

Graduate Student Profile

Jada Watson, Université Laval



Figure 1: Jada Watson.

Jada Watson is a Ph.D. candidate in Musicology at Université Laval under the supervision of Dr. Serge Lacasse. She holds a Diploma in Piano Performance (2003) from Cambrian College, and B.A. with Specialization in Music and a Minor in Russian (2006), M.A. in Musicology (2008), and Master of Information Studies (2011) from the University of Ottawa. In November 2008 she was part of the first panel devoted to country music at the joint meeting of the American Musicological Society and Society for Music Theory in Nashville, TN. In addition to her doctoral studies, Watson is currently the Undergraduate Research Coordinator for the University of Ottawa.

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My primary research interest considers the ways in which country musicians draw on place in their music as a way of negotiating elements of their artistic identity. The tradition of place-based narratives in country music dates back to early hillbilly recordings, songs of the singing cowboy, bluegrass, and Texas Swing music. These songs did not just define place, but also the relationship between the individual and his or her surrounding environment and community. In the late 1960s and early 1970s place themes began to play a

new role in the genre, as a way of defining core elements of an artistic identity, allowing artists to maintain ties to humble origins and a working-class culture. For example, prominent female artists like Loretta Lynn (“Coal Miner’s Daughter” (1969)) and Dolly Parton (*My Tennessee Mountain Home* (1973)) found success in songs that communicated their life experiences, highlighting their poor, rural upbringing. Contemporary country artists continue this tradition today, and use these songs as a way to unveil elements of their identity, values, and beliefs that would otherwise remain hidden or overshadowed.

My first project to explore the relationship between artist and place focused on the Dixie Chicks’ 2006 response to lead singer Natalie Maines’ hometown of Lubbock, Texas, in their song “Lubbock or Leave it”. This research, recently published in the *Journal of the Society for American Music*, demonstrated that, while the trio’s lyrics appear to reject Lubbock outright, the song’s musical setting draws on stylistic conventions deeply associated with the West Texas region against which Maines rails. The use of conventions associated with Lubbock in a song that criticizes the town’s structures and values was not just an act of defiance toward the city; it also re-

vealed the indelible mark that Lubbock has made on the lead singer's artistic identity.

Two other projects considered the ways in which aspects of landscape or environment influenced artists to write music. The first examined music by another Lubbock native, Butch Hancock, whose 1978 concept album *West Texas Waltzes and Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes* had a strong sense of place and landscape (Watson 2011). I explored how Hancock used his voice, harmonica and recording strategies to evoke contrasting characterizations of West Texas wind, while also elaborating the complex relationship between the farmer and his land. And in the current issue of *Canadian Folk Music*, I look at how Québécois singer-songwriter Emilie Clepper finds musical inspiration in the landscape of Texas – her father's home state.

All of these projects have led to my dissertation topic, which explores the ways in which Canadian alternative country artist Corb Lund draws on place-based themes as a way of solidifying his identity as being uniquely Western Canadian (and Albertan in particular). Over the span of his 17-year career as a country artist, Lund has continually turned to aspects of Albertan heritage, politics, and landscape to inform his songwriting, addressing a variety of topics, including ranching, rodeo, conservation issues, veterinary medicine, bootlegging, gambling, and, perhaps most importantly in today's Alberta, the energy industry.

Recent Publications

Forthcoming (expected 2016). "My Tennessee Mountain Home: Region and Identity in Dolly Parton's Songwriting." In J. Williams and K. Williams (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2014. "The Dixie Chicks' 'Lubbock Or Leave It': Negotiation of Place and Identity Through Country Song." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8/1, 49-75.

2013. Encyclopedic entries for: **Carpenter**, Mary Chapin; **Griffin**, Patty; **Griffith**, Nanci; **Harris**, Emmylou; **McBride**, Martina; **McEntire**, Reba; **Parton**, Dolly; **Snow**, Hank; **Welch**, Gillian. *Amerigrove II: Grove Dictionary of American Music*, edited by Charles Hiroshi Garrett and Tim Sachs. *Oxford Music Online*.

2011. "Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes: Representations of Environment in Butch Hancock's Songs about Farming in West Texas." *Canadian Folk Music* 45/2: 10-18.

Co-authored Publications:

Lori Burns and Jada Watson. 2013. "Spectacle and Intimacy in Live Concert Video: Lyrics, Music, Staging and Film Mediation in P!nk's *Funhouse Tour* (2009)." *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* 7/2, 103-140.

Lori Burns and Jada Watson. 2013. Encyclopedic entries for: **Amos**, Tori; **Arden**, Jann; **DiFranco**, Ani. *Amerigrove II: Grove Dictionary of American Music*, edited by Charles Hiroshi Garrett and Tim Sachs. *Oxford Music Online*.

Jada Watson and Lori Burns. 2010. "Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks are *Not Ready to Make Nice*." *Popular Music* 29/4, 325-50.

Conference Papers

2014, March. " 'This is My Prairie': Corb Lund and the Albertan Fossil Fuel Energy Debate." Paper presented at the Society for American Music; Lancaster, PA.

2011, June. "*Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes*: Musical Representations of Wind in Songs About Dry Land Farming." Paper presented at the IASPM-Canada; Montreal, QC.

2011, May. "*Lubbock? Or Leave It?* Negotiating Identity and Place Through Song." Paper presented at the International Country Music Conference; Nashville, TN.

2008, April. "*Lubbock? Or Leave It?* Place, Space and Home in Country Music." Paper presented at IASPM-US 2008. University of Iowa; Iowa City, IO.

2008, March. "*Dear Mr. President*: Female Artists Address the Bush Administration." Paper presented at the 2008 National Popular Culture & American Culture Associations; San Francisco, CA.

2007, June. "Dixie Chicks' *Not Ready to Make Nice*: Regaining a 'Voice' Through Text, Music and Image." Paper presented at the 13th biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music: Que Viva la Musica Popular! Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México; Mexico City.

Paper also presented at the Society for Music Analysis: Study Day. University of Liverpool; Liverpool, England (November 2007).