**Friday, March 22, 2024 / Beyoncé country**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN <Beyoncé - Texas Hold 'Em>

This ain't Texas (woo), ain't no hold 'em (hey)

So lay your cards down, down, down, down

NOEL KING (host, Today, Explained): Beyoncé announced the release of her country album Cowboy Carter to wild excitement…

[<CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4rwzXGILzA)> ABC NEWS: She’s the first Black woman EVER to top the Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart.

and of course rabid nonsense. Everyone from racists…

<[*CLIP*](https://twitter.com/RonFilipkowski/status/1757932780632076523?s=20)*> Racist John Schneider: “They’ve got to make their mark, just like a dog in a dog walk park, you know every dog has to mark every tree …”*

NOEL: …to Azealia Banks…

*Texas Hold 'Em: “Don’t be a bitch come take it to the floor now”*

NOEL: …tried some version of the same critique. Country music is white music. Beyoncé responded: this isn’t a country album, it’s a Beyoncé album. Yes. And also: country music is extremely Black and the story of that is comin’ up on Today, Explained.

Beyoncé - Texas Hold 'Em

*Ooh, one step to the right*

*We headin' to the dive bar we always thought was nice*

*Ooh, run me to the left*

**[THEME]**

NOEL: So last week, I went to the Nashville home of songwriter Alice Randall to talk about Cowboy Carter. Alice has been writing and teaching for a long time about country music’s very Black roots.

If HER life was a country song, it’d go like something like this: a sensitive Black girl with a barfly dad and a distant mom finds solace in Ray Charles and Charley Pride, writes her first country song before she’s even old enough to read, and at 24, hits the road to Nashville with a folder full of handwritten songs - one of which will go to number 1 on the country charts.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4Q68U4-2A0)*> Trisha Yearwood - XXX's and OOO's*

*Phone rings, baby cries, TV diet guru lies*

*Good mornin’ honey*

*Go to work, make up, try to keep the balance up*

*Between love and money…*

NOEL: Xxx’s and Ooo’s sung by Trisha Yearwood. Alice then spends 40 years in Nashville waiting for another Black woman to make it in country, an art form that she defines this way ...

ALICE: The simplest definition, it requires three things. It has to have Celtic, English, Irish, Scottish ballad forms, news reporting elements, storytelling. It has to have Black influences, African influences. That could be in the instrumentation, say a banjo, it can be in other aspects and it has to have evangelical Christianity. Those things come together and you have country music.

NOEL: Does the story that the song is telling have to be a certain type of story to be country?

ALICE: There are patterns of country narrative and a sort of secular theology of country that I have observed, and this is how that would go: God is real. Life is hard. Road, whiskey and family are significant compensations. And the past is better than the present. When I see those four things, I know I may be looking at a country song.

NOEL: And here, Alice’s life diverges from a country song, because for her the present just got pretty damn good.

In 18 days her memoir *My Black Country* comes out, right as Beyonce has all the universe interested in country music / and asking where Black people fit into it.

As it happens, Alice has spent quite a bit of time trying to find an answer to that. She identifies the birth of both recorded country and Black country as a moment in 1927, when DeFord Bailey takes the stage in Nashville.

SCORING IN <[DeFord Bailey - Pan American Blues](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjlR8eS0YPM)>

ALICE: DeFord Bailey is to me the, first superstar of the Grand Ole Opry and the Grand Ole Opry, for those who don't know it, is the oldest country radio show in America. And it's the most powerful. It's the most significant. So DeFord Bailey is one of the people who founds the Opry. One day they were playing the show and the announcer said, we’ve just been listening to grand opera. Now we're going to have some Grand Opry.

NOEL: <laughs>

ALICE: Meaning, we're coming down home. And the next sound that was heard was DeFord Bailey playing Pan American Blues on his harmonica.

SCORING BUMP

ALICE: Now DeFord plays harmonica. Some of his songs are called blues. But he describes himself actively as a hillbilly performer, and although he's known for the harmonica playing, he also does sing, plays guitar and banjo. He was a multi-instrumentalist, and I think that's very important.

NOEL: Mm.

SCORING OUT

ALICE: And I think that Fox Chase is one of his first very important songs.

SCORING IN <[DeFord Bailey - Fox Chase](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjNe9gtQQ0Y)>

*“DeFord Bailey and it’ll be his famous Fox Chase. Alright, DeFord...”*

ALICE: Fox Chase is about the difficulty of being pursued and scrutinized. I assure you, that was a big problem in Black life in America at that time.

NOEL: In 1927, racism is still rampant in America. It's alive and well. How does DeFord Bailey pull this off? Like, why is he allowed in?

ALICE: What's wild about music, we have to always remember about commercial recorded music. It's the business.

NOEL: Yeah.

ALICE: He was making them money.

NOEL: Mm hm.

ALICE: And then, remember, at first it's the radio.

NOEL: Yeah.

ALICE: And so they're not seeing that it is a Black person and they're not necessarily announcing it. And that may be part of the reason in many of those early recordings, he's not speaking or singing because it might have been more evident to people he was a Black person if he was speaking or singing.

SCORING OUT

ALICE: DeFord was able to defy, evade the structural obstacles created to keep his voice off the radio and to keep him out of the public. But he never did have the same opportunities that his white contemporaries had.

NOEL: Okay, so that's 1927. This is 97 years ago now. And then where does Black Country go from that moment on?

ALICE: 1930. We're going to get another extraordinary performance. We're going to get Lil Hardin Armstrong performing on Blue Yodel #9.

SCORING IN <[Jimmie Rodgers - Blue Yodel #9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BFbY9Vw8DM)>

ALICE: Jimmie Rodgers is going to be the singer, the front man. But there are three people on that record. One is a Black woman born in Memphis, Lil Hardin, and the other is Louis Armstrong.

SCORING BUMP  
*“Standing on the corner, I didn’t mean no harm…”*

ALICE: When you listen to Blue Yodel #9, many people think it's a very white song. It is considered the most iconic country song. And Lil Hardin, her piano is driving the session. Louis is playing on it. And it sounds, what people think, it sounds so white, but actually two out of the three geniuses on the record were Black. And so this becomes this aesthetic redlining that that was Black music. Now, whoever labeled it white and it was marketed as white, but actually the people behind the session and their names were not put on the record. This was repressed, erased, information for years.

NOEL: What was the sound that would have led people to be like, oh, we can call this one a white song and nobody will notice?

ALICE: Often they took the exact same recording. And marketed it one to a white audience and one to a Black audience. Sometimes changing the name of the group. So a lot of it is literally marketing and bifurcating the audience, thinking they would make more money that way. There's a lot of cultural redlining that is actually separating things that are not intrinsically separate.

SCORING OUT

ALICE: So fast forward. We’re at 1930. We can't get through the 30s and 40s without one of my other great influences on country, Herb Jeffries, The Bronze Buckaroo.

SCORING IN <[Herb Jeffries - Payday Blues](https://youtu.be/7YOPP0wqUkE?si=n_K25_ayRlulixgT&t=167)>

*“Took my roll and went to town, with some gal and played around, and she cut my bankroll down, oh ho ho, forgot the payday blues.”*

ALICE: These are Black singing cowboy movies. They're financed out of the white world. But this is his concept and he is starring in them. And so that's going to be a whole nother influence on country and Black Country. In the 1890s, 20 to 30 percent of all cowboys are going to be Black and brown in America. Cowboys have cowboy songs and cowboy camps, and in these cowboy camps, singing was an extremely important part of the culture. So we get in Herb Jeffries in the 30s and 40s, some of this wisdom, this collective wisdom from the Black cowboy camps.

SCORING OUT

ALICE: So after the Bronze Buckaroo in the 1940s, I want to jump forward into the late 60s and the early 70s and hit Charley Pride. Charley Pride is going to come out of the Negro Leagues baseball. He's going to rise. By 1971, he's going to be entertainer of the year of country.

SCORING IN <[Charley Pride - Kiss an Angel Good Mornin’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rouSFhnQapE)>

*Whenever I've chance to meet*

*Some old friends on the street*

*They wonder how does a man get to be this way*

ALICE: He is going to come out as Black in the 60s in Detroit City.

NOEL: Wait, what do you mean come out is Black?

ALICE: When they released the early Charley Pride records...

NOEL: Oh, people didn't know.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb8No3cpN24)*> Charley Pride: “My oldest sister used to say to me, why you singing their music? Ok?” “Their music.” “Their music. Ok. I said, well, it’s my music too. Now, that’s me growing up in a segregated Southern state.”*

ALICE: They actively made sure that no one knew he was Black. He quote unquote, I am not saying this, sounds white. That's what it was said at the time that he sounds white, what people thought was white. They did not put his face on the original. They did not share any photographs of him.

SCORING BUMP

*“But some of them never learn it’s a simple thing…”*

ALICE: They wanted people to fall in love with the voice in the records first. And then he came out as Black in Detroit, Michigan. When I was a little girl, I still remember people talking about it in the background of the city. And he will end up going to the top of the charts so many times. And so we get this line from DeFord Bailey to Charley Pride. Both of them will belong to the Opry. Charley will be given superstar status. He will become entertainer of the year, I believe that was in 1971.

SCORING OUT

*And love her like the devil when you get back home*

ALICE: But at that same time, we get Linda Martell trying to step into that space and she is shut down. She will be the first Black woman to sing at the Opry. She will release an album on Plantation Records, which is actually quite extraordinary.

SCORING IN <[Linda Martell - Color Him Father](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM0H1kuk7Nc)>

*I think I'll color him father*

*I think I'll color him love*

ALICE: She has a beautiful voice. She's quite beautiful physically. She can rock these miniskirts. She has very much the sort of style of a Bobbie Gentry and people who are superstars of the moment. The album, I believe, is called Color Me Country. One of the great singles on it is called Color Him Father, which is actually about a stepfather.

SCORING BUMP

*I love this man and I don't know why*

ALICE: It's an extraordinary album, but she's on Hee Haw. She's on the Opry, but she never goes incognegro. The very first time she comes out as a Black woman, there just isn't the traction. She experiences myriad micro and macro aggressions navigating Nashville. She is not allowed in this space.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Okay. Charley Pride had done it. He had, like, broken the barrier. What happened with Linda Martell? Like, what was the resistance? He'd proved you could be popular and make money and be Black, so…

ALICE: One of my favorite songs I've written is a song called “Small Towns (Are Smaller for Girls).” And that was recorded by Holly Dunn. Small towns are smaller for girls. Small towns are even smaller for Black girls. And that's what Linda Martell was up against. And Music City was a small town. Linda Martell, when she left Nashville, continued to make music. She just wasn't making it in country spaces. Now in that time, in the early 60s, we're going to get the arguably most important album of country music and certainly the most important album of Black Country, perhaps to this current moment, is “Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music” by the great Ray Charles.

SCORING IN <[Ray Charles - I Can't Stop Loving You](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDqwmaI_IdU)>

*I can’t stop loving you*

*I've made up my mind*

ALICE: In my way of looking at it, DeFord Bailey is the papa, Lil Hardin is the mama, and Charley Pride is their genius child. This is the first family of Black country and the founding family of all country music. Because when Ray Charles releases “Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music,” it's going to deconstruct and reconstruct the industry and the audience's understanding of what country music is and it's going to claim the first huge white and Black, Asian and indigenous audience for country because everybody…

NOEL: Everybody.

ALICE: … listened to Ray Charles. He may not have been on the country charts, but everybody was listening to this. It was on the radios. It was in jukeboxes. It was everywhere. And it was constructing and deconstructing country music. Ray Charles is the foundation for everything, this genius child, that's coming into this current moment and this Beyoncé moment. And we now know that the album is called “Cowboy Carter,” is the biggest revelation since “Modern Sounds in Country and Western.” And it's that same kind of moment. I say that Beyoncé is Ray Charles’s genius child. She is deconstructing and reconstructing country in her own aesthetic image, but reflecting the Black geniuses come before and larger country cultural genius, and creating new opportunities for genius to come after.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Coming up: Beyoncé Country.

SCORING OUT

*To live in memories of the lonesome times*

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mm9ae_qg9I)*> Beyoncé - Daddy Lessons “Texas…”*

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. We’re back with Alice Randall. 21st century country has gotten really interesting. It includes your Darius Ruckers and your Li’l Nas X’s and other Black artists but Alice, who’s a songwriter and sort of country music historian says, the 21st century hasn’t been much kinder to Black women than the 20th was. Now she does list some bright spots. Rissi Palmer, Miko Marks, Mickey Guyton and then, along comes …

SCORING IN <[Rhiannon Giddens - The Ballad of Sally Anne](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T5qBn2gIA0)>

ALICE: The other great genius of black country, equal to Dolly Parton in country, is Rhiannon Giddens. We're going to see her appear first in the Carolina Chocolate Drops. She will discover the banjo. She will release extremely important country singles and albums. She is, by all standard measures, a beautiful woman. She has an extraordinary voice.

SCORING BUMP

*Sally shivered as she said, I love you ‘til the day I’m dead.*

ALICE: She is an extraordinary instrumentalist. World class. And she's a fine songwriter. Rhiannon should have been a country star. She had everything. To me, she is the evidence the system did not work at that point to allow a Black woman to rise to those heights. Beyoncé has her playing on Texas Hold 'Em.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Did you know Beyoncé was working on a country album?

ALICE: I had heard rumor. But more importantly, I knew Beyoncé had already done country music.

SCORING IN <[Beyoncé and Dixie Chicks - Daddy Lessons (LIVE at CMA Awards 2016)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85Ksi-uzuIg)>

*Came into this world*

*Daddy's little girl*

*And daddy made a soldier out of me (ooh-ooh)*

ALICE: I knew that Daddy Lessons was actually, I think, one of the great country songs of all time, that it was emphatically a country song. I had written an article about that in American Songwriter magazine, and had received some very harsh criticism for that article. And I also knew that when she performed with the Dixie Chicks on air, that it was actually an extraordinary country performance.

SCORING BUMP

*He said, "Take care of your mother*

*Watch out for your sister"*

*That's when Daddy looked at me…*

ALICE: I'd seen how that song had been received, which was negatively.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLB1h-qIS8c)*> Howard Stern interviewing Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks: It's the highest rated 15 minutes in CMA history. And then they start getting, you know, racist assholes bombarding their website with comments and emails and whatever. And so they take her down, they took our performance down and caved to that bullshit and then they, I guess got so much bad press for doing that, within 24 hours they put it back up again. Just cowards. It's just crazy. She just gave you your greatest ratings that you've ever gotten. How dare you take her song off?*

ALICE: I'd seen how much the establishment had pushed away at it, that I'd had myself a lot of push back when I thought I was speaking the obvious truth, that it was a country song.

SCORING OUT

ALICE: So the rejection of that and the rejection of her performance at the CMA Awards, to me, again, it was a Ray Charles moment. Beyoncé is a superstar. She could also be a country superstar. This has happened before. Elvis Presley started off thinking he was a country singer. He at some point became a rock star. And then maybe at some other point, he became a country singer again. And ultimately genre is just a construct too. But Beyoncé can be in both of these spaces. But what is interesting here to me, and what I love, I have seen literally white, black and Asian people dancing to “Texas Hold ‘Em” on my Instagram. I've seen all kinds of people from all walks of life doing all kinds of complicated dances. They're embracing this. Beyoncé is, her beauty is acknowledged widely now in this country space. This is the first time that a Black woman's ability, beauty and musicality has been acknowledged widely as a pinnacle. This moment means that finally the history of Black people in country is being acknowledged. It's far beyond the success of Beyoncé. It is a moment that reveals she did not come out of nowhere. She's not claiming to come out of nowhere. And when I listen to “16 Carriages,” for example…

SCORING IN <[Beyoncé - 16 Carriages](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhKNjTb6U1Y)>

*Sixteen carriages drivin' away*

*While I watch them ride with my dreams away*

*To the summer sunset on a holy night*

*On a long black road, all the tears I fight*

ALICE: …which is elegiac, that is a song that is in conversation with “May the Circle Be Unbroken.”

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0mGl3n9V4o)> The Carter Family - Can The Circle Be Unbroken (1935)

*Can the circle be unbroken*

*By and by Lord, by and by*

ALICE: It's a song in conversation with “Sixteen Tons,” a work song about coal mining.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRh0QiXyZSk)> Tennessee Ernie Ford - Sixteen Tons

*You load 16 tons, what do you get?*

*Another day older and deeper in debt*

*St. Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go*

*I owe my soul to the company store*

ALICE: It's a song in conversation with “Strawberry Wine.” I think about loss of innocence.   
  
 <[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up06CryWQpE)> Deana Carter - Strawberry Wine

*I was caught somewhere between a woman and a child*

*One restless summer we found love growing wild*

*On the banks of the river on a well beaten path*

*It's funny how those memories they last*

ALICE: It's also, I believe, a song, consciously or unconsciously, in conversation with my song “Xs and Os,” about the balance between love and money. That song is a Black country song.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4Q68U4-2A0)> Trisha Yearwood - XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)

*Fix the sink, mow the yard, really isn't all that hard*

*If you get paid*

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhKNjTb6U1Y)> Beyoncé - 16 Carriages

*Underpaid and overwhelmed*

*I might cook, clean, but still won't fold*

*Still workin' on my life, you know*

*Only God knows, only God knows*

*Only God knows*

*Sixteen carriages driving away...*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: It seems that what Beyoncé has the ability to do is, like, illuminate what from the past was lost or ignored, but then also fundamentally to change what the future looks like, right?

ALICE: Absolutely. What is also most important here is she is creating new sounds, new methods of narration. In country there's always a balance between preserving and evolving. But she is significantly preserving and spotlighting past genius, while manifesting her own present genius, and creating a path forward for further innovation.

NOEL: What do you think that means for Black artists? What could that mean for Black artists in country?

ALICE: I think the difference between 0 and 1 is immense. When something has never been done, people can think it is impossible to do. And they don't try and they don't support. When something has once been done, they think it can again be done. Now that she has done it, she has proven it's possible. No one again can say a Black woman can't chart. No one again can say, which is a thing that was unfortunately said around town, bring me the right Black woman. Bring me the one that's pretty enough. Who sings well enough and has some songs. And we'll make her a star.

SCORING IN <Beyoncé - Texas Hold ‘Em>

*This ain’t Texas, ain’t no hold ‘em…*

ALICE: But I think because it's been done, people know it can be done, and so I think it gives them a lot of fortitude. She had to be extraordinary. She is the path breaker. She had to evade layers and layers of cultural redlining. Strategically. Intellectually. Artistically. But she's also proven that there's a giant country audience that's new in this moment as well as an old audience, and that includes white people who thought they were too cool for country but were following Beyoncé and have followed Beyoncé into country. It includes Black people who didn't want to publicly acknowledge they like country, but are willing to publicly announce they like Beyoncé’s country. It includes white people who thought they really did not like Black country, but they just love this. It includes lots of people.

SCORING BUMP

*We’re headed to the dive bar we always thought was nice*

ALICE: People have fallen in love. It's a magical moment when people who don't get music, get it, because some music is being served up that is just irresistible.

SCORING BUMP

*This ain't Texas (woo), ain't no hold 'em (hey)*

*So lay your cards down, down, down, down*

NOEL: Songwriter Alice Randall. I spoke to her in her home in Belle Meade, Nashville. “My Black Country” is the name of her memoir. It comes out next month along with a compilation album of Alice’s songs, all performed by Black women musicians.

Beyoncé’s new album “Cowboy Carter” is out next week.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Amina Al-Sadi.

It was fact checked by Victoria Chamberlin and Anouck Dussaud. Patrick Boyd engineered.

Special thanks to our Nashville team, Amanda Lewellyn and Jolie Myers. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

*There's a heatwave (there's a heatwave) coming at us (coming at us)*

*Too hot to think straight (too hot to think straight)*

*Too cold to panic (cold to panic)*

*All of the problems just feel dramatic (just feel dramatic)*

*And now we're runnin' to the first spot that we find, yeah*

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**