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How "Old Town Road" revealed a deep divide within country music

Vox's Today, Explained podcast chronicles Lil Nas X's challenges with the charts.

By Lauren Katz | Updated Aug 26, 2019, 11:13pm EDT

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Lil Nas X performs onstage during Internet Live By BuzzFeed at Webster Hall on July 25, 2019, in New York City. | Noam Galai/Getty Images for BuzzFeed

The **2019 MTV Video Music Awards** aired on Monday, August 26, and featured **performances by Lizzo, Missy Elliott, Normani**, Taylor Swift, and **Lil Nas X**, among others. Together with Billy Ray Cyrus, Lil Nas X was one of the artists to receive the most nominations heading into the night; the pair picked up **eight total nominations** for their collaboration on **"Old Town Road"**: video of the year, song of the year, best new artist, best collaboration, best hip hop, best direction, best editing, and best art direction. Ultimately, they took home the award for **song of the year**.

But the road to success for the ode to the cowboy life, released in December 2018, hasn't always been a smooth ride. A number of factors have contributed to Lil Nas X's popularity, particularly **the debate over whether "Old Town Road" should be classified as country music**. Earlier this year, Billboard removed "Old Town Road" from its country chart, which boosted the rapper's profile to a wider audience while fueling a debate about what defines country music and who gets to decide. But even before Billboard stepped in, Lil Nas X had found fans through his popular **meme-filled Twitter presence** and a fast-growing TikTok meme dubbed the **"Yee Haw Challenge"** that centered on the song.

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“Old Town Road” debuted in the 19th spot on the March 16 edition of Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart. But the following week it was gone — having been moved to the Hot Rap Songs chart, where it entered at No. 24.

“Upon further review, it was determined that ‘Old Town Road’ by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on Billboard’s country charts,” a Billboard representative told **Rolling Stone**, which reported on the reclassification on March 26. “When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is musical composition. While ‘Old Town Road’ incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version.”

Vox’s Allegra Frank wrote:

The backlash was immediate, as many people criticized Billboard for feeding rigid ideas about **who or what qualifies as country enough** and argued that **Lil Nas X’s race** played a part in the song’s reclassification. Namely, the fact that Lil Nas X is a black teenager from Atlanta and country is a predominantly white genre did not go unnoticed.

“Old Town Road” eventually rose to **No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100** — on the **rapper’s birthday**, no less. The song would go on to become the **Billboard Hot 100’s longest-running No. 1 ever**. But the debate itself represents a deep divide within country music.

On this episode of *Today, Explained*, Vox Culture Editor Allegra Frank chronicles Lil Nas X's challenges with the charts and Charlie Harding, co-host of the *Switched on Pop* podcast, attempts to figure out what counts as country.



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Below, we've shared a lightly edited transcript of Allegra Frank and Charlie Harding's April 9, 2019, conversation with *Today, Explained* host Sean Rameswaram.

Sean Rameswaram

Okay, so there's this song. It's called "Old Town Road." It's by a guy named Lil Nas X. No relation to Nasty Nas from NYC. This song hit No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 today [April 9, 2019]. It is the most popular song in America. And it's also the most controversial.

Allegra Frank

So "Old Town Road" is in the center of an interesting conversation now about who and what gets to count as country music. But as country continues to absorb other genres — like there's country rap, a lot of country music artists are collaborating with pop stars — the traditionalists, the purists who think of country as the "Old Town Road" literally, they start to question who gets to be in it.

Sean Rameswaram

So Allegra, before we get into the song — who is this guy? Who is Lil Nas X?

Allegra Frank

He is a 20-year-old rapper from Atlanta. Technically his birth name is Montero Hill, but he has been calling himself "Lil Nas X" for several years now. And last year he joined SoundCloud, as many people do. And by the end of the year in December he released a song called "Old Town Road."

He bought a beat that had this sort of country-sounding instrumental to it. And he said he was living at home feeling very lonely, feeling like a lonely cowboy, and he decided to pair that feeling with this sort of twangy beat that he bought. So "Old Town Road" starts off very much as this deep-voiced ode to the simple life on the dirt road path with your horse. And then it breaks into what he calls "country trap."

Sean Rameswaram

So he uploads the song to SoundCloud back in December. Why is it just making waves in recent weeks and even months?

Allegra Frank

He basically timed it well for this thing that's called the yee haw agenda."

Sean Rameswaram

The what? The yee haw agenda?!

Allegra Frank

The yee haw agenda. This woman, Bri Malandro, tweeted about how a lot of black artists are getting interested in sort of the country aesthetic. And the way that Lil Nas X factored into that is, while people were picking up on the good ol' cowboy/cowgirl aesthetic, his song was circulating on Twitter and he made it available for free on TikTok, which is this huge platform kind of akin to Vine where people can lip sync to songs and record themselves doing dance moves, and people who already were kind of feeling this kind of ironic cowboy vibe turned "Old Town Road" into the "Yee Haw Challenge." It became this new TikTok phenomenon where people would try and outdo each other dancing to "Old Town Road." So the way the song starts is, it's very like classic country, and then the beat drops.

Sean Rameswaram

And that's where all these videos get their comedy from, it's like what happens when the beat drops. Right?

Allegra Frank

Exactly. So people are kind of just like standing around and then they jump right timed to the beat dropping, and it cuts to them wearing cowboy outfits and doing like square dancing. Lil Nas X continues to argue on Twitter like, "Oh I'm so happy to see all these people making memes and listening to the song. But I'm serious about it — just because it can be funny and I'm funny doesn't mean it's a parody."

Sean Rameswaram

What happens after the song becomes such a huge meme on TikTok?

Allegra Frank

In mid-March the Billboard charts come out. And the song had become so much of a viral hit that it actually appeared on the Billboard charts; it appeared on the Hot Rap Hip Hop songs chart and the Hot Country Songs chart.

Sean Rameswaram

And this is because a song like "Old Town Road" is getting streamed a ton on places like Spotify and YouTube and SoundCloud and those streams now count a fair amount on Billboard, right?

Allegra Frank

Yes, exactly. That was exciting for a lot of people. I mean, we don't often see black artists on the country charts in general and we don't often see SoundCloud-born rap-adjacent songs charting so highly — especially ones that really are just circulated through memes and the internet.

Sean Rameswaram

Okay. So what happens next? The song is starting to chart and it's rising on Billboard. Where does it go from there?

Allegra Frank

Five staffers from Billboard released an article in the publication and the majority of them wrote it off as, "Oh, it's sort of a fluke hit, it's a joke." The following week it was gone from the country chart. It was on the Hot 100 and the rap chart. But "Old Town Road" was not on the country chart.

Sean Rameswaram

Where was it on the Billboard charts when it got removed?

Allegra Frank

It was only on the chart for one week. So when it debuted, it was already at No. 19.

Sean Rameswaram

Which is to suggest that it would have kept climbing had they not removed it?

Allegra Frank

Exactly.

Sean Rameswaram

How often does Billboard remove songs that are climbing up its charts?

Allegra Frank

Very rarely. I mean, people were starting to report on, "Hey, Billboard has quietly stricken 'Old Town Road' from the record."

Sean Rameswaram

What did Billboard say?

Allegra Frank

They said while it incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version.

Sean Rameswaram

How does Lil Nas respond to that?

Allegra Frank

He said he was extremely disappointed.

Sean Rameswaram

This is the point in this story where this becomes about something bigger than country trap and TikTok and fun internet memes because you've got a black artist in America who's charting in a very white music space and his song gets quietly removed by a very powerful, influential organization. How much of this is about race? Or how much does the conversation then shift to race?

Allegra Frank

Genius reached out and of course Billboard said, "Oh no, it has nothing to do with his race, it has everything to do with the song and the lack of country elements in it." It immediately

set off conversation, especially in the black Twitter community. Country has often been very much protected. There's a big gatekeeping sort of vibe, and country music prevents black artists from really penetrating the scene. There are some exceptions.

Sean Rameswaram

Hootie!

Allegra Frank

Hootie! Yes, exactly. Darius Rucker. He's the big one of Hootie and the Blowfish fame. He sort of spawned off from that band into a solo career that has been very successful, but he has said, "Yes, I do receive hate mail from people who say you don't belong here, you're not real country, which essentially is people saying 'You don't look like us and you're not white.'" But he has been an exception in the genre.

Sean Rameswaram

But Lil Nas X clearly subscribes to the "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" school of thought because late last week [on April 5, 2019] he drops a remix that changes the trajectory of this song. Again.

Allegra Frank

Lil Nas X has a huge Twitter following and the news spread so far out that people like "Achy Breaky Heart" sensation and father of Miley, Billy Ray Cyrus, publicly tweeted at Lil Nas X saying, "I think this is wrong, and I'm a fan of your song. And you're country, you're an outlaw just like me." Billy Ray Cyrus coming out so publicly with his support, Lil Nas X of course retweeted that. They talked on the DL and they announced that they actually went in the studio together to remix the song.

Sean Rameswaram

What does that mean for the song? Is it going to get back on the country charts?

Allegra Frank

That's sort of the question now. The only difference is Billy Ray Cyrus really just singing the main hook of the song and then singing a few more verses. It otherwise is the exact same song. But because there's a vaunted legend of country music, the question is, will Billboard consider this country now? Billboard has responded to that saying, "We're investigating the matter and we're paying attention to see if we should reinstate 'Old Town Road' onto the chart."

Sean Rameswaram

Our trip down the "Old Town Road" ain't over yet. Next, we're gonna try and figure out what even is country music anymore. Charlie Harding, you are one of the hosts of Vox's *Switched on Pop* Podcast, as well as a producer and songwriter yourself. A big part of the controversy over "Old Town Road" is about genre. How does one figure out the lines between country and pop and hip hop?

Charlie Harding

When I think about genre I typically think about three main components. There's a musical component, there's a commercial component, and there's a cultural component.

Sean Rameswaram

Let's start with the music. What should we be thinking about when we think about this song and how it fits into the musical genre of country or hip hop?

Charlie Harding

I feel like the controversy right now is, is this thing actually country? And so we have to define: What is country music? And if we look at the musical components, we can think about: What are the instruments that you use? What are the timbres, the twangs, the sounds, and what are the lyrical components?

Sean Rameswaram

Is "Old Town Road" a country song by those three metrics?

Charlie Harding

Well, let's take them one by one. So instrumentation in country music is going to have a lot of acoustic instruments, but traditionally we can hear maybe some banjo, maybe some mandolin, and here there's banjo. So instruments, check. Timber? That vocal twang that we expect in country music, it's in there — Lil Nas X has got a vocal twang, that real nasal sound. And when, of course, Billy Ray Cyrus has done the track you get that twang as well from someone who is a classic country artist.

Sean Rameswaram

He even says "gee-tar."

Charlie Harding

Exactly. And then finally, if we look at the lyrics, this is just through-and-through full of country music lyrical tropes. You got to be on a road. You gotta have a cowboy hat, right. You got to be wearing Wrangler jeans in this case, right.

Sean Rameswaram

You got to be kind of sad.

Charlie Harding

Yeah, totally. Lyrically, I think it has all of those essential components. When I hear that vocal twang, when I hear banjo, I'm like, "Yeah, this is a country song."

Sean Rameswaram

But how about the rest of it? How about that second metric you had: commercial?

Charlie Harding

When we look at the history of where genre in pop music comes from, we'll see that there are some not-so-pretty histories. The short of it is that what is now known as R&B — so, progenitor to hip hop — was at one point called "race music." It was specifically for people who were of a specific race, whereas country music was called "hillbilly music" for people of another race. And basically we had black and white music segregated along those lines with marketing definitions, so that labels would produce music for a specific racial audience. It was that explicit, and we live with that history today.

Sean Rameswaram

I guess that that sort of leads us into this conversation about the culture.

Charlie Harding

Absolutely. You know, Lil Nas X posted "Old Town Road" on SoundCloud. He actually in the metadata said it was a country song. So there's a question about who gets to be the gatekeeper of declaring what genre you are. Really, I think we're just seeing some casual or not-so-casual racism about who is and what isn't country. I think that this gets much more complicated when we actually look at the sounds of contemporary country music — which doesn't conform to that original classification of you have to have banjos and a certain sound or a certain twang, because there's lots of contemporary music which is actually equally pulling from hip hop sounds, trap beats, 808s, all this and that.

Sean Rameswaram

And this is from very conventional white country Nashville artists.

Charlie Harding

That's right. The song that everyone's pointing to is **Florida Georgia Line's "Meant to Be" with Bebe Rexha**. And when you go into the chorus, the thing is a trap song. It's got an 808 beat, it's got stuttering high-hats. The thing is a wild and successful crossover. I thought, "Wouldn't it be interesting if I just went down the country charts to see if there were other songs that were doing this, or is Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line a one-off?" And I just found, over and over, all sorts of songs which didn't conform to the musical categories of country music.

I found **Filmore's "Love That About You,"** which is another song which has a straight-ahead trap beat in it. I then went off and looked at **Dan + Shay, and their song "All to Myself"**: doesn't really feature any standard country music instrumentation, and there's really no vocal twang to it. And so when things on the country charts are bleeding into other generic qualities musically, it definitely feels like it's not appropriate to call out Lil Nas X for having a country sound which includes trap beats and sort of saying, "Well, that's not country."

Sean Rameswaram

So what you're saying is there's already hip hop all over the country charts right now?

Charlie Harding

Hip hop is the dominant musical force everywhere, and it has wildly influenced country music as in other genres. I hear EDM in country music. I hear pop in country music. This is not old-school banjo, mandolin, that kind of upright bass sound from decades past. It is contemporary popular music with subtle, nuanced sounds that maybe make things sound country, and oftentimes it feels like it's more about gatekeeping than it is necessarily about the actual quality of sound.

Sean Rameswaram

But all the songs and artists you're talking about are white. And then this black teenager came along, who's a creature of the internet, and he just sort of exposed a whole world of hypocrisy.

Charlie Harding

Absolutely. And there is a history of country artists actually inviting black artists to perform with them. Louis Armstrong has performed with Jimmie Rodgers and they had a hit, "Blue Yodel No. 9." Glen Campbell invited Stevie Wonder to sing "Blowin' in the Wind." **Willie**

Nelson worked with Snoop Dogg on a track called "My Medicine." There's all these examples of white artists bringing black artists into the country charts, which is accepted, and I think there's also examples of black artists making country music. Ray Charles' *Modern Sounds in Country Music* is one of the most essential country albums of all time, in which he really is demonstrating the historical crossover of these musics.

I mean, Sean, I played in a country band, I love country music. I just picked up the mandolin and I played in a country band with my buddy Nate, who I do *Switched on Pop* with. He was playing banjo. And I promise you nobody was concerned about whether or not we had, like, put in our time to become a country band. Whereas people are really concerned about Lil Nas X playing country music. I wonder why that is ...

Sean Rameswaram

You know, you hear so many stories about how streaming is killing the music industry, how Spotify is destroying album sales for artists, but is this "Old Town Road" story an example of Spotify and SoundCloud and YouTube streams being considered in this sort of bigger picture of success in the music industry being an overall good thing, because it's destroying some of these gatekeepers and some of these norms in the industry that were kind of garbage to begin with?

Charlie Harding

I think that this is the essential question about who gets to be a gatekeeper, and the institutions like Billboard might seem uneasy by the fact that there are other folks deciding whether or not something is or is not a certain genre. I went on Spotify today and I was scrolling through — just browsing in their search section — and the category "**Country**" was next to the category "**Focus**," which I think was maybe even below the category "Podcasts."

These are not mutually exclusive and completely exhaustive categories; there is a lot of overlap. And I think that today people listen as much by mood as they do by genre, upending an entire way of thinking about the importance of these generic categories. "Pump-Up" and "**Chill**" are equally as important as country or hip hop and how people might approach going to listen to music. It is changing the way things chart, where they end up. And there is some uneasy cultural negotiation that needs to be done in order to decide who gets to claim what kind of music they're making.

Sean Rameswaram

And in that regard, Lil Nas X is thus far the most unlikely hero of American culture in 2019.

Charlie Harding

Absolutely. We have to also point out how amazing it is that this thing which was a meme that was commentary on cowboy culture and black identity that became an immediate overnight thinkpiece which an aging country star then remixed. Like, this thing is entirely of our moment. This is not old country music of a rural community. This is the internet generation.

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