

Rhetorical Analysis of "Where were you?" by Alan Jackson (Project 2)

Nine years ago, when Alan Jackson wrote and performed the song "[Where were you?](#)", he tried to do two things. First, he tried to create a common ground upon which Americans could share their grief and anger at the attacks which had occurred on September 11. In this he was wildly successful, and provided an outlet through which America could properly grieve. The second thing Mr. Jackson tried to achieve with this song, which he ultimately failed at, was to promote a peaceful response to this conflict.

Let us first begin by examining his successful attempt at creating a grieving ground for America. One must first recall the situation of the time. This was first sung in November of 2001, two months after the attacks on the world trade center. The United States and Great Britain had already struck at the Taliban. America was still reeling trying to come to grips with this tragedy. President Bush was at the peak of his popularity for his quick response to the attacks. Iraq had yet to be mentioned publicly.

This is the world for which Mr. Jackson wrote this song. He was no politician, "just a singer of simple songs" as he states in the refrain. He was writing this as an everyday American, for everyday Americans. Furthermore, since Alan Jackson is a country artist, "Where were you?" is a country song. As such, it is a very simple song musically, with a slow and simple melody with just a few instruments. This works very well supporting his self-description as "just a singer of simple songs". Another important stylistic choice within the song is to phrase everything except

the advice as a question. This lets people answer it (mentally), and is likely followed by the answer being suggested in the song. It makes it seem like a conversation, despite it being a one way song. This provides the feeling of importance within the listener and that the singer is sympathetic to the listener. Some would suggest that the heavy religious influence of this song would alienate some listeners, referencing God or church or prayer fourteen times in this 5 minute song. But one of the things about this song which made it such a hit was that while he did do this, the song's impact did not rely on a religious outlook. Alan Jackson tried hard enough to connect with every American that this song appeals to everyone.

This just established him as a figure which people could relate to. Much of the power comes from how he relates to everyone in the verses. In the verses, he does two things. One of them relies on a funny property of human memory. When one hears news such as this attack, one tends to remember where they were and what they were doing at the time. This is usually mundane (just due to the probability of doing something mundane at any given moment), but becomes an integral part of the experience of hearing such devastation. Thus in the song Alan Jackson lists five different mundane tasks which likely cover whatever an average American was doing at the time.

Mr. Jackson also asks the listener what their emotional response was to the news. He does this also by phrasing most of the likely possibilities as questions. This was what made this song at creating a sense of communal grief, allowing the U.S. to get over the incident. For through the questions, when one identifies the response that they felt, they instantly feel as if this is a shared emotion. Thus generating a sense of community, and letting everyone know that they were not alone.

Despite the powerful emotional draw of this song, it failed to communicate the message of peace Alan Jackson hoped to convey. One of the reasons for this is that peace was only a secondary message in the song, and the word “peace” is never itself used in the lyrics. It is left as an implicit theme implied when Mr. Jackson emphasized that among God’s gifts “the greatest is love.” He repeats this as 3 of the last 4 lines within the song, as well as at the end of the refrain. The problem with this is that it was buried and never came up until two full minutes into the song. By this point many people are still digesting the first 2 minutes of the song, so this phrase gets less attention and introspection than was intended. Furthermore, the implicated push for peace is based upon biblical teachings. While the appeal may be emotional, phrasing it in religious terms can alienate much of the thinking audience.

The last reason why this argument for peace failed is that it relies on the word ‘love’. This word has many meanings, and does not necessarily mean ‘love your neighbor’. In this context it was *meant* as ‘love your neighbor’, being used in a close paraphrase the New Testament’s first letter from Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 13. This letter describes the love that Christians should have for everyone. But in modern society, biblical quotes are not well-known; so many people would miss the implied meaning of “the greatest is love”.

So while “Where were you?” was an emotional and commercial success (it managed to top the billboard’s country charts), it failed in its secondary aim of promoting peace.

Video link web address: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvj6zdWLUuk>

Resource for billboard success: http://www.thatscountry.com/artman/publish/printer_54.shtml