




CROSSING BORDERS

From top 40 stations to reality TV, country music is everywhere, and its fans are, too—spanning all ages, socioeconomic levels and areas of the U.S., as well as points farther afield. The music genre presents a unique mass-marketing opportunity and more leading brands are signing on.

BY CHRISTINE BIRKNER | SENIOR STAFF WRITER

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In November 2013, Foo Fighters front man Dave Grohl brought down the house at the Country Music Association Awards while sharing the stage with the Zac Brown Band, one of country music's top-selling acts. It was an unlikely pairing and the resulting sound definitely wasn't your grandpa's country music, but the performance was emblematic of a new era for the country music genre—and for its fan base.

Country music now attracts fans from well north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and from customer segments that span the cultural and socioeconomic spectrums, making the country music audience an attractive demographic for mainstream marketers.

"The stereotypes about the country music listener are that they're rural, they're downscale and they're not very tech-savvy, but our research shows that that's all bunk," says Chris Ackerman, vice president of Morrisville, N.C.-based Coleman Insights, a media research firm that focuses on the radio and music industries. "This audience is largely suburban, a mix of white- and blue-collar, and a lot more affluent than even the country industry itself thought. They're a much more attractive target for marketers than might have been perceived."

A WHOLE NEW COUNTRY

Country music is having a pop-culture moment. Country artists Blake Shelton and Keith Urban act as ambassadors for the genre every week on NBC's *The Voice* and Fox's *American Idol*, respectively, while country-themed shows such as ABC's drama *Nashville* and reality shows like A&E's *Crazy Hearts Nashville* and TNT's *Private Lives of Nashville Wives* air in primetime. In December 2013, *Rolling Stone* announced plans to launch country-centric offerings—a new website and a standalone country-themed print issue—and to open an editorial office in Nashville. "There's a huge opportunity for us to expand the *Rolling Stone* consumer base by extending into country music," Chris McLoughlin, *Rolling Stone's* publisher, told *Ad Age*.





Of the more than 102 million country music consumers in the United States, 19.6 million live in the West and 14.5 million in the Northeast, according to New York-based research firm GfK MRI. In January 2013, New York got a country radio station, NASH-FM, its first in 17 years, according to *The New York Times*.

Country music—which has broadened to include sounds more reminiscent of pop, and collaborations with artists from Grohl to rappers LL Cool J and Nelly—was the top radio format in the U.S. in 2013, with 14.8% of total listening share, according to Nielsen. It was the top-ranked format for audiences spanning in age from 18 to 54, and was the No. 2 format for 12- to 17-year-olds and consumers age 55 and older.

“Country’s the No. 1 format in America nationwide and it just had its best year ever, hitting an all-time national high for listening share,” a Nielsen spokesman says. “Country music has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. It’s much more mainstream.”

The audience for the country genre now parallels the U.S. consumer base, in general, spanning the nation as well as cultural and socioeconomic brackets.

“If you look at the distribution of country music fans, it’s almost evenly distributed across the country. People used to have the impression that it was Southern-based, but now you have just as big a distribution in the Northeast and the West as you do in the South,” says Tom Worcester, head of music brand partnerships at Los Angeles-based talent agency Creative Artists Agency (CAA), who has negotiated sponsorship deals with country

artists including Tim McGraw, Hunter Hayes and the Zac Brown Band.

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More teens and twentysomethings, African-Americans and Hispanics, and high-income suburbanites are listening to country now than ever before. From 2000 to 2012, the number of 18- to 24-year-old country listeners grew 30% and the number of African-American country listeners tripled, and in 2012, 25% of Hispanics listened to country music, according to GfK MRI.

In 2013, 24.2% of country music consumers had annual household incomes of \$50,000 to \$75,000, and 27.1% had incomes of \$75,000 or more, according to Nielsen. In comparison, for pop contemporary radio consumers, 22.7% had incomes of \$50,000 to \$75,000 and 35.6% had incomes of \$75,000 or more, according to Nielsen.

Last year, country music fans spent \$88 billion on travel, \$75 billion on home repair, \$18 billion on dining out, and \$12 billion on health and beauty products, according to GfK MRI.



Country artist Blake Shelton acts as an ambassador for the genre each week on NBC's *The Voice*.

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

The Nashville, Tenn.-based Country Music Association (CMA), a trade association dedicated to promoting country music, is working with a more diverse group of sponsors than in the past as brands leverage country's nationwide appeal, says Sarah Trahern, the CMA's CEO. "There are so many media touch points for people to come in to country music today and that gives us a chance to put those sponsors in front of that growing fan base. A variety of brands beyond the traditional country music outlets see value in our consumers."

The CMA hosts annual televised events including the CMA Awards, CMA Music Festival and CMA

Country Christmas, and approximately 50 brands sponsor the CMA's events each year, either through on-site or TV advertising. The CMA's year-round brand partners—American Airlines, Anheuser-Busch, Pepsi, Patrón and Chevrolet—all run ads during all three televised events. Each year-round partnership garners nearly 90 million media impressions across radio, print, PR, social media and on-site advertising, according to the CMA. The 2013 CMA Awards attracted 16.7 million viewers, up 23% from 2012, and 8 million people saw 1.7 million tweets about the show, according to Nielsen.

Las Vegas-based Patrón Spirits Co., maker of premium tequilas, sponsored the CMA Awards'

I WANT MY CMT

LIKE THE COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION, Nashville, Tenn.-based Country Music Television Inc. (CMT) also is attracting more brand partners over the past decade because of country music's increasingly diverse fan base, says Anthony Barton, senior vice president of integrated marketing at CMT. "The categories we're working with are changing based on the fact that the median age of country fans is coming down. We're not the pickup truck network right now, and I think 10 years ago we would've been. Pepsi has a relationship with us and has also signed a relationship with [country star] Hunter Hayes. They're not putting all of their eggs in the Beyoncé basket. Health and beauty endorsements also have become huge for our female stars. Cover Girl, Almay, these are brands that weren't traditionally a part of the country buy. If someone's making a commitment to these artists, we know that they've already become believers in what the country fan base brings to the table."

CMT airs a Hot 20 Countdown show with new artist videos each week, broadcasts the CMT Music Awards show each year, and is a partner for the CMA Music Festival and a TV sponsor for events such as Kicker Country Stampede, a four-day music festival. Since 2001, it has aired *CMT Crossroads*, a show where country artists perform with artists from other genres. Pairings have included One Republic with Dierks Bentley, Fall Out Boy with The Band Perry and Stevie Nicks with Lady Antebellum.

"Pop stars want a piece of the country audience," says Amanda Phillips, vice president of consumer marketing at CMT. "We're in a unique place now because it probably used to be the other way around."

And breaking down those stereotypes from country's boots-and-spurs days is getting easier, Phillips says. "If you say 'country Western' music these days, you'll get run out of town. It's America's music. It's not just country music, and that's what we're reinforcing. There are very few geographical barriers anymore."

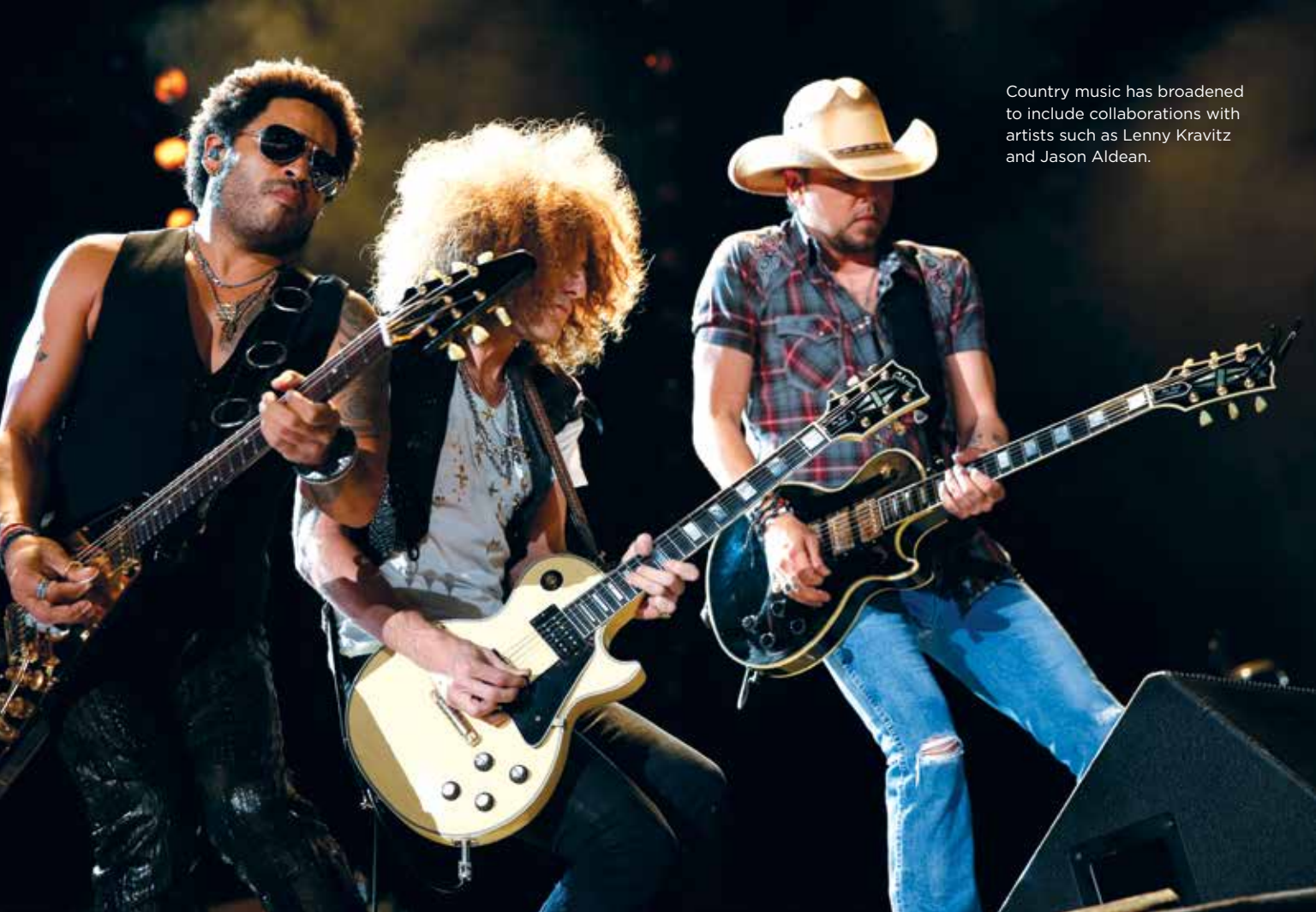
official after-party and on-site fundraising efforts for Keep the Music Playing, the CMA's music education charity, in 2011, 2012 and 2013 because country music's wide-reaching fan base fits well with Patrón's target audience, says Greg Cohen, vice president of corporate communications at Patrón. "We appeal to a young 20s demographic, but we also appeal to an older demographic. We keep our marketing pretty broad, and we know that older people and younger people listen to country, and people in cities and rural areas listen to country, so it's been a great partnership with the CMA."

Another CMA brand partner, Mebane, N.C.-based Kidde Fire Safety, leverages its CMA Awards sponsorship in an effort to reach moms across the United States with its smoke alarm promotions featuring country artist and former first responder Craig Morgan. "We're looking to get to moms, in particular, and the appeal of country music now is no longer just a regional phenomenon. It's a national phenomenon and its appeal continues to grow," says Kidde President Jim Ward.

On the event and experiential end, the CMA's audience continues to increase. The CMA Music Festival, held every June in Nashville and featuring artist performances and meet-and-greets, attracted 80,000 fans in 2013, a 13% increase over 2012, according to the CMA.

Country's international fan base is growing, too, so in March 2014, the CMA hosted a "songwriters series" featuring Martina McBride in London, as well as "Country to Country" festivals featuring Brad Paisley, the Zac Brown Band, the Dixie Chicks and Rascal Flatts in London and Dublin, and a songwriters show for BBC Radio in London, for which Paisley performed.

The CMA also held International Country Music Marketing Summits in Paris in 2013 and in London in 2014 to attract more global brand partners. "There's been a growing interest in the international footprint for a while," Trahern says. "There are country-related TV stations in Canada and Australia, and CMA has ongoing efforts to distribute our show on an international basis in Canada, Australia and Europe."



Country music has broadened to include collaborations with artists such as Lenny Kravitz and Jason Aldean.

TAKING A STAR TURN

Given country's mass appeal, brands including Coors Light, Cover Girl, Diet Coke, Lipton Tea and Ram Trucks are signing country stars to endorsement deals, and research shows that these deals could be valuable. According to the 2013 Celebrity DBI, co-owned by Stamford, Conn.-based marketing research firm Repucom and Dallas-based marketing agency The Marketing Arm, which ranks celebrities based on consumer awareness, likability and trustworthiness, Blake Shelton now is the most effective celebrity endorser. Other country stars rank highly on the list, including Carrie Underwood at No. 2, Reba McEntire at No. 5 and Faith Hill at No. 6.

"Big-name country stars are of the same status as pop music stars right now. Their awareness levels, over the past five years, have stayed steady or improved, and that speaks to the growing fan

base and the increase in the people who know and like them," says Kathy Gardner, global head of the DBI at Repucom. "They're relatable, and that's key. [Country stars] scored well in the most important factors that contribute to consumers making a purchase: trustworthiness, likability and 'breakthrough,' meaning that when you see them on TV, you pay attention to what they're saying."

Country stars also have relatively squeaky-clean images compared with their pop and R&B counterparts, another valuable marketing attribute, Gardner says. "Carrie Underwood has been around for a while and we haven't seen any Justin Bieber-style nosedives from her. Americans, in general, like the clean-cut person who's not getting into trouble."

Andre Gaccetta, CEO of Nashville, Tenn.-based G7 Entertainment Marketing, which worked on campaigns with Coca-Cola and Keds for Taylor Swift's "Red" tour in 2013, agrees. "With country

Darius Rucker, formerly of Hootie and the Blowfish and now a country solo artist, is a spokesman for Transitions Lenses.



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Damon Whiteside, Country Music Association

music, you can have your family in the car and turn on a country station or pop in a Taylor Swift CD, and not have to think twice. The music, generally, is safe. Most brands tend to act conservatively. They don't want to get themselves into a situation where possible morality issues might come into play.”

According to Damon Whiteside, the CMA's senior vice president of marketing and partnerships: “Brands are now more proactive about reaching out to country artists, whereas before, we had to do more of an educational process with them. Years ago, artists might have taken opportunities with brands just for the exposure. Now they can be a little bit more choosy about what brands fit their image.”

Transitions Optical Inc., the Pinellas Park, Fla.-based maker of Transitions Lenses, employs Darius Rucker, formerly of Hootie and the Blowfish fame and now a solo artist, as a spokesman. “For Darius, it's about having a partner, not just doing a product endorsement,” says Francesca Puglisi, associate marketing manager of consumer communications at Transitions. “And the fans are so avid, they're so excited, and they're so connected to the music. If Darius loves a brand, they want to know about it.”

For Rucker's part, Transitions was a natural fit for him because he was already a loyal customer. “The decision to work with Transitions was easy because ... I was already wearing them when they came to me. [I'm] also [working with them] because of all of the great work they do. I like to work with companies that give back,” Rucker says. Rucker appears in Transitions ads and participates in the

brand's charitable efforts with the CMA's Keep the Music Playing. He made appearances at a Nashville performing arts high school promoting Transitions' free vision screenings there during the 2013 CMA Awards week and at Transitions' vision screening booth at the CMA Music Festival.

COUNTRY STRONG

Country music has cemented a place in American pop culture and continues to expand its reach internationally, and more growth is likely, Gaccetta says. The genre's popularity could result in more prominent roles for country artists in both media and marketing, he says. “*The Voice* is not choosing Blake Shelton because he's an interesting, dynamic guy. *The Voice* is choosing Blake Shelton because of the power of the country demographic.”

And because country fans' annual household incomes now skew toward the higher end—averaging \$75,000 in 2013 versus \$54,000 in 2003—the CMA's appeal is growing for brands targeting higher-earning consumers, Whiteside says. “It opens up the playing field pretty dramatically for us to be able to approach higher-end brands. We can go after more luxury brands and tech brands, whereas in the past, those brands weren't thought of in association with the country consumer.”

The appeal of the country music listening audience as a marketing demographic is its sheer size, depth and geographic reach. It's safe to say that the genre today isn't just your grandpa's country music. It's your mother's and brother's and niece's country music, too. **m**