

WITH WORDS AS STRONG AS WARRIORS

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The entirety of this project is dedicated to the loving memory of

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1985-2011



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ABSTRACT

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: JOHN HOOD

Despite the bland and commercial whitewash imposed by its current media giants, America is exquisitely unique in several ways. Among them is the impact that the American folk song has had upon political discourse. A melting pot of musical cultures birthed a fire for revolution that is best carried out with a guitar. In a land of free speech, the one with the guitar is king. This thesis aims to detail some of the aspects of protest music which have made it such a powerful tool. It is meant to accompany an album by the same title as this paper and by the same artist as the author which is available solely through online distributors such as iTunes and CDBaby. The work is intended to re-spark a revolution, or at least a discussion, in face of the horrendous political collapse of the once great republic.

The American Song

An introduction.

Twentieth century America experienced change with a rapidity unbeknownst to any civilization before it. The country began with a revered form of governance intended to guarantee equality and the pursuit of happiness to its people. As history unfolded, however, these ideas of equality and happiness appeared to be just that, ideas. This first became apparent with the issue of slavery, but inequality and disenfranchisement did not stop there. As capitalism progressed, America saw the explosion of technology and industry that would propel the country to wealth and prestige. However, wealth and prestige did not extend to all, and this inequality ignited workers to form the Labor Movement. Years later, American ideals of peace and neutrality were forever shattered by the relentless waves of war that spilled American blood throughout the countrysides of Europe, Korea, Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Guatemala, Chile, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan. During the Vietnam era, American citizens protested the absurd tragedy of war in what has become one of the most popularized American protest movements. In roughly the same era, the Civil Rights Movement fought for racial equality, and through protest and perseverance, became the most legendary and influential of American social movements.

The common threads amongst these altercations within American history are the songs sung by those determined to make a permanent change upon the status quo. Slave songs and spirituals such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” are the earliest examples of this, as they were essential in determining the success

of the fleeing slaves who risked their lives for freedom. Music continued its role in propelling the freedom and equality of African-Americans with potent movement songs such as “We Shall Overcome.”¹ The now world-famous freedom song originated as one of the many songs sung by union members during the Labor Movement², demonstrating the universal effect which music has upon individuals and social movements. The sentiments of the Anti-War Movement during the Vietnam War are demonstrated in songs such as Bob Dylan’s “Master of War,”³ “Talking World War III Blues,” and “With God On Our Side” amongst countless others. Music was essential to the protesters during the Vietnam era in which the movement not only threw napalm on the burgeoning fire which became rock and roll, but spurred a nationwide folk revival.

This common power of music is in no way revolutionary. Throughout human history, music has been an intrinsic part of the human experience. Music has the unique ability to capture the spirit of a moment, to say the ineffable, to bring a voice to the voiceless, and to captivate a generation. From the pulsating tribal beats of indigenous people to Beethoven’s fifth symphony, the spirit of the people and their time is inherent within each note.

The triumphs and tribulations of the American people can be traced through their music. Artists in every generation have used music to fight the establishment, and in some cases, have come out the victor. Along with the poor,

¹T.V. Reed. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.) , 1.

²R. Serge Denisoff, *Sing a Song of Social Significance: Second Edition*. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1983) , 74.

³Denisoff. *Sing a Song of Social Significance*, 74.

tired and huddled masses came songs and traditions from throughout the world. It was in this melting pot of musical varieties that the American folk song was born and became a tool of great social importance.⁴ This tradition of the song's influence on social movements continued through the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. It is this efficacy of the American song to influence political discourse and history that reveals the song's ability to stimulate change.

This powerful facet of song has inspired the entirety of this project. The thesis is comprised of two parts. The more vital of the two is an original musical album featuring six of my favorite protest songs and four original works. The album coincides with this essay, which aims to detail the power of song and specifically the songs used on the album. Both projects are meant to reflect the need for social change and stimuli, a discomfort with the current American situation, and the songs capacity to instigate both. It is my hope that this fair country sees a revival in people's willingness to participate in political discourse and stand for social change. The song's unique ability to do so will be the discussion of the following sections.

⁴Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison. *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51.

Warriors

Songs as Tools for Social Change

Throughout the recording of the album I have questioned music's effect on socio-political forces, fortunately, my doubt has been contrary to the historical facts of the matter. Songs have developed and transformed the American identity since the country's inception. This section is intended to detail some aspects of music which have contributed to its profound effect on the American narrative. There are several aspects of music which contribute to its profound ability to foster change. Nearly every academic discipline has something relevant to say about the power of music. I will humbly attempt to detail a few aspects of the American protest song which contribute to its role in the furthering of social progress.

The significance of the American folk song coincides with its use in the development and perpetuation of social movements. This is largely rooted in the immigrant nature of the foundations of the country. In their book Music and Social Movements, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that these beginnings have allowed the American song to have a larger impact on the country than its European counterparts. They write:

Because of this distinctive historical background, it should not be surprising that the various genres of folk music that emerged in the rural United States should have had a much greater political, social, and economic significance in the twentieth-century United States than similar kinds of folk traditions have had in most European countries.⁵

⁵ Eyerman and Jamison, *Music*, 51.

In the early years of the country, the folk music traditions determined much of the political discourse. What developed soon after was a strong connection between social movements and the songs sung by their members. Eyerman and Jamison continue their argument:

The active use of music and song by social movements was thus a natural outgrowth of the multilingual background of the American people. By the late nineteenth century, popular music, and especially what were beginning to be labeled folk songs, was already becoming a conscious ingredient of social movement activity.⁶

The fusion of the American folk song and American social movements is reflected in the various stages of a social movement's progress. Songs are often very useful to the beginnings of a movement. According to the book Persuasion and Social Movements, songs help fledgling social movements in several ways. Initially, songs have the capacity to popularize the movement. This was seen during the Vietnam War era in which:

Folk songs by Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Barry McGuire, and others addressed war and peace before the Gulf of Tonkin incident thrust the United States into the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s. Only later did many of us come to realize that the popular folk songs of the day were calling our attention to a variety of long neglected, social ills.⁷

Songs have the ability to penetrate the masses and foster conscious political thought without seeming overly radical or unacceptable. Along with having this effect on a young social movement, songs are also used to transform the

⁶ Eyerman and Jamison, *Music*, 52.

⁷ Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith and Robert E. Denton, Jr. *Persuasion and Social Movements* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2007) 88.

perception of the present. This is accomplished by presenting bleak titles or lyrics which reflect the status of the listener in hopes to inspire their further association with the movement.⁸

As a social movement continues to grow, songs “are employed in most movements to energize the discontented.”⁹ Movements begin with an organization, if only a loose one, of those whose strife is the catalyst for the movement. Those who fall within the realm of such social strife must be inspired and “energized” to participate in the political action necessary to truly bring about the desired change. Whether these activities are picketing, striking, voting, or marching, songs “urge followers to ‘stand up and be counted,’ ‘go tell it on the mountain,’ ‘give your hands to the struggle,’ ‘join the union,’ and ‘dump the bosses off your back.’”¹⁰

The songs of protest movements are often feared by the institutions to which they stand opposed.¹¹ According to Stewart, Smith and Denton, this is reflected in the policies of institutions in charge of regulating commercial radio play. They write:

The American Broadcasting Company warned its affiliates that they could lose sponsorship if they insisted on playing music that was a danger to society, while the Federal Communications Commission reminded radio and television stations that they could lose their broadcasting licenses if they played the wrong kind of music.¹²

This case proves the authors’ point that, “Institutions have long utilized music

⁸Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 54.

⁹Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 75.

¹⁰Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 75.

¹¹Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 54.

¹²Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 54.

for a variety of persuasive purposes, and they are leery of its use in the hands of social agitators.”¹³ It is the unique ability of music to foster change which terrorizes those who hold stock in the status quo. Thus making the song one of the most powerful weapons of peaceful action.

I have examined a few of the several ways that music can be effectively used by social movements to help bring about their desired change, but have yet to examine any aspects of the songs themselves. R. Serge Denisoff’s book, Sing a Song of Social Significance, provides us with an extensive and accurate definition of the protest song, or as he more properly identifies it, the propaganda song.

Denisoff defines these songs as such:

A propaganda song in the folk idiom may be conceived of as a song designed to communicate social, political, economic, ideological concepts, or a total ideology to the listener and one which employs those attributes generally identified with a folksong.¹⁴

This definitions provides us a clear picture of what we commonly refer to as a protest song. While this definition can transcend musical genres, the “folk idiom” is often preferred because it provides a simple and recognizable musical backdrop for the singers message to be clearly conveyed.¹⁵ Along with this definition, Denisoff identifies six primary goals that the song may attempt to achieve. These are:

1. The song attempts to solicit and arouse outside support and sympathy for a social or political movement.
2. The song reinforces the value structure of individuals who are active

¹³Stewart, Smith and Denton, *Persuasion*, 75.

¹⁴ R. Serge Denisoff. *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1983) 2.

¹⁵Denisoff, *Significance*, 3.

supporters of the social movement or ideology

3. The song creates and promotes cohesion, solidarity, and high morale in an organization or movement supporting its world view.

4. The song is an attempt to recruit individuals for a specific social movement

5. The song invokes solutions to real or imagined social phenomena in terms of action to achieve a desired goal.

6. The song points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms.¹⁶

These goals outline six ways to identify a protest song and help us to differentiate from songs not being used to inspire a political change. They also reiterate the important function that the protest song has within society.

The song's unique ability to captivate the masses echoes throughout the twentieth century as songs have been used to energize fledgling movements into unstoppable social forces. It is my belief that in the modern age of mass media, war, economic inequality, commercialization, environmental endangerment, etc., the power of song needs to be harnessed more than ever. This is the inspiration for the recording of the album section of my thesis. In the following section of this essay I will outline the songs recorded for the album portion in an attempt to show why I feel they are as important today as when they were debuted.

¹⁶Denisoff, *Significance*, 2-3.

From Guthrie to Haggard

A closer look at the songs included in the album.

I am not certain whether choosing the songs for this record was the easiest or most difficult part of this project. While writing the original songs proved challenging, finding six songs to cover which had both historic relevance and modern cultural significance was an equally daunting task. The selection of covers for the record spans fifty years of modern U.S. history, beginning in the 1930's and ending in the 1980's. I chose these songs not only for their political importance, but also because each holds personal significance and has helped to mould my political outlook.

The album begins with two classics from the folk revivalist era of the 1960s; Malvina Reynold's, "Little Boxes" and the Tom Paxton song, "What Did You Learn in School Today?" Both songs were made popular by the legendary urban-folk revivalist, Pete Seeger. No collection of American protest music would be complete without the inclusion of Woody Guthrie, possibly the most notable figure of politically motivated folk music. The album continues with his song "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd." I chose the song for several reasons that are discussed later in this section. These three songs make up my homage to the traditional approach of Guthrie, Seeger and the 60's generation of folk revivalists whom they inspired.¹⁷ The next three covers begin with Country Joe McDonald's "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag." The theme of non-constituted war and violence continues with The Dead Kennedys' "Kill The Poor." The

¹⁷Allan M. Winkler, *To Everything There Is a Season: Pete Seeger and the Power of Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.) 86-87.

album ends with a less obvious protest song by country music superstar Merle Haggard known as “Rainbow Stew.” Each song aims to achieve the sixth of Denisoff’s listed goals for propaganda music in that they target social ills in emotional terms rather than specifically reflecting the goals or terms of a specific movement. This goal reflects an approach to songwriting which is very much in line with mine, making these songs an easy reflection of my personal convictions as well as style. The overall message of the album is to resurrect the passion of previous generations and introduce it to a new generation so that we may face the ongoing political, social, and environmental disparages of the modern world with a fervor equivalent to that of past generations.

Track 01: “Little Boxes” - Malvina Reynolds

Malvina Reynolds wrote “Little Boxes” in 1962. The song was written during a profound moment of inspiration while driving through the hills of San Francisco with her family.¹⁸ By the time the song was finished, the Reynolds’ arrived at a meeting for the Friends Committee on Legislation in La Honda, CA where Malvina performed the song for the first time to a highly receptive audience.¹⁹ The song was first recorded by The Womenfolk in 1962 and reached the Billboard Top 100 Chart.²⁰ Reynolds holds a PhD in Literature from the University of California and used her knowledge of folklore to furnish

¹⁸“Folk Singing: Tacky into the Wind.” *Time Magazine*. February 28, 1964.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,873851,00.html>

¹⁹“*Artist Spotlight: Malvina Reynolds*, Television Series, 2007, (New York City: Showtime Networks.)

²⁰“Folk Singing: Tacky into the Wind.”

much of the urban folk singers, namely Pete Seeger, with simple yet prolific material. “Boxes” is no exception, as Pete Seeger covered the song in 1963, placing it in the Billboard 100 Chart for a second time. The song has recently been popularized as the theme song to the cable television series, “Weeds,” where its satirical message towards conformity has been introduced to a new generation of Americans. The inspiration which Reynolds felt on that drive in 1962 was spurred by the ongoing housing development in suburban San Francisco at the time. This translates into:

Little boxes on the hillside.
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky.
Little boxes on the hillside.
Little boxes all the same.²¹

As the lyrics progress throughout the verses, Reynolds describes the lives of those who populate such “boxes.”

The people in the houses all went to the University
where they are put in boxes, little boxes all the same.
There’s doctors, and lawyers, and business executives
and they’re all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same.²²

Reynolds furthers her message in the next verse, showing the lives of the future generations in a constant transition from school, to summer camp, and finally to the university where each child is further positioned into their box. She concludes by showing the circular perpetuation of this life style by concluding that, “the boys go into business, and marry, and raise a family, and they all move

²¹Charles H. Smith and Nancy Schimmel, “Malvina Reynolds: Song Lyrics and Poems, ‘Little Boxes.’” *Western Kentucky University*, 2006, <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mr094.htm#1>.

²²“Malvina Reynolds: Song Lyrics and Poems.”

into boxes, little boxes all the same.”²³

The underlying message is a satirical look at the nuclear family and the modern lifestyle, “prodding”²⁴ at the conformity of American life. The most famous summary of Reynolds’ message is that of the University of Florida professor who claimed, “I’ve been lecturing my classes about middle-class conformity for a whole semester. Here’s a song that says it all in 1½ minutes.”²⁵ I chose to record this song because I believe that even five decades later, the message of “Boxes” remains poignant. The recent housing crisis demonstrates Americans’ need for their “little boxes” as well as the true nature of the “ticky-tacky” from which they are built. In recording this song, I intend to remind my generation that there is more to life than following the path set before us by society.

Track 02: “What Did You Learn in School Today?” - Tom Paxton

In 1964 Tom Paxton released the album which would launch his career as a prolific and influential folk singer and urban folk revivalist. The album, *Ramblin’ Boy*, features one of the first songs to enlighten me to the powerfully poignant work of Paxton and his peers. “What Did You Learn in School Today?” is a powerful song exposing educational propaganda²⁶ disguised in a sweet,

²³“Malvina Reynolds: Song Lyrics and Poems.”

²⁴“Folk Singing: Tacky into the Wind.”

²⁵“Folk Singing: Tacky into the Wind.”

²⁶ Richie Unterberger, “Liner Notes for Tom Paxton’s ‘Ramblin’ Boy’” *RichieUnterberger.com*. Accessed July 30, 2011. <http://www.richieunterberger.com/ramblin.html>

lullaby-like, folk tune. Seemingly intended for children, this artistic twist is indeed the beauty of the song. There is a common thread between “School Today” and “Little Boxes” in that Pete Seeger had a hand in popularizing each tune. Years later, Seeger witnessed the impact of the song as well as the rest of Paxton’s work when meeting a man in 1998 outside of Calcutta who did not speak English, but sang to Seeger the entirety of “School Today” in Bangali.²⁷ Today, Paxton continues to write and record politically charged music.

The message of “School Today” is that the American education system does not always provide the nation’s children with the most accurate information. From the perspective of a school child, Paxton explains that:

I learned that Washington never told a lie.
I learned that soldiers seldom die.
I learned that everybody’s free
and that’s what the teacher said to me.

The song continues with three more verses, each holding its own theme of police injustice, politics and war, respectively. I find that the most powerful verse is the last:

I learned that war is not so bad.
I learned of the great ones that we’ve had.
We fought in Germany and in France
and someday I might get my chance.
That’s what I learned in school today, that’s what I learned in school.

Paxton is warning and reminding parents of the half truths and downright propaganda perpetuated throughout public education. American growth has coincided with the expansion of public education. This is often looked at as one

²⁷“Tom Paxton Bio” *TomPaxton.com* Accessed July 30, 2011. http://www.tompaxton.com/publicity_bio.html

of the great progresses of the twentieth century, and with regards to greater access to education, it is. However, the point that Paxton wishes to make is that much of this education is used as a tool to induce ideas into the young minds of the nation's children.

My personal history with education can be best described as splotchy. My elementary days consisted of homeschooling which mostly entailed reading and studying in the back of an automobile during long family moves. I had the occasional stint in a few public institutions, although these never lasted too long. My family settled down in time for me to enroll in high school in a small, rural, Texas town. Graduation would send me to Austin Community College and later to Texas State, completing my public education process. Having such a blotched past of school has given me a formidable insight into the differences between different education systems, and I remember being taught vastly different things about American history, government, political philosophy, science, religion, etc from each school to the next. It is with all of this in mind that I find Paxton's song extremely relevant in modern times.

Track 03: "Pretty Boy Floyd" - Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie was born on July 14, 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma.²⁸ From humble and dusty beginnings, Guthrie soon took to the road as a travelling folk musician in the truest sense of the word. "Pretty Boy Floyd" is one of the many

²⁸ "Woody Guthrie's Biography" *WoodyGuthrie.com* <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography1.htm>

tunes decrying social injustices that Guthrie wrote and performed during his lifetime. The song was written in March of 1939,²⁹ five years after the death of the historical figure who inspired the song. The lyrics are a romanticized version of the legend surrounding the notorious mobster of the 1920's. The song may exaggerate Floyd's philanthropy, but the pervading message of the song is clear in the last two stanzas.

Yes, as through this world I've wandered
I've seen lots of funny men;
Some will rob you with a six-gun,
And some with a fountain pen.

And as through your life you travel,
Yes, as through your life you roam,
You won't never see an outlaw
Drive a family from their home.³⁰

Guthrie concludes the song by showing that while the infamous thief and murderer is able to sustain a reputation of benevolence, the corporate banking structure does more to steal from families and the working class. This is a consistent theme in much of Guthrie's work and is closely tied to the beliefs of the Labor movement of which Guthrie was a prominent figure.

In choosing songs for this project, it would have been impossible for me to ignore the work of Woody Guthrie. The man has written dozens, if not hundreds, of brilliant songs that highlight the socio-economic inequalities and injustices of American culture. When deciding on a Guthrie song, I asked the local songwriting hero, Kent Finlay, about his favorite Woody song to which he instantly replied, "Pretty Boy Floyd." I knew the song, yet in conducting research,

²⁹ Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie, A Life*. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1980.) 193.

³⁰"Pretty Boy Floyd" WoodyGuthrie.com http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Pretty_Boy_Floyd.htm

had not thought of using it. I was immediately drawn to the song because of its story telling structure which is a prominent feature of Guthrie's work. Woody Guthrie believed that "it was more artful and educative to *show* than to *tell*" and used story and metaphor to make points rather than berating people with protest slogans.³¹ I agree with Guthrie in the effectiveness of story telling in changing peoples views. The song is especially effective in the wake of recent housing crises and financial debacles, making it a suitable choice for this project.

Track 04: "Spread My Wings" - Victor Holk

At the start of this project I was encouraged to include a few originals on the album, which I took as an enormous compliment. "Spread My Wings" became the first of three to materialize. The song was originally inspired by memories of the two years working fast food during community college, but the overall inspiration became impending graduation and the inevitable "real world." While the song certainly reflects my personal struggles at the moment of its creation, I saw an immediate rebellious quality in the song that I found poignant. This rebellion is central to the message of the song, which is to create one owns life outside of the confines of a drone-like existence and the struggle one goes through to accomplish this.

Track 05: "With Words as Strong as..." - Victor Holk

³¹Robbie Lieberman. *My Song Is My Weapon: People's songs, American Communism and the politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 89.

During the recording of the album, the band and I decided that we wanted to record an offbeat and spacey track just for fun. It would be fortunate if I had some great political and philosophical idea embedded into the artistic message of the song, however, I have yet to find one.

Track 06: “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag” - Country Joe McDonald

Country Joe McDonald, born Joe McDonald, wrote the “Fixin’ to Die Rag” in the summer of 1965 as a response to the Vietnam War and its consequent draft.³² The song quickly became an anthem of the anti-war movement during the 1960’s. The song is particularly powerful, not only for it’s strong message against war in general, but it’s detailed lyrics regarding different aspects of war. I find the second verse most important when McDonald states:

Come on Wall Street, don't be slow,
Why man, this is war a-go-go
There's plenty good money to be made
By supplying the Army with the tools of its trade,
But just hope and pray that if they drop the bomb,
They drop it on the Viet-Cong.

This verse accurately demonstrates that war is not only a function of government, but a function of business and capitalism as well. The song does not place the blame for the furthering of the senseless wartime that was the Vietnam era on any one particular group, rather, Country Joe points to four independent sectors that all contribute to the conflicts. These are the government (“Uncle Sam

³²Country Joe McDonald, “How I Wrote the Rag.” *CountryJoe.com* April, 2000. <http://www.countryjoe.com/howrag.htm>

needs your help again”), the corporate sector (See above), overzealous military forces (“The only good Commie is one that’s dead”), and finally the parents whose nationalism serves as a justification for their children being drafted into war (“Be the first folks on your block to have your boy come home in a box”). The momentum of the song is in response to the draft occurring during the time it was written, but the song is just as meaningful even with the current “volunteer” army. In an era of constant conflict, speaking out against the vicious cycle of war, capitalism, and unquestioned support is an extremely important message for today’s generation.

Track 07: “Winning Side” - Victor Holk

During one of the writing sessions for the record, while I was working on the first original, “Spread My Wings,” the idea for the first verse of this tune came to mind. A huge burst of inspiration followed and about ten minutes later the lyrics for “Winning Side” were finished. The song is a fictional account of what I imagine the average military recruit of my generation goes through. I wanted to use the lyrics to draw a connection between the American dream, our ideals of peace and neutrality, and the tendency to sacrifice moral values for a comfortable life. The second verse is based on a high school experience when I was consistently harassed by military recruiters for having long hair and braces. It was very difficult to write about soldiers without sounding condescending or offensive, especially without any first hand knowledge of the subject. However, I feel that the message is sound in that using war as a means of profit is accepted in

our society despite being morally repugnant.

Track 08: “Kill The Poor” - Jello Biafra & East Bay Ray

While many people think of protest songs as folk ballads of the 1930s or 1960s, I felt it was necessary to include a song from the punk rock era. “Kill The Poor” was written by Jello Biafra and East Bay Ray, the two songwriting forces driving the legendary 80s punk group, The Dead Kennedys. The band began in the late 1970s in San Francisco and soon became synonymous with the Californian punk rock scene of the 80s. The groups music is decidedly offensive and political, as the band name suggests. But even after most punk bands have either overdosed or given into corporate sponsorship, the Kennedys remain true to their roots. In 2005, the band refused to play a concert in Los Angeles after they learned the event had been sponsored by Coors Brewing Co.³³ The historical importance and the modern day relevance of the group made them an easy choice for using their material. The song, “Kill the Poor,” is a personal favorite and a particularly catchy tune which accentuates the absurdity of war. The song highlights the tendency for the lower classes to be sent to war and how political tactics are used to “kill the poor.”

Track 09: “The King is Dead” - Victor Holk & Christian Wallace

³³Spin Staff. “Dead Kennedys Dodge the Silver Bullet.” *Spin Magazine*. October 7, 2005.
<http://www.spin.com/articles/dead-kennedys-dodge-silver-bullet>

This thesis would be nothing if it were not for the friends who helped me through it. The song, “The King is Dead” is based on a story written by a friend and fellow songwriter, Christian Wallace. Wallace had recently returned from Las Vegas with a small piece of prose describing the lack of authenticity that the city is known for. I found an immediate correlation between this in-authenticity and the modern American life. With America sinking further into debt and existing on a credit based monetary system, any sense of authentic worth in the American life is dwindling. Furthermore, this extends into the every day life of the majority where consumerism holds material possessions over self-worth and quick gains over time consuming labor.

Track 10: “Warriors” - Victor Holk

I spent the entire summer of 2008 writing “Warriors” and, as far as I know, it is the first protest song that I have written. I came up with the first line of the chorus a few nights before moving back home after my first year at Texas State and spent the entire summer trying to write lyrics that I liked as much as the first one. While this album is my second album to include the song, I felt it would be erroneous not to include it in this project. The song is essentially about me being a young song writer trying to better the world. While there may be trouble discerning exactly what I am protesting in the song, “armies” is meant as anything standing in ones way. The message of the song is parallel to that of this entire

project which is to effectively change the world through the power of music and song.

Track 11: “Rainbow Stew” - Merle Haggard

The album ends with an unusual protest song written by country super star, Merle Haggard. “Rainbow Stew” was written in 1981, at the peak of Haggard’s career. The message is surprisingly poignant thirty years later considering the current ecological crisis and the ongoing political turmoil. When discussing the problems faced by modern America, such as financial crisis and political corruption both icing on the cake that is the environmental collapse, it's hard to find a reasonable solution. Haggard seems to be mocking the commonly proposed solutions in a “when pigs fly” fashion, but I believe his intentions are better than that. Haggard is simply saying that while it may seem that our modern problems seem impossible to fix, there are simple solutions which have not been implemented. I chose this song for the end of the record because it provides recommendations for making this country and planet a better place. A good protest song should conclude with a proposed solution to the given problem at hand, although none of the songs on the record use this tactic, I felt the album as a whole should conclude with a proverbial silver lining.

In the Studio

The album was recorded on April 29, 2011 in the Cheatham Street Woodshed studio. While the entire record was recorded live in a single day, it took a little planning and a lot of luck in order for the day's session to yield success. The personnel for the recording featured Colin Colby as the studio engineer, Sterling Finlay playing upright bass, and Burton Lee playing dobro and steel guitar.

Colin Colby has been a figurehead in the San Marcos music scene ever since moving from Denton, TX in 2005. Colin's abilities stretch across every realm of the musical spectrum, from playing lead guitar and producing albums for bands such as The River Hymn and The Prerecorded Tracks, to running live sound at nearly every venue in town. His efforts as studio engineer in recording the album are crucial in creating the live studio sound heard on both this album, as well as my previous release, "There's No There."

Sterling Finlay, from Martindale, TX, has been playing bass for twenty-four years; he is twenty-nine years old. Sterling's music career began at the age of five playing with his father, Kent Finlay, and sister, Jenni. He's gone on to play with the likes of songwriting greats such as Todd Snider and Hayes Carll. Sterling has the unique capacity to learn a song as he is playing it, walking the bass line and hitting the root notes, all on a beautiful 1934 Gibson upright bass. His work on the album included helping me with arrangements and lyrics, not to mention his amazing bass playing.

Burton Lee is a steel guitar player from Denton, TX. He currently plays with

the band Eleven Hundred Springs who have been touring throughout Texas for years and continue to do so nearly every night. We were in luck to have Burton available to come to San Marcos on a week's notice to rehearse and record, as his band was playing shows in Gruene and in Fredericksburg the weekend of the session. His playing on the album, and in general, is phenomenal and the tone of the crying steel guitar contributed much to a true country-folk feel for the record.

A little bit about myself, I have worked as a live sound engineer for Cheatham Street Warehouse since 2007 and have been writing songs since the age of eleven. Music has always been my truest passion, with its importance in my life first becoming apparent as I began forming and playing with local bands during high school. Since then I have sought to develop my songwriting through an array of different groups, from acoustic punk, pop punk, indie rock, to folk rock. The folky, country, bluesy, feel of the album is intentional in an effort to recall these musical styles that had a profound effect on the American musical and political landscape.

The Cheatham Street Woodshed studio is a Pro Tools studio owned by Kent Finlay. Kent allowed us to use the studio gratis. The studio has a good collection of microphones including a brilliant sounding Mojave Audio tube condenser microphone that we used for my vocals. The studio's layout consists of a control room which opens into the main tracking room where the majority of the recording was done. Behind the large tracking room are two smaller rooms, one for drums and the other for guitar amps. The studio is housed within the larger "woodshed" which is, indeed, an old woodshed. In the front of the building

there is an office, a living room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Behind both the studio and the kitchen there remains the original woodshed containing over thirty years worth of Cheatham Street memories and memorabilia.

The four of us, as a group, began rehearsals on the night before the session. I had finished two exams, my philosophy senior exit interview, and had played the Honor's Award Ceremony before fleeing to Cheatham Street Warehouse to meet Colin and Sterling and wait on Burton. Once Burton arrived, we worked into the late hours of the night rehearsing each song, teaching Sterling and Burton the chord changes, practicing the lyrics, and focusing on arrangement decisions such as how many solos and whether to use the dobro or steel guitar. That night, Burton and I both slept in the studio's living/green room after a few celebratory drinks at the famed Warehouse across the street.

One important decision that we made that night was to record the album together, live, and in the same room. We had a few reasons for recording live. The first was time constraints. Burton was playing in Gruene with Eleven Hundred Springs the night of the session and needed to leave the studio by 7:00 pm. There would not be enough time to multi-track ten songs with the traditional method of recording rhythm tracks first and overdubbing leads and vocals later. A second reason we decided to record live is central to the theme of the entire project. The live feel is an homage and a throwback to the days of Guthrie, Reynolds, Dylan, Seeger et. al. Their recordings have a feeling and a sense of urgency within them that is distinctive of their time and place within society. We were in pursuit of capturing a similar moment and momentum rather than sonic perfection.

We awoke the next morning to Sterling unlocking the door and shortly thereafter, Colin arrived. We began by moving our equipment from the living room, where we had slept and rehearsed the night before, into the main tracking room. Burton placed his Fender Twin-Reverb into the closet reserved for such monstrous amplifiers and partially opened the door so that he could hear without the amp bleeding excessively into the other microphones. This turned out to work very well as there was very little steel guitar bleed in the vocals and guitar tracks, which gave Colin an easier job during the mixing process. Sterling and I stood opposite of each-other, both facing Burton. This allowed me to lead the two through the songs so we could better mesh with one another.

As we went through each song, originals first and covers second, we started getting into the routine of running through each song once to remind ourselves of how the song should go, and then we would take three or four takes before we were happy with our performance. A lot of the extra time spent in this process was my own fault, as I would fumble through lyrics or botch a chord change. This taught me something extremely important about songwriting and songs. Before I could successfully record the song, I had to envision the song as the whole that the songwriter originally did. There is something more to a song than just lyrics and chords which are easily memorized. Each song has it's own life and story and I was forced to recognize this aspect of the song and embrace the song as a whole. This has never been an issue before, as I do not cover a lot of music and perform mostly originals. In being the songwriter, I already envision my songs as a whole naturally and subconsciously. I had failed to fully realize this crucial

aspect of songs until the day of recording. Bringing about this facet of songs and songwriting proved to be the most valuable lesson learned during the entire experience.

Once we were finished, Burton left for Gruene to play with Eleven Hundred Springs and Sterling left for Austin to play with HalleyAnna. Colin and I worked on a few mixes, but were so exhausted that we had to call it a day and wait until the studio would be available again, which was the following Tuesday. Mixing proved unproblematic as most of the songs followed a similar format. Once we had found levels which worked for one song, we were able to use them for the next song with little trouble. After a few hours of adding some reverb here and a little automation there, we had finished a product of which we were proud; not only as a “project for school,” as we would describe it to outsiders, but as an album that captured the heart and soul of all involved.

Lyrics

Track 04: “Spread My Wings” - Victor Holk

Momma, I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I'm gonna spread my wings and fly

I don't want to be another number without a soul
another minimum wage story about to unfold
at seventeen you really shouldn't feel this old
but you've only got one life, and one chance to be bold

Momma, I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I ain't gonna work fast food no more
I'm gonna spread my wings and fly

Fly away to
the place I came through
to live the dreams that
don't always come true
Fly away to
the place I came through
to live the dreams that will carry me away

Momma, I ain't gonna go to school no more
I ain't gonna go to school no more
I ain't gonna go to school no more
I'm gonna spread my wings and fly

pencils, books, papers, laptops, a dorm, and a cell phone
how in the hell am i ever gonna pay off them student loans
I'm gonna pick up a guitar, open a bar, move to an organic farm
if you're on the run, its hard for them to take your leg and arm

Momma, I ain't gonna go to school no more
I ain't gonna go to school no more
I ain't gonna go to school no more
I'm gonna spread my wings and fly

Fly away to
the place I came through
to live the dreams that
don't always come true
Fly away to
the place I came through
to live the dreams that will carry me away

Track 05: “With Words as Strong as...” - Victor Holk

Make my words as strong as warriors
I want to take down armies with my songs.
I will stand with inner peace
surrounded by hate and greed.
Lord, Please, give me the strength to carry on.

Track 07: “Winning Side” - Victor Holk

If you bet on the winning side,
you're gonna win every time
and if you can send a few of your own to die
you can change the sands of time

before the first world war the American people were happy to be at peace
until a few in ivory towers found a quick way to make cash over seas
now it seems our countrymen don't know how to let things be
we've been in business for years now of death and democracy

fresh out of high school, barely a man, barely eighteen
more square than a pool table, and about three times as green
a recruitment man sat me down, and had a talk with me
He said son how'd you ever expect to pay for all them dreams

you want a big old house with two dogs and a swimming pool in the back
two and a half kids, a bombshell wife and a four door cadillac
they said we can get you started son, we can get your life on track
so i signed that dotted line, boarded the next plane to iraq

I got off the plane on that summer day, and I all I could do was stare
looked around for miles, and all I could see was sand
but of those who landed there with me, I was one of the few who made it back
but those who stayed, have got it made, they've found peace at last.

and they paid me a fine commission for all of the work that I had done
the bombs I dropped, the people I shot, the oil we had won
and now I've got me a girl in Richmond, and she's carrying my son
and we'll raise him with a bible, old glory, and a gun.

Track 09: “The King is Dead” - Victor Holk & Christian Wallace

I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure Elvis is dead
nothing but impostors selling dreams to newly weds
neon's ringing in my ears, whiskey's pounding in my head
I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure the king is dead

replicas of freedom, melting plastic pillars of gold
from the stories we're not telling, to the stories we've been told
of all the lucky gamblers, and the ones who have sold their souls
and if we keep rolling dice like these this whole house of cards is gonna fold

I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure Elvis is dead
nothing but impostors selling dreams to newly weds
old and faded sequins shine like diamonds in the sand
I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure the king is dead

you can put it on a stamp, put it in your wallet on a twenty dollar bill
you can put it in the tank of the limousine from all of the blood that we've spilt
the wheels will just keep spinning if we get out now so lets just go out in style
we'll ride this thing until our tank of dreams has run down to the very last mile

I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure Elvis is dead
old and faded sequins shine like diamonds in the sand
neon's ringing in my ears, whiskey's pounding in my head
I'm leaving Las Vegas never more sure the king is dead

Track 10: “Warriors” - Victor Holk

Make my words as strong as warriors
I want to take down armies with my songs
I will stand with inner peace
surrounded by hate and greed
Lord, please, give me the strength to carry on

I used to think that gossip was much worse than cocaine
but momma said the little sins they won't fry your brain
My daddy told me son, that shit ain't more than just the same
brothers and sisters help me before I go insane.

Make my words as strong as warriors
I want to take down armies with my songs
I will stand with inner peace
surrounded by hate and greed
Lord, please, give me the strength to carry on

Some people walk through alleys and some people live through storms
some of the best poets work counter at convenient stores
over city traffic a folk singer can't be heard
and those people on the street, brother they ain't listening to your words

Make my words as strong as warriors
I want to take down armies with my songs
I will stand with inner peace
surrounded by hate and greed
Lord, please, give me the strength to carry on

I can hear the ocean, free of hatred
I can hear the ocean, free of hatred and ill will.

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