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Interview with Bob Burnett

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Bob Burnett

INTERVIEW WITH BOB BURNETT

Co-founder of Cisco Systems

Bob Burnett is a Berkeley writer, activist, and Quaker. Before starting a second career as a journalist, he was a technologist and one of the founding executives at Cisco Systems.

Moebius: You explain in your article “Depressed America” that it is “tempting to explain national apathy as a consequence of the declining intelligence of the American people. Observing the amount of media attention lavished on flea wits such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, it’s easy to conclude that between watching hours of television and sucking up mega-doses of corn syrup, our fellow citizens have deep-fried their brains.” But I know you believe differently. Can you explain your idea on the frustrations you see in our society and how that leads to the idea that we are not smart?

BB: I think Americans don’t know what to do and that leads to a sense of apathy. We tend to amuse ourselves with nonsense, and this endorses the conclusion that we are stupid. The popularity of the TV show *Lost* comes to mind because it is ultimately a story about survivors who are struggling with mysterious forces. Along with the survivors, the viewer does not know what the real threat is or who can be trusted. The survivors rely on luck above all else to save them.

Moebius: You mentioned that you are working on writing an article about the Academy Awards and the grim outlook of the nominated best pictures. What does that say about Americans?

BB: *Atonement* is about a doomed relationship, and *There Will Be Blood* is about an oil tycoon who gains wealth but loses his soul. I think these are the distractions that Americans can empathize with: there is no justice. This is the kind of thinking that influences us to do nothing but consume and not elicit smart changes. *Juno* is the only movie with an ounce of hope, and it is because the young pregnant girl makes smarter decisions than everyone around her.

Moebius: Do you think this idea of no justice ties into the American struggle and frustration with government?

BB: I get a sense that Americans think these are grim times. There is no just treatment,

and luck means more than perseverance, like the luck that we see the survivors in Lost applying because the usual perseverance and behavior doesn't help them. Americans feel the system is not working, and they don't know what to do. After September 11 we were told that we couldn't do anything except go shopping and hug our kids. There was not a sense of togetherness to fight a common enemy because the enemy seemed undefined. And this lack of common ground and sense of hopelessness has created a need for the nonsense that we feed ourselves. We see this in the media focus on Americans like Brit-tany Spears.

Americans need to take action and not rely on the government controlling our situation. We need to realize there are things we can change if we act together. Consuming because we are told to will not bring about change; it will not stop poverty in America, and it will not stop global warming. The old forms of association like church, the Ma-sons, and Kiwanis no longer work to unite us as a community as they did before. I see America as needing encouragement to change, a movement that will bring us to action and out of this depression. Americans seem less concerned with real issues because of the depression they feel; therefore, they create a need for distraction with stupid topics.

Moebius: How do you and your wife try to change Americans' idea that we have no control and that there is no sense of community?

BB: We try to change things we can. We may not always win, but we try. For instance, we were able to help bring about a new community college in Berkeley. We also managed to stop development on the bay, and instead we helped create parks where there were none. I believe that one or two individuals can make a change. This last June we con-tributed the most money allowed to the Obama campaign because we felt that someone should challenge the Clinton Machine. We like Obama, but we did not think he would become an integral part of the election; we wanted to make a statement. We also backed Nancy Pelosi in hopes of ending the war; she won the election, but has not yet been able to stop the war. We try to stay informed and act on our belief that we as individuals all have the capacity to make a difference. ☺

Notes

1. Bob Burnett, "Depressed America," *The Huffington Post*. October 30, 2007. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-burnett/depressed-america_b_70374.html

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