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Modern Mainstream Country & The Nashville Machine: How The "Bro"-Crazed Industry Creates a No. 1 Hit

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Florida Georgia Line (Photo : Rick Diamond/Getty Images)

NASHVILLE -- If you're a country music fan, you fall into one of two camps: Those who enjoy **Florida Georgia Line's** 2013 hit "**Cruise**," and those who despise it.

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The industry has been squeezing "bro country" like an old tube of toothpaste, and traditionalists are praying for the supply to run out. Some believe that 2015 will finally be the year their genre ceases to be "embarrassing," as rising star -- and old-school hit maker -- **Kacey Musgraves** [termed it](#).

Despite the backlash, Nashville is still full-speed ahead when it comes to the modern bro tunes, which were [famously defined](#) by *New York* magazine's **Jody Rosen** as "music by and of the tattooed, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude."

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That was in August 2013, near the genesis of now-prevalent party hits and during the record 22-week run that "Cruise" spent at No. 1 on the country chart.

The core bro themes have become even more apparent since.

Dallas-area station The Hardline came up with [its own definition](#): "You have to have a truck, girl, beer and/or liquor, farm equipment, mud/dust, rural setting like a river, jeans, boots, guns, critters. If you run out of things to talk about, just mention the troops."

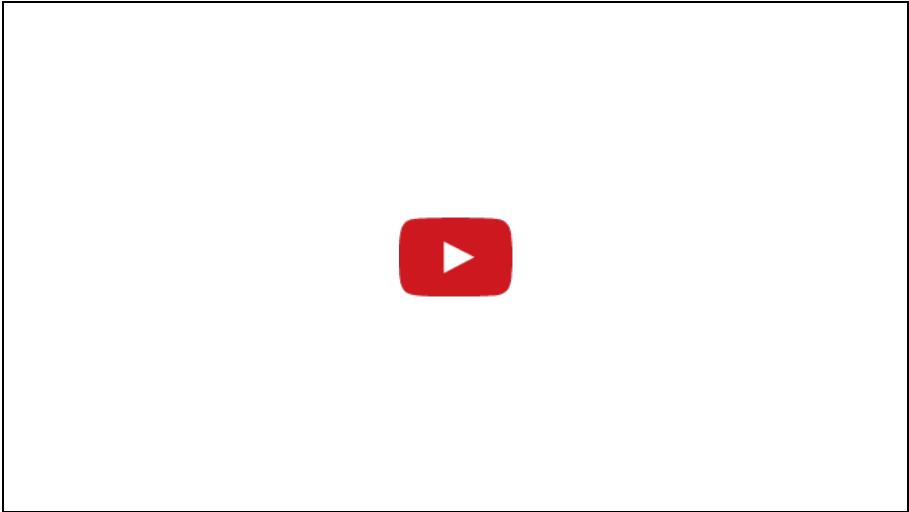
This is a popular set of stereotypes, but one that needs tweaking.

We [charted lyrics from 30 country songs](#), including this week's Top 10 (Jan. 24), the Top 10 from the final week of Florida Georgia Line's record-breaking run (Aug. 24, 2013) and the Top 10 from a decade ago (Jan. 15, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, today's songs are much more misogynist and sexual in nature. But more than anything else, there is an undeniable trend that has taken the radio by storm: Trucks and booze.

The current Top 10 features nine songs that refer to alcohol. Seven of them refer to trucks, with seven total referencing both. Only **Carrie Underwood** ("Something In the Water") steered clear of both categories.

We know the formula works, as evidenced by a recent viral video that mashed together six hit country songs into [one chart-topping beast](#):



Katie Makowiec is a 23-year-old graduate student at **Vanderbilt University** who has listened to country her entire life. She counts Florida Georgia Line and **Luke Bryan** as her two favorite artists, despite the lack of lyrical depth.

"I think they're a lot more shallow," she says of today's songs. "Because now it's party music

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and having fun and being on a beach and drinking. There aren't as many deep songs."

Growing up in Syracuse, N.Y., Makowiec listened to her parents' favorites: **George Strait**, **Alan Jackson** and **Martina McBride**. But none of them remind her of "summertime" like the new superstars.

"It's just all very happy," she says. "I feel like a lot of the older country music is just kind of depressing. My girlfriend left me. My dog died. You know those stereotypes."

The youth have spoken: Jean shorts and Southern Comfort will top "Texas exes" anyway.

But how much longer will that be the case?

We got a first-hand look at how today's country hits are made, and how soon change might be coming, as we drift further into the new year.

November 17, 2014 -- Nashville

Mickey Jack Cones stands in the control room of his massive mid-Tennessee studio, balls up his fists and stares intently at a sheet of paper with the song structure hastily scrawled across it.

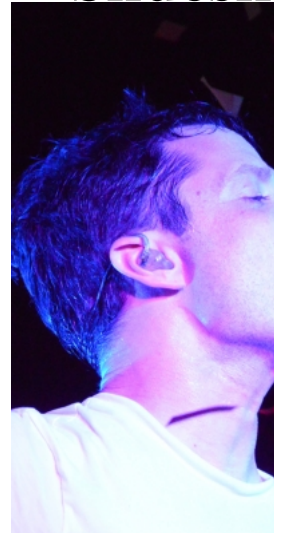
A group of six union musicians are playing in the next room -- the "live room" -- and Cones can track their progress through a patch of glass. The instruments make a rainbow of waveforms across the plasma screen that hovers above Cones' head. Everything looks good. Everything sounds good.

Cones allows his fists to uncurl. He bobs his head and moves his feet to the rhythm.

A 41-year-old San Antonio native who moved to Nashville in 1996, Cones rocks faded jeans, boots and a dark grey pullover. A pair of Ray Bans are neatly tucked into a current of sandy blonde hair.



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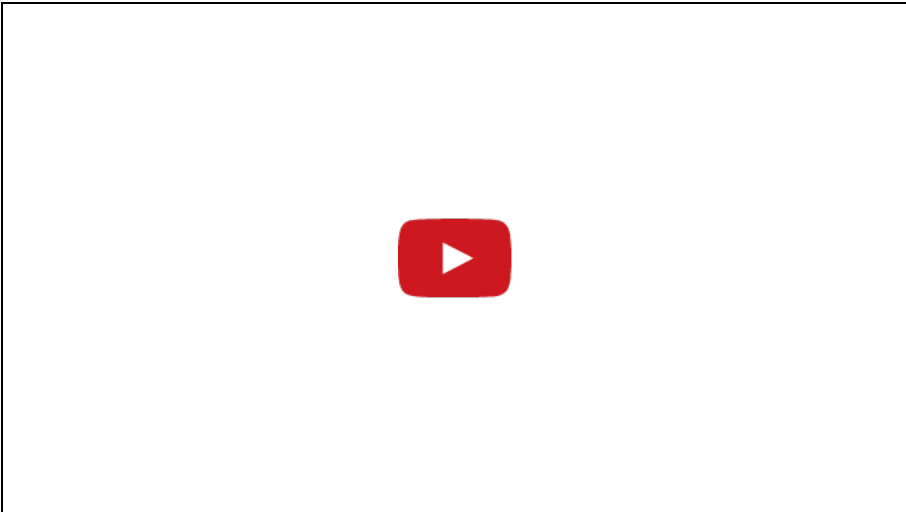
Ariana Grande Playing NBA All-

(Photo : Alex M. Smith) Mickey Jack Cones studies his monitor at Westwood Studios in Nashville, Tenn., on Nov. 17, 2014.

Like most successful men in this town, he looks the part; and with three No. 1 hits in 2014 -- including **Dustin Lynch's "Where It's At (Yep Yep)"** -- he certainly knows how to craft a successful single.

The studio speakers are currently blaring the musicians' live rendition of **"Tall Boys,"** written by a trio of well-versed Nashville songwriters. The very "bro" cut will be part of **Joe Nichols'** new record.

Nichols, a consistent hit maker who picked up his fifth No. 1 single -- **"Yeah"** -- in July at the age of 37, has just finished a couple scratch vocal takes to help guide the band. In the coming months, he'll be back to add master vocals and preside over another batch of songs to finish the new LP.



For now, he's trying not to fall asleep on the studio couch while the Tennessee Titans lose their *Monday Night Football* game.

"Tall Boys" is the fourth song the band has cut today, and they're scheduled to do two more. It's nearing 9 p.m., and Nichols has a 3 a.m. wake-up call for a flight to Georgia.

He rises from the couch and shakes the hands of the studio assistants and public relations people around him.

Cones realizes Nichols' intent, and lets out a yelp.

"You're leaving?" he asks. "No!"

Nichols nods.

"I've got to get up in six hours."






Disappointment drips off Cones' face. He can't believe the timing; the musicians are in the

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middle of their best work yet. They're killing the third take of "Tall Boys." The worry is premature, though. Cones persuades Nichols in less than a minute, and all is calm again.

With his star securely fastened back on the couch, Cones begins to move along with the beat.

"That's hooky, isn't it?" he asks Nichols. "It's gonna grow on you. Grow like a big, itchy wart."

— — —

Traditionalists will chuckle at the "wart" analogy. The genre has always been studded with machismo and the occasional cringe-worthy hit, but it seems the current wave is especially easy to hate.

In bro country, the hooks hit hard, the alcohol is always flowing, and if it wasn't for the tinge of a steel guitar and the accented vocals, you'd be hard-pressed to call these tracks "country songs."

In [the words of](#) rock legend **Tom Petty**: "I hate to generalize on a whole genre of music, but it does seem to be missing that magic element that it used to have."

The current track pulsing through Cones' studio -- "Tall Boys" -- is very fond of scantily-clad women and big ol' beer cans; Petty isn't likely to find any magic between the lines:

*Workin' them short shorts
Drinkin' them tall boys
Poppin' them tabs on 24s
Get you buzzin' like a bee on a back porch*

Nichols is a self-described "traditional artist at heart," but this song is as far from that as possible.

"I think the phrase is," he says, "We do what we have to do, so we can do what we want to do."

There are those who genuinely love to advocate the merits of getting slammed and living it up -- looking at you, Florida Georgia Line -- but there are far more who create similar content because it sells. Country music finds itself mimicking the pop conveyor belt that has long produced America's No. 1 hits.

Guthrie Trapp is a union guitarist who often plays sessions like the one Cones assembled for Nichols. He despises "bro country," but doesn't blame the songwriters, producers and artists for their work.

"They're just making a living," Trapp says. "The American public doesn't want to hear what a bunch of musicians want to hear, because they don't understand it. They want to hear what they know every weekend, and that's going out, drinking, going to church on Sunday. It's the same formula over and over again. They're making so much money from those songs, they're afraid to take a chance on something else."

Trapp tries to pick projects that he enjoys -- his favorite artists to work with include **Ashley Monroe** and **John Oates** -- but he won't turn down an opportunity to work on "stuff I don't really want to hear."

"Nobody likes the modern country music right now," he says. "Everybody knows it sucks. It's the biggest elephant in the room in town. But people are making so much money doing it, what are they going to do?"

The digital age has made wallets much thinner than they once were, though there are still anomalies. Industry queen **Taylor Swift** jumped ship after [deciding country stardom was not "challenging" enough](#), and promptly sold four million copies of her new pop album, **1989**. However, the streaming age has brought a halt to experimentation and forced [more than 80 percent of Nashville's songwriters out of town](#).

Cones, who had three No. 1s in 2014, can only imagine the profit he would have turned 30 years ago. But he's seen plenty of trends come and go in the past two decades, and he's certain things will begin turning around soon.

"I look into it all the time," he says. "They're figuring it out, and people are starting to sue... Once they get the percentage they need to get from streaming -- the writers, the producers, the label, all that -- we're back into a different world again. We're back when the vinyl record came out."

That might be a long shot, but Cones still sees a shifting music landscape ahead in terms of content.

"It's gonna trend back to more content-based, story-based, real-based," he says. "Not just the light-hearted [singing] 'Get my truck bubba-duh.' It's gonna drift back to the real roots of country. Production-wise, that's the 'anything goes' thing right now. But the audience wants more in-depth material.

"People don't know it yet, but that's the way they're gonna feel."

— — —

To understand mainstream country music, you need to understand that Nashville is a machine.

There are several working parts that go into an album. The final product could be genius, awful or left to the vast space in between, but the process is almost always the same.

A hit song typically begins with multiple songwriters jamming together in a living room or a home studio. When their creative spark turns into a bottled flame, the writers punch out a crisp demo and then either 1) have a full-band demo produced or 2) simply program the track themselves.

Once the song is fleshed out, they turn it over to their publisher, who then shops it around to labels, producers and artists.

In the case of "Tall Boys," publisher **Sony ATV** sent the song to Cones -- who says he's received three thousand song pitches over the past few months -- with the intention of getting it on a **Dustin Lynch** record. But they also sent the track to **Broken Bow Records**, which houses Nichols on its roster. Label president **Benny Brown** decided it would be a good fit for Nichols, who emailed Cones, saying, "I love it."

After Brown met with Cones and Nichols to select the new record's first six songs -- including "Tall Boys" -- Cones put together a band to play the tunes.

That's where the the **Nashville Musicians' Association** comes in. The union, founded in 1902, counts hundreds of studio players as members and provides legal protection and support for the men and women who provide the music on most country albums.

Cones hand picks his favorite players from the association, and then schedules three-hour blocks at his studio compound.

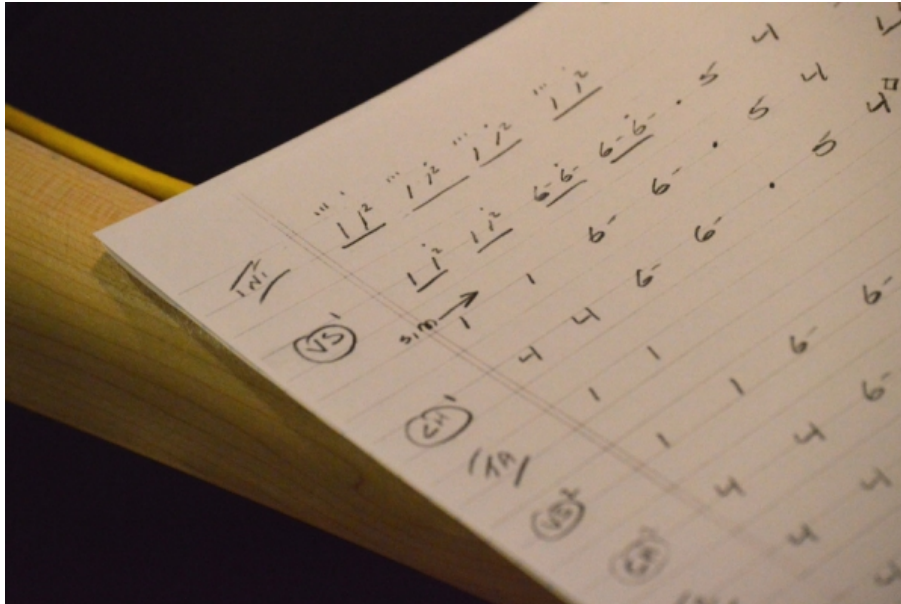
On the day of recording, the musicians sidle in from the unusually snowy weather and trudge past plaques celebrating Cones' No. 1 efforts before setting up their gear in the live room, which provides plenty of breathing room across its 1,000-plus square footage. Nichols pops into the control room and greets the team before assuming his spot on the back corner couch.



(Photo : Chase Lauer) Union musicians settle in at Westwood Studios in Nashville, Tenn., on Nov. 17, 2014.

The first track of the afternoon is "**Shy Girl**," about a young woman who apparently needs assistance showing off her sexy side.

Cones' studio engineer, **Jim Cooley**, plays the radio-quality demo for everyone in the control room while the musicians study the Xeroxed structure sheets.



(Photo : Alex M. Smith) A song structure sheet at Westwood Studios in Nashville, Tenn., on Nov. 17, 2014.

Minutes later, they're strapped into their instruments and pounding out a decent version of the song from memory. Nichols sings the first couple passes in his own vocal booth to help guide the group, which finishes live tracking in just half an hour.

The process is mesmerizing. Keyboardist **Charlie Judge** maneuvers across multiple setups while drummer **Lonnie Wilson** marches forward with robotic perfection. The guitar work (acoustic, electric, pedal steel and bass) from the four other musicians seems to emanate directly from an FM signal.

After the full band runs, Cones helps the the players work out individual kinks. Within roughly 90 minutes of hearing "Shy Girl," they are ready to move on to a second song.

In terms of the quality versus quantity debate, it's the best of both worlds.

"I think the music speaks for itself," Cones says. "I'm not saying one is better than the other, because sometimes a song might need to be worked on for a longer time, but really, it comes down to the musicianship. The players are so good that it spoils us."

Unlike other studios in town that use MIDI drum kits and fewer musicians, this is a jam session, and the energy from the live room is palpable. Little twists and turns will be on the record that could not have been created by a computer program.

Typically, concerns arise when using musicians-for-hire.

"The only thing you worry about is, are they going to bring 100 percent creativity?" Nichols asks after the session. "Are they going to make the record or plow through it like a demo?"

But this group is great; Nichols calls their work "outstanding."

After they wrap "Tall Boy," Wilson, the drummer, walks back into the control room and points to Nichols.

"Hey, three-week No. 1," he says. "Summer 2015."

"Yeah?" Nichols replies.

"I'm just saying," Wilson continues. "I'm gonna be singing that in my head all night, trying to get to bed. Joe Nichols singing me to sleep."

— — —

The role of the country star is a bit misleading.

You usually earn your money on the road. Hundreds of tour dates a year make studio appearances tough to fit into the schedule. You don't have time to write hit songs, and the practice is mostly irrelevant thanks to the publishing houses that bombard producers and labels with new tracks.

When you finally do get into the studio, you typically don't do much besides sing. There are exceptions -- **Keith Urban**, **Brad Paisley** and the **Zac Brown Band** among them -- but guitar heroes are few and far between.

In Nichols' case, he doesn't play a single instrument while the musician's union performs the first six songs on his album. He didn't co-write any of the tunes, either.

But he is the vehicle.

He will bring the "bro country" concocted by songwriters and labels to life in concert, just as he did for three straight nights in Florida before flying to Nashville for this session.

"At the end of the day, the check for writing a great song isn't nearly as important to me as having a great career," Nichols says. "**Conway Twitty** and George Strait -- those guys have made massive careers out of singing other peoples' songs and making 'em theirs."



(Photo : Chase Lauer) Joe Nichols sings a scratch vocal while Jim Cooley (L) and Mickey Jack Cones (R) watch the band perform at Westwood Studios in Nashville, Tenn., on Nov. 17, 2014.

Right now, Nichols is out of gas, and he finally passes out on the couch. Cones laughs and snaps a couple pictures on his cell phone before offering up a shoulder shrug.

"He's been getting like two hours of sleep, and he's got to get up at 3 a.m.," Cones says. "When I heard that, I was like, 'Fuuuuuuuuuuck.' Who's doing this to him?"

A month earlier, a duo were in a similar state at Cones' studio. Battling the flu, they forced their way through vocal takes while a different set of union players recorded a catchy song sent to Cones near the end of the recording session.

Clearly not happy that the label had them working overtime to finish the extra song, the artists began playfully switching words around.

Those in the control room couldn't stop laughing at the alterations, and the mood was considerably lighter.

"Watch," one artist said. "This'll be a single, and I'll have to sing this every day for the rest of my life."

The other chimed in sarcastically: "This song is gonna change peoples' lives."

Cones smiled.

"C'mon," he said. "Watch it happen."

— — —

"Tall Boys" will not change lives, but it will likely be a No. 1 candidate when it's released as a single later this year, and will no doubt soundtrack countless country parties and dances.

When young people attend a Joe Nichols show, they will scream for "Tall Boys" until they get it. The honky tonks on Nashville's famed Broadway strip will turn out covers of the song for years to come.

Or maybe -- traditional country fans hope -- people will be sick of the song before they even hear it.

"In 2016, are people gonna be tired of 'Look at them Tall Boys?' Cones asks. "Or is that just kind of a thing that, it sustains the test of time and it's quirky enough where it's just fun? Who knows."

Lost in the mix of modern songs at Nichols' session is a traditional gem, **"I'd Sing About You."**

As the band begins to play, the control room becomes a time machine. The pedal steel dominates the sound while the honky tonk piano keys slip in and out of the classic love ballad. Nichols made a point of selecting this for his album, despite the completely different tone.

"This is the hard stuff to play now," Cones says. "The old school country. The other stuff is easy now. This is hard."

At 9:50 p.m., Nichols finally escapes the studio with one song to go. Cones does his best to keep his star around, but knows it's a lost cause.

The final track is **"Partyin' With You,"** a cookie-cutter pop song. With no one to fill in on scratch vocals, Cones takes the opportunity for himself.

"Somebody's got to!" he says.

The band begins playing, and Cones stares down the lyric sheet in the vocal booth. Stiff as a board, he works to fine tune his delivery of the lyrics that were formulaically crafted: trucks, girls, booze, repeat.

*Baby, if you wanna get a little crazy
Tell me and I'll make a beeline
Leave these people behind
I'll be there in no time
Pullin' into your drive*

As the tune drags on, Cones loosens up.

*You know I like the jukebox neon haze
Whiskey with the boys, down it like Kool-Aid*

Done with his part, Cones steps out of the booth with a huge smile on his face. He resumes his usual spot by the control board and gets a kick out of hearing himself belt out a party anthem.

As the band goes into their final take, Cones balls his hands into fists and bobs his head.

Soon, the session will end. The musicians will file back out into the snow. The engineer and assistant will linger, then finally leave. Nichols won't be back for another month, so Cones needs

to begin mixing before the master vocals are even recorded.

He will be here until the early hours, playing back the day's best and worst moments. "Tall Boys" will burst out of the speakers again, a tantalizing reminder of the several months between now and its radio debut.

Those words from Wilson, the drummer, will hang in the air.

"Hey, three-week No. 1," Cones will hear on the playback. "Summer 2015."

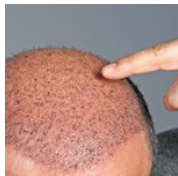









Whether "Tall Boys" will be hit or a dud rests on the shoulders of modern country fans, who will eventually decide whether to keep party going or finally call it a night.

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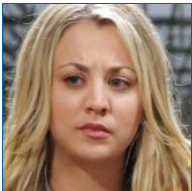
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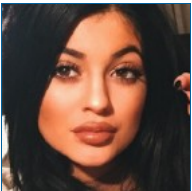
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