

Hardy's Artistic Evolution: From Country to Rock and Back Again

Singer-songwriter Michael Wilson Hardy, more commonly known by his stage name [Hardy](#), traces the beginning of his musical journey back to his hometown of Philadelphia, Mississippi. Here he doubtless found much of the inspiration for the songs he would later write about the country lifestyle. After earning his degree in commercial songwriting from Middle Tennessee State University, Hardy established himself in the Nashville music scene by writing songs for artists like Florida Georgia Line and Blake Shelton. He has gone on to find great success as a performer while continuing to write songs for other country artists.

In recent years, Hardy has also shown his rock influence more blatantly with his two albums *The Mockingbird and the Crow* and *Quit*. Hardy's genre shifts have garnered mixed reactions from fans and critics alike and have likewise affected his career.

Hardy's debut full length solo album, *A Rock* was released in 2020 and stood out because of the way it blended country and rock influence in what some characterized as a more blatant fashion than might usually be expected. The [reviewer](#), Jeff Lincoln was impressed by the blend of country and rock influences as well as by the obvious songwriting skill shown on the album. He wrote, "it's got authentic appeal, and Hardy's found the right label at Big Loud Records. Country music was always more than the hats anyhow."

For my part, I noticed the country and rock influences on this album as well. However, what stood out to me the most about the album was the authenticity of the lyrics. Unlike many stereotypical "country lifestyle" songs, the ones on this album felt well thought through and less played out than something a singer like Jason Aldean or a songwriter like Dallas Davidson could come up with.

In a similar vein, although many of Jason Aldean's songs did attempt to blend country and rock, my impression is that Hardy, having heard and liked many great rock bands growing up, was able to blend it more successfully and plausibly than Jason Aldean who's "pumped up, overbearing party songs were seen as implausible by many pundits and critics.

In the aftermath of *A Rock*, many people assumed Hardy would simply follow up with another rock influenced country album. However, what fans got was a surprise, a 17-track album containing one half country songs and one-half rock songs called *The Mockingbird and the Crow*. This album fully displayed another side of Hardy which, until now, fans had only glimpsed.

The Mockingbird and the Crow reached number four on [Billboard 200](#) with “55,000 album equivalent units making it Hardy's highest charting album so far.” In 2023, the album reached number one on several billboard charts including “top country songs, top rock songs and top singles,” highlighting its wide genre appeal.

Reviewer [Steven Thomas Erlewine](#) treated the album with what I thought to be an unfair level of harshness. He gave the album two stars out of five, stating the country section sounded more like “southern rock and Kid Rock than country music.” He also criticized the “cliche lyrics” on most of the album and seemed to feel that the rock section deserved an unfair comparison to “Nu Metal.”

For my part, I think the country songs on this album are no different than what Hardy had given us on previous albums, and it may very well have been his goal to emulate a southern rock sound on those songs. As for the rock section, again, it may very well have been Hardy's goal to produce the Nu Metal sound on the rock half of the album. So again, I don't feel the album deserved such harsh treatment. I see it as Hardy bringing the country sound his current fans desire while also experimenting with his rock side, given that his earliest musical influences were heavy rock bands.

It doesn't need to be stated that in the aftermath of *The Mockingbird and the Crow*, people were extremely curious as to what kind of album Hardy's next album would be. Would it be another half country half rock album, or would it be a full-on rock album. Gradually, singles started coming out that made a lot of people think Hardy might be going for a full-on rock album. Sure enough, that is what eventually came out, and while many of his country fan base were understandably disappointed, rock fans who had been introduced to him by the second half of his previous album were excited that he was finally going to fully embrace this part of himself.

Hardy's first full rock album, *Quit* came out on July 12, 2024, and featured collaborations with well-known rock artists like Fred Durst, front man of the band [Limp Bizkit](#) and Chad Smith, drummer of the [Red Hot Chili Peppers](#). The two main sub genres of rock that make up the album are described as Nu Metal and Post-Grunge, and the mood of the album is described as “[aggressive and genre bending](#)” by Jessica Nicholson in billboard magazine.

Predictably, this album received mixed reactions from different fans. The rock fan base Hardy had picked up via the second half of *The Mockingbird and the Crow* embraced this full rock experiment, while Hardy’s [country fan base](#) were confused by it and wondered if their hero had turned his back on them for good. A fan expressed this sentiment in a post on a [Reddit](#) forum stating, “lately he's just been experimenting to see how bad he can make a song that some people will still like.”

Hardy’s genre fluctuations have divided the opinions of fans and have caused some of them to lose faith in him completely. However, contrary to what some “close minded country purists” have said about Hardy’s evolution, the *Quit* album does seem to have won Hardy some new rock fans and incited other fans (like me) to congratulate him on his willingness to explore different areas of the music world.

As previously mentioned, Hardy’s decision to make a full rock album was met with positive and negative reactions from fans. The positive fallout from this decision has been the [expansion](#) of Hardy's reach to rock radio and more rock fans being attracted to his live shows. But still, some of Hardy's previous country fan base have questioned the [authenticity](#) of the album as well as the quality of the songwriting. The divide between the country purists and those who embrace genre experimentation is made clear in a [Reddit](#) post in which a user writes, “country fans and elitists... think there’s no such thing as being multifaceted in music.” Well, those disillusioned country fans must have been glad when they heard Hardy's next project would be a return to country music.

To the relief of his original country fan base, Hardy announced his next album would be entitled [COUNTRY! COUNTRY!](#) This album is set to release September 26 and has been [described](#) as “a clear return to unapologetic country.” Hardy’s stated [reasons](#) for making this album were that he “missed the country music community” and that he “felt creatively recharged.” This could mean that after his experimentation with rock, Hardy feels ready to

return to his country roots, or it could mean that after venting his feelings about being in a bus crash on his last album, he is now ready to return to more relaxed, optimistic country music.

Whatever the reasons, while some fans view this new country album as “a welcome homecoming.” Others see it as “oscillation or uncertainty.” To unconvinced fans, Hardy offers this [reassurance](#), he will “never abandon country music,” embracing country and rock simultaneously.

This switching between country and rock shows Hardy is among those who believe [genre boundaries](#) are fluid. It shows he is open to experimentation and willing and able to resist being confined to a single genre. This genre fluidity also shows a balance not many recording artists have, a seeming ability to switch between genres without a noticeable difference in the quality of the songwriting and the propensity to put on an intense live show that pleases fans across the genre spectrum. A likely result of this album for Hardy will be a reinforcement of his roots and unification of his fan base. With these fluctuations between genres, Hardy has shown himself to be a dynamic artist rather than a genre specific performer.

Another “dynamic artist” who makes the habit of making albums with differing genre classifications is Céline Dion who would often make an English album and a French album at the same time or relatively close together. The reason I believe this switching between languages merits comparison to Hardy's switching between country and rock is that there are clear genre distinctions between Celine Dion's English albums and her French albums. Her English albums tend to be more techno infused and beat driven, whereas her French albums are more acoustic, down to earth and folk influenced. Her English albums are intended for a global audience, whereas the intention of her French albums is to hearken back to the music she was raised on and speak to audiences who want that specific music.

The parallel between the genre fluctuations of Céline Dion and those of Hardy could be explained as Hardy also wanting to go back to his original musical influences and explore a side of himself, he knew was there but had not had the chance to fully explore. It could also be that Hardy with his rock music, like Céline Dion with her English music, wanted to gain a larger fan base by extending his genre repertoire. Whatever the case, those who feel

inclined to search will find parallels between these seemingly different musical artists who both managed to make acclaimed music in two different genres.

In conclusion, Hardy's evolution from country to rock and back signals his growth and experimentation. It shows his openness to embrace multiple genres as well as his appeal to multiple fan bases. Regardless of the reaction of critics or fans, Hardy's decision to make another country album suggests an increased level of maturity and a recalibration of his career, he has reached a new level of self-awareness.

In the end, what artists like Hardy and Céline Dion have taught us is that genre fluid artists can thrive by Embracing change and authenticity. In other words, if you stay in one place for too long, you'll never evolve, but new possibilities result in positive evolution.