Pop Talk: The rules of disengagement

by George_Varga

In music, as in politics, timing is everything.

In early 2003, just six weeks after performing the national anthem to kick off Super Bowl XXXVII, the Dixie Chicks became national pariahs after its lead singer, Natalie Maines, told a London concert audience the Texas trio was "ashamed" to be from the same state as President Bush.

DIXIE CHICKS - Natalie Maines (center) and the Dixie Chicks were vilified in 2003, a week before Iraq was invaded, for saying the Texas trio was 'ashamed' to share the same home state as President Bush. CNS Photo courtesy of Sony. NEIL YOUNG - As compared to the Dixie Chicks, the reaction was far milder last year when Neil Young released his scathing song, 'Let's Impeach the President.' CNS Photo. Result: derision, death threats, charges of sedition and worse. The group's music was virtually banished overnight from country radio and its album sales plunged.

In 2006, the same year the Dixie Chicks released an album that won multiple Grammy Awards despite being almost uniformly ignored by country radio, Neil Young put out "Living With War." Young's album featured such brash songs as "Shock and Awe" and "Let's Impeach the President" (sample lyric: Let's impeach the president / For lying and leading our country into war / Abusing all the power that we gave him / And shipping our money out the door).

Result: cheers from some fans and grousing from some conservatives. But, ultimately, a loud silence greeted these musical broadsides from Young, whose 1970 protest song "Ohio" remains one of the most visceral anti-war anthems of modern times.

In the past few years there have been anti-war songs by everyone from Pink, Pearl Jam, Molotov and Eminem to Nanci Griffith, R.E.M., jazz great Charlie Haden and even country-music icon Merle Haggard. (That's the same Merle Haggard whose 1970 song "The Fightin' Side of Me" ripped into hippies and anti-war protesters with zingers like: If you don't love it, leave it / Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin' / If you're runnin' down my country, man / You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me.)

Bruce Springsteen's new album, "Magic," features songs that vividly chronicle the grim human cost of the war in Iraq. He timed its release to coincide with the ongoing presidential primaries. Other artists who have weighed in on the state of this divided nation include Bright Eyes, Trans Am, Calle 13 and such veterans as Steve Earle, John Fogerty, Toby Keith and Tom Waits.

An even broader array of artists - Shakira, Enrique Iglesias, Madonna, Linkin Park, Keith Urban and dozens more - teamed up to perform in eight cities around the world this summer as part of Live Earth, a series of international concerts designed to raise awareness of global warming. And a growing number of musicians - among them U2, Green Day, The John Butler Trio and Jay-Z - have sung out on behalf of the victims of Hurricane Katrina and against the bumbling government response.

Clearly, they aren't shirking the opportunity to weigh in on timely issues, pro and con, here and abroad, be it ex-Fugees mainstay Wyclef Jean working on behalf of his Haitian homeland or Lenny Kravitz and Iraq's Kazem El-Sahir collaborating on the song "We Want Peace."

That's the good news.

The bad news is that the era when a song - any song - helps unite large numbers of people to rally on behalf of a common cause seems to have passed. In this digital age of information overload and corporate monopolies, ring-tones and widgets, it is easier than ever to be heard by millions but far more difficult to make a lasting impact.

True, some 4 million-plus YouTube viewers have watched the video for the R&B-flavored "I Got a Crush ... on Obama" by the lip-syncing Obama Girl (in actuality, a busty model and actress named Amber Lee Ettinger). But it's hard to believe she'll have any more impact on the presidential election than Barbra Streisand throwing her support behind Hillary Clinton or Oprah Winfrey stumping for Obama.

Perhaps we've simply reached a point of oversaturation, or we're just taking a breather before next year's onslaught. Or, maybe, while the causes being espoused now are just as compelling, the music that results is not.

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