

**APRIL 23**

# Country Joe Band 2004: 'Uncle Sam needs you'

**T**aking the stage at a community center in the small Northern California town of Bolinas, a group of four musicians quickly showed themselves to be returning as a vibrant creative force centered very much in the present.

Not that the music of Country Joe and the Fish ever really disappeared. Since the release of the band's first two albums in 1967 – "Electric Music for the Mind and Body" along with "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die" – many of its songs have meandered through the memories and semi-consciousness of millions of Americans who came of age a third of a century ago.

Now reconstituted with four of the legendary group's original five members, the new Country Joe Band has just begun to tour. When I saw them perform, midway through April, the music was as tightly effusive as ever, with poetic lyrics mostly brought to bear on two perennials: love and death.

Their new song "Cakewalk to Baghdad" is in sync with Country Joe McDonald's compositions that stretch back to the escalating years of the Vietnam War. With the post-"victory" occupation of Iraq in its thirteenth month bringing death to many people including children, his old song "An Untitled Protest" remains unfailingly current. Sung the other night, it was no more dated than today: "Red and swollen tears tumble from her eyes / While cold silver birds who came to cruise the skies / Send death down to bend and twist her tiny hands / And then proceed to target 'B' in keeping with their plans." No less than its previous incarnation, the Country Joe Band exemplifies how rock music can transcend itself as an art form. This is no small feat for any musicians, including those who create songs that encourage resistance to deadly routines of the status quo.

Rhetoric is destructive to art. On the other hand, ambiguous or self-absorbed artistry is apt to be isolated from key social realities. But the Country Joe Band is not agitprop or evasive. For an overview, take a look at [www.countryjoe.com](http://www.countryjoe.com) – a website that reflects how a creative process can stay grounded in humanistic projects of our times.

Songs that Country Joe and the Fish released in 1967 are so intricate that an

## MEDIABEAT 2004 | NORMAN SOLOMON

attentive listener is bound to agree with McDonald's recent comment to an interviewer: "Those songs are very complex and difficult to play, they're less rock 'n' roll and perhaps more ... well, symphonic." Rendered by the Country Joe Band, the psychedelic sound can seem orchestral. Yet there's still no reliance on high-tech sound effects.

By now, apparently, we'd be foolish to take the integrity of talented artists for granted. Maybe, as a late '60s advertisement proclaimed, "the man can't bust our music" – but the corporate system can sure water it down a lot. Or turn music into outright pabulum. Television showcases plenty of grim results when so many knees bend toward corporatized altars.

These days, cynicism about famous musicians with protest credentials is running high. Weeks ago, Bob Dylan began to appear in a Victoria's Secret commercial. It may seem that the times they are a prostitutin'. Media outlets are filled with ads, commercial plugs and vapid – or corrosive – content leaving the impression that gifted artists sell out to the almighty dollar sooner or later. "Today's musical superstars seem more interested in hawking their clothing lines and name-brand perfumes than in any meaningful form of political action," magazine editor Leslie Bennetts wrote in a Los Angeles Times essay. By coincidence, the article appeared on the same day that I saw the Country Joe Band in concert.

Unlike the profuse and dreary examples now personified by Dylan, quite a few musicians – renowned or scarcely known – have successfully struggled to retain creative control over their work. They continue to resist the corporate juggernauts that routinely flatten talent into the pap of pop.

A new development to celebrate is the rise of the Country Joe Band. While standing the test of time, music from the ensemble group resonates profoundly each day as young Americans in uniform do their best to survive in a faraway country: "And pound their feet into the sand of shores they've never seen / Delegates from the western land to join the death machine / And we send cards and letters."

It happens that Country Joe McDonald and the band's other musicians have returned to public space together at a time when many American soldiers – following the orders of the commander in chief – are continuing to kill and be killed. An old question is also new: What are we fighting for?

"And those who took so long to learn the subtle ways of death / Lie and bleed in paddy mud with questions on their breath / And we send prayers and praises."

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