

Louder than a bomb

'I only ask God not to make me indifferent to war. It is a great monster that tramples on the poor innocence of the people.' – Argentinean rock musician Leon Gieco in his song, 'Soló le Pido a Dios'

The so-called 'war on terrorism' has provoked many fence-sitters to take a stand and nowhere was this more apparent than in popular music. Some artists chimed-in to the pro-war choir. Paul McCartney indulged in patriotic chest-thumping with his song 'Freedom' written about the attacks of 11 September. Other musicians, though, dared to speak out against the war.

The STOP (Stop The Oppressive Politics) movement released their track 'Down with US', which railed against the Bush Administration's penchant for warmongering rather than dealing with domestic crises. **'When people all around us are starving and homeless, what is Bush focused on, must be his father's old grudges.'**

The Dope Poet Society's song 'War of Terrorism', challenged the moral righteousness of the war and echoed many anti-war activists' concerns that far more insidious motives were driving it: **'It's not a war on terrorism it's a war of terrorism. The old imperialism. You know the money is the reason. America is killing for oil not for freedom.'**

Egyptian folk singer Shaaban Abdel-Rahim's anti-war song 'Attack on Iraq' became a massive hit in the Arab world. **'Leave Iraq in peace, you inspected it. It has no arms of mass destruction but they are still bombing it.'** In these times of war, radical musicians are often at the front line standing up to the bellicose powers-that-be.

Check out the free CD included with this magazine for more examples of anti-war songs.

the beauty of the islands' flora, but embedded in the languid melody was this message: 'We do not value the Government's money. We are satisfied with the stones, the astonishing food of the land.' There are parallels in the spirituals of the American South, apartheid-era South African *m'bube* and *mbaqanga*, Zimbabwean *chimurenga*, Brazilian *tropicalismo*, Algerian *rai*, and even Cuban rap.

Michael Franti's career reflects this legacy. He began his career during the Reagan Eighties as a black-booted industrial-rock artist railing against the alienating effects of television. Next, in a group called the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, Franti became a Public Enemy-inspired didact. But by the mid-Nineties, the high era of Afrocentric, politically charged rap passed, in no small part due to the industry's increasing consolidation and globalization. So Franti reinvented himself again. With a band called Spearhead, he began exploring his blackness and deepening his metaphorical reach. Songs with titles like 'The Language of Violence' gave way to 'Skin on the Drum'.

In describing his newest album, *Everyone Deserves Music*, he says: 'Half the record is a healthy dose of venting anger about that, and the other half is about how do we hold on to our spirituality, our community and our connectedness to each other.' On 'What I Be', over a gentle guitar-driven dance groove, he sings: 'If I were a seed, I'd give birth to redwood trees, and if I were a tree, I'd generate the freshest air to breathe.' In an era

where global media corporations push one-size-fits-all noise and Western politicians advance arrogant unilateralism, Franti offers a musical universalism. 'Even our worst enemies,' he sings on the title track, 'they deserve music.'

Off the fence

And they have been getting it. Since the opening of the Iraq phase of the 'war on terrorism', there has been an outpouring of protest music unlike anything heard in the past two decades. In Britain, Blur unleashed a 59-second art-bomb called, 'We've Got A File On You!' and in the Caribbean, great musical agit-prop also took the form of satire. The late Trinidadian calypso artist Andre Tanker's final carnival song mocked Bush and Hussein's confrontation as a 'Food Fight'. Dancehall artist Beenie Man's single 'Terrorist' sends up wartime surveillance-and-containment hysteria in the North. 'George Bush got nothing on me! CIA, FBI! Cause I'm a terrorist, you don't want to war with me,' he sneers. 'I'll be another DJ dead for speaking out of the mouth what I shouldn't have said!'

After a decade of steady narrowing in the pop universe, Bush's aggressive push into Baghdad finally forced many North American artists off the fence. Bruce Springsteen – whose 2002 album 'The Rising' came uncomfortably close to the point of justifying vengeance for victims of 11 September – defended the Dixie Chicks, added Edwin Starr's 'War' to his concert playlist, and even

chided his audiences for misinterpreting his lyric, 'I want an eye for an eye'. Formerly flag-waving rocker Lenny Kravitz joined Iraqi pop star Kadim Al Sahir to sing, 'We Want Peace' – and some great art was made. Rage Against the Machine's Zach De La Rocha teamed with DJ Shadow for the abrasive 'March of Death', while alt-rockers Yo La Tengo did an impassioned remake of Sun Ra's 'Nuclear War'.

Hundreds of anti-war MP3s suddenly appeared on the web. New York-based pop critic Will Hermes believes the phenomenon may herald a new movement to open up space for timely, relevant protest music in the consolidated, globalized media: 'The explosion of anti-war MP3s represents a new kind of song-making, one that has more in common with internet instant messaging and the old folk-music tradition than with the idea of the album as commodity and artistic statement.'

Franti has found himself retuning his responses to some of those old folk protest songs. 'It's funny. In the past, I'd hear some folksingers singing folk songs or "Give Peace a Chance" and think, God, this is really corny. But then you realize, in a time of war, it's a really radical message.' And like the old folkies, Franti now talks about his music as a community-building project. 'We're creating a community who believes that music can inspire people and help people get through a difficult night. Maybe it can even change moments in people's lives – and hopefully that can have a ripple effect into the world.'

'Earlier in my career, I was just saying, "Fuck the system, everything sucks." This time, I didn't want to make an album that was like "Fuck George Bush". It's all true and I believe all of that!' he chuckles. 'But I want to get up in the morning and feel like my life is worth living.' ■



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No compromise

a tribute to Nina Simone

Activist, artist, singer, songwriter, classical pianist – all these are merely anaemic categories by which we attempt to describe the legendary Nina Simone. For 70 years she stayed true to herself, passionate about her beliefs and writing and performing songs that will endure for generations.

Born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Tyron, North Carolina during the Great Depression, she took an early interest in music, reportedly playing piano as early as two years old. By the age of seven she was an aspiring classical pianist and singing with her sisters in the church choir. But the virulent racism in 1940s US had an early and lasting effect upon her. Years later she recalled, as the most formative event of her life, a piano recital she gave in the local library at the age of 12 at which her parents were asked to stand at the back because they were black.

With the financial support of the local black community she was sent to a girls' boarding school and then became one of the first black female artists to attend New York's prestigious Juilliard School of Music. Her classical training came to an abrupt halt at 21, however, when she was refused a scholarship by the Curtis School of Music in Philadelphia which she maintained was due to her race.

Shut out of the classical-music establishment, she found herself pursuing a reluctant singing career for which she is now world famous. While her earliest recorded songs – such as a rendition of the Gershwin brothers' 'I Loves You Porgy' – propelled her to fame, it was her own compositions which broke new ground in political music. In 1963, after the church bombing that killed four young black girls in Birmingham, Alabama, and the assassination of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, she wrote 'Mississippi Goddam':

*'Picket lines,
School boycotts,
They try to say it's a communist plot.
All I want is equality,
for my sister my brother my people and me...'*

Weaving the turbulent events around her into her music, she dramatically transformed both music and politics and made them her own. Songs like 'Mississippi Goddam', 'Backlash Blues' and 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black' became anthemic to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Her songs about sensuality, beauty and love also contained within them a potent feminism. Songs like 'Four Women' and 'Blues for Mama' conveyed a deep anger at the injustice of sexism and racism combined with a rousing call to black women to hold their heads high, such as in 'Images':

*'She does not know
Her beauty,
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.
If she could dance
Naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know.
But there are no palm trees
On the street,
And dishwasher gives back no images.'*

In 1978 Simone was arrested, and soon released, for withholding taxes in 1971-73 in protest at her government's undeclared war in Vietnam. Her song 'Mr Backlash',

co-written with the late poet, activist Langston Hughes perhaps best sums up her sentiments at the time:

*'Mr Backlash, Mr Backlash,
Just who do you think I am?
You raise my taxes, freeze my wages,
And send my son to Vietnam.
You give me second-class houses,
And second-class schools.
Do you think that alla colored folks
Are just second-class fools?
Mr Backlash, I'm gonna leave you
With the backlash blues'*

Soon after she left the United States permanently, living in the Caribbean, West Africa and finally Europe where she bought her first home in southern France. In a 1998 interview she blamed racism in the US for her self-imposed exile saying she 'paid a heavy price for fighting the establishment'.

Never holding back, she enthralled millions with a music that defies category. 'To most white people, jazz means black and jazz means dirt and that's not what I play. I play black classical music. That's why I don't like the term "jazz", and Duke Ellington didn't either – it's a term that's simply used to identify black people.'

In a 1997 interview she explained how she wished to be remembered: 'I want to be remembered as a diva from beginning to end who never compromised in what she felt about racism and how the world should be, and who to the end of her days consistently stayed the same.'

*Nina Simone died
on 21 April 2003 in
Corry-le-Rouet, France.*

