

The Strokes, David Byrne, Massive Attack, Tom Waits: Artists protest against the Iran war, ICE and the threat of dictatorship—“This ain’t no fooling around”

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The US-Israeli genocide in Gaza has proven a nodal point in political and cultural life. It has opened the eyes of millions to the barbarism of imperialism, for which there are no longer any “red lines.” And there is no returning from this point, either for the ruling classes or the global population.

The violent, anti-democratic operations of ICE added fuel to the fire of popular anger, now further inflamed by the murderous US-Israeli war against Iran and Lebanon.

The accumulating outrage and horror are inevitably finding expression in artistic circles, with greater or lesser clarity depending upon the artist or group.

Large music festivals, despite in many cases the best efforts of organizers, continue to be the occasions for the coming together of anti-establishment artists, such as Kneecap, Massive Attack, Fontaines D.C. and others, and radicalized crowds of young people.

Since 1999 the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival has been held annually (except during the height of the COVID-19 epidemic) at the Empire Polo Club in Indio, California, some 125 miles east of Los Angeles. The event now draws an estimated 125,000 people a day and, across its two consecutive three-day weekends, a total of some 650,000 to 750,000 festival goers attend.

Two performances in particular made headlines at this year’s event (April 10 to 19) for the character of their sharp attacks on war and the criminality of the powers that be.

The Strokes, with Julian Casablancas as lead singer and primary songwriter, is a New York-based band formed in 1999. The WSWs commented in 2020:

Of all the albums from the early 2000s’ New York City music scene, The Strokes’ *Is This It* (2001) most certainly had the broadest popular impact. Music magazines like NME named it the Album of the Decade, and dozens of contemporary artists continue to cite it as a major influence...

Carefully steeped in musical influences from popular

music of the early decades of rock music, the group quickly made an impression. They led with a tight and hard-charging rhythm, angular and creative guitarists and a “raw” crooning lead singer.

At Coachella 2026, The Strokes concluded their set this past Saturday night, according to *Variety*, “with a video montage that accused the CIA of enacting regime change in foreign countries over the decades, finally concluding with footage of Israel bombing Gaza and the United States bombing Iran.”

The same account explained that the band, in front of an “illuminated mosque backdrop,” performed while footage on a huge LED screen

portrayed recent American bombings in the Middle East with the large caption “Over 30 universities destroyed in Iran”—followed by another video clip of a large building in Gaza being destroyed in a controlled explosion, with the caption: “Last university standing in Gaza.” ...

Following the climactic portrayal of bombings in Iran and Gaza, The Strokes’ video montage ended with a shot of a bomber plane in the air, as the song abruptly ended

and the crowd cheered.

Variety was obliged to admit that much of the reaction to the band’s video commentary at Coachella among their fans was positive, “with statements on their Instagram posts like ‘Thank you so much for using your stage to highlight Gaza and Iran and Latin America’ and ‘Amazing show and a bombshell of reality at the end!’” One admirer commented on X, “For those who missed it: this was the moment The Strokes ensured they’ll never set foot in Coachella again! I’m so proud of them.”

The appearance of David Byrne, formerly of Talking Heads, at Coachella may have made even bigger headlines. Critics generally lauded his performance, describing it as one of the best sets of the

weekend, during which he played a number of the Talking Heads' most popular songs.

Clad in an orange jumpsuit, Byrne offered an especially spirited rendition of *Life During Wartime*, the 1979 song that had a vague, apocalyptic feel to it, typical of the art world-influenced music scene of the time. When he composed it, Byrne apparently had the German left-wing terrorists of the Baader-Meinhof group and Patty Hearst in mind.

Asked recently by television talk show host Stephen Colbert if songs such as *Life During Wartime* feel "different in the context of today than when you first performed them," Byrne replied, "My goodness ... 'Life During Wartime,' yes. I licensed some ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] footage shot at the very end of the song. If we did [play the footage] for the whole song, it would be depressing.

"But we showed in the very end and we started with some footage that I saw. It looked like a delivery guy on a bike being chased by the ICE guys and he gets away," he said as the Colbert audience applauded.

The video montage projected behind Byrne and his group of collaborators-musicians at Coachella as they performed *Life During Wartime* included the above-mentioned sequence of the bicyclist escaping stumbling ICE agents, as well as other scenes of anti-ICE and pro-Palestine protests. The video footage, reported *Rolling Stone*, "drew extensive cheers from the crowd."

The song imagines a "revolutionary" of some type hiding from the authorities. Byrne placed considerable emphasis at Coachella on the chorus, which is repeated several times, with variations:

This ain't no party, this ain't no disco
This ain't no fooling around
No time for dancing, or lovey-dovey
I ain't got time for that now ...

This ain't no party, this ain't no disco
This ain't no fooling around
This ain't no Mudd Club, or CBGB [popular New York clubs at the time]
I ain't got time for that now

The Hill observed that Byrne "has been a vocal critic of the Trump administration's actions. He slammed the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran, calling it in an interview on 'BBC Newsnight' earlier this month 'completely illegal.'"

"I'm certainly not a supporter of the Iran government, but we have no right to just start bombing them," he told host Faisal Islam. "No one voted for it, no one decided it, the public did not endorse it, it's just a small group of maniacs who decided they were going to do it, and I think Britain should be very careful following down that path."

The British band Massive Attack and veteran singer-songwriter

Tom Waits have collaborated on a fiery song, *Boots on the Ground*. The visceral, poetic effort presents the typical US soldier as a working class victim of the imperialist operations and machinations of the ruling classes.

We trim your hedges, we fight your wars
Wait in the trenches and we're f—— 'til we're sore
With boots on the ground, boots on the ground

As for the political establishment:

Now who the hell are these federal pricks?
Hiding in the Senate like a bloated-ass tick
Air-conditioned f——stick loafers
Sittin' in a room full of army posters
A coal to a diamond, a vote into law
They campaign up all the blood they can draw
Mold your world, a soldier's just clay
How much does every soldier weigh?
Cut you at the ankles and they throw that ass away

In the end, the song goes on to insist, the soldier

rotted in the sand and all that they found was his boots on the ground
Boots on the ground, boots on the ground
All that they found was his boots on the ground, boots on the ground

The official video, created with photo artist thefinaleye, has been viewed some 650,000 times in five days.

Massive Attack commented:

It's a career honour to collaborate with an artist of the magnitude, originality and integrity of Tom, but this track is arriving in an atmosphere of chaos. Across the western hemisphere, state authoritarianism and the militarisation of police forces are fusing again with neo-fascist politics. Seen within the American emergency, at home and overseas, this track contains pulses of callous impulse & abandoned mind.



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