

**‘Better Decide Which Side You’re On’:  
Authenticity, Politics and Post-Punk in  
Thatcherite Britain**

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## Introduction

Margaret Thatcher died on Monday 9 April 2013. The newspaper accounts of her life published the following morning served not only to demonstrate the divisive political impact of her time as prime minister of the United Kingdom (May 1979 to November 1990),<sup>1</sup> but also to contextualise her within the contemporary political atmosphere, characterised by austerity and polarised opinions of the Conservative Party-led coalition government. The traditionally left-wing *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* published opinion pieces titled 'There was nothing like her before and there's been nothing like her since. Thank God!'<sup>2</sup> and 'She has left a dark legacy that has still not disappeared'.<sup>3</sup> *The Sun* characterised her positively as a saviour of the country's economy<sup>4</sup> and 'the epitome of what feminism means: achieving equality with men',<sup>5</sup> while the *Daily Mail* captioned her front cover portrait 'The woman who saved Britain'.<sup>6</sup> In Wales, the *Western Mail* stated that 'Her legacy lives on – in Welsh poverty'.<sup>7</sup>

As this thesis will demonstrate, the politics of Thatcherite Britain led popular musicians to use their songwriting and performance platform to voice opposition to government policy, as well as to local and international social issues.

Representations of the 1980s in popular discourse characterise the decade as a

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<sup>1</sup> For history and analysis of Thatcher's time in office, see Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (ed.), *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983); Graham Stewart, *Bang! A History Of Britain In The 1980s* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013); Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Press, 2011); Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Routledge, 'There was nothing like her before and there's been nothing like her since. Thank God!', *Daily Mirror*, 9 April 2013, pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo Young, 'She has left a dark legacy that has still not disappeared', *The Guardian*, 9 April 2013, pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Trevor Kavanagh, 'Economic revolution dragged UK out of dark ages', *The Sun*, 9 April 2013, pp. 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Moore, 'She showed a generation of women what we can achieve', *The Sun*, 9 April 2013, pp. 12-13 (p. 12).

<sup>6</sup> *Daily Mail*, 9 April 2013, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Shipton, 'Her legacy lives on – in Welsh poverty', *Western Mail*, 9 April 2013, p. 7.

period in which popular culture was, in part, defined by radical protest.<sup>8</sup> This can be interpreted as a result of punk's dominance of underground popular culture in the latter half of the Seventies, which occurred against a public discourse rich in the rhetoric of 'crisis'.<sup>9</sup> This also played a role in the initial election of Thatcher's Conservatives. As her time in office wore on, popular musicians continued to be influenced by various facets of punk culture, interpreting their performances as not only oppositional to mainstream cultural hegemony, but as a constructive mode of encouraging democratic action against the government.

Upon her death, members of the public sought to commemorate Thatcher's passing with a further 'musical' protest. On 14 April 2013, 'Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead' – a 51-second long song from the 1939 motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* – charted at number two in the UK's Official Singles Chart following a much publicised online campaign aiming to elevate the song to the number one position.<sup>10</sup> While most media outlets opined that the campaign was 'distasteful',<sup>11</sup> the focus of the controversy centred on whether the song should be included on BBC Radio 1's Sunday evening programme *The Official Chart*, which, in theory, plays every song charting in the top 40 that week. On the preceding Friday, the controller of Radio 1, Ben Cooper, posted a blog outlining his decision:

On one side there is the understandable anger of large numbers of people who are appalled by this campaign. On the other there is the question of

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<sup>8</sup> See Chris Heard, 'Rocking Against Thatcher', *BBC News*, 4 May 2004 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3682281.stm>> [accessed 21 June 2014]; Alex Needham, "'Thatcher out' style of political satire is in again", *The Guardian*, 6 January 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jan/06/thatcher-out-political-satire-comedy>> [accessed 21 June 2014].

<sup>9</sup> Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> It ultimately sold 52,605 copies. 'Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead enters chart at two', *BBC News*, 14 April 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22145306>> [accessed 21 June 2014].

<sup>11</sup> Ben Cooper, 'Why we're playing "Ding Dong The Witch is Dead" on Radio 1's Sunday 14 April 2013 Chart Show', *BBC – Blogs*, 12 April 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/posts/Statement-regarding-Radio-1s-Chart-Show-14-April-2013>> [accessed 21 June 2014].

whether the chart show – which has run since the birth of Radio 1 in 1967 – can ignore a high new entry which clearly reflects the views of a big enough portion of the record buying public to propel it up the charts.<sup>12</sup>

The decision addressed questions of freedom of speech: for *Guardian* writer Dorian Lynskey, the campaign was ‘freedom, democracy and market forces in action’, all of which are closely associated with the politics of ‘Thatcherism.’<sup>13</sup> Cooper ultimately decided that ‘a brief excerpt’ of the song would be played ‘in a short news report during the show which explains to our audience why a 70-year-old song is at the top of the charts.’<sup>14</sup> His response suggests that the singles chart is an inappropriate channel for the expression of political protest of this nature; after all, Radio 1’s target demographic is 15-29 year olds,<sup>15</sup> of which roughly 35% would have been born during Thatcher’s time in office, and none of whom – having been five years old at most upon her resignation – would have been politically aware before her departure from 10 Downing Street. This point was elaborated in mainstream analysis of the event. For the *Daily Telegraph*’s chief pop and rock music critic, Neil McCormick,

Ding Dong! belonged on *Newsnight*, not in the chart rundown. It was a chart-jacking, the old folks invading their kids’ territory to make a political point.

Among those who insisted the BBC had a duty to play the song, there was much talk of the chart show being a matter of historical record. Yet it is very hard to imagine anyone listening to US rapper Nelly’s ‘Hey Porsche’...in order

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<sup>12</sup> Ben Cooper, ‘Why we’re playing “Ding Dong The Witch is Dead”’

<sup>13</sup> Dorian Lynskey, ‘Thatcher Ding Dong! Chart campaign is puerile – but the best protest available’, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2013

<<http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/apr/11/margaret-thatcher-ding-dong-chart>> [accessed 21 June 2014]. Thatcherism is a term believed to have been first coined by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall in 1979 (see Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, *Marxism Today*, January 1979, pp. 14-20). The term is used – positively and negatively – to describe politics associated with Thatcher’s governments, particularly with reference to her economic and domestic policy (including immigration). See Hall & Jacques (ed.), *The Politics of Thatcherism*.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, ‘Why we’re playing “Ding Dong The Witch is Dead”’

<sup>15</sup> Nadia Khomami, ‘Radio 1’s playlist secrets uncovered: the battle of the “brands”’, *The Observer*, 25 May 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/may/25/radio-1-playlist-secrets-uncovered-battle-of-brands>> [accessed 30 May 2014].



to better contemplate its social and political significance as a representation of what some kids in Britain have spent their pocket money on this week.<sup>16</sup>

This rhetoric suggests that where once popular music was viewed as a viable vehicle to carry political opinion, in contemporary youth culture it has no place. Indeed this view is reflected widely in popular discourse today.<sup>17</sup> For McCormick, the 'Thatcherite' generation were transplanting into the modern era a model of political protest which had cultural legitimacy during her time in government. This was problematic as the charts – which celebrate the commercial pinnacle of the music industries – only hold cultural importance to the youth of the moment.<sup>18</sup> As suggested by Cooper, this act of political protest was a pointless endeavour: it would mean little to *The Official Chart's* core listenership. However, for Lynskey the campaign was 'a provocative expression of dissent by people whose views [weren't] exactly over-represented elsewhere in the broadcast media' following Thatcher's death.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of who pays attention to record charts, 'at their most interesting,' they 'reflect the messy, visceral, impulsive side of human nature.'<sup>20</sup> The historical record the charts provide would serve to demonstrate that, despite her ceremonial funeral and the huge amount of public mourning suggested by the largely right-wing British press, there was a vocal minority who felt that her death

<sup>16</sup> Neil McCormick, 'Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead belonged on Newsnight, not the charts', *The Telegraph*, 15 April 2013

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpop/features/9994995/Ding-Dong-The-Witch-is-Dead-belonged-on-Newsnight-not-the-charts.html>> [accessed 21 June 2014].

*Newsnight* is the BBC's flagship current affairs programme.

<sup>17</sup> See Emine Saner, 'Billy Bragg and Johnny Flynn: where have all the protest songs gone?', *The Guardian*, 4 November 2011

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/nov/04/young-people-politics-protest-songs>> [accessed 21 June 2014]; Marie Thompson, 'Affect, Protest and the "Death" of Political Popular Music', *333Sound*, 6 May 2014 <<http://333sound.com/2014/05/06/affect-protest-and-the-death-of-political-popular-music/>> [accessed 18 June 2014].

<sup>18</sup> Even if, as suggested by R. Serge Denisoff in 1970, '[for] the adolescent, the Top Forty was his music as opposed to the "straight" or "square" compositions preferred by his parents. Covertly, the genre itself was a form of protest.' R. Serge Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets', *American Quarterly*, 22/4 (1970), pp. 807-823 (p. 810).

<sup>19</sup> Lynskey, 'Thatcher Ding Dong! Chart campaign is puerile – but the best protest available'.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Lynskey also points out that the estate of the song's lyricist, E.Y. 'Yip' Harburg – who was a committed socialist – would stand to receive royalties as a result of the song's 52,605 downloads, adding extra fuel to its use in celebrating Thatcher's death.

represented a symbolic retribution for the ways in which she changed Britain 'for the worse.'

The 'Ding Dong' controversy also served to demonstrate a thesis of John Street's: that all popular culture possesses a political context, and as such has the potential to be used as a form of protest.<sup>21</sup> Even if it is not created with the intention of making a political point, it can be utilised as such. 'Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead' was composed for a scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which an oppressed minority celebrate the death of a tyrannical dictator; it is a moment in which they achieve 'freedom.' While Thatcher was elected democratically, it is easy to see why this song was chosen by her opponents to celebrate her passing. As suggested by the commentators referenced above, these opponents are of a generation that saw popular music being used to achieve political end. The 1980s can be viewed as an era in which protest music was mainstream: 'socialist' performers such as Billy Bragg and Paul Weller performed on *Top of the Pops*, the BBC's long-running chart TV show; political issues such as the miners' strike were supported by musical benefit concerts; and the largest benefit concert of them all, Live Aid, became a global phenomenon that established the terms of the 'mega-event.' It was, like all moments of history, a unique era predicated on a specific set of circumstances.

This thesis aims to establish the explicit and implicit ways in which popular music was used from the late 1970s and through the 1980s in Britain as a vehicle for political protest and social action, and how the circumstances of its creation and mediation affected this use. In popular cultural terms the first Thatcher government was elected in the 'post-punk' era; punk was an extremely important cultural phenomenon for those musicians who intended their performances to encourage political action. It suggested that an identity existed outside of mainstream discourse which could be used to oppose the defining politics of its parent culture. While the

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<sup>21</sup> See John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

influence of punk on these protests is not always explicit, it frames the context of popular music culture throughout the 1980s.

This thesis is split into four sections: Theorizing Politics and Popular Music; Defining Punk and Post-Punk; Musical Protest in the Post-Punk Era; and Anti-Thatcherite Performers: Two Case Studies. Section I establishes the theoretical framework, and is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 examines various interactions between politics and popular music culture; largely how all popular music is composed within a specific political framework, and how performers and consumers of popular music – including the politicians who establish the terms of the political framework – can use it to assert identity and to encourage political consciousness. As such, these uses of identity are tied up with the problematic notion of 'authenticity'. This leads into chapter 2, which examines how authenticity is used in the music industries, not only in the assertion of political identities but also in the dissemination and appreciation of popular music. Given the liberal capitalist political framework within which popular music culture exists in Britain, these questions of authenticity are problematic: if it exists to make money then how can it suggest political morals?

Since the popular music of Thatcherite Britain was appreciated in a post-punk context, Section II serves to define, across four chapters, what is meant by 'punk' and how its impact was felt in the 'post-punk' era. The popular music culture of the mid-1970s was felt by some to have become too extravagant and expensive: it had 'lost touch' with the original 'authentic' position in which it had originated. The popularity of punk was established in opposition not only to the highly-paid superstars of rock, but to mainstream society in general. Chapter 3 gives an overview of this context, before chapter 4 – while establishing that a singular definition of punk is impossible – analyses the various signifiers which suggest what 'punk' meant to those performers who come under analysis throughout the thesis. Chapter 5 presents three case studies of punk bands to demonstrate how these

signifiers were put into practice and led to its establishment as a genre ripe for canonisation. Essentially, punk was assimilated into the historical rock narrative it originally opposed. This assimilation is cited as the point at which punk 'died'; however after this 'death' cultural producers continued to draw influence from the operations of the punk vanguard to establish a new underground milieu. Chapter 6 discusses how the 'post-punks' asserted their independence from the mainstream music industries through the establishment of record labels and the self-releasing of recordings. This decentralisation of the recording industry was integral to the perception that rock in the post-punk era could be used to communicate political and social ideas.

The political uses of punk during the late-1970s largely dealt with the rise in popularity of the far-right party the National Front. Given the turbulent economic situation in the second half of the decade, public discourse in Britain was characterised by 'crisis' rhetoric. This, as will be shown in Section II, has been explained by scholars as part of the backdrop against which punk's popularity grew. 'Crises' often see negative reactions against immigrants and immigration policy, and as such the National Front, as well as Thatcher's Conservative Party, sought to draw on these reactions to further their voter bases. This led to the establishment of Rock Against Racism – the first of three protest 'movements' which are analysed in Section III – which came to be closely associated with punk. Chapter 7 examines the issues of politics and authenticity involved in the establishment of the movement, before chapter 8 presents case studies of three groups who performed at Rock Against Racism events. Each of these groups protested different political issues and used the rhetoric of authenticity in their presentation: the Tom Robinson Band presented left-wing lyrics which opposed discrimination of any form, while Sham 69 spoke on behalf of the white working class youth which the National Front targeted for recruitment. However the final case study – Alien Kulture – provides a

new take on the arguments about Rock Against Racism: as a quartet who featured three children of Pakistani immigrants, they serve to disprove the established history of the movement and suggest that it did involve Asian participants. Alien Kulture's involvement suggests wider questions about Rock Against Racism's engagement with the public and scholarly interpretation of their actions.

After Thatcher was elected prime minister for a second term in June 1983, two further musical protests were established which drew influence from the punk protest of Rock Against Racism. Chapter 9 examines the British side of the international event Live Aid, which, through its use of musical stars – the most profitable 'products' in the free market of the music industries – can be interpreted as a Thatcherite, if charitable, use of popular music. While the organisers of Live Aid had no political aims – their sole intention was to raise money – it came to become part of political discourse and as such found its 'politics' and 'authenticity' questioned. Red Wedge, meanwhile – a group of Labour Party-supporting musicians who sought to encourage audiences to vote against Thatcher in the 1987 general election – used Live Aid's model but aimed to imbue it with more substantial politics. Rather than raising awareness of an issue, they hoped to raise greater political understanding and consciousness. Like the groups involved with Rock Against Racism, this posed questions relating to the 'authenticity' of its members' motives, and suggested that they should perform in a certain way to maintain political strength.

Section IV presents case studies of two performers who used their music to directly oppose Thatcherite politics, often outside of the framework of organised protest. Chapter 11 examines the music and presentation of the 'anarcho-punk' group Crass, with specific reference to their recordings which opposed the Falklands War. The ten week conflict, which began on 2 April 1982, saw Britain retaliate to an Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands, situated in the South Atlantic Ocean.

The Argentinians claim sovereignty over the islands, yet following the conflict – in which around 900 Argentinian, British and Falklands military personnel were killed – it remains a British overseas territory. Crass' anarchist beliefs set them against Thatcherism: they deeply opposed every aspect of her government's policies and moreover their pacifist views gave them further reason to oppose the Falklands War. They characterised the conflict as a means for Thatcher to assert a status as a 'Great British leader' in the mould of Winston Churchill to assist in her victory at the 1983 general election.

Chapter 12 meanwhile presents a discussion of the Essex-born singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, who was a member of Red Wedge. This chapter largely analyses his work and presentation prior to the establishment of Red Wedge in November 1985, with specific reference to his opposition to the Falklands War (which he dealt with in the framework of his short enrolment in the British Army) and the miners' strike of 1984-5. This strike is another key event in the history of Thatcher's time as prime minister, in which she faced down and defeated the National Union of Miners, following the announcement of the closure of 20 state owned pits. The strike is widely credited with the end of the coal mining industry in Britain – whose effects are still felt in communities including the South Wales valleys<sup>22</sup> – as well as the weakening of the trade union movement generally. The analyses of Crass and Bragg highlight the influence they both drew from punk and how this impacted their uses of, and audience perceptions of, their authenticity.

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<sup>22</sup> See Sarah Hill, '*Blerwytirhwng?*' *The Place of Welsh Pop Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) for examination of specifically Welsh musical responses to Thatcherite politics.

## Chapter One

### Popular Music and Politics

The Long Island-based hip-hop group Public Enemy are commonly noted for the political nature of their lyrics, which draw from their experience as African Americans. In a retrospective of their career published in the British music magazine *Mojo* in 2012, founding member Keith Shocklee described his view of the group's early operations thus:

I wouldn't even call it political – it was how we was living. Back then if you were making any money you were automatically considered a drug dealer. We were in the suburbs, we *had* nice things, but still the police wanted to fuck with us.<sup>1</sup>

For Shocklee, there was no distinction between 'politics' and 'being.' The nature of the group's lives informed the subject matter of their lyrics, which inevitably reflected local racial and class politics. His formulation of the group's politics was tied up with notions of authenticity: the content of their songs was inseparable from their everyday lives. Nonetheless, the presentation of Public Enemy as a 'political' group did not happen of its own accord; the group made a conscious decision to address the politics which affected their lives in their lyrics.

John Street suggests that – regardless of its intended use and as a result of the conditions of its creation – all popular culture is inherently political.<sup>2</sup> When it addresses social, cultural or political issues, its producers are aware of the potential for political engagement; when it is apparently unaware or ignorant of this potential, its politics are found in the context of its creation. This thesis will explore popular

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Cowan, 'Will to Power', *Mojo*, August 2012, pp. 44-49 (p. 48).

<sup>2</sup> This is a point Street makes across his published works: *Rebel Rock* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986); *Politics and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

music created with the intention of political engagement. Street posits that this music persists within two strands: that which attempts to 'make a positive difference, to raise money for, and awareness of, a worthy cause', and that with the urge to 'ignite a spirit of dissent.'<sup>3</sup> Both are evident in the post-punk music of Thatcherite Britain. Some musicians, inspired by the mainstream perception of the Sex Pistols as social deviants, sought to use music and subculture to undermine the values of 'respectable' society; some decided to use the antagonistic energy of punk to encourage opposition to specific actors and ideologies. Both inspired communities of performers and consumers to, in an echo of the late-1960s counter-cultural milieu, inspire the social good.

With primary reference to Street's work, this chapter examines the various ways in which popular music addresses the politics of its creation and how it is used by performers and politicians alike as a means to engender political awareness and attempt to define political identities. Street's published writing on politics and popular music is widely read, and deals convincingly with a wide range of issues. As such it has informed the direction of the research and writing of this thesis. This chapter, with reference to other sources, builds upon some of Street's arguments with relevance to this thesis, using historical and contemporary examples to demonstrate and problematize them. As Shocklee's assertion above demonstrates, the politics of popular music are intertwined with issues of authenticity, which will be explored in the following chapter. The problematic of the use of the term 'authenticity' within the capitalist context of the music industries' will be outlined first, before moving to an examination of the ways in which popular music is interpreted as explicitly political, and the ways in which this is used in the formation of identities and promotion of political causes and ideologies.

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<sup>3</sup> John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 25-6.



## Definitions

The term 'popular music' covers a wide range of issues and possibilities.<sup>4</sup> This thesis deals with a very specific strand: music composed in the British Isles within the constraints of the established music industries.<sup>5</sup> This music is performed in pubs, clubs, arenas and stadiums – depending on the popularity of the performers – and primarily disseminated in the recorded forms of singles, EPs (extended plays – usually containing around four songs in contrast with the typical two found on a single) and albums (LPs). In the period on which this dissertation focuses (1976-1987), these 'volumes' of recordings were generally released on vinyl: 7" singles and EPs, and 12" LPs.<sup>6</sup> As such, the experience of the work of a performer is multisensory: the music is heard, but is also 'seen' being created in live performance, the visual aspects of the records, and the performers' image also impact on the ways in which this music is understood.

The term 'popular music' suggests that it is appreciated on a mass scale. Indeed, as Street suggests, the creation of popular music 'cannot be separated from the struggle to win popularity.'<sup>7</sup> However, this is not to say that all popular music *achieves* mass popularity. It is instead defined by its intention to engage a specific community. For any form of popular culture, the context of its 'performance' defines its status. As Street suggests,

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<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Edgar, 'Popular Music', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, pp. 247-9; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) and *Performing Rites* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Bristol, PA & Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995); Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this text I will refer, after Martin Cloonan, to the strands of music industry in the plural, since 'the term "the music industry" is often used to substitute for "the recording industry" and thus gives precedence to the interests of a particular sub-section of the music industries. It also serves to obscure the diversities of the music industries and suggests unity, where there are actually disparate views and conflicting interests. In doing so it obscures the gross inequalities within the music industries.' Martin Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Singles and EPs can also be released on the 12" format.

<sup>7</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 182.

a play that is seen off-Broadway or in London's Royal Court Theatre would not be popular culture in this setting, but were it to be transmitted on a major television channel at peak hours it would become popular culture. In the same way a novel's status as popular culture is defined by its sales rather than its style.<sup>8</sup>

As such, if music aspires to mass engagement, does it therefore express the 'authentic' desires or opinions of its intended audience? Or rather does it aim to shape public opinion and values, to assert, as USA for Africa arguably did in 1985, that 'We are the World' and must therefore be heard? What are the motives behind mass engagement? Popular music, in Street's definition, 'relieves people from tedium or unites them in fun...it is part of the culture through which people identify themselves and each other.'<sup>9</sup> While this is the aim of many popular music producers, a tension arises wherein this intention can be exploited for commercial gain. Popular music creates communities over which it can assume a cultural dominance. For instance, the primacy of Western popular music within the international music industries has led to discussions of 'cultural imperialism'. Local cultures can, according to Roy Shuker, be 'dominated and to varying degrees invaded, displaced and challenged by imported "foreign" cultures.'<sup>10</sup> As Street wrote of the American charity record in aid of the 1983-5 Ethiopian famine:

The stars of USA for Africa may sing 'We are the World', but theirs is, in fact, a very particular world. Pop music may be sold all over the globe, but its production and character derive largely from the 'worlds' of the USA and Britain.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, p. 67. Shuker examines the cultural policies of Canada and New Zealand as they attempt to restrict media imports and foster local cultural industries in the face of cultural globalization (Ibid., pp. 67-82).

<sup>11</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 19.

While popular music builds communities, the understanding of music by individuals differs. No single aspect of a song's creation, promotion or performance 'determines completely how a song is heard or what it means.'<sup>12</sup> Reception of popular music is largely subjective, even if aspects of individual taste are informed by a variety of cultural gatekeepers. While an individual interpretation is informed by a multitude of readings disseminated through varied media, the liberal capitalist business models of the music industries suggest that the 'customer is always right.' As such, Street warns that

Anyone who writes about pop has to be wary of giving a 'definitive' interpretation of a song. The complexities of production and consumption are enough to induce caution into even the most arrogant of analysts.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this regard that Street criticises recorded music 'which offers unquestioning certainty': that which does so 'ignores the tensions and ambiguities that give popular music its potency.'<sup>14</sup> Songs gain their meaning from their listeners' interpretation: the same song can have a different meaning to each listener, and these interpretations are in turn used to define self-identity. As such, Street is highly critical of the investment of cultural and political culture in populism<sup>15</sup> and sees no worth in 'escapist rock' which 'pretends there is no world to be contended with'.<sup>16</sup> Such music offers

the false promises of liberal capitalism: anyone can win, and losers only have themselves to blame. Great rock takes those promises apart. Literally, it

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>15</sup> See Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, chapter 1.

<sup>16</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 197.

makes fun of them. This is the strength of rock's conservatism: it's [sic] ability to provide temporary defiance in the face of the inevitable.<sup>17</sup>

The individualism encouraged by popular music culture might suggest that it is not a useful vehicle for political action: how can one propose a policy when music has an inherent fluidity of interpretation? However, since these individuals come together to form communities of taste, performers are able to assemble an audience to whom they can deliver their 'message' with apparent clarity. By extolling 'the virtue of community', popular music culture therefore organises itself conservatively, since it 'places great emphasis on the ideas of belonging and permanence.'<sup>18</sup> While the music industries are at once 'liberal' in their promotion of individual taste, they revert to 'conservatism' in their dissemination of cultural products. This is how popular music helps us to 'come to know who we are and what we want. Pop both unites and differentiates us in the pleasure it gives us. In taking pleasure, we grasp what is ours alone, and we deny the right of the greedy and the powerful to some part of ourselves.'<sup>19</sup> Our taste is simultaneously a means of rebellion against, and conformity to, societal norms.

### **Popular music and the state**

In *Politics and Popular Culture*, Street suggests that, rather than existing as two distinct spheres, 'popular culture has to be understood as *part* of our politics':<sup>20</sup> they are engaged in a symbiotic relationship. The creation of popular culture takes place within a framework determined by state-implemented policies. As such,

political institutions and ideas materially affect the character, content, production and consumption of popular culture...the state creates the conditions under which popular culture is produced and distributed. The

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>20</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 4. As written.

state's role in broadcasting, education and industrial policy, among other areas, establishes the conditions, regulations and opportunities which help define what kind of popular culture is available in any country or region. In other words, to understand popular culture is to understand the conditions of its production.<sup>21</sup>

However, politics is not 'inevitably linked to popular culture. The connection does not just "happen"; we have to see it as being created and administered.'<sup>22</sup> While all popular music has been created under specific political conditions, we have to find its political context. Choices are made within the creative and promotional processes which imbue performers and their songs, performances and recordings with politics, and it is these choices that are most important. Moreover, the 'uses to which [popular culture] is put' helps it to become 'a form of political activity.'<sup>23</sup> While everything has an implicit political context, the explicit politics of a text can be established outside of its producer's hands.

Therefore the most obvious site of popular music's political context is the state in which it is not only created, but also consumed and analysed. Britain operates as a liberal democracy. Liberal democracies operate free market economies, within which it is implied that citizens have the choice to engage with any form of culture they desire. However, these choices are actually limited by capitalist orthodoxy. At any given time, a *selection* of cultural products are available for consumption, and gatekeepers base decisions as to this selection upon potential profit margins.<sup>24</sup> Products are displayed for sale in the belief that they will be bought, and as such the exchange of goods – money for musical commodities – does not take place on equal terms. As Simon Frith and Howard Horne note, while the buyer makes the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> See Frith, *Sound Effects*.

purchase 'to achieve particular use-values', sellers 'are concerned simply to convert their commodities into cash, to realize their exchange-value.'<sup>25</sup> This suggests that the recording industry encourages, in Marxist terms, commodity fetishism.

Liberalism suggests that we can define our 'individuality' by displaying our 'taste'. However, this 'moment when we feel most clearly ourselves – when we make our market choices – turns out to be the moment when we are most at the mercy of society'.<sup>26</sup>

The recording market's capitalist model therefore impacts on the operation of broadcast channels, the most culturally pervasive of which in the United Kingdom is the state-funded British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). While the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster suggests that it operates apart from capitalism,<sup>27</sup> its practices, at least in terms of its pop music broadcasting, reflect marketplace exchanges. Street concludes that the BBC's 'institutional conservatism is translated into a musical one'.<sup>28</sup> Its radio stations reflect what they assume to be 'popular taste' through a reliance on statistics – be it the official sales charts or, as modes of consumption have shifted in the digital era, YouTube views – in deciding which products will be 'playlisted'.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, they are 'not just providing a service, they are injecting a set of judgements, an ideology even' in coming to define what is, if not what should be, popular.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Simon Frith & Howard Horne, *Art Into Pop* (London & New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> The BBC receives state funding via TV Licensing. However it also operates a commercial arm, *BBC Worldwide*, which 'exists to support the BBC public service mission and to maximise profits on its behalf.' *BBC Worldwide* <<http://www.bbcworldwide.com/>> [accessed 28 February 2014].

<sup>28</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* For detail of how the BBC's most populist station, Radio 1, determines its playlist, see Dan Hancox, 'Is this the most powerful meeting in music?', *Q Magazine*, November 2010, pp. 88-90; Nadia Khomami, 'Radio 1's playlist secrets uncovered: the battle of the "brands"', *The Observer*, 25 May 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/may/25/radio-1-playlist-secrets-uncovered-battle-of-brands>> [accessed 30 May 2014].

<sup>30</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 124.

The BBC can sustain the success of privileged acts through an implication of cultural importance: if it sells, then it must be what 'the public' wants to hear. However, radio stations cannot only play what they 'know' the public like, since new records are released on a weekly – indeed in the internet age, daily – basis. These yet-to-chart records are also selected for airplay largely on the basis of their potential to 'maintain the status quo.'<sup>31</sup> For Street, this demonstrates two forms of conservatism: in relying on the direction of the charts, the broadcaster 'demonstrates a form of liberal conservatism', while 'the criteria for musical selection are conservative in a more traditional, High Tory way: giving people what they *ought* to want, protecting them from their own mistakes etc.'<sup>32</sup> As such, the BBC has in the past sought to 'protect' the public through censorship. However, two of their most notorious bans – on Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'Relax' and the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' – were to achieve chart success, peaking at number 1 and 2 respectively in the singles chart.<sup>33</sup> These examples demonstrate that 'the objectives of censorship are defeated' without total control of the markets: they can ban songs 'but cannot prevent' their hit status.<sup>34</sup>

Most commonly, the BBC has banned records for their political content. While the corporation is state-owned, these decisions stem from its commitment to political neutrality rather than governmental interference. As Street suggests, 'parliament and government...show little interest in the music industry, except as a source of revenue.... Only occasionally have MPs felt driven to comment on the music

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Street points out that the history of British popular music broadcasting differs greatly with that of the USA: 'the sound of British pop can be read as the product of the BBC and public service broadcasting, just as the sound of US pop owed much to US radio and commercial broadcasting.' Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 74.

<sup>33</sup> The Sex Pistols' song is widely considered to have been denied the number 1 spot in the chart as a result of censorship. See Martin Cloonan, *Banned! Censorship of Popular Music in Britain: 1967-92* (Aldershot & Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1996); Savage, *England's Dreaming*, pp. 364-5.

<sup>34</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 20.

itself'.<sup>35</sup> The debate on censorship centres on 'the view that popular culture is capable of representing ideas that have significant political consequences.'<sup>36</sup> For the BBC, their broadcast choices reflect political decisions; therefore playing a song that promotes political idealism betrays their 'neutrality'. As such, the singer-songwriter Billy Bragg could criticise the corporation for their refusal to play Paul Weller's 1984 'Soul Deep' single, which supported the striking miners ('no matter how popular the songs, and how radical the songs, it still boils down to what the BBC wants'),<sup>37</sup> and the BBC could defuse the political argument surrounding the 'Ding, Dong the Witch is Dead' furore by running a news item explaining the song's use as protest in place of the song itself in the chart rundown.<sup>38</sup>

While the BBC's use of licence payers' money to provide popular music broadcasting is little challenged,<sup>39</sup> the use of public money to fund the promotion of popular music in the UK has been met with opposition, usually from conservative, and as such Conservative Party, opinion. In the mid-1980s the Greater London Council (GLC) found itself under attack from, and ultimately was disbanded by, the Thatcher government, partly due to its support for musical events that promoted often left-wing political consciousness. In a *Melody Maker* debate on the Labour Party-supporting Red Wedge group (see chapter 10), Conservative MP Greg Knight told his fellow panellists that he was 'against the use of public money for events of a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 17. See chapter 11 for evidence of the attention paid by the British parliament to Crass' anti-Falklands War record 'How Does it Feel (to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead)?'

<sup>36</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ted Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', *Melody Maker*, 25 January 1986, pp. 23-26 (p. 26). Rock Against Racism is discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>38</sup> See Introduction for a history and analysis of this controversy.

<sup>39</sup> The suggestion that Radio 1's remit can be covered by commercial enterprise has been made, most recently by outgoing BBC *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman: 'I don't quite understand why the BBC does Radio 1Xtra, I don't really understand why it does Radio 1. Clearly, you can meet those needs commercially...the BBC has got an unfortunate history of never seeing an area of broadcasting, or increasingly a web presence, without feeling the need to get into it itself.' Charlotte Higgins, 'The BBC: there to inform, educate, provoke and enrage?', *The Guardian* <<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/apr/16/the-bbc-there-to-inform-educate-provoke-and-enrage>> [accessed 18 June 2014].



political nature. I'm against rock against racism [sic] or any misuse of public funds.'<sup>40</sup>

For Knight, there were 'more ways of speaking to young people than putting on a pop concert where the music trivialises the political issues of the day.'<sup>41</sup>

In his narrative of the history of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB),<sup>42</sup> Martin Cloonan criticises the limited state support for popular music, which he declares 'the late twentieth century's most vibrant cultural form.'<sup>43</sup> For Cloonan, this is due to a 'lack of a coherent strategy or anything resembling developmental work.'<sup>44</sup> Since popular music was regarded as little more than 'a profitable gimmick or an unpleasant epidemic' by most adults,<sup>45</sup> it was not thought a necessary recipient of state funding. As Cloonan suggests, in the early days of the ACGB 'the idea that pop music was culture or that it had any "politics" – and therefore artistic worth – 'would have been anathema to most'.<sup>46</sup> By the time it was recognised as possessing artistic merit in the late 1960s, it was considered commercially successful enough not to *require* funding.

This is not to say that popular musicians did not gain access to Arts Council funding: the Yorkshire-based post-punk group Throbbing Gristle succeeded by calling their work 'performance art' rather than 'rock music.'<sup>47</sup> As Street notes, 'high' culture is the usual benefactor of state funding 'because it is deemed to be worthwhile but unable to sustain itself through the market.'<sup>48</sup> While the high cultural status Cloonan affords pop recognises its ability to communicate ideas beyond commercialism, the ACGB and its successors' operations – even if, since the 1980s, they have

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<sup>40</sup> Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> In 1967, the ACGB saw separate councils established for Wales and Scotland – although they remained 'sub-committees' until achieving total independence in 1994. Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> George Melly, *Revolt into Style* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 226.

<sup>48</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 9.

focussed on the Arts' economic potential rather than its cultural value – are hardly surprising. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to witness an alternative universe in which the state had supported the artistic development of popular music composers. While it would likely not have much impact on the commercial industries, the 'art music' industries may have engaged on a greater level with popular forms, particularly those which made political engagement a central aspect of their work.

### **Political uses of popular music**

The expression of political idealism within popular music happens in a variety of ways. In *Rebel Rock*, Street uses the state censorship of pop music in apartheid-era South Africa to exemplify the emphasis on lyrics rather than music in the political analysis of songs. Censors interpreted lyrics 'as if they were some kind of political tract', and as such songs were banned on the basis of their potential to be read as challenges to policies: censors read songs 'literally (not musically), asking whether they attain the "correct" standards.'<sup>49</sup> This foregrounding of lyrical content is unsurprising; it is more difficult to affirm the 'meaning' of sound. The intentional meaning of music, particularly pop with its 'delight in metaphors and euphemism', cannot be so easily identified.<sup>50</sup> For example, in narrating the role of the ACGB in defining Britain's 'national culture', Cloonan finds that popular music was difficult to accommodate as 'it was hard to portray as uniquely British in any meaningful sense' given its development as a '*multinational art form*'.<sup>51</sup> This meant that when, in the 1960s, 'British popular music tried to address questions of nationhood, it did so in terms of social-realist lyrics, rather than any attempt to develop authentically British popular *music* as such.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-9.

Whether music possesses the ability to directly communicate a political idea is largely down to interpretation, though its stylistic qualities can serve to signify certain values. For example, 'folk' music is assumed to offer a certain set of values and ideas which emphasise the cultural, political and emotional importance of community. As Street assesses, for many people, 'music, especially folk music, chronicles contemporary reality. It is a form of news reporting, and folk musicians are a form of journalist or political commentator.'<sup>53</sup> Therefore even if the lyrics do not offer 'reporting' in this context, the musical language and timbres can signify attitudes and prompt assumptions and expectations of the lyrical content.

Dave Laing finds that because of the vocal aesthetics of punk rock, it is 'thus possible (if difficult) to find pleasure' in the studio recording of the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' without necessarily 'agreeing with its message.'<sup>54</sup> The listener can identify with a sense of anger, frustration or sarcastic humour in singer Johnny Rotten's performance apart from the lyrics of the song. For a band such as the Sex Pistols, whose artistic interest lay in the use of political nihilism as a marketing technique rather than the encouragement of anarchistic revolution,<sup>55</sup> the varied interpretations of the song were important. It allowed for a greater share of the market to engage with their product without necessarily questioning the 'politics' it espoused. However, for songs written in the 'protest' mode, this outcome would be unsatisfactory: if 'someone who rejects the message' of a protest song can still enjoy it musically, 'a gap has opened which was unintended.'<sup>56</sup>

Lyrics also possess the capacity for direct political confrontation. Laing suggests that protest songs, by their very definition, have 'direct addressees' which 'fall into three categories':

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<sup>53</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 48.

<sup>54</sup> Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>55</sup> This is an issue I address in chapter 5.

<sup>56</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 56.

A small number are addressed to 'us', those already believing in the cause ('We Shall Overcome'). There are then those denouncing the people responsible for the social evil; 'You masters of war' sang Bob Dylan. Finally, there are a greater number whose object is persuasion, and whose addressees are more general, and might be defined in opinion poll terms as 'don't knows'.<sup>57</sup>

This brief framework allows Laing to assert that while punk 'has its lyrics of denunciation and those addressed to "us", there are no lyrics aimed at a friendly but non-committal listener. Politics as persuasion has no place in punk rock.'<sup>58</sup> This can explain why punk's power as a politicizing force was limited. While its exponents were put to use by Rock Against Racism, the cause which they were supporting was unproblematic.<sup>59</sup> No persuasion was necessary in stating that racism is repugnant, and the issue did not need to be addressed in performers' songs for them to have an influence on the outcome of the movement's engagements.

The majority of punk songs were uncompromising: it was implied that if the listener disagreed with their content then it was of no concern to the performer. Indeed, the oppositionality of the genre meant that it explicitly encouraged confrontation. As such, those who declined engagement with punk were unlikely to pay much attention to any politics its performers espoused. Further, since 'a number of punk lyrics have modes of address that seem to shift from one addressee to another,'<sup>60</sup> it was arguably ill-suited to coherent political protest. Where the vast majority of popular song lyrics 'have a single, stable point which is addressed, and a stable point from which the lyric is delivered', in punk multiple addressees can appear in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 70-1.

<sup>59</sup> Even if its operations were (see chapters 7 and 8.)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

the same lyric, making any possible politics difficult to decipher.<sup>61</sup> For instance, it is difficult to determine whom Joe Strummer is addressing in the Clash's 'Career Opportunities' when the pronoun 'you' simultaneously refers to 'the Civil Service enemy' and the presumably unemployed listener of Strummer's imagination.<sup>62</sup>

However, while a pop song's political stance is largely suggested by its lyrics, the 'political success of a musical form' is, according to Street,

determined musically, visually and commercially. Its political impact is marked by the way the music is consumed. Music that works politically is not necessarily music that makes political change its self-consciously ascribed goal.<sup>63</sup>

As such, 'political success...cannot be judged in the same way that we judge a political movement or government' since 'conventional politics...fit uncomfortably into popular music.'<sup>64</sup> Indeed, can the political impact of a song be deemed a 'success' when it has occurred unintentionally? While a song's politics are stated most clearly by its lyrics, it cannot, according to Street, 'however powerful its performance...win an argument. The song is a mixture of sounds, references and images; its meaning cannot be stated in the same way that a political view can be articulated.'<sup>65</sup> Indeed, while a song can present opinions within its form, it cannot possibly engage in argument: it cannot respond to its listener's right to reply. It is this that determines that the politics of a song are outside of its author's control. In all forms of popular culture:

[We] can identify politics in a text that are not those of the artist or of the packaging, or at least not those acknowledged by either. And indeed it is the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 174.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 60-1.

struggle over rival interpretations that is most revealing of the politics of the text.<sup>66</sup>

As well as defining 'the politics of the text', these 'rival interpretations' also demonstrate the varied ways in which popular music can be used to assert identity. For many, self-identity is defined through interactions with popular music. 'When pop affects us,' writes Street, 'it temporarily changes the way the world seems or we feel; it may not change the world, but each time a song seeps into our daily life, it becomes part of who we are.'<sup>67</sup> Pop can therefore have a direct impact on our personal politics, for as it forms our identities, 'that identity can be the source of political thought and action.'<sup>68</sup> Our personal politics are in part formed by, or determine our belonging to, a specific group: a subculture, political party, fan club, etc. so as engagement with popular music helps to mark out our selves, it also allows us to 'become engaged with politics, in particular with the politics of citizenship, the right to belong and to be recognized.'<sup>69</sup> While it is not always accurate to say that a 'cultural artefact in and of itself is the independent and sole cause of [political] thoughts and actions', the various ways in which individuals interact with artefacts through a variety of media allow us 'to talk of the "politics of popular culture", where we mean by this the ability of popular culture to give shape to people's political sympathies and concerns.'<sup>70</sup>

While specific genres of popular music – rock, for example – can be used by fans as a badge of rebellion, any form can assist in the organisation of resistance.<sup>71</sup> In a sense, Live Aid (which, as shown in chapter 9, was not a determinedly political event) assists this argument. The music performed did not portray itself as political,

<sup>66</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 34.

<sup>67</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 222.

<sup>68</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>71</sup> This became particularly relevant in the student protests against tuition fee increases in London in December 2010. See Thompson, 'Affect, Protest and the "Death" of Political Popular Music'.

and yet was used to organise a compassionate response to a humanitarian issue. Therefore, Street argues, 'the very fact of the music's popularity is a measure of its political potency'.<sup>72</sup> As Live Aid demonstrated, 'popular culture not only provides a site for the expression of political ideas, but...these ideas have some real impact.'<sup>73</sup> Further, this impact could be measured in the extent to which it worked to illicit 'feelings of compassion' from its audience: 'tangibly, by the hard cash they raise', and 'less directly, by the shifting sands of popular anxiety' which were 'reflected in opinion polls and political agendas.'<sup>74</sup>

For Street, 'despite the tendency for the political story to dominate the narrative' of a cause, events and organisations such as Rock Against Racism (RAR) and Live 8 have worked to show that, when utilised, music 'plays a key role' in the progress of these narratives 'and cannot be treated simply as an instrument or cipher of some larger political purpose.'<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the history of anti-racism in late-1970s Britain cannot be told without reference to RAR (though its effectiveness in the destruction of the National Front's electoral chances is open to debate), and the pressure exerted by Bob Geldof and U2 frontman Bono in the promotion of the international Live 8 concerts had some impact on the outcomes of the G8 leaders' summit of 2005.<sup>76</sup>

Notably, when pop is used politically it primarily supports causes rather than ideologies. This stems, according to Street, from the influence of the operations of political movements rather than from negative reactions to the political establishment: for instance, 'it was Vietnam, and not the Democratic Party that inspired' the involvement of musicians in oppositional politics in late-1960s America, 'and after the war, it has been nuclear power, Nicaragua, famine and apartheid

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<sup>72</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>75</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 97.

<sup>76</sup> See Street, *Music and Politics*, chapter 4.

which has galvanized them.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in the UK, 'it has been fights against racism or Cruise missiles that have mobilized musicians.'<sup>78</sup> For the best part of the post-war years, musicians have largely been 'reluctant to associate themselves with political parties, even where the parties share the same policy aims.'<sup>79</sup> However, the post-punk era saw musicians and other pop cultural figures begin to pledge support for established political parties. In the UK this began after the re-election of Thatcher's Conservatives to government in 1983. More recently, the 2008 USA Presidential campaign was characterised by an array of international superstar musicians pledging their support for Barack Obama, who 'glowed in the cool, reflected glory of his new-won friends.'<sup>80</sup>

For Street – whose *Music and Politics* is adorned with a cover photograph portraying Bruce Springsteen performing at an election rally in support of Obama – the 'particular role of the artist as champion or advocate of political cause, their endorsement of candidates and campaigns, has much to do with the ways in which politics has been "personalized".'<sup>81</sup> This can make endorsement attractive for both parties: the politician and musician's personality alike is important to their electoral or commercial success. For the politician, it demonstrates an understanding of social trends and suggests that they are 'one of us.' For the musician, it signifies their political integrity and intelligence: it suggests that they have given thought to their political identity. As such, having Springsteen onside would have been of

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<sup>77</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 51.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. After *Rebel Rock*'s publication in 1986, further causes have 'mobilized' musicians, but their actions have been overshadowed by general popular protests. For example, the Iraq War, which commenced in 2003, has been referenced in song by a variety of musicians. However protest against the conflict was largely characterised by the international demonstrations which took place at the beginning of the war: the London march saw 'at least 750,000 taking part' ("Million" march against Iraq war', *BBC News*, 16 February 2003 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2765041.stm>> [accessed 25 June 2014]). Most recently the 'Occupy' protests against global capitalism – which has its origins in the Arab Spring, Spanish protests and Occupy Wall Street in New York – have presented the most popular Western protests. See chapter 11 for reference to Crass' inspiration on the 1983-4 Stop the City demonstrations, which can also be viewed as forerunners to Occupy.

<sup>79</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 51.

<sup>80</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 26.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 53.



particular importance to Obama's campaign. Springsteen has been 'placed' by rock critics, according to Frith, as the 'voice of the people'; an icon of Democratic Party populism.<sup>82</sup> His 'authenticity', which Frith works to deconstruct, has led to his being seen by his audience as a working-class hero. Springsteen's endorsement therefore has the potential to bring a number of votes from those who identify with this portrayal and invest the singer with cultural and political capital. His endorsement allows the politician access to his assembled community.

The liberalism of popular music culture can also explain the greater propensity for its use in causes rather than in strengthening ideologies. Street demonstrates this through his summary of Mancur Olson's 'logic of collective action'.<sup>83</sup> Olson 'highlights the disincentives for rational actors to commit to political action, the results of which will neither depend on their contribution nor benefit them exclusively.'<sup>84</sup> If one is considering involvement, they are likely to ask 'what is in it for me?' As such, 'the logic points to participation' when 'we have some reasonable expectation of a return on our efforts (i.e. if the policy has a direct and exclusive benefit to the participants)'.<sup>85</sup> Communities, after all, unite people who, while sharing a belief in particular ideologies, retain individualist desires. For example, in the case of RAR, 'everyone who is affected by racism in its many forms' will benefit from its actions 'whether or not they take part in the movement'.<sup>86</sup> Therefore the incentive to engage with it is weakened without another benefit – i.e. entertainment – being added to the equation. This explains why the benefit concert is a popular mode of encouraging action: the dangerous aspects of political action are lessened – 'they

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<sup>82</sup> Simon Frith, 'The Real Thing – Bruce Springsteen', in *Music For Pleasure* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 94-101 (p. 98).

<sup>83</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 91.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

do not risk getting arrested or abused in the street' – and attendees are rewarded for their engagement – 'they get to hear the music they like.'<sup>87</sup>

Causes offer performers an opportunity to demonstrate their personal compassion. Street notes that 'stars are much more likely to give their services if there is guaranteed coverage' from mass media.<sup>88</sup> Just like their audience, performers can 'wear' their support as a means of advertising their compassion; a facet of their identity which they hope will lead to greater rewards in their traditional capitalist engagements with the music industries. While they may have donated their time and expertise to the cause, they hope to recoup their 'losses' later on – perhaps with still further gains – via the promotion they have received from the cause.

While ideology is widely avoided, this communitarian approach to political engagement may suggest that popular music can be used to encourage identification with socialist action. As Street summarises, 'rock has had its moments of socialist commitment, although this is typically associated with individual artists...rather than any consistent aspect of the music itself.'<sup>89</sup> However, in his conclusion to *Rebel Rock* he states that:

While popular music may accord with conservatism and liberalism, it seems to sit awkwardly with socialism. This incompatibility stems from pop's apparent inability to offer anything other than individual escape or complacent comfort. It cannot, it seems, give a sound to collective responses to present problems.<sup>90</sup>

One could propose that pop's framework of mediation ultimately makes it incompatible with socialism. Since it operates within a capitalist economy, how can it ever be argued that it is working towards social good? Moreover, socialism's

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 31.

<sup>89</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 203.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

celebration of the necessity of work contrasts with popular music's attraction as an opportunity to transcend everyday life. For a society to be truly equal, its citizens must contribute to its operation; self-interest is anathema. However, as Andrew Edgar has suggested, the 'consumption' of popular music is 'a leisure time activity, being a mere corollary to the work process through which the labourer is renewed and prepared for the next day's work'.<sup>91</sup> In pop, finds Street, 'it is pleasure, not work, that occupies performers and audiences. "Work" appears only as a contrast to pleasure or as euphemism for it'.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, since Thatcher celebrated capitalist orthodoxy, her years in government saw connections to socialism instigated by a broad collection of musicians. York-based trio the Redskins,<sup>93</sup> for instance, featured a frontman and drummer who were members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). For singer Chris Dean, the accusation that being a socialist rock act was contradictory was 'bullshit':<sup>94</sup>

You're working for someone, if you wanna get down to bloody basics, you're getting screwed whoever you're selling your labour to, whether it's me or you [the interviewer] working for IPC magazines or someone working for Ford at Dagenham.<sup>95</sup>

As such, Dean believed that 'Any access that's offered' to deliver a political message, 'you take it.... Like The Clash not doing *Top Of The Pops*, that's criminal!'<sup>96</sup> He felt that as a political performer, it was important to use and, if necessary, subvert the mass media to make your voice heard. Their own

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<sup>91</sup> Edgar, 'Popular Music', p. 248.

<sup>92</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 204.

<sup>93</sup> Their name refers to their socialist skinhead subcultural allegiance, which set them in contrast with the assumed 'racism' of skinheads (see chapter 4.)

<sup>94</sup> Adam Sweeting, 'The Redskins: Keeping On And On', *Melody Maker*, 11 February 1984 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=19571>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* As written.

performances were characterised by declarations of their socialist beliefs. Reporting from a Glasgow gig in December 1984, *Melody Maker's* Lynden Barber found that

their set is liberally laced with exhortation and barbed asides. 'Support The Miners' posters plastered all over the backdrop. At one point Dean enters a dialogue with a heckler from the balcony above the side of the stage ('instant political seminar', as drummer [Nick] King later puts it). A striking miner from Scotland's Bilston Glen colliery is taking issues [sic] with Dean's hostility to the Labour Party, but the hordes at the front [of] the stage leap to the wrong conclusion, yelling 'Scab! Scab!' [in] unison. 'He's not a scab,' corrected Dean, but nobody seems to know what's really going on.<sup>97</sup>

The band's apparent commitment to socialist ideology led to cynicism from Barber. While identifying himself as 'a journalist with leftist sympathies', he found their methods of propagandising to be 'patronising' and 'sectarian', as they 'rap people over the knuckles for not supporting the SWP line.'<sup>98</sup> Moreover, he applied the negative analysis of socialist rock laid out above to vocalise his 'suspicions' of their intent. He found the contradiction of 'Decca, a major record company, paying for a return flight to Scotland and a stay in the local Holiday Inn' for him to 'interview a band whose politics are based on revolutionary Marxism' to be oppositional to their presentation: 'I mean, if they're so subversive how come these capitalists are spending this cash on polishing the redness of their image?'<sup>99</sup> For Barber, the Redskins' socialist views were another marketing context to be used by their record label to increase their profit. It gave a community of fans an identity around which to organise themselves.

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<sup>97</sup> Lynden Barber, 'Red On Arrival: The Redskins', *Melody Maker*, 8 December 1984 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/red-on-arrival-the-redskins>> [accessed 7 September 2013].

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

While links between socialism and popular music are problematic, we can see that the most commonly reported engagements of performers with politics are from a left-wing perspective. Determinedly political pop largely deals with issues of equality and attempts to stand on behalf of an oppressed minority. However, if we follow Street's assertion that we can interpret all popular music as a reflection of politics, then we can find that it implicitly validates the liberal capitalist ideology of its industries. As such, in a round table discussion of the anti-Thatcherite collective of performers Red Wedge, Billy Bragg can state that 'music has always been a good vehicle for socialism',<sup>100</sup> while at the same time Police drummer Stewart Copeland can declare that music has

also been the best possible flag for capitalism. The thing about socialism is that it's great for writing songs about – you have intense emotive issues [...]. Capitalism just doesn't sound romantic. I believe that money is love – but it doesn't make a great lyric. I believe that money is the root of all civilisation, and ideology is the root of evil – but you can't sing that in a song. It sounds horrible!<sup>101</sup>

This stance is elaborated by Greg Knight MP, who, in stating a belief that there are 'more Conservative bands than socialist bands',<sup>102</sup> assumes that engagement with the capitalist music industries demonstrates a belief in Conservative Party ideology:

Most Conservative bands choose to sell their music not their politics [...]. Most right wing bands just don't see themselves as political cheerleaders [...]. I'm not saying it's wrong for you to express your political views – I'm simply saying that the majority don't want to have politics mixed with their music.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 25.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Knight's assumption is derived from the rarity of political songs achieving a high placing in the singles charts. As such, political pop must not be what the public wants, and therefore is not a commercially viable subject matter. This must make it incompatible with popular culture: since it does not achieve commercial gains it opposes the prescribed intentions of popular music. In this sense, it can be proposed that popular music is performed authentically when it aspires to and achieves commercial success.

### **Uses of popular music by politicians**

Since, according to Street, 'popular culture has to be understood as *part* of our politics',<sup>104</sup> we must also consider that politics takes place within the context of popular culture. Politicians use popular culture as a means to disseminate their policies and to define their public identity, both of which act as canvassing. As such, 'political communication...is not just about conveying information or about persuading people through the force of argument. It is about capturing the popular imagination, about giving acts and ideas symbolic importance.'<sup>105</sup> Politicians demonstrate to 'the people' their shared interests; that they are 'one of us.' After all, the Members of Parliament who sit in the House of Commons are, by definition, 'common': they are expected to be representatives who understand, through experience, the concerns and desires of their constituents. While MPs may once have been 'one of us', entry into the political class makes their role very different. They are expected at once to be guardians of the underprivileged and a member of this community as well. As such, politicians sell an idea of themselves within this paradox: for Street, advertising serves to provide 'the discourse which now links

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<sup>104</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, p. 4. As written.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

politicians to citizens. The relationship between leaders and led is essentially a commercial relation.<sup>106</sup> For some, this means that

the increasing use of advertisers and their ilk has diminished seriously the quality of political life. They look upon recent developments with dismay. They see the intrusion of the values of popular culture and the techniques of marketing as vulgarizing political life. They do not always see popular culture as the *cause* of this degeneration, but as a powerful symbol of a larger shift in the quality and character of politics.<sup>107</sup>

For Street, however, this view ignores the fact that 'politics has always depended upon popular culture', and therefore 'this relationship does not automatically diminish the quality of political discourse.'<sup>108</sup> This demonstrates that concepts of authenticity are applied to the reception of politicians just as they are to musicians. Engagements with commercial media can be interpreted as populism, demonstrating a greater desire of politicians to acquire votes than to put forward 'serious' policy. Uses of popular media are, in this reading, disingenuous; a commercial agenda cannot represent policy and honesty. However, Street asserts that politicians have always engaged in public discourse within terms set by popular culture; the changing media has merely changed the terms since the 'packaging of politics is a consequence of the "packaging" of mass media.'<sup>109</sup>

Street theorises that the relationship between politicians and popular culture takes three forms. Firstly, in how 'politicians have simply tried to associate themselves with popular culture and its icons, in the hope that some of the popularity will rub off'; secondly 'in the blending of commercial and political interests'; and thirdly 'in the way politicians have come to rely upon the techniques and methods of popular

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

culture in the performance of their political role.<sup>110</sup> The second of these aside,<sup>111</sup> we can see these forms at play in the appearance of current Prime Minister (and then-Leader of the Opposition) David Cameron's appearance on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*.<sup>112</sup> Alongside 'conservative' British choices such as Benny Hill's innuendo-laced 'Ernie' and a recording of Mendelssohn's 'O, for the wings of a dove' performed by Kiri Te Kanawa and the Utah Symphony Orchestra (which, he divulges, was sung at his wedding), the rest of Cameron's choices – including 'All These Things That I've Done' by the Killers (which, having been first released on their 2004 debut album *Hot Fuss*, was perhaps selected with one eye on the youth vote, to display his knowledge of and identification with contemporary musical trends) and the Smiths' 'This Charming Man' – served to demonstrate that he felt his taste in popular music was an important aspect of his personality.

His discussions with presenter Sue Lawley on his selections demonstrate that his opinions on popular music correlate with common notions of authenticity. For example, as his first choice – and 'castaway's favourite' – Cameron specifically selected a live version of Bob Dylan's 'Tangled Up in Blue', 'because he [Dylan] actually changes some of the lyrics in the live version, and I think the sound of the audience listening to him and responding would help me feel less alone on my desert island.'<sup>113</sup> R.E.M.'s 'Perfect Circle' is selected as a reminder of the early days of his relationship with his wife, at a time when they 'didn't share that much in the way of musical taste...but one thing we did agree on; that *early* R.E.M. was *good*.'<sup>114</sup> Meanwhile his choice of 'This Charming Man' is qualified thus:

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>111</sup> Street exemplifies this through the former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, demonstrating how it can become democratically problematic. Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 28 May 2006, 11.15am.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Lawley uses the song's title to discuss how his family has for generations been 'Tangled up in Blue', i.e. engaged with the Conservative Party.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.



I probably don't agree with their lead singer, Morrissey, about anything [laughs] – he's a passionate vegetarian and I'm a big meat-eater – but when he burst onto the scene and appeared on *Top Of The Pops* with flowers hanging out the back of his trousers and the NHS hearing aid, it was a sort of iconic moment for people of my age and generation.<sup>115</sup>

This selection proved to cause some controversy amongst the left-leaning press. The Smiths, through their Mancunian identity and anti-Thatcherite rhetoric, have come to signify northern English socialism: as such, Morrissey's vegetarianism is probably the least of the pair's ideological quarrels. For a leader of the traditionally right-wing Conservative Party to profess his taste for the group was tantamount to heresy for some, leading *The Guardian* to publish a 2008 article examining his taste titled 'Hands off *our* music!'<sup>116</sup> In the article, author John Harris details a visit by Cameron to a youth project in the city of Salford in January of that year, during which, inspired by the photograph of the band which appears on the inside cover of their album *The Queen Is Dead*, Cameron intended to have his photograph taken outside Salford Lads Club. However, he was not to get his wish. The local Labour Party 'got wind of the script, and dispatched a pack of activists to foil him,' who stood at the front of the building bearing placards featuring the slogans 'Salford

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Here Cameron refers to the Smiths' debut television appearance – on 24 November 1983 – which has come to be regarded as an iconic moment in British music history ('Seven Ages of Rock – Events – The Smiths perform on TOTP', *BBC.co.uk* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/sevenages/events/indie/the-smiths-perform-on-totp/>> [accessed 25 June 2014]). Johnny Marr recalls that, although 'there'd been this question of whether it was cool to go on *Top of the Pops*, probably from the Clash refusing to do it [...] we were a new generation and it felt like there were new rules [...]. Plus, when the members of the Smiths were children, *Top of the Pops* was one of the most important days of the week. Suddenly we found ourselves on it. Previously, we'd been synonymous with the John Peel show [on BBC Radio 1], and suddenly that culture was on *Top of the Pops* – John Peel started to present it, and it was a new phase: post-punk going mainstream.' He also states their appearance's influence on the Britpop group Oasis, whose debut single released over a decade later featured a black Rickenbacker guitar on its cover – the guitar Marr used on *Top of the Pops* – exemplifying that it led them to be 'seen as the archetypal indie group'. Johnny Marr, 'The Smiths make their Top of the Pops debut', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/14/smiths-top-of-the-pops-debut>> [accessed 25 June 2014].

<sup>116</sup> John Harris, 'Hands Off Our Music!', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2008 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/mar/18/popandrock.politicsandthearts>> [accessed 8 November 2013]. My emphasis.

Lads not Eton snobs' and 'Oi Dave – Eton Toffs' club is 300 miles that way.'<sup>117</sup>

Further, Harris recounts Salford MP Hazel Blears' speech to the Labour Party's 2008 spring conference, in which she recalled the incident anecdotally:

When her comrades had got wind of Cameron's plans, they had been 'incensed' by the cheek of a Cameron visit to an area that had '80% youth unemployment when the Tories were in power'. They had spent 'all night' getting ready to protest. 'And on the day,' she said, 'Cameron was bundled in the back door, and bundled out of the back door. And he never got his photograph! And that night, I couldn't resist it: I sent him a photo of me outside Salford Lad's Club' – and here she laughed like a triumphal drum – 'and I wrote, "Dear Dave, Sorry you didn't get the picture, all the best from Salford." And when I saw him at the next PMQs [Prime Minister's Questions], he said, "Hazel - I will get my photograph." And I said, "Not on my watch, you won't, Dave."<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, Cameron's celebration of the work of the Smiths has been met with disapproval from the group's chief songwriters, guitarist Johnny Marr and singer Morrissey. Marr took to the social networking website *Twitter* in December 2010 to write:

David Cameron, stop saying that you like The Smiths, no you don't. I forbid you to like it. (@Johnny\_Marr, 1 December 2010)

Morrissey, meanwhile, qualified his disapproval with more detail. While admitting that 'music is a universal language', he states that since 'David Cameron hunts and shoots and kills stags – apparently for pleasure' – that he is not a worthy listener of the band: 'It was not for such people that either *Meat is Murder* or *The Queen is Dead* were recorded; in fact, they were made as a reaction against such

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

violence.<sup>119</sup> This all serves to demonstrate that Cameron's attempts to 'use' his musical taste to portray his 'authentic self' ignored the deep-rooted political potential of popular music. His political critics were able to use his taste to assert a binary 'them and us' scheme along ideological and class lines, which served to portray him as 'inauthentic', distrustful and a manipulator of media: qualities which, Cameron would well understand, are damaging to the potential of political 'success'.

Were a Labour Party politician to proudly declare a taste for the Smiths it would raise few eyebrows. The group's signification of northern socialism means that a 'left-wing' figure of Cameron's generation would be seen to understand the group; to be an authentic member of their assembled community. However, by his own admittance Cameron shares no views with Morrissey; therefore how can the public believe that he understands their songs? As Street points out, when a politician attempts to use musical taste to affect their public profile, they are 'parasitic upon the music.'

Politicians borrow its powers to bring people together; they do not use that community or create it. The music's popularity has only a tangential bearing on the politicians' political populism. They may hope to acquire the right image; they are certain to acquire the money. What happens is that both the politics and the music are reduced to their lowest common denominator.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusions

Music which aims to engender political awareness and action is created, disseminated and consumed under conditions asserted by a) the State and b) the

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<sup>119</sup> Morrissey, 'Message From Morrissey', *True To You*, 4 December 2010 <[http://true-to-you.net/morrissey\\_news\\_101204\\_01](http://true-to-you.net/morrissey_news_101204_01)> [accessed 8 November 2013]. Cameron responded in kind to the assertions of Morrissey and Marr by telling the *BBC* that if he had 'the complete and full set' of band members declaring their opposition to his enjoyment of their music, 'even then, I'm afraid, I will go on and listen to The Smiths.' 'David Cameron: I'll defy Johnny Marr's Smiths "ban"', *BBC News*, 19 February 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21509772>> [accessed 17 December 2013].

<sup>120</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 50.

commercial music industries. While in the British context the State largely withheld from interference in popular music culture during the period under investigation here,<sup>121</sup> governmental practices had an implicit and explicit impact on it: implicitly in the general societal conditions under which it was consumed, and explicitly through the records and performances which protested against its policies.<sup>122</sup> The commercial music industries, operating under the free market conditions asserted by the State, decide which performers are to be widely heard. While they cannot determine which performers will enjoy critical and commercial success (the liberalism of popular music culture is integral to its continued relevance), they are able to decide which examples of political songwriting are to enter into the marketplace, thereby playing an important role in setting popular political discourse. In protesting or supporting a political point, these musical performances and recordings rely largely on the lyrical content of songs. However, while interpreting politics in the music itself can be a more difficult process, there are signifiers to be found in terms of uses of instruments (e.g. the voice) and genre (e.g. allusions to folk). The politics of popular music are not just *there*: the appreciation and enjoyment of a 'protest' song require the listener to identify with its explicit message. Further, music which does not make an intentional political point can find itself being interpreted as a challenge to cultural norms. It is in this sense that we can understand that all popular music possesses a political subtext.

When making an explicit political point performers are expected to express themselves sincerely. Notions of authenticity are therefore key to the interpretation and cultural success of political popular music. If a performer's mode of expression is considered to contradict the political stance they are assuming then they can be accused of performing inauthentically. It is for this reason that popular music is more

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<sup>121</sup> Aside from the BBC's banning of certain records and a call for the prosecution of Crass – see chapter 11.

<sup>122</sup> Some of these records are examined in the following pages.

widely used for the support of political causes than ideologies. The use of popular music to promote socialism, for example, becomes problematic in the context of the capitalist industrial practices through which recordings are released.<sup>123</sup> A support for, rather than rebellion against, the establishment, via direct engagement with politicians might similarly raise doubt about a performer's integrity and accusations of inauthenticity; when politicians express their taste and support for performers they are often accused of inauthentic expression as a means to 'win' votes. Politicians remain 'one of us' in their possession of individual taste, yet they are seen to be part of an establishment to be rebelled against, rather than to be engaged with.

This thesis considers politics and popular music between the years 1976 and 1987, with specific reference to the 'authenticity' of post-punk performers in Thatcherite Britain. The discovery of politics within popular music – either explicit or implicit – is inextricably linked with notions of authenticity. In order to fully understand the context within which the case studies throughout this thesis are analysed, it is important first to explore and problematize the idea of 'authenticity'. While the use of the term authenticity has occurred throughout the post-war history of popular music, the foundations for the justification of its use by fans and critics have remained largely unquestioned outside of the academic context. As such it is important to address the contradictory relationship between political popular music and commercial enterprise. This will take place in the following chapter, after which the reader will be prepared for a critical examination of the musical history of the period outlined above.

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<sup>123</sup> See Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 120-167; John Stratton, 'Capitalism and Romantic ideology in the record business', *Popular Music*, 3 (1983), p. 143-156; Street, *Rebel Rock*.

## Chapter Two

### Popular Music and Authenticity

Writing at the turn of the millennium, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh assert that while 'in an earlier phase of popular music studies the buzzword was authenticity,' as a focus of academic discourse it has now 'been consigned to the intellectual dust-heap.'<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the use of authenticity as an analytical tool is problematic. However it will, and indeed should, remain an area of investigation as long as it continues to play a key role in the presentation, appreciation and consumption of popular music.<sup>2</sup> This is a state of affairs which will undoubtedly exist as long as musical culture is defined by the capitalist practices of the music industries. As Richard Middleton suggests, the practices of labels, agencies, media and journalists 'make it almost impossible to think outside the terms of [the] problematic' of authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the problematic frames a study such as this since, as Street notes, 'Biographies of the politically active musician tell the story of their engagement in terms of personal values and commitments.'<sup>4</sup> Authenticity is as integral to political discourse as it is to that of popular music.

However, it is important to question whether authenticity can be dealt with satisfactorily in academic discourse, let alone in that of popular music culture. 'Part of the disjunction between vernacular and academic discourse', Middleton believes, 'stems from the fact that, although the idea of authenticity seems to retain much of its purchase within the popular music culture, its formulation there, and even to some extent within popular music studies and ethnomusicology, is not particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, 'Introduction', in *Western Music and its Others*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 1-58 (p. 30).

<sup>2</sup> See Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', *Popular Music*, 21/2 (2002), p. 209-223; and *Rock: The Primary Text*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., pp. 198-201.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 50.

well developed'.<sup>5</sup> Critical assessment of music's authenticity is based upon the very same factors which inform its politics: modes of production; musical construction; lyrical content; the performer's biography and presentation and so on. When taken individually, each of these elements may be agreeable or otherwise to a listener's taste; when combined, the listener is faced with an ultimate judgement: is it 'authentic'? Does the sum represent a personal 'truth'?

The importance of authenticity to all listeners reflects the fundamentality of subjectivity – or liberalism – to popular music culture. Middleton uses Born and Hesmondhalgh's assertion that the concept lacks substance to illustrate that 'within the academy, and...within the intelligentsia more widely,' the positive acceptance of authenticity as an aspect of subjectivity 'has become an embarrassment'.<sup>6</sup> However, he goes on to ask 'who is to say that this stubbornness', with regard to its use in value judgements, 'does not reflect a continuing (if often unacknowledged) quotidian adherence, throughout social practice, to the claims of intuitive judgement?'<sup>7</sup> If taste is subjective, who has the right to question the route any listener takes to their value judgements? While the 1970s and 1980s saw

the passage of some pop music styles [...] through various aesthetics of irony and self-deconstruction, the discourse of authenticity within the music culture still holds much of its critical primacy, as dismissive response to turn-of-the-century 'manufactured pop' and 'corporate hegemony' makes clear.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, while the advent of punk sparked numerous challenges to the cultural hegemony of rock-derived ideologies (which, as will be shown in the next Section, sometimes took the form of determinedly commerciality- and artificiality-obsessed performers and entrepreneurs), the success and influence of performers such as

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<sup>5</sup> Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

the Clash and Billy Bragg demonstrated that a variety of prescribed attitudes towards authenticity still held influence on the formation of value judgements. Indeed, more than 35 years after the advent of punk, performers articulate nostalgia for the pre-punk era as a period of 'real' music. The most prominent example of this in the current pop landscape is the 20-year-old Nottingham-born singer-songwriter Jake Bugg, who prides himself on his authenticity – particularly as a marker of difference to contemporary chart acts such as the manufactured pop group One Direction.

As such, Bugg's 'authenticity' comes under scrutiny from critical observers. For instance, in an interview with the London listings magazine *Shortlist*, Bugg is questioned about the cynicism surrounding the writing credits of his debut self-titled album. Over half of the album's songs were co-written by Bugg and the Ivor Novello Award winner Iain Archer. By being paired with a commercially and critically-successful songwriter, his presentation – a young, provincial, songwriting 'discovery' – was perceived as masking the commercial desires of his major record label, Mercury. Bugg responded to this conspiracy theory by stressing that, rather than representing corporate intrusion, the credits are endemic of songwriting 'tradition':

The people I've written with are mates of mine. You have a cup of tea, sit down with a couple of guitars and make a tune. If you look back through time, people have always written songs together. And you learn things that you wouldn't if you were writing on your own. Some people will have a piece of music put in front of them and they'll just sing it. They don't care what they're singing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jimi Famurewa, 'Jake Bugg Interview', *Shortlist Magazine* <<http://www.shortlist.com/entertainment/music/jake-bugg>> [accessed 28 November 2013].



Bugg believes that he exists within a tradition of songwriters who not only sing about what is important to *them* but also seek to 'master' the 'craft' of composition.<sup>10</sup> However, while this represents an appeal to a specific interpretation of authenticity, Bugg has been criticised for rejecting the authenticity of his own era. One such example can be found in Paul Morley's recent *Observer* article, in which he compares Bugg with One Direction's frontman Harry Styles. For Morley, Styles represents to contemporary popular culture 'the truth – authentic, perversely sophisticated, a groomed blank symbol of what's left of pop, the daily hype, monstrous turnover and aimless, targeted pressure.'<sup>11</sup> Bugg, on the other hand, is 'the plastic, phoney contestant, a weedy echo of an echo of an echo of the idea that to write your own songs based on personal experience of a local world and a wider universe can lead to genius.'<sup>12</sup> Further, Morley concludes that Bugg 'cannot win' the 'fight', as Styles' work, which is defined purely as 'playing the role of Harry Styles', is 'not concerned with the kind of credibility those born before 1990 would recognise.'<sup>13</sup> Commercialism can be interpreted as the authentic position in popular music culture.

These examples serve to demonstrate why authenticity remains a key area in popular music studies. It is simultaneously used to promote sales – in itself an 'inauthentic' endeavour – and to form value judgements which often look past the capitalist models of the music industries.<sup>14</sup> While Morley demonstrates an

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<sup>10</sup> For Bugg, it is important to master a *specific* form of composition – the singer-songwriter model – to represent 'himself'. For Street, singer-songwriters represent 'maudlin conservatism' as they 'embrace the inevitable without resistance.' Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 197. See chapter 12 for discussion of Billy Bragg's singer-songwriter presentation.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Morley, 'So Jake Bugg is authentic and Harry Styles is a fake? I don't think so...', *The Observer*, 3 March 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/mar/03/jake-bugg-harry-styles-which-fake>> [accessed 28 November 2013].

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 3-8. Frith mounts a critical defence of the Pet Shop Boys album *Very*, instigated by Hillevi Ganetz's 'mock dismissal' of his taste: 'But *you* like disco!' We can read in Ganetz's rhetoric that she believes the Pet Shop Boys' brand of electronic music is 'inauthentic'. However Frith's critique attempts to demonstrate that a great deal of artistic attention has gone into the production of the record.

understanding of the complexities of using authenticity in popular music discourse, he ultimately uses it in the same way as those he seeks to criticise, to pass judgement on a performer. In this chapter I will examine some of the uses of authenticity in the music industries in the formation of value judgements and the role this plays in organising sales processes. If authenticity simultaneously informs both of these aspects of popular music culture, one must ask whether commerciality is the only truly authentic position to take within the music industries.

### **Cultural background**

Middleton's chapter on 'The Specter of Authenticity' deals with the history of the concept's presence in popular music discourse specifically, and cultural criticism more generally.<sup>15</sup> He finds that its beginnings in the words of the ancient Greeks were taken up by enlightenment thinkers Rousseau and Kant, indelibly associating the idea of remaining true to one's 'natural self' as a tenet of Romantic ideology. As such, while authenticity's presence in popular music discourse can be thought to lie 'in the bourgeois appropriation of folk music, constructed as an Other to commercial pop', within scholarship 'the music features within grids of distinction and political position clearly indebted to older discourses in folkloristics, anthropology, and Romantic *Kulturkritik*.'<sup>16</sup>

The binary opposition of nature and culture, reflected in these areas of scholarship, is important to popular formulations of authenticity. Authenticity is to be found in the 'natural'. It encompasses music and identities composed without contrivance, reflecting the 'true' concerns of its authors. When music is thought of as 'culture', it has been constructed with attention to detail; it is a painstaking human invention which, especially within the context of the culture industries, can be built as a product to achieve capital gains. As such, music assumes a privileged hierarchical

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<sup>15</sup> Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 199-246.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

position when it is thought to have occurred 'naturally' to its composer. These composers, in turn, are canonised, as suggested by Morley above, as 'geniuses'.

This binary opposition is problematic since the very concept of music-making makes us a cultured species, one which disseminates its thoughts and feelings, whether 'primitive' or 'philosophical', via a variety of media. As such, 'nature' has become a prized attribute which is most often thought to be found within the 'Folk': the 'Völkisch' to the German Romantics; the 'working class' to British pop fans. Their musical creativity is especially valued as a triumph over adversity, a 'natural' inclination to 'beauty' which transcends their 'uneducated' status. Moreover, the authenticity of the folk is also defined along racial lines: identification with forms associated with black origins – the blues, soul, reggae – is appreciated for 'rawness' and 'primitivism'. For Middleton, the identification of authenticity within these terms 'speaks in the name of a reified and naturalized transcendental subject...in a binary dance of otherness.'<sup>17</sup> The use of such beliefs implies that, while the expressions of the underclasses are valued, their cultural forms are separate from fine art precisely because they are 'natural': a distinction which can never be reconciled.

'Authentic' popular music, therefore, expresses more than the values of the 'folk'. Middleton finds that 'authenticity has been negotiated not only in terms of the *Völkisch* but also those of Art: the construction of canons has vied with the celebration of ways of life...in the validation of what is to count in the negotiation of distinction.'<sup>18</sup> In other words, to find authenticity within popular music is to assess how well it communicates folk 'truth' within a framework of 'art'. 'If authenticity is to be found, it seemed, works of art, including art music,' with its establishment of the score-based work, focus on the single genius-author and, hence, development of a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

canon, 'would be a key place to look.'<sup>19</sup> The wide dissemination of artistic 'truth' requires an ordered scheme such as a canon, which only allows for a certain type of culture – i.e. that of the bourgeoisie – to be communicated.

The introduction of art music ideology into the reception of popular music has led to the political problematic of its commodification being overlooked, as fans and critics (who, while acting as objectively authoritative gatekeepers, are ultimately 'fans' of certain music themselves) have developed a canon of works that exist as products to be bought and sold. In this respect, a canon of popular music is problematic. Its very establishment implies that 'there are universal aesthetic values' in the critical appraisal of music – of which authenticity is undoubtedly one – so '[individual] works are therefore included in the canon on the grounds that they best express these universal values.'<sup>20</sup> While the authoritative presentation of the canon aims to suggest otherwise, certain styles of music are inevitably to be excluded from lists on the basis of subjective attitudes. By including certain works 'according to culturally dominant stereotypes', others may be excluded for their non-conformity to the 'universal values' apparently derived from them.<sup>21</sup> The canon, therefore, 'appears less as an expression of universal values than as an expression of power relations.'<sup>22</sup>

The dominant canon in popular music is the ordering of the album: an 'artform', according to the *New Musical Express (NME)*, 'by which any act worth caring about wants to be judged.'<sup>23</sup> The problem with this 'artform' lies in the fact that it requires mass production for its mediation. Popular music is generally understood as a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Edgar, 'Canon', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts*, ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 34-5 (p. 35).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. For further discussion of the issues surrounding canon formation in popular music, see Carys Wyn Jones, *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) and *Popular Music*, 25/1 (2006), 'Special Issue on Canonisation'.

<sup>22</sup> Edgar, 'Canon', p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Editorial, 'The 500 greatest albums of all time', *New Musical Express*, 26 October 2013, pp. 49-88 (p. 49).

commodified form: artists must record their work and publish it in the form of singles or albums for it to be enjoyed, assessed and appreciated by fans and critics. These recordings are celebrated as commodities: they are the primary focus of any performer for they allow fans access to their work at any time. Although live performance is considered the most authentic way to experience music, these performances are by and large informed by songs' recorded forms.<sup>24</sup> They either faithfully recreate the sound of the record, or emphasise their 'liveness' by deviating from them. Ultimately, while the recording process can be undertaken cheaply by those who have access, decisions on the widespread dissemination of musical works by record labels are made with commercial – will this sell? – rather than artistic – will this be valued? – considerations (even if a work's 'artistic' credentials themselves act as a selling point).<sup>25</sup> This has meant that cultural critics – after Adorno – can determine that questions of authenticity and artistic worth are not applicable to popular music since their formal elements are defined by their commercial 'nature'.<sup>26</sup>

Since Adorno's totalizing analysis was formulated in response to the light jazz and Tin Pan Alley songs which were played on American radio upon his emigration to New York in the late 1930s, they have less relevance to the progression of popular music over the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> However, some aspects of his writings, particularly with regard to the power of music in commercial enterprise, are of interest when considering the commodification of music. His identification of standardization means that within any song, 'the whole is pre-given and pre-

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<sup>24</sup> See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> See Jon Stratton, 'Capitalism and Romantic ideology in the record business', *Popular Music*, 3 (1983), pp. 143-56.

<sup>26</sup> For convincing critiques of Adorno's writings on popular music, see Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* and Max Paddison, 'Adorno, Popular Music and Mass Culture', in *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture: Essays on Critical Theory and Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1996), pp. 81-105.

<sup>27</sup> See Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, pp. 45-56

accepted, even before the actual experience of the music starts',<sup>28</sup> and as such, the musical details of any song are interchangeable: 'the beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses' without any loss of musical meaning.<sup>29</sup> Each detail serves 'only as a cog in a machine' which is designed to accumulate profit rather than provide artistic truth.<sup>30</sup>

This serves to imply that music can be used to pacify or subordinate its listeners. As Street concludes, Adorno 'represents...an account of music's political importance, not as propaganda or manipulation, but as the disruptive power of sound itself.'<sup>31</sup> Cultural producers use techniques such as 'pseudo-individualization' to keep the listener 'in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them,'<sup>32</sup> and this 'illusion...of individual achievement must be maintained' since 'concentration and control hide themselves' in the manifestation of stylization, and 'unhidden they would provoke resistance.'<sup>33</sup> Consumers would be less likely to purchase goods in the knowledge that every aspect of them is controlled by pre-determined economic structures; therefore cultural producers use the idea of individuality to hide evidence of their control. In this respect, we can view the imbuing of performers' presentation with ideals of authenticity as a form of pseudo-individualization. Frith notes that 'the myth of authenticity is...one of rock's own ideological effects, an aspect of its sales process: rock stars can be marketed as artists, and their particular sounds marketed as a means of identity.'<sup>34</sup> Therefore, while Adorno's views are offensive to those who find artistic worth within popular music forms, as Street suggests, they force us to 'consider the direct effects that

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<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno (with George Simpson), 'On Popular Music', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 437-69 (p. 439)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440.

<sup>31</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, 'On Popular Music', p. 445.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 444.

<sup>34</sup> Simon Frith, 'Towards an aesthetic of popular music', in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert & Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 133-49 (p. 137).

sound has upon us'.<sup>35</sup> Does our passive consumption of music allow it to exploit our taste?

### Uses of authenticity in the music industries

While those working in the music industries aim to achieve financial profit through the exchange of music, to do so requires performers whose abilities and presentation can attract an audience. Frith and Horne's assertion from the late 1980s still has relevance to the operations of the music industries today:

In the pop world...musicians are taken very seriously. The star system works by making them publicly responsible for their own sounds; the sales apparatus of the music press, radio and television depends on the star interview, on the myth of individual production'.<sup>36</sup>

To achieve success and become a star, one must have respect for the music which is being performed. It must be evident that it *means* something to the performer through the delivery of their performance. In his review of Take That frontman Gary Barlow's 2013 solo album *Since I Saw You Last*, music critic Alexis Petridis suggests that his solo career 'initially flopped' thanks to 'a certain lack of charisma. It didn't seem to matter when he was surrounded by the rest of Take That, but it manifested itself in no uncertain terms in his solo work'.<sup>37</sup> While Barlow may have given an authentic performance of himself, his solo presentation was not suited to selling his songs in the same numbers as his group could. For Frith and Horne, stardom 'means playing on a sense of difference, becoming a pop and rock star involves selling the difference to the masses'.<sup>38</sup> While performers are expected to

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<sup>35</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> Alexis Petridis, 'Gary Barlow: Since I Saw You Last – review', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/21/gary-barlow-since-i-saw-review>> [accessed 22 November 2013].

<sup>38</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 65. As written.

give a true account of themselves, this presentation is not always conducive to high sales figures.

As a result of the association of Romantic values with popular music, performers are expected to be individual – i.e. non-generic – to demonstrate their authenticity.

Referring to the experience of the mid-1980s 'modern fine artist', Frith and Horne find that

the shock of the new requires that the initiators of movements [...] exhibit the art school dream of 'working for one's living by living in one's work', but there are few market prizes for coming second.... In aesthetic terms, 'followers' always seem to be weaker and less 'authentic' than innovators, to run counter to the prime art school slogan of 'being true to oneself'.<sup>39</sup>

Sales require an established audience that relies on genre classification; as such performers strike a difficult balance between at once being 'individual' while also being identifiable within a genre. Middleton explains this within the 'conventional mold [sic] for music historiography of the canon (Preclassical [sic], Classical, Romantic)'.<sup>40</sup> Within popular music culture, that performer which defines the 'second stage, the classic, becomes generic – the *Ur*-form'.<sup>41</sup> To be considered authentic to oneself, a performer must settle for originality within a genre. In Britain, this attitude became prevalent – through the art school's influence on pop music culture – in the artistic desires of 'romantic' pop stars, who 'speak only for themselves, and seek, usually in vain, to state their differences from everyone else'.<sup>42</sup> They were themselves, but simultaneously classifiable as 'Romantic'.

Frith and Horne contrast this with American 'rock' Romanticism, an ideology which they emphasise, in an echo of the nature/culture binary, has developed through

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 221.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 74.



'rural' music: it 'celebrates the star as democratic representative, speaking *for* the culturally dispossessed.'<sup>43</sup> Inevitably, this thread has found a presence in British popular music culture as well. All of the musicians key to this study 'speak for' groups of the culturally dispossessed, while simultaneously defining their musical styles as a representation of themselves. They assume the position the politician finds unattainable, becoming leaders of their cultural 'tribe' while remaining members of it.

Whether representing a group or an individual, the musical and lyrical statements of performers are expected to demonstrate their personal emotions and beliefs. As Laing suggests, 'much popular singing is heard within the space of the autobiographical: the skill of a singer or songwriter is judged by how far the audience is convinced of the authenticity of the emotion portrayed; the singer must be felt to *really* feel it in their own life.'<sup>44</sup> He cites the reception of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust persona as an example in which this interpretation is misplaced. Bowie 'intended to *signify*, not become' Ziggy: however his portrayal of the character – notably of his own invention – 'allowed the slide into the autobiographical for much of his audience. For them, he *was* Ziggy.'<sup>45</sup>

Listeners expect that lyrics will portray the 'real' feelings of their singer. Even in the case of cover versions, it is assumed that the singer has chosen to perform the song through identification with its sentiments.<sup>46</sup> As such, vocal performances are not judged by 'how skilfully a singer can *signify* or present an emotion...but by the listener's idea of how far a singer "really feels" what is being communicated.'<sup>47</sup> The perceived authenticity of the singer's expressions impact upon the value

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. As written.

<sup>44</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. As written. See chapter 5 for a discussion of this issue in relation to John Lydon/Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols.

<sup>46</sup> For a thorough exploration of this point see Dai Griffiths, 'Cover versions and the sound of identity in motion', in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh & Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), pp. 51-64.

<sup>47</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 64. As written.

judgements made of the performance. The idea persists that, as an intrinsic part of the human body, the voice is the most authentic instrument in terms of expressing personal truths. In Middleton's analysis of John Lennon's 1970 song 'God', he finds that his voice quality shifts 'from throat-tearing rock 'n' roll shout' to a 'soul-ballad voice...silky, fluid, intimate, domestic' as he attempts to put his past behind him and represent his 'self' for the first time.<sup>48</sup> However, by using two vocal styles that signify authenticity – the primal roar and the black soul voice – Middleton asks, 'Which me, then?'<sup>49</sup> While Lennon sought a singular, autonomous identity, his image was in fact crafted through a necessity for specific modes of expression to portray different emotions.

Being 'authentic' to one's self requires such a state of being to be defined. This has varied approaches within cultural studies. Andrew Edgar summarises the orthodox assumption of the self as 'something autonomous (being stable and independent of all external influences)',<sup>50</sup> a belief drawn from Plato, who, according to Peter Sedgwick, 'argued that the soul (mind) and body are distinct.'<sup>51</sup> However, cultural students more regularly draw 'on those approaches that hold that identity is a response to something external and different from it (an other).'<sup>52</sup> Where Plato saw the distinction between an individual's soul and body as integral to the autonomy of the self, the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume proposed that the self is rather 'a product of a body's ability to have sensations, experiences, etc': the experiences of the body directly impinge on the development of the self.<sup>53</sup> The self is determined through constant dialogue with external sources: it is defined by similarities and differences with the other.

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<sup>48</sup> Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 202

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Edgar, 'Identity', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, pp. 166-70 (p. 167).

<sup>51</sup> Peter Sedgwick, 'Self', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, pp. 302-5 (p. 303).

<sup>52</sup> Edgar, 'Identity', p. 167.

<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick, 'Self', p. 303.

The possibility of a multiplicity of selfhoods derives from the pre-eminence of liberalism in popular music culture. For Street, liberalism offers us the chance to 'choose who we are.'<sup>54</sup> Performers can select a subculture they wish to be identified with through choices of musical style, fashion and persona. In turn, listeners can define themselves by making similar choices. Subjectivism is one of the defining tenets of liberalism: one is free to do and enjoy whatever one likes, so long as it does not negatively impact the desires of one's neighbours. However, what is freedom if it comes with a caveat? Sedgwick states that 'the liberal conception of individuality sets up a normative restriction which tells us what the boundaries of an agent's actions ought to be, even as it asserts the absolute right of individuals to be free from either state or consensual pressures which might impede their basic right to liberty.'<sup>55</sup>

While Street suggests that liberalism offers 'choices', it is more likely that certain actions of the self and others lead to the development of identity. According to Sedgwick, John Stuart Mill, one of the founders of liberal thought, believed that 'individuality gains its meaning [...] from the social context in which agents engage in their personal pursuits.'<sup>56</sup> While everyone is 'free' to choose their identity, it is more often that the 'freedom' of others – in the form of society – has affected its formation. While Mill felt that 'what an individual chooses to do with their own goods and even life is not a matter for public concern, so long as any choices that are made do not adversely affect the private rights of others',<sup>57</sup> these actions will always impact on society, and therefore feed back into their own self-construction.

The actions of those who define themselves against society inevitably impact on the trajectory of the social whole, which impacts on the choices that individuals make for

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<sup>54</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 179.

<sup>55</sup> Sedgwick, 'Liberalism', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), ed. Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, pp. 187-92 (p. 190).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

themselves. This thesis is proposed by Emile Durkheim, which proposes that 'a modern understanding of individuality (and thus, the self-understanding of humans in modern society) was a product of that particular culture.'<sup>58</sup> We can view the individual as a product of society and economic organisation, rather than society as a tapestry of individual personas.<sup>59</sup> As such, popular music culture's concern with remaining authentic to oneself stems from a commitment to a collective identity. Nonetheless, liberalist political thought 'presupposes' that society is 'composed out of individuals'.<sup>60</sup> This end is seen throughout politics and mass marketing: in Thatcher's assertion that there is 'no such thing as society...there are individual men and women';<sup>61</sup> the contemporary Conservative Party's rhetoric which states that their coalition government is working to help 'people who aspire to work hard and get on';<sup>62</sup> and in British Gas' corporate promise that they are 'looking after *your* world'.<sup>63</sup>

Musicians' liberal 'authenticity' has been similarly used as a marketing technique since the beginnings of the music industries, as this extract from an official 1964 biography of the Rolling Stones serves to illustrate:

Many top pop groups achieve their fame and stardom and then go out, quite deliberately, to encourage adults and parents to like them. This doesn't appeal

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<sup>58</sup> Edgar, 'Identity', p. 167.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167-8. For further see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Edgar, 'Identity', p. 167.

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Press, 2011), p. 626. This statement comes from an often quoted interview published in the magazine *Woman's Own*. Thatcher asserted, in her typical rhetorical style (which has obviously influenced the rhetoric of the 2014 Conservative-led coalition government), that people who blame 'society' for their problems and seek to rely on the state for assistance were wrong, as 'no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got the entitlements too much in mind without the obligations'. 'Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing as society")', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 23 September 1987 <<http://www.margarethatatcher.org/document/106689>> [accessed 25 June 2014].

<sup>62</sup> George Osborne, 'George Osborne's Budget speech in full', *The Telegraph*, 20 March 2013 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/budget/9942779/George-Osbornes-Budget-speech-in-full.html>> [accessed 3 December 2013].

<sup>63</sup> My emphasis.

to the forthright Stones. They will not make any conscious effort to be liked by anybody at all – not even their present fans if it also meant changing their own way of life. The Stones have been Rebels With A Cause...the cause of rhythm 'n' blues music.<sup>64</sup>

The Stones were apparently true to themselves – a notably collective selfhood which was made all the more authentic by its passion for rhythm 'n' blues music<sup>65</sup> – and as such their success was attributed to identification with their outward liberalism rather than conforming to a populist identity: they were the instigators, not the followers. Assertions of this type have persisted to the current day – see the emphasis Jake Bugg places on his difference to those who 'don't care what they're singing'<sup>66</sup> – and will undoubtedly continue to be made so long as the commercial music industries exist: it is a successful promotional tool. By telling their fanbase that they are not making a 'conscious effort to be liked', the Stones in fact operated in quite the opposite fashion. They, or more precisely their manager Andrew Loog Oldham, understood that their 'rebellion' – in contrast to the Beatles' clean cut mainstream conformism which is implied in the quote – was their unique selling point.

For Frith and Horne, this commercially-minded hyperbole actually aided the perception of their authenticity. Since Oldham's 'packaging of the Stones was an art – his art – to be celebrated for its cunning and cleverness', the Stones 'were clearly in charge of their own selling-out process' and, as such, 'remained "authentic" artists'.<sup>67</sup> Since the popular music industries are a largely commercial enterprise, the

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<sup>64</sup> The Rolling Stones, *Our Own Story* (London: Corgi, 1964), p. 187, quoted in Frith & Horne, *Art into Pop*, p. 88. As written.

<sup>65</sup> 'As the Stones' rhetoric makes clear, coupled with the commitment to musical truth was a belief in r 'n' b as a means of individual expression – truth-to-the-blues couldn't be separated from truth-to-self.' Frith & Horne, *Art into Pop*, p. 89.

<sup>66</sup> Famurewa, 'Jake Bugg Interview'.

<sup>67</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art into Pop*, p. 102.

pursuit of success can in itself be considered authentic. As Frith and Horne conclude, from a postmodern academic vantage point, the 'art/music story' is

like one of those old-fashioned double-jointed, three-dimensional postcards. Look at it one way and see the story of surrender, the Romantic critiques of pop and rock dissolved in business deals. Shift position slightly and another picture can be glimpsed: the Romantic critique of pop becoming part of the pop process itself.<sup>68</sup>

As such, the Stones stand as an example of how within these overtly commercialised industries, the authenticity of a pop artist/performer can be understood through every facet of their being – including their methods of operation within the constraints of sales processes. For instance, Frith and Horne find that as musicians began to draw influence from pop art – which had, in turn, drawn influence from the mass culture industries of which popular music is part – they began to celebrate, after Oldham, their music's own sales process. This posed a problem:

[How] could they preserve their sense of artistic difference? For a while the rock 'n' roll/youth/sex/rebellion nexus seemed to be enough, in itself, to guarantee some sort of subversive status...but as pop (and Pop) art was absorbed into marketing routines its 'subversiveness' seemed increasingly dubious.<sup>69</sup>

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the postmodern post-punk landscape allowed the explicit celebration of commercial practices to become in itself a subversive act. Attendees of the New Romantic-pioneering Blitz club night, for example, saw music as 'a secondary issue' in comparison with the celebration of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

their individual identities.<sup>70</sup> These 'poseurs' – including Boy George and members of Spandau Ballet – saw music-making as 'a means to an end': stardom.<sup>71</sup> As such, 'commercial and aesthetic success were measured by the same criteria.'<sup>72</sup> It did not matter what the music 'said' or represented: these musicians and their fans determined that 'it was skill in the sales process that made the music "good"', rather than analysis of the music itself.<sup>73</sup> Of course, it is too simplistic to determine that the music played no part in the foundation of fan bases: their songs were carefully constructed and catchy. However, their musical construction, combined with image, worked to celebrate success before it had even been 'achieved.'

While punk has been read as an attempt to rehabilitate authenticity within popular music, one of the styles it sought to oppose – glam rock – is itself read by Street as a return to the authentic expressions of pop's early history. Glam was, 'in part, a self-conscious attempt by musicians and the industry to revive the old showbiz values, albeit with a touch of irony.'<sup>74</sup> The pop industry was not created to sell 'truth'; rather its power derived from escapism. It spoke to youth desires which were not necessarily reflective of their actual lives. As such, 'authentic' recorded music could be interpreted as the kitsch, controlling, entertainment of Adorno's nightmares, which meant that as 'glitter rock' gained momentum it found greater understanding from the industries who struggled to commercialise 'people who wore beads and refused to trust anyone over thirty.'<sup>75</sup> However, Street warns against the assumption that 'the fact that the business could sell glam-rock more easily' meant that it 'extolled unambiguously the values' of the bourgeois capitalist society.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 173-4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

The Rolling Stones' 1964 biography pre-empted the fact that critical assessments of music are often made with foregrounded questions of authenticity. As Street states, 'Music making is judged aesthetically and politically; musicians are judged by their creativity *and* their commitment.'<sup>77</sup> Often these judgements are based around genre rules. Genre labels are central to the sales process of popular music; they assist listeners in determining whether a release will 'suit' them. As such, according to Frith, 'authenticity is a necessary critical value' in the formation of such judgements.<sup>78</sup> When considering a new purchase, the listener asks themselves 'does this...fit my collection? And the answers are inevitably reached by measuring the new music against a notion of the real thing: is this really jazz or punk or disco or New Age?'<sup>79</sup> When making a value judgement, the listener simultaneously makes 'a social judgement: does this music understand the genre, is it true to it?'<sup>80</sup>

As such, no value judgement is based exclusively on the music 'performed': the context of its performance is integral to its authenticity. In his review of Gary Barlow's *Since I Saw You Last*, Alexis Petridis hypothesises that people will find the song 'Small Town Girls' to be 'unbearably gloopy and twee' thanks to its drawing of influence from the commercially successful 'faux-rustic folkies' (read: inauthentic) Mumford & Sons, and 'lyrics that deal in bunting-strewn, Cath Kidstonish whimsy: "Rosy cheeks and grassy knees, their life is heaven-sent."<sup>81</sup> Petridis implies that the recording is a copy of a copy which would add further fuel to the fire for those who would dislike Barlow's commercially-oriented record on principle anyway. However, Petridis' knowledge of the workings of pop music appreciation allows him to theorise that:

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 86, My emphasis.

<sup>78</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.89.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Petridis, 'Gary Barlow: Since I Saw You Last – review'.



had exactly the same song been released in 1968 on [the record label] Deram by a band called something like Dr Murgatroyd's Treatments, at least some of the derisive voices would instead be acclaiming it as a toytown psych/soft-pop masterpiece: whether that's evidence of terrible snobbery or that context is everything is an intriguing question.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, authenticity works as one side of a binary opposition: the authentic is measured against that which is *inauthentic*. Traditionally in popular music culture this opposition is set out within the terms of pop and rock. Pop is defined as formulaic commercialism, music which has been created to serve no other function than to be traded as a commodity – such as Barlow's album. Rock (exemplified by Petridis' fictional group), on the other hand, utilises artistic experimentalism, whose commercial success – as 'demonstrated' by the Rolling Stones – was of no consequence to its composers and performers. According to Frith and Horne:

The original idea of rock authenticity came from a straight-forward Romantic ideology of creativity. For the 1960s art school beat musicians, true expression was defined against both bourgeois and showbiz convention, and 'rock' was differentiated from 'pop' along the axes of passion, commerce and complexity.<sup>83</sup>

The endeavours of the musicians central to Frith and Horne's study – those whose creativity was cultivated in the art schools – were 'about freedom and experimentation, doing what you like and not really caring whether anyone else likes it'.<sup>84</sup> As such, they apparently treated their songwriting as a modernist craft. They opposed the escapist emphasis of pop and sought to utilise instruments and forms

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. Deram records was a subsidiary of the UK-based Decca Records, which came to be associated with the late Sixties psychedelia/orchestral pop sound.

<sup>83</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 148.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

to 'progress' the capabilities of the song; to imply that it could be used to articulate artistic 'truths'.<sup>85</sup>

While these 'rock' modernists saw themselves in opposition to the established pop industry, they in fact established a parallel strand which, while offering stylistically different products, utilised its own set of marketing strategies to achieve the same ends: record sales. While, as Laing suggests, there is 'no issue in teenybop of "paying dues"',<sup>86</sup> rock bands must hone an identity which suggests that they have 'worked hard' to establish their position. Consequently, stars can be marketed to multiple audiences in different ways. For instance, in the mid-1980s pop landscape, Street identifies different techniques in use in the selling of Bruce Springsteen following his breakthrough into the musical mainstream:

When being sold to the rock audience, the photographs were simple:

Springsteen as blue-collar worker; Springsteen as a 'regular guy'. For the pop audience, a new style emerged, captured in the video for 'Dancing in the Dark'. Springsteen was shot in soft focus, miming to a backing track. The film used several shots of the young girls at the front of the stage.<sup>87</sup>

In the contemporary landscape, we see acts primarily aimed at a pop audience also being marketed on more 'intellectual' terms, for instance Lady Gaga, who in 2013 released her third studio album *ARTPOP*.<sup>88</sup> The promotion of the record in the UK utilised a familiar television marketing pattern, with appearances on the BBC's flagship chat show *The Graham Norton Show* and ITV's *The X Factor*. However, Gaga was also interviewed by Miranda Sawyer for a special episode of BBC2's *The*

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<sup>85</sup> See Barry J. Faulk, *British Rock Modernism, 1967-1977* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> '...and nor was there in punk rock. In fact, quite a number of the early punk musicians had a lot of previous experience as professional musicians, notably members of the Damned, Stranglers and Clash. But this background did not count to their advantage in the punk milieu.' Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 60.

<sup>87</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 99.

<sup>88</sup> The significations of this album are open to analysis in the context of Frith and Horne's *Art into Pop*.

*Culture Show*. Her appearances on *Graham Norton* and *The X Factor* were standard, at least on Gaga's eccentric terms, studio performances of her latest singles, characterised by hyperactive dancing, very little clothing and an intense vocal style. But the Sawyer interview saw the two seated in a fabric draped studio, with Gaga deliberately dressed down to look 'natural' in comparison with her often outrageous public appearance. This worked to signify that Gaga was being 'truthful' in the interview; she was giving an honest account of her personality. As such, this 'allowed' her to analyse her work, the 'artistic' signifiers of her new album and her status as 'an artist':

I don't know what I am. I don't even know if [my work]'s any good. And I don't know that that matters. What matters [is] that it is, and that it's there, for you to feel and to be, and to experience. It's a life force on its own. And I'm still very young, you know, in the duration of my work and if you look at the early work of many artists over a sphere of many mediums [sic], you can see them channelling and imitating and bringing along the artists that they've admired and learned from – their teachers – and then later on in their careers, that's when the real sort of amazing work starts to happen. So I don't know that, even, if anything I've done is very good. But that's not really the point. I'm not really the point, if that makes any sense?<sup>89</sup>

While Gaga is certainly a unique figure in the current popular music landscape, the idea that a 'pop' performer can debate their own work on these terms demonstrates that the ideological divide between rock and pop has narrowed in recent years. We can draw parallels between Gaga's self-presentation and the view of Bowie and Roxy Music's Bryan Ferry put forward by Frith and Horne, who credited them with making glam rock 'an art form – something, unlike the teenybop Sweet or camp

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<sup>89</sup> Lady Gaga, in *The Culture Show: 'Gaga - The Mother Monster'*, BBC2, 13 November 2013, 10.00pm.

Gary Glitter, to be taken seriously' by 'revitalizing the idea of the Romantic artist in terms of media fame. Having invented themselves as pop stars, Bowie and Ferry were made sense of in the old terms of rock creativity.'<sup>90</sup> However, the key difference here lies within the realms of gender. While the history of popular music has seen successful male and female performers, the discussion of male 'pop' performers on 'rock' terms is more commonly found than in that of women. Indeed, it is a problematic within this thesis: the key performers who fall under analysis are predominantly male.

This dynamic has been explained in a variety of ways. For the punk journalists Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, 'a girl with the audacity to go onstage is always jeered, sneered and leered up to – rock and roll is very missionary, very religious, very repressive.'<sup>91</sup> 'Girls', within the male dominated music industries, 'are expected to grovel in the mezzanine while the stud struts his stuff *up there*'.<sup>92</sup> This imbalance is also featured in the analysis of Frith and Horne who, framing the operations of the music industries within the history of industrial capitalism, emphasise that 'personal – "domestic" – consumption was associated with women' from its beginnings.<sup>93</sup> As such, from a male perspective the 'serious' analysis of music, according to Frith and Horne, 'was to be a man; to giggle and scream and sigh was to be a woman.'<sup>94</sup> The rejection of 'pop's commercialism was sexed, and therefore 'the appeal of young male stars to even younger female fans' presented 'a relationship which has always troubled self-conscious pop "artists"'.<sup>95</sup>

The ideological divide between rock and pop also extends to assumptions of political engagement by performers on either side. Through a comparison of the

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<sup>90</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 116.

<sup>91</sup> Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny: the Obituary of Rock and Roll* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 86.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 17.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

potential impact of statements by the Specials' Terry Hall and Duran Duran's Simon Le Bon on the futility of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND),<sup>96</sup> Street finds that 'for Duran Duran, there was no tension to be resolved, no need to introduce politics into the music' because Le Bon's 'musical links are with the self-consciously apolitical world of glitter rock, itself a rejection of hippy musical politics.'<sup>97</sup> Since Duran Duran's music offered 'pop' escape from the 'real world' problems dealt with in politics, Le Bon did not need to make political statements to validate his music. If anything, were Duran Duran to have offered reactions to social issues in their songwriting they would have been performing *inauthentically*. Street continues his argument by suggesting that Mick Jagger would not have written the song 'Street Fighting Man' had he been in Duran Duran. The song was composed not because Jagger possessed a desire to perform a hymn to the revolutionary, but 'because it was appropriate to the Stones' rebel image...[its] meaning and politics lie beyond the control of its author. "Street Fighting Man" derives its power from the musical conventions which shape how it was written, not from the personal beliefs of the songwriters.'<sup>98</sup> It was because Jagger was in a 'rock' band that he dealt with 'real' issues; as a 'pop' performer Le Bon's music dealt with 'superficiality.'

As Street shows, the nature of the music industries means that it is 'difficult to imagine making popular music without engaging in some form of commercialism'.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, while 'it is a part of the political culture of pop music', particularly with regard to the appreciation of rock and folk, the concept of selling out 'has doubtful credentials.'<sup>100</sup> This sentiment is similarly found in Frith and Horne, whose proposal that 'the interplay of artifice and authenticity is central to *everyone's* lives in

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<sup>96</sup> Hall: 'I'd support CND if it worked but I accept that they'll never do anything about it.' Le Bon: 'I believe that disarmament will never happen.' Quoted in Street, *Rebel Rock*, pp. 130-1

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

consumer capitalism'<sup>101</sup> we can take as acknowledgement that selling out is as blank a concept as authenticity in the postmodern world. Indeed, while the 'ideology of being an artist runs counter to utilitarianism', those who seek a career in creativity 'confront both an unsympathetic bureaucracy and a market place in which the soul of the artist is a commodity.'<sup>102</sup>

Still, accusations of selling out are applied but only in certain contexts. For example, Street suggests that in the 1980s 'Madonna or Duran Duran could not "sell out"', much as One Direction, or even Lady Gaga, could not be accused of selling out today.<sup>103</sup> These acts are sold to us on the basis that they *have* money; to be spent on their appearance, stage shows, promotion, and so on. They have not had to work their way up to a point of commercial success: they were launched with success as inevitability. While One Direction and Gaga may use signifiers of authenticity – occasional acoustic guitar usage and 'artistic' rhetoric respectively – these are not integral to their wide commercial appeal.<sup>104</sup> However, 'the Clash or John Lennon' – or indeed Jake Bugg – could sell out 'in countless ways.'<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the fact that Bugg wrote songs with an award winning-songwriter is one way in which Bugg could be accused of selling out. 'Rock' music

disguises the money making side of the business, except to disparage it; pop makes money part of the show. Rock hides its wealth (Springsteen's tattered jeans); pop flaunts it (Elton John's diamond-studded glasses). Pop lacks any guilt about the money involved. It can simply demand it.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 180.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>103</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 141.

<sup>104</sup> However such signifiers continue to be strategically placed in the presentation of 'pop' acts. See Elizabeth Eva Leach, 'Vicars of "Wannabe": authenticity and the Spice Girls', *Popular Music*, 20/2 (2001), pp. 143-167.

<sup>105</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 141.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80

## Conclusions

Authenticity is a key term in the analysis of political popular music. A performer must be understood as being honest and possessed of integrity to attain approval from consumers, otherwise their political stance will be invalidated by a perceived pursuance of commercial success. The political performer must conform to presentational aspects which suggest a preference for the communication of their sincere beliefs. However, by engaging with the commercial music industries these performers are no different to those who more obviously prioritise fame and fortune: while they may perform their honest feelings and beliefs, they are doing so to build a career. Therefore their 'authentic' presentation is an important part of their engagement with the music industries. Even those performers who do not make politics a part of their act must display an awareness of issues of authenticity. In an Adornian sense we could consider portrayals of authenticity as merely another 'pseudo-individualization' which serves to hide the fact that the actual 'authentic' position of popular music culture is commercialism.

Notions of authenticity are obviously problematic. Performers are expected to disseminate folk 'truth' within artistic frameworks, thereby blurring the longstanding critical debate on nature and culture. They are expected to be individuals while simultaneously conforming to the rules of genre, itself an aid in the selling process. Further, while commercial and critical success validates performers, to be seen to be in pursuance of this success is to be considered inauthentic. For every performer examined in the proceeding case studies the balancing of these paradoxes became important to the defence of their work. Each was to be scrutinised in the music press in the analysis of their honesty and integrity. While Born and Hesmondhalgh doubt the credibility of the academic analysis of authenticity, the term has continued relevance to the performance and analysis of political popular music.

In the following section, I will analyse the relevance of politics and authenticity to the development and understanding of the genre 'punk'. The analysis presented in Sections III and IV requires knowledge of both the preceding theoretical background and the history of, and academic discourse surrounding, punk. I will demonstrate how these performers approached political discourse through their work in the 'post-punk' era and how this was informed by the notions of authenticity I have already outlined.



## II

**Defining Punk and Post-Punk**

Such was the cultural impact of punk in late 1970s Britain that mainstream popular music discourse throughout the 1980s was shaped by comparisons with the work and imagery of those performers who had instigated its popularity. In the introduction to *One Chord Wonders*, Dave Laing asserts that the term 'punk' 'is used in a way which assumes we know exactly what it was and what it meant.'<sup>1</sup> Further, the canonisation of specific performers and their recorded work has led to its becoming 'one more convenient landmark in the conventional periodization of recent British musical and cultural history.'<sup>2</sup> It is used as such in this thesis: if the period 1976-1978 represents the punk era, then we can consider its past 'pre-punk' and the years that follow 'post-punk'. The term pre-punk is used here to contextualise popular music culture historically. However, post-punk does not only suggest a period of time; the term is also used to describe music that has been influenced by punk. Simon Reynolds' history of this later period, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, deals with the various performers who were categorised under this umbrella between 1978 and 1984.

To define a piece of music or a performer as 'post-punk' is to assume that 'punk' represents a set of aesthetic qualities – whether musical, visual or philosophical – which have formed a basis for further experimentation in any of these areas. As Laing suggests, when 'a disc-jockey or journalist introduces a record or a new band as "punk",' the listener is 'prepared to be shocked, exhilarated, made rebellious or whatever.'<sup>3</sup> Defining aesthetic qualities of punk is problematic: they are too numerous to condense into a single narrative. Punk instead is defined as opposition, by what it 'is not.' As the following chapters will illustrate, the first

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<sup>1</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

performers who came to be regarded as punk were characterised by their opposition to the musical mainstream. This was exacerbated by the exaggeration of their 'difference,' which manifested itself in ways that were alien to public morality: for Reynolds, 'the sheer monstrous *evil* of punk was a huge part of its appeal.'<sup>4</sup>

An understanding of punk requires an understanding of its historical context. March 1976 marked James Callaghan's succession to leader of the Labour Party, and therefore to Prime Minister, following Harold Wilson's resignation. It was a testing economic time for the country,<sup>5</sup> and as such 'public discourse in Britain was subject in the mid-1970s to periodic outbursts of "crisis" or "doom" rhetoric.'<sup>6</sup> The punks dealt with crisis not just in their songwriting, but with their attitude and appearance. For Dick Hebdige,

they were *dramatizing* what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth.... In the gloomy, apocalyptic ambience of the late 1970s...it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as 'degenerates'; as signs of the highly publicized decay which perfectly represented the atrophied condition of Great Britain.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context that punk can be thought to offer potential for political discourse and protest. This potential lay in the way in which it offered an identity to young people whose lives and desires were affected by this rhetoric. However, punk did not come to dominate entirely the progression of popular culture. While for those who were engaged with it, the punk scene came to be regarded as a 'year zero'

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. xiii.

<sup>5</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century* (London: Abacus, 1995); Graham Stewart, *Bang! A History Of Britain In The 1980s* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013); Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 87. As written.

concept<sup>8</sup> – a resetting of the cultural landscape – in a wider sense, rather than revolutionising the sphere of popular music, it provided an alternative path for producers and consumers of popular music. While punk undoubtedly impacted on attitudes and operations, the pre-punk values of mainstream rock and pop culture were little different in the post-punk era: the music industries still operated with capitalist ideologies. Ultimately this can be attributed to punk's fragility: as Laing summarises, 'statements from "inside" punk rock...clearly do not compose some pure discourse of punk rock, markedly separate from other commentaries on punk rock. There are overlaps and echoes between pro- and anti-punk statements, as well as places where the arguments remain separate.'<sup>9</sup> The difficulty encountered in attempting a definitive interpretation of punk stems from the differences in opinion between those who supposedly defined it.

For those musicians of the post-punk era who desired to use the various aspects of their performances to engage in political discourse and protest, punk was an important factor in the development of their musical identities. As such, it is important here to establish the political issues of punk's various aspects – much of which took place within a framework of authenticity. While punk has been considered a 'year zero,' it did not occur in isolation. Punk drew much of its music and presentation from the London 'pub rock' scene of the mid-Seventies. Where the first of the following chapters will analyse this influence, chapter 4 will examine – with reference to key texts on the meaning of punk – the ways in which producers and consumers of punk rock, and those who engaged with it as a subculture, were able to use it to assert a political identity, and attempt to demonstrate the various signifiers of 'punkness.' Finally, before showing through case studies how punk influenced 'political' performers in the post-punk era in the next section of the thesis,

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<sup>8</sup> See Ian Glasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red Books, 2006), p. 8; Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History Of Protest Songs* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 513.

<sup>9</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 104.

chapter 6 will examine pertinent issues in the proliferation of independent record labels which played a role in the dissemination of their recordings. While key historical and theoretical texts on punk exist and are referenced here, what follows also utilises evidence of the popular discourse of the time in the form of the established music press (specifically the *New Musical Express*) and the homemade, photocopied 'fanzines' which came to be emblematic of the era.

## Chapter Three

### Pre-Punk

The 1960s were an extremely important decade in defining popular music as we understand it today. To take the Beatles' prolific recording career as a model of a wider musical progression demonstrates how quickly styles developed and diverged during a relatively short period of time, with only five years separating the conservative rock 'n' roll of their first UK number one, 1963's 'From Me to You', and the screaming proto-heavy metal of 'Helter Skelter' on their eclectic double album *The Beatles* (1968).<sup>1</sup> The extraordinary musical experimentation that took place during these much mythologized years established the modes of recording, performance and appreciation that form the cultural orthodoxy of popular music.<sup>2</sup> As such, some of the decade's most popular performers and composers – the Beatles' John Lennon and Paul McCartney, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton – have enjoyed a lasting influence in the popular music canon.<sup>3</sup> Within the contemporary pop landscape there is still great interest in the release of a new album by McCartney<sup>4</sup> and the touring schedule of the Rolling Stones.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the progression of the Beatles' songwriting see Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edn. (London: Vintage, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Faulk, *British Rock Modernism*; Frith, *Sound Effects*; Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*; Ian MacDonald, *The People's Music* (London: Pimlico, 2003); Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*; Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> This selection is notably all male.

<sup>4</sup> McCartney's 2013 album *New* was well received by much of the mainstream press. See Helen Brown, 'Paul McCartney, *New*, review', *The Telegraph*, 10 October 2013 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/cdreviews/10364773/Paul-McCartney-New-review.html>> [accessed 10 October 2013]; Alexis Petridis, 'Paul McCartney: *New* – review', *The Guardian*, 10 October 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/10/paul-mccartney-new-review>> [accessed 30 October 2013]; Barry Nicolson, 'NME Album Reviews – Paul McCartney – "New"', *nme.com*, 14 October 2013 <<http://www.nme.com/reviews/paul-mccartney/14852>> [accessed 30 October 2013].

<sup>5</sup> 2013 saw the Rolling Stones make their debut performance at the Glastonbury Festival – a yardstick of contemporary popular taste. Their performance perhaps went some way in 'proving' that the desire expressed by some sections of the punk milieu of the late-1970s to strip popular music performance of its extravagance went unfulfilled: Jagger underwent 'several outfit changes', while the stage show saw 'an enormous bird which looked like a cross between a pelican and a phoenix [appear] on top of the stage and mechanically [flap]

Given the popular music press' obsession with 'the new' – of which only a handful of acts will sustain the capital gains of the music industries – this can seem contradictory. At the time of writing nostalgia is a key cultural trend, with many bands reforming to play sold-out shows to their original fans and those too young to have seen them first time around – sometimes in arenas with much larger capacities than those used during their original incarnations<sup>6</sup> This has been maligned by some areas of the press, and indeed musicians themselves: critics see 'past figures' hogging the limelight and pop economy, restricting access for new acts to 'breakthrough.'<sup>7</sup> For the notoriously conservative music industries, however, the guaranteed financial returns of established acts are attractive. As Street theorises, cultural gatekeepers see 'little point in putting much effort into selling a cult artist or a new act, if the same effort could enable an established artist to reach a much larger market.'<sup>8</sup>

### Stadium rock

A similar discourse took place during the mid-1970s, as acts who had found fame in the previous decade, alongside more recently successful acts such as Queen and Genesis, continued to draw large crowds and sell millions of albums worldwide. The huge demand for these acts led to a prominence of stadium performances – the only venues large enough to accommodate the demand for tickets – which became

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its wings before plumes of smoke flew into the sky.' Lucy Jones, 'First Impressions – The Rolling Stones Fulfill [sic] Their Destiny At Glastonbury', *nme.com*, 30 June 2013 <<http://www.nme.com/blogs/festivals-blog/first-impressions-the-rolling-stones-fulfill-their-destiny-at-glastonbury>> [accessed 10 October 2013].

<sup>6</sup> Which, ironically, include some of the punk bands I shall be discussing below: the Sex Pistols reformed for a tour called 'Filthy Lucre' in 1996. Andy Greene, 'Flashback: Sex Pistols Reunite for "Filthy Lucre" Tour in 1996', *Rolling Stone*, 31 January 2013 <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/flashback-sex-pistols-reunite-for-filthy-lucre-tour-in-1996-20130131>> [accessed 19 June 2014].

<sup>7</sup> See 'Paul Weller: "Bands reforming drives me potty"', *NME.com* <<http://www.nme.com/news/paul-weller/65734>> [accessed 19 September 2013]. Notably, these groups continue in 'old industry' models – large scale tours with expensive production values – which are also utilised by 'new' performers. There are performers who take the 'punk' approach today who use alternative strategies – mostly based on DIY ideologies – who quietly sustain careers. The mainstream industries privilege the concept that mass appeal equates with adequate success. (My acknowledgement to Sarah Hill for this point.)

<sup>8</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 96.

increasingly extravagant, and therefore more expensive to stage, in terms of performance and presentation.<sup>9</sup> A perceived disconnect grew between performers and audience. For critics who were sympathetic to the forthcoming pub rock and punk scenes, the point of rock music was that it took place in small venues in which performer and audience shared a space and experience. The size of their preferred bar and pub rooms 'allowed for, even insisted upon, the intimacy between musicians and audience', which they 'believed was somehow essential for meaningful music.'<sup>10</sup> To take performers out of this context and place them on a large and distant stage signified 'inauthenticity': they had "lost touch" with their original audiences.<sup>11</sup> Even the American promoter Bill Graham – whose name is synonymous with stadium tours – claimed his 'desire was never to go to larger and larger facilities':

But it had gotten to the point where the demand was greater than the supply. More and more people wanted to see these acts [...]. Bands began to realise that if they could make as much in one date as they could in three, they wouldn't have to stay out on the road as long. Rock and roll had started in the clubs and the streets and the parks. Then it became a game of supply and demand. As the market price went up, the negotiations got heavier.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A venue use which originated in the USA: see Bill Graham & Robert Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents: My Life Inside Rock and Out* (New York: Delta, 1993) for an account of the San Francisco-based promoter Bill Graham's adventures in organising stadium tours.

<sup>10</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, pp. 353-4. Graham managed the 1974 stadium tour of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young (CSNY), which he suggests 'was the single biggest tour in the history of rock and roll' at that time (ibid., p. 362). CSNY was a group of four singer-songwriters, a performance style whose 'authenticity' relies on the intimate portrayal of the performer's thoughts and feelings. As such, the group's playing in 'baseball stadiums' (ibid., p. 363) calls into question the 'authenticity' of their performances. This interpretation is stated by the group's own Graham Nash, who recalls that the tour 'was a bad experience for us. Financially, we made money. Everyone I talked to that saw those shows loved them. We did play good but there was something missing, you know. We had taken away part of our music. Not musically. But part of the atmosphere and the ambience by not being able to make eye contact with our audience. It particularly pissed David [Crosby] off, who was always wanting to *feel* the audience.' Quoted in ibid., pp. 365-6.

Indeed, where in the 1950s rock 'n' roll began as a representation of teenage rebellion, leading to the oppositional attitudes of the 1960s counterculture, the 1970s saw the rock concert become a mainstream, 'establishment' experience, so much so that the Rolling Stones – whose chief songwriters had been convicted of drug possession offences less than ten years earlier<sup>13</sup> – were 'visited backstage by Princess Margaret' at a concert in Earls Court of 1976.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the excesses of these rich and successful 'superstars' were anathema to the key figures of the forthcoming 'new wave'. In an interview with the *NME* early in the band's career, the Jam's Paul Weller told Steve Clarke that he felt 'the old guard' owed the music business for their success, and as such should not show contempt for their audience through flagrant waste of the riches they had been given:

They've got enough out of the music business so they should put some back. Instead of Keith Moon going round smashing up cars, *use* that money instead of wasting it. That's what really pisses me off. This is the old order and they're all wasting their bread. Paul McCartney brings his cats up on a plane and all this sort of shit.<sup>15</sup>

While to Weller this behaviour proved that they had 'lost touch' with their audiences, a rock star's 'success', according to Street, can be measured by the number of people they have 'to take responsibility for them: personal assistants, managers, maids, hotel staff.'<sup>16</sup> Weller's reaction is symptomatic of the problematic nature of

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<sup>13</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 13. He notes that 'the establishment came to the rescue' of the pair, as the Court of Appeal quashed Richards' conviction and reduced Jagger's sentence to a conditional discharge. For Street this demonstrates that 'for the British establishment, rock musicians were of no great political interest; they were, if anything, minor irritants, albeit ones that continue to inflame the sensibilities of guardians of public morality.' Their original conviction was perhaps supposed to make an example of the pair rather than demonstrate a totalitarian zero tolerance attitude to minor drug offences by the law courts.

<sup>14</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Clarke, 'All change and back to 1964', *New Musical Express*, 7 May 1977, pp. 28-9 (p. 28). As written. It should be noted that of the performers who emerged during the late Seventies, the Jam were the most clearly influenced by the early style of bands such as the Beatles and the Who (see below).

<sup>16</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 139.



wealth in rock culture: Street again states that money is 'a source of embarrassment to radical [punk] populists like Joe Strummer and Paul Weller':

Rock often celebrates a mythical democracy in which rock stars belong to the 'people' and speak for them. The myths matter to rock's belief in the idea of a rock community; they bear little resemblance to reality. While private wealth may in fact make no difference to the music itself, the idea that it does is crucial to how the role of the rock star is constructed.<sup>17</sup>

Stadium rock is characterised as a 'live' phenomenon. However, stadium shows and the excesses of its stars were funded by record sales. Thanks in part to the commercially successful and critically acclaimed work of the Beatles, the studio album ceased to be seen as merely a document of performances of songs; it became accepted as an art form.<sup>18</sup> This ascension was facilitated by advances in studio recording technology. As multi-track recording became more prevalent through the late 1960s and into the early 1970s, it allowed artists to experiment much more in the studio and create sounds and performances which, through the addition of parts beyond the number and abilities of their regular ensembles, were often impossible to replicate live.<sup>19</sup> This progression was a concern for some musicians who viewed the recording process as inauthentic. The Who's Pete Townshend told *Rolling Stone* in 1968 that recordings made using eight-track machines 'cease[d] to become music': the construction of sound recordings piece by piece did not represent a performance since they could be recorded 'in eighths at different locations'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> 'The album is an artform by which any act worth caring about wants to be judged. True artists are out to be lauded alongside their heroes, for achievements that match the greatest in rock'n'roll history.' Editorial, 'The 500 greatest albums of all time', *New Musical Express*, 26 October 2013, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> See Frith, *Sound Effects*; Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*; MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head*.

<sup>20</sup> Jann S. Wenner, 'The Rolling Stone Interview: Peter Townshend', *Rolling Stone*, Issue 17, 14 September 1968, pp. 1, 10-15 (p. 12).

The broadening of techniques at musicians' disposal helped accentuate the quasi-artistic status of popular music, which was already populated by 'bohemian dreams and Romantic fancies' thanks to the art-school education enjoyed by many of its primary figures.<sup>21</sup> While the entertainment provided by early rock groups was ideology-free music and constructed to speak to the emotions and desires of its young audience (as a means to tap into their disposable income), Frith and Horne find that romantic bohemians 'presented themselves as performers and composers "above" normal pop practice and, by the early 1970s, were so successful in selling high seriousness [...] that any contradictions between creative and market forces seemed to be resolved.'<sup>22</sup> While groups such as Pink Floyd built their identity around an 'intellectual' core, which assumed a disavowal of the frivolities of commercial pop, in treating their mass-marketed albums as artistic statements they simultaneously embraced the commerciality of their chosen 'art form'. In pursuing modernist aims through a mass medium, they came to assist the transition to the postmodern era.

The appetite for 'serious' and 'complex' musical ideas during this period, which were largely created with cutting-edge instrumental and recording technologies, meant that 'the generality of musicians in 1976 identified good records with expensive ones'.<sup>23</sup> The recording of a critically and/or commercially successful album 'required' substantial financial backing from a major record company. Concurrently it was expected that live performances would replicate the sound world of recordings. For bands such as Genesis and Pink Floyd, the studio recording was the primary representation of a musical work.<sup>24</sup> Since recordings had previously documented studio performances of songs, there was an expectation that everything heard on a record should be played live. For an 'authentic' live performance of these works, all

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<sup>21</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-4.

<sup>23</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> See Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, p. 37-9.

sounds captured on the record were expected to be heard and, importantly, their creation *witnessed* on stage. However, in the case of 'studio composed' works, songs may not have existed in a 'live' form until after the release of their recording. As bands' musical ideas became grander, so did their live performances, and as such, the costs of putting on concerts, and in turn their gate prices, became more expensive.

### **Pub rock**

It was against this backdrop that London's 'pub rock' scene – historicised as a precursor to punk throughout literature on popular music – took shape. As musicians began to act on a desire for a return to simplicity, a number of groups could be heard playing 'simple R&B on a rapidly growing circuit of pubs'.<sup>25</sup> Savage recalls that their music 'was almost like honky-tonk come to life: it was funky, accessible, performance-led, a deliberate return to the basics',<sup>26</sup> and further, that the success of Dr Feelgood – the Southend-based 'stars' of pub rock whose 'menacing mesh' of sound was 'downright threatening'<sup>27</sup> – 'opened up the pub circuit' to harder edged musicians who would become members of the punk elite, such as the Stranglers and the 101ers (who were fronted by future Clash frontman Joe Strummer.)<sup>28</sup> Burchill and Parsons, who locate pub rock as a specifically live genre, contextualise it as a 'reaction against the giant stadiums at which the opulent rock aristocracy occasionally deigned to play'.<sup>29</sup> They also note that many of its performers failed to transcend the scene as enthusiasm for punk took hold of the capital, attributing their demise to an 'inability to capture the live gig excitement on

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<sup>25</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124. The 101'ers were fronted by Joe Strummer, who would eventually leave the group to form the Clash (see below.)

<sup>29</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 26.

cold, hard, vinylised [sic] plastic'.<sup>30</sup> They propose that rather than providing direction for the music and attitude of punk, the primary impact of the scene was its establishment of a network of venues that provided cheap performance spaces.

Despite the lack of transference of groups from the live to recording industries,

the venues created by the aural movement remained and grass-roots rock combos had a ready made gig-circuit training ground in London for their lean years of apprenticeship. It was no longer uncool for a band to climb on stage without a P.A. system the size of a Lassky's warehouse.<sup>31</sup>

Pub rock was classified as entertainment – music for dancing – where punk has come to be defined as a broad cultural phenomenon. However some pub rock bands, specifically Eddie and the Hot Rods, found themselves 'being classed by commentators [...] as part of punk, not pub, rock' as a result of their intense stage presence.<sup>32</sup> Despite many contrasts – chiefly punk's sometimes flamboyant experimentation with visual and audio aesthetics – pub rock and punk were sometimes linked by 'a shared concern to return music to a basic simplicity,' which primarily lay in pub rock's 'opening up of a *space* for both performing and recording which lay outside the constraints of the mainstream music industry.'<sup>33</sup> As Middleton

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Nonetheless, independent 'pub rock' record labels such as Stiff and Chiswick released records by bands who performed on this circuit; some of whom – chiefly Elvis Costello and Ian Dury – went on to have successful careers in the music industries.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. This circuit still exists in London and throughout the UK, colloquially referred to as 'the toilet circuit'. London venues in particular trade on their place in the history of popular music: the Dublin Castle in Camden Town, for example, features an array of Madness memorabilia on its walls. In 'Going down the pub!' (1997), Andrew Bennett examines the importance of the audience to the continued existence of the pub rock scene. While the 'toilet circuit' is viewed as a training ground for musicians with professional aspirations, Bennett examines the pub-as-venue as an end in itself: a site for a specific type of local event. Andrew Bennett, "Going down the pub!": The pub rock scene as a resource for the consumption of popular music', *Popular Music*, 16/1 (1997), pp. 97-108.

<sup>32</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 8. Eddie and the Hot Rods perhaps fall within Burchill and Parsons' category of pub rock bands who struggled with the recorded form. Mark Perry, creator of the influential fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*, stated that they were 'perfect' live but found their debut album, *Teenage Depression*, to be 'a poor imitation of the real-live-thing'. Mark P., 'Eddie + the Hot Rods' Album.', *Sniffin' Glue*, 5, November 1976, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 9.

shows in his summary of Lennon's 'search for the "real me"', 'simplicity' is a key starting point in the formulation of 'authentic' popular music.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that the capital's drinking houses were the only spaces to be utilised by the early punk bands. The Sex Pistols' first performance took place at a St Martin's College dance; the key members of Manchester's Buzzcocks debuted at the Bolton Institute for Technology; and Rock Against Racism's first event took place at the Royal College of Art in 1976.<sup>35</sup> Frith and Horne emphasise that the atmosphere of Britain's art schools not only helped establish the genre's aesthetics, but also provided bands with experimentally-minded audiences in their bars and halls. This meant that 'art schools were the settings in which the rules of punk performance were first worked out' since 'any sort of performance could be justified according to some art theory (there was always *somebody* in the audience who could apply it).'<sup>36</sup>

However, just as it is problematic to understand punk singularly as a 'street' movement for Britain's working class youth, to assert that the grounding of punk's spectacle took place in the art schools alone qualifies only a specific branch of the movement as 'punk'. While Frith and Horne's assessment that 'punk as a youth subculture' – which went on to become more closely associated with working class frustration – 'has a different history than punk as pop style' is accurate,<sup>37</sup> the two strands were more closely related than they credit. They emphasise in their text that the proliferation of working class students in art schools went some way in defining the establishments' experimental character.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, even if punk had been

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<sup>34</sup> Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, pp. 200-3

<sup>35</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 127. See chapters 7 and 8 for discussions of Rock Against Racism.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>38</sup> The mid-1950s to mid-1960s was a period 'when art schools operated most liberally to provide further educational opportunities to working- and middle-class school leavers who had neither academic nor occupational qualifications but whose "awkwardness" seemed to have some sort of creative potential'. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

formed primarily through the art schools, working class experience would have been an implicit informant. While Frith and Horne inevitably focus on the 'punk-as-art movement' rather than a 'punk-as-pub-rock movement' in their assessment of the influence of the art schools on British popular music (despite an admittance that the two 'movements' were 'always intertwined'),<sup>39</sup> the influence of the aesthetics of pub rock and the spectacle of the extravagant genres the pub scene reacted against – themselves informed by the art school experience – can be viewed within punk in equal measures.

But while punk groups who utilised the 'foundations' established by pub rock generally abhorred the musical and visual exuberance of 'art rock,' the ideologies applied by some to their early performances – drawn from their art school environment – represented a common approach.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Frith and Horne's emphasis on the importance of art school audiences to the development of punk suggests that they played a role in the formation of punk aesthetics. Art schools

provided stages and audiences for first, faltering performances, and while reception may have been 'thin', college audiences have always put less value on 'professionalism', been more open to experiment and surprise than any other group of rock and pop fans.<sup>41</sup>

While the back rooms of pubs perhaps provided space for 'formal' performances, art schools were more receptive of experimental failure. The most successful pub rock bands were formed by experienced and sometimes virtuosic musicians, who were expected to provide more professionalised entertainment. A live review of Eddie and the Hot Rods from *Sniffin' Glue* illuminates this point:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>40</sup> 'A rock generation after Pink Floyd, the Sex Pistols' first gig was an art school dance too; here was the only audience that would appreciate the aesthetics of incompetence, would dance or jeer with glee at the inversion of style.' Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

The Rods reflect their fans' lifestyles. I dunno, most of the Pistols and Clash fans seem to be on the dole or at art college. They like dressing up, looking bored and posing. I doubt if many of the kids who go to see the Rods are out of work. You kind of expect them to be still at school or brickies, labourers, something like that. They come home after a hard days [sic] work and go out to see a group like the Hot Rods to just enjoy themselves and nothing else.<sup>42</sup>

Such assumptions of pub rock could explain the common interpretation of punk as a working class subculture. Indeed, Laing explains that the 'jeans and T-shirt' uniform of pub rock should be understood as "working man" gear', a 'reaction against superstar dressing up' which was present in glam rock.<sup>43</sup> For pub rock bands, and pub-to-punk bands such as the Stranglers and the Clash who followed the same sartorial line, there was no distinction between stage and 'real-life' appearance. They were performing 'themselves' onstage, and as a result their songs could be interpreted as authentic manifestations of their personal beliefs. Meanwhile, bands such as the Damned dressed in a variety of fancy dress horror costumes, continuing a lineage of fantastical stage performance previously seen in glam rock. However, the Stranglers – while styling themselves in an everyday fashion – were still able to draw controversy through their presentation. In February 1977 the *NME* reported that a Stranglers gig at the Rainbow had been cancelled 'because one of them wore an "obscene" t-shirt' featuring an adaptation of the famous Ford Motor Company logo: rather than displaying the word 'Ford', it instead stated 'Fuck'.<sup>44</sup> It is this kind of

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<sup>42</sup> Steve Mick, 'The Hot Rods Hit Woolwich', *Sniffin' Glue*, 5, November 1976. *Sniffin' Glue*, one of the original punk fanzines, serves to demonstrate how punk has been canonised and assimilated into popular music history through its issues being collected into a single volume, complete with a foreword from its creator. Mark Perry, *Sniffin' Glue and Other Rock 'n' Roll Habits* (London: Omnibus, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 91.

<sup>44</sup> Chris Salewicz, 'The t-shirt that stopped a gig', *New Musical Express*, 5 February 1977, p. 3. Salewicz identifies this as evidence that 'the GLC is operating a punk rock "blacklist"'. Allegations such as this were made frequently in the moral panic that followed the Sex Pistols' controversial TV interview with Bill Grundy.

oppositional attitude, found in the smallest of signifiers, which led to punk's distinction from the pub rock scene.



## Chapter Four

### Punk

Widely read semiological analyses of the formation, appreciation and ultimate 'destruction' of punk emphasise that its 'meaning' came from its intentional opposition to mainstream culture.<sup>1</sup> Hebdige places punk, as a subculture, within a lineage of youth groups which indirectly 'challenge hegemony' by expressing opposition 'obliquely, in style.'<sup>2</sup> Laing, meanwhile, sites its musical component as the main focus of punk's oppositional potential, since, in contrast with previous subcultures, it 'began as music and punks themselves began as music fans and performers. In every other case, the youth subculture adopted an already existing type of music.'<sup>3</sup> Despite this difference in interpretation and approach, both Hebdige and Laing (and, to a certain extent, Frith and Horne) provide analyses which emphasise the importance of defining punk *in opposition* to the culture which surrounded it.

#### Opposition as definition

This opposition was multifaceted. For instance, punk rock grew from an opposition to the accepted orthodoxy of performance staging in mid-Seventies Britain.

According to Laing, punk performances attempted to

first abolish the distance, and then the difference, between performer and audience, the activity of one and the passivity of the other. Punk was formed in opposition to rock music which ranged the superstars with their banks of

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<sup>1</sup> See the key texts in this discussion: Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*; Hebdige, *Subculture*; Laing, *One Chord Wonders*. See also Frith, *Sound Effects and Performing Rites*.

<sup>2</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 17. Subcultures define themselves against a 'ruling class' through style. Semiotics allow us to identify ideologies in objects which react against a hegemonic order. Since much 1980s music can be defined as 'post-punk,' this reading of the seemingly superficial has particular relevance to artists' positive and negative reactions to the ways in which Thatcherism altered British society.

<sup>3</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. xi.

technology on stage against the audience with nothing but expensively acquired ticket stubs.<sup>4</sup>

In attempting to minimise the distance between performer and spectator – if not ending their division entirely – punk groups restated the problematic issue of commodification by creating spaces wherein they and their ‘audience’ would participate equally in the creation of a ‘moment’ rather than performing a ‘product’ to be consumed.<sup>5</sup> For Frith and Horne, this is evidence that punk ‘was the ultimate art school music movement’ as it simultaneously ‘tried to keep in play bohemian ideals of authenticity *and* Pop art ideals of artifice.’<sup>6</sup> The elevation of the rock album to a status of art form by the stadium rock generation changed the debate on authenticity in popular music, as performers accepted the commodification of their work and focussed on its musical and conceptual ‘importance’ as the centre of its political challenge.

However, as much as it opposed the grandeur of progressive rock’s approach, punk kept the notion of music’s role in addressing political issues in play, largely centring around the lyrical treatment of social issues. Whether it was the Sex Pistols dealing crudely and almost puritanically with the issue of abortion in the song ‘Bodies’, or the Clash bemoaning the lack of white working class physical oppositionality in ‘White Riot’, punk songs, while not always explicitly aiming to affect social consciousness – ‘Bodies’ seems to revel more in the shock of the song’s subject matter and unrepentant use of the word ‘fuck’ – used these issues as centres for their opposition.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> This is the site at which many attribute punk’s approach to Situationism: ‘The ideologues of punk, Malcolm McLaren and his friends, drew on what they had learnt about the French situationists. The situationists used the symbols and artefacts of everyday life to subvert that life and to expose its rules by disrupting the organisations which maintained them.’ Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 124.

Where this treatment of 'real life' appealed to authenticity, punks also revelled in the 'artificiality' of their presentation, whether in their preference for stage names (Johnny Rotten, Poly Styrene, Joe Strummer – itself a subversion of the 'glamorous' stage names pervading popular music history); an obsession with shock and rebellion; or by challenging modes of dress and styling. The images and sounds conjured by groups created a site of opposition by being 'artificial' within the context of accepted mainstream behaviour. However, for Frith and Horne, the movement failed in its attempt to balance authenticity and artifice, marking 'the death of rock Romanticism and the rise, instead, of the "New Romantics"'.<sup>7</sup> This 'failure...ushered popular music into postmodernism', reflected in the kaleidoscopic divergence of post-punk creativity (see below).<sup>8</sup>

Laing proposes a similar basis for punk's 'decline', stating that as it 'aimed to *undermine* the structure of [popular music] discourse' it consequentially and intentionally 'set up an alternative discourse, with its own conventions and routines'.<sup>9</sup> While the latter was a manifestation of attempts at the former, for Laing 'the story of the "decline" of punk rock is, at one level, the story of [the] separation' of those who wished to continue to challenge the dominant discourse and those who were happy as part of an alternative.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in opposition to the mainstream, punk's 'alternative discourse' was so popular with a huge section of disillusioned popular music culture followers that it inevitably *became* mainstream itself. As the movement was assimilated, its members either stuck by its 'alternative' routines to become part of a frozen subculture, or diversified their approaches to music and fashion to form the post-punk milieu:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

By 1981 the performances of bands such as The Exploited had all the atmosphere of ritual, including lyrics which had now become self-referential: songs about punk itself...the music of the 1980s that claimed to be 'real punk' was a shrunken version, songs for the (self-) chosen few, the remaining genuine punks.<sup>11</sup>

The 'alternative discourse' identified by Laing is key to the development of punk's 'meaning' as an oppositional movement. For instance, since naming in general 'set[s] up expectations of the music which is to come, through what the name positively connotes but also through what it appears to exclude', the names of bands and individuals acted as a frontline in the staging of opposition.<sup>12</sup> Laing determines that, while some punk bands adopted names with multiple meanings and references to cultural and historical incidents and figures,

The vast bulk of punk band names...came from the simpler process of inversion. Consistent with punk's own roots in 'rotten' and 'worthless', groups looked for qualities, objects and activities that established media discourse...could be relied on to find despicable or disgusting. These qualities, objects and activities were adopted as names.<sup>13</sup>

In choosing a name which would appeal to punks, groups and individuals revelled in the fact that it would simultaneously repel conventional mainstream attitudes. This demonstrated an understanding that they had a voice in the discourses of both punk and established pop culture. Laing qualifies this by suggesting that the acceptance and discussion of punk performers such as Johnny 'Rotten' and Sid 'Vicious' on the same terms as Elvis 'Presley' and John 'Lennon' would provide 'some satisfaction for devotees of punk, and a sense that such an event represented in some way a subversion or humiliation of the mainstream discourse of disc-jockey and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

journalist.<sup>14</sup> The meaning of names within punk was in part derived from the negative reception given by those outside of its alternative discourse.

Further, punk's qualitative emphasis on sickness and 'dirt' – in its naming (for example, the Damned's drummer Rat Scabies) and appreciative rhetoric – is taken by Laing as a further example of its opposition to cultural norms. The impact this had on its meaning worked on a variety of levels. Chiefly it led those members of the public who were to be excluded from the milieu to further oppose them, but it also played a role in the building of assumptions that punk was an expression of the working class, since 'contact with dirt signified the genuineness and dignity of the common people.'<sup>15</sup> The ripped and reformed clothing worn by bands and their fans immediately signified poverty – a need to 'make do and mend'.<sup>16</sup> However, Hebdige warns that 'despite its proletarian accents, punk's rhetoric was steeped in irony.'<sup>17</sup> Punks consciously decided to portray themselves in this way, rather than unconsciously performing an inherited working class identity. Indeed, the theatricality of the subcultural fashion on display meant that it was impossible to read 'truth' in anybody's dress:

Though punk rituals, accents and objects were deliberately used to signify working-classness, the exact origins of individual punks were disguised or symbolically disfigured by the make-up, masks and aliases which seem to have been used, like Breton's art, as ploys 'to escape the principle of identity'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> See Hebdige, *Subculture*, p.115: 'we can say that the early punk ensembles gestured towards the signified's "modernity" and "working-classness". The safety pins and bin liners signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced and exaggerated or sympathetically assumed, and which in turn was made to stand for the spiritual paucity of everyday life.'

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

For Hebdige, punk's ironic use of icons makes it problematic for semioticians to read. He proposes that if one were to say that 'poverty was being parodied' in punk dress, 'the wit was undeniably barbed; that beneath the clownish make-up there lurked the unaccepted and disfigured face of capitalism; that beyond the horror circus antics a divided and unequal society was being eloquently condemned.'<sup>19</sup> However this line of enquiry can lead to problematic readings, for punks' oppositionality is too multifaceted to explain as an expression of working class frustration alone:

[If] we were to go further still and describe punk music as the 'sound of the Westway', or the pogo as the 'high-rise leap', or to talk of bondage as reflecting the narrow options of working-class youth, we would be treading on less certain ground. Such readings are both too literal and too conjectural. They are extrapolations from the subculture's own prodigious rhetoric, and rhetoric is not self-explanatory: it may say what it means but it does not necessarily 'mean' what it 'says'.<sup>20</sup>

Frith and Horne argue that the accentuation of working class roots as a means to increase one's cultural capital was usual within the art schools, relating how 'Lennon and [Keith] Richards alike...played up their supposed working classness, dressing up as teddy boys...using rock 'n' roll as a sign of their contemptuous vulgarity' to portray themselves in opposition to the 'sloppy bohemian pose' of their fellow students.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Laing's analysis of the social backgrounds of 49 punk rock band members finds that while

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 81. The current presentation of Alex Turner – frontman of the Sheffield born but now LA-based rock group Arctic Monkeys – could be interpreted in this way. Styled like a 1950s teddy boy, Turner accepted the 'Best Album' award at the 2014 BRIT Awards with a speech in which he declared 'that rock 'n' roll, it seems like its faded away sometimes but it will never die.' 'Alex Turner: "Brits speech was for people in the room

most punk rock performers had working class backgrounds, that majority is not overwhelming enough to justify the claim that punk is fundamentally proletarian. Beyond that lies the effect of other influences on the class position of the musicians concerned. Two factors are important here: the role of further (post-school) education and the unusual position in the class structure of professional musicians themselves.<sup>22</sup>

As such, the musician who desires stardom must use their class background as a means to authenticate their position within a scene: a situation which recurred throughout the post-punk era and is indeed still relevant in contemporary pop music culture.<sup>23</sup> However, identification with a working class identity can manifest itself in a variety of ways. As the review of the Eddie and the Hot Rods' gig above shows, being 'punk' was not the only means of identification available to working class youth during this period. While Steve Mick's analysis of their audience is not statistically rigorous, he assumes that the mainstream working class used music as a means to relieve themselves of the day's pressures; an assumption which draws, if unconsciously, from the mass society theoretical approach to popular music which posits that 'the consumption of music as a leisure time activity' is 'a mere corollary to the work process through which the labourer is renewed and prepared for the next day's work'.<sup>24</sup> Laing posits that this intercontextuality of use is little discussed because the debate on meaning in popular music has been set in terms of a hierarchy of authenticity:

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who've never heard the term rock 'n' roll", *NME.com* <<http://www.nme.com/news/arctic-monkeys/75872>> [accessed 19 June 2014]

<sup>22</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> For the most mainstream contemporary usage, see ITV's successful and long-running show *The X Factor*, in which interviews with contestants are characterised by regular uses of regionalism as a means to emphasise their 'normality.' Where stars are international characters – homeless, if you will – those with dreams of stardom have to 'transcend' their hometown.

<sup>24</sup> Edgar, 'Popular Music', p. 248.

Since mods, teds, skinheads and now punks had some kind of access to a *truth* of working-class existence...those who could not see that truth remained in thrall to the false consciousness of a 'mass' youth culture. This is certainly how subculture members themselves felt at times: true punks made their own outfits, the 'posers' merely bought theirs.<sup>25</sup>

As such, those who 'bought' their punk uniform from shops such as McLaren and Westwood's emporium SEX were not buying authentic 'working class fashion.' According to Hebdige, by opposing the mainstream 'parent culture', punks 'positioned' themselves 'beyond the comprehension of the average (wo)man in the street in a science fiction future. They played up their Otherness, "happening" on the world as aliens, inscrutables.'<sup>26</sup> In this reading, the appreciation of the movement within a context of class and authenticity becomes problematic. Indeed, McLaren and Westwood, who are considered by Frith and Horne to be the authors of punk style, had no real interest in 'street culture', but delighted in exploring 'the *interplay* of producer and consumer in the making of a "look", the way in which people both follow fashion and (mis)appropriate it'.<sup>27</sup> It was 'media moralists' who established the portrayal of punk as 'dole-queue rock', and understandably so:

The subcultural analysis was irresistible – punk fitted the bill of authentic working-class angst, a welcome return to rock 'n' roll's roots after the confusing interlude of art rock and counter-culture, an obvious 'solution' to unemployment, the death of the teenager and the loss of youth's consuming power.<sup>28</sup>

Since cultural discourse in the mid-Seventies gravitated around the country's financial troubles, the understanding of punk in the context of class was inevitable.

<sup>25</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 124. As written.

<sup>26</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>27</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 138. As written.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



The Sex Pistols' first appearances on in the music press saw them portrayed in terms of their opposition to and difference from the excesses of the 'old guard'. In an early live review, Charles Shaar Murray asserts that the band had 'more *real* [sic] than any new British act' of the time, and that 'even if they get big and famous and rich I really can't imagine Johnny Rotten showing up at parties with Rod'n'Britt 'n' Mick'n'Bianca or buying the next-door villa to Keef'n'Anita in the South of France.'<sup>29</sup>

This is not to say that the advent of punk rock represented a consistent desire amongst its performers to remain 'authentically poor' and avoid the success enjoyed by their forebears. For Burchill and Parsons, the 'artistic pretension' of the self-portrayals of poverty in punk 'became self-parody as working-class heroes became cocaine-class tax exiles.'<sup>30</sup> Despite its apparent exultations against the greed of rock's stars, 'the new wave's only revolutionary reform was that now *anyone* could become a tax-exile.'<sup>31</sup> Indeed, once the 'punk revolution' was in full swing, Genesis frontman Phil Collins, in a defence of his tax-exile status, told the *NME*'s Steve Clarke of his belief that everybody who is involved in making music is 'doing it to be as successful as possible, and we all know what that means. It means you have to think about whether you spend this year in the country or whether you don't.'<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren is largely taken as a demonstration of the lack of solidarity towards proletarian 'authenticity' to which Burchill and Parsons refer. Regarding his late-1960s art school education, Frith and Horne emphasise that McLaren's 'radical reading of the punk look came from an argument about style; and its origins lay in design studios not unemployment

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, 'Rebel Fun Page', *New Musical Express*, 11 September 1976, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Clarke, 'Oh to be a tax exile, now that April's here...', *New Musical Express*, 16 April 1977, pp. 7-8.

lines.<sup>33</sup> For McLaren, punk and its aftermath represented a financial opportunity.

Reynolds states that he 'despised the independent labels, like Rough Trade', seeing them 'as a new crypto-hippy aristocracy' while major labels, such as EMI

seemed more trustworthy precisely because they had no counter-cultural pretensions. Conglomerates like EMI also had the gigantic machinery of marketing and distribution to make pop sensations happen on a massive global level. By comparison, the indie labels resembled small merchants – mere 'grocers', as McLaren put it witheringly.<sup>34</sup>

What this all serves to demonstrate is that, while portrayals and readings of punk's meaning are fraught with contradictions and difficulties, to engage with what Laing terms its 'alternative discourse' required a belief in specific ideologies and tastes, and those who formed the discourse – such as *Sniffin' Glue* founder Mark P – were 'to be a certain kind of *listener* (one who could make the link between Frank Zappa and the Ramones).<sup>35</sup> The establishment of the punk movement did not occur in isolation; it was not a total break from the past in terms of its performers' music or its listeners' taste. Identification with punk 'implied allegiance to an overall style or even subculture within which music would eventually become only one sort of badge to indicate belonging.'<sup>36</sup>

However, this 'badge' was an important factor in defining the character of the subcultural milieu. As such, punk was as much about the exclusion of undesirables

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<sup>33</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 138. They deduce that it was in art college that McLaren 'first realized the significance of fashion and style as a blank cultural canvas on which political ideas could be stencilled'. (p. 60)

<sup>34</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 310. Here McLaren mischievously contextualises small label owners as entrepreneurs in the same tradition as Thatcher: the grocer's daughter. Nonetheless, the Pistols', and ergo McLaren's, influence on independent labels were writ large, not only in terms of music but also approaches to visual presentation, challenges to industry expectations and, in turn, signification. For McLaren and his broad cast of collaborators (including Westwood and designer Jamie Reid), 'pop, defined as a collision between music, fashion and street action, wasn't just a source of imagery and aesthetic life, as it had been for 1960s artists, but a *medium*.' Frith and Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

from the movement as it was of provision of space for misfits. For example, this excerpt from a review of a Sham 69 performance at venerable punk venue the Roxy recalls frontman Jimmy Pursey's antagonism of a member of the audience who, while seemingly wearing the 'correct' uniform, was deemed to be an 'inauthentic' participant:

'This one's for YOU!' Jimmy Pursey points at a student in the audience who shops in King's Road, runs a fanzine, stinks of middle-class blandness. Pure, undiluted hatred burns in Pursey's eyes; the victim cowers. Like Rotten and Strummer, Pursey can pick on an individual in the crowd and destroy them. 'Song's called Hey, Littel Rich Boy [sic]!<sup>37</sup>

According to Pursey's reading of punk's meaning, the 'Little Rich Boy's presence distorted the atmosphere of the event. In this sense, punk shared an exclusionary characteristic with the stadium rock it opposed. The implication of Pursey's outburst, and Tony Parson's telling of it, was that his music was written for the underprivileged. The rich had their overpriced entertainment within the stadium circuit, and had no place within punk circles. As such, any potential 'stylistic impact' punk could have on the musical mainstream 'was a limited one', since some sections of the music industry (most importantly radio stations) were 'intent on excluding it, and there was a more general social and state harassment involving exceptional media hostility and many acts of censorship and banning.'<sup>38</sup> Much of this hostility came as a result of the Sex Pistols' disastrous/heroic (depending upon one's reading) expletive-laden appearance alongside Bill Grundy on the Thames Television show *Today*, which served to set punk in opposition to mainstream culture from the outset.<sup>39</sup> As such, Laing explains that, contrary to other genres,

<sup>37</sup> Tony Parsons, 'Next week's big thing', *New Musical Express*, 20 August 1977, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, pp. 33-4.

<sup>39</sup> See Laing, *One Chord Wonders* and Savage, *England's Dreaming* for detailed accounts of this interview and its impact.

it was vital that the import of the lyrics, their message, was communicated to the target, because the outrage and shock thus generated (and the awareness of it) was part of the punk discourse itself. Far from keeping back secret or 'repressed potential' meanings from the mainstream listener, punk rock needed to communicate its full message to that listener in order to enjoy the results of such a communication. Punk was not separate from mainstream morality and culture, but symbiotic with it.<sup>40</sup>

The mainstream moral dismissal of punk was perhaps the reason for its 'destruction'. To be able to perform without fear of censorship, 'some musicians were encouraged' by their record companies 'to dissociate themselves from "punk" and re-classify their work as "new wave",' as the mainstream contempt for the movement 'strengthened what earlier were called the "exclusivist" tendencies within it.'<sup>41</sup> Following their appearance on *Tonight*, the Sex Pistols found that their tour in support of debut single 'Anarchy in the UK' was met with sudden opposition from various city councils. Reporting from Derby, where the group refused to audition for council officials as a stipulation for the concert's approval, Julie Burchill found that the group were being castigated as 'fascist' as a means to discredit them. Her response to this came in the form of a question for *NME's* readers:

The Pistols are coming to your town soon; are you going to make sure they're allowed to partake in the fable of free speech of this democratic country or are you going to sink back into stupor for another decade? The fascists are in the council chambers, not on the stage.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> Julie Burchill, 'And after all that, the dear lads tussle with the city fathers', *New Musical Express*, 11 December 1976, p. 6.

This sense of moral purpose was displayed by other councils around the country, and not only for performances by the Pistols. In July 1977, *NME's* Tony Stewart reported that

new wave groups...allege that the GLC [Greater London Council] are misusing their *Code Of Practice For Pop Concerts*, better known as The Safety Code, arbitrarily to black acts. The GLC, it's claimed, are wrongfully acting as guardians of public morality under the guise of public safety authority.<sup>43</sup>

Moral panic with regard to youth subcultures was not new, of course: Hebdige emphasises that 'the classic symptoms of hysteria most commonly associated with the emergence of rock 'n' roll later were present in the outraged reaction with which conservative America greeted the earlier beat and hipster,' who had 'attracted...inevitable controversy' with the 'unprecedented convergence of black and white' in their love of jazz.<sup>44</sup> The opposition demonstrated by followers of punk culture can be applied to any youth subculture.<sup>45</sup> However, what makes punk unique are the ways in which this opposition was performed, through various re-interpretations of musical modes and stylistic signifiers.

### **Punk: Style**

Despite defining his study as an analysis of punk *rock*, Laing nonetheless discusses 'clothes and appearance' as a 'place' where 'the do-it-yourself part of the punk ethos spread productively to the audience.'<sup>46</sup> He acknowledges that the inspiration for punk attire 'undoubtedly came from the early bands,' but describes the development of fashion as an entry point for fans to develop their influence on the

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<sup>43</sup> Tony Stewart, 'Move over, Sid Vicious', *New Musical Express*, 9 July 1977, pp. 10-12 (p. 10)

<sup>44</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 47. See also Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> See Hebdige, *Subculture*.

<sup>46</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 91.

scene. However, it is arguable that since the first wave of punk bands led to a renewal of interest in musical creativity around the country, this was only one such area of creative impact. The 'audience' *became* the 'performers' in two senses: musically, in that participants formed their own musical ensembles, and visually, in that their appearance and behaviour was important in defining punk's meaning. The former is discussed below, while here, mostly with reference to Hebdige, we will see how the latter established punk's cultural 'rules'.

The work of Hebdige, and indeed of his contemporaries from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies,<sup>47</sup> is characterised by the assertion that 'the emergence of [subcultures] has signalled...the breakdown of consensus in the post-war period.'<sup>48</sup> He places punk within a lineage of subcultures which were inherently opposed to their 'parent culture', ranging from the beats and teds, through mods to punks, emphasising their differences while noting that 'punk style contained distorted reflections' of them all.<sup>49</sup> In punk, he determines that 'we can see that...commodities [as symbols] are indeed open to a double inflection: to "illegitimate" as well as "legitimate" uses.'<sup>50</sup> Punk was a 'stylistic' genre, a literal

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<sup>47</sup> The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in 1964, and saw many leading thinkers in British cultural studies pass through before its closure in 2002. Its work under the directorship of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall (1968-1979) was characterised by the interdisciplinary analysis of class, particularly the impact of the mass media, race, education and gender on youth subcultures. See Andrew Edgar, 'Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies', *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts*, p. 28-29; Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (ed.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

<sup>48</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 17. See also John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson & Brian Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class: a theoretical overview', in *Resistance Through Rituals*, pp. 9-74. 'The war period with its cross-class mobilisations, economic planning, political coalitions and enforced egalitarianism provided a base on which the social reforms of the post-war Labour government could be mounted; and both the war and the post-war reforms provided something of a platform for consensus.' (p. 23) Where the political consensus of the post-war period suggested the possibility of the destruction of the barrier of class status, its re-establishment as the state strengthened provided the context in which youth subcultures would come to assert their opposition to the parent culture.

<sup>49</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

'safety-pinning' together of the music and fashion of historical subcultures to create a new whole which barely concealed its loose joints.<sup>51</sup>

Consequently, 'the resulting mix was somewhat unstable.'<sup>52</sup> For instance, while the Fifties Teddy Boy style in Britain 'existed in a kind of vacuum as a stolen form – a focus for an illicit delinquent identity' – the signification of its commodity usage was quite clear: teddy boy style 'came to mean America, a fantasy continent of Westerns and gangsters, luxury, glamour and "automobiles".'<sup>53</sup> Punks, on the other hand, disregarded consistent and coherent readings by deliberately using objects 'illegitimately' with the intention of demonstrating their 'alienation' from the mainstream:

In punk, alienation assumed an almost tangible quality. It could almost be grasped. It gave itself up to the cameras in 'blankness', the removal of expression (see any photograph of any punk group), the refusal to speak and be positioned.<sup>54</sup>

Laing exemplifies this through an analysis of the punk use of the safety pin. Where its 'legitimate' use would be to hold together damaged or oversized clothing, in its punk 'misuse' as facial jewellery it acted as 'a jolt to the conventional idea of facial appearance', lent further gravitas by taking place at 'the first point of reference in making contact': any attempts towards conventional mainstream 'interpersonal relations' were blocked from the outset.<sup>55</sup> Instead of holding together, its usage attempted to further punks' alienation, while simultaneously signifying a similarity of world-view to fellow punks. For Laing, this second point impacts on 'the refusal of meaning so central to Hebdige's claims for the style of punk.'<sup>56</sup> While this

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

commodity usage was intended to mark out difference, it became a part of a uniform which was to 'denote a punk identity'.<sup>57</sup>

For Hebdige, punk's opposition to the mainstream 'parent culture' was magnified by the nostalgia which surrounded the Teddy Boy revival in the early 1970s. While in the 1950s teds, like punks, 'had been almost universally vilified by press and parents alike as symptomatic of Britain's impending decline', the revival of the subculture prior to punk saw it gain 'an air of legitimacy'.<sup>58</sup> Compared with the punks, they were 'a virtual institution' with 'at least a limited acceptability' to 'those working-class adults who, whether original teds or straights, nostalgically inclined towards the 1950s and, possessed of patchy memories, harked back to a more settled and straightforward past.'<sup>59</sup> The teddy boy subculture was drawn 'closer to the parent culture' in its revival, which 'helped to define it against other existing youth cultural options'.<sup>60</sup>

The appeal of the Ted look lay in its reception as an "authentic" working-class backlash to the proletarian posturings of the new wave.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand the 'new wave', or punk, while alluding to working class origins, gained its power from attempts to entirely dissociate itself from the parent culture, and therefore any notions of class. While the Ted revival demonstrated an explicit connection with the past, punk sought to exist entirely in isolation. However, it could only gain meaning from its contextualisation within a cultural spectrum:

The typical members of a working-class youth culture in part contest and in part agree with the dominant definitions of who and what they are, and there is a substantial amount of shared ideological ground not only between them and the adult working-class culture (with its muted tradition of resistance) but

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 124.



also between them and the dominant culture (at least in its more 'democratic', accessible forms).<sup>62</sup>

All subcultures articulate 'some of the *preferred* meanings and interpretations, those favoured by and transmitted through the authorized channels of mass communication.'<sup>63</sup> The prescribed desire of punks to 'hate' and 'be hated' relied on a close association with mainstream adult opinion as a means to define themselves *against* it. However, once punk had become popular enough to be recognised by the mainstream, the various codified elements which constructed its uniform and attitude were no longer able to develop. The stereotypical imagery of punk had become frozen and, since its oppositional signifiers had come to be widely understood, the separation suggested by Laing had begun.<sup>64</sup>

Subcultures require conformity not only to modes of dress, but also tastes, attitudes and behaviour. Since music plays an important role in cultural identity, this freezing included punk's dance styles. Where dancing in popular music history had been largely considered part of a courtship ritual, punk stripped it of any sexual connotations: any such demonstrations 'were generally regarded with contempt and suspicion'.<sup>65</sup> Rather, punks established their own active rituals with which to 'perform' their appreciation for performances, such as the pose (in which audience members would assume a statuesque position), the self-explanatory robot, and the pogo.<sup>66</sup> While these dance styles are immediately different to previous steps, they represent individuality within a *framework*, rather than free expression.

Modes of appreciation also fell within this framework. Laing notes that the expression of 'affection and appreciation' by fans 'through aggression' was

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. As written.

<sup>64</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 129.

<sup>65</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 108.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

commonplace, and inspired by the attitude of the performers themselves,<sup>67</sup> whether implicitly in the intentionally oppositional music performed, or explicitly in the lyrics of songs or vocal interaction. As such, it was in the live arena that performers were most able to demonstrate their playful disdain for their audience – see, for example, Jimmy Pursey's accusatory attitude towards the 'little rich boy' who had the misfortune of being spotted amongst the throng. Audience's responsive aggression manifested itself in many forms,<sup>68</sup> the most notorious of which was the act of spitting. Its power as a mode of reception, like so much of punk's rhetoric, came from a reversal of its original signification: 'archaically', spitting 'was only acceptable as a gesture of contempt – a sign of strong and formalized emotion, usually in a face-to-face situation.'<sup>69</sup> To seemingly demonstrate 'hate' towards a performer was to symbolically signify positive emotions. Further, it gained extra power from the fact that those 'excluded' from involvement in the scene could only understand it on its original terms.

While punk 'signified chaos at every level,' Hebdige argues that such readings were only possible because 'the style itself was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole.'<sup>70</sup> Following the work of Hall et al, which locates the power of subcultures' attraction within their homology,<sup>71</sup> he affirms that the same applied to punk: 'There was a homological relation' between all aspects of its being.<sup>72</sup> However, a variety of influences exerted themselves on punk fashion which, while similarly signifying opposition, were not frozen within the punk 'look'. The Halloween-esque styling of the Damned, for example, pointed to the influence of glam fashion. While the influence of glam rock on punks appears counter to the

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<sup>67</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 84.

<sup>68</sup> 'The playful and ritualistic nature of can-throwing may well have contained and been fuelled by an unconsciousness or barely-articulated resentment.' Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 113.

<sup>71</sup> See Hall et al, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class: a theoretical overview', *Resistance Through Rituals*.

<sup>72</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 114.

genre/subculture's original desires – i.e. a reaction against stadium rock – such influences were employed for their 'shock factor' and as a means to stand out within the milieu.

For instance, Alice Cooper, whose song 'Eighteen' Johnny Rotten performed in his audition for the Sex Pistols,<sup>73</sup> held a 'special importance' to 'the musicians who became the first wave of punk rock performers' which, according to Laing, 'lay in the sense of outrage which pervaded [the punks'] stage appearance and behaviour, and the consequent oppositional position they occupied in relation to the musical establishment.'<sup>74</sup> Rather than representing an individual taste separate from the narrative of punk, Laing contextualises this influence as wide-ranging. Indeed, any 'individualist' tendencies were only to reveal themselves in the post-punk landscape. The 'New Romantics,' for example, sought 'acknowledgement of their *individual* style' rather than conforming to uniformity.<sup>75</sup> For Frith and Horne, McLaren's 'theory of "disruptive" fashion' – which placed emphasis on the 'artistic gesture' of clothing choices whose 'meaning' was derived from its subversion of fashion norms – was to be played out in this period.<sup>76</sup> As such, the meaning of each individual new romantic's clothing ensemble was to be thought of as unique, and whose power was to be drawn from peer reactions.

In contrast to the New Romantics, whose individualist fashion choices would come to define the zeitgeist of post-punk imagery, were the strictly uniformed 'heavy mods', or skinheads who would come to define the character of the audiences of the hyper-proletarian 'Oi' strand of post-punk. Hebdige identifies mods – a subcultural precursor to the punks – as 'more firmly embedded than either the teds or the rockers in a variety of jobs' since their dedication to their subcultural membership

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<sup>73</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>75</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 145.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

required funding: it was 'the pockets of free time which alone made work meaningful. During these leisure periods...there was real "work" to be done'.<sup>77</sup> A 'polarization' eventually grew between mods whose lifestyle revolved around this fashion, and 'hard mods' who, as the Sixties wore on, grew to constitute 'an identifiable subculture. Aggressively proletarian, puritanical and chauvinist, the skinheads dressed down in sharp contrast to their mod antecedents'.<sup>78</sup> As such, their connection with the obsessively working class Oi scene, spearheaded by Sham 69, was understandable.

However, the construction of their 'lumpen' identity contrasted with the racist behaviour of some elements of the subculture. Hebdige notes that skinheads 'drew on two ostensibly incompatible sources: the cultures of the West Indian immigrants and the white working class.'

A somewhat mythically conceived image of the traditional working-class community, with its classic focal concerns, its acute sense of territory, its tough exteriors, its dour 'machismo'...was overlaid with elements taken directly from the West Indian community (and more particularly from the rude boy subculture of the black delinquent young).<sup>79</sup>

Despite its racist associations, skinhead culture benefitted greatly from West Indian influence in terms of musical and stylistic tastes.<sup>80</sup> This arrived, ironically, through a perception of white working class values being 'eroded by time, by relative affluence and by the disruption of the physical environment in which they had been rooted,' values which 'were rediscovered embedded in black West Indian culture.'<sup>81</sup> As such, Hebdige suggests that 'paki-bashing [sic]', which was ashamedly rife in 1970s

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<sup>77</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 53.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6

<sup>80</sup> Hebdige asserts that this 'tends to be played down: confined solely to the influence of reggae music, whereas the skinheads borrowed individual items of dress (the crombie, the crop), argot and style directly from equivalent West Indian groups.' *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Britain, 'can be read as a displacement manoeuvre whereby the fear and anxiety produced by limited identification with one black group was transformed into aggression and directed against another black community.'<sup>82</sup>

The 'punk' identification with reggae, meanwhile, can be read as jealousy of 'legitimate' rebellion and attitude, and, despite being defined as an exclusionary subculture itself, a fascination with the fact that they could never 'authentically' assume aspects of Rastafarian culture.<sup>83</sup> For Hebdige,

Dread, in particular, was an enviable commodity. It was the means with which to menace, and the elaborate freemasonry through which it was sustained and communicated on the street...was awesome and foreboding, suggesting as it did an impregnable solidarity, an asceticism born of suffering.<sup>84</sup>

As such, 'the punk aesthetic can be read in part as a white "translation" of black "ethnicity"',<sup>85</sup> which is exemplified in the Clash song, 'White Riot' (see below.) While reggae culture was fetishized by some punks, it did not manifest itself in their presentation or identity: to be white was to be excluded from black culture as it defined itself *against* its former colonial masters. Using a term from semiotics, Hebdige proposes that 'we could say that punk includes reggae as a "present absence" – a black hole around which punk composes itself.'<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the iconography of reggae offered punks a view of a subculture which, while living alongside themselves in 'a Britain which had no foreseeable future', seemed more attractive as 'black youths could place themselves through reggae "beyond the pale" in an imagined elsewhere (Africa, the West Indies)'.<sup>87</sup> This identification with 'crisis',

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>83</sup> '[I]t was here, in the exclusiveness of Black West Indian style, in the virtual impossibility of authentic white identification, that reggae's attraction for the punks was strongest.' Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

experienced through roots in the city, is where punk and reggae's tenuous links show most strongly.<sup>88</sup>

'The differences between rock and reggae', Hebdige suggests, 'should be sufficiently obvious to render exhaustive documentation unnecessary'.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, aside from groups such as the Clash (see chapter 5) and those on the ska-inflected Two Tone label, reggae's musical influence on punk is audible in only a relative handful of punk and post-punk bands, as evidenced by the minimal discussion of it in Reynolds' history of post-punk, *Rip It Up and Start Again*.<sup>90</sup> Aside from the Pop Group's 'passion for black music'<sup>91</sup> and the Slits' 'subliminal skank',<sup>92</sup> there are few references to an integration of rock and reggae sounds within the book's largely white-focussed subjects. Nonetheless, Two Tone is treated in its own chapter in Reynolds' history, in which he claims that the label's 'defining stylistic motif...the alteration of black and white', combined with 'the mixed-race line-up of the leading 2-Tone bands...probably did more for anti-racism than a thousand Anti-Nazi League speeches.'<sup>93</sup>

It was the significations of the subculture's style and attitude 'which proclaimed unequivocally the alienation felt by many young black Britons', which perhaps drew the attention of white audiences.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, this identification was intensified by the fact that some of the frustrations which led to this sense of alienation were not solely along racial lines. However, the way in which black youths were able to express

<sup>88</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London & New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 96.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 30. He uses a quote from a *New Statesman* review of a Marley concert written by Mark Kidel to specify this point in terms of drug use: jazz and rock 'often reflect an amphetamine frenzy', while reggae 'tunes in to the slowness of ganja'. (Ibid.)

<sup>90</sup> Reynolds details the Two Tone movement in depth, and discusses the Specials' concept of 'punky reggae' (p. 285) and the Beat's 'punk-meets-reggae' (p. 290). *Rip It Up and Start Again*, pp. 281-303. Laing notes that some 'punk musicians [...] incorporated reggae elements into their music [...]. But an equal number of punk bands preferred simply to admire reggae rather than play it.' *One Chord Wonders*, p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>93</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 289.

<sup>94</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 36.

their feelings satisfactorily through a coherent, connotational style intrigued the largely white punks, particularly as it was exclusively available to black youths through its various signifiers of specifically West Indian 'sufferation' and promise of 'deliverance through exodus to "Africa"'.<sup>95</sup> For Hebdige, 'the Rastaman'

is the living refutation of Babylon (contemporary capitalist society), refusing to deny his stolen history. By a perverse and wilful transformation, he turns poverty and exile into 'signs of grandeur', tokens of his own esteem, tickets which will take him home to Africa and Zion when Babylon is overthrown. Most importantly, he traces out his 'roots' in red, green and gold, dissolving the gulf of centuries which separates the West Indian community from its past, and from a positive evaluation of its blackness.<sup>96</sup>

Part of Rastafarianism's strength as a subculture in Britain lay in its collectivist challenge to 'problems of race and class'.<sup>97</sup> Where previous 'rebel archetypes' had mediated 'oppositional values' as a celebration of 'the *individual* status of revolt', reggae 'generalized and theorized' rebellion so that, rather than being 'the lone delinquent pitched hopelessly against an implacable authority' represented by 'the rude boy hero' of ska and rocksteady music, the young British Rastafarians turned 'negritude into a positive sign, a loaded essence, a weapon at once deadly and divinely licensed'.<sup>98</sup> Hebdige establishes, however, that this new British subculture was 'unique' within the history of Rastafarianism. It was

a refracted form of Rastafarian aesthetic, borrowed from the sleeves of imported reggae albums and inflected to suit the needs of second-generation immigrants. This was a Rastafarianism at more than one remove, stripped of nearly all its original religious meanings: a distillation, a highly selective

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-5.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

appropriation of all those elements within Rastafarianism which stressed the importance of resistance and black identity, and which served to position the black man and his 'queen' outside the dominant white ideology.<sup>99</sup>

As such, much like punk uses of symbolism, the signification of objects were changed to suit the needs of this 'unique' group. The impact of this surge of interest in Rastafarian culture in turn led to an increase in popularity of reggae bands in Britain, with bands such as London's Misty in Roots and Aswad, and Steel Pulse from Birmingham becoming the best-known 'authentic' (i.e. all black) reggae bands in the country. However, the most popular British reggae act of this era – if not all time – came to be UB40, another Birmingham-based group whose leader, Ali Campbell, and indeed three quarters of the original line-up, were white. By the mid-1980s, Steel Pulse's frontman David Hinds was critical of the attention the band received, claiming that 'because they're fronted by white members... they've got a lot more popularity and financing than a Steel Pulse or Aswad.'<sup>100</sup> This was an argument posed towards other bands working within a 'black' medium: for Reynolds, 'it's slightly depressing that' Madness, 'the only all-white 2-Tone-associated band was the one that had the biggest long-term success, while The Selecter, all black except for lead guitarist Neol Davies, were the first major 2-Tone band to fade from public view.'<sup>101</sup>

### **Punk: Music**

In terms of providing an overview of what elements constitute the 'punk sound', it should be stated that, while punk's character is defined by its opposition to the recording extravagances of the stadium rock generation, what follows primarily deals with punk on record. This approach is due to the existence of recordings as

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>100</sup> Dan Snowden, 'Steel Pulse', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 1985 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=5054>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>101</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 292.



artefacts of the period; they are presented, as the majority of 'rock' recordings are, as representations of live performances. While the live arena was the primary site for punk's initial appreciation, it is in the recorded form, alongside contemporary accounts of live performance, that those of us studying the period as a moment of the past must find our evidence for the genre's legacy.<sup>102</sup>

Rather than representing a 'ground zero' for pop music in Britain (even if its attitudes to culture differed with the understandings of the past), the music of punk can be easily contextualised within a 'tradition', both in terms of recorded work and styles of performance. For Laing, there was 'a compact and consistent background' of 'heavily rhythmic and richly chorded, guitar based' music from which punk drew influence – citing acts such as the New York Dolls, MC5, Stooges, Small Faces, the Who and Alice Cooper – whose 'assertive vocals' were 'presented...with a white rock intonation, generally eschewing the mannerisms of soul singing.'<sup>103</sup> However, the 'distorted, dirtied and destroyed' sounds of punk 'mangled' the meaning of extant music, challenging its 'unnecessary complexities'.<sup>104</sup> While the simplicity of punk's musical content served as a reaction to the 'progressive' nature of Seventies rock, the 'principle of musical organization' represented by its destructive aesthetics simultaneously 'challenged' the 'characteristics' of 'simplicity, directness, authenticity' it was seen to represent.<sup>105</sup>

As such, the music of punk rock was, and remains – as Street suggests of all popular music – difficult to read definitively.<sup>106</sup> While it immediately seemed to be performed by aggressive and inexperienced musicians with little thought to their craft beyond attempting to be as offensive as possible, Laing reads its fierce irony

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<sup>102</sup> Laing and Savage refer to live performance and recordings in *One Chord Wonders* and *England's Dreaming* respectively.

<sup>103</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 22.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 153.

as an intentional challenge to the meaning of music itself.<sup>107</sup> While this can certainly be read into the work of the Sex Pistols and the more firmly tongue-in-cheek Damned, in the case of bands such as the Clash and their disciples Sham 69, the aggressive simplicity of their music, coupled with their lyrics' earnest focus on political issues, suggested a belief in a new 'truth'. In other words, there is no single reading of the music and sound world of punk. Nonetheless, the generalised view of its musical content is summed up by Laing's definition of the word 'punk' as a signification, in terms of musical performance, of 'an attitude...which emphasized directness and repetition (to use more than three chords was self-indulgence) at the expense of technical virtuosity.'<sup>108</sup> The ways in which this directness was mediated by various performers demonstrates the multitude of approaches utilised, whose selection was not always undertaken through a matter of choice.

For instance, the Sex Pistols' only studio album, *Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols*, has come to be regarded as the archetypal punk record, a status it enjoys primarily as a consequence of the band's legacy rather than an acceptance of it as an 'authentic' representation of the live punk sound. However, the record's polished production disappointed some fans upon its release: for Simon Reynolds, 'Steve Jones's fat guitar sound and Chris Thomas's superb production – thickly layered, glossy, well organized – added up to a disconcertingly orthodox hard rock that gave the lie to the group's reputation for chaos and ineptitude.'<sup>109</sup> While it was assumed by many that the Sex Pistols 'couldn't play' their instruments, critical responses from the period demonstrate this to be inaccurate. Even as early in the Pistols' career as September 1976, when one might have forgiven the band for continuing to 'hone their chops', Charles Shaar Murray wrote that 'any reports that I had heard and that you may have heard about the Pistols being lame and sloppy

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<sup>107</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>109</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 5.

are completely and utterly full of shit. They play loud, clean and tight and they don't mess around'.<sup>110</sup> Further, in a comparison of the Pistols and Sham 69, Tony Parsons referred to 'Sham 69 slash[ing] out a sound akin to the infectious chiv-sharp dynamics of The Sex Pistols before Steve Jones progressed to the heights his playing reached earlier this year',<sup>111</sup> and, in her *NME* review of *Never Mind the Bollocks*, Burchill remarks that 'I don't really know anything about music but the Sex Pistols seem to play as well as anyone I've heard, and I've heard Jimi Hendrix and Pete Townshend records.'<sup>112</sup>

It is perhaps a result of the Pistols' *influence* on popular music, rather than their performances themselves, which gave rise to this reputation. Many fans decided to start up bands in the wake of the 'this is a chord...this is another...this is a third...now form a band' mantra of punk rock culture.<sup>113</sup> A large part of assuming a 'punk' identity was to have one's own band, and since most fans had limited musical experience, many of these bands featured instrumentalists who were still grasping the basics of their tools. This was the first period of popular music history in which a lack of experience was not a barrier to becoming a performer. If anything, it was a quality to be admired, as this analysis from Laing – reasserting Frith and Horne's statement of art schools' influence – illuminates:

If progressive rock saw itself as skilled labour of an artistic type (comparable to a potter or an illustrator), punk saw itself as self-expression where skill or virtuosity carried with it a suspicion of glibness. Too much concern with the

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<sup>110</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, 'Rebel Fun Page', *New Musical Express*, 11 September 1976, p. 41.

<sup>111</sup> Parsons, 'Next week's big thing'. By comparing Sham 69 positively with the Sex Pistols, Parsons insinuated that Sham possessed an 'authentic punkness'.

<sup>112</sup> Julie Burchill, 'Never mind The Sex Pistols – here's The Bollocks', *New Musical Express*, 5 November 1977, p. 31.

<sup>113</sup> 'Play'in in the band...first and last in a series', *Sideburns*, 1, January 1977.

forms of musical expression could lessen the impact of the substance of the thing expressed.<sup>114</sup>

As a result of this, audiences' value judgements also experienced a marked shift: some performances were judged less on their musical competency and more on their chaotic and subversive content. Compared with the well-practised musical abilities of the pub and progressive rock musicians, some punk bands represented a form of amateur apprenticeship which 'democratised' the sphere of performance and shifted the positive focus of popular music reception away from technical ability and towards idealism.

Moreover, the monotonous driving rhythm of much of punk could be credited with contributing to the genre's 'amateur' sound. Laing suggests that the typical bass playing style anchors the genre's 'monadic rhythm...in a continuous and regular series of single notes which contradict the syncopation of the drumming', citing the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious as one of 'the "purest" of punk bass players in that [he] went furthest in the repetition of notes of the same pitch for as long as possible.'<sup>115</sup> While other bass players, such as the Clash's Paul Simonon, 'evolved bass runs or riffs which could shift the rhythmic balance towards the syncopated', the majority of bands – who perhaps helped to define a canonised 'authentic' punk sound – combined repeated bass notes with a heavily distorted and equally repetitively strummed guitar sound which 'provided a feeling of unbroken rhythmic flow, as the patternings of bar or stanza divisions receded into the background.'<sup>116</sup>

Many, including Laing, trace the approach of the British punks to the work of the Ramones, a band Mark Perry described as 'what 1976 punk rock is all about [...]'. They are REAL PUNKS! Their music is fast, simple and instantly likable [sic]. They

<sup>114</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 60. See also Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*.

<sup>115</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 62.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

hav'nt [sic] got much melody but they've got enough drive to make up for it.<sup>117</sup> Not that their influence on the scene was entirely appreciated by all commentators: Burchill and Parsons dismiss them as 'sub-standard Heavy Metal fare cynically souped-up to a speedy buzz-saw drone that (predictably, as the band all wore leather jackets) passed for punk.'<sup>118</sup> Their reasoning here serves to demonstrate the primacy of style in the 'definition' of punk, if not all musical styles: look the part and you will be subsumed into a scene.

Part of punk's reputation for poor musicianship could also be attributed to its vocal styles. Johnny Rotten's was a thin, sneering and vaguely off-key voice; Joe Strummer sang and shouted with urgency and earnestness (it was what he had to say which was important to him, not the way in which he said it); while Dave Vanian of the Damned sang melodies which were largely monotone or mirrored their guitarist Captain Sensible's riffs. These were not virtuoso singers: their vocals were *functional*, rather than the *focus* of songs, serving to convey frustration and give fans something to sing along to. If anything, the 'roughness' of vocal performances heightened the meaning and authenticity of the group. For Laing,

The implicit logic would seem to involve the conviction that by excluding the musicality of singing, the possible contamination of the lyric message by the aesthetic pleasures offered by melody, harmony, pitch and so on, is avoided. Also avoided is any association with the prettiness of the mainstream song, in its forms as well as its contents: [...] punk has few love songs.<sup>119</sup>

But while the 'singers' of the most popular punk groups assaulted ears with their variously abrasive vocals, the rest of the band were often experienced musicians – The Clash, for example, consisted of seasoned pub-circuit musicians – and the

<sup>117</sup> Mark Perry, 'Ramones (Sire-album)', *Sniffin' Glue*, no. 1, p. 3. Perry describes the song 'Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue' as 'our anthem', and quotes the lyrics of the song's chorus in the introduction to the issue.

<sup>118</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 65.

<sup>119</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 54.

catchiness of the period's hits points to some capable songwriters. However, the vibrancy and ephemerality of the movement led to an expectation that records should capture the often rough and ready sound world of the live setting. Reynolds' criticism of *Never Mind the Bollocks*' production can be understood as an expectancy of punk records to sound 'cheap'. The multi-layered, 'buzz saw' guitars which fill out the sound of Chris Thomas' production work on the Sex Pistols' 'Holidays In The Sun' are miles, and pounds, away from the DIY lo-fidelity aesthetic of contemporary recordings such as the Buzzcocks' self-released debut EP *Spiral Scratch*, with its splashy cymbals, bass-heavy mix and cheaply recorded, thin sounding, apparently single-tracked guitar.

The charm and 'punkness' of *Spiral Scratch* lies in its frugality: the band *had* to have their music heard, so they used what little money they had to produce a record. Moreover the band's musical simplicity fed into the punk narrative: the guitar solo to 'Boredom' features two notes – E and B – alternating in a continuous quaver-crotchet rhythm over a cycle of the verse, bridge and chorus. The verse, featuring an E-G-A-F#-B guitar and bass riff, and the short C major to B major chord bridge suit the solo nicely. However, upon reaching the chorus – which inexplicably modulates to B flat major – it quickly becomes very harmonically tense, as it continues over F, E flat and B flat major chords (although the solo does resolve onto B flat.) The apparent laziness of the solo belies a modernist, bi-tonal harmonic structure.

Laing notes that there is 'a noticeable lack of the atmospheric solo in punk rock...which reflects punk's lack of concern with melody.'<sup>120</sup> However a song like 'Boredom' serves to suggest that it is not melody which punk lacks concern for, but rather sentimentality: the F-C-E flat-B flat-C-B flat melodic pattern of the chorus' 'Bore-dom, bore-do-o-om' refrain is one of the catchiest melodies of the punk

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

period, although this is highlighted by the fact that it is bookended by singer Howard Devoto's sung-spoken vocals elsewhere in the song. Rather, while Reynolds reads guitarist Pete Shelley's 'deliberately inane' solo as 'thrillingly tension-inducing in its fixated refusal to go anywhere melodically', he states that it seals 'the conceptual deal' of the song which is 'an exercise in meta-punk: it expressed real ennui...but it also commented on "boredom" as a prescribed subject for punk songs and punk-related media discourse – a topic that was predictable to the point of being, well, a bit *boring*.'<sup>121</sup>

The 'cheapness' expounded by Buzzcocks' first release was also heard in post-punk bands such as Leeds' Gang of Four,<sup>122</sup> a quartet whose selection of equipment came as much from ideological opposition to the sound of rock music as much as from financial concerns: guitarist Andy Gill tells Reynolds that the band were '*against* [the] warmth' of sound which came from the more expensive valve amplifiers.<sup>123</sup> While one of the main tenets of rock music to that point had been to achieve as warm a sound as possible from guitars, Gang of Four specifically used transistor rather than valve amplifiers, preferring the 'more brittle, cleaner...and colder' timbres of cheaper, circuit board driven equipment.<sup>124</sup> This preference informed their entire sound world: Reynolds finds that they 'trained' their Stevie Wonder-obsessed bassist Dave Allen 'to play more sparsely', and maintained a 'stark and severe' sound world through a shunning of 'sound-thickening' guitar effects 'like fuzz and distortion,' eschewing 'splashy cymbals' and, where most rock

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<sup>121</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 16.

<sup>122</sup> Named after the notorious group of radical Chinese politicians, Gang of Four were one of the more 'political' bands of the post-punk period. Reynolds identifies them as products of the left-wing university culture of the Seventies, characterised by student militancy and the popularity of sociology. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

bands demonstrated their technical proficiency through virtuosic guitar solos, performed what Gill terms 'anti-solos, where you stopped playing, just left a hole'.<sup>125</sup>

Gang of Four's approach to music was largely derived from a belief in the importance of their politics: their Marxist and structuralist-rich lyrics have light thrust upon them by the nature of their dry, precisely mediated musical backing.<sup>126</sup> Gang of Four rejected the star system and promoted democratic collectivism: bassist Allen tells Reynolds that they don't 'believe in the power of the individual,' and 'believe that whatever you do is "political" with a small "p"', which extended to the band splitting all royalties four ways.<sup>127</sup> This approach to lyrical forefronting can be heard most clearly on their debut album, *Entertainment!*, which they treated as a 'studio artefact' rather than a representation of their live sound, emphasising its 'construction' with reverb-less aesthetics rather than attempting to portray it as a document of a live performance.<sup>128</sup> Reynolds identifies equality in the instrumental tracks, where 'guitar, bass and drums [exist] on more or less equal footing', citing 'the taut geometrical paroxysm' of second track 'Natural's Not In It' – whose lyrics, dealing with 'the problem of leisure, what to do for pleasure' and the capitalist encouragement to 'dream of the bourgeois life', also mark it as an example of their Marxist rhetoric – as an example of one of their typical songs where 'everything worked as rhythm.'<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> See Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 54-59 for discussion of the role of the voice in punk rock.

<sup>127</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 114.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 114. The band, not for the first time in their career, experienced accusations of 'selling out' in 2011 after 'Natural's Not In It' was used in a TV advertisement for Microsoft's *Xbox Kinect* software. Gill defended their decision to license the song as 'an extension of our ideological integrity. We are interested in exploring the anxiety of consumerism. And we did so not out of scorn for those who fuel the capitalist machine, but to acknowledge our own complicity in it.' Dave Segal, 'Marxist Punk Funk and the Xbox Paradox', *The Stranger*, 10 February 2011 <<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/marxist-punk-funk-and-the-xbox-paradox/Content?oid=6675552>> [accessed 23 October 2013].



Indeed, the concept of treating the studio as a subversively creative tool in the post-punk landscape was not only found in the self-produced work of Gang of Four. Factory Records' in-house producer Martin Hannett 'demanded totally clean and clear "sound separation" not just for individual instruments, but for each element of the drum kit' in his recording of the Manchester band Joy Division.<sup>130</sup> Reynolds identifies this approach, in which, much to the frustration of the band's drummer Stephen Morris, each drum and cymbal was recorded separately to avoid any bleed through of sound, as a reversal of punk's own general subversion of the 'super-slick seventies mega-rock way of doing things' to 'an extreme degree'.<sup>131</sup> The overall effect is a disjointed and cold-sounding record – *Unknown Pleasures* – which 'sounded drained and emaciated' to the band, who would 'rather have had something closer to the full-on assault of their live performances'.<sup>132</sup>

Nonetheless, the 'Marshall Stack'<sup>133</sup> guitar sound was, and arguably still is, the sound of mainstream rock. This is the sound of the stadium rock band, who require

<sup>130</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 184.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Morris complains that 'I'd end up with my legs black and blue 'cos [sic] I'd be tapping on them quietly to do the other bits of the kit that [Hannett] wasn't recording.'

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>133</sup> This term refers to the use, and stacking, of multiple speaker cabinets to increase the potential volume of an amplifier. This technique was pioneered by the Who's guitarist Pete Townshend, an early customer of the company's founder Jim Marshall. The stack has been seen behind rock guitarists ever since, from Jimi Hendrix to Jimmy Page, Metallica to Spinal Tap – the heavy metal 'band' which spoofed many elements of rock culture. Adam Sweeting, 'Jim Marshall obituary', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2012

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/apr/05/jim-marshall>> [accessed 18 April 2012].

The 'Wall of Sound' technique was also pioneered in California by Owsley Stanley – an associate of the Grateful Dead who not only supplied them with homemade LSD, but also supported them financially and went on to engineer their sound (it was he who encouraged the group to record all of their live performances.) Their audio system 'was designed to give the Grateful dead a distortion-free sound and also act as its own on-stage monitoring system. The huge speaker arrays formed a wall on stage behind the band, and could reportedly reach a half-mile from the stage without delay towers or sound degradation.' It was also 'the first sound reinforcement to use large-scale line arrays' – the process of coupling loudspeakers – and due to the high number of components 'took four trailers and 21 crew members to move and erect the 75-ton Wall.' Alan Brandon, 'Pioneering audio engineer Owsley "Bear" Stanley dies at 76', *Gizmag*, 14 March 2011

<<http://www.gizmag.com/owsley-stanley/18124/>> [accessed 28 June 2014]. See also David Browne, 'The Dead Recall the Colourful Life of LSD Pioneer Owsley Stanley', *Rolling Stone*, 30 March 2011 <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-dead-recall-the-colorful-life-of-lsd-pioneer-owsley-stanley-20110330>> [accessed 28 June 2014]. My thanks to Sarah Hill for the suggestion of Stanley's influence on the stadium rock sound.

an array of amplifier cabinets to disseminate their music throughout the vast space of such a performance arena. For headline bands like the Sex Pistols (who notoriously passed through two major labels – EMI and A&M – before releasing their album on the then-independent Virgin Records)<sup>134</sup> this was the production value their money men paid for; the sound a mass audience was accustomed to which was more likely to reap commercial success. It signified that the bands were going to be heard in stadiums only from now on – a signification which was to remain unfulfilled. It is those performers that conformed to familiar rock tropes; those performers who, being easier to understand in the context of a rock history that led to their commercial success, came to be canonised as emblematic of the period. This is not to say that all performers whose roots could be traced back through rock's history were to enjoy this 'success' – see the discussion of the Tom Robinson Band in chapter 8 – however the three bands examined in the following chapter serve to demonstrate that much of what has come to be considered as punk 'orthodoxy' was not necessarily new to late-1970s British musical culture: there was historical context which determined their presentation and reception.

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<sup>134</sup> See Savage, *England's Dreaming* for details of the Sex Pistols' journey through these record labels.

## Chapter Five

### Case Studies: Three 'Punk' Bands

#### Sex Pistols

As I have outlined, the majority of cultural commentators attribute the growth of interest and involvement in punk throughout the UK to the polarising impact of the Sex Pistols, particularly after their expletive-fuelled appearance on Thames Television's *Today* show with Bill Grundy. Even as early in the development of punk as September 1976, *NME*'s Charles Shaar Murray was describing them as a definitive band:

Ultimately, if the whole concept of Punk means anything it means Nasty Kids, and if Punk Rock means anything it means music of, by and for Nasty Kids. So when a group of real live Nasty Kids come along playing Nasty Kids music and actually behaving like Nasty Kids, it is no bleeding good at all for those who have been loudly thirsting for someone to come along and blow all them old farts away to throw up their hands in prissy-ass horror and exclaim in duchessy fluster that oh no, *this* wasn't what they meant *at all* and won't it please go away.<sup>1</sup>

Despite becoming iconic of the 'independent' punk movement, the band's biography contradicts many of the assumptions of punk's place in the music industries. For a start, the band were – in a sense – 'manufactured': Malcolm McLaren assisted in the formation of the band and their image partly as a means to promote the clothes shop SEX that he co-owned with designer Vivienne Westwood.<sup>2</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, 'Rebel Fun Page', *New Musical Express*, 11 September 1976, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Somewhat obviously, the band's name tied them to the shop. Laing discusses the issues surrounding the band's naming (*One Chord Wonders*, p. 44-6), including its multiple meanings and connotations. However, while he notes that there is a phallic interpretation to be read into the name, it is worth pointing out that the Sex Pistols' name seems somewhat

McLaren managed the group with the intention of engaging with the music industry in a traditional way. He had little desire to cause a musical revolution as an anti-capitalist exercise. Rather, he successfully embarked on an experiment with which he hoped to make a lot of money. The Pistols' three record deals, or more precisely the cancelling of two of them, led to large payouts for all concerned.<sup>3</sup> However, having built up an identity as working class punks who had no concern for the establishment in any sense, this inevitably led to a backlash from their burgeoning fanbase, as demonstrated by this excerpt from a news feature in the *NME* upon their initial signing to EMI:

...not all of London's punk fraternity were knocked out [by the news of the deal] [...]. 'It's a real sell-out,' one young blood told *THRILLS*. 'They're meant to be an alternative to all that big money establishment stuff. It's a big chunk of their credibility gone out the window. Anyway, the Damned are much better.'<sup>4</sup>

The original core of the Pistols – drummer Paul Cook and guitarist Steve Jones – had been friends and bandmates previously in a group called the Strand (after the Roxy Music song, 'Do the Strand'),<sup>5</sup> who mostly covered Rod Stewart and Small Faces songs. As the group disintegrated, Jones identified McLaren – whose shop was a regular haunt – as a potential key to the formation of a more successful band. They were encouraged to link up with Glen Matlock (bass) – a shop assistant in Let It Rock, SEX's previous incarnation – and, after a protracted search for a frontman, arranged a pub meeting with fellow SEX patron John 'Johnny Rotten' Lydon.

Savage notes that the entire group and management retreated to the shop for an

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'ironic': there's nothing explicitly 'sexy' or celebratory of male sexuality in their work or presentation. Moreover, the idea of sex and romance was essentially anathema to most punks.

<sup>3</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> Staverton George, 'Pistols – that four figure signing', *New Musical Express*, 30 October 1976, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> 'Do the Strand' is the opening track to Roxy Music's second LP *For Your Pleasure*, LP, Island Records, ILPS 9232 (1973).

impromptu audition, at which Lydon 'was placed in front of the jukebox, with a shower attachment in his hand as a microphone, and told to sing along to Alice Cooper's "Eighteen".'<sup>6</sup> McLaren's self-assurance of his role as a Svengali is evident in his interview with Savage:

I liked Jones; Jones didn't mind me. I quite liked Cook, but to me he was a bit boring. I brought Matlock into the group as an anchor of normality: he had a certain intelligence that I thought could be used to help Cook and Jones construct songs. Rotten was just an arrogant little shit who thought he knew everything. He hated their music. Cook and Jones were going for the tradition of mutated, irresponsible hardcore raw power: Iggy Pop, New York Dolls, MC5, the Faces. Rotten wanted it like the sixties – Captain Beefheart, all weird.<sup>7</sup>

Savage identifies this fundamental contradiction as the source of their power and influence: 'it would have been impossible for the Sex Pistols to have had the impact they did' without Lydon as their frontman, as his 'very interest in the quirks of post-hippie pop [...] gave the Sex Pistols an exit from nostalgia or lads' Rock into new, uncharted territory.'<sup>8</sup> As such, the Pistols set the terms on which punk has come to be appreciated, whether in discussions of its music, iconography, or ephemerality. For Burchill and Parsons, they 'avoided becoming The Rolling Stones of the Eighties with the most constructive move they had made since their formation – disintegration.'<sup>9</sup> They found their place in the pop music landscape by performing 'primitivism' in the face of 'excess', and where they could have fallen into the same established music industry routines of the dinosaurs of rock they instead disbanded: by doing so they canonised themselves as the 'punkest' ensemble of the period.

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<sup>6</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 44.

Of course, the canonisation of punk bands – particularly the Pistols – can be viewed as problematic when we consider the reasoning behind the establishment of the genre's groups. The Sex Pistols' sole album *Never Mind the Bollocks* has been canonised as one of the 'greatest albums of all time' – even as recently as 2013 it appeared at number 38 in *NME's* 'The 500 greatest albums of all time'<sup>10</sup> – and it features as one of the key texts in Carys Wyn Jones' analysis of *The Rock Canon*.<sup>11</sup> Reynolds has suggested that the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks* sounded a 'death knell' for early participants in the genre, who asked why 'the revolution [had] come to this, something as prosaic and conventional as an album?'<sup>12</sup> The album had turned the band's actions into 'product' which was 'eminently consumable'.<sup>13</sup> Part of the blame for this could be placed on the actions of their record label:

Virgin had turned McLaren's punk critique of commodification into a *commodity*. As a good Situationist, McLaren should really have known all along that 'the spectacle' (mass media, the leisure/entertainment industry) could absorb any disruption, no matter how noxious, and convert it into profit.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Angus Batey emphasises that it is 'an accomplished rock record featuring some pointedly angry and biliously sarcastic songs, played competently for the most part [...]. Those who weren't around at the time could well wonder what all the fuss was about.' 'The 500 greatest albums of all time', *New Musical Express*, 26 October 2013, p. 68. It is the highest charting British 'punk' album on the list, although it is beaten by a couple of its American cousins – Television's *Marquee Moon* (no. 29) and Patti Smith's *Horses* (no. 12) – while the post-punk generation is most highly represented by Joy Division's second LP *Closer* (no. 16). It is also worth pointing out that, in terms of the list's presentation, it passes by with little fanfare and is not being treated with the same 'spotlight' focus as other albums lower down the list such as The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (no. 26), Bob Dylan's *Blood On The Tracks* (no. 36) and American contemporaries Blondie's *Parallel Lines* (no. 45), all of which have half page articles dedicated to them. In comparison with previous lists, the LP charted at no. 13 in *NME's* 1985 list (they were pipped to the accolade of highest charting punk album by the Clash's eponymous debut at no. 4), and hit the heady heights of no. 3 in the magazine's 1993 poll. The album reached no. 4 in the 1977 writers' poll. 'NME Writers Best Of Lists', *Rocklist.net* <[http://www.rocklistmusic.co.uk/nme\\_writers.htm](http://www.rocklistmusic.co.uk/nme_writers.htm)> [accessed 25 October 2013]

<sup>11</sup> As Jones summarises, 'accounts of *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols* represent the album as a nihilistic challenge to the rock music tradition that the canon represents.' Jones, *The Rock Canon*, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305

Being assimilated into the rock 'n' roll establishment was inevitable as soon as the ink had dried on the Sex Pistols' first recording contract with EMI, let alone the third with Virgin. Richard Branson's label released product after product in the group's name after they had split, including a singles compilation titled *Flogging A Dead Horse*. Indeed, as the record label celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2013 they were still using the band and their reputation, alongside the tagline '40 years of disruptions', to imbue their brand with revolutionary cultural capital.<sup>15</sup> For Frith and Horne, this state of affairs is not *against* the intentions of McLaren specifically, or punk more widely; rather it followed naturally that where the pop industry 'sold prepackaged excitement,' punk would sell 'the aesthetics of boredom and the politics of street incredibility.'<sup>16</sup> Its concern was still commerciality: it still had something to 'sell'. The 'artist-designers' they identify as integral to the development of punk aesthetics offered 'a solution to leisure':

Punk modernized the rhetoric, but the message suggested sixties bohemia. Jamie Reid's slogan might have been 'Never trust a hippie' but he and McLaren were the hippies not to be trusted, and McLaren, at least, laughed all the way in and out of the bank. The pose was radical chic aesthetics, the politics of creative subversion. Authenticity was a matter of strategy.<sup>17</sup>

The only difference between the approaches of McLaren and previous musical entrepreneurs was that he aimed 'to be both blatantly commercial...and deliberately troublesome (so that the usually smooth, hidden, gears of commerce were always on noisy display).'<sup>18</sup> However, McLaren's understanding of music industry 'machinery' was not the sole reason for the band's popularity and success: he not only 'had the "luck", like Warhol before him, to find a group that exactly matched his

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<sup>15</sup> *Virgin 40* <<http://www.virgin40.com/>> [accessed 25 October 2013].

<sup>16</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

plans,' but they also wrote hook-laden pop songs whose origins could be traced, allowing them to be understood within an established rock framework.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the 'arrogant little shit'<sup>20</sup> Johnny Rotten 'had a resonance for bored British youth, who had no interest in art theories at all';<sup>21</sup> rather, the bored, obnoxious caricature Lydon had created represented his audience, a believable manifestation of youth frustration regarding their place in the world.<sup>22</sup>

The band's presence – part aggression, part nonchalance – was reflected in their songs. 'Anarchy in the UK' is a case in point: their call for anarchy was a call for chaos for no particular reason. The Pistols were not a political band as such, rather they and McLaren were keen to cause trouble and annoy as many people as they possibly could: for McLaren at least this was itself a strong marketing technique. Laing uses Lydon's vocal performance in the song's recording to emphasise their (un)political stance:

The final syllable [of 'anarchist'] comes out not as 'kissed' but to rhyme with 'Christ'. The embellishment shifts the attention away from the message to the rhyme-scheme and could momentarily set up an ambivalent signal about the 'sincerity' of the whole enterprise. Can anyone who changes the pronunciation of such a key political word be wholly intent on conveying the message of the lyric?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 132.

<sup>22</sup> The concept of 'Rotten' as caricature was cemented after Lydon left the group and formed PiL (Public Image Ltd): 'His anarchist/Antichrist persona – originally Rotten's own creation, but hyped by Pistols manager McLaren and distorted by a media eager to believe the worst – had spiralled out of control [...]. Lydon embarked on the process of persona demolition that would soon result in "Public Image" (the song) and Public Image Ltd (the group).'

Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 58.



Since 'Mark Perry and other partisans claimed punk songs to possess a "realism" lacking in other music,'<sup>24</sup> the Pistols as 'anarchists' nonetheless became a dominant caricature. As such, 'Johnny Rotten' came to be accepted as an authentic representation of the thoughts and expressions of John Lydon: 'there was no disjunction between Rotten's "We hate you" to the audience and Lydon's general artistic strategy', and his 'symbolic violence on stage led directly to real violence being perpetrated on him in June 1977.'<sup>25</sup> He, Cook and recording engineer Bill Price were assaulted by 'men in their thirties' – notably older than their established audience – as they left a London pub during recording sessions for *Never Mind the Bollocks*: Price told *NME* that 'It was obvious that Johnny was not so popular' after the success of 'God Save the Queen'.<sup>26</sup> However, while Lydon was attacked for his portrayal of Rotten, the response of his label and management to the situation demonstrated that, even at this moment of harsh reality, they intended to maintain that Johnny Rotten was 'real'. Virgin Records spokesperson Al Clarke told *NME* that they had 'dismissed the idea of hiring bodyguards', as doing so 'would place the Pistols in the cushioned setting which they so despise about rock stars.'<sup>27</sup>

### **The Clash**

On the other hand, the Clash utilised 'serious' political posturing to identify themselves, and as such their influence was emphasised by many bands who approached political issues in the post-punk years. Part of the same London scene as the Pistols, frontman Joe Strummer split up his pub rock band the 101'ers to form the Clash with ex-members of punk 'rehearsal band' London S.S.<sup>28</sup> They became a

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> 'Thrills: Pistols nearly slain by "Patriots"', *New Musical Express*, 25 June 1977, p. 11. Thrills was the title of *NME*'s news section; the author of the article is uncredited.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> See Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 170 and Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 22. Laing discusses London S.S. as not only an example of the use of Second World War associations in the naming of bands ('the S.S. had been the Nazi storm-troopers'), but also of punk's cultural and historical context: 'many welfare claimants (including unemployed musicians)

model for the political rock group in the post-punk years, as demonstrated by the influence they have exerted on the musicians featured in this thesis. The Clash's use of revolutionary rhetoric is reflected in songs such as 'White Riot', which was written in response to the riots at the 1976 Notting Hill carnival. Strummer tells Savage that he wrote 'White Riot' 'because it wasn't our fight. It was the one day of the year when the blacks were going to get their own back against the really atrocious way that the police behaved [towards them]'.<sup>29</sup> As Dorian Lynskey emphasises in his history of the song, Strummer 'was *in* the riot, but not *of* the riot'.<sup>30</sup> he could not actively participate since, as Hebdige suggests, the riot 'can be interpreted...as [a] symbolic [defence] of communal space',<sup>31</sup> a space to which, as a white man, he could not belong. The song's lyrics describe empathy for London's black community, but also an envy of their collectivism against a common 'enemy': for Savage they 'expressed a desperate longing that a voice and a face should be given to the white dispossessed'.<sup>32</sup>

White riot, I wanna riot, white riot, a riot of my own.

Black man got a lot of problems, but they don't mind throwing a brick.

White people go to school, where they teach you how to be thick.

And everybody's doing just what they're told to,

And nobody wants to go to jail.<sup>33</sup>

As such, the Clash can be taken as a key band in the establishment of the 'links' between punk and reggae. Hebdige identifies the Rastafarian subculture as important to the definition of punk style and attitude, since it experienced a resurgence of interest from black London youths in tandem with the establishment

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referred to officials of the Social Security system as the S.S. because of their hostile attitude.' *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Strummer, quoted in Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 234.

<sup>30</sup> Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, p. 346.

<sup>31</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 235.

<sup>33</sup> The Clash, 'White Riot', *The Clash*, LP, Epic 36060 (1977).

of the punk scene. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, while bands such as the Clash and the Ruts incorporated elements of reggae into their sound, and reggae records were played between bands at punk gigs (perhaps because it was more 'danceable' than punk), these links were mostly formed through an identification by punks with the rebellious significations of Rasta culture.

The Clash's identification with this strand of British youth culture was integral to the crafting of their identity as a 'political' group: they aimed to represent a white stance against broad social injustice, which specifically included racial harassment. Their name was central to the establishment of this manifesto. For Laing, they 'picked another aspect of transgression of the social norm, with its connotations of violent, often politically inflected conflict. "Clashes" in the discourse of news media were what happened between police and demonstrators or guerrillas and government forces.'<sup>34</sup> In an early interview in *Sniffin' Glue*, bassist Paul Simonon tells interviewer Steve Walsh that the name represents 'a clash against things that are going on...the music scene, and all that we're hoping to change quite a lot.'<sup>35</sup>

Further, they were keen to distance themselves from the cartoonish 'anarchism' represented by the Sex Pistols. In an interview for the *NME*, Joe Strummer tells Miles that 'I think people ought to know that we're anti-fascist, we're anti-violence, we're anti-Racist and we're *pro-creative*. We're against ignorance.'<sup>36</sup> They aimed to reach a more serious audience by setting themselves up as a group who could put the destructive feelings felt by a growing section of punks to a politically satisfactory end. Where McLaren relied on the fear factor of the Pistols' identity to breed their success, the Clash, similarly influenced by their manager Bernie Rhodes, saw longevity in perceived political substance. Moreover, Strummer pre-empted their

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<sup>34</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Walsh, 'The very angry Clash', *Sniffin' Glue*, 4, October 1976.

<sup>36</sup> Miles, 'Eighteen flight rock and the sound of the Westway', *New Musical Express*, 11 December 1976, p. 14. My emphasis.

involvement with the burgeoning Rock Against Racism movement by emphasising the potential political power of their music:

We're hoping to educate any kid who comes to listen to us, right, just to keep 'em from joining the National Front when things get really tough in a couple of years. I mean, we just really don't want the National Front stepping in and saying, 'Things are bad – it's the Blacks' [...]. We want to prevent that somehow, you know?<sup>37</sup>

Here we see the rhetoric of 'crisis' in relation to the 'inevitability' of a fascist backlash, and Strummer aiming to be the defender of *all* of those at risk. The critical reception they received from the music press demonstrated an acceptance that they could achieve their goals, but paradoxically they were also criticised for their 'use' of revolutionary chic. For example, in his review of their debut album for the *NME*, Tony Parsons concedes that it 'consists of some of the most exciting rock 'n' roll in contemporary music', and that 'they chronicle our lives and what it's like to be young in the Stinking Seventies better than any other band [...]. I urge you to get your hands on a copy of this album. The strength of the nation lies in its youth.'<sup>38</sup>

However, in their *Obituary of Rock and Roll*, Parsons and Burchill describe the Clash as 'the first band to use social disorder as a marketing technique to shift product' in relation to their use of imagery of the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival riot on the back of the LP.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, despite performing at Rock Against Racism's first 'Carnival Against the Nazis' in 1978 (see Chapter 7), the band came to be seen by the movement's figurehead David Widgery as 'infantile, egocentric and in love with rock and roll which means *I'm somebody and you're nothing*.'<sup>40</sup> While the Clash's authenticity to rock 'n' roll expression made them useful to Rock Against Racism in

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Tony Parsons, 'The Clash: War On Inner City Front', *New Musical Express*, 16 April 1977, p. 33

<sup>39</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 54

<sup>40</sup> David Widgery, *Beating Time: Riot 'n' Race 'n' Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986), p. 90.

terms of '[pulling in] the hard punks',<sup>41</sup> it also made them *inauthentic* in terms of their political legitimacy.

### The Jam

While not one of the initial five punk bands identified by Laing,<sup>42</sup> the Jam were heavily involved in the punk/new wave scene by 1977. An early live review of the band in January 1977 found *NME* writer John Tobler assert that

[in] comparison to the much vaunted Clash, The Jam are totally superior, not least because they have sufficient respect for their material to want it to be heard as music, rather than felt as noise.<sup>43</sup>

Where the Sex Pistols and Clash perhaps found inspiration in the music of mod bands the Small Faces and the Who, their sound was predominantly formed around the aggressive aesthetics of proto-punks MC5 and the Stooges, as well as American contemporaries the Ramones. The Jam, however, expressed their mod influences more directly, not only in their music but also in their dress. Eschewing the King's Road and pub rock fashions of their peers, the Jam were easily identifiable in their moccasins and tailored suits, while their choice of instruments – singer/guitarist Paul Weller and bassist Bruce Foxton used matching Rickenbacker guitars – were an important signifier of a Sixties beat influence; not only in their imagery, but also in terms of sound quality. This explicit identification with the origins of the 'old order' set the band in stark contrast with the rest of their generation. While their music was fast, loud and distorted, they displayed a greater concern for melody and harmonic diversity, using the range of the guitar more

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 143. Laing draws his quantitative analyses of punk lyrics and song titles from the debut albums of what he considers to be 'the first five punk groups to achieve prominence in 1976-7' (p. 27): The Damned; The Clash; The Stranglers; Sex Pistols; and The Vibrators.

<sup>43</sup> John Tobler, 'The Jam, Clayson, 100 Club', *New Musical Express*, 22 January 1977, p. 33.

widely and 'cleanly' than the power chord attack heard elsewhere. For Weller, this set the group apart from the rest of the punk scene. He believed that, like the rock modernists who were his main inspiration, his music had a higher purpose than nihilistic violence:

There was this sense that The Jam had become a blokes' band. Every night there would be a parting of the seas and a section of the audience would kick the shit out of each other, which was just rude. I'm trying to say and do something here and they are carrying on doing what they do on a Saturday down the terraces. But this isn't Sham 69. This is above that stuff.<sup>44</sup>

Tobler's comparison of the Jam with the Clash in part extends from the similarity between the groups' lyrical material, with both addressing contemporary social issues. However, the Jam's 'political angle' was markedly different. In an interview with Steve Clarke for the *NME* around the release of their debut album *In the City* in 1977, drummer Rick Buckler rehearsed the familiar right wing argument that 'it's the unions who run the country', while Weller famously stated that 'he'll vote Conservative at the next election'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, pointing out the contradiction that the band exist in 'the same scene which sired The Pistols', Clarke reveals that 'all the band, particularly Weller, are fiercely patriotic' and that 'Weller believes in the monarchy'.<sup>46</sup> Weller is also keen in the interview to dismiss the 'politics' of the punk generation:

We don't love parliament. We're not in love with Jimmy Callaghan. But I don't see any point in going against your own [...]. Everybody goes on about new orders, but no one seems really clear what they are. Chaos is not really a positive thought, is it? You can't run a country on chaos. Maybe a coalition or

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Weller, quoted in Lois Wilson, 'I'm still open to the magic', *MOJO*, May 2010, pp. 77-86 (p. 83).

<sup>45</sup> Steve Clarke, 'All change and back to 1964', *New Musical Express*, 7 May 1977, pp. 28-9 (p. 29).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

something with younger party members. All this change-the-world thing is becoming a bit too trendy. I realise that we're not going to change anything unless it's on a nationwide scale.<sup>47</sup>

This thinly-veiled dismissal of the Pistols' and Clash's political posturing was anathema to many figures at the radical, left-leaning *NME*. Julie Burchill, writing in a live review of the group seven weeks later, stated that she found 'the Jam's self-righteous indignation a little sickening. Do they really believe the Conservatives will achieve anything the Labour Party won't?'<sup>48</sup> Further, in *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, she and Parsons describe the band as 'the brainchild of lower-middle-class Tories, abhorred by all self-respecting punks for disassociating themselves from a movement which they had no qualms about cashing in on.'<sup>49</sup> They were one of 'a collection of non-starter rat-racers who didn't lack the greed for fame and fortune so patently obvious in the idols they professed to despise'<sup>50</sup> whose second LP, *This Is The Modern World*, was 'severely constipated social comment; the romantic interest of their boy-girl interludes ultimately exposed as nothing but serenades beneath Margaret Thatcher's balcony.'<sup>51</sup>

However, in an interview for the website of right wing newspaper *The Telegraph* ahead of the 2010 general election (which neatly coincided with the release of his tenth solo album *Wake Up the Nation*), Weller told critic Neil McCormick that the band's portrayal as Tory supporters had been

dreamt up by a press officer, saying, 'well, The Clash are left wing, The Pistols are for anarchy, why don't you back the Tories or the Queen, just for an angle?' [...]I've got very definite feelings for the Tories, from the way they

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Julie Burchill, 'The Jam kick out the jams – Maggie Thatcher style?!', *New Musical Express*, 25 June 1977, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Burchill and Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

acted and behaved under Margaret Thatcher in the Eighties, it was disgraceful really. I find it hard to forgive them, as a working class person, for really decimating the trade unions. I have a problem with it.<sup>52</sup>

Where the Sex Pistols, Clash and Jam have come to be emblematic of punk orthodoxy in the ways in which they presented themselves – in terms of their music and politics – those musicians of the post-punk era to be examined in this thesis, while undoubtedly drawing some influence from these three foregrounded bands, were also part of a milieu which developed its own varied aesthetics and political representations. The post-punk era differed from punk in the sense that its protagonists envisaged a culture which attempted to assert its difference from the prescribed attitudes of rock ideology.

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Neil McCormick, 'Paul Weller: Some of my best friends are Tories', *The Telegraph*, 5 May 2010 <<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/neilmccormick/100008022/paul-weller-some-of-my-best-friends-are-tories/>> [accessed 16 March 2012].



## Chapter Six

### Post-Punk

If the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks* did indeed sound punk's 'death knell',<sup>1</sup> the music created in the album's wake shows that the aesthetics and attitudes which surrounded punk still impacted on creative methodologies, even if post-punk was to possess a more positive outlook.<sup>2</sup> As Laing notes, it became 'essential to sound one particular way to be recognized as a "punk band"'.<sup>3</sup> Laing frames the divergence of punk influence after the Pistols' split thus:

The punk family tree had the Clash, Pistols and Damned as the founders of a dynasty where the next generation included Sham 69, then the Angelic Upstarts and on down to the so-called 'Oi' bands like the 4-Skins and the Exploited. While that view was propagated mainly in the columns of *Sounds*, some writers in the *New Musical Express* found solace in a different family tree which was said to lead from the patriarchs via Siouxsie and The Banshees and Adam and the Ants to Southern Death Cult and a 'positive punk' in 1982-3.<sup>4</sup>

The *NME's* desire for 'positive punk' in this period is exemplified in this live review of Alternative TV.<sup>5</sup> Reviewer Steve Walsh focuses his derision of the group's negativity on the song 'Alternatives to NATO', whose lyrics told the audience 'how bad everything is and how no-one is doing anything about it'.<sup>6</sup> For Walsh, Perry's 'disaffection', while characteristic of punk, was no longer desirable: 'Cynicism

<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> The music of post-punk is too varied to chronicle definitively here. See Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again* for a comprehensive analysis of the various stylistic progressions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

<sup>3</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 108

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Alternative TV (sometimes stylised as A.T.V.) were fronted by Mark 'P' Perry, editor of *Sniffin' Glue*.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Walsh, 'A.T.V., Marquee', *New Musical Express*, 18 February 1978, p. 45

ultimately amounts to an admission of one's own impotence and in 1978 we need positive thinkers.'<sup>7</sup> Punk rock largely existed within the 'Oi' strand from 1978 onwards, which Laing describes as 'a sort of glum rock with vocal lines and choruses based on [Sham 69's] anthems but inflected further towards the chants of football fans.'<sup>8</sup> These groups retained the Ramones-derived aesthetics of the early punk ensembles and revelled in their separation from the mainstream, forming an audience of skinheads and 'frozen' punks.

However, musicians, critics and fans alike desired greater experimentation throughout the punk landscape. This ultimately resulted in a softening of opposition to the mainstream, which, in turn, led to some 'post-punk' ensembles achieving chart success seemingly against the tide of social and cultural norms. Moreover, approaches to creative processes were redefined. The Sheffield-based 'synth-pop' group Human League derived their 'punkness' through a disavowal of rock instrumentation, as founding member Ian Craig Marsh told Reynolds:

We went onstage with a tape-recorder, with the rhythm and bass on tape.... We liked the idea of putting the machine where the drummer ought to be, with a spotlight on it. Then we'd come onstage, take our positions by the keyboards, and then very pointedly I'd walk over and press PLAY. We knew this would be a big wind-up to the rock 'n' roll fraternity<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 112

<sup>9</sup> Ian Craig Marsh, quoted in Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 163-4. Note the use of the word 'fraternity': the people to whom this would be a concern were expected by Marsh to be exclusively male. This centring of the drum machine is favoured by the current Cardiff-based group Totem Terrors, a guitar and bass duo who treat their drum machine – which is often placed in between them onstage on a barstool/chair – as a third member of the group. However, in correspondence with the author the band's guitarist commented that she was not comfortable with the centring of the drum machine primarily, since the use of computer technology in contemporary music making is already prevalent; it was not such a challenging thing to do (Rosie Smith, personal communication (Facebook), 22 April 2014). It should be noted that Totem Terrors' presentation pairs with the obvious musical influence of 'post-punk' groups such as the Fall, Gang of Four and Desperate Bicycles.

Further, the group's lead singer Phil Oakey tells Reynolds that 'there were no punk bands *at all*' in Sheffield, which Reynolds attributes to 'a bloody-minded Northern disinclination to follow London's lead.'<sup>10</sup> The different approaches of regional groups to the London milieu can be interpreted as a reaction to their distance from the capital-centric music industries. As such, there grew a reliance on a network of local independent record labels, or even the process of self-releasing, as a means to disseminate recordings.

### **Independence/Independents**

One of the fundamental assumptions of punk's legacy is that it 'democratised' the recording industry by providing opportunities for the self-releasing of recordings.<sup>11</sup> The post-punk landscape was littered with independent record labels based throughout the UK, run by 'petty capitalist entrepreneurs',<sup>12</sup> fans, and bands themselves. Spurred by the popularity and 'do-it-yourself spirit' of punk, they cheaply released limited runs of singles and EPs, before successful labels developed the financial opportunities to release LPs as well. These labels, such as Rough Trade (London) and Factory Records (Manchester), were influential in establishing the terms of popular music culture throughout the 1980s and beyond, and responsible for setting the standards and significations of 'independence' as it is understood today. As such, Laing identifies 'the independent sector' as

the place where punk rock's alternative discursive formation was to be found.

A record signalled to a listener as 'independent' set up a different set of expectations, however faintly. Instead of the associations of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> See David Hesmondhalgh, 'Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade', *Popular Music*, 16/3 (1997), pp. 255-74.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 259

leisure/relaxation/passivity characteristic of mainstream music, there were counter-associations of alternatives/seriousness/experimentation.<sup>13</sup>

However, the independent sector was not responsible for setting the terms of punk appreciation: while the Sex Pistols finally released their album on the independent (if well-established) label Virgin Records, the three punk bands discussed above were all signed to major record labels.<sup>14</sup> Rather, independent labels initially existed to promote the music that they felt the mainstream should not ignore. While some of the music released on independent labels during this period was clearly recorded in opposition to mainstream principles, there was often a concern 'to reach the same people as are reached by the musical mainstream, but by a different route'.<sup>15</sup>

We can take Desperate Bicycles and Buzzcocks as two prominent examples of bands who took this approach and therefore set precedents for others to follow by demystifying the processes involved. For example, Desperate Bicycles' debut single *Smokescreen*, self-released in April 1977,<sup>16</sup> is characterised by its advocacy of the DIY approach: B-side 'Handlebars' ends with the statement 'It was easy, it was cheap – go and do it', while a sleevenote informs the reader that the single cost £153 to produce and asks 'why you haven't made your single yet'.<sup>17</sup> This bypassing and open taunting of exclusionist industry orthodoxies marked an oppositional stance towards the major labels, influenced by the rebellious portrayals of their precursors. However, in order to perform this opposition they were required to work *within* mainstream practises. The band celebrated the commodification of their artistic endeavours as a validation of their work.

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<sup>13</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> The Sex Pistols began at EMI; the Clash were quickly signed to CBS; and the Jam were contracted to Polydor.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> The Desperate Bicycles, *Smokescreen/Handlebars*, 7", Refill Records, RR1 (1977).

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 97. The same approach was taken by Scritti Politti, who Reynolds believes 'went one better than The Desps [sic] in the demystification stakes' with their sleeve for debut single 'Skank Bloc Bologna, 'itemizing the complete costs of recording, mastering, pressing, printing the labels and so on, along with contact numbers for companies who provided these services.' (p. 202)

Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* EP, released on their own New Hormones label in January 1977,<sup>18</sup> was for Reynolds the first independently-released record 'to make a real polemical point about independence'.<sup>19</sup> While its back cover also demystified its creation through 'itemized details of the recording process', the 'polemical point' identified by Reynolds was perhaps most clearly stated in its city of origin: Manchester. It represented a 'regionalist blow against the capital' by achieving national popularity (the first edition sold 16,000 copies) from a Northern base.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, *Spiral Scratch* and *Smokescreen* are notable for their emphasis on the importance of being *heard*, rather than, as was certainly the case with the Sex Pistols, forming but one aspect of the bands' multi-faceted identities. The Sex Pistols were certainly influential on the formation of Buzzcocks: original singer Howard Devoto tells Savage that after he and guitarist Pete Shelley travelled to see the band perform in High Wycombe, they decided to 'go and do something like this in Manchester'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, they promoted the famous Sex Pistols performance at Manchester Free Trade Hall in June 1976 which was attended by various members of the soon-to-be-established Manchester post-punk milieu.<sup>22</sup> However, their approach to the release of *Spiral Scratch* is notable in its difference to McLaren and the Sex Pistols' myth-laden attitude: Buzzcocks demonstrated a clear preference to avoid hyperbole and focus on 'the music.'

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<sup>18</sup> Buzzcocks, *Spiral Scratch*, 7", New Hormones, ORG1 (1977).

<sup>19</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. That said, however, Reynolds goes on to discuss Factory Records' boss Tony Wilson's disappointment as New Hormones 'capitulated to the capital': 'It was as if the only point of indie labels was to exist for a few months so that managers could get their bands signed to majors.' (p. 108). For more on the geographical politics of the Manchester music scene during this period, see Michael Goddard and Benjamin Halligan (ed.), *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Howard Devoto, quoted in Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 153. Devoto left Buzzcocks almost immediately after the release of *Spiral Scratch*, going on to form the group Magazine (see chapter 8). Shelley assumed the role of frontman in his absence.

<sup>22</sup> Savage, p. 175. See also Sean Albiez, 'Print the truth, not the legend. The Sex Pistols: Lesser Free Trade Hall, Manchester, June 4, 1976', in *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time*, ed. Ian Inglis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 92-106.

While this preference existed amongst many other bands and labels, with the product acting as a necessary medium for the music to be heard, some independents were keen to celebrate the *concept* of the product in itself. Reynolds presents Bob Last's Edinburgh-based Fast Product as one such label to which the music was secondary: 'the idea of Fast Product already existed in [Last's] mind as a brand' before he began releasing records, 'but [he] had no specific ideas about what the actual merchandise would ultimately be.'<sup>23</sup> It was only after coming across *Spiral Scratch* that he decided to follow Buzzcocks' lead and release records, with the intention that each would exist as a unique artefact which celebrated 'consumer desire while simultaneously exposing the manipulative mechanisms of capitalism.'<sup>24</sup>

Alongside singles by acts such as Leeds-based post-punks the Mekons and future chart-toppers the Human League, Fast Product's catalogue also featured a duo of conceptual plastic bags, *The Quality of Life* and *SeXex*. Neither contained any music, but rather photocopies of documents and photographs, and objects such as individual pieces of orange peel (*The Quality of Life*) and empty soup cartons (*SeXex*).<sup>25</sup> While each slice of rotting vegetation would be unique, the photocopies and other materials were, in essence, no different to the identical recordings which appear on a vinyl single. This is representative of Baudrillard's assertion that 'the dominance of simulacra' is 'a centrally defining characteristic of the postmodern era'.<sup>26</sup> While a simulacrum is conventionally thought of as 'a copy of a copy in Plato's ontology', the 'general [postmodern] consensus is that the simulacrum [...] somehow avoids contact with the ideal [original] form'; i.e. it is a copy of a copy of

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<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds quotes Factory Records' founder Tony Wilson as saying that 'If I could have put orange peel in a plastic bag and released it with a catalogue number, I would have been proud.' *Ibid.*, p. 95 .

<sup>26</sup> Andy Bennett, 'Even better than the real thing? Understanding the tribute band phenomenon', in *Access All Eras: Tribute Bands and Global Pop Culture*, ed. Shane Homan (Maidenhead & New York: Open University Press, 2006), pp. 19-31 (p. 20).

nothing.<sup>27</sup> There was no *meaning* as such in the selected materials – they derived their meaning from their status as a *product*.

Manchester-based Factory Records worked on a similar model to Fast Product, assigning catalogue numbers to everything associated with the label: from records, to their contracts, through posters and their ill-fated Hacienda night club – even a lawsuit filed against the label by in-house producer Martin Hannett was catalogued (FAC 61).<sup>28</sup> In all, the Factory catalogue lists 451 singles, albums, books and miscellanea – indeed one may argue that Tony Wilson's label took Fast Product's commodity fetishism model to the extreme. However, Factory were also notorious for their poor grasp of financial models, through the musician-centring of their contracts, which ultimately points to an almost fetishistic desire to encourage the exposure and consumption of music rather than using it as a means to profit. Nonetheless, Street suggests that Factory's modes of operation attempted to 'persuade the customer that they are buying something more than they can see and hear, that they are buying a share in a particular group or experience.'<sup>29</sup>

Labels such as Fast Product and Factory demonstrate how, in the early Eighties, subversion became 'a matter of form not content'.<sup>30</sup> For Factory Records, according to Frith and Horne, 'the key to the politics of the pop process is the "moment of consumption" – the shock effect has to be built into the circulation of commodities

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Cochrane, 'Simulacrum', in *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 312-3 (p. 312). See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> A read through the entire Factory Records catalogue demonstrates Tony Wilson et al's mischievous approach to the label, which arguably peaked with the cataloguing of 'The Hacienda Cat' (FAC 191). See 'Factory Catalogue FAC 1-451', *factoryrecords.net* <<http://www.factoryrecords.net/catalogue/index.htm>> [accessed 28 October 2013]. According to Reynolds, 'For Wilson, this brand of mischief was in the spirit of the Situationists', who 'were also stern critics of commodity fetishism...so it's not all that likely they would have approved of Factory's sumptuously designed records' – nor their blatant celebration of the corporate sales process. Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 99.

<sup>30</sup> Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 151.

itself.<sup>31</sup> As the focus of pop music culture shifted from celebrating the progression of musical complexity to a preference for simplicity of expression coupled with commodity fetishism, Frith and Horne find that 'the avant-garde pop gesture in the early 1980s was to make a product so tightly packaged that its meaning was exhausted in the act of purchase.'<sup>32</sup> Where once cultural producers wrestled with the 'problem' of the commodification of their work, there was now an acceptance that mass culture was necessary for its mediation, and, moreover, that it validated one's creative impulses:

For 1960s nostalgics, post-punk/postmodern culture clearly represents the triumphs of artifice over art.... For 1980s optimists, by contrast, postmodern culture is actually speaking the 'truth' of capitalist experience for the first time. What's really going on, in other words, is the eruption of new springs of symbolic authority.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to suggest that all independent record labels used commercialism in a subversive way. Virgin Records, for instance – despite their founder Richard Branson's 'hippy' mythology – were never especially focussed on communalism: their first big act, Mike Oldfield, was signed to an 'exploitative contract which would be the basis of a lengthy court case in the 1980s'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that any independent record label – aside, perhaps, from Factory – was attempting to overthrow major label hegemony for ideological reasons. Figures such as Branson were

go-it-alone businessmen, influenced by some of the cultural values developed in the 1960s, but relatively uninterested in any thoroughgoing democratisation

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>34</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 'Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry', p. 257.



of the social relations of production [...] 'traditional' music business practices were prevalent in the British rock independents.<sup>35</sup>

Independent labels therefore did little to 'democratise' the music industries, but rather broadened the potential for new artistic and political ideas to be explored through commodified music, as well as enabling 'a whole sector of creative people to undertake creative work who would not otherwise have been able to'.<sup>36</sup>

Hesmondhalgh states that democracy 'is a term notoriously prone to abuse,' but the ideas it represents – 'self-determination, collectivism and participation' – can mostly be associated with independent labels, the bands they represented, and the bands they *inspired* who were perhaps 'employed' by major record labels.<sup>37</sup> However, true democratisation across the music industries has not happened. While decentralisation, identified by Hesmondhalgh as 'a vital corollary to access as democratisation', occurred to the extent that labels were able to flourish in cities such as Manchester and Edinburgh, 'cultural resources in Britain...are still concentrated to a remarkable degree in London, at the expense of the peripheral "regions"'.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the success achieved by the labels discussed above was only possible via the support of London-based labels and shops such as Virgin and Rough Trade in terms of distribution and promotion. Hesmondhalgh affirms that true democratisation is probably impossible in the recording industry since 'the commodification of cultural expression involves rigid divisions of labour and the presence of powerful hierarchies'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 256-7.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 135. 'The independents developed an aesthetic based on mobilisation and access. This approach encouraged the unskilled and the untrained to enter a previously highly professionalised industry. As punk had encouraged those with little or no musical know how to pick up instruments, so the independent record labels encouraged the D-I-Y and "learn as you go along" attitude to all elements of the musical production process'. (Ibid.)

<sup>37</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 'Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry', p. 255.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

While challenging the hegemony of major record labels was an unrealistic aim, the impact of this 'movement' of independent labels established 'a network of production, distribution and manufacturing...which allowed musicians from all over the UK access to the means of recording and selling their creative output'.<sup>40</sup> a network which assisted a variety of post-punk figures to make an impact, if not on mainstream culture, then widely within the underground. In fact, the approach of these labels is still influential on people releasing music in the contemporary digital age, whether on independent or major labels.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

## Chapter Seven

### Rock Against Racism

Rock Against Racism (RAR) was a grassroots musical protest movement, established in response to a perceived threat posed by fascist attitudes of political groups such as the National Front in late 1970s Britain. Having been established in 1976, RAR's history is inherently entwined with that of punk. While RAR arguably reached its zenith after punk's 'death', it was nonetheless a formative influence on the establishment of the narrative outlined in the previous chapters. In their critical analysis of the movement, Virinder S. Kalra, John Hutnyk and Sanjay Sharma estimate that 800 RAR events took place in Britain between 1976 and 1979, the largest of which were two 1978 carnivals which drew crowds of up to 100,000 in Manchester and London.<sup>1</sup> Events continued to take place under the RAR banner into the early 1980s, culminating in the release of a compilation LP, *RAR's Greatest Hits* in 1981,<sup>2</sup> and a final large scale 'carnival' in Leeds the same year.<sup>3</sup>

While the two 1978 carnivals were organised by the central committee of RAR, most concerts that took place under the banner were organised by local promoters and fans who had established regional RAR branches:

These local clubs had some sort of existence in over fifty towns, putting on small-scale gigs, run by a mixture of culture-conscious lefties and punk and

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<sup>1</sup> Virinder S. Kalra, John Hutnyk & Sanjay Sharma, 'Re-Sounding (Anti) Racism, or Concordant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents' in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk & Ashwani Sharma (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 127-155 (p. 138). Estimates of the exact numbers in attendance at these carnivals vary from source to source. In his report on the inaugural Victoria Park carnival, *NME's* Chris Salewicz tells us that, 'depending on whose estimate you prefer [...] 50-80,000 people' were in attendance (Chris Salewicz, 'Carnival against the Nazis', *New Musical Express*, 6 May 1978, pp. 31-33 (p. 31)). The lack of definitive documentation of much of RAR's operations serves to underline the improvisational approach taken by those involved.

<sup>2</sup> David Widgery, *Beating Time: Riot 'n' Race 'n' Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986), p. 110. According to Widgery, it was the 'first ever LP done as a political benefit and the precedent for subsequent vinyl [sic] for Amnesty, CND, Greenpeace and Band Aid.'

<sup>3</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 81.

Rasta kids. Like any successful youth outfit, they were informal, a bit anarchic, and dependent on friendship networks rather than membership cards. Which meant they were sometimes shambolic and could create headaches for RAR central.<sup>4</sup>

Musician Tom Robinson remembers that RAR 'made little kits that they sent out to people who wanted to put on a gig, explaining how to put it on and promote it'.<sup>5</sup>

RAR co-founder David Widgery believes that via these local groups 'RAR was helping to fuel a second wave of punk which was producing a regional outcropping of bands'.<sup>6</sup> As such, RAR could possess some claims to crafting the narrative of punk as a regional DIY movement. In their use of 'rock' as an oppositional tool, they inadvertently provided opportunities for fledging punk acts to perform. Further, this emphasis on DIY fed back into the music industries' practice via the operations of independent record labels, who 'encouraged the unskilled and the untrained to enter a previously highly professionalised industry'.<sup>7</sup>

One of the main tenets of RAR concerts was that the line-up should be multi-racial, and, 'as a point of general principle, the reggae act would always headline'.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the breadth of musical styles implied by the word 'rock', the predominant musical styles on show at RAR events were punk, which was taken as representative of white youth, and black-oriented reggae. However, the focus of the National Front's racist activism was firmly on communities. Since, according to Widgery, 'people in the white community who are mates with Afro-Caribbean

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<sup>4</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Vulliamy, 'Blood and Glory', *The Observer*, 4 March 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/mar/04/race.otherparties>> [accessed 16 November 2010].

<sup>6</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p.72.

<sup>7</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Robinson, quoted in Vulliamy, 'Blood and Glory'. By 'reggae', Robinson means 'black'. While RAR were obviously well-meaning in their concert programming, such foregrounding of black performers could be viewed as rather patronising and detrimental to the equality which was pursued by the movement.

cockneys still find it hard to cope with Asian neighbours',<sup>9</sup> one of the more problematic aspects of RAR's history is its engagement with Asian communities. Did it attempt to represent Asian communities onstage as a means of promoting multicultural cohesion?

RAR is widely recognised as an attempt to harness the political potential of punk rock, and direct the sometimes nihilistic energy associated with its music and subculture towards a more positive outlet.<sup>10</sup> As such we find that the involvement and political investment of performers and audiences varies. RAR is an important example in demonstrating how the theoretical issues outlined in Section I were practised in the historical period considered in this thesis. It responded directly to the State in its challenge to societal racism, encouraging action against far-right groups and questioning the policies and actions of mainstream figures. For performers to become involved with RAR they were not necessarily required to make anti-racism a specific subject matter of their songs: performing in support of the cause took precedence over the challenging of ideology through song.

RAR relied upon notions of authenticity which were prevalent in rock culture in their challenge. The actions of RAR were predicated upon the popularity of punk, and played a role in popularizing the view of it as a genre suited to political protest. This is further evidenced by the three 'punk rock' groups analysed in Chapter 8 – The Tom Robinson Band, Sham 69 and Alien Kulture – each of whom performed at RAR events. While each pursued a different political agenda, one will see that they were bound by their modes of expression and operation, which drew from the theoretical framework of politics and authenticity outlined in Section I. In so doing they

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<sup>9</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> See Simon Frith & John Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge: From Music to Politics, From Politics to Music', in *Rockin' the Boat*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), pp. 67-80; Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics Of Rock Against Racism* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2009); Street, *Music and Politics*.

reasserted the rock sincerity bands such as the Sex Pistols had avoided in their pursuit of commercial success.

The methodological approach to each of these case studies varies, drawing primarily upon journalistic and academic source material in addition to my own readings of their music and presentation. However, while The Tom Robinson Band and Sham 69 were widely featured by the music press in the late 1970s, Alien Kulture did not achieve the same level of success, and as such there is very little in the way of source material about the group. My work on Alien Kulture draws mainly from an interview conducted with two members of the group, alongside their friend and manager, during the early stages of my research. This case study is particularly illuminating as an oral history not only of the group, but also of RAR: they constitute three eyewitnesses who played an active role in the movement's history.

### **Race in British politics 1976-1979**

The political landscape of Britain in the mid- to late-1970s was in part defined by the vocal and physical presence of the far-right National Front (NF), whose growing influence prompted the initial establishment of RAR and its associated political pressure group the Anti-Nazi League (ANL).<sup>11</sup> The NF is the widest reaching fascist movement in British history, with a policy centred on the 'repatriation' of non-white British nationals, regardless of their place of birth. They have achieved electoral success at a local level in specific constituencies, usually targeted as a result of – and with the intention of exacerbating – tensions between 'immigrant' and white working class communities. While at its peak in the late Seventies the NF had become the fourth largest political party in the UK, it failed to replicate its local

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<sup>11</sup> The ANL will not be dealt with here, but its history is interwoven with that of RAR. For examinations of the movement, see Martin Barker, *The New Racism* (London: Junction Books, 1981); Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Routledge, 1995); Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus* (London: Methuen, 1995); Dave Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: the Anti-Nazi League, 1977-1981* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2006).

success on a national level. Despite a determined campaign in advance of the 1979 general election, they have never held a seat in the House of Commons.<sup>12</sup>

This has been explained as a result of the Conservative Party's absorption of the NF vote. The party's recognition and acceptance of immigration-related tensions as valid was reflected in a television interview with Margaret Thatcher in January 1978, in which she paraphrased a Home Office committee report saying that

if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in. So, if you want good race relations, you have got to allay peoples' fears on numbers.<sup>13</sup>

For Widgery, Thatcher '[s]ingle-handedly [...] recuperated overt racism into the Parliamentary tradition [...] it's the very sanctimoniousness of those words and the pained poshness of the voice that uttered them which fuels and authenticates the

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<sup>12</sup> The NF still exists, and fielded candidates as recently as the 2010 general election and 2013 local council elections ('National Front – Election Results' <<http://www.national-front.org.uk/election-results>> [accessed 23 April 2014]). However since their poor results in the 1979 general election the party has diminished in size. The main far-right party in the UK is currently the British National Party (BNP); however they have suffered a similar fate as the NF following their poor showing at the 2010 general election. The English Defence League (EDL) is now the main force in terms of far-right movements, although they are not currently a functioning political party.

<sup>13</sup> 'TV Interview for Granada *World in Action* ("rather swamped")', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 27 January 1978 <<http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/103485>> [accessed 2 June 2013]. Thatcher is often misquoted as having spoken of 'The British people's "fear" of "being swamped" by people with "alien cultures".' Sarah Spencer, 'The impact of immigration policy on race relations', in *Race Relations in Britain: A Developing Agenda*, ed. Tessa Blackstone, Bhikhu Parekh and Peter Sanders (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 74-95 (p. 80), my emphasis.

street savagery.<sup>14</sup> Roger Sabin describes her sympathetic rhetoric as an attempt 'to speak "on behalf" of the white working class (an unprecedented move for [the Tories] until this point)',<sup>15</sup> drawing voters initially targeted by the relatively marginal NF towards the mainstream and traditional Conservative Party. While this obviously had an effect on the electoral hopes of the NF, by targeting the 'white working class' the Tories were also staking a claim for voters who were traditionally represented by the Labour Party. By appealing to this demographic on a current contentious issue, coupled with wide discontent with the incumbent Labour government, the Conservatives were able to amass a large electorate which secured their victory at the 1979 general election. While it has been argued that the efforts of campaigns such as RAR diminished the power of the NF, the mainstreaming and dilution of the single issue on which the party fought would also have been a contributing factor.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fascism in popular music 1976-1979**

The activities of the NF had a wide impact on British society, and diminishing its influence was the main focus of RAR's activities. However, it was also established in response to uses of fascist imagery and rhetoric in popular music culture. One of the main concerns in this regard was the use of iconography such as the swastika in punk style. In *Subculture*, Hebdige explains its appropriation by punks as a shock tactic which was void of fascist sympathies:

In punk usage, the symbol lost its 'natural' meaning – fascism. The punks were not generally sympathetic to the parties of the extreme right. On the contrary [...] [their] conflict with the resurrected teddy boys and the widespread

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<sup>14</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 13. He quotes Askan, a fifteen year old boy who organised a protest march of 7000 following the murder of Bangladeshi migrant Altab Ali, as saying that '[t]hese racial attacks, they are getting worse all the time. Worse since the NF on the scene. Worse since Mrs Thatcher's speech.' (Ibid., p. 16).

<sup>15</sup> Roger Sabin, "'I Won't Let That Dago By': Rethinking Punk and Racism', in *Punk Rock: So What?*, ed. Roger Sabin (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 199-218 (p. 203).

<sup>16</sup> Following Thatcher's election to Prime Minister, RAR began to run events under the banner of RAT – Rock Against Thatcher. RAR felt a need to alter the primary target of their campaign following the weakening of the NF.



support for the anti-fascist movement (e.g. the Rock against Racism campaign) seem to indicate that the punk subculture grew up partly as an antithetical response to the re-emergence of racism in the mid-70s.<sup>17</sup>

For Hebdige, the iconography of Nazi Germany appealed to punks through its evocation of 'a decadent and evil Germany – a Germany which had "no future"',<sup>18</sup> while carrying associations of 'the enemy' to those who lived through the Second World War.<sup>19</sup> As such, the appeal of the swastika lay in nihilism: the wearer derived pleasure from the inevitable negative reaction they were to elicit. Despite these associations with the original signification of the symbol, in Hebdige's analysis punks intentionally detached, in semiotic terms, the signifier (swastika) from the signified (Nazism), to create a new 'primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit. It was exploited as an empty effect.'<sup>20</sup> In Laing's view, this analysis 'suffers from a very basic fault: it assumes that the meaning of a symbol's use in a particular context is *single* and is determined by the intentions of the "producer" of that symbol-in-context.'<sup>21</sup> While Hebdige reads the swastika as an empty effect, the wearer cannot determine how it will be received by another observer. It is meant to shock – but to an audience it can appear to signify that its wearer is indeed supportive of fascism.<sup>22</sup>

Sabin is similarly dismissive of Hebdige's interpretation. Due to the ambiguity of their use,

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<sup>17</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Second World War associations were also found in the names of bands, such as Spitfire Boys, Joy Division and London S.S. – see Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>20</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 116-7.

<sup>21</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> In a contemporary context, this can also be applied to the 'reclaiming' of the word 'nigger'. 'The supposed reclaiming of the word doesn't mean it can no longer be used offensively. Firstly because not all black people agree the word can be reclaimed; and secondly, even those people who have reclaimed it still recognise its racist origins. But, who am I to assume that anyone using the word isn't fully aware of its origins, no matter how careless their use of it seems.' Dean Atta, *Nobody's N-Word*, BBC Radio 4, 3 October 2013, 11.30am.

flirtations with Third Reich imagery [...] merit a fresh approach – despite the stock dismissals of it by punk historians as simply a manifestation of the punk desire to shock, to ‘say the unsayable’ – sometimes unsatisfyingly theorised as some kind of postmodernist triumph of style over content. The wearing of swastikas, for example, did contain an element of ‘shock’ [...]. But it could also very possibly mean some degree of sympathy with fascist aims<sup>23</sup>

Sabin argues that not all punks wore the swastika ironically. He aims to dispel the apparent ‘exaggeration’ that punk was an ‘anti-racist’ movement, and show that racism could be found within the actions and songs of so-called ‘left-wing punks’ as well as of those bands who were supportive of the NF.<sup>24</sup> While Hebdige claims that punk was ‘an antithetical response’ to racism,<sup>25</sup> Sabin argues that we cannot presume that all uses of fascist imagery were ironic, and that their overt display allowed punk’s music and subculture to be used by far-right groups for their own ends.<sup>26</sup> This view was supported by the *NME* in 1977, first in an article titled ‘Fascism in the U.K. ’77!’ which outlined the growing fashionable use of fascist imagery and the potential for the exploitation of punks’ nihilism,<sup>27</sup> and also in a Julie Burchill article titled ‘New Wave neat say Nazis’:

Before – dear, unconcerned, sooo cool Reader – you bleat: ‘Politics got nuthin’ to do with rock an’ roll!’ you might care to clock a publication called *British Patriot* (motto: ham-fisted hammer et sickle with words ‘Communism &

<sup>23</sup> Sabin, ‘Rethinking Punk and Racism’, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199. Sabin’s argument, which is based on some of the same sources referenced here, includes some problematic interpretations. For example, he takes Laing’s assertion that ‘Oi’ (see chapter 4) ‘gained a national reputation as a music for racists, if not a music of racism’ (*One Chord Wonders*, p. 112) as evidence of Laing’s *belief* in this reputation. Sabin, ‘Rethinking Punk and Racism’, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 116.

<sup>26</sup> See Sabin, ‘Rethinking Punk and Racism’, p. 199. See also Street, *Rebel Rock*, chapter 3 (pp. 46-68): ‘Elements within the National Front, Britain’s neo-fascist political party, saw punk as providing a real opportunity for propagating the racist message.’ (p. 52) Here Street examines the uses of popular music by political parties, and how their ideological interpretations determine this use.

<sup>27</sup> Mick Farren, ‘Fascism in the U.K. ’77!’, *New Musical Express*, 22 January 1977, pp. 20-21.

Immigration – The Poison For Britain'), the 47<sup>th</sup> edition of which [...] bears an article cryptically entitled 'Rock And Reich.'<sup>28</sup>

Burchill proceeds to paraphrase the article, which describes RAR as 'an International Socialist front organisation [...] DOOMED to DESTRUCTION because of their mouldy music, lousy long hair and dumb dope-smoking.'<sup>29</sup> The author of 'Rock and Reich' characterises RAR supporters as hippies, anathema to fascists for their peace and love message and to punks for their connection to the failed 'old wave'. However, punks, who were apparently separate from RAR, are praised for their 'short hair and clean cut appearance,' alongside their penchant for 'Iron Crosses and Swastikas' (to which Burchill, in a demonstration of the political position of *NME's* editorial at the time, responds 'you still wearing them? You jerk'.)<sup>30</sup> Further, in their comparison of RAR and Red Wedge,<sup>31</sup> Frith and Street share Laing and Sabin's discomfort, 'especially given the familiar sight of youths with an RAR button on one lapel, an NF button on the other'.<sup>32</sup> These accounts serve to prove that, no matter its users' intentions, a symbol can never be 'blank'.

In addition to punk fashion, the actions of two major rock figures – David Bowie and Eric Clapton – exemplified a problematic complacency towards the threat of far-right attitudes.<sup>33</sup> Bowie, while touring his album *Station To Station*,<sup>34</sup> gave an interview to Swedish journalists in which he claimed 'Britain could benefit from a fascist leader':

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<sup>28</sup> Julie Burchill, 'New Wave neat say Nazis', *New Musical Express*, 23 July 1977, p. 11. *British Patriot* was a monthly publication of the British Movement.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See chapter 10.

<sup>32</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Bowie and Clapton were viewed differently through punk eyes: Bowie was respected as a forward thinking artist, while Clapton represented the 'dinosaur vanguard' punks symbolically opposed.

<sup>34</sup> This was during Bowie's 'Thin White Duke' period, a persona which had first been assumed during his tour for *Young Americans* – a record which is noted for its engagement with black American musical traditions.

As I see it I am the only alternative for Premier in England. I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader. After all, fascism is really nationalism.<sup>35</sup>

Upon his return to the UK, this controversy was further stoked when a photograph of Bowie, appearing to show him giving a Nazi salute whilst in a car at London's Victoria Station, was published in the British press.<sup>36</sup> Street notes that Bowie was one of the NF's 'approved' performers, one of a selection in which fascist associations were found in their supposed drawing on 'the sounds and ideas of "white European culture",' rejection of 'black American music,' and use of 'the Futurist imagery of the 1930s. These resources are linked by the racist right directly to the politics of Nazism and the idea of an Aryan race.'<sup>37</sup> Clapton, meanwhile, achieved notoriety in the punk era for repeatedly claiming support for the views of former Conservative Party MP Enoch Powell while performing at the Birmingham Odeon in August 1976.<sup>38</sup> Powell, by this point an Ulster Unionist MP, is widely remembered for his 'Rivers of Blood' speech of April 1968 in which, speaking to a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham, he 'denounced coloured immigration' – a move whose apparent racism widely appalled the British establishment.<sup>39</sup> In Robin Denselow's *When the Music's Over*, author and playwright Caryl Phillips remembers attending the Clapton concert, quoting the singer's opinion that 'Enoch's right – I think we should send them all back'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Tony Stewart, 'Heil And Farewell', *New Musical Express*, 8 May 1976, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> See *Ibid.* for the photograph. It is captioned with the previous quote, beneath which appears the article title, 'Heil And Farewell'. Such coverage is likely to have led to the interpretations of Bowie's 'wave' as a 'Nazi salute'.

<sup>37</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 55. This analysis obviously ignores *Young Americans*, demonstrating the irrationality of many far right analyses.

<sup>38</sup> The historian Richard Vinson sees Enoch Powell as an influence on Margaret Thatcher. *Thatcher's Britain*, chapter 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47. For Vinson, the speech 'anticipated and influenced Thatcherism. Members of Thatcher's shadow cabinet repeatedly referred to the importance of "immigration" as an electoral issue and Thatcher's remarks about the native population of Britain feeling "rather swamped" were seen as an attempt to exploit public feeling on this issue.' *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> Robin Denselow, *When the Music's Over: the Story of Political Pop* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 139.

### Establishment of RAR

It was Clapton's proclamations which prompted photographers Red Saunders and Syd Shelton, with Widgery, to co-sign a letter to the three 'inkies' – *NME*, *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* – in addition to the newspaper of the SWP, *Socialist Worker*, calling for the beginning of a Rock Against Racism movement:

When we read about Eric Clapton's Birmingham concert when he urged support for Enoch Powell we nearly puked. What's going on, Eric? You've got a touch of brain damage? [...] Own up, half your music is black. You are rock music's biggest colonist. You're a good musician but where would you be without the blues and R & B? You've got to fight the racist position, otherwise you degenerate into the sewer with the rats and all the money men who ripped off rock culture with their cheque books and plastic crap. Rock was and still can be a real progressive culture [...] We want to organize a rank and file movement against the racist position in music – we urge support – all those interested please write to: ROCK AGAINST RACISM [...] P.S. Who shot the Sheriff, Eric? It sure as hell wasn't you!<sup>41</sup>

The main concern of the letter is to portray Clapton as 'inauthentic' to diminish the potential influence of his statements on rock fans. By comparing him with the 'money men' of the music industry, who sit at the bottom of any hierarchical interpretation of authenticity, the signatories aim to devalue his 'racist position'. The postscript meanwhile serves as a telling parting shot: he did not 'Shoot the Sheriff' – Bob Marley did – and by covering the song he was falsely assuming the identity of a 'black rebel'. They recognise the implicit irony that a person with such strong views on immigration should achieve commercial success with a song composed by a black man which plays to the racial stereotyping of Afro-Caribbeans as delinquent.

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<sup>41</sup> *New Musical Express*, 11 September 1976, p. 50.

In Denselow's account, the reaction to the letter was 'remarkable. Letters of support flooded in, bands expressed their eagerness to become involved, and Britain's first pop-music-based political pressure group [...] was formed.'<sup>42</sup> He reflects that 'the plan' of RAR was to transform punk 'from its anarchic and arguably Fascist stance into an instrument of more useful social change' through 'the simple device of getting white bands and black bands to play alongside each other, under an RAR banner.'<sup>43</sup> Denselow's view of punk as 'fascist' is misguided, as emphasised by his own political analysis of the musical scene's leaders, in which he identifies none as racist. However, the reasons for the formation of RAR outlined above show that there was a desire to exorcise any racist tendencies.

For Frith and Street, '[if] Clapton's mean sentiments provided the grounds for RAR, its real political and cultural ambition was to seize the opportunity of punk and articulate a new form of proletarian cultural rebellion.'<sup>44</sup> This conclusion can be drawn via Widgery's statements proclaiming that RAR's 'aim was to become unnecessary by establishing an anti-racist, multi-cultural and polysexual feeling in pop music which would be self-generating, and to make politics as legitimate a subject matter as love.'<sup>45</sup> While RAR ultimately came to be defined as a 'punk' movement, their earliest gigs saw the prolonged involvement of Carol Grimes – a singer-songwriter whose style was closer to the rhythm and blues-tinged country rock of the Band than the obnoxious rock 'n' roll of the Sex Pistols.

Widgery recalls booking Grimes to play the first RAR event in November 1976 after fellow RAR activist Roger Huddle described her as 'not only a great singer but

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<sup>42</sup> Denselow, *When the Music's Over*, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.142.

<sup>44</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 115. He goes on to admit their failure, and laments that 'much of the more experimental pop music being produced on surviving independent labels like Mute, Rough Trade and Factory was artistically feeble and politically incomprehensible.'

playing RAR's kind of music.<sup>46</sup> Grimes also performed for RAR at a Royal College of Art event later that year,<sup>47</sup> as well as at London's Roundhouse – an occasion which prompted *NME* journalist Phil McNeill to observe that while it had seemed 'tentative, even slightly silly, at first, RAR has now progressed to the point where it can put £700 on the line to hire' the venue.<sup>48</sup> For Widgery, Grimes' presentation proved she was authentically engaged with the cause:

She loathed racism, lived in Bethnal Green with her son, came from a black music tradition and, although she was one of the best blues singers in Britain, never got anywhere with the record companies because she refused to be prettied up and sold like a shampoo that could sing.<sup>49</sup>

While there is evidence that RAR was more eclectic in its concert programming than the established narrative suggests, the familiar recipe of punk and reggae became routine as punk's cultural influence grew, and as such certain genres were not welcome. RAR 'did not extend into other proletarian forms (heavy metal, for example) nor into other black forms such as funk or disco (to which RAR was explicitly opposed.)'<sup>50</sup> Frith and Street deny that this was 'a racist position': rather it 'reflected punk contempt for "commercial" pop, for mainstream teenage dance music.'<sup>51</sup> This view of disco is confirmed by Burchill and Parsons, who claim that it 'featured no polemics beyond get down and boogie, party, party and Dating Do's

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. Forest Gate, in London's East End, was chosen to host their first gig since 'that was where the NF still claimed they were strong'.

<sup>47</sup> Miles, 'Get down with it and get closer: Rock Against Racism, Royal College of Art', *New Musical Express*, 25 December 1976, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Phil McNeill, 'R.A.R. collection for "Islington 18"', *New Musical Express*, 14 May 1977, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 42. As Street affirms, describing something as 'RAR's kind of music' was 'an ideological claim, one that drew upon a particular reading of music and its politics, one in which "authenticity" was identified in particular sounds and associations' – specifically that music which was part of a 'black music tradition'. Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

And Don'ts.<sup>52</sup> While for RAR 'the number of groups declaring for anti-racism mattered more than the quality of the music',<sup>53</sup> the perceived authenticity of their expression remained an overriding criterion in their acceptance onto a RAR bill. Frith and Street accept that the 'political organization [of RAR] was more organic [and] less overtly bureaucratic' than that of a political party.<sup>54</sup> However, they aim to show that it promoted strict ideologies of musical categorization: 'RAR [...] worked to confine its musicians, declaring that *this* is what punk or soul or reggae mean; they can stand for nothing else.'<sup>55</sup> Its leaders were keen to establish a community of involvement which accepted these definitions and could therefore be located within their conception of authenticity.

It is likely that, given their early choices of acts and the fact that punk only came to mainstream attention after the Sex Pistols' appearance on *Tonight with Bill Grundy* in December 1976, punk was not on the radar of RAR's key figures upon setting out to establish their 'rank and file movement'.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, Widgery admits that 'as committed lefties', he and his fellow RAR founders felt that, in their battle against racism, music 'provided the creative energy and the focus in what became a battle for the soul of young working-class England.'<sup>57</sup> As punk increasingly became a part of this 'battle', the genre's presence on RAR bills was inevitable: for Widgery, it 'was another response to the same social crisis which produced the NF's successes and it could go in any direction.'<sup>58</sup> This belief was widely held post-Grundy: in the 11 December 1976 issue of the *NME*, Burchill reported that the NF were 'threatening to align themselves WITH The Pistols' after the cancellation of their Derby gig by the

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<sup>52</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 69.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. As written.

<sup>56</sup> 'Yet without punk, RAR in turn might well have been little more than what [journalist and RAR national executive member] Kate Webb describes as "a dominant, fairly egocentric group of artistic people – most of whom were of a different generation and experience to the RAR people 'out there'".' Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.



city's council.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the progressive rock-oriented Music for Socialism – formed a year prior to RAR – supported the view of punk as fascist, themselves taking a more intellectual stance towards the use of music to forward socialist aims.<sup>60</sup>

As Ian Goodyer importantly notes, 'Only eight years separate RAR from the militant counter-cultural struggles of 1968.'<sup>61</sup> The growing problem posed by racism presented an opportunity for RAR's founders – some of whom 'were directly involved in' the events of 1968<sup>62</sup> – to put into practise what they had learned from the previous decade. As such, 'some staples of the 1960s underground, such as the use of political theatre, highly amplified rock music and innovative visual communication, came to characterise RAR activities'<sup>63</sup> which, in turn, fed back into the definitions of the increasingly popular punk sphere. For Frith and Street, RAR was an example of how punk 'allowed cultural auto-didacts to live out their theories.'<sup>64</sup> The goals of Widgery et al were similar to those of Music for Socialism: they differentiated themselves by drawing from 'the cultural experience' of being the 'first generation to have grown up in multi-racial inner-urban Britain' rather than basing their revolutionary rhetoric on intellectualism.<sup>65</sup> They lived the 'practise' while MFS developed the 'theory.'

Moreover, Frith and Street claim that the involvement of RAR's organisers with the SWP led to its representation of party political ideologies, and as such the movement has received criticism, mainly from the right-wing groups they fought

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<sup>59</sup> Julie Burchill, 'And after all that, the dear lads tussle with the city fathers', *NME*, 11 December 1976, p. 6. As written. The Clash interview in which Joe Strummer tells Miles 'we're anti-fascist...anti-violence...anti-Racist and we're *pro-creative*' appears in the same issue (Miles, 'Eighteen flight rock and the sound of the Westway').

<sup>60</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 68.

<sup>61</sup> Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 54.

against, that it attempted to use popular music to encourage socialist revolution.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the strongly socialist composer Cornelius Cardew accused the SWP of being 'parasitic' upon the punk scene, via RAR, as a means to further their own cause and divert 'young people's revolutionary sentiments': he felt that the discontent of punk did not portray a definite enough cultural goal to maintain a progressive influence.<sup>67</sup> Even within punk bands, there was a feeling that RAR's modes of operation were polarising. The Fall, while having performed at RAR concerts and being 'regarded as heavy-duty politicians', became 'disenchanted' with the movement's 'treatment of music as a mere vehicle for politicizing youth.'<sup>68</sup>

For Street, however, 'RAR's relative fragility was not a result of political division (no one disagreed with its aims), but was a consequence of stylistic affiliation; the very lack of any politics was what led to the reliance on music as the source of unity and strength [...]. RAR's problem stemmed as much from musical meaning as political interpretation.'<sup>69</sup> Those who ran RAR events privileged music that suggested political 'authenticity.' As such, it helped punk to attain its reputation as a 'left-wing' culture via a perception that it was a 'political' movement. The three bands examined in the following case studies demonstrate three different models of RAR involvement which assisted in the formation of this reputation. Where the Tom Robinson Band explicitly made left-wing political discourse the focus of their songs and performances, Sham 69 had activism thrust upon them as a result of their political ambiguity. In comparison with these two major label-signed groups,

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<sup>66</sup> NF activists established their own Rock Against Communism events. Sabin notes that in March 1979 a group of 'fascist bands [...] linked together, with NF backing, to form "Rock Against Communism" [...] an obvious riposte to RAR, and also the name of a regular column-cum-insert in *Bulldog*. How many gigs were played under this banner at this time is not known, but certainly a few.' Sabin, 'Rethinking Punk and Racism', p. 208. See also Stephen Duncombe & Maxwell Tremblay (ed.), *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), pp. 114-153. This volume collates evidence and analysis of racism in punk culture.

<sup>67</sup> Phil McNeill, 'Who is Cornelius Cardew?', *New Musical Express*, 10 September 1977, pp. 11-12.

<sup>68</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 178.

<sup>69</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 77.

however, the third – Alien Kulture – provide the most illuminating study, as it deals with the question of RAR's treatment of Asian communities: an issue for which the movement has been criticised by commentators on punk and racism.

## Chapter Eight

### Case Studies: Three 'RAR' Bands

#### The Tom Robinson Band

The Tom Robinson Band (TRB) were regarded in the punk era as a 'political' group.

This was apparent in 1978 when Burchill and Parsons wrote that they were

the first band not to shrug off their political stance as soon as they walk out of the recording studio. The first band with sufficient pure, undiluted unrepentant bottle to keep their crooning necks firmly on the uncompromising line of commitment when life would be infinitely easier – and no less of a commercial success – if they made their excuses and left before the riot. Compared to the Tom Robinson Band, every other rock musician is wanking into the wind.<sup>1</sup>

TRB are characteristic of the 'second wave' of punk bands in most regards. The 1977 release of their debut single '2-4-6-8 Motorway',<sup>2</sup> and their 1979 split bookend the band's output within the punk period,<sup>3</sup> and they were viewed as part of the 'New Wave' movement of the late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile the political subject matter of the majority of their songs, combined with their engagement with causes such as RAR, situates TRB within a lineage of bands from this era whose actions are taken as evidence that punk was a political movement.<sup>5</sup> However, their eponymous frontman did not become involved with punk rock exclusively to set in motion political

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<sup>1</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that while it was TRB's biggest hit, reaching number 5 in the UK charts, '2-4-6-8 Motorway' is a rare song in their catalogue as it has no explicit political context. The song's lyrics tap into the 'open road' fantasy of songs such as Steppenwolf's 'Born To Be Wild', albeit with a British twist; the lyrics describe the journey of a trucker with 'driving rain on the window frame.' Tom Robinson Band, *2-4-6-8 Motorway*, 7" single, EMI 2715 (1977)

<sup>3</sup> Steve Gardener, 'TRB: History' <<http://www.tomrobinson.com/trb/history.htm>> [accessed 13 January 2011].

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'Punk' and 'New Wave' were fairly interchangeable at this time.

<sup>5</sup> For Gardner, 'of all the politically oriented *punk* bands of the era - the Clash, Stiff Little Fingers, Gang Of Four, and whoever else you want to name - none was more political than TRB.' 'TRB: History'. My emphasis.

discourse. We shall see that while his songwriting and public persona emphasised this aspect of his presentation, he was determined to become a 'star' – an ambition which, as previously demonstrated, could for some contradict the apparent authenticity of his motives.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to forming TRB, Robinson was a member of an acoustic guitar-based trio named Cafe Society, who were influenced by the songwriting of 1960s acts such as Cat Stevens, Bob Dylan, James Taylor and Neil Young.<sup>7</sup> They signed with Konk Records – run by Kinks frontman Ray Davies – whose attitude towards their career ultimately led to Robinson's exile in October 1976: for Robinson, the label 'was really the Kinks['] toy: our whole careers, lives and expectations depended on their whims and availability.'<sup>8</sup> In May 1976, Robinson experienced punk for the first time, attending a Sex Pistols performance at London's 100 Club:

At the time I really resented it, and left after about 20 minutes – because I couldn't relate to it on any musical terms [...]. I was disturbed, turned off, but simultaneously intrigued.<sup>9</sup>

Not long after this initial experience he realised, through the press attention performers such as the Sex Pistols and Clash were receiving, that punk was becoming the zeitgeist, and, to 'make any impact', his music needed to be 'loud and basic [...] it needed a really big, bold gesture to impress' audiences.<sup>10</sup> Cafe Society, on the other hand, could be viewed as part of the popular music establishment, which Robinson realised had limitations. The growth in popularity of punk rock demonstrated that there was a shift in popular music reception: the 'new wave' held a greater currency with young audiences. These realisations, coupled with

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<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the 'star' systems in popular music culture, see Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, chapter 7; Frith, *Sound Effects*, chapter 6, and *Music for Pleasure*.

<sup>7</sup> Pete Frame, '2-4-6-8 Tom Robinson Bands', *The Complete Rock Family Trees* (London: Omnibus Press, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Robinson, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

interviews given on behalf of TRB, demonstrate that Robinson was not only intent on sustaining a career as a performer, but wanted to be 'a star'.<sup>11</sup>

While Robinson's decision to leave Cafe Society was motivated by careerism, he also cited an inability to express himself fully as a songwriter and performer within the trio – specifically with reference to his sexuality – as a reason for forming his own group. Robinson occupied a unique position as an openly gay rock performer in the late Seventies. He was admired by *NME*'s Phil McNeill for 'simply [being] homosexual rather than pose about and use the "abnormality" of gayness as titillation.'<sup>12</sup> Robinson had 'a horror/fear of appearing camp, because for him it's not a flirtation, it's a hard fact. No bisexual chic, and no gratuitous outrage'.<sup>13</sup> He was aware of the use of homosexual identity as entertainment, and instead performed the 'working man' identity redolent of pub rock, drawing attention to his sexuality through songwriting and political activism rather than his appearance and performance, telling Burchill in an interview for *NME* that 'I don't want to be known as a fag. I want to be known as a singer'.<sup>14</sup>

His song '(Sing If You're) Glad To Be Gay' became an anthem for gay rights, and led to Robinson's infamy, with the *NME* drawing much attention to it and his sexuality in their early coverage of the band.<sup>15</sup> Originally composed during his time in Cafe Society, 'Glad To Be Gay' was released by TRB on their live EP *Rising Free*. The song is a sarcastic attack on the perceived morality which 'informed' the persecution of homosexuals in the 1970s. Despite attempts to perform the song with

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<sup>11</sup> Phil McNeill, 'Tom Robinson', *New Musical Express*, 11 February 1978, pp. 25-30 (p. 30).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Julie Burchill, "'Let's go cruise the gay bars": Tom Robinson meets Julie Burchill', *New Musical Express*, 29 January 1977, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> See Tony Stewart, 'EMI say "yes" to gay power', *New Musical Express*, 20 August 1977, p. 3; Kim Davis, 'Tom Robinson Band, Marquee', *New Musical Express*, 17 September 1977, p. 48.

Cafe Society, Robinson found references to his sexuality met with resistance from his bandmates:

Because the other guys in Cafe Society weren't gay, I was obliged to suppress any reference to my being gay. It was alright to sing one line in one song, or wear a discreet badge on stage, but they were very, very paranoid about getting tarred with the brush [...] which is a bit like Bob Marley joining a white band and the others saying we don't want people to think we're niggers [...]. When I did the first demo of 'Glad To Be Gay' with Cafe Society, Dave Barker wouldn't sing backing vocals on it [...] he found it distasteful.<sup>16</sup>

Robinson's sexuality instigated his politicisation. During his time in Cafe Society he worked as a volunteer for Gay Switchboard – a phone-line service offering advice and counselling – which McNeill posits as 'his first "political" act [...] although he was openly homosexual by the time he formed Cafe Society, he was not "politicised" [...]. Being a gay activist began virtually as a hobby, and at first had little or no relevance to his "day job".<sup>17</sup> McNeill's rhetoric assists in the crafting of Robinson's political identity and its framing within the notion of authenticity. Where the connection to his day job may suggest a cynical use of politics as a marketing technique, his commitment to the cause as a 'hobby' demonstrates greater depth. This transition from 'hobby' to 'day job' is reflected in another *NME* interview conducted by Steve Clarke:

Gay Rights is an issue but I'm concerned with far broader rights than Gay Rights. It's almost a side issue. It's a side product of general oppression of people's own liberty, the liberty to decide what you do with your own body. And that liberty is seen in women's oppression above all [...]. Oppression of

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, quoted in Frame, '2-4-6-8 Tom Robinson Bands'.

<sup>17</sup> McNeill, 'Tom Robinson', p. 26.

coloured people who aren't allowed to work at certain things. You have to fight for the main thing. There's no point in picking out one little area.<sup>18</sup>

He adds, 'it's not that we stand for this, this, this, this and this. We stand for *this* [spreading his arms]'.<sup>19</sup> His realisation of these connections between minority groups led to a wider political outlook and identification with, as well as activism for, causes other than gay rights, which were associated with left-wing politics; anti-racism (RAR), women's rights (Spare Rib and abortion campaigns) and judicial issues (such as the 'Free George Ince' campaign.)<sup>20</sup> As such, these issues permeated Robinson's song writing and public persona.<sup>21</sup>

After making their live debut in January and attracting coverage from the popular music press TRB were signed to EMI in August 1977.<sup>22</sup> The deal was of popular interest: TRB were the first new wave band to be signed to EMI since their termination of the Sex Pistols' contract in January 1977.<sup>23</sup> Following the Pistols controversy, such a signing – of a group fronted by a homosexual man singing vehemently political songs – suggested that EMI saw marketing potential in a group that challenged right-wing morality. *NME* reported the news as a lead story, speculating that 'the deal could prove to be as controversial for the company as its relationship with the Sex Pistols was last year.'<sup>24</sup> Jon Savage assumes the suggestion of EMI outlined above, claiming that the deal 'offered the perfect chance

<sup>18</sup> Tom Robinson, quoted in Steve Clarke, '3-5-7-9 (Laying it on) the little white line...', *New Musical Express*, 22 October 1977, pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Robinson Band, 'TRB Bulletins Part 1' <<http://tomrobinson.com/records/trb/trbltns1.htm>> [accessed 14 June 2014]. George Ince was an East London gangland figure who was convicted on armed robbery charges based on the identification evidence of Police Officers, despite having not been picked out of an identity parade by civilian witnesses.

<sup>21</sup> RAR has been criticised for not recognising the connections between all oppressions and prejudices. See Kalra, Hutnyk & Sharma, 'Re-Sounding (Anti) Racism, or Concordant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents'.

<sup>22</sup> See Burchill, "Let's go cruise the gay bars", and 'Tom Robinson, Golden Lion', *New Musical Express*, 29 January 1977, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> See Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 287.

<sup>24</sup> Stewart, 'EMI say "yes" to gay power'.



for EMI [...] to claw back some radical chic.'<sup>25</sup> Robinson meanwhile claims that TRB signed with the label 'because nobody else wanted to know!'<sup>26</sup> He remembers that independent labels such as the Sex Pistols' employers, Virgin Records, 'turned us down flat, Stiff too,' which is why after they became 'successful, [Robinson] had little time for people who used to come up and say things like "How come you're signed to one of the big multi-national capitalist companies rather than one of the independents?"'<sup>27</sup>

After releasing '2-4-6-8 Motorway' and the *Rising Free* EP, TRB's debut album, *Power In The Darkness* came out in 1978. The design of the sleeve can be taken to reflect either EMI's decision to market the band with a political angle, or TRB's retention of creative control. Its cover depicts a large, yellow, clenched fist on a black background, a symbol which became iconic of the group. On the back cover, beneath a black and white photograph of the group appears three columns, the first of which contains the tracklisting. Alongside each track title appears a short quotation; for instance, the final, title track is represented by an Eric Idle joke titled 'Conservatives & Freedom':

The Tories believe that the basic freedoms are being eroded: freedom to avoid paying income tax; freedom to hang people; freedom to censor books, plays & television.<sup>28</sup>

'Too Good To Be True', 'The Winter Of '79' and 'Man You Never Saw' are summarised by excerpts of their respective lyrics, while 'Better Decide Which Side You're On' is illustrated by a lyric from the Clash song 'White Man In Hammersmith Palais': 'You think that's funny...turning rebellion into money [sic].' Opening track 'Up

<sup>25</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 396.

<sup>26</sup> Frame, '2-4-6-8 Tom Robinson Bands'.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Robinson Band, *Power In The Darkness*, LP, EMI EMC 3226 (1978), back cover. As written.

Against The Wall', meanwhile, is accompanied by a vaguely credited quote which further exemplifies the crisis rhetoric of this period:

'A friend of mine got shot with a pellet gun – four little white boys attacked him and one shot him in the face. The trouble is, when the backlash comes we wont [sic] know which white people are on our side.....' TEENAGE GIRL, N. LONDON 1978<sup>29</sup>

The central column of text provides credits for production, engineering, publishing, photography and art direction, above which are two paragraphs of text which 'explain' the band: first a brief biography, followed by an extended quotation from 'The Tom Robinson Feature by Tom Robinson', an article from the 17 September 1977 issue of *NME*, in which Robinson responds to an article published in the same magazine two weeks previously by Bill Nelson, frontman of the progressive rock group Be-Bop Deluxe. Nelson had criticised the discussion of politics in popular music and raised the issue of inauthenticity with regard to those musicians doing so within the capitalist music industries. Robinson, predictably, takes issue with Nelson's criticisms, and his concluding paragraphs appear on the back cover of the record:

Politics isn't party broadcasts and general elections, it's yer kid sister who can't get an abortion, yer best mate getting paki-bashed, or getting sent down for possessing one joint of marijuana, the GLC deciding which bands we can't see [...] it's everyday life for rock fans, for everyone who hasn't got a cushy job or rich parents. I got no illusions about the political left any more than the right: just a shrewd idea which of the two side's gonna stomp on us first. All of us – you, me, rock 'n' rollers, punks, longhairs, dope smokers, squatters, students, unmarried mothers, prisoners, gays, the jobless, immigrants, gipsies [...] to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. As written.

stand aside is to take sides. If music can ease even a tiny fraction of the prejudice and intolerance in this world, then it's worth trying. I don't call that 'unnecessary overtones of violence'. I call it standing up for your rights. And if we fail, if we all get swallowed up by big biznis before we achieve a thing, then we'll havta face the scorn of tomorrow's generation. But we're gonna have a good try. Fancy joining us?<sup>30</sup>

In the third column appears an advert, along with contact details, for RAR. Coupled with the contact details for Gay Switchboard which appear on the back sleeve of *Rising Free*, this demonstrates a desire to use the access point of the record sleeve to engender political consciousness. Further, the band distributed 'bulletins' at gigs from July 1977 – photocopied, fanzine-style sheets with information on forthcoming gigs, news and lyrics, as well as contact information for organisations such as RAR and Gay Switchboard.<sup>31</sup> They also featured regular articles titled 'It Couldn't Happen Here Dept.' which compared current affairs related to the NF with the events of Nazi Germany, and brought attention to religious fundamentalism in Pakistan and prisoner rights.

TRB's attitude, presentation and, most importantly, age placed them within the new wave, but in terms of sound they followed a rock 'tradition.' This was recognised by critics: Charles Shaar Murray found it 'fairly obvious [...] that Tom Robinson really likes The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and The Clash',<sup>32</sup> while Peter Frame heard them as 'mainstream rock, descended from the Mott the Hoople school, but modernised to meet current audience priorities – the concerned/thoughtful end of the New Wave'.<sup>33</sup> Savage, on the other hand, takes affront with TRB's 'classic rock'

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Robinson's phonetic spellings emphasise a supposed working classness, in contrast with the people who have a 'cushy job' and 'rich parents'.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Robinson Band, 'TRB Bulletins Part 1'; 'TRB Bulletins Part 2'.  
<<http://www.tomrobinson.com/records/trb/trbltns2.htm>> [accessed 13 March 2011]

<sup>32</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, 'Tom Robinson Band: 2-4-6-8 Motorway', *New Musical Express*, 15 October 1977, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Frame, '2-4-6-8 Tom Robinson Bands'.

sound, describing them as 'an orthodox mixture of Rock clichés and dragging tempi. Conservative music was cloaking radical politics'.<sup>34</sup> Their adherence to notions of political authenticity was closely related to the classic rock sound they performed.

Songs such as 'Up Against The Wall', the opening track to *Power In The Darkness*, demonstrate a recognition of the punk rock sound world, while retaining an attachment to rock arrangements. The song begins with an overdriven guitar sound redolent of the heavily criticised 'big guitars'<sup>35</sup> on the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks*,<sup>36</sup> whose I-V-IV-V G major chord pattern is fed further bombast by a hard hit snare and bass drum fill into the fifth bar tutti; Brian 'Dolphin' Taylor supplies a solid rock drum beat in time with Robinson's tonic note bass line, while organist Mark Ambler holds a high G chord distant in the mix. The quick tempo and chord pattern of the verse certainly suggest a punk character to the music, however the instrumental mix and timbres give the record a 'classic rock' rather than 'punk' feel; more Thin Lizzy's 'The Boys Are Back In Town' than the Clash's 'White Riot'.

The rock theme is furthered by Danny Kustow's guitar solo after the second chorus, whose string bends, double stops and hammer-on and offs – all in the upper register of the guitar – contrast with, for example, Pete Shelley's solo in Buzzcock's 'Boredom' discussed previously. It lacks melodic relevance to the song's other musical material, appearing to function primarily as a demonstration of Kustow's impressive technical ability on the instrument. The final verse breaks down into a reggae style; high hat rolls, bass drum and bass guitar staccato hits and palm muted guitar nod towards the perceived relationship between punk and reggae. The sound world of 'Up Against the Wall' is completed by the introduction of Robinson's voice. As a result of the almost exclusively political subject matter of TRB's songs, Robinson's vocal delivery is either passionate and declaiming, or sarcastic and droll

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<sup>34</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 396.

<sup>35</sup> See Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Both records were produced by Chris Thomas.

(as heard in 'Glad To Be Gay'), as he disseminates his observations and opinions. In 'Up Against the Wall', which he uses as a soapbox to point out social problems and their solutions, the former applies: Robinson pronounces each word loudly and precisely. He begins by describing a 'typical' adult view of youth culture, experienced as intimidation:

Dark haired, dangerous school kids,  
 Vicious, suspicious, sixteen,  
 Jet-black blazers at the bus stop,  
 Sullen, unhealthy and mean.<sup>37</sup>

The boredom experienced by teenagers is further exemplified by their 'fighting in the middle of the road' and obsession with Yamaha FS1E mopeds. This provides a generic model of teenage activities, expressed as anti-social behaviour. In the chorus Robinson explains society's woes as a result of governmental incompetence at a local level, and tyrannical policies set in Westminster:

Look out listen can you hear it?  
 Panic in the County Hall!  
 Look out listen can you hear it?  
 Whitehall, up against the wall!  
 Up against the wall...<sup>38</sup>

While the lyrics of the first verse focus exclusively on perceptions of youth culture, those of the second and third verses highlight wider social issues. The second verse hinges on the word 'high' – 'high wire fencing', 'high rise housing', 'high rise prices on the high street, high time to pull it all down' – before describing problems faced by those living within these situations:

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<sup>37</sup> Tom Robinson Band, 'Up Against The Wall', *Power In The Darkness*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

White boys kicking in a window,  
 Straight girls watching where they gone,  
 Never trust a copper in a crime car,  
 Just whose side are you on? <sup>39</sup>

The question posed by Robinson at the end of this verse seems literally to be aimed at the 'copper' in question – 'Are you on the side of the victim or the perpetrator?' However it can be assumed to be posed to the listener as well – 'are you with the NF, or are you with us?' A later album track, 'Better Decide Which Side You're On', is a leftist critique of political apathy in the face of the threat posed by the NF. Over an F# minor i-iv-i progression, Robinson makes a series of bitter accusations of apathy within his target group; the 'downtrodden people' who 'always bear the brunt,' and 'just sit back' on their 'fat backsides till [they] have to face the [National] Front.'<sup>40</sup> He is criticising those who in 'Up Against The Wall' he is seeking to defend. While in the previous analysis he portrays the working class as trapped in a situation which is not of their own making, here he iterates that their political future is very much in their own hands.

In his discussion of TRB contemporaries Magazine, Simon Reynolds finds it 'tempting' to read their song 'Shot By Both Sides' as an answer record to 'Better Decide Which Side You're On'.<sup>41</sup> The title of the Magazine song implies the left and the right as the sides in question, without making any explicit comparisons of the two in its lyrics. For Reynolds, "Shot' captures the era's sense of dreadful polarization, and the vacillation of those caught in the cross-fire with the centre ground disappearing beneath their feet. It is about a non-combatant, an *in*activist. It's a defence of the bourgeois art-rock notion that the individual's struggle to be

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Tom Robinson Band, 'Better Decide Which Side You're On', *Power In The Darkness*.

<sup>41</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 21.

different is what really matters.<sup>42</sup> Indeed front man and lyricist Howard Devoto<sup>43</sup> can be seen as one of the 'trendy thinkers' in 'Better Decide' whom Robinson tells to 'forget those ifs and buts', as shown in Reynolds' account of the writing of 'Shot By Both Sides'. Its lyrics arose from

a heated political argument between Devoto and a socialist girlfriend [...] 'I [Devoto] was playing my devil's advocate role, saying "Yes, but..." [...] In the end, exasperated, the girl declared, 'Oh, you'll end up shot by both sides.' The phrase stuck in Devoto's head and came to encapsulate his emerging ideal: the truly heroic life based on not making your mind up.<sup>44</sup>

Robinson's vocal delivery in 'Better Decide' again falls into the declaiming category, pronouncing words harshly and attacking B, F and P phonemes. The result is a haranguing recording which does not allow for discussion or subjective interpretation on how to tackle or question fascist movements; an example of the popular song's inability to engage in argument. Street, in his discussion of folk music's association with politics, references Jon Landau's criticism of Bob Dylan's 'Masters of War' in which he 'attacks the crude dichotomies established by the song: it is "a song of deep hatred" which exhibits "Dylan's polarizing and dualistic tendencies":

For Landau, the polemical character of the song works against its apparent intention. It insults, rather than involves, the listener – a listener whom Landau

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Emphasis as written.

<sup>43</sup> Devoto was the original Buzzcocks vocalist, leaving the band after the release of *Spiral Scratch* in response to the popularization and genrefication of punk. For Reynolds he 'exemplified the secret truth of punk: it was a movement based in the rebellion of middle-class misfits as much as those mythical "kids on the streets" [...]. Punk's own rhetoric, though, suppressed the art school and university undergraduate contribution, and amplified the imagery of tower blocks, urban deprivation and youth unemployment. This was taken as gospel by the music press and newspapers [...]. The resultant self-parodying yobbishness Devoto found both "silly" and "quite unpleasant". Punk, he says, "felt like a cult thing originally, and in a way you could say that what went wrong is that it *caught on*".' Ibid., p. 15, emphasis as written.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.21.

imagines is at a concert or at home, but not at a peace rally. Dylan creates illusory, disposable enemies, and because they have no substance, there is no point of access for the audience. There is no use for the listener's imagination and no explanation for the origins of 'them' and 'us'.<sup>45</sup>

'Masters of War' exemplifies what Denisoff terms the 'rhetorical' protest song, 'which stressed individual indignation and dissent but did not offer a solution in a movement.'<sup>46</sup> This is in contrast to the 'magnetic' form, which appeals 'to the listener for purposes of attracting the non-participant receiver to a movement or reinforcing the commitment level of adherents.'<sup>47</sup> While the enemies in Robinson's songs are always identified, 'Better Decide', despite seemingly encouraging the listener to join RAR/the ANL, falls in between magnetic and rhetorical. It suggests the listener should oppose the NF, but the party is not the target of the song: it is the imagined listener whom Robinson supposes is treating the conflict of left- and right-wing politics with indifference.

These songs were written with a specific performance context in mind: RAR concerts. Indeed, Robinson has said that 'the Tom Robinson Band was utterly unknown when I first heard about Rock Against Racism. I wrote to the PO box number in the *Melody Maker* and said, "I'm not anybody but count me in"'.<sup>48</sup> The band became involved with RAR from its very beginnings, which must have influenced Robinson's songwriting. However the context in which recordings are heard differs from that of live performance, allowing for multiple interpretations. The atmosphere of a RAR gig, where everybody involved – performers, staff, audience – is assumed to be anti-racist, provides a perfect setting for communal fist-raising, a

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<sup>45</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, 'Evolution of the Protest Song', in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, ed. R. Serge Denisoff & Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally & co., 1972), pp. 15-25 (p. 18).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

<sup>48</sup> Robinson, quoted in Vulliamy, 'Blood and Glory'.



context which allows, Street suggests, the 'politics' of any music to become 'linked (and confused) with the occasion at which it is performed – Ray Charles singing at a Civil Rights demonstration or Steel Pulse playing at a Rock Against Racism rally somehow make the performance "radical".<sup>49</sup>

The process of listening to a record at home, however, induces personal reflection: it is the venue where the liberalism of popular music culture is most clear. This makes the song difficult to listen to without questioning Robinson's relentless finger-pointing, against his intention that the audience should question the actions of the NF and its supporters.<sup>50</sup> Despite the over-arching political subject matter of Robinson's lyrics, it cannot be assumed that those who attended TRB concerts were doing so because they identified with his opinions, as reflected in this *NME* live review of TRB from March 1978:

Sometimes [Robinson is] guilty of misjudgement, and perhaps only to emphasise his daring commitment snarls at the capacity audience that they shouldn't just sing along with 'the latest hip' NF song [...] but do something active, like going to a local Anti-Nazi League meeting, the date and time of which he announces. A faction of the audience freeze, reluctant to join him on the canvas.<sup>51</sup>

This audience reaction problematizes the impact of TRB as a political force. While undoubtedly the group's audience understood, and perhaps agreed with, Robinson's message, such apathy towards overt activism suggests that an appreciation for the group's music occasionally took precedence over a new political

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<sup>49</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> This could have had an effect on the 'shelf life' of Robinson's oeuvre and in part explain why he has not been 'canonised' like groups such as the Sex Pistols and Clash. His recordings are tied to a particular time through their lyrics, and as such they lack the universality which is required for pop songs to remain both commercially and culturally viable after their release. However, they are, nonetheless, 'authentic' artefacts of the punk era.

<sup>51</sup> Tony Stewart, 'Will the real Tom Robinson audience please stand up?', *New Musical Express*, 25 March 1978, p. 42.

consciousness. For Widgery, Robinson 'had to become a diplomat for the Left and was then denounced by it for the crime of being diplomatic.'<sup>52</sup> By taking such an earnest approach to his self-ascribed role, he set himself a challenge which could never be completed. As such 'some nights, when a bitter edge entered his voice as the audience bawled along with "Glad To Be Gay", he revealed the strain he was under, the vulnerability below the calculated stage presentation and the cost artistry such as his extracted.'<sup>53</sup> Widgery's definition of Robinson's work as 'artistry' points to a possible reason for his apparent failure to drive his audience entirely towards political action. The audience were there to engage with his 'art'; to receive their part of the exchange. By attending the concert and singing along, they had given their support. RAR had established terms whereby 'rocking' against racism was a viable form of action. There was no need to attend further political engagements.

### **Sham 69**

Sham 69's experience of RAR's politics was markedly different to that of TRB. Where Robinson engaged with RAR as a participant, Sham 69 were approached by the movement in an attempt to gain access to their sometimes racist fans. For *Rock Family Trees* author Pete Frame, Sham 69 – and particularly their frontman, Jimmy Pursey – exemplify the fleeting nature of the majority of pop musicians' careers:

Since [pop] music was invented, [music writers'] treatment of rock acts has followed the same pattern: they're discovered, championed, praised, tolerated, criticised, mocked, & finally ignored. Sometimes they are remembered, but not too often. Jimmy Pursey is the perfect example. One minute he's a Hershams yobbo working down Wimbledon greyhound track. Next minute he's a star, growing up in public & living like a goldfish. Next

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<sup>52</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

minute he's in the dumper. And what was he? Just a bloke doing the best he could, looking for a place in history.<sup>54</sup>

This assessment can be applied to an array of performers who found themselves approaching wide mainstream appeal in the late Seventies. While the Sex Pistols, Clash and Jam have all assumed a position within the canon, the recorded output of bands such as Buzzcocks, TRB and Sham 69, while still respected by cultural gatekeepers of their own generation,<sup>55</sup> exist as artefacts of the period. Examination of the popular music press in the late 1970s reveals glowing appreciation for these bands: however, the passing of time has seen diminishing reception and discussion of them. Frame explains this thus:

Punk rock was just a cleanser, removing all the crap that was clogging up the system – and the only punk musicians to survive and succeed were those with the talent to adapt and get into the industry mainstream as quickly as possible. Some, like Jimmy Pursey, knew from the outset that their days were numbered, that they may not even make it into the eighties: 'I was on the shit heap a year ago, and I know I'll be back on it in a couple more.'<sup>56</sup>

Despite Pursey's acceptance of his lot, the *NME* took Sham 69 to be spokesmen for their generation, often emphasising their 'authenticity' as a means of giving their literal and musical statements validity. In her first review of the group for the paper, Julie Burchill told readers that 'Sham play rock in the manner that American Negroes fight; not for fun but *for existence*. If they weren't onstage they'd be in a cell or on a railway track.'<sup>57</sup> They represented what Burchill and Parsons termed 'dole queue rock and roll'.<sup>58</sup> For them, the so-called second wave of punk rock was a

<sup>54</sup> Pete Frame, 'Damned & Crucified', *The Complete Rock Family Trees*, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> The establishment of the BBC radio station 6Music has helped in this regard.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Julie Burchill, 'Count Bishops/Sham 69, 100 Club', *New Musical Express*, 27 November 1976, p. 43. My emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Burchill & Parsons, *The Boy Looked At Johnny*, p. 51.

dichotomy: on one side were the 'real' bands who spoke of 'real' issues, such as Sham 69 and TRB: they were respected for their recognition and discussion of social injustices, as well as their engagement with political causes such as RAR. On the other were the bandwagon-jumping 'lower-middle-class Tories' such as the Damned and Jam.<sup>59</sup> Their 'inauthenticity' meant they were not believed worthy of the attention they were granted.

Sham 69's perceived 'realness' stemmed from Pursey's insistence on authentic expression and proclamations that he was 'one of us', having come from the same background as those who fanatically supported the band. His community of fandom was formed around a perceived 'authenticity of experience.'<sup>60</sup> However, this created a conflict wherein he became an apparently unwilling icon and de facto leader of disenfranchised white working class youths. Frame's history of the group details how original members Billy Bostik, Johnny Goodfornothing and Neil Harris were sacked by Pursey 'for non-belief in material',<sup>61</sup> with Pursey explaining their dismissal thus:

I said to my first group "look, do you really believe in the songs we do?" Finally they told me they didn't. Well, I couldn't have that. I'm in this because I believe in it [...] and I believe in everything I sing or I wouldn't do it.<sup>62</sup>

This determination is shown further in an *NME* interview conducted by Paul Morley, in which Pursey stated that 'all the time I want to express myself and say exactly what I think [...]. Why go out onstage and say things I don't really mean?'<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. It is interesting that they should direct such bile at the Jam, who have over time come to be canonised partly for Paul Weller's social-realist lyrics.

<sup>60</sup> Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', p. 220.

<sup>61</sup> Frame, 'Damned & Crucified'. We can only assume that poor Harris was not deemed worthy enough for an alter-ego.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Morley, 'Don't Follow Leaders', *New Musical Express*, 12 November 1977, pp. 9-10 (p. 9).

However, he asserted that by doing so he did not present himself as 'a leader' with solutions to the ills of society:

All I can do is get out on that stage, sing about it and make people enjoy it at the same time as listening to it. I'm not a politician, I'm not a leader, all I am is a bloke who gets on stage and sings rock 'n' roll.<sup>64</sup>

By downplaying his cultural position, Pursey conformed to punk rhetoric: *anyone* in the audience could be in his position.<sup>65</sup> However, this attitude actually served to cement his position as a leader: he was regarded by his fans – in complete contradiction to his 'wishes' – as a hero; his dismissing this role only served to strengthen his fans' perception of him. He spoke to, and for, those who felt that nobody within mainstream culture could represent them. Pursey was hailed, by his fans and the music press, as an idol. As suggested by Frith and Horne, this is endemic in American 'rock' romanticism: Pursey was positioned as a 'democratic representative, speaking *for* the culturally dispossessed.'<sup>66</sup>

Sham 69's involvement with RAR began as a result of the movement's hierarchy's recognition of Pursey's influence on his fans, many of whom were supportive of far-right political groups. In his retrospective of RAR, Widgery identifies Sham as one of three bands, alongside Madness and the Angelic Upstarts, to which 'the fascist skins desperately tried to adhere [...] the NF were after the skinheads, and, via them, the punks.'<sup>67</sup> As exponents of 'Oi', Sham 69 attracted a large number of skinhead fans, whose reputation for racist violence preceded them wherever they went.<sup>68</sup> Indeed this reputation is thought by Laing to have been cultivated by Oi's

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Indeed they often were: stage invasions occurred frequently at Sham 69 shows, with those fans often encouraged by Pursey to sing with or instead of him.

<sup>66</sup> Frith and Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 174. As written.

<sup>67</sup> David Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> Rob Beasley, friend and 'manager' of the band Alien Kulture, described Sham 69's performance at Kingston Polytechnic as the 'most violent gig I've ever been to.' Personal interview, 26 May 2011, London.

'founder' – Garry Bushell – after he 'compiled the first album of Oi! tracks but called it *Strength Through Oi!* (a reference to a famous Nazi slogan) and stuck a picture of a scowling, threatening youth on the sleeve'.<sup>69</sup> Widgery is particularly disparaging of skinhead culture:

Skin bravado was, in fact, loser nihilism; all they were good at was aggro and kicking people when they were down. Their power came from having nothing to lose. They knew where they were (lost) and what they were (rubbish) in a world which didn't even need their muscle power any more.<sup>70</sup>

He claims that the Angelic Upstarts, Madness and Sham 'quickly dissociated themselves [from the fascist element of skinheads]. Not out of liberal sentiment or record-company pressure but because the bands just weren't racist or violent (musicians seldom are)'.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, Sham 69 gigs retained a reputation for violence and an NF presence. In an *NME* report on Sham 69's debut RAR gig, Brian Case details how, at their previous two London gigs, Sham's 'occasionally violent skinhead following had already gone over the top at The Roundhouse and hit the national papers with a Cossack showing at the London School of Economics [...] I would [assume] that [the skinheads have] taken Jimmy Pursey's [pre-gig] ultimatum to heart: any trouble, and he'll never play London again.'<sup>72</sup>

The gig ended as planned with no trouble, even if some NF-supporting fans were still present; 'but apart from a little antiphonal chanting – "What We Got? Fuck All/National Front!" – their contribution is indistinguishable from the general singsong.'<sup>73</sup> When Case interviews a Sham 69 fan about their feelings towards the

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<sup>69</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 112.

<sup>70</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 79.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* Obviously this is a fairly dubious assertion.

<sup>72</sup> Brian Case, 'Angels With Dirty Faces', *New Musical Express*, 11 March 1978, pp. 32-33 (p. 32). Widgery remembers that despite the previous violence, 'RAR went ahead promoting the gig as *Smash Race Hate in '78*. [Although] there were private misgivings that it could instead turn out to be us who got smashed.' Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 80.

<sup>73</sup> Case, 'Angels With Dirty Faces', p. 33.

NF, they tell him 'I agree wiv some of it, but I'd vote Conservative. Stop more coming in, but those that're 'ere – it's just as much their country.'<sup>74</sup> The same fan demonstrates the level of worship devoted by many to Pursey:

Sham 69 are for the people. They make sure everybody has a good time, not like the punks. Johnny Rotten don't care, 'ee loves violence. Jimmy Pursey tries to stop it. Punks are stoopid – earrings froo the marf and nose and that.<sup>75</sup>

It was fans such as these that RAR wished to reach. Widgery claims that the band was put onto the bill in response to the British Movement taking to the stage at 'a Sham 69 Rainbow gig and [standing] there seventy strong *Sieg Heil-ing*'.<sup>76</sup> While the band were not engaging in such activities themselves, Widgery and RAR recognised that Pursey was allowing it to take place, not because he endorsed it, but because of the discomfort he suffered in dictating to his fans how they should behave and what they should believe:

Pursey [...] was OK: a lot of mouth, as desperate to be a star as Judy Garland, but basically a greyhound fancier from Hersham [...]. He was torn between what he knew was right and his racist friends who ran the sound crew and security. The first step was to ease him off the fence.<sup>77</sup>

For Widgery, the gig 'was not about punishment' of potential members of the British Movement that may show up, 'but to show that RAR could hold the gig, support Jimmy and ease the fans in the right anti-fascist direction, if necessary separating them [from antagonistic British Movement members] by force.'<sup>78</sup> As Laing suggests,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 32. As written. Case's use of phonetic spellings is a technique often used by *NME* journalists during this time as a means to characterise interviewees. Compare with the back cover of TRB's *Power In The Darkness*.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 80. The Rainbow gig in question is the same to which Case refers above.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

RAR's own implicit position, like that of Pursey, was one of 'realism': the role of the artist was to tell the truth. But the RAR leadership's Marxist politics also led them to the view that an honestly realistic description of the state of things would *necessarily* imply a leftist politics. Thus, for RAR all Pursey needed to do was to follow through his existing insight to its (socialist) conclusion.<sup>79</sup>

The group were ambivalent 'to the political commitment of both left and right that was occurring in their audience.'<sup>80</sup> While bands such as TRB approached RAR as willing participants, Sham 69 were approached *by* RAR as an opportunity.<sup>81</sup>

Widgery believes that 'if RAR meant anything, it meant preaching to the unconverted'.<sup>82</sup> While this was certainly the aim of the Sham 69 show, other RAR gigs presented the opposite situation. Fans of bands such as TRB were more likely to sympathise with an anti-racist position due to the subject matter of Robinson's songs and the political stance of the group. As such, little was done in terms of 'educating' audiences when TRB were on the bill. We can relate this to Denisoff's assertion that in pre-McCarthy America there was 'a flurry of propaganda song activity' whose 'social impact [...] was severely limited by the isolation of the areas in which they were performed. Songs of persuasion [...] were little more than a "feedback" colloquy: the labor [sic] singer performed songs to audiences comprised of militant union members [...]. Consequently, the songs did little more than reinforce existing attitudes.'<sup>83</sup> The same could be said of Sham 69. Where TRB were known for their promotion of equal rights for homosexuals, ethnic minorities and women, Sham 69 fed the frustrations of white working class youth back to them from the stage. For Pursey,

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<sup>79</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 111.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, Pursey took to the stage at RAR's second London Carnival in Brixton of September 1978 to state 'Nobody's going to tell me what I should or should not do. I'm here because I support Rock Against Racism.' Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 93.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets', pp. 807-808.



the first forms of punk, if you wanna talk about it, were people like the Vikings who were rowing boats across, and when they was getting whipped and that, they was singing [...] because you sing in pain and you sing from the heart.

Punk music is SUPPOSED to be about that, you know what I mean?<sup>84</sup>

The themes of oppression and anti-authority were writ large in his statements and in the songs of Sham 69, and both constituted what it meant to be authentically 'punk' for Pursey. Indeed, Laing suggests that the band's name – supposedly taken from a faded piece of wall graffiti in their hometown which originally read 'Hersham 69' – in conjunction with 'Pursey's reputation, his commitment to "the street" and his emphasized proletarian distrust of anything to do with the "hippies" which had flourished in the late 1960s,' can be read as 'a reference to the false ideals of a past which punk rock energetically rejected.'<sup>85</sup>

The band's debut album, *Tell Us The Truth*, is littered with signifiers of authenticity – most significantly splitting of the record into a 'live' side (A) and 'studio' side (B) – 'punkness' and youth culture.<sup>86</sup> The title alone demonstrates a mistrust of authority, which is further emphasised by the record's cover. It shows the band backed into the corner of what we can assume to be a police interrogation room, while the disembodied arm of a suited man points accusingly at them.<sup>87</sup> While the other band members jeer and lean defensively against the wall, Jimmy Pursey is shouting and standing upright, ready to attack: his left hand is clenched into a fist, while his right hand points accusingly at the suited man.<sup>88</sup> With each party pointing the finger at the other, it is implied that both are demanding that their target should 'Tell Us The Truth'. The 'policeman' demands that this group of untrustworthy punks come clean

<sup>84</sup> Case, 'Angels With Dirty Faces', p. 33. As written.

<sup>85</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 49.

<sup>86</sup> Sham 69, *Tell Us The Truth*, LP, Polydor 2383 491 (1978).

<sup>87</sup> The back of the album sleeve has individual photographs of the group each waiting at a table to be interviewed. Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Since the photograph is taken from the perspective of the suited man, Pursey is also pointing at the photograph's observer.

about a misdemeanour, while the band, who believe that they receive a steady stream of lies and disappointments from authority figures, demand the truth from the faceless 'suit'.

The song titles and lyrics also represent this mistrust of authority: 'George Davis Is Innocent', 'They Don't Understand' and 'Hey Little Rich Boy' all make reference to the injustices felt by Pursey and his audience. On the 'live side' of the record, Pursey tells the audience that 'Rip Off' is 'all about all the nutters that buy things down at Kings Road and Oxford Street', before shouting in the chorus: 'It's just -- a fake -- make no -- mistake -- A rip off -- for me -- a new Rolls -- for them.'<sup>89</sup> No adult is to be trusted, be they a policeman or an entrepreneur. Meanwhile, the presence of a 'live side' on the record signifies the 'authentic expression' which was so important to Sham 69. The group's live performances were extremely well received within the music press, and played a large part in the creation of their authentic identity: Parsons' first live review of the band for the *NME* described how 'Jimmy Pursey spits, screams, sings the vitriolic lyrics with the kind of total self-conviction that is only found in children and the insane.'<sup>90</sup> These help to construct Sham 69 as bearers of 'the truth', doing all they can to deliver messages to their peers. Of course by doing so live makes the truths even more honest; with no studio trickery to hide behind Pursey can deliver his message *directly* to his disciples.

As such, the live experience of Sham 69 was extremely important to their fans, which, in turn, was recognised by the group. In his introduction to 'Ulster', Pursey asks the assembled throng to 'dance and sing [the song]. We want you to sing it

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<sup>89</sup> Sham 69, 'Rip Off', *Tell Us The Truth*. The double hyphen is a visual representation of the guitar and drum 'hits' which punctuate Pursey's vocals. While the obvious interpretation is that Sham 69's antagonist on the front cover is a policeman, the ambiguity of his uniform allows him to represent an array of mistrustful figures, such as the exploitative capitalists Pursey targets in this song.

<sup>90</sup> Tony Parsons, 'Next week's big thing'. Also see Burchill, 'Count Bishops/Sham 69, 100 Club'.

'cause you're gonna go on the LP with us, 'cause you're us [audience cheers].<sup>91</sup>

Part of Sham 69's appeal to young fans was their breaking down of the traditional band-audience relationship: rather than standing onstage performing to the crowd, Pursey encouraged audience members to come onstage with them to sing, dance, or merely become part of the act by framing the band, doing nothing. Case provides a typical example of audience reactions:

A forest of arms shoot up: "SHAM SHAM SHAM!" Like a plaited cross between Esalen and a totem pole, skinheads cluster on stage. Jimmy Pursey, well into his first number, disappears from view. A vast security geezer in scimitar sideboards and a Confederate T-shirt parks his chips, and, invading the stage, patiently lowers the lads in armfuls to the dance floor as if bucolically bringing in the sheaves.<sup>92</sup>

Pursey's appreciation and understanding of his audience was integral to his accumulation of political capital. However, in RAR's view this capital was going to waste. By approaching Sham 69 they demonstrated an acute desire to diminish the influence of the NF on Britain's youth, since using the band would allow their message to reach people who may otherwise have been 'lost'. By putting Sham on one of their bills, RAR were also boosting their own publicity by courting controversy. Sham were notorious thanks to the reputation of their fans, and this reputation must have led some supporters of RAR to question the movement's reasoning behind asking them to play. However the unlikely combination led to plenty of attention for RAR from the *NME* and the national press, allowing the event to be viewed as a success in terms of promoting anti-racism. Meanwhile Sham 69 continued the path identified by Frame above, joining the league of bands who could not maintain a career beyond the punk period.

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<sup>91</sup> Sham 69, 'Ulster', *Tell Us The Truth*. 'Special Thanks To All Our Mates Who Appear On This Side' is written underneath the tracklisting on the LP's back cover.

<sup>92</sup> Case, 'Angels With Dirty Faces', p. 32.

## Alien Kulture

Alien Kulture differ from the two previous groups in that their vision for forming the band came *after* involvement with RAR. Where Robinson was involved in RAR prior to the formation of TRB, he was already a musician and stardom was a personal objective. They are also notable for their racial make-up: alongside white guitarist Huw Jones were three children of Pakistani immigrants – singer Pervez Bilgrami, bassist Ausaf Abbas, and drummer Azhar Rana. Alien Kulture identified with RAR and felt that music was the best way to make their politics and views, which were largely derived from the experiences of the band's British-Pakistani members, heard. Indeed, their involvement with RAR itself came after participation in protests against the NF. In a personal interview, singer Pervez Bilgrami remembers that, leading up to the 1979 general election, he and his bandmates

were demonstrating everywhere we could against the National Front, it was as simple as that. We'd go to Islington Town Hall, Battersea Town Hall: we went all over the place. We'd protest against the National Front then go on to a gig somewhere maybe – Tom Robinson or maybe the Ruts [...] that sort of thing. [...] we got involved in Rock Against Racism [...] it was Battersea Town Hall wasn't it that we met some activists, Left wing activists, who, basically, were trying to get a gig off...<sup>93</sup>

As well as demonstrating Bilgrami's political activism, this statement also emphasises his taste in music – 'punk rock' with a political angle – and the fluidity and amateurism with which RAR gig organisers operated. It also dates the band's

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<sup>93</sup> Pervez Bilgrami, personal interview, 26 May 2011, London. This interview was conducted at Bilgrami's business' offices; also present were the band's bassist Ausaf Abbas, their close friend Rob Beasley and Shakir Kadri, a filmmaker who has been working on a documentary about the band. See appendix for a complete transcript of the interview. The Ruts were keen supporters of RAR and released their debut single 'In A Rut' through reggae band Misty In Roots' *People Unite* label in 1978. Jo-Anne Green, 'Ruts – Music Biography, Credits and Discography', *AllMusic* <<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/ruts-mn0000492357>> [accessed 27 May 2013].

'coming of age' in late 1978/early 1979: while obviously their involvement with protests was taking place in the run up to the general election, this was the period during which TRB and the Ruts were at their most active. While Alien Kulture are described by journalist Sarfraz Manzoor as 'the Asian punks',<sup>94</sup> the band was actually born well into the post-punk era where musical sophistication had replaced the inexperienced thrash of two years earlier. However, the zeitgeist appeared not to be of great concern to the band in terms of their own musical creativity. For bassist Ausaf Abbas, they were 'very much a punk rock group' whose formation came about since he and Bilgrami

knew each other socially, sort of through the Pakistani community, we [...] bumped into each other once or twice and then discovered a sort of common interest in punk, and then we all sort of started getting together and going to gigs, and going to National Front [protests]<sup>95</sup>

Abbas and Bilgrami's involvement with RAR even extended to their being elected to RAR's national committee in the movement's later years, at which point RAR 'were obviously trying to broaden their appeal' following the general election.<sup>96</sup> Abbas recalls that 'we'd already...by that time started Alien Kulture and were messing around with that',<sup>97</sup> and as such exemplified the lack of interest in the movement which occurred following the NF's poor showing at the general election. The band's 'manager' and close friend Rob Beasley confirms the view that RAR adapted to oppose Thatcher following the election, recalling that

when Thatcher got elected [...] it kind of, shifted a bit and RAR started to morph a bit into a [...] band of [anti-]Thatcherhood, [since they believed the Tories had] stolen the NF's clothing [...] the musical thrust of stuff then just,

<sup>94</sup> Sarfraz Manzoor, 'Whatever happened to the Asian punks?', *The Observer Review*, 10 January 2010, pp. 6-7 (p. 6).

<sup>95</sup> Ausaf Abbas, personal interview, 26 May 2011, London.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

kind of moved towards being more about Thatcher and about, you know, two million, three million unemployed rather than the National Front who'd all sort of disappeared.<sup>98</sup>

RAR and Alien Kulture's anti-Thatcherism stemmed in part from their belief that she had won the election thanks to her views on immigration – views which they assert had given the band their name after her *World In Action* interview.<sup>99</sup> For Bilgrami their change in focus was inevitable given the circumstances:

It was all going that way, you know? Tom Robinson Band broke up, the Clash went to America, this that and the other, it all had to end, it all had to progress to something else and [...] whereas you could fight against the National Front or the British Movement or the League of St George or Column 80 or whatever they're called on the streets, eventually it progressed onto, basically, mainstream politics...<sup>100</sup>

As active participants in the running of RAR events, as well as performers on their stages, Alien Kulture contradict the criticisms of Kalra, Hutnyk and Sharma that 'there was no involvement of Asian bands in RAR';<sup>101</sup> and Sabin, who believes that 'punk's biggest failure in the political sphere was its almost total neglect of the plight of Britain's Asians.'<sup>102</sup> Such statements can be appreciated on the terms that at RAR's peak, none of its high-profile acts were Asian. For Kalra et al, RAR was mostly 'white boys' adventure rock for both organizers and performers'.<sup>103</sup> In retrospect, only white acts have enjoyed sustained career success after RAR:

<sup>98</sup> Beasley, personal interview.

<sup>99</sup> As previously noted, this interview is often misquoted: Thatcher actually said 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a *different* culture' (my emphasis.) 'TV Interview for Granada *World in Action* ("rather swamped")', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*.

<sup>100</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview. Here Bilgrami means Column 88, whose name derives from code: 88 stands for 'Heil Hitler' since H is the eighth letter of the alphabet.

<sup>101</sup> Kalra et al, 'Re-Sounding (Anti) Racism, or Concordant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents', p. 139.

<sup>102</sup> Sabin, 'Rethinking Punk and Racism', p. 203.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

British reggae acts have not been enthusiastically canonised in the dominant narratives of popular music history. While RAR gave a platform to lesser known acts of all races, it was the white acts who drew in the crowds – for example, the Clash at the Victoria Park 'Carnival Against the Nazis' in 1978. However, Sabin's assertion is highly problematic. Punk was not a political movement with stated aim: as Street suggests, this criticism forms part of a 'catalogue of failures' identified by certain analysts which derive 'from a perspective which sees RAR as the representation of a political ideology and locates those failures...in the character of those ideologies.'<sup>104</sup> Moreover, if those involved in the staging of punk events did 'neglect' British Asians, how did Alien Kulture come to be part of the RAR milieu? When asked if he felt that Asian communities were represented by RAR, Bilgrami is clear that:

they weren't [...] you can't be represented when there is nothing there because, you know, fine you can have people appear on a RAR stage and they're Asians but there weren't Asian bands there, there weren't Asian performers.... There was, literally, us; Tara Arts group; Hanif Kureishi; Paul [Bhattacharjee] – who was a member of Tara Arts – and one other arts group in Slough and that was literally it. [...] there was nowhere we could have representation, whereas black communities did. You had Steel Pulse, or Misty, or Aswad, or any number of bands or performers – we just didn't have the numbers.<sup>105</sup>

While there were large numbers within Asian communities who were opposed to racism, those who engaged with white-led cultural movements were limited. Reggae acts were booked for RAR events as they 'represented' the black communities in

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<sup>104</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 85.

<sup>105</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview. He goes on to say that as a group of Asian artists they 'sort of meshed: Hanif Kureishi came to one of our gigs; Tara Arts – Paul we knew through going to protests, we went to a Tara Arts play and saw him there acting, you know, so, it sort of *did* come together, we did loosely know each other, there was this community. We had the same, same notions, the same beliefs really.'

London and Britain's other major cities, but Asian communities did not have a popular musical genre which was taken to represent them. Kalra et al dispute this, justifying their perception of RAR's racist exclusion of Asian acts by stating that 'Bhangra bands were playing the circuits of weddings and community events in a context largely neglected by the organisers of RAR.'<sup>106</sup> While this may have been the case, Abbas believes that at that time Bhangra was not a form which spoke to young Asians, and as such would not have been an appropriate style with which to *rock against racism*:

I think if Bhangra had existed back then, then there would have been a clear Asian string. That didn't exist back then [...] Bhangra was basically, you know, what peasant farmers in the Punjab used to sing, it wasn't what sort of hard Asian kids on the streets of London were doing. But that clearly, you know, that desire to have music and to identify with music is very strong, and somewhere along the way the Asian community worked out that Bhangra was going to be their equivalent of punk and reggae, and which it clearly was.<sup>107</sup>

While Alien Kulture's presence on RAR bills demonstrates as false any assertion that Asian bands weren't involved with the movement, it is worth noting that while lyrically their songs spoke of their experience as 'Asian Youth' dealing with a 'Culture Crossover', the music they were set to was clearly inspired by the reggae-influenced, yet largely white, punk bands they followed. There is no musical language which suggests a desire to incorporate elements of traditional Pakistani music into their songs. As the lyrics of 'Culture Crossover' suggest, their interest lay more in British popular music culture than the traditional culture and desires of their Pakistani families:

I don't wanna go to the mosque,

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<sup>106</sup> Kalra et al, 'Re-Sounding (Anti) Racism, or Concordant Politics? Revolutionary Antecedents', p. 139.

<sup>107</sup> Abbas, personal interview.



I wanna go to Nashville.  
 I don't care about the PSA,  
 I wanna hear my records.  
 I don't wanna live in Pakistan,  
 I wanna live my life here.  
 I don't read the Qu'ran,  
 I wanna read my N-M-E!<sup>108</sup>

'Culture Crossover's lyrics deal with the frustrations the band felt in trying to compromise between their home lives with their families and the youthful rebellion which could be indulged outside. This sets up a dichotomy between the traditional Pakistani Muslim culture of their 'elders', who teach them 'how to pray five times a day' and stop them from enjoying youthful exploits which they see as essentially British: they 'want to [...] run and dance and sing and shout', and have enough 'pressure all around' them 'without having to fight [their] elders.'<sup>109</sup> Abbas recalls his father learning of the song's lyrical content:

That was sort of like, 'oh shit'; that was a pretty serious moment. And what I explained to him, I said 'look, I'm not – we're not saying that that's our view, we're talking about Asian kids,' and I said 'you know what *you* need to understand is that Asian kids in many places are leading dual existences: the way that they live at home – the way that they behave in front of their parents – and what they do when they leave the home are complete and total contradictions.' And I said that 'I am honest and open with you. I am going to a National Front demonstration; I am going here; I am going to a party: you know they will lie about what they're doing,' and managed to sort of fudge it

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<sup>108</sup> Alien Kulture, 'Culture Crossover', *Asian Youth/Culture Crossover*, 7" single, RARrecords (no catalogue number). The Nashville Room was a pub venue in the West Kensington area of London well performed by punk bands. 'PSA', meanwhile, refers to the Pakistan Social Association.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

enough to be able to get away with it, but that was probably the most uncomfortable bit.<sup>110</sup>

It is clear, however, that while the lyrics of the two songs which comprise Alien Kulture's only commercially released material are presented as examples of their desire to represent the views of young British Asians, they are representative of their own opinions and desires of the time. Abbas and Bilgrami both recall avoiding Mullahs who would call on their houses on Saturday afternoons to instruct them to go to mosque, and admit that their 'parents were walking a very difficult line' in being relaxed about their socialising with their white peers, since it was frowned upon by other members of the community.<sup>111</sup>

On the B-side of their 7" single, 'Asian Youth's lyrics deal with these tensions more sorrowfully. Musically, it is based around a repeated descending IV-iii-ii-I (varied as IV-iii-ii-V-I during the verses) chord pattern in C, while its lyrics deal with the struggle referred to in 'Culture Crossover', stating the irrelevance of skin colour to the desires and frustrations of all British youth. Ultimately however, its opening lines emphasise the sense of alienation they felt as Asians, which was writ large by the racial make-up of RAR line-ups: 'You want something to belong to, you want something to hold on to.'<sup>112</sup> Young British Asians did not feel entirely accepted by mainstream culture because, as the chorus states, they were not represented by it:

Asian youth, oh where you been?

Asian youth, you wanna be seen.

Asian youth, you dunno who to turn to, Asian youth.<sup>113</sup>

However, despite some cultural differences at home, their lives were not dissimilar to those of their white and black peers:

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<sup>110</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Alien Kulture, 'Asian Youth', *Asian Youth/Culture Crossover*.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

[You] go to college, you read your books, buy your white pegs and structureless jackets.

Weekends you're on maximum pose down at the disco.<sup>114</sup>

The fact that there is acrimony between races in spite of their identical desires is a cause for sadness, prompting sentiments which echo those of Sham 69's 'If The Kids Are United' – a song which sought to encourage Pursey's peers and followers to unite against the establishment they mistrusted:

[You] come from different countries, you belong to different religions.

Hate each other, you swear and fight but you don't realise that you're the same.

Nothing's achieved by being divided why can't we be united?<sup>115</sup>

Where 'Culture Crossover' speaks from the first person – 'we', 'us', 'I don't wanna' etc<sup>116</sup> – 'Asian Youth's protagonist is an inclusionist outsider, accentuating the song's sorrowful tone. The band maintains that their lyrics were not designed to 'preach' specific agendas, but instead to present 'a story' and ask the audience to 'decide whether it's right.'<sup>117</sup> Besides 'Asian Youth' and 'Culture Crossover', unreleased singles such as 'Arranged Marriage'<sup>118</sup> and 'Airport Arrest'<sup>119</sup> deal with the pressures and paranoia felt by Asians of all ages by posing, by today's standards, familiar narratives of their respective scenarios. However, one of their

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. The chorus of Sham 69's song uses the lyrical refrain 'if the kids are united, they can never be divided.' Laing suggests that this type of rhetoric was absent from the 'original' punk groups – 'the Sex Pistols, Stranglers and Clash' – who 'rarely concern themselves with establishing the positive existence of a movement to which they belong. Negativity and individuality dominate the lyrics'. Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 72.

<sup>116</sup> Alien Youth, 'Culture Crossover'.

<sup>117</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

<sup>118</sup> Alien Kulture, 'Arranged Marriage' <[http://alienkulture.org/music\\_player.html](http://alienkulture.org/music_player.html)> [accessed 2 June 2013].

<sup>119</sup> Alien Kulture, 'Airport Arrest' <[http://alienkulture.org/music\\_player.html](http://alienkulture.org/music_player.html)> [accessed 2 June 2013].

later songs, 'Roots, Rock, Ratskank',<sup>120</sup> while linked to specifically Asian fears through its reference to Thatcher's 'talking 'bout an alien culture' – referring to the often misquoted interview for *World in Action* from which the group took their name (see Chapter 7, note 13) – and 'tighten[ing] up the immigration laws', is different in that it shows that, like RAR, their political frustration had widened to incorporate more issues than race alone. The song's title is representative of its musical content, which, featuring off-beat guitar chords and reverb-heavy piano, is obviously highly influenced by the bands of Two Tone, but the word 'Ratskank' can be taken as an amalgamation of the reggae term skank<sup>121</sup> and Rock Against Thatcher (or RAT) – a phrase featured in the final lyric of the song. Here the lyrics deal with Thatcher, the 'Grantham grocer's daughter [who] is a national joke', albeit one which is 'not funny anymore', and her rhetoric of 'the national interest', while also attacking the Tory government's attitudes towards women:

Make it hard to get an abortion, the only ones who want 'em are the dirty  
whores.

Woman's leader who don't care, about a woman's right to choose  
'cause her and her henchmen making damn sure

That a woman knows her place.<sup>122</sup>

The influence of ska and reggae can also be heard and seen in the music and the presentation of their 7" single, which demonstrate a close kinship to the burgeoning Two Tone movement.<sup>123</sup> The middle eight of 'Asian Youth' features a ska-influenced

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<sup>120</sup> Alien Kulture, 'Roots, Rock, Ratskank' <[http://alienkulture.org/music\\_player.html](http://alienkulture.org/music_player.html)> [accessed 2 June 2013].

<sup>121</sup> The word from which 'ska' is thought to be derived, skank refers to the off-beat percussive style of guitar playing which permeates much ska and reggae, as well as the style of dancing which is performed to it.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> For Frith and Street, Two Tone 'could be said to have brought the RAR message into mainstream pop...Groups like Madness and UB40, with major pop followings throughout the 1980s, ensured that a particular kind of "realistic," working-class, political pop survived the collapse of punk and the rise of the New Romantics.' Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 71.

rhythm section solo, during which the guitar accompanies with muted semiquaver 'ska's on the off-beats, while the reverb-laden guitar solo in 'Culture Crossover' is clearly influenced by reggae-derived dub music. The cover of the single's sleeve meanwhile features the word 'KULTURE' writ large across the centre, with a diagonal split which sets the type in white against a black background on the left hand side and vice versa on the right. Superimposed on this is a hot pink bordered 'ALIEN' set diagonally across in stamp effect, while the outer border is a two-tiered chessboard effect, each rectangle of which bears the name of a person or group written in lower case:

andy j., andy l., [...] azhar, annie, [...] au pairs, athar a., [...] Battersea punx, brum rar, [...] glenn the skin, graham, [...] jonesy, james, [...] lse sham crew, liz, [...] mekons, meenu, [...] pervez b., [...] rob the slob, rar, [...] syd, stef, s.l a g., [...] tara arts, [...] zaf.<sup>124</sup>

The reverse of the sleeve is reminiscent of TRB's *Power In The Darkness*, bearing photographs of each band member alongside unattributed quotes:

Who had struck the killer blow? At the in-quest eleven witnesses swore they saw the teacher hit by police. Not one of the 3 SPG witnesses said they saw anyone hit on the head.

TWO of my friends are married to policemen. It's sickening to hear their husbands brag about beating up Indians or frightening motorists pulled up...

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<sup>124</sup> Alien Kulture, *Asian Youth/Culture Crossover*, front cover. Each band member's name appears ('azhar', 'jonesy', 'pervez b.', 'zaf') alongside established bands ('au pairs', 'mekons') who had 'all done RAR gigs' and, according to Beasley, were just 'who you listened to' (personal interview); friends; fellow RAR and punk 'crew's, including a group of friends who called themselves the 'South London Anarchist Group', or S.L.A.G., whose name is stylised with a lower case 'a' within a circle on the sleeve; and fellow Asian artists Tara Arts. The name 'glenn the skin' is notable as a demonstration that identification with skinhead culture did not suggest an inherent racism.

When did you last see a pogoing Punjabi, a mod moslem or a bop-ping Bengali?<sup>125</sup>

Bilgrami attributes the final quote to *Bulldog*, the magazine of the NF, and cites it as one of their reasons for starting the band – to those young Asians looking for a role model, they said ‘now you’ve got us. And that was our method of fighting back, and hopefully the audience would take notice and then you’d carry on and give your message, whatever your message is.’<sup>126</sup> However, while they started the band to give voice to their feelings and hoped to represent an Asian audience, they found that the demand from the community for an Asian punk band was not so high:

I think at the time, when we were going to punk gigs and this and that, most Asian kids were going to discos. They liked disco music. Although some disco music was political most of it wasn't. You know I, I personally liked it, nothing against it. But you know, it needed, to me it's an easy way out: you don't have to really think about the music. You can go out on a Saturday night, you can have a good time, you can dance like Michael Jackson, you come back at 3 in the morning and it's finished [...] you know, I went to my fair share of disco nights [...] I really enjoyed it but that – that was one side of it – but the *proper* side of it was [...] what we were doing.<sup>127</sup>

For Bilgrami, speaking as a person who received his ‘introduction to politics at Grunwick’,<sup>128</sup> music has a higher purpose than just ‘entertainment.’ His musical

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<sup>125</sup> Alien Kulture, *Asian Youth/Culture Crossover*, 7" single, back cover. The first quote refers to the killing of Blair Peach at the Southall Riot, 23 April 1979. An etching on the B-side of the record states ‘Remember Southall and Newham’.

<sup>126</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. The dispute at Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories centred on pay and conditions and the right to belong to a trade union; the workers – mainly Asian immigrant women – received support from the SWP-sponsored and RAR-affiliated *Right To Work Campaign*. The strike was led by Jayaben Desai (or ‘Mrs Desai’ to Bilgrami), which ‘In a period of generally low levels of working-class militancy... provided a vivid illustration of the ways in which the politics of race and class were inextricably entwined.’ Goodyer, *Crisis Music*, p. 26.

enlightenment could be seen to be tied to the punk era, and as such his philosophy on the purposes of music can be said to have been shaped by firsthand experience of the work of RAR, which demonstrated that music could be used to inform and radicalise, developing an attitude that to be 'proper', or authentic, music should address social issues. However, the band members' political views were not set in stone by RAR. For Beasley, his and Alien Kulture's approach to politics 'was pretty non-dogmatic':

Me and Ausaf went to a Rock Against Racism sort of reunion, [...] where you know there was [...] loads of old faces from Rock Against Racism who'd been involved in the set up [...] some of them were really you know, *still* about stuff and we just [...] I mean you know we cared passionately and were bothered, but we weren't, you know you wouldn't try and split hairs in terms of, you know, which particular piece of dogmatic Marxist theory was the, you know, the 'ultimate truth' to which all humankind should follow. We just [...] weren't like that [...] we were, much, much simpler fellows!<sup>129</sup>

For Bilgrami,

some of them [people from RAR] were always like that and, you know, they haven't changed. I think politically we haven't changed either you know; we still believe in what we believe in. You know I'm still a staunch believer in the Labour Party, you know I'll still fight for what's right and rail against what's wrong and I fundamentally haven't changed. I don't think anyone, any one of us has fundamentally changed, it's, you know, the situation we're in has changed – we're older, erm, less hair.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Beasley, personal interview.

<sup>130</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

While their political beliefs have not changed, it could be said that Abbas, Bilgrami and drummer Azhar Rana<sup>131</sup> benefitted from Thatcherite policies. In his history of the band, Manzoor, while stating that they deserve to be remembered 'as three young Asians and their white friend who, through punk and politics, did their part in helping others with a different culture feel less alien',<sup>132</sup> focuses on the apparent contradiction between their existence as a band and the lives they now lead. While the 'very fact that Abbas, Rana and Bilgrami have been so successful is a testament to the way Britain has changed for the better in the past 30 years'<sup>133</sup> with regard to race relations, Manzoor emphasises that 'all the children of the Asian former band members attend private schools' as a marker of their newfound class status.<sup>134</sup> He states that Bilgrami 'set up a recruitment agency with his wife that was initially based in one room in East Ham. Today it is in Mayfair and Bilgrami lives in a six-bedroom townhouse seconds from Baker Street'.<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile 'Rana is a partner in a firm of chartered accountants and lives in a five-bedroom detached house set in three-quarters of an acre. And Abbas is now the managing director of a large American investment bank.'<sup>136</sup>

Manzoor's agenda with the article appears to be to question the authenticity of the band's political idealism, as well as to contextualise them as examples of the growth in class migration as a result of the Thatcher governments: he quotes 'the rather portly and bald Abbas'<sup>137</sup> as saying that 'the success I have had confirms that liberal democracy and capitalism is a pretty fantastic system [...]. At the time, we railed against so much of what she was doing but when you look back you think thank God she did that.'<sup>138</sup> Abbas and Bilgrami recognise Manzoor's insinuations: for

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<sup>131</sup> Rana was absent from my interview.

<sup>132</sup> Manzoor, 'Whatever happened to the Asian punks?', p. 7.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. Bilgrami's offices were the location for the interview.

<sup>136</sup> Manzoor, 'Whatever happened to the Asian punks?', p. 7.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Abbas, quoted in Ibid.



Abbas, Manzoor is asking 'did we change, or did society change to make it easier for us and did society diffuse our rebellion by making [...] life easier for us?'<sup>139</sup> For Bilgrami, Manzoor ignored the implicit context of the group. They, like Sham 69 and many others, had 'a shelf life':

if you look at the premise of the article [...] it's the band that, we know is only gonna last a certain time, it's Sarfraz saying that, you know, we should have gone on and been more political, been more rebellious. You know, you progress, frankly, and that's simply it. And we knew that, you know we had a number of songs in us, that was it. You know, we weren't Lennon/McCartney: that was it. You know [...] the band had a shelf life, it ended [...]. We were never ever gonna be in Alien Kulture in 19-you know, 2010. It was never, never gonna happen. Apart from [...] Jonesey being the musician, the three of us weren't ever going to be musicians because we weren't. [...] I certainly wasn't a musician. So [...] it depends [...] how much you knew about us at the time really.<sup>140</sup>

While Abbas, Beasley and Bilgrami all recognise worth in the lyrical content and ambitions of Alien Kulture, they remain modest about their musical abilities and about how far their musical 'career' would have extended. The band had garnered enough attention from fellow activists and musicians to be invited to perform alongside Two Tone mainstays the Specials at their 'Peaceful Protest Against Racism' concert at Coventry's Butts Athletics Stadium on 20 June 1981<sup>141</sup> – a week after the release of their seminal single 'Ghost Town' – organised in response to the murder of twenty year old Satnam Singh Gill in the city centre on 18 April of the same year.<sup>142</sup> However the concert clashed with Abbas and Rana's final exams at

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<sup>139</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>140</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

<sup>141</sup> Manzoor, 'Whatever happened to the Asian punks?', p.7.

<sup>142</sup> Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix*, p. 112.

the London School of Economics and, according to Abbas, 'being sort of good Asian boys we decided to focus on getting our degrees instead of pretending to be sort of punk rockers'.<sup>143</sup>

For Manzoor, this decision meant that the band 'miss[ed] out on huge exposure that could have catapulted them towards fame and success.'<sup>144</sup> While they saw themselves as less than amateur musicians, by following the familiar narrative of punk – learning three chords and starting a band – Alien Kulture perhaps had more potential for success than they realise. They 'had no ambitions to be big [...] no ambitions to do commercial gigs [...]. It was a very simple attitude, you know your Desperate Bicycles – it was easy, it was quick, go and do it, and that, that's what we did.'<sup>145</sup> Abbas remembers the formation of the band thus:

I mean the band itself [...] was very straightforward. I don't think Pervez had ever sung before in his life, I'd never played a musical instrument before in my life. Azhar actually could drum a little bit. The three of us were Pakistanis and that's why we brought Jones in because we actually needed somebody who vaguely knew about music [laughter from other interview subjects]. And Jones had enormous credibility because he claimed to be a sort of, distant cousin of Mick Jones from the Clash [more laughter]. He actually did look like him.<sup>146</sup>

Abbas and Bilgrami feel that their Pakistani heritage meant that they were not predisposed to the performance of Western rock 'n' roll music. They view their engagement with British youth culture as oppositional to the expectations of their community. Abbas remembers that they were part of a 'little Asian renaissance [...] where it wasn't just Asian people working hard and dreaming about when they could

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<sup>143</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>144</sup> Manzoor, 'Whatever happened to the Asian punks?', p. 7.

<sup>145</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview. Here Bilgrami refers to the Desperate Bicycles song 'The Medium Was Tedium', whose chorus lyrics are actually 'It was easy it was cheap, go and do it.'

<sup>146</sup> Abbas, personal interview. Bilgrami followed up by stating 'No he was a cousin. He was, he was Mick Jones' cousin.'

catch the first PA flight back to Pakistan, it was actually about a generation of Pakistani kids who were growing up and saying "Yes, we want to do this sort of stuff here because this is home and this is what we like."<sup>147</sup> Through growing up amongst British youth culture it became 'theirs'; however this led to conflict with their elders. Bilgrami, whose 'mother was a widow', felt 'she was put on because people would always tell her stories about her [three] sons [...] and the one big story was that, "now your son's in a punk band." You know, we could do anything, but being in a punk band it was really, really frowned upon'.<sup>148</sup> In addition, they found that some of their peers had little understanding of their activities. After one of their TV appearances, Bilgrami

was coming back from work [...]. Two girls walked by, ten yards after they shouted "Oi Elvis" and I thought you just don't understand, because they patently didn't. Because if they'd have said "Oi Joe Strummer" I'd have turned around and said yes I am [...]. Maybe it was Elvis Costello, I don't know...<sup>149</sup>

While they and their friends identified with the politics and music of the punk era, few of their peers were interested. For Abbas, 'the medium [punk] that we were using was one that was quite alien to' the rest of the Asian community.<sup>150</sup> Other than 'a core group of Asian followers who were really a lot of sort of extended friends' of the band, he feels that they didn't broaden significantly the appeal of punk amongst Asians.<sup>151</sup> Bilgrami agrees, saying that while they mainly started the band to try to encourage more Asians to attend demonstrations and gigs, young Asians would 'be at the disco on a Saturday night [...] they weren't out really where it *mattered*'.<sup>152</sup> They believed that it was only after the Southall riot that 'Asians came out and

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<sup>147</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>148</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview. My emphasis.

protested', and that they 'never [protest] until it's on their doorstep'.<sup>153</sup> Nonetheless, Bilgrami believes that 'in our little way we achieved' in bringing Asians together to protest racism, citing examples such as playing at the front of a march through the West End to protest the British Nationality Act of 1981, at which he could see 'for miles and miles just Asian faces and it was good to see once in a while that it wasn't white led'.<sup>154</sup>

While their peers perhaps didn't identify with their means of expression, Abbas believes that their message was understood if only for being 'partly rebellious, partly standing up and being counted and not being sort of beaten down'.<sup>155</sup> However, their intentions and approach did lead to some 'strange situations':<sup>156</sup> Beasley remembers instances at gigs where 'a group of Asians would come in and, sort of stand at the back of the room and just stare [...] and they'd leave when the band had finished their set and wouldn't stay for the rest of the gig'.<sup>157</sup> Bilgrami also recalled the story of their second gig in Birmingham:

the girl who organised the gig thought it would be a good idea to get the great and good Asians of the community to come yeah, and there was us and these 50-year old, middle class Asians who came to see an Asian punk band in Digbeth Civic Hall, and it was a very incongruous situation: they didn't want to be there, we probably didn't want them to be there because they were uncomfortable, but someone thought it was a good idea. You had these odd situations every now and then. But it was, it was well-intentioned but, you know, seemed a bit strange.<sup>158</sup>

## Conclusions

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Abbas, personal interview.

<sup>156</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

<sup>157</sup> Beasley, personal interview.

<sup>158</sup> Bilgrami, personal interview.

All three of the bands examined above are notable for their uses of authenticity as a means to strengthen their political identity, and more specifically for their relation to RAR's typical audience. TRB performed to that audience frequently; Sham 69's audience were an auxiliary community RAR viewed as the *unconverted*; and Alien Kulture were members of RAR's typical audience, a community who were already converted to the movement's ideals. Despite the apparent outsider status of each group – homosexual, disenfranchised white working class, Pakistani – all three were to conform to mainstream rock ideologies of authenticity. Tom Robinson sustained a consistent self-narrative through his politically-motivated lyrics; Jimmy Pursey cemented a fanbase which viewed him as an idol in spite of his assertions that he was 'one of us'; and the members of Alien Kulture battled with the authenticity of their Muslim Pakistani upbringing to assert a new self-identity in terms of rock sincerity.

Where punk had apparently sought to negate rock's assumption of Romantic values, by the time of the release of TRB and Sham 69's debut albums in 1978 the notions of rock authenticity which were mostly ignored by Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols in their pursuit of chart success were being restated. RAR's role in this was important. While punk, to paraphrase Hebdige, 'dramatized' Britain's decline,<sup>159</sup> RAR sought to politicise punk as a means to oppose the sense of crisis offered by the rise in popularity of the NF. Rather than existing as an apolitical challenge to establishment morality (which in itself conversely utilises politics), RAR recoded punk as a vehicle for structured political opposition. As the Thatcher years began, key events nationally and internationally were identified as ripe for musical opposition and engagement. In what follows, I will analyse the way in which punk was used as a vehicle for sincere political rock protest in the period 1979-1987.

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<sup>159</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 87. As written.

## Chapter Nine

### Live Aid

As the punk-obsessed late-1970s gave way to the 1980s, RAR disappeared from view and the use of popular music for large scale protest in Britain diminished. This is not to say that the scope for protest had disappeared. The first half of the decade saw two key events in Thatcher's role as Prime Minister: the Falklands War of April-June 1982 and the almost year-long national miners' strike of March 1984 to March 1985. These events were subject to musical protest (see chapters 11 and 12); however the politics of each were too complex to sustain the approach to popular protest taken by RAR. Given the electoral collapse of the NF in 1979, a pressure group such as RAR was no longer especially needed, and despite various attempts to rebrand itself as Rock Against Thatcher – a movement which perhaps would have been able to mount large-scale protest against the aforementioned events – RAR ceased to exist.<sup>1</sup> Despite its attempts to encourage left-wing rebellion, if RAR had achieved anything it was to exemplify – if only retrospectively – that movements which used authenticity-obsessed rock music to address political conflict had greatest impact when dealing with single moral issues.

As such, it was not until the Ethiopian famine of 1983-5 – a crisis which would arguably have had only a minor impact on British society and politics were it not for the cause it engendered – that a popular protest would be established on the same scale. In fact, these events were to have a much more substantive impact than RAR. Band Aid, and subsequently Live Aid, were to exert an influence far greater than their figurehead Bob Geldof – frontman of the Irish new wave group the Boomtown Rats – would ever have imagined upon viewing Michael Buerk's report on the crisis on the BBC's *Nine O'Clock News*. Geldof was so struck with the horror

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<sup>1</sup> See Goodyer, *Crisis Music*; Widgery, *Beating Time*.

of the imagery that he was moved to devise a charitable response in the form of the single 'Do They Know It's Christmas?', which he co-wrote with Ultravox frontman Midge Ure.<sup>2</sup>

The history of Band Aid and Live Aid is well-documented.<sup>3</sup> However, for the purposes of this discussion it is worth summarising the chronology of the key events which led to the two concerts at London's Wembley Stadium and Philadelphia's John F. Kennedy Stadium on Saturday 11 July 1985.<sup>4</sup> The recording of the Band Aid single took place at SARM West Studios in the Notting Hill area of London on 25 November 1984 after a fraught period of organisation by Geldof. This single session saw most of the performers – the majority of whom were contemporary recording artists and performers rather than established stars – recording their parts throughout the day. The single was released on 3 December 1984, and, thanks in part to Geldof's uncompromising approach to publicity, went straight to the top of the UK singles chart and ultimately became 1984's Christmas No. 1.<sup>5</sup>

The success of the Band Aid single led to similar collaborative releases internationally, most notably USA For Africa's 'We Are The World', which was co-written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie. The difference between the histories of the two recordings is notable. 'Do They Know It's Christmas' was rush-written by two performers relatively unknown in the context of the star system, hastily-recorded

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Geldof, *Is That It?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), Chapter 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Fast, 'Popular music performance and cultural memory. Queen: Live Aid, Wembley Stadium, London, July 13, 1985', in *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time*, ed. Ian Inglis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 138-54; Simon Garfield, Pete Paphides & Carl Wilkinson, 'Rocking the World', *Observer Music Monthly*, October 2004, pp. 16-26; Geldof, *Is That It?*; *Live Aid: Against All Odds*, BBC4, 13 July 2010, 10:00pm; *Live Aid: Rockin' All Over The World*, BBC4, 14 July 2010, 10:00pm.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that since this is a study of popular music in Britain, the following will refer primarily to the events which took place in the UK on 13 July 1985. The internationalism of Live Aid is an interesting area of study; however it is not the prime focus here.

<sup>5</sup> This is an important British popular music institution. It should also be noted that as such 'Do They Know Its Christmas' has been assimilated into the British Christmas musical canon: visits to high street retailers from November onwards are often soundtracked by Bono's loud invitation to 'tonight thank God it's them instead of you.'

and released. 'We Are The World' was composed by two international superstars, recorded over several sessions with a plethora of inter-generational American talent, and released over a month after its final recording session on 7 March 1985. This difference in performers is informative: given that Geldof and Ure were of the punk generation, their association with a largely new pop<sup>6</sup> and post-punk ensemble (featuring members of U2, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet and Heaven 17) can be understood as a rejection of the stadium-filling 'dinosaurs' punk is believed to have rejected.<sup>7</sup> USA for Africa, meanwhile, showed a considered understanding of the American musical tradition, bringing together performers of country (Willie Nelson, Kenny Rogers), soul (Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross) and, in the form of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, established protest singers.

Before the recording and release of 'We Are The World', Geldof formulated the concept of Live Aid.<sup>8</sup> After much organisational conflict, he managed to establish the tandem cross-Atlantic concerts which would form, through the use of satellite technology, an international television event in July 1985, which was intended to act as a telethon to encourage further donations to the Ethiopian relief fund.<sup>9</sup> The Wembley concert began at midday (BST) and the Philadelphia event almost two hours later, with the intention that the acts should alternate between countries in order to make it a truly simultaneous, international, 'happening'. To emphasise this

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<sup>6</sup> New pop is a genre term which covers the array of pop acts that came to define the charts in early Eighties Britain, including, among many others, Duran Duran, Wham! and the Human League. For Reynolds, these groups 'believed they were honouring of furthering some of punk's original mission, albeit in a much transformed context. New Pop was about making the best of what was inevitable – synths and drum machines, video, the return of glamour. Colour, dance, fun and style were sanctioned as both strategically necessary (the terms of entry into pop) and pleasurable (now acceptable with the rejection of post-punk's guilt-racked puritanism).' Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 404.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Paul McCartney and Roger Daltrey of the Who made contributions to the record while David Bowie pulled out of the session, and that many of those contemporary stars went on to become stadium fillers themselves.

<sup>8</sup> 'The idea was half in my mind soon after the Band Aid recording because I mentioned it to Nik Kershaw when I bumped into him at Heathrow in January [1985]. He volunteered there and then, even though there were no firm plans.' Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 326.

<sup>9</sup> 'This was going to be a TV show. It wasn't a concert. Never to me. It was a *TV show*, and the TV show was to get at one end. *Money*. It was all a pragmatic exercise.' Geldof, quoted in Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, p. 467.



collaboration, the day saw Phil Collins perform at both stadia; first at Wembley with Sting, before boarding a Concorde to the USA and performing solo and as drummer for a reformed Led Zeppelin.<sup>10</sup> Despite criticism the event received for such apparent excess while apparently supporting some of the poorest people on the planet, Geldof defended the use of Concorde as

a symbol to link the two concerts, and it was the only way possible [...] it was to show something: look at this fantastic technology, this beautiful plane — what a plane should look like, not a 747 — and we were using space to link the world. The point was, isn't this amazing? Look what we are capable of doing! And now look at this famine, isn't there something really wrong with this? I mean the whole thing was fraught with symbolism.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of raising awareness and money for the Ethiopian famine, Live Aid can be viewed as a success. In addition, its legacy saw the establishment of the 'mega-event' as a cultural form, which, according to Reebee Garofalo, can

involve the creation of a variety of cultural products – live performances, worldwide broadcasts, ensemble recordings, compilation LPs, home videos, and/or 'The Making of...' documentaries – each of which can be produced and consumed in a variety of ways. It is now literally possible for hundreds of millions of people to 'attend' the same concert simultaneously, be it at the 'live' event, at a public broadcast, or in the privacy of their own living rooms.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For an account of the operation of the Philadelphia concert see *ibid.*, pp. 466-477. Bill Graham was approached by Geldof and Harvey Goldsmith (who was instrumental in the organisation of the Wembley event) to manage the JFK stadium event as a result of his promotional experience – particularly his role in the establishment of stadium rock shows.

<sup>11</sup> David Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', *Rolling Stone*, Issue 462, 5 December 1985, pp. 26-34, 60, 63-7 (p. 33)

<sup>12</sup> Reebee Garofalo, 'Understanding Mega-Events: If We Are the World, Then How Do We Change It?', in *Rockin' the Boat*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), pp. 15-36 (p. 26).

Garofalo's discussion of the mega-event, published seven years after Live Aid, leads him to venture two theses: firstly, that '[with] the decline of mass participation in grassroots political movements, popular music itself has come to serve as a catalyst for raising issues and organizing masses of people';<sup>13</sup> and secondly, and perhaps more contentiously, 'that in the most conservative political period in decades (perhaps even because of it), there is one arena [music] where, at least for the time being, progressive forces seem to have real power.'<sup>14</sup> These sentiments are echoed by Frith and Street, who state that 'Live Aid made explicit [...] that pop musicians were able to represent a popular conscience, however sentimentalized; indeed, it made them *responsible* for speaking up, for bearing witness to causes and concerns'.<sup>15</sup> Live Aid

demonstrated the political power of popular music; it [...] gave musicians a new role, that of statesman or woman. In his appeal to our 'humanity,' Bob Geldof moralized a mass music, a music which could no longer pretend to be countercultural or subversive, but which was still able to articulate a sense of concern and to raise vast amounts of money.<sup>16</sup>

The 'power' to which Garofalo, Frith and Street refer is problematic. The power Band Aid and Live Aid held in publicising and supporting relief for starving Ethiopians was real, but it cannot be viewed as *political* power. While the mega-event may have had an impact on British society's approach to charity, it demonstrated little desire, and therefore had limited success, in changing the international political structures that led to the famine.

Following an examination – with reference to its forebear, RAR – of the methods of Band Aid and Live Aid's operations, I will examine Geldof's interactions with

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Thatcher and her political 'use' of his actions, and the 'political' nature of those musicians either involved with, or critical of, the single and concerts. While Live Aid can be considered a 'pop' event within the binary opposition of pop and rock outlined in Chapter 2, its relation to past uses of rock music in the support of causes led to a continued emphasis on notions of authenticity. Even within the seemingly commerciality-focussed genre of pop, interactions with politics come to be scrutinised within a framework of authenticity by critics who have been informed by the rock culture ideology outlined in Section I.

### **The influence of RAR**

While RAR did not have a profound or direct impact on the British public at large in the same sense as Live Aid (or indeed operate in the same way), it is worth hypothesising that the events of 1984-5 would not have taken place were it not for their organisers' exposure to it – particularly its demonstration of the potential results of harnessing the power that popular music holds over its audience.<sup>17</sup>

Widgery views Live Aid as one of the 'endless subsequent attempts to use the RAR formula,' many of which 'worked as fund raisers and crowd pullers but little else'.<sup>18</sup> However, 'Geldof's and Band Aid's brilliant fund-raising effort for Ethiopia, smug and Establishment [sic] as it often was, works politically because, like RAR, it is a practical response to a crisis conventional politics clearly can't handle.'<sup>19</sup>

However, it is arguable that they were in essence no different to Widgery's previously identified homogenised mass of events. Live Aid did little more than build a crowd and demand that it put forward funds. Its political impact derives from the

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<sup>17</sup> See Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*. Cloonan emphasises that it is 'important to note that Geldof was of the punk and RAR era and so had witnessed pop's potential political power at first hand.' (p.16) However, in a personal interview with members of the band Alien Kulture, vocalist Pervez Bilgrami told me that he 'didn't think they [The Boomtown Rats] did' a RAR gig, while the band's friend and manager Rob Beasley found it 'all a bit of a shock that he'd suddenly sort of got into this kind of anti-Africa [sic] politics [...]'. It was a bit of a [...] charade.' Personal interviews, 26 May 2011, London.

<sup>18</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

vast scale on which it worked. For Street, Geldof did 'what politicians and pop stars have always tried to do: to create a following, to put together a "people" (to create an identity) and to give them a focus for their passion. And it is at this point...popular culture becomes the object of politics, rather than its subject.'<sup>20</sup> As a result, Geldof and one of his fellow Live Aid 'beneficiaries', U2's Bono, came to be seen 'as "experts" on debt relief and Africa.'<sup>21</sup> While Live Aid did not entirely revolutionise Western governments' attitudes to international aid, its organisers came to accrue political capital from it. Speaking from his socialist background, Widgery concedes that the political potential of an event is limited:

[A] rock concert can do little to reverse the casual destruction of the globe's ecology and the destructive results of forced cash-cropping for the West's vast crew [...]. But the rock and roll spirit of getting on and *doing* something, the audacious internationalism of the TV transmission and the way electronic audience [sic] could for once feel part of a culture that could act collectively, were all exhilarating.<sup>22</sup>

Cloonan posits that Live Aid 'can be seen as reviving notions of a "rock community" of shared values which had first surfaced in the countercultural movement of the late 1960s.'<sup>23</sup> However, Garofalo sees the 'internationalism' which excites Widgery so as an important distinction between Live Aid and its most obvious forebear, Woodstock,<sup>24</sup> which were linked together by Joan Baez's opening of the

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<sup>20</sup> Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p.114. As written. It is striking that the rhetoric of Widgery's assertion that 'getting on and *doing* something' represents 'the rock and roll spirit' is similar to Thatcher's framing of the event as an example of the power of entrepreneurial spirit within the free market (see below) – indeed it is remarkably similar to Thatcher's rhetorical tone generally. With both the left and right holding up 'getting on and *doing* something' as an exemplar of their ideologies, one could posit that it does not represent a political act at all.

<sup>23</sup> Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*, p. 16. This assessment can also be applied to RAR (see chapter 7.)

<sup>24</sup> For a retrospective history of the 1969 festival see Andy Bennett (ed.), *Remembering Woodstock* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

Philadelphia concert with the statement 'Good morning, you children of the eighties [sic]. This is your Woodstock and it's long overdue':<sup>25</sup>

Woodstock was experienced as participatory, communitarian, and non-commercial (indeed, anti-commercial), with no great spiritual or physical distance between artist and audience [...]. Live Aid, by contrast, was hardly an occasion for folksy nostalgia [...] it was an unabashed celebration of technological possibilities. While Woodstock was hailed as countercultural, there was precious little at Live Aid that could have been vaguely construed as alternative or oppositional. If Woodstock represented an attempt to humanize the social relations of mass culture, Live Aid demonstrated the full-blown integration of popular music with the 'star making machinery' of the international music industry.<sup>26</sup>

As Street suggests, 'Woodstock's success lay in its exclusiveness, the barriers it created between "them" and "us". Woodstock was about being there. Live Aid created no such barriers, being there made no difference to the character of the event; it was just as important to watch it on television'.<sup>27</sup> Where Woodstock and RAR were 'rock' events and therefore inherently oppositional, Live Aid's model depended on being as inclusive as possible. Nonetheless, this notion of collectivism is one of two areas in which we can see loose similarities between RAR and Live Aid, even if the means they used, and the ends to which they aimed, differed in important ways. The 'rock community' RAR sought to establish was akin to perceptions of Woodstock's audience: oppositional and active, with each member being encouraged to take direct action, be it through opposing the NF and other

<sup>25</sup> Garofalo, 'Understanding Mega-Events', p. 15. As written.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16. Street departs from this view of Woodstock, stating that it 'owed as much to cynical calculation, media attention and the self-aggrandisement of the participants' as it did to the counterculture. 'The organizers seemed deliberately to exploit the romantic idealism that the music suggested.' Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 74. This view is also asserted by Bill Graham: '[Live Aid] reminded the straight world again that rock is big biz [sic]. The first time was Woodstock.' Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, p. 477.

<sup>27</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 79.

racist movements ideologically, physically or democratically; spreading the message of RAR by wearing a badge or putting on their own gig under its banner; or even by taking the opportunity offered to perform on a RAR stage. The primary objective of RAR's founders was to raise consciousness rather than money.<sup>28</sup> The ideological and moral nature, and therefore funding, of the movement led to its necessarily operating on a grassroots level, dependent on the vocalism of its community to spread its message.

Live Aid, on the other hand, while similarly moralistic in its *raison d'être*, established a passive, ideology-free community, one which was encouraged to pay for the entertainment a central committee had put together. Once they had paid, they were under no obligation to maintain political action. Rather than attempting politicisation, Live Aid took place, contrary to Widgery's praise, purely as a fundraising exercise.<sup>29</sup> There was therefore little need for grassroots activism to boost its profile and appeal. After analysing the success of the Band Aid single in accruing money, Geldof saw further opportunity in establishing a mega-event: all efforts were put into the promotion and establishment of a single multimedia concert,<sup>30</sup> which could raise vast amounts of money for a charitable cause. It is also notable that Geldof et al did not necessarily seek to attract a 'rock community'. By *rocking* against racism, RAR appealed to a specifically young, underground culture-conscious and oppositional audience. Live Aid was conceived to attract as broad a community as possible, one

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<sup>28</sup> As members of the ANL and SWP increased their physical opposition to the NF they found themselves having to pay expensive legal fees as a consequence. This course of events led to RAR events becoming fundraisers to pay these costs. Rob Beasley – friend and manager of Alien Kulture – recalls that RAR 'suffered by the way that it responded to the Southall riots and the way [...] a lot of its gigs just became fund raisers purely for the legal defence campaign for the people that were arrested at that, and prosecuted after Southall. And actually, you know, that was all good and, you know right to do, but it just meant you didn't have money to do other stuff, it just went in one direction.' Personal interview.

<sup>29</sup> Live 8, Live Aid's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, took a different approach: 'Rather than donating, Geldof urged people to protest.... However, while this was popular music again striving for a community, it was not oppositional. In fact, New Labour embraced its populism and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell pledged support in a press release headed "Let's make it the biggest and best ever".' Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State*, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> As already noted, while there were two concerts they were designed to be enjoyed as one multimedia whole.

which possessed the financial means to donate to the charity via their Access credit cards.<sup>31</sup>

As such, the programming of the concert took place with no ideological emphasis placed upon the authenticity of the acts. The only criterion to which they needed to adhere was mass appeal, hence the booking of elder statesmen of pop Paul McCartney, David Bowie and Elton John; contemporary superstars Dire Straits, Howard Jones and Sade;<sup>32</sup> and consistent bearers of 'good time' rock 'n' roll, Status Quo.<sup>33</sup> The cultural capital, and therefore power,<sup>34</sup> held by these acts was utilised to encourage the donation of money to the charity. For instance, following the airing of the Mick Jagger and Bowie video 'Dancing in the Street', Geldof told the British television audience that the pair 'did that video *specifically* so that you could give something, and it's not happening enough [...] there are people dying *now*, so give me the money.'<sup>35</sup> Where Bowie could be held up as a figure whose political statements demonstrated the need for musicians to Rock Against Racism in 1976, almost ten years later his high camp performance of a Motown hit with the tax-avoiding Jagger positioned them both as icons of compassion. The inference was that they had not recorded the track and video for commercial or artistic/critical gain, but singularly to encourage viewers to donate to the charity.

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<sup>31</sup> 'The political problem was not that Live Aid failed to overthrow imperialism, East and West (which it never intended) but it became so obsessed with Access card numbers it neglected its other declared intention, to really hammer the big powers' refusal of effective aid.' Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting the disproportionate ratio of male to female performers at Live Aid. Sade was the only female headline performer at Wembley; however the Philadelphia event saw Joan Baez, The Pretenders (fronted by Chrissie Hynde), Ashford & Simpson (featuring Valerie Simpson), Madonna and Patti Labelle all perform, while Marilyn McCoo and Bette Midler both handled presenting duties.

<sup>33</sup> An irony can be read in the fact that the concert was opened by a group named Status Quo. How could a concert change the world when the name of its opening act immediately suggested changing *nothing*? Their opening song, 'Rockin' All Over the World', while having obvious meaning to Live Aid, was a safe musical choice. It is also worth noting that Status Quo, whose songs draw from the rock 'n' roll tradition, can be tied to the pub rock ethos (despite forming in the 1960s) and as such their appearance in a stadium context can be interpreted as problematic (see chapter 3.)

<sup>34</sup> See below for a discussion of Live Aid within a Marxist model.

<sup>35</sup> *Live Aid: Rockin' All Over The World*

Garofalo notes that 'In producing mega-events, there is an inevitable tension between recruiting "name" artists who will ensure the financial success of the event versus local artists or artists who have a demonstrated commitment to the issue at hand.'<sup>36</sup> While RAR's Victoria Park carnival of 1978 cannot be viewed as a mega-event *per se*, in booking an act such as the Clash – whose commitment to RAR, despite their apparent political convictions, cannot be said to have been strong – alongside 'RAR-sponsors' TRB, they demonstrated a desire to broaden the appeal of the movement: not by seeking to ensure its 'financial' success, but rather an 'ideological' success by increasing its loose membership through populism. This is symptomatic of the capitalist approach of music industries: the bigger the name, the bigger the (financial) gain. Live Aid is important in defining Garofalo's mega-event, but the RAR carnival exemplifies the idea that even within ideologically-charged and subculturally-oriented events there is an understanding that, in order to achieve mass success, one must appeal to a mass audience.

In order to sustain what it perceived as its status as a politically authentic movement, RAR programmed bands such as the Clash alongside ideologically 'strong' acts such as TRB and X-Ray Spex. Since Live Aid was a singular mega-event and not a movement, such considerations were not important. For one day of massive fundraising all that was necessary was a bill of popular performers who would use their position to encourage their followers to give Geldof 'the money.' However, the political opinions and activism of the acts were not inconsequential as far as Band Aid and Live Aid's organisation was concerned. Acts such as Paul Weller's post-Jam group Style Council<sup>37</sup> and Elvis Costello (who performed at

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<sup>36</sup> Garofalo, 'Understanding Mega-Events', p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> Dorian Lynskey identifies Style Council as 'the most successful leftists in pop' in 1985: Weller, having 'fudged his politics in the Jam...now set about attacking Thatcher with the zeal of a convert.... He affirmed his sincerity, to the disappointment of anyone expecting more music, by devoting the B-side of the 12-inch ['Soul Deep' single] to an extended interview with some striking Nottinghamshire miners.' Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, p. 517.



Wembley), and Joan Baez and Patti Labelle (Philadelphia) had previous associations with activism. Such criteria were not necessary for Geldof to achieve his aims, but helped to imbue the concert with a level of political legitimacy.

This difference in approaches to the establishment of communities is also important with regard to the second loose similarity between RAR and Live Aid: a mistrust of mainstream politics in dealing with the issues at the core of their being. As shown above, Widgery viewed Live Aid as having 'work[ed] *politically*' because it stepped in to fill a void left by 'conventional politics'.<sup>38</sup> RAR sought to redress the balance in late Seventies British society which was identified as widely racist,<sup>39</sup> an issue which, politically, lay low on the list of priorities of the incumbent Labour government and was utilised by the Conservatives as an opportunity to win election votes.<sup>40</sup> RAR aimed to win over the hearts and minds of those touched not by the major parties' election manifestos, but by the policies of the NF, and did so on a basis of morality rather than contextualising racism within the wider politics of the country.<sup>41</sup> Live Aid again used morality as the basis for its approach, but differs from RAR in that its focus was international, rather than domestic, policy, and as such had no specific ground in people's concerns when it came to who should 'run the country.'

The major difference between RAR and Live Aid's political approaches lies in their methodology: RAR existed as a *movement*, while Band Aid and Live Aid

<sup>38</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 114. My emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Sabin, 'Rethinking Punk and Racism', p. 200.

<sup>40</sup> The parties' 1979 manifestoes use strikingly different rhetoric to convey their stances on racism. Labour emphasised that they had 'already strengthened the legislation protecting minorities', and would 'continue to protect the community against discrimination and racialism' if re-elected. ('1979 Labour Party Manifesto', <<http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1979/1979-labour-manifesto.shtml>> [accessed 24 July 2013].) The Tories, meanwhile, argued that 'firm immigration control for the future is essential if we are to achieve good community relations', despite a recognition that 'The rights of all British citizens legally settled here are equal before the law whatever their race, colour or creed.' ('Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 11 April 1979 <<http://www.margareththatcher.org/document/110858>> [accessed 24 July 2013].)

<sup>41</sup> 'Of course we said vote Labour, but with no illusions. RAR's real advice to the electorate – adapted from the female surrealist Mimi Parent – was "Rock hard, life is deaf". The point of bringing the cultural circus into town was to have the political argument and take the anti-racist message to the parts the other political organisations didn't reach.' Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 103.

concentrated on a *moment*. While Widgery views Live Aid as a 'political' event, Geldof believed that 'we had to keep Band Aid non-political if it was to work properly' since it 'was a moral issue: whether you were of the right or left was irrelevant. It transcended local politics because the issue was global.'<sup>42</sup> Though he would have liked it 'to be a movement,' he conceded to David Breskin in an interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine that 'it [was] not going to be so.'<sup>43</sup> This assertion is based in pragmatism: Band Aid had 'been an aberration' in Geldof's life, and he 'would imagine that [...] it [was] an aberration for most others as well.'<sup>44</sup> In order for Live Aid to become a movement would require a manifesto, which would have flown in the face of its ephemeral nature. For Geldof, doing so would cause it to

peter out, because we've used the spurious glamour of pop music to draw attention to a situation, and we've *overloaded* the thing with symbolism to make it reach people. But people get bored easily. People may have been profoundly affected by the Live Aid day — some were shattered by it — but that does not translate into a massive change in consciousness.'<sup>45</sup>

Again, Geldof was pragmatic in his assessment of pop music's ability to stimulate social or political change, as well as of the British public's political and charitable commitment, telling Breskin that 'Band Aid will cease to be effective when we become like those Save the Children adverts on page 5 of the Sunday *New York Times*. You see them, and yet you don't see them. And eventually, people will hear me and not hear me.'<sup>46</sup> His rationalising of the success of the single and concert is steeped in the desire of the public for entertainment. Not only the entertainment-for-

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<sup>42</sup> Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 286.

<sup>43</sup> Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

charity offered by the concerts, but also the spectacle of the delivery of aid – an image of the West to the rescue:

Long-term aid is less exciting than the Seventh Cavalry arriving with food to bring people back to life. And that's a problem. The news, as Ted Koppel said, is crisis orientated. And a tree growing ain't a crisis. It's the remedy to one — a crisis potentially in the future [of deforestation and erosion]. So you're dealing with hypotheticals, and TV can't handle that. It's not result orientated.<sup>47</sup>

Geldof's pessimistic assessment goes some way toward explaining why Band/Live Aid was so successful in its fundraising, while a popular national movement in support of the miners' strike, which ended four months before Live Aid took place, did not experience a similar level of coverage and mass compassion. While politics undoubtedly played a part in the causes and resolution of the famine in Ethiopia, Band Aid's and Live Aid's acts of appealing for and collecting donations featured no political posturing. They did not lobby the British government on foreign policy, but rather on issues that affected their fundraising efforts (see below.) Geldof is correct in his assessment that Left and Right had no relevance in the condemnation of human suffering on that scale. Indeed, while they were clearly a left-wing movement, RAR could also argue that socialism and conservatism had no bearing on the morality of racism. The miners' strike, on the other hand, was an intensely political struggle, one to which Geldof pointed as a comparative example for not expanding Band Aid's remit. He reasoned that

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 67. See also Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Grahams Presents*, p. 476: 'In terms of the forty-five million dollars raised by Live Aid, I don't really know how much good it did. If they had used it to build a dam to get water into those desert lands, fine. But bringing in truckloads of food was like putting a Band-Aid [sic] on for a blood clot. In that situation, they were dealing with terminal cancer.... Live Aid remains at best a righteous gesture by a lot of people toward other people.'

it would only become politicized and diversified into stupidity, like concentrating on minor affairs like a coal strike, which affects a small, local population. This is something that is more massive and has global consequences.<sup>48</sup>

While the 'coal strike' affected a smaller population than that of the Ethiopian famine, miners' families were also reliant on charitable donations. Geldof remembers that prior to the Band Aid recording session, 'Weller had been on the phone asking me to get people to volunteer for his record to raise money for striking miners.'<sup>49</sup> This request to connect the two causes was declined, with Geldof telling Weller that 'he would have a chance to ask people to make a record [...] on the day of the Band Aid recording'.<sup>50</sup> Offering support to the striking miners was problematic for Geldof: the dispute was viewed publicly as a union exerting an undemocratic power over the state. The 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978-9 was still fresh in the mind of many, and they saw Thatcher's attempts to overcome the unions as a political necessity rather than an attack on the working class. If Geldof were to offer official solidarity with the striking miners he would alienate much of the audience he was hoping to tap for his fundraising efforts. Moreover, while he believes that 'English pop music is highly politicized', he sees that '[records] come out in support of a strike, and they do not do very well.'<sup>51</sup>

However, in an interview with *Record Mirror* early in his career, Billy Bragg saw major fault with the contradiction in the public's responses to the miners' strike and Live Aid:

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 286. Weller's song, 'Soul Deep', was performed by the Council Collective – ostensibly Style Council with guests. It peaked at number 24 in the British singles chart.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', p. 33.

If anyone's expecting revolution in a country that couldn't even come up with a general strike to support the miners, they're pissing in the wind. That strike has changed a lot for a lot of bands. It's all very well joining hands and singing for Ethiopia, and I applaud the efforts of Band Aid and Starvation, but to fundamentally attack the system that propagates that sort of starvation and that sort of famine as a necessity – the capitalist system – feeding the world ain't enough. That sound should have been 'smash capitalism *AND* feed the world', because as long as the profit motive remains the only consideration, then those people will always starve – always.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Bragg sensed a conspiracy in the lack of musician support for the miners, claiming that they wouldn't show the same level of support as they did for Ethiopia 'because the record industry wouldn't let them. You'd never get them to press records free for miners. And I hate to suggest it, but I do think [Band Aid] came at a convenient time for the media to take the attention away from the miners' plight.'<sup>53</sup> Here Bragg affirms Geldof's apparent belief that an association with the miners would have been detrimental to Band Aid's aims. Much of Britain's largely right-wing media supported Thatcher's hard line on the situation – indeed, even the supposedly politically-neutral BBC came in for criticism for its coverage of the strike.<sup>54</sup> To Bragg, the Ethiopian situation 'gave them [the media] another tool to be able to say "and you think you've got it bad – look at these poor bastards." You can't

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<sup>52</sup> Eleanor Levy, 'No Band...No Experimental Haircut...No Gimmick...No Fashionable Trousers', *Record Mirror*, 30 March 1985, pp. 8-9 (p. 9). 'Starvation/Tam Tam Pour L'Ethiopie' was a double A-side single recorded by a group of British musicians in response to Band Aid whose proceeds similarly went to charities. The ensemble that recorded 'Starvation' featured members of Two Tone groups The Specials, Madness and The Beat, alongside Birmingham reggae group UB40, while 'Tam Tam Pour L'Ethiopie' was recorded by a group of musicians and singers from French-speaking African countries. The single was instigated in response to the lack of black performers involved with Band Aid.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> See Katy Shaw, *Mining The Meaning: Cultural Representations Of The 1984-5 UK Miners' Strike* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012).

argue with half a million people starving. That doesn't bear any kind of relation to kids having to wear second hand clothes in Yorkshire.'<sup>55</sup>

Geldof's response to the question of the miners' strike underlines that Live Aid was a single-issue humanitarian cause. While politics did not necessarily play a role in the event itself, one could argue that it utilised a capitalist, or consumerist, orthodoxy in its operation. In his summary of the concept of consumption, Andrew Edgar presents the Marxist view that 'An emphasis on humans as consumers suggests an ideological distraction from the essence of economic and political struggle'.<sup>56</sup> He posits the Frankfurt School as 'the most sustained Marxist engagement with consumption'; Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the culture industry<sup>57</sup> argues 'that in late capitalism, use value has been brought within the control of the capitalist producers, thanks to the power of advertising and the mass media.'<sup>58</sup>

As such, Band Aid's and Live Aid's obsession with the recruitment of 'name' stars allows one to theorise that Geldof used a capitalist model in a 'Robin Hood' fashion – drawing money from the rich, using a method to which they were blindly accustomed, to give to the poor. This charity, in a Marxist mass cultural sense, was another commodity to be unconsciously bought. However, while he utilised the system to serve the resolution of an 'economic and political struggle' of which he regularly made his multimedia audience aware – via onstage, TV studio and video announcements – they were simultaneously distracted from it by the range of products and commodities, i.e. performers, that were served up for consumption.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Levy, 'No Band...', p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Edgar, 'Consumption', in *Cultural Theory: the Key Concepts*, ed. Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick (London & New York: Routledge, 2008) pp. 62-5 (p. 63)

<sup>57</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 120-167

<sup>58</sup> Edgar, 'Consumption', p. 63.

<sup>59</sup> RAR operated in a similar fashion: they were *rocking* against racism, but the act of rocking itself could do nothing to change consciousness or political opinion. That came through the

As such, discourse between producers and consumers was absent from the event: the audience were not engaged, but rather continuously informed of both the cause to which they were donating and the range of commodities to which they had access as part of the exchange. Even for the 'live' stadium audiences, the event was much like watching a television broadcast, complete with advertising.

While Live Aid's model was arguably successful in terms of its population reach, its nature meant that serious political engagement was not possible. Widgery argues that rather than being '*too egotistic*', Geldof 'was too easily steered from confronting Thatcher to having off-the-record dinner with the royals, partly because it was too much a one-man band.'<sup>60</sup> Where Widgery saw Geldof's populist focus as a weakness, in fact it was necessary to the success of Live Aid's aims as viewed by its leader. Telling Breskin that 'I'm just a pop singer — not a political figure' who does 'not represent anybody but myself and, perhaps, this vast constituency that wanted to help in this thing',<sup>61</sup> Geldof could not pinpoint the political nature of his creation. While he would have liked to have established a movement, but dismissed its practicality, he simultaneously criticised those who argued against the premise of Live Aid as a political force:

I can't think of any more effective political action than Leonid Brezhnev's son issuing direct challenges at me; or the British Parliament debating the issue three times and citing Band Aid and Live Aid and adding more to their overseas budgets; or the congressional committees in America meeting and discussing this with us; or the French political system calling us and getting

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name of the cause, public pronouncements, or through certain, but by no means all, songs and their lyrics.

<sup>60</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 114.

<sup>61</sup> Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', p. 28.

behind us. In terms of effective political action, other than mobilizing the *in situ* political powers of the world, I don't know what political action means.<sup>62</sup>

Geldof's lack of direct political engagement could be thought to have stemmed from post-colonial guilt. While Ethiopia has remained a sovereign state throughout its history, even during the 'Scramble for Africa', the British Empire's role in Africa is well documented and embarrasses a large portion of the modern (and 1985) British population. To be seen to be trying to influence the politics of an African country would be deeply troubling for many of the liberal figures involved with the cause. He told Breskin that 'we can't be culturally or intellectually imperialistic or colonialistic. We have to say, "This government is there by whatever reason, whether I agree with it or not."<sup>63</sup> While in part the famine stemmed from poor government in Ethiopia, Geldof rejected the premise that it was his place to exert pressure on political structures; rather, he sought to engage with these political structures where it would assist in his fundraising aims.

### **Band Aid, Live Aid and Thatcherism**

Despite Live Aid's successful connection with the British public, Thatcher did not become directly involved in its promotion or production. She, alongside Reagan and Gorbachev,<sup>64</sup> had been approached by Geldof to record a video message to be played out during the event, but, as evidenced in a letter addressed to the chief organiser two days after the event, she was 'sorry that it did not prove to be possible for [me] to record a message for the tens of millions participating in and watching the Liveaid [sic] concert'.<sup>65</sup> a regret which perhaps stemmed from a failure to utilise

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Breskin asks 'what came of' Geldof's attempt 'to approach Reagan and Gorbachev for statements to use at Live Aid', to which he responds 'I think it came down to, they'd do it if Thatcher would do it. I think it's like pop music. They ask, "Well, who's doing? Okay, if they are, we will."' Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>65</sup> 'Letter from Margaret Thatcher – Bob Geldof's Live Aid Scrapbook', *Absolute Radio*, 15 July 1985 <[www.absoluteradio.co.uk/photos/Bob-Geldof/Bob-Geldof-s-Live-Aid-](http://www.absoluteradio.co.uk/photos/Bob-Geldof/Bob-Geldof-s-Live-Aid-)



the political potential it would have presented. Nonetheless, after the event Thatcher attempted to utilise its potential political capital, despite its apparent incompatibility with her ideological record.

Thatcher had first been approached by Geldof at the *Daily Star* 'Gold Star Awards' in February 1985, at which he engaged her on the government's position on the Ethiopian famine. He had unsuccessfully lobbied the government to waive VAT on copies of the Band Aid single to allow the charity to devote more funds to the crisis.<sup>66</sup> Upon pressing the Prime Minister on this point during her individual greeting of award recipients (following Band Aid, Geldof was one), she told him that 'we've used some of your VAT to give back and to plough back. We've given again and again, I mean government has to get taxation from somewhere'.<sup>67</sup> She emphasised the state's commitment to 'giving back' in her July 1985 letter to Geldof, telling him that

I share your concern about the tragic famine in africa [sic] and its consequences: it is too easy to be worried by the short term problems while failing to look at the longer term need to prevent a recurrence. I can assure you that, through the Overseas Development Administration, and the European Community, I shall continue to do what I can to help.<sup>68</sup>

With Band Aid and Live Aid taking place against the backdrop of a national debate on the worth of international aid donated by the state,<sup>69</sup> her reference to, and

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scrapbook/15079/Letter-From-Margaret-Thatcher.html> [accessed 28 August 2012]. This appears on the website as a scan of the original letter.

<sup>66</sup> See Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 279.

<sup>67</sup> 'Remarks at *Daily Star* Gold Star Awards (confrontation with Bob Geldof)', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 27 February 1985

<<http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/105977>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

<sup>68</sup> 'Letter from Margaret Thatcher – Bob Geldof's Live Aid Scrapbook'.

<sup>69</sup> A debate which continues to this day. See the comments made by former UKIP MEP Godfrey Bloom in August 2013 referring to 'Bongo Bongo Land' as a specifically recent example. Peter Dominiczak, 'Unrepentant "bongo bongo land" Ukip MEP says he'll "apologise to country's ambassador"', *The Telegraph*, 7 August 2013

exaggeration of, the government's commitment to aid, as a means of validating its decision to tax sales of the single, contradicts the more typically Thatcherite position expressed during her speech at the awards. She told the audience there that 'for a long time it has been fashionable to encourage the belief that Governments could deliver everything, including greatness as a nation. The state will provide. It isn't true. A great country is a country of great fearless people.'<sup>70</sup> She went on to ask rhetorically 'where could the State provide' the 'guts', 'spirit' and 'dedication' of award recipients – including the crime-stopping 'Granny Fraser', policemen, NHS staff and sports personalities – before answering that it 'can provide none of these things. They spring from the very fibre and spirit of our people.'<sup>71</sup> While Cloonan views Live Aid as 'an act of compassion in a decade during which greed and avarice reached the level of political dogma',<sup>72</sup> Thatcher spun it as a validation of her political ideas: the state need not provide for those who do not have, for the compassionate individual will work to assist those in need who cannot help themselves.

Indeed, Thatcher used Live Aid as an example of the power of the individual on numerous occasions.<sup>73</sup> In an interview with Tom Hibbert, which appeared in *Smash Hits* in the run-up to the 1987 general election, she again praised Geldof's work: she was 'fascinated' by his approach, which she says did not ask 'why doesn't the government give more?' but 'what can I do as a person?'<sup>74</sup> Further, she used the

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<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/10227459/Unrepentant-bongo-bongo-land-Ukip-MEP-says-hell-apologise-to-countrys-ambassador.html>> [accessed 7 August 2013].

<sup>70</sup> 'Remarks at *Daily Star* Gold Star Awards (confrontation with Bob Geldof)'.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK*, p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> She also praised the collectivist approach it espoused: Live Aid 'was humanity in action. That was the young people of Britain and America moved by the plight of others thousands of miles away, using the magic of technology to restate in the language of pop the age-old brotherhood of man. We thank and congratulate them for the marvellous lead they gave.' 'Speech to American Bar Association', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 15 July 1985 <<http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/106096>> [accessed 2 September 2012].

<sup>74</sup> Tom Hibbert, 'The Margaret Thatcher Interview!!?', *Smash Hits*, 25 March 1987 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=13285>> [accessed 16 November 2012]

platform provided by *Smash Hits* to encourage its young readership to follow the examples of those involved in Live Aid, portraying it as an unprecedented youth movement:

It was the first time that we'd been able to get a great body of young people not merely interested in something but actually *doing* something for it and loving doing it and I thought it was absolutely terrific. And I watched some of that and one group after another came and they did a marvellous job. They did a *marvellous* job. I think young people do want to give something: they don't only want to take something, they're desperate to give something – particularly to other youngsters who just don't have a chance.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, Thatcher also framed her praise of the event within nationalistic rhetoric. In her Gold Star Awards speech, she gave her 'personal thanks to all who contributed to that inspired piece of music making [Band Aid]. It means so much that those who our young people revere and idolise should give a lead for good. It lifts everyone. It lifts our country.'<sup>76</sup> It was another example of the 'British character', since 'usually, where disaster strikes you will find Britons ministering unto the victims, or leading the efforts to build a bridge from plenty to hunger, as in Ethiopia.'<sup>77</sup> Band Aid, and later Live Aid, were not rare moments of British compassion: these were examples that affirmed the generosity of 'the Spirit of Great Britain as we find it in 1985.'<sup>78</sup>

While Live Aid should not be viewed as a nationalist event – even if it can be interpreted as an example of cultural imperialism – it was imbued with national pride. The presence of the young Prince and Princess of Wales at the event gave it

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> 'Remarks at *Daily Star* Gold Star Awards (confrontation with Bob Geldof)'. Un-named members of the UK's artistic community also received a tokenistic mention in Thatcher's speech, perhaps demonstrating the populist nature of this event: 'our modern composers, film makers and impresarios who still take the world's stage—and stage awards—by storm.'

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

a royal seal of approval, and the welcoming to their seats in Wembley by performances of the 'Royal Salute' and 'God Save the Queen' by the Coldstream Guards serve as strong signifiers of 'Britishness'.<sup>79</sup> This allows those with a nationalist agenda, such as Thatcher, to enforce a belief that 'we' as a nation helped those of another. The money raised by the concert and sales of the Band Aid single came from the 'British public', a broad inter-generational collective assembled by Geldof – an Irishman.

This sense of Live Aid as a national cultural milestone was felt by some of those onstage. Spandau Ballet guitarist Gary Kemp recalls a 'sense of a grand event going on that could equal England winning the World Cup in 1966 or the Coronation of 1953',<sup>80</sup> while the event's PR manager, Bernard Doherty, claims his 'overriding memory of the day was that it was all so English. Organised chaos. I had to go and photocopy 'Do They Know it's Christmas?' because Bob suddenly realised half the acts didn't know the words!'<sup>81</sup> While at the time the event may have seemed well organised, the shambolic nature of its inception has become a large part of the mythology surrounding it: for Doherty to identify this quality as specifically English shows a wider sense of the idea of nationality at play.

### **Performers' politics**

Having identified that strong political convictions were not a prerequisite to participation in Band Aid and Live Aid, it is important now to address a question posed by Garofalo: 'what motivates an artist to become involved – political commitment, economic consideration, public relations, mock heroism, ego'?<sup>82</sup> This question is particularly important when one considers Geldof's organisational methods. Live Aid's production manager, Andy Zweck, remembers that 'Bob had to

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<sup>79</sup> The Coldstream Guards are one of the key bands of the British Armed Forces.

<sup>80</sup> Gary Kemp, quoted in Garfield et al, 'Rocking the World', p. 21.

<sup>81</sup> Bernard Doherty, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>82</sup> Garofalo, 'Understanding Mega-Events', p. 32.

play some tricks to get artists involved. He had to call Elton and say Queen are in and Bowie's in, and of course they weren't. Then he'd call Bowie and say Elton and Queen are in. It was a game of bluff.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, when attempting to make as many production savings as possible for the Band Aid single, Geldof phoned each of the main record retailers 'one at a time and systematically lied to them'<sup>84</sup> to force them to waive their cut of the record sales.

We had a fairly impressive collection of artists, but I read out to them not only the list of those who had agreed, but the list of all those I intended to approach. I told them that I had already approached the other major distributors. 'And have they agreed to it?' 'Yes,' I lied. 'Everyone has agreed so far. You are actually the last one I'm calling.' 'OK. If they're doing it, I think we ought to too.'<sup>85</sup>

Many involved in the group and concert did not necessarily jump at the opportunity; they required reassurance that it would not affect their public relations. In fact, Geldof recalled to Breskin that after the success of the single, some performers took the view that 'We've done our bit [by being part of Band Aid], and it's not gonna make any difference if we play the concert or not.'<sup>86</sup>

When it came to the production of the single, Geldof, despite having his own musical career, concluded that to raise a substantial amount of money would require collaboration. Having had the germ of an idea to do a benefit single, he told

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<sup>83</sup> Andy Zweck, quoted in Garfield et al, 'Rocking the World', p. 19. Bill Graham is more explicit about the politics of booking acts, claiming that as Live Aid grew in popularity, 'a lot of acts that could not be bothered now wanted to be bothered. Heavy metal acts and certain rock and roll bands suddenly wanted to be on the show. I mean, like ten days out.... It was hard for me to say no to them because of the power structure.' Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, p. 468. However, citing the example of dealings with Kris Kristofferson's the-manager Bert Block, in which Block played a 'game of bluff' with both his client and Graham (which he ultimately lost), Graham suggests that 'you *cannot* blame the bands all the time. It doesn't always happen to be their fault.' *Ibid.*, pp. 469-70.

<sup>84</sup> Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 277.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', p. 30.

his wife, Paula Yates, that 'if the [Boomtown] Rats do it, it won't sell very well. So I thought I might ask a few other people to come in on it.'<sup>87</sup> Being in the middle of a career slump with his band, he felt he 'was in an ideally placed position [...] if Simon Le Bon had rung up George Michael to do something, there would have been suspicion. But I was no threat to anybody [...] if the Rats had done the same record, it wouldn't have been a hit. So I had to get the stars.'<sup>88</sup> Here Geldof addresses the accusation that he used the famine as a means to relaunch his career – which, while simultaneously assisting in its reinvention, it certainly did. He justifies his actions by claiming that he had nothing to gain from it, whereas the stars of the moment – Le Bon and Michael – could be considered cynical or inauthentic if they had organised it.<sup>89</sup>

Frith and Street address this point, speculating that 'if musicians' willingness to support causes became conditional on the presence of television cameras, then their own PR needs became difficult to disentangle from those of the oppressed, starving, or homeless'.<sup>90</sup> Live Aid was unprecedented in the scale to which it provided performers a captive audience. As well as offering charitable support, they were able to address a potentially untapped fan base, or, in the case of acts such as Queen, relaunch themselves on an international scale. However, this wasn't an 'evil' by-product of Geldof's original plan: he understood that this was necessary to raise the maximum amount of money. He fought to have the event televised, first unsuccessfully approaching Channel 4, before signing a deal with the BBC.<sup>91</sup> Television was extremely important for the encouragement of remote donations, and to attract the attention of networks the event required big names: Geldof was

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<sup>87</sup> Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 272.

<sup>88</sup> Breskin, 'Bob Geldof: The Rolling Stone Interview', p. 33.

<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, Geldof criticises the *NME* for being 'snide and sneering from the beginning. There were questions as to why I was doing the whole thing. People said it was to resurrect my failing career, which I likened to Demis Roussos, the Greek pop star, planning the hijacking of the Beirut TWA jet he was on to reactivate his flagging career. It's a little extreme in terms of hype [*laughs*].' Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 75.

<sup>91</sup> See Geldof, *Is That It?*, p. 331-343.

'delighted' when Jagger signed up to perform, since 'The more people like Jagger we got the more the American networks would buy.'<sup>92</sup> As Frith and Street suggest, 'it was the TV cameras that gave the performers their political power in the first place, and what changed, therefore, was the coding of rock *sincerity*.... Now political commitment meant making the most of one's three minutes in the spotlight. What happened behind the scenes was irrelevant.'<sup>93</sup>

An act's presence onstage served as their statement of support for the cause. However, once their short stage slot was over they did not necessarily retain their commitment. There is little evidence to suggest that the experience of Band Aid and Live Aid did much to politicize those involved. Francis Rossi of Status Quo – the first act onstage at Live Aid – recalls that at the Band Aid recording session:

There were shitloads of drugs – coke, dope, all sorts. Everyone was going bananas. Rick [Parfitt, of Status Quo] told me [...] that he got so out of it he couldn't sing anymore [...] Rick and I were the drug centre. People were saying, 'Let's go and see Doctor Rossi and Doctor Parfitt, shall we?'<sup>94</sup>

Even while working to the moral good, many performers obviously did not change their excessive lifestyles. However, George Michael claims that involvement had an immediate politicising effect on him. In a 1986 interview with *NME*, Michael answers a question on persuading fellow performers to engage in a potential artistic boycott of South Africa thus:

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 341. Bill Graham's response to the American TV networks' coverage of the event was apoplectic. 'The people at home were *raped* by television. The consciousness of MTV was completely out of keeping with what Live Aid was all about. Sharing and letting go of the profit motive for one day. They were no different than the T-shirt bootleggers who worked on the streets outside of JFK Stadium. ABC butchered some of the acts because it was time for them to cut away for commercials [...]. They didn't show the Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young reunion or the Led Zeppelin set. In defense of themselves, ABC said, "We have a business to run. We have electric bills to pay.'" Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, p. 475.

<sup>93</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> Francis Rossi, quoted in Garfield et al, 'Rocking the World', p. 18.

I've never been able to do it. When we gave our royalties to Ethiopia last Christmas, I did it well upfront so maybe some of the other acts that had been on Band Aid might feel some pressure to do the same thing. No one did anything of the kind. So I'm quite sure that if I tried to say, pull your records out of South Africa, half wouldn't be bothered and half wouldn't want to give up the money. I'm resigned to the way people in the music business think.<sup>95</sup>

He goes on to claim he doesn't think 'there's any way Britain will pull out of South Africa because the public don't care enough to put pressure on the government to do anything about it.'<sup>96</sup> While he aims to display his compassion and political conviction, he acknowledges an apathy that exists amongst not just the pop music industry but also the public at large. This obviously asks questions as to whether Live Aid should have taken a more political approach to change these attitudes and encourage a greater consciousness towards the causes of situations that require charitable support.

Alongside the politicisation of acts such as George Michael, Live Aid left a legacy which saw the inauguration of not only Red Wedge in the UK (see chapter 10), but further cause-oriented musical events internationally. While the 1985 Wembley and Philadelphia concerts could be said to have taken inspiration from Amnesty International's *Secret Policeman's Ball* series,<sup>97</sup> Amnesty in turn used Live Aid as a model for their North American *Conspiracy of Hope* tour in 1986, featuring Live Aid

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<sup>95</sup> Mat Snow, 'George Michael: Mein Whampf!', *New Musical Express*, 28 June 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=11183>> [accessed 16 November 2012]. Wham!'s single 'Last Christmas' had a peak chart position of no. 2, being held off the no. 1 spot by 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' They donated all royalties from the single to the Band Aid fund.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Four events took place in London under this umbrella title prior to Live Aid: 'A Poke in the Eye (With a Sharp Stick)'/Pleasure at Her Majesty's' (Her Majesty's Theatre, 1-3 April 1976); 'An Evening Without Sir Bernard Miles'/'The Mermaid Frolics' (The Mermaid Theatre, 8 May 1977); 'The Secret Policeman's Ball' (Her Majesty's Theatre, 27-30 June 1979); 'The Secret Policeman's Other Ball' (Drury Lane, 9-12 September 1981). This fourth event saw performances from Live Aid collaborators Sting, Eric Clapton, Geldof, Phil Collins and Pete Townshend.



alumni Sting and U2.<sup>98</sup> Since Amnesty exists to exert political pressure on international governments to release those deemed to have been unjustifiably imprisoned, *Conspiracy of Hope* was 'dedicated to six specific prisoners of conscience. Pre-addressed postcards, to be signed and returned to the dictator in question, [were] distributed at each show.'<sup>99</sup> They attempted to take the Live Aid model one step further, by encouraging political consciousness and engagement. However, as American journalist Charles Bermant reports, this attempt largely fell on selectively deaf ears: 'To judge from the piles of postcards discarded after the show, there were quite a few people who savored the music but ignored the message.'<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, Bermant saw Live Aid and its legacy as enough evidence to suggest that 'rock has now developed a socialist conscience', before quoting Bono's statement of intent to continue his involvement in charitable causes:

There are those who have wished that the doors that have opened with Band Aid and Live Aid would close [...]. Some people have suggested that we get this charity business over with, get back to rock and roll's redundant behavior [sic], like we had in the 1970s. But there are those of us anxious to keep those doors open, by refusing to go back to sleep.<sup>101</sup>

Of course, these doors had always been open to those who wished to enter into activist music making; some of those who were already using their music as a vehicle to convey social messages found the approach of Geldof et al to be distasteful.<sup>102</sup> The overwhelmingly white ethnic make-up of the Live Aid concerts

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<sup>98</sup> Bill Graham was also involved with the management of this tour. See Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, pp. 478-90.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Bermant, 'A Conspiracy of Hope: Amnesty International', *The Globe and Mail*, 6 June 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=9488>> [accessed 16 November 2012]. This method of politicisation was also utilised by Red Wedge – see chapter 10.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Bono, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Indeed, this view was supported within the academy: 'On the day before the Live Aid Concerts in 1985, the academic Will Straw told a group of popular music scholars: "I take it for granted that most of us here find the various charity projects tasteless, self-serving for

became a point of concern for some commentators, including the Birmingham reggae band Steel Pulse – themselves alumni of RAR having performed at the 1978 Victoria Park carnival. Lead singer David Hinds 'got the impression that Live Aid was saying, "If there's going to be any saving going on, it's going to be us saving you as opposed to you saving yourself."'”<sup>103</sup> He accused Live Aid of boycotting 'black music' despite reggae's deep connection to 'the Ethiopian experience': he asserted that for Geldof, no reggae band 'was big enough' to perform at the event.<sup>104</sup> Reggae historian Klive Walker underlines this point:

In 1985, I was present at the Tom Redcam Library for the launch of the Land of Africa project, a benefit for Ethiopian famine relief by reggae artists. Land of Africa, though it provided a modest contribution to the famine relief effort, in its own way underscored the lack of a reggae and African music presence in Bob Geldof's 1984 [sic] Live Aid recording, concert, and film projects. Geldof completely ignored the fact that Rasta reggae artists view Ethiopia as their spiritual home.<sup>105</sup>

Further critiques of Live Aid resulted from the career boosts that many of its performers enjoyed. Jon Langford – guitarist for Leeds-based post-punk group the Mekons – found the event to be a cynical use of political authenticity by those who had enjoyed careers previously uninfluenced by charity or politics. He claimed that

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those involved, symptomatic of existing geo-political relations and politically inappropriate, and that we never much liked Bob Geldof anyway.” Street, *Music and Politics*, p. 118.

<sup>103</sup> David Hinds, quoted in Dan Snowden, 'Steel Pulse', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 1985 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=5054>> [accessed 16 November 2012]. Bill Graham recalls that Geldof 'had no black acts.' However, when organising the Philadelphia concert Graham remembers that he 'contacted every single major black artist [in the USA]. I won't name them because I'm still in the business. But they *all* turned down Live Aid.' He suggests that, while the USA had more black star performers than the UK, and he recognised that questions would be asked of the lack of black performers on the bill ('People could say, "They *should* be available for their brothers and sisters in Ethiopia"'), he struggled to make the line-up 'representative'. Graham & Greenfield, *Bill Graham Presents*, p. 468.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Klive Walker, *Dubwise: Reasoning from the Reggae Underground* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2005), pp. 25-6.

'all the groups used Live Aid as a chance to relaunch their careers. All the music biz hacks from Tin Pan Alley suddenly swaggering around with cigars in their gobs saying, "We're respectable now, we're not rebels anymore".<sup>106</sup> However, for Widgery these changes in attitudes, which he describes as a 'shift in rock-and-roll political consciousness', did not represent inauthentic uses of political capital, but rather demonstrated 'the influence the political Left has had in pioneering new sorts of links between music and politics.'<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusions

For Widgery, the influence of RAR was writ large on Live Aid: he viewed the mega-event as emblematic of a renewed interest in the use of popular music to increase awareness of political and social issues. While Live Aid's performers were largely mainstream stars, it can be said to have built upon a legacy left by RAR in that it came after benefits in support of the miners' strike and in opposition to the proposed abolition of the Greater London Council: events which were populated by performers who were inspired by punk.<sup>108</sup> However, while these benefits opposed British government policy, Live Aid sought only to raise awareness as a means of raising money. While Geldof lobbied the government on issues affecting their fundraising capabilities, their political engagement with international aid policy was less forthcoming. So: was Live Aid a political event?

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<sup>106</sup> Jon Langford, quoted in Jon Robb, 'The Mekons', *Sounds*, 30 September 1989 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=3466>> [accessed 16 November 2012], as written. This accusation was primarily established by the Leeds-based anarcho-punk group Chumbawamba (also referred to as Chumbawumba), whose 1986 debut album, *Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records*, is a wide-ranging attack on the event, its 'whitewashing' of Britain's colonial past, and the corporatisation of charity for Africa. Its opening track, 'How to Get Your Band on TV/Slag Aid' is characterised by its sardonic berating of Paul McCartney, Freddie Mercury/Queen, Bowie, Jagger and Cliff Richard for the apparent hypocrisy of their charitable performances in the context of their past actions, such as corporatism, performing at Sun City, and drug use. Chumbawamba, 'How to Get Your Band on TV', *Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records*, Agit-Prop Records PROP 1 (1986).

<sup>107</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, pp. 114-5.

<sup>108</sup> Indeed, some of these performers went on to engage with Red Wedge.

It did come to have political impact: Thatcher attempted to use the event to raise her political capital; it commenced a popular discourse on international aid budgets; and on the event's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005, Live 8 put popular pressure on political leaders at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, at which economic development in Africa was a priority for discussion.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, some of its performers came to increase their engagement with politics, one of whom – Paul Weller – became an important figure in the Red Wedge group analysed in the following chapter. However, Live Aid's own intentions and ends stated no political position. Geldof rejected the idea that it could become a sustained political 'movement.' This was to be its ultimate strength: by not asking participants – the paying public and performers – to state a political position, by simply asking them to take part in a capitalist exchange, Live Aid's organisers were able to attract an enormous and broad community who could engage with the event on any ideological level of their choosing.

Given what was proposed in Section I – that popular music is most successful politically when it engages with causes rather than ideologies – this demonstrates simultaneously why Live Aid has become an established part of Britain's shared cultural history, while the subsequent Red Wedge group is not so widely remembered. I will show in the following chapter how Red Wedge's failure to make a sizeable cultural impact during its operations is largely due to the problematic nature of the direct engagement between musicians and politicians.

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<sup>109</sup> See Cloonan, *Popular Music and the State in the UK; Street, Music and Politics*.

## Chapter Ten

### Red Wedge

Red Wedge was a loose group of popular music performers, established in late 1985 and more or less disbanded by late 1987, with two explicit aims: to increase political consciousness amongst young Britons and, as the 1987 general election approached, to encourage them to vote for the Labour Party. The group was in turn supported by the Party, who provided resources and encouraged members to interact with the musicians. Red Wedge set about achieving their aims through a series of musical events and encouraging political debate via the music press. Despite apparent establishment support, the organisation of these events seems to have been just as disorganised as RAR and Live Aid. In a report from the 1987 pre-election tour, *NME*'s Len Brown notes how 'given only 10 days to set up the tour the Wedge was unable to find venues in the Harlow, Basildon or Cambridge marginals'.<sup>1</sup> Instead of visiting these key constituencies, they performed in the safe Tory seat of Worcester because, according to a press officer, 'Red Wedge [had] worked politically with the young people of this area before'.<sup>2</sup>

In a feature on Tom Robinson during Red Wedge's period of operation, Frith suggests that:

[Pop] musicians have two political uses – to raise money (Geldof used all the trappings of hype and hard sell for Band Aid) or to raise consciousness (the RAR and Red Wedge emphasis). In practice, cash and ideology can't be separated – Band Aid has unleashed charitable urges which are a threat to the Tebbit brand of Tory self-interest, while, in the end, pop stars' basic

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<sup>1</sup> Len Brown, 'Pre-Election Shuffle', *NME* 13<sup>th</sup> June 1987, pp. 28-9 (p. 28).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

importance for campaigns like Red Wedge is as crowd-pullers and money-makers.<sup>3</sup>

Given the year in which it was established, the organisers of Red Wedge were no doubt influenced by Live Aid. However, they sought to promote political engagement in the same ways that RAR had. Their hope was that concert attendees would be persuaded, first and foremost, of the wrongs of the Thatcher government, and as such when the time came for the ballot papers to be distributed that they would vote against her party; preferably, they stated, for the Labour Party. This was Red Wedge's undoing. While their opposition to Thatcher was consistent, their support for the Labour Party was not. By the time the 1987 election came around, even its figureheads were expressing uncertainty of Labour's suitability for government.

This chapter examines the history and political context of the group's establishment, before looking in turn at the responses of those who held power in determining the success of the group's aims: the popular music press, musical peers, and the politicians themselves. Red Wedge has not been analyzed in this way before. As such, what follows will refer primarily to articles published in the music press: for all performers of this period, print media such as *NME*, *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* were a primary point of contact with their audience. Through this methodology I will clearly demonstrate how the commonly stated issues of politics and authenticity in popular music culture outlined in Section I were practised during the mid- to late-1980s. The music press, like all facets of the music industries, simultaneously reflect and shape popular opinion. As such we can use its journalism as a form of empirical evidence of the discourse which took place during this period, as well as the role it played in the shaping of this discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Frith, 'Tom Robinson: Staying True', *The Observer*, June 1986  
<<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=8423>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

## Background

A central figure in the establishment of Red Wedge was Billy Bragg, who, after becoming involved in political protest by playing benefits for striking miners and against the closure of the GLC in 1984, saw potential for greater involvement of pop musicians in political causes. Despite stating in early 1985 that the Labour Party 'couldn't use someone [as a publicity stunt] if you went down there and laid yourself prostrate in front of them',<sup>4</sup> he approached them to support his *Jobs for Youth* tour which, as a show that featured politically conscious acts and engaged attendance by Labour MPs, proved to be a precursor to Red Wedge.<sup>5</sup> After bringing on board fellow benefit veterans Paul Weller – without whom Bragg believes 'Red Wedge would have been nothing'<sup>6</sup> – and the Communards, Red Wedge was launched in Westminster in November 1985. Bragg promoted the group's launch in an interview with Roger Holland of *Sounds*, in which he outlined their intentions:

We're not just going to be asking people to vote Labour. The idea will be to create common ground for young people to come into contact with the Labour Party, to examine their programme and to see what they have to offer, and then make their *own* minds up.<sup>7</sup>

Red Wedge's relationship with Labour divided opinion. Largely, those who disagreed with its ambitions sought to promote their closeness to the party as a means of discrediting it, while members and supporters often emphasised the group's autonomy to achieve the opposite impact. In an interview with *Melody Maker* prior to the 1987 general election, Bragg expressed the belief that 'if [Labour]

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<sup>4</sup> Levy, 'No Band...', p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Karen Swayne, 'Hey everybody...let's have a Labour Party!', *Number One*, 6 April 1985, pp. 22-3 (p. 22). Bragg described this tour as 'a matter of trying out all the ideas that have now born fruit in Red Wedge.' Quoted in Roger Holland, 'Billy Bragg or Wedge Presley?', *Sounds*, 21/8 December 1985, pp. 22-3 (p. 22)

<sup>6</sup> Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, p. 517. Lynskey emphasises Weller's populist importance by stating that 'none of the Style Council's first eight singles peaked lower than number eleven [in the charts]'.  
<sup>7</sup> Bragg, quoted in Holland, 'Billy Bragg or Wedge Presley?', p. 23.

could [reach youth voters] better themselves, they would.'<sup>8</sup> As Red Wedge's relationship with Labour wore on, they began to distrust the Party, finding that their views of the group and its abilities did not correlate.

To draw audiences to their first tour in early 1986, Red Wedge followed the model of Live Aid and RAR by promising entertainment tempered with the encouragement of political consciousness. Red Wedge clearly learned lessons from the approach of Geldof to Live Aid, through a realisation that involving well-known names would go a long way in drawing audiences towards their messages. According to Bragg, Red Wedge used the tour 'to state our case,' by using 'big names and big venues to draw people in.'<sup>9</sup> They aimed to create a 'common ground' between Labour and young voters 'by *creating* the sort of events where people come *for* the entertainment and the politics is there' as an auxiliary consideration, 'rather than roping them all in to a political meeting.'<sup>10</sup> In this respect, while the model of RAR would have been in the minds of those involved with Red Wedge, they hoped to avoid the accusations of political interference RAR endured through their connections to the SWP. Where local RAR activists would put any band looking for a gig on a bill (so long as they agreed to *rock* against racism), Red Wedge understood that to assist a Labour election victory they would have to take a populist approach to concert programming. Frith and Street identify this as a key difference between Red Wedge and RAR, quoting Jerry Dammers of the Specials' statement at the group's launch that 'We hope Red Wedge is *like* a party atmosphere'.<sup>11</sup> This demonstrates that 'Red Wedge was a much more cautious

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<sup>8</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mick Mercer, 'Bard Elect', *Melody Maker*, 20 June 1987, p. 34-5 (p. 35)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. As an example of the left-wing populism adopted by Red Wedge on this tour, Bob Dickinson states that at the Manchester Apollo date the Style Council's set 'veered perilously close to corn when a slide-sequence of Thatcher and Reagan portraits flashed up during a drum solo played to extracts from many foolhardy speeches.' Dickinson, in Len Brown and Bob Dickinson, 'Hot Bed of Reds!', *New Musical Express*, 8 February 1986, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Bragg, quoted in Will Smith, 'Practical Dreamers', *Melody Maker*, 7 March 1987, pp. 36-7 (p. 36), emphasis as written.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Dammers, quoted in Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 72 (my emphasis).



enterprise than RAR':<sup>12</sup> with a specific political aim, the musicians and Labour had much more to lose than the often chaotic and 'flamboyant' RAR.<sup>13</sup> The party atmosphere, they imply, would be abandoned behind the scenes when the 'real' political work is done.

Red Wedge's apparent disillusionment with Labour is symptomatic of left wing musical activism during this period. According to Widgery, during a nationwide RAR tour prior to the 1979 general election, its activists 'said vote Labour, but with no illusions. RAR's real advice to the electorate [...] was "Rock hard, life is deaf"'.<sup>14</sup> Journalists such as Bob Dickinson were also quick to defend Red Wedge against accusations of taking the socialist line too seriously:

Despite Red Wedge's title, pop is more documentary than abstract constructivist, but sometimes it strays into the strained world of socialist realism [...]. Yes, socialism and sentiment are frequently attracted to each other, but thankfully this package doesn't allow them to tarry too long or too often in that embrace. Instead, Red Wedge derives a great deal of its energy from an enormously necessary sense of humour.<sup>15</sup>

Once the audience had been drawn to events by names such as Weller's Style Council and Bragg, 'they found brown paper bags on their seats; these contained a selection of political pamphlets – one on apartheid in South Africa, one about unemployment among young people, another about the Campaign for Nuclear

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<sup>12</sup> Frith & Street, *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Widgery, *Beating Time*, p. 103. (Adapted from a quotation attributed to the Canadian surrealist painter Mimi Parent.) However, the centralised approach of Red Wedge did mark out a difference from RAR. Richard Coles told Will Smith that 'I'd like to see more things happening in the regions, I'd like to see more local organisation. But, again, from what initially started out as the idea of a few musicians in London, you're talking about a *nationwide* organisation, and it's an enormous step.' Coles, quoted in Will Smith, 'Practical Dreamers', p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Dickinson, in Dickinson & Brown, 'Hot Bed of Reds!'

Disarmament, another on women's rights.'<sup>16</sup> Red Wedge also put their name to community events and daytime workshops as part of their tours: for example, during the pre-election tour *NME* accompanied members of the group to see 'the impressive Afro-Caribbean Media Project [in Wolverhampton] and Sam Sharpe Music project,' which reporter Len Brown described as 'a good example of the Red Wedge's daytime support work aside from the shows.'<sup>17</sup>

While the primary motive behind Red Wedge was to introduce young music fans to Labour, the distribution of 'political pamphlets' and engagement with community organisations serve as attempts to introduce the Party's existing values – as well as perhaps emphasising the political ideas and motivations of the performers themselves. Opinions of Red Wedge's members on its politics and relationship with Labour were as divergent as their musical styles. One of the group's more surprising members, Gary Kemp of Spandau Ballet, told *Smash Hits* that 'Red Wedge hasn't got any strict manifestos or policies',<sup>18</sup> while Weller – a staunchly socialist voice within the group despite his earlier affirmation that he would 'vote Conservative' at the 1979 general election<sup>19</sup> – hoped that they would 'become important enough and powerful enough to be able to apply power and influence on the Labour Party and change the way they think.'<sup>20</sup> For Weller, if Red Wedge were to assist Labour's utilisation of the youth vote, they would have to be seen to be rehabilitating the Party's image. Encouraging credibility-aware youths to vote for

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<sup>16</sup> William Shaw, 'Red Wedge', *Smash Hits*, 12 February 1986, pp. 14-5 (p. 14). C.f. Amnesty International's 'pre-addressed postcards'.

<sup>17</sup> Len Brown, 'Pre-Election Shuffle', p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> William Shaw, 'Red Wedge', p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Clarke, 'All change and back to 1964'. As Middleton asked of John Lennon's dual 'authentic' voices in his 1970 song 'God', 'Which me, then?' (Middleton, *Voicing the Popular*, p. 202). It comes as somewhat of a surprise that Weller's political 'authenticity' was not challenged more after his earlier Tory support.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 24. Weller is quite outspoken in this article, particularly with his views on Red Wedge's importance to the general state of politics in the country: 'I think you *can* overestimate the public [in terms of how they make democratic choices] [...] I'd like to politicise people to the point where they can actually make a rational choice in politics. We haven't got anywhere near that stage yet. I think most people vote in a totally irrational and irresponsible way.' *Ibid.*

Labour was not enough: to represent their 'constituents' accurately they had to make Kinnock and his party aware of the issues that mattered to them.

In this respect, Red Wedge can be seen as a broad Labour Party pressure group. This sets it apart from the single-issue protests of RAR and Live Aid, whose 'success' could be quantitatively assessed, be it through the numbers of fans expressing opposition to racism or, in the case of Live Aid, through the amount of funds raised to aid victims of Ethiopian famine. Red Wedge set itself a more multi-faceted challenge. While the success of their ultimate aim – to elect a Labour government – was easy to determine, its other ambitions were put in place as both a means to achieve this and ends in themselves; the success of these aims could not be similarly judged. Richard Coles of the Communards viewed the importance of Red Wedge's approach thus:

A lot of single issue campaigns like CND and Green Peace [sic] have been successful around a specific issue, but there's no follow up to that. While it's very good that CND exist, if you're talking about more general things like political initiatives, you're talking about changing the political landscape, you're talking about young people's political consciousness, and you're talking about something a lot more substantial than CND or Green Peace. You need something that isn't specifically attuned to one particular issue.<sup>21</sup>

This view is seconded by Bragg in a roundtable debate on the group in a January 1986 issue of *Melody Maker*, in which he claims that Red Wedge could 'make an instant impact on the Labour Party policy concerning things they know little about like pirate radio and the marijuana laws [...]. There is nothing in the Labour Party manifesto about setting up music co-ops for young people.'<sup>22</sup> He also reaffirms the common view of many young people that Party policies represent 'older people

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Coles, quoted in Will Smith, 'Practical Dreamers', p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 24.

making decisions for the young.<sup>23</sup> As a Labour member, Bragg was unafraid to voice the opinions of his young fan base, as well as his own, with regard to its direction and public relations. Indeed, in the week before the general election Bragg's enthusiasm for a Labour government appeared to be rather low for a supposed cheerleader, claiming that most politicians

are in it to further their own careers. Fewer than I actually expected are idealists [...]. The House Of Commons, as it stands, is quite a disappointing place. People, once they get there, adopt a different attitude to what they had before.<sup>24</sup>

As early in the group's history as February 1986, *NME* reporter Bob Dickinson was describing Bragg as 'the political flagship of Red Wedge, romanticising the history of the Labour movement,' and at the same time, a doubting, cockney-accented cynic.<sup>25</sup> All members of Red Wedge were to be seen treading the political centre ground as a means of retaining the trust of their young fans. They emphasised their difference to suited, establishment politicians – they were 'one of us.' As such, Labour MPs such as Clare Short maintained Red Wedge's line on their relationship, seeking to 'make it clear that Red Wedge don't have to have private meetings with Kinnock or whoever.'<sup>26</sup>

This centrist approach by Red Wedge to Labour meant that musicians with hard-left political opinions were less inclined to become involved. From its beginning, Bragg had to publicly balance the group's outlook between the Party's hard-left group – Militant Tendency – and their centrist leader Neil Kinnock to maintain their identity as a broad-left group:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mercer, 'Bard Elect', p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Dickinson & Brown, 'Hot Bed of Reds!'

<sup>26</sup> Clare Short, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 26.

Red Wedge is certainly not anti-militant or anti-Kinnock, or pro-militant or pro-Kinnock. There'd be no point if we were. We've just got to be thoroughly anti-Tory. And whatever shade of red people are within that, I really don't care.<sup>27</sup>

However while this statement can be seen as an appeal to socialists to join the group, some of those who declined did so precisely because Red Wedge was pro-Labour. While Bragg and the SWP-supporting Chris Dean (the Redskins) agreed 'on 90 per cent of things',<sup>28</sup> Dean felt that the 10 per cent deficit was

the difference between winning fights like the miners and Liverpool and Thatcher's ideas becoming the prevailing ideas of the country [...]. What *you* see as our petty arguments and differences is the difference between victory and defeat for socialism as far as the SWP are concerned.<sup>29</sup>

As much as Dean felt that Thatcher had 'destroyed this country', and wanted 'to find a way of destroying her',<sup>30</sup> diluting his principled socialist ideology was not an option in his pursuit of this outcome.<sup>31</sup> Red Wedge's centrist socialism was also a barrier to the Housemartins – whose 'caring sharing brand of Christianity-cum-socialism' Len Brown felt was 'stamped-indelibly on their songs and determine[d] their support for causes such as Miners' Hardship Funds, Labour Party Young Socialists, and CND'.<sup>32</sup> They expressed their disagreement with Red Wedge's policies to Brown in a 1986 interview, in which singer Paul Heaton claimed that they found 'more political allegiance with bands like The Redskins and Easterhouse':

<sup>27</sup> Holland, 'Billy Bragg or Wedge Presley?', p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p.24.

<sup>29</sup> Dean, quoted in Ibid. The Labour-led council of the mid-Eighties came into conflict with the Thatcher government, and indeed its own Party leadership, as it adopted Militant Tendency policies. This led to it voting through an illegal budget in 1985 in which its spending exceeded its income. See Graham Stewart, *Bang!*, pp. 434-5.

<sup>30</sup> Dean, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> However, being a member of the SWP was not an all-encompassing barrier to joining Red Wedge. Jerry Dammers felt it was 'important that Red Wedge is a broad left alliance so that we can unite and get Labour in there [government]' while remaining a member of the SWP. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Len Brown, 'The Housemartins: If You Love Jesus', *NME*, 20 December 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=11155>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

Unless the musicians in Red Wedge actually come out and say they want the music business nationalised, which we most certainly do, we can't support them. I think that, at the, crunch, [sic] when it comes to giving away their riches they'll be against nationalisation. They enjoy, [sic] their hotel lifestyles, their chauffeur lifestyles. They're more interested in telling other people how to live their lives.<sup>33</sup>

He opposed this with the 'serious policy' of his own band – 'staying on friends' floors and Adopt-A-Housemartin. It's a statement against the luxurious lifestyles that musicians afford themselves.'<sup>34</sup> For Heaton, the act of being in a band that preaches compassionate socialism required practising it himself, rather than succumbing to the clichéd behaviour of rock culture. Brown acknowledged this attitude, but responded in the same way Bragg dealt with the beliefs of Chris Dean: he felt a centrist coalition of leftist figures was the most efficient way to combat Thatcherism. Heaton did not disagree with this as such, but believed a 'united front' should not be 'a hypocritical united front, [or] a trendy united front. It should be a proper Red Wedge, a Red Wedge which wants to do away with the Royal Family, to nationalise the music industry, to withdraw imperialism from Northern Ireland once and for all. Clear policies.'<sup>35</sup> For Heaton, Red Wedge would have to aspire to 'authentic' socialist values for him to join.

### Press response

Brown's frustrated response to the Housemartins' attitude is indicative of the left wing landscape within the British music press at this time, particularly at the *NME*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Heaton, quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*. 'Adopt-A-Housemartin' refers to the band's scheme of sleeping on fans' floors during their first national tour. Michael Wagg, 'Old Music: The Housemartins – Sheep', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2012 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/jan/26/old-music-housemartins-sheep>> [accessed 6 January 2013].

<sup>35</sup> Heaton, quoted in Brown, 'The Housemartins: If You Love Jesus'.

<sup>36</sup> The response of the mainstream British press to Red Wedge differed in that the papers did not strictly speak to the movement's intended audience. Rather most readers of papers

The coverage Red Wedge received in the inky and beyond was extremely important in promoting the movement to its target audience and energising debate about its apparent necessity. The pop music press had already played a role in promoting the political consciousness of its young readership before the group had even been established, as recognised by Bragg:

Certainly, in the music press and, to some extent, in the popular press, Red Wedge has undoubtedly begun this debate that we wanted to get going about the Labour Party [...] but we're not responsible for the politicisation of British youth – they were already getting politicised, and we're just a manifestation of it [...] the stuff in the music press has been as important [as Red Wedge], and the constructive criticism and airing the views, getting the views out of people. It's a practical necessity to talk about the Labour Party through what is, essentially, a mass youth media in this country – the pop press.<sup>37</sup>

The response of the music press to the group and its 'debate' was threefold: polite explanation, enthusiastic promotion erring on the side of involvement, and snide criticism. The teen-oriented weekly *Smash Hits* featured coverage which can be categorised as polite explanation. A two-page spread in a March 1986 issue documents a concert in a sober style, flanked by sidebars giving the opinions of politicians of both wings and those of concert attendees. Writer William Shaw succeeds in his apparent aim of neutrality, telling us that

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like *The Sun* would have little knowledge of the musicians involved, and as such Bragg, Weller et al would hold little or no cultural and political capital in trying to influence their vote. Still, *Sun* and former *Sounds* writer Garry Bushell – at the time a card carrying Labour Party member – held strong opinions of them: 'If anything's gonna put people off the Labour Party it's Billy Bragg whining tunelessly away. It's horrible. And Paul Weller, who's turned into the most morose, boring bastard I've ever come across. I used to like Paul Weller when he had some fire in his belly but now he's as entertaining as trying to teach algebra to a stick insect. The state of him! It's a farce, isn't it? A complete vote-loser.' Colin Irwin, 'Garry Bushell: The Most Evil Man In Pop', *Melody Maker*, 10 May 1986  
<<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=19395>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>37</sup> Bragg, quoted in Will Smith, 'Practical Dreamers', p. 36.

Those involved state that they're all committed to the creation of a 'fairer, saner society', and they all reckon that to get *that* you need to get rid of the present government. And though nearly all of them say they aren't totally committed to the Labour Party, they believe that Labour is the best option we've got – the lesser of two evils.<sup>38</sup>

The *NME*, who were largely supportive of the group's efforts and approach, exemplify the second category: Len Brown described 'the birth of Red Wedge [as] the major political development in music in 1986.'<sup>39</sup> In a round-up of their pre-election tour, Brown cements Tory stereotypes while toeing the Red Wedge line on the purpose of their tour:

While the Tories are fielding a galaxy of wrinkled has-beens and Shirley Bassey [...] to win back Thatcher's children (having tossed a generation on the dole heap since 1979), the Wedge have been frantically touring, boosting morale and raising consciousness; encouraging young people to participate in politics, to vote, and have a direct influence over their own futures.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the magazine's publisher IPC's refusal to print political advertising, *NME*'s positive coverage of the group can be interpreted as an endorsement of not only Red Wedge, but also the Labour Party.<sup>41</sup> Brown places emphasis on the positive impact the group had on Labour's election chances, claiming that they 'have been playing a crucial role in marginal constituencies where economic and social depression is rife, effecting a positive revitalisation of young voters' – despite a

<sup>38</sup> William Shaw, 'Red Wedge', pp. 14-5. As written.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, 'The Housemartins: If You Love Jesus'.

<sup>40</sup> Brown, 'Pre-Election Shuffle', p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Mercer, 'Bard Elect', p. 35. In this interview Bragg criticises IPC's stance after they refused to print an advert for his *Back to Basics* compilation, which featured the slogan 'No-one with a conscience votes Tory'.



concert attendee having told him that she felt they 'should've had more speakers to get the politics across'.<sup>42</sup>

There was still space for criticism and cynicism within *NME*'s pages – of not only Red Wedge but the combination of pop and politics in general. In a scathing critique of Red Wedge members Fine Young Cannibals, Barney Hoskyns warned that they are 'in grave danger of becoming the ultimate '80s *NME* band – suitable politics with just the right Red Wedge quotient of style.'<sup>43</sup> He goes on to criticise the role of popular music journalism in terms drawn from the oppositional concept of authenticity:

The only really creepy thing that can happen in the domain of subculture is homogeneity of taste and opinion, and at the moment that is what's happening. The struggle against the *Smash Hits* vidpop establishment is merely producing an inverse status quo of conformity and GLC right-on-ness.<sup>44</sup>

Further, Hoskyns seemed uncomfortable with the use of politics as a marketing tool within pop music, and took issue with 'a guilt that equates stardom with capitalist evil. There's [...] an invisible style council which monitors our social consciences. It's hypocritical, too, because all these people are hiding their political ignorance behind clothes and hairstyle – look the part and you won't have to say anything.'<sup>45</sup> He saw Red Wedge as a badge, representing a prescribed set of political opinions – those of the Labour Party – which could be adopted by any performer as radical chic. Those who accepted Red Wedge's rhetoric without announcing their personal politics were using political identity inauthentically.

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, 'Pre-Election Shuffle', p.28.

<sup>43</sup> Barney Hoskyns, 'Wedged Down The Throat: Fine Young Cannibals', *NME*, 14 December 1985 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=4467>> [accessed 16 November 2012]. Hoskyns demonstrated that he had little time for politics in pop, stating that 'one of the truly Great Bores Of Today is the "politicised" pop star'.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

*Melody Maker*, on the other hand, were more regularly critical of Red Wedge's approach and denounced its possible success. While the magazine could certainly be seen as anti-Thatcher, Stewart Cunningham's report from the Edinburgh Playhouse date of the inaugural tour pre-empts Paul Heaton's critique, serving to paint those involved with the group as clichéd 'rock stars' – far from the salt of the earth socialists they portrayed themselves as:

A post-gig party at the Assembly Rooms featured more local bands [...] and a significant absence of Red Wedge performers. As it turned out, there was a little soiree for them back at the hotel, away from the mob. And that's really the point, isn't it? Pop music is about fame, fortune, stardom.... It's about staying in big hotels, smoking the best dope and avoiding the punters.<sup>46</sup>

For Cunningham, Red Wedge was 'innocuous, safe, banal, simplistic, and horribly, horribly adult [...] an attempt to harness youth culture, whatever the hell *that* is, to a tired old structural carthorse called Kinnock'.<sup>47</sup> He deals in the rhetoric of authenticity: the concept of musicians standing up in the name of a form of establishment is anathema to rock's rebellious, if not revolutionary, spirit. He implies that moving the Tories onto the opposition benches of the House of Commons should never be the aim of pop music: it should question *everything*, including the intrusion of 'adults' into 'youth' affairs. He also saw the politics as secondary to the lure of star power, claiming that 'most of the people here – say, 60 per cent – were here for Weller and his Bragging clone'.<sup>48</sup> However, his cynicism came to be reiterated by Bragg himself, with Cunningham pre-empting Bragg's disillusionment with the Labour Party by stating that 'nothing will really change if Labour get in [...].

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<sup>46</sup> Stewart Cunningham, 'Preaching to the converted?', *Melody Maker*, 15 February 1986, pp. 12-13 (p.12).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

In other words, Red Wedge is about as dangerous as a poke in the eye with a piece of wet, pink toilet paper.<sup>49</sup>

Further, in a report from a post-general election tour, Carol Clerk dismissed Red Wedge's model on the grounds that it opposed a set of ideals of what pop music should 'be'. She attributes this failure to the 'cast [...] banished to the dark corner specially reserved for a bunch of do-gooding bastards with big mouths and bigger aspirations, all of them laboriously detailed in a stream of pronouncements on world affairs.'<sup>50</sup> Clerk admits nonetheless that her experience of a Red Wedge concert had challenged her preconceptions: 'nobody ever told *me* that a Red Wedge gig would be *fun* – and this has served to limit its communicative potential. Lots of people are simply put off.'<sup>51</sup>

This is not to say that *Melody Maker* did not positively engage with Red Wedge. An interview with Bragg and the Communards' Richard Coles in March 1987 was prefaced by Will Smith's assertion that 'While Red Wedge is not exempt from [...] criticism, the movement cannot, and *should* not be dismissed [...] Red Wedge is a political reality'.<sup>52</sup> Prior to this, four pages of an issue published only three weeks before Cunningham's critique were dedicated to 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', in which three 'Wedgers' – Bragg, Weller and Dammers – and the junior Labour MP Clare Short<sup>53</sup> – notably a *young female* member of the Party – were pitted against Police drummer Stewart Copeland, Tory MP Greg Knight – himself a drummer – and Redskins front man Chris Dean to argue the merits or otherwise of the group's organisation and objectives.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Carol Clerk, 'Rebels Without Applause', *Melody Maker*, 21 November 1987, p. 10-11 (p. 10).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11. As written.

<sup>52</sup> Will Smith, 'Practical Dreamers', p. 36. As written.

<sup>53</sup> Short was elected to Parliament at the 1983 election.

The decision of Dean to stand against Red Wedge puts Cunningham's position into some perspective: while the journalist based his objections upon pop cultural rhetoric – claiming that 'more than anything else, [pop music]'s about failure [...]. Nothing ever changing. The glory and the gutter'<sup>54</sup> – Dean dismissed Red Wedge as a 'tidy way to sell out socialist principles in favour of electoral success for Kinnock.'<sup>55</sup> Further, Dean was critical of the group's multi-faceted focus, believing 'that the [1986] Red Wedge tour will not get the same sort of political response that benefits during the miners [sic] strike did because during the strike there was a very strong, active political struggle.'<sup>56</sup> While Bragg criticised him for fighting 'on single issues all the time',<sup>57</sup> Dean was adamant that they were 'not relating to the same level of political activity [as the miners' benefits] when [they were] doing a tour around the possibility of a Labour government in three years time.'<sup>58</sup>

The forum chair, Ted Mico, stressed that 'the interest aroused by Red Wedge is itself a tribute to its importance – Weller, Dean and Copeland all interrupted recording commitments to participate, while the two MPs took time out from the Westland row raging at the House of Commons'.<sup>59</sup> While undoubtedly the debate was important to those involved and to *Melody Maker's* general readership, the testimony of concert-goers serves to contradict Mico's assertion. Cunningham's report found some in attendance who saluted Red Wedge with their fist, such as

Jed, Alistair and Phil, all sharp haircuts, earrings and Redskins tee-shirts. So why are you here Jed? 'Political reasons. But I'm here for the music as well. I like the good bands too. But the political meaning behind it's got a lot to do

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<sup>54</sup> Cunningham, 'Preaching to the converted?', p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Dean, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Bragg, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Dean, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. Westland was Britain's last remaining helicopter manufacturer at the time which was subject to a takeover bid from an American firm; a bid which then defence secretary Michael Heseltine opposed. He and Thatcher were to publicly disagree on the issue, leading to Heseltine's resignation and a Commons debate. See Graham Stewart, *Bang!*, p. 452.

with it. Like Billy Bragg. And the fact that there's Labour MPs as well in the audience.'<sup>60</sup>

However, 'Jan' hopes that the concert 'doesn't affect people's attitudes. I've come here to see Billy Bragg – I think it's good entertainment. I'm here to be entertained, not to have political dogma rammed down my throat.'<sup>61</sup> The responses of some Bragg fans at the Red Wedge concerts are also surprising. In her report from a post-election Birmingham show, Clerk found two concert-goers who informed her that 'in case you're wondering, not all Billy Bragg fans are Socialists [...]. We're a couple of Tories, us [...]. We're here because we love Billy's songs. We don't pay any attention to the politics.'<sup>62</sup> *Melody Maker* appeared keen to demonstrate that Red Wedge's desire for a politically charged atmosphere at concerts went unfulfilled.

### **Performers' responses**

As early in Bragg's career as October 1984, after performing at pro-GLC rallies, he had identified the potential worth that pop musicians could provide to a Labour election campaign. He asked *NME* writer Paul Du Noyer to

draw me up a list of bands who'd be willing to play for the Conservative Party. And when I think of all the bands who'd play for Labour, they'd be foolish not to do it. It's not a case of the Labour Party wanting to be hip; it's a way of drawing attention to their policies. If the Conservatives have got control of the daily papers, and the Labour Party has to skirt around to get to people, then putting on gigs is as good a way as any<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Cunningham, 'Preaching to the converted?', p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Clerk, 'Rebels without applause', p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Bragg, quoted in Paul Du Noyer, 'The Selling of Billy Bragg's Bottom', *NME*, 6 October 1984, pp. 6-7, 53 (p. 6).

While Red Wedge saw immediate involvement from socialist stalwarts Bragg and Weller – alongside the politically-minded Smiths, who, while not central members of the group, performed at Newcastle City Hall during Red Wedge's January 1986 tour<sup>64</sup> – it also drew support from unlikely sources such as Sade and Spandau Ballet guitarist and songwriter Gary Kemp. Kemp was under no illusions as to his worth to the group, telling Shaw of *Smash Hits* that it was 'not really the people in the venue that we want to get to. It's the people who didn't come. It's the people who are going to wake up tomorrow morning and see that Gary Kemp was here and they're going to wonder why.'<sup>65</sup>

However, Kemp's choice of performance style reflected assumptions about the modes of expression suited to political protest. Rather than the slick synth-pop his band were known for, in the words of Shaw, Kemp performed 'a very sensitive folky number called "Between The Barricades" about conflict in Northern Ireland and also, he explained back-stage, "about my girlfriend's sister who's going out with a coloured boy."<sup>66</sup> Here, Kemp attempted a balancing act between increasing interest in Red Wedge among his established fan base, and – through use of an acoustic guitar (a signifier of 'folk' authenticity) and singing lyrics about the Troubles – legitimizing his political voice to Red Wedge's largely *NME*-reading, and presumably Spandau Ballet-opposed, audience. Frith and Street identify this 'aesthetic judgement' as an exercise in ideology; a way 'of symbolizing ideas such as "integrity" or "compassion."<sup>67</sup> Most Red Wedge followers would likely identify with the perception of Kemp offered by Bragg to *Melody Maker's* Carol Clerk:

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<sup>64</sup> Brown, in Brown and Dickinson, 'Hot Bed of Reds!'

<sup>65</sup> William Shaw, 'Red Wedge', p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* Kemp's use of the word 'coloured' demonstrates that, even ten years after RAR, terms considered highly racist by modern standards were still being used by 'socialist' musicians, with no problematization by the press.

<sup>67</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 77.

Spandau Ballet are materialistic.... But Red Wedge struck a chord with Gary Kemp. I was the man who said 'He'll never turn up', but when he did, I went onstage and played with him.<sup>68</sup>

Kemp's membership of Spandau Ballet would render his contribution to Red Wedge hollow. By appealing to a specific ideology he hoped to reverse the label of inauthenticity these fans placed on him. In this sense, we can see a similarity between RAR and Red Wedge. RAR is noted for its criteria of authenticity which excluded disco and heavy metal acts from performing, and, despite Bragg expressing a desire to 'get a few heavy metal bands involved, any bands really, who felt they had something to contribute',<sup>69</sup> Red Wedge's musical remit was similarly narrow. Frith and Street suggest that 'folk and '60s/'70s soul' were 'prominent in Red Wedge shows'.<sup>70</sup> Where Kemp's performance exemplifies the former, the latter was seen in mass performances of songs such as Curtis Mayfield's 'Move On Up' at the end of concerts.<sup>71</sup> For Frith and Street, this 're-discovery of '60s/'70s soul was partly informed by a sense that black music was somehow more authentic, but this time it was not measured by its roughness so much as by its style, its cool.'<sup>72</sup>

As such, decisions on participation and non-participation with Red Wedge were made as much as a result of a performer's musical style as their politics. In an interview with the American magazine *Creem*, when asked about being 'involved with Red Wedge' Bananarama member Keren Woodward answered that

We weren't involved with Red Wedge. We were supposed to go to have our pictures taken, but we decided not to at the last minute. We didn't think it was something Bananarama should be associated with, so we sent a telegram of

<sup>68</sup> Clerk, 'Rebels without applause', p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Bragg, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Frith & Street, 'Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge', p. 77.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

support. Paul Weller's audience are all these boys still mad about the Jam, though to Paul's credit he's trying to get away from that with the Style Council. They were the wrong audience for us, we wouldn't have gone down well.<sup>73</sup>

Elsewhere in the interview Woodward complains that their 'singles with deeper meanings' were 'ignored', and claims they write 'certain types of songs for the charts' as a means to maintain their career.<sup>74</sup> Woodward recognised that two strands of pop appreciation existed during this period: that which valued issue-based songwriting, and the escapist preferences of the chart. For a pop act such as Bananarama to be appreciated by 'serious' listeners required the group to deal with 'deeper meanings' in their songs which, notably for a 'pop' act, they insinuate were all written by themselves. However, their response to Red Wedge reveals a dilemma: they judged that they would not have been taken seriously by its typical audience since, by their own admission, they were a 'chart' act. Authenticity was key to involvement: not necessarily on the part of the group's 'rock' figureheads, but rather to the 'pop' acts who were not expected to have political opinions and allegiances. For instance, after Wham!'s appearance at a miner's strike benefit in 1985, Weller dismissed cynicism about the possibility of artists using Red Wedge as a boost for their credibility by stating that he would

like to see people like George Michael using us for his credibility because it would help us in the long run. We're going to have to get help from people you wouldn't readily associate with socialism. Whatever his motives for when Michael appeared at the miners benefit it aided us more than him.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Iman Lababedi, 'Bananarama: These Charming Girls', *Creem*, December 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=20857>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Weller, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 26. Note the use of 'us' in reference to the supporters of the miners' strike; clearly, despite their appearance at a benefit, Weller does not include Wham! within this community of musicians.



However, Michael was perhaps more politically conscious than Weller suggested. In an interview with *NME*, which also saw him discuss a potential boycott of South Africa, he described Red Wedge as a 'non-starter', criticising its polarising attitude towards the British political situation and singling out Weller as an example of its attitude:

Paul Weller seems to believe that there are over three million left-wing unemployed. They're pissed off with the government, sure, but they're just as affected by the things going on around them as the people *with* money; they want more for *themselves*. And if they get the money they're certainly not going to start spreading it about!<sup>76</sup>

Where an act like Bananarama avoided involvement with Red Wedge because its audience were 'wrong' for them,<sup>77</sup> Michael rejected the group's political idealism outright. While Red Wedge did not publicise itself as a socialist movement, Michael reiterated the criticism voiced by its detractors that while political consciousness is to be encouraged, the promotion of specific political ideologies is an inappropriate use of popular music. His career choices were informed by specific readings of music's purpose. Michael 'tried to argue with [Weller] on certain points, trying to introduce some idea of the limitations of his ideas when you bring human nature into it, and he wasn't accepting anything. And I was thinking, if this man is leading this party in a public sense, then what chance do they stand?'<sup>78</sup> He also insinuates that Red Wedge had a damaging impact after the populist protest of Live Aid through its 'dogmatic approach [...] All they did was cancel out any hope of any kind of social element that came into pop during '85 because of the whole charity thing. Any idea

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<sup>76</sup> George Michael, quoted in Mat Snow, 'George Michael: Mein Whampf!', *New Musical Express*, 28 June 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=11183>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>77</sup> Lababedi, 'Bananarama: These Charming Girls'.

<sup>78</sup> Snow, 'George Michael: Mein Whampf!'

of working towards *goals*, I think that they've wiped it out again.'<sup>79</sup> He expresses a view that pop music can only have a political impact through directed charitable work, not through seeking to promote a political consciousness.

### **Politicians' responses**

Red Wedge events saw Labour MPs and activists in attendance who intended to engage with young music fans. For instance, Len Brown reports that 'Chris Smith, MP, rallied the floating voters and quoted William Morris' at the Islington date of the pre-election tour.<sup>80</sup> However, they apparently had little impact as compared with the performers: for Brown, 'it was Willie's namesake – Sarah Jane of the Communards – who had the final say.'<sup>81</sup> In live reports, journalists' emphasis was consistently placed on the performance of musicians rather than the political rhetoric from the stage or from politicians. Despite their intended purpose, these were musical events first and foremost, and coverage of them took place primarily in the music press. However, if Red Wedge were unable to further political debate within the inkies, then they must be considered unsuccessful in one of the main tenets of their 'manifesto': the promotion of Labour Party support amongst young people. These newspapers were, after all, the primary conduit to mould youth consciousness.

Still, as an apparently strong believer in the worth and operation of Red Wedge, Len Brown was one journalist who remained keen to toe its line. Introducing his report on the pre-election tour, he rhetorically asked 'was it possible to marry politics with pop without preaching or being patronising? Did the audience really give a toss about the Labour Party or were they just there for the stars and bar?'<sup>82</sup> After polling attendees, he determines that 'it *is* possible and that the politics *are* crucial; maybe

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, 'Pre-Election Shuffle', p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

crucial enough to sway a few marginal seats Labour's way on Thursday.<sup>83</sup> This is despite his belief (shared by Weller and Bragg) that 'Labour's candidates still seemed to be out-of-touch grey men who've paid their dues.'<sup>84</sup>

The opinions of politicians published in *Smash Hits*' Red Wedge article give some indication of the divergent opinions across the two main parties. High profile Labour politicians conflicted with Red Wedge on the nature of their relationship. Kinnock's statement on Red Wedge near its launch is telling:

We're not interested in using performers just to add razzmatazz to politics. That is not what we want and Billy and the boys would not let us get away with it. The people involved in Red Wedge are serious about their politics and we want to make sure that Labour listens to young people and responds to what they say. We are delighted that so many people have given their time to get Red Wedge on the move.<sup>85</sup>

While he is keen to stress that the Labour Party are not cynically 'using' Red Wedge to blithely utilise the youth vote, it is clear that he feels the party has something to gain from the relationship – an insight into 'youth opinion'. Ken Livingstone – former Labour leader of the GLC – meanwhile believed that 'part of the reason why the Labour Party has been dead from the neck up' is because 'We've never had pop music in politics'.<sup>86</sup> The Tory response to Red Wedge was somewhat predictable. While Party grandee Norman St John-Stevas MP did not 'object to the idea of pop musicians recruiting for a political party',<sup>87</sup> the junior MP Matthew Parris believed that 'politically Red Wedge is junk, musically it's boring and I think young people see

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Neil Kinnock, quoted in William Shaw, 'Red Wedge', p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ken Livingstone, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Norman St John-Stevas, quoted in *ibid.* He believed that Red Wedge was 'dragging pop music down to the level of politics' rather than vice versa.

through that kind of thing'.<sup>88</sup> Former Chairman of the Federation of Conservative Students Mark MacGregor stated their position:

We think it's all a bit of a sham. The Labour Party are trying to hide the fact with Red Wedge that their Youth section is controlled by the Militant Tendency, so they're hiding a lot of nasty persons who are far to the left, and covering up for the fact that they've only got tired old policies. The musicians who are doing it are getting good publicity out of it.<sup>89</sup>

This reference to Militant Tendency, while having an element of truth, served as an attempt to discredit Red Wedge amongst centrist music fans.<sup>90</sup> Bragg and the other musicians involved were often moved to keep Militant out of the debate while being careful not to ostracise them, but they nonetheless became involved in the running of Red Wedge events. Bragg believed that Militant Tendency 'deliberately undermined many of [Red Wedge's] day events' by falsely advertising that big names would be present as a means to discredit them and sour 'pro-Kinnock feeling'.<sup>91</sup> In one such instance Elvis Costello, who 'used [his] aversion to the R-word as an excuse not to join up' to the group, was recruited to perform at a day event at the Newcastle Riverside after Militant 'falsely advertised Weller, and there had been a "near-riot"'.<sup>92</sup>

While Thatcher herself did not go on the record with a direct response to Red Wedge, an interview with the Prime Minister in *Smash Hits* ahead of the 1987 election can be viewed as a Tory retaliation to Red Wedge's promotion of the

<sup>88</sup> Matthew Parris, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Mark MacGregor, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Militant Tendency were a hard left group associated with the Labour Party. They were denounced by Kinnock at the 1985 Labour Party Conference for their dogmatic approach and controversial use of public funds. See Graham Stewart, 'Bang!', pp. 434-5.

<sup>91</sup> Andrew Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners: Billy Bragg* (London: Virgin Books, 2007), pp. 162-3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Labour Party. Introducing the interview in his inimitable style, Tom Hibbert gave no illusions as to the purpose of the piece in Thatcher's eyes:

So what, might you ask, is Mrs Thatcher doing talking to *Smash Hits*? Simple, really: you see, pop goats, she wants *you*, the youth of the nation, batting on *her* team. Fancy that. So here we are, me, Mrs T and a couple of 'helpers' – a young press officer to lend support on taxing youth-oriented questions, and a bloke with an impressive tape recording machine to record the conversation for posterity.<sup>93</sup>

Following a series of questions giving Mrs Thatcher an opportunity to show how she 'related' to the magazine's young readership,<sup>94</sup> Hibbert begins to steer the conversation towards Red Wedge. After asking whether her children were rebellious, he asks 'would you have been fed up if your children had formed a pop group?'

I wouldn't have been at all upset. I know a *number* of people who are very keen on pop music – jazz in my time – so I shouldn't have been upset at all. I'd have been much more concerned if they didn't do anything. I wouldn't have been at all concerned at a pop group because you meet a lot of people and you're often doing something together and Mark did, as a matter of fact, learn the guitar because he wanted an instrument that you could go around instantly and you could get people singing.<sup>95</sup>

This response echoes her reaction to Live Aid, which she saw as 'the first time that we'd been able to get a great body of young people not merely interested in something but actually *doing* something for it'.<sup>96</sup> Thatcher was well known for her

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<sup>93</sup> Hibbert, 'The Margaret Thatcher Interview!!?' As written.

<sup>94</sup> 'Who were your heroes and heroines when you were growing up?', 'Was school difficult and humdrum?', 'Did you get up to any naughty tricks?' Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Thatcher, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

encouragement of liberal capitalist entrepreneurialism, her belief in the power of the individual to achieve gains – capital or otherwise. When Hibbert first asks directly about her opinion of Red Wedge ('How do you react to today's left wing pop acts – The Housemartins, The Style Council, Billy Bragg – who can't wait to get you out of Number 10?'),<sup>97</sup> she praised the 'highly professional business' of musicians who she is told she 'wouldn't get on with at all well'.<sup>98</sup> After Hibbert presses her further on the main point, she says

most young people rebel and then gradually they become more realistic. It's very much part of life, really. And when they want to get Mrs Thatcher out of Number 10 – I've usually not *met* most of them. Ha ha ha! And it really is lovely to have a chance to talk to them – and it's nice they know your name, ha ha ha!<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusions

While Live Aid had a universal message, Red Wedge was more problematic. Although the musicians involved were keen to stress the 'neutrality' of their actions the socialist attitudes of its 'founding fathers' were always going to make it more difficult to access for those on the right: in *Melody Maker's* 'Great Debate' Bragg told his opponents that 'we're not just going to stand up on stage and say if we all vote Labour then everything's going to be okay and the world is going to change. We want people to look at the issues and discuss Labour Party policy and how it should be changed NOW'; Stewart Copeland responded by telling them to 'just call it the Wedge and I'll join'.<sup>100</sup> The idea that Red Wedge promoted political consciousness from an entirely neutral position was naive.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Thatcher, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 26.

This is why publications such as *Melody Maker* were so critical of them. How could their support for the Labour Party be considered trustworthy when they weren't entirely open about their intentions? For the *NME*, which was further to the left editorially than other music magazines, anything that could assist in the defeat of Thatcher at the general election was beneficial. In this way, Red Wedge became another established part of the political machinations of the country. Labour politicians gave their support in the hope that it would encourage votes, while Conservatives either aimed to discredit Red Wedge through implication of connections to Militant Tendency or, in the case of Thatcher's own patronising rhetoric, by suggesting that 'most people rebel and then gradually they become more realistic.'<sup>101</sup> For Thatcher socialism and popular music fandom were both youth phases – 'adults' understood politics well enough to know that they should vote Tory. As it became apparent that Red Wedge was just another tool for politicians, popular performers became turned off to engagement: they understood how volatile their career could become if they suddenly developed a public political identity.

Ultimately, Red Wedge failed in its aims. Thatcher's Conservatives won the 1987 general election and, despite setting up 'a series of initiatives [...] in various parts of the country: everything from liaising with workers' co-operatives to co-ordinating the successful campaign for a decent transport system in the Forest Of Dean',<sup>102</sup> the group's hopes for wider youth involvement in politics were to remain unfulfilled. While ten years later the Labour Party under Tony Blair sought to appear close to Blur and Oasis as a means of gaining cultural capital,<sup>103</sup> explicit party political engagement within popular music culture in the British context has not been evident since. The contrast in fortunes between Live Aid and Red Wedge serve to

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<sup>101</sup> Hibbert, 'The Margaret Thatcher Interview!!?'

<sup>102</sup> Clerk, 'Rebels Without Applause', p. 11.

<sup>103</sup> See John Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair and the Demise of English Rock* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).

demonstrate two theses proposed in Section I: in terms of large scale political engagement, popular music is better suited to the promotion of causes than of ideologies; and the direct engagement of performers with politicians is problematic. While the politician may benefit from the 'cool' of a popular performer, the exchange of cultural capital is difficult to balance: by identifying with political ideology the performer may limit their commercial opportunities, and further may find their authenticity questioned.



## IV

**Anti-Thatcherite Performers: Two Case Studies**

Through the examination of organisations such as RAR, Live Aid and Red Wedge, one can gauge the impact of music as a politicizing force in the post-punk era primarily in terms of the instigation of large-scale protests against specific ideologies, and the promotion of consciousness as a means of fundraising and encouraging democratic action. It can therefore be argued that music's power to affect social change is strongest not in terms of encouraging individual reflection, but within a collectivist framework. By assembling communities in opposition to racism, famine, and the Thatcher government, these three populist examples used cultural commodities and performances to encourage support for their causes and, in turn, demonstrate the size of their membership.<sup>1</sup> However, outside of the frameworks established by these organisations, some performers expressed personal opinions and ideologies as a means of instigating political dialogue and impacting personal political opinion.

Some performers associated with political rhetoric refused to engage with RAR and Red Wedge on the grounds of disagreement with their methods and presentation: the SWP-supporting Redskins for example, who, as noted in the discussion of Red Wedge, could not countenance becoming part of the group on the basis that it was not socialist *enough*. Prior to its establishment, Redskins singer Chris Dean criticised Paul Weller, alongside post-punk political-pop yardstick Joe Strummer, for merely singing about 'picket lines' rather than taking direct action by making

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<sup>1</sup> While RAR and Red Wedge often operated outside of mainstream culture, there was an understanding by both that populism was key to the widespread dissemination of the views they held.

protests 'something that they themselves go down to.'<sup>2</sup> For Dean, this 'empty' rhetoric was emblematic of the Labour Party's brand of light socialism:

There is only a cigarette paper's worth of difference between Kinnock and Thatcher [...]. Any organisation which is merely an election machine, as Red Wedge is, for a man who accuses Socialists of being maggots in the gut of the Labour Party I want no f\*\*\*\*\* truck with. Liverpool City Council and Derek Hatton aren't the f\*\*\*\*\* maggots and Kinnock hasn't got the bloody guts. At least Hatton and Liverpool council tried to resist Tory cuts, but they didn't go far enough.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, they were keen to publicise that their approach to musical activities was entirely informed by their political beliefs. Following the relative success of their November 1984 single 'Keep On Keepin' On', which peaked at number 43 in the singles chart,<sup>4</sup> the band received pressure from their record label to quickly record a follow up. However, this coincided with the miners' strike, whose benefit concerts the band enthusiastically supported. Dean told *Melody Maker's* Lynden Barber that

For The Redskins to spout on about working class people taking control of their lives and then for us to f\*\*\* off into the studio wasn't on. The Redskins don't have that luxury. We stand or fall on our political activity, not just as poxy musicians but as active socialists off the stage. We f\*\*\* ourselves up from a career point of view, I admit that. And because of our politics it will probably

<sup>2</sup> Sweeting, 'The Redskins: Keeping On And On'.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Barron, 'The Redskins: Acne In The UK', *Sounds*, 18 January 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/the-redskins-acne-in-the-uk>> [accessed 7 September 2013]. Neil Kinnock had described Militant Tendency as 'a maggot in the body of the party'. Liverpool Council's deputy leader Derek Hatton is widely believed to have pulled the strings as the local Labour Party became more Militant in its political outlook. Graham Stewart, *Bang!*, p. 434-5

<sup>4</sup> 'REDSKINS|Artist|Official Charts', *Official Charts Company* <[http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/\\_/redskins/](http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/_/redskins/)> [accessed 7 September 2013].

happen again: that's the difference between us, Bragg, [Jerry] Dammers [of the Specials] and Weller.<sup>5</sup>

The band's authenticity rested on the implication that, while they were an ensemble who performed to entertain, they could not do so without their cultural products being informed by their political beliefs. The following case studies examine the musical recordings, presentation, actions and supporting statements of two other acts whose cultural capital was born from their commitment to politics: Crass and Billy Bragg. While the music, views and commercial success of each act differs greatly, they can be taken as two of the most outspoken political performers of the Thatcher period, whose periods of activity neatly overlap: Crass formed in 1976 before splitting in 1984 after admitting the futility of their actions in the face of the miners' strike, while Bragg released his first solo recordings in 1983 and continues to perform today.

Each case study will examine their understanding and usage of notions of authenticity in terms of their presentation and music, and demonstrate how this was integral to their role as political artists. The methodology will involve analysis of their engagements with the press and biographers, as well as analyses of the composition, performance and presentation of their recordings. Both Crass and Billy Bragg demonstrated discomfort with the commercial machinations of the music industries and read punk as an opportunity to rebel against the establishment. However they differed in their views on engagement with organised politics. While Bragg pragmatically worked within established systems, Crass sought to live as anarchists, apart from mainstream society. Their political beliefs were widely informed by their belief in the importance of authenticity.

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<sup>5</sup> Barber, 'Red On Arrival: The Redskins'.

## Chapter Eleven

### Crass

Crass were an 'anarcho-punk' band formed by drummer Penny Rimbaud (real name Jerry Ratter) and vocalist Steve Ignorant (Steve Williams) in the aftermath of the first wave of the London punk scene, who released records on their own label (Crass Records)<sup>1</sup> until disbanding in 1984.<sup>2</sup> They lived and worked in an Essex cottage – Dial House – in which Rimbaud established a self-sufficient commune in 1967 to encourage the development of visual and musical arts and criticism. As Peter Webb states, this 'cultural community centre' is central to understanding Crass' *modus operandi*, since Rimbaud and his co-habitants were 'heavily influenced by 1960s ideas of communal living and a variety of political and social commentary prevalent at the time (situationism, anarchism, feminism, communism, CND, etc.)'.<sup>3</sup> As such, Crass' founders were cut from the same cloth as those who called for the formation of RAR. However, where RAR was born from a preference for structured socialist politics, Crass' members were determinedly individualist, with a liberal commitment to understanding each other's views. For Webb, this places the band, and their record label, within a unique strand of the music industries. Their presentation led them to 'cause a particular milieu of people' who drew influence from punk to oppose 'the mainstream culture of the time'<sup>4</sup> – a culture to which, in their view, punk itself was part:

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<sup>1</sup> The band's record label is an interesting area of study, particularly with regard to issues of authenticity, but it will not be treated in depth here. For an in-depth examination, see Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*.

<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theorists claim that the band had intended from their beginnings to call time on their 'career' in this Orwellian year, which is in turn dismissed by some band members and confirmed by others. See George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus Press, 2008); Ian Glasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red Books, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Crass can [...] be seen to be part of a generational affect that constantly questions the legitimacy of expert knowledges and authority. This has had both positive and negative affects but is easily traceable as part of the milieu affect of the period that Crass were operating in. As an independent band, with an independent record label, Crass was able to ferment its own combination of art, politics, music, philosophy, and activist questioning that just would not have happened in the same way if the band had been a part of a major label.<sup>5</sup>

As such, Crass' records are understood by fans as authentic, undiluted expressions of their beliefs and cultural allegiances. By retaining independence from a variety of outside agents, they had complete control over the content and presentation of their cultural products. Moreover, they were able to assert how their statements should be interpreted,<sup>6</sup> which, given their political beliefs, largely focussed on what Rimbaud terms 'a decent way of living' as opposed to 'people like Abba and Mick Jagger [who sing] about an exclusive way of living.'<sup>7</sup> However, like the Redskins who followed them, they were also aware of their primary function as a band: guitarist N. A. Palmer (Andy Palmer) tells band biographer George Berger that 'I think there'd be something wrong with what we put on if it wasn't entertaining.'<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Crass felt that their non-compromisingly independent approach led to their being alienated from mainstream popular music culture by the press. They believe that the music press 'hated' them and their debut album *The Feeding Of The Five Thousand*:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gee Vaucher, who designed all of the band's visual work, told journalist Richie Unterberger that 'None of us ever believed that you could sign with a big company and think you could play it your way. I think the Pistols did very well with that.' Richie Unterberger, 'Crass – G Sus interview', *Perfect Sound Forever* <<http://www.furious.com/perfect/gsus.html>> [accessed 3 May 2013].

<sup>7</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Andy Palmer, quoted in *ibid.*

From the start the media has attempted to ignore us and only when its hand has been forced by circumstances has it grudgingly given us credence. It's all fairly simple, if you don't play their game, that is commercial exploitation, they won't play yours. The music bit doesn't just buy its groups, it pays for the music press as well.<sup>9</sup>

Statements such as this serve to strengthen a desired position in opposition to mainstream culture, despite also seeming to rail against exclusion from it. However, Crass did end up becoming members of a 'scene' which was more or less of their own making. While, according to some members of the band, they were not initially established as an explicitly 'anarchist' band, they came to define themselves as such and were lauded for spearheading the development of the anarcho-punk scene in the UK.<sup>10</sup> Crass Records had a particular influence on this, as the band set out to release music by bands who, 'with Penny [Rimbaud] producing their records...sounded like Crass' on records whose presentation – 'packaged in stark black-and-white poster sleeves' – utilised the same aesthetics as their own.<sup>11</sup>

Crass' desire to present an authentic version of 'punk' required them to display opposition to mainstream punk culture. In so doing, they garnered the artistic licence to respond to a multitude of political issues, largely around the topics outlined by Webb above. Much of the band's musical material is worthy of academic analysis in a variety of political contexts – indeed, particularly within the context of Thatcherism – and as such the band have been the subject of a variety of texts and symposia.<sup>12</sup> However, for the purposes of this chapter, in what follows I will focus only on the band's singles that were written in direct response to the Falklands conflict.

<sup>9</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records', *Transmissions From Southern* <<http://blog.southern.com/about-crass-records/>> [accessed 2 May 2013]. As written.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the contradiction of anarchism – a belief in the power of freedom and anti-dogmatism – being a 'scene'.

<sup>11</sup> Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Most recently in the UK at Oxford Brookes' *No Sir, I Won't* symposium, 28 June 2013.

### Crass as 'real punk'

The views of anarcho-punk historian Ian Glasper can be taken as emblematic of those involved with the scene. For Glasper, anarcho-punk was an authentic representation of punk, which existed at 'a time when punk stopped being *merely* a radical fashion statement, and became a force for *real* social change'.<sup>13</sup> Such an assertion is rooted in multi-faceted aspects of the scene: its members 'could communicate directly with the bands and book them into alternative venues at affordable prices' rather than operate within an 'extortionate' promoter-led live system; 'no more glossy magazines [dictated] how punks should look and behave'; and the lyrics became issue-led rather than 'inane' as 'the kids [took] back control and [made] a difference.'<sup>14</sup> Glasper cites Crass as 'a major inspiration' on all anarcho bands – despite 'defiantly [refusing] to be figureheads'<sup>15</sup> – and while he admits that the scene may have developed without the band's existence, positions them as an anti-Sex Pistols who, in reference to 'God Save The Queen', really 'meant it, maan'.<sup>16</sup>

Where the Pistols 'encouraged bored teenagers to get off their arses and start their own bands, [Crass] encouraged them to think for themselves.'<sup>17</sup> Their anarchist, vegetarian and feminist views 'kick-started the mindset of a generation that would ultimately make serious headway in the struggle for human and animal rights', in stark contrast to the 'outlandish fashion statement' represented by the Pistols et al, who 'professed not to care'.<sup>18</sup> Glasper believes that punk was a set of admirable values which were quickly commodified by the culture industry, and that Crass

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<sup>13</sup> Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, back cover. My emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Rimbaud tells Glasper that Crass 'didn't create [the anarcho-punk movement] as leaders. We were just as hard-working as anyone else [...]. We never separated ourselves; we were a part of it, at one with it. There were those that tried to force that sense of leadership onto us, but I think we were very successful in never, ever accepting that role.' *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. As written.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

represented an authentic continuation of its supposed original oppositional standpoint. He states that Crass 'were Year Zero [...] No more companies misrepresenting *our* music; this was the birth of genuinely DIY labels, whose records were sold at virtually cost price, and bearing "Pay No More Than..." notices to make sure they were.'<sup>19</sup>

Glasper's representation of the anarcho scene as 'more authentic' than mainstream punk is ultimately drawn from Crass' own beliefs. For Rimbaud, 'It was our sincerity, and our authenticity, that made us different' from the first generation of punk performers, since they were a successful band whose members 'really' had learned three chords and started a band rather than having 'been [in] pub bands [who had] already tried some form of rock 'n' roll'.<sup>20</sup> He wanted to create political art, and saw being a band as the most appropriate vehicle for doing so:

We were a band for political reasons, and therefore increasingly, as the years wore on, we were producing stuff out of response [to] social situations.

Therefore, artistic or aesthetic considerations didn't really come into it [...]. We weren't a band. We never were a band. I don't think we even saw ourselves as a band. I certainly never saw ourselves as a band. We certainly didn't belong in the sort of pantomime of rock'n'roll, and probably even less in the pantomime of what became known as punk. It wasn't our interest. I mean, we weren't interested in making records. We were interested in making statements, and records happened to be a way of making statements.<sup>21</sup>

Writing for *Vice* in 2005, he further claimed that 'Crass wanted to change the world [...]. We wanted to undermine the prime institutions of the State and everything that it represented [...]. The rock and roll swank of performing in a band was simply the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. My emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Richie Unterberger, 'Penny Rimbaud interview', *Perfect Sound Forever* <<http://www.furious.com/perfect/pennyrimbaud.html>> [accessed 2 May 2013].



platform we used.'<sup>22</sup> Rimbaud's autobiographical statements sustain a consistent narrative: they existed primarily to instigate political debate, and their artistic endeavours were no more than a necessary vehicle to do so. For John Street, Crass were part of a post-punk milieu for which

there was little difference between their role as citizens and their role as musicians.... The choice of musical form becomes an act of political commitment; it is accepted that the political character of the songs is partly determined by the conventions of the music rather than the politics of the musician.<sup>23</sup>

He admits that while the political approach to the band was not consistent – their 'analysis broadened, then narrowed, and broadened [...] what we produced as a band was a reflection of where we stood politically' – their reactions to Thatcher were 'political response[s]' instead of 'musical or [...] lyrical response[s]'.<sup>24</sup> This view is furthered by Dial House resident and Crass' artwork designer Gee Vaucher, who, while discussing the group's musical development, states that 'the most significant change you can hear, really, is the total desperation about the Tory government.'<sup>25</sup>

However, this view of the band's operations is not shared by Steve Ignorant. Admitting in retrospect that his stage name reflected his attitude at the time, he tells Berger that he was exhausted by the consistent political outlook of the group. He felt that 'doing the gig is alright, but afterwards I want to have a bit of fun [...] I remember thinking I'm getting a bit bored by this, and I don't really give a fuck and I'm not gonna lose sleep trying to work out what this guy's going on about the unions.'<sup>26</sup> He also disagrees with Rimbaud, stating that by the time of the miners'

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<sup>22</sup> Penny Rimbaud, 'You're Not Punk and I'm Telling Everyone', *Vice*, 30 November 2005 <<http://www.vice.com/read/fuck-v12n3>> [accessed 19 April 2013].

<sup>23</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Unterberger, 'Penny Rimbaud interview'.

<sup>25</sup> Vaucher, quoted in Richie Unterberger, 'G Sus interview'.

<sup>26</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 235. As written.

strike 'we were an anarchist, political-based band. It wasn't so much about being yobboes'<sup>27</sup> – implying that it was only as the band progressed and grew stronger in their opposition to Thatcher's actions and policies that they *became* a political band.

This conflict between Ignorant and Rimbaud's summaries of the band's philosophy can be seen further in the vocalist's account of discovering Rimbaud's pre-Crass anti-religion prose piece 'Christ, Reality Asylum' – released by the band as a single in 1979. He admits that he 'couldn't even understand [it] but I knew I liked it because it was having a pop at religion, and it had "fuck" in it, which was well punk rock, wasn't it?'<sup>28</sup> Further, recollecting the band's responses to the Falklands conflict, he remembers 'beginning to feel that this wasn't why I joined a punk band and wondering what the fuck we were getting into. If someone asks me about it, I can't explain it, I can't defend it, I can't justify it [...] but it was anti-establishment so I went for it.'<sup>29</sup> His actions were informed by a specific reading of the 'meaning' of 'punk'.

Ignorant and Rimbaud can be taken as two essential poles of Crass' being.

Rimbaud was a middle class, nearing middle age, philosophical artist, who had been 'born into' a 'Liberal Christian middle-class family'.<sup>30</sup> Ignorant, on the other hand, was a young, working class, self-labelled 'yobboe',<sup>31</sup> whose interest in pop music lay partly in a desire to become a star. He tells Gasper that he 'turned up [at Dial House] wanting to be Johnny Rotten or Paul Simonon [...] and with my David Bowie background [...] a part of me always wanted to be famous.'<sup>32</sup> Ignorant admits that he was a black sheep at the commune, telling Gasper that 'you had all these people turning up who weren't working class – they tended to be middle class and into photography and film-making'.<sup>33</sup> This ties Crass to the common narrative of

<sup>27</sup> Ignorant, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 253. As written.

<sup>28</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, pp. 218-9

<sup>30</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 144.

<sup>31</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 253. As written.

<sup>32</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

class status and punk. While it was seen by many as a working class subculture, in actuality many of its performers came from middle class backgrounds and were concerned with the artistic aspects and possibilities it presented. Rimbaud abhorred the concept of class, telling Webb that

I have more contempt for my own class then [sic] I do for any other class because I think that anyone who has had that amount of privilege, that amount of an advantage should use it to the common good and very few do [...]. [Class] means nothing to me – I couldn't judge anyone around that or gender or race and those [who] aren't clever intellectually, they just never made any fucking sense to me, girls aren't any different to boys and poor aren't any different to rich people.<sup>34</sup>

Class was a prevalent topic in Crass' work. While it apparently meant 'nothing' to Rimbaud, they recognised its importance to British society in general, and to punk specifically, by articulating political and religious grievances from the perspective of the proletariat. The lyrics of songs such as 'Do They Owe Us A Living?' – written by Ignorant – portray disgust at a system that continually mistreats its citizens and maintains their downtrodden existence:

At school they give you shit, drop you in the pit,  
 You try, you try, you try to get out, but you can't because they've fucked you about.  
 Then you're a prime example of how they must not be,  
 This is just a sample, what they've done to you and me.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, Rimbaud felt it was important to maintain at all times what Allan Moore terms '*authenticity of experience*, which occurs when a performance succeeds in

<sup>34</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> Crass, 'Do They Owe Us A Living', *The Feeding Of The Five Thousand*, LP, Small Wonder Records WEENY 2 (1978).

conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is "telling it like it is" for them.<sup>36</sup> Rimbaud tells Gasper that:

I always had this imaginary Glaswegian punk in my head [...]. Because at that time Glasgow was the poorest city in Britain [...]. I'd think, 'Now would he understand me taking a two-week holiday in Benidorm?' No, so I wouldn't get on a plane and go on holiday. 'Would he understand me going to the local Chinese restaurant for a meal out?' Questionable, better not do it.<sup>37</sup>

By building an identity around his perceptions of working class life, Rimbaud sought to offer an all-encompassing politically authentic performance to his audience, whether on or off stage.<sup>38</sup> It can be assumed that a holiday abroad and eating out were within Rimbaud's financial means, but he avoided them for fear of betraying those he spoke for. Ignorant agreed with this assessment, believing that they had to 'stand by' the songs they had written since 'all the time we were scrutinised, and we were scrutinising ourselves as well'.<sup>39</sup> Ignorant, by selecting a stage name, similarly constructed an identity which he intended to be a caricature of his 'true', working class self:

I was glad that I called myself Steve Ignorant too, purely because I was ignorant of politics. We used to play in Manchester a lot, and every time we played there, this little group of college-goers always used to single me out and surround me in a semi-circle, and be, like, 'Well, what about the trade unions?' All this stuff that I knew fuck all about! It got to the point where people were more worried about whether you had milk in your tea [...]. I used

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<sup>36</sup> Allan Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', p. 220.

<sup>37</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. with Frith and Horne's discussion of the 'Blitz poseurs', of whom Boy George specifically found that 'to be a pop star...meant to be a Pop Star, all performances – on stage, in bed, for the press, with Terry Wogan – [were] performance art'. Frith and Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 145.

<sup>39</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 18.

to think, 'Maybe I'm stupid, maybe I ought to read all these intellectual books on anarchy [...] but they're all so fuckin' boring, aren't they?'<sup>40</sup>

For Laing, the choice of stage name holds power over a performer's reception. Cliff Richard – the stage name of Harry Rodger Webb – for example, came to connote 'youth'; 'it presents itself merely as natural and innocent, as *denotation*. In so doing, it can suggest that "Cliff Richard's" qualities (youth, honesty, charm) are equally natural, rather than the product of a process of cultural (show business) construction, of which the *choice* of name is a crucial part'.<sup>41</sup> A name such as Steve Ignorant, while explicitly artificial, was intended, like Johnny Rotten before it, 'to convey to a follower that' it 'represented a certain guarantee of the essence of that particular individual'.<sup>42</sup> Where previously in showbusiness the use of obvious stage names – Adam Faith, Billy Fury, for example – marked a difference between their wearers performance and real life, Ignorant's choice of name, combined with the presentation of the band as a whole, worked to describe his performance and his offstage self: like Rotten and Sid Vicious before him, he assumed a 'clearly marked artificial' name, which was to also act as a 'guarantor' of 'a particular temperament as' an individual.<sup>43</sup>

The construction of Ignorant and Rimbaud's public identities was a means to homogenise the identity of the band as a whole, which in turn was part of the process of developing what Rimbaud terms the band's 'un-presentation'.<sup>44</sup>

Alongside their personality constructions, they created visual anonymity by dressing entirely in black, 'a *policy* decision so that we couldn't be individualised [...] we really didn't want to be easily definable in the rock 'n' roll context'.<sup>45</sup> For Rimbaud, their image was not 'about trying to sell ourselves', but to protect themselves from

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 16. My emphasis.

isolation by creating a 'gang' identity;<sup>46</sup> it was 'a statement against that bloody stupid, very expensive clothing that was being flogged down the Kings Road as "punk gear"'.<sup>47</sup> Through their uniform, Crass intended to further distance themselves from 'traditional' punk aesthetics as a means to portray themselves as an ensemble focussed on authentic expression, minus the frills and thrills of punk performance. However, this approach eventually ran contrary to their intentions:

We certainly didn't start wearing black so that everyone else in bloody Britain would start doing the same, though all of a sudden, it appeared that was exactly what every young punk was doing [...]. Rather than exploit it, we just ignored it, and hoped it would die its own death, but it never did. And it's since become synonymous with the whole crusty anarcho-punk thing.<sup>48</sup>

While Rimbaud wrote in 2005 that '[what] we did as activists was much more important to us than the music [...] our interest in performance was secondary',<sup>49</sup> their attention to presentational detail demonstrates that they took great care in retaining control of how their performances were perceived and appreciated. Rimbaud tells Glasper that their live show 'was considered, it was orchestrated, it was very, very rehearsed; it was like a Nuremberg rally, and the closer we could get to that sort of undeniable visual and emotional perfection, the better'.<sup>50</sup> Having set strict criteria of authenticity for themselves, they had to ensure that they were followed to avoid charges of 'selling out.' On the other hand, by consistently setting their own agenda and emphasising their own cultural importance ('It is not

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Crass were not the first group to seek authenticity of expression through presentation. Frith and Horne summarise jazz trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton's account of discovering George Webb's Dixielanders for the first time after the end of World War II: 'these "real" jazzers were to distinguish themselves from Britain's pre-war dance band musicians. They were contemptuous of band uniforms, stage compères, novelty numbers: they cultivated a deliberate image of no image, dressing down, basking in their lack of "professionalism".' Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Rimbaud, 'You're Not Punk'.

<sup>50</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 17. See chapter 7 for a discussion of punk's fascist associations.

grandiose to claim that we have been one of the most influential bands in the history of British rock, true we have not greatly influenced music itself, but our effect on broader social issues has been enormous'),<sup>51</sup> Crass strove to set in stone the terms on which they could be analysed and appreciated: an approach that continues today through Rimbaud's attendance and assertive argument at academic events such as *No Sir, I Won't*.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, they showed that they could never 'sell out'.

Their self-awareness with regard to authenticity also extends to assurances that they 'didn't really make any effort [in the beginning] either; we never tried to sell anything or promote anything.'<sup>53</sup> However, having found an audience the band warmed to the idea of recording and creating products. Their first recording was of a rehearsal, 'just for a friend of ours to listen to in his van',<sup>54</sup> which found its way into the Walthamstow record shop *Small Wonder* whose owner Pete Stennet, in turn, offered to release a record for the band. Rimbaud asserts that 'we certainly didn't give [our friend] the tape with the intention of him doing that.'<sup>55</sup> Despite taking 'policy' decisions to ensure that they existed within a 'real punk' bubble of their own creation, they could not avoid being appreciated on the terms of the mainstream music industries which, in turn, fed their opposition to populist punk.

### **Crass vs. punk orthodoxy**

Crass' obsession with authenticity led to their being regarded, by themselves and others, as 'real punk',<sup>56</sup> an authority on what it *is* to be punk;<sup>57</sup> as well as becoming

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<sup>51</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records'. As written.

<sup>52</sup> Oxford Brookes University, *No Sir, I Won't*, 28 June 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> 'At the end of '82, aware that the "movement" needed a morale booster, we organised the first squat gig for decades at the now defunct Zig Zag Club in London. Along with free food and copious supplies of ripped-off booze, we celebrated our independence once again, this time joined by twenty other bands, the cream of what could truly be called "real punk". Together we supplied a twenty-four hour blast of energy which inspired similar actions

an icon of 'punkness'. Brett Anderson – frontman of the Britpop group Suede – recalled to John Harris that while he was at school, '[all] you needed [...] was a Nagasaki Nightmare patch, and you were a punk.'<sup>58</sup> These ideas of Crass as exemplars of 'real punk' led to 'people like Paul Weller [...] saying that they respected Crass,' and even figures as unlikely as Sade and her management announcing themselves as fans.<sup>59</sup> For Sade's management to express a taste for Crass confirms the cultural capital their focus on authenticity had accrued, which the business departments of the music industries perhaps hoped would translate into financial gain for the artists and for themselves.

Despite the perception of the band as scene leaders and genre exemplars, they actually opposed much of punk's orthodoxy, which, ironically, played a role in their authentication. Punk is assumed internationally to represent 'DIY spirit' and anti-establishment attitude, two characteristics which could certainly be attributed to Crass, but arguably not to the Pistols and the Clash. For Rimbaud,

without Crass, none of what has now looked back as the effects of punk [...] it would have had no effect at all. I mean, the Pistols and that group, those commercial people, lasted for about two years. They were just an extension of the usual music business tactics. They had no sort of political overview whatsoever. It was us that introduced a meaningful overview into what was then called punk.'<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, while their intentional avoidance of the genre's fashionable trimmings led to their 'real punk' status, their output and imagery has come to be used in a

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throughout the world. We'd learnt the lesson. "Do it yourself" has never seemed so real as it did that day at the Zig Zag.' Crass, 'About Crass Records'.

<sup>57</sup> See Rimbaud, 'You're Not Punk'.

<sup>58</sup> Brett Anderson, quoted in Harris, *The Last Party*, p. 27. 'Nagasaki Nightmare' is the title of a Crass song whose lyrics deal with the atomic bombing of the Japanese city and the paranoia which centred around the impending threat of another nuclear assault.

<sup>59</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 207.

<sup>60</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Unterbeger, 'Penny Rimbaud interview'. As written.



fashionistic way. Following the growth in popularity of the branding of bands – witness the Rolling Stones and Ramones being used for t-shirt prints in high street fashion outlets – the English football icon David Beckham has been photographed wearing a 'diamante' Crass t-shirt, despite the band's not licensing their logo to any clothing manufacturers, or indeed having ever made their own t-shirts.<sup>61</sup> While they published stencils with which fans were encouraged to make their own t-shirts, Rimbaud admitted that seeing 'one of the wealthiest people in Britain wearing a bloody Crass T-shirt actually quite upset me [especially since] it wasn't just a Crass T-shirt, it was one with bloody glitter on it.'<sup>62</sup>

Punk has come to be viewed academically primarily as a fashion statement, rather than a set of musical aesthetics or anti-establishment ideologies. The Sex Pistols were more or less assembled by Malcolm McLaren as mannequins for Vivienne Westwood's clothing; Crass saw this as a betrayal of those fans who had been attracted to the band by their confrontational imagery and apparently political rhetoric – as they initially were themselves:

we had realised that our fellow punks, The Pistols, The Clash and all the other muso-puppets weren't doing it at all. They may like to think that they ripped off the majors, but it was Joe Public who'd been ripped. They helped no one but themselves, started another facile fashion, brought a new lease of life to London's trendy Kings Road and claimed they'd started a revolution. Same old story.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Anon., 'Penny Rimbaud', *Expletive Undeleted*, 19 August 2012 <<http://undeleted.wordpress.com/2012/08/19/interview-penny-rimbaud/>> [accessed 3 May 2013].

<sup>62</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records'.

They were frustrated by the Pistols' achievement of cultural capital through a tokenistic espousal of anarchism,<sup>64</sup> believing that it was they who had brought the political stance to light through their presentation and musical and lyrical invention.

Within months [of Crass' first displaying of it,] the [anarchist] symbol was to be seen decorating leather jackets, badges, and walls throughout the country, within a few years it spread worldwide. Rotten may have proclaimed himself an anarchist, but it was us who almost single-handedly created anarchy as a popular movement for millions of people.<sup>65</sup>

For Crass, any political statements put forth by the scene's most mainstream acts could not be taken seriously. For them to fall into the fashionable narrative of rock 'n' roll rendered any of their assertions supporting alternative action hypocritical. Moreover, their ire towards the industrialisation of punk was not just reserved for bands. In the song 'Hurry Up, Garry', Crass rail against the exploitation of Oi bands by journalists such as Garry Bushell, the man who coined the scene's name.<sup>66</sup> Referencing the song 'Hurry Up Harry' by Oi leaders Sham 69, the song's lyrics criticise the journalistic establishment of regulations for how punk should look, sound, and the subjects its lyrics should deal with. Crass believed this to be the antithesis of punk's *raison d'être*:

don't like the music/don't like the words/don't like the sentiments [...] what do you want?/as long as I play it moderate, that's fine [...] you whimper and whine from the pages of the press/ridicule and criticise those who want to change this mess/there's people out here who are trying to live/people who care, now, what do you give?/so many parasites living off our sweat/so many fuckers in

<sup>64</sup> See Sex Pistols, 'Anarchy in the UK', *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, compact disc, Virgin Records CDVX2086 (1977).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Rimbaud could see what 'Garry Bushell wanted to achieve with Oi, the unification of all these youths under one banner, but it backfired on him horribly' in the sense that it confirmed for some that there was a fascist strand to punk. Quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 24.

for what they get/punk ain't about your standards and your rules/it ain't  
another product for the suckers and the fools<sup>67</sup>

While songs such as 'Hurry Up, Garry' were intended as a call to arms for all punks to reject industry-approved genre rules, Glasper details how their opposition in fact played a part in creating 'a very definite rift within the scene, between so called "peace punks" and their more chaos-oriented counterparts.'<sup>68</sup> This highlights a contradiction in Crass' presentation: while they felt that punk wasn't 'about your standards and rules', they were actually very puritanical in their beliefs on what music should achieve. Meanwhile, contemporaries such as the Exploited took exception to Crass' earnest approach and criticism of the punk scene, and, while also dealing with politics, did so in a more crudely visceral manner.<sup>69</sup>

Despite Crass' use of, rather than conformity to, punk as a genre, they have continued to be considered a 'punk' rather than 'post-punk' group. By using punk as a starting point to develop a musical style and promote considered debate, the band arguably had more in common with the performers examined in Simon Reynolds' *Rip It Up and Start Again*. However, Reynolds believes that Crass, alongside TRB, were 'far too literal and non-aesthetic' to be appreciated by the art school-influenced post-punks:

Art students and autodidacts alike tended to prize individuality. As bohemian nonconformists, they were usually made uncomfortable by calls to solidarity or toeing the party line. They [...] regarded [TRB and Crass'] soapbox

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<sup>67</sup> Crass, 'Hurry Up Garry', *Stations Of The Crass*, LP, Crass Records 521984 (1979). As written in the sleeve notes.

<sup>68</sup> Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> The Exploited song 'Maggie' features the lyrics 'Maggie, Maggie, you cunt'. The Exploited, 'Maggie', *Horror Epics*, LP, Konexion KOMA 788012 (1986).

sermonizing as either condescending to the listener or a pointless exercise in preaching to the converted.<sup>70</sup>

Reynolds posits this as part of the case for the post-punk vanguard's avoidance of RAR and ANL involvement. However, rather than representing an explicit distance between them and Crass, it is actually common ground. While Crass were known for their anarchistic political views which called for equality, they are notable by their absence from the narrative of RAR. Although the band performed at a RAR gig, they were publicly critical of the movement's operations, especially its payment policy. Crass' appearance was 'the only gig that we'd ever been paid for. When we told the man to keep the money for the cause, he informed us that "this was the cause". We never played for RAR again.'<sup>71</sup> While the socialist RAR organisers saw the payment of bands as integral to the authentic presentation of the movement, Crass saw it as precisely the opposite: how could RAR be taken seriously when benefit concerts were financially benefitting the performers?<sup>72</sup>

In addition, Rimbaud asserts that they had 'no ideological quarrel' with the RAR-associated ANL, but 'objected to the way they divided people in just as prejudiced a way as the people they were condemning.'<sup>73</sup> Crass' politics avoided the concept of left and right: while their liberal attitudes show some common ground with more moderate left-wingers, Rimbaud admitted that he had 'no patience with either the British Movement or the Trotskyite Red Brigade; they all play the same stupid games.'<sup>74</sup> He points to this as being

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<sup>70</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, xxiii.

<sup>71</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records'.

<sup>72</sup> There is evidence that RAR did begin to collect money to assist victims of racism. A concert in the Spring of 1977 'raised £110 for the rather comically named Islington 18 Defence Fund.' ('The 18' were actually 'seventeen black Islington youths...on trial at the Old Bailey charged with things like "Conspiring to rob persons unknown of amounts unknown on a date unknown." Whether they are right or wrong in their belief, the defence is treating it as a race trial.') Phil McNeill, 'R.A.R. collection for "Islington 18"'.  
<sup>73</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

the reason we became so associated with anarchy [...]. It was my idea to [...] do a big anarchy sign and stick that up and whilst we are about it why don't we put a peace sign up and the peace sign was to say we don't want to fight, we are not interested in sort of conflict and the anarchy sign was to say well we are neither left or right so you can fuck off we are not joining up with anyone.<sup>75</sup>

In doing so, Crass 'very consciously left the door open to everybody', as Rimbaud believed that young skinheads who 'superficially said they supported the British Movement' did so through an embracing of community rather than the possessing of deep-seated racist views.<sup>76</sup> This open approach led to their attracting a section of skinhead fans, allowing comparison to be drawn with Sham 69. Where Sham's Jimmy Pursey felt he had no right to question his fans' racist views, Rimbaud felt duty-bound to problematize them. There are clear consequences of both parties' actions. While Sham's welcoming of all working class white youths no matter their potentially racist views implicitly validated their frustrations (much like Thatcher's acceptance of those who were concerned about those 'with a different culture' swamping Britain), Crass encouraged their attendance at events on the condition that their views would be discussed and challenged.

This led to the band's forging 'an uneasy alliance' of fans, one in which 'British Movement Skinheads' rubbed shoulders, and sometimes traded blows, with 'students who could pick up on what we were saying'.<sup>77</sup> Crass were viewed, much like Sham 69, as a group whose cultural capital could be used to form opinions, discourage racism and recruit fans to formal politics: Rimbaud remembers that 'we started getting people saying oh why don't you come along and represent or play an

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<sup>75</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 147.

<sup>76</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 147.

SWP gig or why don't you do this and why don't you fucking do that and we didn't want to'.<sup>78</sup> Crass' power lay in their self-assurance and liberalist assertion that 'there is no authority but yourself'.<sup>79</sup> to use this to 'represent' a political party would contradict and inauthenticate their cultural standing. The band has been criticised, however, for their rejection of organised politics: Chris Dean of the Redskins dismissed their 'attitude [...] that you can take a step back and be commentators'; in doing so, 'the world will pass you by and you can quietly sit there commentating.'<sup>80</sup>

Alongside their serious treatment of the political potential represented by punk, the appreciation of Crass as a post-punk group can be furthered through an examination of their musical aesthetics, which, rather than conforming to the 'rules' of the punk sound world, saw much experimentation beyond the familiar thrash and crash of their peers. Since the Sex Pistols and Clash were an initial inspiration for their musical approach, they share familiar, technically unsteady instrumental tropes with fellow punks whose abilities could be attributed to their self-tuition. Ignorant recalls to Gasper that 'Andy [N.A.] Palmer turned up; he couldn't play and he didn't have a guitar, but he nicked one from somewhere and tuned it so he could play a chord by putting his finger straight across.'<sup>81</sup> Crass' music is aesthetically aggressive: guitars are repeatedly heavily strummed, the drums and bass guitar are pounded, and the vocals of Ignorant, Eve Libertine and Joy De Vivre have, variously, abrasive, accusatory and aggressive qualities.

Their music is overwhelmingly jagged and jarring, with semitonal clashes and experimental guitar techniques, which sets them apart from the comparatively tame musicality of their forebears. Webb identifies their sound as different from 'the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> This lyric from their final album, *Yes Sir, I Will.*, is used as the title for a documentary about the band by Dutch filmmaker Alexander Oey. Crass, *Yes Sir, I Will.*, LP, Crass Records 121984/2 (1983).

<sup>80</sup> Dean, quoted in Sweeting, 'The Redskins: Keeping On And On'.

<sup>81</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 14. Palmer's 'nicking' of an instrument associates him with the 'yobboe' image touched on by Ignorant.

primitive, distorted Eddie Cochran riffs of the Sex Pistols or the cleaner more melodic Punk [sic] of the Clash', instead citing Rimbaud's apparent inspiration drawn from Benjamin Britten and the group's use of collage and 'found sound' as the ingredients for their creation of 'a more intense feeling and aural assault.'<sup>82</sup> Their unorthodox approach to recording and sound production is exemplified on a live album which was included with *Christ - The Album*, featuring 'Zen poems, random noises and the aural paraphernalia of everyday life'.<sup>83</sup> As Berger puts it, the live album 'was clearly more of a John Cage influenced avant-garde record than anything to do with punk; you certainly wouldn't have got this from an Exploited live album.'<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Rimbaud tells Unterberger that he hears his band's oeuvre 'more in the context of modern jazz or of modern classical music than [...] of rock'n'roll. When we made the music, we were attempting to create an atmosphere, which is an almost classical approach to music. We were making music which was an emotional expression of what we were singing about.'<sup>85</sup>

Their approach to being a 'punk' band came from a specific reading of the burgeoning scene as an independent, DIY rejection of existing models of not only the music industries but also society at large.<sup>86</sup> However, once punk had become the prevalent scene in terms of underground musical production, and the Sex Pistols and the Clash had become mainstream pop icons, Crass set themselves *against* punk. For Webb, while the Sex Pistols and the Clash 'were Punks who used the machinery and finance of the music industry, through the deals that they got with major labels and ended up becoming stars', Crass and their anarcho peers 'were part of a particular social/cultural movement and had a variety of philosophical

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<sup>82</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>83</sup> Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 207.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> 'Penny Rimbaud', *Expletive Undeleted*.

<sup>86</sup> 'When, in 1976, punk first spewed itself across the nation's headlines with the message 'do it yourself', we, who in various ways and for many years had been doing just that, naively believed that Messrs. Rotten, Strummer etc. etc. meant it. At last we weren't alone.' Crass, 'About Crass Records'.

underpinnings for their independent approach [...]. Crass became anti-heroes and influenced culture in a very particular way.<sup>87</sup> Their *raison d'être* was to retain social independence, not to become a commercially viable musical or industrial model.

It was this attitude which developed their dedicated fan base: their apparent authenticity led to them 'receiving "easily 200" letters a week from fans asking for advice, political opinion or just badges.'<sup>88</sup> While the Sex Pistols and the Clash will forever remain icons of 'commercial' punk, Crass believe that 'the true effect' of their work

is not to be found within the confines of rock'n'roll, but in the radicalised minds of thousands of people throughout the world. From the Gates of Greenham to the Berlin Wall, from the Stop The City actions to underground gigs in Poland, our particular brand of anarcho-pacifism, now almost synonymous with punk, has made itself known.<sup>89</sup>

### **Crass vs. the Falklands War**

While Crass' political notoriety led them to court controversy throughout their existence, and while they dealt with a variety of political issues in their songwriting, their responses to the Falklands conflict were to lead to their greatest degree of public scrutiny. Three singles were released in opposition to the war: 'Sheep Farming In The Falklands', which was 'rushed out'<sup>90</sup> anonymously on flexi-disc in 1982, before a re-recorded version – backed with 'Gotcha!' – received an official 7" release in 1983; and 'How Does It Feel (To Be The Mother Of A Thousand Dead)?',

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<sup>87</sup> Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*, p. 143. It is arguable that rather than 'becoming stars' accidentally, the Pistols and the Clash had made this their aim from the outset.

<sup>88</sup> Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 229.

<sup>89</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records'. The anti-capitalist Stop The City movement can be seen as precursor to the Occupy movement of recent years. Demonstrations took place across 1983-4, involving mainly anarchists, who worked to disrupt the City of London through mass protest.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*



a 7" single recorded after the conflict's end and released on 16 October 1982.<sup>91</sup> The aftermath of the war also saw the creation of the 'Thatchergate' tape – an audio collage depicting a recording of an imagined telephone conversation between Thatcher and Reagan, in which they 'discuss' the collaboration of the UK and USA in threatening the USSR with nuclear assault, as well as insinuating that the HMS Sheffield was deliberately sunk to provide moral ammunition to support the Falklands conflict<sup>92</sup> – and the recording of the band's final album, *Yes Sir, I Will.*, with which, Rimbaud tells Gasper,

we were saying [...] 'Back off! Fucking take a look!' We were very angry about the Falklands, and very, very angry that so few people seemed to have anything to fucking say about it. I didn't think that we could go on dancing the night away after the Falklands [...] so we did a piece of music that wouldn't allow people to have any fun to it.<sup>93</sup>

Rimbaud admits that Crass were in the minority in terms of cultural opposition to the conflict. Indeed, besides the Robert Wyatt single 'Shipbuilding' (written by Clive Langer and Elvis Costello) and Billy Bragg's 'Island of No Return' (see below),<sup>94</sup> there was very little music written in direct criticism of the military action. Given that the peace movement has been intertwined with musical rebellion since the

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<sup>91</sup> The Associated Press, 21 October 1982, PM Cycle, International News.

<sup>92</sup> Thatchergate saw the band receive attention from 'The world's media', who 'pounced on the story, thrilled that a "bunch of punks" had made such idiots of The State Department, and "by the way, what else had we done." Throughout the years as a band we had never attracted such attention, the telephone rang incessantly, we travelled here and there to do interviews, all of a sudden we were "media stars" [...]. We had gained a form of political power, found a voice, were being treated with a slightly awed respect, but was that really what we wanted? Was that what we had set out to achieve all those years ago?' Crass, 'About Crass Records'.

<sup>93</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 27. *Yes Sir, I Will* is largely regarded by Crass fans as their least listenable piece of work: Gasper describes it as 'Possibly their most articulate and lasting statement lyrically..., it was unfortunately their least articulate musically by far. In fact, it was an awful noise that tried the patience of even the most ardent Crass fan...but that was the whole point of the exercise.' (p. 26)

<sup>94</sup> Robert Wyatt's original version of 'Shipbuilding' (Rough Trade RT 115) peaked at number 35 in the UK Singles Chart, while Bragg's song – discussed below – was an album track. 'ROBERT WYATT|Artist|Official Charts', *Official Charts Company* <[http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/\\_/robert%20wyatt/](http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/_/robert%20wyatt/)> [accessed 12 September 2013].

countercultural movements of the 1960s – and especially with anarcho-punk – the band regarded this as problematic. In the brief autobiography which accompanies the singles compilation *Best Before*, Crass recall that '[when] the issues had been abstract, the Peace Movement had been all too happy to shout "No more war", now there was a war to shout about, the silence was painful.'<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Rimbaud composed 'An open letter to rock 'n' rollers everywhere' which was published in *Sounds* in 1983. He asked if musicians

are doing enough, or indeed anything to oppose this slow, but inevitable, drift towards total war. Music is a powerful tool through which radical ideas have been expressed since time immemorial, yet at a time when the world is threatened almost daily with annihilation, rock 'n' roll appears to have increasingly concentrated on shallow fun and cretinous escapism.... It is our responsibility to warn of what is happening in this dangerous world rather than just covering up the agony with mindless entertainment. The blues weren't entertainment even if they are entertaining; they were a cry from the soul, 'stop the oppression now', the same cry that led Lennon to sing 'free the people now'. It is our responsibility as 'entertainers' to make similar demands for sanity in our songs, interviews, reviews, press releases etc [...]. It isn't our future as successful bands and artists that matters, it is the future of the world. Please think about what this letter says and try to find it in yourself to act on behalf of the planet rather than your pocket.<sup>96</sup>

Nonetheless, Crass' protests did not go unnoticed by those they wished to reach. While their core audience would always appreciate their music and sentiments, 'How Does it Feel' also provoked the attention of politicians and the mainstream

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<sup>95</sup> Crass, 'About Crass Records'. As written. As I have identified, the Falklands conflict, while controversial, was too politically problematic, if also perhaps too short, to sustain a popular protest.

<sup>96</sup> Rimbaud, 'An open letter to rock 'n' rollers everywhere', quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, pp. 230-3 (p. 233).

press. Writing in his 'Rock' column in the *Daily Mirror*, critic Robin Eggar asserted that, while 'Rock music is often used by the young to voice their protests [...] Crass have gone too far' with 'How Does it Feel'.<sup>97</sup> He calls it 'a vicious and obscene attack on Margaret Thatcher's motives for engaging in the Falklands war' which 'bears little relation to reality', and insinuates that the reason it has 'already sold more than 20,000 copies' is because of its low price.<sup>98</sup>

Meanwhile, Eggar's brother Timothy, Conservative MP for Enfield North, stated his desire to prosecute the band under the Obscene Publications Act for producing 'the most vicious, scurrilous and obscene record ever produced'.<sup>99</sup> Such proceedings never arose however, which Rimbaud attributes to government 'policy': he claims that Tory MPs were told by Party whips that 'on no account must they respond to any form of provocation from us'.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, the politics of the situation led to their receiving 'letters of support from Labour MPs',<sup>101</sup> and Labour MP for Ogmore Ray Powell asked Thatcher if she would 'take time off today to listen to the new record "How does it feel to be the mother of 1,000 dead [sic]?"' during Prime Minister's Questions on 21 October 1982 – a question she notably did not answer.<sup>102</sup>

'How Does it Feel...?' is certainly one of Crass' most violently acerbic songs, both lyrically and musically. Following an initial rubato guitar section, the first 50 seconds of the recording consist of a quick tempo introduction in which the lead guitar continuously plays an almost blues-like slide between G# and A 'power chords',<sup>103</sup> while the bass plays an e-B-E-B-A figure, accompanied by cymbal hits on the first

<sup>97</sup> Robin Eggar, 'Feeling So Nasty: Shock single with a sick message', *Daily Mirror*, 19 October 1982, p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*. A 75p price tag is printed on the single's cover.

<sup>99</sup> The Associated Press, 21 October 1982, PM Cycle, International News.

<sup>100</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 217.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> 'House of Commons PQs', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 21 October 1982 <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105039>> [accessed 15 August 2013].

<sup>103</sup> Power chords – essentially consisting of two tonics and a dominant, i.e. AEA (also known as A<sup>5</sup>) – are common in punk rock aesthetics.

four notes and a four-beat snare roll on the A. This accompanies a direct and personal attack on Thatcher's visual and vocal presentation delivered by Eve Libertine, which assumes that she suffers from guilt after the conflict:

When you woke up this morning, you looked so rocky-eyed,  
 Blue and white normally, but strange like that in black.  
 It doesn't get much better, your voice can just get ripped up shouting in vain.  
 Maybe someone hears what you say, but you're still on your own at night.  
 You've got to make such a noise to understand the silence.  
 Screaming like a jackass, ringing ears so you can't hear the silence  
 Even when it's there – like the wind seen from the window;  
 Seeing it, but not being touched by it.<sup>104</sup>

After a fade out, the song 'proper' begins with Ignorant abrasively shouting 'HOW DOES IT FEEL!?' in his exaggerated Essex accent, before the chorus is introduced:

How does it feel to be the Mother of a thousand dead?  
 YOUNG – BOYS – REST – NOW – COLD – GRAVES IN COLD – EARTH  
 How does it feel to be the Mother of a thousand dead?  
 SUNKEN EYES – LOST NOW – EMPTY SOCKETS IN FUTILE DEATH.<sup>105</sup>

Musically, the chorus is largely faithful to punk rock aesthetics, with power chords, tom-heavy drum beats and a vocal line that either follows the tonic notes of the chord progression (A-B-C-B-A), or is staccato-shouted in unison (as denoted by capitals and hyphens above.) However, the second line of the chorus finds the musicians experimenting harmonically: the guitars and bass play the same melodic shape a semitone apart – i.e. the bass guitar plays C-A-C-A-C-A-C-A, while the guitar plays C#-A#-C#-A# etc. While the dissonance created obviously has a chilling

<sup>104</sup> Crass, 'How Does It Feel (To Be The Mother Of A Thousand Dead)?', *How Does It Feel (To Be The Mother Of A Thousand Dead, 7"* single, Crass Records 221984/6 (1982).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

musical impact, the semitonal clusters also conjure a sense of harmonic space which one can interpret as providing a musical image of the Falklands' stark landscapes.

The same musical material is used in all but the third of the song's five verses. The first half features a standard common time bass drum/snare beat, over which the guitars develop the A-B-C pattern of the chorus into a descending G-F#-F-E line which, in turn, cadences onto the tonic A. The second half becomes more sophisticated, however: as the drums switch to a double time beat, the guitars improvise spidery treble lines as the bass plays a walking line around the same A-C harmony in time with the drums. Following this, the final four bars again make greater use of space as the bass and guitars layer further semitonal clashes within a loose B-C#-D# progression, as Rimbaud hits cymbal crashes at the beginning of each bar. These verses, then, resolve from D# to A as they repeat or return to the chorus – a tritone shift which further intensifies aural discomfort. The central third verse, meanwhile, utilises a repetitive tom roll and further, seemingly random, clashing bass and guitar chords to create a more quietly menacing atmosphere.

Lyrically, the song surmises that Thatcher engaged the Argentineans in war for her own political gain with no consideration for the consequences, and, in contrast to Libertine's imagery, with no feelings of guilt in its aftermath. Ignorant accuses her of 'arrogance' and 'deceit', while her 'lies persuaded people to accept the wasted blood' and her 'filthy pride cleansed [her] of the doubt [she] should have had.'<sup>106</sup> He also insinuates that she saw the conflict as an opportunity to establish herself as a 'Great British Leader' – her ideal of nationalism, infused with selfishness, led her to treat the military action as her own 'great war':<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> This accusation was revisited in the 7" recording of 'Sheep Farming In The Falklands' – see below.

You never wanted peace or solution,  
 From the start you lusted after war and destruction.  
 Your blood-soaked reason ruled out other choices,  
 Your mockery gagged more moderate voices.  
 So keen to play your bloody part, so impatient that your war be fought.  
 Iron Lady with your stone heart so eager that the lesson be taught  
 That you inflicted, you determined, you created, you ordered -  
 It was your decision to have those young boys slaughtered.<sup>108</sup>

These final two lines appear at the end of each verse, and are used as evidence of the hypocrisy of Thatcher's attempt to achieve political gain through the conflict, a concept further explored in the fourth and fifth verses:

You accuse us of disrespect for the dead,  
 But it was you who slaughtered out of national pride.  
 Just how much did you care? What respect did you have  
 As you sent those bodies to their communal grave?

[...]

You use those deaths to achieve your ends still,  
 Using the corpses as a moral blackmail.  
 You say 'Think of what those young men gave'  
 As you try to bind us in your living death,  
 Yet we do think of them, ice cold and silent  
 In the snow covered moorlands, stopped by the violence  
 That you inflicted, you determined [...] <sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Crass' rejection of Thatcher's use of nationalistic rhetoric to justify the war and its casualties is furthered by the paraphrasing of a quote from Hermann Hesse's 1919 essay 'Self-Will' on the single's sleeve:

...it is an abuse of language to say that our poor soldiers, slaughtered at the front, died a 'heroic death'. That is sentimentality. Of course the soldiers who died in the [First World] [W]ar are worthy of our deepest sympathy. Many of them did great things and suffered greatly, and in the end they paid with their lives. But that does not make them 'heroes'. The common soldier, at whom an officer bellows as he would a dog, is not suddenly transformed into a hero by the bullet that kills him. To suppose that there can be millions of 'heroes' is in itself an absurdity. The obedient well-behaved citizen who does his/her duty is not a 'hero'. Only an *individual* who has fashioned his/her 'self-will', their noble, natural inner law, into their destiny can be a hero.<sup>110</sup>

While 'How Does It Feel...?' is a stark and musically challenging record, the two versions of 'Sheep Farming In The Falklands', while partly dealing with similar issues in its lyrics, are markedly different in tone. It is an uptempo, almost tongue-in-cheek song loosely in G major, whose lyrics mock stereotypes of the British Armed Forces and Thatcher. For instance, the title of the song and its chorus' lyrics insinuate that the forces are mostly interested in sexual activities with each other and the Islands' livestock – a focal point of its farming economy:

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<sup>110</sup> Attributed to 'Herman Hesse, "If The War Goes On.", 1919', quoted in liner notes to *How Does It Feel (To Be The Mother Of A Thousand Dead)?* In the original essay, Hesse goes on to dismiss the use of patriotism as justification for conflict: 'How I love the virtue of self-will! Once you have learned to treasure it and discovered some parcel of it in yourself, all the most highly commended virtues become strangely questionable. Patriotism is one of these. I have nothing against it. For the individual it substitutes a larger complex. But it is truly prized as a virtue only in time of war – that naive and absurdly inadequate means of "prolonging politics". The soldier who kills enemies is always regarded as a greater patriot than the peasant who tills his land to the best of his ability. Because the peasant derives advantage from what he does. And in our strange system of morality a virtue that is useful or profitable to its possessor is always held in suspicion.' Hermann Hesse, 'Self-Will', *If The War Goes On* (London: Picador, 1974), pp. 71-6 (p. 75). From this, it is easy to understand why Hesse influenced Crass' beliefs.

Sheep farming in the Falklands, re-arming in the fucklands,  
 Fucking sheep in the homelands, the royal marines are coming!<sup>111</sup>

However the verse lyrics diverge between the two versions. The 1982 flexi disc recording is largely concerned with portraying the conflict, in crude sexual terms, as a joke, telling the forces to 'fuck off to the Falklands for your seafaring fun, big man's jerk off dreamland, watch each other cum', while, in reference to the song's title and chorus, Ignorant implores the soldiers to 'take a picture of a Brit with a shit on his dick and then stick it in the royal, stick it in the royal, stick it in the royal album!'<sup>112</sup>

The centre of the third verse features an audio representation of soldiers raping sheep, complete with the band's female members impersonating the tortured 'baa's of the unfortunate livestock, after which, speaking as a soldier, Ignorant boasts that following 'the Falklands battle, we'll invade Argentina and bugger the cattle.'<sup>113</sup>

The band attribute the record's comical nature to its being released before the true scale of the conflict had become apparent.<sup>114</sup> It does however make reference to the more serious issue of the fear and paranoia surrounding nuclear conflict – with sexualised mentions of 'the red button' and a particularly dissonant coda in which Ignorant shouts accusatory sentiments aimed at Thatcher:

Four minutes, what a shock – balls to you, rocket cock.  
 You're old and you're ill and you're soon gonna die,  
 You've nothing to lose if you fill up the skies.  
 You'd take us all with you, yeah, it's tough at the top,

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<sup>111</sup> Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands (Flexi)', *Best Before*, digital album, originally released 1986. On the 7" recording, the lyrics are altered slightly to warn that 'Her Majesty's forces are coming!' The double entendre of this line is obvious. Crass, 'Sheep Farming In The Falklands', *Sheep Farming In The Falklands/Gotcha!*, 7" single, Crass Records 121984-3 (1983).

<sup>112</sup> Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands (Flexi)'.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> See Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 215.



You slop bucket, shit filled, puss ridden, death pimp snot. Ya fuck.<sup>115</sup>

Rimbaud recalls that as part of their touring act they

had a huge banner with all the words on it. Eve would go along with a stick and the idea was everyone sung along – it was great fun. We were actually on tour when the Belgrano went down and the whole thing wasn't funny anymore [...] it turned into something which was costing lives. We really had a big problem – do we go on doing this song? We did, but the whole colouration changed.<sup>116</sup>

This change in 'colouration' can be heard in the 7" version, recorded and released 9 months after the end of the conflict, and less than 6 months after the release of 'How Does It Feel...?' This second recording is musically and structurally the same – the tonal change is discernible in the lyrics and vocals. For instance, the 7" version makes greater use of Eve Libertine's very accurate Thatcher impersonation – heard minimally in the flexi disc recording – through which she tells the listener that she doesn't

really give a toss if the cause is wrong or right.

My political neck means more to me than the lives of a thousand men,

If I felt it might be of use to me I'd do it all over again.

The Falklands was really a cover-up job to obscure the mistakes I've made,

And you know I think the gamble I took could certainly be said to have been paid.

With unemployment at an all-time high and the country falling apart

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<sup>115</sup> Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands (Flexi)'. These lyrics remain on the re-recorded version.

<sup>116</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 215.

I, Winston Thatcher, reign supreme in this great nations' heart.<sup>117</sup>

Their perception of Thatcher's instigation of the conflict for political gain is furthered by the replacement of the sheep sex scene with an apparent recording from parliament – underscored by a guitar playing Elgar's 'Land of Hope and Glory'<sup>118</sup> – of Thatcher (Libertine) telling the House of Commons that the leader of the opposition is now 'afraid of an election this year [...] bastard, prick'.<sup>119</sup> With the benefit of hindsight and ability to absorb the general social and cultural response to the conflict, Ignorant is able to offer a critique of the 'national mood', which, with the general election looming, did indeed see a growth in support and admiration for the Prime Minister:

Who the fuck cares? We're all having fun,  
Mums and Dads happy as their kids play with guns.  
The media loved it when all's said and done,  
'Britain's bulldog's off the leash', said *The Sun*.  
As the 'Argies' and 'Brits' got crippled or died,  
the bulldog turned around and crapped in our eyes.<sup>120</sup>

Here Crass deal publicly in song with what they felt privately: they were alone in standing outside of the populist jingoism surrounding the conflict. This was tied up with their anti-militarism, which stemmed from pacifism and a rejection of borders rather than a generalised dislike for members of the forces, as reflected by their identification with Hesse and in this statement from the liner notes of the 'Sheep Farming...' 7" single:

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<sup>117</sup> Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands', *Sheep Farming In The Falklands/Gotcha!* Libertine does not just accurately mimic the tonal quality of Thatcher's voice, but by inserting 'you know' and 'great nation' she also effectively includes Thatcher's oratorical quirks.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 'Land of Hope and Glory' is a signifier of English nationalism, and is also briefly played on the guitar at the beginning of the record.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Street notes that the record 'was investigated by a Commons Select Committee for a possible breach of parliamentary privilege because of its use of radio broadcasts from Parliament.' *Rebel Rock*, p. 17. See also Cloonan, *Banned!*

<sup>120</sup> Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands', *Sheep Farming In The Falklands/Gotcha!*

History creates and reinforces base nationalistic concepts of friend and foe and in so doing produces the enemy required by those who seek to justify war. History is the logic that gives war it's [sic] credibility. Armed with this logic we are expected to hate and possibly kill in the service of, and for the benefit of, the self-perpetuating oppressors who not only write the history books, but ensure for themselves leading roles in the gross theatre that they represent.<sup>121</sup>

However, while the band remained pacifist to their end, Ignorant became uncomfortable with 'Sheep Farming...'s caricaturization of the military. He 'didn't like playing "Sheep Farming..." because, while

it's their choice to join up [with the army] I do feel compassion for the squaddie, and I think it was a bit shit to take the piss out of them really [...]. I remember once the war had actually really kicked off and people really were being killed, and the '...Falklands' flexi had gone out, talking about soldiers shagging sheep and stuff, I thought to myself, 'Oh gawd, this is where it might get really nasty'<sup>122</sup>

Ignorant's feelings can be seen to have stemmed from the band's isolated position in terms of opposing the war, which, in turn, had an impact on the beginning of the end of Crass. The conflict offered them an artistic opportunity: Rimbaud tells Berger that 'It's not impossible that had the Falklands War not started, that [*Christ – The Album*, released in early 1982] would have been our final album [...] we wouldn't have known what to do, because we'd said it all. And I don't think the band – any of us – were about to start repeating ourselves.'<sup>123</sup> The war led them to treat everything they released as a 'tactical response – if something happened, we'd get something out as quickly as we could.'<sup>124</sup> They had become frustrated with the

<sup>121</sup> Crass, *Sheep Farming In The Falklands/Gotcha!*, liner notes.

<sup>122</sup> Ignorant, quoted in Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*, p. 25.

<sup>123</sup> Rimbaud, quoted in Berger, *The Story of Crass*, p. 209.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

drawn out process of writing, recording and releasing an album – feeling that it didn't offer them enough opportunity to make emotionally political points. Rimbaud remembers that, with their anti-Falklands singles, they 'didn't think about any of the artistic merits or values. Which is why that stuff is bitter and craggy, and [...] interesting in a historical way.'<sup>125</sup>

The emphasis on these singles as emotionally 'bitter' responses highlights Crass' prizing of authenticity of expression. For Rimbaud the medium in which Crass worked was of no consequence: it was the politics it expressed which was important. While his view contrasts with Steve Ignorant's, every action the group took served to foreground their political expressions. The approach of Billy Bragg, explored in the following chapter, was similar. For performers whose politics were the central tenet of their songwriting – including the Redskins – the decisions they took with regard to their presentation were important to portraying their politics as authentic. To be sure that they were heard, they had to be seen to be practising what they preached.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Twelve

### Billy Bragg

Billy Bragg (full name Stephen William Bragg) is a singer-songwriter who, much like Crass, has come to be known for his political opinions and activism as much as, if not more than, his songwriting. His formative years were spent fronting the new wave-influenced band Riff Raff, whose sound was well-suited to the pub-rock label Chiswick Records, which released their singles. Following a brief live career, the band split in 1980 and Bragg joined the army, completing basic training before leaving and returning to his hometown of Barking, Essex. He embarked on a new solo musical venture – playing ‘singer-songwriter’ style songs with a punk rock edge – which bore the influence of the politically-minded Clash and,<sup>1</sup> perhaps as a result of his exposure to RAR, began to engage in musical political activism.<sup>2</sup> Bragg’s identity began to form around the political nature of his lyrics, and as his profile grew his image and statements began to focus on political authenticity and encouraging social consciousness amongst his fan base.

Upon his first appearances in the British music press around the release of his first album – *Life’s a Riot With Spy vs. Spy* (1983) – he was keen to tell interviewers that he was ‘a socialist’, a critical member of the Labour Party and an even more critical opponent of the Tories.<sup>3</sup> However, his political position could more accurately be summed up as a pragmatic social democrat if compared with his left-wing peers the Redskins. He saw greater worth in establishing a leftist coalition of anti-Thatcherites – see Red Wedge – than in any pro-revolutionary rhetoric. Despite his closeness to the SWP-supporting band, which extended to his expressing a belief that they were

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Seeing The Clash at The Rainbow was like – click! – my whole idea about rock’n’roll and The Rolling Stones changed overnight.’ Bragg, quoted in Gavin Martin, ‘Life’s a Riot with Big Ben Vs. Little Billy’, *New Musical Express*, 14 January 1984, pp. 22-3 (p. 23).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Like what the fuck happened to Rock Against Racism? I remember going to their gigs.’ Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Sweeting, ‘The Climate of Reason’, *Melody Maker*, 2 April 1983, p. 26.

'one of the most important bands in Britain', he disagreed with their Party's belief in 'a workers revolution' and indentified with the British 'everyman' – 'someone who's got a mortgage and two kids' – in not wanting revolution on violent and entirely anti-capitalist terms.<sup>4</sup>

### **Politics as music, music as politics**

An important event in Bragg's politicization and, therefore, the cementing of his presentation, was the miners' strike. He was a notoriously prolific performer at the beginning of his career, and as such found many opportunities in the left wing-oriented benefit concerts of the period. Chief of these were those in support of the miners and their families, and in September 1984 he performed at his first benefit in Newport, South Wales.<sup>5</sup> As well as solidifying his political opinions and resolve, performing alongside the more traditional folk song performers who supported the workers went some way in settling his musical and lyrical styles. Bragg tells Dorian Lynskey that

The folk musicians got there [the coalfields] before me and they were more radical.... Punk rock was Year Zero...[but] when I went up to the coalfields for the first time and saw Jock Purdon singing his songs I suddenly remembered that there *is* something beyond Year Zero.<sup>6</sup>

February 1985 saw the release of his most explicitly political work to date – the *Between The Wars* EP<sup>7</sup> – which was 'dedicated to the work of the Miners' Wives Support Groups'<sup>8</sup> and whose profits were donated to funds that supported miners'

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<sup>4</sup> Bragg, quoted in Tony Fletcher, 'Bragg's Potent Brew!', *Jamming*, 22, November 1984, pp. 8-10 (p. 10).

<sup>5</sup> Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, p. 511.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513. As written.

<sup>7</sup> Billy Bragg, *Between The Wars*, EP, Go! Discs AGOEP 1 (1985).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, back cover.

families.<sup>9</sup> The title track (discussed below) deals lyrically with the traditional male working class identity within an idealised binary framework of contemporary British politics, while two of the EP's four tracks are topical cover versions: a recording of the American pro-trade union song 'Which Side Are You On?', written by Florence Reece,<sup>10</sup> and a version of Leon Rosselson's ballad about the 17<sup>th</sup> century Diggers movement, 'World Turned Upside Down'. However, these two cover versions were more likely to have been inspired by the performances of Dick Gaughan than those of their respective composers: Gaughan has recorded versions of both songs and, like Bragg, became heavily involved in supporting striking miners' families.<sup>11</sup> In an article for music criticism website *The Quietus* about Gaughan's album *A Handful Of Earth*, on which his recording of 'The World Turned Upside Down' appears, Bragg recalls that:

[When] the strike happened, I went up into the coalfields to tell [Gaughan] what it was all about from my punk rock perspective [...]. Hearing [Gaughan's version of] 'The World Turned Upside Down' – I don't know if you've heard the original version by Leon Rosselson but it's like [SINGS SLOWLY] 'In 1649... dun-du-dun...' on the piano; it's a lovely song but Leon doesn't really do it justice. But Gaughan! He grabs it by the scruff of the neck and chucks it into

<sup>9</sup> Nick Barratt, 'Family Detective: Billy Bragg', *The Telegraph*, 31 March 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3631918/Family-Detective-Billy-Bragg.html>> [accessed 8 September 2013.] *Between The Wars* 'marked a break from BB's albums-only pattern, spurred by his urge to get something out – and quickly – that reflected events in Britain in early '85.' Paul Du Noyer, 'How to go on *Top Of The Pops* and still be super-hip...', *New Musical Express*, 6 April 1985, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Bragg's version featured updated lyrics.

<sup>11</sup> 'Like many other musicians and singers, I spent much of [1984] doing concerts all over the country to raise money and support for the NUM. But I also believe that singing songs is not in itself enough - if I was to effectively put the miners' case and claim to speak on their behalf then I had to play as full a part in their struggle as I could so that I could then fully understand their views and represent those properly in concert. So, for most of that year, I was Chair of the Leith Miners' Support Group which involved spending Saturdays collecting food and money in Leith and then delivering this to the Lothian Central Strike Committee at Dalkeith.' Dick Gaughan, 'True and Bold – Dick Gaughan's Discography' <<http://www.dickgaughan.co.uk/discography/dsc-true.html>> [accessed 2 September 2013].

the twentieth century where it lands at my feet and I think 'fuckin' hell, that is an incredible song...'<sup>12</sup>

Despite an interest in folk performers such as Martin Carthy and the Waterons prior to his participation in miners' benefits,<sup>13</sup> it was punk which would prove to be the primary influence on Bragg's musical identity. Following the end of Riff Raff's short-lived live career and his spell in the army, Bragg was reluctant to recruit new band members and set about performing his songs solo, accompanying himself with an electric guitar. His choice of instrument is instructive: where performing with an acoustic guitar – the model of choice for most solo singer-songwriters – would act semiologically to signify Bragg as a folk performer, the use of an electrical instrument suggested a closer connection to punk. For Bragg,

when a folk artist goes out with his guitar, he might think he's James Taylor or Bob Dylan. When I go out, I still think I'm The Clash. And I think I've got a band behind me, and I should make as much fucking racket as that. So when people say to me, why don't I use an acoustic guitar on stage, they just don't understand the dynamics of the thing. That electric guitar is the one thing that makes me different to all the other solo performers.<sup>14</sup>

Bragg biographer Andrew Collins calls this 'Billy's inadvertent gimmick,' which helped to make his songs 'more punk than folk'.<sup>15</sup> Kieran Cashell, who aims to 'locate [Bragg's] work apropos the British tradition by surveying its originary field of influence' – since, he asserts, 'there have been few systematic attempts to

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<sup>12</sup> Bragg, quoted in Colm McAuliffe, 'Worker's Playtime: Billy Bragg's Favourite Albums', *The Quietus*, 18 March 2013 <<http://thequietus.com/articles/11665-billy-bragg-favourite-albums?page=10>> [accessed 2 September 2013].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Bragg, quoted in Du Noyer, 'The Selling of Billy Bragg's Bottom', p. 6. Andrew Collins points out that Bragg was keen to avoid a 'folk' tag: his original stage name, Spy Vs Spy, was in part chosen because 'it sounded like a band's name, and he knew that he wasn't going to get gigs as a solo performer, as solo performer meant folk music – hardly an alluring concept in the post-punk circles Billy intended to move in.' Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners*, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



contextualize Bragg in the British folk tradition'<sup>16</sup> – suggests that his reliance on the electric guitar in early performances can be interpreted as oppositional: his audience's preconceptions of a solo performer were not met. Indeed, by striking the strings of his instrument in a 'punk style', Bragg took 'an aggressive position precisely contra the [folk] tradition', since this style of playing is not found in British, or American, folk tropes.<sup>17</sup> His closer identification with 'rock' than acoustic singer-songwriter also allowed him a greater propensity for addressing political issues, for rock is, according to Street, 'public music, whatever its private inspiration. And in being public, its meaning cannot be determined or controlled by the performer'.<sup>18</sup>

Rock's defiance, however conservative, is in marked contrast to the maudlin conservatism of the singer-songwriters...who embrace the inevitable without resistance. Rock's fun, its pleasure, is lost in chronic self-analysis and fatalistic social observation. The crucial tension between promise and fulfilment is ignored because nothing is expected. Instead, everything is just reported; it just happens.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, Cashell is also able to define his style as folk by emphasising its un-virtuosic nature: while 'Martin Carthy, Nic Jones, Bert Jansch, and Dick Gaughan' have 'experimented with complex alternative tunings to facilitate the unusual modes and rhythms associated with British folk', Bragg's playing 'is unsophisticated and certainly within the capability of an amateur fan to master'.<sup>20</sup> This represents a 'utilitarian ethos' exemplified by the flexi disc included with his 1985 *Back To Basics*

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<sup>16</sup> Kieran Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', *Popular Music and Human Rights Volume 1: British and American Music*, ed. Ian Peddie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 5-25 (p. 6).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 201.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197. Further, 'Singer-songwriters were sold on the strength of their honesty; but it was an honesty which looked inwards to what the individual felt, not outwards to what society demanded or imposed [...] the singer-songwriters made music for an audience that either finds itself, or feels itself, alone in the isolation of the nuclear family or the bed-sitting room.' *Ibid.*, p. 198. While Street writes in the past tense, singer-songwriters are still sold on this 'honesty': see the discussion of Jake Bugg in chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

songbook, titled 'Play Guitar the Billy Bragg Way.'<sup>21</sup> His abilities, this suggests, could be imitated by any player – he represented the 'Völkisch' by suggesting an existence of democracy in terms of performance ability.<sup>22</sup> In a sense, the apparently DIY nature of punk could be traced back to the 'imagined village' in which the community would share entertainment duties without reference to a hierarchy of ability.<sup>23</sup>

This appreciation of Bragg as a folk performer holds strong for many.

Acknowledging that Bragg's 'folk status' is narrowly addressed academically, Cashell notes that Bragg is 'routinely (and often casually) categorized in the folk genre'<sup>24</sup> – as demonstrated by his acceptance of the 'Roots Award' at 2013's *BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards*.<sup>25</sup> Mark Wilhardt, meanwhile, notes that Bragg is more often regarded 'as the inheritor of the legacy of Guthrie and Dylan, not [English folk singers] Harry Cox or Bob Copper'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Bragg's reference to Dylan and James Taylor above suggests that musicians with a pop background are more likely to identify with the American 'folk' tradition as a result of its importance to the progression of commercial music forms. This identification with a popular music canon meant that he, perhaps unconsciously, absorbed folk tropes into his own work. In turn, according to Cashell, the appreciation of Bragg as a folk performer led to his shaping a progression of the English folk tradition: he

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<sup>21</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> The German concept of the *Völkisch* is important to the nature/culture binary which is used to define authenticity. See chapter 2.

<sup>23</sup> See Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> 'BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards 2013', *BBC Radio 2* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00yrkrj/features/folk-awards-2013-nominees>> [accessed 2 September 2013].

<sup>26</sup> Mark Willhardt, 'Available rebels and folk authenticities: Michelle Shocked and Billy Bragg', *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, ed. Ian Peddie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 30-48 (p. 40).

intuitively tapped into some deep resource in the tradition; not by gullibly accepting what is regarded as 'traditional' but rather by way of challenge and question, he augments this heritage, realizing that without critical confrontation, it cannot have contemporary relevance.<sup>27</sup>

As such, Bragg's music and presentation, despite drawing influence from the American popular folk canon, can be heard and viewed as specifically English. In a sense, this can be attributed to the influence of punk: while his guitar-playing style and song structures draw from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean,<sup>28</sup> his Essex-accented vocals and the content of his lyrics – a mixture of kitchen-sink realism, humour and political idealism – demonstrate a strong belief in locality. However, this also ties Bragg to the authenticity-oriented twentieth-century English folk revival since, as Moore explains, 'leading figure Ewan McColl insisted that one should sing only in one's native tongue, and sing songs from one's own social or cultural setting.'<sup>29</sup>

In spite of this his success was not restricted to the UK: he found some popularity with an often Anglophile American audience. Dismissing journalist Tony Fletcher's theory that it was due to 'the Britishness of The Billy Bragg Experience', he attributed his American appeal to what he saw as the universal messages in his lyrics: 'I personally would expect it to be very British, but you meet people after the gigs and they talk about a song like 'To Have And To Have Not' exactly the same as someone over here.'<sup>30</sup> While Bragg's performance style was determinedly British in character, and his songs dealt with his own experience – i.e. that of the working class British baby boomer generation – he felt that the universality of the wider issues at play in his songs demonstrated a humanistic commonality across cultures.

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<sup>27</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> US and UK acts have always drawn influence from each other, and the exchange of ideas has defined the history of the most commercially successful Western popular music.

<sup>29</sup> Moore, 'Authenticity as authentication', p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, 'Bragg's Potent Brew!', p. 9.

Not only did his approach challenge perceptions of the performance style of singer-songwriters – a performance model seen as an ‘authentic’ way to disseminate personal thoughts and feelings – it can also be read as oppositional to the contemporary pop music climate.<sup>31</sup> Bragg, perhaps attempting to distance himself from folk connotations, described himself as ‘a soloist minimalist’ rather than a singer-songwriter,<sup>32</sup> in that ‘when everybody seems to be going for as much as possible in terms of sound and production, I’m trying to keep it as minimal as possible and still keep the same effect. I’m using the lyrics to deliver the punch instead of a horn section or a syn-drum.’<sup>33</sup> His emphasis on lyrical content and avoidance of *en vogue* overproduction – especially with regard to the synthesised instruments that can be interpreted as icons of wealth in the Thatcherite era – are important factors in painting Bragg as an ‘authentic’ artist. Bragg *played* his songs using *real* instruments – his contemporaries *produced* their songs using modern technology.<sup>34</sup> In his discussion of Bruce Springsteen, who could perhaps be considered an American cousin of Bragg, Steve Redhead points out that ‘Real instruments were seen to go along with real feelings in Springsteen’s rise: a certain sort of musical and artistic purity going hand in hand with a sincere message.’<sup>35</sup> Moreover his lyrical style aided this presentation. He was ‘authentically’ expressing the beliefs of ‘the people’, and did so in a style believed to befit such authentic expressions. He displayed an understanding of this in the *Melody Maker* debate on Red Wedge:

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<sup>31</sup> See chapter 2, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Gary Bushell, ‘Boast of the Town’, *Sounds*, 22 October 1983, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> Hugh Fielder, ‘The Bill’, *Sounds*, 27 October 1984, pp. 26-8 (p.26).

<sup>34</sup> As the 1980s wore on this issue was further problematized by the introduction of sampling techniques. Andrew Goodwin examines this phenomenon in the context of Walter Benjamin’s ‘age of reproduction’. Andrew Goodwin, ‘Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction’, in *On Record*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 258-73.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Redhead, *The End-of-the-Century Party* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 52.

No-one buys my records for the disco remix! 'Between The Wars' is pure politics and it got to No. 14 in the charts – it didn't get there because people liked the cut of me trousers but because they were interested in the ideals expressed in the record.<sup>36</sup>

Bragg's clear lyrical style and simplistic musical arrangements allowed for his messages to be easily understood by his audience, who interpreted him as 'honest' and authentic. It can be said that this helped to position him as a folk artist, although this interpretation can also be stated vice versa: he was imbued with authenticity *because* he appeared to be a folk performer.

### **Bragg vs. pop**

Bragg's musical style goes hand in hand with his opinions on the purposes of pop and its political potential, and punk was instrumental in the establishment of both. For Bragg, authenticity of expression was not just important to his own presentation, but also to his appreciation of the work of others. For instance, his earliest press clippings are characterised by a dismissal of new pop as a post-punk form, which, as part of a myth-building exercise around the launch of his career, led him to tell *Sounds'* Roger Holland that what 'made him pick up his guitar and get involved with all this again' was seeing

Spandau Ballet on *TOTP* doing 'Chant No 1'. And when I realised that *this* was what punk rock had achieved, that *this* was what we had cleared the way for, that *this* was why we'd all thrown away our flared trousers, so that Spandau Ballet could get up on *TOTP* in kilts, well then that was it!<sup>37</sup>

He felt that the progression of mainstream pop since the advent of punk was unsatisfactorily inauthentic, and subscribed to the view that it had acted to

<sup>36</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Holland, 'Billy Bragg or Wedge Presley?', p. 23. As written.

democratise the music industry. Spandau Ballet represented a 'remystification of making music', promoting the perception that 'you could only do it in a studio with lots of money, lots of gadgets and a big name producer. And that is a patent lie.'<sup>38</sup> While Bragg accepted that 'The spirit of '77 is a bit of a cliché,'<sup>39</sup> such beliefs about the importance of punk to British popular music, whose impact on social identity and opinion was so strong, were integral to the establishment of his working class socialist identity. As such, he often stressed in interviews his belief in the importance of issue-based lyrics. Despite being known not only as a political lyricist, but also as a writer who dealt with the more orthodox topic of love, he emphasised the importance of delivering messages and saw escapist song writing as damaging to social opinion:

I'm not an angst depresso person, I try to be positive. But this is Britain and I'm afraid it isn't all 'Karma Chameleon' and happy happy. I don't think people need reality slammed down their throats but it doesn't hurt to remind people who, for whatever reasons, are not aware we're living in a country where we're not looking after everybody. We all say our priority is the welfare state but it doesn't even work anymore and the government is trying to pull it apart.<sup>40</sup>

It is on this point that the contradictory nature of Bragg's opinions on the purpose of pop music becomes apparent. In one sentence he accepts that escapist culture is necessary, but also expresses a belief that it is damaging to consumers if they are unaware of what they are escaping from. He made this point more explicitly to Fletcher, asserting that 'if you come into contact with the miners [sic] strike – and let's face it, who hasn't in this country one way or the other? – then it's up to you to

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<sup>38</sup> Martin, 'Life's a Riot with Big Ben Vs. Little Billy', p. 23. My emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

reflect it in your songs.'<sup>41</sup> While prescriptive statements such as these miss the point of popular music's potential political power, they mostly serve as attempts by Bragg to position himself as distinct from mainstream pop music by emphasising his oppositional characteristics. In the *Melody Maker* 'Great Debate' on Red Wedge, Bragg stated that 'Pop music has always paraded itself as a radical means of change but has never come up with anything. It's always been about selling radical chic'.<sup>42</sup> However, while Bragg's career has served to prove that he maintains a commitment to his personal beliefs, one can view his general lambasting of pop's political apathy as his own means of imbuing his cultural products with 'radical chic'.

Moreover, in an interview with *Record Mirror*, Bragg expressed that he did not 'believe you can change the world with music,' and that 'No matter how many times [he] play[s] with The Redskins the government won't fall'<sup>43</sup> – rather he saw that his own primary power as a politicising agent lay in performing at benefits:

I see no difference between playing gigs for the GLC, CND, the miners, the TGWU – because it's all part of the fight against Thatcherism which I feel very strongly more people should become involved with. Politics and music are related to each other, because politics is life.<sup>44</sup>

He demonstrated a pragmatic sense of duty, as a socialist artist, to attempt to politicise his audience by presenting them with facts and opinions, without directly encouraging them to 'storm the Winter Palace.' For Bragg, the post-1983 general election landscape presented a golden opportunity for songwriters to make their political opinions known, and he predicted a swing towards 'lots of bands who are less shy about dealing with politics in their songs' as a result of the burgeoning

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<sup>41</sup> Fletcher, 'Bragg's Potent Brew!', p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Bragg, quoted in Mico, 'Red Wedge: The Great Debate', p. 24. While Bragg claims that the Clash were one of his favourite bands, we can assume that he is referring to them (alongside the Sex Pistols) here.

<sup>43</sup> Andy Strike, 'Papa's got a brand new Bragg', *Record Mirror*, 20 October 1984, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

socialist scene – despite noting that doing so had ‘become really unfashionable, and anybody who writes about it immediately gets no end of stick’.<sup>45</sup> Further, he took issue with what he saw as the empty presentational posturing of ‘much politics in music’, citing ‘the clashing Stakhanovite bodies, red flags and moody Russian backdrops. And what are they trying to say?’<sup>46</sup> Such *inauthenticity* of expression could not only be accused of seeking to turn ‘rebellion into money’,<sup>47</sup> but also of demeaning the socialist messages of Bragg and his peers by commercialising revolutionary imagery.

This is not to say that Bragg felt that revolution could be achieved – or indeed should be sought to be achieved – through music. He insisted that the pop community had a duty to rise above an acceptance that it could not ‘change the entire system’ on its own, and instead use its media power to draw attention to political issues; it should refrain from ‘[closing its] eyes to everything that’s happening’.<sup>48</sup> His dismissal of pop music’s revolutionary potential stemmed in part from pragmatic cynicism – see his criticism of the SWP above – but also from a desire to preserve his working class identity. Speaking retrospectively in a post-1987 general election interview, he told Mark Cooper that he felt that ‘[there] has to be a balance between the personal and the political’ in song writing, and he felt that the ‘political side of me was drowning out everything else’ within his early work.<sup>49</sup> There is a persistent sense of Bragg experiencing a crisis of artistic conscience, confidence and opinion within these relatively early interviews. This can be attributed to an interpretation that as his profile grew, his promotion of anti-Thatcherism and alternative democratic action became his sole artistic aim. His personal songs worked to ground him as an Everyman, a persona that would make

<sup>45</sup> Fletcher, ‘Bragg’s Potent Brew!’, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Du Noyer, ‘How to go on *Top Of The Pops* and still be super-hip...’

<sup>47</sup> The Clash, ‘White Man In Hammersmith Palais’, *The Clash*, LP, Epic 36060 (1977).

<sup>48</sup> Martin, ‘Life’s a Riot with Big Ben Vs. Little Billy’, p. 23. With the establishment of Band Aid a year later, it could be argued that the pop community did just that.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Cooper, ‘The Party’s Over’, *Q Magazine*, November 1988, pp. 21-2 (p. 21).



the dissemination of his political rhetoric easier by attracting a broad audience. This was important in achieving the ends Bragg sought: he tells Lynskey that 'Only the audience can change the world – not performers.'<sup>50</sup>

Like other political pop performers, Bragg was wary of the likely inevitability of preaching to the converted. He believed that 'You shouldn't play to your own audience all the while. If you've got any content in your lyrics, there's no point writing a song that makes any attempt to make a point [and] then continually playing it to people who agree with you.'<sup>51</sup> He understood the reality that the majority of people who followed his musical output would identify with his political viewpoint: the concept of fandom revolves around an identification with the music and lyrics of the song and singer. However, he also expressed a belief that since many people are drawn to pop music by its potentially subversive and escapist qualities, politically-minded performers should use exposure to 'escapist' audiences as an opportunity to encourage consciousness. He wanted to reach 'the guy who *doesn't* want to know, who isn't particularly interested, who just wants to come along to the gig to meet some women or whatever',<sup>52</sup> and saw performing on *Top Of The Pops* not as 'selling out' but rather 'an opportunity to play to an audience which doesn't go to Billy Bragg gigs.'<sup>53</sup>

He legitimises this stance by comparing the poles of his personal taste: 'What did The Clash gain by not playing on *Top Of The Pops*? A generation grew up to love Spandau Ballet.'<sup>54</sup> However, despite boasting to Du Noyer that he supported 'Dave Gilmour at the Hammersmith Odeon, for 3,000 Pink Floyd fans who'd never buy a Billy Bragg record',<sup>55</sup> he became loosely grouped together with acts such as The

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<sup>50</sup> Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, p. 524.

<sup>51</sup> Du Noyer, 'The Selling Of Billy Bragg's Bottom', p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Chris Heath, 'Billy Bragg: Has This Man Sold Out?', *Smash Hits*, 11 April 1985, pp.16-7 (p. 17).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Du Noyer, 'The Selling Of Billy Bragg's Bottom', p. 6.

Redskins and New Model Army as part of a political 'scene', while his instigation of Red Wedge drew him and other left-leaning pop stars together to canvas a largely Labour-supporting, if not socialist, audience. As much as preaching to the unconverted is cited by most performers as the best means to disseminate political thought, their audience is most likely to consist of the converted through their identification with the views of the performer.

### **Authenticity as commerciality**

Key to Bragg's ability to promote his political beliefs and allegiances was the construction of his public, 'working class', identity, which allowed any pronouncements he made to be accepted as vocalisations of 'authentic' working class beliefs: he desired to be seen as a 'good bloke' rather than a star.<sup>56</sup> As such, he took a variety of media opportunities to reach an 'unconverted' audience who had perhaps not given such thought to the politics of their opinions and feelings. However, while he was interviewed and featured by much of the music and mainstream press, he stuck to his principle of never speaking to *The Sun*, claiming that he'd 'much rather sit down with some kid and his tape machine, whose fanzine is the most important thing in his life, than do an interview with The sun [sic].'<sup>57</sup>

However, while he viewed political debate and a wide promotion of socialism and the Labour Party as important, Bragg was wary (like Jimmy Pursey and Crass before him) of being presented as a political leader, and distanced himself from 'that "spokesman of a generation" stuff'.<sup>58</sup> He wished to remain, or at least to be seen as, a member of the working class public rather than become a leftist figurehead, and felt uncomfortable with 'being people's conscience for them, singing 'Between The

<sup>56</sup> Steven Wells, 'Emotional Celibacy – Queue Here!', *New Musical Express*, 21/28 December 1985, pp. 24-5 (p. 25).

<sup>57</sup> Fletcher, 'Bragg's Potent Brew!', p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, 'The Party's Over', p. 21.

Wars' and they go out and buy it and feel as if they've done their bit.'<sup>59</sup> Rather, Bragg saw himself as a promoter of political consciousness, who disseminates information to interested parties in the hope that they will take up the mantle and support socialist causes. He believed that the best way to encourage this was to relate social issues to his own – and therefore his audience's – experiences:

Love and politics are very similar [...] both are very emotional subjects. If you can get into such a state about the fall of capitalism why can't you get just as emotional about love? In some ways bands like The Redskins reflect that unsmiling face of the militant – that all work and no play attitude. If the revolution is only going to be about ideology then I don't want to be part of it. If there isn't room for a laugh, there's no alternative.<sup>60</sup>

By dealing with the everyday issues of working people's lives, Bragg can be situated within the British tradition of kitchen sink realism, which, after being initiated by Fifties and Sixties literature and drama, found a renewal in the lyrical content of acts such as the Smiths in the Eighties, and continued through the Nineties and into the new century through the work of Sheffield bands Pulp and Arctic Monkeys. Cashell sees this as a further connection between Bragg and the English folk tradition: kitchen sink realism 'can be considered to derive from the same cultural foundation from which the English industrial song emerged [...]. This indigenous culture developed a powerful, inherently oppositional expression'.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, Bragg's approach to the processes of recording and releasing of his first two LPs and the *Between The Wars* EP demonstrate multi-faceted appeals to authenticity. Collins details how the recording process of *Life's a Riot...* entailed Bragg playing 'his proven live set over and over again [...] in a soundproof booth

<sup>59</sup> Du Noyer, 'How to go on *Top Of The Pops* and still be super-hip...'

<sup>60</sup> Fred Dellar, 'Yip Yap: Billy Bragg Goes Rainbow Chasing', *New Musical Express*, 25 May 1985, p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 14.

[...]. There was no mixing, they just ran it straight on to quarter-inch tape.<sup>62</sup> Further, Bragg told fanzine-cum-magazine *Jamming* in advance of the follow up, *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, that

All people are gonna get with the new album is eleven songs as best as I could play them in July 1984. I've only ever looked upon myself as being able to do what I know I can do [play live] if [the recordings] get good reviews, that's great, and if they get bad reviews, well...what can I do?<sup>63</sup>

There are two issues at play here. The first is the 'cheapness' and 'liveness' of the documentation and publication of his recordings, and the second is his humility with regard to these processes and the reception he stood to receive as a result. Since Bragg gained a reputation as a troubadour at the beginning of his career, it was inevitable that his recordings would reflect this perception of him as primarily a live performer as a means to give an 'authentic' representation of his songs.<sup>64</sup> Theodore Gracyk argues that the recording occupies the position of primary text in popular music, since performers use 'recordings to submit new musical works to the public.'<sup>65</sup> However in the case of Bragg, this assertion becomes problematic: he is understood primarily as a live performer in the folk model.

At least his first two releases were designed to be received as documents of 'live' performances. Since live performance is considered to be more authentic than studio recording – thanks to its freedom from the 'gimmicks or shortcuts' of overdubbing and multi-tracking<sup>66</sup> – by presenting his records as a set of 'songs as

<sup>62</sup> Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners*, p. 97

<sup>63</sup> Fletcher, 'Bragg's Potent Brew!', p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> The perception of Bragg as a troubadour as a means to increase his commercial viability was not lost on his manager, Peter Jenner: 'I felt it was becoming clear [in September 1983] that there was going to be a fucking huge recession, and while everyone else was doing glamour and glitz, the new romantic bit, I thought that someone going round being a bit Dylanish, doing social-realism would go down well. Cheap, go-anywhere, do-anything. He did it.' Quoted in Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners*, p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

best as I could play them' on a specific day, Bragg emphasises the importance of live performance as a gauge of authenticity alongside an assertion that to authentically express himself he should be heard 'live'. He 'made' all of the sounds on these records 'himself', in contrast with his contemporaries' use of digital instruments. As Street suggests, the development of these instruments through the Eighties led to 'artistic judgements' becoming 'transmuted into technical ones': since 'musicians are able to *choose* sounds rather than make them', the programming of music 'can further encourage the confusion between technical and aesthetic quality.'<sup>67</sup>

Bragg's simplistic studio approach also had financial repercussions: since the tracks were recorded in one take,<sup>68</sup> the costs of studio time would be much lower than those of his 'glamour and glitz'<sup>69</sup> contemporaries whose use of synthetic instruments he so despised. Such financial implications meant that Bragg and his label Go! Discs were able to sell his recordings cheaply, and, as such, the cover artwork for his first three releases featured not only his name, record title and imagery but also, like Crass before him, a definitive price: *Life's a Riot...*'s cover states 'Pay no more than £2.99 for this 7 track album';<sup>70</sup> *Brewing Up...* '£3.99 or less';<sup>71</sup> and *Between The Wars* 'Pay no more than One pound and twenty-five pence [sic]'.<sup>72</sup> While these cover instructions were designed to demonstrate Bragg's socialist compassion and strengthen his connection with his audience, they were not appreciated by the record retail chain *Our Price*, who wrote to Go! Discs to ask if

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<sup>67</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 192.

<sup>68</sup> In the sense that they did not require over-dubbing. The recordings heard on the records were chosen as 'the best' of several takes of each song.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Jenner, quoted in Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners*, p. 105.

<sup>70</sup> Billy Bragg, *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs. Spy*, LP, Go! Discs/Utility UTIL 1 (1983).

<sup>71</sup> Billy Bragg, *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, LP, Go! Discs AGOLP 4 (1984).

<sup>72</sup> Billy Bragg, *Between The Wars*.

they did not realise [...] how much effort had gone into 'educating' the consumer into accepting £4.99 as a reasonable price for an album?<sup>73</sup>

This represented further evidence of Bragg's oppositional qualities: by releasing his records through an independent record label, taking on the recording industry in terms of price structures, and demonstrating that the maximal approach to recording taken by bands like Spandau Ballet was unnecessary, he strengthened his cultural capital by practising what he preached. This was furthered by the design of *Life's A Riot...*'s sleeve: his manager Peter Jenner told Paul Du Noyer that the 12-inch was 'packaged [...] with a theme of economy and quality [in mind]. Hence the old Penguin book look for the cover, and the label Utility – based on the 1940s government wartime programme of cheaply produced goods of a guaranteed standard.'<sup>74</sup> By assuring his fans that he did not wish to 'rip them off', despite the fact that he accepted that he 'could be making a lot more [money] if we weren't pissing about with this "no videos" shit and making cheap records',<sup>75</sup> Bragg sought to maintain an image of ordinariness in the face of pop's fascination with escapist fantasy.

However, as stated by *NME*'s Steven Wells, 'ordinariness itself is a marketable commodity':<sup>76</sup> Bragg's success could be attributed in part to his, while not explicitly calculated, 'good bloke' persona.<sup>77</sup> His debut appearance on *Top Of The Pops*, performing 'Between The Wars', exemplified this, being characterised by his dress-

<sup>73</sup> Wells, 'Emotional Celibacy – Queue Here!', p. 25. Wells responded to this in his typically indignant style: '*Educating!!!!*'

<sup>74</sup> Du Noyer, 'The Selling Of Billy Bragg's Bottom', p. 7. The artwork was designed by Peter Jenner and designer Barney Bubbles.

<sup>75</sup> Wells, 'Emotional Celibacy – Queue Here!', p. 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24. Wells cites as an example the 'success of the Hofmeister and Yorkie advertising campaigns – "lads" drink *this* piss, "lads" eat *chunky* chocolate'.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* More Wells wisdom: 'Those very [socialist/ordinary] aspects of the Bragg phenomenon [...] that are seen as his strongest virtues, are also his strongest selling points. This fact, hardly surprisingly, is one that the bimbo Biz, ever advising him to get an "image" and clean up, has been laughably slow to recognise. Bragg's monochrome perversity may well be an obstacle on the path to his superstardom yet it is equally true that it is that perversity which has thus far set him apart from the bleak herds of bleating pop sheep – that has established his identity (and sold his records).'

down, jeans and t-shirt appearance, an exemplar of the pub rock uniform.<sup>78</sup>

Accompanying Bragg on the day of his debut on the show, *Smash Hits* writer Chris Heath detailed how, after the show's make up team had 'finished his face and combed his hair, Billy [...] mess[ed] his hair up again – "I'm a social realist, and professionally ugly as well," he explains'.<sup>79</sup> While Bragg and his manager shared socialist ideals, they ultimately worked together because Jenner saw a potential for him to achieve limited commercial success by filling a perceived gap in the market place:

If Billy had come along two years earlier, he might not have been nearly as effective, because we hadn't had as much of the Ultravoxes then, kids being sophisticated [...] the lounge lizard thing. If everyone's been rushing around being a lounge lizard, a Man Of The People is bound to have a reaction-appeal. If everybody's 'above politics' and just into 'having a good time' and being decadent, then clearly the reaction's going to be towards someone who *is* political, who *is* concerned with what's going on in the world. Because, obviously, fiddling while Rome burns gets a little unattractive sometimes for a lot of people.<sup>80</sup>

Bragg's entrance into popular music culture set him up in binary opposition to the 'lounge lizards' who embraced the capitalist orthodoxy of mainstream Thatcherite

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<sup>78</sup> Despite being released after two albums, the *Between The Wars* EP was Bragg's first single, reaching number 15 in the UK Official Chart. This furthered his appearance of treating his fans with respect, by releasing all of his material on long players and not encouraging them to pay out for singles as well: it 'was resolutely *not* advertising a forthcoming or existing LP.' Collins, *Still Suitable for Miners*, p. 157. It is also interesting to note the collision of worlds presented by Bragg's socialist anthem being performed to a *TOTP* audience in which some 'were wearing plastic Union Jack hats'. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>79</sup> Heath, 'Billy Bragg: Has This Man Sold Out?', p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Du Noyer, 'The Selling of Billy Bragg's Bottom', p. 7. It is worth noting that Jenner began his managerial career overseeing the rise of Pink Floyd, whom he also signed as a result of their financial potential: 'Jenner and [John] Hopkins had already realized the financial significance of benefit concerts for London's underground institutions, and Jenner had a fantasy of signing up a successful pop group, an income source for everything else.... Pink Floyd were, then, just what was required – an avant-garde beat group! [...] For Peter Jenner and his art world friends, Pink Floyd were a pop group, an accessible (and money-making) contrast to the intense intellectual sounds of avant-garde jazz and art music.' Frith & Horne, *Art Into Pop*, p. 97.

culture. While Ultravox, Spandau Ballet et al reflected an image of contemporary society's desires, Bragg instead stood as an alternative representation of the reality of working people's lives. As such, when he found success and achieved financial rewards, a tension arose whereby journalists such as Wells could question his integrity and the motives behind the building of his career, to which he responded:

Why *should* I feel guilty [about making money]? I can remember when my old man was making £17 a week and I don't feel guilty at all about not having to buy everything on HP [hire purchase] and I don't see why that should make my political ideas any less relevant. Why should it exclude me from sticking to my fucking principles?<sup>81</sup>

It didn't take long for Bragg to find himself being accused of 'selling out',<sup>82</sup> which, for a widely popular artist with such well-publicised socialist principles, is perhaps to be expected. While his songs were characterised from the beginning of his solo career by their blend of political righteousness and reflections on the human condition, he came 'to be regarded as a more one-dimensional and dogmatic character than he actually is,' leading in one instance to his being 'loudly berated by a punter for "not taking it seriously enough"' at a 1987 performance at the Mean Fiddler in Harlesden.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, we can problematize Bragg's commitment to socialist principles by positioning him as a Thatcherite model. His staunchly individualist approach to performance meant that he followed the actions of Norman Tebbit's father who, rather than rioting, famously 'got on his bike and looked for work' when he found himself unemployed.<sup>84</sup> Bragg toured incessantly with as minimal a crew as possible, allowing him to keep his overheads low: for instance he paid 'driver, tour manager

<sup>81</sup> Wells, 'Emotional Celibacy – Queue Here!', p. 25.

<sup>82</sup> See, for instance, Heath, 'Billy Bragg: Has This Man Sold Out?'

<sup>83</sup> Clerk, 'Rebels Without Applause', p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Graham Stewart, *Bang!*, p. 99.



and roadie' Andy Kershaw '£10 a day' to drive him 'halfway across Europe in a tatty Volvo estate'.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, while Bragg's songs were relatable to the experiences of a large proportion of the public, his tales of love, life and politics were deeply personal and demonstrated the 'power of the individual' in their dissemination. While Cashell explains that, since Bragg's 'soloist' stance 'represents fidelity to the DIY ethos of punk culture', his approach can be interpreted as 'an expression of aggressive autonomy in satirical defiance of Thatcher's glorification of free enterprise',<sup>86</sup> it is only through Bragg's lyrics and statements that we can understand his opposition to Thatcherism and identification with concepts of socialist community: his defiance cannot be discerned from presentation alone. There is little evidence to suggest that an association with punk culture alone represents a commitment to community – see Crass' opinions on such an assertion above – rather it was important for Bragg to define himself in opposition to the individualism of punk and its legacy in order to give his socialist beliefs legitimacy.

### **Two anti-Thatcherite songs**

The final track on the A-side of *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, 'Island Of No Return' is one of Bragg's responses to the Falklands War. Released two years after the conflict, the song is less direct than Crass' immediate reactions, but utilises a contextual tone similar to 'How Does It Feel...?' by emphasising the inevitability of death in its title and specific lyrics. However, rather than critiquing the political reasoning and consequences of the military action as Crass did, its lyrical approach instead details the experiences and emotions of a soldier from a first person perspective. Bragg's biography allows him to 'authentically' assume the identity of an infantry soldier, who experiences a mixture of fear and morbid excitement upon

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<sup>85</sup> Toby Walne, 'Andy Kershaw: "I earned £10 a day as Billy Bragg's roadie"', *The Telegraph*, 25 November 2012

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/fameandfortune/9699402/Andy-Kershaw-I-earned-10-a-day-as-Billy-Braggs-roadie.html>> [accessed 6 September 2013].

<sup>86</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 11.

embarking on the mission. The war marked the first major utilisation of the British Army since engagement in conflicts in Korea and Suez, and as such saw many servicemen experiencing combat for the first time. This is reflected by the protagonist's assertions that 'after all this it won't be the same messing around on Salisbury Plain' – in reference to the area's infamy for preparatory training exercises – and that he 'never thought that [he] would be fighting fascists in the southern sea.'<sup>87</sup>

This line from the second verse touches on the political commentary that is generally absent from the song, being suggestive of the criticisms that the conflict had little impact on domestic issues and instead reflected a Thatcherite obsession with the 'greatness' of British history, or imperialism. By introducing the concept of Argentines as 'fascist', it also recalls Crass' accusations that Thatcher seized an opportunity to become a wartime leader as a means to associate herself with the 'strong' leadership of Churchill: a fight against a 'fascist' invasion of a British territory justifies military engagement on historic terms. Bragg also subtly criticises the international arms trade, highlighting the irony that in the Argentine soldier's hand 'was a weapon that was made in Birmingham!'<sup>88</sup> Where Crass would perhaps use this point as an opportunity to rail against the arms industry, Bragg shows greater concern towards his song writing 'craft' – remaining in character and not explicitly politicising the point.

While the character-led approach of 'Island Of No Return' largely sets it in contrast with 'How Does It Feel...?' in terms of delivery, it expands on Crass' reference to the conditions and emotions experienced by soldiers on the islands and during conflict in general throughout both verses. This can be thought to have been informed by Bragg's limited military experience:

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<sup>87</sup> Billy Bragg, 'Island Of No Return', *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Digging all day and digging all night  
 To keep my foxhole out of sight.  
 Digging into dinner on a plate on my knees  
 The smell of damp webbing in the morning breeze.  
 Fear in my stomach, fear in the sky  
 I eat my dinner with a weary eye

[...]

I hate this flat land, there's no cover  
 for sons and fathers and brothers and lovers.  
 I can take the killing, I can take the slaughter  
 But I don't talk to Sun reporters.<sup>89</sup>

Musically, the song is texturally dense and largely in the key of E minor, with Bragg heavily and repetitively strumming his chorus effect-laden guitar. However, the bridge section modulates to the relative major key (G) and the guitar style becomes more rhythmically varied when he portrays the protagonist's more excitable feelings:

Pick up your feet, fall in, move out,  
 We're going to a party way down South.  
 Me and the Corporal out on a spree,  
 Damned from here to eternity.<sup>90</sup>

The chorus, which returns to E minor, sustains the apprehension of the bridge, in which Bragg loudly tells his listeners that he 'can already taste the blood in [his] mouth, we're going to a party way down south.'<sup>91</sup> The vocal style here, and in other elongated vowel sounds ('Salisbury *Plain*', 'Birmingham') calls to mind that of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. This reference to *The Sun* demonstrates that while Bragg is singing in character, it can perhaps be considered as a version of himself.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Smiths singer Morrissey, while his guitar sound is similarly reminiscent to that of the Smiths' guitarist Johnny Marr. This aesthetically ties this recording to the 1980s, marking its distance from the 'timeless' qualities of traditional folk performance.

'Between The Wars', however, can be heard as the first of Bragg's songs to be consciously influenced by British folk music both in terms of lyrics and performance. Having been written and recorded after his performances in support of the miners' strike – which saw him come into contact with many 'traditional' performers for the first time – the song displays musical and lyrical characteristics that bear the influence of folk tropes. His debt to this musical exposure is immediately apparent in his guitar playing. Rather than the fast and repetitive punk-influenced strumming that characterised his earlier material, the chords are arpeggiated in an approximate finger-picking style. However, Bragg notably uses a plectrum to pick out each note – as evidenced by his performance of the song on *Top Of The Pops*<sup>92</sup> – rather than adapting the 'baroque guitar' style associated with the British folk revival.<sup>93</sup> As such the guitar accompaniment is reminiscent of performers such as Gaughan, with melodic motifs, sometimes in unison with his vocal line, contained within the D major harmonic framework which the instrument is primarily present to provide. However, by using a plectrum Bragg simplifies the potentially virtuosic accompaniment, meaning that the part remains, alongside the rest of his catalogue, 'within the capability of an amateur fan to master'.<sup>94</sup>

The lyrics, meanwhile, see Bragg assuming the identity of a working class Everyman to deliver a first person story in the familiar folk tradition, telling the listener that he 'was', all at once, 'a miner [...] docker [and] railway man between the wars,' who 'raised a family in time of austerity' thanks to the wage brought home

<sup>92</sup> 'Billy Bragg – Between The Wars', *YouTube*  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjUA3RU4B8E>> [accessed 27 August 2013].

<sup>93</sup> See Michael Brocken, *The British Folk Revival* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>94</sup> Cashell, 'More Relevance than Spotlight and Applause: Billy Bragg in the British Folk Tradition', p. 10.

from his 'sweat at the foundry'.<sup>95</sup> While these industrial era clichés seemingly present Bragg as a character from the inter-war period, he is in fact imagining himself in the future, looking back on his present as between World Wars II and III: it is therefore shot through with nuclear paranoia as well as socialist pride. Bragg tells Lynskey that the song's title reflects the idea that

In some ways the miners' strike was a war – a war on the working class....  
 ['Between The Wars'] started out as an anti-war song and then became a kind  
 of hymn to the ideas of the welfare state.<sup>96</sup>

The historicity of the song is affirmed by the lyrics of the second verse – which, like Costello's lyrics for 'Shipbuilding',<sup>97</sup> make reference to the conflicting emotions that result from 'the government' bringing 'prosperity down at the armoury' to 'help the working man' – and the double-length third verse, which sets up a binary opposition between the ideologies of the unnamed Conservative and Labour Parties:

I kept the faith and I kept voting,  
 Not for the iron fist but for the helping hand.  
 For theirs is a land with a wall around it,  
 And mine is a faith in my fellow man;  
 Theirs is a land of hope and glory,  
 Mine is the green field and the factory floor;  
 Theirs are the skies all dark with bombers,

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<sup>95</sup> Bragg, 'Between The Wars'.

<sup>96</sup> Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*, p. 514.

<sup>97</sup> For Street, 'Shipbuilding' 'is about an individual's dilemma, but not the dilemma about who is right and who wrong. It is not a polemic. It is about what it means to come down on one side or the other. The song asks questions and raises doubts...where other singers might imbue the song with a maudlin sentimentality, Wyatt maintains a clear-eyed, restrained view of the dilemma. The restraint in Wyatt's voice and the song's even-handedness manage to make the war's waste seem all the more intolerable...its politics lie as much in its sound as in its well-crafted lyrics. The singer's mimicry of the sounds of speech and of emotion carry the song's message.' Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 167.

And mine is the peace we knew  
Between the wars.<sup>98</sup>

Here, Bragg touches on the same issues as Crass on their anti-Falklands records – of the use of militarism as jingoism – albeit in a more poetic style. Where Ignorant's lyrics and performance are urgent, immediate and breathless attacks on Thatcherite policy, Bragg takes a more considered approach reflecting his inclusionary pragmatism. Setting up the comparison of the two parties – 'the iron fist' of the Tories and 'the helping hand' of Labour – he emphasises the consequences of their stereotypical characteristics from the socialist viewpoint. Within this narrative, the Tories' divisionist patriotism will lead to 'skies all dark with bombers', while a Labour government's support for workers and belief in the welfare state would contrarily result in maintenance of peace.<sup>99</sup> The song's status as socialist anthem is confirmed by Bragg's calling upon 'the craftsmen' and 'draughtsmen' to 'build me a path from cradle to grave' – a line which Lynskey relates to the 1942 Beveridge Report, whose recommendations formed the backbone of the establishment of the welfare state under Clement Attlee's Labour government<sup>100</sup> – and stating that he will 'give' his 'consent to any government that does not deny a man a living wage.'<sup>101</sup>

While Bragg's evocative lyrics celebrate the 'sweet moderation' he sees as the 'heart of this nation', certain aspects of them are at odds with the compassionate, consensus socialism he advocates. For instance, his praising of Britain as a moderate nation – one which, at the point of composition, had elected a Thatcher government twice – could be said to be flattering to deceive following the celebratory jingoism that surrounded the Falklands conflict and the minimal

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<sup>98</sup> Bragg, 'Between The Wars'.

<sup>99</sup> Lynskey compares 'theirs is a land with a wall around it' with Woody Guthrie's 'This Land Is Your Land', one of whose verses speaks of seeing a 'no trespassing' sign, the other side of which is blank. Guthrie deduces that 'that side was made for you and me.' Lynskey, 33 *Revolutions per Minute*, p. 514.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 515.

<sup>101</sup> Bragg, 'Between The Wars'.

compassion shown towards miners' families. In addition, while we can interpret Bragg as singing 'in character,' the song sees no mention of the role of women in his contemporary socialist wonderland, focussing on traditional male working roles as the key to building a peaceful state and '[raising] a family'.

### **Conclusions**

For Crass and Billy Bragg, their political identities were inextricably linked with ideas of authenticity. While their musical styles were quite different, they both serve to demonstrate that an 'authentic' political identity is carefully constructed. Crass' presentation was contrived: they took 'policy decisions' on what they should wear; considered the judgements their potential fans would pass on their actions; and asserted their difference from the London punk milieu to emphasise that they were 'real punk.' For Penny Rimbaud at least, everything they did as a group had a political consequence, especially their actions as individuals. While they claim that commercial success was of no consequence to them, their operations served to sustain the fan base they had established.

We can interpret Bragg in a similar way: he chose a style of stage appearance that suggested he was a 'good bloke'; he did not want to be seen to be 'ripping off' his audience; and he opposed escapist pop with its reliance on synthetic instruments. Since Bragg's persona – which was linked with his membership of Red Wedge – was built upon his membership of the Labour Party, his interviews and songs were characterised by the politics of the day and male working class experience in general. He too insinuated that commercial and critical success were of no consequence to him: he did what he did because he had to, and if anybody else liked it then that was a bonus.

As in my analysis of the performers associated with RAR, we can see that, while both Crass and Bragg's musical endeavours were instigated by engagement with

punk, they too rejected its steps towards postmodernism and used their music to restate the earnest sincerity of rock. For them it was a medium with which to engender political discourse. Indeed, while Bragg recognised a need for orthodox songwriting topics, these compositions served to accentuate his politically-minded work. For Penny Rimbaud, Crass' music was unimportant – it was a means to political discourse – but for Steve Ignorant it was their 'truth': the fact that it dealt with political issues was what made it 'punk' for him. The combination of these views has led commentators such as Ian Glasper to interpret them as 'real punk';<sup>102</sup> their cultural and political capital lay in the way they balanced them. Nonetheless, both performers viewed their choice of musical style as politically authentic: they were appropriate forms with which to disseminate political opinion. The cultural capital possessed by both Crass and Billy Bragg grew from an explicit commitment to their political beliefs, which were themselves informed by an acceptance of the validity of notions of authenticity. In turn, their understanding and usage of these notions informed their political beliefs. Crass and Billy Bragg stand as strong examples of the important role authenticity assumed in the creation and consumption of political popular music in Thatcherite Britain.

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<sup>102</sup> See Glasper, *The Day the Country Died*.



## Conclusions

While the late 1970s and 1980s were a period rich in political popular musical protests, the fact that Thatcher's Conservatives were elected to government three times suggests that the actions of those performers who opposed her policies failed to affect political change. For Crass associate Gee Vaucher, the results of the 1987 general election highlighted a futility to their actions:

[When] she got in the third time, I thought that's it. I'm not prepared to keep making videos, keep doing illustrations, that are really concerned with her shit. I just thought, enough, there's another life outside of this. You can only take so much. Unless you really live here and you've known the English [...] spirit and seen it really crushed through what happened with the miners, what happened with the newspapers here, what happened with the women at Greenham, it just took its toll on all of us. We just thought, well, we're not giving up. We're gonna have to change tactics. I suppose that's what's happened.<sup>1</sup>

The examples laid out in this study, coupled with Vaucher's statement above, allow us to ask whether music – especially punk, which widely signified opposition to the mainstream – can ever make a difference to mainstream political and social values. This has been an issue since the idealist protest music of the mid- to late-1960s came to suggest that rock should question the political values of mainstream society. In 1970, R. Serge Denisoff claimed that there was 'little, if any, concrete or empirical evidence that songs *do* in fact have an independent impact upon attitudes in the political arena. [...] In the context of social movements songs evidence the creation of moral re-affirmation rather than the function of building outside support.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vaucher, quoted in Unterberger, 'Crass – G Sus interview'. As written. Here Vaucher refers to the feminist demonstrations against the housing of American cruise missiles at RAF Greenham Common. Women camped around the perimeter of the base from September 1981 until September 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets', p. 807.

As such, he analysed the potential impact of Barry McGuire's 1965 hit single 'Eve of Destruction' – whose lyrics, set to a Bob Dylanesque musical backing, dealt with nuclear paranoia in the face of the Vietnam War – on the political consciousness of the teenage 'Top Forty' audience. He found that while the 'injection of protest material into the offerings of the Top Forty did, as expected, greatly increase the audience for this material',<sup>3</sup> its presence there did not necessarily impact on the political views of its listeners: 'approval [of the song] was primarily couched in the rhetoric of the uplifting quality of popular music, rather than the political sentiments expressed.'<sup>4</sup> Disapproval of the song stemmed not only from negative engagement with these sentiments, but also from an identification of 'inauthenticity' in a 'Top Forty' singer expressing left-wing politics: respondents suggested that such performers were 'made to make money not to win wars and stop them', and 'cannot be taken seriously since they are merely putting the whole world on for a buck.'<sup>5</sup> Such responses suggested that the 'employment of the Top Forty as a genre for transmitting socio-political ideas appears warranted when exposure is a primary goal.'<sup>6</sup>

As Laing clearly establishes in *One Chord Wonders*, while some punk singles charted highly in the UK top 40, the oppositional aspects of punk culture so attractive to its audience made full assimilation of it into the musical, or indeed cultural, mainstream impossible. Even a group such as the Sex Pistols, whose canonisation has placed punk at the centre of a popular music tradition, were not 'easily assimilable to the norms of the musical mainstream' since 'too much of their musical material was designed to be dissonant with these norms.'<sup>7</sup> How, therefore, did it come to be viewed as music with which to change the social opinion it

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 812.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 813.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 815.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 817.

<sup>7</sup> Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, p. 39.

opposed? Did those who used it in this way gain, in spite of Denisoff's analysis, any measureable success?

In attempting to answer this question it is useful to compare the examples of Live Aid and Red Wedge. Live Aid took a populist approach to its ultimately successful aim. Its organisers gave their audience, based upon guidance from the charts, what they believed they wanted to hear. Geldof et al were able to do this because their only stated aim was to raise money to support victims of the Ethiopian famine; they had no explicit political intentions. In building a programme of entertainment they did not concern themselves with the notions of rock authenticity that events such as Woodstock had suggested were integral to musical causes. The fact that their chosen performers had sold millions of records between them signified an 'authentic' desire among the record-buying public to see them perform.

However, notions of authenticity did come to be used by those who were critical of Live Aid. For its detractors, Live Aid's reliance upon the commerciality of the music industries was problematic: it enlisted performers who implicitly supported the capitalist orthodoxy of the music industries, which contradicted the compassionate charitable act they were encouraging. Given that cause-based musical protests of the past had sought to rebel against all aspects of the establishment, Live Aid was seen to be betraying the tradition of opposition as a means to reassert the cultural dominance of the mainstream music industries. Nonetheless, Live Aid succeeded in its aims precisely because it conformed to the dominant ideology of the market: in restating the importance of commercialism to the establishment of popular music culture, it showed – in an Adornian sense – that the authentic position of popular music privileged the capitalism of its industries. As Street suggests, Live Aid did not only act as a charity, 'it also reminded people that pop is big business.'<sup>8</sup> The money

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<sup>8</sup> Street, *Rebel Rock*, p. 3.

raised through purchases of the Band Aid and USA For Africa singles 'was the profit that record companies chose or were forced to forego.'<sup>9</sup>

Red Wedge, on the other hand, failed in its aim to overcome democratically the Conservatives' parliamentary majority because it attempted to give Live Aid's model more 'political substance.' In doing so they reaffirmed the legacy of punk's opposition to mainstream values, thereby limiting the potential reach of their campaign. Where Live Aid's message could be universally understood, Red Wedge spoke only to the readers of the music press; a minority in terms of the electorate. This also played a role in their struggle to encourage broad involvement from popular performers. The Human League's Phil Oakey, for example, despite 'desperately want[ing] the Labour Party to win' the 1987 election, felt that as a pop musician 'the best thing you can do is keep quiet about your political allegiances' since 'the country doesn't like pop groups.'<sup>10</sup> Doing so would be detrimental to their popularity. He accepted that even popular music which achieves chart success – such as his own – speaks not to the voting public but their children:

if you have one hit record, there are probably a million people that really like it, a million people that are indifferent and 54 million who say, 'Who are these berks on the TV with the silly long hair on one side and the make-up on. And now they've got the cheek to tell me what I should vote for. You're joking. Look at them'.<sup>11</sup>

Red Wedge found themselves in a position where, after Live Aid had reasserted the old certainties of the music industries, they struggled to convince potential

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> John McCready, 'The Human League: Flesh and Blood', *New Musical Express*, 20 September 1986 <<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=18361>> [accessed 16 November 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. This point was not lost on interviewer John McCready, who pointed out that while the reader 'may think that Billy Bragg is a learned man of letters [...] it doesn't mean your mum will too. [...] Celebrity and pop are vices of the young. Where Paul Weller puts his "X" The Style Council follower is also likely to put his.' Note McCready's gender stereotyping of Weller's audience.

audiences of not only their politics – with specific reference to the proximity of their relationship with the Labour Party – but also of the general role political discourse had to play in popular music culture. Where Live Aid found success by focussing on their chosen cause and avoiding the discussion of politics altogether, Red Wedge failed because of its proximity to the Labour Party. This was problematic for the group in two ways: firstly, it suggested that they held a positive ideological belief in socialism; and secondly they directly engaged with the Party's politicians. In so doing, Red Wedge came to be associated with the establishment, something antithetical to the idea of rock 'authenticity'. While declaring support for politicians and ideology can have a positive impact on the popular perception of performers in certain cases – see, for example, the relationship between Bruce Springsteen and Barack Obama outlined in Chapter 1 – it can also limit the overall reach of both parties in others.

Where the actions of RAR a decade earlier arguably had some impact on diminishing the NF's power as an electoral force, expressions of specific political opposition in music throughout the 1980s had little overall impact on the state of the nation. While Crass' anti-Falklands War records piqued minor attention from the press and politicians, they had no major political ramifications. While this could in part stem from Crass' isolation in opposing the jingoism of mainstream society – reflected in their re-recording of 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands' – the lack of contemporary solidarity from fellow performers suggests that even for post-punks the war was of no real controversy. Moreover, while Crass were joined by punk-influenced acts such as Billy Bragg and the Redskins in offering support to striking miners and opposing the government's position on the mining industry – which certainly would have been beneficial to miners' support groups – they would have no real impact on the conclusion of the debate itself. When supporting a cause or

opposing an act of the state performers are able to impact on popular opinion: however it is difficult to translate this opinion into wholesale political change.

While the organisers of Live Aid and Red Wedge were of the 'RAR generation', it was the latter which most clearly demonstrated its influence. RAR was founded on the belief that certain forms of popular culture were viable conduits through which to put forth political ideals. RAR invoked punk specifically in its activism as a consequence of its impact as a cultural form, rather than as a calculated appropriation. And it was perhaps inevitable that the two (if punk can be understood as a singular entity) would combine: they were both reactions to the 'crisis' of British society. To the mainstream, punk was a manifestation of society's ills – an interpretation which only increased its 'power' to those it engaged: for 'punks', it was a positive way to identify oneself in opposition to the 'crisis' rhetoric of the mainstream.

RAR and punk, therefore, were an obvious combination: if punk was born from a society in which the NF were encouraging physical opposition to non-white citizens and the Conservatives were validating racial tensions with their rhetoric, then its use to oppose the widely racist values of that society was understandable. The music performed at RAR events was not, however, required to directly address the politics of the movement in its lyrics. While some groups did deal with racial and political issues in their songwriting, RAR relied upon the oppositional signifiers of punk music and culture in its challenge to the mainstreaming of racial discrimination. However, as with Red Wedge, this meant that its reach was limited: it could not affect the mainstream through outright opposition. Its reliance on specific musical styles implicitly excluded from involvement those who did not identify with rock, or more specifically, punk.

For those involved with RAR, the oppositional qualities of punk were attractive. For Tom Robinson, punk and RAR offered opportunities to pursue left-wing songwriting, and in turn his presentation suggested that fans of punk held progressive attitudes: they were anti-racist, pro-feminist, and Robinson was able to perform without encountering prejudice towards his homosexuality. Jimmy Pursey of Sham 69 could exemplify the feelings and anxieties of London's white working class youth, some of whom were involved with far right groups such as the NF and British Movement: the reverence with which he was held by his audience made him a key figure in RAR's operations. The members of Alien Kulture similarly found in punk a way to express their anxieties as the children of Pakistani immigrants. It was they who bore the brunt of the racism perpetrated by the NF, and as such they could engage with RAR not only as opponents of racism, but also give voice to the frustrations of 'Asian Youth' as they found themselves caught in a 'Culture Crossover'.<sup>12</sup>

However, involvement with RAR was also to prove problematic for these performers. Robinson wanted to be 'a star',<sup>13</sup> but by attempting to do so through the punk scene he performed in opposition to the audience he would require to achieve such a goal. Moreover, his chart performances – which can be used as a 'gauge' of stardom – serve to demonstrate that he was most 'successful' when he was least 'himself' as defined by his presentation: the outwardly apolitical '2-4-6-8 Motorway', which reached number eight in the singles chart, would prove to be his most popular song, even if '(Sing If You're) Glad to be Gay' remains an important song to the LGBT+ community of his generation. His earnest political songwriting held little interest to the mainstream. Meanwhile Pursey's apparent desire not to be seen as a leader meant that, while he revelled in his ascribed role as he opposed the establishment and stated his personal support for RAR, he would not condemn the racist views and actions perpetrated by some of his fans. Alien Kulture serve to

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<sup>12</sup> See Alien Kulture, *Asian Youth/Culture Crossover*.

<sup>13</sup> Phil McNeill, 'Tom Robinson', p. 30.

prove that contrary to the common historical narrative of RAR, British Asians *did* engage with the movement. However they were nonetheless a minority at RAR events: as they mediated their anxieties to RAR's largely white audiences, their peers danced their discrimination away, to singer Pervez Bilgrami's consternation, at the disco.<sup>14</sup>

This 'inauthenticity' of cultural engagement identified by Bilgrami came to be restated by Billy Bragg, for whom the political state of the nation meant that escapist music was not an option. For Bragg, the crisis of the punk years had never ended and opposition to it had to be stated through a specific reading of the 'meaning' of punk. Bragg is emblematic of the role authenticity still had to play in punk and post-punk. While the Sex Pistols (via their manager Malcolm McLaren) were not ashamed of their pursuit of commercial rewards, Bragg's 'commitment' to socialist politics was tangled with the various signifiers of rock authenticity that permeated his appearance, performances and identity. He opposed the mainstream but engaged with it in the belief that he could play a part in changing its course. However this belief also stated a desire for commercial success. Bragg understood his role in the music industries and that the 'authenticity' of his presentation was integral to maintaining this position.

Where Bragg understood a need to engage with the mainstream not only to have his political voice heard but also to sustain his performing career, such an approach held no interest for Crass. They intended to change society from beneath, by retaining a stoic integrity to their liberal anarchist views. They too treated their performances with notions of authenticity, but by doing so could only mediate their politics to a specific 'real punk' milieu: even punk was not oppositional enough to mainstream values in their eyes. However, their disavowal of mainstream

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter 8. For Bilgrami, disco 'was one side' of what music could do, 'but the proper side of it was [...] what we were doing.' Personal interview.



engagement meant that they could not hope to affect widespread changes in political and social idealism. While Vaucher's quote above serves to demonstrate that Crass held a belief that they were making headway in their intention to prevent Thatcher's re-election, their work would never be felt widely enough to make a real impact. All of the performers analysed in this thesis spoke only to the converted. Even when they were heard by the 'unconverted', they spoke in terms that would hold little sway in encouraging further action. As Denisoff suggested in the pre-punk era,

popular protest songs are not collective statements of discontent, but rather individualized sentiments as to what is wrong with society. Solutions are not offered, social action is not advocated and, most important, the songs are impersonal statements sandwiched in between other Top Forty selections of a totally apolitical nature.<sup>15</sup>

While Crass did not engage with the mainstream, and Alien Kulture were not nearly popular enough on a national scale to enter the charts, Denisoff's suggestion is applicable to all of the performers analysed here. Their potential popularity was recognised by the cultural mainstream; therefore when they were offered an 'unconverted' audience to expand upon this potential, their performances were contextualised within the market place. Within this context, notions of rock authenticity were utilised in their promotion and appreciation. Each was presented as honest and possessed of integrity to exacerbate their political positions. This was apparent in their styling and biographies, disseminated through the music press, record sleeves and songwriting. They apparently held no desire for commercial success, yet were engaged with industries which sought it for their own benefit.

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<sup>15</sup> Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets', p. 820.

While consumers' enjoyment and decisions to buy recordings may have been based on identification with the political sentiments of the songs, the act of purchase was not an act of defiance: it confirmed the market strategies of the music industries and the State in general. As such, the portrayal of these performers as authentic was paradoxical. However, it is in the way each of them balances these paradoxes that they assert their political identities and the meaning of their work. While Crass aimed to operate apart from the mainstream music industries, the continued dissemination of their 'political art' requires commodification: indeed, their recordings are now available via the new touchstone for commercial music, iTunes.

The enjoyment of a song cannot change political, or indeed industrial, structures: as Hesmondhalgh suggests of the proliferation of independent record labels which occurred in the post-punk years, many were absorbed by existing industrial structures. As such, 'young musicians and entrepreneurs will need a lot of convincing [...] that any real democratisation can ever effectively happen through multinational corporations, or their sub-divisions. And perhaps a continuing suspicion of corporate cultural practice is punk's most powerful long-term impact.'<sup>16</sup>

It is impossible to change the world from within free market industrial practices, but one is still able to voice frustrations of it to a wide audience – as long as cultural gatekeepers will allow it. While the actions of the performers analysed in this thesis did not halt the social implications of Thatcherism, their success as cultural protesters lay in how they asserted an opposition to the status quo, and the communities of dissent they were able to assemble and influence in the continued challenging of capitalist orthodoxy. Authenticity was integral to this result, and while it remains a problematic aspect of popular music culture it will continue to play a role in the shaping of discourse as long as popular music remains a commercial enterprise.

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<sup>16</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 'Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry', p. 272.

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## Appendix A

### Alien Kulture Interview Transcript

The following interview took place in London on 26 May 2011. Present were the author, a filmmaker Shakir Kadri, two members of the group Alien Kulture – bassist Ausaf Abbas and singer Pervez Bilgrami – and friend and ‘manager’ of the group Rob Beasley.

Joe O'Connell: *To start off you could sort of, reflect on your reasons behind, er, starting the band, processes in starting the band, er, and, perhaps how you got involved with Rock Against Racism.*

Pervez Bilgrami: OK, the band...

Rob Beasley: Do Rock Against Racism first, I think. That, kind of, chronologically will...

PB: Hm, OK, well, it, I-I don't know, I don't know what comes first really, it depends, because, if you're an Asian, the concept of racism comes quite early, it doesn't happen in the early 70s...

JOC: *Sure.*

PB: Yeah fine. Rock Against Racism. Basically around – was it 1979? – we went to, during the sort of, I think GLC elections or...

RB: No the general election.

PB: General election. Erm, we were demonstrating everywhere we could against the National Front, it was as simple as that – we'd go to Islington Town Hall, Battersea Town Hall – we, we went all over the place. We'd, we'd, we'd protest against the National Front then go on to a gig somewhere maybe – Tom Robinson or maybe the Ruts, Halfway Tavern that sort of thing. Erm, and, we got involved in Rock Against Racism, erm, it was Battersea Town Hall wasn't it that we met some activists, Left wing activists, who, basically, were trying to get a gig off in, in, what was the pub?

RB: It was a pub called the [Cornell's Horse?].

PB: That's it.

RB: ...which then became Jongleurs, the comedy club.

JOC: *Oh yeah.*

PB: And you [RB] know the story better from there because you told me about it. [Laughter] The gig thing, bands and everything.

RB: Er, yeah the-the two demos that we went to against the-the, the National Front, the third, th-there was three, and the third, the third National Front, er, meeting in



that election campaign was the one in Southall when everything kicked off, and if you weren't in Southall already then the police wouldn't let you in.

JOC: *Yeah.*

RB: And the guys at the time were organising a gig, er, in a pub in, er, Clapham Junction, erm. Er, had it all lined up, had a contract signed with the landlord and stuff like this, and then the landlord cancelled after the, after all the riots in Southall.

JOC: *Sure, right. So you were already going by this point, you'd already been playing together, was this coming up to your first gig or was this pre-forming the band?*

Ausaf Abbas: No this was pre-.

JOC: *OK*

AA: Just in terms of social background, erm, Rob and I were at high school together from the age of 13, and basically in 1976 Johnny Rotten, the Pistols, that broke and a whole sort of, section of school divided into a sort of a Lindisfarne mob and a punk rock group.

JOC: *Sure.*

AA: We were sort of very much a, a punk rock group. [RB laughs] Pervez and I knew each other socially, sort of through the Pakistani community, we – well particularly close, didn't know each other *that* well – but obviously bumped into each other once or twice and then discovered a sort of common interest in punk, and then we all sort of started getting together and going to gigs, and going to National Front – not, anti-NF

RB: Rallies [laughter].

JOC: *What a turn of events.*

AA: – yes, so erm, it just sort of, things began to confluence point where they began to come together. Yep, basically.

PB: Yeah, Azhar [Rana – Alien Kulture's drummer] also had known Ausaf, erm for a long time, and Jonesey again came from this school *and* Rob from this school. That I – we converged on, on anti-racist demos wherever we could, wherever we were, and it went on from there really.

AA: And we got involved in RAR before the band.

PB: Yeah, absolutely.

AA: So we became quite active in RAR, and Pervez and I actually went on to the RAR national committee, er but at a later stage I think towards er, at a time where I think the organisation had peaked –

JOC: *Mm hm.*

AA: – er, but they were obviously trying to broaden their appeal; we'd already I think by that time started Alien Kulture and were messing around with that. Erm, the Clash and Joy Division were our sort of heroes; well they were mine who were yours?

PB: I liked the Clash. And the Beach Boys. [Laughter.]

AA: So those were sort of musical influences, I mean the band itself, erm, was very straightforward. I don't think Pervez had ever sung before in his life, I'd never played a musical instrument before in my life. Azhar actually could drum a little bit. The three of us were Pakistanis and that's why we brought Jones in because we actually needed somebody who vaguely knew about music. [Laughter] And Jones had enormous credibility because he claimed to be a sort of, distant cousin of Mick Jones from the Clash. [Laughter] He actually did look like him.

RB: No he was a cousin. He was, he was Mick Jones' cousin.

JO: *I think that's the sort of dubious information I can't put in a PhD thesis.*

AA: Rob was up at Leeds, where the whole sort of Leeds band scene, the Gang Of Four...

RB: I was up at Leeds after all that stuff had happened. But we were, sort of, going to gigs and following bands that were all, sort of, you know, they were all, they all did, they'd all done RAR gigs...

AA: Tom Robinson...

RB: Gang Of Four, Mekons, Ruts, you know all sorts of people, Au Pairs. And all the sort of reggae bands associated, stuff like Aswad and Misty, people like that. A whole, kind of you know, it was all part of the mood, it was mood music, it was all part of a kind of, you know, 'the scene' of the time. It was just, what you did and who you went to see. Who you listened to.

AA: So we put our band together, and, like most punks and young kids at the time – I don't think you could really call us punks, we weren't punks, but – that time of music, of thinking, you sang about your experiences, and our experiences were arranged marriage, and Asian kids, and immigration...

PB: Religion...

AA: Erm, yeah, Revolution in Iran had just happened, so Islamic militancy was sort of this completely new thing, erm, Hanif Kureishi was just breaking through around the same time, and a tiny little theatre group that used to perform in a room about this size in Tooting called Tara Arts – which is a huge deal bigger now – so there was sort of like this little Asian renaissance going on where it wasn't just Asian people working hard and dreaming about when they could catch the first PA flight back to Pakistan, it was actually about a generation of Pakistani kids, who were growing up and saying 'Yes, we want to do this sort of stuff here because this is home and this is what we like.' I don't think we were a particularly big group which is why I'm thinking of people like Hanif Kureishi, [Paul Badachari], Tara, Alien Kulture,

we came together because there were so few of us frankly, and there was a little bit of comfort in the fact that, er...

PB: Yeah we sort of meshed, Hanif Kureishi came to one of our gigs, Tara Arts, Paul we knew through, er, going to protests, we went to a Tara Arts play and saw him there acting, you know, so, it sort of *did* come together, we did loosely know each other, there was this community, erm. We had the same, same notions, erm, the same beliefs really.

AA: Yeah. And we found the music, really, incredible.

JOC: *Yeah.*

AA: And, you know we loved that period of time, there were so many bands, there was so much enthusiasm, and...

RB: And changing and happening every week...

AA: Yeah. And the NME was like *the* single most important thing that could happen all week. [Everybody talks at once] We used to go to lots of gigs.

RB: And who's this new band, we've gotta go and see 'em NOW.

AA: Yes.

PB: Yeah, you know it was the time when the Specials were coming out, the, you know the whole two tone thing, erm and it, it, it was ever changing, erm and this, I don't know, four year period maybe it was, it was very exciting. If you were young it was very exciting, and the ability to actually go and see bands who you'd mingle with in the bar afterwards – you know when we saw the Ruts at Archway Tavern, their stage was milk crates and hardboard, and they played on that. Malcolm Owen walked off the stage and he was there talking to us, and that's – same with Tom Robinson, same with the Clash, erm, same with the likes of...

AA: Gang of Four, and Mekons. We became very friendly with that particular set, so [band names indistinguishable] the Mekons and er, the Gang Of Four, erm, got to know them well and people who knew them, so, it was, you know, it was fun, and it carried on for a while, but, I mean you know we talked about this a little bit last time, but basically *my* personal view is that any movement that generated *that* much energy and, so much power, erm, it couldn't sustain itself, it just couldn't, and it began to burn out pretty quickly and I think, you know, David Widgery has sort of often said, if it hadn't been for Rock Against Racism punk was actually completely nihilist. It would have just destroyed itself, you know it was all about you know, glue sniffing and dead ends. But RAR gave it sort of a different focus and certainly that's what we focussed on.

PB: Yeah, I-I think RAR was, 'of a time', it came at the right time, it had to come at that time, there was a finite period for it, there had to be. And likewise for our band: we were of a time, there was only two, three years in us anyway, and, and, and you know things progressed whereas, with, with things like punk, erm, it, there was an aggressive nature to it and, and hand in hand go and protest against the National

Front. There is a similarity there but then when music progressed onto, what, what do you call these people?

AA: The New Romantics.

PB: The New Romantics. Now whereas you could Rock Against Racism you couldn't Pose Against Racism – it erm, it was, it was of a time.

AA: You know, the New Romantics and Spandau Ballet, and who were some of the other bands?

PB: Ultravox and...

AA: Right. I mean I think that they almost came out of a reaction for punk because punk was so grungy, it was so hard and it was glue, and safety pins and gobbing and...

JOC: *Dirty.*

AA: Plastic bags, yeah, I mean...

RB: The early version of Ultravox were pretty, nippy [Cacophony of voices, mainly JOC's, talking about Midge Ure.]

AA: But do you remember also I think, didn't we see erm, Sting and the Police at, in, erm, that pub in West Kensington, what was it called? Nashville.

RB: No we saw the, we saw...

PB: The Specials at the Nashville.

RB: We saw the Specials, with Madness were the support band in the Nashville.

AA: Right and that's where all the skinheads turned up. Yes, ska was a bit more complicated wasn't it.

JOC: *Yeah.*

AA: Yeah.

RB: But I think as well the other thing about, you know, is that we got involved in, in RAR because of, sort of you know, being involved in sort of, trying to, you know, stop the National Front and then when Thatcher got elected, which is, you know what you're [to JOC] doing, then it kind of, shifted a bit and RAR started to morph a bit into a sort of, you know, band of Thatcherhood, stolen the NF's clothing – that's where the band's name came from...

JOC: *Yeah.*

RB: ...Thatcher's speech.

AA: Yeah we actually did a song called 'Rock Against Thatcher'. It's one of...

JOC: *Oh really?*

AA: ...our eight songs? [Laughter]

Shakir Kadri: It's not on the website.

AA: Yes it is, isn't it?

PB: It is yeah.

AA: It's called...

RB: 'Ratskank'. [The song is 'Roots, Rock, Ratskank']

SK: 'Ratskank', that's the one. Yes.

RB: Erm, and then, but then, the whole kind of, you know, the-the kind of, the musical thrust of stuff then just, kind of moved towards being more about, about Thatcher and about, you know, 2 million, 3 million unemployed rather than, the National Front who'd all sort of, disappeared.

PB: It was all going that way, you know: Tom Robinson Band broke up, the Clash went to America, this that and the other, it all, it all had to end, it all had to progress to something else and we talked about it, you know a couple of weeks that, whereas you could fight against the National Front or the British Movement or the League of St George or Column 80 or whatever they're called [Column 88], on the streets, eventually it progressed onto, basically, mainstream politics, erm, because the National Front was going for, I think it was the GLC elections they did very well, in a big way for, for the road and then it progressed and they died out, to be against Thatcher, so...

AA: Yeah and that's where you know, when she brought in erm, what's called the 'Corrie Bill' right? In 1981 that was sort of trying to limit women's access to abortion, then the nationality bill came. So that actually, it stopped being simply fighting the National Front and racism which was a very simple message which you could get a lot of people and a lot of, musicians and bands behind, you know I think a much more sort of complicated view about politics and how you fight that, and er, inevitably I think the music, the movement has, has run out of energy.

JOC: *Sure, 'cause I mean obviously when you, when you sort of make it more disparate, you know you've got so many different causes under one umbrella it becomes difficult to focus do you think, and something like that can't keep momentum?*

AA: I think also the music, I mean, the period of punk was when all these bands sort of came from nowhere. I mean they did. No one was putting them together. But after a time, you know the music industry sort of worked out 'well hang on, these kids are doing something, we should be making money out of it' and they did. They gradually put their tentacles into it and they wrapped themselves around it and I think they sort of suffocated it. We were of course incredibly purist and never sold out [laughter], independent to the end.

PB: Exactly.

AA: Erm, but I think it did, you know erm, it's that Clash line, right, er 'You think it's funny turning rebellion into money'. And that's what they did. And, but I think that's often the way that those things go. Suddenly punk, and it then became new wave and it became much more ordinary and mainstream and that was the end of it.

RB: And as an organisation, Rock Against Racism itself then also, kind of, you know with hindsight, suffered by the way that it, it, it responded to the Southall riots and the way it, it, a lot of its gigs just became fund raisers purely for, erm, the legal defence campaign for the people that were arrested at that, and prosecuted after Southall. And actually, you know, that was all good and, you know right to do, but it just meant you didn't have money to do other stuff, it just went in one direction.

JOC: *One criticism I have read of the, the Victoria Park carnival was that while this was, while the carnival was taking place, there was all this, there was this big NF march down at Brick Lane, I think?*

PB: Yep, yep. The same day.

JOC: *The same day, and, there was a march to Victoria Park, but, you know, there wasn't actually a RAR presence at Brick Lane because everyone was at the carnival, and it gets criticised for not, not having a direct approach.*

AA: Yeah but, you know, it...

RB: We knew plenty of people who would go around in vans and jump out and, beat NF newspaper sellers up [laughter]...

JOC: *That's pretty direct isn't it.*

RB: But they just didn't wear RAR badges.

PB: But I don't think you can detract from what happened on that day because obviously the NF march was intended to detract from what was going on in Victoria Park. That would be our day for basically 80,000 people to believe what we believe and to show that we were united, for that one day we enjoyed the music, the rest of the time, if there was a National Front march we'd go to it. But, it was, it was a good thing to happen, to, to march through the streets of London, to end up in Victoria Park, for the Clash, and for these bands who weren't that big at that time, then to become enormous. In that respect Steel Pulse, Tom Robinson Band, the Clash, and to listen to them and they all had one message and one message only. The, Red Saunders MCing as loudly as he could, as only he knows how to. But it was a good day, but you know, you take the criticism on board but, I don't think its such heavy criticism really.

JOC: *Sure.*

AA: Our own band sort of fizzled out too for sort of a different couple of reasons, which erm, were largely to do with the fact that myself and the drummer were at LSE, and we had our finals coming up and er, we had a couple of sort of decent opportunities, but being sort of good Asian boys we decided to focus on getting our degrees instead of, pretending to be sort of punk rockers, erm. And then I went off,

er with Rob, er, for a fairly long 3 or 4 month tour around Turkey and India and Pakistan and Nepal. Erm, you got a replacement bass guitarist in and then, while I was away, by the time we got back it was all sort of stopped.

PB: Yeah, it, it had stopped. As I said, you know, we were of a time, there had to be an end to it because, one: we weren't really musicians, we weren't really songwriters, although the songs that we had which aren't on the website, were never recorded, were actually quite good songs, they were sort of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation songs for us and were a bit more complicated, you know erm, 'Behind The Mask'...

AA: 'Airport Arrest' was, is probably the last one that we recorded...

PB: Recorded properly, but you know we were playing onstage a song called 'Behind The Mask' which was about the burkha basically, and that was 30 years ago and now, it's a, a very, very big subject to talk about. There were other songs, you know we had a song about erm, Zimbabwe called er, 'Liberation Dance', but the, the proper 2<sup>nd</sup> generation songs we're talking a bit more grown up than erm, you know, 'Culture Crossover'. But they never saw the light of day really, erm, as far as recording's concerned.

JOC: *I wonder if I could ask, I mean, in terms of er, of, I mean obviously, obviously you never sort of got to a stage where you were, you know, getting big, er, coverage or anything like that, but was it a concern of yours to be, er, to be portrayed as 'that Asian band'? I mean, obviously you were drawing from your experience, but...*

PB: [To SK] More like the 'Rise and Fall of That Asian Punk Band' [laughter].

JOC: *But erm, I've lost my train of thought now.*

PB: Sorry.

JOC: *It's alright.*

RB: There wasn't anyone else. There wasn't anyone else.

AA: No no-one even trying. I mean the first thing that came after us that was even vaguely Asian was Apache Indian, right?

PB: No erm, Monsoon came before...

AA: They came after us? I mean before Apache Indian?

[All talking at once...]

RB: The only other Asian around, in punk bands was Bid in Monochrome Set.

PB: Yes, yeah, yeah.

RB: He was the only other one.

AA: I mean it's sort of funny, I mean in terms of coverage and things, frankly we get more attention today, 30 years on, than we did at the time [laughs]. Er, we didn't think we were a social phenomena but we were, you know we had a clear view

about Asians, primarily Pakistanis, but Asian kids in Britain, the issues they faced, talking about them. Did we actually connect with a huge Asian population? No, because I think the medium that we were using was one that was quite alien to them. The message I think was one that they identified with, which was, you know, partly rebellious, partly standing up and being counted and not being sort of beaten down. Erm, but you know, we had a core group of Asian followers who were really a lot of sort of extended friends. I don't think we really broadened the appeal beyond that.

PB: Oh no, I don't think we did, but you know it was good, erm, you'd turn up at a gig that you were playing at and there were Asian faces. Because one of the main reasons we, we started the band off was that we hardly ever saw Asian faces at demonstrations, we hardly ever saw, er, Asian faces at gigs, so Asian kids just weren't out there. They'd be at the disco on a Saturday night, they weren't, they weren't out really where it mattered, you know. It wasn't 'til Southall happened that Asians came out, Asians came out and protested. You know black people people Notting Hill riots, Lewisham, that sort of thing but Asians never until it's on their doorstep, and we didn't believe that it had to be on your doorstep for, for protest to take place. So, the aim of the band was to bring Asians together, we did it in our, in a small way, it's erm, but, whatever we did, whatever, could we add, it was good, just good to see Asians pogoing, you know. For example, when we played erm, the Immigration Bill there was a march with 80,000 Asians through, through the West End – we played at the front of that, and, you know, you could, we were on a truck, you could see for miles and miles just Asian faces and it was good to see once in a while that it wasn't white led, it was Asian led, and that pleased me. You know, all the threats of us getting arrested, that sort of thing, erm, you know, but it was good. In our little way we achieved.

RB: There were great, you'd see great scenes at some of the gigs though where, you know the band would be there and then a group of Asians would come in and, sort of stand at the back of the, back of the room and just stare, and [laughter] and, you know, were just, a bit wide eyed and they'd leave when the band had finished their set and wouldn't stay for the rest of the gig.

PB: But there were strange situations when we, we played our second gig in Birmingham at Digbeth Civic Hall? And, erm, the girl who organised the gig thought it would be a good idea to get the great and good Asians of the community to come [laughter] yeah, and there was us and these 50-year old, middle class Asians who came to see an Asian punk band in erm, er, Digbeth Civic Hall, and it was a very incongruous situation – they didn't want to be there, we probably didn't want them to be there because they were uncomfortable, but someone thought it was a good idea. You had these odd situations every now and then. But it was, it was well-intentioned but, you know, seemed a bit strange.

AA: I think, just picking up on some of the politics, erm, that were sort of going around at the time, I think both Rob and I were members of the Labour Party, young socialists, erm, so we certainly had er, in fact our entire sixth form...

RB: And not Militant.



AA: No not Militant. Not Militant. But we were very, I mean we were political, our entire sixth form was massively political for reasons I don't quite know, but [lists classmates] so as a high school we were incredibly politicised, erm, and we were very active, and obviously once I'd started at LSE I was reading quite actively and the one thing that I caught onto was not anarchism at all, but there's a little, was a French revolutionary movement called the Situationists, and I actually became quite intrigued by them and I've got their sort of manifesto at home which I still keep. But it was that thing that really sort of inspired me a little because, I mean the Situationists, if you're familiar with them, they basically argued that society's a spectacle, and we're all spectating and we shouldn't be spectating on a situation we should actually be participating. And if you think about it that was exactly the philosophy of punk, because before punk came along, you'd have bands like Pink Floyd or Deep Purple who would release an album once every two years and do gigs, you know, at Wembley for incredible amounts of money. Erm, punk was about taking music away from those people who'd aggregated for themselves, putting it back into local clubs, local community halls, erm and local bands – kids trying to find a way through. So, and that was exactly if you think about it, on a simple level what the situation is we're talking about, so we stopped spectating in music, we actually became very active participants and began creating that movement and creating that music.

RB: Sounds a bit 'Big Society' to me [laughter].

AA: Maybe Cameron's a secret Situationist.

PB: But it was all about not being victims, you know we'd been victims for years – Paki bashing – it was now our turn to fight back and that's the way we fought back because, erm, well, none of [indiscernible name] bunch were probably very good in a fight, none of the band were very good in a fight, but you can fight back very powerfully with words and that's the only way that, you know, erm. We always started out our gigs off by, erm, can't remember it, erm, there's something from Bulldog, erm, the National Front magazine, 'when was the last time you saw a pogoing Pakistani, a mod Muslim', this that and the other – which, now you've got us. And, that was our, that was our method of fighting back, and erm, hopefully the audience would take notice and then, then you'd carry on and give your message, whatever, whatever your message is.

AA: And as a band as well you know we did try to adopt some of those other sort of Situationist ideas. For example none of us ever dressed to go up on stage: whatever we were wearing we went on stage with, again we were trying to break down the fact that there was a – I mean I'm not sure it was well articulated, but that was certainly the intent, and another way that we used to articulate that sort of participation was, whenever anybody wanted to come up onto the stage with us, we always welcomed them. That's often because we'd sort of run out of songs by then, or perhaps it was [laughter], I'd lost the beat on a particular song and so if we got more people up it sort of obscured the fact that we didn't know what we were doing [laughter]. And often our gigs would sort just end up with sort of this, huge mass of people on the stage and just turning into a bit of a mess, but everyone seemed to enjoy themselves and er..

PB: The Specials copied it. [Laughter] But it, it, our outlook was a very simple outlook. You know we had no ambitions to be big, we had no ambitions to do commercial gigs, and we didn't portray ourselves as great performers, we didn't portray ourselves as great songwriters. It was a very simple attitude, you know your Desperate Bicycles – it was easy, it was quick, go and do it, and that, that's what we did. It was the only way we could probably express ourselves. You know we thought of organising a sort of political movement for Asians, people just need people to follow, so, we did what we thought best.

AA: Yeah and the novelty value was really high. I mean we were on TV three times, erm, which you know, given that that was almost as many songs as we could play is quite striking, but the novelty of having a group of Pakistanis playing music which was so different and talking about things that really the Pakistani community didn't talk about, obviously got us a lot of attention, so, what was it, Something Else, [?], and Here And Now?

PB: Is that the [Toya?] one?

AA: Er yeah, in the, no, no this was the one in Birmingham.

RB: [?]

AA: Did we do four?

PB: No we did three.

AA: We did three, right. Where did we meet [Mehdi Hassan?] then? What was that?

PB: Here And Now in Birmingham.

AA: OK right.

PB: We were due to do a fourth, er, the Oxford Roadshow. Erm, we broke up the day before we were due to go. [Laughter] Oxford Roadshow was the biggest show of the time, basically, and they had all of this planned they said when the schools break up in Southall, we're gonna have you walk down the high street in Southall, all the kids are gonna be looking at you, they had all this planned and I had to break the news to this woman who'd done this, loads of work for weeks about, you know, is Southall the right place, when the school breaks up [laughter]. Just to break that news to her, it wasn't a good situation. I did it over the phone I couldn't do it face to face.

JOC: *Would you have done it by text message if it was today?*

PB: Never, I wouldn't, I couldn't.

[?]: Tweet it. [Laughter]

JOC: *Just hope she's following you. How did you feel about erm, the representation of, sort of Asian acts and Asian communities within, er, within Rock Against Racism? I mean do you feel like, do you feel like Asian, Asian communities were represented?*

PB: Well they weren't, they weren't there. No, but yeah, you can't be represented when there is nothing there because, erm, you know, fine you can have, erm, people appear on a RAR stage and they're Asians but there weren't Asian bands there, there weren't Asian performers, there just weren't. There was literally, us, Tara Arts group, Hanif Kureishi, Paul who was a member of Tara Arts, and one other arts, arts group in, in Slough and that was literally it. Erm, so, you know, there was, there was nowhere we could have representation, whereas black communities did. You had Steel Pulse, or Misty, or Aswad, or any number of, any number of bands or performers – we, we just didn't have the numbers.

AA: We talked about this last time as well but I think you know, clearly punk and reggae came together in a very unusual way which you couldn't really have anticipated, and, again, query, without RAR, whether that would've happened.

RB: Mm hm.

AA: But it did happen, and then you saw stuff like, you know, 'White Man In Hammersmith Palais' come out. Again I don't think, without RAR and the Clash meeting people like Aswad and Misty and hearing their stuff, that kind of music would've emerged, but it did. But, at that time, there was no Asian music. Bhangra, which obviously became, I think if Bhangra had existed back then then there would have been a clear Asian string – that didn't exist back then. And again, last time we said Bhangra was basically, you know what peasant farmers in the Punjab used to sing, it wasn't what sort of hard Asian kids on the streets of London were doing. But that clearly, you know that desire to have music and to identify with music is very strong, and somewhere along the way the Asian community worked out that Bhangra was going to be their equivalent of punk and reggae, and which it clearly was.

PB: Yep. I think at the time, erm, when we were going to punk gigs and this and that, er, most Asian kids, erm, were going to discos. They liked disco music. Although some, some disco music was, erm, was political most of it wasn't. Er you know I, I personally liked it, nothing against it. But you know, it needed, to me it's an easy way out – you don't have to really think about the music. You can go out on a Saturday night, you can have a good time, you can you can dance like Michael Jackson, you come back at 3 in the morning and, and it's finished. I mean you didn't really have to think about the music, there was nothing stimulating about it. Erm, you know, I went to my fair share of disco nights at Bally High [?], erm I really enjoyed it but that-that was one side of it, but the proper side of it was, erm, was what, what we were doing. You know I had my, erm, er, I don't, my introduction to politics at Grunwick. I went to the Grunwick demonstration and there's no better way to, to get a grounding in politics but Grunwick, where you've got, 10,000 people demonstrating and the police are beating you up for it.

AA: I apologise, Grunwick was that Wapping and News International?

RB: No no Grunwick was the Asian women...

PB: ...laboratory in Willesden.

AA: Oh, right, right.

PB: Mrs...Desai. But then, you know, that was my political grounding, then when we got together you, you'd hear stories about, erm, Asians being killed in Southall, you'd hear about Asians [?] in East Ham, erm, but, all, you know, all these things were happening, you, you don't stand by and, and do nothing. You can't say to the white community 'here you are, fight for us, we'll go and have our career.' You've gotta do something. In our, in, all I'll say in our small way we tried, and in our small way we succeeded. Probably that's why you're here. There is a story to tell.

AA: [To SK] Do you want to ask any questions?

SK: I just wanted to ask about your family: what they thought about what you were doing, and how aware they were as well?

PB: Shall, shall we take it in turns?

AA: Yeah.

PB: Well my mother was a widow, like Ausaf's mother, she was, in a way put on. She had 3 sons, pretty wild, and, erm, she was put on because people would always tell her stories about her sons. And, you knew she took them in but she ignored them, and the one big story was that, 'now your son's in a punk band.' You know, we could do anything, but being in a punk band it was really, really frowned upon. So, you know, she knew about it. When we first appeared on, on TV – I don't like watching myself, basically – erm, and so, we always used to have a family, erm, family breakfast on a Sunday, this programme appeared on BBC One at some earthly hour on a Sunday, had to get up early...

RB: Yeah the early Asian slot.

AA: John McGill got up for it by the way. He got up and watched it.

PB: And, and, she, I wouldn't watch it, so she dragged me and said 'it's you, you've got it' and she was quite proud of it, in her own way. And so, that, that's what my mother thought of it, after that we didn't really talk about it because it was just, something I did. Erm, the second time I appeared on television – she always liked to watch Crossroads, I didn't want to turn over the television, I let her watch Crossroads because I didn't particularly, I didn't like watching myself so, you know, it was a happy medium. That, that's what, erm, erm, my family felt about it, I was really supported by my brothers – my brothers turned up at gigs. One of them, behaved really badly at gigs, one of them really well at gigs [laughter]. You know, in our community it was frowned on. The day after I appeared on, or we appeared on [name of show], I was coming back from work and, you knew people had talked about it. Two girls walked by, ten yards after they shouted 'Oi Elvis' [laughter] and I thought you just don't understand, because they patently didn't. Because if they'd have said 'Oi Joe Strummer' I'd have turned around and said yes I am, you know we all did. Maybe it was Elvis Costello, I don't know, but that's...

AA: I think you know with my family, erm, erm, the first thing I had was, you know my mother was widowed but she did remarry so I had a step-father at the time, erm

and I think basically as long as, they were pretty liberal in terms of letting me do what I wanted to do as long as I sort of assured them that I was focussed on my study, and they weren't going to be affected by the band and, this was just really sort of a sideline and something fun to do and I think, you know, they were reasonably comfortable with that. I do think the TV programme brought it home to them in a way that they hadn't, because of the way we talked about the band over dinner, but when they saw it on TV as Pervez said erm, there was...I mean I think it was a sort of a dual reaction – there was a snipey reaction obviously 'cause you know 'he's in a band, look how he's playing the guitar, look how he's standing and', that sort of thing. But at the same time of course I think there were a lot of people in the community who were a bit taken aback that, you know, these sort of kids who they were ignoring were suddenly on TV on...and it's not like TV now I remember back then there were only 4 channels on TV, and to actually be on TV was, er, pretty serious shit back then, and we were on the only programme that Asians ever watched. So it did give us a lot of profile. I think for me what became particularly uncomfortable was when a couple of people sort of began to look at things a bit more closely and I remember one time getting home, my Dad was er, in a particularly sort of stropy mood and eventually he sort of sat me down and he said [puts on Pakistani accent] 'now, someone has told me that in your song you say you don't want to read the Qu'ran and you don't want to go to the mosque,' he said 'what is this nonsense?' Actually my Asian accent wasn't that bad, I thought it would be unfair...[laughter] That was sort of like, 'oh shit', that was a pretty serious moment. And what I explained to him, I-I said 'look, I'm not – we're not saying that that's our view, we're talking about Asian kids', and I said 'you know what *you* need to understand is that Asian kids in many places are leading dual existences – the way that they live at home, the way that they behave in front of their parents, and what they do when they leave the home are complete and total contradictions', and I said that 'I am honest and open with you. I am going to a National Front demonstration, I am going here, I am going to a party, you know they will lie about what they're doing', and managed to sort of fudge it enough to be able to get away with it, but that was probably the most uncomfortable bit.

PB: But we, we were very aware of the community we were in, erm, and I think that there's some comfort – band-wise – in that all our mother's knew each other. So you know 'it's only Ausaf, it's only Azhar', there was some comfort in that. Erm, I'm not sure their mother's felt the same about me, I'm not sure about that, but, you know, we did, we, people didn't understand that, we weren't preaching – the song's weren't of preaching fashion – we said 'here's the situation, you go and decide'. You know, the song 'Arranged Marriage' people, people thought we were saying 'don't go for an arranged marriage', we said 'here's a story, you decide whether it's right.' None of our, never any preaching in any of our songs.

AA: Yeah it was tense though, there were difficult things, you know I mean it's a shame that Azhar's not here to speak to himself, but on one occasion, I think it was just around the time that the single had come out, and like, 15 punks who followed us around – particularly sort of, aggressive, young, colourful bunch, erm, called the South London Anarchist Group, SLAG – turned up at Azhar's house. You know his mother was convinced they were about to all die because these 'skinheads' as

she'd called them were there to sort of attack her, and so she called my mother up and sort of screamed abuse at her that 'your son has destroyed my son, and it's all your son's fault that my son is doing all this nonsense', and as I say it's very unfair 'cause Azhar's not here to represent himself. [Laughter] So there was a bit of that because clearly what we were doing was so far off what Asian families and Asian communities deemed acceptable, that we were sort of, you know well out of orbit and therefore I think it did create some tensions and problems.

PB: It did, it also created some, some funny moments. You know, sometimes when, when I'd meet Azhar you know I'd say to him 'but why green?' [Laughter] Obviously his Father knew, erm about the band, he knew about punks, this that and the other, and very late at night Azhar didn't want to wake the family so he opened the door very slowly, he didn't switch any of the lights on, crept up to, up the stairs and on the landing was sitting his father and the only thing he said to him was 'but why green?' And he was asking 'but why do they have green hair', but all he could say was 'but why green?'

RB: And that became something we'd say to each other all the time, every now and again 'but why green?' [Laughter]

AA: Do you remember, 'Mother is sleeping'? [Laughter] There was a bit where I think we were trying to rehearse, we were working on a song or something in his house and his father came storming down and he just looked, opened the door and shouted 'Mother is sleeping!' And that became another sort of just catchphrase that stuck with us for years and years. No particular reason, it just did. I think, you know, within the Pakistani community, erm, I mean our Pakistani community that we came from was I think basically a sort of solid, lower-middle class, sorry working class, middle class type of community, which by its very nature was conservative. Erm, but I think where the parents had been here long enough to acclimatise, to let their kids have movement and freedom – so we did have, I mean we weren't sneaking out of doors, going to bands, erm gigs and things, we were able to do that relatively openly.

SK: That's really interesting, 'cause erm, that's like one of the conflicts I'm looking at is double lives and, I was wondering like, a lot of my friends that I know, they do, they do lead like, double lives, their parents don't give them much freedom, and they are sneaking out at night even today.

PB: Yeah, I mean we, I know girls who'd, who'd erm, you know, 30 years ago would leave home in traditional garb, they'd reach the tube station, go the toilets, change into mini-skirts and whatever tops, and that was their, their 'West End' attire. They'd come back, change in the toilets to their traditional garb and, to all intents and purposes to their parents nothing had happened. You know, so there were these double lives. We didn't lead them, you know, I never kept anything secret from my mother where we were going, we were going to [Bally High, disco?], if we were going to Lyceum, you know they're all, all treated the same.

AA: I think the other difference as well with us was, again back then I think it was pretty unusual, but like Rob used to come over and stay at my place, I would go

over and stay at his place. I still remember now wandering in on Christmas morning and there were the two beds side by side. Erm, but I think you know, '79 it was unusual for white people and Asian people to be mixing that way and to be socialising that way but, I mean we did we were starting to do that. To my mother, you know, English girls often used to come to my house, I mean Heather and Sarah and Kathy and all that lot and, again, and the snipey stuff from the community would be sort of shit like, you know someone would call up my mother, 'How are you? How are things? Oh yes, I saw Ausaf with two white girls in erm, outside, er Woolworths', and my mother would say, 'Yes?' But then of course she'd say that to them and then she'd scream at me saying 'look if you're going to go with white girls why go into the Woolworths, why don't you go to the common' [laughter]. So I think our parents were walking a very difficult line.

RB: And, whilst, you know, you may have been fairly open, you know, about stuff, you know you, you let the bacon sandwiches off the... [laughter]

AA: We all have our vices. No I think you know, our parents, er I think, all three of us Asians in the band and our parents I think they gave us a lot of room and freedom and flexibility, but I do think there was sort of an implicit trade – especially for Azhar and I – which was 'yeah you can goof off 'cause you're sort of nearly a teenager' kind of thing, 'but study and work is really important and you can never escape that' and I don't know how you [to PB] felt, whether you felt that same pressure?

PB: Erm, to think, I think my mother being on her own with, with three, erm, grown up sons I just don't think she felt she could put any pressure on us, because probably quite strong willed, erm...

AA: Yeah you were also lucky because you had two older brothers didn't you, so they might have had to break some of those taboos first...

PB: No, we basically did them together [laughter]. But, but, you know my mother did sort of, you know, try and reign us back. Every, every Saturday come, I don't know, about 5 o'clock, there'd be three men at the door, long beards, again traditional garb saying 'come on let's go to the mosque.' And we'd have this happen every, erm, every Saturday to the point where there was someone who we used to live with called Robbie, erm, erm you remember Robbie don't you? But it got to the point where we used to make him open the door, and then, and say we weren't home because you know, you can't, you can't keep on lying to these people, saying 'yes we'll come to the mosque we'll be there in 5 minutes' – they knew we were lying and it was very, an uncomfortable situation, but...She was happy with those people turning up, you know she could have said 'no, they're just not gonna go', you know.

AA: I had a different tactic. I had a sister who was 3 years younger so you'd get Mullahs, these bearded guys turn up at the door and I'd send her, and of course the door opened and there's a woman they'd start staring at their feet saying 'oh sorry [mumbling]' and she'd keep staring straight at them in the face, [laughter] and she'd say 'no he's out', and they'd say 'oh OK, OK we'll go.' So I had female protection [laughter]. I think you know, and, Pervez will have his own view, my view, erm, which I've taken on, erm, a lot, right the way through my life and particularly with my

children – cause I actually have 5 sons now – but what I've tried always to instill in them is that, we are Asian, we are Muslims, we have access to that culture and there are some great things about that culture and the way that it works. We live in the west in a liberal democratic modern society, and there are wonderful things to take advantage of there and what you have to try and do is not reject the Pakistani Muslim way of life, or reject the western secular society you live in, but to try and carve balance through there where you take the best of both and ditch the worst of both, and in so doing, you know if you remember the Hegel dialectic – the synthesis, the antithesis – sorry the thesis, the antithesis and you create a synthesis, a new way of being and, erm, my kids, I don't think have the sort of angst that I felt about things, they're pretty relaxed, you know they pray, they go, they fast during rammadan, and one of them's been on Hajj, they all love to party and have fun and go to the cinema, and hang out with girls and things and I think that's a very nice balance. But I do think there's a lot of Asians and Pakistanis in Britain today, who may even have been born and brought up here but who have for some reason decided to completely turn their back on it. I think, you know you get into a whole other area here, the increasing use of the hijab by Pakistani women for whom the hijab is not even part of their culture or the way that they dress – their mothers don't wear hijab.

PB: Yeah I think, you know, I think, I think, I think there's a regression, um, you know. I grew up in Balham, when I got married I moved out, I had to move out, basically because, I knew that if I stayed there I would just repeat my mother's life, and, and some of the people I know who, who, who grew up in Balham are still in Balham at my age, and they've basically repeated their parent's lives and I haven't. Erm, and, and I think it's, you know we live in society now where we're open to a lot of things and so, you know, the way Ausaf brings his kids up is good, I think, equally the way I bring my son up is good, I just say you know, 'I'm a Muslim, your mother's a Hindu. There's Buddhism out there, there's Christianity out there, there's Judaism out there: look at all of them, respect all of them, and that's the only way I know how to live. You know, he may actually choose one way or all ways, I don't know but, it's a decision he has to make because, pretty much, I think we were left to make whatever decisions we made so, you know, why should I be unfair and say 'well, hold on, I'm a Muslim, you've gotta go, you've got to go to the mosque, erm, five times a day, you've got to do this, you've got to do that', because it's, you know, it's not a way I was brought up. So I just think, there's a lot of advantages.

AA: And again, remember that just around the time that all this was happening was, for the very, you know, the revolution in Iran, and the rise of militant Islam or Islamism, as a sort of belief system was just beginning then, and of course you know we had the whole Salman Rushdie business and *The Satanic Verses* and all of that. Erm, and you know, I mean I personally find religion a very very complicated subject, and I, I do think that it's incredibly sad. Erm, I mean again when we were younger, I mean nobody, almost nobody would wear a hijab. Nobody, not a single woman of any age. Now you go to a function and like, something like a quarter of the girls are wearing these things.

RB: No the only people that wore, that used to wear that stuff were Saudi's. And the Arabs in London...



AA: Yeah because that's their culture, that's what they wear...

RB: Yeah but not Pakistanis.

AA: But Pakistanis – Pakistani Muslims, Bangladeshi Muslims in this country seem to have taken a conscious decision that they're going to wear this dress, and this garb. Erm, and the men do it too, and I don't understand it.

PB: But the Bangladesh have always been independent, you know people who got the brunt of the paki-bashing in the East End were the Bengalis in the East End. They were really vulnerable at the time. Erm and the kids, alot of them grew up in a good way – they, they, they started defending themselves, you know, they came out of their shells. They've always sort of been a, been a bit different.

AA: I think you know, I-I still, when I'm at home I go to the mosque on Fridays for the congregational prayer and you see some of these kids now, these young guys I mean boy they're some serious shit, you wouldn't take them on in any circumstances. They're really heavy sort of, kind of guys, but they're there to do Jum'u'ah prayers on a Friday. I mean again, our, in our day Asian kids weren't like that – you didn't have tough, militant Asian kids.

PB: You did if you went to the depths of Ilford or somewhere, you saw, you saw them, but they were, they were, they were little pockets. So, you know, Southall, you got the Sikhs that were quite hard as well, so you saw them in little pockets but, they weren't there in any great numbers, you know. I reckon if I'd got into a fight, I'd have got properly beaten up but any of these kids now, they're just 13 or 14 they can defend themselves.

AA: You remember that footage that I think came out last year where I think some BNP guys were campaigning, and there were like three of them including the candidate and then sort of, two, pretty burly sort of Asian guys. And the BNP candidate turned round and said 'right, so who are you burgling here?' And these two Asian guys, unbelievable, they didn't turn the other cheek, they didn't walk past, they went up to him and said 'what did you say?' And he repeated it and they hit him! [Laughter] And they started laying into him, I was like 'woah!' I mean I was quite shocked.

PB: Yeah but that's the difference, 30 years ago it wouldn't have happened, we would have turned the other cheek but now these guys are defending their turf basically .

SK: I was just going to say I took some footage from Southall, and erm there's a Sikh gentleman talking to a correspondent, and he said that the police were actually protecting, er, the National Front. [Murmurs of agreement] And it was almost like, erm, propagandist as well because, erm, the way it had been edited, it showed erm, Asians as being the aggressors, but they were just protecting their territory and their turf, and the National Front as like, the ones that were the victims, and I just couldn't believe it.

PB: We, we had, we had a few instances of that. Rob in Birmingham you, you had a hailer, do you remember? When Martin Webster was marching by himself. Rob had a hailer, and he was shouting whatever he was shouting...

RB: Commenting on the situation...[laughter]

PB: Yeah and he took his hand, put it down and said 'you're not doing that'.

AA: I think the mistake that they made in Southall was I think again because it was early days and the police had no understanding, but when they started, manhandling Sikh women, lifting them up and moving them off the pavement, the reaction of the Indian men, I mean, you know 'you do not touch another person's wife or mother or sister', that produced a very violent reaction back. Erm, so yeah Southall, I mean many of us you know, look back at that as really being one of the first instances where the Asian community really woke up and decided that you know it was time to take a stand and to actually push back.

PB: It was a watershed wasn't it, it was a watershed moment, it's a moment. That's where we fought back.

AA: And you know also you need, you think about it at the time I mean, when the Brixton riots happened and then, you know, several years later when the Scarman report came out and what a dramatic impact that whole policing. The Stephen Lawrence report which said that police are institutionally racist. I mean they behaved completely differently then. Are they perfect now? Of course not, but I think they've moved a long way from where they were, in terms of how they approach these things and handle them.

RB: If you think back to, what, '79 or '80 when we were starting getting involved actively, you know, kind of, whole chunks of the West End were pretty much no go areas for young blacks, always being picked up and done on 'Sus', which they used routinely.

PB: But what all came out in the Scarman report, wherever it came out, the result of it was, we knew, we knew in '78, '79. It was normal to us. You know we knew that, erm, the British Movement if they marched they got protection, we knew the National Front if they marched they got protection. You know, it was obvious to us, you could see it. Erm, you know, my brother was erm, he'd been arrested whilst he was a thug [?] – he saw Asian kids being beaten up, he saw it with his own eyes. It happened all the time, but it happened to a greater extent to black kids. Much more. So it, none of that is new to us, was new to us, was all run of the mill.

AA: I think the difference is, I mean you know, I'm sure there are still a lot of racist policemen, but I don't think that the police force anymore can be accused of being institutionally racist. I do think they've changed alot in terms of how they try and manage and handle those situations.

PB: Is it just PR or is it actual fact?

AA: [To RB] What's your view, you're probably closer to it?

RB: I wouldn't just pick on the police, when er, when the band formed I joined the fire brigade as well so I was in the fire brigade in London around that, in sort of '79, '80 – '80 I joined. Start of '80. And at the time there were 7 and a half thousand firemen in London, out of them 6 were black. Six. So you talk about institutional racism, it was in the big public services, they were white things. There just was not, you know, black and brown representation in it, they didn't represent the communities they served at all. And now, you know, the fire brigade in London wins awards for its diversity. So, I just think it has, I'd never say anything's perfect, or that you know racism has gone away, but it has changed dramatically.

AA: And I think other examples of that that I really felt: I spent 13 years living in Hong Kong and Singapore – we left in 1990, we came back in 2003 – and to me it was really quite a surprise to suddenly see things like *Goodness Gracious Me*, or *The Kumars at No. 42* on television, erm, and going to Marks and Spencer's and working out that they had the best naans and chapattis and [laughter] I know it sort of, it sounds a bit clichéd, but the fact that when I was at school...

RB: Well not just naans... [laughter]

AA: But when I was at school people, as a term of abuse would say, 'urgh you eat curry', and, you know if somebody said that to my son he'd say 'yeah, would you like some?' and they'd say 'yeah please.' [Laughter] Britain's changed, another term of abuse for us was 'curry munchers', we were curry munchers, you know 'oh you curry muncher.' And that's, maybe it just takes time and maybe you know, sometimes you push too hard for everything to happen all at once, but clearly there are whole aspects of Asian culture which have just been integrated into – actually I should probably be careful about saying that, maybe I, I was gonna say British society but actually maybe it's London society because I do think London is different to [RB talks over AA] You go to Exeter it's probably not like that – I just meant that as an example, but er – there are, yes, clearly outside of London I still think there's probably sort of a large number of sort of middle English towns where the attitudes haven't changed.

PB: If you talk about something like *Goodness Gracious Me*, *Goodness Gracious Me* would never have happened if it was for Tara Arts – it was a good grounding for actors and actresses and I think even, you know, Sanjiv Buskar, I think he actually did some Tara Arts plays. You know without that, without that grounding, I don't think we'd have had a *Goodness Gracious Me*, so...

AA: Yeah there's a lot of Asian authors now writing about their experiences, you know that Asia house evening that I went to – I forget the names of the guys – but, you know erm, the guy who wrote, erm, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *A Case of [Exploding] Mangoes*, I think there's a Pakistani Muslim woman whose written a book about erm...

RB: *A Case of [Exploding] Mangoes* is a brilliant book.

AA: Again so, whether its literature, whether its film and TV, whether its music, I mean clearly you know, Asians are beginning to make headway. I don't know about the fire brigade yet though. Are there any Pakistani firemen yet?

RB: Yeah they're winning awards for diversity – there must be. It's just, very odd. You know it was very odd....

AA: I think you know a little bit of...

RB: You know doing anti-racist stuff and working for an organisation that was almost exclusively white, but, not at all...

JOC: *Two different worlds.*

RB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Members of the NF in the, you know, in the, working alongside you.

AA: It's quite interesting I think, if you read erm, Sarfraz Manzoor's article in the Observer about us, you know I mean that's a little bit of the observation that he's making, that, did we change, or did society change to make it easier for us and, did society diffuse our rebellion by making us, making life easier for us? Erm, you know it's an interesting question. I mean clearly, three of us in the band have gone on to be successful economically and financially.

PB: Yeah, if you look at the premise of the article it, it's the band that, it's the band that, we know is only gonna last a certain time, it's Sarfraz saying that, you know, we should have gone on and been more political, been more rebellious. You know you progress, frankly, and that's simply it. And we knew that, you know we had a number of songs in us, that was it. You know, we weren't Lennon/McCartney, that was it. You know, the 12, 13 songs we possibly had, it wasn't gonna go, be more than 15, 16. And that was it. Erm, the band had a shelf life, it ended – we could have carried on for 6 more months I think, you know we had some good songs, some more good songs in us, but you know things changed, things progressed. We were never ever gonna be in Alien Kulture in 19-you know, 2010. It was never, never gonna happen. Apart from, erm, Jonesey being the musician, the three of us weren't ever going to be musicians because we weren't. Erm, I certainly wasn't a musician. So erm, it depends [?], it depends how much you knew about us at the time really.

AA: As I said earlier the first time I touched a bass guitar was in our first rehearsal, underneath the arches at Alaska studios in Waterloo.

RB: Which is still there.

PB: I think the interesting thing about the band was that when we first, erm, rehearsed, we played other people's songs and we were frankly, we were rubbish. A lot of people would say we were, we were rubbish the day we broke up, but when we started, erm, when we started playing our own songs I think we were better, and we believed in a bit more. Erm, because they're our own words, they're our own music, they're our own beliefs, so, you know it erm, for a time I think we were good. Erm, er, you know Azhar doesn't think we were ever good, erm, but for a time we were good. I'll argue 'til the day I die about that, that we were actually good at some point.

RB: And it was good fun.

PB: Yeah it was good fun.

AA: That was a more important point wasn't it; it was fun. An opportunity for 100, 200 kids to get together to enjoy themselves with something that we created. We set up the gig, we did the hall, we sold the tickets, we did the posters, it was our music and it gave people a focus for the evening and by the way there was a reasonably strong political message that was coming in off it because a lot of our friends were keen political activists and you know if young kids came along they'd say 'oh great, it's really great to see you, glad you're having a good time, why don't you come with us to this demonstration tomorrow?' Then these kids would turn up.

PB: Yeah and, and the band was never four people, you know, it would sometimes be erm, erm 10 people, sometimes would be 25 people, because there was an extension every time we played outside London we'd try and take a coach with us. We'd take, take our friends, those people who wanted to come along, so, you know when we played Birmingham we took a coach there, erm and we stayed up 'til...

RB: A minibus thing...

PB: OK yeah the second time we went we took a coach, erm, so, you know it wasn't just the band, it was a collective really. A collective of people who believed, erm, in the Left – not the extreme Left, not Anarchy, not Anarchy – erm, but, you know for a, for that time we were together it was a great deal of fun. Whatever we...

RB: It was pretty non-dogmatic, you know. Me and Ausaf went to a Rock Against Racism sort of reunion, erm must have been two years ago now, where you know there was a, there were all, loads of old faces from Rock Against Racism who'd been involved in the set up were, some of them were really you know, *still* about stuff and we just, we just, I mean you know we cared passionately and were bothered, but we weren't, you know you wouldn't try and split hairs in terms of, you know, which particular piece of dogmatic Marxist theory was the, you know, the 'ultimate truth' to which all humankind should follow. We just, we just weren't like that. Just, we were, we were, much, much simpler fellows!

PB: But some of them were always like that and, you know, they haven't changed. I think politically we haven't changed either you know, we still believe in what we believe in. You know I'm still a staunch, er, believer in the Labour Party, you know I'll still fight for what's right and rail against what's wrong and I fundamentally haven't changed, I don't think anyone, any one of us has fundamentally changed, it's erm, you know, the situation we're in has changed – we're older, erm, less hair.

RB: Fatter. [Laughter]

PB: Greyer.

AA: Shall we give it another 10 minutes?

All: Yes.

AA: [To JOC and SK] Any key issues you want to touch on that we haven't been there?

RB: [To JOC] I think I'm, for your stuff I think I'm kind of intrigued to find out a bit more about, you know, how you're sort of doing stuff from sort of, you know, music and politics of erm, anti-racist stuff at the start of the Thatcher era, in terms of it went through a sort of you know, in my recollection, went through a brief period of, of er, sort of anti-nuclear stuff, and then, er, and then was but er, and also, but I think also sort of a very strong anti-Thatcher stuff so the Beat, the Specials and other people saying 'stand down Margaret' and all that stuff. And then, becoming, you know the whole sort of, er, Red Wedge stuff which was much more closely associated with the Labour Party which kind of, just sort, just kind of fizzled.

JOC: *Well, I mean, I'm interested in Live Aid as well, and you've got Bob Geldof – Bob Geldof who, was a, you know, same generation as yourselves that, that sort of Rock Against Ra-, he would have gone through that, I'm not sure if, if he played –*

RB: No I don't think the Boomtown Rats ever played a RAR, but I saw him faint at the Marquee once [laughter] in a gig which was so sweaty –

AA: The Members [?]?

RB: No no no, the Boomtown Rats.

AA: Oh the Boomtown Rats.

RB: Yeah Bob Geldof, you know just, fell into the crowd. They were good but it was so hot. And er, you know, was carried out –

AA: I remember the weather in 1976 when –

JOC: *It was a hot summer was it?*

RB: So Boomtown Rats was in, what, '77, so he was, the Boomtown Rats I don't think, they ever did RAR.

PB: I don't think they did, I don't think they'd have done it. Not in our day, anyway.

RB: And it was all a bit of a shock that he'd suddenly sort of got into this kind of anti-Africa politics –

JOC: *Humanitarian cause.*

RB: Yeah yeah yeah. It was a bit of a, bit of a charade.

AA: Sham 69 did RAR gigs didn't they? They did one or two.

PB: And they were doing the, the Carnival.

AA: [To JOC] Do you remember Sham 69?

JOC: *I was just saying to Pervez I've done some writing on them as well. Erm, 'cause, you know they're an interesting group in that they played Rock Against Racism gigs, and to have the following that they had, as well. But, but I mean I did them in a sort of, interest – politicalness to them in that they were, you know they were standing up for, you know, 'What have we got? Fuck all!', you know, you know*

*standing up for this sort of working class youth. So doing that side but not, not sort of doing any sort of broader, you know –*

AA: And Sham 69 is probably a good example of that sort of, that nihilist tendency in punk, you know doing it for them kids who've got nothing to look forward to.

RB: Yeah most violent gig I've ever been to.

JOC: Sham 69?

RB: Yeah. I went to go and see Sham 69, they played at Kingston Poly, and, and no one else would come with me [laughter]. It was just, just, just amazing, extremely violent. And afterwards all the skinheads went down and had a big ruck at Kingston station 'cause the Kingston Road Rats, the Hells Angels gang had turned up. And the police just stood back and let them fight it out until there were sort of casualties...

AA: When the Jam came along and you had the whole sort of mod thing and we couldn't work out where the mods stood on some of these issues and whether they were friend or foe. So there were all these sort of like, tribes. I mean clearly punk was the big tribe, but there were all these sort of –

JOC: *Different off shoots.*

AA: Is it like that now with kids?

RB: What do these young people do? [Laughter]

JOC: *I mean I don't, I don't, I don't know, er, how sort of, how much political consciousness there is in, in popular music for, for kids. I certainly know that when, when I was, I mean I'm still young obviously but when I was a kid I'm talking sort of, teenage years, sort of 18, 20, that sort of age, I was interested in politics, you know I've always been interested in politics, but I didn't get any of that from the music, you know at all. And I don't, I'm not sure there's any sort of rallying causes at all.*

RB: But the cultural stuff is quite different now I think in the music. Saying that I've got a daughter who's 12, and, you know, she likes, you know, the people that she likes, she knows about their sexuality, knows if they're gay or lesbian, stuff like this, whereas no one had come out and said they were gay as a popular star in the '70s. You know, David Bowie when he said he was bisexual was a really shocking thing to say.

AA: Yeah and that's where Tom Robinson was the first. Although even then I still remember, I think it was at Croydon where, you know, I mean 'Glad To Be Gay' became an anthem and such a nice, sort of singalong tune, and then suddenly in the middle of the song he stopped, and he walked over to the singer – was it Danny? I can't remember – but he kissed him. And, you could sort of feel this ripple go through the crowd, because everyone's singing 'oh, we're all glad to be gay' but, you know, shit, he just kissed someone, you don't do that.

RB: And you know, 'Glad To Be Gay' was an anthem but they put that out with another song on, on, there's an EP or a single –

JOC: *Yeah, there was.*

RB: – and the other song could be the thing that got played on the radio.

JOC: *Yeah, I can't remember what the, that 'Right On Sister' song is on that as well.*

RB: Yeah and there's, er, that stuff about 'Martin'.

JOC: *That's it 'Martin'. God I hate that song. [Laughter]*

RB: Yeah but, you know, that was a kind of compromise that he made, sort of you know, to get –

JOC: *But then obviously, his only hit really, was, you know talking in commercial terms was 'Motorway' wasn't it, which is, how is that political? You know...*

AA: But it didn't matter because it gave him the entry, an 'in' basically. And, he was a great supporter of RAR [everybody talks at once]. But the photograph is on the back of that EP isn't it, George Davis.

RB: No no no, no, he's not on the back of that EP, no no its somebody else.

AA: There's a song 'I Shall Be Released' on there which is dedicated to him.

JOC: *That's on 'Motorway' isn't it? Erm, 'I Shall Be Released' is the B-side.*

RB: Not George Davis.

JOC: *It's George Ince. George Davis is the Sham 69 song, 'George Davis Is Innocent'.*

AA: Oh yeah I remember that. I don't know for some reason I went to the bathroom and as I was washing my hands a band's name came, I remember it, Killing Joke. He was an Asian wasn't he as well.

JOC: *Jaz Coleman?*

AA: Yeah.

JOC: *I didn't know that.*

PB: One of them was an Asian.

AA: That was unbelievable. You had to wear ear plugs to that band, they were so loud. So loud. All right, is that all right for both of you?

JOC: *Fantastic.*

PB: Where do you go from here? What have you got planned then?



JOC: *Well, I'm doing a conference next week actually, and hoping to er, sort of talk about yourselves. I'll be, I'm sort of talking generally about Rock Against Racism and looking at, erm, Tom Robinson Band, Sham 69, Alien Kulture, sort of three different, three different tales of involvement.*

AA: Sorry which was the first one?

JOC: *Tom Robinson Band.*

AA: Holy shit, we're right up there aren't we. [Laughter] You don't understand, we used to go and see these people!

RB: Jonesey met, bumped into Tom Robinson at McDonalds at Charing Cross and er, at the time he sort of, he asked if he could, 'cause we'd been fans of Tom Robinson Band and used to go to, see them when they were tiny and stuff, and then you know, Tom Robinson had a passport photo of you [to AA] in his wallet. [Laughter] You know, I thought that was brilliant.

AA: And this is the incredible thing, so I wrote to Tom Robinson, and he wrote back to me, and I was completely gobsmacked. I mean the very first gig I went to in my life was Tom Robinson and Ian Dury at the Blockheads gig in Croydon. I'd never been to a gig before in my life, that was the first time. And so...

RB: Was it [?] Passion? Purley Tiffany's?

AA: No. I wrote to Tom Robinson and I actually, for some reason we got into a bit of a correspondence, back then there wasn't e-mail you wrote things called letters [laughter] and I did, I sent him a photograph at one point, I just didn't know he kept it in his wallet. [Laughter] He wouldn't keep one today, I assure you.

RB: Funny times.

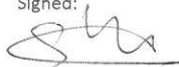
## **Appendix B**

### **Alien Kulture Interview Declarations**

On the following four pages are copies of the signed declarations of the participants of the preceding interview, giving their permission for their statements to be quoted within the body of this thesis.

I, Shakir Kadri, hereby declare that I am participating in this interview voluntarily, having been given a reasonable period of time within which to consider my participation. I give permission for any statements made by myself to be quoted by the interviewer (Joseph O'Connell) within their PhD thesis, unless explicitly stated otherwise. I am aware that I may withdraw such permission at any time.

Signed:



Date:

26/05/11

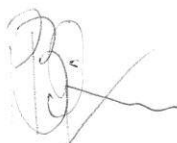
I, Ausaf Abbas, hereby declare that I am participating in this interview voluntarily, having been given a reasonable period of time within which to consider my participation. I give permission for any statements made by myself to be quoted by the interviewer (Joseph O'Connell) within their PhD thesis, unless explicitly stated otherwise. I am aware that I may withdraw such permission at any time.

Signed: 

Date: 26.5.11

I, Pervez Bilgrami, hereby declare that I am participating in this interview voluntarily, having been given a reasonable period of time within which to consider my participation. I give permission for any statements made by myself to be quoted by the interviewer (Joseph O'Connell) within their PhD thesis, unless explicitly stated otherwise. I am aware that I may withdraw such permission at any time.

Signed:



Date:

26th May 2011

I, Rob Beasley, hereby declare that I am participating in this interview voluntarily, having been given a reasonable period of time within which to consider my participation. I give permission for any statements made by myself to be quoted by the interviewer (Joseph O'Connell) within their PhD thesis, unless explicitly stated otherwise. I am aware that I may withdraw such permission at any time.

Signed:



Date:

26 May 2011