

Promoting the ALF: Music, Tabling, and a Call for Education

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Today, one of the most common forms of political outreach and education is tabling at music shows. In most cases this generally involves setting up assorted literature, possibly a television for videos, talking to people that are interested in what you are doing, selling books, t-shirts, and stickers, and getting people to sign up for announcements about future events such as protests, speakers, and workshops. Undeniably, this does help reach some measure of new audiences and when combined with bands that evoke political messages, many in the audience recognize the event as transcending mere entertainment and evoking a cultural politics. When the hardcore band and its associated outreach table become a primary form of political education for a radical movement, however, there is the assurance of danger. This is the cautionary theme of this article for the contemporary animal liberation movement.

Of course, political music is great, but could you imagine Dead Prez headlining a show where Malcolm X or Huey Newton was given a mere fifteen minutes prior to the performance to articulate the cause? It is unthinkable. In part, this is because those associated with black liberation in the Sixties took Malcolm's words to heart when he said that, "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today." Malcolm's very person was a demonstrated example of the transformative power that could be gained by engaging oneself in a rigorous educational program. He cultivated a political figure of respect, and he got it.

Make no mistake about it, a popular band is not going to ignite a revolution any time soon, nor is it going to teach you how to begin to do so. While many current bands with animal liberation themes in their music reiterate some of the content of the cause for which we struggle, they arguably have moved larger concerns about the development and health of the movement to the side. To be fair, it may well be impossible to encapsulate such material in a song, but that only re-emphasizes our point that music can be motivational, informative, and sometimes even tactical, but hardly is it ever the central engine driving the birth of revolutionary communities and struggles.

If we follow figures like Herbert Marcuse and the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, we can define politics *as* a form of education, and in this sense we call for the refocusing of the movement's culture on educational concerns. We must force the quest to gain further information, skills, and political literacies to the forefront of this movement. We have learned the hard way that without such education negatives can too easily occur – such as snitches, group infighting, and the lack of tolerant political value system. Further, without educational processes even the most well-meaning of people repeatedly fail to realize the importance of strategically utilizing a wide-range of tactics that move from mainstream pushes for revised legislation to marginal direct action oppositional stances. Ultimately, there needs to be more animal liberation education at music shows – just another table of pamphlets and slogans will not cut it when attempting to legitimately develop militant politics.

We might say, then, that direct action cannot be advanced or sustained without formal educational processes playing a considerable role. For instance, when a new member of the Black Panther Party or the American Indian Movement joined, they were not given a rifle to fire, but books to read. As the animal liberation movement continues to grow and forge forward in support of direct action, this is where the potential dilemma begins. Who will teach and how?

From Freya to Goldfinger to KRS-One, we have seen it over and over again – bands and musicians promoting political messages and motivating people to take action on key social issues. Again, this is great, don't get us wrong! However, the downfall of our political movement relying upon music and performers to generate activist enthusiasm is that it can devolve into motivation without education. In our opinion, this is a possible danger for the animal liberation movement. In this case, people often know more about the bands singing for animal liberation than they do the intricacies of animal liberation history itself. At the least, there is a tendency in the music tabling scene to promote the actions committed by the Animal Liberation Front, and generate the style associated with the group's public reputation, while information such as the ALF's guidelines and the possible consequences of engaging in ALF-style politics remains lacking. Charged by the driving message of the music at liberation events, potential members of the movement can often quickly recognize the path to ethical righteousness and demonstrate how pissed off they are by the horrors being committed upon animals, but this in no way guarantees that they will then direct their energy strategically and thoughtfully towards building an organized politics and complex social critique beyond the event. How can we transform this and make sure the issue of youthful enthusiasm is strength for the animal liberation movement rather than its Achilles heel? Here are two suggestions directed to the Animal Liberation Front support community:

- 1) Provide and offer an experienced activist to speak on stage after a band has played to clarify points and concepts raised by the band, and

Providing and offering experienced speakers on the ALF is fundamental for the direct action community to move forward. It is the job of veteran animal liberation activists to train and educate others to speak on, organize, and practice direct action. Thus, we need to hear from veterans in order to create continuity with those who come into the movement. Of course, it is always nice to hear long-time animal rights activists speak on the ALF, but it is especially inspiring to hear a new, young, passionate, and thoughtful speaker as well. It is often these speakers who can serve as reminders that the movement's legacy is alive and such newbies often will push current discourse forward into connections with new topics, such as how feminism relates to the ALF, or the ALF's use of technopolitics. There is a balance at stake, then. On the one hand, measures of control need to be exerted on how the ALF is presented – and veteran activists are the people directly responsible for this. On the other hand, we need to allow ALF discourse to build and expand, rather than treating it as an exclusive domain available only to the few. We should not pretend to own the ALF. If we try to own it, or behave as if we do, then we will suffocate it and soon kill it. Conversely, we need to train, assist, and open up space for new activists to speak on this very radical organization, to be at forums,

conferences, and/or meetings, and make a greater show of force. The best venues to begin speaking on the ALF are arguably at one's own local animal rights organization, like the Syracuse Animal Rights Organization (SARO). After that, ask collectives such as the Grassroots Animal Rights Conference (GARC) or the Center on Animal Liberation Affairs (CALA) to speak at their events, or in CALA's case, try to contribute something to its journal. Sure, one might not be a veteran activist, but hopefully GARC, CALA, and other similar national and international organizations will be responsive if the presentation is exciting, the demeanor serious, and the thoughts fresh. As long as one prepares with someone else that is thoroughly knowledgeable about animal liberation issues and who can proof one's talk or article for facts, theory, and structure, one should feel confident that their point of view will be welcomed. To reiterate, however, veteran activists should always be contacted to provide constructive critique.

- 2) Have a table with more than simple flyers and literature about fur, veganism, and the present PETA campaign, by including literature aimed at educating someone interested in the ALF and the workings of the liberation movement.

In our opinion, there is certain literature that can serve as good models for future work and be considered trusted sources for information on the ALF and animal liberation politics. Included in this category we would place (though there are certainly others): No Compromise magazine, Bite Back magazine, a flyer with the Introduction and Guidelines of the ALF, the Animal Liberation Primer pamphlet, Memories of Freedom, Final Nail, Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Reflections on the Liberation of Animals, Free the Animals, and a number of theoretical articles from Arkangel magazine (established by Ronnie Lee, the founder of the ALF). This list comprises something like a complete table, anything less and you are risking a weak link in the movement. You can get most of this literature off of the Internet by e-mailing No Compromise, Bite Back Magazine, or other direct action support groups. One group that tables well and provides highly inclusive educational literature specifically at hardcore and punk shows is CounterPoint, a group based out of Central New York and which tours cross-country.

These are two forms of education that will drive the liberation movement forward and greater attention should be paid to the method and content of each. It is true that education is not the key that will unlock true revolution, but revolution will not materialize without it. As the great liberatory educator Paulo Freire once suggested, revolutions in society require revolutions in education and vice-versa. It is our job in the animal liberation movement to propound the sort of larger social education that will ensure a more free and better tomorrow. This begins by the concentrated and continued education of ourselves first and foremost.