

Grass-Roots Campaign

HeadCount aims its voter-registration drive at a group with a history of choosing pot over politics.

By Dan Morrell

Frat boys in clean cargo pants chug light domestics, would-be ravers in oversized jeans twirl Glow Sticks, middle-aged men in dresses ride rolling coolers, and well-groomed girls in sunglasses huddle around Jettas; all are attending the same concert.

Nervous high-schoolers shuffle down the lines of cars, searching for new glass pipes, nuggets, and grilled cheese, predictably in that order. Hooded salesmen walk briskly through the crowd, some whispering their wares, others boldly touting them with no regard for the world outside the parking lot: "Doses!" "Kind bud!" "Molly!" The loud hiss of nitrous tanks is randomly interrupted by the pop of overfilled balloons, which is followed by an empathetic chorus of "Awww," and, sometimes, cries of "Five-O!" Audience cheers from the bootlegs screaming out of mammoth stereo systems overpower heated discussions about set lists. The smells of veggie burritos, lazy pot smoke, and a potent mixture of patchouli and body odor all compete for attention.

Asking people in the middle of such a scene to increase their political involvement is akin to walking into a keg party and trying to sell life insurance. But that's exactly what the young idealists who work for HeadCount, a jam-band-fan voter-registration organization, are doing.

If they're lucky, the people manning HeadCount's booths—or approaching revelers in the parking lots—get a giggle and a "No, thanks." Or, as volunteer Shawn Gallagher, 30, an environmental lawyer from Pittsburgh, found out at a Dave Matthews Band show this summer, they can also get a "Fuck you, ya hippie."

Anger seems to be a common response from the crew in the lots. Alan Packman, chief of operations for HeadCount, recalls a lot of ire at the shows he's worked. "You get a lot of 'Our vote doesn't matter' or 'It doesn't matter who you vote

for' or 'It's all rigged,'" says Packman, 23, a political strategist for LSG Strategies in D.C. Packman processes registrations and creates the guidelines and rules that direct HeadCount's 1,800 volunteers across the country.

Packman first read about HeadCount in January on a message board at Phantasy-tour.com, a Web site that allows fans of eight of the most popular jam bands to play a sort of fantasy-sports game with their idols by predicting set lists. He wrote an e-mail to the nascent group, asking how he could help. One of the people he began exchanging e-mails with was HeadCount co-founder Andy Bernstein.

Bernstein's inspiration came this past winter, after one too many frustrating conversations with friends and colleagues about the state of the union.

"Enough complaining, enough throwing things at the television—I'm gonna do something," recalls the 32-year-old, a reporter for a sports trade magazine in Manhattan. "The idea hit me right away." In his vision, he would take advantage of his high profile in the jam-band community (he was a contributor to three volumes of *The Phammer's Almanac*, a text that quenches Phish fans' thirst for minutiae) to further his newfound desire to give improvisational-music fans a shot of activism. It would be like Rock the Vote, he figured, but stoner-specific.

Bernstein reads from the HeadCount action plan. "While this group [of fans] is large in number—approximately one million across the U.S.—and has its roots in 1960s counterculture, it has not been a politically active one." Jam-band fans skew young, he adds—which doesn't help. According to data from the 2000 election, less than a third of those between the ages of 18 to 24 voted, and less than half were even registered to vote.

Packman attributes these numbers to apathy, complemented by a dearth of

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Weed the People: Packman hopes to strengthen the jam scene's political constitution.

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energizing issues and a general lack of political awareness. "People may not be learning enough in their junior and senior year of high school," he says. "And some people may be hesitant to vote based on the fact that they just don't know. They know 'Republican' and 'Democrat,' but they don't know who stands for what and what they themselves should stand for—if they should stand for anything at all."

"For those people who felt that politics wasn't relevant to them, we're trying to give them an emotional connection," notes Bernstein. "And that's where the artists come in."

About 30 bands allow HeadCount to register voters at their shows, and there are 20 "partner bands" running voter-registration drives on their own. HeadCount's board of directors includes Dead guitarist Bob Weir and moe guitarist Al Schneider. "Bob Weir talked about us onstage at every Dead show this summer," says Bernstein. "He hasn't talked about a cause or a charity or an issue in 35 years."

Musicians have also provided the organization with financial backing, which helps defray the costs of three major tours, postage, and supplies for booths at concerts. "I can tell you that we got \$15,000 from Dave Matthews, \$15,000 from the Dead, and \$35,000 from benefit concerts," says Bernstein. A recent Gov't Mule concert held at Colorado's famed Red Rocks Amphitheatre aided HeadCount by donating \$2 from the price of each ticket.

Personal donations helped fund the public-service television spots produced by HeadCount, which began airing nationwide a few weeks ago on TBS and TNT. In the ads, Dave

Matthews, Phish's Trey Anastasio, and members of the Dead—their bands forming the major triumvirate of the scene—all encourage their legions to get out there and participate in the Great Democracy. While comparatively expensive, Bernstein says, the commercials constitute a cornerstone of HeadCount's strategy. "No matter how detached you are," he argues, "if Trey Anastasio appears on your TV and tells you how important it is, you take notice."

If jam-band musicians tend to lean left—they are, after all, presumptive heirs to the political and social ideology of their '60s counterparts—jam bands as a group have usually remained apolitical. But according to Disco Biscuits' bassist Marc Brownstein, who co-founded HeadCount with Bernstein, things have changed, not only for him, but for a majority of those associated with the scene. In the run-up to November's presidential election, the Dave Matthews Band has played benefits for Democratic candidate John Kerry, and such jam-band crossover acts as Ben Harper and My Morning Jacket have participated in fundraisers arranged by MoveOn PAC, one of the best-known of the anti-President Bush groups.

But the scene is not as homogeneous as the musicians might like. As Gallagher tells it, as many as 200 of the 1,200 voters he had signed up as of Sept. 15 registered as Republicans. Packman, who works shows in the D.C. area, sees similar numbers. "It's not 50-50," he says. "But I would say that there's about 20 to 30 percent Republican." He cites recent shows in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama as a factor in those figures, and he should know: He handles a good amount of the registrations personally in the

group's "processing center"—his apartment in Falls Church, Va.

Packman adds that he was surprised at the number of young GOPers who can cheer both Bob Weir and Bob Dole. "I guess the music you listen to doesn't change anything about how you group up in society," says Packman. "I think this is a progressive, enlightened, forward-thinking group of people, and [you'd assume that] people that aren't apt to see things that way, in this sort of expanding-one's-mind realm, wouldn't go to 57 Dead shows. But someone's political leanings might not be aligned that way."

The majority of people who register, however, are lefties, and they often try to coax the HeadCount volunteers into admitting that they are backing Kerry. "People try to test our volunteers all the time," says Bernstein. "Fans will say, 'Can I register to vote for George Bush?' and our volunteers will say, 'Absolutely!' and hand them a clipboard."

Still, the group has its hopes. "We're obviously cognizant of the battleground states, and have teams there, and have as many shows as possible," concedes Packman, whose employer was contracted by the Democratic National Committee to develop a voter-contact program in key states in the 2000 elections. "And we're aware that these are the places where people need to be voting."

The last few notes of the first set of Phish's two-day farewell concert hang in the air over the grounds of Newport State Airport in Coventry, Vt. When the feedback and cheers finally give way to a low murmur of awe and exclamation, the giant monitors on both sides of the stage light up above the smoky crowd, encouraging the masses to

register at the HeadCount table, located near the main thoroughfare of the camping area.

Among the dazed crowd are a troupe of young women in fairy costumes led by a stocky man in Lycra; a guy dressed as Batman; and the hordes of exasperated, woozy dreadlocks pulling themselves through 6 inches of mud. Aside from the odd "Fuck Bush" hat or "One-Term President" shirt, there isn't much political expression going on. The guy in the hat seems to have spent most of his time at the festival so far discussing various types of drugs, then taking them. It's clear that asking this bunch to organize itself is a tall order.

Still, a band of 20 HeadCount volunteers persists, both at the booth and in roving teams throughout the festival. Over three days, they will manage to sign up about 1,300 voters. Attendance reports vary, but there are at least 60,000 at Coventry.

With only 40,000 voters registered to date and the summer concert season nearing its end, HeadCount seems far from its stated goal of 100,000 new voters by Election Day. And the group is \$30,000 in the red.

Brownstein interprets concertgoers' apathy as almost a core value. "Our scene is an escape mechanism for people that don't want to be thinking about politics, that don't want to think about social issues," he says. "It's like, 'Come on into our little vacuum and enjoy our fantasy land.'"

"There is misconception that all the jam-band kids are off in their own little world, with no respect for authority, with no respect for anything," counters Packman. "They hop on the bus, go on tour, and sell grilled cheese. But I think that we've lit a fire under the scene and shown that we do care about issues." CP