

TRANS COUNTRY ARTISTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

A Passel of Essential Trans Voices

by Mya Byrne – 7-8-20

It’s been a banner year for trans representation in the wider world, but trans folks in country, Americana, and related genres don’t always get their due. (See [“The Case of the Missing Trans Country Artists”](https://countryqueer.com/article/the-case-of-the-missing-trans-country-artists/) in yesterday’s edition of CQ.) Elana Redfield, one of the founding artists of Brooklyn’s venerable Queer Country Quarterly shows, told me, “When I was starting out playing pedal steel, I walked into a bar one night and saw what looked to be a trans woman playing steel guitar. She tore up those tunes on a double-neck steel and it may have been the first time I realized I might find a place in country music. It meant the world to me.” With this article, we hope to do the same for some of y’all out there.

(Note: we know this list is heavy on white folks: If you know – or are – a BIPOC trans country artist, [let us know](https://countryqueer.com/contact-us/)!)

Let’s begin with a person who blazed a trail for many of us, the folk-rocker [Namoli Brennet](http://namolibrennet.com/). She released her first album in 2002, and has never stopped performing or recording. She’s a 4-time Outmusic award winner, has toured worldwide, and has self-released everything she’s put out. Here’s a recent cut that I adore, “The Whiskey Don’t Help.”

Arguably the most visible trans person who crosses into queer country as an independent artist right now–Los Angeles-based folk-rocker [Ryan Cassata](http://www.ryancassata.com/tour). While he’s had the eye of the media for a long time, coming out on Larry King Live as a teen, he has worked his ass off to get where he is. His video for “Daughter” just hit a million views on YouTube, and we just reviewed his excellent new record, Bamboo Plants. I really dig this tune, “Extended Vacation.”

A legend in his own right is [Cidny Bullens](https://www.cidnybullens.com/), two-time Grammy nominee, who began his career as a backup singer for Gene Clark and Elton John, and then was signed to UA and Casablanca in the 70s and 80s as a solo artist. He [came out publicly as trans in 2012](https://www.theeastnashvillian.com/cid-bullens/) and toured a solo stage show, Somewhere Between: Not an Ordinary Life. On June 18, he announced his new album Walkin’ Through This World, produced by Ray Kennedy and featuring guest artists Mary Gauthier and Beth Nielsen Chapman, which will be released August 21 on BMI, but you can listen and buy it on[Bandcamp right now](https://cidnybullens.bandcamp.com/?fbclid=IwAR13RkQUogfUQ4lorwXORJkiCELnMFrgfZrMvMjw93DwmuGPSATuhtCFL-w). Here’s a solo acoustic version of “I Gotta Believe in Something.

Another fixture of trans performance in the 2000s is Canada’s [Rae Spoon](http://www.raespoon.com/). In 2008, Spoon went into electronic-influenced indie pop, but their roots remained country. Their 2013 album [My Prairie Home](https://raespoon.bandcamp.com/album/my-prairie-home), a companion piece to the [CBC documentary of the same name (which you can watch for free here](http://www.raespoon.com/my-prairie-home-documentary)) focused on their rural Alberta upbringing, and returned them to these roots. However, not one to stop pushing boundaries, Spoon has recently released a number of pop-influenced songs I absolutely love, including this one, “Do Whatever the Heck You Want.”

The only trans artist I know of who falls into modern pop-country is [Brody Ray](https://www.brodyray.com/). A Nashville transplant from Nebraska, he was featured on American Idol and America’s Got Talent, and at the 2019 GLAAD Concert for Love and Acceptance, hosted by Ty Herndon. His latest single is “Stomping Ground”.

I was recently turned onto [Juan and the Pines](https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Musician-Band/Juan-the-Pines-129875960426142/), the high-and-lonesome C&W expression of Lambda Literary Award-nominated [Julian Talamantez Brolaski](https://blueflowerarts.com/artist/julian-talamantez-brolaski/), a two-spirit and transgender poet from Oakland and NYC of mixed Mescalero and Lipan Apache, Latin@, and European heritage. Its music is so sweet, cutting, and melancholy, and its work has been featured across media.

The next two I’ll shout out here are NorCal-based alt.country artists. [Joe Stevens](https://joestevensmusic.com/) (formerly of Coyote Grace) often tours as a side person while also supporting his own songs and projects, recently developing the stage musical The Civility of Albert Cashier (selected for the 2019 New York Musical Festival). Here’s one of my favorites of his back catalog, “Guy Named Joe”, which was featured on MTV.

Then there’s [Eli Conley](https://www.eliconley.com/). He is the founder of Queer Country West Coast (the Bay Area counterpart to Brooklyn’s [Gay Ole Opry/Queer Country Quarterly](http://www.gayoleopry.com/), coordinated by  Karen Pittelman of Karen and the Sorrows). Conley writes some truly fine songs, and teaches voice and songwriting to trans folks. His presence is a godsend to many in the trans community, as his mentorship is unparalleled. Here’s “Strong & Tender”, performed live and beautifully filmed.

Moving back down the coast and more into Americana, LA’s [Angeles County](https://www.angeles-county.com/) is a dynamic duo featuring the extremely talented multi-instrumentalist and singer-songwriter, Lauren Steely. She arranged and co-wrote the album with Meehan Rasch. CQ contributor Rachel Cholst positively reviewed their 2018 EP, Raised Clean (which made me blush, as I produced it!). Check out one of my favorites, “Roll Another Dollar”.

A trans artist who’s just made her first leap into Americana is Oakland’s incredible, multitalented[Lafemmebear](https://www.lafemmebear.com/). Just this past weekend she dropped “Here, On The Ground”, an airy, light piece for these stormy times. As a producer pre-transition, she worked with teams from Sony and Interscope before effectively being blacklisted after coming out. She didn’t quit making music, though, and her pop-R&B songs have landed her coverage from Billboard and Autostraddle, and a recent collaboration with Peppermint (RuPaul’s Drag Race) on a Valentine’s single. (Full disclosure that I am featured on this track, playing guitar, steel, and bass.) [It’s available exclusively on Bandcamp.](https://lafemmebear.bandcamp.com/track/here-on-the-ground-ft-mya-byrne)

But heck, as long as I’m talking about work I’m involved in, you can [check out my own material, too](http://myabyrne.bandcamp.com/)! Here’s my song “Faultline”, co-written with [Neale Eckstein](https://www.foxrun.org/foxrunstudio/), which won Best Folk Song at the 2019 [Trans Trenderz](https://www.transtrenderz.com/) Music Awards.

Another Bay Area badass is San Francisco’s [Shawna Virago](http://shawnavirago.com/). No Depression had some very kind words about her, which certainly tie into our theme here: “She’s the definition of ‘folk music,’ which is not just an expressive body of work, it’s a cultural movement.” Her punk-influenced Americana is a staple of live shows in the Bay and beyond, and she’s been performing as an out trans woman since the 1990s. Her videos are always gorgeous, as befits her status as the director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. I especially like this track, “Last Night’s Sugar”, which was an official selection at the 42nd Frameline Film Festival, and features trans filmmaker StormMiguel Florez and Sean Dorsey, recognized as the first out transgender modern dance choreographer.

One of my favorite trans country songwriters is Jesse Boutchyard, of [Severed Fingers](https://www.facebook.com/severedfingersnc/)out of Durham, NC. They write and play devastating, viciously truthful punk-leaning country. Here’s a video from the first time I saw them live (I’m standing front and center!). This song is called “Blasphemer”.

Noel’le Longhaul, Alyssa Kai, Nick Berger, and Ruby Vespertillo make up [Loone](https://www.facebook.com/laughingloone/), a four-piece band of trans and genderqueer musicians from Western Massachusetts. Their eerie, trippy backwoods folk-rock has been incredibly influential to me and they cross genres like it’s nobody’s business. [Here’s a live set of their songs I absolutely adore](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKeKmlcSlU4).

Maddie Witler, of the [Lonely Heartstring Band](http://smarturl.it/podjw8), is openly trans and bi, and a nationally recognized mandolin shredder based in Brooklyn. She’s shared the stage with many legends, including Tony Trishka. [Here’s her recent set from Porch Pride, presented by California’s Bluegrass Pride.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg2Gorl2Qqk)

[Bethel Steele](https://m.facebook.com/bethelsteelemusic), from Colorado by way of Boston, was one of the first people in the folk world who knew I was transitioning, and my last tour under my old name was with him. He’s a self-described Americana song-slinger whose accessible, beautiful lyrics leave no doubt why he was chosen as a Kerrville New Song Finalist. In 2012 he received a grant from the Club Passim Iguana Music Fund to fund a show about gender identity. Here he is singing “Gentle Babe”.

Originally from Buffalo, [Noa Laniakea](http://www.instagram.com/Pynxis) is a composer who plays bass fiddle for bands including Fog Holler, while also performing solo pieces. And emphasis on “fiddle”! This Oakland artist was just featured at Porch Pride as well with some solo horsehair-burnin fancy bow work. Bet ya never thought the bass could get you tapping your boots like this! Check out her Porch Pride livestream set here.

### Gay Ole Opry Trans Artists

The previously mentioned Gay Ole Opry/Queer Country Quarterly has been a fixture in Brooklyn for almost a decade, not only supporting trans artists, but also organizations like the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and the [Trans Justice Funding Project](https://www.transjusticefundingproject.org/). Here’s a sublist of some of their all-star performers:

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the late[Bryn Kelly](http://www.brynkelly.com/bio/), who hosted three of the Gay Ole Opry festivals and performed often at QCQ. If you don’t know Kelly’s work, [she was an incredibly influential trans activist and HIV advocate](https://www.queerappalachia.com/copy-of-about), who we lost in early 2016 to suicide. Her passion for country music was an essential part of the QCQ, according to Karen Pittelman. Here she is in 2010 singing with The Invert Family Singers (featuring the aforementioned Brolaski along with drummer Naomi Clark), an early queer/trans country group.

AJ Lewis played bass for various QCQ artists including Karen and the Sorrows in the mid-teens, then moved to banjo and started his own band, [AJ Lewis & Friends](https://www.facebook.com/AJ-Lewis-Friends-1566727440261636/). He is currently teaching at the Iowa Writers Workshop. In this 2015 video, he delivers some clawhammer goodness along with an intro riffing on Greil Marcus and queer themes in country music

Elena Elías is a nonbinary Latinx singer-songwriter based in upstate NY. They’ve released many fabulous albums and are well worth a listen. Their current project, Hen in the Foxhouse, is a partnership with Jem Violet. <http://heninfox.com/> There is a lot of soul and pop influence in their music, and their lyrics are witty and clever, e.g., “I don’t care what gender you are…you can start off as one and wind up anywhere,” on “Not Not My Baby”, a live solo version of which can be found here.

[Jem Violet](http://jemviolet.bandcamp.com/) is also making her own incredible, heartfelt music in the Hudson Valley. Open and freeing, her piano-based EP [Low Songs](https://jemviolet.bandcamp.com/album/low-songs) is pretty dang special. But while her solo stuff is deep and heart-rending, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a sense of humor. Here’s her submission to NPR’s Tiny Desk Concert from a couple of years ago, “Take My T,” featuring Elías.

[Mylo](https://mylochoy.com/) is a fantastic singer-songwriter originally from Wisconsin, who describes their music as “bedroom-folk”, and is now based in New York. Their dreamy lyrics are matched by their innovative arrangements. They were recently profiled by [No Depression](https://www.nodepression.com/album-reviews/on-delta-mylo-offers-a-rare-gift/) by Rachel Cholst. Here’s a gorgeous video for “Tides”, filmed in Hawaii.

Elana Redfield fronted Brooklyn’s The Low & The Lonesome on pedal steel. She grew up in farm country before relocating to New York City. A part of the original QCQ roster, she also played with Karen and the Sorrows until retiring from music in 2016 to focus on trans activism and anti-racism. Here’s one of her excellent tunes, “about surviving NYC in an apocalypse by returning to my country roots”, according to Elana.

[Rahne Alexander](http://www.rahne.com/music), based in Baltimore, was recently featured at Queer Country Quarterly. Out and proud, we’re glad to have her in the family. She performs music under the moniker of 50’♀ (love it!) and draws from country, pop, and rock in her evocative, emotional tunes.

This list is not exhaustive, of course. By putting it out, we’re hoping not only to introduce you to some great trans artists, but that other trans country and Americana/folk artists will realize that they’re not alone, but part of a larger community.

We’ll conclude with a shoutout to a few venues that have consistently supported trans country performers: Branded Saloon in Brooklyn, which has hosted Queer Country Quarterly since its inception; El Rio and the Ivy Room in the Bay Area; and Dee’s Country Cocktail Lounge in Nashville. We thank you, and can’t wait to pull up a barstool again when the time is right.

Note: This list would have been a lot shorter were it not for Karen Pittelman, who helped so much with research and personally connected me with many artists listed here. She is a blessing to our queer country community and I am proud to know her.