

Where is the Protest Music?

Paul Vos Benkowski

The wake-up call of protest music is always out there. Sometimes it is hidden away and other times it cannot be avoided. But it is always there and there is always a cause; from solidarity with Central American farmers to death penalty opponents, from anti-war songs to anti-nuclear songs. Regardless of the medium or the exposure of these songs, they are sung. The question is, are we listening?

Immediately following 9-11, popular music was loathe to confront the military build-up and march to war with Iraq. Instead jingoistic rhetoric seemed to rule the radio and a person had to search far and wide for a dissenting voice. And now that the war in Iraq is nearing its fourth year, one does not have to search far at all to find a song of protest. Heavy hitters such as Bruce Springsteen, who has rehashed a batch of Pete Seeger songs, and Neil Young, who garnishes much press lately with his *Living with War* album, reach large audiences. Young's new album is political like a sharp stick to the eye with songs "Let's Impeach the President" and "Shock and Awe." Not since the tragic killings at Kent University in 1970 and the subsequent "Ohio" has Mr. Young been so timely or so widely received.

Pearl Jam has hit on a bit of resurgence with the snarling "World-Wide Suicide" which is about the reasoning behind a soldier's death. Even the snotty-nosed Green Day sold over five million copies of *American Idiot*, an album rife with disillusionment with, well, almost everything, including the decisions of war-minded leaders. But this is only popular music, that mill of mediocrity where records sales outweigh content and where toes must be tapping and fingers snapping in order for the masses to even know the song exists. Despite the reluctance to embrace music of dissent, a few acts break through with a song or two and perhaps millions of people will pause long enough to question what it is they hear.

While opposition on the radio may be novel enough to warrant comment, protest in song is widespread and ever vibrant. You just have to pick your poison. On the country side of life outlaws Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard have vocalized their displeasure with the war with songs like "Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth," "That's the News" and "America First," which urges the leadership of this country to fix the ills at home before fixing the ills elsewhere. It has been a long time since Willie and Merle were at the forefront of popular country music, so that allows them some freedom to speak their minds without dire consequences. In contrast, the besieged Dixie Chicks merely spoke out against President Bush at a concert in London and suffered a huge backlash which turned their name into an adjective. So instead of putting their discontentment onto vinyl (can I still use that term?), they write songs about their willingness to forge ahead despite being "Dixie Chicked." Hardly protest music, but one cannot fault the sentiment.

Rap and Hip Hop has also added a protesting voice, although one must seek deep to find it among the hollow bling of urban life and suburban party hits. Paris, a San Francisco artist, has



Neil Young sings "Let's Impeach the President" and "Shock and Awe."

been a consistent voice against the war, pondering the cost of war against the reasons given for the war. "What would you do if you/knew all of the things we know?/Would you stand up for truth/Or would you turn away too?" Look also for Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, The Perceptionists and the ever active Zach de la Rocha and his pairing with DJ Shadow on "March of Death," which is as riveting and provocative as anything else produced in rap. They spit out lyrics like "His Texas twisted tongue/the poor lined up to kill in desert slums/for oil that burn beneath the desert sun."

Yet to really mine protest music one must return to its roots and the offshoot of those roots; folk and punk rock — from Pete Seeger to Billy Bragg to The Minutemen to Anti-Flag. No other forms of music hold such an urgency like a single person with a guitar and a voice loud enough to be heard standing on a street corner or outside of a barbed wire fence pointing out the injustice and calling for action. And when people do not listen, that one person is joined by another, the guitar is amplified and voices become a howl. There is no more time to sleep, there is only a call to action. There are no concerns of record sales and no mention of radio play, only a song that needs to be sung and a desire to sing by any means necessary, to anyone willing to stop and give a listen.

Where popular music tends to paint with broad strokes, folk and punk cut right to the heart of the issue. From Yucca Mountain and the School of the Americas to that power line they want to push through your backyard, the song of dissent is a needed wake up call to the people affected most. Pat Humphries and Sandy O., Tom Neilson, Donald Keesing, Ani DiFranco, Sara Thomsen and Dar Williams are all progressive artists unafraid to play at benefit concerts, actions or marches. Dar Williams, a long time friend of Nukewatch, performed at the Stop Project Elf Campaign coalition concert in 2000. Williams donated all \$7,000 in proceeds to the project — a financial shot in the arm that helped carry the campaign to its fruition with the closing of the ELF transmitter in September of 2004.



Dar Williams performed at Project ELF in 2000

Punk rock, that step child of folk, is no different in its aim of getting the word out. Never mind how loud or distorted, its aim is dead on. Like folk it thrives on a tight knit community and unabashed politics. Where else are you going to hear a song like "Depleted Uranium is a War Crime" or "Political Nightmare?" State Radio, Sick of it All, NOFX and Anti-Flag are at the forefront of the political punk world. They are taking on the same issues as the folk musicians with a virulent passion that cannot be tamed. From Anti-Flag's song "The School of Assassins" one can take away some inspiration and a bit of hope for the future, "Take our rights back/ shut down the SOA/ this is the era when we will give the world a better way."

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