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Black, Female and Carving Out Their Own Path in Country Music

Five singer-songwriters discuss the challenges of becoming the change they want to see in a famously homogeneous segment of the music industry.



Clockwise from bottom left: Reyna Roberts, Miko Marks, Mickey Guyton, Rissi Palmer and Brittney Spencer. The five women spoke about their experiences in Nashville. Photographs by Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

The singer-songwriters Mickey Guyton, Miko Marks, Rissi Palmer, Reyna Roberts and Brittney Spencer may represent several generations and hail from different regions of the United States, but they share a common dream: making a living in country music like the women who inspired them, a list that includes Loretta Lynn and the Chicks. That they don't have a Black female role model who ascended to those levels of stardom deters them not one iota; they plan to be the change they want to see in Nashville.

Black artists were foundational to the roots of country music, but the industry has been famously inhospitable to Black performers. Outside of the success of [Charley Pride](#), a giant of the genre who [died in December](#) from Covid-19, and the harmonica ace DeFord Bailey, there were few other high-profile Black performers in Nashville until Darius Rucker of Hootie & the Blowfish pivoted to country music in 2008. More recently, Jimmie Allen and Kane Brown have made inroads with a radio-friendly sound.

In the past decade, women were increasingly pushed to the genre's margins as the heavily male bro-country aesthetic dominated. The disparity has played out on country radio, which is still largely responsible for breaking acts and maintaining their status. In the infamous ["Tomato-gate" uproar of 2015](#), a male radio consultant asserted in a salad analogy that women should be akin to tomatoes — sprinkled into the mix. [A 2019 study](#) examining data from Mediabase, a service that monitors airplay, found that between 2002 and 2018, male solo artists received 70 percent of spins at country radio.

Guyton, Marks, Palmer, Roberts and Spencer stand at the intersection of two marginalized communities in country music at a pivotal moment — as the genre, and the wider world, re-examines itself in light of the protests for racial justice in 2020. Just this month, Nashville got its first high-profile test, when the star [Morgan Wallen was captured on video using a racial slur](#). Guyton tweeted a challenge to her peers — "So what exactly are y'all going to do about it. Crickets won't work this time." — and as other artists reacted online, the industry rebuked Wallen, pulling his songs from radio and playlists.

All eyes will be on the Texas native Guyton, 37, on March 14 at the Grammy Awards, where she is nominated for best country solo performance for ["Black Like Me"](#) — a first for a Black female artist. But all of these musicians have earned a spotlight. Roberts, 23, had her first single, the raucous "Stompin' Grounds," adopted by ESPN for "Monday Night Football." The veteran indie artist Marks, 47, will release "Our Country," her first new album in over a decade, later this year. Spencer's cover of the Highwomen song "Crowded Table" led to a writing session with the group's Maren Morris and Amanda Shires. (Spencer and Roberts were also both recently named members of the 2021 class of CMT's "Next Women of Country.") And Palmer, 39, has drawn high marks for her Apple Music radio show "Color Me Country," which explores the genre's Black, Indigenous and Latino beginnings. (The title was inspired by the Black country pioneer Linda Martell.)

The five musicians gathered on an animated and emotional video call in December. There was roof raising, finger snapping and tear dabbing as they discussed something sacred to them — country music — and the challenges and outright racism they've faced trying to break into a notoriously homogeneous segment of the music industry.

But above all, they are determined to be true to themselves and support each other: "These white men at these record labels, they're not going to do it for us," Guyton said. "These white men at these radio stations, they're not going to do it for us. But Black women will do it for each other, and that is literally the only way." These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

What's your first country music memory?

PALMER My mom loved Patsy Cline. Saturday mornings she would play Patsy records. I remember very distinctly thinking, "I hope I sound like that one day."

ROBERTS When I was 3 years old, on Christmas Day, my mom had this fake guitar, and we were just rocking out to "Sin Wagon" [by the Chicks]. I was just jumping around, singing the words.

MARKS I remember when I was really small, listening to Loretta Lynn and seeing “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” It was just something about the storytelling. Johnny Paycheck was running rampant in our house. “Take This Job and Shove It” was like my mom’s anthem.

SPENCER The Chicks was my introduction to country music too. I was in church and my friend Kisha said, “You need to listen to them.” I was like, “What are you talking about?” So she put in an album and it sounded like church to me. It sent me down this rabbit hole. I just submerged myself in CMT.

GUYTON My grandma was probably my first real memories of country music. Whenever I would go to her house she always had Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers VHS tapes.

Several of you have cited LeAnn Rimes as an influence.

GUYTON My first LeAnn Rimes experience was going to a Texas Rangers baseball game at 8 years old. We were all the way up in the nosebleed section. She sang the national anthem. She was wearing a denim outfit with the American flag bedazzled on the back. You could have heard a pin drop in that stadium. We were just mesmerized by this little girl that sounded like a grown woman. And then “Blue” came out, and the rest is history.

PALMER She, to me, was the closest thing that I had at the time of someone who sounded Black and country, because she did the gospel thing, she did the runs, and has one of the most soulful voices to this day in the genre. She can sing anybody under a table.

GUYTON I tried to learn how to yodel because of her. [Laughs]

So you love country music, listen to your inspirations and make your decision to head to Nashville. What happens next?

PALMER There, I am told by two major labels that took a meeting with me based on the music, sight unseen, “You’re good, but we don’t know what to do with you.” This was 2000.

MARKS I heard, “You won’t sell” ... because I’m Black, without saying because I’m Black. But I knew what they meant. This was in 2003 maybe.

Mickey, you arrived a few years later. What did you hear?

GUYTON Before I met with [her current label] Capitol, I met with Warner. And they started testing me, playing country songs that they didn’t think I would know. And I was like, “Oh, that’s Joe Nichols.” And they were like, “Oh, well, you know country music.” I was like, “Yeah, I actually do.” Country music is a way of life. It’s not just about whether you know a song. I grew up in the country, on gravel roads. But because I was Black, I wasn’t enough. This was 2010.

Brittney and Reyna, you arrived more recently. Have your experiences been different?

ROBERTS First of all, you guys have laid the road for us to be able to walk on and Mickey has given me so much guidance. And the other thing is that my managers set me up with the right people, so I didn’t have to go through those things. When I came to Nashville, I already knew who I was, because I was writing and trying to record in California first. I would have people saying like, “You need to be in hip-hop. You need to be in R&B. You need to be in pop. You need to be in rock.” And I’m like, “No,

no, that's not me." I don't fit the country standard, not just being a Black woman, but I got red hair, I wear jumpsuits. I mean, if you look at me, people probably think I look quote-unquote L.A. And I was like, "I'm not changing that."

SPENCER As a fan of country music, I did the very classic go down to Broadway [honky-tonks]. The first night, someone tried to trip me and make me slip in a puddle of water. And then once I started getting into doing demo sessions, it was just like microaggressions. It's like that racism that you can't really prove in a court of law, but you know intuitively what's going on.

When did you each decide to let go of trying to fit in?

PALMER It actually was in the boardroom before anybody had ever heard me. I remember us sitting around — and this was Black and white people — arguing about whether or not my hair was going to be offensive to people. I remember wanting so badly for everybody to love me and be OK. So, I did this photo shoot and I wore these wigs. One was a straight shag, like soccer mom hair. And they were just like, "That's it." It looked crazy, and it wasn't me. I remember saying, "Can we just do one photo shoot with my hair?" And those ended up being my promo pics and my favorite pictures of me that I've ever taken. But I had to fight just to be me.

MARKS I didn't start fighting until much later. I had the kind of manager that was like, "Sometimes you've got to get in the box to get out the box." I had the cowgirl hat, the weave, the boots. I had the whole box. A little while after that, I shaved my head, because I forgot who Miko was. Something about that hat and that weave and them boots, it just had me so I couldn't breathe. And so I was like, "Well, I still love the music, but this is me right here. This is it."

Mickey, once you stopped trying to please people, you felt like your music became more authentic?

GUYTON Yes. I wrote a drinking song called "Rosé" about three years ago. And I was just like, "What girl doesn't love rosé? If there's a song that country radio will finally accept from me, it would be this one."

I played it for the label. Crickets. Some white radio promo guy said, "Yeah, but I don't know if this song is going to bring back Mickey," and derailed everything. It put me into the deepest, darkest, scariest depression that I've ever felt in my entire life, because I realized that no matter what I did, it was never going to be enough. Because surely if a white girl presented this song, they would have had a music video and a pink hotel with drinks and the whole thing.

At that point I was just so done trying to please these people. I heard of a woman at Capitol Records, and I was going to talk to her about this. We were at a restaurant around the corner from the record label, and the hostess said, "Would you like to sit in our rosé lounge today?" I was like, "As a matter of fact, I sure [expletive] would." We sat there, and I made up my mind. I'm going to write my truth. And not only that, I'm going to find every Black female country singer that there is, and open that door too, because the only way that this will ever work is if we find each other and we bring each other up.

I released "Black Like Me" myself. And I only did it because I saw unjust deaths happen, just like everyone on this call did. I put it out there for no other reason than to maybe make a couple of people feel hope. And it took on its own life.

And now you have a Grammy nomination.

GUYTON Right. It's our Grammy nomination, by the way.

Here's where it gets complicated: Hopefully, the day will come where we can't name all the Black country artists because there are so many. But you also don't want to lose that powerful element of identity that informs a song like "Black Like Me." How do you balance making sure being Black is part of your music but not the only story?

SPENCER Well, I'm the new kid on the block. I've released an EP, and I wanted four songs that I felt talked about the whole me. I just write about anything, sing about everything. And hopefully that puzzle makes sense to people. But for me, it's just been important to talk about the things that I want to talk about, and that does include being a Black woman. People will have to understand that no artist in general is just one thing.



"You guys have laid the road for us to be able to walk on and Mickey has given me so much guidance," Reyna Roberts said. Lelanie Foster for The New York Times

MARKS Now I'm making music that matters to me, and that is something I want to be proud of leaving here. And so, I haven't written a song about a drink. I haven't written a song about tractors, because that's not important to me right now. What's important is my people, my ancestors, racial and social injustice going on. I used to be scared to even talk about it and now I'm finding freedom in the music, and it'll resonate with who it resonates with.

Social media has been a key signal booster for several of you. How has it changed the game?

SPENCER The first big thing that happened to me on social media was Rissi Palmer opening my DM. I just said, "Hey, I would like to meet you." Because I didn't know any Black women in country music. So when Maren Morris and Amanda Shires reposted my video, I was prepared in a sense, because

by that time I'd already made friends online. When Maren Morris included several of us in her CMAs acceptance speech, I just started tagging other Black women in country music. Like, I'm going to post about it, but I'm going to tell you that I'm not the only one. Mickey ain't the only one, Rissi not the only one, Miko, Reyna, it's a whole bunch of us. We're a whole damn army.

Can that army take on country radio?

PALMER I'm going to be 100 percent real with you. It is a beautiful thing if you get accepted on country radio, period. Should an artist bank on them accepting you? No, absolutely not.

GUYTON And that includes white women, too.

PALMER If you're smart and resourceful, which the artists are now, you figure out other ways to circumvent the system. Because if you're relying on them to be your end all, be all, then it's going to be the end.

Miko, you came to town in the early '00s and eventually left in frustration. Do you feel like you've seen the needle move?

MARKS I have — and I get emotional around it, because I didn't think I would see any of this in my lifetime. The country music industry doesn't want to open up the gates. Because if country music really gave everyone an honest opportunity, they couldn't play the game anymore, because their players just wouldn't be up to par.

Rissi, on "Color Me Country" you make a point to discuss Black historical figures and accomplishments in country music. Why is it so important to you to communicate that history?

PALMER Because then you can't be told that you don't belong here. You can't keep me out of something that I helped build. And I don't want it to be looked at like this is a fad. Something that I got told a lot was, "Oh, you're just using this to get over to pop." Yes, I, a Black woman, am using country music to get over to pop music, because Beyoncé doesn't exist. I felt like it was really important, not just for white listeners, but for Black people too, and for Hispanic people, and for Indigenous people, to know, "We recognize you. We hear you. We see you. You exist. Your voice is important." That was what I wanted to do, because I was just like, "If I wait for somebody to do it from Nashville, then I'm going to be dead."

The Pointer Sisters, the only other Black women to be nominated in a country category at the Grammys, shouted Mickey out on Twitter. In a competitive industry, it isn't always common to see artists supporting and celebrating each other.

PALMER When I played the Opry for the very first time, I got to my dressing room, and there were flowers from Miko sitting in the dressing room waiting for me.

MARKS You didn't even know me, but I wanted you to know I saw you, and I was very happy for you.

GUYTON That's why we're here. That's why we went through this, so that we can protect you guys from the stuff that we went through. I can't emphasize enough how important this sisterhood is, that is building with this. I could not do this without every single woman on this call. And organizing is happening in country music. And it's not just for Black musicians. There's members of the

L.B.G.T.Q.I.A.+ community. There is real change. We're not just opening the doors for ourselves. We are literally busting it open and being like, "Get in here, too!"