

Conjuring the Ultimate Emo Rock President

By Kristin Friedrich

**It's a crying shame I'm all alone.
Not with you, nor her, nor anyone.
Won't you knock me on my head,
Crack it open, let me outta here.**

— Rivers Cuomo of Weezer, "Why Bother?," Pinkerton, 1996

**Life sucks.
My life sucks in particular.
The rain will rain down.
The blood will bleed out.
The sweat will sweat...forth.
I'm gonna be that guy.
I'm gonna be that guy.**

— "Populism, Yea, Yea," a song from *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*
Written by Alex Timbers, Music and Lyrics by Michael Friedman
Directed by Alex Timbers, 2007

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FOR THEIR FIRST COLLABORATION, writer/director Alex Timbers and composer/lyricist Michael Friedman knew they wanted to deconstruct a historical figure in a rock show setting, a sort of grown-up take on the animated, Saturday morning *Schoolhouse Rock* segments many of us hummed as kids.

They weren't married to a specific era, so their brainstorming sessions zigzagged from one luminary to the next. There was talk of Susan Sontag, for example — perhaps they could create a meditation on camp, the aesthetic she wrote about in 1964; perhaps a piece about Sontag living among the mole people said to reside underneath New York.

Well, the mole people idea was scrapped. But Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" essay resonated, and the duo started thinking about a broader consideration of a specific style. "That brought us to our fascination with emo," Timbers says, "which in turn directed us to the realization that Andrew Jackson was the ultimate emo president."

The rock music genre nicknamed "emo," short for emotive or emotional, is characterized by tortured outpourings of love and rejection. It's the chosen oeuvre for band members with slouchy haircuts and jeans. What if, in some kind of protective time capsule (those haircuts are expensive), emo and its accoutrement backtracked to the early 19th century?

In those tumultuous years, America's seventh commander in chief had been orphaned and tortured at the hands of redcoats by the time he was 15. He learned to fight early and never gave it up, scrapping with British and Spanish troops, numerous Indian tribes, corrupt politicians and anyone stupid enough to question the honor of his twice-married wife.

Jackson was a maverick politician: He founded the Democratic Party and brought a new type of interactive, populist government to the people.



Alex Timbers



Michael Friedman

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According to Friedman, it was "part of a movement in America fully disconnected from European roots, and one that seemed, at the time, particularly emblematic of a young country."

Jackson didn't belong to European traditions and he was also separate from early American ones. The first president who was neither a founding father nor the son of one, Jackson was not cut from Washington cloth. He was entirely his own invention.

He was also bloodstained, literally and figuratively. He and wife Rachel bled themselves medicinally. With the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forcibly relocated tens of thousands of Indians (and legalized later travesties such as the 1838 Trail of Tears), he bled the nation.

The notion that this tough guy — this repository of musket shrapnel and ruthlessness — might also be in the habit of pouring his heart out became the foundation of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. Workshopped at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2006, the musical now makes its world premiere at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

The way in which it explores a historic figure has become Timbers' hallmark, an aesthetic shaped while a Yale undergrad. "There was a level of obsessive academia and ridiculousness on campus that I found fascinating," he says.

A love for subverted academia and experimental theatre was the impetus for forming, and running, Les Freres Corbusier once he moved to New York. The theatre company has a winking pompous name (the Corbusier brothers, translated — named for the fictional grandchildren of architect Le Corbusier) — and a reputation for melding lowbrow and highbrow sensibilities. An early calling card was *A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant*, a biography of L. Ron Hubbard played by child actors ranging in age from 8 to 12. (Santa Monica's Powerhouse Theatre staged it in 2004 — it is Timbers' only play on the West Coast until now.)

When Timbers was working on *Boozy*, a play about urban planner Robert Moses, he met composer Friedman. Though the latter was too busy to come aboard, the two kept in touch. Friedman was also affiliated with an acclaimed New York theatre company, The Civilians, which parlays dialogue from documentary-style interviews into highly theatrical shows.

When the collaboration did begin, Timbers and Friedman wanted the project to combine the aesthetics of their companies — historical topics imbued with rock culture overtones; personal-sounding dialogue that sneaks up on larger social issues.

Modern day emo boys sing about high school crushes and unrequited love, and that subject matter is a long way from political machinations and Indian massacres. But Jackson's passion and grudges and bloodletting, it seemed to Timbers and Friedman, were tied to the impetuous style of emo. The style became a touchstone for both script and song — because combined with historical fact, it let adolescent emotion and gruesome action brew inside one man.

For Jackson's monologues, Timbers imagined what singer Rivers Cuomo would say. Friedman soaked in emo bands like Cuomo's Weezer and Dashboard Confessional, then cut himself off to write fresh. The results combine emo, grunge and more recent electronic-rock styles with sounds of the Wild West and vaudeville. The play's anthem, "Populism, Yea, Yea," features cowboys who sing of interactive democracy and war against elitists, but also, the girls they can't get.

"I think the music fits with the exploration of youth and maturity, personal and national, that is at the center of the show," Friedman explains. "The music sounds young but it grows up over the show. By the end we've wandered into more sober territory."

Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson is a fast-paced, full-fledged musical now, with 11 songs compared to the handful in the Williamstown version. Tonally, it shifts from broad, over-the-top comedy to more naturalistic drama, a journey meant to mirror Jackson's life.

Though their character never reveals a guilty conscience, this Jackson is ultimately concerned with his legacy — and possibly his soul. Timbers and Friedman agree Old Hickory was a terrible guy, yet still relatable. "He's part of this lineage of American politicians that we all love," Timbers says. "If the choice is strong-but-wrong or weak-but-rational, we choose strong-but-wrong every time. That cowboy swagger, down-home charm, the fact that he doesn't talk correctly — it's exciting but dangerous. What does that say about American character?" ●

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