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"Sound"

SOUND AND FURY

By Charles Lieurance

They're the bands of the "new sincerity." They wear leather fringe jackets, they're growing their hair out, they stretch their guitar straps all the way out so their axes hang to their knees. They say they're new, but they look like Aerosmith or Crazy Horse or Buffalo Springfield. Their music, for the most part, would be perfect for any of those American college commercials for soda pop, Chevrolets and beer — you know, old folks playing horse-shoes, family reunions, watermelon feeds, farmers slapping their tractors the way Roy Rogers used to give Trigger an affectionate slap on the flank. Things made the American way, things like they used to be, old meets new with a small-town howdy-doo.

Aside from the fact that this America shriveled up into a few condemned old barns and some bottomland the small farmer uses as a buffer zone from the hydra of the corporate farm more than two decades ago, the music makes a wonderful bargaining chip for the atavistic public-relations corps of our government. Grab a few scenes from Steinbeck, Muir and Thomas Wolfe, find a white picket fence that no one has scrawled anarchy's big black "A" on yet, and stage a healthy America.

Despite the fact that the bands of the "new sincerity," for the most part, are either critical of these images of Americana or ignore them completely in their lyrics, it is the "sound" that attracts Washington, the sound "of America singing." The PR kings are willing to even incorporate the sort of Americana that "long-haired hippies goin' back to the land" represent, rather than buckle under to punks — those short-haired, unpredictable political vacillators, pogo-ing from left to right like out-of-control novelty dentures.

Take the bands chosen to represent Miller and Budweiser beer — X (punks with a beatnik sensibility), the Blasters, the Long Ryders, the Del Feugos — bands with "integrity." None of this trendy bull for Miller and Bud, no siree. No Swans or Sonic Youth hawking for Milwaukee. This is America, and we can spot a scam when we see one. No one's pulling the aluminum over our eyes — you can bet that on a horse.

So who are these pretenders to Woody Guthrie's throne, these would-be Leadbellies? When you grapple the music out of the hands of those demented twits who somehow managed to construe Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." as a statement of America's blossoming health, as a message of Reagan-era positivism, what's left? (or should I say, what's right?)

Of course the view from the sky is Springsteen's, who fleshed out the ambiguous monicker "American Music" and also emanated vats of

"sincerity." Springsteen's sketches of American life, from the rural angst of the "Nebraska" LP to the urban charcoal panoramas of "The Wild, the Innocent and the E Street Shuffle," go beyond rock'n'roll whether one appreciates the man's style or not. It's like reading "Spoon River Anthology" by Edgar Lee Mas-

voice of the times to boot, are multitudinous. For one, you can't contradict yourself. For another, people start following you around, blindly believing everything you say. For yet another, *you* might start believing everything you say.

And you spawn would-be voices of the times who want to hang onto your Levi beltloops on the ride to stardom. Springsteenism gave a directionless hack from Indiana who had been marketed as everything from the "new David Bowie" to the "new Meat Loaf," a new lease on life, as the Springsteen of the farm belt, champion of the confinement feeder-pig operator and the tractor-out farmer. The man was John Cougar. He was born to make American music. And as a move to sincerity, he dropped the feline Bowie-ism of "Cougar" and became "John Mellencamp," the shaggy, diminutive hometown boy who made good on some ancient promise to his pappy to be the Robin Hood of music.

You can almost hear Copeland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" blaring up out of the cornfields.

Then someone told everyone it was easy to write songs about American, that America is made up of a fairly finite number of icons. Not only that, but these icons have names that rhyme with almost anything. Bar. Car. Chevy. Levy. Road. Know'd. Sign. County line. Long way to go. Mexico. Mortgage. 12 gauge.

Once the word was out, you could hear all America singing. John Calferty sang. The Long Ryders sang.

Sort of made you want shitkickers like Lynnyrd Skynnyrd and Molly Hatchet back. Bands who empathized with people too stupid even to farm.

But the mainstream wasn't the only stream affected by the "new sincerity," "the new Americana." Nope. Someone discovered that Michael Stipe was "America Singing" too, and REM became the voice of the American haircut. The stampede that followed made the run into Oklahoma look like a line at the Kresge's snack bar.

Rainmakers. Winter Hours. Connells. Feelies. Meat Puppets. Come hear American mumbling. Although most of these bands can claim some glory of their own, it is ludicrous to think REM didn't pave the way for their success.

And sincere? What could be more sincere than an alternative band? If it's not money they're after, or a place on American Bandstand or Soul Train, or Rolling Stone cover, it must be a sincere need to communicate.

At least you don't see Reagan quoting REM songs (although sometimes he sounds like he is). Or the Feelies on national TV, popping a cold Bud while they lean up against a pool table, saying something like, "Our music isn't commercial, it's real."



Brian Mary/Daily Nebraskan

ters, a collection of voices so diverse that it is difficult to believe one man is responsible for them. Springsteen took on the voices of the dead, the wounded, the downtrodden, the criminal and the junkie. Like Woody Guthrie, Springsteen pretty much ignored the lives of the upper and even the middle class, except as an easy target for parody. Springsteen's characters all tried to substitute the high the rich managed to get from money with the high of sex, the high of drugs, the high of driving fast and the high of living on your toes. The problems with being not only a musician, but an important