

THEY AIN'T DRUNK, THEY AIN'T BEATIN' THEIR WIVES, AND THEIR DOGS ARE STILL ALIVE

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[Assignment: Choose an area of popular culture you know about and make a point about it in a short essay. Don't simply describe your subject; draw a conclusion about it which will be of interest to your readers.]

(1) You're heading down a deserted highway in southern Indiana and the only company you have is the dial on your AM radio. You try tuning into an extremely weak station playing songs that your parents once listened to. The static gets to be too much, so you turn the dial to an opera star singing so high that you are afraid that your windshield might shatter at any moment. You quickly turn the dial again and the only other station coming in "loud and clear" is the local country station. Your first reaction is to turn it off, but you are afraid that you may fall asleep from the hypnotic passing of cornfields, so you leave it on. You prepare yourself for a "hwang-twang" singer caterwauling about drowning himself in whiskey after beating his wife when he found that his dog is dead. However, as you start to listen, you find out that your whole perception of country music could be wrong. These singers that you hear are actually singing about real life, and the melody and rhythm are catchy and memorable. You suddenly realize that they aren't drunk, beating their wives, and "lo and behold," their dogs are still alive. Many people share this misconception about country music but if they were only to take the time to listen to it, they would find out they are wrong. Let me describe the content and style of some contemporary country songs to clear up this misconception.

(2) Many country singers sing about problems that they see around them everyday. They see a world that has deteriorated from the "good world" that their grandparents once knew--a time when morals were strong and people looked out for one another. The Judds, a mother-daughter duo, have written a song recalling the values of the past. "Grandpa, Tell Me 'bout the Good Ol' Days" describes a world where people fell and stayed in love, families actually sat down at the dinner table and prayed before they ate, people kept their word, and fathers did not leave their families when "the goin' got rough." The Judds make a point by addressing their grandfatherly role model: they feel that they have to go back two generations to hear about this ideal world. Garth Brooks, another country vocalist, takes a different approach in singing about the world around us. He has an influential song called "Wolves." No, it is not about the actual animals, but about human "wolves." Garth Brooks is talking about the "wolves" who have stolen the land from underneath the feet of his friends. One of the lines from the song goes like this: "Charlie Barton and his family stopped today to say goodbye. He said the bank was takin' over; the last few years were just too dry." Garth Brooks saw a man work hard and then lose his land to a pack of human "wolves" because of something he had no control over: the rain.

(3) Another misconception about country music is that the women in the songs are "country bumpkins" or getting beaten and cheated on by their husbands or lovers. This is far from the truth in many of today's

country songs. Women are now treated with respect, and their men are no longer cheating behind their backs. In the song "Straight from the Factory," Clint Black talks about a love that was perfectly matched. He reassures his lover that he will never leave her because she is the only one for him. He sings, "Some folks just send 'em back and never find what they need. But, babe, my satisfaction's guaranteed." He has found the one woman for him, and he is sticking by her until the end. The group Alabama has tried to get away from the stereotype that country men get drunk and beat their wives. In the song, "A Very Special Love," a woman from California is quoted as saying, "I've heard how Southern men respect the ladies and I'd like to meet a gentleman like you." Alabama strengthens the message by saying that this woman has a successful acting career and can support herself without a man.

(4) There is, however, once exception to this cheating problem between men and women. In the past few years, there has been an explosion of female country singers. Suddenly, it is not the men who are doing the cheating, but the women. (I wonder if this is from all those years of getting beaten by their men?) Women singers have presented themselves as the ones making the decisions, being strong, and actually leaving the man instead of the other way around. Once again the Judds provide an example. They show this new type of female in the song "Give a Little Love": "They treat you cruel, but I'm not going to fall for that because my momma didn't raise no fool."

(5) Many feel that country music is played on an old washing bucket, a whining harmonica, and an old family fiddle. Visions of Willie Nelson and Boxcar Willie come flashing through their minds. Believe it or not, the latest technology has hit the South. They have real drums, real electric keyboards, and "honest to goodness" electric guitars. Yes, that old fiddle may still be heard (and even some of those have been electrified), but you may be surprised to feel your foot suddenly tapping along with the beat of a "good ol' country" song.

(6) So you see, country music isn't what you may have thought it was. It is about real people singing about real life. These songs see women as more than sex objects or as "punching bags." So the next time you are traveling down that country road, and the only station you can pick up is country, leave it on and give it a chance. You may find that "they ain't drunk, they ain't beatin' their wives, and their dogs are still alive."