# 4.1 Country Music Opens Its Ears

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May 23, 2014

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NASHVILLE — About a year and a half ago, as the country superstar Blake Shelton was working on songs for his latest album, “Based on a True Story ,” he reached out to John Esposito, the president of his label, Warner Bros. Nashville.

“I get a text from Blake saying, ‘Espo, we have just recorded the sound of money, lots and lots of money,’ ” Mr. Esposito recently recalled in his office here.

Mr. Shelton is one of the genre’s leading lights — coach on “The Voice,” co-host of the Academy of Country Music Awards — and knows from money. So, intrigued, Mr. Esposito drove down Music Row to Ocean Way Studios, where he heard Mr. Shelton’s rainmaker “Boys ’Round Here.”

Surprisingly, the noise money made was the sound of Mr. Shelton rapping. And he wasn’t wrong: Eventually, “Boys ’Round Here” would rise to No. 2 on the Billboard country chart, and achieve his highest position on the Billboard Hot 100.

And so here is a sign of the Nashville times: One of the genre’s reigning traditionalists (a tricky one, but still) diving headlong into what may have seemed like a passing fad, the overlap of hip-hop and country, and finding success with it.

Country has been on a collision course with hip-hop for the last few years, and Mr. Shelton’s embrace of it, however fleeting, was an indicator that what was afoot was more than a flirtation. Rather, it reflected a change in country music’s DNA, and was also a harbinger of its more open-eared future.

There has been no escaping the sonic shifts that have been reconfiguring country music of late. Already the country-rap crossover — collaborations with rappers, hip-hop slang sneaking into songs — has a partner in the recent spate of country songs produced with flourishes of electronic music.

The floodgates are opening because of generational shifts in Nashville and demographic shifts in listenership that have shown that country can no longer afford to be walled off from the rest of the world, and has to reimagine itself as a result. That’s meant Luke Bryan’s spring break anthems, Lady Antebellum’s soft rock, Jason Aldean’s fight songs, and also any number of songs — by Mr. Bryan, Mr. Aldean, Florida Georgia Line and more — that incorporate rapping, and songs by Keith Urban, Jerrod Niemann and Jake Owen, among others, that nod to the dance floor.

Country is likely as broadly successful as it’s ever been — it is the most popular radio format — but as it becomes more widely embraced, it struggles mightily to retain its core values. A genre saddled with moral superiority and social inferiority, it wants to police its borders even as what’s inside is evolving radically. There is a widening and not fully reconciled distinction between country as a genre (i.e., what gets played on the radio) and country as a set of lived practices (i.e., what country folks do).

“So many of our artists came from small rural backgrounds, and they never really escaped the boundaries of their backgrounds until they hit it big. A lot of the tenor, the flavor came from where they came from,” said Mike Dungan, chairman and chief executive of Universal Music Group Nashville. “Much of the innocence of that narrow view of the world has been infringed.”

What that means for country is a generation of stars — mostly in their mid-late 30s, old enough to have grown up with hip-hop as a fact of life, even in the small towns they hail from, who think nothing of sprinkling a little bit of it into their music.

“Nobody grew up more country than me,” said Mr. Bryan, maybe the genre’s biggest star of the moment, “and we listened to Eazy-E and 2 Live Crew.”

Mr. Bryan’s climb to the top has been a long one, and he developed his fan base playing not just in honky-tonks, but also at college parties and spring break ragers. “We watched what the D.J. played afterward,” he said. “Right when I got offstage, they started playing Juvenile and Outkast.”

This natural hybridity has made for a new category of stars — Mr. Bryan, Jason Aldean, and most notably, Florida Georgia Line, whose hip-hop-inflected hit “Cruise” was one of last year’s dominant pop singles, helped along by a remix with the rapper Nelly, who was also part of the other significant hip-hop-country crossover record of the last decade — “Over and Over,” the 2004 Tim McGraw duet. (Florida Georgia Line will tour minor league baseball stadiums with Nelly this summer.)

“Jason and Luke busted down the doors,” said Tyler Hubbard of Florida Georgia Line. “This sound is part of the evolution of country music.”

There was never a guarantee that this would happen. Just a decade ago, when the MuzikMafia, a group of country experimentalists led by the duo Big & Rich, tried to infiltrate Nashville, only to be received lukewarmly. “People looked at us like we were crazy,” said John Rich, half of Big & Rich. “It was science fiction 10 years ago, and now it’s reality.”

At least part of the difficulty faced by Big & Rich was that they tried to gain access to Nashville through the front door, in an era before the Internet made it easy to seek out fans directly. Now, unconventional artists have ways of generating their own audiences.

Many of the most radical ideas along these lines had come from outside the country-music system. To find the origin point of this latest movement you have to look outside Nashville, to Atlanta and Athens, Ga., in the mid-to-late 1990s. That was when Shannon Houchins, who was an in-house producer for the influential Atlanta hip-hop label So-so Def, first worked with rappers who would go on to be Colt Ford and Bubba Sparxxx, who were briefly in a rap group called One Card Shi.

“We didn’t think anyone wanted to listen to us talk about the dirt roads and shotguns and bonfires,” Mr. Houchins said in his memorabilia-festooned office at Average Joes Entertainment here, where he is a founder and president. “It was really Bubba who said we need to talk about the things we do.”

The first Bubba Sparxxx album, “Dark Days, Bright Nights,” caught the ear of the hip-hop producer Timbaland, who signed him to his Beat Club imprint. Together they made the 2003 album “Deliverance” (Beat Club/Interscope), which remains one of the most inventive hip-hop albums of the 2000s, and probably wouldn’t sound terribly out of place if released today.

“Deliverance” was, in mannerism, if not genre, pure country, from the bluegrass-sample beats to the muddy lyrics. At the time, though, it was little more than a curio.

“I know my blood’s in the mortar that laid the bricks,” Bubba Sparxxx said in an interview at Average Joes, where he is now signed, reunited with Mr. Ford and Mr. Houchins. Country-rap is now an established scene, but Bubba Sparxxx, who’s had more mainstream club hits, is not a guaranteed sell in that world, despite his rural upbringing. “It’s been difficult integrating him into the fan base,” Mr. Houchins admitted.

He continued, “These country kids now — it’s worse than early-90s ‘are you real?’ hip-hop conversations. They’re ready to trash this guy if he’s not really country.”

Imagine the country-rap world as the new underground, made up of fans true to country values but who are left cold by mainstream country music.

But what’s creating the tipping point in country music as a whole is the top-down embrace of hip-hop, with established stars like Mr. Aldean borrowing a little bit of the style and attitude to diversify their approach.

It’s probably not a coincidence that, not long after Mr. Aldean took Mr. Ford out on the road as an opening act in 2009, soon after Mr. Ford had released his debut country-rap album, he decided to record his own version of Mr. Ford’s “Dirt Road Anthem,” which went on to become the highest charting hit of Mr. Aldean’s career on the Billboard Hot 100.

“As much as I like Colt, the way we were going to do that record, our approach was going to be different,” Mr. Aldean said, adding that the success of his version, different from Mr. Ford’s only notionally, in that it was a singer doing the rapping rather than a rapper, “let people know it was O.K. to do things like that.”

Mr. Aldean’s “Dirt Road Anthem,” which was released in 2010, was the line in the sand, the first broadly successful country-rap song and an almost complete outlier at the time.

Things have changed. “Right now, to write a country rap, it’s almost predictable,” said Luke Laird, in the attic studio of his new office space on Music Row. “It’s more of a risk to write a traditional country song.”

Mr. Laird, one of Nashville’s most promising young songwriters, hasn’t written any of the most notable crossover records, but hip-hop is embedded into his songwriting process in a different way. Many times he’ll begin working on a demo by laying down a beat before introducing guitar. Turning to his computer, he began playing a demo he recently recorded with Rodney Clawson — “Nashville royalty,” he said — that uses a drum sound he got from a Jake One sample kit. “It’s all these influences from my childhood coming together,” he said.

Among songwriters, Mr. Laird isn’t alone in that. Mr. Esposito said that finding writers to collaborate with Big Smo, the country rapper he signed who’s about to release his major-label debut album, “Kuntry Livin’,” hasn’t been a challenge.

Demos from songwriters looking to sell their songs “come in with raps on them now,” Mr. Ford says.

At the same time that hip-hop is affecting how country singers sing — though it can be argued that thanks to recitation records, spoken vocals have been integral to country for decades — dance music is having an impact on how some country songs sound. When Taylor Swift flirted with dubstep on her last album, it seemed to be a singular move, and one that reflected her position as a pop star with country bona fides, not a Nashville loyalist. But it may have inadvertently cleared the way for a recent spate of hits, like Mr. Niemann’s “Drink to That All Night,” that bring Nashville back to the dance floor years after country-disco, the line-dancing craze and the Denim & Diamonds nightclub.

This emergent phenomenon was on display one night in March at Dierks Bentley’s Whiskey Row, a bar-nightclub in Scottsdale, Ariz., designed in what might be called modern urban faux honky-tonk style, and where Dee Jay Silver has a monthly residency. “Bottle service country music,” he called it. There were waitresses ferrying bottles to revelers at V.I.P. tables, which also featured their own beer taps. Jordan Wessel, the reigning Miss Arizona USA, went behind the D.J. booth for some conversation. There was also a cluster of good old boys in cowboy hats congregating in front of the camouflage-draped D.J. table, grabbing bachelorette party attendees for a quick two-step.

About a decade ago, Dee Jay Silver worked with Nelly, D.J.-ing parties for his Pimp Juice energy drink. Since then, he’s become a regular at clubs across the country, spinning eclectic sets that have almost always included a touch of country.

But in the last few years, Dee Jay Silver’s career has changed mightily: First, Mr. Aldean took him on tour. Brad Paisley currently includes him in his stage show. And in April, he started a syndicated country radio mixshow, which airs in over 40 markets, and on which he plays high-energy country and his own country-dance remixes.

At this club, he treated country like any other genre — mixing it seamlessly with mainstream hip-hop and dance hits. Modern country, with its heavy bass thump and rapped verses, fits neatly into this paradigm, but he also displayed how older songs, like “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” by Brooks & Dunn and Garth Brooks’s “Friends in Low Places,” were just as friendly to the dance floor.

This is mainstream country now — nightclubs, spring break, college parties, city life. So as the genre feels increasingly unmoored from the rural experience, it leaves a gap for country-rap, which is often, word for word, far more specifically rural than what’s on the radio. In part, that’s because it’s less conventionally popular, and subject to less of the inevitable smoothing-out that comes with success via mainstream outlets. That makes it something like the outlaw country of the day.

Mr. Ford recalls talking to radio programmers about what they play and telling them, “If you think that’s country and what I do is not, then we’re from way different kinds of country.” Country radio, which has just one format, remains largely resistant to country-rap’s charms, unless the person doing the rapping is an established star. “I feel like I’m standing on the outside of the glass sometimes,” Mr. Ford says.

Given that the usual doors are closed, Mr. Ford’s label and others are looking for nontraditional outlets to be heard. (Maybe it’s time for “Yo! CMT Raps.”) The business model of Average Joes has a lot in common with that employed by hip-hop outsider labels like Strange Music or Psychopathic Records, outfits that have built their own infrastructures to best serve audiences and tastes ignored by traditional rap labels. Average Joes recently bought half of the Mega Truck Series, a racing organization. Mud bogs — huge, messy outdoor parties — have been crucial in building the success of country rappers like Mr. Ford and Big Smo.

In Unionville, Tenn., a spare town about an hour south of Nashville, Big Smo lives in a small house on a huge spit of land. Parked out front is a 1972 Buick Riviera, with the license plate KRANKED, which he said is the one used in the film “Crank.” It’s being washed by a friend of the rapper, who is filming a scene for his coming reality show, “Big Smo,” which will premiere on A&E next month.

Out here, it’s hard to refute the country bona fides of Big Smo, even if the medium he uses to deliver them isn’t the familiar one. Early in his career, he rapped about more typical street-oriented subject matter, but “learning that’s not who I was is part of my journey,” he said, weaving through cows on the farmland adjacent to his house.

Instead, he raps about blue-collar concerns, about life nowhere near a spring break college party, and has found plenty of people willing to listen. Even if traditional radio isn’t available to him — and it almost certainly won’t be — he’s happy to gather up the stragglers to make his own fan base.

“I’m going to go out here and grab these weird country” fans, Big Smo said. “The ones that feel like they don’t belong somewhere, and I’m going to be like ‘Hey, you dip-chewing, mudslinging, shine-guzzling” folks — though he used a more affectionate, dirtier term — “you roll with me now. You’re kinfolk, let’s go.”