

NO COUNTRY FOR FEMALE ARTISTS: ARTIST & SONGWRITER GENDER ON POPULAR COUNTRY CHARTS FROM 2014 TO 2018

Research Brief

ANNENBERG INCLUSION INITIATIVE

Recently, the Academy of Country Music (ACMs) announced – for a second year in a row – all male nominees for the prestigious Entertainer of the Year award. The host of their award ceremony, Reba McEntire, not only pointed out the lack of female representation among the candidates but also that a “bro culture” seems to be pervading country music.¹ Speaking of male-dominated networks, she also added “I think it’s kind of going away from that a little bit.”

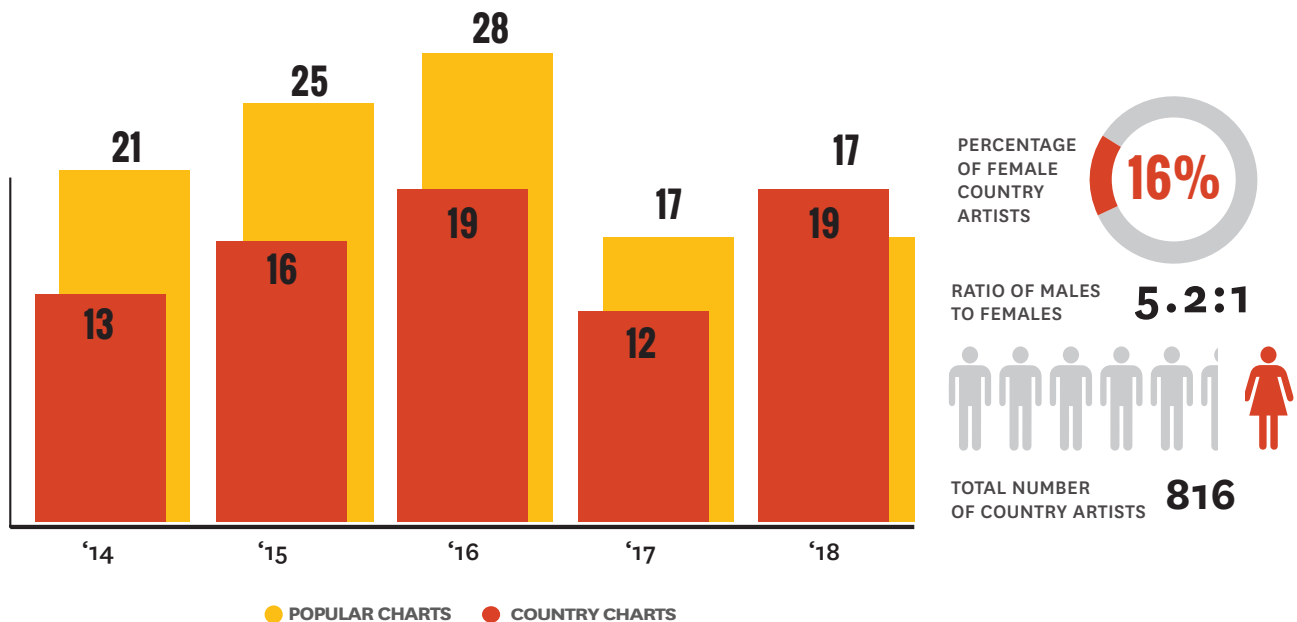
But is it? This research brief is designed to test this claim. We examined performer gender across 500 songs on the Year-End Billboard Hot Country charts from 2014 to 2018.² Further, we assessed the number of male and female songwriters who received credit across two years (2014, 2018) of this sample.³ We wrap up this research brief by examining the gender of nominees across 4 categories at the ACMs that parallel the sample time frame.⁴ Only differences of 5 percentage points or greater are noted below.

Findings

Only 16% of all artists were female across 500 of the top country songs from 2014-2018. This translates into 5.2 male country artists to every 1 female country artist. While 2018 (19%) was higher than 2014 (13%) and 2017 (12%), it did not differ from 2016 (19%). As shown in Infographic 1, females held a smaller proportion of the top charts in country music than across the Billboard Hot 100 Year End Charts for four of the five years sampled. Thus, the “bro culture” is still alive and well in country music and things are not getting better.

WOMEN ARE MISSING IN COUNTRY MUSIC

Infographic 1



Examining the *types of credits* (i.e., solo, duo, band) artists hold revealed another cause for concern. Seventeen percent of the artists ($n=430$) who received solo credits across the 5 years sampled were female, which is substantially lower than the 30% found on the Billboard Hot 100 Popular Charts during the same time frame. If we examine unique or individual country artists, the pool of performers reduces from 430 to only 101 individuals.⁵ Of those 101 solo artists, a full 29% were women!

WHO'S TOPPING THE CHARTS?

Infographic 2

AVERAGE AGE OF
TOP MALE
ARTISTS:

42

YEARS

AVERAGE AGE OF
TOP FEMALE
ARTISTS:

29

YEARS

Top Male Artists	Age	# of credits	Top Female Artists	Age	# of credits
Luke Bryan	42	16	Carrie Underwood	35	9
Blake Shelton	42	14	Miranda Lambert	35	7
Thomas Rhett	29	12	Kelsea Ballerini	25	6
Jason Aldean	41	12	Maren Morris	28	5
Eric Church	41	11	Lauren Alaina	24	3
Keith Urban	51	11	RaeLynn	24	2
Kenny Chesney	50	9	Cam	34	2
Dierks Bentley	43	9	Kacey Musgraves	30	2
n/a			Carly Pearce	28	2

Note: Credits include solo and featuring credits. The same songs appearing on more than one year end chart were only counted once. A 9th male performer was not included as multiple artists tied at that rank. Age reflects how old the artist was as of December 31st, 2018.

The top performers and their total number of credits and age as of December 31st, 2018 are shown in Infographic 2.⁶ Men had roughly twice as many credits as solo or featuring artists than did women at the highest performing levels (top 3). As you move down the rank order, the number of credits between men and women only widens.

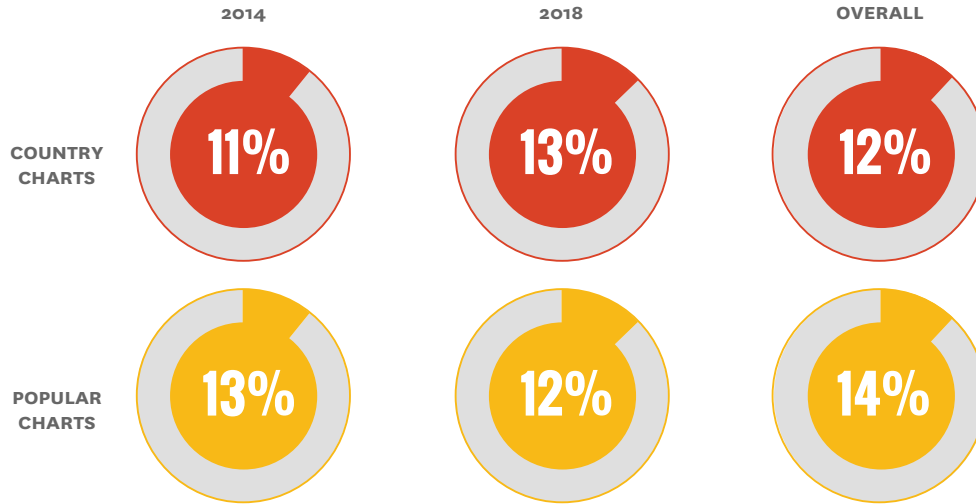
Interestingly, the mean age for top performing male solo artists was 42 whereas the mean age for top performing female solo artists was 29. Women are not only disadvantaged in the country market, but their age illuminates a sell by date that their male counterparts do not experience. Looking at the 101 unique or individual artists on the charts, the mean age sample wide was 37 for males and 34 for females. Thus, career longevity is much shorter for female than male artists—a pattern also found across other entertainment platforms.

Rounding out our analysis of credit type, we also assessed the prevalence of women in duos and bands. Less than a sixth of all duo members were women (15%), a percentage which deviated by year. Ten percent of duo members were female in 2018 and only 1 (6%) in 2017. In 2014, 21% of duo members were women. Turning to bands, 15% of the members were female across the 5-year sample. A quarter of all band members were women in 2018, which was significantly higher than 2017 (6%) and 2014 (11%).

Given the overall trends for performers, we were interested in the prevalence of female writers on the country charts in 2014 and 2018.⁷ Overall, 12% of all writers were women across 200 songs (see Infographic 3). Just over one tenth of the songwriters were women in 2014 (11%) and 13% in 2018. These findings are consistent with the percentage of female writers (14%) across the top 500 songs on the Hot 100 Billboard Popular Year End Charts from 2014 and 2018. Across the songs in 2014 and 2018, female artists were more likely to work with female songwriters than male songwriters. Thus, one key to increasing the number of female writers in the music business is to increase the number of women artists.

WHERE ARE THE FEMALE SONGWRITERS?

Infographic 3



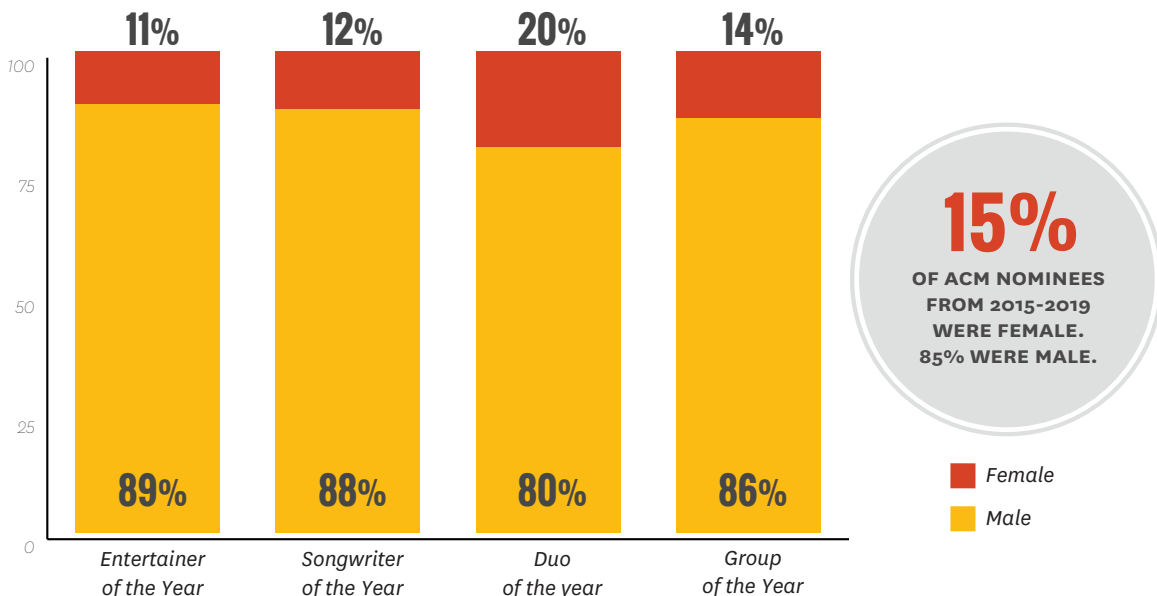
Note: Graphic presents the percentage of female writers across 200 songs in country and popular music from 2014 and 2018.

Finally, the nominations at the ACMs over the last 5 years were assessed for gender. Only four non gender specific nominations were examined (i.e., Entertainer of the Year, Songwriter of the Year, Duo of the Year, Group of the Year) in areas that reflect individual artists' contributions and were in line with the categories measured above. Put differently, gender specific awards (e.g., Male/Female Artist of the Year, New Male/Female Artist of the Year) and those involving companies and/or labels were excluded from analysis (e.g., Album of the Year, Single of the Year, Song of the Year, Music Event of the Year).

As shown in Infographic 4, only 15% of the ACM nominees across 4 categories measured were women. Less than a sixth of all nominees (11%, $n=3$) were women in the Entertainer of the Year category. In reality that figure reflects only 2 women who were nominated across the sample time frame: Carrie Underwood (1 nomination) and Miranda Lambert (2 nominations).

AND THE NOMINEES ARE... MOSTLY MALE

Infographic 4



Note: Graphic presents the Academy of Country Music Award nominees by category from 2015-2019

FEW FEMALE NOMINEES AT THE ACMS

Infographic 5

CATEGORY	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
ENTERTAINER OF THE YEAR	17%	20%	17%	0	0
SONGWRITER OF THE YEAR	0	0	40%	20%	0
DUO OF THE YEAR	20%	30%	20%	10%	20%
GROUP OF THE YEAR	19%	8%	16%	15%	15%
TOTAL NUMBER OF WOMEN	7	6	8	5	5

Note: Only the percentage of females is shown in the graphic. The percentage of males nominated in each category by year can be found by subtracting each cell from 100. Numbers in the bottom row reflect the total number of female nominees in each year across all four categories.

Twelve percent ($n=3$) of songwriters nominated were women across 5 years. Again, this number and percentage reflects only 2 women who were recognized for their achievements. Hillary Lindsey received 2 nominations in the sample time frame and Lori McKenna earned 1 nomination.

A fifth of all members in duos nominated were females, with only four individuals accounting for this designation (Maddie & Tae, Faith Hill, Joey Feek). Finally, 14% of band members were women ($n=15$) from three groups: Little Big Town, Lady Antebellum, and The Band Perry. The over time nominations as well as the frequency of females per category are shown in Infographic 5.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this research brief was to provide a snapshot of how women are doing in country music as performers and songwriters. Though representing half of the U.S. population, females only comprised 16% of performers across 5 years and 500 songs on the Year-End Billboard Hot Country charts from 2014 to 2018. Among top performers, male artists appeared on the charts at least twice as many times as female artists did across the sample. Additionally, not one of these top-performing women was over the age of 40, while all but one of country's top performing men had reached or exceeded that age. Women represented 12% of songwriters across the five years studied—one positive finding emerging from this report was that female artists were more likely to work with female songwriters than male artists were. Finally, at the ACM's women were outnumbered in the four major categories assessed, and in multiple years no women were nominated in the Entertainer and Songwriter of the Year categories.

While these findings may not be surprising, they do invite questions. Namely, how can the playing field be leveled for female artists and songwriters in country music? The most effective solution is for the industry to undertake a collective effort to address disparities. We posit that this industry-level action should include the following:

- **Labels** must assess their own data on recruitment, signing, and promotion of new male and female talent in country music. This analysis should encompass signing, recording, marketing and promotion budgets awarded to new talent. This should enable labels to understand whether men and women start out in their careers at the same level.

- **Terrestrial Radio** must examine the perceptions of their programmers and management regarding both talent and audience preferences. Additionally, station ownership must scrutinize playlisting to understand how often songs by female artists are played. With data in hand, radio must devise a plan to address biases and set inclusion goals to improve the experiences and situation for female talent and their audiences.
- **Advocacy groups** such as She Is The Music, Change the Conversation, and others are already working to improve access and opportunity for female voices in the music industry. For example, She Is The Music establishes songwriting camps that work with female songwriters to increase the number of women working behind the scenes in music. These efforts should be supported by **artists, companies and philanthropists** to ensure women songwriters are connecting with other artists in the space.
- **Streaming and online music companies** can utilize their unique insights into the country audience to counter perceptions about what listeners want. These groups, too, must examine the content of their playlists to ensure that algorithms do not systematically disadvantage women.
- **Promoters, touring, and live entertainment companies** can examine their contributions to the findings in this report. Are festivals, tours, and other stages places that include female talent? Additionally, these entities can examine the demographics of the audiences that attend their events to dispel myths about who supports male and female country artists.

The current reality in country music does not have to be the future of the genre. By taking action as an industry, executives, programmers, advocates, and even consumers can leverage their influence to create a space that produces great music—by male *and* female artists.

Footnotes

1. Nawaz, Amna (2019, March 26). *Reba McEntire on women in country music and returning to her roots*. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/reba-mcentire-on-women-in-country-music-and-returning-to-her-roots>.

2. The sample of Hot Country Songs on Billboard's Year-End Charts was retrieved March 21st, 2019 from <https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end> for 2014 to 2018. Artists and song titles were collected exactly as listed on Billboard. All performers were categorized as *individuals*, solo artists that predominately release and perform music by themselves; members of *duos* or duets, pairs of artists that regularly work together and occasionally fall under one moniker or name; or *bands*, groups of three or more performers.

For artists listed as pairs or groups of people, we noted the individuals that were members of the duo or band at the time of a song's release. Artists denoted as 'featuring' were included in the sample and categorized as individuals, duos, or bands.

The gender of each performer was looked up online and categorized (male, female, gender non-binary/non-conforming) using images, gendered pronouns, and references. No gender non-binary/non-conforming artists were confirmed to be in the sample.

Throughout, we refer to data based on the Billboard Hot 100 Year-End charts. These findings reference Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2019). *Inclusion in the Recording Studio?* Available: <http://assets.uscannenber.org/docs/aii-inclusion-recording-studio-2019.pdf>.

3. For each song, the online databases of three repertoires (BMI: <http://repertoire.bmi.com/>, ASCAP: <https://www.ascap.com/>, and SESAC: <https://www.sesac.com/#/>) were queried to determine songwriting credits. Data were collected

March 27th to April 1st, 2019, entered manually and then checked a second time for accuracy.

4. We retrieved the list of nominees March 29th, 2019 for Entertainer of the Year, Songwriter of the Year, Duo of the Year, and Band of the Year for five award ceremonies from 2015 to 2019 from multiple online sources: <https://tasteofcountry.com/2015-acm-awards-nominees/>; <https://theboot.com/2016-acm-awards-song-of-the-year-songwriter-of-the-year-nominees/>; <https://theboot.com/2017-acm-awards-nominees-full-list/>; https://www.cbs.com/shows/academy_of_country_music/2018/nominees/; and <https://www.acmcountry.com/noms>.

5. Songs that appeared a second or third time (n=82 songs) were excluded when calculating the amount of times artists appeared across the sample. Between 2014 and 2018, 81 songs appeared a second time on the Hot Country Songs' Year-End charts and one song had three appearances: *Tennessee Whiskey* by Chris Stapleton on the 2015, 2016, and 2017 charts.

6. Date of birth was retrieved using Wikipedia.org for each of the 101 solo artists on April 1st, 2019. Age was calculated as of December 31st, 2018.

7. Gender was researched for songwriters using the same method applied to artists. To examine the relationship between female artists and female writers, the 26 songs in 2014 and 2018 with at least one female artist (both featuring and not featuring) were examined to see if a different female was credited for songwriting.