

MUSIC / WILLIAM RUHLMANN

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Music Seminar Discusses How to Put More of the 'L' Word Into Campus Radio

On Nov. 8, voters between the ages of 18 and 22 are expected to cast a majority of their votes for Vice President George Bush, but you'd never have known that from the CMJ Music Marathon, a gathering of students involved with college radio that was held last week at the Vista Hotel in New York City's financial district.

From its opening on Thursday morning, Oct. 27, the convention's overriding concern was how to express a more liberal viewpoint over the airwaves of college radio stations throughout the country.

To an extent, this was to be expected. It's common to suppose that the young will be more liberal than the old, and there is a longstanding bias toward liberalism in the popular arts. Further, the proximity of the coming election would be expected to politicize even a music convention. But given the polls, one would nevertheless have expected a wider debate than that evident at the convention last week.

In one panel discussion after another, at open forums, in musical performances, and in the convention's keynote address, the issue was not so much whether to push a liberal political

**BILLY BRAGG**

agenda to concentrate on music itself over the music business, and while the convention was crowded with publicists and promoters, record company personnel and aspiring artists, as well as college radio programmers, the musical focus remained on quality rather than commerciality.

Just as there was relatively little debate on political direction, no one much questioned what constituted good new music. Rather, new music, in a dizzying variety of forms, was what conventioners talked about helping to foster.

This debate came across most strongly during the convention's first day, when a six-hour session was given over to a symposium on college radio. Passing microphones from hand to hand, attendees engaged in a prolonged bull session that ranged from how much freedom should be allowed on college radio to how important the inclusion of campus sports was. The session was interrupted regularly for impromptu musical performances, in the morning by members of the Minneapolis group Yo La Tengo, and in the afternoon by the British political singer-songwriter Billy Bragg.

Bragg, who has toured the Soviet Union, was asked in a pre-concert press conference about his experiences there, and said the differences with the United States were great, but that there is a similarity in the fears and worries people in the Soviet Union have to those people feel here.

This led Bragg into a series of political remarks. He spoke of the reaction to the present election as

"apathy with a capital 'A,'" saying that the lead enjoyed by Bush would lead to a disinclination to vote. He predicted that, "unfortunately," a Dukakis defeat, rather than leading to a shift to the liberal attitudes of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, would move the Democratic Party more toward the conservative views of Sen. Sam Nunn. He also said there was a great danger in having the same party win three elections, noting that this would lead to oppression of homosexuals and others.

Bragg was equally critical of the current musical scene. "Nostalgia is breathing down our necks," he said. "The baby boomers took so many drugs in the '60s they can't remember where they left their Grateful Dead records." Hence, the record industry is making money reissuing old albums on compact disc.

Bragg did praise college radio, however, repeating the popularly held belief (at the convention, anyway) that it was the source of breaking new music and that, without it, music would be streamlined and programmed.

Bragg's political stance came through clearly in his concert performance,

**MICHELLE SHOCKED**

agenda thorough college radio, it was how to do so.

None of which is to say that music, the convention's reason for being, was slighted in the political atmosphere. Unlike such rivals as the New Music Seminar, the CMJ convention tends to

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**SIOUXSIE AND THE BANSHEES**

which included a song called "Waiting for a New Deal Now" that accused Dukakis of being a Republican and called for "Jackson action," and a rewrite of Elvis Costello's "Oliver's Army" that included couplets like "Do yourself a real big favor/Ask George Bush about Noriega."

Bragg was applauded warmly, but the college students showed a little

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more of the happy-go-lucky spirit college is known for in a press conference held by the British punk rock group Siouxsie and the Banshees. After seeming to be at a loss for questions, students lined up at a mike, ready to ask why the group has gone through so many guitarists and what their favorite types of cheese were. (Only Siouxsie herself answered that, praising Stilton cheese.) When asked about the importance of style, the group, — all of whose members had hair that was either dyed black or peroxide blond — said their style was natural, not manufactured.

A political cast returned to the convention in its second day with a keynote address by Michelle Shocked, a folk-rock singer-songwriter from Texas recently signed to a major record label. Conflating the personal with the political, Shocked pursued the question of whether it was more effective to try to change the system from outside or from inside, saying that she felt she'd gone as far as she could in the folk underground, and that, while she felt she'd been "shanghaied" from outside the system, she saw an opportunity. "And you can always go back outside," she noted.

Shocked pointedly disagreed with Bragg's assessment of the presidential campaign, saying that it wasn't apathy that kept people out of the voting booth. "Some people are actively not voting," she noted. Citing the motto of Germany's Green Party, Shocked said that change would come by "unity through diversity," specifically over environmental issues. "let's not call ourselves 'music industry,'" she said, "call it 'music community.'"

Perhaps the convention's most political panel discussion was one called "Music as a Social Force: The Struggle for Human Rights," at which writer Jim Fouratt, noting the polls, asked the audience to tell him why college students were voting for Bush. One brave student, the business director of WNYU, tried to answer that, but seemed so emotionally overwrought at having to take so obviously unpopular a stance, that he quickly retreated, after saying little more than that he was a Republican and supported Bush.

Subsequent student speakers claimed that college radio personnel tended to be better informed, and said that most college students, who have grown up under the current administration, are

satisfied and don't want to seek out information.

Rock singer Lou Reed, who has appeared at Amnesty International and anti-apartheid benefits in recent years, noted that he had always thought that "politics could best be expressed through a story, not through proselytizing," but that he had changed his mind recently. Referring to AIDS and the problem of homelessness, Reed said that, perhaps, living in New York, one saw certain problems before they hit the rest of the country. "What's going on in New York is going to spread like a virus," he said. "You could do something. I think music could change the world, and I think you should think that too."

If such panels at least expressed a political viewpoint coherently, the CMJ's accompanying mini-convention, devoted to hard rock "heavy metal" music, engaged a variant of such issues in as aggressive a manner as the music it represented. At a panel discussion called "We have Come for Your Children ... Or Have We? Does Metal Deserve Its Bad Reputation?", a group of panelists led by Deena Weinstein, professor of Sociology at DePaul University, criticized condemnations of heavy metal by such groups as the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). Weinstein said that heavy metal was aggressive, teenage, rebellious music, used as a scapegoat for other problems, and said that the PMRC was a front for the religious right. Phyllis Pollack, a freelance journalist, went on to criticize "de-metalling centers," at which teenagers are weaned of their attraction to heavy metal, as "so sick I don't even know where to begin."

Panelists also criticized the recent television special hosted by Geraldo Rivera and devoted to satanism. Weinstein said that satanism was used in heavy metal in a figurative way. Dave Ellefson, of the group Megadeth, referred to a song on his band's album *Peace Sells ... But Who's Buying?* called "Black Friday." (The song is a description by a killer of his deeds. A typical couplet goes, "Their bodies convulse, in agony, and pain/I mangle their faces, till no features remain.") "If you take 'Black Friday' seriously you're f---ed up," said Ellefson, leaving unanswered the question of what you are if you write such a song. "It's a fantasy, nothing more, nothing less," said a former member of the group Grim Reaper.

Surprisingly, a few questioners did speak of the responsibility of heavy

metal performers for the lives of their fans, and did criticize some heavy metal bands, but they were isolated voices. Even teenage suicide, as far as the panel was concerned, was an intriguing idea. After all, as Weinstein noted, "What other more individualistic thing can you do than kill yourself? It's symbolic of rejection of middle-class conformist values." And besides, the man from Megadeth noted, "the worse the record is, the better it's gonna [sell]."

Little could have been farther from this discussion than the panels on jazz and country music held on the last day of the convention. And the two panels provided an interesting contrast between these two popular genres. The jazz panel, dominated from its start by artist manager Marty Khan, talked of the ways by which jazz could succeed despite itself. "In 1988, what does 'jazz' mean?" asked Joe Milner of the New York record store Vinylmania. And Khan advised, "Don't call it jazz."

But at the country panel, members spent the better part of their time trying to shoehorn a variety of styles into a definition of country music, from Steve Earle to Loretta Lynn. "The music is more diverse than ever," said moderator Ron Huntsman. Singer Darden Smith drew the panel's greatest response when he said he had a six-point plan for breaking a new artist — a plan that would apply to pop as well as country. "Point one," he said, "get a lawyer. Point two, get a manager. Point three, get a record contract. Point four, get a promoter. Point five, get your record out. Point six, go on the road. And there you are: you're broke."

It was perhaps the most perceptive comment in an involved three-day discussion of what constitutes new music, and what college radio's role is in fostering it. At a final panel, featuring various recording artists, the moderator, a disc jockey from WNYU, after a series of testimonials from the performers, summed up college radio's responsibility to the audience. "College radio is to commercial FM radio today as commercial FM was to 'beautiful music' radio in the '60s," he said.

That, clearly, was how college students wanted to see themselves at the CMJ convention, as forward-looking, adventurous, and open. And with that, they packed up their freely distributed new music CDs and cassettes along with their Dukakis buttons, and headed back to school, where George Bush and the Beach Boys continue to be the Big Men on Campus.