

'STAND BY YOUR MAN' THE STAGING OF THE FEMALE BODY IN COUNTRY MUSIC

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I am going to look at performativity and expressions of femininity in popular music; more specifically in country music. An interesting example can be the Canadian singer d.lang, where the transition between women/man dynamic to a more ambiguous gender construction is fundamental in how lang represents herself through her songs.

Performativity

The connection between gender and performance has been discussed in many cultural theoretical settings, using the term 'masquerade'. The term has become an important and nuanced theoretical aspect of femininity and its representation. Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' from 1929 holds a key place in discussion of female sexuality in psychoanalysis. Riviere argued that femininity was a performance where there was no genuine femininity separate from the masquerade; there is no distinction between authentic womanliness and its masquerade. "Womanliness ... could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it..." (Riviere 1929:213). According to this, gendered identities are produced and performed in everything one does, and there is no gendered identity separate from performance. Performance demands the idea of an act, where the performer constructs a fabricated or invented identity.

In this context we can also include Judith Butler's ideas about performativity. We as individuals create ourselves through activities. Performance is not something passive which carries in it an inherent meaning; instead we are created by active actions that confirm meaning. Gender is created through performative actions. In this sense we can talk about *doing* gender, not *having* or *being* gender. "...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*" (Butler 1985:519).

The term 'performance' can refer to the act of playing, singing, or otherwise engage in a musical activity on stage, as well as the act of everyday life that constitute gender identity, inspired by the theories of Judith Butler. Popular music artists project forms of gender exposition that are experienced on both public and personal levels. According to Susan McClary, construction of gender and sexuality are two fundamental effects of popular music, and often these constructions challenge traditional gender norms (McClary 2002).

We can argue that gendered identity may be constituted, maintained and/or undermined through musical performance, as well as through the performances in everyday life (like showing emotions, family scenes, professional roles etc). If we can conclude that music has direct effect on the listener's body, and that it may therefore change the way the listener relates to his or her own body, then the potential role music has in terms of rewriting the rules of gender are significant. The idea of gender and gender roles will play an important role; gender can be looked upon as a role play, both what happens on stage in a musical performance but also in everyday life. The stage performance can in many cases be perceived as an extreme version of everyday

life. The gendered identity is not a fixed shape or form but will always go through a change and is the object of negotiation: femininity is not a clear-cut identity.

Gender and country music

The musical stage has always been gendered. Late in the music-hall days, women were expected to grace the musical stage with their inherent charm and sweetness. Women who did not do so were difficult to classify, difficult for the industry to market, and difficult for the spectators to identify themselves with. Gendered identities and stereotypes were particularly difficult to challenge. Country music as a genre has been especially conservative when it comes to issues of gender. The discourse of country music is heterosexual, supplied by traditional representations of gender and the traditional 'nuclear' family, permeated with patriotic references. Country music is above all the home of domestic melodrama. Country music often depicts the private home as the source of female happiness. In the lyrics you find very few topics of women's issues like e.g. those aspects that address what is unique for women, like childbearing; topics such as pregnancy, childbirth, about motherhood, about remaining single, about 'not' wanting to have children, about abortion. Such topics might sound harsh and out of context in country music, because it adheres to very strict conventions. Important are the traditional virtues connected to work, family, fidelity, honesty, and simplicity. According to many, there is much role play in what country musicians do, and rather than expressing themselves as unique individuals, country music presents a cultural model or ideal type. According to Ruth Banes there are three such types when it comes to women: the dreamlike Southern lady who represent ideal femininity, the farm wife who is mother and housekeeper and a Christian woman with natural beauty, and finally the negative stereotype: the poor white trash woman who is sickly, amoral, filthy, and victimized, who leads a joyless life (1992).

One can distinguish in country music between hard-core and soft-shell performance style. The hard-core style revolves around the artist's authenticity –the artist must through image, looks, and performance style prove that he or she is on equal terms with the audience. In country music, authenticity has traditionally been directly linked to the artist's identification with the working class audience. Straightforward lyrics about love, death, religion and working-class identity. Hard-core musicians are those who appear as though they weren't musicians, they would be farmers, truck drivers, housewives or hair dressers. A hard-core image also entails that the private life of the performer is publicly known and that they are singing songs from their own life. A good example here is e.g. Loretta Lynn's 'Coal miner's daughter'.

That follows that country music emphasize homophobia due to their ideologies of patriotism, traditionalism, and the nuclear family. In the country music repertoire there are numerous songs about abandoned love or marriage – as e.g. the archetypical country song by Tammy Wynette 'Stand by your man' (1968), where the songs talks about the need for women to support and care for their men. That single turned out to be the most selling single ever recorded by a female country singer!

In many areas of musical life women have not had a central role. In country music, on the other hand, women performers and songwriters have since the 1950s made an immense impact: - although at the same time, there is no genre that is so stereotypical regarding gender roles and

the proper way to act and behave, like country music. There is an emphasis on the narrative in country music. It's a preference of the narrative before the symbolic; the songs express a story to express an emotional truth.

Dolly Parton

The archetypal country artist might be the singer and songwriter Dolly Parton (born 1946). She not only emphasizes her feminine traits (her breasts and her hair) but also exaggerates them; she is the star example of exaggerated womanhood with her breast enlargement and the sky-high hair. She applies to the Nashville philosophy: "The higher the hair, the closer to God"! And often she dresses in a tight body-hugging jump suit. She is the ultimate female: looks like a Barbie doll.. She was one of the first big stars of country music. She took out her breast implants at some point, but her fans demanded that she put them back in again and she had to abide by her fans. She is quite petite, so her breasts are an eye catch. A song typical for her and country music in general is *Down from Dover*, which unlike most other country songs actually deals with the topic of childbearing. In this song a young girl becomes pregnant, is abandoned by her lover, thrown out by her parents, and ends up with giving birth alone to a dead baby.

Down From Dover

By: Dolly Parton

I know this dress I'm wearing doesn't hide the secret I have tried concealing
When he left he promised me that he'd be back by the time it was revealing
The sun behind a cloud just casts the crawling shadow o'er the fields of clover
And time is running out for me I wish that he would hurry down from Dover

He's been gone so long when he left the snow was deep upon the ground
And I have seen a spring and summer pass and now the leaves are turning brown
And any time a tiny face will show itself 'cause waiting's almost over
But I won't have a name to give it if he doesn't hurry down from Dover

My folks weren't understanding when they found out they sent me from the home place
My daddy said if folks found out he'd be ashamed to ever show his face
My mamma said I was a fool and she did not believe it when I told her
That everything would be all right 'cause soon he would be coming down from Dover

I loved him more than anything and I could not refuse him when he needed me
He was the only one I'd loved and I just can't believe that he was using me
He couldn't leave me here like this I know it can't be so it can't be over
He wouldn't make me go through this so long, oh he'll be coming down from Dover

My body aches the time is here it's lonely in this place where I'm lyin'
Our baby has been born but something's wrong it's much too still I hear no cryin'
I guess in some strange way she knew she'd never have a father's arms to hold her
And dying was her way of telling me he wasn't coming down from Dover

The song is written as first-person narrative, which gives us the perspective of a girl who is alone and abandoned. The girl is totally helpless, naïve and completely miserable. It seems that she did not even enjoy the sex; the only reason why she did it was because the male character (referred to only as He) needed her and she could not refuse. She is all by herself, afraid, and as what might seem as a poetic justice for some; her baby dies at the end. Morality is the winner here. The woman comes across as weak and as a victim. She does not take responsibility for herself. Just waiting for something to happen: everything will be all right, because the man soon comes home.

In her last album *Backwoods Barbie*, Parton sets some things straight: and she is very conscious about her appearance and the mask she is wearing: she sings “Don’t let these false eyelashes lead you to believe that I’m as shallow as I look ‘cause I run true and deep.” As if she wants to emphasize that her looks is something she puts on; her performativity. And she realizes that people might misunderstand, that they think what they see is what they get. In this last album she seems very persistent to emphasize that her make-up and high hair is just country’s ideal of woman. “I’ve always been misunderstood because of how I look. Don’t judge me by the cover ‘cause I’m a real good book.” And in the last verse: “Yes, I can see where I could be misjudged upon first glance..”

Backwoods Barbie

By: Dolly Parton

I grew up poor and ragged, just a simple country girl.
I wanted to be pretty more than anything in the world,
like Barbie or the models in the Fredricks’ catalog.
From rags to wishes in my dreams I could have it all.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, too much makeup, too much hair.
Don’t be fooled by thinkin’ that the goods are not all there.
Don’t let these false eyelashes lead you to believe that
I’m as shallow as I look ‘cause I run true and deep.

I’ve always been misunderstood because of how I look.
Don’t judge me by the cover ‘cause I’m a real good book.
So read into it what you will, but see me as I am.
The way I look is just a country girl’s idea of glam.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie in a push-up bra and heels.
I might look artificial, but where it counts I’m real.
And I’m all dolled up and hopin’ for a chance to prove my worth,
And even backwoods Barbie’s get their feelings hurt.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, too much makeup, too much hair.
Don’t be fooled by thinkin’ that the goods are not all there.
Yes, I can see where I could be misjudged upon first glance;
But even backwoods Barbie’s deserve a second chance.
I’m just a backwoods Barbie just asking for a chance,
just a backwoods Barbie.

Patsy Cline

A few decades before Parton, we find the first big star in country music: Patsy Cline. She was born in Virginia in 1932 and died in a tragic plane crash when she was only 30 years old in 1963. Two of her biggest hits were 'Crazy' and not the least 'I all to pieces' from 1961, which was nr. 1 on the country music list, which was very unusual for a female singer at that time. She has a very strong emotional expression on stage; she has a large and expressive voice. She was the first woman in the music industry who showed that she could surpass her male colleagues, both regarding record sales and the number of sold concert tickets. She was regarded as a pioneer and hero by her female colleagues, who thought that she opened the doors for women, in an industry that was dominated and governed by men. In retrospect one can argue that she opened the door for a more pop-inspired country music. She controlled her own career and challenged the rules which dictated where a career should go according to the traditions. At this time female country singers were regarded as decoration, as opening acts or an extra attraction for the more popular and higher paid male star. Patsy Cline was the first woman who had her own show and demanded the equal amount of pay as men.

One of her songs which has a typical country theme is 'Three cigarettes in an ashtray', where she describes a non-reciprocal, hetero love -a triangle relationship- which is a very typical country music theme.

Three cigarettes in an ashtray

By: Patsy Cline

Two cigarettes in an ashtray
My love and I in a small café
A stranger came along
And everything went wrong
Now there's three cigarettes
In an ashtray

I watched her take him from me.
Now his love is no longer my own.
Now they have gone
And I sit alone,
And watch one cigarette
Burn away.

The triangle relationship has gotten numerous songs dedicated to it. This is an example of one of the most characteristic elements of country music's version of femininity; it is always heterosexual, and the genre is generally one of the most hetero styles in popular music. Country music provides a context where women's participation is particularly acceptable, but the versions of femininity are also always heterosexual, or at least nearly always. Country music is widely acknowledged as one of the most heterosexual styles in popular music. Martha Mockus in the anthology *Queering the pitch, The new gay and lesbian musicology* from 1994, claims that any reference to homosexuality is completely banished. It is possible to find or allow for a minimal queer presence in other types of popular music, country music, on the other hand, does not allow this at all. Men are men, women are women, and anything queer is completely unacceptable.

d lang

Nonetheless, gays and lesbians have adopted country music and the most noticeable icon to come out of country music is kd lang. She does not exactly fit the country music image: short-haired, vegetarian, and she is lesbian (she came out just before the release of her fourth album). However, she performs in Nashville and sings together with the great ladies of country music: Kitty Wells, Loretta Lynn, and Brenda Lee: this points to the apparent clash between herself and her country persona. She was born in 1961 in Canada. She changed her artist name from Kathy Dawn Lang to the gender-neutral k.d. lang. When she released her first major-label album in 1987, she caused considerable controversy within the traditional world of country music. With her artificial feminine approach, androgynous appearance, and music more towards rock, very few of the audience knew what to make of her or of her music, although nobody questioned her great vocal talents. She won a Grammy in 1989 (best female country singer), however, she was never fully accepted by the Nashville community. Nashville resisted lang, especially her image on stage. For Nashville, k.d. lang was disruptive to how a woman should behave and have always behaved on stage. The *Vanity Fair* journalist Leslie Bennett described her thus: "Her glossy dark hair is full but short, and when she tosses her head and strides across the stage on those long, strong legs, you suddenly realize she's moving with a kind of physical freedom you've never seen a female singer display onstage before (Valentine 1995:476).

She did not either get very popular in Nashville when she claimed that she was a vegetarian and protested against the meat industry. It is very interesting that her initial genre was country. Lang has acknowledged the fact that her association with country music has been a troublesome one. They even refused to play her Grammy award-winning hits on the radio. She represents the queer, the other, the different – and this is a clash with the normal, the heterosexual conformity. In her early years lang was acting very heterosexual: both in her song lyrics and in the way she presented herself. At this point she is very consistent with Joan Riviere's notion of masquerading womanliness. It's an interesting comparison: for lang and Riviere, womanliness itself is a mask, which does not indicate the actual presence of a 'genuine womanliness' underneath.

In her first album she sings the very traditional country classic by Patsy Cline; 'Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray', where she describes unreciprocated, triangular heterosexual love. In 'Three Cigarettes' there is a clear toying with the two entities: the text, which talks about straight love triangle – typical topic for the country song and how she performs it. Her appearance stands out as quite an ironic contrast to the traditional lyrics, with her country and western shirt, cowboy boots, short hair and no make-up. She tempts us, the spectators, to figure out the complexity of this picture: lang's believed lesbian sexuality, her separation from country music's ideal, the unaffectedness and naturalness of her great voice, and her love for Patsy Cline. This all together is k.d.lang. Lang's vocal style seems to have a great emotional impact on the listener. She uses ornamentation, the dying falls, the small tear; her voice is trained, and adheres to the country tradition. Her singing style is apparently inspired by both female and male singers. A rural/Southern American accent is part of the particular kind of performativity that is inherent in country music.

The tension between the implied and overt is a consistent part of lang's performativity. In the beginning she looked like a trucker, but she did not sing like one. At some points she toys

with clichéd pictures of femininity: big eyelids, big hair – then she takes off her wig to show her very short hair. She creates a clash between the utterly heterosexual and the utterly lesbian elements – however, she does not go any further in order to obtain a synthesis of the two.

That confusion never quite diminished during her career, even when she abandoned country music for love songs, popular, sentimental love songs -adult contemporary pop- in 1992 with her fourth album, *Ingénue*. Before the release of that album, lang stated that she was a lesbian in an interview. This could have been a risky plan, since Nashville's industry was notorious for not accepting people who fell outside of the mainstream. However, the new album was not a country album. *Ingénue* was a set of contemporary pop that had little in common with country.

Androgyny

But since lang came out as a lesbian she has dropped this fascinating look she had at the beginning, that could both hide and reveal her lesbian identity. She has moved to a more androgynous look. At the same time her music has also changed; from the country style to more mainstream popular music, more easy listening. After the album *Absolute Torch and Twang* (1989) lang has taken a different path. She started performing in black clothes, a man's suit; she has made a move towards an androgynous appearance. In this, as Stella Bruzzi points out in an article (Bruzzi 1997), that lang's performance has become a denial of difference – she denies rather than reaffirms gender difference by not showing her real self. Bruzzi looks upon this move to androgyny as a loss, and she mourns the loss of the dangerous lang. But is this move a loss? I would like to look a bit further on the aspect of androgyny. If we start by looking at the term itself: it derives from Greek: aner=man, and gyne=woman. The term means ambiguity; the term is also 'in-between-place' –referring to something unspecific. In this way androgyny is a term that visualizes the "human unison" more than it marks the difference between the female and the male. It transcends culturally based notions about gender. It refers to visual and auditive surface expressions, which are easy to detect as being performative, since it's obvious that this is not about artists who have two sexes (Hermaphroditic). Androgyny can be used as a strategy to tone down focus on gender/sex and sexuality, and through this free oneself in relation to cultural regulations, expectations and evaluations linked to sex and sexuality.

There has been a greater acceptance for men playing with gender roles, like an exaggerated masculinisation, cross dressing, playing with androgyny, but the expectations for women are that they shall confirm to cultural notions about gender. The term androgynous as a designation for a woman can be understood as 'lack of femininity'. And this is conceived negatively, since women are devalued since they are different from men, but at the same time it is also this difference that gives value to the woman. The difference has had as its function to limit and define women. To downsize femininity can therefore be challenging, vulnerable –and brave. Women playing with androgyny could be understood as rebellious, or as a subversive act, in that the individual insists on being more than just the difference. Other female pop artists might also be included in this category of performers who downplay femininity on stage; Grace Jones and Annie Lenox are such examples. In an interview Lenox says that it has been a conscious decision for her to use an androgynous image on stage: it gave her more strength or even power (Shelia

2000). By using ‘the other’ (in this case the man’s) symbols (suit, tie, short hair) -the stereotypical conceptions about gender- she creates a confusion around the gender categories. Lennox’s use of a man’s suit could also signalise that she is a woman who takes control over her own career and position.

Referring to lang, she uses an androgynous image to tone down the focus on both gender and sexuality by assuming a neutral, non-sexually associated position. Most of lang’s presentation contributes to camouflaging gender even as a topic. Her artist’s name consists of initials, which does not give away her gender. Her choice of clothes – a man’s suit – and her short hair and lack of make-up can easily be associated with a gender-neutral position with masculine connotations. Also her relatively deep voice might be perceived as androgynous, same as some of her lyrics, where gendered positions are not accentuated. In this way gender is neutralized in her whole expression. At the same time: her positioning can be understood as queer. Lang’s androgynous performativity is both a protection of herself, to protect a personal vulnerability, and a commercial strategy. To tone down her lesbian sexuality within a strong homophobic genre, country music, is understandable and she probably could not have come out as a lesbian earlier without committing commercial suicide. But many think that lang has had a special position for other gay people because she – through her ambivalence – made identification with difference possible. The fact that she positions herself differently than most other female artists in an entertainment industry who use the woman’s body as a sales trick, can also be looked upon as an act of resistance. Bruzzi argues that after lang’s outing she has become much more mainstream in her representation. Even though there are very many women artists who overplay and stage ideas about gender I think when it comes to staging or performing norm deviant gender representations, it operates in a much more restricted and rigid framework for women: the acceptance of ‘male femininity’ in the public space stands in a contrast to how ‘female masculinity’ is represented and accepted.

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