

Artists Speak Out Against the War

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Michael Stipe, Bright Eyes, Steve Earle, Moby and more play New York anti-war event

By CHARLEY ROGULEWSKI

R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe, Bright Eyes, Steve Earle, Rufus Wainwright, Fischerspooner, Moby, Peaches and Devendra Banhart all performed at Monday night's Bring 'Em Home Now! concert at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom. The event, to benefit a number of anti-war groups, could be seen as an anti-war rally at the third anniversary of the United States' invasion of Iraq, bringing together an array of musical styles — hip-hop, country, rock, pop, indie and electronica — with one shared view: It's time we pull the troops out Iraq and end the war.

The concert kicked off just after eight o'clock with Earle's in-your-face tune "F the CC," off his 2004 anti-propaganda album *The Revolution Starts . . . Now*. The song's refrain — "Fuck the FCC/Fuck the FBI/Fuck the CIA/Livin' in the motherfuckin' U.S.A." — managed to warm up the crowd. Although at go time, the venue was still only half-full, with many waiting in an avenue-long line in the bitter cold for will-call tickets, that didn't slow down the country-roots rocker. "Who do you want your kids to learn to cuss from? Me or Dick Cheney?" Earle called out to the yuppie-skewed crowd.

While Earle delivered the first of what would be many soliloquies bashing President George W. Bush and the current administration, some people passed out flyers for upcoming anti-war rallies and pamphlets packed with casualty statistics.

Pop electronic act Fischerspooner delivered a spectacle complete with live band, fake blood and Cirque du Soleil-inspired choreography. A giant American flag unfurled in the background as singer Casey Spooner and his ensemble of dancers marched in military form to the chant "We need a war!," a song off the art rockers' latest album, *Odyssey*. "No we don't!" Spooner shouted out to close their set.

The night moved quickly, with most performers delivering two- to three-song sets, interspersed with messages from speakers Susan Sarandon, Public Enemy's Chuck D, comedian Margaret Cho and Air America radio DJ Laura Flanders. A number of boldfaced names dotted the approximately 3,000 in attendance, including actors Mike Myers, Joaquin Phoenix and Julia Stiles. One of the evening's main guests, however, was Cindy Sheehan, who became one of the anti-war movement's central figures after the death of her military son, Casey, in Iraq two years ago. The concert kicked off a national Bring 'Em Home speaking tour, which will bring Sheehan and others to fifteen cities across the U.S. next month.

Sheehan's voice quivered when she spoke of the still-raw memory of her son's death, but resounded with confidence when bashing the president. With the anniversary of Casey's death approaching on April 4th, she told to the crowd, "That horrible thing on 9/11 was a criminal act — and we go and we persecute and find the criminals. We don't invade two innocent countries."

"George Bush says we have to complete the mission to honor the ones that have already fallen," she continued. "But I don't want Casey's sacrifice and saving his buddies to be used to kill more innocent buddies. George Bush's mission is 'We have to kill more people because I've already killed so many.' And you know what? That's a shitty mission." Sheehan then led the crowd in a chant of "Violence and occupation do not bring liberation! That's Bullshit! Get off it! This war is for profit!"

An unbilled Moby made a surprise appearance, performing an acoustic version of Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth." Devendra Banhart and his fellow long-haired bandmates opened their amped set with his tune "Heard Somebody Say." Singing, "Here's what we believe/It's simple/We don't want to kill," Banhart and his band looked as though they could have been dropped in the middle of a Vietnam War-era protest.

Electro-trash queen Peaches gyrated in her trademark knee-high boots and a gold sequin ensemble, waving some kind of wand. Naughty as usual, the outlandish singer came onto the stage chanting, "Eat my bush/Impeach Bush." Peaches performed "2 Guys for Every Girl," a new track from her forthcoming album, before closing the set with her crowd favorite, "Fuck the Pain Away."

Striking a completely different note, operatic singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright also inspired the audience — even though he forgot the words to his tune "11:11" and *la la la*-ed his way through. With expected melodrama, smoke filled the stage and lights illuminated the crowd during a sing-a-long on his gospel tune "Hallelujah." Wainwright's mother Kate McGarrigle played piano as he belted out Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" — changing the closing lyrics to "Where troubles melt like lemon drops/Away from Bush and Cheney/That's where you'll find me."

Bright Eyes followed with one of the hardest-rocking sets of the night, making a grand finale of their controversial anti-Bush tune, "When the President Talks to God." "When the president talks to God," frontman Conor Oberst sang out, ". . . Does he ask to rape our women's rights?/And send poor farm kids off to die?"

Michael Stipe wrapped the charged night with a set that included guests James Iha and singer-songwriter Joseph Arthur. The gang performed the Arthur-penned "In the Sun," which Stipe recently recorded as a benefit track for Hurricane Katrina victims.

"We have to do this thing more often," said Stipe, "you know, *protest*."