We will not speak of the innumerable instances in which profligate and idle men live upon the earnings of industrious wives; or if the wives leave them, and take with them the children, to perform the double duty of mother and father, follow from place to place, and threaten to rob them of the children, if deprived of the rights of a husband, as they call them, planting themselves in their poor lodgings, frightening them into paying tribute by taking from them the children, running into debt at the expense of these otherwise so overtasked helots.¹

Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

In his appeal to a wildness that might temper our over-civilization, Thoreau acknowledged that there is wildness afoot in our culture. Some of this wildness does underwrite or enable political agency, as it did for Thoreau himself in his small efforts at civil disobedience. But some of the wildness also produces collateral damage; it was just such damage that caused many to worry over the aims of John Brown’s abolitionist activism even as Thoreau gave him his highest praise. Hank Williams, whose life I will consider in this chapter, understood experientially what Thoreau meant by “wilding” and “acting,” but he failed to see the responsibility and the demands placed on him by his political action. In what follows, I will take a look at a particular social setting—that of popular country music—in which wildness performs some of its important work but delivers with it a set of traits that create ongoing forms of social damage. In describing this setting, I hope merely to sketch some actualities that attend Thoreau’s call for wildness, and to open a conversation about what the
generic features of Thoreau’s border existence might require to temper the more detrimental aspects of social wildness.

Country music has in the past suffered, and continues to suffer, criticism driven by classist takes on the world. “Hicks” and “rednecks” remain pejorative terms, and the country music associated with them, despite its tremendous popularity, is still resisted adamantly by urban and suburban middle- and upper-middle-class folk. It is routinely criticized for being too “twangy” and for “sounding all alike.” Even though various genres of rock and roll also “sound all alike” to the inexperienced ear, they less often suffer this sort of complaint. This drives what I will call hillbilly politics. Just as rap and hip-hop are politicized because they are avenues of popular communication for marginalized communities, so country music has, since its inception, been engaged in hillbilly politics—in defending and defining rural, middle- and lower-class living in America.

Although, as I will suggest, the women in country music have in many ways been more politically effective than the men of country music, it is the men who have held center stage, at least until recently. These men took up Thoreau’s call of the wild to inform their political resistance, but, as Waylon Jennings sings, things “done got out of hand.” In briefly looking at the life of Hank Williams, the most visible male performer in the history of country music, we can get a sense of both the political usefulness of wildness and its potential excesses.

Women in country music asserted themselves well before women in rock and roll, and they did so in an environment entirely hostile to the independence of women. As early as the 1930s Aunt Molly Jackson was singing country protest songs against the coal mining industry. She was successful enough that in 1931 she “was forced to leave the coal fields by Kentucky authorities.” Despite such success, in the realm of popular country music, women such as Jackson had difficulty breaking into the ranks. Nevertheless, some made it a point to do so. Between 1945 and 1955 fewer than 10 percent of the top country recordings “featured women’s voices.” But, when Kitty Wells recorded “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels” in 1952, in
pointed response to Hank Thompson’s hit “The Wild Side of Life,” she combined protest and popularity, and openly established a feminist tradition in country music. Thompson’s song proclaimed that men were led astray by “honky-tonk angels.” Thus, as Wells put it, “Honky-Tonk Angels” was “kind of the womenfolk getting back at the men.” This tradition, until recently usually overlooked by academics, developed in the subsequent two decades. Patsy Cline fought her way into prominence in the male-dominated culture of Nashville. Then, in the early 1960s, Loretta Lynn began her long career of singing songs on behalf of poor, rural, and working-class women across America, including “Don’t Come Home a-Drinkin’ (with Lovin’ on Your Mind),” “One’s on the Way,” and “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” When later, in 1975, she recorded “The Pill,” she sent shock waves through the country music establishment. As she put it: “I mean the women loved it. But the men who run the radio stations were scared to death. It’s like a challenge to the man’s way of thinking.” Though she denied being a “woman’s libber,” she was clearly and effectively engaged in feminist and class politics. Through the 1960s and 1970s the feminist tradition grew in strength and presence. Songs such as Jeannie C. Riley’s “Harper Valley P.T.A.,” Jody Miller’s “Queen of the House,” and Norma Jean’s “Heaven Help the Working Girl (in a World That’s Run by Men)” set up a strong line of resistance to the masculinized world of country music and opened the doors for a next generation of female country singers who were openly independent and every bit as successful as men. This generation included Emmylou Harris, Kathy Mattea, The Judds, Barbara Mandrell, Lucinda Williams, Mary Chapin Carpenter, and Iris DeMent, among others.

In the midst of this revolution stood one singer and one song whose complexities have provoked ongoing examination: Tammy Wynette and her signature song, “Stand by Your Man.” Like other women in country music, Wynette came from Southern poverty, having worked picking cotton as a teenager and later moving on to a “beautician’s” life. Following the lessons of Patsy Cline, Wynette learned to be hard-edged in dealing with the men and the business of Nashville. Her story was further complicated by the fact that she was
married to George Jones, one of the outstanding male singers of her time who also, as we will see, happened to be one of the most difficult of country men to deal with. When she recorded “Stand by Your Man,” the largest-selling single by any female country artist, Wynette was immediately marked as exemplary of the submissive, conservative, lower-class, country woman—a throwback to the 1950s and earlier times. This image has dogged her, and she has suffered unreflective ridicule at the hands of women, such as Hillary Clinton, whose own lives seem relatively easy compared with Wynette’s. Yet, as later live performances of the song indicate, as do many of her other songs, Wynette saw herself within the country feminist tradition in many ways. “They took it the wrong way,” Wynette said. “I didn’t sing the song to say, ‘You women stay home and stay pregnant and don’t do anything to help yourselves.’”

This misrepresentation of Wynette is not accidental. We academics in particular have systematically assumed the weakness and subservience of women in country music even when the evidence to the contrary stares us in the face. This is in part due to the sexism that pervaded country music culture in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. But it is also in part due to our sexist and classist assumptions that poor, working-class country women could be nothing other than submissive, weak, and illiterate. But Wynette’s version of “Stand by Your Man” is filled with the ironies of the life of a woman in her Southern culture. The song indeed points us to the central character flaws of the country music male singers who created, unwittingly at times, the very culture in which Wynette and the others worked so aggressively to survive. The ideal of this male singer became an important model and idol for the lower-middle-class American white male in the 1950s and 1960s. Hearing the irony, and thus the traces of feminism, in Wynette’s renditions of “Stand by Your Man” in the setting of this cultural environment is what led me to the considerations in what follows.

In the opening line of the song, Wynette sings in a restrained and understated voice, “Sometimes it’s hard to be a woman; giving all your love to just one man.” The emphatic truth of being “hard to be
a woman” is usually overlooked when we hear the song and we wait for the powerful punch line: “Stand by your man.” But more irony presents itself before the punch line arrives: “And if you love him, be proud of him, ’Cause after all, he’s just a man.” When Wynette says of George Jones and, presumably, of American men in general, “after all, he’s just a man,” I take her to mean at least two things. First, she is asserting the fallibility that attends us all in the human condition. Second, and more emphatically, she is addressing the weaknesses of country music men and those who live under their influence—the very weaknesses that have been drawn from Southern post–World War II culture and that were then returned to that culture through the radio airplay of the music of Southern country men. The irony is that this man is pitiable and pathetic more than he is lovable or respectable.

One reason country music draws listeners is its direct appeal to the most basic features of our cultural experience, and Wynette seems to have identified a significant one in “Stand by Your Man.” Both meanings of “after all, he’s just a man,” point to and highlight the hubris—a tragic and comic hubris—that our greatest male country stars have exhibited since their mass appeal took hold in the 1950s. From Hank Williams to George Jones to Waylon Jennings, it is almost as if wildness, social stupidity, and self-destructive living have become necessary conditions of country authenticity and excellence. As Curtis Ellison suggests, “It appears that, for some artists and fans, the notion of a male tragic troubadour experiencing the hard times of domestic turmoil is virtually synonymous with country music authenticity.”

No behavior is without consequences. And, though one consequence of this behavior has been a history of powerful and liberating music, another has been the creation of a culture of self-conflict, violence, and substance abuse in which it is, without question, “hard to be a woman.” Ironically, it may also be a culture in which it is hard to be a man, though in very different ways.

In recalling the previous chapter, we can see that Thoreau’s call of the wild never left the American scene. His rover, wanderer, Walker, outlaw who sets up shop outside the state, the church, and the people
is neatly matched by what Bill Malone calls the metaphor of the “rambler” in the country music tradition. “Ramblin,’” Malone says, is “a metaphor for the man who defies or otherwise tries to live apart from the conventions of society.”

If we trace the traits of Thoreau’s Walker Errant, we see that the country men about whom Wynette sings and about whom I wish to speak exemplify them well. They are lost within their culture. Their truest names are usually nicknames: “Luke the Drifter,” “No Show Jones,” the “Outlaws,” among others. They are also strongly politically minded; they understand their cultural oppression, and they mean to make a place for themselves despite it. There is no doubt that these singers “affected the day.” The three about whom I wish to speak—Hank Williams, George Jones, and Waylon Jennings—were bright, creative, charismatic, and strong-willed; each seemed to take up Thoreau’s call to take a walk on the wild side to try to awaken those around them. In some ways, as was John Brown, they were immensely successful; they brought widespread notoriety to the lives of the rural underclass. They created a cultural space for their music and the experiences of rural America about which their music spoke. In the absence of Thoreau’s constraining cultural stoicism, however, the artistic harvest they reaped was complemented by tremendous human failure. They are representative of the dangers involved in pursuing Thoreau’s call of the wild without having an aptitude for finding and living in the border world Thoreau himself sought. In being “just men,” Williams, Jones, and Jennings had difficulty establishing or finding boundaries once they wandered away from the civilized and toward the wild side. Self-aversive thought and self-recovery eluded Williams altogether, and the others found doses of it only in their later years. Their story is at once a lesson in living toward the wild and a basis for rethinking the lives of women and men in country culture as we move into another century. Moreover, their story should inspire us to listen again to the country music of women in the postwar United States; theirs is a story that still remains, for the most part, unheard and untold. In many ways, country music feminists seem to exhibit a better grasp of living in the border world Thoreau described than did their male
counterparts; they could see both the effectiveness of the “wild” side and the damage that wildness could bring when not subjected to some sort of self-control.

Hank Williams played the initial role of the wild and uncontrollable country star; in his case especially this meant that he was genuinely “country” or “hillbilly”—a foreigner to upper/middle class, urban/suburban America and a barbarian who already had one foot on the less civilized side of the border. Born into the working class in Mount Olive, Alabama, Williams began his country career at age fourteen, singing in bars and aiming at an ersatz cowboy life. His songs often reflected the rambler’s quest and the wildness that was the mark of freedom; “Honky-Tonk Blues,” “Honky-Tonkin’,” and “Ramblin’ Man” set the tone of the hillbilly musician–outlaw. But eventually Williams, simply by his actions, created a model for himself and for those who would follow. He began to act out the lyrics of “Lost Highway”: “Just a rollin’ stone, all alone and lost; and for this life of sin I have paid the cost.” Addicted to performing, to alcohol, to morphine, and to women, Williams routinely alienated family and friends, as well as the business that sustained him, including the Grand Ole Opry. His friend and publisher Fred Rose wrote to Williams on March 19, 1948, challenging this way of being:

Wesley tells me you called this morning for more money, after me wiring you four hundred dollars just the day before yesterday. . . . We have gone as far as we can go at this time and cannot send you any more.

Hank, I have tried to be a friend of yours but you refuse to let me be one, and I feel that you are just using me for a good thing and this is where I quit. You have been very unfair, calling my house in the middle of the night and I hope that you will not let it happen again as it isn’t fair to Lorene.11

Roses’s experience was not unique. Band members tried futilely to keep Williams away from alcohol so that he could perform. On more than one occasion Williams was found drunk in the streets of some small town, firing a pistol in the middle of the night. His family life was marked by argument and violence, with occasional, though tem-
porary, sedative moments of religiosity. As Malone points out, Williams, like other hillbilly musicians, “inherited from their regional culture a cluster of presumptions that extolled the idea of aggressive masculine independence, and a body of songs that chronicled the exploits of manly men.”12 These presumptions of manliness stood in marked contrast to the actualities of the inheritors, who were young, inexperienced, sensitive, and, often, fundamentally insecure. This insecurity underwrites the pathos present when we hear the irony in Wynette’s voice. Williams nevertheless adopted this inheritance and, using the concert hall, the radio, and the sale of records, he returned these presumptions with a vengeance to the young males of the American hillbilly life; he was the central figure in hillbilly politics.

Williams died en route to a concert in Canton, Ohio, in the backseat of his blue Cadillac on New Year’s Day 1953, at the age of twenty-nine. His death at the height of his popularity sealed the fate of the image of the authentic male country singer—being wild and crazy became the country star’s badge of authenticity. The fact that Williams’s death was the result of alcoholism and his abuses of morphine and chloral hydrate was largely left unspoken. Despite all the trouble he had caused friends and relations, Williams was given a hero’s send-off at his memorial service in Nashville by Roy Acuff, leader of the same Grand Ole Opry that had earlier excommunicated Williams. The image of the wild side of life in country music was more important than any version of the truth. Indeed, this repackaging of the truth was itself a phenomenon characteristic of the manly country male.

The message was not lost on those who followed in Williams’s footsteps. Male country performers, more than ever, began to describe themselves as wild and crazy and to live lives that authenticated the descriptions. And, as George “No Show” Jones learned early on, the wilder, the better. Jones came out of the rural poverty of East Texas with a stunningly supple and evocative country voice, and in his early recordings there is no mistaking his imitation of the sound of Hank Williams. But his imitation of Williams’s lifestyle was even more essential. After missing an important show at the Bitter End in
New York City, Jones was hailed by the *New York Times* as the greatest country singer of all time without having sung a note. Waylon Jennings, also from Texas, was not far behind, putting together a string of songs that traded on his wilder side: “I’ve Always Been Crazy,” “Lonesome,” “Orn’ry and Mean,” and Rodney Crowell’s “I Ain’t Livin’ Long like This,” to name just a few. Like Jones, he lived in Williamsesque style, though he upgraded from a Cadillac to a Silver Eagle touring bus.

It is important to note that this “hillbilly” difference displayed by Williams and his descendants took a part in the recivilizing of American culture. Even when unintended, their music was consistently political, calling issues of class and economic practices into question and making visible a large segment of American culture that for many folks went unnoticed. They began to infuse our lives with yet another picture of American reality and experience. Their music reached out to those who shared their experiences and rippled beyond, to a wider middle America. Williams’s songs were even performed by the likes of Jerry Vale, Mitch Miller, and Tony Bennett. Moreover, in terms of sheer influence, it is impossible to overlook the culture-transforming work of rockabilly, and especially the impact of Elvis Presley. Though country was not yet “cool,” it began to reshape the contours of middle American life in ways that we now take for granted. As Thoreau wrote: “In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness.” The same seemed to be true in country music. As the writer of the liner notes for a recent alternative-country compilation titled *Boone County* (Bloodshot Records) writes: “More than anything perhaps, country music embodies the fact that a two-week drinking binge, getting used up and tossed away in the game of love, and longing for the ‘better days’ of some misremembered past are simply equal parts in a well balanced life.” So it was that Hank Williams brought his own brand of wildness to American life. He moved from the country in 1942, to work at the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company in Montgomery, Alabama. And, as Colin Escott notes, he found a ready-made audience for his music not only there in Montgomery but also in “Cleveland, Wash-
ington, and even Oakland”; his hillbilly music was “like a letter from home,” a phenomenon that has lingered and spawned what Jennings later called the “Hank Williams Syndrome.” Jennings himself first sang a song titled “Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?” Later, we find a slew of Hank songs, including Paul Craft’s “Hank Williams You Wrote My Life,” that manifest the wide appeal Williams’s music and message held for the “middle” and lower ranges of white, male American culture. The breadth and staying power of Williams’s influence is revealed in, for instance, Neil Young’s “From Hank to Hendrix” and Bob Dylan’s impromptu performances of “Lost Highway.” In the chorus to “The Hank Williams Syndrome” Jennings, not long before his own death, reflected on this influence in both its positive and negative dimensions:

Hank, you were my inspiration  
And I was obsessed with your ways,  
But to tell you the truth, it’s no thanks to you  
That I’m still living today.  
Hank, I still love your music  
And in spite of the things I’ve just said  
You’ll always be a hero to me,  
But the Hank Williams syndrome is dead.17

Williams’s wildness was thus, at one level, genuine in virtue of his place in American culture. “Hillbilly” meant uncivilized, “hick,” uneducated, naïve, poor, dirty, and unimportant, and performers like Hank Williams were routinely portrayed as “hillbillies from the shallow end of the gene pool, holes in their britches and a bottle of hooch among them.” As Fred Rose put it in an open letter to Billboard in August 1946:

We pride ourselves in being a very intelligent people and good Americans . . . but we say of “our own good ol’ American folklore” that it is “hillbilly music and sometimes we’re ashamed to call it music.”19

Such regional resentment and classism, despite the crossover of much contemporary country music, is still with us. In Williams’s day it was
a deep and dangerous habit of the culture. Williams, like those who followed, took on the battle for social acceptance, ironically, by way of the very wildness with which he was already branded; he was creating a border world between his roots in Alabama poverty and “mainstream,” white, middle-class America. If “hillbilly” meant “wild,” Hank Williams intended to represent it well. He was not about to kowtow to this mainstream American civilization or even to the tamed and civilized *Hee Haw*–like country-western culture of Nashville. It was precisely this conservative and economically powerful tameness that sent Waylon and Willie Nelson back to Austin, Texas, in the early 1970s, wearing the label “Outlaws”; in Austin they took country music back to its hard-core, wilder ways. Williams was creating his own standard that would be impossible to ignore or overlook. In Thoreau’s terms, his wildness clearly had a political edge and effect.

The two particular avenues of wildness the country male used to revise the American experience are not new to the history of human cultures: they are wandering and outlawry. Both inhabited the groundwork of the new standard that Williams created. Through his alias, Luke the Drifter, Williams created the role of the hillbilly wanderer in the automobile age. He generated a myth or a legend by which others would have to measure their authenticity. Road life was straightforwardly uncivilized and uncivilizing. It rejected day jobs—the routinized labor to which Southern poor males seemed destined—and, despite its grueling nature, appeared as a radical freedom from the dominant drudgery of daily life. In this much it met Thoreau’s negative criteria for being awake and alive; it sought to outflank “quiet desperation” and aimed to keep the wanderer intensely alive to the possibilities of life. The road life is so well documented in country song that it is difficult to find a place to begin. But where the music life alone is considered, the legacy of Hank Williams is most clearly articulated in Willie Nelson’s “Me and Paul” and “On the Road Again,” in Danny O’Keefe’s “The Road,” in the Grateful Dead’s “Truckin,” and in Jackson Browne’s “Running on Empty.” The same themes are given presentation in a wide range of “trucking”
songs from Dave Dudley’s “Six Days on the Road” to Little Feat’s “Willin’” and, more recently, Son Volt’s “Windfall.” The country male musician must have a road mentality.

The freedom of the wanderer bears its own traits and excesses. Perhaps the central feature is displacement—a chosen homelessness of which Thoreau was well aware. Waylon Jennings, a master of the road art, put it this way:

For any migrating performer, travel takes on a life all its own. The shows become stopovers; the highway is where you spend most of your time. In transit. In transition.

You enter a strange space when you get on the bus. You’re not home, and you’re not there yet. You’re on the way.

In this much the country traveler again embodies some Thoreauvian virtues—life is in the transitions; it is on the way. The living death of our daily desperation is highlighted in contrast to the wanderer’s life that booms out across the night air of America on WSM, WWVA, KWKH, WLW, and now from thousands of cloned stations nationwide. The country male became emblematic of hillbilly freedom from the world of work, poverty, and social and geographical immobility. For many, he became not only a transient but also a transcendent figure: transcending class and region, transcending the constraints of deadened American existence.

His transcendence emerged also in his attention to the inner wilderness necessary to carry out the ongoing resistance to civilization’s dictates, to become an outlaw. Together with wandering, alcohol, drugs, and attitude became the standard props that opened the door to this wilderness, and they each had the Hank Williams stamp of approval. Songs and performances seemingly were spawned and enhanced when the country male was wildest. The wildness, at least in legend, became a necessary condition for the music. Jennings, who, as we noted, by the 1970s was being labeled an “outlaw” in a now-civilized Nashville (together with Willie Nelson, David Alan Coe, and others), points to Williams’s influence once again:

If I had an Outlaw hero, someone to set my standard and measure my progress, it was Hank Williams. . . . You’d hear all these stor-
Embracing the darker sides of their own characters, these country boys transcended the ordinary and stood above the civilized world. In keeping with their country raising, they resisted external (and especially Northern) authority—the law—and a radical, antisocial attitude became their normal way of living. David Alan Coe expressed this attitude well in his cult anthems “Long-Haired Redneck” and “If That Ain’t Country (I’ll Kiss Your Ass).” “Oh, the country DJs all know that I’m an outlaw,” he sings in describing his own live performance, and then confirms it when he sings, “The loudmouth in the corner’s getting to me, / talking about my earrings and my hair; / I guess he ain’t read the signs that say I’ve been to prison; / someone ought to warn him ’fore I knock him off his chair.” The attitude of internal wildness is the catalyst to the freedom of the country male performer, a freedom that marks him as an outlaw.

The journey away from the overcivilizing world through wandering and wildness took Hank Williams and the others in the direction of Thoreau’s redemptive wilderness. They intentionally exercised no self-constraint, and they outflanked external constraint in virtue of and empowered by their popularity, their money, and their genuine fame. At one point, Jennings recalls, he was spending up to fifteen hundred dollars a day on his drug habits, revealing the fact that in America money is one mode of freedom. But their journeys led them into a standard vice—a weakness and perhaps mortal sin—of country culture; they began to “get above their raisin’.” To themselves and to others, in legend at least, they seemed to be a bit more than human. They, so the legend went, could handle the alcohol, the cocaine, and the sleep deprivation. By his own account, Jennings had never acknowledged or understood that cocaine was illegal until he was arrested for possession. George Jones seemed to think it was acceptable for him to fire a revolver at his friend’s car when the friend turned to Christianity to try to free Jones from his addictions. The country male
learned that he was “just a man,” if at all, the hard way. In each case, in trying to overcome the pervasive classism in American culture, he moved aggressively past the recivilizing prescription of Thoreau and into a debilitating wilderness of excess—a wilderness whose reach extended to family and friends and whose effects were felt most strikingly by the women in the lives of these male country stars. They crossed the border from recivilizing to dehumanizing. This all became part of the legend; Hank Williams not only lived in transition, he died in transition.

The homelessness of his existence was complemented by an inner loneliness noted by all those who knew him; it was a loneliness often disclosed in his music, most effectively in songs such as “Lost Highway” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” His wandering eventually translated into lostness and loss; he had no place where he could settle, and his addictions gradually made him unrecognizable not only to those close to him but also to himself. He lost himself to the road and to his wildness; he died socially before he died physically. On the one side, his wildness created a new and vital community in American culture; on the other side, it alienated him from this and all other communities.

Jones and Jennings each finally attempted recovery when they came face-to-face with similar deaths. Their awakening to their lostness and loneliness was a slow road, and in both cases their recovery was enabled—not demanded—by a woman. Jessi Colter, country artist and wife of Jennings, and Nancy Jones, wife of George Jones, lived lives that are exemplary cases of Wynette’s opening understatement, “Sometimes it’s hard to be a woman.” Jennings began to admit his lostness to himself when he wrote “Don’t You Think This Outlaw Bit’s Done Got Out of Hand?” shortly after he was busted for possession of cocaine. In retrospect, George Jones recognized that it was precisely and ironically country culture’s acceptance of his proclaimed heroic wildness and outlaw status that enabled him to prolong his addictions in the wilderness. The police would call his friends to tell him to disappear when a warrant for his arrest was issued:
Did they think they were doing me a favor? I needed to be arrested. I needed treatment. But it all goes back to the special rules by which show-business people are sadly allowed to live.\(^25\)

The unchecked transcendence of the country male star thus bore a twin fruit: music that entranced and transformed the culture that engendered it and the lostness and self-loss of the men who made the music.

Interestingly, neither Jones nor Jennings lived with a great deal of regret. They regretted primarily the injuries and pain they caused others simply by being themselves. They seemed to acknowledge and accept the fatality of their rise and fall as paradigmatic characters of country music. Hank Williams remained at the core of their being. Jones said, “In the mid-1970s people wanted their country singers to be drunk and rowdy, as Hank Williams had been. In that respect, I gave the fans all they wanted and more.”\(^26\) In the absence of regret there lingers a trace of their unwillingness to recognize that, after all, they’re just men. Their pride may have been hurt, but it was not eliminated. Ironically, if not sadly, their contemporary and equally wild performer Merle Haggard, in one of his final albums, sings longingly of the days of partying and addiction: “Watching while some old friends do a line; / holding back the want to in my mind.”\(^27\)

If there was no regret, however, there was warning to the next generation. Jones titled his autobiography *I Lived to Tell It All*, and in the last chapters he discusses the ways one can come to grips with addiction. Jennings, in concert with the ethos of country life, refused to tell others how to live their lives. But candid revelations of the depth of his own despair bear the mark of overt warning. One of his most difficult tasks was telling his youngest son of his addictions. Despite such warnings by Jennings, Jones, and others, the myth, romance, and legend of the Williams syndrome is still with us. Country-influenced rock artists Gram Parsons (The Byrds and Flying Burrito Brothers) and Lowell George (Little Feat) both died in the 1970s while pursuing the Hank Williams formula. In the 1990s country singer/songwriter Keith Whitley recorded an interview several months before his death from alcoholism; in it he admitted to his addictions and his need for
recovery, and at the same time acknowledged his debt to the George Jones lifestyle that he believed gave him genuine country credentials. Perhaps more important, the effects of the legend were never limited to the stars themselves. The effects became a part of the American social landscape from Lubbock, Texas, to Portland, Maine. Men were expected to drink, hang out in bars, be inattentive to family life, endorse and employ violence—in short, to do all those things that, as Wynette’s song says, women were not supposed “to understand.” But again there is irony. Women surely understood what country men did—that is only too evident in the songs they wrote in response to male behavior. Many of them also seemed to see the weakness in country men that engendered such self-destructive and culturally blind behavior. It is not clear to me, however, that country men understood this; to many of them it seemed merely one form of excess accompanying the necessary wildness of the political transformation of culture.

The legend and the myth suggest that the men were somehow special in their freedom to act in such ways. They were above the world of daily life. Bill Malone sees the story somewhat differently and, I think, more accurately. “But not surprisingly,” he says, “the yearning for the open road in country music nevertheless springs as often from a sense of failure and insecurity as it does from the façade of swaggering sense of confidence that seems to envelop many songs.”

The future of the myth and legend is hard to assess. But the sooner we see the experiential truth of Malone’s claim, the sooner we might be on the road to transforming the country culture of American males—and, perhaps more important, its impact on what it means to be male in America. Jennings saw at least a glimmer of hope in the new generation: “The new hats are here, / and it’s interestingly clear / our day is slipping on by; / They’re not like me and you, / but that’s alright too, / they could keep the music alive.”

Hank Williams was a creative genius who took hillbilly life and inserted it into the consciousness of American society. But he also perpetuated and generated a culture of self-engrossment and self-destruction whose negative consequences for women and children, as well as for men, have extended
through several generations. Given the irony of Wynette’s words, the only way to stand by these men will be to transform them and the culture that has enabled them to be destructive. The difficulty is to accomplish this transformation without losing the powers of Thoreauvian wildness and the possibility of a borderland existence. A wildness born of insecurity seems bound for an unhappy ending. For Malone, “In reality, Hank Williams seemed more lost than rebellious, more confused than hedonistic, and perhaps more pathetic than tragic.” Thoreau suggested one avenue to finding a border existence when he suggested that the wildness must be deliberate and the aim of recivilizing must be kept in mind. The move to wildness must be experimental, with an eye toward the appearance of damaging consequences and with a felt awareness of the extent to which its cultural effects might reach. Country males will have to begin by recognizing that they are not alone in their worlds. This will be a difficult existential shift, but the most important one. It is perhaps the point that country women have most emphatically projected in their responses to the male dominance of their worlds. Indeed, it seems reasonable that country men should turn to country women to learn how to handle the wild life.

Moreover, insofar as they are not alone, country men will also have to recognize that transforming their world is not something they can or should do alone. Country women, whose music shows that they in many ways understand men better than the men understand themselves, must have a role in the transformation. In part this will involve telling the men their own stories about their lives in a world dominated by the Hank Williams syndrome. This is precisely the project undertaken by Loretta Lynn, Jeannie C. Riley, and Kitty Wells, and more recently by Lucinda Williams, Iris DeMent, Tish Hinojosa, and the Dixie Chicks. It is not a story that I can or should write, but it is one that I, and others who have been raised under the influence of Williams, Jones, and Jennings, need to listen to carefully. The first step in a genuine recovery and revision of the world of country music will be a genuine conversation concerning the past damage and the future possibilities. But it must be a genuine conversation in which
the men listen and hear far better than they have in the past. And at the same time, if Thoreau is right about the importance of an element of wildness and a borderland existence, we can hope, as does Malone, that this conversation will acknowledge “both the perils that lie outside the prescribed boundaries of our culture and the possibilities of renewed strength and excitement that lie hidden in those forbidden zones.” In the alternative-country music we presently hear outside the Top 40 of country radio, this conversation seems already to have begun; we can only hope that there will be voices strong enough, as strong as those of Lynn and Wynette, to bring this conversation back to the center stage of country music culture.