



'Dixie Chicking': Post-9/11 Blacklisting in the Entertainment Industry

http://www.truthdig.com/arts_culture/item/20071025_dixie_chicking_post_9_11_blacklisting_in_the_entertainment_industr/

Posted on Oct 25, 2007

Ed Rampell

The HUAC/McCarthy era and Hollywood blacklist may be over, but the not-so-grand inquisitors are still among us. On March 31, 2007, activist/actor Mike Farrell, who co-starred in TV's "M*A*S*H" and co-founded Artists United to Win Without War, told Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting's "CounterSpin" radio program, "There's a price to be paid for speaking out, and some have paid a fairly serious price." Around that same time, at a March 24, 2007, anti-war Oakland town meeting called by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, actor Sean Penn stated: "we are encouraged to self-censor any words that might be perceived as inflammatory—if our belief is that this war should stop today. We cower as you point fingers telling us to 'support our troops.'"

There are other examples of creative people suffering the consequences of their outspokenness since 9/11, but none are as compelling as the saga of the Dixie Chicks, the top-selling "girl group" of all time. Indeed, the red, white and bluegrass band's name became a verb meaning censoring and punishing dissenters: "Dixie Chicking." The Chicks' story was turned into a documentary by two-time Academy Award winner Barbara Kopple (1976's "Harlan County USA" and 1990's "American Dream") and Cecilia Peck. Cecilia's father, Gregory Peck, won the Oscar for portraying the screen's archetypal fighting liberal, Atticus Finch, in 1962's anti-racist "To Kill a Mockingbird," and produced the 1972 anti-Vietnam-War film "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine," about the Berrigan brothers' anti-draft activities. (In August 2007, Tim Robbins' L.A.-based Actors Gang troupe presented a reading of the "Catonsville Nine" drama as a fundraiser.)

"Shut Up & Sing" was presented on March 23, 2007, at Los Angeles' Pacific Design Center as part of the West Hollywood Women's Leadership Conference, along with a post-screening panel discussion moderated by radio host Stephanie Miller that included Cecilia Peck and Chicks member Natalie Maines. During the Dixie Chicks' 2003 "Top of the World" tour, it was Maines who set off the firestorm on the eve of "shock and awe" when she told British concertgoers: "Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas."

As "Shut Up and Sing" demonstrated, all hell broke loose after Maines' on-stage comment made the media rounds. The Chicks lost most of their airtime on right-leaning country-western radio; CD and concert ticket sales plummeted. Encouraged by reactionary FreeRepublic.com bloggers and DJs, ex-fans destroyed Chicks CDs en masse during the ensuing "Dixie Chicks Destruction" campaign. Concerts were picketed by Red-baiters who called the Chicks "traitors" and "communists," although the group's fans were divided, with many remaining loyal. Worst of all, bomb-sniffing dogs and metal detectors were deployed at Dixie Chicks concerts. Under heavy security, the Texas trio confronted a 2003 death threat at a Dallas performance, after a letter threatened to shoot Maines in the same city where John F. Kennedy had been gunned down 40 years earlier. For his part, President Bush appeared to egg on the Chicks' persecutors, saying: "They shouldn't have their feelings hurt just because some people don't want to buy their records."

Sixty years after the beginning of the Hollywood blacklist, "Shut Up & Sing" raises the issue of modern-day censorship. Onscreen, Maines reacts to the group's loss of airtime, angrily demanding to know, "How is [this] not a boycott? They haven't been playing our music for a few weeks." Paul Beane, general manager of the Lubbock, Texas, radio station KRBL, declared: "We're not going to play them anymore. It'd simply be financial suicide." At a 2004 Senate hearing, in one of his finer moments, Sen. John McCain mocked Clear Channel's denial that the media conglomerate was ordering its radio stations to ban the Chicks from its corporate airwaves.

(In 2004, CNN quoted Howard Stern as saying that the San Antonio-based Clear Channel is "very tied to the Bush administration." In the CNN report, Stern says: "Clear Channel for years has been defending me. ... I criticize Bush and then I'm fired. ... They acted out of politics.")

During the panel following the March 2007 "Shut Up and Sing" screening, Stephanie Miller, host of the nationally syndicated "Stephanie Miller Show," noted that, ironically, Clear Channel was a co-sponsor of the screening. Despite Clear Channel's apparent support of that event, Miller said, "There's a concerted effort to shut down progressive talk. [Conservative] Christians are buying radio stations." Miller, whose father was Barry Goldwater's Republican running mate in 1964, claimed that progressive stations were even being taken off the air in markets where they were No. 1 in the ratings. Ed Schultz, whose nationally syndicated program is also heard on Air America, similarly complained of blacklisting in Ohio markets.

'Freedom of Speech Is Not Free'

Onscreen, and in the “Shut Up and Sing” panel discussion, Maines displayed her defiant spirit, which was also evident on Dec. 15, 2003. On that date, at the height of the backlash against progressive artists, the Dixie Chicks attended the annual Bill of Rights Dinner presented by the American Civil Liberties Union’s Southern California chapter in Beverly Hills. The function celebrated the 212th anniversary of the first 10 amendments of the Constitution and honored Chicks manager Simon Renshaw (and that other “Dixie Chick,” fellow Texan Molly Ivins).

Asked which of the 10 amendments was their favorite, Maines, fellow Chick Emily Robison and manager Simon Renshaw all proclaimed the First. Renshaw added: “You know! The big one! The whole, like, speech thing one! ... The right to bear big mouths.” If she had to choose between 10 platinum albums or the First Amendment, Robison said she preferred “Freedom of speech. That’s ... really easy to answer. It was hard for us to be made an example of this year—but sometimes you’ve got to be the one. ... We still want to stand up for what we believe is right.”

How is it that Americans pride themselves on living in a free country where people can speak their minds, but if they express dissent they’re often punished? “That’s the new system here,” Renshaw responded. “Certain people in the country have figured out that the best way of actually curtailing freedom of speech is to make sure people understand freedom of speech is no longer free, and there’s consequences to exercising free speech. What we saw in 2003, when people spoke out, there was a very well organized, vociferous group that immediately went after them and attempted to harm their well-being. Certainly, the Dixie Chicks saw death threats as a result of what they said,” Renshaw said.

Maines added: “After September 11th, we felt lots of vulnerability, and wanted somebody to lead and save us. The country’s been in a strange state ... so try not to get too discouraged about everything that occurred. Things like that should always be a reminder, that we haven’t necessarily come as far as we think we have, and we have to constantly be checking ourselves. A mother of a military guy wrote us saying, ‘Freedom’s not something you can write on a wall. It’s something you live.’ So I feel proud that I use my freedoms, and don’t just claim on a daily basis to have freedom.”

Expressing admiration for the ACLU, Maines noted, “Standing up for the underdog sometimes is not politically correct.” When the tongue-in-cheeky Maines presented the award to Renshaw, she poked fun at those questioning her patriotism: “Lots of people will be surprised to hear I was here tonight, because they were waiting for me to get out of that hole with Saddam.”

Maines added: “Another power the federal government refuses to limit [is] the power of the corporate media. Not the media’s right to speak, but the media’s obligation to let other people speak. I don’t want to mention any names, but freedom of speech requires a clear channel to communications. ... We have to all get active and challenge our government, or ... the Bill of Rights will just be something from history we learn about in school.”

During his acceptance speech, Renshaw mocked “George the Second,” contending: “Certainly, 2003 ... [was] the year America was deceived into a war, and part of that deception was putting on notice any dissenting voice to ensure they understood freedom of speech is not free. The concept of ‘shut up and sing’ was born. ... It’s now possible to be ‘Dixie Chicked.’ ... There are many well-organized groups of right-thinking citizens who will work selflessly to make sure that those who dare to speak up and dissent are suitably ‘Dixie Chicked.’ They make their views known from the safety and anonymity of the Internet and radio talk shows. ... They’re determined to ensure that we understand freedom of speech is not free.”

Renshaw continued: “Especially you—Hollywood. You music and movie celebrities ... are all on notice: Shut up and sing—or act or whatever. But shut up! I also learned we can count on America’s liberal media—yeah, right! Instead of asking the questions and encouraging debate, our new media conglomerates issue corporate ‘fatwas’ on those to be ‘Dixie Chicked.’ Music networks can ban your music, talk shows can vilify your personality, what remains of this country’s so-called news media trivializes it all into neat 30-second sound bites. ... You may have freedom of speech, but our media now seems to be designed [so] we’ll never be heard. ... A well-known German TV personality ... told us: ‘In my country, our media would never allow this to happen again.’”

Finally, Renshaw concluded: “I’d like to thank the Dixie Chicks [for] the way they handled themselves through a lousy time ... and for having the strength to say ‘no,’ and for their insistence on always doing the right thing. ... Freedom of speech is only important if it’s exercised. Celebrities should not shut up and sing: They should stand up and shout, and we must support them.”

‘Stand Up and Shout’

In a similar spirit, during his March 24, 2007, speech, Sean Penn declared: “Well, you and the smarmy pundits in your pocket, those who bathe in the moisture of your soiled and bloodstained underwear, can take that noise and shove it. We will be snowed no more. Let’s make this crystal-clear. We do support our troops in our stand, while you exploit them and their families. The verdict is in. You lied, connived, and exploited your own countrymen and, most of all, our troops ... you Mistery Bush and Cheney; you, Ms. Rice, are villainously and criminally obscene people. ...”

Their courage and creativity sustained dissident artists, as the tide of public opinion eventually began to turn. In 2004, Penn and co-star Tim Robbins won Oscars for “Mystic River,” a film about child-killing and abuse, directed by Clint Eastwood,

who went on to helm the anti-war-themed 2007 best-picture nominee "Letters From Iwo Jima." And the Dixie Chicks swept 2007's Grammys, as their single "Not Ready to Make Nice" expressed the band's fighting spirit. These awards are affirmations for contrarian performers in industries subject to popular and commercial whims.

Likewise, in the decades following their censure, some blacklist-era artists also made comebacks. Dalton Trumbo wrote numerous movies, including "Spartacus," and directed and wrote the 1971 pacifist picture "Johnny Got His Gun," which won the Jury Grand Prize at that year's Cannes Film Festival. Ring Lardner won a screenwriting Oscar for 1970's anti-war comedy "M*A*S*H," and screenwriter Waldo Salt won for 1969's "Midnight Cowboy," which also took the best-director and best-picture Academy Awards. Salt was also co-nominated for 1974's "Serpico" and co-won another Oscar for 1978's anti-Vietnam-War drama. "Coming Home," starring Jane Fonda and Jon Voight. Abraham Polonsky's "Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here" (1969) was a gritty look at indigenous Americans' plight.

The Committee for the First Amendment '47/'07 was formed this year, not just to commemorate the Hollywood 10 and the blacklist or to seek redress for past grievances. Rather, the main reason for its creation was to remind people about a previous era of repression in order to shine a light on contemporary censorship against dissenting artists so that another blacklist—and a new brand of McCarthyism—never comes to pass. The following is a list of several artists and media figures who have paid the price for dissenting since Sept. 11, 2001.

"Watch What You Say": The Post-9/11 Dixie Chicked:

* Like truth, comedian Bill Maher was an early casualty of war. Discussing 9/11's skyjackers on the Sept. 17, 2001, episode of "Politically Incorrect," Maher stated: "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly. Stupid maybe, but not cowardly." Maher's remarks prompted Bush's then-spokesman Ari Fleischer to warn: "Watch what you say." The Disney-owned ABC network canceled Maher's show in June 2002.

* Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Phillip Noyce's adaptation of Graham Greene's novel "The Quiet American," starring Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser, was reportedly shelved because it critiqued U.S. foreign policy in 1950s Vietnam. According to the Toronto Sun, Miramax (then part of Disney) "abandoned it because ... Harvey Weinstein did not like the politics." Caine, a two-time Oscar winner knighted by Queen Elizabeth, was forced to plead for the release of the film, which finally opened in November 2002.

* In February 2003, Sean Penn sued producer Steve Bing for \$10 million for allegedly firing the actor from a film because of Penn's 2002 Washington Post anti-war ad and trip to Baghdad. Bing counter-sued.

* After the Dixie Chicks' frontwoman Natalie Maines said at a March 2003 concert in London, "[W]e're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas," the Chicks, who were the top-selling all-girl group, went on to lose airtime on country-western radio stations owned by Clear Channel and other corporations, and CD and concert ticket sales plummeted. Egged on by reactionary bloggers and DJs, anti-"DXC" listeners destroyed Dixie Chicks' CDs during "Dixie Chicks Destruction" events.

* In 2003, actor David Clennon was targeted by a right-wing Internet campaign seeking to have him fired from CBS' CIA series "The Agency" for comparing Bush's America to Nazi Germany.

* Conservatives attempted to impeach "acting president" Martin Sheen from NBC's "The West Wing" and his Visa and American Express endorsements.

* Also in 2003, right-wingers lobbied MCI to drop activist-actor Danny Glover as its spokesman.

* As the Iraq war loomed, the peace sign Amanda Bynes flashed was removed from ads for 2003's "What a Girl Wants."

* After Michael Moore said, "Shame on you, Mr. Bush," at the March 23, 2003, Academy Awards ceremony, a right-wing, "pro-family" group published the address of Moore's house in rural Michigan, according to Moore, who said, "They published a photo of it. My home was vandalized. There have been attempts to do various things. Harvey and Bob [Weinstein] have to pay for 24/7 security for me. It's a rotten way to live."

* Phil Donahue's liberal-leaning talk show was canceled on March 28, 2003, despite being MSNBC's highest rated program (surpassing "Hardball").

* Madonna reportedly self-censored her April 2003 "American Life" music video.

* On April 6, 2003, CBS fired Ed Gernon after the producer of the 2003 miniseries "Hitler: The Rise of Evil" told TV Guide that the series' story "basically boils down to an entire nation gripped by fear who ultimately chose to give up their civil rights and plunge the whole world into war. I can't think of a better time to examine this history than now." The New York Post, owned by Rupert Murdoch, denounced "Hitler: The Rise of Evil" as "a sign of Hollywood's anti-Americanism." Fox News commentator and "Bush Country" author John Podhoretz called the docudrama "an act of slander against the president" in

his New York Post column.

* In 2003, the Cooperstown, N.Y., Baseball Hall of Fame canceled a 15th anniversary "Bull Durham" commemoration because of the anti-war politics of its stars Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon. On April 15, 2003, Robbins told Washington's National Press Club: "A history teacher tells [my] 11-year-old ... nephew [that] Sarandon is endangering the troops by her opposition to the war. Another teacher ... asks our niece if we are coming to the school play. 'They're not welcome here,' said the molder of young minds. ... A friend listen[s] to the radio down South as the talk radio host calls for the murder of a prominent anti-war activist. Death threats have appeared on other prominent anti-war activists' doorsteps. ... Relatives of ours have received threatening e-mails and phone calls. And my 13-year-old boy ... has recently been embarrassed and humiliated by a sadistic creep who writes—or, rather, scratches his column with his fingernails in dirt. Susan and I have been listed as traitors, as supporters of Saddam ... by the Aussie gossip rags masquerading as newspapers, and by their 'fair and balanced' electronic media cousins, 19th Century Fox."

* At a September 2003 fundraiser for presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich, actor Ed Begley Jr. said: "There's a boycott list on the Internet for all the people who spoke out against the war, to write letters to studios telling them you don't want to see shows featuring Jamie Cromwell, [myself], Ed Asner, Tim Robbins. ... Janeane Garofalo [took] a big hit. They've suffered financially, can't get work now. They've been blackballed. People don't want to hire them. ... Janeane gets so much hate mail. ... I didn't work from when that boycott list happened until just a few weeks ago. ... I've never only worked three days in nine months since ... 1967." Reactionary Web sites, including celiberal.com and boycott-hollywood.net, urged boycotts of activist actors.

* Conservatives reportedly pressured CBS to edit and reschedule the less-than-laudatory miniseries "The Reagans" from its original November 2003 CBS broadcast date to 2004 on the cable TV channel Showtime, which—like CBS—is owned by Viacom but has fewer viewers.

* The FCC proposed a \$495,000 fine against six Clear Channel stations airing Howard Stern's radio show on April 8, 2004. The shock jock responded, "This is a follow-up to the McCarthy-type 'witch-hunt' of the administration and the activities of this group of presidential appointees in the FCC, led by 'Colin Powell Jr.' [FCC Chairman Michael Powell]. ... They ... are ... imposing their opinions and rights to tell us all who and what we may listen to and watch and how we should think. ... It is pretty shocking that governmental interference into our rights and free speech takes place in the U.S. It's hard to reconcile this with the 'land of the free' and the 'home of the brave.' I'm sure what's next is the removal of 'dirty pictures' like the 20th century German exhibit in a New York City museum and the erotic literature in our libraries; they too will fall into their category of 'evil' as well."

* In May 2004, Disney reneged on its distribution deal for Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," momentarily leaving the Cannes Palme d'Or winner in limbo until Lionsgate released it.

* After Linda Ronstadt praised "Fahrenheit 9/11" during her July 17, 2004, concert at Las Vegas' Aladdin resort, fans grew irate; she was escorted by security guards off the property and banned from performing there again.

* CBS News producer Mary Mapes was fired, and Dan Rather eventually forced out, after their Sept. 8, 2004 "60 Minutes II" election-year report challenged George W. Bush's Vietnam War service record. The expose presented compelling evidence that strings had been pulled to get Bush out of going to 'Nam, and into the Texas Air National Guard's "Champagne Unit" instead.

* On Sept. 21, 2004, a Washington-bound passenger jet bearing British musician Cat Stevens—who had long before converted to Islam and had re-recorded his 1970's "Peace Train" hit to protest the Iraq war—was diverted to Maine after U.S. authorities matched his name with one on a no-fly list. Homeland Security denied Stevens admission to the U.S.

* Following a successful 2005 run on the London stage, on March 22, 2006, the premiere of the pro-Palestinian rights play "My Name Is Rachel Corrie" at off-Broadway's New York Theatre Workshop was postponed. The drama was based on the titular 23-year-old American peace activist, who was crushed on March 16, 2003, by an Israeli military bulldozer as she attempted to prevent the demolition of a Palestinian pharmacist's home in Gaza. The play finally debuted at Greenwich Village's Minetta Lane Theatre in October 2006.

* On Sept. 15, 2006, Bill Maher claimed that CBS News withdrew its offer for the comic to appear in the short-lived "Free Speech" segment on Katie Couric's "CBS Evening News" program after Maher—an atheist—chose religion as his proposed topic.

* In October 2006, right-winger Florian Sokolowski sent left-leaning talk show host Stephanie Miller a letter declaring: "As with Cindy Sheehan, the best thing that could happen to you would be seeing some wonderful activist sticking an AK-47 up your glory holes and sending you into eternity."

* By early 2007, the Clear Channel-owned radio station WTPG-AM changed its liberal talk show format, dropping programs including the nationally syndicated Stephanie Miller and Ed Schultz shows, although the Columbus, Ohio, station had reportedly tripled its ratings. Miller, Schultz and Air America programs were replaced by right-wing shows hosted by Michael

Savage and Laura Ingraham. Miller alleges, "There's a concerted effort to shut down progressive talk. [Conservative] Christians are buying radio stations." In the April 6, 2007, edition of the Los Angeles Times, Schultz claimed his program's move to the evening on Clear Channel-owned KTLK-AM in Los Angeles "has nothing to do with ratings or sales." "Big Eddie"—whom Talkers Magazine called America's leading "progressive talk" host—alleged that Air America "wrote [KTLK] a check" to put a host with lower Arbitron ratings in Schultz's afternoon time slot.

* Folk singer Joan Baez, who had performed at numerous anti-Vietnam-War demonstrations, was forbidden to participate in John Mellencamp's April 27, 2007, Walter Reed Hospital concert for wounded troops.

* On the fourth anniversary of the start of the U.S. military's "shock and awe" campaign in Iraq, CNN's White House correspondent Ed Henry sparred with Bush's press secretary over what the "recipe for success" in Iraq is. During the March 19, 2007, briefing, Tony Snow told Henry to "zip it."

* On May 2, 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department notified Michael Moore that he was being investigated for violating the U.S. trade embargo's travel restrictions to Cuba by taking ailing 9/11 rescue workers for treatment there as part of his movie "SiCKO." In case U.S. authorities tried to seize it, Moore hid a copy of his health-care documentary in an overseas safe house. After "SiCKO" opened on June 29, Moore was grilled by many mainstream media outlets with the kind of zeal the corporate press had failed to exhibit during the lead-up to the Iraq war.

* On May 9, 2007, retired Maj. Gen. John Baptiste, former commander of the First Infantry in Iraq, appeared in an anti-war TV ad—and was quickly fired as a CBS news consultant.

* Following a May 23, 2007, on-the-air confrontation with conservative co-host Elisabeth Hasselbeck, Rosie O'Donnell quit ABC's "The View" before her contract expired. The outspoken O'Donnell called Hasselbeck "cowardly" for not defending her when "Republican pundits" accused O'Donnell of equating American troops with "terrorists."

* On June 25, 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against former Alaska high school student Joseph Frederick, who had unfurled a "Bong Hits 4 Jesus" banner seen on national TV during the Olympic relay. Frederick contended that subsequent reprisals by school administrators violated his First Amendment rights. This was the high court's first ruling on student free speech rights in 20 years.

* The Interior Department and Republican Sens. James Inhofe and Mitch McConnell reportedly blocked the U.S. portion of the anti-global-warming Live Earth telecast from taking place at Washington's National Mall. The July 7, 2007, global concert and environmental fundraiser was co-presented by Al Gore, whose documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" won an Oscar.

* In a front-page story, the August 21, 2007, Los Angeles Times reported that the Israeli Defense Forces are blacklisting celebrities and performers who have evaded the draft or not completed their service, barring them from entertaining at military functions and venues and on its media outlets.

* When Sally Field attempted to make an anti-war statement during her acceptance speech on the Sept. 16, 2007, Emmy awards ceremony televised live on FOX TV, network censors cut the audio and video. What the censored actress said was, "Let's face it, if the mothers ruled the world, there would be no goddamned wars in the first place."

* Former CBS news anchor Dan Rather filed a \$70-million wrongful termination lawsuit against CBS on Sept. 19, 2007, alleging that, in the aftermath of the "60 Minutes II" report charging that Bush had ducked military service, CBS had made Rather a "scapegoat" in order to "pacify" the White House. Rather told the L.A. Times that "any money he collects will go to nonprofit groups, including the Committee to Protect Journalists."

* The U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning a MoveOn.org ad by a 72-25 vote on Sept. 20, 2007. MoveOn's full-page ad in The New York Times was headlined and subheaded: "General Petraeus or General Betray Us? Cooking the books for the White House." Apparently the 22 Democratic senators who voted with the majority agreed with Bush, who attacked MoveOn's ad as "disgusting."

On Oct. 26, the precise 60th anniversary of the Committee for the First Amendment's first "Hollywood Fights Back!" broadcast, contemporary talents, along with blacklist survivors and their relatives, will reenact the original 1947 radio program. Performers scheduled to participate include: former SAG President Ed Asner, Norma Barzman, Larry Gelbart, Isabelle Gunning (ACLU/Southern California president), Marsha Hunt, Camryn Manheim, Ramona Ripston, Christopher Trumbo, James Whitmore and Becca Wilson. The event, presented by the ACLU Foundation of Southern California, will take place at Los Angeles' Skirball Center. For more information call (213) 977-9500, Ext. 227.



AP photo / Dima Gavrysh

Still singing: Dixie Chicks (from left) Emily Robison, Natalie Maines and Martie Maguire perform on “Good Morning America” on May 26, 2006.