

# Country music creeds

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Here are some lyrics from the top song on Billboard's top country songs<sup>1</sup>:

Early Monday morning, til Friday 5  
Man I work, work, work but I don't climb, climb, climb  
Boss man can shove that overtime up his can  
All I want to do is put a drink in my hand

Fill it up, throw it down  
I got a 40 hour week worth of trouble to drown  
No need to complicate it, I'm a simple man  
All you got to do is put a drink in my hand

Here's #2, from the *Tailgates and Tanlines* album:

You got your hands up  
You're rocking in my truck  
You got the radio on  
You're singing every song  
I'm set on cruise control  
I'm slowly losing hold  
Of everything I got

Numbers three through six are love songs that read like every love song. Number five<sup>2</sup> was somewhat interesting, alluding to a breakup and the singer's guilt for cheatin'.  
Next non-love song:

For me it's a beach bar<sup>3</sup>  
Or on a boat underneath the stars  
Or with my band up on a stage  
For a while everything's okay

For some it's a fast car

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.billboard.com/charts/country-songs#/charts/country-songs>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.elyrics.net/read/d/david-nail-lyrics/let-it-rain-lyrics.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.cowboylitics.com/lyrics/chesney-kenny/reality-30755.html>

Moonshine in a mason jar  
And everybody has their way  
Somehow to escape

Consider the characters in the non-love songs I've shown you so far. The characters are deliberately common Johnny Paycheck types. In fact, the narrator in the third example doesn't even have an explicit character, and we are instead left to infer who the person is by a list of things the person enjoys.

There's a thread of pop music that is deliberately opaque, so the listener can imagine a mood instead of focusing on the story, like this song about having a crush<sup>4</sup> with an accompanying video about nothing. There is some great writing around interesting characters: The Nields' wallflower<sup>5</sup> or Dinah Washington unloved<sup>6</sup> or this self-loathing narrator and his captor<sup>7</sup> or even this immigrant longing for home<sup>8</sup> which also touches on the *I remember fond times* motif.

The country songs don't have their provenance in any of that. Rather, they trace back to the creed<sup>9</sup>, a document that the faithful are expected to recite to reinforce the teachings of the religion. From the Apostle's creed<sup>10</sup>:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.

As literature, it is rudimentary and has no characters to speak of. It is simply a list of things the author of the creed believes in. It was written for others to recite, and when they do, they are affirming that they too believe in these things. The intent of a Christian creed is as clear: to make sure that everybody has their story straight and doesn't stray from the accepted norm.

A country song, like any good rock & roll, is meant to be sung along to, and I'd say, subjectively, that country songs tend to be easier than most to sing along with, thanks to an emphasis on clear singing and little divergence from verse-chorus forms.

If you go back to the top of this column and read those lyrics as creeds, they make a lot of sense as such. They are a list of things that the speaker believes and enjoys, and not all that much more.

Chart-topping hip hop tends to do it too. The singer in this song also has no character or goals beyond her fashion statement:

[...]I'm gonna hit this city  
Before I leave, brush my teeth with a bottle of Jack

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if-UzXIQ5vw&ob=av3e>

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z\\_oY8pBc8k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z_oY8pBc8k)

<sup>6</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=judyCgN2daA>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeWjzBHUdsI>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA8UEWLUkd0>

<sup>9</sup><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creed>

<sup>10</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27\\_Creed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27_Creed)

Cause when I leave for the night, I aint coming back

I'm talking - pedicure on our toes, toes  
Trying on all our clothes, clothes  
Boys blowing up our phones, phones  
Drop-topping, playing our favorite cds  
Pulling up to the parties  
Trying to get a little bit tipsy

...

Aint got a care in world, but got plenty of beer  
Aint got no money in my pocket, but Im already here

But at least this sort of thing is intermixed with hip hop songs that touch on some conflict and characters that do more interesting things.

A reader who formerly lived in Austin would also like me to clarify that radio country is not all of country, and was quick to point to current songs<sup>11</sup> in the country genre<sup>12</sup> with good lyrics<sup>13</sup>. I.e., there are still musically intelligent adults who listen to country and still musically intelligent singers who write for them. But that has little to do with what is in heavy rotation on the radio and on Billboard's top sellers list.

How did country music go from being like any other pop but with more twang to being a long sequence of creeds about how the speaker enjoys family, the outdoors, and a good rock 'n' roll show? I dunno. But that's what we've got: millions of people who choose to listen to and recite creeds about a relatively narrow definition of small-town life, each time affirming faith in that creed and implicitly rejecting alternatives. At least disagreeing with a country song isn't heresy.

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/lynn-loretta/miss-being-mrs-12986.html>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.metrolyrics.com/minneapolis-lyrics-lucinda-williams.html>

<sup>13</sup><http://www.elyrics.net/read/p/patty-griffin-lyrics/long-ride-home-lyrics.html>