

REDLINING IN COUNTRY MUSIC 2.0:

Representation in the Country Music Industry in 2021 and 2022

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On 12 March 2021, "[Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry \(2000-2020\)](#)" was released. Taking an intersectional approach to studying representation within the Country music industry, the report drew on four datasets of industry data to examine the results of internal decision-making processes and practices and consider connections between radio programming, label signing, and award nomination processes in the industry mainstream. Through these data, the report revealed the extent to which the industry has privileged white artists and denied opportunity to Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian artists, redlining them to the margins of the industry.

The release of Redlining in Country Music followed ongoing discussion of representation and the lack of equity, diversity, and inclusivity within the Country music industry that had been unfolding for years but that had emerged to the fore of industry and media discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic. Countless panels, webinars, and meetings unfolded virtually (with much dialogue taking place on social media), all centered on the history of the industry, structural racism embedded in industry and its practices, and the experiences of BIPOC artists in Nashville. But as the industry made its return to in-person programming and activities, the conversation seemingly slowed within Nashville, but was maintained by artist- and journalist-organized initiatives. This includes the development of a suite of programs developed by Apple Country Radio that spotlight music of artists marginalized by the industry, the birth of Black Opry, and the growth of Country Soul Songbook Summit and Rainbow Rodeo, to name a few.

To many watching the Nashville mainstream, it looked like things could be changing: Mickey Guyton co-hosted the Academy of Country Music Awards (2020), released a debut album (2021), received increased attention for her music, and sang the national anthem at the Super Bowl (2022); Jimmie Allen was named New Artist of both the ACM (2020) and CMA (2021) awards; and a group of new Black, Biracial, and Latinx artists were signed to Nashville labels – some of whom have already toured with major-label artists over the last two years.

But close examination of radio playlists and industry charts tell a different story about the industry's response to conversations about the historic and continued whiteness and maleness of the Country music industry. The attention to the lack of diversity from both inside and outside of Nashville has not translated into change within industry practices, especially within radio programming.

Where exactly does the industry stand today? Has there been any change or diversification within the systems of production, distribution, and recognition in Nashville? Redlining in Country Music 2.0 returns to the central questions posed in the initial report, updates the datasets to include radio, chart, label, and award data from the last two years to analyze industry activity in 2021 and 2022. New to this study is the inclusion of MusicRow's Songwriter charts, to open dialogue about representation in other creative arenas within the industry.

The results presented here reveal little change in radio and on airplay charts – in fact, in many respects the situation has worsened. Key findings presented in this report include:

- More BIPOC artists have had songs on Country format radio, but this has not translated to increased airplay;
- Most of the airplay for songs by BIPOC artists is for songs by 3 men;
- BIPOC women remain absent from programming, with none of their songs in regular rotation during daytime hours;

- Despite new label signings in 2021 and 2022, nearly all of the BIPOC artists on major labels are men; and
- BIPOC artists have received nominations in CMA and ACM artist-centered categories but remain absent from Single and Album categories.

The study addresses two trends emerging in the industry. The first concerns the continued increase in airplay for songs by multiethnic ensembles. While these collaborative recordings are on the rise, those receiving the most spins are led by white male artists. The BIPOC men contribute, then, as featured artists with limited airtime on these tracks, showing the continued dominance of white men even within multiethnic collaborations.

The second trend concerns the rise of collaborations between solo male and female artists. This increase in collaborative records has coincided with a decline in airplay for female artists (down to 11% by 2022). Given that radio programmers code male-female ensembles as "female" within their programming practices, it seems likely then that these collaborations seemingly taking the place of airplay for songs by women, but they are all collaborations of white artists and contribute to the continued exclusion of BIPOC women within the industry.

MusicRow's songwriter charts offers the opportunity to go behind-the-scenes in cultural space that privileges whiteness and maleness. White male songwriters dominate the charts. 385 unique songwriters appeared on MusicRow's Top Songwriters chart between 2019-22, 95.5% of whom are white songwriters, with just 4 (1.0%) Black men, and 4 (1.0%) Biracial men. Only 1 of the 4 Black artists make their career as a professional songwriter, the other 3 being label-signed artists with writing credits on their own songs. Here, as with other spheres of the industry, Black female Country songwriters are absent.

The results presented here reveal the enduring racial and gendered hierarchy within the industry, showing the connections between each facet of the industry. Radio airplay remains an integral component of the development of an artist's career, including the promotional support received from a label and eligibility for awards by the two main trade organizations. This data suggests that the lack of representation on airplay does not just impact the trajectory of an individual artist, it also impacts the careers of those around them, including future artists, and songwriters.

Redlining in Country Music 2.0 addresses contemporary issues pertaining to representation in the industry, focusing on the two years following the original study period. The report's methodology is outlined on the first page of the Appendix, describing SongData's approach to intersectional coding and analysis, as well as the sources of industry data. Here, as before, the results show the continued cultural redlining of BIPOC artists in the industry and the various ways in which current practices perpetuate the white racial framing of Country music culture. This report does not repeat the historical and contextual framing presented in the initial Redlining in Country Music study. Readers that do not know this history or have not read the March 2021 report are encouraged to start there, as it offers critical contextual framing to the findings presented here. Redlining in Country Music 2.0 is a follow-up to the original study, addressing what has or has not changed in the industry over the last two years.

UNIQUE ARTISTS ON COUNTRY RADIO

Between 2002 and 2022, 3,080 artists and collaborations had songs played on Country format radio. As in the March 2021 report, the majority of the artists with songs played in this period were white. While that total percentage reported in March 2021 – 96% – is down to 92%, just 2.6% were Black (1.4%), Biracial, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latinx, or Filipino (1.2%). The remaining 5.3% of the artists with songs played on Country format radio were multiracial/ethnic ensembles or collaborations. These figures include 232 non-Country artists whose songs were played on the format. What is notable here is that the percentage of Black, Indigenous and artists of color has remained unchanged from the March 2021 report when including new artists with songs played in 2021 and 2022. The notable change that resulted in the 4% drop in white artists was an increase in multiethnic ensembles and collaborations.

Removing the non-Country artists from the list results in a reduction of the percentage of BIPOC artists from 2.6% overall down to 1.8% (0.9% Black, 0.8% IPOC), and as a result increases the representation of white Country artists from 92.0% to 94.0%. This information is summarized in Table 1 below.

Drilling into this data to look closer at the last three years (2020-22), Figure 1 describes representation of unique Country artists with songs played in each year. In the last three years, an average of 2.7% of the Country artists with songs played on the format are Black (10 men, 7 women), while an average of 1.1% are Biracial or Latinx artists (5 men, 1 woman). Indigenous and Asian Country artists have not received airplay in this three-year period. As with the initial [Redlining report](#), Lil Nas X is the only queer BIPOC artist with a Country songs played on the format.

The results in the March 2021 report revealed a trend toward an increase in multiethnic collaborations and the results here reveal its continuation. With an average of 6.5% of the artists with songs played, multiethnic ensembles and collaborations are on the rise. However, most of these collaborations (91.5%) are led by white men with just 5.6% led by Black men, 2.9% led by Biracial men. Recalculating this information, then, shows that an average of 96% of the artists with songs played on the format are either white artists or white-led multiethnic collaborations. Even within these multiethnic collaborative partnerships, then, white men dominate programming and suggest little effort on the part of the industry and radio to change.

How many songs are played by these artists and collaborations, and how often they are spun within programming will offer greater perspective on representation within Country format radio.

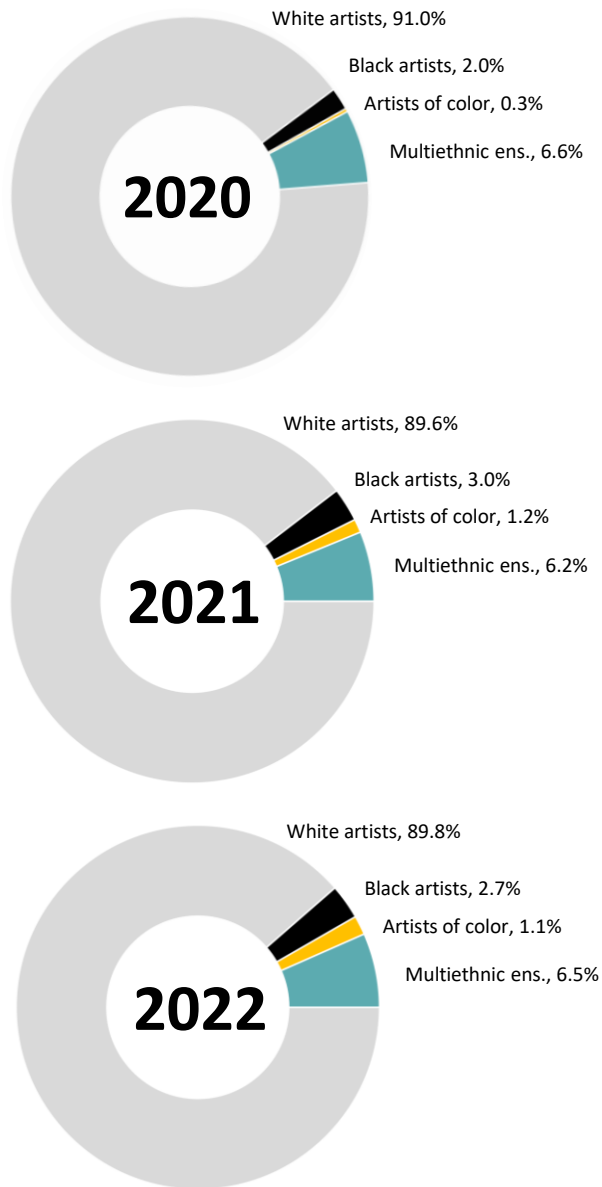


Figure 1. Unique artists with songs played on Country format radio.

Table 1. Unique Country artists (2002-2022)

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	57.2%	23.0%	13.8%	0.0%	94.0%
Black artists	0.6%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%
Artists of color	0.5%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	2.5%	0.2%	1.5%	0.0%	4.3%
	60.9%	23.8%	15.3%	0.0%	

Despite an increase in the number of BIPOC artists in 2021 and 2022, 95.4% of the artists are white or multiethnic collaborations led by white artists.



UNIQUE SONGS PLAYED

Between 2002 and 2022, 12,718 unique songs were played on the stations reporting to Mediabase. 95.9% of those songs were by white artists, with 1.2% by Black artists, 1.0% by Biracial, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian artists, and 1.9% by multiethnic ensembles/collabs. Removing the non-Country songs from this count, the percentage of songs by white artists increases to 96.3% (see Table 2).

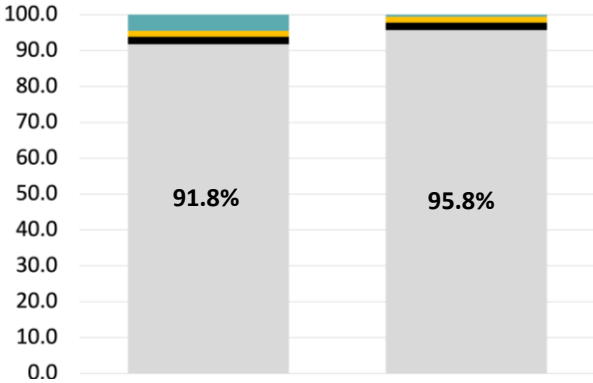
Table 2. Unique Country songs played on radio (2002-2022)

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	66.0%	23.3%	7.0%	0.0%	96.3%
Black artists	0.8%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%
Artists of color	0.7%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	1.0%	0.2%	0.5%	0.0%	1.7%
	68.5%	24.0%	7.5%	0.0%	

The March 2021 [Redlining report](#) revealed an increase in representation between 2014 and 2020. The findings presented here show that unique songs by BIPOC artists have continued to increase since 2020, to a high of 6.1% in 2022 – 3.2% by Black artists and 2.9% by Biracial and Latinx artists. This increase is documented in Figure 2. The graphic also reveals the steady increase of unique songs by multiethnic ensembles and collaborations. While the data shows that an average of 4.5% of the unique songs played are by multiethnic ensembles between 2020 and 2022, 90% of those songs are led by white artists.

The stacked bar graphs of Figure 3 disaggregate the data to reveal the distribution of unique songs between 2020 and 2022. In both graphics, the stacked bar graph on the left details the breakdown of songs by white, Black, artists of color and multiethnic ensembles. The stacked graph on the right presents the same data but combines the data for white artists with white-led multiethnic ensembles. Analyzing the data in this manner reveals that 88% of the song by multiethnic collaborations are led by white artists. Here, as with the discussion of unique artists, songs by white-led multiethnic ensembles gives the false perception of change on radio. This information is also captured in Figure 2: the dotted line traces the percentage of unique songs by white artists and white-led multiethnic collaborations between 2002 and 2020, a two-decade average of 97.7%.

Unique songs in 2020 and 2021



Unique songs in 2022

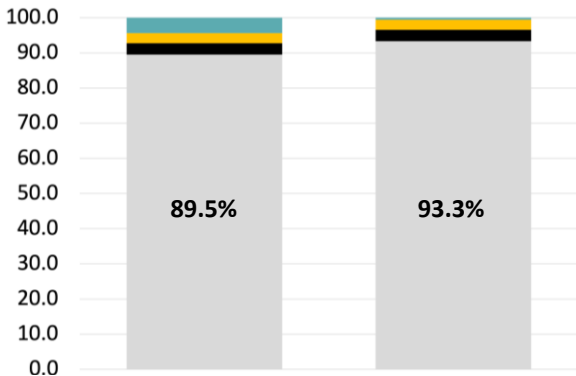


Figure 3. unique songs in 2020/2021 and 2022

Left stacked graph: representation of unique songs by race and ethnicity of the artist and ensemble/collaboration.

Right stacked graph: representation disaggregated to combine figures for white artists and white-led multiethnic collaborations.

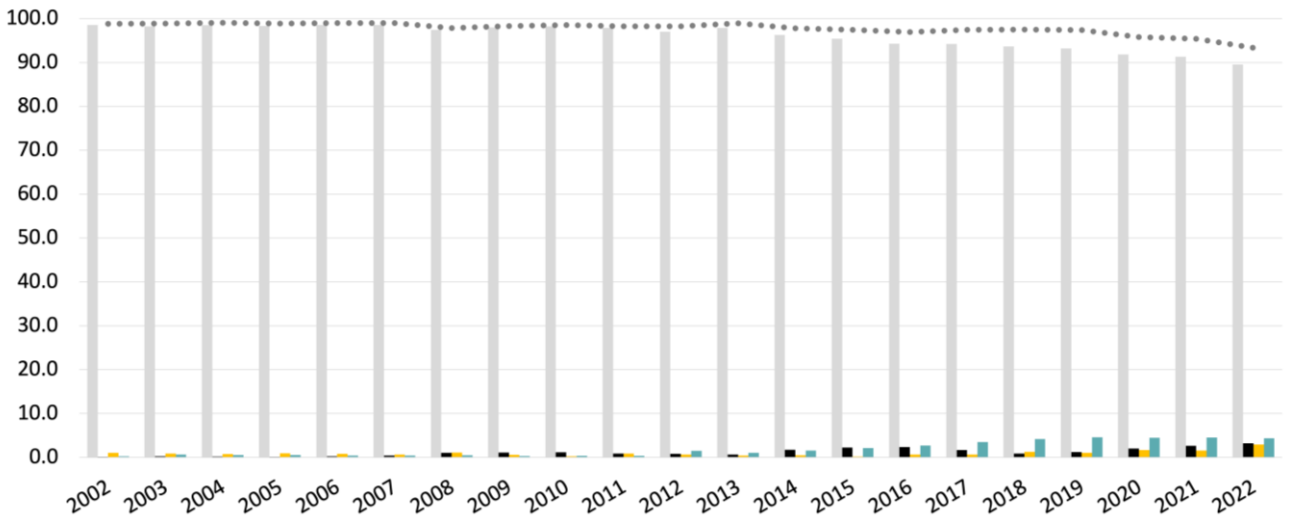


Figure 2. Distribution of unique songs played on Country format radio between 2002 and 2022.

AIRPLAY – Distribution of spins

Critical to the discussion of representation on Country format radio through all SongData reports has focus on distribution of spins in weekly programming. While the data thus far has revealed a slight increase in BIPOC artists and songs, the rate at which these songs factor into regular programming determines whether or not their songs have the type of exposure required to become known amongst radio listeners. The March 2021 [Redlining report](#) revealed three periods within programming between 2002 and 2020:

- 2002 to 2007:** BIPOC artists were nearly absent from radio programming; just 0.5% of the songs played ere by BIPOC artists, and they averaged 0.3% of the spins.
- 2008 to 2013:** representation increased marginally, to an average of 1.5% of the songs played, averaging 2.0-2.5% of the spins.
- 2014 to 2020:** representation increased again, to an average of 3.7% of the songs played, with an average of 4.8% of the spins in this final six-year period.

The results presented here show that the number of songs by BIPOC artists has remained unchanged over since 2020. The same is not true for actual airplay (i.e. spins) between 2020 and 2022. In fact, as tracked in the bar graph below, there has been a *decrease* in spins for songs by Black artists from 2.2% in 2019 down to 1.3% by 2022, and for songs by Biracial and Latinx artists from 3.2% in 2019 down to 2.6% in 2022. Here, as with the Redlining report, the bulk of this airplay continues to be for songs by a handful of Biracial and Black men: Kane Brown (53.0%), Jimmie Allen (22.4%), Darius Rucker (16.4%), and Frank Ray (7.2%), whose *solo songs* receive 99.0% of the spins for songs by BIPOC solo artists. (This figure does not include their collaborative songs.)

While there has been an increase in the number of Black women with songs on Country format radio since 2020 (when Mickey Guyton was the only Black woman with songs played), the 29 songs by seven Black female Country artists received just 0.05% of the airplay in 2021 and 2022 combined. At this low rate of airplay, songs by Black women barely

register within daily programming, the same being true for Biracial (0.02%), Latinx (0.0%), and Indigenous or Asian women (0.0%). Songs by husband-wife duo War and Treaty, the only Black male-female Country duo received 0.001% of the spins in 2022. These figures are so small that they do not appear in the summary data in Table 3.

The graph below also reveals continued increase of spins for songs by multiethnic ensembles to a peak of 7.3% in 2021. However, discussion surrounding these songs should be considered within the larger conversation of the identity of the lead artist (whose voice is most prominent in a recorded track). As with unique songs, the majority of the spins accorded to songs by multiethnic ensembles has gone to songs by a white-male lead (82.9% in 2021 and 74.7% in 2022). As such, whether discussion unique artists or songs or programmed airplay, white artists and white-led (male) collaborations are prioritized within radio programming. Despite the increase in spins for songs by BIPOC artists and multiethnic ensembles, then, drilling into the data reveal that 95% of the airplay between 2020 and 2022 was for songs by white artists and white-led multiethnic collaborations.

Table 3. Distribution of spins in 2022

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	71.5%	11.0%	9.0%	0.0%	91.5%
Black artists	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
Artists of color	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	4.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	4.7%
	79.5%	11.0%	9.5%	0.0%	

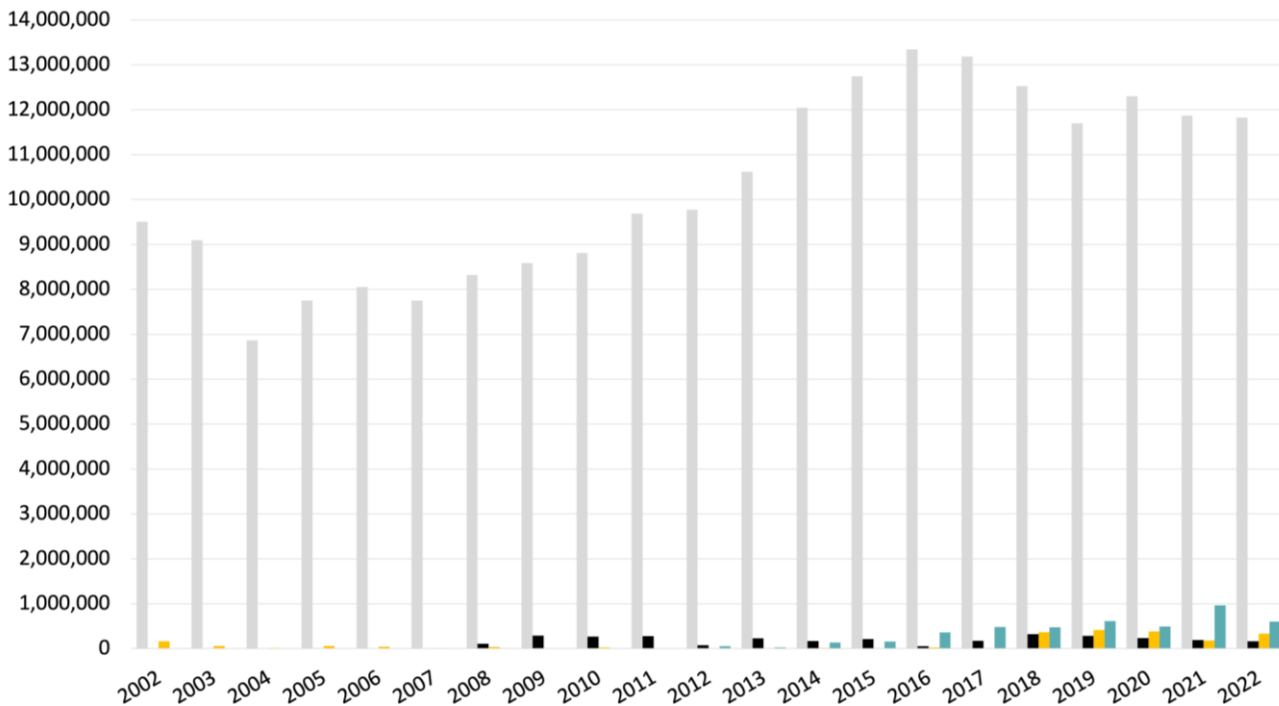


Figure 4. Distribution of spins for songs played on Country format radio between 2002 and 2022.

AIRPLAY – Spins by daypart in 2022

Drilling into this data to examine the distribution of spins across the 24-hour radio cycle is an important part of understanding representation within Country format radio. Analyzing the data in this manner offers critical insights into *when* an artist is most likely to be heard by listeners. The 24-hour cycle at terrestrial radio is divided into five dayparts:

- the overnights (12:00 to 6:00 a.m.),
- the morning (6:00 to 10:00 a.m.),
- the midday (10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.),
- the afternoon, (3:00 to 7:00 p.m.), and
- the evening (7:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m.).

According to a 2019 Nielsen study (Bouvard 2019), 42% of most radio listening occurs during the morning and afternoon drive times (21% in each daypart) and that 26% occurs in the midday period – but these are often the times of day with the fewest songs played. As with the [Redlining report](#), then, examining *how much* airplay songs by BIPOC artists receive according to daypart helps to understand *when* their songs are played, and *how likely* they are to be heard by listeners throughout the day (Watson 2019c, 2021).

The March 2021 Redlining report revealed a racialized and gendered hierarchy within programming that privileges white men, second places white women and male-female ensembles/collaborations and pushes Black and of colour artists to the margins of the dayparts. Reporting the distribution of songs by dayparts in 2020, the Redlining in Country Music revealed that songs by men received 83.5% of the spins, songs by women had 12.3%, and male-female ensembles 4.2% – each grouping privileging white artists. The same is certainly true in 2022 (see Figure 5), except that here we see a drop in airplay for songs by men and women and an *increase* for male-female ensembles. This change can be attributed to the increase in collaborations between male and female solo artists in 2022. 57.0% of these collaborations were led by white

male artists and received 68.0% of the spins for white male-female ens./collabs. The 1.3% drop in airplay for songs by white female artists, and the rise in airplay for these white collaborations suggests that collaborative recordings were included in the internal quota accorded to songs by white female artists.

As described in Figure 5, songs by female artists receive just 11% of the spins in 2022, a figure represents almost entirely songs by white women, whose songs received 99.97% of the spins in 2022. Songs by Black and Biracial women received 0.03% of the spins in 2022, and almost entirely in the evenings (0.01%) and overnights (0.02%).

At this rate of programming and placement in the dayparts, songs by Black and Biracial women are not just underplayed, they are also unlikely to be heard by audiences outside of peak listening hours. These songs – all of which are by new Black artists – are not receiving the type of exposure that would allow them to become known by radio audiences and to enter a station’s playlist. As a result, these songs do not receive regular airplay, none of them have entered into daytime current programming, and none of them receive enough airplay to chart. Their songs receive *just enough* airplay for programmers to say they tried, but not enough to make any measurable or quantifiable change in programming or for the careers of women of color.

Multiethnic collaborations, which are nearly entirely collaborations of male artists, are also of concern within daytime programming. Drilling into the data for spins accorded to songs by multiethnic collaborations reveal that 75% of the spins for multiethnic collaborations (in each daypart) are for songs by white-led collaborations of male artists, revealing that they receive 3.5% of the daytime programming (spread nearly equally across all five dayparts. Daytime programming, then, is dominated by songs led by white men, even for songs that feature BIPOC male artists.

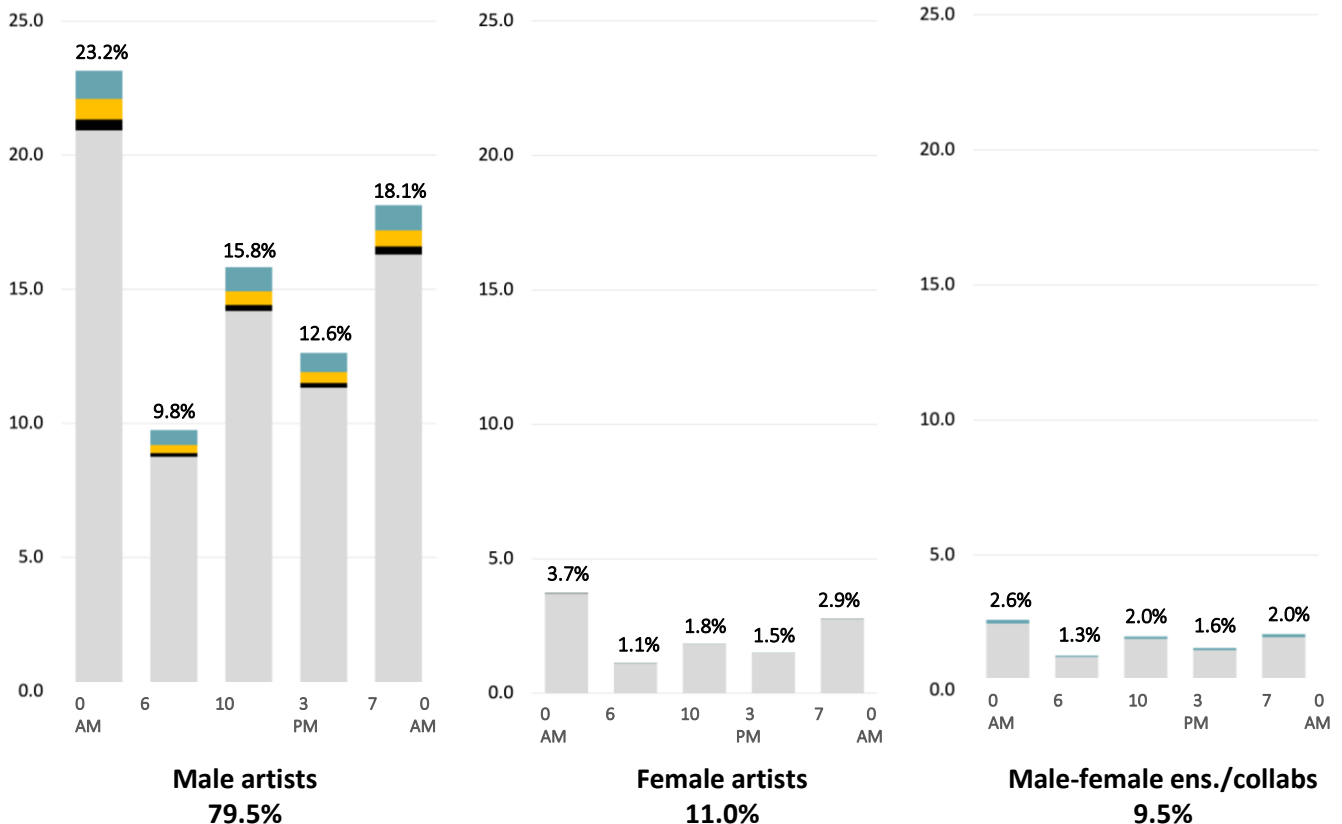


Figure 5. Distribution of spins for songs played on Country format radio in 2022 by time of day.

AIRPLAY – Current vs. Recurrent status (2022)

Graphing distribution by current and recurrent status provides an important lens into how much and how long songs by BIPOC artists factor into radio programming. Current songs are those that are new releases to radio and are vying for contention on station playlists and ultimately on industry charts. Recurrent songs are those that have peaked and exited the weekly airplay chart but are maintained in a station’s recurrent playlist for continued playing. Recurrent records also include songs that are retained as part of a station’s back catalogue of “gold” songs. With such little support from Country format radio and songs that peak almost entirely outside of the Top 20 (discussed below), songs by BIPOC women are absent from recurrent and gold rotation status, as are songs by queer BIPOC artists.

Combined, BIPOC artists receive 3.01% of the current airplay and 0.85% of the recurrent airplay. The bulk of this current and recurrent airplay, 1.98% and 0.85% (respectively), was for songs by BIPOC men.

Why does this distribution matter? While radio airplay has the potential to introduce an artist and to provide support for their music to enter and climb charts (which is tied to other opportunities within the industry), the retention of songs as part of a station’s back catalogue is just as important to contributing to the longevity of an artist’s career. This means that once their songs peak and exit the chart, that they are retained for continued play into the future. More critically, this is part of “canon-building” within the industry, as the songs retained within a station’s gold catalogue of songs become not just recognizable to audiences, but they are also foundation-building to the culture and sound of the genre.

Tables 4a and 4b breakdown the percentage of spins for songs played on Country format radio in 2022 reveal critical information about

playlisting. First, the data reveals that songs by BIPOC artists (in general) and women (specifically) are not retained within station playlists at the same as as those by white artists. In fact, songs by Black and Biracial women that were played on Country format radio in 2022 received such little airplay that no songs were included in a station’s regular playlist. Their songs were eliminated almost immediately from rotation – not even receiving enough attention to make it out of evening and overnight slots into daytime programming. All of the songs by BIPOC women received less than six week of airplay, except for Tiera’s “Found it In You” which had 25 weeks of airplay, amassing 3,376 spins and peaking at #67 (17 positions outside of the chart).

This observation on the lack of retention for songs by BIPOC women is true also for songs by multiethnic ensembles led by BIPOC men in 2022. Evaluating the data for multiethnic ensembles reveals that airplay for spins are nearly equal for current singles – with 54.8% for songs by white-led male multiethnic collabs and 45.2% for songs by multiethnic collaborations led by BIPOC male artists. However, the picture changes for recurrent records, wherein 90.7% of the spins for recurrent songs by multiethnic collaborations are for those led by white men. Because this study is looking at airplay in 2022, a year in which many of these songs are also charting, this figure needs to be revisited at the end of 2023 to evaluate how the shift from current-to-recurrent playlisting plays out over a longer period of time.

In the short term, however, the findings here concerning a programming practice that retains the songs by white male artists at a rate far greater than all other artists – notably BIPOC artists – serves to reinforce the white racial frame or what Pittelman (2014) refers to as the “white sound” of this industry. To this I would add that this is a “white male sound,” further articulating the combined white supremacist and heteropatriarchal values underpinning the industry.

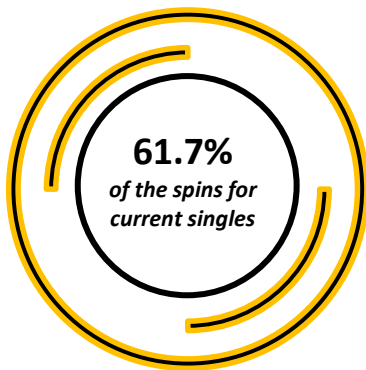


Table 4a. Distribution of spins for Current Singles in 2022

	Male artists	Female artists	Male-female ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	44.23%	8.70%	3.69%	0.00%	56.62%
Black artists	1.03%	0.03%	0.00%	0.00%	1.06%
Artists of color	1.95%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.95%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	1.60%	0.00%	0.48%	0.00%	2.08%
	48.81%	8.73%	4.17%	0.00%	

Table 4b. Distribution of spins for Recurrent Records in 2022

	Male artists	Female artists	Male-female ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	27.28%	2.21%	5.35%	0.00%	34.84%
Black artists	0.22%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.22%
Artists of color	0.63%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.63%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	2.6%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.6%
	30.73%	2.21%	5.35%	0.00%	

CHARTING SONGS

As reported in the March 2021 [Redlining report](#), just 19.0% of the songs by BIPOC Country artists that were played on Country radio between 2002 and 2020 received enough airplay to enter the charts. Study of the charts revealed the same trend outlined for airplay over that period, with an increase in representation from an average of 0.3% between 2002 and 2007, to an average of 1.5% between 2008 and 2013, to an average of 2.0% from 2014 to 2020.

In the two years since the release of the Redlining study, songs by BIPOC artists have increase to 3.5% of the charts In 2021 and 2022. But just 8.3% of the songs by BIPOC Country artists peaked within the 50-position weekly charts, 1.3% of the charting songs overall.

As summarized in Table 5, there is a significant and notable absence in the charting songs: women of color. Not a single song by a Black, Biracial, Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian woman has received enough support from radio – or any other means of distribution – to enter and climb the 50-position Mediabase chart.

During the last two years just four solo male BIPOC artists have charted songs (Jimmie Allen, Darius Rucker, Kane Brown, Frank Ray). Breland and Blanco Brown have also charted as featured artists on songs by Dierks Bentley and Parmalee (respectively), and hip-hop artist Nelly has charted on Airplay for his duet with Florida Georgia Line “Lil Bit”.

The absence of songs by Black and of color women on the charts is a surface-level indication of the deeper racialized and gendered practices within the industry’s culture. A hierarchy that privileges white men, second places white women (and male-female ens./collabs) and tokenizes a small number of BIPOC men is indicative of a white supremacist and heteropatriarchal system uninterested in change. Proximity to whiteness is central to this internal practice – and this is achieved in the increase of white-led multiethnic collaborations. 91.3% of the charting songs in 2021-22 are by white artists – a percentage that increases to 94% when adding white-led multiethnic ensembles.

The absence of songs by Black and of color women on the charts ensures their absence from other spaces in the industry. With no charting songs, singles by Black and Biracial women that received airplay in 2021 and 2022 are ineligible for ACM and CMA awards. These awards require a Top 20 and Top 10 (respectively) in order to be deemed *eligible for consideration* – not to mention the opportunities to participate in industry events, walk red carpets, tour and perform at festivals that emerge as a result of radio and chart exposure.

Table 5. Unique charting songs in 2021 and 2022

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	67.7%	13.5%	10.5%	0.0%	91.3%
Black artists	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%
Artists of color	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	4.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	5.2%
	75.6%	15.7%	8.7%	0.0%	

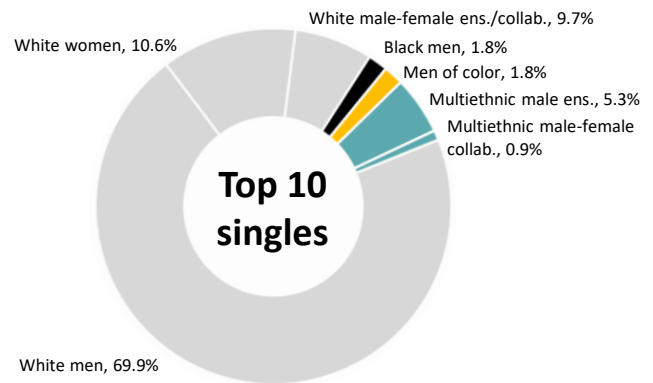


Figure 7. Unique Top 10 charting songs on Mediabase’s Weekly Airplay chart in 2021 and 2022

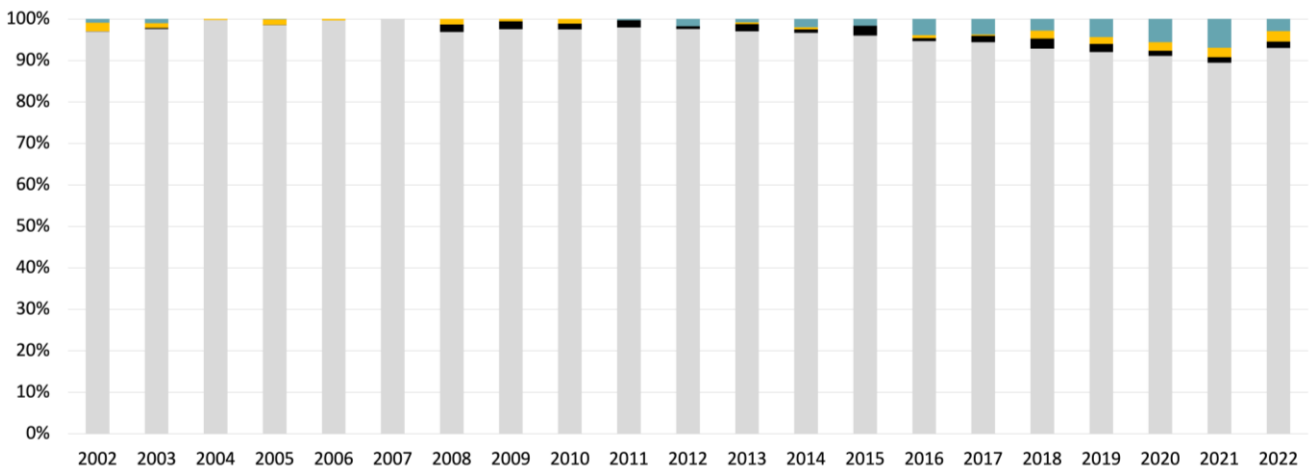


Figure 6. Distribution of songs on Mediabase’s Weekly Airplay charts

LABEL ROSTERS

Country format radio plays predominantly (if not entirely) the music of current label-signed artists. Save for some recurrent records by artists that might no longer be signed to a label, current singles are those recorded by artists on labels within the Nashville label system. The March 2021 [Redlining report](#) revealed that over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, just 3.2% of the artists signed on one of the three major labels – Sony, UMG and Warner – are BIPOC. But what has happened in the last two years? Have these three labels made changes within their rosters? Have they invested in supporting and signing new artists? Or are their rosters still nearly entirely filled with white artists?

Figure 8 aggregates the rosters for Sony, UMG, and Warner, revealing that by 2022 the rosters of these three labels are 90.0% white, with just 4.0% Black artists, 2.0% Biracial artists, and 4.0% multiethnic ensembles. Figure 9 drills into the rosters for each label, breaking down figures for 2021-2022. (This data is also presented in a table in the appendix)

At the end of 2020, Kane Brown (Sony), Mickey Guyton and Darius Rucker (UMG), and Shy Carter (Warner) were the only BIPOC artists signed. In the two years following the report, Willie Jones and Kat & Alex were signed to Sony and Breland to Warner.

Roster data was extracted from the Music Row Artist Directory issues, which did not include War & Treaty (UMG), Dover Dalton (UMG) and Madeline Edwards (Warner). But even adding these artists does not suggest a concerted effort for change within these three major labels. Twenty new artists were listed in the artist rosters for Sony, UMG, and Warner in 2021 and 2022, 85% of whom are white – 60% male artists, no nonbinary artists.

As with representation on charts, these three labels (see Tables in Appendix) are not supporting BIPOC women. While UMG has been the label-home of Mickey Guyton since 2011, she was the only Black woman signed in 2021-22. Despite being signed to one of the three major labels for twelve years, it took a decade before UMG supported the release of her debut full-length album. *Remember Her Name* was released in September 2021 and despite the production of a music video for the title track, the label did not push out a single to Country format radio.

None of these labels currently have an Indigenous, Latinx, or Asian solo artist on their roster. There hasn't been an Indigenous artist since Crystal Shawanda left Sony in 2008, a Latinx artist since Leah Turner left Sony (2014) and Rick Trevino left Warner (2007). The last Asian artist to be signed to one of these three major labels was Japanese American Angie Johnson who was on Sony in 2013 and before her Filipino American Neal McCoy was on Warner until 2003. There is much work to do here to diversify artist rosters on labels with deep pockets to offer the financial support to build a career in the industry mainstream. However, it's not enough to simply sign more BIPOC artists to a label roster; label staff – top to bottom – and internal practices needs to change in order to create a safe environment in which these artists can work.

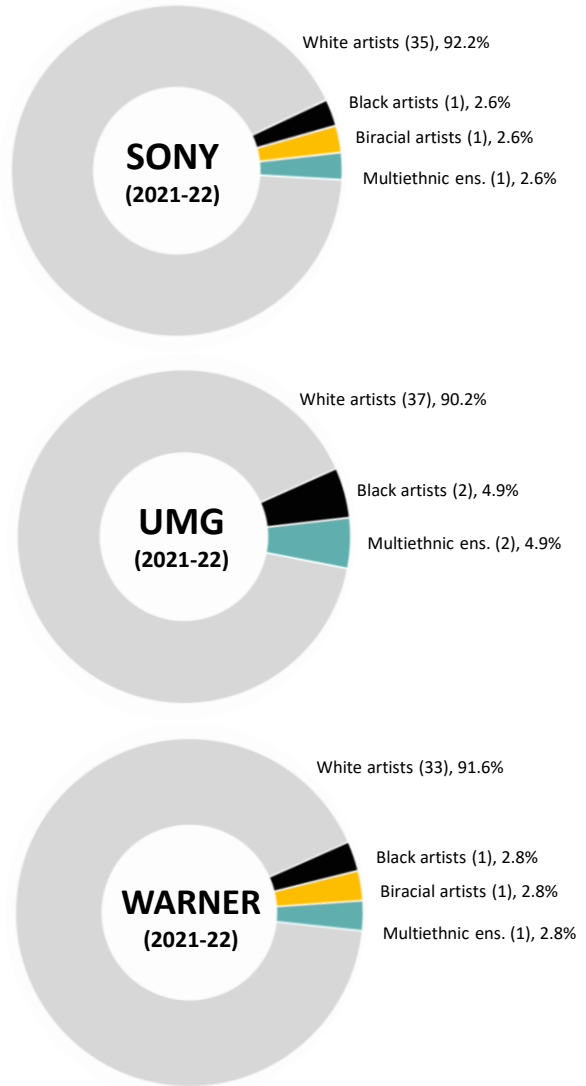


Figure 9. Unique artists signed to Sony, UMG and Warner in 2021-22

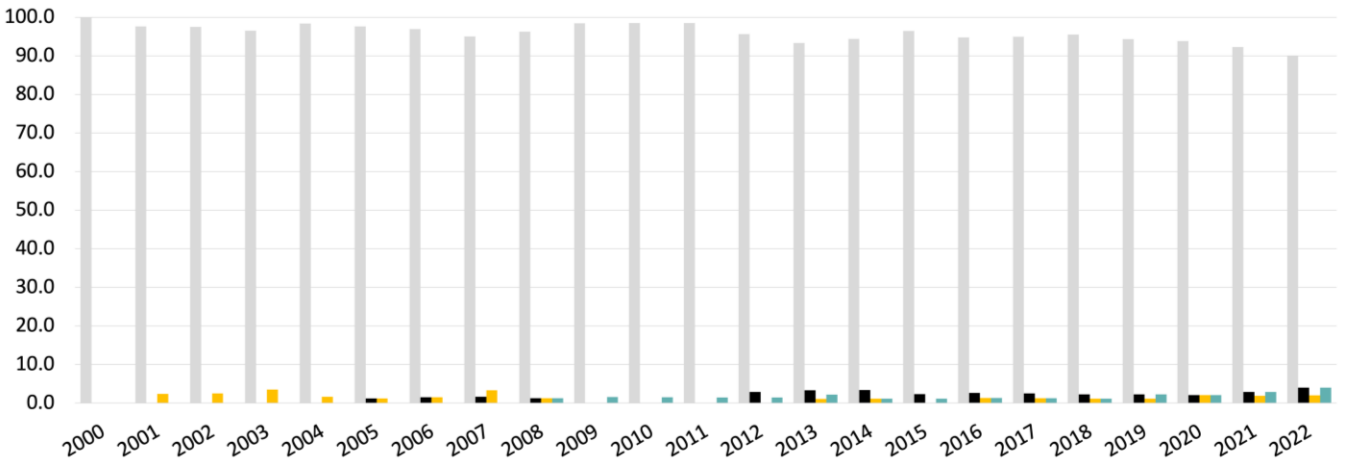


Figure 8. Representation on Sony, UMG and Warner Nashville between 2000 and 2022

SONGWRITERS – whose writing radio hits?

Often ignored in discussions of representation within the industry are songwriters and other individuals that remain largely off the stage or behind the scenes in the industry. The March 2021 [Redlining report](#) aimed to address this lacunae where possible, bringing in data regarding songwriters, producers, and engineers responsible for writing and recording radio-charting singles. New to this study is the MusicRow Songwriters chart. Each week, MusicRow Magazine releases a 60-position Top Songwriter Chart, using algorithms based on song activity according to airplay, digital download track sales and streams to rank the week’s top songwriters.

According to [their Instagram](#), MusicRow uses a proprietary software, evenly splitting points earned by each song among co-writers, “echoing how the publishing business works in Nashville with respect to revenues and ownership, while reflecting the overall success of active songs for each songwriter.”

Focusing on the four-year period from 2019 to 2022, Table 7 breaks down representation for all songwriters that charted. It also drills into the list to evaluate representation of Country songwriters and artist-writers (combined) and songwriters (alone) with the goal of learning more about representation of charting songwriters who make their living from writing.

This Table reveals that 95.5% of the songwriters that charted are white, but that they become *whiter* when focusing on Country songwriters and artist-writers (97.0%) and Country songwriters (97.8%). Perhaps more critically, just one Country songwriter on the charts is Black (Cameron Bedell), a number that increases with the addition of Artist-Writers Jimmie Allen, Blanco Brown, and Darius Rucker. The only Black female songwriter to chart in this period is R&B/hip-hop and pop writer Tayla Parx, who was one of the co-writers on Dan + Shay’s “Glad You Exist”.

MusicRow’s [Top 100 Songwriters of 2022](#) list, published 5 January 2023, reveals that 95.2% of the top charting songwriters are white. While 3.2% of the charting songwriters are Black men, only one is a Country *songwriter* by profession (Cameron Bedell), while Jimmie Allen is the only Black artist-writer. The two other Black songwriters are Lucky Daye and Rykeyz, R&B/pop co-writers on Ingrid Andress’s “Wishful Drinking”.

The enduring whiteness and maleness of the Top Songwriters charts can then be mapped on to the ACM and CMA Song of the Year award, which honors writers on top charting songs. In the March 2021 report, 98.8% of the songwriters nominated for CMA’s Song of the Year and 97.3% of those nominated for ACM’s Song of the Year are white writers. For the two years studied here, the writers nominated are all white (Figure 10), as were the nominees for ACM’s dedicated Songwriter of the Year award.

While more research must be done to better understand the demographics of the songwriting industry, analysis of MusicRow’s charts and the CMA and ACM wards reveal the near complete dominance of white writers penning hits in Nashville’s mainstream.

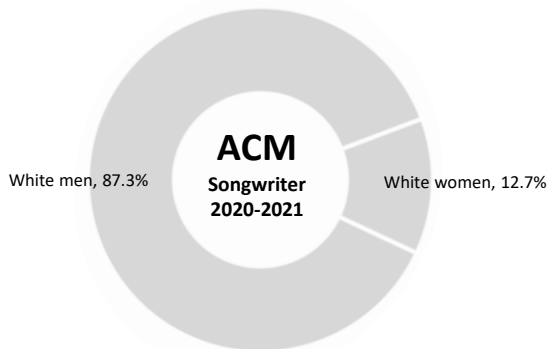
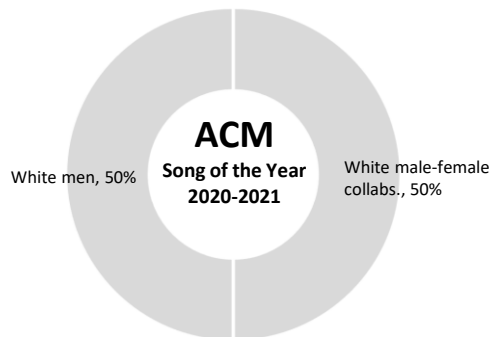
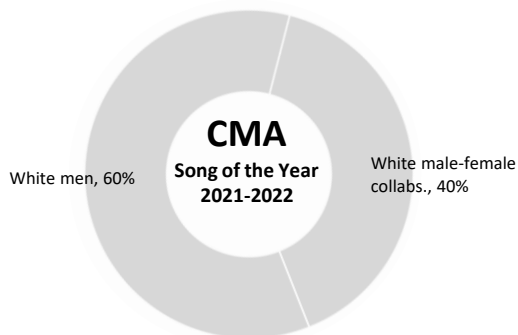
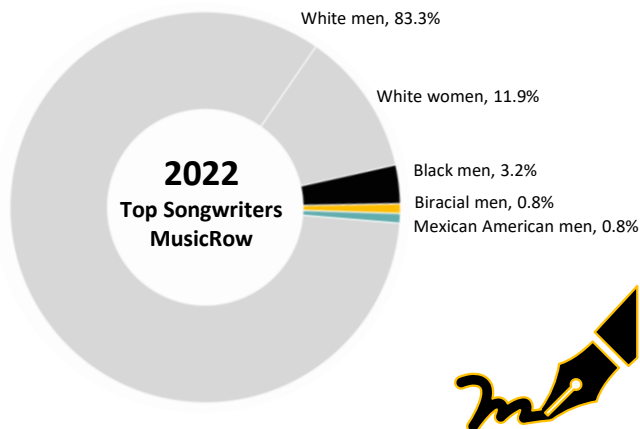


Figure 10. Songwriters nominated for CMA and ACM Awards

Table 7. Unique songwriters on Music Row Charts (2019-22)

	All Songwriters	Country Songwriters and Artist-writers	Country Songwriters
White men	81.9%	83.3%	85.7%
White women	13.6%	13.7%	12.1%
Black men	2.4%	1.2%	0.4%
Black women	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Biracial men	1.0%	1.2%	1.3%
Biracial women	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Men of color	0.8%	0.6%	0.4%
Women of color	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%



INDUSTRY AWARDS

Industry awards play a big role in the evolution of the industry's identity and the artist, songs and albums that become canonized in Country music history. Radio airplay and charts have both a direct and indirect role in determining eligibility for Country Music Association (CMA) and Academy of Country Music (ACM) awards. Not only do categories like Single or Album of the Year require a specific chart position in order to be deemed eligible for consideration, but eligibility for artist-centered awards draw on a range of other markers of "excellence" or contributions to the industry that are only made possible for artists that have support of radio and their label. Artists whose music is redlined into the evenings and overnights or doesn't appear within industry charts have fewer opportunities for exposure. As a result, the longstanding decision to use charts as a determinant for eligibility creates often insurmountable barriers for BIPOC artists in the industry.

Tables 8a and 8b summarize representation of nominations from 2000 to present for both the CMA and ACM awards (respectively) for the solo artist, Single and Album categories. Each of these categories has been dominated by white artists – all with percentages in the mid-to-high 90s. The percentage of nominees in the Female Vocalist category is particularly disconcerting: not one nominee has been a BIPOC woman.

The New Artist categories have seen the most change in the last three years. Four Black artists have been nominated for the CMA's New Artist award since 2000: Darius Rucker (2009), Jimmie Allen (2020, 2021) and Mickey Guyton (2021). Both Rucker and Allen won this award. The ACM's New Artist categories have seen Kane Brown, Jimmie Allen, and Mickey Guyton each receive two nominations over the last two decades, with Allen the only to win the award in 2020. Guyton's CMA and ACM nominations were the first for a Black female artist.

No BIPOC artists have been nominated for CMA's Entertainer of the

Year award in the last two decades. Charley Pride remains the only Black artist to be nominated for this award, with 6 nominations (winning the award in 1971). Jimmie Allen is the only Black artist to receive a nomination for the ACM's award in this period – the first Black artist to be nominated since Pride's third and final nomination in 1972. Johnny Rodriguez remains the only Mexican American Country artist in ACM's Entertainer category, with a nomination in 1973.

The music-centered awards considered here, Single and Album, require chart activity to be deemed eligible for consideration in the nomination rounds. The current requirement for Singles and Albums to have reached the Top 10 (CMA) or Top 20 (ACM) in order to be eligible for nomination, which creates an insurmountable barrier for BIPOC artists, notably women, whose music does not receive the same opportunities for distribution within the industry.

Given the historic exclusion of Black women from radio playlists, which creates barriers to charts, it is not surprising that a Black woman has yet to receive a nomination in either category not just over the last two decades, but the entire history of both organizations.

Darius Rucker has received one nomination for Single of the Year in both organizations (both for "Wagon Wheel"), while Kane Brown has received an ACM nomination in 2018 for "Heaven". Brown also received a nomination in the Album category for *Mixtape Vol 1* in 2020. No other BIPOC artist has received a nomination in this category (for either org) in this two-decade period.

Also included in Tables 8a and 8b is a breakdown of the Producers nominated for Single of the Year. Between 2000 and 2022, 97.4% of the nominees have been white, with 2.6% of the nominations for a multiethnic collaboration. In the last two awarding years for both the organizations, the nominees have been entirely white productions (90% white men, 10% white male-female collaborations).

2.5% of 80 nominations for in solo vocal, ensemble, Single and Album categories were for a BIPOC artist.



Table 8a. CMA nominations (2000-2022)

	White artists	Black artists	Artists of color	Multiethnic ens.
New Artist	96.5%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Female Vocalist	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	NA
Male vocalist	99.1%	0.9%	0.0%	NA
Entertainer	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Single (Artist)	96.5%	0.9%	0.0%	2.6%
Single (Producer)	97.4%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Album (Artist)	98.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%

5.5% of 90 nominations for in solo vocal, ensemble, Single and Album categories were for a BIPOC artist.



Table 8a. ACM nominations (2000-2021)

	White artists	Black artists	Artists of color	Multiethnic ens.
New Female	96.6%	3.4%	0.0%	NA
New Male	94.9%	2.6%	2.6%	NA
Female Vocalist	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	NA
Male Vocalist	98.2%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Entertainer	99.1%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Single (Artist)	96.5%	0.9%	0.9%	1.8%
Single (Producer)	97.4%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Album (Artist)	97.3%	0.0%	0.9%	1.8%

REDLINING IN COUNTRY MUSIC 2.0

The results of this study reveal that little has changed in the mainstream Country music industry. In the two years since the publication of [Redlining in Country Music](#), and after increased attention to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the Nashville-centered business, analysis of radio airplay reports and charts reveal the continued dominance of white artists – notably *male* artists – within the industry. In fact, evaluation of representation by airplay on Country format radio reveals an *increase* in spins for songs by white male artists over the last two years through (1) the continued privileging of their current singles songs within within programming, (2) the retention of their songs for recurrent airplay, and (3) the prioritization of their songs with primetime dayparts with the highest percentage of listeners.

Cultural redlining remains pervasive within the industry and songs by BIPOC artists – *women especially* – continue to be pushed to the margins of the industry. Redlining is still most visible in the dayparting of programming on Country format radio and in the retention of songs for recurrent airplay within an industry's catalogue. Even though radio has introduced more Black women to Country listening audiences in 2021 and 2022 than any of the preceding years, their songs have received such little airplay (0.05%) with distribution almost entirely in the evenings and overnights. Not only are songs by BIPOC women to be pushed into the dayparts with the smallest listening audience, unlikely to be heard by a radio listener, but they are not being retained for long-term programming.

Increase in collaborative recordings

The March 2021 Redlining report revealed an increase in airplay for songs by multiethnic ensembles beginning in 2016, largely a result of airplay for the CMA's Artists of Then, Now & Forever collaboration and Eric Church and Rhiannon Giddens' "Kill a Word". The percentage of airplay for songs by multiethnic ensembles and collaborations has continued to increase, reaching a peak of 7.3% in 2021. While these collaborative recordings are on the rise, those receiving the most spins are led by white men. The BIPOC men contribute as featured artists with limited airtime on these tracks, showing the continued dominance of white men even within multiethnic collaborations.

The second trend concerns the rise of collaborations between solo male and female artists. Previous research has already shown that songs by male-female ensembles are coded as "female" in radio programming (Watson 2019a) and that decline in songs by women artists often occurs in step with increased representation of male-female ensembles. The same appears to be true for these collaborative recordings with men and women solo artists. Songs by female artists declined to 11% by 2022 against an increase for songs by male-female collabs.

Together, the increase in these collaborative recordings are working to solidify the narrative of whiteness and maleness within the industry, pushing BIPOC artists further to marginal spaces within the mainstream.

Behind-the-scenes

Communities behind-the-scenes in the industry – songwriters and producers – continue to be dominated by white men. Songwriter charts offer first steps toward understanding representation of the writers behind chart-topping songs. The results discussed here reveal that 95.5% of the songwriters are white, becoming whiter when drilling into the data to focus on Country songwriters/artist-writers (97.0%) and then just those Country artists that make their living as songwriters (97.8%). With each perspective the percentage of white men increases, white women decreases, but these changes ultimately result in the solidification of a white-dominated writing world. 4 of the Country songwriters/artist-writers are Black and 4 are Biracial, but all of them are men. Only one of the Black writers makes his living writing songs, while 3 of the Biracial men work predominantly as songwriters.

The complete absence of BIPOC women as either a songwriter or artist-writer on this chart is unsurprising given the complete absence of BIPOC women from charts and radio. Black women that write their own songs

are absent from the Songwriter charts because their songs are not supported by radio in a capacity that would land their music on industry charts. But this absence also creates barriers for BIPOC women in other facets of the industry, including building careers as songwriters penning songs for label-signed artists. This does not mean that there are no BIPOC women writing in the industry today, but that their contributions are either not making it onto albums or not selected as radio singles. To better understand the dynamics of songwriting culture more research is needed. This would require access to publishing rosters and album metadata in order to consider representation more deeply.

The same is true of production credits, which here focuses on CMA- and ACM-nominated singles. Results show the continued dominance of white men in the production seat, with women only figuring into production credits when they are also the artist singing the track. Here, too, it is not for a lack of women producers, but rather barriers to entry that have rendered production a white male dominated space. [IAlex Kline](#) made history in January 2021 when she became the first solo female producer to have a song performed by a female artist reach the top of the Mediabase Airplay chart for Tenille Arts' "Somebody Like That." The absence of BIPOC and women producers in this space needs to be further addressed for the impact that it has on the pervading whiteness of the industry power structure.

INDUSTRY CHANGE WITH OLD MACHINES?

The introduction of this report acknowledged the growing community of BIPOC Country artists over the last two years. Black Opry, recently included on the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's [American Currents exhibit](#), is perhaps the most notable. Through the community-building efforts of founder Holly G and co-director Tanner Davenport, the Black Opry has grown from a webspace uniting Black artists and fans to a collective of touring artists with artist-development programs. There have also been several projects celebrating the Black artists in Country music, including Rissi Palmer's Color Me Country Radio, Andrea Williams and Elamin Abdelmahmoud's [For Love & Country](#) (released on Amazon in 2022), and the ongoing work of Quia Thompson to honour the contributions of her grandmother [Linda Martell](#), to name a few. Most critically, these are spaces in which Black artists are telling their stories on their own terms and exposing the industry along the way, and more work needs to be done for Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian artists.

But, as [Andrea Williams](#) recently observed in conversation with Abdelmahmoud for CBC's *Commotion*, many of these initiatives remain largely "in silo and on the side of the mainstream." When focusing on the core Nashville industry, which is under examination here, "we still don't have a path where a Black artist can come in can follow the blueprint, can follow the 10-year plan, if you will, get signed. A songwriter or producer can come in, can make connections with publishers, get signed. [...] While we have these kinds of surface-level efforts [...] the machinery itself [...] remains the same."

This report reveals that "old machinery" is still work in 2022. Yes, a few more BIPOC artists have had songs on Country radio or have been signed to labels, but the systems that surround them – especially the women – have not changed since their 1920s inception. Not only does this system *not provide a clear path* for BIPOC artists in Country music, but its internal practices – daytime programming and lack of retention for recurrent airplay – also erase contributions as they are being made.

And yet, simply "adding and stirring" new artists into the industry is not the answer. Echoing Marcia J. Citron, there is danger in mechanically adding new artists and works into the system, especially those artists who are outside of the system, without questioning the system and conceptualizing its reconstitution. Visibility counts for a lot, Citron argues, but it is not the whole picture. The industry cannot just add BIPOC artists and women without changing the way the system works and without changing the individuals that work in the system.

There can be no change with old machines – with a century-old system that looks back to past practices, conventions, and data to make decisions about the future. The past dwells in this old machine, and the 2021-2022 data studied here reveals no signs of change.

APPENDIX:

Methodology Data sources

REDLINING IN COUNTRY MUSIC 2.0: METHODOLOGY

Examining representation through an intersectional lens brings to light the dynamics of power and oppression based on the overlapping identities of artists included – and excluded – from participation. Taken together, the datasets used in the March 2021 [Redlining in Country Music](#) report and in this follow-up study tell part of the story about the ways in which the industry has maintained its whiteness and maleness, and its enduring cis-gendered, heteronormative values. While ability was not coded into this study, it is imperative to acknowledge from the outset that a significant component of this constructed white supremacist narrative is a dismissal of artists with disabilities and a rejection of non-Christian values.

The color-coding scheme for this study follows the race/ethnicity of artists present in the dataset. This is not meant to be limiting in racial and ethnic diversity but is rather reflective of the identity of artists whose songs are included in the weekly reports tabulating airplay for stations reporting to Mediabase between 2000 and 2022, the artists signed to Sony, UMG, and Warner Nashville between 2000 and 2022, and the artists nominated for CMA and ACM Awards along that same timeline.

- White artists and/or ens.;
- Black artists and/or ens.;
- Biracial, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latinx, Filipino and Japanese artists and/or ens.;
- Multiracial/ethnic ensembles and collaborations.

It is imperative to recognize from the outset that combining artists that are not white or Black together in one category is not ideal. To prepare this dataset, I referred to previous studies examining race and gender on *Billboard* charts to develop these codes (Lafrance et al. 2018; Watson 2021a/b/c). Like these studies, using one term to draw together artists of several ethnicities might be read as an attempt to reinforce the hierarchy of racial importance by positioning white and Black artists as a standard and Biracial, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latinx, Filipino and Japanese artists as an exception. Rather, this decision was taken in order to ensure coherent and consistent analysis across all datasets. More importantly, because there is such little airplay for songs by Biracial, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latinx, Filipino and Japanese artists in the dataset, collapsing these categories meant that their contributions would be visible within the results. As such, it allows for a more relevant and meaningful discussion of the broader issues surrounding representation in the Country music industry. It is also important to note that many of the artists of color are white passing, but it was critical to this study to remain faithful to coding practices. As will be seen in the findings presented here, both Black artists and POC artists (even those that are white passing) are severely underrepresented in this industry – to the point where their data is often not visible on graphs.

DATA SOURCES

- [1] Weekly radio airplay reports and Airplay charts were tabulated by and downloaded from Mediabase.
- [2] Label rosters of Sony, Warner and UMG published in *Music Row News*' annual artist directory (December issues). Issues were provided by the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University.
- [3] Weekly Songwriter Charts were tabulated by and retrieved from [MusicRow News](#).
- [4] Academy of Country Music Awards nomination history extracted from data provided by the ACM in April 2020 and verified on the [ACM database](#).
- [5] Country Music Association Awards nomination history extracted from the database on [the association website](#).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the support, expertise, and feedback of many individuals with whom I work. Special thank you to Andrea Williams for critical discussion about project methodology and to Olivia Beaudry at the Centre for Popular Music for providing access to resources. Holly G and Tanner Davenport of the Black Opry, Rissi Palmer's *Color Me Country*, the Country Soul Song Book, Hunter Kelly's *Proud Radio*, and Kelly McCartney's *Record Bin Radio* have all been integral resources for this study. Thank you also to CMT for making it possible to share this study at SXSW in March 2023.

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APPENDIX:

Accumulated Spins in 2021 and 2022

Accumulated spins for Top 10 artists on weekly airplay reports (2021 and 2022)

	TOP WHITE MALE ARTISTS	TOP WHITE FEMALE ARTISTS
1	LUKE COMBS - 1,319,930	GABBY BARRETT - 485,734
2	MORGAN WALLEN - 925,995	MIRANDA LAMBERT - 322,984
3	LUKE BRYAN - 741,012	CARLY PEARCE - 319,133
4	THOMAS RHETT - 618,822	LAINÉY WILSON - 257,832
5	SAM HUNT - 612,059	MAREN MORRIS - 236,124
6	JASON ALDEAN - 578,418	KELSEA BALLERINI - 183,414
7	LEE BRICE - 558,663	TENILLE ARTS - 176,508
8	COLE SWINDELL - 485,941	PRISCILLA BLOCK - 169,628
9	CHRIS STAPLETON - 456,066	CARRIE UNDERWOOD - 128,924
10	SCOTTY MCCREERY - 454,415	CALLISTA CLARK - 103,130

	TOP BIPOC MALE ARTISTS	TOP BIPOC FEMALE ARTISTS
1	KANE BROWN - 406,283	TIERA KENNEDY - 4,187
2	DARIUS RUCKER - 176,862	BRITTNEY SPENCER - 663
3	JIMMIE ALLEN - 170,137	MICKEY GUYTON - 618
4	FRANK RAY - 106,508	CHAPEL HART - 592
5	BRELAND - 3,404	MADÉLINE EDWARDS - 394
6	SHY CARTER - 1,055	SACHA VISAGIE - 51
7	BRUNO MARS - 391	ASHLIE AMBER - 49
8	LIL NAS X - 197	CAMILLE PARKER - 44
9	THE WEEKND - 103	BEYONCÉ - 14
10	BLANCO BROWN - 60	H.E.R. - 13

APPENDIX:

Label rosters in 2021 and 2022

Sony Music Nashville (2021-22)

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	68.5%	23.7	0.0%	0.0%	92.2%
Black artists	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Artists of color	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%	2.6%
	73.7%	23.7%	2.6%	0.0%	

UMG Nashville (2021-22)

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	58.5%	29.3%	2.4%	0.0%	90.2%
Black artists	2.45%	2.45%	0.0%	0.0%	4.9%
Artists of color	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	4.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.9%
	65.9%	31.7%	2.4%	0.0%	

Warner Nashville (2021-22)

	Male artists	Female artists	Mixed ens.	Nonbinary artists	
White artists	69.4%	19.4%	2.8%	0.0%	91.6%
Black artists	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.8%
Artists of color	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.8%
Multiracial/ethnic ens.	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.8%
	77.8%	19.4%	2.8%	0.0%	

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