

US country singer Steve Earle subjected to witch-hunt

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Months before its commercial release, a song written from the perspective of John Walker Lindh—the American youth captured last November with Taliban forces in Afghanistan—is already being subjected to hysterical attacks in the mass media. “John Walker’s Blues” is written and performed by country-rock singer Steve Earle and will be included on Earle’s latest CD, *Jerusalem*, scheduled for release September 24.

The song presents Lindh as a young man drawn to Islamic fundamentalism as a way out of the spiritual emptiness he feels growing up in America:

*I’m just an American boy raised on MTV
And I’ve seen all those kids in the soda pop ads
But none of ‘em looked like me
So I started lookin’ around for a light out of the dim
And the first thing I heard that made sense was the word
Of Mohammed, peace be upon him
A shadu la ilaha illa Allah
There is no God but God*

But Lindh’s dreams are shattered and, with “chains around my feet,” is returned to the country of his birth:

*But Allah had some other plan, some secret not revealed
Now they’re draggin’ me back with my head in a sack
To the land of the infidel.*

In a press release, Earle makes clear that the song is not intended as an endorsement of Lindh or his cause: “I don’t condone what he did. Still, he’s a 20-year-old kid. My son Justin is almost exactly Walker’s age. Would I be upset if he suddenly turned up fighting for the Islamic Jihad? Sure, absolutely. Fundamentalism, as practiced by the Taliban, is the enemy of real thought, and religion too. But there are circumstances.... He didn’t just sit on the couch and watch the box, get depressed and complain. He was a smart kid, he graduated from high school early, the culture here didn’t impress him, so he went out looking for something to believe in.”

Such nuance is of little concern to those who have denounced “John Walker’s Blues.” Leading the attack, right-wing talk radio host Steve Gill told his audience that the song “celebrates and glorifies a traitor to this country.... This puts [Earle] in the same category as Jane Fonda and John Walker and all those people who hate America.”

Gill called on listeners to boycott stations that play or stores that sell the CD, while cynically purporting to defend Earle’s right to artistic expression. “I’m not calling for burning CDs,” said Gill,

“but people can vote with their wallets as a counter-expression to the free expression Steve’s expressed in his song.”

Other media outlets, including Fox, CNN and the *New York Post*, quickly took up Gill’s attack. In a July 21 story headlined “Twisted Ballad Honors Tali-Rat” the *Post* claimed that “American Taliban fighter John Walker Lindh is glorified and called Jesus-like in a country-rock song ... by maverick singer-songwriter Steve Earle.”

Two days later, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece by columnist Collin Levey mocking the very notion of artistic license (“a watery line of defense”) as justification for writing a song from the perspective of a “traitor.” According to Levey, Earle “discredit[s] the honored tradition of dissidence in popular song”—a tradition which for Levey is exemplified by the insipid 1980s feel-good anthem “We are the World”!

Other commentators have taken a more personal line of attack. Former *Wall Street Journal* media critic and popular music historian Martha Bayles condescendingly suggests that Earle’s choice of Lindh as narrator reflects “a psychological need to repeat the good old days of the radical 60s, just like Mom and Dad.... Never mind whether the cause makes any sense—the point is to get on TV. It sounds as if Earle is singing to this crowd.”

The attacks on “John Walker’s Blues” take place against the backdrop of a continuing media campaign to vilify John Walker Lindh and distort the facts of his case. From the outset, the media has worked hand-in-glove with the Bush administration to turn public opinion against Lindh, labeling him the “American Taliban,” downplaying the blatant unconstitutionality of his treatment and leading the call for his execution as a traitor.

Lindh’s treatment by US authorities, however, has been a legal and human rights travesty from the outset. After being captured late last year by the US-backed Northern Alliance, Lindh was imprisoned in Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif and threatened with death by CIA interrogators. Wounded during a US-North Alliance massacre of captives at the prison, the half-starved and seriously shocked Lindh barely escaped with his life. US military and FBI personnel refused to treat Lindh’s wounds, interrogated him for days on end and ignored his requests for a lawyer and his right to remain silent. The first contact Lindh had with the lawyer hired by his parents was on January 25, almost three months after his initial capture.

The most serious charges against Lindh—that he attacked Americans or played a significant role in either the Taliban or Al

Qaeda—were so transparently false that the Justice Department chose instead to proceed only on the lesser charges of providing services to the Taliban and carrying weapons in that service, for which Lindh was handed a punitive 20-year sentence. Yet the media continue to portray him as a traitor, his fate a triumph of the justice system. In this climate, even a remotely sympathetic view of Lindh is sure to come under attack.

“John Walker’s Blues” offers an encouraging alternative to the responses to September 11 and its aftermath that have so far distinguished popular music, and indeed popular culture as a whole. To the extent that popular musicians have addressed these events at all, the results have, for the most part, been complacent, conformist and utterly forgettable. Typical is Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning),” a cloying ballad crammed with more images of an idealized America than a 1950s State Department propaganda film, or Paul McCartney’s chest-thumping anthem, “Freedom,” with a lyric so abstract (“Everybody’s talkin’ bout freedom/We’re talkin’ about freedom/We will fight for the right to live in freedom”) that it could have been written about virtually any political cause, issue or event.

Far worse, however, is the jingoism typified by “New Country” singer Toby Keith’s current single “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (the Angry American).” An enormous hit, the song echoes the bellicose rhetoric of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism.” (“*The big dog will fight/When you rattle his cage/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*”). Given the success of the record, one can confidently expect the music industry to offer much more of the same in the near future. Needless to say, “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” has received far more favorable treatment than “John Walker’s Blues” in the mainstream media.

Earle says the entire *Jerusalem* CD was conceived as a response to September 11. In a press release, he describes it as “a political record, because there seems no other proper response to the place we’re at now.” In particular, Earle says he wanted to voice his contempt for the Patriot Act, “an incredibly dangerous piece of legislation ... that has to be opposed.” In addition to the war in Afghanistan, the album reportedly addresses subjects ranging from Bush’s drug enforcement policies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Jerusalem* is Earle’s fifteenth album, and the sixth in as many years.

The son of an air traffic controller, Earle was born in Fort Monroe, Virginia and raised near San Antonio, Texas. He showed early promise as a musician but was often in trouble with the law and dropped out of school after eighth grade. At 16, he left home, eventually settling in Houston, where he came under the influence of singer-songwriters Townes Van Zandt and Jerry Jeff Walker.

At 19, Earle moved to Nashville, where he found some success as a songwriter, and also had a small part in Robert Altman’s 1975 film *Nashville*. After moving back to Texas he assembled the first version of his backing band, the Dukes, and began playing local clubs. He began recording in 1982 and was signed to Epic Records the following year. The label did little to promote him, however, and in 1985 he signed with MCA. His debut album, *Guitar Town*,

won the admiration of both rock and country fans and the title track reached the Top 10.

Subsequent albums *Exit O* and *Copperhead Road* were also commercially successful, but Earle’s increasingly hard-edged sound and dark subject matter did not endear him to the Nashville establishment. For much of the 1990s, his career was derailed both by run-ins with record labels and deepening personal problems. He became addicted to cocaine and heroin, and in 1994 was arrested for heroin possession, for which he was sentenced to a year in rehabilitation. He returned to the limelight with the acclaimed 1995 acoustic album *Train A Comin’*.

“John Walker’s Blues” is typical both of Earle’s subject matter and narrative style. His work often shows great empathy for the oppressed, and he has written a number of remarkable songs from the perspective of loners, drifters and others outside the social mainstream. A vocal opponent of capital punishment, Earle has explored the subject in several songs, including “Ellis Unit One” and “Over Yonder (Jonathan’s Song).” The latter work, from *Transcendental Blues*, one of Earle’s recent albums, is told from the point of view of Jonathan Wayne Nobles, the Texas death-row inmate whom Earle befriended in the late 1980s. Earle was a witness at Nobles’ execution in 1998, an experience he describes powerfully in a story reprinted in the January 2001 edition of the *Utne Reader*. Earle’s play *Karla*, based on the life and death of Karla Faye Tucker, who was executed in Texas in 1998, is scheduled to open in Nashville later this year.

The campaign against “John Walker’s Blues” and its author is sure to intensify greatly when *Jerusalem* is released in a few weeks. Anticipating the response he expects to see whipped up against him, Earle told an audience at the Mariposa Folk Festival last month that the song may get him deported from the US.



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