ROCK NOTES

Mellencamp lands in 'Trouble'

Controversy surrounds lively CD of down-to-earth blues, folk covers

By Steve Morse, Globe Staff, 5/30/2003

Imagine John Mellencamp, the ultimate midwest rocker, being called "un-American." It still gnaws at him. "Yeah, I was definitely called un-American," he says. "I saw it in a couple of articles and on a couple of talk shows."

He saw it after word leaked out of a new recording, "To Washington," which was actually a remake of a tune done by Woody Guthrie and the Carter Family. "Everybody rewrote it for the times, and that's all I did," Mellencamp says of the track, which appears on his first album of cover songs, "Trouble No More," due out on Tuesday.

"I didn't think there was anything in that song that was ever questionable," he says. "I was strictly talking about the economy."

The lyrics say: "So a new man in the White House with a familiar name/Said he had some fresh ideas, but it's worse now since he came/From Texas to Washington and he wants to fight with many/And he says it's not for oil/He sent out the National Guard to police the world/From Baghdad to Washington."

"I support freedom of speech myself," says Mellencamp. "That's what people died for in World War I and II and in the Korean War and in Vietnam and in Iraq. If people didn't die for freedom, then I don't know where I'm living."

The controversy helped obscure the fact that Mellencamp has made perhaps the most pro-American album of his career. As a founder of Farm Aid (with Willie Nelson and Neil Young), Mellencamp has been a staunch supporter of the little guy. And he continues that on the new album, which casts fresh light on such underappreciated American folk and blues acts as Son House, Memphis Minnie, and Philadelphia's Dickey Doo & the Don'ts. He and his band cover songs by these acts, as well as the better-known figures Robert Johnson, Hoagy Carmichael, Willie Dixon, and -- from modern times -- Lucinda Williams.
"I had never really attempted to do a record of mostly old blues and folk songs, and to try to make them my own," says Mellencamp. "The Stones were able to do it, and Bob Dylan did it, but I had never tried until now."

The idea for it came, Mellencamp says, when he played Johnson's "Stones in My Passway" at a New York benefit last fall for the family of deceased Billboard editor Timothy White, who was a friend. A record-company exec said, "Why don't you make a record of songs like this for us?" he recalls. Mellencamp was stunned, because most of his contracts had stipulated that he had to write at least 10 songs per album himself, so the label wouldn't have to pay royalties to other publishers.

Mellencamp bit at the opportunity, and the result is an album that is a purist's delight, but it also has enough of an electric edge to appeal to his longtime fans. Songs such as Dixon's "Down in the Bottom" and Dickie Doo's "Teardrops Will Fall" have plenty of energy, while Mellencamp's vocals sound fresh and recharged. He cut the album without any computers ("It just made sense that we didn't bring Pro Tools into this," he says), and it's an impressive addition to the Mellencamp discography, even if one song has riled up some right-wingers.

Mellencamp, however, will not tour behind the album this summer. Instead, he'll devote his attention to a musical he's making with novelist Stephen King about a father who tries to get his two sons to bury the hatchet and get along. Which might be a good idea for anyone who hears "To Washington" as well.

**Reggae festival:** The KRucial Roots Reggae Festival has been booked locally for June 26-29. It includes two dozen acts spread over three clubs, led by Jamaican icons Ras Michael & the Sons of Negus at Bill's Bar on June 29. The festival is being coordinated by Kyle Russell of Dub Station, a band that anchors the weekly Sunday reggae event at Bill's. The festival kicks off June 26 at Rhythm & Spice in Cambridge with the likes of I-Tal Fire and Jahiffe, followed the next night at Bill's Bar by I Rebel Soul, Dub Station, Don Dread, and Strongtree Sound. The June 28 show is at the Middle East Downstairs, with roots groups Midnite (from St. Croix), Dub Station, Skiffington, and others. And there's a daytime conference at Rhythm & Spice. More info is available at www.reggae4i.com or 617-628-1046.

**Hardware Cafe is back:** The folk-flavored Hardware Cafe, the brainchild of John Sares, has reopened at the Breakfast Creations Coffee Shop in New Bedford. Local fave Ron Arruda, who has been described as a cross between Gordon Lightfoot and Jim Croce, appears tonight from 7 to 9, followed by Rick Fetters (who has cowritten songs with Peter, Paul and Mary) from 9 to 11 p.m. Then tomorrow is Kerry "Lark" Cudmore, who "plays the guitar like she rides her Harley -- hard and fast," says Sares. More info is available at www.hardware-cafe.com or 508-998-6212.
**Bits and pieces:** The 2003 Vans Warped Tour double-CD compilation comes out Tuesday. It features 50 previously unreleased tracks by the Used, Less Than Jake, Glassjaw, Simple Plan, NOFX, Lagwagon, and many others . . . Foo Fighters and Pete Yorn are at FleetBoston Pavilion July 5. Tickets go on sale tomorrow. B. B. King, Jeff Beck, and Galactic are at the Tweeter Center Aug. 17. Tickets go on sale tomorrow . . .

Boston Rock Opera celebrates its 10th anniversary with a June 7 performance at the Middle East Downstairs. It includes cofounders Mick Maldonado and T Max with Gary Cherone, Chris Mascara, Suzi Lee, and many others. The evening will feature Harry Nilsson's rock fable "The Point!" along with excerpts from "Jesus Christ Superstar," "Preservation," and more. By the way, Cherone just tried out for the national touring company of "Jesus Christ Superstar." . . .

**Tonight:** Vibewise at the Western Front, Dirty Water CD release at T. T. the Bear's, Boston Horns at the Blackhorse Tavern, and Nicole Nelson at the Sea Note in Hull . . .

**Tomorrow:** The Spurs at Johnny D's, Mike Verge and Friends and T-House of the Almighty at the Linwood, Seks Bomba and the Downbeat 5 at the Lizard Lounge, Uncle Cracker at Six Flags New England ( 8 p.m.), Sugar Ray and the Bluetones at the Sea Note, and Sam Hooper and Beth Boucher in the Saturday afternoon series at Jimmy Tingle's Off Broadway in Davis Square (2-4 p.m.). . . .

**Sunday:** the Yardbirds at House of Blues . . .

**Tuesday:** Ziggy Marley and Pete Francis at Avalon.