

Ethel Cain's New Songs for the South

by [Ryder Kern](#)

Ethel Cain's music video for "American Teenager" opens with grainy footage of a stop light suspended from a wire, reminiscent of rural America. Cain rides her bike across an empty street in a small town, wearing a quintessentially American cheerleader uniform. She picks flowers growing beside a discarded lottery ticket; she looks over her shoulder as she climbs a fence onto a high school football field. Cain seems to be dancing around a ghost town, its empty highways and deserted stadiums suggesting it was once a thriving city. The song features an echoey guitar riff over upbeat drums, and spearheaded by Cain's acrobatic falsettos, frequently reaches thrilling climaxes. It's so quintessentially pop that it's impossible not to dance along, and all the while Cain sings about being so drunk in church on Sunday that she can't stand straight.

Ethel Cain is not a real person. She's a stage name, an idea, a means through which her creator, singer-songwriter Hayden Silas Anhedönia, expresses her own struggles with her femininity and upbringing. Ethel Cain is a "'terrifying figurehead' who 'eats men and has an army of [cult-following] daughters' but also 'exudes utter sex appeal,'" says Anhedönia (qtd. in Jocelyn). Performing as Cain, Anhedönia's music evokes murky images of queasy Sunday mornings and sex in the back of pickup trucks. Singing "God's Country" and "A House in Nebraska," Cain summons her upbringing in working class rural America, romanticizing aspects of her life often considered trashy. In her song "Crush," she describes a man who "works with his hands" and "smells like Marlboro Reds," and the video shows him shoplifting from a gas station ("Crush"). Rather than shunning stigma, Cain leans into negative stereotypes, lampooning them with the title of her 2021 album, *Inbred*. Cain declares herself wholeheartedly American, and proud to be "white trash" ("Inbred").

Anhedönia's choice to stage this sort of pride may come as a surprise, since she is transgender, and the America Cain epitomizes is one that often rejects people like her. When transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney partnered with Anheuser-Busch to advertise Bud Light, rural America's response was swift and violent, "with many bars in conservative states from Tennessee to Wyoming refusing to stock Bud Light" (Zilber). Country rocker Kid Rock posted a video of himself firing an automatic weapon into a stack of Bud Light beer cans. To reconcile with transphobic audiences, Anheuser-Busch ran commercials featuring Budweiser's trademark Clydesdale horses and strong patriotic themes, leaning hard into national pride (Dennis). For *The View* host Whoopi

Goldberg, the ad “suggested that ‘horses are so much more American than trans people’” (Zilber). And the problem goes much deeper than beer ads. Per Arwa Mahdawi of *The Guardian*, “At least 452 anti-LGBTQ+ bills [had] been introduced in state legislatures across the US” prior to April 8, 2023 “whose main purpose is seemingly to terrorize minorities rather than lay out clear law.” In Kansas, the state legislature passed a bill allowing parents to sue if they believed a transgender girl prevented their daughter from making a team, even as just three out of 106,000 Kansan high school athletes are transgender girls (Mahdawi). This rhetoric of replacement, in which a handful of transgender girls somehow replace all women in sports, comes from misplaced fears of conservative American values being replaced with liberal ones. Those who believe America’s glory days lie in the past cast transgender people as anti-American, and a metaphor for unwelcome social change.

Yet Anhedönia does not seem to feel that being ‘American’ and being transgender are incompatible. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she doubled down on her appreciation of her home, vowing to continue working from rural Alabama even as her fame skyrockets. Cain has “clung to the culture, turning the lows of Americana and fantasies of freedom into a caustic and self-aware Southern Gothic persona” (Coscarelli). Anhedönia acknowledges the South as fundamental to her identity, not idealizing but rather representing this American landscape, including her suffering within it. Her wide popular appeal means that the passionate ambivalence of her music has touched a common nerve.

Class struggle threads through Anhedönia’s music. She grew up with “the popular classes” who are the “losers of globalization,” in an economic landscape riven between urban elites and the rapidly dissipating rural middle class (Campani). This America enforces rigid traditional values out of a yearning for a prosperous past, clinging to any salvageable fragments of its rapidly dissolving identity, “putting too much faith in the make believe” and “another high school football team” (“American Teenager”). The culture rejects progressivism and people like Anhedönia, resentful of progressive cosmopolitan cultures that have benefitted at rural America’s expense. Anhedönia does not shy away from this culture that rejects her, but rather highlights its trauma as her music explores its evils. Cain describes cultural trauma that is generational and subliminal; she sings about “a long cold war with your kids at the front” perpetually lurking in the collective subconscious (“American Teenager”).

Cultural trauma is present, too, in the sound of Cain’s music. Her gratuitous use of reverb creates a sense of loneliness, mimicking the echo of an empty hall or an abandoned church. The intro of “Crush” is faint and distorted, creating a sense of distance. As the song reaches one of many crescendos near the chorus, Cain uses a faint overtone, creating a choral effect reminiscent of the church singing that Anhedönia did a child. Anhedönia told *The Face* magazine that the South is “not dark and creepy – it’s

actually bright and sunny and creepy. It's hot, it's humid, your head is swimming and you hear crickets and cicadas all day" (qtd. in Reed). Listening to Cain can feel like a visit to this South. Most immediately, you hear its pleasantries – catchy electric guitars and strong bass lines – but an undercurrent of resentment and nostalgia quickly boils to the surface, becoming unavoidable. Anhedönia's description of the South applies to Cain's music: "there's a tension that never really goes away" (qtd. in Reed).

Cain's modernized Southern Gothic music arose as a continuation of an Americana genre within contemporary music. Her rise mirrors that of artists like Lana del Rey, who "sings of her infatuation with a California that's burning away, with classic rock stars who tragically died of drug overdoses, with self-loathing poets who are ultimately more pompous than interesting," as expressed by Vassar student Abby Tarwater in *The Miscellany News* (Tarwater). Cain's themes echo the work of country artists like Tyler Childers, who in his song "Peace of Mind" characterizes "a menthol-smoking, Avon makeup-selling mother of a cheerleader distractedly burn[ing] frozen waffles as she works over what went wrong in her life," a study in a discipline that Childers coins as "piss-poor anthropology" (Bengal). Cain is part of a breed of artists looking both to capture the essence of rural American culture as it disintegrates and make clear that the idealized conception of its past never existed.

Ethel Cain as an idea was born in 2019, when Anhedönia decided to change her sound radically from her early music. Under the names White Silas and Atlas, Anhedönia had performed a very synthy and wispy style of dream pop, so distant and melancholic it could've been hallucinated. With Cain, Anhedönia decided "it was no more gothic churches, no more electronic music. It was guitars and it was schoolhouses and 'Little House on the Prairie'" (qtd. in Coscarelli). Cain exists only through her association with an idealized American mythos, which she works constantly to subvert. Describing an impoverished contemporary rural America, she emphasizes shared private traumas, conveying Anhedönia's sense that "everybody's all smiles. And then everyone goes home and they are deeply disturbed" (qtd. In Reed). Presenting a facade of trivial teenage whimsicality, Cain and her activities powerfully juxtapose middle America's mythology of its past and the reality of its current situation.

Equally, Cain centers a mythical degree of femininity in her work, particularly in her music videos. For Anhedönia, Cain emerged as "kind of a subconscious manifestation of what I wanted out of my femininity. I was weak and kind of shaky in my own femininity, especially after I came out [as trans], so Ethel was a huge swing in the other direction" (qtd. in Jocelyn). In her videos for "American Teenager" and "Crush," she frolics through fields, shaves her legs in the shower, twirls her hair and kicks her legs while on the phone, and dons hair curlers as she smokes off the back of a pickup truck. Her image is a caricature of rural American femininity. Rejecting those that seek to exclude her from femininity, she makes her own unavoidable, placing herself entirely

within the predominant, rigid conception of femininity prominent in her middle America.

As a facet of this femininity, Cain poses herself as a maternal figure to her listeners. Her record label is named Daughters of Cain and her instagram handle is @mothercain. In an interview with *Them* magazine, she dives into the subject, saying “I want to be that mother figurehead. I never really want kids of my own, but I would love to foster kids, feed whoever needs it, and give a room to whoever needs it” (Anhedönia qtd. in Jocelyn). Anhedönia sees Cain as existing across history: “I see her as being like a matriarch in the ‘50s, a housewife in the ‘70s, a rebellious teenager in the ‘90s. I want her to be the embodiment of a woman who feels trapped throughout history – timeless” (qtd. in Jocelyn). She suggests that this idealized conception of traditional America came at the expense of women’s suffering. Cain poses herself as a mother for all those scorned by American society – a role model of someone who has rejected the limits placed on her by her birth, who was even scapegoated, and survived.

Even as Anhedönia’s specific struggles as a trans woman inform her music, the pain she summons is intentionally universal. Anhedönia rarely references her trauma’s specifics, instead inviting her listeners’ own emotional response with lyrics like “God loves you, but not enough to save you” (“Sun Bleached Flies”). Although her experiences have been amplified by her position as a particular outsider within American society, her music speaks for any and all outsiders who choose to fraternize with her – outsiders who choose to stay. Perhaps she sees her suffering not as a localized moral failure, but as part of a larger trend across America, one that need not be irreversible.

Even as it rejects her, she remains adamantly rooted in rural America. When asked about relocating to Los Angeles or New York, like many artists of her caliber, Anhedönia says, “Oh God, I will never be caught dead living in either of those cities I don’t want any career that requires me to be there” (qtd. in Coscarelli). Despite the suffering that her upbringing has imposed on her, she viscerally avoids urban life because it doesn’t reflect her. Cain speaks for and embodies her home, romanticizing aspects of her culture denigrated as morally bankrupt and synthesizing them with her identity as a transgender woman. As Anhedönia constructs her, Cain is everything that America doesn’t want her to be, unavoidably feminine and shamelessly ‘white trash.’ Anhedönia proudly recounts an early meeting with her record label in Los Angeles “looking like an absolute hillbilly,” proudly reclaiming a term designed to be derogatory towards poor rural Americans (qtd. in Coscarelli). When Cain walks barefoot along a country road, smokes gratuitously, and pines after her shoplifting crush, she is not attempting to exhibit moral failure, but show aspects of her culture caused by trauma and poverty. In doing so, Cain combats the cultural and economic forces that have destabilized her home, and placed its hatred onto her as a woman.

Anhedonia may just stay put in the putative sinking ship of America's neglected countryside. She has made a brand out of giving a voice to America's forgotten people, and could no sooner abandon them as she could abandon the persona of Ethel Cain altogether. While many artists seek to assimilate their styles into broader popular culture, "Cain is intent on bringing the industry to her world" (Coscarelli). She is a shining pillar for the so-called 'losers of globalization,' and the losers among even these people, in a pop culture landscape where they are often ignored.

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