The Country of Country

By ANN PATCHETT

Last week, I watched "Wag the Dog," the 1997 Barry Levinson film about a Hollywood producer who is hired to create a television war to cover up a domestic crisis. The first call he makes is to a character played by Willie Nelson. Every war needs a theme song after all, even a fake war, and so Willie flies out to California and walks around the swimming pool, strumming his guitar and riffing on words like "America" and "proud" and "free."

Country music is not providing the soundtrack to American life on an average day, unless you count the crossovers, which means that Shania Twain is played on pop stations and Faith Hill lands on the cover of fashion magazines. Most of the time, country music, like pop music, is just a bunch of love songs anyway, and no one really cares if there is a little extra twang in the guitar. Peacetime blurs the cultural divide between Britney Spears and LeAnn Rimes. But during times of war, Americans find a flag to snap onto the windows of their S.U.V.'s and country music sails into the foreground. For every battle, we get a new, disposable anthem, one that's catchier than "The Star-Spangled Banner" and easier to sing. Cultural conservatives, who rightly feel unrepresented in most of popular culture, are as comfortable with the lyrics of a country hit as they are tuning into Fox News, as these are the places their viewpoints are powerfully and abundantly represented. And that's
exactly what makes these venues so popular. Country is no longer about the South; it's a state of mind. (Two of the Top 5 country stations are in Los Angeles and Chicago.) Listeners and viewers are united by ideology, not geography.

In 1967, Merle Haggard wrote the first of the pro-war, anti-hippie-liberal-protester songs, "Okie From Muskogee," a line from which -- "We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street" -- set a standard for what it means to be a country-music-loving patriot that still stands today. Lee Greenwood was able to base an entire career on his 1983 "God Bless the U.S.A.," a song that has been trotted out for wars, fireworks displays and all occasions in between. Everything that has come out since has felt like a variation on the theme. Darryl Worley's new album, "Have You Forgotten?" -- which is currently sitting at the top of the Billboard country charts -- covers just about every flag-waving impulse known to man. He wails about the importance of not backing down, being up for the fight, getting bin Laden (whose name he manages in a feat of vowel gymnastics to rhyme with "forgotten"). Toby Keith has also scored big with "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (the Angry American)," whose chorus pretty much packs it all in: "And the Statue of Liberty/Started shaking her fist/And the eagle will fly/And there's gonna be hell/When you hear Mother Freedom. . . . " You get the point.

There was a time when the fire that country music lighted beneath its listeners was to get down to the bar, get drunk and see if you couldn't find somebody to go home with. But the only rabble being roused these days is the call to arms. Country music has become so squeaky-clean that a recent song in which Tracy Lawrence claimed that his grandfather taught him "how to cuss and how to pray" was banned from several radio stations, cussing being too strong a concept for airplay. Long gone are the days when Merle Haggard took care of his searing morning hangover with an "afternooner" and sang about it. This is thanks in large part to the vice grip of Clear Channel Radio, which buys up radio stations and makes carefully researched decisions about what Americans are free to listen to. Clear Channel has decided that patriotism sells, and that cussing and afternooners are definitely out. As a result, the music industry is frantically trying to find people who look and sing like whoever was on the top of last week's chart.

Until the invasion of Iraq, the band that everybody in Nashville most wanted to copy was the Dixie Chicks, whose most recent album, "Home," had the best of the war singles, a Vietnam ballad called "Travelin' Soldier." Then, in a concert in London, the group's lead singer, Natalie Maines, told a cheering audience that "we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas." And that was it for...
the Dixie Chicks. Suddenly they were standing on the other side of the Merle Haggard line in the sand. They had become those hippie-liberal protesters they should have been singing against.

Oddly, though, because of country music's political consistency, what the Dixie Chicks did was big news. Their small statement of protest put them on the cover of Entertainment Weekly and earned them a Diane Sawyer interview, something that could not be replicated by any rock or pop or movie star whose protests are frankly expected. It would have been disappointing if Michael Moore had won an Oscar and failed to mention that President Bush didn't win the popular election. That's his job, and so he takes his boos and exits the stage, and no one really thinks about it much again. But country music is firmly on the other side of the cultural divide. Nashville is making music for an audience that is largely white and Republican. It is making music for the people who supported the war, though not necessarily for the people who fought in it.

In a sense, the songs become a kind of news service in themselves. A war is easier to understand when you can squeeze all the major objectives into a chorus and back it up with a catchy tune. You can hum along to all the reasons people fight and die. It's one way political opinion is made. Of course, free speech is another time-honored American tradition, even if it's not a hallmark of country music. Maybe the Dixie Chicks were speaking for some of those other folks. Maybe country music could use a few new hallmarks.

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