

"Oil"
from the CD
The Mechanics of Destruction

Matthew Herbert



(Editors' Note: The following are the "liner notes" to Matthew Herbert's CD, *The Mechanics of Destruction*, which is available on line at Mr. Herbert's website [<http://matthewherbert.com/>](http://matthewherbert.com/).)

Despite this album being in the planning stages for over a year, it has suddenly found a whole new position in the world. Instead of being seen as a personal soundtrack to western society's deliberate and malicious empirical ambitions, it feels defensive in its attacks on an America so tragically transformed.

I do however see a link between the position we find ourselves in now and the attitudes and aspirations of the influential anti-globalisation movement. Whilst it would be disrespectful and dangerous to trace a direct link from the behaviour of large corporations to acts of terrorism, there is now such a mass of evidence to show how the relationship between commerce and state has become so deeply entwined, it is impossible to imagine western governments acting in matters of war where there isn't the promise of

profit. Indeed, Rwanda had so little to offer in terms of resources or useful geographic positioning, the West turned a blind eye (along with many others) to the rapid and predicted genocide.

Today it seems rather convenient that a vigorously violent American retaliation, backed once more by an equally hypocritical English government, turns not to Saudi Arabia from where the hijacking pilots came and where the Taliban had received consistent support, but to Afghanistan, a country whose population is dying of hunger, who, to my knowledge, has never committed acts of terror, either in America or the UK, but whose country happens to be the central point in the long-planned Unicol pipeline carrying the vast Caspian sea oil reserves to an oil-obsessed west keen to move the flow of oil away from the Saudi Arabian monopoly. One has only to look at the illegal, vicious and devastating 'war' on Iraq to see how many people we are prepared to sacrifice for cheaper petrol in our cars. Cars which incidentally we should not be using anyway. It all begins to feel very familiar when you consider that George W Bush, like his father before him, is a fully paid-up member of the oil companies. It is of no surprise then that Exxon, Bush's biggest backer was so successful in wrecking the Kyoto climate control protocol. The bedfellows of power and business have never been so insidious or utterly dangerous.

There now exists a whole new breed of cynical politicians keen to exploit the invigorated American mood to dampen calls for fundamental shifts in policy, privacy rules and education expansion, and promote such bizarre ideas as 'freedom through trade' as US trade representative Robert Zoellick put it. One writer even went as far as to imply that the reason terrorism exists in places like Afghanistan is because there aren't any Starbucks. As for the state of domestic commerce after all this, the airline companies are showing that it's business as usual. As an industry it fails its public by not providing adequate security (unsurprising since it was vociferous in lobbying for minimum security at airports) and then when the public choose not to use its services anymore, demanded to be bailed out with taxes from the same public it's been ripping off for years. If people choose to stop buying my records in future, I am pleased to know that I can expect the government to give me money to carry on regardless.

This underlines what has become the defining myth of our time: the myth of the free market. The unashamed subsidies and tax incentives offered to large companies; the heavily-weighted free trade agreements that allow companies to use cheap labour abroad to raise profits domestically; the de-regulated mergers position allowing the creation of mega-corporations; monopolistic behaviour to put rivals out of business, all coupled with the ability of these companies to shift large portions of its wealth around the world to avoid paying taxes; paying itself handsome performance-related bonuses despite poor business results and generally paying as little as possible back to those from whom it has drained the most. It all contributes to a distinctly non free-market. Furthermore, it appears that along with its memory, it has forgotten its conscience. Hollywood has appeared to make no apology for its continual representation of domestic terror as a worthy form of entertainment and when it comes to TV, adverts including ones for robot war-style kids' toys with strap on missiles continued throughout the day on September 11th. Despite France showing no adverts for two days as a sign of respect, American TV stations hardly

paused. In our hotel room in Manhattan that day, the shopping channel was back in business by the afternoon. We should also not forget in these days of anthrax scares that American companies made and exported the stuff, including to Saddam Hussein who was then bombed for not showing it to them.

These are not times when companies have suddenly started to act with integrity.

It would be wrong to merely vilify single companies when often whole chunks of the same industries are at fault. Nor should we criticize companies just for providing products the public wish to buy, although food is easier to sell with huge amounts of sugar added. Coke for example is the most popular drink due, in part, to the enormous and continuous annual marketing budget rather than simply being the public's number one choice. Once again, the myth of the free-market is that choice alone has determined the population's consumption habits. Starbucks' ruthless pursuit of local coffee houses to target blanket coverage of their own peculiar version of coffee has less to do with customer choice than unlimited financial reserves. The specific companies I have used often serve as a spokesperson for their industry. For example, whilst the Gap is a well-known entity, the rag trade as a whole has undergone significant shifts by expanding its workforce away from a domestic immigrant workforce willing to work for lower wages in poor conditions and moved the whole manufacturing base to remote countries with sympathetic governments and large poverty-ridden populations.

Whilst McDonalds is clearly the biggest of the fast food chains, there is no shortage of companies vying for their top slot and Nike for example, for all its public criticism, may well now operate a system of employment in Asia that is better than Adidas for example. What is as important though is the public perception of these companies. The hijacking of public space with advertising, marketing and sponsorship has meant that advertising is consumed in much greater quantities than factual programs, thus creating a society informed by half-truths, exaggerations, distortions or even lies. Weirdly enough though, instead of voting in elections, we now are taught to exert our opinions through consumer choice: a very one dimensional activity in comparison to voting which requires a legal relationship with your representative, whether you choose to exercise it or not.

In this shift then from state power to corporate power, the link between Nike and Kissinger becomes clearer. Post world war two, business-minded governments funded and empowered by their chosen benefactors have more than ever pursued policies that serve only 'national interest' i.e. those companies or individuals with access on enough of a regular basis to push their personal agendas. The criticism of the behaviour of politicians is reduced to examinations of private affairs rather than bloody indiscretions abroad. It is this process of 'commercial selection' that has so far rewarded Kissinger with statesman-like status, lucrative book tours and protection from being brought before a human rights court to explain how the murder of another democratically elected leader on foreign soil is all part of the just war against communism. It is also of no surprise that Nike trainers are now made in the very countries Kissinger was so instrumental in 'freeing' i.e. arming and supporting brutal murderous regimes who were responsible for millions of deaths but were easy to do business with: Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam etc.

As for the album, it had become time to make that link with the political role played by my own music in a system I criticise. Music is largely political in two principal ways, either operating separately from the hegemony by offering either an escape or an alternative, or by offering a critique of it. I have come to realize that whilst alluding to my own political discontent in harmony and lyrical metaphor (it was only in the song 'Hymnformation' by Doctor Rockit that I had been explicitly critical of things: chillingly the phrase "we're selling anthrax to our enemies") the time had come to present an overt critique of it. What I find most appealing about this process, is that it can be done without lyrics. Incidentally, the album was also completed without the use of computer plug-ins.

Since music is the organisation of noise, the selection and structuring of that noise becomes a metaphor for the organisation of a society. If, as I started out, you are merely sampling the noises from your kitchen appliances it is quite clear that you have nothing better to worry about. If you are sampling the noise of someone dropping cluster bombs on you, the selection is part of the message. Therefore as my imagination has caught up with my worldview, helped in no small way by writers such as John Cage and Jaques Attali, the music on 'The Mechanics of Destruction' has become my forum.

I also derived great pleasure from consuming these omnipotent products in ways that they weren't designed for. I didn't drink the Coke, watch the TV or eat the Big Mac. In part then, it's a chance to reclaim these products that have filled the world's landfill sites with non-biodegradable plastics and people's stomachs with less than healthy food. It's also a journey of rubbish, turning shit into music, the temporary into permanence, and the identical into the unique. Whether you actually like the music or not, is an entirely other matter...

This album is profit-free.



Oil

(This audio file requires Quicktime.)

Sole sound source: 2 cans of oil and 1 can of brake fluid. The link between oil and destruction is a long and unpleasant one. From the Gulf war, fought over control of the far east's oil supply, to the division of Africa according to its resources and the courting of brutal regimes such as Sudan and Burma for its reserves; from the disastrous environmental spills to its vast polluting off-shoots: petrol, etc., oil has a decidedly unpleasant effect wherever it appears. It's time to switch to renewable resources. Fast.