

Michael Franti and the Battle Against Cynicism

The 2010 Ralph J. Gleason Award Recipient on music, community, and making things better.

By Casey Lowdermilk



Coping with the daily injustices, economic challenges and violence in our world is a constant stress, and for many, music is a welcome release. Cheerful dancing with kindred spirits and playing your favorite album on a sunny afternoon are simple pleasures, but, as we've seen with the Grateful Dead's music, can also be a source of encouragement and positivity, helping build a passionate, multi-generational, socially conscious community.

As the recipient of the Rex Foundation's 2010 [Ralph J. Gleason Award](#), honoring people who strive to bring fresh cultural ideas and music to the mainstream public, [Michael Franti](#) helps to carry this flame of the power of music. With a musical message that transcends cultures, Franti is uniquely a product of his home, the San Francisco Bay Area--its music, its proud diversity and sense of inclusion, and its fight for social justice and peace. He's addressed such issues as the death penalty and corporate globalization, and has explored the human cost of war with visits to Iraq, Israel, and Palestine in his 2005 documentary [I Know I'm Not Alone](#).

In February, just after three West Coast dates in support of his latest, *The Sound of Sunshine*, we had a chance to speak with the rebel rocker himself about his Bay Area worldview, the battle against cynicism, the joys of eating an orange, and more.

Rex Foundation: What came to mind when you first found out about receiving this award?

Michael Franti: Well, first I know the Rex Foundation because I guess I could consider myself a Deadhead. I've always loved the community around the Dead and the fact that anytime you go to a concert experience there's always this incredible diversity of people -- and also this unwritten higher calling that people should do good for each other and that people should help plan it out. I've always shared that vision in my music. What I've done is try to bring that to as many people, even beyond the festival community and more into the mainstream community; that idea of consciousness.

Rex: What's one of your earliest memories of realizing the powerful impact of music in your life?

MF: The first thing for me was being in church as a kid. My mother was an organist and piano player in church and I remember there were certain songs we'd sing and I'd find myself tearing up unexpectedly. Rather than feel bummed out by the experience when those hymns would be put up on the hymn board, I'd always look forward to singing them.

As I grew up I started seeing how music affected my life. I grew up in a household where people didn't really discuss their feelings so much out loud. But I remember having a crush on a girl in my 3rd grade class and a song would come on the radio and I'd think "Wow, that song says everything that I feel about Sally Pinkner in my 3rd grade class!"

Music started to take on a new significance for me as I started to make my own musical choices. And as I got older I started hearing groups that had a message in their music that was beyond just my little world. I'd listen to artists like Bob Marley, Linton Kwesi Johnson, or Mousa Baraka, or The Clash or The Police. There was always this larger meaning in the music that resonated with me. I grew up in Davis, California, and at least what it felt like to me at the time was that it was a very small town. Music helped me to expand my borders way beyond what I could physically touch.

Rex: While you were at the [University of San Francisco](#), how did the Jesuits influence you, especially concerning social issues?

MF: The Jesuits are really vocal about social injustice, and especially about the rights of people who are impoverished. Although they are very much a part of the Catholic Church, they would be the first to say, "Don't believe everything that your church has to say. If you feel like it's wrong, then you should speak up and stand up against it. I didn't grow up in a Catholic household, but having that education and being around a lot of priests who were rebels and who were writers and scholars was impactful.

One of the priests who really taught me was Father Huerta; he died a year and a half ago. He was the one, more than anybody, who taught me how to organize my thoughts. He taught me how to write an essay and come up with a thesis statement, which in a song is really like the hook. And all the different paragraphs that support your thesis, which would be the verses of a song. That's how I learned to write songs, more than from anybody else, was from Father Huerta.

Rex: Some have complained that *I Know I'm Not Alone* is biased against Israel. How would you respond to them?

MF: In the film I went to spend time in occupied territories. It's a very difficult thing to try to create balance in any subject that deals with... I mean, the Holy Land, it's almost impossible to create a balance!

But what I tried to do is interview people on both sides. I spent time with Israeli families, I spent time with Palestinian families, I interviewed Israeli soldiers. Ultimately at the end of the day, I believe in a two-state solution. I believe Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side. And I don't believe that there should be a wall separating them. I think that message comes across in the film.

What I was moved mostly by in my experience both in Iraq, talking to Iraqi civilians and US soldiers, and then also in Palestinian territories and Israel, was that it didn't matter which side I was on. I found people who were willing to take incredible risks to achieve peace.

I met an Israeli woman whose son had been killed, and he was a captain in the army. She started having lunch in this cafe, and one day she met this Palestinian woman who had also lost a family member. They started to have these conversations about their loss, so they started to meet every week and eventually they invited other people to come to these meetings. The message that they came out with from the conversations is that we don't want the death of our family members to be used as a cry for more war, we want it to be used as a cry to end all wars. (Read more on this group, the [Parents Circle/Bereaved Families Forum](#).) That's the side I'm on, I'm on the side of the peacemakers, doesn't matter which country they belong.

Rex: Being raised in a multi-cultural, multi-racial house, not to mention being from Oakland, how has that experience affected your worldview and how you make music?

MF: My mother, Mrs. Franti, adopted me as a baby. My birth mother is Irish, French and German and my birth father is African-American and Native American, Seminole Indian to be specific. The Frantis, who are Finnish-American, had three kids of their own, and then they adopted me and another black son.

I grew up in this really mixed household -- my mother is 5'1" and I'm 6'6". She was a very tough lady to control all five kids in this house. She was insistent that all five of us kids were treated alike, and she was insistent that when we went out into our neighborhoods that we treat everybody the way that we wanted to be treated. It didn't matter if you were the family around

the corner from Mexico, or if you were the family across the street who was Korean, or the family next door who was Jewish; every kid was supposed to be treated the same way, and that message has lived on in my belief and in my music. I really believe music is a way to bring people together from all walks of life, all sexual preferences, all religious experiences, every language. Music is one of those things that helps to break down those barriers.

Rex: Your last two albums have a heavy Jamaican influence. Are you interested in the future in exploring other cultures or genres for your music?

MF: I love all forms of music--I'm always inviting different styles into what I do. In the last few weeks we've been doing a lot of electronic music. I always start every song with the acoustic guitar. I believe that you have to have a song that you can sing just on the guitar by itself before you dress it up with any other rhythmic style or sounds. The song needs to be powerful just with your voice and the guitar.

Rex: Your new album is different from the others in that its focus is personal relationships and not global issues. What prompted this shift?

MF: This album was written after I had a life-threatening hospitalization. My appendix had ruptured in the middle of tour and we didn't figure out what was wrong for seven days since it ruptured. By this point my whole body had become really infected.

By the time we had figured it out and had the operation, I woke up and realized--I'm still here, I'm still alive! and everything took on a new appreciation. Really simple things, like seeing my son smile, and being around my friends. Or one day eating an orange, sitting there peeling it and watching the juice drip down my arm and I'm like "Wow, this orange is really amazing, I love you orange!" And I started crying into this orange.

Everything started to take on this new perspective of beauty and importance, and I wanted to put that into words and music. That's where the title of the record came from, *The Sound of Sunshine*. The sun is something that makes all of us feel a sense of hope or optimism, it brings us the green that we see everywhere, it brings us warmth into our hearts and illuminates us so that we can see. I wrote this record about the simple things in life that we often overlook. Most of the time those are the people right in front of us.

Rex: As well, with the similarities between you and the Dead, it seems like fans of your music feel as though your message is part of a larger movement. What do you feel your fans are connecting with?

MF: I think people today are in a battle against cynicism. It's really easy to get frustrated. When you go to vote and think, "Man, we're gonna elect somebody who's gonna really make a big difference." You vote and things don't really seem to change at the rate that we want them to. It's easy to become frustrated and cynical. Watching Wall Street and the economy and reading the news day after day, you get frustrated.

So I'm really engaged in this battle against cynicism to find optimism and the hope that brings us endurance and tenacity. More than brute strength and the power of numbers we just need tenacity, and things slowly change. Music occupies this really great place in our world today; it

reminds us that love, dancing, playfulness, laughter, frivolity--at times hedonism--are all a really important part of us staying human and holding onto our vision.

I've always loved that about, not just the music of the Grateful Dead, but the community that the Dead has inspired for so long. They revere the clown just as much as they revere the philosopher.

