

Letters home: Themes and messages in soldier songs of the second Iraq War

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Country music has a long tradition of war-related songs dating back at least to the Civil War and is present today in the context of the current war in Iraq. Amid the many jingoistic songs in this category is a subgenre referred to in this study as “soldier songs.” Since WWII, soldier songs have retained an important place in country music during subsequent periods of war because of their personal reflections on the tragedies of war. The appearance of soldier songs in relation to the timeline of the war, in combination with the personality of the recording artist, is significant to how the audience receive the song. The main objective of this study is the analysis of the messages and contexts of modern soldier songs, which support the troops but not necessarily the war, and establish a sort of political middle ground that can be appropriated by both sides of the political spectrum.

Introduction

After little more than a cursory examination of representative songs and industry news, country music appears completely one-sided regarding politics and war. This observation reflects the general view of the industry throughout much of its history after the 1960s and even suggests that the country music industry is a bastion of conservative politics and a fount of jingoism.¹ While still not traditionally a stronghold for liberals or Democrats, that very industry, however, shows many signs of a growing political diversity, especially as the current war in Iraq continues into its sixth year. Not all country artists subscribe to the jingoism of some of the popular wartime songs, and even those that appear to may have misgivings about the war or how the administration has conducted it. One genre of country songs, in particular, provides an excellent entrée to this larger discussion and supports a focused discussion in its own right. Limitations of length prevent this study from being a comprehensive analysis of this subgenre and all the political organizations, song lyrics, personal statements, and media coverage, with which the country music industry has reacted to the war in Iraq. The main objective of this study is the analysis of songs that support the troops but not necessarily the war, and establish a sort of political middle ground that can be appropriated by both sides of the political spectrum.

This subgenre is the “soldier song,” and it has a long tradition in country music. Its roots can be

traced to ballads, which tell stories and suggest moral lessons, and to event songs, which generally focus on news-making tragedies. The term “soldier song,” used as a specific title for this group of songs, is absent from the literature. James Perone uses a somewhat similar term, “plight-of-the-soldier songs”; but he groups them with “pro-government songs” in *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict*.² Perone alleges that soldier songs are related to the pro-government songs, but he also states that some of the soldier songs are actually anti-government. Because “the focus of these songs was on the soldiers themselves and on their stories, and not on an antiwar statement,” Perone has joined them with the pro-government songs.³ Pro-war and patriotic songs soldier songs often overshadow soldier songs in scholarship and popular media.⁴ In effect, these sometimes forgotten songs can function as calls to end a war or to voice a general disapproval of a war. Thus, the diversity of opinions on war and politics in the country music industry is demonstrated in part through these soldier songs.

Although it is a characteristic trend of country music, in general, jingoism is not always the industry’s predominant attitude during wartime. The jingoism and patriotism in some songs often can be attributed to the pandering to, and exploitation of, the audience. Country artists will record songs they know will sell whether or not the artists himself believes one hundred percent in the song’s message, because as country songwriter Sam Tate put it, “it’s the music BUSINESS, not the music ARTS.”⁵ The sincerity and poignancy of many

soldier songs and other non-war-related songs are memorable and strong, and they help provide a balance of sentiment next to the more zealously patriotic songs. The appearance of soldier songs in relation to the timeline of the war, in combination with the personality of the recording artist, is significant to how the audience receives the song. Pro-war and pro-government songs generally dominate airwaves and headlines at the outset of war; as fighting escalates, however, those songs diminish in popularity and number.⁶ Simultaneous with the decline of those typically jingoistic songs, the more melancholy soldier songs and the rare antiwar or protest songs increase in number and popularity.

The main themes of soldier songs include loneliness, lost love, and worried family, as well as the difficulties a veteran faces when returning to everyday society, death on the battlefield, and ceremonial burial. These themes are not particularly useful for rallying support for a war, and many of them demonstrate gruesome and tragic consequences of war. Many soldier songs also contain lyrics that declare the soldier's patriotism without being jingoistic. Nonetheless, a statement of patriotism may be lost in the overall message and tone of a song because of the overt sentimentality of the song's main themes (death or loneliness, for instance). Few scholars or journalists have commented on this contrast and plurality of themes in soldier songs.

The exploration of soldier songs that follows takes into account many of the aspects directly related to the creation, dissemination, and use of these songs, as well as to how the songs and artists contribute to the diversity of political perspectives in the Nashville country music industry. The songs and artists under consideration are all current and relate to the ever-more controversial war in Iraq. The peculiarities of this war and the related responses to it from the country music world provide an intriguing and stimulating context for understanding the importance of contemporary soldier songs.

Background and History

Wartime songs are much older than the early modern commercial country war songs of WWII. The Civil War has been a popular topic of folk and country music scholarship, with particular interest in how the songs of that era have been reused and rethought since the end of slavery.⁷ Commercial

country music, however, did not come into being until the late 1920s, and the first commercial country songs dealing with a contemporaneous war appeared during the Second World War. The lyrics of these early war songs addressed WWII, governments, and soldiers, first through patriotism, then through telling the soldiers' tales, and later through concern for the fate of the world after the introduction of atomic weapons. Thus began the relationship between commercial country music, war, and politics.

The first major name in war songs was Denver Darling. Darling's career was based almost entirely on recording war songs, although only a few of his recordings were hits. "Cowards over Pearl Harbor" was among the first WWII songs to hit the airwaves, and according to Charles Wolfe, the lyrics and tone of Darling's recording are "neither belligose nor angry," but "sad and resigned."⁸ Because the Pearl Harbor attack caused an immediate reaction throughout the nation, country music audiences enthusiastically responded to "Cowards over Pearl Harbor" on the airwaves.⁹ Neither soldier song, antiwar song, nor pro-war song, "Cowards" is perhaps best categorized as an event song.

Many more songs supporting the war soon found an appreciative home on folk and hillbilly radio stations. "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam's the Guy Who Can Do It)," also by Darling, and "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," written by Frank Loesser were two of the more jingoistic songs to appear during the early stages of the U.S.'s involvement in the war. Perhaps the most popular WWII song was "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere," written by Bob Miller and Paul Roberts and recorded by Elton Britt. In 1944, it became the first gold record for a country artist, proving the popularity of war-related songs in the folk and country genre. During the early stages of America's involvement in WWII, Americans had little reason for antiwar sentiment because their own land had just been attacked; hence few, if any, outwardly antiwar songs made it to the airwaves while patriotic songs dominated.

As the war continued to deplete the nation of money, supplies, and soldiers, country songs began to deal with more ominous themes such as loneliness and death. Charles Wolfe describes this group of songs as "a second generation of songs that dealt with war on a personal level by reflecting the anguish of families separating and suffering on a firsthand basis."¹⁰ These were the starting point for the modern soldier song. Examples of these early

soldier songs are Floyd Tillman's "Each Night at Nine"; the nostalgic "Silver Dew on the Blue Grass Tonight" by Bob Wills; "White Cross on Okinawa" and "Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima" by Wills and Tommy Duncan; and Ernest Tubbs' recording of Redd Stewart's "Soldier's Last Letter." Each of the last three songs reached the top spot on the *Billboard* "Folk Records" charts. "Soldier's Last Letter" tells the story of a soldier's mother receiving a letter from her son, but the letter is left unfinished and she realizes that her son has died in battle. The last section of the song brings together sorrow, religion, and patriotism: "Then the mother's old hands began to tremble/ And she fought against tears in her eyes/ But they came unashamed for there was no name/ And she knew that her darling had died."¹¹ The mother then prays for the other soldiers and for the continued freedom of America. These three themes—sorrow, religion, and patriotism—are highly representative of the soldier song genre, and the concept of a song based on a letter has been a favorite subtype of soldier songs in many subsequent wars. Other examples of soldier song subtypes include tales of lonely lovers, cheating partners, and perhaps, the most poignant topic, the burial of loved ones.

Molly O'Day's rendition of "Teardrops Falling in the Snow" is perhaps one of the most stirring soldier songs of the WWII era. The lyrics of "Teardrops Falling in the Snow" are extremely sentimental, a characteristic that invites the audience to reflect on the consequences that the soldiers and their families must pay during a war. Written by Mac McCarty, the song uses religion as a dominant theme while relating the story of a mother's pain as she awaits the arrival of her son's casket. The combination of religion and the intrinsic mother-son relationship creates parallels between the characters in "Teardrops" and the traditional Mary-Jesus relationship found in Christianity.¹² Jesus' death was a necessary sacrifice to "save" others. In "Teardrops," the soldier's death is understood to be in the service of defending the principles of his nation, and during WWII, to help stop the killing of millions of people. The soldier's mother endured the loss of her son just as Mary suffered through Jesus' crucifixion. In many of the mother-son soldier songs, the mother continues to support the troops who are still fighting in the war, just as Mary supported the Twelve Apostles after Jesus' Ascension. Additionally, the strong presence of religion in a soldier song calls to mind the image of Christian soldiers, which is a popular subject of Christian hymns. Although

likely to be only subconscious, these parallels create a religious connection that may help audiences find solace through religion, a theme that has played an important part in the history of country music.

The number of popular soldier songs during WWII demonstrates the importance of the genre. As the war progressed, songs developed and matured from patriotic and sometimes jingoistic songs to the more personal and melancholy soldier songs. This development reflected the nation's changing sentiment from war-ready in the early 1940s to war-weary toward the end of the war. The pessimism and despondency associated with the latter sentiment often was echoed in the melancholy themes of soldier songs. Following the pattern set during WWII, the war-related songs that have appeared at the outset of later wars also tended to be patriotic and sometimes jingoistic, while soldier songs have continued as a "second generation" of war songs.¹³ This trend reveals that diverse messages in wartime country songs have been extant since the genre was established, and that country music is not always about the jingoism and patriotism that is specific to songs like "We're Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap."

After WWII, several songs dealt with communism, the Korean War, and the beginnings of the Cold War. Linked to both WWII and the Cold War, songs about the atomic bomb also became popular in the late 1940s. Some songs targeted key political figures, while other lyrics condemned communism more generally. Several of the seemingly patriotic songs also contained the subdued melancholy that is characteristic of soldier songs. For example, "Wrap My Body in Old Glory" depicts a soldier's dying moments and retells his last words. The lyrics are patriotic, citing the soldier's love for his country and a plea for his fellow soldiers to continue fighting for what is right, but the overwhelming theme is the soldier's death. Lyrics of other songs better reflect the soldier song tradition of pain and loneliness, including several that showed the suffering of family members. Paul Roberts declared a father's pain of losing his son in the sentimental ballad "Fuzzy Wuzzy Teddy Bear." The Louvin Brothers recorded "Robe of White" and "From Mother's Arms to Korea," which both describe a mother's grief over the loss of her son.

Other examples of soldier songs from the Korean War dealt with the toll of war on romantic relationships. These "lonely lover" soldier songs can range in tone from heartbroken to bitter. "A Dear John Letter," one of the most popular war songs

from the end of the war, describes a girl who has fallen out of love with her soldier and has married another man. Some of the most biting lyrics come at the end of the narration section of the song: "Will you please send back my picture/ My husband wants it now/ When I tell you who I'm wedding/ You won't care, dear, anyhow / Now the ceremony has started/ And I'll wed your brother, Don/ Will you wish us happiness, forever, Dear John."¹⁴ The song became popular on country as well as pop radio stations, topping those formats' charts at number one and number four, respectively. Other songs that express loneliness are more sorrowful, less bitter, and express the heartbreak of soldiers. A few examples are "Missing in Action," "The Battle in Korea," and "A Heartsick Soldier on Heartbreak Ridge." Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr. point out the rise in popularity of these sentimental songs toward the end of the Korean War and indeed, "at the *end* of every American war since the Revolution."¹⁵

All types of war songs appeared throughout the 1960s as the conflict in Vietnam escalated. With the rise of worldwide protests in 1968, tensions rose between war protesters and supporters, and country music became associated with protesting the protesters. Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me" were two of the most popular pro-war and pro-government songs on country radio and came to define Haggard's early career.¹⁶ Some country artists, however, were not convinced that they had to support the Vietnam War or the government just because they were country artists. Willie Nelson recorded the antiwar ballad "Jimmy's Road," but the song was largely ignored by the public. Glen Campbell's "Galveston" was a successful soldier song that some critics acknowledged as having a stronger antiwar message than other soldier songs, but the song was successful enough to reach the number one *Billboard* position in 1969. The lyrics suggest that the soldier is not in Vietnam, but in an earlier war, perhaps the Spanish-American War.¹⁷ The character describes the girl he left behind in Galveston and his longing to return there and find her. Campbell's many hits during the late sixties and his wholesome image overpowered any negative repercussions from the critics' suggestions of an antiwar message in "Galveston." Johnny Cash visited the Vietnam battlegrounds firsthand and came back to put his views in song. It remains debatable if the resulting recitation-song, "Singin' in Viet Nam Talkin' Blues," is strictly antiwar or only yearning for peace after

victory. In "Dear Uncle Sam," Loretta Lynn tells the government that she needs her soldier more than the army needs him, and this anti-government message reached number four on the *Billboard* charts during 1966, well before "Okie" and "Fightin' Side of Me." The early appearance of Lynn's song shows that even in the country music world artists and listeners were not universally supportive of the war during its early and middle stages, and the protesting-the-protester songs were directed at not only the hippie and counterculture community but also members of the country music industry itself.

The next wartime era that spurred country artists to produce war-related songs was the Persian Gulf War. The brevity of this war was perhaps the reason for the few number of war-related country songs. By far the most memorable hit was Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA." The song was created in response to the Korean Airlines disaster of 1983 in which the Soviets shot down a plane traveling from New York to Seoul. The song quickly outshined Greenwood's other songs and became an "unofficial national anthem," according to Tom Roland.¹⁸ The song did not reach the height of its fame, however, until the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991. Greenwood's song has moved audiences with its patriotism and has become a standard for artists performing at patriotic programs and specials. Despite the great success of "God Bless the USA," the Persian Gulf War did not produce many other war-related country songs.

A decade later, the attention of people from around the world was drawn to New York when the attacks on the World Trade Center (hereafter WTC) occurred on September 11, 2001 (hereafter 9/11). Country artists participated in benefit concerts and many earlier patriotic country songs received healthy revivals; "God Bless the USA" was one of them. Additionally, new recordings were made of old classics, particularly the national anthem. Songs particular to the WTC attacks appeared within months, including Aaron Tippin's "Where the Stars and Stripes and Eagle Fly," which was actually written some two years before the attack, and Alan Jackson's "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning." Jackson's song was first premiered at the CMA awards in November of 2001 and quickly rose to the number one spot on the *Billboard* country charts.¹⁹ The tone of the song is reflective and never vengeful, bearing a strong resemblance to Denver Darling's WWII hit "Cowards over Pearl Harbor."

The next big hit that dealt with 9/11 was Daryl

Worley's "Have You Forgotten," which appeared in the *Billboard* top ten just as the war in Iraq began. Worley and co-writer Wynn Varble wrote the song after visiting troops in Afghanistan in 2002, and the timing of this song certainly affected the response to it. At the time of the song's rise through the charts, U.S. troops began invading Iraq, and this caused the song to be confused as a call to war in Iraq rather than a call to support the war against terror in Afghanistan. The lyrics clearly make no mention of Saddam Hussein or Iraq, but nevertheless, Worley came under ridicule for the song's seemingly pro Iraq War message.

Once the war with Iraq began, Toby Keith's popularity rose dramatically after his songs "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)" and "American Soldier" entered the charts. "The Angry American" was written after 9/11 but was intended to be a tribute to Keith's father, who died earlier in 2001.²⁰ The song became popular as a post 9/11 song and remained popular during the initial stages of the Iraq war. This song is often cited as one of the prime examples of jingoism during the early stages of the war. Phrases such as "You'll be sorry that you messed with The U.S. of A./ 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass, It's the American way" have caused mixed reactions.²¹ While some audiences have enthusiastically endorsed the song, as evidenced by its success on the *Billboard* charts, other audiences ridiculed the "jingoistic swagger."²² The artist caused quite a stir when he decided not to perform any songs on a Fourth of July program after Peter Jennings opposed having "The Angry American" performed. Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks had her own opinion of the song. "I hate it, it's ignorant and it makes country music sound ignorant.... Anybody can write, 'We'll put a boot in your ass.'"²³ A series of disparaging remarks between Maines and Keith reached an early climax when the Dixie Chicks lead singer wore a T-shirt with the letters F.U.T.K. inscribed on it to the 2003 Academy of Country Music Awards. The audience and host of the show interpreted the acronym as "Fuck You, Toby Keith," although when asked what the letters stood for, Maines used the slogan "Friends United Together in Kindness."²⁴ This represents just part of the heated disputes between Maines and Keith since 2002.

Beyond the much publicized Natalie Maines-Toby Keith controversy, other artists have taken part in political voiced misgivings about the current war in Iraq. A group of Nashville artists joined together and created the Music Row Democrats in

2003 to show that the industry is filled with more than conservatives and Republicans. Today it boasts over 1300 members of the Nashville music community. Some artists also have joined the nationwide Musicians United to Win Without War, an organization opposed to the use of war and open to artists from all music genres. Lucinda Williams, Roseanne Cash, Steve Earle, and Emmylou Harris are some of the country artists who belong to this organization.

As evidenced by examples of overtly sentimental and morbid soldier songs, the anti-war and anti-government songs of Vietnam, and the trend to produce songs that resonate with the nation's changes of sentiment, country music has shown a diversity of political and social views regarding war since the beginning of wartime songs in commercial country music. The establishment of political organizations together with a few spectacles by high profile artists amplified the dissenting voices in the industry at the beginning of the war in Iraq. As the Iraq War continues into its sixth year, the path of war-related songs appears to follow the trends of earlier wars with pro-war and pro-government songs appearing first, followed later by soldier songs that reflect the strains felt by soldiers and their families.

Today's soldier songs and the second Iraq War

The Iraq War is somewhat of an anomaly because it developed in the cloud of confusion that surrounds the so-called War on Terror. The War on Terror began after 9/11 as a search for the leaders of the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; but members of the U.S. government soon became more concerned with possible weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The connection between the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda and the Iraqi government has not been clearly demonstrated; nevertheless, government officials declared the Iraq War as a part of the War on Terror, and the U.S. is now involved in an ongoing war in Iraq. Four representative and very popular soldier songs demonstrate some of the controversies, irregularities, and conventional aspects of how country music has dealt with this war.

One of the first soldier songs of the post-9/11 era was "Travelin' Soldier" by the Dixie Chicks.²⁵ The song is about a young soldier who has no lover to write to once he goes off to war. While waiting for the bus to take him away, a young soldier meets a

young girl and asks if he can write to her while he is away. She agrees, and the two correspond while he is in Vietnam. Part of the chorus reads, “Never more to be alone/ When the letter says a soldier’s coming home,” making the girl’s loneliness evident.²⁶ Later on the lyrics portray a high school football game at which a list of local fallen soldiers is read and, hiding underneath the stands, the girl cries as she learns of her sweetheart’s death. The background music is quieter at the start of this verse, and the music completely fades out along with Maines’ voice during the line “For the list of local Vietnam dead.” This musical gesture emphasizes the fateful conclusion of the ballad but is not particular to this song. Indeed, fades and dropouts have been used for many decades to highlight main themes and important moments in songs.²⁷ In soldier songs, the technique almost always calls attention to the most affecting, saddest, and poignant lyrics.

The song’s sentiments—loneliness, heart-break, and agony over the death of the soldier—are characteristic of the “lonely lover” group of soldier songs, and due to the narrative nature of the song, it also draws heavily on the ballad tradition. In addition to the lonely-lover characteristics, religion is also included briefly in the mention of the saying of the Lord’s Prayer at the football game, but it is by no means a dominant theme as it is in some other soldier songs. Themes in “Travelin’ Soldier” follow the design of many earlier lonely-lover soldier songs, with emphasis on communication, loneliness, and death.

Despite the sorrowful ending, the song does not contain a particularly strong pro- or antiwar sentiment and, and to further remove any current political implications from the song, the characters are from the Vietnam era rather than the current era. Still, the Dixie Chicks’ historical song was amply relevant to the soldiers fighting the War on Terrorism. Technically, “Travelin’ Soldier” was released before the official start of the war in Iraq, but because there were already soldiers stationed in Afghanistan the song had relevance to that group of soldiers as well. On one hand, “Travelin’ Soldier” came at a time of frustration for many American citizens because of the lack of progress in tracking Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. This drop in morale is consistent with the traditional time for soldier songs to appear in relation to a war, thus rendering the appearance of “Travelin’ Soldier” as rather insignificant. On the other hand, the song appeared just weeks before the expected announcement that the U.S. would be entering into

a new war against Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Some even predicted the song would be the unofficial anthem of the soldiers already in Afghanistan and those preparing to go to Iraq.²⁸ The appearance of a soldier song before or at the start of a war is very unusual; while “Travelin’ Soldier” does not contain explicit antiwar statements, the artists were aware of an impending war in Iraq and still chose to produce a soldier song that concluded tragically. This decision and the audience’s support of the song demonstrated that the industry and its fans appreciated non-jingoistic war-related songs at a time when ultrapatriotic songs were most popular.

Many will remember “Travelin’ Soldier” as the song that marked the Chicks’ downfall from respect and stardom. The controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks at the height of the songs’ popularity—the song held the number one spot on the *Billboard* charts—started with Natalie Maines’ comment at a London concert on March 10, 2003. Maines said, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas,” just before the U.S. invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003. Within weeks, President Bush declared war on Iraq while the Dixie Chicks received death threats.²⁹ Randy Rudder points out that many worse things were said by popular artists and actors about the President, but the “vitriolic response” to the Dixie Chicks was triggered because of their country star status, which presupposes a pro-war or pro-government perspective.³⁰ As confirmed by the song’s popularity, the Chicks had a winning song with “Travelin’ Soldier,” but neither the production of the song nor the lyrics were cause for the song’s unwarranted downfall.

Indeed, the appearance of “Travelin’ Soldier” compares well with Pat Boone’s 1960 recording of “A Dear John Letter,” which was made just as the Vietnam War started.³¹ Both songs were covers of songs from previous eras, and both came at a time when war was on the horizon but was not yet fully engaged. To demonstrate another similarity, both songs include the major themes of communication between a soldier and his lover and the toll war takes on the lover. In contrast to these similarities, vast differences between the performers bring a twist to this comparison. Now a conservative political commentator, Pat Boone belittled the Dixie Chicks after Maines retracted her apology for the London statement. He remarked that, “for America’s entertainers to bash their president, denigrate him, make him seem like an idiot and a self-

servicing fool, and then have the media go along with it and promote it like crazy and try to undermine the whole war effort,” would be a great advantage to the terrorists.³² Like nearly every other critic, however, Boone did not comment on the music of the Dixie Chicks. By not mentioning the song, critics highlighted an important practice of many country artists, and perhaps one that all artists are expected to observe—quite simply that artists should “shut up and sing.” This motto was used by Chicks fans and many country music fans and later became the title of a documentary about the Dixie Chicks and their fall from grace in the eyes of many country music fans.

“Travelin’ Soldier” went from the top spot on *Billboard* to number three the following week and then fell off the charts completely.³³ Rumors spread that radio conglomerates had blacklisted the Chicks’ music. Some commentators went so far as to suspect a larger conspiracy involving President Bush and Clear Channel.³⁴ Corporate spokespersons tried to sidestep these rumors by insisting it was individual station managers’ decisions to pull the group’s music based on audience demand. Nielsen Broadcast Data Systems, which provides data for *Billboard*, reported that 26 of 148 country stations did not play any song by the Dixie Chicks on Monday, March 17, 2003. Additionally, a ban on Dixie Chicks songs was instituted by Cumulus Broadcasting, which owns 42 country stations, and some observers have commented on how the Telecommunications Act of 1996 assisted the bans of the Chicks’ music.³⁵ Criticisms of these bans were voiced by both Democrats and Republicans, and Republican Senator John McCain voiced his disapproval with the actions of the media giants through criticizing the Telecommunications Act as “an erosion of the First Amendment.”³⁶ Whether it was corporate executives, fans, station managers, or a well conceived conspiracy, the outrage against the Dixie Chicks seemed to have nothing to do with their music but everything to do with their public criticism of the President. In fact, the group’s music continues to receive praise even after the many controversies with which the artists have been involved. When reviewing the Chicks’ album “Taking the Long Way,” Sasha Frere-Jones says, “It’s a shame that the Chicks’ words fail them, because they get so much else right.”³⁷ Battling through the negative press and criticism from fans and artists, the Chicks made a successful resurgence. An editorial in *The Boston Globe* sums up the changing mood of the nation and Nashville

industry:

The music-business insiders who gave the Dixie Chicks five Grammy awards Sunday night—including three for their song “Not Ready to Make Nice”—aren’t the same people who shunned the Texas trio four years back. But the Chicks’ resurgence, coupled with other rumblings of discontent within the world of country music, shows how much the nation’s mood has shifted since March 2003.³⁸

The lesson to be learned for country artists is to play music and keep quiet about political views. The Chicks had a number one soldier song before the dawn of a new war, a fact that in itself was unprecedented. The song’s loneliness and morbid conclusion are typical characteristics of soldier songs, thus the song itself was not found to be offensive. An injudicious public statement instigated a reaction that led to the innocuous song’s collapse and even greater damage to the artists’ careers. While “Travelin’ Soldier” was well-received by the audience and industry, the group’s dismissal due to their anti-Bush remarks and their squabbles with Toby Keith showed that the country music fans and industry are unwilling to tolerate “radical” and “unpatriotic” actions by artists.

Much less controversy surrounds other current soldier songs. John Michael Montgomery’s “Letters From Home,” which appeared in April 2004, was another relatively early soldier song, but it remained uncontroversial as Montgomery refused to involve himself publicly in politics. The song appeared roughly a year after the start of the war in Iraq and just after Toby Keith’s hit “American Soldier” peaked at number one on the *Billboard* country charts. Although “American Soldier” could also be considered a soldier song, the tones of Keith’s and Montgomery’s songs have little in common, and Keith’s song contains much more love-of-the-country patriotism than does “Letters From Home.” In contrast, “Letters From Home” focuses on family as its main theme. The character reads letters from his mother, wife, and father, and shares them with his fellow soldiers. Each letter is increasingly affecting and personal. A chorus follows each letter, and certain lines in the middle of the chorus change to reflect upon message in the previous letter.

The letter from his mother is read first and is a basic update of the weather and everyday life in his hometown. It also includes an important line that materializes in the song’s last letter: the mother writes, “Your stubborn old daddy ain’t said too much/ But I’m sure you know he sends his love.” The father’s lack of nerve to talk to or about his

soldier son leaves the mother unsettled enough to mention it in the letter, but does not inhibit her from communicating with her son. Montgomery does not finish reading the letter to his military friends but brings his recitation to a close with the line “And she goes on in a letter from home.”

The lonely-lover tradition is at the heart of the second letter, which is from his wife or fiancée—the lyrics make no definite distinction one way or the other. The line, “I saw your momma and I showed her the ring” suggests that the soldier and woman are either engaged or married, but no further information is given to make the distinction. The woman is lonely and worried about her man as she lay awake all night, “Wonderin’ where [he] might be.” As she writes the letter, she is sleepless because of the news on the television but reassures her soldier that she will be all right, ending her letter with, “And this is me kissin’ you X’s and O’s in a letter from home.”

The soldier’s final letter from home is an unexpected message from his father and is the shortest of the three letters by a full three lines. Drawing attention to this moment as the most affecting of the three letters, ironically, is a decrease in volume caused by the sudden drop in instrumental backup. Montgomery’s tender vocals dominate the song more than ever, and each and every word of the letter seems to have meaning to the soldier. This much of the letter is read, “Dear son, I know I ain’t written/ But sittin’ here tonight alone in the kitchen it occurs to me/ I might not have said it, so I’ll say it now/ Son you make me proud.” Considering his son’s potentially deadly task of fighting in a war, the stubborn father finally opens up and expresses his feelings to his son. This letter has a sobering effect on the soldiers; unlike the reaction to the previous letters, to which the soldiers respond by laughing at the southern vernacular and content of the letters, the soldier’s buddies are reverent, and they appreciate the impact of the father’s message on the soldier. The soldiers’ somber reactions to this remarkably direct letter remind the listener that both the families and soldiers recognize the possibility of a fatal experience in the war.

After each letter the chorus brings in the soldier’s comrades and their reactions to the letters. The first two lines of the chorus read, “I hold [the letter] up and show my buddies/ Like we ain’t scared and our boots ain’t muddy.” The listener becomes aware of the realities of being a soldier: the lifestyle of the men and women serving in the armed forces is not easy, and the soldiers are far from

fearless. The next two lines of the chorus change after each letter is read. After the first letter from the mother those lines are, “And they all laugh like there’s somethin’ funny about the way I talk/ When I say momma sends her best y’all.” This illustrates the effort to represent diversity among the soldiers through the fact that several of the buddies are not accustomed to hearing such vernacular phrases as “y’all.” The second chorus changes those lines to “And they all laugh ‘cause she calls me honey/ But they take it hard ‘cause I don’t read the good part.” Apparently the soldier left out a more intimate section of the letter from his sweetheart. Finally, after the letter from the father those lines become “But no one laughs ‘cause there ain’t nothin’ funny when a soldier cries/ And I just wipe my eyes.” Clearly these are the most affecting lines of the song, and the message is important: soldiers are just as human as the rest of us, and they need the support of their family and friends while fighting to defend the nation in a war that seems to be going nowhere.

The remaining lines of the chorus stay constant throughout the song. “I fold it up and put it in my shirt/ Pick up my gun and get back to work/ And it keeps me drivin’ on, waitin’ on letters from home.” Encouraging the soldier song tradition of supporting the troops during arduous times, the last line sends a message to families and friends that their letters are indispensable for keeping up the morale of the soldiers.

The message of the song supports the soldiers and encourages family and friends to write letters to their loved ones overseas, but one element that is popular in many other soldier songs is absent in “Letters From Home”: religion. Neither the letters nor the chorus make mention of prayer, God, or church. This omission allows the listener to concentrate on the soldier’s relationships with his family. These relationships are a key point for Jim Malec, editor of a popular country music blogging website. He refers to Montgomery’s hit as “an eerily accurate portrayal of life on both sides of the soldier/civilian divide.”³⁹ He says “Letters From Home” “has a humanizing effect on our image of the soldier. We see him laugh, we see him cry, we see him proud, and this, I think, is a reality often overlooked in favor of the popular stereotype.”⁴⁰ The “humanizing effect” is not exclusive to this song but is a distinctive feature in many soldier songs. In “Travelin’ Soldier” the young recruit reveals his reservations of going to war, and even in Toby Keith’s “American Soldier,” the character shows his understanding

and fear that he may pay the ultimate price for his country when he states, “I don’t want to die for you.” Montgomery’s “Letters” exemplifies the effect to a much deeper level, and without the references to religion that are popular in many other soldier songs.

Undoubtedly supportive of the troops, “Letters From Home,” like “Travelin’ Soldier,” does not present an outwardly pro- or antiwar message. Because the lyrics are so supportive of the troops, an antiwar undertone is difficult to associate with the song. Of the soldier song characteristics present, loneliness is perhaps the most prevalent emotion, while death is never explicitly mentioned in the lyrics. On paper the song seems to be rather positive in terms of content and images, but Montgomery’s performance is what gives the song its poignancy. His affective performance brings out the suffering of both civilian and soldier. The dual focus on soldier and civilian is further emphasized in the music video.⁴¹ Scenes alternate between the soldier’s life in battle and the lives of his mother, father, and wife at home. Communication through letters is the focus of the song and the video, and each letter is shown being written by the different family members and then read by the soldier in front of his buddies. While reading the last letter, the soldier begins to cry, and his comrade tips his hat down over his face as a gesture to give some privacy to the tearful soldier.

When the song began climbing the charts in 2004, Toby Keith’s “American Soldier” was on the decline. Just one year after the beginning of the Iraq War, the second major soldier song of the war found its place on country radio and in country minds. Big John Howell, a radio personality Chicago’s WUSN 99.5, said, “This song really represents all that’s good about country music—it crosses all political spectrums, it’s listenable, it’s not hyperbole, it’s not over-the-top. It’s really a perfect song for this time.”⁴² While Montgomery and Keith’s songs’ respective peaks were just weeks apart, they differ dramatically in tone. The aura of each artist was perhaps somewhat responsible for the reception of and even the decision to record each song. Whereas John Michael Montgomery is a veteran of the country music field and is known for such affecting songs as “I Swear,” “I Love the Way You Love Me,” and “If You’ve Got Love” from the early and mid 1990s, Toby Keith’s stardom has centered around the success of his post-9/11 patriotic songs. Montgomery claims, “I’m not a political person, as an artist, I don’t think people are really inter-

ested in my opinions. I think they’re interested in me singing a song that they appreciate. I make my difference when I go vote.” His views are reflected in the apolitical nature of his songs. The artist feels that “Letters From Home” “really hits home” and “doesn’t make a distinction” when it comes to supporting or opposing the war in Iraq.⁴³

In contrast, Keith has been frank about his political views. Based on the content and presentation of his war-related songs, Keith may appear to be a staunch supporter of the war in Iraq and a hardcore conservative. In fact, in a *CBS* interview the artist claimed that he has never supported the war in Iraq but does, however, support the War on Terrorism and, in particular, the search for the leaders of al-Qaeda. “When the Iraq war started, I was a little mad because we didn’t finish what we started in Afghanistan,” he said. “Our troops had to move on into Iraq. Our government asked them to go do it for whatever reason. We won’t know for probably 20 or 30 years whether it was the right thing to do or not.” Keith also commented on his patriotism and political ties while declaring, “I’m actually a lifetime Democrat,” and went on to say that he is not a political person, just a patriotic one.⁴⁴ In his song “American Soldier,” Keith takes on the role of a soldier and declares his loyalty to the country. Images of battle, loneliness, and death are relatively absent from the lyrics; family is mentioned briefly at the start and end of the song, and death is brought up only as a sacrifice that will give the character honor. The lyrics are immodest to say the least. Lines like “Providing for our future’s my responsibility/ I’m real good under pressure,” and “Hey I’m solid, hey I’m steady, hey I’m true down to the core” show the egocentricity of Keith’s song while perhaps also trying to inspire the same self-confidence in the audience, which included many soldiers.⁴⁵ The lyrics and themes are based more in the tradition of patriotic songs than in that of soldier songs, and the tone of Keith’s voice, full of confidence and assertiveness, lacks the tenderness and intimacy found in Montgomery’s “Letters” and other soldier songs. The differences between the soldier song characteristics of “Letters From Home” and the more patriotic and jingoistic “American Soldier” are easily discernible. The appearance of Montgomery’s song and the lack of new patriotic songs in the following months show the industry’s turn away from strong pro-war and pro-government songs in the middle of 2004. While perhaps too early to suggest a far-reaching antiwar sentiment, this turn does demonstrate the shying

away from the expression of battle-ready jingoistic tunes just a year after the start of the war in Iraq.

Toward the end of 2004 the female group SHeDAISY released “Come Home Soon,” a sentimental song from the viewpoint of a military spouse.⁴⁶ Whereas the Dixie Chicks’ ballad “Travelin’ Soldier” and John Michael Montgomery’s “Letters From Home” include details from both the soldier’s life and those of his loved ones at home, “Come Home Soon” focuses solely on the loneliness of the loved ones at home. Reaching as high as number fourteen on the *Billboard* charts, the song is sung in first person and is even more sentimental than the previous examples.

The differences and similarities between SHeDAISY’s song and other soldier songs reflect the waning popularity of pro-government lyrics. In fact, the lyrics alone do not automatically designate the song as a soldier song; “Come Home Soon” easily could be appropriated by anyone who has a spouse on a business trip or some other extended travel, although the song was intended to be relevant to the soldiers and their families.⁴⁷ Apart from the songwriters’ intentions, the soldier song status of “Come Home Soon” was created publicly by a combination of the lyrics, marketing, and context of the song’s appearance.

Lyrical, the song focuses on the emotions of the singer, or the soldier’s wife, rather than on the experiences or emotions of the soldier. Nowhere in “Come Home Soon” are the words “soldier” or “war” mentioned. In his countdown of the top twenty war and soldier songs, Jim Malec commends the song for its lyrical simplicity, stating that it “never invokes the usual images of camouflage-clad soldiers or American flags. It doesn’t have to. The lyric is mature and immensely intimate, and the plea, “*come home soon,*” is so simple that it’s heart-breaking.”⁴⁸ The lyrics do not refer to the government or raise the issue of the soldiers’ obligation to fight for their country. The absence of these key words and ideas leave the lyrics open to focus more closely on the experience of a soldier’s wife. The distinction between yearning for physical touch and emotional connection is juxtaposed throughout the song. In the first verse, the wife incorporates her longing for her husband’s touch into the task of tucking her children into bed. The next verse uses physical actions in combination with emotional and mental activities to form a connection between the man and woman. The recurring one line interjection before the chorus includes two non-physical tasks, but the second—praying—brings about a strong

visual image for people of almost any faith. The first chorus is primarily concerned with the physical actions of sleeping, crying, and living alone, although at least one of those—crying—is equally associated with the emotional side. In the third verse the contrast between physical and emotional is more apparent than before. The singer knows that the couple is together in the sense of a relationship, but the physical distance dividing them is great. The lucky penny necklace is a physical item that gets pressed to the singer’s heart, suggesting that the physical closeness of the special token to her heart will bring their love closer together.

The bridge offers even more juxtaposition of physical and emotional elements. The wife imagines and misses her husband’s physical touch and resigns herself to the fact that “love needs a fighting chance,” a line which contains the strongest war-related imagery with the word “fighting.” The next line compares the soldier’s duty to serve in the military and the resulting separation of the couple to the military’s and wife’s occasions to dance with, or obtain possession of the man. The remainder of the lyrics is variations on the first chorus. In the second chorus, the third line comments on how the husband’s absence has changed the nature of the home. Then in the third chorus, the second line changes from the physical-emotional “cry” to a stronger mental implication with “try.” Before the closing tagline of “Come home soon,” is the gravest and most dispirited line in the entire song. Considering a possible consequence of the war, the wife states that she will wait for her husband to return and that she does not want to die alone. At this point the music slows, the background music fades out, and a moment of silence allows for a dramatic pause before the final lines are sung.

The official music video for “Come Home Soon” emphasizes the song’s focus on the wife.⁴⁹ It begins with the scene of people tying yellow ribbons on trees and then pans to a group of people with candles in their hands walking down a street. This group consists not only of women, but also of children and men. With the number of songs that almost always present married male soldiers, it is easy to overlook the number of women and unmarried men serving in the armed forces. The producers of SHeDAISY’s music video, and perhaps the three women who make up the group, did not make this mistake and included the men who might have wives in the military and older individuals who might have spouses, children, or grandchildren serving. The main point is that the vigil participants are more diverse than

just women and children.

With faces showing lonely and worried looks, the crowd lights their candles and gathers around the three singers. The camera angle constantly focuses on and revolves around the trio of performers—especially on lead singer Kassidy—as if the group was the center of the town’s world. Occasional shots of the audience members from the perspective of other onlookers give some visual variety to the video, but the entire video takes place at the vigil and no images of the soldiers or foreign places are brought into the video. Views of infants and toddlers sleeping on their parents’ shoulders, panoramas of lonely single adults, and shots of elderly people with forlorn expressions are combined to create characters with whom the viewer can sympathize. This camera work, however, is eclipsed by the lead singer’s visual and physical centrality, which echoes the focus on the wife in the song’s lyrics and is reinforced by the single location and lack of images of soldiers.

At the end of the song the crowd blows out its candles and quietly walks away. Whether this act is meant to suggest the extinguishing of hope or simply a close to the song is unclear. The video concludes with the appearance of this text: “For all our heroes here at home.” This message seems to support the families who must endure the hardships that accompany having a loved one at war, but other readings of the message also seem sensible. The “heroes here at home” could also refer to the fallen soldiers who have been returned to the country and buried, or to the veterans who have survived, or to a combination of these.

Soon after the release of “Come Home Soon” as a single in November 2004, SHeDAISY partnered with the American Red Cross to help support members of the military and their families. A Red Cross press release notes, “Military families across the U.S. are feeling the pains of uncertainty and separation.”⁵⁰ This demonstrates how the message of “Come Home Soon” and its music video reflects the mood of the nation at the time of the song’s release. In order to raise funds for Red Cross sponsored support groups and other initiatives, SHeDAISY began selling “Come Home Soon” bracelets on their website. The family-oriented nature of this program and of the song demonstrates the importance of family to the soldier song tradition but also indicates the turn away from soldier- and war-centered themes.

One of the most recent soldier songs to appear is Tim McGraw’s “If You’re Reading This,” which

peaked at number three on the *Billboard* charts in May 2007. Much like “Letters From Home,” this song is epistolary; however, it is not a letter from home, but rather a letter to home. Intended to be sent to the soldier’s wife if he is found deceased, the letter addresses many of the traditional soldier song themes. Death is the prevailing theme, although religion and family are also substantially pronounced, with patriotism and duty also entering into the lyrics halfway through the song. The very idea of writing a letter that is meant to be read only after the author dies is rather morose and suggests the author’s bleak outlook on the war. McGraw’s letter, however, attempts to lighten the tone with religious and familial topics. For example, in the first verse, instead of simply saying “I’m not coming home,” the soldier writes, “Looks like I only got a one way ticket over here.” A few lines later he writes a more reflective phrase, “War was just a game we played when we were kids.” Contrasting his actual experience in battle with what he imagined as a child, the soldier insinuates that the reality of war is unimaginable for the inexperienced. Religion and family are employed at the end of the verse as well as in the spiritually charged chorus. The soldier reassures his wife that he is with God and that they are both looking down on her. He asks to be buried in a field outside of town, which may or may not refer to an actual cemetery, and he goes on to comfort his wife by saying that his soul is where his mother “always prayed where it would go.” This is reinforced throughout the song with the tagline, “I’m already home.” The combination of religion and the mother figure recalls the themes and analogies in mother-son soldier songs.

The importance of family returns in the depressing thought of the birth of a baby girl who will grow up without ever meeting her biological father. Although the idea of fatherless children is suggested in other songs, such as “Come Home Soon” and its music video, this very negative consequence of war is not often a subject stated so openly in soldier songs. The soldier hopes the child will look like her mother and will act like himself, but unfortunately he will not be able to take care of her and watch her grow up. Regarding the author’s motivation to fight, he declares that he “stand[s] up for the innocent and the weak,” and that he does not regret following in his father’s footsteps by serving in the military. This momentary reflection on the soldier’s sense of duty and patriotism shows that soldiers are appreciated. Aside from this one patriotic moment, the rest of the song contains classic

soldier song themes that impart a certain melancholy; this melancholy does not effectively serve to inspire any kind of support for the war, however, it does seem to appeal to the families of soldiers.⁵¹

The last verse of “If You’re Reading This” is a final farewell to the soldier’s wife. Acknowledging the pain and loneliness his wife will suffer, as well as her complete selflessness, the soldier expresses his acceptance that she will one day find a new man to take his place. McGraw’s voice changes tone here, although the instrumental background remains much as it was throughout the rest of the song. His last request of his wife is that she remembers that her soldier is in heaven. The last line before the final return of the chorus focuses again on religion, and more specifically on heaven. When claiming that “Soldiers live in heaven,” the author reinforces the Christian tradition and the reality of soldiers’ deaths, but at the same time comforts the families with the idea that the soldier is in heaven. “If You’re Reading This” is undoubtedly supportive of the troops and their families, but, like “Come Home Soon,” the lyrics move away from detailing the experiences of soldiers and instead focus on family and religion as a source of consolation. Moreover, the sorrowful concept of a soldier’s last letter and the maudlin lyrics draw attention to the suffering of soldiers’ families and point toward the nation’s growing frustration with the situation in Iraq.

Although he debuted the song at the Academy of Country Music Awards in 2007, McGraw did not originally have plans to release the song on an album or as a single. In fact, he did not even notify the awards show of which song he would be performing. The show producers helped make arrangements for nearly 100 family members of fallen military heroes to be on stage during the performance, but the actual song was never performed for them before the live show. Because of this, no one, not even McGraw himself, was prepared for the emotional intensity of the occasion. The website for Great American Country, a country music television station, posted this observation in an article about the song’s debut:

Tim said he didn’t realize the impact of the song until afterward when one of the children from the stage approached him. “This little 5-year-old girl tugged on my sleeve and said, ‘You just sang a song about my dad, didn’t you?’” Tim related, adding, “No matter what side of the politics you fall on, these are people going over there sacrificing their lives for what they’re sent to do.”⁵²

McGraw’s description of the song’s seemingly

neutral message reinforces the objective of the lyrics: to support the troops without presenting a stance on the war itself. He has kept his views on the war largely to himself but has communicated his ideas about various social issues and his support for the Democratic party.

In recent years McGraw has publicized his Democratic party ties in numerous interviews and by supporting various political campaigns. His admiration for former President Bill Clinton was emphatically presented in a 2004 Time interview in which he stated, “I love Bill Clinton. I think we should make him king. I’m talking the red robe, the turkey leg—everything.”⁵³ Explaining his long held interest in politics, McGraw announced his interest in running for the office of Tennessee Senator, and in a later interview, the Governor of Tennessee. Clinton voiced his own approval of the country star and encouraged him to one day run for political office.⁵⁴ McGraw’s main interests are in revising healthcare legislation and working on other social issues that affect the lower and middle class populations. These Democratic politics do not appear to follow traditional views presented by country artists, given examples like Guy Drake’s hit from 1970 “Welfare Cadillac” [sic], which disparages citizens who are on welfare programs, and Roy Clark, Webb Pierce, and Tammy Wynette’s support of the presidential campaign of the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace in the 1960s and 70s.⁵⁵ Although he has been rather vocal about his political views, McGraw has said little about the war in Iraq. McGraw says, “Country music has a lot of rules,” and Josh Tyrangiel thinks the megastar observes most of them, including keeping “progressive politics (mostly) to yourself.”⁵⁶ Perhaps McGraw’s views on the war are unpopular among the country music industry, hence his abstention from the sometimes heated war-related discussions between other artists.

The song continues the trend of focusing on communication between a soldier and his loved ones, but unlike the soldiers in the other songs discussed above, this soldier is dead even before the song begins. Any hope that the soldier will come home alive is lost before the first verse ends. Instead, the soldier states his own hopes for his family who must cope without him. The acceptance of death and the release of certain hopes point toward the later stages of the nation’s war-weariness among which this song debuted. One wonders then, if this particular song would have been as big a hit if it would have been released several years earlier.

Would the message and concept of the letter have resonated with the audience in 2003 or 2004 when the war was still in its early stages? Perhaps not, because by observing historical trends, “country music changes with the mood of the nation at large, expressing popular opinion quite accurately.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

Since WWII, soldier songs have retained an important place in country music during subsequent periods of war. In some ways, soldier songs have become even more personal than they were during earlier wars. Although the themes have always remained extremely personal, the dissemination of the songs has gone from the somewhat limited sphere of radio and albums to the seemingly endless frontier of internet and mass media in the 2000s, ironically allowing fans to become more involved than ever with the songs. Now listeners can digitally link their own personal stories, tributes, pictures, and home videos with the music and share their multimedia montages with friends, relatives, and complete strangers.

Lyrical and thematically, soldier songs have undergone few changes, and the four songs discussed above are connected to each other and to past soldier songs through major themes. All four songs—“Travelin’ Soldier,” “Letters From Home,” “Come Home Soon,” and “If You’re Reading This”—use written and sometimes telepathic communication as a principal means for relating the hardships that both soldier and civilian face during times of war. The songs’ main emphases include the effects of war on the soldier’s family, rather than on the soldier himself. Home is another major theme in all of the songs, whether through the descriptions of a soldier longing for home, a soldier being reluctant to leave home, or a relative longing for the soldier’s homecoming. The fundamental concept is that being at home is preferable to being at war. When considered in more depth, the preference for being at home indicates a preference for the soldiers to not have to go to war in the first place, which seems to present antiwar undercurrents. Another dominant theme in two of the songs is death, and a third touches upon the possibility of a spouse’s demise without the tragedy actually occurring. Religion is another recurring theme in three of the songs and serves as a source of solace for the family members. Patriotism is not a pronounced theme in any of these songs, but when it does make a brief

appearance, patriotism plays an important role in expressing support for the troops and reminding them that their valiant efforts are indeed appreciated. Still, the secondary nature of patriotic themes is eclipsed in soldier songs by the dominant themes that involve the unpleasant realities of war.

Apart from trends in the lyrics, these songs also show musical similarities. The instrumentation of each is predominantly acoustic rather than electric. Each song’s performance uses fade, dropout, and affective vocal techniques to emphasize the most poignant moments in the lyrics. And, predictably, most soldier songs are sung in a somewhat subdued manner and at a fairly slow tempo in comparison to the often high energy pro-war songs. These musical similarities often compliment the lyrics, resulting in a gentle, intimate, and nostalgic atmosphere.

The context of each song’s debut also shapes how its message is perceived by the audience. Three of these soldier songs appeared rather early in the timeline of the war, when antiwar sentiment was not yet near its peak. The lyrics of these early soldier songs are more hopeful than the postmortem letter of “If You’re Reading This,” which appeared at a much later stage of the war when the nation was more anxious for the Iraqi conflict to end. Accordingly, at least one of the earlier songs was cited as an unofficial anthem of the soldiers, while the latter song instead pays homage to the fallen.

The various similarities among these four representative soldier songs bind them together as a distinctive subgenre, and their differences demonstrate that they are not simply another set of “manufactured” songs, a practice that is prominent in much of today’s popular music, country included. Certain artists are more publicly involved in politics than others, and the resultant association between artists’ personae and their politics can either help or hinder the success of their musical output, which, more often than not, seems to have nothing to do with the political endeavors of the artist. Analyzing some of the major themes of these songs in regard to their chronologies demonstrates how the songs reflect the growing antiwar sentiment of the general population. To recall a quote used above, “It would be more accurate to say that country music changes with the mood of the nation at large, expressing popular opinion quite accurately—if in its own terms—as can most clearly be seen in the songs dealing with war,” rather than to assume all country war-related songs to be pro-war or pro-government.⁵⁸ Soldier songs demonstrate that, contrary to much popular thought, the

country music industry is concerned with more than just unquestioned support for the war and the government. The industry shows sympathy and compassion for the victims of war, both military and civilian, as well as accepts the music of artists who have political beliefs beyond the traditional rural, religious, and conservative ideologies.

Treading a sort of political middle ground, soldier songs can be appropriated by both ends of the political spectrum. Appealing to the right are the classic themes of patriotism and support of the soldiers, while the left might contend that repeated emphasis on the gruesome and tragic effects of war shows no support for the war itself or the government managing the war. This bipartisan accessibility could become an important asset to both Republicans and Democrats, especially as the 2008 Presidential Election draws ever closer.⁵⁹

The country music industry, as Lester Feder and others have noted, has a long standing and seemingly unbending association with conservative politics. Cautiously, I hope that country music can divorce itself of this association with conservatism and one-sided jingoism and appeal to an even larger and more diverse audience. Feder suggests this could happen if Democrats could “learn to listen” for the themes in country songs that are explored in this study.⁶⁰ This is not the time to introduce a lengthy and heated political discussion; however, I believe that if more listeners would “learn to listen,” country music would be better understood as a genre that can appeal to more segments of the population than most are willing to admit.⁶¹ The intent of this argument is not for country music to undergo a fundamental ideological change, but to upend certain stereotypes through an “outside” audience becoming informed that not all country songs and artists follow stereotypical patterns. Educating a population who traditionally avoids country music because of certain stereotypes that they view as negative may result in a reduction in the intensity of those negative stereotypes.

Soldier songs deserve greater attention than they typically receive from the media. Indeed, this group of songs is only one example of how the Nashville industry is accessible to a very diverse audience. Taking into account the establishment of the Music Row Democrats, interest in non-conservative politics by various artists, and the blatant anti-government songs by country artists like Merle Haggard and Steve Earle, country music is showing a growing interest in shedding some layers from its association with conservative poli-

tics. Just five years ago, Natalie Maines’ seemingly petty remark (compared to other stars’ comments) caused an uproar, but now stars like Tim McGraw can voice freely their political persuasion without being condemned. As the Iraq War continues to dishearten the nation even further, and as a large percentage of the population anticipates a Democrat to win the Presidential Election, the mainstream country scene is beginning to tolerate diverse political messages in speech. As demonstrated with examples of soldier songs, however, the industry has supported for many years diverse messages in song, even if those messages were not always fully realized.

References

- 1 Jingoism in The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy is defined as “extreme and emotional nationalism, or chauvinism, often characterized by an aggressive foreign policy, accompanied by an eagerness to wage war.” The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third ed., s.v. “jingoism.”² James Perone, *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 71.
- 3 Perone, *Songs of Vietnam*, 71-72.
- 4 Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr., “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority,” in *Sounds* ed. Denisoff and Peterson, 44. The authors comment that “super-patriotic” songs are remembered while contemporaneous and “equally popular love songs” are largely forgotten.
- 5 Sam Tate, e-mail message to author, July 2, 2007.
- 6 This trend is observed in the analysis of *Billboard* charts from March 2003 to September 2007. For previous wars, see Malone, *Country Music USA*, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 194-195, 317-319; and Denisoff and Peterson, eds., *The Sounds of Social Change* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 45.
- 7 James Akenson and Andrew Smith, “The Civil War in Country Music Tradition,” in *Country Music Goes to War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 1-25, and Bill Malone, *Country Music USA*, 1-29.
- 8 Charles Wolfe, “Bloody War,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, 30.

- 9 “Cowards over Pearl Harbor” has a remarkable parallel in Alan Jackson’s 2001 hit “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” which described the tragedy and shock of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. Jackson’s song is discussed in more length below.
- 10 Wolfe, “Bloody War,” 31.
- 11 Sgt. Henry Stewart and Ernest Tubb, “Soldier’s Last Letter,” 1944, <http://www.cowboylyrics.com>. Complete lyrics are provided in the Appendix. Songs dealing with letters from or to soldiers continues to be a popular theme in today’s soldier songs. See below for a discussion of two of the most popular, “Letters From Home” and “If You’re Reading This.”
- 12 Many other soldier songs use similar themes as found in “Teardrops.” The religious associations are not particular to this song alone.
- 13 DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, “Ballad,” in *Sounds*, 45. As with most trends, exceptions will occur, and occasionally very successful soldier songs appear earlier in a war, for example “Travelin’ Soldier” by the Dixie Chicks, which appeared just months before the March 2003 start of the war in Iraq.
- 14 Lewis Talley, Fuzzy Owen and Billy Barton, “A Dear John Letter,” 1953, <http://www.cowboylyrics.com>. Complete lyrics are provided in the Appendix. The chorus is sung, but the verses (parts of the actual letter) are usually spoken. This popularity of this song led to its being recorded by Ferlin Husky and Jean Shepard in 1953 (during the Korean War), by Pat Boone in 1960 (at the very beginning of U.S. involvement in Vietnam), and by Skeeter Davis and Bobby Bare in 1965 (during Vietnam).
- 15 David Ewen, *The History of Popular Music* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), cited in Denisoff, *Sounds*, 45. The emphasis on “end” demonstrates the trend of soldier songs as a second generation of war songs through the history of American wars.
- 16 Malone, *Country Music USA*, 319. Haggard did not think “Okie” would be taken seriously by the audience; in fact, it turned out to be one of his biggest hits and helped spark the movement that protested the protestors.
- 17 Complete lyrics are provided in the Appendix.
- 18 Tom Roland, “Classic Country Recordings,” in *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* (New York: DK Publishing, 2006), 303.
- 19 All *Billboard* data for songs from 2001-present was obtained from the American Country Countdown website archives. <http://acctop40.com/listingsarchive.asp>.
- 20 Jerry Armor, “Toby Keith’s ‘Angry American’ May Become A Documentary,” June 17, 2007, <http://music.yahoo.com/read/news/12052347>.
- 21 Toby Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” <http://www.cowboylyrics.com>.
- 22 *Boston Globe*, “Dixie Chicks’ victory shows country’s antiwar turn,” February 12, 2007, sec. A.
- 23 Randy Rudder, “In Whose Name?” *Country Music Goes to War*, 215.
- 24 *Shut Up and Sing*, directed by Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck (2006; Weinstein Company, 2006).
- 25 Complete lyrics to the four songs discussed in this section are provided in the Appendix.
- 26 Bruce Robison, “Travelin’ Soldier,” 1996, <http://www.cowboylyrics.com>.
- 27 A “dropout” occurs when the background music suddenly ceases, which can create a moment of suspense, reflection, resignation, or various other moods that are relevant to the lyrics.
- 28 *Billboard*, “Patriotism Lifts Pro-War Songs; Chicks Suffer,” April 5, 2003, 66-67.
- 29 Sasha Frere-Jones, “Pop Music: Making Nice – The Dixie Chicks’ New Album,” in *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2006.
- 30 Rudder, “In Whose Name?” 208. Jennifer Anniston declared Bush a “[expletive] idiot,” Danny Glover called Bush a racist, and Chrissie Hynde said, “we deserve to get bombed. Bring it on.... I hope the Muslims win.”
- 31 Another popular war song from early Vietnam was Johnny Cash’s 1964 recording of “The Ballad of Ira Hayes,” which was about a soldier from WWII but was still relevant to the soldiers in Vietnam.
- 32 *WorldNetDaily*, “Pat Boone rips Dixie Chicks for Bush bash,” May 22, 2006. http://www.worldnetdaily.com/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=50330.
- 33 At the time of Maines’ statement, “Travelin’ Soldier” was number one on the *Billboard* charts and had been in the top ten for six weeks.

- 34 Rudder, "In Whose Name?" 213. Connections between the Bush family and Clear Channel (a Texas-based company) are known to exist, but the company has not been found guilty of illegal activity.
- 35 Phyllis Stark, "Dixie Chicks Comments Spark Country Radio Boycotts," *Billboard*, March 29, 2003.
- 36 Peter Cooper, "Pocketful of Gold," in *Will the Circle be Unbroken: Country Music in America*, ed. Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash (New York: DK Publishing, 2006) 341-342.
- 37 Frere-Jones, "Making Nice."
- 38 *Boston Globe*, "Dixie Chicks' victory."
- 39 Jim Malec, "20 Top War and Soldier Songs," October 1, 2007, <http://www.the9513.com/20-top-war-and-soldier-songs/>. According to the website, The 9513 is "the web's premiere country music blog." It is also 100% independent and has four editors and one correspondent on staff. Although neither a scholarly source nor an in-print publication, web blogs are beginning to serve important roles in our society, especially for popular culture.
- 40 The "popular stereotype" that Malec refers to is the confident, fearless American soldier, as represented in Toby Keith's "American Soldier."
- 41 Music video available at <http://music.aol.com/video/letters-from-home/john-michael-montgomery/1133313>.
- 42 Dickinson, "LETTERS."
- 43 Chrissie Dickinson, "LETTERS departs from chest thumping..." Special to the Chicago Tribune, May 16, 2004, http://john-michael.musiccitynetworks.com/index.htm?inc=5&news_id=8906.
- 44 *CBS News Sunday Morning*, "Toby Keith: Voice of the Patriotic," <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/10/sunday/main1990758.shtml>
- 45 Toby Keith and Chuck Cannon, "American Soldier," 2003, <http://www.cowboylrics.com>. The Armed Forces Network broadcasts two music radio stations to military bases around the world. Mainstream country is one of the three music formats. The AFN website can be found at <http://myafn.dodmedia.osd.mil/>.
- 46 The three Osborn sisters Kelsi and Kristyn, both backup singers, and lead singer Kassidy make up the group SHedAISY. <http://shedaisy.musiccitynetworks.com>.
- 47 American Red Cross, November 24, 2004, http://www.redcross.org/pressrelease/0,1077,0_113_3787,00.html.
- 48 Malec, "20 Top Songs."
- 49 Music video available at <http://music.yahoo.com/vid-2171429--Come-Home-Soon>.
- 50 American Red Cross, November 24, 2004, http://www.redcross.org/pressrelease/0,1077,0_113_3787,00.html.
- 51 A general search on the internet for the song brings up homemade music videos and blogs made by military families. Videos can be found at <http://youtube.com>. One blog example can be found at <http://mylifeasamilitaryspouse.blogspot.com/2007/05/tim-mcgraw.html>.
- 52 Great American Country, "Tim McGraw's Special Tribute," http://www.gactv.com/gac/nw_headlines/article/0,,GAC_26063_5547858,00.html.
- 53 Josh Tyrangiel, "The Clinton of Country," *Time*, September 20, 2004, 71.
- 54 Bill Clinton, "The Endorsement: Tim McGraw," *Time*, February 2006.
- 55 Lester Feder, "'Song of the South': Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 205-207. To present a fair but often unrecognized balance of political persuasion, liberally-oriented songs like "What is Truth?" by Johnny Cash have also been popular, and industry superstars like Johnny Cash, Earl Scruggs, and Tom T. Hall were known for their progressive views. DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, "Ballad," 44-45; Brendan Vaughan, "Who the Hell is Tim McGraw?" *Esquire Magazine*, February 2006, 100.
- 56 Josh Tyrangiel, "Clinton," 71.
- 57 DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, "Ballad," 45.
- 58 DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, "Ballad," 45.
- 59 Country artists have participated in past Presidential affairs, most notably for the Alabama segregationist George Wallace's campaign. The CMA also produced a special album for Richard Nixon in 1972. "The Conservative Evolution of Country Music," a discussion of the album with Lester Feder, is available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7484160>.
- 60 Feder, "Song of the South," 233.

61 Thematic trends of non-war songs have traditionally appealed to southern, rural, and conservative audiences. Some significant and very popular songs have overcome this inclination. Americana and other subgenres of country have already successfully crossed political borders, but mainstream or Top 40 country remains a conservative bastion in the eyes of many Americans.

Appendix

“Soldier’s Last Letter”¹

When the postman delivered a letter
It filled her dear heart full of joy
But she didn’t know til she read the inside
It was the last one from her darling boy.

Dear Mom, was the way that it started
I miss you so much, it went on
Mom, I didn’t know, that I loved you so
But I’ll prove it when this war is won.

I’m writing this down in a trench, Mom
Don’t scold if it isn’t so neat
You know as you did, when I was a kid
And I’d come home with mud on my feet.

The captain just gave us our orders
And Mom, we will carry them through.
I’ll finish this letter the first chance I get
But now I’ll just say I love you.

Then the mother’s old hands began to tremble
And she fought against tears in her eyes
But they came unashamed for there was no name
And she knew that her darling had died.

That night as she knelt by her bedside
She prayed Lord above hear my plea
And protect all the sons that are fighting tonight
And dear God keep America free.

“Teardrops Falling in the Snow”²

Page by page our lives are written
In the Master’s book above
Wonder if he makes an entry
For each darlin’ mother’s love
Like the one I saw this mornin’
In here through the station door

She was cryin’, softly cryin’
Teardrops falling in the snow

As she came up to the window
Passing me, I let her through
She was waiting for a casket
One draped in red white & blue
Then she said “I’ll wait outside, Sir
Soon I know you’re train will blow”
I could see her through the window
Teardrops falling in the snow

Then the whistle of the engine
Broke the silence of the air
As the train was slowly stopping
Upon her lips I saw a prayer
On the box there was a number
And the name was right below
As she looked upon the casket
Teardrops falling in the snow

There’s a new-made grave a-waiting
And it’s depths are dark and cold
Just to claim this mother’s darlin’
War for her has taken toll
But I’m sure they’ll meet up yonder
Where God’s children always go
And I always will remember
Teardrops falling in the snow

“A Dear John Letter”³

CHORUS:
Dear John, Oh, how I hate to write
Dear John, I must let you know tonight
That my love for you has died
Away, like grass upon the lawn
And tonight I’ll wed another, Dear John.

Narration: (Chorus melody played in background)
I was overseas in battle
When the postman came to me
And he handed me a letter
I was happy as can be
For the fighting was all over
And the battle just had been won
Then I opened up the letter
And it started, Dear John.

CHORUS

Narration:
Will you please send back my picture

My husband wants it now
When I tell you who I'm wedding
You won't care, dear, anyhow
Now the ceremony has started
And I'll wed your brother, Don
Will you wish us happiness, forever
Dear John.

CHORUS

*"Galveston"*⁴

Galveston, oh Galveston, I still hear your sea
winds blowin'
I still see her dark eyes glowin'
She was 21 when I left Galveston

Galveston, oh Galveston, I still hear your sea
waves crashing
While I watch the cannons flashing
I clean my gun and dream of Galveston

I still see her standing by the water
Standing there lookin' out to sea
And is she waiting there for me?
On the beach where we used to run

Galveston, oh Galveston, I am so afraid of dying
Before I dry the tears she's crying
Before I watch your sea birds flying in the sun
At Galveston, at Galveston

*"Travelin' Soldier"*⁵

Two days past eighteen
He was waitin' for the bus in his army greens
Sat down in a booth at a cafe there
Gave his order to the girl with a bow in her hair
He's a little shy so she gave him a smile
So he said would you mind sittin' down for a while
And talkin' to me I'm feelin' a little low
She said I'm off in an hour and I know where we
can go

So they went down and they sat on the pier
He said I bet you got a boyfriend but I don't care
I've got no one to send a letter to
Would you mind if I sent one back here to you?

CHORUS:

I cried
Never gonna hold the hand of another guy
Too young for him they told her

Waitin' for the love of a travelin' soldier
Our love will never end
Waitin' for the soldier to come back again
Never more to be alone
When the letter says a soldier's coming home

So the letters came
From an army camp
In California then Vietnam
And he told her of his heart
It might be love
And all of the things he was so scared of
Said when it's gettin' kinda rough over here
I think of that day sittin' down at the pier
And close my eyes and see your pretty smile
Don't worry but I won't be able to write for a while

CHORUS

One Friday night at a football game
The Lord's Prayer said and the anthem sang
A man said folks would you bow your heads
For the list of local Vietnam dead
Cryin' all alone under the stands
Was the piccolo player in the marching band
And one name read and nobody really cared
But a pretty little girl with a bow in her hair

CHORUS

*"Letters From Home"*⁶

My Dear Son, it is almost June,
I hope this letter catches up to you, and finds you
well.
It's been dry but they're calling for rain,
And everything's the same ol' same in Johnson-
ville.
Your stubborn 'ol Daddy ain't said too much,
But I'm sure you know he sends his love,
And she goes on,
In a letter from home.

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 bout' the way I talk,
When I say: "Mama sends her best y'all."
I fold it up an' put it in my shirt,
Pick up my gun an' get back to work.
An' it keeps me driving me on,
Waiting on letters from home.

My Dearest Love, it's almost dawn.
 I've been lying here all night long wondering where
 you might be.
 I saw your Mama and I showed her the ring.
 Man on the television said something so I couldn't
 sleep.
 But I'll be all right, I'm just missing you.
 An' this is me kissing you:
 XX's and OO's,
 In a letter from home.

I hold it up and show my buddies,
 Like we ain't scared and our boots ain't muddy,
 and they all laugh,
 'Cause she calls me "Honey", but they take it hard,
 'Cause I don't read the good parts.
 I fold it up an' put it in my shirt,
 Pick up my gun an' get back to work.
 An' it keeps me driving me on,
 Waiting on letters from home.

Dear Son, I know I ain't written,
 But sittin' here tonight, alone in the kitchen, it
 occurs to me,
 I might not have said, so I'll say it now:
 Son, you make me proud.

I hold it up and show my buddies,
 Like we ain't scared and our boots ain't muddy, but
 no one laughs,
 'Cause there ain't nothing funny when a soldier
 cries.
 An' I just wipe me eyes.
 I fold it up an' put it in my shirt,
 Pick up my gun an' get back to work.
 An' it keeps me driving me on,
 Waiting on letters from home.

*"Come Home Soon"*⁷

I put away the groceries
 And I take my daily bread
 I dream of your arms around me
 As I tuck the kids in bed

I don't know what you're doin'
 And I don't know where you are
 But I look up at that great big sky
 And I hope you're wishin' on that same bright star

I wonder, I pray

And I sleep alone

I cry alone
 And it's so hard livin' here on my own
 So please, come home soon
 Come home soon

I know that we're together
 Even though we're far apart
 And I'll wear our lucky penny 'round my neck
 pressed to my heart

And I wonder, I pray

I sleep alone
 I cry alone
 And it's so hard livin' here on my own
 So please, come home soon

I still imagine your touch
 It's beautiful missing something that much
 But sometimes love needs a fighting chance
 So I'll wait my turn until it's our turn to dance

I wonder, I pray

I sleep alone
 I cry alone
 Without you this house is not a home
 So please, come home soon

I walk alone
 I try alone
 I'll wait for you, don't want to die alone
 So please, come home soon

Come home soon
 Come home soon

*"If You're Reading This"*⁸

If you're reading this
 My momma is sitting there
 Looks like I only got a one way ticket over here
 I sure wish I could give you one more kiss
 War was just a game we played when we were kids
 Well I'm laying down my gun
 I'm hanging up my boots
 I'm up here with God
 And we're both watching over you

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
 If you're reading this I'm already home

 If you're reading this
 Half way around the world
 I won't be there to see the birth of our little girl
 I hope she looks like you
 I hope she fights like me
 Stand up for the innocent and the weak
 I'm laying down my gun
 Hanging up my boots
 Tell dad I don't regret that I'd follow in his shoes

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
 If you're reading this, I'm already home

If you're reading this
 there is going to come a day
 You move on and find someone else and that's okay
 Just remember this
 I'm in a better place
 Soldiers live in peace and angels sing Amazing
 Grace

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
 If you're reading this
 If you're reading this
 I'm already home

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