

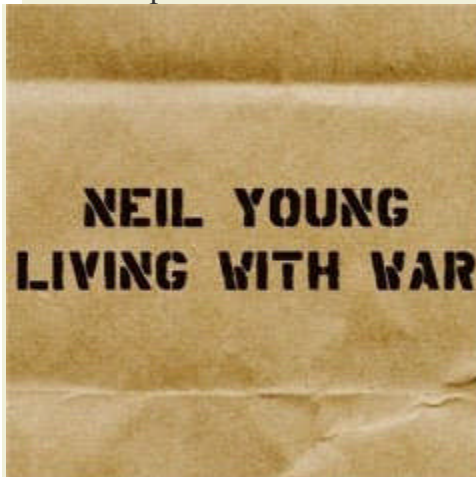
## MUSIC

# MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

## Neil Young Takes On George Bush

Review by Al Kaufman

Neil Young is not a knee-jerk liberal. Despite his associations with hippies and Woodstock, this is a man who supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and, just four years ago, described the Patriot Act as a good idea. The fact that he is a moderate makes his 10-song diatribe against President Bush, *LIVING WITH WAR* (Reprise) all the more powerful.



In less than two fever-pitched weeks, Young wrote the songs, cobbled together a 100-person chorus, and recorded an album as fuzzy and angry as anything he has done with Crazy Horse.

Most artists lose their creativity and even musical ability when they start preaching politics. For Young, who has often been as subtle as an atom bomb when he rocks (think “Ohio,” “This Note’s For You” and “Rockin’ in the Free World”), this is not a problem. His songs, although filled with fire and brimstone, remain intelligent and melodious. His arguments are as sound as they are passionate. Although many will point to certain cuts on the album, most notably “Let’s Impeach the President,” and chalk the whole thing up as an anti-Bush rant, what Young has created is a love letter to the USA. “America is beautiful/But she has an ugly side,” he sings. He searches for answers as emphatically as he points out problems. It’s the love of his adopted country (Young is still a Canadian citizen although he has lived here for 40 years), warts and all, that ultimately shines through. His insistence that we “don’t need no more lies” is too sincere to be considered simplistic.

But what’s the point?

Right-wing pundits claim Young is just trying to cash in on the war. If true, it would seem to be poor marketing to release the CD free online a week before it arrived in stores.

Both the National Review and FOX News denounce him for never becoming a U.S. citizen (funny, they had no problem with this when he came out in support of Reagan), and they say the country he is trashing has made him rich and famous. This exemplifies the typical Bush rhetoric that accuses you of not loving America and siding with terrorists if you disagree with his policies.

FOX commentator Josh Gibson went so far as to say that Young was disrespectful of the people who died during September 11. Gibson has apparently never heard "Let's Roll," Young's hawkish tribute to the passengers of United Flight 93, from the 2002 CD ARE YOU PASSIONATE?

The left wants to know what took him so long. Young claims he was waiting for some younger voice to come along. "I waited a long time. Then I decided that maybe the generation that has to do it is still the Sixties generation," he told the Los Angeles Times.



Photo from "Heart of Gold" DVD  
(c) Paramount Classics

Younger voices have, in fact, been doing it. REM ("Final Straw"), Bright Eyes ("When the President Talks to God") and Midnight Oil ("US Forces") released songs but received no airplay. Artists with cult followings, such as Tom Waits and Mike Doughty (of Soul Coughing) also released anti-Bush fare. Country rock maverick Steve Earle released two CDs full of his anti-establishment agenda (JERUSALEM and THE REVOLUTION STARTS NOW), and so did former Jayhawk Mark Olson (POLITICAL MANIFEST) and Dan Bern (MY COUNTRY II).

The problem is radio was playing none of it. Say what you will about how the Internet drives music sales more than radio. The fact is, with the exception of Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, if bands aren't heard on the radio, the songs don't sell. Radio, owned by huge corporations such as Clear Channel and Infinity, does not want to offend listeners. Stations play it safe musically and try to act alternative by using morning DJs that talk about sex and pick on gay people.

Up until this year, the only band able to break through with their political message was Green Day. All the radio stations were able to point to them and say, "See, we play political music."

Yet now that Bush's approval ratings have dipped well below the freezing mark, it is okay to play songs like Pearl Jam's "World Wide Suicide" and Pink's "Dear Mr. President." LIVING WITH WAR was the most added CD to AAA radio the first week of its release. Radio has become as alternative as the majority it seeks to please.

Which brings us back to the question: what's the point? Can a song actually influence a Bush supporter to switch sides? Should a musician be telling us what to think politically?

For Dan Bern (think early Bob Dylan meets Lenny Bruce), it was just something he had to do. "I thought getting rid of Bush in the '04 election was by far the most important thing I could help to do at the time, and it superseded anything else I might have had on my mind. Cowboy songs, love songs, etc., were all put on the back

burner. I simply wanted to do my part, hopefully influence those who could be influenced, have people pass it along to others, and provide cheer and optimism for those engaged in a similar fight.”

Bern also dismisses those who think musicians’ opinions are not credible just because they are musicians: “I think whatever you do in your life can be a platform for something. Muhammed Ali, Jackie Robinson – who could say they are just athletes? With musicians, the what you are saying is married to the how you are saying it. If someone is able to crystallize thoughts and ideas into a musical form that makes the whole thing strong and compelling – well, isn’t that what everyone’s trying to do?”

Bern is right. We spend a great deal of our lives convincing others to see our point of view. Musicians have the perfect platform for that, so why not use it?

But does it work? *LIVING WITH WAR* will most probably be bought by people who already agree with Young’s positions. Its sales have not been as brisk as those of his previous CD, *PRAIRIE WIND*. But damn, it gets my blood pumping every time I put in on, and that’s what I like music to do for me.