Iulia Andreea MILICĂ
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania

IDENTITY CRISES AND CONTEMPORARY ANXIETIES PLAYED AGAINST THE SOUTHERN RHYTHMS OF COUNTRY MUSIC: "WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD" BY RON RASH

Like many other Southern writers from the past or from the present, Ron Rash shares the belief that the best writing stems from the writer's profound connection to his/her region, or birthplace. In a short essay entitled "The Importance of Place," Rash writes that

> "the best regional writers are like farmers drilling for water; if they bore deep and true enough into that particular place, beyond the surface of local color, they tap into universal correspondences, what Jung called the collective unconscious. Thus Faulkner's Mississippi, Munro's Ontario, and Marquez's Columbia are both exotic and familiar." (*On Writing*).

This metaphor of the farmer drilling for water resonates with another famous metaphor of a fellow Southern writer, Eudora Welty, who compares regionalism to a Chinese lamp: what one sees, is a mere lamp with a scene painted on the outside, however, once the lamp is lit,

> "through the porcelain sides, a new picture comes out through the old, and they are seen as one. [...] The lamp alight is the combination of the internal and the external, glowing at the imagination as one, and so is a good novel" (Welty 120).

Location becomes a stage altered an enriched by the writer's imagination who imbues it with a universal meaning, appealing to readers beyond the region's borders. While recognizing the specific cultural context, readers are able to form connections with the human views expressed in it.

Ron Rash, therefore, places himself in the gallery of Southern writers, but, like many of his contemporaries, he has already departed from the ideas promoted, at the beginning of the twentieth century, by the representatives of the Southern Renascence, who described a homogenous South, a representation which ignores diversity and tends to bind all Southerners together by common traits, goals and ideals. For Rash, there are "many Souths" within a larger region, a quilt-like patchwork of regions, mentalities, ideals and representations, all southern, yet distinct in their peculiar vision

on "Southerness". The monolithic South becomes divided in smaller, more specific regions and communities, bound together by a common allegiance to the South, yet separated by loyalty to a more distinct and smaller cultural and social space.

In this light, Ron Rash is both a Southerner and an Appalachian writer, a complicated identity, since, being an Appalachian means being a Southerner, but not loyal to many Southern "myths" and representations. Appalachia is a region that has gained prominence in Southern studies more recently that others and still retains a more marked individuality. According to Ronald Eller, "always part of the mythical South, Appalachia continues to languish backstage in the American drama, still dressed, in the popular mind, at least, in the garments of backwardness, violence, poverty and hopelessness, once associated with the South, as a whole. No other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite as persistently as Appalachia" (ix). A similar line of definition is followed by other researchers. For instance, Rodger Cunningham (1996) argues that while the South may be labeled the "Other" by the North, Appalachia becomes the "Other's Other" – "a region marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being" (qtd. in Tate 131). Some even see Appalachia as an "internal colony." The one who first made this assertion, the writer Silas House, contends that Appalachia is treated as an Other "in a culture that increasingly places value on Sameness" (65) and argues that this form of representation, that of being an "internal colony", is rather the manner in which the rest of the Americans see this region, especial with reference to media misrepresentation and manipulation (House 66). This representation is, indeed, simplistic, as it ignores the region's diversity, and yet, to American eyes, Appalachia seems to be now what the South was in the nineteenth century, a place of poverty, violence, backwardness and lack of sophistication, more conservative and traditional. A writer, like Rash, for instance, needs to navigate through these stereotypes and present a more complex, as well as a more realistic facet of what Appalachia really is and he does so, according to Zachary Vernon, as he

> "reveals an Appalachia that is, like all regions of the country, both backward and progressive, poor and rich, rural and urban/suburban. Refusing to commodify while also refusing to exoticize, Rash creates characters who are balanced and believable, and as such, readers see neither the noble Appalachian individualist nor the demeaning Appalachian simpleton; rather, readers see Appalachians

displaying the full and complex range of human sensibilities. Therefore, Rash's commemorative vision of the region enables readers to see Appalachians as being simultaneously unique and universal" (Vernon 122)

Regional specificity and an identity crisis is addressed in the short story *Waiting for the End of the World,* included in the volume *Burning Bright* from 2010. The stories of this collection are set in the Appalachian Mountains and bring to mind glimpses of Flannery O'Connor's Georgian backwoods: violence, poverty and grief are occasionally interspersed with moments of redemption, glimpses of humor or gestures of kindness. The short story does not have a specific location, the only setting being a roadhouse, but it becomes clear that the larger background is Appalachia, with later references to country music, and especially to artists who are (fortunately) more Appalachian than Southern, like Gary Stewart. Thus, a sense of regional identification is inserted later in the text which addresses the issue of modern alienation, loss of identity and despair against a background that seems to be specifically Appalachian: country music and drug addiction.

Though this combination may appear strange and unfit, it can be explained in the larger context of Rash's Appalachian writings. The story's background of addiction reflects a social problem which Rash addressed in many of his writing, drawing the alarm on the rampant increase of drug consumption in modern Appalachia, while also following the grotesque literary tradition of southern writing.

Disease and deformity have often been part of Southern fiction, as reflections of the Southern gothic and marks of southern specificity. Representations of disease in various forms: mental and physical, bodily deformities and illnesses, psychological problems point to the southern sense of marginalization and deviance, a region of poverty, disregarded by the rest of America. Similarly, disease and deformity also function as a metaphorical representation of various southern problems: the sins of the past, the "disease" of slavery, the burden of family traditions, the repressed guilts, the violence, and the list may go on. Beyond these metaphorical representations of disease and deformity, Ron Rash's frequent references to drugs, especially to methamphetamine, represent a real depiction of contemporary problems in Appalachia. In an interview given to Thomas Aervold Bjerre, Rash underlines the fact that "the 1970s is the end of the agrarian world, when the young generation will no longer be involved in that lifestyle and the time when drugs abuse became a rising problem. Not

that people weren't already using drugs, or particularly, cultivating marijuana. But in the '70s you really saw it explode, and it's led ultimately to something much more sinister, and that is meth, the use of methamphetamine, which is really rampant in a lot of rural areas in the United States and definitely in Appalachia" (Bjerre 2019). The passage from tradition to modernity is thus marred by serious issues, as these drug issues point to an uncertain and ambiguous future mainly suggested, in the short stories of this collection, by the death of children, the addictions of young people and the strange choices of the elders.

The entire story unfolds in a few hours, in a dingy roadhouse, The Last Chance, populated by "human wreckage" (107), drunkards and addicts, and it is narrated in the first person by Devon, the main singer of the band, a former teacher of English literature. The vagueness of the time reference "it's somewhere between Saturday night and Sunday morning" (106) and the ominous name of the place "I'm in a cinderblock roadhouse called The Last Change" (107) might suggest a symbolic descent of all humanity, into perdition, but the first person narrative, with the acid comments on the situation also allows the reader a certain Poesque distance from the terrible scenes depicted, an ironical view more of the narrator himself, than of the scene unfolding before our eyes.

While pondering on the human spectacle in front of his eyes and on his own life, the narrator fails to see that he is also part of this crown of human wreckage, a truth he is not ready to admit in his solitary and stubborn search for hope. His meditations are accompanied by three songs, whose choice is either his own, or prompted by the public. These songs are more than a musical accompaniment of the narrator's musings, and each reflects the singer's and the listeners' desperate attempt to find solace, meaning and happiness in a desperate existence. The musical references deepen character analysis (Lang 85) and "It is music, song, and the aspiration contained in the lyrics that transport listeners beyond their current condition, affording them a type of transcendence, one of the major functions of art itself. As a musician, an artist figure, the narrator combats the forces of disintegration, of chaos and despair." (Lang 85) Even though he fulfills the demands of the bar's denizens, he also imposes, even to their discontent, his own personal choices of music, as he feels, at least temporarily, a sense of control, or, at least the mere comfort of believing he still has a choice.

The three songs of the story are Gary Stewart's *Roaring* (1980), a choice of the narrator, Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Free Bird* (1973), an almost addictive song for the people in the bar from one of the most famous country-rock Southern bands, and Elvis Costello's *Waiting for the End of the World* (1977), which Devon plays after he remains alone in the bar. Chained in this sequence, the songs seem to trace Devon's quest towards hope and in a confusing and bleak world. This particular choices of songs, coupled with references to literature, also open the path towards other challenging discussions, such as regional and national identity (stemming from the choice of more or less famous country-rock songs), high culture and low culture, mass media cultural production and distribution and live performance. The display of human degradation and despair in the form of a bar filled with drunkards and addicts, with the narrator at once part of it (he has reached rock bottom after having had a career and a family) and an outside (as he still has the capacity to meditate on the situation and adopt a tragi-comic stance), is played against the background of music, literature, and modern media (mention of records, television, music industry). Modern identity is shaped both by personal choices as well as by social problems, pressures and by media production.

The story connects the protagonist's past and present existence by casually connecting music stars and canonic writers, names stemming out of the narrator's past as a teacher of English literature and his present as a singer in a bar. While he mentions the song he just finished playing for the fifth time, *Free Bird,* Devon is "not thinking of Ronnie Van Zant, but an artist dredged up from my former life, Willie Yeats, and his line *surely some revelation is at hand*." (106) Willie Yeats, whose name resonates with that of Ronnie Van Zant, vocalist and lyricist of the Southern band Lynyrd Skynyrd, is none other than William Butler Years, and the line belongs to one of his most famous poems, *The Second Coming* (1920). The poem, charged with allusions to various other texts, from the Bible to Shelley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Nerval, forms a hidden scaffolding on which the story is constructed as the reference to Yeats' "rough beast" open and end the story. The "rough beast" may be the agent of destruction and yet, it may also be messenger of salvation and, by trying to escape, through art, from the bleak present, Devon may, at least, hope, that there is still some meaning in the world.

The literary references are dealt with irony, as the story avoid succumbing either into sentimentality, or into patronizing intellectual pretenses (though the narrator seems to fall into the trap of considering himself superior due to his cultured background). Thus, the Biblical, apocalyptic imagery of the poem ironically resonates in the degrading current situation of the story's characters, as the "the only rough beast slouching toward me is my rhythm guitar player, Sammy Griffen, who is down on all fours, weaving through the crowd of tables between the bathroom and stage" (105). The poem's fantastic creature, the Sphynx, "A shape with lion's body and the head of a man,/ A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,/ Its moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds" (Yeats 158), seems to reverberate in another fantastic beast, the Gryphon, comically embodied by the guitar player, Griffen, who crawls through the drunken customers, symbolizing the degradation of humanity under the effects of alcohol and drugs, coupled with despair and alienation. On the other hand, though, despite the light tone when mentioning Yeats and his poem and the ironic connections, its meaning is taken seriously, as the short story also ends with a reference to *The Second Coming*: "and whatever rough beast is already asleep out there in the dark is getting its wake-up call and I'm ready and waiting for whatever it's got" (111), remind of the last lines of Yeats' poem: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (Yeats 158). A potential, but not at all certain salvation may still be possible for Devon, as it may also be for the rest of humanity.

In this ambiguous reference to salvation, Ron Rash's short story actually follows the Southern gothic tradition as a reflection of the darkness of the human heart, the emotional and psychological degradation of people, a sense of despair and loss, but this vision is not completely pessimistic. Often compared to Flannery O'Connor, Rash's use of violence or the grotesque underlines the creative and not the destructive forces of a universe in which grace is offered to humanity, but only if people are ready or willing to accept it. The apocalyptic imagery of Yeats' poem underlines the narrator's despair and loss of direction as well as his hope that salvation may still come.

Other cultural and literary allusions are inserted in the text, suggesting that, very often, what we see is not the reality. For instance, the bar owner, Rodney, the one who makes money out of the addictions of his clients, and,

as such, looks like an "updated version of Flem Snopes" (108), the (in)famous character from William Faulkner's writings, is actually a university graduate, "with a degree in social work. He wanted to make the world better, but, according to Rodney, the world wasn't interested." (108). Ending up as the owner of the Last Chance, Rodney proudly displays his disillusionment with humanity by placing a Darwinian bumper sticker above the cash register, accompanied by the line "Exterminate the brutes!" taken from another famous literary text, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

These literary references are interspersed in a text that heavily relies on musical references, especially country music, since this is one of the jobs Devon needs in order to survive and also pay the alimony. Apparently disgusted by what he sees as a degrading position, in comparison to his more elevated previous situation as an English teacher, Devon displays a thorough knowledge of music, deeper than what is required for a simple job. He likes music, but, in order to distance himself from the customers of the bar, he pretends he hates his job, which he accepted only because of a better pay. He way in which he speaks about music, though, and how he feels it suggests that this form of art is, for him, more than a job. It is a safe space of comfort and control as he steers through the rough waters of his life.

By making, from the start, the connection between popular music and canonic literature, what in superficial terms we would call "high culture" and "low culture", the narrator strives to create a distinction between himself and the rest of the denizens of the bar, dissociating himself from what he sees as "human wreckage", but painfully aware that he is part of them. Even in his musical references, he repeatedly discriminates between the valuable and the commercial, the original and the sellable as he creates for himself the illusion of superiority reflected in his choices of Gary Stewart, Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam, he sees as more original country artists, in comparison to Lynyrd Skynyrd, a very famous country group and the public's choice.

This oscillation between value and superficiality, authenticity and commercialization reflects one of the challenging aspects of country music and the industry it created. Despite its immense popularity in the United States, it remains, to many, a reflection not only of a more distinct region of America, namely the South, but also the product of less sophisticated, rural and marginal groups of people. Barbara Ching points out that country music seems to retain an inferior position even among other southern genres:

> "Southerners use music for the much more colloquial and mundane task of talking. Music, down there, descends from a civilized art to the mere commerce of everyday life. […] country music remains a degraded dialect of Southern-speak, beloved but scorned for its distinctively pathetic themes, its ostensibly untrained musicianship, and its association with lower-class whites, known variously as crackers, hillbillies, and white trash" (2004: 203).

Her assertion is not meant to present a reality, but to underline a more extensive, albeit subjective, attitude on the South as she highlights the fact that this classification in "higher" and "lower" types of music is a form of marginalization of the South from a Northern vantage point, implying that the former is seen and represented in various media as inferior, poorer, less cultivated and more racist, backward and sentimental. What for Southerners is seen as a mark of Southern distinctiveness and one of "the South's great natural resources and one of its most valuable exports" (White 322), a token of originality and authenticity, for others it is sold as mere backwardness, lack of sophistication and a reflection of "hillbillies", "white trash", "crackers", "bubbas", etc. Thus, this very popular genre, it is also "un-popular" for at least two reasons: first, it is associated with the South in a rather pejorative manner, adding to all the other media representations of this region as inferior and, second, this poignant mark of "Southerness" leads to an assumed sense of marginality that is identified by the Southerners as authenticity, originality, preservation of a sense of identity as a form of resistance to commodification and uniformity. This is strategy of assumed self-marginalization has often been employed by the Southern intellectuals in their efforts, through various ages, to define the Southern identity. Richard Gray, for instance, points out the fact that:

> "the difference with the Southern strategy is that it customarily begins from a consciousness of its own marginality and even 'failure,' its position on the edge of the narrative. The constitutive otherness of the North or the American is considered central; the South, in whatever terms it is understood, is placed on the boundary, posed as a (albeit probably preferable) deviation. This is a poignant reversal of the usual strategies of cultural self-positioning." (4).

In other words, this strategy of self-marginalization from a more dominant North has long been applied in literature and extensively analyzed in critical works. In addition, it seems to function also in other cultural realms where the idea of "Southerness" is in evaluation, like music. In terms of the country music's popularity, this sense of assumed otherness is explained by

Christian Schmidt whose argument is that its immense popularity measured in sales figures is viewed by those involved in it with skepticism „since country music quickly runs the risk of selling out the interests of the small folk for whom it has to speak and sing." (149)

For a reader who may have only a superficial knowledge of country music, the references to the artists and songs in Ron Rash's short story are a clear indication of a southern background and, at first sight, they seem to reinforce the preconceived idea that this is a facile type of entertainment for bar performances and seems to comply with the typical image of marginality, inferiority, backwardness, as it seems to be fit for roadhouses and bars frequented by low-lives, drunkards and addicts. At a closer look, though, musical choices are not random, neither are they superficial and merely conjectural. Each one of the three songs we read about can be connected to identity creation, community bonding, regional identification and vision upon existence. It is also important to notice not only what is sung, but also how the tunes are chosen by the singer and how these songs are connected to other cultural and literary references that eventually depict a richer cultural background than it might have been understood at a first, superficial reading.

The first song that is mentioned belongs to a famous rock-country band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and is entitled *Free Bird.* However, the song is only mentioned as being one of the most required by the public who "got to have 'Free Bird' at least once an hour, Rodney said when he hired me, saying it like his clientele were diabetics needing insulin. The rest of the time you play what you want" (Rash 106). However, it is not the first song to be more extensively presented in the story. After this first mention, Devon, the protagonists, moves on to a choice of his own, *Roarin'* by Gary Stewart, postponing the presentation of *Free Bird* for later.

Rougher and closer to the roots of country music, Stewart appealed to the more traditional country music lovers, but his career was cut short by his suicide following the death of his wife. According to Bill C. Malone, Stewart "never flirted with the country-pop sound, but instead veered between rockabilly and honky-tonk, combining the zest and bounce of the former with the tortured lament of the latter. … Hard-core country fans found Stewart's clear and pleading tenor voice, with its pronounced and breathy vibrato, immensely appealing. He was one of the few country entertainers to draw the approval of *Rolling Stone* reviewers. Their endorsement, however,

was triggered by the rockabilly in him—by the hedonistic abandon and "let the good times roll" qualities that characterized much of his music" (480). It is probably his less commercial, more authentic sound that prompted Devon's choice of *Roarin'*, as he seems to identify both with the artist's tragic destiny, as with his regional (Appalachian) allegiance.

> "Stewart was one of this country's neglected geniuses, once dubbed honky-tonk's 'white trash ambassador from hell' by one of the few critics who bothered listening to him. His music is two centuries' worth of pent-up Appalachian soul, too intense and pure for Nashville, though they tried their best to pith his brain with cocaine, put a cowboy hat on his head, and make him into another talentless music-city hack. Stewart spent some of his last years hunkered down in a North Florida trailer park: no phone, not answering the door, every window of the hulk of rusting tin he called home painted black. Surviving on what songwriting residuals dribbled in from Nashville" (Rash 107).

Devon ironically comments that such a life of isolation may have its appeals, especially as he looks around himself thinking that "maybe it's time to halt all human reproduction. Let God or evolution or whatever put us here in the first place start again from scratch, because this isn't working" (Rash 107). The misanthropic comment accompanies Devon's disillusionment and despair. His life is also a failure, "Mistakes were made, as the politicos say" (Rash 107), and taking the wrong turn and sliding down the slope of life is only too easy. His personal failure, that of Gary Stewart and even the collection of human wrecks around him, imply that failure is not only an individual loss of direction, but a social problem, like a contagious disease, spreading and contaminating everyone. Eliminated from his school and teaching career and from his family, the narrator is reduced to a check. The loss of humanity is stressed by his objectification – he is no more than an object, a sum of money sent in an envelope, no physical contact, no emotional connection, just impersonal transaction. The only choice that he can make at this point is that of the song he plays, and the bouncy rhythms of Stewart's song, with its lyrics that speak about living at the greatest intensity "When the wild side of me starts showing / You better get out of my way / Cause I'm roarin' ", even when "My eyes are wide open but I'm dead on my feet" (Stewart) contrast sharply with the performer's or the audience's state of mind.

Devon's identification with Gary Stewart and the appreciation of his later isolation from the world also expresses some of the dualities implied by

country music: "those dualisms exhibit the friction between oppositions such as the rural past and the urban present, home versus rambling, and freedom versus restraint" (Edwards 9). The sense of freedom expressed in both songs, Stewart's and Lynyrd Skynyrd's, contrast sharply with that happens in his own life where freedom and personal choices seem to succumb to financial pressures and punishment for past mistakes.

The choice of this particular artist, as well as his subsequent preference for Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam, he never gets to play because the public has other preferences, is also interesting, because it is clear that Devon is a connoisseur of music, knowing more than an English teacher might be expected to. Indeed, he ended up earning his existence by singing in bars, however, the way in which he explains and approaches these songs reveals the English teacher's critical thinking and the passion of a music aficionado. This apparent lack of sophistication of country music leads to very sophisticated comments from an intellectual, supporting Barbara Ching's analysis of country music as a volunteer display of unsophistication:

> As a cultural phenomenon, then, country music can be heard as the music *chosen* by the unsophisticated. At the same time, the music itself expresses this group's lack of sophistication. In fact, country music often proudly signals its lack of sophistication-a quality that in its terms is decidedly contemporary and urban. But this skeptical picture of urbanity in itself is neither surprising nor interesting. Instead, what interests me is the critique of pure country that such skepticism can produce. The most flamboyant country music-the lyrics, the characteristic instrumentation and vocal techniques, and the stars of country music, taken together-often functions as a sly, even campy, announcement of the fact that it is a *performance* rather than a spontaneous expression of some pure emotion or state of being. In other words, country music is capable of performing the rural role in such a way as to underline its construction and social purpose rather than its presumed natural essence, innocence, and/or bad taste (1997: 233)

Devon insists that he is just a performer, and not part of the people around him, separating himself from the rest in a gesture of self-protection and, even, self-delusion, hoping that he retains some form of control over his own existence as he feels he is slowly losing his individuality and is engulfed in the mass of "human wreckage" around him. His comments on Gary Stewart's form of country music and on his career are his manner of suggesting that there is more to the music he sings and that he is a performer who has the ability to detach himself from the simple emotions music generates, being capable to understand it at a deeper lever. He also implies

what many music commentators have mentioned, namely the fact that success and commercialization of the country music is seen by many practitioners as a decrease of value, as he tries not to feel ashamed for performing in such a sordid environment. When the band finishes the song, "only three or four people clap. A lot of the crowd doesn't know the song or, for that matter, who Gary Stewart was. Radio and Music Television have anesthetized them to the degree that they can't recognize the real thing, even when it comes from their own gene pool" (108). They do not even care to hear other songs, as he would have preferred to continue with Steve Earle or Dwight, but keep asking for Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Just like Gary Stewart, Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam are also part of a more traditional trend in country music. Both "privately described themselves as hillbillies but responded bitterly if someone else called them that" (Malone 48), reflecting this ambivalence of country music practitioners who want to stay close to their roots, but reject the pejorative nuances that are associated with the term "hillbilly". According to Bill Malone, Steve Earle "has similarly stayed on the fringes of country music but has profoundly impressed musicians both within that field and in bluegrass" (500) and Dwight Yoakam is known for „because of his outspoken criticism of Nashville and his passionate defense of hillbilly music and values" (498), both of them sharing with Gary Stewart this search for authenticity and an anti-commercial spirit.

While commenting on the "un-popularity" of this very popular music genre, Christian Schmidt argues that "Even though its self-understanding is that of music made by and aimed at the common man—thus, popular in a very elementary sense of the term—it explicitly rejects an association with popular culture, understood as artificial 'pop' culture" (148). What almost appears to be nonsensical, becomes understandable in connection to what country music is supposed to represent – the authenticity of the American experience and life, the "small town" ethos and the unsophisticated (as in honest, straightforward, untainted) mindset. Schmidt also explains that:

> True country music, so the reasoning goes, is the unpopular realm of small-town folks and precisely not the glitter of Hollywood or Broadway and thus almost necessitates a negation of commercialism and popular success. It is not a part of the pop culture industry, but rather an honest encounter between fans and performers, who meet as equals in the shared space of the home of country music, which is usually located in an idealized, Southern small town. (150)

Many other commentators and researches concur with the same idea, namely the desire of country music practitioners to appear as authentic as possible and to avoid being associated with superficial mercantilism:

> The country genre makes insistent claims for authenticity, demanding of its performers some proof of credibility (sometimes earned through affiliation with rural life, demonstrable hard-luck life experiences, or dedication to the Nashville music community). Scholars have pointed out that country music's construction of authenticity involves a perceived tension between artistic purity versus the market, organic rawness versus commercial polish, anti-modern nostalgia for rural agrarianism versus modernity and the commercialization of the mass media marketplace (Edwards 10).

Devon implies that even though the public may not be able to distinguish any longer the true, original country song from the commercial tunes, country music is more than what they are fed on from the media. Moreover, the verb "anesthesized" used in relation to Radio and Music Television resonates with the alcohol and drug consumption present around him all through the story and depicting a dreary image of the contemporary world. It is almost as if suggesting that people fall not only because of their own choices, but also because the world bombards them with anesthetic, cheap trick, that lure them into perdition.

Other representations of the southern culture are casually inserted as the two other facets of southern pop-culture are ironically inserted in the text: sports - baseball and car racing – NASCAR, complementing the references to Nashville, the capital of country music. And, just like in the case of music, these references are examples of falsity, pretense and destruction of value. Thus, among the people present, Devon spots Hubert McClain, a well-known baseball player "sitting at the bar, beer in one hand and Louisville Slugger in the other. Hubert is our bouncer, two hundred and fifty pounds of atavistic Celtic violence coiled and ready to happen" (Rash 107). The presence of McClain, his baseball bat in his hand, seems at least odd, but helps create the complex background of the story. The human wreckage presented at the beginning, is made up of destroyed individualities, people with a past who, somehow, got lost on their way, much like some of the artists mentioned by Devon. The almost supernatural tableau is completed by McClain's companion, Joe Don Byers, formerly known as Yusef Byers, who draws the attention because, "While it seems every white male between fourteen and twenty-five is trying to look and act black, Joe Don is going the

opposite way, a twenty-three-year-old black man trying to be a Skoal-dipping, country-music-listening good ole boy." (Rash 108). What also draws the attention is his Toyota with a Dave Earnhardt bumper sticker, though "any true Earnhardt fan would rather ride a lawn mower than drive anything other than a Chevy" (Rash 108). All references, therefore, to elements of contemporary Southern distinctiveness (music, sports and car races) have the same ambivalence, oscillating between pop-culture elements, tainted, in the view of the narrator, by media transmission and commercialization and Southern authenticity, recognized in its core by few, but imitated in a flawed manner by many.

At the public request and against his wishes, Devon need to return to *Free Bird*, played by the rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. He is asked to play it at least once every hour, functioning almost like a drug, a temporary escape, from the complacency, resignation and despair in which these people live:

> Heads rise from tables and stare my way. Conversations stop. Couples arguing or groping each other pause as well. And this is the way it always is, as though Van Zant somehow found a conduit into the collective unconscious of his race. Whatever it is, they become serious and reflective. Maybe it's just the music's slow surging build. Or maybe something more—a yearning for the kind of freedom Van Zant's lyrics deal with, a recognition of the human need to lay their burdens down. (111-2)

The repetition of the line "this bird you cannot change" and the ending "Won't you fly high, free bird, yeah" resonate in the minds of all those who do not see such freedom in the future. Devon's views on Lynyrd Skynyrd are not as favorable as for the artists that he wants to play "Ronnie Van Zant didn't have the talent of Gary Stewart or Steve Earle or Dwight Yoakam, but he did what he could with what he had. Skynyrd never pruned their Southern musical roots to give them 'national appeal,' and that gave their music, whatever else its failings, an honesty and an edge." (Rash 110). This attitude marks the narrator's subjectivity and allows readers to create a distance between his personal opinions and reality, and, in doing that, to have a more correct appraisal of Devon's own failures. He seems to dislike this band and dismiss it as superficial simply because the others prefer it, and he tries not to be like them. In fact, in music history, the band Lynyrd Skynyrd is actually seen as one of the most famous representatives of country-rock, sticking to their Southern allegiances as well as embodying a rebellious, anti-system attitude. The volume dedicated to music of the

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, describes them as "Led by lead singer Ronnie Van Zant, Lynyrd Skynyrd emerged from the Florida swamps with a sound that almost slapped listeners in the face. The group was influenced by country, the blues, and the Rolling Stones, who had earlier created a sound from country and blues music. But Skynyrd brought something new that no other southern rock band, or rock band in general, had: a screw-you attitude that applied to both musicians and politicians." (Malone 140). Therefore, Lynyrd Skynyrd remains in music history, for many, as "the quintessential southern rock band, and its string of hits and fulfillment of many southern stereotypes seems to back this up" (Malone 140). According to Barbara Ching, Lynyrd Skynyrd was one of the band whose members wanted to be seen as Southern and, in order to resist the rock trend that made Southern music more „American", they „defended Alabama with Southern chivalry and swagger" (Ching 2004: 214). As he seems to misunderstand the real impact of Lynyrd Skynyrd, Devon also fails to connect to the rest of the bar's customers and to admit that he is also part of them. His story of failure and disillusionment does not and cannot remain separate, but blends with that of Rodney, Hubert McClain, the other members of his band, whose stories we do not know, and all the rest. Music unites them and offers a temporary escape and oblivion of hardships, the feeling of shared burdens, communion and kindness:

> "Heads rise from tables and stare my way. Conversations stop. Couples arguing or groping each other pause as well. And this is the way it always is, as though Van Zant somehow found a conduit into the collective unconscious of his race. Whatever it is, they become serious and reflective. Maybe it's just the music's slow surging build. Or maybe something more—a yearning for the kind of freedom Van Zant's lyrics deal with, a recognition of the human need to lay their burdens down. And maybe, for a few moments, being connected to the music and lyrics enough to actually feel unshackled, free and in flight." (Rash 110-1)

This moment that seems to transport all out of this wretched place and terrible time is cut short and the return to reality is painful. Rodney interrupts the light and throws everybody out of the door. In leaving the place, the customers return to their sub-human reactions: "It's like the last scene in a vampire movie. People start wailing and whimpering. They cover their eyes, crawl under tables, and ultimately—and this is the goal—scurry toward the door and out into the dark, dragging the passed-out and knocked-out with them." (Rash 112). The scene is almost unearthly, terrible

in its suggestion that the sordid bar appears to be, for them, the only safe haven they have.

Devon does not leave the bar and prefers this apparent safety that the place offers. Unwilling to return to the real world of the daylight, he keeps on singing for himself, letting music be his companion in times of struggle. While he previously laughed at the customers' vices, he also seems addicted to an artificial paradise, not that of drugs or alcohol, but one offered by music, or, at least, the temporary freedom he feels in listening to or performing various song. His choice is *Waiting for the End of the World* by Elvis Costello, who is not part of the country tradition, but whose song seems to have helped Devon in times in crisis during the divorce. Just like with Gary Stewart, Devon tries to find common points with Costello, mentioning that the first two albums were "pure rage and heartbreak" (111), probably what he felt when his world came crumbling down. He does not remember the lyrics, except for the refrain: "We were waiting for the end of the word / We were waiting for the end of the word / We were waiting for the end of the word / Dear Lord, I sincerely hope you're coming / 'Cause you really started something" (Costello).

The short story's ending is rather ambiguous, as a sense of despair seems to take over the protagonist who cannot summon the courage to leave the bar and confront the following day. John Lang sees in this ending a glimpse of hope: "Rash's elaborate closing sentence, ninety words long, reflects Devon's sense of control and his willingness to resist the anomie surrounding him" (191), arguing that "unlike the bar's clientele, who leave the Last Chance 'wailing and whimpering' and covering their eyes, Devon is a figure of strength who has a sense of purpose and confronts the threat of meaninglessness open-eyed" (190). It is indeed a more direct form of confrontation of the world that what the rest of the bar's customers are doing, as Devon has the capacity to think about what happened to him and how the world looks like. He sees the human tragedy unfolding in his life and around him and still hopes that there is a form of salvation. The certainty of grace is not there, it is just the hope of God's coming (expressed in Costello's songs) and the "rough beast's" wake-up call (of Yeats' poem). His willingness to accept whatever is coming, however, can be seen as a form of control and as a refusal to let himself go completely.

Ron Rash's short story, therefore, offers a complex representation of contemporary "Southerness" by references to the country music tradition

and ambiguous position in the American music industry, as well as a rational depiction of contemporary problems. Addictions, failure and modern anxiety are played against the background of literature and music as the narrator deals with his own flaws and despair while hoping for a divine solution. Music seems to offer solace and a sense of human bondage in a world filled with despair.

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CRISE D'IDENTITÉ ET ANXIÉTÉS CONTEMPORAINES JOUÉES CONTRE LES RYTHMES DU SUD DE LA COUNTRY MUSIQUE : « EN ATTENDANT LA FIN DU MONDE » PAR RON RASH

Résumé: La nouvelle „Waiting for the End of the World", incluse dans le recueil „Burning Bright" de Ron Rash en 2010, regorge de références à la littérature et à la musique, tout en déployant la scène de la misère et du désespoir humains. Racontée

à la première personne par un chanteur de groupe qui se produit devant une foule hétéroclite d'ivrognes et de toxicomanes dans un relais routier bien nommé The Last Change, l'histoire est un aperçu complet et profond de l'identité, de la culture et du consumérisme contemporains, des spécificités du Sud et la mondialisation. Le but de cet essai est d'analyser les références littéraires et musicales de cette nouvelle spécifique du point de vue de la spécificité sudiste afin de voir comment les artefacts culturels contribuent au sentiment d'identification et d'appartenance des gens. Les discussions autour de concepts tels que la culture pop, la « haute culture » et la « basse culture », l'authenticité et le commercialisme visent à définir la manière dont l'individu moderne tente de trouver un sens dans un monde de mercantilisme et d'indifférence. Le contexte de la nouvelle, un relais routier dont les clients sont des ivrognes et des toxicomanes fuyant une existence terrible, perçue par un chanteur tout aussi désespéré, renforce l'importance de la musique qui peut offrir, au moins temporairement, un sentiment de contrôle, d'évasion, réconfort et communion humaine.

Mots-clés: *Sud américain, identité, régionalisme, country music, pop-culture, identité, addiction.*

Abstract: The short story "Waiting for the End of the World", included in Ron Rash's 2010 collection 'Burning Bright', is replete with references to literature and music, while unfolding the scene of human misery and despair. Told in the first person by a band singer performing to a motley crowd of drunks and drug addicts at a roadhouse aptly named The Last Change, the story is a comprehensive and profound insight into contemporary identity, culture and consumerism, the specificities of the South and globalisation. The aim of this essay is to analyse the literary and musical references in this specific novel from the point of view of Southern specificity, to see how cultural artefacts contribute to people's sense of identification and belonging. Discussions around concepts such as pop culture, 'high culture' and 'low culture', authenticity and commercialism aim to define how the modern individual attempts to find meaning in a world of commercialism and indifference. The setting of the story, a truck stop whose customers are drunks and drug addicts fleeing a terrible existence, as perceived by an equally desperate singer, reinforces the importance of music, which can offer, at least temporarily, a sense of control, escape, comfort and human communion.

Keywords: *South American, identity, regionalism, country music, pop culture, identity, addiction.*