

Michael Franti: Giving the Gift of Attitude



Quick, when was the last time you visited Baghdad, traveled to Folsom Federal Prison or spent the day in Hiroshima with a Bomb survivor? If you happen to be musician Michael Franti, the driving force behind Spearhead, your answer would be: "2004, 2005 and this September."

Fortunately, for the rest of us who haven't stepped across the Green Line into Gaza lately, (Yes, he's been there too), Franti recently released "Yell Fire" a musical travelogue of his observations in the Middle East and "I Know I'm Not Alone," an independently produced documentary film. What could be better this holiday season than spreading a little Frantian good cheer?

"I have to be a participant in the world," explains the towering dreadlocked songwriter over a vegan lunch when in Seattle this past October to play a sold out Paramount show. "I can't just be an observer."

This explains why, when asked by a friend where he would most want to be in the world right at that moment, Franti chose Baghdad. And also why four months later, armed with his acoustic guitar and handheld camera, he spiraled into the Baghdad airport to see what his Iraqi driver would call "the real shit." He returned home with 200 hours of film footage that eventually became the 90-minute "I Know I'm Not Alone."

"What struck me most about the Iraqis," recalls Franti, whose almond eyes grab you and refuse to let go,... "is how hard they try to be happy. They'll grab any chance to celebrate. I quickly learned they didn't want to hear protest songs, only upbeat, positive tunes. It makes sense. What was I doing telling them about the casualty of war?"

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"Remember," says Franti, "These kids went over there thinking they were going to fight Osama bin Laden. Now that they've learned firsthand that this war was a lie, they're forbidden to come home."

Franti's stories captivate the listener for the same reasons his shows transform a group of strangers into a community of people holding hands, extending peace signs and jumping up and down in unison. The man exudes joy.

Always barefoot—he considers shoes the ultimate example of developing world exploitation—and dwarfing his guitar, Franti gallops around the stage, and beams at his band members and his audience with equal radiance.

LISTEN TO THE WORDS

Michael Franti and Spearhead's "Yell Fire" joins "Imagine," "Exodus" and "Fear of a Black Planet" in the pantheon of political albums that inspire listeners to laugh, cry, dance and act.

"Political music is only as good as the amount you want to listen to it," Franti explains. "It has to be great music first."

Watching the crowd frolic and groove for well over two hours at his Seattle show, there was no doubt that Franti has nailed the political beat. His song, "Hello, Bonjour," a typically vibrant mix of reggae, rock and global modern rhythms, would cajole a DMZ sentry to smirk.

"Sure that's a great dance tune, but listen to the words," says Franti, as he quietly recites a verse.

"You say you're a Christian 'cause God made you, you say you're a Muslim 'cause God made you, you say you're a Hindu and the next man a Jew then we all kill each other 'cause God told us to, NAH. Hello, hello. Bonjour, bonjour ..."

"It's one of the most political songs on the album," he remarks 'loudy,' (a favorite adjective Franti picked up from the Black Scorpions, a Baghdad heavy metal band he jammed with underground [literally!] in Iraq.) "I like my bass loudy, loudy, louder!" he sings on the "Yell Fire" track, "Everybody Ona Move."

Still, one has to wonder how Franti, after witnessing such human-inflicted pain, remains so hopeful about peace on earth?

"Look," he says smiling. "I truly believe in the power people possess to give and receive love. I see evidence everywhere I go."

By Crai S. Bower
