

## Zippo Songs: Poems from the Front

**Phil Kline**

I'm skeptical about communicating political ideas through art, and I have doubts as to whether a piece about the Vietnam War might change your mind about that conflict. I derive my political views through direct observation of life. Yet art inevitably enters the political process, as it reminds me what it means to be alive. They say all politics is local, and art helps me locate myself.

*Zippo Songs* originated when I found out about poems American GIs scratched on their lighters in Vietnam. It's interesting that this hadn't happened during World War II or the Korean War, since Zippos had long been widely available through Army PX stores; but in the '60s, personalized poems on the sides of soldiers' lighters became the norm. These inscriptions contain a world of emotion that spoke purely and directly to me without the baggage tag of political commentary. I saw the poems as a vital little body of literature and began to think of a way to work with them as dramatic material, not propaganda.

Wartime Zippos are highly collectible, so I was able to find them on eBay and through collector catalogs, which read almost like books of poetry. Once I had over 100 poems I began sorting and culling them, eventually hitting upon the idea of grouping them by themes: drugs, sex, fear, peace, etc. As the themes accrued, they seemed to mark the coordinates of a journey from life to death.

At this point, I realized that I wanted a prelude to the Zippo poems, and I looked to General William Westmoreland, the equivocating director of the Vietnam War. In classical terms I saw him as the underworld god who sent these souls on their dark journey. But I couldn't find any quotes I liked. However, right there in the news was Donald Rumsfeld's ridiculous circumlocutory. Different time, same game: I'd found my great prevaricator. Of course this implied a connection to the war in Iraq, which I chose not to avoid. So *Zippo Songs* begins with a suite of three Rumsfeld songs.

People frequently ask about making art in the post-9/11 world, and I always say the impulse is the same. The pain and anxiety was in the air before that particular Tuesday, and was already in the art. But the commitment to get it done, to communicate, is greater now. There is a sense of urgency, of time running out, and the upcoming election only heightens that.

These days, choosing an insecure income source such as music is in itself a revolutionary act. How much more strikingly can an intelligent person opt out of popular value systems? I do what I do because, really and truly, I need to. In advance of any project, I don't really know what I want to say other than, "Here is the world I see, a world that I find painful and baffling and hilarious and ravishing, that I want to continue to live in and maybe meet you in." And when I hear voices of authority telling me that I should be fearful and angry, I want to say "screw you" and be confident and joyful. Those are my politics.