The Backlash Grows Against Celebrity Activists

By WARREN ST. JOHN

FOR a few days after the Dixie Chicks' lead singer, Natalie Maines, told a London audience, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas," there was not a ripple about the remark. The American ambassador to Britain, William S. Farish, was at the show on March 10, and made it a point to greet the Texas trio at a reception afterward. Though six critics reviewed the concert, only one mentioned the comment in print.

Four days later, all that had changed. Reports of the remark spread to the United States through Web sites — notably the Drudge Report and a conservative site called Freerepublic.com — and in no time, the Dixie Chicks, who had been riding the top of the charts with their album "Home" after winning Grammy Awards in February, found themselves the subject of radio boycotts and public CD burnings. Ms. Maines apologized for the remark, but by week's end, the boycotts had contributed to a 20 percent drop in airplay of the band's music.

For celebrities considering taking a public stance on the Iraq war these days, and in particular using the platform that the Academy Awards presents to address an audience of millions, the Dixie Chicks episode has become a cautionary tale.

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While politically active stars have long provoked strong reactions from those who disagree with them — think of Jane Fonda, Edward Asner and Charlton Heston — opposition to celebrity activists has never been more vocal or better organized. Web sites with names like Boycott-hollywood.us and Famousidiot.com are spearheading e-mail and telephone campaigns against stars and, in the case of television performers, the companies that advertise on their shows. Together with talk radio and evening political talk shows, the online organizing has created a formidable gantlet for celebrities who choose to make their politics known.

The movement to take aim at celebrities has some unlikely champions. After watching the actor Martin Sheen, star of "The West Wing," denounce an invasion of Iraq on television last December, Lori Bardsley, 38, a homemaker in Summerfield, N.C., started an online petition, Citizens Against Celebrity "Pundits" at ipetitions.com. The petition now has more than 100,000 signatures.

"That evening I was very angry and I knew I wasn't the only one in the country who would be," Ms. Bardsley said. "Many Americans have felt this for a long time."

Neal Gabler, an author who has written extensively about society's attitude toward celebrity, said that the same public that worships stars as performers can turn against them when they express opinions like ordinary people.

"Entertainers symbolize something about American life that many Americans resent," he said. "They have so much money and they're so conspicuous about it. The idea is that all celebrities are spoiled and naive and fundamentally not serious. They're dabblers."

Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review, a conservative journal, echoed this view.

"Subliminally it bothers people that these are famous, rich, celebrated people who America has treated extremely well," he said.

Questioning the patriotism of Hollywood activists is a favorite theme of celebrity-bashing Internet sites. Famousidiot.com is a case in point. Under the banner, "They don't speak for US," the site ranks celebrities according to the number of "anti-Americanisms" they've
supposedly uttered.

"While America faces monumental challenges at home and abroad," the site declares, "they feel compelled to leave their mansions and attack the country that makes it possible for them to do so."

Janeane Garofalo, an actress who has been outspoken in opposition to the war, argues that the antipatriotism charge is meant to "shut down debate and thwart First Amendment rights."

"We are extremely supportive of the troops," she said. "Anyone who says yes to peace and diplomacy is saying yes to the troops."

Ms. Garofalo said that the news media interest in celebrities who oppose the war has the effect of trivializing the antiwar movement. There are plenty of celebrities who are in favor of the war, she argues, but they rarely come in for abuse.

"If all the voices against the war were scholars and academics and politicians, and all those who were for the war were Ted Nugent and Bruce Willis and country-western singers, then you'd see the polls start to shift," she said.

The larger question might be, Why do celebrity opinions get attention at all? Bill O'Reilly, host of "The O'Reilly Factor" on Fox News and a frequent critic of politically active celebrities, says that while few of his viewers are swayed by celebrities' opinions, they nevertheless are intrigued by them.

"People love emotional conflict," he said. "Once you have a famous person who takes a stand, then you can feel one way or another about that stand. If Barbra Streisand says it, you know her — you get involved."

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