

# SCORE

WHERE MUSIC & MOVIES MEET

Singer/songwriter MICHAEL FRANTI wades right into the traumas of The Middle East and comes out with his directorial debut, the powerful documentary *I KNOW I'M NOT ALONE*.  
BY BILLY BAXTER



## the importance of being michael

An unarmed 6-foot-6 American man disembarks a plane in the Middle East. He carries a video camera and a guitar. Outside the airport he passes two bombed-out cars, the charred bodies of their occupants still smouldering inside. It is exactly what he expects to see; the same thing he has seen on his TV so many times before. He finally reaches the city and is stunned by what he sees next.

"People were going about their everyday lives, doing everyday things."

The city is Baghdad, the people are Iraqis, and the American is singer/songwriter Michael Franti. Mix in the video camera and the guitar and what you get is Franti's directorial debut: the surprising documentary *I Know I'm Not Alone*.

Surprising because Franti – the one-time front man of The Beatnigs, and The Disposable Heroes Of Hiphoprisy, and later Spearhead – knows almost nothing about filmmaking, yet he throws a wrench

into the American propaganda machine and delivers a compelling film. "I had no idea what I was getting into," Franti confesses. "My initial thought was, 'Let me just go there and see what's going on and I'll write songs about it and be a more effective communicator when I come back.' Then I said, 'Well, let's bring video cameras,' so that's what we did."

Franti aims to even up the propaganda scales by revealing the human face of the Middle East – and it isn't a dirty, scowling face, perched over the sights of a Kalashnikov, like the American media would have you believe. "Before I got there, all I'd seen on the news were people burning flags and waving guns in the air. That's the only image of the Middle East we're presented with."

Franti achieves the aim, and while some Iraqis tell him that life was better under Saddam (at least they had constant electricity and running water back then), Franti

doesn't allow the film to regress into a pro-dictatorship rant. "People who lived under thirty years of Saddam that I spoke to in Iraq welcomed Saddam being gone, but they didn't want in his place an American military government."

After Iraq, Franti heads to Palestine to compare the single generation of Iraqis living under American occupation to the three generations of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. He encapsulates the complex political and social history of The Middle East in a brief and easy to understand package, and it's hard to find fault in his argument that Palestinians have been living under Israeli occupation since The War of 1948 (known by Palestinians as The Catastrophe of 1948). Franti is transformed when he experiences life in Iraq and Palestine. He hopes your outlook might change too. "I don't support the oppression of people and I think it's possible to hold a politic that considers the desires and needs of all sides that

doesn't support political violence," Franti says. "That's who I am, and that's why I say that I'm not on the side of the Americans, Iraqis, Israelis, or Palestinians; I'm on the side of the peacemakers, from whatever country they come from."

Shot on-the-fly, sometimes clandestinely from within a backpack, and initially edited on the tour bus, the film has a rough edge. When you shoot in Middle East restricted zones, where signs say NO CAMERAS and the US military is authorised to use deadly force to ensure compliance, some shaky camerawork is understandable, but the jerky style, admitted Franti, wasn't always on purpose. "I'd never made a film before and my camera people had never really used cameras. Then there was a point in editing where we realised we're not going to make a 'pretty' film – there's not going to be nice, smooth cuts, and there's not going to be flowing pans of beautiful things. So we said, 'Let's just cut this as if, you know, we're making, you know... I don't even know what word to use.'

When questioned as to the extent of his film knowledge and vocabulary, Franti laughs, his shortcoming busted, but because he laughs at himself you forgive him. His disjointed film reeks of first-timer, but it is instilled with the same qualities that Franti embodies as a man – a combination of charm, compassion, and gunpowder – so you listen. In this incarnation, his message comes across as wildly pro-Iraqi, pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli, and anti-American... but Franti doesn't see it that way.

"I think what I've done is something that's very patriotic," he says. "I visited with Israeli families who lost their children as well as Palestinian families. I visited the sites of suicide bombing attacks as well as the sites of people that have had their homes destroyed in Palestine, and I spent a lot of time speaking with US soldiers, but I couldn't film them because they're not allowed to talk about their personal views. There have been 2,300 of our young men and women killed over there [in Iraq] but we've killed tens, if not hundreds, of

thousands of Iraqis. That just brings more anti-American sentiment, so that's how I find what I've done to be very pro-American and pro-planet."

Through music, Franti has come to understand the power of the spoken word and the well-penned lyric, but it is through images that he now hopes to invoke change. "My first memories as a kid were of the Vietnam War," Franti says. "That was the first thing I ever saw on TV: a naked girl running down the street, burning from napalm. Beyond the economic cost or the political cost of the war, people saw the human cost of the war and that's what really turned the tide in America."

In terms of global peace ambassadors and their influence,

**"I'm not on the side of the Americans, Iraqis, Israelis, or Palestinians; I'm on the side of the peacemakers, from whatever country they come from."**

Franti knows that at this point he's no Bono, but he does like his name being mentioned in the same sentence as the U2 frontman. "I'm really an admirer of Bono because he's somebody who brings people together to have a dialogue that creates policy, and one of the things that he has done which is so great is what we were talking about before: he tries to hold a politic that considers all sides."

After the positive experience of making his first film, Franti plans to direct again. "Geronimo Pratt was a Black Panther in the '60s and early '70s. He served in the Vietnam War and he was accused of a murder and he served 28 years in prison in California. Later it was found that he didn't do it, so he sued the FBI and



he won a financial settlement and with the money he went and started a health clinic in a village in Tanzania. I want to go and spend time with him there and then travel to other places in Africa and do a similar kind of thing."

Unfortunately, there is a downside to all this. Franti enjoying directing means you probably won't see him act again. After his incredible performance as a Marauder in the 1985 TV film *Ewoks: The Battle For Endor*, that is shame. [Shockingly, he was shunned by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in favour of William Hurt, who won for *Kiss Of The Spider Woman*.]

"They replaced me with a CG

wookie. If wookies were still being hired, I'd still be in the business," Franti joked.

Just days before this magazine went to print, seventeen Shiites were killed inside a Baghdad mosque in a clash with the US military. Only five people were wounded. Before Franti's film, you may not have given the news a second thought. Afterwards, you see seventeen faces, and a 6-foot-6 American with a video camera and a guitar, and you know he's not alone.

*I Know I'm Not Alone* is released on April 11 (VIC), April 15 (Byron Bay), April 18 (Darwin) and will be released on DVD on May 12. ♦