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## Denver hip-hop act brings political message to Mile High Music Festival

Flobots flow

*By Quentin Young  
Longmont Times-Call*

DENVER — The band Flobots, assembled in the aftermath of the 2004 election, delivers a message of social justice with hip-hop bombs that, as the November election approaches, are sending tremors across the state and beyond.

Now allied with Universal Republic Records, the band is rolling through America promoting its 2007 album “Fight With Tools,” which contains the hit single “Handlebars,” a song that opens with the unthreatening “I can ride my bike with no handlebars” and builds to the chilling, ironic “I can end the planet in a holocaust!”

The band members, who sometimes appear in promotional photos masked like bandits in American flag bandanas, are as familiar with U.S. misdeeds in South America as with the Iraq war, and books like Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” get passed around on the tour bus.

According to emcee Jonny 5 (aka James Laurie), who with Brer Rabbit founded the Flobots, the band has “big plans” for the Democratic National Convention next month.

“We’re still solidifying what we’re actually doing that week,” Jonny 5 said, “but the overall message we want to send is that we think there’s a movement happening in this country that is bigger than any candidate, bigger than any campaign, and that this movement is about both telling the truth about what our country has been and then really investing in the promise of what it could be.”

### **Kaboom!**

First, however, the Flobots will haul their artillery to Dick’s Sporting Goods Park in Commerce City, where they will join Tom Petty, the Dave Matthews Band, John Mayer and other high-ranking artists on the stages of the Mile High Music Festival, on Saturday and Sunday.

Politics is not just an abiding concern for the band. It was the seed of its creation.

In 2004, Jonny 5 and Brer Rabbit — who have been friends since childhood in Denver — began performing together, partly as a way to engage young people in the election.

Jonny 5 had returned to Denver from Rhode Island, where his involvement in community organizing had engendered some ideas.

“I was seeing things from a community-organizing perspective and had this realization that music could be as powerful as community organizing, if not more powerful,” he said. He wanted to see if he could use music to advance his thoughts on social change. “So Brer Rabbit and I — we’ve known each other since we were 10, and we were on the same page — we started trying to do that in the 2004 election cycle and had some successes and learned some things and got in contact with the group of people that eventually became Flobots.”

### **Why “Flobots”?**



Denver hip-hop group Flobots will perform during the Mile High Music Festival this weekend at Dick’s Sporting Goods Park in Commerce City. **Courtesy Flobots**

### If you go

**What:** Mile High Music Festival, featuring the Flobots along with about four dozen national and local acts, including headliner Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers

**When:** Saturday and Sunday

**Where:** Dick’s Sporting Goods Park, Commerce City

**Info:** [www.milehighmusicfestival.com](http://www.milehighmusicfestival.com)

### Unframed blog

Read more about the Flobots, listen to music and watch videos on [Quentin Young’s blog](#)

“The name has been around for more than a decade, when a group of us decided that since Gobots go, Flobots flow,” Jonny 5 said.

The current lineup owes much to guitarist Andy Rok (aka Andy Guerrero), now a Flobot, who once saw Jonny 5 and Brer Rabbit perform with violist Mackenzie Roberts and suggested they put a live band behind their hip-hop act. The emcees tried out such a format for a Rock the Vote show, and although, based on their lyrics, the 2004 election did not go the way they had hoped, the band succeeded beyond what it could have imagined.

The Flobots, even for fans with no interest in the band’s trenchant political views, are easy to listen to. The beats are strong, the arrangements are tight and the rapping is competent, if not virtuosic. The music is primed for popularity.

Throw in the lyrics, and the Flobots become musical orators.

“We’ve been all over the globe on our government funds/Leaving man, woman and child dead, bloody and numb,” raps Jonny 5 in “Same Thing.” “We’ve been overthrowing leaders with legitimate views/Democratically elected but we didn’t approve.”

The pen is occasionally handled ham-handedly. “We need money for health care and public welfare” might rhyme, but the line is more wonkish than artful.

Note, however, that this direct approach sometimes sets the Flobots’ fearlessness in stark relief. There’s little ambiguity in the song “Stand Up” when Jonny 5 raps, “We won’t fight a war for fossil fuel/It’s times like this that you want to plot a coup.”

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And the band is capable of inventive versifying. Jonny 5 created a routine in which he cycles through the letters in “Iraq,” finding words that start with those letters to construct an anti-war diatribe: “Imagine, rewind, analyze quotations/I rally all quarters/Increase resistance, anticipation, question ... It’s really a quagmire.”

The Flobots, in the Bono tradition of walking the talk, are recruiting volunteers for what they call Street Teams, which will, as Jonny 5 put it, “live the lyric.”

The band so far has initiated three projects: promoting voter registration in partnership with the Colorado Progressive Organization, campaigning with the Student Peace Alliance for a proposed U.S. Department of Peace, and working with abused and neglected kids at the Denver Children’s Home.

“It’s really important to that band that people are socially activated,” said Shannon Lowe, development director at the Children’s Home. “What really made this program work was their dedication and their heart.”

As part of the program — which the Flobots, with funding from the Hunt Alternatives Fund, first proposed to Home leaders — band members teach kids music and recording. The students get to lay down tracks using Apple’s GarageBand recording software.

“The empowerment in this program is really huge,” Lowe said.

The Flobots so valued their work with the kids that band members recently filmed a portion of a new video for the track “Rise” at the Children’s Home, Lowe said.

Two of the Street Team volunteers are Longmont residents Brandon Mowrey and his fiancée, Aubree Peckham, who, through the Colorado Progressive Coalition, go to concert venues before shows and walk the lines registering new voters.

“I love what the Flobots are doing with Street Team,” Mowrey wrote in an e-mail. “They are turning it into a positive movement that has the potential to affect the world in a positive way.”

Mowrey also approves of the band’s songs.

“I love Flobots music,” he wrote. “It is incredibly positive and uplifting.”

It must be gratifying for Jonny 5 to know his songs can ignite thought and action. But he seems most proud to hear that some of the troops fighting the war his music protests are among his fans.

“At every place we’ve gone, there’s been somebody who either has just been in Iraq or has a relative who’s in Iraq,” he said. “We’ve gotten e-mails from people who are in Iraq right now saying, ‘You know what? We know you support the troops, but we want you to know that the troops support you.’ ... I think when you have folks who are in the military saying, ‘You know,

I'm deploying for Iraq in two months, and I know that this war is being waged to support the military-industrial complex. Keep making the music you're making and saying what we can't say' — when you get an e-mail like that, that's encouraging, and it also shatters all barriers, all ideological barriers.”

Kaboom! Kaboom!

Quentin Young can be reached at 303-684-5319 or [qyoung@times-call.com](mailto:qyoung@times-call.com).