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American Idiots: Charting Protest and Activism In the Alternative Music Scene During George W

Bush's Presidency

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Abstract

In 2002, System of a Down frontman Serj Tankian joined an increasingly vocal movement within the American alternative music scene by denouncing the presidency of George W. Bush. Tom Morello, of platinum selling bands Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave, agreed that Bush should be tried as a war criminal if the United States invaded Iraq.

When the Iraq war did begin the following year, both men used their platform to create anti-war, anti-Bush music intended to galvanise the American public against what they felt was an unjust conflict. These are two examples of a larger anti-war sentiment during the Bush presidency within the subgenres of rock, punk and metal music.

The social impact of these anti-Bush musical protests formed an integral part in the overarching anti-Bush movement across the United States. This provided a focal point for the young and disaffected to channel their resentment, leading to increased engagement, particularly in 2004 as part of the well-supported Punk Voter movement, led by NOFX singer "Fat" Mike Burkett and future Obama administration advisor Scott Goodstein, and through Tankian and Morello's Axis of Justice organisation, which worked to promote awareness of government policy through activism and information broadcasts over the internet

“The band called me in and went: ‘Are you trying to get us killed?’” recalled Serj Tankian, front man of the Grammy award winning metal band System of a Down, in a 2021 interview. (Everley, 2021) Tankian was remembering his publication of an essay entitled “Understanding Oil,” posted on the band’s official website two days after the World Trade Centre attacks of September 11, 2001. The essay argued strongly for the cessation of bombing activity in Iraq, and an understanding of the motives of the terrorists involved in the attack. Tankian’s words were swiftly removed by the band’s record label, Sony Music, but the call for a nuanced conversation on American objectives in the Middle East was clear. In 2002, Tankian went one step further; “I think there was a coup d’etat in this country without military weapons,” he said, “the American dream has definitely been taken for a ride”. Tankian’s friend Tom Morello, of platinum selling bands Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave, agreed with his views and went even further still, noting that President George W. Bush should be tried as a war criminal if the United States invaded Iraq. (Blabbermouth, 2002)

It has often been argued by authors such as Faubel and Martin that examples of protest music and anti-war sentiment within the music industry were thin on the ground during the Iraq War when compared to previous engagements, particularly the Vietnam conflict of the 1960s and 70s. Faubel and Martin in particular have completed an empirical analysis of contemporary news coverage which suggests a perception of protest music “in decline” during the Bush presidency. (Faubel and Martin, 2020) Likewise, Jones and Smith argue that anti-war music was “often shrill, lacking both nuance and arresting word play,” while concluding, “few anti-War on Terror recordings gained much in the way of public traction, let alone commercial success.” (Jones and Smith, 2021) For some time, consensus has been that anti-war protest during the Bush-era was largely toothless, failing in its attempt to evoke the more well regarded and influential music of the Vietnam era. Though it may have felt like a lonely road, Tankian and Morello were far from the only artists to take a stand against the Bush presidency, particularly against the Iraq War and American military engagements in Afghanistan. Several sub-genres of modern rock music combined between 2001 and

2009 to protest actions taken in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The voices of Tankian, Morello and other such as NOFX's "Fat" Mike Burkett ultimately helped to galvanise an anti-war, anti-Bush feeling amongst metal and punk musicians and fans, particularly following incursions by the United States into Iraq and Afghanistan during the era. Morello's Nightwatchman project, separate from his more visible projects, joined other punk-leaning musicians such as Alkaline Trio, NOFX, Anti-Flag and former Dead Kennedys singer Jello Biafra in playing shows marketed as anti-Bush protests in 2004. System of a Down, despite some resistance to Tankian's views, won the Grammy Award for best hard rock performance in 2006 for their 2005 single *Bring Your Own Bombs (B.Y.O.B.)*, the same year Green Day won Record of the Year for *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, another anti-Bush themed song. (Grammy Awards, 2005)

These views must be re-evaluated, particularly when reviewing the efforts of metal, alternative and pop-punk musicians to create grassroots social justice movements and raise awareness amongst the public during George W Bush's presidency. Pedelty and Weglarz note that while political rock music is not common compared to "the big rock party," there has always been a political element to rock music and the genre can and should operate as, "a medium for political communication." (Pedelty and Weglarz, 2013, 12) By casting politicised musicians of the era not only as songwriters and performers, but as social justice activists operating in a world opened to them by the dawn of the internet age, we can re-appraise the role of musicians in protesting the war on Iraq. In this analysis it is also vital to account for the changing landscape of the music industry's commercial interests, as well as the reach afforded to musicians with both alternative sounds and alternative views on the war as legislative changes drastically altered the musical landscape. This closed off many opportunities for politically active musicians to make their voices heard.

In this article, specific case studies from several musicians associated with the punk and metal genres will be assessed, particularly "Fat" Mike Burkett, Billie Joe Armstrong, Serj Tankian and Tom Morello. Efforts by each musician to publicise and protest the war will be analysed, particularly

Burkett's Punk Voter initiative which railed against George W Bush, Tankian and Morello's Axis of Justice which took on a range of social justice issues, and the dramatic shift of Armstrong's band Green Day from pop-punk slackers to openly political songwriters during the Bush era. The actions of these musicians, alongside their impact on the pop-cultural and political landscape will be analysed. A comparison between the methods, levels of success and longevity of the Punk Voter and Axis of Justice movements, as well as the actions of their creators, will show the fundamental impact of alternative music activism in the years following the Bush presidency. It is first vital to any study of musical protest in the post-Vietnam era to review the changing conditions of American music broadcasting. In this case, the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which played a role in allowing partial monopolisation of local radio, must be analysed to show how a change in methods was required for many musicians who wished to protest government actions.

The Post-9/11 American Soundscape

George W Bush presided over a turbulent period in American history. In his first year in office, the 9/11 attacks galvanised public support for the president – his approval rating jumped from 51% to 86% in the days that followed the incident and remained high throughout his first term in office. (Gallup, 2001) The aftermath of the incident saw the United States commit to the War on Terror and ultimately invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan which proved extremely contentious and impacted public perceptions of Bush in some quarters. His second term saw further controversies emerge, particularly the federal government's handling of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated several southern states and in particular the city of New Orleans. The *New York Times* alleged in October 2005 that the disaster had already been used as cover for "ideas that could never stand on their own," including a "remarkably brazen raid" on the public treasury. (*New York Times*, 2005) Bush's presidency was marked by protests against U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the Iraq War, both in the United States around the world. In the same week that the *New York Times* reported on millions gathering to protest the escalating Iraq War, (Lueck, 2003) another article

argued that pop-culture, specifically the music industry, had not changed to match the “darkening national mood.” Music was not reflecting the escalating war, and protest songs were non-existent as bland pop music dominated the charts. (Strauss, 2003)

This may be true of mainstream popular music, and there was a clear perception that protest music and artistic anti-war sentiment did not reach the height of earlier divisive wars, particularly the Vietnam conflict. In fact, comparisons to the 1960s were evident even during the Iraq War, as was a sense that the musical environment of the early 2000s made it more difficult to create an effective, prolonged protest. This was not the only reason given for the perceived lack of reaction from musicians. The radio landscape had changed significantly since the last major conflict fought by the United States, and had trended towards a more corporate, business-minded approach. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 effectively deregulated to a large extent ownership of radio stations nationwide, and the text of the Act allowed corporate entities more power to buy up local stations across the United States. (Federal Communications Commission, 1996)

An effective monopolisation of the airwaves by an increasingly smaller group of people followed. Alexis Petridis noted in *The Guardian* in 2003 that by the time escalation in Iraq began, US radio had been largely bought up by two major corporations – Clear Channel and Infinity – with the former reaching around 54% of the US population through their 1,200 local stations. (Petridis, 2003) Gilens and Hertzman argue strongly that the act favoured corporations with interests in television and radio broadcasting, which were still the principal methods through which music was transmitted during the Bush presidency, and particularly favoured companies who were already close to exceeding ownership restrictions in this field. (Gilens and Hertzman, 2000) This narrowing of the field of radio station ownership was not lost on contemporary pundits. A *New York Times* editorial from February 2003 bemoaned the restructuring of radio ownership rules in the 1990s and the “corporatization” of the airwaves. This, it was argued, led to steep odds against any status-quo challenging music making it into the pop-cultural landscape. (Staples, 2003)

A lack of mass-market options for protest music during the Bush presidency differentiated the period from the Vietnam War, which saw large scale dissent from popular musicians such as Bob Dylan and Creedence Clearwater Revival regularly broadcast for public consumption through a more diverse radio network. Shevory contends that Vietnam stood as an aberration in terms of popular protest as the conditions for using music to challenge government decisions became a more complex process. There was clearly a change in the music industry between Vietnam facilitated by the Telecommunications Act, and this stifled the traditional way in which protest musicians reached the public: through the radio. Shevory also notes the power of the Clear Channel throughout the Bush presidency, as the company's president had ties to the Bush family and donated significantly to the Republican Party. (Shevory, 2008)

The need for protest music to adapt to this more cynical, commercialised, atmosphere became clear in the first year of Bush's presidency. The Clear Channel's power over the airwaves was exercised in the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks – an infamous memorandum circulated amongst its 1,170 radio stations saw a list of around 150 songs pulled from the airwaves temporarily. (Hatcher, 2001) Many of the affected songs came from alternative, rock, punk and metal musicians and songs such as Green Day's "Brain Stew," Slipknot's "Left Behind" and System of a Down's "Chop Suey." (Eakin, 2015) Notably, the latter two singles were from high performing current albums; Slipknot's *Iowa* charted at no. 3 on the Billboard charts on September 15, while System of a Down's *Toxicity* reached no. 1 on September 22. (Billboard, 2001) Lyrics such as "I don't think you trust/in my self-righteous suicide/I cry when angels deserve to die," from "Chop Suey" were considered unacceptable in the wake of such a large scale tragedy. (System of a Down, 2001) More importantly, the growing influence of alternative music, particularly nu-metal and pop-punk, was becoming clear through the charts – album sales for the week remained high despite the brief period of radio censorship.

The second issue faced by Bush-era musicians who wanted to compose protest music was one of public interest – quite simply the question of whether the public actually wanted to hear music which criticised the government in the wake of a defining moment such as 9/11. The immediate aftermath of the attacks saw an upswing in patriotism and music which advertised and exalted traditional American values and in some cases even revenge against the enemy. Country singer Toby Keith's 2002 single *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* was emblematic of the post-9/11 wave of patriotism and meant as a warning to the perpetrators of 9/11; "And you'll be sorry that you messed with/ the U.S. of A./ 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass/ It's the American Way." (Keith, 2002) The song was popular, and became certified platinum in 2012 by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). (RIAA, 2012) Even within the sphere of rock, metal and punk music, outright protests songs were not as common as more general themes of alienation, disaffection and anger. Deena Weinstein notes this is not a problem limited to rock's sub-genres, noting the "myth of their ubiquity," in the United States. (Peddie, 2012, 3) While this is true, a significant enough proportion of popular music from within the genre of alternative rock questioned official narratives and argued against both foreign and domestic policy to require attention.

Contemporary views of anti-Bush and anti-Iraq protest music noted a lack of sincerity and effort from most mainstream musicians. Some exceptions came from stalwarts of the Vietnam era such as Neil Young, bands from outside the United States such as Billy Bragg and Radiohead, who railed against British involvement in Bush's "War on Terror," and German industrial metal group Rammstein, whose 2004 song *Amerika* critiqued US consumerism taking over the world and included a biting satirical description of core US values as "Coca-Cola, sometimes war." Perhaps most visibly, country musicians the Dixie Chicks, who were heavily criticised for comments made about George Bush at a concert in London in 2003 compared by *The Guardian* to "punk rock." (Clarke, 2003) In fact the Dixie Chicks served as a warning to musicians who would cross the president. In his study of the band's post-9/11 activities Griffiths notes the violent backlash received by the band, and their singer Natalie Maines, from the Country Music scene following their criticism of Bush in 2003. (Griffiths,

2015) However, despite a largely lethargic response from the pop music scene and a highly supportive one from country musicians, there was a clear trend towards protest and anti-war sentiment from elsewhere.

As well as from alternative genres, some mainstream rock musicians also wrote protest songs. Artists from both the United States and the United Kingdom joined the growing protests as Bush's presidency wore on and the forces of both countries became embroiled in the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan. Jay-Z, R.E.M., Sheryl Crow and others took out advertisements to protest impending U.S. military intervention in 2003, while the likes of Radiohead took on Britain's role in the conflict with their 2003 album *Hail to the Thief*. (Radiohead, 2003) Yorke described the album's title – a play on the Presidential anthem Hail to the Chief – to *Rolling Stone* as being influenced by “how the Florida vote had been rigged, and how Bush was being called a thief.” (Fricke, 2003)

Pearl Jam, themselves a survivor of the 90s grunge era, released a scathing criticism of Bush in 2002 with the song “Bu\$hleaguer. The band's singer, Eddie Vedder, engaged in a public war of words with the telecommunications company AT&T in 2007 for editing anti-Bush comments from a video of the band's performance at the Lollapalooza festival. (Marra, 2007) He protested Bush's foreign policy throughout the presidency. Democrat aligned musicians such as Don Henley and Bruce Springsteen also campaigned for the president's removal. These musicians all largely spoke to an adult fan base. Radiohead had been a staple of the British rock scene for most of the 1990s, Henley and Springsteen were stalwarts of the 1980s rock scene, and even Pearl Jam had been releasing hits for a decade by the time Bush came into office. Their debut album *Ten* was released in 1991 and spent 250 weeks in Billboard's top 200 albums chart. (Billboard, 1992) This left a gap in the market to influence youth voices through popular music, something which was particularly relevant given the relative disengagement of youth voters in the 2000 election. Punk musicians, particularly from the pop-punk sub-genre, were able to exploit this gap.

As its popularity peaked at the turn of the century, alternative, pop-punk and metal music provided a viable outlet for dissent and protest which was connected to but removed from traditional channels. Having always thrived on word-of-mouth and live performances, musicians from within this sphere provided worldwide exposure for alternate views of the Bush government. The internet also provided a relatively new method of engaging with youth culture, something which was not lost on bands within alternative scenes or their marketing teams. This activism therefore came not just from overt social justice campaigns like Axis of Justice and Punk Voter and was validated through album sales and widespread exposure through both less traditional means for high profile artists such as Green Day, whose 2004 album *American Idiot* album sold 6 million copies in the United States. (Payne, 2014) In fact, Green Day's tour for the album was likened to a series of anti-Bush rallies; at one show in London Armstrong proclaimed one song was, "a big fuck you to the American government." (Hendrickson, 2005) Where contemporary pop artists were either unwilling or unable to create music which challenged the status quo in American government, a trend in alternative rock for questioning events which acted as a lightning rod for young activists and helped further the goals of anti-war, anti-Bush campaigns by providing advertising space to young people.

Perhaps the most visible and commercially viable point of protest against the Bush administration in its first term came from *American Idiot*. Released in the throes of the 2004 election campaign, the album spawned singles such as the title track, a searing response to American post-9/11 attitudes, and Holiday, which directly aimed at President Bush through the lyric "Sieg heil to the President gasman." (Green Day, 2004). Armstrong said later that he felt like the country was "unravelling," as the Iraq War progressed, claiming he never thought he would see, "a war brought to you on TV, twenty-four hours a day, and it became like entertainment." (Lynskey, 2012, 380) *American Idiot* was exceptionally well received by both the public and critics, ultimately being certified platinum by the RIAA and winning the band their first Grammy Award in a decade alongside an MTV Europe Music Award for Best Rock Album. (Billboard, 2004)

A review of some of the most visible anti-Bush protests from within punk and pop-punk is pertinent; modern punk music has been accused by many of becoming “declawed” after its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. Dorian Lynskey for example argues that it had been commodified into grunge music by the time of the early 1990s, and even further so by Bush’s election in 2000. Lynskey’s example of the commodification of punk is best served by the licensing of the 1980 song *Holiday in Cambodia*, a stunning punk-rock critique of poverty tourism by the *Dead Kennedys*, to Levi’s for an advertising campaign which proved so controversial within the band that its use had to be approved via lawsuit. (Lynskey, 2012, 360) Thompson does not necessarily agree with this definition, arguing that “punk is made up of a series of major scenes,” beginning with New York in the mid-1970s and continuing through the California Pop-Punk scene, which was dominant by the time of Bush’s presidency. He links the two scenes back to one another, depicting California’s “nostalgic but tempered desire to revivify the impulses that ran through the New York Scene but did not reach fruition.” (Thompson, 2004, 73) The scene crystallised over the early success of Green Day’s albums *Kerplunk* and *Dookie*, as major labels scrambled to sign a collection of similar popular bands such as The Offspring and latterly, Blink-182.

The argument over how punk as a sensibility has evolved over time has raged consistently for several decades. Dick Hebdige noted in his seminal work *Subculture* that “No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down on itself such vehement disapproval.” (Hebdige, 1979, 40). This rings especially true for punk’s attitude toward politics and political action, which has often bucked societal trends. From the scathing anti-establishment criticism of the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” – “God save the Queen/the fascist regime,” through The Offspring’s “Baghdad” – “The President said let it ride, ride/Islam be damned/Make your last stand/In Baghdad, to *American Idiot* – “And can you hear the sound of hysteria/The subliminal mind fuck America.” (The Sex Pistols, 1977, The Offspring, 1991, Green Day, 2004) Kevin Dunn argues punk’s political association has worked on two levels; the first is on a local organisational level using decentralised social network

and a “DIY ethos,” to co-ordinate within local politics and be at the forefront of global and local protests across the political spectrum from left to right. The second has been to mobilise on a macro level during the internet age, particularly during the Bush presidency, to provide alienated people with “resources for global communication outside hegemonic control.” (Dunn, 2008)

By the 1990s, most of the punk music in the United States had been watered down into a more radio friendly pop-music hybrid as artists such as Blink-182 and Sum-41 sang about teenage problems and growing pains instead of the social anxieties prominent in punk’s 1970s heyday. Kristiansen refers to punk as being “childproofed” by commodification by the end of the 1990s. (Kristiansen, 2016). This new commercial genre, which came to be referred to as pop-punk, was not constrained by the same ideological concerns as the larger punk genre, but ultimately retained the ethos and social consciousness displayed by many of their predecessors. While the debate continues to rage over what politics define punk rock and even whether punk should be defined as an ideology or a style of music, the same cannot be said of pop-punk, which ultimately defined itself politically in the early 2000s as largely left-of-centre through the efforts of activists within the industry. In this sense the commodification of the genre assisted in the process by allowing artists to define themselves politically while sidestepping the ideological debate of what “punk” entails and how punk can operate within the bounds of establishment politics. Deryck Whibley, of pop-punk stalwarts Sum-41, noted that the legacy of the genre is often overlooked; “We’ve always taken things and the world seriously. Sometimes it gets attention, and sometimes it doesn’t.” (Goldfine, 2019)

NOFX, “Fat” Mike and Punk Voter

The genesis for one of the most visible and effective social movements under the Bush presidency came from punk musicians, in the form of the owner of independent label Fat Wreck Chords and singer of NOFX, “Fat” Mike Burkett. Burkett’s political awakening had come following the 2000 election between Bush and Al Gore, which Bush won after a disputed and hotly contested race

by a few hundred votes in the state of Florida. (Garofoli, 2007) Coming to the realisation that if NOFX fans had voted in the election it could have gone the other way, he hired political consultant Scott Goodstein and set to work creating the framework of Punk Voter. Goodstein was a strong political ally, who would go on to work on Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 and Bernie Sanders' 2016 push for the presidency by founding the "Artists for Bernie" group. (Kaufman, 2016)

Punk Voter aimed to educate the young people who listened to punk and pop-punk music, while pushing for support from popular bands to spread the message. Punk Voter's mission statement argued "The current administration is out of control, spending billions on a disastrous, pre-emptive war in Iraq; passing hundreds of billions of dollars in debt on to future generations (in other words; US!); and waging an unprecedented attack on civil rights and personal freedoms." (Punk Voter, 2004) The movement gathered momentum in the second half of Bush's first term as president, and Burkett himself proved a significant political curiosity, finding himself invited to Democratic Party fundraisers and associating with the likes of businessman George Soros and filmmaker Michael Moore. (Garofoli, 2004) Burkett skirted around the idea of selling out his punk ideology by simply admitting the fact; "Yes, that's exactly what I am. I am using my reputation for something else. But this is important enough to do that." (Garofoli, 2004)

The success of Punk Voter quickly led to a pair of compilation albums – Rock Against Bush vol. I and II – being released in 2004 as Bush campaigned for re-election. Contributions came from large and small names alike. Bands with punk credibility such as Bad Religion and Descendents joined with pop-punk artists like Sum-41 and big-name acts like Green Day and Foo Fighters. The compilations were released by Fat Wreck Chords and were not without their drama. Propagandhi, a band with strong anti-authoritative political opinions of their own and signed to Fat Wreck Chords who were slated to appear on Rock Against Bush, pulled out after a dispute over the pro-Democrat message on the album. Burkett clarified that he did not want comments from the band which criticised George Soros included in the compilation. (Paul, 2004) Inevitably, a Rock Against Bush tour

followed the compilation which worked its way through swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida. Tom Morello took part in the tour performing as his solo act, the Nightwatchman, and he was joined by NOFX, Anti-Flag and other, less popular punk and rock bands. (Billboard, 2004) The tour had voter registration booths aimed at pushing attendees to commit to voting in the November election. Ministry's Al Jourgensen was among musicians who particularly supported this action, claiming to CNN that he would be "at the Punk Voter booth before the show to get that [18- to 25-year-old] voter demographic off their ass." (de Sola, 2004) Booths were also situated at stops along the more popular *Warped Tour*, which ran from June through August and boasted big name punk and rock acts such as Good Charlotte and Alkaline Trio alongside NOFX and dozens of others.

Throughout Punk Voter and Rock Against Bush's organisation there was evidence of consistency in message and branding, and this led to results. The compilations did not break sales records but proved to be an underground success as they topped the Billboard independent album charts and sold over 100,000 copies. (Billboard, 2004) Burkett claimed in 2020 that the campaign registered "a few hundred thousand" voters and raised over \$1 million which was donated to John Kerry's Democrats campaign against Bush. (Makar, 2020) Burkett and the Punk Voter team worked largely outside the normal musical avenues of major label support, radio airplay and television, using word of mouth and internet campaigns to engineer a consensus among dozens of pop-punk and punk musicians. They were able to use this to carry out an effective political campaign which had an impact, though not a decisive one, on the 2004 presidential election. However, Punk Voter was not without its detractors, even within the punk scene.

Despite political unanimity among many of the larger bands, the punk scene was not uniform in its politics. The band Guttermouth left the 2004 *Warped Tour* by "mutual agreement," after lead singer Mark Adkins claimed nine of the touring bands complained about their pro-Bush political stance. (Carnes, 2013) Several movements sprung up against Punk Voter, mostly in the form of online blogs and conservative punk sites. One, a blog entitled "Punkvoter Lies," accused the

crusading musicians of sounding, “just like our enemies,” while Nick Rizzuto, a radio station employee based in New York, created “Conservative Punk,” a website which aimed to encourage those involved in the sub-genre with a more Republican sensibility. (Lynskey, 2004) Rizutto told the New York Times that he did not understand how punk and conservative politics did not go together, arguing that “the biggest punk scenes are in capitalist countries like the U.S., Canada and Japan. I haven’t heard of any new North Korean punk bands coming out. There’s no scene in Iran.” (St. John, 2004)

Rizutto’s ideals were not strongly held by his contemporaries. Conservative Punk itself spawned offshoots such as GOPunk, and were supported by some notable names including Michale Graves, one-time singer of the influential punk group Misfits who became associated with right wing conservatism and even the militant Proud Boys in 2020. (Lynch, 2021) Graves never shied away from conservative thought, and joined the US military following the 9/11 attacks before being given an honourable discharge on medical grounds in 2005. (Blabbermouth, 2005) However these were not well supported within the wider punk community. Siblo notes that Rizutto and especially Graves used the anxieties of the September 11 attacks and fears over potential subsequent attacks to attempt to stoke a culture war within the punk scene. (Fisher and Flota, 2011, 134) In fact, Rizutto was affected deeply by the 9/11 attacks – the *Washington Post* reported that they had “rewired his worldview,” as he transitioned from liberal college student to conservative. (Segal, 2004)

However, these attempts to push punk into a conservative political space largely failed. While they generated significant media attention in the run up to the 2004 election, this was almost universally rooted in coverage of the larger, better supported Punk Voter movement. Michale Graves was one of only a scattered handful of names within the scene who supported the movement; while some of the most influential punk rockers of the 1970s and 80s considered themselves to be conservative, including Johnny Ramone and Alice Cooper, few were in a position to lend their support to this particular cause. Ramone in particular considered himself a Republican and

declared his allegiance publicly in 2002 but died of cancer in September 2004. Cooper spoke out against rock musicians supporting John Kerry in an interview with *The Washington Post* that August, arguing that “I call it treason” but ironically claimed, “If you’re listening to a rock star in order to get your information on who to vote for, you’re a bigger moron than they are.” (Lei, 2004) He stopped short of endorsing any conservative movements.

Punk Voter, on the other hand, was able to convince around 200 bands to lend name support to the cause. Among these were platinum sellers such as Foo Fighters and Green Day, alongside credible artists from the punk scene such as Social Distortion and Mighty Mighty Bosstones, and big-name artists of the day from within the pop-punk world such as Good Charlotte, Blink-182 and Sum-41. (Punk Voter, 2004) Also included on the list was The Offspring, whose 1994 album *Smash* remains one of the largest selling independently released album of all time and who lent the enterprise both big-name credibility and \$10,000 from an unnamed band members’ pocket. (Garofoli, 2007)

The conservative punk scene was ultimately a footnote in the history of the genre. Even the most popular of these websites failed to gain genuine traction amongst the fanbase and without truly big names backing the movement it faded from public view following the 2004 election. Following Conservative Punk’s demise in 2010 a campaign to pay for hosting funds received only five backers and around one third of the required funds, and as of 2021 none of the conservative punk websites continue to function. (Indiegogo, 2013) However, while pop-punk remained left of centre and largely democrat supporting throughout the tenure of George Bush’s presidency and beyond, older punk musicians became more conservative as time passed. Siblo argues convincingly that conservatism became more prevalent within the ethos of former punk musicians. Fugazi’s Ian MacKaye argued; “Usually the dudes, because it’s almost always dudes, who are the conservative ones essentially spend a lot of time discussing the back in the day type of crap.” (Fisher and Flota, 2011, 141)

The ultimate influence of punk activism on the course of Bush's presidency is debatable. Punk Voter's considerable support for John Kerry did not swing the election in 2004 as Bush won re-election for a second term, but the efforts of punk musicians and activists to push voter registration and their subsequent influence cannot be ignored. The youth vote had dwindled to an all-time low in the 2000 election – just 36% of potential voters between the ages of 18 and 24 voted, but this increased to 47% in 2004. This is a significant increase – much higher than the general increase in voter turnout from 2000 to 2004. (Lopez et al, 2005) While there was clearly a surge in voter interest due in part to the Bush administration's divisive foreign policy, there is a marked increase in voters aged 18-24 compared to every other age group, something which can be attributed in part to voter registration drives like Punk Voter, which were targeted specifically at youth votes.

Punk Voter raised over \$1 million during the 2004 election cycle, while the website claimed to be receiving over 15 million hits each month, which is significant in showing the political influence of punk in the early internet era. (Garofoli, 2007) The power of the movement had been proven and Burkett showed himself to be an able figurehead despite opposition from fringe areas of the punk and pop-punk scene. Moore argues that "Subcultures and social movements which are critical of society must respond to the political economy of signs and styles with the weapons of parody, irony and performance epitomized by punk." (Moore, 2010) Burkett and Punk Voter did this by using the tools at their disposal to invigorate young, disaffected voters to be active and engaged in politics with uplifting messages such as their stated objective; "To build a coalition of informed voters who can individually and collectively influence public policy." (Punk Voter, 2004)

Following Bush's victory in 2004, Punk Voter continued in diminished form until 2008, and Burkett remarked in 2012 that following Barack Obama's 2008 election win he was done with political activism, telling the Toronto Sun that he thought Obama would win an easy victory in that year's presidential election. (Kinsella, 2012) Burkett's retirement from the arena of politics signalled the end of unified protests from the punk scene, but other musicians from within the larger

alternative scene continued their efforts to effect radical change from the government. In contrast to the headline grabbing nature of Punk Voter, protest from metal musicians was more subdued and less widespread, though still relevant through the efforts of numerous artists. Perhaps the best examples of protest within this sphere were the social justice and awareness efforts of Tom Morello and Serj Tankian. As the singer of System of a Down, a prominent, popular and successful act, Tankian's continued protest against the Bush government's foreign policies drew public attention. Alongside this, Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave guitarist Tom Morello performed activities as the Nightwatchman, organising and participating in protest concerts while assisting Serj Tankian in forming a grassroots activist group, the Axis of Justice.

The Axis of Justice

Axis of Justice differed from Punk Voter in that it was not specifically an anti-Bush affair. Tankian and Morello used the shows of their respective bands to spread information about their cause and ran a regular radio show which moved to satellite radio via the broadcaster Sirius XM in 2009. (Blabbermouth, 2009) Tankian and Morello routinely discussed their own views on activism. The Axis invited guests such as documentary film maker Michael Moore and academic writer Noam Chomsky, who had extensive experience as a political agitator and critic of US foreign policy, to discuss their views. The exchanges between Tankian, Morello and their guests shone a light on their political views. Chomsky was a strong example of this as they discussed in some depth his prior work on communications and propaganda, while asking leading questions about the war in Iraq. Tankian, for example, asked Chomsky why journalists "went along with all of the transparent lies that the White House used to justify the war," as Chomsky in response compared the United States' media atmosphere to North Korea. (Axis of Justice, 2006)

This politically minded ethos did not go unnoticed. By the beginning of Bush's second term in office, System of a Down were well known for combining politics and hard rock, while Tankian specifically received considerable attention from the press for his activism; "For fans of System of a

Down...a pre-show report on genocide is as fitting as a guitar solo,” claimed Billboard Magazine in May, 2005. (Billboard Staff, 2005) This reputation was extended by Tankian’s opposition to the Bush administration’s politics; a 2021 retrospective described their musical output as examining, “political disorder at home and abroad, decrying police brutality, privatized prisons and healthcare, and unmanned drone strikes, using withering humor and astounding technical prowess to shake its American audience out of faith in the goodness of government.” (Jenkins, 2021)

Tankian separated from the band during Bush’s second term, and released a solo album, *Elect the Dead*, which was “politically charged,” (Scaggs, 2007) and featured promotional videos which pushed his views on US policy forward. The video released for the album’s lead single – Empty Walls – was particularly evocative. Children acted out scenes from the ongoing War on Terror, including the World Trade Centre attacks and the destruction of a statue of Saddam Hussein in April, 2003, interspersed with scenes from the funeral of a US serviceman. (Tankian, 2007) The song’s lyrics were equally harsh; “Don’t you see their bodies burning/desolate and full of yearning/ dying from anticipation/ choking from intoxication.” (Tankian, 2007) The album represented a shift even from the protest music of System of a Down. Unshackled from the band’s moderating influence, Tankian was able to create music entirely dedicated to his social and political agenda. While it did not sell as strongly as the previous three System of a Down albums, *Elect the Dead* was moderately successful, spending twenty weeks on the billboard album charts and reaching number 4. (Billboard, 2007) The promotional videos also received regular airplay on music television channels, providing an outlet for the political protest and cementing Tankian as one of the genre’s foremost politically minded musicians. Tankian, like Burkett and others around him, saw the value of new forms of media to continue protest and rebellion. He told *Rolling Stone* in 2007, “it’s not just music anymore, it’s communication and music, it’s blogging and music...it’s become a lot more interactive.” (Rolling Stone, 2007)

Morello was also a seasoned hand, having performed and protested with his politicised band mates in Rage Against the Machine throughout the 1990s before going on hiatus in 1999. Morello vociferously campaigned against the Bush administration, particularly foreign policy. While performing in Scotland with the reunited Rage Against the Machine in 2008, he called for Bush to be tried as a war criminal. (NME, 2008) The band claimed they were accused of calling for Bush's assassination by the conservative leaning news network Fox and encouraged the crowd to react against US foreign policy; "If in protest to their war you burn down the American embassy...it's up to us, generation after generation to beat the system which perpetuates war. Wake up." Separate from the band and Tankian, Morello also toured with Burkett and the Rock Against Bush tour, then launched his own social justice themed tour towards the end of Bush's time in office. The Justice Tour ran during 2008 and performed on it as The Nightwatchman, as he had toured with Rock Against Bush in 2004. Morello enticed big names from the world of punk and metal to join the tour at different stages; Alice in Chains' Jerry Cantrell and Guns'n'Roses guitarist Slash played on the New York leg, while members of culturally relevant, high-profile metal, hip-hop and rap-metal acts such as Jane's Addiction, Tool, Cypress Hill and AFI were present throughout the tour – all popular musicians with millions of albums sold and a solid fanbase from which to build. The tour was aligned with Axis of Justice and other charitable organisations, including Amnesty International's campaign to close American detention centres such as Guantanamo Bay. (Blabbermouth, 2008) The tour focused on social justice issues, and acts gave overtly political messages on stage. Morello himself asked the audience on the Boston leg to organise a text message campaign "to send a message that we won't stand for torture. We demand Guantanamo be torn down!" (Pop Matters, 2008) The Justice tour was a prime example of the metal, punk and alternative communities coming together to promote social justice under the Bush administration.

As a more general form of anti-government, anti-policy protest, Axis of Justice differed in many ways from Punk Voter. Where Punk Voter focused specifically on Bush as a figurehead, Axis of Justice was a more wide-ranging endeavour aiming to raise awareness of a variety of social issues

while still offering sharp criticism of Bush and his methods. However, the two movements had one key similarity. It represented an attempt by metal musicians to engage with new forms of social protest, away from the stifling influence of mass media interference. Tankian and Morello were able to use the tried and tested method of a radio show but joined a growing number of activists who used online communication to circumvent more traditional methods. The Axis of Justice ultimately had a more subtle impact on the landscape of protest but still proved to be influential in its own way. By focusing less on the character of President Bush and more on wider socio-economic and foreign policy issues, the campaign remained relevant throughout the decade and beyond, as the two men transitioned into the mainstream of protest politics in the years following Bush's presidency.

Alternative Legacies

Through critical and commercial success, as well as through the more traditional methods of the alternative genre – word of mouth, activism at live shows and self-promotion, punk, pop-punk and metal musicians were able to influence and affect change, acting as a lightning rod for youths who were disaffected by the crusades and failings of the Bush presidency. This activism was particularly visible in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, then ebbed but did not disappear completely following Bush's re-election in 2004. While attempts to mobilise young, disaffected potential voters were unsuccessful in ousting Bush, the impact and legacy of these subcultural movements is clear as they helped increase young voter turnout and influenced a new generation of political agitators, protestors and organisers. Ultimately, political agitation from punk and metal musicians left an imprint on American society for some time both during the Bush presidency, and after it ended.

NOFX's 2003 album *War on Errorism* reached no. 1 on the Billboard independent albums chart and the lyrical content remains significant; a cover of the lead single *Franco Un-American* with lyrics updated to the Trump era was released by pop-punk band MxPx in 2019 replacing lines such as

“Now I can’t believe; what an absolute failure/ The President’s laughing ‘cause he voted for Nader,” with “Now I can’t believe what the Dems did with Bernie/ The President’s laughing ‘cause he grabbed us by the pussy.” (NOFX, 2003) *American Idiot* topped charts in the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere and was even reworked into a stage musical in 2010, showing the worldwide power of the anti-Bush themes of the album, while other rock and metal musicians found their efforts rewarded. System of a Down won a Grammy award for the song *Bring Your Own Bombs (B.Y.O.B.)*, an overtly anti-Iraq war song which included the line “Why don’t presidents fight the war? Why do they always send the poor?” (System of a Down, 2004) The Grammy signified a large-scale change in attitudes helped along by visible rock and metal protest; in 2003 Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) had asked Grammy winners not to mention the Iraq conflict. (Petridis, 2003) By the 2006 ceremony, social commentary from the music community was not only allowed but rewarded and spearheaded in part by the band. The song was a commercial success as well, having been certified Gold by the RIAA in 2005, before achieving Platinum status in 2007. (RIAA, 2021) The appetite for protest in alternative music is nothing if not proven by the success of B.Y.O.B., and the band’s popularity continued long after the Bush era ended – in 2020, “Chop Suey” became arguably the first metal song to reach 1 billion views on YouTube, ahead of Metallica’s “Nothing Else Matters.” (Blake, 2020)

Mike Burkett’s Punk Voter and Rock Against Bush initiatives may not have helped elect John Kerry in 2004 but they pushed an awareness in youth voters that helped drive a significant increase in votes from 18–24-year-olds and outlasted a backlash within the punk and pop-punk community against left-wing, liberal activism. A new generation of punk and pop-punk musicians found themselves inspired, most notably Tim McIlrath, whose band Rise Against’s vocally anti-Bush albums *The Sufferer and the Witness* and *Appeal to Reason* peaked at no. 10 and no. 3 on the Billboard 200 respectively in 2006 and 2008, continuing the popularity of critical statements against Bush’s policies within the punk scene. “He got the ball rolling,” McIlrath said of Burkett in 2007. (Garofoli, 2007) However, the punk ethos as a viable source of future government protest was shown by Punk Voter

to be fragile. The debate that raged over what could be defined as “punk,” and the accusations of selling out levelled at Burkett by commentators like Nick Rizutto throughout his tenure with Punk Voter. Fragmentation occurred over partisan and religious lines, and though this did not ultimately impact Punk Voter’s appeal, it would have a notable effect on future attempts to unify punks to a political cause.

The movement split over future campaigns; hardline campaigners such as Jello Biafra and Anti-Flag continued to rail against the establishment, while Burkett and other moderate campaigners accepted Bush’s successor Barack Obama as an adequate leader after years of campaigning. The punk community returned to a more fragmented method of campaigning after a moment of unity, but Punk Voter set a standard for future musical campaigns. Anthony Snellings argues that the true benefit of the campaign therefore lay in its creative use of the internet as a campaigning tool. (Snellings, 2017) The website was one of the first truly online political movements, and generated interest almost completely outside of radio and television advertisement. The focus on appealing to youth voters was taken on by future political operations. It is telling that administrative staff such as Scott Goodstein quickly moved on from Punk Voter to successful future campaigns such as the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008. Obama’s election was noted for the large amount of youth support. (Rosentiel, 2008) This is something that Punk Voter undoubtedly had some influence on through both the personnel involved and by helping to create a template for subsequent online activism.

Green Day’s vocal anti-Bush sentiment also continued throughout his presidency and their music continued to explore themes of systemic government failings in subsequent releases, particularly *21 Guns*, the follow up to *American Idiot*. The lasting worldwide impact of these political statements has also been made clear by Green Day’s brand of protest music, as *American Idiot*’s title track re-entered the charts in the United Kingdom fourteen years after release as part of a protest against the 2018 visit of President Donald Trump. The song peaked at number 25 in the chart. Much

like Burkett and Punk Voter, Green Day influenced a new generation of politically edged punk and hard rock bands. McIlrath expanded on their impact in a 2009 interview with Rolling Stone by likening the band to U2, who had been extensively politically active in previous years; “Kids in Middle America, who grow up in conservative towns, they’re letting them know: ‘Hey, if you don’t agree with the government...you’re not alone.’” (Weingarten, 2009) Green Day have remained politically active, making statements against the Trump administration and encouraging voters to go to the polls for the Democrats in 2020.

Other high-profile musicians from within alternative sub-cultures followed suit, such as Nine Inch Nails’ Trent Reznor who was involved in a high-profile dispute with MTV over an anti-government statement at their annual awards show. (Montgomery, 2005) Reznor wished to perform the song *The Hand That Feeds* with what he described as “an unmolested, straightforward image of George W. Bush as the backdrop.” (Montgomery, 2005) The song was a hit, spending twenty weeks on Billboard’s hot 100 chart (Billboard, 2005) and gaining even more visibility among young listeners by being licensed for several popular video games such as *Guitar Hero* and the first instalment of Viacom and Harmonix’s billion-dollar grossing franchise *Rock Band*. (Kreps, 2009). It took a clear swipe at Bush’s foreign policy – lyrics such as “What if this whole crusade’s a charade/ and behind it all there’s a price to be paid,” (Reznor, 2005) explosively criticised the war in Iraq. Reznor stood by his beliefs and refused to change the intended protest, belligerently refusing to play at the event instead. This is another example of the influence exerted by high profile musicians from within alternative rock; although MTV were able to recover the situation by simply using the Foo Fighters in Reznor’s place, negative publicity was generated, and the singer ultimately succeeded in his goal of creating a high-profile protest against the Bush administration.

Perhaps most visibly, the founders of Axis of Justice – Tom Morello and Serj Tankian – have continued their activism and even expanded beyond protesting the Iraq War and Bush administrations policies. Tankian has worked particularly hard to push his political agenda and in

places has openly clashed with the politics of other members of System of a Down, including his brother-in-law and the band's drummer, John Dolmayan. Tankian's Bush-era releases with System of a Down – *Toxicity*, *Mesmerize* and *Hypnotize* – were well received by critics and fans alike, topping the US album charts and winning the band a Grammy award for the single *B.Y.O.B.* In the years that followed, Tankian campaigned successfully for a more personal goal, to push for the United States to recognise the Armenian Genocide of 1915. This goal was seemingly achieved in 2021 when President Joseph Biden explicitly referred to the event as a genocide, something Tankian relayed to MSNBC's Brian Williams in April 2021. (Williams, 2021)

The band have released music specifically recognising the genocide in 2020, and a documentary by Tankian, *Truth to Power*, was released in 2021. (Tankian, 2021) Both Tankian and Morello, along with around 600 other musicians, signed an open letter asking artists to boycott Israeli venues following political unrest between Israel and Palestine in May 2021. (Kreps, 2021) For his part, Morello has remained active in using his status to push his politics into the mainstream. As the *Nightwatchman*, Morello played shows in support of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. He also appeared in a 2013 video defending Chelsea Manning after she leaked classified information from the US army. (Gavin, 2013) In the same vein as musicians from the Vietnam era were embedded in mainstream politics by the time of the Iraq War, so too are the campaigners from alternative music landscape of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The landscape of popular music changed after the Vietnam War. The continued commercialisation of the industry made it more difficult for dissenting voices to be heard, and the popular music acts of the era were more reticent than previous generations to release music that pushed back against the status quo as a result. A good proportion of the slack was picked up by punk, pop-punk and metal musicians, who worked to educate voters and recruit disaffected youths who had deserted the ballot box at the 2000 election. One of the first organised online campaigns came from within punk, as NOFX's Mike Burkett led attempts to mobilise punk and pop-punk

listeners with a dedicated website, compilation albums and a nationwide tour. This was alongside a presence on the larger Warped Tour which carried credibility within the scene. Veteran punk rockers Green Day stood alongside high-profile rock and grunge artists from the 1990s such as Foo Fighters and The Offspring to rally anti-Bush sentiment. From the metal scene, System of a Down and Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello spearheaded a voter awareness and social justice campaign – Axis of Justice – and used their own shows to help inform and register young constituents who were against the policies of the Bush administration.

All these musicians circumvented the traditional structure of the music industry to make their voices heard, either by using the structures of their individual music scenes to spread their politics and belief among fans or supporters, or by taking advantage of new forms of communication to provide organisation. While this took a vastly different form from the previous activism of figures like Bob Dylan and Creedence Clearwater Revival, many of the artists who took an active stand against the Bush government were rewarded with high record sales, critical and awards success, lasting popularity and increased cultural awareness.

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