

Stompin' Grounds: Performing Country Music in Canada

by

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Abstract

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Country music in Canada and its different geographical regions existed within a transnational set of fictions which were shared by a great many North Americans. Industry members, performers, and fans have relied upon the markers of sound, rurality, masculinity, and later “Canadian-ness” to prove the music’s “authenticity.” More than anything, what is noteworthy about country music is not that it is a continuation of “authentic” folk practices, but the music’s ability to continually reinvent itself while maintaining these fictions. By examining five distinct country music performers who had active careers in Canada – Wilf Carter, Earl Heywood, Don Messer, Stompin’ Tom Connors, and Gordon Lightfoot – this study examines how Canadian country music artists between the 1920s and the 1970s created “authentic” images. This was achieved through song lyrics and instrumentation, visual markers such as cowboy hats, and through interviews, autobiographies, photographs, and other publicity materials.

"Country music is three chords and the truth."

-Howard Harlan

"Music is the emotional life of most people."

-Leonard Cohen

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Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis examines how a regionally-sensitive Canadian musical identity became forged within the context of a yodeling, rhinestone studded, cowboy-hatted, hybrid art imported from America's Appalachia, mid-West, and old South regions. How did Canadian country music artists create a seemingly authentic image for themselves, characterized primarily around the markers of sound, rurality, masculinity, and later "Canadian-ness," when these notions were largely fabrications which changed over time? Such conundrums cannot be avoided because both fans and the country music industry have made these markers important. Country music is a created tradition and industry members, performers, and fans have relied upon a set of fictions made seemingly actual through the promotion of the idea of "authenticity." Country music exists within the realm of fiction. All at once it can be construed as "folk" or "commercial," "modern" or "traditional." While performers and industry members have actively sought to define country music as a close relation to traditional folk music, the music demonstrates that folk art – as defined within the context of twentieth-century North America – is commercial in its essence. In it the traditional and the modern are inseparable. This study shows that relying upon strict categorization for musical genres proves to be an unrewarding approach as it is impossible to pull the tangle apart. Each of country music's created traditions has its own history that has changed over time. This study traces how these authenticated fictions of Canada's country music have changed from the 1920s to the 1970s. This is achieved by considering a selection of Canadian performers, the country music industry, fans, and the Canadian state. By examining five distinct country music performers who had active careers in Canada – Wilf Carter, Earl Heywood, Don Messer, Stompin' Tom Connors, and

Gordon Lightfoot – this study demonstrates how and why new iterations of country authenticity replaced older ones, and the wider implications of these shifts.

Recent studies in Rural History have shown an interest in the cultural side of rural life. Scholars have increasingly questioned how the rural has been constructed, how it has been made up of images and ideas, not only of farmers and their fields.¹ By investigating country music, this study contributes to the field of Rural History by examining how ideas and images of the countryside became the basis for the many created traditions upon which country music relied. More broadly, this study contributes to our understanding of Canada's cultural history. "Canadian" culture, like country music, consists of a highly fabricated set of ideals and images which have steadily been updated over the course of the twentieth-century due to social, political, and economic change. Each of the five figures examined here represents specific invented identities which found favour with segments of Canadian audiences, but the narrative they spun of Canada and rurality was not free of dissonance. These five figures found popularity among some listeners, but not all, demonstrating the importance of consumers' individual tastes and preferences. It is important to consider how audience members responded to the images and narratives created by these performers and the country music industry. While often cultural histories about music leave out the role of the audience, this study contributes to the literature on cultural history and country music by considering the audience as a plural listening

¹ Consider for example, studies on masculinity and sexuality such as Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, and Margaret Finney, eds., *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) and Catharine Anne Wilson, "A Manly Art: Plowing, Plowing Matches, and Rural Masculinity in Ontario, 1800-1930," *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (June 2014): 157-186. Additionally, more attention has increasingly been paid to emphasizing that not all rural dwellers were farmers and not all rural lives were the same. See R.W. Sandwell, *Canada's Rural Majority: Households, Environments, and Economies, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), as an example.

public. Wilf Carter, Earl Heywood, Don Messer, Stompin' Tom Connors, and Gordon Lightfoot have been chosen for this study in large part because of their fame which ensured that primary source material was available. Country music can be a challenge to research as very often there is little material available. As a product of popular culture, recordings, magazines, radio shows and the like were deemed to be of little value and rarely archived. The five figures examined here are exceptions to this. Additionally, they were chosen as they each demonstrate certain consistencies within the genre while also highlighting certain changes and challenges. This study analyzes the image, body of work, and audience reception of these five performers to illuminate important questions, particularly the relationship between their country music style and authenticity as it related to the construction of the identity-based categories of sound, rurality, masculinity, and "Canadian-ness" in popular culture. Examining these five performers highlights how rurality and "Canadian-ness" have been fabricated over time and have relied upon masculine fictionalized images and narratives of the countryside.

As a study of country music in Canada, therefore, this study contributes to the literature by expanding the academic study of Canadian cultural and rural history. Currently there are no sustained academic examinations of country music performers in Canada. This study fills that void by taking the study of country music beyond Nashville to consider how the broader industry, Canadian performers, and Canadian fans interacted with this transnational phenomenon over the course of the twentieth century. Importantly, music scholarship in Canada has been heavily focused upon demonstrating how Canadian performers are distinct in their image and sound from American performers. This preoccupation with establishing a "Canadian sound" has resulted in a highly celebratory body of literature which simplifies the

history of musical production and consumption within the nation. Instead of trying to prove the existence of the “Canadian sound,” this study complicates the matter by demonstrating that country music is a highly fictionalized, transnational genre which originated in America. It is this factor which has made country music problematic for many music scholars. Trends and ideas were easily and willingly exchanged among Canadian and American industry members, performers, and fans. This study further contributes to the literature by seriously considering the “authenticity” label. Many studies on Canadian music have not seriously grappled with the concept of authenticity, typically assuming that because the performer was a Canadian citizen, that was enough to position them as an “authentic” representative of Canada’s musical legacy. This study differs by considering how performers actively fashioned an “authentic” image for themselves in order to attract fans and industry support, and in turn, how industry and fan expectations affected that image. A performer could only succeed if they successfully convinced their audience that they were an authentic artist, and in the case of country music, this meant adhering to the North American markers of country music. Lastly, this study further expands the literature on the academic study of Canadian cultural history by looking at the state and issues of nationalism. Studies on rock music, ballet, even *Sesame Street* exist, but very little is available on country music. As this study demonstrates, country music has been popular in Canada since the genre emerged as a commercial entity in the 1920s. Numerous Canadians have interacted with the genre, becoming fans, performers, and industry members. It is therefore important that this genre be taken seriously, as it challenges many of the long-held assumptions regarding “Canadian” music, particularly the constant fear of American cultural take-over.

This study argues that there exists a collection of key measurements which have remained important to the classifying and performance of country music in Canada. Even though these measurements have been imagined and fashioned in different ways over the course of the twentieth-century, they have come to be accepted as the markers of country music authenticity by performers, industry members, fans, and the Canadian state. The first of these key markers was the sound of the music, which was expected to fall within the parameters of what was popular amongst industry members, performers, and fans at any given time. As a result, Canadian performers generally sounded the same as their American counterparts. This was followed by the performer's display of masculinity. As performers in a largely white, male-dominated genre, Canadian country artists portrayed different types of masculinity, from the approachable, family-friendly man to the rough, rambling man. Rurality formed another key marker, as industry members, performers, and fans all had varying expectations of a performer's "rural-ness." Initially, Canadian performers were expected to provide a rural backstory – true or otherwise – in order to authenticate their claim to represent the genre. With time and the growth of urban-based audiences, the performer's need to prove themselves through real-life rural experiences lessened significantly. A performer could find success as a country musician by projecting a rural aura which was achieved by wearing a cowboy hat and boots and showing allegiance to country music's "rural" values. In both cases, "rural-ness" was connected to a varying degree of anti-urban, anti-modern sentiment, even though the industry was dependent on urban-based corporate infrastructure and a growing urban fan base. Performers were expected to demonstrate their "honest" adherence to "rural" values through a down-to-earth persona which was manifested through their connection with

their audience. In these ways, the markers of sound, masculinity, and rurality ensured that Canadian performers followed the North American trends of country music. Lastly, however, the state and cultural elite's growing preoccupation with a Canadian identity made "Canadian-ness" another measure of authenticity. "Canadian" country music was linked to the definition of authenticity as defined by twentieth-century folk song collectors who searched for historical and regional accuracy in the tunes they collected. Being identified as a contributor to Canada's musical legacy helped to legitimize country music performers. Increasingly performers had to consider the "Canadian-ness" of their music. For many performers – not just country music performers – this was an uncomfortable stretch. While performers may have liked the state support, these musicians and their fans were deeply influenced by the pan-American country music genre. They knew that to be commercially successful they had to establish their masculinity and rural backstory while connecting with the country music trends prevalent across North America.

Defining Terms and Meaningful Assumptions within the North American Genre

For this study to succeed, clearly defined definitions of "country music" and "authenticity" must be established. Country music developed from a mixture of music brought to North America by immigrants from Ireland, Great Britain, and Europe and the music of African slaves. Over time, this mixture formed the folk music of the Appalachian Mountains and the rural South, from which country music grew. The genre became commercialized in the 1920s with the emergence of radio and phonograph records. Known at this stage as "hillbilly" music, the first commercial recording was made in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1923. What has come to be considered the founding moment of commercial country music, however, was the recording

session of Ralph Peer in Bristol, Tennessee, in 1927. During the famed Bristol Sessions, Peer recorded the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, two of the most influential and best-selling acts from this early era. Peer distributed these recordings on the Victor label, bringing “hillbilly” music to a mass audience. In comparison to other popular commercial styles of the 1920s, particularly jazz and vocal music featuring opera-trained voices, “early country music entertainers relied on untrained, high-pitched nasal voices and simple musical accompaniments, evoking images of farm, family, and old-fashioned mores.”² Many record executives did not understand the appeal of this kind of music nor how to market it. The “hillbilly” label was sometimes seen by performers as belittling and so other labels including “old-time” and “cowboy” were used as well. It was the 1960s before the term “country music” was consistently applied to the genre, under the influence of the Country Music Association (CMA). The use of this term brought together a large collection of various subsets of the genre which had developed – bluegrass, cowboy music, western swing, for example – under one all-encompassing term.³ Historian Bill C. Malone argues that the music “defies precise definition” and “no term (not even ‘country’) has ever successfully encapsulated its essence.”⁴

The sound of the music changed over the course of the twentieth century. It was defined in part by the inclusion of specific instruments, namely the fiddle, banjo, harmonica, the dulcimer, or the steel guitar. Performers were identified by the wearing of certain signifiers, particularly the cowboy hat and boots. The music was also defined by its lyrics which projected

² Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

³ Neil V. Rosenberg, “Country Music – Popular or Folk?” in *All that Glitters: Country Music in America*, ed. George H. Lewis (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 151.

⁴ Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 1.

populist rhetoric. Since the music's commercial inception, however, the genre has been affected by and borrowed from various forms of popular music. The impact of African-American music has been obvious as the genre's performers have adapted its instrumental techniques and vocal stylings along with musical forms such as the blues, ragtime, and rhythm-and-blues.⁵ A number of stylistic changes also coincided with Nashville's rise as the production centre of country music. For example, from the 1940s to early 1950s, the rough "honky tonk" style, with its fiddles, steel guitar, and nasal sounding vocals, was most popular with country music audiences. Increasingly, however, country performers wanted to have "cross-over" appeal, meaning they wanted their songs to appear on both country and pop music ranking charts and draw in new fans who had typically shied away from country music. Furthermore, the arrival of rock-and-roll in the mid-1950s pushed the country music industry to develop a fresh sound and find new talent in order to compete for record sales. This gave rise to the "Nashville Sound" in the mid 1950s wherein the fiddles, steel guitar, and nasal vocals of honky-tonk were replaced by the smooth-sounding elements of 1950s pop music, such as string orchestration, background vocals, and a crooning singing style. While the mixing of "pop" and "country" had always influenced the genre, the quest for pop dominance grew during these years at an unprecedented rate. By avoiding the fiddle and steel guitar, for example, country performers sought the broadest possible appeal and won new audiences, ones that would have been turned off by such clichéd rural instrumentation.⁶ Not all artists, however, appreciated these developments and much splintering occurred within the genre with sub-genres such as

⁵ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 245-251.

bluegrass and hard-country emerging.⁷ Structural changes such as these combined with the genre's history of eclectic borrowing from an assortment of sources and other genres made it difficult to establish a simple definition of the genre and its signifiers. Surely what is unique about country music, however, is its ability to persistently reinvent itself while maintaining the fiction that it has been a continuation of folk practice.

For the purpose of this study the term "country music" will be used throughout for this label is seemingly the most widely understood when referring to the genre. Enthusiasts apply a wide variety of terms to specific streams of the genre to this day, breaking it into an assortment of clusters such as "country folk," "pre-commercial country," or "vernacular country."⁸ To make such distinctions would be overly cumbersome for the purposes of this analysis. Therefore, I will use the blanket term "country music" to capture both early foundational styles and those which have emerged since the adoption of the "country music" label, which collectively form the commercial country music genre.

The term "authenticity" must also be clearly defined as it is vital to understanding the invented traditions and assumptions country music hold dear. Country music fans, industry

⁷ The term "Bluegrass" was coined by Bill Monroe, who named his band, "The Bluegrass Boys." The style is considered a form of American roots music which blends the style of Appalachia music with jazz and gospel. For more information see Neil V. Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005). Hard country, according to Barbara Ching, is set apart from mainstream country by its focus on sad stories and bad behaviour. The sub-genre focuses on country music's low position in the American cultural hierarchy and rejects the romanticism and nostalgia of mainstream country. See Ching's *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 10. "Country folk" was popularized by artists such as Bob Dylan who were influenced by the sounds of Rock 'n' Roll but preferred an acoustic dominance in their sound. This style is not necessarily aimed exclusively at the country music audience. "Pre-commercial country" is a rather convoluted term but aims to differentiate earlier country music from seemingly more stylized and more commercialized country music. "Vernacular country" relates to any type of "vernacular" music which is defined by its accessibility in comparison to "art" or "serious" music. "Art" music largely refers to classical music which was written using advanced structural and theoretical knowledge. Vernacular is popular or folk and its associated genres, including country. This is ordinary "everyday" music that is not based upon theory or musical education.

members, and performers have consistently been preoccupied with “authenticity” as a method to differentiate the genre from the realm of mainstream popular music. This use of “authenticity” is not unique to country music, as rock culture has also used the concept to the same end.⁹ Authenticity is complex and difficult to define as scholars do not agree on a single definition and some go so far as to argue that it is, in fact, meaningless. More recently, scholars – particularly in the field of tourism – argue that authenticity can be produced, staged, and experienced.¹⁰ Certainly this can be seen in country music. For the purposes of this study, country music’s authenticity was measured by fans, performers, and the industry in a number of ways. First, it was defined by the music’s performance in a historically or regionally recognizable way. This was further proven by demonstrating a respect for and continuation of the music’s “traditional” roots. Demonstrating authenticity through historical accuracy harkens back to the ideals of early Anglo-American folklorists who on a basic level believed that whatever was constant and unaffected represented the “providential core of a culture and society.” The need to identify what was unaffected meant that all forms of folk art revolved around the question of its “authenticity.”¹¹ Second, authenticity was further defined by a performer’s ability to identify his or herself with a group which in turn considered the performer one of their own. This was achieved, in part, by relying upon a definition of authenticity which was continually evolving and negotiated. According to sociologist Richard A. Peterson, authenticity as used by country music formed a shifting synthesis of old and new by

⁹ Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 131.

¹⁰ Carol J. Steiner and Yvette Reisinger, “Understanding Existential Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 33, no. 2 (2006): 300.

¹¹ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 13-14.

which preexisting images of a seemingly authentic folk culture were attached to new styles of music. In this way country music's authenticity was an evolving concept. Peterson maintains that no one authority was "in a position to dictate authenticity in country music" so it was "continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image."¹² In this manner, country music's many fabricated traditions could evolve to serve the needs of the present while connecting with the past and a common understanding of the genre amongst industry members, performers, and fans.¹³ Third, to identify as an authentic member of the country music group, performers needed to exude an honesty in their performance. A performer was considered "authentic" if their music was performed as an "honest" expression of "sincere" feeling that fostered an organic connection to their audience and a sense of community. This required performers to be emotionally convincing with a down-to-earth persona on and off stage to connect with fans. Significantly, audiences needed to buy into a performer's projection of authenticity. While the industry and the performers certainly influenced the construction of "authentic" images and narratives, the form had to appeal to and be accepted by audiences in order to prove successful.

The country music industry and its performers sought to distance themselves from other forms of popular music by arguing for country music's inherently authentic folk roots. Folk art, in all of its forms, including country music, offered a mechanism to refashion the daily realities of working people into something meaningful and culturally valuable, and seemingly more authentic than modern consumer cultural products. Importantly, throughout the

¹² Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6-10.

twentieth-century, rural populations were often marginalized due to North America's urbanization and industrialization. This refashioning of rural life was overseen by twentieth century, anti-modern cultural producers, as well as rural dwellers. This refashioning positioned various forms of folk art as being of cultural value due to the perceived authenticity, especially if it could be shown that they were created in an environment free from any sort of professional training.¹⁴ Such a concrete rift dividing folk and commercial music certainly ignored the long-term borrowing, syncretism, and amalgamation of forms integral to folk and country music.¹⁵ Regardless of this reality, when country music could be perceived as a continuation of folk music, it could be set apart from other forms of popular music and seen as "authentic" by the industry, performers, and fans alike. Scholars Richard A. Peterson, George Lewis, and Bill C. Malone have noted that both the industry and many of its performers have remained devoted to folk symbolism for this reason. This reliance is rooted in the music's constantly evolving definition of "authenticity."

The idea that country music was southern music became tied to the genre's conception of authenticity. The spatial hegemony of America's Appalachian and Southern states was initially fixed upon country music at the point of its commercial origin by the recording industry in the 1920s. This engrained the idea that country music represented the Southern working-class in the popular imagination. It was later, in the 1930s, that the imagery of the cowboy and

¹⁴ See for example, Erin Morton, "Ordinary Affects: Folk Art, Maud Lewis, and the Social Aesthetics of the Everyday," *Journal of Canadian Art History* XXXIV, no. 2 (2013): 81-108 and Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Michael Taft, "Syncretizing Sound: The Emergence of Canadian Popular Music," in *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada*, ed. David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 197-98.

the old West were added, and the dominance of Nashville grew after that. Due to the genre's strong association with the South, and later, cowboys and the West, performers and other industry members who arose from outside country music's seemingly traditional regions have felt the need to prove that they were just as "authentic." Canadian performers, for example, could achieve this by moving to Nashville, adopting monikers which associated them with these regions, or by wearing country music signifiers such as the cowboy hat. Canadian Wilf Carter, for example, became "Montana Slim" when he became a radio star on CBS in New York. The name associated him with the American West and the cowboy entertainment of the 1930s. For scholars of the genre, the strong association between country music and the American South can be traced back to these earlier connections made by the recording industry.

The association with America's Southern states was further solidified with Bill C. Malone's 1968 publication, *Country Music, U.S.A.* Malone validated the recording industry's decision to connect the genre to America's Southern states by arguing for "the spatial centrality of the American South as being the location where country music originated and then radiated from."¹⁶ As the first academic study to take the genre seriously, studies which followed were required to respond to Malone, most often by agreeing with his argument or by emphasizing the "authenticity" of country music developed in a region beyond the immediate South.¹⁷

¹⁶ Brian Rusted, "Hank Snow and the Eastern Frontiers of Western Music," in *Challenging Frontiers: The Canadian West*, eds. Lorry Felske and Beverly Rasporich (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004), 183.

¹⁷ See for example: Charles Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), Ivan Tribe, *Mountain Jamboree: Country Music in West Virginia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), Simon Bonner, *Old-Time Music Makers of New York State* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), George H. Lewis, ed., *All that Glitters: Country Music in America* (Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993) and, Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

The portrayal of country music as inherently more authentic than folk, rock, or other forms of popular music is rooted in a romantic anti-modernism which was used by the industry, performers, and fans to varying degrees throughout the twentieth century. Scholars have noted that country music “often nostalgically celebrates an ‘authentic’ folk culture as part of a premodern rural past.”¹⁸ This has transformed the lives and work of rural citizens into a fantasy which exists separate from their lived experiences in modern times. Studies by Barbara Ching and Gerald Creed as well as Joli Jensen have emphasized that in country music’s effort to blend nostalgia for the premodern with a form of popular culture, a very problematic view of rural life has emerged. The romanticism of rural life constructed by country music has created a dangerously blasé attitude amongst those unfamiliar with rural life towards the complexities experienced by those who live the rural reality.¹⁹

Scholars have also noted that country music’s definition of authenticity relies upon a perceived tension between “artistic purity,” meaning the folk element, and its commercialism. Country music has always been conflicted in how it defines itself because of this tension. Does the genre rely upon originality and rawness or commercial refinement? Why can it not be both? Is it defined by “anti-modern nostalgia for rural agrarianism or modernity and the commercialization of the mass media marketplace”?²⁰ It comes down to the fact that the genre’s emphasis upon authenticity is a constructed one which has been shaped and used by all industry members including producers, performers, and song writers. It is from this tension that

¹⁸ Leigh H. Edwards, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 10-11.

¹⁹ Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, eds., *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997) and, Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation/Vanderbilt University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Edwards, *Johnny Cash*, 10.

the genre's invented traditions and signifiers have grown and been modified to suit changing socio-economic conditions.

Rooting the music in anti-modern nostalgia for rural agrarianism has created the assumption that the music was by rural people for rural people. The history of country music, however, demonstrates that the industry and its performers were equally engaged with modernity and the commercialization of the mass media marketplace. Consumers of the music have never strictly been farm dwellers and, further complicating the issue, consumers cannot be defined as "rural" or "urban" simply based upon where they lived. In its most basic sense, the "rural" is defined as those spaces which are not urban. Such a separation is difficult to make, however, for boundaries around cities are easily blurred, populations grow with time, and how does one categorize country people who move to the city or city people who settle in the country? More recent shifts in rural studies emphasize that there are multiple discourses of the "rural" in existence and that "rural" is largely a constructed concept. Researchers must examine how the media and advertising have represented the rural and in turn how various groups of people have consumed and acted out these representations.²¹ Country music presents a key site for such considerations.

For the period covered by this study, country music largely had a male vision and various forms of masculinity were important markers of authenticity. To study country music in these formative years is to enter a space of white male dominance and this is reflected by the list of performers examined here. Significantly, many of the gendered images which country

²¹ Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, and Margaret Finney, "Masculinity and Rural Life: An Introduction," in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, eds. Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, and Margaret Finney (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 13-15.

music relied upon were recognizable images of rural masculinity such as cowboys, farmers, and woodsmen (or lumberjacks). These images portrayed rural masculinity as powerful, favouring “alpha males” over lesser men, yet positioning all men as more powerful than women. The power portrayed by these icons explains their allure for both urban and rural men and their female audiences.²² These positive masculine images dominated country music, despite the fact that rural masculinities, like masculinities everywhere, were numerous and flexible.

Catharine Wilson argues that, “masculinities are multiple and fluid, forged in particular spatial and temporal settings that are themselves ever changing . . . performed and practised.”²³ Masculinity is shaped by how men and women interact with each other as well as how men define “manliness” amongst themselves. At any given time, more than one form of masculinity can exist and even dominant forms are reinvented as relations, meanings, and circumstances change.²⁴ The idea that the performance of gender in Canada has been ‘contested’ is developed by the contributors to Jane Nicholas and Patrizia Gentile’s, *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History* (2013). By drawing on Judith Butler’s work on gender and performativity, the essays in *Contesting Bodies*, suggest that the case of fashion modes of dress, styles, and trends can lead towards understanding both gender history and the Canadian nation. This thesis argues that cowboy hats and boots are cultural artifacts that enable the wearer to perform and negotiate gender and class. The serious country music artist’s performance began with the cowboy hat. Like the rucksack or hiking boot the cowboy’s gear

²² Campbell, Bell, and Finney, “Masculinity and Rural Life: An Introduction,” 5-6.

²³ Catharine Anne Wilson, “A Manly Art: Plowing, Plowing Matches, and Rural Masculinity in Ontario, 1800-1930,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (June 2014): 161.

²⁴ Wilson, “A Manly Art,” 161.

was the equipment of rugged, respectable patriotic frontiersman and labourers. As such, it was and continues to be a status and occupation marker like the cap, beret, Sou'wester, or bowler. Symbolically, its roots are traceable to the "Wild West" and pioneer life. The cowboy hat allowed the male or female performer to widen or reduce the boundary between the audience and stage through the simple mode of seemingly authentic cross-class or cross-gender dressing. For example, as early as 1947, Nuta Kotlyarenko, known professionally as Nudie Cohn, designed elaborate costumes from everyday objects of rural dress for wealthy musicians and Hollywood celebrities. Cohn's decorative rhinestone-covered suits, known popularly as "Nudie Suits" enabled post-war men and women to conform to or subvert the traditional use of ostentatiously expensive western wear. The selected performers in this study wore their western gear in non-confrontational ways to represent conventional ideas of masculinity. On stage, other performers, men and women with unconventional careers or lifestyles subverted middle-class notions of domesticity and respectability through confrontational modes of western dress. From Dale Evans, Elvis Presley, Liberace, the Village People, to k.d. lang, and their line-dancing and hooting fans the dramaturgy country music scene challenged social class stereotypes (middle class, rural-urban, young-old) and celebrated gender fluidity and artistic diversity.²⁵

²⁵ Patrizia Gentile and Jane Nicholas, eds., *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). Also see: Rainer Hillrichs, *Queer Frontier: Appropriating the Classic Western in "Lonesome Cowboys" and "Brokeback Mountain,"* M.A. Thesis, Bonn University, 2007 (https://www.academia.edu/35402465/Queer_Frontier_Appropriating_the_Classic_Western_in_Lonesome_Cowboys_and_Brokeback_Mountain), Corey W. Johnson, "'Don't Call Him a Cowboy': Masculinity, Cowboy Drag, and A Costume Change," *Journal of Leisure Research* 40, no. 3 (2008): 385-403, Moya Lloyd, "Performativity, Parody, Politics," *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 2 (1999) 195-213, K. Bradford, "Grease Cowboy Fever; or, the Making of Johnny T," *Journal of Homosexuality* 43 (2003): 15-30, "Performativity," in *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism, Vol. 1*, ed. Leslie L. Heywood (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 240-242.

For country music specifically, a number of scholars have pointed out that performances of masculinity have come to represent a vital component of country music's staple identity.²⁶ From the straight-shooting, honest, and heroic cowboy, to the Nashville sound era's representation of domestic masculinity, and rusticated styles like honky-tonk and the Outlaw movement, country music has performed masculinity in a variety of configurations. Gender identities have always been critical to the production and consumption of country music. Over the genre's history, constructions of gender for both men and women determined which sounds and images could be included within the genre's boundaries. Country music historian Kristine M. McCusker has argued that the initial gendering of the genre began both onstage and off at the time of the music's commercial beginnings. Onstage, men were the stars and women played supporting roles. While exceptions to this rule existed, the assumption that men were the stars has been long-lasting and perpetuated by the industry's emphasis on "traditionalism" and "authenticity." Offstage, men worked as producers, managers, recording engineers, and artists & repertoire men, while women sewed costumes, worked as secretaries, and answered fan mail. Furthermore, the growth of radio significantly affected the genre's development of its gendered conventions. Barn dance radio programs tended to adhere to a growing industry standard in which these programs had male and female performers supplemented by a comedian. Male and female performers played off each other; men were cowboys and hillbillies while women were cowgirls, sweethearts, and matriarchs. Only comedians, who were often

²⁶ See for example: Kristine M. McCusker, and Diane Pecknold, eds., *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2004) and Kristine M. McCusker, and Diane Pecknolds, eds., *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2016).

male but sometimes female, could cross these gendered boundaries without challenging the genre's notions of authenticity.²⁷ Such conventions are certainly seen in this study in the examinations of *CKNX Barn Dance* and *Don Messer's Jubilee*. For both men and women, country music's gender roles could be constricting, even as they changed over time. Recent scholarship in this area encourages us to position our work within a framework which engages with gender as a defining aspect of country music performance.²⁸ This, in turn, encourages scholars to question country music's narrative of authenticity more extensively.

By examining country music that was performed and consumed in Canada by Canadian performers, this study probes and challenges the genre's reliance upon the notion of "authenticity" and highlights just how fabricated this concept is. More than anything, what is truly unique about country music is not that it is a continuation of folk practice, but its ability to continually reinvent itself while maintaining that fiction. Country music in Canada and its different geographical regions existed within a transnational set of fictions which were shared by a great many North Americans.

The Canadian Context

Understanding Canada's experience with country music is difficult because of the genre's emphasis upon authenticity. Canadians' perceptions of country music swing back and

²⁷ Kristine M. McCusker, "Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Oxford Handbooks Online), accessed March 19, 2019, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190248178.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190248178-e-9>.

²⁸ See for example: Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), Leigh H. Edwards, *Dolly Parton: Gender and Country Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), and Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

forth. Sometimes it is seen as just another American cultural import. At other times it is regarded as a unique body of work which Canadians have adapted into an “authentic” element of Canada’s cultural landscape. Folklorist Michael Taft has argued that since at least the 1930s, when Canada’s domestic country music industry was in its infancy, Canadians have been inspired by American imports, but the act of borrowing, syncretism, and personal preference has meant that adaptations were also made by Canadians.²⁹ In contrast, writers for publications and programs made for public consumption on Canada’s country music history claim that country music in Canada was transformed by the eclecticism of the nation’s performers. They claim that, while Canadian country performers and fans relied upon the same fabricated traditions and narratives regarding the genre as their American counterparts, the “Canadian-ness” of the nation’s performers inevitably transformed the music into something distinct from “American” country music. For example, when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired *Country Gold* in 1992, the three-hour television special emphasized that Canadian country music was “rooted in tradition,” with “no one sound, no one style, no guidelines to restrict it.”³⁰ Ian and Sylvia Tyson, as both a duo and as solo artists, along with Gordon Lightfoot, were praised for their folk-country mash-up. Murray McLauchlan was noted for his ability to “extol the virtues of a rural lifestyle and those who live it.” This was *despite* his urban upbringing and highlighted two important assumptions: first, that country music was made for and by rural dwellers; and, secondly, that only those with a rural background could write and perform country music. “I think I’m country as hell,” McLauchlan argued. Additionally, Rita MacNeil was

²⁹ Taft, “Syncretizing Sound,” 202.

³⁰ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Country Gold: A Two-Part History*, 1992, University of Toronto Media Commons Media Archives, “Anne Murray Fonds,” 2015.003.2054/2015.003.2055, Box 3.

praised for bringing “a stirring Celtic soul to country music,” while the influences of Stompin’ Tom Connors, Tommy Hunter, and George Fox were also recognized. More recent groups such as Prairie Oyster and Blue Rodeo were acknowledged for their desire to move the genre in a new direction by filtering the music “through a modern sensibility” making it more accessible for “city dwellers,” while Blue Rodeo created “something that was unique” by mixing roots, country, and jazz. Overall, the program reinforced the perception that “Canadian” country music stood alone and what made it unique was its eclectic mixture of styles. Throughout the program there was no acknowledgement of American influence, and little attention was paid to industry development, state intervention, or audience preferences, leaving many questions about the genre’s cultural relevance unanswered. Collectively these individuals and their music were tied to Canada’s sense of self simply because they were Canadian citizens. While many of these artists had lyrics or fiddling styles which demonstrated a regional sensitivity, their music also fit into the signifiers and traditions which country performers shared more broadly across North America as they worked to prove their authenticity.

Most scholarship available on country music in Canada has typically focused on the Maritime provinces, no doubt because a disproportionate number of country singers have emerged from this region. The need to demonstrate authenticity remains the centerpiece of these studies. For these scholars, authenticity draws upon ideas of the folk and traditionalism, thereby maintaining the assumption that country music is a continuation of folk practice. Folklorist Neil V. Rosenberg’s 1976 study, *Country Music in the Maritimes: Two Studies*, is an early example of the literature. Over a period of three years, Rosenberg conducted research in Newfoundland and the Maritime provinces to determine the regional character of country

music.³¹ He recognized that the influence of American country music could be seen in the music of a great number of country stars who emerged from the region, notably Wilf Carter, Hank Snow, and Stompin' Tom Connors.³² Based on research conducted through interviews and living in different communities, however, Rosenberg argued that the region's country music was a mixture of older folk traditions and the stylings of newer country music performers. Rosenberg contended that print, phonograph records, radio, and eventually television, enabled local performers to continually expand their repertoire by mixing folk standards with new popular songs. Rosenberg showed that in the Maritimes various racial and ethnic groups performed and consumed country music. He found that, historically, the Maritimes' Afro-Canadian population swapped music in certain work environments where song performances were commonplace. While black labourers were often segregated from white labourers, lumber camps and ships created space for musical exchange. "Such settings were the source for a musical repertoire which was brought home to the family and community, a factor in the spread of song and music between various ethnic and regional groups in the Maritimes," Rosenberg argued.³³ Exchanges of this kind inspired Afro-Canadians to form country bands, become fiddlers for dances, and perform before both black and white audiences. Rosenberg found examples of other ethnic groups, including Acadian, Lebanese, and Chinese, also playing country music. Despite his

³¹ Neil V. Rosenberg, *Country Music in the Maritimes: Two Studies* (St. John's, NFLD: Memorial University, Department of Folklore, 1976), 1.

³² Rosenberg, *Country Music in the Maritimes*, 3. Also see: See: Neil V. Rosenberg, "'Folk' and 'Country' music in the Canadian Maritimes: A regional model." *Journal of Country Music* 5, no. 1 (1974), "Studying Country Music and Contemporary Folk Music Traditions in the Maritimes: Theory, Techniques and the Archivist" *Phonographic Bulletin* 14 (1988), and "Repetition, Innovation, and Representation in Don Messer's Media Repertoire," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 115, no. 456 (Spring, 2002): 191-208.

³³ Neil V. Rosenberg, "Ethnicity and Class: Black Country Musicians in the Maritimes," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (1988), 145.

findings, the music has remained predominantly characterized as a white man's music, fitting within larger transnational ideas of what was authentically country music.

Other literature on the subject relies upon the perceived need to find country music's "folk" roots in order to prove its authenticity. Scholar Gregory Marquis, for example, has also considered the presence of country music in the Maritimes.³⁴ Using a broad definition of folk music as an authentic style which used "traditional" instrumentation and belonged to a specific group or region, Marquis emphasized the meshing of hillbilly and cowboy music with old-time favourites, arguing that country music became embedded in rural and small-town New Brunswick. Marquis concluded that early forms of country music became a type of folk music for New Brunswick's English-speaking population, largely because it was what the "folk" chose to listen to. He argued that "these musical forms, despite their commercial origins and dissemination via technology such as recordings, radio, and motion pictures, constituted a de facto folk music for the anglophone populations of the province."³⁵ Historian Tim B. Rogers further addressed the emphasis upon the intermingling of folk and country music in the Canadian context with his 1978 article, "Is there an Alberta folk music?" Using a similarly broad definition of folk music, Rogers examined Alberta and the singing cowboy's repertoire in relation to the older folk repertoire and found that many older folk songs were re-worked by performers such as Wilf Carter, becoming popular country hits.³⁶ This connection has been explored even further by ethnomusicologist Gillian Turnbull, who argued that a number of

³⁴ Greg Marquis, "The Folk Music of Anglophone New Brunswick: Old-Time and Country Music in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 3 (2012): 57.

³⁵ Marquis, "Folk Music," 57.

³⁶ T.B. Rogers, "Is There an Alberta Folk Music?" *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 6, no. 1 (1978): n.p. Rogers also wrote "Country music bands during the 1950s: A comparative survey" In "Ethnomusicology in Canada," edited by R. Witmer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

nineteenth-century “folk” cowboy songs and poems were re-fashioned by twentieth-century cowboy singers into commercial hits.³⁷

Concern over identifying authentic Canadian country music rooted in an older folk tradition became more important to Canadians as new technologies sped up the dissemination of American-made country music. Radio was key to the growth and development of the country music industry, as the initial spread of the genre across North America was made possible by radio technology. The emergence of radio and its increasing affordability throughout the 1920s and 1930s meant that more content could be circulated, and broadcasters were always on the look-out for something new and affordable to put on the airwaves. It was within this context, argues historian Paul Rutherford, that the mass culture of America more generally “absorbed elements of pre-existing subcultures that had been outside the mainstream, whether regional (southern country music), ethnic (black ragtime), proletarian (rough sports), or youth (experimentation) to fashion a new ersatz brew that appealed to everyman and everywoman, and most especially to the middle classes.”³⁸ While the potential profits of country music were first demonstrated by the sale of records, it was radio broadcasting upon which it ultimately built its base, particularly from the mid-1920s until the end of the Great Depression.³⁹ For rural musicians especially, radio offered a new opportunity to foster a wider audience beyond their hometowns, while broadcasters saw it as a new and cheap form of entertainment. Therefore,

³⁷ Gillian Turnbull, “Authorship and Nostalgia in Contemporary Cowboy Repertoire,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 58-67.

³⁸ Paul Rutherford, “Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada,” in *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada*, ed. David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 267.

³⁹ Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.

numerous scholars agree that after 1920 the radio was country music's chief method of dissemination.⁴⁰ Through "hillbilly" string bands, "old-time" fiddling groups, barn dance variety programs, and singing cowboys, country music programming found a wide audience across North America in both rural and urban locales.

The spread of American country music into Canada via radio airwaves caused concern amongst Canadian cultural nationalists because it was understood as quintessentially American music, another form of American cultural take-over. Canada had long been in the shadow of two powerful nations, each with its own assertive and highly developed culture: Britain and the United States. British and American products within the realm of sports, news, magazines, and music were regularly consumed by Canadians, and by the 1920s American cultural products were beginning to dominate. In Canada, the development of private radio stations was slow in contrast to America's quickly expanding broadcasting industry with networks such as WLS, NBC, and CBS. The powerful transmitters used by these stations easily out-distanced their Canadian counterparts, and by the end of the decade an estimated eighty percent of all programming which Canadians listened to was American in origin.⁴¹ That Canadians were affected by the wide variety of American "hillbilly" radio programs is undeniable. Canadians were quick to tune in to these programs and establish their own versions, heard on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or on privately-run stations. Francophones were not immune to the phenomena either. In Quebec, the province's folk music continued to be an important form of

⁴⁰ Malone, *Country Music*, 33. Also see: Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Rusted, "Eastern Frontiers," and Rosenberg, *Country Music in the Maritimes*.

⁴¹ Rutherford, "Made in America," 266. See also: Paul Litt, "Canada Invaded! The Great War, Mass Culture, and Canadian Cultural Nationalism," in *Canada and the First World War: Essays in Honour of Robert Craig Brown* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 323-349.

entertainment, but as urbanization began slowly to change the province, access to other forms of musical entertainment reached citizens. In cities especially, access to vaudeville, motion pictures, and translated versions of popular Tin Pan Alley songs grew.⁴² The signals emanating from French-language radio during the 1930s were not strong enough to reach rural areas. People living there who had radios listened to English-language stations playing country music, “with ensembles featuring fiddles and singers glorifying cowboy life, open spaces, and sentimental views of the family – themes that, even in English, resonated strongly.” Performers were affected too and soon artists such as Roland Lebrun, Marcel Martel, and Willie Lamonthé translated these themes into French songs.⁴³ Importantly, then, though Canadian country performers demonstrated a regional sensitivity by using place names in their lyrics or adapting familiar folk tunes to suit Canadian topics, they also did covers of popular country songs they heard on American radio stations and wrote songs about Texas, sweethearts, the family farm, and other typical country music themes. In their quest for authenticity, Canadian country music performers latched onto the genre’s identifiers, particularly sound and dress, and the

⁴² Tin Pan Alley was the label given to the group of New York City music publishers and songwriters who dominated American popular music from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. While the origins of this label are unclear, it referred to West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan’s Flower District where a number of music publishers had set up shop. These publishers largely produced sheet music which could be sold and distributed to the masses. (Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 201).

It is worth noting that the historiography of music in Quebec is highly developed. Due to the impact of Quebec nationalism, the music of Canada’s francophone population has been examined closely by Quebec scholars who argue that the relationship between the francophone population and music differs from the experiences of anglophone Canadians. Studies of note include: Brian Christopher Thompson, *Anthems and Minstrel Show: The Life and Times of Calixa Lavallée, 1842-1891* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), Richard Baillargeon and Christian Côté, *Destination ragou: une histoire de la musique populaire au Québec* (Montreal 1991). On the importance of the Quebec Chanson see: Robert Giroux, 'Des fonctions mobilisatrices de la chanson lors de la "revolution tranquille" au Québec (de 1959 a 1972),' *1789-1989: Musique, histoire, démocratie*, vol 1 (Paris 1992).

⁴³ Keillor, *Music in Canada*, 197-198. Folk and fiddle music remained a vital part of Quebec tradition and there was an emphasis on maintaining regional folk music traditions to protect Quebecois culture.

popularity these performers found amongst audiences demonstrated how adaptive the domestic music scene was to the influence of American cultural imports.

For some Canadians, this access and the inclusion of new, popular material emanating from the United States caused concern over the possible damage this exposure could unleash upon the nation's culture. Many Canadian elites promoting high culture considered the content of popular American entertainment as a moral threat and pushed for "moral protectionism" over cultural production.⁴⁴ Cultural products, especially sports, were viewed by many Canadians through a strict moral code. Throughout the nineteenth century, religious institutions, newspapers, schools, and the courts had stressed that Canadians should follow a "Victorian ethos." "People were expected to abide by an increasingly rigid code of behaviour which segregated the sexes, emphasized self-improvement and class harmony, and embodied a puritanical distrust of pleasure," historian Paul Rutherford argues.⁴⁵ As a result, Canadian elites envisioned Canada as a morally pure country, especially in comparison to its southern neighbour, and this notion continued to affect Canadians and their culture well into the twentieth century. Canada and the United States had always shared a permeable border, making the transmission of ideas, consumer goods, even people, relatively easy.⁴⁶ During the 1920s, the "invasion" of American culture escalated, and it was filtered by many through this moral lens. Many Canadians, particularly cultural elites and social reformers, viewed the United States as a country of excess, governed by corruption and greed, and lacking in moral fibre. It

⁴⁴ Rutherford, "Made in America," 261.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁶ Historian Paul Litt has argued that this focus on differentiating Canada's culture from that of the United States has long been of vital importance due to the fact that "at first blush" there in fact appears to be very little difference between the two (*Trudeaumania* (Vancouver & Toronto: UBC Press, 2016), 79).

was this attitude which enabled elites to justify their efforts to shield the country from the damaging impact of American ideology. Canadian elites were particularly concerned by the spread of American cultural products, but their efforts to exert “moral protectionism” over Canadian culture were difficult to enforce. Partly, this was because a large portion of the population actually *preferred* the imported American forms of entertainment, or, at the very least, entertainment which copied American arrangements.⁴⁷ Music-based programming was exceptionally vexing because, as a major component of entertainment broadcasting, it was liable to have the largest impact on listeners’ leisure time.⁴⁸ Country music on radio airwaves caused concern not only because it was understood as quintessentially American music, but also because its association with American popular culture led people to assume it was simply another form of America’s cultural take-over via radio.

Believing that a response was needed to the influx of American broadcasting in particular, the Canadian state debated whether a public broadcasting system in the fashion of Britain’s BBC, or a commercial broadcasting system such as America’s NBC or CBS, should be established. Public broadcasting would give the Canadian government more control over what citizens consumed, which was certainly attractive amidst discussions of American cultural dominance. Public broadcasting, however, was not monetarily rewarding. In typical fashion, Canada adopted elements of both systems, establishing a public broadcaster while also allowing private licensed stations to broadcast.⁴⁹ Historian Len Kuffert argues that Canadian

⁴⁷ Rutherford, “Made in America,” 261-264.

⁴⁸ Len Kuffert, *Canada Before Television: Radio, Taste, and the Struggle for Cultural Democracy* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 159.

⁴⁹ Kuffert, *Canada Before Television*, 23. Also see: Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2012), Gene Allen and Daniel J. Robinson, ed., *Communicating in Canada’s Past: Essays in Media History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), Mary

radio in the 1920s and 1930s was also a unique case because it was “a system that involved both private and public broadcasters operating next door to the richest and most dynamic radio marketplace in the world.”⁵⁰ Historians of broadcasting have tended to characterize American programming as pushing in where it was not wanted, but as country music in Canada demonstrates, it was not that simple.⁵¹ The bigger issue was that Canadians and their broadcasting platforms always struggled to compete with American programming, especially since so many Canadians preferred those imports. Kuffert maintains that, for Canadians, “American programs provided both encouraging and disappointing examples of the fare that could emerge under a commercial system blessed with a much larger potential audience.”⁵² There is no doubt that different groups of people saw in radio the potential to inspire national cohesion, a cohesion threatened by the popularity of American programming. Whether nationalists liked it or not, however, “entertainment value usually guided the tuning hand of the listener, and to most listeners, the national origins of a program mattered little.”⁵³

With this advancement in national public broadcasting, the need to produce “authentically Canadian” content grew. While country music performers sought to authenticate themselves by fitting within the transnational parameters of the genre, the context in which

Vipond, “British or American?: Canada’s “mixed” broadcasting system in the 1930s,” *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 2, no. 2 (2004): 89-100, and Anne F. MacLennan, “American Network Broadcasting, the CBC, and Canadian Radio Stations During the 1930s: A Content Analysis,” *Journal of Radio Studies*, 12, no. 1 (2005): 85-103.

⁵⁰ Len Kuffert, *Canada Before Television*, 23.

⁵¹ More on this discussion can be found in: Rutherford, “Made in America,” Paul Litt, *The Muses, The Masses and the Massey Commission* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992) and N. Alice Frick, *Image of the Mind: CBC Radio Drama, 1944-1954* (Toronto: Canadian Stage & Arts Production, 1987). Also see, Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992) and, Mark Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada’s Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990).

⁵² Kuffert, *Canada Before Television*, 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

their music was broadcast to audiences was quite different between the two nations because of the state's involvement in cultural production. Unlike the American experience, Canadian broadcasting had been heavily monitored by the state. The establishment of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932 – replaced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1936 – as the national broadcaster meant that nationalist concerns and state involvement would continue to affect the direction of Canada's mass media throughout the twentieth century. Unlike the majority of local and privately-run stations, the CBC had the technology to broadcast from coast-to-coast, and, for some locales, it was the only station they could pick up, meaning that the actions of the CBC, its motives, and the content it distributed, mattered.

The recording industry was also concerned about America's cultural influence. When the recording devices invented by Thomas Edison became available in the late 1880s, Canadians began recording music, and by 1900 the E. Berliner company in Montreal was issuing commercial recordings, the first in the nation. RCA Victor continued to record in Canada until the 1930s, but eventually the impact of the Great Depression caused it to shut down. The recording industry in Canada was further reduced by material shortages during World War II. Restrictions on shellac hit the industry hard and the industry did not begin to revive until the 1960s. The lack of recording infrastructure in Canada, however, was seen by cultural protectionists as just another example of American take-over, as it ensured that Canadian performers had to head south of the border to build careers for themselves. This situation was perceived as an American effort to usurp Canadian talent. The impact of state broadcasting continued to increase with the shift to television beginning in 1952 and the establishment of CBC stations in Toronto and Montreal. By 1955, CBC's television services were available to 66

percent of the Canadian population.⁵⁴ Eventually, the Canadian versus American content battle contributed to the establishment of the “60 percent Canadian content” rule for television by the CRTC in 1970, and the “30 percent Canadian content” ruling for radio in 1971.⁵⁵

Despite protectionist rhetoric and the desire to sound “authentically” Canadian, CBC imported a number of hit variety programs from the United States to boost ratings and revenue, such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which was routinely in the top three of the network’s most popular programs with viewers. It also worked to produce a number of its own variety programs emulating larger American network shows. In the realm of country music, CBC radio, and later television, were quick to pick up on the popularity of this type of programming, producing programs with content that seemed to suggest domestic relevance. *Country Hoedown*, a barn dance production, first appeared on CBC television in 1956 was joined by *The Tommy Hunter Show*, which began as a radio program in 1960 and transitioned to television in 1965. *The Tommy Hunter Show* overtly emulated Nashville’s *Grand Ole Opry* becoming known as the “Grand Ole Opry of the North.”⁵⁶ These programs were relatively cheap and easy to produce with wholesome, family-friendly characters who suited the desire of the CBC to tie its programs to social uplift while separating Canadian culture from what it deemed to be the “frivolous” and “violent junk” produced in America.⁵⁷ At the preliminary meeting of CBC board members in September 1936, it was stressed that “the Corporation’s actions should be

⁵⁴ Paul Rutherford, *When Television was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952-1967* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 8.

⁵⁵ Ryan Edwardson, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 20.

⁵⁶ Tommy Hunter, *Tommy Hunter: My Story* (London: Methuen, 1985), 5.

⁵⁷ Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 226.

governed by a non-political, non-local, national outlook,” but this study demonstrates that this was not always the case.⁵⁸ The corporation also played upon regional stereotypes to “provide audiences with a dose of Canadiana,” such as *Don Messer’s Jubilee*.⁵⁹

Ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman has reasoned that nationalism often comes “from the top, that is, from state institutions and ideologies” and that it “enters music” when there is an audience which accepts the message.⁶⁰ It is almost impossible for researchers to look at any form of cultural production within English Canada and not encounter such questions of nationalism or a nationalist agenda.⁶¹ The state’s interest in cultural activities and industries has affected what audiences can tune into and constructed a direct link between culture and nationhood. This has significantly influenced the music which Canadian artists have produced and performed by tying their creativity to the very fabric of the nation.

The literature on Canadian music more generally reflects this construction of “Canadian” music with many authors attempting to highlight and prove the “Canadian-ness” of certain performers and their music. Edwardson argues that, in various ways, cultural producers purposely reclaimed Canadian musicians – particularly famous expatriates – turning them into national representatives with special status. In response, Canadian-born musicians were forced

⁵⁸ “Minutes of Preliminary Meeting of Board of Governors, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, In Ottawa, on September 26 and 27, 1936,” National Archives, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, RG 41 Volume 615, Appendix 1, pg. 8.

⁵⁹ Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 122.

⁶⁰ Philip V. Bohlman, *Music, Nationalism and the Making of the New Europe*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Routledge, 2010), 5.

⁶¹ See: Maria Tippett, *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, Jeffrey Cormier, *The Canadianization Movement: Emergence, Survival, and Success* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004) and, L.B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

to grapple with the “Canadian” label. Some chose to embrace it while others fought against it.⁶²

A majority of studies revere the 1960s as the period when a distinct “Canadian” sound was developed and emphasize the contributions made by the artists who arose during this period above any Canadian performers who came before them. The literature often ignores country artists entirely as they sound similar to “American” country music and it is assumed that they contributed nothing uniquely “Canadian” and failed to inspire “national allegiance.”⁶³

This study contributes to the literature on cultural nationalism by avoiding the “Canadian sound” trap and instead focusing on how the categories of masculinity, rurality, and “Canadian-ness” have been fabricated for and by the performers under examination here. Increasingly for these performers, the need to identify themselves as “rural” became less important as country music’s audience and narrative broadened in the 1950s to focus on the urban middle class as well as the working-class. The need to identify themselves as “Canadians” meant performers increasingly had to grapple with divisive questions regarding Canadian identity and culture. Few of the performers examined in this study were actually consciously working to support the state’s cultural agenda, which was to further the growth and development of “Canadian” music within the nation’s borders and to win Canada status

⁶² See Ryan Edwardson’s, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁶³ Such publications are often less scholarly and made for popular consumption, such as, Douglas Fetherling, *Someday Soon: Essays on Canadian Songwriters* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1990), 8-11. Also see: Marco Adria, *Music of Our Times: Eight Canadian Singer-Songwriters* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1991), Nicholas Jennings, *Before the Gold Rush: Flashbacks to the Dawn of the Canadian Sound* (Toronto: Viking, 1997), and Beverley Diamond and Robert Witmer, ed., *Canadian Music: Issues of Hegemony and Identity* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc., 1994). More recent academic studies, however, are considering Canadian music within broader transnational frameworks which examines music production and performance as more than just a mechanism for creating national identities. See for example: Jason Wilson, *King Alpha’s Song in a Strange Land: Jamaican Migrant and Canadian Host in Toronto’s Transnational Reggae Music Scene, 1973-1990*, Ph.D. Thesis: University of Guelph, 2013 and Barbara Lorenskowski, *Sounds of Ethnicity: Listening to German North America, 1850-1914* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

internationally. The need to demonstrate their “Canadian-ness” did, however, become increasingly important for their careers as the twentieth century wore on. So too did the need to demonstrate that they fit within country music’s markers of authenticity. By performing in a historically or regionally accurate way, combined with fashioning an image for themselves which identified them with country music’s industry members, other performers, and fans, their authenticity could be proven. For Canadian performers working in Canada, this identification with the group increasingly grew to include a demonstration of their “Canadian-ness.” It is important to remember that the five performers examined here, like all performers, constructed images of themselves which were not one-dimensional. Their displays of masculinity, rurality, and “Canadian-ness” were not static and, likewise, how they were viewed by broadcasters, industry members, and different audience members could evolve dramatically over the course of their careers.

Review of Sources

To demonstrate how markers of authenticity have shifted and evolved over the course of the twentieth century, a number of sources have been used. A substantial number of recordings and song lyrics produced by all of the selected performers were consulted. The use of recordings requires consideration of how available technologies shaped or limited the music’s performance. Additionally, the historical context in which a song was written and recorded is also vital to study, for this can illuminate much about the society and how people in that society consumed it. Such considerations can demonstrate a performer’s influence and contribution to the genre. For the purposes of this study, the songs which have been analyzed have been effective in demonstrating how these performers built upon earlier recordings, how

they were affected by their contemporaries, and how they inspired each other as well as emergent artists. Collectively this helps demonstrate how Canada's music industry and the country music genre have evolved over time. Sound and song lyrics in particular are valuable for the story that they tell. For the purposes of this study, sound and lyrics illuminate the type of performance image the artists were working to craft for themselves as well as what was fashionable with audiences in Canada at the time. Establishing the specific "meaning" of a song, however, is generally difficult because "meaning" varies based on who is performing and who is consuming the song. Songs are open to interpretation and this can make it difficult to come to solid conclusions regarding the performer's intentions and audience reception. Other source materials assist in filling this void while also further illuminating the goals and experiences of the performers examined within this study, particularly oral histories, autobiographies, and interviews.

This study has relied upon autobiographies written by Wilf Carter and Stompin' Tom Connors as well as biographies of Don Messer and Gordon Lightfoot which were endorsed by those performers. Country performers have a tradition of releasing these published autobiographies in order to establish their authenticity to industry members, other performers, and fans. Autobiographies are believed to strengthen the tie between the performer and audience by highlighting that they are relatable and not far removed from their fans. This also means, however, that performers have a motive to portray themselves in a certain light and emphasize specific aspects of their lives and careers while sweeping away elements which might lessen their country identity. If we are searching for their "actual" life experiences, this fact can make these publications difficult but because this study is concerned

with the “image” of authenticity these performers wished to portray, they are very helpful in understanding how these performers wanted to be seen. Interviews and oral histories share this concern. In all of these sources, things can be mis-remembered and of course the performer shares their own perspective. Capturing the performer’s projected identity is, however, why these sources are also of great value for this study. These sources have added to this study because they offer performers a voice and provide insight into their mentalities while contributing new information about their experiences within the country music industry and how they wished to be seen and understood.

Oral history and interviews, in some cases, were all that was available for certain performers. Earl Heywood, for example, never wrote an autobiography or endorsed a biography, and little interview material could be found in newspapers or magazines. Nevertheless, oral history interviews conducted by the North Huron Museum in the 1970s filled this void and provided valuable insight into his career. Additional material was sourced by interviewing his son, Grant, who was generous enough to share stories about his father and what it was like growing up with a singing cowboy. Alternatively, while Gordon Lightfoot was interviewed extensively throughout his career by media outlets, he has been reluctant to share personal details or truly open up about his life and career in an interview setting. His biography by Nicholas Jennings, however, provides this type of insight because Lightfoot supported the project and agreed to do a number of personal interviews with Jennings. Such sources have proven to be vital to this research, especially in trying to grasp how these performers constructed an image for themselves around the issues of rurality, masculinity, and “Canadian-ness.”

Material found in newspapers and magazines has highlighted how the genre has been perceived by critics and audiences over the course of the twentieth century. Articles focused specifically on these performers have contributed to this study's search to understand how they were depicted by the media. Publicity materials such as advertisements and fan souvenir booklets further reveal the narratives created about the performers. In examining *CKNX Barn Dance*, for example, no film or audio clips exist of the program but examining the show's publicity material indicates that the show's promoters wanted the show to be understood as a form of entertainment which had an "authentic" rural flavor.

This study has also attempted to consider the audience response to these selected performers whenever possible. Studies of country music have generally revolved around the industry and analyzing the audience has been largely ignored. Partly this is because little source material on listening audiences actually exists. For the purposes of this study, "Letters to the Editor" in various newspapers, for example, provided glimpses into audience opinions about the presence of country music on Canada's radio and television stations. In the case of the cancellation of *Don Messer's Jubilee*, newspapers provided a vital space for audience members to voice their protest and ensure that the CBC knew their discontent. Audience response was further supplemented by audience surveys conducted by CKNX Wingham and the CBC. The drawback of such material is that it only records the opinions of a sample of viewers, who, by virtue of how the samples were created, were from Canada's anglophone population. It also captures only short sets of time. The results that are available, however, have significantly contributed to this study's quest to consider audience opinion and understand who was

listening to these performers and how they responded to the image portrayed by each performer.

Finally, visual sources such as costumes, photos, and television footage demonstrate how these performers actively constructed “authentic” visual images of themselves or performance identities to associate themselves with the markers of country music’s “authenticity.” Adopting the genre’s attitudes, style of dress, slang – in short, the genre’s identity – validated them to their fan base. None of these performers went so far as to adopt accents, but the use of costumes was vital to their image and their efforts to connect with the genre’s audience. Earl Heywood was the only performer whose actual costumes were available and on display, and so photos and television clips were relied upon for the other performers. Significantly, the costumes accentuate the changes which occurred in the industry over time. Wilf Carter, for example, dressed as a cowboy with plain chaps, hat, and boots. Earl Heywood’s costumes were colourful and bedazzled, reflecting the rhinestone-encrusted rodeo wear that was popular following World War II. As an artist, Gordon Lightfoot was strongly associated with the pop-folk revival. His cowboy boots proved to be enough to position him as a cross-over artist with one foot in the folk camp and the other in country. He was a more bohemian cowboy with jeans and fringed leather jackets and vests, demonstrating that the signifiers of a “country” identity had widened dramatically and moved with fashion trends.

Collectively, all of these sources have provided a foundation for considering to what extent these performers forged a rural, masculine, regionally sensitive, Canadian identity for themselves within the context of a transnational musical genre. Additionally, these sources emphasize how these performers interacted with their audiences, how audiences responded to

these performers and their music, the industries which produced and sold their recordings, and the impact of broadcasters and government legislation.

Chapter Overview

The first chapters of this study examine the careers of Wilf Carter and Earl Heywood who both, in many ways, performed an imagined West, demonstrating how country music's western motifs circulated in different geographical regions. Furthermore, their careers highlight how audiences and performers alike can be identified with constructed traditions which hail from far-off places. Within this context, the examination of both performers brings up questions about how "Western" identities have been crafted and why and to what extent consumers of popular culture accepted these identities.

As Carter and Heywood show, singing cowboys authenticated themselves to industry members, other performers, and fans by performing their music in historically and regionally accurate ways. They further authenticated themselves by emphasizing their rural roots – often portrayed with a romantic gloss – and portraying a wholesome and approachable masculinity encompassed within the image of a mild cowboy. Focusing on the late 1920s to the 1950s, their careers were not heavily affected by the need to prove their "Canadian-ness," although these were questions with which scholars and fans would grapple in later years.

Carter's career took place within the context of the Great Depression, which had certain implications for the production and consumption of cultural products and how he fashioned his identity. Recording and radio technology heavily shaped his career and his use of cowboy outfits and repertoire found favour during this era when Hollywood's "singing cowboy" found great popularity. He got his start in Calgary, Alberta, and later found success in the United

States – going by the stage name “Montana Slim” – while maintaining an immense popularity across Canada. While he was from the Maritimes originally, many Albertans came to view him as belonging to that region. His use of real-life experiences worked to authenticate Carter to the industry and fans as they demonstrated his rurality and masculinity. The fact that he had been a *real* cowboy gave him authority to sing about the life of a cowboy. As a “singing cowboy” Carter blended fantasy and reality within the transnational patterns of country music to construct a seemingly authentic image of himself. In later years, Carter’s use of his real-life experiences led some scholars and fans to re-fashion his music into folk music, labelling Carter as the father of “Canadian” country music.

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, Earl Heywood created a cowboy persona which was theatrical and mirrored the trends emanating from Nashville. His sound was more polished and consisted of more instrumental depth and embellishment than Carter’s. The goal was to dazzle the audience with showmanship, and so he wore rhinestone suits, kept a horse for publicity purposes, and invented a ranch for the setting of his radio show. By examining Heywood’s career from the 1940s until the 1950s, we see the growth and many changes which occurred in the country music industry following the upheavals of World War II, particularly the rise of the “Nashville Sound” and the impact of rock-and-roll. Inspired by his American hero Gene Autry, Heywood was concerned with pleasing his local audience, which was heavily concentrated throughout southwestern Ontario, although he certainly performed beyond this region.

The idea that country music reflected a rural reality was becoming less important. Heywood had grown up on a mixed farm in Southwestern Ontario, far removed from ranching

and cowboys. He did not need to emphasize his rural back story as prominently to prove his authenticity, as audiences were less concerned that performers authenticate themselves through their real-life experiences. Proving one's authenticity was more about looking the part and connecting with the audience. Heywood's portrayal of masculinity, therefore, revolved around his wholesomeness and status as a family man, an image many listeners were familiar with. His authenticity was also connected to harkening back to something old, in an effort to soothe audiences who felt that their way of life was changing dramatically due to post-World War II conditions. Heywood was not overly concerned with categorizing his music as "folk," "country," or "popular," nor did he believe that a musician's nationality mattered. To Heywood, all country performers were bound together by the music they made and nothing else mattered. For the purpose of this chapter, the focus remains on Heywood's time at CKNX, then a privately-operated radio station located in the rural town of Wingham, Ontario. Heywood's career provides an opportunity to consider how American music and local preferences influenced his sound and performance style, and how the local audience responded to his country music radio programs. By focusing on an example from Ontario, this study extends the study of country music in Canada beyond the typical focus on the Maritimes and Alberta.

Chapter Four examines Don Messer and the popular CBC program, *Don Messer's Jubilee*. Valorized as an "authentic" piece of Canadian folk culture, many fans were shocked by the CBC's cancellation of *Don Messer's Jubilee* on April 14, 1969. Fans passionately protested the decision, arguing that it was an affront to audience tastes and "Canadian" values. With the program's reliance upon the fiddle and renderings of folk songs and dances, the program represented the "old-time" country music which had been popular in the years before World

War II. Folklorists deemed it to be “authentic” because the program appeared as a historically correct reading of rural life in the Maritimes. Unlike Wilf Carter or Earl Heywood, *Jubilee* did not feature horses or steers, but expanded the country music narrative to include folksy Maritimers. Messer’s construction of the “rural” was focused on the community. The show’s down-home folksy feeling rested on being amongst neighbours, not being alone on the range. Messer’s own image as a humble and modest family man, and an honest-to-goodness Maritimer, served to further authenticate *Jubilee* to audiences. The creation of an “authentic,” rural, down-home feel, had initially suited the CBC’s goals to provide audiences with “authentically Canadian” entertainment which was both wholesome and educational. *Jubilee*’s place on CBC television, first airing nationally in 1959, ensured that a majority of Canadians were exposed to this narrative. This access served to turn Messer and his *Islanders* into figures of national prominence and the values projected by *Jubilee* were accepted by many fans as being “authentically Canadian.” The program’s national success ensured that the fabricated narrative and image came to be understood as the “real thing.” By 1969, however, *Jubilee* had become outdated to many viewers and the entertainment industry more generally, reflecting the many social changes which had affected Canada over the course of the 1960s. To remain competitive, the CBC became significantly less interested in capturing an “authentically Canadian” folk experience, and instead wanted to foster a young, dynamic feel to attract the interests of the powerful youth cohort. While *Jubilee*’s cancellation was certainly not a pointed attack on traditionalism by the broadcaster, for many audience members the event came to symbolize the anxieties felt by citizens during a period of great change.

Chapter Five examines how Stompin' Tom Connors positioned himself as both a patriot and a rebel, a tension which he did not resolve, but instead found useful over the course of his career to prove his "authenticity." Connors' music had a rawness to it which set it apart from the performers above and the more polished country music of the late 1960s and 1970s. His clothing choices, public statements, interviews, publicity photos, and later his autobiography, all worked to position him as being an ideal speaker for Canada's "common man." The songs he penned often glorified "ordinary" life and involved male protagonists who worked hard, took pride in their labour, and affirmed their self-worth through their labours. This established Connors' portrayal of a heroic-working-class masculinity which was further solidified by his play upon "the rambler" trope, a figure with a long history in country music which typically disregarded social conventions. Within this framework, Connors' rurality relied upon symbols of folk culture and populist rhetoric. He sang about "real" working men in identifiable towns and a simpler era, free of the impacts of modernity. Such characteristics positioned him as an "authentic" country music star. Furthermore, his assumed authenticity enabled Connors to claim that he spoke for the nation when he argued that more needed to be done to support Canadian musicians. His "Canadian-ness" became pivotal to his career as he established himself as an industry outsider, claiming to reject the rules established by Nashville and Canada's broadcasters, and disparaging those in power who did not actively defend Canadian talent. This was manifested most vehemently in his loud cries that more needed to be done by the state, broadcasters – really anyone who had a stake in the music industry – to nurture Canadian performers and keep them within the nation's borders. In his mind, music and nationalism were irrevocably entwined. His message that Canada was worth singing about became influential to

industry members, other performers, and fans, because Connors always appeared honest, down-to-earth, and committed to his message. In a word, he always appeared “authentic” and this transformed him into a “Canadian” hero.

Lastly, Chapter Six examines the career of Gordon Lightfoot and his production of songs which appealed to listeners who understood the symbolism of Lightfoot’s many nature-based songs and longed for the revitalizing power of open spaces. His authenticity was connected to his sincere expression – his perceived honesty – in being able to express the tension between the rural and the urban, the romantic and the modern. Over the course of his career, Lightfoot supplemented his rich baritone voice with his guitar and band accompaniment to create a sound which had a lush and layered instrumentation. He became famous for his poetic lyrics, and his sound was smooth, polished, and produced to a high quality. Like Connors, his public image also revolved around his version of a “rambler” masculinity. While some songs spoke of modern realities, many of his songs celebrated encounters with Canada’s forests and waterways. His great ability to craft songs which played upon such cherished Canadian narratives transformed him into a highly celebrated, “authentically Canadian” performer. With his talent and success, he attracted much attention and his career was affected by the implementation of CanCon regulations. His “authenticity” was challenged at various points in his career, due to his own personal stresses, his celebrity status, and over-exposure on radio airwaves and at domestic award shows. He sometimes found it a challenge to balance his own version of “authenticity” – being able to do things his way – with the version of “authenticity” held by others who expected him to uphold the ideals of Canadian nationalism.

Chapter Two

Cowboys Wanted: Wilf Carter Becomes Canada's Singing Cowboy

On December 20, 1933, Wilf Carter arrived at RCA Victor's Montreal studio. He was twenty-nine years old and had spent years working in Alberta as a harvester and ranch hand, competing in rodeos, and training horses. Originally from Nova Scotia, Carter could not read music but had taught himself how to yodel and play guitar and had begun composing his own songs years before this monumental day in Montreal. Amidst the Great Depression Carter had found success on the Calgary radio station CFCN and working as a trail rider and cowboy entertainer with the Calgary Stampede and the Canadian Pacific Railway. He struggled to make ends meet, however, and when RCA Victor offered him train fare to visit their studio, he eagerly accepted and set out from his base in Calgary.¹

When he arrived, he met Hugh Joseph, the company's director of Artists and Repertoire, and recorded two original songs that day. First, *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby* combined the sounds and style of the era's increasingly popular American country music with lyrics which reflected his experiences working as a trail rider in Alberta's mountain ranges. The song established Carter as a gifted yodeler, emphasizing the wide-reaching influence of American country singer Jimmie Rodgers. Carter's unique "three-in-one" technique, which sounded as if his voice were echoing down a lonesome mountain valley, became known as an "echo yodel."² On the flip-side was *The Capture of Albert Johnson*, based on the real-life man-hunt for Johnson, known as "The Mad Trapper of Rat River," which had caused a media frenzy across

¹ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

² Jason Schneider, *Whispering Pines: The Northern Roots of American Music from Hank Snow to The Band* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2009), 21.

Canada in 1932.³ Hugh Joseph was impressed with Carter's distinct yodel and his extensive collection of original material which Joseph described as having "a 'homey' quality – a sense of sincerity and undertaking – that appealed to people of all walks of life."⁴ When Carter left the studio in Montreal that day, he was bound for New York, where he had been hired by the Canadian Pacific Railway to work as an entertainer on board its new luxury cruise liner, the *S.S. Empress of Britain*, not realizing that he had just cut a hit "hillbilly" record. *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby* became a best-seller, making it the first popular country music record by a Canadian performer.⁵ The recordings kicked Carter's singing career into high-gear and earned him a contract with RCA Victor's *Bluebird* label. Once signed, the company instructed him to do what he did best: go back to the foothills of Alberta and write more hit songs.⁶

Relying upon a simple sound augmented by his yodel, Wilf Carter blended together transnational country music patterns with his regional experiences in Alberta to create a mixture of fantasy and reality, a seemingly authentic blend to build his career upon. He further authenticated himself to industry members, other performers, and fans through his portrayal of a gentle and wholesome masculinity which was in keeping with the 1930s image of the sentimental cowboy. Furthermore, he emphasized his rural roots by refashioning his real-life experiences with farm and ranch work into a romanticized rural back story which suited fans

³ Causing a media frenzy in February 1932, Johnson became a fugitive from the RCMP after he injured an officer and later killed another. He evaded arrest for weeks, scaling the Yukon's mountain ranges. The RCMP eventually had to enlist the help of a bush pilot, Wop May, who was finally able to find Johnson's tracks from the sky. This led to a shootout with the RCMP resulting in Johnson's death (Schneider, *Whispering Pines*, 21).

⁴ Schneider, *Whispering Pines*, 21.

⁵ "Swiss Moonlight Lullaby," *Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame*," accessed January 15, 2018, <http://www.cshf.ca/song/my-swiss-moonlight-lullaby/>.

⁶ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

and industry expectations of authenticity. As his career developed over the 1930s, Carter's need to grapple with issues of "Canadian-ness" was not significant. In later years, however, others, including scholars and fans, fashioned him into the father of Canadian country music, positioning Carter as a legend in his own time. Wilf Carter's career effectively illustrates how Canadians responded to the sounds and styles of country music beginning in the 1930s. By examining his time with *The Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies*, the costumes he wore, his song lyrics, and autobiography, this chapter demonstrates that by living the fiction he created, he transformed himself into Canada's first country music star. Many listeners came to view Carter's music as "their own" and took to his smooth voice, yodel, and simple guitar accompaniment with great enthusiasm.

Canadians shared in a country music experience which originated in America and then spread quickly across the continent through broadcasters and consumers. Similar socio-economic systems, geographical proximity, and, for English Canada, a shared language, meant that as country music grew in popularity, it became a continental, not just a national sensation. Radio schedules printed in Canadian newspapers from the mid-1920s until the immediate post-World War II era demonstrate that most stations – influenced by their American neighbours – featured country music programming which showcased "old-time" fiddlers, "cowboy" singers, and some "hillbilly" comedians. Alternatively, many Canadians could tune-in directly to popular country music programs on American stations where signals entered north of the border. The musical styles of Canadian and American country were similar; artists relied on the fiddle and traditional jigs, reels, and square dances. In some instances, Canadian groups adopted costumes which reflected the region in which they were based. CFBO in Saint John, New

Brunswick, for example, hired *Don Messer and his Singing Lumberjacks* in 1929. The young Don Messer, not yet an icon of Canadian “old-time” music, wore plaid shirts and the lace-up boots associated with the men who worked in lumber camps in promotion photographs. Most groups, however, chose to adopt the cowboy look as Canada’s domestic country music industry quickly developed. It was on CFCN Calgary’s *Old Timers* program in 1929 that Wilf Carter’s career as a country music performer began.

Wilf Carter’s image and music demonstrate that the country music originating in Canada during these early years was romantic and largely sentimental, reflecting the broader influence of country music’s early super stars. Carter’s image and musical style clearly evolved from exposure to Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry. “Yodeling bluesman” Jimmie Rodgers, one of country music’s earliest and most influential stars, rose to fame in 1927. His famed blue yodel mixed with his hard-livin’ working-stiff persona inspired many male would-be performers to emulate this early hero of the genre.⁷ Carter mixed the early influence of Rodgers with the visuals and crooning vocal style of Gene Autry which had become popular in the early 1930s and made country music seem more sophisticated. Through his music and image, Autry had re-invented the saga of the cowboy and the West by building upon the pop culture cowboy of nineteenth century dime novels and minstrel shows and the images of the influential cowboy film stars William S. Hart and Tom Mix. A silent film star, William S. Hart had appeared in gritty and rugged westerns which had moralistic themes. By the early 1920s, however, the public was increasingly attracted to a new version of the movie cowboy epitomized by Tom Mix. Mix wore

⁷ See Jocelyn R. Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

flashier costumes and his films were more action-oriented. The plot lines featured clearly defined heroes and villains, and a wholesome, clean-cut cowboy with his faithful steed always saved the day. Autry, with his bright costumes, horse Champion, and a smooth, slick sound that was more like the era's popular music, successfully introduced this winning combination of image and sound to country music and audiences through his radio performances on WLS Chicago, recordings, and later, on film screens.⁸

Carter, like Autry, had been exposed to minstrel shows and dime novels about cowboys and the West. These past experiences led Carter to blend older notions about the cowboy and the West with new ideas to reinvent and romanticize the cowboy saga. Throughout his career, Carter emphasized that he had actually competed in rodeos, worked with cattle, trained horses, and lived in a bunkhouse. This authenticated Carter's image to both the country music industry and his listeners. His life in Alberta before he found fame on the radio was used to give his image an element of reality and position him as an authority on the life of a cowboy. It was an effective rural back-story that proved his rural pedigree. Carter's image and sound, which evolved from a mixture of broader industry trends and his regional experiences in Alberta, helped to create a mixture of fantasy and reality to build his career upon. Furthermore, the fact that Carter had been born and raised in Nova Scotia and had come to Alberta after reading dime novels about the West enabled him to be malleable in his image. He came to Alberta looking for work in this imaginary environment and had the freedom to pick which themes and mythologies he would work into his own performance image.

⁸ Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No.1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

Carter's career as a professional country music performer developed amidst the Great Depression when audiences were searching for strong masculine images in response to the way the era challenged men's traditional gendered roles as breadwinners. That a heavily romanticized, wholesome, clean-cut, and in many ways sentimental version of the independent cowboy became the most popular form of country music during the 1930s reflected the fact that audiences were heavily burdened by the economic conditions during the Great Depression, a time of devastating national and international economic crisis. While Canada had endured earlier recessions and depressions, scholars note that none caused such long-term effects socially, politically and economically as the one which lasted from 1929 to 1939.⁹ Historian Michiel Horn notes that a majority of Canadian families both on the farm and off had struggled financially during the 1920s, many living close to the poverty line. "For these people," he argues, "the Twenties had not roared." The conditions of the 1930s, however, were the worst most people had ever seen. The downturn lasted longer than anyone could have imagined, and it hit middle-class Canadians just as hard as working-class ones, taking away the population's sense of security.¹⁰ The collapse of the economy made it extremely difficult across the entire continent for men to fulfill their role as family breadwinners. Historian Lara Campbell has asserted that "the impact of unemployment on culturally defined notions of male pride" greatly complicated life and influenced how citizens responded to the crisis. What defined men as masculine certainly shifted over time, but for white, heterosexual men becoming a 'man' had

⁹ Lara A. Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁰ Michiel Horn, ed., *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1972), 14-15.

long been associated with the ability to work and to provide for one's family. The economic crisis of the 1930s, Campbell argues, "laid bare" the volatile association of "economic independence and masculinity, and the anxiety contained within that hegemonic definition of manhood."¹¹

For audiences facing the hardships of the Great Depression, the singing cowboy provided a form of escapist entertainment. It was "a character that represented the fantasies, desires, and ambitions of those who felt keenly the economic hardship" of the era and "offered hope and promise to those suffering the devastating effects of rural poverty, urban unemployment, and migration."¹² Within this context the singing cowboy became the most popular form of country music in the 1930s. When country music had first emerged as a commercial entity its performers had largely dressed as "hillbillies" or "rural rubes" and there had often been a comedic element to performances. The music had sounded rough with the twang of string instruments and high-pitched nasal voices. The rise of the singing cowboy in the 1930s provided a new and more widely marketable image for the country music industry.¹³ Importantly, this reinvention of the cowboy responded to the era's gender role tensions by constructing a masculine persona around a principled and sentimental version of masculinity. The sentimental cowboy was emotive yet still strong and heroic. In being sentimental the "singing cowboy" signaled to men and women that it was acceptable to express vulnerability (as the era's lack of work had made them). This version of the cowboy, however, also signaled

¹¹ Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*, 57.

¹² Stephanie Vander Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy and 'The She Buckaroo': Gene Autry, Patsy Montana, and Depression-Era Gender Roles," *The Musical Quarterly* 95 (December 2012): 208.

¹³ See Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

that men and women were to remain principled despite their circumstances. With a crooning voice, the cowboy mollified the concerns of the era with his myths of the West.¹⁴ It was within this context that Carter worked to create an appealing performance image for himself.

Carter's image as a "Western" cowboy who sang country music relied heavily upon his real-life experiences whereby he had come to Western Canada as a young man seeking adventure and had built a career for himself by moving back and forth between ranch work and performing as a singing cowboy. This interplay of reality and performance was emphasized by Carter and was regularly celebrated by the press, especially during the formative years of his musical career as he developed his claim to being an authentic country music performer. That he had been born in Port Hilford, Nova Scotia, was commonly touched upon, but newspapers relished the fact that he was a *real* cowboy who had been lured West by a sense of adventure much like the pioneers had been before him. In 1935, for example, an exposé on Carter's rise from cowboy to radio star published by *The Calgary Herald* noted that "he came West at an early age and worked for several years on a cattle ranch." It was "there on the open plains that he worked at and perfected his now famous 'echo yodel,' and learned to sing many of the old range songs." The article praised Carter for composing most of his songs himself, remarking that "the themes of his works invariably come from little episodes of his own experience or from dramas of real life in the West." The article concluded by commenting on Carter's intention to compete in that year's Calgary Stampede where he could "show the world" that he was still a "real cowboy."¹⁵ For all those who attended the annual Calgary Exhibition and

¹⁴ Vander Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy," 208-209.

¹⁵ "Hill-Billy Songs Bring Cowboy Fame," *The Calgary Herald*, June 8, 1935, 11.

Stampede, the event provided an opportunity for corporate and personal expressions of both the city and the province's "western" identity. It was a pivotal event for fashioning the public's popular conceptions of Western Canada and understandings of the region's "frontier" history.¹⁶ The fact that Carter participated and later sang about this event which shaped citizens' perceptions of "western-ness" would have further established him as an authority on cowboy life.

Carter saw his move West as a defining moment. In his 1961 autobiography, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, Carter explained that his life at home with his family ended abruptly when he was fifteen. He had begun skipping his father's sermons and after arguing about it, his father told him he was no longer welcome at home. He slept in ditches and barns until the farmer he milked cows for took him in. He never went home again and only stayed in touch with his mother.¹⁷ Now on his own, he bounced from place to place and labored to provide for himself. When he was about sixteen he began taking work in New Brunswick's lumber camps, earning twenty-dollars a month. He survived on bread and beans and read dime novels about the wild West in his bunkhouse.¹⁸ Around 1923, inspired by these novels, he joined a harvest excursion out to Alberta. "I got the urge from kinda readin' the novels about the cowboys and the West," Carter explained. "I heard of a Cape Breton excursion train that was leaving for Calgary so I made arrangements . . . and came west."¹⁹ He arrived in Calgary with only his knapsack. Like

¹⁶ Maxwell Foran, "The Stampede in Historical Context," in *Icon, Brand, Myth: The Calgary Stampede*, ed. Maxwell Foran (Calgary: AU Press, 2008), 7-8.

¹⁷ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 20.

¹⁸ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

¹⁹ "Wilf Carter Interview," *New Horizons Oral History Project*, 1973, Audio Cassette, Glenbow Museum and Archives (Calgary, Alberta), RCT 148.

other young men of his generation, Carter viewed the West with a dreamy-eyed optimism. Harvest excursions pulled West many young men who were curious about the region. While few of these men actually became “cowboys” and instead ended up doing more typical farm work, there was a desire to go West and emulate the cowboys they read about, listened to on the radio or watched on film.²⁰ “We went to Calgary and worked for the big farmers in the Alberta grain fields,” Carter recalled in his memoir. “This was a new life for me; for the first time I saw big teams of horses, eight or ten or twelve, hitched together to pull heavy equipment. I was fascinated . . . I liked my life in the harvest fields.”²¹

While popular culture mythologized and romanticized the cowboy, the real-life experience which Carter encountered was very different. In his memoir, Carter recalled the bitter cold that set in when threshing season began. The entire crew slept in a wheeled bunkhouse and would be up at five o’clock in the morning. “We removed only our shoes, taking even them in with us to keep them from becoming so stiff with the cold that we could not put them on in the morning,” he remembered. He even wrote optimistically about the freezing cold saying, “Our bunk shacks were often made of green lumber, which as it weathered left widening spaces through which I could see the stars and feel the sifted snow on my face.”²² Working on a variety of different ranches and farms over the years, he hauled grain, broke horses, split posts, and tended cattle, alongside his fellow ranch hands. Working throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, meant that Carter was not a part of the long-haul drives in which

²⁰ See, Gordon Hak, “The Harvest Excursion Adventure: Excursionists from Rural North Huron-South Bruce, 1919-28,” *Ontario History* LXXVII, no. 4 (December 1985): 247-265.

²¹ Wilf Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy: Montana Slim from Nova Scotia* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961), 23.

²² Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 24.

cowboys moved cattle great distances across the plains, work for which they were famous. This practice had died out by the early twentieth-century.²³ Emphasizing these early experiences with hardship, physical labour, and a desire for adventure, both Carter and the media moulded these experiences into a narrative which provided Carter with a masculine image that was hard-working, wholesome, and strong, with a romanticized back story. They legitimized him as an authentic representative of cowboy life to both the country music industry and his listeners.

For a performer like Carter who was still developing his career, radio offered an opportunity to fine fame, money, and legitimize his style and talent. Carter's initial foothold in the country music industry came from the new opportunities for income and exposure offered by radio and the singing cowboy's growing popularity during the late 1920s and 1930s. While working as a ranch hand and harvester, he had become the main attraction at local dances held weekly in various small-town church halls and school houses. Carter was inspired by this success to audition for the Calgary radio station CFCA in 1925. It was an unsuccessful audition, but it directed Carter toward the rodeo circuit where he could both compete and entertain. Working as a cowboy entertainer and competing in various events at the Calgary Stampede later brought Carter to the attention of the city's other radio station, CFCN. Carter joined the station's Friday evening country music program, *The Old Timers*, in 1929, which broadcast from atop the *Calgary Herald's* downtown building. The station's powerful transmission equipment meant that its programs could be heard by all those within a radius of approximately 300 kilometres, reaching into parts of British Columbia and Saskatchewan.²⁴ "To keep myself going I

²³ See Warren M. Elofson, *Cowboys, Gentlemen & Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

²⁴ "CFCN Broadcast Range," Glenbow Museum and Archives (Calgary, Alberta), CFCN Fonds, box 20.

worked on a farm, sweating out the time until each Friday came and I could go into town and do the work I really loved,” he professed in his memoir.²⁵

The Rocky Mountain tourism industry also saw his talents as a tourist draw and legitimized him as a “singing cowboy.” His success across CFCN’s broadcast region had not ensured his financial security. He still struggled to earn enough to make ends meet and he relied on his various skills and personal connections to find additional employment. In 1932, for example, in the slump of the Great Depression, Carter wrote to Pat Brewster, the Banff-based wilderness outfitter, lamenting that because CFCN could not pay him “enough to live on” he had decided to join a harvesting crew. He still hoped though that he might find more radio work. “Do you suppose,” he asked Brewster, “I could get a chance at Banff this winter with the CPR broadcasting. I would appreciate it very much if you could find out for me, as you have a better chance of doing that, than I have. The station here cut me to five dollars a week so I had to quit.” He signed the letter, Wilfrid C. Carter.²⁶ His inquiry brought him work in Banff as a trail packer with the Brewster company and his radio broadcasts drew the attention of Dr. John Murray Gibbon, the publicity agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway and its various tourism offshoots. Gibbon pegged Carter as a perfect candidate for the position of “Trail Ride Musician” with *The Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies*. The group was sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Railway, working to give campers an immersive “Wild West” experience.

As a “Trail Ride Musician,” Gibbon offered Carter the chance to quite literally be a singing cowboy for the group’s annual excursion. More importantly, however, the experience

²⁵ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 39.

²⁶ “Letter to Pat Brewster,” The Whyte Museum and Archives (Banff, Alberta), F.O. (Pat) Brewster Fonds, f 18 – f 20.

gave him the opportunity to perform the saga of the cowboy and the West before an audience looking to experience that fantasy. *The Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies* was formed in August 1923 by Gibbon and a collection of his friends and their wives, most of whom were members of North America's social elite. The group included the editor of *Country Life* magazine, Reginald Townsend; Harry Beach Clow, the President of the Rand McNally Map Company; and Chicago artist Reinhold Heinrich Palenske. They annually set out on horseback together for extensive outback excursions in the Rocky Mountains. The group spent its days riding the backcountry trails, and set up tents, cooked over an open fire, and entertained themselves with singing in the evenings. Inspired by this experience, the group founded *The Order of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies* so that other recreational riders could join them. The CPR saw a golden opportunity to attract tourists to their hotels in Banff and Lake Louise soon began sponsoring the organization. The excursions offered a chance for tourists to experience the wilderness on horseback, much like the mythologized cowboy. As the organization grew, a number of the region's prominent figures became involved including J.B. Harkin, Canada's first "Commissioner of Dominion Parks," and botanist and explorer Mary Schaffer. The group also developed a working relationship with the Brewster brothers Jim, Bill, and Pat.

Working in this environment, Carter could actively shape his cowboy persona based on the themes and myths the tourists most enjoyed. Carter came on his first trail ride in 1932. During the day, he worked as a packer, handling the group's equipment and luggage, while in the evening he led the entertainment and orchestrated a campfire sing-a-long. Illustration 2.1 features Carter surrounded by a number of young female participants emphasizing that Carter

was fashioned as a non-threatening, sentimental cowboy, an image appreciated by women. Carter was a hit and the group hired him back every summer. Carter claimed in his memoir that he made about one-hundred dollars in tips on each trip.²⁷ By the 1934 trail ride, the group set out from the corral at Game Warden's Cabin at Leancoil, and Carter was the chief musician. Carter perched himself on a fence post and sang to the riders as they headed out on a four-week excursion.²⁸ In the serenity of the Rocky Mountains, surrounded by members of North America's social elite, Carter found great inspiration for his cowboy image and many of the songs he would later record including *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby* and *My Little Yoho Lady*.²⁹ In keeping with the CPR's portrayal of the Rocky Mountains as a type of "scenic theme park" participants went away dazzled by the untamed mountain scenery and the joys of camp life.³⁰ For Carter, these trail rides certainly demonstrated that he could succeed monetarily and professionally by living the part romanticized fiction, part real-life version of the cowboy he had crafted for himself.

Alongside these pivotal experiences, Carter had to supplement his cowboy image with appropriate costumes. During the 1930s, some actors and singers chose to be working cowboys, portraying a "work-hard-play-hard" attitude towards life in keeping with the image and sound created by Jimmie Rodgers. Their costumes were simple and reflected what real working men actually wore. Other performers played the cowboy as an unconquerable loner; a

²⁷ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 54.

²⁸ "Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies, Bulletin No. 37," (Printed October 1934), The Whyte Museum and Archives (Banff, Alberta), Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies Collection.

²⁹ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 53-54.

³⁰ Daniel Francis argues that tourists were a major source of revenue for the CPR and so much "effort went into presenting an image of the West, and particularly of the Rocky Mountains, that would attract visitors" (See, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 25.)

man of few words who rode the range alone. This persona was especially perfected on film in the late 1930s by John Wayne, who also tended to wear simpler costumes. Owing to the influence of performing cowboys such as Gene Autry, the idea of a rhinestone cowboy was also becoming increasingly popular. In this vein, the cowboy was portrayed as shaven and clean-cut, wearing neat outfits which were made by rodeo tailors. These outfits were flashier than the working cowboy's and had more colour and styling. The rhinestone cowboy was well-dressed so as to impress the audience. While figures like William S. Hart and Tom Mix had been very masculine cowboys, who were strong, well-built men with square jaws, Autry's version of the cowboy portrayed a gentler hero archetype.³¹

Upon first glance, Carter's costume choices do not appear to place him squarely within the realm of the rhinestone cowboy. Carter was never a "flashy" dresser. He appeared in *Maclean's* magazine in 1935, for example, wearing batwing chaps with simple adornment, a plain dark shirt, coloured necktie, with cowboy boots and hat. Referred to as "Calgary's Yodelling Cowboy" who "vibrates over Western airwaves to the delight of radio fandom," Carter's outfit was relatively simple, but it was still neat and tidy.³² It is possible that in the midst of the Great Depression, Carter did not have money to spend on elaborate costumes but he did choose to maintain this more simple outfit, even when he began working at CBS in New York, around 1935. Others encouraged him to follow the trend and adopt a more flashy and colourful costume. "I was told that I should change my attire to something more colourful," Carter recalled. He insisted, however, that he was "just an ordinary cowpoke singer" and

³¹ George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1*, 138.

³² "Calgary's Yodelling Cowboy," *Maclean's Magazine*, October 15, 1935, 20.

wanted to be himself not “a movie cowboy.” “They gave up after that,” Carter claimed, “I still stuck to my old western clothes and was comfortable and felt myself. I think the people liked me that way.”³³ This recollection in his memoir suggests that Carter chose to authenticate his performance in a more down-to-earth and notably “honest” manner.

Along with his costumes Carter had a very unassuming, non-threatening appearance which suited the era’s portrayal of a gentler, romantic cowboy. He always appeared clean shaven and photographs and promotional materials featured him with a quiet smile. In interviews, he exuded an approachable, “happy-go-lucky” personality, and while his outfits were simple, he was always well-dressed. In these ways Carter portrayed the more fantasy-based rhinestone cowboy. Like other performers who adopted this media persona, he exuded warmth and sincerity within an image that was non-threatening so as to attract both female and male fans, who sought this type of respectable, reassuring, and approachable image during the Great Depression.³⁴ He was not the gun-slinging hooligan or the aloof loner and his many love songs emphasized that men could express their feelings without appearing weak. Carter’s persona did not vary dramatically over the course of his career. His costumes, persona, and later, the publication of his autobiography, demonstrate that he performed both a sentimental and principled form of masculinity to complete his cowboy image.

Carter also performed a principled masculinity, best displayed by the self-presentation offered in his autobiography of a hard-working, law-abiding man. His 1961 autobiography, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, chronicled his career up to that point in time. As historian Pamela Fox has

³³ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 60.

³⁴ George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1*, 139.

argued, autobiography became “one of country music’s most cherished components” because it enabled performers to establish their authenticity to both the industry and their fans.³⁵

Autobiographies could be useful tools for measuring a country performer’s honesty and their adherence to the markers of the genre such as rural origins and familiarity with hardship. Like many of his contemporaries, Carter’s autobiography emphasized his hardiness and rural roots as he claimed he had been “born with a tooth” because he knew “life would be rough.”³⁶ Carter’s status as a married family man who, with hard work and an adherence to Christian morality, had risen above the poverty he had been born into, demonstrated his principled masculinity, defined by his morally upright and wholesome character.

His autobiography also confirmed his eligibility to be an authentic country music performer because he fit within what the industry and fans were looking for at the time. He demonstrated that he was grateful for his good fortune and the support of his fans. This established his humbleness and emotional honesty. He continually emphasized the gratitude he held for his fan base, underlining that his goal had always been to perform well for their benefit. Reflecting on his early days at CBS, for example, Carter wrote that he had given his new job, “all I had, singing my heart out and loving what I was doing.” The reward came “when the fan mail began to roll in [and] I was a happy guy . . . I worked all the harder wanting to please my new unseen audience, and time went by faster because of my devotion to my work.”³⁷ His reflections upon his live performances further stressed his gratitude. Again during his time at CBS, the station sent him across the United States as part of the country’s Artists’ Service,

³⁵ Fox, *Natural Acts*, 114-115.

³⁶ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

offering free shows to bolster public spirit during the 1930s. Highlighting his approachability, he recounted telling the crowd at one of these shows that he didn't "want to be on the top of the ladder . . . only one rung up, so I can reach down and shake the hands of all you wonderful people!" Not willing to make such an assumption himself, he concluded that these appearances must have been successful since the station kept sending him out to perform. Ultimately, though, Carter's memoir focused on what a pleasure it was for him to do such performances. "I was truly grateful for the privilege of being there before them . . . I loved them all . . . they were wonderful people, well-mannered, quiet and friendly!" he wrote of the audience.³⁸

Carter's portrayal of himself also set him apart as being less commercialized, and more sincere than most popular music stars. Claiming to work for his fans separated Carter from the commercialized popular music industry, which was driven by profit. His assumed authenticity was confirmed by his humble attitude, by his claims that he desired to please his fans alone, and had experienced hardship and rural labour. By portraying himself as a humble and approachable man, Carter created for himself an image which attracted fans throughout the course of his career. "Why is Wilf so popular, so acclaimed by the public, so cheered wherever he goes?" an anonymous fan asked *Country Song Round-Up* magazine readers in 1953. "The big reason of course is the voice," the author argued, but it was also because "none of his popularity ever went to his head . . . he's the same guy he ever was and treats everyone as his equal."³⁹ Others simply praised the fact that "he looks like a cowboy and talks like one."⁴⁰

³⁸ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 61-62.

³⁹ "Montana Slim/Wilf Carter," *Country Song Round-Up* no. 21 (1953), 22.

⁴⁰ *Scrapbook of Hillbilly and Western Stars*, The Glenbow Museum and Archives (Calgary, Alberta), CFCN Fonds, box 20.

Collectively, the persona Carter crafted for himself fit within the parameters of country music and likewise the sound and style of his music also followed these patterns. In general, Carter's songs used simple chord changes and his echo yodel, rather than guitar playing, offered ornamentation. Like most singing cowboys of the era, his songs told stories with little hidden meaning and drew upon common themes such as life on the range, sweethearts, and the family (mothers in particular). He was very good, however, at working material which pertained to Western Canada into his lyrics. By incorporating places, people, and events familiar to Canadians, but especially Albertans, many of Carter's songs demonstrated how regionally-based references could be blended with wider transnational patterns.

Singing cowboys during the 1930s consciously combined the seemingly more genuine cowboy folk music with popular Tin Pan Alley styles to help authenticate their "western" personas. This was done by creating ballads which supposedly built upon the oral practices of cowboys living on the open range yet used the tropes of popular music created in Tin Pan Alley to embellish and romanticize images of the West for their listeners.⁴¹ Carter achieved this by referencing people, places, and events he was familiar with due to his years spent in Alberta. This would later be used as an example of his "Canadian-ness." "Anywhere working men have been isolated for periods of time in particular circumstances, a tradition of song by or about those men and their work develops," argues historian Douglas B. Green.⁴² In the nineteenth-century, the rough conditions of cowboy work inspired many to write long, first-person

⁴¹ Vander Wel, "The Lavender Cowboy," 209. The idea of a cowboy oral culture and cowboy folk songs is best exemplified by John Lomax's 1910 collection, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, which provided material for western stars to draw upon.

⁴² Such repertoires, for example, developed amongst sailors, loggers, railroad workers, boatmen, and miners (Douglas B. Green, *Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 13).

narrative poems which focused on their work. Men who could sing transitioned this poetry to song, using the popular songs of the era for inspiration.⁴³ Many of these cowboy songs portrayed a stoic cowboy who dealt as best he could with the hardships of the job. It was song writers working in New York's Tin Pan Alley during the early decades of the twentieth-century who blurred the lines between cowboy folk songs and the popular cowboy songs which began appearing on record, film screens, and radio airwaves. Tin Pan Alley writers dropped the cowboy and the western frontier into songs about romance and masculine virtues, thereby moving the cowboy genre closer to the aesthetics of popular music.

Examples of Carter's regionally focused songs include *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby*, *My Little Yoho Lady*, *The Capture of Albert Johnson*, and the songs he wrote about Pete Knight, a hero of the Calgary Stampede. Both *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby* and *My Little Yoho Lady* tell tales about a cowboy's sweetheart and were inspired by the time he spent with *The Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies*. *My Little Yoho Lady*, for example, developed during one of these trail rides when he met a young female school teacher from Minnesota. While walking along in the moonlight close to Yoho Falls, he was inspired to write the song.⁴⁴ The lyrics create a love ballad which celebrated both his sweetheart and the landscape, creating a very romanticized and glamorous image of the Yoho Valley:

I'm longing tonight once again to roam
 In a beautiful valley I could always call home
 There's a girl I adore and I'm longing to see
 In a beautiful Yoho valley

My little Yoho lady-o

⁴³ Gillian Turnbull, "Authorship and Nostalgia in Contemporary Cowboy Repertoire," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 59.

⁴⁴ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 53-54.

And I'll sing you a song while the moon's rolling low
 My little Yoho lady-o
 In a beautiful Yoho valley

My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby similarly tells the story of a cowboy riding through the mountains under the moon, on his way to see his sweetheart who lives in a swiss chalet. *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby* features Carter's echo yodel and both songs feature simple guitar accompaniment and singing style which reflected the stylistic parameters of country music in the 1930s.

The Capture of Albert Johnson played upon the division between "good guys" and "bad guys" which had become pivotal to the cowboy saga. While Carter's song drew on current events, it also relied upon a historical theme. The story of "The Mad Trapper" veritably harkened back to the days of the Yukon gold rush, positioning the Mounties as being up against a fugitive gun-man. Albert Johnson was a mystery man; no one knew for certain if that was his real name or how he had come to Canada. Johnson conveniently filled the role of the violent stranger threatening the peace until the Mounties saved the day. Again, Carter used a simple singing and guitar style to tell the tale of "The Mad Trapper," who had led the Mounties on a four-week long manhunt in February 1932:

T'was up in that far north country
 Lived a trapper thought insane
 Two of his redskin neighbours
 To the police sent a complaint

Two redcoats of the Mounties
 Who are known for their fame
 Went north to find the trouble
 That the trapper was put to blame

They journeyed out to his cabin
 No harm was meant you know

But the trapper with his six gun
He laid a Mountie low

In a ballad format Carter's song relays the tale of this epic man hunt which led the Mounties through the wilderness as Johnson scaled the Yukon's mountain ranges to evade capture. Johnson's tale ended with a shootout resulting in his death, because, of course, the Mounties "always get their man," and the "good guys" win.⁴⁵

Carter's use of popular narratives and figures familiar to Western Canadians also extended to his songs about Pete Knight. Carter befriended Pete Knight, a cowboy from Alberta famous for his bronc-busting skills, while competing in the annual Calgary Stampede and Exhibition in the late 1920s. Carter immortalized his friend in *Pete Knight, King of the Cowboys*. Here, Carter told the story of Knight's transformation into a famed rodeo champion. Carter asked his audience to "listen awhile to my story bout' a lad from the wide-open plains who has won a great name the world over Pete Knight, King of rodeo fame." Tying Knight to the hard work of a cowboy, Carter sang of Knight's efforts "out 'mongst the broncos" which kept him busy for Knight "took a real love for the saddle, like most of us boys in the West." Carter's ode to Pete Knight certainly romanticized the life which he led but also created a folk ballad which memorialized the cowboy experience. While Knight had been happy to help Carter work on his own rodeo skills, he encouraged Carter to give up the dangerous sport of Bronc riding altogether and focus on his music instead.⁴⁶ Knight himself was killed during a rodeo event by a

⁴⁵ Wilf Carter, *The Capture of Albert Johnson*, RCA Victor/Bluebird, 1934, Wilf Carter, *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby*, RCA Victor/Bluebird, 1934, Wilf Carter, *My Little Yoho Lady*, RCA Victor/Bluebird, 1937.

⁴⁶ Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 31.

horse named Duster on May 23, 1937. His funeral was the largest Calgary had ever seen and it again inspired Carter to write about Knight, this time producing *Pete Knight's Last Ride*.⁴⁷

Moving at a slower tempo than *King of the Cowboys* and featuring the mournful sound of the Hawaiian steel guitar, Carter lamented the loss of his friend:

It seems my whole life's full of heartaches and sighs
Always something to make me feel blue
For I just lost a pal like a brother to me

Seems I can't believe that its true
We were old pals on the prairie
Many times we have rode side by side
Never dreamin' a bronco would throw him
And Pete Knight would take his last ride⁴⁸

Carter's use of this regional content endeared him to Canadian fans while the songs fit in terms of sound, style, and theme within the wider parameters of country music. In this he created a base upon which Canada's domestic country music industry would develop, keeping Canadian performers largely focused on the wholesome cowboy.

The importance of this regional content came to be quite significant in the 1960s and 1970s when folklorists and scholars, in search of what they considered "authentic" "Canadian" music, began to argue that Carter had in fact constructed Alberta's only example of English-language folk music due to the regional content contained within his songs. For the purposes of his career, Carter had proven his rurality and honesty in performance to industry members and fans. Others were now actively fashioning Carter into an authentically Canadian performer who represented part of a long "folk" tradition within the nation. It is clear from these arguments

⁴⁷ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

⁴⁸ Wilf Carter, *Pete Knight, King of the Cowboys*, RCA Victor/Bluebird, 1937.

that “authentic” “folk” music was understood as a category of music which was defined as “belonging to a particular ethnic, regional or historical group, or music which employs ‘traditional’ or acoustic instrumentation.”⁴⁹ Carter’s music was viewed as “belonging” to Albertans because he used regional references. In 1962, the folk song collector Edith Fowke examined the distribution of cowboy songs across each region of Canada and found that American pioneer and cowboy songs were widespread in the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. “This is to be expected,” she argued, because the Canadian West was settled later than the American states and many homesteaders crossed the border when new land became available. Additionally, many of the first ranches in Canada were stocked by cattle driven up from Texas and there was an influx of migrant railroad workers to the region as well. All of this activity brought in new cowboy and pioneer songs which were adopted into the local repertoire.⁵⁰ Untangling the exact origins of these songs was difficult, Fowke insisted, because the songs were changed over time under the “Canadian influence.” Fowke found that some cowboy songs were likely originally composed in Canada and had been taken to the United States, demonstrating, “that the process of song transmission has gone both ways across the border.” Fowke had no doubts, however, that the vast majority of such songs came to Canada from the United States.⁵¹

Fowke was anxious to prove that musicians – highlighting Wilf Carter as a significant example – had used older material to create a commercialized form. The familiar cowboy song,

⁴⁹ Gillian Mitchell, *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945-1980* (Cornwall, GB: Ashgate, 2007), 8.

⁵⁰ Edith Fowke, “American Cowboy and Western Pioneer Songs in Canada,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Oct. 1962), 252.

⁵¹ Fowke, “American Cowboy and Western Pioneer Songs in Canada,” 256.

The Dying Outlaw, for example, had been sung in Western Canada since before World War I. In earlier versions, the song's villain, who sealed the cowboy protagonist's fate, was changed to a "red-coated foeman" in reference to the Canadian Mounties' famous red uniforms. In 1940, Carter recorded his version, *The Two-Gun Cowboy*, which changed the villain to a "red foe," referencing the popular media storyline and more transnationally understood "Cowboys vs. Indians" narrative. He also added an extra stanza about the doomed cowboy's love interest which had not originally appeared.⁵² Both of these inclusions would have better suited the popular cowboy mythology of the era in which it was recorded, making it suitable for both American and Canadian listeners, and, therefore, more commercially viable. By tracing Carter's use of an older repertoire, Fowke created a narrative which linked Carter to folk traditions and authenticated his work as "Canadian." Following Fowke's assertions, in 1978 historian Tim B. Rogers asserted that the fragments of Alberta's folk music traditions had been "transformed," and could be found instead in commercial cowboy songs. Once this transformation occurred, he argued, "folklorists and collectors would not be particularly interested in collecting them."⁵³ Rogers, like Fowke, used Carter as the prime example to support his argument. In Rogers' estimation, by making a commercialized version of an older song, Carter's version had become much more wide-spread, setting a standardized version, something new due to the growth of mass communication technologies.

The notion of Carter as a folk artist, however, is problematic. Any form of folk art is typically thought of being produced in a closed community by someone who is untrained and

⁵² Fowke, "American Cowboy and Western Pioneer Songs in Canada," 253 and T.B. Rogers, "Is There an Alberta Folk Music?" *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 6, no. 1 (1978): 5.

⁵³ Rogers, "Is There an Alberta Folk Music," 4.

ignorant of how commercialized art forms are produced. It is seemingly formed in isolation free of any outside influence.⁵⁴ While the country music industry during the 1920s and 1930s heavily emphasized the music's folk roots, the music was a commercialized form from its time of origin. Even the genre's most unpolished early recording artists were often professional or semi-professionals who performed for an audience while adding to their repertoires from traveling medicine and vaudeville shows.⁵⁵ While Carter had taught himself to sing, yodel, and play guitar, his music demonstrates the influence of external commercial forms, such as travelling vaudeville shows, and other country music stars, such as Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry.⁵⁶ He sought a professional career for himself on the radio and by 1935 he had a recording contract with RCA Victor. Trying to untangle the "folk" from the "country" in Carter's music is impossible.

What is more significant is that the public came to believe by roughly the 1960s and beyond that Carter was a folk artist. Carter's music came to be viewed as representing Western Canada, Alberta especially, and therefore as belonging to the region because many of his songs told stories about everyday events, tying him to the balladeer tradition. Gordon Lightfoot, for example, himself a vital component of the North American folk revival of the 1960s, supported this idea and viewed Carter as more than a cowboy entertainer: "Really, he is a folk artist in a lot of respects, a balladeer who told stories and [is] highly recognized in the country music

⁵⁴ Morton, "Ordinary Affects," 84.

⁵⁵ Green, *Singing in the Saddle*, 16.

⁵⁶ His Memoir, for example, discusses his childhood encounter with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a traveling vaudeville show which he saw perform in Canning, Nova Scotia. It was at this show that he heard "The Yodeling Fool" perform and was inspired to learn how to yodel himself (Carter, *The Yodelling Cowboy*, 17-18).

field.”⁵⁷ The effort to position Carter as a folk singer by scholars such as Fowke and Rogers, and the fact that subsequent country music artists such as Gordon Lightfoot accepted that position, reflected the larger changes that were happening in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s and that since the 1950s, Carter’s image had evolved.

In 1940, Carter and his wife, Bobbi, were badly injured in a car accident in Montana. It would take Carter almost ten years to recuperate to the point that he wanted to perform again. By the time he re-entered the country music scene in the early 1950s, the industry had grown and changed substantially. Yodeling was going out of vogue as country music attempted to refashion itself around a more polished image and sound. The cowboy and his music remained popular, but the importance of the nuclear family meant that country music began revolving around a more domestic masculinity as men’s status as fathers and breadwinners was of greater importance.⁵⁸ To re-enter the business, Carter began performing with his daughters – Sheila and Carol – touring as *The Family Show with the Folks You Know*, throughout the 1950s in both Canada and the United States. Carter’s family-friendly show suited the domesticity of the post-war era and the principled and sentimental cowboy image he had constructed for himself easily shifted into a type of father figure or role model for a new generation of fans.

Touring across Canada during these years turned Carter into a household name across the entire nation. Gordon Lightfoot has asserted that at that time when he was young, Carter had a major radio presence. Hearing him on the radio regularly attracted many listeners to

⁵⁷ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

⁵⁸ Diane Pecknold, “I Wanna Play House: Configurations of Masculinity in the Nashville Sound Era,” in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, eds. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 87.

country music, including Lightfoot and Stompin' Tom Connors. Both of these significant performers have noted his influence upon them.⁵⁹ In 1971, Connors celebrated that influence with his song, *Wilf Carter Tribute* on his *My Stompin' Grounds Album*. Attempting his own yodel, Connors underscored Carter's cowboy style and continued influence as an important figure in Canadian country music:

When he sang, he'd play guitar, tellin' stories that were true
For the songs that he wrote, were always about people that he knew
Just the plain and simple cowboy, with that old familiar grin
Now the message of my story won't be hard to understand
And I think I speak for every hardcore country music fan
I still love to hear Wilf Carter singing the cowboy songs
And Wilf can still yodeleyaee any time he wants for me⁶⁰

For many Western Canadians, Carter inspired regional pride. They had come to consider him their representative. He sang about Western Canada to all Canadians and the ethos of the cowboy, not the sod-buster, had come to symbolize the region to many Eastern Canadians.⁶¹ Carter's success as a radio and recording artist, which earned him fame across Canada, the United States, and further afield – particularly Australia – positioned him as a vital figure for Canada's domestic country music industry.⁶² He maintained his simple and straightforward singing and guitar style and continued to yodel.

In the media, it was Carter's legacy and fame across all of Canada which became the major point to emphasize. Carter's new-found status as a legend of country music was explored

⁵⁹ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>. Also see, Stompin' Tom Connors, *Stompin' Tom and the Connors Tone* (Toronto: Viking, 2000).

⁶⁰ Stompin' Tom Connors, "Wilf Carter Tribute," *My Stompin' Grounds*, Boot Records, 1971.

⁶¹ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

⁶² Ibid.

by journalist Jack Scott, who covered many of Carter's live performances throughout the summer months of 1950 for *The Ottawa Citizen*. Calling Carter an "indestructible phenomena in Canada," Scott argued that "anywhere in Canada . . . it is almost impossible to go through a day without hearing the plaintive baritone of Mr. C [and] any one of the 300-odd sentimental ditties he's written and recorded." Scott relayed that he had witnessed over 4,000 fans in Amherst, Nova Scotia, wait in line for hours to see him perform and that in Ottawa he was mobbed by fans. In Winnipeg, the audience erupted into a great cheer when he began to sing *My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby*. In Scott's opinion, Carter had become for audiences more than just a cowboy singer but a Canadian country music legend. Carter agreed with this assertion, telling Scott, "a lot of people think a cowboy singer is anybody who puts on a big hat and a pair of high boots, but it's sincerity that counts in the long run." In Carter's estimation, it was the fact that he had worked as a cowboy himself and now owned a ranch in Alberta which made audiences sit up and listen. "When I write my songs and when I sing em' I'm tellin' about real experiences I know. Heart. That's what does it," Carter argued.⁶³

Carter's position as a fan favourite was further dissected by journalist June Callwood in *Maclean's* magazine in 1951. The article featured a photo of him strumming his guitar and singing to his horse wearing simple western wear. In a shirt decorated with steer horns and white pipping, he looked neat and friendly, every bit the approachable singing cowboy. The article emphasized that he was a hit with audiences and able to draw large crowds across Canada with sentimental songs "in praise of mother, daddy, home, that blue-eyed sweetheart,

⁶³ Jack Scott, "Yodellin' Cowboy," *The Ottawa Citizen*, August 4, 1950, 36.

and the range.”⁶⁴ While he could not be considered the most handsome, nor the best singer of all time, Carter’s ability to connect with his audience was deemed his trademark characteristic alongside his impressive yodeling skills. Callwood praised Carter for his ability to make “the audience feel he is sincerely delighted with them,” arguing that “the bulk of his following is middle-aged people who are sentimental, or unsure, or lonely. He has a way of expressing his feeling for them.”⁶⁵ The article stressed that Carter was “the strangest singing cowboy in the business” for “he actually *was* a cowboy once.”⁶⁶ “I don’t like to knock other boys in the business,” Carter told Callwood, “but Roy Rogers comes from a farm in Ohio and Hopalong Cassidy never rode a horse until they started cranking the cameras on him.” I “really rode the range,” he reasoned, implying that this made him more authentic than a number of his peers. He disparaged the fact that some Canadians were “passin’ themselves off as Texans” by using southern accents “you could hardly understand.”⁶⁷ “Carter is disgusted with movie cowboys who stride the prairies with young cannons in their holsters,” Callwood wrote. He explained that “real cowboys don’t wear guns,” arguing that in the seven years he had “punched cattle” he “never saw a cowboy with a gun, except maybe a rifle in a saddle holster.”⁶⁸

Such comments from Carter and his own emphasis upon his sincerity demonstrate that Carter was working to create space for himself within the changing country music scene. By the 1950s he would have been considered a singer from an older generation. To compete with up-and-coming performers, Carter portrayed himself as being more authentic than younger singing

⁶⁴ June Callwood, “The Singing Cowboy from Nova Scotia,” *MacLean’s Magazine*, December 1, 1951, 24.

⁶⁵ Callwood, “The Singing Cowboy from Nova Scotia,” 25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

cowboys who adopted accents and drew attention to their six-shooters. By playing upon his real-life experiences, Carter created the perception that he was rooted in tradition, that both he and his music were more authentic because of his sincerity and life experiences. He overlooked the fact that he had relied upon the fantasy of the cowboy saga during the formation of his career in the 1930s and in later life happily accepted others' fashioning of him as a legend of Canadian country music.

Wilf Carter lived the fiction he created, and this served to authenticate him to both fans and the country music industry. He authenticated himself to industry members, other performers, and fans through his portrayal of a gentle, wholesome, and principled masculinity which was in keeping with the 1930s image of the "sentimental" rhinestone cowboy. By refashioning his real-life experiences with farm and ranch work into a romanticized rural backstory, he further fulfilled industry and fan expectations of "authentic" "rural-ness." Of course, such images did not remain static and they shifted at various points in his career to serve different purposes and contexts.

In the 1960s Canadian nationalism was in full swing, and questions of national identity were of concern for politicians, intellectuals, and artists. The expansion of cultural institutions by the federal government gave Canadian cultural producers the freedom and finances to create *their* version of a distinctly "Canadian" culture.⁶⁹ Positioning Carter as a folk artist helped Alberta's cultural producers grapple with the province's – indeed the entire country's – increased modernization and the rising importance of nationalistic narratives. Arguing that he

⁶⁹ See Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

was a folk artist gave him seemingly more significance than being simply another singing cowboy. This distinction distanced Carter from the influence of American culture at a time when Canadian cultural producers emphasized the unique attributes of Canadian culture. To venerate Carter as a folk artist was to position him as an example of Canadian originality and marginalize American cultural influence. Like Carter's glamorized West, it was a narrative constructed to serve a specific purpose. With time, Carter's fame dwindled and his style of simple music and yodeling went somewhat out of vogue. Yet, his influence upon Canadians had been entrenched and he remained a beloved figure amongst audiences. In 1985 he was inducted into the Juno Awards Hall of Fame. Accepting the award, he doffed his white Stetson to his audience and with his trademark humble attitude he closed by giving thanks, saying, "you've really been great to a fella called Wilf Carter."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc>.

Illustration 2.1 Wilf Carter playing guitar with Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies. Circa, 1934. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff, Alberta. V484/NA66-2036, George Paris Fonds.



Illustration 2.2 Wilf Carter at the Calgary Stampede, 1967. Source: *The Vancouver Sun*, courtesy Joyce Tebbs.



Chapter Three

A New Twang in Town: Earl Heywood and the Barn Dance Radio Broadcast at CKNX Wingham

Every Saturday night at eight o'clock, CKNX listeners tuned in for the weekly edition of *CKNX Barn Dance*, broadcast out of Wingham, Ontario. A travelling program which had been on the air since 1937, *CKNX Barn Dance* completed a broadcast circuit throughout central Ontario, stopping in cities, towns, and villages, and putting on a memorable live show which combined elements of the familiar rural barn dance and traveling variety entertainment into a rehearsed radio production. Featuring a number of regional musicians, square dance callers, and fiddling champions, fans looked forward to when the show would roll into their hometown. Those lucky enough to get a seat were treated to a ninety-minute live performance of popular country music numbers, comedic interludes, and a real live hoedown. Following the radio broadcast, chairs were cleared away, fiddles and guitars were re-tuned, and the audience danced to jigs, reels, and country tunes. Whether listening at home or in a community auditorium, *CKNX Barn Dance* gave listeners a chance to kick their heels up each week. Leading a number of these tunes was Earl Heywood, who became a regular on the program in 1946.

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, Earl Heywood created a theatrical cowboy persona which reflected what was popular in Nashville. His sound differed from Wilf Carter's in that it was more polished and had more instrumental layering. The goal was to dazzle the audience with showmanship, as the simple sounds of country music, popular before World War II, were decreasingly fashionable. Heywood's efforts to authenticate himself to industry members, other performers, and fans reflected changes to the cowboy image. Increasingly, the idea that country music reflected reality was becoming less important. Heywood's portrayal of masculinity revolved around his wholesomeness and status as a family man. He still drew on his

rural back story to prove his authenticity, yet audiences were now less concerned that performers authenticated themselves through their real-life experiences. Proving one's authenticity was increasingly more about looking the part and connecting with the audience. It was also about harkening back to something old, in an effort to soothe audiences who felt that their way of life was changing dramatically due to post-World War II conditions. The upstanding, heroic, and wholesome cowboy provided reassurance during an era of great change. It also inspired pride, for while Heywood's audience members had no real experience with places like Texas or ranch life, cowboy iconography offered them an empowering ideal which inspired pride in their lived rural experience. While this imagery did not reflect their rural reality, audiences appreciated Heywood's down-to-earth qualities and in that connection he gained authority to speak for them. Meanwhile, a growing urban audience idealized cowboys and country music entertainment as the antithesis to all they disliked about modern, urban life. Rurality was heavily romanticized as something more "authentic" than urban modernity. In Heywood's own estimation, it was essential that he authenticate himself as a country music performer by following the standards set by Nashville. He did not believe that distinguishing himself as "Canadian" was important. Country music, in his mind, formed its own community and the CKNX listener community was vital to his success. The music itself linked industry members, performers, and fans together into an organic community, and nationality had little to no role to play in this.

Following World War II, changes occurring within the country music industry in the city of Nashville increasingly became significant for all country music performers as they developed their image and sound. Adhering to the Nashville scene helped performers authenticate

themselves as country music performers. The many changes which were occurring in country music caused an aesthetic splintering. The rise of “rockabilly,” which blended country with rock-and roll appealed to teenagers but was too overtly sexual for many listeners. The more polished “Nashville sound” offered a more wholesome and refined aesthetic and the popularity of this form contributed to Nashville’s rise as the centre of country music. “Music Row” emerged during this period as a developed commercialized music centre with state-of-the-art recording facilities, licensing agencies, and representatives for all major record labels. Both industry members and performers worked to fashion a new professional image for themselves free of the genre’s earlier association with hillbillies and rusticity.¹ As the rise of rockabilly and the Nashville sound demonstrate, the Nashville scene was not a cohesive unit stylistically. Many performers tried to create a middle-of-the-road sound and style which would sustain the flavor of country music within a commercially appealing framework that enticed the masses. Country music continued to be a transnational phenomenon and for Canadian performers like Earl Heywood it was a balancing act to decide which trends to follow and incorporate into their own sound and style while demonstrating their overall adherence to the Nashville scene.

Increasingly, country performers became concerned with “crossing over,” meaning, country singers and musicians increasingly wanted to reach beyond country music’s typical fan base and attract fans who tended to prefer popular music. Many industry members and performers became focused on keeping the music’s rural flavor but refining it to attract more listeners.

While the mixing of pop and country was not new, this insistent emphasis upon reaching the

¹ Diane Pecknold, “I Wanna Play House: Configurations of Masculinity in the Nashville Sound Era,” in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 87.

pop charts had never so strongly dominated the industry before.² This reflected the fact that audiences were pluralized, not one collective group. Listeners were divided by their individual tastes and country music stakeholders wanted to widen the genre's reach. Such goals affected all country music performers, even those performing in small towns like Wingham, Ontario. While this "cross-over" did begin to happen with more consistency in the late 1940s, it meant that country performers had to move away from older country forms and change the stylistic structure of their singing and instrumentation. For example, western swing, which blended country with the sound and style of swing music, became popular and singers like Marty Robbins, Al Terry, and Jim Reeves adopted quasi-pop styles and a crooning style of singing.³ Additionally, it was argued that if country singers modified their instrumental accompaniment, they might attract a wider audience. Fiddles and steel guitars, for example, should be replaced so that the urban, pop audience would not be deterred by such unrefined rural instrumentation.

The country industry and performers were facing the impact of rock-and-roll and vinyl records during these years. Like country music, rock-and-roll was built upon a number of musical forms, but the influence of rhythm-and-blues, borrowed from the African-American population, was especially obvious.⁴ In the early years of rock's development, it was a highly contentious phenomenon and flourished largely because of the era's rise in "youth culture" during the 1950s. "Teenagers" used music as an identifier and rallying point to separate themselves from older generations. The rise of rock-and-roll was also made possible by the

² Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 246-247.

³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

transformation of teen record-buying habits. In America and Canada, the experience with the genre's rise was much the same.⁵ For the first time, "teenagers" made up their own unique group and they benefitted from a post-war prosperity that gave them greater buying power. They had disposable incomes which they spent on entertainment and recreation, such as listening to music. This coincided with advances made by the record industry, which enabled it to grow substantially. The introduction of 45 rpm singles and long play records which could be played on better sounding stereo equipment made for a more enjoyable listening experience. Additionally, records had become more affordable with the introduction of polyvinyl chloride. "Vinyl" records were cheaper to produce and more affordable than the original phonograph records which had been made of shellac. Furthermore, households before World War II would have owned only one radio set and possibly a gramophone, which meant that a musical overlap would have existed between listeners of various ages as they shared this equipment and listened to music and programming together. By the mid-1950s, however, the mass production of inexpensive transistor radio sets and record players meant that youths could listen to whatever they wanted on their own devices.⁶ Many youths were choosing to listen to rock-and-roll and country music performers took notice.

The influence of rock-and-roll on country music can be seen in the rise of "rockabilly," which blended country with rhythm and blues. Influential rockabilly artists included Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Buddy Holly, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The style attracted teenagers who were not regular listeners of country music and the style carried over well into

⁵ Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

popular music. No country entertainers before these rockabilly performers had exuded such raw, masculine appeal and rockabilly became synonymous with uninhibited emotionalism. Male performers were defined by their brash masculinity and female performers were fierce and assertive. The music was fast-paced with high energy.⁷

As a radio star navigating these developments during these years, Heywood had to consider his audience, which consisted largely of families living on farms or in growing urban areas such as Kitchener and London. The emotionalism and sexuality of rockabilly would not have suited this population but a more wholesome and family friendly approach, similar to the Nashville sound, did. In the post-war era, the demographic which CKNX served was primarily white farm families with religious ties to Protestant churches. According to the 1941 *Canada Census*, Huron County – home to Wingham – boasted a population of 43,742. Out of this total, 36,782 people identified the British Isles as their place of racial origin with the majority, 15,762, being English in origin.⁸ Furthermore, 22,432 people identified themselves as members of the United Church, while the Presbyterian church claimed 7,809 people and the Anglican church, 5,167 people.⁹ Agriculture constituted the largest occupation in the county; for those over the age of fourteen, 9,199 males and 128 females were employed by this sector.¹⁰ The makeup of Huron County's population reflected the general characteristics of Ontario's farm population during this era. Out of a total population of 3,787,655, Ontario's farm population was calculated

⁷ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* 245-251.

⁸ Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1944-1950). Outside of this British majority, 5,108 claimed to be of German racial origin, 1,183 French, and 320 claimed the Netherlands.

⁹ *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*. 3,873 were listed as being members of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁰ *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941*.

at 704,420.¹¹ Seventy-eight percent of all farms were privately owned and operated.¹² Historian Royce MacGillivray who studied Ontario's culture, argued that the province's population, especially farmers and the rural populace, believed in the Victorian values of duty, virtue, frugality, and respectability and valued family above all else.¹³ CKNX's audience, therefore, was generally conservative and family-oriented.

Heywood sought to create an image and sound for himself which would authenticate him to this audience as well as the country music industry more generally. To achieve this, he drew inspiration from Gene Autry, whom he had grown up listening to on his family's farm near Exeter, Ontario. Heywood had been born on March 12, 1917, and was raised on a mixed farm with cows, chickens, and hogs, where he fed the livestock, milked the cows, and harvested hay. He embraced country music, in part, because from a young age he was exposed to the genre as it emanated from the family radio. He was "drawn to the wholesome, good guy image of the cowboy" and felt that though he had grown up on a mixed farm, he could identify with the figure of "the cowboy out on the range and singing on the fence."¹⁴ While he liked music generally, he felt that he had a voice best suited to the "cowboy" music of the era and he identified with the performance style with which it was associated.¹⁵ He learned guitar and how to sing the popular songs of the era while on the farm. He learned how to read music when he became a member of the Exeter Brass Band at the age of eighteen and performed at Fred Funk's Variety Show in the nearby beach town of Grand Bend. In 1946, following a successful

¹¹ *Eighth Census of Canada*, 1941. Ontario's total rural population was calculated at 1,449,022. The category of "farm population" was meant to separate persons who lived on a farm from the "rural, non-farm" population.

¹² *Eighth Census of Canada*, 1941.

¹³ Royce MacGillivray, *The Mind of Ontario* (Belleville, Ontario: Mika Publishing Company, 1985), 49-52.

¹⁴ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

¹⁵ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

audition, Heywood joined the cast of *CKNX Barn Dance*. While the *CKNX Barn Dance* had always been popular with listeners, it was during the late 1940s that the show significantly flourished. The number of entertainers who joined the show grew substantially and it became a major country music attraction for the region, welcoming a number of prominent country performers as guests, including Wilf Carter, Gordie Tapp, and Tommy Hunter.

Despite the era's debate over the use of instruments like the fiddle and steel guitar, Heywood did not abandon these instruments. He fashioned himself after Gene Autry by personifying the rhinestone cowboy who was honest, morally up-right, clean shaven and well dressed. He reflected on Autry's influence upon him later in his life, stating that he had "made very much an idol" of Autry.¹⁶ Fashioning himself along the lines of the fantasy-based rhinestone cowboy meant he also built upon the domestic trends Wilf Carter had established, but Heywood followed the post-war Nashville emphasis upon flashy, rhinestone-encrusted costumes and used a more layered instrumentation than Carter had. Heywood relied upon a band for his performances which often included steel and acoustic guitars, accordion, multiple fiddles and a bass. He also consciously shaped the sound of his music and his image to suit the romanticized and glamorous image of the cowboy and the West which had been constructed during the 1930s but was being reshaped to suit the context of the post-war era. For Heywood, it was less about proving that he had truly experienced cowboy life and more about projecting an entertaining fictionalized image of the cowboy.

Sociologist Richard A. Peterson has argued that in order for country artists to be accepted by fans and their contemporaries, they first had to "authenticate their claim to speak

¹⁶ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

for the *country* identity.” To do so meant that artists demonstrated their adherence to conventions of the genre with their sound, lyrics, and promotional materials, and by wearing signifiers such as cowboy boots and hats.¹⁷ So, while Heywood himself had never worked as a cowpuncher, his songs using western iconography tied him to a familiar and popular entertainment tradition which authenticated him to listeners and the industry more broadly. In an era when the family was believed to be the centre of society, much of country music remained heavily focused on the topic of sweethearts, parents, and the home. Heywood aimed to produce clean entertainment, arguing that “true country fans like love songs, ballads and story songs . . . and they can’t stand it when you trample on the values of home and family.”¹⁸ This preference for family-friendly entertainment and Nashville’s influence can be seen by examining Heywood’s *Serenade Ranch* program.

Serenade Ranch was modeled after Gene Autry’s 1940-1956 radio program, *Melody Ranch*. From 1946 to 1953, Heywood hosted *Serenade Ranch*, which aired every Thursday afternoon. Heywood was joined by a skilled group of musicians who accompanied him with fiddles, steel guitar, accordion, and bass. Occasionally his wife Martha also sang. Audience research conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on the listening habits of those who lived within CKNX’s broadcast range found that 77% of all listeners tuned in at noon, when farm work halted for lunch. They listened to CKNX’s *Farm and Home* program, and the

¹⁷ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 218-219.

¹⁸ “Interview with Earl Heywood,” *The London Free Press*, October 4, 1989, B2.

Toronto market reports, and then took a few minutes for some entertainment, provided by Heywood and the Serenade Ranch gang.¹⁹

Every episode introduced the performers by verbally invoking western imagery. Heywood declared to his audience, "Once again the bunkhouse doors swing wide . . . for a fifteen-minute jamboree . . . Earl Heywood and all the Serenade Ranch Gang are on hand to bring you the songs you like best: just plain, good old Western-style melodies."²⁰ Autry's *Melody Ranch* always opened with a performance of *Back in the Saddle Again*; likewise, Heywood opened his program with his composition, *Sing Me a Song of the Saddle*. While Autry declared, "I'm back in the saddle again, out where a friend is a friend, where the longhorn cattle feed," Heywood applied a similar template with imagery depicting the cowboy as a man free to roam and at home in wide-open spaces:

Sing me a song of the saddle and the clear blue sky above, it's clear it's where I love to
be cause it's where a man is free, sing me a song of my love
Sing me a song of the saddle and the plain I love to roam where God and man are one
while the work is being done, sing me a song of my home²¹

Once the show was opened, audiences were treated to covers of popular country numbers and instrumental fiddle or square dance tunes. A surviving episode of *Serenade Ranch* from 1953 featured performances of the 1946 western swing hit, *You Can't Break My Heart*, a cover of Gene Autry's *Cowpoke Pokin' Along*, and the cowboy spiritual, *Roll Along Jordan*, which was a reworked version of the slave song, *Roll Jordan Roll*, which had been popularized in the 1930s by country performers Sons of the Pioneers. The episode also featured a square dance number,

¹⁹ "Radio Listening and TV Viewing in an Ontario Farm Area: A study of farm uses of the broadcasting media in the Wingham area in the Winter of 1958," CBC Audience Research Report, Ottawa.

²⁰ Earl Heywood's "Serenade Ranch Radio Show, 1946-1953," CKNX, nd.

²¹ Earl Heywood's "Serenade Ranch Radio Show, 1946-1953," CKNX, nd.

fiddled by Ward Allen and Mel Levigne.²² With this variety, *Serenade Ranch* successfully emulated the larger network versions of radio barn dance variety programs.

Also thrown into the mix were Heywood's own original cowboy compositions, which reflected the era's rising Nashville Sound with their smooth sentimental quality. While Heywood had no real association with cowboys and the plains of Texas, he used the romanticized saga of the cowboy and the West to compose songs which could easily fit within the patterns of country music. His composition *While the Wagon Wheels of Texas Roll Along*, for example, featured a cowboy on the plains of Texas reveling in the fulfillment found in life as a cowboy:

I'll be singing in my saddle 'hind a herd of Long Horn cattle
While the wagon wheels of Texas roll a-long
We'll have beans and coffee that's strong
Oh the West has always given us a life that's worth while
While the wagon wheels of Texas roll a-long²³

Other original compositions such as *The Queen of Cherokee* told the story of a First Nations woman living "in an Indian town of Cherokee" while the cowboy spiritual *Ridin' Down the Trail of Glory* told the story of a cowboy at the end of his days. These "western" narratives were interspersed with a number of sentimental love songs such as *I'll Tell the World I Love You* and *There's a New Love, True Love in my Heart*. Additional compositions picked up on religious themes of virtue, redemption, and love and loss, possibly reflecting the more conservative and religious make-up of his audience. His song *The Road of Life*, for example, told listeners that "the road of life" is "a good road with some places bad, and it's strewn sometimes with much

²² Earl Heywood's "Serenade Ranch Radio Show, 1946-1953," CKNX, nd.

²³ Earl Heywood's *Song Book No. 1, Canada's No. 1 Singing Cowboy* (Toronto: Canadian Music Sales Corp. Limited, 1948), 3-5.

sorrow” but “it’s the way of life, not what you make it, for God hath decreed it to man, to labour, suffer and sorrow and mourn, it’s a part of the Master’s great plan.” Furthermore, nestled amongst these biblical themes and calls to accept both the good and bad that life handed you, it was assumed that because life is trying, the cowboy – and by extension the audience – would be rewarded with a place in the divine hereafter. “If you listen you’ll hear sweet music of Gabriel and David of old” the song concludes, “Can you sing the new song with the marching throng, on the streets that are now paved with gold.”²⁴

Of course, none of Heywood’s original compositions reflected the daily experiences of his listeners, particularly the regular routine of family or farm work. Heywood’s lyrics about being back in the saddle, out on the range, or sleeping in the bunk house, conjured up a romantic, even exotic, image for listeners in Southwestern Ontario. Unlike the cowboy, free to roam, Ontario farmers were tied to the routine of mixed-agriculture and by the 1940s they had larger dairy herds to milk twice a day and were replacing their horses with tractors. Indeed, the post-war era in general was a time of major change for both rural and urban areas across the country and brought significant changes to communities like Wingham. While family farms continued to dominate Ontario’s agricultural sector, small farms increasingly faced hard times while others expanded their operations becoming more capitalized, mechanized, and scientific.²⁵ This often meant taking on large amounts of debt. It was also a period of increased government intervention through the introduction of marketing boards and the rise of

²⁴ *Earl Heywood’s Song Book No. 1, Canada’s No. 1 Singing Cowboy* (Toronto: Canadian Music Sales Corp. Limited, 1948), 12-13.

²⁵ See for example M.A. Tremblay and W.J. Anderson, eds., *Rural Canada in Transition* (Ottawa: Agricultural Economics Research Council of Canada, 1966), Tony Fuller, ed., *Farming and the Rural Community in Ontario: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) and Henry Epp, *Agriculture in Southern Ontario* (Don Mills, Ont.: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1972).

agribusiness. Farmers were actors in all of these developments and helped stimulate change themselves, but it was not always easy managing such rapid change. Other transformations were occurring. The population of Huron Country grew slowly in comparison to urban centres such as Toronto. The 1941 *Canada Census* and the 1961 *Canada Census* demonstrate that Huron County's population grew from 43,742 to 53,805, an increase of 10,063. In comparison, York County which then encompassed Toronto, grew from a population of 951,549 in 1941 to 1,733,108 in 1961, an increase of 781,559. While Ontario's rural areas were not devoid of growth, urban areas were expanding quickly, and this was rearranging the province's structures of power and influence during these years of change. The post-war period signaled a significant decline in the total rural population and the actual number of farms in Ontario.²⁶

Heywood's music provided solace to an audience facing such immense changes. While Heywood's music certainly did not reflect the audience's reality, it provided comfort by harkening back to something which seemed familiar and authentic. Furthermore, Heywood's cowboy entertainment offered audiences a way to assert themselves and find pride in their way of life, which seemed to be drastically changing. Even though the iconography of the cowboy and the West was largely unrelated to their way of life, country music sung by cowboys had come to symbolize values which the audience imagined were essentially "rural" and by

²⁶ Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1944-1950) and Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Census of Canada, 1961* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1962-1964). The size of Ontario's rural population did not change as dramatically as has long been assumed. The 1951 *Canada Census* changed the definition of "urban" and "rural." An "urban" place became defined as any place with a population over 1,000. This definition, however, gave the impression that Ontario's rural population had dropped much more dramatically than it actually had. As the predominant size of rural towns in the province ranged between 1,000 to 5,000, and most of these towns were rural and based in agriculture, this segment of the population was incorrectly counted as "urban" (Anthony M. Fuller, ed. *Farming and the Rural Community in Ontario: An Introduction* (Toronto: Foundation for Rural Living, 1985), 14).

engaging with this entertainment the audience could feel like they were tapping into their rural roots. Heywood's cowboy portrayed a masculine image which many would have seen as a "traditional" rural masculinity. While audience members were re-framing rural masculinity around the values of business efficiency, speed, and proficiency with machines and new technologies, older conceptions of masculinity, namely rugged individualism and the mastery of nature, continued to appeal to the audience's sense of nostalgia.²⁷ Therefore, the cowboy, as portrayed by Heywood, appealed to audiences as it was a comforting and familiar image. Heywood styled himself as a strong and sentimental cowboy who was also a wholesome family man. Many of his CKNX promotional photos and biographical details, for example, spoke of his dedication to his wife Martha and their children.²⁸ Such emphasis demonstrated to listeners that Heywood fulfilled his duties as a father and breadwinner, as was expected of his male listeners. Heywood's cowboy expressed his emotions without appearing weak or effeminate. In these ways the audience could relate to the cowboy image Heywood portrayed as they saw personal qualities they wished to portray. An important differentiation though was that the cowboy was free to roam the open range. Such a strong, masculine image would have appealed to men who were confined to family farms that were becoming increasingly capitalized and associated with debt. The cowboy represented a previous time when farming seemed to be less complicated. There was comfort to be found in that idea. Based upon the number of women who wrote into the station to praise its country programming, this image clearly appealed to

²⁷ Wilson, "A Manly Art," 157.

²⁸ See for example: *Earl Heywood's Song Book No. 1, Canada's No. 1 Singing Cowboy* (Toronto: Canadian Music Sales Corp. Limited, 1948), 17, 28.

female listeners as well.²⁹ The cowboy was a relatable figure encased in a form of escapist entertainment.

Heywood's cowboy image was further constructed through his use of costumes which suited the country music image generated in Nashville. By ascribing to these patterns, Heywood connected himself to the genre's "authentic" theatrical tradition. Examining the history of western wear, designer Michelle Freedman and journalist Holly George-Warren note that during the first decade of commercial country music, artists had performed in their Sunday-best or in farm work clothes, such as bib-overalls, or had dressed as "hillbillies" with broken straw hats. In the mid-1930s this began to change due to the growing popularity of WLS Chicago's *National Barn Dance* and its lead performers, Gene Autry and Patsy Montana. The popularity of Autry and Montana's version of a heroic west inspired other artists at WLS to begin dressing in western shirts with piping and appliqués, fringed vests, split skirts, decorated batwing chaps, belts, cowboy boots, and hats.³⁰ With the greater dissemination of American popular culture in the 1930s through recordings, radio, and movies, however, the elaborate outfits worn by figures like Autry and other singing cowboys were gradually accepted by country singers. "And, of course," George-Warren and Freedman argue "as the popular artists embraced this western style, so too did amateur and wannabe entertainers, as well as their fans."³¹

In promotional shots, Heywood was generally featured in tailored pants and a western-styled shirt which incorporated some type of piping, embroidery or appliqué. His outfit was

²⁹ CKNX, *CKNX Monthly Almanac*, (May 1942), 8.

³⁰ George-Warren and Freedman, *How the West was Worn*, 104-105. Freedman and George-Warren remark that the notion of musical groups dressing with a western theme had started much earlier than this, highlighting the example of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* which included a cowboy band that traveled with the show from 1883 until about 1916.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

completed by a cowboy hat and boots. Heywood believed that in order to be an entertainer he had to dress like one, and part of his success came from his dressing the part of the singing cowboy. Heywood was particularly enamored with the “Nudie” suits which were becoming all the rage with country music entertainers.³² Named after their designer, Nudie Cohn – dubbed the “Dior of the Sagebrush” – Cohn began making waves in the late 1940s with his elaborately jeweled and embroidered suits. Suits with western iconography such as wagon wheels, cacti, steer horns, and flowers had been available before this, and popularized by performers such as Gene Autry and Patsy Montana. Cohn, however, introduced rhinestones. When Cohn first began, his prices were affordable, and he would collaborate with the individuals ordering these outfits, thereby ensuring that these articles of clothing were unique and reflective of the wearer’s personality. Cohn also offered a “first suit free policy” which attracted many stars, and performers such as Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams who further helped popularize the style. In the “Nudie” suit, “the mythologized cowboy was taken to the extreme” during an era when country artists were increasingly concerned with showmanship and a desire to impress fans by moving away from the “working” cowboy and farm attire to wearing some of the most dazzling entertainment apparel ever seen.³³ This elaborate western wear inspired confidence, acting like a uniform for performers that transformed them into glittering country stars.

³² Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017. Dressing the part had always been a pivotal element of radio entertainment. Photographs for promotion were often taken while artists performed in the studio. For Heywood, even though he was a radio performer, the station had a large window on Wingham’s main street where fans could stop and watch him perform in the studio. Additionally, because *CKNX Barn Dance* was performed before a live audience, always looking the part was pivotal to Heywood’s performance persona.

³³ George-Warren and Freedman, *How the West was Worn*, 6, 119. Over the late 1940s, 1950s and into the 1960s, he dressed many a country singer and celebrity from Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, to Hank Williams, John Wayne, Elvis Presley, and even Bob Dylan.

Such costumes were just as much a part of the performance as the music but of course for Heywood finding a store in Wingham which sold such dazzling western wear was impossible. “Most of us would usually buy our stagewear in Toronto or other cities at special western wear stores or even by mail order,” Heywood remembered.³⁴ But more often than not, Heywood’s custom outfits were stitched together by his wife, Martha, who would keep an eye out for unique materials and designs. Martha knew that Heywood liked the elaborate “Nudie” suits and copied them. Luckily for Martha, she was not the only home seamstress putting western outfits together at the time. As a result of the era’s cowboy craze, western sewing patterns complete with embroidery and appliqué transfers had begun to appear in the late 1940s. These patterns enabled home sewers to re-produce the style of expensive rodeo tailors like Nudie Cohn, but it wasn’t long before the demand for western wear inspired manufacturers to produce “wash-and-wear” outfits for the whole family.³⁵ Thanks to Martha’s efforts, Heywood later told interviewers, he had “always felt like a million bucks” whenever he walked onstage “in fancy new duds,” noting that “the audience took notice too.”³⁶ Such costumes worked to transform the performer into a larger-than-life character while also connecting the performer with the country music image being generated in Nashville. Through this lens, the wild outfits donned by each performer were in fact statements of individualism, but also statements of belonging for such outfits aligned performers with the conceptions of country music.

³⁴ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

³⁵ George-Warren and Freedman, *West was Worn*, 146.

³⁶ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

Heywood even went so far as to adopt a horse whom he named “Hero” in order to fully connect himself with the values of the cowboy and country music in the minds of his audience. According to his son, Grant, Heywood believed that he needed a horse because Roy Rogers had Trigger and Gene Autry had Champion. So, he adopted “Hero” from his father-in-law. “He didn’t ride him a whole lot,” Grant remembers, “it’s just that he needed Hero for publicity.”³⁷

Addressing his fans in an introduction to his first published song folio, *Earl Heywood’s Song Book, No. 1, by Canada’s No. 1 Cowboy*, Heywood drew attention to “one of the members you don’t hear on the air, but who is naturally a part of *Serenade Ranch*,” his “faithful horse, Hero”:

Just like his name, he really is a wonderful horse to ride. Hero loves the feel of the saddle . . . and he likes a good song too. The way he perks his ears and whinnies when I get through singin’ a real good song, is Hero’s way of tellin’ me, that he sure likes the song I’m singin’.³⁸

As audiences were increasingly losing contact with farm animals, especially as tractors were replacing horses, Hero reminded them of a by-gone era. Hero was given a personality and a role to play so that as a team Hero and Heywood matched the visual representation of the singing cowboy which appealed to audiences. Over the time that *Serenade Ranch* aired, even the stage set was constructed to evoke the program’s adherence to country music’s “authentic” theatrical practices by giving listeners the impression that broadcasts were made from an actual ranch. The fiction proved quite convincing as one day there was a knock on Heywood’s door to his cottage home in Wingham. It was a man from Oshawa who was a fan of *Serenade*

³⁷ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

³⁸ *Earl Heywood’s Song Book No. 1, Canada’s No. 1 Singing Cowboy* (Toronto: Canadian Music Sales Corp. Limited, 1948), 21.

Ranch. “Are you Mr. Heywood?” he asked. “Yes.” “Where’s the *Serenade Ranch*?” “This is it!” Heywood smiled.³⁹

The use of Hero and the *Serenade Ranch* stage set further emphasizes that it was not only barn dance performers who actively portrayed themselves as authentic representatives of country music as the programs as a whole were broadly marketed as “authentic” presentations of rurality. It is important to note that by the post-war era, cowboy and western iconography had come to symbolize something “truly rural” even though most listeners did not live that life. It reflected the consumption of popular culture more generally. When barn dance programming first began appearing on the radio in the early 1920s, the shows relied upon a re-fashioning of the traditional practice of hosting and attending barn dances. The programs offered up a variety of tunes including those which audiences might tap their feet to at home. There was a long tradition of barn dances and rural house parties throughout communities across both the United States and Canada. In Canada, during the nineteenth-century, dances were commonly held following a barn-raising bee, offering gatherers a chance to relax after a long day of work. Importantly, these events reflected the economic and social integration of early Canadian farm families.⁴⁰ The tradition of gathering for barn dances and house parties continued well into the

³⁹ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

⁴⁰ As Catharine Anne Wilson has convincingly demonstrated in her work on Ontario work bees, the bee was “not only an economic and social exchange but also a process through which shared values and a collective identity were created and communicated.” Young people in particular appreciated the opportunity to flirt and dance with each other, being on the look-out for a potential partner in matrimony. In hosting a barn raising bee, for example, the family was responsible for repaying their neighbours with a good time and they were well aware that if they failed to provide enough food, games, and dancing, their reputation would suffer and neighbours would be reluctant to help again. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that a barn dance was not a trivial matter, but an important tradition which contributed to the social life of the community and was intricately entwined with the system of exchange labour among farm families (“Reciprocal Work Bees and the Meaning of Neighbourhood,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (September, 2001): 431-464).

twentieth century, at the very least up until World War II.⁴¹ Tying the barn dance program to an idyllic rural past was a calculated decision made by radio executives to expand the marketability of these programs to both rural and urban audiences. This narrative overlooked the fact that certain rural dwellers – such as Quakers, Mennonites and Methodists – were morally opposed to dancing. Furthermore, work bees and barn dances were not always peaceful as there are many recorded examples of excessive drinking and fights breaking out, leading to injury, even death.⁴² Such truths were conveniently overlooked when radio stations began re-fashioning the barn dance into a tradition which emphasized wholesome family and community togetherness.

While barn dance programs claimed to be a continuation of folk practice, and therefore an authentic representation of “rural” values, program directors also used vaudeville traditions which brought the programs a level of theatricality. While WLS Chicago had set the standard program format, WSM Nashville’s *Grand Ole Opry* program also influenced the direction which barn dance programming would take. *Opry* performers used stock vaudeville characters that had proven appealing to audiences. Vaudeville had long depended upon a set of stereotyped characters, such as the Irishman, city slicker, and the hillbilly, and *Opry* performers employed these popular and easy to identify characters because they could be visualized through verbal cues by radio listeners, though they remained unseen.⁴³ The programs borrowed from travelling medicine and vaudeville shows too. Heywood himself had been drawn to country music through his own exposure to travelling vaudeville shows, claiming that he had aspired to become an entertainer following his first encounter with a travelling medicine show when he

⁴¹ Eleanor Todd, *Burrs and blackberries from Goodwood* (Goodwood, Ontario: Eleanor Todd, 1980), 182-183.

⁴² Wilson, “Work Bees,” 433-435.

⁴³ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 75.

was eight years old. In 1924, Heywood visited the travelling medicine show that had pulled into his hometown. Run by “Doc Kelly,” Heywood remembered being inspired by what he witnessed:

[Doc Kelly] ran his show for a week in Exeter and my Dad, the hired girl and I went out to the show every night of the week. At these medicine shows, they sang, danced, did banjo numbers and sometimes there was a ventriloquist. They put on this variety show for about half an hour and then they would come out and pitch medicine. They had all kinds of things such as banyon and shamrock oil. Doc Kelly would leave a supply of his remedies at the local drug stores so that his customers could get them even after he had left the town. After seeing Doc Kelly's show for a week, I decided that I would like to be an entertainer someday.⁴⁴

Barn dance radio programs were a continuation of this form of entertainment, drawing more content from the vaudeville circuit than actual barn dances, but through the efforts of the country music industry, advertising, promoters, broadcasters, and the performers themselves, the pretense was that these programs represented rural cultural traditions. As a transnational phenomenon, barn dance radio programs had a typical pattern which producers followed, but they could be tweaked to suit the regional audience through, for example, song choices and advertisements. Performing at CKNX, therefore, Heywood used a hybrid art imported from America to contribute to Canada’s domestic country music industry.

Borrowing the sounds and styles of America’s top country performers had the potential to be problematic due to rising concerns over cultural protectionism during the post-war period. Cultural elites were uneasy about the amount of American programming Canadian audiences were exposed to. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, as part of their effort to create a national consciousness, cultural elites had promoted highbrow Canadian

⁴⁴ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

content to counteract the influence of American films, magazines, and radio programs that promoted American lifestyles and led to the “barbarous homogenization” of the masses. They argued that ensuring Canadian audiences were exposed to refined culture would safeguard social unity and affluence.⁴⁵ Discussions over “Canadian” culture and America’s cultural influence remained pertinent due to the continued growth of radio and especially with the arrival of television in the early 1950s. Compared to other types of programming, music programming in particular provoked anxiety amongst elites and broadcasters because it was the most popular form of leisure programming for listeners and could influence the audience’s entertainment and leisure preferences profoundly.⁴⁶ Canadian audiences – especially Anglophones – generally preferred imported American programs, even over Canadian-produced imitations.⁴⁷ Even as the CBC hoped to inspire a “pan-Canadian consciousness” with its radio programming, it was American imports which usually drew their largest audiences.⁴⁸ Barn Dance programs were certainly an illustration of an American import inspiring Canadian grown imitations.

Heywood did not believe that entertainment should be reduced down to the issue of Canadian versus American content. Heywood believed that all country performers shared a kinship rooted in the music and that that was more important than concerns over whether or

⁴⁵ Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 10. Such concerns had pushed the state to establish the 1932 Radio Broadcasting Act, which established the CRBC. Though it was private broadcasters who had instituted the nation’s broadcasting system, concerns over content meant that most elites favoured a system of public ownership, like the BBC. Instead, Vipond argues, it was necessary for concessions towards private broadcasters to be made, due to the realities of the North American marketplace. It was within a “mixed” system of private and public broadcasting that CKNX worked first and foremost to serve the demands of their listeners, not necessarily to suit the initiatives of elites and the state.

⁴⁶ Kuffert, *Canada Before Television*, 159.

⁴⁷ Rutherford, “Made in America,” 270.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

not the music was “authentically Canadian.”⁴⁹ It was that country music community, both in a North American and local sense, which he cherished. Heywood’s audience members were accustomed to American programming and responded positively to CKNX’s version of popular barn dance programming. Nevertheless, Heywood and CKNX were adamant regarding the need to appeal to local needs and provide local talent. Based upon the positive audience response the station regularly received, the station succeeded in its goal. In 1951, the station’s content rules declared that, “All news . . . was to have 50 percent local content” and talent “wherever possible was to be live and local.”⁵⁰ The station’s self-proclaimed guiding principle revolved around this concern for serving listeners:

It is a peculiarity of Western Ontario that this vast area of over 11,000 square miles and 350,000 people served by CKNX is, in reality, but one community . . . The towns, townships, villages and crossroads of Western Ontario are banded together by one common factor: agriculture. CKNX gains and maintains listeners by catering to the many-sided aspects of this expansive topic.⁵¹

To cater to this agricultural population, CKNX reported on market conditions and the Toronto livestock exchange and featured country music and barn dance programs. The station hired Wingham locals, *The Early Birds*, for example, to play “old time” music in the mornings to entertain farmers as they went about their chores, and many of the same members also belonged to *the CKNX Ranch Boys* who played in the afternoons and evenings. A Mrs. G.H.S. from Arthur wrote in requesting a picture of the group. “Sure get a great pleasure listening to them,” she wrote. “But, Oh, how we like to hear them sing.”⁵² “We never miss any old time

⁴⁹ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

⁵⁰ CKNX, *This is CKNX: 25 Years of Community Service* (1951), n.p.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, n.p.

⁵² CKNX, *CKNX Monthly Almanac*, (April 1942), 2.

programs – especially the CKNX Ranch Boys. They really can play,” gushed Mrs. A.H. from Owen Sound.⁵³ The entertainment broadcast by CKNX also garnered fans south of the border. Misses A. and B.H. – twins from Grindstone City, Michigan – bashfully wrote into the station “boys”:

I don’t know how to start this, but here it goes anyway. Every Saturday night from 7.30 to 9.30 we listen to your beautiful music and your station comes in so plain. I took the United States map and found that Wingham is across from where we live. We have been listening to your station since two months or more.⁵⁴

The important role which the station played for regional listeners should not be underestimated. For listeners who were tied to their farms and spent most of their lives within the surrounding area, CKNX offered news, access to popular entertainment, and helped individuals feel knitted together.⁵⁵ Recognizing CKNX’s importance to regional listeners, *Rural Radio* magazine insisted that “it’s more than just a radio station – it is guide, philosopher and friend to thousands of faithful farm listeners.”⁵⁶

The “authentically” rural flavour and connection with the local population was heightened by the types of sponsors *CKNX Barn Dance* typically relied upon. The vast majority of North American barn dance programs relied upon flour and farm machinery companies,

⁵³ CKNX, *CKNX Monthly Almanac*, (June 1942), 2.

⁵⁴ CKNX, *CKNX Monthly Almanac*, (August 1942), 2.

⁵⁵ Wingham local, Doc Cruickshank, first founded CKNX in 1926. Then known by the call numbers JOKE, Cruickshank had built his own transmitter with the help of a *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Cruickshank wasn’t even aware he was being heard on-air until a Wingham neighbour phoned him to say that they could hear him tinkering around on their receivers. This was an impressive feat, as the people of Wingham had only a handful of radio sets in the town at this time. It was a hobby at first and he did not have the equipment to play records, so everything was live and locally produced. Encouraged by the response of the community, Cruickshank paid the required ten-dollar federal licensing fee and while he essentially managed the project on his own, local citizens formed a radio club, paying dues which he used to buy new equipment and hire help. Such activity was typical of rural communities where by necessity households often pooled their resources to produce and consume the goods and services they sought. In the case of CKNX, co-operative efforts ensured households could access the entertainment and leisure activity they wished for. In 1935, Cruickshank received a commercial radio license and CKNX was officially established. By then, a small staff had been hired by Cruickshank. (CKNX, *This is CKNX: 25 Years of Community Service* (1951), n.p. and Andrea Gal, “Co-operative Consuming: Ontario Beef Rings, 1899-1945,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 48, no. 97 (November 2015): 381-402).

⁵⁶ “CKNX,” *Rural Radio*, June 1946, 48.

further emphasizing the assumption made by promoters that the majority of their audience was indeed rural.⁵⁷ For a number of years, *CKNX Barn Dance* was sponsored by Pioneer Feeds, demonstrating that like their contemporaries the station kept their advertising focused on regional companies and products which were generally geared towards an agricultural audience.⁵⁸

The station's success at providing "authentically rural" entertainment which brought local country music fans together drew the attention of the CBC. In 1958, a group of CBC researchers conducted a study of the farm uses of the broadcasting media in the Wingham area. By then, CKNX had a television as well as a radio station.⁵⁹ Station personnel with the help of prominent locals assisted the researchers as they interviewed 157 male and 101 female farm residents within the station's broadcast range. The majority, 43%, were between 36 to 50 years old. The CBC wanted to better understand how farm households used radio and television technology and how CKNX had so successfully satisfied its audience. The report stated that by 1958, 99% of the farm households contacted owned at least one radio, which was most likely found in the kitchen, while 20% of farms reported having an additional set in the barn for entertainment, but also to soothe their cows. CBC's researchers also sought to understand how farm listening patterns differed from urban patterns. The study found that, by 1958, farmers listened to the radio slightly more than urban dwellers but, overall, the study found that the pattern of reported listening among farmers in the Wingham area was comparable "to the

⁵⁷ For example, *Grand Ole Opry's* long-time sponsor was Martha White Flour, a Nashville based company.

⁵⁸ Earl Heywood, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

⁵⁹ CKNX Television known as "Chanel 8" went on air on November 18, 1955. The station was welcomed to the air by Ed Sullivan that evening on his program. "CKNX Tales from Wingham," *North Huron Museum*, accessed July 8, 2016, http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=386&hs=0&rd=96301

national pattern for both farm and city residents.”⁶⁰ While CBC targeted farm audiences with programs such as the *Farm Radio Forum*, the men and women surveyed both listed CKNX’s *Farm and Home Hour* program as their favourite farm broadcast.⁶¹ The popularity of CKNX throughout the region was ultimately credited to the fact that the station was dedicated to providing quality service and programming to its listeners.⁶² That the station was focused on the regional community and its immediate concerns and preferences seemed to boost the station’s in-house productions above CBC’s offerings. The station’s popular entertainment programs, particularly *CKNX Barn Dance*, were no exception to this rule and garnered a great deal of attention across the station’s listening range (Map 3.1). By the late 1940s, *CKNX Barn Dance* filled the station’s coveted Saturday night slot due to its immense popularity amongst the local fan base.

The show’s performers portrayed “country” authenticity to the audience through their rendering of “honest,” “down-to-earth personas.” The show regularly attracted a large live audience while approximately another 150,000 listeners tuned in on their radios at home, making it the most-listened-to program on the station.⁶³ With this live format, Heywood was able to interact with fans each week and this established his connection to his fan base.

According to his son Grant, Heywood thrived in these exchanges. “He had an ego! He always talked to the audience, he loved it. . . he just liked to be with people, he liked to entertain

⁶⁰ “Radio Listening and TV Viewing in an Ontario Farm Area: A study of farm uses of the broadcasting media in the Wingham area in the Winter of 1958,” CBC Audience Research Report, Ottawa.

⁶¹ See Ruth Sandwell’s article, “‘Read, Listen, Discuss Act’: Adult Education, Rural Citizenship and the Canadian National Farm Radio Forum,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation*, 24, no. 1 (2012): 170-194, for more information on the Farm Forum.

⁶² “Radio Listening and TV Viewing in an Ontario Farm Area: A study of farm uses of the broadcasting media in the Wingham area in the Winter of 1958,” CBC Audience Research Report, Ottawa.

⁶³ CKNX, *CKNX Barn Dance Souvenir Booklet* (1951), n.p.

people,” Grant recalled.⁶⁴ This ability to easily interact with his audience enabled Heywood to reiterate his down-to-earth persona which established his “authenticity” amongst fans. “Often, fans would get talking with my Dad and be surprised to see that he was just like them,” Grant has noted, “People look at stars and think they’re something special, but with Dad, they’d get talking and be surprised to find out that he had worked on a farm and understood their lives; this made them like Dad even more.”⁶⁵ While Heywood was still a star, he came across as “one of them” and was therefore vindicated as an “authentic” representative of the local country music fan base.

For the performers, travelling from one community to the next added an element of uncertainty, for performers never knew how large – or small – their audience would be. A major traffic jam was caused in Kitchener by the huge number of people heading to see the show one evening. Arguably the largest crowd the show ever amassed was at the 1948 International Plowing Match in Lindsay, Ontario, where approximately 40,000 people attended the performance. When performing in Lucan one evening, however, a snow storm kept all but three audience members away. While one band performed, the other artists filled the front row, whistling and clapping, to create crowd noise for the live broadcast.⁶⁶ Jim Swan, who worked at CKNX later in his life, recalled being a child in Elora when “everyone in town seemed excited because the Barn Dance was coming.” He was too young to attend but listened in on

⁶⁴ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

⁶⁵ Grant Heywood, interview by author, February 22, 2017.

⁶⁶ Wingham Kinettes, *One Hundred Years of Memories* (Wingham, Ontario: Wingham Kinettes, 1983), 70.

the radio. He recalled being “fascinated by the fact it was happening right there in that very town, it was a big deal having a story to tell about the radio coming to town.”⁶⁷

Even though the show was attracting listeners from growing cities like Kitchener and London, as well as the station’s standard farm base, the rural flavour of the program was emphasized. “Everyone with a drop of farm blood in his veins loves the rhythm and swing of the barn dance,” *Rural Radio* argued. Profiling the program, the publication noted that the “dialogue is home-made; ribbing good natured [and] folksy songs are a feature.”⁶⁸ The show was good, old-fashioned fun.

While no film or audio clips remain of the show, publicity material, particularly fan “souvenir” booklets, demonstrate how *CKNX Barn Dance* promoted itself as being “authentically rural,” largely by emphasizing each performer’s rural roots. The show’s large cast was profiled in a twenty-five-cent souvenir booklet sold at each show (Illustration 3.2). While the information contained within the booklet was true, the rhetoric and images used certainly served to market these performers as respectable individuals who were familiar with rural life, if not still actively involved in it. In this way CKNX evoked the show’s rural flavor. By emphasizing the performer’s rural roots, the program could much more easily be perceived as an authentic reflection of rural life, even though it relied heavily upon fictionalized imagery. Perusing the booklet demonstrates that there was an obvious concern over the visual representation of the performers; cowboy attire predominates with a sprinkling of hillbilly garb. The station created biographies for each performer, in which the rural and small-town roots of

⁶⁷ Jim Swan, interview by North Huron Museum Oral History Project, 1975.

⁶⁸ No author, “CKNX,” *Rural Radio*, 1946, 52.

their performers were highlighted as well as their marital status, experiences with hard work, and farm chores. Reflecting country music's emphasis upon male performers as being the true stars of these programs during this era, the few female accompanists who were involved in the program – particularly Cora Robertson who played piano – were not profiled. With his growing celebrity status, Heywood was introduced as the group's "RCA Victor Star" and "top hand of the CKNX Barn Dance Gang." In the short paragraph detailing his life, it was noted that he was a family man who "was born and raised on his father's farm near Exeter, Ontario." Such information connected Heywood to farm life and its associated values, particularly, a wholesome, family-focused existence. The respectability of each performer was also stressed in the souvenir booklet. Even though "hillbilly" comic "Rags n' Gags" Lucky Ambeault "dressed in rags on the stage," publicity writers distanced Ambeault from this increasingly unfashionable image, which was only suitable for comedians. Writers instead emphasized that Ambeault's "hillbilly" was a "character" as off stage he preferred "good cowboy clothes." Fiddler Archie Mann was lauded for his "old time fiddling" and being "a very efficient tiller of the soil," while George Jordan, a square dance caller, was noted to have "turned over many a furrow" over the years. Other performers included "Grand-daddy of the Hillbillies" Cactus Mac, and "Bashful Boy" Ernie King, whose "smooth voice lends an added touch to romantic cowboy ballads that causes many a young heart to skip a beat."⁶⁹ While Heywood also had a successful recording career with RCA Victor, his association with CKNX remained with him throughout his career and he stayed active with the station. By the mid-1950s, television had become more popular and

⁶⁹ CKNX, *CKNX Barn Dance Souvenir Booklet* (1951), n.p.

listening numbers for *CKNX Barn Dance* slowly dropped. *CKNX Barn Dance* remained on the air until 1963, making it the longest-running barn dance radio program in Canada.

Responding to the trends emanating from Nashville and his audience's preferences, Heywood sought to fashion a cowboy persona for himself which exuded honesty and down-to-earth approachability while also dazzling his audience with his showmanship. Heywood, unlike earlier country music performers such as Wilf Carter, did not need to authenticate himself to the industry and fans by emphasizing his lived cowboy experiences. He did, however, call upon his real rural background to connect with his local fan base while using costumes and his horse Hero to connect with broader country music trends. This reflected larger shifts occurring in country music more generally whereby the sound and style was meant to evoke a "rural" flavor with less reliance upon "hillbilly" clichés. Such changes were meant to give the music a "cross over" appeal by which country music songs could appeal to a wider listening base. As urban and rural life changed dramatically during this period, rurality continued to be heavily romanticized. Heywood's cowboy portrayal evoked a masculine image which was wholesome and harkened back to more "traditional" perceptions of rural masculinity. This image attracted Heywood's local fan base, for while they had no real experience with cowboys or life on the range, western iconography had come to symbolize the values of rural life more generally. Despite debates over promoting "authentically Canadian" content, Heywood did not believe that setting himself apart as a "Canadian" entertainer was vital. Country music, in his mind, formed its own community and it was more important to authenticate oneself to this group.

Illustration 3.1 Earl Heywood's Serenade Ranch Gang

Left to Right: Lucky Ambeault (bass), Bill Mankiss (accordion), Earl Heywood (guitar), Ward Allen (fiddle), Mel Lavigne (fiddle), Lloyd Bank (steel guitar) Source: Barn Dance Museum, North Huron Museum, Wingham, Ontario



Map 3.1 CKNX Broadcast Range. Source: CKNX 25th Anniversary Magazine, 1951, np. The station's broadcast range, like the music itself, was oblivious to national borders and encompassed Michigan as well. Source: Barn Dance Museum, North Huron Museum, Wingham, Ontario.



Illustration 3.2 *CKNX Barn Dance* Souvenir Booklet Cover

Source: Barn Dance Museum, North Huron Museum, Wingham, Ontario



Chapter Four

“A Folksy Fiddler and His Flock”¹: *Don Messer’s Jubilee*, TV, State Sanctioned Culture, and Viewer Response

As the last stroke on their fiddles fell silent, a packed community hall, somewhere in Canada, clapped voraciously for Don Messer and his *Islanders*. Following the performance, children, a scattering of teenagers, parents and grandparents, formed a line, hoping to have a chance to speak with Canada’s “folksy fiddler,” Don Messer himself, and have him sign their souvenir photographs. One of these fans was an elderly woman, bundled up in a rain jacket who shared with Messer that she had first heard him on the radio “many a year ago.” Messer, dressed in a black and red tartan blazer, responded with a grin. Other fans chatted with *Islander* Marg Osburne about their children who liked to dance at home to the music. Towards the end of the signing session, an elderly man held out his photograph, and said with great sincerity to Messer, “Came to say goodbye since you’re not going to be on the air anymore . . . it’s a Canadian bond we feel which has been broken.”²

In 1969, writer and director Martin Defalco traveled with Don Messer’s summer *Jubilee Tour* which took members of the Canadian television staple, *Don Messer’s Jubilee*, across the country, stopping in major urban centres and small towns alike. The tour marked Messer’s thirty-fifth year in the entertainment industry. More ominously, the tour occurred following the announcement made earlier that year by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, that after ten years on its television network, the show was to be cancelled. The announcement was met with outcry across the nation. While Messer and his *Islanders* regularly toured across Canada during

¹ Pat Johnson, “The Fuss Over a Folksy Fiddler and his Flock,” *The TV Telegram*, June 20-27, 1969, 2-4.

² Martin Defalco, *Don Messer: His Land and His Music* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1971).

the summer, following the CBC's decision it was assumed this tour would be the last. Defalco's documentary, *Don Messer: His Land and His Music*, was later distributed in 1971 by the National Film Board of Canada. Reflecting on what he witnessed while filming, Defalco revealed that "Don Messer's group and its audiences are really close . . . Messer and his entertainers could forecast, not only what songs or tunes would be asked for, but exactly what sort of people would ask for them."³ To capture this relationship, Defalco's film used a multiscreen effect to highlight both the character of the performers and the audience's enjoyment. The special bond between the two was thus captured.⁴ Throughout the film, the locations remained ambiguous for where exactly Messer was performing did not matter, as Messer was connected to all Canadians. Life on the road was not easy, but everywhere the Jubilee troupe stopped, they were met with warm welcomes, and this made the bad food and spotty sleep worth-while. To any observer, it is obvious that the film captured a farewell tour between an artist and his admirers. Based on the numerous fans who were caught on film declaring that they would "have to turn the dial" now that *Jubilee* was off the air, the CBC's decision to cancel *Don Messer's Jubilee* had clearly upset many people.

Valorized as an "authentic" piece of Canadian folk culture, many fans were ultimately shocked by the CBC's cancellation of *Don Messer's Jubilee*, believing it was an affront to audience tastes and "Canadian" values. Produced on a shoestring budget using Celtic and some Western iconography, *Don Messer's Jubilee* played upon Nova Scotia's cultural identity as a region and people who embodied "traditional" folk values. The focus on folk music had initially

³ *Don Messer: His Land and His Music*, Press Booklet, National Film Board of Canada, 1971, n.p.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n.p.

suited the CBC's goals to provide audiences with "authentically Canadian" content – not an American import – which was wholesome, educational, and drew upon the folk music of immigrants from the British Isles.⁵ Messer's own image as a humble and modest family man, and an honest-to-goodness Maritimer, served to further authenticate *Jubilee* to audiences. *Jubilee's* place on CBC television ensured that a majority of Canadians was exposed to this narrative and turned Messer and his *Islanders* into figures of national prominence. With the program's reliance upon the fiddle and renderings of folk songs and dances, the program represented the "old-time" country music which had been popular in the years before World War II. Creating a Celtic-country variety program which expanded the country music narrative in Canada to include not only cowboys but folksy Maritimers as well, *Jubilee* reflected what folklorists had deemed to be "authentic" in that the program appeared as a historically correct reading of rural life in the Maritimes. Unlike Wilf Carter or Earl Heywood, *Jubilee* did not feature horses or steers, nor did it have a ranch backdrop. Messer's construction of the "rural" was less farm-based and more about the community. The show's down-home folksy feeling rested on being amongst neighbours, not being alone on the range. The program's national success ensured that the fabricated narrative and image came to be understood as the "real thing." By 1969, however, *Jubilee* had become outdated to many viewers and the entertainment industry more generally, reflecting the many social changes which had affected Canada over the course of the 1960s. To remain competitive, the CBC became significantly less interested in capturing an "authentically Canadian" folk experience, and instead wanted to foster a young, dynamic

⁵ *Jubilee* transitioned from radio to television in 1956, airing on CBC Halifax, and became part of CBC's nation-wide programming in 1959. For the next ten years Messer and his *Islanders* brought audience members together on Monday nights at 7:30 p.m.

feel to attract the powerful youth cohort. While *Jubilee's* cancellation was certainly not a pointed attack on traditionalism by the broadcaster, for many audience members the event came to symbolize the anxieties felt by citizens during a period of great change.

When *Jubilee* first appeared on CBC television, much debate was circulating amongst cultural elites regarding how media content could potentially define and spread Canadian-made content and help define a "Canadian" identity. Developments such as the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, overseen by Vincent Massey, pushed for more state funding and involvement in the arts. The 1951 report lauded the potential of the CBC and the National Film Board to define and circulate Canadian content. It was indeed the CBC's mandate to ensure that audiences were exposed to "authentically Canadian" content which was wholesome and modest, as well as enlightening and educational. The CBC also recognized, however, that it had to package this content in a variety of forms so as to suit the varying tastes of its viewers. Amongst the many ballets, orchestras, and theatre productions the CBC aired, *Don Messer's Jubilee* provided Canadian-made content direct from the Maritimes which could serve to educate Canadians about English-Canadian "folk" culture. The program neatly fit within the "folk" definition set down by twentieth-century North American folklorists, in that it represented regional culture in a historically familiar way. When the show was first chosen by the CBC to be put on the national television network, the decision was justified by Gene Hallman, director of CBC network shows, because of its "authentic regional flavor," which commanded "the loyalty and affection of many viewers across the country."⁶ With its Celtic-

⁶ Lester B. Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer* (Kentville, N.S.: Kentville Publishing Co., Ltd., 1969), 59.

country, down-home style, the program represented a type of rural “purity” in its portrayal of white, Anglophone, rural culture derived from the region’s British Isles heritage.⁷

Importantly, because the program aired on CBC, Canada’s dominant network and in some places the only one available, it meant the program had wide exposure thus creating a type of “national” country music. *Jubilee*’s emphasis on the talent found in the Maritimes was supplemented by featured guests from across Canada, such as step dancers from the Ottawa Valley and Earl Heywood and his band when they toured. The program’s Buchta Dancers – led by German immigrant Gunter Buchta – also performed a variety of ethnic-folk dances to highlight the nation’s cultural diversity. In these ways the nation’s different regions were included to help create a seemingly more “national” outlook. While it may seem counterintuitive to celebrate regionalism as a mechanism for fostering nationalism, the program’s perceived authenticity and place on CBC television positioned the program as being a weekly dose of “authentic” Canadian content from which citizens of all ages could partake. To watch *Jubilee* was to engage with something which seemed uniquely “Canadian.”

Messer was very concerned with portraying the Maritimes as a wholesome and deep-rooted territory and showcasing the region’s “traditional” music. Tapping into folk roots had been an ideal the country music industry used during its commercial rise in the 1920s. To validate the importance of the genre, it was argued that the music’s roots lay in folk music so as to make the genre seem more authentic and less commercialized. This was a fabrication which lay at the heart of the country music narrative. Positioning *Jubilee* as a continuation of Maritime

⁷ Trew, “Conflicting Vision: Don Messer, Liberal Nationalism and the Canadian Unity Debate,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 26 (Fall 2002): 48.

folk traditions was a further iteration of this and it also fit with the image of Nova Scotia which its urban cultural producers had been fashioning since the 1920s. Essentially, this was that rural life represented days gone by, that it was a laid-back way of life, and that it was an enduring example of an older way of life which many had given up to embrace the progressive evolution of urbanization.⁸ With changing social, economic, and political conditions, *Jubilee* could be seen as representing an idealized way of life which seemed to be disappearing in the 1950s and 1960s.

When it came to producing his show, Messer himself was concerned that it should be understood as an “authentic” representation of Maritime culture. “It has to be authentic,” Messer told the *Toronto Star* in 1967. “The people want to see real Maritimers playing down-east music and they want it to come from the Maritimes,” he argued. “When our show started the CBC wanted me to come and do it in Toronto. I said no, it won’t work. People want to hear CBC Halifax, you know?”⁹ *Jubilee* created a narrative of Maritimers living the simple life and the show’s use of Acadian, Scottish, and Irish songs, jigs, and reels perpetuated the understanding that Nova Scotia was a bastion of “traditional” culture from early settlement days in Canada and the British Isles, especially Scotland. Traditional Scottish and Irish performers were also regularly featured, and Johnny Forrest became a regular performer on *Jubilee*. Forrest was born in Carlisle, Scotland, in 1936 and immigrated to Canada in 1956. Outfitted in Highland dress, he played accordion and performed numbers like “The Gallant Forty Two,” generally dated as being from the mid-nineteenth century and associated with Scotland’s 42nd foot regiment

⁸ Erin Morton, “Ordinary Affects: Folk Art, Maud Lewis, and the Social Aesthetics of the Everyday,” *Journal of Canadian Art History* XXXIV, no. 2 (2013): 87.

⁹ Volkmar Richter, “After a century, Canada still has that old Don Messer soul,” *Toronto Daily Star*, July 1, 1967, 35.

known as the Black Watch. Other times, Forrest performed newer numbers such as “A Scottish Soldier.” This song had been written by Scottish entertainer Andy Stewart using the traditional bagpipe tune “The Green Hills of Tyrol” and the song reached no. 1 in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK in 1961. It also was well received in the U.S.¹⁰

Messer ran a tight ship on set and it was largely his taste which determined the show’s content.¹¹ The show’s producer, Bill Langstroth, noted to *Chatelaine* magazine in 1961 that nothing about the show was left to chance. The *Islanders* planned “the show in such detail that [they] can’t possibly be flummoxed by hitches. . . every camera angle, every bit of folksy dialogue, every movement is worked out in advance.”¹² Messer alongside his fellow *Islanders* Marg Osburne, and to some extent Charlie Chamberlain, carefully crafted and controlled their public image while the show itself used plain sets and costumes. Generally, performances were done in front of a backdrop that featured a clap board house’s porch with a rocking chair, flowers and porch swing, a general store set, or a simple barn façade with rail post fences and a bale of hay here and there. The “rural” was about perpetuating the ideals of a small-town in the Maritimes. It was about replicating spaces where neighbours spent time together and creating the feel of being part of a close-knit community.

Messer himself believed strongly that the entertainment he provided represented the province’s folk culture. When Messer’s show was still only on radio, *Maclean’s* magazine profiled the series. *Maclean’s* quoted Syd Kennedy, the CBC’s Maritime program director who

¹⁰ “Johnny Forrest,” *The Glengarry Celtic Music Hall of Fame*, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://glengarrycelticmusic.com/archival-tune-johnny-forrest/>.

¹¹ Volkmar Richter, “After a century, Canada still has that old Don Messer soul,” *Toronto Daily Star*, July 1, 1967, 35.

¹² Christina McCall Newman, “What Makes the Don Messer Show Go?” *Chatelaine*, January 1961, 21.

reflected that, “you’ve got to judge the *Islanders* by the kind of music they play. It’s great – for hillbilly stuff.” *Maclean’s* noted, however, that “Messer cringes when his work is called hillbilly or western, as it so often is.” Messer went on to tell *MacLean’s* that what the *Islanders* played was folk music. “It is folk music . . . the music of the people. Our forefathers brought these hornpipes, jigs and reels over with them from the old country Scotland and Ireland and they kept them alive.”¹³ This differentiation on Messer’s part was likely because using the “folk” label inherently tied the music he played to its ancestral roots and Canadian history, thereby increasing its value in the eyes of the CBC and audiences as a Canadian product.

While Messer certainly relied upon many songs and reels which had ties to the songs brought over by Nova Scotia’s European settlers, it is unreasonable to position Messer as truly a “folk” artist as such a positioning implies that he was ignorant of the conventions and mechanisms of the entertainment industry. Messer was a trained fiddler who had worked in a professional capacity with modern technology for decades by the time of the 1969 cancellation. He did not live or create in isolation from outside influences. The Maritimes was not in fact a culturally isolated and primitive locale and folk music by the mid-twentieth century was no less commercialized than country music. Furthermore, a variety of ethnic backgrounds converged in the region, and far from being an ideal community rooted to tradition, ethnic, religious, and ideological tensions were alive and well.¹⁴ The narrative which *Jubilee* created for itself positioned Messer and his *Islanders* as representatives of a seemingly threatened way of life which was supposedly being gobbled up by the march of modernity. *Jubilee’s* portrayal of an

¹³ David MacDonald, “The Breakdown Boys from Spud Island,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, October 15, 1953, n.p.

¹⁴ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 26.

organic community which practiced “rural” activities such as square dancing and house parties served as an example of the resilience of “traditional” ways of life. Such a portrayal was good for business and tapped into strongly-held assumptions about rural life and Maritime culture.

In his work, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, Ian McKay explains how the Maritimes came to be understood as Canada’s bastion of folk culture. As early as 1920, urban cultural producers had developed a “folk” identity to explain Nova Scotia’s culture and history. Viewing rural dwellers through a lens of “romantic Otherness,” these cultural producers “constructed the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything they disliked about modern urban and industrial life.”¹⁵ The people in Eastern Canada became differentiated as “Maritimers,” defined by their traditional ways. As McKay describes it, the Nova Scotian identity became defined “as the pursuit of a simpler and more colourful traditional way of life,” not one marked by poverty and hardship.¹⁶ Such efforts to re-write the regional narrative established the Maritimes as a place where people were made of “old stock” – meaning Acadian and Scottish. Nova Scotians were set apart as being “simpler, kinder, slower, and more rural – more innocent, in a word – than those who were categorizing them.”¹⁷ A major component in creating Nova Scotia’s “folk” was the collection of ballads and songs which were seemingly free from the taint of modernity. Any songs which were sung for collectors, such as Helen Creighton in the 1920s, that were modern (and these appeared often) were conveniently left out of the song anthologies which these urban collectors published. Such techniques supported the pastoral ideal which McKay defines

¹⁵ McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 265.

¹⁷ Ibid., 275.

as “a beautiful relation between rich and poor that transcended the temporary, superficial, and divisive misunderstandings of class [and] bore witness to the ethnic unity of the Nova Scotians.”¹⁸ In McKay’s estimation, the harmful aspect of this narrative was that in positioning Nova Scotians as representatives of traditional folk values, it swept away the region’s history of an urban, capitalist society, class and ethnic tensions, and gender inequality. The narrative perpetuated by *Jubilee* which reveled in the idealization of rural simplicity, however, came to be accepted as “authentic” in large part because of the program’s presence on CBC television which ensured that it was accessible to Canadians across the country.

The provision of “authentically Canadian” content was foremost on the minds of CBC managers. Historian Paul Rutherford argues that by 1960 “primetime viewing had become the single most common cultural experience of Canadians.”¹⁹ The CBC reigned as the country’s dominant network and for some regions it was the only service available. Importantly, the CBC led the way in “made-in-Canada” programming.²⁰ When CBC Television first aired in September, 1952, managers of the corporation were determined to make the service a national one which would serve and enrich the tastes of Canadians from all regions and walks of life. For CBC managers, television was not simply a leisure activity; if used correctly, it could be a source of nationalism, democracy, and inspire civility and decorum amongst Canadian citizens.²¹ By 1961, early forms of Canadian content laws were appearing on the books. Audiences were offered “cultured” and “genteel” programming such as orchestras, ballet, and theatre, alongside

¹⁸ McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, 275.

¹⁹ Paul Rutherford, *When Television was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952-1967* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 8.

²⁰ Rutherford, *When Television was Young*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

current affairs shows. Further ensuring that audiences received their regular dose of “authentically Canadian” programming, many CBC shows played upon regional stereotypes, such as *La Famille Plouffe*, a show centered on the lives of a working-class family in Quebec. Translated as *The Plouffe Family*, in English, the show was popular in both languages. *Don Messer’s Jubilee* was an obvious example of this type of regional programming. Even *Sesame Street* was “Canadian-ized” when it first aired in 1969 by replacing the show’s Spanish content with regional characters from Canada. Such segments, for example, included a six-year-old son of a lobster fisherman in Richibucto, New Brunswick.²² *Chatelaine* magazine applauded the CBC’s efforts: “As the Canadian content goes up, the program gets better . . . the Canadian inserts have a more lyrical, humanistic tone than most of the American version . . . great identity-builders for Canadian kids.”²³ Ironically, while the goal of much of this programming was to showcase regional identities, such shows actually broke down regional barriers and this had a nationalizing effect as it meant that regional barriers no longer limited what audiences could access from coast-to-coast. In many ways, television served to create a “celebratory national discourse” through exposure to programming which applauded the constructed narratives of each region.²⁴ In essence, the unique attributes of each region were re-defined as contributing to the national identity, not undermining it, and growing accessibility meant Canadians enjoyed a more uniform television-watching experience.

²² Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 122. Also see: Matthew Hayday, “Brought to You By the Letters C, R, T, and C: *Sesame Street* and Canadian Nationalism,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 27, 1 (2016): 95-137.

²³ Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 123.

²⁴ Edwardson, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 198.

Jubilee was part of CBC's variety programming sector and because it used a down-to-earth, homey feel, combined with the performer's perceived honesty, it fulfilled the network's search for "authentically Canadian" content. Like most variety shows, it was easy to produce, and it was believed to contribute to the development of *Canadian* pop-culture. Producers argued that, in general, variety shows had to be "sincere," "nice," and "casual" in order to attract the largest possible audience and while critics panned this seemingly inconsequential entertainment, research showed that viewers did in fact enjoy this type of program.²⁵ With small budgets and sparse sets, variety programs relied upon the skills and personality of performers who used "direct address" to talk and sing straight to their audience. Hosts such as *Jubilee's* Don Tremaine used the theme of hospitality, along the same lines as Earl Heywood's *CKNX Barn Dance* program, to "invite" their audience to join in with these friendly performers who had no greater pleasure in life than performing for the public. Such shows were considered successful if they were able to create a bond between the performers and their audience. Hence, viewers were encouraged to write in and request their favourite tunes and Tremaine opened every episode with a call for the audience to, "drop the knitting, set the checker board aside, and pull the chair round' this way, and join us for this edition of *Don Messer's Jubilee!*" At the end of each episode, audiences were ushered back home to reality with a rendition of *Till We Meet Again*, performed by crowd favourites Marg Osburne and Charlie Chamberlain. Such sequences reiterated the program's down-home feel.

The unbridled success of *Don Messer's Jubilee* surprised industry executives and critics. By 1961, it was the third most popular show across Canada behind *Hockey Night in Canada* and

²⁵ Rutherford, *When Television was Young*, 197.

The Ed Sullivan Show.²⁶ That same year, *Chatelaine* magazine offered readers a behind-the-scenes scoop on the show, proclaiming, “Don Messer’s Jubilee has confounded show-business experts by making country corn Canada’s favourite dish.”²⁷ *Chatelaine* explained the show’s “unalloyed approval” with Canadians as being a symptom of the show’s simplicity: “The program features thirty-minutes of uncompromisingly corny country music played by a group of musicians whose uncommon talent for projecting plain, down-to-earth folksiness is due mainly to the fact that they are plain down-to-earth folk.”²⁸ Showcasing the program, *CBC Times* magazine acknowledged that “a popular pastime in the entertainment press has been to try to guess reasons for the show’s popularity.” *CBC Times* posited that it was the show’s honesty, arguing that “Messer, Charlie Chamberlain, Marg Osburne, and the rest of the cast have sung and danced these gay and sad songs, jigs and reels, for many years, and their public has sung and danced along with them.”²⁹ The *Winnipeg Tribune* praised Messer and his Islanders as kings of “country classics” who “reigned supreme in the field of old-time country music.” The *Tribune* credited the show’s success “to a homespun presentation of the music people want to hear.” Furthermore, his years of experience was credited for “Messer’s present position on national tv ratings.”³⁰

There were, of course, critics and commentators who were skeptical of *Jubilee’s* assumed authenticity and its appeal to twentieth-century audiences. The December 2, 1963, edition of *Maclean’s* magazine featured a special write-up: “An Opinionated American looks at

²⁶ Ibid., 206.

²⁷ Christina McCall Newman, “What Makes the Don Messer Show Go?” *Chatelaine*, January 1961, 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 56.

²⁹ *CBC Times*, Sept. 24-30, 1960, 2.

³⁰ Frank Sullivan, “King of Country Classics Plays What People Want,” *The Winnipeg Tribune*, Friday July 23, 1965, n.p.

the Best and Worst of Canadian TV.” Journalist Richard Gehman spent a week watching Canadian television and commented on both the good and the bad. Gehman praised the “superbly done” *Hockey Night in Canada*, but *Don Messer’s Jubilee* did not fare so well.

Gehman described the incredulous looks he received from friends when he declared he was headed off to watch *Jubilee*. “You’re *really* going to watch the *Don Messer* show?” he was asked. Gehman claimed to find the show lacking in humour and deemed it “bad” TV.³¹

Journalist William Littler, who reviewed Messer’s live performance in Vancouver on Friday, July 16th, 1965, questioned Messer’s appeal. Writing for the *Vancouver Sun*, Littler “found it difficult to understand why, in the middle of the twentieth century in a metropolitan centre like Vancouver, this rural schmaltz concocted by an old-time fiddler and his barn dance cronies can attract an audience.” Littler expressed surprise that “kilts, corn and country music” could “command as loyal a public in Vancouver as in Sturgis, Sask., Pincher Creek, Alberta, and Arborg, Manitoba, sister stops on Messer’s tour.”³² Fans of Messer took exception to Littler’s tone. Dora Baxter from Vancouver, writing a rebuttal to his review for the *Sun*, argued that “we are not all long-hairs, neither do we all subscribe to the modern groaning, finger-snapping, eye-rolling style the kids think is music. There is a happy medium and Don Messer’s music is it. Long may he fiddle and his modestly-dressed dancers pirouette.”³³

Like Carter and Heywood, Messer fashioned a certain kind of masculinity which revolved around his wholesome, principled, and hard-working demeanor. His desire to play-out

³¹ Richard Gehman, “An Opinionated American looks at the Best and Worst of Canadian TV,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, Dec. 2, 1963, 16.

³² William Littler, “Potatoes 1st, Then Messer,” *The Vancouver Sun*, Sat. July 17, 1965, 7.

³³ Dora Baxter, “Not Long-Hairs,” *The Vancouver Sun*, Wed. July 21, 1965, 10.

Maritime culture shaped his image, dress, sound, and stage persona. On television, Messer rarely spoke and developed a persona as a quiet, mild-mannered performer, letting his fiddle speak for him. In the early stages of his career he had dressed as a lumberjack or woodsman, but by the time of *Jubilee's* appearance on television, Messer chose to wear neatly tailored tartan blazers with matching ties, or tartan button-down shirts. Such clothing choices emphasized his personality as an “authentic” and committed East Coast entertainer of Scottish heritage.

His image as an “authentic” Maritime fiddler was enhanced by his biography. Messer had been born in 1909 to a Scottish-Canadian family on a farm in New Brunswick and was a much-admired fiddler who was playing for local rural dances and house parties by the time he was sixteen. At sixteen, he left home to work in Boston where he took violin lessons, learning a classical music repertoire. Most fiddlers of Messer’s generation could not read music, so his formal training set him apart. He built his reputation around playing folk standards the “right” way. His publication, *The Don Messer Anthology of Favorite Fiddle Tunes*, standardized many of these melodies and established the “Don Messer” form of fiddling that is still practiced across Canada.³⁴ Folklorist, Neil V. Rosenberg has noted that Messer’s style was “precise,” with a “light touch, characterized by single noting and playing the tune with little variation throughout.” This set Messer apart from American Southern fiddlers, for example, who tended to play with

³⁴ Neil V. Rosenberg, “Repetition, Innovation, and Representation in Don Messer’s Media Repertoire,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 456 (Spring, 2002): 198.

constant variation, slides, and double stops. Messer's precise form contributed to the establishment of a regional style of Maritime fiddling.³⁵

Charlie Chamberlain crafted a different stage persona. Chamberlain was needed to provide balance and give the show a necessary dose of personality. Chamberlain had joined Messer's band in 1934 when the group was based in New Brunswick, performing in concert halls and on the radio. Chamberlain was not a particularly gifted singer but his jovial behaviour endeared him to audiences. Known as the "Singing Lumberjack," he was celebrated for his sense of humour, step dancing skills, and renditions of traditional Irish melodies. Like Messer, Chamberlain's "authenticity" was proven by his biography, which emphasized that he was not far removed from his audience. Chamberlain left school when he was in the fifth grade, after his father died. Eventually he went to work in the lumber camps of New Brunswick to help support his mother and siblings. It was here, in the woods, working amongst many Irish men, that Chamberlain picked up an Irish twang and learned many traditional Irish songs and dances, material he used on the show and for which he became famous. Such information emphasized Chamberlain's down-to-earth honesty. When the show was profiled in the *Toronto Star* on July 1, 1967, Chamberlain was lauded as easily being "the most popular personality on the show." "There's a zest for life in him the people take to immediately," wrote journalist Volkmar Richter.³⁶ Attempting to explain his public appeal, Chamberlain told interviewers, "People I guess buy me for what I am, just big, good natured Charlie."³⁷

³⁵ Neil V. Rosenberg, *Country Music in the Maritimes: Two Studies*, (St. John's, Nfld: Memorial University Reprint Series, 1976), 4. Rosenberg argues that the continued popularity of the "Messer" style of fiddling is evident in the country music subsequently produced in the Maritimes region.

³⁶ Volkmar Richter, "After a century, Canada still has that old Don Messer soul," *Toronto Daily Star*, July 1, 1967, 35.

³⁷ Rachel Bower, *The Singing Lumberjack* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2015).

Unlike Messer's quiet and precise demeanor, Chamberlain was a physically imposing, fun-loving man. His masculinity was shaped by his charm and that he was known for being a bit of a rascal. His experiences with New Brunswick's forests, and the known fact that he sometimes drank a bit too much, fashioned Chamberlain into an honest-to-goodness Maritimer. In an interview with *The Toronto Star*, Chamberlain noted that many entertainers would never admit to performing with a hangover. "Not good for the image," he said.³⁸ Chamberlain, however, had no qualms admitting that he himself had done this more than once, a statement which emphasized that he was not a celebrity, but an ordinary man who happened to be on television. In June 1965, Chamberlain was charged with impaired driving. He was remanded without plea and released on bail.³⁹ Six months later, in September 1965, Chamberlain was featured as the subject of the *Maclean's* cover story, *Backwoods Troubadour: Everybody here loves Charlie*. Gracing the cover, dressed in a checked jacket and surrounded by smiling children, Chamberlain's bright blue eyes stare back at the viewer as he strums a guitar. An exposé on Chamberlain, the article pitched him as a "rough-cut, trouble-prone, carefree bear of a man . . . with an innocent, affectionate charm that could melt the frown on any disapproving face."⁴⁰ While no sources can shed light on how this article came to fruition or who had initiated it, the occurrence of Chamberlain's DUI and the appearance of this article six months later seemed connected as a possible public relations effort. *Everybody Loves Charlie*

³⁸ Volkmar Richter, "After a century, Canada still has that old Don Messer soul," *Toronto Daily Star*, July 1, 1967, 35.

³⁹ "Chamberlain is Charged," *Halifax Town Guardian*, Friday June 11, 1965.

⁴⁰ Susan Dexter, "Everybody Here Loves Charlie Chamberlain," *Maclean's Magazine*, September 18, 1965, n.p.

emphasized that it was Chamberlain's life experiences – all of them – which made him to relatable and beloved amongst audiences. He was simply an honest-to-goodness Maritimer.

Significantly, the expectations placed upon Messer and Chamberlain and their stage persona differed greatly from those of their female partner, Marg Osburne. As a man, Messer could expect to be the band's leader and in charge of many pivotal decisions and as a man Chamberlain could get away with being a bit of a rogue. As a *Jubilee* performer, Osburne was expected to embody convention and to offer a soothing presence. Osburne joined Messer's band in 1947 after he had heard her singing for her local radio station in Moncton, New Brunswick. Osburne blended with the band well thanks to her great versatility, and audiences latched onto her folksy-gospel style.⁴¹ While the very act of performing on television and having a career meant that Osburne was unconventional and challenged the era's constructions of gender, her gospel tunes and her media image as a housewife and mother served to alleviate that tension. A 1963 feature of Osburne in *Chatelaine* magazine, for example, argued that unlike other television singers who were "chic and aloof," Osburne was "a plump and contented homemaker" who could not read music, yet had amassed "the devotion of fans befitting a television queen."⁴² The article was quick to point out that Osburne remained "more interested in her family than in show business."⁴³ Pictured happily grocery shopping with her daughter, Melody, Osburne was portrayed as the ultimate embodiment of motherhood and respectability. "Without dressing, living or acting like a celebrity," the article praised, "she's

⁴¹ Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer*, 49.

⁴² Shirley Mair, "TV's Marg Osburne: The Housewife who Became a Household Word," *Chatelaine*, December 1963, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

managed to become one of the most popular stars on Canadian television.” Furthermore, unlike Chamberlain, Osburne had to be much more careful about her public image which meant her behaviour had to be more guarded. A story relayed in *The Toronto Star* noted that once she had smoked a cigarette in a restaurant where a fan saw her. The fan proceeded to write her “a disappointed letter” which put an end to Osburne smoking in public.⁴⁴ While some critics moaned that she was simply a “frumpy matron,” the media’s idealization of Osburne perpetuated “traditional” gender stereotypes and her repertoire of ballads and gospel standards contributed to *Jubilee’s* wholesome image.

In the program’s ordinariness, a certain “authenticity” was portrayed. Newspaper articles and letters sent to Messer demonstrate that many Canadians valued the simplicity of *Jubilee*. Writing for the *Vancouver Sun* in 1960, journalist Jack Scott argued that:

[*Jubilee*] breaks new ground in several directions, notably in the use of a cast of real people made of human flesh as opposed to those glittering, glamorous, superbly-posed, make believe shadows we normally associate with Televisionland . . . Real people are people like you and me and Don Messer’s Islanders have broken the barrier in bringing them to the small screen. . . He is in short, believable . . . and so strangely wholesome that you just have to see it to believe it.⁴⁵

Other citizens from across Canada were not shy in expressing their enjoyment of *Don Messer’s Jubilee*. In Messer’s personal papers, housed at the Archives of Nova Scotia, are numerous hand-written and typed letters from fans which Messer kept. Many express an appreciation for Messer’s talent and how much they enjoyed his program.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Volkmar Richter, “After a century, Canada still has that old Don Messer soul,” *Toronto Daily Star*, July 1, 1967, 35.

⁴⁵ Jack Scott, “Television,” *The Vancouver Sun*, October 11, 1960, 1.

⁴⁶ Don Messer Collection – Correspondence, Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-132/045.

Apart from the television show, Messer and the *Islanders* also toured across Canada every summer and this helped create an organic, national community of fans who connected with Messer's "authentically Canadian" entertainment. The *Islanders* performed to packed community centres in cities and small towns across Canada and this fortified Messer as a figure of national prominence. As a result, the performers were asked to be a part of Canada's 1967 Centennial celebrations. John Fisher, the Centennial Commissioner overseeing the 1967 celebrations, felt that since "Don Messer and His Islanders have unequalled prestige throughout Canada," it was only natural that the *Islanders* be a part of the year's celebrations by touring across Canada, making seventy stops.⁴⁷ *Don Messer and His Islanders* were included on the Festival Canada program which, according to Fisher, was designed "to help make Canada conscious of its cultures, the talents of its artists and the reasons why we should preserve and develop the arts resources we have." The presence of the *Islanders* on the program was meant to spread "the 'Maritime Message' throughout Canada" so that "a deeper, more meaningful interpretation is being encouraged for our easternmost provinces."⁴⁸ Following the success of Messer's Centennial Tour, many politicians took the opportunity to recognize Messer's success and status amongst Canadians. "Your television show has become a vibrant part of our national life," wrote Arthur Laing, then the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.⁴⁹ "[Y]ours is the type of show which should be heard and seen as widely as possible – one which every member of the family can enjoy, regardless of age," applauded R.N. Thompson, Social

⁴⁷ Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer*, 64.

⁴⁸ Don Messer Collection, *Don Messer's Jubilee Coast to Coast Centennial Tour* (Souvenir Booklet), Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-135/102.

⁴⁹ Don Messer Collection – Correspondence, Arthur Laing, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, January 26, 1968 to Don Messer, Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-132/050.

Credit Member of Parliament for Red Deer, Alberta.⁵⁰ The Reverend Alison MacLean saw Messer as pivotal to keeping “alive the best in our musical past – the expression of our thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. He is soul music carved from the rock from which we have sprung. He is perpetuating the roots of the community life in which he was born and reared.”⁵¹ Responding with his characteristic humility and quiet nature, Messer felt that “Canada has been good to us and the Canadian people have been loyal fans . . . the support of the public is most important in keeping in touch with the present trends and interests while retaining the fundamentals necessary to appeal to the vast audience reached through radio and television.”⁵² For a region that had long been plagued by out-migration, a failing economy, and the feeling that as a region they had very little political influence upon the rest of Canada, the national success of Messer became a matter of regional pride for “down-easters.”⁵³

Despite Messer’s national success, by the mid 1960s the CBC’s many variety programs were lagging in ratings and producers were unsure how to create programs which would appeal to adults and youths alike and attract commercial sponsors. Canadian society was changing quickly, and executives were especially interested in attracting youth as this would ensure the network’s future existence and importance. Executives were concerned with making CBC a competitive network and so aimed to create a trendier programming line-up. In this pursuit, the CBC entered a period of evaluation whereby it re-framed the type of “authentically Canadian”

⁵⁰ Don Messer Collection – Correspondence, R.N. Thompson, M.P., December 29, 1967 to Don Messer, Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-132/051.

⁵¹ Sellick, *Canada’s Don Messer*, 129-130.

⁵² Don Messer Collection, *Don Messer’s Jubilee Coast to Coast Centennial Tour* (Souvenir Booklet), Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-135/102.

⁵³ See for example Gary Burrill, *Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario, and Alberta* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992).

experience it wished to promote. It wanted Canadian content which was youth-oriented, stylish, and seemingly modern. The CBC, therefore, began considering which programs were no longer suitable. Viewer statistics collected from English-speaking viewers regarding the enjoyment, age, and education of viewers collected over a four-week period from September to October, 1965, emphasized that *Jubilee* remained extremely popular.⁵⁴ This meant that Messer had successfully connected with his fan base. The statistics, however, also showed that his fan base was largely made up of an older, conservative demographic. The statistics confirmed what the CBC had already suspected and so when the program was cancelled, the network made it clear that it was because it wanted to attract a younger generation. The CBC's surveys simultaneously confirmed Messer's success and signaled his downfall.

Averaged over this four-week period, *the Ed Sullivan Show* was the most viewed program, pulling in 38% of viewers. This was followed by *Bonanza* with 37%. *Don Messer's Jubilee* pulled in 26% of all viewers making it the tenth most-watched show on CBC, out of a possible twenty-five. Intriguingly, however, 66% of *Jubilee* viewers reported enjoying the program "very much" while only 38% of *Ed Sullivan* viewers claimed the same level of enjoyment. *Jubilee's* 66% was the highest ranking of enjoyment a CBC program received, indicating that those who did watch were loyal supporters and experienced an extremely high level of satisfaction. Even new kid on the block, *The Tommy Hunter Show*, while having slightly more viewers at 28%, only had 50% reporting to enjoy the program "very much," despite the

⁵⁴ CBC Research, English Network TV Audience Panel, "The Week-by-Week Audience to All CBC-TV (English) and CBC and CTV Network Programs and the Extent to Which the Programs were Enjoyed by Those who Saw Them," Library and Archives Canada, RG 41, box 1048. The report explains that the information was collected from the CBC's English network audience panel of some 2000 respondents, "selected on a probability basis to be representative of all persons in Canada with television over the age of 12 who are 'English speaking' – i.e. whose main language of communication at home is English."

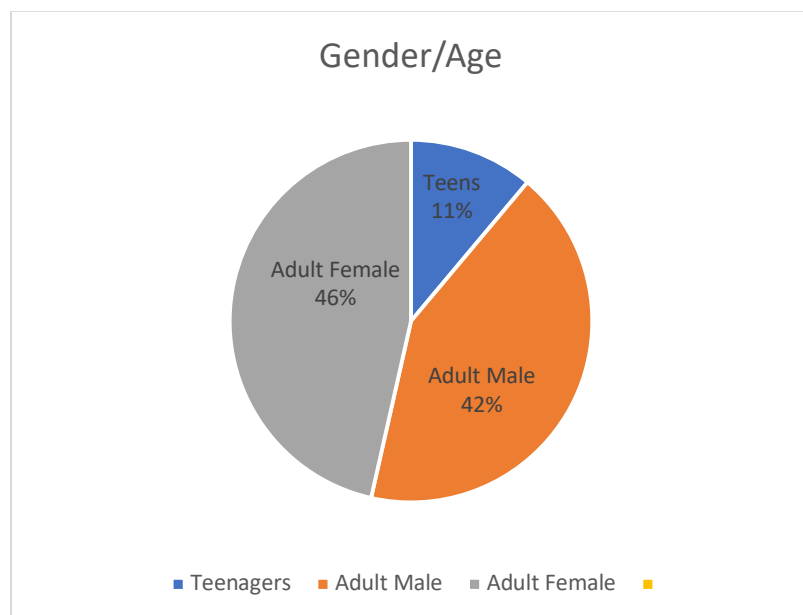
fact the program was meant to be a fresh, updated, country music variety program. The high percent of enjoyment for *Jubilee* fans further implies that viewers liked the consistent formula the show followed. The audience enjoyment of *Ed Sullivan* was more tempered. For example: 38% enjoyed the show “very much” and 34% enjoyed it “quite a bit.” The nature of the two shows was very different as *Ed Sullivan* had diverse acts and types of music every program. Not every show had historic moments that introduced audiences to performers like Elvis Presley and The Beatles who would change the face of music forever. Mixed within these grand moments were jugglers, ballet dancers, plate spinners, and other musical acts and styles that were decidedly less hip. *Jubilee*, on the other hand, was predictable. For those who enjoyed thirty minutes of country, folk, reels and ballads, it was the show to watch.

The audience composition of these programs was dissected as well. Of the 26% of *Jubilee* viewers, 11% were “teenagers,” 42% were “adult males” and 46% were “adult females” (Figure 4.1).⁵⁵ Broken down further into age groups, 28% of viewers were fifty-five plus making this group the show’s audience majority. *The Tommy Hunter Show*’s audience composition did not vary dramatically from *Jubilee*. 13% of viewers were “teenagers” while 42% were “adult males” and 44% were “adult females.” With 13% of viewers being thirteen to nineteen years of age, *Tommy Hunter*’s take on country music pulled in a slightly larger youth audience than *Jubilee*. The highest percentage of viewers, with 23%, were between thirty-five and forty-four years of age. It is unsurprising, however, that in terms of variety programming, it was the *Ed Sullivan Show* which attracted the youth. 20% of *Ed Sullivan* viewers were between thirteen and

⁵⁵ Note: These statistics are somewhat flawed, as this adds up to 99, not 100, meaning 1% is unaccounted for.

nineteen. Predictably, only 17% of viewers were forty-five to fifty-four and 19% were fifty-five plus (Table 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Summary of Audience Composition, *Don Messer's Jubilee*, 1965



Source: CBC Research, English Network TV Audience Panel, "The Week-by-Week Audience to All CBC-TV (English) and CBC and CTV Network Programs and the Extent to Which the Programs were Enjoyed by Those who Saw Them," Library and Archives Canada, RG 41, box 1048.

Table 4.1 Composition of Audience by Age for *Don Messer's Jubilee*, *The Tommy Hunter Show*, and *Ed Sullivan*, 1965

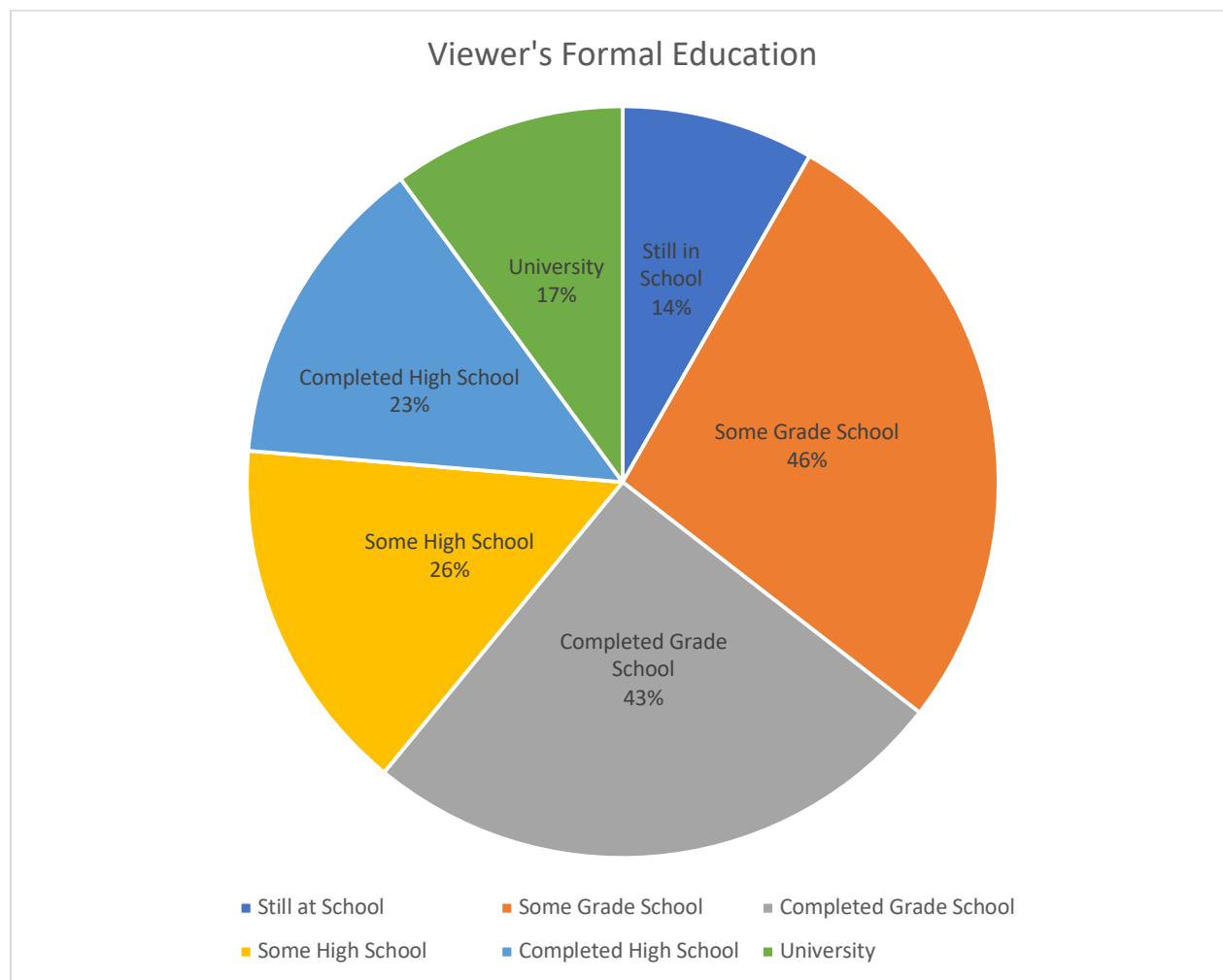
Age Range	<i>Don Messer</i>	<i>Tommy Hunter</i>	<i>Ed Sullivan</i>
13-19	11%	13%	20%
20-34	19%	22%	20%
35-44	22%	23%	23%
45-54	19%	18%	17%
55 & Over	28%	22%	19%

Source: CBC Research, English Network TV Audience Panel, "The Week-by-Week Audience to All CBC-TV (English) and CBC and CTV Network Programs and the Extent to Which the Programs were Enjoyed by Those who Saw Them," Library and Archives Canada, RG 41, box 1048.

Viewers were also divided according to their level of formal education (Figure 4.2). The statistics demonstrate that those with higher levels of formal education were less likely to watch country music variety programming. For viewers with “some grade school,” *Ed Sullivan*, *Don Messer’s Jubilee* and *The Tommy Hunter Show*, in that order, ranked as the three most-watched shows. *The Tommy Hunter Show* and *Don Messer’s Jubilee* decreased in popularity as the audience’s level of formal education increased. For viewers with a university education, CBC’s news and current affairs program *This Hour Has 7 Days* ranked as the most-watched show with *Tommy Hunter* coming in seventh and *Jubilee* ranking seventeenth. For those with “some grade school,” *This Hour Has 7 Days* ranked nineteenth in popularity. Overall, 38% of *Jubilee* viewers had completed “some grade school,” 33% had “some high school,” 17% had “completed high school,” and 22% had a “university” education.⁵⁶ These numbers can likely be explained by considering the correlation between age and education in regard to entertainment preferences. In the 1960s, older Canadians in general had less formal education due to more limited opportunities and the social norms of their generation. As the majority of *Jubilee’s* audience was fifty-five plus, this likely goes a long way in explaining the education level of the show’s viewers.

⁵⁶ Note: Again, these statistics are not entirely accurate, as this totals 169%.

Figure 4.2 Formal Education of *Don Messer's Jubilee* Viewers, 1965



Source: CBC Research, English Network TV Audience Panel, "The Week-by-Week Audience to All CBC-TV (English) and CBC and CTV Network Programs and the Extent to Which the Programs were Enjoyed by Those who Saw Them," Library and Archives Canada, RG 41, box 1048.

Additional audience research done over the month of November 1965 focused on deciphering which specific components of CBC's programs audiences liked. Those who watched *Jubilee* were polled on what components of the show they had enjoyed most. The singing talents of Catherine McKinnon, a native of Saint John, New Brunswick, and a new addition to the show, was ranked first overall by viewers. She was young and fresh with an excellent singing voice. Don Messer's fiddling followed. Close behind, the audience ranked the show's host, Don Tremaine, and the Buchta Dancers as their third favourite component. The CBC's

report on this research noted that the audience's consistently high enjoyment of *Jubilee* was likely because the show varied little in its format, following a consistent performance pattern.⁵⁷ Additionally, the audience's make-up of older individuals reflected that Messer represented an older iteration of country music. His show did not reflect the many changes which had occurred in country music with the splintering of styles and impact of the youth cohort. Likewise, the folk revival of the era which attracted so many of the youth was highly political. Messer's program reflected what had been trendy in the decades before WW II. For older Canadians Messer's version was familiar and clearly cherished but did not reflect changes occurring within the music and entertainment industries.

Importantly, *Jubilee's* portrayal of an "authentic," rural, down-home feel had become equated with Canada's older generation and static entertainment. The CBC was now less interested in capturing an "authentically Canadian" folk tradition. As of 1969, the CBC wanted to foster a young, dynamic feel, to reflect the changes which had occurred in Canada over the 1960s and to attract the attention of the powerful youth cohort. On the morning of April 14, 1969, Messer was handed a telegram while he busily worked at the CBC Halifax studio. The telegram was from Doug Nixon, CBC's director of entertainment programming, informing him that "a necessary change" was "the cancellation of the Don Messer series." Nixon's telegram noted that "the reasoning for this is to inject a fresh new element" into CBC's line-up of Canadian produced television shows. Admitting that "in the past" CBC had "recognized the values of Don Messer" it was time that "a younger look and younger orientation" inform the

⁵⁷ CBC Research, English Network TV Audience Panel, "Audience Enjoyment Survey, November, 1965," Library and Archives Canada, RG 41, box 1007.

network's television line-up.⁵⁸ Almost immediately, published letters and articles of protest appeared in newspapers while the public signed petitions, called and wrote to the CBC, hoping the decision would be overturned.

It mattered that at the time of its cancellation, *Jubilee* was on CBC as opposed to a private, commercially driven network. When examining the outrage expressed by viewers when *Jubilee* was cancelled, people emphasized their dissatisfaction with CBC's apparent dismissal of their personal preferences. The CBC's official statements always emphasized their ability to support Canadian content while shaping the public's taste. The public clearly saw the relationship as an exchange between the broadcaster and themselves. In exchange for their tax dollars the CBC provided entertainment which would accommodate all citizens. When executives cancelled *Jubilee*, they seemed to be defaulting on this bargain. In response to the cancellation, Messer argued that "the CBC directors have forgotten they are public servants and have turned into dictators . . . They're forgetting the public is paying the shot and should have a say in it." Messer felt that *Jubilee* was "a working man's show" and one of the few left on CBC that spoke to this demographic. The CBC was not serving Canadians' tastes and after giving the CBC "the best years of my life" Messer felt "disappointed" and "used" by this turn of events.⁵⁹

It was suggested by many in their statements of protest, that the CBC – in its effort to be modern, fresh, and focused on the youth demographic – was being heavy handed and Toronto-centric. "Why has the Don Messer show been dropped by the CBC?" asked Douglas S. Brown from Saint Martins, New Brunswick. "Does the Ontario oligarchy consider anything from the

⁵⁸ Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer*, 88.

⁵⁹ "Usually Reticent Musician Sounds Off About CBC," *The Chronicle-Herald*, Monday May 26, 1969, 5.

Maritimes passé . . . Or is it just the general arrogance of the CBC – take what we give you and like it? That seems to be their attitude even to the hand that feeds them.”⁶⁰ Fellow entertainer Earl Heywood wrote to Messer directly, stating that he “was not very pleased with the decision,” informing him that CKNX listeners were being encouraged to write to their local M.P.⁶¹ L.B. Sellick, Messer’s biographer, weighed in on the debate, arguing that “the present controversy is not a regional one.” “Rather it is a battle of tastes. It is a question of a group of officials ‘deciding’ what is good for Canadians regardless of the latter’s expressed desires.”⁶² In the eyes of the public, the CBC had some serious explaining to do.

On May 8, 1969, CBC President George Davidson appeared before the Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts where he was questioned by four Members of Parliament, Robert McCleave (Progressive Conservative, Halifax-East Hants), Heath MacQuarrie (Progressive Conservative, Hillsborough, PEI), Walter Dinsdale (Progressive Conservative, Brandon-Souris, Manitoba) and Harold Stafford (Liberal, Elgin-Norfolk, Ontario). Davidson justified the decision on the basis that *Jubilee* had “acquired a certain static character.” More variety on the network was needed and cancelling *Jubilee* made space for new productions from the Maritimes “to show the people of Canada, generally, that the culture of the Maritimes does not consist exclusively of the Don Messer show.”⁶³ McCleave rejected Davidson’s assertion that the controversy surrounded the fact that Messer was from the Maritimes. “I

⁶⁰ “Letter to the Editor from Douglas S. Brown, St. Martins, NB,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 2, 1969.

⁶¹ Don Messer Collection – Archives of Nova Scotia, Miscellaneous File, Letter from Earl Heywood to Don Messer, May, 1969, File: 1998-432/044, #135.

⁶² L.B. Sellick, “The Messer Battle has Just begun,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, Thursday April 24, 1969.

⁶³ Canada. Queen’s Printer. *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts, Bill C-184 and CBC Programming (Don Messer)*, Thursday, May 8, 1969 (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer).

think I would be fighting the battle just as hard if Don Messer were a British Columbian or somebody from the Prairies,” he stated.⁶⁴ As a Nova Scotian, however, McCleave did likely feel that his home region needed defending, as many Maritimers seemed to believe the cancellation was a slight directed at them. While some of the public saw the controversy as a dig at the Maritimes, others took offence at the CBC’s alternative justification, that the show was being cancelled in order to “inject a fresh new element” and “provide a younger look and younger orientation.”⁶⁵

The emphasis on serving the youth reflected the larger cultural shifts of the era. Historian Doug Owsram argues that during the 1950s and 1960s strict barriers were drawn between youths and adults. The cultural changes unleashed by World War II and the impact of the baby boom culminated in this social separation between the young and the old. This separation reached its peak “in the 1960s, when youth not only demanded independence but asserted the primacy of their culture and fashion . . . The 1960s were dominated by the issues and tastes of the young.”⁶⁶ This had significant implications for prevailing conceptions of rurality and rural spaces. Youth culture and the rise of a complex set of ideals made popular by the New Left and counterculture had significantly reshaped perceptions of rurality for a sub-set of youths. Rurality was no longer just conceptualized as the wholesome fun portrayed by *Jubilee* but was complex and politicized. Much of the idealism of counterculture youth hinged upon the rejection of modern, urban society, and its focus on materialism. They were attracted

⁶⁴ Canada. Queen’s Printer. *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films and Assistance to the Arts, Bill C-184 and CBC Programming (Don Messer)*, Thursday, May 8, 1969 (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer).

⁶⁵ Telegram from Doug Nixon, Director of CBC entertainment programming to Messer. Printed in: Sellick, *Canada’s Don Messer*, 88.

⁶⁶ Owsram, *Born at the Right Time*, 311.

to rural simplicity as a way of escaping the materialism they had grown up with. During the late 1960s there was a broad exodus of this youth sub-set who sought alternative lifestyles by joining communes or going “back to the land,” establishing pockets of counterculturalists in rural areas, bringing their politics and ideals with them. Sparsely populated rural areas in British Columbia and the Maritimes, for example, became a haven for both Canadian and American youths seeking to escape modernity and start anew. They built homesteads and communes, shielded American draft-dodgers, and established schools and food co-operatives, drawing upon the key elements of the era’s idealism. Importantly, such developments meant that conceptions of rurality were splintered during this era. While some people saw rurality as an adherence to “conventional” values like family, hard work, and political conservatism, these radical youths took to the country as a way of rejecting “conventional” values, and rural spaces provided them with the opportunity to establish their earthly utopias.⁶⁷

Such changes provided country music with a newfound relevance. Country music had suffered under the British Invasion’s domination of the pop charts in the mid-sixties. The “Nashville sound” had become outdated. The relationship which developed between country music and the folk revival helped reinvigorate the genre, making it seem more in-tune with the youth cohort. The need to play upon rural stereotypes to evoke authenticity had become unnecessary and country music grew in sophistication. Changes in how rurality was defined, combined with the youth’s focus upon music as a form of protest, greatly affected both folk and country music. The impact of figures such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez had infused the folk

⁶⁷ Kathleen Rodgers, *Welcome to Resisterville: American Dissidents in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014) 5, 9. Also see: Sharon Ann Weaver, *Making Place on the Canadian Periphery: Back-to-the-Land on the Gulf Islands and Cape Breton*, Ph.D. Thesis: University of Guelph, 2013.

revival with great relevance and the popularity of this revival had led to the appearance of pop-folk as a mainstream alternative. Importantly, the popularity of folk styles during this decade affected country music in that the genre developed a reciprocal relationship with the folk revival as both borrowed from each other.⁶⁸ Hence, performers such as Gordon Lightfoot forged relationships with country stars like Johnny Cash wherein they would draw inspiration from and cover each other's material. These developments enabled country music to thrive and broaden so that by the late 1960s Nashville became a hip recording destination for non-country performers such as the Byrds, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, and George Harrison. Working with the city's versatile musicians, such artists blended their folk, rock, and pop styles with country elements, creating new "cross over" styles such as country-rock, and the Nashville scene grew and greatly diversified.⁶⁹ With these many changes, both country and folk music had been re-shaped into something new, pushing aside previous iterations, such as Don Messer's.

By 1969, Messer was sixty-years-old and still focused on his pursuit of the "traditional." He was not interested in changing his musical style and his show did not reflect the many shifts which were occurring, not only politically and socially, but within the entertainment industry as well. Messer knew that musical tastes changed and reasoned that "music goes in cycles. . . a fad like rock n' roll and other mod stuff will come along but . . . it doesn't last like the classical music and the old-time country and western music . . . Folk music I am sure will continue on."⁷⁰ Throughout his career, Messer avoided songs that could be seen as rebellious, believing that

⁶⁸ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 281.

⁶⁹ *Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press, 2015), 17-19.

⁷⁰ Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer*, 138.

music was not meant to be used as a form of protest.⁷¹ This attitude certainly contradicted the opinions held by many baby boomers who used music more than any other medium to make their political opinions known. In maintaining his focus upon “old-time” country and folk music – what had been popular in the decades before WW II – Messer’s style became quite static and, by industry standards, *Jubilee* was admittedly out of date in the context of the late 1960s.

Don Messer’s Jubilee was further affected by changes occurring at the CBC. In 1968, CBC president Joseph-Alphonse Ouimet was replaced by George Davidson, who would hold the post from 1968 to 1972. As well, Doug Nixon had become the director of entertainment programming. The dwindling appeal of CBC’s many variety programs had inspired executives to re-evaluate a number of these programs which were either overhauled or replaced entirely. “CBC Toronto was engaged in a general kind of house-cleaning to retire or spruce up or replace existing shows and stars,” argues historian Paul Rutherford.⁷² *Country Hoedown*, for example, had been losing audience numbers and this did not change, even after the show was given better sets and new writers were brought in to produce more sophisticated sketches and dialogue. The show’s regular performers were made uneasy by these changes and ultimately, *Country Hoedown* was replaced in the Fall of 1965 by *The Tommy Hunter Show*.

CBC’s new country music programs purposely avoided the rustic, country aesthetic and instead produced a “respectable” country show that was up to date with industry trends.⁷³ *Tommy Hunter* was a much more youthful program which reflected the pop-country style

⁷¹ Sellick, *Canada’s Don Messer*, 140.

⁷² Rutherford, *When Television was Young*, 216.

⁷³ “Tommy Hunter Show, The,” *TV Archive*, accessed August 31, 2017, http://www.tvarchive.ca/database/18832/tommy_hunter_show_the/details/.

coming out of Nashville. The new program showcased Canadian country stars alongside big-name American performers visiting from Nashville. Unlike *Country Hoedown* or *Don Messer's Jubilee*, the sets were colourful with bright lights and performers generally dressed in the elaborate rhinestone suits which were popular at the time. New shows were also being introduced in an attempt to suit the plurality of audiences. It was in this push to update and re-energize CBC's variety programming that *Jubilee* was placed on the chopping block to make way for *Singalong Jubilee*, which had been *Jubilee's* summertime replacement when the show took a filming break. *Singalong Jubilee* featured a large cast of young Canadian performers and the informal set featured not haybales but small nooks and crannies that created the intimate feel of an urban Yorkville coffee house. The cast included Anne Murray and *Jubilee* favourite Catherine McKinnon. The performers were certainly younger and the music they played reflected the folk revival of the era, featuring renditions of folk, country, spiritual, and popular songs. The CBC's decision to cancel *Jubilee* was clearly not a flippant choice, nor was it the only program targeted. *Jubilee's* cancellation was part of a larger strategy on the part of the CBC to create a trendier and hopefully appealing broadcast schedule. The outcry which arose following *Jubilee's* cancellation on April 14, 1969, was no doubt surprising but, admittedly, CBC could have handled the situation more effectively. Claiming that *Jubilee* needed to be cancelled in order to give the broadcast schedule "a younger look and younger orientation" earned the CBC little favour amongst many fans.⁷⁴

The cancellation quickly became a politicized issue as supporters argued that the cancellation was a direct threat to what they viewed as "authentically Canadian" content, and

⁷⁴ Sellick, *Canada's Don Messer*, 88.

modest, wholesome entertainment more generally. Placing the cancellation in the context of the late 1960s, it is important to remember that many political changes were in progress at the time of the cancellation. For example, homosexuality and abortion had been decriminalized and liberation movements for women, the gay community, and Indigenous people were beginning. Furthermore, the cultural radicalism of the long-haired hippie was highly publicized by the media, giving the impression that all youths thumbed their noses at authority and “tradition.”⁷⁵ A number of Canadians had been made uncomfortable by such changes, believing they challenged “traditional” family values, and some audience members found reassurance in the “wholesomeness” of *Don Messer’s Jubilee*. What *Jubilee* represented, however, had become outdated to many members of the population as well as the entertainment industry.

The many letters of protest which appeared in newspapers and magazines made it clear that fans were fuming, believing that the cancellation was a slap in the face for wholesome entertainment, and relied upon arguments of the show’s “authenticity.” Don Messer is “a true depiction of our Canadian culture,” wrote Mrs. E. Marjorie Miller from Kings County, New Brunswick.⁷⁶ For Mrs. John R. Peters of Glouster County, New Brunswick, the cancellation revealed that “things are wrong in human behaviour and morals.”⁷⁷ An editorial in Saint John’s *Telegraph Journal* relied upon the expert opinions of the Miramichi Folk Song Festival executives who, relying upon an older definition of “tradition” which cherished historical accuracy, argued that the show was “genuine folk culture.” The article noted that the pleas to

⁷⁵ Paul Litt, *Trudeaumania* (Vancouver & Toronto: UBC Press, 2016), 47.

⁷⁶ “Letter to the Editor from Mrs. E. Marjorie Miller, Kings County, NB,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 3, 1969.

⁷⁷ “Letter to Editor from Mrs. John R. Peters of Clifton, Glouster County, N.B.,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 2, 1969.

save Don Messer came “not only from the cracker-barrel gang in the country store” but from such cultural experts as well. “Almost nobody wants the Don Messer show kept on – nobody except the people,” it concluded.⁷⁸ “We have enough of this other noise which the younger generation speak of as music to go with the dances that came out of the jungle . . . we of the older generation who appreciate good old toe-tapping music and lively old songs, please leave us the Don Messer show,” an anonymous fan from Blackville, New Brunswick, wrote to *The Telegraph Journal*.⁷⁹ “Personally, I think some of the tripe that is showing on TV is not fit for a man or a beast . . . [*Jubilee*] is a stabilizer in a time of unrest,” argued a fan from Moncton, New Brunswick.⁸⁰ “It is a pity that we old people won’t just drop dead and then you could get juveniles on all your programs and be happy,” wrote a more dramatic protester from Toronto, Ontario.⁸¹ Other fans protested that “*Singalong Jubilee* is not a substitute good enough” while others lamented that in place of *Jubilee* they would get “a band of long-haired folks.”⁸² A fan from London, Ontario, questioned the emphasis on youth programming “when they would not be sitting watching TV anyway, and especially not on a Friday night at 8:30 p.m.”⁸³ Why not then just change the program’s air time?

Such comments highlight two key issues. First, fans took the cancellation personally. CBC’s initial goal behind variety programming had been to create programs that produced a bond between audience members and the performers. *Don Messer’s Jubilee* epitomized this

⁷⁸ “Editorial Content,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 2, 1969.

⁷⁹ “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in Blackville, NB,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 2, 1969.

⁸⁰ “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in Moncton, NB,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, Thursday, April 24, 1969.

⁸¹ “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in Toronto, ON,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, Thursday, April 24, 1969.

⁸² “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in Tiverton, ON,” and “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in Port Coquitlam, BC,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, Thursday, April 24, 1969.

⁸³ “Letter to the Editor from Anonymous in London, ON,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, Thursday, April 24, 1969.

goal by inviting viewers to join them on Monday evenings and encouraging them to send in their song requests. The bond was further enhanced by the *Islanders'* yearly tours and public appearances. The audience had invited Messer and his *Islanders* into their homes first via radio every week, and for the past ten years through television. For the CBC to then step into a family's living room, into their personal space, and declare that *Jubilee* was no longer welcome clearly irked viewers' sense of agency. Their personal tastes and preferences were under attack by the very media source their tax dollars supported. That sought-after bond between viewer and performer was now proving a major thorn in the CBC's side. The fact that CBC was a public entity and meant to serve the tastes of all Canadians remained a persistent argument against the decision.

Secondly, arguments against the cancellation epitomized the belief amongst viewers that Canada's "authentic" values and culture were under attack, reflecting the fact that *Jubilee's* "authentically Canadian" narrative had been firmly accepted by the program's fan community. *Jubilee* had come to represent Canada's folk heritage and in that was found wholesome family values which could stand against the era's seemingly loosened morals. Take for example a one-page advertisement printed by the *Sudbury Star* which implied that should *Jubilee* go off the air, "traditional" values – "Canadian" values – would be replaced with sex and violence. The advertisement juxtaposed two images: one of an over-turned car swarmed by a crowd of rowdy teenage boys, and the other an image of the full *Jubilee* cast posing together on set. The advertisement asked, "Which do you prefer? Too often in this fast-moving world of today, we find sex and violence replacing our Canadian culture." The advertisement featured a coupon that could be clipped out and sent to the local Member of Parliament by readers, to

demonstrate their objection to the cancellation. "In the interest of good Canadian programming," the advertisement argued, "DON'T LET IT HAPPEN!!!"⁸⁴ Further protest was led by folk dancing champion Gilles Roy, fiddling champion Graham Townsend, and singer Carol Kennedy who led a "Fiddle-in" on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Performing largely to an audience of RCMP officers, their goal was to constantly remind the House of Commons of the issue. Additional "Fiddle-ins" were also held in front of CBC's Toronto and Halifax headquarters (4.2 and 4.3). Politicians took up Messer's cause on behalf of their constituents. New Brunswick Liberal Premier Louis J. Robichaud wrote to CBC President George Davidson asking for the show to be saved arguing that there was "no reason why people should be deprived of a program they thoroughly enjoy and approve of."⁸⁵ Both the Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia Legislatures passed a resolution calling on the CBC to reconsider its decision. William C. Scott, Progressive Conservative M.P. for Ontario's Victoria-Haliburton district, wrote on behalf of his constituents directly to CBC President Davidson "over the arrogant and disgraceful treatment meted out to the Don Messer Show." Scott argued that over the years *Jubilee* had "contributed a great deal to Canadian radio and television and to the country itself" and was "one of the few shows that provides wholesome entertainment and which has been able to attract a large following without falling back on the obscenity and offensiveness . . . that is levelled at us today from our tv screens." While the maintenance of such values may not have mattered to the CBC, Scott persisted that "there are still people in this country who really appreciate good, clean

⁸⁴ *The Sudbury Star*, May 3, 1969, 15.

⁸⁵ "Premier Writes to Corporation," *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 1, 1969, n.p.

entertainment and those people pay as much as any other group of the taxes that are poured into the maintenance of the CBC.”⁸⁶

The matter was debated in the House of Commons from April to June of that year where it became clear that, at least officially, the CBC was less concerned with “authenticity” and more focused on having a youthful appeal. On April 25, Progressive Conservative M.P. David MacDonald (Egmont, PEI) asked that the CBC explain, “What attempt was made to assess the importance to the viewing public of the Don Messer show prior to its cancellation?” Parliament was informed that “one of the factors taken into consideration was the gradual decline in the size of the audience . . . another factor was the age structure of the Don Messer audience.”⁸⁷

The matter was again brought up on May 27, by Progressive Conservative M.P. Robert McCleave (Halifax East-Hants), who asked the CBC, “How many individuals have expressed their (a) approval, (b) disapproval, of the CBC’s decision?” The CBC stated that:

As of May 27, letters and petitions written directly to the CBC protesting the Don Messer cancellation totaled approximately 8,130. Letters and petitions approving the cancellation totaled approximately 80. Telephone calls totaled approximately 1,475 protesting the cancellation and 50 approving it. The CBC has also received some 13,000 pieces of mail . . . [from other sources] including the CRTC, Members of Parliament, newspapers and private stations.⁸⁸

The voice of those who supported the CBC’s decision was much less emphasized and difficult to ascertain, but in response to the parliamentary debates, Mr. Robert Stanbury, Parliamentary Secretary to the Secretary of State, encouraged a more nuanced discussion, stating:

I would like the honourable member to withdraw the suggestion that the villains of this piece in Toronto are trying to take something away from Halifax. On the contrary, they

⁸⁶ Don Messer Collection – Correspondence, Letter from William C. Scott, M.P. to Victoria-Haliburton to George Davidson, CBC President, April 24, 1969, Archives of Nova Scotia, File 1998-132/065.

⁸⁷ Canada. Queen’s Printer. *Minutes of Proceedings, House of Commons*, April 25, 1969, (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer).

⁸⁸ Canada. Queen’s Printer. *Minutes of Proceedings, House of Commons*, May 27, 1969, (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer).

seem to be trying to inject new life into Halifax because they advise me that the purpose of this change of programming is to provide that time slot with a somewhat younger look and orientation. They tell me that they recognize the great contribution made by the Don Messer program over the years, and they hope that the new program “Singalong Jubilee” will inspire the same kind of support and approval.”⁸⁹

Such statements urging for calmer heads to prevail were few and the idea that *Jubilee* needed to remain on air in order to support the maintenance of wholesome values and “authentic” Canadian culture continued to be argued by various politicians. While some Liberals became involved in the debate, it was largely members of the Progressive Conservative Party, a great many of them from ridings in the Maritimes, who fought the strongest. It is particularly telling that former Conservative Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker, then a Member of Parliament, also came to Messer’s aid by addressing the House of Commons. As the defender of “Old Canada,” Messer represented Diefenbaker’s image of Canada, a Canada which, he argued, still existed for many. Described by the *Telegraph-Journal* as an “Old Firehorse . . . snorting angrily,” Diefenbaker asked the house why “a show as popular as the Messer show” was “being denied to the people of Canada by these individuals who prefer revolutionaries?”⁹⁰

Valorized as an “authentic” piece of Canadian folk culture, many fans were ultimately shocked by the CBC’s cancellation of *Don Messer’s Jubilee*, believing it was an affront to audience tastes and “Canadian” values. Playing upon Nova Scotia’s cultural identity as a region and people who embodied “traditional” folk values, *Jubilee’s* place on CBC television had ensured that a majority of Canadians were exposed to this narrative. This access served to turn Messer and his *Islanders* into figures of national prominence and the values projected by

⁸⁹ Canada. Queen’s Printer. *Minutes of Proceedings, House of Commons*, May 27, 1969, (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer).

⁹⁰ “Editorial Content,” *Saint John Telegraph-Journal*, May 1, 1969, n.p.

Jubilee were accepted by many fans as being “authentically Canadian.” Thus, the fabricated narrative and image came to be understood as the “real thing.” By 1969, however, *Jubilee* had become outdated to many viewers and the entertainment industry more generally, reflecting the many social changes which had affected Canada over the 1960s. *Jubilee*’s portrayal of an “authentic,” rural, down-home, Canadian existence became linked to Canada’s older generation and static entertainment. To remain competitive, the CBC was significantly less interested in capturing an “authentically Canadian” folk experience, and instead, wanted to foster a young, dynamic feel to attract the interests of the powerful youth cohort. While *Jubilee*’s cancellation was certainly not a pointed attack on traditionalism by the broadcaster, the event came to symbolize for many audience members the anxieties felt by citizens during a period of great change. While it is unlikely that the CBC could ever have predicted such an outcry over its verdict, the irony lies in the fact that while it stuck to its decision, *Jubilee* was picked up by CHCH-TV, an independent station in Hamilton, Ontario. It was a private broadcaster that came to the aid of citizens to save a cherished piece of Canadian content. The show continued to air until Messer’s death in 1973.

Illustration 4.1 Marg Osburne, Don Messer, and Charlie Chamberlain, 1966.

Credit: Photo used courtesy of Library and Archives Canada and Robert C. Ragsdale, FRPS.

Source: Don Messer Collection, Nova Scotia Archives, accession no. 1998-132 vol. 071 no. 246



Illustration 4.2 A “Fiddle-In” staged at CBC Halifax Headquarters. Employees made song requests throughout the day. Source: Don Messer Collection, Nova Scotia Archives, 1998-432/044 #128



Illustration 4.3 A “Fiddle-In” staged at Parliament Hill. Source: *The Ottawa Citizen*, Wednesday, April 23, 1969, 21.



Chapter Five

A Cowboy Philosopher: The Rise of Stompin' Tom Connors

On a Saturday night in 1973, in a room decorated like an old barn, with smoke hanging in the air, men and women socialized at the Horseshoe Tavern on Toronto's Queen Street West. Migrants from the Atlantic provinces, folks who had driven in from Sudbury or Timmins, university students, blue collar workers, and recent arrivals from Jamaica sat in the shadowy tavern with easy access to the stage, joined together for that evening's entertainment. The stage they looked upon had hosted some of Nashville's biggest stars and kick-started the careers of many up-and-coming Canadian performers. Known as "Nashville North," it was the best joint in town to hear live country music. In 1973, the stage was regularly occupied by Stompin' Tom Connors, one of the most successful acts the Horseshoe ever hosted, drawing in large crowds and setting attendance records.¹ The scene was gritty in comparison to the wholesome aesthetic of *Don Messer's Jubilee* or Heywood's *CKNX Barn Dance*. Always dressed in his standard black cowboy hat and boots, Connors smoked and drank beers with audience members between sets. Stomping a half-inch plywood board to spare the stage floor when he performed, he sang songs about the things he had seen, the work he had done, and his version of Canadian history.

Stompin' Tom Connors positioned himself as both a patriot and a rebel, a tension which he did not work to resolve, but instead found useful over the course of his career to prove his "authenticity." Connors' music had a rawness to it which set it apart from the more polished country music of the late 1960s and 1970s. With his low voice and guitar to provide rhythm,

¹ John Saxton, *Across This Land*, (Toronto: Cinepix, 1973).

Connors' sound was quite simple. He introduced his famous stomp to help him deal with louder venues and over the course of his career he used an eclectic mix of instrumentation which emphasized the diverse influences which had shaped country music in Canada. His clothing choices, public statements, interviews, publicity photos, and later his autobiography, all worked to position him as being an ideal speaker for Canada's "common man." The songs he penned often glorified "ordinary" life and involved male protagonists who worked hard, took pride in their labour, and affirmed their self-worth through their labours. This established Connors' portrayal of a heroic-working-class masculinity which was further solidified by his play upon "the rambler" trope, a figure with a long history within country music which had been popularized by Jimmie Rodgers in the 1920s, Hank Williams in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and by the Outlaw movement led by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings in the 1970s. "The rambler" actively disregarded social conventions and could therefore convey "a working-class fantasy of liberty from the constrictions of work and a nostalgia for the [assumed] individualism of rural life" lost to the conventions of modernity.² In this sense the arbitrary nature of the "working-class" label was emphasized, for Connors found fans in metropolitan Toronto, small towns and rural enclaves, college students, factory workers, and immigrants, proving that anyone could internalize the inherent tension of nostalgia for rurality versus urban industrialism. Within this framework, Connors' rurality relied upon symbols of folk culture and populist rhetoric. It appealed to many audience groups who idealized country music as a continuation of folk culture, representing a simpler era free of the impacts of modernity. Such

² Leigh H. Edwards, *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 12.

characteristics positioned him as an “authentic” country music star. Furthermore, his assumed authenticity enabled Connors to claim that he spoke for the nation when he argued that more needed to be done to support Canadian musical performers. His “Canadian-ness” became pivotal to his career as he established himself as an industry outsider, claiming to reject the rules established by Nashville and Canada’s broadcasters, and disparaging those in power who did not actively defend Canadian talent. His message that Canada was worth singing about became influential to industry members, other performers, and fans, because Connors always appeared honest, down-to-earth, and committed to his message. In a word, he always appeared “authentic” and this transformed him into a “Canadian” hero.

Connors had a hearty respect for “tradition” and incorporated himself into the lineage of Canadian country stars like Wilf Carter and Hank Snow. Under Connors, however, a part of Canada’s country music narrative morphed into something much more politically radical, and anti-American, than was traditional. The emphasis upon the open range and bronc-busting disappeared as Connors’ songs reflected instead the reality of Canada’s working people and celebrated aspects of life in Canada. By the 1970s, ambivalence within the country music industry regarding its assumed rural past grew substantially. The country music industry had by this time discovered that producing music which had a vague identity and no overt regional traits ensured the music had the widest possible appeal amongst consumers. In many ways, this was a season of change and revolt as the splintering of styles continued to impact the industry. Some performers and fans protested country music’s “dilution” and continued emphasis on “cross over” appeal. In contrast, the Outlaw movement, which became popular in the 1970s, was fueled by a “rocking anti-Nashville stance” and fans viewed these performers as “tradition-

minded rebels who could save country music from pop dilution.”³ Connors, likewise, argued against Canadian broadcasters’ requirements that in order to receive airtime, country performers had to emulate Nashville’s standards. He argued that Canadian broadcasters and industry members should “encourage songwriters to write about our people and our places.”⁴

Connors’ image and career were also affected by the fact that many media outlets in the 1970s began treating country music with a newfound seriousness, leaving out references to “hillbillies” and “corn.” The contemporary meaning and relatability of the music was emphasized instead.⁵ Journalist Dick Brown, for example, noted in *The Globe and Mail* that “country music has changed and so has its audience.” “Country music fans have shed that image they used to have as a bunch of hillbillies,” he continued, “[T]he Country Music Association warns [country music radio stations]: Don’t instruct your announcer to ‘sound country.’ There is no reason for deejays to take on a phoney accent, or drawl, because they’re programming country music.”⁶ The need to play upon rural stereotypes to evoke authenticity had been outgrown and this was partly to do with the perception that the music itself had grown in sophistication. Stars such as Kris Kristopherson – a Rhodes scholar with a Master’s degree in English Literature – seemingly elevated the genre. Brown further referenced the influence of Johnny Cash’s *At Folsom Prison*. “The record made Cash – and a good deal of country music – not only acceptable but, in many circles, fashionable. A lot of college kids suddenly accepted it,” Brown argued. According to Brown, this helped explain Connors’

³ Barbara Ching, *Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 120-121.

⁴ Judith Fitzgerald, “Canadian radio lets down our stars,” *The Toronto Star*, February 16, 1992, C1.

⁵ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 369-370.

⁶ Dick Brown, “The Horseshoe Tavern Had Faith,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 14, 1973, A 33.

popularity with university students. “Today, performers like Stompin’ Tom Connors play to university audiences across Canada. Stompin’ Tom knocks the kids out with a sort of reverse sophistication,” he reasoned.⁷ Like Cash, Connors’ rough edges suited counter-cultural tastes and the rebellious attitudes of youths alongside working-class audiences. Connors was not entirely free from media condescension, however, as some commentators believed that he was nothing more than a novelty act. A January 1973 review of his performance at Massey Hall in *The Toronto Star*, for example, described him as a “hapless, Canadian, country hick” who had somehow managed to “stomp his way into Canadian hearts” with his “crazy, corny, funny way.”⁸ “Letters to the editor” from fans took offence at these comments. Maribel Conover, from Mississauga, argued that “it is infuriating that writers continue to call him corny, repetitious, and gawky. Come on city sophisticates, let’s stop knocking our country approach – learn something and join in the fun. It’s an all-Canadian party.” John Neville from Toronto took “strong exception” to the article, stating that it was “a condescending, insulting, put-down of Connors himself, and a snide comment on the sensitivity and music appreciation of his many fans.” Anyone who had seen him perform “could attest to the fact of Connors’ originality, creativity, artistry, timing, and popularity.”⁹

Connors became a household name to Canadian country music fans while roaming through Ontario’s small towns and northern cities, such as Peterborough and Timmins, and especially during his time at Toronto’s Horseshoe Tavern. At the time, the Horseshoe Tavern

⁷ Dick Brown, “The Horseshoe Tavern Had Faith,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 14, 1973, A 33.

⁸ Marci McDonald, “Stompin’ Tom Connors has stomped his way into Canadian hearts,” *The Toronto Star*, January 20, 1973, 49.

⁹ “Stompin’ Tom is an Artist,” *The Toronto Star*, February 2, 1973, 7.

was considered *the* place to perform country music, not only in Toronto, but for Canada as a whole. His time there helped to establish Connors as a rising country music star. Under the ownership of Jack Starr, the tavern had opened in 1947 on the edge of Toronto's garment district, then a scruffy, working-class neighbourhood. Like other bars in the city, Starr faced resistance from clergy members when he applied for a liquor license, but he eventually received one and set up an affordable drinking and eating establishment.¹⁰ Starr's intention was to serve Toronto's blue-collar workers and those considered "outsiders" who were not a part of the social elite.¹¹ It had not been Starr's intention, however, to make the tavern a major country music destination. Starr himself was not a huge country fan but the country acts he booked always packed the tavern, especially with Canadians who were originally from the East Coast provinces.¹² The venue became known as "Nashville North" and a regular tour stop for top country acts such as the Carter Family, Johnny Cash, Conway Twitty, and Loretta Lynn. Discussing his success with *The Globe and Mail*, Starr argued that "country music was not a socially acceptable genre" when the tavern opened in 1947, and so it "provided an escape for country music lovers."¹³

"Everybody who was a country fan and who landed in Toronto for any reason, either by plane, car, bus, or train, for any length of time, sooner or later wound up paying a visit to the Horseshoe," Connors later reflected, explaining why he so desperately wanted to be a part of this scene.¹⁴ Connors finally mustered up the courage to audition for Jack Starr in November,

¹⁰ David McPherson, *The Legendary Horseshoe Tavern: A Complete History* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017), 20-22.

¹¹ McPherson, *Legendary Horseshoe Tavern*, 20-22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³ Dick Brown, "The Horseshoe Tavern had Faith," *The Globe and Mail*, April 14, 1973, A33.

¹⁴ Stompin' Tom Connors, *Stompin' Tom Connors and the Connors Tone* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2000), 33.

1968. Starr offered Connors a week-long gig playing with the Horseshoe's new house band. His performance won over Starr and the Horseshoe's regulars, earning him another gig there, this time for three weeks. Connors developed a great rapport and friendship with Starr and continued to play regularly at the Horseshoe until the mid-1970s. He played at other country venues in the city such as the Edison Hotel and the Matador, but his commercial growth was largely connected to his time at the Horseshoe. Landing this gig provided Connors with exposure, a fair pay-check, and a growing legion of loyal fans who would regularly pack the venue to capacity. Importantly, it was at the Horseshoe that he was approached by Jury Krytiuk, a representative from Canadian Music Sales. Krytiuk signed Connors to CMS's label, Dominion Records, which gave Connors better record distribution, industry representation, and royalties. His first album with Dominion, *Bud the Spud and Other Favourites*, was released in 1969. Krytiuk helped Connors facilitate his recordings and substantially expanded his audience by breaking into the urban market.¹⁵

After signing with Dominion, Connors' image changed little, and he maintained some of the traditions and constructs of country music. His stage outfit of a black cowboy hat, boots, and vest, for example, continued the tradition of cowboy images in country music. Such contradictions emphasize the dualism of his career in that he was both a trendsetter and a traditionalist. His digs against Nashville homogeneity served to set him apart from his contemporaries and reiterated his rebellious attitude and "rambler" persona. With his sound, lyrics, rhetoric, and visual image, he managed to carefully balance a number of theoretically

¹⁵ William B. Echard, "Approaching Stompin' Tom: An Overview of the Early Works of Tom C. Connors" MA Thesis, York University, November 1994, 15-16 and Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 43.

opposing elements, such as his ability to be both serious and silly, traditional and inventive.¹⁶

Such creative tensions led to a unique performer persona.

These contradictions can clearly be seen in his stage wear, performance traits, sound, instrumentation, and lyrics. Initially, Connors played small, often run-down hotels in Toronto and struggled to book anything bigger. “No matter how hard I tried, I could never seem to land a half decent job in downtown Toronto,” Connors lamented in his memoir. His friends suggested that the problem was how he dressed and presented himself. “You’re always approaching these people in jeans, looking like a farmer . . . but when you’re in the big city you should probably do like the rest of us . . . If you had a suit and a nice white shirt and tie, you could probably be a lot more successful,” his friends argued. Connors was not convinced; he was a country singer and did not “intend to walk around looking like some kind of city slicker.” When Connors next auditioned, he wore a suit, and as he suspected the effort did not pay off. The owner he auditioned for assumed that Connors’ performance style would be of the Engelbert Humperdinck persuasion. Connors’ suit and style of music did not add up and the hotel owner was not impressed.¹⁷ After signing with Dominion, Connors was typically seen in public wearing his black cowboy hat and boots, a long-sleeve shirt, and usually a vest. In fact, he was so committed to this uniform that he refused to remove his hat when he performed for Queen Elizabeth II in Ottawa in 1973. His hat was likened to a religious head piece in order for the concert to proceed.¹⁸ His outfit stood out because of its plainness and it made Connors

¹⁶ William Echard, “Inventing to Preserve: Novelty and Traditionalism in the Work of Stompin’ Tom Connors,” *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 22 (1994), 12.

¹⁷ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 30-31.

¹⁸ Sandra Martin, “Canada’s troubadour sang of everyday lives,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 9, 2013, n.p.

seem more in-tune with the working-class men he sang about. The uniformity of these clothing choices worked as a form of branding to create a consistent and reliable – and by extension, his “authenticity” – image for his fans.¹⁹

Connors’ decision to sport cowboy gear – despite its connection to the American West, American country music, and “Western” images more generally – purposely connected him to the lineage of country music, linking him to the likes of Wilf Carter and Hank Snow. As a Maritimer who held anti-American sentiments, Connors would not have wanted to emphasize the American aspects of this clothing. The fact that Connors wore a cowboy hat and boots reflected the fabricated traditions of country music as by this point, the hat had become accepted as an “authentic” wardrobe piece for all country performers. Again, it was more important that Connors authenticated himself as a continuation of the lineage established by earlier country stars, like Wilf Carter. Connors avoided the more elaborate rodeo tailoring which Earl Heywood had dressed in. With the exception of his hat and boots, Connors’ clothing projected the image of an ordinary working man more than a cowboy, but those accessories were distinctive and helped draw attention. Connors admitted that he purposely wore these clothes in order to make himself stand out.²⁰ Furthermore, his choice to wear a black hat, instead of white, made it loud and clear that he stood in solidarity with working men. Wilf Carter and Earl Heywood wore white hats to symbolize that they were “good guys” and in tune with the fantasy of the Wild West. Connors’ decision to wear black reflected the shifting ideals

¹⁹ Echard, “Inventing to Preserve,” 13.

²⁰ *Morningside*, CBC Radio, Dec. 27, 1988.

of certain segments of country music which were more politically outspoken and pro-labour.²¹

Collectively, Connors' stage wear achieved much in that it continued the tradition of cowboy images in country music while being simple enough so as not to separate Connors from his audience. It played upon the tension between "tradition" and "trendsetter."

Connors' very utilitarian stage wear also informed his performance traits and sound. At the start of every concert he would lift up his plywood stomping board to show his audience, and again at the end, he would lift it up to make a point of dumping off the sawdust. Reflecting on this performance tradition in 1988, he told CBC radio:

I knew very early in my career that there was no way I was going to get people into a hotel door by standing there and singing like the rest of the people. I had to do something different. And, so, let's say the boot and the board got them in the door. Because people talk. They say, you should come and see this guy ripping boards apart, and the sawdust flies everywhere and it's into your drink and it's in your clothes and it's all over the place and you can go up and get a matchbox full of sawdust just to prove to people that this happened, and all this kinda thing.²²

Connors' use of the stomping board certainly attracted attention, but it also had the practical element of saving the stage floor and carpets from his foot stomping which enabled him to keep time.

In terms of his sound, Connors' creative tension between the "traditional" and the "trendsetter" resulted in a unique hybrid sound which positioned him as an "authentic" country performer. Connors' sound reflected the impact of Wilf Carter, who was his hero as a boy. Connors' singing voice was fairly low and while he did not yodel, he relied upon a simple,

²¹ This approach was most famously used by Johnny Cash who wore black in order to draw attention to the issues facing the American population, particularly the Vietnam war, poverty, and racial inequality (Edwards, *Johnny Cash*, 18).

²² *Morningside*, CBC Radio, Dec. 27, 1988.

straightforward style of singing and guitar playing, like Carter had before him. He used little varied repetition, and his guitar playing had little ornamentation as it was meant to provide the rhythmic background. When he began playing in larger urban centres, his instrumentation changed somewhat, as he incorporated the electric guitar and stand-up bass.²³ The instrumental style of his recordings varied somewhat from his live performances. Scholar William Echard notes that Connors' "instrumental style on records features a careful balancing of diverse influences and tendencies and results in a hybrid that is difficult to characterize . . . Stompin' Tom's style refers to, and re-enacts, traditional models, but introduces much invention and imaginative recombination." In his recordings, Connors also utilized a wide variety of instruments – such as the mandolin, banjo, electrified music, and background vocals – which expanded his sound and style beyond the impact of early influences, to include various aspects of the country music genre. In this sense, Connors' music highlights the various influences which have shaped country music in Canada.

Connors wrote lyrics which were uncomplicated, reflected his own extensive travels across Canada, and celebrated the ordinariness of working Canadians, believing that there was pride to be found in their labour. Therefore, like others before him, he selected locally relevant topics and places but he relied upon slang, low humour, and his rebellious attitude. In doing so, Connors' lyrics worked to authenticate him to his audience and relayed his creative tension. Songs such as *Sudbury Saturday Night* and *Bud the Spud* showcased Connors' admiration for the labour of ordinary citizens. In *Bud the Spud*, for example, Connors used a common theme in

²³ Echard, "Inventing to Preserve," 16, 18.

country music: revelry in the lifestyle of working men.²⁴ Connors emphasized that truck driver Bud took pride in his work. Bud was optimistic as he was “rollin’ down the highway smilin’” trying to be in Toronto on time to deliver the spuds on the back of his rig. Evading the Ontario Provincial Police who “don’t think mucha Bud” because he had “been rippin’ the tar off the 401,” Bud was a likeable fellow just trying to deliver “another big load of potatoes.”²⁵ Other songs, such as *Tillsonburg*, emphasized that Connors himself had done hard physical labour. Recounting his time picking tobacco on a farm in the Southwestern Ontario town, Connors conveyed that his “back still ached” when he heard the word, “Tillsonburg.” This lyrical focus on “ordinary” working people helped establish Connors as a type of musical rebel; his use of slang, regional accents, and references to “gettin’ stinko” on a Saturday night, transformed Connors into a seemingly authentic representative of this way of life by proving that he understood it and stood in solidarity with those who lived that reality. As he told *The Globe and Mail* in 1971, “I’ve done these jobs, I’ve lived with them. There’s not one guy from the working class can come up to me and say, look here, Tom, you’re full of crap.”²⁶

Connors’ constructed a heroic working-class masculinity that further authenticated him to fans. He presented himself as a “man’s man.” Connors’ men were truckers, miners, labourers, in essence, hard-working men who enacted a version of physical masculine pride. His

²⁴ Country music has a tradition of truck-driving songs which reflect the genre’s preoccupation with “working men’s songs” which celebrated the lives of working men. These songs can be traced back to Ted Daffan’s 1939 song, *Truck Driver’s Blues*, but they became more common following Dave Dudley’s 1963 hit, *Six Days on the Road* (Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 319-320).

²⁵ *Bud the Spud* was the first of Connors songs to receive national attention and when he returned to Prince Edward Island in 1971 to perform the song at Charlottetown’s Old Home Week, he was met with tears and pandemonium (Marok Starowicz, “Stompin’ Tom: Once a Drifter Playing for Chimes, He Sings About Canadian Cities With Love,” *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 13, 1971, p. 31).

²⁶ Marok Starowicz, “Stompin’ Tom: Once a Drifter Playing for Climes, He Sings About Canadian Cities With Love,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 13, 1971, 31.

insistence on the dignity of these men and his celebration of them spoke of Connors' embodiment of a heroic working-class masculinity that could resist the impacts of modernity and class discrepancy. In contrast, Connors' lyrical portrayal of women positioned them as either a type of angelic sweetheart or the source of the male protagonist's problems. Connors' *Red River Jane*, for example, tells the tale of a man left high and dry in Winnipeg by a "fast" female:

Red River Jane that's her name
 69 rip-off lane
 I must have been insane to play her game
 But crazy fools have got to learn
 Country boys gotta get burned
 And I blew my mind and my money in vain
 And I blew my past on a fast Red River Jane²⁷

Red River Jane is quite a different character from Connors' *Bonnie Belinda*, described as the "purest of maidens." In other cases, women were defined by their ethnicity, such as *My Little Eskimo*, which ensconced the female protagonist as an exoticized ethnic "other."²⁸ In his songs about love and women, therefore, Connors' relied upon many of the "traditional" stereotypes long used by country music.

His heroic-working-class masculinity was further authenticated by his play upon "the rambler" trope, a male figure who resisted societal expectations and broke free from the constrictions of paid labour. Connors achieved this through his emphasis upon his own nomadic, hand-to-mouth lifestyle which he had lived in the days before he had begun making a steady income with his music. His many songs about ordinary people and the towns they lived

²⁷ Stompin' Tom Connors, "Red River Jane" *The North Atlantic Squadron*, Boot Records, 1975.

²⁸ Stompin' Tom Connors, "Bonnie Belinda," *My Stompin' Grounds*, Boot Records, 1971 and "My Little Eskimo," *Bud the Spud and Other Favourites*, Dominion Records, 1969.

in filled Connors' catalogue. Songs such as *Tillsonburg*, and his cover of Hank Snow's *I've Been Everywhere*, positioned him as a man who worked hard but was free to live life on his own terms. It was in that freedom that the working-class could live out the fantasy of being free from the constrictions of paid labour, whether it was at a construction site, a mine, or a farm. It was in Connors' freedom to ramble that he could be seen as heroic.

Connors also actively worked to connect with his audience by portraying himself as an honest, down-to-earth fellow who understood his audience because he himself had experienced the same challenges and set-backs they had. He typically achieved this by relying upon populist rhetoric during his live performances, a technique which had long been used by country music performers.²⁹ Connors knew that a sure-fire way to attract an audience was to sing a song about where he was, tell corny jokes, and encourage his audience to shake hands and get to know each other. With his rhetoric, he emphasized the idea that his audience formed a collective group and it was "them" against the world. His audience members were "the people" and Connors juxtaposed them against anyone who would try to tell them they weren't worthy of celebration.

Across this Land with Stompin' Tom Connors: Live at the Horseshoe Tavern – a 1973 concert film which was commercially released – demonstrates that effort to connect with his audience in order to authenticate himself to them. Connors was aware, for example, that many of his fans at the Horseshoe were his fellow Eastern Canadians and they were feeling a little homesick and out of place in Toronto. In response, he told "Newfie" jokes which were met with

²⁹ Neil V. Rosenberg, "Country Music – Popular or Folk?" in *All that Glitters: Country Music in America*, ed. George H. Lewis (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 158.

huge smiles and claps and he sympathized with their hopes that they would find economic security in Ontario. He paused between songs to tell his audience about when he too had “first come up from P.E.I to seek my fortune in Ontario where all the gold bricks were supposed to be laying on the street.” Yet, he found disappointment because he “never had no money, nothin’ in me pockets except wind and patches in me pants.” Such stories helped Connors commiserate with his audience and prove that he was one of them. To show sympathy he played songs like *Old Atlantic Shore*, a sentimental song he wrote about a man hoping to return “to old Halifax” and the girl he left there. “I’m coming back home, never more to roam, from the old Atlantic shore,” he sang.³⁰

It was ultimately his patriotism and image as an “authentically Canadian” performer, however for which he became most famous. This was manifested most vehemently in his loud cries that more needed to be done by the state and broadcasters – really anyone who had a stake in the music industry – to nurture Canadian performers and keep them within the nation’s borders. Mickey Andrews, Connors pedal steel player, remembered that “no matter how hard [Connors] tried in those days, he couldn’t get airplay. They wanted their music to sound like what it sounded like in Nashville.”³¹ In response, Connors chose to play the rebel in conjunction to Nashville dominance, similar to other country artists, such as the Outlaw movement, which spurned the Nashville scene as being too mainstream. This emphasizes how

³⁰ This song appeared on the album, *Bud the Spud and Other Favourites*, Dominion Records, 1969. See Greg Marquis’ article, “Confederation’s Casualties: The “Maritimer” as a Problem in 1960s Toronto,” *Acadiensis* 39, no. 1 (January, 2010): 83-107, for more information on East Coast out-migration and the Toronto response.

³¹ McPherson, *Legendary Horseshoe*, 58.

splintered country music was more generally in that there were various formats and constructed traditions which could be followed.

The biggest hurdle holding back Canadian talent in the realm of country music, according to Connors, was the attitude of broadcasters and record labels who assumed that if the music was not produced in Nashville, then it was not “authentic.” This discontent over the lack of support for domestic talent shown by the industry at home ultimately shaped the direction of Connors’ career as he loudly reprimanded anyone who did not support Canadian talent or the nation more generally. Why did the national origins of the music being played on the radio or performed on television even matter? For Walt Grealis, a Toronto music publisher who co-established the industry trade magazine *RPM* in 1964, national origin counted. Grealis argued that the origin of the music played on the radio or being sold in a record shop mattered because if a tune was not already popular in the United States, it was not being heard by Canadians. This was shutting domestic talent out of the market and undermining the development of a Canadian recording industry.³² According to Grealis, “the biggest problem facing the development of a music scene was . . . the ‘apathy of broadcasters,’ . . . [a] promotion man would take in a Canadian record [to a radio station] and they’d throw it into the garbage right in front of him.”³³ In the years before he signed with Dominion Records, Connors himself had struggled to get his material on the radio, getting no traction in his efforts to establish a career for himself. Connors had been told by executives and record companies, on multiple occasions, that his material was not commercial enough to sell. “They’d tell me that

³² Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 139-140.

³³ *Ibid.*, 140.

the type of songs you're singing, they're not hit parade material, they don't compare in any way with the Nashville sound . . . and therefore your songs will never go anywhere," Connors told CBC Radio in 1973.³⁴ Connors' argued that this attitude pushed singers and songwriters to the United States, "leaving Canada much poorer, culturally," he argued.³⁵

Connors was determined to stay in Canada and became his own public relations man working even harder at shaping a distinct image. He used "vanity pressing" services and became his own public relations man. Connors' band members recollected that between sets at the Horseshoe Tavern he would use the time to connect with his audience and promote himself. He'd have a beer or two, chat, and sell his self-commissioned records. He remembered everyone's name and at the end of the night, "[he] stood by the front door, as if he owned the place, thanking them for coming as they left."³⁶ Connors arose at the same time as Gordon Lightfoot and both used Canadian places and people to produce popular songs. Lightfoot's gentler touch seemed to endear him to the music establishment which quickly turned him into the darling of "Canadian" music. While Lightfoot was a poetic, erudite singer who could satisfy high-brow tastes, Connors' rhymes and bathroom humour led many industry members and critics to peg him as a low-brow entertainer. Connors took this rejection and the argument that his simple lyrics made him a mere novelty act and ran with it. In 1969, without telling anyone, Connors spent all the money he had to have nineteen billboard advertisements put up around Toronto which read, "Help Stamp Out Stompin' Tom." Mickey Andrews revealed that each billboard cost Connors approximately seven-hundred dollars. "You didn't know how to take it

³⁴ *Cross Country Checkup*, CBC Radio, February 11, 1973.

³⁵ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 150.

³⁶ McPherson, *Legendary Horseshoe Tavern*, 55.

[the message] . . . it created a big thing about him because they wouldn't play him on the radio."³⁷

It is important to note that Connors' pro-Canada stance occurred during a period of heightened anti-Americanism. Historian Brian Bow has noted that anti-Americanism has "a long and colourful history in Canada" dating back to the arrival of United Empire Loyalists following the American Revolution. Since that time, anxieties about American influence have constantly been in flux depending on economic and political conditions. During the late 1960s in particular, many Canadians looked upon their southern neighbour with anxiety due to the racial conflict, urban violence, and political corruption which American society was experiencing. Bow argues that a "renewed anxiety in Anglophone Canada [arose] about the need to shelter the country's distinctive national culture from the tidal wave of American ideas and values."³⁸ Conflicting opinions regarding America's involvement in the Vietnam War also spurred on anti-American sentiment, creating the perception that the very fabric of America was "inclined to an aggressive and self-destructive foreign policy." The general public grew to mistrust American influence economically, politically, socially, and culturally. By the early 1970s, Bow argues, this mistrust and a "general perception that the two countries' values and purposes were diverging" led many Canadians to support Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's move to distance the nation from the influence of American culture, politics, and economics and pursue a more "independent" path.³⁹ The message of many of Connors' songs combined with his open

³⁷ McPherson, *Legendary Horseshoe*, 58.

³⁸ Brian Bow, "Anti-Americanism in Canada, Before and After Iraq," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2008), 347.

³⁹ Bow, "Anti-Americanism in Canada," 348.

hostility towards Nashville, and the general image of him as a champion for all things Canadian, placed him neatly within this impulse to protect “Canadian” culture and reject American influence.

Connors took the promotion of Canadian talent seriously and was willing to put his money where his mouth was when he started Boot Records on January 1, 1971. The company was formed with Jury Krytiuk, who had first signed him to Dominion Records, as well as Doc Williams, an American country performer, and T. St. Clair Low, the president of Canadian Music Sales. They set up shop in a four-room apartment above a Bathurst Street bakery in Toronto and the company became a distributor for both Canadian and American music.⁴⁰ The focus, however, was on the distribution of Canadian material both at home and globally. Connors’ goal with Boot Records was to create a label unlike any other company in operation at the time and one that was concerned with mining for Canadian talent. “I’d like to help keep some young singers and musicians from having as tough a time getting started as I did, and I’d like to promote Canadian talent,” he told *Maclean’s* magazine about the venture.⁴¹ “We were looking for people who had their own original songs,” he wrote in his memoir, “there wasn’t much point in putting artists on the label who were only interested in playing the music from Nashville.”⁴² Connors did not explicitly define “authenticity” but appears to have defined it upon the requirement that an artist identified themselves as “Canadian” and was largely working within the nation. He signed a wide variety of artists, including Inuit singer-songwriters Willie Thrasher and Charlie Panigoniak; the Irish-Canadian group, Larry McKee and the

⁴⁰ He also established Cynda, a budget label, and later in 1986 he established A-C-T (Assisting Canadian Talent).

⁴¹ Alden Nowlan, ‘What’s More Canadian than Stompin’ Tom? *Maclean’s Magazine*, August 1972, 44.

⁴² Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 123.

Shandonairs; and Canadian favourite, Ian Tyson. Nothing was considered “untouchable, unapproachable or without merit.”⁴³ This included Liona Boyd, a classical guitarist, who was signed by Connors to Boot Records for her first album, 1974’s *The Guitar*. “It was Tom’s vision obviously,” Boyd recalled:

[A]s I understood it, he wasn’t really a fan of classical music but he had heard Canada had no classical label, which was absolutely true. So bless him, he went and decided he’d be the first one. . . It’s like me deciding, “Well listen, maybe I don’t know much about rap, but hey Canada doesn’t have a rap label, I’ll go and do it.” So he was a bit of a pioneer with classical music.⁴⁴

While Connors hunted for new talent, it was important to him that his role in the company remained a secret. He held a fifty-one percent share and therefore had final say on all decisions. He did not feel, however, that he could maintain his “down-to-earth country boy” persona if people found out that he was in fact a “big wig” owner.⁴⁵ This would, presumably, challenge his “authenticity.”

Connors credited his commitment to creating and encouraging “authentically Canadian” music to an encounter he had early in his career when he was working in Timmins, Ontario, at the Maple Leaf Hotel in 1964. His time at the Maple Leaf Hotel was a major turning point for his career. He became a popular attraction at the hotel’s bar and stayed for fourteen months. A local radio announcer, Nick Harris at CKGB, invited Connors to sing for the station and encouraged him to make his own demo record. He paid to have a “vanity pressing” completed, and sold his records in the local music stores and by mail order. In 1965, Stompin’ Tom records

⁴³ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 197.

⁴⁴ Jane Stevenson, “Love for Stompin’ Tom Connors went beyond Canada’s borders,” *The Toronto Sun*, March 7, 2013, 6.

⁴⁵ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 118.

outsold the Beatles, in Timmins at least.⁴⁶ It was while playing at the Maple Leaf Hotel that Connors met a group of teachers from the audience who had recently returned from an exchange program in Germany. It proved a providential encounter. While sharing a beer together, the teachers relayed to Connors that amongst their group of international teachers, they would often be asked to sing songs from home. They could never think of anything besides *O Canada* or American songs they were familiar with from listening to the radio. Connors claimed they were amazed that he had so many songs about Canada and they wondered “why hadn’t the Canadian population at large even noticed how few songs there were about their own country?”⁴⁷ Connors argued that this encounter inspired the patriotism he became famous for: “Before that night, I guess I had always written songs because they held a personal interest for me. But from then on, I began to see how my songs could have special meaning for the people of the whole nation.”⁴⁸

Over the course of his career then, Connors did not become “authentically Canadian” by accident. By his own designs, he chose to remain in Canada, demonstrating loyalty to his fans and thumbing his nose at the Nashville establishment. “A lot of people have been asking me, hey Stompin’ Tom, why don’t you ever sing one of them nice Nashville songs?” he told his audience while filming, *Across this Land*. “Well I only got one answer for them. When them nice Nashville fellas start singin’ my songs, I’ll start singin’ their songs.”⁴⁹ This anti-establishment chip on his shoulder gave him a marketable element of notoriety which increasingly drew an

⁴⁶ Connors, *Before the Fame*, 446.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 453.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 454.

⁴⁹ John Saxton, *Across This Land*, (Toronto: Cinepix, 1973).

audience. In turn, Connors' reliance upon Canadian people, places, and themes for his songs demonstrated that there was a desire amongst consumers for songs that were considered "authentically Canadian." "My ambition? I guess you could say it's to sing Canada to the world," he told *MacLean's* in 1972.⁵⁰ Observers were not immune to the national fervor Connors could stomp up. "I never thought that nationalism was so deeply ingrained in this country until the first time I saw Connors at the Horseshoe," journalist Marok Starowicz wrote in *The Globe and Mail* in 1971:

I've seen a packed crowd go wild over a singer before, but I've never, never seen so much unrestrained joy and applause as when this rumpled Islander got up and started strumming . . . The Toronto subway has ads coaxing and begging people to see a Canadian play at the St. Lawrence Centre, or come to Stratford, and the CRTC's debating Canadian content, and this beer hall on Queen Street has people going crazy in it and a lineup around the block.⁵¹

Through his lyrics, Connors made it clear that *his* Canada was made up of ordinary, working people. To him, Canada was a working country with grit and citizens who were not afraid to get their hands dirty.

To Connors as well, Canada was a nation of regions. Historian Tina Loo has aptly pointed out that Connors' focus on particular places reflected the arguments made in the 1960s by historians Ramsay Cook and Maurice Careless.⁵² Cook and Careless reasoned that Canada's many "limited identities" was nothing to bemoan. Canada's identity was defined by its

⁵⁰ Alden Nowlan, 'What's More Canadian than Stompin' Tom? *Maclean's Magazine*, August 1972, 31.

⁵¹ Marok Starowicz, "Stompin' Tom: Once a Drifter Playing for Climes, He Sings About Canadian Cities With Love," *The Globe and Mail*, November 13, 1971, 31.

⁵² Tina Loo, "Class Act," *Canada's History*, Jun/Jul 2013, 23, Ramsay Cook, "Canadian Centennial Celebrations", *International Journal*, XXII, 1(Autumn 1967), 659-63, J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities' in Canada", *Canadian Historical Review*, 1 (March 1969), 1-10. Reprinted in J.M.S. Careless, *Careless at Work: Selected Canadian Historical Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 281-91.

“heterogenous pluralism.” Regional, ethnic, and class differences made the country unique.

Cook and Careless later questioned the soundness of their argument but this tension of regional versus national identities remained a persistent debate. Looking at Connors’ music, it is clear that *his* Canada was a nation of regions. That simply was the way Canada worked and he did not seem to think that this was detrimental to the strength of Canada’s unity. By using the tried and tested method of singing about various Canadian locales he felt he was singing *for* Canadians – directly to them – and in the process, he incorporated specifically regional content into the broader Canadian country music canon.

Connors had a particular fondness for folklore and history and so many of his songs called upon iconography that diversified country music’s typical icons and celebrated Canada’s regional diversity. In particular, he incorporated seemingly distinctive Canadian iconography alongside “the cowboy.” His lumberjack songs were a prime example. The presence of lumberjacks in Canadian country music was not uncommon. The 1930s Toronto-based group *George Wade and his Cornhuskers* occasionally dressed as backwoodsmen and Don Messer began his radio career in Saint John under the name “the New Brunswick Lumberjacks.” Islander Charlie Chamberlain became known as the “Singing Lumberjack,” to *Don Messer’s Jubilee* fans, because of his experiences working in New Brunswick’s lumber camps. Connors tapped into this tradition, not by dressing the part, but with songs that highlighted the enduring position of lumberjacks in Canadian culture through folklore and history. In his 1973 concert film, *Across this Land*, Connors sang *Canadian Lumberjack* in both French and English whilst dedicating the song to any French-Canadians who might have been in the audience. With his lyrics, Connors directly tackled the cowboy’s monopoly over country music:

If I Sang about a saddle with a lasso and a gun,
 You'd think about a cowboy beneath the prairie sun
 But I sing about a pine tree with a bucksaw and an axe
 I sing about a big man, the Canadian Lumberjack⁵³

While the mythology of the cowboy and the Wild West had long attracted Canadian audiences, the lumberjack, likewise, had become a figure of cultural significance and imbued as a character of consummate masculinity. Advertisements, media, literature, and academic writing such as A.R.M. Lower's *The North American Assault on the Canadian Forest*, established the lumberjack as a folkloric hero, a man of intense strength and grit, within Canadian culture.⁵⁴ With *Canadian Lumberjack*, Connors played on the image of the "happy workin' bushman" who was "born to live, by the big bold axe." He also introduced audiences to the legendary French-Canadian lumberjack Joe Montferrand (Joe Mufferaw in English) with his song, *Big Joe Mufferaw*. A man of super strength and size, he could paddle fast, put out forest fires (with balls of his spit), and "beat the livin' tar" out of twenty-nine men. With this song, Connors used an "authentically Canadian" ideal to expand the iconography of country music. Admittedly he was not always politically correct in his pursuit of the "authentically Canadian," with songs such as *Muk Tuk Annie* for example, but he consistently strove to celebrate the diversity of Canada's regions and create music that could be construed as "Canadian." When he performed these songs, they often connected with audience members who were familiar with these tales and destinations. Journalist Marok Starowicz noticed the effect this had on listeners when he attended a

⁵³ Stompin' Tom Connors, "The Canadian Lumberjack," *Bud the Spud and Other Favourites*, Dominion Records, 1969.

⁵⁴ A.R.M. Lower, *The North American Assault on the Canadian Forest* (London: Greenwood Press, 1938).

Stompin' Tom Connors performance in 1971. "Connors mentions the name of a town in a song, say Kirkland Lake, and an entire table at the left rear roars and pounds and cheers," he wrote.⁵⁵

Music scholars argue that exposure to music which features references to specific places can increase the geographical and cultural awareness of the nation.⁵⁶ Connors' first original album, *Northland's Own* from 1967, featured sixteen songs. Only five of these titles did not specifically invoke "Canada." Six songs referenced specific towns or cities in their titles: *Movin' on to Rouyn*, *Algoma Central No. 69*, *Streets of Toronto*, *The Peterborough Postman*, *Sudbury Saturday Night*, and *Little Wawa*. Five others invoked Canadian symbols or imagery: *Northern Gentleman*, *Goin' Back Up North*, *Emily the Maple Leaf*, *The Flying C.P.R.*, and *The Maritime Waltz*. Connors believed that "we view our jobs, our towns and our lives as drab until we hear someone sing about them. I like to make people's towns and work and their country come alive for them. When I'm on stage I like to see the looks on peoples' faces when I mention their towns - - wow!"⁵⁷ Popular American music had always made use of place-naming. Nashville, for example, filled the country music canon while references to California defied genre, from the Mamas & the Papas *California Dreamin'* to the Beach Boys' entire catalog. Canadian performers have traditionally not used the place-naming practice to nearly the same extent. Part of this has been tied to the preferences of record labels which assumed that if Canadian performers were

⁵⁵ Marok Starowicz, "Stompin' Tom: Once a Drifter Playing for Climes, He Sings About Canadian Cities With Love," *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 13, 1971, 31.

⁵⁶ Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

⁵⁷ Brent Hagerman, "There's no place like home! Just ask Stompin' Tom," *The Globe and Mail*, Monday October 16, 2000.

to succeed in the American market, references to Canadian places would not be understood.⁵⁸

Connors addressed this issue in his memoir, *The Connors Tone*:

When people ask my advice about how to make it in the music business I ask them, do you have a love for the people you are writing about or do you just want to get played on the radio? If so, then do what the industry tells you to do and go to Nashville or New York or L.A. If not, then write for the people so they will hear about themselves.⁵⁹

Connors believed that it was his “authentically Canadian” content, found in the tales he spun with his lyrics, which caught people’s attention. For example, he was conscious of his popularity with university students, telling journalist Jack Batten that “the kids are getting turned on with my stories.” “It isn’t music I’m selling,” he maintained, “It’s stories and happenings . . . and the kids like that.” He continued to tell Batten about his experiences touring England and Ireland:

I went on a tour of England and Ireland a little while ago, and the thing the audiences liked about my songs over there was that they were informative. The songs tell about Canada, and plenty of people came backstage and told me they’d learned more about Canada from listening to me than from reading a history book on the subject.⁶⁰

Despite these new audiences and opportunities to tour, Connors reiterated to Batten his disinterest in performing in the United States. “[The] Grand Ole Opry – I hardly care if I play there,” Connors told Batten. “For one thing, you don’t need it any more to be a success in country music. For another thing, it’s not like me – I’m Canadian and it’s American.”⁶¹

Significantly, Connors snubbed anything “American” and his support for all things “Canadian” could be highly divisive. His ideals were not universally accepted; audiences tended

⁵⁸ Brent Hagerman, “There’s no place like home! Just ask Stompin’ Tom,” *The Globe and Mail*, Monday October 16, 2000, n.p.

⁵⁹ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 175.

⁶⁰ Jack Batten, “C and W seeking a new audience,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 5, 1972, 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

to either love or loathe this “East Coast blue-collar cowboy.”⁶² Consider for example his appearance on CBC’s *The Tommy Hunter Show* on October 1, 1971. By chance, this episode was sent to a broad spectrum of CBC employees to review the talent and production value of the show. Many individuals commented on Connors’ performance. Andy Body, a choreographer for *The Tommy Hunter Show*, gave a positive review of the show’s talent but when it came to Connors, Body commented: “well . . . he’s a nice person.” “I guess people dig his down-home foot stompin’ numbers” but he “always looks like he needs a bath.” John Malloy, director of TV sales, felt that Connors did nothing to enhance the program and felt that he did not interview well, advising that “interviews or conversations with someone like Stompin’ Tom should be avoided.” Set designer, Bob Hackborn, in contrast, wrote that, “Stomping Tom Connors epitomizes Canadian folk-art form – came through as a natural honest personality.” Bill Hartley, a head writer for *The Tommy Show* also sang Connors’ praises, arguing that Connors had, “certain folk hero qualities about him . . . in some ways he is like Johnny Cash and deserves that sort of larger-than-life, man-in-black, dramatic visual approach.”⁶³ By the mid-1970s these types of opposing views increasingly surrounded Connors. His rough-and-tumble rebel persona established him as more than just a country singer, as some audiences regarded him as a folk hero, the ultimate country music rebel. Others, however, suggested that he simplified politics, relied upon “low” humour, and occasionally entered xenophobic territory with his brand of “Canadian-ness.”⁶⁴

⁶² Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond, *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada, 1996), 210.

⁶³ Programming, Tommy Hunter, 1970-1973, “Internal Evaluation, October 1, 1971,” Library and Archives Canada, RG41-B-I-5.

⁶⁴ William B. Echard, “Approaching Stompin’ Tom: An Overview of the Early Works of Tom C. Connors” MA Thesis, York University, November 1994, 100.

Connors' rally cries for the support of "Canadian" music placed him at the centre of a major controversy in 1973. That year was a big one for Connors: he played for Queen Elizabeth II, won that year's "Country Album of the Year" Juno award, and married Lena Walsh, whom he had met while performing at the Prince Edward Lounge in Prince Edward Island.⁶⁵ It was also the year that Connors ruffled many feathers when he refused to perform at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) alongside Charley Pride. Pride was one of few African-Americans who had found success in the country music industry and he was a hot-ticket item at the CNE. At the time, Pride was the best-selling performer for RCA Records since Elvis Presley and CNE organizers likely understood that he would be a big draw. Connors had initially been delighted by the offer to share the stage with Pride, but the deal turned sour when Connors learned that Pride would be paid thirty-five thousand dollars while he would receive three-thousand five-hundred dollars. Connors would barely break even on the performance. He viewed this wage disparity as an insult to all Canadian musicians. Should the CNE not feel some responsibility to support home-grown talent? By 1973 Connors had three gold records and had just won his third Juno award; CNE executives claimed Connors was an "unknown" and they suggested that the real issue was racial prejudice towards Pride. That was the last straw. Connors refused the contract outright while the issue continued to be debated in the media.⁶⁶ The dispute demonstrated Connors' willingness to engage in controversy in order to highlight what he saw was the unfair treatment of Canadian talent and was a sign of future controversies to come. His

⁶⁵ Connors and Walsh were married on November 2, 1973. The marriage was televised on CBC's, "Elwood Glover's Luncheon Date." Some argued it was a tasteless publicity stunt but Connors told the *Toronto Daily Star* that getting married on television gave everyone across the country who supported him a chance to be a part of his life on this special day (Marci McDonald, "Stompin' Takes a Bride – And 2 Million Watch on TV," *Toronto Daily Star*, November 3, 1973, A3).

⁶⁶ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 245-254.

cries for support, however, did not rouse the changes Connors hoped to inspire. No Canadian performers openly spoke out in support of Connors' stance.

Following this commotion, the media became increasingly critical of both Connors' music and opinions.⁶⁷ "It's great to see Canadians so happy to cheer a Canadian performer (it was not always so), and Tom's musical patriotism is fine – as long as it stops short of demanding a Canadian birth certificate from every performer," an article in *The Globe and Mail* argued following a Stompin' Tom concert in 1974. "Tom is entitled to sing what he prefers – which is to say, 100 percent Canadian material – but his old cry that he won't sing Nashville songs until Nashville sings his is meaningless," the review concluded.⁶⁸ "We know, of course, that you don't judge Connors as a conventional musical talent – you judge him as a phenomenon," journalist Jack Miller quipped in *The Toronto Star*, "but even with that reservation, he wasn't a very phenomenal phenomenon, for starters."⁶⁹ Journalist Blaik Kirby took exception to Connors' version of nationalism, feeling it was "heavy-handed" and outdated:

Stompin' Tom Connors knows his audience by now – all the people who feel they're the abused, hard-slugging common herd. And he caters to them so shamelessly that he is rapidly becoming a caricature . . . Connors is, of course, heavy-handed – or heavy-footed – at the best of times. He solicits applause by mentioning home-town place names. A little notice paid to Tillsonburg or Sudbury or PEI is bound to bring a response. It identifies him as the arch-Canadian country-folk singer, of course, but by means of a dated, hackneyed and devalued stage trick. His Canadianism shouldn't be delivered in such a tattered old parcel.⁷⁰

The media's growing willingness to question Connors' construction of "Canada" and what being "Canadian" meant, highlighted a key discrepancy in Connors' music and rhetoric,

⁶⁷ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 245-254.

⁶⁸ "7,500 Fans Clap, Cheer and Stomp for Canada's Musical Nationalist," *The Globe and Mail*, August 5, 1974, 13.

⁶⁹ Jack Miller, "A Painful Journey with Stompin' Tom," *Toronto Daily Star*, September 27, 1974, E9.

⁷⁰ Blaik Kirby, "Connors Curries Favour Shamelessly," *The Globe and Mail*, June 4, 1975, 14.

namely, his belief in the myth of Canadian unity. The image of Connors as a down-home, honest, and authentic Canadian performer seemed to give him the necessary credentials amongst his fans to claim that he represented “Canada.” His push for unity, however, was not all inclusive. Historian Daniel Francis argues that “the myth of unity” is a “core myth” which has become engrained in Canada’s culture and national identity.⁷¹ “The belief that there is one Canada sharing not only the same territory but also the same sense of itself as well,” is engrained in Canada’s historical narrative and is continually used by politicians to deal with conflict. Since Quebec’s Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, however, this myth has steadily become harder to sustain. The assertions of both Quebec nationalism and the Indigenous population have demonstrated the cracks which exist in the fabric of Canadian society making it difficult to maintain the long held “myth of unity.”⁷²

Music scholar William Echard has pointed out that Connors’ lyrics assumed that the people he sang about were united by shared feelings and experiences; there was no room for dissenting voices. By assuming that all people shared a common understanding of basic emotions, Connors argued that all Canadians understood each other and lived in harmony. “This faith – in the ability of simple common emotions to unify people and provide a common base for understanding and community,” Echard argues, “is absolutely central to Connors’ work and rhetoric.”⁷³ A number of his songs, throughout his career, assumed that people were proud

⁷¹ Francis, *National Dreams*, 108.

⁷² Ibid., 108.

⁷³ William B. Echard, “Approaching Stompin’ Tom: An Overview of the Early Works of Tom C. Connors” MA Thesis, York University, November 1994, 101.

to live in Canada and were bound together by their shared citizenship. His song, *My Stompin'*

Grounds, from 1971, assumed that all Canadians were friends:

Just take a little piece of PEI and old Saskatchewan
Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, way back in Newfoundland
Alberta and Manitoba
Ontario and BC
And you'll have found the stompin' grounds of all my friends and me

We found people in this here land that would help a guy along the road
Some of them lived in the country
And others lived in town
But these are the people that made me proud
To say this is my Stompin' Ground

His sentiments had not changed by 1993 with the release of *Canada Day, Up Canada Way*:

O Canada, standing tall together!
We raise our hands and hail our flag;
The maple leaf forever!⁷⁴

Such songs have served to make Connors' music and opinions accessible to a wide variety of people, however, they have also perpetuated a national mythology. In Connors' estimation, Canadians could have unique regional qualities, but core "Canadian" values held the country together. Such concerns highlight the ambiguous nature of Connors' career. What was consistent throughout his career, however, was Connors' belief that music and nationalism were intimately entwined, and Canada's musical establishment was failing in their duty to further the growth of Canadian talent. Nowhere was this more evident than in Connors' protest against the Juno Awards.

⁷⁴ Stompin' Tom Connors, "My Stompin' Grounds," *My Stompin' Grounds*, Boot Records, 1971 and Stompin' Tom Connors, "Canada Day, Up Canada Way," *Dr. Stompin' Tom, Eh . . .?*, Ole Media Management, 1993.

In Connors' estimation, "authentically Canadian" talent lived and worked in Canada and such dedication was to be praised and rewarded appropriately. The Juno Awards began as the *RPM Gold Leaf Awards* in 1964. Award winners were selected by the readers of *RPM Magazine*, and in 1971, the awards were renamed after Pierre Juneau, the first CRTC chairperson. The goal was to raise public awareness and recognition of Canada's musical talent. In 1975, the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (CARAS) was formed to manage the annual awards ceremony. Voting became reserved for members of CARAS and membership was open to those who worked in the recording industry.⁷⁵ Connors won his first Juno Award on Sunday, February 21, 1971. He attended with his business partner, Jury Krytiuk, who "had a nice rented suit on" while Connors wore his "normal stage wear – black hat, boots, vest, etc."⁷⁶ He was surprised that evening when he won for Best Country Artist of 1970 and when he won his second Juno Award the following year for the same category, Connors felt it was "an assurance . . . that the first one hadn't been a fluke."⁷⁷ From 1971 to 1975 he won this category consecutively along with Country Album of the Year in 1975 for *To It and At It*. Yet, Connors was uneasy with the awards arguing that there was no variety to the list of nominees and winners. New talent was not benefitting from the ceremonies and too many awards were being given to Canadians who were now permanently living and working in the United States. Favouritism was leading to discouragement. Connors argued that a "National Juno Award," "for those who chose to work within this Canadian musical community," and an "International Juno Award," for Canadians working anywhere outside the nation should be created. Such a distinction would have made a

⁷⁵ "Our Story," *Juno Awards*, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://junoawards.ca/about/our-story/>.

⁷⁶ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 128.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

fair playing field, Connors reasoned.⁷⁸ His opinions on the Junos did not seem to be popular with those in the industry but it was not the first time he had called out established organizations for not doing enough to support Canadian talent at home. Connors did not understand why those running the organization did not see that favouritism and awarding those who had left was doing nothing to further Canadian talent. “It seemed to me that all they cared about was the award show, and raking in the big bucks, while obtaining the top entertainment for cheap,” Connors argued.⁷⁹

He was not the only one to recognize these issues. “The Junos tell one story this year: the failure of the American-dominated record industry in Canada to encourage and promote new Canadian talent,” Paul McGrath wrote in *The Globe and Mail* in response to the 1979 list of Juno nominees, reflecting the efforts of Canadian talent in 1978. “The list of nominees is disappointingly similar to those of the past two or three years,” he continued. Year after year, Gordon Lightfoot and Anne Murray were recognized while others were not. “This might come across as nationalist claptrap,” he concluded, “but the Junos are a cheap, nationalistic game and can’t escape being judged by their own presumptions . . . they are intended to represent the building of the Canadian star system, and nothing is being built.”⁸⁰ That same list of nominations inspired country music fan, George Stanley, to write a “Letter to the editor” at *The Globe and Mail* decrying the Juno’s “unfair handling” of the country music categories. “I naturally had supposed that this glittering extravaganza would recognize the achievements of the best in different musical categories for the preceding year . . . not so, apparently.” Stanley

⁷⁸ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 342.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 353.

⁸⁰ Paul McGrath, “Juno list has that familiar look,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 21, 1979, 13.

accused the organization of “deliberately sidestepping” country music groups such as Family Brown and Canadian Zephyr who had both sold well and been regularly featured on Canadian radio, demonstrating a “blatant neglect of country music talent.” The fair recognition of Canadian talent in general, but especially country performers, was “little more than a charade” in Stanley’s opinion.⁸¹ CARAS President, Brian Robertson, replied to Stanley’s complaints a few days later, stating that Stanley’s assertions had “no validity at all.” The problem was that fans simply did not understand the voting criteria; no “sidestepping” was at work.⁸²

In March, 1978, Connors reviewed the list of Juno nominees. To him, the show “was becoming a bigger farce than ever” and he attempted to quietly withdraw his name for Male Country Artist on the grounds that until CARAS changed its policies, he would not participate.⁸³ His true motives were questioned by the media and he was accused of simply trying to scare up publicity. He responded to such assertions boldly. He called for a press conference at Boot Records on March 31, 1978. In front of reporters and television cameras, Connors lined up his six Juno awards, packed them in a box addressed to the CARAS office, and sent them off in a taxi. For the next year, to prove his integrity and commitment to “authentically Canadian” music, Connors announced that he would not perform or record. If after a year, CARAS had changed its policies regarding “Juno jumpers” (those who lived outside Canada and only returned to pick up their awards), then he would re-enter the competition. Along with the return of his awards, Connors sent a letter that was later printed in *RPM Magazine*. It read:

⁸¹ George Stanley, “Country fan resents the way Juno awards sniffed at top talent,” *The Globe and Mail*, Wednesday April 4, 1979, 7.

⁸² Brian Robertson, “Juno Awards,” *The Globe and Mail*, Monday April 9, 1979, 7.

⁸³ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 364.

Gentlemen,

I am returning herewith the six Juno awards that I once felt honoured to have received and which I am no longer proud to have in my possession. As far as I am concerned you can give them to the border jumpers who didn't receive an award this year and maybe you can have them presented by Charley Pride. I feel that the Junos should be for people who are living in Canada, whose main base of business operations is in Canada, who are working toward the recognition of Canadian talent in this country and who are trying to further the export of such talent from this country to the world with a view to proudly showing off what this country can contribute to the world market. Until the academy appears to comply more closely with aspirations of this kind, I will no longer stand for any nominations, nor will I accept any awards given.

Yours very truly, Stompin' Tom Connors.⁸⁴

The reference to Charley Pride was particularly poignant, a reminder of the CNE controversy which had occurred five years earlier.

His stance caused a media stir and the decision inspired a lot of speculation. His recollection of the events in his memoir as well as the tone of his press conference gave the impression that his continual frustration with the lack of support for Canadian performers had boiled over. His last album before his 1978 boycott, *The Gumboat Clogeroo*, featured songs such as *Ripped-Off Winkle* and *The I Don't Know How to Fix the Damn Thing Blues* which were decidedly more pessimistic in tone than previous recordings.⁸⁵ Speaking to *The Globe and Mail* about his decision the day after his press conference, Connors reiterated his opinion that "all nominees should have their principal place of residence in Canada and conduct their business affairs from a Canadian base of operations thereby keeping the Canadian Junos Canadian."

⁸⁴ The letter was published in RPM magazine, "Stompin' Tom discloses reasons for Juno nomination withdrawal," *RPM*, April 22, 1978.

⁸⁵ William B. Echard, "Approaching Stompin' Tom: An Overview of the Early Works of Tom C. Connors" MA Thesis, York University, November 1994, 29.

Connors felt frustrated by the “complacency” being shown by Canada’s music industry leaders. “Does this mean that Canadian entertainers are not concerned with their opportunities for further advancement within their own country or that they don’t even have an interest in their own Canadian music industry?” he asked. “If it is too much to ask others for their support in this matter,” he continued, “then I consider that my contribution to the Canadian music industry thus far has been pointless.”⁸⁶ He echoed this statement the following day while being interviewed for CBC Radio’s *Sunday Morning* program. Here, he was asked to explain who he considered to be “Canadian.” “As far as I’m concerned, somebody that jumps the border and wants to reside in another country is no longer a Canadian,” he maintained.⁸⁷ True to his word, Connors did not perform or record for a year, and when the 1979 Juno Award nominations were announced, he found that nothing had changed. Discouraged, Connors walked away from the music industry and was rarely seen or heard from for the next ten years.

Connors’ protest against the Juno Awards and his subsequent decision to quit the industry was a bold move which solidified to both his fans and his critics how serious he was about supporting Canadian talent. “In an industry that already reeks of unfairness,” he argued in his memoir, “it’s time for those with even an ounce of integrity to separate themselves from those who can’t see anything wrong with its perpetuation.”⁸⁸ His decision, much like the rest of his career, was met with opposing views. Terms such as “hick” and “xenophobic” were thrown around and his villainization of “the Americans” exposed him to the criticism that he was

⁸⁶ “Stompin’ Tom Awaits Industry ‘Blacklist,’” *The Globe and Mail*, April 1, 1978, 32.

⁸⁷ *Sunday Morning*, CBC Radio, April 2, 1978.

⁸⁸ Connors, *The Connors Tone*, 387.

merely a reactionary.⁸⁹ For his supporters, however, it confirmed Connors' honesty and "authenticity," and cemented his status as a folk-hero, a man of the people. That status ensured that while he was gone from the public eye, he was not forgotten.

In the years that followed, pleas for his return came from many fans such as broadcaster and journalist Peter Gzowski, singer k.d. lang, and actor Dan Aykroyd. In 1988, Aykroyd told *The Toronto Daily Star* that he was on a "crusade" to convince Connors to "un-retire." He recalled being young, in Toronto, listening to Connors' records and seeing him perform live at the Horseshoe. "I think people could be real ready for him again," Aykroyd stated.⁹⁰ Connors eventually emerged from his self-imposed retirement with the release of his first album in twelve years, 1989's *Fiddle and Song*. "By the time of his return," critics Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond eloquently argue, "Tom had become a larger-than-life symbol of balls-to-the-wall Canadianism."⁹¹ In downtown Toronto, Sam the Record Man promoted Connors' new album with an enormous wall mural making him "look like a pumped-up combination of Johnny Canuck, Quick Draw McGraw and Paul Bunyan."⁹² The frenzy caused by his return attracted a number of new fans.

Back in the spotlight, media and fan responses to Connors made it clear that his arguments for the development of domestic talent had connected with a younger and wider audience who respected his patriotic stance. Journalist John Doyle reflected in *The Globe and Mail* that after immigrating from Ireland, Connors' songs had been a "revelation." "The telling

⁸⁹ William B. Echard, "Approaching Stompin' Tom: An Overview of the Early Works of Tom C. Connors" MA Thesis, York University, November 1994, 32.

⁹⁰ Peter Goddard, "Dan Aykroyd's stompin' for the return of Tom Connors," *Toronto Daily Star* November 24, 1988, C5.

⁹¹ Pevere and Dymond, *Mondo Canuck*, 213.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 213.

of Canadian stories big and small . . . it helped make me truly Canadian,” he wrote.⁹³ In 1992, *Maclean’s* published an interview with Connors claiming that he was the chronicler of the national dream. His sentiments that “Canadians should think about what holds them together” had earned Connors the “admiration of other entertainers,” *Maclean’s* asserted.⁹⁴ Connors music had become an opportunity – a rare opportunity – for Canadians to express their patriotism. When he received the Order of Canada in 1996, in recognition of his support for Canada and its musicians, it solidified the fact that Connors’ message had sunk in. His support for “authentically Canadian” talent and love for his nation had reached new audiences who were perceptive to his message that Canada was worth singing about.

His comeback status as a national hero was connected to broader industry changes within Canada’s music scene over the course of the late 1980s and 1990s. By the early 1990s the domestic Canadian “fringe scene” was producing noteworthy acts who were perceived by many fans and industry members as being prime examples of “authentically Canadian” culture. Sarah McLachlan, Sloan, The Tragically Hip, Ashley MacIsaac, Blue Rodeo and Barenaked Ladies, to name a few, were performing outside of the boundaries of the mainstream music industry, building national and modest international followings amongst audiences.⁹⁵ A new-found confidence emerged in the music being produced and performed by Canadians in Canada, a confidence which Connors had always had but the support had been lacking in his own heyday. The 1990s was a major growth moment for Canadian performers. This generation of

⁹³ John Doyle, “How Stompin’ Tom made me a true Canadian,” *The Globe and Mail* March 11, 2013, L7.

⁹⁴ Victor Dwyer, “Poetry and patriotism: Stompin’ Tom chronicles the national dream” *Maclean’s Magazine*, July 6, 1992, 72.

⁹⁵ Pevere and Dymond, *Mondo Canuck*, 158.

performers worked and lived in Canada, developing large and loyal followings which created the necessary “conditions for this bumper crop of pop Canadiana.” They were fed-up with the conservative attitude of the mainstream music industry, which seemed more focused on the bottom-line. Borrowing tactics from the punk-rock scene, these performers were adamant that they could succeed on their own terms. This meant building a fan base close to home, distributing their own independently-produced recordings, continuously touring, releasing their own music videos, and taking advantage of the new opportunities made available by MuchMusic, which was unveiled in 1984. “Since the do-it-yourself approach provides opportunities for exploration and exposure independent of the mainstream, mainstream criteria exert little or no influence on what many of these artists do,” Pevere and Dymond argue noting that the result “has been nothing short of one of the richest periods in Canadian pop music history.”⁹⁶

It was an approach which Connors had used years before when the mainstream music industry would not give him the time of day. By the 1990s, then, his message as well as his methods were no longer something to censure but had appealed to an up-and-coming generation of artists working not just in country music, but in a wide variety of genres. Connors had demonstrated how a performer could build up a loyal following and have a successful career at home in Canada outside the resources of the mainstream industry. His example inspired this new generation of Canadian music makers. For new fans discovering Connors in the early 1990s, he became a beacon of “Canadian-ness.” As citizens struggled to digest the continued American influence upon the nation’s economy, politics, and culture, and wondered

⁹⁶ Pevere and Dymond, *Mondo Canuck*, 158-159.

how major events such as the failure of the Meech Lake Accord, the Oka Crisis, and the establishment of the Bloc Quebecois would affect their homeland, Connors' folk symbolism and populist rhetoric soothed many people's anxieties. Writing for *The Georgetown Herald*, journalist Ian Weir recounted that while attending a Stompin' Tom "come-back" tour concert in June 1990, it had dawned on him that the solution to Canada's many woes was simple: elect Stompin' Tom as Prime Minister.⁹⁷ Indeed, in his return to the music business, Connors found himself poised as a national hero in the minds of his growing fan base. With his low voice and famed stomp, Connors continued to use simple lyrics which applauded the ordinariness of working Canadians and celebrated the pride to be found in their labours, within the nation they called home. His message that Canada was worth singing about, combined with his "rambler" persona and heroic-working-class masculinity, still worked to authenticate him to his audience. Furthermore, his continued commitment – especially in the years following his hiatus – to Canada's domestic music industry, and celebration of the "common man," reaffirmed Connors' perceived honesty and down-to-earth image. In essence, his perceived commitment to both his message and the people of Canada worked to position him as an "authentically Canadian" hero.

When Connors passed away on March 6, 2013, the news was met with an outpouring of emotion and reflections on his influence were made by a wide variety of Canadians. Fans, broadcasters, journalists, The Band front-man Ronnie Hawkins, former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and James Moore, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, all weighed in on the lasting impact Connors had made on the country he loved. The news was important enough to be picked up outside of Canada, making

⁹⁷ Ian Weir, "Stompin' Tom for PM," *The Georgetown Herald*, June 13, 1990, 7.

headlines in the *New York Times* and *Billboard*.⁹⁸ All of these statements emphasized Connors' place as a national icon and praised his support for Canadian talent. CBC's Rex Murphy argued that Connors was part of a "trinity" of troubadours alongside Leonard Cohen and Gordon Lightfoot. Connors was the "folk-poet-singer of the country itself . . . his whole work was one rich hallelujah for the little guy . . . it's not hard to understand Tom Connors, he loved his country," Murphy stated.⁹⁹ His "authentic" character and rough persona was praised by the *National Post*, which argued that Connors persona "wasn't shtick":

Stompin' Tom was one of the great Canadian story-tellers, and a uniquely collegial one as well. The proper venue for a Gordon Lightfoot performance is a concert hall, where the audience connects silently and contemplatively. The proper venue for Mr. Connors was a smoky bar room where people connected by slamming their beer mugs together, hopefully obliterating whatever difference existed between them.¹⁰⁰

Connors had not forgiven CARAS and the Juno Awards, making it clear that he did not want his career celebrated by the organization posthumously.¹⁰¹ In a farewell letter penned to his fans in his final days, Connors maintained his "authentically Canadian" image and message that a united "Canada" needed to come first. Saying goodbye, Connors commissioned his fans with a special task: "I must now pass the torch, to all of you, to help keep the Maple Leaf flying high."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Martin Douglas, "Stompin' Tom Connors, 77, Canadian singer," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2013, n.p., and, "Canadian Singer Stompin' Tom Connors Dies at 77," *Billboard*, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1550767/canadian-singer-stompin-tom-connors-dies-at-77>.

⁹⁹ Rex Murphy, "Patriotism and Stompin' Tom Connors," *CBC News: The National*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TF-95FOiQio>.

¹⁰⁰ "Farewell, Stompin' Tom," *The National Post*, March 13, 2013, n.p.

¹⁰¹ Karris Donkin, "Juno Awards: No tribute to Stompin' Tom Connors," *The Toronto Star*, April 17, 2013, n.p.

¹⁰² "Stompin' Tom Connors' final letter to his fans," *The Canadian Press*, March 7, 2013, n.p.

Illustration 5.1 Stompin' Tom, circa 1975. Source: Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN 4368791.



Chapter Six

“Caught Between the Top Forty and the Back Forty”¹: Gordon Lightfoot becomes an “authentically Canadian” Icon

On November 17, 2018, Gordon Lightfoot turned 80 years old. It was business as usual for Lightfoot as he celebrated this milestone by performing at a benefit concert in his hometown of Orillia, Ontario. The concert was part of Lightfoot’s “80 Years Strong” North American tour which had begun earlier that month in Sacramento, California. Before his ninety-minute set began, the crowd serenaded him with a heartfelt rendition of “Happy Birthday.” Terms such as “legendary,” “Canadian icon,” and “beloved singer-songwriter” were bandied about and fans reveled in hearing some of the most well-known “Canadian” songs of all time performed live by the man himself. Showing no signs of slowing down, Lightfoot later announced that his twenty-first studio album, featuring new material, would soon be released. Asked about how he felt to be out touring, Lightfoot joked that “as long as all my band members can keep up with me,” nothing would slow him down.²

Over the course of his career, Gordon Lightfoot supplemented his rich baritone voice with his guitar and band accompaniment to create a sound which had a lush and layered instrumentation. He became famous for his poetic lyrics which celebrated natural landscapes and examined human emotions. His sound was smooth, polished, and produced to a high quality. He publicly exuded a “rambler” masculinity and drew inspiration from his train travels to Northern Ontario and annual canoe trips which informed many of his songs. He drew upon a

¹ Peter Goddard, “Lightfoot lacks variety in sound but voice good,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 5, 1967, 11.

² Randy Lewis, “Lightfoot is 80,” *The LA Times*, March 8, 2019, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-gordon-lightfoot-80-years-strong-tour-20190308-story.html> and Nathan Taylor, “Lightfoot wows the crowd on 80th birthday,” Orillia Matters.com, November 17, 2018, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.orilliamatters.com/local-news/lightfoot-wows-the-crowd-on-80th-birthday-1126507>.

familiar country music trope which embodied the tension of rural versus urban, romanticism versus modernity. While some songs spoke of modern realities, many of his songs celebrated encounters with Canada's forests and waterways. He wrote lyrics which appealed to listeners who had little to no contact with the reality he sang about, but in their minds they understood the symbolism of Lightfoot's many nature-based songs because Canadians had long been conditioned to celebrate the revitalizing power of open spaces. It was his great ability to craft songs which played upon such cherished Canadian narratives that transformed him into a highly celebrated, "authentically Canadian" performer. His "authenticity" was challenged at various points in his career, due to his own personal stresses, his celebrity status, and his over-exposure on radio airwaves and at domestic award shows. It was a challenge for him to balance his own version of "authenticity" – being able to do things his way – with the "authenticity" of others who expected him to uphold the ideals of Canadian nationalism.

Today, many fans would perhaps challenge the assertion that Lightfoot was a country music performer. This understanding, however, negates the complexity of country music's constructed traditions, persistent stylistic splintering, and continually evolving image. There is no doubt that Lightfoot had one foot firmly planted in the folk-revival of the 1960s, but he also had a foot firmly planted in the realm of country music. Lightfoot was the definition of a "cross over" artist, the kind which Nashville loved to promote, successfully earning fans in the realms of the folk revival and country music. His smooth sound with a faint country twang, an assortment of bohemian-cowboy stage wear, and lyrics which conjured up rural romanticism, all worked to authenticate him to both fan bases, and the success he found with this mixture poised him as the golden boy of "authentically Canadian" folk-country music to Canada's

domestic music industry. It must be remembered that the popularity of folk styles during this decade influenced country music significantly. A number of country music stars developed reciprocal relationships with folk-revival artists during this period, borrowing material from them, and performing with them.³ Lightfoot forged relationships with the likes of Johnny Cash, wherein both drew inspiration from and covered each other's material. This provided country music with a newfound relevance, as the genre's influence had been weakened by the British Invasion. The pop and rock influence which had contributed to the rise of the "Nashville sound" had become outdated and so the relationship which developed between country music and the folk revival helped reinvigorate the genre, making it seem more in-tune with youth.⁴ Lightfoot's style blended the popular folk sounds of the era with his own love of country music. He had grown up listening to Wilf Carter and found this influenced him, with some reviewers christening his style "Country-n-Lightfoot."⁵

As his career began taking shape, Toronto's folk revival scene was building, largely in the Victorian row houses of the Yorkville neighbourhood. Becoming a part of this scene enabled Lightfoot to craft a seemingly authentic image for himself but also find monetary success by blending elements of the North American folk revival with familiar country music patterns. Yorkville was a place where musicians shared old tunes amongst themselves, created new ones, and hoped to launch careers for themselves. Folk revivals were certainly nothing new, but unlike earlier revivals such as that in the Great Depression, which attracted left-leaning

³ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 281.

⁴ Ibid., 319.

⁵ Historica Canada, *The Last Round-Up: The Wilf Carter Story* (Toronto: Historica Canada, 2004), accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAJQ-MUFOc> and Ryan Edwardson, *Canuck Rock: A History of Canadian Popular Music* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 79.

intellectuals with radical ideals, this revival attracted a broad range of individuals, but especially middle-class baby boomers who were “too hip for Sinatra but scared by the [Rolling] Stones.”⁶ By 1963, Toronto’s coffee-house scene was blossoming and throughout the decade Yorkville attracted thousands of bikers, artists, musicians, hippies, and curious observers. Historian Stuart Henderson’s study of Yorkville, *Making the Scene*, contends that for ten years the neighbourhood “served as a crossroads for Toronto youth, as a venue for experimentation with alternative lifestyles and beliefs, and as an apparent refuge from the dominant culture and the stifling expectations it had placed upon them.” This turned Yorkville into contested space, for while it supported counterculture initiatives, it was looked upon with suspicion by those outside the movement for “its perceived saturation with anti-establishment energy.” In this way, Yorkville, like other counterculture sites, reflected the cultural debates and conflicts of the era, spurred on by youthful subversive interests such as pacifism, civil disobedience, and revolution.⁷

For a performer like Lightfoot who was just starting out, such circumstances required him to craft a style and sound which was new and exciting but also in tune with this generation’s search for “authenticity.” There was an interest amid these folkies to search for

⁶ Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond, *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1996), 125. Though it could trace its roots back to the late 1940s, the 1958 release of *Tom Dooley* by the Kingston Trio is generally viewed as the ignition of this commercial folk-revival period. Gillian Mitchell notes that scholars are not immune to the “absurdities” of the movement such as the contradictory political “hang-ups” of many participants and the efforts of record companies to “cash in” on the music’s popularity by releasing “embarrassingly sanitized” recordings. Scholars continue to debate what actually constituted “folk music,” why exactly it became so popular and what this revival ultimately signified. While the lasting implications and historical parameters of the movement will likely continue to be debated, it is clear that the movement was political in its ideology and that it gathered a great variety of interested parties including students, academics, and political and social activists, both young and old (Mitchell, *North American Folk Revival*, 115). Also see Neil V. Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁷ Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (Buffalo & Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 8.

“new” material amongst the back-catalogues of early “hillbilly” recordings.⁸ These baby boomers were familiar with their parent’s country music – big hitters like Hank Williams or Hank Snow – and had grown up listening to singing cowboys like Wilf Carter or watching Roy Rogers on television. They dug into the genre’s back-catalogues to find early country music from the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that this material had more grit and authenticity than contemporary songs.⁹ In their anti-establishment claims, many performers rejected the categorizations of genre that the music industry had long relied upon in their efforts to blend the “old” with the “new.”

Performers like Lightfoot alongside Ian and Sylvia Tyson found a willing audience in Yorkville’s many coffee houses with their seemingly “authentic” material. It was noted in *The Globe and Mail* in 1965 that these “modern” folk writers were “blowing cobwebs from an old idea” by digging into this older catalogue of lesser known country, blues, folk, and gospel numbers.¹⁰ Furthermore, folk was being fused with rock, R&B, blues, country, and jazz. In some cases, performers were being labelled “folk” simply because of external factors like the size of a venue or the cost of having a backing band. Sylvia Tyson noted that country musicians often could not afford to hire a band, or the stage was not large enough to accommodate one. In those cases, musicians performed modest sets and people simply labelled it “folk” because of

⁸ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 319.

⁹ Both Canadians and Americans began to “rediscover” seemingly “obscure” folk music from regions which were economically underdeveloped but deemed culturally “rich,” particularly the Maritimes and the Appalachian Mountains. Folkway Record’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* reached the likes of Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers who adopted many of the songs on the anthology which featured field recordings from the 1920s and 1930s of both white and African-American rural singers. This music was once again relevant. Later in the decade, however, amidst a changing political climate, many American performers moved away from the folk scene out of disillusionment while Canadians generally came to view “folk” music as a piece of the nation’s heritage and continued performing it (Mitchell, *North American Folk Revival*, 2, 12, 75).

¹⁰ Marvin Schiff, “Folk Music: Modern writers blowing cobwebs from an old idea,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 17, 1965, 13.

its stripped-down sound.¹¹ Both Lightfoot and the Tysons argued to *The Globe and Mail* that, “many [songwriters] . . . have immersed themselves so deeply in the study of traditional music that anything they write bares traces of a traditional form and represents an evolution of it.” As a result of this, they acknowledged that “the distinctions between pop music, country and western and folk music have become so blurred it is often hard to categorize a song.”¹² That same year, Ian Tyson told *Maclean’s* magazine that “everything’s coming together” to inform the sound of pop music. “We listen to each other, we use each other’s material, and a lot of guys move back and forth across the different styles.”¹³

Lightfoot was the definition of a “cross over” artist and this authenticated him to both “country” and “folk” fans and industry members. He easily swayed back and forth between the youthful dissenters of Yorkville and the older, working-class audience of Steele’s Tavern, which was part of Toronto’s Yonge Street bar scene. He produced catchy, well-written songs with universal themes which were inoffensive and could be appreciated by a broad range of listeners. When his first album, *Lightfoot!*, was released in January 1966 with United Artists, for example, his blend of folk and country demonstrated that he had the sophistication and approachable image necessary to make him a successful singer-songwriter who could cross genre boundaries easily.¹⁴ The album’s sleeve pictured him leaning back in his chair, dressed in denim, cowboy boots, and with his guitar in hand. Lightfoot looked bright-eyed with a laid-back

¹¹ Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 84.

¹² Marvin Schiff, “Folk Music: Modern writers blowing cobwebs from an old idea,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 17, 1965, 13.

¹³ Jack Batten, “Sweet Song of Success,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, August 1965, 15, 38.

¹⁴ Pevere and Dymond note that, “like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and a number of his stool perched contemporaries, Lightfoot became known as a supplier of songs well before being recognized as a performer in his own right” (*Mondo Canuck*, 124).

attitude (Illustration 6.1). The album featured fourteen songs; eleven were his own compositions alongside covers of Ewan McColl's, *The First Time (Ever I Saw Your Face)*, Phil Ochs, *Changes*, and Hamilton Camp's *Pride of Man*. The write-up on the album sleeve positioned Lightfoot as a type of modern-day cowboy. "He wears cowboy boots most of the time," it stated, "he understands about the cowboy and the psychology of open spaces that makes up the mood of life in the biggest part of Canada, as it did and does in the American West."¹⁵ Lightfoot had captured the romanticism of natural landscapes. He didn't rely on the ranch or the front porch but created songs built upon "a wide-open-spaces metaphor" which could be connected to a geographically vague, "rural" landscape of wide-reaching appeal.¹⁶

The perception of Lightfoot as an authentic blend of "folk" and "country" was praised by the media as his career began to take off. His voice, for example, was described by journalist John Dafoe as "a cleaned-up version of the classic cowboy twang."¹⁷ Additionally, it was not unusual for reviews to note that onstage he looked "like a bashful country boy."¹⁸ When he performed at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, he told Robert Shelton of *The New York Times* that he was "aiming at a new thing . . . in the area in between folk and country" and his "decidedly western" style reflected his co-mingling of these styles.¹⁹ Later in 1967, journalist Peter Goddard reflected that "Gordon Lightfoot remains something of a paradox." Reviewing his performance at the Riverboat Café in Toronto, Goddard stated that while "many of his songs are concerned with the ossifying city existence" Lightfoot sang them "with a country-and-

¹⁵ Gordon Lightfoot, *Lightfoot!*, United Artists Records, 1966.

¹⁶ Gordon Lightfoot, *Lightfoot!*, United Artists Records, 1966.

¹⁷ John Dafoe, "Good songs and voice are in Lightfoot's art," *The Globe and Mail*, January 19, 1966, 12.

¹⁸ Marilyn Beker, "Lightfoot: with fans in the palm of his hand," *The Globe and Mail*, February 5, 1968, 15.

¹⁹ Nicholas Jennings, *Lightfoot* (Toronto: Viking, 2017), 59.

western edge.” “To deepen the confusion,” Goddard continued, “[Lightfoot] is a folk-singer who has a hit parade record that laments a gigolo-jilted go-go girl.”²⁰

Lightfoot’s stage wear also reflected his “cross over” capabilities. Typically, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, his stage wear balanced tradition with attention to the era’s fashion trends. His cowboy boots, denim, and vests called upon the tradition of cowboy images in country music but they were also simple enough so as not to separate him from his audience. He would don a tie and suit jacket when playing venues such as Massey Hall and as his career progressed and his celebrity status heightened, his appearance reflected many of the trends of 1970s fashion. He still wore denim and cowboy boots, but he experimented with hats and sunglasses, wore leather fringed jackets, and turquoise jewelry, and permed his hair. Such choices authenticated him to a very broad audience. He could appear neatly composed before a more conventional audience at Massey Hall while seeming cool and trendy to younger audiences.

Following his success with *Lightfoot!* Lightfoot recorded his next album in Nashville, placing him within country music’s perceived epicenter. By the mid-to-late 1960s, pop music was trying to get back to the basics and many performers wanted to achieve a more “authentic” sound by creating a simple, stripped-down style which harkened back to something older and familiar. This search for pop “authenticity” was perceived by critics as a reaction to the chaos which had encumbered the 1960s. Audiences were tired after years of social discord and wanted music which would soothe their senses.²¹ Lightfoot’s blend of folk and country fit

²⁰ Peter Goddard, “Gordon Lightfoot: artist or entertainer?” *The Globe and Mail*, January 4, 1967, 9.

²¹ Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 119.

perfectly within this search for musical simplicity and “authenticity.” Lightfoot was sent to Nashville by his American agent, Albert Grossman, in 1967 to begin working on his second album. Nashville had become a major recording destination following this interest amongst musicians and performers looking to tap into the audiences’ growing desire for nostalgia. Adopting familiar traits and sounds of country music seemed the most logical way to find this simple, nostalgic, and “authentic” sound.²² Much of this interest stemmed from the events of February 1966, when Bob Dylan had taken it upon himself to head to Nashville where he would produce a trilogy of country-inspired albums over the next few years. Compared to Dylan’s previous rock releases – releases which had certainly upset the folk scene – these albums had a stripped-down simplicity and straightforward lyrics, demonstrating to the world “that reluctant counterculture hero Bob Dylan embraced country music.”²³ According to Charlie McCoy, a studio musician who appeared on many of Dylan’s Nashville sessions, “folk-rock artists would never come to Nashville, but after Dylan did, man, the floodgates opened. It was like Dylan gave his stamp of approval.”²⁴ Both Dylan and Lightfoot were managed by Grossman, and Lightfoot has stated that he paced his own career with Dylan’s. If Dylan was trying something new, Lightfoot took note.²⁵ Working on his album, *The Way I Feel*, in Nashville alongside his touring band, Red Shea and John Stockfish, Lightfoot added Nashville musician Charlie McCoy and drummer Kenny Buttrey. McCoy recalled that the sessions were “very relaxed . . . Kenny and I were digging the songs, Gordie’s voice and Red’s playing.” Lightfoot took charge of the sessions,

²² Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press, 2015), 10-12.

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 75.

²⁵ Ibid., 74.

telling McCoy and Buttrey to “just play what you feel.”²⁶ *The Way I Feel* garnered Lightfoot tremendous praise; it was labelled “masterful” by *Billboard* and credited with “timeless appeal” by *Hit Parader*.²⁷ The country-folk sound of the album appealed to Dylan, who was working on his latest Nashville album, *John Wesley Harding*. Dylan later told *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1969 that he had tried to capture the same sound on his own album, hiring the same musicians Lightfoot had worked with. “I heard the sound that Gordon Lightfoot was getting with Charlie McCoy and Kenny Buttrey and figured if he could get that sound, I could. But we couldn’t get it (laughs). It was an attempt to get it, but it didn’t come off.”²⁸

Lightfoot’s time in Nashville cemented his “cross over” capabilities and he built relationships with many of the country artists he came into contact with, with a number of country artists doing covers of his original songs. Country artist George Hamilton IV, for example, was so inspired by Lightfoot’s lyrics and sound that he covered a number of his songs, eventually recording an entire cover album, titled *Lightfoot Country*. While working in Nashville in 1967, Lightfoot had coached Hamilton on his recording of Lightfoot’s composition *Steel Rail Blues*.²⁹ Asked about his affinity for Lightfoot’s songs, Hamilton stated that the important thing about Lightfoot was that his “roots” were in country music but he had broadened the field by relying upon a wide variety of influences. Hamilton went so far as to argue that Lightfoot was “the greatest talent” of their generation.³⁰

²⁶ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁸ Jann Wenner, “Bob Dylan Talks,” *Rolling Stone*, November 29, 1969, np.

²⁹ Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation Press, 2015), 27. George Hamilton IV was an American country singer who had been a teen idol throughout the 1950s before switching to country music in the early 1960s.

³⁰ Blaik Kirby, “The Ivy League Rube, George Hamilton IV,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 29, 1969, 13.

The acceptance Lightfoot found amongst his fellow folk and country performers worked to authenticate him to the industry as well as fans. Importantly, Lightfoot's perceived "country" authenticity did not rely upon a romanticized rural back-story or his real-life experiences. His authenticity was connected to his sincere expression – his perceived honesty – in being able to express the tension between the rural and the urban, the romantic and the modern. In interviews, Lightfoot – whether consciously or not – perpetuated the idea that he understood both city and rural life. Consider, for example, Lightfoot's interview with journalist John Macfarlane, which appeared in *The Globe and Mail* in 1966. Referring to Lightfoot's rural, romantic lyrics, Macfarlane wrote that Lightfoot's "singing voice is strong and resonant with just a wisp of nasal country twang . . . [while] most of his contemporaries are writing songs of social and political protest, lyrics like that make Lightfoot something of an enigma." While the press felt that Lightfoot's lack of protest songs set him apart from his musical counterparts, Macfarlane argued that Lightfoot's protest was "not about war and peace" but "against urban complexity, against the crushing impersonality of Metropolis." Speaking with Macfarlane, Lightfoot emphasized his admiration for life outside the city:

I used to spend a lot of time on farms. All my relatives are farmers and I guess I've been influenced by them. They always seemed to be having so much fun. They were so carefree I always hated like hell to leave, I used to go away talking like them. Everyone had a job to do and did it. Everyone contributed . . . I guess you could call me a cosmopolitan hick . . . I know I have written good folk songs . . . but I'm not the best in the world . . . Me, I'm just a country boy, doin' the best I can.³¹

³¹ John Macfarlane, "Lightfoot: the lyrical loner," *The Globe and Mail*, June 18, 1966, 15.

Macfarlane's piece combined with Lightfoot's words positioned the performer as an urban romantic in touch with the virtues of rural life. This apparent ability to appreciate simplicity seemed to set him apart from his contemporaries and asserted his "authenticity."

It was his perceived honesty as expressed through his sincerity that cemented his "authentic" image. Throughout his career, Lightfoot stated that what inspired him were the people, places, and events with which he felt he had a personal connection. It was his own experiences and the things he witnessed which inspired him because that was what he understood, and it was within that desire to understand his subject that his "authenticity" was found. "Everything I've written," he told *The Globe and Mail* in 1966, "has come from something that's happened to me, something I've seen, something that's impressed me." While he also found inspiration in newspaper stories, this need to experience things to truly understand them gave Lightfoot an air of authenticity but also kept him away from political subjects. His first album, *Lightfoot!*, from 1966, for example, was relatively protest and politics free with the exception of *Peaceful Waters* and his cover of Hamilton Camp's *Pride of Man*, an anti-nuclear protest song. Speaking with Marvin Schiff of *The Globe and Mail* in 1966, Schiff asked Lightfoot if he felt "obliged to sing protest songs." Lightfoot argued that while he had written a handful of these types of songs, he had found that he "couldn't handle that sort of stuff." "Peaceful Waters is about the only civil rights thing I've written and it wasn't even written with civil rights in mind," he told Schiff. "I found out after I'd written it that, by God, this song's about civil rights!" Lightfoot felt that first and foremost he was an entertainer and that "the responsibility of an entertainer is to entertain." While he accepted that performers were entitled "to use the stage as a podium from which to preach to people," it was not necessarily

what he wanted to do.³² *The Globe and Mail* noted that because “Selma, Alabama and the war in Vietnam are outside his orbit,” his songs did not deal with these issues.³³ He did write *Black Day in July* following the 1967 Detroit Riot, chiefly because he had performed in the city many times and had witnessed the city’s racial tensions himself, but he later recoiled from the song. “I felt it was kind of silly for me to write protest songs, being a Canadian,” he later explained, “after all, people could say, ‘What the hell is a Canadian doing protesting against an American problem?’ It’s tantamount to cashing in on a sensitive American situation.”³⁴

Comments by Lightfoot to the press about his musical style indicate that he was aware of the fact that he was not writing songs about hot button issues, but that simply was not who he was as an artist. To go against who he was would challenge his honest and sincere expressions, thereby tainting his perceived authenticity. “The thing is to try and make it on your own terms,” he told *The Globe and Mail* in 1966, “I could write rock-n-roll tunes . . . but I’m looking for my own sound, my own kind of music . . . I want to make it with a sound that’s completely me.”³⁵ Lightfoot’s real interest appeared to be examining the tension which existed within modern, urban life and to escape those complexities for a simpler, rural life. Peter Goddard, reviewing Lightfoot’s performance at the Riverboat Café in July 1967, praised Lightfoot’s voice but questioned his song material and development as a songwriter. “The confrontation between Lightfoot’s rural training and imagination with his new urban environment has reduced his musical development to a state of suspended animation, neither

³² Marvin Schiff, “Josh White and friends talk folk,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 12, 1966, 17.

³³ John Macfarlane, “Lightfoot: the lyrical loner,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 18, 1966, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

hick nor hop. . . [it's] variety that he lacks," Goddard declared. "Lightfoot prefers to stand removed from current trends," Goddard argued, claiming that his songs contained "neither the romantic anarchism of Tom Paxton, nor the moral nihilism of Bob Dylan" as Lightfoot searched "for a latter-day Walden." Lightfoot was, "caught between the Top Forty and the back forty . . . [reaching] back to the same simplified, naturalistic, and unadventurous language as other Canadian writers such as W.O. Mitchell and Farley Mowat . . . the words register quick stabs of picturesque detail, sense impressions and the musical reactions of a rural, disenchanted singer," Goddard concluded.³⁶

While some critics doubted him, it was ultimately Lightfoot's ability to express the tension between the urban and rural within his image, music, and lyrics which attracted so much interest amongst audiences and lent him a great deal of artistic complexity. While some songs such as *Go-Go Round* and *Black Day in July* spoke of modern realities like Go-Go dancers and the 1967 Detroit riot, many of his songs celebrated encounters with Canada's forests and waterways. Changes within Canada's economy and society over the course of the twentieth-century had functioned to create a rather simplistic, universal view of the nation's "rural" landscape. Due to urbanization and industrialization, to be "rural" came to mean anywhere not urban. It could refer to agriculture, areas of low population density and small settlements, but it also became equated with open spaces devoid of people. While many people still believed that urbanites needed to escape the confines of the city in order to experience moral uplift and regeneration through contact with the land, the wilderness was increasingly seen as able to fulfill this capacity and, by the inter-war period, mere exposure to the fabricated images of

³⁶ Peter Goddard, "Lightfoot lacks variety in sound but voice good," *The Globe and Mail*, July 5, 1967, 11.

forests, lakes, and rocks was believed to be enough to provide this necessary regeneration.

“Imaginative contact with the land through exposure to a properly crafted symbolic representation would allow [nature] to work its magic even more effectively than an actual physical presence in it,” historian Allan Smith has argued.³⁷ Lightfoot’s focus on rurality had become for many of his audience members an imagined ideal.

Though Lightfoot lived in Toronto, had grown-up in a middle-class family in the town of Orillia, and had little farm experience, his train travels to Northern Ontario and annual canoe trips meant that he had more contact with the land than many of his audience members, and this positioned him as an “authentic” representative of this lifestyle. Lightfoot was particularly fond of taking canoe trips, especially during the height of his fame in the mid-1970s, as they provided a break from his busy recording and touring schedule. It was one of the few subject areas he was happy to discuss with interviewers. Speaking to interviewers about a five-week canoe trip he had planned to take in Northern Quebec, in 1974, Lightfoot emphasized that it was “hard work . . . you paddle fifteen or twenty miles a day and do away with the amenities of life. The expedition is a revitalization of the mind [by] stripping down to basics.”³⁸ His association with the canoe and his belief in the therapeutic powers of nature helped position him as an avid outdoorsman. He often used these experiences to produce songs which appealed to listeners who had little or no contact with nature but they understood the “symbolic representation” and the “vitalizing power” of open spaces.³⁹ Listening to one of

³⁷ Allan Smith, “Farms, Forests and Cities: The Image of the Land and the Rise of the Metropolis in Ontario, 1860-1914,” in *Old Ontario: Essays in Honour of J.M.S. Careless*, ed. David Keane and Colin Read (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1990), 88.

³⁸ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 135-136.

³⁹ Smith, “Farms, Forests and Cities,” 91.

Lightfoot's songs about Georgian Bay or the forests of Northern Ontario gave listeners a point of contact, not only with Lightfoot's vision of that landscape, but with the landscape he depicted. Combined with his cowboy boots, country-tinged sound, and his portrayal of a rambler masculinity, this proved enough to convince industry members and listeners that Lightfoot understood the freedom to be found through contact with the land and life found outside of the city.

The Canadian landscape positioned Lightfoot as an "authentically Canadian" performer. Nature, especially the wilderness, has long held a pivotal position within Canada's national identity. Artists such as the Group of Seven and Emily Carr, for example, made certain landscapes seem vital to the nation's identity with their work and despite regional differences, Canadians have been viewed by both themselves and others as creations of their environment.⁴⁰ This idea that Canada's expansive geography and plethora of open spaces defined the character of its people has filtered into art, literature, poetry, and music. Music in particular has become an area where commentators are highly celebratory of musicians who seemingly tap into an "authentically Canadian" experience. Douglas Fetherling's publication, *Some Day Soon: Essays on Canadian Songwriters*, for example, argues that musicians such as Lightfoot, Neil Young, and Joni Mitchell are of national importance because they successfully convey the "sense of isolation" and "loneliness of the landscape" in their sound and lyrics.

⁴⁰ Tina Loo, *States of Nature*, 1. In the 1950s, Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye began making a case for the connection between the Canadian imagination and its reaction to the Canadian environment. Based upon his observations of Canadian literature he argued that by extension, the Canadian identity could be defined by a fear of nature, by the history of settlement, and by automatic adherence to the community. Margaret Atwood elaborated on this theory in her publication *Survival*. These theories have expanded beyond literature and have been applied broadly to understandings of the "Canadian" psyche and cultural production. See: Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971) and Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972).

Similarly, Marco Adria's, *Music of Our Times: Eight Canadian Singer-Songwriters*, concludes that what makes Canadian music unique is its "frontierness."⁴¹ The problem with such narratives is that these claims are almost impossible to truly substantiate and they disregard the reality of "Canadian" music, in that it is heavily influenced by both transnational and global trends. As Ryan Edwardson points out, this type of celebratory rhetoric pits Canadian musicians against Americans, creating an "'us' versus 'them' dichotomy" while playing upon "the pre-existing and deeply entrenched idea that the 'true' Canada is one of the outdoors and open spaces."⁴²

A number of Lightfoot's songs tapped into this outdoors mythology of forests, natural purity, and rejuvenation. Songs such as *Long River* and *Peaceful Waters* referenced the rugged nature of the country's landscape while *The Way I Feel*, with its haunting melody, used the metaphor of a bare robin's nest "whose babes have flown" to describe feelings of loneliness. While some of Lightfoot's songs were rather vague, describing trees and birds that could be located anywhere, others highlighted specific Canadian locales: *Alberta Bound*, for example, or *Seven Island Suite* off of 1974's *Sundown* album, which was inspired by his time sailing on Georgian Bay. *Seven Island Suite* dug into the supposedly restorative power of nature, contrasting the idyllic natural landscape with the materialistic temperament of the city. "Anytime would be the right time to come up to your bed of boughs," he declared, for "anybody with a wish to wander could not fail but to be aroused." "Living high in the city," was fine but, "fortune will not find you in your mansion or your truck." The song continued with a plea for the listener to:

⁴¹ Douglas Fetherling, *Someday Soon: Essays on Canadian Songwriters* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1990), 8-11, Marco Adria, *Music of Our Times: Eight Canadian Singer-Songwriters* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1991), 6.

⁴² Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 14.

Think of the air you're breathing in, think of the time you waste
 Think of the right and wrong and consider the frown on your face
 It's time you tried living on the high side of the bay, you need a rest⁴³

Like he had done since the beginning of his career, he juxtaposed the urban and the rural, expressing a weariness for city life. Additionally, describing the sunset as “a fiery autumn haze,” Lightfoot’s landscape was raw and rugged, reminding the listener of the numerous autumn scenes done in fiery hues of red and orange by the Group of Seven.⁴⁴ While many of these songs described natural areas in Canada, they had what Ryan Edwardson has called a “universality . . . a shared North American romanticized anti-modernism and connection to rurality, land, and a pioneering spirit.”⁴⁵ “Like time capsules,” music critic Robert Everett-Green has argued, “Lightfoot’s songs preserve a mythic, rural vision of Canada that was strong in the sixties and seventies.”⁴⁶

Lightfoot investigated these themes alongside his other preoccupation, love and relationships, and in doing so he proved his ability to connect with his audience through these universal themes. This also contributed to his “authenticity.” By portraying a rambler masculinity, Lightfoot explored the tension of rural versus urban, often by singing about male protagonists who missed their home life and the stability offered by domesticity and modernity but could not seem to avoid the call of the open road and the freedom that went along with it. Often the protagonist lamented how modernity had changed that “rambler” experience. His now seminal *Early Morning Rain*, for example, featured a main character who was drawn to his

⁴³ Gordon Lightfoot, “Seven Island Suite,” *Sundown*, Reprise Records, 1974.

⁴⁴ Gordon Lightfoot, “Seven Island Suite,” *Sundown*, Reprise Records, 1974.

⁴⁵ Edwardson, *Canuck Rock*, 95.

⁴⁶ Robert Everett-Green, “Gordon Lightfoot: The way he felt,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 26, 1999, C5.

home and family and yearned for the days before air travel when you could simply jump a train to reach your destination, but still reveled in his whiskey and love affairs. Such songs engaged with masculine frustrations over the rambler-versus-domesticity dichotomy.⁴⁷ Singing with a touch of melancholy in his voice, Lightfoot's lyrics expressed the feeling of being far from home:

In the early mornin' rain with a dollar in my hand
With an achin' in my heart and my pockets full of sand
I'm a long way from home and I miss my loved ones so
In the early mornin' rain with no place to go

Such feelings could be temporarily relieved since "the liquor tasted good and the women all were fast," but in the cold light of day, he was still grounded:

This old airport's got me down, it's no earthly good to me
'Cause I'm stuck here on the ground, as cold and drunk as I can be
You can't jump a jet plane like you can a freight train
So I'd best be on my way in the early morning rain⁴⁸

In one expertly crafted line – *You can't jump a jet plane like you can a freight train* – Lightfoot captured the feeling of being caught in the existing, modern, urban world, wishing for a simpler past.⁴⁹ The song was credited with establishing the "Lightfoot sound" for it captured the poetic imagery with which his lyrics quickly became associated.⁵⁰ Reflecting on the song's success in 1966, Lightfoot mused to *The Globe and Mail* that the song "manages to capture the romantic values . . . which I suppose makes it a good song."⁵¹ Other Lightfoot compositions explored

⁴⁷ Edwards, "Johnny Cash," 12. This was a common tension found within country music and had been played upon by Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and was popular in the 1970s with the Outlaw movement led by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings.

⁴⁸ Gordon Lightfoot, "Early Mornin' Rain," *Lightfoot!*, United Artists Records, 1966.

⁴⁹ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 47. Lightfoot explained to music writer and critic, Nicholas Jennings, that the lyrics came from his time at Westlake College in Los Angeles. "Some nights, we didn't have much to do and weren't far from the airport," Lightfoot recalls, "so we'd drive out and stand and watch the airplanes landing and taking off" (47).

⁵⁰ John Macfarlane, "Lightfoot: the lyrical loner," *The Globe and Mail*, June 18, 1966, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

those themes of romanticism and rambling. *Sixteen Miles* used train travel to craft simple but poetic lyrics describing a lush landscape and a lone figure, eager to escape the memories of a bygone love affair, away from the conventions of urban life:

Sixteen miles to seven lakes way up among the pines
 In some hidden valley where the twirling river twines.
 Where the fish swim up and down and the sparkling water falls,
 Where the thunder rolls and the lonely puma calls,
 Somewhere on the mountain I'll take another name,
 Rid my mind of memories and start my life again.
 Somewhere in the wilderness I'll build a cabin small, then forget so I won't remember
 you at all.⁵²

Both *Steel Rail Blues* and *Sixteen Miles* had been informed by a train trip Lightfoot had taken from Toronto to Moosonee in 1965. Wanting to find inspiration in Ontario's remote and forested areas, Lightfoot had taken the eighteen-hour trek to "absorb the whistle stops."⁵³

In keeping with the rambler trope – and reflecting the typical country music narrative – Lightfoot's songs about women and relationships generally portrayed women as the source of the male protagonists' problems, depicting them as women who have done the man wrong by breaking his heart or by not understanding his inherent need to be free. Thus, Lightfoot simultaneously played upon the tension within the rambler-versus-domesticity dichotomy while placing his work within the wider country music framework. This served to authenticate his music to a broad range of listeners. *Ribbon of Darkness*, for example, told the tale of a thwarted lover, whose "heart just aches and breaks all day." *If You Could Read My Mind*, from 1970, reflected upon his own crumbling relationship with his first wife, Brita. His lyrics

⁵² Gordon Lightfoot, *Lightfoot!*, United Artists Records, 1966.

⁵³ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 55.

expressed the feeling of having “chains upon my feet . . . and I will never be set free.”⁵⁴ Some pointed out that while he was celebrated as a romantic, his songs were not always kind to their female subjects. Journalist Jack Batten noted in 1970 that while some of Lightfoot’s love songs were “excruciatingly soft and tender,” he had a “darkside” which showed “a streak of male vanity . . . that isn’t nearly so attractive.” Songs such as *For Lovin’ Me* and *I’m not Sayin’*, Batten argued, “imply a putdown of women with their message that whatever the song’s male narrator does with his affections ought to be cool . . . a man must do what he must do.”⁵⁵

Such criticisms stress that unlike Wilf Carter, Earl Heywood, and Don Messer, Lightfoot at times challenged the conventions of an “authentic” folk-country performer held by many fans and industry members. While times had changed, the adherence to “family values” and social mores was still expected of performers. While male country performers could get away with extramarital affairs and heavy drinking, the idea that country performers were ultimately meant to uphold the values of honesty and the home had not subsided. At Lightfoot’s worst, he disappointed some fans and industry members by not adhering to “authentic” country music values. Lightfoot’s rambler masculinity was supplemented by the many stories which circulated about his heavy drinking and womanizing, positioning him as a man who questioned and defied social conventions. At the height of Lightfoot’s international fame in the 1970s, he struggled to keep his personal life in order. He was rarely home, which placed significant strain on his marriage to Brita. The lifestyle of constant touring and recording was draining, and he relied

⁵⁴ Gordon Lightfoot, “Ribbon of Darkness,” *Lightfoot!*, United Artists Records, 1966. Gordon Lightfoot, “If You Could Read My Mind,” *Sit Down Young Stranger*, Reprise Records, 1970.

⁵⁵ Jack Batten, “Lyrics Makes Lightfoot a Moving Historian,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 4, 1970, 14. Lightfoot himself has commented on how misogynistic some of his earlier songs were, *For Lovin’ Me* especially. He no longer performs this song and has changed other questionable lyrics (Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 232.)

heavily on alcohol and had a number of affairs while away from home. As he told *Maclean's* in 1978, he was "a good Canadian drinker. I've been drinkin' a bottle a day [of Canadian Club whiskey] for the last three years."⁵⁶ His marriage to his first wife, Brita, ended in divorce in 1973 and the proceedings were heavily publicized in the media. The fact that he had admitted to adultery as the cause for the separation was heavily commented upon, as was the financial settlement Brita received, as it was the largest in Canadian history. The news was printed in detail on the front page of *The Globe and Mail*.⁵⁷ He was known for being notoriously elusive with the press and difficult to interview; based upon his aversion to speaking about his private life, this coverage would likely have been stressful and agitating. Like many performers who fit within the rambler trope, he admitted to feeling an intense guilt over his behaviour. While he would not have considered himself a religious person, his small-town Ontario, Protestant upbringing influenced his thinking and he bound himself to a strict moral code which he believed he had broken many times over. This unleashed feelings of guilt and regret which made him increasingly unhappy during these years.⁵⁸ In the midst of these struggles, stories of his taciturn personality increasingly began to be seen in the press, especially after a handful of performances were cut short when Lightfoot's frustrations with sound equipment and heckling audience members boiled over and he marched off stage. Performing at New York's Avery Fisher Hall in December 1974, for instance, it was reported in *The New York Times* that an hour into the performance, "he stalked off stage, cursing about feedback in his own sound system."

⁵⁶ Tom Hopkins, "Gordon's Song: Portrait of the artist as a no-longer-young-man," *Maclean's Magazine*, May 1, 1978, 42. Lightfoot believed that it was the alcohol which fueled his songwriting. This heightened his dependency and made it difficult for him to recognize the damage it was doing to his life (Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 196-197).

⁵⁷ "Top folk artist admits adultery," *The Globe and Mail*, December 8, 1973, 1.

⁵⁸ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 85.

“The walk-out had been preceded by curses between verses of his songs and sour remarks,” journalist John Rockwell reported. Rockwell went on to comment that such behavior was “simply unprofessional and self-indulgent on Mr. Lightfoot’s part.”⁵⁹ His cranky behaviour was extended to peers as well. Anne Murray recalls in her memoir trying to pay her respects after he performed in Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1972. When his assistant announced her presence outside his door, Murray heard him bark, “I don’t care who the fuck it is, I’m not seein’ em.” In her words, she “beat a hasty retreat.”⁶⁰

In trying to do the best he could to deal with his celebrity status and maintain his “authenticity” by living life on his own terms, Lightfoot offended some commentators, whose comments emphasized that Lightfoot had broken the conventions of an “authentic” country-folk performer. While his music continued to be highly praised and valued by his fans throughout the 1970s, his celebrity had made it difficult for him to develop the close performer-audience bond and his large income made it challenging for fans to relate to him as a person. At the height of his fame, it was tricky to view him as the down-to-earth, small-town Ontario boy he had been before he had hit the big time. Reports of his taciturn behaviour further dampened the sincere emotionalism – the honesty – required of an “authentic” country-folk performer. *Maclean’s* magazine, which had previously published a number of complimentary articles, turned on him briefly, running a less than flattering exposé in 1978. The article portrayed him as a tragic victim of fame with few friends who had become nothing more than a cold and calculating businessman. He was described by the author as having a “tired and

⁵⁹ John Rockwell, “Gordon Lightfoot Sings, Fumes, Then Stalks Off,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 1974, 81.

⁶⁰ Anne Murray, *All of Me* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2010), 99. They had a laugh about this at an awards show years later.

puffy" face who hollered at his roadies "sounding like a worried pig farmer at his first auction." Throughout the article, he was labelled "vain," "arrogant," and "desperate." His songs were deemed "lightweight," "bland," "indistinguishable from one another," and a "sort of bathetic sludge."⁶¹ Lightfoot later acknowledged that he felt stung by the article.⁶² That same year, journalist Ray Conlogue argued in *The Globe and Mail* that "Lightfoot does not return the love of his fans, and his concert manner clearly shows it." He called Lightfoot "smarmy" and "graceless," and accused him of "tossing back in his fans' faces the wealth they have given him" by showing his audience a photo of his 45-foot sailboat.⁶³

While such periods of discontent certainly caused some critics to question Lightfoot's "authenticity," the high reward and favour he had found amongst a broad number of Canadian fans and industry members carried him through such rough patches in the 1970s. Since the late 1960s Lightfoot had been positioned as a pivotal cultural figure for Canadians by the media and the music industry, becoming known as "Mr. Canada" because of his ability to write songs about Canada's landscape, history, and national mythology. "Lightfoot has already won from us a position as one of those great and revered Canadian men of the arts," journalist Jack Batten argued in 1971. "He's one of us who has made it, the very best in our country at what he does with his talent." Batten highlighted Lightfoot's always sold out annual concert series at Toronto's Massey Hall as evidence of Canadians' reverence for him coupled with the expansion of his audience to include "teeny-boppers, college students, 'serious' folkies and people over

⁶¹ Tom Hopkins, "Gordon's Song: Portrait of the artist as a no-longer-young-man," *Maclean's Magazine*, May 1, 1978, 32-37.

⁶² Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 174.

⁶³ Ray Conlogue, "More of the same Lightfoot," *The Globe and Mail*, March 20, 1978, 13.

40." Most of all, Lightfoot had earned this respect with songs which had won "recognition as classic statements from his audience." "We love Lightfoot's songs for dozens of reasons" but mostly because they "say something special about Canada," Batten concluded.⁶⁴ The use of such themes seemed to prove that he was an "authentically Canadian" performer. Using tales of history and the grandeur of nature, *The Globe and Mail* claimed in 1977, "[In concert], the lean, curly-haired, restless Lightfoot . . . becomes Mr. Canada in the bounce of *Alberta Bound* and the ease of *Christian Island* up there in Georgian Bay and the *Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* in baleful Lake Superior." The article continued, arguing that he was, "in a word, authentic." Emphasizing his national importance, the article concluded by stating that, "the country needs Lightfoot and a song to explain our gladness and our grief as much as we need Trudeau and another manifesto."⁶⁵

While such recognition certainly contributed to Lightfoot's great success, he himself did not seem overly concerned with being "authentically Canadian." In the early 1970s, Lightfoot spoke with a group of teens from Vancouver for CBC television's *Down Centre* program. Asked when he had begun writing songs about Canada, Lightfoot clarified that his songs were "not specifically about Canada . . . I've never contrived a Canadian song." Lightfoot argued that it "was the atmosphere of Canada that are in the songs." He added: "The fact that I am a Canadian and that I dig Canada and the landscape of Canada and the geography and everything, just comes out in these songs."⁶⁶ Despite his reluctance to be a flagbearer of Canadian

⁶⁴ Jack Batten, "Classic Lightfoot more impressive," *The Globe and Mail*, March 20, 1971, 26.

⁶⁵ Dick Beddoes, "Glorious gift the man had," *The Globe and Mail*, March 25, 1977, 8.

⁶⁶ CBC Archives, "Canada's folk laureate Gordon Lightfoot turns 80," accessed May 9, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/canada-s-folk-laureate-gordon-lightfoot-turns-80-1.4895881>.

nationalism, he achieved a mythical status as a vessel of “Canadian” culture when he moved into a large Victorian mansion in Toronto’s upscale Rosedale neighbourhood and established Early Morning Productions in 1969. The move was significant for it indicated that despite his international fame, he intended to stay close to home, not relocate to New York or Los Angeles like so many other Canadian performers did once they found success in the American market. The move signaled the end of his American management by Albert Grossman, a few months after Grossman had negotiated Lightfoot a recording contract with Warner/Reprise which promised him one million dollars over the next five years; at that time, it was the largest paying recording contract ever signed by a Canadian musician.⁶⁷ “Gordon Lightfoot is one of the few Canadian superstars to achieve success south of the border while choosing to stick to home territory,” journalist Stephen Godfrey wrote, “yet he has given so few interviews that his reasons for this . . . are unknown.”⁶⁸ Indeed, while Lightfoot’s address made many nationalists, fans, and industry executives stop and take note, he was slow to explain the decision. Establishing Early Morning Productions in Toronto certainly set a precedent for future musicians, but Lightfoot was not explicitly motivated by a sense of patriotic duty. “I didn’t move to the States, because I wanted to keep my family ties,” he later explained. “I liked being near my relatives. I was a bit of a homebody. It wasn’t really necessary for me to move lock, stock and barrel.”⁶⁹ The decision was made possible by the fact that he was successful and well-established. The proceeds from his touring, songwriting royalties, and record sales earned him approximately \$250,000 a year and he had enough clout to ask people to come to him if they

⁶⁷ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 96.

⁶⁸ Stephen Godfrey, “Shedding some light on Lightfoot” *The Globe and Mail*, September 1, 1977, 12.

⁶⁹ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 98.

wanted to work with him.⁷⁰ Whether naturalistic or not, the decision garnered Lightfoot an enormous amount of respect amongst Canadians and contributed to positioning him as an “authentically Canadian” performer. When he received the Order of Canada in 1970 – praised as a “singer and composer of international renown” – it officially positioned him as a Canadian of significance.⁷¹ Receiving such an award – which was meant to honour a lifelong contribution of service supporting the betterment of the country – while he was only just thirty-two years old may have seemed premature. It signified, however, the meaningful position which a “popular” musician could be granted. Upon receiving the award, he became the first English-speaking “popular” musician afforded the Order which further invested national value and “authenticity” in his body of work, whether he purposely flew the Canadian flag or not.

Lightfoot’s revered position caught the attention of the era’s nationalists who were concerned about Canadians seeking fame and larger pay-cheques south of the border and staying there. Record executives and broadcasters had typically shown an extreme apathy towards Canadian music with the general attitude being “that if it came from Canada, it had to have something wrong with it.”⁷² Between 1967 to 1969, however, Canadian talent was nurtured by the success of the local club and folk music scenes. The success of this hip scene inspired Canadian record companies – largely affiliates of American companies – to put a real

⁷⁰ Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 98.

⁷¹ “Honours, Order of Canada, Gordon Lightfoot,” *Office of the Governor General of Canada*, accessed November 20, 2018, <http://archive.gg.ca/honours/search-recherche/honours-desc.asp?lang=e&TypeID=orc&id=1014>. This distinction was later upgraded to a “Companion of the Order of Canada” in 2003. The reasoning for this appointment read: “Gordon Lightfoot has been telling our stories in song for over five decades. He possesses a unique ability to blend contemporary urban music with our traditional roots. Genuine and reserved, he has a down-to-earth style that defies categorization.”

⁷² Jack Batten, “Everybody sneered at Grealis, but Juno is suddenly respectable,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 26, 1972, 27.

effort into signing and developing Canadian talent. Artists such as Joni Mitchell, The Band, Neil Young, Anne Murray, Leonard Cohen, and of course, Gordon Lightfoot, emerged, finding success nationally and internationally.⁷³ The lure of the United States did not diminish, however, as many of these artists still traveled south, believing this would ensure a lifelong career, merely using centres like Toronto as stepping stones. The importance of having national cultural figures active within Canada, however, heightened in intensity during the late 1960s as a symptom of the “Canadianization” movement. Between 1967 to 1972, this movement of English-Canadian nationalism was directed by influential elites such as author Margaret Atwood, philosopher George Grant, and academic Robin Mathews, in conjunction with many youth-generated grassroots movements. In essence, these nationalists feared the “American empire.”⁷⁴ In the wake of World War II, the United States had taken Britain’s place not only as a global leader, but as Canada’s major economic market and primary source of investment, stoking anxieties over an American cultural take-over.⁷⁵ Nationalist intellectuals, however, soon awoke to the reality that nationalist ideology was controversial. Around the globe, civil conflicts and two world wars were attributed to the effects of manic nationalism. Stompin’ Tom Connors certainly ruffled feathers with his outspoken nationalistic fervor and not all citizens were impressed by such sentiments. Helen Brisbin, for example, a Toronto resident, wrote to

⁷³ Pevere and Dymond, *Mondo Canuck*, 167. Also see Nicholas Jennings’ publication, *Before the Gold Rush: Flashbacks to the Dawn of the Canadian Sound* (Toronto: Viking, 1997), which examines how this period is considered the “golden age” of Canadian music.

⁷⁴ Ryan Edwardson, “‘Of War Machines and Ghetto Scenes’: English-Canadian Nationalism and The Guess Who’s ‘American Woman,’” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 343. Also see: Jeffrey Cormier, *The Canadianization Movement: Emergence, Survival, and Success* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁷⁵ Brian Bow, “Anti-Americanism in Canada, Before and After Iraq,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 3 (2008): 346.

Maclean's in 1971 arguing that while every Canadian "felt some pride when Expo 67 came and Canada achieved maturity in our own eyes and in the eyes of the world" it was time to recognize "that the way to improve our nation isn't simply to pretend that the world stops at Newfoundland and Vancouver." In Brisbin's opinion, nationalism was "the new chauvinism" and Canadians were developing "smug, self-centered attitudes."⁷⁶ For Canada's nationalists though, it was justified as "defensive nationalism," necessary in the face of American supremacy.⁷⁷ In this environment, music grew in cultural stature as musicians and their songs became increasingly valued for nationalistic purposes.⁷⁸ Defining "authentically Canadian" music became pivotal and Lightfoot fit the bill perfectly with his many songs about Canadian icons such as the landscape and the railroad.

With his catalogue of songs celebrating Canadian events and spaces, Lightfoot easily filled the shoes of an "authentic" national troubadour. His song *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, in particular, became a highly praised "Canadian" cultural product which resonated strongly with listeners. In 1968, Marjorie Harris wrote a feature on Lightfoot for *Maclean's* magazine. The article highlighted Peter Bryson, a high school student who had gone through Albert Grossman's office to arrange a Lightfoot concert at his highschool. The night Lightfoot performed, Bryson told Harris that while Lightfoot's love songs were good, the songs about Canada were different. "Take something like the *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*," Bryson explained. "It makes you want to go across Canada and have this song in your mind as you travel. I'm

⁷⁶ Helen Brisbin, "Mailbag: Enough Nationalism," *Maclean's Magazine*, November 1971, 14.

⁷⁷ Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 145.

⁷⁸ Edwardson, *Canadian Content*, 147.

proud he's a Canadian. I'm proud [he] sings about Canada."⁷⁹ Harris reiterated Bryson's comments, noting that "the remarkable song has the quality of Francis Parkman's histories of Canada. You can *feel* how empty and lonely it was."⁸⁰ The pride which Lightfoot's lyrics could inspire amongst Canadians was further reflected upon by journalist Jack Batten who wrote in *The Globe and Mail* that "Lightfoot's lyrics make [him] a moving historian." Batten argued that listeners, "go to Lightfoot . . . for the message of his lyrics." It wasn't his voice or melodies, in Batten's opinion, which drew audiences but his writing "that matters most" for Lightfoot was "supremely effective as a historian." "What else is his marvelous *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* but a faithful and moving retelling of a great event in our own history?" Comparing the song to the work of Canadian historians Donald Creighton and F.H. Underhill, Batten praised the song for making listeners "proud to be a Canadian, and in these days when we're starting to show off our nationalist spirit, Lightfoot offers an essential contribution to a collection of Canada-loving songs."⁸¹ Lightfoot was further applauded by historian and author of *The Last Spike*, the best-selling book on the same subject, Pierre Berton, who told Lightfoot that he had done "more good with your damn song than I did with my entire book on the same subject."⁸² The song certainly reflected the state of Canadian history at the time by presenting an Anglo-centric and cleaned-up version of the nation's colonization experience, celebrating this mythologized "Canadian" accomplishment considered pivotal to Canadian Confederation.⁸³ While he tapped

⁷⁹ Marjorie Harris, "Gordon Lightfoot," *Maclean's Magazine*, September 1968, 58.

⁸⁰ Harris, "Gordon Lightfoot," 55.

⁸¹ Jack Batten, "Lyrics Makes Lightfoot a Moving Historian," *The Globe and Mail*, May 4, 1970, 14.

⁸² Jennings, *Lightfoot*, 74 and Daniel Panneton and Erin Schuurs, "The Story of our Sesquicentennial," *Maisonneuve*, Summer 2017, 10-13.

⁸³ Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 15.

into the mythology of this event more so than the reality, Lightfoot brought this seemingly pivotal moment in the country's history to life for many listeners and they believed in his ability to write "authentically Canadian" songs.

Despite such praise and his many successes, Lightfoot was a celebrity who lived and worked within Canada during a period of intense debate regarding the perceived need to protect and promote "authentically Canadian" culture. While Lightfoot's career certainly benefited from state support and the perception that he was a valued cultural figure, capable of inspiring nationalistic pride amongst citizens, this attention also placed him under a critical microscope. Some critics and listeners could not get enough of the Lightfoot sound, while others took exception to what they saw as his over-exposure. Much critical scrutiny, for example, landed in Lightfoot's lap due to the newly implemented Canadian Content regulations which were put in place following the hearings conducted by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) in February to April 1970. These regulations required that at least thirty-percent of the content played by domestic AM radio stations be "Canadian." It was a controversial piece of legislation but also one of the most important developments in the history of Canadian popular culture.⁸⁴ For Lightfoot, such regulations ensured his presence on the radio which helped to make him famous. His constant presence on the air, however, caused some radio listeners to bemoan his music:

"Oh Gawd! Lightfoot again?" and off goes the radio. It's getting to be a problem these days. People who listen to AM radio have heard all of Gordon Lightfoot's songs a thousand times and want a rest. Radio stations would be happy to oblige but they compare their lists of Canadian songs against the quotas they have to fill and throw the

⁸⁴ Pevere and Dymond, *Mondo Canuck*, 167.

record back on the turntable. Even Lightfoot himself has complained that he's being played to death in Canada.⁸⁵

Further criticisms were laid at his door regarding his growing collection of Juno awards. Lightfoot received many accolades for his music, particularly Juno awards, some years winning more than one. Lightfoot's almost annual win as "Male Vocalist of the Year" seemed to confirm Stompin' Tom Connors' assertion that the Juno awards could be doing much more to develop Canadian talent by supporting a wider variety of performers. Throughout the 1970s, newspaper comments reflected the favouritism shown to Lightfoot and Canada's songbird, Anne Murray. "This year's Juno winners, Murray and Lightfoot, were predictable," wrote journalist Jack Batten in 1972.⁸⁶ Nothing had changed by 1975 when it was reported that "the Juno Awards for Canadian recordings limped to a foregone conclusion last night at the CNE and on the air with Anne Murray [and] Gordon Lightfoot collecting multiple awards as forecast."⁸⁷ "What is the point in giving Gordon Lightfoot his eighth Juno?" journalist Paul McGrath asked in 1977, "certainly it will make no difference to his week-long appearance at Massey Hall . . . A Juno Award isn't going to sell any more tickets, they were plumb sold out weeks ago."⁸⁸ Artists were judged not only upon artistic merit but also high sales. As Lightfoot and Murray were responsible for some of the highest-selling albums by Canadian artists at the time, it was inevitable based upon these requirements that Lightfoot would constantly be in line for these awards.⁸⁹ Even worse, however, Lightfoot rarely showed up to actually collect his awards and

⁸⁵ Robert Martin, "Some successes, some failures in the CRTC content regulations," *The Globe and Mail*, October 19, 1974, 34.

⁸⁶ Jack Batten, "Everybody sneered at Grealis, but Juno is suddenly respectable," *The Globe and Mail*, February 26, 1972, 27.

⁸⁷ Blaik Kirby, "Junos for Murray, Lightfoot and little hope for quality," *The Globe and Mail*, March 25, 1975, 14.

⁸⁸ Paul McGrath, "Move Over Gordon and Randy" *The Globe and Mail*, March 9, 1977, A3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, A3.

the press noticed. “All the industry’s biggies will be there . . . except for Lightfoot,” journalist Jack Batten quipped about the 1972 annual ceremony.⁹⁰ In 1973, *The Globe and Mail* rather sarcastically noted that that year’s ceremony featured Toronto Mayor David Crombie awarding Stompin’ Tom Connors his award as “Male Country Singer of the Year” while “Gordon Lightfoot, five time winner as ‘Male Vocalist of the Year,’ *finally* showed up to receive an award.”⁹¹ Of course, neither the excessive number of Juno awards nor the constant radio play were his fault. These were consequences of the environment within which he worked and the fact that he was one of the most successful performers working in Canada at the time. However, it certainly made it difficult to position Lightfoot as a humble, down-to-earth, performer. Indeed, such criticisms placed his perceived authenticity in doubt.

Changes within Lightfoot’s personal life worked to counteract this negative press and as his career moved into the 1980s and beyond, he was actively fashioned by fans, critics, and industry members into a living legend within Canada’s folk, country, and popular music industry. By the early 1980s, life seemed to offer Lightfoot a shot at redemption. He quit drinking and began a regular exercise regimen. He was soon in the best physical condition he had been in for a number of years. He worked on repairing his relationship with his children and slowly the sound of naysayers subsided. While the music he produced was not considered as cutting-edge as his earlier releases, he was not ready to retire and was still filled to the brim with new lyrics and melodies. Following these changes, the stories of his taciturn behaviour faded into the background and his image revolved firmly around the loyalty he inspired

⁹⁰ Jack Batten, “Everybody sneered at Grealis, but Juno is suddenly respectable,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 26, 1972, 27.

⁹¹ Robert Martin, “Connors, Lightfoot win Juno awards,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 13, 1973, 15.

amongst his fans and his importance to the Canadian music industry. “He inspires loyalty for a simple reason” journalist Paul McGrath argued, “he was the first of the Canadian storytellers and, to this day, he remains the ideal symbol of what Canada is.”⁹² While such a statement is certainly overblown, considering the songs of Wilf Carter, later material written by Earl Heywood, and the fact that Stompin’ Tom Connors was still active, yet it emphasized the persona which Lightfoot’s fans upheld. He was still “Mr. Canada” to many of his audience members despite the pressures and criticisms he endured. Journalists noted that “the people who go to see him genuinely adore the man” and to many fans as time went by, Lightfoot’s predictability offered comfort and stability.⁹³ His continued popularity caused critics to pause. “No easy or cynical explanation of his continuing popularity suffices,” journalist Liam Lacey reflected in 1984. “In his awkward and romantic way . . . Lightfoot speaks for Canadians secret, awkward and romantic selves in a way few artists are able to speak to any audience . . . He’s not a national institution for nothing.”⁹⁴ Music critic Robert Everett Green noted that Lightfoot’s songs seemed to belong to the Canadian people. “They’re as Canadian as the Group of Seven,” he argued, “They’re as familiar as family, and like family they tend to get strong reactions.”⁹⁵ Cries that he was vain, cold, and arrogant thoroughly subsided, and instead fans and media comments applauded him for being “humble,” “classy,” “a musical genius” and “a cool guy who seems unaffected by his success.”⁹⁶

⁹² Paul McGrath, “Lightfoot still Mr. Canada,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1977.

⁹³ Paul McGrath, “It’s the same old concert, and Lightfoot fans love it,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 19, 1979, 17 and Alan Niester, “Lightfoot comforting as the years roll by,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 17, 1980, 13.

⁹⁴ Liam Lacey, “Lightfoot speaks for our secret, romantic selves,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 14, 1984, M9.

⁹⁵ Robert Everett-Green, “Gordon Lightfoot: The way he felt,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 26, 1999, C5.

⁹⁶ “Gordon Lightfoot on Justin Bieber and Today’s Music Industry,” *CBC News: The National*, August 14, 2015, accessed June 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pw4e6R15Vlc>.

Over the course of his career, Gordon Lightfoot supplemented his rich baritone voice with his guitar and band accompaniment to create a multifaceted sound which drew upon a wide variety of musical influences. He became famous for his poetic lyrics which celebrated natural landscapes and examined human emotions. His image heavily revolved around his portrayal of a “rambler” masculinity which expressed the consistent tension found in his music between constructions of the urban and the rural, the modern and the romantic. This tension within his image, music, and lyrics also extended to his perceived rurality. Lightfoot portrayed a rurality largely through his train travels to Northern Ontario and annual canoe trips which informed many of his songs, which despite his own largely urban existence gave him more regular contact with the land than many of his listeners. His listeners understood the symbolism of Lightfoot’s many nature-based songs because Canadians had long been conditioned to celebrate the revitalizing power of the landscape. It was his great ability to craft songs which played upon such cherished Canadian narratives which transformed him into a highly celebrated, “authentically Canadian” performer. His “authenticity” was challenged at various points in his career, due to his own personal stresses, his celebrity status, and over-exposure on radio airwaves and at domestic award shows. It could be a challenge for him to balance his own version of “authenticity” – being able to do things his way – with the “authenticity” of others who expected him to uphold the ideals of a country-folk performer and Canadian nationalism more generally. Ultimately though, Lightfoot had been fashioned into a pivotal icon of “Canadian” music.

When Lightfoot was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2003, he was instated by fellow Canadian singer-songwriter Tom Cochrane.⁹⁷ Cochrane observed that Lightfoot was a true dichotomy. While he was fiercely proud of his work, he was also known to shy away from and be embarrassed by accolades and awards. Cochrane further remarked that Canadians were “proud of his work,” arguing that Lightfoot’s stature amongst his fellow citizens was comparable to the place held by Robbie Burns amongst the Scots or James Joyce with the Irish. This pride hung on the fact that Lightfoot had proven that you could be true to your roots and draw upon those influences to inspire your work and still find international success. For many Canadians, Lightfoot continues to be a national institution.

⁹⁷ Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame, “Gordon Lightfoot is Inducted into the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame,” accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.cshf.ca/songwriter/gordon-lightfoot/>.

Illustration 6.1 *Lightfoot!* Album Cover. Source: Author's Collection.

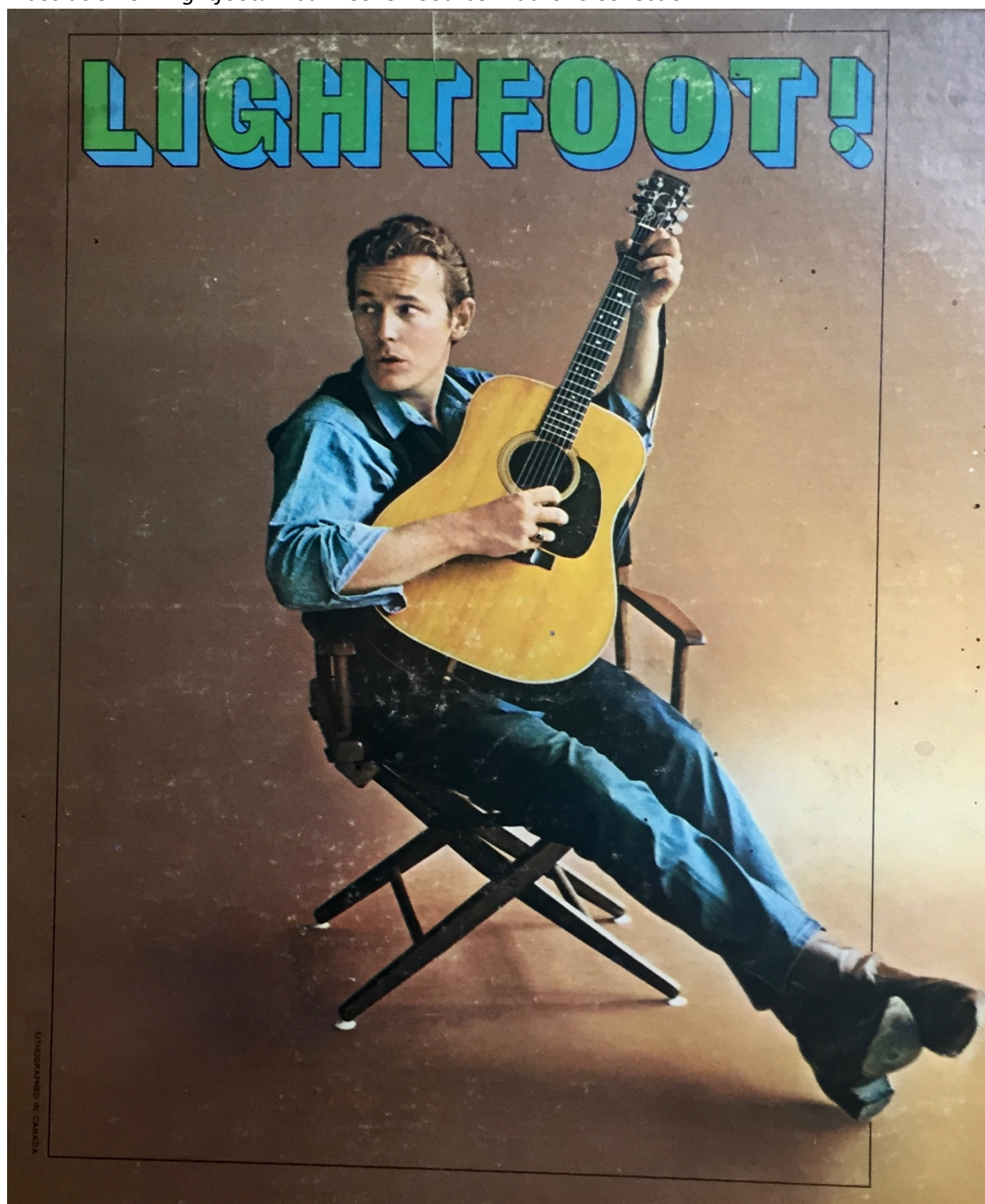


Illustration 6.2 1973 Juno Awards Ceremony. Credit: Bruce Cole, Plum Communications Ltd. Lightfoot with Anne Murray and Stompin' Tom Connors. Anne Murray won two Juno's that night herself. Reflecting on the evening years later she said: "It was a much smaller club back then, and you kind of knew everybody. Even though we didn't see each other at all – we were so busy. But you know what? I still feel that camaraderie."⁹⁸



⁹⁸ Brad Wheeler, "Photographic Memories: What They Were Thinking Across the Decades," *The Globe and Mail*, March 26, 2011, R6.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In 2017, the Country Music Association of Ontario asked country music fans living within the province what it was about the genre which “spoke to them.” “Country music is like a personal journal . . . It seems truly genuine compared to more mainstream top-40 hits,” fan Courtney Styles told the organization. She further argued that “country musicians do music for the fans, rather than solely for the money, so I feel like the quality of the music is far beyond that of what comes from Hollywood.” Fan Emile Scheffel felt that country music was “grounded in the values I care about . . . country is about family, humility, hard work and honesty.” “In today’s hectic world, we’re filled with the need to constantly communicate and be ‘attached,’” fan Andrew Retfalvi stated. In his opinion, country music was the “polar opposite” of our technology-filled world and served as “an instant de-stressor.” “It invokes feelings of freedom, of happiness, and provides an escape from the concrete jungle to a dirt road . . . Country music brings people together, even if those people are from the city,” fan Adam Stanley contended.¹

Such rhetoric echoes the many shared assumptions and fabricated traditions which have shaped the understanding of country music. These comments highlight that country music continues to play upon rural nostalgia and the notion that it is a more “authentic” form of entertainment, a perception reinforced by the music industry and its performers’ abilities to connect with their fans on a personal level by exuding an honest, down-to-earth persona.

Importantly, such comments solidify the arguments which have been made throughout this study, namely that a collection of key measurements exist which have remained important

¹ Stephanie Brooks, “What Country Music Means to Ontarians,” *Country Music Association of Ontario*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://cmaontario.ca/newsletter/what-country-music-means-to-ontarians/>.

to the classifying and performance of country music within North America. These markers include the actual sound of the music, a performer's display of masculinity, a connection to rural spaces and/or values, and, specifically for Canadians, a show of "Canadian-ness." Collectively these markers have worked to authenticate Canadian country performers to industry members, fellow performers, and importantly, to fans. Performers successfully portrayed these markers through song lyrics and instrumentation, through visual markers such as cowboy hats and rhinestone embellishments, and through interviews, autobiographies, photographs, and other publicity materials. The analysis of such sources has highlighted how these performers actively authenticated themselves to their fans and industry members, and in return, how others re-fashioned these constructed images in later years to serve new efforts to prove their "authentic Canadian-ness."

In relying upon the term "authenticity," this study has rejected the notion that it is a meaningless analytical category. This study aligns with scholars who have argued that authenticity can be produced, staged, and experienced, but the constructed nature of authenticity does not mean that it is without value.² As scholars we must question accepted narratives of authenticity to better understand the culture and society within which we function. This can only be achieved if we acknowledge the power held by the pervasive concept which is "authenticity." Indeed, in this study's use of the term it has been about focusing on how performers, fans, and industry members shaped and relied upon this concept in the production and consumption of cultural products. The focus has not been to unmask claims of

² See for example: Maiken Umbach and Matthew Humphrey, eds., *Authenticity: The Cultural History of a Political Concept* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and Chris Barker, ed., *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (London, UK: SAGE, 2012).

“authenticity” as being fraudulent but to emphasize that constructions of authenticity contain elements of reality and imagination giving the concept its power to influence. The careers of Wilf Carter, Earl Heywood, Don Messer, Stompin’ Tom Connors, and Gordon Lightfoot demonstrate the tension within country music between ideas of the traditional and the modern, the real and the fabricated, which at its core, is a discussion of country music’s relationship with “authenticity.”

In looking at the careers and fan responses of these five performers, this study has confirmed that country music has consistently relied upon understandings of authenticity which were continually evolving and negotiated. One characteristic commonly understood was that country music was defined by a shifting synthesis of old and new by which preexisting images of a seemingly authentic folk culture were attached to new styles of music. This left the definition of “authenticity” open to interpretation and it was continuously negotiated by industry members, performers, fans, and even the state. It was fans as much as the industry who wanted to see their favourite country stars as “authentic” country music performers and performers responded in kind.

From the time of its commercial inception in the 1920s, the industry wished to distinguish country music as a genre which had emerged from the life experiences of its performers, and to some extent, fans as well. Not all parts of the lived experience, however, translated to performance. No one would have been particularly interested in the time Wilf Carter spent mucking out horse stalls. The goal of these performers then was to translate what lived experiences they had into a performance, an idealized narrative which had wide audience

appeal. Some authenticity effects were more invented than others and over time the signifiers of rurality became increasingly removed from experience.

All forms of culture are produced by the selective interests of stakeholders. It is the constructing of authenticity which is useful to examine and how and why its effects were successfully communicated and accepted. As this study has shown, constructed narratives of country authenticity have informed Canadians' perceptions of rurality, masculinity, what it means to be Canadian, and what sounds constitute country music. This helps explain the many rural stereotypes and persistent nostalgia which inform how many Canadians continue to view rural spaces.

Stompin' Grounds' examination of authenticity is supplemented by discussions of rurality and masculinity. Rural history in Canada has typically focused upon the land, agricultural production, the household economy, consumption, and the environment. This work has been pivotal in demonstrating the complex and diverse character of rural areas, however, less scholarship within the Canadian context has considered the cultural perceptions held by Canadians regarding the countryside, especially in the post WW II era. A rising interest in rural cultural studies has emerged in recent years as scholars have increasingly focused on challenging the notion of the rural-urban dichotomy in an effort to explore the diverse everyday cultural practices of rural areas and the place of rural life within larger global networks.³ In essence, scholars have shown that the divide between the urban and the rural is not as obvious or as entrenched as has been typically assumed. The findings in this study demonstrate that

³ See for example: David Carter et al., "Rural Cultural Studies: Introduction," *Australian Humanities Review* 45 (2008): 27-36. Also see: Adam Crerar, "Writing across the Rural-Urban Divide: The Case of Peter McArthur, 1909-24," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007): 112-137.

country music became a means for Canadians – both rural and urban – to “connect” with the countryside no matter where or how they lived and was a vehicle for romantic readings of rurality to develop and persist. The sources demonstrate that the early country music press extended elements of romantic agrarian thought into the modern media age creating the basis for a feeling of rural cultural distinctiveness which audiences generally appear to have accepted. Country music could fill a nostalgic void as an “authentic” representation of rural life thereby offering an alternative to everything listeners disliked about the modern urban world which was rapidly developing during the twentieth century. This study therefore emphasizes the cultural side of Rural History, demonstrating that to “be rural” was not just about a person’s address or labours, but also a series of nurtured perceptions and assumptions.

Rurality and masculinity walked side-by-side in this study. It is evident that country music relied upon recognizable, gendered images. The construction of positive imaginings of cowboys, farmers, and lumberjacks held a powerful allure amongst audiences who romanticized rural life and the men and women who performed these gendered images. This study agrees with country music scholars such as Kristine M. McCusker, Diane Pecknold, and Leigh H. Edwards in arguing that performances of masculinity are fundamental to country music’s staple identity.⁴ While conventions of gender certainly shifted, it remained a defining attribute of country music performance over the course of this study. As a male dominated

⁴ See for example: Kristine M. McCusker, and Diane Pecknold, eds., *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2004) and Kristine M. McCusker, and Diane Pecknolds, eds., *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2016). Also see the work of Leigh H. Edwards: *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009) and *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

genre, Canadian performers portrayed different types of masculinity. From Carter, Heywood, and Messer's approachable, family-friendly man to the more rough, rambling man portrayed by Connors and Lightfoot, masculinity dictated the expectations and restrictions placed upon these country music performers.

Significantly, *Stompin' Grounds: Performing Country Music in Canada* has contributed to our understanding of Canadian culture by the very fact that it has focused upon country music. Country music has been a popular genre of music amongst Canadians since its emergence as a commercial product, yet no sustained academic studies have examined its importance. During the twentieth century, it became a more socially accepted form of entertainment and condescending comments about "hillbillies" were largely left behind. Understanding Canada's experience with country music is difficult because the genre is so heavily associated with the American rural South. The prevalence of historical studies like Bill C. Malone's *Country Music, U.S.A.* forces any scholar delving into the study of country music to respond to his assertion that country music is exclusively a product of the American rural South. These five case studies emphasize that in terms of sound, dress, and portrayals of masculinity and rurality, country music constituted a transnational phenomenon. From the time of country music's commercial launch, ideas and trends were easily and willingly exchanged and adopted by American and Canadian industry members, performers, and fans. Canadians shared in a musical experience which originated in America and then spread quickly across the continent through broadcasters and consumers. While many of the performers examined within this study used lyrics or fiddling styles which demonstrated a regional sensitivity, their music also fit into the signifiers and traditions which country performers shared more broadly across North America as they worked

to prove their authenticity. This greatly complicates the typical narrative found in the Canadian literature on all forms of popular music which works to differentiate “Canadian” music from “American” in order to prove the “authenticity” of beloved Canadian performers. Indeed, as historian Paul Litt has noted, this focus on defining the “Canadian” character of both the nation and its cultural products “required much fine hair-splitting.” Litt has pointed out that “at first blush any comparison of Canada and the United States would find them more remarkable for their similarities,” and so defining the nation’s uniqueness became of vital importance in the postwar era.⁵ While the five performers in this study incorporated regional influences at varying levels within their music, Canadian and American fans shared a similar understanding of country music and what it ought to be. They expected to see and were swayed by a performer’s successful portrayal of country “authenticity.” Country performers in Canada knew that to be commercially successful they had to establish their masculinity and rural backstory while connecting with the country music trends prevalent across North America. The popularity these performers found amongst audiences demonstrates how adaptive the domestic music scene was to the influence of American cultural imports.

Stompin’ Grounds avoids the “Canadian” sound trap which the literature on Canadian performers has so often relied upon. Whether or not one can “hear” the Canadian Prairies or “feel” the isolation of the Canadian Shield on the recordings done by these performers, the findings in this study demonstrate the inseparability of national identity from the discourse which surrounds domestic musical production and performance.⁶ While earlier performers like

⁵ Litt, *Trudeaumania*, 79.

⁶ In her introduction to *Canadian Culture: An Introductory Reader*, editor Elspeth Cameron argues that “if Hugh Kenner is right, no one hearing this will take it amiss: ‘the surest way to the hearts of a Canadian audience is to

Wulf Carter or Earl Heywood did not have to seriously contend with the question of their “Canadian-ness,” it became a key marker as the twentieth century progressed. Importantly, this constitutes a pivotal difference between Canadian and American country music performers in that Canadians experienced state intervention and the cultural elite’s preoccupation with establishing and entrenching a “Canadian” identity. It was this preoccupation which made it possible for the “Canadian” label to grow in importance in the realm of popular music production and performance, especially during the postwar era. Such concerns were not only motivated by a desire to “protect” “authentically Canadian” content but it was also about creating a widely understood and accepted understanding of what it was which actually constituted “Canadian” culture.

As the sources examined here demonstrate, with time the rhetoric amongst journalists, audiences, institutions, and some performers increasingly revolved around Canadians’ desire for a distinct identity. Whether the performer cared about this or not, it was a question that steadily preoccupied commentators and fans such that performers had to at least consider it. And so, while country music has rarely appeared in discussions regarding “Canadian” culture, the historic trends and contemporary context which inform this study reveal that to perform country music in Canada was to engage with the authenticity markers of sound, rurality and masculinity, and increasingly essentialized notions of “Canadian-ness.”

inform them that their souls are to be identified with rocks, rapids, wilderness and virgin (but exploitable) forest.” This reader does an excellent job in establishing that vital changes in Canada ensure that such a statement cannot explain the country’s culture (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1997, 225). It is a narrative, however, which continues to emerge and can be seen at work in publications on Canadian music such as: Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), Douglas Fetherling, *Someday Soon: Essays on Canadian Songwriters* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1990), and Marco Adria, *Music of Our Times: Eight Canadian Singer-Songwriters* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1991).

Stompin' Grounds specifically shows that ideas regarding what it meant to be "Canadian" and by extension how to define "Canadian culture" was an ongoing and problematic pursuit. Country music is a widely enjoyed and performed genre of music that constitutes a shared experience with the United States within a nation that has historically feared the possible effects of American cultural imports. Ultimately, this study speaks to how country music could have multiple connotations within different contexts and to varying audiences. While the performers studied here constructed and engaged with largely fictionalized narratives, they have been equally mythologized by industry members, the media, the state, and fans. Their legacies offer a telling perspective on country music history beyond the American rural South and the genre's continuous authenticity debates.

Appendix A

A Stompin' Grounds Playlist

Wilf Carter

My Swiss Moonlight Lullaby
The Capture of Albert Johnson
The Two Gun Cowboy
Calgary Roundup
Hittin' the Trail
Hang the Key on the Bunkhouse Door
My Little Grey-Haired Mother in the West
Pete Knight, King of the Cowboys
Pete Knight's Last Ride
Hobo Song to the Mounties
The Yodelling Hobo
Rambling My Whole Life Away
Moose River Mine Disaster

Earl Heywood

Sing Me a Song of the Saddle
While the Wagon Wheels of Texas Roll Along
Ridin' Down the Trail of Glory
The Road of Life
Withered Roses in the Snow
There's a New Love True Love in my Heart
Tears of St. Anne
Alberta Waltz

Don Messer

Medicine Hat Breakdown
Prince County Jig
Arkansas Traveler
Ragtime Annie
Don Messer's Breakdown
Riley's Favourite Reel
Hannigan's Hornpipe

Stompin' Tom Connors

Wilf Carter Tribute

Sudbury Saturday Night
Pizza Pie Love
Bud the Spud
Old Atlantic Shore
To It and At It
The Canadian Lumberjack
Big Joe Mufferaw
Movin' on to Rouyn
Algoma Central No. 69
Streets of Toronto
The Peterborough Postman
Little Wawa
Northern Gentleman
Goin' Back Up North
Emily, The Maple Leaf
The Flying C.P.R.
The Maritime Waltz
Red River Jane
Bonnie Belinda
My Little Eskimo
Ripped-Off Winkle
The I Don't Know How to Fix the Damn Thing Blues

Gordon Lightfoot
Canadian Railroad Trilogy
Go-Go Around
Steel Rail Blues
Ribbon of Darkness
Sixteen Miles
Early Mornin' Rain
Peaceful Waters
Black Day in July
The Way I Feel
Alberta Bound
Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald
Long River
Seven Island Suite

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