

Willman, Chris. *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*. (New York: The New Press, 2005), pp. 302. \$25.95  
ISBN 978-1-59558-017-7

**Oklahoma is known throughout the world** for its contributions to the musical arts. Of course, country music is the most prominent of this state's entertainment exports. This musical tradition stretches from the singing cowboy days of Gene Autry to the American Idolization of Carrie Underwood. In between, numerous Oklahomans have made a habit of perfecting and then reinventing the country music genre. Bob Wills inaugurated the western swing era. Woody Guthrie popularized the Dust Bowl wisdom of the folk song. From the late 1960s to the early 1990s, Tulsa-based Roy Clark provided down-home humor and musical charm to American families. As co-host of the nationally syndicated *Hee Haw* variety show, his pickin' and grinnin' became a mainstay. Yukon native Garth Brooks injected his country stylings with powerful rock riffs and a dazzling stage presence. In 1999, the Recording Industry Association of America named him the top selling solo artist of the twentieth century edging out Elvis Presley for the coveted title. Prolific Oklahoma songwriters such as Hoyt Axton and Jimmy Webb have also made their mark. Even now, the country music universe is ruled by a cavalcade of Oklahoma superstars such as Reba McEntire, Vince Gill, Ronnie Dunn (of Brooks & Dunn), and Toby Keith.

In his book, *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, journalist Chris Willman takes the reader through a fascinating journey in contemporary politics. Country music serves as both metaphor for politics played on a larger

stage and as a significant venue of political power play in and of itself. Some of the best and most provocative books about American politics come from outside the typical channels of political punditry, electioneering, and scholarship. Although it may not be particularly palatable to the urban intelligentsia, especially on the east and west coasts, to truly understand American politics a sense of what's going on in the heartland of America is necessary. And there, country music is king.

Willman makes a strong case for country music as actually being the most popular form of American music. He points to the music industry's annual awards shows. The 2005 Grammy Awards drew 18.8 million viewers while the 2005 Country Music Association Awards drew just a little less with over 18.4 million viewers. Willman explains the significance: "In other words, if the Grammys had expanded the token country segment—into which they had shoehorned stars like Gretchen Wilson, Tim McGraw, and Keith Urban—to fill the program's entire three hours, the show might have been about as highly rated as it was with J. Lo and Usher thrown in, too" (p. 6). Country music continues to be the longstanding leader in radio penetration. Talk radio gets a little over half that coverage. Even though Top 40 and other urban formats seem to get most of the attention from the news media, they lag far behind in terms of radio outlets and broadcast coverage. Willman says, "After the 2004 election, pundits had to confront the possibility, welcome or otherwise, that the red states making up the nation's vast middle represented the mainstream of America. If you follow that line of thinking, you could theorize that country, long marginalized by gatekeepers on the coasts, is actually America's most mainstream music" (p. 5). The South has certainly played an outsized political role over the past four decades. Like the lights that brighten high school stadiums on Friday nights and the church choirs belting out hymns on Sunday morning, country music is an undeniably powerful cultural institution dominant in this region. That it has a major impact on American politics should not come as a big surprise.

Willman seamlessly switches among various perspectives of the political scene. He focuses on how business executives carefully maneuver their media products through an environment of polarized politics. At times, these music industry leaders swallow their own political preferences to cater to the oft validated perception that their

audience expectations now lean right. The actual degree of the drift toward conservatism among country music fans is a matter of some dispute. Some surveys suggest a relatively balanced partisanship among country fandom. But Willman persuasively illustrates that events like the Dixie Chicks fiasco would not occur unless country music fans were not skewed significantly toward the right.

Willman provides one of the best descriptions about how intelligent, informed people of conflicting political persuasions can and do communicate with each other. In one passage, he describes Nashville's famous "Music Row," the de facto center of the country music business as a hotbed of political diversity and debate: "It makes for many a tense moment as folks try to feel each other out—as well as some exciting ones as people who respect each other sometimes discover they're ideologically at odds and end up having substantive debates from across party lines, something you don't often find on the Upper West Side or in Birmingham" (p. 197). According to Willman, rampant bipartisanship characterizes the top executives at Music Row. "Sony has Democrat Grady on top and Republican Mark Wright right under him; the Universal Music Group has liberal Luke Lewis and conservative James Stroud in the top spots; Universal South has its own guys on either side of the aisle, Tim DuBois and Tony Brown as cochairs; and so on" (p. 196). These corporate types in Nashville appear to live within a political culture that places high value on tolerance and civility. Such demonstration of mutual respect coupled with a willingness to deliberate on the nation's policy issues is rare in the new world of red states v. blue states. The top executive at the Warner music label, Paul Worley says, "As you're sitting with somebody, maybe getting to know 'em for the first time, there's a little dance that people do to figure out whether to go there or not, probing ways of talking and looking that you can use to subtly let somebody know where you stand, that if they want to pull out, it's okay, and that if they go in, they may not like what they hear" (p. 197). Willman is quick to add that this uniquely balanced and deliberative mix of progressives and conservatives among the top managers of country music does not characterize the rest of the country music industry. As you travel down the food chain in the country music business, the professional employees lean more and more to the right. Likewise, the vast majority of the top musical talent seems to be very visibly bent toward conservatism. Willman's interviews with the board

of directors for the Country Music Association lead him to estimate that over three-fourths of the membership are conservative (p. 196).

Willman interviews countless music artists about how their political tastes relate to their craft. He recounts the political activism (and restraint) of various artists. Since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the stakes have become high. The spark that ignited the most recent political controversy within country music is the famous remark by Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks. She told a London audience that she was ashamed to hail from the same home state as President George W. Bush. Willman even invents a new adjective to describe the process of a left-leaning country music star ostracized by his or her conservative fan base: "Dixie Chicked." In their case, record sales plummeted, concert venues were canceled, radio stations ignored their songs, and even their CDs were burned. Meanwhile, initial reports that the Dixie Chicks music sales were unaffected by the controversy proved wrong. They turned out to be based on data covering the time period before their London remarks received publicity on this side of the Atlantic. Sales dropped from 202,350 units per week down to 33,127 by the next month. As Willman notes, "Considering that every liberal worth his salt was swearing he or she was headed out to buy the album just to show support, the incredible shrinking numbers suggested a severe vote of no-confidence in more conservative climes" (p. 36). Such open hostility directed toward the Dixie Chicks is incongruous with the fact that other very public progressives in country music such as Willie Nelson are able to express their liberal sentiments with little public reaction. Willman explores whether there are double standards for male and female but he rejects this feminist explanation. He finally concludes that the Dixie Chicks basically pulled a bait and switch on their fans. "That's the very cornerstone of country music: that the entertainers are no different from their audience, a rule not found in any other genre, not even hip-hop, where a certain amount of ostentatious, super-elitist bling is customary along with the still-down-with-y'all, just-got-shot-at-yesterday street realism," explains Willman, "In the Chicks fracas, some country fans may have been wounded by the realization, subconscious or otherwise, that they aren't really so tight with the people who they believed gave a voice to what was in their hearts after all" (p. 33).

Willman chronicles the historical evolution of country music with its rural, agrarian roots and common-man sympathies. That it has come to be aligned with the Republican party is a relatively new development. Both what have come to be termed country music and folk music originated with traditional Appalachian songs. “Country partisans have always been suspicious of pop crossover, and Woody Guthrie was the original crossover star, making his name in the hillbilly ghetto he soon abandoned for the less woody climes of Carnegie Hall when it became evident that his burgeoning political sensibilities wouldn’t require such careful parsing up north” (p. 11). Willman sees a reconvergence of folk and country and offers the inability of the Grammys to cleanly categorize its nominations as examples: “Nearly every album that’s been nominated recently in their ‘contemporary folk’ category. . . can at least loosely be considered alt-country at the core” (p. 11). It is perhaps a byproduct of the divergence between country and folk in which the latter came to be identified with progressive politics during the decades in the mid-twentieth century. Now, country music for liberals must be known by any other name such as pop, alternative country, or contemporary folk. Linda Ronstadt who has long been forgotten as getting her start as a country-western singer on *The Johnny Cash Show* singing tunes from Waylon Jennings now refers to her own music with the painfully awkward phrasing, “Mexican American agrarian music” (p. 174).

Oklahoma’s country stars have not fit as neatly as one might expect into the tight conservative boxes assigned to them by their publics. Vince Gill, for example, came out early in defense of the Dixie Chicks saying that there are political leaders who “have said a lot worse things about George Bush than Natalie did, and nobody rips them for it. . . . I kind of feel like she’s been bashed enough” (p. 37). He later succumbs to pressure from his public to distance himself from the Chicks and lets it be known that he holds “the completely opposite view of Natalie Maines” (p. 37). Reba McEntire proved to be fairly apolitical in Willman’s treatment although George W. Bush particularly favors her songs because of their emphasis on traditional values of family and faith (p. 89). Garth Brooks raised a few eyebrows among Southern conservatives with his unabashed stance against gay bashing. In his song, “We Shall Be Free,” Garth sings, “When we’re free to love anyone we choose/ When this world’s big enough for all different views. . . . Then we shall be free” (p. 166). In 2000, Brooks very pointedly joined gay icon George

Michael to sing Freedom 90 at Equality Rocks, the first major benefit concert in the United States for gay rights (Birch, 2000). Willman theorizes that once you rise to the status of Elvis, the public will let pass a stray heresy or two.

Much of *Rednecks & Bluenecks* covers Oklahoma's own Toby Keith. In fact, the second chapter is devoted to him. Throughout much of the rest of the book as well, the complexity of Keith's politics is further explored. Keith arrived most visibly on the political scene with the release of "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)." The song was ostensibly written in reaction to the terrorist attacks of 9-11 and to show support for American soldiers sent to Afghanistan. But the song was widely interpreted to show support for the president during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq. Keith delivered a message to the terrorists in the blunt poetics of country music—America is going to "put a boot up your ass." His song became a #1 hit on the country music charts and even crossed over into Top 40. As military action progressed, Toby Keith and Natalie Maines would publicly trade barbs on their differing responses to America's new policy of preemption. He also made several appearances in support of the Bush campaign during the 2004 election. By all appearances, Keith became the poster boy for conservative causes and a very convenient campaign asset for the Republican Party. Willman comments, "If you polled Al Franken's audience, Toby would probably have a Q rating somewhere between Ron Silver and Don Rumsfeld" (p. 59). Then once more, Willman goes behind the scenes to reveal that reality is a little more complicated than what it seems at first blush.

With maybe just a little bit of a tongue-in-cheek overstatement, Willman declares, "Toby Keith is the face of the Democratic Party in the South" (p. 62). He grew up as a Democrat and is still committed to the Democratic party. "Back home he campaigned on behalf of conservative Oklahoma's Democratic governor, Brad Henry" (p. 64). He helped the Democratic party campaign for the state lottery to help pay for Oklahoma's public education. And, "Keith has famously buddied up to country music's most veteran liberal, Willie Nelson, without apparent discomfort" (p. 64).

And finally, what about that "Okie from Muskogee" who once famously derided those San Francisco hippies for growing their "long and shaggy" hair, taking drugs, and burning draft cards? In his modern

incarnation, Merle Haggard has done a 180 degree turnaround and has been filing a series of protest songs against the war in Iraq and the Patriot Act. As a result, Haggard has become a new darling of the left. Willman pairs up Haggard with Johnny Cash, terms them “the Omnipoliticians” and devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of these stalwarts of country music.

Of all the top country music stars with Oklahoma roots, only Ronnie Dunn of Brooks and Dunn fame, appears to be consistently conservative in the vein preferred by the fan base. What Willman’s book reveals is that Dunn “is a boot-scootin’ foreign policy wonk” who feasts his eyes on such tomes as *What Went Wrong* by Princeton historian Bernard Lewis and *Hatred’s Kingdom* by the former ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Dunn loves a good talk about politics. “Unlike Alan Jackson, Dunn can tell you the difference between Iran and Iraq. At length” (p. 90-92).

Overall, *Rednecks & Bluenecks* confirms the widely held notion that country music is a strong bastion for conservative beliefs. In the entertainment world, country music is therefore a bit of an oddity. Although the surface appearance of a conservative bent is well founded, Willman successfully analyzes at a deeper level to reveal more complexity. In that respect, the author plays an important scholarly role in addition to mere journalistic treatment. Willmann shows that country music’s alliance with the right may just be a quirk of recent history. Very few producers or even artists strive to be overtly political. “A majority of artists and the bean counters who rely on them would prefer that the music remain altogether apolitical and not alienate even a single listener whose purchase might provide the next day’s per diem” (p. 8). But the reality is that business necessity must pay its due to political reality. *Rednecks & Bluenecks* is an important primer for helping the uninitiated unlock many of the mysteries of American political culture. Admittedly, my expectations were not that high when I first picked up this book, but I found it filled with exceptional political analysis. It should not be dismissed.

Brett S. Sharp  
University of Central Oklahoma

