

## **"I Come in Here So I Don't Have to Hate Her"**

*Midland and the Barroom Weeper*<sup>1</sup>

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Singing a barroom weeper is like writing a haiku about cherry blossoms or a Western about a laconic hero who cleans up a violent town. You're under significant pressure to nail the obligatory elements of the form but you also have an opportunity to make fresh meanings by rearranging its familiar Lego pieces and taking advantage of a novel context. Whether you're adding a song to the tradition or covering one that's already in the tradition, you're walking the line between getting it right and making it new. It's a question of how creative you can get while working with, as the guys in Midland put it in their barroom weeper "Drinkin' Problem," "Same old folks, same old songs/Same old same old blue neon."

The barroom weeper is a country music warhorse in which a narrator with drink in hand and too many under the belt tells a story of yet another big night out that's also a tale of woe. Sometimes this narrator is a woman—as in the case of Kitty Wells's classic answer song "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels"—but more typically the narrator is a man and he's there because of a woman. Especially in the hands of the genre's greatest exponents, Merle Haggard and George Jones, this lament wearing the mask of a bottoms-up anthem can explore complex psychological states: jaunty pique combined with despair, recrimination with forgiveness, bitter resentment with critical self-examination. "Forget her; let's party" perpetually fuses into "It's no use; I miss her" like C major into A minor when you press the first pedal in E9 tuning on the pedal steel. There's some woman-hating in barroom weepers, but there's much more self-loathing and frankly admitted heartache; there's wit as well as sorrow, there's plenty of pedal steel guitar, and there is an infinite number of jukeboxes playing other steel-guitar-soaked barroom weepers in a kind of tail-chasing self-citational honky tonk ouroboros.

Like Hollywood, Nashville tends to innovate on the templates of tried-and-true models. Moving forward to the next thing often consists of looking back at what has worked in the past and wrapping that familiar musical and thematic package, and the aura of tradition that comes with it, around a slightly modified payload.

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1. My thanks to Eric Weisbard and to members of the audience and fellow panelists at the Pop Conference at the Museum of Popular Culture in Seattle, where this essay was first presented as a talk on April 29, 2018.

Case in point: Midland's "Drinkin' Problem," their debut single, which went gold and peaked at No. 3 on the country chart in 2017. It's way honky tonkier than most of what was on country radio around it, the usual mix of American turbofolk, twanged-up power pop and arena rock, and crypto-updates of Tin Pan Alley formula. The three guys who make up Midland—Mark Wystrach, Cameron Duddy, and Jess Carson—know their classic honky tonk better than most of Nashville's current stars, but they're nowhere near as hardcore as honky tonk fundamentalists like BR-549, who seem wholly committed to figuring out a way to get back into the womb circa 1935 to arrange for a do-over on living through the postwar period. Midland is more like the Mavericks, who know their classic country but have an appreciation for lounge and other period pleasures beyond a strict constructionist's idea of hardcore country. Midland's appreciation of honky tonk comes heavily filtered through a sensibility dominated by nostalgia not for the 1950s and 1960s but for the final quarter of the twentieth century: John Conlee and Alabama and early Dwight Yoakam and George Strait, and the Eagles, too, an influence you can hear loud and clear in the latter part of the chorus of "Drinkin' Problem" ("They keep on talkin' . . ."), which sounds like "New Kid In Town."

Midland's ostentatious curating of influences as a kind of performed nostalgia is part of a larger vintage-nerd persona that extends to their clothes. Wystrach, the lead singer, had careers going as a model and an actor and has an eco-conscious shoe company on the side, and all three are the kind of clotheshorses who can offer an extensive disquisition on men's shirting or the finer points of the Nudie suit as both evening wear and collectible. The fussiness of their self-regard, part list-making buff and part winking peacock, is the main component of a self-conscious post-bro quality for which they get a fair amount of shit.<sup>2</sup>

Some honky tonk purists find Midland affected and bridle at their band-mythologizing talk of paying their dues in backwater joints in Texas, pointing out that, before the band formed, Wystrach was an underwear model and appeared in TV dramas and soaps, while Duddy had a successful career underway as an award-winning director of videos for Bruno Mars, among others. This kind of questioning of honky tonk credentials is par for the course.<sup>3</sup> The authenticity police can find a violation if they look hard enough, and they come down on almost everybody sooner or later—with a small handful of exceptions, like Merle Haggard, whose childhood in a converted boxcar and stretch in San Quentin cause the authenticity police to treat him as above reproach. The attacks on Midland as too precious sound like when Dark Knight fundamentalists complain that there's too much of Adam West's goofy 1960s incarnation in some new and insufficiently brooding rendition of Batman. Just replace the Dark Knight with Merle, and you have Midland's situation.

2. See, for instance, "Despite the Quality of 'On the Rocks,' Midland Are Still Bullshitters," a self-consciously self-contradictory rant (Midland's playing "authentic honky tonk" that is "the best example of true traditional country that currently exists in the mainstream," and yet they must be despised as fake honky tonk poseurs) posted on [savingcountrymusic.com](https://www.savingcountrymusic.com) (September 25, 2017) by Kyle Coroneos, the self-appointed authenticity watchdog who writes under the pen name Trigger: <https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/despite-the-quality-of-on-the-rocks-midland-are-still-bullshitters/> (accessed July 12, 2018).

3. Marissa R. Moss, "How Midland Epitomize the Authenticity Debate in Country Music," *Rolling Stone* (September 28, 2017): <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/country/how-midland-epitomize-the-authenticity-debate-in-country-music-206194/> (accessed July 12, 2018).

There's plenty that's traditional about "Drinkin' Problem": the blend of drinks-in-the-air anthem and heartbroken lament, the implied presence of the jukebox ("same old songs"), the midtempo lope that splits the difference between keeping the night going and sinking into your drink, the slipping mask of bravado, the prominent role of the steel guitar. And there are some new wrinkles, the most remarked-upon of which are the Eagles-style harmonies that smooth the rough edges of classic honky tonk. Even that added smoothing is pretty subtle, though it has an oddly far-reaching effect, which is to overtly stylize hurt, making it seem more like a temporary and optional state than an existential condition. It's as if the narrator is saying, "Okay, I'm kinda bummed out, so I'll wallow in it, old-school Merle-style, which will make me feel better and also more like an authentic honky tonk man, and while I'm wallowing I can perhaps manage to be cute enough in my sadness to persuade a woman to feel bad for me and try to make me feel better, and then I'll really feel better." In contrast to, say, George Jones's factory-installed brokenheartedness or Haggard's profound compulsion to prod the sore spots masked by touchy pride, this is despair that you choose to put on and take off, like a perfectly distressed rare vintage T-shirt that makes your arms look bigger.

The new wrinkle in the lyrics is even more subtle. It's a line in the second verse: "I come in here so I don't have to hate her." You could see it as just a clever rhyme for the preceding line, "Last call gets later and later," which doesn't actually make any sense if you've ever spent time in bars. But this wrinkle suggests a little more than simple clever convenience.

To tease out this aspect of the song's resonances of meaning, it helps to know that it was co-written with Josh Osborne and Shane McAnally, and also produced by McAnally, who is in the first rank of Nashville's hit-making songwriters. McAnally writes all sorts of songs with and for all sorts of artists, and prides himself on being able to walk the line between getting the formula right and giving it a little push in a fresh direction: an extra shade of emotion, a flash of fresh perspective, a new way of saying or thinking about a traditional subject. He's also well-known as one of the very few very out gay men—at times it has seemed that he is the only one—in the mainstream country music industry's elite circles. When Jody Rosen profiled him in the *New York Times* a few years ago, he captured nicely McAnally's status as a master technician with a special gift for tweaking gender conventions in familiar country formulas typically used as vehicles for thinking about sexuality—like the heartbreak song, the cheatin' heart song, the come-on-over song, and the slide-on-over automotive love song.<sup>4</sup>

It's not too much of a stretch to say that when McAnally, in walking that line between tradition and innovation, looks to push toward the latter, it's part of a long-running project in which he and allied song makers are quietly and very gradually engaged in rewriting mainstream country's DNA to stimulate mutation in its assumptions about sex and gender. Those assumptions are famously hidebound to a ritualized extreme, in sharp contrast to pop, where, compared to country, pretty much anything goes. It's not that big-time commercial country music doesn't know about the full range of human possibilities, it's that part of the industry brand, the

4. Jody Rosen, "Out and Riding High in Nashville," *New York Times* (May 24, 2013; print version May 26, 2013, p. AR16); <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/arts/music/out-and-riding-high-in-nashville.html> (accessed July 12, 2018).

approved house style, was and is to act as if it doesn't want to know about large sections of that range of human possibilities. So when Kacey Musgraves asked in a moment of writing-room frustration why she couldn't just go ahead and talk about kissing girls in "Follow Your Arrow," it was McAnally who pushed her off the fence and urged her to go ahead: one more incremental bit of genetic information rewritten.

This is how commercial country music changes. You rewrite enough bits of genetic information, and, though each individual change may be vanishingly tiny, after a while the sausage-link formula songs on the radio are about asking your object of affection to slide on over in your hybrid pickup so you can go down a dirt road to the sustainably fished unfracked watering hole, where bathers of all sexual preferences and identities are welcome.

Think of "I come in here so I don't have to hate her" as one of those mutation-enabling codons that now says something very slightly different. The "here" in the line is literally the bar, but in a barroom weeper the "here" is also always the barroom weeper itself as a form. One standard reason to spend time in "here" is to indulge in hating whoever is responsible for your unquenchable thirst, to fantasize about getting even, or just to make sure everybody knows who is to blame. It's by no means the only function of a barroom weeper, and it's not even the most important (declaring oneself a fool probably is), but woman-hating has been one function among others. "I come in here so I don't have to hate her" denatures that particular function and demotes it from even the possibility of obligatory status (a status implied by "*have to* hate her") by admitting that the whole point of inhabiting a barroom weeper is to transmute potential rage into stylish self-pity. This isn't in any way a bold revision of the genre—more like shading it in a direction in which it has always wanted to go anyway. The very next line is "Same old folks, same old songs/Same old same old blue neon," as if to say, "Here we are, back in the barroom weeper, and now we know exactly why we're here: so we can be sorrowful and get drunk in an attractive and winkingly authentic way with malice toward none."

In 2018 Midland was out on the Breakers tour with Little Big Town and Kacey Musgraves. This tour can be seen as an alliance of artists who have more or less explicitly signed up to be McAnally's on-stage allies in the project of quietly rewriting mainstream country's gender DNA. Little Big Town's hit song "Girl Crush," written by Lori McKenna with Hillary Lindsey and Liz Rose, wouldn't have qualified as noteworthy in the pop world (where even interspecies sexual tension—say, "Three-way Rhino Crush"—might not rate a second look) but on country radio it was regarded as risqué. Musgraves's "Follow Your Arrow," which stretched the boundaries of what could be said on country radio with its explicit mention of both same-sex kissing and rolling up a joint, is emblematic of her layered ironic/serious-as-your-life take on being a traditional Nashville diva, which makes a resonant pair with Midland's similarly layered take on being honky tonk heroes.

Musgraves is an instructive case that way. She aimed high from the beginning, setting out to be a big Nashville star who hit all the industry marks and also expanded the range of what mainstream country music could say and who listens to it. Teaming up with Katy Perry, covering "No Scrubs" in concert, and calling out "Where my gays at?" from the

stage are all markers of that expansive impulse, and so is constructing a usable Nashville past around historic convention-stretchers such as Dolly Parton, John Prine, and Willie Nelson. So when she revisits a foundational barroom weeper, as she does in her recent cover with Nelson of Ray Price's "Are You Sure?" (which Nelson co-wrote with the pedal steel god Buddy Emmons), she is up to something complicated. She is planting one foot in tradition to balance her pop forays and ideological boundary-stretching, but doing so by going so deep into the commercial and aesthetic history of the genre that it ends up being an outflanking maneuver. Her choice and execution of this cover serves to remind the situp kings who dominate the commercial end of the genre that she cut her teeth on the East Texas opry circuit, where knowing how to handle a barroom weeper like this was basic equipment for living. She may be too country, as well as too cosmopolitan, for them to keep up with.

Other than slowing down the song and adding an overlay of cannabis haze in keeping with the brand personas of two of country music's most prominent evangelizing stoners, there's not a great deal of trying to make it new in this faithful and respectful cover. And there's a whole lot of trying to get it right, beginning with bringing in Paul Franklin to play pedal steel. Franklin is widely regarded, along with Tommy White, as Nashville's greatest living virtuoso of the instrument, though he is replaced in the video by a stand-in who is a lot younger and cuter than Franklin and, though he may be a fine musician in his own right, also pretty obviously not playing what you hear. The magisterial tempo, the foregrounding of Franklin's flowingly lush steel guitar, and the august presence of Willie Nelson's voice and acoustic guitar all contribute to a shift in tone and feel: what was a suave and relatively brisk exercise in roué crooning for Ray Price has become a gorgeously nostalgic wallow in genre style for Musgraves. She's sure that immersed in the world of the barroom weeper is exactly where she wants to be. The video deepens this impression. Watching the young, elegant, talented, ambitious, eminently self-possessed, thoroughly up-to-date Musgraves go through her paces in a telegenic dive, you can see that there's next to no chance that she'd end up among the barflies or find herself entangled with the kind of loved one who would. She's in this dive with these sad losers not because her heart is broken but because, like Midland, she's staging a triumphantly stylish excursion to the heartland of the barroom weeper.

Musgraves's treatment of "Are You Sure?" recasts the mainstream commercial country music of another era as part of a hardcore aesthetic foundation that's understood to be too often obscured in the mainstream commercial music of this era. So old and so right that it's new again, "Are You Sure?" has been promoted to a kind of honorary folk-like timeless status that glosses over the fact that once upon a time it was the country music industry's most sophisticated cutting-edge product, a challenge to rustic versions of authenticity that had prevailed before then. This revival presents the barroom weeper as usable past, as standard of excellence, as multigenerational memo on best practices. Put it together with "Drinkin' Problem," and you've got a pretty good map of the line between getting it right and making it new, between citation and mutation, between saying it again for old times' sake and saying something new for next time's sake. ■

