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Country Strong

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Country Strong

Abstract

This is a film review of *Country Strong* (2010).

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2009's country-music-themed film hit, *Crazy Heart*, snuck up quietly on the viewing public, eventually earning Jeff Bridges the Best Actor Oscar. By contrast, 2010's *Country Strong* was released with almost as much hype as a summer blockbuster. *Country Strong* tells the story of the interconnected travails of four people in the music industry. Kelly Canter is an aging country star who prematurely leaves a substance abuse rehab program at the start of the film in order to launch a comeback tour. James Canter is her husband and manager, wracked with grief and anger that Kelly has ruined her career and their life together through her drinking. Beau Hutton is a part-time singer and part-time aide at the rehab center, where he has met and begun an affair with Kelly. Chiles Stanton is a young beauty queen (and friend of Beau's girlfriend) who aspires to be a country singer and has just signed on (with James as manager) to be the opening act in Kelly's comeback tour. Beau claims to be one of Kelly's sponsors in her recovery, and he too is added to the tour lineup.

As the story moves forward, the relationship questions multiply. Will James and Kelly reconcile? Will Beau and Kelly run off into the sunset together? Are James and Chiles having an affair or just flirting? Will Beau and Chiles fall in love? If you're confused already, then you have an accurate sense of the disjointed nature of the story. A simple love triangle would have been complicated enough, but a

love quadrangle with a little mercenary sex on the side is too much to keep track of.

The film reflects the way Christianity is woven into country music's mostly Bible-belt culture. Kelly reminisces about her life with James before they left Bristol and about singing in the church choir. When Chiles is asked by a reporter during the tour who her idol is, she replies, "I'm touring with her. And Jesus Christ. Kelly Canter and Jesus Christ."

Ultimately the plot boils down to the stories of two couples. The story of Kelly and James is a story of wounds too deep to heal, a relationship too broken for forgiveness. The back story involves Kelly having gone onstage in Dallas drunk and pregnant, falling off the stage, and miscarrying. In the most moving scene, Kelly does a "make-a-wish" appearance with a young boy who is dying from leukemia. Watching her interact with the child, James has an impulse of forgiveness and makes a small gesture of reconciliation, but just as suddenly pulls away when the depth of his anger and grief overcomes him.

The story of Beau and Chiles is a sappy and disappointing love story that strains credulity. It is difficult to believe that a character portrayed with so much ambition would abandon it all to go live with her lover in the bunkhouse of the ranch where he has taken work as a day laborer. Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe

when she shows up at the bar where Beau is singing in the closing scene, she's only there for a visit and plans to return to the glamorous singing career she wanted so badly.

The characters remain largely a cipher throughout the film. No hint is given regarding the nature of the demons that drove Kelly to drink in the first place. It is revealed that Chiles is lying about her past, but the true details are only hinted at, and the wellspring of her vast ambitions remains hidden. Nothing is said about Beau's past at all. He is portrayed as someone who prefers a simple life of singing in local bars to a life of fame and fortune, but no reason for this preference is suggested.

The portrayal of country music is also problematic. There has never been a successful female country singer with a public reputation for drunkenness or with the overt sexuality that Kelly is portrayed as having. When she dances provocatively onstage while singing, "If you've got it, flaunt it / Make the cowboys want it," she has overstepped country music's standards of propriety for female artists. The film's star, Gwyneth Paltrow, said in an interview, "In country music, there's no irony, no cynicism."¹ If that's true, then her character is not a cynic and Hank Williams never sang "I'll never get out of this world alive."

Underneath the film's myriad problems lies a somewhat interesting and tragic story about forgiveness—how difficult it is even under normal circumstances, and how a relationship can accrue beneath a patina of normalcy such a thick crust of pain that forgiveness becomes impossible.

¹ Claudia Puig, "Gwyneth stays 'Strong' on all fronts," USA Today, December 17, 2010, 2D.