

# Music to a Politician's Ears



BY CHRISTOPHER SNOW HOPKINS

If you want to know the secret to motivating young voters, music may be the answer. Meet **Andy Bernstein**, cochairman and executive director of HeadCount, a group that registered more than 103,000 voters at concerts and music festivals in 2012.

This week HeadCount announced a strategic partnership with iCitizen, an app for mobile devices that allows users to skim policy-related news coverage and track the voting records of their elected officials.

In the coming year, the two organizations will set up “a co-branded event oasis” at hundreds of concerts and major music festivals. These pavilions—outfitted with charging stations, comfortable seating, and Wi-Fi connectivity—are designed to entice young people into the political milieu. “It’s all about getting them registered,” Bernstein said.

According to company lore, HeadCount started with a rant from its gregarious executive director about Guantanamo Bay.

“It began on a whim,” said Bernstein, a former writer for *SportsBusiness Journal*. “In late 2003, I was interviewing [an ESPN reporter] when he made an offhanded political remark, which prompted me to make an offhanded political remark. Before I knew it, we were having a spirited conversation about civil liberties.... I put the phone down, and I said to myself, ‘I’ve got to stop complaining, and I’ve got to do something.’”

Bernstein, an acolyte of the band Phish and coauthor of the 1998 compendium to the group called *The Pharmer’s Almanac*, dashed off an email to Marc Brownstein, bassist for the Disco Biscuits, and the two decided to start a voter-registration campaign for concertgoers.

“Between my contacts and Marc’s contacts, we were able to put together a board of directors,” Bernstein said. “By early 2004, people started coming out of the woodwork and asking how they could get involved.

“To this day, I can’t believe how fast we moved. By April 2004, we were registering voters at 25 concerts a week. Throughout it all, the concept never changed: We would set up card tables at concerts and build a community within a community.”

Fast forward to 2012. During the last election cycle, HeadCount registered more than 100,000 voters. Like concertgoers in general, these newly minted voters skewed toward a younger demographic: 44 percent of them were under the age of 24 and 65 percent under the age of 29.

Last year, HeadCount debuted #SoundOff, a mobile-friendly Web platform that allows users to tweet to members of Congress. “We really believe that to engage young Americans, you have to be on the cutting edge of technology, and you have to make it really easy and convenient,” Bernstein said. “We’re in an era where everything has become one click and one touch.”

Today, HeadCount collaborates with an eclectic array of artists—from Phish and the Dave Matthews Band to Jay-Z, Pearl Jam, and the Roots—and expects to be present at more than 500 concerts in the year to come. It has also formed alliances with progressive organizations like GLAAD and the NAACP, although Bernstein insists that HeadCount is resolutely nonpartisan.

“From the beginning, we wanted HeadCount to be neither Democratic nor Republican,” he said. “Voter registration should be something that everybody, or nearly everybody, can get behind.”

The iCitizen app, which embodies a mini-



Bernstein: Truly rocking the vote.

malist aesthetic, is “something new and fresh to make voter registration sexy,” he added. The iPhone version of iCitizen was introduced in November, and the Android version will be released at the end of this month. It is oriented around 18 policy areas, from the budget to women’s rights to the environment.

“Our partnership with HeadCount gives us the opportunity to apply technology to the voter-registration process,” said Rod Massey, CEO of Citizengine and one of the app’s architects. “iCitizen allows you to find out easily who your elected officials are and what they’re doing in your name.”

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Bernstein studied modern culture and media at Brown University, where he called hockey games for the Brown Bears. He then spent 11 years as a sports journalist before that fateful conversation with the ESPN reporter. “I had this career that was completely separate from what I’m doing now,” he said. “I had no desire to get into politics.” ■