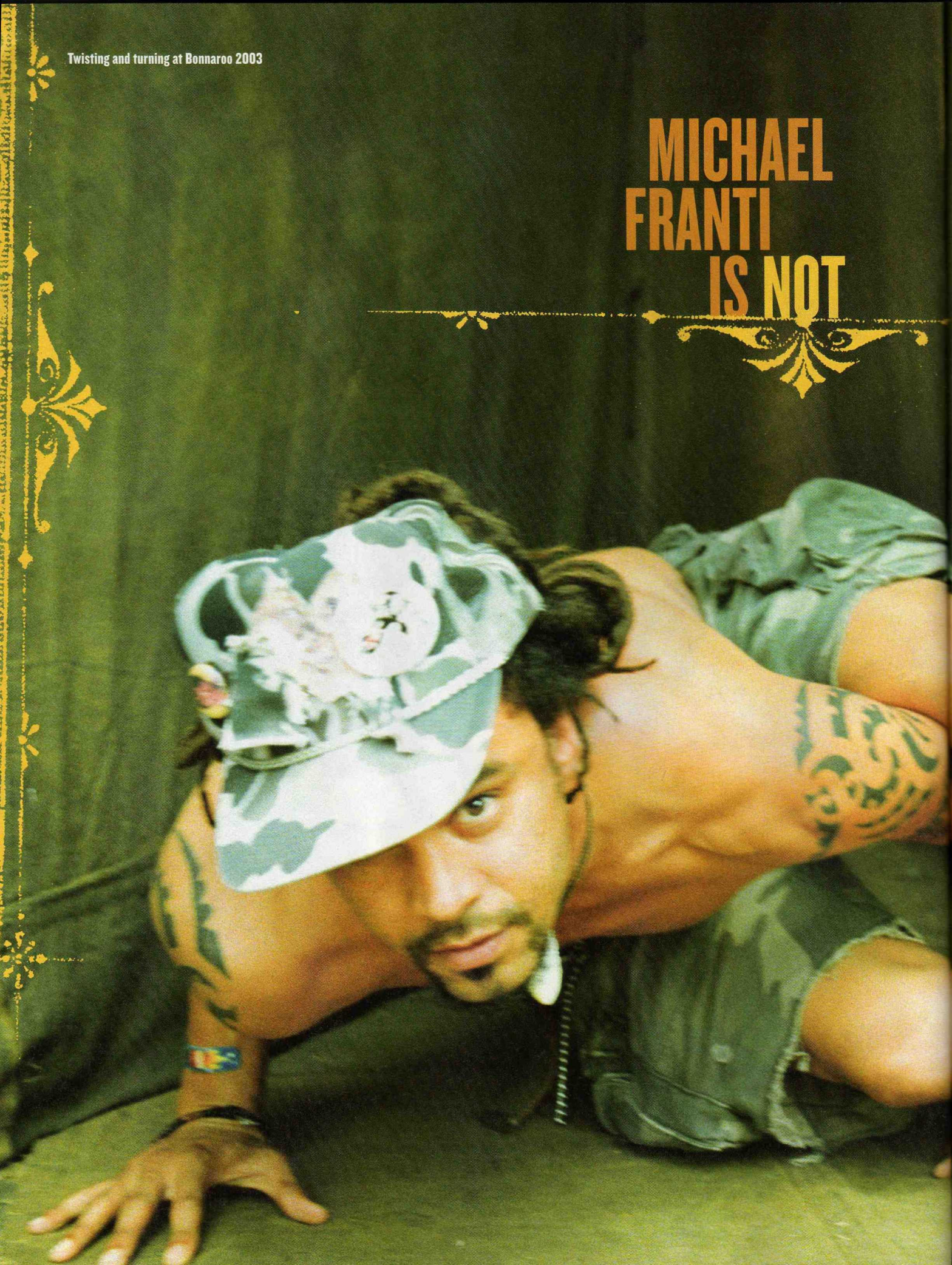
Twisting and turning at Bonnaroo 2003

MICHAEL FRANTI IS NOT



ALONE

He has a new album, a new film about the Middle East, and a new life after burying old ghosts (oh, and he's still full of righteous rebellion)

by Wes Orshoski

"I felt scared every second I was there," says a barefoot and shirtless Michael Franti, contorting his midsection on a stretch of sun-soaked concrete. It's a little before two o'clock in the afternoon and Franti has just gotten up, having emerged from Spearhead's tour bus for his daily yoga session. After driving all-night from yesterday's stop at the All Good festival in West Virginia, the Big Summer Classic tour has brought the band to the sprawling, evergreen Blossom Music Center in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

In between yoga positions, Franti is sharing memories of his trip to Iraq. It's July 2005, just over 13 months since he and a group of filmmaker friends touched down in Baghdad, and the weather is almost identical: hot and sunny.

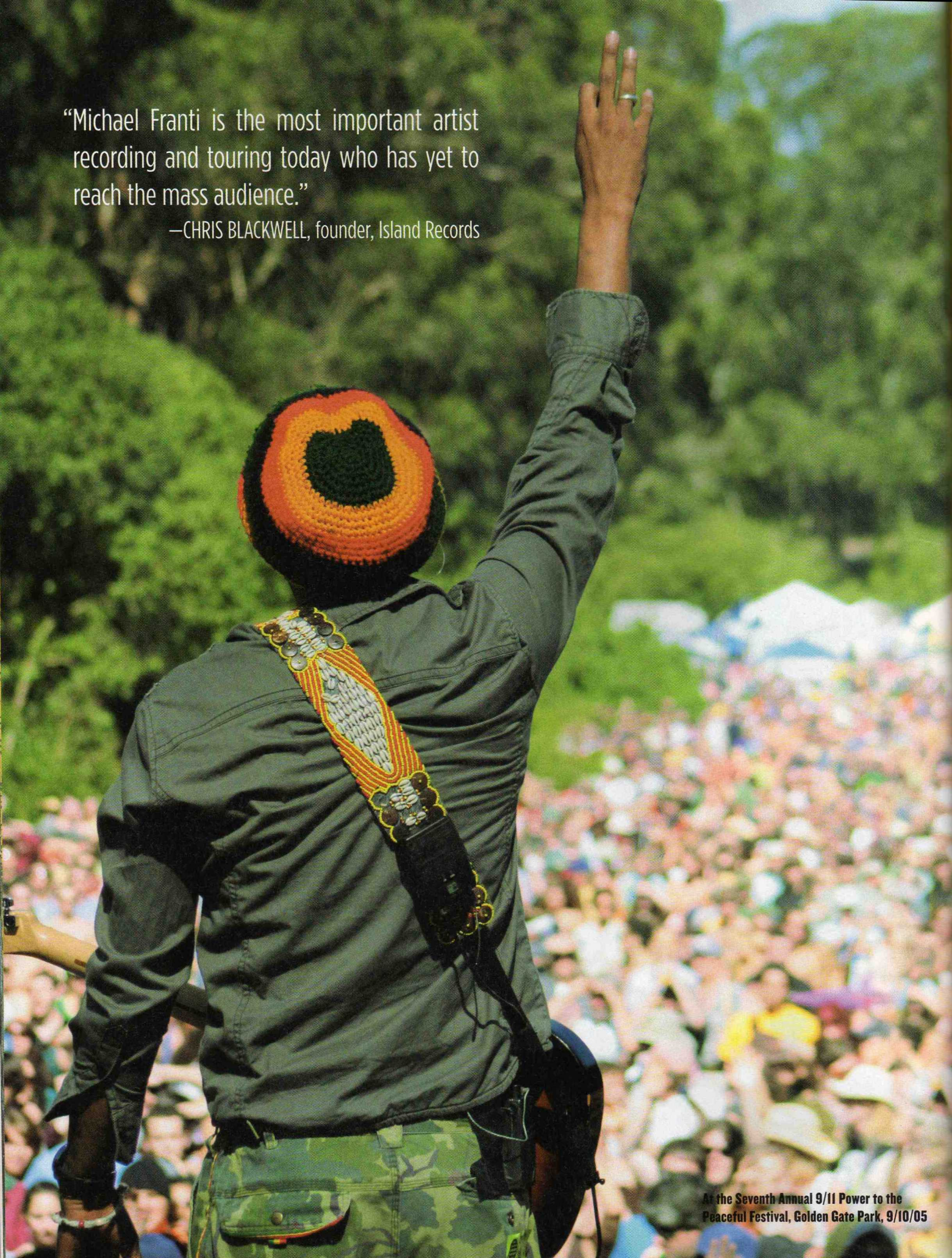
"As soon as we got off the plane, the first thing we encountered was two cars that had been blown up within the past ten minutes. They were on fire, and bodies were hanging out. Our drivers were like, 'Keep your cameras down.' Around the airport, it's all controlled by the U.S. military. You can't shoot anything. They'll just open fire on your car, because they're so paranoid of people surveilling for car-bombing."

In between twisting himself like licorice, the dreadlocked Franti has been talking about waking up the morning after the invasion of Iraq, finding a television and seeing politicians and generals discussing the political and economic costs of the war, but never the human cost. Right now, he's talking about his experience making *I Know I'm Not Alone*—the documentary film he made while visiting Iraq, Israel, The West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

"It was the most powerful experience of my life," he says, sweat beading on his forehead. "That and having my sons."

Watching a rough cut of the film on the bus later, it's easy to understand why: In it, Franti enters a polluted Baghdad inhabited by people in need of water and electricity and littered with bombed-out cars, homes and hotels. He ducks into basements where now-jobless men and their families hid for as long as 11 days in complete darkness during the initial bombings of Baghdad. He visits musicians and double-amputee children. And everywhere he goes—from the streets of Baghdad to a military checkpoint along the barbed wall separating The West Bank and Israel—he brings his guitar, playing simple songs for children and protest songs before soldiers.

Photo: Danny Clinch



"Michael Franti is the most important artist recording and touring today who has yet to reach the mass audience."

—CHRIS BLACKWELL, founder, Island Records

At the Seventh Annual 9/11 Power to the Peaceful Festival, Golden Gate Park, 9/10/05

As Franti types away on his laptop, I watch him on the bus monitor; he spreads smiles on the faces of hospitalized Iraqis, and attracts throngs of children while strumming happy chords to the word "habibi," Arabic for "my beloved friend." In occupied territories in The West Bank and on the streets of Baghdad, beaming children are bouncing up and down, chanting "Ha-bee-bee! Ha-bee-bee!" Old men standing nearby grin and dance. I watch as Franti visits an Iraqi thrash-metal band and beatboxes with a Palestinian hip-hop group, before stepping into the rubble of homes bulldozed by Israeli forces, and evoking tears from an Israeli mother who lost her son in a suicide bombing.

Watching the film, you feel the fear of which Franti speaks: During an interview with an on-duty U.S. soldier one night, a bomb explodes nearby and conversation immediately ends. As they walk through a Palestinian neighborhood one afternoon, gunfire sounds out, and everyone within the camera's eye scatters. You also laugh, and feel joy and excitement, heartbreak and grief. Over 90 minutes, *I Know I'm Not Alone* illuminates the resilience of the human spirit, while offering different perspectives on the war, one gained from cab drivers and musicians, homesick soldiers and children.

"It's really emotional to relive, and to see these people that I met," Franti says, looking up, and closing his computer. "Ya know, when I went to Ground Zero after September 11th, I was like, 'This is so *fucked*. I don't wish this upon anyone.' And then to go and see face to face... Not only have we done that to people, but we continue to do it *every* day. There's gotta be a better way."

Ha-bee-bee! Ha-bee-bee! Franti in Hebron, The West Bank

"Ever since September 11th, this administration and the media have done everything to convince us that dissent is unpatriotic, when in fact it's what this country was founded on."

Out of his experiences in the Middle East, Franti wrote two albums. *Yell Fire!*, a collection of reggae-soaked rock tracks, will be the first to see daylight. *Cool Water*, an introspective, acoustic album will follow. With titles like "It's Time to Go Home" and "Sweet Little Lies," *Yell Fire!* includes tracks heard throughout the film and several previewed live, like the anthemic title track and the roof-raiser "Everybody Ona Move."

"It comes from that expression, 'Don't yell fire in a crowded theater,'" Franti says of the album's title. "'Don't alarm people unnecessarily.' But I feel like right now we need to be yelling fire, because there's an absence of dissent. Ever since September 11th, this administration and the media have done everything to convince us that dissent is unpatriotic, when in fact it's what this country was founded on."

Hyping the 9/11 festival at KGO San Francisco

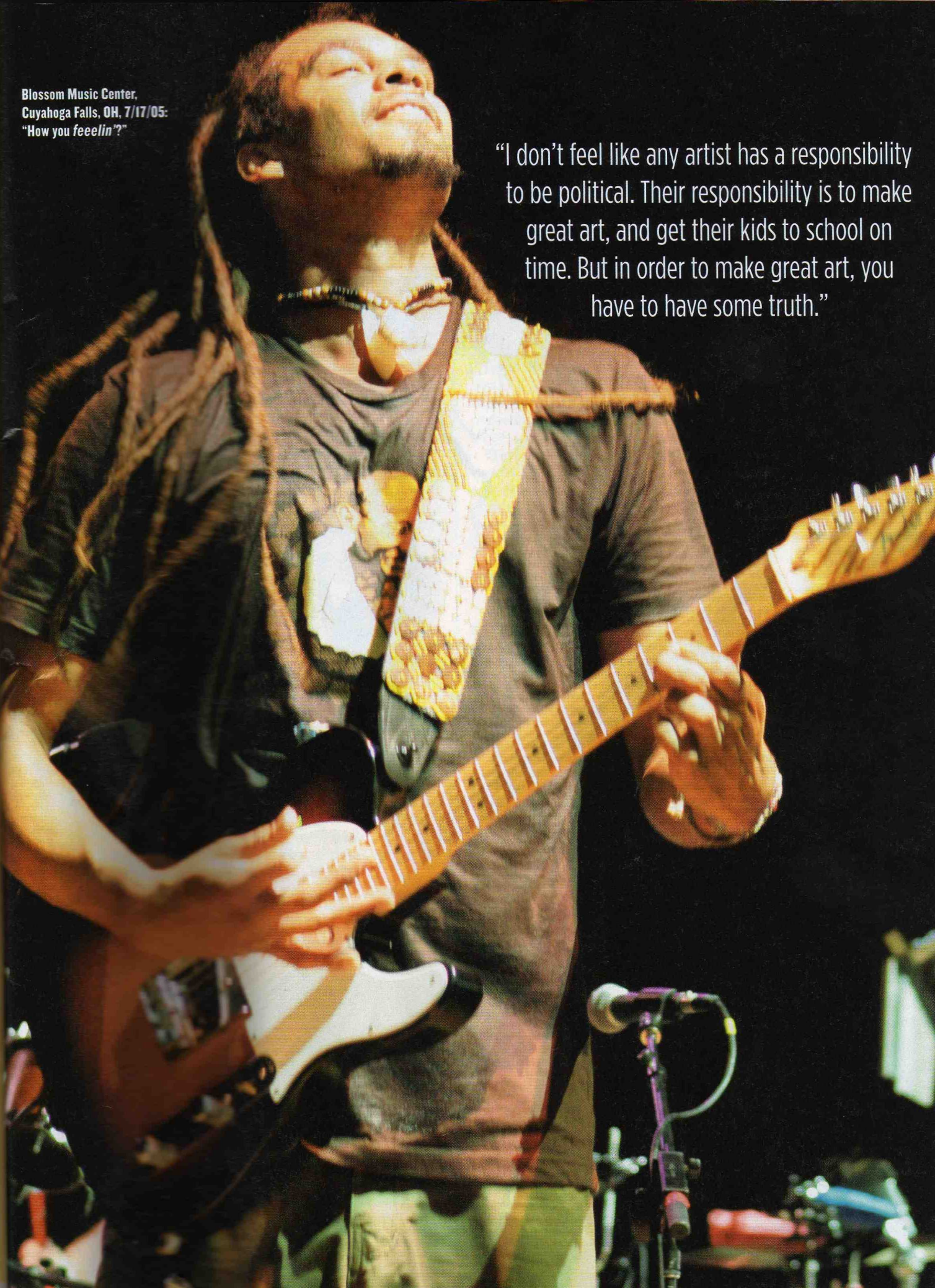
While political, *Yell Fire!* isn't stiff. A big-hearted album partially recorded in Jamaica—with riddim masters Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare—its songs are breezy and funky and punctuated with Jamaican toasting and dub playfulness. While some songs are rooted in the dusty streets of Baghdad, others, like the gem "One Step Closer to You" (featuring Jamaican DJ Squid Lee and subtle backing vocals from Pink—yep, *that* Pink), is a sweet, universal love song. With bassist Carl Young, guitarist Dave Shul, percussionist Roberto Quintana and drummer Manas Itiene, Franti has once again pulled off the rare trick of writing conscious music that people can—and *will*—dance to.

Musically, *Yell Fire!* marks a new beginning for Franti. The disc was primarily written on guitar, which he plays throughout the album, on which he's rarely heard rhyming. Gone is hype man/beatboxer Radioactive, a Spearhead staple since the late '90s. Radio's role diminished as Franti increasingly explored more of a traditional troubadour path, one that's a giant stylistic leap from his days as a street performer-turned-MC. The new songs find Franti evolving, but not at his audience's expense. If his 2001 concept-album masterwork *Stay Human* marked his coming of age as an artist, *Yell Fire!* foreshadows a long, fruitful career full of reinvention.

At 38, Franti is marking two decades as a professional musician this year. And in those 20 years, he's blossomed as a musician and man, while amassing a fiercely credible catalog. The militant history lessons and societal critiques he doled out as a member of The Beatnigs and Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy have given way to songs of peace and love, compassionate, witty poetry balanced with funk-injected party tracks.

If Franti ripped his songs from the headlines and rewrote history as a young artist, on the eve of 40 he's more interested in universal emotions and understanding. "When I first started, every song was angry, every song was, like, 'Fuck the system.' Now I want to write songs that reflect the whole rainbow of human emotions."

Photos: Wes Orshoski (Power, studio); Tina Talnui (kids)



Blossom Music Center, Cuyahoga Falls, OH, 7/17/05: "How you *feeelin'*?"

"I don't feel like any artist has a responsibility to be political. Their responsibility is to make great art, and get their kids to school on time. But in order to make great art, you have to have some truth."

"My dad's never really expressed an interest in being a part of my life. It's something I feel sadness and pain about."

As his peers delved into drugs and alcohol, Franti abstained, as the starring center of his high school basketball team, and because of his father. He began roadtripping to shows in the Bay Area, where he caught the Beastie Boys, The Clash and The Police and a lot of reggae. Trips to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury proved revelatory: "I was coming from a mostly white town, and a mixed family, and all those things didn't really matter there. There's a greater sense of acceptance—you get to chart your own course, rather than have it dictated to you, because of the way you look."

As he neared his senior year, his father's alcoholism intensified, and Franti ran away. "I told my dad that I wasn't going to come back unless he stopped drinking—and he did. He went to AA." But it didn't last. Of his abuse, Franti says, "He wasn't, like, beating all the time, but he would definitely not be shy about pushing you around or hitting you or whatever he felt was necessary at the time. And that's what ultimately led to me leaving."

He left Davis in 1984 on a basketball scholarship to the University of San Francisco, where Division I pressures would soon siphon the fun out of the game. While his teammates rarely left campus, he started hanging out in Haight-Ashbury, just four blocks away. He began smoking weed (which he stopped a few years ago) and participating in rallies against apartheid in South Africa and the Iran-Contra/Oliver North scandal.

After three seasons at USF, he switched to San Francisco State University, where he studied film, music, performance art and theater. His father, who had never missed one of Franti's sporting events—home or away—disowned him. "He said, 'You're not my son anymore. I wish I never adopted you.'" Franti says, with a sad, deflecting laugh. "That was one of the most painful times in my life. He thought, 'You're just gonna be a fuck-up.'"

At 21, Franti had dropped out and was working as a bike messenger, while promoting underground parties and DJ events and playing bass and singing in The Beatnigs. "We started combining poetry with instruments we would make out of metal, kind of like *Stomp*." His musical aspirations were full of promise, but when his then-girlfriend, Allison, got pregnant, he was sure it was over.

The calm after the storm: With son Ade after last year's 9/11 festival

"In that first moment, it's like everything else is gone. I was scared shitless." That year, she gave birth to the first of Franti's two boys, Cappy. To this day, he sings Allison's praises for not only supporting his decision to drop out of college, but also to pursue music. The couple lived together for three years, but never married. While Cappy's birth lit a fire under Franti, forcing him to focus on his musical vision, it was also the impetus for him to find his biological parents.

Two years after contacting an agency he discovered on television, Franti dialed his mother's Massachusetts phone number: "When I called, I was concerned that if I said, 'Hey, this is your son,' she might hang up, and I would feel like I'd never want to call back, or she'd never take my call again. So when I called, I said, 'I have something really important to say, but I want you to take down my number first, just in case we get disconnected.' She did, and then I told her my birth date, and I said, 'Does this day have any significance to you.' And she was like, 'Yeah,' and I said, 'I think you might be my mother.'"

The call was relatively short, as shock washed over Rodrick. The next day, they reconnected, shed some tears and set up a visit. After nearly 20 years, their relationship is still evolving. "We've never really gone through that whole process of everything you need to go through to feel close, but I would say we're actively working on it."

Through Rodrick, Franti met his biological father, who, from the start, "just wasn't that into it," says the singer. "Years and years went by and he never bothered to tell his family and his other sons about me. Finally, I just said, 'Fuck it. I'm gonna track them down on my own,' which is what happened.' My dad's never really expressed an interest in being a part of my life. It's sad. It's something I feel sadness and pain about."

Playing bass in The Beatnigs in 1987: "We were like *Stomp*."

More the anything else, the main message in Franti's music is that it's okay to be yourself. And it hasn't always been easy for him to practice what he preaches. In the late '90s, after Spearhead released two albums on Capitol, the label underwent a regime change and Franti thought he was hallucinating when the new president asked him to collaborate with Will Smith and turn his group's next record into a cameo-packed chart-topper.

When he asked to leave, the label said no, and it took him nine months to break free of his contract. He began work on Spearhead's third album as if it would be his last. Breaking from the polished, urban feel of 1997's *Chocolate Supa Highway*, he began re-exploring the music of his youth—Curtis Mayfield, Sly Stone, Marley and a heap of

Photos Danny Clinch (portrait); Jay Blakesberg (Beatnigs); Wes Orshoski (Ade)

'70s soul—while crafting an album protesting the death penalty. What resulted was an album of a lifetime: 2001's *Stay Human*, a stroke of genius written, recorded and produced by Franti. Immersed in politics, it featured his most anthemic and heartfelt songs to date.

With *Stay Human*, Franti had finally hit gold on a trail that he been blazing for almost a decade—since 1992, when his Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy briefly served as support act for U2. Co-founding the The Beatnigs eight years prior, he eventually left to focus on rhyming. He formed Disposable Heroes with fellow Beatnig Rono Tse in 1991. On the group's lone album, *Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury*, Franti emerged as the West Coast's answer to Chuck D. in tone and force, spitting militant, leftist rhymes. The group scored a minor hit with the still-impressive "Television, the Drug of the Nation," and toured the world.

But by the time the Heroes hit the road with U2, their songs had become shtick for Franti. "I was going around the world doing this angry-man routine, but I didn't really feel angry every day." On the tour, Franti bonded with Bono during conversations that awoke his inner storyteller. Two years later, Franti returned with Spearhead's debut, *Home*, an album built upon personal experiences and highlighted by tracks like "Positive," about getting tested for HIV (he was negative), and "Hole in the Bucket," maybe the smartest pop song ever written about the homeless.

Ever since, Franti has plotted a wholly individual course, rising as a beacon of humanity and a complete stylistic anomaly in the musical world. He's a complete original, says collaborator Robbie Shakespeare: "That's the thing I love most about Michael. Everything he does, the way he approaches his music, is completely original."

"The music he's trying to do is from his heart," says friend and former tourmate Ziggy Marley. "It's not for the commercial success, but to reach people's soul and spirit. And I think people react to the sincerity and the joy that he puts into his performance—and the freedom of it."

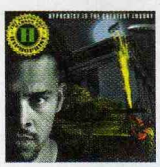
Two months after his gig in Ohio, Franti is home in San Francisco, grabbing lunch at a vegan restaurant. His guitar leaning against his knee, he's recalling the first time he actually purchased an album: "I got this gift certificate for five dollars to this record store across town. So one day I rode my bike there and picked out Earth, Wind & Fire's *Greatest Hits* on cassette, and brought it up to the counter.

"The clerk looked at me and said, 'That'll be $5.37.' I was like, 'What? It clearly says "$4.95" right on it.' I was *traumatized*. Up until that point, I had never really bought anything in my life, except food—and in California there's no tax on food. I had to ride back across town to get the 37 cents. So my first attempt to buy a record, was like my first run-in with *the government*!" he laughs.

It's the day before Franti's seventh annual 9/11 Power to the Peaceful festival, a free day of music and activism in Golden Gate Park, and his schedule is full. There was a meeting this morning to go over last-minute details, and once he's done eating, he'll promote the gig with an AM radio interview. The festival is a sight to behold: Thousands jam into Speedway Meadow to bounce to Spearhead, the concert space lined with hip vendors and dozens of activist groups.

THE FRANTI SONGBOOK

Now celebrating his 20th year in music, reinventing himself has become second nature to Michael Franti. Over those two decades, he's served as bassist with the short-lived Beatnigs, the MC behind Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy and now the guitar-toting focal point of Spearhead. Below, we offer you a guide to the most significant releases of his career. Visit www.relix.com/franti for the essential Franti/Spearhead playlist. web extra



Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy *Hipocrisy is the Greatest Luxury*

(4TH AND B'WAY/ ISLAND), 1992

With freshly sharpened rhyming skills, Franti gets deeply introspective and shames war-mongers, gay-bashers, racists and others in songs referencing everything from apartheid and Kuwait to Milli Vanilli and Exxon. His stanzas serious and his flow militant, Franti is captured in transition. While "Television, the

Tonight, he's hosting a pre-party at his house in Hunter's Pointe, where Michael Kang of String Cheese Incident will jam with Franti and his longtime friend and actor Woody Harrelson. A couple friends coming straight from the Burning Man festival are staying over, so he's hunting for a futon today, too.

In the gritty Hunter's Pointe, Franti is anonymous. "My neighbors think I sell pot," he says, laughing. His house is unassuming from the outside, where a Toyota 4-Runner sits. He's restoring it, with plans to donate it to a local church. The interior is minimalistic and decorated with a few pieces of artwork from around the globe. There is no television, but there is a computer monitor which he uses to watch cartoons and *Pink Panther* DVDs with his five-year-old, Ade, his only other child. Franti is finalizing his divorce from Ade's mother.

Before getting home, he stopped at a Mexican folk-art boutique to buy a gift for his girlfriend, Carla Swanson, a petite, brunette filmmaker and graphic designer who volunteered her services to Franti's management company. Their romance ignited as she assisted on the editing of *I Know I'm Not Alone*. When she arrives, Franti envelops her, stamping her with a long, sweet kiss. "I wake up every morning and I can't wait to see her," he says. "I can't wait to find out what the next thing is that we're going to do together.

"Growing up, I never had examples of healthy, loving relationships. It's only been through years of dealing with it on my own, and learning how to be more skilled in personal relationships that I've gotten to where I am now, where I have a *great* one."

A healthier, stronger love isn't the only thing that has come to Franti with time and hard work. After 20 years, he's making the best and most relevant music of his life. As much as he disapproves of its policies, the Bush White House has played

"When I first started, every song was angry, every song was, like, 'Fuck the system.' Now I want to write songs that reflect the whole rainbow of human emotions."

a role in that: Franti has matured as both a poet and musician in step with the unfolding of the second Bush presidency. It's fueled his lyrics and vision. As a result, his past three albums—*Stay Human*, *Everyone Deserves Music* and *Yell Fire!*-carry a resonance and purpose lacking from his earlier work. To be sure, his moment has arrived.

In time, another relationship also blossomed. In 1999, his adoptive father, Charles Franti, suffered a stroke, and in the four years that followed—prior to his death in 2003—he bloomed as a human being. "He became this really beautiful man," Franti says. "He cared about people, hugged people, loved people, and he made amends to me and other people in my family that he hurt along the way.

"That changed me as a person. One time, I was expressing my gratitude to him. I said, 'Dad, you've changed so much, it's amazing,' and he said, 'I haven't really changed, I've always been like this. It's just that I was never able to express it. I was never able to let it out.'

"And that's why I make music: For me, music is a way to let it out. My goal with my music is to create a place, a moment, for other people to let it out. Beyond politics, beyond anything else, that's my favorite part—just seeing people experience joy." ★

Drug of the Nation" is still powerful, overall, the disc is uneven, some songs more dated than others. Featuring Charlie Hunter on bass, the project took shape when Franti scored free studio time after rapping on a European Hanna-Barbera cartoon.

Spearhead *Home*
(CAPITOL), 1994
Inspired by a fateful conversation with Bono, Franti overhauls his vision, and begins writing about personal experience, infusing his songs with humor, heart and wit. His words still conscious and smart, and his rich baritone smoother, Franti regroups with a live band (and changes the name of his musical vehicle upon the encouragement of Ian MacKaye of Fugazi). Inflected with funk, soul and reggae, he writes his first set of songs for both the mind and dancefloor, penning genius pop songs about the homeless and the need to get tested for HIV. A backpacker-hip-hop classic.

Spearhead *Chocolate Supa Highway*
(CAPITOL), 1997
Franti takes the organic feel of *Home* and gives it a polished sheen, punctuating the criminally ignored *Chocolate* with massive, Trench Town-worthy basslines. The blackest Spearhead outing, it's a moody, nighttime record layered with additional MCs and stronger, sexier female backing vocals. Dipping into Marvin-esque soul and stepping further into reggae, it thumps and bumps harder and louder, with Franti again ripping songs from headlines (O.J., Oklahoma City), but also using personal relationships as fodder for songs about race, lovers and the ills of the world.

Michael Franti and Spearhead *Stay Human*
(BOO BOO WAX/ SIX DEGREES), 2001
A regime change at Capitol causes Franti to fight to escape his contract. Worried that this might be his last shot in the music biz, he begins *Stay Human* as if it might his last record. Writing, recording and engineering it in his own studio, Franti grew into his own as an artist, birthing the album of a lifetime: a concept record protesting the death penalty, and packed with his career's best—and most heartfelt—songs, songs of love and understanding. Flirting with Latin sounds and playing guitar for the first time on record, Franti perfectly melds words, music and politics.

Michael Franti and Spearhead *Everyone Deserves Music*
(BOO BOO WAX/ ARTIST DIRECT), 2003
If *Home* found Franti walking the streets of San Francisco, here he walks barefoot down the streets of the world. His most dance-friendly disc yet, it finds him evolving as a guitarist and embracing broader issues. He preaches global unity and pays tribute to both his adoptive father and a late fan in "Never Too Late," while penning the great anti-war track "Bomb the World."

Michael Franti and Spearhead *Yell Fire!*
(ANTI-), 2006
The first of two albums born out of his experiences in the Middle East, *Yell Fire!* finds Franti evolving still, writing most of the record on guitar, and fully embracing reggae, recording in Jamaica with Sly & Robbie and again overdubbing Jamaican toasters. He writes his finest ballad yet, "One Step Closer to You" (featuring Pink) and balances war-inspired songs like "Time to Go Home" with party tracks like "Hey Now Now."

★ *Wes Orshoski*