

Give Peace A Chance

White Riot

Straight Edge

WORKING SOLIDARITY

PROTEST SONGBOOK

A PROJECT BY BIG HOPE
WWW.BIGHOPE.HU

Between The Wars

Redemption Song

Anarchy In The UK

'Protest Songbook' is an inquiry into the connections between music, art and political engagement.

In July 2003, Big Hope: Miklós Erhardt and Dominic Hislop, recorded telephone interviews with New York based artist Martha Rosler, Glasgow based artist Ross Birrell and Torino based political activist Elio Gilardi as part of a radio programme broadcast on Radio Helsinki in Graz. The following pages contain excerpts from those interviews.

Full texts and an archive of public contributions of protest songs and views on the topic can be found at www.bighope.hu/protestsongbook

Ship Building

Working Class Hero

Blow
In The Wind

Kerosene

Peat Bog Soldiers

What's Goin' On

Fight The Power

Ross Birrell

is a Glasgow based artist and lecturer of Historical and Critical Studies at Glasgow School of Art.

BH: To what extent do you feel songs can be political?

RB: I suppose that all art and all music is political regardless of its specific content because it's produced either in a capitalist society or is funded or supported by a particular class or market or whatever. So you can't escape politics from that particular point of view regardless of whether you feel you have a direct political comment or voice. Also, a song can become political or politicized through its appropriation by a specific movement or in dealing with a specific context.

Jacques Atali who wrote a book called "Noise, the Political Economy of Music" said something interesting "music is a herald for changes inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society. Listening to music is listening to all noise, realising that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power that is essentially political". I think music can be a source for political change and transformation and how the definitions of music can be challenged and what constitutes music is actually maybe more political than a political song. To challenge what constitutes music in our culture can be equally as political as writing a protest song in a traditional folk genre.

BH: Do you think that political songs actually have an impact on people, in shaping their political consciousness or they just reaffirm existing values and views?

RB: I definitely think that songs that appeal to a broad sentiment for change for example Lennon's songs - "Give Peace a Chance" or "Power to the People" - simplistic, sloganistic songs that are actually heartfelt emotions that can be chanted in any context, definitely create an atmosphere where change or the potential for change becomes realisable and therefore gives spirit to a movement. I think all protest movements or all political forces for change need to have an old fashioned thing called morale and an idea that an ideal can be realised or else what's the point of getting involved in social action. There were other artists in Britain like Billy Bragg, who was very important and influential and especially throughout the Thatcher government and the miners strike. He articulated in song some very important criticisms of government policy in an ironic way.

BH: I can think of some examples of songs that changed people's behaviour in some way, like for example The Smiths "Meat is Murder" or Minor Threat's "Straight Edge". Do you think that these kind of changes are just a part of forming an identity along with a pop group or examples that that songs can succeed in inspiring some small changes?

RB: They can be effective in single issue based politics or affecting lifestyle changes particularly I suppose if you are an adolescent and you're trying to assert difference, pop music is a conventional way that people do that. It's also where you assert your economic difference because you're buying a particular commodity which situates you either differently from your schoolfriends or your parents and that can come down to choices of vegetarianism or other things I suppose. Personally I wouldn't proselytize against either alcohol, drugs, sex or meat but then that's just where me and Morrissey differ. If you're in that position yourself, the choice is either silence and acquiescence with power or interruption and resistance and you're always going to open yourself up to those charges of egotism if you do speak up in those circumstances.

BH: Looking at some other strategies, some bands like The Clash, even with singles high in the music charts, always refused to play on "Top of the Pops". Their absence implied a rejection of establishment pop culture that I could relate to but as a big fan, I remember that I would still have loved to have seen them appear in amongst the vacuousness of the other acts.

RB: It's an old one, I don't think Lennon ever played 'Top of the Pops'. I think there's a certain nobility in that tradition, a kind of purist antagonistic position to blatant consumerism and the commercialisation of creativity in mainstream capitalist culture. That obviously that takes place, but at the same time, the retreat from that space, which is actually a communicative space in that it has a market in every living room in the land, to not take that stage, is problematic as well. It's a question of whether you attack from the outside or whether you attack from the inside.

I suppose the KLF would be a primary example of a group who tried to implode the music industry from the inside, at the same time as making a lot of money, but when they entered into the art world as the K-Foundation, they tried to attack it from the outside and both strategies were equally futile but at the same time, it was very entertaining watching them do it. It was like this feedback system where it showed the system to itself but to the viewers and the audience at the same time. I think the real thing is about audience because when we're talking about buying a guitar or whatever instrument or buying a sampler or couple of decks, it moves you from a notion of an audience and consumer to a producer of your own culture, and that means finding your voice and articulating your voice. Even if you emulate another voice, I think that's fine, it's about production of your culture rather than consumption of it. Any means or mode or mechanism which enables or acts as a catalyst towards that is the first step towards transforming society. If you can transform the culture around you, then you can transform the society around you.

BH: What do you think about the role of the traditional protest song in relation to contemporary pop music?

RB: Well, I suppose first of all we have to acknowledge that protest songs are popular music. If they weren't popular, then they wouldn't be effective as protest songs. That then introduces a dialectic between the protest song as opposition and the protest song as commodity for consumption in a market, so if a protest song is on the one hand antagonistic towards capitalism, say something like Billy Bragg or John Lennon, or a whole host of writers of protest songs or bands like say Chumbawumba in Britain or Public Enemy who are antagonistic towards a particular cultural condition, we can't escape that on the other hand, they are commodities with a market, so they are popular music.

However, the singing of protest songs collectively on the street in a march, is a shared experience that stands outside of the notion of commodity and maintains an antagonistic relationship to the market. Some of these have songs have their roots in folk music traditions, something which is actually quite conservative, but has subversive potentials. This idea of a collectively sung folk song actually stands outside the apparatus of capitalism. It's real relationship is not to the commodity but to exchange and to a legacy, something that's freely exchanged. It appeals to the logic of the gift and that I think is a potential source for change.

Martha Rosler

is a New York based artist who has engaged with social and political issues in her work since the late 1960s.

BH: Could you tell us about some song that for you either encapsulates or has had an influence on forming some of your political views?

MR: It would be easy for me to suggest one, two or even three songs. I remember when I was a young teenager hearing Pete Seeger sing "Peat Bog Soldiers". It taught me something about history and made me very curious about oppression in Europe before my lifetime.

In the eighties I was very affected by Bob Marley's "Get Up Stand Up," which represented the idea of continuing struggle. It emanated from a place other than my own but it was a pretty much universal song. Bob Marley is fantastic and it's a fantastic song. I used a clip from it in a piece that I did in 1979-81 called "On the Cusp of the Eighties," a performance that was about resistance. Among other things, I put together a collage of sounds on the soundtrack and that was one of the pieces.

BH: Was that something new for you to be working with music that had political content as well as the visuals?

MR: Well I hadn't done it a lot, but I had done it a bit. For another work, "Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses," in 1983, a work about globalization and cultural penetration, I used a little piece of Marianne Faithfull's "Broken English," which is not so clearly political as "Get Up Stand Up", perhaps.

BH: I'd like to ask you about the connection between politics in art and politics in music. For my own part I do like a lot of political songs, but I'd say the majority of the songs I listen to and appreciate have more of an emotional expression. Whereas in my own art practice and the art practice that I appreciate, it's much more of a political engagement that I'm interested in. I'm just wondering if you have anything of a similar outlook or if politics for you has an equally important place in music?

MR: Well, I would not presume to say what kind of music people should be making, but I also tend towards music that is not directly political. I remember pointing out to my friend Craig Owens, a powerful critic who died of AIDS in the mid 1980s, that he wanted art to be political but did not dream of demanding anything similar from music; he hadn't even noticed.

I think the thing to remember is that music is more often non-verbal than verbal in its direct address to people and that songs are more than their lyrics. Even the delivery of lyrics is an essential element. I think that the meaning of music for human beings transcends the rational and therefore the political. Music and dance are among the most basic unifiers of human beings from the earliest days of our existence as a species, so there's nothing more important than music.

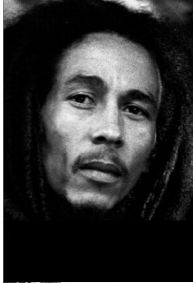
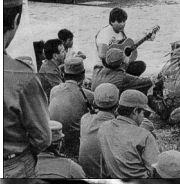
BH: Is it important for you that art should include reflections or engagement with social and political issues?

MR: It's certainly important for me, but I'm not a cop - I don't believe in making rules for everybody. I started as a painter, and I have great sympathy for people who are not interested in expressing social engagement in whatever form in their work. Of course everyone does, no matter what, but if people feel that their work is about something else, I think the world is richer for this divergence of meaning.

BH: I remember reading that during the Vietnam war you decided that you had to get involved somehow and decided to stop making art because it wasn't contributing towards the movement opposed to the war. You downed your paintbrushes to do a different kind of creative act which you didn't consider to be art at the time but later became recognised in the art world as part of your overall body of work. I'm just wondering whether your view of your role as an artist when involved in a creative activism has changed since then?

MR: Well, I don't worry so much about it now. At the time, around the end of the 1960s, because I was deeply involved in making abstract paintings, of course I had to make a decision. And, as you say, it was in effect a step outside of my self-identity as an artist to have another kind of practice. I remember thinking at that point that if I have to choose between calling myself an artist or a political activist I would have to say political activist because this is an urgent task. I had to stop going into the studio because I felt so guilty continuing to paint. I did however, continue making installations and even sculptural works, virtually all of them about women's issues and politics.

Now I do a number of different kinds of things, none of which involve abstraction, so I consider that the work that I do always to be political - or I should say socially engaged - but it ranges from being directly agitational to being much more structural, in looking at the meaning of social beliefs, social products, social constructions and things like that. I'm thinking particularly of things relating to, for example, the built environment - airports, modes of travel, housing and so on - which have a directly political dimension sometimes but often speak through their architecture in muted tones about social assumptions, social obligations or their lack.



Elio Gilardi

is a member of the creative 'Pink' group of the political activist group, Torino Disobbedienti.

BH: Can you think of any songs that somehow either helped shape your own political consciousness or was a good reflection of your existing views?

EG: Well, at the moment the creativity group that started in Genova, has changed its approach a bit. Now we are working on samba. Samba began in Brazil, amongst the slaves, as a method of protest - taking to the streets. So that historical element is one of the reasons for doing it. Also, we can't imagine any songs or music other than samba, that can be so communicative, can as effectively bring people together in politics and action, so we have decided that for the moment at least, playing samba songs is a good way of demonstrating.

BH: What do you think of traditional protest songs where the lyrics are full of poetic or even direct political commentary or reflection or are trying to encourage people to take some political action?

EG: We don't play those kind of songs anymore. These days, I don't think they're very effective in involving people, making them feel like taking action or participating. Certainly, in my life, they're really not so important. I mean they are good to play at home, but not good for activism and actions anymore.

BH: However, Italian traditions in this field are strong, as there is the huge tradition of *ecantaurii*, with its very powerful and popular songs with more or less direct political content. Have these songs ever been used for activist purposes, or sung together at demos?

EG: The tradition of these politically conscious cantautori and songs goes back to the war of liberation in 1945. Ever since then they have been sung by loads and loads of people and we still play these songs. They are a really strong means of preserving the history and consciousness of the war of liberation and the subsequent leftist movement. Over the last few years, we have played them from a truck with a big sound system at every single demonstration. Songs like 'Bella Ciao' for example. People still feel something when they hear these songs, so this tradition isn't over, it's still strong.

BH: I think that the fact that you consider samba to be a good way of demonstrating, must be a sign of a big change in the attitude of people towards political actions, as I suppose that samba is not based on the content but much more on the capacity of music to create a community, or to make people to feel good together.

EG: You're right, it is much more of a method, much more of a practice, a music that makes you feel the revolution inside yourself, rather than stimulating your analytical thinking. So it's completely different from our tradition of revolutionary songs.

BH: That is to say it is not about that kind of revolution anymore?

EG: It's more a way of expressing yourself, of being creative in political actions. Those songs we were talking about are a tool that make you feel part of a history, part of a big group, where everybody is listening to the same songs and everybody feels the same way, about being revolutionary people. Samba is a way of communicating with other people, it's a way of creating unity and at the same time being creative, because it's not just samba, it's samba combined with action. It's certainly a different thing to express yourself by singing at a demonstration. As the Disobbedienti did a few years ago when setting up of the 'theatre of conflict' with the police, incorporating samba creates a different way to express ourselves. It's important for our continuation to change the way of creating these conflicts. But one thing should be clear: Disobbedienti is a huge movement, a national network of groups and ours is just a small group that is related to Disobbedienti, but we are not The Disobbedienti. So concerning the overall strategies of the movement, they are discussing the levels of violence, conflict and communication, but when I'm talking about samba and creative strategies, I'm just referring to the small creative group within the Torino Disobbedienti that I'm involved with at the moment.

BH: In creating a situation in the street that grabs public attention, using props - that being the 'prop maker' of Torino Disobbedienti - have quite often been made by you, a lot of the actions of the Disobbedienti have the appearance of what are important performance actions in art history. I'm just wondering how you see that relation to a history of politically motivated performance in contemporary art or, if you're familiar with the actions inspired by the Situationists, whether you consider your activism to be a kind of socially engaged art practice?

EG: Well, I'm no expert in art, I know that, especially in the 60s and 70s, artists directed a lot of attention towards social problems and made art in the street. That expanded our idea of where we can express ourselves in a creative way and from then, I think, art is quite often seen on the streets. This can be a direct inspiration to more people to be active in expressing their own ideas too.