**Friday, September 20, 2024 / Everybody’s gone country**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

*SCORING IN <Shaboozey - A Bar Song (Tipsy)>*

*My baby want a Birkin, she's been tellin' me all night long*

NOEL: Shaboozey’s “A Bar Song” is at the top of the Billboard hot 100 for the TENTH week in a row.

*MID/DOWN One, here comes the two to the three to the four*

*Tell 'em bring another round, we need plenty more*

*Two steppin' on the table, she don't need a dancefloor*

NOEL: He’s having a moment, also COUNTRY is having a moment - Shaboozey, Post Malone, Beyoncé - they’re all crossing over, they’re collaborating with Dolly and Willie and Jelly and they’re propelling country up the mainstream charts, EVEN AS STREAMING puts it into the ears of millions of new listeners.

*It's gettin' kind of late but the ladies want some more*

*Oh my, good Lord*

NOEL: Ahead on *Today, Explained*. We’ve gone country.

*Someone pour me up a double shot of whiskey (double shot of whiskey)*

*They know me and Jack Daniels got a history (way back)*

*There's a party downtown near Fifth Street (come on)*

*Everybody at the bar gettin' tipsy (ooh)*

**[THEME]**

<TEx - country music bumper>

MELINDA: I'm Melinda Newman, and I'm Billboard's executive editor for the West Coast and Nashville. I oversee all of our country coverage with a staff in Nashville, but I'm in charge of all of the country output that we do, other than charts and things like that.

NOEL: Melinda, you look at the charts, you look at downloads, you even look at album sales. These are like blockbuster numbers for any genre. What is driving this?

MELINDA: This is very much driven by the listeners. What had happened was, country music fans were not streaming music at the rate that fans of other genres like hip hop, rock, pop, Latin were streaming. And because they were older, because they were still very attached to terrestrial radio. And they've shifted. They're discovering artists via streaming as opposed to waiting to be spoon fed music by country radio. Streaming numbers last year were up 23.5% over the year before. That indexed higher than any other genre. Country radio is still very important. It's probably the most important in country than any other genre. But fans are now steering the ship now.

NOEL: So who are the names? Who's getting up to number one and really making this a moment?

MELINDA: We're having a bunch of names. It's coming from kind of across the board. For example, last year, there were four number one songs on the Hot 100 by country artists, and that had not happened since the 70s. And the Hot 100, just so people understand, is all genres. And it's based on streaming, sales, and radio play. It's a multi-metric chart. And so last year, Morgan Wallen's “Last Night” hit number one.

*<CLIP> MORGAN WALLEN - LAST NIGHT*

*Last night we let the liquor talk*

*I can't remember everything we said, but we said it all*

MELINDA: Jason Aldean’s “Try That In a Small Town” hit number one.

*<CLIP> JASON ALDEAN - TRY THAT IN A SMALL TOWN*

*Good luck*

*Try that in a small town*

*See how far ya make it down the road*

MELINDA: Oliver Anthony's “Rich Men North of Richmond” hit number one.

*<CLIP> OLIVER ANTHONY - RICH MEN NORTH OF RICHMOND*

*It's a damn shame what the world's gotten to*

*For people like me and people like you*

MELINDA: And then Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves’ “I Remember Everything” hit number one.

*<CLIP> ZACH BRYAN AND KACEY MUSGRAVES - I REMEMBER EVERYTHING*

*I wish I didn't, but I do*

*Remember every moment on the nights with you*

MELINDA: And if you know those songs, they're very different songs. Four very different songs. And so it just shows the range of what's happening in country and the popularity.

*<CLIP> ZACH BRYAN AND KACEY MUSGRAVES - I REMEMBER EVERYTHING*

*UNDER MELINDA: Rotgut whiskey's gonna ease my mind*

*Beach towel rests on the dryin' line*

*Do I remind you of your daddy in my '88 Ford?*

*Labrador hangin' out the passenger door*

MELINDA: We're seeing, if you look at the two songs this year that have hit the Hot 100 and were our top two songs of the summer, they were both country songs. Some of them crossed over, but they were number one on country as well.

*<CLIP> POST MALONE AND MORGAN WALLEN - I HAD SOME HELP*

*I had some help*

*It ain't like I can make this kinda mess all by myself*

*UNDER MELINDA: Don't act like you ain't help me pull that bottle off the shelf*

*Been deep in every weekend*

MELINDA: So Post Malone and Morgan Wallen's “I Had Some Help” was our number one song of the summer.

*<CLIP> POST MALONE AND MORGAN WALLEN - I HAD SOME HELP*

*if you couldn't tell*

*They say, "Teamwork makes the dream work"*

*Hell, I had some help (help)*

MELINDA: Followed by “A Bar Song (Tipsy)” by Shaboozey.

*<CLIP> SHABOOZEY - A BAR SONG (TIPSY)*

*There's a party downtown near Fifth Street (okay, let's go)*

*Everybody at the bar gettin' tipsy (at the bar gettin' tipsy)*

MELINDA: That was very much a crossover song. But the interesting thing, just to show how popular country is, is last summer the number one song of the summer was Morgan Wallen’s “Last Night,” followed by Luke Combs’ remake of Tracy Chapman's “Fast Car.”

*<CLIP> LUKE COMBS - FAST CAR*

*You got a fast car*

*Is it fast enough, so we could fly away?*

*You still gotta make a decision*

*Leave tonight, or live and die this way*

MELINDA: And that had never happened in the history of our charts where we've been tracking this, where the songs of the summer, the top two songs were both country songs.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Post Malone’s gotten a ton of attention this summer, justifiably so, I guess. What has gone on with him? Can you talk a little bit about the evolution here?

MELINDA: What's happened is, nine years ago Post Malone said he wanted to make a country album. And then a couple of years ago, he started coming to Nashville. He started writing with some of the top songwriters.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQyqpit7mgo)*> POST MALONE: It's really nice meeting people in Nashville that made me feel so welcome, and new friends and kind of building new stuff, and for once I'm, like, I'm, I'm not sad anymore. I'm happy, very happy.*

MELINDA: He really infiltrated Nashville. He really settled in and was coming to Nashville very frequently, writing with songwriters. Anyone that you talked to that worked with him, said he knew country music forward and backwards.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://open.spotify.com/episode/1e0ghg6yi6z8Fi2TlkdmAu)*> TASTE OF COUNTRY PODCAST*

*JELLY ROLL: We all forget that Post Malone broke on YouTube singing Bob Dylan songs, before “White Iverson.”*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_NS9Vd1sMA)*> AUSTIN RICHARD - COVER OF BOB DYLAN’S DON'T THINK TWICE, IT'S ALL RIGHT*

*But don’t think twice, that’s all right*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://open.spotify.com/episode/1e0ghg6yi6z8Fi2TlkdmAu)*> TASTE OF COUNTRY PODCAST*

*JELLY ROLL: He’s, he’s just making it to where his heart is. And man, I’ve hung out with that guy. He’s one of the best dudes on earth. The sweetest soul on earth. And he knows more about country music than guys in this town that have ten number ones.*

MELINDA: He grew up in Texas, outside of Dallas, so he was raised on this music. And he made a very credible country music album, *F-1 Trillion*, that came in at number one on the country chart and on the Billboard 200 all genre albums chart.

NOEL: Is he like a country music star now?

MELINDA: He is!

NOEL: Huh!

MELINDA: I think what really convinced people, he'd convinced people in town already just because of his attitude and how gracious he was and how unassuming he was.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1021269406457051)*> TAYLOR SWIFT: There is a very clear reason why Post Malone is everyone in music’s favorite person to collaborate with. And it is because you are so ridiculously talented, you are so versatile, and you’re the most down-to-earth person. Honestly, so unfailingly polite, it has taken me forever to get him to stop calling me ma’am. <crowd laughs>*

MELINDA: But then if you listen to the album, 15 of the 18 tracks are duets. There are three solo tracks. And then later the morning of the release, he put out nine more all-solo tracks.

*<CLIP> POST MALONE - BACK TO TEXAS*

*All hat, no cattle, all belt, no buckle*

*UNDER MELINDA: All snake, no rattle, all honey, no suckle*

*And I'ma take every last dime stuffed under this mattress*

*And make a Lone Star B Line…*

MELINDA: And they are hardcore country. They're much more country than a lot of the duets on *F-1 Trillion* that tend to lean country pop. And so if you listened to just the solo tracks that he released later that day, that is a very country album, very traditional country album in some ways.

NOEL: And he had some help, right, from country, country stars.

MELINDA: No pun intended. So, yes. So…

NOEL: <laughs>

MELINDA: “I Had Some Help” was the first single, with Morgan Wallen, and that was a very smart move. You know, you're pairing arguably the two hottest male artists out there right now together. And so that, that took off like a rocket ship, you know, it was number one for many, many weeks. But he also sang with Dolly Parton.

*<CLIP> POST MALONE - HAVE THE HEART (FT. DOLLY PARTON)*

*Baby, I don't have the heart to break yours*

MELINDA: He sang with Blake Shelton. He sang with Lainey Wilson. He sang with Jelly Roll.

*<CLIP> POST MALONE - LOSERS (FT. JELLY ROLL)*

*Come kick it with the losers (Oh)*

*UNDER MELINDA: The outcasts and the sinners*

*The ain't-never-been-no-winners (Never been no winners)*

MELINDA: Like, he covered the waterfront in terms of artists from all different eras and just showed his adoration. There's an incredibly cute Instagram of him and Dolly and they're just adorable.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.instagram.com/dollyparton/reel/C-v_b0mvOXv/)*>*

*DOLLY PARTON: And you’ve got lots of fans and I can say I’m cool because of you.*

*POST MALONE: No, that’s not true, I’m cool cuz of you. Yes ma’am.*

MELINDA: You can tell everyone loves him and he is so respectful, which is the very smart way to approach the genre if you're going to come in.

NOEL: Who else have we seen pivoting to country in 2024? And of course, I am asking about Beyoncé. But who else? <laughs>

MELINDA: Yeah, so we, so we had Beyoncé with *Cowboy Carter*.

*<CLIP> BEYONCE - SMOKE HOUR ★ WILLIE NELSON*

*WILLIE NELSON: Now for this next tune, I want y'all to sit back*

*Inhale, and go to that good place your mind likes to wander off to*

*And if you don't wanna go, go find yourself a jukebox*

*Thank you*

*<CLIP> BEYONCE - TEXAS HOLD ‘EM - BANJO INTRO*

MELINDA: “Texas Hold ‘Em” came in at number one on Hot Country Songs chart, which was also the first time a Black woman had topped that chart.

*BEYONCE: This ain't Texas (woo)*

MELINDA: And then she was followed by Shaboozey on the hot country songs chart. So that was history making, in terms of, that was the first time that two Black artists had ever been back to back on that chart. So very, very significant album.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@hollercountry/video/7330661087412538657)*> LANA DEL REY - So if you can’t already tell by our award winners and our performers, the music business has gone, going, we’re goin’ country! [applause]*

MELINDA: So in addition to Beyoncé, Lana Del Rey has been working on a country album titled *Lasso* that we're not sure when we're getting it. It was going to be later this year. Now it looks like it's going to be 2025.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@hollercountry/video/7330661087412538657)*> LANA DEL REY - I knew it, I said it, it’s happening! That’s what’s happening!*

MELINDA: Then there are even traces of country in Sabrina Carpenter's new album.

*<CLIP> SABRINA CARPENTER - SLIM PICKINS*

*It's slim pickings*

*If I can't have the one I love*

*I guess it's you that I'll be kissin'*

MELINDA: And Ed Sheeran has talked about really wanting to do a country album. He spends a lot of time in Nashville. He's written with a lot of Nashville writers. He and Luke Combs appeared at the Academy of Country Music Awards in 2023, so there's probably a lot more to come.

NOEL: It sounds like a big old party. How does the country music industry feel? Is it embracing these crossover artists?

MELINDA: The country community has not always been so embracing. They’re very embracing of this right now. They realize it's just bringing new listeners to the format. And that is a really, really wonderful thing. But they have not always been so embracing. For example, in 1994, when Alan Jackson released Gone Country, it was a great song written by one of the all-time great songwriters named Bob McDill.

*<CLIP> ALAN JACKSON - GONE COUNTRY*

*She's been playin' in a room on the strip for ten years in Vegas*

MELINDA: What it did was it really poked fun at all the carpetbaggers coming into the country format, about how anyone who, whether they were in Las Vegas or New York or L.A., they were like, you know what, country music could use me right now. And it seems like I kind of match that sound. And I'm going to go to country and I'm going to go to Nashville and make my mark.

*<CLIP> ALAN JACKSON - GONE COUNTRY*

*She's gone country, look at them boots*

*She's gone country*

MELINDA: So that kind of caught a little bit of the attitude that people were having in Nashville.

*<CLIP> ALAN JACKSON - GONE COUNTRY*

*She's gone country*

*Here she comes*

MELINDA: And then even further back in 1975, there's a very famous moment at the CMA Awards when John Denver won Entertainer of the Year and Charlie Rich, who's about as country as they come, may he rest in peace, actually burned the card…

NOEL: Hm! <laughs>

MELINDA: …on stage announcing the winner.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf3t3unp-Gg)*> CHARLIE RICH: My friend, Mr. John Denver!*

MELINDA: So they have not always been embracing, perhaps to their detriment. And I think they've learned it's a lot better to be embracing.

*SCORING IN <POST MALONE, MORGAN WALLEN - I HAD SOME HELP | OFFICIAL INSTRUMENTAL - F-1 TRILLION>*

MELINDA: But again, these artists are coming with respect. These artists are coming with knowledge. They aren't just capitalizing on this. Post Malone and Beyoncé do not need country audiences. They're pretty popular on their own. So it's been done in respectful ways and with artists who aren't carpetbaggers.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Coming up on *Today, Explained*, more with Billboard’s Melinda Newman on where country goes from here.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<BUMPER> POST MALONE - FINER THINGS*

*POST: Platinum on my teeth and Wagyu on my grill*

*AVISHAY: Today, Explained*

*POST: crankin’ out my Coupe DeVille*

NOEL: Lainey Wilson maybe said it best.

*<CLIP> LAINEY WILSON - COUNTRY’S COOL AGAIN*

*Doggone, dadgum it, didn't see that coming*

*Country's cool again (woo, yeah)*

NOEL: Melinda Newman from Billboard did see it coming. She says country’s popularity does tend to wax and wane.

MELINDA: This isn't the first time that country music has caused such a stir. In 1980, when the movie “Urban Cowboy” came out starring John Travolta…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6L2vbdpG-4g)*> URBAN COWBOY*

*Debra Winger: You a real cowboy?*

*John Travolta: Well it depends on what you think a real cowboy is.*

MELINDA: …it caused a whole wave of country music crossing over, of country fashion crossing over. It was really a movement. And there were songs such as Mickey Gilley's remake of “Stand By Me”…

*<CLIP> MICKEY GILLEY - STAND BY ME*

*Darling stand by me*

MELINDA: and Johnny Lee's “Lookin’ for Love” that did very, very well across the board.

*<CLIP> JOHNNY LEE - LOOKIN’ FOR LOVE*

*I was lookin’ for love in all the wrong places*

MELINDA: And then again in the early 90s when Garth Brooks just surged in popularity and brought millions of listeners to the country format and was the hottest artist across the board of all genres.

*<CLIP> Garth Brooks - Friends in Low Places*

*Cuz I've got friends in low places*

*Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases my blues away*

MELINDA: So we've seen this happen before, but this is just a very interesting take in terms of pop artists coming over and people feeling like they're very welcome and that these are very authentic expressions.

NOEL: To that point, what's happened this year with country artists who are not changing genres, they're not doing crossover, they've just always been making country music that's really, really good. Are they changing what they do at all?

MELINDA: If you look, there are artists like Zach Bryan, Kacey Musgraves, you know, they are not necessarily on country radio because country radio has a fairly small playlist. Without getting into too much detail, the country music chart for radio, for the airplay songs chart, moves very slowly. So it's a fairly limited playlist and it moves very slowly. So a lot of these artists are just not willing to play the radio game, which means…

NOEL: Hm.

MELINDA: …going to country stations and, you know, shaking hands and kissing babies. And their streaming numbers are so strong. You look at Zach Bryan, he's selling out stadiums. You may have never heard him on country radio other than “I Remember Everything” with Kacey Musgraves. So they're finding their audiences through streaming and just through live music. And they also are a little bit of a blend. If you look at someone like Zach Bryan, there's some rock in there. He tops a number of our charts, not just the country chart.

*<CLIP> ZACH BRYAN - SOMETHING IN THE ORANGE*

*To you I'm just a man, to me you're all I am*

*Where the hell am I supposed to go?*

*UNDER MELINDA: I poisoned myself again*

*Somethin' in the orange tells me you're never comin' home*

MELINDA: So they're doing it their way and they're saying, if country radio wants to play me, that's fine, but I'm okay if you don't. I'm just going to keep doing my sound. I’m gonna keep doin’ what I do and you know where to find me.

NOEL: How do we see the larger music industry responding to the popularity of country? What's changing?

MELINDA: What you're seeing is what we call the coastal labels, which is the labels based in New York and L.A. and are primarily not dealing with country, are now signing country artists. And for example, Zach Bryan is on Warner Brothers out of Los Angeles. Megan Moroney, who's a rising country star, is signed to both Columbia out of New York and Sony Nashville out of Nashville. And what the coastal labels saw by looking at the analytics and the data was that these artists were streaming. They didn't necessarily have to go to country radio to have success.

NOEL: Is there a change at all, I wonder, in the kind of story that country songs are telling? You mentioned two songs from 2023, Jason Aldean’s “Try That In a Small Town,” Oliver Anthony's “Rich Men North of Richmond.” Those were political songs. Those were political songs telling stories, whether you liked them or not. We don't see as much in 2024. Is that a bit of a pivot?

MELINDA: I don't think it's a bit of a pivot. I think if you go back to the 70s and the 60s, I mean, there was a strong history of country taking on politics or issues. Whether it was Loretta Lynn with “The Pill”…

*<CLIP> LORETTA LYNN - THE PILL*

*Miniskirts, hot pants and a few little fancy frills*

*Yeah I'm makin' up for all those years*

*Since I've got the pill*

MELINDA: …or Merle Haggard with “Okie from Muskogee”…

*<CLIP> MERLE HAGGARD - OKIE FROM MUSKOGEE*

*We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse*

*And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all*

MELINDA: …people don't do that as much anymore. So whether you agreed with them or not, and Jason Aldean would actually say “Try That In a Small Town” was not political. Many people would disagree. Oliver Anthony, same thing. He would say “Rich Men North of Richmond” was really just expressing angst at the scene in general. But we're not seeing a raft of political songs or issue songs. When you bring a lot of women into the format or you look at Jelly Roll, someone like that, they aren't doing the typical, you know, whiskey, truck, tailgates, girls in cutoff jeans and cowboy boots. They're not doing that. So you are seeing a shift in terms of just a broader topical appeal. And I think that's helping a lot.

*<CLIP> JELLY ROLL - I AM NOT OKAY*

*But God knows, I know*

*When it's all said and done*

*I'm not okay*

*But it's all gonna be alright*

*UNDER MELINDA: It's not okay*

*But we're all gonna be alright*

*Gonna be alright*

MELINDA: When you look at Jelly Roll, some of those songs are about mental health. Some of those songs are about really taking on deep, deep issues that are resonating with people. And that's what country has always done the best.

*<CLIP> JELLY ROLL - I AM NOT OKAY*

*Gonna be alright*

MELINDA: At its best, country music is the best storytelling genre. It is songs about real life, what real life means today. It's songs about struggles, songs about triumphs. And if you look on the chart now, you can kind of find something that represents everything. And I think that's part of the huge appeal is you are just seeing this broadening of styles, both musically and thematically, that is really capturing listeners.

NOEL: So what's the vibe in Nashville these days? Is it real cocky? <laughs>

MELINDA: Oh man, they're, you know, they are happy as can be. If you follow Nashville at all, you know that any artist with any name recognition at all is opening a bar on Lower Broad. It is the bridesmaids capital of the world in terms of bridesmaids parties. It's kind of crazy what Nashville is like right now. And Music Row, which used to be where all the labels and publishers and studios were centered. Everything's not on Music Row anymore, which is a little sad for people who remember when everything was really contained within these 3 or 4 blocks. But it can't be anymore. It's just kind of taken over the whole town. And so for tourism, it's fantastic. For traffic, it's a little rough.

NOEL: <laughs>

MELINDA: But these are very, very good times in Nashville.

NOEL: Hey, do you think that times last? So country’s gone mainstream again and people seem to be really liking it. Do you think this is a forever thing, or next year are we talking about a different genre?

MELINDA: I don't think we're talking about a different genre next year. I think it will last for a while and I think it will be, just as when Garth Brooks hit, it brought a whole new audience to country. Just as when Taylor Swift hit, she brought in a youth wave. There was just like a whole new wave of young girls that had never listened to country before. It always subsides, but they always leave the format higher than it was before.

NOEL: Hm.

SCORING IN <Country Fried Hip Hop - APM>

MELINDA: So that's what's going to happen. Eventually something else is going to come in. You know, hip hop has somewhat fallen off. You know, there's, there's the theory that a lot of what's happening is that this is making up for that, you know, filling that void right now. But some of these listeners that have come to country in ‘22, ‘23, ‘24, they're going to stay. And so even when the industry’s moved on, even when some listeners have left, country’s still going to be more popular than it was in 2020.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Melinda Newman. Billboard’s Executive Editor, West Coast and Nashville.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Amina Al-Sadi. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Rob Byers. I’m Noel King. This is where the cowboy rides away.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**