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Coed Duets Return Female Voices to Country Playlists



Earlier this summer, Dierks Bentley introduced his duet partner, Elle King, to a football stadium full of country fans who had traveled to Nashville for the C.M.A. Music Festival. George Jones and Tammy Wynette they were not: Mr. Bentley epitomized coltish, clean-cut country stardom, spending much of his set bounding around the stage in a T-shirt and jeans, while Ms. King, who had a Hot 100 hit last year with the retro rocker [“Ex’s & Oh’s,”](#) wore blue hair and had heavily inked arms. They performed the broody ballad [“Different for Girls,”](#) about how men and women deal with the pain of a breakup, side by side.

“You look at her, and you think, ‘rock ’n’ roll badass,’” Mr. Bentley said in a recent phone interview. “You wouldn’t expect her, maybe, to be singing this song.” More to the point, you wouldn’t expect Ms. King to be singing this song with Mr. Bentley. And yet their duet is a hit on country radio — still the major driver of mainstream country success — and it’s not the only head-turning matchup receiving airplay right now: On the most recent chart, a duet by Kenny Chesney and Pink rose to No. 12, and one pairing Brad Paisley and Demi Lovato had just slipped out of the Top 20.

Country music rarely goes a year without an extravagant coed exchange like Mr. Paisley and Carrie Underwood’s “Remind Me” grabbing attention. But true male-female duets (in which the singers equally split the lead vocals) haven’t populated the country charts in these numbers for a couple of decades — not since the format abounded in durable partnerships like those of Reba McEntire and Vince Gill, and Tim McGraw and Faith Hill. Lately, there have been weeks when such duets effectively doubled the number of foregrounded female voices in the Top 30 on Billboard’s country airplay chart.

The country music industry is several fatiguing years into a debate over how gender factors into making hits. In 2015, the observation that radio had relegated women to a meager number of playlist slots based on supposed conclusions drawn from market research was amplified by now-notorious remarks from a country radio consultant. (He explained that female singers should be regarded as [the “tomatoes,”](#) garnishing the format’s salad.) Meanwhile, a disparaging generalization settled over country’s leading men: that they leaned on the blithe, boozy bangers that seemed to rule the genre — the trend referred to by critics as bro country.

Staging a musical conversation with a female singer is one way that a male star might remind listeners that there are other sides to his persona. Mr. Bentley and Ms. King’s duet is one of two big coed moments on his latest album, “Black.” In the other, “I’ll Be the Moon,” the often-introspective singer swaps lines with Maren Morris, a sharp new country-pop contender.

Neither song was originally conceived of a duet by its writers. But after hearing [“I’ll Be the Moon,”](#) which explores the power imbalance in an illicit love affair, Mr. Bentley concluded it was missing an essential element: “Where’s the girl that he’s talking about? Let’s get her in there to sing that part, not just sing background vocals but take verses.”

Elsewhere, a woman’s voice helps carry the verses in [“Home Alone Tonight,”](#) where Luke Bryan engages in a breathless back and forth with Karen Fairchild, the not-so-secret weapon in the country-pop quartet Little Big Town. Mr. Paisley spars with the pop singer Ms. Lovato in [“Without a Fight,”](#) and she supplies the

track's heat, much like Pink's assertive vocal attack powers the chorus of Mr. Chesney's single "[Setting the World on Fire.](#)"

Such exchanges are also central to Chris Young's duet with "The Voice" winner Cassadee Pope, "[Think of You,](#)" as well as partnerships that haven't yet been pushed as radio singles: between the hard-rocking headliner Jason Aldean and Kelsea Ballerini (who inspires a chummy, almost Taylor Swiftian devotion among young country fans); between Keith Urban and Carrie Underwood; and between the high-profile couple Blake Shelton and Gwen Stefani.

All of these performances are structured as dialogues, as opposed to soliloquies supported by guest artists' harmonies. None of these women have slight instruments or passive personas. And several of them come from the pop world.

Mr. Young, a deep-voiced crooner with traditional inclinations, liked the thought of matching up with Ms. Pope, a rock-informed country belter who had spent time fronting a pop-punk band. "I think the song needed that kind of voice," Mr. Young said. "I think that enabled the play of the back and forth, because we're able to stand on our own and also sing together."

Mr. Bryan and Ms. Fairchild's song was his first duet with a woman; it was on last year's "Kill the Lights," an album meant to add layers to the frat-friendly, good-time, goofball image he developed over the first decade of his career. "This record is definitely the most mature record he's made," said Cindy Mabe, president of Universal Music Group Nashville, Mr. Bryan's label. "It is the 'finding my way to 40, and this is my family, and these are the things I want to say now' [record]. We went down this lane of the spring-break stuff, playing to these college kids. And frankly that sort of just played its cards out over time."

Changing a familiar pattern can definitely have advantages, too. Ms. Mabe noted that Mr. Bentley generated a talking point, not to mention television bookings, with his choice of duet partner. "It gets him a lot more interest: Why would you pick Elle King? Why would you pick that voice?" she said. "She's not part of this format."

Solo female artists have struggled to get attention on the country charts, but women continue to dominate pop, and those singers potentially raise the profiles of the male country singers who take them on as partners. Rod Phillips, a radio programming veteran who now leads the iHeartCountry conglomerate, calls this surge in pop collaborations "a plus" for country radio.

“Typically, the more variety you can have in sound,” he said, “the more you can get different people to listen to a format, versus a segment of the audience that likes a specific sound that’s more traditional country.”

Aside from Ms. Fairchild and Ms. Underwood, who has made her share of guest appearances, the duet partners who come from country — 20-somethings like Ms. Morris, Ms. Ballerini and Ms. Pope — tend to be younger singers on the rise whose presence can reaffirm the relevance of men who’ve been around for a while.

But the male singers aren’t the only ones being helped. Though they are just four years apart in age, Ms. Pope’s pairing with Mr. Young amounted to a co-sign from a more established artist, resulting in her first, and only, chart topper to date. (They’ve since toured and written together, and hinted at future studio collaborations.) “I didn’t have anything going on,” she said. “My music wasn’t really hitting. I didn’t have a single working at radio. And for him to not care and just give me that opportunity, it was really special.”

If anything, this resurgence in duets is a sign that country music is again in transition, and a reminder that some of its major players, Mr. Bentley for one, want to feel like they’re moving the industry, and their own artistry, forward.

“I know I’m really proud to have all these women on my record,” Mr. Bentley said. “I’d probably have taken it even further if I’d thought about it at the time.”