

Album's political overtones challenge listeners

By Bryan Peterson
Staff Reporter

In writing this column, I have been, and will continue to be, concerned primarily with music that has some sort of social or political message. Fifth Column: music as a subversive activity. I have no pretensions of belittling non-political music. Nor do I suggest that all music should have a message of great social impact. I do feel that such music is important and often neglected by the press or easily dismissed by the public at large. This is as true of three-chord hard-core choruses of "Make love, not war" as it is of the more musically adept creations of "real musicians." How could Prokofiev have known his love theme would be used by Sting in a song pleading for international understanding and empathy? In any case, that is what this column is all about -- music for change.

One last thing -- some may think

I emphasize lyrical content at the expense of music criticism. This is a valid concern, but I feel that overtly political bands are using music as a vehicle to convey ideas. In this sense, I think it is more important to examine ideas than to lay judgments on a musical style. Besides, I am a much better ideologue than aesthete.

Above is an introduction from a Fifth Column which ran three semesters ago. It still pretty well sums up what Fifth Column is about: the use of music as socio-political commentary.

Fifth Column initially focused upon the ramblings of obscure punk bands but gradually has expanded its subject matter. Prince, Metallica, Public Enemy, Dolly Parton, and Michelle Shocked are among those who have made their way into Fifth Column at one time or another.

Keeping with its origins, this Fifth Column will look at "The State of the Union," a recent com-

pilation album featuring sixteen bands (mostly punk) from the Washington, D.C., area.

The album is a benefit for the American Civil Liberties Union and the Community for Creative Non-Violence compiled by Positive Force D.C. and released on Dischord Records. Both organizations have long histories of supporting alternative music and ideas in the Washington, D.C., area.

D.C. bands long have been known for the "personal" qualities of their lyrics -- a fact recalled in nearly every underground rag. The D.C. punk scene has influenced bands across America since its earliest days when Minor Threat, G.I. and other bands were just beginning. Over the years, though, D.C. bands gradually have been expanding the scope of their concerns.

Every Dischord band used to sing about personal struggles concerning identity, existence and the integrity of the local underground

"scene." The same concerns still appear, but the bands are taking on increasingly political overtones.

The anger and introspection still abound, but the focus is now more direct and the fingers are pointed at "us" rather than "them." Many of the bands examine their own roles in the problems with which they are concerned.

Others explore their own shortcomings as activists ("Arbitrary in our pity, selective in our shame"). Not lost in this sudden maturity among punk sentiments, the anger remains. Consider these words from the band Ignition: "I may be blind in my actions/ And have no control of my rage/ And suffer from heated moments/ But that result was not unforeseen/ I know what my anger means."

A central theme on this compilation is responsibility, a theme best expressed by the band Fire Party: "By turning a blind eye/ I thought

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