Musical Activism in the U.S. and Japan in the Post-9/11 Era

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Abstract
This paper examines the musical and critical responses to the War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11 in the U.S. and Japan by drawing from newspaper and magazine articles, published interviews of musicians, and recordings. It analyzes the backlash against an American country music trio who voiced anti-war sentiments while country musicians largely supported the war. It highlights how Japanese critics used the language of democracy and freedom to interpret the controversy. The study also examines Japanese musicians' opposition to the Iraq War, focusing on the anti-war activism of a popular rock artist who published a poem and composed a song about the futility of war. While American and Japanese artists received similar criticism, their approaches to anti-war expressions differed. The paper identifies an anti-war rhetoric in Japan that emphasizes the image of children as innocent victims, a theme deeply rooted in post-WWII Japanese memory.

Keywords: Post-9/11, Music, Activism

Introduction

This paper explores how musicians and critics in the U.S. and Japan responded to the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing wars. After 9/11, there was a surge of patriotic sentiments, particularly among country musicians, in the U.S. Artists made songs that justified the War on Terror. On the other hand, a country music trio that opposed the war and criticized the President was boycotted and threatened. Japanese critics viewed this incident as revealing the hypocrisy of the nation that prides itself on being the beacon of freedom and regarded the trio's comeback as a symbol of the restoration of democratic values in the U.S. This is compared to how Japanese musicians and celebrities expressed their opposition to the Iraq War, which they did in large numbers against the conventional wisdom that they should stay out of politics to remain popular among the public. The paper focuses on the anti-war activities of a member of a popular rock band who wrote a poem, opened a forum, and made an anti-war song to promote peace, with mixed reviews. It shows that in contrast to the way patriotism and the merit of a particular war were debated in the U.S., Japanese musicians and critics utilized the image of war in general derived from popular national memory of World War II.

There have been studies on the musical responses to 9/11, such as anthologies *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror* (Fisher & Flota, 2011) and *Music in the Post-9/11 World* (Ritter & Daughtry, 2007). While the former focused on the American phenomenon alone, the latter included articles on musical reactions outside the U.S., such as Peru, Senegal, Egypt, Mexico, and Afghanistan, with an emphasis on songs based on indigenous music. None of these case studies focused on Japan. My paper provides a new perspective on musical responses outside the U.S. by focusing on music in the Western genre of rock made in Japan, a key U.S. ally in East Asia.

9/11 and Country Music

A day after announcing his presidential candidacy, a Texas Republican Senator, Ted Cruz, remarked in a television interview that he had experienced a musical conversion after 9/11. He said that even though he had grown up listening to rock, he was disappointed by "how rock music responded" to 9/11 and was impressed by country music's reaction. Cruz stated that country music "resonated with me and [...] I had an emotional reaction that said these are my people" (CBS News, 2015). Some critics, including the comedian Bill Maher, perceived this remark as a cynical move to pander to conservative primary election voters. Maher spent a portion of his late-night some *Time with Bill Maher* questioning Cruz's sincerity, with which his guests, former Congressman Barney Frank, actor Zachary Quinto, and political commentator S.E. Cupp, agreed. Maher further pointed out that "a roster of classic rock" participated in benefit concerts in support of the 9/11 victims, which made Cruz's negative view of rock music's reaction dubious (Real Time with Bill Maher). Regardless of whether he was sincere, Cruz's remark highlighted the prominence of country music in its support of the War on Terror and the genre's association with conservative politics (Tachi, 2019).

Country musicians such as Toby Keith and Darryl Worley wrote songs that justified U.S. military retaliation after 9/11. The lyrics to Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (An Angry American)" (2002) in part read, "And you'll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A. / 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass / It's the American way." Worley sang in his song "Have You Forgotten" (2003): "Some say this country's just out looking for a fight /

After 9/11, man, I'd have to say that's right." Alan Jackson's seemingly somber, reflective song about 9/11 titled "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" (2001) asserted the validity of conservative, anti-intellectual values. In its refrain, he sang: "I'm just a singer of simple songs / I'm not a real political man / I watch CNN, but I'm not sure I can tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran / But I know Jesus, and I talk to God…" In this short passage, the singer articulated conservatives' belief that knowledge spread through major media is less important than faith in Judeo-Christian God. The singer also revealed the political nature of the song while denying his being "political."

Chris Willman, the author of *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*, wrote that "Darryl Worley and Toby Keith had come up with the most rousing protest music in a generation" (p. 15). According to Willman, rock music was slow in its musical response to 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror until Green Day "finally had a commercial and critical hit in late 2004 with *American Idiot*" (p. 15). In contrast to the 1960s movement, when anti-war activists led the singing protest movement, the post-9/11 singing protest movement was led by those who supported the war.

The Dixie Chicks Controversy and Its Reception in Japan

The Dixie Chicks (renamed the Chicks in 2020) controversy in 2003 was one of the most notable incidents in the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror that highlighted the conservatism of country music. On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, lead singer Natalie Maines told their cheering audience in London that she was against the impending war, saying, "We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas." As this news spread to the U.S., country music radio stations dropped the band's songs from their playlists, called out for a boycott, and some staged a demonstration of smashing CDs with a bulldozer. Maines even received death threats during a concert tour (Younge, 2003, p. 8; Rossman, 2004, pp. 61-62; Kopple, Peck, & Cassidy, 2006; Katz, 2008, pp. 139-140). Their record sales plummeted, and they withdrew from the music scene for about three years until they reemerged with an album, *Taking the Long Way* (2006), which included a defiant song, "Not Ready to Make Nice." They also had the controversy documented in a film, *Shut Up and Sing* (2006), published in the same year (Katz, 2008, p. 140; Kopple et al., 2006; Hijikata, 2007, p. 35; Nishida, 2007, p. 19).

Economist Paul Krugman (2003) famously wrote an article in the *New York Times* stating that the radio conglomerate Clear Channel, which had ties to the Bush administration, was behind the movement, suggesting that this was not a grassroots movement but a corporate-led political attack on the artists. Gabriel Rossman (2004) argued that while Krugman's theory was widespread, the Dixie Chicks blacklist backfired against the radio conglomerate because it became the subject of a Senate Commerce Committee hearing, where senators criticized media concentration. Rossman contended that the audience, not the corporate elites, pushed local radio stations to boycott Dixie Chicks. Claire Katz argued that the Dixie Chicks controversy revealed misogyny in the country music business. The reason why the group was slammed after an anti-administration remark was not simply because country music fans were conservative and they made a comment that went against their beliefs, but because they were women who dared to make a political commentary: "Dixie Chicks were uppity women who had the audacity to speak out as women—as mothers—about an issue that is typically defined in hyper masculine terms, and as part of a masculine world. They had to be shut down" (p. 152). The band members seemed to agree with the view, as the title of their documentary film, *Shut Up and Sing,* taken from the lyrics

of “Not Ready to Make Nice,” suggests. In 2013, Maines answered in an interview that the lack of support they received from the country music industry after their controversy confirmed her prejudice about country music and that she did not intend to return to the country music world (Time, 2013).

Japanese critics viewed this incident as going against the American ideal of free speech and democracy. Music critic Tadashi Igarashi wrote an article in May 2003 titled “The symbol of ‘The Land of the Free’ is weeping.” He listed the attacks that the group had received and wrote, “Where has the First Amendment of the US Constitution that guaranteed the freedom of speech gone?” He also referred to the *New York Times* and other reports about radio conglomerates staging the boycott movement. He warned that the domination of the media by a small number of corporations threatened the fundamentals of democracy (Igarashi, 2003).

Magazines and major newspapers reported on the trio’s comeback in 2007, when they received five Grammy Awards, suggesting that it showed the restoration of democratic values in the U.S. For example, Hiroshi Nishida wrote an article in the major national newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* titled “Winning the Grammy Award: Exercising the Freedom of Speech” and asserted that one of the reasons why the Dixie Chicks had received the award was because they persisted despite a harsh backlash against them and maintained their sense of resistance and progressivism, which, according to Nishida, were an integral part of popular music in the U.S. Nishida added that it was interesting that country musicians, whose music is old-fashioned, showed the conscience of Americans. He regarded the Dixie Chicks’ defiance as expressing an American ideal (p. 19).

Sunday Mainichi magazine also reported the Dixie Chicks’ winning of five Grammy Awards as the victory of the freedom of speech and the restoration of democracy in the U.S. Sachiko Hijikata contended in her article entitled “Three Anti-Bush Female Trio Made a Comeback with Five Grammys” that it was ironic that the restoration of democracy in the U.S., as exemplified by the fact that the Dixie Chicks’ exercise of free speech was rewarded, was brought about by the Bush administration’s declining credibility, which was caused by the war that was initially promoted in the name of democracy (Hijikata, 2007, p. 35).

Japanese newspapers and magazines also recycled the image of protesting anti-war American folk singers from the 1960s to depict the anti-Iraq War movement in the U.S. For example, on March 17, 2003, asahi.com showed a picture of the Sixties icon Peter Paul and Mary singing songs in front of the Lincoln Memorial at an anti-war march in Washington, DC. American folk songs of the 1960s were popular in Japan and were incorporated into political activism. A Japanese anti-war group called “Folk Guerilla” held weekly sing-ins in a central train station in Tokyo for six months in 1969, singing American folk songs of protest and Japanese adaptations and compositions (Tachi, 2009, pp. 128, 145-149). The 1960s folk song movement became the precursor of singing anti-war activities in Japan.

Anti-Iraq War Activities in Japan

Japanese citizens also joined in protest against the War on Terror, particularly the impending Iraq War, which the Japanese administration supported. According to the national newspaper *Asahi Shinbun*, in response to an American group ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), 10,000 protesters gathered in Hibiya Park in Tokyo, 5000 in Osaka, 4000 in Kyoto, and 1000 people in Nagoya. In Niigata (population 810,000), 100

gathered in response to a call from a minister, and they chanted "No War" on the rhythm of African drums ("Iraku Kogeki Hantai," 2003).

Japanese musicians and celebrities expressed their opposition to the Iraq War in large numbers against the conventional wisdom that entertainers should remain politically neutral to gain favor with the public. For example, musician and composer Ryuichi Sakamoto linked his home page to a site that counted war casualties and published a book opposing not only the War on Terror but categorically denounced war. A veteran rock musician, Kiyoshiro Imawano, known for singing controversial topics, sang American folk songs of protest from the 1960s, such as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" and John Lennon's "Imagine" on stage at his live concert ("Myujishn ga Haiyu ga," 2003). Women's magazine *Josei Seven* reported on demonstrations and hunger strikes carried out in front of the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and listed 15 Japanese celebrities—actors, musicians, and athletes—opposing the war, alongside four American celebrities who were well-known in Japan, Sheryl Crow, Madonna, Winona Ryder, and George Clooney. The article showed pictures of these celebrities with their quotes, which ranged from directly opposing the Iraq War to mild condemnation of war in general and hope for peace ("NO WAR no Hata no Moto," 2003, pp. 226-227).

A rock musician, TAKURO, a member of the band GLAY, published a poem titled "Things that No One Can Take Away" in *Asahi Shimbun*, a major national newspaper, on March 19, 2003. It read: "There are things that no one can take away / Their families / Their lovers, / Their close friends / Their blue sky in their hometown / Their memorable places / Their smiles / Their hopes / Their dreams / And Their New Century." Then he wrote in English, in all caps, "CHILDREN IN THE WAR." He concluded the poem by stating that there is no reason or justification for war.

TAKURO also set up a web page titled TAKURO-NO-WAR.jp and invited people to post comments on this issue. According to an interview he gave a year later, this website had 342,442 accesses and 9443 comments in the two months until he closed the site in early May when President Bush made the Mission Accomplished speech. Those who commented on his web page ranged from a 9-year-old to a 79-year-old, but most were young people, with 55% teenagers and 24% in their twenties. The 79-year-old man wrote (through his grandchild who typed) that he was still haunted by the horrific memories of World War II and that he should be the last generation to have such an experience. He wrote that war meant seeing people die in front of you and bombs being dropped on you. He concluded that he was absolutely against the war and that there was no reason for that. TAKURO recalled that his web forum prompted many young people to talk to their grandparents who had experienced World War II firsthand and came away with anti-war sentiment ("NACK5 Special").

While he received sympathetic comments, he also faced criticism and threats. One commentator wrote that he was a hypocrite because all he could do was talk and could do nothing to stop the war. Another commented that his outrage toward the impending war in Iraq was arbitrary in that there were human rights violations everywhere in the world, including China, where the band toured. TAKURO also received personal threats, and his management office advised him not to go out alone at night. According to the interview, he and other celebrities also received criticism from those in the media for being opportunistic and not having enough credentials to discuss politics as they were mere entertainers ("NACK5 Special"). This line of criticism echoed the "shut up and sing" rebuke that the

Dixie Chicks received. It reflected a sense of contempt towards those in the entertainment business. On the other hand, while the Dixie Chicks were mainly criticized for opposing a particular war, TAKURO was denounced for making a political stance.

After the newspaper announcement, TAKURO wrote a song titled "CHILDREN IN THE WAR," reusing the central phrase in his poem. The song opens with "a nameless flower with grey eyes that bloomed in the desert," muttering, "What is peace? What is peace?" The song's narrator, presumably a soldier, confesses that he had a hard time sleeping the previous night because he had killed a person for the first time in his life. The line reads: "The lightness of the trigger was laughing at the weight of human life." In the middle of the song, he juxtaposes the following English words: "Who's [sic?] Sacrifice, Victims, Presidents," perhaps alluding to the human sacrifice caused by the decisions made by political leaders. The title phrase "children in the war" is repeated twice before and after the English section, which serves as a refrain. After an extended instrumental interlude, the song concludes with the narrator looking up at the sky with an unspecified person, "you," hoping to return home. Still, the home is gone, along with the flower and friends, as the last line reads, "The town has all turned into ashes" (GLAY, 2003). TAKURO explained later in an interview that he deliberately made the song ambiguous and avoided graphic descriptions of atrocity, as that would deprive the audience of their imagination and discourage them from thinking further. He wanted to encourage the listeners to think independently about the meaning of peace ("NACK5 Special"). Twenty years later, as the war in Ukraine was waged, the band included the song in the repertoire of their concert tour upon TAKURO's insistence. His bandmate and vocalist TERU explained this selection in a general term, stating that the song dealt with the "eternal theme" of life and death caused by human conflicts and that he always sang this song with the hope that things would get better (Omae, 2023).

It is interesting to note that neither the poem nor the song is particularly about children, and yet the phrase "children in the war" is central to both works. The image of innocent children as victims of war is found in anti-war rhetoric in Japan, pronounced by both activists and citizens expressing their voices. For example, protesters chanted, "Do not drop bombs on Iraqi children" in a demonstration in Shizuoka on March 15, 2003. Protestors in Tokyo demonstrated a banner with a picture of little children printed on it ("Iraku Kogeki Hantai").

The categorical denouncement of war, along with the imagery of innocent children as victims of war, is a common characteristic in Japanese anti-war rhetoric. Historian James Orr (2001) argued in his book *The Victims as Hero* that the idea that the Japanese citizens were victims in the atrocious war was tied to the sense of national identity and became widespread in post-WWII Japan, as both the conservatives and progressives promoted that idea to serve their political purposes. Many of the young commentators who responded to TAKURO online also drew lessons from World War II and concluded that war is wrong because of the suffering of civilian victims, particularly children. They were not just against a particular war but all wars, with children as potential casualties.

Conclusion

This paper showed differences in how the War on Terror was musically discussed in the U.S. and Japan. Japanese critics used the language of democracy and American values when depicting the American artists who criticized the U.S. administration and opposed the war. Still, the Japanese musicians who publicly opposed the war did not receive the same kind of

recognition. An examination of the works of an anti-war musician also showed the centrality of a categorical denial of war and an emphasis on victims in the discourse of war that has been fostered in post-WWII Japan.

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