

Impassive resistance: Protest songs for today

By Mike McHone
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"I cannot be a vegetarian just between meals"—Nanci Griffith, folk artist

Recently, Madonna wrote a song opposing the war in Iraq. So did Lenny Kravitz. The Beastie Boys, R.E.M., John Mellencamp and even George Michael have written one. So have System of a Down, Jay-Z, Green Day, Mick Jones and Paula Cole. Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore launched a free MP3 site (protest-records.com) which features underground bands performing antiwar songs. Country artist Steve Earle penned and recorded "Jerusalem" last year—an entire album dedicated against war, bloodshed and governmental propaganda. So, now, having said that ... have you heard any of them?

Nope, I didn't think so.

How can America exist in the commercialized music culture that it has been manufacturing since the early '50s and not hear anything new from some of its most recognized artists? How is it possible that you have all of these people whom, at one time or another, have been hounded to a certain extent by the pop media and imitated and worshiped by countless fans, and yet when they put their thoughts, ideas and feelings into their music—everything that a good musician is supposed to do—they get tossed aside?

System of a Down is known primarily for being anti-government and has been applauded by fans and critics the world over for speaking their minds. So why should it be different this time around? Madonna, like it or not, has had a long history of pissing people off. Yes, most of the time it was to garner a bigger paycheck. Yes, it was just to get the attention of the media. But she sold records. Henceforth she made the record industry money. Henceforth, record executives stood behind her. So what's the problem now? Why try to ban her video? From a completely economic standpoint, why are they not trying to promote a guaranteed cash crop? Why is it that nearly every single artist mentioned above has had to circumvent radio and albums and release their songs on the Internet?

By all accounts, the music industry is not unlike the automobile industry. If there's a model out there that people really like, they'll buy it, and that model will be updated and made anew for the next round of potential customers.

Same thing with music. If people like your album, they'll more than likely pick it up, or at least go to one of your concerts.

But suppose GM put out a brand new Cadillac, yet hardly anyone knew about it, very few dealerships carried it, and you never, not even once, saw it advertised on television or in the paper. It would be ridiculous, right? Well, then why is the music industry doing this?

To prove the kibosh that has been dropped on musicians as of late, the average fan really only needs to consider one thing—Zack De La Rocha, the former frontman of Rage Against the Machine.

Here is a guy that fronted one of the best bands to come out of the '90s, had a hand in writing the lyrics to two of the best albums in the last fifteen years, drew attention back to Leonard Peltier, and, let's face it, is pretty much guaranteed to sell albums to a certain extent. He has a new song that has been posted on his web site. So why haven't we heard anything from him? Even when David Lee Roth split from Van Halen, people, for better or worse, tuned in just to hear what he could do (which, obviously, wasn't much).

In his new song, "March of Death," De La Rocha attacks the government and its punch-line policies to what's happening in Iraq. During the second verse he references a Lennon/McCartney lyric from the Beatles song "A Day in the Life," in an account of witnessing the first day of the bombings: *I read the news today, oh boy...* De La Rocha has always spoken out against government oppression—whether it is the American government or otherwise. And, like the aforementioned Madonna, this act of controversy is what sold his records; and this, in turn, is what made record executives money.

But, as it is known, times have changed. The spectrum is different. Public dissent is no longer a discussable topic. You have a few people storming out of Joan Baez concerts because she decides to sing the French, German, and various Middle Eastern national anthems—even though Baez, for nearly 40 years, has had a reputation for being antiestablishment. You have a few people walking out of a Pearl Jam concert because Eddie Vedder impaled a mask of George W Bush on a mic stand—even though it has been

well known, for at least the last decade or so, that Vedder has a provocative personality. You have a few people burning Dixie Chicks albums because Natalie Maines said what was on the minds of many Texans. And a few people walked out of a Bruce Springsteen concert recently because he opened up with the Edwin Starr song “War”—even though this just happens to be the same guy who has been playing that song live for nearly 30 years, and also happens to be the same guy who wrote “Born in the U.S.A.”

If this is the trend that is happening in the music industry, it’s very probable that concerts might soon be a thing of the past, right?

No.

Here’s the thing: Notice in all of the above instances I only said “a few”? The fact is, yes, there are a select group of individuals that stormed out of the Pearl Jam show, but from what I’ve heard it was only about two dozen or so. Two dozen out of thousands. But of course the media words it differently, saying something like—“People Run Out on Pearl Jam,” or “Vedder Angers Audience.” And, yes, people have returned some Dixie Chicks tickets, but in all actuality, it is no higher than a normal return rate.

So, it isn’t the fans who are demanding that the artists subside and censor themselves. Well then who would it be? I think you’ll be able to figure out who the culprit is before I place a period at the end of this sentence. The Republican government and its puppets—Clear Channel, Cumulus Media and the FCC [Federal Communications Commission]—are to blame.

Clear Channel, a monopoly that owns over 1,200 radio stations in this country alone, and its president Lowry Mays and vice-president Tom Hicks, are the ones that refused to play Dixie Chicks albums on air. They are the ones who support and advertise pro-war rallies. Why would they do this? Because Mays and Hicks are both Republicans and supporters of George W. Bush. Lowry Mays is of the UT Investment Management Company—created under legislation by G.W. Bush—and which, of course, has contracts with the communication, electrical and military organization, the Carlyle Group, headed by George Bush Sr. The vice-president, Tom Hicks, was the man who bought the Texas Rangers from George W. Bush, and just happened to contribute \$500,000 to the Bush campaign.

But of course it can be noted that even though Clear Channel is a monopoly, it only accounts for roughly 10 percent of all of the radio stations in America. But then there’s Cumulus Media, which owns nearly 5 percent of all of the radio stations. But what about the remaining 85 percent?

Well, I guess that’s why Colin Powell’s son, Michael, is head of the FCC.

And, of course, the FCC stated far back in the mid-’80s that it was a completely independent group answerable only to the president of the United States. It also stated, as George Carlin pointed out once, that radio was the only form of media not truly recognized under First Amendment rights.

What we are seeing now is a government who restricts the expressions of its artists, limits an area of choice, and has a hand in shaping the country’s perspective on certain topics.

Aren’t these the very same accusations George Bush has made against Saddam Hussein and his control of the Iraqi media?

Whenever (whenever!) a government chooses to silence a group of people over any subject, no matter what that subject may be, it tramples upon the very ideology that Thomas Jefferson formulated, and which Abe Lincoln and Martin Luther King perpetuated.

I don’t know about anyone else, but I prefer George Martin producing songs over Lowry Mays and Tom Hicks.

I leave you with a quote that is more relevant today than it was when it was first spoken. It comes from Mr. Frank Zappa at the PMRC [Parents’ Music Resource Center] hearings in 1985. Zappa, along with Dee Snider and John Denver, felt that by labeling music, restricting it to only a select few markets, and enforcing a form of governmental censorship, it not only violated artistic integrity, but stepped on First Amendment rights.

“It is my understanding that, in law, First Amendment issues are decided with a preference for the least restrictive alternative. In this context the [government] demands are the equivalent of treating dandruff by decapitation”—Frank Zappa

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