

The Return of Son of Dead Kennedys

Bill Blank

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An excerpt from an exclusive Detroit interview with Jello Biafra, lead singer of the Dead Kennedys, one of the more famous hardcore bands. In 1979 Jello ran for mayor of San Francisco, finishing fourth out of ten with a 'platform' which included requiring all businessmen to wear clown suits from nine to five. Exclusive here because there was only one other interviewer backstage, asking the usual 'How did you get your name?' and 'How long have you been together?' questions while I kept asking Jello if he needed a ride.

Using one of today's most powerful forces on the planet to its full potential, Jello's on-stage rap makes Abbie Hoffman sound lame, reminding the audience why 'There's a big difference between the MC5 and Ted Nugent.' And there's a Big Difference between the DK's and say, the Circle Jerks (who endorsed Reagan last year).

Supplement, don't substitute this interview with a heavy dose of DK music. The necessary lyric sheet is usually provided with the vinyl and with shows like their November 4 return to Mowed-town, Jello will sandwich more between songs than most musicians will say their whole career. And like discard the labels.

Incidentally, their new album is called 'Frankenchrist.' This interview was conducted by Bill Blank on November 4 and 5.

JELLO: Basically our purpose is to torpedo the 'Me Generation' and what it stands for while dispensing information. Did you see what happened to that pitcher of water I passed down to the kids, to the products of the Me Generation? They had no concept of sharing even after I tried explaining it a bit. They tore into each other in two seconds...Still it was better than last time we played here, at least they were trying to catch each other from hitting the floor (in stage diving)." Last time they'd let the guy smack on the floor and then kick him a few times or give 'em some studs to the mouth. When we stopped the show this time I still didn't want to dictate exactly what they should do, that's too hypocritical...We're learning together how not to be ass holes to each other. I know I'm still learning...

BB: Well, let's go back to your stage comments about the MC5 tonight. Many thought their shows were excessively violent and-

JELLO: Ah yes, the MC5. Didn't their scene also get infiltrated with certain people, certain government aid, passing around excessive drugs?

BB: You mean the CIA's LSD and MK Ultra mind control programs? Operation Jones? —

JELLO: And what else? Course it was not just drugs. There was also censorship verses selling out among other things...

BB: Like with Phil Ochs. You've heard of him, right? (Jello hums a few bars from 'Love Me, I'm a Liberal') 400 pages of FBI files, half of them blacked out, have been released recently through the Freedom of Information Act. Are you aware of or expecting increased harassment from various agencies?

JELLO: Hhmm. Well, first we feel our music is the logical extension of what Ochs and the folk movement were into. Like the day of just sitting back and listening to folkies is, well, I won't go into that now. Wow, as for surveillance first I wouldn't send in for any files through the Freedom of Information Act, simply because that means you'll be watched even more closely. I know it all begins with your elementary school records. Why do you think

they start so early with evaluations like behavior and citizen reports? Those records aren't destroyed, they're passed on but I must tell you this: we're already seeing this trickle down from Congressional and corporate do-gooders for censorship—

BB: Like the PTA and the PMRC? (Parents Music Resource Center).

JELLO: Yes, in the form of mysterious' show cancellations! In one town we ended up playing a biker bar at the last minute. But so far, in two cities we were scheduled to play we had to go early to the next tour stop due to some intense pressure from people affiliated with this PMRC against the club and promoters. One of the places was in Boise, Idaho though...

BB: People think they're not going after political music.

JELLO: That's what they want to get! Why do you think the politicians are so into it? The dirty words thing is just a front. It's obvious they're trying to end the spread of certain political ideas. I was told of a recent chat with one of these people. She kept whining, 'My son's now asking me who I voted for and he's scribbled one of those capital 'A's on my telephone book and he told me he was going to see this group called the Dead Kennedys, can you imagine that?'

In a store in New Jersey that used to be a big supporter of us, they've recently pulled our 'In God We Trust' EP from the shelves, just because our cover art was deemed offensive for Christian consumers. I know who funded this. The Beach Boys!

BB: Yes, Mike Lowe gave the PMRC an initial \$5,000 to get it all started.

JELLO: More than that. Anyway, it all goes with what I was saying about the big difference between the MC5 and Ted Nugent, the difference in the message; music to make you think or music to make you stupid...

BB: Say, how do you feel about one of your bigger fans, Joe Strummer of the Clash?

JELLO: (Grabs his throat and snickers) No, really I got nothing against Joe. The Clash are just a good example why we have never and will never sign with a major label. The controls are big enough with an independent—Joe should take whatever money he has left and form his own label and release exactly what he really wants to say...

BB: So anyway, you're not worried certain people will make things even worse for you?

JELLO: No, I'm not worried. My parents must be monitored as much as me. I come from a radical family. It's in my blood, you see. So no, we're not going to quit what we're doing now.

BB: Ah, but most bands, especially alternative or political ones, break up within a year or two. Why is that and why have you managed to stay together since '78?

JELLO: You know, life on the road. Didn't Zappa do a song about it? (Laughing) Sure, I almost quit about nine months into We had to take those months off (in '83 & '84) not just because we ah, we're becoming a greatest hits rerun but we got a little on each other's nerves—it's easy to doubt yourself and pick on each other even when the band's not the reason things aren't progressing...If we split for good it's only because we don't want to end up parodying ourselves like Iron Butterfly, or Mitch Ryder, or Santana,, or the Stones (names a few more).

BB: Or Steppenwolf?

JELLO: Yea, except they had some good tunes with something to say for awhile.

The informal interview continues even after the stage managers begin kicking us and the dozen or so left out the back door and into the cold late night drizzle.

While Jello searches for a ride he asks to hear more about Detroit's unique Devil's Night fires (500 or so). Then he blurts, 'I can tell you a big news story nobody's covering, even mentioning in this country. Last week (Oct. 29-Nov. 4) there were fires set all over Amsterdam. Squatsters and radicals went after government buildings and they burned the main police headquarters! How do I know? Our driver used to live there, he's got friends and family there, here let me introduce you to him.'

We trot over to their U-haul and though the driver quickly confirms the story (which didn't reach its watered down version on the news wire till Nov. 13) while asking about Detroit's strange bar-barbecue, it's time for them to hit the road to Cleveland.

After my mild horror stories about Detroit and even local bands getting harassed, my big car across the dark street in an unlit parking lot doesn't look too inviting to Jello. 'I can't see your car' he yelps before leaping into a packed car.

Running back across the pavement I laugh remembering Jello's opening stage remarks before the DK's went into a 200-mph version of 'Take This Job and Shove It', dedicated to 'the American businessman, for nobody can screw Americans better than an American can.' He was urging the anxious audience to buy Japanese since GM and Ford continue to move their big money overseas, already owning 51% of Toyota. Some guy in leather next to me was offended and gave Jello the finger, yelling 'Reagan is God!' before storming away from the swelling mass. Maybe the Dead Kennedys aren't for everyone but like they should be, if the lyrics really do make a difference.

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