

THE MUSICAL FEATURES OF 2015's TOP-RANKED COUNTRY SONGS

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## ABSTRACT

Mason Taylor Allen: The Musical Features of 2015's Top-Ranked Country Songs  
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The 2015 top-ten country songs analyzed in this study are characterized by the various formats of their song form, harmonies, and lyrics. This thesis presents a comprehensive study of the structure and narratives in sixty-seven songs that summarizes the distinctive features within those domains of contemporary commercial country music. A detailed description of the norm along with identifiable trends emerges. The song form that features most prominently in this repertory includes a verse-chorus-bridge form with three iterations of the chorus, an intro and outro section, and instrumental sections immediately following each chorus. The top-ten country songs have varying degrees of departure from this typical model. Primary features of the harmonies of these top songs include the frequent use of a double-tonic complex, the absence of a 5-1 authentic cadence, the same chord progression throughout the verse, chorus, and bridge, and the use of only two chords throughout the song. Lyrical analyses show that 2015 songs are continuing the traditional themes about romantic attraction, love, heartache, good times and partying, home, family, nostalgia, religion, and inspiration, within the context of small-town country life that this genre has used for years. Specific vocabulary suggests some differences from the past to reflect modern times and influences from other popular musical genres. Finally, interviews with songwriters suggest that the present collaborative approach to songwriting leads to many of these trends, and that songwriters are consciously working with tensions of genre

boundaries, ties to tradition, and impulses toward innovation that result in many of the structural characteristics that describe contemporary country songwriting and arranging.

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## INTRODUCTION

A familiar phrase in country music, “It all begins with a song,” is attributed to country songwriters Tom T. and Dixie Hall.<sup>1</sup> This expression is well known among songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee, home of country music, where “it” can be interpreted in different ways, such as the foundation of the music industry, the start of a songwriter’s or artist’s career, the personal journey of the listener, or the growth of the genre. Country music has grown to become one of the largest genres of music in American culture today. It is growing in popularity among American consumers with estimates of more than 98 million fans or 42% of American adults listening to this music in 2013.<sup>2</sup> According to historian Bill Malone and musicologist Jocelyn Neal, this music was played by musicians in the southern states and first regularly recorded in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> Musicians played acoustic instruments and told their stories about the everyday lives of working-class people. While these attributes remain at the core of country music today and continue to account for its broad appeal, the genre has also evolved to include influences from rock, pop, blues, and other genres of music. With these different influences and the introduction of electrified instruments, different styles have appeared over the span of nearly half a century,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie P. Ledgin, *Homegrown Music, Discovering Bluegrass*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers (2004), 69.

<sup>2</sup> “CMA The Power of Country,” *CMA World*, (2013), 1, <<http://www.cmaworld.com/cmaaddons/world/2013-ConnectwithCountry.pdf>>; Vernell Hackett, “New Statistics About Country Music Fans Revealed at Billboard Country Summit,” *Billboard*, (08 June 2011), <<http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/country/1177554/new-statistics-about-country-music-fans-revealed-at-billboard-country>>.

<sup>3</sup> Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (3rd revised edition), Austin: University of Texas Press, [1968] (2010), 1.

and subgenres have developed that target different subgroups of fans. Of particular interest for this study are pop country and country rock, along with the more recent emergence of bro country, which takes influence from hip-hop, rock, and electronic music, and typically references attractive women, alcohol, and partying. The stylistic diversity within country music has long provoked questions and challenges about what characterizes and defines the genre. To address this question with regard to the current landscape of commercial country music in 2015, the present study is aimed at addressing the musical structural, formal, and stylistic elements intrinsic to the recordings themselves through a catalog and analysis of features that most prominently mark today's songwriting and performing within commercial, radio-targeted country music.

In recent years, several studies have analyzed the lyrics of top country songs and showed that social themes continue to reflect stories of everyday events, traditional relationships, and conservative cultural beliefs. In a narrative analysis of country music from 2001 to 2008, Jessica Gehrke showed that topical songs continue to thrive in the genre, as well as some songs that engaged with extraordinary events and political views in the country during that time.<sup>4</sup> Journalist Robert W. Van Sickle also addressed lyrical themes in the number one country songs from 1960 to 2000, finding that romantic love and interpersonal issues have been a common theme, but songs during that time period and in recent years have rarely expressed overly political views.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the lyrics of top country songs in 2008, songwriter Ralph Murphy found many

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Gehrke, "A Narrative Analysis of Country Music's Discussion of 9/11, Patriotism, and War" (Masters thesis, Washington State University, 2009), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Robert W. Van Sickle, "A World without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960–2000," *Popular Music and Society*, 28.3 (2005): 329; Jeremy Hobson, "Country Music and Politics Go Arm in Arm," *NPR Here and Now*, (1 March 2016).

themes of love, including romantic love, love lost, love of family, love of God and country, and love of good times, which were expressed primarily through the use of first-person pronouns.<sup>6</sup> Additional studies of lyrics show that family relationships and the Christian faith are key themes addressed in this genre.<sup>7</sup> The use of simple words, often filled with emotion, phrases with double meaning, clichés, and humor are common in country songs.<sup>8</sup> While lyric analyses continue to make up the majority of published research on country songs, a number of analytic studies, ranging from trade books for songwriters to academic articles also address the common musical elements of country songs, almost always within a mix of pop and rock songs as well.<sup>9</sup> However, none of these studies draws together all the characteristics within songwriting of a specific, short time period for more than the number 1 country songs.

In the present study, I undertook formal analysis of the musical and lyrical content of the top ten songs on the 2015 *Billboard* “Hot Country Songs” chart to identify the most prominent compositional and arranging features of contemporary commercial country music. *Billboard’s*

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<sup>6</sup> Ralph Murphy, “Murphy’s Laws of Songwriting Part I,” *Canadian Musician* 31.58 (2 May 2009): 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyn Neal, “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 29.1 (2007): 42

<sup>8</sup> Jimmie N. Rodgers, *The Country Music Message: Revisited* (Fayetteville, AR: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1988), 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> One book that specifically addresses country music’s form as well as lyrics is Ralph Murphy, *Murphy’s Laws of Songwriting*. Nashville, TN: Murphy Music Consulting, Inc., 2013. Other published research on the musical elements of contemporary songwriting focuses primarily on pop and rock music, but with relevance to country. These include: David Tough, “Teaching Modern Production and Songwriting Techniques: What Makes a Hit Song?” *MEIEA Journal*, 13.1 (2014): 97-124; Paul Asercion, “So You Want to Make a Hit Song?” *Columbia University Journal of Politics and Society* (June 16 2014).

“Hot Country Songs” top-ten entries changed on a weekly basis because any particular song may have maintained or changed its rank position, or have been displaced from the top ten (Appendix 1). Consequently, there were a total of sixty-seven songs that were identified as having reached their highest rank as one of the weekly top ten in 2015 (Appendix 2). Except for one song, Heartland’s “I Loved Her First,” which premiered in 2006, all were released in 2014 or 2015.<sup>10</sup> For this study, listening to the officially released version of the song was the method of identifying the song’s form, instrumentation, major or minor key, and chord progressions; the harmonic transcriptions were confirmed at a piano. For purposes of transcription and as a notated form for analysis, this study used the Nashville Number System to notate the harmonic progression around the tonal center, showing the harmonic content of a song as Arabic numerals (representing scale-degrees of chord roots) laid out by formal section and hypermeter.<sup>11</sup> To gain a greater understanding of the songwriting process, trends in the genre and within the industry, and additional insights on the musical features observed in the transcription process, I interviewed several Nashville songwriters. They shared their process for songwriting and trends they have noticed in country music over many years of working in the industry. Those interviews were correlated with my formal study of the recordings for this project.

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<sup>10</sup> The re-entry of Heartland’s song, “I Loved Her First” in the 2015 charts is attributed to a viral wedding video that featured this song; “Sam Hunt Scores Second No. 1 on Hot Country Songs, Heartland Returns,” *Billboard*, 12 February 2015, <<http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/6472672/sam-hunt-heartland>>.

<sup>11</sup> Chas Neal Williams, *Nashville Number System*, (2012). This system shows chord roots as Arabic numerals. All chords are assumed to be major unless annotated with a lower-case “m” or “-” to indicate minor. Slash notation is used to indicate bass notes that are not the root of the chord. The layout of the chords on the page conveys information about hypermeter and song form. Additional details of the notation system are covered in depth in Williams’ book.

The primary findings from this analytic study were in the following domains: song form, harmonic progression, and lyrical themes and vocabulary. Chapter 1 of this thesis addresses song form, presenting the most common models. The verse-chorus-bridge form is most commonly used, with three iterations of the chorus, and instrumental sections immediately following each chorus. The bridge frequently has the same chord progressions as the verse or chorus, with contrast provided through variations in texture. An abridged second verse, a pre-chorus, and/or a pullback chorus are features that are present in some songs. Chapter 2 explores the harmonic vocabulary of contemporary country, specifically the trends toward cyclic progressions, the use of a double-tonic complex, the avoidance of the dominant harmony, the same chord progressions in the verse, chorus, and/or bridge, and the use of only two chords in the song. Chapter 3 focuses on traditional themes present in the lyrics, concerning love and family relationships, faith, inspiration, and good times, usually within the context of rural country life. While these themes have been present in country music in the past, specific vocabulary reflects modern times and influences from other popular musical genres. In summary, the analyses of these sixty-seven songs characterize contemporary country music as both linked to its musical past and incorporating significant elements from pop, rock, blues, and rap styles. The overall consistency of formal approaches found in these songs indicates that country listeners anticipate certain features and relate to identifiable models of song form in a particular time period.

## CHAPTER 1: SONG FORM

Within contemporary country music, the forms of the songs, meaning the identifiable sections, the musical-rhetorical functions of those sections, and the relationships between them-- follow stock patterns. These basic patterns, which describe such pervasive models as the “aaba” and “verse-chorus” forms, are common across many genres of popular music and can be traced historically through more than a century of vernacular American music and beyond. Yet there are some identifiable trends in how contemporary country songwriters are using those song form patterns that help to characterize today’s top-40 country music. This chapter begins with a very brief explanation of the basic, prototypical models of song forms, then shows how the most common model, namely the verse-chorus-bridge model, is deployed in contemporary country. It then proceeds to identify and analyze five specific features of song form and musical arrangements that are prominent within contemporary country. These features are, first, the use of the pre-chorus; second, a musical arrangement that changes the texture of a song through a pullback chorus; third, the conditions under which a bridge is or is not present in a song; fourth, the common practice of abridging the second verse of a song; and fifth, the use of specific types of solos and reuse of introduction material as a spacer between song sections. In total, this discussion of song form highlights current practice, the pervasiveness of a few specific song form models, and the features that most prominently mark today’s songwriting.

The basic model on which most contemporary country music is constructed is a verse-chorus form, with two contrasting sections that repeat multiple times in a song. Music theorists

have shown the relationship between the verse-chorus-bridge models of song form and the more abstract patterns of “aaba,” or “statement-restatement-departure-conclusion” and how these forms have evolved historically.<sup>12</sup> Verse-chorus song form has been used in rock music since the 1950s and became the most popular song form in the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> In the verse-chorus song form, the verse has a fixed melody and harmony that does not change, and its text tells the story contained in the song, with different lyric content in each successive verse. In the chorus, the melody and harmony are also fixed, but may differ from the verse. The text gives the main point of the song, usually containing the title or hook in the last line of the chorus. Some songs include a bridge section, in the second half of the song, which provides contrast textually, offering a different point of view or perspective. Conventionally, the bridge has contrasting harmonies, frequently changing to the subdominant or other flat-side keys and typically being open harmonically at the ending.<sup>14</sup> In 2015, the most common model is a readily recognizable verse-chorus-bridge model.

Along with the basic model just described, contemporary country songs follow a musical organization with other stock elements. These include the song’s intro, various instrumental solos, and an outro. The instrumental sections frequently have guitar solos. Luke Bryan’s song, “I See You,” is a prime example of the form that is most typical of country songs in 2015 (Example 1.1).

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Everett, *Foundations of Rock: From “Blue Suede Shoes” to “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,”* Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA (2008), 140-2; Jay Summach, “Form in Top-20 Rock Music, 1955-89,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2012), 106-9.

<sup>13</sup> Summach, 123-28.

<sup>14</sup> Neal, 45.

**Example 1.1: Luke Bryan’s “I See You” Highlighting the Typical Song Form and Chord Progression Using the Nashville Number System Notation**

Note: In all of the chord-progression charts, a box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences. In many instances, there is a phrase overlap such that the conclusion of the chorus occurs on the first bar of the subsequent formal section (usually an instrumental). This structure places the final cadence of the chorus on a hypermetrically strong bar, which gives weight and emphasis to the moment of cadence. The formal charts are laid out on the page based on hypermeter, not melodic phrase structure. In songs with this phrase overlap structure, the conclusion of the chorus coincides with the start of the next formal section.

Time	Form	Chord Progression	
0:00	Intro	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5
0:20	Verse 1	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5
0:34	Chorus	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db Cb Db Ebm Gb/Bb Cb Cb Db Db→	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5 4 5 6- 1/3 4 4 5 5 →
1:05	Instrumental	<b>Ebm</b> Cb Gb Db	<b>6-</b> 4 1 5
1:14	Verse 2	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5
1:26	Chorus	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db Cb Db Ebm Gb Cb Cb Db Db →	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5 4 5 6- 1 4 4 5 5 →
1:56	Instrumental	<b>Ebm</b> Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db	<b>6-</b> 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5
2:11	Bridge	Ebm Cb Db Db	6- 4 5 5
2:18	Chorus	Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db Cb Db Ebm Gb/Bb Cb Cb Db Db →	6- 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5 4 5 6- 1/3 4 4 5 5 →
2:48	Outro	<b>Ebm</b> Cb Gb Db Ebm Cb Gb Db Ebm	<b>6-</b> 4 1 5 6- 4 1 5 6-

Example 1.1 represents the typical song form although the bridge section is optional and in this case does not have a contrasting harmony. As noted earlier, the Nashville Number System shows the harmonic content of a song as Arabic numerals (representing scale-degrees of chord roots); all chords are assumed to be major unless indicated with an “m” or “-” for minor. The songs are transcribed around a perceived tonic, as will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Beyond the basic use of a verse-chorus-bridge model, there are other commonalities among the song forms of today’s country music. For instance, the songs analyzed most commonly had three iterations of the chorus. Table 1.1 shows the songs that had variations from this standard, namely two, four, or five iterations of the chorus. It is worth noting that fully sixty of the sixty-seven songs analyzed in this project held to the more formulaic approach of three choruses. That means that listeners are entirely acclimated to expect three iterations of a chorus in a song.

**Table 1.1. Variations in the Number of Iterations of the Chorus**

Song	Artist	Number of Chorus Repeats
Girl Crush	Little Big Town	2
One Hell of an Amen	Brantley Gilbert	2
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	Keith Urban	4
Perfect Storm	Brad Paisley	2
Raise ‘Em Up	Keith Urban	2
Save it For a Rainy Day	Kenny Chesney	5
Wild Child	Kenny Chesney	4

Within the basic approach to song form, another section that may appear within this model is a pre-chorus. The pre-chorus is the first feature that stands out in current songwriting practice and is defined as typically four or eight bars of music appearing just before the chorus. The pre-chorus functions to increase the energy of the song and acts as a “ramp” or “launch” into

the chorus. The harmonies are typically pre-dominant to dominant chord progressions, ending in a half cadence and functioning to prepare for the chorus. In theorist Jay Summach’s analyses of the top-20 rock songs from 1955-1989, he found that the use of a pre-chorus had changed over time, but when used, it provided an increase in momentum through changing harmonic progression, harmonic rhythm, instrumentation, and lyric phrasing.<sup>15</sup> Within the corpus of this project, only fifteen songs of the sixty-seven analyzed had a pre-chorus, suggesting that it is currently out of fashion within country song form.<sup>16</sup> Table 1.2 lists the songs analyzed that had a pre-chorus.

**Table 1.2. Songs Having a Pre-chorus Section**

Song	Artist	Position of Pre-chorus
Burning House	Cam	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Die a Happy Man	Thomas Rhett	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
God Made Girls	RaeLynn	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
House Party	Sam Hunt	1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> choruses
I Got the Boy	Jana Kramer	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
I Loved Her First	Heartland	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Little Toy Guns	Carrie Underwood	1 <sup>st</sup> chorus
Make Me Wanna	Thomas Rhett	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
My Baby’s Got a Smile on Her Face	Craig Wayne Boyd	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Nothin’ Like You	Dan + Shay	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Something in the Water	Carrie Underwood	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> , and 3 <sup>rd</sup> choruses
Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses
Tonight Looks Good On You	Jason Aldean	1 <sup>st</sup> chorus
Young and Crazy	Frankie Ballard	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> choruses

As indicated in Table 1.2, songs varied in having one, two, or three iterations of the pre-chorus.

Example 1.2 shows one of the songs with a pre-chorus, Thomas Rhett’s “Die a Happy Man.”

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<sup>15</sup> Jay Summach, “The Structure, Function, and Genesis of the Pre-chorus,” *Music Theory Online* 17.3 (2011): 2.

<sup>16</sup> Summach, 9. Jay Summach found 60% of verse-chorus songs in the top-20 charts had a pre-chorus in the years 1985-1989.

The pre-chorus is 8 bars, begins on a predominant chord, and ends harmonically open on a dominant chord in the second phrase. An acoustic steel string guitar is added to the first electric guitar and begins playing lightly to add texture to this section. In another case, Jason Aldean’s, “Tonight Looks Good On You,” (Example 1.3) includes a four-bar pre-chorus that begins on the subdominant chord and ends on the dominant chord in a half cadence. A change in instrumentation, which adds another electric guitar and a cymbal hit signals the beginning of the pre-chorus. In both of these instances, the harmonic progression of the verse does not end on a dominant chord, so the pre-chorus provides a moment of tonal orientation and a crucial half-cadence that builds harmonic tension for the arrival of the chorus.

**Example 1.2 Thomas Rhett’s “Die a Happy Man” Highlighting the Pre-chorus**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression							
0:11	Verse 1	D	Bm	G	D	1	6-	4	1
		D	Bm	G	D	1	6-	4	1
		D	Bm	G	D	1	6-	4	1
		D	Bm	G	D	1	6-	4	1
0:34	Pre-chorus 1	Em	D/F#	G	D	2-	1/3	4	1
		Em	D/F#	G	A	2-	1/3	4	5
0:47	Chorus	Bm	Bm	G	D	6-	6-	4	1
		Bm	Bm	G	D	6-	6-	4	1
		Bm	Bm	G	D	6-	6-	4	1
		Bm	Bm	G	<b>D</b>	6-	6-	4	<b>1</b>

### Example 1.3 Jason’s Aldean’s “Tonight Looks Good On You” Highlighting the Pre-chorus

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences. The default notation in the Nashville Number System is one chord per bar, and either duple or quadruple meter; where more than one chord occurs per bar, the spacing on the page makes clear that two chords occur within that unit of time. Where two chords occur in one bar, the notation system assumes that they divide the duration of the bar equally. The notation system uses dots—shown here as asterisks—above the chords to show how many beats each chord gets when the division is not equal. For instance, two chords in one bar, with three asterisks over the first and one over the second, would be played with three beats for the first chord and one beat for the second.

Time	Form	Chord Progression			
0:11	Verse 1	*** *	*** *		
		F#m F#m E D D E	6- 6- 5 4 4 5		
0:34	Pre-chorus 1	*** *			
		F#m F#m E D D	6- 6- 5 4 4		
1:14	Instrumental	D E D E	4 5 4 5		
1:14	Chorus 1	*** *	*** *		
		F#m F#m E D D E	6- 6- 5 4 4 5		
1:14	Instrumental	*** *	*** *		
		F#m F#m E D D E →	6- 6- 5 4 4 5 →		
1:14	Instrumental	*** *	*** *		
		<b>F#m</b> F#m E D E	<b>6-</b> 6- 5 4 5		

A pullback chorus is the second feature of the song form examined in the song analysis. This term refers to a particular musical arrangement of a chorus that provides great musical contrast without introducing a different song section. A pullback chorus begins with thinner instrumentation, which creates a noticeably lighter texture and one that features acoustic sounds more prominently. The words in a pullback chorus remain the same as the other chorus lyrics; the impact, however, is very different because it begins with a softer, acoustic sound. The unmediated arrangement creates intimacy and connects the audience and performer. In the typical case, a pullback chorus will return to full instrumentation either suddenly or over a brief span somewhere near the chorus’ middle. This may be similar to the same textural density or sometimes an even greater density than the previous choruses and finishes strong with the full

band. Of the songs that have a pullback chorus, it usually occurs on the third chorus. An example of a song that utilizes the pullback chorus techniques is Chris Young's "I'm Comin' Over" at time 2:00 minutes. Right after the bridge, Chris Young begins the third chorus with his solo vocals and a light rhythmic electric guitar strum pattern. As the song approaches the second half of the third chorus, the drums are added to build overall texture. When the second half of the chorus' lyrics begins, the full band has kicked in.

A third feature examined in the songs analyzed was the presence or absence of a bridge or bridge-like section. Forty-six of the sixty-seven songs analyzed (69%) had a bridge or bridge-like section. A bridge traditionally provides contrasting harmonies, a different melody, or lyrics that give a different perspective, point of view, or change in the narrative. Most of the bridge sections in the songs analyzed had chord progressions that were the same as the verse or chorus, which is a striking change from the way that bridges have been traditionally described. In these instances where the harmonic progression is not providing any sharp contrast, other musical features have risen in prominence as marking these sections as "bridges." Some had new melody over the retained progression, and many had stripped down instrumentation that gave contrast to this section. It is worth noting that songs with a pullback chorus always had bridges with full texture and instrumentation, thereby saving the change in texture for the "pullback chorus" moment in the songs; see for example "Break Up With Him," by Old Dominion and "Mean to Me" by Brett Eldredge. By contrast, songs that did not employ the pullback chorus, instead, typically used the bridge as the point of radical sonic change by stripping down the instrumentation and texture there. All songs that had the same chord progression in the bridge as the verse and chorus had the stripped down bridge with the full textured final chorus. Carrie Underwood's "Smoke Break" is an example of a song with the same chord progression in the

verse, chorus, and bridge (Example 1.4). During the bridge, there is only an acoustic guitar strumming block chords in accompaniment to Carrie Underwood’s vocals for contrast. When the final chorus begins, full instrumentation is added back again to create a dense texture.

**Example 1.4: Carrie Underwood’s “Smoke Break” Highlighting the Bridge with the Same Chords as Verse and Chorus**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

<b>Smoke Break</b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Chord Progression</b>		
1:00	Verse 2	F# E B F #	1 7 4 1	
		F# E B F#	1 7 4 1	
1:23	Chorus 2	F# E B F#	1 7 4 1	
		F# E B <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">F#</span>	1 7 4 <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">1</span>	
1:48	Instrumental	F# E B F#	1 7 4 1	
2:00	Bridge	F# E B F#	1 7 4 1	

Thomas Rhett’s “Crash and Burn” is an example of a song with a bridge that has the same chord progression as the verse and the second half of the chorus (Example 1.5). The bridge has stripped back instrumentation so that the musical texture is providing contrast where the chord progression is not, and, therefore, this song does not have a pullback chorus. An example of a song with different chords in the bridge section than the verse and chorus is Old Dominion’s “Break Up With Him” (Example 1.6). This song does not have stripped down instrumentation at the bridge, where the contrast is provided not by the texture but rather by the harmonic progression itself. Thus, the song retains the significant textural shift until after the bridge, and uses a pullback chorus.

**Example 1.5: Song Form of Thomas Rhett’s “Crash and Burn” Highlighting the Bridge with the Same Chords as Verse and Chorus**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression				
1:07	Verse 2	E <sup>b</sup> Cm E <sup>b</sup> Cm	1	6-	1	6-
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	5
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm E <sup>b</sup> Cm	1	6-	1	6-
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	5
1:36	Chorus 2	Cm E <sup>b</sup> /B <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	6-	1/5	4	1
		Cm E <sup>b</sup> /B <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	6-	1/5	4	5
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm E <sup>b</sup> Cm	1	6-	1	6-
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup> <span style="border: 1px solid black;">E<sup>b</sup></span>	1	6-	4 5	<span style="border: 1px solid black;">1</span>
	Bridge	E <sup>b</sup> Cm E <sup>b</sup> Cm	1	6-	1	6-
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	5

**Example 1.6: Song Form of Old Dominion’s “Break Up With Him” Highlighting the Bridge with Contrasting Chords**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression				
1:17	Verse 2	E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
1:41	Chorus 2	E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> <span style="border: 1px solid black;">E<sup>b</sup></span>	1	6-	4	<span style="border: 1px solid black;">1</span>
2:10	Instrumental	E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
		E <sup>b</sup> Cm A <sup>b</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	1	6-	4	1
2:23	Bridge	B <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup>	5	5	4	4
		B <sup>b</sup> B <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup> A <sup>b</sup>	5	5	4	4

This discussion of the use of bridges and changes in texture highlights the way that significant changes in musical texture stand out in a song. Songwriters and arrangers are limiting themselves to only one of these points of textural contrast in a song, which therefore affects the relationship between bridges and choruses, and how contrast is controlled and balanced within the song’s domains of harmony and texture. In summary, songs tend to have either a pullback chorus or a texturally thin bridge, but not both, and the similarity or difference between the bridge and the verse and chorus’s chord progression determines whether the contrast in the bridge has to be created texturally or not. A list of songs that have stripped down instrumentation in the bridge with a full chorus are listed in Table 1.3.

**Table 1.3. Songs with Stripped Down Instrumentation in the Bridge and Full Chorus**

Song	Artist
Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line
Crash and Burn	Thomas Rhett
Drinking Class	Lee Brice
Gonna	Blake Shelton
Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice
Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch
Homegrown Honey	Darius Rucker
Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell
Little Toy Guns	Miranda Lambert
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young
Lose My Mind	Brett Eldredge
Say You Do	Dierks Bentley
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood
Strip it Down	Luke Bryan
Til It’s Gone	Kenny Chesney

As far as using a bridge, most songwriters agree that this depends on the song and the story, as these sections are determined by what fits that particular song; it would give contrast

and could make the song more interesting.<sup>17</sup> However, adding a bridge should not make the song too long since it needs to be around two and a half minutes for the radio. Although the majority of today's country songs have a bridge, a change in the conventional format from previous decades is that most bridges in the music considered in this study are the same harmonically as the verse and chorus. This creates an unusual situation in which there is a component of continuity that runs throughout the song without changing, namely the cyclical chord progression. In the absence of a changing chord progression, the writers and arrangers must delve more deeply into the other elements to create a sense of contrast and differentiation in the bridge.

A fourth common feature among the top country songs in 2015 is the abridgement of the second verse. Many songs have a second verse either cut in half or with only one line of the chord progression in comparison to the first verse, bringing the song back to the chorus more quickly. An example of a song with a shortened second verse is Blake Shelton's "Lonely Tonight" (Example 1.7).

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<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Nashville songwriters: Marc Beeson, Rivers Rutherford, Maggie Rutherford, and Rex Paul Schnelle.

**Example 1.7: Blake Shelton’s “Lonely Tonight” Highlighting Abridgement of the Second Verse**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression				
0:00	Intro	F	F		1 1	
0:11	Verse 1	F	Am	B $\flat$	Gm/B $\flat$	1 3- 4 2-/4
		F	Am	B $\flat$	Gm/B $\flat$	1 3- 4 2-/4
		F	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	1 3- 4 4
0:46	Chorus 1	F	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	1 3- 4 4
		F	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	1 3- 4 4
		Dm	C	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	6- 5 4 4 <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 2px;">1</span>
1:27	Verse 2	F	Am	B $\flat$	Gm/B $\flat$	1 3- 4 2-/4
1:40	Chorus 2	F	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	1 3- 4 4
		F	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	1 3- 4 4
		Dm	C	B $\flat$	B $\flat$ →	6- 5 4 4 →
2:16	Instrumental	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 2px;">F</span>	Am	B $\flat$	B $\flat$	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 2px;">1</span> 3m 4 4

Songs with an abridged second verse are listed in Table 1.4.

**Table 1.4. Songs with Abridgement of the Second Verse**

Song	Artist
Ain’t Worth the Whiskey	Cole Swindell
Break Up in a Small Town	Sam Hunt
Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice
Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan
Homegrown Honey	Darius Rucker
Lonely Tonight	Blake Shelton
Loving You Easy	Zac Brown Band
Nothin’ Like you	Dan + Shay
Sangria	Blake Shelton
Strip It Down	Luke Bryan
Wild Child	Kenny Chesney

Abridgement of the second verse in the first half of the song allows the chorus to be repeated sooner. The resultant effect is that country songs today emphasize the hook and catchy chorus over the importance of a detailed narration and plot. The association between country music and

“story songs” from past decades is still present, but is not as much a part of the musical genre’s profile today, illustrating a significant change in how country music communicates and connects with its audiences.

The final feature seen in the majority of the songs analyzed are instrumental sections immediately following each chorus. These sections are often called turnarounds and frequently employ the same chord progression as the intro. They function as a transition leading into the next section. The instrumental section following the first chorus is often one or two lines of a chord progression and sometimes a simple solo, frequently guitar. The second instrumental section after the second chorus is often a more virtuosic solo, frequently guitar. A prime example that illustrates this form is Luke Bryan’s “I See You,” shown in Example 1.1 at the beginning of this chapter.

The features that most prominently mark the 2015 country songs show that not only the overall form of the songs, but also the detailed aspects of the arrangement are formulaic and stock in today’s music, and therefore, the norm through which country fans hear and anticipate their music. Even though there are 125 Songwriters on the top-ten list of sixty-seven songs, the music we hear on the radio is very consistent in its models. It is focused on choruses and uses musical texture as a major feature for providing contrast within a song.

## CHAPTER 2: HARMONIES

Several in-depth studies of the harmonic patterns in popular songs come from earlier studies of rock songs, from 1950 to 2000, rather than country songs. In an earlier analysis of two periods of pop-rock music from 1957-58 and 1999-2000, the majority of rock songs were tonal; however, they frequently contained elements of the medieval modes and the minor pentatonic scale.<sup>18</sup> In a second study, looking at rock music from the 1960s to 1990s, harmonic analyses showed that many rock songs do not fit into a conventional tonality of a particular major or minor key. Rock music often contained tonal, modal, and blues elements that lacked a leading tone.<sup>19</sup> In a third study, analyzing 100 songs from the top-20 during the 1950s through the 1990s, rock songs had a mix of major and minor key elements, as well as modal elements and frequent repeating harmonic structures.<sup>20</sup> In the 2015 country songs analyzed in this study, four primary characteristics are described as they relate to harmonic progressions of modern country songs. These features include first, the use of a double-tonic complex in many songs; second, the absence of a 5 chord; third, the use of the same chord progression throughout the verse and chorus; and fourth, the use of only two chords in the song.

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Everett, "Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems." *Music Theory Online*. 10.4 (2004): 3-6. <[http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w\\_everett.html](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w_everett.html)>; Everett, *Foundations of Rock*, 247.

<sup>19</sup> N. Biamonte, "Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music." *Music Theory Spectrum* 32.2 (2010): 95.

<sup>20</sup> T. De Clercq and D. Temperley, "A Corpus Analysis of Rock Harmony," *Popular Music* 30.1 (2001): 55.

The first feature described in the present study of 2015 country songs is the use of the 6 minor chord in songs that make use of a double-tonic complex, where the tonality of the song seems to identify with two keys.<sup>21</sup> Country music's harmonic language used to be characterized as diatonic, with clearly established tonic identity. However, appropriation of rock harmonic language, most notably its modal elements, can be heard in many of the chart topping country songs today. Many of the songs analyzed here are mixing elements of major and minor keys, as seen in rock music.<sup>22</sup> The distinction between the major key and its relative minor are becoming blurred as the songs enter into a modal space. Jason Aldean's song, "Just Gettin' Started," (Example 2.1) illustrates a pitch collection centering around the 6 minor chord that uses 1 and 5 chords in prominent positions, but without a sense of dominant-tonic resolution.

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<sup>21</sup> This term is explained by Robert Bailey, in 1985, in reference to Wagner. This is discussed in Joseph Kerman, *Music at the Turn of Century: A 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music Reader*, Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press (1990), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

**Example 2.1: Jason Aldean’s “Just Gettin’ Started” Harmonic Transcription Highlighting the Double-Tonic Complex**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression							
0:00	Intro	Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
0:22	Verse 1	Am	Am	F	Dm	6-	6-	4	2-
		Am	Am	F	G	6-	6-	4	5
		Am	Am	F	Dm	6-	6-	4	2-
		Am	Am	F	G	6-	6-	4	5
0:44	Chorus 1	Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
		Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	Am	G	G →	6-	6-	5	5 →
1:08	Instrumental	<u>Am</u>	C	F	Dm	<u>6-</u>	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
1:20	Verse 2	Am	Am	F	Dm	6-	6-	4	2-
		Am	Am	F	G	6-	6-	4	5
		Am	Am	F	Dm	6-	6-	4	2-
		Am	Am	F	G	6-	6-	4	5
1:42	Chorus 2	Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
		Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	Am	G	G →	6-	6-	5	5 →
2:05	Instrumental	<u>Am</u>	C	F	Dm	<u>6-</u>	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
2:18	Bridge	F	F	G	G	4	4	5	5
		F	F	G	G	4	4	5	5
2:31	Chorus 3	Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
		Am	C	F	Dm	6-	1	4	2-
		Am	Am	G	G →	6-	6-	5	5 →
2:54	Outro	<u>Am</u>	C	F	Dm	<u>6-</u>	1	4	2-
		Am	C	F	G	6-	1	4	5
		Am				6-			

The effect is one of bitonality with the 6m (Am) structurally serving as tonic (meaning a point of arrival), but the chord progression referencing 1 (C) as the tonic. The pitches linger in a modal space without a defined leading tone and no “5-1” resolution in Am or C. Instead, the dominant chord (G) continuously resolves deceptively back to 6m (Am), so that the motion becomes the stable structure in the piece, “deceptive” becoming normative. The two competing ideas of pitch organization have been documented in rock from the classic rock era of the 1950s to the present. Songs in the present study that employ this double-tonic complex are listed in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1. Songs That Employ the Double-Tonic Complex**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>
Break Up in a Small Town	Sam Hunt
Burning House	Cam
Gonna Know We Were Here	Jason Aldean
Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch
Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan
I See You	Luke Bryan
Just Getting’ Started	Jason Aldean
Kick the Dust Up	Luke Bryan
Little Toy Guns	Carrie Underwood
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young
Lose My Mind	Brett Eldredge
Love You Like That	Canaan Smith
Sangria	Blake Shelton
Sippin’ on Fire	Florida Georgia Line
Take Your Time	Sam Hunt
Tonight Looks Good on You	Jason Aldean

Harmonically, these songs have an edgy, mysterious quality due to the 6m sounding like the home sonority, yet there is an overarching positive feel from the competing relative major pitch center.

The second prominent feature in the country songs analyzed here is the absence of a dominant chord in a major key. This is also a harmonic practice that has been documented in pop-rock music.<sup>23</sup> This lack of a 5 chord creates a sense of the modal ambiguity, where there is a collection of chords without the orienting presence of tonic-dominant cadences. An example of a song that lacks the 5 chord is Luke Bryan’s “Strip It Down” (Example 2.2).

**Example 2.2: Luke Bryan’s “Strip It Down” Harmonic Transcription Highlighting the Absence of the 5 Chord**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression							
0:00	Intro	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
0:14	Verse 1	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
0:41	Chorus 1	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
1:22	Instrumental	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
1:37	Chorus 2	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
2:20	Instrumental	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
2:33	Bridge	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
2:47	Chorus 3	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
3:28	Outro	Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1
		Bm	D	A	A	2-	4	1	1

Each phrase ends with a 4-1 plagal motion, and the pervasive use of these chords gives the sense of an arrival on 1. The key sounds like A major, and the melodic pattern, centered around scale

<sup>23</sup> Biamonte, 97.

degrees 1, 3, and 5, confirms this reference point. Songs that do not have a 5 chord anywhere are listed in Table 2.2a, and those with a 5 chord only in the bridge section are shown in Table 2.2b.

**Table 2.2a. Songs Without a 5 Chord**

Song	Artist
Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line
Fly	Maddie and Tae
Gonna	Blake Shelton
House Party	Sam Hunt
Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray
Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser
Say You Do	Dierks Bentley
Shotgun Rider	Tim McGraw
Smoke	A Thousand Horses
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood
Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne
Strip it Down	Luke Bryan
Sun Daze	Florida Georgia Line
Tennessee Whiskey	Chris Stapleton
Til it's Gone	Kenny Chesney

**Table 2.2b. Songs with a 5 Chord Only in the Bridge**

Song	Artist
Break Up With Him	Old Dominion
Fly	Maddie and Tae
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young
Take your Time	Sam Hunt

An example of a song with a 5 chord only in the bridge is shown in Example 2.3.

**Example 2.3: Old Dominion’s “Break Up With Him” Harmonic Transcription  
Highlighting the Presence of the 5 Chord Only in the Bridge**

Note: Parenthetical chords are those implied by context, but not realized harmonically, and are usually under a single unaccompanied vocal note.

Time	Form	Chord Progression	
0:00	Intro	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1
0:14	Verse 1	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1
0:37	Chorus 1	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ (E $\flat$ )	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 (1)
1:04	Instrumental	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1
1:17	Verse 2	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1
1:41	Chorus 2	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ (E $\flat$ ) A $\flat$ (E $\flat$ )	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 (1) 4 (1)
2:10	Instrumental	E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$ E $\flat$ Cm A $\flat$ E $\flat$	1 6- 4 1 1 6- 4 1
2:23	Bridge	B $\flat$ B $\flat$ A $\flat$ A $\flat$ B $\flat$ B $\flat$ A $\flat$ A $\flat$	5 5 4 4 5 5 4 4

Several Nashville songwriters interviewed about their songwriting process and trends they see in modern country music commented on the lack of the 5 chord in country songs. The professional songwriter, Rivers Rutherford, said that it sometimes feels “too buttoned up,” or

harmonically closed, to use the 5-1 cadence.<sup>24</sup> Marc Beeson commented that it helps to keep the tension up by avoiding the 5 chord at least until the end of the chorus.<sup>25</sup> These comments show the deliberate harmonic crafting that is considered by top songwriters.

A third feature of many of the 2015 top country songs is the use of the same chord progression repeated in different sections of the song, specifically across the verse and chorus. In these instances where the harmonic progression does not contribute to sectional differentiation, other musical parameters are engaged in creating a sense of contrast and variation, namely textural changes and shifts in instrumentation. Differences in texture through the choice of different or additional instruments and backup vocals, as well as how they are used, can create contrast and variety between the verse and chorus. Country music songwriters have confirmed that it is popular to use the same chords in the verse and chorus, but the writers give contrast between the verse and chorus in some way, such as using punchy, phrase driven verses, and long-sustained choruses, or vice versa.<sup>26</sup>

Example 2.4 shows a song that employs the same chord progression throughout the song, Chris Stapleton's "Tennessee Whiskey."

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<sup>24</sup> Personal communication with Rivers Rutherford.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with Marc Beeson.

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication with Rivers Rutherford.

**Example 2.4: Chris Stapleton’s “Tennessee Whiskey” Harmonic Transcription  
Highlighting the Use of the Same Chords in Verse and Chorus**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression							
0:20	Verse 1	A	Bm/D	Bm/D	A	1	2-/4	2-/4	1
		A	Bm/D	Bm/D	A	1	2-/4	2-/4	1
0:57	Chorus 1	A	Bm/D	Bm/D	A	1	2-/4	2-/4	1
		A	Bm/D	Bm/D	<b>A</b>	1	2-/4	2-/4	<b>1</b>

In this song, the verse instrumentation consists of rhythm acoustic guitar, electric base, rim shots and high hats on the drums, and lead vocals by Chris Stapleton. The chorus has added instrumentation that includes an electric guitar in addition to the rhythmic acoustic guitar, a cymbal hit at the beginning, full snare hits instead of rim shots on the drums, and the addition of back up vocal harmony.

The song “Tennessee Whiskey” has an unusual history leading up to its arrival on the 2015 *Billboard* charts. It was written in 1981 by Dean Dillon and Linda Hargrove and recorded by David Allan Coe. It appeared on the *Billboard* charts at number 77 in that year. A cover was recorded in 1983 by George Jones on his album “Shine On” and reached number 2 on the *Billboard* charts that year. This past year, it was a cover song by Chris Stapleton, performed with Justin Timberlake at the 2015 Country Music Awards and reached the number 1 position in the 2015 *Billboard* Hot Country Song charts. This version uses the same lyrics, but is slowed down, and the chord progressions have been changed to remove the 5 chord from the original 14151 harmonic progression. This is following the trend to omit the 5 chord that has been observed in

2015 country songs. This is a simultaneously derivative trend and one that is following contemporary “fresh” trends.

Songs with the same chord progression throughout the entire song are listed in Table 2.3a. A second example of a song with the same chord progression is Luke Bryan’s “Strip it Down” in Example 2.2 (shown earlier in Chapter 2). Luke Bryan’s “Strip it Down,” already used (Example 2.2) to show a song that eschews the dominant, is another song that cycles the same progression throughout it’s formal sections. Songs with the same harmonic progression in the verse and chorus, but different chords in the bridge are listed in Table 2.3b.

**Table 2.3a. Songs with the Same Chord Progression Throughout the Song**

Song	Artist
Don’t It	Billy Currington
Gonna	Blake Shelton
Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray
Strip it Down	Luke Bryan
Tennessee Whiskey	Chris Stapleton

**Table 2.3b. Songs with the Same Harmonic Progression in the Verse and Chorus**

Song	Artist
Break Up With Him	Old Dominion
Fly	Maddie and Tae
House Party	Sam Hunt
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	Keith Urban
Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young
Make Me Wanna	Thomas Rhett
Shotgun Rider	Tim McGraw
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood
Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne
Sun Daze	Florida Georgia Line

Similar to the compositional approach of keeping the chord progression the same from one song section to the next, an alternative strategy is to introduce slight variations in hypermetric and phrase structure without fundamentally altering the progression. Sixteen more songs have nearly the same chord progression in the verse and chorus; however, they have slight variations such as hypermetric expansion, an added line from the song's typical form with chord variation, or subtle variations in the return of the same essential chorus. An example of a song with different chords only in the bridge is Old Dominion's "Break Up With Him" shown in Example 2.3 (shown earlier in Chapter 2). This song also has one instance of hypermetric expansion in the second chorus just before the guitar solo, where the metric unit of the song is lengthened by the repeating words, "I know that you're so done with him / Break up with him / Break up with him," which lengthens the number of measures in that chorus. Another example is Tim McGraw's "Shotgun Rider," which has several instances of hypermetric expansion in the verses, choruses, and guitar solo (Example 2.5).

**Example 2.5. Tim McGraw’s “Shotgun Rider” Harmonic Transcription Highlighting the Use of the Same Chords in Verse and Chorus**

Note: The two asterisks over the chord are the typescript equivalent of two dots in the Nashville number system, indicating that this chord occupies a measure of only two beats instead of four. A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression				
0:00	Intro	G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4
0:23	Verse 1	G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C C <sup>**</sup>	1	3-	6-	4 4 <sup>**</sup>
0:47	Chorus 1	G Bm/D Em C	1	3-/5	6-	4
		G Bm/D Em C C C→	1	3-/5	6-	4 4 4 →
1:15	Instrumental	<b>G</b> Bm Em C	<b>1</b>	3-	6-	4
1:27	Verse 2	G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C C <sup>**</sup>	1	3-	6-	4 4 <sup>**</sup>
1:51	Chorus 2	G Bm/D Em C	1	3-/5	6-	4
		G Bm/D Em C C C→	1	3-/5	6-	4 4 4 →
2:20	Instrumental	<b>G</b> Bm Em C	<b>1</b>	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C C	1	3-	6-	4 4
2:45	Chorus 3	G Bm/D Em C	1	3-/5	6-	4
		G Bm/D Em C C C→	1	3-/5	6-	4 4 4 →
3:26	Outro	<b>G</b> Bm Em C	<b>1</b>	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4
		G Bm Em C	1	3-	6-	4

Finally, a fourth feature of the harmonic language in contemporary country music is a two-chord vocabulary, as was seen in the simplified progression of Chris Stapleton’s “Tennessee Whiskey.” Songs that consist primarily of two chords for the entire song are listed in Table 2.4.

**Table 2.4. Songs that Have Only Two Chords**

Song	Artist
Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line
Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice
Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray
Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser
Make Me Wanna	Thomas Rhett

Some of these songs may have slight variations from the two chords, such as the addition of an extra one or two chords in one of the verses, choruses, or in the bridge. An example of a song that has only two chords is Michael Ray’s “Kiss You in the Morning.” The 1 and 4 chords alternate 4-beat measures consistently throughout the entire song (Example 2.6).

**Example 2.6. Michael Ray’s “Kiss You in the Morning” Harmonic Transcription Highlighting the Use of Two Chords in the Verse and Chorus**

Note: A box around a chord indicates the place where the chorus’s vocal melody cadences.

Time	Form	Chord Progression	
0:13	Verse 1	F# B	1 4
		F# B	1 4
		F# B	1 4
0:33	Chorus 1	F# B	1 4
		F# B	1 4
		F# B	1 4
		F# B →	1 4 →
0:58	Instrumental	<b>F#</b> B	<b>1</b> 4
		F# B	1 4

The expected dominant-tonic relationship is actually reversed here in what sounds like 1-4. In singing the lyrics, Michael Ray outlines the melodic scale degrees of 3 and 5 (pitches A# and C#) in “Kiss You in the Morning.” These melodic scale degrees become dissonant when sung over the 4 chord and support the choice of the tonic key and the interpretation of the chord progression as 1-4. The chorus ends with a phrase overlap, so the title of the song and final

cadence of the chorus fall on a hypermetric downbeat and overlap with the start of the instrumental section. As such, the chorus's cadence is 4-1 (B → F#) plagal motion that gives a sense of closure in the songs that use the 1-4 motion in place of a 1-5 motion.

In summary, the distinctive harmonic features observed in the sixty-seven country songs analyzed include a double-tonic complex, the absence of a 5 chord and a dominant-tonic resolution, the use of the same chord progression throughout, and/or the use of only two chords in the song.

### CHAPTER 3: LYRICS

From its beginnings, country music has incorporated traditional values, practices, and social relationships. The song lyrics typically describe rural settings and lifestyles, and refer to concepts dealing with family, religion, patriotism, work, and romance.<sup>27</sup> In the sixty-seven 2015 songs analyzed, the lyrical themes and vocabulary were consistent with those traditionally seen in country songs. In the present study, 82% of the song themes involved heterosexual romantic love and attraction, heartache, and good times and partying. Other themes observed were Christian faith and inspiration, nostalgia, and the centrality of work in one's life. The common vocabulary included words that supported these themes, described country settings and events, and reflected a conversational or, less frequently, a storytelling tone. In the present sample of 2015 songs, some specific contemporary features that had been less commonly observed in past years are internal rhyme at the syllable level, vocabulary that reflects the current time period, and a lyric delivery that includes spoken sections, rather than sung sections.

In the present sample of top-ten songs, lyric analysis revealed six theme categories: (1) romantic love and attraction, (2) heartache, (3) good times and partying, (4) nostalgia, home, and family, (5) the working class, and (6) religion and inspiration. These themes are generally consistent with those used in other studies to classify the main topic areas of country song lyrics. Of these categories, the theme of romantic love and attraction was the most frequently observed in the present study, as has been the case in other studies of this topic. Romantic love has been a common theme in country songs from 1960 to 2000 and specifically 33% of the #1 country

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<sup>27</sup> Rodgers, 12, 47.

songs in 2009 and 28% in 2010, according to published studies.<sup>28</sup> Of the present sixty-seven songs analyzed, 40 (60%) of the top-ten 2015 country songs were about romantic love and attraction (including sexual attraction), and an additional 13 (19%) were about love and heartache, including topics of break-ups, missing someone, jealousy in a romantic relationship, and moving on from a break-up (Tables 3.1a and 3.1b; many songs have overlapping themes as indicated). The majority of these songs involve the artist as the lover in a first-person point of view, using the personal pronouns “I” and “we,” and singing to a person referred to with the second-person pronoun “you.” This approach gives a personal, intimate feeling to the song and results in an emotional closeness between the listener and the artist.

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<sup>28</sup> The general trend over four decades is described in Robert Van Sickle, “A World without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000,” *Popular Music and Society* 28.3 (2005): 326-9; the data for 2009 and 2010 is reported in Ralph Murphy, “’09 The year of More and Less,” (2012) <<http://www.murphyslawsofsongwriting.com/index.php/laws-of-songwriting/1-laws-of-songwriting/26-09-the-year-of-moreand-less->>, and “Murphy’s Laws of Songwriting 2010,” (2012) <<http://www.murphyslawsofsongwriting.com/index.php/laws-of-songwriting/1-laws-of-songwriting/35-analysis-of-the-top-ten-1-hits-of-2010>>.

**Table 3.1a: Songs with the Theme of Romantic Love and Attraction**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Break up with Him	Old Dominion	Romantic Attraction
Die a Happy Man	Thomas Rhett	Romantic Love
Don't it	Billy Currington	Romantic Attraction/Love
Girl Crush	Little Big Town	Heartache (Jealousy in Love)/ Romantic Attraction
God Made Girls	RaeLynn	Romantic Attraction
Gonna	Blake Shelton	Romantic Attraction/Love
Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice	Romantic Attraction/Love
Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch	Romantic Attraction/Good Times
Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
Homegrown Honey	Darius Rucker	Romantic Attraction
I'm Comin' Over	Chris Young	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
Just Getting' Started	Jason Aldean	Romantic Attraction/Love
Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray	Romantic Attraction/Love
Leave the Night On	Sam Hunt	Romantic Attraction/Good Times
Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell	Romantic Attraction/Love
Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser	Romantic Attraction/Love
Like a Wrecking Ball	Eric Church	Romantic Attraction/Love
Little Red Wagon	Miranda Lambert	Romantic Attraction
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young	Romantic Attraction/Love
Lonely Tonight	Blake Shelton	Heartache/ Romantic Attraction
Lose My Mind	Brett Eldredge	Romantic Attraction/Love
Love Me Like You Mean it	Kelsea Ballerini	Romantic Attraction/Love
Love You Like That	Canaan Smith	Romantic Attraction/Love
Loving You Easy	Zac Brown Band	Romantic Love
Make Me Wanna	Thomas Rhett	Romantic Attraction/Love
Mean to Me	Brett Eldredge	Romantic Love
My Baby's Got a Smile on Her Face	Craig Wayne Boyd	Romantic Love
Nothin' Like You	Dan + Shay	Romantic Attraction/Love
Perfect Storm	Brad Paisley	Romantic Attraction/Love
Sangria	Blake Shelton	Romantic Attraction/Love
Sippin' on Fire	Florida Georgia Line	Romantic Attraction/Love
Shotgun Rider	Tim McGraw	Romantic Love
Smoke	A Thousand Horses	Romantic Attraction/Love
Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne	Romantic Love
Strip it Down	Luke Bryan	Romantic Attraction/Love

Take Your Time	Sam Hunt	Romantic Attraction/ (Family-Domestic Violence, only in video)
Tennessee Whiskey	Chris Stapleton	Romantic Love
Til it's Gone	Kenny Chesney	Romantic Attraction/ Love/ Good Times
Tonight Looks Good on You	Jason Aldean	Romantic Attraction/Love
Wild Child	Kenny Chesney	Romantic Attraction/Love

**Table 3.1b: Songs with the Theme of Heartache in Love**

Song	Artist	Theme
A Guy Walks Into a Bar	Tyler Farr	Heartache
Ain't Worth the Whiskey	Cole Swindell	Heartache (Moving on from a Break-up)/Patriotism
Break Up in a Small Town	Sam Hunt	Heartache
Burning House	Cam	Heartache
Crash and Burn	Thomas Rhett	Heartache
Girl Crush	Little Big Town	Heartache (Jealousy in Love)/Romantic Attraction
Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
I Got the Boy	Jana Kramer	Nostalgia/Heartache
I See You	Luke Bryan	Heartache
I'm Comin' Over	Chris Young	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
Lonely Tonight	Blake Shelton	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
Save it for a Rainy Day	Kenny Chesney	Heartache (Moving on from a Break-up)
Say You Do	Dierks Bentley	Heartache

Additional themes seen in the 2015 songs analyzed were ten songs about good times and partying (Table 3.1c), which included five songs that overlapped between romantic attraction and good times. Two other songs were about nostalgia for good times of the past, and one other was about contentment with home (Table 3.1d). Also, in Table 3.1d are two songs about family, one concerning the love of family and another about family and domestic violence. A second song's music video, Sam Hunt's "Take Your Time," also reflected domestic violence, although this

theme was not clear from the lyrics alone and relied upon the video to highlight this point. In the video, Sam Hunt observes a woman being mistreated. When she attempts to leave her abusive partner, Sam Hunt fights the partner while the woman drives away in her truck. From listening to the lyrics of this song, it is unlikely that one would picture these circumstances from the words alone. This choice of theme for the video departs from the typical themes observed in country music songs, as well as, the lyrics of its own song. Carrie Underwood’s “Little Toy Guns” is the only other song in the present study that had domestic violence as its subject.

**Table 3.1c: Songs with the Theme of Good Times and Partying**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line	Good Times and Partying
Gonna Know We Were Here	Jason Aldean	Good Times and Partying
Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch	Romantic Attraction/ Love/Good Times
House Party	Sam Hunt	Good Times and Partying
Kick the Dust Up	Luke Bryan	Good Time and Partying
Leave the Night On	Sam Hunt	Romantic Attraction/ Love/Good Times
Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell	Romantic Attraction/Love/ Good Times
Sun Daze	Florida Georgia Line	Good Times and Partying
Til it’s Gone	Kenny Chesney	Romantic Attraction/Love/ Good Times
Young and Crazy	Frankie Ballard	Good Times and Partying

**Table 3.1d: Songs with the Themes of Nostalgia, Home, and Family**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Homegrown	Zac Brown Band	Home (Contentment)
I Got the Boy	Jana Kramer	Nostalgia/Heartache
I Loved Her First	Heartland	Family (Love of Family)
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	Keith Urban	Nostalgia/Religious
Little Toy Guns	Carrie Underwood	Family (Domestic Violence)
Talladega	Eric Church	Nostalgia

Another three songs were about the working class with one of these specifically concerned with consumerism and money (Table 3.1e).

**Table 3.1e: Songs with the Theme of the Working Class**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Buy Me a Boat	Chris Janson	Working Class (Consumerism, Money)
Drinking Class	Lee Brice	Working Class/Good Times
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood	Working Class/Religion

The theme of Christian religion or faith has been central to this genre.<sup>29</sup> References to this theme appeared in six songs, some of which overlapped with the two themes of nostalgia and the working class, and four of the songs had inspirational messages, including religious messages (Table 3.1f). Three songs had references to patriotism or love of country, which has commonly been seen in country songs and in the present study overlaps with themes of heartache (Tables 3.1b) and religion and inspiration (Table 3.1f).

**Table 3.1f: Songs with the Themes of Religion and Inspiration**

<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Fly	Maddie and Tae	Inspiration
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	Keith Urban	Nostalgia/Religion
One Hell of an Amen	Brantley Gilbert	Religion and Inspiration/ Patriotism
Raise ‘Em Up	Keith Urban	Religion and Inspiration/ Home/Patriotism
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood	Working Class/Religion
Something in the Water	Carrie Underwood	Religion and Inspiration

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<sup>29</sup> Neal, “Narrative Paradigms,” 42.

The sixty-seven songs analyzed frequently overlap in themes and are shown according to their highest chart position in Appendix 3. There is not a correlation between a song's highest chart position and its theme.

The specific ways in which these themes appear in the lyrics are embedded in the traditions of country songwriting that rely on images and associations linked to working-class identity. An example of this approach is found in Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man" (Example 3.1), which is primarily an expression of romantic love.

**Example 3.1: Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man" Highlighting the Theme of Romantic Love**

Baby that red dress brings me to my knees  
Oh but that black dress makes it hard to breathe  
You're a saint, you're a goddess, the cutest, the hottest, a masterpiece  
It's too good to be true, nothing better than you  
In my wildest dreams

And I know that I can't ever tell you enough  
That all I need in this life is your crazy love

If I never get to see the Northern Lights  
Or if I never get to see the Eiffel Tower at night  
Or if all I got is your hand in my hand  
Baby I would die a happy man yeah

I don't need no vacation, no fancy destination,  
Baby you're my great escape,  
We could stay at home, listen to the radio  
Or dance around the fireplace

And if I never get to build my mansion in Georgia  
Or drive a sports car up the coast of California  
Oh if all I got is your hand in my hand  
Baby I could die a happy man

The lyrics talk about sophisticated and global sights that this country man may never get to see, such as the Eiffel Tower and the Northern Lights. He also may never obtain wealth and

purchase a mansion and sports car, but staying home is total satisfaction to him because of his partner's love. This is part of a long country music tradition of valuing simple love over material wealth and travel to foreign countries. This narrative of love is reminiscent of the 1988 song by Randy Travis, "Deeper Than the Holler," in which the singer proclaims his love to be "deeper than the holler, stronger than the river ... and longer than the song of a whippoorwill." This reworking of the narrative in a different time period and with different music creates continuity in the genre. Some specific features in the lyrics of "Die a Happy Man" include internal rhymes and assonance at the level of the syllable, such as "goddess/cutest/hottest," which are a modern lyrical feature of rap influence.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man" contrasts in values with Chris Janson's "Buy Me a Boat" (Example 3.2). While Rhett's song is about not needing a rich, cosmopolitan lifestyle, Janson's song takes a different approach in fantasizing about a materialistic "good life."

**Example 3.2: Chris Janson's "Buy Me a Boat" Verse and Chorus Highlighting the Theme of the Working Class**

I ain't rich, but I damn sure wanna be  
Working like a dog all day, ain't working for me  
I wish I had a rich uncle that'd kick the bucket  
And that I was sitting on a pile like Warren Buffett  
I know everybody says money can't buy happiness

But it could buy me a boat, it could buy me a truck to pull it,  
It could buy me a Yeti 110 iced down with some silver bullets  
Yeah I know what they say, money can't buy everything  
Well, maybe so,  
But it could buy me a boat

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<sup>30</sup> An example of internal rhymes and assonance at the level of the syllable in rap is seen in these lines from Eminem's "Lose Yourself," "His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy/ There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti" and "You better lose yourself in the music, the moment/ You own it, you better never let it go."

These conflicting values are both common in today's country music and represent modern influences. In viewing the videos for these two songs, Thomas Rhett is singing in a paradise and on a nice boat, but in the lyrics of his song, these things are not important to him because he only needs her "hand" in his "hand." While Chris Janson wants a "pile" of money, the video is ironic because it shows him to have a modest fishing boat, a cooler of beer, and a truck to pull the boat.

Colloquial diction and nonstandard grammar are seen in these lyrics with the use of "ain't" and "wanna," while examples of clichés are seen in the phrases, "working like a dog," "kick the bucket," and "money can't buy happiness." Similes are also frequently used, such as "like a dog" and "like Warren Buffett." Colloquial diction, nonstandard grammar, clichés, similes, and metaphors are commonly used in country music.<sup>31</sup>

The themes of nostalgia for good times of the past and heartache are seen in Jana Kramer's song, "I've Got the Boy" (Example 3.3).

### **Example 3.3: Jana Kramer's "I've Got the Boy" Chorus Highlighting the Themes of Nostalgia and Heartache**

I saw your picture in a paper, Honeymoon in Jamaica, she's a lucky girl  
You look so grown up in your black tux, from a ball cap in a pick up, seems like another world  
You and me and our big dreams, falling in love  
We were two kids in the backseat, all fearless and young

I got the first kiss and she'll get the last  
She's got the future, I got the past  
I got the class ring, she got the diamond and wedding band  
I got the boy, she got the man

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<sup>31</sup> Jill Jones, "Country Music Lyrics: Is There Poetry in Those Twangy Rhymes?" *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, Ed. Charlotte Pence. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, (2012), 109, 113.

This song is an example of the continuity of country music narratives over half a century. It speaks to the theme of lost love and remembering the past with both tenderness and regret. The lyrics parallel those of Patsy Cline in her 1962 song, “She’s Got You,” penned by songwriter Hank Cochran. In a similar way, her lyrics tell the story of her love from the past where the protagonist keeps the material objects and memories of the past romance, but the man has moved on and left her alone with just the tokens: “I’ve got your class ring, that proved you care,” and “I’ve got your picture, she’s got you.” The two songs open respectively with “I saw your picture...” (Kramer) and “I’ve got your picture...” (Cline). Those two parallel images, namely the photograph and the class ring, forge an intertextual relationship between the two songs that would be readily perceptible to the legions of country fans, who know Patsy Cline’s repertory. The appearance of the same basic narrative and specific phrases in these two songs is just one of many examples that shows the continuity within country music themes and narratives over more than a half-century. In spite of all the changes that have occurred in the daily lives and social fabric of the American working- and middle-class populations during that time, these particular narratives still resonate in almost identical forms.

Controversy tends to surround songs within country music with lyrics that deviate into more liberal topics. For example, Little Big Town’s “Girl Crush” received criticism from some listeners who interpreted their lyrics to imply a lesbian attraction, and consequently wanted it removed from airplay.<sup>32</sup> In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Karen Fairchild of Little Big Town clarified the meaning of their lyrics to be about jealousy from one woman to another over the love of a man.<sup>33</sup> However, the idea of “I wanna taste her lips,” even if it is to taste the

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<sup>32</sup> Emily Yahr. “Why Stations are Pulling Little Big Town’s ‘Girl Crush’ –and What That Says About Country Radio,” *Washington Post* (25 March 2015): 1.

unnamed “him” vicariously, is still a physical magnetism that complicates the way the song speaks about romance and crushes (Example 3.4).

**Example 3.4: Little Big Town’s Girl Crush Highlighting the Theme of Heartache and Jealousy in Love**

I wanna taste her lips, yeah, ‘cause they taste like you  
I wanna drown myself in a bottle of her perfume  
I want her long blonde hair, I want her magic touch  
Yeah, ‘cause maybe then you’d want me just as much  
I got a girl crush, I got a girl crush

This song reached number 1 on the Billboard charts, indicating its popularity, even though some listeners were critical of its ambiguous lyrics.

The double meaning is similar to the lyrics in the song “Jolene,” released by Dolly Parton in 1973. Parton sang of being jealous because her man is with Jolene, and she obsessed over Jolene’s charm and beauty with the lyrics, “Your beauty is beyond compare/With flaming locks of auburn hair/With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green.” The way in which these songs, performed and presented with a woman as singer and protagonist, point to another woman’s beauty and desirability could be viewed as lesbian imagery, as has been explored by scholar Nadine Hubbs at length.<sup>34</sup> If the lyrics of “Jolene” can be interpreted as lesbian imagery, then it would seem that the lyrics of “Girl Crush” could be interpreted similarly. While heteronormative relationships are consistent with the conservative nature of country music, some songwriters present lyrics that can imply multiple meanings and hint at other types of relationships.

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<sup>33</sup> Yahr, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Nadine Hubbs, “‘Jolene,’ Genre, and the Everyday Homoerotics of Country Music: Dolly Parton’s Loving Address of the Other Woman,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19 (2015): 72.

In the lyrics of Kacey Musgraves' 2013 song, "Follow Your Arrow," there are instances of same-sex relationships and marijuana use, which are outside of the typical conservative limits of the genre. This song won "Song of the Year" at the Country Music Association Awards in 2013 and may indicate a trend toward acceptance of more modern and less conservative lyrics in country music. In the past, country artists who did not conform to the conventional opinions of the establishment had been banned from radio, even for their political opinions, as in the case of the Dixie Chicks, who criticized George W. Bush over the 2003 Iraq invasion.<sup>35</sup>

Along with the analysis of overall themes and topics within country music, this study examined the use of specific vocabulary, in particular nouns, verbs, adjectives, colloquial diction, and slang words that mark the genre and reflect specific trends and traditions in songwriting. For the most part, the vocabulary in song lyrics also confirms the continuity with tradition in the genre, including representations of social class. There are some differences in vocabulary between the present songwriting norms and past country music.

The most common words found in 2015 country songs include girl, baby, night/tonight, wanna, love, heart, eyes, dance/dancin', and kiss. These words appeared in many of the songs analyzed and reflected the theme of romantic attraction and love seen in the majority of the top songs. The next most frequent set of words that appeared in many songs reflected the theme of good times, partying, and taking a break from work. These words were drink/drinking, smile, crazy, burn/burnin', lonely/alone, whiskey, phone, lips, home, country, party, truck/pickup, and car. Slang words, such as gonna, wanna, gotta, ain't, kinda, I'mma, and whatcha are frequently found in the lyrics and common to southern and rural regions; however, they were not always used, and this may depend upon what fits best in the song. Also, many words convey images and

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<sup>35</sup> Gehrke, 2; Van Sickle, 321.

evoke feelings of country settings, such as dirt road, country road, back road, river/riverside, tailgate, tractors, John Deere, Jack, the sticks, and cornfield.

While there were many references to alcohol and drinking, including whiskey, beer, and bars, there were only two references to “stoned,” and one was the metaphoric usage in “stoned on your love” in the song, “Tennessee Whiskey.” The absence of many references to drugs is consistent with the conservative values of the country music genre. This norm has also meant that the recent appearance of references to drugs, especially marijuana, in country music outside of this sample have garnered a lot of attention. Over past years, some country songs dealing with drug use include Toby Keith’s 2003 song, “Weed for Willie,” which pointed to Willie Nelson as a promoter of marijuana, Eric Church’s 2009 song, “Smoke a Little Smoke,” and the recent song, “It’s All Going to Pot” by Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard. In the present 2015 top-ten songs analyzed, Florida Georgia Line’s song “Sun Daze,” references drug use with the lyrics: “All I wanna do today is wear my favorite shades and get stoned.” It also mentions sex in the lyrics, “If I’m lucky yeah I might get laid.” Both of these phrases set the song apart from the more core traditions in country music, and marked Florida Georgia Line as a group whose target audience was younger, had more cross-over from pop, and was less tied to the historical identity of country music. With this as the notable exception, in general, there was very little use of curse words, explicit sex, race, or same-sex relationships in the songs analyzed. These characteristics of country music have themselves been the source of comedy and parody, as when Hank Williams, Jr., and Kid Rock performed a song with the hook line and refrain, “In country music, you just can’t say the F-word.”

A feature of contemporary country songs that deals with the delivery of the lyrics involves the use of words that are spoken rather than sung. This form of lyrical delivery has been

commonly used by artists such as Sam Hunt and Jason Aldean and is a style present in pop and rap. In Sam Hunt's song, "Take Your Time," the first three lines of the verse are spoken (Example 3.5).

### **Example 3.5: Sam Hunt's "Take Your Time" Highlighting Spoken Lyrics**

*I don't know if you were looking at me or not  
You probably smile like that all the time  
And I don't mean to bother you but  
I couldn't just walk by  
And not say, "Hi"*

This use of words that are spoken rather than sung is also present in Jason Aldean's songs "The Dirt Road Anthem" (2010) and "The Only Way I Know" (2012), in which he speaks the words in the verses and sings the choruses. Johnny Cash's 2002 song, "When the Man Comes Around," and Charlie Daniels Band's 2010 song, "This Ain't No Rag, It's a Flag," are other examples of country songs with spoken verses. Rapped verses and sung choruses are a style borrowed from rap and hip-hop, although there is a history of spoken-word recitations within country and gospel as well. The more prevalent appearance of spoken words in country songs is one way that another genre, in particular, rap, is influencing country artists to make their songs unique and more progressive.

In another way, however, country writers are not incorporating the themes of contemporary rap. For example, some rap artists assume an arrogant role as a "rap god" or superior being. The rap audiences respond favorably to this attitude; however, this would unlikely be tolerated by country music listeners. Nevertheless, there are some country song lyrics, which may be viewed as over-confidence in a light-hearted, humorous way by some listeners, but interpreted as arrogance by other listeners. This may be seen from the 2015 top-ten songs in

Old Dominion's song "Break Up with Him," when the country guy says to a girl, "Tell him that it's over/Then bring it on over," and in Randy Houser's "Like a Cowboy," when the guy says, "I'll ride in on a sunny day/Sing you a song, steal your heart away." In Blake Shelton's 2013 song, "Boys Round Here," Blake raps on this song, "Chew tobacco, chew tobacco, chew tobacco, spit" and sings about the girls with these lyrics, "And just can't help it cause they just keep fallin'/ For the boys 'round here." While these lyrics may be interpreted as arrogant to some listeners, they are quite "toned down" in comparison to some rappers' lyrics. An example of this is evident in the rap song, "I am a God" by Kanye West.

I am a god  
Hurry up with my damn massage  
Hurry up with my damn ménage  
Get the Porsche out the damn garage  
I am a god.

Another example is from Jay-Z's song, "Hovi Baby," with the lyrics, "I'm so far ahead of my time, I'm bout to start another life/Look behind you, I'm bout to pass you twice." These rap lyrics clearly show more arrogance than that which is suggested in country music songs.

These analyses of song lyrics, both at the level of main narrative theme and at the level of specific vocabulary used, show that contemporary country songwriting is continuing the same traditions that it has followed for years. The specific echoes of earlier songs, such as the 2015 song, "I Got the Boy," in relation to the earlier song, "She's Got You," and even the parallels between "Girl Crush" and the suggested homoerotic layers in "Jolene," show how connected the genre remains to its past, and how much continuity there is in the social themes relevant to the country audience sixty years ago and today. The vocabulary used is still descriptive of country settings, however, the use of specific modern words suggests some distinction between contemporary country music and its past, and the relationships between country and rap songs

show how country is both influenced by its contemporary musical genres today, yet remains distinct from them by retaining its traditions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 2015 top-ten country songs are characterized by various formats of their song forms and harmonies, and traditional, as well as contemporary elements of the lyrics that have been described in this study. The song form that features most prominently in this repertory includes a verse-chorus-bridge form with three iterations of the chorus, an intro and outro section, and instrumental turnarounds immediately following each chorus. The top-ten country songs have varying degrees of departure from the typical formats, such as the inclusion of a pre-chorus, the absence of a bridge, and/or more or fewer than three iterations of the chorus. Newer song form features that are not part of a long tradition within country music include a shortened second verse, which brings the focus of the song back to the chorus and departs from conventional storytelling. Newer features also include a pullback chorus, and a bridge that frequently has the same chord progression as in the verse or chorus, but provides contrast through variations in instrumental texture. Songs tend to have either a pullback chorus or a texturally thin bridge, depending on whether the contrast in the bridge has been created through a change in harmonic progression or requires textural contrast. Primary features of the harmonies of these top songs include the use of a double-tonic complex in many songs, the absence of a 5-1 authentic cadence, the use of the same chord progression throughout the verse, chorus, and bridge, and the use of only two chords throughout a song. Lyrical analyses show that the top-ranked country songs in 2015 are continuing to address the traditional themes of romantic love and attraction; heartache; good times and partying; nostalgia, home, and family; working class; and religion and inspiration, within the contexts of a small-town or rural “country life.” However, some specific vocabulary in

the lyrics suggests differences from the past that reflect modern times, as well as influences from other popular musical genres. This analysis of the 2015 top songs indicates that while country music is clearly recognizable as a genre that has retained its traditions, it is, nevertheless, pushing boundaries in its forms, harmonies, and lyrics and borrowing from other contemporary musical genres to reflect trends of today.

### **Songwriter Culture**

The expression, “It all begins with a song,” also applies to this research project. Learning about popular song analysis in a music theory class, followed by learning to appreciate the songwriter culture behind country music while interning with a touring country artist and band led to my interest in this topic. In coming to know a number of artists and songwriters, I experienced a sense of heart and truth that was present in songs about their real-life experiences and that used their own colloquialisms in the lyrics. This experience gave me the chance to observe first-hand how this music evokes notions of “authenticity” for its audiences in the themes, settings, and connections it establishes between the performers and listeners. While the majority of this study addressed structural elements in the songs, the way those songs forge strong connections and emotional responses with their audiences is, in essence, what I was researching and describing in the body of this paper.

During the course of this research study, several well-known Nashville country music songwriters, many of whom, were not specifically involved in writing the songs in the present study, but who are active in the larger scene, generously provided information to me about the

songwriting process.<sup>36</sup> They indicated that the process usually involves a group of co-writers, as was the case for all sixty-seven top country songs analyzed in the present study. The working methods employed by these groups are generally to begin the process with a hook or title, a phrase, or a musical riff. Each writer then builds on this idea as the lyrics are created with the riff played on guitar or piano. The song is usually not planned with full band arrangement at this stage. Several of the songwriters mentioned that a song should be able to stand alone and “carry itself,” meaning hold the attention of the listener and be perceived as aesthetically “good,” even in its simplest acoustic performance. Songs vary in the amount of time they take to complete. Many aspects of a song may be completed in a day, but the group of writers may go back and forth on a line of lyrics for several weeks until they are satisfied with it. Co-writers bring ideas based on their own musical listening experiences from the past, and younger writers in a group are often credited with bringing fresh ideas that help established songwriting groups stay current. This perspective illustrates songwriters’ perceived importance of working with current trends and allowing their style of writing to evolve over time.

The country music songwriters explained that they usually write for a well-defined, target listener population, especially for songs that will be played on the radio. They also expressed their views that modern country music is being influenced by pop music. Marc Beeson said, “It’s definitely leaning toward pop. The lyrics, melodies, and instrumentation.” Even though many aspects of pop music influence country music, session musician Charles Judge said, in regard to using synthesizers in country recordings, that one “can’t be too overtly electronic, but has to be more organic.” Rivers Rutherford explained that modern country music is “more immediate and

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<sup>36</sup> Personal communications with Nashville songwriters and musicians: Drew Baldrige, Marc Beeson, Charles Judge, Maggie Rutherford, Rivers Rutherford, Rex Paul Schnelle, and Lizzie Wilson, see Appendices 4 and 5.

more young – youth-driven and in the moment.” However, it still uses what he summarized as country themes and words that describe country settings, an indication that elements of past tradition weigh heavily in the songwriters’ contemporary craft. Songwriter, Drew Baldrige added, “I love where country music is going. It leaves the door wide open to be creative and push boundaries.”<sup>37</sup>

While influenced by other current genres of music, songwriters frequently borrow melodies or stories from their musical heroes from the past and build from their styles, so that most songs are derivative in some way. An example of this was discussed in Chapter 3, where parallel images of a photograph and class ring appear in two songs separated by more than fifty years. Jana Kramer’s “I Got the Boy” (2015), which opens with, “I saw your picture...” and Patsy Cline’s “She’s Got You” (1962), which opens with “I’ve got your picture...” show the continuity of themes and narratives within country music. The 2015 song might be heard as a modern version of an earlier theme through its use of current vocabulary in the lyrics, as well as other musical differences. Another example of continuity between songs within the genre is Chris Stapleton’s cover of the 1983 song, “Tennessee Whiskey,” as discussed in Chapter 2. This cover song uses the same lyrics and melody, but was made to sound current through a new chord progression that omits the 5 chord. With such a cover song, Stapleton presents something simultaneously old and new: the song links him to the tradition of legendary country singer George Jones, while giving his audience a new performance with his own, contemporary, signature sound.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Even though there is continuity in the narratives within this genre, country music songwriters recognize how important it is to resist writing anything that is too similar to another song. In view of recent copyright infringement cases, Nashville songwriters generally agreed that it can be difficult to make a song that does not have a “feel” like another song. Within songwriting practice, the chord progression is not a musical domain that lends itself to stark differentiation. The common harmonic language serves to unify the genre, but also requires that other musical domains be the sites of differentiation by which songwriters keep from sounding like they are copying other songs. Some writers credit the trend of co-writing as being a way to avoid one single songwriter’s style dominating in more than one song. With a group of writers, the resultant song will usually reveal a blend of influences from all the writers. Critics have noted, however, that co-writing teams can have their own identifiable style that risks resulting in songs that are “too similar.”<sup>38</sup> The underlying issue of how to make a song sound current and trending without sounding too much like existing works can be a source of tension within the community of both songwriters and fans.

Most songwriters agree that a well-crafted song makes a statement both melodically and lyrically. Even with all the technical components already described that are typically present in today’s country songs, the songs are still treated by their fans as personal expressions of a recognizable “truth” that the listeners can connect with. As explained by songwriter, Rex Paul Schnelle, a hit song depends on skill and timing, and requires “good crafting, a great vocal performance, a good recording, and tight lyrics.” “Country music is meant to be real,” said

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Beam, “Zac Brown Says Luke Bryan’s ‘That’s My Kind of Night’ Worst Song Ever,” *Saving Country Music*, September 14, 2014, <<http://www.savingcountrymusic.com/zac-brown-says-luke-bryans-thats-my-kind-of-night-worst-song-ever/>>; Billy Dukes, “‘That’s My Kind of Night’ Songwriter Dallas Davidson Responds to Zac Brown’s Criticism,” *Taste of Country*, September 20, 2013, <<http://tasteofcountry.com/luke-bryan-thats-my-kind-of-night-dallas-davidson-zac-brown/>>.

songwriter, Drew Baldridge. “Some of the best songs come from a real spot—you’ve seen it and been through it. People put themselves in the story—that’s what you want.” This is a fundamental characteristic of this genre of music and may help to explain the loyalty of its fans. Songwriter, Rivers Rutherford points out that it is important for a song to “move us emotionally.” Songwriter Marc Beeson adds, “I think what really grabs people is when they hear something that’s true--that is real for them. People recognize the truth when they hear it. That’s my absolute starting point for every song.” The listener’s recognition of the simple truth in a country song is the counterpoint to all the craft, structure, and formal design present in the song, and is, after all, the ultimate goal of both songwriter and artist.

**APPENDIX 1: WEEKLY TOP 10 COUNTRY SONGS ON *BILLBOARD* CHARTS  
IN 2015**

January 3, 2015

- 1-My Baby's Got a Smile on Her Face-Craig Wayne Boyd
- 2-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw
- 3-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 4-Talladega-Eric Church
- 5-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Perfect Storm-Brad Paisley
- 7-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 8-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 9-Til it's Gone-Kenny Chesney
- 10-Leave the Night on-Sam Hunt

January 10, 2015

- 1-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 2-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw
- 3-Talladega-Eric Church
- 4-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 5-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 6-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 7-God Made Girls-RaeLynn
- 8-Perfect Storm-Brad Paisley
- 9-Burnin' It Down-Jason Aldean
- 10-Leave the Night on-Sam Hunt

January 17, 2015

- 1-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 2-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw
- 3-Talladega-Eric Church
- 4-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 5-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 6- Perfect Storm-Brad Paisley
- 7-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 8-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 9-Just Getting' Started-Jason Aldean
- 10-God Made Girls-RaeLynn

January 24, 2015

- 1-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 2-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw
- 3-Talladega-Eric Church

- 4-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 5-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 6- Perfect Storm-Brad Paisley
- 7-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 8-Til it's Gone-Kenny Chesney
- 9-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 10-Drinking Class-Lee Brice

January 31, 2015

- 1-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 2-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 3-Talladega-Eric Church
- 4-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 5-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 7-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw
- 8-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 9-Til it's Gone-Kenny Chesney
- 10-Drinking Class-Lee Brice

February 7, 2015

- 1-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 2-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 3-Talladega-Eric Church
- 4-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 5-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 6-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 7-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 8-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 9-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 10-Shotgun Rider-Tim McGraw

February 14, 2015

- 1-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 2-Talladega-Eric Church
- 3-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 4-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 5-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 6-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 7-Something in the Water-Carrie Underwood
- 8-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 9-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 10-Like a Cowboy-Randy Houser

February 21, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 3-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 4-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 5-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 6-Talladega-Eric Church
- 7-I Loved Her First-Heartland
- 8-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 9-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 10-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge

February 28, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 3-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 4-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 5-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 6-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 7-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 8-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 9-Like a Cowboy-Randy Houser
- 10-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell

March 7, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 4-I See You-Luke Bryan
- 5-Sun Daze-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 7-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 8-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 9-Like a Cowboy-Randy Houser
- 10-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band

March 14, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 3-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 4-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 5-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 6-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 7-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 8-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 9-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young
- 10-Like a Cowboy-Randy Houser

March 21, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 3-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe
- 4-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 5-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 6-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 7-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 8-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young
- 9-Make Me Wanna-Thomas Rhett
- 10-Homegrown Honey-Darius Rucker

March 28, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 3-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 4-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 5-Little Red Wagon-Miranda Lambert
- 6-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 7-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young
- 8-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 9-Homegrown Honey-Darius Rucker
- 10-Lonely Tonight-Blake Shelton with Ashley Monroe

April 4, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 3-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 4-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young
- 5-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 6-Homegrown Honey-Darius Rucker
- 7-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley
- 8-Mean to Me-Brett Eldredge
- 9-Just Gettin' Started-Jason Aldean
- 10-Little Red Wagon-Miranda Lambert

April 11, 2015

- 1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 3-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 4-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell
- 5-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young
- 6-Drinking Class-Lee Brice
- 7-Homegrown Honey-Darius Rucker
- 8-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley

9-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr  
10-Smoke-A Thousand Horses

April 18, 2015

1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt  
2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band  
3-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell  
4-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young  
5-Girl Crush-Little Big Town  
6-Drinking Class-Lee Brice  
7-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley  
8-Homegrown Honey-Darius Rucker  
9-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr  
10-Raise 'Em Up-Keith Urban with Eric Church

April 25, 2015

1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt  
2-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band  
3-Drinking Class-Lee Brice  
4-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell  
5-Girl Crush-Little Big Town  
6-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley  
7-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line  
8-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr  
9-Lonely Eyes-Chris Young  
10-Don't It-Billy Currington

May 2, 2015

1-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt  
2-Girl Crush-Little Big Town  
3-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band  
4-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line  
5-Drinking Class-Lee Brice  
6-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley  
7-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr  
8-Don't It-Billy Currington  
9-Raise 'Em Up-Keith Urban with Eric Church  
10-Ain't Worth the Whiskey-Cole Swindell

May 9, 2015

1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town  
2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt  
3-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line  
4-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band  
5-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley  
6-Drinking Class-Lee Brice

- 7-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 8-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr
- 9-Raise 'Em Up-Keith Urban with Eric Church
- 10-Smoke-A Thousand Horses

May 16, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 7-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr
- 8-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley
- 9-Smoke-A Thousand Horses
- 10-Raise 'Em Up-Keith Urban with Eric Church

May 23, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 4-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 5-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 6-Smoke-A Thousand Horses
- 7-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr
- 8-Raise 'Em Up-Keith Urban with Eric Church
- 9-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 10-Say You Do-Dierks Bentley

May 30, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-Smoke-A Thousand Horses
- 6-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 7-A Guy Walks Into a Bar-Tyler Farr
- 8-I'm Coming Over-Chris Young
- 9-Homegrown-Zac Brown Band
- 10-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood

June 6, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton

- 5-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 7-Smoke-A Thousand Horses
- 8-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 9-Wild Child-Kenny Chesney with Grace Potter
- 10-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood

June 13, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 4-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 5-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 6-Smoke-A Thousand Horses
- 7-Don't It-Billy Currington
- 8-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 9-Wild Child-Kenny Chesney with Grace Potter
- 10-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood

June 20, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 4-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 5-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 6- Don't It-Billy Currington
- 7-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 8-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood
- 9-Wild Child-Kenny Chesney with Grace Potter
- 10-Smoke-A Thousand Horses

June 27, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 6-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood
- 7-Sippin' On Fire-Florida Georgia Line
- 8-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 9-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 10-Wild Child-Kenny Chesney with Grace Potter

July 4, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt

- 3-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 6-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood
- 7-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 8-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 9-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 10-Love You Like That-Canaan Smith

July 11, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 3-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 6-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini
- 7-Little Toy Guns-Carrie Underwood
- 8-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 9-Love You Like That-Canaan Smith
- 10-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church

July 18, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 6-Love You Like That-Canaan Smith
- 7-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 8-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 9-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 10-Love Me Like You Mean It-Kelsea Ballerini

July 25, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 5-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 6-Love You Like That-Canaan Smith
- 7-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 8-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 9-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 10-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson

August 1, 2015

- 1-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 5-Sangria-Blake Shelton
- 6-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 7-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 8-One Hell of an Amen-Brantley Gilbert
- 9-Love You Like That-Canaan Smith
- 10-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church

August 8, 2015

- 1-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 2-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 5-One Hell of an Amen-Brantley Gilbert
- 6-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 7-Tonight Looks Good on You-Jason Aldean
- 8-Loving You Easy-Zac Brown Band
- 9-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 10-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson

August 15, 2015

- 1-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 2-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 3-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 4-Girl Crush-Little Big Town
- 5-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 6-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 7-Loving you Easy-Zac Brown Band
- 8-One Hell of an Amen-Brantley Gilbert
- 9-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 10-Kiss You in the Morning-Michael Ray

August 22, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 4-Loving you Easy-Zac Brown Band
- 5-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 6-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 7-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 8- Girl Crush-Little Big Town

- 9-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 10-Kiss You in the Morning-Michael Ray

August 29, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 3-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 4-Loving you Easy-Zac Brown Band
- 5-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 6-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 7-Take Your Time-Sam Hunt
- 8-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 9-Young & Crazy-Frankie Ballard
- 10-Hell of a Night-Dustin Lynch

September 5, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 4-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 5-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 6-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 7-Loving you Easy-Zac Brown Band
- 8-Young & Crazy-Frankie Ballard
- 9-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 10-Hell of a Night-Dustin Lynch

September 12, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 4-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 5-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 6-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan
- 7-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 8-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 9-Hell of a Night-Dustin Lynch
- 10-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church

September 19, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 3-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 4-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 5-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 6-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge

- 7- Hell of a Night-Dustin Lynch
- 8-Like a Wrecking Ball-Eric Church
- 9-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 10-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan

September 26, 2015

- 1-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 2-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 3-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 4-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 5-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 6-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 7-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 8-Burning House-Cam
- 9-Fly-Maddie & Tae
- 10-Kick the Dust Up-Luke Bryan

October 3, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 3-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 4-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 5-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 6-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 7-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 8-Burning House-Cam
- 9-Fly-Maddie & Tae
- 10-Break up with him-Old Dominion

Oct. 10, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 3-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 4-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 5-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 6-Buy Me a Boat-Chris Janson
- 7-Crash and Burn-Thomas Rhett
- 8-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 9-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 10-Burning House-Cam

Oct. 17, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 3-John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 4-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney

- 5-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 6-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 7-Burning House-Cam
- 8-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 9-Anything Goes-Florida Georgia Line
- 10-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young

Oct. 24, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 3-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 4-Burning House-Cam
- 5-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 6- John Cougar, John Deer, John 3:16-Keith Urban
- 7-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 8-Anything Goes-Florida Georgia Line
- 9-House Party-Sam Hunt
- 10-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood

Oct. 31, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 4-Burning House-Cam
- 5-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 6-Anything Goes-Florida Georgia Line
- 7-Lose My Mind-Brett Eldredge
- 8-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 9-Save it For a Rainy Day-Kenny Chesney
- 10-Gonna Wanna Tonight-Chase Rice

Nov. 7, 2015

- 1-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 2-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 4-Burning House-Cam
- 5-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 6-Anything Goes-Florida Georgia Line
- 7-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 8-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 9-Let Me See Ya Girl-Cole Swindell
- 10-Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay

Nov. 14, 2015

- 1-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 2-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan

- 3-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 4-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 5-Burning House-Cam
- 6-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 7-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 8-Anything Goes-Florida Georgia Line
- 9-Let Me See Ya Girl-Cole Swindell
- 10-Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay

Nov. 21, 2015

- 1-Tennessee Whiskey-Chris Stapleton
- 2-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 4-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 5-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 6-Break up with Him-Old Dominion
- 7-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 8-Burning House-Cam
- 9-Let Me See Ya Girl-Cole Swindell
- 10- Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay

Nov. 28, 2015

- 1-Tennessee Whiskey-Chris Stapleton
- 2-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 3-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 4-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 5-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 6-Burning House-Cam
- 7-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 8-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 9-Gonna-Blake Shelton
- 10-Let Me See Ya Girl-Cole Swindell

Dec. 5, 2015

- 1-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 2-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 3-Break up in a small town-Sam Hunt
- 4-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 5-Burning House-Cam
- 6-Nothin' like you-Dan & Shay
- 7-Gonna-Blake Shelton
- 8-Break up with him-Old Dominion
- 9-Tennessee Whiskey-Chris Stapleton
- 10-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan

Dec. 12, 2015

- 1-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 2-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 3-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 4-Burning House-Cam
- 5-Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay
- 6- Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 7-Gonna-Blake Shelton
- 8-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan
- 9-Gonna Know We Were Here-Jason Aldean
- 10-Stay a Little Longer-Brothers Osborne

Dec. 19, 2015

- 1-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 2-Break up in a Small Town-Sam Hunt
- 3-I'm Comin' Over-Chris Young
- 4-Burning House-Cam
- 5-Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay
- 6- Gonna-Blake Shelton
- 7-Gonna Know We Were here-Jason Aldean
- 8-Stay a Little Longer-Brothers Osborne
- 9-Smoke Break-Carrie Underwood
- 10-Strip it Down-Luke Bryan

Dec. 26, 2015

- 1-Die a Happy Man-Thomas Rhett
- 2-Break up in a small town-Sam Hunt
- 3-Burning House-Cam
- 4-Gonna-Blake Shelton
- 5-I'm Comin' Over
- 6-Stay a Little Longer
- 7- Gonna Know We Were Here-Jason Aldean
- 8-Home Alone Tonight-Luke Bryan
- 9-Nothin' Like You-Dan & Shay
- 10-I Got the Boy-Jana Kramer

**APPENDIX 2: THE SIXTY-SEVEN TOP SONGS ANALYZED**

Song	Artist	Songwriters	Album (Label)	Date Released
A Guy Walks into a Bar	Tyler Farr	Jonathan Singleton, Melissa Peirce, Brad Tursi	<i>Suffer in Peace</i> (Columbia Nashville)	Aug. 18, 2014
Ain't Worth the Whiskey	Cole Swindell	Cole Swindell, Josh Martin, Adam Sanders	<i>Cole Swindell</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Nov. 3, 2014
Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line	Felix McTeigue, Chris Tompkins, Craig Wiseman	<i>Anything Goes</i> (Republic Nashville)	June 15, 2015
Break Up in a Small Town	Sam Hunt	Sam Hunt, Zach Crowell, Shane McAnally	<i>Montevallo</i> (MCA Nashville)	Sept. 21, 2015
Break Up With Him	Old Dominion	Matthew Ramsey, Trevor Rosen, Whit Sellers, Geoff Sprung, Brad Tursi	<i>Meat and Candy</i> (ReeSmack-RCA Nashville)	Jan. 20, 2015
Burning House	Cam	Cam, Jeff Bhasker, Tyler Johnson	<i>Untamed</i> (Arista Nashville)	June 16, 2015
Buy Me a Boat	Chris Janson	Brent Anderson, Chris DuBois, Byron Gallimore, Chris Janson	<i>Buy Me a Boat</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Oct. 30, 2015
Crash and Burn	Thomas Rhett	Jesse Frasure, Chris Stapleton	<i>Tangled Up</i> (Valory Music Group)	Apr. 27, 2015
Die a Happy Man	Thomas Rhett	Thomas Rhett, Sean Douglas, Joe Spargur	<i>Tangled Up</i> (Valory Music Group)	Sept. 28, 2015
Don't It	Billy Currington	Ross Copperman, Ashley Gorley, Jaren Johnston	<i>Summer Forever</i> (Mercury Nashville)	Oct. 27, 2014
Drinking Class	Lee Brice	Josh Kear, David Frasier, Ed Hill	<i>Don't Dance</i> (Curb)	Sept. 8, 2014
Fly	Maddie and Tae	Taylor Dye, Maddie Marlow, Tiffany Vartanyan	<i>Start Here</i> (Republic, Dot)	Jan. 26, 2015
Girl Crush	Little Big Town	Lori McKenna, Hillary Lindsey, Liz Rose	<i>Pain Killer</i> (Capitol Nashville, Interscope)	Dec. 15, 2014

God Made Girls	RaeLynn	RaeLynn, Nicolle Galyon, Lori McKenna, Liz Rose	<i>Me</i> (Valory Music Group)	June 30, 2014
Gonna	Blake Shelton	Luke Laird, Craig Wiseman	<i>Bringing Back the Sunshine</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Aug. 3, 2015
Gonna Know We Were Here	Jason Aldean	Brett Beavers, Brett James	<i>Old boots, New Dirt</i> (Broken Bow)	Aug. 17, 2015
Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice	Jon Nite, Jimmy Robbins, Shane McAnally	Ignite the Night (Dack Janiels, RPM, Columbia Nashville)	Nov. 10, 2014
Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch	Zach Crowell, Adam Sanders, Jaron Boyer	<i>Where It's At</i> (Broken Bow)	Nov. 3, 2014
Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan	Jody Stevens, Cole Taylor, Jaida Dreyer, Tommy Cecil	<i>Kill the Lights</i> (Capitol Nashville)	Nov. 23, 2015
Homegrown	Zac Brown Band	Zac Brown, Niko Moon, Wyatt Durrette	<i>Jekyll + Hyde</i> (Southern Ground, Big Machine)	Jan. 12, 2015
Homegrown Honey	Darius Rucker	Darius Rucker, Charles Kelley, Nathan Chapman	<i>Southern Style</i> (Capitol Nashville)	Aug. 25, 2014
House Party	Sam Hunt	Sam Hunt, Zach Crowell, Jerry Flowers	<i>Montevallo</i> (MCA Nashville)	June 1, 2015
I Got the Boy	Jana Kramer	Connie Harrington, Tim Nichols, Jamie Lynn Spears	<i>Thirty One</i> (Elektra Nashville)	Mar. 30, 2015
I Loved Her First	Heartland	Walt Aldridge, Elliott Park	<i>I Loved Her First</i> (Lofton Creek)	June 5, 2006
I See You	Luke Bryan	Luke Bryan, Ashley Gorley, Luke Laird	<i>Crash My Party</i> (Capitol Nashville)	Nov. 3, 2014
I'm Comin' Over	Chris Young	Chris, Young, Corey Crowder, Josh Hoge	<i>I'm Comin' Over</i> (RCA Nashville)	May 11, 2015
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16	Keith Urban	Shane McAnally, Ross Copperman, Josh Osborne	<i>Ripcord</i> (Hit Red, Capitol Nashville)	June 9, 2015
Just Getting' Started	Jason Aldean	Chris DeStefano, Rhett Akins, Ashley Gorley	<i>Old Boots, New Dirt</i> (Broken Bow)	Nov. 10, 2014
Kick the Dust Up	Luke Bryan	Dallas Davidson, Chris DeStefano, Ashley Gorley	<i>Kill the Lights</i> (Capitol Nashville)	May 19, 2015

Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray	Justin Wilson, Michael White	<i>Michael Ray</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville/Atlantic)	Feb. 16, 2015
Leave the Night On	Sam Hunt	Sam Hunt, Josh Osborne, Shane McAnally	<i>Montevallo</i> (MCA Nashville)	June 16, 2014
Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell	Cole Swindell, Michael Carter, Jody Stevens	<i>Cole Swindell</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	April 20, 2015
Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser	Randy Houser, Brice Long	<i>How Country Feels</i> (Stoney Creek)	May 19, 2014
Like a Wrecking Ball	Eric Church	Eric Church, Casey Beathard	<i>The Outsiders</i> (EMI Nashville)	Mar. 9, 2015
Lonely Eyes	Chris Young	Johnny Bulford, Jason Matthews, Laura Veltz	<i>A.M.</i> (RCA Nashville)	Aug. 25, 2014
Lonely Tonight	Blake Shelton (with Ashley Monroe)	Brent Anderson, Ryan Hurd	<i>Bringing Back the Sunshine</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Nov. 17, 2014
Little Red Wagon	Miranda Lambert	Audra Mae, Joe Ginsberg	<i>Platinum</i> (RCA Nashville)	Jan. 12, 2015
Little Toy Guns	Carrie Underwood	Carrie Underwood, Chris DeStefano, Hillary Lindsey	<i>Greatest Hits: Decade #1</i> (Arista Nashville, 19)	Feb. 16, 2015
Lose My Mind	Brett Eldredge	Ross Copperman, Brett Eldredge, Heather Morgan, Brian Burton, Thomas Callaway, Gian Franco Reverberi, Gian Piero Reverberi	<i>Illinois</i> (Atlantic Nashville)	May 4, 2015
Love Me Like You Mean It	Kelsea Ballerini	Kelsea Ballerini Josh Kerr, Forest Glen Whitehead, Lance Carpenter	<i>The First Time</i> (Black River)	Sept. 22, 2014
Love You Like That	Canaan Smith	Canaan Smith, Brett Beavers, Jim Beavers	<i>Bronco</i> (Mercury Nashville)	July 21, 2014
Loving You Easy	Zac Brown Band	Zac Brown, Niko Moon, Al Anderson	<i>Jekyll + Hyde</i> (Southern Ground, BMLG, Republic, John Varvatos Records)	May 4, 2015
Make Me Wanna	Thomas Rhett	Thomas Rhett, Bart Butler, Larry McCoy	<i>It Goes Like This</i> (Valory Music Group)	Aug. 4, 2014
Mean to Me	Brett Eldredge	Brett Eldredge, Scooter	<i>Bring You Back</i>	July 14,

		Carusoe	(Atlantic Nashville)	2014
My Baby's Got a Smile on Her Face	Craig Wayne Boyd	Mark Marchetti, Stephanie Jones	Single (Dot)	Dec. 2014
Nothin' Like You	Dan + Shay	Dan Smyers, Shay Mooney, Chris DeStefano, Ashley Gorley	<i>Where It All Began</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Feb. 23, 2015
One Hell of an Amen	Brantley Gilbert	Brantley Gilbert, Mike Dekle, Brian Davis	<i>Just as I Am</i> (Valory Music Group)	Nov. 10, 2014
Perfect Storm	Brad Paisley	Brad Paisley, Lee Thomas Miller	<i>Moonshine in the Trunk</i> (Arista Nashville)	Sep. 1, 2014
Raise 'Em Up	Keith Urban	Tom Douglas, Jaren Johnston, Jeffrey Steele	<i>Hit Red</i> (Capitol Nashville)	Jan. 26, 2015
Save it for a Rainy Day	Kenny Chesney	Andrew Dorff, Matthew Ramsey, Brad Tursi	<i>The Big Revival</i> (Blue Chair, Columbia Nashville)	June 29, 2015
Sangria	Blake Shelton	J.T. Harding, Josh Osborne, Trevor Rosen	<i>Bringing Back the Sunshine</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Apr. 6, 2015
Say You Do	Dierks Bentley	Shane McAnally, Matthew Ramsey, Trevor Rosen	<i>Riser</i> (Capitol Nashville)	Oct. 6, 2014
Shotgun Rider	Tim McGraw	Marv Green, Hillary Lindsey, Troy Verges	<i>Sundown Heaven Town</i> (Big Machine)	Sep. 8, 2014
Sippin' on Fire	Florida Georgia Line	Rodney Clawson, Matt Dragstrom, Cole Taylor	<i>Anything Goes</i> (Republic Nashville)	Feb. 16, 2015
Smoke	A Thousand Horses	Michael Hobby, Ross Copperman, Jon Nite	<i>Southernality</i> (Republic Nashville)	Jan. 19, 2015
Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood	Carrie Underwood, Chris DeStefano, Hillary Lindsey	<i>Storyteller</i> (Arista Nashville)	Aug. 21, 2015
Something in the Water	Carrie Underwood	Chris DeStefano, Brett James, Carrie Underwood	<i>Greatest Hits: Decade #1</i> (Arista Nashville)	Sep. 21, 2014
Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne	John Osborne, T.J. Osborne, Shane McAnally	<i>Pawn Shop</i> (EMI Nashville)	Mar. 10, 2015
Strip it Down	Luke Bryan	Luke Bryan, Jon Nite,	<i>Kill the Lights</i>	Aug. 4,

		Ross Copperman	(Capitol Nashville)	2015
Sun Daze	Florida Georgia Line	Tyler Hubbard, Brian Kelley, Cary Barlowe, Jesse Frasure, Sarah Buxton	<i>Anything Goes</i> (Republic Nashville)	Sept. 16, 2014
Take Your Time	Sam Hunt	Sam Hunt, Josh Osborne, Shane McAnally	<i>Montevallo</i> (MCA Nashville, Capitol)	Nov. 24, 2014
Talladega	Eric Church	Erich Church, Luke Laird	The Outsiders (EMI Nashville)	Sep. 15, 2014
Tennessee Whiskey	Chris Stapleton with Justin Timberlake	Dean Dillon, Linda Hargrove	<i>Shine On</i> by George Jones (Epic)	Original Aug. 1983; Cover 4 Nov., 2015
Til it's Gone	Kenny Chesney	Rodney Clawson, David Lee Murphy, Jimmy Yeary	<i>The Big Revival</i> (Blue Chair, Columbia Nashville)	Oct. 13, 2014
Tonight Looks Good on You	Jason Aldean	Dallas Davidson, Rhett Akins, Ashley Gorley	<i>Old Boots, New Dirt</i> (Broken Bow)	Mar. 23, 2015
Wild Child	Kenny Chesney	Kenny Chesney, Shane McAnally, Josh Osborne	<i>The Big Revival</i> (Blue Chair, Columbia Nashville)	Feb. 2, 2015
Young and Crazy	Frankie Ballard	Rhett Akins, Ashley Gorley, Shane McAnally	<i>Sunshine &amp; Whiskey</i> (Warner Bros. Nashville)	Jan. 12, 2015

**APPENDIX 3: SONGS LISTED BY HIGHEST CHART POSITION AND INDICATING LYRICAL THEME**

<b>Highest Chart Position</b>	<b>Song</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Theme</b>	
#1	Die a Happy Man	Thomas Rhett	Romantic Love	
	Girl Crush	Little Big Town	Jealousy in love	
	House Party	Sam Hunt	Good Times and Partying	
	I See You	Luke Bryan	Heartache	
	Kick the Dust Up	Luke Bryan	Good Time and Partying	
	My Baby's Got a Smile on Her Face	Craig Wayne Boyd	Romantic Love	
	Something in the Water	Carrie Underwood	Religion and Inspiration	
	Strip it Down	Luke Bryan	Romantic Attraction/Love	
	Take Your Time	Sam Hunt	Romantic Attraction/ (Family-Domestic Violence, only in video)	
	Tennessee Whiskey	Chris Stapleton	Romantic Love	
	#2	Break Up in a Small Town	Sam Hunt	Heartache
		Buy Me a Boat	Chris Janson	Working Class (Consumerism, Money)
		Crash and Burn	Thomas Rhett	Heartache
Homegrown		Zac Brown Band	Home (Contentment)	
I'm Comin' Over		Chris Young	Heartache/Romantic Attraction	
John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16		Keith Urban	Nostalgia/Religion	
Lonely Tonight		Blake Shelton	Heartache/Romantic Attraction	
Lose My Mind		Brett Eldredge	Romantic Attraction/Love	
Make Me Wanna		Thomas Rhett	Romantic Attraction/Love	
Shotgun Rider		Tim McGraw	Romantic Love	
Talladega		Eric Church	Nostalgia	
#3		Ain't Worth the Whiskey	Cole Swindell	Heartache (Moving on from a Break-up)/ Patriotism
		Break up with Him	Old Dominion	Romantic Attraction
	Burning House	Cam	Heartache	
	Drinking Class	Lee Brice	Working Class/Good Times	
	Sangria	Blake Shelton	Romantic Attraction/Love	
	Sippin' on Fire	Florida Georgia Line	Romantic Attraction/Love	
Sun Daze	Florida Georgia Line	Good Times and Partying		

#4	Don't it	Billy Currington	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Gonna	Blake Shelton	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Lonely Eyes	Chris Young	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Loving You Easy	Zac Brown Band	Romantic Love
	Mean to Me	Brett Eldredge	Romantic Love
	Save it for a Rainy Day	Kenny Chesney	Heartache (Moving on from a Break-up)
#5	Just Getting' Started	Jason Aldean	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Little Red Wagon	Miranda Lambert	Romantic Attraction
	Love Me Like You Mean it	Kelsea Ballerini	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Nothin' Like You	Dan + Shay	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	One Hell of an Amen	Brantley Gilbert	Religion and Inspiration/Patriotism
	Say You Do	Dierks Bentley	Heartache
	Smoke Break	Carrie Underwood	Working Class/Religion
#6	Anything Goes	Florida Georgia Line	Good Times and Partying
	Like a Wrecking Ball	Eric Church	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Little Toy Guns	Carrie Underwood	Family (Domestic Violence)
	Love You Like That	Canaan Smith	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Perfect Storm	Brad Paisley	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Smoke	A Thousand Horses	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Stay a Little Longer	Brothers Osborne	Romantic Love
	Tonight Looks Good on You	Jason Aldean	Romantic Attraction/Love
#7	A Guy Walks Into a Bar	Tyler Farr	Heartache
	God made girls	RaeLynn	Romantic Attraction (Gender Roles)
	Gonna Know We Were Here	Jason Aldean	Good Times and Partying
	Homegrown Honey	Darius Rucker	Romantic Attraction
	I Loved Her First	Heartland	Family (Love of Family)
#8	Home Alone Tonight	Luke Bryan	Heartache/Romantic Attraction
	Raise 'Em Up	Keith Urban	Religion and Inspiration/Home/Patriotism
	Til it's Gone	Kenny Chesney	Romantic Attraction/ Love/Good Times
	Young and Crazy	Frankie Ballard	Good Times and Partying
#9	Fly	Maddie and Tae	Inspiration
	Hell of a Night	Dustin Lynch	Romantic Attraction/Good Times
	Let Me See Ya Girl	Cole Swindell	Romantic Attraction/ Love
	Wild Child	Kenny Chesney	Romantic Attraction/ Love
#10	Gonna Wanna Tonight	Chase Rice	Romantic Attraction/Love

	I Got the Boy	Jana Kramer	Nostalgia/Heartache
	Kiss You in the Morning	Michael Ray	Romantic Attraction/Love
	Leave the Night On	Sam Hunt	Romantic Attraction/Good Times
	Like a Cowboy	Randy Houser	Romantic Attraction/Love

**APPENDIX 4: LIST OF COMMUNICATIONS WITH NASHVILLE  
SONGWRITERS/MUSICIANS AND DATES**

<b>Songwriter/Musician</b>	<b>Contact Date</b>
Maggie Rutherford- musician, songwriter	January 20, 2016
Rex Paul Schnelle- musician, songwriter, and publisher	January 21, 2016
Rivers Rutherford- musician, Grammy-nominated songwriter for Universal Music Publishing	January 27, 2016
Marc Beeson- musician, songwriter for BNA records	February 2, 2016
Charles Judge- musician for many country hit songs	February 25, 2016
Drew Baldrige- artist, songwriter	March 22, 2016
Lizzie Wilson- musician, songwriter	April 17, 2016

## **APPENDIX 5: LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR SONGWRITERS/MUSICIANS**

These questions served as a resource for discussions with the songwriters/musicians. Due to differences in songwriters/musicians, times available for discussions, and the directions of the conversations, not all, or the same questions were asked of these individuals.

How did you get into a career as a session musician or songwriter?

Do you have a particular songwriting process?

When you are writing a song, do you plan it with the full band arrangement in mind?

Are instrumental solos planned by the songwriters or added by the session musicians?

Have you noticed any trends in modern country music?

What do you think contributes to a song being a hit?

Are their common chord progressions that you like to use?

Do you usually include a bridge or pre-chorus?

Have you noticed a lack of the 5 chord in many of today's songs?

Do your songs reflect your own beliefs or your own point of view? Do you always write from the perspective of yourself as opposed to third person perspective?

In view of recent copyright infringement cases, is there any way that you make sure your songs are original and do not have any parts similar to another artist's song?

How does a new songwriter earn a place in a songwriting group?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your music?

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