

# Even our enemies deserve music

Michael Franti and other young artists are spearheading a new generation of politically engaged musicians. **Jeff Chang** charts their paths.

**I**N New York's hermetic world of music and fashion, it's been the year of the throwback, a post-11 September retreat to the familiar and comfortable. Kids sport Seventies athletic jerseys, Eighties painted baseball caps and basketball shoes, and sing or rap to beats made popular in the Nineties. Brooklyn hipsters swing down the street in skinny ties and Madonna lace like they were walking out of an early MTV video.

But musician Michael Franti represents a different kind of throwback, with a retro chic entirely his own. His hair tumbles in rootsy dreadlocks. His feet are always bare no matter the setting or weather. His music calls up the desegregating Eighties – the multifarious rock of the Clash and the Police, the worldly-wise DJ-sets of Larry Levan and Afrika Bambaataa – and his fiery lyrics sometimes recall the American folk protest music of the Fifties and Sixties.

Over the loping dance groove of 'We Can't Stop' – an explicit homage to The Clash's 1981 hit 'The Magnificent Seven' – he raps: 'They got a war for oil, a war for gold, a war for money, and a war for souls, a war on terror, a war on drugs, a war on continents, and a

war on hugs.' Another of his recent songs, 'Bomb the World', has become the anthem of a new generation of anti-war protesters with its stirring chorus: 'You can bomb the world to pieces but you can't bomb it into peace' and a coda ready-made for marching: 'Power to the peaceful!'

Another generation, raised on Pete Seeger or John Lennon, might easily accept these as political songs firmly rooted within the protest tradition, but Franti is wholly the product of his time. His new album, *Everyone Deserves Music*, is full of songs about kids and flowers and love. Is that protest music too? Increasingly, a new generation might answer: 'Yes!'

Political music in the West may well be entering another golden age of artistry and popularity, on a par with the high-water mark of the late Sixties and early Seventies. Until recently many had bemoaned the passing of political music.

Punkers decried air-headed major-label bands. Hip-hoppers bemoaned bling-blingism. Pop music seemed increasingly manufactured and escapist.

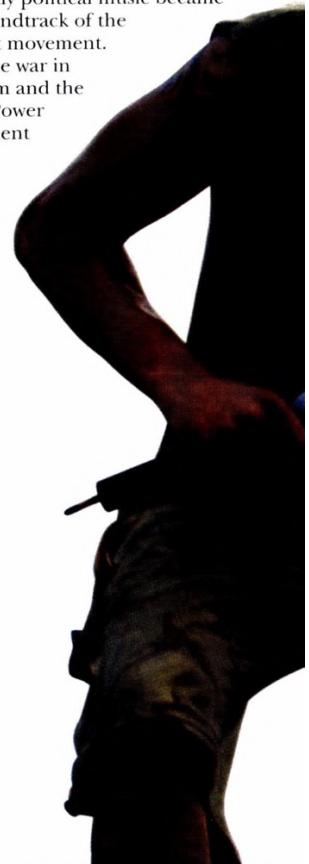
In the months following 11 September, the dearth of anti-war music in the US was stunning.

Media corporations like Clear Channel and Citadel Communications circulated 'don't-play lists', including songs like John Lennon's 'Imagine' and Yusuf Islam's (formerly Cat Stevens) 'Peace Train'. At the same time Clear Channel financed hawkish Republican candidates and 'patriotic' rallies while record-company execs met with Bush Administration officials to discuss how to help the war on terrorism. Patriotic songs flooded the stores and the airwaves. Many Arab artists were forced to cancel their US tours. All of these events had a chilling effect. Political music seemed to have reached its lowest point in 50 years. It was a travesty, many felt, in a country whose folk, rock and hip-hop movements have been so influential on the music of other people's struggles.

## Backtracking

During the Fifties, a progressive folk movement with deep links to the rising Civil Rights movement emerged in the US, drawing on sources from still earlier times manifest in the music of traditional black spirituals, blues and gospel, bluegrass and Irish standards. A decade later, the folk revival produced stars like Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Joan Baez, whose often explicitly political music became the soundtrack of the student movement.

As the war in Vietnam and the Black Power movement



escalated, the baby-boomers shook the American music industry to its core and its tastes for revolutionary music and political radicalism were mirrored in hits like Nina Simone's 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black', Aretha Franklin's 'Respect', Creedence Clearwater Revival's 'Bad Moon Rising', and James Brown's 'Say It Loud (I'm Black

### One of the judges said: 'Normal people go to concerts wearing suits and ties'

Spearhead's Michael Franti (centre) and Radioactive (right). In recent months, they have had their songs and videos banned, and their families have been harassed by FBI officials due to their anti-war stance.

and I'm Proud'). During the mid-Seventies, Curtis Mayfield, whose 'Keep On Pushing' was the late Martin Luther King Jr's favourite anthem, wrote an ode to the 'Pusherman'. Although some dismissed it then as shallow exploitation, time hears the song as a scathing critique of the way the US Civil Rights and Black Power movements collapsed under government pressure and internal

discord. At the same time, elsewhere in the Caribbean, Bob Marley's rise signalled the arrival of Majority-World freedom songs to Western ears, paving the way for other artists like Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Youssou N'Dour, and Marley's bandmate and longtime friend Peter Tosh. British punk bands like The Clash, Fela's afrobeat, Miriam Makeba's apartheid-era songs of struggle and hope, the early South Bronx stirrings of what would later be known as hip-hop, and all their stylistic progeny carried the legacy of protest forward.

But the music industry changed drastically during the Nineties. Consolidation and globalization dramatically narrowed the content of popular music. American radio, deregulated in 1996, standardized and reduced its playlists. Only four corporations now control the global pop market. Independent distribution is all but a thing of the

past. And despite being mired in its biggest slump in decades, the record industry has run away from most politicized music, leaving the production and distribution of protest music to tiny independent labels and artist-initiated digital distribution online in the form of MP3s. Political artists in the US such as Public Enemy, Michael Franti and Ani DiFranco now record for their own independent labels and struggle to develop alternative forms of

distribution. It's not that political music no longer exists: it's that it is often no longer widely available.

At the same time, media companies have tried to compartmentalize the music landscape in which niche-markets have proliferated. Political rappers are folded into the 'conscious rap' niche, the marketing equivalent of the kiss of death. The same thing goes for 'straight-edge punks' and 'alt-country singers' who have all been moved to the back of the bin with genres like 'jazz', 'classical' and so-called 'world music'. Rap's biggest artists are those who play along with the media monopolies' synergy-seeking game. Rapper Jay-Z, for instance, owns a clothing and vodka line to go with his movie and music businesses. Although he has released three albums and dozens more songs since 11 September, only one – a guest shot on British Asian bhangra-rapper Panjabi MC's single 'Beware Of The Boys (Mundian To Bach Ke)' – openly discloses his opposition to the war on Iraq. Playing the game means vigilant self-censorship.

In an odd way the state of global pop highlights disturbing parallels between the so-called 'free world' and the world it is allegedly trying to rescue from fundamentalism and authoritarianism. In March, mass protest broke-out in Morocco when authorities banned a heavy-metal festival in Casablanca and herded 14 of the performers into jail. Islamist authorities argued that the black-shirt wearing, baseball-capped rockers were peddling satanism and debasing the morality of Muslim youth. The Moroccan Government crushed the demonstrations and

sentenced some of the artists to year-long jail terms. One of the judges said: 'Normal people go to concerts wearing suits and ties.'

Similarly, the US Federal Communications Commission – headed by Colin Powell's son Michael – banned a feminist retake of Gil Scott-Heron's classic 'Your Revolution' by African-American poet and performance artist Sarah Jones. The song, a castigation of mainstream rap and dub reggae misogyny, received a stiff fine and a virtual airplay ban. Meanwhile, the videos featuring scantily clad dancers, which prompted Jones to write her song in the first place, continued to dominate Viacom-owned MTV and Black Entertainment Television. The ruling was later reversed after much outcry from the hip-hop world, but the lesson was shocking – the difference between artists under democracies weakened by fundamentalism or global capitalism and artists under authoritarian regimes are simply matters of degree.

In such conditions protest music has always evolved. At the end of the 19th century, after the US forcibly took over Hawai'i, one of the most popular island tunes became 'Kaulana Na Pua' (Famous Are the Flowers). On the face of it the Hawaiian lyrics told of



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