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Queer Songtellers: LGBTQIA+ Stories Told Through
Covers of Dolly Parton's Music

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Music

University of Washington

Abstract

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Dolly Parton is one of America's most cherished singer-songwriters who has stated multiple times that she would be a drag queen if she had been born a man. Even while making these statements, she has managed to hold a fanbase that ranges from conservative country-music lovers to drag queens who impersonate her. Many may assume that these themes of lived hardships she sings about only pertain to straight, cis-gendered people, however, the narratives in Parton's songs also describe lived LGBTQIA+ experiences. By examining musical covers performed by artists like Lil Nas X, Orville Peck, and Trixie Mattel, specifically queer narratives of despair, hope, and joy are brought to the surface in the layers of Parton's music. Additionally, the medium of musical covers is especially suited for elucidating these narratives. While the queerness of her music has gone unnoticed by those who are situated outside queer communities, a great deal of people have heard these narratives across her long career. This queer aspect of Parton's music and its covers are only now being discussed in a formal setting and to deny this attribute ultimately deprives us of the rich and complex depth of Parton's oeuvre. Ignoring the queerness of Parton's music threatens to erase queer peoples' existence in country-folk music and from society at large.

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Musical artist Lil Nas X turns his gaze directly into the camera. A lone electric guitar arpeggiates a mournful minor triad breaking the silence. As if from the void, his warm sultry voice appeals into his rhinestone encrusted microphone. “Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene. I’m begging of you please don’t take my man.” Lil Nas X’s plea is solemn. It is steeped in despair. It is queer.¹ As he continues through his cover of “Jolene” a story unfolds of a man in love with another man who may be stolen by Jolene. Lil Nas X’s cover of the song, originally written and performed by Dolly Parton, retains the original lyrics and melody while highlighting a queer narrative that had been previously concealed.

In addition to Lil Nas X, other artists, like Trixie Mattel and Orville Peck, have created covers of Parton’s music which highlight the complex tapestry of queer narratives and experiences. Analyzing these covers brings to light a better understanding of the shared stories of despair, hope, and joy across queer communities which are found in Parton’s music. Traditionally, country music has been assumed to be far removed from queer people and their lived experience, instead featuring only the tales of cis-gendered and heterosexual subjects. Yet, these queer narratives have always existed in Parton’s music and denying their presence disregards a major component of her music while also threatening to obscure or even erase queer culture and queer people’s stories. During her long career, Parton has broadcasted veiled and direct messages to her queer fans like in 1987 when she exclaimed that she would be a drag queen if she had been born a man on her talk show.² Parton has grown increasingly vocal about

¹ Lil Nas X’s cover of “Jolene” video was published on BBC Radio 1’s YouTube in September of 2021. Currently, the recording boasts 5.5 million views on BBC Radio 1’s YouTube channel and this number does not consider the views on reposted video and audio versions of the cover. BBCRadio1Vevo, “Lil Nas X - Jolene (Dolly Parton Cover) in the Live Lounge,” posted September 21, 2021, YouTube video, 2:28, <https://youtu.be/RWjnC8HSRdU> Accessed September 10, 2022.

² Classic Shows, “Dolly Parton Variety Show 1987 1st Episode,” January 23, 2020, YouTube video, 47:33, <https://youtu.be/gWChySnR76M>. Accessed September 25, 2022.

her support of queer communities and looking to artists like Lil Nas X and their covers only elucidates and amplifies the inherent queerness of Parton's music.

This thesis endeavors to shed light and bring to the surface these queer narratives that have previously been unnoticed and unheard by those outside queer culture. The title, "Queer Songtellers: LGBTQIA+ Stories Told Through Covers of Dolly Parton's Music" combines the many queer communities with the word "songteller" which Parton created for her 2020 book, *Dolly Parton: Songteller: My Life in Lyrics*.³ Dolly Parton describes how she came up with the term writing, "I decided to call my book Songteller because that pretty much sums me up. I love songs, I love to tell stories, and most of all, I just love to write. It's just who I am. I am a 'song teller.'"⁴ Parton tells stories through songs and in turn, queer communities are able to hear their lived narratives told as well. In a similar vein, those who set out to make their own covers of Parton's music become songtellers in their own right. The words and music may have been penned by Parton, but its complex layers give us permission to interpret the messages in a personally expressive way.

It is critical for me in writing this thesis to discuss the use of the word queer in both the title and while discussing LGBTQIA+ communities. As someone who considers themselves a member of one of these communities, it is important that I address the history of the word and why I have chosen to use it rather than the acronym, LGBTQIA+. The word queer has a long history of use in regards to LGBTQIA+ communities and prior to the AIDS pandemic it was most often used as a derogatory term. However, in the past forty years since the pandemic people have worked to reclaim the word queer. In the past twenty years the number of sexualities and

³ Dolly Parton, *Dolly Parton: Songteller: My Life in Lyrics*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2020),

⁴ Parton, *Dolly Parton: Songteller*, 8.

gender identities outside of the cis-gendered binary have been recognized in the growing acronym. As the number of different gender and sexual identities grow in names, the word queer has taken on a new role as an umbrella term for all those who wish to identify with and be a part of a community.⁵ The fluidity of the word is also a reason I prefer to use it as it includes those who do not feel like there is an appropriate term for their individual sexual or gender identity. The word queer best represents the idea that gender and sexuality exist on a spectrum and as a person moves through life, they can feel free to grow and change freely and discover who they are. While I personally use the term queer as an umbrella term for the wide spectrum of queer communities represented by the acronym LGBTQIA+, I recognize that there may be many who do not approve of the word and still view it as a derogatory term. However, along with the potential for greater acceptance queer has gained respect and even has a discipline named after it, queer studies. Finally, queer encapsulates not only the quality of a person, but a particular sort of existence that is both unique to the individual and shared at the same time.

DOLLY PARTON'S QUEER FANDOM

At the same time Lil Nas X and other queer-supporting artists like Kacey Musgraves were making waves in country music, Dolly Parton was producing the Netflix series titled *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings* which began streaming in 2019.⁶ While Lil Nas X and Musgraves were taking clear stances on their support of queer communities, Parton was also making a statement

⁵ James Dawson, *This Book is Gay*, (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2015), 24-25.

⁶ Kacey Musgraves began her career in country music and voiced her support for queer communities fighting the stigma around queer people in country. Her advocacy began in 2014 when in her debut album *Same Trailer Different Park* released containing the song "Follow Your Arrow" which offers lyrics that support the idea of kissing whoever you want to. Additionally, she has appeared on *Rupaul's Drag Race* and was the first country musician to receive a GLADD award. Her advocacy accelerated in 2018 with the rising popularity of Lil Nas X and she continues to be an ally for queer communities today. To read more about Musgraves allyship please see: Allison Bloom, "A Closer Look at Kacey Musgraves' LGBTQ Allyship Over the Years," *GLADD*, April 1, 2022. "Two Doors Down," *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings*, season 1, episode 2, Netflix, November 22, 2019. Accessed September 27, 2022.

with *Heartstrings*. The series features Dolly Parton who introduces each of the eight episodes from her theatre in Dollywood, her theme park located in Pigeon Forge Tennessee. Each hour-long episode serves as a musical anthology representing one of Parton's songs which also acts as the title for each episode. The song provides the foundation for the story and is often connected to the themes touched on in the episode. The episode that sticks out most from the entire anthology is based on the song "Two Doors Down," for its direct presentation of queer characters and narratives. More specifically, "Two Doors Down" tells the story of a closeted gay man named Tyler who is returning home to his conservative family for his sister's wedding. While shenanigans ensue, Tyler is outed to his family and the remainder of the episode then grapples with specifically queer struggles such as acceptance, rejection, and self-discovery.⁷ As is par for the course for much of Parton's content, the episode manages to tell a compelling story that is humorous and campy while never making-light of or glossing over the more serious aspects of the queer narrative being told. In addition to Tyler's coming out story the episode also addresses gender identity by including references to non-binary characters which expands the binarism often found in queer media.⁸ The episode concludes showing Tyler's parents taking positive steps towards accepting their son. Parton then appears in the episode as the wedding singer performing "Two Doors Down," directly placing herself in the narrative and strengthening her progressive stance of queer acceptance.

The closing of the episode "Two Doors Down" visually represents Parton's message of support for queer communities, however, in the opening of the episode, Parton voices her

⁷ The term "outed" refers to having one's sexuality or gender identity revealed without consent. Being outed is often a source of trauma for queer people.

⁸ Often queer people are portrayed as gay or straight, man or women in media. This has led to the erasure of other sexualities, such as bisexuality, in addition to completely ignoring gender identity. However, there have been efforts made to escape the binarism and produce more inclusive and accurate queer media content.

feelings directly by describing her time touring on the road and the people who she had worked with over the years explaining:

But it wasn't always fun. And being gone all that time from my home and family, well, that was tough. Well, what I found out on the road was a whole new family with bands and crews that were made up of all kinds of people who were different colors, gay, lesbian, transgender, and all different faiths. But it didn't matter as long as we all loved each other and got along. And we did, and we still do. Because what it all comes down to is love is love... Now, life might not always be a party, but you are better off if you can just enjoy yourself, have fun, and accept and love the people around you.⁹

In addition to the heartfelt message, the episode itself hits close to home for many in queer communities as it outlines one of the many familiar narratives of despair that evolves into hope and even joy. Parton found a way to retell commonly shared narratives of queer people which contain themes of coming out, rejection, homophobia, love, reconciliation, and hope. Yet, the ties between Parton's music and queer communities run much deeper than this single episode. Just as Parton has captured one of the many queer narratives in *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings*, queer people have likewise heard their own narratives in many of her songs. For many queer fans of Parton, her personal anecdote about accepting a wide spectrum of queer people into her personal circle confirms that she is aware, and supportive of them. Although Parton has never made a negative remark about queer people, this explicit statement differs in its directness. She is not dodging the question, giving a neutral answer, or turning to humor. Parton is looking into the camera and saying that she loves people in these communities and that your life can be improved by choosing to love and accept those around you regardless of your differences.¹⁰

⁹ "Two Doors Down," episode 2, in *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings*, Netflix, November 22, 2019.

¹⁰ "Two Doors Down," episode 2, in *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings*, Netflix, November 22, 2019.

It is no secret that Parton has a great deal of devout fans who belong to queer communities. Historically, she has always managed to be supportive of her queer fans without directly taking a stance in words on the gay rights movement or the fight for marriage equality until approximately 2018.¹¹ This is also how she has handled questions about her political opinions and positions in regards to feminism and feminist movements. As author Sarah Smarsh points out, Parton was surrounded by activism and movements while she toured America, and yet she never used her popularity to engage in explicit support any such group or movement.¹² Her activism has been in no way overt. Rather, it can be observed through her actions and her music. For example, while she never took a strong stance on feminism, she did choose to star in *9 to 5* in 1980 as her first movie role which highlights the issues faced by women in the workforce. Additionally, she co-starred with Jane Fonda who is a well know feminist and Lily Tomlin who was not forthcoming about her sexuality at the time, but widely rumored to be a lesbian. Not publicly taking a divisive stance has been a brilliant economic strategy for Parton and it has, in part, contributed to her success in attracting and keeping fans on opposing sides of the political spectrum. This is precisely why her story about the queer people in her life, using the phrase “love is love,” and her call for acceptance in *Heartstrings* is so striking. The Slogan “Love is Love” is associated with the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015. The phrase also operates as a signal that one supports equal rights for queer people. Parton mentioning it in *Heartstrings* undoubtedly acknowledges the reference. This message is direct and advocates for the acceptance of the queer community. The content of the episode only confirms this stance.

¹¹In interviews prior to the late 2010s, queer fans are only mentioned as Parton’s gay fans. This is reflective of a time where “gay” was the umbrella term for anyone who was not cis-gendered and heterosexual.

¹²Sarah Smarsh, *She Come by It Natural: Dolly Parton and the Women Who Lived Her Songs*, (New York: Scribner, 2020), 73-75.

PARTON AND QUEER MESSAGING: A HISTORY

Dolly Parton's relationship with her queer fans has existed for a large portion of her career and, much like the queer narratives in her music, her support for LGBTQIA+ communities has also been subtextual. One of Parton's most memorable quotes to this day that highlights a hidden message acknowledging queer people comes from a question she was asked on the *Dolly Parton Variety Show* in 1987.¹³ Towards the end of the program, Parton would take questions from the audience and in one particular episode she was asked if she ever wished that she had been born a guy. She responded, "Do I ever wish I had been born a guy? Lord no. I've always been a sissy and if I'd been born a man, I'd a been a drag queen."¹⁴ The crowd erupts in laughter at the thought that even if she were a man, her desire for the wigs, makeup, jewelry, and flashy outfits would still compel her to dress as she does. In essence, Dolly Parton will always be Dolly Parton, a very queer concept. This marks her as a master of turning a topic like drag queens into something light-hearted and palatable for a diverse audience. The timing of this quote also emphasizes her practice of saying a lot without actually saying that much compared to her direct messaging in 2019 with *Heartstrings*. Considering that drag queens and drag culture has only gained popularity in the past ten or fifteen years, the significance of their mentioning on television in the 1980s is not to be overlooked. For much of the twentieth-century, drag performers have had to fight for acceptance even from within queer communities who viewed drag queens unfavorably.¹⁵ Even though Parton is able to turn the topic of drag queens into rolling laughter, it is important to note that she positions herself as the subject of the joke. This

¹³ Classic Shows, "Dolly Parton Variety Show 1987 1st Episode," 2020.

¹⁴ Classic Shows, "Dolly Parton Variety Show 1987 1st Episode," 2020.

¹⁵The discrimination of drag performers in the queer community was often perpetrated by gay men who saw heightened femininity as sexually undesirable. This view that only masculine men are desirable, often referred to as "Masc for masc," is an issue that has persisted into the present.

kind of tongue-in-cheek delivery is one way in which queer communities have received her message of support, even in a time where the topic of drag was taboo for public discourse.

Parton's declaration that she would be a drag queen if she had been born a man was heard live by a young gay boy by the name of Cory Albertson. Albertson, now as sociologist and author, vividly recalls watching this episode of the *Dolly Parton Variety* show as a child in 1987.¹⁶ Parton's answer about being a drag queen was so impactful to Albertson that he still thinks about her response to this day. In March of 2021, Albertson published an essay titled "The Radical Queerness of Dolly Parton" in *The Bitter Southerner* where he reflected on this memory, writing:

Dolly acknowledged the struggle of mixing femininity with manhood, knowing it was easier for her to be a sissy as a woman. But she also reclaimed "sissy" — her femininity — as something she was comfortable with and, actually, liked. And with the commandment that she would be a drag queen, Dolly knew she would be queer in an alternate, gender-reversed universe.¹⁷

While those outside the purview of queer communities may have only heard a joke from the quick-witted Parton, queer people like Albertson heard another message. Similar to how the term queer has been reclaimed Albertson interprets Parton's use the word "sissy" as marker of pride in her own femineity. Also like the word queer, the word sissy has historically been used as a derogatory word for a feminine man who is assumed to be gay.¹⁸ Albertson's queer reading of Parton's response highlights his intuition that Parton identifies with drag performers and would

¹⁶ Albertson has focused on queer and feminist topics often involving media in his professional career publishing the Book *A Perfect Union?: Television and the Winning of Same-Sex Marriage* in 2018. To read more about the rise of queer representation in television media in the build up to the legalization of same-sex marriage see: Cory Albertson, *A Perfect Union?: Television and the Winning of Same-Sex Marriage*, (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁷ Cory Albertson, "The Radical Queerness of Dolly Parton," *The Bitter Southerner*, March 4, 2021.

¹⁸ Similar to the rejection of drag performers, feminine-presenting gay men have endured rejection and harassment from within and outside of queer communities.

be one of them in another world. Beneath the surface there is some kind of inherent queerness about Parton that other queer people recognize. Not only is this queerness found in the Dolly Parton the person, but it is also intimately laced together with her music and the covers people make of it. Just as Cory Albertson was able to tune into the queer message contained within Parton's response, other queer people have likewise heard the queer messages and narratives in her songs.

Stories of queer people who found that Parton's music in conjunction with her persona resonated with them on one or multiple levels are plentiful. This holds true even for those who made a special effort to disassociate from country music as a genre. One such case is observed in the story of a young Brian Kennedy, author and queer activist, who grew up in the 1990s. In March of 2022, Kennedy wrote a personal article for the *Gay and Lesbian Review* titled, "How Dolly Parton Guided Me Out," where he discusses the difficulties he faced while growing up gay in a rural setting and how through understanding his deep appreciation of Parton he learned to appreciate himself. In his article, Kennedy explains how Parton had always been in his perimeter growing up in the mid-west and vividly recalls hearing Parton and Kenny Rogers' Christmas album playing in his childhood home. As a teenager he purposely rejected country music on the basis that the genre was too "male-oriented."¹⁹ Kennedy was not alone in the "anything except country" crowd as musicologist Nadine Hubbs points out in her book, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*.²⁰ By shutting out the entire genre, Kennedy was looking to avoid songs with subject matter that included drinking and chasing women. Consequently, he

¹⁹ Brian Kennedy, "How Dolly Parton Guided Me Out," *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, March 31, 2022.

²⁰ Author and musicologist, Nadine Hubbs, delves into a phenomenon where middle-class people distance themselves from the genre of country music as to not be associated with blue collar workers or the "Rednecks" in the southern United States." While Kennedy did not avoid country music for purely class reasons the overall desire to not be associated with the themes of a large portion of country music are inherently the same. To read more see: Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

also barred himself from enjoying the music he could relate to like “Jolene” or “9 to 5.” In the end, the alluring messages from Parton would be key for Kennedy’s return as a fan of country music and to Parton.

Kennedy, like Albertson, also recalls Parton professing that she would be a drag queen if she had been born male and credits her confidence in her camp esthetic as a major reason for his appreciation of her and her music. Beyond Parton’s camp, Kennedy identified with Dolly Parton’s struggles as a woman in the male-dominated industry of country and folk music. However, perhaps the most potent attributes that Parton possesses are her confidence in her identity and the high quality of her music. A large part of queer culture is centered around growing acceptance and love for the self. For Kennedy, part of his journey of accepting his own queer identity involved realizing that he could enjoy country music and Parton’s songs with pride and without apology. He has even taken his love for Parton into his career as an author writing a contemporary romance novel published in June of 2022, titled *A Little Bit Country*, which features a queer romance set in a theme park that is based on Parton’s theme park Dollywood.²¹ For Kennedy, Parton and her music was instrumental for his return to his country roots where he found that there was room for a gay man like himself.

QUEERNESS IN COUNTRY

Dollywood, Parton’s theme park situated in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, has held significance to queer communities as a safe place of acceptance located in one of the most conservative and anti-queer regions in the country. The presence of Dollywood is especially meaningful for queer people who live in these regions. Along with musical shows and park rides, Dollywood offers

²¹ Brian Kennedy, *A Little Bit Country*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, June 7, 2022).

fans a look at Parton memorabilia which chronicles her life story from growing up poor in the smokey mountains through her rise to stardom. The theme park's popularity with Parton fans has drawn in crowds from all around the world. While Parton has been supportive of her LGBTQIA+ fans historically, reporter and author Kim Severson calls into question whether Dollywood is actually as welcoming a place as it is believed to be.

In Severson's article featured in the *New York Times*, "A Little Bit Country, A Little Bit Gay: Dollywood Bring Together Southern Camp and Gay Camp in Down-home Togetherness," Severson notes that Dolly Parton is generally supportive of her queer friends and fans.²² However, Severson also argues that the park's relationship with queer communities is more complicated. She describes one such example writing:

Still, [As of August, 2014] neither she [Dolly Parton] nor the park has fully embraced the gays who make their way there [Dollywood]. Her gay fans organized a 'gay day' at Dollywood in the mid-2000s, modeled after a popular annual event at Disney World in which gays and lesbians would show up at the park in red shirts. It lasted five years but was never endorsed by Ms. Parton. Lawyers for park officials sent a letter to organizers asking them to stop using the Dollywood name. After that and threats from the Ku Klux Klan, organizers disbanded.²³

This response or lack of response was pretty standard for Parton in the time prior to *Heartstrings*, 2018-2019. Parton has been vocally supportive of her queer fans in interviews but in this case, she did not intervene or call for queer peoples' acceptance even at her own theme park. Most comments on the subject of queer park guests at Dollywood are usually blanket statements that state that everyone is welcome. In addition to this event, Kim Severson writes about the

²² Kim Severson, "Little Bit Country, Little Bit Gay: Dollywood Brings Together Southern Camp and Gay Camp, in Down-Home Togetherness," *New York Times*, August 24, 2014.

²³ Kim Severson, "Little Bit Country," 8.

entertainers who identify as queer working at Dollywood. Due the park's appeal for queer people, park employees have been able to form a kind of safe space even in the more conservative south. Even though Parton did not directly call for acceptance of queer people until roughly 2018, their association with her as a queer ally and supporter has not waived despite her occasional silence. Likewise, Dollywood has continued to be a safe space in the minds and hearts of the majority of queer people.

Queer narratives imbedded in Parton's music may be apparent to those belonging to queer communities, but this is not the case for those on the outside and especially those who carry strong opinions on what popular country music should be. John Gerome, a writer based in Nashville, wrote a column in the *Globe and Mail* in 2006 titled, "Only Legends should Sing Gay Country: The Twang Fan Isn't Ready for Brokeback Ballads, DJs Say" where he addresses the country-music stars producing music involving queer topics.²⁴ The column reads like a response to Parton's writing of the song "Travlin' Thru" for the film *Transamerica* and Willie Nelson and Emmylou Harris' work on the music for *Brokeback Mountain*.²⁵ Gerome adds that in the opinion of Bill Hagy, operations manager for the station WXXB in Johnson City, TN, these legends of country music are able to involve themselves directly with queer content without the risk of backlash because their fans are loyal and they are no longer dependent on producing hits to further their career.²⁶ Essentially, the claim being made identifies artists like Parton, Harris, and Nelson as legends of country music but largely irrelevant in the current country music of 2006. While Gerome excludes these artists as relative country musicians, he also believes that more

²⁴ John Gerome, "Only Legends should Sing Gay Country: The Twang Fan Isn't Ready for Brokeback Ballads, DJs Say," *The Globe and Mail*, February 18, 2006.

²⁵ Both of these films involve queer relationships in an explicit way. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee (Focus Features, 2005). *Transamerica* (2005), directed by Duncan Tucker (The Weinstein Company, 2005).

²⁶ Gerome, "Only Legends should Sing Gay Country," R12.

country songs and stars producing queer works is unlikely and largely undesired. Gerome also includes a quote about the integration of queer themes and country music by Jamie Billman, a self-identifying country music fan visiting Nashville, who says, “It does kind of offend what country music stands for.”²⁷ What Gerome fails to see is that country music has always contained queer narratives and Parton, Nelson, and Harris’ songs were simply explicit rather than subtextual.

The column written by Gerome, and those interviewed for it, are without a doubt country fans, albeit fans who are wearing blinders when it comes to the inherent queerness contained within country music. They do not share the same narrative experiences. The issue arises because these country stars have made a statement by being involved in projects that have clear queer narratives. Their musical contributions immediately mark them as an ally of these communities whether or not that was their intention. Despite the pushback from those outside LGBTQIA+ communities, country music and especially Parton’s music has always contained queer narratives. Many people have heard Parton’s hidden messages about gender and owning one’s femineity in her tongue-in-cheek response on her television show, in her movies, and her songs. Gerome claims that there will not be any queer country love songs on the foreseeable future, and yet, one of Parton’s most famous songs, “Jolene,” has been suspected of having a queer reading and the song was released back in 1973. Ultimately, Gerome was wrong on both counts. Lil Nas X, Kacey Musgraves, and Parton all proved with their explosive success in the late 2010s that queer country-music and artists are desirable to fans of the genre.

²⁷ Gerome, “Only Legends should Sing Gay Country,” R12.

NOT QUITE A COVER

The turn table spins a single 45 rpm record with one song on it, “Jolene.” The arm of the machine lowers slowly with its needle falling to meet the vinyl. Crackles from the aged record begin to pop out of the speaker when a familiar guitar riff mournfully cries its first notes. From the trudging band comes a deep velvety voice that sings that iconic name once again, Jolene. Who is this sweet singer? It is Dolly Parton. In 2010, this video titled, “Jolene at 33 rpm” was published on YouTube and features a 45 rpm record of Parton’s “Jolene” played on a record player set for the speed of a 33 rpm record.²⁸ This results in a slowed-down recording of “Jolene” which, as a side effect, pitches Parton’s voice into a lower register. The entire recording has fallen into a slower, more relax tempo, approximately 80 bpm in contrast to the original’s 110 bpm. The video boasts over 11 million views, over 8,000 comments, and has inspired multiple “copycat” videos. Despite the slower tempo dropping Parton’s soprano voice into the territory of a traditional male register, it seems that the impact of “Jolene” is not lost on its listeners.

On the contrary, I argue that the gender-flipping interpretation prompted by the change in vocal register in this altered version of “Jolene” helps to elucidate queer readings that already existed in the original unaltered song. While this thesis will primarily look at covers of Parton’s music, queer readings can be observed even in this altered version of Parton’s own performance. The first hinting at a queer reading can be found in a comment by user Anders Ledell who writes, “Dolly’s art not only transcends generations and lifestyles but also entire octaves.”²⁹ As multiple generations begin to identify with Parton and her music, she possesses the uncanny

²⁸ Tom Berry, “Jolene at 33 rpm,” posted February 20, 2010, YouTube video, 3:38, <https://youtu.be/doz1QJ7LwjA>. Accessed May 20, 2022.

²⁹ Anders Ledell, “Dolly’s art not only transcends generations and lifestyles but also entire octaves,” YouTube video, posted 2021.

ability to resonate with all ages and across multiple communities. Additionally, the word ‘lifestyles’ carries a specifically queer connotation that has been used to refer to queer people at a time where being queer was defined as a lifestyle choice. Even a comment like this one by Ledell carries a hidden understanding of what the pitched down voice may imply.

Additional comments on the video strengthen the validity of a melancholic and decidedly queer interpretation present in the pitched down and slowed recording. User Peachykeen’s comment links the slower tempo with a change in the song’s mood. Their comment describes the connection, writing “Somehow at this speed the song sounds even more melancholy than the original does.”³⁰ These kinds of observations can be found throughout the comment section and they emphasize the idea that “Jolene,” a song that may be defined as somewhat melancholic in nature, is taken even farther into that territory by the tempo and pitch change. The shift into the realm of melancholy and despair also conjures the thoughts of queer narratives for some viewers. One comment comes from Arun who writes, “Feels like it should’ve been a song in *Brokeback Mountain*.”³¹ Arun, in this case is pairing the song with perhaps one of the most famous queer films of the 21st century which also happens to be steeped in despair. It is striking that all of these comments are reacting to a recording of “Jolene” that Parton herself recorded. The recording has only been slowed down on a turntable and yet, alternate readings have begun to appear to the listeners. Therefore, there must be something inherently queer about the song “Jolene.” But there is also something to be said about the resulting change in context that slowing down and pitching down has on the queerness of this version.

³⁰ Peachykeen, “Somehow at this speed the song sounds even more melancholy than the original does,” YouTube video, posted 2020.

³¹ Arun, “Feels like it should’ve been a song in *Brokeback Mountain*,” YouTube video, posted 2022.

It is a common occurrence that queer people encounter a situation that is obviously queer to them, however others will try to assign a heteronormative justification for that situation as a kind of cover up. One comment on the “Jolene at 33 rpm” video from Whitney Harris brings up this phenomenon writing, “Historians: this is a song about a man afraid of losing his good friend.”³² Here Harris recognizes that this slowed down version of “Jolene” can be heard as a gay love song between two men. At the same time, she is also calling out the long history of the erasure of queer people, their culture, and their stories. Harris is making a reference to a popular internet subreddit called “Sappho and Her Friend.”³³ The page description states, “A sub [subreddit page] dedicated to historical and other LGBTQ erasure from academia and other spaces.”³⁴ Mostly humorous but open to serious discussion as well.” While humor is definitely a part of calling out these queer situations in posts on the subreddit, the more serious side proves that many queer narratives have been suppressed across history. However, the shared experiences of queer people have the ability to bring narratives that would otherwise remain subtext to the surface. The level of connection that the internet provides is a useful tool for queer communities in their fight against erasure and dismantling the false stories of about us and our “good friends.”

³² Whitney Harris, “Historians: this is a song about a man afraid of losing his good friend,” YouTube video, posted 2020.

³³ The name of the subreddit is a reference to the queer Greek poet Sappho. The phrase “their good friend” is often used to explain how a queer situation is nothing more than good and strong friendship. The platonic friendship is acceptable and takes the place of a queer romantic relationship. To find the subreddit please see: “SapphoAndHerFriend,” Reddit, Accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/SapphoAndHerFriend/>.

³⁴ “SapphoAndHerFriend,” 2022.

LIL NAS X'S COVER OF "JOLENE"

Material	Dolly Parton's Lyrics	Section
Chorus 1	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him just because you can	Introduction
Verse Group 1	Your beauty is beyond compare With flaming locks of auburn hair With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green Your smile is like a breath of spring Your voice is soft like summer rain And I cannot compete with you, Jolene He talks about in his sleep And there's nothing I can do to keep From crying when he calls your name Jolene And I can easily understand How you could easily take my man But you don't know what he means to me Jolene	Development
Chorus 2	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him just because you can	
Verse Group 2	You could have your choice of men But I could never love again He's the only one for me Jolene I had to have this talk with you My happiness depends on you And whatever you decide to do Jolene	Climax
Chorus 3	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you please, don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him even though you can <i>(Lil Nas X repeats this line two more times)</i> <i>Please don't take him even though you can</i>	
	<i>Please don't take him even though you can</i> Jolene, (Jolene)	Closing

Figure 1. Lyrics and form of "Jolene."

Lil Nas X's cover of "Jolene" can be broken down into four sections which musically represent the narrative of despair he is portraying by varying the level of intensities which reflects a story arc. A musical analysis of these sections further supports the queer reading of his cover. Through sections which I have labeled introduction, development, climax, and closing, the general pacing of intensity grows exponentially until the closing section. In Lil Nas X's cover, he utilizes a band consisting of electric guitar, electric bass, synth, drum kit, and vocal harmony provided by two male back-up singers. As previously mentioned, the introduction section opens with the rolled minor guitar chords and Lil Nas X's solo voice. While the opening chorus is not devoid of a regular pulse, the minimal instrumentation and intentional space inserted between lines creates the illusion of timelessness as if the singer is lost and wandering in their own melancholy. Compared to Parton's original, this opening is remarkably low in harmonic drive and intensity invoking a convincing mood of despair. As a comparison, Parton's "Jolene" is about 110 bpm and Lil Nas X's cover ranges from 90 to 100 bpm. It is not out of the realm of possibility to interpret the opening of the cover as a man who has come to appeal to Jolene, but who has come to do so already defeated. This defeated affect returns in the closing section as Lil Nas X makes his final plea singing, "Please don't take him even though you can." The intensity that had been growing throughout the cover vanishes with the dropping out of the drumkit and the return of added space before the final word of the song. The final word, "can" is especially dour concluding with a melisma on a three-note descent. The framing of the cover creates a narrative arc that begins and ends in a similar manner implying a failure on the part of the narrator in convincing Jolene to not steal the other man.

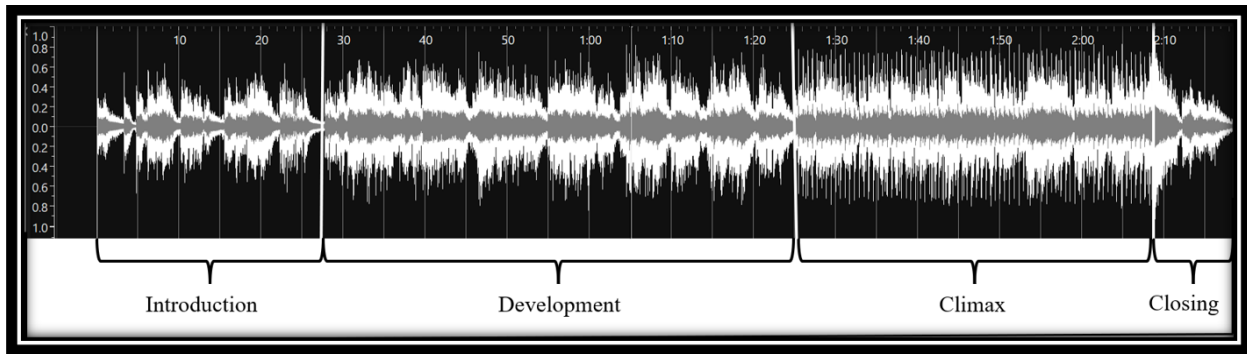


Figure 3. Waveform of Lil Nas X's cover of "Jolene" broken into the four components.

While the introduction and closing sections frame the cover with low defeated energy, the development and climax sections grow with intensity and represent a sense of urgency and panic on the part of the narrator. The development section which begins at the onset of the first verse and continues through the second chorus introduces the bass guitar, keyboard synth, the high-hat symbols played very softly, and back-up vocals. Critical to the growing intensity is the addition of the rhythmic section and elimination of long pauses between lines of text. Toward the end of the development section the symbols crescendo and become a more noticeable portion of the texture that aids the transition of the music into the climax section. The peak of intensity is reached in the climax section of the cover when the drum kit begins to use the kick-drum which can be seen in the wave form as the even vertical lines. See figure 3. for the wave form diagram. The increased activity of the drum kit brings the intensity of the song to its climax which propels the music towards the end. The guitar also takes a more active role which enriches the overall texture while also increasing the forward momentum. Across the development and climax sections there is a growing sense of desperation on the part of the singer. One reading of the cover suggests that the protagonist is losing control of his emotions as he tries to persuade Jolene to leave him and his man alone. Compared to Parton's original, Lil Nas X's cover follows a more

traditional narrative structure that is outlined by a musical growth in intensity which ultimately ends in despair.

A cover performed by Lil Nas X, a gay man, recontextualizes the narrative of “Jolene.” Combined with his queer identity, the music in Lil Nas X’s cover brings into focus the queer narrative by creating an intense sense of melancholy that morphs into desperation and finally, a state of queer panic.³⁵ As mentioned previously the story that Lil Nas X creates ends in defeat with the return of the affect found in the introduction section. The listener experiences the growth of panic with the singer and shares in the loss. In Parton’s original song it is difficult to say whether the singer is successful in her plea to Jolene or not making the song rather open ended. However, in the case of Lil Nas X’s cover, it is fair to say that he is not successful and that he has accepted defeat before even finishing the last word of the song. As a queer person myself, I can think of countless interpretations of Lil Nas X’s cover that speak to uniquely queer experiences. Ultimately, the cover is undeniably linked to Parton’s song on a foundational level as it is still immediately recognized as “Jolene.” The lyrics are unaltered and the melodies unchanged, and yet the queer people who have engaged with the cover and felt strongly enough to comment, explain that the narratives hit close to home as we will see. A large portion of the relatability of Lil Nas X’s cover of “Jolene” is at least in part due to the musical techniques and instrumentation which beautifully outline the narrative.

Along with the musical elements of Lil Nas X’s cover, his own queer identity also plays a part in an audience’s reading of the cover. As an openly gay black man, Lil Nas X has been both controversial and celebrated during his rise to stardom. His openness about his sexuality was met

³⁵ Queer or Gay Panic is a term for an extreme emotional reaction to a uniquely queer situation such as being outed or, in the case of this recontextualized cover, a situation of losing a lover who may or may not be open about their sexuality.

with resistance from conservative members of the country-music community who made claims that the genre and queer culture are not a popular or successful combination. While there has been resistance from those who view country music with a firm conservative lens, the positive response to Lil Nas X has been explosive. When Lil Nas X released one of his first hits “Old Town Road” at the turn of 2019, not only did the song skyrocket to the top of the US Billboard Top 100 charts but it continued to push the boundaries of traditional country music, themes, and aesthetics. Joining Lil Nas X on the track was Billy Ray Cyrus, a legend in country music whose presence strengthens the blend of queerness and country. Just as Lil Nas X ventured into other genres outside of country such as rap, R&B, pop, and hip hop, he also represents a diverse number of communities that often overlap. As previously noted, he is openly queer and has pushed the boundaries of gender identity. Prior to the release of his album *Montero*, he appeared pregnant on his social media as a representation of him giving birth to his music. It is also important to note that Lil Nas X is not just queer, he is also black and from the south. He is one of the musicians that has historically been counted out of country music and yet, he accomplishes exactly what a good country star does best, create music and art that people deeply connect with.

Surveying the comments section on the YouTube video of Lil Nas X’s cover offers examples where listeners are connecting with the queer narratives brought to the surface by the recontextualization of Parton’s song. One such example comes from user Ted Ecker who writes, “As a 74yo [years old] gay men, I feel like a proud auntie to a whole generation of people who are living their authentic (and fabulous!) selves!!!”³⁶ Ted Ecker, who belongs to a past generation where musicians would traditionally be in the closet, is clearly inspired by the

³⁶ Ted Ecker, “As a 74yo [years old] gay men, I feel like a proud auntie to a whole generation to a whole generation of people who are living their authentic (and fabulous!) selves!!!,” YouTube video, posted 2022.

increased acceptance of queer people and artists that Lil Nas X represents. In this case, Lil Nas X's identity is key for the recontextualization of the song, and user Steven Watson appears to agree commenting, "Soulful and heart wrenching and then also so refreshing to hear a man sing about loving another man and possibly losing that love."³⁷ Lil Nas X would agree with this assessment as he compares the song to his own original music that deals in heart-wrenching topics. In place of the original narrative where an assumed female singer is asking the other woman to not take her man, a male singer asking a woman not to take his man summons familiar queer stories of despair, pain, and the complex issue of coming out.

Some commenters even go as far as to share their own interpretations of the queer narratives emphasized by the cover. User Elaborate Tiger explains one such narrative writing:

I love how without changing a single word the song takes on a whole new meaning. In the original it feels like the antagonist Jolene is trying to take her man but here I feel like it's "the man" taking both Jolene and the singer for a ride, probably seeing dudes behind Jolene's back but not having the courage to come out and make a commitment.³⁸

Here Elaborate Tiger points out some relatable themes found in queer tales of despair that involve coming out and infidelity. Beyond infidelity and a lack of commitment, Lil Nas X's cover touches on a deeper queer narrative which is linked to personal shame of one's self. In their comment, Elaborate Tiger also takes note that not a single word has been changed. Every single word is Parton's, implying that this queer story has always existed in the song even if it has been mostly hidden beneath the surface. These interpretations are real lived experiences for

³⁷ Steven Watson, "Soulful and heart wrenching and then also so refreshing to hear a man sing about loving another man and possibly losing that love," YouTube video, posted 2022.

³⁸ Elaborate Tiger, "I love how without changing a single word the song takes on a whole new meaning," YouTube video, posted 2022.

many queer people who, like Lil Nas X, grew up in traditionally conservative places. User Skip R who can relate to living in such an environment writes in the comments of the video:

I come from a very conservative country where it's all too common for loving gay couples to break apart because one dude's parents forced him to marry a woman. You can't compare this to Dolly's version, but hearing Nas -a gay man- begging a woman not to take away the only love he'll ever know just hits too close to home.³⁹

Around the world the queer narrative of love oppressed by restrictive society is recognized by those who are all too familiar with this reality. While artists like Lil Nas X are representative of changing times, both in the United States and around the world these lived experiences continue to occur.

COVER V.S. PARODY

In the case of both musical covers and parodies of popular music, the literature, produced by authors like, P.D. Magnus, Serge Lacasse, Michael Talbot, Doris Leibetseder, and Jon Stratton, struggles to pin down a clear definition of both genres which results in a blurred line between them. Magnus, author of *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, generally defines a musical cover as a recording of music that has been recorded by someone else first.⁴⁰ Essentially, an artist takes another artist's song and puts their own individual impression on it. The degree to which one imparts their own ideas onto the original varies as we can observe across the multiple examples in this thesis. This means that the term "cover" is very flexible and difficult to define which Magnus points out in the first chapter of his book.⁴¹ In addition to this flexibility, the cover

³⁹ Skip R, "I come from a very conservative country," YouTube video, posted 2022.

⁴⁰ P.D. Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2022), 4.

⁴¹ In his first chapter Magnus outlines five problems with covers and the challenges associated with unique cases like what makes a parody different from a cover. To read his five problems with covers and his proposed solutions see: P.D. Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, 4-8.

grants the artist that creates it a certain level of anonymity, acting as a literal kind of cover which shields their personal identity.

The degree to which one wishes to display their self-expression and identity in a cover is at the discretion of the artist and is adjustable based on the decisions they make in their recording. In this way covers exist on a spectrum of thickness that reflects how efficient the new song is at concealing identity. A trend towards the thinner side of the scale is indicative of more changes and personal inflections imparted on the music. Conversely, a cover that trends towards the thicker side preserves much more of the original artist's song and is more conservative when making changes. Lil Nas X's cover of "Jolene," for example, falls on the thinner side. He did not change the melody or the lyrics, but the accompaniment and overall pacing and narrative arc departs significantly from Parton's original. If an artist wishes to remain hidden behind the cover, then fewer changes will be made to the original song resulting in a thick barrier between them and the listener. Consequently, this will draw less attention to the performer and invoke familiar memories and thoughts of the original artist's recording. The further a song falls on the thicker side of the spectrum correlates to a lower chance of offending anyone who may object to the manner in which the singer is representing the original. As a result, thickness translates to greater ambiguity of the subject. However, if one makes changes to the lyrics, alters the genre, or greatly changes the harmony or melody, they create a thinner cover that showcases more of their own personal identity.⁴² If an artist opts to reveal a clear representation of themselves, the increased level of personal expression invites an increased risk of criticism. The concept of a

⁴² All three kinds of changes mentioned in Magnus' book are not necessary to create a cover that is linked more to the covering artist than the original artist. For example, Whitney Houston's cover of "I Will Always Love You" originally by Dolly Parton, is considered by many, including Parton, to be Houston's own version that is authentically her song even though they lyrics are not altered at all. To see Parton discuss how she sees Houston's cover see: Skip Martin, "Dolly Parton Interviewed by Dan Rather," posted April 27, 2014, YouTube Video, 9:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_cVTeyUsPc. Accessed on 12/1/22.

spectrum depicting thickness and thinness of cover songs bears a resemblance to the spectrum that queerness exists on, suggesting that covers themselves are also inherently queer.

Pinning down a definition of cover is a challenge, and P.D. Magnus' definition of parody is a particularly wide one. He suggests that altering the genre, melodies, and lyrics may still constitute a cover, however, authors like Serge Lacasse and Michael Talbot do not agree with the placement of the ambiguous line between parody and cover. While Magnus claims that it is not the actual number of altered lyrics that give a song the distinction of parody or cover, Lacasse and Talbot are more specific about when a song becomes a parody writing:

The example [Weird Al Yankovic's parody *Smells like Nirvana*] thus conforms exactly to this definition of parody: the overall song sounds very close to the hypotext (similar style) [of the original recording], but with new lyrics (different subject). Even within the new lyrics some important structural properties are preserved, such as most of the rhyme patterns...⁴³

Here Lacasse and Talbot are explaining that the new lyrics alter the subject away from its hypotext and in doing so, it places the song into the category of parody even though it may retain the song's "important structural properties" and sound like the original.⁴⁴ Author Jon Stratton echoes a similar classification of parody in his article, "Parodies for a Pandemic: Coronavirus Songs, Creativity and Lockdown," where he begins by defining parody in his own words writing, "These songs are called parodies because they lift off from the tunes of preexisting, well-known songs giving them new lyrics which express people's experiences during lockdown..."⁴⁵ For

⁴³ Magnus makes his claim about the number of changed words here: P.D. Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, 7. To read Lacasse's claims about parody see: Serge Lacasse, and Michael Talbot, "Intertextuality and Hypertextuality in Recorded Popular Music," In *The Musical Work: Reality or Invention?*, (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 41.

⁴⁴ Serge Lacasse, and Michael Talbot, "Intertextuality and Hypertextuality," 41.

⁴⁵ Stratton provides his definition of parody but argues that music he is referencing in his article is better described as folk music. For his definition of parody and to read his article see: Jon Stratton, "Parodies for a Pandemic: Coronavirus Songs, Creativity and Lockdown," *Cultural Studies* 35, no. 2-3 (2021): 412-13. doi:10.1080/09502386.2021.1898035.

Stratton, like Lacasse and Talbot, what makes a song a parody hinges more on its deviation from the lyrics of the original regardless of how similar the musical elements may be.

Magnus theorizes that the parody may actually be defined by the intent of the song writing, “Perhaps the only thing that stops ‘Another One Rides the Bus’ [a Weird Al Yankovic parody] from being a cover is that it is a parody, which in turn is because it is funny.”⁴⁶ For Magnus, the intent of humor diverges from the intent of the original song thus earning the distinction of parody. In addition, Magnus mentions that cover songs were historically kept separate from novelty records implying that the marketing of a song factors into identifying whether it falls into the category of parody or cover.⁴⁷ In Doris Leibetseder’s book, *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*, she begins her second chapter on parody and gender trouble by looking at the history and definition of Parody.⁴⁸ In the process of discussing the etymology Leibetseder quotes Margaret A. Rose writing, “The word ‘ridiculous’ was used to describe the basic meaning of parody as the singing of a song whose words had been distorted or changed.”⁴⁹ This definition of parody falls somewhere between Magnus and Lacasse and Talbot, emphasizing the portion of parody that is humorous and contains words that have been “distorted.” While I am inclined to believe that lyrics that change the overall meaning of the song do in fact distort it, what happens if new lyrics enhance the intent of the original? A firm definition for either term is difficult to arrive at and yet, I argue that even if some words are

⁴⁶ Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, 7.

⁴⁷ Magnus, *A Philosophy of Cover Songs*, 7.

⁴⁸ Doris Leibetseder, “Parody – Gender Trouble,” In *Queer Tracks: Subversive Strategies in Rock and Pop Music*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), doi:10.4324/9781315603254.

⁴⁹ Doris Leibetseder, “Parody – Gender Trouble,” 35. Margaret A. Rose’s quote can be found here: Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7-9.

altered, the intended meaning the artist is endeavoring to create must be considered when attempting to label a song a cover or a parody.

“JOLENE BUT IT’S GAY COVER BY REINAEIRY”

Material	Dolly Parton’s Lyrics	Reinaeiry’s Lyrics
Chorus 1	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him just because you can	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please just leave your man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please just leave him 'cause I know you can
Verse Group 1	Your beauty is beyond compare With flaming locks of auburn hair With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green Your smile is like a breath of spring Your voice is soft like summer rain And I cannot compete with you, Jolene He talks about in his sleep And there’s nothing I can do to keep From crying when he calls your name Jolene And I can easily understand How you could easily take my man But you don't know what he means to me Jolene	Your beauty is beyond compare With flaming locks of auburn hair With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green Your smile is like a breath of spring Your voice is soft like summer rain And I just want to be with you, Jolene I think about you and I weep 'Cause there’s nothing I can do to keep From crying when you call his name Jolene And I can't easily understand How you would settle for that man 'Cause you don't know what you mean to me Jolene
Chorus 2	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him just because you can	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please just leave your man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please just leave him 'cause I know you can
Verse Group 2	You could have your choice of men But I could never love again He’s the only one for me Jolene I had to have this talk with you My happiness depends on you And whatever you decide to do Jolene	You could have your choice of men But I could never love again 'cause you're the only one for me Jolene I had to have this talk with you My happiness depends on you And whatever you decide to do Jolene
Chorus 3	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you please, don't take my man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please don't take him even though you can Jolene, (Jolene)	Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene I'm begging of you, please just leave your man Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Please just leave him 'cause I know you can Jolene, oh Jolene

Figure 4. The text that has been altered has been highlighted.

“Jolene but it’s Gay Cover by Reinaeiry,” is a self-identified cover of Parton’s song “Jolene” which utilizes altered lyrics to emphasize a queer narrative already imbedded in the original.⁵⁰ See figure 4. for a comparison of Parton’s original lyrics and Reinaeiry’s alterations. In the case of Reinaeiry’s song, I agree that it is classified as a cover because, although some lyrics are changed, the changes made align with a real interpretation of Parton’s original song. Additionally, an in-depth analysis of the lyric alterations reveals that very few words, never more than four words in a phrase, have been changed. This is significantly less changes than a Weird Al Yankovic parody for example. The slight changes to the lyrics now draw attention to the narrator who is pining for Jolene and asking her to leave her man. As is the case with covers, the original rhyme structure is still intact. While it is clear that the story has been tweaked to make its queer reading more explicit, it is simultaneously still recognizable as Parton’s song. This association with the original is strengthened by the accompaniment in Reinaeiry’s cover which melodically resembles Parton’s song, although, the cover has reduced the band down to a solo piano accompaniment. Even in the reduced accompaniment, the opening instrumental riffs are kept intact which preserves the identity of original.

The queer reading that Reinaeiry’s cover offers is heavily inspired by Parton’s song, and listeners of the cover as well as musicologist Nadine Hubbs agree that there is something inherently queer about “Jolene.” Reinaeiry’s cover focuses more on the narrator who never says a bad word against Jolene in the song and is actually interested in Jolene herself. However, this description could also be applied to Parton’s original song as well. The suggestion that “Jolene” is actually a queer love song between two women was discussed on the podcast *Dolly Parton’s*

⁵⁰ Reinaeiry, “Jolene but it’s Gay Cover by Reinaeiry,” posted February 10, 2021, YouTube video, 3:06, https://youtu.be/QHfT_D4BMmI. Accessed on 12/1/22.

America in the episode titled “The Only One for Me, Jolene.”⁵¹ In the podcast, hosts Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee reveal that many fans of “Jolene” have felt that the song has always been a queer romance story between Jolene and the singer. Nadine Hubbs, who has written on the topics of country music and queer people joins the podcast to weigh in on the conversation.⁵² Hubbs explains that “Jolene” is a unique song in country music because as an “other woman song,” which is a sub category of the “cheatin’ song, it breaks away from norms of the genre.”⁵³ The “other woman song” traditionally features a woman singer who confronts the other woman who is having an affair with the singer’s man. It is common that the lyrics are pretty harsh and demeaning to the “other woman.” However, Nadine Hubbs points out that Parton uses the other woman’s name in the song instead of some derogatory moniker.⁵⁴

Contrary to the conventions of the “other woman” genre, “Jolene” does not feature one woman expressing hate for the other woman. On the contrary, Parton is writing a song about a woman loving another woman, or at the very least, showing affection and appreciation for her. Hubbs was then asked if she could write a fourth verse to “Jolene” that would make the story explicitly a queer love story. She agreed to this request and wrote and recorded a verse for the podcast.⁵⁵ With the new verse in hand, Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee play it for Parton during their interview portion of the episode. Parton seems amused at the interpretation. She then tells a story about a planned Netflix movie based on Jolene stating, “someone came up with that basic idea to say, ‘wouldn’t it be cool if the two women just dumped both of em’, dumped the guy all

⁵¹ Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee, “The Only One for Me, Jolene,” *Dolly Parton’s America*, episode 7, Spotify, November, 19, 2019. Accessed on 12/1/2022.

⁵² To read Nadine Hubbs’ work on the overlap between queer people and country music see: Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

⁵³ Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee, “The Only One for Me, Jolene,” 2019.

⁵⁴ Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee, “The Only One for Me, Jolene,” 2019.

⁵⁵ To hear Hubbs’ fourth verse please refer to the podcast here: Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliaee, “The Only One for Me, Jolene,” 2019.

together and went on with our lives as friends.”⁵⁶ While Parton did not intend to write “Jolene” as an overtly queer narrative, *Dolly Parton’s America* emphasizes and supports the idea that for many fans and listeners, “Jolene” is and always has been a queer love song.

Music scholars like Hubbs and even Parton herself see the potential for a queer reading of “Jolene,” but they are not the only ones who have categorized the song as queer. Fans of “Jolene” and Reinaeiry’s cover have logged on to YouTube to share their feelings about both versions. One such comment on Reinaeiry’s video made by user Unushree Mishra reads:

There is no gay version of Jolene, because the original is already gay. The narrator is actually in love with Jolene, and has misunderstood her own feelings...What do we know about Jolene? She has flaming locks of auburn hair, her beauty is beyond compare...sounds fruity to me.⁵⁷

Comments like Unushree Mirshra’s highlight a commonly shared feeling that “Jolene” is queer and that the cover is only making this story more apparent. The comment also lacks any kind of surprise and the addition of, “sounds fruity to me,” implies that Parton’s song being queer is an established and widely-known truth for those who are able to perceive it. For others who saw this truth, Reinaeiry’s cover offers validation like in the case of user Spenser Trusque who writes:

I knew I wasn’t imagining it! I have always had this head-canon that the bisexual narrator (who may or may not have realized their bisexuality yet...) was genuinely in love with the man...even though the relationship clearly isn’t working any more. When she makes her original entreaty to Jolene (who is 100% lesbian) she means it sincerely...⁵⁸

⁵⁶ To hear Dolly Parton’s response, see: Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliace, “The Only One for Me, Jolene,” 2019.

⁵⁷ The word ‘fruity’ is often used to describe a person or situation that carries the suspicion of being queer. Unushree Mishra, “There is no gay version of Jolene, because the original is already gay,” YouTube video, posted 2022.

⁵⁸ Spenser Trusque, “I knew I wasn’t imagining it,” YouTube video, posted 2021.

Spenser Trusque's comment reflects many others that echo the validation felt by the cover. One byproduct of the cover is the permission it offers to listeners to share their long-held thoughts on Parton's hit song and connect with others who share the same queer reading. Whether the story ends with a happily ever after or in tragedy, the comment section overwhelmingly agrees that it is queer.

Musically speaking, Reinaeiry's cover bears some similarity to Lil Nas X's cover of "Jolene," as both possess a heightened melancholic mood suggesting another queer narrative of despair. In part, this affect is created by the solo piano accompaniment, slower tempo, and lack of percussion, which is very reminiscent of the beginning of Lil Nas X's cover. For Reinaeiry, the decision to reduce the accompaniment down to solo piano restricts the driving motion provided by percussion which is found in both Lil Nas X's cover and Parton's original song. This change in instrumentation highlights the gentler and more morose side of the narrator's pleading. Also similar to the Lil Nas X cover, is where Reinaeiry's song is located on the scale of thickness. Reinaeiry's work falls even further into the territory of thinness revealing how aware she is with the queer subtext of Parton's music and the narratives it contains. The directness in which Reinaeiry alters the lyrics thins the shield even further. The thinness she utilizes along with her musical choices enhance her relatability to her audience who share stories of despair which are observed in the engagement on the video.

Comments that acknowledge themes of despair are found on Reinaeiry's cover in high volumes. One such example comes from Lilith A who writes, "The tragedy of the lesbian who fell for a straight girl," which encapsulates a painful lived experience that is commonly shared

amongst those in the queer communities.⁵⁹ Unrequited love based on one's gender identity and sexuality by itself is a theme that extends as far back as stories themselves however, the addition of sexuality and gender identity as a justification for rejection holds a prominent position in countless queer narratives. The phrase, "don't fall for a straight boy/girl/person," is a common warning between queer people that they should guard their feelings. This is a tale of star-crossed lovers barred from one another, not by family differences, but by opposing gender identities and sexualities. Lilith A's comment may be short but it conjures countless memories and experiences that those in queer communities are intimately familiar with. Considering that the audience never knows definitely if the narrator in Reinaeiry's cover was successful in their pleas to Jolene, the possibility that Jolene is straight and uninterested should be considered. Lilith A does not shy away from offering this narrative, and while it is not a particularly uplifting story or memory for many, it is apparent that it lurks in Reinaeiry's cover.

User Ace writes, "Let's face it: This was ALWAYS the subtext," which says the quiet part out loud that Parton and Reinaeiry's cover are both queer.⁶⁰ While the cover increases the amplitude of the layers of queer meanings, it allows the listener to experience the multiple meanings of Parton's song. For the listener who never thought that "Jolene" had anything at all to do with queer topics, Reinaeiry's cover can offer a new view on the song enriching its complexity. For queer people the cover is a chance to feel seen and validated not only in their perception of "Jolene" as a queer love song but to have some kind of representation being produced, enjoyed, and made visible.

⁵⁹ Lilith A, "The tragedy of the lesbian who fell for a straight girl," YouTube video, posted 2021.

⁶⁰ Ace, "Let's face it: This was ALWAYS the subtext," YouTube video, posted 2021.

QUEER ONLINE CULTURE

Both Reinaeiry and Lil Nas X's covers are not found in a music store in the form of a compact disk or record, and they cannot be heard on the radio. Instead, they exist on the internet where people offer their thoughts and comments behind the veil of invented usernames and avatars displaying a particularly grumpy looking British shorthair. In the same way musical covers are able to literally provide a kind of cover or anonymity. This covering can also act as a safe guard for those who are unable or uncomfortable with being open about their sexuality and gender. The protection allows for closeted people to participate in the discourse of queer communities without the repercussions of coming out. While the internet may exist in a virtual space, it offers a place to share music that does not make the list of top 20 pop hits. In its current state, the internet also offers its users the freedom to search for the content that speaks to them the most. This does not imply that the internet is always a safe space, but as an ever-expanding entity that consumes more and more of our time, analysis of cyber content will be a much bigger part of the picture now and in the future.

In the early 2000s many sat at their computers and logged onto the internet to created their very own blog posts where they discussed their life, often touching on topics like sexuality and gender which were not being openly discussed in the physical world. In 2005, author Julie Rak, published an article titled, "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity," which considers the difference between web blogs and paper diaries.⁶¹ Rak examines blogs by self-identifying queer people and assess how their writings tie in to personal identity and queer communities. In discussing the differences between the personal-paper diary and the internet

⁶¹ Julie Rak, "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity," *Biography* 28, no. 1 (2005): 166–82.

blog, Rak offers Madeleine Sorapure's theory on the differences between the two sources.⁶² Sorapure claims that the two mediums differ from each other in that the self in the case of blog posts is directed towards other readers and the traditional paper diary is not. Blog posts are an outward sharing of a person's personal thoughts where a diary focuses inward and is often a private document. As the self that Rak discusses is producing information for other readers, they are ultimately contributing to something greater, a trusting online queer community. Rak describes the phenomena in the following passage:

The numerous incitements to bloggers to produce information about themselves also contribute to the production of a certain kind of queer identity based on a strategy of the real, where liberal ideas about the nature of the self and elaborate biographical documentation create an effect of the real online, to promote community and trust between bloggers.⁶³

It is important to keep in mind that the internet has changed greatly in the past 18 years and so has the perception of queer people and communities. Nevertheless, examining the construction of queer communities online in the past sheds light on how these communities have developed as the world-wide web has grown. By understanding the origin of queer internet culture, we can also better understand how queer people navigate the internet today.

The popularity of blog posts has declined since Julie Rak published her article. In the place of the internet blog, Facebook accounts and community groups, Instagram pages, Twitter pages, Reddit, Tik Tok, and perhaps the biggest and most influential platform, YouTube, now dominate the internet. The number of platforms and the number of people who utilize them daily has exploded. However, the questions surrounding the self, identity, and anonymity are still relevant. While videos like vlogs do not provide the same kind of anonymity that the traditional

⁶² Rak, "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity," 167-70.

⁶³ Rak, "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity," 180.

blog did, they retain similar functions such as contributing to the conversation around queer identity.⁶⁴ Additionally, vlogs create a meeting place for others seeking an online queer community. On these platforms anyone can make an account if they have access to the internet and a device. Their account can be whatever version of themselves that they wish to display to the world. Very few of them use their actual name or photo. One specific genre of vlogs is a popular type of YouTube video called the “coming out video” discussed in the article, “Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube,” written by Sander De Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens.⁶⁵ In the case of these videos, the creator is broadcasting their queer identity out to the public audience of the internet. While this effectively outs the creator to the world it also provides a kind of cover for those who wish to stay anonymous in places like the comments section.⁶⁶ The musical covers of Parton’s music being examined in this thesis operate in a very similar manner. Due to the safety these queer pockets of the internet provide it is no coincidence that it is on the YouTube platform that we find so many musical covers with queer subject matter. Queer culture and queer content are deeply intertwined with the internet and it is unlikely that this will change anytime soon.

FROM COVER TO INDIVIDUAL VERSION

In 1973 Dolly Parton wrote, recorded, and released her song “I Will Always Love You” which garnered great success rising to the top of the country charts twice in two decades, once in the original release in 1973-4 and again in 1982 when she re-recorded it for the film, *The Best Little*

⁶⁴ The vlog (video blog) is a popular type of YouTube video where a content creator shares filmed content of their life. This can include any kind of activity from picking an outfit for the day to sharing intimate details about their life like a video diary.

⁶⁵ Sander De Ridder, and Frederik Dhaenens, “Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube,” *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 43–60.

⁶⁶ It is important to acknowledge that there is also a financial incentive for creators to create these “coming out videos” as they usually garner high numbers of clicks, views, and comments.

Whore House in Texas. However, the third time “I Will Always Love You” topped the charts in 1992 it would be awarded to Whitney Houston’s cover of the song for the film *The Bodyguard*. Parton wrote “I Will Always Love You” while she contemplated leaving *The Porter Wagoner Show* in which she was a regular performer. In multiple interviews Parton has explained that the song was meant as a goodbye to Porter and the show. She figured that if Porter, who could be rather stubborn, would not listen to her when she talked about leaving the show, she would tell him in song.⁶⁷ As it turns out, Parton’s swan song for *The Porter Wagoner Show* would turn out to be one of her biggest hits.

Whitney Houston’s cover of “I Will Always Love You” quickly became more popular than Parton’s version throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century resulting in a generation of people who assumed that Houston’s cover was in fact the original version. However, in the past few years a plethora of YouTube videos have been appearing where the viewers in the video react to performances of Parton performing “I Will Always Love You,” often learning in the process that the song is Parton’s and not Houston’s. Many of these videos boast titles like “I Didn’t Know This Was the Original! | Dolly Parton - I Will Always Love You 1974 Reaction,” and “First Time Hearing Dolly Parton - I Will Always Love You Live Reaction.”⁶⁸ With the rediscovery of Parton as the original artist with her own distinct style separate from Houston, the public has widely accepted that Houston’s cover is best defined as its own version of the song.

⁶⁷ For a more in-depth retelling of the story about Dolly Parton composing “I Will Always Love You” including interviews with Parton and other experts in the country-music field, please see: Francis Whately, *Dolly Parton: Here I am*, Netflix, December, 26, 2019. Accessed on 11/1/22.

⁶⁸ For the videos mentioned see: MrLloyd Reacts, “First Time Hearing Dolly Parton - I Will Always Love You Live Reaction,” posted January 2, 2021, YouTube video, 7:42, <https://youtu.be/Ie5ZfwhscB4>. Accessed on October 10, 2022. Also see: Life with Recklezz, “I Didn’t Know This Was the Original! | Dolly Parton - I Will Always Love You 1974 Reaction,” posted June 19, 2021, YouTube video, 11:03, <https://youtu.be/KLrYnn1hYoA>. Accessed on October 10, 2022.

Material	“I Will Always Love You Lyrics	Dolly Parton Version	Whitney Houston Version
Verse 1	If I should stay I would only be in your way So I’ll go, but I know I’ll think of you each step of the way	Instrumental opening before voice accompaniment with the voice Connected lines of the verse	Acapella More ornaments and longer pauses between lines
Chorus 1	And I will always love you I will always love you	Accompaniment continues	Accompaniment joins in
Verse 2	Bittersweet memories That’s all I’m taking with me Good-bye, please don’t cry We both know that I’m not what you need	Similar to Verse 1	Regular rhythmic percussion appears More ornamentation
Chorus 2	But I will always love you I will always love you	Addition of backup singers	Leads into the solo saxophone solo
Verse 3	I hope life treats you kind And I hope that you have all That you ever dreamed of And I wish you joy And I wish you happiness But above all this I wish you love	Parton talk-sings this portion of the verse Begins singing again at “but above all this...”	Sung lyrics with building tension Grand pause
Chorus 3	And I, will always love you I will always love you I will always love you	No modulation Increased ornamentation	Modulation up Climax of singing and ornamentation

Figure 5. The lyrics for “I Will Always Love You” and a comparison the two versions.

The solidification of individual Houston and Parton versions of “I Will Always Love You” implies that there are key elements that are unique to their respective versions and when analyzing covers of the song, understanding these elements is critical in identifying from which version they are derived. A visual representation of the differences can be seen in Figure 5. Some of the largest differences between Houston’s cover and Parton’s original include the genre, stylistic changes, instrumentation, and some minor harmonic changes. However, the lyrics and basic melodic shapes are retained from the original in Houston’s cover. While Parton sings in a more traditional country-folk style, Houston delivers a powerful soul-infused ballad that starts from the most exposed style of singing, acapella. This acapella opening continues until the first chorus where the accompaniment fills in with strings, synth, and percussion. In Houston’s version there is additionally a solo saxophone section before the final verse and chorus which is not found in Parton’s original. Unlike Parton’s performance, Houston sings all the verses and choruses with the final chorus being the most iconic portion of the arrangement. This moment occurs before the final chorus where there is a grand pause which is broken by a sudden drum kick launching Houston’s belt on “And I,” which has modulated up a half-step. In Parton’s original she talk-sings the third verse which transitions into the final chorus.⁶⁹ Parton’s version also does not include the pause before the final chorus. However, there are still many similarities between these two versions. One such similarity that can be heard is in the final chorus which showcases the most elaboration and ornamentation of the melody. “I Will Always Love You” has been a beloved song for generations and with the solidification of Houston’s cover as her

⁶⁹ Often Parton will speak some portions of her song lyrics in a dramatic rhythmic manner, part of her signature style which ranges in pitch inflection. I refer to this technique as talk-singing.

own individual version of the song, artists are able to create their own covers that take inspiration from both Parton and Houston.

The high volume of changes made in Houston's version marks it as the thinnest example of a cover that I will mention in this thesis. The drastic departure from Parton's original song combined with the genre change from country-pop to soulful ballad makes a strong statement on who Houston is, both as an artist and the character she embodied in *The Bodyguard*. Houston plays a character who is a famous actress and music star who needs a bodyguard after threats are made against her. Ultimately, a failed romance between this famous singer and her bodyguard leads to a bitter-sweet goodbye and the perfect backdrop for Parton's song to accompany the moment. It is perfectly plausible to hear this performance as an expression of her actual life or the fictional setting of the film. The character Houston played, Rachel Marron, shares similar attributes like being a star singer and actress. Also like the character Rachel Marron, Houston was often in the news for rumors about romances that were secret or scandalous and never blossomed into a fruitful relationship.⁷⁰ The strength and confidence Houston and her character display in the film is applicable to her real life. This persona is encapsulated in her version of Parton's song. For listeners, this creates a strong sense of authenticity and results in a kind of deep vulnerability which yields a whisper of a cover in terms of its thickness.

Covers that appear to be a fusion of both versions suggests that Houston's cover stands on equal footing to Parton's original, and vice versa, while still retaining its own individual authenticity. It is not only by popular consensus that Houston's cover has been deemed its own

⁷⁰ Kevin McDonald, "Whitney," posted September 26, 2021, YouTube Video, 2:00:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtFpKkTU2Nk>.

version. Parton herself has weighed in on this topic in an interview with Dan Rather in 2014 explaining:

People say, ‘Well, that’s Whitney’s song.’ I said, ‘That’s fine. You can give her the credit. I just want the cash. So, send that check on to me.’ (Laughs) But it was her song. The way she did that to make that such a world-wide hit, mine woulda never have done that. But- since then people have done it- you know, as instrumentals, as duets and all of that. So, it’s just one of those simple little songs that says nothing and yet everything. It’s very simple.⁷¹

Parton’s endorsement of Houston’s cover as her own song seems to settle the already widely-held belief of the existence of two versions. Ultimately, this creates a deeper well of musical material to consider as individuals craft their own music. While covers between the 1990s and approximately 2018 heavily swayed in favor of Houston’s version, the rediscovery of Parton’s music and her recordings of “I Will Always Love You,” has yielded even more covers that both borrow from her style and Houston’s, blending them into a hybrid.

⁷¹ Skip Martin, “Dolly Parton Interviewed by Dan Rather,” 2014.

ORVILLE PECK'S COVER OF "I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU"

A gentleman with a black hat, studded black Versace jacket, and acoustic guitar is seated in front of the camera. His face is hidden behind a black leather mask that transitions to golden fringe just below the nose. He speaks with a deep baritone voice introducing himself as Orville Peck and announces that he will be performing a cover of "I Will Always Love You."⁷² He prefaces his performance with the reason that he chose to cover this song in particular, explaining:

This song was written by one of my favorite artists of all time and then it was covered by another one of my favorite artists of all time. So, this song is written by Dolly Parton, obviously a big inspiration to me my whole life, and it was one of her most heartbreaking songs. And then it was covered by the incredible Whitney Houston who's also my number one. And so, these two ladies kind of share this song. And so, I'm going to cover it here today.⁷³

Peck is indicating to his audience that he will be borrowing from both versions of the song to craft his cover, and yet, the cover transcends being solely a blend of Parton and Houston as he adds elements of his own unique performance style. To see a comparison of the three versions of "I Will Always Love You," see Figure 6. While Peck may be inspired by these two divas his performance is truly a representation of his own identity. As a gay man who sings country music, Peck's cover of "I Will Always Love You" represents a queer narrative of hope that is powerful and yet sensitive at the same time.

⁷² VFILES, "Orville Peck Covers 'I Will Always Love You' Dolly Parton (Concert 4 No 1) | VFILES LOUD," posted December 18, 2019, YouTube video, 4:22, <https://youtu.be/eD3g5CEnRJ0>. Accessed on October 9, 2022.

⁷³ Transcription by me. VFILES, "Orville Peck Covers 'I Will Always Love You' Dolly Parton (Concert 4 No 1) | VFILES LOUD," 2019.

Material	“I Will Always Love You Lyrics	Dolly Parton Version	Whitney Houston Version	Orville Peck Version
Verse 1	If I should stay I would only be in your way So I’ll go, but I know I’ll think of you each step of the way	Instrumental opening before voice accompaniment with the voice Connected lines of the verse	Acapella More ornaments and longer pauses between lines	Acapella Longer pauses between phrases Guitar accompaniment starts with “So I’ll go...”
Chorus 1	And I will always love you I will always love you	Accompaniment continues	Accompaniment joins in	Accompaniment continues
Verse 2	Bittersweet memories That’s all I’m taking with me Good-bye, please don’t cry We both know that I’m not what you need	Similar to Verse 1	Regular rhythmic percussion appears More ornamentation	Accompaniment continues with occasional pauses between lines
Chorus 2	But I will always love you I will always love you	Addition of backup singers	Leads into the solo saxophone solo	Accompaniment continues
Verse 3	I hope life treats you kind And I hope that you have all That you ever dreamed of And I wish you joy And I wish you happiness But above all this I wish you love	Parton talk-sings this portion of the verse Begins singing again at “but above all this...”	Sung lyrics with building tension Grand pause	Half sung; half spoken Begins singing again at “but above all this...” Grand pause
Chorus 3	And I, will always love you I will always love you I will always love you	No modulation Increased ornamentation	Modulation up Climax of singing and ornamentation	No modulation Increased ornamentation

Figure 6. A comparison of Peck’s, Houston’s and Parton’s versions.

As Peck begins to sing the first verse, his gravelly voice sings acapella mirroring the start of Houston’s version, however, the timbre of his vocals is much more akin to Parton’s style. This opening immediately blends the two versions. Peck offers an extremely intimate performance utilizing only a guitar and his own voice which again shares many similarities to Parton’s performance style including some light talk-singing. Peck tips his hat towards Houston by

including a slight pause in the music in between the last verse and the final chorus, however, he does not include the half-step modulation upward. Because the modulation is such an iconic moment in Houston's version, the omission of it situates his cover in a sensitive inward-looking position. The presence of the pause without the expected modulation is a dramatic twist for the listener, but beyond the shock value, it embodies hope itself. The melody strives to launch into the modulation like Houston's version, but falls short and remains in the same key. The pause offers the prospect of change, that a Parton-esc cover can become a Houston inspired one. Perhaps the definition of love also has a hope of growing and changing. While Peck offers a performance that is weighted more in the style of Parton, he has made musical decisions that are still inspired by Houston. Not only is he successful at creating a cover that is cohesive and musical, he demonstrates the musical sharing sonically without sacrificing his own individual style.

Peck's persona and identity are woven into his cover of "I Will Always Love You" which strengthens his authenticity, especially for a queer audience. Peck's authenticity, as a sincere and openly queer person, is pivotal in the interpretation of the narratives that his cover is able to produce. The song itself does not address any one person in particular making it a blank canvas for the artist to express themselves. The song acts as a conduit for Peck's authentic self to communicate with his audience. In author Mark Butler's article on covers of the Pet Shop Boys, he discusses authentic connections between the music and listeners. One kind of authenticity outlined by Butler is personal authenticity which involves the audience resonating with the performer's personal narrative, or at least one that the listener has interpreted to be personal.⁷⁴ In

⁷⁴ Mark Butler, "Taking It Seriously: Intertextuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 1–19.

Parton's case this is the story about her leaving *The Porter Wagoner Show*. For Houston, it is tied to her role in the *Bodyguard* film. However, for Peck the audience sees an openly queer man performing the music of his favorite divas in a genre that has historically been unfriendly to queer communities. This synthesis of Peck's authenticity and his musical style represents a great deal of change and provides a narrative of hope for a more inclusive future.

The authenticity in Peck's cover of "I Will Always Love You" is not limited to people's individual identification with him, rather he utilizes a second kind of authenticity centered around communities which Butler discusses in his article. This community-based authenticity, as I have called it, is described by Butler in the following manner:

Like many other musicians in a wide variety of genres, the Pet Shop Boys [the performing artist] create authenticity by establishing a connection with the musical and cultural tradition of a particular community.⁷⁵

In the case of Parton and Houston, both artists have strong ties to queer communities and Peck's admiration of them adds validity to their place as cultural icons.⁷⁶ For Peck, his unapologetic queerness gives a voice to those who identify as both country-music fans and LGBTQIA+. His music is unique in that he is one of the only cowboys singing love songs about men. His trailblazing songs and fashion align with many cultural traditions surrounding queer communities. His steadfast dedication to queer country-music, along with artists like Musgraves

⁷⁵ Mark Butler, "Taking It Seriously," 14.

⁷⁶ Whitney Houston is held as a queer icon both for her music and suspected queer identity. During her life it was rumored that she was in a relationship with her best friend Robyn Crawford. The relationship between Houston and Crawford is rather complicated as they were both very close friends and worked professionally together. I would argue that claims that identify Houston as a lesbian or straight explicitly to be exaggerated on both ends. This is supported by interview with others who know Whitney Houston and talked to her about her private life. To hear these interviews please consult this 2018 biopic on Whitney Houston's life told by her family and close friends. Julieta Millan, "Whitney – Full Documentary (2018)," posted September 26, 2021, YouTube video, 2:00:23, <https://youtu.be/gtFpKkTU2Nk>. Accessed on 10/1/22. To read about an example of an article that depicts Houston's desire to be with Crawford see: Caroline Howe, "Inside Whitney Houston's Secret Torment for Being Gay, Falling for a Woman," *New York Post*, February 5, 2022. 1.

and Lil Naz X, can be seen as a form of resistance against traditionalists in the folk-country genre. While working with drag performers such as Trixie Mattel, Peck's choice to perform under the pseudonym "Orville Peck" and to physically cover his face is very aligned with both drag culture and anonymity. The queer interpretation of "I Will Always Love You" has roots that start with Parton and her song that is able to express a multitude of different varieties of love. Houston extends the expressive range of the song with her version into territories that Parton did not. For Peck, the culmination of personal and community-based authenticity results in a cover of "I will Always Love You" that, when performed in the sultry tones of his voice, is authentically queer.

Peck's high caliber of authenticity, along with his blended song that borrows from both Parton and Houston, is rather difficult to place on the spectrum of thick and thin cover songs. The listener is able to identify portions that are inspired by Parton's original, and other parts that are clearly influenced by Houston's version. Complicating things further is Peck's own style that is also in the mix and stands out against the attributes sourced from his beloved divas. I argue that this particular example still falls on the thinner side of the scale, but much closer to the mid-point on the grounds that the listener is able to hear three artists at once. Peck is clearly at the center and his audience is invited to know him as a performer. Yet, it is possible that through his performance, Parton and Houston also appear in the ears of the audience. But for Peck this aligns beautifully with his performance persona. He makes the decision to never reveal all of himself to the public and so, it stands to reason that the thickness of his cover resembles a semi-permeable barrier which is slightly more restrictive. Despite the thickness or thinness of his cover, Peck's performance still carries a narrative of hope which is imbedded in the subtext of both versions of "I Will Always Love You."

COVERING UP & DOLLY DRAG

Both Orville Peck and Dolly Parton are equally famous for their fashion and performing persona which simultaneously enhances their authenticity and identity while physically masking the person beneath the clothes. Peck occupies the more extreme side of this dichotomy, keeping his true name and appearance a complete mystery to the public. In fact, all we really know is that he is currently based in Canada and was born in South Africa. Performing in an American country-music style further blurs the background of Peck. His decision to perform with a mask also possesses a symbolism that speaks volumes about the nature of the queer experience. Masking and maintaining anonymity against the world have been a very real way of living for queer people who strive to avoid ostracization and physical violence both historically and currently. There is also a sense of irony that one of the most openly-queer country stars is an enigma, both completely open and out about his sexuality, yet completely closeted about who he is underneath the veneer of Orville Peck the persona. The mystery of Peck's identity behind the mask has not negatively impacted his career or his authenticity as a performer. His music and performances are very sincere and honest often telling queer stories not commonly heard in country music. For many queer listeners, Peck is a deep expression of queerness and queer lives. Peck is one of them and is making music for them. The mask he wears may cover his face, but it amplifies the sincerity of his music and tells the audience exactly who he is.

Parton, like Peck, also utilizes a performance persona and while she does not take her persona to the same extremes, there is a great deal of overlap in the way their performing identities and authenticity are implemented and perceived by an audience. In the place of a mask, Parton opts for rhinestone-studded gowns, huge blonde wigs, high-heeled shoes, and a fully painted face. Her desire for this appearance started from childhood when she idolized the

women who dressed in this flashy manner, even if these women had poor reputations in town. Just as Peck never appears without his mask, Parton always insists on appearing in high-glamor in public and even with her friends. Jane Fonda, Parton's co-star in *9 to 5*, recalls that in the many hours spent filming the movie and even when she visited Parton at her home, Fonda never saw Parton without the hair, make-up, and outfits.⁷⁷ Where Peck makes a masked man feel like a friend, Parton convinces us that someone dressed so "artificially" can actually be the most real and authentic person in the room. In 1977, Barbra Walters interviewed Parton while she was on tour. During the interview, Walters asks Parton rather directly why she chooses to dress in the manner she does despite already being pretty to which Parton responds:

No, It's certainly a choice. I don't like to be like everybody else. I've often made the statement that I would never stoop so low as to be fashionable, that's the easiest thing in the world to do. So, I just decided that I would do somethin' that would at least get the attention. Once they got past the shock of the ridiculous way I looked and all that, then they would see there was parts of me to be appreciated. I'm very real where it counts, and that's inside, and as far as my outlook on life and the way I care about people and the way I care about myself and the things I care about... I'm very content, I like the kind of person I am, so, I can afford to piddle around and do-diddle around with make-ups and clothes and stuff because I am secure with myself.⁷⁸

While Walters seems to be rather critical of the performance persona Parton has created for herself, ultimately, Parton was correct. Her fans may be dazzled by her appearance but it is her magnetic and charming personality that has made her so authentically her.

The adornments that Peck and Parton use in their public image may literally mask their body, but this physical covering yields a heightened level of expression while offering their

⁷⁷ Whately, "Dolly Parton: Here I Am," first aired December, 26, 2019.

⁷⁸ Happy Mag, "Dolly Shuts Down Patronising Interview in Style," posted July 6, 2021, YouTube video, 4:01, <https://youtu.be/If-oWqUYzlQ>. Accessed Mach 23, 2023. The misspelling of 'patronizing' is the in the title of the video.

audiences a more intimate insight into who they are personally. This concept of covering oneself to gain access to greater expression of the self is not a new concept, especially in drag culture. The process of getting in drag allows a person to shed their pedestrian self by changing their appearance. This new form can be whatever the person wants to be, and often this is an unedited version of the person hidden in the everyday. When this new form of a person begins to perform for an audience, they can be considered a drag performer. It seems that Parton is well aware of the similarities between her manifestation of her true self and drag performers who share a similar esthetic. Both Peck and Parton have entered the pantheon of revered queer figures and have had a great deal of correspondences with drag communities. For decades, Parton and her music have been inspirations for drag performers and their performances. In this way Parton acts as a catalyst for drag performers to express themselves. Putting on Dolly-drag frees the wearer from the confines of rigid society. Performing Parton's music, whether it be lip-syncing or covering, acts as a live retelling of queer narratives in impeccable fashion.

Peck and Parton are aware of their relation to the drag community, especially Parton who has spoken many times on drag communities. Sometimes in shows she replaces the name "Jolene" with "drag queen" as an inside joke that some drag queens rival her own beauty and extravagance just like Jolene does in the song.⁷⁹ Parton has also inspired 'Dolly Parton look-a-like' drag contests where drag queens compete for the best-looking Dolly Parton impersonation. In 2017, Parton appeared in an interview with Harry Connick Jr. where she tells the story about the time she went to a gay bar and entered one of these contests and lost.⁸⁰ Not only does Parton

⁷⁹ To see a clip of Parton doing this in concert see: Justin Gobble, "Dolly Parton Talking About Drag Queens During Jolene," posted August 21, 2008, YouTube video, 00:30, <https://youtube.com/shorts/MqM2mNwOBw4?feature=share>. Accessed 3/7/23.

⁸⁰ In the more recent 2022 interview with Jimmy Fallon Parton tells this story but leaves out that it was specifically a gay bar that was holding the look-a-like contest. In her interview with Connick she mentions that it was a gay bar and that drag queens were participating. For the Connick interview see: Harry Connick, Jr, "Dolly Parton Does a

compliment the glamor of the drag queens she was competing against, but she is generally amused with the entire event. Peck has also worked with several well-known drag queens in his musical career and has appeared on *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a guest judge as recently as 2023. Deeper than the clothes, hair, fringed masks, and rhinestones, is the idea that drag, which physically obscures the wearer, simultaneously allows one to express their authentic self. For this reason, I consider both Parton and Peck to be drag performers in their own right. For the sheer influence that Parton's performing persona has had on drag culture I consider her particular style as "Dolly Drag."

Bad Dolly Parton Impersonation," posted October 31, 2017, YouTube video, 0:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3U7txa_tCQ. Accessed on March 1, 2023. For the Jimmy Fallon interview see: The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, "Dolly Parton Clears Up Rumors About Her Secret Song that Is Locked Away in Dollywood (Extended)," posted November 30, 2022, YouTube video, 7:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9rckoLbTD4>. Accessed November 30, 2022.

TRIXIE MATTEL’S COVER OF “BACKWOODS BARBIE” AND QUEER JOY

Dolly Parton’s “Backwoods Barbie” Lyrics

I grew up poor and ragged, just a simple country girl.
I wanted to be pretty more than anything in the world,
Like Barbie or the models in the Fredricks' catalog.
From rags to wishes in my dreams I could have it all.
I'm just a backwoods Barbie, too much makeup, too much hair.
Don't be fooled by thinkin' that the goods are not all there.
Don't let these false eyelashes lead you to believe that
I'm as shallow as I look 'cause I run true and deep.

I've always been misunderstood because of how I look.
Don't judge me by the cover 'cause I'm a real good book.
So read into it what you will, but see me as I am.
The way I look is just a country girl's idea of glam.

I'm just a backwoods Barbie in a push-up bra and heels.
I might look artificial, but where it counts I'm real.
And I'm all dolled up and hopin' for a chance to prove my worth,
And even backwoods Barbie's get their feelings hurt.

I'm just a backwoods Barbie, too much makeup, too much hair.
Don't be fooled by thinkin' that the goods are not all there.
Yes, I can see where I could be misjudged upon first glance,
But even backwoods Barbie's deserve a second chance.
I'm just a backwoods Barbie just asking for a chance,
Just a backwoods Barbie.

Figure 7. Lyrics to Parton’s “Backwoods Barbie.”

In 2008, Parton released her album *Backwoods Barbie* which featured a song of the same name. The song chronicles her experiences growing up in rural Sevierville, Tennessee which, while paying homage to her roots, also brings up some of the difficulties she faced.⁸¹ See Figure 7. for the lyrics of “Backwoods Barbie.” While Parton has reflected very sweetly about her home and family in many interviews and songs, “Backwoods Barbie” tells another side to the story, one

⁸¹ Dolly Parton, *Backwoods Barbie*, released 2008, Spotify album, 48:25. Accessed August 27, 2022.

where Parton felt a little out of place in her Tennessee mountain home. The song addresses Parton's feelings of judgment from a community who viewed her appearance as distasteful and artificial despite the fact that she was always absolutely genuine as a person. Parton's look was first inspired by the women in town who wore a face full of make-up and tight dresses who her mother referred to as "trash."⁸² This story is a real experience from Parton's childhood, and yet it is widely recognized by countless others across multiple generations. It is the story of being born into a place you do not quite fit into. The story of having to leave to explore who you are. It is a queer story.

The complex picture of belonging and rejection that Parton is painting is expressed not only in the lyrics, but also in the music video and song itself. The music video for "Backwoods Barbie" opens on a rural farm house surrounded by shrubbery.⁸³ The laundry has been hung on the line as it dries in the wind. The entire scene is black and white like Dorothy's Kansas before she lands in Oz.⁸⁴ A child representing a young Parton twirls into frame brilliantly colored against the grey world. The camera then cuts to adult Parton, also in dynamic color, who is strolling longingly down the same grey country roads. All the people who pass by are also a dull grey, establishing that they were meant for the world they are treading in. Child Parton is seen crushing berries for lipstick and using a burnt match for eyeliner, paying homage to Parton's desire to be dolled up. As the video progresses, Adult Parton is seen walking down Hollywood Boulevard. The background remains grey, but as she walks down the street, she sees a line of street performers and entertainers who are also beaming with color like herself. Towards the end

⁸² Parton tells the story of her mother calling certain women trash in: Whately, "Dolly Parton: Here I am," 2019.

⁸³ To see the music video, see Dolly Parton, "Backwoods Barbie (Official Music Video)," posted March 16, 2009, YouTube video, 3:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJBz1U6Y-pg>. Accessed on 11/1/22.

⁸⁴ In the film *The Wizard of Oz* the state of Kansas scenes are all filmed in black and white. Oz, the mystical land, was shot in color.

of the video, Adult Parton returns to her home, just as she does in her actual life, still brightly colored against the grey. The final image as the video fades is Parton standing confidently in the grass, visually demonstrating the complex relationship she shares with home. While it is clear that she has a soft spot in her heart for home, she is also aware that others like her are out there in the world, away from Sevierville. This sense of melancholy is palpable in her performance and beautifully describes the struggle for belonging.

The sense of melancholy that Parton has created visually is paired with music that enhances her narrative. The song has a strong country-folk sound utilizing the pitch bending steel guitar, acoustic guitar, fiddle, and drum kit. The pace of the song remains steady throughout with interjections from the steel guitar and fiddle, framing the lyrics. The folk connotation from the steel guitar and fiddle sounds like the ghost of Parton's roots that follows her even when she makes it to Hollywood. The music is in a major mode but the general affect is still in the realm of the bleak. While Parton displays strength, the music implies that the old folk tunes of woe are a part of her no matter where she goes. Parton's musical narrative acts as an analogy for the idea that we are made up of many parts, and sometimes these parts of yourself are in conflict with each other. For many queer people, myself included, growing up in a small community and feeling repressed or trapped is a widely shared experience. For some queer people, their hometown represents deep trauma which stays with them into adulthood. In the song, Parton owns both parts of her identity, her country home roots as well as her place on the world stage as an entertainer.

Drag performer Trixie Mattel, like Parton, grew up in a rural community in Wisconsin and, through the performing arts, managed to find mountains of success as a drag queen, music

artist, and owner of the make-up company Trixie Cosmetics.⁸⁵ Mattel, who has been inspired by Parton's fashion and music, began playing guitar and singing as a child being taught by her uncle. Like in the song "Backwoods Barbie," Mattel left her rural home to perform in larger drag shows in Milwaukee and Chicago before going on to win the crown in *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* season 3 in 2018. Mattel is also celebrated for being the first and only drag queen to write, perform, and produce country-folk music, releasing her first two albums *Two Birds* and *Once Stone* in 2017 and 2018 respectively.⁸⁶ In 2019, Mattel released an EP [extended play] soundtrack to *Trixie Mattel: Moving Parts*, a documentary based on her life and career, where she covers Parton's 2008 song, "Backwoods Barbie."⁸⁷ Parton's song fits in very nicely on the soundtrack as it depicts Mattel's life from childhood to present.

Another connection between Parton and Mattel is this interest in the Barbie doll. The drag name and persona Trixie Mattel was conceived around the idea of being a living doll. Her last name Mattel is sourced from the name of the company who manufactures Barbie. Barbie the character, is also much like Mattel and Parton in that she represents a sort of hyper-femininity and a beauty standard that is physically out of reach for humans. However, Barbie's multiple careers have represented endless possibilities for the future, inspiring young children who grew up infatuated with her. Barbie dolls in particular have a reputation in queer communities as the toy

⁸⁵ Trixie Mattel is the drag name of Brian Firkus. In this thesis, I will be using Mattel's name as well as the pronouns she/her as this is what the artist uses in her music career, drag performances, and make-up business.

⁸⁶ To listen to *One Stone*, see: Trixie Mattel, *One Stone*, March 16, 2018, Spotify album, 22:30. Accessed June 5, 2022. To listen to *Two Birds*, see: Trixie Mattel, *Two Birds*, released May 2, 2017, Spotify album, 21:56. Accessed June 7, 2022. https://open.spotify.com/album/1XpbGFX7t7G8JwCnCkiPhy?si=_jUtKEhJT2ig4B4dTFuABg.

⁸⁷ An EP or extended play record is a term for musical recording that is longer than a single song but not as long as a complete album called a LP or long play. The length of LPs and EPs are tied to amount of music one could have on a two sided 33 ½ vinyl record. To see the EP see: Trixie Mattel, "Moving Parts (Acoustic)," recorded May 8, 2020, Spotify album, 16:01. Accessed October 9, 2022. To see the documentary, see: Nick Zeig-Owens, *Trixie Mattel: Moving Parts*, Released April 25, 2019, Amazon Prime Video, 1:31:00. Accessed June 7, 2022.

denied to children who are expected to be masculine presenting, the idea being that certain toys are meant only for boys or girls completely disregarding any children outside the gender binary. Small gay boys like Mattel who secretly coveted a Barbie of their own are all too familiar with this story. In this way, Barbie who is often seen as the pinnacle of heteronormativity, is also very queer in her own right. Parton and Mattel are Barbies that grew up outside the dreamhouse in Malibu, California. As displaced Barbies they have both found ways to reconcile their origins with their dreams, aspirations, and successes.

Parton's original recording of "Backwoods Barbie" carries a somber and melancholic atmosphere, however, Mattel's cover emulates a narrative of queer joy that celebrates one's true self. Mattel's cover utilizes only voice and acoustic guitar while increasing the tempo from 70bpm to 80bpm. The brighter timbre of the guitar, faster tempo, and removal of the pitch-bending steel guitar and fiddle greatly lifts the overall mood of the song. Mattel's cover of "Backwoods Barbie" acts as a retelling of the queer narrative which so often ends in despair. Instead, Mattel offers a story of queer joy that parallels her own personal life from being a backwoods Barbie to internationally recognized drag superstar, singer-songwriter, and make-up mogul. Like Peck's cover of "I Will Always Love You," Mattel's delivery is very intimate and genuine. Without changing any of the words or any portions of the melody, she highlights that there is joy for queer people in the future and sometimes, knowing that you don't quite fit in means you know exactly who you are. Parton's song is about her life but it is also meant for everyone. But Mattel's cover feels explicitly addressed to queer people in an authentic and honest way.

Much like Peck's cover of "I Will Always Love You," Mattel's cover of "Backwoods Barbie" is tricky to pinpoint on the sliding scale of thickness and thinness. Compared to

Reinaeiry's cover, Mattel makes far fewer alterations to Parton's original music in terms of melody, harmony, and genre. But Peck and Mattel still leave their individual stamp on their respective covers of Parton's songs through their authenticity and portrayals of queer narratives. While the listener may hear Parton in Mattel's cover, the recontextualization of the story in her song distances the two artists from each other. Parton's conflict between the love of her home and her need to leave, and Mattel's triumph and success as a queer drag performer paint different pictures of each artist. The thinness of Mattel's song is a result of the audience's ability to identify with her and her story of queer joy even under the cover of drag.

Both Parton and Mattel are addressing the theme of not fitting in, but for each artist respectively, the actual lived consequences of their otherness are rather different. For Parton, her desire to be a star with big hair and make-up mostly earned her some teasing, but for a queer kid like Mattel, being out of the closet in a deeply conservative area is potentially life threatening. The real-life threat of physical and political violence against queer people, especially transgender and nonbinary folks has not dissipated. Currently, legislation in the conservative states is targeting queer communities with special attention on children who may also feel like Backwoods Barbies. Listening to Mattel's deep baritone voice sing about being a poor country girl who just wanted to be pretty is queer poetry. That small queer child who wanted to be a beautiful Barbie is now performing on stage in a massive blonde wig that eclipses Parton's. Blurring the gender binary as a six-foot drag queen, Mattel's cover is a message to queer people about a life beyond survival. It is a message that one's origins cannot stop you from finding queer joy. The truth is, Backwoods Barbies are everywhere, queer narratives, both explicit and in subtext, are everywhere. And the most important message of all is that queer people are everywhere.

A FUTURE FOR THE COVER SONG AND ITS STORIES

Dolly Rebecca Parton is one of America's most cherished singer-songwriters whose fanbase is perhaps the most diverse one could imagine ranging from conservative country-music lovers to drag queens who impersonate her and perform lip-syncs to her music. Often, Parton's music is praised for its ability to tell the stories of real people and real life. Yet, for those who continue to hold onto conservative views of country music, such as John Gerome and those who sought to disband queer people's visibility at Dollywood, the lived experiences of these "others" do not belong. The truth is that lived hardships such as poverty, tragedy, loss, and unrequited love do not pertain to straight people only. The queerness of Parton's music has gone unnoticed by a majority of people outside of queer communities, but for a great deal of these people, the subtext has been heard loud and clear across her long career. Although the queer subtext of Parton's music is only now being discussed in a formal setting, to deny what so many have known for decades, deprives us of the rich and complex depth of her music.

Covers of Parton's music possess the unique ability to amplify and elucidate the queer narratives that have eluded many listeners but have always existed in her music. In this way, covers are specially equipped to excavate the numerous interpretations in Parton's songs and beyond. A cover operates as a tool for artists to make familiar-sounding music that places queer people at the center of the songs rather than excluding them. This genre operates as a serious and diverse method of music creation where meaning can be queered with or without changing the lyrics. The flexibility and variability of covers, whether they be thick or thin, also lend themselves as an elastic foundation for artists like Lil Nas X, Reinaeiry, Orville Peck, and Trixie Mattel to highlight queer narratives of despair, hope, and joy in their own individual ways. Further, the blurred dividing line between musical cover and parody is reflective of a queer

liminal space where the literal reading of lyrics and the lyric's intentions are increasingly difficult to define.

From Nadine Hubbs' queer reading of "Jolene" to P.D. Magnus and Serge Lacasse and Michael Talbot's disagreement on where to draw the line between parody and covers, it is evident that the discourse on these topics is ripe for serious academic study and discussion. As I have endeavored to highlight in this thesis, a great deal can be learned about both popular music and ourselves by studying these growing genres. As the internet, including social media, becomes an increasingly significant source of our music, it simultaneously transforms into an archive of people's engagement with music, covers, parodies, and musical artists. For this thesis I have selected some interactions in the form of YouTube comments that represent the kinds of engagement found on the examples I discussed. These are queer voices that would likely be silenced outside the safe queer pockets of the internet, much like the blogs discussed by Julie Rak. YouTube, which was launched in 2005, is now not the only platform where covers have begun to flourish as John Stratton discusses in his article about the pandemic, covers, and TikTok. Paula Harper is also writing music on the internet with articles like "Receiving, Remixing, Recuperating 'Rebecca Black—Friday.'"⁸⁸ Additionally, scholars like Doris Leibetseder are making connections between parody and queerness.

I sincerely hope that this thesis contributes to the academic conversation of covers by highlighting the inherent queerness they contain. Beyond the noble task of defining what these genres are, I am interested in what they are capable of achieving when they combine preexisting music with new forms of expression. In the case of Parton's music, covers have revealed a

⁸⁸ Paula Harper "Receiving, Remixing, Recuperating 'Rebecca Black—Friday,'" *American Music* 38, no. 2 (2020): 217–39. <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.38.2.0217>.

plethora of narratives which are specific to queer communities and encapsulate the feelings of despair, hope, and joy. This genre extends beyond the recreation of an original recording. It is also an act of creation that can both conceal and reveal one's personality and authenticity. Both personal and community-based authenticity, as Mark Butler defines in his article, are key factors in cover songs that contribute to the level of authenticity an artist is able to manifest. As it turns out, covers are full of nuance and intrigue. They are able to hold their weight amongst original songs and carry just as much meaning. For communities historically neglected by society, cover songs can mean even more to them than the top 20 hits on the radio. This genre makes it possible for their stories to be heard.

Whether Parton is professing that she would be a drag queen if she had been born male, like she did on her variety show in 1987, or swapping Jolene's name for drag queen in performance, her acknowledgement of her queer fans and queer communities in general cannot and should not be ignored. As she has progressed through her career, Parton has grown increasingly vocal and direct about her support like in the episode, "Two Doors Down" from her Netflix series *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings*. In the 1960s and 70s, Parton provided much of her support in subtext and tongue-in-cheek humor without taking a decisive stance in the gay rights movement. However, this did not stop queer people, like Brian Kennedy and Cory Albertson, from picking up on her messages. The high quality of her music coupled with her utilization of subtext makes the act of covering a rich experience for artists like Lil Nas X, Reinaeiry, Orville Peck, and Trixie Mattel. The variety of stories found in Parton's music alone suggests that analysis of additional covers and parodies, even ones with less apparent ties to queer communities, can yield new insight into the hidden narratives of people and groups traditionally neglected in popular music.

At the time of writing this thesis, American legislature in states like Parton's home state of Tennessee are attempting to criminalize the most vulnerable in our community, primarily transgender individuals, non-binary individuals, and drag performers. Many politicians around the country have proposed bills which seek to strip queer people's health care and force them to live according to the government's laws. Additionally, these same people seek to demonize the queer community and defend their devastating legislature by claiming it is protecting the public. Make no mistake, this is an attempt to erase queer people and queerness from America. While this prospect is terrifying for many, queer people are resilient and strong. Queer people and their narratives are a part of human history as well as the history of art and music. The musical covers of Parton's music serve as excellent examples of the queer genes that exist in the DNA of country-folk music all across the southern United States. These covers not only enrich our lives with their creative interpretations but they expose the true depth of Dolly Parton's music.

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