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Felice Bryant and Country Music Songwriting in the 1950s

Paula Bishop

If you were a country music artist working in Nashville in the 1950s, you might have found yourself at the home of Nashville songwriters, Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, enjoying one of Felice’s home-cooked meals. Boudleaux would present songs that he and Felice had written while Felice offered suggestions and corrections from the kitchen. On the surface this domestic scene suggests conventional gender roles in which the husband handles business while the wife entertains the guests, but in fact, the Bryants had learned to capitalize on Felice’s culinary skills and outgoing personality in order to build their professional songwriting career. As she once quipped, if they fed the artists a “belly full of spaghetti and ears full of songs,” they were more likely to choose a song written by the Bryants.

Some of their biggest successes came when Don and Phil Everly scored hits on the country, R&B, and mainstream charts with the Bryants’ songs “Bye Bye Love,” “Wake Up, Little Susie,” and others. The Bryants’ approach—entertaining artists at home—helped them become two of the most sought-after songwriters during a critical period in the development of country music. Furthermore, by using her domestic sphere, Felice was able to defy the gendered constraints of the country music industry of the 1950s and build a successful career, becoming what Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann called the “woman who ignited the explosion of women writers on music Row.”

Felice Bryant (1925–2003) was born Matilda Genevieve Scaduto in Milwaukee, the home of numerous European immigrants. Her father had arrived from Palermo, Sicily, around 1912, and her mother was a second-generation Sicilian American. Felice loved to sing, and as a young girl, turned to writing songs, as well as poems and stories. She found inspiration in The Best Loved Poems of the American People, as well as the Italian folksongs of her family and the hymns and sacred songs of the Catholic Church. She met Boudleaux Bennett. Some of their biggest successes came when Don and Phil Everly scored hits on the country, R&B, and mainstream charts with the Bryants’ songs “Bye Bye Love,” “Wake Up, Little Susie,” and others. The Bryants’ approach—entertaining artists at home—helped them become two of the most sought-after songwriters during a critical period in the development of country music. Furthermore, by using her domestic sphere, Felice was able to defy the gendered constraints of

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Felice and Boudleaux Bryant (Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum)

Their songs were recorded by country artists such as Little Jimmy Dickens, Cowboy Copas, Red Foley, Hank Snow, Carl Smith, and Eddy Arnold, as well as mainstream pop artists like Tony Bennett. Some of their biggest successes came when Don and Phil Everly scored hits on the country, R&B, and mainstream charts with the Bryants’ songs “Bye Bye Love,” “Wake Up, Little Susie,” and others. The Bryants’ approach—entertaining artists at home—helped them become two of the most sought-after songwriters during a critical period in the development of country music. Furthermore, by using her domestic sphere, Felice was able to defy the gendered constraints of

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(1920-1987) on Valentine’s Day, 1945, when his jazz band was playing at the Schroeder Hotel where Felice worked as an elevator operator. When she first spotted him, she immediately felt attracted to him and conspired to get his attention. She offered to buy him a (free) drink at the water fountain but accidentally splashed water on him instead. He was charmed by her, and a few days later they embarked on their life together. Boudleaux gave her the nickname of “Felice,” which she used for the remainder of her life.

In the early years of their marriage, Felice and Boudleaux made Boudleaux’s hometown of Moultrie, Georgia, their home base. From there they traveled together to musical gigs, but more often than not, Felice stayed home while Boudleaux went out on the road to perform. Left alone for long stretches, she grew bored and turned to writing songs. As she explained, “My God, it took half an hour to clean this damned apartment. There is nowhere to go. I mean what could you do?” Boudleaux, too, was writing songs while out on the road.

Eventually, they pooled their work and began to write together. Once they had written over eighty songs, they looked for a publisher but were not successful at first. In 1949, they met Fred Rose of Acuff-Rose Publishing, one of the first Nashville-based, country music-focused publishers. Rose placed one of their songs, “Country Boy,” with Little Jimmy Dickens, who scored a number seven hit with it. The success of that song inspired them to pursue songwriting as a full-time profession, and so they moved their family, which now included two young sons, to Nashville in 1950. At that point, most country music songwriters supplemented their income by performing or working at other jobs. Some were recording artists who wrote for themselves. But very few people made songwriting their full-time profession. Furthermore, in 1950 Nashville was not yet the center of the country music industry. “Everybody thought we were crazy,” Felice later noted, “but we saw the far vision.”

Felice and Boudleaux knew that to support themselves solely as songwriters they needed to write a fair number of hit songs. That meant getting as many songs as possible recorded with the top and up-and-coming country music artists, which in turn meant they would need a substantial catalog from which artists could choose. They quickly established a writing routine that allowed them to balance their career with their home life. In the early years, they would write at night after putting their sons, Dane and Del, to bed. In the morning, they would send the boys to school then sleep until they returned. While working together at home, Felice recalled that they could “feed ideas back and forth while I did the housework.” Boudleaux wrote down their ideas while Felice moved about their home completing the household chores, thus finding a way to balance the demands of their professional life with their family and home life.

Outside of performing as lead or backup singers (not playing instruments), the only other roles available to women in country music were typically secretaries. Felice and just a small handful of other women … worked as songwriters, a profession generally reserved for men.

[Photo: Donn Reynolds, George Morgan, Wesley Rose, Boudleaux Bryant, and Eddy Arnold, 1957 (Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons)]
Songwriters in Nashville in the 1950s worked somewhat like the Tin Pan Alley writers of New York City in that publishers hired song pluggers to present songs to recording artists. This was most often done in the studio of the record label as artists came and went for recording sessions. Some writers created demo tapes that could be sent to artists or label executives. While the Bryants did go to the studios and make tapes, they had the most success by charting a different course, one that took advantage of Felice’s domestic skills and outgoing personality.

Soon after they arrived in Nashville, they started visiting with artists backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, the metaphorical home of country music. While Boudleaux jammed with musicians backstage and showed them songs they had written, Felice would tap into the network of female artists and wives of male artists to find someone to watch their sons while she went into the house to act as cheerleader for their songs. Their son Del recalled, “Mom was always running around and going out to the stage area to get in to the audience to scream and yell and hopefully encourage an encore from the audience because if you got an encore your song was sung again. Or you had another verse that Mom and Dad had written and [it was] sung again. It was better exposure for your song. And if you had three or four or five or six encores on a song, it might help launch it into that next level of whatever that it took to become a hit.” Not only were they able to pitch songs and help current ones gain further success, Felice and Boudleaux could tap into their knowledge of the artists gained through their backstage relationships and write songs specifically for an artist, increasing their chance of placing a song.

Another strategy that they used, and one that proved to be quite successful for them, was to invite artists to their home. Felice would fix a meal inspired by her Italian upbringing—something like spaghetti or chicken cacciatore, exotic foods in Nashville in the 1950s—while Boudleaux suggested songs from their collection, often singing the tune while accompanying himself on the guitar. Felice would offer comments and suggestions from the kitchen, maintaining an active role in the selling and marketing of their songs. Fred Foster, founder of Monument Records described the scene: “When they were showing songs, it was like a party. She was always bringing something to eat or drink, and he’s singing or looking through the book [the ledgers in which they wrote their songs]. And he comes on a song, ‘Oh, this might be good.’ And she’d say, ‘No, Boudleaux, how about so-and-so?’ because that would trigger something in her mind, you know.” Chet Atkins, in describing a similar scene, recalled that Boudleaux usually went along with Felice’s suggestions. She once humorously noted that they fed the artists “until they couldn’t move and Boudleaux would have a captive audience. They had to listen, and to get out, they had to take something. We’d trap ‘em!”

Entertaining at home this way allowed Felice to work around the entrenched conservative male-dominated processes that governed the country music industry. Felice explained, “[T]hat was one of the reasons I stayed home a lot because it aggravated the good old boys [to have her in the studio]. And you sort of tried pretty much to stay out of their way because you were an uppity woman, whatever the hell that was. But what I did at home was my business. I’m glad that Boudleaux enjoyed what we did at home and it became a business. It started out a hobby, but it became our livelihood. But I still had to stay out of the way of the boys.” The men did not want her in their space, but she could get them into hers and use her skills and tools to create a working business relationship. By inviting them into her home, Felice controlled the situation and maintained agency over her career, while working within the
gendered constraints of the country music industry of the 1950s.

Broadly speaking, only a few women found success in country music during this time. The industry and its audience fully embraced the conservative post-World War II middle-class notion of the “ideal woman.” Women worked in the home, rearing the children, taking care of the household chores such as provisioning, cooking, and cleaning, and providing for the needs of the husband. He, in turn, was expected to work outside the home and provide the income and stability necessary to achieve and maintain the idealized middle-class lifestyle. Fan magazines such as Country Song Roundup regularly praised female performers or the wives of male performers for maintaining an efficient and orderly home and caring for the children. Women performers were expected to dress and behave conservatively, which included not wearing revealing clothes, drinking in public, or traveling alone with men that were not their husbands. Outside of performing as lead or backup singers (not playing instruments), the only other roles available to women in country music were typically secretaries. Felice and just a small handful of other women, including Cindy Walker, Jenny Lou Carson, and Marijohn Wilkins, worked as songwriters, a profession generally reserved for men.

While developing her career as a songwriter, Felice simultaneously accepted and relished her role as a wife and mother. This was before Betty Friedan suggested in The Feminine Mystique (1963) that women were, in actuality, being stifled by their roles as housewives and mothers. Scholars such as Elaine Tyler May have depicted women like Felice as victims of a Cold War era recontainment of women after their successes outside the home in World War II, implying that they were victims without agency. These narratives of containment depict the domestic sphere as a place from which to escape, not one to be harnessed. Therefore, the stories of women who were rebellious or revolutionary and made significant contributions to a male-dominated domain have been privileged over those women who worked within the social and cultural boundaries of their time and place, as well as the women who worked in traditional support roles. Country music histories have further inscribed this idea by focusing primarily on the exceptional women performers who achieved success despite the odds (for example, Kitty Wells and Wanda Jackson in the 1950s). Joanne Meyerowitz and others have criticized May’s containment narrative and challenged us to look for the ways these women created “pockets of resistance” and quietly challenged various systems in order to bring about change for women. Using her domestic space to create a pocket of resistance, Felice built a successful career as a songwriter, and likely acclimated Music Row executives, musicians, and other industry leaders to the idea of women as full participants in the creation and production of country music outside of their traditional roles as singers and secretaries.

Bibliography


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