The History of Country Music: Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, and Willie Nelson

The origin of country music can date all the way back to the 1920's. Country music has since evolved immensely. And a lot of that change and evolution came during the 1960s and the 1970's. In the 1960's, country music saw the rise of Loretta Lynn. She was one of the first female country artists to fight gender social norms. She advocated for the strength and independence of women. Also, in the 1960's, country music was introduced into a lot of new genre mixing such as country rock, country pop, and outlaw country. However, introduced in the 1960's a lot of these sub genres of country music gained momentum, further development, and wide commercial success in the 1970's. Patsy Cline was one of the first artist to successfully convert from country to country pop and pop music. And Willie Nelson was one of the most successful outlaw country artists.

Loretta Lynn is a female country artist from Butcher Hollow, Kentucky. She was born Loretta Webb on April 14, 1932 and still continues to make music to this day. The story of Loretta Lynn can begin when she married Oliver Vanetta "Doolittle" Lynn on January 10, 1948. Not only was Loretta Lynn only the young age of 15 but she has only known Oliver Lynn for a single month, prior to getting married. Not long after, pregnant Loretta and Doolittle Lynn moved to Custer, Washington. Loretta and her husband would continue to birth and raise six children. And although their love was strong, soon Loretta and Oliver began to fight. Their marriage would suffer through physical abuse and infidelity. Oliver being an alcoholic, only made the situation harder. This is what made Loretta Lynn so special. She lived the same life as women and wives, who are subject to their husbands, misogynist, and an unfair society, all across the nation. In the mid 1950's she learned how to play the guitar. By the end of the 1950's she began performing in local clubs and shops with her very own band, Loretta and the Trailblazers. In 1960, she signed her first contract with Zero Records but eventually signing with the famed, Decca Records. She immediately started recording and by the late 1960's she had already become a household name and women everywhere related heavily with her music.

In addition to being one of the first female country artists to advocate for women, the timing couldn't have been more impeccable. In the 1960s, the second-wave feminism, or the women's rights movement has just begun to take off. This movement fought for the equality of women not only legal issues but unfairness in the workplace, marriages, divorces, and reproductive rights. This movement also wanted to bring to light domestic abuse, marital rape, sexual harassment, and sexual assault in the workplace. At this time women faced massive inequality not only in the workplace but at home and in all society. With nowhere to go as an outlet, Loretta Lynn not only became their release. And as Loretta's marital issues continued and began facing inequalities in the music industry, she soon became feminism's anthem. Although her songs already spoke about her own issues that women faced, she began to specifically tackle these issues with her music. She released songs such as "You Ain't Woman Enough", "Don't Come Home a Drinkin'", "Woman of the World (Leave My World Alone)", and "The Pill". Each song tackles these issues and gives women across the nation a voice.

And not only was her music groundbreaking and extremely impactful on many lives, her music was really good. By 1980 she had 11 number one hits and 37 top ten hits on the country

billboard charts. She is extremely loved and praised by the country music industry and fans. She was an incredible person with amazing music and she received the awards and accolades accordingly. She is the first and only woman awarded the female Academy of Country Music Artist of the Decade. She was also the first woman to with the Country Music Association Awards Entertainer of the Year. She has woman multiple Female Artist of the Year from multiple award programs. She is the most decorated female country artist and rightfully so.

In the 1970s, country music experienced a lot a change. There was a massive shift toward new subgenres. In the 1960s we saw the experimentation of mixing country music with other genres. By the 1970s these subgenres gained full force and momentum, even becoming the more popularly listened types of country music. The most popular of these subgenres were country rock, country pop, and outlaw country music.

The origins of country rock began in the mid-1960s. Rock and roll dominated the music industry in the 1950's. And as the country music industry began to truly take off in the 1960s, folk rock artist began to inject their folk rock sound into some country music. One the first folk rock artist to do this was Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan released a full country-rock album in 1969 called "Nashville Skyline". Gram Parsons is an example of an artist who experimented with country rock the other way. Gram Parsons was a mostly country artist but working with the Byrds, a rock band, and the Flying Burrito Brothers, further developed country rock. Today, The Flying Burrito Brothers are known solely as a country rock band. Country rock furthered its development with many bands and acts including the Grateful Dead, Eagles, Linda Ronsradt, and Neil Young. Country Rock took off so much so, that legendary rock band, The Rolling Stones, took the time to make a few country rock songs. The Rolling Stones country rock songs were called "Dead Flowers" and "Honky Tonk Women". "Honky Tonk Women" topped the billboard charts and became a number one hit single in multiple countries.

Like country rock, country pop began its development in the early 1960s but reached major success in the 1970s. Patsy Cline, who will be discussed later, was one of the very first country artist to convert to pop music. Making music through the 1950s and reaching peak success in the early 1960s before her untimely death. She was an integral piece to the start of country pop. Of course, one cannot discuss country pop without mentioning Dolly Parton. Although not quite the creator or innovator of country pop, she is arguably one of the most widely known country pop artists.

Dolly Parton was a famous country artist born in Locust Ridge, Tennessee on January 19, 1946. She experienced plenty of commercial success as a traditional country artist in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. However, in the mid-1970s she announced her attempt to switch on over to pop music. Of all her famous songs such as "Jolene", "Coat of Many Colors", and "9 to 5", "Here You Come Again" most fits the country pop subgenre. In 1978, Dolly Parton went on to win Entertainer of the Year. She was only the second woman ever to win the Entertainer of the Year Award after Loretta Lynn, who was previously mentioned. Dolly Parton is still alive today and continues her fame in many cameos in television shows and movies.

Dolly Parton was not the only one who also achieved success from country pop. Other famous country pop artists of the 1970s include Glen Campbell, Kenny Rogers, Bobbie Gentry, John Denver, Anne Murray, and many more. Glen Campbell released his famous songs "Gentle on My Mind", "By the Time I Get to Phoenix", Wichita Lineman", and "Galveston". These songs landed him a total four Grammys among many other awards in both country music and pop

music. Kenny Rogers had little success as a solo country artist in the 1950s. He reached a step up playing in a band in the 1960s. But from the mid-1970s his band separated and he kicked off his solo career and soared on the pop charts. Country pop was started by a risky few, developed by many, and paved the way for a modern taste on classic country. These artists paved the way for the young talent of the 21st century. Today we see worldwide famous country pop powerhouses such as Carrie Underwood, Taylor Swift, Rascal Flatts, Florida Georgia Line, and Lady Antebellum.

Outlaw Country is mix of the sound of authentic country music with the heavy, rebellious attitude of rock. Therefore, with its overall sound is much closer to authentic country than country rock's is. A great example to explain this sound is the famous outlaw country song, "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash compared to the famous country rock song, "Hotel California" by the Eagles. A lot of Johnny Cash's music can be attributed as outlaw country due to his heavy, raspy voice along with his bluesy, emotional lyrics sung in its country tone. However, the roots of outlaw country were famously developed in the 1970s by Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson; the latter of which will be expanded on later.

Waylon Jennings was a country artist born in Chandler, Arizona on June 15, 1936 in Littlefield, Texas. Waylon Jennings began singing at a very young age, and reportedly started performing at the age of 12. In 1964 at the age of 28, Jennings signed a contract with RCA Records. Less than half a decade later his music such as, "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line", Good Hearted Woman", and "(I'm a) Ramblin' Man" started topping the charts in the 1970s. Eventually Waylon Jennings grew tired of country music and sought out to make a change. That is when he teamed up with Willie Nelson and started to develop outlaw country. Together they released an album in 1976 called "Wanted: The Outlaws" which had tons of commercial success and broke records as a Nashville album. Their album was the first Nashville album to reach over a million albums sold. Eventually, Jennings, Nelson teamed up with Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson to form an outlaw music band called the Highwaymen. Together they continued on the outlaw country music movement.

The 1970s was an extremely important time for country music. It experienced lots of evolution and experiment. However, the most important take away were the extremely influential artists such as Dolly Parton, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan, Gram Parsons, Eagles, and many more who paved the way for the expansion of these sub genres to come in the following years.

Speaking of highly influential and impactful artists, Patsy Cline was previously mentioned when discussing country pop. Patsy Cline was born Virginia Patterson Hensley on September 8, 1932 in Winchester, Virginia. She as well as, Loretta Lynn, helped break down the gender discrimination in the music industry. In fact, Loretta Lynn always described Patsy Cline a mentor to her. At the age of eight years old she began learning to play the piano. By the age of twenty in 1952, she began performing in a band and changed her stage name to Patsy. In 1953, she married Gerald Cline and took on the famous name Patsy Cline.

In 1954, Patsy Cline landed her first recording contract with Four Star Records. Cline recorded various genres of songs for Four Star including rockabilly, country, and pop. However, struggling to find her stride and her niche, she reached very little success. However, in 1957 her mother, a talent scout for Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts, landed Patsy a spot on the show. Performing an unreleased country pop song, "Walkin' After Midnight", she finally had her break

through. Decca Records, who were working with Four Star Records in regards to Patsy Cline, rushed to immediately release the song. “Walkin’ After Midnight” went on to top the Billboard Country Music Chart at the number two spot as well as the Billboard Pop Music Chart at the number 12 spot.

Unfortunately, her success did not continue after “Walkin’ After Midnight”. After being forced to record music that she did not like. She moved out to Nashville, Tennessee and finished out her contract with Four Star Records. Under new manager Randy Hughes, Cline was able to land a steady gig at the Grand Ole Opry, which was a weekly country music stage concert in Nashville. She continued to officially sign with Decca Records. Her very first single at Decca Records, “I Fall to Pieces” reached the number one spot on the Billboard Country Music Chart as well number twelve on the Billboard Pop Music Chart.

After surviving and recovering from a life-threatening car accident, she got back to work on her music in just a few weeks. She then worked with Willie Nelson to produce the country pop song “Crazy”. “Crazy” much like her other two singles, reached the top of both the Billboard Country and Pop Music Charts. “Crazy” reached number two on the country chart and number nine on pop chart. Finally, Cline’s Career took a better turn. In 1981 her second album, but first with Decca Records, Patsy Cline Showcase out performed her very first album immensely. Wither her newly found success she was able to escape poverty and help her mother. The following year, 1962, Cline released “She’s Got You”, another country pop song. “She’s Got You” again topped the country charts at number one and reaching fourteen on the Billboard Hot 100.

Unfortunately, Cline’s career didn’t get the opportunity to progress much further as she was in a fatal plane accident in 1963. Although her career was short, she received many awards and was eventually inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1973. And arguably most importantly, she was able to pave the way for country pop, as previously stated. At Decca Records she met Loretta Lynn and mentored her. And as you now know, Loretta Lynn had an incredible career that Patsy Cline would’ve likely had. Patsy Cline was an extremely influential country pop artist that had a ground breaking role in the music industry.

Another great pioneer and previously mentioned, was country artist Willie Nelson. Willie Nelson was born on April 29, 1933 in Abbott, Texas. Willie Nelson grew up in a religious household and therefore, was first exposed to gospel music. Raised by his grandparents, he received his first guitar when her was six years old. Following the death of his grandfather, Nelson began writing poetry and eventually songs. Although initially raised quite conservative, through performing at various bars and rag tag locations, he soon lost that innocent tone. Nelson always felt as one of the wild side.

After playing in a couple small bands that led to little success, he graduated high school and enlisted in the United States Air Force. However, due to back issues Willie Nelson was medically discharged from the Air Force less than a year later. After, Nelson was quite lost. He bounced around pursuing faming studies and taking odd jobs such as, door to door salesmanship and as a disc jockey for multiple radio stations. Eventually he found his stride songwriting and landing local gigs, performing at small town clubs. With songs such as “Night Life”, “Crazy”, and “Funny How Time Slips Away” on his song portfolio, he landed a songwriting position at Paper Music. His songs would be adapted by artists and top the Billboard Charts. As previously mentioned, “Crazy” made its way to Patsy Cline and after release, reached number one on the country charts and number nine on pop charts. He also

wrote “Hello Walls” which also reached number one on the Billboard Country Music Charts. He continued to write a few others but were not quite as successful.

Despite his success as a songwriter, his career as an artist failed to take off. In 1962, Nelson recorded singles, “Willingly” and “Touch Me” which reached the top ten of the country charts but his first two albums, And Then I Wrote, and Here’s Willie Nelson, failed to reach commercial success. Willie Nelson had a unique sound that did not quite fit into authentic country music, and he fought his producers about it. After moving back home and experiencing other tragedies, such as his house burning down, he still continued to work on his own unique sound and his own craft. In the meantime, Nelson began hosting and performing at Woodstock inspired picnics and met the likes of Kris Kristofferson and Waylon Jennings.

In the early 1970s, the world was finally ready for Willie Nelson’s sound. Gaining popularity in Austin, Texas he began recording with Atlantic Records and retained the freedom to make music that he wanted to make. By 1973, he completed and released Shotgun Willie. Despite not quite flying off the shelves, Shotgun Willie, is still widely praised and still known to this day as some of his best work. The following year he released another album, Phases and Stages that once again failed. Finally, in 1975 he moved over to Columbia Records and with the release of his newest album, Red-Headed Stranger, he finally received the fruit of his long dry career. Red-Headed Stranger reached number one on the country charts and top 40 on the pop charts. His album received incredible commercial success.

Soon after, Nelson was developing outlaw country along side Waylon Jennings. Their new outlaw music album, Wanted! The Outlaws was released in 1976 and just like Red-Headed Stranger, it was widely popular and had tons of commercial success. Nelson had finally made it but he did not stop. After many more songs and a few more albums, came another gem, Stardust in 1978. He eventually joined The Highwaymen along side Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Cash. The unbelievable star-studded group put out three albums, Highwayman in 1985, Highwayman 2 in 1990, and The Road Goes on Forever in 1995.

To this day Willie Nelson is alive and continuing to put out more music and content. He has written and produced and incredible amount of music as well as go on many world tours. He has defined an entire genre with other legendary artists. He not only influenced a new generation of modern music and artist but also got the opportunity to work with the many artists that he inspired.