

# Everything but Country: On Adolescence and Alan Jackson's "Chattahoochee"

## I.

Caleb was the older kid next door who once dropped me headfirst on our concrete cul-de-sac. A few grades ahead of me, he would sometimes try to highlight our age gap by either saying or doing things that a late-elementary schoolkid like myself wouldn't be able to say or do. I don't know why he did that. Maybe he was insecure. Maybe he thought he was demeaning himself by hanging out with me, which led him to highlight the power imbalance between us. Or maybe he just wanted to be admired, as we all do.

The day he dropped me on the concrete, I was standing outside, waiting for my parents to take me to my friend Aleco's sleepover birthday party. This was in the Houston suburb of Sugar Land, in the subdivision of Sugar Mill. Me and my brother and some neighborhood kids had been playing baseball with a tennis ball on the street—manhole cover as home plate—but now we were just hanging out in the front yard before I had to leave. Then Caleb walked outside. He was thirteen, that unfortunate age. Tall, too. Most of us were ten or eleven years old. His arrival changed the atmosphere.

I'm not sure how long he was out there before he decided to pick me up, but that's what he did: he picked me up. We weren't doing anything that led to this. No wrestling, no tag. Unless I've forgotten now, I didn't say anything to offend him (although the sensitivity of the male teenager is such that any number of innocuous comments could've set him off). His motives were probably as mysterious to him as they were to me. But whatever they were, he walked up to me, grabbed my waist, flipped me upside down, and then held me over his shoulder.

I told him to put me down, trying to sound calm, maintain my dignity. He ignored me and walked from the grass out onto the cul-de-sac, holding me over the concrete by my ankles now.

"Put me down," I said again, struggling to break free.

He told me he would put me down, and then he dropped me. That sounds like he did it on purpose, but he didn't. He was being stupid, not malicious. My ankles slipped out of his hands as he made a move to put me down, and I fell straight down, the top of my head colliding with the concrete, the rest of my body crumpling to the ground.

I remember moaning, overwhelmed by the pain in my head. When I finally stood up, the world was unsteady. But I was lucid enough to recognize Caleb's reaction—apologizing profusely, saying it was an accident—and to determine that the words came from one place and one place only: he didn't want to get in trouble.

I pretended I was fine, trying to laugh it off, even as I struggled to find my balance. I didn't tell my parents, or if I did, I underplayed it. Even though I was still in elementary school, I was teaching myself one of the crucial rules of male adolescence: don't tell anyone how you really feel.

When my dad dropped me off at Aleco's party, I still felt a bit dizzy. I remember the birthday cake because I didn't want any. That was unusual. When we sang "Happy Birthday," the flames from all the candles were blurry. Everything at Aleco's house seemed like it was underwater: the other kids, the cake, his parents. Even the singing felt blurry. I heard Aleco's dad speak to everyone—he had a strong Greek accent—but I couldn't process the words. I couldn't process anyone's words, actually. I didn't talk much. I never vomited. I just drifted around their house, profoundly confused, until it was time to crawl into a corner and go to sleep.

## II.

Skip forward a couple years, the cul-de-sac concussion only a bad memory by this point. I was twelve, nearly thirteen, a year of middle school already under my belt. Heading to seventh grade at the end of the summer. Not quite a boy anymore, but not quite the next thing.

One afternoon Caleb showed up at my house. This wasn't a normal occurrence. He stood outside my front door and told me he wanted to show me something. He seemed to be suppressing a smile.

"Come over to my house," he said.

Caleb was almost fifteen, a high schooler. Even taller now. He'd tried out for the baseball and basketball teams, I think, but he hadn't managed to make an identity for himself as an athlete. Or as anything else, really. He was a generic-seeming White teenager from the generic-seeming white-collar suburbs, just as I would soon be. We left my house and walked over to his. I had no idea what he was going to show me. But I was still a little scared, because this was the guy who dropped me on my head and because he liked to show me things that made me feel young and small.

We went upstairs to Caleb's bedroom, and he shut the door behind us. I didn't feel great about that. But I was also excited to be here, since I hadn't spent much time in any teenager's room, and I was always looking to older kids for clues about what I would or should become.

What he wanted to show me, it turned out, was a tape. Not a VHS tape, not some Skinimax late-night feature recorded over footage of Christmas 1988. No, a cassette tape, an audiotape. The blank kind, Maxell or whatever, the kind that I would use a few years later to exchange Bob Dylan bootlegs with strangers on internet message boards. Caleb held the cassette up to me, smiling big.

"Listen to this," he said.

I think I expected music about sex. Or music with cusswords. Or maybe both. I'd heard that an album by 2 Live Crew had so much sex and cusswords that it had been banned by the Supreme Court. I'd heard a few of the censored versions, but I'd still never heard the real thing. Maybe that's what he wanted to play me. I prepared myself to enjoy it, or at least to pretend to enjoy it.

He put the tape in, pressed play. It wasn't 2 Live Crew. It was a country radio DJ, one of the local stations, KILT or KIKK. I listened to those stations in the car a lot with my parents and my friends' parents. I knew those stations. I liked those stations.

In his upbeat country-radio voice, the DJ said, "Hello, who's this?"

The caller on the other end of the line, speaking in a thick country accent, said, "This here is Billy Bob."

"Alright, Billy Bob, what can we play for you today?"

"I wanna hear some of that there 'Chattahoochee' by Alan Jackson."

"You got it, Billy Bob. Here you go . . ."

And then the opening guitar riff kicked in, followed by the fiddle. "Well, way down yonder on the Chattahoochee . . ."

This was still early summer 1993, just before "Chattahoochee" topped the country charts for several weeks, before it became inescapable. So I was hearing the song for the first time, or at least the first time that I could recall. I liked what I heard, though I didn't know why he'd brought me here to listen to it. And I didn't know why he was still smiling.

I smiled back in a knowing way, knowing nothing. Did he bring me here to laugh at the caller and his redneck ways? Did I know the term "redneck" by then? Did I know the term "hick"? I'm not sure, but I know that I'd learn to use these terms soon

enough. Was Alan Jackson a hick? Did Caleb think the song was ridiculous? Is that what he was trying to say?

If so, I was ready to play along.

Caleb stopped the tape. I wanted to hear the rest of the song, but I didn't say anything. "You know who that was?" he said.

I just shook my head, still trying to pretend that I knew what was going on.

"That was me," he said, still smiling.

Once I processed what he was saying, this revelation struck me exactly as hard as he'd intended. That caller was Caleb, *pretending to be a country guy*.

He rewound the tape, played it again. "This here is Billy Bob..."

The accent sounded different to my ears this time. It sounded way more over the top. My granddad grew up on a farm in the small town of Normangee, Texas, and he had a pretty strong Texas accent. And his sons, Houston born and bred, including my dad, all had pretty strong accents, too, of the old-school Houston variety. (Their children, including me, inherited only traces of this accent.) But Caleb wasn't talking like my family; he was talking like a cartoon version of a cowboy, a caricature. I started to understand, or to think that I understood: he was making fun of country people. He'd *prank called* the country station! And not only did he get away with it, he'd recorded the whole thing! I was full of admiration.

He was pleased by my awed response. I got the sense that he planned to keep requesting "Chattahoochee" all summer, under a whole series of cartoonish country names and country voices. I wanted to go home and immediately tell my younger brother, who was, like me, a big admirer of prank calls. And I wanted to do something like that myself, though I probably knew, even then, that I wouldn't ever have the guts to call a radio station pretending to be someone else.

But after I went back to my house, a bunch of questions kept nagging at me: Was Caleb making fun of "Chattahoochee," too? Was he making fun of the whole station? Was he making fun of everyone who liked country music? If so, what did that mean for me? Didn't I like country music?

### III.

Country radio was the soundtrack of my life before I was allowed to choose the soundtrack of my life. It wasn't the only kind of music my parents listened to in the car, but it was the genre that

seemed to most saturate my family's experience, our Saturdays, our family road trips. George, Garth, and Clint. Randy and Reba. Vince and Martina. Tim, Toby, and Trisha. Trace Adkins and Tracy Lawrence. John Anderson and Joe Diffie. Brooks & Dunn. Shenandoah and Diamond Rio. And, of course, Alan Jackson. Back when I unquestioningly liked whatever my parents liked, I really liked country music.

When "Chattahoochee" became a massive hit in the summer months after Caleb made the prank call, I was still young enough to enjoy it without reservation, as long as Caleb wasn't around to make me self-conscious about it. I knew all the words. It was a highly sing-alongable song, and I sang along every time I heard it. I loved the bendy guitar riff at the beginning of the song. I loved Alan Jackson's voice. I loved the rhymes. I loved the images. I loved the idea of burning rubber on the Georgia asphalt. I loved the grape snow cone. I loved the pyramid of cans in the pale moonlight, even if I didn't really know what was in those cans yet. I loved every line, even the ones I didn't fully understand. (It was years before I realized what "hotter than a hoochie coochie" meant. Actually, I'm still not totally sure.)

Most of all, I just loved how *fun* the song was. It made me happy. It made me feel good. And that was probably my highest standard for art back then, even if I couldn't have articulated it.

"Chattahoochee" was a perfect summer song. But then the summer ended. I started seventh grade, turned thirteen. And soon enough the song's best quality—how enjoyable it was, how upbeat—made it feel suspect, even embarrassing.

At some point in middle school it dawns on you in a thrilling and also terrifying way that the world is much, much bigger than the one you've experienced so far through your parents. There are so many things they never told you about. There are things *they* don't even know about. And you start to learn about these things, little by little, in the school cafeteria, or at a friend's house, or by turning your boombox radio dial to a station that your parents would never listen to.

By the time I was thirteen, I knew about Nirvana and Pearl Jam. I knew about Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre. I listened to the song about feeling stupid and contagious. I listened to the song about gin and juice. I saw the naked baby in the pool being lured by the dollar bill. I read the CD-booklet comic about the profane, misogynistic, drug-obsessed, anthropomorphic dog. I became aware of flannel and lowriders. I learned what "Jeremy" was about.

I learned what The Chronic meant. And, above all, I knew that the music and culture coming out of Seattle and Compton were indisputably cool.

Whether I liked all of this stuff was less important to me than whether *other people* liked this stuff. I didn't really know what I liked anymore. Do you remember that feeling? Do you remember that there was a time in your life when you actually didn't know what you liked? Do you remember when the most important thing in the world was being cool according to standards that you didn't fully understand?

By eighth grade, it was a truth generally acknowledged among us that country music sucked. Sugar Land Middle was a diverse public school where Black and White and Asian and Hispanic kids walked the halls together, where multi-generation Texans sat in the cafeteria next to kids whose parents had immigrated not so long ago from Pakistan and India and China and Vietnam and the Philippines and Nigeria and Jamaica. But the verdict against country music came mostly from the kids who'd grown up listening to it: the White kids. At this point, a lot of these kids were listening to Green Day, and how could country compare to *Dookie*? Sure, there were some holdouts who still liked country music, but those kids were corny and lame and out of touch, just like the genre itself.

I began to pretend that I hated country music, and I did such a good job of pretending that I forgot I ever liked it in the first place. I discovered that if I ever found myself in the potentially humiliating situation of having to say what kind of music I liked, there was one response that would always be socially acceptable: *everything but country*. After I heard other people use this phrase with success, I adopted it myself, confident that it would meet the approval of my peers.

No one ever challenged me on it. No one ever said, "Oh, so you like elevator music? Brazilian death metal? Circus tunes? Radio static? Rhythmic chanting? But *not* country music?" And no one ever asked me *why* I didn't like country music. Nor did anyone ever defend country music after I answered the question. All the cool people, and even the wannabe cool people like me, knew that country music was indefensible.

And so, in mid-adolescence, I finally understood: of course Caleb would prank call the country station. Country music was ridiculous. Alan Jackson was ridiculous. "Chattahoochee" was ridiculous.

I'd always hated that stuff.

#### IV.

By the time I realized this, Caleb had moved away. His family had gone to Virginia, wanting to get away from the big city, get closer to the country, something like that. I didn't pay much attention. It felt strange not to have them living beside us—they'd lived there the entire time we'd lived there—but I was deep in the self-centered throes of adolescence by then, so I didn't think about it much. I'm not sure I even said goodbye.

After Caleb was gone, my relationship with country music became even more complicated. I moved on from Sugar Land Middle to an all-boys Catholic high school in the city. Freshman year, I was occasionally threatened—"Give me your Latin homework or I'll beat your ass"—by a hulking and doofy sophomore football player who was part of a clique that called themselves ITK. A mock-fraternity: *I Tappa Kegga*. These private-school boys wore cowboy boots, dipped tobacco, and drove large trucks purchased by their fathers. Most of the trucks had Jerry Jeff Walker or "Luckenbach, Texas" bumper stickers affixed to the back window. Some of the ITK guys, on occasion, wore cowboy hats. Almost everyone thought these guys were cool. I couldn't stand them. The fact that they liked country music made me hate it even more.

One other thing complicated my relationship with country music: I got really, really into Bob Dylan. I got so into Bob Dylan that I stopped listening to anyone else for a while. No other music seemed as *real* to me. I got so into Bob Dylan that I started buying blank tapes and exchanging them online for Dylan bootlegs with names like *Guitars Kissing and the Contemporary Fix* and *Thin Wild Mercury Music*. I got so into Bob Dylan that I started reading, or at least trying to read, every writer he referenced, from William Blake and Rimbaud to Kerouac and Ginsberg to Isaac Bashevis Singer. I became a little bit literary, a little bit artsy. I started to form the beginnings of an identity.

And thus I found even more motivation to hate on modern country music. Compared to Dylan at his wild-haired, razor-minded, electric-poet peak, the stuff coming out of Nashville was so slick, so polished, so commercial, so corny, so trite, so dumb—full of guys in cowboy hats singing stuff they didn't even really mean. Country music was obviously clueless, while the biting, brilliant Dylan of *Highway 61 Revisited* seemed to know everything about everything.

I hadn't yet discovered the pleasures of *Nashville Skyline*. I hadn't yet recognized the simple joys of other Dylan country songs, from "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" to "Wallflower." I hadn't yet come to realize that Dylan's greatest hero wasn't Kerouac or Rimbaud or even Woody Guthrie—his greatest hero was Hank Williams. Loving Dylan led you to Hank. Loving Dylan led you to Johnny Cash, Dylan's friend and *Nashville Skyline* duet partner. Loving Dylan led you to Waylon Jennings singing "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." Loving Dylan led you to *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* and *Grievous Angel*. Loving Dylan even led you, in the end, to Jerry Jeff Walker. Bob Dylan was a gateway drug to a bunch of great country music. I just didn't know it yet.

One day, when I was seventeen and smack in the middle of my obsession with mid-sixties Dylan, an old pickup truck came rolling down my street. I was standing outside my house with some friends, just like all those years before. The truck slowed down in front of us, and we all looked inside. The driver rolled down his window. It was a dude in a big cowboy hat.

"Hey man," the guy said, in a country drawl. He was smiling, which made me uncomfortable.

"Hey," I said.

Only after I spoke did I realize who this was.

"Caleb?"

He smiled, chuckled. Like he'd pulled another prank on me. I was speechless for a second.

"What . . . what are you doing here?" I finally said.

Just visiting, he told me. Checking out some of the old haunts, showing his lady friend around. He gestured and I noticed for the first time the young woman in the seat next to him. He smiled and she smiled. I waved. But I couldn't think about her much, because I was too focused on Caleb's voice. He was still talking in that low, thick country drawl. Was that a joke?

"What are you doing these days?" I asked.

"Well," he said, sounding a little like Alan Jackson, "I moved on out to Nashville last year. Trying to make it in the country-music business. Singing and writing songs. Playing some gigs."

I tried to take this in. He didn't seem to be joking.

"Wow," I finally said.

He was still smiling, seeming to enjoy my shock, sitting there in a cowboy shirt to go with his hat. He also seemed calmer than the Caleb I knew, or maybe more secure in himself.

I must've asked him more about the music business, how it was, how it was going, because at one point he leaned his arm out the window of his

truck and shared some gossip about Tim McGraw and Faith Hill's relationship before they were married. Nothing very salacious at all, but clearly meant to show me that he was a Nashville insider these days.

If anyone had asked, I would've said I had absolutely no interest in Faith Hill or Tim McGraw, but I found myself listening closely to this little bit of gossip, impressed once again with Caleb's worldliness. He was always one step ahead of me.

I thought we might catch up for a while, but then he said, "Well, alright, man. It was good seeing you."

"You too," I said, and then he put the pickup truck in drive, circled around the cul-de-sac, and drove away.

I felt woozy and disoriented. It was so strange, talking to this person that I hadn't seen in years, who was clearly the same guy as before but also totally different. His accent disturbed and confused me. How could someone just pretend to be a totally different person?

And so I responded the way I did with so many things that disturbed and confused me: I made fun of it. I told my brother, told my parents, told friends of mine that didn't even know him: My old neighbor Caleb came by, trying to act like a cowboy! A country singer! The guy who used to prank call the country station!

I never saw Caleb again. He never made it on the radio, as far as I know, but the internet still has some stray evidence of his music career, which seems to have lasted nearly a decade after he spoke to me from that pickup truck. I can see that he performed under a different last name. I can see the names of some of his songs, though I can't listen to them. I can see a bio he posted online, or that someone posted on his behalf, which emphasizes his experience playing state fairs and jamborees and a rodeo in Virginia, and "paying his dues" at places like Tootsies Orchid Lounge in Nashville. I assume all of this is true, but it's not the whole truth. The bio makes no mention of his time in Sugar Land.

The Caleb of the bio is described as a country music "purist," but the Caleb I knew was everything but country. What was I supposed to make of this? How was I supposed to interpret the difference between the Sugar Land Caleb and the Nashville Caleb? When he showed up on our street in a cowboy hat, wasn't he still pretending, just like on that prank call? And did he really think that giving himself a different name would make him a different person?

Eventually I made a connection that should've already been very obvious to me: my favorite, the artist formerly known as Robert Zimmerman, also changed his last name. He'd also fibbed about where and how he grew up. At one point, Dylan told people he'd grown up in Galveston and worked as a carny, neither of which was remotely true. And in his early days, he presented himself as a deeply authentic folk artist, a purist, when he was really just a rock 'n' roll fan who'd recently been living in a frat house. And that always made me like Dylan even more. I enjoyed thinking about how he'd essentially invented himself from scratch (and then *kept* reinventing himself, over and over). The more I thought about it, the more I finally admired Caleb for doing exactly the same thing. What's more authentic than trying to will yourself into becoming a totally different person? What's more American?

Our age difference always made me think of him as old, so it took me a long time to realize how young he was. He was always really young. Even when he talked to me near the cul-de-sac in his cowboy hat, with his lady by his side, he was only nineteen or so. He was figuring himself out, too, still working his way through the massive and perilous act of self-invention that we call growing up. And at a young age, he totally went for it, chasing that neon rainbow. Maybe he never made it big, but so what? He tried. Most people never do. Only now can I see the courage it must've taken to move out to Nashville at eighteen or nineteen. It's the kind of audacity Dylan himself might admire. And it's the kind that I've never had.

Here's one last thing I realized: Caleb loved "Chattahoochee." He *loved* it. He loved it so much that he wanted to request it on the radio over and over. He loved it, but he was fourteen and didn't know how to sincerely respond to that love. He was at that stage—we were all at that stage—when it's almost impossible to be sincerely enthusiastic about what you love, especially if it doesn't align with whatever restrictive rubric of coolness you've chosen to obey. But he did love it. And when he got a little older, he put on his cowboy hat and went all in on that love.

It took me way too long, but I've finally embraced all those nineties country artists that I'd forgotten I loved. These days I listen to a lot of Alan Jackson. Especially some of the big hits: "Gone Country," "Livin' on Love," "Don't Rock the Jukebox," "Tall, Tall Trees," "Chasin' That Neon Rainbow." They still hold up. They still give me joy.

I drive around with my kids and hope they start to memorize the lyrics.

What I loved about "Chattahoochee" when I heard it at Caleb's house is what I love about it now: that spirited guitar riff, the specific and memorable lyrics, the good-natured charm of Jackson's vocals. It's a song that very much fits within the tradition Hank Williams started, the tradition of well-crafted, deeply enjoyable country songs that seem simple but endure forever (or, as Dylan once described Hank's music, "songs from the Tree of Life"). It's also everything that a country-music hater might despise. If you're lucky, though, you get to a point where you realize that it's better to maximize the stuff you enjoy and minimize the stuff you despise. Maybe that's why Caleb went to Nashville. It's a relief when you finally give yourself permission to like what you like. ✨