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"Why Do They Always Send the Poor?": Antiwar Lyrics in Contemporary Rock

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It has now been five years since the U.S. entered Afghanistan and three and a half years since the invasion of Iraq. No one knows how long these conflicts will last, but a lot more people seem concerned these days than they did in the fall of 2001 or the spring of 2003. I helped distribute pacifist fliers in the weeks and months leading up to the Iraq conflict and also volunteered for the Kerry campaign in the fall of 2004, yet only now does it appear that the tide is finally turning in public opinion in light of the election results this week, in terms of a lack of support among American citizens for the war and an overall generally pessimistic sentiment concerning our continued military presence in the Middle East. Several years ago, quite a few folks openly looked down their noses at my peace-supporting activities as if I were some middle-aged flower child—imagine that! So nowadays the time is ripe, maybe even overly so, for the blossoming of antiwar songs in the popular and alternative media, and a number of recent news articles confirm this fact (cf. article titles). Now it seems more and more musicians and singers of all genres are hopping on the bandwagon and are waking up to smell the burnt coffee that's been smoldering on the backburner of many stoves for quite some time. And that's a good thing.

Mind you, lots of the antiwar lyrics of today are not at all reminiscent of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, or other icons from the era of protest songs about the Vietnam War. Yes, it's true that Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen, and other like-minded aging rockers have recently contributed to the rising stream of music opposing the war, and these tunes are angry, at times virulent, reprisals against the violence and tragedy perpetuated by the

Bush regime's foreign policy and military tactics in Iraq. These performers, however, are no doubt preaching to the choir of middle-aged boomers who were weaned on Dylan, CSNY, and similar folkies of their generation. Unfortunately, Springsteen's recent tour in support of his Pete Seeger tribute CD lacked strong numbers in the arenas, and the same can be said of Young and Dylan. So, what contemporary bands are speaking to and reaching the youth of today with the message of political dissent and discontent as well as extreme frustration about the direction our country has been taking for the past five years? I propose that two bands from the alternative genres of punk and metal have offered the freshest expression of antiwar viewpoints in their lyrics over the past two years, thus affording today's youth with a couple of hip, although not extremely youthful, role models who might just reach out and shape the minds of more of today's young Americans. Green Day and System of a Down have managed to infiltrate the pop charts, the airwaves and the iPods of today's teens, tweens, and twentysomethings to good effect and by putting a counter-cultural spin on an old message.

Green Day's *American Idiot* CD, released in September 2004, was nominated for seven Grammy awards in 2005 and was recognized as the Best Rock Album of that year. Widely referred to as a concept album and hailed by the critics, this work signified a major change in direction for the punk band that has been recording since 1989. The first of their records to take an overtly political stand, four of the album's songs were released as singles and became big hits, thus receiving major attention in the popular media thanks to the amount of airplay they enjoyed and the number of CDs sold. The title song, "American Idiot," is an obvious send-up and critique of Bush and his administration, while it echoes the rhetoric and sentiment of Michael Moore's "Idiot Nation" from *Stupid*

White Men (2002). With lyrics including satirical references such as "a new mania," "the sound of hysteria," "alien-nation" as a play on words, "redneck agenda," "do the propaganda" (like a dance!) and "the age of paranoia," the band is hitting upon key criticisms of the emotionally-charged climate of the mid-decade after several years of media-saturated hype pitting liberals against conservatives. With lines like, "One nation controlled by the media," and "The subliminal mind fuck America," Green Day opens the CD with an in-your-face slash job of the current political divide in our country. The anger and self-righteous indignation of the best punk music is right here, with a biting, albeit somewhat heavy-handed, damnation of our commander-in-chief and the often-unpopular trend toward the limitation of freedoms that have accompanied his tenure in the White House.

When I played this song for my freshman comp and lit class in the fall of 2005, I had at least one student deeply offended and angry that such objectionable material—along with Moore's essay!—was being presented in a college class. After some private discussion with her about her feelings and reaction, I convinced her not to drop the course for that reason and that, despite our differences in opinion on the political front, we could still work together in the class.

Another song from *American Idiot* is perhaps more interesting because it is expressly against the war. "Holiday" refers to the flag-draped caskets of Iraq War casualties, which have been forbidden to be shown in the news media. Again more of a punk anthem than a traditional rock or folk protest song, this piece begins slightly more subtly than the title track, but still contains some fairly virulent language. For example, Billie Joe Armstrong sings about "…the falling rain, / coming down like an Armageddon

flame" in the song's first two lines, making an apocalyptic reference to the current crisis in the Middle East created by our military presence, followed by the lines, "the shame / the ones who died without a name," which may refer to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians who have been killed since the invasion. There follows then two passages which add an element of economic critique about how American big business profits from the military engagement: "and bleed the company lost the war today" and "another protester has crossed the line / to find the money's on the other side." The sharpest barb in "Holiday" is the use of the phrase "Zieg heil" [*sic*] combined with the Hitlerian reference "to the president gasman" making clear that analogies between the trend that the U.S. has taken at the very least borders on the far-right mentalities and tactics of the Nazi era. (Such an allusion reminds me of reports of peaceful demonstrators during the 2004 presidential campaign who were interred and held without arrest, a phone call, or other basic civil liberties in outdoor holding pens. Think also of the Patriot Act.) Another reference in "Holiday," "Bang bang goes the broken glass," may refer to the "Night of Broken Glass," or *Kristallnacht*, the night of November 9, 1938, the first major widespread violent suppression and flagrant attack on Jewish shop owners and the general Jewish population in Germany under the Nazis. The following line, "Kill all the fags that don't agree," adds fuel to the fire of how those differing from the set policy and practices of the current administration might be dealt with under extreme conditions—a line bleeped on the radio not for its reference to violence, but rather because of the derogatory gay term. (On a related note, in the song "American Idiot," Billie Joe also sings, "Maybe I am the faggot America / I'm not a part of a redneck agenda," and thus juxtaposes gays and right-wingers a second time.) [Play song]

While Green Day makes overt references to the legacy of fascism in "Holiday" with its connection to the killing bred by war and reactionary politics and policies, the alternative metal band System of a Down asserts a satiric denial of such a parallel in their hard rock hit "B.Y.O.B." (i.e., "Bring Your Own Bombs") from their 2005 album *Mesmerize*. The line in question reads, "And we don't live in a fascist nation," which implicitly implies the opposite of this denial (but which in turn protects them from making such an outright defamatory statement through not-so-veiled irony). This song, which received heavy airplay in Columbus on the hard rock radio station and is rife with expletives, is in its rhythms, tempo and style fairly typical for this band of Armenian heritage.

System of a Down is the first major metal act in recent years to use the savage-sounding vocals, guitars, and rhythms of this rock genre to promote left-leaning principles. (In contrast, a song by the metal band Godsmack was recently featured on a recruiting advertisement for the U.S. Army.) "B.Y.O.B.," like "Holiday," alludes to the profiteering of American business interests in the Middle East with lines like "Victorious victories kneel / For brand new spankin' deals"; "Breaking into Fort Knox / Stealing our intentions"; and "Hangars sitting dripped in oil / Crying freedom." These lyrics suggest a direct link between the U.S. military presence in Iraq and American interest in their oil reserves to be appropriated for monetary gain.

As an antiwar song, "B.Y.O.B." goes beyond being just a protest against the war in Iraq, however, with further insight into these economic underpinnings for the current war. The lyric screamed at the song's beginning, and repeatedly shrieked in the middle and end in a mesmerizing way (cf. the album title *Mesmerize*) because of its many

repetitions, brings System of a Down's critique into the realm of consciousness-raising

for the general listening audience on the issue of class division in American society.

Clearly, in a volunteer army, typically it is the young men of the working and lower-

middle class who sign up to fight, thus risking and often losing their lives in the process

or becoming wounded and permanently disabled, while the youth of the middle, upper-

middle, and upper classes are afforded the privilege of attending college and/or working

to avoid enlistment. This is precisely the point the SOAD guys are pounding home with

the line, "Why do they always send the poor?!" In the mid- and later-sections of the song

lyrics, this question is coupled with two other pointed inquiries: "Where the fuck are

you?" and "Why don't presidents fight the war?" Again, these probing questions remind

me of when Michael Moore, in his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, asked a congressman who voted

for the invasion of Iraq whether he intended to send his son into the military to help fight

this war, and the obvious answer was no. (Metal has not always been apolitical or

lacking a social consciousness; for example, part of the lyrics to Black Sabbath's "War

Pigs" is very similar in nature to the economic and class critique of the working poor who

are used as soldiers on the front line:

> Politicians hide themselves away.
> They only started the war.
> Why should they go out to fight?
> They leave that role to the poor….)

[Play song]

System of a Down presents a more traditional antiwar lyric with the song "Soldier

Side" from the companion CD to *Mesmerize*, titled *Hypnotize*, also from 2005. Here the

tone and tempo, images and minor key create a somber, dirge-like lament about the

futility and sorrow of wartime suffering. In this case, the lyrics' Biblical references to

"savior" and "Jesus" echo the mention of Moses in "B.Y.O.B.," a reminder that the underlying foundation of Christianity in American society has its roots in that region of the world. In this song, the hopelessness and abysmal outlook are more characteristic of the metal genre, where drugs, suicide, self-hatred and a pervasive anger towards others and society are widespread and ubiquitous, which ironically may actually increase its appeal among some young people who savor the morbid and macabre in metal lyrics.

This band is actively engaged in social reform movements, as seen in work of the group's two front men, Serj Tankian (whose grandfather was a genocide survivor) and Daron Malakian, to reach an official acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide by the United States. Many other of their song lyrics highlight human rights abuses and injustices in both this country and elsewhere around the world. Despite the strident nature of their music and language, and the fact that their style is no doubt an acquired taste for most adults, System of a Down presents a fresh approach to the often apathetic and apolitical antics of today's heavy rock scene and offers promise of future endeavors filled with intriguing forays into the political arena which challenge the status quo and prod their listeners into going beyond the surface level of everyday, business-as-usual, acceptance of the norm, and possibly, to concrete, constructive activism.

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Anti-war tunes are getting a hearing By Edna Gundersen, USA TODAY (6/30/06)
Heavy metal gets socially conscious by JUSTIN M. NORTON Associated Press
http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/entertainment/music/15243707.htm