



Three Models For An Analysis Of The Aesthetic Value Of Country Music

*Mark S. Cohen
Nederland, CO*

Aesthetics is that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of beauty. Though philosophers from Socrates to Sartre have devoted considerable effort to aesthetics, no professional philosopher has ever attempted to analyze the aesthetic value of country music in a scholarly fashion. Until now.

To establish that country music is a form of art, we must first define art. Art is a human endeavor in that works of art result from the conscious activity of Man. Works of art exist in a medium; the poet uses words, the sculptor uses clay, and so forth. An artist's medium is the instrumentality through which he expresses his artistic insight. The medium of the musician is music.

To define art as any purposeful manipulation of a medium by man is not quite satisfactory. A cowboy might whistle to signal his sheep dog to chase down a stray, but this would hardly qualify him as a musician. To be art, the creation of the artist must be something which has no other utilitarian purpose. Applying this definition,

music is art because it represents the purposeful manipulation of a medium for the purpose of eliciting an aesthetic response. Country music is an American art form which may be defined as that type of music created by the musician's conscious manipulation of three essential components: notes, lyrics, and twang.¹

In its formative years, country music was popular chiefly among those in rural areas, but as urban sprawl consumed increasing amounts of farmland, it gained popularity among city dwellers as well — thereby proving conclusively that the popularity of country music is inversely related to the amount of farmland in the United States.

¹ There is one form of country music which results from the musician's semi-conscious manipulation of notes, lyrics, and twang; namely, the drunken cowboy song. This paper assumes that any consciousness, however slight, is sufficient to bring about purposeful artistic creation.

Given the rate at which farmland is being consumed, we can safely predict that the popularity of country music will continue to grow. It is therefore appropriate to inquire into the various models we may use to assess the aesthetic value of country music. This paper presents three such models: the mystic interpretation, the pleasure interpretation, and the experience interpretation.

The mystic interpretation of the role of country music asserts that country music is a means by which man is able to experience reality in a way he cannot do through science or everyday experience. Viewed in this light, the country musician is a mystic — a spiritual cousin of the Zen masters — who enables us to see the eternal reality normally hidden by the hustle and bustle of modern life. Thus, when Willie Nelson sings “I Gotta Get Drunk,” the common man gains insight into the existential pain suffered by all men — an insight he could not gain by reason or experience alone.²

The pleasure interpretation holds that the role of country music is simply to provide human satisfaction. Those who adhere to this view argue that country music has no practical or utilitarian value, and that it would have no value at all if it did not give pleasure.

Both approaches have merit, but there are problems with each. The mystic interpretation over-emphasizes the distinction between appearance and reality. If the role of country music is to enable the listener to experience a hidden reality, it becomes difficult to distinguish between good country music and bad country music; each listener must judge for himself whether a particular song has helped him experience the hidden reality. This approach is completely subjective.³

Though it correctly recognizes that one justification for country music is the pleasure it brings to the listener, the pleasure interpretation also suffers from the defect of being subjective; it offers no criteria by which to measure what is pleasurable. Even a simpleton knows Merle Haggard’s music is superior to the endless moaning of Garth Brooks, but the pleasure interpretation pro-

vides no way to prove it.⁴ We must simply accept it, as did Kant, as *a priori* knowledge, and no different in that regard than the laws of mathematics or logic.

The experience interpretation recognizes the merits of the other approaches, but is not so far removed from human experience and is therefore less subjective. This interpretation recognizes that country music enables us to see the hidden reality and that it provides pleasure; however, it requires us to interpret country music in the context of social, public and human experience. Perhaps the most well known proponent of this school of thought is David Allen Coe, a noted country singer who studied philosophy for several years at a state institution in San Quentin, California. In one of his scholarly writings, Coe tells of a friend who claimed to have written “the perfect country and western song.” When Coe first heard the song, he told his friend that he had not written the perfect country and western song because he hadn’t said “anything at all about momma, nor trains, nor trucks, nor prison, nor gettin’ drunk.” The friend sat down and wrote another verse to the song and, after reading it, Coe realized his friend had written the perfect country and western song. The last verse goes like this here:

Well, I was drunk the day my momma got out of prison, and I went to pick her up in the rain; but before I could get to the station in my pick-up truck, she got runned over by a damned old train.

Coe’s use of the experience interpretation can be criticized because it places undue emphasis on lyrics at the expense of notes and twang; nevertheless, Coe’s five criteria for beauty in a country song — momma, trains, trucks, prison, and getting drunk — provide some objective criteria by which to assess the aesthetic value of country music. This is an important contribution to the literature and should inspire further academic discussion.

² Nelson does not explain whether he means he must get drunk in a mechanistic sense or in a teleological sense. If he means it mechanistically, he is expressing a deterministic point of view and proclaiming that his getting drunk was the inevitable consequence of events which preceded his getting drunk. If he means it in a teleological sense, he is adopting the free will position and admitting he chose to get drunk in order to fulfill some higher purpose in life. I leave the interpretation of this ambiguity to philosophers specializing in the metaphysical aspects of country music.

³ Philosophers generally agree that subjectivity is bad.

⁴ There are people who claim to enjoy neither Merle Haggard nor Garth Brooks, but these are generally the same people who still believe orange juice is just for breakfast, and we need not concern ourselves with them here.

