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POP GOES TO WAR, 2001–2004: U.S. POPULAR MUSIC AFTER 9/11

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Mainstream popular music in the United States has always provided a window on national politics. The middle-of-the-road sensibilities of Tin Pan Alley told us as much about societal values in the early twentieth century as rock and roll's spirit of rebellion did in the fifties and sixties. To cite but one prominent example, as the war in Vietnam escalated in the mid-sixties, popular music provided something of a national referendum on our involvement. In 1965 and 1966, while the nation was sorely divided on the issue, both the antiwar "Eve of Destruction" by Barry McGuire and the military ode "The Ballad of the Green Berets" by Barry Sadler hit number one within months of each other. As the war dragged on through the Nixon years and military victory seemed more and more remote, however, public opinion began to turn against the war, and popular music became more and more clearly identified with the antiwar movement.

Popular music—and in particular, rock—has nonetheless served contradictory functions in American history. While popular music fueled opposition to the Vietnam War at home, alienated, homesick GIs eased the passage of time by blaring those same sounds on the battlefield (as films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Good Morning, Vietnam* accurately document). Rock thus was not only the soundtrack of domestic opposition to the war; it was the soundtrack of the war itself. This phenomenon was not wasted on military strategists, who soon began routinely incorporating music into U.S. military "psychological operations." When the United States invaded Grenada in 1983, one of the first military objectives was to

take over the government-run radio station. Just before Manuel Noriega was arrested in Panama, the military “blasted” him out of his compound with barrages of high-volume rock. The United States has used rock more recently in similar ways throughout the Middle East. In some sense, then, rock has become the sound that the U.S. military uses to announce its presence in foreign lands. Still, until recently, popular music—or what I would identify more precisely as the rock and rap axis of popular music—has been linked primarily with liberal to left-wing issues and causes.

In the mid-eighties and nineties, a new chapter in the politics of American popular music opened with a series of globalized fund-raising concerts and politicized rock and rap songs, all addressing a range of social issues that included hunger and starvation in Africa, apartheid, the deteriorating environment, homelessness, child abuse, racism, AIDS, industrial plant closings, and U.S. intervention in Central America, to name but a few. Providing a counterpoint to this liberal humanitarian impulse, the Parents Music Resource Center, joined by a number of conservative Christian organizations, waged a campaign against popular music to promote their vision of a more wholesome culture. In this way popular music became a primary site of contestation over American values and identities, with conservatives (and some prominent liberals) opposing prevailing musical practices at every turn.

Then came September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks that leveled the World Trade Center towers, blew a hole in the side of the Pentagon, and crashed a plane in a Pennsylvania field shook the United States out of its sense of security, elicited sympathy (however short-lived) from nations around the world, and plunged the economy into a prolonged tailspin. The role of contemporary popular music also changed dramatically as it adjusted to this new political reality. If popular music had previously been associated with rebellion, defiance, protest, opposition, and resistance, it would now be used in the service of mourning, healing, patriotism, and nation building. In this new order, the dissent—and in particular the antiwar protest music—that helped provide the basis for the national debate on Vietnam was nowhere to be found on mainstream media during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. If anything, country anthems that pushed the envelope in support of government policy seemed more likely to capture the popular imagination.

As Martin Cloonan has argued, “post 9/11 it became increasingly hard for musicians to express dissent, not because music had lost its power to be able to do this, but because of a changed political climate.”²¹ This new political context included decisive conservative control over all three branches of government, legislation and executive practices that privileged national security over civil liberties, and concentration and

consolidation in the music industry itself that narrowed the diversity of voices in the musical marketplace. The purpose of this essay is to document the events that have ushered in this new context within the American mediascape, and discuss their effects on freedom of expression generally and on popular music as a social indicator in particular. I focus on five aspects of this recent history: (1) initial popular music responses to 9/11; (2) the role of country music in endorsing military action; (3) the new conservative activism of corporate radio; (4) musicians' responses to government disincentives to political protest; and (5) fledgling attempts by progressive musicians to engage the political process.

INITIAL RESPONSES

While the initial shock of 9/11 briefly transformed all media into news outlets—and, for a time, even held out the possibility that hard news might replace the tabloid fare consumers had come to expect—people soon returned to music to minister to their emotional (if not their intellectual) needs. In fact, the music industry was among the first to mount an institutional response to the tragic events. In addition to massive individual contributions—Dr. Dre, for example, personally donated one million dollars to the victim-relief effort and countless others earmarked proceeds from tour dates—the music/entertainment community turned to the ensemble benefit concerts and all-star recordings that had become tried and true fund-raising strategies since Live Aid and “We Are the World.”

Prior to the attacks, U2's Bono had already recruited hip-hop producer Jermaine Dupree and artists Christina Aguilera, Backstreet Boys, Mary J. Blige, Wyclef Jean, Michael Stipe, and others to record an ensemble version of Marvin Gaye's 1971 classic “What's Goin' On” for Artists Against AIDS Worldwide. In the aftermath of 9/11, they added the United Way's September 11 Fund as a beneficiary. Arista re-released Whitney Houston's stirring 1991 Super Bowl performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” with proceeds earmarked for New York firefighters. The Houston single shot up charts, peaking at number six, and sustained enough momentum to finish 2002 as the ninth most popular song of the year. Columbia rushed production on a compilation album called *God Bless America*, featuring a cross section of artists such as Celine Dion, Bruce Springsteen, Mariah Carey, Lee Greenwood, Bob Dylan, and Frank Sinatra, with “a substantial portion of the proceeds” earmarked for The Twin Towers Fund. Michael Jackson ultimately failed to release an ensemble recording of his new composition “What More Can I Give,” which included

Destiny's Child, Backstreet Boys, Tom Petty, and Seal, among many others, but the song was performed at the October 22 "United We Stand" benefit in Washington, D.C., which raised \$3 million.

Concerts to benefit the victims of 9/11 were organized with remarkable efficiency and cooperation among all sectors of the music business. The first and most impressive of these, staged on September 21, just ten days after the attacks, was "America: A Tribute to Heroes." The event included twenty-two performing artists and fifty actors staffing telephones, and was transmitted over the big four commercial networks, as well as thirty cable channels, without credits or commercial interruptions. The Tribute raised \$160 million from its East Coast broadcast alone, making it the largest single fund-raising event in history, even before the DVD and compilation CD were released. A month later, on October 21, the "Concert for New York City" was held in Madison Square Garden. Produced by VH-1, Cablevision, Miramax, and AOL, and headlined by Paul McCartney, the concert featured a number of British and American rock acts, and generated \$30 million for the New York Fire Department. Finally, the Beastie Boys organized "New Yorkers Against Violence," a two-night fund-raiser at the Hammerstein Ballroom that brought together Moby, Michael Stipe, Bono, Mos Def, and the Strokes. Significantly, it was the only U.S.-based 9/11 event of its kind that was explicitly committed to nonviolence.

A comparison between "America: A Tribute to Heroes" and the "Concert for New York City," produced just one month apart, reveals the trajectory of the new social role for popular music in the post-9/11 context. In the month that separated these two events, the United States invaded Afghanistan. The character of these two events thus marked the transition from the initial shock immediately following 9/11, when the nation was plunged into grief, to the more calculated and vengeful search for those responsible.

"America: A Tribute to Heroes" was an understated, reverential event, which captured the national mood during a brief moment of what I would call "gentle patriotism." In an effort to achieve the proper tone, the tribute's dominant aesthetic was that of *MTV Unplugged*, within which the event scheduled a diversity of performers including Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, Faith Hill, the Dixie Chicks, Sting, Paul Simon, Limp Bizkit, Sheryl Crowe, and Wyclef Jean, among others. As Kip Pegley and Susan Fast note elsewhere in this volume, the event downplayed the star power of these performers to create a sense of community that included the performers and television viewers at home. Within the generally respectful atmosphere, a number of performers articulated sentiments that hinted at the mixed

concerns and competing agendas that characterized the initial response to the attacks. Will Smith introduced Mohammad Ali as a Muslim in a segment that included footage of Muslim children in America expressing fears of retaliation. In their defense, Stevie Wonder chastised those who “hate in the name of God or Allah” in his intro to “Love’s in Need of Love Today.” The only overtly conservative commentary was offered by Clint Eastwood, who referred to 9/11 as “the twenty-first century’s day of infamy.” If Tom Petty’s toned down, but still somewhat aggressive, rendition of “I Won’t Back Down” was a call to arms for the nationalist project that was about to get underway, it was offset by Neil Young’s stirring performance of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” which conjured up visions of a world with neither religions nor countries and “nothing to fight or die for.” And if something like Celine Dion’s bloated arrangement of “God Bless America” was considered obligatory for a moment like this, noticeably absent was “The Star-Spangled Banner” with its “rockets’ red glare” and “bombs bursting in air.” It should also be noted that the all-cast version of “America the Beautiful” led by Willie Nelson that closed the show included the second verse, which calls on America to “Confirm thy soul in self-control/Thy liberty in law.”

If “America: A Tribute to Heroes” attempted to be a muted, measured response to the tragedy of 9/11, the “Concert for New York City” was a grand, commercialized, public extravaganza staged at Madison Square Garden that announced to the world, as host Billy Crystal said in his opening remarks, “that we’re not afraid to go out”—this in contrast to the “America” tribute, which, for security reasons, was staged in undisclosed locations. Crystal then introduced “6,000 special guests”—all the firefighters, policemen, and emergency workers for whom the show was produced, who were present in uniform and assigned to the best seats in the house—in contrast to the “America” tribute, which had no live audience. While the “America” tribute tended to obscure celebrity, the New York concert welcomed it with all its attendant fanfare, as each media personality, actor, political figure, and performer was introduced by name. Crystal set the political tone for the event with his introductory comment that “We’re showing everybody that we don’t hide in caves like cowards,” a sentiment later echoed by former president Bill Clinton. The concert also offered a platform to other political figures ranging from Tom Daschle and Hillary Clinton to George Pataki and Rudy Giuliani.

Musically, the concert was a tribute to white, male, guitar-based rock in both its line-up and performance styles. The increased testosterone level of the music was a clear indicator of the change in mood, emotional tone, and political will that was taking place in the United States. While

some measure of diversity was provided by rapper Jay-Z (who had to be explained to the audience by Mark Wahlberg) and Destiny's Child (who were introduced in a sexually demeaning way by Chris Kattan), the bill was dominated by British and American rockers including Billy Joel, Bon Jovi, John Mellencamp, David Bowie, Eric Clapton, The Who, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, Elton John, and Paul McCartney. Though there were more American performers overall, the press treated the show as if it was another British Invasion, which resonated well with Britain's support for U.S. policy over the next few years.

As the headliner, Paul McCartney—who was often identified erroneously in the press as the organizer of the event—closed the show. McCartney's very presence was significant as the primary link between the first British Invasion and the present alliance between Britain and the United States. He performed three Beatles songs—"I'm Down," "Yesterday," and "Let It Be"—and showcased his new song "Freedom," which he reportedly wrote as he was sitting in a plane on a New York runway when the World Trade Center was hit. "Freedom" includes the cautionary line: "Anyone who tries to take it away, they'll have to answer." In five short weeks talk of helping and healing had begun to give way to the rhetoric of revenge and retribution. Of all the speakers and performers who appeared at the concert, only the actor Richard Gere attempted to deliver a message of moderation when he talked about "the possibility of taking . . . all this horrendous energy that we're feeling . . . and turn[ing] it into compassion and to love and to understanding." He was roundly booed for his trouble.

The theme of revenge for the September 11 attacks was foreshadowed in Bon Jovi's performance of "Wanted Dead or Alive," which echoed President Bush's pronouncements regarding the capture of Osama bin Laden. But it was The Who that put it over the top. Who better to give vent to the anger in the room than the group that practically invented the symbolic release of violent emotion as part of their stage act? Opening their set with classic Pete Townshend power chords on "Who Are You"—now a query to the terrorists—the group performed their high-energy single in front of a Union Jack background, as if to recall their use of the British flag as a pop-cultural icon in the 1960s and to let the audience know that Britain was still in the house. As they segued into "Baba O'Reilly," the background changed to an American flag. Following "Behind Blue Eyes," they closed their set with "Won't Get Fooled Again"—easily read as a message to Al Qaeda—performing before a Union Jack flanked by two American flags, solidifying the special relationship between the two countries.

This theme of the conspicuous display of the American flag as a fashion statement of patriotism reached its peak during U2's halftime performance at Super Bowl XXXVI in early 2002, where Bono visibly displayed the American flag lining of his jacket (à la Roger Daltrey's Union Jack jacket circa 1968), and the band unfurled a giant scrim that listed the names of all the 9/11 victims. In keeping with the new pop reality, as artists rushed to show their support for a grieving nation, many seemed to retreat from the ideological positions on which their earlier reputations were built. The Who songs performed at the "Concert for New York City," which once threw down the gauntlet of intergenerational conflict, were resignified as antiterrorist anthems. The U2 at the Super Bowl was a very different band than the one whose defining moments included images of Bono carrying a white flag as he ranted against war on "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" in 1983. The post-9/11 McCartney related differently to the prospect of a long-term occupation of a foreign country than he did in 1972 when he protested the British occupation of Northern Ireland on "Give Ireland Back to the Irish."

Many artists also seemed to take unpredictable positions as spokespeople. Neil Young shocked his audience at the 2001 People for the American Way gala, at which he received a Spirit of Liberty Lifetime Achievement Award, when he endorsed administration policy by saying that "we're going to have to relinquish some of our freedoms for a short period of time."² Even Bruce Springsteen paid Bush an offhanded compliment when he told the *London Times* just before the release of *The Rising*: "The war in Afghanistan was handled well. It was deliberative, which I wasn't counting on. I expected a lot less from this administration."³ Clearly, some of the biggest names in popular music—artists who would have been identified with an oppositional stance in a previous era—had adopted new positions in response to a new political reality.

COUNTRY MUSIC MATTERS

While rock has generally been associated with a loud, aggressive stance pitted in opposition to the status quo (despite the contradictions and ambiguities revealed in the preceding discussion), country music has always been coded as conservative and patriotic. So it was perhaps not surprising to see lyric content overwhelmingly supporting administration policy in post-9/11 country music. From the 9/11 attacks through the war in Afghanistan to the invasion of Iraq, popular country hits followed a rough trajectory from thoughtful reflection to conservative patriotism to strident fight songs.

On October 28, 2001—he remembers the exact date—Alan Jackson penned “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” which went straight to number one on the country singles chart and crossed over to the top thirty on the pop charts. “Where Were You” was a thoughtful rumination on the kinds of things people might have been doing when the Twin Towers were struck; it recalled the notion that most people remembered exactly what they were doing when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Around the same time Aaron Tippin weighed in with “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly,” which became the ninth most popular song of 2001. Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA”—which appeared on four different compilations by the end of 2001—came in at number six for the year. Both songs expressed pride in America and a willingness to pay a price to defend her freedom. It is remarkable that these songs found their way into the year-end top ten with only a couple of months of sales.

Greenwood actually had written his anthem in 1984; it became the title song on his 1990 album of the same name, during the buildup to the first Gulf War. At that time, Greenwood had turned to patriotism to bolster a flagging career. According to one biographer: “Though he tried to retain his audience through patriotic work during the 1991 Gulf War—even earning the Congressional Medal of Honor Society’s Patriot Award and a Points of Light Foundation Award—he couldn’t successfully battle the onslaught of harder-edged, contemporary country artists that overtook country radio in the early ’90s. By the middle of the decade, he was no longer charting singles.”⁴ The 9/11 attacks propelled “God Bless the USA” (and Greenwood) back into the upper reaches of the pop charts, and the war in Afghanistan provided the hit single with enough momentum to finish 2002 as the eleventh most popular song of that year as well.

In a similar way, Aaron Tippin began his career as a recording artist in 1991, releasing “You’ve Got to Stand for Something” from his debut album of the same name, in the wake of the first Gulf War. The song became a top-ten hit, and Tippin was invited to join Bob Hope’s USO tour. A decade later, “Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagle Fly” became a crossover hit that reached the pop top twenty. A number of other artists also recorded patriotic songs during the time frame of the first Gulf War. In 1990, Hank Williams, Jr. released “Don’t Give Us a Reason,” which told “old Saddam” that “you figured wrong.” Billy Ray Cyrus contributed “Some Gave All” from the eponymous 1992 album.

If the sheer tragedy and disorientation of 9/11 produced a somewhat restrained and reflective patriotism in pop country, the rhetoric surrounding the war in Afghanistan and the increasing demonization of

Iraq as part of the “axis of evil” set a different tone. It was Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” from *Unleashed* (2002) that captured the new vengeful attitude more than any other song. With a number of platinum releases to his name, Keith was no stranger to stardom, but it was “Courtesy”—which warns anyone who messes with the “U.S. of A.” that “We’ll put a boot in your ass/It’s the American Way”—that made him a household name. On the strength of the hit single, *Unleashed* hit number one in 2002 and was certified double platinum by year’s end.

In the countdown to the war in Iraq, Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten,” went to the top of the country chart in five weeks, reminding listeners “about Bin Laden/Have you forgotten?”⁵ Pat Garrett continued in this vein with “Saddam Stomp,” which made an explicit connection between the Iraqi leader and Osama bin Laden. In fact, both songs provided Bush with a sorely needed, if symbolic, link between Iraq and bin Laden, which he was having great difficulty demonstrating in reality. These were followed by Clint Black’s “I Raq and Roll,” which warned the enemies of the United States to “be careful where you tread” and Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Red, White, and Blue,” whose message was summed up by singer Johnny Van Zant as “love it or leave it,” providing the group with its first hit in years.

The fact that many of these songs became year-end bestsellers suggested that they hit a nerve among large segments of the U.S. populace. Indeed, support for official U.S. foreign policy was very strong at the time.⁶ The momentum created by these songs encouraged artists from other genres to get on board. R. Kelly contributed “A Soldier’s Heart.” Ray Stevens scored with a novelty track “Osama – Yo’ Mama,” which criticized bin Laden’s mother for not raising him correctly (this was the same Ray Stevens who had a top-five hit with “Ahab, The Arab” in 1962). Neil Young weighed in with “Let’s Roll,” in honor of the passengers who reportedly fought the hijackers on Flight 93. This song presented his more liberal rock fans with something of a dilemma, as it trumpeted what had already become one of President Bush’s (appropriated) classic one-liners. As critic John Metzger put it:

Part of the problem with “Let’s Roll” is its uncomfortable lyricism. While it pays tribute to those on ill-fated Flight 93 . . . it’s also impossible not to take it as supportive of the current Administration and their poorly planned war-run-amuck. To be fair, at the time of the song’s writing, America was in shock and was more willing to concede to its leaders’ whims. But with lines like, “We’re goin’ after Satan/On the wings of a Dove,” the song now stands as an odd

statement from someone like Young who long has rallied against war and unjust government policy. Then again, Young also spent a portion of the '80s speaking in support of Ronald Reagan.⁷

The fact that most of these songs delivered a conservative message was not, in itself, all that surprising. The vehemence with which the country music establishment rejected any alternative perspectives, however, reflected a new moment in the nation's political polarization.

Steve Earle was a case in point. As much a rocker as a country artist, Earle's songwriting is sharp and edgy, tending toward outlaw country, and his progressive political point of view has seldom won him any friends in Nashville. As concerned and confused as anyone about the events of 9/11, Earle included "John Walker's Blues"—about John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban"—on the album *Jerusalem* (2002). On this song, Earle attempted to get inside Walker Lindh's head to explore from his point of view what might have led an American youth searching for truth in Islam to take up arms with the Taliban. While *Jerusalem* was a top-ten country album, which crossed over to pop, conservative commentators routinely branded Earle a traitor or denounced him for being sympathetic to one for attempting to humanize Lindh.⁸

The boycott of the Dixie Chicks was even more dramatic. The Dixie Chicks rose to superstardom on the strength of their 1998 multiplatinum debut major label release *Wide Open Space*. On *Home* (2002), the Chicks went deeper into their country roots with traditional instrumentation and few concessions to pop sensibilities. *Home* debuted at number one on the *Billboard* album charts and garnered not only Country Music Awards, but also American Music Awards, People's Choice Awards, and four Grammys. *Home* also included "Travelin' Soldier," a tender love song about a Vietnam-era casualty, which had been the group's only commentary on war and its consequences. Riding the popularity of their blockbuster album, the Chicks were selected to sing the "National Anthem" at the 2003 Super Bowl. For a time it seemed as though they were the darlings of the whole country. But while on tour in London in March 2003, lead singer Natalie Maines told her audience: "We're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas," an obvious reference to her dissatisfaction with his handling of the impending war in Iraq. Although she issued an apology to President Bush within days, calling her remarks "disrespectful," the Dixie Chicks were banned on some seventy-four country radio stations in the United States. The message was clear: it was not an option to criticize the president during a sensitive period of military engagement.⁹

Intended to silence the Chicks, this action instead emboldened them. Like many women in country, the Dixie Chicks were made of strong stuff, and they were no strangers to feminist or First Amendment values. At the very first show of the U.S. leg of their continuing tour, they addressed the controversy head-on with the performance of “Truth #2,” a song about standing up for one’s beliefs, during which they showed video footage of civil-rights and gay-rights events and pro-choice demonstrations, in conjunction with slogans like “freedom” and “truth” projected on the screen. Maines was outspoken in her defense of First Amendment rights even in a time of crisis, at one point telling her concert audience, “If you’re here to boo, we welcome that, because we welcome freedom of speech.”¹⁰ Despite the country radio boycott, their sixty-two-date U.S. tour nearly sold out. Natalie Maines also held her own trading barbs with Toby Keith, whose “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue” she called “ignorant.” The jousting reached its climax when Maines appeared on the Country Music Awards telecast wearing an “F.U.T.K.” T-shirt.

CORPORATE RADIO STIFLES DISSENT

As pro-war anthems emerged as best-sellers in 2001 and 2002, protest and antiwar music remained underground and was seldom heard on mainstream radio. This absence of protest was notable, especially by the time of the war in Iraq. While the invasion of Afghanistan was generally applauded by the U.S. populace and widely supported abroad, nothing approaching a consensus existed at the advent of the Iraq War. World opinion was clearly opposed to a unilateral military action, and even in the United States the antiwar movement had established a significant national presence well before the war began. Many peace activists began to wonder aloud if protest music hadn’t died.¹¹ In fact, there was plenty of protest music being produced; it simply wasn’t being played on radio. The reasons behind this are complex and include a new level of consolidation in the radio industry in the wake of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, a period of suppression and self-censorship following the passage of the 2001 Patriot Act, and a new activist role for corporate radio deriving from a more conservative political climate and explicit ties to the Bush administration.

Many observers blamed the 1996 Telecommunications Act for constricting media offerings in general. The 1996 law, twelve years in the making, was the first major overhaul of the telecom landscape since the Communications Act of 1934. Often cited as a model of bipartisan cooperation, the legislation altered the telecom sector in ways that were

not always beneficial to the consumer. The controversial Communications Decency Act, which was inserted as part of the legislation (and later declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court), drew considerable attention away from one of the central provisions of the Act—the relaxation of the rules of ownership for media corporations. As a result, the concentration of media ownership within a handful of industry giants has increased significantly since the passage of this landmark bill.

When Ben Bagdikian wrote *The Media Monopoly* in 1983, he expressed concern that fifty corporations controlled most of the major mass-media outlets. By the 1990s, that number had shrunk to fewer than twenty and, as the new millennium began, it reached low single digits in the radio industry, with just four companies controlling 90 percent of the ad revenue.¹² In 2003, the FCC under the direction of Michael Powell, the son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, sought to relax the rules of ownership still further. It wasn't until hundreds of thousands of irate voters—and a list of organizations that included such a diversity of groups as the National Rifle Association, the Catholic Conference of Bishops, and the National Organization for Women—complained to their elected representatives, that Congress halted, even if temporarily, this headlong rush toward further media consolidation.

This level of concentration had serious implications for programming. Though there were about 30,000 CDs released in the United States in 2001, each of which contained on average more than a dozen songs, national radio hardly noticed. “In one recent week,” reported *Rolling Stone* in August 2001, “the forty top modern-rock stations added a total of sixteen new songs, and the biggest forty-five Top Forty stations added a total of twenty.”¹³

Clear Channel, the largest radio chain in the United States, was the poster corporation for these developments. In 1995, prior to the passage of the Telecom Act, Clear Channel owned forty-three radio stations. By the early 2000s it had acquired more than 1,200 stations in the United States, which took in more than \$3 billion, or 20 percent of the industry dollar volume, in 2001; it had a lock on outdoor advertising, owning over 700,000 billboards; and it controlled 65 percent of the U.S. concert business, with a \$1.1 billion gross from concert tours alone in 2002. In total, the corporation posted annual revenues in excess of \$8 billion in 2002.¹⁴ By this time the music industry was awash in stories of record companies decrying the difficulty of breaking new artists on the centrally programmed chain, and artists complaining that if they chose not to perform at a Clear Channel concert venue, they would pay the price in radio play.

Even without any political intent, then, it was clear that the “natural” commercial tendencies of corporate radio in the post-9/11 context played a major role in narrowing the range of cultural expression that might speak to topical issues of concern. Noting that popular hits like Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s “Ohio” had “played a crucial role in the national debate over the Vietnam War,” Brent Staples argued in the *New York Times*, “A comparable song about George W. Bush’s rush to war in Iraq would have no chance at all today. There are plenty of angry people, many with prime music-buying demographics. But independent radio stations that once would have played edgy, political music have been gobbled up by corporations that control hundreds of stations and have no wish to rock the boat.”¹⁵

In the days immediately following the attacks of 9/11, for example, a program director at Clear Channel began to circulate among member stations a list of more than 150 “questionable” songs as potentially “inappropriate” for airplay.¹⁶ Defended by Clear Channel as a simple act of sensitivity toward the victims’ families, the list was denounced by its critics as an act of suppression and quickly took its place as part of a running battle pitting civil liberties and freedom of expression against the need for national unity and internal security. While the corporation reportedly never actually forbade any of its stations from playing a particular song, one thing was perfectly clear: given how centrally Clear Channel was organized and programmed, any list of songs to be avoided that was sent out from corporate headquarters was likely to be read as more than a suggestion.

The list included some obvious choices like Metallica’s “Seek and Destroy” and AC/DC’s “Shot Down in Flames” that could be credibly defended as inappropriate, and some not so obvious selections such as Carole King’s “I Feel the Earth Move” and the Bangles’ “Walk Like an Egyptian,” whose transgressions appeared highly metaphorical at best and illusory at worst. The fact that the list also included “all Rage Against the Machine songs” further raised the specter of censorship, as this constituted the elimination of the entire body of work by a single group. Most surprising to many observers, John Lennon’s “Imagine” was also included on the list, which made it all the more interesting that it was the song Neil Young chose to perform at *America: A Tribute to Heroes* the following week.

Clear Channel’s choice of songs like “Imagine” said something about their particular approach. In the days and weeks following 9/11, all media outlets were concerned about what would be appropriate to play. An MTV spokesperson reported, “The music department started picking through the playlist in the library to figure out what

we might add, what would be meaningful.”¹⁷ Most of the outlets that took this approach included “Imagine”—alongside other selections like Bob Marley’s “One Love” and Prince’s “When Doves Cry”—as songs that would provide solace and comfort in the midst of all the pain. In adopting a negative approach by choosing to eliminate a selection that most stations regarded positively, Clear Channel’s practices could only be read as further reducing the diversity of voices in an era of already shrinking playlists.

Clear Channel also went on to adopt an activist posture that marked a new role for corporate radio. As the nation went to war against Iraq, grassroots peace activists organized numerous antiwar demonstrations around the country. Around the same time, a series of pro-administration events bearing the name “Rally for America” attracted up to 20,000 participants each in cities including Atlanta, Cleveland, San Antonio, and Cincinnati. At first, much like their antiwar counterparts, these rallies appeared to be organized from the ground up as spontaneous local events and were reported as such. It was later revealed that the rallies were organized and sponsored by Clear Channel, and at least two of them had been promoted on the company’s Web site. “While labor unions and special interest groups have organized and hosted rallies for decades,” wrote Tim Jones in the *Chicago Tribune*, where Clear Channel owned six radio stations, “the involvement of a big publicly regulated broadcasting company breaks new ground in public demonstrations.” Added former Federal Communications Commissioner Glen Robinson, a law professor at the University of Virginia, “I can’t say that this violates any of a broadcaster’s obligations, but it sounds like borderline manufacturing of the news.”¹⁸

It is not difficult to imagine that Clear Channel’s support for administration policy might have been motivated by the fact that they had upcoming business before the FCC—business that would have allowed the radio giant to expand considerably, particularly into television. Furthermore, an even more troubling connection to the Bush family itself was also revealed. While a number of investigative reporters were connecting the dots between the Bush Administration and Middle East oil—not just between Vice President Cheney and the Halliburton Corporation, but between the Bush and bin Laden families as well—Paul Krugman, writing in the *New York Times*, also traced a direct connection from President Bush to Clear Channel:

Experienced Bushologists let out a collective “Aha!” when Clear Channel was revealed to be behind the pro-war rallies, because the company’s top management has a history with George W. Bush. The

vice chairman of Clear Channel is Tom Hicks. . . . When Mr. Bush was governor of Texas, Mr. Hicks was chairman of the University of Texas Investment Management Company, called Utimco, and Clear Channel's chairman, Lowry Mays, was on its board. Under Mr. Hicks, Utimco placed much of the university's endowment under the management of companies with strong Republican Party or Bush family ties. In 1998 Mr. Hicks purchased the Texas Rangers in a deal that made Mr. Bush a multimillionaire.¹⁹

It is, of course, always threatening to free expression when a public media company enjoys this degree of intimacy with any government agency, let alone the White House.

REAL PATRIOTS DON'T DISSENT

The restrictive, and at times partisan, practices of corporate radio were not the only reasons behind the lack of protest music on the national airwaves. Some observers felt that the passage of the Patriot Act had created a climate of intolerance for opposing viewpoints and caused many artists to censor themselves. Passed overwhelmingly by both houses of Congress one month after the 9/11 attacks, the Patriot Act created a Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security and provided "enhanced surveillance" powers for police agencies, including so-called "sneak and peak" searches that allow police to enter and search a home or office without notifying the owner. It was revealed in a 2005 review of the Patriot Act that police had engaged in such searches 108 times in a twenty-two-month period. More important, the potential for abuse of civil liberties and the shroud of secrecy that had surrounded these practices clearly had a chilling effect on those who might otherwise have been inclined to express dissent.

Immediately following the passage of the Patriot Act, presidential strategist Karl Rove began meeting with leaders of the entertainment industry in a process that produced an uncommon consensus to close ranks around administration policy. Jack Valenti, then president of the Motion Picture Association of America, marveled at how the participating executives, "who are antagonists, who kill each other in the marketplace," produced "a circle of unity in that room, the likes of which I've never seen." Searching for a "new word" to describe this relationship with government, "one that encompasses the voluntary and patriotic nature of it," Bryce Zabel, chairman of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, exclaimed, "I think the new word is advocacy. We are now advocating America's message."²⁰ With homeland security as its prime

directive, it was clear that tolerance for dissent was not on the agenda of the entertainment industry and that artists who chose to engage in it would be taking professional risks in doing so.

“We’ve seen dozens of acts quietly bury their edgier songs,” complained Jeff Chang in 2002. “The Strokes pulled a song called ‘New York Cops’ from their album and Dave Matthews decided not to release ‘When the World Ends’ as a single.”²¹ When artists performed controversial protest material during this period, they often paid a price, even if in small, obscure ways. Bruce Springsteen was bold enough to perform “41 Shots” at one of his New York dates, about the N.Y.C. police shooting of unarmed Amadou Diallo, but it cost him his customary after-concert police escort to the airport. He chose not to include the controversial song on *The Rising*. On the tour supporting the release of *Riot Act*, Pearl Jam was accused of “impaling” a mask of the President on a microphone stand while performing “Bushleaguer” during an encore in Denver. Evidently spooked by subsequent calls for punitive action, they didn’t play the song again for three weeks and removed it from the playlists of all but six of sixty scheduled tour dates. In 2003 Madonna reportedly withdrew a completed video for her “American Life” single because it portrayed her wearing army fatigues, tossing a grenade at a President Bush-like figure. Jethro Tull was banned from classic rocker WCHR-FM in New Jersey for complaining that drivers who hung American Flags from their cars and SUVs were confusing nationalism with patriotism. “As far as we’re concerned,” said program director and on-air personality Phil LoCascio, “this ban is forever.”²² In July 2004 Linda Ronstadt was banned from ever performing at the Aladdin Casino in Las Vegas after dedicating one of her songs to Michael Moore, as she had on every other date on her tour.

In such an unfriendly political climate and with the absence of radio play, many artists interested in protesting the war turned to the Internet, often posting protest songs as MP3s available for free download. A sampling of protest songs that were posted on the World Wide Web by major artists between Spring 2002 and Spring 2003 included the following:

- Beastie Boys, “In a World Gone Mad”
- Luka Bloom, “I Am Not at War with Anyone”
- Billy Bragg, “The Price of Oil”
- Chuck D, “A Twisted Sense of God”
- Zack de la Rocha (w/DJ Shadow), “March of Death”
- Nanci Griffith, “Big Blue Ball of War”
- Mick Jones, “Why Do Men Fight”
- Lenny Kravitz, “We Want Peace”

John McCutcheon, “We Know War”
 John Mellencamp, “To Washington”
 Meshell Ndegéocello, “Forgiveness & Love”
 Leslie Nuchow, “An Eye for an Eye (Will Leave the Whole World
 Blind)”
 R.E.M., “The Final Straw”
 Spearhead, “Bomb the World”
 Cat Stevens, “Peace Train”
 System of a Down, “Boom!”

Because the Internet offered only limited possibilities for promoting such protest music, however, dissenting voices were often effectively silenced in the public sphere.

It is perhaps because of the pall that was cast over any meaningful dialogue about 9/11 that Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising*, released July 30, 2002, was greeted with such unbridled enthusiasm. Given Sony’s promotional muscle and the return of the E-Street Band, a certain amount of gushing in the mainstream press was to be expected. What was more surprising was that the album was embraced, albeit with a few notable exceptions and some obligatory criticism, across the political spectrum from the *Socialist Worker* to *National Review*. To be sure, there was much to celebrate in *The Rising*. It avoided the jingoism and vengefulness of the most prominent 9/11 statements up to that date. And on songs like “Into the Fire,” “You’re Missing,” and “Lonesome Day,” Springsteen did what he does best: give voice to the voiceless, make everyday people his heroes, and try to build bridges that unite disparate people in their common humanity. At its best, *The Rising* is a sensitive, emotional engagement with the grief of 9/11 and a message of hope, all packaged in a rockin’ good album. It is not, however, an overt political critique of 9/11 and its aftermath, and thus one can’t help but wonder how much this contributed to its widespread acceptance.

The overwhelmingly positive reception of *The Rising* should not mask the fact that a multitude of statements about 9/11 were being made by popular musicians. Those that resonated with administration policy, like the conservative country anthems already examined, tended to get radio play. Those that were a bit edgier politically, like Steve Earle’s “John Walker’s Blues,” were more likely to be met with harassment. Earle took on the politics of 9/11 even more directly on *Jerusalem*’s lead track, “Ashes to Ashes,” where he reminds the listener that “every tower ever built tumbles, no matter how strong, no matter how tall.” There were others as well. Released in the same time frame as *The Rising*, Sleater-Kinney’s *One Beat* is brimming with anger and skepticism on

cuts like “Far Away” and “Combat Rock,” where Carrie Brownstein bellows, “Where is the protest song . . . dissent’s not treason.” A number of stalwarts continued to release antiwar material through the Iraq War. Just before the U.S. invasion, George Michael released a cover of Don McLean’s “The Grave” after taking aim at British Prime Minister Tony Blair on “Shoot the Dog.” Pearl Jam disparaged the president on “Bushleaguer,” claiming “He’s not a leader/He’s a Texas leaguer.” Public Enemy reinforced this notion on “Son of a Bush.”

Throughout the post-9/11 period, the most radical anti-administration statements came from artists located in the more progressive sectors of punk and rap. Even before the United States invaded Afghanistan, Anti-Flag released “911 for Peace,” whose chorus repeatedly shouts, “I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna kill.” NOFX addressed the Iraq War with “The Idiot Son of an Asshole,” built simply around the endless repetition of the title’s hook. Although rap had been roundly criticized for its violence, misogyny, and unabashed materialism throughout the 1990s and beyond, it was also the music that delivered the fullest, deepest, and most radical critique of U.S. foreign policy.

Special mention needs to be made of rap’s relationship to the Twin Towers themselves and, therefore, to 9/11. As Murray Forman has astutely pointed out, “Following the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center, MCs transformed the incident in their own unique manner into a potent metaphor that described the vulnerability of the city’s urban infrastructures, commenting on the fallibility of those who possess authority and power.”²³ The cover of Jeru the Damaja’s *The Sun Rises in the East* (1994), for example, pictures the rapper hovering over the Manhattan financial district with the city skyline in flames and one of the WTC towers burned halfway to the ground. While Jeru the Damaja previewed the devastation of 9/11 visually, Dead Prez anticipated it in the lyrics of their 2000 release “Propaganda,” when they rhymed: “Sign of the times, terrorism on the rise/ Commercial airplanes, falling out the sky like flies.”

This violent imagery inadvertently spilled over into the 9/11 era when the Oakland-based socialist rap group The Coup released *Party Music* in the summer of 2001. The original cover depicted the duo in front of the World Trade Center, with Boots Riley detonating bombs in both towers that looked frighteningly similar to photographs of the actual explosions of 9/11. Released more than two months before the Twin Towers were struck, The Coup defended their cover art as anticapitalist—not a statement about 9/11. Still, the group’s label, 75Ark, quickly withdrew the cover. Oakland’s fiercely political Paris picked up where The Coup had left off with the cover art on *Sonic Jihad* (2003), which

depicts a speeding 747 about to crash into the White House. If The Coup's collision with 9/11 was an accident of history, Paris's cover was intentionally inflammatory. Controversial cover art was not the only thing these rappers had in common. Both also employed the infectious funk beats that had become a staple of West Coast rap to deliver their subversive messages. Between these two unabashedly political releases, there was a steady stream of pointed rap commentary throughout the post-9/11 period.

Somewhere between slam poet and dedicated hip-hop artist, Sage Francis released "Makeshift Patriot" in October 2001. The song, one of the first substantial responses to 9/11 in any genre, opens with a live audio track recorded by the artist at Ground Zero five days after the attacks. It leads to an extended rap set to a churchlike organ that captures all the horror ("Leaping lovers are making decisions to jump, while holding hands . . . to escape the brutal heat") and the contradictions ("We taught that dog to squat. How dare he do that shit in our own back yard!") of that fateful September day. He is clear about the outcome, however. "Freedom will be defended," he acknowledges, but quickly adds, "at the cost of civil liberties."

Some of rap's responses were more circumspect, manifesting their own internal tensions. Outkast's "The Whole World" presented a more vague, gut-level response to the initial attacks set to an up-tempo beat, as Big Boi moaned, "Lookin on the TV/Everything is looking Dismal." Talib Queli expressed contradictory feelings toward police and other officials on "The Proud," accusing them one minute of killing "my people everyday" and admiring them the next for their selflessness at Ground Zero. On Wu Tang Clan's "Rules" Ghostface Killah, angry and confused over the bombings, showed respect toward Osama bin Laden with the line, "No disrespect, that's where I rest my head. I understand you gotta rest yours too nigga." But when he realizes that his people are dying as a result, he takes matters into his own hands: "Mr. Bush sit down, I'm in charge of this war."

As the war in Afghanistan began to segue into talk of invading Iraq with little in the way of hard evidence or concrete connections to justify it, some of the more outspoken political rappers took a more radical stance. Boston's Mr. Lif began "Home of the Brave" with a sample of a Kennedy speech that establishes thoughtful political protest as "the basis of all human morality." Then he tears into his subject, accusing Bush of stealing the presidency, asserting the complicity of the media, and going so far as to suggest that a war in the Middle East would amount to little more than a manipulation designed to divert people's attention from other pressing issues, such as a recession at home. Paris, who

addressed the 1991 Gulf War with “Bush Killa,” took this analysis to its logical conclusion on “What Would You Do,” which was later included on the *Sonic Jihad* album. On this cut, Paris names Bush as the person who has the most to gain from a war in the Middle East and accuses the administration of creating an enemy to justify its actions: “It’s plain to see / the oldest trick in the book is make an enemy / of phony evil now the government can do its dirt.” On “Why” (2004), Jadakiss asked even more provocatively, “Why did Bush knock down the towers?”

There were hints of this dissatisfaction within the rap community among higher-profile artists as well. On “Rule” from *Stillmatic* (2002), Nas asked Bush to “call a truce, world peace, stop acting like savages.” But these sentiments were overshadowed by the less important war between Nas and Jay-Z over rap supremacy in New York. Eminem included some critical verse in cuts like “Business” and “My Dad’s Gone Crazy” on *The Eminem Show* (2002). The album’s first video for “Without Me” featured the artist dressed as Osama bin Laden, doing the “running man” dance in a cave. On “Square Dance” he cautions young people about joining the war effort. For *Encore* (2004), Eminem (and Dr. Dre) produced a Spartan album with straightforward lyrics. On “Mosh” he unleashed a barrage of criticism, as he intoned “Fuck Bush, until they bring our troops home.” Though these examples cannot be construed as the dominant message of rap and hip-hop in the first years following the attacks, they clearly establish the genre as the site of the most provocative political commentary in an otherwise timid and muted post-9/11 environment.

“TIME TO GET MAD”

By 2003, many musicians who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs began taking a more activist stance by joining forces with the broad-based Win Without War coalition, an organization that came together to prevent war in Iraq whose members included the NAACP, the National Council of Churches, Physicians for Social Responsibility and MoveOn, among others. Musicians United to Win Without War described itself as “a loose coalition of contemporary musicians who feel that in the rush to war by the Bush administration the voices of reason and debate have been trampled and ignored.”²⁴ The group included the usual suspects, ranging from David Byrne and Sheryl Crowe to Ani DiFranco and Fugazi, as well as newcomers as diverse as Missy Elliot, Dave Matthews, and Bubba Sparxx. Other musicians, including Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, and Michael Stipe, were also active but

listed themselves as members of a sister organization, Artists United to Win Without War, which included mostly actors.

The momentum of their efforts brought together progressive voices across marketing categories as diverse as rock, rap, punk, and country. At MUWW's founding press conference on February 27, 2003, Russell Simmons and Ben Chavis of the Hip Hop Summit Action Network gave the new group an additional shot in the arm by committing themselves, in the name of the hip-hop community, to joining the fledgling coalition. Rockers and rappers launched an energetic voter registration campaign, signing up nearly 100,000 new voters in a matter of weeks. MUWW also convinced alt-country icons Emmy Lou Harris, Steve Earle, Rosanne Cash, and Lucinda Williams to sign their petition protesting the invasion of Iraq. By early 2004, a new group called the Music Row Democrats had formed in Nashville to organize a progressive political voice among country artists. Punks took a more aggressive stance. Under the leadership of Fat Mike from NOFX, they formed Punkvoter (www.punkvoter.com), dedicated to building a "united front in opposition to the dangerous, deadly, and destructive policies of George Bush, Jr." As Fat Mike told *The Nation*, "It's time to get mad."²⁵

Although the invasion of Iraq proceeded without interruption, all this activity revealed considerable antiwar sentiment. Significantly, the partners in the Win Without War coalition were some of the same organizations and individuals protesting concentration in the mass media, the erosion of artists' and consumers' rights, and the globalization policies of the World Trade Organization. Attempting to pull these disparate strands of political activism into a united movement for social change, in November 2003, Billy Bragg launched the "Tell Us the Truth" Tour, which also featured Tom Morello now performing as the Nightwatchman, Steve Earle, Lester Chambers of the Chambers Brothers, and on some dates, rapper Boots Reilly of the Coup. The tour was sponsored by the AFL-CIO, Common Cause, The Future of Music Coalition, Free Press, and Morello's Axis of Justice. Other artists such as the Dixie Chicks, R.E.M., the Dave Matthews Band, Pearl Jam, James Taylor, John Mellencamp, and Bonnie Raitt joined the "Rock for Change Tour," mounted to support the Kerry/Edwards ticket in the 2004 presidential election. This electoral effort was perceived as sufficiently important that even Bruce Springsteen joined the tour, also endorsing the Democratic candidates (a first in his long career) in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*.²⁶ The effort to defeat George Bush at the polls also yielded two *Rock Against Bush* compilation albums. While these developments represented a significant cross section of center-left U.S. political thought, they were not loud enough to drown

out the chorus of nationalist anthems otherwise dominating American popular culture, or sufficiently compelling to voters to recapture the White House for the Democrats.

CONCLUSION

Amid a general public debate over the curtailing of civil liberties in the United States in the wake of 9/11, a less publicized struggle has also taken place involving the suppression and marginalization of voices resistant to dominant political ideologies, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the realm of popular music. Clearly, a variety of opinions have been expressed by popular musicians about the Bush administration and its war on terrorism. Given the changes in political climate and the corporate landscape of the culture industries, however, country anthems supporting military action as the appropriate response to the 9/11 attacks have overwhelmed more critical voices in rock and rap that challenged this course of action. Many of these rock and rap songs, released within the chart life of the country singles that dominated the national airwaves, could have contributed to a national debate on U.S. foreign policy. Instead, they received only the most limited exposure. One of the supreme ironies of the war on terrorism is that the freedoms the United States says it is fighting to protect have been among the first casualties of the war.

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NOTES

1. See Martin Cloonan, "Musical Responses to September 11th: From Conservative Patriotism to Radicalism," in *9/11—The World's All Out of Tune: Populäre Musik nach dem 11. September 2001*, ed. Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2004), 14. This article is also permanently available online at the Freemuse Web site (<http://freemuse.inforce.dk/graphics/Publications/PDF/cloonan11sept.pdf>).

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7. John Metzger, "Neil Young: Are You Passionate?" *The Music Box* 9(5), May 2002, available at: <http://www.musicbox-online.com/ny-pass.html>.
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9. See Scherzinger essay in this volume for further analysis of the Dixie Chicks controversy and broadcast-media censorship.
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