

The Public Ought to Know: Singers raise their voices for presidential change

By Corey Bearak

09/02/2004



Corey Bearak

Unless something changes, perhaps a candidate getting a few more pennies or just a change of heart, we Queens residents will miss a "cute" political ad beating up on the Boss -- not Steinbrenner from the Bronx by way of Tampa, but Springsteen.

The ad in question has aired on Fox News in Staten Island and Albany and if its producer, U.S. Senate candidate Marilyn O'Grady, secures sufficient funding, it could be broadcast on other cable systems that carry Fox News.

A minor party candidate against incumbent U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, O'Grady's ad attacks the singer-songwriter and leader of the E Street Band, first name Bruce, for speaking his mind this political season via a series of concerts he and 19 other music groups announced earlier in August in protest of continued Bush leadership.

All of a sudden some folks want to make a big deal of a celebrity speaking his or her mind. Why this time? Should one's ability to succeed in one sphere -- sports, entertainment or industry, for example -- limit that person's ability to speak out, just like you or me, when it comes to the political issues of the day? I think not.

Two music message boards in which I occasionally participate to catch up on news of my favorite performers got hot and heavy on this issue after the Las Vegas Aladdin Casino & Resort expelled Linda Ronstadt for dedicating a song to Michael Moore of "Fahrenheit 911" fame. Evidently, half of those attending the concert left in protest.

While it is concertgoers' right to leave or boo as loud as they can, they are not right to argue that artists such as Ronstadt or Springsteen or movie maker Vincent Gallo (always good to note there are some artists on the right or supporting the president, or both) should cede their First Amendment right to speak their mind.

I later found out she previously did the same thing in Brooklyn at the Seaside Concert series sponsored by that borough's president, Marty Markowitz, after I called my brother on his "failure" to let me know about that free concert.

For that matter, various corporations from car makers to beverage giants sponsor concert tours hoping the alignment with a performer will improve their product image and increase sales. Often, artists who perform in Vegas, Atlantic City and other casino venues offer their hosts similar "benefits." Few voice complaints when these artists "sell out."

Sometimes performers take their stands through their work as much as their public statements. Neil Young's "Ohio," Springsteen's "41 shots," John Fogerty's "Fortunate Son" and "Deja Vu (all Over Again)" as well as Moore's various documentaries represent good examples. Sometimes it might make bad business sense to speak out.

The Clear Channel Communications conglomerate that owns radio stations, billboards and other media, as well as promotes concerts all over the United States, took the Dixie Chicks off their media after Chick Natalie Maines criticized the president at a London concert. Their hit "Landslide," dropped from Billboard magazine's No. 7 to No. 43 a few weeks after that December 2003 concert.

The message board discussions ran the gamut from those critical of an artist speaking out to those arguing that the artist could speak out but not when folks pay to see the artist perform. Others expressed glee that a particular artist did not speak out at a concert, at least in recent memory.

The discussion apparently forgot POCO's 1979 performances at the "No Nukes" rally at Battery Park and the concert that evening at the place where the Republicans just gathered this past week.

Someone posted about a Fox News interview with Ron Silver, an actor identified with some liberal causes and who has supported Democratic candidates for national office. Many New Yorkers, especially those who follow politics, know that Silver dabbled a lot with one Rudy Giuliani, who was elected as a Republican and obviously aligns himself with the GOP. I recall going to the movies and watching on cable movies featuring Silver.

I did not cease rooting for the Mets because their intelligent and well-spoken pitching ace, Al Leiter, presided over the inauguration of Giuliani's fellow Republican successor.

Despite these two relationship examples, many creative folks identify more with certain issues than with "Pols." Pols in all parties on the left, right and in the center and beyond try to use and exploit those relationships.

Celebrities, including musicians, should not fear using their renown for the causes they support; they must be equally aware of whom they align themselves with. Celebrities are no different than common folk when it comes to the trappings of power. The sense or belief that you have access can dupe you into not seeing things that may be unattractive about those who offer you the access.

Performers who exploit their celebrity to advance issues must also remain wary of others hopping on and abusing that platform for personal ends.

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles. He can be reached via e-mail at Bearak@aol.com.