

Since the 1980's MICHAEL FRANTI has been creating conscious sounds that you can move to. Starting with the cut and paste techno punk of THE BEATNIGS, to the political hip hop of THE DISPOSABLE HEROES OF HIPHOPRISY, and now with the grooving street sense of SPEARHEAD, he's kept the rebel music real and the politics clear, and stands at the forefront of a movement that demands all power to the peaceful.

UGLY PLANET: People tend to criticize entertainers for making political statements, but now with Arnold Swarzenegger elected as governor of California, the line is no longer so clearly drawn.

MICHAEL FRANTI: In regards to Arnie being governor of California, you might remember the last actor we sent to that office, and the world hasn't been the same since. There have been a number of films about demagogic political leaders who it turns out are really just actors. But really, at the end of the day, they are all just actors. Every single politician. So it really doesn't matter to me what walk of life you come from to enter into political office.

Do you feel like artists who make political statements are making any kind of real impact?

In terms of artists, or actors and musicians speaking out politically, I feel all of us should raise our voice in whatever way we can about things that concern us in the world - whether we are bus drivers, school teachers, musicians, it doesn't matter. I think anytime you speak out and speak up you make an impact. However, we live in a celebrity driven society, and it's unfortunate that celebrity is something that turns up and tunes in people's ears and makes them watch or listen. But for many artists who choose to speak out on issues, that idea of celebrity isn't the fact, it isn't the reality. There's a difference between celebrity and activism. Celebrity is when you take a light that's being shined to you and you bring it to yourself. Activism is when you take that light that's being shined to you and you divert it somewhere else that isn't getting attention. That's what I try to do with the little bit of attention that I get. To turn the light onto something else, to other things, other issues, that don't often get to have light on them. We can change things by bringing them to light. Bring wrong out of the darkness and into the light, then we can make right.

Now with the corporations controlling more and more of the music industry and the media in general, the voices of dissenters and other sources of alternative information become more and more vital.

Definitely, community radio is more important than ever and artists and activists who speak up and out become more important because there is so much corporate media who's sole interest is pacifying us with apolitical entertainment while they collect dollars from advertisers. We need different ways to communicate ideas, messages, music that speaks to a portion of the community that doesn't ever receive those messages, those ideas, that music. We need all kinds of different ways to get alternative ideas and messages out there.

Your records are now put out on your own label, Boo Boo Wax? Was this your attempt to get some alternative ideas out there?

Yes. We were trying to further distance ourselves from the corporations, and spread some conscious, funky, human music that people can move to, and be inspired by. We want to get the voices of the community out there, put across the culture and music of the community that doesn't get heard. Our motto is *conscious music for the masses*, music to inspire all of us to stay in the struggle.

You've said you don't believe in prisons or the death penalty?

I don't believe we create justice just by killing another person or tossing them into a cell. If you look at the cases of murder in this country, you are always looking at the extremes. We have 2.2 million people in prisons in this country and 70% of them are there for petty drug offenses. So, why are we locking up all these people? Because prison is an industry, it's big business. The people who build prisons are private corporations, the people who staff the prisons, as guards, and other workers have some of the more powerful unions in this country and make incredibly high salaries as opposed to other state workers like teachers, for instance. So prison is big business and it's not at all about rehabilitation or creating a better person or a better world.

So what should be done with people who commit murder?

I believe in restorative justice, which is when someone has done a crime that involves a victim, you work with the victim and the person involved to make retribution. You sit down when it's time, to talk. There are places in America that are beginning to use that restorative model, especially for youth offenders. Now in terms of the death penalty, the death penalty is not justice. If you look at who gets the death penalty, the single most determining factor is economics. Those who can afford it get sentences that are either first degree murder without the death penalty, or life in prison, or second degree murder, or manslaughter. Those who can't afford it get sent to the chair. It's for that reason - and also because there are people who are innocent who are still on death row, or people who have been executed who were innocent, that I disagree with the death penalty and the prison industry as a whole.

I guess for some people it might just seem easier to simply toss someone in a cell or kill them outright and forget all about them. And the politicians would argue that they are just giving the people what they want.

The republican governor of Illinois, governor Ryan, had a moratorium on the death penalty in his last days of office where he set people free who were on death row. He was someone who had been a fervent anti crime governor, but he realized in his heart that the death penalty is immoral. I should add that I don't think the death penalty is wrong just because you might kill someone who is innocent,

although that's a good enough reason, or just because of the economics involved.

I believe it's wrong also because it's simply wrong to kill people. We don't create right by killing someone else. That goes for the death penalty, and also goes for gang banging in our neighborhoods. Where I live in San Francisco, I tell that to the kids on the streets there, we don't create a right by killing someone else. We don't get anywhere by doing that. It also goes for relationship with other nations. Because we had this loss of life here on Sept 11, were we then justified to go and kill thousands of people in Afghanistan, and tens of thousands of people in Iraq? They look at it like it's payback, but it's not. There is no real payback. And you don't make justice, peace, or right through killing. (Continues on page 37)

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Michael Franti + Spearhead

Everyone Deserves Music



Do you think peace is attainable in our lifetime?

Martin Luther king said that peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice. So I don't think there will ever be a time in this planet when we'll see absolute justice, fairness, economic equality, political equality, food for everybody who is hungry, a place to live for everybody who is homeless... I don't think that's possible, or reality. But I do know that it is possible for each of us as individuals to find ease of heart in a difficult world. And that too is a form of peace. So we can create peace for ourselves despite the chaos of the world, and when we find that peace in our hearts it makes our minds clear to understand how we can alleviate suffering on the planet. And then we can begin the work of alleviating that suffering. But even if you alleviate someone's political suffering or hunger or give them a home, it still doesn't mean they are going to find peace within their hearts. We see that in anyone, even in the richest people in the world. They have everything in the palm of their hand, but some of them still don't ever find peace. So we can't ever neglect the spiritual world that we live in, and work to create peace in our own lives, and then when we have that clarity of mind, that brings us that peace, and then once we have that determination that is brought to us by that peace, we can work to alleviate suffering.

What about those who think we went to Iraq to create peace, to alleviate suffering there?

Well that's a very mean spirited trick that's been played on the American population, and the world by the Bush administration. In our time of sadness, our time of grief over the loss of lives on Sept 11, they used that to sneak in their own neoconservative agenda. Which is, after all, something they've been trying to do for the last 30 years. Really what this war is about is not creating peace, it's not even necessarily about oil. it's more about maintaining what America's economy is based on which is militarism. It's about making sure that there's a need in the world for arms manufacturers to create more arms to sell to people who are living in fear. And that's what we've done throughout the Middle East - to try to create this tension, this turmoil, this instability, have this leader Saddam Hussein, these leaders that we, the United States created, and hold them up as the bad guy so that the U.S. can go to Syria, Jordan, Israel, even Iran and Iraq, and say: buy our arms. This is how you are going to fight your wars here. With these resources and this treachery, and that's how America has stayed a rich nation.

You have children, how do feel about bringing more children into this less than peaceful world?

I have two children, one is 16 and the other one is almost 5. In the song "Every Single Soul," I say "right from the start, a world torn apart, a baby's love leaves fingerprints upon the heart, so many think it, but never say it, why bring a child to this planet full of hatred, they may not make it like the youngest departed, worst of all they might become a part of it, involved in it, perpetrating violence, growing up in silence." So I definitely fear for the world my children are going to inherit from our generation. I also worry that my children might become part of the perpetuation of violence, because it's a lot easier to go in that direction, than it is to go in the other direction. But at the same time, having children makes me see and have a sense of hope for the future, because I see the brightness, the light, that is in children. The light, the love, the creativity, the spontaneity, the innocence, all of it gives me determination and hope because I can see clearly how the generations before us fought hard to get us where we are today. So I can also see how we have a responsibility to the seven generations to come, to continue that struggle, to create a balance in this world. It's our responsibility to now protect what's left of the natural world, and also to try to live a life that is prosperous for all of us, the planet as a whole. That's a difficult balance, and it's what I really worry about: the world that we will leave for the children. ☺

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