

Iris DeMent song provokes intense debate

Richard Phillips
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The folk/traditional American music scene has produced powerful social commentators from Woody Guthrie and others in the 1930s and 40s, through to the numerous folk singers who spoke out in the 1960s against racism, the war in Vietnam and other political and social issues.

Today there are few artists within this genre prepared to deal with the social problems confronting ordinary working people or speak out against religious hypocrisy, war or government attacks on democratic rights. Those capable of producing songs that combine hatred of the social ills produced by the profit system with genuine musical creativity and emotional depth are few in number indeed.

Iris DeMent, a 37-year-old singer/songwriter born in Arkansas and raised in California, is amongst the best within this small group of musicians. DeMent cites Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Carter Family as some of her principal musical influences.

In 1996, after two critically-acclaimed CDs (*Infamous Angel* and the intensely personal *My Life*), DeMent released *The Way I Should*, an album containing "Wasteland of the Free" a blunt indictment of the right-wing political and social agenda dominating in the US. The five-minute song denounces religious and political hypocrisy and corruption, government and corporate attacks on workers' wages, the great and growing gap between rich and poor, and the imprisonment of tens of thousands of unemployed and poverty-stricken American youth.

"Wasteland" derides those claiming the US to be an "advanced civilization" and describes government and media scapegoating of the poor as a "Hitler solution". The song also attacks US foreign policy declaring: "We kill for oil then we throw a party when we win/Some guy refuses to fight and we call that a sin". It concludes: "While we sit gloating in our greatness/Justice is sinking to the bottom of the sea/And it feels like I'm living in the wasteland of the free."

Naturally, conservative radio programmers and DJs would not play the song, and the album was poorly received by most of those critics associated with the recording industry in Nashville.

A year later, in 1997, the song so inflamed Republican

State Senator John Grant of Florida that he used it as a pretext to secure government support for a \$US103,000 cut in annual state funding to WMNF-FM, a community radio station in that state. Grant cited DeMent's song and two others--one by Robert Earl Keen, another by Dan Bern--as the pretext for cuts representing almost 17 percent of the station's budget.

In a crude, but nonetheless instructive example of how governments censor small independent stations, Grant, citing extracts from "Wasteland of the Free", claimed the station was broadcasting adult content and therefore not eligible for funding. He suggested that if the station changed its programming he might be willing to change his position.

The station's management who immediately told listeners about Grant's "offer" rejected this. This produced an outpouring of anger against the senator and support for the station. An emergency one-day fund drive saw listeners donate \$120,000 to the station.

Grant responded by claiming credit for the support and told station management that all they had to do was work harder and raise the \$103,000 shortfall each year. It was only after hundreds of protest letters and widespread local media publicity that the Florida state legislature agreed to restore funding but only at three-quarters of the previous allocation.

"Wasteland of the Free" still has a tremendous ability to provoke serious reflection and discussion about social and political life, not just in America, but around the world. Evidence of this, and a growing understanding amongst sections of the population that something is fundamentally wrong with society, is shown in a series of e-mail exchanges about the song on a Iris DeMent discussion group in early February.

In a debate over the song's relative strengths, or weaknesses, a Canadian writer described "Wasteland" as a "damning indictment of unbridled capitalism, corporate and public greed. The Hitler metaphor was pretty strident stuff and came as a bit of shock, but makes sense: the ends justify the means." An American correspondent rejected assertions that the song "lacked balance" and said it told "the truth of what goes on in the States."

A letter from a disgruntled concert-goer denounced

DeMent as "a selfish, non-thinking socialist of the 1960's sort" and said he would never purchase her CDs or attend her concerts again.

"It's easy to have all that America provides as long as you don't have to contribute anything, especially your life. She made references to 'them' and 'the other side', intimating about people with religious beliefs and who have conservative economic values. I am not a member of any church, Christian Coalition, or anything even remotely connected.

"I came away disheartened by what I had thought was a remarkably talented person. In music yes. In thought, character, honesty and loyalty--NO. She was divisive and certainly deserves no credit for her poor performance.

"In case you want to know. I'm 52 years old, served in Vietnam and Thailand in 1966-67. Believed that and still do that communism is a despotic system. Sure you think I'm an old right-wing crank. Part of that Hilary inspired 'conspiracy'. Was starting to believe that the Country was, after many long years, coming together again. What I heard from Iris was divisive, revisionist, and in all, of poor taste."

This letter produced a rash of thoughtful comments, including the following: "I don't know that it's so much a song about 'left wing good/right wing bad' but a song of tremendous frustration with the world. I think it is simply lack of empathy, honesty and justice in our culture that has Iris angry and it makes me angry and frustrated, too. It is, at its heart, a song about how we need to think about solving problems, not blaming people or 'spinning' them in a way that supports some other agenda."

Other readers commented on DeMent's courage and conviction and confirmed the song's observations about the profound problems confronting youth in America. "My boyfriend is a NYC inner city school teacher and from what he says and from what I have seen, the song rings true. I really like the song and admire Iris for being so forthright," another writer said.

Two interesting letters were posted by former Vietnam veterans. The first explained: "Strangely enough I also served in Vietnam and Thailand '63-'65 and my opinions on Iris do not mirror our original contributor on this subject.

"Show me a folk singer who isn't left wing and it would truly surprise me (the exception might be Burl Ives who when asked by the McCarthy committee if he'd identify subversives said 'sure' and named almost everybody associated with folk music). A folk singer's job is in some respects to point out shortcomings in our society."

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The last letter said: "I am new to this list, but not new to listening to Iris. I discovered her several years ago when I heard 'Our Town' on the closing episode of 'Northern

Exposure'. I was the first person in Baton Rouge (when I lived there) to get a copy of her 'The Way I Should'. I am a retired Army Officer and Vietnam Vet and I find great irony in her songs. I am not in the least offended. IT'S THE TRUTH! All great folk artists have taken their licks for publicly expressing their opinions... sometimes the truth is a bitter pill. To this end... Right On Iris!!"

Last year in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* Iris DeMent explained that "Wasteland of the Free" was a difficult song to perform because it was so direct. "But I can't keep quiet about these things," she added.

"I don't have all the answers but if my songs make people think more deeply and figure out solutions that I'm not able to, then this is what it's for. If people get upset and it forces them to stop and think, then the song has done the job."

Three years since the release of "Wasteland of the Free", the song is doing its job--forcing people to confront the social ills produced by the profit system, compelling them to critically contrast government and media platitudes about democracy and freedom with social reality. The discussion and questioning provoked by this and similar songs continue in spite of the efforts of Senator John Grant and other big business politicians.

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Iris DeMent, who has maintained a strenuous touring schedule since the release of *The Way I Should*, is said to be working on a new collection of songs for a future CD. Over the last two years she has appeared as a featured artist on the following albums: *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers-A Tribute; Real: The Tom T. Hall Project; The Horse Whisperer* soundtrack; Steve Earle's latest album, *The Mountain*; and Tom Russell's excellent, soon to be released, *The Man from God Knows Where*. This album, dealing with the hopes and dreams of immigrants to America, is a blend of traditional Irish, Norwegian and American country and folk music. Other artists featured on *The Man from God Knows Where* include Dave Van Ronk, Ireland's Dolores Keane and Kari Bremnes from Norway.



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