

The Washington Post Style

Torture Songs spur a protest most vocal

Musicians call for release
of records on Guantanamo
detainee treatment

BY JOE HEIM

Was the theme to "Sesame Street" really played to torture prisoners held at Guantanamo and other detention camps? What about Don McLean's "American Pie"? Or the Meow Mix jingle? Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A."?

A high-profile coalition of artists — including the members of Pearl Jam, R.E.M. and the Roots — demanded Thursday that the government release the names of all the songs that were blasted since 2002 at prisoners for hours, even days, on end, to try to coerce cooperation or as a method of punishment.

Dozens of musicians endorsed a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the National Security Archive, a Washington-based independent research institute, seeking the declassification of all records related to the use of music in interrogation practices. The artists also launched a formal protest of the use of music in conjunction with torture.

"I think every musician should be involved," said Rosanne Cash in a telephone interview Wednesday. "It seems so obvious. Music should never be used as torture." The singer-songwriter (and daughter of Johnny Cash) said she reacted with "absolute disgust" when she heard of the practice. "It's beyond the pale. It's hard to even think about."

Other musicians, including Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails and Tom Morello, formerly of the band Rage Against the Machine, also expressed outrage.

"The fact that music I helped create was used in crimes against humanity sickens me," Morello said in a statement. "We need to end torture and close Guantanamo now."

The musicians' announcement was coordinated with the recent call by veterans and retired Army generals to shut Guantanamo. It is part of a renewed effort to pressure President Obama to keep his promise to close the prison in Cuba in his first year in office. Television and radio spots focused on the issue also launched this week by the National Campaign to Close Guantanamo, led by Tom Andrews, a former congressman from Maine.

A White House spokesman said music is no longer used as an instrument of torture, part of a shift in policy on interrogations that Obama made on his second full day in office.

The president also formed an inter-agency group, called High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, to examine the techniques used during questioning, but a White House spokesman said this week

MUSIC CONTINUED ON 3C

● A most-wanted list of artists and songs. 3C

Musicians unite in call for Guantanamo files

MUSIC, FROM IC

that the new group has yet to be fully constituted.

"The president banned the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, and issued an executive order that established that interrogations must be consistent with the techniques in the Army Field Manual and the Geneva Conventions," a White House official said.

"Sound at a certain level creates sensory overload and breaks down subjectivity and can [bring about] a regression to infantile behavior," said Suzanne G. Cusick, a music professor at New York University who has studied, lectured about and written extensively on the use of music as torture in the current wars. "Its effectiveness depends on the consistency of the sound, not the qualities of the music."

Played at a certain volume, she said, "it simply prevents people from thinking."

Human rights activists hope that the musicians' actions will bring attention to the practice and ensure that it won't be used again.

"In light of the patterns of widespread use of music as torture over the last seven years, facilities in accessing these current detainees and the failure of the U.S. to explicitly rule out the use of loud music, the musicians' FOIA request is crucial for learning about the United States' past, present and even future use of music as a torture technique," said Jayne Huckerby, research director at the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at the

NYU School of Law.

The prolonged use of loud music to control or coerce prisoners, Huckerby points out, is a violation of the U.N. Convention Against Torture and constitutes both torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The United States is a party to the convention.

According to Huckerby, the use of loud music was "pretty much a widespread tool of the U.S. government and a standard condition of CIA prisons." Huckerby's organization represents Mohammed al-Asad and Mohammed Bashir, former prisoners who were released in 2005. Both men say they were forced to listen to excruciatingly loud music continuously for days and weeks.

Cusick, the NYU music professor, has interviewed a number of former detainees about their experiences and says the music they most often described hearing was

heavy metal, rap and country. Specific songs mentioned include Queen's "We Are the Champions" and "March of the Pigs" by industrial rockers Nine Inch Nails.

Another former prisoner, Bryan Mohamed, told Human Rights Watch that he had been forced to listen to the rapper Eminem's song "The Real Slim Shady" for 20 days.

Joining in the call for the release of information were dozens of musicians, including David Byrne, Billy Bragg, Steve Earle, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt and T-Bone Burnett.

For now, the artists are trying to find out what songs were played. They say they will explore legal options once the songs are known. It is unclear what, if any, recourse they may have.

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Staff writer Michael Shear contributed to this report.



"STAR-SPANGLED BANNER" BY GERALD MARTENEAU/THE WASHINGTON POST. OTHER PHOTOS BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

NOT-SO-JOYFUL NOISE:

Former detainees say sensory assaults included repeat playings of, from top, the Bee Gees, Christina Aguilera, "The Star-Spangled Banner" and Metallica.



RECORDS SOUGHT

The Freedom of Information Act request submitted by musicians Thursday asks for documents that include but are not limited to references to the following performers or songs: AC/DC

- Aerosmith
- "Barney" theme song (by Bob Singleton)
- Bee Gees
- Britney Spears
- Bruce Springsteen
- Christina Aguilera
- David Gray
- Delicide
- Don McLean
- Dope
- Dr. Dre
- Drowning Pool
- Eminem
- Hed P.E.
- James Taylor
- Limp Bizkit
- Marilyn Manson
- Matchbox Twenty
- Meow Mix jingle
- Metallica
- Neil Diamond
- Nine Inch Nails
- Pink
- Prince
- Queen
- Rage Against the Machine
- Red Hot Chili Peppers
- Redman
- Saliva
- "Sesame Street" theme (by Christopher Cerf)
- Stanley Brothers
- "The Star-Spangled Banner"
- Tipac Shakur