

“Shutting Detroit Down”: Country singer John Rich sings about the crisis, but also spreads confusion

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A new song by American country music singer John Rich, expressing anger over the Wall Street bailouts, home foreclosures and the destruction of the auto industry, has been gaining in popularity with listeners. A video of Rich performing the song during an appearance on a New Jersey radio station has been viewed more than 300,000 times on Youtube, and the track has risen to number 12 on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart.

Rich is one half of the successful country music duo Big ‘N’ Rich and has composed or produced songs for a number of popular country singers including Gretchen Wilson, Faith Hill and Wynonna Judd. Rich is a well-liked, award-winning musician with a large audience. His release of a song protesting the conditions confronting the working class under the impact of the economic crisis, a song not typical of his career, is of some significance.

“Shutting Detroit Down” is direct and to the point, if somewhat ham-fisted. Rich sings about the fate of workers whose benefits have been slashed after a lifetime on the job. In one verse, he sings “Well that old man’s been working in that plant most all his life, now his pension plan’s been cut in half and he can’t afford to die. It’s a crying shame, cause he ain’t the one to blame.” It isn’t hard to understand why so many have cheered Rich’s song at a time when unbelievable amounts of money have gone to bailout banks and corporations while workers have been forced to suffer enormous losses for a crisis not caused by them.

The song’s chorus makes reference to the de-industrialization of Detroit, now the poorest major city in the United States:

In the real world they’re shuttin’ Detroit down

While the boss-man takes his bonus pay and jets on out of town

And D.C.’s bailing out them bankers as the farmers auction ground

Yeah, while they’re living it up on Wall Street in that New York City town

Here in the real world they’re shuttin’ Detroit down

Here in the real world they’re shuttin’ Detroit down

Rich’s song and activities reflect the enormous confusion of a wide layer, pulled to the left and to the right. Until now he has been considered a committed right-winger. He supported John McCain in the 2008 Presidential race and performed at the Republican National Convention. He recently sang “Shutting Detroit Down” at one of several “Tea Parties,” anti-tax rallies organized or promoted by several personalities on the right and in the media. Rich’s Tea Party performance was broadcast on the Fox News Channel in a segment hosted by right-wing pundit Sean Hannity. Rich also performed “Shutting Detroit Down” on quasi-fascist talk radio personality Glenn Beck’s program.

While Rich appears to be sincere in his concern for workers, his song is populist, sentimental and, in its opening lines, longs for a return to an earlier, idealized way of life in the United States: “My daddy taught me in this country everyone’s the same, you work hard for your dollar and you never pass the blame when it don’t go your way.” This is a popular, but problematic work.

An official video for the song features songwriter and

actor Kris Kristofferson, well known for his left-liberal views, portraying a veteran auto worker (a supervisor) named John who is laid off his job at a plant after a lifetime on the floor. Actor Mickey Rourke plays a somewhat younger friend and co-worker who finds himself unable to control his rage upon witnessing the unjust treatment of his friend.

The video is somewhat angrier than the song, thanks in part to the presence of Rourke and Kristofferson. In one scene, Rourke's character and John arrive at John's house only to see all of his belongings set out on the street, the result of being evicted from his home due to foreclosure. Rourke angrily throws a beer bottle at a police car and goes after the officer overseeing the eviction. John collapses from the stress into the arms of his wife. It's more than a little melodramatic and facile, but the feelings of the actors come through.

The video includes television footage reporting on various aspects of the economic crisis, including mass layoffs and foreclosures. Interestingly, there is also a brief glimpse of congressman and frequent Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich (the only politician who appears in the video), considered, however incorrectly, a political outsider who challenges the power of corporations. A curious mix, all in all, of left and right.

While one can't be sure to what extent Rich agrees with the positions of the various far-right commentators, he obviously shares some of their views and his participation in their programs and events will likely serve to lead some of those moved by "Shutting Detroit Down" into very sinister territory. The likes of Hannity and Beck address the problems of working people and "average Joes" only to send them in the direction of anti-immigrant, nationalist chauvinism and other reactionary views. Rich, in the lyrics to "Shutting Detroit Down," never strays into this territory himself, but will only contribute to further confusion and misdirection by associating the song and himself with such reprehensible figures.

Rich is expected to follow up "Shutting Detroit Down" by releasing his song "The Good Lord and The Man" as the next single from his *Son of a Preacher Man* album. The lyrics are standard right-wing fare, playing into nationalist sentiments of which Beck and Hannity would no doubt approve. Rich sings:

When I see people on my TV taking shots at Uncle

Sam,

I hope they always remember why they can

'Cause we'd all be speaking German, living under the flag of Japan,

If it wasn't for the good Lord and the man.

"The Good Lord and The Man" is one of several similar works on Rich's latest album. Also included are the narcissistic "Everybody Wants to Be Me" and another pandering, populist track called "Trucker Man." The album is very poor, much of it entirely wrongheaded. "Shutting Detroit Down" is the opening track on the album. One must say it fits in more than one might expect.



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