

# Haranguismo

## 2.1.03

A wonderfully various crowd in a festive mood, a concert to benefit the anti-war groups, five well-known performers, a balmy winter's night in Berkeley....a night to look forward to.

Yet once it started, a kind of depression came over me. We were of course exhorted strenuously by speakers well aware of a live radio broadcast.. The exhorting was of the barrage style, political phrases like "not in our name" screamed hard with arms waving upward to get people standing as house lights flashed on. A rhetoric familiar in the shallow US militant Left in which "revolutionary" cadre groups attempt to slightly popularize their radical ideas to tailor to the pop sensibilities they are trying to sway. The clenched fist raised high, the yell to "give it up for [ x ]", the emotional tenor gauged close to the edge of blind rage. It's getting pretty familiar at the marches and rallies. The first group to perform was Chuck D's, and it seemed continuous in haranguist tone with the speeches. Again lots of moments when the crowd was almost punished with demands to join in some empty mechanical phrase, like "STOP THE BOMB!". It never felt spontaneous, with houselights flashing like the old "Applause" signs held up in live TV variety shows.

Then more intervals of speechifying. By now I was alienated. But a good half of the audience was on automatic, jumping to their feet at the least cue, giving out whoops as punctuation.

The next group, Ozomatli, is a lot more interesting as a band, but they fed the mood tacitly with a very hyper stage presence and a couple of impromptu speeches which all fired the same audience giddiness. There was a mandatory exhortation about Mumia Abdul Jamal, and then a recording of his voice, lecturing us dryly on the goodness of music that serves the end of political truth as well as art. Lots of whooping & fists.

The poet Saul Williams then came out alone with the curtains down, and performed a couple of energetic "slam"-type poems, which kept the crowd mania going. But then an unusual thing happened. He began to talk in a normal voice introducing his next poem, giving a little personal background, some introspective philosophizing. At first he was getting whoops after every sentence or breath-pause, no matter what he said. But then he seemed to want to swim against the stream, and kept going in a reflective mood, talking about the need to realize how empty materialistic culture is, how Cobain & Jim Morrison got to the point of rarefied success & then the distress of feeling "this is all it is?"....and the crowd slowed down a little...even let him finish his thoughts without hollering. It seemed a Herculean effort, that even disoriented Williams as he was doing it. I greatly respected him for it, but it didn't really turn the tide...Many speeches peppered and hectored us before the evening was done, and the crowd went right back to its fawning & cued responses.

There's a much different feeling in a popular arena when a band or singer taps into the reveling needs of a big crowd. We've all felt that, the spontaneous wave of back & forth musical madness that makes a great performance. It's also very different in a meeting hall or protest event when a great speaker seems to rise to the occasion, touching everyone & speaking one's best inner thoughts, so that in a throng you want to give your all in cheering and enthusiasm.

But what was going on at that concert was neither. The speakers acted as if they had already gotten

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our endorsement for great oratory. And the crowd never was really given the chance to fall in love with the performers. It was already "the greatest concert ever". We were already a triumphant anti-war movement. It was the perfect soil for demagoguery.

One wants to say: *see how you feel as the actual carnage begins*. We haven't stopped anything yet. This was more a night of patting selves on the back and pretending that the really cool Sixties thing is back. It was hard not to feel that the USA is the least likely place in the world to develop a politically sophisticated and philosophically honest peace movement. Look who we are, for pete's sake. Even our gesturing is violent. Look what our kids actually know about history or the myriad cultures of the world. Look how much time we elders spend in the pleasing comforts of consumption and diversion. Who would expect us to have the wisdom or concentration to skip over the scruffy phases of opposition to an Imperial War? The rise of demagogues, the police agents taking up half the membership rolls of the radical parties, the fools taking bait of guns or bombs from provocateurs, the clumsy legal defenses, the extreme dogma clashes, the hysteria and frustration as month follows month of terrible news and the months drag into years. The really cool Sixties thing was riven through with massacres & assassinations and frame-ups, with the Inferno living in the flat below Eden, with nine years of war crimes "in our names" and the constant daily threat of total thermonuclear extermination.

When the old ones look back they want to tell you: *don't follow leaders....*