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Novel Liberation Strategies of a Black Female Country Songwriter

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“XXX’s and OOO’s” is a song about female money anxiety, about the need to “try to keep the balance up, between love and money.” It suggests that the balance may be impossible to achieve, leaving women to seek shelter in “God” and “good wine” from economic and emotional distress. I cowrote “XXX’s and OOO’s” in 1994 with Matraca Berg, with each of us drawing on our own “cash cow” experience.

The first verse spotlights work done outside the home, emphasizing the need to “go to work” and worries about the impact of appearance (through direct reference to “TV diet guru lies” and “makeup”) on a woman’s ability to earn.

The second verse spotlights the second shift many women work each day, the return home to housekeeping tasks, “fix the sink, mow the yard.” The specific duties cited, tasks stereotypically gendered masculine and often outsourced to *paid* male contractors, plumbers, and gardeners, are here claimed as *unpaid* female labor.

This introduces yet another source of money and work disquiet, “it really isn’t all that hard, *if you get paid.*” There’s a lot of pressure, a freight of fear, on that little word “if.” “How hard is it to work if you don’t get paid?”

Aretha Franklin, who makes a cameo appearance in the bridge, knew something about female money anxiety and the money anxieties of artists. She famously demanded her performance fee in cash prior to taking the stage and kept the satchel containing her pay near her feet throughout her performances.

Name checking Aretha does more than give an iconic face to female money anxiety. By putting the names “Aretha Franklin and Patsy Cline” in Trisha Yearwood’s mouth, and in that order, country is no longer a space where whiteness always comes first, and Blackness is invisible. And it is no longer a space in which females get written about but don’t write. Aretha was an accomplished songwriter; Patsy, a prolific letter writer. The song describes literal black marks (ink) on white paper, “She signs her letters

with XXX's and OOO's" to emphasize the truth girls write. By embedding Franklin and Cline, one Black, one white, in the text, we created surrogates for ourselves and establish – on multiple levels – that writing is an elemental aspect of “American Girl” identity.

“XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)” is a song that earned me twentieth- and twenty-first-century mailbox money.

“Mailbox money” is Music Row slang for money earned by successful songwriters from songs that get recorded and get played out in the world.

In the twentieth century, mailbox money was typically a combination of monies earned from mechanicals (royalties based on physical singles, albums, cassettes, and CDs) and monies earned from performance rights (license fees by radio stations, television stations, live music venues, bars, restaurants, and more) paid to the big three performing rights organizations, ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC. Old-timers boiled all that down to “records and radio.”

In the twenty-first century, mailbox money is typically a combination of monies earned from legacy sources, “records and radio,” collected by old and new PROs (performing rights organizations) and old and new MROs (mechanical rights organizations), and monies earned from digital music providers and online music videos, some of which is collected by the Mechanical License Collective. Twenty-first-century mailbox money boils down to radio and streams.

What follows is a mailbox money memoir written by a Black and female country songwriter who did not get to twenty-first-century mailbox money without navigating the external obstacles and internal anxieties addressed in her biggest hit.

The “XXX's and OOO's” money story starts in 1993 at a country music celebrity bowling event hosted by BMI's legendary Frances Preston to raise funds for cancer research.

Between frames, I met a Hollywood agent who knew that Brandon Tartikoff, the former president of NBC and Paramount pictures, was looking for a writer to develop a TV series about the ex-wives of country stars that he wanted to call “XXX's and OOO's.”

I got the job. Tartikoff set a deal at CBS and soon in addition to cowriting the script and coproducing the pilot, I was writing the theme song. My publisher, Donna Hilley at Sony/ATV, was thrilled. I invited Matraca Berg to cowrite. We worked hard and got nothing. Eventually, I made the call to my publisher to break the bad news. I would not have the theme song in the new CBS pilot. They would use a country classic.

The next day, demoralized, I slapped a smile on my face, clipped a bow in my daughter's hair, and drove her to school. I was jumping into the

shower when my bedroom phone started ringing. A permission slip that my first grader “had to have” wasn’t in her backpack. I stepped into the shower cussing at myself for being a failure as a mother and a money-maker. Hot water was spraying on my head, when these words came to me, “You got a picture of your Mama in heels and pearls, and you’re trying to make it in your daddy’s world.”

I rushed to my daughter’s school with the permission slip, then over to Matraca’s. When she opened her door, I spat out new lines, before saying hello. She waved me in. The lines to the second verse came to Matraca almost as fast as the lines to the first verse had come to me. We told the truth we were living, how hard it was to make money, make love, and care for family all in the same day. The whole song was written in less than ninety minutes.

Fast forward. Wynonna Judd recorded the song but doesn’t show up for overdubs. We’re back to using a country classic. Except I knew a singer, a woman who had years before sung demos for me, who had the vocal control and voice required to sing on Wy’s tracks and eclipse Wy’s performance, and she was at a nearby studio working on her own album. I raced to where Trisha Yearwood was recording. I blasted past the receptionist and into Trisha’s session. I blurted out the truth starting with, “We have known each other since our first marriages . . .” I entreated her to help me save my last best chance to have a big hit. Trisha said, “Yes.” That generous woman left her own session to save mine.

On the July 9, 1994, *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, “XXX’s and OOO’s” was listed as the No. 1 country single. The single would spend two weeks at No. 1.

We were on our way to “XXX’s and OOO’s” mailbox money. We didn’t know that the mailbox money earned would provide some of the funding I needed to write *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), *Pushkin and the Queen of Spades* (2004), *Rebel Yell* (2009), *Ada’s Rules* (2012), and *Black Bottom Saints* (2021), all of which reference Black presence in country music. We didn’t know a radical plan I started hatching in 1980 would come to full fruition in the twenty-first century.

In no small part, my move to Nashville, Tennessee, a city where I had no friends, family, or set job, in the winter of 1983 was a conscious effort to acquire the economic wherewithal required to thrive as a fiction writer.

The plan had first begun to take shape in the fall of 1980, my senior year at Harvard University. I was fresh out of a two-century, multi-language

survey of “Women’s Writing,” and completing an undergraduate thesis on Jane Austen, when I realized that I, too, wanted to be a novelist.

Recognizing that the strategies and resources available to Austen were not available to me, and aware that Zora Neal Hurston had late in life worked as a maid to support herself and her writing, I determined I would support my fiction writing by becoming a country music songwriter and publisher.

For a young Black woman born in Detroit, Michigan in 1959, my plan wasn’t as audacious or original as it may seem. I knew Anna and Gwen Gordy were successful songwriters who had founded a record company, Anna Records, a year before their brother Berry Gordy founded Motown Records in 1959. I also knew Loucye Gordy, until her death, ran the two primary Motown publishing companies, Jobete and Stone Diamond. The first hit single on the Anna label was “M-O-N-E-Y” recorded by Barrett Strong. Motown, the city, the record label, and that song taught me to take my own entrepreneurial ambitions seriously.

Before Motown taught me, my family taught me more. I am a third-generation entrepreneur. My grandfather moved from Selma, Alabama, to Detroit, Michigan, where he established a dry-cleaning business, Ran’s Cleaners, on the city’s lower East Side in Black Bottom. My father, who ran coin-operated laundries and dry-cleaners, reinforced the lesson. When I asked my father what his favorite color was, he said green because it was the color of money – his idea of child’s play was allowing me to sort change from the laundries. Daddy regaled me with stories of a coffee shop not far from the original offices of Motown, where “sharks” would sit waiting for despondent songwriters, exiting “Hitsville” to pop in for a consoling cup of java. The sharks would buy the songs rejected by Motown outright and cheap, for fast cash, then carve them up for parts, lines, phrases, and titles.

My father’s money tales felt foreign and faraway at Harvard – except when I was talking to my freshman roommate Emily’s mother Gloria Messinger. Gloria also told money tales. One that made a vivid impression? Graduating from Yale Law School in 1954, she was offered jobs at top law firms – as a secretary. Only ASCAP offered her a job as a lawyer. She took it.

Our paths crossed several times during my undergraduate years. She fueled my ambition to become a country songwriter by sharing the information that revenues from ASCAP’s Nashville office were steadily increasing. By the time graduation rolled around, she was ASCAP’s managing director, and arguably the single most powerful woman in the music business.

Some months after graduation, I reached out to say I was ready to launch my career in country music. Gloria arranged a songwriting audition for me in New York with Hal David, one of the great lyricists of the twentieth century and President of ASCAP.

Hal offered his judgment that my song ideas were “country,” my phrasing was “country,” and my storytelling was “country” – but country like he had never heard. He flattered me by stating that the only thing wrong with my best lines was he hadn’t written them. And yet, he wasn’t sanguine about my prospects of “making it” in Nashville.

Music Row, I was warned, was exceptionally close-knit and insular. It had its own distinct business culture, language, style, and campus. They suggested an “Award Season” “scouting trip” to test the waters.

Award season in Music City is a seven-day extravaganza of breakfast parties, luncheons, cocktail parties, dinners, after-hours bashes, high-stake business meetings, annual meetings, romantic assignations, and shopping sprees, all scheduled around four major events, the Country Music Association Awards and the ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC awards banquets. Awards season usually falls in October.

Every meeting Gloria set for me was with a white man, specifically, Buddy Killen, Ralph Murphy, Archie Jordan, Waylon Holyfield, Bob Morrison, and Ronnie Gant, the men who would play a significant role in Gloria being able to announce a year later during Awards season that ASCAP had collected 202,582,000 million dollars.

I showed up to the building where Hank Williams, Sr. had picked up his publishing checks, the Acuff-Rose office, wearing a light gray skirt suit. Ronnie Gant, who ran Acuff-Rose publishing, was wearing jeans and a button-down shirt. He had his feet up on the desk and started peppering me with questions the moment I settled into the chair opposite him, ending with, “Where *are* you from?” When I answered, he shook his head like it hurt. He had arrived at a conclusion, “I don’t see it. I just don’t see it. You need to go back to wherever it is you came from.” Then, perhaps remembering who had gotten me into the room, he walked back the complete dismissal. He said he would show my lyrics to two of his younger writers who were more familiar with “raw” material.

A few weeks after I returned to Nashville, I got a letter from Ronnie Gant saying he had shared my lyrics with Mark D. Sanders and Randy Albright. All three men had come to the same conclusion: “You have no talent whatsoever.” That was the day I decided to move to Nashville.

Ronnie’s tone was the catalyst. And that word “see.” He looked at Black, female, suit-wearing me, and he didn’t “see” anyone he thought could

possibly ever earn mailbox money. And this was a man whose salary was paid for by songs written by Hank Williams, Sr., who learned to pick poetry from a Black street musician called Tee-Tot. He was acting like Lil Hardin hadn't played on Jimmie Rodgers's iconic single "Blue Yodel #9"; like Elvis Presley hadn't learned to sing "Hound Dog" from Big Mama Thornton; like Black Ellen Snowden didn't fiddle and give birth to the sons Ben and Lew Snowden, who taught the song "Dixie" to white Dan Emmett; like country wasn't an Afro-Celtic genre with Black presence and influence all up in it, no matter what lies Bill C. Malone told in *Country Music, USA*.

I was moving my Black and female body from Washington, DC, to Music City, and I was going to find a way or ways to make this truth known: Black women helped birth country.

It was time to secure funding and make a tighter plan for getting to mailbox money. I called on another Harvard connection, Edith Gelfand. Edith grew up in Brooklyn and started listening to country music while skiing in Vail. A childless lawyer, married to a doctor, she was willing to take on risky investments. She offered me \$100,000 for twenty percent of the publishing company we would form, Midsummer Music.

On February 18, 1983, I hit the road with three friends, one woman and two men, in a rented car pointed South. On the twelve-hour drive, we sang along loud to the radio. The song that had me mesmerized? "Faking Love . . . only temporary lovers as we lie here to each other. . . faking love." Buddy Killen, one of the people I met on my scouting trip, had produced "Faking Love" and told me all about its cowriters, the legendary Bobby Braddock who wrote "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" and my all-time favorite country song, "He Stopped Loving Her Today," and an eighteen-year-old songwriter phenom Matraca Berg.

My weeks quickly took on a particular structure. The newspaper arrived on Sunday, including a local entertainment magazine listing all the songwriter's nights. Every Sunday I would choose the shows I would attend. One a night minimum. Sometimes I hit three in a single night. Then I slept with the radio on. I had a notebook that I was determined to fill with potential collaborators, song titles, business advice, and the lyrics to every song on the Hot 100 on the radio. In the front covers, I created an evolving map/chart of the connections/power structure of the country music industry as I encountered it. The head of the ASCAP office, Connie Bradley, for example, was married to Jerry Bradley, who was the head of RCA for over a decade. Her father-in-law Owen Bradley was a legendary producer. Her brother-in-law Harold Bradley was a noted session musician. Together and separately, the Bradleys owned multiple recording studios and publishing

companies. During the week I would work my way through, one song at a time, the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart. The goal was to have heard, and outlined, every single song. I reached that goal. After I'd been at it a few months, each week only brought one or two new songs. That gave me time to go to the basement of the Country Music Hall of Fame and start looking at the sheet music of country classics.

I paid particular attention to songs that were not about love. I knew the country song genre drew: 1) from a ballad tradition that privileged the sung narration of history and current events ("Dear Uncle Sam" and "Galveston"); 2) from worksong, folksong, and blues traditions, which centered on the challenges of poverty ("Don't Forget the Coffee Billy Jo" or "Sixteen Tons"); and 3) from both white evangelical Christianity and Black gospel traditions, which appreciated songs that explicitly addressed God (such as "Drop Kick Me Jesus Through the Goal Post of Life" or "Why Me Lord?"). My chief strategy to becoming a successful songwriter and publisher was to write and publish songs in these categories.

I referred to this as "getting out of the traffic." In the post-*Urban Cowboy* boom of country song success in the 1980s, many writers and publishers were hyper-focused on achieving their own "Looking for Love (in all the Wrong Places)" major mailbox money by exploring the new sexual freedoms in the context of country romance and making it rhyme. Although there were non-love songs on the *Urban Cowboy* soundtrack, including "Hello, Texas" (performed by Jimmy Buffett), written by Robby Campbell and Brian Collins, and Michael Martin Murphy's brilliant "Cherokee Fiddle" (sung by Johnny Lee), the three biggest songs to emerge from the film were love songs. My new acquaintance Bob Morrison and his cowriters Wanda Mallette and Patti Ryan had spent three weeks at No.1 with "Lookin' for Love."

In search of inspiration for my non-love songs, I started exploring the oldest sections of the city and ended up on the banks of the Cumberland River on 2nd Avenue at a dress shop owned by Barbara Kurland, which is a very good thing because, as Michael Martin Murphy explains in "Cherokee Fiddle," "if you wanna make a living you got to put on a good show." I needed work clothes that worked.

Barbara Kurland had them. Her dress shop was in a nineteenth-century brick building across from a feed store. She sold cow-punk couture.

Clothing is an aspect of the construction of country music "performance identity" and (as I had discovered in Gant's Acuff-Rose office) "work identity." In the twentieth century, Manuel and Nudie were the most visible architects of the performance style, and they had an impact on the

work style. As a person attempting to work in the industry, my clothes were work tools that marked or unmarked me as a viable member of the community.

Costuming is one reason that Lil Hardin and Ray Charles are not recognized for their seminal contributions to country: they didn't "dress country." Lil Hardin's costumes reference leisure and luxury. Racism and sexism are the primary reasons Lil gets erased, but costume and image play a role: she sings in elegant debutante-type gowns. Image was also, I believe, a delaying obstacle to the long overdue induction of Ray Charles into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2021. Those who worked in the twenty-first century to see the placement of a plaque honoring Charles on the wall of the hallowed Rotunda among the other – and many lesser – greats had to overcome the visual impact of his seminal album. The cover of his masterpiece *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* is a striking red, white, and black cover that features Charles in a black tuxedo jacket, white shirt with studs, and what appears to be a cross between a black tie and an ascot, with his signature dark sunglasses. Charles looks the picture of urban and urbane-understated wealth and cool. There is not one iota of country bumpkin in the picture – though there are bars and bars of beloved-by-country-bumpkin-strings, and all his gut-bucket-rugged-cross-Black country vocals on the iconic album.

I purchased most of the clothes I worked the Row in from Barbara. She curated an inventory that helped to define a new, but distinctly recognizable, Music Row insider work uniform. I can still remember some of those one-of-a-kind, artsy, and affordable pieces: I chose dresses from her collection that slyly referenced Black banjo playing women, Black fiddling women, Black blues shouting women, and Black gospel singing women *might wear*; dresses my grandmother *did wear*. Those dresses allowed me to walk in and announce without a word that I was connected. There was something liberating about walking the Row and knowing I did not need to be a breastless, hipless woman in a suit, to be a significant power. Barbara Kurland helped me get to that.

And she provided me with insider information about songwriters and recording sessions. Barbara's daughter Amy Kurland had just opened the Bluebird Café, which was fast becoming the gathering spot for working songwriters. Her husband Shelly Kurland was one of the most in-demand session players and string arrangers in the city. Nashville was a very small town.

Dressed for a new brand of success, and with a head full of the hottest songs on the country charts from studying *Billboard* and the weirdest

country songs through immersing myself in that old sheet music and decades of demo reels (through a Barbara Kurland connection), I checked in with ASCAP's Bob Doyle. He had someone he wanted me to meet, Diana Reid Haig.

Diana was working at House of David as a studio manager and occasionally as recording engineer. The Sarah Lawrence graduate arrived in Nashville in 1981 and has been called the first female sound recording engineer on the Row. Diana and I started writing.

Everything about Diana was fifties. That's how she aesthetically negotiated a place for herself on the scene. She drove a two-tone 1956 four-door Chevy Bel Air, which was dark gray and cream. Her front room boasted an extraordinary collection of fifties-era television sets that were never turned on. A vintage record player with vintage singles was always going.

When our first song "Dangerous Curves," a cow-punk version of a fifties doo-wop was completed to our satisfaction, armed with the knowledge, probably from Barbara, that Steve Earle was cutting soon, it made sense to us to call Bob Doyle, talk him out of Steve Earle's phone number, then cold call Steve at his home to pitch the song.

It did not make sense to Steve. He started cussing. He called me everything but a child of God. A week later he called me on my rotary home phone at the number I had scribbled on the label. "You're going to be a hit songwriter one day and I'm going to help you." Steve and I set up standing writing appointments. The songs "You Tear Me Up," "Half-Way Home," and "You Can't Break My Heart" were my cowriting 101 class. In my father's terms, I was learning to "print money." I was still looking for a "gold mine," a writer I could publish.

I found one at the Weenie Roast.

The Weenie Roast was an annual Music Row summer ritual. Everyone, literally everyone was invited; anyone could just show up, and most folks doing any kind of work on Music Row came. It was hosted by a bank that liked being known as the "musician's friend." I attended my first Weenie Roast wearing one of my Barbara Kurland purchases. A tall man with dark eyes struck up a conversation. He was an extremely well-read surfer from California and seemingly high as a kite on ambition to be a hit songwriter. When he told me he wrote for Acuff-Rose, I asked him what his last name was. He said, "Sanders." When he discovered I was a songwriter, he invited me to write. I told him he didn't want to write with me because I had "[n]o talent whatsoever." When he realized that I was quoting his own words back to him, half-embarrassed, half-amused, he repeated the invitation to

cowrite. This time I accepted. I was eager to prove Mark and his boss wrong.

Our first cowrite produced the cringeable, “I Don’t Want to Be Your No. 1 (I Want to Be Your One and Only One).” Mark had seen and rejected my best ideas. His publisher wanted love songs. I had veered from my established strategy. The next time we sat down to write, I worked my plan. I suggested we write a song about religious hypocrisy and unwed mothers. He liked the idea. I pitched a title, “Reckless Night” and lines from a rough draft he had previously seen and dismissed. This time he was intrigued.

By the time we completed “Reckless Night,” a song that would get recorded, I knew I had found a radically under-utilized and radically underfunded asset. Mark was substitute teaching five days a week to pay his bills. I suspected we could lure him away from Acuff-Rose if we offered a big enough draw. And I believed if we encouraged him to start writing something other than the love songs Ronnie was hankering for, he might be the Midsummer gold mine.

Mark wasn’t ready to sign with Midsummer yet. We didn’t have a plugger other than me. He believed I could write. He wasn’t sure I could plug.

I found my song plugger looking for a writer who would let me pitch. Karen Conrad approached me between sets at one of the bars on 8th Avenue, Douglas Corner, or the Sutler. She came straight to the point, “I see you all the time. We should know each other. Come see me.” Then she gave me her card. The way she went back to working the room, I knew I would take her up on the invitation.

One conversation convinced both of us that our interests were aligned. My business partner Edith and I contracted with Karen to pitch the Midsummer catalog. The woman who had pitched Jimmy Buffett and Jim Croce and had stepped out to form her own publishing company was now pitching me. Karen was thrilled to be, as she described it, “No longer hanging on by my fake fingernails” and to be able to use some of the money we were paying her to pitch to fund signing her own writers. At that time no bank in Nashville would loan a female independent publisher money for the purpose of running her business. It was a big win-win.

It was time to have another conversation with Mark Sanders. He had moved from Acuff-Rose to Maypop, a publisher owned by the band Alabama. We offered a big draw, I think I remember it was \$37,500, with the stipulation he couldn’t keep substitute teaching – he had to write full time. And we strongly encouraged him to write songs about something other than love.

Soon enough Mark was writing for Midsummer Music, Karen was pitching our songs, and we had an office in the cool Audio Media Building on 19th Avenue South. All we were missing was that first cut – for me as a songwriter and for Midsummer Music as a publisher.

Steve Earle helped get that done. One afternoon, he invited me and a visiting out-of-town friend of mine to hang out with him at the publishing company where he was, Silverline-Goldline. His publisher, Pat Halper, joined the conversation. Before I knew it, my friend was mansplaining to Pat Halper, one of the first women to be hired by a major publisher, why she needed to listen to “Reckless Night” and get it recorded.

Ever gracious, and often amused, Pat listened to the cassette demo of the song. Then she opined the song could be perfect for the Forester Sisters – and she was pitching at Warner Brothers for the Forester Sisters the very next week. Though she had nothing to gain financially, Pat pitched the song to her friend Paige Levy, the A+R (Artist and Repertory) executive at Warner Bros. working with the Foresters. I was on my way to having a song on their most successful album and the B-side of a No. 1 single. The album *The Forester Sisters* reached No. 4 on *Billboard's* Country Albums chart. And in time they would prove to be one of the most successful all-female country groups with fourteen Top 10 singles.

The same week Pat got “Reckless Night” “on hold,” I got engaged to be married to my daughter’s father. Mark sang “Reckless Night” at my wedding reception in Washington, DC. Shortly after the wedding and honeymoon, my new husband joined the State Department and we shipped out to the Philippines, where the country standard, “Baby I Lied,” performed by my friend Deborah Allen and written by Deborah and her then-husband Rafe Van Hoy, would become the theme song for the People Power Revolution. For my first anniversary, my husband got me a Shih Tzu puppy; we named him Reckless. I was based in Manila but commuting to Nashville.

My first long summer writing trip I got invited to attend Farm Aid, which in 1986 was still being held on Willie Nelson’s ranch outside of Austin, Texas. Bonnie Raitt’s mesmerizing performance of “Angel from Montgomery” would have been the highlight of that trip, but that got eclipsed. An acquaintance tried to pressure me into joining in the illicit druggy fun. I declined but ended up coaxing them into trying a jolt of sobriety. In the Austin airport, flying back to Nashville, the lines to “Girls Ride Horses, Too” began to take shape. It was a story song about a drug-running man who tries to intimidate a girl and ends up getting robbed and educated by the girl.

As I remember it, Mark Sanders and I took about three days to get that song written right. Then Karen got it cut almost as quick. Her old friend Tommy West was producing an album for Judy Rodman, newly signed to MTM Records, a country label founded by television star Mary Tyler Moore. Soon enough Mark and I had our first Top 10 Hit – and the mailbox money was rolling in.

Edith remembers that I came to her one day and said, I no longer want to be management, I just want to be an artist, by which I meant songwriter and novelist. And I remember that, too. It was exhausting trying to be an artist and management. And we weren't making big bucks yet. I had an idea. Bob Doyle was leaving ASCAP to start his own management and publishing company based on a new writer-performer he had discovered, Garth Brooks. I suggested we join forces in publishing. We did. It was a most excellent business decision.

I remember I sold a part of the company to Edith when my daughter was born, in 1987, decreasing my share to fifty percent. By 1990 I had sold Midsummer completely to Edith and signed with Sony/ATV, the company that Buddy Killen had built, which by the time I arrived was led by a financial force of nature that was Donna Hilley – a big, blonde, and brilliant, shark.

Donna rose from being a secretary at Tree to being the head of the conglomerate Tree, which became Sony/ATV. She was ready to conquer Hollywood and thought I “might-could-be” her ways and means. She knew I had written Reba McEntire's video of the year, “Is There Life Out There,” and had some spec screenplays that were music driven. She gave me a hefty advance. And she got me invited to that celebrity bowling event, where I met the Hollywood agent.

I was signed to Donna at Sony/ATV publishing when I cowrote “The Ballad of Sally Ann,” a song about a Black wife who seeks justice for her Black husband who is lynched between their wedding and their reception. It was recorded by Mark O'Connor and the New Nashville Cats in 1990. It didn't connect with a large audience then or bring me much mailbox money in the twentieth century.

It's doing a lot better in the twenty-first. The American Music Shop video of the song featuring John Cowan on lead vocal was posted to YouTube on January 4, 2013, by Mark O'Connor's account. As of this writing that video has 93,766 views on that platform. Some consider it a modern bluegrass classic. Songs I wrote, published, and got recorded; songs in the twentieth century about the homeless, about small towns being

smaller for girls, about environmental justice, about Black Cowboys, about slut shaming, about gender-based religious hypocrisy, about suicide and drug addiction among prostitutes on the American frontier that languished as album cuts in the twentieth century, earning little and having less social impact than I dreamed, than I wished, than I worked for, are connecting to audiences in the twenty-first.

“Went for a Ride,” a song about a Black cowboy, which I cowrote with Radney Foster, has over 300,000 streams on Spotify alone. “Who’s Minding the Garden” has 10,000 streams and was discovered on a streaming platform by a church that has now worked it up as a hymn for their in-person services that are also available virtually. In the twenty-first century, including “XXX’s and OOO’s,” my songs have now racked up more than twenty-three million streams on Spotify.

Midsummer Music is still in business to this day. And Mark? He proved to be a gold mine for Midsummer and after Midsummer. He’s had fourteen No. 1 hits, fifty singles, and over 200 cuts. His biggest song? “I Hope You Dance,” recorded by Lee Ann Womack, which he wrote with my daughter’s Saturday night babysitter – Tia Sillers – after I introduced them.

In 2022, Midsummer Music came back to me. Things are looking up. I am trusting that the Mechanical Licensing Collective is going to provide me with a whole new source of twenty-first-century mailbox money. And of course, I no longer step out onto my porch to pick up a check. I log into my email.

Sometimes when I go to my online email mailbox to see how much money I’ve made, I think of a Black woman born in Nashville in 1945 known on Music Row by a single name, Shirley. She came to work each day in a variation of the same crisp uniform, bright-colored tailored shirt and trousers. Shirley Washington found a room for me to write when I hadn’t reserved a room. Sometimes she elevated me to the boardroom. Washington wasn’t an “official” writer’s rep, but she always had a seat, a cold Co-Cola, and advice for me. Shirley knew people would make an appointment to write and not bring their best lines, their best hooks, or their best melodies. She knew who was too racist or too sexist to write hits with me. She knew which of my outfits worked and which didn’t work. She knew better than anyone else in the ASCAP building. And she wasn’t afraid to tell me.

Shirley Washington began at ASCAP in 1982. She retired in 2010. For twenty-eight years, she played a role in connecting writers to other writers, to their official performing rights reps, and in getting the daily business of ASCAP done.

Every time I pick up my twenty-first-century mailbox money, I am benefitting from a woman who in the twentieth century worked on the Row in her version of a nineteenth-century maid's uniform.

I still “work the Row” and I work it in a uniform. There are many versions, but they are all head-to-toe black and drapey. That's what I wore when I joined the Vanderbilt University faculty in 2004, to teach Country Lyric in American Culture; it's what I wear when I teach Black Country, including the day Mickey Guyton visited class. It's what I wore consulting for and appearing in the documentary series, *Country Music* (2019) by Ken Burns, and the PBS documentary film on Charley Pride, *I'm Just Me* (2019). My uniform is my tribute, hiding in plain sight, to the only Black woman working Music Row when I arrived, a woman who contributed collaborative insight, administrative acumen, and elbow grease to the business of country music and yet got written out of too many histories of the business because of the uniform she wore. Whose country? Shirley's country. My country, too.