



home

[2004 SUMMER GUIDE](#)

cover

[FROM THE EDITOR...](#)

campaign'04

news

[Feedback](#)

[News Feature](#)

[News Feature 2](#)

[News Shorts](#)

[Shannon's Law](#)

[That Ain't Right](#)

[The Beat](#)

[The Nation](#)

[The Sideline](#)

[The Sound, The Fury, etc., etc.](#)

[The White Shadow](#)

arts

[Arts Agenda](#)

[Theatre](#)

[Visual Arts](#)

film

[Film Capsules](#)

[Film Feature](#)

[New Release](#)

food

music

[CD Reviews](#)

[Live Music](#)

[Music Feature](#)

[SoundMenu](#)

week/glance

[Week at A Glance](#)

calendar

contact us

best of

archives

[Home](#) » [Cover Story](#) » [Cover Story](#)

NOVEMBER 11, 2003

Tour Of Duty

Activist-artists take their patriot act on the road

BY [DAN ARMONAITIS](#), [SCOTT O. HALL](#) and [JAMES SHANNON](#)

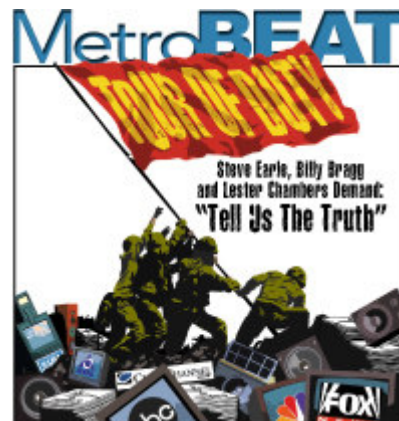
Last weekend in Madison, Wis., an unusual tour began. A group of artists including Billy Bragg, Tom Morello of Audioslave and '60s icon Lester Chambers of the Chambers Brothers got together to declare that time has come today for a little truth-telling. They will be joined along the way by such luminaries as Steve Earle, Mike Mills of R.E.M. and actress/comedian Janeane Garofalo. Rather than barnstorm the country to promote a new album or movie, these activist-minded artists have embarked on the "Tell Us The Truth" tour to raise public awareness and demand answers to questions about media consolidation and fair trade.

The reality of fewer and fewer corporations owning an overwhelming majority of the newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations in the United States makes these artists — and many other Americans, if truth be told — very uncomfortable about how the free flow of information so necessary in a democracy is being impacted by the concentration of this power in the hands of such media giants like Time-Warner, Disney, News Corp, Gannett and Clear Channel. Although the war in Iraq is not a central theme of this tour, the artists involved cannot help but observe how this media consolidation affected the way that war was sold.

"Fair Trade" is really a code word for efforts to resist globalization, where American jobs are lost to countries with terrible wages, labor and environmental standards. The result is a huge increase in corporate profits and human misery, at home and abroad. As a result, the "Tell Us The Truth" tour is being supported by a wide range of unions, environmental, religious and media reform groups, including the AFL-CIO, Common Cause and Citizens Trade Campaign.

Each of the artists has made themselves heard in the past. Tom Morello of Audioslave first came to prominence with Rage Against the Machine, and now performs solo, billing himself as The Nightwatchman. Like a latter day Paul Revere, he is on a long ride to warn of coming danger. Steve Earle describes himself as the last of the hard-core troubadours. When country music could not swallow Earle, it coughed him up like a hairball. He is an American original, preaching a passionate message in his music that recalls nothing so much as the populism of Woody Guthrie. The link between Woody and Billy Bragg is strong as well, since Nora Guthrie entrusted Bragg with volumes of her father's verses that were set to music on the Mermaid Avenue sessions.

Described as a combination of acoustic music and spoken word performances, organizers promise an evening unlike anything on the road today. "This tour will be the loudest, angriest, funniest and most effective challenge to corporate domination of the public discourse in recent history,"



Additional Images: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#)

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- [Role Reversal](#)
- [Strength in Numbers](#)
- [Long Live the King](#)

[More \(139\)...](#)

says Morello.

The tour comes for a mantinee performance at the Orange Peel in Asheville, Saturday, Nov. 15, and the Variety Playhouse in Atlanta on Sunday, Nov. 16. To contact the Orange Peel, call 828-225-5851 or 1-866-468-7630, or visit www.theorangepeel.net; the show starts at 2 p.m. and tickets are \$15. To contact the Variety Playhouse, call 404-249-6400 or visit www.variety-playhouse.com; the show starts at 8 p.m. and tickets are \$22.50. (James Shannon)

BILLY BRAGG

What is the media's responsibility in covering political issues?

I think the responsibility of the media at the moment in the United States of America would be to reflect the ambiguity that the majority of the American people feel about the situation in the post-9/11 world, whether that's about their own security, the behavior of their own government, [or] most importantly the situation in Iraq.... One of the things we might try to explain is why, according to polls, the majority of the American people think that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11. I think this is a crucial piece of information because the majority of the European public, and also the Canadian public, just didn't buy that connection. And that's the reason for the mass demonstrations in Europe and the refusal of even the British public to side with the Bush administration on [the invasion of Iraq]. It's not a case of un-Americanism. You must remember the European public broadly supported the invasion of Afghanistan in the days following 9/11 because they accepted the connection that was made between al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the perpetrators of September 11. But I'm afraid the public outside the United States of America have not really accepted [the connection between Iraq and 9/11]. They don't feel the facts that have been presented by the administration legitimized the invasion of Iraq. And I think a real crucial difference is that our media were able to articulate the concerns and the ambiguities and the opposition.... I don't think the media in the United States of America are doing a proper service to the American people. My experience of coming over since September 11 and during the buildup to the war in Iraq is that the American people are just as concerned and ambiguous about the invasion of Iraq as the people in Europe. And I think the media has failed to reflect that and therefore have a debate about the justification for invading Iraq.

What are some of the stories that you think the mainstream media has not addressed?

It's hard to just pull out single examples. Gray Davis was recalled because California was running a deficit of 10 percent of their state spending. Bush is currently running a deficit of 25 percent, yet no one is asking for him to be recalled. You can look around and wonder why that might be, but I think what's happened is the media presently — now I'm talking about the mainstream media not all the media; there is a debate going on in America about these issues but it's going to be pushed to the margins by a lack of diverse voices in the mainstream. That's the problem.... The mainstream American media more or less bought what they were hearing from the administration, most notably from the Pentagon. I think that's where the problem is. And everything else had been kind of driven in behind that agenda, whereas in Europe and in Canada, the argument offered by the military is under constant question. We questioned everything that our military wanted to do in regard to Iraq every step of the way. I think the American mainstream media have given the Pentagon and the administration more than the benefit of the doubt.

It seems that George W. Bush has basically been given a free pass by

the mainstream media despite the lies that keep coming out of the White House, especially when compared to Bill Clinton.

Clinton just fucked his secretary. Bush is fucking the Middle East as far as I'm concerned. The terrible reality is that because voices of opposition have been pushed to the margin, the chance for someone of having a proper debate about how to get out of Iraq now is diminished.... If the end result of this was just humiliation for George Bush, then all well and good, but the reality of it is that [in the] United States, young men and young women from your communities, many of them reservists, are being put in harm's way everyday in Iraq. It's not just about some goofball in the White House. This is about people coming home in body bags. So I think the message of the tour is a message that the American people will be interested to hear. The stuff I hear that's coming directly from the troops in Iraq can be summed up in the phrase, "What in the fuck are we doing here? What is all this about? How did we find ourselves here?" In some ways you found yourselves here because your media didn't do its job and give you the facts. In the days following September 11, the most important weapon that we could have to bring the perpetrators to justice, which all of us want to do, is facts, the facts of what happened.... By going into Iraq, they've kind of given the terrorists the initiative because they've set up the American servicemen and the extra governmental agencies there like the Red Cross [and] the UN and put them in this dreadful shooting gallery and then have just left them there. I oppose the war on the grounds that the evil men that did this thing on 9/11 did it because they wanted to start a war between America and Islam. Don't we owe it to the victims of September 11 to find a better way to resolve this situation? I believe we can only do that by debate. And you can't debate with someone who says, "You're either with us or against us." You can't argue these issues with someone who says, "My country, right or wrong." Neither of those positions are rational positions. I think these things are worth airing and my contributions as a foreigner and in some ways an outsider is to try and bring in these perspectives and explain to you why we didn't follow you wholeheartedly into Iraq. The perspective that I'm offering is that it has to do with the way we were informed by our media, not through the stupidity of the American people at all. Because I think the American people are as smart and as liberty-loving as all the rest of us, but I just don't think their media did them the service it should do that manifested their deep ambiguity about involving themselves in a foreign war like this.

Here in South Carolina, we have this new mainstream commercial radio format called "God & Country."

Whoa! Look out!

It's a combination of contemporary Christian and positive country. You'll have Michael W. Smith followed by Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?"

Hank Williams is spinning in his grave, buddy. (laughs)

Basically, they seem to have taken the patriotic fervor of 9/11 and turned it into a radio format.

Can you get me a bumper sticker? I would love to stick that on my bumper here in Southwest England. That would scare the shit out of everyone. Whoa!

Is this another example of media irresponsibility?

It worries me. It really worries me. I think anybody who has a fundamentalist view of the world from whatever religion they come from, I'm very concerned about. Because again, they sometimes use the monotheism of their belief to blot out any alternative voice or any alternative opinion. I have been chained

to the fence of American nuclear bases in the UK to little old ladies who were Quakers and whose religious beliefs — belief in Christianity — led them to be there next to me chained to those fences. So I have no problem with Christianity and I have no problem with people holding their religious beliefs, but when it becomes a controlling system, then that's where I have a problem.

I know that organized labor is something very important to you. Both North Carolina and South Carolina are Right To Work states and anti-unionism here is very rabid to say the least. How can people overcome enshrined prejudices against organized labor?

I think by example, really. I think people need to understand that if you're going to exploit your labor, which most of us do in order to work, you want to exploit it on your terms. And unless you're organized, you're asking to be exploited on the bosses' terms. And they're going to be out there to make as much money as they can off of your sweat and labor, so what you want to do is make sure you get your due, and the only way to do that is through organized labor. And one of the reasons why I work closely with them is unlike political parties they represent the same people around the world. They represent the work force, their families and their communities. And I've found that wherever you go in the world, if you work with good union people, you're working with people who are involved in the same struggle. So that's why I'm really pleased that the tour is co-sponsored by the AFL-CIO.

A lot of people don't seem to understand the fact that the 40-hour work week, compensation for injured workers, health insurance and so forth was nothing that was just spontaneously offered up by employers. Each was won in hard fought, bloody strikes.

Why do you think we have free health care in the UK? Do you think the bosses came up with that? Unions came up with that. The Unions organized a political party called the Labour Party. As soon as they got power, full power, huge power, landside power, in 1945, they put in the welfare state. That's the way you have to go.

Is there some way to carry that message to younger people who might not have that sense of history?

Yeah, pop music. That's why this tour is important. Music first, message second. People have got a way of remembering tunes. People remember the tunes of the '60s. They might not remember the speeches, but they remember the tunes of the anti-Vietnam war movement and the civil rights movement. And that's why song is a really important way of communicating these ideas to a new generation. People say, "Tom Morello, Steve Earle, Billy Bragg, what do they have in common?" What we have in common is The Clash. We were inspired to do what we do by them, and we hope to inspire young people in much the same way.

How do you as an artist attempt to instill some historical perspective in a young audience that may be pretty much content to live in the moment and whose frame of reference may barely extend beyond yesterday?

I have to argue with that. I think they really need a sense of where they're coming from and a bit of a guide as well.... They might not know what we did in the '70s with The Clash or in the '80s with Reagan and Red Wedge in my country, so we have that to pass on and then hopefully we'll be able to articulate that. Because it's part of a tradition what we're doing. We're all Woody Guthrie's grandchildren. We're all inspired by the great singer-songwriters of the '60s and '70s.

Can you talk about the importance of internationalism in this day and age?

At a time when voices from outside the United States of America are not heard in the mainstream, internationalism becomes a crucial thing. The Free Trade Area of the Americas and the implications of what that may be for the American work force is best reflected by talking to people from countries where these laws have already been put in form and where they don't have union protection, where they don't have workers' rights. So I think voices from the international community are really, really important to the United States of America. (Dan Armonaitis)

STEVE EARLE**When we read the quote "It is the job of the press to expose and challenge those lies," some of us were wondering if we have been doing enough.**

It's one of those things, it's not just the press. It's everybody. I think we get the press we deserve to certain extent. I think there was a time in our past that we demanded of our news sources that they find shit out for us, and we seem to have gotten away from that. It's sort of everybody. I'm not one of those people who goes around saying 'They are doing this, and they are doing that.' I don't think it's about — there's always a 'them'. I think we went to sleep.

Tell us about the genesis of the "Tell Us The Truth" tour.

It came from Jenny Toomey and the Future of Music Coalition, which is an organization that does work around the issue of media and the shrinking of media as one corporation buys out another large media company, how that affects the quality of the music we get, how it affects the quality of art itself, and also the quality of information that we receive. Jenny is a singer-songwriter and was in punk rock bands in DC for a long time. She's an activist and did this fasting vigil at the Supreme Court, this death penalty event that I do every year. She did it this year and approached me there. She was already talking to Bragg, and he's an old friend of mine. Billy and I did some land mine concerts in England together four months ago, and by that time he decided he was going to do it. Then Jenny got Tom Morello involved and it sort of grew from there.

I remember when the Nixon Justice Department did a full court press on John Lennon's immigration status because he opposed the war in Vietnam. Any indication they might go after (British citizen) Bragg that way?

Well, Bragg's not trying to live here, so there's not much they can do at this point. I mean, they could keep him from entering the country, but I think he may already be in. They can try, but they're still going to get me and Lester Chambers and Tom Morello and [R.E.M.'s] Mike Mills for some of the shows and other people for some of the shows that they can't deport. It would be a drag, but I don't think it will happen.

One of the things that struck me about your intro to "Christmas in Washington," when you're talking about your heroes, you're not talking about Che Guevara and Danny the Red. You're talking about mainstream guys who stepped out and did something, like [Illinois Gov.] George Ryan, like [Vermont Sen. Patrick] Leahy.

Yeah, I'm talking about those guys. You know, Che Guevara is a hero to a lot of people. I think Che Guevara was a really brilliant guy, but if you know his

history, he got pretty murderous there at the end. He probably came apart. Through him and a lot of people that came before, I don't believe in violent revolution. I don't think that works, and I think it's been proven not to work over and over again. But I do believe in revolution.

I guess my point is that you are closer to the mainstream than people give you credit for. Some of the things you're talking about are right there, they're not way out.

No, they're not. I mean, they're way out by today's standards. Look, it's pretty simple. I don't think there's any excuse for people to go hungry in the richest country in the world. Period. Simply because it's immoral. It's immoral to stand by and watch your fellow man starve to death when there's so much in this country. It's just not acceptable to me, and it never has been. I don't believe people should have to be entrepreneurial in order to have enough to eat and decent medical care. I just don't buy all of that. We've been slipping away to a point where as long as we're doing okay, we've developed more and more tunnel vision every day. There was a time when people were more willing than they are now to help people out voluntarily. This talk about privatizing what have traditionally been public services in this country.... Look, human beings are human beings and we're not perfect. To me, government is our collective conscience, it should be a way for us to kinda keep an eye on each other and make sure we do the right thing. Left to our own devices when nobody's looking, what do we do? We keep the change, we cheat on our wives, we do a bunch of other awful shit if nobody's paying any attention. So I believe in government being more of a reflection of the conscience of a people than the current trend. I think that's the difference between me and a lot of people.

Where did this change in attitude come from, "I've got mine; screw you," that increasingly, social Darwinism is okay — the survival of the fittest and everybody else can starve? When did we change?

We didn't change; we kinda came that way. Where we changed was after the Depression, we got into so much trouble that we developed a form of socialism that was very American called the New Deal, and it was necessary to our survival. But it scared the fuck out of the people who had controlled everything up to that point in our history, and those people are still there and they swore the day that FDR died that it would never happen again. That's where term limits came from for the presidency, because they wanted to make damn sure that never happened again. The reason FDR kept getting elected was because people loved him, because he had saved everybody's ass. He was a rich guy; he was an elitist, but he saw the need to do things differently than we'd done up to that point in our history. The idea that the United States attacked Iraq to overthrow an oppressive regime is ludicrous. We're not opposed to oppressive regimes. We're only opposed to oppressive regimes that nationalize their oil companies, and we've kinda always been that way. But there are people that don't feel that way in this country, and it is a democracy, and we can make our presence felt.

Are you a pacifist, or are there some things worth fighting for? What would it take for you to pick up a gun?

Guns are something I'm kinda weird about just because I've had some weird experiences with them. I kinda carried them for a long time, and got shot at and shot at people....

So when you say you took your pistol and hundred dollar bill and went downtown, you really did that?

Yeah, yeah, I did. And then my son, when he was fourteen, found a pistol I had hid up under my mattress and hid it in his room and wouldn't admit that

he had it, and it took me days to find the gun. That cured me of having loaded weapons in the house, and I haven't kept a gun in the house ever since. I scuttled every thing and haven't had one since. Am I a pacifist? I aspire to being a pacifist, but yeah, there is a point at which I will defend my home territory. But we're not talking about anything like United States soil being attacked by Iraq. That didn't happen. We were attacked, but we weren't attacked without provocation. If I hear another person say, "They hate us because we're free" — they hate us because we support Israel and because we support the House of Saud. Period. It wasn't, in the way these people think, without provocation. And you know what? What they think and what people outside this country think counts, because we're part of the world. I've never for one second believed that there was any parallel, and I haven't been worried for one second they were going to find any connection between attacking Iraq and the September 11 attacks simply because...

None exists.

None exists, never has existed. All you have to do is go back over the history of the New American Century, the think tank that included most of the major players in this administration. They took this idea to Clinton because he was acting so much like a fucking Republican that they thought he'd go for it — and he didn't. But attacking Iraq was on the table from the day that George W. Bush was sworn in. It's common knowledge.

We did a cover story on the New American Century for our paper, so we're not totally out of the loop.

Well, keep in mind there are people who covered it. The New York Times covered it, but they buried it. It's one of those things. Look, I don't think this is about the Bush administration controlling the media.... I'm okay with media, right wing or left wing, that has a point of view. I'm okay with going to England and picking up a copy of the Guardian and picking up a copy of the Times of London and sorting things out for myself. What we've got is a media that for the most part is only concerned about what is going to sell advertising and what is going to please stockholders. That means it ends up having no point of view, so when it comes to determining what's going to be on the front page, they think, "What's going to sell the most beer? What's going to sell the most cell phones?" It's not about information. It used to be we did keep editorial policy on both broadcast and print media separate. I mean, you let Procter & Gamble dictate what you said on a situation comedy or a soap opera, but you didn't let them touch the news department. But those days are gone.

Let me take a run at this "patriot" word again. That's been tossed around a lot, it's been used against you, and I think your response is pretty strong.

I have a different definition of "patriot," and it has to do with, in my definition, it's unpatriotic in a democracy not to question everything. The very suggestion that it is unpatriotic to question anything in a democracy is dangerous. To me, that's the way the patriots I admire, my heroes, always thought.

Do you find the younger audiences you're playing to these days are becoming more or less engaged with some of these ideas that you're trying to propagate out there?

I think it's funny. The ones that are, are the very youngest because we're seeing the youngest audiences we've ever seen on a tour this year. We've still got the other people. In their defense, some of them are the people who were in the streets during the Vietnam war, and they never gave up, and they were the first people out in the streets when the rumblings of this war started.

You can tell those people, they didn't franchise their waterbed store and quit. But we're seeing younger and younger people who are much more politically active. We raised two or three generations of kids that were really terrified of being destitute if they made less than \$80,000 a year.

And that informed all their choices?

Yeah, and I expect that on the Vanderbilt campus. I moved to Nashville in '74 and thought, "Oh, cool, it's a college town" — and it wasn't. It was just a place where they hydroponically grow prosecutors. It's a place where people expect to send their kids to get a Ivy League education where they don't want them going to school with Communists. Schools like that are one thing, but it got to the point that kids were going, "Hey, just leave me alone and let me get my degree and have a lot of stuff." But I'm seeing more kids who are more like I was when I was a kid all the time, and that's what it's going to take. It's kids that are not voting. You know, it's 18-to-35-year-olds. If you could get those people to vote, I don't think there would be a chance of another Republican administration in our lifetime.

That's who voted for Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger, unfortunately.

Well, absolutely, on one hand, but...

Especially the young males.

But you're still dealing with a real low voter turnout. I mean, it was a high voter turnout by California standards, but we're living in a country where in a good year, the president of the United States is elected by 35% of eligible voters. That's embarrassing. You tell people in Europe that, and they don't understand it because they have to vote. They have laws that basically you participate in the government in other ways if you don't vote, then you're just not a full-fledged citizen. And I'm not sure I have a problem with that. (James Shannon)

LESTER CHAMBERS

How did you get involved with the Tell Us The Truth tour?

In the process of selecting the artists, Jenny Toomey called me. She is the head of the Coalition for the Future of Music. She called and told me such a tour was being considered and asked if I would be interested in participating. I told her of course I would.

Are any of the issues on the Tell Us The Truth agenda of specific importance to you?

All of the issues are very, very important. Not enough people know about them and the few of us that do, that are brave enough to do something about it, realize that this is a very important statement that we are trying to bring upon people.

You refer to "the few of us that are brave enough to do something." Do you feel that there is a climate out there today that makes people feel threatened about voicing their opinions?

There has always been that blanket over our head. We have never really been able to be heard in so many ways. It's about time that we get told the truth.

Being one of the elder statesmen on this tour, what changes have you seen take place in the form of activism and public concern regarding trust of the powers that be?

There have been so few changes. I think for the longest time [for] people that know about things of this nature and have a concern, there have been so few changes that we are having to do it all over again. You know, to my knowledge, a lot of things should have moved up, more forward. But we get stuck in ruts, and like I said there has been a blanket over us for so long that even as musicians that could spread the word, or could be heard, sometimes we had to do the quiet scene just to make a living.

Did you play a role as an activist during the Vietnam era?

The Chambers Brothers were very influential in concert activities. We did a lot of tours that were related to why the children, the kids of that younger generation, were having such a hard time finding a place, which is where "Time Has Come Today" came from. We were paying attention to the fact that the whole world was in the same place, but the whole world didn't know that they were there together. Everybody at that particular time wanted a lot of love, a lot of peace and a lot of happiness, but the road to that was not made clear, and it's not made very clear today either.

Do you see any parallels to the way that the government has misled the public regarding our situation in Iraq and the way they handled the public in relation to Vietnam?

Like I said earlier, we didn't know then and we don't know what's going on now. And it's a very unfortunate thing that we are having to do the same thing again to bring attention to the issues that people want answers to, things that people need to know, families need to know, employees need to know, musicians need to know. You know, we might could make the whole world happy if we could get everyone together at one time for a great show, and I think a lot of this confusion could be explained and somewhat understood. I think we should be paid more attention, not just as musicians but as the people of the world that need to know, and we need to be told the truth. It's been a long time coming. (Scott O. Hall)

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- [Americana the Beautiful](#)
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- [More \(42\)...](#)

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- [Campaign 2004: Runoffs and Rejections](#)
[June 16, 2004]
- [Politics: The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner](#)
[June 16, 2004]
- [Shannon's Law: Legend & Legerdemain](#)
[June 16, 2004]
- [More \(205\)...](#)

[HOME](#) | [2004 SUMMER GUIDE](#) | [COVER STORY](#) | [FROM THE EDITOR...](#) | [CAMPAIGN 2004](#) |
[NEWS](#) | [ARTS](#) | [FILM](#) | [FOOD](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [PICKS](#) | [CALENDAR](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [2003 BEST OF](#)
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