

# FEATURES

MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2009

PAGE 13

## 'Son of a Bush'

There was plenty of musical outrage at Bush's presidency. But who was listening?

BY **DORIAN LYSKEY**  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Two weeks before Richard Nixon left the White House in August 1974, Stevie Wonder released an album, *Fulfillingness' First Finale*, which contained the toxic goodbye *You Haven't Done Nothin'*. "We are sick and tired of hearing your song," Wonder scolded the departing POTUS. The 43rd president demands no such hurrying. Even though he doesn't step down until tomorrow, US President W. George Bush's song has been all but inaudible for the past year. As his opponents have sublimated Bush hate into Obama love, he has become a ghost president, hardly worth the bother of attacking.

If you require a good-riddance sound track, however, there are plenty to draw on from the preceding years. Between Dixie Chick Natalie Maines telling a London audience in March 2003 that she was "ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas" and Kanye West declaring on a live telethon in September 2005 that "George Bush doesn't care about black people," the president's approval rating halved and the trickle of critical songs became a torrent. You could construct a decent box-set of anti-Bush songs — Songs in the Key of W, perhaps — covering ground from Bright Eyes to Eminem, Pink to Public Enemy, Jay-Z to Elbow. Neither Nixon nor Ronald Reagan attracted such consistent and wide-ranging personal opprobrium.

Bush was a gift to songwriters because he allowed so many lines of attack. To Public Enemy in *Son of a Bush* (2002) it was an alleged coke habit (which Bush had previously denied) and execution-happy record as governor of Texas. To the Beastie Boys in *In a World Gone Mad* (2003) it was his bellicose posturing: "George Bush, you're looking like Zoolander/Trying to play tough for the camera." To Pearl Jam in *Bu\$hleaguer* (2002) he was a "confidence man" who "got lucky."

But these artists, along with fellow early critics REM and Zack de

la Rocha, were longstanding liberals and leftists who cut their teeth during the eras of Reagan and Bush senior. One mark of a truly bad leader is the ability to stir outrage among artists who usually leave their politics at the studio door. Just before the 2004 election, Eminem labeled Bush a "weapon of mass destruction" in his stirring anti-war record *Mosh*, and Green Day released *American Idiot*, which, if it wasn't specifically about the president, didn't bend over backwards to discourage that interpretation. Evidently, though, no artistic efforts mobilized enough younger voters to put John Kerry in the Oval Office. After Bush's re-election, and with Iraq's continued descent into chaos, the songs grew more bitter. As the second term began, Bright Eyes' *Conor Oberst* memorably depicted Bush as a deluded religious maniac in *When the President Talks to God* (2005).

Rob Tannenbaum, music editor of the US music magazine *Blender*, heard Oberst sing it at New York town hall that January: "I can't think of many occasions when I felt an audience was so engrossed in the drama of a song and I don't know that I've ever seen a singer project as much sincerity. There was a point when I thought he was going to start crying." But over the next few months, echoing Bob Dylan's painful efforts to disentangle himself from politics in the 1960s, Oberst fled from the song. He later complained to the *Guardian*: "I guess they see some kind of glimmer in you, the left, and they want you to be an activist full time."

It was a forgivable reaction. Since the early 1960s, more politically outspoken musicians have backed down through fear of leftwing expectation than rightwing persecution. It takes overwhelming conviction to do more than record a one-off protest song, and to stay the course at the risk of disappointing or, worse, boring your fans. Among the few who took up the anti-Bush cause in earnest were Pearl Jam with their



Kanye West, top, and the Flaming Lips are just two of many bands that tackled US President George W. Bush in song.

Riot Act tour, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young with their *Deja Vu* shows, and the Flaming Lips, who included a fistful of protest songs, including *The Yeah Yeah Song*, on 2006's *At War With the Mystics* album and attacked the president from the stage at show after show. "The frustration was coming out of us in the songs," says frontman Wayne Coyne. "But the other side of that is just dumb cheering along. We really do love having someone we can all hate."

And yet when Neil Young was promoting his *Living With War* album in May 2006 and said: "I was hoping some young person would come along and sing some songs about it, but I didn't see anybody, so I'm doing it myself," nobody rushed to contradict him. That such a patently inaccurate statement passed unchallenged raises the question: despite so many voices being raised against Bush, was anybody really hearing them? A protest song is like the theoretical falling tree: if nobody hears it, does it make a sound?

If Iraq saw an escalation in Bush-burning songs (as Coyne points out, "the reason we hate George Bush isn't because he's a dumb shit: it's because he's sending these young guys off to



Bush administration weren't songs at all, but the off-the-cuff comments by Maines and West.

Tannenbaum sees something significant in that: "They found a different kind of medium rather than getting a song on the radio. What's the point of writing a protest song? [US radio giant] Clear Channel isn't going to play it. MTV doesn't play videos. What you need is something far more viral and guerrilla. I think there's a distrust of the traditional mode of protest songs." One culprit, he suggests, is the cultural fragmentation of the digital age. "If you wanted to reach alienated young people in 1968 you got a song on the radio and they would all hear it in the same week. Now there isn't one station that everyone is tuned into — I don't just mean a radio station, I mean a central media station."

Wayne Coyne points out another significant difference between the 2000s and the 1960s: "My older brothers knew guys at high school who got drafted [Coyne is 47], went to Vietnam and two weeks later they were dead. That's a powerful experience. When Green Day are singing a song, you're like, 'Cool song dude, I got my new iPhone.' That's not a powerful experience. The youth aren't dying in the same way. A lot of people didn't really feel the effects of Bush. They weren't powerless — they just didn't give a shit."

Looking back on all the songs opposing the Bush presidency, it seems that what was missing wasn't passion, but cohesion. Until Obama provided a flag to rally around, musical dissent was so diffuse that to the average listener it could become inaudible. Conversely, the tidy narratives of the 1960s or punk exaggerate the significance of previous protest songs. As Christgau observes, "Cultural reach always seems to get romanticized and overstated in retrospect." One day, perhaps, the Bush years will benefit from this effect and the many musical dissenters will get credit for their efforts.

### [ THE WEEKENDER ]



Torquil Campbell, left, and Amy Millan of the Montreal indie-pop band Stars, who played at The Wall last Monday.

## Indie stars rock The Wall

Mogwai and Canadian group Stars cement The Wall's reputation for hosting international acts

BY **DAVID CHEN AND JACK HEWSON**  
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Taipei's top indie rock club The Wall (這牆) had a banner week as it hosted Montreal band Stars last Monday and venerable post-rock outfit Mogwai on Friday night.

Judging from the response of the near-capacity crowd on Monday, Stars lived up to their name. Their pop-rock sound, a mix of New Wave, electronica and soul, made for a spirited and fun evening.

Many in the audience of some 400 people danced and sang along throughout the band's two-hour show. Fans in front of the stage, which was adorned with roses, squealed as vocalist Torquil Campbell reached his hand out into the crowd while singing. Everyone seemed to know all the lyrics.

Vocalist Amy Millan was taken aback by the boisterous response. "We heard rumors that you were docile [in Taiwan]," she told the audience halfway through the show.

Campbell and Millan were perfect counterparts on stage, just as they are on their albums. He came across as flamboyant and melodramatic, prancing about the stage and gesturing while singing. She was steady and quiet, grounded at her spot with a guitar and swaying gently with the band. They both flung rose petals into the audience all through the evening.

The band started with *The Night Starts Here*, a synthesizer-heavy song with a driving beat. A few kinks in the sound system threw the band off, but they recovered quickly with a rousing version of the anthemic *Take Me to the Riot*.

The *Riot* started to simmer after a boisterous version of *Reunion*. The audience was pumped, and so was Campbell. "This might be a bit early to say ... you just might be the best fuckin' crowd we've ever played for," he said, out of breath and wiping his brow.

Everyone cheered, then the band launched into *Bitches in Tokyo*, sung by Millan, which sent the crowd into another frenzy.

Later in the show, Campbell thanked The Wall and shared his impressions from the band's stay in Taiwan's capital: "Taipei is like *Blade Runner*." He also talked about trying betel nut. "It's like really bad coke you buy on the beach in Miami," he said and then admonished the crowd not to "do drugs ... unless nobody's looking," to even more cheering and laughter.

The band ended their set with rousing renditions of the Smiths-esque *What I'm Trying to Say* and a crowd-pleasing *Elevator Love Letter*. Tired and elated, they return for an extended encore, a loose but spirited set that included Millan's soul-pop number *Favourite Book*.

On the final song, *Calendar Girl*, as the cymbals crashed and the song reached a dramatic crescendo, Campbell bid farewell by saying, "We are Stars, and so are you." He then set down the microphone, stepped to the edge of the stage and yelled out a different refrain to the song: "You're alive! You're alive! You're alive!"

Emerging through a blue haze of dry ice onto the stage on Friday night, Mogwai had plenty to live up to considering the gig's NT\$2,800 ticket price on the door. Scaling trademark delay-drenched peaks and juxtaposing loud and soft with predictability, there were few surprises, but the crowd enjoyed the experience nonetheless.

Dynamic contrasts (originally intended to startle audiences) prompted knowing anticipatory smiles. The band spoke very little except from a few Glaswegian accented "Thank-yous" from Stuart Braithwaite.

Being there felt like the gig equivalent of re-watching a favorite movie — you know what's going to happen, you can quote the lines in full, but for a lack of imagination you rent it anyway, and bask in the warmth of fond familiarity.

US pop star **Kate Perry** was given the international song of the year award for *I Kissed a Girl* at a French music award, but it turns out her song wasn't the best after all.

The host of the NRJ Music Award in the Riviera resort of Cannes announced at the end of the show Saturday that there had been a mistake in vote-counting and that Perry was not the winner.

The award instead went to Barbados-born singer **Rihanna** for *Disturbia*.

The trophies were handed out based on results of audience votes on NRJ's Web site in the weeks leading up to the awards ceremony.

Perry, who had stepped up to the podium to pick up the award for international song of the year, did however win in another category — best international album for *One of the Boys*.

The international female artist of the year award went to **Britney Spears** who was not present to receive the honor. The Pussycat Dolls won for best international group and **Enrique Iglesias** was named top international male artist.

Actor **Patrick Swayze**, the *Dirty Dancing* star who is battling pancreatic cancer, has been released from a weeklong stay at a hospital where he was treated for pneumonia, *People* magazine reported on Friday. Swayze, 56, was hospitalized in Los Angeles



Hollywood actor Tom Cruise dreamed of killing Adolf Hitler.

on Jan. 9, hours before he was scheduled to appear at a gathering of television critics to promote his new TV crime drama, *The Beast*, which premiered on the A&E cable network on Thursday.

**Tom Cruise**, who fails to assassinate **Adolph Hitler** in his new movie *Valkyrie*, said he grew up really wanting to kill the Nazi leader.

In the World War II thriller based on a true story of the unsuccessful attempt by German soldiers to kill Hitler, Cruise plays Colonel **Claus von Stauffenberg** who plants a briefcase bomb under a table at Hitler's military headquarters.

A heavy wooden table saves Hitler and Stauffenberg is executed with his co-conspirators.

"I always wanted to kill Hitler, I hated him," the Hollywood star of such major blockbusters as *Top*

*Gun* and *Mission Impossible*, told the press during a visit to Seoul to promote his latest film.

"As a child studying history and looking at documents, I wondered, why didn't someone stand up and try to stop it? When I read the script, it was entertaining and informative to know what the challenges were and what it was like to be in the environment."

Stauffenberg's legacy helped ease the burden of guilt about World War II and the Holocaust Germans still endure. But Germans had balked at the prospect of Cruise playing Stauffenberg as they objected to the actor's ties to Scientology, the movement founded in the 1950s by science fiction writer **L. Ron Hubbard**.

Germany, which does not recognize Scientology as a religion and regards it as a cult, made it difficult for the crew to film in the Benderblock building and courtyard where Stauffenberg was shot dead.

"I've never heard of this story before ... It turned out to be an incredible adventure, just to be there and shoot at these locations that Stauffenberg was. It was a very powerful experience and hopefully it will communicate with the audience," the actor said.

"It has certainly influenced my life, just knowing that there were people who tried to stop him (Hitler)."

*Valkyrie*, directed by **Bryan**

**Singer**, opened in the US on Dec. 25 and fared better than skeptics had predicted, reaching No. 4 in the North American box office ratings for the three-day weekend starting Dec. 26. It opens on Thursday in Seoul for the first time in Asia.

Veteran British writer and leftwing lawyer **John Mortimer** whose most famous creation was curmudgeonly old London barrister *Rumpole of the Bailey* died Friday aged 85, his family said.

Mortimer — also known for defending *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the underground magazine *Oz* against obscenity charges — died peacefully at his home in the Chiltern Hills northwest of London, they said.

"His wife and family were at his side," they said in a statement. Mortimer's prolific literary output often poked fun at the legal profession.

Starting out in the 1940s, he was a prodigious author of plays, novels and television and movie scripts, including the 1999 *Tea with Mussolini* directed by Italian film and opera legend **Franco Zeffirelli**.

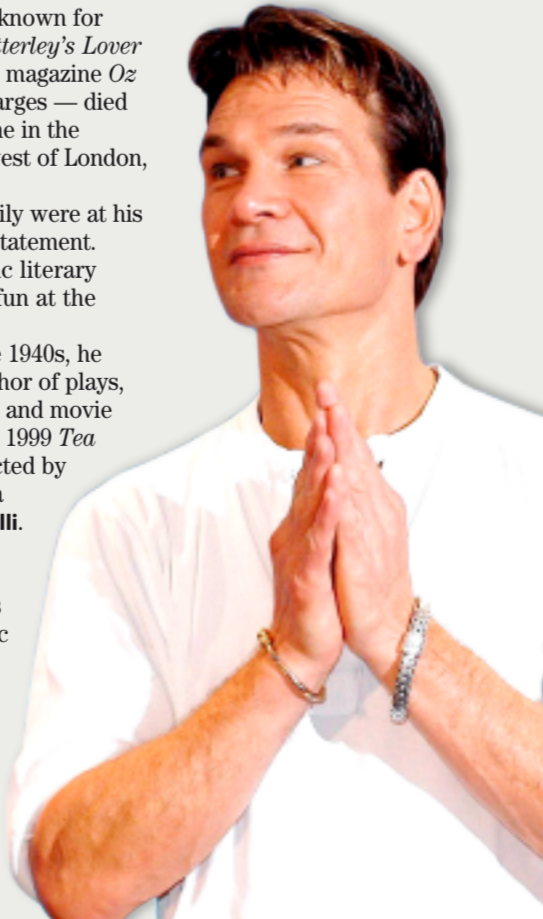
A vociferous supporter of the Labour Party, he was a sharp-tongued critic of prime minister **Margaret Thatcher** before her ouster in 1990 and the election of a

Labour government in 1997.

As a lawyer he successfully defended Penguin in the 1960s over obscenity charges against **D.H. Lawrence's** steamy book *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, doing the same for the publishers of the magazine *Oz* in 1971.

*Rumpole of the Bailey* was turned into a long-running television series and string of radio programs.

—AGENCIES



US actor Patrick Swayze, who is battling pancreatic cancer, checked himself into hospital on Jan. 9 after contracting pneumonia.

PHOTO: EPA

## PLANET POP