

Multi-Platform Storytelling, Popular Music, and Dolly Parton

LEIGH H. EDWARDS

The video that accompanies this essay can be found at:
<https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays>

In this video essay, I argue that Dolly Parton's work demonstrates how popular music can make greater use of multi-platform storytelling, in which artists tell stories in a coordinated way across related texts in different mediums, extending their story. While that media trend has more often been applied to franchises using films, comic books, television shows, and video games, it is also relevant to popular music. As musical artists continue to develop immersive multi-platform storytelling, popular culture scholarship can address those developments more fully. In my previous book, *Dolly Parton, Gender and Country Music* (2018), I argued for the value of applying the multi-platform storytelling concept in popular music studies and especially in country music studies, precisely because the genre focuses on storytelling and engaged audiences who will follow immersive stories into different mediums.

While music videos have long added a visual storytelling component, more recent developments in popular music multi-platform storytelling have a larger vision and include additional texts such as full linked visual albums, films, novels and short stories, reality TV shows, video games, graphic novels, and comic books. Examples include Beyoncé's pioneering visual albums involving extensive films and videos. Janelle Monáe has an encyclopedic science fiction storyworld built across albums, visual albums, films, and her own book of stories. Lizzo's reality

LEIGH H. EDWARDS is Professor of English at Florida State University. She authored the books *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* (Indiana University Press, 2018, Foreword Book of the Year Award), *Johnny Cash and the Paradox of American Identity* (Indiana University Press, 2009), and *The Triumph of Reality TV: The Revolution in American Television* (Praeger, 2013). Her media research includes work in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Global Media Journal*, and *Journal of American Studies*. She is on the Institute for Bob Dylan Studies advisory board and *Journal of Popular Television* editorial board. She can be reached at ledwards@fsu.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal

Volume 11, Issue 1

©2023

TV series casts dancers for her tours. The posthumous Johnny Cash *Forever Words* project includes a book of his poetry, a tribute album where artists put his words to music, and music videos.

As I detail in this video essay, Dolly Parton is an apt case study, because she has long engaged in multi-platform storytelling. I examine her most recent, unusual example, which is her novel, *Run, Rose, Run: A Novel* (2022), which she co-wrote with James Patterson, and which she released alongside her coordinated new album *Run, Rose, Run* (2022). She has a planned film in which she will star. Parton says she based the fictional novel in part on her own experiences of striving to make in the country music industry. It is significant that Parton used the novel to drive the composition of her album, and the novel encourages readers to turn to the album, which fully realizes the songs the novel only describes. In another recent example, her Netflix television series *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings* (2019) expands eight of her classic songs, like “Jolene,” into new television stories, adding new content, recontextualizing her songs and citing autobiographical references in these stories.

Here, I argue there are two things that are distinctive about how Parton is doing multi-platform storytelling. The first is the degree to which she is using her autobiography as the basis for her multi-platform storytelling. The second is the degree to which she uses multi-platform storytelling in a way that is self-aware about how branding and projections of authenticity work, a knowingness about self-commodification.

These multi-platform storytelling worlds are all united by Parton as the artist and her stage persona and media image, what Richard Dyer would call her “star text,” which is a multi-platform story itself. Parton uses her life story and personal mythology as the basis for her larger multi-platform story and branded self, drawing on it for content in her songs and all her texts across mediums in a performance of what Sarah Banet-Weiser would term “branded authenticity.”

In my book on Parton, I examined how she created her own media image and stage persona, and I argued that it critiques country music authenticity narratives. Her media image is a conscious mixture of real and fake, constructed image and underlying sincerity based on her autobiography, as in her Backwoods Barbie song, where she sings “I might look artificial, but where it counts I’m real.” As I argued in my book, her appearances on reality TV shows like *The Voice* and *American Idol* demonstrate how reality TV and country music share similar codes for performing authenticity and selfhood, and Parton uses them to extend her branded self. Indeed, country music is particularly apt for reality TV portrayals because of similarities in

how both genres perform authenticity, or constructed ideas of what is genuine or believable performances of selfhood. In both, the most successful artists can appear to “be themselves” in their self-presentation in the media, performing a version of the self, using performance codes in those genres.

While multi-platform storytelling has long existed, as in illuminated Medieval manuscripts, today’s trend has wider scale, developing out of the growth of digital media since the 1960s and media deregulation since the 1980s, and the rise of media convergence, where formerly separate media have come together on the same devices, combining old and new media. This kind of storytelling trend is prevalent in contemporary media not only for corporate synergy reasons but also because current active audiences seeks out linked storytelling texts as they engage in what Henry Jenkins calls “participatory culture,” hunting the content they want across different mediums. Multi-platform storytelling goes beyond adaptation because each text also adds something new, new content in new mediums, and it involves coordinated co-creation. As Jenkins observes, examples of effective storytelling in this mode provide different points of entry, make use of the affordances of each medium, and each additional text can stand alone and contribute to the larger whole.

Parton is an artist who calls herself a “songteller,” and she emphasizes the relationship between storytelling and country music, with an emphasis on cogent stories and devoted audiences. Here, the immersive multi-platform storytelling she does epitomizes how adaptable popular music is to this kind of immersive world-building. Likewise, her work illustrates how her autobiography and star text is what holds her storytelling together.

It is important to do more scholarly work in popular culture studies to account for popular music in evolving multi-platform storytelling. The trend obviously reflects corporate synergy. Nevertheless, musical artists can use these models to deepen storytelling universes, nurture the affordances of various mediums, and engage active audiences.

Works Cited

- Edwards, Leigh H. *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music*. Indiana UP, 2018.
- Parton, Dolly. "Backwoods Barbie." Track 4 on *Backwoods Barbie*. Dolly Records, compact disc, 2008.
- . *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*. HarperCollins, 1994.

Parton, Dolly and Robert K. Oermann. *Dolly Parton, Songteller: My Life in Lyrics*. Chronicle Books, 2020.