

O'er the Land of the Free and the Home of Country Music

The Name of the Tune is Red, White and Blue with a Twang.

By Don Cusic and Peter Szatmary

"We live in the greatest country on earth."

That statement is embedded in every American — and in many country music tunes.

We hear that statement our entire life until we take it for granted, accept it as a self-evident fact and then say it to each other over and over. But that statement has different meanings when it comes to patriotism — and country music embraces some of these meanings and rejects others.

For liberals that statement means that we are in the process of fulfilling our destiny and that we have the freedom as well as the obligation to question, criticize and challenge our country as it travels on this journey. Indeed, we have an obligation to question, criticize and challenge our country, liberals believe, in order to live out and realize our ideals, a process that makes us "the greatest country on earth." For liberals it is unpatriotic not to question, criticize and challenge the policies and actions of our country.

For conservatives the statement "we live in the greatest country on earth" is a conclusion that has been drawn, an established fact and a done deal. Therefore, it is unpatriotic for America to be questioned, criticized or challenged for its policies and actions because, conservatives believe, those very questions, criticisms and challenges are a rebuttal to the belief that "we live in the greatest country on earth."

The patriotic country songs heard on country radio generally present the conservative view in a variety of ways but usually defend America against questions, criticisms or challenges and support whatever actions or policies our country is engaged in. In this way, patriotism is defined as unquestioned loyalty to and support of our country with the implication that questions, criticisms and challenges are unpatriotic.

Sing the praises of the land

Patriotism is often expressed as pride in being an American, particularly when the country is under attack.

Perhaps the best example is "God Bless the U.S.A.," the Country Music Association (CMA) Song of the Year in 1985, written and recorded by Lee Greenwood and then rereleased in 2001 after 9/11. The chorus to the anthem-like songs begins, "And I'm proud to be an American" and states further that the singer will "defend her" against all challenges and criticism.

The events of 9/11 inspired a number of other artists to release patriotic recordings in 2001, including "America Will Survive" by



Two-time Country Music Association Entertainer of the Year Award winner **Hank Williams, Jr.**, performed his patriotic song "America Will Survive" at a 2008 political rally. (Photo credit: Jeremy Westby. Photo courtesy of Webster & Associates Public Relations.)



Hank Williams, Jr.

Hank Williams, Jr. (It's a rewrite of his 1982 signature song, "A Country Boy Can Survive" about a rural lad in a big city.) He growls to a twangy guitar, "Our flag is up, the stock market's down. / But we're all united from the country to the town." "Only in America" Brooks and Dunn assert in their country-rock song of the same name, can people dream as big as they want to, no matter their background.

The Southern rock song "This Ain't No Rag, It's a Flag," by the Charlie Daniels Band, turns the red, white and blue into a symbol of united might. Part of one typically

alpha stanza goes, "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."

And in the mournful love song, "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)," Alan Jackson's Grammy Award-winner that reached No. 1 on the charts, the self-proclaimed "singer of simple songs" poignantly asks "you" listeners, to a steel guitar, numerous questions about that tragic day. The CMA Song of the Year and Single of the Year touches on shock, confusion, sorrow, fear, outrage, relief, faith, hope, resolve and pride.

While saying he's "not a real political man," he wonders in the ballad, "Did you shout out in anger?" "Or did you just sit down and cry?" "Did you feel guilty 'cause you're a survivor?"



Alan Jackson asks many 9/11-themed questions in the 2001 hit single, "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)." (Russ Harrington, photographer. Courtesy of D. Baron Media Relations Inc.)

"In a crowded room did you feel alone?" "Did you call up your mother and tell her you love her?" "Did you look up to heaven for some kind of answer / and look at yourself to what really matters?" "Did you lay down at night and think of tomorrow / go out and buy you a gun?" "Did you burst out in pride for the red, white and blue / the heroes who died just doing what they do?"

The war in Iraq wound up in song

Country artists supported the troops in the Iraq War, which began in spring 2003, with numerous songs. In cowriter and performer

Darryl Worley's emphatic "Have You Forgotten?" the singer asks a listener if he/she still remembers 9/11 and the reason for a war. There are "some things worth fighting for," the No. 1 hit song from 2003 proclaims, adding, "And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout bin Laden. / Have you forgotten?"

In cowriter and performer Toby Keith's chart topper "American Soldier" from 2003, the titular male character declares, with passion, in the ballad, "And I will always do my duty, no matter what the price. / I've counted up the cost, I know the sacrifice." In performer John Michael Montgomery's mandolin-influenced "Letters from Home" (2004), a soldier treasures mail from his folks and sweetheart back in the States. He says about each letter in the refrain, "I hold it up and show my buddies / like we ain't scared and our boots ain't muddy / and they all laugh like there's something funny. . . . I fold it up and put it in my shirt, / pick up my gun and get back to work."

Performer Trace Adkins' "Arlington"

(2005) honors the soldiers who have fallen in battle and are buried in Arlington National Cemetery. To a mournful fiddle, a ghostly grunt observes in the chorus, "And I'm proud to be on this peaceful piece of property. / I'm on sacred ground and I'm in the best of company. / I'm thankful for those thankful for the things I've done. / I can rest in peace, I'm one of the chosen ones. / I made it to Arlington."

And cowriter and performer Tim McGraw's earnest "If You're Reading This" from 2007 is a posthumous letter from a soldier to his survivors. In it, the fallen fellow realizes that he won't be around for the birth of his little girl and despite dying while serving his country, he has no regrets following in his father's footsteps. The chorus goes: "So lay me down / in that open field out on the edge of town / and know my soul / is where my momma always prayed that it would go. / And if you're reading this, I'm already home."

Even after most of the American public turned against the Iraq War and President George W. Bush (or when most of the public turned against the Vietnam War and President Richard Nixon), there were no country songs that criticized the war or president or challenged the role and image of the United States in the world. (See below about the criticism that the Dixie Chicks leveled from the concert stage at President Bush in reference to Iraq.)

Rock and pop artists, on the other hand, are free to question, criticize, challenge — and condemn — the United States for its actions and policies.

Musicians find new worth in Old Glory

Patriotism is also reflected in defending "the American way of life." That can include pride in the flag and what it stands for, such as "Ragged Old Flag" (1974), a celebration of American freedoms and a reckoning of American wars by Johnny Cash. Partly set to a military type of drum, it amounts as much to an oration as a song. After the narrator notices how worn the county courthouse flag is, an old man on a park bench defends it.

The elder sage points out, "You see, we got a little hole in that flag there / when Washington took it across the Delaware. / And it got powder-burned the night Francis Scott Key / saw it writing 'Say Can You See.'"

The tune also references the Battle of New Orleans, the Alamo and the Civil War, and how in the latter, the flag "got cut with a sword at Chancellorsville / and she got cut again at Shiloh Hill." After mentioning damage suffered in World Wars I and II and after alluding to Korea and Vietnam, the song touches upon homegrown harm ("In her own good land here she's been abused. / She's been burned, dishonored, denied, and refused.") before concluding, "And she's getting threadbare and wearing thin. / But she's in good shape for the shape she's in. / 'Cause she's been through the fire before / and I believe she can take a whole



The Oak Ridge Boys (left to right: **Duane Allen**, **Joe Bonsall**, **William Lee Golden** and **Richard Sterban**) sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the grand finale of the National Anthem Project, in Washington, D.C., in 2007. The group served as musical ambassadors for the three-year National Anthem Project, an educational campaign to reteach the country's song. (Photo courtesy of the Oak Ridge Boys.)

lot more."

In the No. 1 hit "The Fightin' Side of Me" (1970), by Bakersfield-influenced Merle Haggard, the singer states that "if you're runnin' down my country, man / you're walkin' on the fightin' side of me." (Another reason this is interesting: Haggard served time in prison for attempted robbery.) His 1970 CMA Single of the Year, "Okie From Muskogee," a No. 1 favorite that he cowrote, is a song that protests protesters and states that Muskogee is a place "where even squares can have a ball" and where, like in Cash's song, "We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse."

Everyday convictions serve as themes

All-American sensibilities are also embedded in country songs of family values such as No. 1 hits "Stand by Your Man" (1968), performed and cowritten by Tammy Wynette, and "Love Is the Foundation" (1973), performed by Loretta Lynn. The impassioned former number, a Grammy winner, embraces the sanctity of marriage even though "sometimes it's hard to be a woman / giving all your love to just one man. / You'll have bad times / and he'll have good times." The confident latter, stoking desire, knows that "all you need is love to ease your mind."

A song like "I Found My Girl Here (in the Good Ole U.S.A.)," by traditionalist Jimmie Skinner (1909-79) — in which the singer notes that he'd been around the world but his loved one comes from home — demonstrates pride in being American and finding true love with a fellow American. Similar sentiments run through "American Made" (1983), a No. 1

single performed by the Oak Ridge Boys — in which the singer states that his TV and camera might be made in Japan but his sweetheart, even when wearing blue jeans from Mexico and French perfume, is "American made, born and bred in the U.S.A."

The idea that an essential part of being American is being a Christian is expressed in, for instance, "Family Bible" (1980), performed by Willie Nelson — "Now this old world of ours is full of trouble. / This old world would also better be / if we'd find more Bibles on the tables." This type of piety also is the source of the hymn-like "Why Me?" a No. 1 hit from 1973 by singer/songwriter Kris Kristofferson — in which the singer, assessing his life, observes in the chorus: "Lord, help me, Jesus, I've wasted it so. / Help me, Jesus, I know what I am. / Now that I know that I've needed you so / help me, Jesus, my soul's in your hand."

Country music works at its beliefs

The life of the working man has been popular in country music with the underlying belief that a "true" American is a hardworking man or woman.

Examples include a number of truck-driving songs, such as "Six Days on the Road" (which ends "and I'm gonna make it home tonight"), performed by Dave Dudley in 1963 and Sawyer Brown in 1997. Merle Haggard's "Workin' Man Blues," a No. 1 single from 1969, begins, "It's a big job just getting' by with nine kids and a wife. / I've been a workin' man dang near all my life. / I'll be working s'long as my two hands are fit to use. / I'll drink my beer in a tavern / and sing a

little bit of these working man blues."

It later boasts, "Hey, hey, the working man, the working man like me. / I ain't never been on welfare, that's one place I won't be."

In the 1963 Grammy-winning "Detroit City," performed by Bobby Bare, a country boy moves north to work in a car factory but wants to go home: "Home folks think I'm big in Detroit city. / From the letters that I write they think I'm fine. / But by day I make the cars, by night I make the bars. / If only they could read between the lines."

The joys of the working life are more directly challenged in the 1977 smash "Take This Job and Shove It," performed by Johnny Paycheck, and the traditional role of women is directly challenged in songs like "The Pill" (1975), cowritten and performed by Loretta Lynn. But there is still the implicit belief that the songs are, at heart, prototypically American. Both, after all, celebrate standing up for yourself in one way or another.

There is even a slight challenge to the American way of life in "What Is Truth?" (1970) written and performed by Johnny Cash; in "Clean up Your Own Back Yard," (1969), performed by Elvis Presley; and in the 1968 CMA Single of the Year, Grammy-winning sign of the times and No. 1 crossover, "Harper Valley P.T.A.," performed by Jeannie C. Riley. Each criticizes some aspect of American status quo: "Yeah, the ones that you're calling wild / are going to be the leaders in a little while" in the Cash number; pontificating types in "Clean up Your Own Back Yard"; and a hypocritically censorious and overly prudish school board in "Harper Valley P.T.A."

But again, there's something patriotic



Country music legend **Johnny Cash** sang about patriotism in numerous memorable songs, turning the man in black into one who was red, white and blue. (Photo credit: MovieWeb.com via Sony BMG Music Entertainment.)



The Dixie Chicks (left to right: **Emily Robison**, **Natalie Maines** and **Martie Maguire**) lost fans and airplay when after questioning policies of President George W. Bush in 2003. (Photo credit: MovieWeb.com.)

in these songs because assumptions get reexamined (“You better help the voice of youth / find ‘what is truth.’”), territory gets marked (“Clean up your own back yard. / You tend to your business. / I’ll tend to mine.”) and wrongs get righted (“No, I wouldn’t put you on because it really did, it happened just this way / the day my Mama socked it to the Harper Valley P.T.A.”). And that’s the American way.

So is paying taxes. Perhaps the best example of a country tune about taxes is “The Good Lord Giveth (and Uncle Sam Taketh Away),” an underappreciated song from 1975 by honky tonk vocalist Webb Pierce, who had a slew of hits in the 1950s.

In 1990, the IRS billed the hard-working Willie Nelson \$16.7 million in back taxes. The country music outlaw and famous free spirit cleared his bill by 1993 (the year he turned 60), partly by going back “On the Road Again,” as his most famous tune suggests — and partly by making a solo, acoustic double CD in 1992 titled *The IRS Tapes: Who’ll Buy My Memories*, a collection of demos, outtakes, obscurities and a few new tunes, with proceeds going to Uncle Sam.

One reason fans didn’t turn their backs on The Red Headed Stranger was because they recognized how much Nelson loves

his country — if for no other reason than he has held a Fourth of July Picnic concert just about every year since 1973 and, in 1985, co-organized Farm Aid, an annual concert to support family farms.

Country music favors conservatives

Patriotism cannot be called into question in the confrontational manner of the Grammy-winning Dixie Chicks who, from a London stage in March 2003, criticized President George W. Bush’s plans for war in Iraq and proclaimed they were “ashamed” that Bush also came from their home state of Texas.

Even though politicians routinely say worse things about each other, that statement crossed the line at a time in American history when the Iraq war was popular or at least considered necessary. Country radio stations boycotted the Dixie Chicks, the group’s popularity suffered and CD sales plummeted (generally until 2006 when the tide had changed and the band won another clutch of Grammys — although the Dixie Chicks have not won any CMA awards since 2002).

For conservatives, true patriots do not question, criticize or challenge their country

or its leaders in a time of crisis. Country music tends to present a “conservative” point of view, so the comment by the Dixie Chicks was out of bounds for most country music fans. However, the Dixie Chicks were embraced by the pop music community, which tends to lean towards the liberal view in which questioning, criticizing and challenging the American policies and practices form essential parts of patriotism.

Country music is the music that articulates the thoughts, feelings and lifestyles of the white working and middle class in America. The audience for country music tends to be older than the audience for pop and rock, which are aimed at those in the 15-24 age range. The bulk of the audience listening to country music is older than 35. The hot blood of youth has been cooled and tempered by the time most folks reach the age of 35 and older and the idealism of youth has been tempered by the realities of day-to-day life. Most young people crave change; most older folks resist it.

Country music is patriotic in the conservative sense because the audience for country music is patriotic that way too. The fans tend to be more conservative in their political, cultural and social views and more comfortable with keeping things as they are or making changes slowly. It is a music genre that is proud to display the flag and sing about its love of this country. That love reflects the fundamental belief they have arrived at after working to make a living in the United States as well as perhaps hearing some news from other places on the planet.

That love of our country and the patriotic country songs heard on country radio embrace a basic, unyielding belief: “We live in the greatest country on earth.” ■

Author’s note: Many of the songs referenced in this article can be heard on Web sites such as YouTube or the performer’s official Web site.



For more photos and an annotated reading list, go online to: <http://www.PhiKappaPhi.org/Web/Publications/Forum/summer09/countrymusic>



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