

The Gendered Voice of Australian Country Music

Graeme Smith

How do Australian country music singers sing, and why do they sing as they do? In his 1987 article 'Why do songs have words,' Simon Frith stresses that the words of a song constitute a very small part of the meaning of the musical act.¹ The 'voice' of the singer, understood both as the sound produced and the discursive position that the singer occupies, is a complex vehicle for meaning, acting within musical, historical, stylistic and linguistic fields. As Australian country music emerged as a genre in the 1930s and 1940s, Australian singers produced versions of the musical styles of American performers like Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter family and others. Australian performers soon developed ways of performing localism within the music style. The genre has made persistent claims to be Australia's authentic music and the true representation of Australian experience and national identity.² For its practitioners and fans, Australian country music has become a voice of the nation.

The national ideological and musical position occupied by Australian country music is not an unusual one. Many popular music genres around the world create in similar ways local mixes of nostalgia, nationalism, regionalism, address to rural and working-class audiences, and social conservatism. American ethnomusicologists Aaron Fox and Christine Yano have sketched out a field called Global Country, within which we might comfortably also include

¹ Simon Frith, 'Why do Songs have Words?' *Lost in Music: Culture, Style and the Musical Event*, ed. A.L. White (London: Routledge 1987) 97–98, 100–1.

² Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music* (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2005) 85–96.

enka from Japan, Brazilian *sertaneja*, Czech *trampski* music or *pleng luk thung* from Thailand. Ireland has produced a comparable genre generally known as Country and Irish.³

Whilst they share many similarities, these musics map onto cultural landscapes and attempt to ground musical representations of social experience within common-sense and vernacular understandings of national and local identities. Each uses its own symbolic repertoire to represent the local. The musical strategies of Australian country music singers are based on an ideological and political map within which the national localism of their genre is located and understood. The dominant ideological framework of Australian country music is often dubbed 'the Australian Legend,' a metahistorical concept formulated in the 1950s in the work of the historian Russell Ward.⁴ Within this model, Australian-ness is most strongly expressed by the rural, white, working-class male. Though this thesis came under great criticism from both the new left and the right from the 1970s onwards, it remains the dominant core of Australian nationalist ideology at a national popular level.⁵ From its powerful formation in the radical nationalism of the 1950s, the Australian Legend linked cultural independence to an anti-imperialist and often anti-American sensibility. The puritanical tendencies of the left of the 1950s added a wariness of American popular culture to this national position.⁶ Yet for all the highly significant localisations that have developed within Australian country music, the genre has continually been inspired by and imitative of American models. Thus Australian country music inevitably confronts contradictions when it calls up Australian Legend imagery to support its claims to national significance and authenticity. One area in which this ambivalence has played out is in the question of accent and dialect. It is useful, before looking at the Australian case, to survey linguistic and music studies of the interplay of accent, dialect and singing style.

The analytical study of the uses and the meanings of linguistic accents within popular music singing began with the work of noted sociolinguist Peter Trudgill in the 1980s. He investigated a number of British singers from the Beatles to Punk performers of the 1980s, and identified five specific phonological elements that singers tended to modify. These linguistic tokens were subsequently dubbed by Simpson the 'USA-5.'⁷ Trudgill found that while singers apparently were attempting to use a generalised American English, dialect elements were often inconsistently applied, and that the use of these elements varied between genres and, historically, within genres. Thus, Punk singers did not use such changes as the inserted postvocalic [r], or the monophthonal [a] as substituted for [ai] in the realisation of

³ Aaron Fox, 'Global Country: Class, History and Indigeneity in a "World Music",' paper presented at the IASPM Conference, Kanazawa, 27 July 1997; Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2002). See also Suzel Ana Reily, 'Musica Sertaneja and Migrant Identity: The Stylistic Development of a Brazilian Genre,' *Popular Music* 11.3 (1992): 337–58; Chris Goertzen, 'Popular Music Transfer and Transformation: The Case of American Country Music in Vienna,' *Ethnomusicology* 32.1 (1988):1–21.

⁴ Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: OUP, 1958).

⁵ Michael Roe, 'The Australian Legend,' *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne: OUP, 1994) 34–41.

⁶ See Graeme Smith, 'Making Folk Music,' *Meanjin* 44.4 (1985): 481–82; John Docker, 'Culture, Society and the Communist Party,' *Australia's First Cold War: Volume One*, ed. Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984) 204–5.

⁷ Paul Simpson, 'Language, Culture and Identity: With (another) Look at Accents in Pop and Rock Singing,' *Multilingua*, 18.4 (1999): 343–68, 345.

the PRICE vowel in such words as 'my,' 'life' and so on. However, they popularised the use of the glottal stop for the medial and final /t/ traditionally associated with Cockney and, latterly, its derivative 'estuary English.'⁸ Trudgill's work has been advanced by such writers as Simpson, Coupland, Beal and others. Beal has recently discussed the ways in which the group the Arctic Monkeys have used phonological and lexical markers to emphasise their Sheffield origins, and 'authenticity' in expressing these roots.⁹ Coupland has argued that dialect use in popular singing often involves conscious stylisation, which can involve plays of 'knowing inauthenticity' that open up complex possibilities of irony and hybridisation within performance.¹⁰ Gibson's study of New Zealand popular singers establishes new levels of detail in the analysis of sung vowels by such singers, quantitatively analysing both sung and spoken expressions of a number of New Zealand singer-songwriters. Gibson has used spectrographic analysis, an advance in precision on much research in this area, which has been based on qualitative and impressionistic studies.¹¹ Renae O'Hanlon has studied Australian hip-hop performers demonstrating that whereas Australian pop singers tend to adopt the characteristic American-English 'USA-5' tokens, Australian hip-hop performers eschew them to a significant degree, and frequently, and equally markedly, use broad Australian vowel variants. The latter are easily discernable by listeners within the genre known as oz hip-hop, and are clearly linked to hip-hop's vigorous protestations of local authenticity, the famous invocation to 'keep it real'¹².

Sociolinguists have sought to understand the lability of dialect variation in singing, and the social and communicative aims of the style variation. Simpson, in a wide-ranging overview, has attempted to align shifts in language strategies with changing popular music norms at a fairly general level.¹³ Many studies concentrate on the degree to which sung dialect is a conscious variation from a spoken 'normative accent.' Other writers have cautioned against too strong a reliance on models of norms, and urge a perspective that emphasises the active construction of identity within the choices singers make. Gibson argues that his New Zealand singers also operate within a norm of mainstream singing style, and their choice of a local accent in singing reflects an active real-time construction of identity.¹⁴

Such studies as those described above have been able to outline phonological changes that have taken place, but there have been few detailed meta-pragmatic examinations of the way that these communication acts create meaning in the very act of their execution. An adequate study of this aspect needs to take into account the conventions of meaning that are built into

⁸ Peter Trudgill, *On Dialect: Social and Geographical Perspectives* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) 114 ff.

⁹ Joan Beal, "'You're Not from New York City, You're from Rotherham": Dialect and Identity in British Indie Music,' *Journal of English Linguistics* 37.3 (Sep. 2009): 223–40.

¹⁰ Nikolas Coupland, "The Mediated Performance of Vernaculars,' *Journal of English Linguistics* 37.3 (Sep. 2009): 284–300, especially 291. See also his 'Voice, Place and Genre in Popular Song Performance,' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15.5 (2011): 573–602.

¹¹ Andy Gibson, *Production and Perception of Vowels in New Zealand Popular Music*, MPhil thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2010.

¹² Renae O'Hanlon, 'Australian Hip Hop: A Sociolinguistic Investigation,' *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 26.2 (2006): 193–209; Tony Mitchell, 'Australian Hip Hop's Multicultural Literacies: A Subculture Emerges into the Light,' *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music in Australia*, ed. Shane Homan and Tony Mitchell (Hobart: ACYS Publishing, 2008) 232, 237–44.

¹³ Simpson, 'Language, Culture and Identity,' especially 54–64.

¹⁴ Gibson, *Production and Perception of Vowels*, 165 ff.

the music genre, and to place linguistic tokens alongside and within the elements that create musical communication. Tylor Bickford, in his linguistically founded musical analysis of a single Bob Dylan song, opens such an analysis, which extends the possibilities for identifying the sites of the creation of musical meaning in the range of manipulations and distortions of phonological elements.¹⁵ Bickford argues that whereas language creates the meanings of signs within simple, categorical, binary oppositions, music typically relies on continuous variations of acoustic parameters, using non-categorical gradations to express meaning.¹⁶ Thus identifying phonological choices made by singers in purely linguistic terms is bound to be limited in its analytical possibilities. Furthermore, singers are not bound by ‘naturally occurring’ dialect forms, but can exploit ‘marked’ deviations for expressivity. A study of Apache country singers in Feld, Fox, Porcello and Samuels (2004), subtitled ‘Real Apaches don’t Twang,’ discusses another country genre where phonological choices have deep significance for performers. Samuels notes that while American country singers typically conform to a Southern dialect emphasised by a strong diphongalisation of vowels understood as ‘twang,’ Apache singers refuse to perform this dialect marker, in an effort to distinguish themselves and their music from the Anglo-centric identity of mainstream country.¹⁷ This example also highlights the reflexivity of country singers—no matter how much they may assert a natural directness in their performance, it gains its nuance and expressivity from a careful calibration against a tradition, defined as ‘real country,’ ‘hard core’ or ‘authentic.’¹⁸ The genre is highly aware of its history and individual innovations and models, if successful, are characteristically read as reshaping this on-going tradition. As will be argued here, influential performers in Australian country music participate in continuing reassessments of the role of dialect.

The first Australian hillbilly singers relied heavily on creating an affinity with the American models on which the emergent genre was based, adopting monikers like Tex (Morton), Buddy (Williams) and Slim (Dusty), which suggested that the American cowboy mythology could be transplanted to the Australian countryside, along with some version of the sung dialect of Jimmy Rodgers, Hank Snow, and others. The most obvious transplanted marker was the fully realised non-prevocalic /r/. For example, in Morton’s first localised Australian hillbilly song, ‘The Yodelling Bagman,’ he realised the non-prevocalic /r/ in every potential occurrence, as in the words ‘guitar,’ ‘heard,’ ‘worked,’ ‘Cairns,’ and ‘southern.’ By comparison, Buddy Williams tended to use fewer ‘American’ elements in his singing throughout his performance career. Slim Dusty followed a pattern between those of Morton and Williams, and displayed a certain inconsistency of application, such as Trudgill observed amongst British popular singers. In Slim Dusty’s trademark recording of ‘The Pub with no Beer,’ for example, we hear bar as both [ba:r] , and [ba:], dreer as [dri:r], but sneer as [sni:a], here as [hi:a], fear as [fi:a], dear as [di:a] and beer as [bi:a]. A count of this single token of Americanness—perhaps the most easily

¹⁵ Tyler Bickford, ‘Music of Poetry and Poetry of Song: Expressivity and Grammar in Vocal Performance,’ *Ethnomusicology* 51.3 (2007): 446–58.

¹⁶ Bickford, ‘Music of Poetry,’ 444.

¹⁷ Stephen Feld, A. Fox, T. Porcello and D. Samuels, ‘Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song,’ *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 332–33.

¹⁸ Aaron Fox, *Real Country* (Chappell Hill: Duke University Press, 2005); Richard Petersen, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

recognised of the USA-5 variants—in bush ballad performers from the 1950s to the 1980s would reveal considerable variation in the frequency of realisation. Singer Gordon Parsons tended to use the /r/ realisation in slower songs; balladeers of more localised reputation such as Stan Coster used it scarcely at all. This variability meant that from the time Australian hillbilly music consolidated its nationalist credentials from the late 1950s, the unstable markers of accent would become a way by which singers and audiences could register the intensity of national identification.

However, attitudes to the use of such accents, and to their associations and meanings, have varied. Many fans and performers expect an approximation to an American accent as a normal and necessary part of country music.¹⁹ It is the unmarked form of country singing, and when singers adopt it, they can assume the listener's access to the genre's emotional range and its themes. For others, this accent is not that of 'natural' Australian spoken discourse, and its use undermines claims of the genre to national distinctiveness. Singer Greg Champion says:

Some fans of country music think it's OK if you have an American accent. They argue that country music is more or less born in the USA, and they grow up listening to it and it's OK if singers and performers have a bit of a twang in their singing style. Another school of opinion, which I think basically splits people 50-50, is that we should be striving for an Australian style of country ... I prefer to be in the second school. I think it is quite important for our national identity and for the advancement of Australian culture that the Australian accent is paramount in Australian country music.²⁰

Champion's statement expresses the continuing significance of accent style choice in Australian country singing. But as would be expected, the 'folk terms' used to identify and evaluate this 'bit of twang in their singing style' are unlikely to be sufficient to describe the details of dialect variation or analyse the meanings and motivations of singers and audiences.

Yet no singing is simple and natural in language use. To transform the sounds of ordinary speech into pitched singing, a performer does not just maintain a constant pitch through the sound of a word. Country music, whether American or Australian, enhances its allusion to the natural voice by techniques such as alteration of registers of address: different levels of formality, or oscillation between spoken and sung delivery, and even the famous highlighting effect of the emotive shock of vocal breaks known as the tear in the voice. All these strategies encourage familiar ways of establishing the relationship between performer and listener, a poetics of de- and re-naturalisation on which the assertion of authenticity in address and meaning is based.²¹ Singing involves choices of the way resonating vocal areas are used, in particular the glottal and nasal areas, the allocation of the primary vowels of a diphthong through a sustained note, and the way vowel formants need to be modified in different parts of

¹⁹ The conscious adoption of a non-native accent in country music is not unique to Australia. Samuels, in Feld, Fox and Samuels, *Vocal Anthropology* (section 4.2) notes that the dialects from the area of Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee form the basis for the accent style adopted by most American country singers, whether they are from this region or not.

²⁰ Lindsay Frazer, dir., *Doesn't Everybody want a Golden Guitar*, ABC TV documentary (Westleigh, NSW: Vitascope, 1995).

²¹ Aaron Fox, 'The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music,' *Popular Music* 11.1 (1992): 54–56.

the vocal range. Gibson's studies of New Zealand singers demonstrate that there are large shifts in formants which distinguish vowels occurring in singing, yet these shifts do not compromise intelligibility, or the ability of listeners to identify the representation of national variants.²² Singers and audiences hear the sung vowels as representing their spoken models. Singers develop systems of pronunciation and articulation that are partly personal and idiosyncratic, though to be effective they must use recognisable and public stylistic conventions. Thus the sung accent is never natural; while it is based upon spoken accents, as Champion acknowledges, it is something to be 'striving for.'

For Australian country singers, a singer's accent expresses gestures and signals within a field of alternatives of accent and dialect. Within this field, the Australian-American dichotomy has historically been an important contrast. This division also intersects with the cultivated/broad polarity in Australian English. The spectrum of dialect is the most widely recognised indicator of class in Australia and so is implicated in country music's claim to sing in the voice of 'ordinary' Australians.²³

Linguists generally classify Australian English into cultivated, general, and broad forms.²⁴ As these names indicate, the categories correlate approximately with differences in education and socio-economic status, and are conventionally associated with social stereotyping. Moore points out that the socially-inflected hierarchy in the Australian accent was formed in the complex interactions between imperial attitudes to colonials within Australian class cultures in the early twentieth century.²⁵ Yet the accents we use are not merely determined by our exposure to language models. We also often make unconscious choices to speak with the accent of particular groups we identify with, or with which we wish to be identified by others. Studies of users' perceptions of Australian English show that the cultivated form is frequently read as 'good speech used by phoney people whereas broad is bad speech used by real people.'²⁶

Sociolinguists describe the deliberate choice of apparently low-status language variants as demonstrating the 'covert prestige' of such dialects in certain circumstances or for certain groups, a strategy where 'bad but real' is preferred to 'good but phoney.'²⁷ This linguistic strategy is quite congruent with the address of country music, with its discourses of natural and direct truth of expression. Nonetheless, models for representing broad Australian in a sung voice are still relatively unstable in Australian country music, and have often been associated with comic and novelty songs. A well-known exemplar in this field is Chad Morgan. His repertoire, developed in a performing career based on a rural trickster-fool character from the early 1950s to the present day, relies on broad humour based on rural lower-class stereotypes and old-fashioned music-hall-style bawdy innuendo. His songs are peppered

²² Gibson, *Production and Perception of Vowels*, 102–10.

²³ Smith, *Singing Australian*, 19–39.

²⁴ A.G. Mitchell and A. Delbridge, *The Pronunciation of English in Australia*, rev. ed. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965).

²⁵ Bruce Moore, *Speaking Our Language: The Study of Australian English* (South Melbourne: OUP, 2008) 126 ff.

²⁶ Barbara Horvath, *Variation in Australian English: The Sociolects of Sydney* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) 24.

²⁷ Jennifer Coates, *Women, Men and Language* (London/New York: Longman, 1993) 80–82; Peter Trudgill, *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974) 169–85.

with a characteristic Australian slang lexicon: 'shielas,' 'drongos' and so on. He sings with a nasalised production and tense high larynx position. Most importantly, he emphasises the second element of characteristically Australian diphthongs in extended notes.²⁸

In the 1980s, however, some country music performers began to use accent register to identify with Australian experience in a more serious way. This trend was led by John Williamson, who developed a hyper-Australian style in the 1980s within a number of high-selling (for country) commercial record releases.²⁹ After a period in which many Australian performers were questioning the value of prominent national references in country music, his success led to many other performers emphasising Australian imagery.³⁰ Thus it is valuable to look at the evolution of his style, and the strategic processes of meaning creation that lie behind accent choice. Williamson's earlier songs of the 1970s often referred to Australian locations, but he used many epithets from American country. His 'Boyhood Story' from this era, for example, contains lines like 'my daddy was a railroad man.' He also chose conventional country instrumental colouring, particularly steel guitar, in his backings, with parallel thirds and sixths in lead guitar figures. Most importantly, in contrast to his later recordings, the projection and vowel repertoire of his vocal style was that of a smooth country crooner.³¹

Around the early 1980s, Williamson began a period of touring as a solo performer that resulted in a much clearer projection of an Australian style. During this time he started to move his singing voice into a surprisingly explicit evocation of the broad Australian accent. His projection shifted towards a more speech-like delivery, with a low level of sung quality, a general modification of his vowel positions and a use of elongated diphthongs in ways suggestive of older Australian rural accents. He emphasised those features that most strongly mark the accent levels in Australian English. In combination, these linguistic choices evoked a hypothetical archaic rural accent. The speech-like delivery stripped his voice of the bright 'twang' of nasal resonance associated with American-influenced Australian country singing styles. By decreasing the projected, sung quality of the voice in favour of an intimate spoken quality, he was able to bring into play the effect of the sung-vs-spoken frame-shifting which has been an important part of the general affective armoury of country singing. However, when Williamson links this vocal strategy with the Australian accent, he evokes the nationally distinctive emotional register of laconic understatement.

This remodelling is most clearly seen in Williamson's song 'True Blue,' which he recorded twice, first in 1982 and then in 1986.³² The second version of the song broke into the pop hit parades. The song nostalgically calls up a putative vanishing working-class Australia and its values:

Hey true blue, don't say you've gone,
Say you've knocked off for a smokoe,
and you'll be back later on.

²⁸ See Chad Morgan *The Shiek of Scrubby Creek* (Sydney: EMI, 1969).

²⁹ Smith, *Singing Australian*, 120–24.

³⁰ See the comments of singer Ray Kernaghan in Monika Allen, *The Tamworth Country Music Festival* (Sydney: Horwitz Grahame, 1988) 31; Smith, *Singing Australian*, 113

³¹ 'Boyhood Story' is on the compact disc *True Blue* (Sydney: EMI, 1982).

³² 'True Blue' appears on Williamson's albums *True Blue* (1982), and *Mallee Boy* (Sydney: EMI, 1986).

'True Blue' presents the lower-class national character, and the song also relies heavily on forms of coercive solidarity ('me and you'), which he links to structures of sociality on which national identity might be based: family, friendship, and shared experience.

A comparison of the 1982 and 1986 versions of this song show Williamson's shifts. Particularly observable is the lowering of vowel positions, the emphasis on vowel glides, and also the use of a dark velarised [ɹ] in the word 'blue' from the title phrase, where a clear [l] is more usual. In the second recording of 'True Blue,' a stark keening upper voice is used in the background singing an octave above Williamson, and harmonies used in the chorus of the first version are replaced by a cosy, unison chorus, sung the first time through by rough-hewn male voices, and the second time by a mixed-sex group. The women's voices in the chorus strikingly expand the song's scope to include women. This inclusiveness is reinforced by a single word alteration in the chorus line, where 'is it standing by your mate when he's in a fight?' becomes 'when she's in a fight.' Although Williamson has consistently projected a highly masculinised version of national character, he has at the same time often depicted his song characters within stable monogamous relationships, in songs like 'Cootamundra Wattle,' and others.³³

Williamson's foregrounding of broad Australian features in his singing is easily identified as a covert prestige strategy. However, one of the most striking features of the covert prestige strategies—of deliberately using low-status language registers—within Australian country has been its strongly gendered character. Many linguists, notably Peter Trudgill and others, argue that the linguistic strategy of covert prestige is predominantly available to males and historically this has been the case in the public and dramatic representations of the Australian accent. Trudgill's explanation of the gender asymmetry of the strategy of covert prestige is clearly supported by the gendering of hegemonic Australian populist nationalism.³⁴ Although there have been many influential Australian women country singers since the genre started to consolidate in the 1940s, their repertoire and singing styles developed along different paths from those of male country singers.³⁵ Eric Watson, songwriter, producer and historian of the Australian country scene, argued in the 1980s that Australian female country singers were overwhelmingly tied to models of American singers, and that there was no widely accepted model of an Australian sung vocal accent among the female performers.³⁶ We will look briefly here at two contrasting female performers, Kasey Chambers and Sara Storer. These represent two extremes in the use of sung Australian accents.

Kasey Chambers has risen to national country and popular crossover fame over the last decade.³⁷ After a classic country music musical foundation touring with a family band, Chambers started to be noticed by the mainstream Australian music industry around 2000, and in the following years has won multiple industry awards, and is now taken as the voice of a new popular country music. Although some of her repertoire is in the pop-crossover model,

³³ 'Cootamundra Wattle' may be found on *Mallee Boy* (1986).

³⁴ Horvath, *Variation in Australian English*, 89–95; Trudgill, *Social Differentiation of English*, 195.

³⁵ See Shirley Tucker, 'The "Country" in Contemporary Australian Women's Country Music: Gender, History, Narrative,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 86 (2006): 111–18.

³⁶ Eric Watson, 'Country Music: The Voice of Rural Australia,' *Missing in Action: Australian Popular Music in Perspective*, ed. Marcus Breen (Kensington: Action Graphics, 1987) 75–76.

³⁷ Paul Hicks, *Making Country Cool: The Australian Mainstream Success of Kasey Chambers*, MComms thesis, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 2004; John Lomax III, *Red Desert Sky: The Amazing Adventures of the Chambers Family* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2001).

in most of her songs she projects a hard country style which highlights honky-tonk vocal stylings. Carriage and Hayward have identified the wide range of country vocal techniques that Chambers so fluently deploys, including her trademark breaks and catches, shifts in register and tone quality.³⁸ While she has an uncompromisingly working-class style in her public image and address to her public and fans, there is almost no reference to Australian accents within her vocalising. Chambers' reference points are all clearly American, and she is much likened to Lucinda Williams and other alt-country performers.

Many of Chambers' songs draw on the non-urban repertoire of images of country, but they avoid any association with the economic role of the agricultural construction of the land and country; absent is the ideology of 'countrymindedness,' where the true spirit of Australia is seen as residing in those who work the land productively.³⁹ Some of her songs are positioned in a generalised 'country,' but those that refer to a specific Australian landscape reclaim it for both her generation and her gender. Her 'Nullarbor Song,' set in the arid landscape, presents it as a site for the personal introspection and angst associated with rock music: 'swallowing the sky I feel no anger, I feel no shame, I feel no reason to cry.'⁴⁰ Chambers does not sing of the settled agricultural land, but of the non-arable outback, the Nullarbor. The young, urban audience that has been the foundation of her success is more likely to be attracted to this understanding of country than to the reclamation of white, rural, historical experience. Thus, although the Dead Ringer Band, the family band with which she started her performing career, had a number of songs within the model of the agriculturally-based bush ballad, the experience of the land does not appear in Kasey Chambers' lyrics.

Chambers has avoided the paths of Australian identifications through dialect use, thus exemplifying the pattern of gender asymmetry of covert prestige. However, Sara Storer, another young female singer, has achieved popularity and public prominence since 2000 with a dialect strategy that explicitly imitates that of John Williamson. Sara Storer was a singer and schoolteacher in the Northern Territory, and released her first recording, 'Chasing Buffalo,' in 2000. Storer's sung accent relies on extended diphthong glides during sung notes, as well as more usual highlighting of the alteration of 'ing' endings to [n] and the use of iconic lexical markers. Unlike Chambers, Storer deliberately foregrounds images of 'countrymindedness' in her subject matter: she adopts the persona of a grateful younger observer of the pioneer generations in many of her songs. Her accent style consolidated on her 2002 album *Beautiful Circle*, and is conspicuous on such tracks as 'Tell These Hands.' Storer's accent has become a frequently commented upon feature of her performance and is typically seen as a mark of honesty and authenticity in her singing.⁴¹ Storer's next CD,

³⁸ Leigh Carriage and Philip Hayward, 'Heartlands: Kasey Chambers, Australian Country Music and Americana,' *Outback and Urban: Australian Country Music*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Hayward (Gympie, Qld: AICM Press, 2003) 113–45.

³⁹ Don Aitken, 'Countrymindedness: The Spread of an Idea,' *Australian Cultural History* 4 (1985): 34–40.

⁴⁰ Kasey Chambers, 'Nullarbor Song,' *Barricades and Brickwalls* (Sydney, EMI, 2001).

⁴¹ Typical comments are 'Talk to people about Sara Storer and the same words keep being used: "real", "unaffected", and "authentic",' or, 'Sara Storer's voice is the sound of Australia—honest, untainted, and altogether charming.' See 'Sara Storer and Greg Storer—My Stories ... My Dreamings,' <http://www.nswevents.com/Event/20-01-2011/sara-storer-greg-storer-my-stories-my-dreamings>; 'Sara Storer,' <http://musicnt.ning.com/events/sara-storer>, accessed Dec. 2011.

Firefly, while it demonstrates a small extension of themes, continues and consolidates her singing accent package.⁴²

In interviews Storer maintains she is ‘proud of her Australian accent’:

It’s just been what I’ve done, and I’m really grateful about that I guess, because I love the Aussie accent. I love hearing it coming through the radio or through albums, I love the sound. I think it’s sweet and I’d sound pretty weird singing some of my songs with an American sounding accent, especially when I use a lot of Australian slang and towns. It feels right for me to sing in that way.⁴³

Storer has continued to produce several successful albums, and established herself as a performer in the last decade. Some other Australian female country performers have followed her path. For example, the Sunny Cowgirls, a young sister duo from Western Australia, have gained a popular following with songs delivered in a marked Australian accent. They were probably encouraged to develop their distinctive approach—involving light-hearted celebrations of rurally-set youthful relationships and entertainment—after securing a place at the Australian Academy of Country Music in 2005. They use a more projected, less speech-like singing style than Storer’s, and their vowels, while often clearly based on broad Australian forms, are often unstable, and occasionally alternate with conventional American-English sung vowels. Becky Cole, winner of many country music awards, favours conventional non-Australian sung diphthongs—[ei] rather than [æi] for the FACE vowel, ‘ask’ as [æsk] rather than [a:sk]—frequent use of the non-prevocalic /r/, and the use of an unrounded [ɑ:] for the NORTH vowel. These linguistic preferences are most prominent in songs that adopt a strong characterological figure of personal and sexual independence. Songs with a greater sentimental, nostalgic or serious resonance tend to use these and the USA-5 tokens less consistently, often linked to a speech-like projection.⁴⁴ This variation illustrates the way in which the prominence of spoken Australian forms or conventional sung modifications can be used to reinforce various performed character of the singer.

However, the trend towards a more distinct sung form of Australian English by Australian women country singers is still not universally accepted. Take, for example, this review of a record by the Adelaide female-centred alt-country group The Audreys:

It’s a relief to hear an album of Australian folk-country-bluegrass and not once hear an over-Strined vowel. Made famous by Tiddas, it is a habit that has spiralled out of control thanks to the likes of Missy Higgins and The Waifs. You won’t hear The Audreys do any of that here—maybe that’s because they’re from Adelaide.⁴⁵

⁴² Sara Storer, *Beautiful Circle* (Sydney: ABC Country, 2002) and *Firefly* (Sydney: ABC Country, 2005). See also Rebecca Coyle, ‘Country Folk: The “Voices” of John Williamson and Sara Storer,’ *Roots and Crossovers: Australian Country Music*, vol. 2, ed. Phillip Hayward and Geoff Walden (Gympie, Qld: AICM Press, 2004) 159–78.

⁴³ Richard Fidler, ‘Singer Songwriter Sara Storer,’ interview, ABC Local Radio 621, 4 Dec. 2007, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2007/12/04/2109331.htm>, accessed 22 Aug. 2011.

⁴⁴ Compare her usages in the songs ‘Blackwood Hill’ and ‘Lifeboat’ with ‘Sorry I Asked’ or ‘Girls out Here’ from the album *Becky Cole Live @ Lizottes* (Sydney: ABC Music, 2007). ‘Sorry I Asked’ provides a contrast of her sung accent with several spoken parodic broad Australian accents.

⁴⁵ Tom Jellet, review of The Audreys’ *Between Last Night and Us*, *Weekend Australian*, 25–26 Feb. 2006, 20. The Adelaide reference alludes to the regional distinctiveness of Adelaide Australian English; see Moore, *Speaking our Language*, 167–68.

The rise of Australian-accented female singers in the country scene is not an isolated phenomenon, although the internal dynamics of that scene and its nationalism have been important parts of the process. Parallel trends towards Australian-accented female voices are observable in other popular music genres in Australia; a cohort of Australian female alternative singer-songwriters has been adopting such voices in the 2000s. This more general popular singing movement is frequently traced to the singer Angie Harte in the band Frente, whose recordings gained a strong following and a number of hits in the early 1990s. The group was enthusiastically supported by the ABC youth station Triple J. In songs such as 'Labour of Love' (1992) and 'Accidentally Kelly Street' (1993), Harte uses Australian vowels and diphthongs in a new and striking way. In 'Labour of Love,' to give just one example, the word 'love' (pronounced [la:əv]) is highlighted in its place in the lyrical hook of the song. Her rendering of the title phrase invoked a tacit contrast to the emblematic way in which 'love' is pronounced in standard American-English singing. She amplifies the effect of her phonological choices through the unprojected speech-like character of her delivery with its falling intonation on many words at the ends of phrases ('the cars and guitars'), or interjections of non-melodic pitch jumps (her 'fall-fall-fall' phrase). In the years that followed, Harte's style was taken up by singers such as Missy Higgins, Sarah Blasko and many others.⁴⁶ One reviewer of Harte's recent comeback album points to 'the legion of local indie girls who sprouted in Frente's shoes,' and notes that 'her distinctive voice is almost iconic these days.'⁴⁷ At present, some form of Australian sung accent is used by the majority of alternative female singer-songwriters. These singers may, however, be aiming at different authenticities to those claimed by country singers. Beal, in her study of the Brit-pop group the Arctic Monkeys contrasted their uses of regional dialect with those of British folk performers, arguing that the latter were projecting a historicity and link with tradition, where the former aimed for an 'ontology' of 'keeping it real' to establish contrast to conventional pop music genre conventions.⁴⁸ The Australian singer songwriters mentioned here are all performing within an 'alternative' popular genre, and aiming for a similar direct communication with a community of listeners. Whatever the differences, the trends are discernable enough to elicit the description 'spiralling out of control.'

Simon Frith has noted that the idea of 'voice' in popular music studies is understood in at least four different ways: as a musical instrument, as a sign of the singer's body, as an expression of the person of the singer, and as the vehicle of character expressed in the narrative of the song.⁴⁹ These different usages extend beyond the purely linguistic, and yet the manipulation of phonological variation in accent and dialect choice is a primary contributor to the creation of meaning in all these fields of discourse. Amongst Australian country music performers, the last two categories of voice—as the person of the singer and as the character portrayed — are particularly important within mobilisations of claims to national authenticity and personal social integrity. The above commentary on a number of performers illustrates the performative and dynamic choices involved in creating these voices, both sonically and metaphorically.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Sarah Blasko, *As Day Follows Night* (Brisbane: Dew Process, 2009); Missy Higgins, *The Sound of White* (Sydney: Eleven, 2004).

⁴⁷ Michael Dwyer, review of *Grounded Bird*, *Age*, Entertainment Guide, 20 Sep. 2007, 14.

⁴⁸ Beal, "'You're not from New York City,'" 238.

⁴⁹ Simon Frith *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 187–88.

Singers such as John Williamson, Sara Storer and Kasey Chambers, as well as many others in Australian country music, do not merely naively and transparently adapt pre-existing models of register and dialect. As Simpson observes of popular singers generally, they select and adopt 'a cluster of variables [which serve to] ... create, rather than reflect a universe of discourse.'⁵⁰ Thus the choices made by successful singers invent public repertoires of meaning and association. Nonetheless, singers work within musical and linguistic conventions, and gender constraints, particularly in the use of covert prestige strategies, inflect the social meanings of their performance of song and character.

The new female Australian sung accents are an emergent phenomenon that needs analysis, starting with a comparison of singers and their styles, and linked to a probing of audience and other critical reactions. It is clear that the level of detailed linguistic analysis exemplified by Gibson's study of New Zealand singers and O'Hanlon's work on Australian hip hop is an essential first step to answering several questions. The first of these is the extent to which overtly Australian sung accents are becoming sufficiently common to no longer be read as a marked choice, and thus primarily identified against normative internationally identifiable styles. The extension of prominent Australian-English phonological choices to singer-songwriter fields would suggest that this is may be the case, but clearly much more empirical work is needed. The second, linked question is the extent to which such accents are seen as part of a 'stigmatised vernacular,' with this wilful use understood as invoking covert prestige, and the extent to which gender continues to influence this strategy. Numerous studies have shown sung accents to be genre-conventional and constructed. Emergent trends, as they become familiar, can index meanings for a genre as a whole, and within a genre can provide an expressive resource to be aesthetically manipulated. We can expect that the continued use of accent to encode meanings at the supralexic level will extend in richness. Current performers may be pioneers in presenting the familiar in new ways.

⁵⁰ Simpson, 'Language, Culture and Identity,' 359.