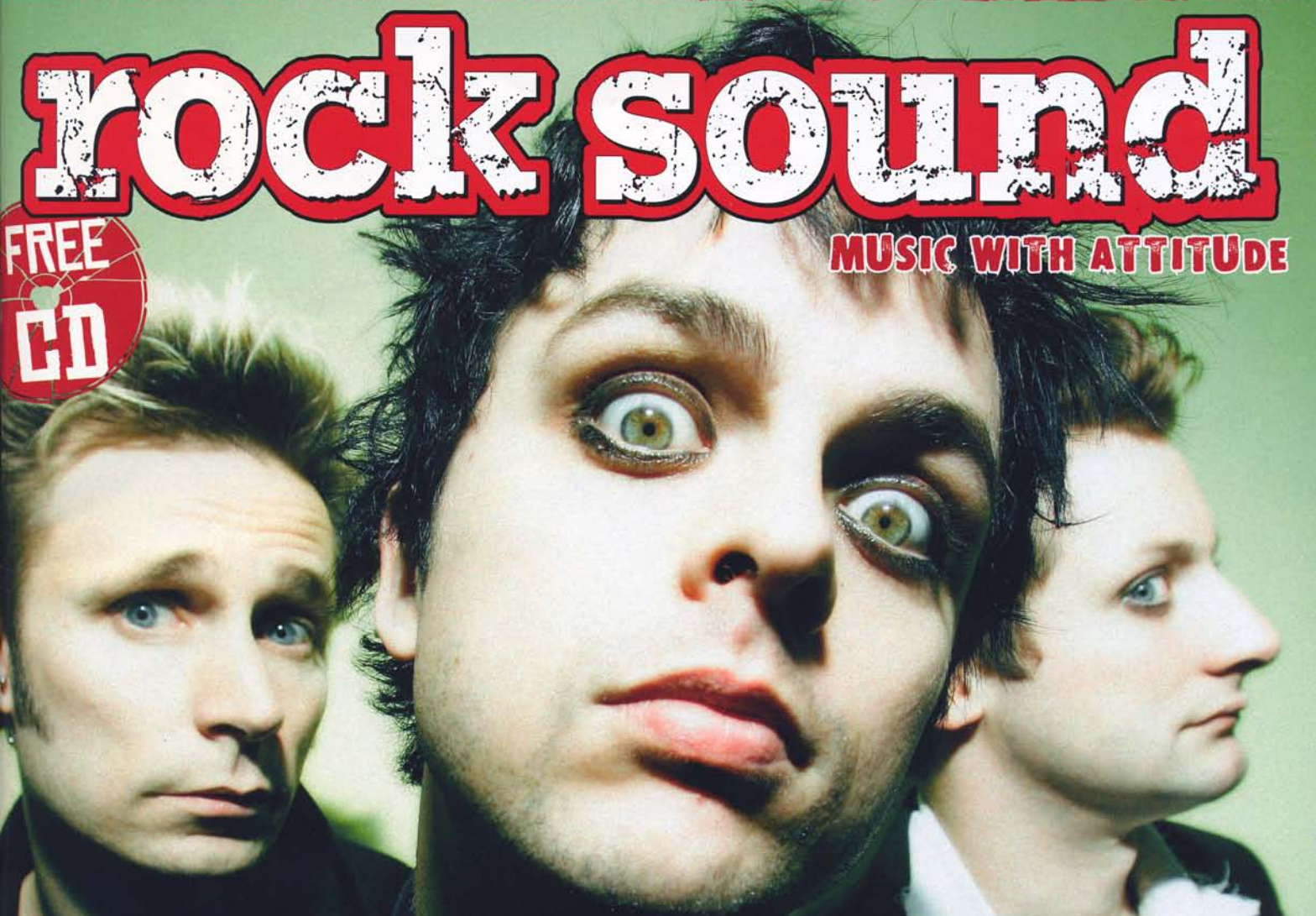


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MUSIC WITH ATTITUDE



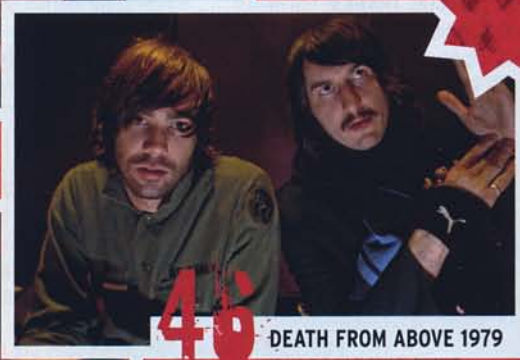
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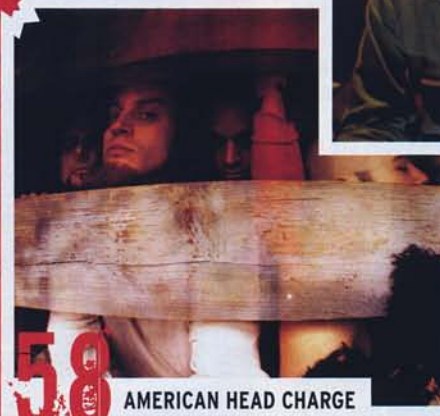
NIGHTWISH



THE MARS VOLTA



DEATH FROM ABOVE 1979



AMERICAN HEAD CHARGE



HIGH ON FIRE



"POLITICS IN AMERICA IS LIKE BAD TABLE MANNERS. YOU DON'T REALLY DISCUSS IT OR HAVE AN OPINION BECAUSE IT'S A PRIVATE ISSUE.

IT'S ALMOST LIKE VIRGINITY." BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG



GREEN DAY

They were last year's biggest success story thanks to 'American Idiot', but neither their newfound politics nor fame and fortune could change the Green Day we know and love. **rock sound** finds the same good-time punk band underneath it all.

WORDS: Victoria Durham / PHOTOS: Nigel Crane

Let The Good Times Roll

In the corridor of a plush hotel on the outskirts of Frankfurt, Tré Cool is posing for the camera, attempting to spurt water from his mouth "kinda like Moby Dick". He'll soon prove to be the highlight of today's cover shoot. When he's not providing a running commentary on his chosen poses or baffling passing guests with his witty observations, he's putting everyone around him on edge by running off unannounced, albeit only to venture a few metres away. And there lies the intrigue. As much as the drummer's live-wire behaviour is challenging when you're trying to get a job done, it's also innocently playful. There's no real feeling that this man is going to sabotage anything. He just wants to entertain. You know, too, that six months ago, before 'American Idiot' sent Green Day stratospheric, he would have acted in exactly the same way. Even collectively there's no hint of smugness about the band or any outrageous rock star demands. That they've sharpened up their image is undeniable, with the trio almost exclusively adopting a strict dress code of head-to-toe black these days. Yet the skin-tight jeans, spiked hair and eyeliner remain, in respectful homage to their roots, as does the willingness to goof around for the camera. Such reflections on their incredible career will be in everybody's thoughts today. Perhaps unusually for an American band, they spent a considerable amount of time in Germany in the early 90s, making visits here over a decade later an important reminder of how far they've come. "The people who were booking our tour were pretty much squatters so they'd book us in every single squat. They became

the majority of places we played," recalls bassist Mike Dirnt. But, if they were tough times, they were also character forming. "I think out of all the shows we played in Europe, in three months we spent about two of those months here," continues frontman Billie Joe Armstrong. "I remember not having any equipment and having to borrow it every night. But it made us a really good band, playing on different equipment and in different situations. I think it made us better because obviously there's a language difference and it meant we had to be more animated and project a bit more physically, instead of getting away with talking for 35 minutes and playing for five. We seemed to get a good response because we were so different from most of the bands playing. They would range from a nomeansno rip-off band to something like Napalm Death, and then there would be Green Day creating a party atmosphere." Indeed, it's in Green Day's live show that you'll find the most convincing evidence that nothing much has changed. Tonight they play Offenbach's jam-packed Stadthalle venue with New Found Glory in support, and it's a far cry from slumming it with Germany's best copycat acts. Over the past few years the band have developed a tried-and-tested stage-show of explosions, fancy dress parades, water pistols and the trademark form of Green Day crowd interaction, "making the band", where kids are invited on stage to play their instruments and, if they're lucky, keep them. It's then that you understand how it's not so much that Green Day have changed, just that the props have got bigger and better and, along the way, the outside world's become a more dangerous place.



THE INNOCENT CAN NEVER LAST

For a brief moment it did look like Green Day were preparing to toy with our perceptions. When our favourite snotty-nosed punk rockers, who up to then had been best-known for anthems about being driven insane by adolescent boredom, started delving into political territory with 'American Idiot' last year, it was a bit like entering the music world's own version of the twilight zone. Then we all had our socks blown off by the single of the same name and any doubts were dismissed. According to Billie Joe, the fans weren't the only ones unsure that Green Day and politics would mix. The band were also wary. It's for that reason, he says, that we should believe they'll never be in danger of becoming a "safe" rock act, despite their new mainstream appeal. "This record and the success that we're having has nothing to do with being safe," he explains. "It was about challenging anything from our core audience to ourselves as musicians, putting ourselves out there and putting our careers on the line. For all we knew it was as likely to go to hell in a hand-basket as sell millions of records." In retrospect, the singer has taken away a valuable lesson from the experience of making 'American Idiot' and it's one that he hopes to apply to Green Day's future efforts with similar results: "Anytime you're doing something that you feel genuinely good about but that

"ANYTIME YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING THAT YOU FEEL GENUINELY GOOD ABOUT BUT THAT ALSO SCARES THE SHIT OUT OF YOU! AT THE SAME TIME, YOU'RE ON TO SOMETHING GREAT." BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG

also scares the shit out of you at the same time, you're on to something great," he enthuses. Yet it will be a long while before politics becomes a defining factor in what Green Day do. On the one hand they truly believe they've stuck their necks out by using their music to make such bold statements. "Politics in America is like bad table manners," stresses Billie Joe. "You don't really discuss it or have an opinion because it's a private issue. It's almost like virginity or something." For that reason he believes "it takes a lot of guts to go out and question things as a musician," especially in a musical climate that, as Tré emphasised back in August, is now lacking guidance from its political forefathers ("Where are your Bob Dylans? Where are your Rage Against The Machines?"). Billie Joe continues: "The difference [with other bands] is I don't think a lot of them were putting themselves on the line enough. It seemed like it was a moderate way of saying 'just vote' or something. No one was really declaring the opposition. The difference between what we've done and what a lot of other bands were doing is that it may have been more fashionable for them to jump on the political bandwagon." On the other hand, Green Day are reluctant to push the political satire too far and become "the next George Michael" (how can we forget the embarrassing spoof video for 'Shoot The Dog') or, for that matter, Sum 41. "It's just funny thinking of them [in the Congo]," chuckles Mike. "It's like us going some place and standing on a podium talking to people. It'd be like,

'Now, from the makers of 'Dookie', they came here to help you out.' Does he think a band becoming actively involved in politics is ineffective, that they should just confine their views to the songs? "No, I don't think it's ineffective. But it just seemed like their situation came out of nowhere. It's good that they cared enough to go somewhere and learn something." Critics might argue that Green Day's political beliefs also came out of nowhere. But in talking to the band you realise that might be the point. As much as they've taken a risk by singing about politics, it quickly emerges that they're no different from any other informed American citizen. 'American Idiot' is just a result of their beliefs being heightened by the political injustices they increasingly see around them. That, surely, has long been the attraction of both Green Day and punk rock – music made by people who could just as easily be one of us and who live through problems that are also our own. "We're not going to be running for office at all," quips Billie Joe. "Politics is just as important for us as it should be for any young adult. Whatever decisions they make are going to end up affecting them for the next 40 or so years of their life. So for us it's important to be involved somehow, at least just having an opinion." So if purists might be disappointed that Green Day don't reel off political history, or name-check famous commentators along the way, it doesn't really matter because, as Billie Joe stresses, "It's okay to party a little bit sometimes, too."



POLITICS SELLS

Green Day might not attribute the success of 'American Idiot' wholly to politics, but it's not unusual for bands to make a career out of controversy.

SEX PISTOLS

Led by the maniacal Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols set the precedent for political stunts at a time when speaking out against "the system" in Britain was unheard of. Attacking anything and everything that smacked of hypocrisy and exploitation, it's made them an impossible act to follow ever since. **KEY TRACKS:** 'Anarchy In The UK', 'God Save The Queen', 'Holidays In The Sun'

THE CLASH

Minus the aggression that fuelled the Sex Pistols, The Clash were a more thoughtful take on revolution, but no less powerful. Speaking out on behalf of the working class man, their songs addressed authority, ignorance and the underdog and they left behind a legacy of classic protest tracks and great albums.

KEY TRACKS: 'Death Or Glory', 'Revolution Rock', 'Guns Of Brixton', and their version of 'I Fought The Law'.

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

From appearing on stage naked in a protest against censorship to causing a riot in Wall Street during the video shoot for 'Sleep Now In The Fire', Rage aimed to raise awareness over issues like capitalism, oppression and war with some of the most impressive displays of political activism the rock world has seen, and they were never afraid to get arrested in the process. **KEY TRACKS:** 'Killing In The Name Of', 'Sleep Now In The Fire', their incendiary cover of NWA's 'Fuck Tha Police', and practically everything they've ever done.

SYSTEM OF A DOWN

Never ones to shy from speaking their minds, System are seen by many as filling the void left by Rage Against The Machine. Their website includes a 'Global Action' section listing news items on oppression and injustice around the world, while frontman Serj Tankian is one half of the brains behind Axis Of Justice - a music-based campaign for "peace, human rights and economic justice".

KEY TRACKS: 'Boom!', 'War?', 'Fuck The System'

DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Typically most of Green Day's political heroes are fellow musicians. The Dead Kennedys, the Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again' were just some of the trio's reference points growing up around San Francisco's Bay Area, but it took a long time before they could even think about following in their footsteps. "I think the thing that turned me off so much was that people in politics were so willing to point fingers," ponders Billie Joe. "Part of the problem when it comes to liberals is that there's so much in-fighting. That was always a turn-off so that was why our songs were so much more personal and about love or drug abuse or television." Consequently, in true punk rock fashion, Green Day are now "attacking politics in an irreverent way, more with reckless abandon," because for them it will always come back to the music before anything else. "When we got the idea for the record we wanted to create an atmosphere and that's more what it is, it's a product of the times," he elaborates. "It's about coming of age in current political times in America. The way I look at 'American Idiot' is that it's this kid's story, the death of the American Dream really. It's about this kid, Jesus Of Suburbia, and which side of rebellion he wants to go on, whether it's the side where you follow your beliefs or following a path of self destruction which could be disguised as rebellion. I guess that's the personal side of the album. It's like pointing at yourself as part of the problem, too, and trying to find your individuality through that. I think most of the lyrics are asking questions rather than having an agenda." Then there's new single, 'Holiday', which Billie Joe says has no relation to the Sex Pistols' attack on the glorification of war in 'Holidays In The Sun', despite the initial similarities. "I love that song. But I think I was listening to a bit of Bob Dylan at the time. 'Holiday' picks up from where 'American Idiot' leaves off, where you're flipping through the channels on your television and getting all this information thrown at you and trying to make sense of it. Then the middle part of the song is sort of like a politician's worst nightmare where he's talking to the house representatives and it's the things politicians are really saying like, 'Zieg Heil to the President Gasman'. I just tried to make it as twisted as possible." What underpins

"SOME OF OUR FANS DID VOTE REPUBLICAN, NOT A LOT OF THEM, BUT A COUPLE." MIKE DIRNT

'American Idiot' as a whole, however, is the concept of the rock opera, exemplified by bands like The Who with *Quadrophenia* and *Tommy*, or Billie Joe's own favourites, The Beatles' *Help!* and 80's *Rude Boy*, starring The Clash. Fittingly, Green Day are currently talking to writers about turning 'American Idiot' into a film: "A lot of the record was like doing a storyboard so it seemed like the most natural thing," says Billie Joe. In the light of John Kerry's defeat, it seems as likely that it was their epic ambition that tipped the scale for Green Day's record sales as it was their ability to articulate the feelings of America's disenfranchised youth. "People who like British rock, old American rock 'n' roll, I think 'American Idiot' really tapped into that," says Mike. "People who don't want to dive into a record to see the intelligence in it, they want to see it right on top first and then dive in and start to figure it out. You hear, 'Don't want to be an American idiot' and it's like, 'Okay, where's this going?'" "There are times when we're playing songs from 'Dookie' live and there are people at the front who don't even know what we're playing. If you sell this many records you're not necessarily preaching only to the converted," adds Billie Joe. Certainly, while Green Day have always had a devoted fan base, a No.1 album and a UK tour that takes in four London dates plus a headline show at Milton Keynes Bowl is testament to their renewed appeal. Whether that appeal is musical, lyrical or something else entirely will have to wait until the next album. "I don't really base it [the success of the album] on people's political beliefs," concludes Billie Joe, "that's not the sole basis of their character." Which is probably just as well considering that if Green Day carry anything forward from 'American Idiot', it's more likely to be its energy than its subject matter. "We set ourselves up to create an environment with this album that was energetic," considers Mike. "Where that leaves us for the next record is with a formula that tells us how to set ourselves up in a really good creative way. Maybe it won't work next time, maybe it will, but we'll definitely have an approach."

CITY OF THE DAMNED?

For now, though, Green Day have set themselves up as political spokesmen of sorts and so, it has to be asked, did "putting themselves on the line" for their views feel like a waste of time following Kerry's defeat? Mike is adamant that it didn't. "I don't think any of the effort was wasted. The youth vote was up and if anything [the result] got people's awareness up of knowing we can't be passive in the next election. People do need to find an opposition or a direction and be firm about whatever they're going to go for otherwise they're going to lose again."

"As liberals we've got to be campaigning for 08 and start now because Republicans are trying to run another Bush and make it 20 years in office," Tré offers. "We've still got to maintain our beliefs and keep having discussions." Those discussions will undoubtedly include Green Day's



"THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE'RE PLAYING SONGS FROM 'DOOKIE' LIVE AND THERE ARE PEOPLE AT THE FRONT WHO DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT WE'RE PLAYING."

BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG

fans who, when they're not sporting "Fuck Bush" T-shirts at shows, are keen to talk politics with the boys. It's an education for both band and fans alike. "Some of our fans did vote Republican, not a lot of them, but a couple," reveals Mike. "I've had discussions with them that a couple of years ago might have just been a debate or an argument. I think we've got a venue for discussion now with this album having come out and we can discuss and agree to disagree." Naturally though, amid all the seriousness, humour is never far away in Green Day's world. "I reckon eventually all these old fuckers who vote for Bush are going to die off and then the younger, cooler generation will vote accordingly," interjects Tré, a mischievous smile creeping across his face. It's that same juxtaposition of intelligent opinion and light-heartedness that will later allow Billie Joe to follow an "anti-authority, anti-America, anti-war" 'Holiday' with 'Basket Case', or to fire a water pistol into the crowd against the backdrop of a fist clenching a hand grenade. So, while you can be sure that Green Day won't let the politics of 'American Idiot' define them, as the final notes of Queen's 'We Are The Champions' ring triumphantly from the speakers, it's something they have every right to be proud of nonetheless. **BS**

The single 'Holiday' is out on February 28, and the album 'American Idiot' is out now, both on WEA. Website: www.greenday.com

