Excerpt from "Honky Tonk Angels:
Feminist Activism through the Lyrical and Personal Expression
of Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton"
by Elyse Wilson

Author's Note: *The following text is a condensed version of an original senior thesis. For the purposes of this publication in the* Hanover Historical Review, *the author has removed the comparative sections concerning Dolly Parton to provide a more concentrated analysis of Loretta Lynn's working-class feminist narrative.*

Since its creation, country music has been a foundational part of American culture. This music has the power to transcend generations, time, and place through relatable, simple tales. Much like other art forms, country music uses its lyrics and construction to promote certain messages or make commentary on the world, nation, culture, or political atmosphere it exists in. Loretta Lynn is an exemplar in the country music space, and her work has transcended generations from the height of her fame in the middle of the twentieth century. Lynn and those like her in country music were activists and created elements of cultural change by challenging stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Lynn has used her platform in a way that trailblazed a path for future female performers and women in America. Her lyrics and life touch on personal topics for her and her audience (such as motherhood, traditional gender roles, and forms of expression) while also promoting activism in a way that brings her listeners to want more instead of alienating or isolating them. Lynn's contributions to music as an artist are celebrated especially for how she has influenced the music world and the political atmosphere by working to create a freer and more equitable future. The main caveat is that Lynn never actually subscribed to the feminist movement. However, through her actions and values, Lynn sought to emphasize the structural injustices women have faced in American society and thus fueled ideas about how women in the next generation could exercise their freedoms. While not being a traditional feminist, Loretta Lynn had a significant impact on the country music industry and the larger conversation and changing societal notions about women.

Lynn's disposition towards activism demonstrates her social position and the larger history of the development of activism within the genre. Mark Allan Jackson's *Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* examines the nuances of progressive ideas and how they present themselves through lyrics and the actions of performers. The chapter titled "Stand Up to Your Man" focuses on Loretta Lynn's use of her platform to voice her opinions (through her lyrics, interviews, and books) on injustices she experienced and encountered. Jackson's main claim is that Lynn would downplay her subscription to feminist ideals but still make statements that seem to be proudly supporting the movement.[1] For Lynn, her music subscribes to the ideas around feminist change even if she herself was unwilling to acknowledge it publicly. The increasingly "riotous, anti-male stance of the Women's Movement" that developed in the late 1960s was too extreme in comparison to the stances that Lynn took, which is why she could not associate herself with it.[2]

In an article from 1982, author Jimmie Rogers analyzes the type of love and type of women Lynn describes in her songs, which shows how he and other critics regarded her role in the progress of the women's movement. "Images of Women as Depicted in the Messages of Loretta Lynn" highlights the traditional stereotype of men and women within country music and the agreement among popular opinion and music experts that women are often criticized unfairly. One study Rogers discusses focused on 137 songs involving love, relationships, and women's demeanor to determine if Lynn supported common stereotypes of women. The analysis found that only 38 songs had a submissive woman while 99 did not subscribe to this stereotype. In these 99, Lynn challenges the double standard between men and women and highlights the unequal treatment women face in relationships. The article claims that Lynn's best demonstration of these demands for equality is through her song "We've Come A Long Way Baby" where the female narrator insists on receiving "sexual satisfaction." Additionally, the song conveys Lynn's outspoken belief in women's right to abortion.[3] In the end, Rogers claims that Lynn was not an active spokesperson for the women's liberation movement and even tried to take herself away from the spotlight on these issues. Even so, her lyrics tell the real story. Although she may want

[1] Mark Allan Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man: The Working Class Feminism of Loretta Lynn," in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, edited by Mark Allan Jackson (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 117.

[2] Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man," 104.

[3] Jimmie N. Rogers, "Images of Women as Depicted in the Messages of Loretta Lynn," *Studies in Popular Culture,* no. 5 (1982): 47.

to take herself out of this campaign, her music focuses on the problems that many women face, and "when those women…elect to attend to a Loretta Lynn song they often hear about females who are *not* described as submissive, dependent, and supportive," which in turn is activism for the women's liberation movement.[4]

Lynn acknowledges the difference in her stardom and her reality through her song "Success." In the song, the singer laments about her partner's success and how she has become "second place… since fame and fortune knocked our door."[5] Writing semi-autobiographically, from her husband's point of view, Lynn recognizes how she has to spend so much time away from her family and that her "success has made a failure of her home."[6] Lynn regrets how little time she was able to spend at home but knows that her success is creating her family's wealth. She holds stake in the gendered constructs of the mid twentieth century, which say that women should not be the sole breadwinner. Her commitment to her family reflects the new wave feminist belief that women can have the success they desire while also deserving the experience they want within the home. While the feminist movement wants to empower women to have social and occupational opportunities, women still have the choice to take a more traditional role, but feminists stress that traditional roles should be a choice, not something assigned to women based on their gender. When Lynn was first discovered, she already had a husband and children and could have easily not taken the opportunity to become a performer, but nevertheless she did. Lynn uses her fabricated and exaggerated depiction as a traditional southern woman to relate to her audience, while also defying gender norms by being the main contributor to her family.

Lynn's statements and actions as a popular figure create space for other women to feel comfortable expressing their opinions on the circumstances of their lives. One of Lynn's most popular songs, "The Pill," tells the story of a woman who, now with access to the birth control pill, has the freedom and confidence to stand up to her husband because she is no longer burdened by pregnancy. With direct lyrics, including "I'm making up for all those years now that I got the pill" and "this incubator is overused because you've kept it filled," Lynn paints a very realistic picture of what women have gone through and how necessary birth control is. In her

[4] Rogers, "Images of Women," 47–48.

[5] Johnny Mullins, "Success," performed by Loretta Lynn, *Honky Tonk Girl* (Bradley's Barn, Owen Bradley, 1962).

[6] Ruth A. Banes, "Mythology in Music: The Ballad of Loretta Lynn," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 16, no.3 (1985): 288.

song, the husband has been "crowing how you and your hens play" (implying infidelity) and forcing his wife to bear and raise many children while not being a participant in the household. The birth control pill is the key to the woman's liberation because she now has a choice in the number of children she has, contributing to the success of the household itself by reducing the number of children needing to be raised. The song was originally recorded in 1972, a year before the landmark decision *Roe vs. Wade,* and was released three years later. It quickly became controversial and was banned from country radio stations after it hit No. 5 on the Billboard Hot Country charts. Its popularity and controversy led some pop stations to start playing the song and contributed to its spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart at No. 70.[7] The aversion of country radio to promoting this song aligns with traditional values the genre typically subscribes to. Lynn's acceptance and promotion of the birth control pill was too much for the men running these radio stations to bear as it reflected a changing society and descriptions of women's liberation and choice. Her commitment to making conversations about the pill more mainstream contributed to a greater social acceptance of a woman's right to choose.

Lynn's promotion of the birth control pill gave women more freedom to express their beliefs and goals for their life while still not rejecting tradition. This song was wildly popular with female audiences as it allowed for conversation about female sexuality, reproductive health, and the power dynamics within marriages. Lynn herself said she was not reliant on contraception. However, when she was having children the birth control pill was not available. While she does not regret the children she had, she believes she would not have had as many if the pill had been accessible sooner.[8] Lynn recognizes how the availability of the pill as well as comprehensive sex education would help women in situations like hers (bearing children with a very dominant husband in a working-class household). In the end, her position on birth control was controversial for the times, but she was willing to take that position, even though her being the matriarch of a large family made her an unlikely representative of the movement.

Songs like "The Pill" exist as examples of how Lynn, and other artists in her realm, could poke fun at the hypocrisy they deal with. Naomi Weisstein was a feminist critic during the women's movement of the 1970s. She studied women's humor in feminist media and highlighted

[7] Beverly Keel, "Why Loretta Lynn's 'The Pill' Is Sadly More Relevant Than Ever (Guest Commentary)," *Billboard: Country,* Oct. 5, 2022, https://www.billboard.com/music/country/loretta-lynn-the-pill-relevant-1235150781/.

[8] Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man," 114.

how women present themselves to the world. She explains that "women's charm has depended on our passivity and muteness as well as on our acceptance of the myth that it is in our nature to suffer."[9] This is the same message that Lynn uses in her music. While Lynn still subscribes to some more traditional notions of women though her family life, her songs reflect a different attitude about what she believes a woman can be. Lynn has shown that she is not afraid to speak about what she believes in and is outspoken about the unfair limitations that women have been subjected to.[10] Weisstein recognizes the emotional toll and anger that women carry by having systematic hinderances to their liberty; they can in turn use humor to criticize those who instigate and contribute to this system of oppression. She continues by saying "once women begin to develop a sense of shared oppression …with the surfacing of anger comes the realization that sarcastic humor can serve as one way for women to regain some measure of social control and thus reduce the feeling of personal and group powerlessness."[11] Lynn's ability to bring women together in this way can be seen in the public reactions to "The Pill." Lynn was able to speak about a controversial topic and help women to "reject the myth that it is a wife's duty to produce one child after another with no choice in the matter."[12] The intersection of humor also speaks to the creation of women-only conversations and spaces within the public sphere. Traditionally women-only conversations took place in domestic spaces like the kitchen under the guise of some domestic task. Because of the influence of the women's movement and Lynn's music, these conversations can happen more publicly even if radio stations tried to ban the song from being played. Even while Lynn did not directly subscribe to the women's movement, her actions and music connected to feminist goals by creating a place for conversations on women's agency.

Lynn's hit "Coal Miner's Daughter" best represents the dualism within Lynn's life as an agent of change while also being a member of traditional Appalachian culture. Ruth Banes unpacks this when describing how southern artists create the mythology of the South: "Southern mythology is similarly represented in the conflicting dualities…: poverty and affluence, traditional and liberated female roles, Appalachia and America."[13] Lynn reminisces on the life she grew up in, describing the hardships her family faced, with her father working in the mines

[9] Suzanne L. Bunkers, "Why Are These Women Laughing? The Power and Politics of Women's Humor," *Studies in American Humor* 4, no.1 (1985): 87.
[10] Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man," 117.
[11] Bunkers, "Why Are These Women Laughing?" 87.
[12] Bunkers, "Why Are These Women Laughing?" 88.
[13] Banes, "Mythology in Music," 284.

and her mother raising eight children. She does not lament about their circumstances but tells her family's story with a sense of nostalgia. When Lynn writes songs about her own life, she reflects both the truth and the narrative she wants others to hear. While she claims to sing authentically, memory is not always what it seems to be. People can sometimes remember events from their childhoods through a haze of nostalgia because they were unaware of their families' true circumstances. In "Coal Miner's Daughter," Lynn sings about how her family only had enough money to buy one pair of shoes per child per year: "But in the wintertime we'd all get a brand new pair / From a mail order catalog / Money made from selling a hog."[14] The song goes on to say that Lynn's father always made sure they had the money, even if she did not know where it came from. These details add to the narrative that is twentieth-century Appalachia, where survival is dependent on the collaborative efforts of everyone involved despite a culture of rugged individualism. In Butcher Holler, the people cared about the well-being of their neighbors and worked for the greater good of all. Through "Coal Miner's Daughter," Lynn expresses how this type of community shaped her life and how over time the world outside Appalachia has caused this comradery to no longer exist. "Coal Miner's Daughter" is a critique of a different kind than that of her other songs because it focuses on the issues in a changing America, such as how rural communities are being transformed and how the nation is losing its sense of community.

The public reaction to Lynn's songs and the reluctance of radio stations to play them proves how "against the grain" her ideas were for the time, even if they seem obvious now. Although Lynn denied being a "libber," her popularity and confidence to make these statements helped to "set up a strong line of resistance to the masculinized world of country music and opened doors for…female country singers who were…every bit as successful as men."[15] Even though Lynn personally does not assign this label to herself, she demonstrates her opinions through her actions. She is working within the confines of the music industry, which historically does not favor female artists, and she takes a stance within the industry, becoming an agent of change and activist for women in the future, as her music has already shown. Through her lyrics and presentation, Lynn becomes a symbol for women and for the southern working class while

[14] Loretta Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter," performed by Loretta Lynn, *Coal Miner's Daughter* (Bradley's Barn, Owen Bradley, 1971).

[15] Anderson, "After All He's Just a Man," 96.

still being contradictory in nature. Banes describes Lynn as endorsing values that are "distinctively southern" with an "emphasis upon…. loyalty to family and place... and an individualistic morality."[16] Her lyrics represent how she remembers her own life making her uniquely able to describe the inner thoughts and feelings of her audience.

[16] Banes, "Mythology in Music," 284.

WORKS CITED

Banes, Ruth A. "Mythology in Music: The Ballad of Loretta Lynn." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 16, no. 3 (1985): 284–288.

Bunkers, Suzanne L. "Why Are These Women Laughing? The Power and Politics of Women's Humor." *Studies in American Humor* 4, no. 1 (1985): 87–88.

Jackson, Mark Allan. "Stand Up to Your Man: The Working Class Feminism of Loretta Lynn." In *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*. Edited by Mark Allan Jackson. University of Massachusetts Press, Mass, 2018: 104–117.

Keel, Beverly. "Why Loretta Lynn's 'The Pill' Is Sadly More Relevant Than Ever (Guest Commentary)." *Billboard: Country*. Oct. 5, 2022. https://www.billboard.com/music/country/loretta-lynn-the-pill-relevant-1235150781/.

Lynn, Loretta. "Coal Miner's Daughter." Performed by Loretta Lynn. *Coal Miner's Daughter.* Bradley's Barn, Owen Bradley, 1971.

Mullins, Johnny. "Success." Performed by Loretta Lynn. *Honky Tonk Girl*. Bradley's Barn, Owen Bradley, 1962.

Rogers, Jimmie N. "Images of Women as Depicted in the Messages of Loretta Lynn." *Studies in Popular Culture*, no. 5 (1982): 47–48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45018089.