

Up front



U2's Bono on the Virginia leg of the band's recent U.S. tour

## PREACHING TO THE ROCK 'N' ROLL MASSES

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America is a nation in which even a group like the Beastie Boys can become famous and successful.

Clearly, American pop music lovers want to fight for their right to party. But they have also made room in their

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music collections for albums with meatier messages, social consciences,

and politically charged lyrics.

Several artists who have gained enormous popular support in the past year have released albums containing songs with blatantly political themes. They have also attracted huge audiences in performances in this area.

□ The Irish quartet U2 delighted capacity crowds at Hampton, Va., two nights in mid-December. The concerts were nothing less than fantastic. The music was about turmoil in Central America and Ireland, economic decline among British mining communities and political prisoners.

□ R.E.M., the Georgia band widely credited with initiating the wave of Southern progressive music, played two shows at Duke's Cameron Indoor Stadium in early October. With the release of *Document*, the quartet reached a much broader audience than ever before, and as the lyrics became more distinguishable, listeners could discern statements about U.S. interventionism in Central and South America and a new McCarthyism at home.

□ Former Police frontman Sting played to an enthusiastic crowd at the Smith Center in January in support of his album... *Nothing Like the Sun*. Along with his sophisticated borderline jazz, he included a wealth of literary and historical allusions as well as pointed statements about the repressive Pinochet regime in Chile and corruption and violence in the disturbed Central American nations.

Such internationalist political outlooks are certainly a stark contrast to the tripe offered by pop stars such as Bon Jovi or L.L. Cool Jay. But does the public's acceptance of political statements by musicians with broad visions have any real meaning, or are these lyrics being played but not heard?

International political action is becoming established as a proper channel for rock musicians, with this decade seeing the Band Aid and Live Aid projects, as well as the Amnesty International Conspiracy of Hope Tour. Amnesty is vocally supported by both Sting and U2. In fact, the Hampton arena was bedecked with banners espousing freedom for political prisoners and related causes, and Bono brought a pair of banner-holding fans onstage with him as he made an appeal for everyone to join Amnesty at tables in the lobby.

Clearly such actions make politics difficult to ignore as an intrinsic part of U2's personality. Bono himself is an extremely charismatic figure who has even been compared to Christ.



Michael Stipe, lead singer of R.E.M. Tar Heel file photo



Former Policeman Sting brought his political ideology to the Smith Center Jan. 28

While that comparison is far-fetched, the man did exude an aura of goodness — for want of a better word — during the concert, and his political concerns seemed to be unquestionably genuine as he described his vision of a better world.

As in current American politics, religion is an ally of U2's politics. U2's music has always contained Christian messages. In fact, the famous concert-order "40" is biblical text directly from Psalms 40. The Christianity of U2's music does not lead to right-wing fundamentalism but rather to a global peace-and-justice liberalism.

Perhaps one of the reasons for U2's growth in popularity in the United States is this international approach. Much of the band's earlier material seemed to focus more on the problems of the British Isles. Americans can more easily relate to the powerful "Bullet the Blue Sky," describing America's imperialistic efforts to the south — "I can see those fighter planes."

Sting's political tactics do not blatantly involve religion, but he does mix in his psychological beliefs in uniting the masculine and feminine sides of one's psyche. On... *Nothing Like the Sun*, he sometimes targets specific objects of criticism, as in "They Dance Alone," in which he relates how the female relatives of

political prisoners in Chile protest by silently dancing with photographs of their loved ones. Other times he is more vague and moralistic, as in "History Will Teach Us Nothing," in which he says to "convince an enemy... that he's wrong is to win a bloodless battle... to blow up his children will only prove him right."

Children were a powerful political motivation in "Russians," a song from *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* which rejects the notions of nuclear deterrence and limited nuclear war ("We share the same biology/ Regardless of ideology/ What might save us me and you/ is that the Russians love their children too"). A far cry from the Evil Empire brand of politics in Reagan's America.

The music of U2 and Sting is, however, not American; it promotes visions articulated by observers, not natives, of a superpower. R.E.M. is a homegrown band, and partly because of this, the band's messages come across differently. Much of the political content of the album *Lifes Rich Pageant* is aimed at immediate domestic problems, such as water pollution, acid rain, and political apathy. They are, in their own words, "young despite the years... concerned despite the times."

R.E.M.'s messages are apt to be more satiric and sometimes more cryptic than those of the other two

artists. "Exhuming McCarthy" on *Document*, for instance, takes a cynical look at yuppie values ("You're beautiful, more beautiful than me/ You're honorable, more honorable than me/ Loyal to the Bank of America") and compares the resulting intolerance to that of Joseph McCarthy.

R.E.M.'s style is a far cry from the others'. Lead singer Michael Stipe is an enigma who, in turns, broods and becomes hyperactive. His complex lyrics have become more discernible over the years. (Perhaps R.E.M.'s earliest albums were highly political, but nobody could tell).

While albums and concerts by these three musical giants have become more appealing to the general American pop music audience, it is unclear whether the fans consciously flock to hear politics or not. After all, R.E.M. broke onto the Top 40 with "The One I Love," probably the most rapid set of words ever to emanate from Stipe's mouth. And Sting's major hit from the new album, "We'll Be Together," is a well-done song, but hardly political. Maybe the standard pop songs are the spoonful of sugar to make that political medicine go down.

On the practical level, the question is whether or not audiences absorb the political messages in pop music, especially when they are in album cuts rather than hit singles. On a norma-

tive level, the question is whether or not popular musicians should be so blatantly political. After all, pop stars are the heroes of today's younger generation. What a figure such as Bono says (or sings) to teenagers is liable to be taken to heart more than what Reagan says. Is it appropriate to use one's status as a musical star to propagate sometimes controversial political views?

For comparison, consider the role of preachers in advocating controversial political stances. Many people feel that this is an abuse of the power of a pulpit. Is it not a similar abuse to preach politics to an adoring crowd of young rock fans?

The answer is no, of course. Rock stars do not generally claim to have divine authority, and they do not throw God's weight behind their messages. Popularity as an artist, or even as a personality, is a legitimate tool for advancing political causes.

It seems that there is little to fear from the recent popularity of groups with intelligent and substantive lyrics. Those who understand and appreciate the messages are the same people who will more than likely be discriminating in ideology and will not blindly embrace ideas, even if they are put forth by their favorite musicians. Those who would uncritically swallow politically charged content probably won't notice or understand it anyway.