

Pool: Conservatism and country music

Posted: Tuesday, March 13, 2012 4:00 am

I listen to country music when I drive long distances across our country. I do not have any country stations preset on my radio.

The rhythms and rhymes of a country song are as obvious as the lights of a pickup truck on too strong.

When I listen to Pandora at home, my four most frequently played stations are based on the music of Georg Friedrich Handel, Bix Beiderbecke, Paul Simon, and Antonio Carlos Jobim. Still, I have learned to enjoy country music in moderation and on occasion.

On Andrew Sullivan's blog, a post on country music and conservatism contained an embedded video of a Collin Ray song, "One Boy, One Girl." There's a lot I don't know about country music, but I know that song.

Sullivan linked to another article, by Will Wilkerson, a former researcher at the Cato Institute of libertarian tendencies, writing about the congruence between country music, conservative ideology, and personality types.

Wilkerson cites research that links musical preference to personality type. Specifically, he refers to research that shows the correlation between openness and musical taste.

Jonathan Haidt is a psychologist who claims we differ from each other in five major traits; conscientiousness, agreeability, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion.

People who score high in openness on psychological tests are more likely to self-identify as liberals; conservatives are comparatively low on the openness scale. On the other hand, conservatives tend to be high in conscientiousness, where liberals score low.

Peter Rentfro and Samuel Gosling, at the University of Texas, have published scholarly papers identifying four musical preferences: Reflective and Complex, Intense and Rebellious, Upbeat and Conventional, and Energetic and Rhythmic.

People with high openness scores go for Reflective and Complex music, like jazz and classical. People with low openness scores go for Upbeat and Conventional music, such as country.

There is far more to this research than this column can address, but it does make sense to me. Rod Dreher, blogging with The American Conservative, puts a very personal spin on this. I have mentioned so many names because these folks are easy to find on the Internet.

People with low openness like things to be familiar, and in their personal lives they celebrate the simple, enduring, and profound moments of their lives.

Wilkinson says, “Country music is a bulwark against cultural change, a reminder that ‘what you see is what you get,’ a means of keeping the charge of enchantment in ‘the little things’ that make up the texture of the every day, and a way of literally broadcasting the emotional and cultural centrality of the conventional big-ticket experiences that make a life a life.”

As I drive across the country, listening to the music of people whose rural and small-town lifestyle is both familiar and distant to me, I find myself drawn to sentimental songs of love and loss, of hard work and family.

This past summer, I was in Idaho, heading for campground, and I heard Trace Adkins singing about taking his little girl fishing, and how he knew how important this time together was, but she thought she was “just fishin’.”

In 1996, in Colorado, I heard Collin Ray’s song “I Think About You,” and how he came to respect women by seeing them as “somebody’s little girl” like his eight year old daughter, “with big blue eyes and a heart of gold.”

My daughter’s eyes are brown, but she was the same age, and the great love of her Daddy’s life. In that moment, I understood and loved something about country music.

— Frank Thomas Pool is a poet and English teacher working in Austin. He grew up on Maple Street in South Longview and graduated from Longview High School. Email him at FrankT.Pool@gmail.com.