



Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
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“YES, I AM AMERICAN”: AN ANALYSIS OF JASON
RINGENBERG’S *EMPIRE BUILDERS*

Francisco Javier Rodríguez Arranz

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Tutor: Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan
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ABSTRACT

I have analyzed Jason Ringenberg's *Empire Builders* as a political manifestation of American culture. My aim is the analysis of how country music can reflect the political ambivalence in the United States as well as other themes that are central in the American tradition such as work ethics or individual worth. Firstly, this paper shows the historical and social background where the American society develops and exposes the different theories that were elaborated to explain the complex human landscape in the United States, putting especial emphasis on multiculturalism. Then, previous to verifying the links between country music and American identity, the role of music when shaping both individual and collective identity, and the different perspectives on this matter are explained. Finally, by analyzing the visual elements in the album and the themes of the songs it is proved how a critical view of the American society is not incompatible with respecting its values and traditions.

Keywords: United States, American Identity, Musical Identity, Country Music, Empire Builders.

RESUMEN

He analizado el disco *Empire Builders* de Jason Ringenberg como una expresión política de la cultura americana. Mi objetivo es analizar como la música country puede reflejar la ambivalencia política en los Estados Unidos al igual que otros temas fundamentales de la cultura americana tales como la ética del trabajo o la valía individual. Primeramente, este trabajo muestra el trasfondo sociocultural en el que desarrolla la sociedad americana y expone las diferentes teorías que se han elaborado para explicar el complejo paisaje humano de los Estados Unidos, haciendo hincapié en el multiculturalismo. Después, y antes de constatar el vínculo entre la música country y la identidad americana, se explica el papel de música a la hora de definir tanto la identidad individual como la colectiva y los diferentes puntos de vista acerca de dicho asunto. Finalmente, analizando los elementos visuales del disco y sus canciones se demuestra que mirada crítica a la sociedad americana no es incompatible con el respeto a sus valores y tradiciones.

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos, Identidad Americana, Identidad Musical, Música Country, Empire Builders.

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Introduction

Traditionally, among other cultural expressions, the literary text has been one of the most useful tools when trying to understand the idiosyncrasy of any people or society.

In a broad sense of the term, literature does not only mean the canonical works that enrich the cultural heritage of a certain country, but also refers to the oral tradition, folktales, newspapers and publications, popular songs, documents, and other elements which tell us about the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of those who have been witnesses of the vicissitudes of that society. In this sense, authors as Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean in their work *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* consider that “the concept of a text is open to redefinition” (7) and that “it also becomes clear that to restrict the study of cultural products to a small handful of approved texts runs the risk of omitting a great deal” (6).

The huge scientific and technological development that the 20th century brought meant the emergence of new forms of mass communication and leisure. The cinema, the radio, and the television allowed the spreading of news, music, films, and cultural events among others. Concurrently, a flourishing industry was created to provide the new products that radio and television stations needed to satisfy their audience. The musical and cinematographic production increased and the result is a great amount of materials that can be used with the same purpose as the literary texts above mentioned. Campbell and Kean point out that these materials are really useful for cultural studies and argue that they have used texts from established writers as well as “material from other sources including popular culture, photography, art, music, film, television, and material artefacts.” (6)

The main aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the topics of *Empire Builders*, the fifth record in the American musician Jason Ringenberg’s solo career, a work that has not been previously studied from the academic point of view. Born on November 22, 1958 in Kewanee, Illinois, Jason Ringenberg grew up in a hog farm where he soon learnt what hard and honest work means. In that farm, one day like any other, the airwaves opened young Jason the doors of a new world; when he listened to George Jones & Tammy Wynette’s *Golden Ring* coming from the radio he decided music was going to be his path. In the early 1980s he moved to Tennessee where he

created the band Jason & The Scorchers, a band that inflamed Nashville's musical scene with their blend of punk and country elements and that helped to coin the term Alternative Country or Alt Country. After a successful career with The Scorchers, Jason Ringenberg undertook a solo project that included music for children performed by his alter ego Farmer Jason. *Empire Builders* is the fifth album in Jason Ringenberg's solo career and the most politically committed.

My intention is to investigate how American identity, strongly determined by political and religious elements, is described in the songs that Ringenberg compiled in *Empire Builders*. For that purpose I will analyze the content of the songs. I will also investigate the iconic elements that are included in the booklet, i.e., the photos of the singer, the front cover, and the back cover.

There are several reasons why this album has been chosen as my object of study. Firstly, the songs of *Empire Builders* deal with a good amount of topics pertaining to the current situation of the United States of America both in the national and international scene. Historical events, personal experiences, the ethnic minorities, the American identity, the legacy of the ancestors, and political and economical issues among others are the base on which Jason Ringenberg builds his message.

All these topics, many of them common in the American artistic and literary production, are not described superficially or with a sweetened approach. On the contrary, the author offers a critical point of view that was received with hostility by some sectors of the American right wing. Despite the criticism, the concern, and the personal experience, the message that Jason Ringenberg conveys in *Empire Builders* is not a rough and abrupt expression of his feelings.

As I will later discuss, country music is one of the most iconic styles if not the iconic style, in the United States and as such listeners inevitably associate it to a particular stereotype, mainly the conservative cowboy that, as usually, does not always match with reality.

Finally, the booklet included in the CD is another worth considering element. Full symbolism and with a powerful visual impact, the design of the booklet is a graphic summary of the content of *Empire Builders*, both from the musical and narrative point of view, and perfectly accompanies the essence of the album.

Taking all these points into account, in this dissertation I will investigate the recurring topics in American culture that are present in the record, how the question of American identity continues to be present in the United States society, and, yet, the

amount of the clichés and assumptions that are in a number of cases surprisingly erroneous.

By using a linguistic simile, the different themes Jason Ringenberg deals with in the songs which make up *Empire Builders* could be considered as the hyponyms which help to shape a superordinate, a hyperonym that takes precedence all over the intellectual output in the United States of America: the American identity.

Historical and cultural background

In 1709, English explorer John Lawson published his book *A New Voyage to Carolina*. The work is the result of several years of expeditions and explorations in the future state of North Carolina, supported by the colonial authorities, and deals with different matters such as botany, geography, and natural history among others. One of the most interesting passages in the book is that in which Lawson describes his encounter with the Hatteras Indians, who proudly claimed to be descendants of European people:

These tell us, that several of their Ancestors were white People, and could talk in a Book, as we do; the Truth of which is confirm'd by gray Eyes being found frequently amongst these Indians, and no others. They value themselves extremely for their Affinity to the English, and are ready to do them all friendly Offices. (62)

Those white people the Indians were referring to as their ancestors were the colonists who tried to settle in Roanoke Island, one of the English first attempts to establish a permanent colony in North America, almost one hundred years after the Genoese navigator Giovanni Caboto, John Cabot for the English, arrived at the shores of Newfoundland in 1497.

In the next decades, English colonists successfully settled first in Jamestown and some years later in Plymouth. Whereas in the former case the Virginia Company of London invested in the foundation of the colony expecting economic profits, in the latter it was mainly the quest for a space of religious freedom the reason what took the Pilgrim Fathers to the lands of the New World. If to all of it we add that the Spaniards had already founded the first permanent European settlement in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565 and the expeditions accomplished by other great powers such as France or the Netherlands, yet in the early sixteenth century it can be perceived the complexity and the polyhedral character of the identity of the future United States of America. According to Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley, this perception was not exclusive of outer observers and “[t]his varied, multi-faceted view of America has also been shared by those who settled in America” (2). This identity will be assembled, sometimes in terms of opposition such as North/South, East/West, Black/White, or Protestant/Non-Protestant, and others in terms of homogenization such as the Melting Pot metaphor, cultural assimilation, or “Mom and Apple pie, values that nobody can disagree with” (Campbell 35). In addition, it must be taken into account that: “America

existed in the European imagination long before its official discovery by Columbus in 1492” (Bradbury 32) one more time in terms of opposition:

Since Sir Thomas More and before, America has been both Utopia and Dystopia for those in other lands. From its finding and founding, and even before that, America has been a point of refraction – less an objective reality than a mirror, in which observers have seen their own reflection, sometimes curiously diminished, sometimes immensely enlarged. (Bradbury 2)

From the early times of the colonization newcomers start to produce writings where the guidelines that will rule the lives of those who hanker after joining the new society and the first shapes of the American character begin to be defined. Thus, statements like Captain John Smith’s “that he that will not worke shall not eate” (83) point the work ethics and somehow anticipate the economic system to follow, poems as *Upon a Spider Catching a Fly* by Edward Taylor support the Protestant creed and suggest the central position of the WASP population, and ideal images as John Winthrop’s “A City upon a Hill” or questions as Crèvecoeur’s “What, then, is the American, this new man?” (69) express the awakening of the self-consciousness of being a different people with a very specific mission in history.

In *National Identity*, Anthony D. Smith declares that an historic territory, or homeland, common myths and historical memories, a common mass, public culture, common legal rights and duties for all members, and a common economy with territorial mobility for members are the fundamental features of national identity (14). By synthesizing these concepts two principal elements are obtained: a group of people sharing a common space, not only geographical but also political, cultural, and social, and a necessary development over time, since, as Beller and Leersen state “[i]dentity [...] is closely linked to the idea of permanence through time” (335). And it is precisely at this point where the difficulties to define the American identity emerge, and some discrepancies appear:

between what America stood for in image or concept – the City on the Hill, the Land of the New Start, Democracy, Equality, Liberty, Freedom of Opportunity – and the explicit realities that Americans actually encountered in their everyday lives [...] in part, because all that is America – nationality, society, characters, ideals, ideology – has had to be invented. (Bradbury 2)

Ellman Crasnow and Philip Haffenden reinforce this idea:

The problem of defining America is indeed an old one, even older than America itself. [...] America was, it has been said, not so much discovered as invented, and came into existence very much as a result of ideas already attached to it by men elsewhere. (Bradbury 31)

In *The Limits of Liberty* Maldwyn A. Jones argues that, although “[t]he United States began as an extension of Europe” and “[i]n some important respects it has remained one,” the models and institutions transferred to America were not exact copies of those in Europe, in large part because of the American peculiarities – its size, geographic factors, climatic conditions, the long distance from the mother country – in part because the settlers did not share just a single European tradition (1). Bradbury and Temperley highlight the influence of the geographic factors when molding American settlers’ distinctiveness:

The wonderment inspired by the American Indians was transferred to those who took America as a place to settle. To be sure they were not as exotic as the natives, but they were generating new institutions in a new world, and it soon became evident that the ways of life in the New World differed in some important respects from those of the Old. There was even speculation that this was the result of some form of geographical determinism, so that in due course the Europeans would revert to the conditions of the Indians. Indeed, there was not lack of evidence that in many cases something very like this was happening. But, whatever the nature of the forces at work, it was plain that when people and their institutions crossed the Atlantic they suffered a sea-change, and that, whatever their plans, and however determined they might be to preserve European practices, they invariably ended up with something different. These changes were particularly marked in the case of the English settlements in North America, and above all by those that became in time the United States. (5)

Temperley, Bradbury, and Jones coincide on considering that the economic policies applied by the English government in the colonies, partly due to the acceptance that the early settlements were not as economically profitable as at first moment it was thought (Bradbury 5), bestowed English colonists a bigger degree of freedom compared to that of settlers from other European countries such as Spain or France (Jones 15), contributing in this way to reinforce that distinctiveness above mentioned.

Population in America, as well as the inhabited area, progressively began to grow; during the period known as the “Great Migration” (1618-1623) population in the colonies multiplies almost by ten, from 450 to 4,500 people; in 1763 reached two million, many of them English immigrants; French Huguenots, German Lutherans, Swiss Amish, Scotch-Irishmen, Sephardic Jews, and other ethnic groups spread across the country in the coming years (Jones 20).

In 1782 Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur publishes *Letters from an American Farmer*. In *Letter III* the French-American author reflects on the nature of that varied group of people in America and although “each ethnic group tended to cluster in separate areas and its members did not marry outside it” (Jones 21) he somehow idealizes the situation by presenting the example of “a family whose grandfather was an

Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations” (69-70) to illustrate the process that will lead to the conformation of the American individual. When a few lines after he declares that “[h]ere individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (70). Crèvecoeur is anticipating one of the most recurrent concepts in the American imaginary: the melting pot – indeed, God’s melting pot. The term became popular in 1908 due to the play *The Melting Pot* by the English Jew writer Israel Zangwill and supports the idea that the adequate blending of peoples sharing the American territory will produce the embodiment of Americanness. Although Zangwill included: “Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow” (Zangwill n. pag.) in the melting pot, the legal system, with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or the National Origin Act of 1924, used to ban ethnic groups such as Indians, Asians, or Blacks from that ideal room.

In 1620 the arrival of twenty Africans to Jamestown will decisively determine not only the human landscape in the future United States, but will also be the cornerstone of its subsequent economic development. Although at a first moment these men, as some Europeans, were traded as indentured servants, in a few years the situation changed and Africans were considered slaves by law. Thus, slavery introduced a new protagonist in the already intricate map of the American identity: that group of people that together with their descendants will be labeled as Negroes, Niggers, Blacks, and in more recent times African Americans. At this point it is interesting to appreciate James D. Fearon’s words in his paper *What is Identity (as We Now Use the Word)?*: “In the U.S., having a single, non-too-distant ancestor who was coded as white does not make one ‘white’, but one may be coded as black if one has ‘a single drop of black blood’, as the racist saying goes” (18).

The intersections among the different ethnic groups in America, their role in society, the connotations and consequences of this interaction have been widely theorized along the years. The diverse origin of the people who populate the current United States obviously motivates the central position the ethnic question has when determining the nature of American identity. Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean consider the dual aspect of this issue:

Ethnicity in the United States of America has been and continues to be this blend of antagonism and coalescence, a mix of different voices struggling to be heard, some

restricted and silenced, while others dominate, and yet always with the possibility of finding expression and authority. (73)

In an early stage the United States “preached and pursued Angloconformity.” This theory required the immigrants firstly to learn and use the English language and secondly to abandon their cultural background in order to “conform in every possible way to the host culture” (Bradbury 161), a culture that was pre-eminently tinged with WASP values. The melting pot theory softened previous stances towards immigrants, and according to Bradbury and Temperley, Zangwill’s approach “was not quite Crevecoeur’s idea of amalgamation as it suggested an equality among the ingredients and it reflected a progressive optimism that by melting something superior would emerge.” (161-162)

The assimilation model proposed by the melting pot theory was well received by wide sectors of the society, foremost politicians included. Thus, President Theodor Roosevelt wrote Israel Zangwill a letter praising his drama: “I do not know when I have seen a play that stirred me as much” (Rabinowitz 229), and more recently Ortiz Montaigne Walton in his essay *Toward a Non-Racial, Non-Ethnic Society* quotes Patti Davis, Ronald Reagan’s daughter, to show the optimism and faith the ex-president had regarding this subject: “He pointed out that America was a ‘melting pot’ and there really are no pure races left. We’re all a mixture of various races and ethnic backgrounds. That fact alone, he said, should be enough to make us all strive for harmony” (452). Nevertheless, the melting pot was at the same time rejected by some immigrants and members of ethnic minorities, nativist groups, and other thinkers. Then, new approaches appeared. In *Trans-national America* Randolph S. Bourne questions the homogeneity of the American citizenry and recovers the classical notion of cosmopolitanism (13-14) whereas Horace M. Kallen developed the concept of ‘cultural pluralism’ and supported the idea that immigrants keep their languages, institutions, and cultural traditions but at the same time English is the official language and they must adopt the labor and political American values (Rabinowitz 230). The assimilation model set out by the melting pot theory was also rejected by Ruby Jo Kennedy who publishes the results of her research on intermarriage in the essay titled *Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940*:

The traditional “single-melting-pot” idea must be abandoned, and a new conception, which we term “the triple-melting-pot” theory of assimilation, will take its place as the true expression of what is happening to the various nationality groups in the United States. (332)

Will Herberg shares Kennedy's concept of triple melting pot and, in opposition to Kallen's view, points out that 'cultural pluralism' does not adequately correspond with the American reality. In *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* Herberg argues that the decreasing flux of immigrants, due to World War I and restrictive legislation, makes the third generation occupy a central position in American society. Third generation immigrants, already American-born, are not as aware of the ethnic question as their parents and grandparents were, and feel comfortable speaking in English and sharing the American values. Nevertheless, and although feeling totally Americans, they do not cut the links with their ethnic groups and keep their ancestors' faith. Then, religion, not the skin color or the original nationality, becomes the main identifying factor in American society (Herberg 31). In the early seventies Carl N. Degler adapts Horace M. Kallen's metaphor of America as an orchestra and by changing the vehicle coins a new term to define the way the different ethnic groups coexist within the United States: the salad bowl. The concept radically differs from the idea of the melting pot and suggests that the result of the Americanization process is, rather than a single unity, a combination of elements which, still maintaining their essential characteristics, contribute to enhance the final product:

The metaphor of the melting pot is unfortunate and misleading. A more accurate analogy would be a salad bowl, for, though the salad is an entity, the lettuce can still be distinguished from the chicory, the tomatoes from the cabbage. (Billington 11)

Of course the salad bowl metaphor did not satisfy everybody and other alternative metaphors appeared. Thus, Jimmy Carter in his speech in Pittsburgh during the 1976 presidential campaign uses a new term: "We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams" (qtd. in BrainyQuote) whereas Professor Lawrence H. Fuchs in his book *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* considers that "The most accurately descriptive metaphor, the one that best explains the dynamics of ethnicity, is 'kaleidoscope'":

No metaphor can capture completely the complexity of ethnic dynamics in the U.S. 'Melting pot' ignores the persistence and reconfiguration of the ethnicity over the generations. 'Mosaic,' much more apt for pluralistic societies such as Kenya or India, is too static a metaphor; it fails to take in to account the easy penetration of many ethnic boundaries. Nor is 'salad bowl' appropriate; the ingredients of a salad bowl are mixed but do not change. 'Rainbow' is a tantalizing metaphor, but rainbows disappear. 'Symphony,' like 'rainbow,' implies near perfect harmony; both fail to take into account the variety and range of ethnic conflict in the United States. [...] American ethnicity is kaleidoscopic, i.e., "complex and varied, changing form, pattern, color . . . continually shifting from one set of

relations to another; rapidly changing.” When a kaleidoscope is in motion, the parts give the appearance of rapid change and extensive variety in color and shape and in their interrelationships. The viewer sees an endless variety of variegated patterns, just as takes place on the American ethnic landscape. (276)

During the second half of the twentieth century cultural pluralism promoted by Horace M. Kallen and the concepts of salad bowl, mosaic, and kaleidoscope evolve and are gathered under the umbrella of multiculturalism, an ambiguous term with different currents within it and with as many defenders as detractors.

The term multiculturalism, in its modern sense, began to be used in the 1960's and it was introduced in the United States and other English speaking countries via Canada, where “it gained its general meaning (Özensel 20). The Civil Right Movement that fought against racism and discrimination suffered by Black people, Jews, Catholics, women, gays, lesbians, and other minority groups and the subsequent emergence of Cultural Studies in the American academic context strongly contributed to the development of theories of multiculturalism which put the question in the center of the social debate. The phenomenon of multiculturalism is not new and some of its basic elements, that is, different ethnic groups with different languages and religious confessions sharing a particular geographical and social space were common in other societies along history as Ancient Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the USSR, and, according to Professor Vincent N. Parrillo, even the United States: “[a]lthough the current debates do contain some new elements, the fact is that multiculturalism has been an ongoing social reality in the United States, not just since its inception as a nation, but even in its primeval colonial cradle” (523). Some of the new elements into debate that Parrillo refers to are indeed related to common patterns in the liberal democratic systems. Thus, Will Kymlicka states that “[i]deas about the legal and political accommodation of ethnic diversity – commonly termed “multiculturalism” – emerged in the West as a vehicle for replacing older forms of ethnic and racial hierarchy with new relations of democratic citizenship” (1). Nevertheless, the implementation of legal and political dispositions regarding ethnic groups and other minorities, which sometimes involve affirmative action programs, has found strong opposition not only from conservative and reactionary sectors but also from some members of progressive movements, leftist scholars and even from members of ethnic minorities. In addition, new elements are adding complexity to the question. In the United States, tensions among ethnic minorities, the rejection of new immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean by part of the Afro American community, events such as the killing of a

black young male by the police and the subsequent riots in Ferguson, Missouri, or the mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, and, above all, the terrorist attacks in New York and San Bernardino, are obliging to redefine and reassess the multicultural question.

Musical identity

The postmodern condition and the rise of Cultural Studies, especially in the last third of the twentieth century in the Anglo-Saxon countries, did not only broaden the academic field of investigation and put the scope in new terms and concepts but also added new tools and new perspectives to the study and research of the social sciences. Thus, new disciplines such as African-American studies, social semiotics, or gender studies and new concepts such as multiculturalism, ecology, or globalization are contemplated and approached, other than canonical sources, by means of products of the contemporary culture as films, TV advertisements, comics, popular music, fanzines, and others.

Over these past years, identity and its construction has been the subject of great debate not only by scholars and intellectuals in the cultural and academic spheres but also by common citizens from different social groups. Identity is a multilayer concept with the primary dichotomy personal identity / social identity at a first level, followed by a group of defining qualities such as age, race, gender, culture, or nationality from which other categories can be inferred. Then, for example, it is possible to talk about working class identity, Harlem's identity, or the identity of subcultural groups.

Culture and its different manifestations have traditionally been determining factors when stating, describing, and shaping both personal and social identities, but at the same time, neither all disciplines nor every cultural product were given the same consideration by scholars and researchers. In this regard music is one of the most useful and effective cultural manifestations, and a correct treatment of this issue is essential when trying to define the basis and the ongoing development of identity; because identity "is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*" (Frith 110). Of course music, in the manner of many other cultural manifestations, has been broadly studied and a great bulk of literature has been devoted to this issue, but a changing criterion when considering the cultural material and a hierarchical classification of the very arts have not probably contribute to clarify the question. In his essay *Music and Identity*, Simon Frith reminds us that:

It is conventional, nowadays, in the academy at least, to divide the arts into separate categories such that the performing arts (theatre, dance and music) are differentiated from the fine arts (literature, painting, sculpture) and, on the whole, the performing arts are taken to be inferior to the fine arts, incapable of providing such rich aesthetic experience or social commentary. (115)

However, this distinction was neither always uniform nor the sole one. Thus, for instance, in the eighteenth century the performing arts were considered to be clearly superior to the fine arts (Frith 116) whereas postmodernism and the subsequent society, the postmodern society, tried to definitively erase the red lines which distinguished among highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture or music. Despite everything, the British musicologist Philip Tagg affirms that the “study of popular music [...] is often confronted with a bemused attitude of suspicion implying that there is something weird about taking ‘fun’ seriously or finding ‘fun’ in serious ‘things’ (37).

Even though each art, or cultural manifestation, influences in a different way in the development of both the social and the individual, this restructuring of the cultural question decisively helped to clarify the role of music in the construction of identity; and although among scholars and researchers, as will be later explained, unanimity does not exist regarding the different theories explaining the identity process, they mostly coincide in pinpointing the variables (music, individual/collective, identity) intervening in the equation that explains it. Thus, Tagg supports Frith’s assertion that “[m]usic seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (110) and equally highlights the social significance of music when constructing the identity:

Music, as can be seen in its modes of ‘performance’ and reception, most frequently requires by its very nature a group of individuals to communicate either among themselves or with another group; thus most music (and dance) has an intrinsically collective character not shared by the visual and verbal arts. This should mean that music is capable of transmitting the affective identities, attitudes and behavioural patterns of socially definable groups, a phenomenon observed in studies of subcultures and use by US-American format radio to determine advertising markets. (Tagg 40)

Two main theories were traditionally formulated to explain how music influences in the construction of identity, why different social actors (whether they are ethnic groups, social classes, subcultures, age or gender groups) identify with a kind of music and not with other musical forms (Vila n. pag): structural homology, proposed by British subcultural scholars, and interpellation, mainly defended by Marxists and post-structuralist theorists. Later, authors such as Simon Frith and Pablo Vila criticize these points of view and propose narrative as a third category to explain the relationship between music and identity (Pelinski 164).

Basically, homology is “some sort of *structural* relationship between material and musical forms” (Frith 108), that is, musical structures have some kind of parallelism

with social structures (Pelinski 164). Subcultural scholars and other musicologists supposed that different cultures create musical forms which are structurally coherent with themselves (Pelinski 165). Then, if there are different social groups with different cultural capital and, very important, different cultural expectations, their musical expressions will be necessarily different (Vila n. pag.). This theory, which nowadays is mainly related to subcultures such as punk or heavy metal and social classes, describes musics and subcultures according to very rigid patterns so that the birth of new subcultures will demand a change in the already existing musical forms in order to represent the new subcultural experience (Vila n. pag). But on the other hand it fails to explain several points such as the change of musical tastes in social actors who did not change their status in a certain social structure, the reasons why some social actors adopt musical styles that do not match with their social status (Vila n. pag), or why similar musical forms can be found in societies with a different social structure (Pelinski 165). Frith also agrees with this view and exposes it in a simple way:

The assumptions in such arguments about the necessary flow from social identity (whether defined in terms of race or sexuality or age or nation) to musical expression (and appreciation) seem straightforward enough in the abstract (who could possibly deny that African-American music is music made by African-Americans; that the difference between male and female experience will be embedded in male and female music; that Phil Collins is an imposition on the soundscape of the Australian outback?). But they are less convincing in the everyday practice of music making and listening: how do we make sense of the obvious *love* of European listeners and players for the music of the African diaspora? Who is expressing what when, say, Ella Fitzgerald sings Cole Porter? When Yothi Yindi *rocks*? (108-109)

Since the interpellation theory is intimately related to the conative function of language it is interesting to remember Tagg's definition of music as "that form of interhuman communication in which individually experienceable affective states and processes are conceived and transmitted as humanly organised nonverbal sound structures to those capable of decoding their message in the form of adequate affective and associative response" (Tagg 40). Interpellation (or hailing), a term coined by French Marxist structuralist philosopher Louis Althusser, is the process or operation by which ideology, the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (174), addresses the subject rather than the individual; in his own words, "it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)" (174). In order to illustrate this concept, Althusser uses the example of the police hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Faced with this hailing, the reactions will be different within a heterogeneous

group of people; some will not even give heed to the words, others will look at where the shout is coming, and finally those guilty or suspected will understand that the police are directly addressing them. Then, the interpellative function of music basically consists on those mechanisms that put the public of a musical event in the position of addressee (Pelinski 167). Besides, that interpellative function does not derive from the immanent significances of musical syntax but from the significances the public gives to the music (Pelinski 167). Vila adds that music has a great interpellative power because it deals with emotional experiences that are stronger than in other cultural manifestations, partly due to the complexity of the codes intervening in the musical event which apart from sound and lyrics include dance, theatrical attitudes, and others (Vila n. pag). This theory has been criticized because on the one hand it gives the subject the ability to recognize and answer the interpellation but on the other hand that subject is subdued by the ideology. (Pelinski 168)

Finally, narrative is a quite abstract concept that, as Vila himself recognizes, does not give a definitive answer to the question of the musical identity, but at the same time, it allows us a better comprehension of the surrounding world because firstly, human time cannot be understood out of a narrative frame and secondly, narrative is the only cognoscitive way to understand the causality of the social agents' facts. This is so because narrative is an epistemological category traditionally confused with a literary genre (Vila n. pag). A key element when trying to define identity, both particular and social, is the concept of the Other/Others, in opposition to the self/selves: we precisely know that we are what we are because the Others are what they are, the self is in the centre and the Other is the margins, we are what the Others are not, the Others are different to us. In the introduction to *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir stands it clearly:

No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travelers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travelers to become vaguely hostile "others." Village people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious "others." For the native of a country inhabitants of other countries are viewed as "foreigners"; Jews are the "others" for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes. (xxii)

According to Vila, the only tool human beings have to develop a compact and unified self-image is telling stories, constructing narratives about us and the Others because only by descriptions and classifications, in other words narrative, we can know

and recognize the Other and, consequently, ourselves (Vila n. pag). Frith, for his part, stands that “identities are, inevitably, shaped according to narrative forms” (122) and argues that narrative is able to explain the process of constructing musical identities because it gathers two ways to consider what music offers in this sense: on the one hand an illusory and utopian representation of the self, that is, not what we are but what we would like to be and on the other hand the real feeling of the self, the pleasure people find in making or listening to music (Pelinski 171).

In the United States, the natural development of the arts and sciences and the awareness of the necessity of its own cultural identity led to the establishment of a cultural panorama with genuinely American cultural products. Thus, in 1790 the U.S. Congress passed the first United States Copyright Act, “[a]n Act for the encouragement of learning, by securing the copies of maps, charts, and books, to the authors and proprietors of such copies” (U.S. Cong.), and more than forty years later, the Copyright Act of 1831 protected musical compositions, although the public performance rights were not contemplated until 1907. At a first moment, American music was clearly influenced by European standards, but it went progressively losing its imitative character and began to explore its own paths. Although among those who signed the United States Declaration of Independence there was a musical composer, Francis Hopkinson, the first professional American composer was William Billings (1746-1800), who mostly used protestant religious chants as the basis of his work (Hanson 20-21). However, the real precursor of a purely American composition was Edward MacDowell (1861-1908) who was inspired by Native American melodies to compose his best known piece: *Suite n° 2 Op.48* or *Indian Suite* (Hanson 23). Concurrently, the popular music continued to develop and offered genuine American genres such as Blues, Gospel, Jazz, and perhaps the most iconic of them all: Country.

Country music and American Identity

In one of the scenes of John Landis' musical comedy film *The Blues Brothers*, Jake (John Belushi) and Elwood (Dan Aykroyd) have tricked their band about the place where their concert is going to take place. The problem is that the concert was not arranged, so they are desperately looking for a place to perform their rhythm & blues show. While roaming around with no particular destination in mind, they see the Bob's Country Bunker's neon lights, a bar in Kokomo, Indiana, where a concert by The Good Ole Boys was previously scheduled. Jake and Elwood decide to impersonate The Good Ole Boys and enter the bar to talk to the owners. Behind the counter Claire is kindly assisting the costumers when Elwood asks her: "What kind of music do you usually have here?" Claire's answer is revealing: "Oh, we got both kinds. We got Country and Western." Once on the stage – cage wire in the front and bales of hay on the sides – an angry booing redneck crowd greets their first song, a cover of The Spencer Davis Group's blue-eyed soul piece *Gimme Some Lovin'*, with a rain of beer bottles, cans, and glasses which does not reach the band thanks to the chicken wire separating the musicians from the audience. Bob, the owner, saying: "That ain't no Hank Williams song," switches off the stage lights while the crowd carries on with yelling and throwing objects. The band decides to change the repertoire and firstly play the theme from the western TV series *Rawhide* following with Tammy Wynette's *Stand by Your Man*. Finally Bob and Claire are pleased, the show goes on while the crowd claps and cheers enthusiastically, some of them dance on the tables, and the bottles keep on flying.

Besides this stereotyped and full of clichés approach to country and western music, *The Blues Brothers* shows a bunch of good songs and brilliant musical numbers of some of the genres considered to be genuinely American such as Blues, Soul, Jazz, Gospel, and Rock & Roll.

In *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music*, Professor Philip H. Ennis proposes the concept of musical stream as the defining element when making a classification of American popular music and distinguishes seven different musical streams in the American cultural panorama. According to him, a musical stream "is more than a metaphor [...] is a palpable part of social reality, made up of several elements: an artistic system, an economical framework, and a social movement" (21). The embryo of the American genres was the wide range of musical

manifestations that were present in the United States from the early years of the nation and witnessed the human expansion across the new territories and reflected both the great deeds and everyday life. Around the beginning of the 20th century these different traditions “crystallize [...] into six streams, which maintained each own boundaries by allowing only minimal and controlled exchange with the others” (Ennis 24). Ennis enumerates and defines these streams as: Jazz – “in its early days, a nighttime, city music associated with everything that walks in the wild side” – (Ennis 26), Folk – “everybody’s ancestor” – (Ennis 27), Gospel – “the religious music of Americans of every kind and conditions” –(Ennis 27), Pop – “the ‘commercial’ music of the nation” – (Ennis 24), Black Pop – “the popular music of black Americans” (Ennis 25) –, and Country Pop – “the popular music of the American white South and Southwest” – (Ennis 25). A seventh stream, Rock & Roll, results from the meeting of these six streams.

Although these musical genres are unequivocally of American origin and all of them have contributed, and they still do, one way or another, to the construction of the American identity, country music is not uncommonly perceived as the most intimately related genre to the essence of America and its values. In his overview of country music, Ennis concludes by saying that it “has been championed as The American Music” (Ennis 26). But despite this consideration, country music has also been seen with a certain disdain by some sectors of the society, both in America and abroad. The supposedly conservative, sexist, and racist traits of country music and the redneck, illiterate, and simple-minded character of part of its audience have been broadly criticized; whereas other genres such as Black Blues, Jazz, Rhythm & Blues, or Rock & Roll have been object of interest, “as expressions of a distinctly “other” culture” the formers and as “expression of young rebellious anger, sexuality, social alienation” (Tichi “Reading” 1) the latter by the intellectual community, country music has traditionally been ignored by the academia; and finally, as it has been seen in the scene of *The Blue Brothers* above mentioned, country music has also been the target of stereotypes, mocks, and parodies, even by reputed bands such as The Rolling Stones: “Dear Doctor was a parody country song, a send-up of hillbilly traditions complete with a corny harmonica, Band-like mandolin, and a narrative about a shotgun wedding that didn’t work out. Country music was still a joke to the Stones.” (Davis 246)

As many other musical styles, as the United States themselves, country music is not a uniform and homogeneous entity, rather it is a polyhedron, strong and solid, with

several facets or styles polished by the passing of time and the different geographical spaces in the immensity of the nation. Thus, for instance, whereas Bluegrass relates the hard life conditions in the Appalachian Mountains, the Bakersfield sound rises as a reaction to the soft and sometimes oversweet sounds coming from Nashville in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or Red Dirt music evokes the color of the Oklahoma land, the middle 1980s see how bands such as The Long Ryders, or Jason & The Nashville Scorchers get a considerable success in Europe with their Cowpunk, a mix of traditional Country with punk elements.

Taking into account the origins, the circumstances, and the actors involved in the process of formation, a parallelism between the nature and development of country music and those of the United States can be established. Sociologist of music Richard A. Peterson states that “American vernacular music always has been, like the American people themselves, a complex mix” (64-65). Similarly to the United States, country music comes from the meeting and later coexistence of different human groups which brought cultural traditions that the passing of time, the interaction among them, and the geographical determinants will shape and modify to get an entity that, of course, keeps on changing and evolving. Cultural historian Piero Scaruffi states that the origins of country music:

were lost in the early decades of colonization, when the folk dances (Scottish reels, Irish jigs, and square dances, the poor man's version of the French "cotillion" and "quadrille") and the British ballad got transplanted into the new world and got contaminated by the religious hymns of church and camp meetings. (Scaruffi n.pag.)

These French, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon musical expressions will blend with elements coming from different traditions such as the Tyrolean yodeling, the Eastern European polka, Spanish genres (Evans 9), Mexican sounds, and African rhythms, constructing in this way what it is known today as country music. Although country music, whether in terms of performers or audience, has traditionally been perceived, sometimes by both whites and non-whites, as an exclusive, selective, and even racist white phenomenon, the truth is that the African presence and its influence were clear in country music, as well as in other scopes, almost from the beginning. One of the most iconic instruments in country music, the banjo, “[o]riginally from Arabia, and brought to western Africa by the spread of Islam” (Evans 9), reached the American land due to the trade of African slaves and, at a first moment “it was largely denigrated as a “slave instrument” until it became popular via the Minstrel shows” (Evans 9). In *Notes on the*

State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, when commenting on black people and their musical skills, says that “[t]he instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa” (288). Another main instrument, the fiddle, – “[t]he three main instruments associated with country music are the banjo, the fiddle, and the guitar” (Koskoff 343) – was also common among black musicians:

Blacks in America, from the earliest days, were also adept at playing the fiddle. In 1779, the *Virginia Gazette* ran a notice concerning Harry, a runaway slave, who was “very fond of playing the fiddle.” Lydia Parrish wrote in *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* that the fiddle, although sinful, was the favored instrument of Southern blacks. Butch Cage, the black fiddler who recorded early in this century, remembered hearing old black fiddlers in Mississippi performing songs now associated with white fiddling and bluegrass, in the late 1800s – songs like “Arkansas Traveler” and “Old Wagoner.” (Lewis 2)

But, one more time, despite the proven role of African descendants as fiddlers and banjoists, and their participation in the earliest recordings of hillbilly music, black people also suffered racism and discrimination in the sphere of country music and, for instance, “African Americans were systematically excluded from photographs and advertisements commissioned by record companies.” (Rehm 13) Along history, black musicians have continued entering the boundaries of what traditionally has been considered to be an exclusively white territory; some of them even gained success in such an institution as the *Grand Ole Opry* and others reached the top of the charts (Stimeling 226-227), although at some point all of them had to face some kind of discrimination. But discrimination does not only focus on the skin color and, curiously, those who are considered to be the forefathers of the genre also suffered it. Folklorist Archie Green points out that:

“HILLBILLY, THE WORD, has been used both pejoratively and humorously in American print since April 23, 1900. On that day the New York Journal reported that ‘a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.’” (n. pag.)

And it is at this point when music becomes a key factor in the construction of a particular identity because hillbilly music “gave a collective voice to these people, who were marginalized from American society by their economic and social status, and provided them with a means for defining themselves in a period when their lives remained in an almost constant state of flux” (Lange 1).

Then, the question is how and why a music genre many times tinged with such negative nuances can be so intimately linked to the identity of a nation. The answer can

be found in the ability for attraction of country music narrative and the extraordinary appealing power of its lyrics – so strong that *Harper's Magazine* published an article suggesting the link between the Bakersfield sound and the violent events during the 1973-74 truckers' strike (Buckley 24). Cecelia Tichi states a comparison between Black Blues and country music, two genres that share common features such as the rural origin, the link to those economically and socially disadvantaged, and the expression of identity “through music that is often urgent, raw, and soulful” (Tichi “High” 7). The key point is that “the emphasis on story separates white country music from black blues.” Thus, “[e]ach blues stanza can be a stand-alone entity that might or might not relate to others in the song. In white country music, by contrast, the story is central, coming as it does through the tradition of the British ballad” (Tichi “High” 7). Americans have traditionally been considered to be an optimistic people who have fostered the attainment of the personal and collective objectives – the famous America dream – but at the same time pragmatic and down to earth. They soon realized the need of distancing from European parameters and then developing their own cultural products which could define them as a different and independent people. Many country singers and players agree in considering that country music is that product, and when defining it they:

usually do it so in the context of its lyrical qualities. The country music lyric bases itself primarily in realism, in the mundane, and in the hopes and fears of its listeners. In essence, Ray Price points out, “country music is music expressing deep feelings of folks in areas pertaining to their work... their religious experience... their ups and downs, joys and disappointments... It concerns everyday happenings about everyday people about things that touch directly on them.” To Roy Acuff “it’s the music of our people and our places.” (Lange 6)

Then, quotidian issues, simplicity, and realism nourish the lyrics of country music songs and lend the genre that unequivocal American taste:

[c]ountry songs convey a down-home approach to life and an elemental view of love, home, and patriotism that are absent from other forms of American music. In an age of computerized complexity, country music owes its appeal to the yearning of simplicity and rootedness that permeates American contemporary society. (Malone “New Encyclopedia” 55)

Taking into account that “[a]s one of the first musical expressions of the United States, country music represents the values and ideals on which the nation was founded” (Schäfer 3) and that “[t]hrough its realistic depictions of everyday life, country music seemed to capture the essence of Americans’ contemporary concerns” (Lange 15), it is easy then to understand the importance of country music as an identifying and

agglutinative element in American culture: “[t]he formation of identity is particularly important in country music because its lyrics tell universal stories which can be transposed onto individual lives and may thus give the listener comfort and advice in suffering times” (Schäfer 10). In his essay *Country Music and American Values*, John Buckley puts into context the issue of realism in country music and states that the lyrics create a fictive world that “is not the same as the real world of audience members, but it is the one they can easily understand and with which they can identify” (32). According to him, there are three reasons why lyrics are central in country music. The first one is that “[t]he instrumental is subordinated to the vocal” because, on the contrary to other musical forms, “country music lyrics are meant to be heard” (Buckley 25). Secondly, there is no room for ambiguity in country music narrative; “there are not allegories and not double meanings” (Buckley 25) common in other genres, so “performer and audience clearly understand the meaning of a song” (Buckley 25). Finally, “the lyrics are often an attempt to identification” (Buckley 25) and the fact that not every country music listener has “experienced some of the situations described in the music (i.e. going to prison, committing murder) is less important than that the music attempts to elicit universally shared emotions” (Buckley 25).

Of course country music is not perceived in the same way by groups of population who have, whether by the broadcasting in the media or by their personal experience, certain knowledge of the genre. American expert on music Don Cusic distinguishes three segments of population who are not appealed by the narrative and performance of country music. The defining traits of these groups – young people, cultural elite, and African Americans – perfectly match with of the parameters which shape crucial aspects of the personal and collective identity: age, social environment, and race. Young people, logically, want to be accepted by their peers and choose mainstream Pop or Rock, African Americans feel country music alien to them and even racist, and the cultural elite prefers Jazz and classical music because country music “is vulgar and smells of the riff raff.” (Cusic 2)

Cusic starts his book *Discovering Country Music* by stating that “[c]ountry music ain’t what used to be [...] neither are country people and neither is America” (1). The changes brought by globalization and the multicultural society, the development of technology, and the general interest people have in knowing and consuming different cultural products have motivated country music to cross the national boundaries of the United States and to be quite popular not only in countries in the Anglo-Saxon sphere

such as New Zealand or Ireland but it also enjoys a considerable success in, say, such exotic places as Argentina, Nigeria, and even among the Inuit people. However, although this music is played miles away from its original birthplace by bands or soloists who may have not even visited the United States, the layperson in this matter will have problems to discern whether the music is performed by authentic Americans or foreign emulators. This is in this way because the iconography, the performance, and, above everything, the essence of what it is transmitted always have that genuinely American flavor. Because country music “is America’s music because it tells the story of those who are the backbone of America” and it “is the story of America set in a song” (Cusic 1). In a few words, country music “can be seen as the epitome of the American dream” (Schäfer 3).

Empire Builders Analysis

When we are in a record shop searching its shelves not everything we see catches our eye, and if a few more seconds are spent in observing some albums it is because we previously know about the performers or, even knowing that a book cannot be judged by its cover, their sleeve design is communicating something to us. Thus, some sleeves perfectly match with the standards of a certain genre – darkness, illegible logos, and ultra-gothic elements in Black Metal or the color and shape explosion suggesting the drugs' effects in psychedelic music albums – while others flee from conventionalisms and offer more or less evident visual metaphors that, sometimes, hide deeper meanings.

From the beginning, *Empire Builders* is a statement of intents. The album's title, *Empire Builders*, is quite significant and proposes the issue it is going to deal with and, at the same time, holds a crucial duality explained by Jason Ringenberg in the back cover: "I reckon there are two types of Empire Builders: those who build empires of material wealth and power, and those who build empires of heart, spirit, and dignity."

Its front cover combines generic conventions, strong symbolism, and, perhaps, hidden nuances (see fig.1). The front cover is a collage consisting of a color photograph overlapped with a monochrome background image framed by the artist's name at the top and the album's title at the bottom; uncommonly, the tracklist – meaningful words by their own – can also be seen.

Both artist's name and album's title are in same size western font, which on the one hand can give the potential listener a clue about the album's musical style and on the other hand puts the author and the work at the same level suggesting in this way the importance of narrative in country music and its subgenres. Western imagery has been closely related to country music and its subgenres since the singing cowboys and their image were popularized by radio and especially Western movies in the first decades of the 20th century, and some of its iconographic elements – denim, Stetson hats, cowboy boots, or big buckles – became identity marks of the genre. But the cover is also a metaphor referring a particular real situation in a particular historical context and the very use of the collage is quite expressive. The collage is a characteristic cultural product of postmodernist society that entails within it a particular vital perspective: we

are living in a fragmented reality where objectivity and past time's certainties have no room. The picture of a typical American happy family takes up the central position in the collage. The coloring of their attire and the summertime motives deeply contrast with the grayscale background showing the ravaged landscape of a bombed town; paradoxically, the menacing presence of a squadron of Blackhawk helicopters seems to comfort them. As it will be seen later, the message of the cover will be completed and put into context in the first track, *American Question*. But there are some details that at a first glance are unperceived and could have a hidden meaning.

Firstly, by closely watching the picture, it will be observed that the father has his right leg amputated as well one of the fingers of his left hand, perhaps suggesting the flaws in American society and the price the common citizen, whether a worker or a private, has to pay for maintaining their way of life. Secondly, the shape of a guitar body and its sound hole is part of the structure of what seems to be a ruined temple behind the family could be a consideration on the current condition of the musical panorama.

The inner pages show the lyrics and some comments by Ringenberg on monochrome old pictures related to the songs' themes. The booklet is completed with pictures of Jason Ringenberg wearing jeans and a cowboy hat and shirt. Besides the comments and acknowledgements, Ringenberg uses the cowboy image to reaffirm his American identity and to express that the proud of being American is not incompatible with critical awareness of the current social and political situation in the United States and its subsequent impact in the rest of the world.

In some manner, *Empire Builders*, especially if focusing on the pictorial and literary material offered in its front and back covers and booklet, is not a traditional work. The strong symbolism in its front cover, reinforced by the inside pictures, is firstly clarified by the significant songs titles printed on it and, above all, by the message included in the first page of the booklet. In a kind of epistolary way, Jason Ringenberg meaningfully addresses not buyers, listeners, or aficionados but neighbors, and states the subject matter of this work. The message (see fig. 3), headed by the eloquent upper-case epigraph "YES I AM AMERICAN FROM NORMANDY TO VIETNAM," and signed by "Your friend and neighbor Jason" – the signature in handwritten lines –, clear evidence of personal and collective reassertion of identity,

puts into the arena the main topic *Empire Builders* deals with: the United States of America and the way the nation and its implications, whether on the particular or on the collective are perceived, both inside and abroad. It is traditionally considered that the powerful narrative embedded in country music lyrics deals with a limited range of topics. Johnny Cash, probably the best considered white American musician, together with Bob Dylan, from the many times distant and elitist European perspective, points out his preferences:

I love songs about horses, railroads, land, Judgment Day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heartbreak and love. And Mother. And God. (Lange 6-7)

Buckley summarizes the themes which characterize country music and establishes eight categories. Thus, satisfying and fulfilling love relations, unsatisfactory love relationships, home and family, country, work, individual worth, rugged individualism, and patriotism are the central issues the appealing country lyrics are going to deal with (25-27). These themes can intermingle in the songs, but usually one of them is central and prevails over the others. Of course, these topics are not exclusive to country songs and many other popular musical expressions include them in their repertoires, but, in Buckley's words, "[w]hat is unique is the symbolic world that is sketched by these themes" (27).

Although love, especially its saddest and bitterest side, is one of the most repeated themes in country music – in the 1960s seventy-five percent of country songs talked about it (Buckley 27) – there is only a song overtly dealing with this topic in *Empire Builders*. "She Hung the Moon (Until It Died)" is a bittersweet song about a woman – she could also be a metaphor of America – who does not fit the traditional passive role that country music, as well as other cultural expressions, has many times designated to them. The author expresses his melancholy when his lover has voluntarily interrupted a totally satisfactory relationship, where sex, respect, and friendship are present. But apart from the gender roles or the considerations on love, the song shares a common characteristic with the standards of country music; excepting occasional evocations of high school times, country songs always talk about adult relationships (Buckley 28) whereas childhood and youth are commonly observed from the perspective of nostalgia.

Among the possible epithets which could be dedicated to *Empire Builders* that of concept album has also room. Jason Ringenberg's maturity and personality offer a compact work with a line of argument that begins and ends with two songs which directly address its subject matter: the United States foreign policy, considered to be by some sectors as a synonym for imperialism. Although the political nature of country music, especially its alleged conservatism and patriotism, has been one of its most widely debated aspects, excepting in very particular situations, political and social issues have not been preeminent in country music: "[c]ountry songs [...] seldom protested against larger social and political problems, but instead voiced a preoccupation with private sins and worries" (Malone "Country" 212). Of course, this neither means that political concern is totally absent from country music nor that, at some point, its performers do not support a particular political party or an ideological tendency.

The invasion of Iraq by an international coalition led by George W. Bush's cabinet in 2003 raised a worldwide wave of protests, which also reached the United States and, as could not be otherwise, had an impact on country music world. As *Empire Builders*, the Dixie Chicks controversy is a clear example of it. During a concert in London, Dixie Chicks lead vocalist Natalie Maine expressed their rejection of the war and the shame they felt for President Bush, the same as the band, being from Texas. Maine's declarations caused an enormous stir in the United States; radio stations banned the Dixie Chicks from the playlists and fans even gathered to destroy their CDs (Malone "Country" 476-477). On the other hand artists such as Bruce Springsteen or Merle Haggard publicly supported the band's freedom of speech.

There are three openly political songs in *Empire Builders*: "American Question," "New-Fashioned Imperialist," and "American Reprieve." "American Question" and "American Reprieve" open and close a circle path which runs through the American reality and visits some emblematic moments and figures in American culture and history. Both have a common structural pattern that could be compared with that of poem. The songs consist of four verses with four lines each without bridge or refrain among them; both begin in the same way "Yes we can bomb most any land," and share sometimes the same lines, or others very similar, always in the same order. The statement "Yes I Am American" is repeated in both songs, but whereas in the first song

“from Normandy to Vietnam” is maintained, in “American Reprieve” it is exchanged for “from Pearl Harbor to Afghanistan.” The significance of these lines is evident; the author proclaims his identity not only when American values such as democracy, equality or justice shine but also when the role of the United States in the international arena is at least disputable. World War II was a crucial moment in the American history. The warfare not only broke the traditional American isolation and triggered a huge economic development that opened an era of prosperity and full employment “but it also quickened the tempo of American life and accentuated social tensions that would eventually give rise to the racial, sexual, and generational conflicts of the late fifties and early sixties” (Malone “Country” 177). Besides, the war decisively contributed to the enlarge the scope of country music and both American songwriters and audience showed their support to their government by consuming and creating songs dealing with a war where the United States were, as well as their European allies, victims: “[p]atriotic songs and related war songs were among the most popular numbers in the hillbilly repertory from 1941 to 1946” (Malone “Country” 194). On the other hand, the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan were events that found strong opposition in the United States and that strongly contributed to damage the image of the country in the international panorama.

The serene and pensive tone Jason Ringenberg employs in “American Question” and “American Reprieve” becomes acid and satirical in “New-Fashioned Imperialist.” Whereas the formers mainly focus on political aspects, notwithstanding such prominent icons of the American capitalism as McDonald’s and Coca-Cola are also mentioned, the latter deals with the capitalist economic system. Ringenberg ironically criticizes the pernicious consequences of the current economic system such as offshoring or excessive consumerism, and denounces the implicit hypocrisy of ultraliberal economic politics. Economic issues are not quite common in country music but “New-Fashioned Imperialist” is not an exception and, for example, in the 1930s several songs extolled the New Deal legislation (Malone “Country” 135).

As it is explained in the introductory lines addressed to his European cousins, *Empire Builders* was conceived while Jason Ringenberg was touring Europe and Australia. “Rebel Flag in Germany” relates the author’s astonishment when seeing a Confederate flag while traveling across Germany by train and the reactions his western

attire provoked in many European citizens. Americans who visit Europe are many times greeted with a kind of hostility due to their government's foreign policy – although during the post-9/11 terrorist attacks period good feeling toward the United States increased (Weber 19) – and are identified with the negative values associated to the Confederate battle flag. The controversy on the use and display of the Confederate flag is not new and whereas many social groups see a symbol of racism and white supremacist ideology others considered it to be an emblem of Southern heritage and identity. The controversy reached its boiling point after the mass shooting occurred in Charleston, North Carolina on June 17, 2015 when a white supremacist assassinated nine people in the Emanuel African Episcopal Methodist Church. The massacre triggered a campaign for removing the Confederate flag from public spaces which was supported by wide segments of the American population and even by some Republican politicians backed it. Of course, the events were also reflected in country music and Virginian songwriter Steve Earle, a rebellious personality whose song about the war in Afghanistan “John Walker’s Blues” was misinterpreted as unpatriotic in 2002 (Malone “Country” 478), contributed to the cause by composing “Mississippi It’s Time,” a song that urges Mississippi to remove the Confederate flag from the state flag.

Ethnic minorities and common people, those who indeed built the nation with their personal efforts and struggles, are also represented in *Empire Builders*. In “Link Wray” Ringenberg plays homage to the Native American musician, one of the best and most influential guitarists in the history of rock music. The most salient aspect of the song is how the author opposes current mainstream popular music to Wray’s honesty and authenticity, and highlights his political independence. The line “You’ll never see him on the White House lawn” makes reference to, and probably subtly criticizes, the politically motivated institutional custom of receiving American popular music performers in the official residence of the President of the United State: “[s]ince Lyndon Johnson’s administration, the appearance of country entertainers at White House or presidential-related functions has become almost routine, and musicians have sometimes been used to bolster administration positions.” (Malone “Country” 372)

The patriotic theme is considered from a different perspective in “Tuskegee Pride.” The song goes over the life of a World War II black veteran, son of a sharecropper – a system “by which plantations owners kept laborers, both black and

white, working at subsistence level for eighty years after the end of slavery” (Peterson 46) – and grandson of a slave, who could flee from the hard life of the fields thanks to the creation of a fighter pilot school in Tuskegee, Alabama. Besides the flying school, Tuskegee is a significant place for the African American community for other reasons. In 1881 Lewis Adams, a former slave, and George W. Campbell, a former slave owner, joined their efforts and contributed to found the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, an academic institution devoted to the formation and education of African American people and which was the embryo of the future Tuskegee University. In the early 1930s, the institute was witness of one of the most abominable clinical trials in American medical history: The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, commonly known as the Tuskegee experiment. The experiment was conducted on a considerable number of African American males, most of them illiterate poor sharecroppers, who were led to believe that they were being healed of other diseases while, indeed, the health authority allowed syphilis development in order to compare the different impact in black and white males. The experiment lasted forty years, from 1932 to 1972, and nowadays some people are still suffering its consequences. President Bill Clinton publicly apologized for these facts in 1997. The key point in “Tuskegee Pride” is the accurate description of the feelings of part of the African American population. The proud pilot belongs to that segment of black people who, in opposition to other African Americans who thought that the United States wars were just white men wars, considered joining the army, involving in public life, and working hard was the best way for African Americans to acquire total equality in the American society.

Country music has traditionally addressed blue-collar working class (Malone “Country” 211), so a great bulk of songs deals with the theme of work. Other than “Tuskegee Pride,” in *Empire Builders* this topic is considered in two other songs. Jim Roll’s “Eddie Rode the Orphan Train,” probably the most touching song in the whole album, tells the story of one of the thousand orphans and abandoned children who populated the streets of the developing Eastern cities. The Orphan Train Movement was a welfare program intended to relocate these children with Western families. As it is expressed in the lines “Eddie landed on a farm a lonely boy works like a man / They trained him well to earn his keep,” many times, those families considered the orphans to

be not children but mere free workforce, so many of them grew up emotionally isolated and spent their childhood working like adults.

Bill Malone states “[t]he catalogue of country music is filled with songs extolling the farmer, and the whole scheme of rural values (*Country 7*). An example of this exists in “Half the Man,” Jason Ringenberg’s personal tribute to his father, and by extension to all those common Americans who bravely and honestly got to raise their families in the hardest times of the nation. The themes of home and family, country, work, and individual worth concur in a song that, as many others in country music, is intensely tinged of nostalgia.

Conclusion

The division of the arts into superior and inferior categories and the almost exclusive study of the canonical works to the detriment of other artistic and cultural expressions have been the pattern traditionally followed by a large number of scholars and researchers. Over the past few years the Academia has widened its field of study and considers popular cultural manifestations to be a really useful tool when analyzing the current society and the relationships between people and their environment. Technical advances contributed to the spread of traditional popular culture and favored the emergence of new ways of expression that enriched and shaped the American society.

From the early times of colonization, the encounter of different ethnic and social groups has defined the essence of the United States. Soon, these groups became aware of their singularity and started to look for their collective identity as Americans. As a result of the study of the interaction among these groups and the role each of them play in the American society, different theories have aimed to define the nature of the United States. The celebrated melting pot was the antecedent of series of theories that, sometimes by changing the metaphor – salad bowl, mosaic, or kaleidoscope – others by focusing on the egalitarian adjustment of the ethnic variety to the legal and political system – multiculturalism – have justified the role of each social group in the American society. The increasingly fast changes in society, the emergence of new political and philosophical tendencies, and the continuous human quest for an own identity among other factors have favored the rejection and the subsequent substitution of one theory by a new one.

Identity is a multifaceted concept that entails dichotomy and opposition in a progressive process that is affected by external factors related to the sociocultural background. In this sense, popular music is a cultural manifestation that simultaneously reflects and helps to build citizen's both individual and collective identity and consequently several theories have analyzed how and why the process of identification is determined by the different perceptions of music. Thus, structural homology establishes a parallelism between music and social structure that at a certain level correctly explains the construction of identity but fails to justify other aspects of the

process. Interpellation and the narrative theory try to fill that gap by remarking the appealing power of the music and the understandable message it conveys.

United States' ethnic and cultural diversity favored a variety of music genres which have gone through its borders and have provided different social groups with both musical and national identity. In this sense, country music is many times perceived, both in the United States and abroad, as the musical genre that is most intimately linked to the American identity and, as such, is often stereotyped and misinterpreted. Country music is a multifaceted entity many times shaped by the same agents that built the United States. The seed of country music was planted in the early years of the colonization when the first colonists brought with them their cultural and religious traditions and it was later watered and fertilized by the different human groups – black people included – that met in the immensity of the new territories. The appealing lyrics that talk about quotidian issues in a realistic way and the clarity of a message that is mainly addressed to common people are basic features of a music genre that decisively contributed to forge the American national identity and that, for that reason, has been considered to be very conservative and even jingoist.

The analysis of Jason Ringenberg's *Empire Builders* shows how country music is not a monolithic entity that exactly matches with a rigid pattern but a variety of subgenres that, even sharing some common traits, find their own way of expression. On the contrary that it used to think, country music is a genre that usually does not deal with political issues. However, *Empire Builders* is an exception to this rule and sends a politically committed message, but at the same it proves that a critic view on the United States and its foreign policy perfectly matches with the proud of being American and the respect for the tradition. *Empire Builders* offer a bunch of good songs that talk about traditional themes in country music such as work or patriotism in simple and direct way because country songs “describe life as it is, not as one might wish it would be” (Malone “Country” 298).

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Annex



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

American Question
Lyrics by Jason Ringenberg, Music by Jim Roll
Housesitter Music BMI

Yes we can bomb most any land
Then send their kids to Disneyland
Give them a Big Mac and a prayer
Then forget that they are there

It's all there inside of me
All that guilt for all to see
Yes I am American
From Normandy to Vietnam

World War II is history
And this advice sounds good to me
It's time to bring that bull to heel
And our true hearts to reveal

Are we an empire all alone
Throwing the world a rubber bone?
Or can we export dignity
Respecting those who disagree?

Writing locale: a train traveling from Denmark to Norway

Produced, engineered and mixed by Jim Roll
at Backstreet Productions, Ypsilanti, Michigan
Jim Roll: guitar, fiddle, banjo, goat hooves, drum
programming, Hammond organ, bass
John Lanini: wah wah pedal steel
Jason Ringenberg: vocal

Rebel Flag in Germany
Jason Ringenberg

This isn't Alabama oh how well I know
I'm in central Germany where I love to go
Then how come I am seeing right in front of me
My Lord there flies a Rebel flag in central Germany
My Lord there flies a Rebel flag in central Germany

I was riding peacefully on this train
Enjoying the scenery and mellowing my brain
Then stuck atop a pretty barn there for all to see
The nonrepresent rebel flag in central Germany
A massive Confederate flag in central Germany

Bridge:
I slink down in my seat and I search for a disguise
I say "I am Canadian" with averted eyes
Am I being paranoid? Do they think it's me?
Do they think I hung that flag in central Germany?

So now I'll bet you're listening in righteous merry bliss
Thinking "How will Jason write his way out of this?"
Well I reckon I can tell you that Robert E. Lee
Would not have wished to see his flag in central Germany
I wish I'd never seen that flag in central Germany
Hell I don't even want to see that flag in Tennessee

Writing locale: a train traveling through central Germany

George Bradfute: electric and acoustic guitars, bass
Fats Kaplin: steel guitar
Steve Ebe: drums
Jason Ringenberg: lead and harmony vocals

Fig. 4

Rainbow Stew
Merle Haggard
Sony/ATV Songs/Tree Publishing/BMI

There's a big brown cloud in the city
And the countryside's a sin
The price of life is too high to give up
It's bound to come down again
When the worldwide war is over and done
And the dream of peace comes true
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew

When they find out how to burn water
And the gasoline cars are gone
When airplanes fly without any fuel
And the sunlight heats our home
One of these days when the air clears up
And the sun comes shining through
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew

Chorus:
Eating rainbow stew with a silver spoon
Underneath that sky of blue
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew

You don't have to get high to be happy
Just think about what's in store
When people will be doing what they ought to be doing
And they won't be a-booing no more
When the president gets to the White House door
And does what he says he'll do
We'll all be drinking that free bubble up
And eating that rainbow stew

George Bradfute: guitars, bass, cello, keyboards,
viola, baritone guitar
Fats Kaplin: steel guitar, fiddle
Luther Bradford: Moog & Serge modular
purling stew sounds
Kristi Rose: harmony vocals
Steve Lee: drums
Jason Ringenberg: lead and harmony vocals

Tuskegee Pride
Jason Ringenberg

Daddy was a sharecropper south of Tuskegee
His granddad was a slave 'til Lincoln set him free
Me I was the golden boy Dad swore he would save
He taught me to never see the grandson of a slave

In the fall of '39 Hitler made a mess
But frankly I didn't see the difference I guess
From what he was doing and what was done to us
Sometimes I had to wonder in what God they trust

*So light me up a cigarette and I'll tell my story
Once I was a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee*

My sister raced home with the news that in Tuskegee
At our famous institute there was going to be
A fighter pilot school to teach us how to fly
I didn't even hesitate I ran down to apply

*I studied hard and flew the best — Dad was proud to see
His son was a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee*

They shipped us off to Europe where still we would hear
The awful names they'd yell at us so very loud and clear
But when we got into the air and bullets they would fly
I felt a perfect freedom in those fatal skies

*We were lords of the skies of Northern Italy
All us crazy fighter pilots trained at Tuskegee*

Soon they didn't call us names as our boys went down
Protecting all those bombers over German towns
We took our share of bullets while far away at home
Our wives took all that bigotry neglected and alone

*My face was burned in '44 as you can plainly see
When I was a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee*

Now I'm in a nursing home run by the V.A.
My grandkids came to see me just the other day
One of them asked about the burns upon my face
I said "Those are scars for freedom now carry on the chase"

*But I don't need your platitudes or your sympathy
'Cause once I was a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee*

*I'm proud I was a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee
Yes I am a fighter pilot trained at Tuskegee*

Fig. 5

*Writing locale: rural Michigan — edited live at the gig
January 14, 2004, with the help of the wonderful audience
at the Ellis Reference Center, Monroe, Michigan (Bill Reiser
rocks).*

George Bradfute: baritone guitar, acoustic
guitars, bass, keyboards, cello
Fats Kaplin: fiddle
Greg Morrow: drums, slaker, tambourine
Jason Ringenberg: lead and harmony vocals

She Hung the Moon
[Until It Died]
Jason Ringenberg

She could make the morning sun come up for me
She could pour the coffee oh so perfectly
She never failed to satisfy
She hung the moon until it died

She had the program she had the plan
Making love was like a trip to Disneyland
She never failed to take a side
She hung the moon until it died

She had the spirit she had the heart
She could finish up what I could barely start
She never failed to testify
She hung the moon until it died

She knew herself she knew the score
She could give the world then take a little more
Now she won't fail to justify
She hung the moon until it died

*Writing locale: a German castle and
the Highlands of Scotland*

George Bradfute: guitars, bass, cellos,
keyboards, tambourine
Fats Kaplin: steel guitar
Greg Morrow: drums
Molly Felder: harmony vocals
Jason Ringenberg: vocal

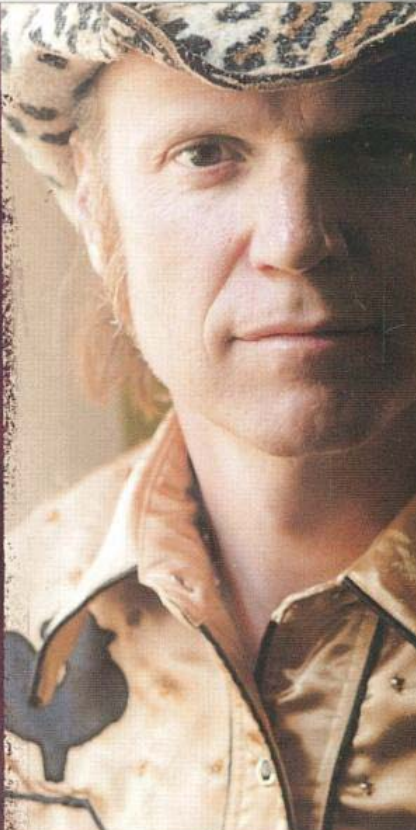


Fig. 6

Link Wray
Jason Ringenberg

I've known Link Wray for 20 years now and his enthusiasm and commitment to performance never cease to amaze me. For those of you who may not know his story (and unfortunately that number is way too high), Link was one of the pioneering loud, distorted guitar gods of the '50s and he continues to rock out to this day. In my opinion, he possesses THE soul of the rock'n'roll guitar. One of my main long-range career goals is to still be able to rock like he does when I am 70 something. It was such a pleasure having Eddie Angel and Jimmy Lester from Les Straitjackets throw in on this. When Molly Felder and Kristi Rose did the '50s girl chorus at the song's close, I was in rock'n'roll heaven. Link, I hope you are honored.

His guitar sounds like an old chain saw
He loves Jesus and his ma and pa
This is a song about old Link Wray
He can play guitar like it is Judgment Day
Part mountain lion part Cherokee
Rockin' like the devil at seventy

In a leather jacket and long black hair
He can take you back and then leave you there
He wrote RUMBLE in a minute flat
In sweet Virginia on the tidal flats
You'll never see him on the MTV
But he rocks more than any band you'll see

Now all these bands are so rock'n'roll
With their cheap tattoos and their L.A. souls
But I'd trade 'em all for a single chord
Slammed by Link on his six-string board
You'll never see him on the White House lawn
But he rocks out no matter what you're on

Writing locale: Anchorage, Alaska, while watching a moose rummage through a McDonald's Dumpster

George Bradfute: tremolo guitar, bass
Jimmy Lester: drums
The legendary Eddie Angel: lead and rhythm guitars
Kristi Rose & Molly Felder: girl chorus
Jason Ringenberg: vocal

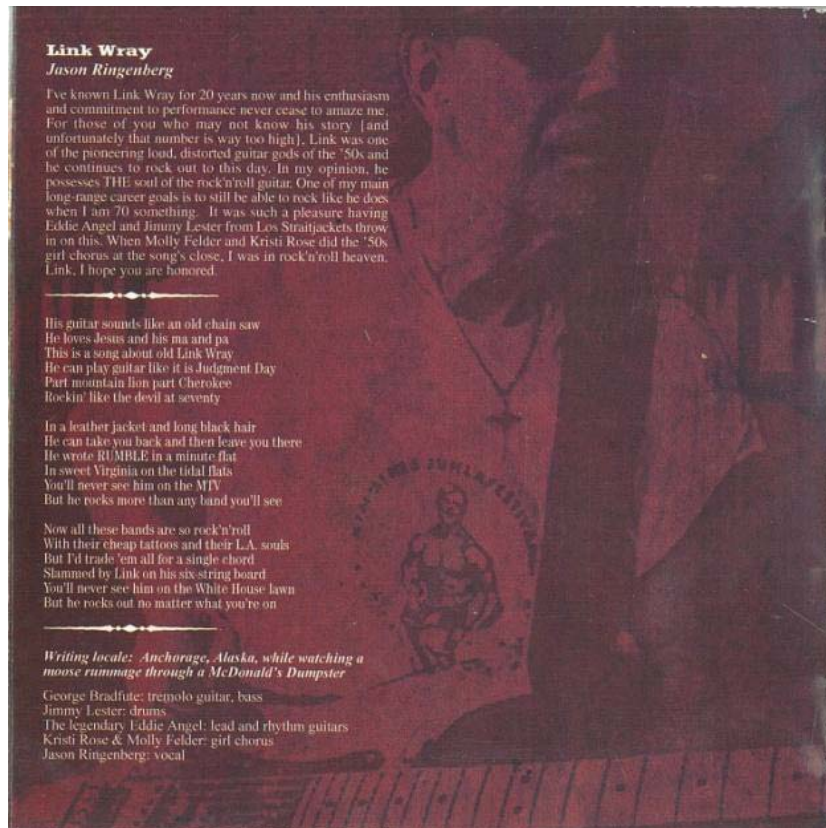


Fig. 7

Chief Joseph's Last Dream
Jason Ringenberg

This song was inspired by the story of the great Native American Nez Percé chief Hin-mah-too-yah-lit-kektih (Thunder Ascending the Mountains), known to us linguistically challenged white folks as Chief Joseph. Come out to my show and I'll tell his incredible story before I sing the song. Believe it or not, I am playing the intricate finger-picking part (brag, brag, brag). The guitar and vocal are the original scratch track. It had such a vibe that we decided to use it for the master and build the parts around that core. For you fellow history nerds, yes, I do realize that Chief Joseph died in Washington state, not in Oklahoma. I used Oklahoma for the song setting because that is where he spent the worst years of his life. His dreams died there.

Chief Joseph's last dream before he passed away
On that godforsaken Oklahoma day
He saw a purple sun rise through a mountain mist
He felt his first wife give him a pure and holy kiss
Her face was shining brilliant in a sky of blue
And her smile told him he had no more to lose

Chief Joseph's last dream then continued on
He saw a stillborn baby beside a mountain pond
He saw a young brave racing up a mountainside
They voted him their leader the day his daddy died

Chief Joseph's last dream then turned into the time
When gentleness could overcome the anger in his mind
Of giant herds of ponies with mountains to the east
That were still unscarred by the white devouring beast

Bridge:
*Beyond the dream a woman said "Come here quick he's dying
His soul has left this awful place to the mountains flying"*

Chief Joseph's last dream as he passed away
He saw one hundred thousand faces rising up to pray
They crossed over the mountains shimmering and white
And passed right through the setting sun into the orange light

Writing locale: Trondheim/Oslo, Norway, south central Alaska

George Bradfute: bass viola, pizz bass
Fats Kaplin: violins, steel guitar
Molly Felder: harmony vocals
Steve Ebe: drums, percussion
Jason Ringenberg: vocal, acoustic guitar

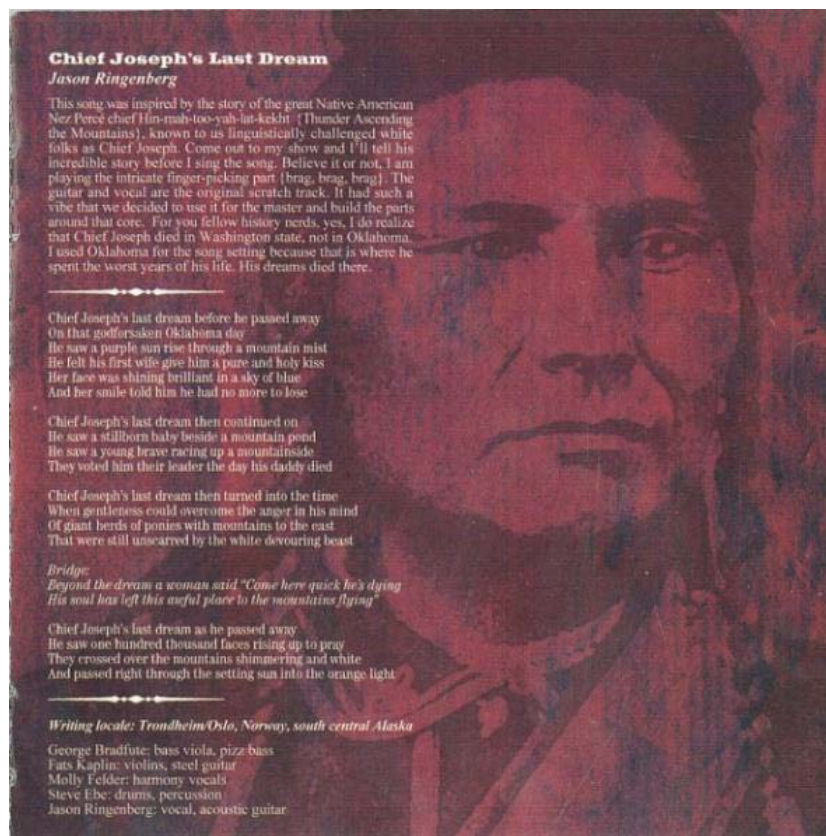


Fig. 8

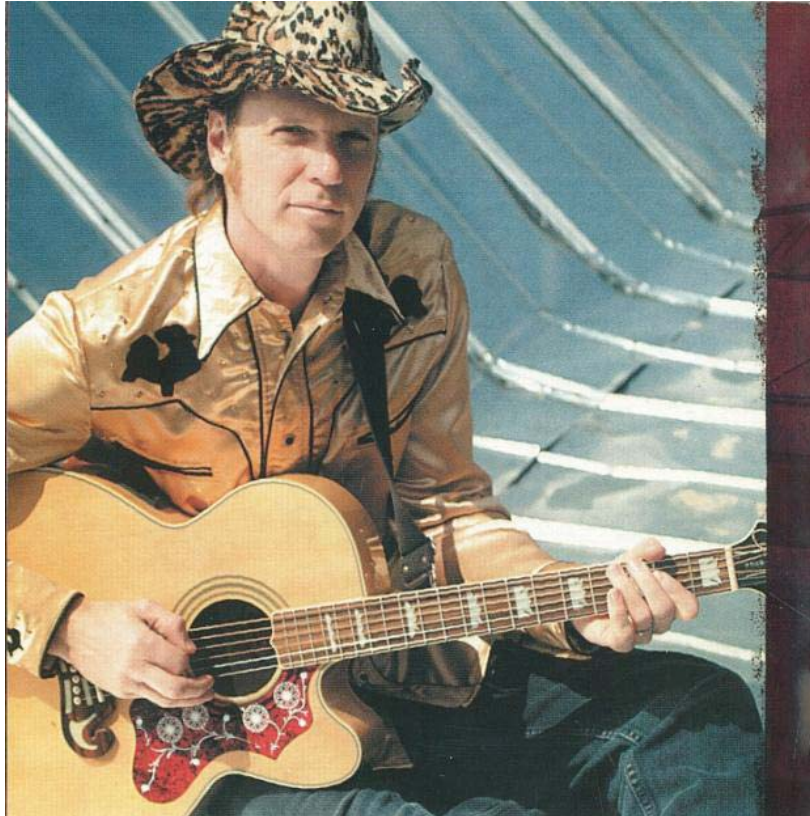


Fig. 9

New-Fashioned Imperialist
Jason Ringenberg

While I was attending a songwriter seminar on Samsoe Island, the conversation turned, as always, to American foreign policy. A writer whom I respected and liked told me with great focus, "Your government is the enemy." A week before that a Norwegian had told me: "I like you and normally I don't like Americans." As we used to say in the '80s, my mind was blown! I wrote NEW-FASHIONED IMPERIALIST that night in my cabin. I am not sure that I can explain the connection. However, the song is based on a composite of several very real people. On a full-circle note, Dave Jacques plays those wonderful tuba parts. He was the bassist for my first solo band in 1992.

He is a new-fashioned imperialist
 He may not have a mill but he has a lot of grist
 Chinese convict labor will manufacture this
 He is a new-fashioned imperialist.

He is a new-fashioned imperialist
 "Hell Wal-Mart" is the battle cry that rings out in the mist
 His loyal friends would love to give him the Judas Kiss
 He is a new-fashioned imperialist.

He is a new-fashioned imperialist
 His lovely wife reigns supreme on the drug dealer's list
 Her virtue is a problem he will never miss
 He is a new-fashioned imperialist.

He is a new-fashioned imperialist
 He has a giant SUV to stomp all who resist
 We have lots of oil he will still insist
 He is a new-fashioned imperialist.
 We need to take their oil if they still resist
 He is a new-fashioned imperialist.

Writing locale: Samsoe Island, Denmark

George Bradfute: guitar, bass, clarinet, keyboards
 Steve Ebe: drums
 Fats Kaplin: fiddle, accordion, chuckles
 Dave Jacques: trombone, tuba, baritone horn
 Jason Ringenberg: vocal

Fig. 10

Half the Man
Jason Ringenberg

This one is obviously about my father, although no song can truly do that man justice.

In this world of toil and stress
The thing that I remember best
Is driving that old tractor as I sat in your lap
My hands were small but through it all
I could feel you take the wheel
Whenever I was veering off into the muddy ditch

The wisdom of Solomon the patience of the skies above
Five children and 500 hogs you kept under your care
Lawn mowers and endless chores
Without a scene you fed our dreams
And somehow found the solid ground for us to bloom and grow

Chorus:
Half the man half the man if I could be just half the man
That you are and I try to be
Half the man half the man if I could be just half the man
You can bet I'll rest contentedly

When I see all around me the things that I will need to be
And I stand inside your shoes and find them hard to fill
Now you're here at four score years
And like a prayer you are always there
Without ever a one complaint or a thought for yourself

Writing locale: Oslo, Norway

George Bradfute: guitars, 12-string guitar,
upright bass, banjoitar
Fats Kaplin: steel guitar, fiddle
Steve Ebe: drums
Jason Ringenberg: lead and harmony vocals



Fig. 11

Eddie Rode the Orphan Train
Jim Roll (Housesitter Music BMI)

I spent a good bit of time with Jim Roll on my two swings through Michigan in 2003 and 2004. He is one of my favorite American songwriter/producers and this song shows why. I couldn't resist recording this one. It fits perfectly on this release. Check out Jim's stuff. You won't be disappointed. Once again little Grafton Grimm makes a cameo appearance. That's him talking to his mommy, Molly, as she prepares to sing.

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
And every stop along the way they promised him a rubber ball*

The train he rode it had no plan no families waiting on the way
Just town to town the train rolled in and tried to give a child away
I can't imagine what was told my grandpa riding on that train
Was he lost in someone's lies or was he hiding all the pain?

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
And every stop along the way they made him stand against the wall*

Eddie landed on a farm a lonely boy works like a man
They trained him well to earn his keep
A child of God should work the land
Eddie worked as the only son right up to his parting age
And when the farm took on some men well Eddie never drew a wage

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
And every stop along the way they promised him a rubber ball*

As he fixed to leave that home an unexpected child was born
A baby boy with ice blue eyes took Eddie's room
And he showed no scorn
The family aged and the children grew
And the foster parents' time did wane
And when they read out the will
There was no Eddie and no orphan train

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
Every stop along the way he lay down in a bed of straw*

It's hard to guess where lies the rage deep inside an orphan child
But Eddie somehow raised his kids
With patient eyes detached and mild
He passed along the way the papers hardly gave his name
Except to say he was survived by a family and an orphan train

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
And he lived a long life the only rule was God's law*

Well my baby's name is Ed and like his grandpa he rides trains
At night he rides the Iron Ghost by day he eases someone's pain
And all along this blessed land of sometimes life and liberty
Just beneath our emerald soil lies old child's trains and misery

*Eddie rode the orphan train from Soho down to Arkansas
And every stop along the way they promised him a rubber ball*

George Bradfute: acoustic and slide guitars,
bass, cellos, clarinets
Fats Kaplin: violin, accordion
Steve Ebe: drums
Molly Felder: harmony vocals
Jason Ringenberg: lead and harmony vocals

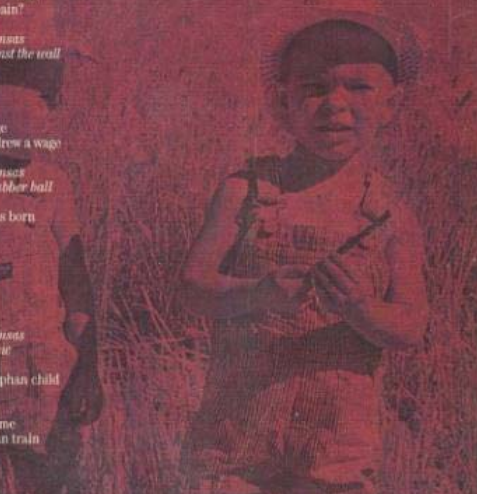


Fig. 12

American Reprieve
Jason Ringenberg

We recorded this completely live. I spoke the poem as the great jazz drummer Mickey Grimm and George vamped around it. The poem is meant as a question and a prayer. May we somehow find justice AND peace in this big, troubled world of ours.

Yes we can bomb most any land
On CNN with marching bands
Pour ourselves an ice cold Coke
Make a war and tell a joke

It's all there inside of me
The fear and insecurity
Yes I am American
Pearl Harbor to Afghanistan

Vietnam is history
That lesson didn't come far free
The politicians didn't bleed
Misguided patriots indeed

Are we an empire loose and fast
Or can we find a peace to last?
Is the answer here at home
Or buried in a foreign storm?

Writing locale: my Tennessee country home

George Bradfute: upright bass
Mickey Grimm: drums and percussion
Jason Ringenberg: vocal



Fig. 13

Sleeve design: *Paul Needham* www.rockingmohavek.com
Jason photography: *Brydget Carrillo* www.brydgetcarrillo.com
except Jason live shot by *Paul Needham*
Editor extraordinaire: *Lori Timm*
Website manager: *Mike Hodge*
Web site design: *Charlie Brooks, Mike Hodge, Paul Needham*
For North American booking info, contact *Marie Arsenault*
maria@roughneckmusic.com
For international booking info, contact *courageouschick@cs.com*
Jason's shirt designed and created by *Jennifer Reavis* at *Altstitch*
www.altstitch.com


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Klanderman, Herman's Barn, The Dickheads, The Seatsniffers, David Gardner, The Shetland Islands, Billy Kelly, Tim & Michelle Rasmussen, Bart DeHouwer, Spurs For Jesus, Loren McHenry, Paul Sloan, Earling Daell, Warner & Deb Hodges, Richard Emmett, The Evening Muse (Charlotte), Tim Kimrey, Vicki Knoffler, Mark & Gaye Abrahams, Charlie Brooks, David Laing, Anderz from Gearbox, Ian James, Colin Jamieson, Cara Hogan, Lisa Morrison, Warren Rudolph, Steve Negro, Old Town School of Folk Music, Erik the Sioux Cowboy, Nikke Strumm, Pontus Snibb, Brady Blade, Lasse Englund, Kalle, Christina & Charlotte Olander, Kevin Welch, Chris Becker, Lori & Mark Coryell, Bas Flesseman, Molly Felder, Mickey Grimm, Phil Doran, David Jimenez, Juan Santera, Tomas and Love to Art (Spain), The Tom Tom Club (Holland), Lorenz & Alexander Ritter, Xurxo from Vigo, Jeff Stepp, The Musician (England), Iain Barbour, Chad Williams and most of all to Farmer Jason for graciously allowing me time from his busy schedule to do this project.

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Jimmy Lester and Eddie Angel appear courtesy of Yep Roc Records



Live by the chicken, die by the chicken!

Fig. 14



Fig. 15

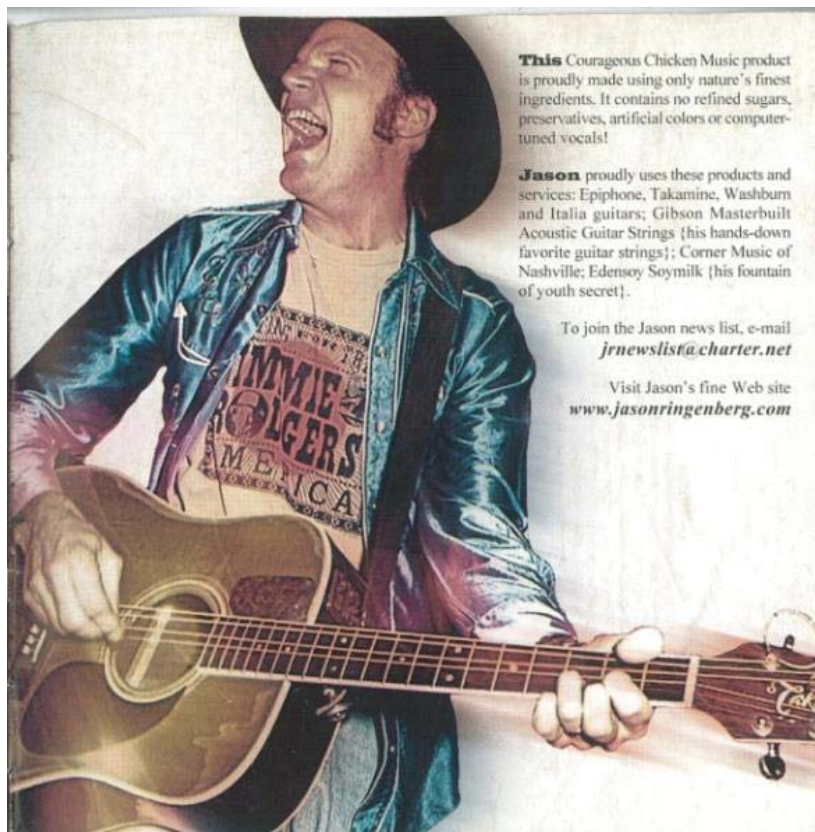


Fig. 16

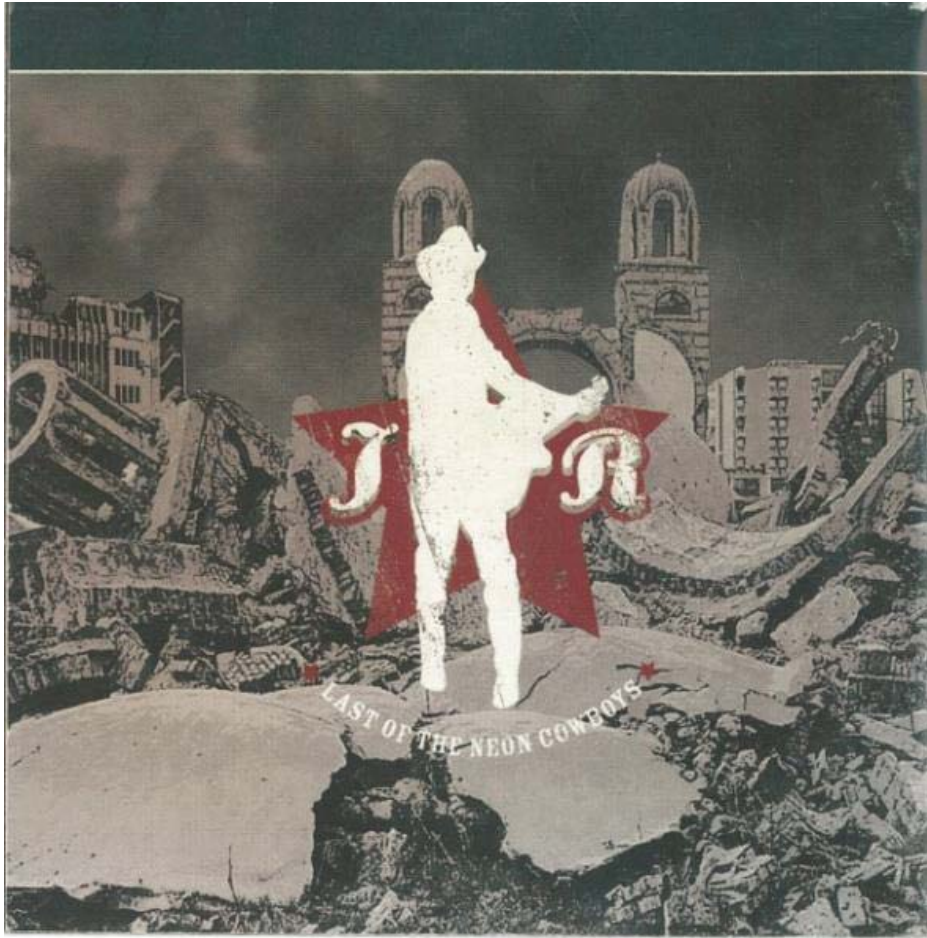


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

