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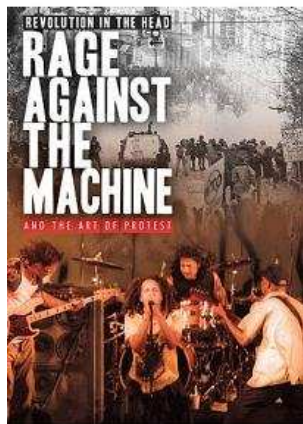
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DVD review: Rage Against the Machine, and the Art of Protest

Written by Brian Q. Newcomb
February 22, 2010



"Revolution in the Head: Rage Against the Machine and the Art of Protest"
A Sexy Intellectual Production

[Parental/Youth pastor advisory: Most of Rage's albums landed one of those warning stickers about explicit content due to their use of graphic language. This film is no exception, and includes brief photo shot to the band's nude protest. So, be advised.]

Might as well go ahead and let you in on the two real disappointments that I had with this DVD upfront. First, while there is plenty of footage of the Rage Against the Machine guys playing live, I admit that I was really hoping to see/hear full length live versions of at least a handful of the band's best songs—there have been some live reunions of a sort since 2007. Frankly I was hopeful this documentary was proof that the band would be coming back together, making more albums and touring. It's a lot to ask, but I miss this band.

The reason for this is tied to my second problem/issue: "This DVD is not authorised (sic.) by Rage Against the Machine, their record company or management." Not only does this mean that the folk who made this disc, like me on deadline, failed to use spell check adequately ("authorized"), but they didn't have access or permission to include the complete Rage songs, live or otherwise. They also don't have the band speaking directly about their own inspirations and intentions.

But, given those two caveats, "Revolution in the Head" is a fine, informative and enjoyable documentary of the career of this band and it's impact in the tradition of the similarly powerful DVD: "Woody Guthrie; This Machine Kills Fascists" (Snapper Music). It connects Rage Against the Machine to the protest music movement that stretches back to folk music's roots, and found expression in influential artists like Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger and came into the 60's through Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and John Lennon. While you could also mention artists like Credence Clearwater Revival and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, the documentary focuses on those acts that had a more direct impact on the sound of Rage Against the Machine: Minor Threat, Public Enemy, Bad Brains, The Clash, and the spiritual guidance in the music of Bob Marley and Bruce Springsteen.

Through academic discussion, and the more direct expression from folk protest singer Jerry Silverman (who sings a bit of his song, "Joe Hill"), the film connects rock and hip-hop music's rebellious nature and the more direct political movements of the peace, labor and civil rights movements. With that background, Rage's leading men, vocalist Zach de La Rocha and guitarist Tom Morello, are described as facing racism in their youth, growing up Hispanic and mixed race in suburban America, adopted a left-leaning politics and created music that, Ann Powers of the L.A. Times says "gave young progressive people their own voice" in the 1990s.

Alongside Powers, the film leans heavily on the analysis and insight of a RATM biographer Colin Devenish, OC Weekly writer Gustavo Arellano, Joe Levy a former editor at Rolling Stone and Blender magazines, the Epic Records A&R person who signed the band, Michael Goldstone, Garth Richardson who produced the band debut album and the band's live sound engineer Dave 'Rat' Levine. The film follows the band's history and often paradoxical rise, with forays into the band's unique sound and political emphasis, as well as bold public protests.

They take a look at the band's now infamous "naked performance" on the Philadelphia stop of Lollapalooza '93, where the band stood unclothed except for duct tape over their mouths for 25 minutes of feedback, with only the letters PMRC on their chests (a stand against the censorship of music instigated by the Parents Music Recourse Center.) The making of the notorious "Sleep Now in the Fire" video with Michael Moore, with its guerrilla film-making technique which had the effect of shutting down Wall Street if only for an afternoon. With songs like "People of the Sun" which celebrated the

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Zapitista movement of the Native Indians of Mexico, and "Bulls On Parade" which explored the business of war that proved prophetic of America's war in Iraq and the privatization of military efforts by the Bush administration.

When Rage was amazingly popular, there were further paradoxes. RATM, a left-wing protest band, signs to a major corporate music entity in Epic Records. Many of their fans loved the angry, rebellious tone of the music but missed the deeper analytical tone of the band's politics. And the assertion in the song "Testify" that the two political parties in America and the two presidential candidates of that era, Bush and Gore, were essentially the same, which led to a performance outside the Democratic National Convention of 2000 in Los Angeles.

Though the band shared many similar left-leaning political ideals, there were documented disputes and in-fighting, leaving La Rocha in disagreement with the Morella and the rhythm section Brad Wilk and Tim Commerford. So much so that after three albums together the remaining trio went on to perform as Audioslave with singer Chris Cornell (previously of Sound Garden). Still, while together, says engineer Dave Rat, "it's that volatility that makes (the music) so interesting."

Given the band's huge commercial success, and the vastly influential albums: "Rage Against the Machine" (1992), "Evil Empire" (1996), and "The Battle of Los Angeles" (1999). The record company managed to pull together a cover album in "Renegades," which included Springsteen's great "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and songs by Cypress Hill, MC5, Afrika Bambaataa, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and more, and a 2000 concert recording, "Live at the Grand Olympic Auditorium."

An artful, creative, energized musical act, as well as a prescient political protest act, brilliant in its use of media and direct action, Rage Against the Machine is willing to point out injustice, inform the public and send a wake up call to the world. As such, this film captures an important voice from the 1990s and if we're lucky again in the 2010s.

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