

appeal.



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## Icon and Identity: Dolly Parton's Hillbilly Appeal

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Icon and Identity Dolly Parton's Hillbilly Appeal

*Graham Hoppe (bio)*

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*"They portray mountain people like we are all these dumb barefoot*

*hillbillies. I think country people are the smartest people in the world, and I've been everywhere."*

—Dolly Parton<sup>1</sup>



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*Asheville, NC, 2008. All photos by Tammy Mercure.*

## [End Page 49]

"Dolly, where I come from would I have called you a hillbilly?" asked Barbara Walters in 1977. "If you had, it would have probably been very natural, but I'd have probably kicked your shins," replied Dolly Parton, continuing, "We're the ones you would consider the Li'l Abner people, Daisy Mae, and that sort of thing—they took that from people like us. But, we're a very proud people. People with class—it was country class, but it was a great deal of class."<sup>2</sup>

What Dolly Parton understands is that the "hillbilly" aspects of her upbringing, her origin story, endear her to people who share that background and create an unmistakable air of authenticity for those who don't. Her "dumb blonde" is not so dumb (and not so naturally blonde either, as she's fond of saying). Parton's hillbilly brand subverts the

familiar stereotype, always rendered as white and usually barefoot. Hillbillies like to sing and hate to work. These cartoon mountain folk tend to have one of two faces: simpleminded and lazy, but harmless—too stupid to damage anyone but themselves—or violent, drunken louts who are incapable of controlling their sexual urges. Fueled by moonshine, the hillbilly is likely to fire a blunderbuss to scare off outsiders and/or is prone to try to have sex with anything that moves (including blood relatives and livestock). Overalls and a big floppy straw hat is, of course, the outfit of choice for the fellas. Hillbilly women get a similar treatment—curvaceous and usually blonde, they are presented as man-crazy, oversexed, and just as dim as their male counterparts. (A favorite conceit of hillbilly comics and cartoons is a voluptuous bride, or her father, marching a hapless boyfriend down to the church at gunpoint—the shotgun wedding.) It is this caricature that Dolly Parton plays to. Blonde, buxom, and beautiful, she was like a country music version of *Li'l Abner's* Daisy Mae Scragg come to life.

Daisy Mae is as responsible as any character for the popular notion of a hillbilly vixen. Created in 1934 by cartoonist Al Capp as a romantic foil for his good-natured but dimwitted hero Li'l Abner, love-struck Daisy chased Abner all over their fictional hometown of Dogpatch, Kentucky. Daisy wasn't any smarter than Abner, but she wasn't quite as lazy; she had a man to catch. Her scant outfit has become something of a trope itself—a polka dot peasant top and a skirt torn at the hem is often used as shorthand for a hillbilly pinup. Daisy Mae must have had some resonance with Parton, who posed on a hay bale in a replica of Daisy Mae's outfit for a 1978 poster, and then a decade later, in 1989's "White Limozeen," sang of a heroine who sounds more than a little like Parton herself. A "hometown girl" with "eyes full of stars [and] a heart full of dreams" who comes to the big city seeking stardom, Parton describes her as "Daisy Mae in Hollywood."<sup>3</sup> **[End Page 50]**



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*Stereotypes are certainly reductive and invite oversimplification, but in the right hands they can also work as effective brands. Parton has been exceptionally successful in bending stereotypes to her advantage, understanding early that her upbringing, her origin story, endears her to people who share that background and creates an unmistakable air of authenticity for those who do not. Her "dumb blonde" is not so dumb (and not naturally blonde either, as she's fond of saying). Pigeon Forge, TN, 2008.*

**"'WHITE TRASH!' I AM."**

In the early years of Parton's career she played a bit of the hometown girl with starry eyes. It seems hard to imagine now, but in early interviews with...

ESSAY

# Icon and Identity

## Dolly Parton's Hillbilly Appeal

by **Graham Hoppe**

*"They portray mountain people like we are all these dumb barefoot hillbillies. I think country people are the smartest people in the world, and I've been everywhere." — Dolly Parton'*



*Asheville, NC, 2008. All photos by Tammy Mercure.*



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