Culture

Beyoncé accepts the Innovator Award at the iHeartRadio Music Awards April 1 at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. (AP/Chris Pizzello)

by Nicole Symmonds

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In an Instagram post published 10 days before "Act II: Cowboy Carter" dropped, Beyoncé explained the inspiration for her new album. Inspired by her first experience with the country music industry after the release of "Daddy Lessons" (from "Lemonade"), she took the lemons of that negative, exclusionary experience and made the lemonade that became "Cowboy Carter."

In one signature line toward the end of that post, she exclaimed, "This ain't a country album. This is a 'Beyoncé' album."

That sentence reverberated worldwide, and hid a key to the heart of "Cowboy Carter." If "Cowboy Carter" is a "Beyoncé" album, then it is in the vein of her fifth studio album, "Beyoncé," which was the beginning of a season of becoming vulnerable and emotionally transparent in her music, operating at the highest level of artistic creativity and weaving together a tapestry for Black human life.

"Cowboy Carter" is not just a second act, but the fourth act in an oeuvre that keeps diving deeper into the interiority of one of the world's most celebrated yet private artists. "Cowboy Carter" continues Beyoncé's intimate, balladeering work with songs such as "16 CARRIAGES," "DAUGHTER" and "PROTECTOR," while also showing us a good time with songs such as the lead single "TEXAS HOLD 'EM," "SWEET*HONEY*BUCKIN' " and "RIIVERDANCE."

Beyoncé cradles us somewhere between tugging at our heartstrings and making us twerk — and she does all this by taking listeners on a genre-transgressing ride that defies and redefines country music.

"AMERIICAN REQUIEM" opens the album, in my opinion the most important song on the album and a clear sign that this deserves an Album of the Year Grammy nomination — and win. It sets the tone for the 27-track album where Beyoncé lays many things to rest, including our ideas about genres and when and where Black people can do country music.

As the song begins, Beyoncé sings in layered harmonies with herself and an organ, "Nothing really ends / For things to stay the same, they have to change again."

The sound of the organ grows as she crescendos to belt the chilling lyrics, "American requiem / The big ideas (Yeah) / Are buried here (Yeah) / Amen." And this is when I sensed that Beyoncé came to put the nail in the coffin of country — or perhaps even in the country itself.

The song doubles as a narration of her negative experience at the 2016 Country Music Awards when she says, "It's a lot of talkin' goin' on / While I sing my song," and serves as a dirge for the nation: "Goodbye to what has been / Pretty house that we never settled in / A funeral for fair-weather friends / I am the one to cleanse me of my Father's sins / American requiem / Them big ideas are buried here / Amen."

Beyoncé has always been country. We are talking about an artist who proudly reps Houston, Texas, and her "mama from Alabama / daddy Louisiana" roots; a woman who speaks with a Southern drawl and has long been serving us "everything is bigger in Texas" including bodies and Bugattis.

On "Cowboy Carter," Beyoncé moves seamlessly between songs heavy with the twang of banjos played by black women (Rhiannon Giddens) and pedal steel guitars to more of her usual pop/R&B/rap fusion with thick bass lines and bawdy bars. The album transcends the boundaries of genre, country music and otherwise, and she makes this point clearly through a cameo from Linda Martell, the first commercially successful Black woman country artist.

Martell appears almost halfway through the album on a track called "SPAGHETTII," where she says, "Genres are a funny little concept, aren't they? / Yes they are / In theory, they have a simple definition that's easy to understand / But in practice, well, some may feel confined."

Martell's sage wisdom communicates that genre requires not holding on tightly to what has defined it in the first place.

Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton also echo the necessity of the country genre's development and pass the baton to Beyoncé.

In "SMOKE HOUR II," Nelson says, "Sometimes you don't know what you like until someone you trust turns you on to some real good shit." Here, listeners can discern that the trust in the genre is facilitated by knowing where it has been and where it's going. Nelson's words are the hat tip inviting the doubtful who need certain

bonafides to step over the threshold.

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Parton completes the trinity of the old country guard, passing the baton. She first appears on a track titled "DOLLY P" to introduce Beyoncé's cover of Parton's hit song "Jolene," and then again as the featured artist on the erotically enflamed "TYRANT."

With "DOLLY P" as a short and sweet introduction doubling as the music legend's blessing, Beyoncé throws the classic country tune into 2024 with aplomb. This is not your mama's "Jolene." Beyoncé is not pleading for "JOLENE" not to take her man; she is issuing a demand sandwiched between barbs such as "You're a bird. Go on and sing your song, Jolene," and "Your peace depends on how you move, Jolene."

It is a Black woman demonstrating what it looks like to stand by her man against all odds, mainly the odds already stacked against a population of women least likely to get and stay married. In such a case, Beyoncé must stand her ground.

As "Cowboy Carter" makes stops in country music history via the scrolling radio stations on SMOKE HOUR I and II, Beyoncé also features young country music artists who have made their way in an industry that still frowns upon anything other than old ideas of Americana. In her cover of the Beatles' "BLACKBIIRD," Beyoncé sings with four young Black women country artists, Tanner Adell, Brittney Spencer, Tiera Kennedy and Reyna Roberts, fashioning wings with which they will fly. The album also features a few Black male country artists, such as Shaboozey and Willie Jones.

In platforming these artists, Beyoncé emphasizes that country music should be about bringing everyone in. That is a statement not just about artistry, but about inclusion. It is a gesture to the point that haunts the album, which is that country music's racial myopia has ensured that its big ideas are buried. Therefore, Beyoncé rides in on her white horse (literally, check the album's cover art) to break through the white horizon of country music.

"Cowboy Carter" starts and finishes with a requiem, a Mass for the repose of the soul of the dead. Who or what is dead here? I reckon that Beyoncé is saying a Mass for a genre and a nation that is in danger of dying if it does not push past its constructed limitation of what and who constitutes country — and who gets to be in this country 'tis of thee.

To this end, "Cowboy Carter" puts a nail in the coffin of what country was to make room for what it ought to be: a genre and a spatial reality that inclusively weaves the songs of the many different people who make up the tapestry of these here United States.

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