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AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY ROLLINS.

Tour of Duty

by **Elsbeth Reeve**

Only at **TNR Online** | Post date 04.13.07

(5)

Henry Rollins kicked off his career singing for the hardcore punk band Black Flag, which was at the height of its awesomeness in the early '80s. Since then, he's had a solo music career, played himself in movies, and written several books. These days, he can be seen on "The Henry Rollins Show," now in its second season on the Independent Film Channel. Rollins, who attended military school as a child in Washington, D.C., has been on seven USO tours. He spent a week in Iraq in the summer of 2004.

What parts did you go to?

I was basically at bases very close to the Green Zone. ... At the Victory Base, we got to be there for the daily mortar attack, and for these guys it's just like flies, you know? It's like no big deal. They're like, "Oh yeah. Mortar." As a civilian, that'll stick in your memory for a while, but for these guys, it's like, "Oh yeah, see, I told you sir." ... What was intense was being in the Green Zone. To basically go across the street in the Green Zone--since I'm like "the talent," and they are very careful with a non-com--we get the multi-Humvee caravan to go to from like here to your car. That's like half an hour to get it going for a seven minute ride, ten minutes to get it parked, so everything was this arduous thing, like "OK, today, for the next hour, we're going to get from here to here."--"But it's only like right over there"--"I know sir, but" And so it was grimly, just intense.

Did you perform while you were over there?

No. At lot of the time, when I'm in these places, they put me on what is called a handshake tour ... where you basically do--have you ever seen a record store, like an in-store appearance? You pose for photos and shake hands and all that? That's what I do. But not all the time. Sometimes they say, "We've got this lounge for all the guys and girls here, would you mind going up for an hour and speaking to them?" And I'm like, "Of course. Whatever you want." And so I've done that in quite a lot of places....It's an interesting ride, being in and amongst these people in this way. Because I don't support Bush or the war, but I like the troops, because I really don't think that they're more than just chess pieces in this whole thing. So it's not hard to like them. And they're so happy that someone visits them. It means so much to them. It's really cool that they get such a kick out of it.

So do you get much of an opportunity to talk to any soldiers?

I let them initiate conversation. I don't walk up to them and go, "Hey man, your war is bogus!" That's just really not ... you wouldn't want to do anything that's deleterious to morale. Or distracting For these young people, the war is, "My buddy got shot today." So when you say, "Prewar information was manipulated ..." they're like, "Kiss my ass. I'm getting shot at by guys who served me tea this afternoon." ... You just try and distract them from what they have to go out and do for the next

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Have you developed any Iraq-specific jokes that people just wouldn't get stateside?

No, because I have such a reverence and nausea about ... this conflict--and the fact that it tears the limbs off young men and women and destroys them and kills them and ruins families and lives--I don't see the funny parts. I mean, there probably is humor there. It's hard for me to find it, so far. So, basically, you can tell stories. A lot of these young people know me from being in the *Jackass* movie. Or being in *Bad Boys II* or something like that. So they go, "Sir, what was Steve-O like?" And you tell them the Steve-O story. ... I do have people coming up to me and saying, "Hey, I see your show, I've read part of your books, I know your take on all this, and while I respectfully disagree, I'm glad you're here." You know, fair enough. So I hear all kinds of sentiments, but never, "I disagree with you, I hate you, get out of here." ... They're just very happy that you took the time. And I always semi-lie: "Aw man, no problem." It is a problem. It is 25 hours to get out there, with layovers and all that. And the food isn't great, and the sleeping accommodations are eh. And you're doing the whole thing on jet lag, and you're on military time, which means you hop out of the military transport vehicle having just flown in, and your first thing starts in 40 minutes, and for the next nine to 14 hours it's just go-go-go-go. You sleep a little, and it's like, "OK, it's midnight, and we're going to get you up at 0440 because we want you to get breakfast with the troops at this base, and then you're going to have breakfast with the troops over at this base." And you're like, "Right, OK, I'll sleep later." This is not about you, it's about these people. You kinda go, "OK, exhaustion, who cares?"

You'll go by the phone kiosk and you'll hear young men having these very strange, almost surreal arguments or discussions with their wives over something like, "Hey the garage is leaking, how do we fix that?" And what she maybe doesn't understand is, maybe that guy just got ambushed, like half an hour ago, and he's shaking from the adrenaline, and he's just calling her just to hear a familiar voice, and she's like, "We gotta get the sprinklers fixed." And he's like, "Oh, OK ... I love you." He just wants to get back to the ground. And that's what makes me angry, is what all of this is doing to these very young families. It just makes me mad. It makes anybody mad. So whenever I hear some of these people who say, "Oh, you all don't have the stomach for war," or whatever, it's like, you know, if you're sane and civilized, I don't think any person in their right mind has the stomach for this crap. To have a stomach for it--Stalin probably had a stomach for it.

So few people know people in the military now, it's hard for them to imagine.

Yeah. I do hope I get back to Iraq this year. I always ask the USO to put me back there. I always ask for Afghanistan and Iraq, and they say, "Well in '07, you'll probably get both, if you have time." And I say, well, for the soldiers I'll make time. For me, at this point, it's a personal thing. I really like these people, and young people write me. I send them books. I do big care packages, to these different websites like AnySoldier.com. I'm involved like that. I get letters from them almost daily. Because these guys know that I write soldiers back. They're like, "Dude, is it really you?" I'm like, "Yeah man, yeah I'll write you back." ... If you can raise spirits, make someone's afternoon or make someone's hour, it's a little thing to help. And it's one of the only kind of OK things I see to do with celebrity or fame or whatever it is that I have--recognizability, I don't know what it is. ... But the fact that in some places, it's currency that you can do something good with--well then OK, fame is not so bad ...if you can cheer someone up. It's really great when you can walk into a room at Walter Reed and there's a guy with like a leg gone and nerve damage in his hand, and that big smile--"No way, you're here man!"

Do they know you more for your show or your music?

Oh yeah, they know the music. I've been in some of these places where these people come out of their hooch or whatever they're staying in with one of my books. You can tell it's dogeared--they'll read anything out there. They'll read the back of an oatmeal box. You get pretty bored, so some of these guys have turned into voracious readers. They're not busy all the time, and they're not playing video games all the time, so these guys read. ... I'm sending out a few books today to a guy who's in Iraq. He's going to be there for the next nine months, and I'm going to send

Kurt Vonnegut and his critics

How not to mock a writer

"American Idol"'s Sanjaya Malakar is the country's latest wedge issue

him a couple books. And he's like, "I'll pay!" And I'm like, "Come on."

Some entertainers have said they're sort of "taken to the principal's office" when they get to a base--you know, told, "You see how it's not like on tv? You see how we're making progress?" Have you gotten any of that?

I've been given the rap. You meet the big cheese. ... And you go into his office and there's all this pre-fab KBR [the Halliburton subsidiary formerly known as Kellogg Brown & Root] furniture, everything was stood up an hour ago. It's all pre-fab carpet flown in by ton. "Well we have real good organization here, Mr. Rollins. We're very happy you're here. We're doing a lot of good work for a lot of good people, taking care of bad guys." Yeah, they talk like that. And they're fine, they're just giving you the rap. ...But none of them have basically said, "Here's your talking points." Ever. Nor have they said, "Look, here's what you don't talk about." No one in the USO or DoD. No one has ever told me to cool it.

The last trip I made, I ended up hanging out for an afternoon pretty much with all KBR people. And they are so frighteningly intense and corporate. They're like [in a robot voice] "So, we suggest you try the macaroni. The macaroni is great." And their wives are out there, and they've all got the doctor pants and the fake Izod shirt, and they look like they're selling that back porch furniture. At one base, their part--the KBR/Halliburton part of the camp--is completely walled off from the rest of the camp. They kind of walk in and amongst the troops, but don't really talk to them. ...And if you really want to ruin your day, you stupidly get into a discussion about policy or whatever. Because these people are on the Dick Cheney playbook. They're just really cold about all this. You say, "Iraq" and they're like, "Strength is great. Everything's a triumph. ... And we're doing so great for the Iraqi people and the troops *love* it."

Even if you read the newspapers obsessively, you don't really get a sense of how it really is over there.

You don't have a sense how anything is until you go and bark your nose up what Mark Twain called 'the territory.' If you want to know, you've got to go. And I live by that. Knowledge without mileage is just bullshit to me. That's how I live.

ELSPETH REEVE is a reporter-researcher at The New Republic.

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