Country Music Trailblazers CRS Panel with Luke Combs, Maren Morris, NPR's Ann Powers

Ann Powers: Hi everyone! Here we are in Zoom land, where we are all connected yet strangely disconnected. Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm so excited to have Luke Combs and Maren Morris here for this conversation. You know, I just put together a little paragraph to introduce this conversation. You all know that we have two of the leading lights in country music with us today, and this is one conversation among many happening about country's heart and soul, and among other things, addressing racial iniquity in the genre. It's important to say before we start talking that we are three white people talking about race, among other subjects, so necessarily this is an incomplete conversation. At the same time, I am so glad that Luke Combs and Maren Morris pushed for a panel that was originally intended to focus on their careers to become one about personal artistic and genre-wide accountability. I say thanks to them and I welcome Luke and Maren to this conversation. Hi!

Maren Morris: Hi!

Ann Powers: So I want to start where I believe every conversation about cultural change needs to start…with a bit of self-assessment. First off, I just want to say that for myself, confronting my own blind spots, failures of courage and desire to stay comfortable, is an ongoing process. I now both of you have been doing a lot of soul searching and figuring out ways to respond to this moment personally, professionally and through your music. So Maren, you I'm going to start with you. You've been very open about this process of self-confrontation and also about challenging country music and the Nashville music industry. In October, you released a song called "Better Than We Found It", which explicitly takes the cause of the movement for black lives and highlighting how policing can be racist among other themes in the song and shout out to my neighbor Laura Veltz who co-wrote that song with you. More recently you've been speaking out on Twitter and in interviews about the need for white Americans to educate themselves and take an anti-racism stance and especially in country music. I'd love to hear a little bit about your personal journey in becoming more outspoken about these issues.

Maren Morris: Well I mean, thank you for having us by the way. Um, CRS. I would say with my journey, I really didn't set out to be this activist and obviously none of us are the authority on racism because as you said, we are white and existing as white people in a space that is historically rooted in a lot of racism so I think it's really hard for me as a white person to deconstruct all of that. I think the initial sort of white fragility moment is like "I'm not racist" "I haven't done anything racist" "I have friends that are black". Yada yada, you can go down the list. I think once I took that layer away, it's kind of liberating to not bow up any time someone questions a motive or an action of yours. I think you know I'm still shedding that insecurity… that edge that white people especially in country music get when we don't really want to face the history of this genre that I would say that we all love dearly and has shaped us as human beings and as artists. But it is really important for me to look at that history, know who created it and how do I as one person have enough of a ripple effect and can do what I'm doing in my own lane to make room for more black people that want to be in country music, whether that is a songwriter, an artist, a musician or someone that wants to be in the industry so I feel like that's what I can do with my power as an artist so yeah. I don't know if that answers any sort of question but that's where my head is perpetually at especially these…this last year. A little late but better late than never.

Ann Powers: The phrase "Better Than We Found It" is such an interesting metaphor. You know, connected to that phrase is the phrase "Leave No Trace", right? It's like how do you leave a space. You're thinking about your legacy and you're challenging yourself to not leave no trace but actually fight for change and I know this is tied up for you and the fact that you have a young child and you talk about that in the video for "Better Than We Found It". How can an artist like...how can you… what is the first step to moving towards change and leaving things better than you found it?

Maren Morris: Well, like I said and I don't have the answers here. I just know what I am capable of doing and with the platform that I have and part of that is I am outspoken when I believe in something. When I see an action or inequality happening, it really affects me in a deep way so. This isn't about you know causing a ruckus for ruckus sake. I speak up when it's important. I feel like yeah definitely being a parent has changed me as I've… If you've watched the end of my music video for "Better Than We Found It" I write a letter to my son and we ended up using it in the video. What I can do as an artist is a little bit different than what I can do as a mother; to leave a better path behind me for my son but my son is also going to grow up in this world as a white male and I am absolutely aware of that. There are things that will absolutely bend in his favor forever but I think it's my job to wake up now and create a world around him that is a lot more open and where we can have these kinds of conversations without getting offended or having friction. We're going to make missteps as we get to the place we want to be, where it's more inclusive and we have more black people on these CRS panels. So I think that I'm taking steps every day to be a better human being, better parent, better artist. Better human is really what I'm attempting to do, what I think we are all attempting to do. It's going to be uncomfortable but that's how you know it's working in the right direction hopefully.

Ann Powers: I guess that was sort of what I was getting to at the phrase "Better Than We Found It" vs "Leave No Trace". I think in a lot of ways and Luke feel free to jump in here too… Country music has sort of operated on this principle of if we leave everything the way it is, we'll just continue…let's all be sweet to each other. It's that southern charm…southern like we welcome you but it can feel very surface you know? It's like well let's not disturb ideas of the past and the present because we want to preserve rather than challenging and changing. There's a kind of a conservatism that has…that can feel attractive because it is about preserving things we love but in a moment of social upheaval, we recognize that things must change. How do we balance with that desire that overwhelming I think in country music desire to kind of like be sweet, you know? Be welcoming, be polite. All of those impulses.

Luke Combs: I think for me…first off thank you for having me by the way. Hello everybody watching. I think for me it's…it's you know we want to preserve the history of the genre. I understand that. I think the first thing that we can do as a genre and I'm speaking for myself. I'm trying to not speak for anybody else so these are my thoughts and my thoughts alone. I think that just acknowledging that it exists is the first step for anyone out there. I think you know Maren has obviously done a fantastic job of sharing her opinions and the things that she believes in and I admire her a lot for that because that's a big risk in the climate of our genre. You know it's a hard thing to get on here and talk and have these tough conversations because you're nervous as an artist because you sit down and you say well what am I going to say? Am I going to say the wrong thing? Am I going to do this? I mean I think just saying there are things that need to change and taking a moment to be aware of that and knowing that there are problems that exist is the biggest first step that I have taken and I think the biggest first step that anyone

out there may be watching that's in the industry can take is just say hey these things do happen. Let's not sit here and say that they don't because they do and that's why I'm here. I'm here to learn. I feel like I'm kind of you know at this highly successful moment of my career and I couldn't just sit back and not do anything. Like I couldn't not say that hey I want people to know that we as a genre care about this issue. I think that's why we're here.

Ann Powers: Well Luke, you recorded and released a song "The Great Divide" with Billy Strings that kind of addresses… what I love about this song it calls for unity and we can talk about what is unity but it also like I feel your own struggle in that song to understand how we became so divided and I know you yourself have…we as a nation have become so divided, let me say. I know you yourself have been wrestling with these issues and I'm just going to say like a few incidents in your own past, imagery that you have been associated with. I know you're willing to talk about this. You were in a video several years ago in which you stood in front of a confederate flag. There are also photographs of you with a guitar that is covered in stickers and one of them is from a business that featured the confederate flag. I know that you have a story to tell us about that and you know your song calls for unity and offers hope but of course many people in this country, not only black Americans, see that image and they immediately say well how can we talk about unity when there is an image of sedition right in our presence so I just want to open the floor for you to address that and talk a little bit about your journey around…where you got from the guy standing in front of a confederate flag to the guy who is here today.

Luke Combs: Right, yeah, yeah. When I put that song out, that was written probably sometime last summer down here in Florida. I was just watching and consuming amongst the pandemic so many other things like this social unrest and Black Lives Matter movement and was like absorbing all of these insane things that were going on. That song was really written from a good place of this…

Ann Powers: "The Great Divide" you're talking about.

Luke Combs: Sure, Sure. Yeah, right, right. And so when I released the song, there were some images that kind of resurfaced of me that you spoke of and it's not the first time that those images have surfaced and have been used against me. Obviously those are images that I can't take back. LC: They are not images that I can say "okay well they're gone now, so that didn't exist". That was - those images are 7 to 8 years old now and I've grown a lot as a man and as a human being and as a citizen of the world. Since those images, I didn't have a team in place then as well and so the second that I got my team in place it was like "hey how can we disassociate ourselves with that? And so we immediately tried to do that years ago. Obviously in the age of the internet, those things live forever. There is no excuse for those images. I'm not trying to say this is why they were there and it's okay that they're there because it's not okay. I think as a younger man that was an image I associated to mean something else and as I've grown as my time as an artist and as the world has changed drastically in the last 5 to 7 years, I am now aware of how painful that image can be to someone else and no matter what I thought at the time what that were to meant or what it could possibly be interpreted as for myself, I would never want to be associated with something that brings so much hurt to someone else. I think that it's not about history or this or that, it's about this is something that hurts someone else that I was standing in front of and so knowing that is upsetting to me as a man because I'm all about, I want people to be happy I want people to feel accepted, I want people to feel welcomed by country music and by our community, and at the

time that those images existed I wasn't aware of what that was portraying to the world and to African American artists in Nashville that were saying "man I really want to come in and get a deal and do this thing, but how can I be around with these images being promoted, and so I do apologize for that. I do apologize for being associated with that. It's not about hate. Hate is not a part of my core values and is not something I will considered a part of myself at all, and so I'm just looking to be here, not to say that, to say "I'm so sorry, please forgive me." I'm here to say I'm trying to learn. I'm trying to get better. I know that I'm a very highly visible member of the country music community right now and I want to use that position for good and to say that people can change and that people do want to change and I'm one of those people trying and if you're an artist or anyone out there that is trying to change, you should be able to do it and you can do it and you should be able to talk about those things and feel comfortable having these conversations because if me and Maren can do it, anybody can do it. That's kind of my two sense on that and I hope that that's – I hope I said everything right.

Ann Powers: Thank you for saying that Luke and I just want to quickly respond and say I do think the confederate flag is something that hurts us all as Americans, whatever, whoever we are. I know for myself, being very honest, seeing that image of the flag in the Capitol building was very disturbing and we are all learning together what these images have meant, but of course that's what the image has always been. That's what the flag has always meant and an audience member asks "How do you feel about older songs with confederate rebel imagery"? I want to expand that question a bit because I actually have this question. One of the most beautiful things about country music is that it unites people and it celebrates elements of human experience that are very important to people like family, like nations, patriotism, spirituality, religion, all of these things run through country music. At the same time, there are so many different experiences of those things and I think as a nation we are having a public conversation about how to reimagine American history beyond music, you know what I mean? So how do you both as writers, envision connecting to this side of country music that is about preserving and celebrating the past and especially as Southerners. Maren, you're from Texas. Luke, you're from North Carolina. How do you as writers consider that side of country music that's about celebrating legacy when now we have to understand that legacy and when I said "we" I'm talking about we three white people here have to understand that legacy differently if we weren't understanding it differently before. How can country songs reflect all of America? I'll throw that to Maren.

Maren Morris: Well, I think that's what we're drawn to when we fall in love with country music for the first time is the nostalgia. It's the witty, the heart-breaking songwriting, the art of a lyric just cutting to your core. And you know it's about remembering. And I feel like how to preserve that – I don't know if preserve is the word – I think it's going back and redefining what it was to begin with. And I remember watching the amazing Kin Burns Country music documentary and just myself being so ignorant to what the roots of this genre was started in and not knowing that the banjo is a West African instrument. This is so integral to the sound of country music's beginning and I feel like things like that – it's not about preserving – to me, going forward, my relationship with country music and what I always loved about it was the honest truth of it and if we want to pride ourselves on being three chords and the truth, we need to be truthful with ourselves and know who started this genre. It wasn't just white people, and going forward, making room, and it's not to say or diminish my hard work or Luke's hard work, but we've absolutely had more doors opened for us from being white. And to kind of circle back to the confederate flag thing, and I'm from Texas, this is just sheer ignorance and privilege but I did not know

that the rebel flag meant what it meant until I was probably 15 or 16 years old. I mean this is how horribly white washed and how history has failed us. That southern pride thing, the south will rise again. Those are all just terms thrown around. There was no explanation behind it and I think a large majority of people that listen to country music don't know that either. The deeper meaning behind what that flag signifies or at least maybe that's wishful thinking. I don't think they understand what that really signifies and for me being a teenager before I realize, it was like "okay". Can we just agree at these country music festivals. I see the confederate flags in the parking lots. I don't want to play those festivals anymore. If you were a black person, would you ever feel safe going to a show with those flying in the parking lot? No, I feel like the most powerful thing as artists in our position right now is to make those demands of large organizations, festivals, promoters, whatnot. That's one of the things we can do – is say "no I'm not doing this. Get rid of them." So yeah, I'm kind of all over the place but it reminded me of that because there's no place for it anymore.

Ann Powers: Actually, I'm really glad you talked about your own growing up with that imagery and not knowing what it meant. That was something I was sort of trying to get at with that question. I wonder Luke if you had a similar experience because I'm not from the pacific northwest originally, but I did have a daughter in the school system in Alabama for several years and the way that southern history was taught, well let's just say we had to do some supplementing at home, so I wonder if that was your experience too growing up? Like those images meant something differently to you or just the rhetoric around Southern pride, etc. What did it even mean?

Luke Combs: I think – I agree with what Maren said on not knowing the full scope and the full impact of what that flag means to somebody else you know and not having to grow up with being afraid of that image and seeing that image as something that says "well I'm not welcome here". I can't imagine thinking back on all the times and places I've seen that and if I were a black man or a black woman and just go I'm definitely not- this is definitely not somewhere where I'm being welcomed. I never considered that up until 7 or 8 years ago and it comes down to – it's something that's not really talked about a lot in the South and I think Maren's right and I'd like to think that most people are still unfamiliar with that. And I know that that's probably surprising to a lot of people out there and I'm not making any excuses for anyone because we can all grow and get better which is what we're trying to do here. But, there are and I understand it in the sense of "okay, well I'm from the south and I'm proud of that." I understand that. There are so many things, you're from – Maren's from Texas. She's proud to be from Texas. I'm from North Carolina. I'm proud to be a North Carolinian. There are so many things beyond the rebel flag that we can do to be proud of being from the South. You can go plant a vegetable garden in your yard of plants that your family used to grow 200 years ago. That's something you can do to be proud of your Southern heritage. You can cook a meal that your grandparents made. Those are the things that I try to do now to say "Hey I am proud of being from North Carolina. I am proud to be a rural guy." That's okay to be proud of that. You don't need the flag to be proud to be from the South. It doesn't have to be a part of that, and I think that that's something that unfortunately we're still figuring out. It's been a slow process – it has. And so like I said, I'm with Maren on that. I'm totally with her on that entire sentiment.

Ann Powers: Well, I love your example of a vegetable garden. It makes me want to say that one thing that white southerners can be proud of is the rich heritage of the black South that we've been so lucky

to be connected to including food ways. How many of our beloved dishes that we considered part of our own heritage are really rooted in African and African American cooking. And that makes me want to move the conversation to appropriation. The great debt that every white artist and musician especially owes to African American culture and heritage. Maren, your breakthrough single "My Church" was really gospel inspired. Luke, you've worked with Leon Bridges and that showed in the soulfulness and the connection to classic soul in your music. And with an awareness of racial equity, how can country artists – I'm asking this question because so much of country is influenced by Hip-Hop today as well, and both of you have I'm sure been influenced by Hip-Hop. How can white artists acknowledge the debt musically that you owe to African Americans and music making itself a more equitable place?

Maren Morris: Who wants to go first? Well, I think that for me learning the actual history is a big part of it and in country music particularly, we really hold our idols on a massive, massive pedestal. I mean they are untouchable and they weren't the first ones. They weren't the pioneers. Lesley Riddle was a black guitarist that taught Mable Carter her picking style that became so influential in those early decades of hillbilly songs and it wasn't until white people decided to separate the two and there were hillbilly records and then race records and that's when they started getting separated. And then there were so many artists, like even Johnny Cash being taught by Gus Cannon, and people that we idolize, there are our pioneers. They were not the pioneers. And I think just knowing the history of that is respectful to them because it's the truth. And so for me going forward as someone that is heavily influenced by R&B and also Motown. I grew up listening to all of the Motown and Stax and I would say that when I sing it is tinged with sort of a gospel-y tone especially if you are referencing "My Church". Or I name dropped Johnny Cash and Hank. Both men taught by black men, but that gets rewritten. So I think just doing the deep dive of history and knowing where this genre came to be is a really huge part of it. And then, there's an amazing writer that you probably know, Andrea Williams. She is a black writer and she called me out last summer. She was like "Maren, love that you're doing R&B songs on your record. Love "RSVP". Why are you doing them with a bunch of white people?" And I remember when she said that on Twitter or wherever, I was like that sort of bow up like why are you coming for me? I love black people. And I think just accepting that oh okay, that's a really good question. Why am I doing these R&B influenced songs because that is in me with a bunch of white people? So I think for me going forward, I have got to correct that and acknowledge that yeah absolutely, cultural appropriation, culture vulturing is a real thing. And I love country music so much. I have my version of it – of what I make, and I think going forward I just want to pay respect to the people who actually built it for me and continue working and educating myself and trying to educate people around me. I mean I can't shove it down anyone's throat but if you're gonna follow me or if you're a fan of mine, you're absolutely going to know where I stand. And this is not a pile on or talking a bunch of smack about country music and its peers. It's about accountability of all of us including me. So that's kind of how I would like to move in this space going forward.

Ann Powers: I'm glad that you took us there Maren because this leads to some talk about practical things that people can do in the community. Here we are at a radio seminar, a lot of industry people in the room, and equity in country music is top to bottom from internships to executive suites. What can artists do to help promote diversity and equity in the industry? I don't know. Luke, do you want to start with that one?

Luke Combs: I think just me and Maren being here is a good first step. I think it's a first of many conversations that we need to have as an industry to get to the root of these issues. I think there are a lot of companies in Nashville that do have diversity programs, diversity offices who are trying to do what they can to get better. But like you said, I think it starts – it's got to be from the bottom up. I had a friend recently who's been wanting to get a deal for a long time. He's a great writer, a great friend of mine. He recently was able to get a deal and I remember – he's not an African American but when he got his deal, when we were talking about him getting his deal, after me and Maren had this conversation, I had this light bulb moment go off in my head where he would always say to me "Man I'm doing so much. I'm working so hard to try to get this thing that I've worked so hard to get and I feel like all I want is someone to give me a chance and someone to give me a fair shake." And he felt like he wasn't getting that and so I can't imagine the multitude of black creators in Nashville that are going "I want the same thing." Everyone deserves the same shot. And like Maren said earlier, I'm not diminishing anyone else's accomplishments. I worked my ass off to get where I am and so did Maren, but like she said it's impossible to not say we had it easier than our black counterparts or I had it easier than Maren, my female counterpart. That's – it's undeniable. For me to sit here and tell you that that's not true would just be a lie. So I could stay silent and say "well I'm here so I'm just not going to say anything because I don't want to risk anything". I just didn't feel like that was the right thing to do. So I think it starts with if you're a publisher and a black writer comes in, are you giving them the same look that you're giving me if I come in. And I'm not accusing anyone of anything. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying take a minute of your day and think back like, "well maybe I have done that", even if it is subconsciously and you're not aware of it. It still could have happened and I think that's all we're doing. If you work at a label, are you giving everyone that walks through the door, the exact same chance that the last guy had or that the next girl has? And I think that that's what it is. It's not saying that anyone deserves more of a chance than anyone else. We're just saying that everyone deserves the same chance, is what we're trying to say.

Ann Powers: Let's talk about country radio for a moment, both of you succeeded both through conventional radio, but also through streaming. Apple Radio has really worked to have a more diverse idea of what country can be. Streaming seems to have some possibilities of challenging the structures of terrestrial radio. Terrestrial radio could change too. I just want to go back and mention Maren that you were on Rissi Palmer's "Color Me Country" show, you, Rissi, Andrea, and Cam created a playlist for that show that was so interesting, because it was country, but it included artists that maybe would have been classified as blues or Americana, folk, whatever the other genres might be, and yet you said, "hey, this can be country." What happen to country radio when artists who haven't been previously deemed country are included, do you think there is a fear among people who work in radio of diluting the sound? What happens to the sound of country when we have racial equity and fight to be anti-racist?

Maren Morris: I don't know quite how to answer that, because I don't really look at the charts unless there is some good news coming my way, I don't follow it until someone tells me it's going well. It's funny I think that radio in general, whether it's country, pop, you know these are the major charts I'm talking about, a hit is a hit, but you know it is about, is a bad song a hit or is a good song a hit. I feel like it's rare when you get both a good song that is also a hit. That's almost an entirely different conversation for me because catchiness, what gets your ear, coming out of your radio speakers or coming off of a playlist on Spotify or Apple Music, that's a bit tougher because we are talking about songs that just pop.

I would say, if we have more Black creators, Black songwriters, Black artists, because I feel like writers, so many writers, myself included, have become artists in the process. I think we've seen it with Jimmie Allen, I hope very much that we can get Mickey Guyton a number one song, there's like an influx of Black talent, and it's only going to make our genre, our songs, what we consider catchy, better. If we're taking the steps, we kind of have to start at home. Black songwriters in the room making hit songs with us, feeling comfortable and welcome to do so, will change the sound of country radio for the better. That's the point of inclusion, is if you're shutting out people, if you're shutting out Black writers, Black artists, you have no idea if you are shutting out the next hit song. Do you? It could be a song that's not only a hit, but saves a hundred people's lives. When you shut the doors on those people, from even getting in the room, getting signed to a record deal. Radio comes later, I feel like you've got to sign the writers, sign the artist first. Imagine over the last 50 years, the songs that we haven't gotten to hear because we shut the door in a Black person's face. Could have been song of the year, we'll never know, we've got to change that going forward.

Ann Powers: Obviously country is very much driven by the live experience, tragically we haven't been able to get out there this year, we've been confined to our homes, the road will open up again. Both of you are road warriors, Luke, you particularly built your career on the road, grassroots, what does the road look like when we're thinking about these issues of creating and antiracist country music? Will you consider having a non-white opener, non-white members of your band, are those things you're thinking about for the future?

Luke Combs: I mean yeah, I don't think that there's anything that would keep me from doing anything like that. I think as I continue to move forward and as my camp continues to grow and things change, you know I have no way of knowing how things shake out with anybody that works with me. You know if we were to lose somebody, as unfortunate as that would be, I would be so welcoming and open to that. Going back to radio, I wanted to add a little something to what Maren was saying there. I welcome it. I welcome there being a more diverse climate, because me as an artist, and as someone who's having success right now, I'm so driven to be the best. I welcome the competition of that and I welcome getting to create music with new kind of folks and different types of people. That's what keeps me going, the music keeps me going. I think we all innately have this drive to want to be the best we can be. Anybody not getting that opportunity who feels like, "man, I'm the best dude out there," and if they don't have the chance that I do to be the best dude out there, I would hate that. Imagine if Michael Phelps couldn't get into a swimming pool. If someone was like, "no, you don't swim." I agree, there's no way of knowing what we could miss out on if we're not doing that.

Ann Powers: Also you as an artist, you are missing out by not being able to collaborate with those artists. These conversations have been happening for a while, but the current conversation was brought on by a recent incident. I was struck by his apology via Instagram, where he found himself pleading with his fans, saying please do not defend me. That brought up the question for me, about the audience. I know I am putting you both on the spot here, the audience is everything to a country artist. Country artists give more to their fans than I've ever seen. You're connected so deeply with your fans. Our previous conversation on the topic of Confederate flags in the parking lots at shows, sometimes the audience, there is behavior, there are views that have been explicitly racist, in other ways that you don't agree with as people. How do you connect with your fans on these issues, can minds be changed, how

can minds be changed, and how can we make that, use the connection between artist and fans as an agent of change, as an agent of anti-racism? I know I'm putting you on the spot, it's a hard question.

Luke Combs: It's definitely a tough question, I think me and Maren talked about this earlier when we talked last week. We're not here to skirt around anything, to be a leader in the genre is something that we both want to do. Thank you for asking the tough questions. It has been difficult for me, I'm sure it's been difficult for Maren. It's been difficult for my team to prepare for this. It feels good to be doing it. I think it's just, people can be changed. I think I'm a living, mouth-breathing example of it right here. People can change, and people do change. People can be resistant to change, and that's okay. It's all about how do we move forward together, and I'm not sure how you would connect with a fan and do that. I haven't given thought to that to be completely honest with you, but it is possible. I believe it is definitely possible, and I think through our music is a great way of doing that. When Maren released her song, and I released mine, we were trying to do something positive. I think there's always an attempt to say well, "you didn't do this quite right," or "you didn't say this the right way, or you should have done it this way," but that's our expression as an artist, and we're trying to get better. I think sometimes when you're attacked for things, you're coming at them with great intentions that can make you want to clam up in a shell and go, "I don't want to do this anymore, I don't want to talk about it." You feel like man, I am trying to be better, I'm trying to do this and people just keep attacking me for that. I think it starts with the music, and that's a painful process as an artist because you do have people that want to cut you down and say you don't know what you're talking about or you should have said this instead of that. You just have to know where your heart is, and you have to know that you're doing it for the right reasons. I think that's the thing that's beautiful about being an artist, you push yourself and you create new boundaries for yourself. So I think through the music is the perfect way to reach your fans. Like Maren did with her song, that was incredibly brave thing to do, and I applaud her decision to do that.

Ann Powers: I just want to acknowledge that as I asked that question I glanced over at the chat, and Fletcher Brown said, "As an African American country PD I am watching the country audience as much as the artist, the audience needs to hear this from you, Luke and Maren, as much as the industry does." I just want to thank you Fletcher for asking that question. I want to ask this question, country music always likes to call itself a family, that's obviously why so many people like to be a part of it. Maren, when you've said controversial things, especially about the Morgan Wallen situation recently, we've seen responses that amount to basically, "you're creating a rift in the family," and honestly Luke maybe you're going to get that after today, who knows what's going on, on Twitter. This idea that you're hurting the family of country music by bringing up these issues. How do we convince people that subjects that can be polarizing need to be addressed, and that it doesn't hurt the so-called family. I just ask, how do we have a family that looks like America?

Maren Morris: By holding each other accountable. This isn't about going after people or a fan base for sport, no one does that, or I don't. That doesn't give me pleasure. I think this whole thing, we're different , we're country, we protect our own, we don't go after people in the public, well I mean, what is going after someone saying the n word is bad? Like, that's the least we can do is not say that. I think that your fans are a reflection of you and what you're about. I think that, you can't control a human being, but you absolutely can let them know where you stand. I appreciate Morgan saying "quit defending me," to his fans because it's indefensible. He knows that, we know that, all we can do so

there isn't an elephant in the room is say that out loud, hold our peers accountable. I don't care if it's awkward sitting down the row from you at the next award show. Like call them out, so that if you really love something and this is a family, and you love it, you love country music, call it out when it's bad, so you can rid the diseased part, so we can move forward, all of us, all people of color, LGBTQIA+, and all feel like we are a part of this family. Because this whole we're a family, we're protecting our own, it's protecting white people. It's not protecting Black people. That's the long and the short of it. It was funny, even just saying this is representative actually of our town, and I think that by speaking saying it isn't with this whole controversy is absolutely diminishing. The plight of Black people in country music that are trying to make it in this genre in any degree, and that is what they see representing it every day. My husband was like, because you know I had some fans coming after me after you know just calling it out, and my husband was like, I've never seen someone so willing to get the shit kicked out of themselves, talking about me. I was like yeah, that's true, but imagine what a Black person in country music feels like every day. This is like a sliver of it. I just think if you love something, you should absolutely call out the parts that are complicit and wrong. So we can move forward in a healthier way. I think sitting here having this conversation with you, and you Luke, at CRS, the week of country music, is a huge step and we've all got healing to do, and accountability is the first step of that. It's got to get bad before it gets good, so I think that we're on the road to a very hopeful place. We have to be willing to have these conversations with each other, with our friends. I don't care if you're holding them accountable on Twitter, or if you're holding them accountable after a show drunk on the bus, like just call them out when you see it happening, so we can move forward, all of us.

Luke Combs: Once again, thanks for having us. Thanks for watching everybody that's out there and listening to us. Like Maren said, it is tough, and there is change that needs to happen, and I think that we just wanted everyone to know that we're here and we want to be stewards of our genre because we are proud of it. You do hear the old adage of country music is a family, and I do believe that more than anything, but I want it to be a family that everyone can feel like they're a part of. Because it has changed my life, it has changed my band's life, and my best friend's lives that I write songs with and everyone's life, and I want everyone that wants to feel that, to be able to experience it. Because it's an incredible feeling. I just want everyone out there to be able to be accepted and come into our community and not feel excluded, or pushed out because country music is amazing, and I love it, it's so important to me, my fans are so important to me, the music is so important to me, the songs are so important to me, and I know that there are other people out there in our genre that feel that way, and people that want to be in our genre that feel that way. I want those people to have the same opportunities that I had to feel that incredible feelings of having their dreams come true in our amazing genre that we have. That's kind of my final thought, thank you again Ann, thank you Maren for being here, thanks you folks watching, we love you guys.

Ann Powers: Well thanks to everyone, and let's get together in say two years, I'm going to give it two years because we've got to get back on the road, we've got to get this pandemic under control. Let's have a panel where there are other and more people on it, where perhaps we are in the minority on the panel, and that it represents country music. I want to see that panel, and I want to hear what concrete steps we've all taken toward a country music that looks like America, the reality of America. Thank you so much to both of you.