

## **A Meditation on John Mellencamp's Life, Death, Love and Freedom**

A few years ago, the Hungarian ambassador to the United States asked me to moderate a panel discussion at the embassy on "Rock & Roll as a Force for Freedom on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain." The panel was to consist of the ambassador (András Simonyi), Tommy Ramone and me.

"In all respect to Tommy," I said, "why him?"

"Because he is only native-born Hungarian in Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," said András.

"And why me?"

"Because you are Ramones expert."

So I said okay. Then a couple days before I took the train down to Washington for the panel, it occurred to me that I didn't know anything about Hungary. "Perhaps I should avail myself of the modern marvel of Google and learn some stuff," I thought. And I did, finding a list of famous Hungarians that said something to the effect of, "Even though Hungary is only the size of Indiana, it has produced many distinguished people..." The list included about a hundred names, everyone from Edward Teller, the father of the H-bomb, to Béla Lugosi, the definitive Dracula in the movies.

The unstated implication was: "Look on my Hungarian works, Indiana, and despair."

This seemed to me somewhat unfair. Indiana has produced lots of accomplished celebrities, ranging from Garfield the Cat to Larry Byrd to Kurt Vonnegut to John Mellencamp.

John Mellencamp--he who plays the no-opening-act concerts during which you think, "Oh yeah, that was a good one...oh yeah, that was a good one..." And after three hours you think, "He didn't even play all the good ones."

How many Hungarian celebrities can do that? Well, Béla Bartók could play his hits all weekend, but he couldn't sell out the big halls like Mellencamp. And Bartók ain't in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Mellencamp, like Tommy Ramone, is.

So the point I want to make here is not just that Indiana has no reason to feel inferior to Hungary as long as John Mellencamp is making music. I want to reiterate that rock & roll has indeed been a force for freedom on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and we've never needed it more on this side of the Iron Curtain, even if the Iron Curtain doesn't exist any longer. John Mellencamp is still up there on the barricades with his guitar that says "Fuck Fascism," rallying the troops through some incredibly dark times. For 20 albums, he's

been doing his damndest to be a citizen of the world as well as a song-and-dance man, organizing benefits for worthy causes like the family farmer, making real-world decisions about which candidates to endorse, expressing his utter bewilderment that the average voter could cast a ballot for politicians intent on dropping the Iron Boot on the United States.

Having so famously grown up in a small town with people he mostly liked, or at least found interesting, Mellencamp can't take his eyes off the collision on Main Street between the semi full of hypercapitalism and the family of six that got crushed in their mini-van. And maybe it's just as well, because their house just got foreclosed by the bank.

He's been thinking about that collision--what the dislocations of corporatism run amok have done to his small town--for a long time now, and what it all boils down to is Life, Death, Love and Freedom. In the culture and on this career-capping-statement of an album, we're looking death square in the face and yearning for a little more life, love and freedom, even if it means putting up with more defeat and more occasionally annoying people. It's sorta like Tom Joad of *The Grapes of Wrath* met the Charlie Patton of "Oh Death" in 1937 and an archaeologist just dug up their 78's in a basement somewhere in Oklahoma.

Except that the sound is a lot better. Get the 96 khz, 24-bit DVD (CODE Audio) version--playable on anything that can make sense of a DVD--and you'll hear overtones that Charley Patton only heard when he stuck his ear in the sound hole of his guitar. Only surface noise could make this stuff sound more authentic. Thank producer T Bone Burnett for the effort to keep things as real as technology allows.

Anyway, there are fourteen songs here. Most of them are about death, either personal or cultural. The one actual rock & roll song, "My Sweet Love," is brilliant, like something Buddy Holly could have been writing in his notebook when his plane crashed. It creates a glimmer of joy in an otherwise rotten world. The rest of the songs are stark, simple, mournful. They are also exhilarating if you dig the truth, if you don't recognize the country you thought you were raised in, if you are utterly flummoxed that the Baby Boom could have produced most of the greatest rock & roll, propelled the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, gender equality....and elected George Bush.

I suspect a lot of people in the baby boom are feeling the way Mellencamp feels--closer to the end than the beginning, looking back and asking, "Did I accomplish what I wanted to accomplish?" And the answer is of course "No." The country is going over a cliff. Indeed it prefers going over a cliff to facing war and eco-disaster directly. And what can we accomplish now? Mellencamp offers the consolation of honesty, even when "you

know you got no flame,” as he sings in “Longest Days.” Honesty--it’s not the solution to everything that ails world, but it is the ultimate force for freedom.