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An Interview With Jello Biafra

Northridge Review: Describe your spoken word performances. Do you consider them to be poetry or performance or a combination of both?

Biafra: That's for other people to decide. That's the beauty of a more wide open term like *spoken word*. It doesn't restrict the listener to a concept of, like, the kind of poetry in dripping horror movie letters that you might have expected if you've had poetry rammed down your throat in school as though it were a chore, which of course has turned generations of people off to all kinds of literature, just like the way they teach music in the schools has people hating music and not liking to sing. But, no. Some of it is expanded versions of song lyrics I had written in the past. Most of it is new. If I'm doing it on a college campus and being billed as a "speaker," then it's usually appropriate that I do some kind of question and answer session as well, which can be quite bizarre. At Cal State Fullerton "Hardcore for Christ" came on stage and proselytized for a good twenty minutes in the middle of one of my pieces . . . Handing out these tracts to the audience, and one guy with, you know, that glazed-eyed grin that those people who have been born again have (yes one of those with that kind of weird-ass smile) was saying, "Yeah, man. See me, man? I used to be really fucked-up and strung out on angel dust, man. Now I'm strung out on the Bible, dude." Other people were heckling them and would have done just about anything to get them to go away, but I had to kind of bite my lip and remind myself that if here I am crying wolf about losing a free society, I can't very well deprive people like that of their opportunity to speak either. I mean the past couple of days has been a kind of lesson in that. I discovered right at the last minute, to my horror,

that I would be riding to the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in a limo with Tipper Gore, and one of the things Tipper is well schooled in from, being a political wife of course, is that she's very friendly, very attractive, almost sexy, and there wasn't the dagger-eyed Berlin Wall of disgust with each other like what happened with the woman from *Back in Control* when we were both on *Rock and Roll Evening News*, because we didn't say a damn word to each other, but Tipper was friendly: "Oh hi. You must be Jello. I'm Tipper Gore, and oh yes, one of my daughters is now starting to explore the punk rock, like The Clash and Bunny and the Echomen."

Jimmy Swaggart once said that we picked the name *Dead Kennedys* to promote necrophelia in children. I thought that was hilarious, but not as hilarious when you realize how much power that guy has, even now. I love left handed compliments like that. I would even go so far as to say that we thrive on them. It means that we're penetrating. It means that we're getting through. It means even the most closed of minds can still be penetrated and shaken up and jolted into thinking, even though the thinking may totally disagree with your own.

N.R.: So are you trying to shake people up through your performances?

Biafra: I think that's been a thread through the things I've done for many years. You know . . . Art as a prank, and I've always had a soft spot in my heart for a good prank, creative crime, properly placed vandalism and sabotage . . . That kind of thing. So I figured why not find a constructive use for these impulses and be able to sing and write and do songs and things at the same time? There's not that many people who have somehow blundered into a fortunate enough situation where they can actually make a living by pissing off the normaloids (a service that I am

always happy, if not eager, to provide).

N.R.: What is the most up to date rendering of your legal situation?

Biafra: We filed an action known as a demurer, which is kind of the opposite of an appeal. A demurer is trying to get the charges thrown out ahead of time, so working people, who aren't fortunate enough to be married to senators, don't have to take six to eight weeks off their jobs and live in a motel or something in San Francisco and go to court every day. I mean that's what people are looking at here. So, we feel that we should probably try to get the charges out of there to begin with because a show trial is only going to make matters worse. A municipal court judge has kind of leafed through our documents with a thumb and turned them down. The Superior Court turned them down, so now we will be in the state court of appeals. Meanwhile, there's an arraignment scheduled for April 13th, but the arraignment has been postponed for almost a year now, so I have no idea of what will happen. Yes, April 15th is the one year anniversary of when all this crap began. It was the day I kind of half awake looked outside the bedroom part of the attic where I was, and this big old guy was tromping up the stairs. "We're police officers," and I find there's nine of them tearing my whole fucking house apart.

N.R.: Sounds scary . . .

Biafra: Yeah. They claimed they knocked, but of course they didn't. The scariest part to me was that I was held in one room by a couple of them while the other ones went through all the other rooms in the house so I had no idea if they were, like, destroying things, or lifting things, or worse yet, planting illegal drugs on the premises to bust me for (in the fine tradition of someone like the MC5, or something). I didn't want that to happen. So, it was very,

very scary, very degrading, very humiliating, kind of a subtle form of rape, if you will, which is exactly what those cops had in mind. The two that held me in the room played a constant good cop/bad cop game. They were both LAPD. One was a big old bull who was saying, "Ha, ha. You'll get about a year. Will somebody please shut this guy up so I don't have to hear him anymore?" That kind of thing, and while the other guy would sit down and kind of grin. "You in a band? Wow, I know some people who played in a band, and uh, do you make any money off your band?" You know . . . Feeding me questions that could have bearing on the case, which I was very careful about answering, of course. But the main moment of comic relief came when the head of the San Francisco part of the party walked in with a glazed look on his face. "What are all those pictures of missing children doing on your kitchen wall? Do you know where they are?" I was tempted to say, "Yes, I'm John Wayne Gacy, and they're all buried in my basement," but I realized at the time that if I'd said that, they probably really would have dug up the basement, then my landlady would have been through with me one and for all.

N.R.: How much of a case do they actually have against you? After all, you did have a label on your album.

Biafra: Well, the thing that slips by a lot of people is that any warning label, plus the PMRC proposed stickers and movie ratings are all corporate agreements, they are not laws on the books, they can't prosecute over them. The reason that the PMRC wants voluntary compliance is that if a law was passed, it would be thrown out on its ass immediately for being unconstitutional.

N.R.: Do you think the PMRC is just out to get musicians, or do you think their influence will even actually spread to books and other forms of creative expression?

Biafra: Even if the PMRC doesn't, anything that legitimizes them or lends any credence to their campaign of hysteria will encourage other people to take their censorship tactics one step further. For example, after the Senate Hearings on rock music, suddenly Jimmy Swaggart's irrational complaint about rock music in itself being pornography began appearing in the mainstream papers, and he has enough power that he could tell a large drugstore chain to take Rolling Stone and Creem and Tiger Beat and thirty other publications off their shelves, because they were pornographic. This wasn't even a threat letter from Ed Meese, this was from fucking Jimmy Swaggart. This is the real danger of some people like that having the power to tell us what we should be able to read, and of course, even if another store across the street from WalMart still had all those magazines, it still hurts the magazines, because not everybody is going to run from store to store in their busy shopping times and go look for all the magazines, they'll just throw up their hands. I'm sure the same thing would happen with records. I mean how many people would bother to look hard enough to find a Dead Kennedys record, if you can only buy it by mail or at the X-rated bookstore? I don't want to have to see all our supporters have to walk in with a big old trenchcoat and a hat down over their eyes look over their shoulder and say in a breathy voice, "Hey can I buy one of those... Dead Kennedys records please," and then look quickly around again to make sure no one they know from work is watching. That kind of climate belongs in the Dark Ages, not today. But unfortunately I've felt for many years that we have entered a new Dark Ages.

N.R.: What is the difference between you and someone like Prince, as far as the PMRC goes?

Biafra: Tipper says that it was Prince that inspired her to start going after rock lyrics, and luckily for him, he has all the legal help money can buy. We don't, that's why they picked us to charge instead. Michael Guarino of the L.A. City Attorneys Office even said right on an evening newscast here, "We feel this is a cost effective way of sending a message that we are going to prosecute."

N.R.: **How do you feel about being mentioned in Tipper Gore's new book, "Raising PG Kids in an X-rated Society"?**

Biafra: This is a masterpiece in slick persuasive packaging. First of all there's the name. Already now by the title, the reader will assume that we live in an X-rated society, whether we really do or not. These warning things that she wants on wicked records is right on the front of the book as a way of anesthetizing the consumer to its presence. One of the best compliments she's ever payed my band is on page 28, "Recent album of the Dead Kennedys band contained a graphic poster of multiple erect penises penetrating vaginas. Where's the difference? In the hands of a few warped artists their brand of rock music has become a Trojan Horse rolling explicit sex and violence into our home." . . . I mean where's the real Trojan Horse here? It seems to me it's books and people like this who are claiming, oh these poor parents who are uninformed, they need ratings to make a proper choice for their children, therefore we should be able to do the ratings and do parents thinking for them. I mean how many parents really accompany their kids to record stores anyway? How many of them have the time? And if they keep accompanying their kids to the record store, what happens when they turn the kid loose at eighteen in the marketplace, and the kid's emotional and intellectual growth has been stunted because Mommy and Daddy

had to make all their decisions for them when they grew up, or worse yet, were letting books make them for them.

N.R.: What do you mean when you say that you use a “mutant form of journalism”?

Biafra: It means I pepper my presentation with tidbits of information that I’ve come across that people don’t generally know, and might find interesting if they did. For example, there’s a piece called, “Why I’m Glad the Space Shuttle Blew Up,” that I wrote after seeing a xeroxed copy of an item in *The Nation* magazine that was sent anonymously to my mailbox, that said that if that one hadn’t blown up, then the next one would have gone up carrying a payload of 46 pounds of plutonium. Say that space shuttle also blew up, guess what we’d all have now. We’d have radiation cancer and all the human life on earth would slowly be dying. People estimated “conservatively” that if that had blown up there would have been enough radiation in the air to cause cancer in as many as five billion people. I mean this is how reckless our Defense Department is today, to just try and launch Star Wars behind everybody’s back and not even care if the whole population of the earth gets killed. This is almost the highest level of hypocrisy these people reach in a way. They go on and on, “We must protect the human race from annihilation by building Star Wars beam weapons,” that were originally proposed by Lyndon LaRouche, keep in mind. But at the same time when they’re talking about protecting us from annihilation that way, where’s the Reagan administration with a defense-department-size budget for research on AIDS?

N.R.: After you finish with your legal battles, will you continue with the spoken word performances, or will you

go back to music?

Biafra: Well, since I've been put out of commission as a musician, for all practical purposes, for at least another half year to a year, I might as well try to grow artistically in other ways. And, so I'm trying a bit of this, of course doing a lot of talk shows, things, there's a very vague offer of hosting a radio talk show in San Francisco, which would be a real kick in the ass if I actually got the job. There's some things I normally wouldn't pursue, but the opportunity came along, I'd be a fool to say no to it.

N.R.: You once ran for mayor of San Francisco. Do you have any more political aspirations?

Biafra: I'm leaning against that. I mean, even in my position as a saboteur candidate, there were still all these people coming up trying to make little deals with me and stuff. I began to realize, my God, these poor fools who get as far as national office, they don't even know who they are anymore, because they have made so many deals and so many compromises and so many horse trades that you can't have any principles, you don't have any principles left by the time you get that far. I mean I can fully see why the Democrats could nominate a complete nincompoop like Walter Mondale who just allowed himself to be led on a leash wherever he went. That is the kind of people we get in politics because they're the only people willing to put up with it and stick around. I think one way to solve that, particularly with the presidential election, would be to make it like they have in Europe, especially in Britain where if there is going to be an election you get six weeks notice of when the day to vote is, so there isn't like three years of campaigning for president. You've got six weeks to do a blitz, and the rest of the time you can do something else. I think an even better way to take care of these

bozos who think they should be in the White House would be for them to follow the example of my favorite revolutionary hero, Pope John Paul the First. Here was a guy who worked years and years to get to the peak of his power and what does he do? He dies thirty days later. I think that's a great example for revolutionaries everywhere, because many of them, when they reach a position of power, the revolution stops, and they just want to stay with the status quo. Not Pope John Paul I, he did everybody a favor and died. Imagine how many of these jerks could be president if they could just do it for thirty days and then die. We'd be through most of them by now!

N.R.: **The Dead Kennedys recently broke up. Is there any chance that the band will ever regroup?**

Biafra: No . . . that's been another effect of this whole affair. There's bad blood there now.

N.R.: **Why did you call yourselves the Dead Kennedys?**

Biafra: It's a calling card no one can ignore. It's not just like tee ha ha ha Kennedys. I mean, how did the Me Generation start after all? American empire getting bigger, atomic age astroworld movie star president, gorgeous wife, suddenly, capow! Where has the American dream gone from there? Especially when the person on the street has this funny feeling it wasn't just some nut with a gun in a school library. Then Robert Kennedy gets killed, Martin Luther King dies. Vietnam and Watergate were the straws that broke the camel's back. But I think the ball got rolling towards the Me Generation, the sheer greed and selfishness we have today got started with the Kennedy killings.

N.R.: **Why the name Jello Biafra?**

Biafra: Why not?

N.R.: It's strange . . .

Biafra: It IS, ha, strange. The juxtaposition of images designed to stimulate the brain . . . I picked it out of a notebook. Me and a friend just years ago wrote down cool names for bands, for people in bands, names for songs . . . things like that, and it came time to get a new name, so I opened the book back up and that looked like the best one. It seemed like it would last a little longer than Smegma Pig Vomit, Bobby Bacteria, or any other nominations.

N.R.: But Jello Biafra is not legally your name?

Biafra: Oh no. The last thing I want to do is to have my notorious name on a driver's license so if a cop stops me, they decide to beat the shit out of me and leave me by the side of the road.

N.R.: If people don't start taking notice of what's going on and start protesting against it, where do you think we'll end up? In ten years, will we be living in a much more conservative society?

Biafra: I think nationally it will be kind of like it is in North Carolina right now, where people sit on their ass while an anti-obscenity bill orchestrated by Jesse Helms became law. This bill is, this law is so strict, that if you're in a college art class and the professor opens up a book of Middle Ages paintings or Michelangelo statues and there's genitalia on the statue, the professor can go to jail for three years and be fined 10,000 dollars. Many, many books have been taken off of many, many library shelves, and in the case of these colleges, entire classes have been dropped on account of this law. That's about the ugliest form of censorship you can get. Direct intimidation, which is also what the PMRC had in mind when their literature called for the "reassessment of contracts" of

artists who did things onstage the PMRC didn't happen to approve of. This is the goal of many of these people, even if they can smile and be nice and likable and say, well they're just concerned parents who are against sexism, which I can understand, easily understand and agree with, and don't want their kids screwed up by violence, on TV shows or on records. The problem is what they are really trying to do is intimidate people into going much farther. For example, Beastie Boys having songs taken off their record, and Slayer having to move to another label to get theirs out. Anytime any artist waters down their own work out of fear of reprisal, that in itself is censorship. A climate of fear is a very powerful weapon, and we are a very scared country right now, and people who want to screw us around can thrive on that.