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PUNK POLITICOS AIM TO ALTER HISTORY

NOFX's Mike Burkett incites disillusioned young fans into the voting booth

BY DAVID HARRIS

Mike "Fat" Burkett—the bassist and fleshy frontman of one of punk music's most prolific bands, NOFX—has developed an appetite for political action. And by the looks of it, the hunger is spreading.

Burkett's cyber-brainchild is *Punkvoter.com*, a Web site targeting punk fans that has helped to register 10,000 new young voters. Collecting 500,000 unique hits per month, it has become a mobilizing force for a voting block better known for drowning their anger in blistering anarchistic anthems than for heading to the voting booths.

"I never voted before 2000," says Burkett, speaking from the offices of his label, Fat Wreck Chords in San Francisco. "After Bush won, I even tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, but he turned out to be the worst president ever."

With constantly updated links to news stories, a collection of guest columns, free downloads of bumper stickers and flyers, and even a feature called "Conspiracy Corner," the Web site aims to inform, alert and amuse. Most importantly, users can download a voter registration form.

In targeting the 18 to 24-year-old demographic, *Punkvoter.com* also addresses a few statistics overlooked by the mainstream media. According to the Web site, while only 38 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds voted in 2000, an estimated 60 percent of 2003 graduates will move back in with their parents because of the lack of jobs.

"We are not a non-partisan Web site," explains Burkett. "You can't just tell people to vote; you have to tell them why they're getting screwed."

Taking President Bush to task on everything from the environment and a sputtering job market to the Patriot Act and the war in Iraq, Burkett has solicited the help of dozens of musicians. With two compilation CDs and a DVD, and with some bands touring as a block under the banner "Rock Against Bush," these musicians are joining forces like never before. Burkett's seasoned punk credentials means others are going to listen.

"I didn't have to jump through any hoops to get other bands to come on board because I've been doing this so fucking long!" says Burkett, who first arrived on the Los Angeles punk scene with NOFX nearly 20 years ago. "I talked to people directly so I didn't have to go through their managers. What's important is how many people we can get involved."

Bands lending support to *Punkvoter.com* include: Anti-Flag, Bad Religion, Blink 182, Circle Jerks, The Descendents, The Donnas, Foo Fighters, Green Day, Mudhoney, Flogging Molly, Pennywise, Sleater-Kinney, Social Distortion, Sum 41, Tool, Mike Watt (from the 1980s underground pioneers The Minutemen), Tom Morello (from the now defunct Rage Against the Machine), and Jello Biafra, (the former singer of The Dead Kennedys).

"I'm down with *Punkvoter.com* because I think it's important that more people register to vote, get involved and show up on election day," writes Biafra in his *Punkvoter.com* guest column. "I'm all for insurrection in the street, but it doesn't accomplish much without insurrection at the ballot box."



A disillusioned Mike Burkett campaigns for change.

As the second volume of the *Rock Against Bush* compilation hits stores in August—and with tour dates in swing states like Oregon and Florida in September—punk politicians are hoping to make a substantial impact for the first time in American history.

"Howard Dean showed us that the Internet has changed the way campaigns are run," says Matthew Streb, assistant professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University. "The wave of the future is using Web sites to mobilize. Four years from now, it will be even more important."

But for Burkett, the future is now.

"Anywhere you go, you tell people a few things, and they start to care," says Burkett. "You have to tell people what the difference is [between the candidates]. If you want freedom, you want Kerry... Bush wants to turn this country into a religious police state."

Burkett has heard from one NOFX fan working at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) who had never voted until he heard the band mention Michael Moore in between songs. He went to see Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and was able to get all his co-workers at KFC to register to vote.

While the conversion of punk fans to voters may or may not have a profound effect on the outcome of the November election, few can deny the importance of engaging every sector of the American public in debates about the issues that affect their lives.

Asked if he will have as much of a hands-on role in the Web site after the election, Burkett serves up an honorable punk rock excuse.

"I do have a pregnant wife and a poker addiction," he says. "But we're gonna keep this thing going after the election no matter who wins."

—David Harris is a freelance journalist and a recent graduate of the screenwriting program at the American Film Institute.