Delia Poey

Striking Back without Missing a Beat: Radical Responses to Domestic Violence in Country Music's The Dixie Chicks and Salsa's Celia Cruz

"Earl Had to Die," and "¡Que le den candela!" (Have them set him on fire!) are the rallying chorus and title of songs by the Dixie Chicks and Celia Cruz, respectively. Both are posed as solutions to situations of domestic violence and abuse.[1] The two songs offer similar responses to domestic violence while working in two distinct musical genres: country music and salsa. In working within these particular music traditions, they engage issues of race, class, and gender in ways that simultaneously play into and critique conventional constructs and expectations.

Country music and salsa, at first glance, appear to be at opposite ends of the musical spectrum, and in terms of structure and musical arrangement, they may well be. However, their socio-political positionings in relation to the hegemonic have common elements. Both are associated with working class roots and audiences. They are the music of populations that are consciously "outsiders" to the mainstream. Stereotypically, country music and salsa fans are viewed as less affluent and less educated, with a low-brow aesthetic that is too easily parodied and caricatured. Both genres also participate in, and promote or create, conservative gender ideologies. Incidentally, they are also both multi-billion dollar industries.

The purpose of this article is to contextualize these two popular music representations of domestic violence, these two songs, within their respec-

tive traditions. As Mia Consalvo points out, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the representations of domestic violence in the media, and "even less attention has been paid to popular culture representations of domestic violence" (Consalvo 62). However, popular culture, being heteroglossic, has multiple, and at times contradictory, speakers and messages. It does not represent monolithically. An analysis of these two songs and how they signify in their respective traditions can shed light on how they offer a gendered perspective within the boundaries and frameworks of their genres. These two songs confront and critique gender inequity and violence in heterosexual relationships, proposing radical courses of action, but they do so while incorporating elements of their patriarchal traditions.

Race, Class, and Gender in Country Music

While country music traces its roots to folk music and ballads of rural, poor, white Southerners, it has grown and expanded to become the leading musical radio format in the United States, with over seventy million Americans tuning in to country music radio stations on a regular basis. By 1993, country music radio sales totaled close to two billion dollars annually (Lewis, "Lap Dancer" 163; Tichi 2). The demographics of country music's audience have also changed. Once defined as rural and poor, the audience is now more affluent and just as likely to reside in urban or suburban areas.[2]

Although country music's audience is more diverse now than ever before in terms of location, education, and socioeconomic background, the genre continues to appeal primarily, if not overwhelmingly, to a white public. It has traditionally been, and continues to be, racially and ethnically associated with Anglo American heritage.[3] In terms of class, country music's roots in poor, white, rural communities continue to exert an influence on the genre's themes and perspectives, as well as its construction of its own identity. Despite the audience's changing demographics, country music remains rooted in the concerns and perspectives of white working class Americans.

Thematically, country music tends to deal with everyday life experiences. As Curtis Ellison points out, "Country music culture is probably best known to nonparticipants as a popular expression of heartbreak, hard times, and personal failure" (Ellison xvii). This perception has a basis in the fact

that "an important motif at the heart of this entertainment is a sense of living in hard times. Hard times are usually expressed as financial distress, marital discord, family problems … [and] personal loneliness" (Ellison xvii). The genre's class-based perspective, however, does not translate into a progressive mobilization for change, but rather a predominantly conservative reaction idealizing traditional values. One reason for this is that "hard times in country music typically are represented as an intimately *personal* condition. . .not the result of economic conditions or tensions between social classes that might be remedied by collective action" (Ellison xviii).

In terms of gender roles, country music has historically been quite conservative. With its idealization of home and hearth, the genre has promoted strictly prescribed and proscribed gender roles. As Pamela Fox states, "from its inception in the late 1920s traditional country mythology has made the family its centerpiece, envisioning distinctly gendered roles for that institution's maintenance and protection" (Fox 244). In terms of the representation of women, these have tended to be stereotypical and dichotomized as the "good girl" who is longed for, or the temptress. Ruth Banes has argued that country music has also included a "countermythology" of southern womanhood, portraying working-class women who are neither belles nor vamps but strong characters exemplifying traditional virtues, hard work and inner strength. Nevertheless, even this countermythology defines rigid and hierarchical gender roles within the family and limits women's possibilities and worth to their roles as homemakers and nurturers, even when they are also breadwinners.

Given the structure of the industry, which is patriarchal, with men dominating the commercial aspects as well as the artistic side as song writers and performers, it is not surprising that even as country songs have dealt extensively with issues of home and family, including discord and conflict, they have been overwhelmingly from a strictly male perspective. Even when dealing with representations of domestic violence, country songs have taken a male perspective that is at times chilling. The most famous example of this is probably Johnny Cash's "Delia's Gone." In the song the speaker recounts his killing Delia, explaining that "had I not shot poor Delia, I'd have had her for my wife." He admits he found her "in her parlor and tied her to her chair." The ensuing murder is recounted matter-of-factly in the lines,

"first time I shot her, I shot her in the side . . . but with the second shot she died."

It is revealing that one of Delia's "devilish" aspects is that she's "travelin'." A dominant theme in country music is the pull between "home" and "rambling" (Malone). This pull, reserved exclusively for males, is characterized by either the performer or the cowboy's need to wander, while lamenting the absence of "home and hearth." For women, however, "rambling" represents abandonment of social responsibilities and conventions, making her, as Cash's song illustrates, "devilish." As Lewis observes, the "new woman" who defies strict gender roles by traveling is occasionally portrayed in country music songs, yet "in contrast to the man, who is constantly torn in both directions—which makes him appear both tragic and noble, even as it offers him an excuse for excess in the area of freedom—the new female is seen as one-dimensional in intent, turning her back on social responsibilities…[she is] a one-dimensional bitch" (Lewis "Duelin' Values" 115).

The presence of women in country music, particularly as performers and song writers, has made some headway in destabilizing patriarchal structures. While having to conform to at least some of the gender-based conventions of the genre, women performers have managed to also, in limited ways, contest those structures.[4] Female performers, however marginalized, have existed since the inception of country music as a genre and as an industry. Given country music's emphasis on the personal, it is not surprising to see women's voices and perspectives gaining ground throughout the musical genre's history. Country superstar Reba McEntire perhaps sums it up best in expressing her own rebellion against the industry's censorship of women's issues by "trying to sing songs for women, to say for them what they can't say for themselves" (Bufwack 207).

This "new kind" of female country singer has included songs of female empowerment and independence. As Lewis summarizes:

> Although the roots of female independence go back a long way—at least to Kitty Wells' 1952 "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels"… and Emmylou Harris' 1978 "To Daddy,"… this theme took a strong stride forward in 1987, with K.T. Oslin's "80s Ladies"….This increasingly strong women's perspective has been explored in the 1990s in Mary Chapin Carpenter's ironic "He Thinks He'll Keep her," Rosanne Cash's "The Truth About You,"

> and—in what is arguably one of the most powerful country recordings of the 1990s—Martina McBride's version of the Gretchen Peters song "Independence Day," in which, as told from the perspective of her child, an abused mother burns down her home with her drunken husband inside on July 4th—Independence Day. ("Lap Dancer" 168)

"Independence Day" is a particularly important song in that it uses the rhetoric of freedom and patriotism to denounce gender oppression. By equating the mother's "revolution" with the American movement of independence from British colonialism, it locates women's rights and freedoms as inseparable from American ideals.

In historical terms, the Dixie Chicks' song, "Goodbye Earl" is not the only song in the genre, or even the first, to represent domestic violence from a woman's perspective. What makes an analysis of this particular song compelling is the way it plays with conventions and boundaries in its articulation of a radical solution to a situation of domestic violence.

"Goodbye Earl" as Feminist Critique within the Country Music Tradition

"Goodbye Earl," released in 2000, is structured squarely within the country music tradition of the "story song." The story, narrated in the third person, has two best friends—Mary Anne and Wanda—as protagonists. Mary Anne chooses to leave home in search of something better, while Wanda quickly marries local boy Earl. As Earl regularly beats Wanda, she leaves him and files for divorce. He then beats her so severely she ends up in Intensive Care. Mary Anne immediately returns to the hometown and the two women plan and carry out Earl's murder via poisoned black-eyed peas. The two friends go on to live happy lives as proprietors of a roadside stand. As performed by the Dixie Chicks, the song is self-consciously satirical with a tongue-in-cheek attitude directed not just at its subject matter, but at its definitively "country" character.

Natalie Maines' vocals on the track are intensely twangy, taking on a heavy drawl in the phrasing of the lyrics. The lyrics themselves, compact as they are, make repeated and marked references to "country" stereotypes. In the opening stanza, as the protagonists are introduced, it is clearly estab-

lished that they are not only "good girls," but "good country girls," since they are appropriately "both members of the 4-H Club, both active in the FFA [Future Farmers of America]." After high school, Mary Anne "went out lookin' for a brand new world," in keeping with country music's recurring theme of "rambling." That Mary Anne is a woman, however, could make this problematic. As demonstrated in Cash's "Delia's Gone," a "travelin" woman is "devilish" and should be stopped. Mary Anne's later return, however, redeems her.

In contrast to Mary Anne, Wanda remains "home." In country music's cultural parameters, Wanda's pursuit of a socially and culturally sanctioned path should be rewarded. However, in "Goodbye Earl," Wanda's staying home closes off her possibilities. She "looked all around this town, and all she found was Earl." These lines imply that not only was Earl a poor choice, but that in remaining in "this town," he was the only choice.

After a mere two weeks, Wanda's marriage turns violent. Her first reaction is to keep the abuse hidden as "she put on dark glasses and long sleeved blouses, and make-up to cover the bruise." Her second strategy in dealing with the violence is to file for divorce and "let the law take it from there." Yet, since "Earl walked right through that restraining order, and put her in Intensive Care," it is clear that she cannot rely on institutions such as the courts or the police for protection. By recounting Wanda's failed strategies for ending the abuse—dealing with it privately and then appealing to institutions of social order—the listener can release all blame for Wanda's next course of action, which is to kill the perpetrator, Earl. In other words, it preempts the simplistic victim-blaming response: "Why didn't she just leave?"

The decision to kill Earl is not made solely by Wanda. The catalyst for it is Mary Anne, who "flew in from Atlanta." Returning to the home vs. rambling theme, Mary Anne leaves home "lookin' for a brand new world" represented in Atlanta. The choice is significant in that while Atlanta is a major urban center, it is still the South. Thus, the good country girl can migrate to an urban setting, but she is still true to her roots by remaining in the South, albeit the city that stands out as the quintessentially cosmopolitan "New South." It is through this female friend as catalyst that Wanda is able to reach a definitive solution to her dire situation. While in Intensive Care, they "worked out a plan, and it didn't take them long to decide that Earl had

to die." The topos of a female friend as catalyst for change is also present in Celia Cruz's song, which will be discussed later in this essay.

Once the women have made the decision to kill Earl, the musical composition of the song changes. It becomes louder, has more instruments coming in, and is more up-tempo, with the voices of the other band members joining in. It signals a musical and lyrical shift from a song about "hard times" to one of celebration and transcendence. This shift works within country music's tradition in that, according to Curtis Ellison, "if hard times are the principal topic of country music culture, its consistent hope is to escape them" (Ellison xviii). Ellison goes on to note that "country music affirms the possibility of finding better times in the rewards of romantic, familial, or heavenly love" (xix). In "Goodbye Earl," escape from hard times begins with the decision to kill Earl, but true happiness is found, as the later verses articulate, not in the promise of romantic, familial, or heavenly love, but rather in the friendship and partnership between the two women.

Earl's death is brought on by poisoned black-eyed peas served to him by the two women. In cooking and serving the meal to Earl, Wanda is fulfilling her prescribed gender role. At this point in the song, there is actual dialogue presumably spoken by Wanda, who says, "Those black-eyed peas, they tasted all right to me, Earl." Continuing her role as the solicitous wife, Wanda suggests, "Why don't you lay down and sleep, Earl?" Her feigned concern is even carried out in the disposal of the body as Wanda asks, "Ain't it dark, wrapped up in that tarp, Earl?" The way this scene is played out in the song signifies through country music conventions in several ways. It uses standard musical arrangements while employing irony to contest domestic arrangements, which as promoted in country music, entail conservative gender roles and the idealization of "home and hearth." The scene also plays on the genre's tendency to romanticize what it deems old-fashioned Southern values in its use of black-eyed peas as a murder weapon.

After recounting the murder scene, the song returns to a more subdued musical arrangement and third person narration with only Natalie Maines on vocals. The verse absolves the women of any blame as it presents Earl's absence as a positive outcome, not only for Wanda, but for the world in general, since even the police make little effort in finding him because "it turns out Earl was a missing person who nobody missed at all." The two women go on to lead happy lives running a "roadside stand out on

Highway 109." Here again the transgressive behavior remains within certain parameters. In being situated on Highway 109, the women are at a half-way point between home and rambling. As entrepreneurs, they are not found at home as either wives or mothers; that is, they are outside of the control of the patriarchal family structure. Yet, what they sell at the roadside stand is "Tennessee ham and strawberry jam," which are regionally appropriate products and what one might associate with home cooking. The women have thus succeeded in finding a way to live within patriarchy but outside of patriarchal control, redefining "home and hearth."

Race, Class, and Gender in Salsa Music

Salsa music is not a rhythm or a dance step, but a genre which developed in the 1960s and 1970s in New York City as Latinos from various parts of the Caribbean lived, worked and sought entertainment in close proximity to one another. The genre emerged as a response to their collective condition as immigrants and/or minorities in the abject and alien urban environment of the barrio. Musically, it claimed no central authenticity, but rather favored incorporation of various influences to create something new. In this way, salsa is the musical representation of Caribbean *mestizaje*, or cultural and racial blending carried out in a U.S. context.

Frances Aparicio succinctly defines salsa as:

> A syncretic art form that originated in the Latino barrios of New York City. A conjunction of Afro-Cuban music (*el son*) and rhythms, of Puerto Rican *bombas* and *plenas*, and of African American jazz instrumentation and structures, salsa music has become the quintessential musical marker of *latinidad* in the United States and in Latin America. (Aparicio 662)

The roots of salsa are easily traced to Afro-Caribbean musical expressions which developed, or rather survived, within the institutions of the plantation and slavery. The Cuban *son*, salsa's primary influence in terms of rhythm, is itself syncretic, using polyrhythms adapted from the various regions of Africa reflecting the cultural diversity of the slaves forcibly transported to Cuba, in conjunction with European influences. Thus, even in its influences and roots, salsa denies authenticity in favor of incorporation and cross-pollination. It is also, significantly, a genre with roots in cultural sur-

vival through a delicate balance of maintaining tradition while also promoting innovation. Salsa's other strong influences, particularly in terms of lyrical structure, are traced to Puerto Rico through the incorporation of *bombas* and *plenas*—which also developed within the plantation system. These forms carried in their lyrics news and anecdotes of everyday occurrences and events. The songs served as entertainment, a depository of collective memory, and a way to disseminate information over large areas.[5]

Fusing these two strains, and adding others such as jazz, salsa developed as a genre that looks to the past for its structure, but addresses present conditions in concrete ways. Felix Padilla explains the historical basis for salsa's power as social commentary as well as its innovation assigning importance to the lyrics in the following way:

> The major structural feature which distinguishes Salsa from other earlier Latin music forms is the importance given to lyrics. Following closely the tradition of the Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena*, as well as the *seis*, another Island music form which has become a focal part of the working class of the countryside, Puerto Rican Salsa was built around particular messages expressed in the words of songs….The leading messages conveyed by the music revolve around themes having to do with love (happy and unhappy romance songs), friendship, music, humor, and just as important, ideas reflecting the social, cultural, economic, and political visions and realities of *barrio* people. (Padilla 97)

Thus, salsa is used to "speak directly to the social, cultural, economic and political experiences of Latinos as a group" (Padilla 100).

Extending the tradition of the *plena* in relating experiences of everyday life, now in an urban setting, salsa songs also offer commentary, usually through the use of humor. For example, Ramón Jiménez's song "Se te quemó la casa" (Your House Burnt Down) made clear reference to the practice of setting fire to buildings that provided housing for working class Latinos in order to encourage more upscale renovation and neighborhood gentrification (Quintero Rivera, "Migration" 220).

Listening to salsa, or more fully participating through dance, can be described as dialectical processes in that the music is set to, first of all, make the body move. While the words are present and constant in the background, insinuating themselves into the listener's consciousness, it is the rhythm that draws in the listener. Frances Aparicio has pointed to the

superficial perception of salsa as "easy listening," as well as its class and racial/ethnic associations, as reasons for dismissing the genre. Yet the tension created by the seemingly contradictory relationship between the lyrical and musical content is where salsa's subversive potential lies. As Quintero Herencia observes, "salsa promises not to get you wet, while soaking you through and through. In short, salsa *plays* innocent, *la salsa se hace la pendeja*" (Quintero Herencia 196).

Given the musical genre's oppositional potential and its tradition of speaking to systems of oppression and marginalization, the fact that this does not extend into gender ideology is all the more disturbing. Salsa's relation to gender is contradictory in that "while it reaffirms a Pan-Latino cultural resistance within the United States and in that sense can be deemed politically progressive, it simultaneously participates in the patriarchal systems of both Latino and North American culture" (Aparicio 662). As an industry, salsa is male-dominated to the point of being almost exclusively male in terms of both the commercial and artistic aspects. There have historically been no successful female song writers and very few performers. The exclusion of women is so blatant that "since the 1960s, only one female, Celia Cruz, has been able to maintain a career singing salsa" (Derno and Washburne 142).[6]

Even the most politically and socially progressive male performers, such as Rubén Blades and Willie Colón, who have included issues such as AIDS and homophobia in their songs, have left inequitable gender relations and representations intact. As Augusto Puleo points out, "the sexist, misogynistic, and machista ways of thinking and behaving have been reflected and glorified in the patriarchy of salsa music" (Puleo 224). Salsa's misogynistic side is overt and goes beyond the one-dimensional representations of women as the source of either pleasure or pain (Puleo 225), wherein the subject is male and women are objects. The genre's tradition also includes, and implicitly sanctions, "gender based violence, as in the songs 'Bandolera' (Hector Levoe 1978) or 'Yo la mato' [I Kill Her] (Daniel Santos 1974)" (Aparicio 669).

Women's very limited participation in the industry has no doubt been a factor in the perpetuation of sexist and misogynistic ideologies, yet critiques of salsa's sexual politics have, with rare exception, been absent. As Aparicio states: "Despite isolated attempts to raise the issue of women's representa-

tion in Caribbean popular music, salsa lyrics have remained virtually uncontested by female musicians, singers, consumers and critics" (661).

"Que le den candela" as Feminist Critique within the Salsa Music Tradition

Celia Cruz, the undisputed Queen of Salsa until her death in 2003 at the age of 78, recorded a few songs, in her long career, in defense of women. "Las divorciadas" stands out as an example. Yet only two songs in her extensive repertoire spanning a sixty-year period address male violence against women directly: "No le pegue a la negra" (Don't Hit the Black Woman) and "Que le den candela." The first exposes and denounces gender and racial violence by narrating the story of a black female servant who is beaten by her white male employer. In the song, the title line is spoken by the woman's lover or husband, who comes to her defense. "Que le den candela" focuses on inequity and violence in the context of heterosexual romantic relationships by offering advice to a woman in an abusive relationship.

In contrast to "Goodbye Earl," "Que le den candela" is not lyrically structured as a story narrated in the third person. Rather, it is a monologue in which the speaker addresses a "Buena amiga" (good [female] friend). What is similar in the two songs is that a female friend is the catalyst, and indeed the co-conspirator, in enacting a radical course of action to put an end to the victim's situation of abuse. While "Goodbye Earl" presents the listener with a story in which the radical solution is killing the perpetrator of the abuse, ""Que le den candela" offers possible radical solutions that are not carried out in the narrative of the song.

Like most salsa songs, "Que le den candela" begins with an explosion of sound and an up-tempo dance beat. The music then slows down and becomes subdued as the verses open. In the first two verses, the speaker describes the ways in which "ese hombre" [that man] is unsuitable as a romantic partner. He is described as rude, inattentive, lazy, demanding, and all-around undeserving of all the love the woman bestows on him. In contrast to the man, the woman in the relationship is described in stereotypically positive ways. She cleans, does the washing, irons his clothes, etc. In other

words, she fulfils all the domestic duties ascribed to women by a patriarchal gender ideology. Like Wanda in the Dixie Chicks song, the victim in the abusive relationship is defined as a "good woman" and therefore blameless.

The second verse of "Que le den candela" ends with the startling lines that if the woman should by chance complain about the inequity and abuse in the relationship, he becomes indignant and wants to hit her. Immediately following these lines, the instrumentation changes for the chorus, becoming louder and more up-tempo. With additional vocals coming in, the chorus returns to a strong, rhythmic dance beat as, lyrically, it spells out a list of possible physical responses to the situation of abuse including setting him on fire, cooking him in a pot and/or putting him on a kite and cutting the string.

Like "Goodbye Earl," Cruz's song uses humor in proposing radical solutions to an abusive relationship. This similarity is not coincidental, as the use of humor can disarm the audience/listener and make the violence enacted, or proposed in the case of Cruz's song, acceptable. Because both salsa and country music have strong and long traditions of employing humor in songs, even when dealing with serious topics or themes, the use of humor in both "Goodbye Earl" and "Que le den candela" works squarely within the frameworks of their respective genres, even as it also functions in subversive and transgressive ways. That is to say, both songs manage to subvert conservative gender ideologies while working within the parameters of their respective musical genres.

The last verse of "Que le den candela" offers the female victim advice with the lines: "If I were you I would leave/ the suitcases at the door and a note saying/ from this moment on, have your grandmother cook for you."[7] The lines are significant in that at first they seem to suggest that the woman leave, but after a brief pause, the lines reveal that it is the man who must be forced to leave. In other words, it is the man who must be displaced from the home. The woman remains as the rightful occupant of this space which in the abusive man's absence can return to a place of safety and comfort. The final line of the verse is not only an insult directed at the man, but can also be interpreted as returning the man to the position and status of a child or even the dependency status of an infant.

"Goodbye Earl" and "Que le den candela," in offering radical responses to situations of domestic violence and abuse while working within their respective musical traditions, disrupt conservative gender ideologies. As Ferraro

has pointed out, "Domestic violence discourse…challenges male dominance in its most cherished location, the home" (78). While the two songs analyzed here do just that, they go one step further in challenging patriarchy using the very tools, frameworks and assumptions that their respective genres have used to reinforce and reproduce inequitable and repressive gender ideologies.

Delia Poey
Florida State University

Notes

[1] As Ferraro articulates it, the term "domestic violence" is "a code for physical and emotional brutality within intimate relationships, usually heterosexual" (77).

[2] For a full description of country music's audience demographics, see Lewis' "Lap Dancer or Hillbilly Deluxe."

[3] As Lewis, among other critics, has pointed out, country music has strong influences from black American music such as the blues and gospel. See Lewis, "Lap Dancer or Hillbilly Deluxe."

[4] For a comprehensive history of women in country music and their role in the growth of the genre, see Mary Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann's book *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music*. For a history of country music gender conventions as they relate to stage personas and representations, see Bufwack's "Girls and Guitars."

[5] Angel Guillermo Quintero Rivera has traced the development of Puerto Rican music to the *cimarrón*, or runaway slave, and proposes a theory of the music as following a tradition of liberty and justice. See his article "La música puertorriqueña y la contra-cultura democrática."

[6] Two other possible examples of successful female salsa performers are La Lupe, who had a strong career in the 1960s and 1970s, and La India, a contemporary singer often compared to La Lupe, who shows signs of maintaining a strong and long career in salsa.

[7] The original lines in Spanish read: "si yo fuera tú/ le dejaría, las maletas en la puerta/ y una nota que dijera/ apartir de este mometo que te cocine tu abuela." The translation is my own.

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