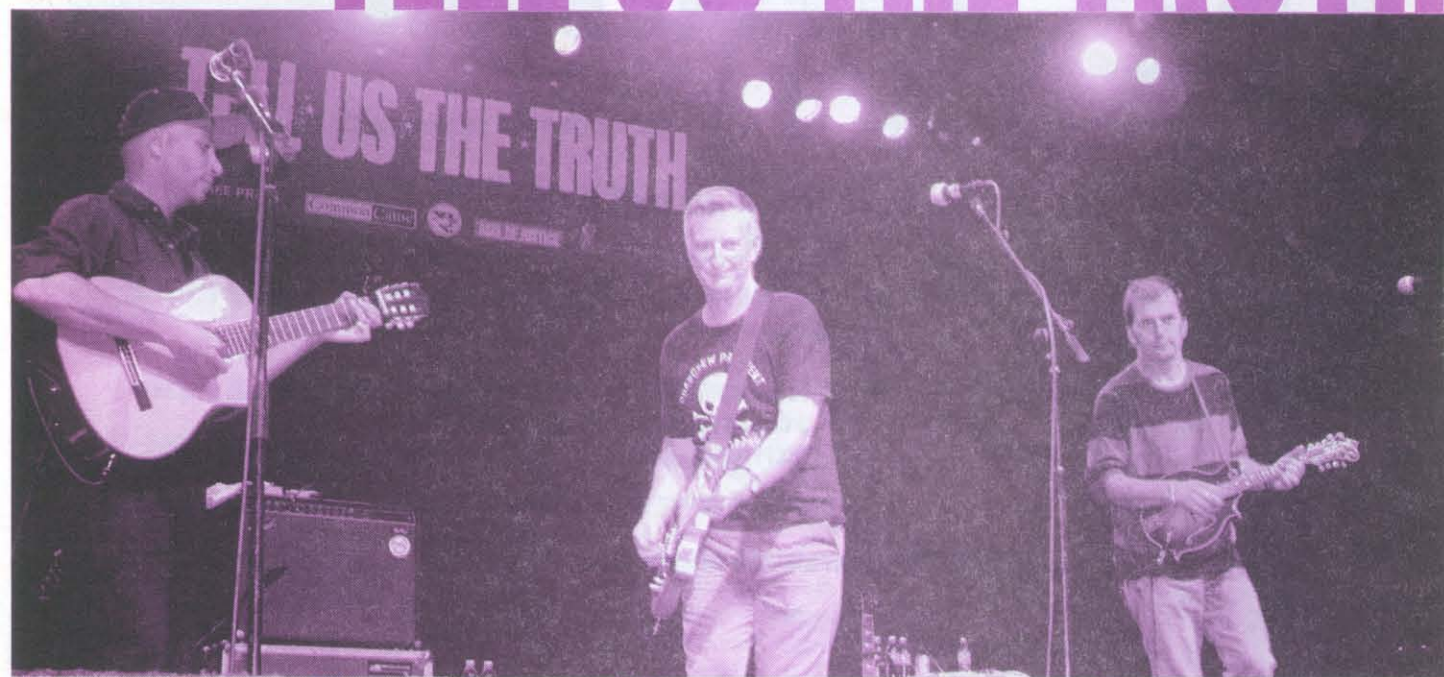


# TELL US THE TRUTH



## ROCKING FOR FREE MEDIA AND FAIR TRADE

by Seth Baum  
 Photos by Bob Ingalls

What do a rapper from Oakland, a folk singer from England, a comedian from Los Angeles, and an historian from Cambridge have in common? They all shared the stage at Berklee Performance Center on November 23 as part of the Tell Us The Truth Tour. Boots Riley from The Coup, Billy Bragg, Janeane Garofalo, and Howard Zinn all helped the Tour raise awareness of media consolidation and fair trade issues through music and entertainment.

Sponsored by Free Press, the Future of Music Coalition, Common Cause, and the Axis of Justice, The Tour was largely inspired by a recent Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decision to expand the abilities of single companies to own multiple media outlets within the same media market. With today's major media companies pushing their corporate-centric politics in their programming, having a diversity of coverage and opinion within the media is essential to keeping properly informed. And a successful democracy depends on well-informed citizens.

The Tour kicked off with a performance at the first ever National Conference on Media Reform in Madison, Wisconsin on November 7-8 and has been working hard to draw attention to this issue on its stops around the country.

Fair trade has become a larger rallying point for activists this year with the advent of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement [see report on page 23]. Under current trade practices, corporations dodge U.S. labor and environmental restrictions by set-

*Hip-Hop, banjos, tambourines, country draws, and a little bit of Howard Zinn make for a great night out if you care about making the world better. The Tell Us the Truth Tour brings like-minded activists, performers, and lecturers together for a show full of good music and much-needed inspiration.*

ting up shop in countries where they can get away with labor, environmental, and human rights abuses. Fair trade advocates seek to improve conditions for foreign workers and level the playing field for American workers. We should expect the media to extensively cover these abuses. However, an increasingly corporatized media is increasingly projecting the corporate viewpoint.

While trade ministers from throughout the western hemisphere were in Miami on November 19-20 to discuss expanding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include Latin America through the FTAA, thousands showed up to protest, and the Tour played a special concert for them. "We're probably the only ones to

perform here [at Berklee] all year who have gotten tear gassed," said The Nightwatchman (alter-ego of Tom Morello from Audioslave and Rage Against the Machine) referring to their experience in Miami.

The show started on a somber note with Howard Zinn, retired professor of history from Boston University and author of *A People's History of the United States*, putting into context the challenge that today's activists face. He recalled listening to a radio show during which an anonymous caller spoke of visiting a G.I. hospital and seeing guys back from Iraq with no arms, wondering what this was all for. He described how we in America "are also being occupied . . . by a little group of people, none of whom were elected", presumably referring to neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle who have wreaked havoc on American policy since they gained power via George W. Bush. Or perhaps he was referring to Bush himself, who lost the popular vote in 2000 and won the election only after the Supreme Court halted the recount by a 5-4 vote.

What followed was an avalanche of artistry as the artists took the stage. Despite their eclectic range of styles, they managed to come together for several songs before splitting up for individual showcase performances. Lester Chambers (from the Chambers Brothers) led the entire ensemble through some blues before Morello took over with his brand of dark, haunting folk. The eeriest moment in his set was when he said, "I know how you feel—I'm a lifelong Cubs fan. I was at the game when the fan caught that ball. I went home that night and wrote a song called 'God Help Us All'. It's too sad to play, so I'm going to play a different one."

Jill Sobule, with what I'm guessing was a banjo, clashed style with substance. Clad in an ordinary print dress and white t-shirt, she crooned in a sweet, angelic voice, "You'd better not kill in Texas, because they'd love to kill you," and, "Kathy Lee's in love with me, plus we run a sweatshop . . . Condi Rice—she's into some real weird shit."

Country rocker and Schertz, Texas native Steve Earle, with his raspy voice and slight drawl, mixed Southern roots with progressive ideology. "Manifest destiny might be the ultimate piece of bullshit revisionist history," he said. "This next song is unrelated to that." The highlight of his set was "John Walker's Blues," his controversial song about John Walker Lindh, the American who trained with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which Earle sings partly in Arabic. "I'm proud that the first person to sing in Arabic at Carnegie Hall was a hillbilly," he said.

Earle was followed by Boots Riley, who nicely handled being the oasis of hip-hop in a sea of acoustic guitars, banjos, and harmonicas. After his first song, which he performed a capella, he got "about as funky as you can get with a guitar, a bass, and a tambourine." His flow was as relentless as it was

thoughtful, with songs ranging from "5 Million Ways to Kill a C.E.O.," based on a letter written by a Haitian slave revolt leader to Napoleon, to "Wear Clean Drawers," a song of advice he wrote for his then-four-year-old daughter.

Billy Bragg was the last solo performer, and certainly not the least. He congratulated Massachusetts on its recent Supreme Judicial Court ruling that bans on gay marriage are unconstitutional. His lyrics smartly take the administration to task: "The gates to the 9/11 perpetrators do not lie through Baghdad," or, "I don't think we can defeat the Axis of Evil / by putting smart bombs in the hands of dumb people."

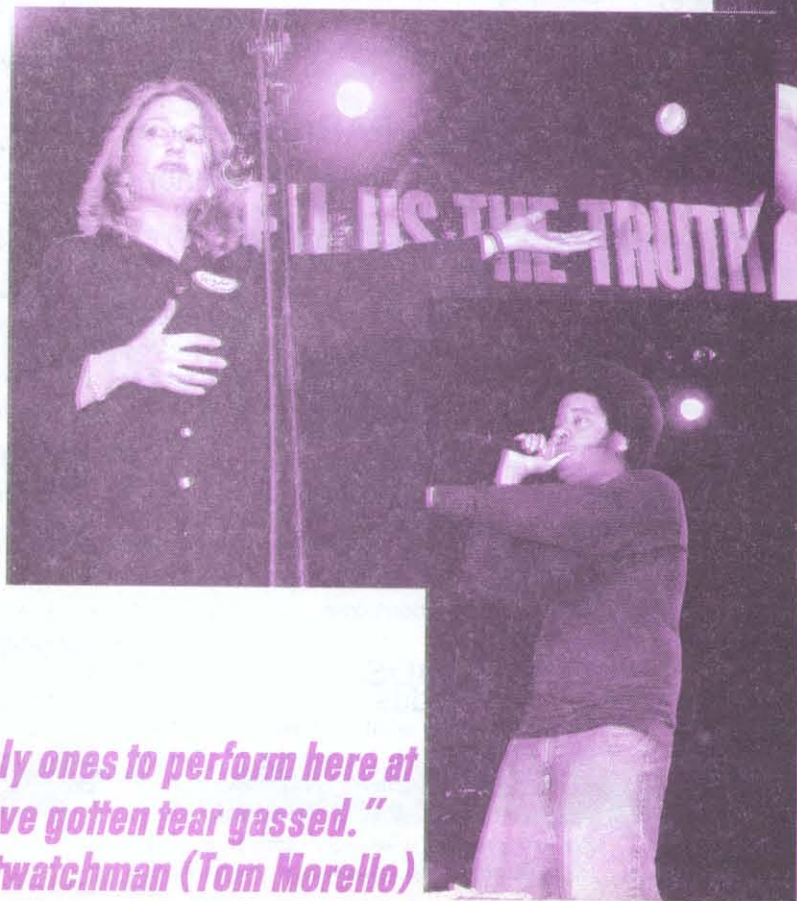
The entire ensemble then returned to the stage and Boots Riley wrapped it up. Somehow they made this unusual sound not only work, but actually sound good, as if it made sense. But what made the most sense (and still does) was their message that we stand at a crucial point in history, with forces like media consolidation threatening democracy as we know it, and that it is incredibly important for us to now stand up for what we believe in and set our country back on the right track. **WU**

Check out [www.tellusthetruth.org](http://www.tellusthetruth.org) for more information on the artists, the issues, and the sponsors of the Tell Us the Truth Tour.

Seth is into engineering, socially conscious music, and Alvin & the Chipmunks during the holiday season.

**"I don't think we can defeat the Axis of Evil / by putting smart bombs in the hands of dumb people."**

**— Billy Bragg**



**Opposite: Tom Morello, Billy Bragg, and Steve Earle team up against the powers that be. This page, clockwise from left: Boots Riley of The Coup, Lori Wallach of Public Citizen, and Billy Bragg.**

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