

Understanding the Relationship between Data and the Lack of Diversity in Country Music

SXSW Presentation Notes (17 March 2023)

**These notes are drawn from an article that I wrote for the Nashville Scene in January 2023 and for a chapter included in Whose Country Music? Genre, Identity and Belonging in Twenty-first Century Country Music Culture (Cambridge UP, 2022). They also present results of Redlining in Country Music 2.0 – an update to the March 2021 study on presentation of Black, Indigenous and Artists of colour in the country music industry.*

Thank you to RenderATL for inviting us to come here today to discuss the relationship between data and the lack of diversity and equity in the country music industry at SXSW.

I am honoured to be here today and to be part of this panel with these remarkable women.

I've been tasked with framing this conversation about the relationship between data and lack of diversity and equitable practices within the country music industry an issue that I have been researching for nearly a decade.

[slide 2: White artists continue to dominate the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart]

After two years of increased discussion of the lack of “diversity” in the Nashville-centered business, Billboard's Country Airplay chart reveals an increase in songs by white artists from an annual average of 91% between 2018 and 2021 to 94% in 2022. The *only song* by a solo Black artist to chart on Country Airplay last year was Jimmie Allen's “Down Home,” which landed at 58 on the Year-End list published in December.

[slide 3: Male artists also dominate the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart]

Singles by white women have likewise decreased on the chart, dropping from a decade high of 18% in 2020 down to 14% in 2022. Not only did a song by a Black woman did not chart in 2022, but a Black woman has not charted since 2015.

No matter which way 2022 chart data are examined, the drop in representation of Black artists and white women — and the continued absence BIPOC women — suggests this is an industry uninterested in change.

[slide 4: How did we get here? Graphic by [Rena Li and Jasmine Mithani for the 19th](#)]

So how did we get here? The history of the recorded music industry is well-known. The popular music industry developed in the 1920s along a musical color line that echoed Jim Crow-era laws. Black and white musicians played and listened to the same music, but record executives segregated their recordings, placing the music of white artists on “hillbilly records” and of Black artists on “race records,” marketing records from these labels to white and Black communities respectively. These specific marketing categories are no longer used today — replaced with what we now call “genre” labels of country and R&B by 1950 — but the racial segregation has remained central to the inner functioning of the industry.

Radio developed in parallel to — and in the same racially segregated structure of — the industry and became the primary means of distributing recorded music.

Charts soon followed and replicated this segregated structure. In 1958, *Billboard* launched three weekly singles charts — Country & Western, Rhythm & Blues and the all-genre (or “mainstream”) Hot 100 — three poles around which most popular music circulated since the early days of the industry and continues to circulate today.

The country music industry became one tentpole of this racially segregated structure, centralizing in Nashville in the 1950s through the development of a network of recording studios, record labels and publishing houses — all centered around radio and charts.

Analysis of representation on the long-running Hot Country Songs charts since its 1958 inception reveals combined racial and gendered hierarchy within the industry.

[slide 5: White artists maintain 60-year average of 96.5% of the songs on the *Billboard* Hot Country chart]

Since 1958, 94.4% of the songs appearing on the long-running *Billboard* chart are by white artists. Songs by Black artists (1.1%) — especially women (0.1%) — are nearly absent from this historic chart.

[slide 6: Songs by women peak at 33% before declining to 12.8% by 2016 on the *Billboard* Hot Country chart]

If we then focus on gender identity alone, we see a firm binary narrative emerging, and the dominance of male artists. Songs by female artists have historically been underrepresented

within every face of the industry: increasing from 6.5% in 1968 to a historic high of 33% in 1999, before declining to where their songs sit today at 14% of industry charts.

[slide 7: Decline of spins for songs by white artists does not result in increase for Black artists]

These statistics are not altogether surprising for anyone that follows country music. But they reveal the depth to which racism and sexism persist in the 21st century. The report I am releasing today, Redlining in Country Music 2.0, is a follow-up to my March 2021 study, reveals that songs by Black artists received just 1.2% of the airplay in 2022, 0.03% for Black women.

[slide 8: Spins for songs by women artists are on the decline again, ending 2022 at 11%]

Women artists received 11% of the airplay in 2022, 10.97% for white women.

[slide 9: Songs by women and BIPOC artists receive most of their spins in the evenings and overnights]

More disconcertingly, airplay for songs by women occur largely in the evenings and overnights – and that includes nearly *all of the airplay* for the 0.03% of the spins for songs by Black and Biracial women.

[slide 10: Streaming... the great equalizer?]

While streaming is becoming increasingly important in the broader popular music industry, the Year-End country streaming charts reveal considerable racial and gender inequity (not to mention homogeneity, when 16% of the top 50 songs streamed are by one artist, Morgan Wallen) and just this week had 36 of the 50 songs on the Hot Country Songs chart. Though it is often believed that streaming will level the playing field, creating a path for independent artists to bypass gatekeepers, label-signed artists continue to dominate. More critically, when streaming services offer recommendations, their algorithms use past data influenced by patterns within the industry. Both editorial playlists and recommender systems just reflect radio playlists back to users, defaulting white and male, creating a feedback loop.

[slide 11: Radio and charts influence decisions within the entire ecosystem]

Charts might seem benign and equitable — the simple “tallying” of various forms of data — but they are dictated by the industry’s structural configuration. Chart data influences how labels sign, promote and support artists, it also influences how publishers sign and work with songwriters feeding back into the system from which they emerged, ultimately determining who “belongs” in an industry.

Data also play a significant role in determining industry awards. Chart rankings are used as criteria for which an artist may be deemed *eligible for nomination*. But how are the contributions of artists who do not have this type of support to be weighed in comparison to the white men and (to a lesser extent) women who have access to opportunities within the industry?

Data is destiny, as data scientist and code poet [Joy Buolamwini](#) has stated. The industry uses data to track consumption, to uncover patterns and trends, to make business decisions. But while the industry is forward-looking, the data they use reflects history. Rather than seeing the absence of BIPOC artists on charts as indicative of a systemic problem, the industry uses the lack of data proving BIPOC artists’ commercial viability to justify and maintain institutional practices. The past dwells within this data, and 2022 reports and charts reveal no sign of change.

It’s critical to acknowledge that the data highlighted here today reflect that decision making of radio programmers and that in 2022 continues to cement a harmful binary narrative not just about race, but about gender identity and sexuality. In 2022, 0.13% of the airplay on country format radio was for songs by queer country artists, and no nonbinary or trans artists received radio support.

Nashville, the hub of the mainstream industry, is becoming an increasingly dangerous place for the LGBTQIA+ communities and the recent passage of the anti-drag House Bill 9 and House Bill 878 that empowers government employees to deny marriage licenses to same-sex, interracial and interfaith marriages. These bills are wide-reaching and will undoubtedly impact cultural communities like the country music industry, which has for a century held central to its business model white supremacist, capitalist hetero-patriarchal values.

[slide 12: Thank you to RenderATL, Content for change and CMT for the opportunity to share new data and links to Redlining in Country Music 2.0]

I will end there, and I am honoured to be part of this conversation and I have left this final slide up with a link to the report released via SongData today.