'ONLY IN AMERICA' COULD OBAMA BORROW THE GOP'S FAVORITE BROOKS & DUNN SONG

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Categories: Country Y'all, Current Affairs, Democratic National Convention 2008, Music, Politics as Entertainment

Last night, Barack Obama's exit music at the close of his historic Democratic convention acceptance speech was "Only in America," a song by country's foremost multiplatinum duo. Meanwhile, rival John McCain has been traveling the country blasting another stirring hit by the same act, "That's What It's All About." At last, it's become clear what this election is really about: a battle for the hearts and souls of Brooks & Dunn!

Forget the audacity of hope, for a moment. How about the audacity of the Democrats stealing the Republicans' favorite song? If you're not aware of the history of the GOP using "Only in America," a refresher is in order: Brooks & Dunn played it at the Bush inauguration in 2000. At the 2004 GOP convention, Dick Cheney used it as his exit music after his speech. And President Bush frequently used it on the campaign trail four years ago, even asking Brooks & Dunn to come out and play it live at rallies in the final week of the race. So you have to think its sudden repurposing served two purposes for the Democrats. Number one, it told millions of Americans that Obama is heartland-friendly enough to use a country smash rather than a Will.i.am ditty to cap off perhaps the most critical moment of his career to date. And number two, for anyone aware of the tune's political history, it was also a subtle, funny, knowing tweak — too benign to really count as an old-school dirty trick, but almost in that risible spirit.

I wrote about the partisan use of "Only in America" by the Republicans in a book I penned shortly after the 2004 election called Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music. Here's how I described it then: "...Bush's recorded intro and exit music — along with an occasional live rendition straight from the horsemen's mouths — was Brooks & Dunn's 'Only in America,' the unofficial Bush theme song. Funny enough, that number was cowritten by a buddy of theirs, Don Cook, who went on to found a fledgling organization called Music Row Democrats. Having 'Only in America' drafted as the new 'Hail to the Chief' wasn't really what Democratic activist Cook had in mind for his song (which isn't even that gung-ho — listen closely, and there's an ambivalence about the American dream to be found in the lyrics). But in Nashville, even of you're on the other side of the aisle, sometimes it's hard not to give at the office."

I got Don Cook, the cowriter and Democratic stalwart, on the phone today to talk about the tune... and about how Brooks & Dunn themselves reacted to Obama's use of it. Since Cook was a little taken aback when the GOP adopted it, does this feel like turnabout is fair play? "That's exactly what Kix Brooks said to me when he called," said Cook. "He said, 'You had to endure George Bush using it, so it's only fair that I would have to endure Barack Obama using it.' But he said it in a real light-hearted way. For us as writers and them as performers, truthfully, we're proud when anybody uses our song for something that's substantial. Even if you're diametrically opposed politically to the person who's using your song, the fact that they like it well enough to use it at an important place in their life, you have to love that." But not everybody necessarily feels the same way. Cook related to
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me a story about John Rich, the one country star who's been a strong campaigner for John McCain already. "John Rich sent an angry text message to Kix last night, saying why did Kix allow that song to be used? And Kix said 'I had nothing to do with it — that was their right.' I sent John a text message today saying 'If you enjoyed last night, you're gonna love Kix's version of 'Ba-Rock My World, Little Country Girl'" (taking off on another Brooks & Dunn hit).

Kix Brooks released his official response in a benign statement: "Seems ironic that the same song Bush used at The Republican Convention last election would be used by Obama and the Democrats now. Very flattering to know our song crossed parties and potentially inspires all Americans." Of course the tune isn't partisan by nature; it's become a staple of 4th of July fireworks shows as well as political rallies. As Ronnie Dunn told me when I interviewed him for my book four years ago, the song "was apolitical. It was written before 9/11, and it was just talking about the American dream, what's out there for all of us, what's attainable—the sky is the limit. And that's it. It's just ironic that the first line is 'the sun coming up over New York City.' I think that just had a kind of a freaky little coincidence" that gave it some extra resonance.

Cook reminded me of just what a 9/11 anthem the tune became: "It was at the top of the charts when 9/11 happened, and after that it became a rallying point and had another life. I think it spent 18 or 19 weeks in the top 10 after 9/11, which is an unheard-of amount for a single these days. It was a bittersweet thing for me, and always will be, because of those circumstances. For me, the bitterness that I associate personally with my own song diminishes every time I see it used in a positive way like last night. It was a lot of fun to be talking about the song in positive terms even when Bush was using it—better than talking about it immediately post-9/11," Cook said.

Brooks & Dunn may be flattered by Obama's use of it now, but it's hard to imagine the Ronnie Dunn I interviewed four years ago having been okay with it if John Kerry had wanted to use "Only in America." (Kix Brooks, by contrast, has always been more recalcitrant about getting into his political views.) Of all the Republican country stars I spoke with in Nashville, Dunn came off as the most intelligent and informed—very nearly a foreign policy wonk, in fact—and was quick to articulate why the Republicans were better prepared to stand up to the threats of terrorism, which was his primary concern, far more than any social issues. But a few weeks ago, Brooks & Dunn told CNN they were sitting out making any endorsements in this election. I've sensed far less passion for the GOP cause among country stars in general than there was four years ago, when I was writing Rednecks & Bluenecks—with the exception of Big & Rich's John Rich, a true believer who wrote a campaign song, "Raising McCain," for his preferred candidate. Toby Keith, who performed at an election eve rally for Bush in 2004, has come out and said he thinks Obama is a good man and worthy candidate, so I suspect we won't see him playing any McCain rallies this year. Is everybody backing off over career concerns, not wanting to tick off significant parts of their audience? Or is there genuine ambivalence, even among some reliably conservative country stars, over the slate of candidates this time? Hard to tell for sure just now.

One thing that's certain is how neither Republicans nor Democrats seem too worried about whether the songs they're drafting as anthems are by artists who line up on their side. Just as the Democrats have developed a sudden love for Brooks & Dunn, the music that was playing after the announcement of Sarah Palin as GOP VP pick this morning was "Who Says You Can't Go Home," by Bon Jovi (a prominent Democratic supporter) and Sugarland's Jennifer Nettles (who played a Democratic convention event earlier this week). But then, that same Bon Jovi song was also played by the Dems this week. As these musical tug-of-wars continue, we can only hope for more rock and country turf wars. Will Palin try to wrest Tom Petty's "American Girl" away from the firm grasp of Hillary Clinton? Will Obama get really audacious and start playing Charlie Daniels songs on the trail? To both sides, we say: Bring it on!

Of course, many of the songs that candidates trot out, from "Born in the USA" to "Pink Houses," are fraught with undertones that may actually contradict the message the politicos want to convey. When Stevie Wonder sang "Signed, Sealed and Delivered" on Thursday night in Denver, I kept waiting for a Republican commentator to seize on lines like "Like a fool I went and stayed too long/Now I'm wondering if your love's still strong" and "I've done a lot of foolish things that I didn't really mean." Petty's "American Girl" had a few lines that fit Hillary, but her supporters might have have wanted to hit the mute button when the lines "He crept back in her memory/God it's so painful/Something that's so close/And still so far out of reach" came on. And when Brooks & Dunn sing, "One kid dreams of fame and fortune/One kid helps pay the rent/One could end up going to prison/One just might be president," it does open the door for either side's loyal opposition to suggest that the campaigner in question is headed for the wrong big house, of the two mentioned in that verse.
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COMMENTS

Cromulus Fri, Sep 5, 2008 at 09:46 AM EST
I thoroughly understand Obama's choice of B&D's song. It's an attempt to link certain bridges and whatnot (as he said, he'd like to be not a blue state president or a red state president but an American president), but I still kept hoping that Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" would have been played.

Jade Fri, Sep 5, 2008 at 08:44 AM EST
I too, noticed that line in "Only in America" after Obama's speech. I think the song applies to him more than it ever did to Bush and Cheney, that's for sure! Unless they meant "only in American can it's citizens be so duplicitously deceived, battered and bruised".
Now let's see if Palin comes out using Stevie Nicks' "Sara".
Hell, all the candidates with the exception of good ole Joe scare me.

Erin Wed, Sep 3, 2008 at 11:00 AM EST
I really enjoyed this article, well written and very interesting. And "bak" your comment cracked me up!

bak Sun, Aug 31, 2008 at 09:43 PM EST
New McCain campaign strategy...
"Put a Girl In It!"

Todd Cotton Sun, Aug 31, 2008 at 12:19 AM EST
Obama is a poser & a paper tiger! If you think he is the next savior of America.....your as lost as he is!!!!! We truly objective people are grounded in the real world & look forward to the debates by the VP's & the main players. The rubber will hit the road soon enough! You naysayers will be eating your words in quick fashion. God bless America!!!!

DanOregon Sat, Aug 30, 2008 at 02:51 AM EST
I've always loved "Right Now" by Van Halen and wondered why it wasn't used more. Loved BO using Only In America. But I also enjoyed the use of Remember the Titans for the Fireworks and "Rudy" for Palin's intro. Classic stuff.

Jee Fri, Aug 29, 2008 at 11:01 PM EST
I am impressed. This was a very well written piece, and I am going to buy the book. I am for McCain and noted the use of the Brooks and Dunn, Republican favorite, song last night. But I was also moved to (almost) tears thinking about how true the title was, especially last night. Congrats Sen Obama and Gov Palin.

aps Fri, Aug 29, 2008 at 09:44 PM EST
I think that the music for candidates thing is way overblown (not in the sense of this article, which i think just helps show my point. very nice piece here really). I think honestly Kix Brooks has it right. There were so many artists complaining of their songs usage for one party or the other (let's be honest, especially artists being upset with republicans using their songs..dating all the way back to primaries and such. although john rich is a clear counter to that). I understand how these artists have their own points of view on politics, but this is background music. No one remembers candidates music. Or they shouldn't. It just sets the mood and gets people on their feet.

kim in kentucky Fri, Aug 29, 2008 at 06:00 PM EST
Know only a few country songs - had not even heard the song before last night - but as i listened to the lyrics, i thought "How Perfect!"