



A collage featuring an American flag, a guitar, and the text "JAM THE VOTE". The background is a textured, layered composition. On the left, a portion of an American flag is visible, showing yellow stars on a blue field. To the right, red and white stripes of the flag are seen. A black electric guitar is positioned diagonally across the center, with its neck pointing towards the top left. The text "JAM THE VOTE" is overlaid in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. The letters are semi-transparent, allowing the underlying patterns and colors of the collage to be seen through them. The overall aesthetic is gritty and artistic, with a focus on American musical and political themes.

JAM  
THE  
VOTE



ANDY BERNSTEIN IS IN SAN FRANCISCO FOR THE Outside Lands festival. The *Pharmer's Almanac* author is staying with friends in San Francisco's Inner Richmond neighborhood, a few blocks from Golden Gate Park and about 15 blocks from where the festival will begin the next afternoon. We walk upstairs, into the home of Tappan and Morgan Vickery, a young married couple who are the San Francisco team leader and West Coast regional coordinator, respectively, for HeadCount, the voter registration organization Bernstein co-founded in 2003. The apartment is long and narrow, mildly cluttered, and guarded by a little brown and white spaniel named Cooper. My Morning Jacket is on the stereo. It's fairly typical for a pair of improvisational rock-loving 20-somethings in San Francisco.

It's funny. Bernstein heads what has become a nationally-based political organization. But meeting him here feels like going to meet a friend of a friend who's in town for the shows, staying with friends

from Brooklyn, and a State Supreme Court Justice. "He would say, 'This is just an example of what one person can do,'" Brownstein explains. "Don't ever feel that it's all too big, and you can't do anything."

So, when Bernstein called to talk about starting a music-centered voter-registration organization, Brownstein was already able to envision it not only happening but happening in a way that could alter the political landscape in the music scene, and even nationally.

Brownstein called Al Schnier from moe. Schnier called Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir. The musicians gathered their music industry contacts, and began systematically building an organization. They put together a board of directors, and started recruiting volunteers.

Over five years and three national election cycles, HeadCount has become a well-known organization, allied with larger networks of nonprofits that promote activism at shows, and nonpartisan voter registration across the country. Dave Matthews' Bama Works Foundation gave \$50,000 to fund volunteers on its summer tour; the

# HOW THE DAVE MATTHEWS BAND, PEARL JAM, WILCO, THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND AND OTHER FAVORITES ARE GETTING YOU TO THE POLLS.

who are also going to the shows. You know how the story goes. We're gathered around a big coffee table, talking about grass—grassroots, that is, and politics, and voter registration.

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HeadCount was born in 2003 in response to the policies of the Bush Administration, and the prospect of George W. Bush's re-election. Bernstein and his friends, like many people, were seeking ways to make the proverbial difference.

"I was a reporter at the time," he says. "I was on the phone with somebody, and the conversation turned to politics. I was so riled up, I was like, 'I've got to do something, what am I going to do?' And, like a minute later, I said, 'You know what? If I can do something to get fans of the bands I listen to to vote, that's what I can do.'"

Bernstein immediately called Disco Biscuits bassist Marc Brownstein, a high school pal.

Brownstein is a political junkie. He spends four hours a day reading and re-reading the news and opinion pieces online. It's in his blood though: his father, Irwin R. Brownstein, was a New York State legislator

Dead's Rex Foundation contributed \$5,000 to fund a HeadCount-OxFam voter information guide and Cents for Sense, an innovative program where a set cut of each concert ticket—50 cents or two dollars, say—goes to HeadCount. That's brought in \$60,000—including \$10,000 from Sound Tribe Sector 9 alone. Pearl Jam, Wilco, Jack Johnson, The Allman Brothers Band, RatDog, moe. and John Mayer all fund volunteers' travel. They also get money and logistical support from major promoters like Live Nation and Superfly, from private foundations and individual philanthropists, from media outlets such as this magazine, and direct contributions from regular folks.

They're plugged into legal advice, and can legally register voters in 47 states. They've registered a total of about 110,000 voters—50,000 just in the last year.

HeadCount has been getting tons of national press, including TV newsmagazines ("John Stossel *grilled* us" in an interview for *20/20*, says Brownstein). And when Weir played an April house party benefit in Washington D.C., it had to be moved to a bigger house. Too many D.C. muckymucks wanted in.

BY RICHARD B. SIMON

# JAM THE VOTE

The idea of registering voters at shows re-emerged in the jamband scene made sense, given that its denizens already organize themselves into music-centered social networks. It's brilliant, really—a 21st century grassroots political organization, based on networks that are already primed to expand exponentially (like some recursive virus). Similar to the bootleg tape-trading networks that spawned file-sharing or ride boards that became discussion forums, networks of music fans—who gather by the thousands several times each week, in town after town after town, for months at a time, all across the country—would prove a key nexus for political action. Especially among the wired Millennial Generation, which Bernstein and others describe as exceptionally civic-minded, community-oriented and poised to make a big impact in the world.

“That’s how we got involved,” says Tappan. “That’s why we stayed involved and engaged. In 2004, Morgan signed up right away—because he was a big Biscuits fan and got the email—and then he asked me to sign up, and then our best friend became the team leader in San Francisco. We just wanted to do everything that we could; it was a natural progression.”

It’s a common story, says Bernstein. HeadCount expands through circles of like-minded friends who dig live music and are also interested in politics and activism.

This year HeadCount teams have hit every major festival they can, as well as coliseum and arena shows, theaters and dancehalls. They’ve become so ubiquitous, Tappan explains, that people know to look for them—like the Greenpeace table at a Deadshow or WaterWheel at Phish.

It helps that the types of people who get really, really into bands like the Dead, Phish or the Disco Biscuits can be obsessive. And thorough.

Sitting around the Vickers’ brown flowered sectional sofa, Tappan and Bernstein compare the numbers of registrations they’ve processed at recent gigs. They got 1,000 registrations at Bonnaroo, and nearly that many at All Points West. Tappan’s in charge of the effort at Outside Lands. She really wants to beat the Bonnaroo numbers. She knows it will be tough: the tickets are expensive, so this will be an older crowd, and San Francisco is a very political town so people will tend to already be registered. She’s counting on doing a lot of address changes. Another vari-



(L-R): Bernstein and Brownstein at Camp Bisco during 20/20’s taping.

**“There are Republicans in the jamband scene—a lot of them.” — Marc Brownstein**

able is that the “Jack Team”—the HeadCount crew that’s touring aboard Jack Johnson’s bus—will be onsite on Sunday.

You can’t help but think that if they weren’t collecting voter registrations, they’d be collecting tapes, or ticket stubs or setlists. And, really, they’re doing that, too.

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When HeadCount burst onto the scene in 2004, it seemed from the outside to be a pretty sharp partisan idea: register Deadheads and their ilk to vote, and turn the political tide. RatDog frontman and Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir could say “It doesn’t matter who you vote for, just vote” all he wanted. He obviously didn’t want you to dance your way to the polls with “Throwin’ Stones” in your brain and flip the lever for George W. Bush.

But what may have started as a plan to get out the hippie vote has morphed into something bigger, and in the long run, more interesting for democracy. HeadCount has become focused not on trying to tip the scales of electoral politics to one party or the other, but to increase voter participation more generally, to arouse the youth vote, and stimulate civic engagement among people who in past decades were so busy dancing, they forgot to change the world.

HeadCount volunteers are heavily trained to avoid confrontation, especially in the cautious art of nonpartisanship. For example, how to respond to the Frequently Asked Question: “So, who are *you* voting for?” with-

out actually taking sides.

“It’s okay to say ‘Jerry Garcia,’” says Bernstein. “That’s allowed. As long as you don’t say what party[’s ticket] Jerry Garcia will be running on.”

Even in the initial planning, HeadCount was to be a nonpartisan organization. As it turns out, not everyone at a rock concert has the same political views—including the ones onstage.

“There are Republicans in the jamband scene—a lot of them,” says Brownstein, his voice a gruff Brooklynese. “Do we know that the Dead is for Obama? Yes, we do, because they keep staging these concerts, Deadheads for Obama. Can you assume that the Disco Biscuits are all for Obama? I don’t think that you can assume that. It would be a hard assumption to make.”

Bernstein echoes his partner’s contention.

“The overwhelming majority of people that we register—this is really interesting—do not claim a party,” notes Bernstein. “Anecdotally, there is a lot of support for third party candidates, and also for Ron Paul. You just hear about it in the field. So I think this sort of presumption that we’re like ten to one Democrats or things like that—nothing in our experience indicates that. On the other side of that, there is a value system and a predominance of progressives at a lot of the events that we go to.”

HeadCount has done outreach to other music scenes, at hip-hop and Latin rock festi-

vals, and at colleges (including organizations at historically black colleges and universities), and is now planning to go on the Music Builds Christian rock tour—a scene that's not known for its liberal politics.

What may have seemed a legal formality at first—a line to carefully toe to guard the organization's tax exempt status—has become HeadCount's core culture.

"The notion is that we could get a bunch of young people involved in democracy—not politics," Weir told the *Washington Post* in April. "It seems to me more than ever that if people just sit back and let the powers that be run the show, this country will slide inevitably to a plutocracy."

"Our volunteers and everyone in our organization are instructed very seriously on the issue of partisanship," says Brownstein. "They are instructed to register *anyone* to vote—Republican, Democrat, Independent, Libertarian, Green Party—whatever you are, we want you to vote. We *honestly don't care* who you vote for. Very quickly HeadCount became about participation in democracy. Even beyond that, it's poised to become the training facility for the grassroots, non-profit sector in the live music scene. We're training the activists of tomorrow today."

And HeadCount volunteers are zealously, jealously nonpartisan. While Nellie McKay sings at Outside Lands' solar stage, Tappan says that, between its stageside booth and ten roving volunteers with clipboards, HeadCount registered 143 voters on Friday, and had 200 more by late Saturday afternoon. She notes, with a competitive grin, that the Obama campaign (posted outside the gate) had only gotten eight registrations on Friday.

"See?" she says. "Nonpartisan is the much better approach."

★ ★ ★

Mike Rutz is holding a clipboard that says "VOTE HERE." He's got a crew-cut, a silver nose-ring and a close-cropped reddish-brown beard. He's registering his tenth voter today in the Polo Field, while Toots and The Maytals do the Reggay. He checks that the young woman's form is filled out correctly, gives her a sticker, and asks if she needs help finding her polling place.

Rutz, a HeadCount veteran who started on The Dave Matthews tour in '04, is touring this

year with Jack Johnson. "The 2004 election, we learned as we went," he says. "We learned from some of the mistakes of that tour, and really stepped it up."

For example, they learned to carry stickers and cards, and to have signs on the backs of their clipboards—little logistical tricks that make a big difference on the ground.

When I run into Tappan and Morgan during Johnson's festival-closing set at Outside Lands, they tell me they've registered more than 700 people. They didn't break 1,000, but they did pretty well for politically-engaged Northern California. As Morgan talks about the other sets he's seen, Tappan dances closer to the stage, until she disappears.

"I'd better go find my wife," Morgan says, and he follows her into the crowd. They're music fans, after all.

Two weeks later, the HeadCount booth at



On its way to 1,000 registered voters at Bonnaroo '08

Michael Franti's Power to the Peaceful festival, in the very same meadow in Golden Gate Park, is even busier than at Outside Lands. It's a young crowd, with a lot of college students. While Spearhead sings Musical Youth's "Pass the Dutchie," 12 young people sit in camp chairs and in the grass around the tent, filling out voter registration forms.

Volunteers, including Dr. Alli Higgins, the Mountain West regional coordinator who's flown out from Denver, help them navigate.

Tappan and Higgins discuss all the shows they've been to in the last few weeks: Nine Inch Nails at the Oakland Coliseum, three Dave Matthews shows at the Greek; Derek Trucks at a fest in Utah, gigs around the Democratic Convention in Denver. Tappan was so burnt she opted out of the Slow Food Nation festival the weekend between, which

Phil Lesh headlined.

Higgins introduces herself as Alli—she doesn't like to flaunt that she's a doctor, an internist who works in a Denver hospital by night ("They joke that I'm a 'nocturnist'"). In her free time, she organizes all the HeadCount teams in Colorado, Utah and Texas. She's really looking forward to going to Austin City Limits festival.

HeadCount volunteers are no slouches; the organization's website specifically warns stoners and slackers away. Morgan has a master's degree in environmental management, and works as a construction manager installing industrial solar systems. Tappan is working toward her MBA. She's been using HeadCount as the basis for school projects and then bringing what she's learned back to the organization. Both started as ground level volunteers in 2004, and purposefully worked to move into leadership positions by 2008. Now they hope to help map HeadCount's future.

"I think the most exciting organizational development is this 'What Next' committee that we were talking about," Morgan says.

HeadCount is looking toward the next thing, "leveraging the potential might of music nation toward things that we think are important," Bernstein says, beyond the 2008 election. That might include projects on the Gulf Coast, maybe reconstruction projects, or any of a hundred other ideas that will be "on

the wall."

They intend to stay non-partisan, to focus on community organizing in ways that find common ground among the warring electoral factions.

"I think if you ask both McCain and Obama, they will tell you that protecting the earth is important, that government should be fair, that people should have equal access to voting, and they will tell you that personal freedom and rights matter," says Bernstein. "These are potential areas that HeadCount can engage upon without picking sides."

For now, it's about getting voters registered, and reminding them to go to the polls.

"We are reminding people that voting is the pertinent issue of the day," Brownstein says, "because we can't get anything accomplished unless we're voting for the right people." ★