
The Punk Rock Politics of Anti-Flag

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For some fifteen years now, I have been teaching a two-week, undergraduate course entitled Visualizing American Literature. When I designed the course, I had intended to compare literary works with visual counterparts, which we did for the first several years and still do, but to a lesser extent. We consider stories like Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" along with paintings by Thomas Cole, Sanford Robinson Gifford, and other Hudson River school painters, poems like E. E. Cummings's "Picasso" with Cubist paintings, and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* with the film directed by James Foley. The class, however, has evolved into more of a study of the American experience in which we consider a range of works from essayists, politicians, ministers, and various types of artists. (The course is long overdue for a name change.) One of the most popular segments of the course is termed Politics and Art. In addition, to short stories (by Tim O'Brien, e.g.), speeches (by Dwight David Eisenhower, e.g.), and films like *Casablanca*, we listen to popular music, usually beginning with Woody Guthrie and moving through Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Public Enemy, Steve Earle, and Anti-Flag. Anti-Flag, who will be familiar to a handful of students, provokes the strongest reaction and the most journal entries.

"Liar! Killer! Turncoat! Thief! Criminal with protection of law" begins Anti-Flag's opening salvo aimed at President Bush on *The Terror State*, the band's 2003 release. It's an arousing punk anthem, one that never fails to electrify audiences at their live

shows. However, what might be simple ranting and sloganeering for most punk or rock bands takes on genuine significance with



Anti-Flag

Anti-Flag. Accompanying *The Terror State* and *For Blood and Empire*, the 2006 follow-up release, are 24-page booklets with not only lyrics but also explanations for the lyrics. For instance, Bush, we read, is a “turncoat” for his tax program which “benefits a tiny minority of wealthy Americans” and “screws the American worker by supporting corporate welfare for companies who move their factories to the Third World”; a “killer” for presiding over 152

executions as Governor of Texas and for the civilian casualties in the aerial bombings of Afghanistan and Iraq; a “liar” for falsifying the threat of Iraq to the world and the ties between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda; and a “thief” for, when governor, changing investment rules for the endowment of the University of Texas to benefit friends and business associates. The band supports its claims by citing specific articles from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Sun-Times*.

On “Confessions of an Economic Hit Man” from *For Blood and Empire*, the hitman begins with a reference to the “windfall of profit to get to” and threatens to turn “the jackals loose if I cannot get through.” In the chorus, the commentator responds with frustration at the hitman’s unchecked profiteering and corporate empire building, and, in the next verse, he catalogues victims: Jacobo Árbenz, Mohammad Mosaddeq, Salvador Allende, Jaime Roldós Aquilera, Omar Torrijos, and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, all “elected democratically, all snuffed out by the CIA.” Following the lyrics is a brief excerpt from John Perkins’s best-selling and frightening book from which the song takes its title and references to websites for further information. It’s punk rock with endnotes,

citations, and annotations.

In May, I spent some time with Justin Sane, the leader of Anti-Flag. I asked him what record companies thought of the booklets. “They hate them. [*Big laugh.*] They’re expensive.” Noting the depth of the commentary, the careful citation of sources, and the band’s hectic schedule, I asked about their preparation. “They’re mostly all by me unless it’s a guest writer. And it is time consuming because – well, you saw my day today; it’s pretty much how my day always is. It’s always insane. It’s like 3am and I’m finally by myself: ‘I guess that I can surf the Internet now and read things and research things.’ It does take me a long time because I don’t have a lot of free time, but it’s a passion. There are issues that are interesting and important to me.” Reflective of these passions, the Anti-Flag website provides links to conscious-raising sources (<http://www.anti-flag.com/>).

For *Bright Lights of America*, the band’s latest release and eighth album, Anti-Flag tried something different. “We did an online faux newspaper,” explains Justin, “and we actually got a cease-and-desist order from *USA Today*, which is very funny. They were going to sue us for everything, including our first born children. Apparently, *USA Today* has a monopoly on questionable news stories [*laughs*].” Along with the CD comes a series of postcards addressed to different offices of the United Nations intended to encourage listeners to sound a voice for stronger human rights and environmental protection initiatives. “You know, the postcard and the write-in drive to me wasn’t so much to say that, ‘Ok, everyone’s going to send these postcards in and they’re going to have this big impact.’ The goal of it was to give people a gateway into activism and to give people the sense that they on their own can be involved.”

Justin and drummer Pat Thetic first formed a short-lived incarnation of Anti-Flag in Glenshaw, PA, just outside Pittsburgh, in 1988. After several other bands and a few months on the West coast, Justin returned to Pittsburgh and, in 1993, reformed Anti-Flag with Pat and Andy Flag on bass. Andy departed after recording the band’s first CD, *Die for the Government* (1996), and was replaced by a succession of bassists, including Chris Head who switched

over to rhythm guitar when Chris #2 joined in 1999. The lineup has remained in place. *Bright Lights of America* is the band's second album for RCA, with whom they signed after releasing two albums (*Underground Network*, 2001; *The Terror State*, 2003) on the legendary Fat Wreck Chords. The shift to a major label has been predictably controversial among listeners. "I understand where kids come from saying that 'You sold out,'" Justin explains, "but in my mind everything we've ever done, we've always weighed the pros and cons. But the pros of that arrangement were just so good, and to have the resources of SONY/ BMG at our finger tips, that was just something that we would be irresponsible to pass up, especially under the circumstances in which we are able to create the messages and say the things we are saying."

For a band that on stage can be angry and acerbic when railing against social inequities, governmental blunders, and corporate greed, they frequently surprise fans and interviewers with their humility, warmth, wit, and straight-edge lifestyle. Following Justin on the grounds of the Bamboozle Festival in New Jersey, I was especially impressed by his concern for the band's fans. He signed autographs and spoke to them long after his manager tried to hustle him back on the tour bus for a tight schedule which included an interview, a band meeting, and a plane flight home.

He continues our discussion about the RCA relationship: "I mean *For Blood and Empire* is probably the most political record we've ever made, so I guess it's kind of funny and ironic that on this major label comes this really, really political record. And more political than any indie record that we made before that. ... We saw the opportunity that we had and certain parts of that record led to really great things. You know, [our involvement with] Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA), who we worked with on the depleted uranium campaign and who had a lot of influence with pushing through legislation for Congress to do a study on depleted uranium, came directly out of working with SONY and having that clout to push that issue and put it in front of people."

On "Depleted Uranium Is a War Crime," the closing track on *For Blood and Empire*, sound clips from Congressman McDermott, totaling well over a minute and from an interview conducted by

Justin, are woven seamlessly into the song and extend after the music concludes: “The women [in Iraq] at the time of birth don’t ask it it’s a boy or a girl, they ask: is it normal?” And then, “The military denies first, and then after the evidence builds to the point where they can no longer deny, then they do the research That’s what happened in the Vietnam era around Agent Orange and I suspect and I’m worried that that’s what will happen this time.” To introduce “The Modern Rome Burning” from *The Bright Lights of America*, Anti-Flag uses a sound clip from Mumia Abu-Jamal, who, from death row, calls America “the prison house of nations,” as it accounts for “23% of the world’s incarcerated” although it has just “a mere 5% of the world’s total population – not since Rome have we seen such a fever for imprisonment.”

For *The Bright Lights of America* the band decided to experiment with different sounds. After listening to Morrissey’s *Ringleader of the Tormentors* (2006), Justin suggested veteran producer Tony Visconti, who has also worked with TRex, David Bowie, Paul McCartney, and the Boomtown Rats: “When we started writing and we pretty much had things worked out knowing that we wanted to use orchestral instruments ... brass ... a harmonica, [and] different kinds of instrumentation ... we thought we really need to work with a person who has experience creating different kinds of sounds and different dynamics.”

This different sonic and the more personal approach to songwriting on *Bright Lights* resulted, in part, from a tragedy the band has had to endure – the murder of #2’s sister and her boyfriend. “It really had a profound impact on the record. ... After she was killed we would go play shows and kids and people in general would come up to us ... and they’d want to express to us their condolences, but they also wanted to share their personal tragedies with us, which was something that we never saw coming. ... [It was] therapeutic in a lot of ways and I think it showed us that there was a place and, I think, even a need in our community for someone to write a record that said to people that if you’re going through these kinds of hard times that you’re not alone.” The opening track (“Good and Ready”) and the listed closing track (“The Ink and the Quill [Be Afraid]”) use children’s choruses, especially rare on a

punk record, that could be interpreted as a profoundly sympathetic gesture to the two children left behind in the double murder. In late 2007, the band released an EP, *A Benefit for Victims of Violent Crime*, with proceeds donated to the Center for Victims of Violence and Crime, a Pittsburgh organization.

“We found that we could open up as a band, on a personal level, and that the personal in the end is very political. I think that a lot of the reasons that certain events happen in our lives can be traced back to a political climate or social climate of where we live and the political decisions that are made that effect that political climate.” The ironic title track, for instance, is based on two fans: “The character is a girl who I met ... a cutter who for whatever reason can’t quit cutting herself. ... The other character is a boy who has a really rough home life and he can’t handle it. His only way of dealing with it is to take a lot of drugs. They’re really dark subjects, but in the end I think it’s a very optimistic song.”

I ask Justin to explain the optimism in a song about an America “where they sell souls” in “suburbs that never end” and where the protagonists try “to leave this empty ugly place” and be “far away from the bright lights of America,” an image reflective of the lost American Dream, an inversion, for instance, of John Winthrop’s seventeenth-century “City upon a hill” in which Winthrop’s New World community was to shine forth to serve humankind as paradigm for emulation. “First of all,” responds Justin, “the question that really needs to be asked and the question I’m trying to raise in the song is just who are we as Americans? What kind of society have we built that people feel the only way they can exist is to do these things [the actions of the song’s protagonists] to themselves? Why are so many people on anti-depressants just to get through the day? Do you have to be on anti-depressants? Why are so many people so strung out and drugged? Why are we having people so stressed out in our society? Is this the direction that we want to head in as a country and as a world?”

However, despite the band’s different approach to the album, *Bright Lights* is still pure Anti-Flag, which is to say fiery punk rock with scorching guitar riffs, Justin’s cutting lead guitar lines, call-and-response vocal patterns, anthemic choruses, #2’s pumping

bass lines, and Pat's pounding drums – all driven by the urgency of their convictions and commitment to politics, social causes, the individual, the community, and to the very rock-and-roll concept of fun. “In the end this should be a good time,” says Justin before he adds quickly, “And activism should be fun. ... So I try to encourage people to get involved.” Their personal songs can be quite witty, if not funny. In “Go West,” a break-up song, the distraught singer agonizes: “She hates me and I know it because she said so/ And I forgot my notebook and Socialist Manifesto ... Go west young man.”

Influenced by the Clash, the Dead Kennedys, and Good Riddance, Justin is upset with those punk bands who have abandoned politics and social consciousness: “I am frustrated with the lack of bands in the mainstream taking a stand and singing about issues such as the war. I think that there's a place for all music and all ideas and I think that love songs are just as important as anti-war songs, but with that said I think there is also a place and a time when it's important to stand up and be counted. The last couple of years have certainly been one of those times and so few bands have really done that. I think especially in the punk community. I think it's embarrassing that it has not been a very good representation from the mainstream punk community as far as bands being willing to put their own self-interest aside and take a stand. In all honesty, I think that's frustrating.” As he sings on “The Project for a New American Century” (*For Blood and Empire*), it's time for “a gut check of what you believe.”

I asked Justin about the 2008 presidential candidates: “Eight years ago I would have sat here and said I'm voting for Nader because Bush and Gore are the same. But Bush and Gore are not the same and I was wrong. It doesn't take much for someone in power to steer the ship in a direction that is so catastrophic that we find ourselves in the position that we are today. I really don't believe that if Al Gore had been President that the United States would currently be occupying Iraq. I don't think that our environment would be in the kind of shape that it's in. I don't think our economy would be in the kind of shape it's in.” Justin made clear that this time he would vote for the Democratic candidate. “I'm for anyone

who can beat McCain because I think McCain is just going to be four more years of Bush. ... [McCain's] more of a war hawk and neo-con than George Bush was when George Bush came into the White House."

For an introduction to Anti-Flag, I recommend any of the last three albums, giving perhaps a slight edge to *For Blood and Empire*. Certainly, I suggest that you check out YouTube, particularly "Turncoat," "The Press Corpse," "Bright Lights of America," and, from their first album, "You've Got to Die for the Government," a defining song which might be considered a punk version of Wilfred Owen's ironic World War I poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est," or "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." And, if Anti-Flag is performing in your area, see them for one of the tightest, most energetic, and galvanizing shows in rock today.

Selected Discography (Full length CDs, except where noted.)

- *Die for the Government* (1996)
- *Their System Doesn't Work for You* (1998)
- *A New Kind of Army* (1999)
- *Underground Network* (2001)
- *Mobilize* (2002)
- *The Terror State* (2003)
- *For Blood and Empire* (2006)
- *A Benefit for Victims of Violent Crime* (EP, 2007)
- *The Bright Lights of America* (2008)