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Kiefer Sutherland: just doing his job

itting in the lobby after the interview, I look up and see that a man has stopped on his way out. "Thank you," he's saying to me, "thanks for coming by, it was good to meet you." I wonder what this stranger is talking about. Then I realize who it is. Kiefer Sutherland looks in real life so commonplace, so unlike a movie star, that it's possible not to recognize him only minutes after spending an hour in a hotel suite with him.

This must be a testament to his acting skills, because the face of Special Agent Jack Bauer is indelibly recognizable to millions of 24 fans all over the world. Like James Bond or Jason Bourne, Bauer has become less a role than a global phenomenon, a hero to everyone from Bill Clinton to Karl Rove — his popularity as inexhaustible as his ability to save America from ever more audacious terror plots. The drama series set in a fictional counter-terrorism unit screens on 236 channels to 100 million viewers worldwide. It has won Sutherland an Emmy nomination for every one of its six series to date, and made him the most highly paid television actor in the world

The show was devised a year before 9/11, but the uncanny prescience of its plotlines foretold the Bush administration's war on terror. "Whatever it takes" is Bauer's gravelly motto — and what it takes on 24 can be highly violent, illegal and frequently involve torture. Why so many fans are in love with a man who tortures people is perhaps a disturbing puzzle — but not as troubling as the question that has dogged Sutherland and 24's creators for the last 18 months. Is admiration for Bauer confined to the escapism of make-believe — or has it had an impact on public opinion and military strategy in the real world?

"What Jack Bauer does is all in the context of a television show," Sutherland begins, very slowly and deliberately, in the grainy register of a heavy smoker. He looks unexpectedly slight, and a little tired, but his engagement is direct and considered. "I always have to remind people of this. We're making a television program. We're utilizing certain devices for drama. And it's good drama. And I love this drama! As an actor I have had an absolute blast doing it. You sit in a room and put a gun to a guy's knee and say, 'Tell me!' Oh, you feel so amazing after that!

"But I know it's not real. The other actor certainly knows it's not real. And up until a year ago, everybody else knew it wasn't real."

In 2007 it was reported that a delegation from West Point had visited the set of 24 to tell producers that their portrayal of torture was seriously affecting military training. Cadets love 24, a general explained, "and they say, 'If torture is wrong, what about 24?" A former US army interrogator told them he'd seen soldiers in Iraq "watch the shows, and then walk into the interrogation booths and do the same things they've just seen." Their claims were corroborated by a book last year by Philippe Sands about interrogation techniques

The most highly-paid television actor in the world talks about how playing Special Agent Jack Bauer on '24' has changed his life

BY **DECCA AITKENHEAD**

at Guantanamo Bay, in which military officials cited just going to tell you outright, the problem is not 24. To 24 as an inspiration for early "brainstorming try and correlate from what's happening on a television meetings." Bauer, one officer admitted, show to what the military is doing in the real world, "gave people a lot of ideas." I think that's ridiculous." Does he mean he Sutherland is a Democrat and says doesn't believe the reports of 24's influence? he longs for the day when Bauer's "Well I haven't read all those reports. But interrogation techniques "go back if that's actually happening, then the to being a figment of someone's problem that you have in the US military is massive. If your ethics imagination, as opposed to mirroring things that are in the military, in your training, in fact happening across is going to be counterminded by the world." Authenticity, a one-hour weekly television however, has always been show we've got a really big central to 24's appeal. problem." His growl grows Just a week before heavy with contempt. "If US President Barack you can't tell the difference Obama announced that between reality and what's happening on a madehe was going to close Guantanamo Bay, the up TV show, and you're latest series opened with correlating that back to the counter-terrorism how to do your job in the real world, that's a big, unit disbanded, and Bauer facing indictment big problem." for torture. "The world Although an executive is changing," Sutherland producer, Sutherland didn't smiles, "and season attend the meeting with the seven deals with that. It West Point delegation, but deals with Jack Bauer in the generals reported talking

said he'd admitted the show's
"unintended consequences"
worried him. "Absolute
bullshit," Sutherland insists.
"Absolutely. I declined
to meet them because I
found it to be so deeply

to him briefly afterwards, and

manipulative. When the

entire country was looking at the US military's behavior in places like Abu Ghraib, I found that whole thing was a real effort to slide the blame on to something else, and I wasn't going to be a part of it."

If the US army is using Bauer as an excuse for abuse, Sutherland's indignation is understandable. But if, I ask, 24s influence were demonstrably proven, would he then feel any obligation for the show to modify its depiction of torture?

"No," he says flatly. "24 and 20th Century Fox and Sky TV are not responsible for training the US military. It is not our job to do. To me this is almost as absurd as saying *The Sopranos* supports the mafia and by virtue of that HBO supports the mafia. Or that, you know, *Sex and the City* is just saying 'everybody should sleep together now." He looks increasingly exasperated. "I have never seen anyone — and I really do not believe this — I have not seen an average citizen in the US or anywhere else who has watched an hour of 24 and after watching was struck by this uncontrollable urge to go out and torture someone. It's ludicrous.

"So when I put it like that, do you understand?" Actually, when he puts it like that, I think he's being a little disingenuous. Sutherland is too intelligent not to know that television's influence can be more subtle than that. 24's creator, Joel Surnow, who has described himself as a "right-wing nut job," has certainly given the impression of being not unhappy if 24 impacts on public opinion, saving: "America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer. He's a patriot." The Fox executive who bought the show has said candidly, "There's definitely a political attitude on the show, which is that extreme measures are sometimes necessary for the greater good. Joel's politics suffuse the whole show." The essential message of 24 is not just that torture can be morally justifiable, but, more importantly, that it works. And in the absence of other more accurate sources of information in American popular culture, it's hardly surprising if the viewing public believes it.

Sutherland repeatedly invokes the phrase "in the context of a television program," and stresses, "this is a drama," but there are moments when exactly who is confusing TV and reality is unclear. "Jack Bauer," he asserts, "is to me an apolitical character." Really? "Well, can you tell me if Jack Bauer is a Democrat or a Republican?" I would say he's clearly a Republican. "Absolutely not!" Sutherland flashes back triumphantly. "Not a chance." Why not? "Because I'm not a Republican, and I created the character." If Bauer is supposed to be pure make-believe, then surely Sutherland's personal politics are beside the point? I get the impression that the only really consistent thread in the logic of his defense

"Whatever it takes."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

of 24 might be an intellectual motto of

[CD REVIEWS]



a world that's changing

But the charge is that

mirroring what it saw on 24.

When I put it to Sutherland, the

life has been imitating art,

smile quickly thins, and he

begins to look annoyed.

"First off, I'm

where he is obsolete."

INCREDIBAD Universal Republic Lonely Island

Lonely Island

With apologies to Debbie Harry, Tairrie B, Invincible and Amanda Blank, the most significant white female rapper of all time is Natalie Portman. (To Northern State and Uffie, no apology is necessary.) Based on Eazy-E's No More?'s, Natalie's Rap, which originated in 2006 as a Saturday Night Live sketch written by Lonely Island—and appears on this comedy team's first musical album, Incredibad—is savagely funny, a reputation changer for a young actress and, most surprisingly, an utterly convincing revisiting of late-1980s Los Angeles gangster rap. It isn't parody; it's a love letter.

Over the last few years the members of Lonely Island — Andy Samberg, Akiva Schaffer, and Jorma Taccone — have been responsible for writing many of the comic high points on *SNL*. That US television's grandest comedy institution was rejuvenated by three white hip-hop kids from Berkeley, California, says a great deal not only about Lonely Island's deftness but also the penetration and evolution of rap culture.

The first Lonely Island album, in parts, gets hip-hop to laugh along. T-Pain is the guest on "I'm on a Boat," a sendup of triumphant materialism. And on *Santana DVX*, a celebration of a Carlos Santana-branded sparkling wine ("The sham-pan-yuh/from the man with the bandana," Samberg raps) produced by the indie rap satirist J-Zone, E-40 raps amusingly as Santana, though it's not as funny as E-40's 1994 ode to cheap

wine, Carlos Rossi.

There has been shockingly little well-meaning rap satire over the years, which makes these affectionate songs all the more potent; here verisimilitude is the joke. Ras Trent, a savage takedown of trustafarians (privileged, cultureslumming white kids), is produced by the reggae legends Sly & Robbie. And the hilarious Like a Boss, based on the Slim Thug song of the same name, uses rap to comment on the deadening effects of corporate life: Hip-hop can be a comic mode, too, Lonely Island knows. (Most of the songs are produced by Taccone, who has a keen ear for the nuances of different rap styles.)

About half of this album is a greatest-hits collection. The accompanying DVD includes the group's essential *SNL* digital shorts, including the 2007 Emmy-winning one, with an unprintable name, which features Justin Timberlake in a lewd spoof of early 1990s R 'n' B, and the more recent megaclub trance-influenced song, also with an unprintable name.

The only place this collection falls flat is in its inclusion of some pre-SNL Lonely Island material. It's funny, but no-fi and awkward. Back then Lonely Island clearly wasn't yet comfortable enough truly to poke fun, or maybe wasn't totally sure that it was allowed to.

L ove is both bliss and panacea, while politics is a test of fortitude,



TESTIMONY: VOL. 2, LOVE & POLITICS
Soulbird Music/Universal Republic

on India.Arie's fourth studio album, *Testimony: Vol. 2, Love & Politics.*One of the most determinedly virtuous songwriters in R 'n' B or pop, India.
Arie strives to make faith, goodness and positive thinking seductive, and on this album, working as her own co-producer (with Dru Castro), she's endearing even

when she's preachy. Testimony: Vol. 1: Love & Relationship, released in 2006, delved into the pain of a breakup, and in Psalms 23 she hints at more strife: "I've been through a couple of litigations/ through character assassination." But on most of Vol. 2 her equanimity has been restored. Her lover in the lilting Chocolate High (as portrayed by her duet partner and co-writer Musiq Soulchild) is an addictive treat. Elsewhere her man is an everunderstanding listener in the celebratory

Therapy and the ballad *He Heals Me*. As usual most of the songs feature India.Arie's acoustic guitar and her forthright but still girlish voice, with its Stevie Wonder phrasing. Acoustic syncopation accompanies her global view of poverty and survival in the flamenco-tinged Ghetto and in Pearls, which features a singer from the Ivory Coast, Dobet Gnahore, But the music doesn't stay folky. Long Goodbye, about a last tryst, grows into a power ballad akin to Prince's Purple Rain. In Better Way, India. Arie protests the response to Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq and prematurely sexualized children,



COWARD Cryptogramophone Nels Cline

matching bluesy vocals to Keb Mo's

electric guitar.

There's a limit to how many self-help platitudes a song can bear, and it's certainly exceeded in *A Beautiful Day*, with lines like, "There's only one you/ Just take a moment to give thanks for who you are." But with a brisk, pulsating track and boundless anticipation in her voice, India. Arie comes close to making the truisms ring true.

If the guitarist Nels Cline had joined the revered and more than semi-popular rock band Wilco in his early 20s, rather than in his late 40s, he might never be making solo-guitar albums on the side like *Coward*. This record reflects a far-and-wide aesthetic imagination, one that's been broadening for a long time.

Cline's playing has seriously mixed blood, and when he records multiple versions of himself on electric and acoustic guitars and about a dozen other stringed instruments, he becomes exponentially more mongrelized. He does his version of John Cipollina's wide runs and fast vibrato; he likes crying slide guitar glissandi, looped clumps of distortion and amplifier hum, the clashing overtone sounds of Sonic Youth and the slow, deliberate, almost monastic music of traditional Japanese koto players. But he doesn't let anything rest in one place. Meditative and minimal as these pieces may be, they're written with rigor. Hear them



LOVE HATE AND THEN THERE'S YOU Majordomo The Von Bondies

once, and you might only be lulled, but one more time and you'll hear the purpose and symmetry.

Rod Poole's Gradual Ascent to Heaven is the imposing accomplishment here. It begins and ends with long zither chords, and over the 18 minutes between, links together slowly evolving figures, building and ebbing. Poole, an experimental English guitarist who lived and worked in Los Angeles and who was a friend of Cline's, was murdered in 2007; a piece like this seems the right kind of homage to someone who had the patience to fully absorb long-form music. But then much of this record strikes a similar tone: It sounds like both an advertisement and an elegy for deep listening.

The Von Bondies last released an album five years ago, around the time that this decade's garage-rock revival was petering out. And while the album, Pawn Shoppe Heart, made an urgent case — its standout single, C'mon, C'mon, had the force of a defibrillator jolt — it also felt like something destined for dismantlement. Jason Stollsteimer, a whippetlike lead singer and guitarist, howled his compact choruses as if on borrowed time.

What then to make of *Love Hate and Then There's You*, which mainly flogs the same formula as its predecessor? Once more we find Stollsteimer pushing a catchy anguish, and the drummer Don Blum pounding his way to rapture. And

here again are the female background singers, with their hey-nows and their whoa-oh-ohs. (This time those voices belong to the bassist Leann Banks and the guitarist Christy Hunt.)

The riffs are tight, but not so fresh. When they don't evoke vintage Von Bondies, they suggest the Killers or, in the case of a dramatic lead single, *Pale Bride*, the British band Bloc Party.

Stollsteimer seems painfully aware of his band's restrictions, imbuing the album with a defensive streak. "Can you say a good word about us?" he pleads, or dares, in a song called *Shut Your Mouth*. Elsewhere he insists on forced apathy ("I don't care anymore/Don't care anymore") or churlish indignation ("Who's sorry?/You're sorry"). These would feel more like private sentiments if they weren't all delivered as anthems.

His most straightforward lyrics arrive in the opening track, *This Is* the *Perfect Crime*, apparently a new manifesto. "We are the spark/We are the grit," Stollsteimer declares, adding, "We are the underground!" It's a hopeful idea for a band that no longer has any claim to the mainstream. And it gets more hopeful still:

A lot of fads will come and go It's hit or miss on unpaved roads And chances are that crowds will grow

To seek the sounds below.

- NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE