

Country Music Goes to War

Edited by Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Pp. viii, 250. Illustrations, references, discographies, notes, \$35.00.)

This volume explores how country music songs, performers, and entrepreneurs have responded to the opportunities and challenges of war. In the wake of 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the resulting spate of songs such as the mournful "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)," the belligerent "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)," and the defiant "John Walker's Blues," this collection also serves as a timely reminder of country music's capacity to render momentous events more intelligible for millions of Americans.

This is not to imply that this wide-ranging, albeit somewhat unfocused, anthology restricts its attention to the United States. Rae Wear offers a useful introduction to Australian troubadour Brian Letton and the ideological ambidexterity that fuels his populist critique of globalization. Less successful is David A. Wilson's analysis of paramilitary Ulster loyalists' recasting of popular American songs as anthems of Loyalist identity and anti-Catholic bigotry. Because country music held no particular appeal or meaning to paramilitary tunesmiths, who ransacked multiple musical genres, Wilson's essay seems a poor fit for the collection.

The same holds true for Aaron A. Fox, who contributes a methodologically sophisticated, trenchant medi-

tation on authenticity, class, and alt-country that falters when he tries to link the discussion to 9/11 in a forced and unconvincing manner. Meanwhile, Andrew K. Smith and James E. Akenson catalogue a number of country songs and albums that invoke the Civil War, but provide little in the way of analysis. Charles K. Wolfe traces the emergence of the war song in early country music, and in a second essay combines original interviews with solid textual analysis and an awareness of historical context to fashion a solid overview of the short-lived atomic bomb genre in country music.

Louis Hatchett and W. K. McNeil ably examine "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere," one of the most popular records to emerge in World War II. A trio of engaging, if conceptually underdeveloped, entries chronicle the World War II experiences of Gene Autry, Kentucky entrepreneur John Lair, and the "Hayloft Gang" of Chicago's National Barn Dance. Ivan M. Tribe provides a useful survey of country songs dealing with the Korean Conflict. Kevin S. Fontenot makes good use of James N. Gregory's "Plain Folk Americanism" to contextualize the "forceful, corny, and sometimes perceptive defenses of the American way of life and attacks on the glaring deficiencies of Communism" unleashed by country performers during the early years of the

Cold War (p. 143). Randy Rudder's discussion of post-9/11 country music is informative but lacking in analytic rigor. Akenson concludes the collection with a useful essay on employing popular music in middle-school and high-school classrooms.

If several contributors explore areas that might be profitably revisited by future scholars, the smell of antiquarianism permeates too many pieces. Some contributors offer interesting stories but never present readers with either a thesis or statement about why their topic matters. The omission of the Vietnam War is grievous, as no conflict has inspired more high-profile country songs or proven more critical to the cultural and political positioning of contemporary country music. If it did not speak with one voice regarding Vietnam, taken as a whole, country music—fully recognizing the erosion of the cultural consensus that informed earlier songs such as “There’s a Star

Spangled Banner Flying Somewhere” or “God, Please Protect America”—lent support to the narratives America brought to that war and excoriated those who challenged and imperiled “traditional American values” in ways that both anticipated and helped bolster the conservative ascendancy in national politics. *Country Music Goes to War* fails to examine the cultural ruptures introduced by Vietnam, the efforts of country music to redress and repair these fissures, and the legacies of these endeavors. At its best, however, this collection offers a solid starting point for examining the meanings various country performers have assigned to combat, citizenship, and patriotism.

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*The Fate of Family Farming
Variations on an American Idea*

By Ronald Jager

(Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2004. Pp. xx, 244. Notes. \$26.00.)

This highly readable book invites readers to question the idea that family farming is simply a subject for nostalgia. Farm families' adjustments are numerous—niche farming, organic farming, integrated pest management, and community-supported agriculture—but there is also help available, such as

the “beginning-farmer networks” operated by county extension agents and the women-in-agriculture networks. Thanks to these and other programs and strategies, family farming remains alive and kicking in America.

Ronald Jager grew up farming in Michigan during the World War II era,