

Tracking the Sound of Revolution

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The band [Junkyard Empire](#) does not differentiate among music, message and life.

Political Affairs magazine said, "A jazz version of Rage Against the Machine, Minnesota-based Junkyard Empire blends jazz instrumentals, hip hop, and socially conscious lyrics to create a fresh sound ... this new Midwestern band has something to say."

The title track of their new CD Rebellion Politik, declares:

*They lure us in stores to keep us all poor
Ignoring the cure for what's at the core
Explore the floor of the third world poor
Creating the wars for mineral ore*

Lead vocalist/rapper Brian Lozenski, whose stage name is MC Brihanu says, "Music and art should represent life. My life revolves around social justice and trying to make a better world for my children. Therefore my music reflects that. I don't think every piece of art and music needs to be explicitly political, but there needs to be an accurate reflection of people's lives. Most of the mainstream music we hear today is purposefully not political. That is a political act in itself because corporate media does not want its consumers to think critically and challenge the status quo." They are a band endorsed by Noam Chomsky.

Christopher Cox, founder of the band, tells Truthout the name evolved in this way:

"I originally proposed the name 'Refuse Empire' which was clearly anti-imperialist, but also an ecological statement. The US is an empire of refuse, since the American Empire is based on everything being expendable, quick, throwaway ... including capitalism itself, which never leads to long-term good, it only leads to short-term 'good,' and that's a short-term good only for a small group of people. So building an empire on junk is not good for anyone for the long term." The name then morphed into Junkyard Empire from there.

Mirroring Cox's thoughts, Brihanu is clear about the current state of affairs, and what he feels needs to happen:

"The number one problem I see right now is the corporate control of the government. We cannot hope to see any realistic change until we separate private enterprise from the federal and state governments. The public cannot compete with the corporations in terms of money and power. The political system we have can work only if it is able to operate without politicians being allowed to profit from their political decisions. The only other way would be through a violent revolution and I think no one really wants to see the chaos that would ensue. However, I also realize that the power elite will not let go without a fight, so it may come to a traditional bottom up revolution in order to create a more just society."

Brihanu began his activism as a student at Cornell University where he pushed for fair housing and culturally diverse programs. He has been involved in the campaign for the release of Mumia Abu Jamal and other political prisoners, in anti-poverty initiatives and in the demand for education rights. The list of organizations he associates with range from the Uhuru Movement to Wellstone Action to The League of Pissed Off Voters. He believes that activism is integral to his life. Even as a public school teacher he tried to engage his students in thinking critically about society.

Cox is a Sonoma State University graduate in political science. He has earlier worked on [Project Censored](#), a group with the mission “to teach students and the public about the role of a free press in a free society – and to tell the News That Didn’t Make the News and Why.” “My head was into political organizing,” the trombone/keyboard/electronics player told Truthout, “So for me, I didn’t want to play music just to make a living, I wanted to get politics in there.”

In August, Junkyard Empire was invited to Cuba for a rare opportunity to meet with Cuban arts organizations and leaders and to perform several shows. The Havana Times wrote of their visit, “The US hip hop group Junkyard Empire – accompanied by trombone, drums and bass – invited everyone attending ‘to sing against imperialism and to unite their voices for freedom and equality.’ According to the host, they represented good-hearted Americans who defied the blockade to come to Cuba and offer their art.”

The state of political consciousness in the United States today is a joke, and civic participation in activism pales in comparison to that during the Vietnam era. In the wake of President Obama’s recent announcement to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan people are feeling more powerless and demoralized than ever. It is in this environment that Cox, Brihanu, guitarist Bryan Berry, bass guitarist Dan Choma and drummer Graham O’Brian have created a combination of activism and art. The day after Obama’s announcement, Cox and Berry were arrested in Minneapolis while protesting the escalation.

The band does not shy away from hot topics. Everything from the US financial meltdown to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis is addressed in the new album. The song “Manifest” tackles head-on the foundational doctrine of the United States:

*So the message becomes repetitive, seduce you like a sedative
You hear it in school, in the media and in your church edifice
We’re the civilized here to save the savages
Their culture is ravenous, they’re a lesser people
Not equal to receive the gifts bestowed on god’s righteous leaders
Let’s teach them they’re inferior and should despise themselves
And if they don’t conform to us, they’ve destined themselves for hell
If they rebel we have no choice but to take them by force
It’s what we’re destined for, so you know it’s god’s law
And if need be it’s a justification for war
By any means necessary, destroy all our adversaries
And spread our doctrine to the edge of the Earth
Cause the world is ours, it was manifested by birth
We want your land and your resources for the nourishment of our society*

*But don't fight it and don't test we
Just realize this is your manifest destiny*

To ensure their survival and success, musicians in the US keep away from the contentious issue of politics. They are rewarded by the corporate-dominated media with excessive publicity and, as a consequence, higher sales. In such an atmosphere, bands like Junkyard Empire are unlikely to find any of their songs reaching the number one position on the charts. Nor do they hanker for that brand of popularity. They do want to reach people, but through different routes and for very different reasons.

It is not indifference to public taste, but rather an examined intent to sensitize the public that guides the band.

Ask them what is wrong with someone just wanting to listen to music to have a good time, and leave politics out of it, and Brihanu responded, "Why does it make them uncomfortable? Does it make them uncomfortable to hear the misogyny, violence, and materialism prevalent in 'fun, party' music? The best music should stimulate our minds, bodies, and souls. It is impossible to deny the impact of Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Michael Franti, Fela Kuti, Dead Prez, Public Enemy, and numerous other musicians on our society. Like those musicians, we want to challenge people through our music in the hope that they will question what we've been taught and how we operate. I also believe that if you have a platform to say something then you should say something with substance. Plus, there's nothing wrong with shakin' your ass to a political message that sparks a fire inside of you."

Cox shares his view: "Some of the most educated and political people I know are jazz musicians. However, most of them don't feel politics belong in their art. But I think politics affects everything we do, including our music. And as a jazz musician, I have always felt there should be more to the music. My take is that all music has intense social relevance. For us, we're just taking this path because we have some things we want to say, and we're using music as our way of saying it. If you're given a stage, why not include something that changes people's minds, or at least opens them up?"

Truthout attended the band's release concert of their new album, Rebellion Politik, in September, at the Cedar Cultural Center in downtown Minneapolis. The band refers to the title track as an "operating theory" that uses as a force for organizing and political action, "the science of survival in a repressive environment."

The track "Original Assumption" asks:

*What is freedom?
Is it the perceived option to choose between two preconceived concoctions
Of a two party dictatorship, based on maintaining a deranged relationship
With no explanation of our benefits*

The chorus of the title track reinforces the thought:

*Rebellion Politik, the opposite of what you know as politics
Where corporate capital makes the government break their promise*

*It's a new day where people create the policy
And the economy trickles up to eradicate the poverty
So get up, stand up, these are our demands, what
We want our money back so politicians get your hands up
Equal distribution of the land and the profits
An end to all war and a socialized democracy*

These lyrics come as no surprise from a band that, along with thousands of protesters, was chased by riot-gear clad police at last year's Republican National Convention in Minneapolis. The experience galvanized the band as a unit, explained Cox. "That experience kind of made Junkyard Empire, in our minds. It solidified for us how much we want to be a part of the movement, versus being a band that is just into the subject matter."

One of their gigs during the convention week took place on the steps of the Capital, the day after Rage Against the Machine had played at a festival. Cox recounted, "We played for a protest called 'No peace for the war makers.' We played our set on stage, with some speeches between our songs, it was great, and intense. All of a sudden I looked to my right and saw about 50 cops in riot gear, and I was wondering what was about to happen. So it was a bit awkward, but the energy was great. It was the first time for us, as a band, that we felt like we were doing exactly what we wanted – playing live music, involved in a live protest, cops around, and being connected to both, was incredibly energizing."

The band's conviction is both refreshing and unmistakable. Junkyard Empire believes that their music can assist in fomenting the change they feel must happen in the world right now. For them, it is important to combine music, art and politics because they see music as an inspirational mechanism to create change.

Brihanu reminisced, "One of the first ways I realized that there were problems to be confronted, was when I was listening to Public Enemy and KRS-One as a child. It helped me interpret my world and built a passion for social justice inside me that I didn't even realize was there."

Today he hopes their band might have the same effect on people.

"Our music and message are one in the same, they are meant to provoke thought and inspire us all to realize our true potential. We want to be the soundtrack for a mass social movement in the US and around the world."

*Right now I'm speaking as the voice of the masses
Defeated, mistreated, believe it you beat us robbed us and gassed us
We've been passed up, locked up, exploited and downsized
But we will uprise, no compromise, this is the fire next time*

Junkyard Empire is sporadically touring the Midwest, looking to partner up with other radical bands for a larger tour, and working towards a tour of Europe. They are also in the planning stages for other international political actions, and are promoting Rebellion Politik, which is their third album.

Bhaswati Sengupta contributed to this report.

Dahr Jamail's new book, The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and

*Afghanistan, is now available. Order the book here <http://tinyurl.com/cnlgyu>. Visit Dahr Jamail's website <http://dahrjamailiraq.com> ***

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