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Nevermind the age gap

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Green Day may no longer be the young punks they once were, but, more than a decade after their debut, a rousing political anthem has propelled them back into the spotlight and on to the bill for Live 8

Parents dressed in over-sized jeans, twentysomethings in preppy clothing and teenagers wearing safety pins queue in same-sex lines prior to security checks. "Hey buddy, you got a light?" asks one fan. "Rock on, dudes," he says, walking off. One teenager wears a T-shirt featuring a caricature of Bush with a safety pin through his nose. These are but a few of the thousands of fans waiting in orderly lines at the Schottenstein Center to see the American latter-day punk band Green Day, and the venue is significant. We are in Columbus, the state capital of Ohio, where in last year's US elections, in the early hours of November 3, John Kerry conceded the state's electoral votes and confirmed a second Republican administration.

It was no thanks to Green Day. In the run-up to the election, the group's single, *American Idiot*, roared out of speakers across the US to become an anthem for the nation's dissenters. "Well, maybe I'm the faggot America/I'm not part of the redneck agenda", bellowed singer Billie Joe Armstrong, berating his countrymen for being taken in by a "nation controlled by the media". Not that it worked here in Columbus. Ohio would certify the Bush-Cheney victory with a clear majority of 119,000 votes. But what it did do was put an ageing Berkeley-based, outwardly liberal punk group back on the cultural map. And how. Some ten years after their breakthrough single, a petulant song called *Basket Case*, the group's latest album, also called *American Idiot*, has sold eight million copies – six million in America, and 1.2 million in the UK. Last February, the group won a Grammy for Best Rock Album, and in the same month, they were nominated for a Brit award. Two weeks ago, Green Day played in front of 120,000 people as they headlined two nights at the Milton Keynes Bowl. Columbus also marks new territory for a group whose radicalism has taken them mainstream. "You hope that people here will take the message," says Armstrong, 33. "The election was really charged in the Midwest. At times it felt as if the East and West Coasts were fighting for Middle America."

Green Day emerged from the Californian punk scene of the late Eighties. Armstrong and bassist Mike Dirnt formed their first band, *Sweet Children*, in Rodeo when they were just 14 years old. Tre Cool, the group's drummer, joined in 1990. Like a US version of *The Young Ones*, they spat and swore their way across America, epitomising the culture of immaturity that dominated the punk scene at the time. No one could have predicted that they'd become radical torch-bearers of the Noughties. "We were interested in drinking and having fun," says Armstrong. "If you grow up in California, having a good time with your friends comes easy. It is part of the lifestyle."

"When I was younger, politics just never figured in my world," adds Dirnt, also 33. "I would get angry at certain things, but I guess I'd never really had a political awakening."

Few would have expected the band to have survived long enough to make *American Idiot*. While mainstream musicians – *The Who* and *The Rolling Stones*, for example – embrace vaudeville, punk music, synonymous with the high emotions of youth, blooms only with fury; by the very nature of the music, punk bands rarely survive past the effusions of their early recordings.

"The challenge for most punk bands is that while they always want to change, their fans often want them to remain the same," says Steven Blush, author of *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, a book that documents the country's emerging punk scene of the early Eighties. "That hasn't happened with Green Day, partly because they're from San Francisco, probably the most intellectual, the most cynical and the most open of all American cities. They've grown up embracing new ideas. Their fans have also done the same."

Green Day's conversion to the role of social messengers, however, was more to do with greater San Francisco's criminal elements than its intellectuals. Recordings for *American Idiot*, which took place in Oakland during 2002, halted after all 20 masters of the group's songs were stolen. Aside from the growing pains of adulthood, the group, devastated by the loss, were also close to a break-up. "I think we were at that point most men get to in their early thirties where you think, do you want to be successful, or do you want to be creative?" says Cool. "We were tired. We weren't really speaking to each other. We could have easily released another two albums that sounded like our old recordings. But where would that have left us? We had to take a chance on something different."

"Of course you have doubts," adds Armstrong who, surprisingly shy for a frontman, sits back and gazes around the room while the others talk. "I worried that we were taking too big a risk. I mean, if you end up with a record that sounds like nothing you've ever done before, you genuinely wonder if anyone is ever going to buy it. At the time, there wasn't much dissent in the world of rock'n'roll. Plus, we had examples of what happened to other groups who tried to say something controversial. I mean, the Dixie Chicks got a really hard time for criticising the President. At a point, as an adult, you just think, 'I have to do this. I can't grow otherwise'."

His bandmates agree, but the change did at least mean that Green Day weren't going to split up. "We all felt scared, but we all felt scared together," says Cool.

As the thirtysomethings felt increasingly divorced from their male-bonding anthems, the responsibilities of parenthood had also crept up on them. Armstrong married in 1994 and has two sons. Dirnt has a daughter with his ex-wife, while Cool is also married and has a daughter with a former wife.

"Things are different once you have children," says Armstrong. "You realise that you just can't go on swearing and acting rude all the time. You have responsibility."

Like many people getting their political tuition in their early thirties, the three members of Green Day often view politics in its most elemental form. Armstrong, Dirnt and Cool didn't grow up resisting the centripetal forces of Ronald Reagan. Instead, the group's formative years were spent basking in the expanding economic glow of Clinton's America. "That doesn't mean that there aren't topics worth discussing," says Armstrong. "The world has changed a lot since September 11, 2001."

That said, the group are all too aware of the perils of sloganeering. At the Schottenstein Center later that evening, in front of a jubilant audience, the group refrain from the kind of

political posturing that has killed off so many of their peers. After running through the highlights of American Idiot at breakneck speed, with Dirnt racing around the stage, almost as if he's being dragged by a passing vehicle, Armstrong engages in some call-and-response banter with the crowd. "Let every redneck in America hear you," he shouts, as the crowd roars back at him.

At one point, Armstrong asks the crowd to find him a bass player. "Do you play bass?" he asks a young girl, who has moved to the foot of the stage. "You'd better be damn good. You'd better not let me down!" he laughs. She is helped on stage and watches amazed as Dirnt hands over his guitar and teaches her a simple bass-line.

Minutes later, a young man, boastful of his musical skills, is sitting at Cool's drum-kit, pounding out an accompanying beat. Armstrong then hands over his guitar to another young audience member. The ad-hoc band, guided by their musical heroes, then runs through an old Green Day song. Armstrong later confirms his credentials as a frontman by leading the group through a rowdy version of Queen's We Are the Champions.

Throughout the evening, the crowd eagerly responds to the brash show. Ageing punks nod their heads in approval, while teenagers dance on their seats. A series of Mexican waves swells around the auditorium. Afterwards, in the car park, the area rings with screeches and chants. Even the drive back to Columbus is punctuated by yells from passengers in passing cars making their way home. It seems for all the band's newfound political awareness, where Green Day fans are concerned, things haven't changed that much.

Green Day will play at the Berlin Live 8 concert today

0 comments



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