Robert Barry
Knees up Mao Zedong

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In the 1970s, composer Cornelius Cardew went from avant-garde experiments to songs that aimed to speak directly to workers in struggle. He failed miserably then, but perhaps he's worth listening to again?



Cornelius Cardew and Laurie Scott Baker in People's Liberation Music, supporting the Grunwick march. (Photo by Andy Scott / Wikimedia Commons)

Cornelius Cardew's diary entry for 10 May 1974 read simply, 'Leave Elm Grove Road. Scratch dissolved.' Over the course of the previous ten years, he had gone from being Britain's leading voice in the dissemination of modernist composition and one of its greatest virtuoso pianists to becoming a member of the pioneering free improvisation group AMM, before finally founding the Scratch Orchestra, a ragtag band of musicians and non-musicians who toured community centres and public spaces and might just have changed the face of music forever. But now he was saying goodbye to all of that. The avant-garde works he had once championed were condemned in a scathing book called *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*. The Scratch was over. His marriage, likewise. He took a job in a paint factory and moved into a rather squalid B&B off Westbourne Grove.

Cardew had played a growing role in the Communist Party of England (Marxist–Leninist), later named the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist–Leninist), since its formation in 1972. But when, shortly before its dissolution, he changed the name of the Scratch Orchestra to Red Flame Proletarian Propaganda Team with a plan to write model operas for the imminent revolution, he was told the party wouldn't need operas until they had 50,000 members (to the best of my knowledge the RCPB (M-L) never had so much as *1,000* members). Feeling ruefully out of touch with the proletariat, Cardew undertook what his friend and biographer John Tilbury describes as a kind of 'social training' by playing with a pub singer named Fred Byrne, knocking out standards at the Earl of Essex in Islington. Unfortunately, though Cardew could play Stockhausen's fiendishly complicated Klavierstücke blindfolded, he struggled to quite get the hang of 'Knees Up Mother Brown'. The pub piano style, Tilbury concluded, 'did not come naturally to him'. Though he practised for hours, 'he always felt inadequate, worried that he would not be up to scratch for Fred'.

There's something I find rather sweet about this story, if not a little poignant. It speaks directly to the heart of Cardew's predicament in those years. He was desperate for his music to commune with the common man. Yet for all his years of study and undoubted brilliance, he was utterly at a loss about how to do so. His approach to working-class culture was more that of an anthropologist than of an engaged participant. Like many an anthropologist, he fell into the trap of fetishising older forms of popular culture as somehow more truthful or authentic. To the pop music of his own time, he remained wilfully blind. For Cardew, modern pop was no more than an 'ideological weapon' wielded by the bourgeoisie; the burgeoning punk rock was inherently reactionary. He spent much of 1976 agitating for the expulsion of David Bowie from the Musician's Union.

You will be hard-pressed, these days, to find anyone willing to defend People's Liberation Music (PLM), Cardew's strangely lumpy-sounding post-Scratch agit-prop rock band. Even Tilbury, one of its founder members, now seems baffled by the group, comparing their sound more to the music hall 'or even to the Salvation Army repertoire' than anything likely to stir the hearts of the proletariat. The songs, he concludes, 'lack a dialectic'. Another contemporary, Chris Cutler, goes further. In a withering review for the ReR catalogue, the former Henry Cow drummer writes:

> They were supposed to appeal to the masses (whoever they are), support the struggle, and harmonise with the musical dialect of 'the people'. PLM must have thought it a painfully simple dialect. That may sound hard, but it is a judgement difficult to avoid when listening to this collection of pastiche songs, mostly in the style of Julian Lloyd Webber and scarily devoid of any (intentional) humour — played, moreover, unremittingly senza brio.

There is, undeniably, something a little stiff about most PLM songs. The voices, in particular Cardew's own, have an embarrassingly patrician air. But there is also something rather jolly about a song like 'Smash the Social Contract' — even if the resemblance of the

chorus to The Goodies' 'Funky Gibbon' (as pointed out by David Stubbs in a 2015 piece for *The Quietus*) does rather undercut the presumed seriousness of its intent. A few years ago, when all that nonsense about *The X-Factor* and Rage Against the Machine was going on, I even remember a brief tongue-in-cheek social media campaign to push that song to Christmas Number One.

It's hardly surprising that many of the radical musicians who were actually there at the time so strongly resented PLM. It's probably not much fun to turn up at a gig expecting a nice bit of Charles Ives, only to be denounced from the stage as an imperialist stooge by a man with a voice like Hughie Greene singing about being a 'blackleg miner'. But perhaps, with the passing of time and for a new generation, the awkwardness of these songs can start to be heard as a source of interesting strangeness. Finally, numbers like 'Revolution is the Main Trend in the World Today' might find their true radical destiny — no longer as tub-thumpers to be sung at party rallies, but as novelty tunes.

Contributors

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