

English Pathways

Language Study: SACE No 649826E

The Language of Rap and Country Music

Introduction

Country and western and hip-hop are two genres generally considered to be at opposite ends of the popular music spectrum because of their deep stylistic and cultural differences. These two genres however have grown and evolved to be widely loved throughout the world and have created recognisable subcultures among fans. To explore the themes behind the lyrics in these two genres, this language study compares the two artists rated top in their genre each with their top two singles of this year. Themes including visions of "the good life", gender stereotypes, inter textual references and taboo topics will be analysed from the songs of hip hop's *Pusha T*, and country western's *Luke Bryan*.

Visions of "The good life"

In the beginning of *Numbers On The Boards* There is a sample from Bunny Sigler's *Shake Your Booty* at the beginning of the song which says "how you feeling? Good, feel alright?" a very upbeat beginning to the song before the beats begin. This is a beginning reflection upon the upbeat mood of the song, as the general theme is success.

Both genres of music portray a certain ideal of "the good life" or a life worth living. A key ideal in the rap music is that a good life is one in which the rapper is successful in their career:

"Now I'm on this money, lounging like it's a beach chair

Poppa don't preach, all we do is reach here

Raised round killers, we just happy to be here"

Whereas in country and western, having an attractive female partner and big pickup truck or possibly relaxing in the countryside:

"Out where the corn rows grow, row, row my boat

Floatin' down the Flint River, catch us up a little catfish dinner"

A recurring theme across the two genres is alcohol¹ in relation to their perceptions of 'the good life' or having a good time. The rap music often refers to the consumption of finer liquor as a part of 'the good life'. The country and western however, refers to beer, whiskey and other cheaper alcohols, since being wealthy is generally less important in the country and western genre the assumption is that they would not enjoy the finer liquors¹. In the hip hop genre the consumption of finer liquors is associated with the 'good life' not because of intoxication rather than being wealthy enough to afford it, as this ties in with being wealthy. For example in Pusha T's *Sweet Serenade* the first verse of the chorus is "come on let's pop the champagne, this one's for the life", whereas in Luke Bryan's *That's My Kind Of Night* he says "Your little hot self over here, Girl hand me another beer, yeah!" implying the man has had several others with his female partner.

As well as references to alcohol both genres have different views on the 'perfect day' or what the singer/rapper would do on their ideal day. In *Pusha T's* music there are some references to taboo topics such as illicit drugs and intercourse, but the main recurring 'good day' theme is being successful in their career and striving for a better life through difficulty. Pusha T often refers to hardship throughout his life in to his success, as he has overcome these struggles to be the pinnacle of rap success that he is. For example in Pusha T's *Numbers On The Boards* he speaks in second person to an unknown other rapper or person comparing his life to theirs;

*"How could you relate when you ain't never been great?,
And rely on rap money to keep food up on your plates"*

Gender Stereotypes

Relationships between men and women feature prominently in most, if not all, musical genres and there are unique constructions of masculinity and femininity in each². All four songs analysed portray certain aspects of sexism, with the western music being more prominent as the ideal of a being with pretty girl is associated with the 'good life'. For example in Luke Bryan's *That's My Kind Of Night* he addresses the anonymous girl he is singing to as "your little hot self over there" in second person, as well as describing her as the "pretty girl by my side". Using the adjectives "little", "hot" and "pretty" implies a very limited view of the woman and perhaps women in general. The sexist comments are often cloaked with acts of chivalry such as in the line:

"Gonna sound like a winner,

¹ "References to tequila, cognac, vodka and champagne brands were more prevalent in urban music (R&B, hip-hop and rap), while references to whiskey and beer brands were more common in country or pop music."

J. Shepher, D. Horn, & D. Lacing (Eds.), *Continuum encyclopaedia of popular music of the world: Vol. 3 Social Phenomena, Alcohol* (pp. 149 -150). London: Continuum.

² See Marion Leonard *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* edited by Kristine M. McCusker, Diane Pecknold *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power*

when I lay you down and love you right"

This implies a certain chivalry or care for the woman, but really speaks of getting intoxicated and having intercourse with the anonymous girl he has met earlier in the song.

In the rap genre the sexist comments are not dressed up as chivalry but are explicit and straightforward. Pusha T makes the generalised comment that all women want from him is to use him for money:

*"That's a tactic that they use,
f**k 'em high then suck 'em dry."*

The main term he refers to women as is 'hoes' implying a relationship of ownership than as a partner or friend, for example in this line:

"While my hoes doing they magic, voodoo moulin rouge"

There are tensions and inconsistencies in this view of women. For example in *Numbers On The Boards* an ambiguous line is "Can't a bitch live and say I bought her Michael Kors?"

He is referring to a girl as a "bitch", but then claims that he treats her well by buying her a renowned expensive brand like Michael Kors.

Inter textual References

Modern music is full of references to other texts and cultural icons. In many instances it "rejects notions of originality . . . and cultivates a willfully derivative and intertextual approach."³ In Luke Bryan's songs the main references are to famous singers such as himself. In *That's My Kind Of Night* he refers to *Conway Twitty* as part of a mixtape he wants to play, but only states the name *Conway* as the audience he appeals to would be aware that *Conway* means the famous country music star. Another reference he makes is to a famous rap star, *T-Pain* which any music fan would be aware of. Luke Bryan does this to establish himself as a 'real' country singer, possibly that he knows *Conway Twitty* on a first name basis.

Pusha T's songs jump between a wild variety of topics and intertextual references. In *Sweet Serenade* he references a variety of texts from *Moulin Rouge*, a famous movie, to the "Ouija board", a pseudoscientific board known to contact the dead. The recurring pattern is that though the references may range in topic, they are all well-known references that the audience should be able to understand. The Inter textual references are mainly used to segue to the next verse whilst still in the same topic, for example in *Numbers On The Boards* Pusha T says in second person "your SL's missing an S" in reference to an Audi car, then "your plane's missing a chef" implying that Pusha T is more successful than this person, then he goes on to explain his metaphor:

³ Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

*"the common theme,,see,
they've both got wings"*

This observation acts as a poetic cohesive device tying both verses together. He then turns the metaphor into a death wish on his opponent: "if you fly, do it to death". This meaning that he is determined to maintain this style of life to his deathbed, a sentence of resolve for a rapper.

Taboo Topics

Both artists refer frequently to taboo topics such as alcoholism, sex, explicit language and illicit drugs. Luke Bryan tends to cover more alcoholism and sex as part of his representation of the "good life". One of his songs is called *Your Mama Should've Named You Whiskey* which associates the addictive nature of alcohol to this woman. In this song he constantly glorifies alcohol abuse as well as claims this girl is as addictive as alcohol to him for example in this line:

*"90 proof is an understatement
I get around you and I'm way past wasted"*

One line which could possibly be about his alcoholism but if in reference to this girl has possible sexual connotations, this line states "Just a little taste won't hurt at all, But once I get a sip, I know I'm gonna wanna drink it gone, all gone". Either way this line is interpreted it is explicit material under the cloak of western culture that it is okay to abuse alcohol.

remarks are glorified and linked to his success claiming his wealth can afford these materials and women. For example in *Sweet Serenade* he says

"The boat comes, the dope drums, my team wins, Yuugh!"

This the life that we made, Gun shots in the dark like a sweet serenade"

This associates his success or his team's to a large amount of illicit drugs as well as making the unconventional comparison that gunshots to him sound like music. This is a show of the desensitisation of taboo topics over the course of hip-hop⁴, this line was not said to create shock value rather than promote his status to a king-like state, any that oppose are killed.

Pride

Both artists portray a sense of pride in their songs, this being more prominent in hip-hop than country and western as hip-hop artists tend to flaunt their success in each song. In country and western the sense of pride is in possessions and enjoying life with these possessions. In Luke Bryan's song the possession he maintains a sense of pride in is his pickup truck with references to the rims which are 35 inch "Rollin' on 35s", as well as a diamond plated tailgate "Might sit down on my diamond plate ". As part of Country Western culture it is more respected if a person has a modified truck with the bigger the

⁴ www.crisismagazine.com/2012/materialism-is-killing-country-music Viewed 14/10/2013

better rims as possible and therefore Luke Bryan adds references to his pickup-truck where possible as for him he takes pride in it. This is common in country music generally, leading some to suggest that "materialism is killing country music".⁵

In Pusha T's songs the sense of pride is in his success as well as his possessions which are frequently mentioned. In both of his songs he makes references to material possessions as well as possessions of large quantities of illicit drugs as he takes pride in this. As for example in *Sweet Serenade* he says "The Sergio Tacchini life we uphold" which is an intertextual reference to Sergio Tacchini a famous tennis player who became a world renowned fashion designer. Using this brand as an adjective to describe his life implies that he lives a life of expensive material possessions because of his money and success. As well as this there are references to illicit drugs in his possession. It is referenced in both songs under different names such as "dope drums", "blow", "mound", "bricks", and "dirt". These are slang or code references to the illicit drugs of cocaine and marijuana which are packaged in bricks and possibly drums referring to illegal transportation of marijuana. Even his rapper name could be possibly referencing to this movement of illicit drugs, as his real name is Terrence Thornton the name "Pusha T" creates an image of an illicit drug dealer. The point of these references is to mark his success in reference to the expensive drug cocaine Pusha T says "I might sell a brick on my birthday" which is a large amount of money but to him it is a casual activity.

Conclusion

Although both artists show similarities in their worldview and outlook on life, there are also key differences in values. Luke Bryan focuses his songs on the 'pretty girl' that he is speaking to as well as the perfect day and alcoholism in his songs (with occasional sexist remarks). Pusha T however takes pride in his success and tends to base lyrics on different topics with the same general theme of success in each song. He speaks in second person to an anonymous person about his own success and that this person may never achieve this heightened level of fame as he has through hard work. This shows the difference of environments that country and western singers and rappers are in. Country and western singers do not describe their success as beautiful women and cars therefore are not singing in a competitive environment with others and this is reflective upon the lyrics. Whereas rappers are in a competitive environment with other rappers as to who has succeeded through their own personal issues, or who has succeeded more with more money and is reflective upon the lyrics produced.

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Appendix: Lyrics

Rhyming Scheme= AABB in verse, AABCCD in verse, AAB on bridge

Use of Accent to Rhyme- ____

(A)- American Slang

(S)American "western" Stereotype

(M)- Verse with no proper meaning

(I)- Inter textual reference

"That's My Kind Of Night"- Luke Bryan 2013

I got that real good feel good stuff (M) **A**
Up under the seat of my big black jacked up truck (S) **A**
Rollin' on 35s (A) **B**
Pretty girl by my side **B**

You got that sun tan skirt and boots **A**
Waiting on you to look my way and scoot (A) **A**
Your little hot self over here **B**
Girl hand me another beer, yeah! (S) **B**

All them other boys wanna wind you up and take you downtown **A**
But you look like the kind that likes to take it way out **A**
Out where the corn rows grow, row, row my boat (S) **B** (M)
Floatin' down the Flint River, catch us up a little catfish dinner (a) **C**
Gonna sound like a winner, when I lay you down and love you right **C**
Yeah, that's my kind of night! **D**

Might sit down on my diamond plate tailgate (S)(A) **A**
Put in my country ride hip-hop mixtape (S) **A**
Little Conway*, a little T-Pain, might just make it rain (S) (I) **B**

You can hang your t-shirt on a limb (S) **A**
Hit that bank and we can ease on in **A**
Soak us up a little moonlight (S) **B**
You know I know what you like, yeah! **B** (M)

My kind or your kind is this kind of night (M) **A**
We dance in the dark and your lips land on mine **A**
Oh oh oh oh oh, gonna get our love on **B**
Oh oh oh oh oh, time to get our buzz on **B**

Slang-

Rollin on 35's- riding on truck which has 35 inch wheels
Scoot- to slide or move across, possibly a dance floor or bar
Flint River-A river in Georgia, USA
T-Shirt on a limb- to hang the t-shirt loosely, In Australia is called a "Sloppy Jo"

Rhyming schema- ABBC, ABBA, ABACC,AAA,AA

Use of Accent to Rhyme- _____

(A)- American Slang

(S)American "western" Stereotype

(M)- Verse with no proper meaning

(I)- Inter textual reference

"Your Mama Should've Named You Whiskey" – Luke Bryan 2013

Just a little taste won't hurt at all **A**
But once I get a sip, I know I'm gonna wanna drink it gone, all gone (S) **A**
90 proof is an understatement **B**
I get around you and I'm way past wasted **B**
I can't think at all **C**

Your mama should've named you whiskey **A** (S) (A)
I never should've let you kiss me **B**
And every time you leave it hits me **B**
Your mama should've named you whiskey **A** (S) (A)

Girl, you got a smile like a devil on my shoulder (I) (S) **A**
Tempting me sayin', honey come over right now, right now **B** (A)
I know I shouldn't wanna, but I think I'm probably gonna **A**
Even though I know I'm gonna be wakin' up hurtin' in the morning **C**
Shoulda come with a warning **C**

I'm addicted girl, I'm hangin; on **A**
I'm a fool in love, I'm long past gone (M) **A**
Yeah, so, come on (M)**A**

I'm addicted girl, such a fool **A**
I'm addicted girl
Such a fool **A**

Slang-

90 proof= A bottle of rum that's labeled 90 proof is 46% ABV.