Using Contemporary Music to Teach Critical Perspectives of War

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Although music can be used in social studies classrooms to give students a picture of society from different time periods, modern music of all genres can help students understand more recent historical events. This practitioner paper seeks to assist and encourage teachers to utilize modern music for present-day analysis of society. We will address the current events of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and help teacher’s stimulate critical responses in students by using a variety of musical genres to analyze multiple perspectives of the wars. Teaching strategies and assessing students through authentic engagement with content and artists are discussed and we conclude by offering a sample lesson plan using a model of analysis.

Key Words: Multimedia, Analytical Tools, Music, War, Classroom Strategies, Authentic Assessment

Introduction

From smart phones to iPods, young Americans use some type of media approximately seven hours per day (Russell, 2012). Today’s students track the latest gossip, watch YouTube videos, and listen to their favorite music. Tapping into the media consumption of students can provide a meaningful and culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995) companion to any classroom. Indeed, music has been an innate part of human cultures for at least 30,000 years; it elicits responses in infants and even has reported to have the ability to alter brain patterns (Weinberger, 2004). Brain-based research has linked music to increased learning (Cain & Cain, 1991; Jensen, 2001) and as an intelligence of “information processing,” whereby people connect learning with the recognition of tone, pitch, and rhythm (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). As social studies research suggests students easily relate to music (Binkiewicz, 2006), it makes an ideal tool to enhance understanding of historical and contemporary events.

For social studies teachers, incorporating music in the classrooms serves to contextualize historical content (Mangram & Weber, 2012; Pellegrino & Lee, 2012). Analyzing song lyrics reinforces critical components of social studies education, including skills necessary for participatory citizenship. These skills include the ability to interpret ideas, draw meaningful connections across different context to understand history and contemporary events, and seek out music and other forms of media as a form of civic dialogue and social justice expression (Brkich, 2012). Despite the many benefits of music, research indicates as students become older, the less likely they are to encounter music in their classroom instruction (White & McCormack, 2006).

This article encourages teachers to use music to challenge students to explore multiple perspectives of recent historical or current events. While many teachers primarily rely on music from several decades ago—well beyond the life-scope of today’s youth—to discuss historical events, such as the 1960’s or World War II, we advocate for continually incorporating modern music as a way to contextualize current American conflicts, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Mangram & Weber, 2012). We encourage teachers to draw on a variety of
mainstream and non-mainstream, contemporary music from multiple genres and communities, such as punk rock and hip-hop, to expose students to multiple perspectives of a topic. Finally, we offer a model for analyzing messages and meanings about current issues found in lyrics.

**Teaching Critical Perspectives with Music**

According to the National Council for the Social Studies, “citizens of the twenty-first century must be prepared to deal with rapid change, complex local, national, and global issues, cultural and religious conflicts, and the increasing interdependence of nations in a global economy” (NCSS, 2001). This statement calls on teachers to prepare students to be critical citizens, or those who question deeply issues in society and seek to uncover where key democratic values have still yet to be realized or in some cases abandoned. The thinking citizen performs the role of activist, participating in her or his communities to preserve these democratic values. Performance art, such as songwriting, can be viewed as an activist expression, communicating powerful messages about gaps in democracy and contradictions in the values and actions of people in a democracy. Songs that express such social commentary offer students valuable learning opportunities to engage in critical deliberation and dialogue about the role of citizens in a democracy.

The study of global conflicts, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, can offer useful cases for the tensions, contradictions, and decisions made by democratic governments and their citizens. The depiction of wars in public schools often justifies a country’s actions, ignoring the messiness that arises in most global conflicts. One text study found, for example, “in U.S. textbooks World War II is depicted as a clean-cut affair, an epic tale of good versus evil with its own heroes and villains” (Nicholls, 2006, p. 97). Unpacking this good versus evil narrative will help future citizens develop critical perspectives essential for future citizenship.

Like music from the 1940s and 1960s, however, wars from the same era appear distant to today’s youth. We advocate for teaching students about conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for two main reasons. First, these wars exist in the memory and media of today. Young people will have heard of these issues, but may not have an understanding of the conflicts. Second, because of the connection between Iraq, Afghanistan, and the tragic events of 9/11, these wars mark a significant cultural turning point for both Americans and the international community. Just as Vietnam inspired Briton John Lennon, Canadian Neil Young, and Americans Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix and more in the 1960s, Iraq and Afghanistan have inspired the artistry of current recording artists from nearly all musical genres (see appendix 1 for sample song list) into producing a thorough body of music representative of diverse opinions. Classroom teachers simply should not miss the wealth of this artistry.

Songs about Iraq and Afghanistan present examples of what Walter Parker (2003) calls “powerful texts,” meaning they challenge student ideas or values through multiple interpretations and create meaningful dialogue through seminar discussions. These powerful texts can inform, challenge, and construct new knowledge. Teaching with music will require teachers to find musical resources, teach students an analytical technique to apply to the music, and determine appropriate assessment tasks.
Finding Music Resources

Locating songs that address historical and social topics can be both an enjoyable and time-consuming activity. The availability of songs, however, is only getting easier with free streaming services like Spotify, Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and Pandora (see list of web-based references), which offer millions of available tracks to stream free of charge. For those wishing to own their resource library, digital stores like Apple iTunes, the Amazon MP3 store, and digital download sites directly from artists and record labels offer affordable tracks on an individual basis. YouTube also streams tracks by artists, as well as fan-made videos that often include lyrics flowing on the screen along with the music. Finally, students themselves can also offer suggestions of music with lyrical content relevant to historical or contemporary events. Building a music resource library may take some time, but will add a new and engaging component to the classroom instruction.

Locating lyrics is a simple task. Dozens of websites are available with a quick Internet search, but among the easiest to use are Song Meanings, AZ Lyrics, Metro Lyrics, and Lyrics (see list of web-based references). Song Meanings includes discussion forums for each song. When a teacher locates lyrics for a song they want to use from Song Meanings, the teacher can read comments provided by listeners discussing interpretations of nearly any song. Additionally, music journalism offers free online sources of music critique and dialogue, thus contributing to a teacher’s ability to conduct classroom conversations. Teachers can discuss music genres and cater to the preferences of students, as well as visit sites such as Hip-HopDX, Lambgoat, No Depression, NPR Music, Pitchfork, Punknews, and Rolling Stone for current music news and reviews.

Teaching an Analytical Technique

To start a class lesson using a song, teachers must familiarize students with some form of analytical strategy to get the most out of the song. We recommend using a guide, such as SONGS (see table 1), to lead students through their analysis. Additionally, teachers can offer opening questions generally related to music for a whole group brainstorm, such as: What can music lyrics do or accomplish? Based on this brainstorm question, students can spend time as a body collectively demonstrating their thoughts on the possibility of musical lyrics. After students are familiarized with the SONGS guide and have brainstormed around a big question (e.g., What can music lyrics do or accomplish?), the instructor can then play a chosen song, in this case about the Iraq War, from the suggested song list provided in the article. While listening and scanning lyrics, students can individually collect their thoughts using the SONGS guiding questions.

We encourage teachers to draw on a variety of mainstream and non-mainstream, contemporary music from multiple genres and communities, such as punk rock and hip-hop, to expose students to multiple perspectives of a topic.
Using Authentic Assessment

We recommend that authentic assessment be used to measure knowledge, by looking at student performance on tasks that are intellectually worthy and have students actively inquiring into resources (Wiggins, 1989). Students, for example, can prepare questions for a possible short interview with the author or musician through telephone, email, or social media. Large-scale artists are often difficult to contact, but many small-scale national or regional musicians can be reached via social media, arranged conference call, or email. Students also can organize cross-curricular mini-conferences in their school or for their grade level aimed at arts appreciation that could host guest and student performers, presentations, and events. Students might choose social issues; research available music on the topic; and write school newspaper articles about what current music has to say about the issue of their choice. Finally, using technology, students can use web 2.0 programs, such as Animoto or Xtranormal, to construct music videos and/or presentations of their interviews with musicians. These assessment strategies ask students to create an authentic product that furthers their initial analysis of the song(s) and inquiry into the issues. These critical thinking skills are essential for citizenship education.

Songwriters often demonstrate participatory citizenship through free speech, creating an auditory primary source that is both exciting and useful. American social studies students have long learned about their country using songs that can inspire patriotism and pride, such as “the Star Spangled Banner” and “America: The Dream Goes On,” or could critique our nation’s multiple shortcomings, such as Billie Holiday’s, “Strange Fruit.” Teachers can and should continue to use these classic songs, and then go further, exposing their students to songs such as “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival, “Universal Soldier” by Buffy Sainte-Marie, or “All Along the Watchtower” by Bob Dylan, which offer critiques on topics such as power, society, racism, and war. Not only do students learn through poetry, rhythm, and melody, they also engage with historical artifacts created by socially-motivated individuals.

In the USA, the particular subject of war always elicits a range of responses from the arts community, from the conquistador message of “In America” by the Charlie Daniels Band, to objectors like Dylan addressing the business world’s profiting from conflict in “Masters of War.” Such songs, while excellent, are now aging statements of the past and social studies teachers
should continue to build their resource library with modern music. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have inspired a new generation of artists of all political affiliations to critique involvement in international conflict. Songs like Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)” or Tom Morello’s “Battle Hymns,” represent the new generation that can be used in classrooms, but little research indicates how or when contemporary music is used. Inspired by this new generation of music addressing the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we offer the following comprehensive sample lesson plan, “Letter Home,” to show how teachers can utilize contemporary music from numerous genres in their teaching.

“Letter Home”: A Sample Lesson Plan Using Music to Discuss War

This lesson’s song, “Letter Home” by the band Strung Out, revolves around the perspective of war from a soldier’s point of view and the relationships the soldier has back in his home country. The song is politically ambiguous and contains easy to understand vocabulary.

NCSS Standards

This lesson plan aligns with themes one (culture), nine (global connections), and ten (civic ideals and practices) from the National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards (2010). By following this lesson plan, students will explore cultural diversity, the interconnectedness of international countries affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the thoughts and actions of American men and women.

Accessing Prior knowledge

Instruct students to brainstorm personal definitions of war, sacrifice, and cowardice. Next, have students individually write a 3-5 sentence paragraph describing their understanding of what soldiers do while deployed to war. At your discretion, students can then partner up with one or two other students, discuss their thoughts, and potentially collaborate to create a shared definition. The teacher will then solicit suggestions from groups and gather definitions on the board for the class to refer on to after analyzing the song.

Review SONGS Guidelines

In order to engage all students, distribute a lyric sheet that contains plenty of room for students to label appropriate parts of the song. Have students to scan lyrics quickly after they receive their copy and highlight words whose meaning they do not know. Ask students to review their SONGS guidelines. (It may be helpful to include the SONGS guiding questions on the backside of the lyric sheet with space for student responses.)

Guidelines for Song Analysis

We recommend five general categories for analysis of any song’s social studies content. The acronym SONGS is a useful mnemonic device (Table 1) and can be described as such:

1. **Subject and story/situation** (What is the subject of the song? What is the story/situation described in the song?)

2. **Opinion of author** (What is the opinion of the author about the subject, story, or situation in the song?)

3. **Notions the reader takes away** (What notions do you as reader take away from the lyrics about the subject and story/situation?)

4. **General purpose** (What is the general purpose and background of this song? [eg. A protest song? A rallying point? To a person? Popular music? Social critique, etc.])
5. **Stylistic devices** (What stylistic device does the artist use to emphasize main ideas in the song? These can include melody, beat, pitch, repetitions of sound, and breaks/changes/pauses in the song tempo.) At this time, play the song for students with the purpose of reflecting upon the guiding questions. **“Letter Home” (Lyrics by Jason Cruz, reprinted with permission)**

Well I feel stupid writing this
Cause it's almost like I'm getting ready
For something I'm not ready for
I guess I just wanna let you know
Wish I could be face to face with you
And tell you how I feel
I wasn't gonna write this,
You see my buddy and I had a deal
I just hope and pray that
Neither one of us has to deliver
As it comes down to it
I will always be with you
I will always be watching
I miss you all
Tell my girl that I love her
I'll be dreaming of her
And I don't wanna fight anymore
And I'm still not sure what I'm doing here
I'm praying and praying,
Who are we praying to
That might understand
And if you get this letter
I'm sorry I didn't make it back
I will always be with you
Always watching
And now I know that I'll never die alone
No matter where I am
Hold on, please don't forget me when I'm gone
Cause I forgot why I ever left at all
These times take the best of them
And leave nothing for the rest of them
And I judge myself in every way
And I can no longer look at myself in the same way
And I don't wanna be a coward
But does any of this mean a thing
The sacrifice, whose sacrifice
I will always be with you
I will always be watching
And now I know that I'll never die alone
No matter where I am
Hold on please don't forget me when I'm gone
Cause I forgot why I ever left at all
Why I ever left at all
Why I ever left at all
I just had to let you know

At the end of the song, give students 5-7 minutes to individually collect their thoughts on the lines within the song and what they means within the context of the guiding questions. Ask them to review their original descriptions of war, cowardice, and the duties of soldiers at war. Ask them whether they wish to revise any of their thoughts based on the perspective from within the song. You may replay the song again after students analyze the lyrics to allow them to capture any complementary stylistic devices used in the music to emphasize the messages found in the song.

**Group Discussions**

As students finish their personal reflection, have them re-join their original group of four for a reflection session using the guiding questions. Allow each person to share thoughts on each question. Encourage group members to respond with a “glow and grow” response, in which they identify something they liked and something they would like to offer to “grow” their group analysis. Playing the song a third time for the group members to reconsider their appraisal of the song may be helpful. In their group of four, assign each member one component of the SONGS acronym; this person will serve as the group’s representative spokesperson for the later whole class discussion.

As groups are finalizing their conversations, reconvene the class. Allow each group to discuss their group responses and encourage students to challenge and question each other’s interpretations.

**Assessment Opportunities**

At the conclusion of the lesson, students should demonstrate a deeper understanding of the message of the song. Students could create a series of questions to be used if she or he was to interview the songwriter. As noted earlier, local and regional musicians can be accessible through social media and email and are often excited to discuss their music with interested students. Strung Out is active in the music community with public personal member email addresses and a message board for fan interaction at the bands website. Singer and lyricist Jason Cruz also has a personal website called Americ an Blackheart. In order to assess student learning based on the perspectives presented within the song, ask students to each write down one question to ask Jason Cruz about the song if they had the chance. Each student will have time to re-read the lyrics, reflect upon the class discussion, and write a question.

As the teacher, you can contact the songwriter using social media or email and submit the list of questions, who can then answer select questions of their own choosing for a response. As another option, the students can submit their question personally to the artist using social media or email. If you contact the artist in advance of the activity and receive a response, you can ask which method of question submission is preferred. As the class receives feedback, they can
contribute their answers at the start or close of class during the unit on the Iraq or Afghanistan wars.

Other assessment ideas might include any of the following:

- **Illustrating the Song.** Students illustrate major aspects of the song by creating a collage based on their group analysis. The student group, for example, can design cover image or art for the release of music CD.

- **Create a music video.** Using Web 2.0 technology, such as Animoto or video capturing devices, students create their own music video for the song that highlights important messages occurring in the lyrics.

- **Research songwriters and lyrics.** Provide a song list by genre to students. Have students select songs that spark their personal interest. Then have students use an inquiry method into each of their chosen songs based on the SONGS questioning strategies. Students can write to each artist either through Facebook or the artists’ personal website to gather the artists’ perspectives on their songs. Then, students write annotations about the songs for a column called “From the Artist.” These annotations and “From the Artist” blurbs can be shared on a class website or published as small features in the school newspaper.

**References**


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**Web-Based References**


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**Appendix 1**

**Song List by Genre**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Band/Artist</th>
<th>Album</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punk Rock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Song Title</td>
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<td>Annotation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blueprint of the Fall-An dystopian outline for the future</td>
<td>Strung Out</td>
<td>Exile in Oblivion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter Home-see sample lesson</td>
<td>Strung Out</td>
<td>Blackhawks Over Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter from Iraq-Lyrics written by a soldier on the ground describing worsening conditions</td>
<td>Bouncing Souls</td>
<td>The Gold Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Transmission-The non-existent future of a deceased young soldier is described</td>
<td>Street Dogs</td>
<td>Fading American Dream</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Empire Strikes First-Discussion of the pre-emptive approach to war</td>
<td>Bad Religion</td>
<td>The Empire Strikes First</td>
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<tr>
<td>March of the Paper Tiger- A look at crony capitalism and the motivations of modern imperialism (annotation provided by Eric Hausser of Counterpunch)</td>
<td>Counterpunch</td>
<td>Dying to Exonerate the World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcome (The Recapitulation)- A critique of the cultures of consumption and war</td>
<td>RX Bandits</td>
<td>The Resignation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tommy Gun- A young man grows up around glorification of violence</td>
<td>Justin Sane</td>
<td>Life, Love, and the Pursuit of Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>War Sucks, Let’s Party-War protesters feel suppression of their voice</td>
<td>Anti-Flag</td>
<td>For Blood and Empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Last Letter Home-A young soldier writes to each member of his family</td>
<td>Dropkick Murphys</td>
<td>The Warrior’s Code</td>
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<td>Franco Un-American-See through the eyes of a frustrated American at home</td>
<td>NOFX</td>
<td>The War on Errorism</td>
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<td>From Her Lip’s to God’s Ears (The Energizer)-The question “what are we going to do now? is posed to world leaders</td>
<td>Against Me!</td>
<td>Searching for a Former Clarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>White People for Peace-Addresses the weakness of the</td>
<td>Against Me!</td>
<td>New Wave</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>peace movement</strong></td>
<td>Albright Monument Baghdad - <em>Read about the Ba’ath Regime as “the Red Scare of yesteryear”</em></td>
<td>Propagandhi</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Folk</strong></td>
<td>Self-Evident- A post-9/11 apology to invaded nations</td>
<td>Ani DiFranco</td>
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<td></td>
<td>United States- A post-9/11 letter to America from British protest folk band</td>
<td>Seize the Day</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Out of the Clear, Blue Sky- Addresses the rage felt by Americans leading up to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars</td>
<td>John Lester</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Soul</strong></td>
<td>Coming Home- Awaiting the return of soldiers</td>
<td>John Legend</td>
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<td><strong>Rock</strong></td>
<td>The Hand that Feeds- An administration critique</td>
<td>Nine Inch Nails</td>
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<td>Day After Tomorrow- A soldier questions his purpose</td>
<td>Tom Waits</td>
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<td>The Humbling River- A man faces the difficulties of humanity</td>
<td>Puscifer</td>
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<td>When the President Talks to God- War-era discussion between the Christian God and the President</td>
<td>Bright Eyes</td>
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<td>A concept record about family, consumption, war, 9/11 and more</td>
<td>Neil Young</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Iraq- Formerly pro-war advocates question their beliefs</td>
<td>Flobots</td>
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<td>Bomb the World- Encouragement to the population to take a stand for their beliefs</td>
<td>Michael Franti &amp; Spearhead</td>
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<td>We Don’t Stop- A look at the different types of modern wars</td>
<td>Michael Franti &amp; Spearhead</td>
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<td>We Don’t Need Your War- An easily interpreted protest song</td>
<td>Widescreen Mode</td>
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<td><strong>Hard Rock &amp; Heavy Metal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Soldier Side- Discusses religion and war</td>
<td>System of a Down</td>
<td>Hypnotize</td>
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<tr>
<td>B.Y.O.B. (Bring Your Own Bombs)-Analyzes the history of war and low socioeconomic status</td>
<td>System of a Down</td>
<td>Mesmerize</td>
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<td>Exit Strategy- Draws connections between money, politicians, natural resources, and foreign invasion</td>
<td>Valiant Thorr</td>
<td>Legend of the World</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confrontation- A call for defiance</td>
<td>OTEP</td>
<td>The Ascension</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Hip-Hop</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Live from Iraq- Deployed soldiers discuss their experiences through hip-hop</td>
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<td>Not in our Name- A pledge of defiance and the promise of a non-violent society</td>
<td>Saul Williams</td>
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<td>The 4th Branch- An intense call to encourage learning</td>
<td>Immortal Technique</td>
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<td>March of Death- Discusses the power of words for opposition</td>
<td>Zack de la Rocha &amp; DJ Shadow</td>
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<th><strong>Country</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)- A song asking the nation to reflect</td>
<td>Alan Jackson</td>
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<td>American Soldier- A description of an American soldier’s duties</td>
<td>Toby Keith</td>
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<td>Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)- A man reflects on the death of his veteran father in a post-9/11 and Iraq War world</td>
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<td>Have you Forgotten? Call to Americans to remember 9/11 to gain a favorable view of the wars</td>
<td>Darryl Worley</td>
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<td>This Ain’t No Rag, it’s a Flag- A warning to enemies of the</td>
<td>Charlie Daniels</td>
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USA

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<td>Ashes to Ashes- The songwriter discusses what was going through his mind watching the 9/11 attacks</td>
<td>Steve Earle</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
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<td>That’s the News- Critique of the media coverage of the Iraq War</td>
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<td>Haggard Like Never Before</td>
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Compilation Albums

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Spoken Word

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*Please preview all songs for lyrical content in advance

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