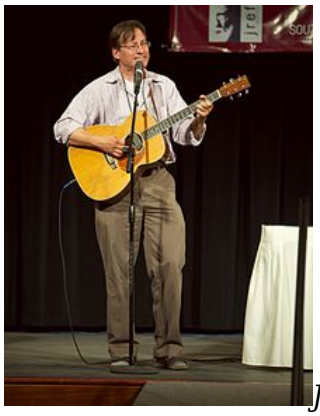
Satire and Healing

written by Jack Shalom | July 28, 2021

 *Jack Shalom spoke to Roy Zimmerman on February 4, 2021. This is an edited version of their conversation that first aired on* Arts Express with Host Prairie Miller *on WBAI FM in New York City.*

Jack Shalom*: Roy Zimmerman has been described as "Lenny Bruce meets Stephen Sondheim in Brian Wilson's living room." Roy is a master satirical political songwriter as well as a damn fine musician. I've been listening and laughing at his sharp wit for years. Hi, Roy.*

Roy Zimmerman: Hi there, Jack.

JS*: Roy, you not only write your own melodies, but you also do song parodies, and your song about The Donald, "The Liar Tweets Tonight," has something like 11 million views on YouTube so far.*

RZ: Well it was an amazing, amazing occurrence over the course of the campaign season that my wife, Melanie Harby, and I came up with that parody and put the video out there. We did four different iterations of "The Liar Tweets Tonight" because it became so popular.

All four of these videos have amassed about 120 million views over all of social media, which sounds like a lot until you realize that, you know, the dumbest YouTube video has a hundred and thirty million views.

> *The Liar Tweets Tonight*
>
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkU1ob_lHCw
>
> ("The Lion Sleeps Tonight" words and music by Solomon Linda. Parody lyrics by Ede Morris, Roy Zimmerman, Melanie Harby)
>
> *In the White House, the mighty White House, The Liar Tweets Tonight*
> *In the West Wing, the self-obsessed wing, The Liar Tweets Tonight*
>
> *[Chorus, repeat 2x:]*
> *Vote him away, vote him away, vote him away, vote him away*
> *(Don Exotic, Lyin' King)*
> *Vote him away, vote him away, vote him away, vote him away…*

JS: *Before COVID hit, you spent years touring to every state in the Continental US, which is pretty remarkable. I don't think there are too many Americans who can claim that they've done that. What*

did you find that stood out for you?

RZ: Well, it became our modus operandi to do loops around the country, and we were always looking for the most progressive people every place we went, but that of course included all the least progressive places in the country. We were heartened to find that the progressives are there. There are people doing wonderful progressive work where you might least expect it, or where it might be the most difficult.

JS: *Is there some secret place to find them. Where's the first place you go?*

RZ: Well, a lot of the shows that we did were at Unitarian Universalist churches — you know, huddled in the basement with their arms linked — and in some cases they're in Democratic Party groups, certainly union halls, and local groups of the Indivisible movement that have sprung up since the Trump era.

> *Socialist!*
>
> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXJgM2Z8n8k

How many Socialists we got here tonight? Come on, let's see a show of left hands. You drive here on a public street? Socialist. You go to a public school? Socialist. Y'ever visit a public library? Why? I'll tell you why…

> *'Cause you're a Socialist! like Ulysses S. Grant*
> *Yellowstone National Park — y'ever been there?*
>
> *Yeah, you're a Socialist!*
> *Like Teddy "Pinko" Roosevelt*
> *That guy was talking about universal health care.*
>
> *You're a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin', nanny- state-in' Socialist!*
>
> *Y'ever mail a letter? 'Course you have…*
>
> *'Cause you're a Socialist!*
> *Like Dwight D. Eisenhower*
> *He built highways between the states.*
>
> *Yeah, you're a Socialist!*
> *Like Richard "Red Diaper" Nixon*
> *He put food stamps on people's plates.*
>
> *You're a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin', nanny statin' Socialist!*

How many Socialists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Too many. Four to requisition the light bulb, four more to process the requisition in triplicate, eight to manufacture the light bulb, three to supervise the manufacturing and procurement process, seven to warehouse the light bulb for an indeterminate length of time, four to deliver the light bulb to the WRONG ADDRESS, four more to redeliver the light bulb, six to receive the light bulb and one to SCREW IT UP. Forty-seven.

How many Capitalists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Two. One impoverished nation willing to exploit its malnourished population and rape its natural resources to manufacture, package and ship the light bulb to Walmart… and me.

You know why that's funny? That's right…

> *'Cause you're a Socialist!*
> *Like Ronald W. Reagan*
> *Earned Income Tax Credit*
>
> *Yeah, you're a Socialist!*
> *Like George Double-U-S-S-R Bush*
> *That guy wrote the book on government interference.*
> *'Course, he never read it.*
>
> *You are a taxatin', appropriatin', regulatin', nanny-statin',*
> *Stalin-huggin', Castro-kissin', Marx-fellatin', spawn o' Satan Socialist!*
>
> *Every last one o' ya!*
>
> (Words and music © 2009 by Roy Zimmerman)

JS: *How did you get into songwriting?*

RZ: It kind of drafted me. In junior high, I just began writing songs. It was a natural thing for me to do to respond to what was happening. So all the songs that I was writing were about what was happening around me, and it wasn't long then before I drifted into political waters.

JS: *What kind of household did you grow up in?*

RZ: I grew up in a conservative household, very much so. So I would love to have any of your listeners explain to me how I turned out to be like I am; I still don't understand that, but I am happily who I am, that's for sure, and I'm doing the work that I think I was intended to do.

JS: *But somehow in junior high school you gave yourself permission to write these satirical songs.*

RZ: Yeah. Tom Lehrer was a big influence, too. I was discovering Tom Lehrer about a decade after he was putting those records out. It was contraband, that was the big attraction of it. It was something I had to sneak, so sneaking satirical songs became a secret high for me.

JS: *For those who don't remember Tom Lehrer, or perhaps were born too late, he was the author of such hits as "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park," "Pollution," and "The Vatican Rag." Did you ever meet Tom Lehrer?*

RZ: Yes, I got to sit down with him in his living room one afternoon while I was touring years ago. Very approachable, and a great person to talk with, not just about songwriting, but things in general.

JS: *After listening to a selection of your songs, it certainly becomes evident that not only are you an ingenious songwriter, but you're also a master of musical genres from folk to pop to Broadway to the Beatles to gospel to doo-wop. How did you get your musical education?*

RZ: Well, thanks for noticing that. First of all, the attempt is always to find the musical style that best suits the satirical purpose of the song. So that's part of the fun of it, copying the production chops and so forth that make that song more effective satirically. I do have a degree in music composition. My wife Melanie and I have been writing these songs for a long, long time, so we have a good deal of fun. It's just coming up with: What is the feeling, what kind of song are we after?

JS: *When you got that degree in musical composition was it with the intention of writing these kinds of songs?*

RZ: I knew I wanted to write songs. In fact, I was already writing songs. I wanted to write theater songs, which is kind of what these are. There's a character behind each song. Really, if you're doing satire well, you're never speaking from your own point of view, you're speaking from the point of view of somebody who you disagree with — which is the trouble in listening to it! Sometimes you want to get behind the character. The song and then the satirical point become more obvious.

JS: *Yes, Roy has a* Conservative Girlfriend *(https://bit.ly/3wu30Z0)*

RZ: For instance!

JS: *For instance!*

JS: *That's interesting that you talk about it being a theatrical form because I really get the impression that even more than the folk scene, you were studying the Great American Songbook, like E. Y. Harburg and Lorenz Hart.*

RZ: I love those songs. I mean those songs are so amazingly well constructed and they're so unafraid to be clever. And they all have a point of view as well. Even though it may be just a flat-out love song, it's set in a certain place, with a certain character, with a certain point of view.

JS: *Yes, absolutely. Do you have a sense of how many songs you've written?*

RZ: I have a sense of it. It's over a thousand. I stopped counting. At some point it was too many to compile, let's put it that way.

JS: *Is songwriting for you a discipline, a job that you do every day, at a fixed time, or do you wait until inspiration hits?*

RZ: It comes in spurts; there are fecund periods and unfecund periods. There"ll be a spate of three songs forming themselves at once, then a spate of the other parts of this job that we have to do. The hustle never stops, so you got to keep doing the online shows, you got to keep putting the message out there on social media. There's a lot of business involved in that.

JS: *And you put together these videos. I imagine you must have invested quite a bit of time in putting together these virtual sing-alongs. I was wondering, how do you get everybody to sing in the same key and the same rhythm? Or is that tweaked in the audio?*

RZ: Well, it's a little tweaked. But mostly we just send out a guide track. So if somebody writes us that they'd like to be part of it, we write them back with a little guide track. That's an MP3 that they can have earbuds in and sing along with, so they're in the right key and in the right tempo.

JS: *Can you write a song anywhere? When you're on the road are you able to write songs?*

RZ: Yes. My suggestion for any songwriter listeners of yours would be—if you don't do this already—have a way to codify your ideas whenever they come to you because inspiration is fickle. And I can't tell you how many times I've been humming a song to myself and thinking "Oh, this is great, this is great," and then you get home and you have to make lunch or whatever, and by the time you finish with lunch, you've forgotten the idea. So have a way to write it down, have a way to record it, so that you can go back to it, and go, like, "What was that? Oh, yeah. It was great."

JS: *You've been on the road so long, I'm always curious about this with musicians: What kind of family challenges are there when you're on the road so long?*

RZ: Well on the road, it's very difficult because you never see your family, you know, except Melanie and I see each other.

JS: *How did you generally get around from place to place? By car?*

RZ: Yeah. We just drove our MINI Cooper around the country. We called ourselves the Satire Delivery Service. You know, like FedEx or UPS? Fed-UPS is what we called ourselves.

JS: *Ha! That's a good line. And now a Roy Zimmerman song about health care.*

Dear Number 1036924053887

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAJ98iCMQeM

The cost of healthcare in America is rising and I don't know how much higher it can go

But there's a prescription
To make it all better
Laid out in this letter
From my HMO:

Dear Number 1036924053887
Have you considered suicide?
It's a health care plan you prob'ly haven't tried
Enclosed please find a tab of cyanide
For your perusal

You're getting to an age where your potential need for medical
Attention, even intervention isn't hypothetical
So, do it quick
And solve the nation's health care crisis by not getting sick

Die now
Buh-bye now
Before you get one hemorrhoid older

So long
You're no longer a
Cost-effective policy holder

Won't you help us file your folder
In the shredder
By being just a little bit deader?

Dear Number 1036924053887
Before you take another breath
Consider the advantages of death
We've enclosed a lethal dose of crystal meth
For your convenience

And when you're dead and buried, you'll be covered, thank the POTUS
And if you've killed yourself already, disregard this notice

So, pretty please
Remember, don't jerk, just squeeze
And make it easier to write these policies

For insurees who never sneeze, contract disease, get injuries, need EKG's, have tricky knees, can't stomach cheese or get some wheezy little cough

It's up to you
103692…
Knock yourself off

Signed, your kindly HMO

(Words and music, © 2008 by Roy Zimmerman)

JS: *Dare I ask you, what songs did you write that you think to yourself, I really did something extra special there?*

RZ: There are songs, certainly, that I'm proud of. Not even necessarily because of what we did, but because of the response that they bring out in people. Because we've come to realize that these songs aren't sung at people, they're sung because of people, and that came from the touring, all the people we talked to, all the people who are doing great work.

What ministers to their needs? People have needs. They have emotional needs that arise around political issues. Some of these needs are to laugh, you know, and to take it a little less seriously, to get some perspective on that — that's what the satirical songs are for. But some of these needs are to help deeply-felt trauma. Truly. I mean the Trump years were traumatic for so many people. He was a walking trauma trigger. There are people whose needs are met in some ways better by music than by conversation or talking heads or whatever else they might turn to. Music has a way of really getting behind that emotional response.

JS: *I was thinking today about some of my favorite songwriters, and who it was you reminded me of. And for some reason, John Prine kept coming up. And I said no, Jack, that's ridiculous, he's nothing like John Prine. But what I think I'm responding to is that you and John Prine engender such a response in the audience, and it seems you both fill some important emotional need.*

RZ: I love that comparison, and obviously I love John Prine, and we're so sorry to see him pass. The things that I would be most thankful for in the comparison, I guess, are one, he's not afraid to take a big left turn in a song. A song starts off about one thing and turns into its own completely different thing. That's amazing. And, two, to draw an incredible amount of information into a short line, a short ostensibly simple line, like "Daddy's got a hole in his arm where all the money goes." Oh my God!

JS: *Isn't that great? Well, but those are my favorite kinds of songs of yours. My favorite two songs of yours are "Thanks for the Support" and "DWB." And those are both songs that start off a little humorously, but soon the audience is going "Uh-oh, maybe I shouldn't have laughed so soon," because then the songs turn deadly serious and hit you in the gut.*

RZ: Yes, thank you for that observation. That is exactly right. How else can you deal with subject matter that's like what those two songs deal with?

JS: *Can you talk a little bit more about the circumstances around writing each of those songs, starting with "Thanks for the Support"?*

RZ: "Thanks for the Support": there was a rhetorical support that the Bush administration was showing for the young men and women who were sent over to Iraq in that incredible misadventure. It was just cynical talk with all that "support," and all the SUV's driving around with yellow ribbons, and so forth. The irony of that song is bitter. It's a satirical song and I've often said that satire is the form of comedy that isn't funny. Because you're dealing with subject matter where you're drawing these very stark juxtapositions between what is said and what is done. So that was what the impetus was for that song.

Thanks for the Support

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuXorDsGvt0

You've got that yellow ribbon stuck on your H-2
Thanks for the support
Memorial Day weekend you threw a bar-b-que
Thanks for the support

I can feel the love seven thousand miles away
And I'm a patriot, as I was trying to say
When you cut me short
Thanks for the support

I was gunning for Osama, and you sent me for Saddam
Thanks for the support
Now I'm sitting down to dinner – it's another can of Spam
Thanks for the support

You say complete the mission, and I say count on me
'Cause I don't even know what mission there might be
To abort
Thanks for the support

You sent me here a third time, and my house was repossessed
Thanks for the support
Now my wife is in a trailer, but she sent a kevlar vest
Thanks for the support

And I think of her only every time I bleed
And someday we will meet again at Walter Reed
The resort of last resort
Thanks for the support

And you hired those mercenaries who make eight times what I do
Thanks for that
And you dropped in on Thanksgiving with a turkey and a camera crew
Thanks … giving

Now you're giving guns to the ones who shot at me
The tank is full, but the strategy might be down a quart
Thanks for the support

I 'preciate the stopgap, and I 'preciate the Surge
Thanks for the support
Another twenty thousand voices to harmonize this dirge
Thanks for the support

And to the Democratic Congress who could have brought me home
Who must have come down with a new Gulf War Syndrome
Of some sort
Thanks for the support

And if I die tomorrow, won't you ship me home at night
Thanks for the support
And if I have a funeral, make sure it's outta sight
Thanks for the support

In the final seconds you've got a plan to win
Cut those taxes and let Jesus put one in
From half-court
Thanks for the support

Thanks for the support

(Words and music © 2008 by Roy Zimmerman)

RZ: That song started out much funnier. As Melanie and I reworked that song, you know, we realized that we should take it in a different direction. And again, not just us saying this to people, but hearing this from people. That's the attempt, anyway, to write a song that ministers to that emotional need.

And the same with "DWB." If you want to write a song about Black Lives Matter from the point of view of an admittedly Left Coast white suburban snowflake like myself, what is the best way into that subject matter that truly allies you with the cause, the real cause of that? I found myself increasingly frustrated and angry and confused about the response of America to Black men, in particular, being killed on the streets.

JS: *We should point out that the song wasn't just written yesterday. It wasn't just in response to George Floyd.*

RZ: No, certainly not. It goes back to Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner and before that. So there are references in there to all of those things. But I tried to keep it broad enough to make the phenomenon the thing we're talking about, not only a particular incident.

DWB

https://bit.ly/3ff9hlu

I pulled you over
'cause you were speeding
Do you know how black you were going?
I had you clocked at fifty miles per black
In a forty-five blacks per hour zone

I'll be right black

When I've run your license
Just sit black and re-blax

Step out of the vehicle, son
Come with me
Gonna book you on a DWB

You put your hands up
So, naturally
I thought you had a gun up there
Hidden somewhere in mid-air

And you said, "Don't shoot"
You tried to flee
Which I took as an attack
And shot you five times in the back

I chased you down 'cause
You had a pocket knife
I thought you might be joining the Swiss Army

Or stealing Skittles
Or passing twenties
Or otherwise compromising Western Civilization

Oh you can't breathe
No you can't breathe
You can't breathe, you can't breathe

That's what they all say
Come quietly
I'll book you on a DOA-WB

(Words and music, © 2014 by Roy Zimmerman)

RZ: The other point about that, Jack, that relates to the theatricality of the songs, is that we believe that a song should go someplace and that's not, say, what a pop song calls for. I mean, you can write a great pop song and you've expressed a single thought well over the course of three and a half minutes, but these songs—and theatrical songs in general—should end up in a different place from where they started: they should get funnier, they should get angrier. They should take you someplace that you weren't when you began the song.

JS: *What a wonderful lesson for songwriters. That's fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to add, Roy?*

RZ: Yes, I want to add a word about Anne Feeney who passed away the other day. We lost her to COVID-19 unfortunately. She's was an amazing spirit, an amazing activist, an amazing songwriter, and a real light in this world. And so I want to just mention that she covered a song of ours called "Defenders of Marriage" (https://bit.ly/3oPTOMc), a song written now twenty-something odd years ago about marriage equality. Well, there's a question that often comes up: Does your satire change anybody's mind? Well, you know, nobody wants their mind changed—but it did happen, and it's amazing when it does. Anne often used to tell a story about changing minds with that song. Somebody was really razzing her during her performance of it, not accepting the song's premise.

But a couple of months later, he came up to her and said, “You know, I’ve thought about your song, and it changed my mind.” So we loved hearing that.

JS: *That’s wonderful. Anything else?*

RZ: Just please go to our internet website https://www.RoyZimmerman.com and check out these new virtual shows. You can sign up for the mailing list, which is a good way to know about new songs that we’re doing and new videos that might involve your participation. You could actually send in a video clip and be part of this juggernaut that we call virtual singing videos.

JS: *Fantastic. Well, Roy Zimmerman, COVID-19 or not, Donald Trump or not, I suspect you’ll be around for a long while more. As you once said, “As long as there’s poverty, war, bigotry, ignorance, greed, lust, and paranoia,… I’ve got a career!” It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. Thanks so much, Roy.*

RZ: You bet, Jack. Thank you very much.