

From Berkeley to Broadway

The (R)evolution of *American Idiot*

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

The Bay Area's very own Green Day has sold over 22 million records in the United States, but who imagined that their concept album, *American Idiot*, would end up a compelling musical on the Great White Way? For the punk band that came to fame at 924 Gilman Street in Berkeley in the late '80s, this bold and brilliant move culminated on April 20th at the rock opera's Broadway opening.

Throughout the evening, cameras, chic attire, and applause were plentiful, and an after-party at the Roseland Ballroom featured *American Idiot* fare, complete with platters of Pop Tarts, Twizzlers, hot dogs, and mini sugar cones crammed with Guinness ice cream.

For Billie Joe Armstrong, Green Day's front man, who sang show tunes at hospitals and nursing homes as a boy, things had come full circle. For theatergoers, it suddenly seemed plausible that a mosh pit might form among the velvet-upholstered seats that once bore witness to show tunes of a slightly different nature — say, *Oklahoma's* "Surrey With a Fringe on Top."

Yet those plush seats at the St. James Theater also witnessed the debut of The Who's *Tommy*, whose revolutionary rock musical delighted audiences years ago. Much like that show, *American Idiot* signifies a leap into uncharted waters for both the band and the stage.

The musical features songs from Green Day's *American Idiot* album, as well as several from their Grammy Award-winning new release, *21st Century Breakdown*. The stellar cast — led by Tony Award-winner John Gallagher, Jr. — rocks out with a backdrop of television screens spewing images of rolling tanks in Iraq, George Bush, sitcoms, and upside-down American flags. So the lyric goes: "Don't want to be an American idiot/One nation controlled by the media." All this amid blazing lights, ani-



ated guitars (along with the occasional violin and cello), and passionate punk rock performers makes for a truly electric show.

Inspired by the album's narrative, acclaimed Tony Award-winning director of *Spring Awakening* Michael Mayer approached Green Day in June of 2008 with the hope of bringing the record to life. Assembling a notable creative team, their vision evolved into an eight-member onstage band and a cast of 19. In September 2009, the punk opera premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, becoming the top-grossing show in the theater's history.

Exploring the struggles of contemporary American youth in a post-9/11 world, the show portrays three friends from the suburbs: Johnny, who leaves for the big city and gets tangled up in a tornado of drugs and sex; Will, who takes up residence on his couch with beer and bong when his pregnant girlfriend leaves him; and Tunny, who ships off to Iraq. Confusion abounds for the distressed dudes, whose angst-filled lives expose the malaise of



meaninglessness that plagues so many in today's techno-saturated, ADD world. Dizzying scenes intentionally crafted for sensory overload leave the audience alternating between tender and feisty, angry and hopeful.

In these rapidly changing times, young people in particular want to see live theater they can relate to — something relevant to their generation. And who but Green Day, a Berkeley band whose rich body of work was birthed in the Bay Area, can offer such a timely piece? 🍌

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