

Roger Waters in concert: Art and politics in a time of crisis

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Roger Waters, the renowned musician and activist, co-founder of the group Pink Floyd and its creative driving force from 1968 to 1984, is currently touring his concert and multimedia installation *This Is Not a Drill* across North America. At least one million people are expected to attend the performances.

The tour, which made a stop in Detroit on July 23, uses Waters' extensive artistic catalog to condemn the ruthlessness of the ruling elite in the US and around the world. Virtually every song is directed toward pressing issues of our time: imperialist war, fascism, the poison of nationalism, the plight of refugees, the victims of state oppression, global poverty, social inequality, the attack on democratic rights and the danger of nuclear annihilation.

Such an event, so unusual and important, demands special consideration, above all because it raises to a high and pressing level, in the actual experience of large numbers of people, the issue of the relationship between art and politics in a period of unprecedented crisis.

The concert in Detroit was a remarkable musical, visual and intellectual experience. *This Is Not a Drill* incorporates many of the memorable songs from Pink Floyd's catalog while Waters was still at the helm, but never becomes a nostalgia tour. Waters, in fact, does not want anyone to "forget about their troubles for a while." His main concern throughout the evening was ensuring that the songs corresponded to ongoing social and political developments.

A lesser-known song from Waters' solo work, "The Powers That Be" (1987), is performed in thunderous fashion against footage of police shootings and military bombings. The imagery culminates in a textual memorial to nearly two dozen victims of police violence in the US and other countries. The angry protests of the audience increased with each death notice.

On the searing 1992 anti-war song "The Bravery of Being Out of Range," Waters incorporates images of each US president since Ronald Reagan with descriptions of their murderous foreign policies and superimposes the words "War Criminal" on every one. As for Joe Biden, Waters

notes that he is "Just Getting Started." At the crescendo of the song—which has the memorable refrain "Old timer, who are you gonna kill next?"—a sudden red audio-visual blast envelops the audience, intended to provide a sense of what it must be like to be shot at by a military drone or aircraft.

At the end of the nightmarish 1979 song "Run Like Hell," the animated imagery transforms into video footage of a US military helicopter firing missiles on a residential neighborhood. The text explains this was actual footage of 10 civilians and journalists killed in Iraq in 2007. It adds that the video was "courageously leaked by Chelsea Manning" and "courageously published by Julian Assange." The installation is then emblazoned with the words "Free Julian Assange" and "Lock Up The Killers," generating some of the loudest cheers of the evening.

The performance ends on a high and disturbing note, richly drawn out. Waters' band first performs a medley of songs from the legendary 1973 *Dark Side of the Moon* album—"Us and Them," "Any Colour You Like" and "Brain Damage." The steadily rising chorus of each is set to gradually multiplying images, eventually hundreds of them, of people from around the world. These are portraits of a wide range of human beings—adolescent victims of wars, industrial workers, mothers, sick children, the homeless. It is a humane and unifying imagery, which climaxes in a giant panorama at the conclusion of "Brain Damage." It is a reminder from Waters of how much there is to lose in the world.

This medley is immediately followed by the lesser-known but powerful "Two Suns in the Sunset" (1983). Waters introduces the song with references to the current dangers of nuclear war, clearly pointing to the US/NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine, involving the world's largest nuclear-armed powers. The initial pastoral and brightly animated imagery of an individual driving in the countryside frighteningly changes character. We realize that the "brightness" emanates from a nuclear bomb's mushroom cloud, which incinerates large masses of people in the visuals.

The conventional wisdom, pumped out by innumerable

literary and music journals, taught at every art and drama college, has it that art and politics, like oil and water, had better not be mixed. Various cautionary examples from the past are regularly produced to intimidate young artists, to impress upon them the folly of social engagement. Even more generally, the prevailing notion is that the aesthetic element is a thing existing in and of itself, a value that has little or nothing to do with the lives and concerns of the great masses of people, as though the artist who creates an aesthetic form and the audience who enjoys it are empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it.

If the artist, the official version goes, has strong views, he or she had better keep them to him or herself. And many artists and musicians, sadly, live up to these notions. But Waters is not one of them. The entire concert tour is a deliberate and conscious refutation of such ideas. An opening message on the multimedia installation spells this out: “If you’re one of those ‘I love Pink Floyd, but I can’t stand Roger’s politics’ people, you might do well to fuck off to the bar right now.” How appropriate and eloquent! In reality, how could art in our time of unparalleled turmoil and suffering be significant if it did not possess the element of protest? What would it be saying to its audience? The artist who accepts the false dichotomy between art and politics, who knows his or her “proper place,” will end up not meaning much to anyone and will certainly not endure.

The powers that be recognize the danger. Though *This Is Not a Drill* has received some favorable news coverage, there is an obvious lack of reporting on it in the mainstream press. Waters recently denounced the Toronto media after it refused to provide any significant coverage of his two-night performance in that city. The critics prefer their music without the angry unpleasantness.

The decision to ignore Waters’ performances in Toronto has to be connected with his opposition to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The musician has taken a principled stand on the conflict. While firmly opposing the reactionary Russian invasion, Waters commented that a “long drawn-out insurgency in Ukraine would be great for the gangster hawks in Washington. It’s what they dream of.”

It is impossible not to be moved by Waters’ socially engaged, historically informed musical performance, by the fusion of serious art work and incisive political analysis. Waters is not presenting a systematically developed political perspective, much less the program of a particular tendency. What finds expression in *This is Not a Drill* is deep outrage against injustice, against war, against official hypocrisy and lies.

Waters at 78, possessing the energy and spirit of an

individual half his age, is not conducting a nostalgia tour. Other performers his age continue to travel and play their old hits, presumably earning a living. The vast majority of them—particularly those whose art was rooted in the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights struggles of the 1960s—lost their anger decades ago. They made their social and artistic peace with society. They have to continue performing their original material because they have nothing new and important to say. Worst of all, they may even have a Kennedy Center Honor, that “wide rainbow-colored ribbon” of shame, hung around their necks by US presidents whose hands are drenched with blood.

Waters, on the other hand, is not a “legend,” i.e., a relic. He remains a living, working, thinking artist. He is still engaged, still pressing forward. His work is a response of a serious artist to the conditions of his time.

The three-hour performance was a tour de force, which involves the participation of master musicians. Waters proves in practice at every performance on this tour the truth of Leon Trotsky’s proposition that “a protest against reality... always forms part of a really creative piece of work,” and that every new tendency in art—and such an installation-concert must be considered a “new tendency”—“has begun with rebellion.”

Waters is a serious and, therefore, unflinchingly honest artist, bold in his conceptions about the world. His striking artistry and his opposition to the existing social system are interwoven, they nourish one another. This is not an artificial “leftism,” grafted on a contrived and superficial “radicalism” that is careful to avoid stepping over the accepted limits. Waters absorbed “rebellion” into his bone and marrow a very long time ago, and he continues to live and breathe it. He inspires the audience to think critically, to feel outrage against that which exists, and to believe that a new and better world can and must be brought into being.



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