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## ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Kiki - 2008/06/13 10:48

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Hey y'all, Kiki here, MondoHomo organizer. I got an email from one audience member at the PinkEye "Pansy Division" screening, regarding the ukelele player Ben Lerman and his songs. I'm posting the question here (below) so anybody interested can discuss it.

Here's some discussion guidelines:

1. Listen to Ben's songs first:

<http://www.benlerman.net/benlerman/music.html>

2. Keep the discussion about the ISSUES. Personal attacks will not be tolerated.

3. Racial politics are VERY difficult to discuss, especially in a web or email forum, where it's difficult to tell people's intonations. Keep this in mind, and give people the benefit of the doubt.

4. Diversity is good; diversity of opinion is good. We won't all agree, politically or otherwise. So let's approach this with a "this is what I think" attitude, not "my way is the most correct."

5. We're all coming to this with different social, class and political backgrounds. Be patient and go overboard in explaining what you mean. And have tolerance for folks with different experiences or politics than you.

Here's the question:

"I wanted to ask if any one addressed the overt racism that was present in that comedic mandolin players delivery on that night at the eye drum. It was really upsetting and in retrospect some of my friends and I wished that we had shouted out about it and walked out of the performance."

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Amy from G\ville - 2008/06/13 11:37

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I'm glad that you said this because we felt exactly the same way but thought maybe it was because we were some of the few Black people in the audience. I personally think that it is sad that white people don't tend to display much solidarity in these situations!

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Ben Lerman - 2008/06/13 12:00

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Hi everyone,

First, I am deeply sorry that I offended anyone.

Secondly, I am not racist. I have never been racist, overtly, covertly, or any other vertly. I hope to correct this misunderstanding, but at present I'm not sure I understand how it even came about.

Maybe if you guys tell me what I did that you thought was racist, that would be a good starting point. Was it the cover version I did of Riskay's song "Smell Yo' Dick"? Was it something else? Please be specific so as to help me understand what is at issue here.

Again, I never meant to offend anyone. I am not about propagating racist stereotypes. If anything, my work seeks to subvert them through exposure of their inherent absurdity.

I welcome your criticism and questions, and I will respond to them as best as I can.

Sincerely and respectfully,  
Ben Lerman

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Laurie - 2008/06/13 14:13

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Hi, I am the one that posted that comment and Kiki and I have been having a dialogue about it that hasn't gone out to the list serve, so here is some of my response to her that i feel is relevant to this conversation.

It was the "Smell your dick" song that I was referring to. The song was offensive in terms of a white man missappropriating black culture and using it to gain laughs in his performance to a primarily white audience in which most of us sang and laughed right along with him.

I don't think that as a white person it is honest to say that you are not racist....It is impossible to be white and live in this world and not have some racist patterns, attitudes and actions....it is something that we (I am a white person) need to be working on everyday and all of the time...

I think there is a long history in the white g,b,l,t,q movement that many of us think that we understand oppression and therefore cannot be racist like white heterosexual people are....which is utterly not true since white skin regardless of gender and sexual orientation affords us a level of access to priviledge far beyond that of people of color....

I think that your (Ben's) performance of that song was a modern day equivalent to wearing a black face in a vaudeville performance.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by javier - 2008/06/13 14:35

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i knew the riskay song before i heard his cover, and when he announced he was doing a cover, i must admit i was concerned. i was actually horrified that he did not replace the n-word. it made me very uncomfortable.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by todd - 2008/06/13 14:36

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Hey...

I'm glad you started this thread. I also felt a little squeemish about two of the songs in particular-- the Riskay cover and "Greencard" songs. I understand the point that these songs were supposed to be critical through humor (at least "Greencard," although I'm not 100% sure how the Riskay cover song was meant to be critical), but given the rhetorical context I'm primarily disturbed at how that humor was generated-- along culturally assumed notions of racial difference.

Take "Greencard" for example. I can understand that this song, told I assume from the perspective of a white business owner to a non-white immigrant worker, could be said to be a critique of a system that takes advantage of immigrant labor. So the theory would be that the offensive stereotypes ("wetback," "my short friend," etc.) could be stereotypes spoken from the business culture, or that even capitalism, contributes to if not creates these racist, divisive stereotypes. I'd buy it if it seemed like the humor was directed at the employer, and not the worker-- it almost seems (and this is again, part of the rhetorical context of assumed white speaker and predominantly white, English-speaking audience) that we are invited "in on the joke"-- shared with the employer at this worker's expense. It's hard to imagine something that does more to build xenophobia and crush solidarity than a type of humor that demarcates racial difference and thus creates hierarchies based on those differences.

Sorry to be so long-winded.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Ben Lerman - 2008/06/13 15:16

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Hey Laurie,

Thanks for your thoughtful reply.

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Without any shred of irony or sarcasm, I'd like to say (and I said it at the performance too) that I think "Smell Yo Dick" is one of the best songs released last year.

I understand the long history of white people using black stereotypes to make fun of black people, i.e. blackface. Blackface portrayed blacks as ignorant buffoons, and that is terrible.

In covering this song, I'm attempting to celebrate it, not make fun of it. It's a funny song, and it's funny because it rings very true, that it's a true story. I think that people (whatever their background) laugh because the song takes a delicate situation (infidelity) and puts it into indelicate terms.

I understand what you mean when you say you feel that my performance of this song is like blackface. I can see the connection you are making. But I disagree.

This is not a song that I wrote. And I don't believe that it portrays black people as inferior. On the contrary, this is a song whose honesty I admire. The blunt message of this song transcends race.

Further, the audience that I play to is not a mainstream audience. If you are looking for the modern day equivalent of blackface, look to the white executives who produce a large portion of "black" entertainment media that is marketed to mainstream audiences.

Let me ask you a question: Would you prefer that I changed the word "nigga" to the word "faggot" when I sing the song?

One more thing I'd like to add...

I was caught on tape backstage at Milwaukee Pridefest last Saturday doing a duet of this song with internet drag sensation Britney Houston. Several thousand people have seen it, including DJ Quest, the original song's producer. He left a comment saying, "hahahaha thank you for the support!!! - Dj Quest"

I want to be sensitive to your feelings and to the feelings of others who might be offended, but if you were me, and the original artist greenlighted your cover version, what would you do?

I look forward to more!

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## Re: ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Allan - 2008/06/13 15:43

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<http://tinyurl.com/5mzach>

same as: [http://www.benlerman.net/benlerman/home/Entries/2008/6/13\\_Meltdown!\\_-\\_%E2%80%99Smell\\_Yo%E2%80%99\\_Dick%E2%80%9D.html](http://www.benlerman.net/benlerman/home/Entries/2008/6/13_Meltdown!_-_%E2%80%99Smell_Yo%E2%80%99_Dick%E2%80%9D.html)

Without getting into it at all at this point, please check out this page (contains two short videos) from backstage at Pridefest. It could be helpful to this discussion.

Text from that page (there are links embedded on the original page):

"Meltdown! - "Smell Yo' Dick"

Friday, June 13, 2008

We were waiting Pridefest stage to open, where the Feast of Fools, Britney Houston (above left), and I were opening for Natasha Bedingfield (above right), after the giant tornado and rain that hit Milwaukee that night, we were all a little gloomy, sitting in the Feast of Fools trailer backstage. I decided it was time for a little sing-along to pick up the mood. Britney Houston was all over that, and when she started "playing the blinds" I almost fell out of my chair. Fun!!!

Watch it below or here, where the people have talked about how cute I am and how much they love me. You know what? I never get tired or hearing that."

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

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Posted by Ben Lerman - 2008/06/13 15:51

todd wrote:

Take "Greencard" for example... I'd buy it if it seemed like the humor was directed at the employer, and not the worker--

Hey Todd,

I worked in restaurants for many years. In one restaurant, the management was bouncing checks and not paying the employees. For the people who were citizens, we could (and did) file complaints with the labor board. We eventually got the money owed to us. The people who were undocumented could do nothing. Their only option was to find work at another restaurant where they would probably be treated just as poorly. This experience was the impetus for this song.

I find that the immigration debate in the popular media ignores a very basic truth, that people use undocumented immigrant labor on a daily basis.

Also, I would like you to know that I've played this song in front of an audience that was made up of a very diverse crowd at Brooklyn College, including many Caribbean and Latin-American immigrants, at Brooklyn College. The response was overwhelmingly positive. They understood that I was championing the undocumented worker, shining a light on one of the myriad ways he is mistreated.

Thanks,  
Ben

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by todd - 2008/06/13 18:56

They understood that I was championing the undocumented worker, shining a light on one of the myriad ways he is mistreated.

May I ask how this song champions the undocumented worker? By depicting a job/boss that is exploitative/racially oppressive? But it still seems to me that, to turn on a cliché, we are invited not to laugh at this speaker/boss (as we should be) but instead laugh with him (and thus at the workers he is exploiting. These immigrant workers seem the target of the joke as the song closes with "the only person I can pay less is the retard" and a rendition of racist caricatures in the sampling of "La Cucaracha" and "aiee!").

I agree with you that the pop media has portrayed this issue poorly, but as a former restaurant worker and long-time union organizer I actually see the song as playing into rather than criticizing a view that can all too easily turn into a Lou Dobbs-ish form of xenophobia. While seemingly at first sympathetic towards a laborer who is reluctant or unable to stand up for their rights at a job (a view which forgets that undocumented workers stand up in solidarity with each other all the time-- witness events like the last two May Day protests to institutions like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers as well as the fact that they participate in labor union activities on a daily basis), this view often relies upon notions of racial difference to build a nativist, thinly-veiled racist case for anti-immigrant action. I'm not saying the song is calling for a wall to be built on the US-Mexican border, but I am saying the song turns upon racialized differences in the workplace-- a wedge that has undercut and continues to undercut worker solidarity based on ridiculous cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Ben Lerman - 2008/06/14 00:48

Todd,

It's a big, complicated problem. Clearly, it can't be fully explored in a 2 and 1/2 minute novelty song. But I think the song does its job as social satire. It brings to the forefront a character who is not entirely unsympathetic. Both the worker and the employer are in difficult positions. In the beginning of the song, the narrator says, "I can barely make ends meet." He says, "Consistency and value is what I want, but how can I compete?"

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I think "La Cucaracha," the cockroach, the eternal symbol of an undesirable visitor (the view of anti-immigrant activists toward immigrants) is quite an appropriate end for this tale. And "Aieeee!" is a comical way to express frustration at the situation.

I'm no T.C. Boyle (The Tortilla Curtain). I'm not nearly smart enough. I'm just trying to point out some societal ills, and laugh at them. Because let's face it: they are enough to make you never want to get out of bed.

I think the refrain of the song is what people come away with, "I want someone willing to work hard, and you want a Green Card." It's simple and goes to the heart of the problem, the shadowy compromise of undocumented labor in a capitalist system. And, of course, it rhymes.

I would LOVE to hear what El Vez (the Mexican Elvis) thinks of this song. He's my hero. I think he'd like it.

All the best from Pittsburgh,  
Ben

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by random reader - 2008/06/14 08:05

hi ben

i was not at the performance, and have not heard the songs, but my only recommendation is for you NOT to defend the material. the common intention as artists and comedians is to find the line and cross it, in order to create a reaction and a dialogue.

youve successfully done that. youre not going to please everyone, and not everyone is going to get it. especially since its satire, which is always criticized and not everyones taste of humor. (sarah silverman, south park- ect)

your greencard song sounds very much like a very popular M.I.A. song "Paper Planes," where in the chorus she repeatedly says "all i wana do is-gunshots- and take your money." a first time audience would simply write the song off while missing the deeper context. we could call it controversial, but could we call it racist? shes is a woman of color, so she doesnt have the white priviledge white people evidently always have to take into account.

(though white priviledge implies that white poverty does not exist. simply because of skin color white people are apparently immediately granted access to healthcare and education. also white people apparently are not victims of assault, abuse, addiction, rape or fear- but thats just what i think is implied when people say "white priviledge.")

my opinion is that the comparison to "black face" comment from a poster was really a HUGE leap into the ridiculous and shows zero sensitivity or knowledge of the actual "black face" phenomena. i also think that just because someone doesn't get it, doesn't mean youre wrong ben. i dont think because youre white doesnt mean you can't cover black songs, i dont think it means you cant use the word nigger in art or performance. and i think some people should get off soapboxes and into the world to fight racism where it actually exists, which is probably not at a Queer multicultural festival. you sent a complex message to some complicated people. coming on here to declare yourself as "never being racist" is unnecessary and doesnt really reflect favorably. owning your message, taking responsibility for creating discussion, and leaving a lasting impression on an audience who left your performance still processing is something that most artists will never achieve. congrats!

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by random reader - 2008/06/14 08:55

i just re-read the original post and saw that listening to the songs was rule number 1. i just wanted to clarify that i did follow the link, but was unable to download the music to actually listen to them. i hope this technicality is not means for removal of my opinion. my response was directed in support in general of artists, and my response to the overtly casual reference to the "black face" phenomena.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Myra in ATL - 2008/06/14 10:00

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To Laurie:

I was just linked to your comment and am compelled to comment. Since you put in a qualifier in your comment, I am a straight, black woman.

I feel like you are the one "Misappropriating black culture," when you compare a cover song performed in 2008 to a "Vaudeville black face." That is a gross misinterpretation of the social implications of blackface. PLEASE research it. I will even link the wikipedia article for you for a good jump start.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface>

"using it to gain laughs in his performance to a primarily white audience in which most of us sang and laughed right along with him."

So now not only are you calling Ben Fuerman a racist, but the entire audience? Laurie your opinion is valueable, but full of entitlement, misuse of historical reference, and far more offensive than the actual performance.

You're pointing out that the LGBT community cannot compare their struggle to that encountered by people of color is a regurgitation of something you do not understand and shouldn't use divisively.

My 2 cents.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Laurie - 2008/06/14 12:10

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Hey, I have been thinking about this and don't have time to fully/thoughtfully reply right now, cause i am buisy with birthday parties and good bye parties for kids and friends.....

I do agree however,that i went too far with the black face vaudeville comparison...I don't think that was an accurate analysis....It was reactive ignorance on my part and i appreciate being called on it....it was full of entitlement and misinformation....

I still think that the performance of the song by Ben was racist and that the audience (myself included)who went along with it needs to be called on it.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by todd - 2008/06/14 12:17

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and i think some people should get off soapboxes and into the world to fight racism where it actually exists, which is probably not at a Queer multicultural festival.

This snippet is entirely unfair and an ad hominem directed at people whom this writer knows absolutely nothing about--almost as if "those people who have concerns either are too P.C., just don't get satire, or have nothing better to do than complain, and thus their criticisms should be dismissed." As a friend of Laurie, I can assure you she does a lot to fight racism in "the world where it actually exists." Furthermore, (and this in many ways is even more disturbing to me) why shouldn't a Queer multicultural festival be considered part of that "larger world"? Why should it be excepted? (Just wanted to say as an aside, though, that I had a really good time at the festival and that the organizers should be commended overall.)

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Amy from G\ville - 2008/06/15 12:57

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Ben you can say you're not racist, which maybe you aren't. I don't know you so I don't know. But what I don't get is what was supposed to be funny about that song where you pretended (pretty badly) to be a Black woman? How was that doing anything other than making fun of her and what is a pretty funny song about infidelity but is NOT your song?

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Where was the joke supposed to be in your performing it?

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Kiki - 2008/06/15 15:37

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long-winded post that was written 24 hours ago (so doesn't reference most of the last 6 or 6 posts)

hey y'all, I'm really glad we're all talking about this. One of my big pet peeves is how discussion of racial politics and racism is so difficult and taboo here in the South, that it's rarely possible to discuss it in a meaningful, non-aggressive way. So THANK YOU.

I'm also really glad that we're keeping this on-topic, about the issues and about the actual songs, not about individuals or personalities. Let's keep that up.

---- stepping out of Moderator role ----

Here's my personal take on it (stepping out of Moderator role for a moment).

(PREFACE: My general position as an ally is that: 1) anti-racism is an ongoing process of listening and learning, 2) what's most important is for me is to first shut up and listen, then consider with an open mind, 3) it is my responsibility to educate myself and not demand that people of color tutor me, and 4) it is also my responsibility as an ally to speak up, and to be accountable for my own racism.)

I too was uncomfortable with some of the language in Lerman's songs. Before we booked Lerman, I'd listened to other songs on MySpace, and had this reaction:

First, I was uncomfortable with the language. He uses politically offensive and edgy language. But when I felt uncomfortable about it, my second reaction was to pay attention to that feeling. I know about myself, as a white person who considers myself an ally to people of color and an anti-racist, that sometimes my discomfort comes from use of specific terms -- without considering their context.

For instance, I personally will never use the N-word. I always substitute "N-word" if I need to somehow quote it. However that doesn't change what the word refers to, that merely addresses my own discomfort with using it. While I'm not comfortable using it, there are times in our culture when it's use is appropriate - in the context. For example, quoting someone who's used it offensively. Some hiphop songs use it as a term of brotherhood among men of color. I don't personally approve of using it even then, but it is culturally and politically appropriate in those contexts.

So what I've learned is that CONTEXT is more important than vocabulary. With that perspective, I re-listened to Lerman's songs more closely, and decided that he was using these offensive terms to make subtle political points. (We may not all agree about this.)

(SIDE NOTE: "Smell My Dick" is not a Lerman song, and is not posted on his Myspace or website.)

My take was that Lerman is specifically not "preaching to the choir." Meaning, that when this type of humor is used in an overly-obvious way, we white liberals can all congratulate ourselves on getting the joke made at the expense of politically oblivious or conservative peers. While I enjoy that kind of humor as different from less-political humor, I don't think it does anything to make us think or push any political boundaries.

Lerman's songs, on the other hand, I felt were more open to interpretation -- and therefore made me (and I hope others) specifically think through all of the political implications, and my beliefs. I LOVE THIS! I think we on the left NEED to be challenged into defining and re-defining our beliefs.

My personal experience of coming to new and more radical politics follows this same kind of dialectic: first I'm offended or feel misunderstood, second I think it thru trying to understand, third I come to a new place regarding that particular issue. So this is how I feel Lerman's songs work.

On the other hand, I've followed that process with the "Smell My Dick" song, and I agree that I don't feel it's making a subtle or underlying political point that offsets the offensiveness of 1) using the "n-word" (particularly to a white audience in the South!), and 2) a white person appropriating a stereotypically black voice for humor.

While I think there can be racially specific humor, and even use of stereotypes, that isn't offensive, I think "Smell My Dick" went over the edge, without enough justification or basis. I would ask Lerman to re-consider using this song in his

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performances.

In his defense, I think that doing the kind of edgy, potentially offensive humor he does means that sometimes you're gonna go over the edge. Which is an opportunity for him and us all to learn and decide how we will all react to such situations in the future.

--- back in Moderator role ---

However I do want to publicly apologize to the audience that I, as host for the evening, didn't contextualize Lerman's performance, or offer any way for audience members to deal with their reactions. If, before his performance, I had let the audience know that he uses edgy, potentially offensive language to make somewhat subtle political points, I think the audience would have had a chance to listen more carefully and evaluate their own reactions in that context. Also, if I'd established a post-show forum for folks to discuss their reactions with Lerman, I think that would have done more towards my own goal of promoting critical thinking and personal re-evaluation of each of our politics.

So please accept my apologies -- I'll definitely take those steps next time.

I also want to specifically apologize to the people of color in the room who understandably felt "left out to dry" by my not speaking up. I know that's a frustrating and depressing scenario, particularly when you were probably expecting to be in a "safer" space of mostly queer left-leaning folks. I will take this as a challenge, as a self-avowed ally, to stand up and say something in difficult circumstances in the future, and try to remember that I speak not just for myself, but for those around me as well, when I openly confront offensive stereotypes.

While, upon reflection, I personally support Lerman's songs and performance (aside from the "Smell My Dick" song), it definitely makes me re-think it AGAIN to hear that poeple of color in the audience also felt offended.

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## Re:ukelele songs at PinkEye screening

Posted by Kiki - 2008/06/16 14:24

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hey y'all, I didn't mean to shut down the conversation, just to add to it! Feel free to continue... - Kiki

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