Rockin' the Boat

Mass Music and Mass Movements

Edited by
Reebee Garofalo

South End Press

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Cover design by Jane Cook
Page design and production by the South End Press collective
Manufactured in the United States
Printed on acid-free, recycled paper

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rockin' the boat : mass music and mass movements / [edited by] Reebee Garofalo.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-89608-428-0 : $40.00. — ISBN 0-89608-427-2 : $16.00
1. Rock music—History and criticism. 2. Protest music—History and criticism. 3. Music and society. I. Garofalo, Reebee.
ML3534.R6348 1992
781.5'92—dc20 92-8334
CIP
MN

99 98 97 96 95 94 93 92 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

South End Press, 116 Saint Botolph Street, Boston, MA 02115

This book is dedicated to the memory of
Rick Dutka
for whom the connection between
popular music and political struggle
was a fact of everyday life.

Val Morrison into translating Denis-Constant Martin's chapter on South Africa from the French original. She/they did a great job.

Finally, I am indebted to Debby Pacini for her friendship and emotional support, her knowledge of world music and insightful comments on the manuscript, and her helpful hints and power-user shortcuts for using Microsoft Word.

Amnesty International tour, Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Singers from left: Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Youssou N'Dour, Johnny Clegg, Sting, and Bruce Springsteen. (Photo: © Neal Preston)

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Introduction

Reebee Garofalo

On the eve of Paul Simon's 1992 South African tour—the first such tour by a major U.S. artist since the lifting of cultural sanctions—the offices of the promoter and sound company were bombed by the Azanian National Liberation Army. While the tour was supported not only by the white minority government, but also two of South Africa's main black organizations—the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party—other anti-apartheid tendencies held that the lifting of sanctions was premature. Simon was undoubtedly considered an appropriate target because of the controversy that surrounded the release of his 1986 Grammy Award-winning album, *Graceland,* which was based largely on South African musical styles and was recorded mostly in South Africa under questionable circumstances, in violation of the UNESCO cultural boycott. Just as the bombing incident can be seen as one indicator of the degree to which culture—and popular music in particular—is taken seriously as a force in political struggle, the controversy surrounding *Graceland* raises a number of issues which must be confronted head-on in any analysis of the role of mass music in global political change.

Graceland was, in many ways, a pivotal album of the 1980s. It was released during the ascendancy of the so-called "charity-rock" phenomenon, and no doubt benefited from the unprecedented international focus on Africa created by "mega-events" such as Live Aid and Sun City. (Simon himself appeared as a soloist on "We Are the World," but interestingly refused to participate in the more radical Sun City project, which directly opposed violating the cultural boycott.) Historically, the album has taken its place as one of the defining contributions to the amorphous category of "world beat" or "world music," and as such has been at the heart of highly politicized discussions concerning musical appropriation and ownership on the one hand and "cultural imperialism" on the other. Because such issues invariably accompany discussion of the global political role of mass culture, they will surely surface among the readers of this collection.

Rockin' the Boat is about the relationship between mass-mediated popular musics—that is, musics which share an intimate relationship with mass communication technologies—and political struggles around the world. From West African highlife to political cantopop in Hong Kong, from Hungarian punk to the Aboriginal rock styles of Australia, the collection focuses primarily on musics which have combined mass cultural elements—primarily Anglo-American and African-American—with indige-

The Clash plays at the Anti-Nazi League Carnival organized by Rock Against Racism.

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Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge

From Music to Politics, from Politics to Music

Simon Frith and John Street

The two most systematic attempts in Britain to use "mass music" to inspire a "mass movement" were Rock Against Racism (founded in 1976) and Red Wedge (founded in 1986).[1] These movements had much in common (not least, some of the musicians most actively involved). They were both explicitly socialist organizations focused on mobilizing youth; they both made populist assumptions about the equation of class experience and cultural expression; and they both sought to make pleasure educational and education pleasurable. Music was taken as the means to all these ends. But Red Wedge and Rock Against Racism (RAR) differed sharply too: Red Wedge was formed by and for a political party, Labor, with electoral aims; RAR was, ideologically at any rate, a spontaneous movement of musicians and fans, concerned with the politics of the everyday. And perhaps even more importantly, the decade between the two groups' origins, 1976-1986, marked a decisive shift in people's understanding of the possibilities of music and movements: RAR was a product of punk, Red Wedge of Live Aid. These differences of origin are now held by cultural commentators to explain the success of RAR (the marginalization of racist politics), and the failure of Red Wedge (the Labor Party's dismal electoral performance in 1987). Neither portrait is wholly accurate. There is no simple distinction to be drawn between the sources of the two movements. Nor are there any simple conclusions to be drawn about each's intention or their effectiveness. Together, however, their stories tell us much about how causes and chords become entwined, and about what happens to the politics and the music in the process.

Rock Against Racism

RAR was provoked into life by Eric Clapton's infamous remarks at the Birmingham Odeon in August 1976. From the stage, Clapton said he wanted

to "Keep Britain White"; he also expressed support for the British politician Enoch Powell, who had made political capital since the 1960s from playing on the "dangers" of immigration.[2] One consequence of Clapton's outburst was a letter to *Melody Maker, NME,* and *Sounds,* written by Red Saunders, Syd Shelton, David Widgery, and others. They wrote:

> We want to organize a rank and file movement against the racist poison in music. We urge support for Rock Against Racism. P.S. Who shot the Sheriff, Eric? It sure as hell wasn't you![3]

This letter prompted 140 replies in the first week.

RAR's relatively modest origins were in stark contrast to its founders' ambitions. They were all veterans of 1960s libertarian politics and agit-prop work (now ensconced in the Socialist Workers Party [SWP]) and they still wanted to harness the political power of the imagination. David Widgery, by profession an East End physician, by inclination the SWP's most combative and entertaining cultural theorist, wrote of his plans for the movement:

> We aimed to rescue the energy of Russian revolutionary art, surrealism and rock and roll from the galleries, the advertising agencies and the record companies and use them again to change reality, as always had been intended. And have a party in the process.[4]

In this respect, RAR was partly defining itself against Music for Socialism (MFS), a group of progressive rock musicians and writers who had come together the previous year in a kind of last throw of 1960s idealism.[5] MFS (which was particularly influenced by Italian examples) was more interested in the politics of music-making and the music industry than in youth as such, and its initial response to punk (as voiced by the Maoist composer, Cornelius Cardew, for example) was overtly hostile: punk was denounced as "fascist." From the RAR perspective this reflected MFS's elitism. RAR's political activism was to be provided by "cultural autodidacts," people for whom Tamla/Motown was as important as Bertolt Brecht, and punks' shock value use of the swastika (key evidence for the Cardew line) would be challenged directly, on the streets.[6] In short, if Eric Clapton's mean sentiments provided the grounds for Rock Against Racism, its real political and cultural ambition was to seize the opportunity of punk and articulate a new form of proletarian cultural rebellion.

RAR was, then, the child of punk. It drew on punk's style, its rhetoric, and its music. Most of the musicians who played RAR gigs had come to prominence with the emergence of punk. Punk had re-established pop (as opposed to progressive rock) as the medium for political statement; it had created a new culture of street protest, through the do-it-yourself magazines, the market stall clothes sellers, the front-room recording studios, the slogans, and the politics of gestures generally. Punk allowed cultural autodidacts to live out their theories.

But whatever the range of theoretical references behind RAR (and its street spontaneity depended as heavily on art school situationism as on Trotskyist agit-prop), it remained, in concert practice, confined to a surprisingly narrow musical spectrum. British RAR, unlike its U.S. counterpart, was focused musically on punk and reggae (and, ideally, demonstrated their integration formally—the Clash and the Ruts were the perfect RAR performers). It did not extend into other proletarian forms (heavy metal, for example) nor into other black pop forms such as funk or disco (to which RAR was explicitly opposed). This was not a racist position, as in the United States (though RAR's musical values did have an offputting effect for Asian British youth), but reflected punk contempt for "commercial" pop, for mainstream teenage dance music. RAR thus drew on a particular strand within British punk ideology, on what might be called its folkist wing. Although Johnny Rotten gave a sympathetic interview to the *RAR* magazine, *Temporary Hoarding,* the Sex Pistols were noticeable by their absence from RAR platforms. Their anarchist, disruptive aesthetic found little common ground with the worthier craft musicians: Joe Strummer, Elvis Costello, Tom Robinson.

As punk extended RAR's artistic context beyond the drunken mumblings of an Eric Clapton, so an upsurge in overt racism created a wider political context for anti-racist activity. It went beyond the music business or even youth culture. The National Front (NF), then the leading racist party, was collecting significant support in local government elections. It was also acquiring a considerable public presence through street demonstrations, often staged in areas which contained substantial black and Asian populations. RAR was intended, therefore, as a way of challenging all public displays of racism directly, whether contained within the music industry or within the wider political sphere. The cries and slogans captured its spirit: "Black and White / Unite we fight! NF = No Fun!"

The first RAR event was staged at a London pub in November 1976. The following month the venue was the Royal College of Art. According to Widgery, the audience was a mixture of 15-year-old girls, art students, and sixties freaks. Political leaflets and bookstalls occupied the side walls. "Something was in the air, not just dope, but a serious music-politics-black-white mix-up."[7] The founding conference was held in January 1977.

RAR's most memorable events were the big London marches and concerts organized in London in 1977 and 1978 with the Anti-Nazi League. These were outdoor events with all-star punk/reggae line-ups (Aswad, the Clash, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, X-Ray Spex, Stiff Little Fingers, Tom Robinson, Steel Pulse, and others) and short sets—the number of groups declaring for anti-racism mattered more than the quality of the music (this

was the model of the Big Event later to be used by Live Aid). Their most striking feature was the make-up of the audience, as the 1960s generation of political activists sat on their blankets with their children and their leaflets gawking at the decidedly menacing display of punk and Rastafarian fashion (to the untrained eye there was little semiotic difference between the racist and the anti-racist punk, especially given the familiar sight of youths with an RAR button on one lapel, an NF button on the other).

Although much energy went into organizing an RAR tour in the summer of 1978 (a changing line-up of two or three acts from the central roster playing concerts around the country), RAR's most important achievement was to provide a model (and a name) for local activities that were put on without any reference to the central organization at all. 1978-79 saw not only a plethora of small town RAR gigs as local political groups of various sorts used concerts (religiously following the black/white line-up) to reach youth and to publicize particular local struggles, but also, more importantly, a series of instant public responses to local racial incidents. In Coventry, for example, local musicians (led by the Specials) were able to mount an immediate, powerful, and effective outdoor concert response to a spate of "Paki-bashing" incidents (street attacks on Asian British by skinhead gangs) which had resulted in a fatal stabbing.

RAR was not just a touring rock show, then, nor just an oppositional spectacle; it also set an ideological and organizational example. Its magazine, *Temporary Hoarding*, was thus a crucial forum for articulating the movement's message and its strategy. It mixed punk cut-up style with "our dubbed version of Marxism" and was a constant source of names, contacts, and addresses.[8]

A key ingredient in this was the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP was (and is) a Trotskyist organization with a keen eye for current trends and fashions. Its tactics are to focus on emergent struggles and movements, and to use these to build support for the SWP itself. It does not aim to take over these struggles but to educate and direct those involved, to provide a theory and a practice. With RAR, the SWP played an important supporting role, loaning it premises, providing a page for support and publicity in *Socialist Worker;* or, at least, that is how the party would describe its contribution. David Widgery explained the relationship like this:

> The music came first and was more exciting. It provided the creative energy and the focus in what became a battle for the soul of young working-class England. But the direct confrontations and the hard-headed political organization which underpinned them were decisive.[9]

This is undoubtedly true, if one adds the perhaps paradoxical rider that in some cities and circumstances the "hard-headed political organization" wasn't the SWP itself, but either another Trotskyist group like

IMG (International Marxist Group) or, more commonly, an ad hoc committee of local activists.

As cultural politics, RAR was a considerable success. Its outdoor concerts were immensely popular and hugely publicized (particularly in the music press) and are still recalled affectionately by those who gathered in North and South London in the summers of 1977 and 1978. By 1979, *Temporary Hoarding* was selling 12,000 copies and RAR's educational effects were plain. Brinsley Forde of Aswad explained what he saw as the intention and achievement of RAR:

> Racism is caused by people not being educated, being ignorant of different cultures. Before RAR, a lot of white people would be terrified to go to a reggae show. And it was a platform for saying things that wouldn't have been said. It was the start of more bands being politically aware.[10]

RAR could be seen, then, as an important inspiration for the anti-racist message of Coventry's 2-Tone label—inspiring not so much the content of the message as its form—and for the punk-ska bands like the Specials and the Beat, who became immensely popular with white working-class youth in 1979-1981. Indeed, these musicians could be said to have brought the RAR message into mainstream pop—the Specials' "Ghost Town" topped the charts in the weeks in which British cities exploded in black youth anger in 1981. 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.

RAR, however, had more than cultural ambitions; it saw itself as having a direct political effect, and here one's judgement of its achievements must be more mixed. If RAR's intention was to rid Britain of the National Front, it could claim some success in doing this. By 1979, the NF was a spent electoral force (although it was to rise in different incarnations in the 1980s), and the SWP strategy of street confrontation undoubtedly helped both to deglamorize the NF's appeal to bored white youth and to mobilize black and Asian youth (it was striking that in the various city "riots" of 1981, black and white youth usually fought together against the police rather than—as in 1958—among themselves).

If, on the other hand, RAR's intention was to rid Britain, British youth, or the British music business of racism, then, not surprisingly, it failed. Racism found a new political home in the Conservative Party of Margaret Thatcher (who, in the run-up to the 1979 General Election, let it be known that she understood those people who felt they were being "swamped" by immigrants); the music industry continues to discriminate against black entrepreneurs (if not black musicians); and the pop/rock

audience continues to be divided along racial lines even in the era of club music and acid house.

But this is to judge RAR by its most utopian rhetoric—demand the impossible!—and therefore to devalue its two most important achievements: first, to ensure, in the fraught political times of the late 1970s, when recession brought about both mass youth unemployment and a sharp political swing to the right, that racism did not become white youths' "common sense"; second, to sustain, through a period of disillusion with rock ideology, the 1960s belief that socialists can use mass culture to their own ends. Both achievements were necessary for the thinking behind Red Wedge.

Red Wedge

Like RAR, Red Wedge was to be a party with a purpose. Jerry Dammers (leader of the Specials, founder of the 2-Tone label, and tireless activist for Artists Against Apartheid) announced at the organization's launch: "We hope Red Wedge is like a party atmosphere, we just want to be part of the massive anti-Thatcher popular movement."

But even in the optimism of its initiation, Red Wedge was a much more cautious enterprise than RAR—it was only to be "like" a "party atmosphere." There was none of RAR's flamboyant rhetoric, no tributes to the power of the imagination. The contrast between Red Wedge and RAR is illustrated most graphically by each organization's journal. Where *Temporary Hoarding* was a chaotic collage of images and words, recalling the design styles of both *Oz* and *Sniffing Glue*, Red Wedge's *Well Red* was a neat, formal glossy, a lively *Marxism Today*.

The formation of Red Wedge was announced in November 1986. Significantly, the launch party was held at the House of Commons. It brought together trade unionists, Labor politicians, comedians, and rock musicians. There was no doubting, therefore, the political interests behind its creation. At the same time, the performers included both those associated with political causes (by now, the miners' strike rather than Rock Against Racism—Tom Robinson, Billy Bragg, Paul Weller) and those with no such association (Sade, Johnny Marr, Ray Davies, Dave Stewart). In a sense, the two performer strands represented two attitudes toward Red Wedge—for the first type of performer, it was an activist organization devoted, in this instance, to supporting the Labor Party; for the latter musicians it was simply a way of indicating an electoral position (like signing a party political advert). Musicians' involvement in Red Wedge activities varied accordingly.

A concert tour formed the backbone of the Red Wedge campaign. The musicians organized a traveling roadshow, just like the Tamla shows of the 1960s. Each performer would play a short set, and then everyone

would get together at the end to sing Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up." The emphasis was on musical entertainment (even if, for a performer like Billy Bragg, the songs were explicitly political), but just outside the concert hall, meanwhile, there would be a select group of Labor representatives (including Members of Parliament), who would chat to the audience and distribute party literature. On the day before the evening performance, these politicians and musicians would visit the local town, seeking out youth training schemes and photo opportunities; local groups would play a local Red Wedge concert.

Red Wedge was not confined to these events and visits. In the run up to the 1987 election, it also organized tours of women performers and of comedians. Coordination of these was the responsibility of a small London-based organization, which also published *Well Red* and produced the usual paraphernalia of pop: T-Shirts, stickers, buttons, posters.

Red Wedge was built upon a partnership between the Labor Party and the musicians. The party wanted Red Wedge to act as a means of reaching a youth audience. The musicians wanted Red Wedge to put pressure on the party to recognize the political interests of the young, and to adopt an effective cultural policy. Together, they wanted, at the very least, to bring youth to politics; it was a British equivalent of the U.S. voter registration campaigns. As one leaflet put it: "Red Wedge aims to create, through the world of the arts, a fresh and direct approach to politics, which ultimately will affect and involve *you*."[11]

As the Labor Party reflected upon its electoral defeats in 1979 and 1983, it was acutely aware of the desertion of first-time voters. The Party was convinced, too, that its victories in the 1960s had been achieved through support from the young. Then, Labor had been able to present itself as a youthful, modern party—an impression made all the easier by the elderly, aristocratic leadership of the Conservative Party. In the mid-1980s, however, Labor could no longer pretend to such an image. From 1979 to 1983 it had been led by the aged Michael Foot. And young voters' memory of Labor in power was of a party that presided over decline and industrial disruption.

Red Wedge, then, was part of an attempt to improve Labor's image among the young: simply, to make it fashionable. For the party officials who were engaged in negotiating with the musicians and were responsible for the modest funding that the party provided, Red Wedge was seen not as part of the policy-making process, but of the image-making process.

The musicians had different ideas. They saw Red Wedge as an opportunity to educate the party in youth politics, to force changes in policies of relevance to the young. The agenda was not confined just to those areas of direct interest to musicians: cultural policy, the music industry, copyright, etc. The musicians were concerned about youth training and

youth unemployment. At the same time, the musicians were keen to maintain their distance from the Labor Party; they did not want to be the poodles of the politicians. Red Wedge was, therefore, run independently of the party.

What did Red Wedge achieve? As with RAR, the answer depends on what purpose we attribute to it. If it was intended to win Labor the 1987 election, it clearly failed. If it was intended to win the youth vote for Labor, then the results were more ambiguous. Labor made some small gains from the Tories among first-time voters, but this was against the background of a particularly bad 1983 performance. Intriguingly, Labor made most progress among young women. Young men remained obstinately resistant to Labor's message.[12]

The measure of Red Wedge does not, however, lie just with its ability to serve Labor's electoral interests. The musicians anticipated something from the relationship. They wanted more on youth and youth issues in the manifesto. They could point to some small steps here (around the commitment of resources for youth training, for example), but these steps were marginal and incremental, buried in the small print of the party's program. And certainly in terms of a policy on music—whether through using a tax on blank tapes to help support the independent sector of the record industry, or through expanding the remit of arts subsidy policy to cover rock and pop—Red Wedge suggestions seemed to fall on deaf ears. (Although, at a local level, Labor councils in such cities as Sheffield and Norwich were adopting "rock" policies, investing in a municipal recording studio in Sheffield's case, and investing in a live venue in Norwich's case.)

And what of the audiences, what did they get out of Red Wedge? They got a good-natured night out for a bargain price. The events were convivial affairs. There was little air of tension or adventure. Everyone knew they were gathered to support a good cause, so there was a general reluctance to complain about indifferent performances. Red Wedge offered a platform for polemic, but as Stuart Cosgrove once observed, "It is not political music that matters but using music politically."[13] Red Wedge failed to do the latter.

Role Models

Between the heyday of RAR and that of Red Wedge much changed in the world of musical politics. The most obvious expressions of the changes were, first, the willingness of musicians to become directly involved in established political organizations; and, second, the willingness of politicians to associate themselves with musicians. With RAR, the relationship had been tentative. The political organization was more organic, less overtly bureaucratic; it was more of a musical creation. The same was not true of Red Wedge.

The change owes much to Live Aid. It was this event that demonstrated the political power of popular music; it was this that 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. He recognized the huge, transnational appeal of Western pop stars, and he used the mass communication technologies and industries which market Phil Collins, Queen, and others. What Live Aid made explicit was 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.

The most obvious effect of this was to redefine the political impact of rock as its power of publicity. It is easy to be cynical about this—if musicians' willingness to support causes became conditional on the presence of the television cameras, then their own PR needs became difficult to disentangle from those of the oppressed, starving, or homeless; both Live Aid and the Mandela concerts effectively revived old rock careers and launched new stars (Tracy Chapman, for instance). But the opportunism of the performers (or, rather, of their managers and record companies) is not really the issue. The fact was that 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*. Tom Robinson's "true" devotion to the RAR cause had been measured by his willingness to *muck in:*

> Tom took the RAR star everywhere, on tour and on TV, helped with our office, fitted RAR into tour schedules and loaned us money.[14]

Now political commitment meant making the most of one's three minutes in the spotlight. What happened behind the scenes was irrelevant.

The Changing Politics of "Youth"

Part of the shifting character of political pop was an effect of the change in its audience, or, rather, in the way in which that audience was perceived. The cause lay as much with new marketing strategies as with altered sociological conditions. In the 1980s, as the actual number of young people in Britain fell, "youth" became an advertizer's design concept, and political affiliations were rethought accordingly. Politics was increasingly conceived as a matter of imagery. When the Labor Party-sponsored magazine, *New Socialist,* revamped itself, it hired the designer of *The Face,* and its lead article was written by a *Face* "style guru," Robert Elms, who berated the left for its outmoded fashions and lack of style. The parliamentary wing of the party, itself under the guidance of an ex-TV producer, was reorgan-

izing its image, making itself media-friendly, giving Kinnock the same sort of advice about voice and clothes and gestures that had already transformed Margaret Thatcher's "look." It was into this packaged world that Red Wedge bought.

RAR, by contrast, was inspired by an idea of youth that had been fashioned by the rhetoricians of punk. For its ideologues, "youth" was a political, rather than a marketing, category; punk was the resulting sound of disaffiliation. The ethos of "do-it-yourself," the aesthetics of the sneer, set punk aside from established political institutions. The only acceptable form of political expression was a mass street movement.

The Aesthetics of Protest

If Red Wedge and RAR were marked by quite different political arguments about how to make protest music, there was, nevertheless, an obvious continuity between the two in terms of political imagery. Red Wedge borrowed its name directly from El Lissitsky's "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge," while RAR organizer Red Saunders recalled his 1960s cultural education in these terms:

> I was just a working photographer and then the art got to me, typography, Rodchenko's posters, Mayakovsky's poetry. I was educated by the theatre group CAST (the Cartoon Archetype Slogan Theatre), it was the rock on which everything was based—brilliant minds and high energy—who taught me everything I know, about culture, politics, organizing. So that we would be reading Preobazhensky this week, right, then we're off to see the Prague Theatre of the Black and then it's *The Crimes of M Lange* at the Kilburn Grange. It trained you for cultural fanaticism. It wasn't just entertainment and you'd go out for a meal afterwards. We'd go back to the flat, eat sardines on toast, get herbed up and analyze it all night.[15]

The aesthetics of protest are not, of course, confined to images and artwork. There are also judgements to be made about the music, for which the Russian Futurists are less helpful, and in the cases of both RAR and Red Wedge it is clear in retrospect that conventional political assumptions determined tastes. For RAR, the value of a musical form lay in the proletarian authority of its performers—soul and R&B expressed the Afro-American working class; reggae expressed the Afro-Caribbean working class; punk the white working class. Music without such roots was worthless. This dogma had some odd consequences—as we have seen, both heavy metal and disco bands were excluded from RAR line-ups, for example, presumably on the grounds that they were a form of false consciousness. From RAR's perspective the only real problem arose when an authentic band (working-class punk) had "inauthentic" followers (skinheads, racists).

This was the issue addressed when Jimmy Pursey's Sham 69 offered to play for RAR. The organization had to decide whether such a band was appropriate, and the tactic adopted was to schedule Sham 69 only with reggae bands. In the 1978 tour Sham 69 thus shared the bill with Misty in Roots. The audience was riven with tension, but the event passed off without incident, and RAR's decision was vindicated. In 1981, though, RAR confronted the problem in a new form. There was a proposal from some oi bands to play an RAR benefit. Oi was an offshoot of punk, but one which celebrated a peculiarly violent version of male working-class culture, and which had, like Sham 69, attracted a racist following. This time RAR refused them permission, less out of a fear of violence at a gig than from a determination not to give legitimacy to "incorrect" music.

Red Wedge held similar beliefs about the correct relationship of musical style and political principle. Two genres were prominent in Red Wedge shows: folk and '60s/'70s soul. When Gary Kemp from Spandau Ballet performed, he opted for an acoustic guitar. Kemp was establishing a political credibility for himself through his musical choice. His ability to do this depended on his (and, to a lesser extent, the audience's) reading of the meaning of musical forms. Some musics were deemed to constitute a basis for political authenticity and legitimacy, a way of conveying concern.

These aesthetic judgements were essentially exercises in ideology, ways of symbolizing ideas such as "integrity" or "compassion." The interesting question is how these judgements got made and how they were organized by the political and musical activists. At one level, there was simply a question of whom to play to and whom to play for. At another, there was the issue of what the music meant, and how these meanings were conveyed. The first dilemma addresses old arguments about the ability to cause change and the difficulty of preaching to the unconverted. The second dilemma touches on a less politically familiar territory.

David Widgery exemplifies the kind of political thinking that informed the musical choices of RAR. Writing of Carol Grimes, the white soul/R&B singer who performed at the early RAR events, he explained:

> ...she was not only a great singer but play[ed] RAR's kind of music....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.[16]

Elsewhere, he recalls the cultural education that had taught him his aesthetics:

> ...black music was our catechism....We went for black music because it was so strong rhythmically, there was a passion in it, it was about life and had some point to it.[17]

Hidden in such recollections are a number of assumptions about "authenticity" and how it was captured in the conditions and tones of "black" music. Also in there are notions of integrity, defined by not "selling-out." These judgements of music and its performers have direct equivalents in Widgery's political ideology.

A similar match, but with different politics and different musics, could be read into Red Wedge. The 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. These virtues in the music were paralleled by the political project upon which the Red Wedgers were engaged: to give the Labor Party and politics generally a desirable elegance. (There was, of course, nothing intrinsically socialist about the music, as Levi's use of Marvin Gaye testified.) The point was that certain musicians and writers were able to invest the music with this type of meaning.

The Medium and the Message

One key difference between RAR and Red Wedge was the way message and medium coincided more for RAR than for Red Wedge. RAR's political claims about racial equality could be demonstrated on stage. Red Wedge's concerns could not be symbolized so simply or so sympathetically. Racial harmony is a lot easier to sell than the British Labor Party (though Red Wedge did make sure it had a "balance" of black/white, male/female performers to demonstrate the party's "broad" concerns).

The problem is not just one of image. Differences of subject matter are also significant. Some issues or ideas translate more easily into song. Racial oppression is, of course, an established concern of popular music. Songs about forging alliances with a traditional, political party do not fit so easily in the repertoire of the average rock performer.

It's My Party...

The tension between musical forms and political ideas was replicated at the level of political organization. With RAR, the political organization (whatever the intentions of the SWP) grew from the cultural organization of the movement (and the moment). Red Wedge, by contrast, had to fit itself within—or set itself apart from—the Labor Party. Its politics had, at some level, to relate to the established electoral purposes of the Party. RAR was not so constrained. Its political ambitions were much less clearly defined.

More importantly, RAR could work with issues and ideas which fell outside the formal political agenda.

Even so, RAR remained wedded to a particular political perspective and the institutions associated with it. As Dick Hebdige has argued:

> RAR was widely identified with the Socialist Workers Party, and retained a residual commitment to the old sense of political priorities and tactics (marching, changing minds to change the world, exposing and explaining the historical roots of racism in *Temporary Hoarding*, identifying the enemy, "raising consciousness."[18]

For Dave Laing, RAR remained rooted in a determinist politics:

> ...the RAR's leadership's Marxist politics...led them to the view that an honestly realistic description of the state of things would *necessarily* imply a leftist politics...This position...lacked an awareness of the creative and moulding power of ideology.[19]

Both Red Wedge and RAR were, by this analysis, tied to, or influenced by, their political patrons. And despite the vital attraction provided by the music and musicians, the political interests so affected the music as to reduce both its power and that of the movement which it accompanied. RAR, just as much as Red Wedge, worked to confine its musicians, declaring that *this* is what punk or soul or reggae mean; they can stand for nothing else.

Both Red Wedge and RAR sought to connect the obvious power of music and musicians (to move people, to inspire people, to shape people) with the political power necessary to achieve their own ends (whether that power was mobilized on the streets or in the ballot box). The question is whether the different forms of power involved here are compatible. The histories of RAR and Red Wedge suggest that attempts to use mass musics to forge mass movements will always face two problems.

First, there is the problem of time scale. The power of popular music is by its nature momentary. Shock effects can't be repeated; novelty wears off; the history of rock is a history of jolts and routinization—the declining "buzz" of the big RAR concerts, for example, was apparent event by event; nostalgia is built into the pop experience. At the same time, the taste alliances which propel stars into sudden positions of authority (now David Bowie, now Bob Marley, now the Specials, now Boy George, now Madonna) are inherently unstable. The history of pop is a history of endless audience fragmentation. No political organization, not even one as street-conscious as the SWP, can sustain itself on bursts of power; all political organizations (even the anarchist ones) are part of the routinizing (thus disempowering) process. Reading David Widgery's retrospection on RAR, it becomes clear that for him, as for the other RAR activists, the importance of the movement was as much that, for a moment, it restored fun to politics

as that it developed a politics of fun. All we would add is that the "momentary" politics of pop were, in this instance, well adapted to the task at hand—ending the "moment" of the National Front.

Red Wedge, lumbered with a rather more bureaucratic backing group, never suggested that politics was fun (voting was presented as a moral duty), but their shows did make clear the second problem of musical power—the confused nature of its "collectivity." The power of mass music certainly comes from its mobilization of an audience; a series of individual choices (to buy this record, this concert ticket) becomes the means to a shared experience and identity. The question, though, is whether this identity has any political substance. The Labor Party looked to Red Wedge to deliver the youth vote (just as advertisers look to certain sounds or stars to deliver the youth market), but it was never clear that Red Wedge's performers had the necessary authority to do this (to put it simply: Were they popular *enough*?) or that "youth" made sense as a collective category anyway. At one level the Labor Party had an old-fashioned and inappropriate view that Paul Weller, Billy Bragg, and others somehow "represented" young people (and were preferable representatives than the party's Young Socialist branches, long an entry point for Trotskyists). But the real problem for Red Wedge was that it was meant to appeal to everyone (along the lines of Live Aid) by using music, the collective power of which depends on its sense of *exclusion*. When people feel most passionately about music together it is because of its power to mark boundaries (this is obvious in the case of punk and heavy metal, for example); inclusive, "mainstream" music never has such power. RAR, at least, offered an enemy. Red Wedge, for all the targeting of the Tories, called on its audiences to be reasonable. And whatever else mass music may represent, it is not the power of reason.

5

The Times They Are A-Changin'

Rock Music and Political Change in East Germany[1]

Peter Wicke

Since World War II, nothing has affected the world as deeply as the breakdown of the East-West conflict in Europe resulting from the collapse of the Stalinist system of communism in Eastern Europe. What will come of this change—a more peaceful world or one that is even more unstable—remains to be seen. Certainly, cultural movements will play an important role in this struggle. Rock music played an important role in the dramatic changes which occurred in the former German Democratic Republic, the eastern part of Germany, in 1989—a role which went largely unreported even though the events surrounding these changes were widely publicized in the West. In fact, rock mucisians were instrumental in setting in motion the actual course of events which led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the GDR.

Music is a medium which is able to convey meaning and values which—even (or, perhaps, particularly) if hidden within the indecipherable world of sound—can shape patterns of behavior imperceptibly over time until they become the visible background of real political activity. In this way, rock music contributed to the erosion of totalitarian regimes throughout Eastern Europe long before the cracks in the system became apparent and resulted in its unexpected demise. Czechoslovakian President Vaclav Havel, for example, himself an artist, continues to number rock musicians among his closest political consultants. Ironically, in the GDR, it was precisely because the music was initially repressed that it became a medium of resistance which was more or less impossible to control.

Historical Background

The relation between rock music and politics in the GDR had a long and fluctuating history which preceded the events of the autumn of 1989.[2] This history began as early as 1965, on the occasion of the eleventh meeting