

Who will tell the people?

an interview with David Rovics

Witch Hazel

In mid October, I met up with radical songwriter David Rovics on the US Out of Colombia roadshow. He and his singing partner Allie Rosenblatt provided a musical backdrop to this powerful traveling presentation, which featured a descriptive slideshow and a talk by Colombian labor organizer William Mendoza.

David and Allie's new album "Hang a Flag in the Window" is filled with hard-hitting political tunes, interspersed with reflective ballads and funny story-songs. Check his website: www.davidrovics.com for upcoming tour dates and a bunch of MP3s of his songs, including some unrecorded

WH: What is folk music?

DR: Ah, that's a juicy one. Originally it would be very broad—like anything that's not elite is "folk". If it's not "fine" it's "course". Y'know, if it's not a fine art then I guess it's folk art, so that would include anything basically other than classical music...Since the folk revival in the 60s—which was mainly white, middle class, urban people singing their own versions of primarily rural white and rural black traditional music—that is now the mainstream idea of folk music. So by the modern definition of folk music that's what I am, but I just don't like using the term cuz it's so narrow and excludes so much stuff that really is "music of the folk"—therefore folk music.

WH: What's "political" music?

DR: "Political music" simply means writing something "about the world". But if you write about anything other than heterosexual relationships, you're doing "political music" as defined by the music industry. But before the music industry and for most of the world still today, people write about all kinds of stuff. They write about what's going on around them. You'll find more political music at an open mic than you will coming out of say, Red House records, or some independent folk record label like that. The different labels of different kinds of music—that's an invention of the music industry. It used to be much more fluid, but now they funnel everything into market niches and standardize everything, so that basically the music industry has totally fucked up music as much as they possibly could. Anyone who sings about what's happening in the world is writing what they call "novelty songs." But if you look at traditional music before the time of the music industry you find that people write about everything: love, mine disasters, police brutality, going to war, getting shot, evil landlords, the theft of land. These things are age-old subjects...killing the king...

WH: What is your role as a political songwriter?

DR: When we say we're writing political songs, it's weird cuz that implies that the norm is apolitical. And that may be true—but only because of powerful forces in industry and government create that situation. As a musician, I play the same role musicians in political movements have played for, I dunno, thousands of years...all social movements have had music. For one, it's educational. It's also inspirational—to sing about things that are really depressing—people being killed and all kinds of horrible stuff, yet do it in a way that it can be funny, and inspirational, and that people can sing along to. Even if it's a depressing song with nothing really upbeat about it—just the act of a whole bunch of people singing together is really powerful.

WH: In what way...emotional?

DR: Yeah, emotionally. It helps them feel a sense of community...and we need a sense of community in order to have a movement. I'm totally convinced of that.

WH: Could you say something about any kind of controversy you've stirred up with your politics?

DR: First of all, I'm mostly singing for activist crowds, so people tend to agree with my politics before they hear the songs. When I sing in classrooms for students who might be more conservative or whatever, I find that people are rarely offended. A couple weeks ago, I played at a friend's class in Connecticut, and he had his students write evaluations of the performance and the talk. 28 of the 30 students had positive reactions and had never heard folk music before and had never heard music with any kind of message. Most people in this country are not reactionaries; they're either progressive or ignorant. The ignorant are a vast majority, but I think ignorant people tend toward being progressive when given something to think about. They are mostly exposed to CNN, and—through no fault of their own—they don't know where to look for information. The ignorance is created by our culture.

"Who will tell the people/that free speech is a ruse?/The corporations run the country/and then they make the news/Is it media or mind control? heroic victories or crimes?/who will tell the people/that we're living in these times?" (from David's song "Who Will Tell the People? ")

WH: Which issues have been the most controversial?

DR: 90 percent of the negative reaction I've ever gotten has been about my position on Israel, which is anti-Zionist. The other 10 percent has been around patriotism, specifically the flag. If it's not "Hang a Flag In the Window", it's "Flag Desecration Rag".

"Hang a flag In the window/All hail to the chief/Follow the leader and suspend your disbelief/My country right or wrong/You know what to do/Sing, "God Bless America "/That red, white and blue." (from the title song on David's new album)

WH: If you had to put a label on yourself politically, what would it be?

DR: I'm not sure...I would just refer to myself as a progressive, a leftist, a radical, a revolutionary—all pretty vague terms, and I like them because they're vague. Of course there's also terms I reject that are vague: like liberal, for example, and...

WH: Terrorist?

DR: (laughs) I like to sort of embrace the word terrorist just because it's one of these words that everyone's afraid of. "We're all terrorists"—everyone that doesn't like G.W. Bush is a terrorist by modern definition. Do I consider myself an anarchist or a socialist? I generally avoid either of those labels just cuz they've been so bastardized that nobody understands what they mean anymore. Plus, there's so many strains of anarchism and socialism—it's too easy to alienate anarchists by calling yourself a socialist, and vice-versa. And for what? I'd rather just explain my politics.

WH: Where did you get your political education?

DR: People, books and experiences...

WH: How and why did you start writing songs with a message?

DR: I had been exposed to Pete Seeger and various songwriters when I was a kid. Later in California I was actually exposed to Marxism and song-writing by David Kern. Then I got turned on to Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie, Buffy St. Marie, Utah Phillips. When I went to Seattle I saw Jim Page play on the street and was blown away. When my house-mate and friend was killed in SF, I started writing some songs that had more emotional depth to them, and less general "Capitalism Sucks" sentiment. They were more telling a certain story, which is generally more powerful and useful than broad condemnation type songs.

WH: You've been kind of "summit hopping" for the past few years...what are your thoughts on the Global Justice Movement in Europe compared to here?

DR: I think the fundamental difference, is that in Europe there's a powerful union movement, and here...with some exceptions, the American union movement sucks. Compared to Europe the level of militancy here is barely worth mentioning. There are lots of good locals but the national leadership is some combination of incompetent and corrupt. What we saw in Seattle was just a glimpse of the kind of mass movement that goes on in European countries many times a year. They have protests much larger than that and as militant.

WH: What kinds of criticisms do you have of the movement in the US?

DR: Mostly I just appreciate anybody who's acting out of their best intentions and believes what they're doing is right. The biggest criticism I have is of all the people who aren't involved in it—of all the indifferent people who may know about what's happening but do not care to the degree that they're actually doing anything, other than being on Prozac or whatever. I wanna see those people stand up and do something. Having said that, I wish, for example that Mobilization for Global Justice would take a position on the bombing of Iraq. You can't oppose economic imperialism without opposing military imperialism. It's ridiculous—it's stupid. It makes no sense.

WH: What are some revolutionary movements in history that have inspired you most?

DR: Maybe I'm being a romantic, but what turns me on the most is when people are joining what might be perceived as someone else's struggle...like the St. Patrick's Battalion, the International Brigades that went to Spain, the anti-fascists, the people that risked their lives to shelter Jews in Germany during the Holocaust...

WH: Solidarity?

DR: Solidarity. And also, the environmental movement—people who are willing to risk their lives to save a tree, which doesn't bear directly on their lives. It doesn't make a difference what happens to the forest as far as whether they can eat the next day...

WH: You made a whole album exclusively about 9–11. Is there any one song that you consider your best?

DR: Invariably it's the most recent one, so right now I really like "The Next Attack"...

WH: And what's that about?

DR: It goes into different reasons why "the next attack" is in the CEOs' advantage to come, and why it's to Cheney's advantage, and also why the Afghan child whose parents were just killed would want the next attack to come, and just exploring that whole idea...

WH: A lot of people out there just find it all really confusing and overwhelming...

DR: The main contradiction before 9–11 and since 9–11 is still US imperialism. One of the biggest challenges in political song-writing is that you're stuck with images coming from the mass media, and then, you have to work with those images and give people something that makes sense. So, with, let's say "The Dying Firefighter," you're taking these quite effective images from the media about the heroism of these firefighters, and you can assume that people identify with these people, as I certainly did. Those images of people marching into burning buildings is powerful shit.

WH: The same thing holds true in "Jenin"—taking the perspective of the suicide bomber—a charged image—and not necessarily sympathizing with him in the song, but...

DR: It's not saying what he's doing is right, but it is sympathizing. It's saying, I acknowledge where you're coming from, and let me describe the circumstances that led you to such a...really, a logical decision. I mean, just the fact that these people are sacrificing their lives just to do something...is powerful. Besides what they're actually doing, they're giving everything they can possibly give for their cause...

WH: Which is a just cause...

DR: Which is a just cause...yeah.

WH: Do you have a critical perspective in terms of seeing it as religious fundamentalism?

DR: No, I think religious fundamentalism can be fueled through oppression and through dividing society into Muslims vs. everybody else, but I don't think the fundamental question is around religion—I think it's around occupation, starvation, oppression—stuff like that.

WH: If you look at the IRA and then Hamas—completely different religions—it's oppression that fuels it.

DR: Yeah, same principle applies...

(later, in the car)

WH: Do you feel like you have any anthems?

DR: Yeah I like writing songs with an anthemic quality. I guess you could say that "Hang a Flag in the Window" is sort of an anti-war anthem for the modern era... well, it might not be relevant for more than a little while...

WH: There's "Shut Them Down."

DR: Yeah, and "Glory and Fame", "Pray for the Dead"... "Kiss Behind the Barricades"

WH: What inspired that one?

DR: After Carlo Giuliani was killed, and Starhawk wrote a great piece about how important it is to stick together and take care of each other and have community. I thought it was an obvious point, but really important one;

activists, especially in the anarchist scene can be like, 'I'm really tough' and 'nothing bothers me... I don't care about a little tear gas'. There's something good about that attitude, but also something destructive. We shouldn't pretend that these things can't cause physical and emotional trauma. Also, it's inspired by a photograph from 1968 Paris...the classic kiss behind the barricades...two students or young workers are both pulling their bandannas off their faces to have a quick kiss while hiding behind the barricades, before presumably going out to riot some more...I mean if you think of one photo that represents Paris '68 that would be it.

WH: ...a pretty romantic image. Do you see our struggle as romantic?

DR: Yeah, I think it's really romantic cuz to me, what's most beautiful is struggle: it's people fighting for a better world. And, I guess being a fairly sex-positive person, what's really beautiful to me is physical affection, and sex, and love—people expressing their feelings for each other in different ways. And when that's combined, well jeez, it doesn't get any better than that...unless there's a few redwood trees around...(laughs)

WH: Which has happened...

DR: Yeah, they can all be combined...(laughs) I guess the most romantic possible thing must be eco-defense...because it combines love of natural beauty with love of humanity and each other...all together.

Sidebar

David Rovics. Put a Flag in the Window. CD—21 songs, \$15 from P.O. Box 995, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

David's latest CD is a non-stop, searing political commentary that arrives in perfect timing to help foment resistance to the events of the day. Sarcastic anthems mingle with emotive, revolutionary ballads to deliver a potent impact. From 9–11, to Colombia, to the Israel-Palestine conflict, to pirate radio, Rovics gets down to the roots of the issues, consistently indicting US imperialism and resource-lust, and exposing covert military alliances around the globe.

I've heard it said that Rovics' albums are political commentary disguised as music, but in my mind, integrating these elements require unique skill and sensitivity. Having witnessed countless live performances of these songs, I have seen a rare emotional intensity exchanged between audience and stage that runs the gamut from exuberant sing-alongs to stunned silence. David Rovics is an artist and an educator, inspiring and provoking the kind of communal experiences that keep us struggling.

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