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2023-01-26 CLASS Looks to Diversify Seattle University

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2022 was the Year of Queer Country Music

Sam Bunn, Investigative Editor

Country music has gained a reputation as a largely conservative genre. From subject matter traditionally focusing on the experiences of rural Southerners to influential artists such as Aaron Lewis penning staunchly right-wing songs, the stereotype is not entirely unwarranted.

But that isn't all that country music is—or can be. Queer artists, progressive artists and others who are often excluded by this restrictive view—are alive and kicking. These artists sometimes self-categorize into other genres, such as Americana, folk, roots or bluegrass, but there is relatively little sonic difference between these subcategories. At the heart of all of them is what Dolly Parton so succinctly defined as “ordinary stories told by ordinary people in extraordinary ways.”

One such musician is Adeem Bingham, who performs under the name of Adeem the Artist. They released a 2022 record titled “White Trash Revelry” that features the best and brightest of progressive country music. Layered in strong instrumentation and provocative writing that hits right at the center of social issues, Adeem the Artist makes a statement that cannot be ignored. As a nonbinary, queer artist, they address experiences of persecution with unmistakable licks of humor in the boot-stomping “Going to Hell” and the rollicking “Redneck, Unread Hicks.”

“Everybody gather round we got another one here, got pronouns listed it’s a genuine queer,” Adeem the Artist sings in mocking parody.

Adeem the Artist also engages with their complicated Southern heritage in several tracks, with “Heritage of Arrogance” an alt-rock expression of anger at the values instilled in them as a child. Perhaps the most powerful song on the album, “Middle of a Heart,” is a fingerpicked ballad telling the story of a young man who grows up, joins the military under the promise of a free education and, in a heart-wrenching twist, turns his gun on himself, haunted by the lives he had taken.

Another album released in 2022 that deserves mention is “Peculiar, Missouri” by Arkansas native Willi Carlisle. A 6’4, 300-pound queer force of musical authority, Carlisle towers over his contemporaries both physically and metaphorically. On “I Won’t Be Afraid,” he professes his unwillingness to bend to regressive expectations.

“I will love whoever I well please,” Carlisle sings. “I’ll kiss my friends upon the cheek.”



Album art for Peculiar Missouri by Willi Carlisle.

"Peculiar, Missouri" draws heavily from folk influences, making liberal use of banjo, fiddle, harmonica and short punchy verses. In the same vein as his predecessors, Carlisle doesn't balk at making heartfelt statements on the ills of poverty and discrimination. In the song "Vanlife," he belts out a darkly humorous diatribe reflecting on the plight of the young and homeless. The unquestioned standout song on the piece is "Tulsa's Last Magician," an emotionally crushing track using the tale of a desperate magician to explore disappearing professions. Beyond his recording work, Carlisle has developed a reputation as an unparalleled live performer, and his live recordings on channels like Western AF are a must-watch for any music fan.

Ashley McBryde also released her magnum opus in 2022, with the album "Ashley McBryde Presents: Lindeville." Lindeville is a collaborative album that prominently features multiple queer country acts. Describing the life of a small Southern town in 13 installments, McBryde features Brandy Clark on three different tracks and TJ Osborne, of the award-winning duo Brothers Osborne, on a powerful song about, of all things, the power of baseball to connect generations. In the spoken-word "Gospel Night at the Strip Club," Benjy Davis tells the story of Lindeville's lost souls through the lens of a Saturday night club.

"Patti's got an upper to get her through her shift," Davis sings. "And a downer so she can lay down with the kids."

In the chorus of the song, Davis and McBryde join together on an existential refrain reinforcing Jesus's love for all of the denizens of the club that night. In Lindeville, being queer or a sex worker or struggling with addiction does not make you any less worthy of love or salvation.

While baseball, small-town imagery and religious doctrine may not have the same impact for everybody, Lindeville is a shining example of the most traditional country music themes with a queer twist. Despite all efforts, LGBTQ+ artists will not be silenced.

Country music prides itself heavily on the image of the outlaw. But in an increasingly urban world, the image of a solitary cowboy defying organized society to float on his own through the vast Western emptiness lacks the same punch. In Adeem the Artist, Willi Carlisle and Ashley McBryde and company, the spirit of drifting across societies, living by your own rules and loving as you please shines through every note of their music. In some sense, these queer troubadours are the modern-day outlaws.