

# **Make Music Not War: American Popular Music Opposing Bush's "War on Terror"**

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While most of us can easily recall multiple protest songs from the Vietnam Era the typical American cannot name an anti-war song written during the War on Terror. Even those of us who were paying attention and were consuming popular music regularly are hard-pressed to name multiple protest songs from the early 2000s, if we are even capable of naming one. The reasons for this are a bit of an enigma, though I'll discuss some theories later. One thing is clear though, this seeming dearth had nothing to do with a lack of trying on the part of musicians. Though it was not disseminated in the typical ways protest music during the War on Terror actually existed en masse outside of the standard system. In fact, as Jeneve Brooks found in her comparative study, the number of anti-war songs during the Iraq/Afghanistan war vastly outnumbered those written during Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> Musicians were simply facing a social, political, and economic landscape that varied greatly from the Vietnam era and made it difficult to get their message to the masses.

In order to study what these musicians were saying and how they tried to say it I've broken their messages down thematically and will present a representative example of each. Anti-war music during the War on Terror shared the same purpose as protest music during any war: to reflect the sentiments present in society at large. It expressed disagreement with the stated reasons for the war and identified what the artist believed ought to be the real concerns. The majority of songs expressed sadness for the soldiers, their families, and civilians in this and other countries whose lives were impacted by the war. Some addressed perceived corruption within the government or corporations with an interest in the war. Some artists painted America as a tyrannical nation, imposing its will on others. While others believed that there were more pressing issues at home and in their neighborhoods that ought to be dealt with first.

## **Anti-War**

The most straight-forward protest theme found in popular music was, of course, the anti-war sentiment. These songs may have used any or all of the other main themes discussed in protest music, but their main objective was to express their resistance to the war in general.

## **System of a down —Boom**

System of a Down's song and video "Boom"<sup>2</sup> was released on November 26, 2002. It was one of the earliest protest songs to be released during the War on Terror. SOAD had a distinct perspective on the war considering the band comprised four Armenian-Americans, two

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<sup>1</sup> Jeneve R. Brooks, *The Silent Soundtrack: Anti-War Music from Vietnam to Iraq*, dissertation, Fordham University, (May 2009): 162.

<sup>2</sup> System of a Down, *Steal this Album*, American/Columbia, November 26, 2002.

of whom had families that took refuge America because of the violence in their home country. The threat of another war in the Middle East was of particular concern to them.

“Boom” touches on many of the main protest themes during the war. It discusses the band’s perception of the consumer-driven state of American society, the corruption in the American government, as well as the suffering in the world because of war. The chorus discusses the immorality and futility of war.

I’ve been walking through your streets  
Where all you money’s earning,  
Where all your building’s crying,  
And clueless neckties working.  
Revolving fake lawn houses  
Housing all your fears.  
Desensitized by TV.  
Overbearing advertising.  
God of consumerism.  
And all your crooked pictures.  
Looking good, mirrorism.  
Filtering information  
For the public eye.  
Designed for profiteering.  
Your neighbor, what a guy.  
  
Modern globalization  
Coupled with condemnations.  
Unnecessary death.

Matador corporations  
Puppeting your frustrations  
With the blinded flag.  
Manufacturing consent  
Is the name of the game.  
The bottom line is money.  
Nobody gives a fuck.  
4000 hungry children leave us per hour  
from starvation  
While billions spent on bombs,  
creating death showers.  
  
Why must we kill our own kind?  
  
BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM,  
Every time you drop the bomb,  
You kill the god your child has born.

The video for “Boom” was more historically important than the song itself. It was directed by Michael Moore and chronicled the world-wide protests against the invasion of Iraq in February 2002. It is set up somewhat like a newscast with text displayed on the bottom of the screen. Many times this text expressed concern for the effect on Iraq and the Middle East. This is displayed prominently at the end of the video. After the music has ended, a Middle Eastern teenager is shown riding a bike and smiling. Given the focus of the song, it is a chilling scene as one can imagine how it might have ended.

### **Pro-Peace**

Some musicians took the pacifist route and promoted a focus on peace rather than discussing the war or politics directly.

#### **Lenny Kravitz – We Want Peace**

An example of this was Lenny Kravitz’s “We Want Peace.” His arrangement was particularly notable because he performed the song with Iraqi pop star, Kadim Al Sahir, Palestinian strings musician, Simon Shaheen, and Lebanese percussionist, Jamey Hadded.

The song begins with a cadenza-like introduction on oud by Shaheen before breaking into Kravitz’s signature electric guitar funk-style backed up by lush vocal harmonies. The lyrics are meant to motivate listeners to be a part of the “peace revolution.”

Come on people.  
It's time to get together.  
It's time for the revolution.

Here is once again in our face.  
Why haven't we learn from our past?  
We're at the crossroads of our human race.  
Why are we kicking our own ass?

We're on the eve of destruction my friends,  
We are about to go too far.  
Politicians think that war is the way  
But we know that love has the power.

Break

The solution is simple and plain:  
There won't be peace if we don't try.  
In a war there is nothing to gain  
When so many people will die.

We want peace,  
We want it.  
Yes, we want peace,  
We want it.  
Yes, we want peace  
And we want it fast.

Kravitz paints war as self-defeating and old-fashioned. He heightens the emotion and urgency of the situation by claiming the (then) present as a “crossroads” in history. He exaggerates this by making an overt reference to Barry McGuire’s Vietnam protest hit, “Eve of Destruction.”<sup>3</sup>

Before the final verse, the song breaks from its funky dance groove into a haunting crossover between pop and Middle Eastern styles. The electric guitar cuts out leaving drums and a Middle Eastern string ensemble backing up a vocal improvisation by Kadim Al Sahir. After this break, the focus of the lyrics then turns from the “eve of destruction” to calling for action in the pursuit of peace. The chorus, which repeats throughout the song, is simple and catchy making Kravitz’s point unmistakably clear.

### **Corruption**

A few anti-war songs focused on the problems with Americans and the American government; they looked at the corruption in the government and corporations, the ambivalence of the American people to the suffering of the world, and the widespread acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution.

### **Beastie Boys – In a World Gone Mad**

While many musicians were nervous to write protest music in early 2003, the Beastie Boys released a song specifically protesting the impending military invasion of Iraq called “In a World Gone Mad.”<sup>4</sup> When interviewed about their motivation behind the song, rapper Mike D told *MTV*, “There’s definitely been a concept put out that to speak up is potentially unpatriotic, [but] voicing one’s opinion is generally democratic and American, and that’s one of the things that compelled me to speak up.”<sup>5</sup> “In a World Gone Mad” was not revolutionary in its musical or lyrical content, but it was extremely important for its pioneering role in post-9/11 protest music from big-name musicians. It started a trend in which musicians eschewed the traditional mode of

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<sup>3</sup> Barry McGuire, *Eve of Destruction*, Dunhill 4009, single, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Beastie Boys, “In a World Gone Mad,” single, internet download via *Beastieboys.com*, March 11, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Corey Moss, “Beasties, Audioslave Say Protest Songs An Important Part Of Our Culture: ‘Voicing One’s Opinion is Generally Democratic and American,’ Mike D Says,” *MTV*, March 20, 2003, <<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1470658/beasties-system-talk-protest-songs.jhtml>> (6 September 2013).

musical dispersal through radio play and began posting their protest music online for free download.

“In a World Gone Mad” hails back to the early days of rap with simplistic beats and basic samples, à la Run DMC. The lyrics reflect anger toward the Bush administration, disapproval of the war, and—a sign of the times—caution in how their message might be interpreted and received. The song begins with the chorus which is a short rant against violence.

The first verse criticizes Bush and politicians in general, but the Beastie Boys temper their words as though trying to keep from alienating people who supported Bush. This tiptoeing seems a bit artificial considering they also imply he drank and did cocaine with Saddam Hussein, started the War in Iraq because of a mid-life crisis, and that all politicians probably smoke crack.

The second verse expands on their reasons for protesting the war, most prominently because they felt it was corrupted by corporate interests and oil. The end of the verse is particularly interesting because after ranting about corruption, reciting Arabic phrases, and declaring “Peace to the Middle East, peace to Islam,” they make sure to reiterate their patriotism. Apparently even rap artists who were already known for protesting felt the need to walk this line in an effort to avoid public backlash. But it is hard to take anyone seriously who uses waffle metaphors.

The final verse begins with the most poignant lyrics of the song, addressing the belief that the war was for oil and that those who had financial interests in the war were not the ones paying the ultimate price. It then becomes a somewhat nonsensical call for a stop to the war and a focus on domestic issues instead.

In a world gone mad it's hard to think right.  
So much violence hate and spite.  
Murder going on all day and night.  
Due time we fight the non-violent fight.

Mirrors, smokescreens and lies.  
It's not the politicians but their actions I despise.  
You and Saddam should kick it like back in the day  
With the cocaine and Courvoisier.  
But you build more bombs as you get more bold  
As your mid-life crisis war unfolds.  
All you want to do is take control.  
Now put that axis of evil bullshit on hold.  
Citizen rule number 2080:  
Politicians are shady.  
So people watch your back because I think they smoke crack.  
I don't doubt it look at how they act.

First the “War On Terror” now war on Iraq.  
We're reaching a point where we can't turn back.  
Let's lose the guns, and let's lose the bombs,  
And stop the corporate contributions that their built upon.  
Well I'll be sleeping on your speeches 'til I start to snore  
'Cause I won't carry guns for an oil war.

As-Salamu alaikum, wa alaikum assalam  
Peace to the Middle East peace to Islam.  
Now don't get us wrong 'cause we love America,  
But that's no reason to get hysterica.  
They're laying on the syrup thick.  
We ain't waffles, we ain't having it.

Now how many people must get killed  
For oil families pockets to get filled?  
How many oil families get killed?  
Not a damn one so what's the deal?  
It's time to lead the way and de-escalate.  
Lose the weapons of mass destruction and

the hate.

Say, ooh ah, what's the White House doing?  
Oh no! Say, what they got brewing?!  
Well I'm not pro Bush and I'm not pro  
Saddam.  
We need these fools to remain calm.  
George Bush you're looking like Zoo  
Lander,

Trying to play tough for the camera.  
What am I on crazy pills? We've got to stop  
it.  
Get your hand out my grandma's pocket.  
We need health care more than going to war.  
You think it's democracy they're fighting  
for?

### **Domestic Concerns**

Many anti-war songs expressed concern over the state of American society. Sometimes this meant discussing the needs of the country that were being neglected for the war, while other times musicians focused on the seeming detachment of American society from the war

#### **Merle Haggard**

After Toby Keith and the Dixie Chicks, Merle Haggard was probably the most interesting story in country music during the Iraq War. Legendary for his über-conservative Vietnam-era anthems, "Okie From Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me," Haggard has been treasured by traditional country fans for decades. But during the Iraq War, he landed on the exact opposite side of the spectrum, releasing multiple anti-war songs over the course of Bush's presidency.

"The Hag" has always been more complex than is readily apparent, but his reaction to the War in Iraq caught many people off guard. In 2003, he did two things that most country musicians wouldn't dare. He publically defended the Dixie Chicks and just weeks after their fall from grace and amidst the hype of Toby Keith's "Angry American," Haggard released an anti-war and anti-media song, "That's the News." The song and Haggard's anti-war stance caused a media firestorm. This artist who had faded from popular consciousness for over a decade was suddenly featured in interviews and headlines around the country.

"That's the News" is a short, musically uncomplicated tune recalling country music's folk roots. The instrumentation is sparse and outdated with an understated drum pattern and simplistic guitar and violin melodies.

Written in response to Bush's "Mission Accomplished" declaration, the song is highly contemptuous of the pronouncement and the state of the nation. "That's the News" condemns the war because of the losses sustained and the cost to the world. The lyrics are an overall indictment of the media in their choices to cover celebrities and popular stories in lieu of war coverage. Haggard also comments on the emotional distance maintained by politicians and Americans in reference to the war.

Suddenly it's over, the war is finally done.  
Soldiers in the desert sand, still clinging to a  
gun.  
No-one is the winner and everyone must  
lose.  
Suddenly the war is over. That's the news.

Suddenly celebrity is something back in  
style.  
Back to running tabloid for a while.  
Pain's almost everywhere, the whole  
world's got the blues.  
Suddenly the war is over. That's the news.  
That's the news, that's the news.  
That's the ever-loving, blessed, headline  
news.

Someone's missing in Modesto, and it's sad  
about the clues.  
Suddenly the war is over. That's the news.

Suddenly the cost of war is something out of  
sight.

Lost a lot of heroes in the fight.  
Politicians do all the talking, soldiers pay the  
dues.  
Suddenly the war is over. That's the news.

Maybe it was his age, his iconic status, or his willingness to show his face on *FOX News*, but somehow, Haggard got away with it. In an article about the "That's the News" by Chet Flippo in *CMT*, Haggard was portrayed as someone who hailed back to the "country music verity of storytelling." His message is downplayed as "gently chiding America, its media establishment and all of us for accepting the force-fed government line that the war is over." Haggard is lauded by Flippo (and others) as one of the "few true mavericks."<sup>6</sup>

### **Compassion/Real Cost of War**

The most prominent theme of anti-war music was to point out the costs of war in human casualties. As it is put cynically but hauntingly in an article on the liberal site, *truthdig.com*, "Mangled bodies and corpses, broken dreams, unending grief, betrayal... these are the true products of war."<sup>7</sup> Songs often bemoaned the cost to soldiers, their families, civilians in America or the countries being invaded, or even the "enemies" of America.

### **Steve Earle – John Walker's Blues**

Steve Earle has been meandering on the outskirts of the country music establishment since the 1980s. He caused an uproar in 2002 with the release of *Jerusalem*, a concept album describing his jaded view of post-9/11 America. The most controversial song on the album was "John Walker's Blues,"<sup>8</sup> a sympathetic look at the young American, John Walker Lindh, who had become a Taliban fighter and was captured in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The song is sung from Lindh's perspective in a growl that Earle says was inspired by his interview on *CNN*.<sup>9</sup> The first verse portrays Lindh as an innocent but alienated American. Though he experienced the same culture as most Americans, he didn't identify with it and instead, found his truth in the word of Mohammed.

The second verse goes on to portray Lindh as a young man who, like many, is following his own heart and belief system despite what his parents might have wanted. The final line of the verse, where Earle, as Lindh, mentions Jesus, was of particular concern critics.

The final verse shows sympathy for Lindh's plight as following his beliefs has ended with his head in a sack on his way back to where he started. The tenor of the words makes Lindh sound simply like a misguided young man.

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<sup>6</sup> Quotes from *CMT* taken from: Chet Flippo, "Nashville Skyline: Merle Haggard: That's the News," *CMT*, October 9, 2003, <<http://www.cmt.com/news/nashville-skyline/1511473/nashville-skyline-merle-haggard-thats-the-news.jhtml>> (23 September 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Chris Hedges, "The Crucifixion of Tomas Young," *TruthDig*, March 10, 2013, <[http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the\\_crucifixion\\_of\\_tomas\\_young\\_20130310/](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_crucifixion_of_tomas_young_20130310/)> (26 June 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Steve Earle, *Jerusalem*, E-Squared/Artemis, September 24, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> John Harris, "My Country is Sleepwalking," *The Guardian*, September 23, 2002, <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2002/sep/23/artsfeatures.iraqandthearts>> (1 October 2013).

Each verse is followed by a chorus which declares, “There is no God but God,” in Arabic and English, pushing the point even further.

I’m just an American boy raised on MTV  
And I’ve seen all those kids in the soda pop  
ads  
But none of them looked like me.  
So I started looking 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

If my daddy could see me now, chains  
around my feet.  
He don’t understand that sometimes a man  
Has got to fight for what he believes.  
And I believe God is great, all praise due to  
him.  
And if I should die, I’ll rise up to the sky

Just like Jesus. Peace be upon him.

We came to fight the Jihad and our hearts  
were pure and strong  
As death filled the air, we all offered up  
prayers  
And prepared for our martyrdom.  
But Allah had some other plan, some secret  
not revealed.  
Now they’re dragging me back with my  
head in a sack  
To the land of the infidel.

Ash’hadu Alla Ilaha Illallah  
There is no God but God

The controversy started before the song was even released with an article in the *New York Post* whose headline declared, “Twisted Ballad Honors Tali-Rat.”<sup>10</sup> It went on to claim that Earle glorified Lindh, calling him “Jesus-like,” and that Earle believed that those who attacked the United States had hearts “pure and strong.”

Earle’s sentiment was brazen to be sure but not out of character. He has been known to sympathize with challenging figures throughout his career. Earle said he wrote “John Walker’s Blues” because Lindh embodied a kind of alienation that he believed many Americans would do well to understand and, moreover, he felt Lindh could have been his own son. Recalling the song and the fallout in 2011, he told *Spin* quite candidly:

I wrote that song because no one else was fucking going to... I saw a skinny, 20-year-old kid very similar-looking to my own, firstborn son, duct-taped to a fucking board in Afghanistan. My first thought was, “Oh my God, he has parents somewhere.”... And I responded as a parent. I knew there were going to be repercussions... Somebody on *FOX* accused me of doing it to sell a lot of records. I was like, “Dude, there are a lot of things you can do to sell records in this climate and that ain’t one of them.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aly Sujo, “Twisted Ballad Honors Tali-Rat,” *New York Post*, July 21, 2002, <<http://nypost.com/2002/07/21/twisted-ballad-honors-tali-rat/>> (1 October 2013).

<sup>11</sup> “Will Sheff Meets Steve Earle,” *Spin*, May 17, 2011, <<http://www.spin.com/articles/will-sheff-meets-steve-earle/>> (9 June 2014).

## **Body of War**

One of the largest compilations of protest music was the result of a 2008 documentary, *Body of War*. It chronicles the story of an Iraq War veteran, Tomas Young, who joined the military in a spirit of retribution two days after the September 11 attacks. He was deployed in Iraq for five days when he was shot through the spine, paralyzing him from the chest down. He felt betrayed by the government and upon his return to the U.S. he became an outspoken anti-war activist.

### **Eddie Vedder – No More**

Eddie Vedder's song, "No More," is used throughout *Body of War*. The musical arrangement hails back to the archetypal protest style of the Vietnam era. It is performed with an acoustic guitar and sparse vocal harmonies backing up Vedder's melody. The simple and repetitive chorus opens the song up to crowd participation.

I speak for a man who gave for this land.  
Took a bullet in the back for his pay.  
Spilled his blood in the dirt and the dust,  
He's back to say:  
What he has seen is hard to believe  
And it does no good to just pray.  
He asks of us to stand  
And we must end this war today.

With his mind, he's saying, "No more!"  
With his heart, he's s saying, "No more!"  
With his life, he's saying, "No more!"  
With his eyes, he's saying, "No more!"  
With his body, he's saying, "No more!"  
With his voice, he's saying, "No more war!"

Yeah, nothing's too good for a veteran.  
Yeah, this is what they say.  
So nothing is what they will get in this new  
American way.

The lies we were told to get us to go were  
criminal,  
Let us be straight.  
Let's get to the point where our voices get  
heard  
Behind the White House gates.

No more innocents dying  
No more terrorizing  
No more eulogizing  
No more evangelizing  
No more presidents lying

With our minds, we're saying, "No more!"  
With our hearts, we're saying, "No more!"  
With our lives, we're saying, "No more!"  
With our eyes, we're saying, "No more!"  
With our voices, we're saying, "No more!"  
With our bodies, we're saying, "No more  
war!"

The lyrics begin with a focus on the sacrifice made by Young as a representative for all soldiers. Vedder portrays Young as a hero who "gave for this land" but was paid back with a "bullet in the back." This is followed by the soldier's call to end the war. The second verse shows Vedder's disdain for the treatment of veterans, the war, and the president. The bridge is lyrically simplistic but has complex implications. In it, Vedder points out the human impact of the war but also portrays the United States as a terrorist entity responsible for the loss of innocent lives. The last two phrases lament the manipulation of the American people with religion and power. The chorus is the rallying cry of the song. It focuses on the soldier's and protestor's plea.



## Conclusion

Despite the activism of well-known musicians, popular music during the War on Terror had minimal impact. In reference to the state of musical protest during this time, rock historian Dave Marsh noted, “With Vietnam, you had a movement. Now you don’t have a movement. You have a president with low approval ratings, and a bunch of songs.”<sup>12</sup> Though the circumstances were often compared with the Vietnam War, musicians were facing much different conditions.

Contributing to the lack of impact of protest music was the lack of interest in the war in general. In the absence of a draft and with minimal media coverage of the war, the majority of youth—the main target audience for popular music—was removed from any emotional connection to the war. The larger implication of this ambivalence was that there was not a social movement against the war that was anywhere comparable to Vietnam. Without a social movement, protest music had a limited platform.

Another prominent theory for the lack of powerful protest music had to do with the practical monopoly held by a small number of media conglomerates in the 2000s. Because of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the ownership of mass media consolidated from around fifty corporations in the 1980s to only four companies controlling 90% of the ad revenue by the turn of the millennium.<sup>13</sup> This led to decreased programming, limitations on new music, and increased difficulty in breaking new artists into the industry.

Clear Channel took most of the flack because of their long-standing ties with George W. Bush and their apparent conservative agenda after 9/11. This was evidenced most notoriously in the days following the 9/11 attacks when a list of 150 “questionable” songs was circulated amongst Clear Channel radio executives. It advised songs or artists that might be “inappropriate” in light of the attacks. Some of these suggestions made sense—like Dave Matthews’ “Crash Into Me”—while others seemed to be motivated by conservative politics—like John Lennon’s pacifist anthem, “Imagine.”<sup>14</sup>

The other main theory to explain the lack of a musical protest movement was that, because of the socio-political climate, artists were censoring themselves. In his article, “Double Voices of Musical Censorship After 9/11,” Martin Scherzinger posits, “It is the silent and invisible acquiescence of the cautious and compromised artist that ultimately registers the extent of genuine political power.”<sup>15</sup> This power is illustrated in Merle Haggard’s comments to *Billboard* in 2003.

I’ve never put any sort of a governor on my speaking until lately and I really seriously watch what I’m saying, because I’m afraid if I said the wrong thing, those men in black, whoever they are, would come down the rope on me in a hot minute. ...They’re not gonna allow a little hillbilly in Northern California like me

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<sup>12</sup> As quoted by: Dan DeLuca, “On the Antiwar Path: The Protest Song Returns, but Without Backup,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 21, 2006, <[http://articles.philly.com/2006-05-21/entertainment/25400314\\_1\\_iraq-war-protest-music-musical-spectrum](http://articles.philly.com/2006-05-21/entertainment/25400314_1_iraq-war-protest-music-musical-spectrum)> (21 January 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Cynthia Cotts, “Telecom for Dummies,” *Village Voice*, 4 September 2001. Available online: <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-09-04/news/telecom-for-dummies/>> (12 December 2010).

<sup>14</sup> The complete list of songs can be found at: Eliza Truitt, “It’s the End of the World as Clear Channel Knows it,” *Slate*, September 17, 2001, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20071015200337/http://slate.com/id/1008314/>> (6 March 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Martin Scherzinger, “Double Voices of Musical Censorship After 9/11,” in *Music in the Post 9/11 World*, eds. Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry (New York: Routledge, 2007), 95.

to upset any sort of rhetoric that's in favor. Sorry, but I think we live in that kind of a world right now. One guy said to me, "If a guy wasn't paranoid at this time in history, he just hasn't looked around."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Haggard Speaks Out 'Like Never Before,'" *Billboard*, October 4, 2003, <<http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/68723/haggard-speaks-out-like-never-before>> (24 September 2013).