

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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The Country Music Hall of Fame:
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► **BOOKS:**

"Country Music Goes To War" by Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson

Country music tuned to war

Current stars hew to history of nationalism

By **THADDEUS RUSSELL**

The musicians honored at last week's Country Music Awards ceremonies have distinguished themselves not just with their big hats and twangy voices, but with their politics as well. Among the nominees and performers at the CMAs were Trace Adkins, whose current hit single "Arlington" pays homage to a fallen soldier and a president who "cried the day they brought me home," the duo Montgomery Gentry, who link today's soldiers with veterans proud of their "right-wing stand on Vietnam," and Toby Keith, whose anthems promising America's enemies that "we'll put a boot in your ass" continue to rock stadium audiences.

With polls showing that the number of Americans who support the war in Iraq is a minority and steadily declining, country musicians find themselves increasingly isolated as loud and loyal supporters of the president's foreign policy. This is especially striking given that most of the American casualties in the war are members of country music's core demographic of working-class whites. But if country musicians remain true to their genre's tragic and troubling history, every death or maiming will only deepen their commitment to martyrdom and their resentment of those unwilling to fight.

Nationalism in country music is not new; it was apparent in earlier wartime country songs such as Roy Acuff's "Cowards Over Pearl Harbor," Bob Willis' "Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima," Harry Choate's "Ko-



JOHN RUSSELL / Associated Press

Toby Keith performs his song "Courtesy of the Red White and Blue" as he closes the 2003 Flameworthy Awards show in Nashville in April 2003. Keith, like many country music stars, passionately supports the war effort.

rea, Here We Come," and Jimmie Osborne's "Thank God for Victory in Korea."

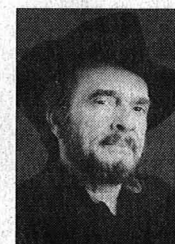
Like their predecessors, current country stars pair white self-identification with an ethic of sacrifice. Gretchen Wilson, winner of country music's Female Vocalist of the Year, became a star last year with her single "Redneck Woman," and

on her new album she sings of being "Politically Uncorrect." She is "one of many who can't get no respect" because they are "for the farmer with dirt on his hands and the soldiers who fight for this land."

The current generation of pro-war country singers often pay homage to the performers of the Vietnam era, who combined

patriotic anthems with songs that identified the singers and their audiences as superior to those who put themselves ahead of family and country. Merle Haggard warned that anti-war protesters were walking on "The Fighting Side of Me" and declared, "I ain't never been on welfare, and that's one place I won't be." Loretta Lynn insisted that "we must save freedom now, at any cost" and sang reverentially of her father,

who "worked for what he got" and "never took a handout." To be white, country music said, is to work, and, if necessary, to die.



Merle Haggard has assailed the Iraq war in his songs, shocking both his fans and his detractors.

Today, despite what appears to be the genre's overwhelming support for the Iraq war, a new wind is blowing in country music, and it is coming from an old and unexpected

source. In 2003, Merle Haggard shocked many of his admirers — and detractors — with a song attacking the media and the government for rushing to war.

Then, last month, the man who threatened violence against opponents of the war in Vietnam issued an album in which he made no bones about his opposition to the current war. "Freedom is stuck in reverse," Haggard sings on his first single from the album. "Let's get out of Iraq and get back on the track, and let's rebuild America first."

This year's Country Music Awards ignored Haggard and his new message. Will country fans?

► **Thaddeus Russell** is a professor of history and American studies at Barnard College. He is at work on a study of race and American citizenship since World War II.