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## Blowin' in the Wind? The Musical Response to the War on Terror

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### ABSTRACT

Popular music was the most immediate way in which the cultural response to 9/11 manifested itself. Initially music offered a way of mourning and coping with grief. As the United States moved toward the invasion of Iraq, pop music also began to reflect the divisions in society between patriot-artists who supported the invasion, most notably in country music, and protest-artists who articulated critical attitudes to war. These anti-war songs did not attain the stature of those that characterized the era of protest during the Vietnam War, nor did they offer a musical accompaniment to a social movement with any enduring political significance. One little observed dissonance that a longitudinal survey of the musical response to political violence reveals, however, is that over time the attitudes of protest songwriters and the patriots transvalued. Ironically, interventionist “rednecks” became disillusioned with the endless wars of intervention, whilst the “protest” writers lost their voices after President Obama came to power. Ironically, icons of popular music instead turned their ire on those who voted for an anti-establishment President Trump who vowed not to involve the U.S. in further military adventures.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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The events of 11 September 2001 ushered in a new political era in the United States and much of what is termed the Western world, the axis of democratic, ostensibly liberal societies in North America, Europe and Australasia. The name given to this epoch, the “War on Terror,” extended from the Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and the Pentagon in September 2001, to the invasions of Afghanistan in October of the same year, and later to Iraq in 2003, but which also encompassed widespread Islamist inspired attacks across Southeast Asia, India, North and West Africa. Many European countries beyond the U.S. – Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Germany among them – were also to suffer regular “home-grown” jihadist assaults. These spasms of violence were the accompaniment to widespread instability in the Middle East, often stoked by Western military interventions, culminating a decade later in the events of the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011.

A further decade on from the Arab Spring, and two decades on from the shattering events of 9/11, many parts of the world are still living through the era of the War on Terror. The reverberations from 9/11 continue to make their presence felt, be it in the enhanced security measures at airports and most points of travel, and the greater

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levels of surveillance across all sectors of society, through to the persistent instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, the protracted Syrian Civil War, and the continuation of jihadist attacks in the West.

Given the trauma and disruption the 9/11 era caused, it was to be expected that the broader culture would seek to assimilate, interpret and reflect upon the tumultuous events of this period. Since the liberal democratic West, in theory at least, possesses the liberty to articulate a plurality of viewpoints, it is plausible to ask how the popular music idiom addressed the complexities of the twenty year encounter with the War on Terror? Did the artistic response tackle the central moral, ethical and political complexities of the age, and how well did it do so?

### **The First Cut is the Deepest in the *Zeitgeist***

In trying to make sense of popular music's response to 9/11 and the political events it interpreted and reflected, inevitably present problems of organization and structure. Pop music is a medium spanning many genres. This vast industry of musical production was always going to offer a wide range of views and responses that would be difficult to capture within the space of a short study. It would, moreover, be unrealistic and indeed strange, to expect that such a mode of expression would somehow coalesce into some overarching universal statement on a subject as broad and controversial as the War on Terror.

Popular music as a vehicle for political and social commentary is also constrained by its very format. The standard 3-4 minute pop song restricts what can be conveyed both musically and lyrically. Unlike film, theater, or the novel, the format of the popular song impedes the capacity to delve into subjects and themes in much depth. For that reason, popular music is perhaps the least introspective of artistic mediums, given its limited scope for reaching serious insight or meaning.

Nevertheless, examining pop music after 9/11 does have validity, extending – ironically perhaps – precisely from its more ephemeral nature. Popular music, as its very name suggests, is not the sole preserve of a liberal cultural elite as may be said of playwrights, ivory tower intellectuals, screenwriters, movie producers and directors, painters, sculptors, photographers and other creative artists. Pop music is intended to be populist: its fundamental rationale is to appeal to the mass, especially the youth market. If it aspires to any higher cultural ambition it is to express mass opinion, and in particular to be the voice of youth, that is to say, usually the least culturally sophisticated social demographic. Therefore, while the music industry is not necessarily conducive to contemplation and reflection, the medium is attuned to capture the popular mood of the moment.

An additional reason why pop music is more likely to be reflective of contemporary cultural currents is that unlike other genres such as film or literature, and in contrast to other musical forms like classical composition, all of which can take months or years to complete, the pop song can be written and produced in a short time. For example, Paul McCartney wrote his song *Freedom* in a day after he watched the 9/11 attacks unfold whilst sitting on a plane at JFK airport.<sup>1</sup> McCartney went onto perform the song live at “The Concert for New York City” held at Madison Square Gardens

on 20 October 2001, a benefit event in honor of the sacrifices made by the New York Fire and Police Departments on the day of the attacks.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in both its mass appeal via the packaging of short, easy to comprehend, songs and its knack of being emotionally reactive to events, pop music's social importance is its capacity to capture a sense of immediacy. Pop music, in other words, serves as the first-cut of the *zeitgeist*.

Before proceeding, we should clarify the limits of this study. The notion of “pop” music has no obvious delineation from other contemporary forms of musical expression. The Oxford Dictionary defines the noun “pop” as a field of music that “has been popular since the 1950s, usually with a strong rhythm and simple tunes, often contrasted with rock, soul and other forms of popular music.”<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this analysis no differentiation will be made between genres of popular music, and will examine, amongst others, work in the broad categories of rock, country, soul, rap and hip hop, as well as what may be understood as strong rhythm and simple tune compositions that denote “pop.”

Given that pop as a musical style is widely agreed as having originated in the United States in the 1950s, with a strong British input from the early 1960s, the focus will be on song writing in the Anglophone tradition. Additionally, the analysis will focus on the song itself, expressed primarily in its title and lyrics, as the principal source of its social, cultural or political meaning. To that extent, other cultural signifiers, such as whether the artist himself or herself was known as politically active, or had voiced partisan sympathies prior or post-9/11, will be discounted for the most part. Cover art and music videos will receive attention but only as secondary manifestations of cultural significance.

It is also worth stating that musical contributions that may be said to constitute more *avant-garde* examples of aural art will not be considered because they are by design esoteric and therefore fall out of the definition of populist/popular. Hence, Steve Reich's string composition, *WTC/911* (2009/10), performed by the Kronos Quartet, which incorporated the recordings of NORAD radio communications on the day of 9/11,<sup>4</sup> or William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* (2002/03),<sup>5</sup> will not be assessed, culturally striking and suggestive though they are.

Finally, by way of establishing the borders of our inquiry, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) use of pop music as a means of torture to degrade the senses will not be discussed. This topic has already received scholarly attention, which examined the role played by dissonant music in inducing a sense of futility among detainees at facilities such as Guantánamo Bay and other “dark sites.”<sup>6</sup> Interviews with service personnel revealed that the CIA's “enhanced interrogation program” employed songs such as *Hit Me Baby One More Time* by Britney Spears and *Dirrty* by Christina Aguilera to “create fear, disorient... and prolong capture shock.”<sup>7</sup> Intriguing though this subject may be, these songs were not specific reactions to 9/11 and will therefore not be treated in this discussion.

## Pop Music as Group Therapy

The popular music industry in the United States acted as the nation's first cultural responders in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This was manifested in the

organization of a number of high profile benefit concerts in the days and weeks following. “America: A Tribute to Heroes,” featured a range of artists including Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Paul Simon, Faith Hill, the Dixie Chicks, and Alicia Keys.<sup>8</sup> The tone was simple, sad, and respectful, giving expression to the nation’s sense of suffering, extending sympathy for the victims, and mourning the loss of life. The artists concentrated on acoustic performances, which gave the event an appropriately somber quality, best captured perhaps by Limp Bizkit’s affecting rendition of Pink Floyd’s classic *Wish You Were Here*.<sup>9</sup>

A month later on 20 October, Madison Square Garden held “The Concert for New York City.” This was a more flamboyant affair featuring a lineup of American and British rock and pop aristocracy: David Bowie, Elton John, Bon Jovi, Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, amongst others. The atmosphere, too, was more belligerent. Bon Jovi’s highly charged acoustic performance of their hit *Wanted Dead or Alive*<sup>10</sup> intimated encouragement to hunt down Osama bin Laden, while The Who conveyed a not dissimilar message when belting out *Won’t Get Fooled Again*.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, the immediate reaction to 9/11 saw popular music functioning therapeutically, a means of uniting the nation, and giving vent to the wide range of emotions, which as Edmund Burke observed, such a “sublime act of terror” induces: grief, loss, mourning, shock, anger and incomprehension.<sup>12</sup> Beneath the immediate need for unity these concerts projected, there also surfaced premonitory intimations of the political fault lines that were to solidify leading up to the invasion of Iraq. The resilience and resolve inherent in Tom Petty’s performance of “I Won’t Back Down”<sup>13</sup> at “A Tribute to Heroes” contrasted diametrically with the pacifism Neil Young expressed in his version of John Lennon’s *Imagine*, with its utopian view of a world where there is no religion, no countries, no hunger, no possessions and, most particularly, “nothing to live or die for.”<sup>14</sup>

Most of the musical responses in this moment of grief and sorrow were not of course original compositions but the rendering of prior hit songs into which messages of solidarity, defiance or conciliation could be read. One exception to this was Paul McCartney’s *Freedom*, which closed “The Concert for the City of New York.”<sup>15</sup> Although political discord was already surfacing during the concert – the crowd booed Richard Gere for a speech imploring people to turn “all this horrendous energy that we’re feeling... into compassion and to love and to understanding”<sup>16</sup> – nevertheless, McCartney’s song with its repetitive lyrics “Talkin’ about freedom/I’m talkin’ about freedom/I will fight for the right/To live in freedom,” did succeed, according to Chris Willman, in unifying “the divided peoples of a wounded nation in unanimous declaration that this was the suckiest composition of his storied career.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Let’s Roll: Unity and Solidarity after 9/11**

It took a few months after September 2001 for more considered appreciations of the implications of 9/11 to be reflected in popular music. Canadian songwriter Neil Young captured one aspect of this evolution with his single *Let’s Roll*, released in November 2001.<sup>18</sup> Reappraising the placatory overtones in his cover of *Imagine* at “The Concert for New York City,” he now offered a more forceful response. *Let’s Roll* was an explicit tribute to the passengers of United 93, which crashed in a field near Shanksville,

Pennsylvania on 11 September. The hijacked plane was being piloted toward either the White House or the Capitol Building when passengers stormed the flight deck. They included Todd Beamer, whose last words spoken on his cell phone were: “Are you ready, okay let’s roll.”<sup>19</sup> The lyrics to the song captured the existential choice that confronted the passengers: “No time for indecision/We’ve got to make a move/I hope that we’re forgiven/For what we got to do/How this all got started/I’ll never understand/I hope someone can fly this thing/And get us back to land.”

With its last verse proclaiming “Let’s roll for freedom/Let’s roll for love/We’re going after Satan/On the wings of a dove,” it was easy to construe *Let’s Roll*, as some of his more pacifist fans worried, as an endorsement of the more aggressive U.S. foreign policy stance that was already contemplating the invasion of Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Young himself appeared to give some credence to this interpretation when he stated in an interview: “Even though we have to protect freedoms, it seems we’re going to have to relinquish some of our freedoms for a short period of time.”<sup>21</sup> However, the lyrics may also be interpreted as voicing more universal, personally redemptive, themes about the inadvisability of running away when confronted by evil, rather than a call to arms or military adventurism. This moral sentiment can be seen in the verse:

No one has the answer  
 But one thing is true  
 You’ve got to turn on evil  
 When it’s coming after you  
 You’ve gotta face it down  
 And when it tries to hide  
 You’ve gotta go in after it  
 And never be denied.

Young’s song was not, in any overt way, political. Rather, it gave voice to a wounded America. It was Bruce Springsteen’s album, *The Rising*, which perhaps most effectively encapsulated this perspective.<sup>22</sup> Released in July 2002, the album met with widespread critical acclaim for offering America “comfort and light in the cruellest and darkest of moments.”<sup>23</sup> Springsteen’s song cycle captured the emotional pain of 9/11. Compositions like “Into the Fire,” “You’re Missing,” and “Lonesome Day,” made thoughtful, if sometimes maudlin, allusions but eschewed direct reference to the events of 9/11 and refrained from offering any direct political message.<sup>24</sup> Instead, as the lyrics to the eponymous title track underlined, “Come on up for the rising/Come on up, lay your hands in mine,” the songs offered a simple exhortation to Americans to rise together after tragedy.<sup>25</sup>

In effect, *The Rising* represented the spirit and self-image that liberal America most wanted to hear, elevating hope, personal reflection, and reconciliation above feelings of national chauvinism and revenge. In the words of Reebee Garofalo: “Springsteen did what he does best... make everyday people his heroes, and [tries] to build bridges that unite disparate people in their common humanity.”<sup>26</sup> Ironically though, *The Rising* symbolized one of the last cultural attempts, may be even *the last*, which projected a message of American solidarity. Subsequently, popular music gave increasing voice to mounting social fragmentation and division.

## War Time or Jail Time? The Hip Hop Rejectionists

As the United States under the Presidency of George W. Bush moved to invade Iraq, disharmony and rancor began to mark the world of pop. From the outset, of course, the distinctive genres of rap and hip hop were never on board with the message of national unity. Taking their cue from a tradition of disaffected urban-ghetto youth, stretching back to the era of black radicalism in the 1960s, these artists challenged the idea that America was the innocent victim of 9/11, questioning whether the War on Terror was a justified self-defense strategy and a foreign policy that the world needed. Dead Prez's *Know Your Enemy* (2002), crystalized this critical perspective, asserting: "You want to stop terrorists?/Start with the U.S. imperialists."<sup>27</sup>

Rejecting the mainstream narrative of unity and solidarity in the face of "America attacked," rap and hip hop portrayed President Bush as incapable of fighting for freedom. They reflected an important sentiment among the African American community that the government's foreign policy was a threat to their civil liberties and welfare caused by the devotion of national resources to war rather than to more pressing domestic concerns. Hip hop did not regard the War on Terror as a priority. From this perspective, the black community was fighting for equality, social needs, and to stop racial violence and discrimination.<sup>28</sup> J-Live, in his sarcastically titled song, *Satisfied* (2002), captured this alienated mood, intoning:

By the time Bush is done, you won't know what time it is  
 If it's war or jail time, time for promises  
 And time to figure out where the enemy is...  
 But now it's all about NYPD caps  
 And Pentagon bumper stickers  
 But yo, you still a n\*\*\*\*\*a  
 It ain't right the cops and them firemen died  
 The shit is real tragic, but it damn sure ain't magic  
 It won't make brutality disappear  
 It won't pull equality from behind your ear.<sup>29</sup>

To what extent artists such as J-Live contributed to the propagation of radically alternative political narratives is difficult to evaluate. Judging from their commercial sales, their impact was limited. One of the more successful compositions in this genre, Immortal Technique's *The 4th Branch* (2002), (which garnered some 1.8 million downloads on Spotify),<sup>30</sup> declared: "They bombed innocent people trying to murder Saddam/ When you gave him those chemical weapons to go war with Iran." However, other songs in this critical idiom like Mr Lif's *Home of the Brave* (2002), which offered the somewhat divisive proposition: "And you can barely wave that piece of shit flag if you dare/But they killed us because we've been killing them for years," barely registered a few thousand plays and remains largely unknown.<sup>31</sup>

## Of Faith and Flag: Country Music Responds to the War on Terror

For the most part more mainstream, and commercially successful, popular music managed to maintain the line of national solidarity throughout 2001. However, the

consensus broke down between 2002 and 2003. Partisan feelings about whether to support Bush's pro-war stance, whilst broadly suppressed over the invasion of Afghanistan, broke out in the pop response to the invasion of Iraq. This phase of the musical response increasingly reflected broader divisions in society. Thus, patriot-artists most notably in country and western music supported the Iraq invasion, whilst protest-artists voiced increasingly critical attitudes to the Iraq campaign.

Country music with its roots in rural America and its more trenchant, Jacksonian, political traditions, was inevitably going to offer a patriotic rejoinder to 9/11. Even so, early country music responses also chimed with the theme of unity in the face of external assault. This sentiment was most notable in Hank Williams's *America Will Survive* (2001) that promoted a vision of togetherness "from the country to the town." "We live back in the woods you see/Big city problems never bothered me," Williams sang, "But now the world has changed and so have I/And America can survive/America will survive!" Avowing a sense historical reconciliation between the North and South, and the urban and rural, the song concluded with the lines: "We're from North California and South Alabam'/And all they've done is unite the whole land/There's no more Yankees and Rebels this time/ But one united people that stand behind/America can survive/America will survive."<sup>32</sup>

Well, perhaps. Nevertheless, Williams's song also conveyed an early sense of wanting to visit Old Testament forms of justice on America's enemies with the refrain: "I read, 'A tooth for tooth and an eye for an eye'/And that's an old slogan we're gonna revive/'Cause America can survive." Articulating what would be a more characteristic country music audience's desire for revenge was Charlie Daniels' *This Ain't No Rag, It's a Flag* (2001).<sup>33</sup> Couched as a message to Al-Qaeda, the lyrics decreed: "This ain't no rag, it's a flag/And we don't wear it on our head/It's a symbol of where the good guys live/Are you listening to what I said?" Dispensing with any need for subtlety, the song informed its listeners of what was now in store for those who had "wounded our American pride:"

And now we're coming with a gun  
 And we know you're gonna run  
 But you can't find no place to hide  
 We're gonna hunt you down like a mad dog hound  
 Make you pay for the lives you stole  
 We're all through talking and a messing around  
 And now it's time to rock and roll.

"Rockin' and rolling" all the way to Baghdad typified the prevailing country and western mood. Artists like Toby Keith and Darryl Worley proved two of the more popular purveyors of this disposition. Keith's *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* (*The Angry American*), released in May 2002, provided a full throttled patriotic declaration of intent. The song lamented how "this nation that I love has fallen under attack/A mighty sucker punch came flyin' from somewhere in the back." He warned the perpetrators: "And the eagle will fly man/it's gonna be hell/When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell/And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you/Brought to you courtesy of the red, white and blue." In the most notable line

of the song which invariably brought audiences to their feet, Keith declared: “And you’ll be sorry you messed with the U.S. of A./’Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass/ It’s the American way.”<sup>34</sup>

Darryl Worley’s *Have You Forgotten* (2003) offered a more meditative take on the condition of America, critically addressing the growing anti-war movement that objected to the impending invasion of Iraq: “I hear people saying we don’t need this war/I say there’s some things worth fighting for.” The song’s lyrics instructed its listeners not to forget how it “felt that day/To see your homeland under fire/And her people blown away.”<sup>35</sup> More in lament, than anger, Worley reflected that: “Some say this country’s just out looking for a fight/After 9/11 man, I’d have to say that’s right.” The song expressed, above all, the need to remember those killed, and gave voice to an understandable desire for condign retribution.

In contrast, Clint Black’s “Iraq and I Roll” (2003) exhibited mounting impatience with those who “wave our signs in protest/Against America taking stands,” reminding them that “The stands America’s taken/Are the reason that you can.” The lyrics warned that “we can’t ignore the devil/He’ll keep coming back for more,” but also suggested that the naïve, radical, pacifists might be just as much in the firing line as the Iraqis: “It might be a smart bomb/They find stupid people too/And if you stand for the likes of Saddam/One just might find you.” As if to underline the readiness to take on the objectors, both external and internal, the chorus chanted: “I rock, I rack’em and I roll/I’ve got infrared/I’ve got GPS and I’ve got that good old fashioned lead/There’s no price too high for freedom/So be careful where you tread.”<sup>36</sup>

It is easy to dismiss country music’s response as simplistic war-mongering bravado that brooked no opposition to its patriotic certainties.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in a series of career wrecking moves, Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks criticized the music of Toby Keith for making “country music sound ignorant.” “You’ve got to have some tact. Anybody can write, ‘We’ll put a boot in your ass,’” she said.<sup>38</sup> Maines later went onto alienate even more of the Dixie Chicks’ fan base by informing a concert crowd in London on 10 March 2003 that the band was “ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.”<sup>39</sup>

Yet, Maines’ reproach overlooked the fact that country music was not monolithic in its response 9/11. Steve Earle’s *John Walker’s Blues*, for instance, provided an intriguing reflection on the case of John Walker Lindh, an American found amongst the ranks of the Taliban following the American invasion of Afghanistan. Earle’s lyrics pondered how “an American boy, raised on MTV,” could find himself sufficiently estranged from society to “start lookin’ around for a light out of the dim.” Seeking sanctuary in the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad and the pursuit of jihad, Walker Lindh ended up in Afghanistan only to find that “Allah had some other plan, some secret not revealed/Now they’re draggin’ me back with my head in a sack/To the land of the infidel.”<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, condemning country music for being xenophobic and aggressively pro-war misrepresents the genre’s function. Country music was never about tact. As a musical tradition it gives expression to a vital American constituency steeped in rural custom, committed to flag and country, and adhering to an authentic, if declining, individualist frontier philosophy. It would be surprising if, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the evolving War on Terror, country music did anything other than voice

primal reactions that could be construed as jingoistic and boorish but also as cathartic. Criticism of country music for its lack of sophistication also overlooks the more playful, ironic and self-mocking elements in country: the punning on the Southern accent, the corny sentiments, the humorous word play, and of course, the irreverent baiting of America's adversaries.

Mockery is most notably evident in Toby Keith's 2003 album *Shock'n Y'all*,<sup>41</sup> which includes the track, *Taliban Song* that tells the story of a "middle-eastern herdin' man," who has "got a little two bedroom cave here in north Afghanistan." "Things used to be real nice and they got outta hand/Since they moved in/They call themselves the Taliban/Ooo Ooo the Taliban baby." The lyrics explained how the Taliban made this shepherd's life a misery, compelling him and his wife to think about fleeing on a camel. Considering his options, he wondered whether "We should do just fine out around Palestine/Or may be Turkmenistan," concluding: "We'll bid a fair adieu and flip the finger to the Taliban."<sup>42</sup> A similar sentiment can be found in Ray Stevens' 2002, *Osama-Yo-Mama*,<sup>43</sup> which castigated Bin Laden's upbringing from the satirical perspective of a good ol' Southern boy:

Osama – yo' mama didn't raise you right  
 When you were young she must have wrapped yo' turban too tight  
 She should have kept you home on those Arabian nights  
 It's plain to see you need to keep out of those fights...  
 Saw you on TV with yo' gun  
 Mercy sakes, I can't do a thing with you hon  
 And I can just hear dubyah sayin'  
 "You in a heap 'o trouble boy,"  
 And I don't think you will enjoy  
 Our game of search and destroy.

### **Of Oil and F-Bombs: Anti-War Protest Songs in the War on Terror**

Alongside the patriotic sentiments stirred by country music songs, some of which were commercially successful and received extensive air play, there also appeared a wide variety of anti-war music, spanning a number of genres, from heavy metal and punk to more conventional rock and pop. There were, in fact, numerous compositions that fell into the category of anti-war protest, but few would become especially popular.<sup>44</sup> Beyond the serially alienated practitioners of rap/hip hop, early entrants into protest artistry after 9/11 existed in niche sub-genres like rap-metal and punk. With few exceptions, protest artists emanated from the East and West coasts and the big cities. In contrast to country music, they represented another and different American demographic: urban, multi-ethnic, street-wise, cynical yet idealistic at the same time. Their indignation focused on themes of government propaganda and manipulation, and corporate interests pushing the country toward war in the Middle East in pursuit of capitalism and oil.

The general tenor of these songs was often shrill, lacking both nuance and arresting word play. Thus, *Boom* (2002), by Californian heavy metal band System of a Down,

complained that: “The bottom line is money nobody gives a fuck.../While billions are spent on bombs/Creating death showers/Boom boom boom boom.”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Anti-Flag, a punk group from Pittsburgh, in their 2003 number *Operation Iraqi Liberation (O.I.L.)* railed against “Liberating life from bodies, helping spirits fly.../The government lies!/The masses die!/The military lies!/And we all die!”<sup>46</sup>

One of the better known groups articulating this anti-war viewpoint were the Beastie Boys who *In a World Gone Mad* (2003) drew the connection between “First the ‘War on Terror’ [and] now war on Iraq/We’re reaching a point where we can’t turn back.” The lyrics beseeched the President to “put that axis of evil bullshit on hold.../Let’s lose the guns and let’s lose the bombs/And stop the corporate contributions they’re built upon.” Despite the anti-government rhetoric, the band was still at pains to emphasize their patriotic credentials: “Now don’t get us wrong ‘cause we love America/ But that’s no reason to get hysterica/They’re layin’ on the syrup thick/We ain’t waffles we ain’t havin’ it.”<sup>47</sup> Unsurprisingly, the song was named 26<sup>th</sup> in a list of the fifty worst songs of the noughties, with one critic remarking: “Everyone in our generation will never forget where they were when they heard about the greatest tragedy to ever occur on American soil: The Beastie Boys forgot how to rap.”<sup>48</sup>

As the war in Iraq progressed from invasion to occupation, protest songs began to focus specifically on President George W. Bush, who became the object of ardent hostility. Zack de La Rocha, formerly of rap metal titans Rage Against the Machine, penned *March of Death* (2003) that queried: “Who let the cowboy on the saddle?/He don’t know a missile from a gavel.” Another rhetorical question presented itself: “Who’s gonna chain this beast back on the leash?/This Texas führer for sure a compassionless con who serve a/Lethal needle to the poor, the cure for crime is murder?” De La Rocha, concluded: “Here it comes the sound of terror from above/He flex his Texas twisted tongue/The poor lined up to kill in desert slums/For oil that boil beneath the desert sun.”<sup>49</sup>

Clearly also not a fan was aging rocker John Mellancamp, who felt Bush’s interventionist proclivities had disrupted the precursor era of Democrat stability. In “*To Washington*” (2003), he discerned that: “it’s worse now since he came/From Texas to Washington/And he wants to fight with many/And he says it’s not for oil/He sent out the National Guard/To police the world/From Baghdad to Washington.”<sup>50</sup> It was, however, white rapper Eminem’s *Mosh*, released in October 2004, that took the assault on Bush’s character to new heights:

A father who has grown up with a fatherless past...  
 Rebel with a rebel yell, we gonna let’em know  
 Stomp, push, shove, mush, Fuck Bush  
 Until they bring our troops home (c’mon)...  
 Maybe this is God just sayin’ we’re responsible  
 For this monster, this coward  
 That we have empowered  
 This is Bin Laden, look at his head noddin’...  
 Maybe we can reach Al-Qaeda through my speech  
 Let the President answer a higher anarchy

Strap him with an AK-47, let him go, fight his own war

Let him impress daddy that way

No more blood for oil, we got our own battles to fight on our own soil.<sup>51</sup>

There was little variation in the lyrical content of these protest songs, which rarely strayed beyond *ad hominem* attacks on Bush's character and the general charge that the War on Terror was simply a pretext for a war-for-oil. The critique had little, if anything, to say of the consequences of American foreign policy for the civilian populations of Iraq or Afghanistan, or any wider implications for domestic order. The predominant concern was the waste of resources. One interesting modification of this motif was Prince's *Cinnamon Girl* (2004) that takes as its subject a young Muslim-American, alienated by the casual prejudice she experiences after 9/11 and the subsequent saber-rattling "As war drums beat in Babylon." The classically pop melody tends to undermine the earnestness of the lyrics that relay how the:

Cinnamon Girl of mixed heritage

Never knew the meaning of color lines

911 turned all that around

When she got accused of this crime

So began the mass illusion, war on terror alibi

What's the use when the god of confusion

Keeps on telling the same lie.

Prince's intention was, it seems, to counter anti-Muslim stereotyping. However, the lyric goes on to inform us that the "Cinnamon Girl opens the book [namely, the Qu'ran] she knows will settle all the scores." The rather labored and over-literal video accompanying the song shows the girl transforming herself from an all American high school-teen to a suicide bomber who proceeds to blow up – or at least fantasize about blowing up – a civilian airport terminal full of innocent but *kaffir* victims.<sup>52</sup> No stereotyping there, then.

### Hitting a False Note? Anti-War Artists and the Protest Song Tradition

Radio X's list of "The 50 Best Protest Songs" features only one anti-War on Terror song. The majority of noteworthy protest songs date from 1960s through to the 1980s.<sup>53</sup> Green Day's *American Idiot*, the title track from the group's 2004 album, was the only post-2001 song to make the cut. Although unstated, it was not difficult to infer that the eponymous "idiot" was President George Bush. Even so, the song also connoted a broader attack on the direction of U.S. society under the aegis of the War on Terror, which the band vigorously rejected. "I don't want be an American idiot/Don't want a nation under the new media/And can you hear the sound of hysteria/The subliminal mind fuck America." The album was a commercial success, a number one best seller, and garnered a Grammy for Best Rock Album of 2005.<sup>54</sup> The record also contained another hit, *Holiday*, equally anthemic, and even more scathingly dismissive of Bush, proclaiming: "Sieg Heil to the president Gasman/Bombs away is your punishment."<sup>55</sup>

Given how disastrously the War on Terror worked out in terms of the failed occupations and regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the wider instability inflicted on the Middle East, and the overall human and financial costs, the protest-artists can legitimately claim a degree of moral validation.<sup>56</sup> It was noted at the time, and since, however, that they had little impact on public opinion.<sup>57</sup> Apart from *American Idiot* and a handful of other examples such as British band Radiohead's 2003 album *Hail to the Thief*<sup>58</sup> – another allusion to President Bush – few anti-War on Terror recordings gained much in the way of public traction, let alone commercial success. Still less did they have much impact on Bush's reelection to a second term in 2004. For the most part, these songs were limited in their popularity, appealing at best to niche audiences and a loyal fan-base.

The protest song genre has a venerable tradition in the United States extending from the era of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War in the early 1960s, with era defining songs that provided the sound track for a generation of idealistic, anti-war, activists.<sup>59</sup> Some artists, like Lenny Kravitz, with his 2004 single "We Want Peace," tried to reinvigorate this spirit, but it went nowhere commercially.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, no analogous socio-cultural protest movement emerged in the War on Terror epoch. In the first decade of the new millennium, commentators mused whether the protest genre had any public relevance. John Pareles wrote in the *New York Times* in 2003 that "the day may be long past when a song like [Bob] Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' – the all-purpose and seemingly timeless protest song that encompasses both war and civil rights," could become hits.<sup>61</sup> Green Day's *American Idiot* partially dispelled that claim, but as the Radio X list intimated, this was largely a one-off.

In particular, critics identified a stifling political conformity in the wake of 9/11 that caused artists to "quietly bury their edgier songs." According to John Chang: "We've seen radio playlists rewritten so as not to 'offend listeners.' And we've seen Republican officials and the entertainment industry – long divided over 'traditional values' issues such as violent content and parental advisory stickering – bury the hatchet."<sup>62</sup> Responsibility for this state of affairs tended to focus on the consolidation of the radio and music industry from the late 1990s onwards that eliminated many independent stations and record labels, concentrating the industry in the hands of a number of large corporations, and restricting the scope for musical diversity. One such corporate was Clear Channel – now iHeart media – that by the early 2000s controlled nearly 1,200 stations in the United States. The company was perceived as close to the Bush Administration,<sup>63</sup> which was at the time understood to have met "regularly with entertainment industry officials to discuss how they can help the war on terrorism."<sup>64</sup>

Observers correctly pointed out that a censorious atmosphere prevailed in the aftermath of 9/11 that limited artistic expression and restricted the channels for dissenting voices. Three days after 9/11 Clear Channel listed 164 songs that it deemed "lyrically questionable" and therefore unsuitable for airplay.<sup>65</sup> While the rationale for listing some titles was to avoid insensitivity, such as *Shot Down in Flames* by AC/DC or *Suicide Solution* by Ozzy Osbourne, other inclusions were bizarre, like *Obla Di, Obla Da* by the Beatles, whilst others now appear in hindsight faintly ridiculous like, *Falling for the First Time* by Barenaked Ladies, *Great Balls of Fire* by Jerry Lee Lewis, or *Leavin' on a Jet Plane* by Peter, Paul and Mary.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, as Garofalo notes: "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.<sup>67</sup>

Even so, as those like Pareles cautioned, we should not over-burden the 9/11 musical response with comparisons to the Vietnam era. As he pointed out, even back then, protest songs “offered little commercial challenge to more lighthearted pop and rock.” Further, there were no comparable social and political forces like the civil rights movement, or the hippie counter-culture to inspire a youthful rebellion, and most importantly, “no military draft to pull together a constituency and force life-or-death choices on every male teenager.”<sup>68</sup> One might add that in contrast to the escalating U.S. presence in South Vietnam, America did suffer a series of grievous attacks on 11 September 2001, more Pearl Harbor than Gulf of Tonkin, which was always likely to be answered by an overwhelmingly patriotic response that would crowd out the voices of protest.

### **The Changing Dynamics of Pop Culture**

Perhaps the most important factor affecting the post-9/11 impact of popular music reflected the dramatically different relationship between the artist and the audience that had evolved since the Vietnam War. During the 1960s and 1970s groups from The Beatles and Pink Floyd to The Doors, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, and Jefferson Airplane, regularly hit the charts. These bands were no one-hit wonders, like many contemporary pop acts, producing a successful song and then disappearing. They created a mutually reinforcing bond with their followers. This bond intimated that the audience shared a passionate interest in the ideas that the cult band articulated. Ultimately, singers and audiences shared a common, but counter culture.

By the millennium, expecting the average pop fan to listen, learn and appreciate lyrics was no longer culturally fashionable. The music industry had already developed a formula for commercial success that involved repetitious melodies and simple lyrics, an evolution confirmed by a number of academic studies.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, songs from the likes of Justin Bieber or Luis Fonsi can accumulate hundreds of millions of plays in a matter of months. In contrast, work from politically conscious artists like Springsteen, Radiohead or Green Day, popular though they are with their fans, are not in this league of “radio station sensations.”

A final factor to consider is that by the mid-noughties many music listeners were beginning to access songs through online playlists that mixed the works of different artists. Although there are exceptions, playlists are created for audiences with short attention spans who are unlikely to recognize that albums and songs often demand time to understand and enjoy. This structural change in the pattern of music consumption means that its contemporary audience devotes little time dwelling upon the meaning of lyrics. The ritual that music fans once enjoyed of eagerly anticipating a new album, purchasing it, and listening to it obsessively no longer applies. In other words, even if contemporary pop icons composed music with a political message, its effect upon their audience is likely to be superficial.<sup>70</sup> As a result, “political music” tends to be confined to a small niche of fans, usually with similar views, backgrounds and even lifestyles.

## Good God, I Sound like a (Neo) Liberal: The Sound of Resignation?

Thus, both structural and cultural factors combined to limit the impact of political messaging in War on Terror music. Furthermore, by 2007, John Pareles could detect the “sound of resignation,” as songwriters evinced exhaustion with a “war [in Iraq] that wouldn’t go away.”<sup>71</sup> Hence, John Mayer’s “Waiting for the World to Change” (2007) bewailed how everything was “going wrong/With the world and those who lead it,” complaining that “We just feel like we don’t have the means/To rise above and beat it.” Therefore, the option was to endure passively in the hope that someone would “bring our neighbors home from war,” and “keep waiting” for the “world to change.”<sup>72</sup>

Neil Young’s album, *Living with War* (2006),<sup>73</sup> reflected the seemingly interminable fact of “living with war everyday.”<sup>74</sup> The songs on the album catalogued the falsehoods and subterfuge that had led to the conflict in Iraq. “Way out in the desert sands/Lies a desperate love/They call her the “Queen of Oil,” Young sang in *The Restless Consumer*.<sup>75</sup> However, “There is no mission accomplished here/Just death to thousands.” Moving from his qualified endorsement of the U.S. government’s actions in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Young’s album signaled the complete reversal of his political stance. From *Let’s Roll*, Young moved to *Let’s Impeach the President*, which denounced Bush for dividing the country, eroding civil liberties, and for “Misleading our country into war/Abusing all the power we gave him/And Shipping money out the door.”<sup>76</sup> In a similarly cynical vein, and of a similar vintage, The Rolling Stones’ *Bigger Bang* album (2005) satirized the hypocrisy of preemptive interventions. Mick Jagger condemned the avaricious *Sweet Neo Con* who loves gasoline: ‘I drink it every day/But it’s getting very pricey/And who is going to pay.../We must have loads more bases/To protect us from our foes/Who needs these foolish friendships/We’re going it alone.’<sup>77</sup>

After 2007 musical interest in the War on Terror fell away dramatically. Some of the last protest songs of this decade featured on the album *Send Away the Tigers*<sup>78</sup> by the idiosyncratic Welsh rock band, the Manic Street Preachers.<sup>79</sup> *Imperial Bodybags* obviously referenced the loss of life suffered by the armed forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, “coming home in dribs and drabs/Life is numbers with doggy tags,”<sup>80</sup> while *Rendition* was one of the few songs to raise the subject of enhanced interrogation techniques: “Rendition, Rendition, blame it on the coalition/Rendition, rendition, I never knew the sky was a prison.”<sup>81</sup> The lyrics contained the caustic observation: “The CIA will stay invisible, oh good god I sound like a liberal.” The mocking reference to sounding “like a liberal” was presumably a comment on the idea that right thinking people in Western democracies were happy to tolerate coercive interrogations, provided they were kept out of sight.

The few other songs of this period that mentioned the 9/11 era started to re-direct attention away from the ideas of being misled into failed military misadventures abroad, and instead began to reinterpret the War on Terror as a commentary on the underlying racism and prejudice of Western democracies. Thus we find Bloc Party’s 2007 song, *Hunting for Witches*, referencing the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 attacks on London’s transport system, which killed 56 people, as a pretext for a media inspired witch hunt that was encouraging the “ordinary man, with ordinary desires,” who was apparently “sitting on the roof of [his] house” ... “With a shotgun and a six pack of beer,” to go on a rampage against Muslims and immigrants more generally: “The *Daily Mail* says

the enemy is among us/Taking our women and taking our jobs/All reasonable thought is being drowned out/By the nonstop baying for blood.”<sup>82</sup> According to the *NME*, the song was “brilliantly evocative of the paranoia and Islamophobia” that supposedly gripped the ignorant masses.<sup>83</sup>

Leaving aside the improbable – in fact, non-existent – image of the average Brit sitting atop their house, Budweiser in hand, with their firearm of choice (only the exceedingly dimwitted in Britain would attempt to sit on their tiled, usually sloped roofs, with the constant prospect of being rained upon, whilst nearly all guns – including shot-guns – are heavily licensed, if not banned outright), those who experienced the aftermath of the 2005 London attacks might wonder what alternate reality Bloc Party was inhabiting at the time. Far from stoking up anti-Muslim/anti-immigrant rage, the media and political establishment bent over backwards to preserve harmonious community relations and to emphasize the peaceful character of Islam while warning against any backlash from unspecified right-wing elements, which of course never materialized.<sup>84</sup>

However, the mold was cast: the evolving narrative that developed in political and academic discourse, was beginning to find its echo in the contemporary pop song, namely, that Al-Qaeda inspired attacks were not the problem, home grown terrorism was not the problem: Islamophobia and Western racism were the *real* problems. In a not dissimilar manner, one of the few other songs of this period to mention 9/11, before the genre went quiet on the subject, was the Black Eyed Peas’ somewhat cheesy “Where is the Love” (2009), which perceived racialized undertones in the “War on Terror” as more indicative of problems of systemic racism within the domestic polity:

Overseas, yeah, we try to stop terrorism  
 But we still got terrorists here livin’  
 In the USA, the big CIA  
 The Bloods and The Crips and the KKK  
 But if you have only love for your own race  
 Then you leave space to discriminate  
 And to discriminate only generates hate  
 And when you hate you’re bound to get irate, yeah.<sup>85</sup>

The main reason, however, for the decline of the War on Terror protest song was the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. Widely perceived as an antidote to the moral and policy failings of the Bush regime, his arrival in office was welcomed by the entertainment industry as a whole.<sup>86</sup> Neil Young’s 2006 track, *Lookin’ for a Leader*, from the *Living with War* album, was notably prescient in this respect. Young, it seems, was “Lookin’ for a leader, To Bring our country home/Reunite the red white and blue/Before it turns to stone.” “Someone walks among us,” he continued: “And I hope he hears the call/And maybe it’s a woman/Or a black man after all/Yeah, maybe it’s Obama.”<sup>87</sup>

Drawing the poison of the Bush years, much of the cultural establishment went quiet on the War on Terror, which leads to one final twist in the tale. Youthful, urbane, articulate, and socially conscious, Obama, as the first black President of the United States, not only provided a dynamic contrast to George Bush, he also served as a

liberal icon in the John F. Kennedy mold, offering hope, renewal and optimism to a divided nation.<sup>88</sup> Even so, despite denouncing the conduct of the War on Terror, Barack Obama failed to terminate involvement in the U.S.'s long wars once in power. While his rhetoric was persuasive, he nevertheless failed to close the Guantánamo Bay detention facility as promised.<sup>89</sup> Nor did he renounce overseas “neo-liberal” interventionism. He took a key role in supporting the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011.<sup>90</sup> Osama bin Laden was tracked to his Pakistan compound and killed by a Navy SEAL team in May 2011. Meanwhile, targeted assassinations, often via drone strikes, increased under his watch.<sup>91</sup> This extended to the extra-judicial killing of American citizens, like the radical preacher, Anwar al-Alwaki, killed by a drone strike in Yemen in late September 2011.<sup>92</sup> In response, the once vociferous protest-artists went curiously mute in their response to Obama's failure to live up to his campaign promises. In fact, an interesting role reversal was taking place in pop culture.

### The “Redneck’s” Revolt

“I’m not part of a redneck agenda,” declaimed Green Day singer Billy Joe Armstrong in *American Idiot*.<sup>93</sup> The reference to “rednecks” was directed at the perceived character of President Bush, whose political home was Texas. Equally, the lyric could also be construed as disparaging of the broader constituency that supported U.S. military intervention and its simplistic rhetoric of combating an axis of evil, and the crass nationalism it sometimes engendered in a popular idiom like country music. Yet, over the course of the long war decades, it was these very same “rednecks” that came to repudiate the War on Terror and the politics of neo-liberal interventionism far more vehemently than the coastal liberal elites and their voices of protest.

The disillusioning of “middle America” – the “rednecks” and “hillbillies” of the flyover states, and the declining industrial heartlands of the “rust belt” – had been decades in the making. The outsourcing of once secure industrial jobs overseas, wages threatened by illegal immigration, the destruction of once thriving communities, the descent of families into poverty and opioid addiction, had begun to alienate large swathes of the once loyal core of the populace.<sup>94</sup> The mounting disenchantment of middle America became evident in popular music from the early 1990s. Big Country, for example, had explored the challenges of industrial working class life since the group's formation in 1981.<sup>95</sup> Originally from Dunfermline, Scotland, the band's principal songwriter, Stuart Adamson, was much influenced by American folk styles, country music in particular. Adamson re-located to Nashville in 1996 where he spent most of the remainder of his life before his untimely suicide in 2001.<sup>96</sup> Big Country's powerful 1993 album, *The Buffalo Skinners*, gave full vent to an early but evolving working class embitterment at the hands of a corrupt globalist elite in songs like *Seven Waves*, *What Are You Working For*, *We're Not in Kansas* and *The Selling of America*.<sup>97</sup>

As the United States became increasingly immured in the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, anger began to surface in formerly supportive country and western music circles. In 2005, Merle Haggard vocalized this frustration in *America First*: “Why don't we liberate these United States/We're the ones that need it most/Let the rest of the world help us for a change/And let's rebuild America first.” The song was an explicit

rejection of the verities of the War on Terror, and expressed cynicism at those who were running the country: “Yeah, men in position are backin’ away/Freedom is stuck in reverse/Let’s get out of Iraq an’ get back on track/And let’s rebuild America first.”<sup>98</sup> Some years later, The Rolling Stones channeled the changing *zeitgeist*. Their 2012 song, *Doom and Gloom*, sensed the growing loss of American self-confidence, with Mick Jagger declaring: “Lost all that treasure in an overseas war/It just goes to show you don’t get what you paid for/Bowing to the rich and you worrying about the poor/Put my feet up on the couch and lock all the doors.”<sup>99</sup>

J.D. Vance’s best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* captured the growing sense of despondency in the patriotic hinterlands of America,<sup>100</sup> while Tucker Carlson’s *Ship of Fools* gave it a broader political voice.<sup>101</sup> Socially, however, it made its most dramatic impact with the election of Donald J. Trump as President in 2016, who came into power with an America First agenda and a dismissive view of America’s political establishment that had led the nation into a condition of economic torpor and an era of “forever wars” engendered by the War on Terror. Overseas interventions, whatever their former merit, were now seen as a distraction from more pressing domestic concerns.<sup>102</sup>

The response of much of the pop music world to Trump’s victory was, in this respect, somewhat curious. Impetuous and capricious as Trump proved to be, in policy terms he, in fact, embraced the agenda inherent in much of the anti-war protest songs a decade earlier: bring the troops home, end overseas military adventurism, and concentrate on domestic economic concerns.<sup>103</sup> Yet, the entertainment industry utterly denounced this “America First” agenda.<sup>104</sup> The rapper Eminem, for example, who made much of his trailer trash roots,<sup>105</sup> moved from his call in *Mosh* in 2004 to “Fuck Bush,” to proclaim in *The Storm* in 2017 how much “we fucking hate Trump.”<sup>106</sup> In the spirit of national reconciliation, he offered the following insight:

‘Cause like him [Trump] in politics, I’m usin’ all of his tricks  
 ‘Cause I’m throwin’ that piece of shit against the wall ‘til it sticks  
 And any fan of mine who’s a supporter of his  
 I’m drawing in the sand a line, you’re either for or against  
 And if you can’t decide who you like more and you’re split  
 On who you should stand beside, I’ll do it for you with this:  
 Fuck you!<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps we should not read too much into the thought processes of Marshall Mathers, but the willingness of his lyrics to show sympathy for poor “tormented Hillary,” Trump’s 2016 Democrat election rival, and to suggest that “we better give Obama props, ‘Cause what we got in office now’s a kamikaze/That’ll probably cause a nuclear holocaust,” suggests a high degree of moral confusion. Much of Trump’s political support derived from an instinctual dislike of Hillary Clinton, an archetypal figure of the Washington establishment, who had served as Obama’s Secretary of State. As such, she was often identified as a foreign policy hawk willing to entertain thoughts of going to war against Iran, and in all other respects was complicit with the policies of “neo-liberal” interventionism, drone strikes, and targeted killings that characterized the Obama administration’s iteration of the War on Terror.<sup>108</sup>

By contrast, Trump was the first President since Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) not to begin or expand a war. He drew down troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, lowered political temperatures on the Korean peninsula and sponsored a number of landmark peace treaties between the Arab states and Israel.<sup>109</sup> All of which suggested a peculiar cognitive dissonance in the political attitudes of the nation, which pop music fully reflected during the War on Terror: namely, “America First” patriotism was to be denounced when it was in favor of an interventionist foreign policy, and it was also to be condemned when it rejected an interventionist foreign policy. May be such incoherence simply goes to show how entrenched political allegiances always seek to legitimize whatever they currently believe in against those to whom they are opposed. Nevertheless, we can cast doubt on the sincerity of pop icons willing to support or denounce policies based solely on whether or not someone has the letter “D” after their name, and marvel at how deftly protest artists moved from being vociferously anti-war to offering *de facto* support for the War on Terror.

## Conclusion

Popular music seldom delves deeply into politics. It offers passion rather than coherence. But it can function as the “sound track” to a generation, and on occasion succeeds in crystalizing the spirit of the age. Over the twenty years since the War on Terror era opened, we can see that a variety of pop music genres have, in their different ways, absorbed and reflected the political and social impact of events.

Music, as we have seen, offered the most immediate way in which mass culture responded to 9/11 through benefit concerts, live performances and songs that spoke to the shock that the attack generated. This initial reaction saw popular music functioning as group therapy, a means of uniting the nation as it came to terms with the impact of grief and loss. However, after the United States and its Coalition allies invaded Iraq, popular music soon began to reflect deeper divisions in society. Patriot-artists, notably in country music, gave voice to a vigorous prosecution of the invasion, whilst protest-artists evinced politically critical or pacifist attitudes in a variety of popular performance modes.

In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, and as the difficulties of occupation became more evident, protest songs increasingly expressed a visceral distaste of both George Bush and his advisers, and his administration’s foreign policy. Even so, no anti-war track attained the enduring influence of songs that characterized the Vietnam War era, nor did they give voice to a movement with any enduring political significance.

One paradoxical dissonance that this survey of the pop response to forever war reveals is how, over time, the stances of critical and patriot songwriters became trans-valued. War supporting “rednecks” became gradually disillusioned with the endless wars of intervention, whilst the “protest” writers went silent after Obama came to power. Ironically, progressive pop icons turned their ire on the “basket of deplorables” for voting for an anti-establishment figure like President Trump who vowed to eschew further military adventures.<sup>110</sup> In so doing, they revealed the histrionic lack of seriousness and moral posturing of contemporary pop artistry, which was willing to appropriate the genre of the protest song without ever really believing in it.

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