of the twenty-first century the continued presence of the Sacred and Profane continues despite the seeming break down in religious affiliations. The “Sacred and Profane: Roots Music. U.S.A.” Facebook page collection will be used for song selection. Each song reflects a different artist and other variables including gender, race, age, and visual components.

“Tennessee Orange” topped the *Country Aircheck*/Mediabase Country Airplay chart in the summer of 2023 (Hollabaugh, 2023). Megan Maroney’s hit may seem like an unlikely starting point to demonstrate the continued presence of the Sacred and Profane manifestation in Country Music. Then again, orange is indeed a Protestant color. Akenson (2016, 2018, 2023) clearly connects Irish Protestant influences to contemporary evangelical beliefs.

The algae that, by 1960, cover two-thirds of the Protestant minds in America, have a very precise origin...the genetic line runs directly from Ireland and leads to Billy Graham and all his imitators....John Nelson Darby... in 1827..creates a tiny religion in Dublin...committed to a literal reading of the Bible. (Akenson 2005, 338-339).

The 'Big Orange' University of Tennessee sits in the Bible Belt of the U.S. South and the love song references a football rivalry in Knoxville at Neyland Stadium with a deep South team, the University of Georgia. Lyrics state clever thoughts referencing blue eyes, traditional courtesy opening the door, and making her feel like home. She also admits to doing things she hasn't done before and then references Georgia, and that she's wearing Tennessee orange.

A reference to blue eyes suggests that Maroney doesn't cross racial boundaries. The straight male-female relationship reinforces traditional gender roles comfortable to well-mannered Southerners who still open doors in deference to a weaker sex. Maroney seemingly implies some sexual engagement as she's "doin' things I've never done," then pulls back to state she's wearing Tennessee Orange. A reference to 'feels like home' further implies staying with core values and fits within Country Music references to Down Home for those white Southerners who migrated out of the South in search of better jobs after World War 2. A specific mention and reference to sin while playful, implies that the Southern culture of her native Georgia continues to believe in a dichotomy of the Sacred and Profane. Later, Maroney mentions knowing right from wrong.

Such things reinforce Megan Maroney's authenticity. She references her southern roots. She references Southeast Conference sports rivalries. She tells a believable story consistent with traditional gender roles still deeply harbored in denominations such as Southern Baptists. She believes that sin exists. In addition, the Tennessee Orange video places her in traditional settings. The video opens with a preschool girl in living room setting with Georgia Bulldog uniform and two red bows in her hair. The video's straight relationship clearly suggests an intimacy with her partner. Scenes on Broadway Avenue in Nashville include authentic hard core Country Music venue Roberts Western World. Vintage blue she picks on her guitar in a vintage blue pickup truck out in the country. She picks out a Johnny Cash vinyl album. She sits in a diner with wall mounted juke boxes. She mentions a romantic historical past in the Tennessee state song "Rocky Top." Maroney's entire persona establishes Country Music authenticity.

A more overt set of Sacred and Profane evangelical Protestant references takes place in Keith Urban's "God Whispered Your Name." A love song. Yes. Certainly, though, "God Whispered Your Name" functions as a Trojan Horse for the Sacred and Profane conservative Evangelical mind set. The opening three lines state that Urban felt cold, lost, nothing seemed true, and he couldn't bear the cross. Urban goes on to sing that God whispered your name, everything changed, and then there was 'talk about being saved.' Direct communication with God came about through the Protestant Reformation. There was no need for the intermediary of the established church. God whispering your name is indeed direct communication. Accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal savior transforms the sinner with salvation and makes the 'old man new.' Urban finds something similar. He wants to live more than ever and is 'never gonna be the same.' Indeed, the old man is dead.

If Urban once was blind and lost, but now saved it only seems logical that a public display of belief would follow. Urban feels that he's been baptized. No sprinkling. Baptism is immersion. It is truly "amazin,' amazin' grace." Salvation and forgiveness provided to former slave trader John Newton came as a gift from God despite the unworthiness of the recipient. Newton wrote "Amazing Grace" which "...became a popular song by Baptist and Methodist preachers in their evangelizing, especially in the American South.." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace William Walker's use of the "New Britain" melody found in shape note singing books and traditions strongly rooted in the South further links "Amazing Grace" to the Sacred and Profane. (Original Scared Harp, 1936, p. 35) Topped off with repeated Hallelujahs the semantics leave little doubt to the evangelical Christian mind set occupying the space of a Country Music song dedicated to romantic love. "God Whispered Your Name" is a Trojan Horse of sorts for the Sacred and Profane world of Evangelical Protestant Christianity.

Amanda Kate Ellis' "Tequila and Jesus" also shows the contemporary 21st century presence of the Sacred and Profane. Ellis finds life difficult the way the "world's spinning round" and once evening comes she achieves inner peace "Thanks to King James, salt, and lime." The reference isn't just to any Bible, but to the King James version symbolic with its roots deep in conservative Evangelical Christianity. The King James version of the Bible isn't viewed as symbolic or metaphorical but is absolute literal truth and guidance for daily life. Emphasis on John 3:16 and the personal commitment of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior emerges. Ellis proclaims the power of both extremes of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy as she states "Heaven knows I'd fall to pieces. It wasn't for tequila and Jesus." The tension between both ends of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy work their power in the life of Ellis.

The Tequila and Jesus” video finds Ellis on the streets of Ft. Worth, Texas, traditionally viewed as more country than Dallas. Ellis immediately establishes an element of authenticity as she wears a cowboy hat, western shirt, jeans, a belt with a large buckle, and a long duster coat. Her long blond hair and wide smile further connect her to traditional gender roles. Her entry into a bar includes playing pool with western dressed men and a cattleman reference clearly visible in neon outside the establishment. A sign in the bar proclaims that men without shirts and shoes receive no service. The sign also proclaims women without shirts or shoes receive free drinks. The humor further establishes an authentic division of traditional gender roles most frequently upheld within Country Music culture that males pursue females. The fiddle and steel guitar further used in the instrumentation suggest that Amanda Kate Ellis lives an authentic Country Music existence as she proclaims the Sacred and Profane dichotomy.

Sophia Scott’s official world video premier of “Boots, Jeans, and Jesus” took place at 9:45am on 20 July 2023. The sleazy and forbidden nature of lust driven sex comes across in a motel room clearly devoid of major chain signifiers, contemporary colors, and contemporary materials. Scott’s dilemma of the Sacred and Profane involves various temptations including alcohol, but revolves around good and evil and the pleasures of sex. Her “barstool confession” which she feels will make her “fall from heaven” involves a “guilty pleasure” of a male in a Stetson, and “Sunday service ain’t for two days.” Scott reinforces her awareness of traditional gender norms by reference that she is “Thinking things that ain’t lady-like.” She also mentions that she should be taken to the chapel and references the book of Genesis and the temptation to “bite the apple.” She feels that the only things keeping her from engaging in sexual pleasure are “boots, jeans, and Jesus.” It might be that Jesus can help her keep on her boots and jeans as she is “hanging on a prayer.” It might help her retain her purity as she mentions “no I ain’t never.” Yet in a concluding tag she states “C’m on boy” and finishes with “God help me.” Falling for sexual pleasure yet believing it isn’t lady like fits the Sacred and Profane. Thinking about Sunday church two days further fits Sophia Scott in the Sacred and Profane universe with all its complexity of Biblical guilt and pleasure.

Tiera Kennedy’s “Jesus, My Mama, My Therapist” provides a contemporary touch with the introduction of a therapist. The basic setting remains the same. Kennedy disapproves of the bartenders ‘big mouth.’ The beauty shop operator will also gossip and tell all. The minister ‘Pastor Pete’ passes judgment ‘like they pass the plate around’ and states that the ‘whole town’ passes on the gossip. Kennedy thus references a small-town setting with conventional gender roles and references to passing the plate commonly done in Evangelical Protestant settings. In addition, Kennedy references Jesus, her mother, and her therapist in terms of their being her ‘Holy Trinity.’ Jesus clearly is in heaven when Kennedy is ‘sending up a prayer’ and can be trusted not to tell God. This despite a questionable assumption about communication amongst the elements of the God Head. Lastly, Kennedy’s mother can also be trusted not to tell her father. Such a comment suggests traditional marriage, a role for the mother as confidant and nurturer, and the father a stern, more protective defender of female weakness. Jesus, her mother, and her therapist function differently, but don’t pass judgment on her deteriorating love relationship. Despite the inclusion of the therapist, Tiera Kennedy provides the listener with a tale of heartbreak set within the continued vitality of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy in Country Music. Each of Kennedy’s references establishes her authenticity as a Country Music artist. She fits the historical memory of what relationships ideally exist within Evangelical Protestant dominated culture. She deals with a common existential crisis yet filled with the tensions of the Sacred and the Profane.

The power of the Sacred and Profane keeps exerting itself day to day. The proliferation of reels makes new artists easily visible on youtube and other platforms. Mary Kutter provides a veritable Sacred and profane machine with Kentucky based songs such as “Devil’s Money,” “Bootlegger’s Bible,” and “Talk to Yourself.” Kutter’s lyrics describe a Kentucky bootlegger who donates money for a new church, that the proof of his discipleship I is his whiskey tinged gospel, and even a state that half the people praying don’t believe in God and it isn’t God’s fault, but God receives all the blame. Julia Cole explains that she went to church alone yet partner was gone hunting and came on Monday afternoon. The Band Loula addresses “Who Get’s to Heaven?” and concludes that nobody knows and it might not be who you think. Carter Faith holds a grudge and claims that a sanctimonious Christian woman would be a bitch to Jesus. The remarkable list goes on and on as each day new artists drop new material with Sacred and Profane references.

Discussion

Data collection and analysis beyond the 1957 onslaught of The Nashville Sound suggests an enduring aspect of real and mythic character of Country Music. Despite a variety of shifts in U.S. culture contemporary Country Music continues to manifest a surprising Sacred and Profane presence into the third decade of the twenty-first century. The sample songs illustrate a remarkable continuity of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy appearing in songs of chart-topping and lesser well known Country Music artists. The discussion leaves out a large number of songs from the likes of Little Big Town, Thomas Rhett, Hardy, Brooks and Dun, The Kendalls, and Ernest Tubb to Jelly Roll, Paul Pace, Bailey Zimmerman, and Morgan Wallen as well as the most recent Luke Combs hit “Ain’t No Love in

Oklahoma.” The frequency of Sacred and Profane dichotomy references need not be a statistically significant variable for the Sacred and Profane to retain its impact and reflect the power of the Evangelical Protestant mindset still manifesting itself within the U.S. South and throughout the United States. Be it John Ritter’s “Rise Up Country” Sunday syndicated radio program, a small market dominant regional station such as The Country Giant in Cookeville, Tennessee, youtube videos, or varied social media platforms, the Sacred and Profane dichotomy manages to be seen and heard.

The supporting concepts of authenticity, historical memory work in harmony with the Sacred and Profane to provide lyrical, musical, and visual cues to enhance the vitality of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy. From hats to boots, to pick-up trucks, bars with names evoking Country Music culture, the visual cues reinforce the tension of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy as the existential present of daily life and its temptations reveal themselves. The Sacred and Profane dichotomy takes place in the context of historical memory of Jesus Christ who offers salvation through his death on the cross. All of the Sacred and Profane dichotomy reinforces the historical memory of a supreme sacrifice by a Lord and Savior who performed miracles and rose again as described in an infallible source for life’s guidance, the Holy Bible.

Conclusion

The Sacred and the Profane dichotomy characterizes cultures other than the Christ Haunted U.S. South. Yet it provides a useful tool in coming to grips with the complexities of Country Music from its inception and crystallization into the third decade of the 21st century. Despite the apparent secularization and weakening of denominational ties in the U.S. and even the South, the Sacred and Profane dichotomy with its roots deeply embedded in Country Music continues to manifest itself into the 21st century. Mark Twain may, or may not, have actually stated that the accounts of his death were greatly exaggerated. William Faulkner accurately proclaimed that the “past isn’t dead, it isn’t even past.” The weakening of religious bonds nationally and in the U.S. South do not deter the Sacred and Profane found in Evangelical Protestant Culture from continuing to manifest itself in Country Music. Indeed, issues derived from the strong Southern cultural hearth of Country Music play out nationally. Tucker and Gaillard’s “The Southernization of America” certainly reinforces an earlier set of related thoughts by Peter Applebome’s “Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture.” It should be no small wonder that the Sacred and Profane dichotomy continues to persist in Country Music even in the turbulent third decade of the twenty-first century. Myth and Reality live on.

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