Words from the wasteland

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Bedtime for Democracy is the fifth album from the Kennedys and it follows last year's release of *Frankenchrist*. With the release of *Frankenchrist* came the by now well-known litigation against the band backed by the recently-emerged P.M.R.C., a collection of influential and conservative Washington politicians' wives dedicated to the censorship of recorded music. The suit brought against *Frankenchrist* was due to the nature of the poster included in the album as part of its packaging, which the band and artistic circles around the world considered art and the American religious right considered pornography. Although the suit is still unresolved, the amount of financial pressure exerted on both the band and their label, Alternative Tentacles, made the release of this fifth album difficult. *Bedtime for Democracy* was released, however, and in many ways it is a response to the attack against them by the P.M.R.C. and what have been their targets of criticism and satire for the past eight years — the American right and the repression of expression and individuality it represents.

As is usual with a release from the band, you get much more than just an album for your money. Included in the gatefold sleeve is a poster of bizarre newspaper clippings entitled FUCK FACTS, as they included on the *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables* and *Plastic Surgery Disasters* albums, as well as a newsletter explaining both the case against the Dead Kennedys and the organization that has been set up to fight artistic censorship, particulary that caused by the P.M.R.C.

The Dead Kennedys have always been in my opinion the foremost political band of any country anywhere. Their lyrics are long, involved, perceptive, insightful, and incisive. Singer Jello Biafra writes most of the lyrics and his attacks are directed against nearly all the facets of conservative, apathetic, American consumer culture. Consequently, one can suffer from information overload when listening to a song. Kennedy songs are not easy to sing along with, but I'm sure they would agree that if you want easy music, the MTV option is still unfortunately available. A lyric sheet is of course included.

"Triumph of the Swill" is the central song on side one. It is the first direct address to the people who want to censor rock music and the forces that are persecuting and prosecuting the Dead Kennedys. It begins with the incident of the parent whose son shot himself in the head with his father's handgun while listening to an Ozzy Osbourne record. The father came to the conclusion that it was the presence of the Ozzy record in the home rather than his own pistol that was responsible for his son's death, in a staggering feat of conservative American logic. Triumph of the Swill also attacks the idea of music as an escape from reality, a fundamental philosophy of the Kennedys. They feel that music should not discourage independent thought, as argued in "MTV Get Off the Air", but rather it should spark it.

"Macho Insecurity", the next song, deals with another of the Kennedys' frequent targets: the macho, unstable, destructive personality that they feel society forces on men. The song is against this sort of conformity and stupidity, but really doesn't say anything new or significant on the subject. They say the same things much better on such songs as "Goons of Hazzard".

Finally on the first side is "Cesspools in Eden", another song about environmental destruction and corporate indifference to the damage to both the ecology or the people they have poisoned. It is very similar to the song *Moon Over Marin* from *Plastic Surgery Disasters*. All about the diseases that develop in a suburban community that has been built over an illegal chemical waste dump, the song stands out on this side because it is slower and much longer than the others. Musically, it reminds me of the longer, slower, more intricate playing on Frankenchrist, with the atonal guitar provided by East Bay Ray.

Frankenchrist was criticized by many punks as being too slow and not the thrash-verging-on-metal that many other hardcore bands have been featuring in the past few years. This is entirely the wrong position from which to criticise the Dead Kennedys as they are a band for listening to and understanding and to reduce them to the level of generic hardcore is a grave error.

On the flip side, "Gone With My Wind", a political satire song, is a kind of dramatic monologue as the president's aides explain to him why he has the lump on his head the next morning. It seems he had a little too much to drink last night and in a fit of depression tried to press the button. He had to be overpowered. Oh well, it's another day . . .

Following this song comes a trilogy of songs which show just how strong a stand the Kennedys are willing to take. In these songs they attack their own fans, and even go so far as to question themselves. That they are willing to criticize their own power base — the hardcore community — shows that on this album they are not going to play it safe, and they are not going to compromise their principles when it appears they apply to their own fans.

The first song is "Anarchy for Sale", a song about how punk has been bought out by the corporations and music business. A certain kind of punk fashion has been foisted on the scene and pressure is exerted to consume these fashions. Buy that anarchy button! But those studded bracelets! You can't be a punk without them. Of course, there is a problem here. Alternative Tentacles also produces a line of such merchandise — band T shirts and stickers, etc. But I think perhaps the target here is the pressure exerted to conform to these fashions and the people who are willing to conform in their nonconformity.

Following this is "Chickenshit Conformist". It is a sweeping criticism of punk that starts with the memorable line "Punk's not dead, it just deserves to die." Obviously this is another manifesto-type song, along the lines of the political epic "Stars and Stripes of Corruption" from their last album. Directed at the people who want all hardcore to sound the same, the people who encourage stupid heavy metal "crossover" music, the bands who refuse to take chances and explore new musical and lyrical territory, the promoters who sign only the most expensive, stupid, violent bands possible and the punks who encourage all this behaviour and cooperate with it, this is the most radical song presented on this album.

The next song, "Where Do Ya Draw the Line", is a statement of their own sense of occasional indirection, and an indirection which must be felt in just about all leftist circles. They ask questions like: Can anarchy really work? Is direct action in which people are injured an ethical alternative? Amid all this there is also the criticism of movements that become rigid churches of leftist belief, movements that exclude people who share the common goal because of incidental difference in belief. In this song, the refrain is "I'm not telling you, I'm asking you." The Kennedys here are trying to provoke thought. It's good to see that they are aware of the debate that surrounds some of their own positions and are willing to accept differing opinions in search of a workable solution. They admit they are a band as much about questions as they are about criticisms and answers.

Finally, the twentieth song on Bedtime for Democracy is an East Bay Ray/Jello Biafra collaboration from 1984, "Lie Detector". The song criticises a subject being pressured by the interrogators so the lie detector will register negative. What the Kennedys really take issue with here is not so much of use of the machine as the principle behind its use — the assumption that one must prove innocence rather than guilt.

With *Bedtime for Democracy*, the Kennedys have responded to the attacks on artistic expression made by the American religious right, as well as continuing their criticism of the society that tolerates and encourages such censorship. The album is a political statement as well as an artistic one. It's also an album well worth owning.