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Carrie Underwood on the Lack of Successful Female Country Artists: 'You Would Think We'd Be Farther Along' (Exclusive)

By Phyllis Stark, Nashville | January 30, 2014 10:46 AM EST



In both 2012 and 2013, just three of the top 25 artists on Billboard's Top Country Songs chart were solo women. In a Billboard Country Update column last fall, we heard what country radio has to say about this, but what do the artists themselves think?



- Why So Few Female Stars In Country Radio? Theories Abound
- Country Music's Dearth of Females Extends Well Beyond the Artists
- Billboard Women In Music 2013: Full-List, Features, Video, Desert Island Discs, Gallery, More!

Carrie Underwood was one of the artists who made that list of three both years (along with Miranda Lambert and Taylor Swift), and she's among the ranks of those hoping things will improve for females this year.

"You would think that we would be farther along in the thinking about women in country music," Underwood says. "I like to think things are getting better, but then I see stats like [the one cited above] and realize that women really do seem to get the short end."

Theories abound about why women get short-changed in country music, but Underwood notes, "There is certainly not a shortage of talented ladies out there that want so badly to get their fair shot in this business. But there seems to be only room for only a few." On the flip side, she says, "there seem to be so many male singers out there who can be viewed as similar, and there seems to be plenty of room for all of them.

"We see new male artists have their first single reach No. 1 on the charts, but it generally takes a female a lot longer to build momentum," Underwood continues. "I know that I am an exception to this, but I [also] know that if I hadn't made my place in country music via 'American Idol,' I probably could have tried to make it for the rest of my life and never made any progress."

One working theory is that song content has been a potential factor in the male/female disparity. Women—the theory goes—tend to write and/or choose to record songs with more substance and deeper themes than the "Parking Lot Party"-type songs that are working so well for the male artists right now.

Underwood agrees that that theory has some merit. "I don't think women can get away with the partying, beer-drinking, hung-over, truck-driving kind of music that a lot of the guys have gotten away with lately," she says.

"It does kind of seem like it's a big party right now," Kellie Pickler agrees. She notes that, "All the women that are played [on the radio] are outselling the men, and people are listening to what they have to say, so I don't know why more women aren't played."

"I'm really, really sick of trucks and bonfires," says Suzy Bogguss, who had her hits in the early '90s at a time female artists were flourishing on the radio—including Mary

Chapin Carpenter, Pam Tillis, Kathy Mattea, Patty Loveless and Lorrie Morgan—who collectively turned the derogatory term “chick singer” into something Bogguss says “meant you had some balls.”

“When that radio door opened, it let so many of us through,” she recalls of that time. “I felt at the time that [female listeners] really wanted us to speak about things they related to, and a lot of us did. One of the things we’ve gotta hope for is that the tide will turn and female fans will continue to speak up and say, ‘We need some real material here.’”

In the meantime, Underwood says, expectations remain different for male and female artists. “It seems women are expected to be so much more than men, which means we have to work that much harder,” she says. “We’re the ones under the microscope. We’re expected to sound perfect. We’re expected to look perfect all the time. We’re expected to be style-setters, whereas the boys roll onto the stage in their jeans, T-shirts and baseball caps. I don’t know what we all can do to change this. But I do hope it does change. I would love to see more women making their mark in the music that I love so much . . . There are so many more out there just waiting for their shot. I hope they get it!”

In next week’s column, female music industry executives discuss the dearth of women in the artist (and industry) ranks.

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