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ANTI-NORMAL

Jun 17, 2008



Adam Green and Lach focus on the flashpoint of the antifolk movement.

BY RANDY HARWARD

“I just got out of the *Cash Cab*, man,” says Adam Green as he makes a late

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entrance to the party line where BLURT and Lach, founder of the antifolk scene that spawned Green and his band The Moldy Peaches, await. “Me and my mom just won \$850. We got every question right.” Lach, unfamiliar with the game show that has become a bona fide pop culture phenomenon, is dumbfounded. “How did you win \$850? What was one of the questions?”

As Green repeats a question about Galileo’s theory about the Earth revolving around the Sun—heliocentrism, Lach is amazed. “Wow, very cool,” he raves before good-naturedly ribbing Green (“You didn’t have to Google it on an Apple iPhone?”) and then getting on with the task at hand. On the occasion of their new albums—Green’s *Sixes & Sevens* (Rough Trade) and Lach’s *The Calm Before* (Fortified), the two have come together to discuss the origin and essence of antifolk—the shambling but powerful junction of singer-songwriter and punk rock from which Beck, Hamell on Trial, Ani DiFranco and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs all sprung.

Adam Green: From my understanding, antifolk has its genesis in 1980s, but what exact year did it start and what’s the story behind it?

Lach: I don’t believe in linear time to begin with, and I’m not so good at remembering dates and stuff... Roughly, I would say around 1983. I first came in to the West Village folk scene in like the early 80s, thinking that it was gonna be great, and then I ran up against the walls of the so-called folk scene there and then I rebelled against that. I moved to the Lower East Side, and I found a loft space. That would’ve been around 1983. I emptied out the loft and I put in a stage, and I slept in, on it during the day and at night, I ran it as a club and it was called The Fort [Note: The Fort is now The Sidewalk Café, and Lach still runs it]. And, uh, the antifolk scene started from there. It was very different times back then on the Lower East Side than it is now. It was like the Wild West, pretty scary, with gunfire and, you know...

GREEN: I’ve always told people that antifolk wasn’t a style of music, that it was more of a community of songwriters that all had their own idea of what kind of music that they wanted to make individually. But at the same time, I understand that antifolk has ties to the punk rock movement. Do you think there were more stylistic similarities between the performers back in the 80s then there are in all of the performers that play the open mic now?

LACH: Well, there’s a bunch of different things you’re talking about. The open mic is not necessarily the antifolk scene. The open mic, which we call the Anti-Hoot, became part of the antifolk scene. But when antifolk first started, there wasn’t really an open mic.

GREEN: Okay, okay. So, so it didn’t start with the Anti-Hoot.



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LACH: No, no, it didn't start with the Anti-Hoot. I don't think—oh, man. You know, eventually I gotta write a book 'cause this is sort of ancient history to me. Um, but , but, what you're saying, it's an interesting idea. Yeah, I think there was probably more of a cohesion of style in the early 80s and as the years went by, and it branched off, there was more cohesion to it. And antifolk in the early 80s, one thing that I think differed is that there was a lot more stuff that wasn't singer-songwriter. You know, there was more spoken word, there was more performance art, there was more just off-the-wall, craziness. I mean, more a sense of what we were doing being not only less of the radio dial, but illegal.

GREEN: Yeah.

LACH: When I had my own club on Livingston Street, the club was illegal, we didn't have a license, it was after hours. We opened up around eleven at night and stayed open 'til four the next afternoon with the windows blacked out so people didn't know that time had passed, and it was really anything goes. And as we moved into the [legal] clubs, you didn't have as much extremeness going on, you know. And as far as branching out, I think there are almost different *styles* of antifolk now. For instance you'd have Joie/Dead Blonde Girlfriend, Hamell on Trial and Joe Bendik; they all call themselves antifolk. And then you would have stuff that would be like Ching Chong Song and maybe like The Moldy Peaches kinda stuff that would call themselves antifolk. But honestly, they're quite different.

GREEN: Yeah. It's gotten to the point where I feel that I haven't really been able to identify it as a style at all. You can't even really compare what Paleface does to what Diane Cluck does. They're just completely different, you know? What I always thought was interesting about it was that—maybe sort of unlike a popularity contest, I thought that songwriting was the currency. I found it to be a community where people couldn't rise up unless they could deliver the songs.

LACH: I would totally agree with that.

GREEN: A lot of people raised their own personal bar, creatively.

LACH: It's a community that is critical and competitive, but at the same time there's a warmth and a love. And that's a great, fertile ground for art. One of the reasons I started the whole antifolk scene was I needed something better than me. I needed to be able to go to clubs and hear songwriters who were better than me, who inspired me to be better myself. And I wasn't finding that on the folk scene in the Village. [laughs] I just wasn't finding anyone near the level of what I was doing or pushing the envelope in the way that I wanted to

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go. Or even understanding when I drew out of the lines.

GREEN: I guess around 1983 was probably like— Chronologically, the beginning of antifolk seems to be the beginning of most people having home recording technology available to them. Was home recording always intrinsically part of antifolk or did it merge later down the line?

LACH: Later down the line. In '83, home technology and lo-fi recording wasn't really here yet. People were still going into studios to record. Antifolk—I didn't mean for it to be this way when I first started it, but it eventually evolved into, for lack of a better model, a sort of school. You'd get your fresh new class that would come in, hang around, make their first recording—now they're a sophomore—and learn how to promote themselves. Eventually they'd go out into the bigger world and become alumni. And the first class back in the early 80s, that we recorded, would have been Roger Manning. And Roger recorded for SST. That was really huge to us.

GREEN: How did the West Coast SST label discover New York's Roger Manning?

LACH: That was Greg Ginn and Black Flag. I don't know how that connection first got made. You'd have to ask Roger. They put out Roger's album, and then they put out Kirk Kelly's record, [which] made us realize that we weren't completely crazy. To talk about it now, that we were playing punk rock on acoustic guitars, that we were doing spoken word, that kind of stuff, now, seems sort of regular. I mean, [since] Nirvana did *Unplugged* and stuff. But back then... When I say we were kicked out of the clubs, I mean *physically* thrown out of clubs, where you felt your ass hit the pavement. And it wasn't because we were just drunk and yelling; it was because of what we were doing musically, artistically. Which was unfathomable to me, because I thought these were supposed to be open-minded people.

But there are a couple of things that happened that let us know we were on the right track. Shortly after The Fort started, the Violent Femmes came out with their first album. And we're like, "Oh my God. This is what we're doing—and these guys have a record deal." And then Springsteen put out *Nebraska*, which he recorded on the four-track. And again, this is what we're talkin' about. Then Roger got signed—this isn't necessarily in strict chronological order, here—but Roger got signed to SST, Kirk got signed by SST— 'Wow, this is really happening.'

Then over the years, stuff like this would happen all the time. I mean, every two years, someone who had come through the scene would bubble up to the top. Whether it was Michelle Shocked or a few years later it was Paleface or Beck. More recently, you guys or Regina [Spektor].

GREEN: Yeah, I've often mentioned to people that a lot of people you wouldn't clearly associate with having passed through the open mic, have. Including the guys from Interpol and Karen from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Remember when she was playing as Unitard?

LACH: Yeah, Unitard.

GREEN: And like, the Spin Doctors or Ani DiFranco or something. Why do you think that so many people who've passed through don't mention antifolk at a certain point?

LACH: I don't know. I think it might be different for different people; you'd have to ask them. I think what's funny is, when that first started happening, when someone would sign to a major out of the antifolk scene? I think they were *actually told* to dissociate themselves from us.

GREEN: You think that really happened?

LACH: Yeah. I do. I think that they were told, "You gotta go into this other world. Stop associating yourself with antifolk. It's nowhere, whatever. They're a bunch of punks. Punk, get out of here!" But *now* it's changed. Now record labels actually send people down— We had this case a few years ago where, I think it was Atlantic—it was a major label—sent an act down to play *The Sidewalk one time*. And they videotaped it, right? This chick. And then about six months later, her album comes out with an accompanying 20-minute video, a documentary of how she came out of the streets of the East Village and played the antifolk scene. They actually went out of their way to associate her with us, and she had *never played* on the antifolk scene other than that one night. It's incredible. And now antifolk's this worldwide phenomenon. But we're not the first. I think that antifolk, in a way, is a continuum of a vibe that's been going through art and culture and has had a curious relationship with the East Village for a long time.

So I think that the— You had the Beats, Kerouac and Ginsberg and Burroughs, and then you've had this sort of romantic, poetic, rebellious outside vibe. And this torch was picked up by the antifolkers.

GREEN: I can't believe that people aren't familiar with Ish Marquez's music, Dufus's music; Turner Cody; Jeffrey Lewis; you know, it goes on and on and on.

LACH: Well, yeah! I agree with you.

GREEN: I do think that people who spent time at the Anti-Hoot [think of them] as being standards in their record collection.

LACH: Artists have to ask themselves what they're doing their art for. Why we're doing what we do. And the answer is not because 'I want to be famous' or because 'I want some material thing outside of myself that I think is now gonna bring me happiness.' That holds absolutely no interest to me. I think part of the antifolk ethos is that we're doing this because this is what we do. Like I say in the song "Jester," I'd go crazy if I didn't.

GREEN: Yeah.

LACH: This is what we do and so, what do you want out of life? Do you want to be an artist? Do you want to be creative? Do you want to have a creative community? Do you want input into what we do in this community? When you walk into The Sidewalk, you turn around and you know this person, this person—"How you doin'?" We've had babies born, we've had friends die. All in this little thing. It's life. And it's something that's very special and what more do you want, you know?

GREEN: Yeah.

LACH: I don't know if I answered your question.

GREEN: Well, I don't remember what my question was [laughs].

LACH: I heard your album, *Sixes & Sevens*. I listened to it in the car and I love it.

GREEN: Thank you.

LACH: It's just this charming, musical—I'd call it a gem, but you already put out *Gemstones*. It's just lovely. The musicality on there is just wonderful.

GREEN: It's funny 'cause in a way, I don't even identify with being a folksinger so much, but I don't think that was the premise of antifolk anyway. I think everyone was a creative musician and saw themselves as doing something artistic with folk or pop music. And it's often been a misconception that people that were involved in antifolk were averse to folk music in the first place. It's crazy, because I don't know anybody that participated in the Anti-Hoot that wasn't a huge fan of traditional American music.

LACH: I think that we were fans of traditional music. I wouldn't say that we were fans of folk music, you know? What happened was, you have your traditional music—that's folk music. You may not know who the author is, it's gone down through hundreds of years. Japanese folk music, Irish folk music, Jewish folk music, you know what it's gonna sound like. But when you get to America, the country's only 200 years old; we don't necessarily have folk music. And they go, "Well, it was Woody Guthrie." But Woody Guthrie was writing his own songs. And he's your epitome of a folk musician? And then you have Woody's grandchildren, the Greenwich Village coffeehouse crew. And when Dylan left those people in the dust, they circled their wagons and said, "Look. We've got this little goldmine called folk music. We've got a place in the record bins; we're never gonna compete with the Beatles and Stones. So let's hold on to this. And we're gonna call this folk. And by the time I entered the scene, what they were callin' folk was just a couple of chords strummed by white, college-educated—*pabulum*. It sucked. It was useless.

GREEN: It's ironic that you say that. Because remember—you encouraged me not to go to college.

LACH: [*laughs*] How'd that work out for ya?

GREEN: Lach told me not to go to college. It was splendid.

LACH: You know, my record entered the college music charts this week. A radio guy told me that. And I asked him if they had Dropout Charts. I wanna be on the Dropout Charts, man.

GREEN: So considering that you started hosting The Fort 25 years ago—and I know you took a short hiatus and moved to San Francisco... Do you see yourself hosting the Anti-Hoot in 25 more years? You are one of the most compelling emcees that does these sort of functions and I was wondering if you planned on continuing it into your old age?

LACH: *[sighs]* Ah, boy. I don't really think past today. I see myself more as a songwriter than an emcee, Adam.

GREEN: But you're a great emcee.

LACH: What do you think of my songs?

GREEN: **You're the best songwriter that I've ever met.**

LACH: Well, thank you. Let's put that in bold print. *[laughs]*

[Pictured, L-R: Adam Green, Lach]



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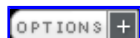
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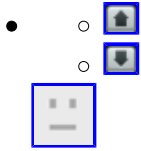
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my two cents: the concept of an "anti folk" movement started at least as early as the Sixties with people like the Fugs and Holy Modal Rounders, who were putting a psychedelic (or amphetaminized) twist on the traditional folk movement on the Lower East Side.

also it's kind of ironic that this story got posted online a few days after Lach announced he was retiring the Anti-Hoot, shutting it down instead of just passing it along to a new host.

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