



Political Satire in Unfunny Times: An Interview with Dave Lippman

by *Simona Sharoni*

A few months ago someone suggested we invite Dave Lippman to perform at our Georgetown conference. Before we contacted him and before I found out that almost everyone around already knew who he was, I went to check his webpage. I was struck by his ability to link so many issues and struggles and I chuckled reading an interview with Dave's traveling companion, singing CIA agent George Shrub. We were lucky to get Dave to come to the conference. Still, I was worried that he wouldn't be able to make us laugh. It was just days before the war resolution was introduced in Congress and the Senate, and it seemed that things couldn't get worse. Well, I was wrong on both counts: he had us in tears- laughing - and things did get worse politically. Last week, I had the pleasure of seeing Dave Lippman and George Shrub on stage again when they stopped by in Olympia to perform at a regional conference titled: "Seeking Peace with Justice in the Middle East." Although he was at the end of a 10-day long Northwest tour, Dave was upbeat and excited not only to perform but also to share experiences and insights from his local anti-war organizing in North Carolina. After witnessing the effects of his performance on several occasions, I am convinced that laughing is not only therapeutic; in these dark times, it is an act of resistance. This interview sheds some light on Dave Lippman's work, but to truly understand Dave and Shrub, you have to meet them in person!

Simona: Those unfamiliar with your work may conclude that George Shrub, the "world's only known singing CIA Agent," is a recent, post 9/11 creation. But the truth of the matter is that you have lived with/in Shrub's shadow for quite some time. Is there a fundamental difference between the old Shrub of the "Committee to Intervene Anywhere" and his new incarnation as the "Cultural Director of the Department of Homeland Security"?

Dave: The significant change is that since 9/11 the government speaks openly of world domination. This is what Shrub

has done all along, but without obfuscation: explain Manifest Destiny without the velvet glove of democratic values. Of course nothing substantive has really changed since 9/11, or Vietnam, or the U.S. seizure of Spain's colonies, or Rome, or earlier. Greed is greed and power corrupts. This is perhaps a larger discussion. But the onstage Shrub

has always been able to say things the President can't. People turn to me for translation of press briefings and other lies back into plain English.



Shrub started out by explaining America's recapture of the Americas from the Grenado-Bulgaroid Communist Cabal, then clarified the need to liberate Our Kuwaiti Oil from our former friend Saddam. He's now turning to art, redrawing the map of the Middle East. I'm sure he'll be able to convince people that although we're not imperialists, our empire is a good thing for the world.

Simona: It seems that Shrub is sharing with the public the crude rationale of US foreign policy without the corporate media's sugar coating. But the relationship between Shrub and Lippman also unveils the potential of resistance.

Dave: That's what I hope. Or at least it's the rationale for allowing me on stage along with Shrub, or just after. I suppose it exemplifies the two-stage process of purging through sarcasm/anger followed by an elevated act, the tendering of positive values and social priorities. However, my own contribution seems to get more sarcastic as time goes on and society wears down. I have to make the effort to do a few serious tunes as well; it gives folks the opportunity to reflect in a different way and to sum up in a direct and perhaps hopeful mode.

Simona: You've been singing and doing political satire for over 20 years. What are you most proud of?

Dave: I was glad that Shrub was asked to eject Howard Zinn from the stage, and even more that Zinn agreed it would be fun. I was glad Pete Seeger liked my Grenada song. I don't recall being proud that I wrote it before the invasion. I was proud to be recorded for Yugoslav TV and even prouder to be censored by them.



Simona: What has been most challenging?

Dave: Jorge Arbushto - George Shrub in Spanish. Learning that Shrub is more popular than I am. Choosing which atrocity to joke about. Choosing among offers from different TV networks to stay away from their comedy shows.

Simona: In your CD "I Hate Wal-Mart," which was released before the anti-WTO

protest in Seattle in November 1999, you draw clear and strong connections between injustice and corporate power both in the US and globally. Do you expect your audiences to be well educated about these connections or do you have any ambition that your songs will help educate people who are not up to date on all the issues?

Dave: My audiences are largely those already involved and those who are sympathetic, with a third important group being those who are open to progressive ideas and a fourth group those who are open to committed comedy. These are real people who don't fit neatly into such categories, of course. Certainly it helps to know some of what's going on, but lots of people who don't follow the news every minute can get the gist of what I'm doing. If my songs educate, I think it's mainly about the persistence and legitimacy and necessity of social change movements. I try to write for people approaching a topic with fresh eyes, without years of movement duty, but I don't always surmount my own political culture.

Simona: You sing about such serious issues as America's past and present political prisoners. "I Hate Wal-Mart" includes the song "If You Can See me," where you mention Black Panthers Geronimo Pratt and Sundiata Acoli, Puerto Rican Independence leader Ida Luz Rodriguez, American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier, and Mumia Abu Jamal.

The chorus comments:

*Down at the market, no one talks
about it
On the TV you won't see this tale,
but if you can see me, then they must
free me
So won't you please lift up the veil.*

Is this an example of integrating your musical talent with your work as a reporter for Free Speech Radio and your MA in Communication Studies?

Dave: Of course Mumia has been both a reporter and a Black Panther. Much of what we do in social action is

reporting things to people; I just have a couple extra ways of doing it. Shrub is reporting too, isn't he? In his way.

Simona: In a recent show you commented that after 9/11 political satire was briefly banned from the movement. Can you describe some of your experiences last year and the challenges of re-presenting tragic events and poking fun at our/our government's ways of coping with 9/11?

Dave: Comedy is tragedy plus time, they say. Who are they? How do they know so much? Will they sell it?

Much of the trouble you can get into with comedy is from treading on something that turns out to be somebody's sore toe. Cutting out jokes about other people's misfortunes really slims down your set, but cutting out jokes about genocide would totally eliminate my act, wouldn't it? In fact most jokes about dark or controversial topics have secondary targets. Inside the comedy business, most political jokes turn out to be about sex, fat, drugs or incompetence. In the case of anti-business comedians, we try to expose hypocrisy and venality. It's less bloody than war, but it stays with the point of the discussion: power, inequity, suffering, working for social correction.

There was a period of adjustment after the attacks, when activists sorted out what they thought was really going on in the world. After a short time, the opportunism of empire-building on the graves of World Trade victims became a point of debate even in the corporate press. By then the business comedians had jumped back in. Of course most of them just joked about terrorists, flirting with racism. The rest of us are more inclusive, joking also about ongoing state terrorism.

Simona: You have written some new material about the possible US attack on Iraq. What are some other issues you are writing about these days?

Dave: Well, I try to include Palestine, which is endlessly humorous, isn't it? Also Indonesia, Burma, Kashmir, and that country Bush is so concerned about, Africa. Then there's the Axis of Pretty Bad - Brazil, Venezuela and France. In terms of corporate globalization, sweatshops are one of the key handles for understanding this vileness. Here in the Homeland, we are currently ignoring the clever vanishing act of the Bill of Rights, so that needs some attention. Gays and thespians continue to act out, and that needs to be reported on. Culturally, I have lots more to say than anyone wants to hear about advertising, and of course the general Wal-Martinizing of the world. Regarding city planning and gas-guzzling, I wrote "What would Jesus Drive?" before asking that question was cool. And I've got



a brand new, totally original song called "Puttin' on the Ritz," about Enronitis.

Simona: Over the years, you have remained quite active in the peace and justice movement, organizing locally on a range of issues and speaking and singing at anti-war rallies around the nation. Can you make any observations about the strengths and the weaknesses of the current anti-war movement?

Dave: The creativity has just exploded. That's critical. Old slogans of the Peace is Better variety have very limited use. We have to appeal on a number of levels, and pay attention to the clarity and creativity of our chants and bumper stickers.

We have a lot to study - all these new countries they keep finding to attack, and new vexing questions about terrorism and religion and western democracy and whether it will ever be tried in Florida. We all have to know what we're talking about, a little more each day. And we have to be honest, and talk about all aspects of the world situation, so that our worldview is comprehensible and useful to people. No point pretending there's a simple good guys-bad guys equation we can solve by zeroing out one side. I'd venture to say that would be a bit doctrinaire. If not algebraic.

And we have to make sure the movement keeps moving. Every tactic should be ever-expanding into relations with other tactics, and every event should be building for other events. Growing strength, and the perception of it, is key. Sad to say, we need strategies to match our attention spans.

Simona: Can you share some tips on how we can challenge what's being done in our name in this dark moment in history?

Dave: Stay visible. Challenge yourself to speak out of turn and publicly. Prove that there's sanity in the world and that the government is lying. Cooperate with others who do things differently. Choose lobbying or demonstrating or letter-writing or any combination that gives voice to your

strengths. Try new things. Party. It's going to take a while.

Simona: Like you, all your brothers have been very active in the peace and justice movement. Is this simply a coincidence or are there particular family or other influences that shaped your political paths?

Dave: Our original involvement in social justice movements has been traced by most scholars to cultural and environmental roots rather than genetic. Our persistence has been due in part to our skepticism of cults, leaving us few alternatives for social belonging. I think our failure to join up with consumerist society can be partly credited to our involvement in folk music and culture, and again, to our skepticism of cults.



Dave Lippman currently resides in Chapel Hill, NC. You can learn more about his work, listen to recordings and purchase CDs (a perfect holiday gift!) at: <http://www.davelippman.com>

Simona Sharoni is the Executive Director of the Peace and Justice Studies Association (PJSA) and the editor of the *Peace Chronicle*.

Dave Lippman recently agreed to join our revamped speakers and artists bureau. He will be touring the Midwest and the West Coast in the Winter and Spring. If you would like to bring him to your community and/or college, please contact pjsa@evergreen.edu and write Dave Lippman in the subject. We will be happy to put you in touch with others in your area and help you maximize Dave's contribution to your community event.