

I SEE A DARKNESS

The restless voice of ornery America, **JOHN MELLENCAMP** has spent three decades railing against injustice and conservatism. Now, on the eve of the US election, **MOJO** finds him contemplating his own mortality on the set of Elvis Costello's new TV show...



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DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S BEEN happening today?" John Mellencamp enquires, responding briskly to a broad opening question about his "left-wing Democrat" politics. Well, it's September 15 in New York City and, thus far, leading investment bank Lehman Bros has gone bankrupt, the Bank Of America has rescued broke stockbroker Merrill Lynch, and America's largest insurance company, AIG, has announced it needs \$80 billion pronto or it's going belly-up.

Assured that MOJO's got the gist, Mellencamp proceeds with his smoke break cum photo session in the cluttered alleyway behind the Harlem Apollo, machine-gunning bullet points from a lifetime of raging against the system.

"While the liberals were worried about being politically correct, the Republicans stole Wall Street," he begins.

But you're a liberal, aren't you?

"Yeah, that's what I'm sayin', we're stoopid! I'm stoopid! We were thinking about handicapped parking places while they were taking power."

He's not a city boy, though, he's true country from Seymour, Indiana. And as both the official progenitor of "heartland rock" and, with Willie Nelson and Neil Young, founding co-director of Farm Aid, he soon turns his thoughts back to where it all went wrong for family farmers. Earl Butz did it, he says – that is, President Nixon's secretary of agriculture who switched subsidies from the smallholdings to agribusiness and advised the little people to "Get big or get out".

The mention of Nixon reminds Mellencamp of his own ➤

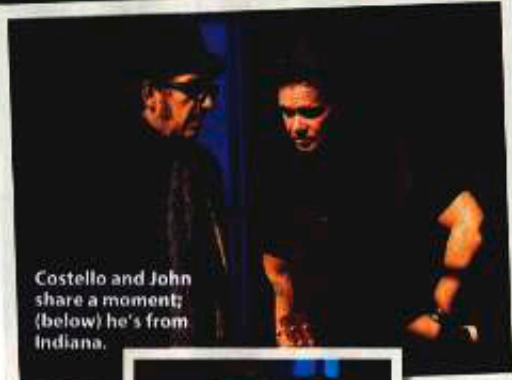
On the guitar pull: (from left) Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Elvis Costello, Rosanne Cash, Mellencamp, (at back) guitarist John Leventhal.



AMERICA TURNED ITS BACK ON ROCK N ROLL

“dumb” lack of commitment back when, as a 17-year-old, he went to Washington for the 1970 May Day demo against the Vietnam war. “I was goin’ pretty good until I saw this girl and then ‘Oooooo’ (his head turns)... I didn’t make the march.” He sparks up his raspy 60-a-day laugh at this youthful folly.

His reminiscences are curtailed. It’s time to rehearse. Interview to be continued as and when. He bounces downstairs towards the cellar dressing-rooms.



Costello and John share a moment; (below) he’s from Indiana.

ENTERING THE APOLLO IMPARTS THAT ‘hallowed-portals’ feeling. However, once you’ve paused to admire the framed photo collages in the foyer – Smokey, Aretha, James Brown on down – it’s just a small, comfortable, working theatre.

To the right of the stage a screen announces, “Spectacle: Elvis Costello with...”. A new 13-part TV series, it features as-live song and Elvis-led talk from assorted big names he likes, including Lou Reed, The Police, Jakob Dylan, Herbie Hancock and Smokey Robinson himself. In the America it will be carried by Robert Redford’s Sundance channel; in the UK by Channel 4’s 4 Music in December.

On-stage, Costello is conducting a remarkably convivial rehearsal – spontaneous and, as will later emerge, only approximately connected with what’s played on the show itself. Costello is flanked by Kris Kristofferson, Rosanne Cash and Norah Jones. Perched on stools, guitars on knees, they’re working up Johnny Cash’s I Still Miss Someone. “What key are we in, darlin’?” grizzled-as-God Kristofferson asks Rosanne. She tells him, “I just need to know what I’m doin’ and so far I don’t,” he guffaws. Within 15 minutes uncertainty, bum notes and squinting at the autotune have alchemised into a harmony chorus of hair-raising loveliness.

Mellencamp appears, stage left. He sits restlessly, straining at the leash of the others’ after-you civility. At one point he declares he’s not much of a collaborator: “I’m from Indiana and there’s nobody



else there!” It shows. A good job they all know and understand his edgy ways – plain-speaking but a touch insecure at the same time.

The rehearsal closes with Mellencamp alone on-stage singing his 1986 American hit Rain On The Scarecrow, one take and fiercely: “The crops we grew last summer weren’t enough to pay the loans/ Couldn’t buy the seed to plant this spring and the Farmers Bank foreclosed/... Blood on the scarecrow, blood on the plough.” Like his oldest hero Woody Guthrie, he doesn’t leave much to subtext.

BACK WITH MOJO, MELLENCAMP – WHO some in the UK may recall from the ‘70s as pop-rock icon (failed) Johnny Cougar – is talking about the rough ride a blunt, political songwriter can face in America. “I updated an old folk song called To Washington (*Trouble No More*, 2003), he says – his lyric suggests President Bush is a warmonger possibly motivated by oil profits. “People were driving past my house throwing shit and yelling and giving my wife Elaine the finger as she drove down the street [in Bloomington, Indiana, their home for years].

“I was driving to the airport one day with the boys [about nine and eight then] and they played the song on the radio. A listener calls and says, ‘I don’t know who I hate the most, that fucking John Mellencamp or Saddam Hussein.’ It really freaked the kids out and it pissed me off. We had to get security to come around the school playground because the teachers thought people might harm them.”

His latest album – produced by T Bone Burnett – takes a more panoramic perspective as is indicated by the title, *Life Death Love And Freedom* – archetypal American song book themes, he says. In key tracks Longest Days, John Cokers, Young Without Lovers and Don’t Need This Body, Mellencamp, 57 now and survivor of a heart attack in the ‘90s, writes first-person about age and mortality. He cre-

ates bitter characters who prepare for their end cocooned in stubborn, self-righteous isolation.

“This record is about life,” he asserts. “Parts of life that we don’t really want to think about. But life, ultimately, is beautiful. That’s why I wrote the songs. People say this is a dark record and I’m thinking, No, it’s about our one shot at being here and it’s beautiful so if you can’t get that you’re not old enough to be listening to this fucking record.”

“That song If I Die Sudden goes back 20 years to an uncle of mine who died of cancer at 58 from smoking. On his death bed he said, ‘I’m an atheist. Do not have a preacher come here and say what a great Christian life I’ve led. I didn’t.’ For me that was like, Wow! You gotta be pretty damn sure of yourself or pretty damn stupid to say that. I couldn’t figure out which one it was.”

You’ve got to be pretty damn sure of yourself to make an album about dying.

“I don’t think so,” he crackles. “You’ve just got to be willing not to sell records!”

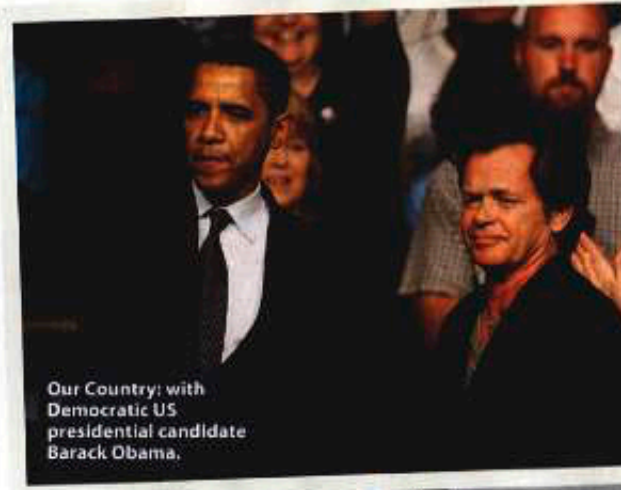
IT’S SHOWTIME. THE CROWD’S IN NOW and Costello’s chatting away on his stool, no autotune. He explains the evening is modelled on a Nashville “guitar pull” where a bunch of guitar-strumming pals sit around and try out their new songs. Rosanne Cash adds, “I think they originated in my dad’s living room with Bob Dylan, Kris and Waylon Jennings. Kris sang Me And Bobby McGee for the first time there.”

They take their turns solo, trio and quintet, Costello offering his unrecorded road favourite Down Among The Wines And Spirits, Kristofferson the not entirely unknown Sunday Morning Coming Down, and Norah Jones a new song co-written with Ryan Adams called Light As A Feather. Then Mellencamp – not playing the TV-unfriendly acoustic with “Fuck Fascists” scrawled above the strings – sings Longest Days, from his new album, one of its gentler intimations of impermanence. He forgets the title, blurts it out when he gets to the chorus, makes a bit of a hash of it. When he finishes Rosanne reaches across to him and says a few words as if kindly consoling him...

But that wasn’t the case, he explains later. “There were tears welled up in her eyes and she said, ‘That’s something you mean.’ I sorta said, Oh come on, ‘cos my performance wasn’t great, but I saw her eyes... it was quite, uh... I’m glad...” he trails off.

Everyone enjoys peer approval, but it may be extra important to Mellencamp because of the demoralising Cougar episode which “launched” his recording career. In 1977 he came to London where David Bowie’s former manager Tony DeFries reinvented him from the name upwards. Pin-up pop-rock when punk ruled, “Cougar” succumbed because all he had back home was a wall papered with record company rejection letters. The hype ruined his reputation in the UK and he feels the taint remained even when he reverted to his real name and music he believed in.

His next UK manager, Billy Gaff, Rod Stewart’s ex, persuaded him to part with the publishing on his first 10 albums. When Mellencamp, back in the US, started making hits, even \$5million wasn’t enough to buy his rights back. But by then he’d begun the music life he



Our Country: with Democratic US presidential candidate Barack Obama.

NOTE FOR CHANGE

Why Mellencamp is soundtracking the Democrats. By Phil Sutcliffe.

“I’M FOR gettin’ conservative politics out of the United States,” declares John Mellencamp.

Which explains his ubiquity in providing a soundtrack for the Democratic Party’s 2008 US Presidential candidates. At various points he played fundraisers for Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. Both Clinton and Edwards used his song Our Country (*Freedom’s Road*, 2007) at their rallies. Last June, when Clinton quit the contest, she greeted her supporters with Thank You (from Mellencamp’s 2004 album, *Words & Music*). And when Joe Biden emerged as Obama’s running mate, the convention house band swung into Mellencamp’s Pink Houses (*Uh-Huh*, 1983).

However, both Pink Houses and Our Country were also deployed by John McCain’s Republicans, despite their irredeemably liberal import (Our Country argues, “There’s room enough here/For science to live/And... for religion to forgive”). Mellencamp’s people wrote to McCain’s people suggesting that his songs didn’t make much sense in a Republican setting and they did desist.

“Nobody does the gentlemanly thing and asks permission to play your song,” says Mellencamp. “I guess they use music because it appeals to people’s emotions, not their logic. And sometimes politicians’ logic doesn’t add up so they want people on a fist-pumping high before they start talking.”

craved. “Critics were never going to like Johnny Cougar,” he says. “He was a fucking jerk. My only option was to make hits so big I had to be accepted. I sat down with the band and said, Look, we’re 30 years old, if we don’t quit fucking around, we’re gonna be out of business. Well, I knew the bars of America because we played 300 of them a year. They wanted something raucous. So we applied the smallest number of words, the lowest common denominator, don’t try to make any big points: (sings) ‘Come on baby/make it hurt so good’.”

Hurts So Good, from John Cougar’s 1982 *American Fool*, hit Number 2 in the singles chart. Then the LP reached Number 1 along with the Jack And Diane single – “Two American kids growing up in the heartland”, one of whom had been black until Mellencamp decided to shelve such complicating notions.

Encouraged, and now stage-named John Cougar Mellencamp, he moved to phase two: “With Pink Houses [from *Uh-Huh*, 1983] we went out on a limb. I said, Look, let’s try and pull a fast one. Let’s write about what we really think of the United States, but tie it up in a chorus. Made an anthem out of it...” And a Top 10 hit. “At that point I realised, Now I can start doing what I need to do. I wrote Rain On The Scarecrow.”

ON-STAGE, THE GUITAR PULL PROCEEDS good-naturedly via Me And Bobby McGee and Mellencamp’s love-hate reflection on Indiana, Small Town. Closing, each of the quintet takes a verse of Johnny Cash’s Big River. Mellencamp tears into his, harsh and high, practically launching himself off the stool like a sprinter from the starting blocks. The crowd roars. Then does it again for a couple of retakes. The artists shake hands, hug and clap one another.

Afterwards, Mellencamp affirms he did enjoy this strange experience of co-operation. Such company only reinforces his certainty that *Life Death Love And Freedom* represents his future. “It’s about growing up to be a Kris Kristofferson or growing up to be a Willie Nelson,” he muses. He cuts loose a little then, in grumpy-old-man mode. Corporate America, he opines, is “stealing our culture – the same TV shows, the same stores, the same food, the same accents everywhere you go.” Disneyland popsters have taken over music since “America turned its back on rock’n’roll – now there’s only one record store in New York City! You can download tracks, but who wants that? The quality’s so terrible!”

He crackles a last laugh and swings back to an experience that gave him food for thought about his new album: “I had the strangest phone call. This friend of mine calls me up about 11 o’clock at night and says, ‘This guy here wants to talk to you’. It’s a famous actor who I’m aware is dying of cancer. I’m thinking, What the fuck’s he want to talk to me about? Anyway he says, ‘Hey man, I’ve been listening to your album. It’s such a comfort to me.’ He says, ‘It’s made my life more bearable’. I didn’t know what to fuckin’ say.”

“And my friend who’d been with him, he’s such a wise-ass, he rang the following day and asked me, ‘What’d he say?’ I told him and he said, ‘Now you know what it feels like to be a real artist’. I said, Yeah, thanks.”

