Inequality on Country Radio: 2019 in Review

By Jada E. Watson

in partnership with CMT's Equal Play Campaign

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Twenty years ago, today, the Dixie Chicks celebrated their third consecutive week in the #1 position of the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles & Tracks Chart with "Cowboy Take Me Away". Joining the trio in the chart's top positions were Faith Hill with "Breathe" at #5, Reba McEntire with "What Do You Say" at #6, Martina McBride with "Love's the Only House" at #10, Jo Dee Messina with "Because You Love Me" at #11, SheDAISY with "This Woman Needs" at #12, LeeAnn Rimes with "Big Deal" at #15, and Chely Wright with "It Was" at #19. That's 8 songs by women in the Top 20 positions of the radio chart – making up 40% of the week's top songs. An additional 12 songs by female artists charted outside of the Top 20 on the 19 February 2000 chart, bringing the count to 20 songs (26.7%) on the chart.[1]

Last year in this same week, just 2 songs by women were in the Top 20 – Carrie Underwood's "Love Wins" at #14 and Kelsea Ballerini's "Miss Me More" at #18, making up 10% of the top songs. Eight other songs by women ranked in the bottom 40 positions of the chart – bringing the count to just 10 songs (16.7%) of the week's chart.[2]

Over the course of this 20-year period, the culture of *Billboard's* airplay chart changed so drastically that the percentage of songs by women in the Top 20 declined 75%. While the chart itself reduced in size (dropping from a 75- to 60-position chart in October 2012), by 2019 there were as many charting songs by women overall as there were in the Top 20 two decades earlier.

Ten percent is a key statistic for women in country music. Ten percent represents the space that women occupied within country music culture by 2019:

- 10% of the spins for songs within the Top 150 on Mediabase's Yearend Airplay Reports between 2010 and 2019;
- 10% of the daily spins on Mediabase's Weekly Airplay Reports in 2019;
- 10% of the songs in the Top 20 of Medibase's Weekly Airplay Charts and *Billboard's* Weekly Airplay Charts in 2019;
- 10% of the songs in the Top 10 of Medibase's Weekly Airplay Charts and *Billboard's* Weekly Airplay Charts in 2019;
- 10% of the songs on the *Billboard's* Yearend Airplay Chart in 2019.

Ten percent. Depending on the time of day a listener tunes-in to their local station, that's barely enough to be heard. It's certainly not enough exposure to become known, to build a fanbase, to climb charts, to gain enough recognition to have access to opportunities and resources within the industry. It's just enough airplay to show that songs by women are *receiving* airplay, but not enough to make their work visible to viewers. Over the last 20 years, women's music has become invisible through the quota system that has limited their space on playlists and their access to prime location in daily rotation.

Despite such drastic underrepresentation at the start of the year, there were minor improvements by the end of 2019 on both Mediabase's Airplay Reports and *Billboard's* Charts. Today, SongData is releasing a study on the relationship between airplay activity and the charts, considering the impact that the declining presence of women on radio playlists has on the broader genre culture.

This report evaluates the last year in country music and investigates the path to becoming the 10%. With the goal of working toward Equal Play for all artists, the report reflects on how this culture can change. The results presented here provide a clear perspective on the current status of women in the genre and outlines a path to *Increasing the 10%*.

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Five years ago, Sony Music Chairman and CEO Gary Overton boldly stated, "If you're not on country radio, you don't exist." Immediate reaction came from independent artists like Aaron Watson and Charlie Robison – artists that have had successful careers outside of radio who felt rightfully slighted by the statement.[3] While his comments were directed more generally toward the impact that radio has on breaking artists, Overton's statement presaged the increasing invisibility and declining presence of female artists on terrestrial radio.[4] While artists were responding to Overton's statement, conversation within the industry turned pointedly toward women in the following months and years. In a session on music scheduling at Country Radio Seminar the week of Overton's statement, one panelist recommended programming female artists at a target of 13% of current scheduling.[5] In a more in-depth interview three months later, this topic was elaborated upon: songs by women were deemed bad for ratings, programmers were discouraged from programming their songs back-to-back and women referred to as the "tomatoes" of the male-dominated country music salad. Much has been written about #TomatoGate over the last five years, and prominent women in the industry, artists and advocacy groups challenged these practices and sought to draw awareness to the issues. But little has changed for women on radio in that time.

Despite the central role that women have played in the development of country music culture, their voices have been slowly erased from country radio over the last 20 years. In a series of studies published in consultation with the woman's advocacy group WOMAN Nashville, SongData dug into airplay data to better understand how songs by women factor into radio programming. The results were startling. The first study, published in April 2019, revealed a 66% decline in the number of songs by women on the Yearend Airplay reports between 2000 and 2018, as well as significant disparity in the total spins accorded to songs by men and women in this period – increasing from a 2 to 1 ratio in 2000 to 9.7 to 1 in 2018.[6] A second study, published in December 2019, parsed the spin counts by their time of day, revealing that women received just 8.9% of the daytime spins in 2018.[7] The majority of spins for songs by women occurred in the evenings and overnight dayparts – dayparts with the lowest percentage of listeners at just 8% and 4%, respectively.[8]

In this context, women's music – which receives limited and infrequent airplay – has become easily "cast away", dismissed and undervalued by program directors who determine which artists make it on to radio playlists and their placement within the hourly rotation. 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 viability and indeed success of artists. This is especially crucial at the launch of an artist's career as this type of exposure is linked to various other opportunities, including label/publishing deals, touring and festival opportunities, award nominations, fan clubs, merchandising and more.[9] Naturally, the declining presence of women on radio evolves into a sustained, industry-wide deficit.

The year 2019 marked a critical turning point for women in the country music industry. Throughout the year, a number of critical events and accolades for women brought increased attention to their absence on radio. We can point to CMT's 2018 Artist of the Year celebration, which honored women for their contributions to the genre, as a marker of this turn.[10] In the days, weeks and months following the event, the female country artists were in the spotlight:

- Carrie Underwood's *Cry Pretty* debuted at #1 on the all-genre *Billboard* 200 with the highest sales for a country album in three years – she went on to headline a massive North American tour with Maddie & Tae and Runaway June as her opening acts,[11]
- Kacey Musgraves swept the Grammys for her critically acclaimed album *Golden Hour*,[12]
- Maren Morris launched *Girl* into the world and shattered the record for the largest streaming week for a country studio album and debuted at #1 on the *Billboard* Country Albums chart,[13]
- The Highwomen formed and released their self-titled debut album,
- Tanya Tucker returned with a critically acclaimed and Grammy award winning album *While I'm Living*.[14]

These are just a handful of the notable moments for women in the genre and doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what women accomplished – with limited or no support from radio – in 2019.

The absence of women on radio loomed in the background through every accolade in 2019, and was brought to the fore on the red carpet of the 53rd annual Country Music Association Awards in the form of Jennifer Nettles' show-stopping Christian Siriano pant-suit and Alice-Mizrachi-designed cape with "Play our F*@#in records please and thank you" scrawled across the interior. The CMA followed CMT's lead from 2018 and used their annual award ceremony to spotlight the women that have contributed to the development of the genre with three legends – Carrie Underwood, Reba McEntire and Dolly Parton – sharing co-hosting duties. Maren Morris took home the award for Album of the Year, Ashley McBryde was named New Artist

of the Year, and Jenee Fleenor was the first woman to be nominated for *and win* Musician of the Year in the history of the award. The biggest shock of the evening was Carrie Underwood's loss of Entertainer of the Year – an award that many felt the artist had rightfully earned for her outstanding year and contributions to the genre.

Beyond celebration of accomplishments, there were notable steps made within the industry. In June 2019, Country Radio Seminar also took steps toward facilitating a discussion among leaders in the industry by hosting a two-part webinar on gender imbalance issues at country radio.[15] In an interview with Marissa R. Moss earlier in 2019, CRS executive director RJ Curtis spoke positively about there being room for an airplay initiative.[16] CRS, who plays an educational role within the industry, then announced a series of events for the 2020 conference that spotlight women, including conversations with Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood, and a panel on breaking female artists.[17]

Concern about the growing inequity in the genre came to a head in January 2020, following one country station's response to *Variety* reporter Chris Willman's tongue-in-cheek tweet about hearing two songs by women played back-to-back. Saginaw, Michigan's 98 KCQ responded with "We cannot play two female back to back. Not even Lady Antebellum or Little Big Town against another female. I applaud their courage." The tweet went viral after Kelsea Ballerini called foul, criticizing the practice and using her platform to celebrate her colleagues. Pure Country 99's program director Brittany Thompson saw Ballerini's tweet and immediately programmed all 14 women name-checked by Ballerini back-to-back on the evening of Friday, 17 January 2020 and then on announced her station's equal play pledge on 29 January 2020.[18] Two days later, senior vice-president of music and talent at CMT Leslie Fram pledged 50/50 airplay for its video hours.[19] By including more songs by women in their programming, both platforms are taking important steps toward creating equal opportunity for women in the industry and reintroducing audiences to their stories and voices.

This study re-evaluates gender representation on country radio following this year of heightened awareness to the growing inequality on radio. The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether or not the situation has improved for female artists on radio and popularity charts. Has the number of songs by women increased over the last year? Have their songs received more spins than previous years? Is there an improvement in the programming of recurrent songs? Are songs by women receiving enough support in the form of radio airplay to climb the charts? In short, has there been any change?

The study focuses on the last decade (2010-2019) to contextualize the result of 2019 and uses four datasets curated from the reports published by Mediabase and the charts tabulated by *Billboard.* These datasets include the Top 150 songs ranking on the Mediabase's Yearend Country Airplay Reports between 2010 and 2019, and the Weekly Airplay Reports for 2019. The remaining datasets were curated from *Billboard's* Country Airplay Charts, including the Yearend charts from 2010 to 2019 and the Weekly Charts for 2019. Secondary datasets of *Billboard's* Yearend Country Streaming Songs and Yearend Digital Song Sales charts from 2013 to 2019, and SongData's studies on Spotify and the Country Music Association's award nominations from 2000 to 2019 are also used.

As with previous SongData reports, this study maintains a coding practice of separating male-female ensembles and female artists into two categories. While radio programming software codes both simply as "females", parsing out this data allows us to better understand the impact of gender-based programming on women across the genre. As a result, three codes were used to define artists their biological and sociological status: M for men, W for Women, and M-F for male-female ensembles.

The graphs in this study maintain the following colour coding scheme used in all SongData research:

- Female artists
- Male artists
- Male-female artists
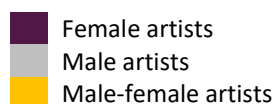
While this employs a binary coding system that does not represent a nuanced discussion of gender identity within the genre, the data culled from radio airplay statistics does not, in fact, reflect the diversity of the genre and its audience. In effect, the absence of transgender and gender-nonconforming artists in the datasets is suggestive of larger socio-culture issues at play within programming that are in dire need of attention. As Letitia VanSant recently stated in interview with Marissa R. Moss, within the fight for gender equality, "white, cis-gendered women band together to advocate for representation in the face of a male-dominated industry," often without realizing "who is unintentionally being left out."[20] It is not SongData's intention to exclude these voices, but to acknowledge their absence from the data and advocate for more inclusive programming, which is addressed in the final section of this report.

The report is divided into three sections: (1) an analysis of airplay according to the Yearend and Weekly Airplay Reports, (2) an evaluation of how airplay impacts charting opportunities for women via the *Billboard* Airplay Charts, and (3) a discussion of how airplay and charting activity impacts the broader ecosystem. The report concludes with a reflection on diversity and inclusion in the industry.

Part I: Representation on Airplay Reports

Women have been severely underrepresented on country radio for the last 10 years. The issue has been widely discussed for many years both inside and outside of the industry, but much of the discussion remained largely anecdotal reports about audience experiences until Change the Conversation (est. 2014) and WOMAN Nashville (est. 2017) formed and began using their platforms for sharing statistics about inequalities at radio. In July 2015, Devarati Ghosh (known as Windmills on social media) released a study commissioned by Change the Conversation that evaluated the rate of introduction of new female artists against success rates at radio via the *Billboard* Country Airplay Charts. She found that between 1992 and 2015 the number of new female artists remained relatively stable at 38-41%, but that "women have experience disproportionately lower success at country radio."[21] With their formation in Fall 2017, WOMAN Nashville focused their attention to spotlight the growing inequality through fact-based research, evaluating the weekly charts, holding institutions accountable for programming not just on radio but on tours and festivals as well, promoting the work of others in the field, and opening critical dialogue with institutions within the industry to find pathways for making change within the industry.

The first section of this report focuses on representation on Airplay Reports as generated by Mediabase. This section focuses on aggregated data for the 156 stations reporting to the Published Panel, airplay that generates the Airplay Charts published weekly in *Country Aircheck*.[22] There are two datasets used here, the first includes the Top 150 songs on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports from 2010 to 2019, and the second uses the Weekly Country Airplay Reports for the 2019 alone. Both datasets have been augmented with descriptive details to define the identity of the artist, including ensemble type, gender and race/ethnicity.

Yearend Airplay Reports (2010-2019)

As summarized in Table 1.1, across the 1,500 songs that appeared on the Yearend Airplay Reports between 2010 and 2019, 1,224 of the songs (81.6%) were by men, 186 (12.4%) were by female artists, and 90 (6.0%) were by male-female ensembles. These songs were released by 184 individual artists, broken down to 71.2% male artists, 22.8% female artists and 6.0% male-female ensembles. Of the 184 artists with songs in the Top 150 songs of the Yearend Reports over this 10-year period, only 5 are artists of colour, representing just 2.7% of the dataset. Together, these 5 artists are responsible for 24 of the 940 unique songs – just 2.6% – on the Yearend Reports. The majority of those songs, 23 of the 24, are performed by men of colour, with just 1 by a woman of colour. Mickey Guyton's "Better Than You Left Me" ranked at #110 on the 2015 Yearend Report. While artists of colour are significantly underrepresented in country music, women of colour are excluded.

Table 1.1. Gender representation across all and unique songs on Yearend Country Airplay Reports, 2010-2019

	# of songs overall	% of songs overall	# of unique songs	% of unique songs	# of unique artists	% of unique artists
Men (solo/group)	1,224	81.6%	751	79.9%	131	71.2%
Women (solo/group)	186	12.4%	130	13.8%	42	22.8%
Male-female ensembles	90	6.0%	59	6.3%	11	6.0%
Total songs	**1,500**	**100.0%**	**940**	**100.0%**	**184**	**100.0%**

The April 2019 study of gender representation on country format radio revealed that the number of songs by women within the Top 150 of the Mediabase Published Panel declined 66% from 50 songs in 2000 to 17 in 2018.[23] The most drastic part of this decline occurred over the course of the first 10-years of the period, dropping 54% down to 23 songs in 2010. In the decade that followed (shown in Figure 1.1), an average of 18 songs (12.4%) by women ranked within the Top 150 songs each year. The lowest point occurs in 2014, with just 7.3% of the yearend songs performed by women. The final three years exhibited a 29.2% increase in the number of songs by women within the Top 150 – from the extreme low of 13 (8.7%) in 2017 to 24 (16.0%) by 2019. While this suggests a positive change in the airplay granted to songs by women, their placement within the Top 150 positions suggests continued imbalance in programming.

Figure 1.1a. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on Yearend Country Airplay Reports, 2010-2019
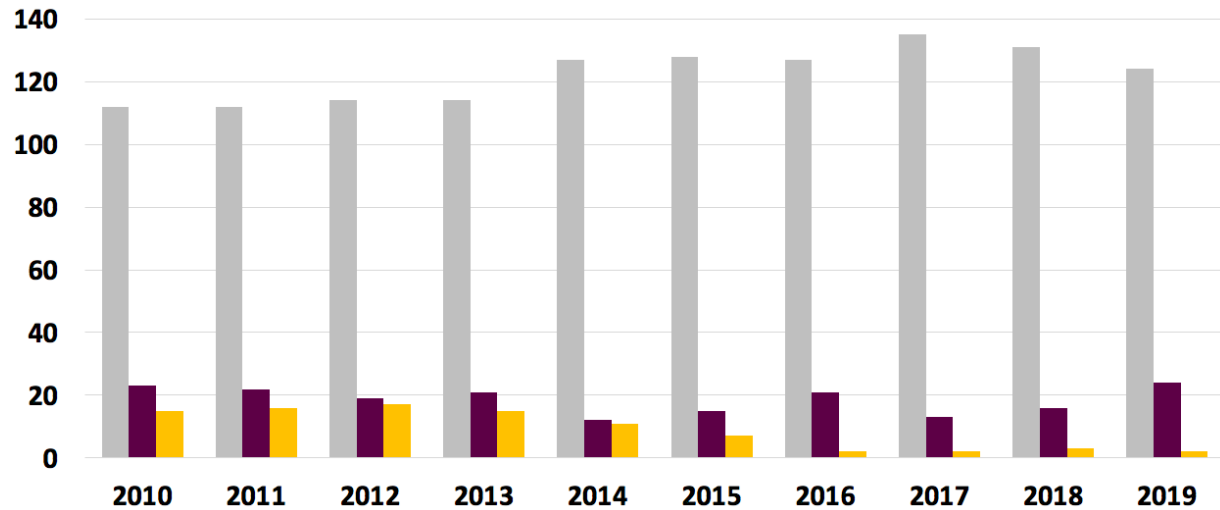
Drilling down to the Top 60 positions on the Yearend Reports (an equivalent sized report as *Billboard's* Yearend Airplay Charts) shows a 66% decline in the number of songs by women registering enough spins throughout each calendar year to rank in those top positions over the last decade, with 9% of the songs overall (Figure 1.1b). What is perhaps most shocking is how drastically underrepresented women are within the Top 60 songs in 2019 – a year with arguably the most focused attention to the gender imbalance on radio. In 2019, just 4 songs by women reached the Top 60 positions of the Yearend Airplay Reports: Kelsea Ballerini's "Miss Me More" at #23, Maren Morris's "Girl" at #35, Runaway June's "Buy My Own Drinks" at #39 and Carrie Underwood's "Southbound" at #47. Ballerini, Morris and Underwood each had #1 songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports in 2019, while Runaway June's song peaked at #5. Thus, only a handful of the highest peaking songs had enough airplay in the calendar year to register within the top of the Yearend Reports, with 55 songs by male artists.

Figure 1.1b. Distribution of song by men, women and male-female ensembles in Top 60 of Yearend Country Airplay Reports, 2010-2019
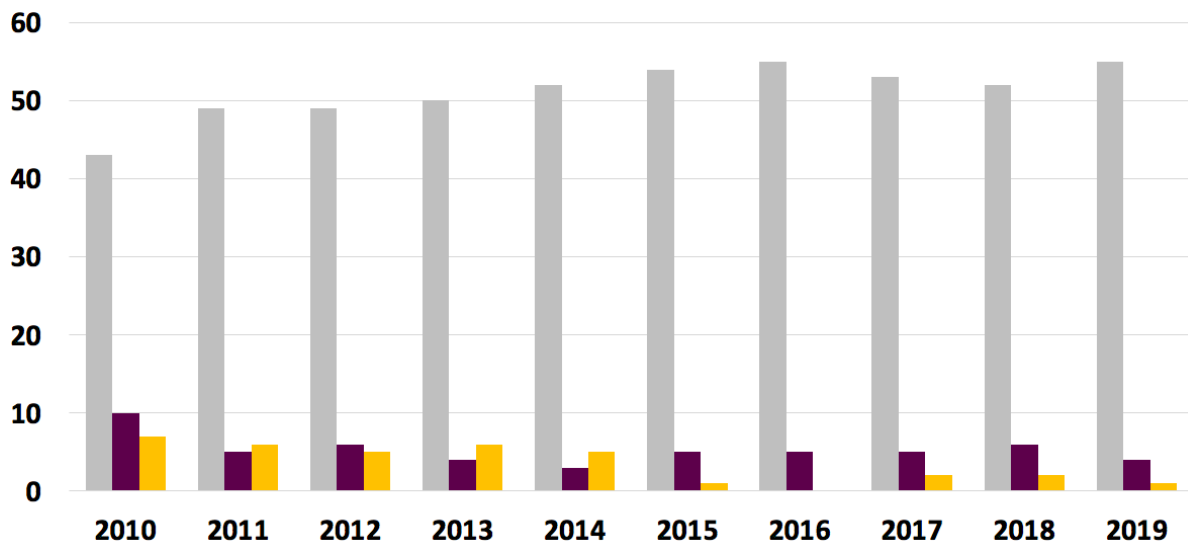

Figure 1.2 graphs the frequency of songs by their peak position, offering a broader perspective of where songs by women land on these on the Yearend Airplay Reports. This graph removes duplicate songs and graphs each individual song according to its highest peaking position over this 10-year period. Most startlingly, male artists register 89 songs in the Top 10 positions alone,

which is more than half of the number of songs by women overall (130 songs). Combining songs by women with those by male-female ensembles (189 in total) shows that the number of songs with a female-lead are relatively similar to the number of songs by men in the Top 20 (177 songs). With 13.8% of the individual songs on the Yearend Airplay Reports, female artists average 0.9% of the songs within each 10-position range. The highest percentage of songs by women occur between #31-40 with 13 songs (1.4%) and #61-70 with 12 songs (1.3%). This reveals that women are not just marginalized in the top positions of the charts, but that they are underrepresented in the bottom positions as well. This sweeping marginalization of an entire group of artists is not the result of the market, but of a discriminatory practice that limits the space available to that group.

Figure 1.2. Distribution of songs by their peak position on the Yearend Country Airplay Reports, 2010-2019
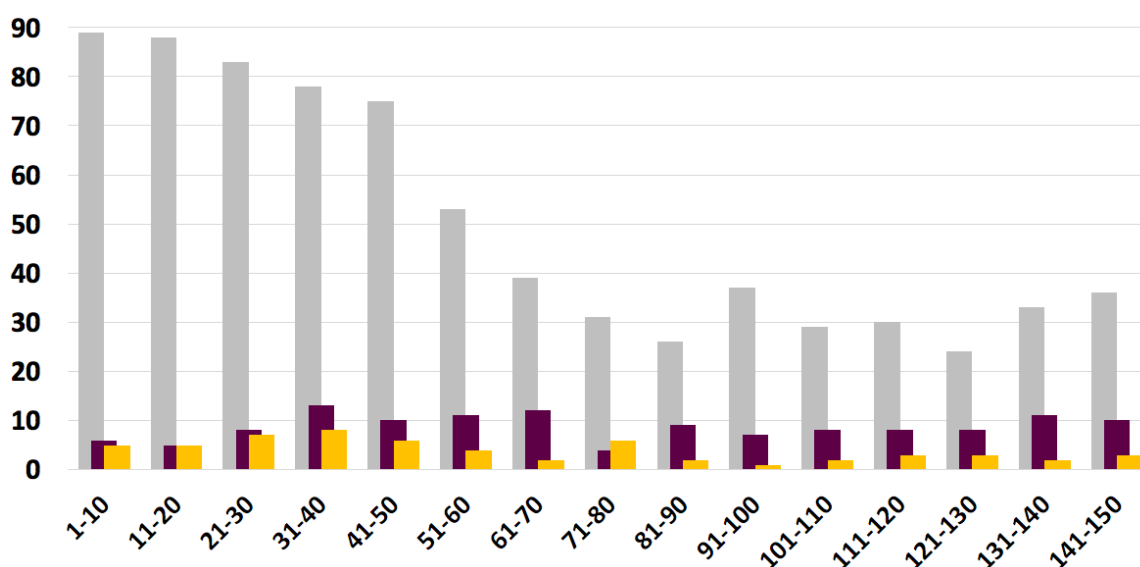
The songs that rank within the Top 150 are those that receive the most airplay throughout the year – enough to enter and climb the 50-position Airplay Chart. Figure 1.3 shows that between 2010 and 2019, songs by women received an about of 1.1 million spins a year, which amounts to an annual average of 10.3% of the spins across this decade. While the number of spins for songs by women remained relatively unchanged over this period, the number of spins for songs by men increased 47.0% between 2010 and 2017, before a slight 5.0% decline in the final two years of the decade. The gap in the percentage of spins for songs by men and women increases 10 percentage points over the course of this period, from 80.6% in 2010 to a high of 91.0% in 2017 and 2018 and ending with a gap of 88.5% in 2019. This gap amounts to an 8.7 to 1 ratio of spins in 2019, a drop from the 9.7 to 1 ratio reported in the April 2019 study.[24] Songs by male-female ensembles occupy an even smaller space within country radio – declining from 10.6% of the spins in 2010 to just 1.3% of the annual spins in 2019. Overall, this is an 82.1% drop between 2010 and 2019. Combined, songs by women and male-female ensembles drop from 25.2% of the total annual spins in 2010, down to 11.4% in 2019. Over this period, then, the total space allotted for women on country radio decreases significantly for the songs within the Top 150 of the year-end reports.

Figure 1.3. Distribution of spins for songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on Yearend Country Airplay Reports, 2010-2019
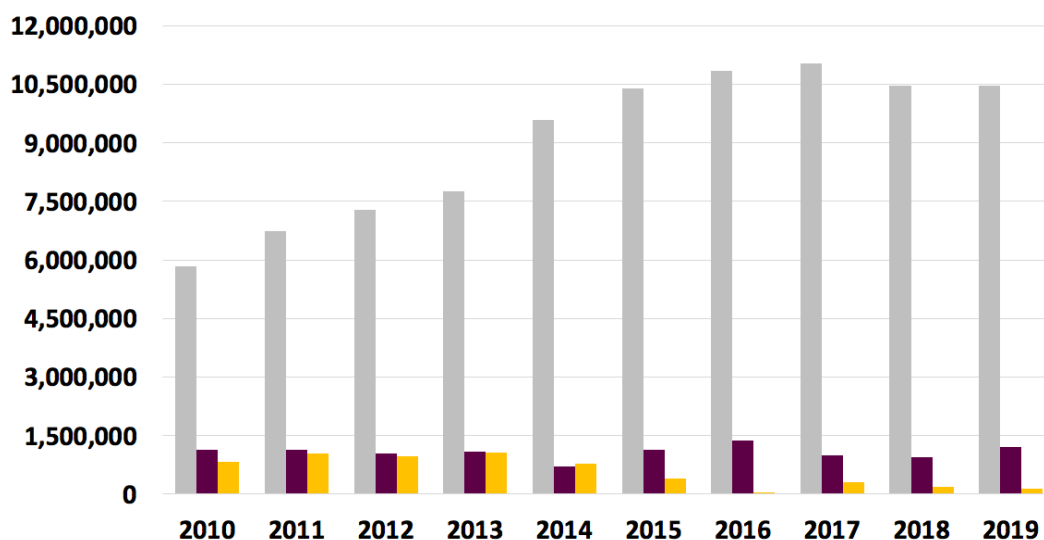
Weekly Airplay Reports (2019)

The Weekly Airplay Reports for 2019 offer greater perspective on why women are so underrepresented within the Yearend Reports. Figure 1.4 maps the distribution of individual songs by men, women and male-female ensembles each month of 2019. Women had an average of 18% of the individual songs on the Weekly Airplay Reports, increasing from 17% in January to 23% by December. Again, this graph suggests positive change at the level of programming, wherein more songs by women are included on playlists in the final months of 2019. This change occurs first in August (following Maren Morris' #1 with "Girl") and then again in November, coinciding with the celebration of women's contributions to the genre at the 53rd Country Music Association Awards show.

Figure 1.4. Distribution of unique songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on Weekly Country Airplay Reports, 2019
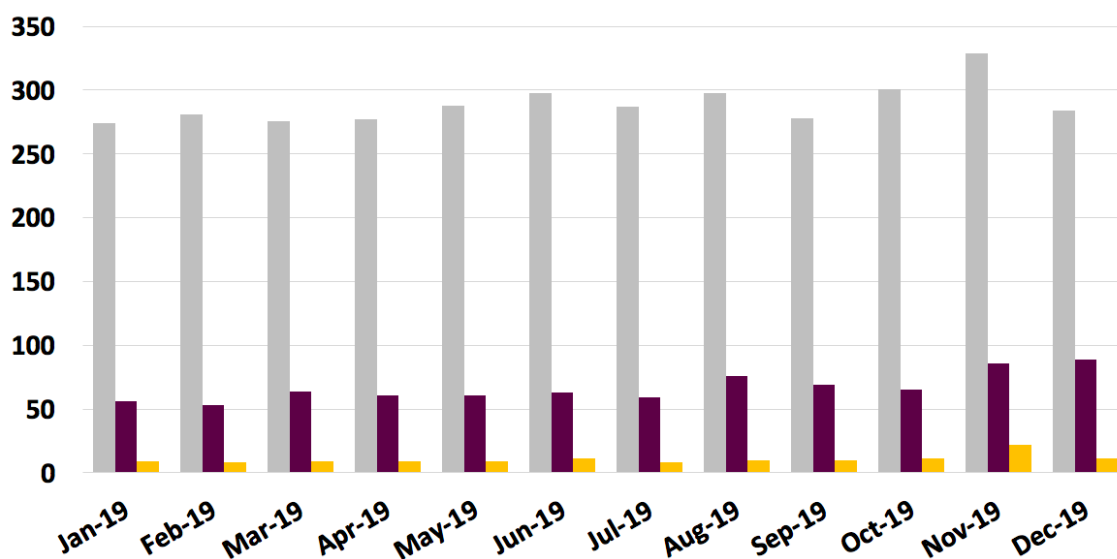
However, it is imperative to note that this figure includes *all songs* on radio – both current singles and recurrent or gold catalogue songs. Drilling into this data to evaluate representation by song status, the majority of the unique songs that

received airplay in 2019 were current singles in chart contention at 75.2% of the Weekly Airplay Reports, while 24.8% were recurrent/gold songs. Table 1.2 breaks down the percentage of unique songs by gender, showing the percentage of songs by women and male-female ensembles that factor into programming. Parsing the data in this manner shows that 18.9% of songs by women were current singles and 3.9% were recurrent songs. By contrast, songs by men make up 53.5% of the current singles and 20.2% of the recurrent songs. More startlingly, just 42 songs (3.9%) by 22 women were in recurrent status in 2019, including songs that have recently exited the chart but are still in high rotation alongside those that are in gold catalogue status. A table in the Appendix lists all 42 songs recurrent songs by solo female and all-female groups and includes their spins (while in recurrent status) for 2019, totaling 211,965 for the year. This amounts to 4.2% of the spins for all songs in recurrent rotation. Of course, several of the songs on this list are songs that were considered current singles at some point in 2019. While it is encouraging to see songs by new artists on this list (showing that their songs did not immediately disappear from playlists once exiting the chart), it is disheartening to see a lack of established artists alongside them. Even more problematic is that Martina McBride and Reba McEntire only factor into programming with their Christmas songs: none of their well-known chart-topping songs are included. The same can even be said of Underwood and Lambert, who appear here with more recent songs. This then puts Figure 1.4 into perspective: the rise of unique songs in December 2019 is not the result of more support for *current* artists, but the inclusion of holiday songs performed by women. Where are songs by the women that helped to shape contemporary country music – many of whom are still very much active today? Where are the women that busted down doors for these new artists? Why are gold catalogue songs by women absent from country music culture?

Interestingly, the oldest songs in recurrent status for the stations reporting to Mediabase dated to 2015 for women and 2014 for men. Unlike recurrents by women, however, which are much smaller in number, there are 216 individual songs by 83 men in recurrent rotation – *200 of which* were not charting songs in 2019. Combined, recurrent songs by men amassed 4,788,722 spins in 2019 (95.6% of the recurrent spins). Only 7 songs by male-female ensembles were in recurrent status in 2019 – the oldest dating to 2017. Combined, these 7 songs received 9,022 spins for the year – 0.1% overall.

Table 1.2. Unique songs by men, women and male-female ensembles in current and recurrent status in 2019

	# of current songs	% of current songs	# of recurrent songs	% of recurrent songs
Men (solo/group)	572	53.5%	216	20.2%
Women (solo/group)	202	18.9%	42	3.9%
Male-female ensembles	30	2.8%	7	0.7%
Total songs	**804**	**75.2%**	**265**	**24.8%**

Figure 1.5 then parses the distribution of spins for these songs in current and recurrent status. More than half of the annual spins – 61.5% – were granted to current singles, while 38.5% were for recurrent/gold songs. What is perhaps most startling here is how these categories are then parsed out for women: songs by women receive 10.1% of the spins in 2019, with 8.5% for current singles and 1.6% for recurrent/gold songs. Both of these figures are overwhelming low for female artists, and continue to suggest that songs by women are cast away once they exit the chart. By contrast, current singles by men receive 51.8% of the spins, and recurrent songs receive 36.8% – amounting to 88.6% overall. Even more disheartening than the low representation of female artists in this picture, is the erasure of male-female ensembles, whose current singles receive 1.2% of the spins in 2019 and just 0.1% of the spins for recurrent songs.

Figure 1.5. Percentage of unique songs in current and recurrent status across Weekly Country Airplay Reports, 2019
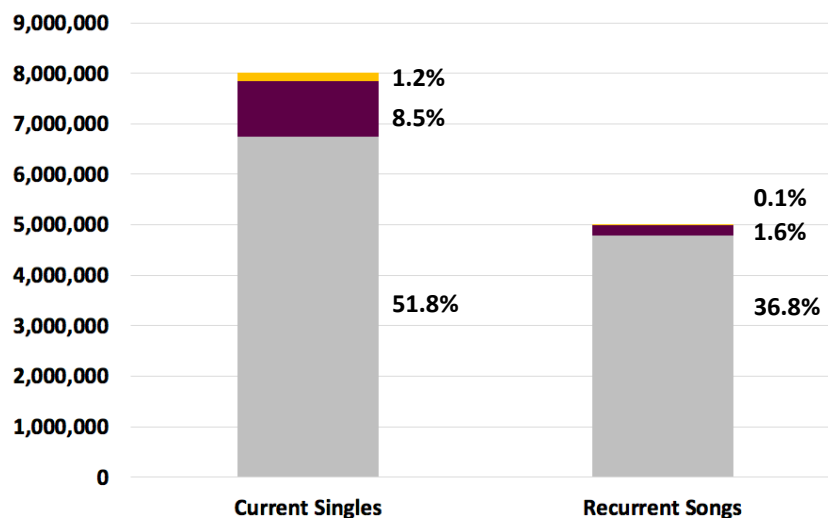
There is slightly more racial diversity on the Weekly Airplay Reports at the level of individual artist. Of the 1,069 unique songs in the Weekly Airplay dataset in 2019, 34 were by artists of colour – 3.2% of the songs. This includes, however, songs by pop artists that received airplay on country radio, including Camila Cabello, Cardi B, Flo Rida, Luis Fonsi, Lizzo, Bruno Mars, Cece Winans and multi-racial group Pentatonix. Removing the songs by non-country artists, brings the song count down to 23 – 2.2% – in 2019. At the level of individual artist, there were 16 artists of colour with songs on the radio in 2019, amounting to 5.2% of the artists on radio in 2019. When removing non-country artists, the number divides in half, with just 8 artists (2.6%); however, several of these artists have multiple songs on the radio, including 4 by Jimmie Allen, 9 by Kane Brown, 2 by Sundance Head, and 4 by Darius Rucker. Again, women are underrepresented here: 22 of the songs by country artists were performed by 7 men, with just 1 song by a woman of colour. Here, too, the one female artist is Mickey Guyton, whose "Sister" received airplay in the Fall.

With so few spins for songs in current status, it is not surprising to then see that an average of just 8 songs by women entering the 50-position Weekly Airplay Report that *Country Aircheck* publishes each Monday. Figure 1.6 graphs the distribution of songs entering the Top 50, showing an average of 16.5% of the Weekly Reports. Between January and May, there was an increase from 6 to 10 songs on the weekly chart, and then declines back to 6 by July – averaging 6 songs a week over the course of the summer. The year ends with an increase to an average of 9 songs (19%) of the weekly charts. Given the barriers that women have been facing and the increased awareness to issues of representation, this increase suggests a period of positive change in radio programming.

Figure 1.6. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles entering the 50-position Country Airplay Report in 2019
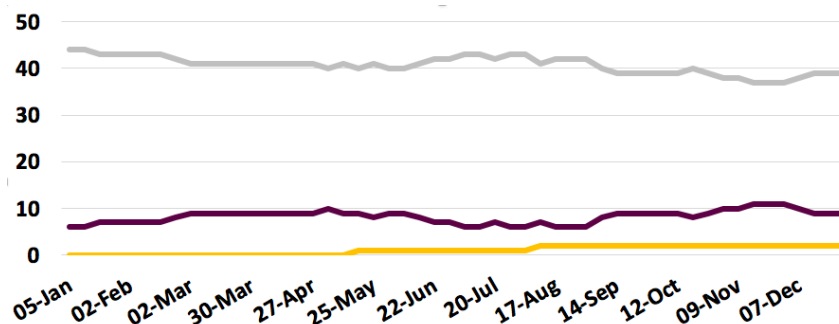

Six of the 140 songs that charted in 2019 were by artists of colour – all of which were performed by men. This amounts to 4.3% of the charting songs last year. Four of the songs peaked in the Top 20, with 3 in the Top 10 and 1 – Kane Brown's "Good

As You" reaching #1. While these are positive strides – albeit slow – toward a diverse chart culture, there is a continued absence of female artists in this culture. Guyton's "Sister" had just 4 weeks of airplay in September and October, racking up 104 spins and peaking at #98.

Despite the increase toward the end of 2019, the majority of these songs – throughout the entire year remain in the bottom 30 positions of the chart. In 2019 – as in previous years, an average of 2 songs by women entered the Top 20 of the Weekly Airplay Reports, averaging 10.0% a week. Figure 1.7 maps the distribution of songs entering the Top 20, showing a maximum of 3 songs in the Top 20 in the summer months of June, July and August. Even fewer songs reached the Top 10 in 2019, with an average of 1 song a week (10%) following a 10-week period with no songs by women in the Top 10 between January and Mary and another 10-week period between October and December.

Figure 1.7. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles entering the Top 20 on the Country Airplay Report in 2019
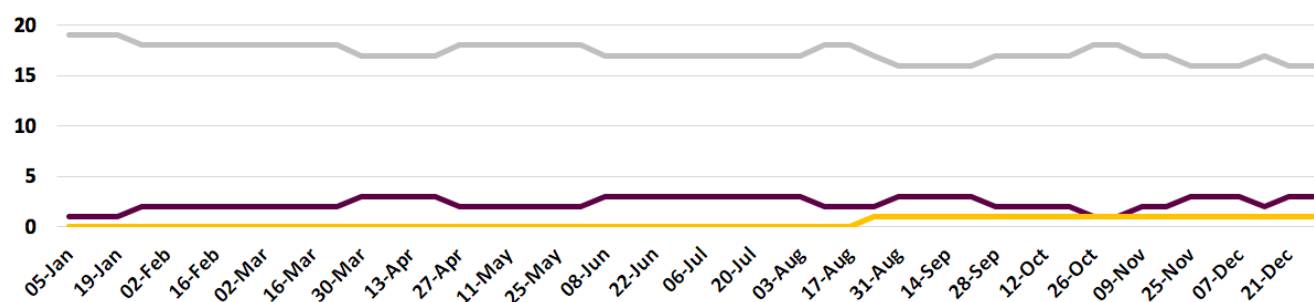
While songs by women were strikingly absent from the top positions of the charts, 3 songs reached the top of the Weekly Airplay Reports in 2019: Kelsea Ballerini's "I Miss Me More" (June 8), Maren Morris' "Girl" (July 27), and Carrie Underwood's "Southbound" (October 5) all reached #1 on the chart. Combined, these songs make up 5.8% of the weeks at #1, with the remaining weeks dominated by men at 94.2% of the year (49 out of 52 weeks). Drilling into the #1 data, 28 individual male artists released 38 songs that peaked at the top of the chart. Like the *Billboard* Airplay charts, several male artists had multiple #1 songs in 2019, including Jason Aldean, Dierks Bentley, Luke Bryan, Dan + Shay, Dustin Lynch and Old Dominion with 2 songs each and Luke Combs and Thomas Rhett with 3 songs each. Combs dominated this period, with 9 weeks at #1 for 3 different songs – amounting to 17% of the year.

Airplay by Time of Day (2019)

The time of day that songs are heard plays a significant role in this discussion. As reported in the December 2019 "Study of Spins Across Dayparts on Country Format Radio", the majority of the daytime airplay occurs in the Evenings (22%) and the Overnights (29%), the periods of the day with the lowest percentage of listeners.[25] Distribution of airplay across the five dayparts in 2019, reported in Figure 1.6, shows little change from the preceding years, and the lowest percentage of airplay continues to occur in the Morning (13%), Midday (20%) and the Afternoon (16%). These dayparts have the highest percentage of listeners tuning in – 68% overall, but the lowest number of songs on rotation.[26]

Figure 1.6. Breakdown of the percentage of spins by daypart for all songs on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports, 2019
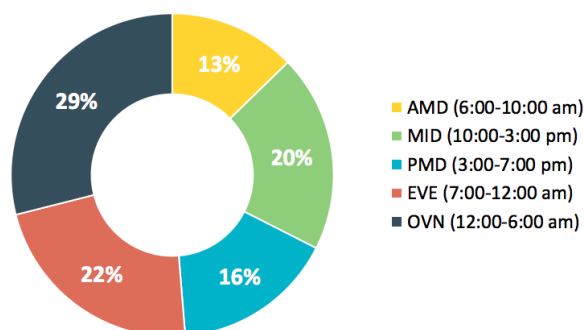
Figure 1.7 shows breaks down the distribution of the spins for men, women and male-female ensembles. As noted above, songs by men received 88.6% of the total spins in 2019, with 10.1% for songs by women and 1.3% for those by male-female ensembles. This shows an increase of 1.2% for songs by women from 2018 (from 8.9% to 10.1%). Despite this slight increase, songs by women continue to be underrepresented in the daytime hours, receiving 4.2% of the AMD, MID and PMD spins – down 0.2% from 2018, against 43.8% for men. Songs by women register fewer spins overall as men do in any daypart in 2019, but they do register the same percentage as men in the AMD when combined with the total spins overall for male-female ensembles (11.3% combined).

The 24-hour picture for women remained relatively unchanged in 2019. The December 2019 report on Time of Day Airplay revealed that an average of 30 songs by women were played throughout the day, with 4 in the morning, 6 in the midday, 5 in the afternoon, 7 in the evening and 9 in the overnight. From 2018, there was an overall increase in spins for women – an increase of 1.2% spins overall. As Table 1.3 summarizes, the distribution of songs by women remains nearly identical to 2018 in the daytime, with the 1.2% increase occurring in the evening and overnights in 2019. While an increase in the evenings and overnights might help a song's chart trajectory, it does nothing to help an artist develop her network and fanbase. Any increase at the level of spins is thus neutralized by the time at which these songs are spun: the potential impact on an audience is negligible and women's voices continue to be invisible to radio listeners.

Figure 1.8. Distribution of spins for songs by men, women and male-female ensembles by daypart across Weekly Country Airplay Reports, 2019
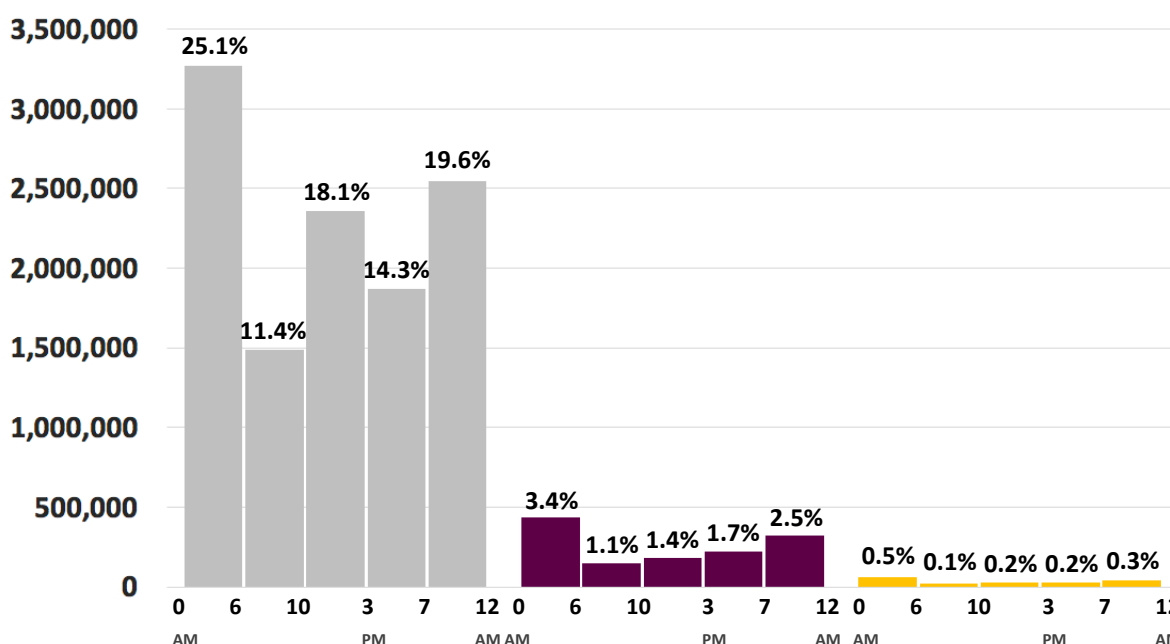

Table 1.3. Distribution of spins for songs by men, women and male-female ensembles across all dayparts in 2019

Daypart	Songs by Men	Songs by Women	Songs by Male-female ens.
AMD (6:00-10:00)	39	4	2
MID (10:00-3:00)	61	5	1
PMD (3:00-7:00)	48	6	1
EVE (7:00-12:00)	66	8	1
OVN (12:00-6:00)	85	12	1
Total 24 hr cycle	**300 (88.6%)**	**34 (10.1%)**	**6 (1.3%)**

Summary

With just 10% of the annual spins across this 10-year period, songs by female artists do not have the same level of support as male artists overall or across the dayparts. While the results of the Yearend Airplay Reports show a *slight* improvement in the number of songs by female artists appearing within the Top 150, the vast majority appear outside of the Top 60 with just 4 songs (6.7%) of the top songs by 2019. More critically, the 24 songs by women that rank within the Top 150 receive a combined 1.2 million spins in 2019 – just 10.2% of the annual spins in 2019.

The same is true for songs on the Weekly Airplay Reports. While here, too, there is improvement in December, this appears to be mainly a result of recurrent programming of holiday songs. While 24.8% of the individual songs played in 2019 were by women, they received just 10.1% of the annual spins – 8.5% for current singles and a strikingly low 1.6% for recurrent/gold songs. What is more disconcerting is the time of day that these songs are played and that the highest percentage of spins for songs by women occur in the evening and overnight periods – times of day in which most audiences are not tuned-in. Thus, any improvements made toward including more songs by women on playlists, is canceled out by the insufficient amount of airplay for songs by women and the time of day that their songs are spun. Women become invisible to audiences within this type of a system – marginalized on playlists and ghettoized to the evenings.

Part II: Impact on Chart Contention for Women

The data presented above offers a fuller picture programming across the 24-hour cycle and by status of songs included on playlists. How this type of airplay activity – 10% programming – impacts the placement of songs by women on the charts is imperative to understand. Part 1 revealed the impact on the 50-position Airplay Chart generated from Mediabase's monitored data, and Part 2 drills into representation on *Billboard's* Weekly Airplay Charts in 2019. *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart tabulates the Top 60 current singles by radio airplay on 149 reporting stations. It is important to note that these are not necessarily the same 149 stations as the 156 monitored by Mediabase, but the results here suggest a similar underlying programming practice to those stations. These charts play an important role within popular music culture and are often a barometer for measuring the vitality and diversity of a genre. There is one dataset used in this section, the Weekly Airplay Charts, augmented with descriptive details to define the identity of the artist, including ensemble type, gender and race/ethnicity.

Weekly Airplay Charts in 2019

In 2019, there was an average of 10 songs by women that on *Billboard*'s Weekly Country Airplay Charts (Figure 2.1a), with an increase in the number of individual charting songs in the final four months of the calendar year. Following a strikingly low period of representation in 2018 with an 8-month average of 6 songs per week over the summer months that year, this graph shows improvement in 2019.[27] Like the Yearend Reports (and *Billboard's* Yearend Charts presented in the associated Brief), artists of colour are underrepresented on *Billboard's* Weekly Airplay Charts, with just 9 of the 172 (5.2%) charting songs by a black male lead. No songs by women of colour entered the Weekly Airplay Charts in 2019.

Drilling into the level of weekly activity as mapped in Figure 2.1b on the Weekly Airplay Charts reveals a 42.9% increase between 1 January and 28 December. This is a really high percentage that should be further qualified to indicate that the increase was from 8 songs in January to 14 in December. Though not a steady increase, there is an improvement in representation of female artists from 13.3% of the weekly songs in January to 15% in February. Following a period of fluctuation between 11% and 16% in May through October, the period ends with a rise to an average of 22.4% through November and December. While this is certainly not representative of parity on the charts, it – like the Weekly Airplay Reports in Part 2 – suggests subtle changes that show greater support for songs by women. Where this differs from the Weekly Airplay Reports discussed above is that these songs are all *current* singles; they are new songs released to radio in hopes of audience-impact and chart contention.

Figure 2.1a. Distribution of individual songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on the *Billboard* Weekly Country Airplay Charts in 2019
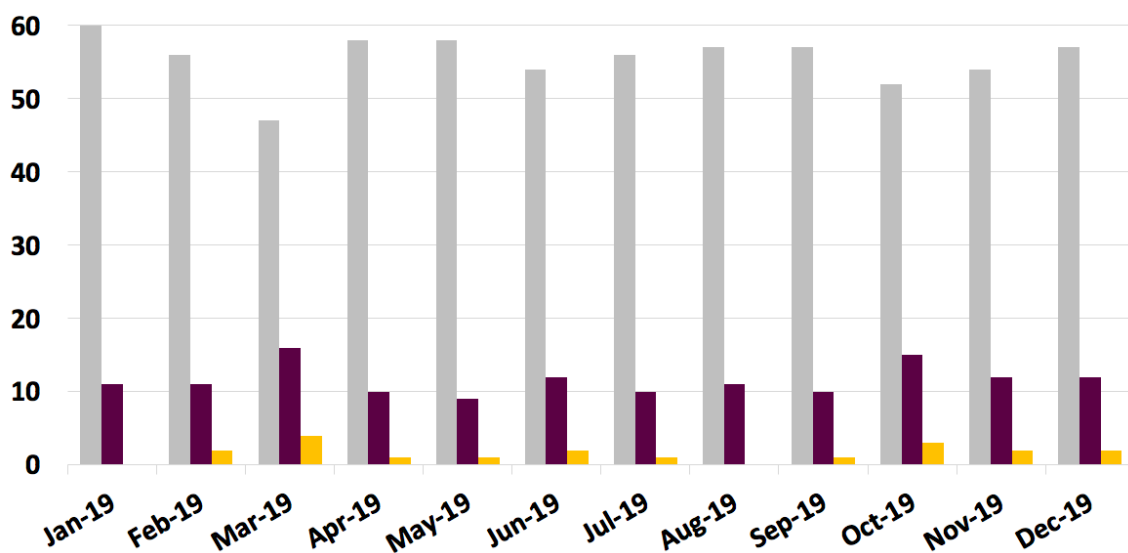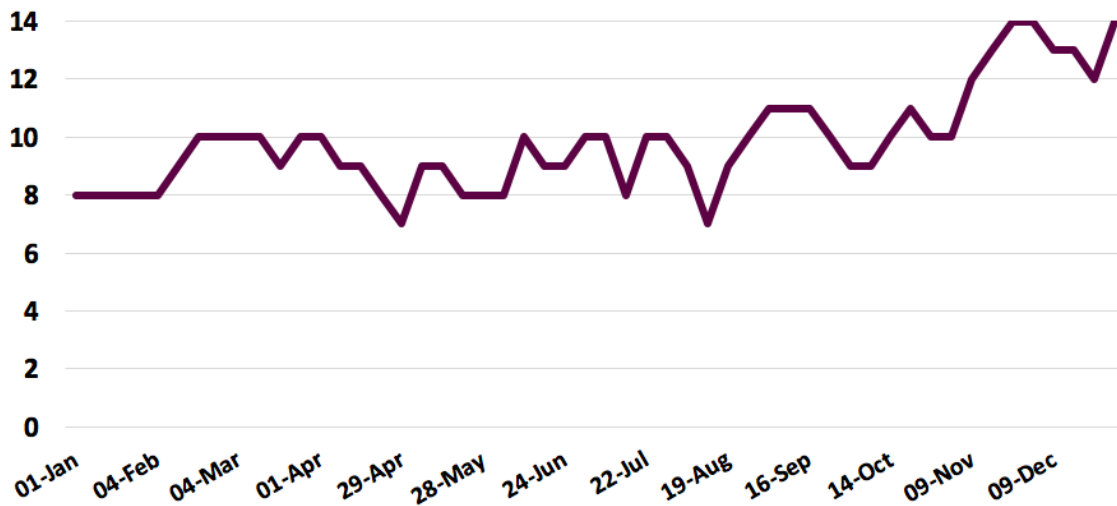
Figure 2.1b. Distribution of songs by women on the *Billboard* Weekly Country Airplay Charts in 2019

Despite *more* songs by women entering the charts in 2019, the vast majority of these songs remain outside of the top positions. Figure 2.2 reveals – like Mediabase's Airplay Reports – an average of 2 songs by women (10%) entered the Top 20 each week in 2019 – to a total of 10 individual songs overall (by just 7 artists). Despite the alarming 87% gap between men and women, there are some moments worthy of isolating: the period between 1 April and 16 September saw a rise to an average of 3 songs by women in the Top 20. While the number of songs by women in the Top 20 declines from this point back to two, this occurs against an overall decline of the number of songs by men in the Top 20 – declining from 95% in January to 80% by December. This also coincides with Lady Antebellum's "What If I Never Get Over You" climbing into the Top 20, bringing the average number of songs including a female artist to 3 (15%).

Five of the 9 songs by artists of colour were in the Top 20 in 2019 – two of them having reached their ultimate peak the year previous: "Best Shot" by Jimmie Allen and "Lose It" by Kane Brown. Both songs peaked at #1 in 2018. Of the remaining 3 Top 20 songs, 1 reached its peak in 2019: Kane Brown's "Good As You" reached #1. The final chart week of 2019, Jimmie Allen's "Make Me Want To" hit #10 and Kane Brown's "Homesick" reached #12 and are within the Top 10 the week of 17 February 2020. Only 3 songs by artists of colour remained within the bottom positions of the chart in 2019: Kane Brown's "Short Skit Weather", Hootie and the Blowfish's "Hold On", Blanco Brown's "The Git Up", and perhaps not surprisingly given controversy surrounding the hit single, Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road". While it is a positive change to see increasingly more artists of colour on *Billboard's* charts, one cannot help but notice the complete absence of women of colour.

Figure 2.2. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles in the Top 20 of *Billboard's* Weekly Country Airplay Charts, 2019
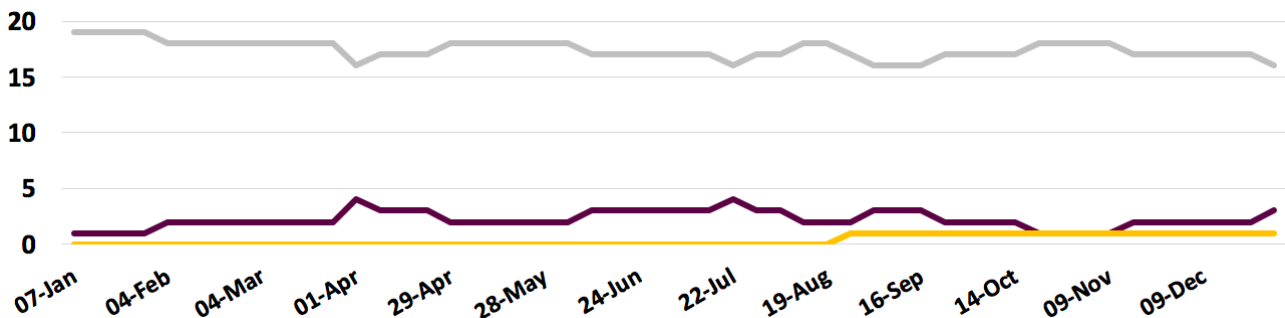
Given the low number of songs by women in the Top 20, it is not surprising to see that women are underrepresented in the Top 10 of the Weekly Airplay Charts. In fact, as shown in Figure 2.3, no songs by women entered the Top 10 for 23 weeks (or 44%) of the calendar year. For a 5-month period between 8 April and 7 October an average of 1 song by a woman entered the Top 10, peaking at 2 songs in May and September. The 5 songs by women that enter the Top 10 are performed by 3 solo artists: 2 by Maren Morris, and 1 each by Kelsea Ballerini, and Carrie Underwood. Remarkably, Runaway June also peaked in the Top 10 – the first all-female ensemble to do so since SheDAISY in 2005. As with the Top 20, there is a significant deficit of songs by male-female ensembles entering the Top 10 – with just one entering the Top 10 the week of 9 November. Male artists are responsible for 54 of the 60 songs – 90% – that peak in the Top 10.
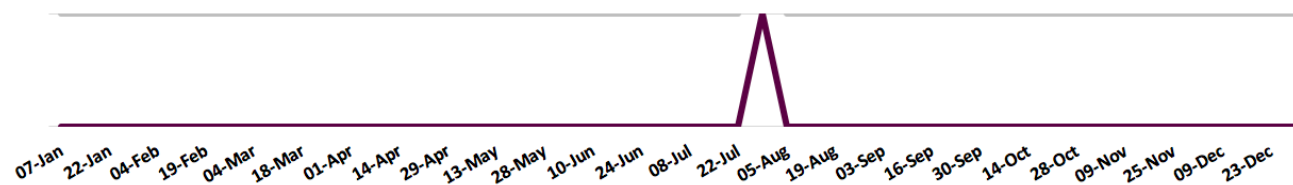
Figure 2.3. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles in the Top 10 of *Billboard's* Weekly Country Airplay Charts, 2019
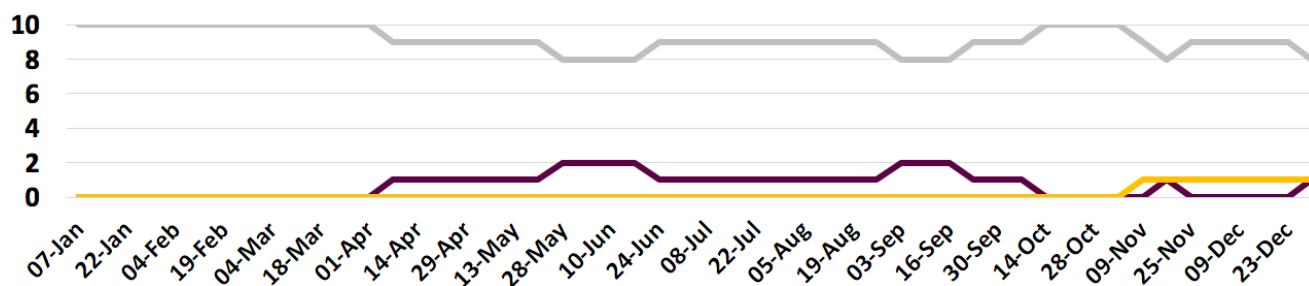
Naturally, given the absence of female artists in the Top 10 and 20 positions of the chart, male artists continue to have more #1 songs than female artists on the *Billboard* Weekly Airplay Charts. Figure 2.4 shows that male artists hold the #1 position for 98% of this period (51 out of 52 weeks), with just 2% (1 week) of the year for female artists. No male-female ensembles reached the top of the chart in 2019. Drilling into the #1 data, 24 individual male artists released 31 songs that peaked at the top of the chart. Several male artists had multiple #1 songs in 2019, including Jason Aldean, Dan + Shay and Old Dominion with 2 songs each and Luke Combs and Thomas Rhett with 3 songs each. Combs dominated this period, with 13 weeks at #1 for 3 different songs – amounting to 25% of the year.

Women are vastly underrepresented at the top of the chart yet again in 2019, with just 1 song reaching the top in 2019: Maren Morris's "GIRL" (29 July 2019). A period of 17 months lies between "GIRL" and the previous #1 by a solo female country artist (Kelsea Ballerini's "Legends" on 24 Feb 2018).

Figure 2.4. Distribution of songs by men and women in the #1 position of *Billboard's* Weekly Airplay Charts, 2019

Songs by women are clearly not receiving the same level of exposure and support as those by their male colleagues. Figure 2.5 maps the distribution of songs by men and women according to their peak position for just the 116 songs completed their chart activity in 2019. This means that the 56 songs that were still on the chart in January 2020 were removed from the dataset. Of the 116 songs that completed their chart trajectory in 2019, 83% were by men, 15% by women and just 3% by male-female ensembles. Graphing the frequency of songs in this manner reveals that the majority of songs by men (48%) peaked within the Top 10 positions. The same is true for women, too, with 24% of their songs in the Top 10 positions; however, 24% of is just 4 songs, 12 times less than the number of songs by men in the Top 10 positions. Not only do men have 11.5 times more songs (46 in total) in the Top 10, they have 3 times more songs in the Top 10 than women do overall. Perhaps more strikingly, 100% of the songs by male-female ensembles peaked in the bottom 10 of the chart in 2019.

Figure 2.5. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles by their peak position on *Billboard's* Weekly Country Airplay Charts, 2019
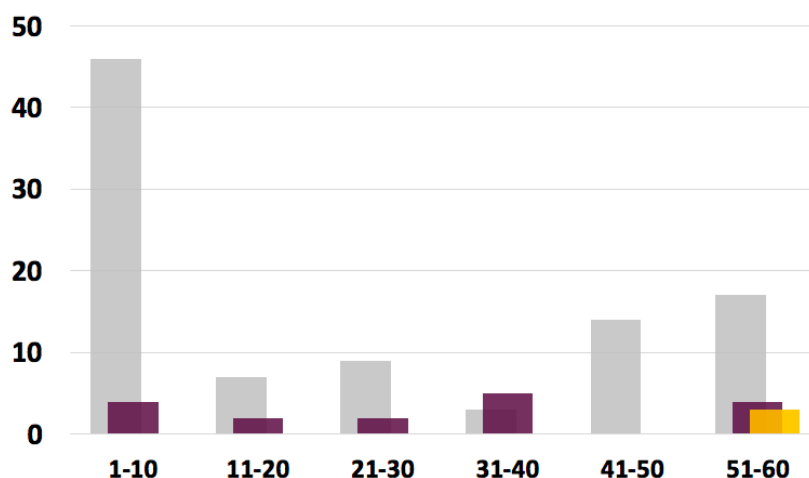
Summary

Billboard published its Yearend Charts on 5 December 2019, ranking the Top 60 songs between 24 November 2018 and 16 November 2019.[28] With such a significant lack of songs by women on the Weekly Charts through this 12-month period, only 6 songs by women ranked on the 2019 Yearend Chart: Kelsea Ballerini's "Miss Me More" at #13, Maren Morris' "Girl" at #26, Carrie Underwood's "Southbound" at #36, Runaway June's "Buy My Own Drinks" at #39, Carrie Underwood's "Love Wins" at #45 and Miranda Lambert's "It All Comes Out in the Wash" at #59. The first 4 songs listed overlap with the songs by women in the Top 60 of Mediabase's Yearend Report – the only songs by women to rank within the Top 10 on both lists. The remaining 2 songs – "Love Wins" and "It All Comes Out in the Wash" – were the other songs by women to rank within the Top 20 in that 12-month period. Here, as with every other angle for evaluating the place that women occupy within country music culture in 2019, songs by women occupy just 10% of *Billboard's* Yearend Charts.

With just 10% of the daily airplay, songs by women do not receive enough support to move into the *Billboard* Weekly Country Airplay Charts. Despite positive changes in the number of songs by women throughout 2019, these changes have not yet correlated to high-ranking songs on the chart. Songs by women comprise just 10% of the songs in the Top 2 and Top 10 of the Weekly charts, with their strongest period occurring between April and September of 2019. The final months of 2019, in which the highest number of songs by women ranked on the Weekly Charts, fewer songs by women were in the top positions. This, of course, makes sense, given that it takes time for songs to climb the charts. It will thus be important to watch the charts in 2020 to observe if this translates into meaningful change.

In this culture, it doesn't matter if more songs are played because those songs are still not receiving enough spins overall or at peak points in the day to allow them to be heard by radio audiences. This then impacts career opportunities for artists and the listening audience's experience of country music culture. When an entire group of people receive just 10% of the industry's support, there is no space for those artists to develop their careers and fanbases.

Part III: Cultural Impact of Gender-based Programming

The results of the first two parts of this report – and indeed of all SongData studies to date – show the absence of women within country music culture. The gradual disappearance of songs by women from the Yearend Airplay Reports and Charts is a clear sign of their absence in daily programming. While they two organizations monitor different stations, it's clear that the stations monitored have similar programming practices. With the exception of the result for the #1 position on both charts, songs by women make up a similar percentage overall and within the Top 20 and Top 10 of both charts. Interestingly, Mediabase's Report had three #1 songs by a female artist in 2019, while *Billboard* had just one. More critically, the results of Part I show continued underrepresentation in the daytime hours between 6AM and 7PM – periods of the day with the highest percentage of listeners – renders their voices invisible within the ecosystem. Not only are their stories not heard by audiences, but they are not afforded enough airplay to enter and climb the weekly charts and grant them greater visibility.

These are not new issues to the genre; rather, these inequalities are the result of a faulty foundation. The industry was built 100 years ago to support the careers of white male artists, with female artists as a secondary focus and artists of colour pushed out to the margins or in marketed in other musical categories – like OKeh's 8000 "race" records series.[29] Research has shown that male artists were historically associated with "public work" of performance and management, with women tucked away in domestic, administrative and musically supporting roles.[30] Despite such 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, became the genre's commercial and artistic center.[31] 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.[32] Thus, even as women became more prominent on stage, they didn't have the resources or position to ensure change for women across the industry. This is the product of a way of thinking (and acting) about the role of women in the genre's culture – one that is ingrained in its foundations and has been perpetuated for a century. It is a cultural system still in active force today – a system that is rendered visible through the absence of women on playlists and their invisibility in the Top 20, Top 10 and #1 positions of the Weekly Reports and Charts, and their underrepresentation in nominations for the genre's most prestigious awards.

We are now beginning to understand the far-reaching and damaging impact that this type of cultural system has on country music culture. Based on Mediabase's Country Airplay Reports and *Billboard's* Country Airplay Charts, radio's listeners would presume that there are only a handful of women participating in the genre – or that women are not producing high-quality music to receive airplay. As WOMAN Nashville recently stated, "People trust their stations. They believe if you aren't consistently on radio, their trusted source for music that matters, then you're probably lesser somehow." They went on to say, "Radio is the primary contributor in creating a culture among listeners who believe women just aren't making the kind of music that can cut it. That's not true and it's just one more by-product of year[s] of training listeners poorly."[33] It's thus not just about playing a few more songs by women, it's about bringing them into regular rotation and offering them the same platform as male artists throughout the day and when the majority of the listening audience is tuned-in. The type of programming that is occurring – with women at 10% of the 24-hr cycle and the majority of their songs in the evening and overnights, marginalizes female artists and ghettoizes their songs to a time of day when the majority of the listening audience is sleeping. This ghettoization is also true of specialty programs that feature songs by women for an hour a day or week. This paints a false picture not just of the *number of women* participating in the genre's culture, but also the racial diversity of the women making country music.

Why does this matter? There is a direct relationship between the amount of times a song is spun each day and its ability to break into the weekly charts, as exhibited in the analysis presented above. For the last 10 years, songs by women have not received enough airplay to break into the chart and climb into the top weekly and yearend positions. Not only does this falsely suggest to audiences that women are not making high-quality music, it impacts the trajectory of an artist's career and their livelihood and ability to make an income. As mentioned earlier, this type of exposure is crucial for an artist's career – especially new artists, as it is linked to other opportunities, including label/publishing deals, touring and festival opportunities, award nominations, fan clubs, merchandising and more.[34] The declining presence of women on radio evolves into a sustained, industry-wide deficit: if women are not receiving the kind of support from radio that would allow their songs to chart, labels

will react by signing fewer women or reducing their support of female acts on their rosters. This then trickles into tour lineups and festival rosters and eligibility requirements for award nominations at the industry's own events.[35]

Perhaps more critically, airplay increases audience familiarity. Analysis of airplay data has clearly shown that women are not receiving enough airplay or exposure – in *any* daypart – for their songs to be discovered, to build fanbases, to become *familiar* with audiences.[36] Kingston, Ontario's Pure Country 99 program director Brittany Thompson recently admitted that country radio does "a better job [at] establishing and promoting male artists."[37] By limiting airplay for songs by women to less than 10% of the daytime spins, radio is not offering women the same platform for development and exposure as male artists, making their voices and stories unfamiliar to audiences. Audiences respond more favorably to what they hear and know, and audiences know songs by men.

One area that is in dire need of investigation is streaming. Streaming is still a relatively new platform for music dissemination. While it is usually seen as the "great equalizer" of the music industry – as a platform that offers an equal playing field for musicians, research has begun to reveal significant bias engineered in streaming algorithms. Streaming services received more attention in 2019, thanks to Martina McBride sharing her experience with using the recommender system to curate a "country music" playlist on Spotify.[38] Influenced by McBride, SongData replicated her experience on 24 September 2019 to examine how women are underrepresented through the algorithm, revealing that the average user is presented 1 song by a woman for every 11 by men.[39] But worse than this, Spotify users have to refresh *at least* 12 times before being offered by just 1 song by a woman. Figure 3.1a visualizes SongData's experiment, showing the placement of songs generated within recommender system, showing that it generated 121 songs by men before recommending Miranda Lambert's "Mama's Broken Heart" at #122. Within the first 200 songs (19 refreshes), only 6 songs (3%) by women and 5 songs (3%) by male female ensembles were recommended – all emerging after the first 121 songs by male artists. This equated to a 31.5 to 1 ratio within the first 200 recommendations. This is not the great "equalizer" it is meant to be, but a system with a level of algorithmic discrimination that perpetuates a significant socio-cultural program and exacerbates inequalities that already exist within the genre.

Figure 3.1a. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles generated by Spotify's recommender system
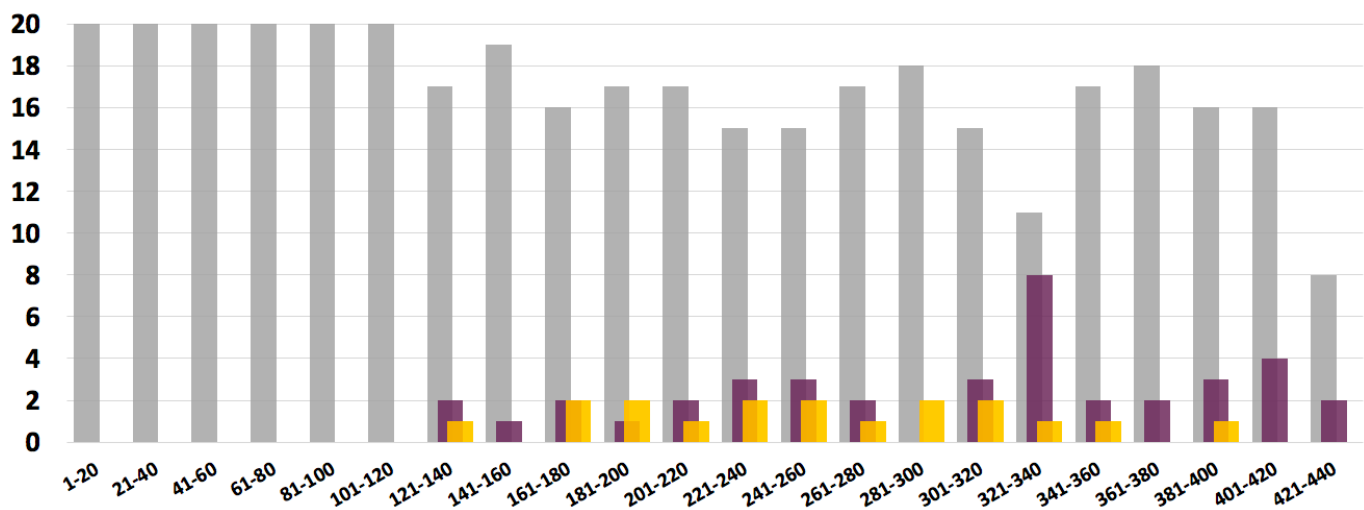
This type of algorithmic bias naturally impacts broader streaming culture and chart activity. *Billboard* began tabulating Streaming Charts in 2013, ranking the Top 25 songs by combining different versions as accessed via programmed, on-demand and subscription song and video platforms to calculate a summarized figure for top songs. The first 7 years of the chart show significant disparity in streaming culture. Just 8.6% (15 songs) of the 175 songs that ranked on *Billboard's* Yearend Streaming Charts were performed by women – 1 of which includes the pop-country collaboration of Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line, which topped the chart two years in a row (2018 and 2019). These results show a similar culture within streaming that unfolds in radio programming. While, yes, streaming services need to work on their algorithm to determine the root cause of the gender bias, the inequalities in other facets of the genre do play a role here. This is the result of systemic gender bias in an industry in which women have become increasingly invisible within the broader ecosystem.

Figure 3.2. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on *Billboard's* Yearend Streaming Songs Chart
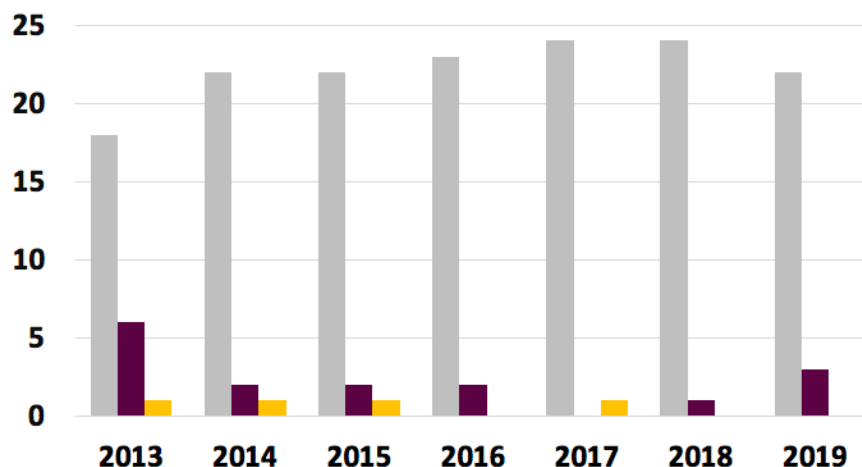
What happens when audiences are presented with fewer songs by female artists on radio or by streaming platform algorithms? They are less familiar with female artists and purchase fewer songs and albums by them. Despite a belief that sales represent audience *preferences*, it is imperative that we consider the impact that inequalities outside of digital purchasing platforms have on purchasing *choices*. With fewer opportunities to hear and become familiar with songs by women through the industry's music dissemination platforms, audiences become less likely to purchase songs by women: they cannot purchase what they do not know, what they do not hear, what they are not exposed to. These results show the broader impact of programming on women's careers.

Billboard's Digital Song Sales chart ranks the top-downloaded country songs according to sales data compiled by Nielsen SoundScan. Between 2013 and 2019, fewer than 10 songs by women enter the chart every year, totaling 41 of the 350 charting songs on the Digital Sales chart, averaging 11.7% of the songs each year in this period. The decline of songs in 2014 and from 2016 to 2018 match the decline that we see across Airplay Reports and Charts above. The rise in 2019, which also echoes the increase in songs on Weekly Reports and Charts, likewise matches an increased presence of female country artists across other platforms.

Figure 3.3. Distribution of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles on *Billboard's* Yearend Digital Song Sales Chart
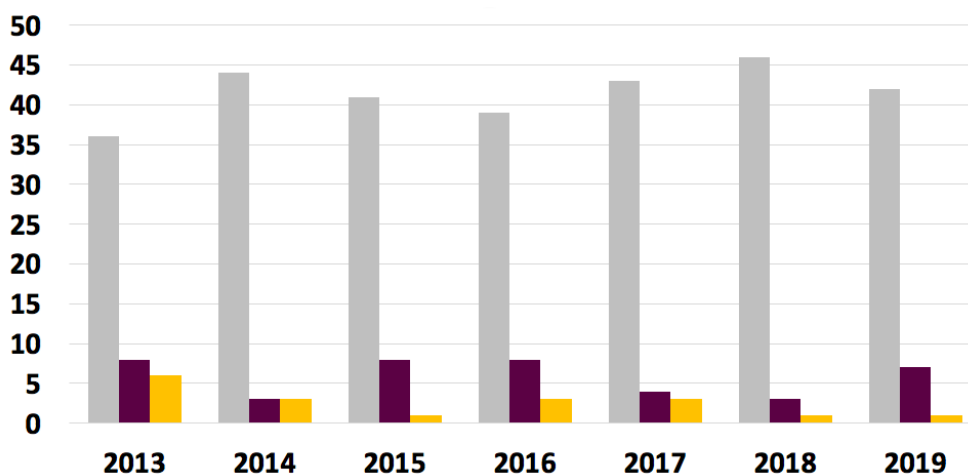

Of course, this entire cultural ecosystem significantly impacts opportunities for recognition within the industry. In November 2019, SongData published a blog on gender and race/ethnicity of nominees and winners for Country Music Association's non gender-based awards over the last two decades.[40] Between 2000 and 2019, there have been 1,105 nominates for artists outside of the gender-based categories. Drilling into these nominations, 719 (or 71%) have been male solo artists or groups,

166 (or 17%) have been female solo artists or groups, and 121 (or 12%) have been male-female ensembles and collaborations. Only four of these nominations (0.3%) have been for artists of colour. Four nominations (0.3%) have also been for collaborations with an artist of colour. And one Album nomination included tracks with solo performances by artists of colour. Combined, these nine nominations amount to 0.8% of the nominations between 2000 and 2019. Not a single woman of colour is included in this data.

Entertainer of the Year is arguably the most coveted award of the Country Music Association ceremony. The Award criteria considers not just charting activity and sales, but a whole complex of elements that include leadership, attitude and contributions to the genre. Over the course of the last 20-years, only 12 of the 100 nominations have been for female artists, with 2 for male-female ensembles and the overwhelming majority – 86 nominations – for male artists (see Figure 3.4). The 100 nominations over this 20-year period have gone to 23 artists -- with 12 nominations for Keith Urban, 11 for Kenny Chesney, 8 for Brad Paisley and George Strait, 6 for Luke Bryan and Alan Jackson, and 5 for Brooks & Dunn. The only women to have multiple nominations include Taylor Swift (with 4), Miranda Lambert (with 3), and the Dixie Chicks and Carrie Underwood (with 2).

The strongest year for female nominees was 2000 – when Faith Hill and the Dixie Chicks (who won the award) were both nominated. The years that follow show the complete absence of women in this category, with no nominations for a female artist between 2002 and 2008 and again in 2017 and 2018. Male artists completely dominated the categories in these years with 100% of the nominations (and 80% of the nominations in most of the remaining years).

Figure 3.4. Distribution of nominations for Country Music Associations' Entertainer of the Year Award, 2010-2019
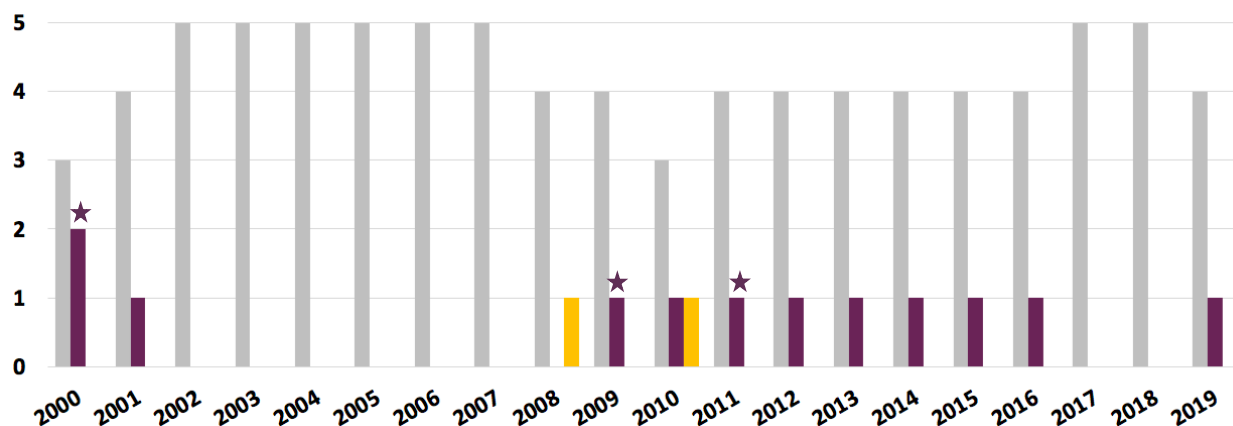
While radio and sales are not the only determining factor for this award, the absence of female artists on these charts would certainly impact eligibility for consideration. With increasingly fewer women participating in the mainstream of the industry throughout this period, female artists have fewer opportunities for exposure, leadership and broader contributory acts throughout the calendar year. Over the 19-years in this period, only three women have won Entertainer of the Year – Dixie Chicks in 2000 and Taylor Swift in 2009 and 2011. The remaining years have been won by male artists – with 2 wins for Garth Brooks, Luke Bryan, Alan Jackson, and Keith Urban and 4 for Kenny Chesney.

What does it mean when an artist like Carrie Underwood – who's *Cry Pretty* album debuted at #1 on the *all-genre Billboard* 200 albums chart, who embarked on an explosive and extremely successful North American tour, who has the most spins of any female artist for the last decade,[41] who celebrates and promotes country music proudly, who has hosted the CMA show for the last 12 years and who runs a successful clothing line (to name just a few of her career accomplishments) – cannot win Entertainer of the Year for her own industry's event?[42] If she cannot win, which woman can?

Perhaps more critically, what does it mean for the genre when its female artists are winning the biggest industry accolades for which they cannot even be deemed eligible within country music? Kacey Musgrave's 2019 sweep at the Grammy's – including the all-genre Album of the Year – and Tanya Tucker's 2020 win for Country Song and Album are particularly striking when we considering that neither had support from country radio.[43]

Increase the 10%

The purpose of this study was to re-evaluate representation of gender on country music after a year of heightened awareness to the growing inequality on radio. After two decades of significant decline in the number of songs by women appearing on the charts and the amount of spins granted to those songs, the results for 2019 shows signs of improvement for women by the end of the year. Although the changes were not significant overall, the increase in the number of songs on the Mediabase Country Airplay Reports and *Billboard* Country Airplay Charts in the final months of the year suggest slow change in programming. These changes, however, have not resulted in impact in the charts.

Songs by women consistently make up 10% of country radio airplay: they receive 10% of the daily spins on the Weekly Airplay Reports, 10% of the annual spins for songs in the Top 150 of the Yearend Airplay Reports, and as a result they are 10% of the Top 20 and Top 10 songs on *both* Mediabase's and *Billboard's* weekly charts. Increasing the 10% is an imperative next step to work toward not just meaningful change, but also correcting the damage done by limiting women to 15% of playlists and not playing songs by women back-to-back. In fact, it is clear from this study that even if 15% of the songs on playlists are by women, they are only heard 10% of the day.

The gaps in the data presented above offer pathways toward change: if country format radio stations add 10% more songs by women to their playlists, gender parity would be achievable within the next 5 years. The figure associated with the 10% depends on individual station practices. For example, a typical station plays about 330 songs a day with about 30 by women. This station could work toward equality and reshaping their audience's experience by adding 30 songs – 10% – by women to their daily programming. Do the same next year by adding 30 more and continue this practice until playlists reflect a more diverse and inclusive country music culture. What would this look like? Figure 4.1a maps this change on a three-year plan to increase the 10%. Unlike the coding system used in SongData studies, this plan maps just two categories and recommends coding songs by male-female ensembles by the most prominent voice in each track. Figure 4.1b offers an alternate plan for those unable to increase the full 10% and instead adds ~20 songs to daily programming over the next five years. Not only will this create space for more artists, but audiences will become more familiar with female voices and stories.[45] Playlists will become more diverse and less homogenous.

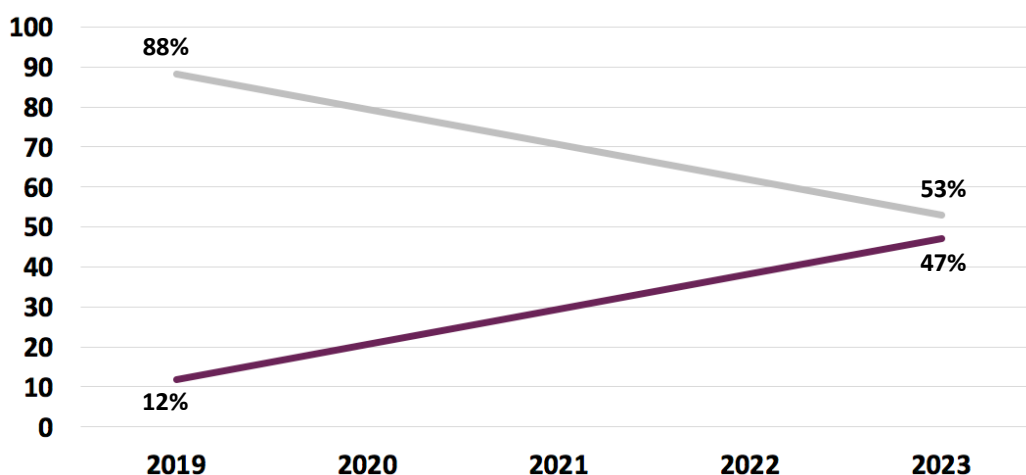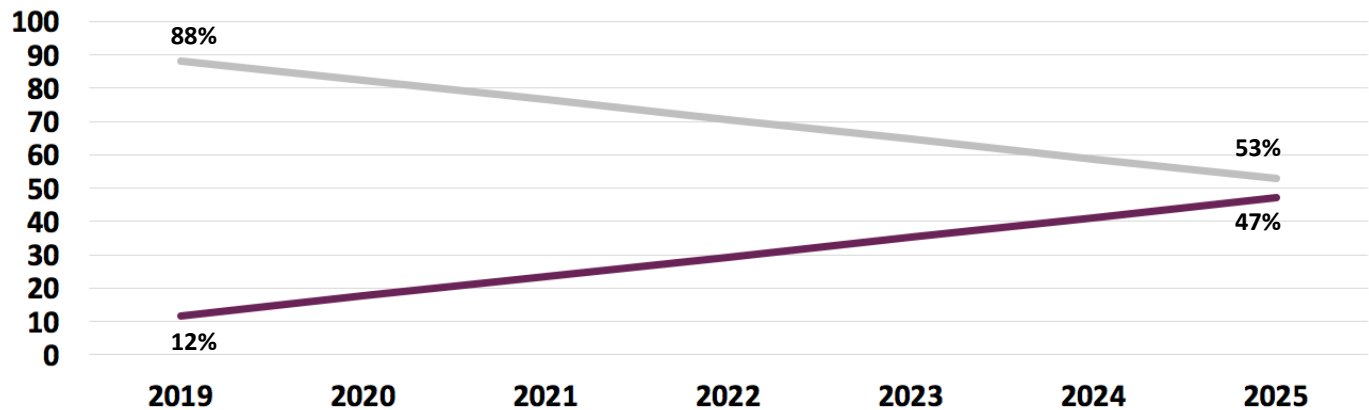**Figure 4.1a**. Increase the 10% - 3-year plan

Figure 4.1b. Increase the 10% - 5-year plan

This approach creates more opportunity for female artists and does not take away from current singles by male artists. Dislocating recurrent songs by men – which often receive as much airplay as lower-charting current songs – will create opportunity for others. This is not about taking from one group to increase representation of the other, it is a question of redistributing the space to create better balance, a more diverse sound, and an inclusive culture. And this change must happen across all song statuses: increasing the 10% is not just about introducing new female artists, but also reintroducing songs by established women. One way to do this is to create a list of gold catalogue songs by women that audiences know and love, and include those songs in daily programming to increase representation across recurrent rotation – where songs by women currently account for 4.2% of the spins. This should not only occur during the holiday season, in all weeks of the year, as a way to create inclusive programming.

None of this will work if stations do not increase representation in the dayparts with the highest percentage of listeners. Including more women in the morning, midday and afternoon dayparts will ensure that audiences actually *hear* these songs and will not continue to ghettoize women in the evenings and overnights. This must be coupled with changes testing strategies. For audiences to respond positively to changes in programming, call-out testing must reflect the changes in a playlist. Listeners' expectations and preferences will not change without exposure through all facets of their interaction with their local radio station. If audiences prefer songs that are familiar to them, that they hear often, then they must be presented with them more often for them to test well with listeners.

While working toward change, think about diversity strategies. The country listening audience is more diverse than the 97% white Airplay Reports and Airplay Charts. Include songs by artists of colour, by artists that identify as LGBT and by performers with disabilities. Assuming that your listening audience has one monolithic identity is a disservice to the genre and broader country music culture.[46] The genre did not emerge out of the Southern, white, rural world institutionalized in country music histories; this is a fictive construct that was established by the industry in the 1920s and that has been perpetuated through years of institutional decisions.[47] It's time to think more critically about the origins of the genre and how to build programming that reflect the audiences that listen to and love country music.

Pure Country 99 in Kingston, Ontario has already proven this strategy to be possible. On 29 January 2020, Pure Country's program director Brittany Thompson announced a pledge for equal play in the daytime hours (between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.). Although Thompson had already been contemplating changes to her programming, her timeline was accelerated by the tweet from Michigan's 98 WKCQ-FM. Figure 4.2 captures the changes in her programming over the first 2 weeks. Thompson pledged equal play throughout the daytime parts and achieved this through her programming in one week. Results of an analysis of her hour-by-hour activity the week of January 22 shows 26.3% of the airplay for songs by men occurred between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., with 20.7% for songs by women and 4.3% for male-female ensembles. Given coding at radio, combining the figures for women and male-female ensembles brings the count for songs by women to 25.0%. While this is not part of SongData's practice, the songs by male-female ensembles on the day examine had a strong presence of women.

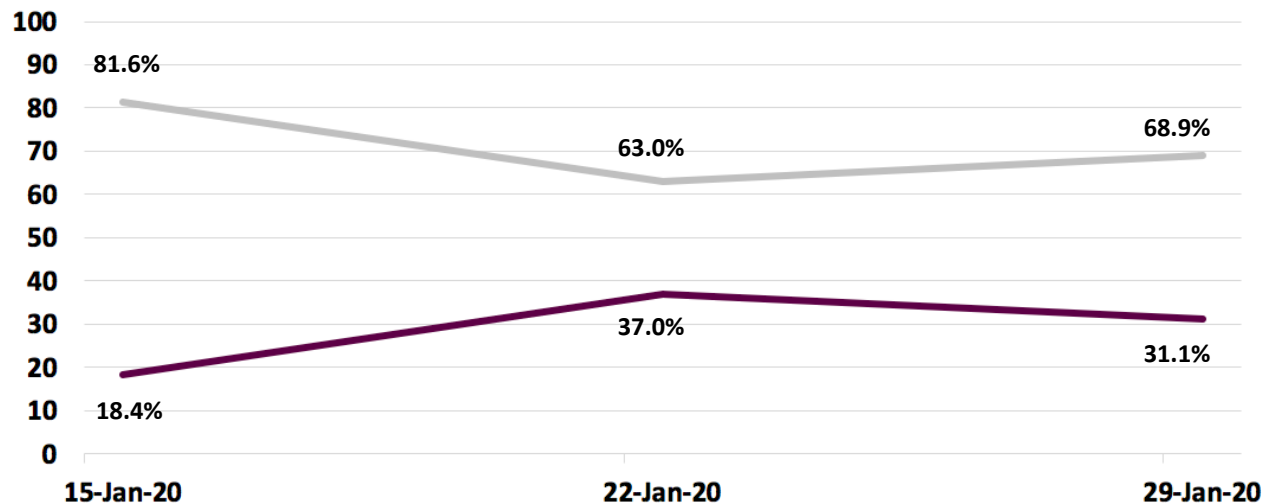**Figure 4.2**. Pure Country 99 (Kingston, Ontario), equal play pledge the week of January 20-24, 2020

Figure 4.2 shows that Thompson was able to increase the number of songs by women and male-female ensembles within one week, from 18.4% on 15 January 2020 to 37.0% by 22 January 2020. Through proactive programming, she closed the gap from 77.4% to 41.3%. Although Pure Country's programming changed the week following the equal play challenge, with women dropping from 37.0% to 31.1% by January 29, 2020, this isn't a step backwards for the station. Rather, it is part of their continual evaluation or negotiation of the weekly playlist on the path to making change.

In email correspondence, Thompson shared her thoughts on how to achieve a better balance:

> *We can do more when it comes to pushing in more female recurrent and gold. I looked at 7 stations over the last 7 days that are award winning or have some influence in Canada right now and out of each station's top 50 gold, most where playing 1-3 females in that category. If stations can even get recurrent and gold combined up to 25%, I think there would be a huge difference.*

> *Golds and recurrent typically test better than any new music, regardless of being male or female. You want to surround your new stuff with these categories. It's the current/new stuff that we need to push for the most balance. Those will become the recurrents and golds overtime. This week we're at 38% female in current. I'd like to get this to 45%-50% in the next couple of weeks and the hope would be to maintain that. I do not necessarily believe that setting aside a percentage is a good long-term solution, but for me personally, it will help with keeping the imbalance top of mind. It will become much easier if and when more parts of the industry take active measures to close the gap.*[48]

This also included reintroducing songs and artists that Thompson believed were "very good but never got a chance," including those by Kacey Musgraves, Lauren Alaina and Maddie & Tae. She even reached out to Mickey Guyton on Twitter to request a .wav file of "Sister" so that she could include it in her rotation.[49]

It is imperative to note that programming software often works against stations, since the algorithm is often expected to run in off-hours when there is no one in-studio to make changes. To do this, Thompson coded "male/female duets, groups, and duos as neutral," and going forward will code based on the lead of the song. If, for example, Hillary Scott is a prominent lead on a Lady Antebellum song, it will be coded "female" and if Charles Kelley is more prominent it will be coded "male". The same will be done for all male-female ensembles.

There is a lot to learn from Thompson's actions at Pure Country. Within two weeks they nearly doubled the number of spins accorded to songs by women, with the largest increase occurring in the daytime hours. The response seems overwhelmingly positive. Despite a handful of negative comments, Thompson notes that engagement has gone up: their social media numbers increased across all platforms and people have been telling her that they are switching to Pure Country because they heard about the pledge. Perhaps more critically, the overwhelming response was that her programming sounded "fresher and more contemporary."

Thompson's actions prove that the abovementioned 10% challenge is achievable. The timeline doesn't need to be one week like Thompson – who was already contemplating ways to change her programming. Rather, increasing the 10% can unfold over the course of three months to allow time to adjust coding in programming software, to redistribute spins for songs by women across the dayparts, and to build equality into call-out testing.

Conclusion

To echo the words of Caroline Criado Perez in her ground-breaking *Invisible Women*, "when women are able to step out from the shadows with the voices and their bodies… things start to shift."[50] Their stories will be heard. Their voices will become known and familiar. Their successes will be celebrated and their talents honoured. The gaps will begin to close. For too long, the industry has limited the opportunities and space available for women in the genre, allowing only a handful to succeed at once. As a result, women have become absent from main channels of dissemination – radio, streaming, tours, festivals, and invisible within charting cultures. Along with changes in representation, the genre will begin to change, too; music will sound less homogenous, it will become more innovative and fresh, and it will represent a wider segment of the population.

It's time for a change in programming across all facets of the industry. Achieving parity in country music cannot be achieved by a handful of stations and CMT alone. And it certainly is not a problem isolated to dissemination platforms. Program directors need more songs by women in their programming database to be able to increase representation on their playlists. The entire country music community needs to play a role in increasing the 10% by supporting and promoting female artists, from labels to publishers to tour and festival rosters. The April and December 2019 reports offer a series of actions developed with WOMAN Nashville that could be taken by organizations within the industry, artists and even those outside of the industry such as advertisers.[51] These actions were conceived as a suggested starting point for taking the necessary and meaningful steps to include more women in daily programming and develop strategies for a more inclusive and diverse country music. Only through a cross-industry collaborative approach will women start to be seen.

APPENDIX: RECURRENT SONGS BY WOMEN, 2019

Bebe Rexha, ft. FGL	"Meant to Be" (2017)	60,838
Kelsea Ballerini	"Miss Me More" (2017)*	33,274
Maren Morris	"Rich" (2016)	27,328
Maren Morris	"Girl" (2019)*	15,787
Carrie Underwood	"Southbound" (2018)*	10,769
Carrie Underwood	"Cry Pretty" (2018)	10,713
Maren Morris	"I Could Use a Love Song" (2016)	10,694
Runaway June	"Buy My Own Drinks" (2018)*	7,219
Kelsea Ballerini	"Legends" (2017)	6,917
Carly Pearce	"Every Little Thing" (2016)	5,954
Carly Pearce	"Hide the Wine" (2017)	4,317
Carrie Underwood	"Love Wins" (2018)*	3,190
Kacey Musgraves	"Rainbow" (2018)	2,350
Lauren Alaina	"Road Less Traveled" (2015)	2,172
Maddie & Tae	"Friends Don't" (2018)	1,560
Carly Pearce	"Closer to You" (2018)*	1,400
Ashley McBryde	"Girl Goin' Nowhere" (2017)*	1,363
Kelsea Ballerini	"Yeah Boy" (2015)	1,073
Lauren Alaina	"Ladies in the '90s" (2018)*	803
Tenille Townes	"Somebody's Daughter" (2018)*	709
Miranda Lambert	"It All Comes Out in the Wash" (2019)*	659
Runaway June	"Sleigh Ride" (2018)	641
Lauren Alaina	"Doin' Fine" (2017)	582
Lindsay Ell	"Criminal" (2016)	446
Caroline Jones	"Chasin' Me" (2019)*	443
Ashley McBryde	"A Little Dive Bar in Dahlonega" (2017)	251
Runaway June	"Lipstick" (2016)	81
Gwen Stefani	"You Make It Feel Like Christmas" (2017)	75
Reba McEntire	"O Little Town of Bethlehem" (2017)	69
Martina McBride	"Home for the Holidays" (2018)	54
Reba McEntire	"Back to God" (2017)	53
Reba McEntire, ft. Vince Gill	"Mary Did You Know" (2017)	44
Cam	"Diane" (2017)	36
Martina McBride	"Frosty the Snowman" (2018)	20
Miranda Lambert	"Tin Man" (2016)	20
Taylor Swift	"New Year's Day" (2017)	19
Runaway June	"Wild West" (2016)	15
Mallary Hope	"Just a Baby (Mary's Song)" (2017)	14
Martina McBride	"Happy Holidays" (2018)	6
Kelsea Ballerini	"Children go Where I Send You" (2017)	5
Abby Anderson	"Merry Christmas" (2018)	5
Danielle Bradbery	"Worth It" (2017)	5

Song charted in 2019

Endnotes

[1] Billboard, "Hot Country Singles and Tracks Chart," *Billboard* (19 February 2000), p. 34.

[2] Billboard, "Country Airplay Chart," *Billboard Country Update* (19 Feburary 2019), p. 6.

[3] Trigger, "Charlie Robison Pens Epic Response to Gary Overton's 'You Don't Exist'," *Saving Country Music* (28 February 2015).

[4] Nate Rau, "Sony's Gary Overton Talks Year Ahead," *The Tennessean* (21 February 2015).

[5] Chuck Aly, "Music Scheduling," *Country Aircheck* (2 March 2015): 9.

[6] Jada E. Watson, "Gender Representation on Country Format Radio: A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," *SongData Reports* (April 2019). Report prepared on consultation with WOMAN Nashville.

[7] Jada E. Watson, "New Report: A Study on Spins Across Dayparts on Country Radio," *SongData Reports* (6 December 2019). Report prepared in consultation with WOMAN Nashville.

[8] Pierre Bouvard, "Perception vs. Reality: Drive Time isn't the Only Time for AM/FM Radio," WestwoodOne (19 February 2019)..

[9] Watson, "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)," p. 1.

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[11] Billy Dukes, "Carrie Underwood's 'Cry Pretty' Album Lands at No. 1, Breaks Records," *Taste of Country* (24 September 2018).

[12] Marissa R. Moss, "How Kacey Musgraves' Grammy Wins Give Country Radio a Choice to Make," *Rolling Stone Country* (12 February 2019).

[13] Jessica Nicholson, "Maren Morris' 'GIRL' Breaks Streaming Record, Debuts at No. 1," *Music Row News* (18 March 2019).

[14] Noah Yoo, "Grammys 2020: Tanya Tucker Wins First Grammys at 61," *Pitchfork* (26 January 2020).

[15] Those interested in viewing the webinars can do so through the CRS360 Webinar page.

[16] Marissa R. Moss, "Women on Country Radio: CRS 2019 Sends Mixed Messages," *Rolling Stone Country* (27 February 2019).

[17] Inside Radio, "CRS 2020 Reveals Advance Agenda, New Faces of Country Finalists," *Inside Radio* (13 November 2019).

[18] Pure Country 99 Tweet, 19 January 2020.

[19] CMT Tweet, 21 January 2020; Leslie Fram Tweet, 21 January 2020.

[20] Marissa R. Moss, "How CMT's Pledge to Play More Videos by Women Could Influence Country Radio," *Rolling Stone Country* (24 January 2020).

[21] Devarati Ghosh, "Women & Country Music: Music Row Works to 'Change the Conversation'," *Mjs Big Blog* (6 July 2015). Phyllis Stark, "New Study Explores Success Rate (or Lack Thereof) for New Female Country Acts," *Billboard* (15 July 2015). Ghosh's work on gender imbalance in country music was exemplary. She was an early critic of #TomatoGate, with her first blog following the May 2015 interview devoted to challenging presumptions about the audience and call-out research. See "Country Radio & The Anti-Female Myth: A Data-based Look," *Mjs Big Blog* (28 May 2015). She has also written widely about *Billboard's* decision to implement the hybrid-Hot 100 formula on the Hot Country Songs Chart: "Billboard Changes Country Chart Rules, Boost 'Crossover' Songs," *Saving Country Music* (22 October 2012) and "The Meaningless Florida-Georgia Line Billboard Country Songs Record: Who Really has the Biggest Country Hit?" *Mjs Big Blog* (2 August 2013).

[22] 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. There are currently 321 country format stations monitored, with 156 of them reporting on the Published Panel. Mediabase's daypart coding system can be retrieved from their website.

[23] Watson, "A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," p. 4.

[24] Watson, "A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," p. 11.

[25] Watson, "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)."

[26] Bouvard, "Perception vs. Reality." "Share of the Ear" study details can be accessed online.

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[28] Billboard, "Year-End Charts: Country Airplay Songs," *Billboard.com* (2019).

[29] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[30] 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.

[31] 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.

[32] Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008; 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.

[33] WOMAN Nashville, Tweet on 21 January 2020.

[34] Watson, "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)," p. 1.

[35] For more on underrepresentation on festival lineups, visit the website for Book More Women.

[36] See SongData's studies, "A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018" and "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)."

[37] Jackson Weaver, "Stand by your man – and woman: Country Music Radio Station Pledges Equal Play," *CBC News* (25 January 2020).

[38] NewsChannel5, "Martina McBride calls out Spotify over lack of female representation," *YouTube* video, 2:15 (10 September 2019).

[39] Jada E. Watson, "Reflecting on Spotify's Recommender System," *Keeper of the Flame* blog (1 October 2019).

[40] Jada E. Watson, "Looking at the Last 20 Years of Country Music Association Awards Nominations," *Keeper of the Flame blog* (12 November 2019).

[41] Watson, "A Study of Published Reports 2000-2018," p. 10 and Watson, "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)," p. 25.

[42] Brittney McKenna, "The 2019 CMA Awards' Attempt to Honor Women Goes Sideways," *Rolling Stone Country* (14 November 2019).

[43] Marissa R. Moss, "How Kacey Musgraves' Grammy Wins Give Country Radio a Choice to Make," *Rolling Stone Country* (12 February 2019); Tom Roland, "What Did Kacey Musgraves' Triumphant Grammy Night Say About Country Radio?" *Billboard* (21 February 2019); Emily Yahr, "Why Kacey Mugraves, Who Keeps Winning Awards, Still Can't Get a Radio Hit," *Washington Post* (6 June 2019); Tim Appelo, "Tanya Tucker Wins her First Grammys at 61," *AARP.org* (27 January 2020).

[44] Brittany Thompson Tweet, 26 January 2020.

[45] The Increase the 10% campaign is influenced by Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's "Just Add Five" campaign. See Stacy L. Smith, "Hey, Hollywood: It's time to Adopt the NFL's Rooney's Rule – For Women (Guest Column)," *The Hollywood Reports* (15 December 2014).

[46] Suggestions for building diverse playlists is influenced by Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's Solutions for more inclusive films. See Katherine Pieper, "Solutions," *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* (3 March 2016).

[47] For more on the origins of the genre see Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Diane Pecknold (ed.), *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); and Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

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[49] Brittany Thompson, Tweet on 22 January 2020.

[50] Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019), 25.

[51] Watson, "A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," p. 24 and "A Study of Spins Across Dayparts (2002-2018)," p. 28.