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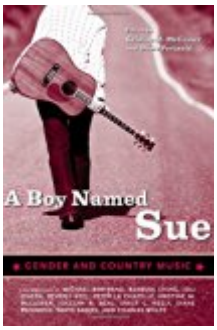

Kristine M. McCusker, Diane Pecknold, eds.. *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. xxiv + 232 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57806-677-3.

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I have been waiting for a collection like this, something varied and insightful that ***really*** looks at gender in country music. That is exactly what the contributors to *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* do. As editors Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold point out, in country music scholarship the term "gender" has been most commonly applied to signify women or, alternately, to describe aspects of country music as songs, artists, fans, and industry without digging for deeper meaning. This is most certainly not the case within the pages of *A Boy Named Sue*. The writers discuss men and women, as well as gender presentation and performance. There is little confusion between the rather intangible multimeaning concept of gender and the relatively more concrete issue of sex. And, as many of the offerings make clear, even in country music it is growing increasingly impossible to separate out gender from other categories of identification and association.

A Boy Named Sue is organized in chronological fashion, which helps the reader track developments of gender issues in country music. A foreword by David Sanjek describes the search for authenticity that has long been a crucial part of country music, while it simultaneously exposes the very constructed and performative nature of authenticity. Instead of searching for purity, Sanjek insists that we "continue to recognize and document how country music, and all American music for that matter, is a muddy and turbulent mix" (pp. xiii, xv). He sees the application of gender in this collection of essays as a useful tool in "the dissolution of the purported transparency of country music" (p. xiv). A postlude by the late Charles Wolfe praises the contributors to *A Boy Named Sue* for going beyond songs, singers, and the existing mass of factual data to tackle the ways that gender and other factors impact, are shaped by, and complicate country music. He saw a new direction in country music history, a new generation of scholars that come not only from the usual disciplines of history, folklore, and literature, but also from the areas of gender studies, media studies, industrial sociology, musicology, cultural geography, genre integrity, and cultural consumption (p. 198). In addition to the foreword, an editors' introduction, essays, and a postlude, *A Boy Named*

Sue recommends a list of related books and articles for further reading. Moreover, the contributors' extensive notes are a rich bibliographical source for future research.

Gender has previously shown up as the subject of country music scholarship. Particularly over the last decade or so, there has been an increase in writing about women in country music, most often focusing on performers, songwriters, industry professionals, and fans. Frequently cited is what I consider to be my "bible" of women in country music, Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann's *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (2003).[1] It is an impressive tome that, like similar scholarship, takes on the enormous task of writing women back into the history of country music. Though they do offer some analysis of gender in terms of songs, performers' images, and fan makeup, such texts have had different goals from that of *A Boy Named Sue*. In their introduction, editors McCusker and Pecknold assert that applying gender to country music scholarship accomplishes several feats: it challenges the familiar narrative of country music, questions traditional understandings of country's important commercial moments and changes, shows that women have played a vital role in country's evolution as commercial entertainment, calls attention to reliance on specific meanings and expressions of gender for appeal, complements existing scholarly work on class in country music, and develops our understanding of country music audiences to include a diverse national listenership (pp. xx-xxi).

These objectives are addressed through a range of intriguing essays. About half of the contributors use the careers and images of individual artists to investigate representations and meanings of gender. Kristine M. McCusker uses the constructed persona of Linda Parker to view definitions of tradition. Emily C. Neely looks at stardom and obscurity in the career of Charline Arthur. Michael Bertrand delves into Elvis Presley's performances of Southern masculinity. Joli Jensen explores fame, reputation, and feminine identity in Patsy Cline's crossover success. Barbara Ching uses the publication *No Depression* (1998) and its focus on artist Robbie Fulks as a way to examine gender and ownership in the undefined world of alternative country. The remaining contributors look at gender and related issues in the context of specific physical, geographical, historical, or thematic settings. Peter La Chapelle views women's domesticity through country music journalism in Cold War Los Angeles. Diane Pecknold writes of a distinctly domestic version of masculinity that emerged during the Nashville Sound era. Jocelyn R. Neal shares her findings regarding how gender is played out in country dance halls. Beverly Keel follows recent developments in the tradition of pro-feminist sentiments in women's country music lyrics.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of *A Boy Named Sue* is the fact that the contributors grapple with the intertwining of gender with other categories of individual and collective identity. Integration of these categories, including but not limited to race, class, tradition, generation, history, region, and politics, are especially evident in contributions by Kristine M. McCusker, Michael Bertrand, and Barbara Ching. McCusker's piece, "'Bury Me Beneath the Willow': Linda Parker and Definitions of Tradition on the *National Barn Dance*, 1932-1935," contests "country music historians' most cherished assumption: that Southern, commercial music was (and is) solely the language of working-class men and women" (p. 4). The character of Linda Parker from radio programs of the early 1930s performed the role of the sentimental mother. In this figure could be found ideals of purity and tradition, a soothing balm for the homesickness of migrants, and a middle-class gender ideology of separate spheres. Bertrand's "I Don't Think Hank Done It That Way: Elvis, Country Music, and the Reconstruction of Southern Masculinity" brings consideration of Elvis Presley's image and music beyond racial appropria-

tion and commercial exploitation of African-American music and culture. Bertrand discusses the biracial quality of Southern culture, and stresses the significance of rockabilly's emergence during a historical period full of anxiety about racial desegregation in the South. Both Presley's music and his image borrowed heavily from black Rhythm and Blues musicians, and the form of masculinity he adopted "demonstrate[d] his manhood within a society in which his dignity and self-respect as a gendered being had traditionally been under constant assault" (p. 75). In "Going Back to Old Mainstream: *No Depression*, Robbie Fulks, and Alt.Country's Muddied Waters," Ching reveals that the discourse of alternative country and its "antimodernist politics" can be decidedly less progressive than it makes itself out to be (p. 179). Placing itself in opposition to the "hot new country" of Nashville, which the editors of alt.country periodical *No Depression* and alt.country artist Robbie Fulks characterize as feminized, the alternative brand of sexism and elitism alt.country produces rivals any ever witnessed on Music Row. Ching asserts that while alt.country bills itself as innovative but traditional, sophisticated but rootsy, "it also conveys nostalgia for the good alt days when red-blooded hemen sang as they pleased" (p. 190).

As Charles Wolfe wrote in his postlude, *A Boy Named Sue* is "one of [the] first chapters" of "the full story of the complex dynamic that is the country music experience" (p. 198). Hopefully this collection is just one of many to come that will further develop and question our understandings of country music. I would also like to think that it signals the coming of future inquiries into the relatively untouched matters of queer sexuality and same-sex desire in country's music, images, and performances.[2] Not only is *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* a useful compilation for conceptualizing gender in the world of country, it is also, quite simply, an incredibly enjoyable read.

Notes

[1]. Other useful texts that address the importance of women in country music history include Jim Brown, *Country Women in Music: Man, I Feel Like a Woman* (Kingston: Quarry Press, Inc., 2000); James L. Dickerson, *Go, Girl, Go!: The Women's Revolution in Music* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2005); and Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, eds., *The Women of Country Music: A Reader* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

[2]. Two of the essays do mention homosexuality briefly. In "Dancing Together: The Rhythms of Gender in the Country Dance Hall," Jocelyn R. Neal brings up the profusion of gay country dance bars. Beverly Keel brings up the out lesbianism of k.d. lang in "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women's Movement in Country Music." Additionally, the bibliography lists Teresa Ortega's article about ties between Johnny Cash's image and symbolic representation among lesbians, Teresa Ortega, "'My name is Sue! How do you do?': Johnny Cash as Lesbian Icon," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (Winter 1995): pp. 259-272.

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