



Fred Smith wins third place in the All-American Smiling Competition

October in America

Fred Smith returns from touring America behind his new CD 'Texas'

October was an intense time to be touring in support of a political album in the United States of Anxiety.

In an economy that thrives on confidence and credit both were suddenly in short supply. America is wrestling with a three way crisis of overextension: foreign, fiscal and financial, exacerbated on all three fronts by a bloated and overactive military industrial complex.

I saw teeth marks of the financial crisis everywhere I went: two grown men crying and hugging outside the subway in New York City- 'just retrenched'; folk clubs reporting attendances down by half; and on the TV screens occupying every public space (saving decent Americans from the horrors of silence and under stimulation) financial analysts fiercely debating whether viewers were better off stuffing their money under a Sealy Posturepedic or a Sleepmaker.

I spoke to Molly the hotelier in the bar of her small town Ohio hotel one morning as we watched the TV screen where Obama and McCain took turns to position themselves on the financial crisis.

The meltdown was a tricky issue for both candidates. On the one hand they needed to reflect public indignation at 'Main street bailing out Wall Street'. On the other they had to accommodate the reality that if Government doesn't do something to salvage the situation

everyone gets hurt. It was a delicate dance that Obama managed better than McCain, which is not to say he knows the answers.

Molly put it succinctly: On mortgage vendors: “they woulda made a loan to your dog!”. On foreign policy: “We’ve been a bull in a China shop. This is a time of adjustment.”

So I was touring an album of songs of love and hate for America at a time when most Americans were letting go of their own delusions of infallibility. It may be that I was just playing to the folk club soft left, but it felt like I found a soft spot. They were in the mood for laughing at themselves, lest they should cry. And there was a lot of both from the audiences during the tour.

The tour had many highlights: watching on airport TV’s as the public image of Palin was commandeered by comedian Tina Fey; seeing the leaves change in Massachusetts; walking in the Cascades and the Rockies. But the biggest highlight for me was Kansas. Yes, Kansas.

Saying ‘Kansas’ to an American is like saying Kambah to a Canberran, or Seven Hills to a Sydneysider, or Bayswater to a Melbournian. It signifies boredom.

Kansas is smack bang in the middle of America. It’s flat and brown and nothing happens. Consequently no one wants to live there. Consequently there’s a lot of space so the military has taken to relocating air force bases out there. Which comes to my reason for being in Kansas:

My mate Joe Jencks is a burly, bearded Irish American singer songwriter with a passion for social justice, beer and European sausages. He also has the voice of an angel and writes great songs (www.joejencks.com). He’s always up for an outlet for indignation, especially during the week when paid gigs are sparse.

Joe’s mate Marty was running a Heartland Speaks workshop at the Quality Inn followed by a Civil Disobedience around the Air Force base in Salina Kansas. It was timed around a locally heralded ‘bombing and strafing competition’, designed to celebrate the capacity of the US Air Force to maim and mutilate with precision while wasting volumes of money that the American taxpayer no longer has.

The timing worked out since Joe had to pass through Kansas on his way from Chicago to Denver where he had gigs booked for the coming weekend. Joe and I toured together back in 06 and enjoyed each others company so I decided to come along for the ride.

So it was that on an autumnal Tuesday afternoon a bunch of earnest and indignant Americans, plus Joe and I, gathered in the function centre of the Quality Inn in Salina, Kansas for a workshop on Civil Disobedience –specifically on how to cross the police line surrounding the Air Force base and get arrested without getting your arm broken.

Marty had already contacted the police and local magistrate and a time and date had been agreed upon, in liaison with the local press, for ‘a Civil Disobedience’.

Joe, needless to say, became inroaded with inspiration during the workshop and wrote a song, called ‘Crossing Over’, invoking the spirit of Ghandi, MLK, and Nelson Mandela.

The Wednesday morning was cold, windy and rainy. 50 or so protesters rose early to march the route from the motel to the Air Force base. Me and Joe went out in the advance party to set up a PA system in a car park adjacent to a barbed wire fence surrounding the Air Force base. Two metres in from and parallel to the fence was the police tape – “The line”.

We were there to provide the soundtrack to the protest. Only eight of us were actually planning to cross the police line most of whom, it must be said, were in their early 70's. Only a Septuagenarian can afford a police record in America.

The marchers arrived at 0830 and gathered in front of the PA System. With chilly winds and A10 bombers taking off in the background it was not the ideal context for a couple of folk singers accustomed to serene coffeehouses.

Nonetheless, speeches were made, songs of indignation were sung and sung along to with gusto, and then more songs, till by about 1030 we were all out of songs and my fingers were cold. I said to Marty, ‘cant you blokes just cross the line now so we can pack up the PA and home?’

‘No’, he said, ‘we gotta wait till 1130, that’s when we told the police we’d cross.’ So Joe and I found another hour’s worth of tunes and kept playing.

It was well worth sticking around.

At 11:30 sharp the protesters swarmed the line. Joe sang ‘Crossing Over’ at the top of his voice. The chief cop barked the mandatory warnings through a bull horn. 10 cops emerged from a nowhere and politely nabbed the offenders. Four screaming bombers landed in the background.

There was nary a dry eye in the carpark as the last of the Septuagenarians was handcuffed to her walking frame and led off to a nearby shed for finger printing.

After packing up the PA Joe and I drove off westwards on route 70 of the Dwight D Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. We made it to the outskirts of Denver five hours later in time to see the sun setting over the Rocky Mountains.

I listened from behind the wheel as Joe pulled out his laptop and read to me the entirety of President's final speech as President.

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military/industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

So it looks like 8 years of ideologically driven madness have come to an end with a thud rather than a whimper. The new President will have a hard time turning that ship around with a massive budget deficit and a political system, two wars going nowhere and a system hamstrung by wealthy and powerful interest groups.

But have faith. There are good people in America. They are certainly outspent, but not out numbered.

You can see the Heartland Speaks Rally on You Tube: <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=YhK85W5rRbY>



Cool Hand Freddy

