

# **Gender Representation on Country Format Radio: A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018**

By Jada E. Watson

in consultation with WOMAN Nashville

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Issues related to gender equality have been at the fore of public and scholarly discourse surrounding the popular music industry for at least the last five years. A number of critical articles and reports have been published by leading journalists and scholars, sharing statistics on the precarious position of women within popular music in general (Annenberg [2018](#), [2019](#); Prior, Berra & Pieper [2019](#)), and the country industry specifically (Ghosh [2012](#), [2013](#), [2015](#); Watson [2018](#); [Archived manuscript](#); Annenberg [2019](#)). Taken together, these studies show that, despite increasing presence on charts and radio in the late 1990s, women's position has weakened in the industry since the early 2000s.

Despite heightened awareness and public discussion surrounding gender inequality in country music, and discriminatory practices in radio programming, the situation has worsened over the last three years. My September 2018 publication on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart identified a 10% loss in the number of women debuting on the chart over the course of a two-decade period from 1996 to 2016, and a 27% drop in those reaching the #1 position (Watson [2018](#)). This study focused on the impact of radio programming practices and on changing *Billboard* methodologies, showing how women have been pushed out of the long-running chart.

The majority of the published studies have focused on the Hot Country Songs chart. Once the flagship country chart for *Billboard*, October 2012 changes to the chart methodology have profoundly altered the composition of the chart. From January 1990 to October 2012, the chart tabulated popularity based on country format radio airplay. In October 2012, *Billboard* announced their decision to apply the Hot 100 hybrid-method to Hot Country Songs, combining digital sales, streaming and airplay *from all radio formats* to determine weekly rankings. It is crucial to underscore this point: before this methodological change, a country song needed country format radio-airplay alone to appear on and climb the chart. With the new 2012 formula, a song benefits from time spent on all radio formats and charts. Because cross-over airplay is tabulated in the method, *Billboard* does not differentiate between radio edits. As such, a song serviced to both Country and Top 40 formats with different radio edits are now counted as just one unit (Billboard [2012](#)). The impact of this methodology was thoroughly investigated in my September 2018 publication, which illustrates how the new method has radically changed the chart — significantly reducing the number of artists reaching the coveted #1 spot and nearly erasing women from the chart (Watson [2018](#)). While these are critical issues with regard to gender representation, to be sure, this *Billboard* chart is no longer an accurate representation of country radio — an issue this report addresses.

This report examines gender representation in country music, focusing on radio airplay as tabulated by Mediabase for their yearend charts published between 2000 to 2018, as well as on the weekly charts between 2002 and 2018. This report shares new results of a data-driven analysis of the songs and artists that appear on country radio, looking at how many individual men, women and male-female artists receive radio airplay in this period. Crucial to this study is this three-level gender analysis. While country radio programmers only use two gender codes (male and female — using the latter for male-female ensembles), this study differentiates between female artists (solo/ensembles) and male-female ensembles in order to better understand the gender inequities in programming.

Also new in this study is the discussion of spins. Focusing on the yearend spin counts for artists gives us a new perspective on how women factor into programming decisions. These results show that women are not receiving anywhere near the same amount of spins as their male colleagues, suggesting systemic issues of gender discrimination in radio programming far beyond what was originally presumed. The last five years (and in some cases 2018, in particular) emerge as particularly problematic for country culture, which lacks diversity and perpetuates gender biases. These results show us the results of programming decisions, and the impact that they have had on female artists and male-female ensembles.

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## Industry context

Gender has been a central dynamic of the country music culture; masculinity and femininity have been invoked throughout the genre's history to define class boundaries, cultural tastes, institutional hierarchies, performance styles, and the evolution of socially prescribed roles.<sup>1</sup> As research has shown, a rigid male/female binary underpins the genre's century-long history. Kristine M. McCusker traced this binary narrative to the first published history of the genre (Bill C. Malone's 1968 *Country Music U.S.A.*), which associated male country artists with the "public work" of performing and management, with women tucked away in domestic, administrative and (musically) supporting roles.<sup>2</sup> Studying the relationships between female artists and the almost exclusively male management in 1930s country radio, McCusker revealed the gendered double standard that guided practices, including restrictions placed on female performers with regard to their public conduct, image, and sexuality – restrictions that were not placed on their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Despite these restrictions, women helped to shape country music from the beginning – from early country radio programs, to the recording studio, and certainly the stage. Throughout the twentieth century, women became increasingly successful as solo performers and, by the 1990s, were the genre's commercial and artistic center.<sup>4</sup> Yet female artists in the 1990s still had to navigate spoken and unspoken parameters to avoid offending the industry's gatekeepers, who had the power restrict the space available to them on radio playlists, which often limited the opportunities made available to them on record label rosters, tours and television programs.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, country format radio has a lot of power. Functioning as the gatekeepers of the genre, they make programming decisions that do not just impact the genre's culture and identity, but also the careers and livelihood of artists.<sup>6</sup> Country program directors have historically blamed the lack of women in the format on a pre-existing gender imbalance on label rosters. *Country Aircheck* editor Lon Helton admitted in an interview with Beverly Keel that program directors have been recommending that women not be played back-to-back since the 1960s. "It's not sexism," he says, but a lack of female artists in the genre. He argues that because there are so few women, you have to "spread them out" on a playlist.<sup>7</sup> But the practice of "spreading them out" worsened in the early 2000s, and has resulted in the near erasure of women on country radio today. This is due, in large part, to a decades-long practice of programming women at 13-15% of a station's playlist.<sup>8</sup> This report addresses the impact of this practice, illustrating the ways in which female artists have been marginalized in country music culture and gradually eliminated from the top positions of radio airplay charts.

## Programming quotas on country format radio

In May 2015, radio consultant Keith Hill reported in an interview with Russ Penuell of *Country Aircheck* that he encouraged program directors on country format radio to program women at just 13-15% of their playlists in order to improve/maintain strong station ratings.<sup>9</sup> In this interview, radio was referred to as a "predominantly male format", and the audiences (who he defined as comprised mostly of women) were reported to prefer male voices.<sup>10</sup> While gender representation in country music culture was certainly widely known and discussed in the community (as far back as 1985),<sup>11</sup> Hill's public admission of a statistical formula guiding radio practices had not yet been put into print for public scrutiny. It is important to note that industry representatives had been discussing programming in this manner for years – both behind closed doors or at industry conferences. In fact, Hill delivered similar remarks three months previous at Country Radio Seminar in February 2015, pontificating on his belief that women are bad for ratings – ideas that had guided his consultation practice (and programming practices) since the late 1990s.<sup>12</sup> In the months and years that followed, prominent women and advocates in the industry challenged these practices and sought to draw awareness to the issues.

In July 2018, Woman of Music Action Network ([WOMAN Nashville](#)) engaged Hill in a public debate on Twitter about his practice and research.<sup>13</sup> He discussed the origins of his quota-based practice and the studies he conducted in the early 1990s. He spoke about programming as a careful balance of song tempo, sounds codes (the level of "twang" present in a vocal), star to non-star ratio, and gender representation all as a means to keep listeners "tuned-in" to a station. The first two categories listed speak to the musical elements of a song, and the

careful interplay of not playing songs that sound similar back-to-back. The latter categories code artists based on industry status and their biological/socio-cultural differences, and advocate gender-based programming.

Hill indicated that his research was influenced by two factors: market research on listener preferences and his belief that the genre's majority female audience prefers male performers. Guided by these factors, Hill tested removing half of the women from his scheduling catalog and reported a ratings increase. He then replicated this test across each of his stations.<sup>14</sup> As noted in the study of *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, despite self-reported success with the formula, Hill failed to consider long-term consequences of applying a programming quota to female artists.<sup>15</sup>

The current culture of inequality that is so openly discussed in the media and by artists today can be traced to these types of radio programming decisions. The quota has a significant impact on the lives and careers of female artists; it does not just limit the space available to them on country radio, but it has broader implications on other career opportunities, including label/publishing deals, touring, festivals, fan clubs, and more. Although streaming has become a major player in the marketing and promotion of popular music, country radio still functions as the gatekeeper of the genre and is integral to the concomitant viability and indeed success of artists. As a result of the gender-based quota system governing how radio operates, it has become increasingly challenging for new female artists to break into the industry. More critically, it has contributed to a context and culture of misconduct, wherein women are expected to be accessible to those in a position of power as a means to secure radio airplay not readily available to them. This is most evident in the articles written by journalists Marissa Moss and Emily Yahr, both of whom have reported on discriminatory practices in the industry (in general) and radio (in particular).<sup>16</sup>

In the broader conversation about gender equality in country radio, the issue of a lack of diversity and impact on audiences is emerging as a significant issue. By playing mostly men, radio is training listeners to appreciate just one type of voice, one type of sound, one type of narrative subject position or story. As a result, women's voices have been marginalized, their achievements have been minimized, and their narrative voice limited. Instead of hearing stories about women by strong female artists, audiences are inundated with songs about women and how they ought to behave.<sup>17</sup> The listener experience has been shaped by this practice, which has completely altered their perception of who is contributing to country music culture.

## Study Datasets

This study uses two datasets curated from charts published by Mediabase. The first includes the top 150 songs on the yearend Country format charts for the Published Panel covering the years 2000 to 2018.<sup>18</sup> The dataset includes the song title, artist and featured artist name, the song's yearend position, as well as data capturing song spins (total annual and monthly spins) for 2,850 records over the 19-year period. This dataset was augmented with the biographic data defining ensemble type and gender for lead and featured artists/ensembles. The second dataset consists of the weekly charting activity of the Published Panel covering the years 2002 to 2018. This dataset captures the same data as above, but also includes the weekly ranking positions for the 302,387 records across this 17-year period.

As with the study of *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart,<sup>19</sup> this study maintained a coding practice of separating male-female ensembles and female artists into two categories in an effort to better understand the impact of gender-based programming on country radio. As a result, three codes were used to define artists by their biological and sociological status: M for men, W for women, and M-F for male-female ensembles (i.e., groups comprised of artists of both sexes). With regards to collaborations, the song was coded by the gender of the lead artist. Tables 1.1 (p. 3) and 2.1 (p. 13) outline the study's coding system as it relates to the yearend dataset.

In the following graphs, the following colour coding scheme is observed:

- Female artists
- Male artists
- Male-female ensembles

# Part 1: Yearend Reports, 2000-2018

Between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2018, 2,850 songs appeared on the Published Panel yearend reports. As with the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, regardless of how the data are examined, the number of songs by male artists exceeds the number of songs by both female artists and male-female ensembles. Table 1.1 outlines the details of the coding system used to analyze the yearend reports. This list shows how songs were coded, but also provides a breakdown of the full complex of the dataset according the number of records by men, women, and male-female artists and their various ensemble combinations. As Table 1.2 summarizes, male artists had 2,309 songs (73.8%) on the yearend charts, while female artists had 498 (16.6%), and male-female ensembles had 137 songs (4.6%). This amounts to a 1,717-song difference (or of 58.6% percentage points) between the number of songs by men and women in this 19-year period, or a 4.4 to 1 ratio on the yearend reports.

**Table 1.1** Study's Coding System for the Yearend Reports (2000-2018)

Code	Artist/Ensemble Type	# of songs	% of songs
M	Male solo artist	1,746	61.3%
M	Male group	381	13.4%
M	Male solo artist feat. male artist	33	1.2%
M	Male solo artist feat. female artist	47	1.6%
M	Male group feat. male artist	7	0.2%
M	Male group feat. female artist	1	0.0%
F	Female solo artist	435	15.3%
F	All-female group	54	1.9%
F	Female solo artist feat. female artist	3	0.1%
F	Female solo artist feat. male artist	6	0.2%
M-F	Male-female ensemble	136	4.8%
M-F	Male-female ensemble feat. female artist	1	0.0%
	Total songs	2,850	100%

**Table 1.2** Number and Percentage of Songs on Yearend Country Format Reports (2000-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs
Men (solo/group)	2,215	77%
Women (solo/group)	498	18.4%
Male-female ensembles	137	4.6%
Total songs	2,850	100%

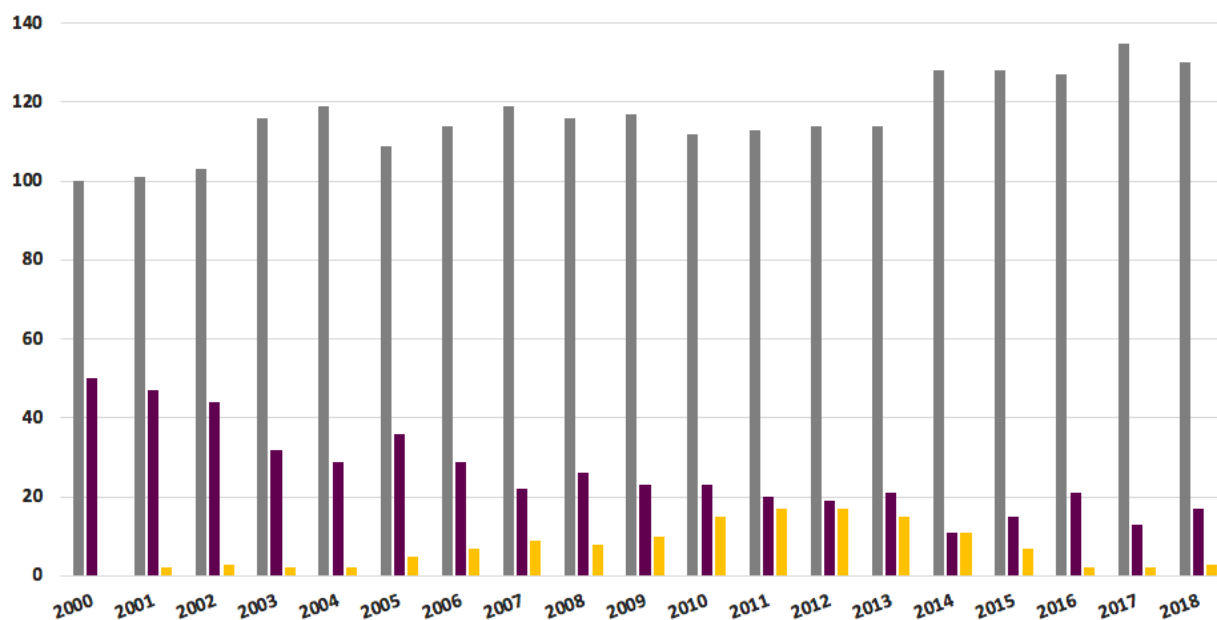
The total number of songs (2,850) includes 1,136 repeated songs; that is, songs that appear on more than one yearend chart. When removing these songs, the sample reduces to 1,714 unique charting songs. The percentage of songs by men, women, and male-female artists remains relatively unchanged when reducing the dataset to these unique songs. Table 1.3 shows that 1,301 songs (76.4%) are by male artists, 333 songs are by female artists (19.6%), and 80 songs (4.7%) are by male-female ensembles. The gap narrows slightly here, from 58.6% percentage points with the full 2,850-record dataset to 55% with the unique songs – and narrows further still when examining the number of unique artists that release these songs. A total of 202 men (70.1%) released 1,301 songs, while 74 women (25.7%) and 12 male-female ensembles (4.2%) released the remaining 413. This results in a 44.4% difference between the number of individual male and female artists reported on the yearend charts. Not surprisingly, these initial statistics show that men dominate country format radio.

**Table 1.3** Number and Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs	# of artists	% of artists
Men (solo/group)	1,301	75.9%	202	70.1%
Women (solo/group)	333	19.4%	74	25.7%
Male-female ensembles	80	4.7%	12	4.2%
Totals	1,714		288	100%

Figure 1.1 maps the yearend activity on a line graph, illustrating that the number of songs by male artists exceed those by female artists by a significant margin each year throughout the study period. There is an average 36% percentage point difference between the number of songs by men and women in the first three years of the study period. Following 2002, the gap increases to 56% percentage point in 2003 and then to 60% – an average maintained between 2004 and 2013. In 2014, the gap increases to an average 76% between 2014 and 2018. The year 2017 has the largest gap in percentage points between men and women, with a high of 81.3%. Like the study of *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, there is no single year in this study period in which women have the same number or more songs on the yearend charts as male artists – strongly suggesting that they are not programmed at the same level.

**Figure 1.1** Distribution of Songs by Men, Women, and Male-female Ensembles on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)



Unlike the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, where there was a general trend toward decline for all artists over the two-decade study period,<sup>20</sup> these yearend radio reports show an increase in the number of songs by men against a decrease in songs by women. Men consistently have more than 100 of the top 150 songs on the yearend charts, with an average of 114 between 2003 to 2013, increasing to an average of 130 songs between 2014 to 2018.

Female artists enter the new millennium with 50 songs (33.3%) on the yearend country airplay reports and decline to 17 songs (11.3%) by 2018. Over a period of 19 years, this amounts to a 66% decline in the number of songs by female artists on these yearend charts. The trend in this graph is one of stability and growth for men (who dominate the chart) and significant decline for women. The final five years of this study shows continued decline for women. In fact, from 2013 to 2014 there was a 6.7% drop to just 7.3% of the songs on the yearend report. Despite an increase to 21 songs (14%) in 2016, female artists maintain an average of 15 songs (10.8%) on the

yearend reports in this five-year period. The decline points to the self-fulfilling nature of the gender-based programming practices outlined above. Indeed, the results strongly suggest that radio is gradually programming fewer female artists every year.

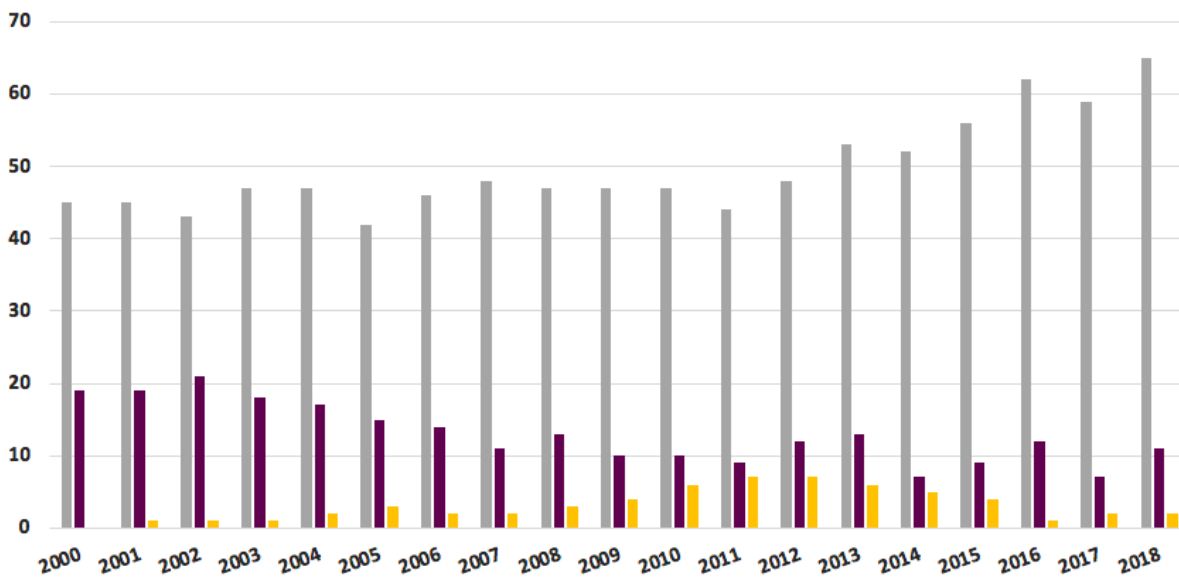
Male-female ensembles comprise a very small segment of the yearend charts. There are no male-female ensembles on the yearend reports until 2001, and they consistently make up a small percentage of these charts – despite the significant achievements of Lady Antebellum, Little Big Town, The Band Perry and Sugarland. The general trend in this chart shows an increase in activity from 2006 through to 2012 (to a high of 17 songs), dropping to just 11 songs (7.3%) in 2014, to an average of 4 songs (2.3%) between 2015 and 2018.

Given that country radio programmers code male-female ensembles as “female”, it is worth considering these results with that coding practice in mind. Of course, when combining women and male-female ensembles, there is still a decline in the number of songs on the yearend charts between 2003 to 2013, with an average 35 songs per year (or 23.3%). As with the previous graph, the final five years in which female artists are combined with male-female ensembles register a drop in activity for artists that program directors code “female”. While solo female artists and all-female groups had maintained 10.8% of the annual yearend reports, when combined with male-female ensembles, they are an average 20 songs – 13.6% – of the yearend charts. We can thus see a fairly strong correlation between the yearend statistics and the reported programming quota (13-15%) for female artists. These results suggest that, whether intentionally followed or not, Hill’s programming rules have become standard practice in radio programming.

The trends outlined above hold true for the number of unique individuals on the yearend reports, as reported in Figure 1.2. In addition to the decreasing number of songs by women on the yearend reports, there is a declining number of individual women releasing these songs. Male artists account for an average of 70% of the yearend reports between 2000 and 2005, increasing to an average 74% between 2006 and 2013. Again, the final five years are troubling: the percentage of male artists on the yearend chart increases to an average of 86.4% (with a high of 87% in 2017), and a low average of 13.6% by women and male-female ensembles (and an ultimate low of 13% in 2017).

Despite stronger years in the early 2000s in which women comprise 29.5% (an average of 19 women) of the yearend charts, the number of women included on the yearend reports begin their downward turn in 2003. Following an initial drop from 21 to 18 women (27.3%) in 2003, an average of 14 women (22.9%) appear on the reports between 2004 and 2008, dropping to 11 (or 17.1%) between 2009 and 2013, and to 9 (12.9%) between 2014 and 2018.

**Figure 1.2** Distribution of Unique Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)



## Gender frequencies of unique songs and artists peaking in the top positions of the Country format reports, 2000-2018

Drilling into the yearend dataset to the chart's top positions, the picture worsens for female artists and male-female ensembles. As Tables 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6 indicate, male artists continue make up a higher percentage of these top positions than both female artists and male-female ensembles by an increasing margin from the Top 20 (Table 1.4), to Top 10 (Table 1.5) to #1 (Table 1.6) position. The difference between the number of male and female artists increases from 58.6% of the full dataset, to 72.1% in the Top 20, and to 79.5% in the Top 10. Of course, not only do men have more songs in these top positions of the yearend charts, but there are also more male artists reaching these positions. These summary tables show that the percentage of individual artists increases for men at each level, while the number of women decreases. As with the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs study, the percentage of male-female ensembles remains relatively unchanged at each level of inquiry.

As summarized in Table 1.4 and 1.5, just 47 songs by 23 female artists reached the Top 20 of the yearend reports, while 13 songs by 10 women entered the Top 10. No female artists registered a #1 song on a yearend chart and just 1 male-female ensemble (Thompson Square with "Are You Gonna Kiss Me Or Not" in 2011) registered a yearend #1 song. Of course, women and male-female artists had #1 songs on the weekly reports during this period, but none of them registered enough spins to have a yearend #1. (Details on weekly activity are covered in part 2.)

**Table 1.4** Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists in the Top 20 on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)

	<b># of Top 20 songs</b>	<b>% of Top 20 songs</b>	<b># of Top 20 artists</b>	<b>% of Top 20 artists</b>
Men (solo/group)	324	85.3%	88	75.2%
Women (solo/group)	39	10.3%	22	18.8%
Male-female ensembles	17	4.5%	7	8%
Totals	380	100%	117	100%

**Table 1.5** Percentage of Unique songs and Artists in the Top 10 on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)

	<b># of Top 10 songs</b>	<b>% of Top 10 songs</b>	<b># of Top 10 artists</b>	<b>% of Top 10 artists</b>
Men (solo/group)	168	88.4%	74	83.1%
Women (solo/group)	13	6.8%	10	11.2%
Male-female ensembles	9	4.7%	5	5.6%
Totals	190	100%	89	100%

**Table 1.6** Percentage of Unique Songs by Men, Women, and Male-female Ensembles in the #1 position on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)

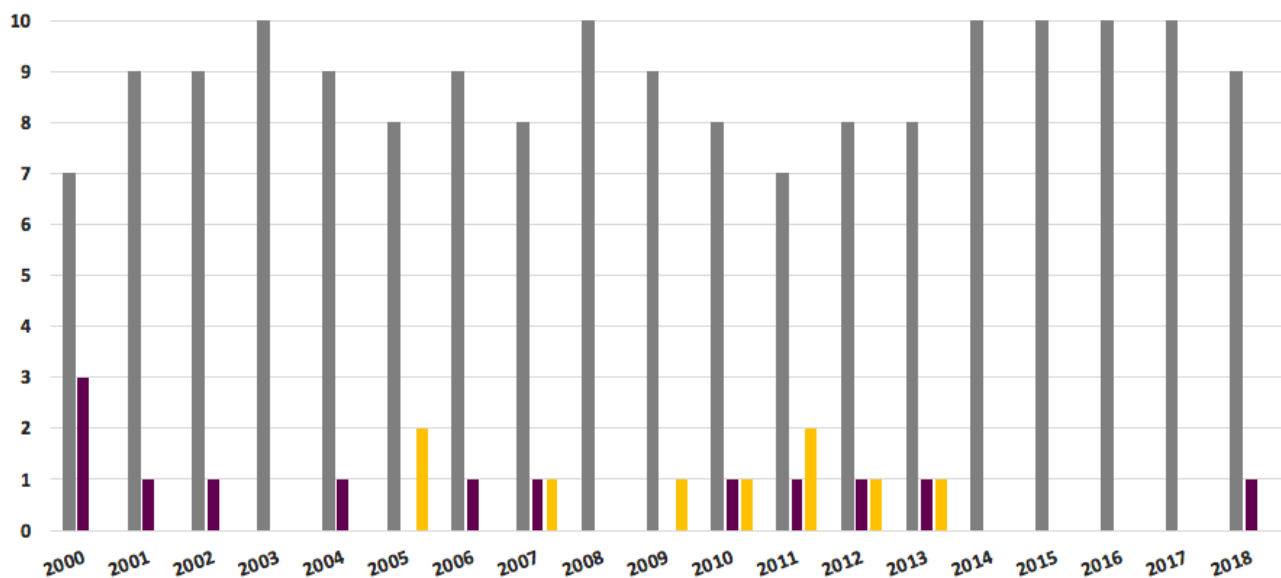
	<b>#1 songs</b>	<b>% of #1 songs</b>
Men (solo/group)	18	94.7%
Women (solo/group)	0	0%
Male-female ensembles	1	5.3%
Totals	19	100%

These summary tables show the weakening and precarious position of women and male-female ensembles on country radio. Women do not receive enough airplay annually to appear in the top positions of the chart, revealing a gradual erasure of women through the Top 20, to the Top 10 and the #1 position. This is further demonstrated in



the line graph of Figure 1.3, which maps the unique songs in the Top 10 of the yearend reports between 2000 and 2018. With the exception of 2000, when female artists had 3 songs (30%) in the Top 10 of the yearend report, there are ten years in this study in which they only had 1 song in the Top 10, and eight years with no songs in the Top 10. Male-female ensembles are likewise absent in the yearend Top 10 positions: there are twelve years with no song in the Top 10. The years 2003 and 2008 show no songs by women or male-female ensembles in the Top 10 (100% of the songs by male artists). The absence of female artists in the yearend Top 10 for 2003 is not surprising given the months-long radio backlash to the Dixie Chicks for lead singer Natalie Maines' denunciation of President Bush while on tour in the UK in March of that year.<sup>21</sup> While severe programming decisions were directed at the trio alone in 2003, the results show a broader trend in constrained programming for female artists in the early 2000s – magnified by the removal of Dixie Chicks music from regular rotation. The last five years of the period are particularly alarming, as there are no female artists or male-female ensembles in the Top 10 between 2014 and 2017. While there is one song by a female artist that ranked at 8 on the Top 10 in 2018, the song in question was the pop-country collaboration of Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line, showing that, in fact, no female country artists registered a Top 10 hit in this year as well. Women are programmed at such a small percentage of radio playlists that they have not received *enough spins* to rank in the Top 10 of a yearend list for five years.

**Figure 1.3** Distribution of Unique Songs in the Top 10 of the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)



These statistics are particularly troubling when considering the amount of attention brought to gender representation in the years following the May 2015 *Country Aircheck* interview. Although women have been very clearly disadvantaged by the gender-based programming practices since the early 2000s, one cannot help but see a correlation between the rise of public awareness about the issues and the absolute *erasure* of female country artists from the yearend reports between 2014 and 2018. Indeed, the more aware the public has become about gender representation issues, the worse the situation has become for women on country format radio.

## Frequency Distribution by Spin Data

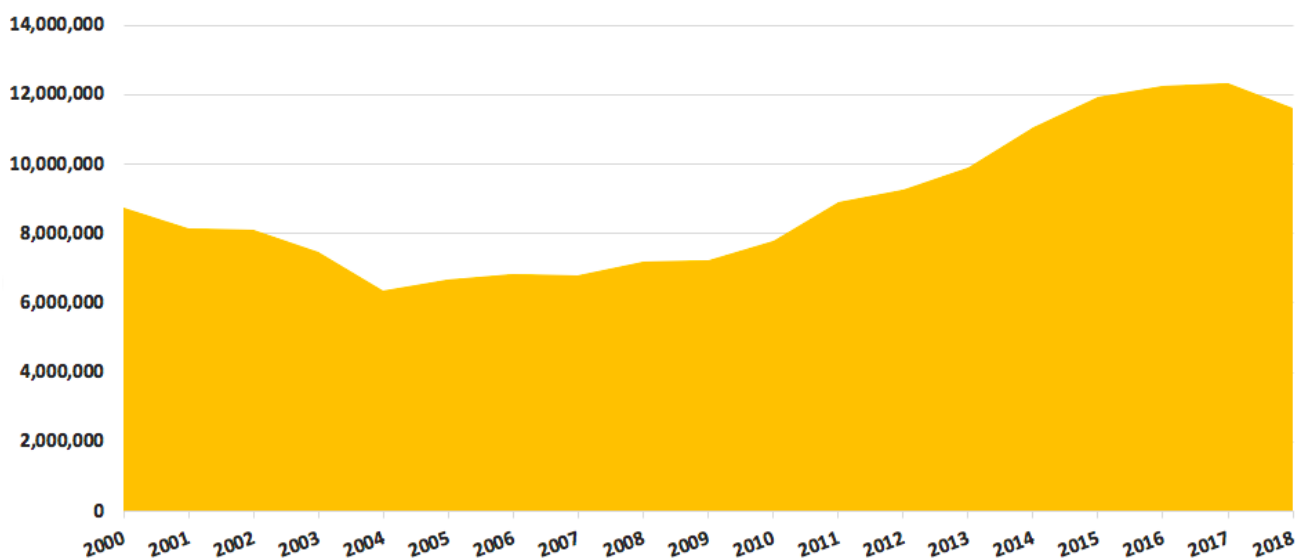
When we discuss the impact of radio on a song's trajectory, we need to consider the number of spins received in order for it to climb a chart. The yearend dataset includes the total spins for each month a song receives radio airplay, providing invaluable insights into the shape of radio culture, and which artists receive the most support from decision-makers at radio.

Over the course of this 19-year period, there has been a significant increase in the number of total spins for the top 150 songs on the yearend reports (see Figure 1.4). The yearend chart for 2000 reports 6,898,844 spins for the Top 150 songs on the chart, increasing to 8+ million spins between 2001 and 2003, but then dropping back down

to a five-year average of 6.8 million spins between 2004 and 2007. In 2008, the number of total annual spins for these top 150 songs increases to 7.1 million and then continually increases up to 11.5 million by 2018. The most significant changes occur with the 14.6% increase between 2010 and 2011 and the 11.8% increase between 2013 and 2014. Although there is a 5.8% drop in spins from 2017 to 2018, there is still an overall 68.1% increase from the beginning to the end of the study period.

The decline in total annual spins between 2000 and 2004 is rather challenging to explain without additional data regarding the number of stations reporting during this period. However, broadcast clutter due to an increase in advertisements through the early 2000s could speak to this decline. In a 2005 article by Steve McClellan, Nielsen Monitor-Plus reported that “U.S. viewers and listeners were bombarded with more than 106 million separate broadcast commercial messages in 2003,” and jumped to 108 million in the first 11 months of 2004.<sup>22</sup> The increase in spins starting in 2003-2005 and through to 2018, then, can likely be attributed to the decrease in commercial loads. As Judann Pollack noted in April 2018, Entercom has been trying to improve the listener experience, “trimming commercial loads by 5 percent to allow for my DJ chatter and more music.”<sup>23</sup> One of the ways in which Entercom stations are addressing the issue is by instituting a “Two Minute Promise”, cutting back commercials to no more than three 2-minute commercial breaks an hour. In this way, fans are exposed to more music (increased spins) an hour, and less advertising.<sup>24</sup> More research on spot ads in general, and in country format radio specifically, is needed to fully grasp the impact of advertisements on programming throughout this study period.

**Figure 1.4** Total Annual Spins for Reporting Stations on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)



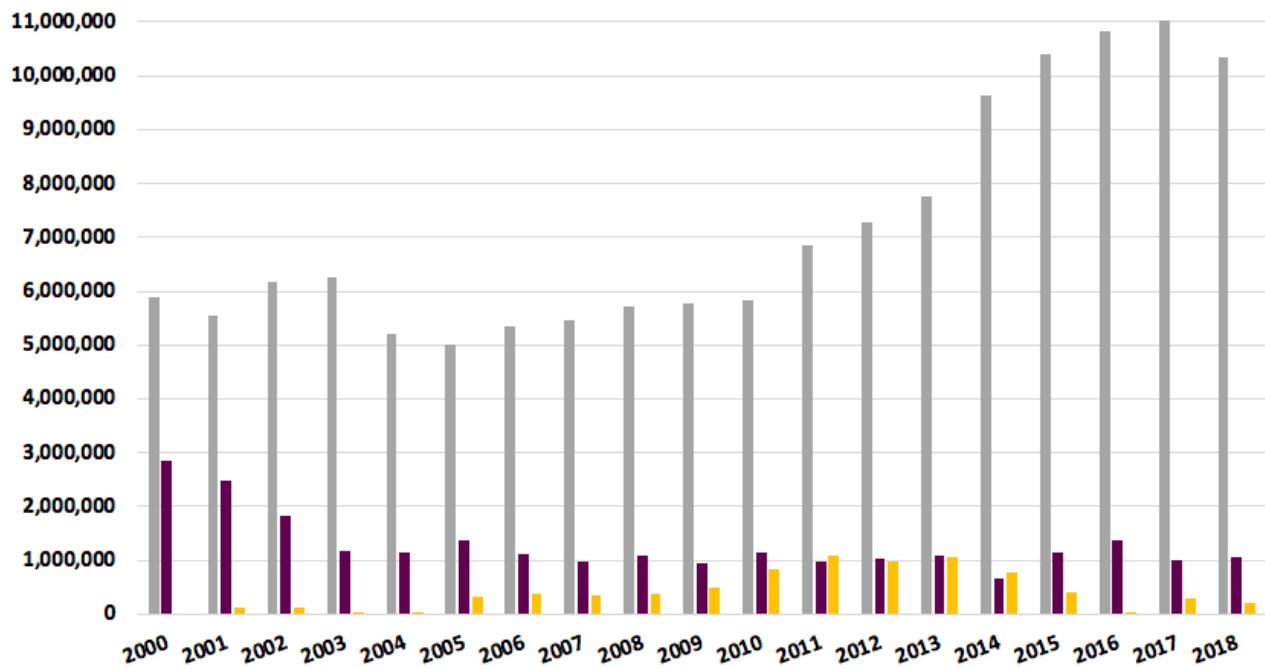
Where the total number of annual spins is perhaps most disconcerting is through the gender frequency distribution over the course of this 19-year period. Table 1.7 summarizes the total spins for men, women, and male-female ensembles. With a total of 175,560,067 spins between 2000 and 2018, 80.1% of the total spins were for songs by male artists, 15.3% by female artists and just 4.6% by male-female ensembles. This results in a 5.5 to 1 male-to-female ratio in the overall spins. Figure 1.5 presents the frequency distribution of total annual spins by artists' gender, and the results show that women had 2,846,744 spins at the start of the period in 2000, and decreased over the 20-years to 1,067,483 in 2018. This, while male artists increased steadily and indeed significantly (by 42.9%) from 5,896,507 total spins in 2000 to 10,336,609 in 2018. This picture is quite startling: the total number of spins increased significantly over this period, yet they did not increase at all for female artists between 2003 and 2018. In fact, their total spins remains within the 1.0-1.1 million range in this 15-year period. Thus, as male spin-activity increased significantly, the gap widened to 53.5% percentage points in 2002 and then to an average of 65.2% between 2003 and 2013. A 14% increase in spins for male artists results in a difference of 81% percentage points between men and women in 2014, and a three year average gap of 79% percentage points between 2015 and 2018. Over the course of this period, the total space allotted for women on country radio decreases significantly for the songs that made it into the top 150 of the yearend reports. Indeed, the ratio of spins between

male and female artists increased from 2 to 1 in 2002, to an astonishing 9.7 to 1 by 2018. In this context, in which programming has become so heavily skewed toward male artists, female artists do not even have a chance at success on popularity charts.

**Table 1.7** Number and Percentage of Total Spins on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)

	Total spins	% of total spins
Men (solo/group)	136,327,425	80.8%
Women (solo/group)	24,396,290	14.5%
Male-female ensembles	7,937,508	4.7%
Total spins	168,661,223	100%

**Figure 1.5** Distribution of Total Annual Spins Received by Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports (2000-2018)



Understandably, spins have a significant impact on the career trajectory of artists. It was reported above that 10 female artists registered songs in the Top 10 of the yearend charts in this 19-year period. This includes songs by the Dixie Chicks, Lee Ann Womack and Faith Hill in 2000, Jessica Andrews in 2001, Martina McBride in 2002, Gretchen Wilson in 2004, Carrie Underwood in 2006 and 2007, Miranda Lambert in 2010, 2011, and 2013, Jana Kramer in 2012, and pop-artist Bebe Rexha in her collaboration with Florida Georgia Line in 2018. The Rexha-Florida Georgia Line collaboration garnered by far the most annual spins with a total of 178,598 across the year (with an astonishing 25,006 in May 2018 alone). With the exception of Gretchen Wilson (“Redneck Woman”) and Carrie Underwood (“Jesus Take the Wheel”) – whose songs had 99,910 and 91,955 spins (respectively), the remaining Top 10 songs by female artists range in the area of 120,000-140,000 annual spins for their songs.

Top 10 songs by male artists have significantly more annual spins than female artists. While 19 of these Top 10 songs have fewer than 100,000 annual spins, 84 songs have annual averages in the same range as female artists, 39 have spins in the range of 140,000-170,000, and 19 garnered 170,000-200,000 spins. Seven male artists have over 200,000 annual spins, including Luke Combs’ “Hurricane” in 2015, Dierks Bentley’s “Somewhere on a Beach”, Brett Young’s “In Case You Didn’t Know”, and Jon Pardi’s “Dirt on My Boots” in 2016, and Luke Combs’ “One Number Away”, Kane Brown’s “Heaven”, and Sam Hunt’s “Body Like a Back Road” in 2017 (with an

astonishing, though not surprising given his 34-week reign at the top of *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, 258,749 spins).

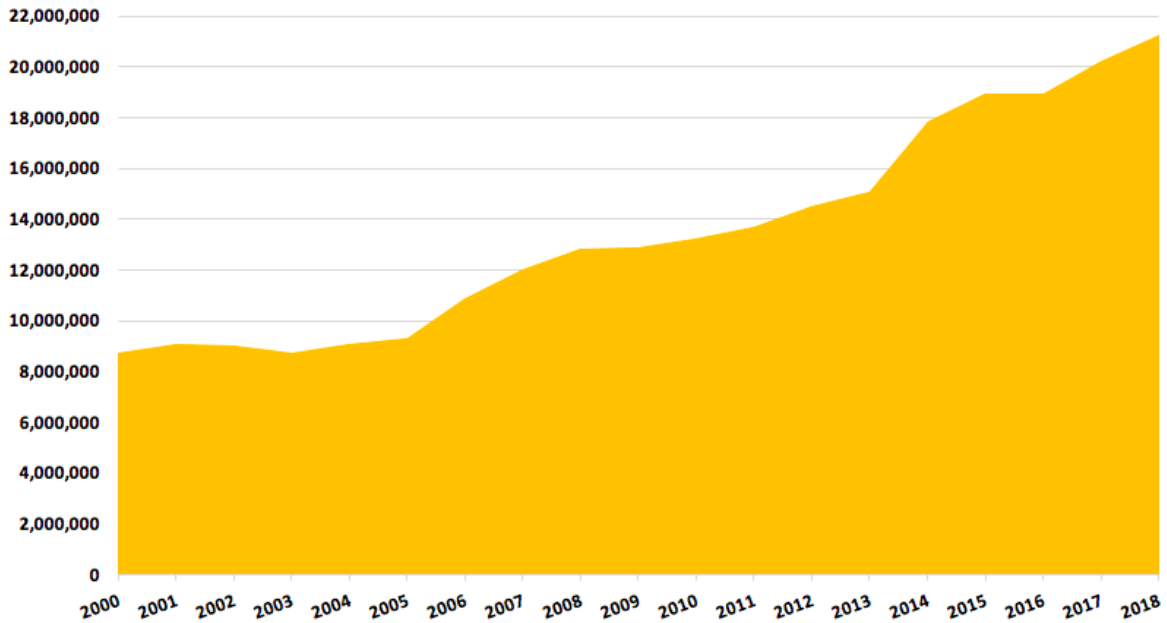
While no female artists registered a #1 song on a yearend chart, the male-female duo Thompson Square registered a #1 song with "Are You Gonna Kiss Me Or Not" in 2011. This song received 143,935 annual spins. Interestingly, Lady Antebellum holds the record for annual spins for a Top 10 song by male-female ensemble with "Downtown" in 2013 (146,729 spins), but the song only hit #2 on the yearend chart in 2013. In this 19-year period, artists with the most career spins have amassed more than 3,000,000. The Top 10 artists by spins are all men:



Carrie Underwood comes in at a close 11<sup>th</sup> place overall (1<sup>st</sup> among women), with 3,182,237 spins, beating out George Strait (with less than 3,000,000 career spins in this 2000-2018 period). The next female artists include Miranda Lambert at 21 with less than 2,000,000 career spins, Taylor Swift at 24 with 1.8+ million spins on country radio in this period, Martina McBride at 35 with 1.4+ million, and Sara Evans at 43 with 1.2+ million. Faith Hill, the Dixie Chicks and Reba McEntire round out the Top 50 artists by number of career spins between 2000 and 2018 at 48, 49, and 50 with just over 1+ million spins each. It worth noting that male artists that emerged in the last 5 years, during this period in which gender equality has been topic of public discussion, have more career spins than women that have been active since the early 2000s. This includes Florida Georgia Line (coming in at 13), Thomas Rhett (at 16), Sam Hunt (at 36), and Cole Swindell (at 39) on the list of Top 50 artists by spins.

While this report focuses on the Published Panel of reporting stations, it is important to step back and consider total spins across *all* US stations – even those in smaller markets that do not report to Mediabase. Figure 1.6 shows that, unlike Figure 1.4, there is a steady and significant increase in the number of annual spins for the top 150 songs from 8,743,251 spins in 2000 to 21,234,735 in 2018. This is a 142.9% increase in spins over a 19-year period, suggesting that an increasing number of stations were playing country music over the course of this period. Of course, as with the previous graphs evaluating annual spin data, the gender frequency distribution of this data is particularly alarming. Table 1.8 summarizes the annual spins data for men, women, and male-female artists for all US country format stations. While the percentages remain relatively similar to the published panel, the actual totals for the number of annual spins is disconcerting. Male artists received 173.6 million *more* spins over this period than female artists, and 196 million more than male-female ensembles.

**Figure 1.6** Total Annual Spins on the Yearend Reports for All US Country Format Stations (2000-2018)

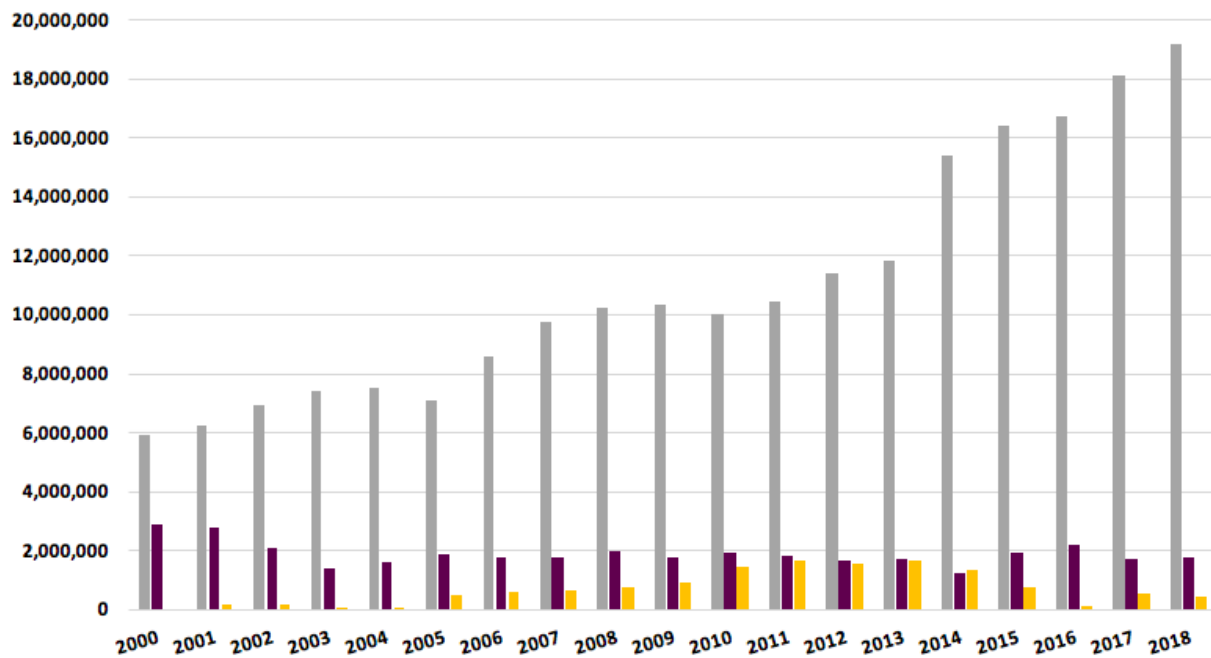


**Table 1.8** Total Annual Spins for Men, Women and Male-Female Ensembles on the Yearend Reports for All US Country Format Stations (2000-2018)

	Total spins	% of total spins
Men (solo/group)	208,661,259	81.4%
Women (solo/group)	35,043,569	13.7%
Male-female ensembles	12,615,009	4.9%
Total spins	256,319,837	100%

Figure 1.7 maps the annual spin data on all US stations in a line graph, showing the significant widening of the difference from 34.9% percentage points in 2000 to 82% by 2018. Given these figures, it is clear that female artists are significantly disadvantaged on most country format stations across the USA. At the start of the period, they have 34.9% of the total annual spins, decreasing to 15.3% by 2003, to 11.2% in 2012, and to a period low of 8.1% in 2018. Where the ratio of spins was 9.7 to 1 between men and women with the yearend Published Panel, the ratio increases here to 11.1 to 1 when looking at all US stations. Male-female ensembles likewise have a significant deficit of spins. They begin the period with no spins (not having registered a song in the top 150 of the yearend in 2000), increasing to 11.6% in 2011, but then decline to 1.8% by 2018. Like some of the trends we saw on the Hot Country Songs chart, male-female artist activity *increases* as the spins for female artists *decreases*. This suggests that radio has not been willing to make space for both female artists and male-female ensembles, and continue to lump them together in one all-encompassing “female” category.

**Figure 1.7** Distribution of Total Annual Spins Received by Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles on Yearend Reports for All US Country Format Stations (2000-2018)



## Summary

The findings for Part 1 on the yearend published panel illustrate the gender inequity on country format radio. Male artists do not merely have more songs on the charts than female artists, but there are also more men than women on the charts, and male artists receive a *significant* amount of the total annual spins. These findings indeed echo the results of the analysis of the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart:

1. Male artists are programmed more than women in every year of this study period by an average of 58.6% when looking at all 2,850 songs on the yearend reports;
2. Men's worst showings on the overall chart for this period are significantly higher than women's best showing at each angle of analysis;
3. The percentage of songs by male artists increases from the complete yearend chart analysis, to the Top 20, Top 10 and #1 position, just as the percentage of songs by female artists decreases;
4. Female country artists (as well as male-female ensembles) are completely shut out from the Top 10 of the yearend reports in 2003, 2008, and for the last five years of the study period;
5. The disparity between male and female artists is most pronounced when evaluating the total annual spins: male artists receive increasingly *more* spins every year while female artists decrease expanding from a 2:1 ratio in 2002 to 9.7:1 by 2018;
6. The gap for spins for both the Published Panel and all country format stations in the US increases to an astonishing 81% and 82% percentage points, respectively.

Overall, these results point to the prevalence for programming women and male-female ensembles at 13-15% of a station playlist. Whether intentionally followed or not, Hill's programming rules have become standard practice in how radio programs women within their playlists. Part 2 will address the weekly charts over a 17-year period. They also show the underrepresentation of women in radio programming.

## Part 2: Weekly Reports, 2002-2018

The yearend reports provide an overview of general trends toward gender inequity on country format radio. Part 1 of this study revealed a widening percentage point gap between male and female artists at every level of analysis from the total songs on radio between 2000 and 2018, to the number of artists and their presence on radio by total annual spins. Part 2 dives deeper into radio airplay data, analyzing the weekly airplay charts for the period of 2002 and 2018. This dataset begins at 2002, rather than 2000, because the database does not include a full year before this point (the data starts at July 2001). This dataset allows us to examine not only the individual songs and artists that receive radio airplay on reporting stations, but also the amount of time spent on the chart. The dataset for this part of the study has of 302,287 rows of songs, comprising all of the songs that appeared on reporting country format stations on each week of a 17-year period. This means, of course, that songs appear more than once in the dataset, as it captures the weekly activity for every song played on country radio. The number of positions each week fluctuates from one year to the next, and includes both currents and recurrents for each week in the 17-year period.<sup>25</sup> Over the course of this period, 125,637 songs in the dataset are considered *current* and 176,648 songs transitioned into recurrent status. Table 2.1 outlines the fine-grained details of the coding system of the 302,287 weekly reports. This list shows how songs were coded, and a breakdown of the full complex of the dataset according the number of songs by men, women, and male-female artists.

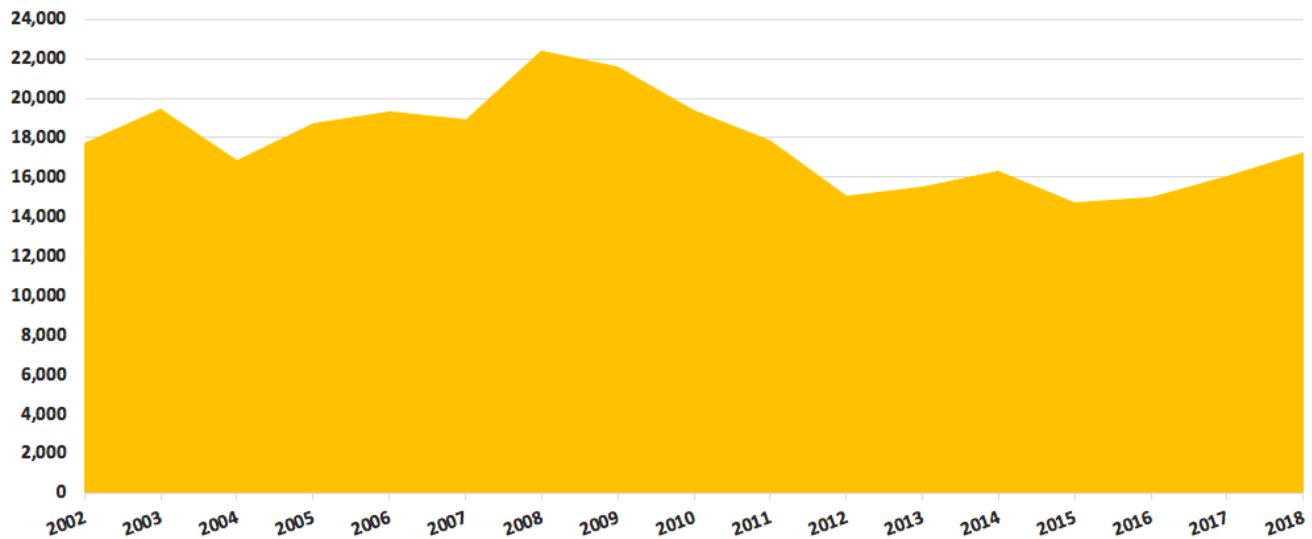
**Table 2.1** Study's Coding System for the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

Code	Artist/Ensemble Type	# of songs	% of songs
M	Male solo artist	217,543	72%
M	Male solo artist feat. male solo	4,807	1.6%
M	Male solo artist feat. female solo	4,772	1.6%
M	Male solo artist feat. male group	993	0.3%
M	Male solo artist feat. female group	21	0.0%
M	Male solo artist feat. male-female ensemble	172	0.1%
F	Female solo artist	51,724	17.1%
F	Female group	5,163	1.7%
F	Female solo artist feat. male solo	1,123	0.4%
F	Female solo artist feat. female solo	438	0.1%
F	Female solo artist feat. male group	578	0.2%
F	Female solo artist feat. female group	27	0.0%
F	Female solo artist feat. male-female ensemble	52	0.0%
M-F	Male-female ensemble	14,797	4.9%
M-F	Male-female ensemble feat. male solo	31	0.0%
M-F	Male-female ensemble feat. female solo	44	0.0%
M-F	Male-female ensemble feat. male group	2	0.0%
Total songs		302,287	100%

Figure 2.1 graphs the distribution of songs on the weekly charts, outlining the increase in total number of songs charting from 17,754 in 2002 to a period high of 22,393 in 2008 and then the decline to a period low of 14,748 in 2015 before a final rise toward the yearend 17,232 in 2018. While research is currently underway regarding the fluctuation in the total number of songs on country radio during this period, it is possible that acquisition and consolidation played a role in the 2008 to 2015 decline. This period was marked by several significant changes of ownership and consolidation. For example, Townsquare Media and Cumulus made several large acquisitions

during this period. They purchased stations from Gap Broadcasting in August 2010 and then from Peak Broadcasting in August 2013. In 2011, Cumulus purchased 9 stations from Citadel, and then announced a 65-station swap-deal with Townsquare over the course of 2012-2013. According to *Radio Insights*, this deal was done so that both Townsquare and Cumulus could consolidate within markets in which they already had a presence.<sup>26</sup> These are just a few examples of radio purchases that allow large conglomerates to consolidate stations, arrangements that could have had significant impacts on the programming practices at individual stations. For example, preliminary studies currently underway suggest that playlists were reduced following changes in ownership.

**Figure 2.1** Distribution of Songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)



As with Part 1, there is a significant disparity between men and women on the weekly airplay reports. Table 2.2 summarizes the full dataset, showing that 228,308 (75.5%) of the songs on country radio were by men, 59,105 (19.6%) were by women, and 14,874 (4.9%) were by male-female ensembles. Table 2.3 parses this same data into current and recurrent status on the reports, to discover that within the 59,105 songs by female artists over this period, 26,731 (8.8%) were current songs, while 32,374 (10.7%) were recurrent. For male artists, 92,782 (30.7%) of their 228,308 songs were current, and 135,526 (44.8%) were in recurrent status.

**Table 2.2** Gender Representation for all Songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs
Men (solo/group)	228,308	75.5%
Women (solo/group)	59,105	19.6%
Male-female ensembles	14,874	4.9%
Total songs	302,287	100%

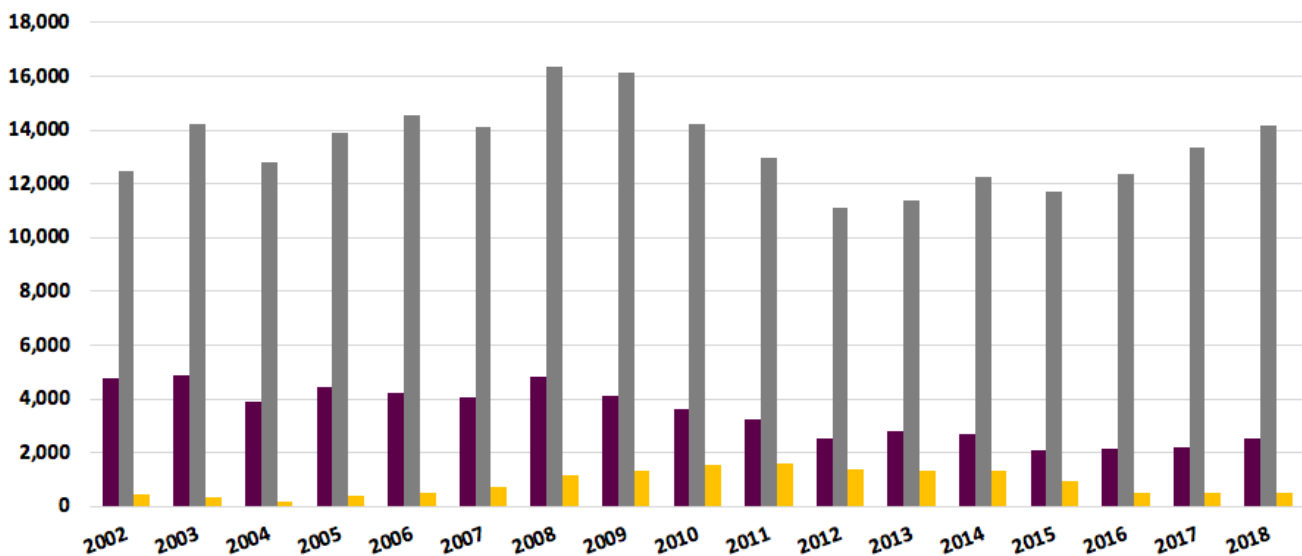
**Table 2.3** Gender Representation by Current vs. Recurrent Status of all Songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of current songs	% of current songs	# of recurrent songs	% of recurrent songs
Men (solo/group)	92,782	73.8%	135,526	76.7%
Women (solo/group)	26,731	21.3%	32,374	18.3%
Male-female ensembles	6,126	4.9%	8,748	5.0%
Total songs	125,639	100%	176,648	100%



Figure 2.2 reveals the distribution of men, women, and male-female ensembles over this 2002-2018 time period. In 2002, there was a difference of 43.4% percentage points between men and women, increasing to 55.4% in 2008, and ending with an average 67.6% gap from 2015-2018. Given the above hypotheses about consolidation and potentially shrinking sizes of playlists, the decrease in songs by male and female artists through 2008 to 2012 suggests that changes in this period impacted both men and women. Despite the fact that the change *appears* to have impacted men more in this period (with a drop of 47.7%, compared to 31.9% for women), the difference between male and female artists in fact *increases* from 51.4% percentage points in 2008 to 57.4% in 2012. From this point forward, the gap continues to increase to a high of 69.4% percentage points in 2017, and back to 67.6% by the end of the study period. Interestingly, throughout this 5-year period in which male and female activity declined, male-female ensembles were on the rise, increasing from 1,190 (5.3%) songs to 1,627 (9.1%) songs in 2011. From this high point in the study period, male-female ensembles decline significantly to just 505 songs (2.9%) by 2018.

**Figure 2.2** Distribution of Weekly Activity of All songs by Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

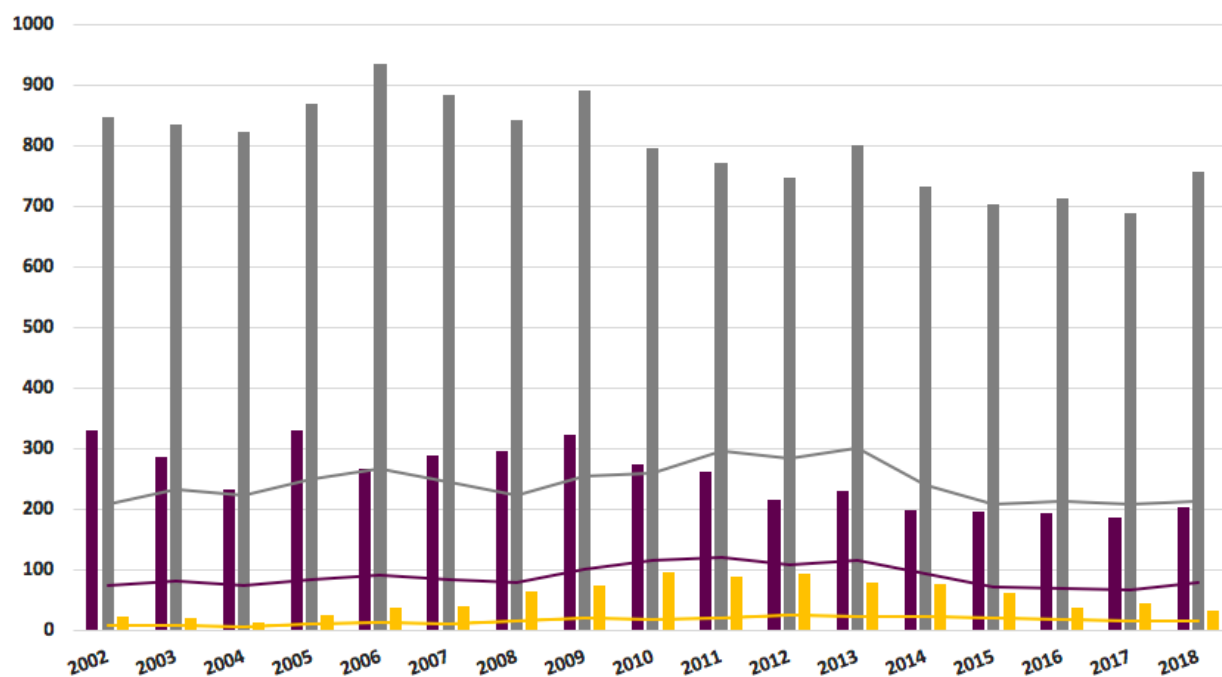


Through the weekly reports, we get a clearer picture of the impact of programming on individual artists over this 17-year period. Table 2.4 summarizes the total number of individual songs and artists, which is also graphed in Figure 2.3. Not surprisingly, there is not one year in Figure 2.3 in which women are programmed at the same rate or even come close to the same rate as male artists. Indeed, when looking at the individual number of songs in this period (represented in the bars) the gap increases from 43% percentage points in 2002 to 55.3 in 2004, remains at average of 45% between 2007 and 2011, and then increases to an average of 55% in 2016-2018. An improved relationship emerges in the number of individual artists (represented in lines) on these weekly charts; an annual average of 70% of the chart is comprised of male artists, while female artists maintain a 25% average, with the final 5% by male-female ensembles. Women have their strongest showing in 2010, when 101 women (29.5%) had songs on the radio. Despite the improved percentages, however, it is important to note that there are at least 135 more individual men than women on these weekly reports throughout the entire period.

**Table 2.4** Number and Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs	# of artists	% of artists
Men (solo/group)	6,769	71.1%	1,348	66.1%
Women (solo/group)	2,300	24.2%	591	29%
Male-female ensembles	450	4.7%	100	4.9%
Totals	9,519	100%	2,039	100%

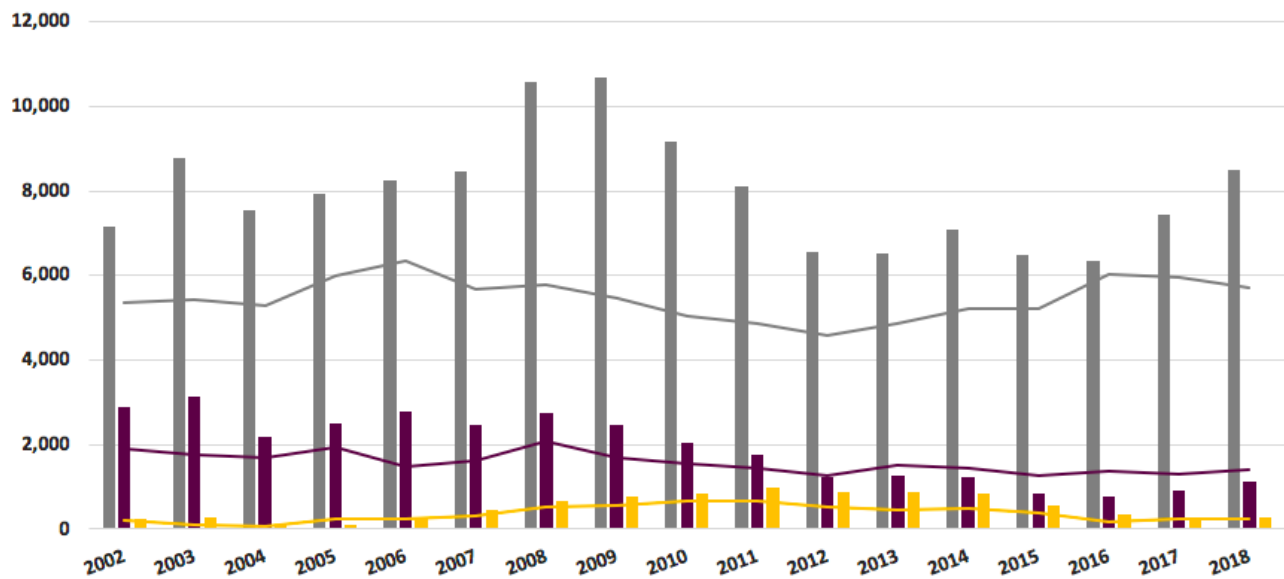
**Figure 2.3** Distribution of Unique Songs (bars) and Artists (lines) on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)



The reason for this roughly 70/25 split can be attributed to the fact that these weekly reports include recurrent songs (see Table 2.3), which comprise a significant portion of a station's weekly reporting activity. Figure 2.4 maps the weekly distribution of recurrent (bars) against current (lines) songs on country format radio. Here, too, male artists are programmed at a much higher rate with both their current and recurrent songs. In fact, their recurrent songs outnumber their current songs in every year of this study period – up to a period high of 45% in 2009. The distribution of current and recurrent songs by female artists is most surprising. Between 2002 and 2011, as one might expect, there are more recurrent songs in weekly rotation than current songs by women. In 2013, the number of current songs begin to outnumber the recurrent songs, suggesting that songs that fall out of current rotation and old (“gold”) catalogues are dropped from and/or reduced in programming at a greater rate.

These figures thus show that women are disadvantaged in programming with both their current songs and the repetition of their older catalogue of songs. While male artists are no doubt privileged, it is interesting to see how much greater a percentage of their recurrent songs are included in regular rotation across reporting stations. Here too, there is potential concern about acquisition and consolidation activities on programming. Any potential impact on artists by consolidation looks as though it occurred through the recurrent songs at a higher rate than the currents. One might argue that these cuts would make room for more currents; and indeed it *did* for male artists – but not for women or male-female ensembles. Although there is a general decline overall and an initial cut in male recurrent songs, there is a more significant and longer-term impact on women and male-female ensembles.

**Figure 2.4** Distribution of Recurrent (bars) and Current (lines) Songs by Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles on Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)



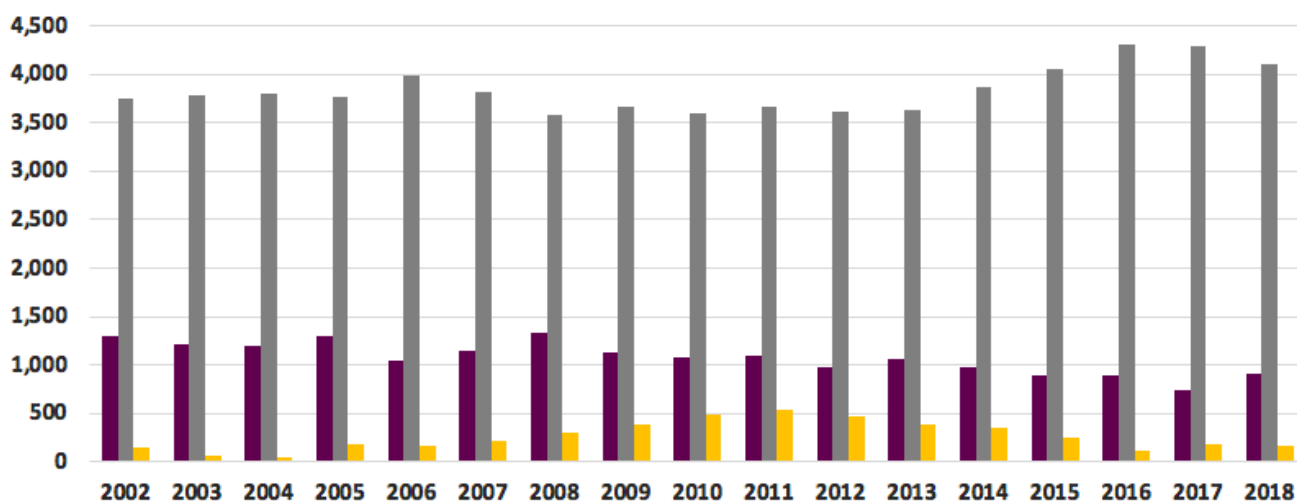
Drilling into the top positions of the weekly reports shows us how programming impacts the trajectories of songs by female artists. Tables 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7 summarize gender representation in the top spots of the weekly charts, showing how women are filtered out of these positions. Looking at the Top 100 songs (the number of songs Mediabase reports via *Country Aircheck* each week) in Table 2.5, 4,684 (70.5%) of the songs are by male artists, while the remaining 1,630 (24.5%) are by women and 327 (5%) male-female ensembles. The figures for female artists are higher for the Top 100 songs in the weekly reports than for the yearend charts, and male-female ensembles are relatively similar. This difference can be explained by the fact that the songs need to garner enough annual spins to be ranked on those yearend charts. As such, the results from Part 1 show that women do not receive enough spins from radio during a calendar year to reach this milestone. The results here show us that women are filtered out of the top positions of the weekly charts, proving that they are not programmed enough to make the yearends.

**Table 2.5** Number and Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists the Top 100 of the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs	# of songs	% of songs
Men (solo/group)	4,684	70.5%	1,030	65%
Women (solo/group)	1,630	24.5%	482	30.4%
Male-female ensembles	327	5%	73	4.6%
Totals	6,641	100%	1,585	100%

The overall distribution of these Top 100 songs, mapped in Figure 2.5, shows increasing activity for male artists (72.4% in 2002 to 79.1% by 2018), against a declining trend for female artists of 24.9% in 2002 and 17.6% in 2018. The greatest disparity between male and female artists emerges in 2017, where male artists have a high of 82.5% of the Top 100 songs, and female artists drop to 14.1%. Throughout this 17-year period, male-female ensembles maintain a 5% average of the weekly positions, expanding to 10% in 2011. In these middle years, 2008 to 2013, women and male-female ensembles account for 30% of the chart, declining to 20% by 2018.

**Figure 2.5** Distribution of Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles in the Top 100 Songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)



Drilling into the dataset, 960 songs peaked in the Top 10 of the weekly airplay reports, 550 of which reached the coveted #1 position. Male artists are programmed at a higher proportion than both female artists and male-female ensembles in terms of both the number of songs peaking in the Top 10 (Table 2.6), and reaching the #1 position (Table 2.7). The difference between the number of songs by male and female artists likewise increases, expanding from 67.6% in the Top 10 to 72.9% in the #1 position. As with previous tables, not only do men have more chart-topping songs, but there are also more male artists reaching these top positions. Each of these summary Tables (2.5 to 2.7) show that the percentage of male artists increases from the Top 100, to the Top 10 and the No. 1 position, while the number of women decreases and the number of male-female ensembles remains relatively unchanged. These relationships are complementary to the Hot Country Songs chart.<sup>27</sup> Here, too, the difference between the number of unique songs by men and women increases from 46% in the full chart and Top 100, to 67.6% in the Top 10 and 72.6% in the #1 position.

**Table 2.6** Number and Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists in the Top 10 of the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs	# of artists	% of artists
Men (solo/group)	781	81.4%	131	76.1%
Women (solo/group)	132	13.8%	33	19.2%
Male-female ensembles	47	4.9%	8	4.7%
Totals	960	100%	172	100%

**Table 2.7** Number and Percentage of Unique Songs and Artists at the #1 Position of the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

	# of songs	% of songs	# of artists	% of artists
Men (solo/group)	462	84%	89	78%
Women (solo/group)	61	11.1%	19	16.7%
Male-female ensembles	27	4.9%	6	5.3%
Totals	550	100%	114	100%

The weekly distribution of the Top 10 songs is mapped in Figure 2.6. This graph illustrates a 17-year period with a greater than 50% percentage point gap between men and women. With the exception of 2005 (when women

maintained 21.7% of the Top 10 songs), female artists had 15% of the Top 10 songs between 2002 to 2004 and 2006 to 2012. Again, as with other Figures in this study, 2013 marks a down turning point for female artists, where they drop to 8.4% of the Top 10 songs in 2014, and maintain an 8.8% average over the last five years. Female artists have their lowest point in 2014 with just 6.3%, where male-female artists have more Top 10 songs (7.9%). Male artists maintain a 17-year average of 82%, with highs of 90.2% in 2003 and 2016 and 92.1% in 2018. These results show a significant disparity between male and female artists in the Top 10 of the chart, which is also reflected in the graph of the Top 10 songs on the yearend reports in Figure 1.3. In this context, women are not allotted enough space on radio playlists to move their songs up the chart and into the Top 10.

**Figure 2.6** Distribution of Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles in the Top 10 of the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

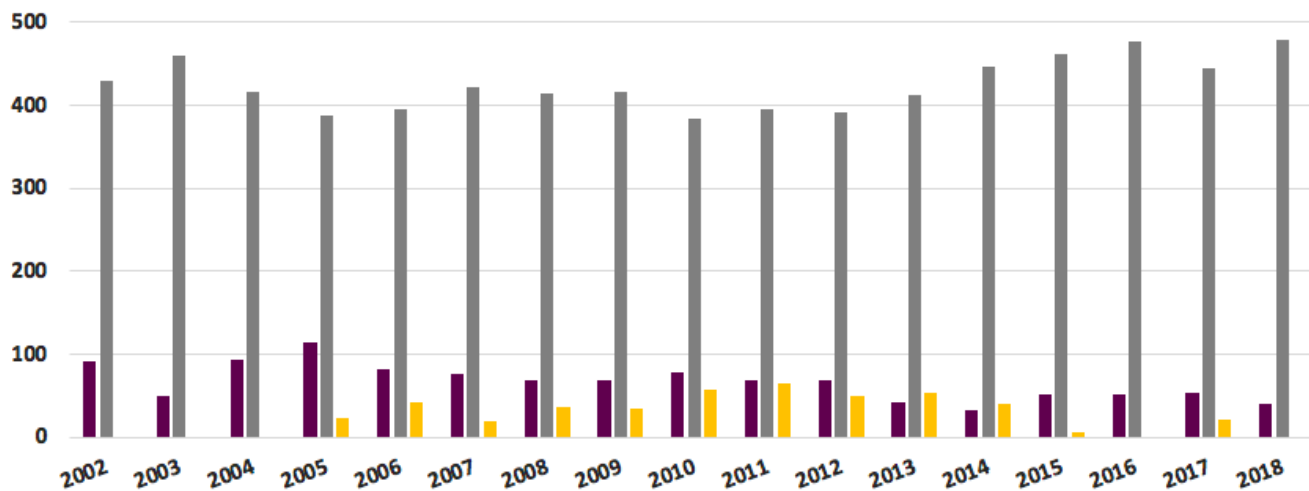


Figure 2.7 illustrates the annual activity of gender-related trends in the #1 position of the chart. As in previous figures (in both Part 1 and Part 2), the long-term trends in this graph shows that men have more #1 songs than women in every year of this 17-year period. Like the Hot Country Songs chart, men have an increasing number of #1 songs throughout this period, to an extreme peak of 45 unique #1 songs in 2015, and women have fewer than five #1 songs a year throughout this period with the exception of six songs in 2008 and seven in 2010. As with the Hot Country Songs study, male-female artists have an increase in #1 songs between 2009 and 2014, with a high of 5 songs (programmed at a higher rate than female artists) in 2013. Following 2014, male-female ensembles do not fare well in the #1 position, registering no #1 songs in 2015, 2016, and 2018.

These results show a drastic increase in the number of chart-topping songs (in general) and for men (specifically). There appears to be a shift in 2008-2009 (an increase of six songs) and again in 2012-2013 (an increase of eight songs), with a high of 49 #1 songs in 2015. This shows a significant rate of turnover in the #1 position – which is unlike the activity in the #1 position of the Hot Country Songs chart at this point in time.

The years 2006 through 2010 were perhaps the strongest years for female artists between 2002 and 2018. While female artists had just five #1 songs in 2005, this amounted to 18.5% of the chart-topping songs that year, increasing to six #1 songs (20.7%) in 2008, and seven songs (20%) in 2010. Following this year, fewer songs by women reach #1 on the weekly reports, falling to five songs in 2011, to four in 2012 and 2013, and dropping to a 17-year low of just two songs #1 songs in 2014. Although there is a slight rebound to four songs in 2015 and 2016, these figures are still significantly lower when you consider them against the drastic increase in the number of #1 songs by men, which, by 2015 reaches 45 #1 songs – a difference of 83.7% percentage points between men and women. As a result of few songs by women reaching #1 and three years with no #1 songs by male-female artists, the gap between men and women during the last five years of this study period remains at a high average of 83.7%.

**Figure 2.7** Distribution of Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles in the #1 Position of the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)

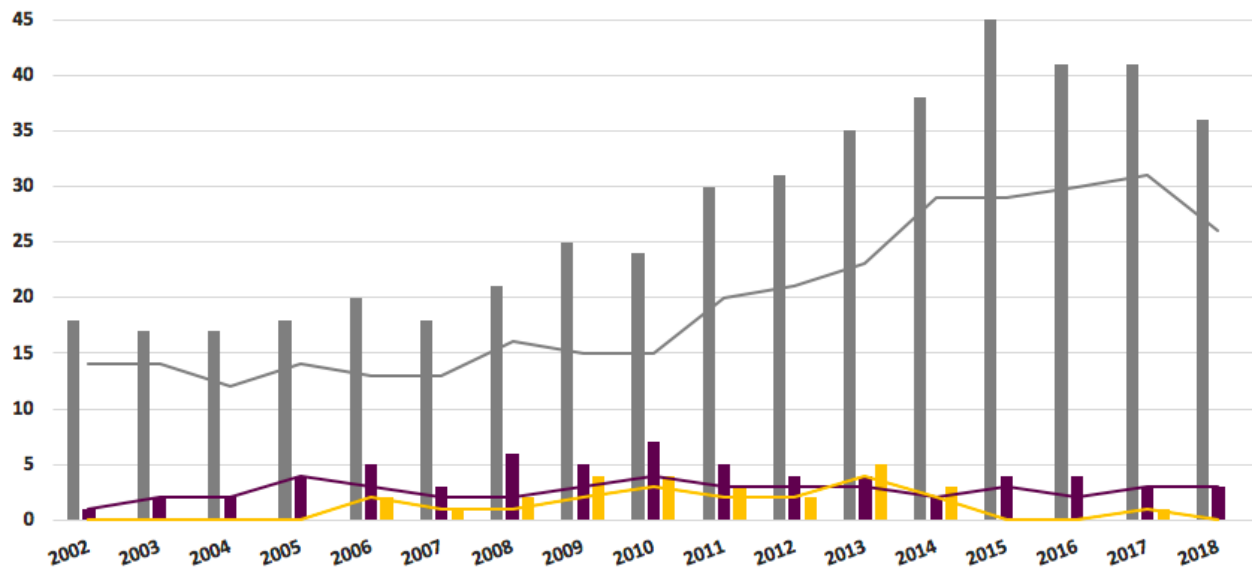


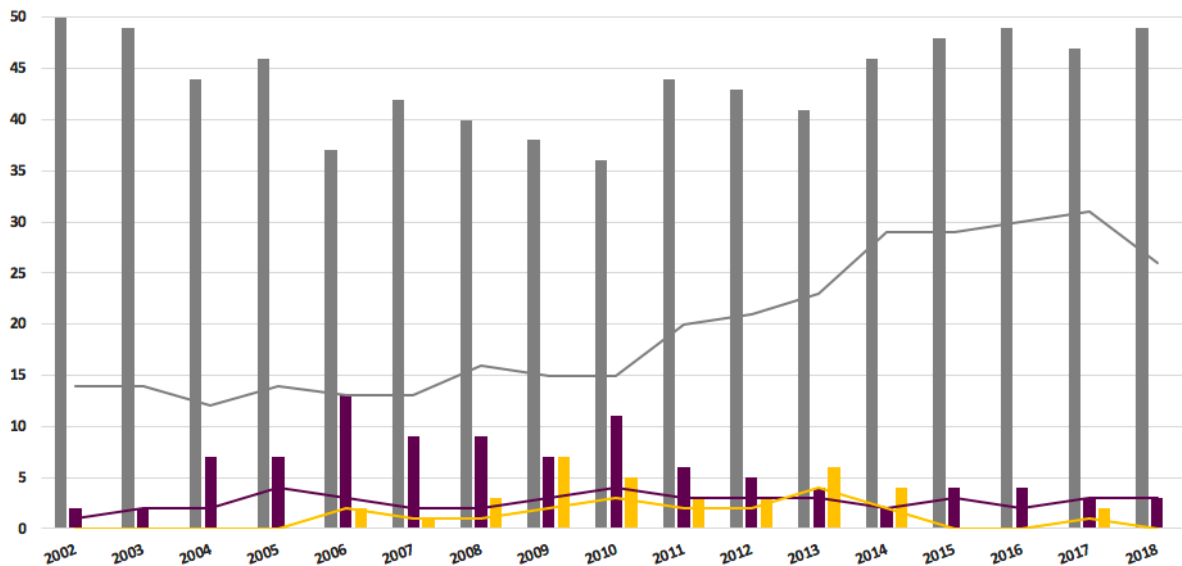
Figure 2.8 illustrates the weekly activity in the #1 position of the weekly reports between 2002 and 2018. The years 2002-2004 are particularly weak for female artists at the start of this period. Martina McBride (“Blessed”) spent two weeks at #1 in 2002 and Terri Clark (“I Just Wanna Be Mad”) and the Dixie Chicks (“Travelin’ Soldier”) each spent one week at #1 in 2003. This early period is characterized by male artists registering longer-running #1 songs like Kenny Chesney’s “The Good Stuff” (7 weeks) and Keith Urban’s “Somebody Like You” (8 weeks) in 2002, Alan Jackson’s “It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere” (8 weeks) in 2003, and Tim McGraw’s “Live Like You Were Dying” (10 weeks) in 2004. Women spend increasingly more time in the #1 position between 2004 and 2011, registering more than 5 weeks in the #1 position of the chart. While they do not come close to matching male-activity in the top position of this period, they do have strong showings in 2006 (13 weeks) and 2010 (11 weeks). In fact, Carrie Underwood held the top spot for 5 weeks in 2005 with “Jesus Take the Wheel” and again in 2008 with “Wasted” and “So Small”. Despite these gains, the percentage point gap remains significant with regard to the number of weeks in the top position. In the eight-year period between 2004 and 2011, female artists held the #1 position for just 69 of the 416 weeks, with Sara Evans, Gretchen Wilson, and Miranda Lambert spending six weeks at #1, Taylor Swift with 16 weeks, and Carrie Underwood dominating the period with 22 weeks at the top of the chart.

Here, too, as with Figure 1.3 mapping distribution of Top 10 songs by men, women and male-female ensembles in the yearend reports, the final years of this period on the weekly charts shows a decreasing number of songs in the #1 spot by female artists. While male artists register 197 songs in the #1 position between 2014 and 2018, only 16 songs by female artists receive enough spins to reach #1 (each for just one week) in this 5-year period. These #1 songs include:

- Miranda Lambert’s “Automatic” and Maddie & Tae’s “Girl in a Country Song” in 2014,
- Cam’s “Burning House”, Carrie Underwood’s “Little Toy Guns” and “Smoke Break”, and Kelsea Ballerini’s “Love Me Like You Mean It” in 2015;
- Kelsea Ballerini’s “Peter Pan” and “Dibs”, and Carrie Underwood’s “Heartbeat” and “Church Bells” in 2016;
- Lauren Alaina’s “Road Less Travelled”, Carly Pearce’s “Every Little Thing”, and Carrie Underwood’s “Dirty Laundry” in 2017; and
- Kelsea Ballerini’s “Legends”, Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line’s “Meant to Be” and Maren Morris’s “I Could Use a Love Song” in 2018.

Kelsea Ballerini and Carrie Underwood emerge with four and five #1 songs, respectively. With no #1 songs by male-female ensembles in 2015 and 2016, this period is dominated by male artists.

**Figure 2.8** Distribution of Men, Women and Male-female Ensembles by Weeks in the #1 Position (bars) and Unique Artists (lines) on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports (2002-2018)



## Summary

The findings for Part 2 on the weekly distribution of songs charting on the Published Panel further describe the gender inequity on country format radio. Here too, there are more songs by men on the chart, and more men charting overall and annually. Male artists are, as these results show, given more opportunities by radio programmers than female artists and male-female ensembles – and by a significant margin. The results here point to the following trends:

1. Male artists have more current *and* recurrent songs than female artists, with a gap of 52.5% percentage points between them in the overall currents, increasing to 58.4% in the recurrent songs;
2. Male artists are programmed at a higher rate than female artists when looking at the weekly trends in terms of both the overall number of songs and artists, as well as the unique instances of both factors;
3. When looking at the overall chart representation in this period, the percentage point gap increases from 43.4% in 2002 to 67.6 in 2018;
4. As with the yearend charts, the percentage of songs by male artists increases from the complete chart analysis, to the Top 100, Top 10 and #1 position, just as the percentage of songs by female artists decreases;
5. Male artists have increasingly more #1 songs on the chart, with a 17-year high of 45 individual songs in 2015.

The years 2008 through to 2012 form a fascinating period of decline and growth. While we see an overall decline for both men and women through these five years when looking at the full weekly charts (Figure 2.2) and even unique songs (Figure 2.3), when we drill into the number of individual artists and the top spot on the chart, the year 2010 seems to be a point around which the decline ends for men (who have an increase in songs and individual artists) and continual, if not drastic, decline for women. As with the yearend reports, the last five years (2014 to 2018) of the weekly reports show that fewer women are included in regular rotation on the full chart, and that they have been gradually eliminated from the chart's top positions. This is most striking in the #1 position, where there is a difference of 83.7% percentage points between male and female artists.

# Conclusions

*Don't play too many female artists.*  
*Don't play women back-to-back.*  
*If you want to improve station ratings, remove the women.*  
*Country radio is a principally male format.*  
*Women are not financially viable.*  
*Women don't have as many hits.*  
*We only have space for one female on the roster.*  
*Women don't want to hear women.*

Women working in the country music industry hear phrases like these every day. This language reflects the discriminatory gender politics that govern the industry – the statements made by the predominantly male gatekeepers about the place of female artists in the industry and in radio programming, and about audience preferences. Women are made to feel that their music is not viable, that their songs are not “hits”, and that their audiences are not interested in their voices. The results presented here suggest a different read on the cultural dynamics of radio. They show that programming decisions have a direct impact on the success of songs, and that women are not afforded the same opportunities as their male colleagues. The graphs throughout this study show a deteriorating picture of the position of female artists in country music culture – despite continued attempts on the part of women to promote their music to and via radio. Gender-based programming has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: instead of seeing an opportunity to promote and program female artists (indeed *new* female artists) to audiences, radio has increasingly programmed women at a smaller percentage of their playlists. As indicated in my study of the Hot Country Songs chart, programmers are “implementing a practice introduced in the 1960s that limits the number of women allowed to participate in country radio – and then use the absence of women on [radio playlists and popularity charts] to justify and maintain this practice.”<sup>28</sup>

Male artists are privileged in this space by every metric. These results show that men are programmed at a higher rate than both women and male-female artists and that the numbers are not even close. There are increasingly more male artists and songs by male artists on the weekly charts throughout every metric of this study – which results in more songs appearing on the yearend charts (overall, in the Top 10 and the #1 position). Within this space, they receive more songs on *current* playlists (44.8% overall), but they appear in significantly greater numbers in the *recurrent* songs (30.7%).

The most alarming finding relates to annual spins for artists. Over the course of the 19-year period of the yearend chart analysis, this study reveals that male artists are given more annual spins and increase by 42.9% over this period from 5.8 million total spins in 2000 to 10.3 million in 2018 (when looking at the Published Panel). Women have 2.8 million at the start of this period (just under half the total annual spins of male artists), but then decline to an annual average of 1.1 million over the majority of this study period (15 years). While they maintain 1.1 million spins annually, the drastic increase in spins for male artists means that women occupy a smaller percentage of the yearend charts in each of these 15 years. Spins for male artists increase through and following all industry changes: ratings slumps, increase and decrease of commercial loads, and consolidation of stations. Women are disadvantaged in this culture and suffer through each of these moments of change in the industry, and are gradually eliminated from radio culture to a point of 11.3% of the overall yearend charts and 9.2% of the annual spins in 2018. When songs by male artists receive 9.7 times more spins than those by female artists (as in 2018), we have a significant cultural problem.

And yet, it hasn't always been this way. In a 1997 article in *Billboard* magazine entitled “Women's Work”, Chet Flippo outlined the slow rise of female artists throughout the genre's history. He stated that the “women's revolution has been gradual” throughout the history of country music, and identified Maybelle Carter, Patsy Cline,



Dolly Parton, and Loretta Lynn as pioneering women. He positioned Reba McEntire and The Judds as a bridge between the Parton and Lynn and the new generation of artists, including Martina McBride, Faith Hill and Shania Twain (to name a few) who he states had “significantly identifiable voices, a problem that has wracked the dwindling surge of male hat acts who seem indistinguishable from each other.”<sup>29</sup> For Flippo, the mid-1990s marked a decisive change in both the tone and number of female artists in country music. He points specifically to the *Billboard* charts as a marker for evaluating this cultural shift. This observation is confirmed by my study of the Hot Country Songs chart: then a radio airplay chart, the data from the late 1990s shows that female artists occupied a much more significant part of country’s radio culture. Between 1996 and 2000, they maintained an average of 30% of the overall chart, with a high of 34.1% in 1999. They also achieved significantly more #1 songs in this period, registering 40% of the chart-topping songs in 1996, increasing to 52.4% in 1998 (when they had *more* #1 songs than male artists).<sup>30</sup> These results confirm a period in which female artists were included in regular rotation at a significantly higher percentage and in which audiences had much more diverse programming on their stations. The Hot Country Songs results, like those reported here, show drastic changes in popularity charts in the early 2000s that can only be the result of changes in programming – changes that privilege male artists and disadvantage women and (by extension) male-female ensembles (who are coded as “females”).

In a world in which these popularity charts and statistics impact how labels sign, produce and promote artists, programming decisions play a vital role in the broader cultural space of the genre. While program directors and consultants are likely to point to Figure 2.3 to argue that women maintain about 20-25% of the weekly rotation (or 25-30% when including male-female ensembles), we need to remember that this graph includes recurrent hits – both the singles that have fallen out of regular rotation and the non-singles/old (“gold”) catalogues that still receive airplay. Figure 2.4 lays these details bare, showing not only a decline in overall programming for women, but the reduction of recurrences in airplay for female artists between 2013 and 2018. When removing recurrent songs and focusing on the distribution of the Top 100 songs on the weekly reports and certainly activity in the Top 10 and #1 positions, the disparity between male and female artists becomes clear. Where programming (spins) generates “hits” and additional opportunities for artists, these results show us that women are not even playing in the same field as male artists.

In her critical text *Weapons of Math Destruction*, mathematician Cathy O’Neill argues that data are used in ways that reinforce pre-existing inequalities and discriminatory practices.<sup>31</sup> The results here show the development and increasing severity of the results of gender-based programming that privileges male artists and disadvantages everyone else. They illustrate that programming decisions have resulted in and indeed perpetuated a culture of inequality, decreasing the space available to women and nearly erasing them from country radio. Practices at radio – from programming, to commercial loads, to acquisition and consolidation of stations – need to be further investigated before they become (even more) commonplace, ritualized, and an accepted part of the rhetoric of country music culture.

# Moving forward...

The results of this study point to significant gender imbalance in the genre, and renders visible the impact of the gender-based programming that has governed the industry for decades. Indeed, these discriminatory practices are not new to country music. They date to the early days of radio programming when female artists had to abide by rules regarding their public conduct, image, and sexuality and were not programmed back-to-back because of (as Helton stated) a lack of female hits. By the late 1990s, this practice of “spreading them out” developed into a gender-based formula in which women were programmed at 13-15% of radio playlists. These issues do not just persist today – they are significantly worse now than in the late 1990s. They are systemic to the industry and so ingrained in the culture that those in positions of power do not see the sexism and discrimination in their actions.

The solutions do not lie in the hands of the women that have been knocking on closed doors. They have done their part. Nor do they lie in the research and reporting of journalists and scholars who use their platforms to address these imbalances and spotlight women’s achievements.

The solutions lie in the hands of the industry leaders at radio, labels, management and touring agencies, publicists, and professional associations. These entities share a responsibility to reflect on the results presented here, understand that gender-based quotas and programming have serious and long-term consequences for female artists and male-female ensembles, and start taking meaningful action toward inclusion.

In January 2019, Change the Conversation organized a panel discussion between Beverly Keel with leading journalists Ann Powers, Jewly Hight and Marissa Moss to discuss gender inequality in the industry.<sup>32</sup> This event occurred just weeks before the 50<sup>th</sup> annual Country Radio Seminar was to take place in Nashville – putting pressure on the organization to address the issues in a public forum. Country Radio Broadcasters Executive Director R.J. Curtis revealed that he was in attendance because they (the CRB) were listening. He stated:

“We don’t want to make a perfunctory, check-the-box pass at this. Doing so would be an insult to everyone in this room tonight. It has to be done thoughtfully, intelligently. We have to recruit informed industry leaders who also participate in sessions during CRS to contribute, too, so that any discussion we have ends up being productive... It is a multilayered situation that does not have a simple solution.”

Much-needed next steps are complicated only in that the commitment of many companies and leaders are necessary to address these long-standing issues within country music. It will take an “all-in” approach to begin seeing measurable improvement. However, the individual actions each entity could take are relatively simple:

- **Radio:** spin more women, more frequently.
- **Labels:** sign and promote women with the same commitment, intensity and resources as male artists.
- **Industry associations (CMA, ACM, CRS):** set a standard for inclusion and representation throughout your mandate: update eligibility requirements for awards and honours to exclude ingrained bias and work with participating sponsors to develop diverse programming.
- **Promoters and Presenters:** create and book diverse and inclusive tours, festivals, and experiences.
- **Management and Agencies:** take the lead from Stacy L. Smith and her recommendations for the film industry: work with your artists to develop *inclusion riders* – demand diversity and inclusivity in the studio, on tour, and at festivals.<sup>33</sup>
- **Male artists:** play an active part in this discussion and with the inclusion rider! Demand that your female colleagues have equal opportunity on radio, tours, festivals, and more!
- **Audiences and Advocates:** hold the above businesses accountable for their choices and offerings.

Those outside of the country industry can likewise participate; **Businesses and Organizations** who promote their products and services via radio or who sponsor events can demand more diverse and inclusive programming.

These solutions are not hard, but they do require significant change. They require public commitments, action plans and benchmarks for accountability. The decisions driving the industry should reflect and represent its diverse and growing audience. The future of country music can be one of inclusion and opportunity for all.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (eds.), *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016), vii-xvii.
- <sup>2</sup> Kristine M. McCusker, "[Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender](#)," in *The Oxford Handbook to Country Music*, edited by Travis D Stimeling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 355–74.
- <sup>3</sup> Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> Mary Ann Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press; Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), 471-74.
- <sup>5</sup> McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls*; Beverly Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl," in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, edited by Kristine McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 155–77; and Kate Heidemann, "Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals: Performance of Identity in Songs by Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton," in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, edited by Diane Pecknold and Kristine M McCusker. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016), 166–88.
- <sup>6</sup> Gabriel Rossman discussed the power of radio programmers to break singles in chapter 3 and 4 of *Climbing the Carts: What Radio Airplay Tells us About Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). As Keith Negus reported on his time in Nashville in the 1990s, radio seemed so powerful and influential that artists and producers believed programmers were directly impacting "who was being signed to publishing and recording contracts" and were "ultimately influencing the ways in which artists were recorded." Though his comments came out of his study of the 1990s, they are certainly relevant today. See Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 110.
- <sup>7</sup> Beverly Keel, "[Sexist 'Tomato' Barb Launches Food Fight on Music Row](#)," *The Tennessean*, 27 May 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> As stated by Keith Hill in interview with Russ Penuell, "[On Music Scheduling](#)," *Country Aircheck*, 449 (2015): 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Keith Hill, "[Interview with Russ Penuell](#)," 8.
- <sup>10</sup> Hill, "[Interview with Russ Penuell](#)," 8.
- <sup>11</sup> John Rockwell, "[Vitality Without Popularity for Country-Music's Women](#)," *The New York Times* (11 August 1985). See also Chet Flippo, "[Women's Work](#)," *Billboard Magazine* (27 September 1997), 40 and Craig Havighurst, "Scenes from a Rose Garden," reprinted in *Country Music Reader*, edited by Travis D. Stimeling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 330-39.
- <sup>12</sup> The March 2, 2015 issue of *Country Aircheck* published a report on CRS 2015, which indicated that Hill opened the Friday morning session with a talk entitled "Unlocking the Secrets to Successful Music Scheduling." He spoke about "eliminating clusters of sameness," programming women at 13% of the current scheduling, and claiming that "women want to hear males." See the review of Hill's session in "[Music Scheduling](#)," *Country Aircheck* 437 (2 March 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> WOMAN Nashville, "[Breaking the Bowl: Time's Up on #Tomatogate](#)," Woman of Music Action Network, 13 July 2018.
- <sup>14</sup> Keith Hill, "[Interview with Larry Gifford](#)," *Radio Stuff Podcast*, 2 June 2015.
- <sup>15</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Marissa Moss, "[Inside Country Radio's Dark Secret History of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct](#)," *RollingStone Country*, 16 January 2018, and Emily Yahr, "['Radio Tour is Not for the Weak': Inside the First Step to Country Music Stardom](#)," *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2017.
- <sup>17</sup> Grady Smith, "[Why Country Music Was Awful in 2013](#)." YouTube video, 3:28. Posted on 20 December, 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> The Published Panel refers to the charts that are tabulated based on the programming of stations that report to Mediabase. Reporting stations are weighted based on their Average Quarter Hour (AQH) Arbitron Number and market size on a scale of 0-10. The AQH refers to the average number of individuals that listen to a particular station for at least 5 minutes in a 15-minute period. (See AHQ definition on [Arbitron website](#).) There are currently 321 country format stations monitored, with 156 of them reporting on the Published Panel.
- <sup>19</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 8.
- <sup>20</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Jada Watson and Lori Burns, "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks are 'Not Ready to Make Nice'," *Popular Music* 29, no. 4 (2010): 325-50.
- <sup>22</sup> Steve McClellan, "[Radio Takes the Lead in Cleaning Up the Clutter](#)," *Adweek.com*, 7 February 2005.
- <sup>23</sup> Judann Pollack, "[Radio's Health is Better than You Think, But What's the Long-term Prognosis?](#)" *AdAge*, 17 April 2018.
- <sup>24</sup> Fred Jacobs, "[One Minute On the Radio](#)," *Jacobs Media Strategies*, 3 May 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> It is imperative to note that the dataset categorizes songs that are no longer in the top charting positions alongside older songs (i.e., non-singles) and gold catalogues as "recurrent." As such, the dataset does not differentiate between them. Future studies will work toward differentiating between these levels of recurrent status.
- <sup>26</sup> For more information on the Townsquare-Cumulus 65-station swap see "[Cumulus, Townsquare Swap Involves 65 Stations, 13 Markets, \\$116 Million Cash](#)," *AllAccess.com*, 30 April 2012, and Lance Venta, "[Cumulus & Townsquare Swap 65 Stations](#)," *Radio Insight* 3 October 2012. For more on Cumulus' 2013 acquisitions, see "[Official: Cumulus Buys Dial Global, Spins Some Stations to Townsquare; Peak Stations Sols to Townsquare, Fresno Spun to Cumulus](#)," *AllAccess.com* 30 August 2013; and on Townsquare acquisitions in 2013 see "[Townsquare Media Acquiring Assets from Cumulus and Peak](#)," *Townsquaremedia.com*, 30 August 2013.
- <sup>27</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 10.
- <sup>28</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 18.
- <sup>29</sup> Chet Flippo, "[Women's Work](#)," *Billboard Magazine*, 27 Sept. 1997, 40.
- <sup>30</sup> Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 9-14.

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<sup>31</sup> Cathy O’Neill, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (Maryland: Crown Books, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Nicholson, “[Change the Conversation Panel Discusses Gender Inequality in Music](#),” *MusicRow* 23 January 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Smith first shared the idea at her 2016 TED talk on “[The Data Behind Hollywood’s Sexism](#),” but it picked up significant speed after Frances McDormand finished her Oscar speech with the following: “I have two words for you: inclusion rider.” (See Martin Belam and Sam Levin, “Woman Behind ‘Inclusion Rider’ Explains Frances McDormand’s Oscar Speech,” *The Guardian* 5 March 2016.)

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