

Singer Iris DeMent refuses to perform in protest against Iraq war

David Walsh
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US country music singer and songwriter Iris DeMent announced to an audience in Madison, Wisconsin March 21 that she would not be performing while the US was pursuing its war against Iraq. DeMent, who has recorded both fiercely personal and socially critical songs, told the surprised crowd of 600 at the Barrymore Theater that she had been agonizing over the decision for hours in her dressing room. Her opening act had already performed.

DeMent explained, "It would be trivializing the fact that my tax dollars are causing great suffering, and sending a message to the world that might is right."

Many in the theater stood and cheered her decision, although some had traveled considerable distances to attend the performance. Some audience members also refused to take their money back, in a show of support for her stance.

A contributor to DeMent's web site discussion group explained in greater detail the events of the evening:

"Iris came out to the center stage microphone and stood very still while the crowd applauded loudly for her. When it quieted down, she began to speak. Her voice was soft, yet audible, as she began to talk in a somewhat shaky, but very sincere voice. She confessed that she had been sitting in her dressing room for hours, trying to make a difficult decision. In the end, she said, she could only do 'what is in my heart.' She informed the audience that, because of the pain, destruction, brutality, and suffering going on in our world today ... she was not able to sing.

"Her voice became a little teary, as she went on to say that she would feel like a hypocrite, singing as if everything was right with the world. ... [She] immediately continued as she had begun—trying to explain to the audience how she felt about this war, and how the bombing attacks on Iraq, had deeply affected her. The crowd grew very quiet, and she went on to say that the tickets would all be refunded, and that if anyone had any trouble at all getting their money back, they should

contact her directly through her web site. She thanked everyone for coming, said 'Goodnight,' and walked off the stage. At this point, some audience members, myself included, stood up and applauded."

The response of contributors to DeMent's web site was overwhelmingly supportive, many of the emails coming from individuals who had been present in Madison. "Your decision to cancel the Madison concert was understood and respected by our community," commented one. "Thank you for your strength and your moral stance—we will keep listening!" said another. "We applaud the courage of your convictions in not performing," wrote a third.

A contributor from Wisconsin observed, "I was in attendance at your Madison concert on March 21, 2003. I just wanted to say, in case you might be dealing with any backlash for your move to cancel, that there are many of us who appreciated what you did out of respect for the trouble overseas and at home. It was one of the most powerful political statements I've ever witnessed, and you have definitely won my respect."

A few message writers expressed support for DeMent's position on the war, but opposed her decision not to sing.

Once a wire service story on the incident reached the national press, a few right-wing commentaries appeared. One contributor to the discussion group, describing himself as a "US Serviceman," commented, "You should be so thankful to the soldiers, seamen, airmen, and marines that are out there protecting your whiny, bleeding-heart liberal, uninformed life! You are a disgrace to the US and you should just leave. I'll be glad to buy you a one-way ticket to Iraq for you if you need it."

He was answered by another contributor, who wrote, "Mr. Serviceman, I am a veteran who spent over 2 years stationed in Germany, and this campaign Bush JR has started on is dead wrong.... Did you know that 10,000 Gulf War ONE veterans have died since their return

home, our government for the longest time refused to acknowledge there was even a Gulf War Syndrome, and that the Veteran's Administration continues to keep getting money cut from them year after year. Funny how we support our troops isn't it???"

On her 1996 CD, *The Way I Should*, DeMent included a song, "Wasteland of the Free," that was sharply critical of the social agenda being pursued by the political establishment in the US. It condemned Christian evangelist hypocrisy and corruption, the chasm between rich and poor and the law and order mania that was resulting in the incarceration of masses of young people. Referring to the first Gulf war, DeMent sang, "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." DeMent came under fire from right-wing elements at that time.

Iris DeMent was born in rural Arkansas, near Paragould, in 1961, the youngest of 14 children. After efforts by her father and others to unionize a local factory failed, the family moved to California. After high school she moved to Kansas City and later to Nashville. DeMent released her first CD, *Infamous Angel*, in 1992 and her second, *My Life*, in 1994.

She told the WSWS's Richard Phillips in 1998: "The more I hear and learn about the world and all the injustice that goes on—the poverty, the terrible things that happen—it makes me realize that maybe I should begin writing more and more about these subjects. This has got to be done so that more people understand what we are really facing.

"The poor are treated like enemies and it's getting now that you are almost considered a nut case if you speak out for ordinary people. This is something that I worry about a lot."



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