



Music

Making Social Change With Music

By Jeff Nall

In the 2004 election, hardly a week went by without the mainstream media deriding an actor or musician for speaking up against the re-election of President Bush. Websites such as MSN.com featured polls that asked people whether they cared what their favorite actor or musician thought about social issues. Meanwhile, TV pundits declared political matters off-limits to anyone who wasn't regulated by corporate media speaking fees or invited to pontificate on the major networks' Sunday news programs.

Many artists, nevertheless, continue to speak out on social justice issues. In the music industry, however, it is still rare to find a group that goes beyond speaking out from time to time, by weaving its music and political consciousness together, day in and day out. We find one of those rare examples in the folk duo Emma's Revolution. The group takes its name from activist Emma Goldman, who is famed for having responded to a colleague's criticism of her dancing by saying, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution."

Comprised of songwriter Pat Humphries, who has authored the progressive anthems "Swimming to the Other Side" and "Keep On Moving Forward," and Sandy Opatow, Emma's Revolution is probably best known for its peace anthem, "Peace, Salaam, Shalom," which appeared on their debut album *One*.

Recently the duo released its latest CD, *Roots, Rock & Revolution!*

which affirms the duo's belief that music is a means to learn, organize, and motivate. Released in December 2006, the CD features such songs as: "Silent No Longer," detailing a successful landmark case against the oil corporation UNOCAL on behalf of villagers from Burma; "Coast of Maine," dealing with the gap between rich and poor in a small community; and "Living Planet," an environmental hymn. Among the disk's more iconic tracks, "Who Lies" details a Republican-controlled government and tackles everything from war and the environment to the suffering of the poor and Muslims:

*People in a bind
unemployment line...Bechtel
Halliburton, Carlyle and more
Emptying the shelves of the
company store*

*Who lies, who dies
who pays, who profits
Staying out of gang
trying to be cool
seeing through the lies fro
recruiters in the schools
stand up like a man
for freedom lend a hand
join the occupation of
an oil rich land*

*Who lies, who dies
who pays, who profits
Gulf Coast shore
same as before
poor people's lives for a
rich man's war*

*no services or plans
for people in need
just ignorance and arrogance an
government greed*

In "Where are you now?," a song about the chaos surrounding Katrina, Opatow transmit's a sorrowful sentiment that transcends any one disaster, reminding listeners of any number of tragedies:

*Where are you now
where did you sleep
do you have food
are you OK*



Opatow and Humphries perform with New Orleans musician Gina Forsyth
—photo from Equality Loudoun

*Where did you sleep
are you in peace
where are you now
I held your hand
firmly in mine
then the tide surged
I couldn't hold on
My love couldn't hold back a current
so strong*

*Where are you now
where did you sleep
do you have food
are you OK
Where did you sleep
are you in peace
where are you now*

*I caught a glimpse
thought it was you
then the crowd rushes
guardsmen pushed through*

*where are you bound
how will I know
where will we meet
where did you go*

Opatow said she and her partner were specifically inspired to write the song after hearing the desperate pleas of Katrina victims being broadcasted from New Orleans. "When we first heard about what was going on, Amy Goodman was there pretty quickly and one of the

things she was doing was giving an open microphone so that people could say, 'I'm looking for my brother, here is my cellphone number.' 'I'm looking for my uncle.' 'I'm going to be in Houston,' or whatever—they were just naming all their people who were missing, who they wanted to find. It reminded us so much of people after September 11 who put up posters that said, 'My mother was in this tower too, we haven't seen her, can you call us?'"

Viewing attempts by the media to downplay the inherent political import of music and art, Humphries rejects those who argue music and current events are a mismatch. "This has been the essential purpose of music from the very beginning," she said. "People always used music to tell the news."

Humphries insists one of her main motives as an artist-activist is to tear away the illusion that individuals are incapable of making a difference in the world. "We're constantly being told that our vote doesn't matter, that our choices in what we buy or don't buy doesn't matter, and it's a lie. It's purposeful, to keep people silent and to

keep people disconnected from their outrage; to keep them from that sense of compassion that some of us grew up more connected with."

Beyond progressive commentary, Emma's Revolution examines issues of our time the way the media should. "We're very aware that what we're doing is spreading truth," said Opatow. "And stories of triumph, like 'Silent No Longer,' or situations that still need work, like the 'Coast of Maine,' a song about the discrepancies between rich and poor in a coastal area where people are buying summer homes and many of those who live there year round are struggling to get by. They are definitely underreported stories."

Emma's Revolution's journalistic approach to songwriting also makes a point to look at the victories and virtues of grassroots activism. "People have short memories and we do try to remind people of victories because everyone needs to know change is happening and people are making a real impact against the problems that exist," said Opatow.

"[The UNOCAL lawsuit] was a landmark case, the first ever against a U.S.-based corporation for a trust that is, on its behalf, off of U.S. soil. Right after they won that case, Senator Diane Feinstein's office tried to do some kind of legal change so that that law, the way that it was won by [the organization] Silent No Longer could no longer be used by any other corporations.

"It was actually shouted down by thousands of people who sent her emails saying, 'We see what you're trying to do. We see that you're trying to destroy this victory.' When we sing that song, in the introduction, we often say, these people won a lawsuit against an oil corporation on behalf of 15 villagers from Burma. And people cheer because it's good news and they hadn't heard about it."

While some artists succeed in inspiring the indignation necessary to prompt action in individuals, Emma's Revolution succeeds in the equally important task of inspiring the hope necessary to keep the fires of indignation burning.

Rather than simply lamenting voting debacles of recent elections, the duo's song, "Vote"—featuring a guest appearance by Jethro Tull drummer Doane Perry—is an indictment of election tampering and, more importantly, an inspiring call to arms:

*If they can count 424 billion for the war
why can't they count our votes
if they can count thousands of bomb
and still be buying more
why can't they count our votes?
We're not done
we're not tired
we won't stop until, Donald
Rumsfeld, you're fired!*

The duo also offers an uplifting cover of "If I Had a Hammer," originally written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes in 1949, which calls for peace and unity. Explaining her reasoning for mixing somber and elated moods on the album, Humphries said, "I think it's important, on one hand, to be sure to cover the subject and to cover the gravity of the subject, and at times to keep things in that sort of more somber frame. But also I feel devoted to the importance of keeping people energized. People have got to leave feeling hopeful. They need to feel hopeful and empowered. It's the only way change happens—if people can believe change can happen and believe that they are an essential part of the change."

But singing about the issues is just the beginning for these artists. Opatow and Humphries live their music and activist spirit, dedicating themselves to sharing their songs and the stories and building communities around the United States and beyond. Frequent guests at activist events, in August Emma's

Revolution performed at the Scottish Parliament's second annual Festival of Politics, and in November the duo played a vigil calling for the close of the School of the Americas in Georgia.

As of late, the two have been on the road playing a series of house concerts throughout the southeast. Often seating fewer than 100, these concerts make for a unique opportunity to build bridges between people who are working on different issues in the same community.

"The other piece of the community building," said Opatow, "is that we talk about a whole bunch of different issues. Some people will come because they hear the peace and justice stuff and some people will come because they hear the environmental rights issues—then they get to meet each other. If it's at a big venue they may get to meet each other. If it's a house concert they will definitely get to meet each other. It helps make connections between the activists in that community and we really love helping to make those connections."

Summing up the duo's purpose, Humphries said Emma's Revolution intends to uplift, empower, and enjoin. "The point is we really want people to be informed about what's going on; we want them to feel connected to their own emotions about these things so that they can connect to the real impact of these issues. But we also want them to feel hopeful and believe in the power of their actions and the power of their voices; and that they can make some conscious decisions about what they do in this life and the impact that it has on the world around them. We want them to be able to cry when it's appropriate to cry, and to dance and celebrate when it's appropriate to dance and celebrate." **Z**

Jeff Nall is a community activist and freelance writer. He regularly contributes to publications such as Online Journal and the Humanist.