

Station 5: Lil Nas X

In December 2018, Atlanta rapper Lil Nas X released his hit single “Old Town Road,” which some have described as country trap. In spite of the song containing elements of traditional country songs, the song was removed from the Billboard Hot Country charts igniting controversy and discussion about how country is categorized. The song went on to become the longest running number one song on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Read the article below and answer the questions that follow.

Lil Nas X: How the West Was Won

Blazing the trail for a new kind of cowboy, Lil Nas X is the viral star whose country-trap sound brought chaos to Nashville, and sent thunder through the internet

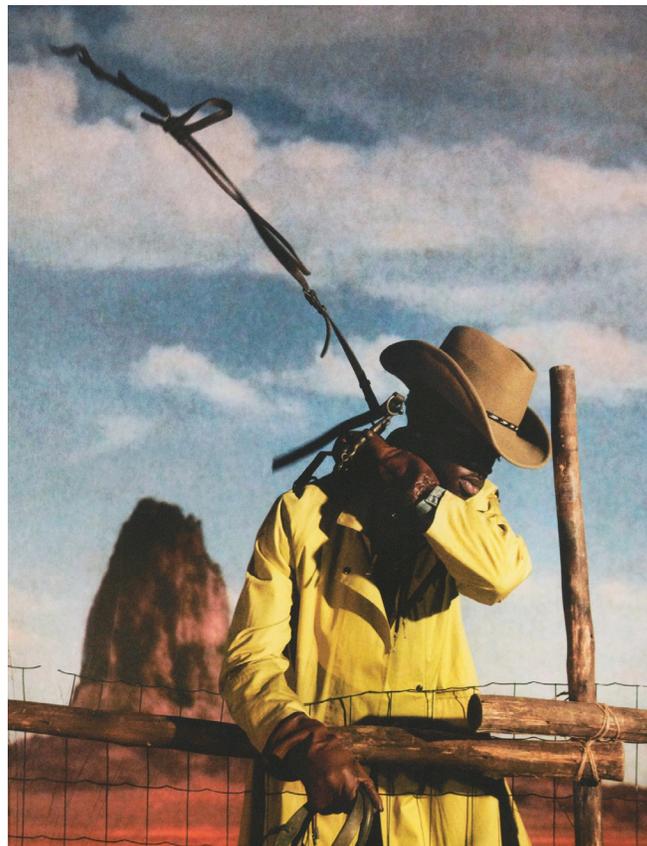
By Jack Mills, *Dazed Digital*, July 30, 2019

At the end of last year, the myth of the ‘lonesome cowboy’ crept into the imagination of a 19-year-old rapper from the Atlanta suburbs. “I literally saw myself in a movie,” he recalls, “a loner cowboy western. I wanted to run away from everything.”

Montero Lamar Hill – now better known as Lil Nas X...

When Hill enters the red clay set for the video to “Old Town Road” – which co-stars Diplo, Vince Staples and Chris Rock – he isn’t just wearing spurs and fringed chaps, the usual cowboy getup. He’d had Indiana-based designers Union Western imagine a black suit embroidered with racing-pink and electric-blue unicorns – the kind made for events such as the Rose Parade, where prestigious carriages lined the streets of Pasadena. Hill has been immersed in character ever since his “Old Town Road” revelation, lacing his earlobes with miniature horse shoes and elongated leather tassels that remix the ‘bolo tie’ shape worn by movie sheriffs. Looking like one of Kenneth Anger’s kaleidoscopic Hell’s Angels on the set of this cover shoot, Hill is the hero figure of a narrative thread that traces back centuries of American history.

Hill has spoken at length about the ways he wrote in “Old Town Road”’s meme-ability (“I was like, ‘I gotta make sure this song has quotables in it,’”), but the biggest fire lit for the track was on TikTok, an app in which users share 15-second homemade clips. A Massachusetts man called Michael Pelchat – or @nicemichael, to his six-figure TikTok following – found a meme clip of “Old Town Road” back in late January, and decided to dance to it on his channel. The set-up was simple: appear at the start of the clip in your usual clothes, and transform into full cowboy attire at the click of the bass drop. By early March, Pelchat had reached more than 100,000 people, and many were replicating the format under the hashtag #TheYeehawChallenge. He believes that “Old Town Road” and the Yeehaw Challenge have cleared a bright new path for music marketing, one that signals





the death of the traditional music video. “I can guarantee you it is better for an artist to invest in a content creator to make a video,” says Pelchat, who now charges hundreds of dollars for clips off the back of his “Old Town Road” break. “They can easily drop a music video on their YouTube channel with no followers, but they’re not tapping into a new market.”

Ultimately, it was the internet as a whole that spun Hill’s song into a cultural cataclysm, and the internet that came to its defence after an attempt to silence it. In March, Billboard removed “Old Town Road” from its country-music chart, and their ahistorical statement – about the song not having the right blend of country music ingredients to qualify for it – was a reminder of the long shadow the Nashville establishment still casts over the industry. “Clearly, race is vital to Billboard’s rejection of the original song, (and) it is undeniable that many high-ups in the country music industry are interested in policing the racial boundaries of the music, trying to ensure the ‘whiteness’ of the genre,” says Tore Olsson, a historian and lecturer at the University of Tennessee.

“Musically speaking, it’s not that far off from what’s happening in a lot of mainstream country music today,” adds Stimeling, whose job it is to trace the genre’s subtle evolution. Hip hop has an undeniable presence in the country-music mainstream, he argues, from “Over and Over”, a 2004 collaboration between Nelly and country favourite Tim McGraw, to Meghan Linsey and Bubba Sparxxx’s 2014 song “Try Harder Than That”. “Country is more blocked off and this was a pierce,” Hill told journalist Zach Sang. “It’s like, ‘If we allow this, what the fuck is next?’”

For all the facts, figures, retweets, memes and smashed records underpinning the success of “Old Town Road”, witnessing its impact in a real-world setting is still shocking. Currently, it has the power to rip the bottom out of dancefloors across the world, and one viral video shows the Texas Tech American Football team destroying a locker room to the song after a match. Another clip, posted in May, shows Hill performing the song to elementary school kids, who dip, twist, rise and sit to Hill’s gestures like a starling murmuration. “(Hill) said, ‘I need y’all to be quiet’ a single time and got an entire school to shut up,” 22-year-old Eric, a Lil Nas X fan from Pennsylvania, tells me. “There’s not another living artist with that kind of influence.”

But for Bri Malandro, who runs the Instagram page The Yeehaw Agenda, the clip holds a far more profound significance. Malandro coined the term after seeing Ciara wear a white cowboy hat on the cover of King Kong magazine last September. She started the account to document the various other black cowboy moments she could find across pop culture, from musician Oyinda’s outfit at Telfar’s AW19 fashion week show, to 21 Savage in a fringed western jacket for a Saint Laurent campaign.



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“The video made me realise that, for the majority of kids growing up today, (Hill) is the first cowboy they’ve ever seen,” says Malandro. “When they find out the detailed history of black cowboys, they won’t be as shocked as people seem to be today – because they’ll have known about him.” Stimeling points out that, after the civil war, an estimated one in four cowboys in the US were African-American. More broadly speaking, he argues, the erasure of the black cowboy from popular culture is clogged in the industrial mechanisms that made the censorship of “Old Town Road” such an urgent piece of controversy. Hill, who credits the country-trap sound to his Atlantan elder Young Thug, says he is “hoping this opens the door for even more acceptance, within all and any genre”.



Questions:

How has Lil Nas X taken his own approach to the American Cowboy and country music?

Why do you think there has been backlash towards Lil Nas X being on the Billboard Country charts?