

Back to the future (again)

Simon Matthews

Walls Come Tumbling Down

Daniel Rachel

Picador, 2016, £12.99

The British Underground Press of the Sixties

James Birch and Barry Miles

Rocket 88 Books, 2017, £35.00

Daniel Rachel's book is a brilliant oral history of the UK's anti-racist, pro-left cultural activists from the mid '70s through to the early '90s. I knew several of these people and it was good, so to speak, to meet them again and to see pictures of them doing their stuff all those years ago. On page 534 – yes, it's that long – Robert Elms proclaims: 'Thatcher might have won elections, but culturally we won'; and 'Look at Britain now: it's a society where racism is absolutely frowned on; where gay marriage is accepted. It's totally different from that Little England that Thatcher tried to hold on to.' I presume these comments were made pre-23 June 2016. The anti-EU vote has much wider ramifications – and not least the politics of those who successfully propelled us to the result. For many who supported the struggle for progressive politics during the bleak Thatcher years the future, once again, now looks far from rosy.

We kick off in the 70s, with the National Front polling 25% in London and staging noisy and relatively well attended demonstrations. After utterances from Eric Clapton and David Bowie that seemed to validate such antics,¹ Red Saunders, a photographer noted for his contributions to *The Sunday Times*

¹ David Bowie stated on 26 April 1976, 'I believe Britain could benefit from a dictator' and 'Hitler was the first rock star'. See <<https://tinyurl.com/y97wucgp>> or <<http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/02/nazism-and-narcissism-david-bowie-flirtation-with-fascism.html>>.

Eric Clapton's utterances, about Enoch Powell and immigration, were made at a gig in Birmingham on 5 August 1976. See <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/apr/20/popandrock.race>>.

magazine, started Rock Against Racism with (amongst others) Carol Grimes and Gered Mankowitz, another photographer and son of Wolf Mankowitz.² Almost exactly a decade before Rock Against Racism, the campaigning groups Shelter and Release had formed in the late '60s. Rock Against Racism was a very much of that mould and that period of time: concerned individuals taking action against something they wished to change. Lower key than either Shelter or Release, there were still plenty of people willing to participate.³ The problems started when you tried to work with rock stars.

Great hopes were pinned on the burgeoning punk scene. Alas, Rhoda Dakar (later lead singer in The Bodysnatchers) recalls 'Joe Strummer talked in slogans'; Paul Weller proclaimed he would vote Conservative at the next election;⁴ Malcolm McLaren was too obviously a hustler; Ian Dury and John Lydon were, in different ways, unpredictable. This left Tom Robinson (who had already written 'Glad to be Gay' for the Campaign for Homosexual Equality), a few reggae acts and Carol Grimes, who had no record deal in 1976.⁵

The early RAR gigs were small scale and changed nothing. Initially they lacked a political angle. This arrived when the Socialist Workers Party (always on the look-out for campaigns they could take over) launched the Anti-Nazi League in 1977, scooping up RAR in the process. Peter Hain became a prominent supporter at this point,⁶ and Peter Jenner too, another very obvious overhang from the '60s.⁷ They organized the Carnival Against the Nazis in April 1978,⁸ which was a great success, particularly the performance by Poly

² The photographer as radical figure, recording grim reality, was something of a trope in the '60s. Of the two, Saunders was fiercely political, whilst Mankowitz was court photographer to the Rolling Stones at one point.

³ Starting a campaign against anything deemed wrong or objectionable was traditional on the left. Wolf Mankowitz was a co-founder of the Partisan Coffee House, with Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall and Eric Hobsbawn, back in 1958. The Aldermaston marches were planned in its basement. RAR and the Anti-Nazi League could be seen as a continuation of this approach.

⁴ Paul Weller said this when interviewed by the *Sniffin Glue* punk fanzine, 12 May 1977.

⁵ Carol Grimes was launched in 1970 as a UK equivalent of Janis Joplin but never enjoyed comparable success.

⁶ Peter Hain had, originally, been a very active (and visible) campaigner for the Liberal Party but joined Labour in 1977.

⁷ Jenner organized a set of festivals in Hyde Park in the late '60s and initially managed The Pink Floyd. He also thought Strummer 'all over the place'. Strummer – a boarding school boy in the 60s whose elder brother joined the National Front – was a problematic figure who struggled to retain 'credibility' in certain quarters after signing to CBS.

⁸ See the original poster, archived by the V&A at <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1260469/carnival-against-the-nazis-poster-king-david/>>.

Styrene, correctly recognized in the book as 'the advance party for the generation that would remake Britain'.⁹ Poly Styrene may not have lasted but the many ANL/RAR festivals that followed brought back into circulation the Glastonbury Festival kit (triangular tent above the stage, sound system and hippy roadies) after a gap of seven years and led directly to the relaunch of Glastonbury Festival itself in '79 with Peter Gabriel headlining. It has run continually ever since, a direct legacy of the activism of this period.

For a while things seemed hopeful. In January '79 the 2-Tone label was started with the intention that it function as the UK equivalent of Tamla Motown, showcasing a wide array of mixed-race dance bands singing socially relevant pop songs.¹⁰ Unlike punk, this wasn't London-centric and was based around The Specials, a savvy 7-piece act from Coventry. To get this degree of autonomy they turned down a deal with Rolling Stones Records¹¹ – not something Joe Strummer would have done – and signed instead to Chrysalis,¹² with the proviso that they had their own subsidiary label and the right to release 10 singles a year. It turned out to all have been in vain.

In the political arena Callaghan threw away the chance of Labour continuing in power in the autumn of '78 when he decided against a general election. Predictably, like all governments that go full term, Labour went down to defeat in 1979. Nor was white working-class and white suburban racism defeated. Voters of that ilk just moved into the embrace of the Conservative Party after Margaret Thatcher legitimized their concerns with her 'feeling rather swamped' comments on Granada TV in January 1978. Both Labour's '79 defeat and the Tories assimilation of the extreme right were salutary lessons that cultural campaigns and nice music were no substitute for winning real political battles. 2-Tone faded away quite quickly and had run out of steam by late 1980. Nor did artistic unity prevail. Two of its early signings both quit as soon

⁹ Poly Styrene was a fantastically memorable character – and not just for her stage name. She died in 2011, aged 53. One of the better obituaries was in the *Daily Telegraph* - see <<https://tinyurl.com/yb8rdmzw>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/8474012/X-Ray-Spex-singer-Poly-Styrene-dies-aged-53.html>>

¹⁰ There had previously been commercially successful mixed-race pop groups in the '60s – e.g. Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames, Geno Washington and The Ram Jam Band, The Foundations, The Equals – but all had vanished fairly quickly as white youth culture hardened and the mods of an earlier period turned into the skinheads of the mid '70s.

¹¹ All now seems to be hunky-dory between The Specials and the Stones, as The Specials are the opening act for the Stones' Coventry gig later this year (2 June). Ref <<http://www.rollingstones.com/>>.

¹² Chrysalis were the ultimate hippy management agency, handling Jethro Tull for many years.

as better deals came along: Madness for Stiff Records in September '79 and Bad Manners a few weeks later for Magnet.¹³

The road to 1983, and an election from which the left emerged shell-shocked, began here. In the aftermath things moved up a gear and a serious political alliance finally developed with the Labour Party, which was seeking to hitch itself to the youth vote. Labour hoped to thus counteract a Conservative ascendancy that, by virtue of the UK's electoral system, looked set to last a couple of decades. Neil Kinnock, Larry Whitty (General Secretary) and Tom Sawyer (NUPE) all recognized this and what emerged was Red Wedge. Based initially in the same offices as CND, it intended to produce high quality cultural support for the Labour Party. A chastened Paul Weller returned to the fold, Peter Jenner was central and with him came his new signing Billy Bragg.¹⁴ An awful lot of Red Wedge subsequently revolved around either Bragg or Weller. Not spelt out in the narrative is what Kinnock *et al* must have really expected. Given the scale of Labour's defeat in '83 they must have known that a Conservative defeat (or even a hung Parliament) was unlikely for at least 8-12 years. Did the various musicians, graphic designers, journalists and fashionistas who assembled behind the Red Wedge banner understand this? For them the Miner's Strike of '84-'85 was a steep learning curve and the third term that Thatcher duly won in '87 (albeit with a reduced majority) a desperate disappointment.

After which – in a narrative that again suggests a seamless transition, which was not the case in reality – Red Wedge morphed into the 'Free Nelson Mandela' campaign. If there was nothing doing in UK politics, perhaps inveighing against wickedness elsewhere might be better? On the face of it, yes, Mandela walked free. But a useful corrective is provided in the book by Peter Hain who points out that the mass concerts, hit records and condemnation of apartheid in the music press had little to do with Mandela's release. After the dramatic unravelling of the Eastern bloc in 1989 and the effective end of the Cold War, the US had no further strategic use for South Africa and duly applied pressure.

With Labour consistently winning bye-elections and Thatcher gone, great hopes were pinned on the 1992 election. Rachel's book reaches its conclusion at this point; or, more specifically, concludes with a critique, from all sides, of

¹³ Both defectors were London-based, rather than rooted in 'the provinces' and both were popular with gangs of white skinheads. Bad Manners moved to the record label run by Michael Levy, later Lord Levy.

¹⁴ Fast forward to 2018 and Billy Bragg was lecturing the Bank of England on 'Accountability - the Antidote to Authoritarianism'. See <<https://tinyurl.com/yctftqqq>> or <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/events/2018/april/one-bank-flagship-seminar-billy-bragg>>.

Kinnock's '92 rally in Sheffield where he hyper-ventilated like a Disney cartoon character: 'a disaster' (Lucy Hooberman), 'really embarrassing' (Tiny Fennimore), 'like a fucking geezer down the pub' (Cathal Smyth) and 'a real body blow' (Billy Bragg). But none of these had purchase on the Labour Party. Hooberman was an independent film maker, Fennimore a tour manager and Smyth a musician. None had votes at the Labour Party conference, and none, including Bragg, were the people to whom Kinnock was talking.

At the suggestion of Peter Mandelson, from '89 Kinnock had been listening closely to pollster Deborah Mattinson. Her view, privately, was that Kinnock would never win in '92. He was small, balding, freckly, from a geographically marginal area of the UK and prone to answering simple enquiries with sentences that had so many commas and sub-clauses that he still hadn't reached a full stop two minutes later. He was deeply – even unreasonably – unpopular among the clusters of the electorate that she sampled in her focus groups.¹⁵ True, the opinion polls were 38%–38% on polling day; but in actual votes it went 42% Conservative–35% Labour.

The Red Wedge activists clearly think that if Kinnock had reached out slightly more to younger voters . . . been more adventurous . . . Parliament could have at least gone hung in '92. Considering that John Major returned to Downing Street with a majority of only 21, this might be a reasonable assumption. The psephology here is interesting. In the early 1970s the under-35s had been 10.5% less likely to vote than the over-55s. By 1983 this turnout gap had widened to 11%. By '92 it was 11.5%. If turnout by the young had been 1% more in 1992, then it is conceivable that Major would have ended up leading a minority government and Kinnock would have stayed as Labour Party leader. But, for this to happen, Labour would have had to have targeted young voters with policies that appealed to them. Instead, Mattinson and Mandelson decided to concentrate on re-assuring the (often ill-informed) non-political suburban voters.

Kinnock departed smartly after 1992 and his successor John Smith died suddenly in 1994.¹⁶ The new broom, Tony Blair, was anxious to avoid either a further spell in opposition or a hung Parliament, and actively sought the youth

¹⁵ For a full account of this period see Mattinson's book, *Talking to a Brick Wall* (2010), reviewed in *Lobster* 60 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster60/lobster60.pdf>> p. 140.

¹⁶ John Smith, Leader 1992-1994, had attended only one focus group. During the debrief afterwards, a massively disappointed Smith was informed that the participants were 'recruited as C1C2 swing voters'; to which, Smith was described as 'Spluttering with rage he could hardly bring himself to voice the ultimate insult: "They were all Tories!"'

See Deborah Mattinson's book, as mentioned in footnote 15.

vote again. (Though he also wanted the suburban vote, too). By this point Red Wedge, Jenner, Weller, Bragg *et al* were no longer deemed a viable mechanism for obtaining this. Instead, through his connections to the late John Preston,¹⁷ Tony Blair constructed the (short-lived) entity that became known as 'Cool Britannia'. At the '96 Brit Awards Blair made a presentation to David Bowie, now cool again having, according to one's views, either 'recanted his earlier statements' or 'explained them'. Bowie duly said, yes, he would endorse Labour; but it might be tricky as he was a tax exile. Not surprisingly, the endorsement didn't happen.

After Labour's remarkable electoral triumph a year later a reception took place at 10 Downing Street – musicians, artists, film makers, actors and creative types of every kind being courted and invited to take their place within the New Labour tent. Significantly, virtually all of them declined the request to actually campaign for Blair. No explanations were given, no secrets spilled (though Noel Gallagher joked about taking cocaine in a lavatory at No. 10). For whatever reason people like film-maker Danny Boyle and record company owner Alan McGee, both of whom had struggled through the hard years of the '70s and '80s, never felt that Blair and his grouping were people they could work with on a long-term basis.

To return to Robert Elms. Back in 1980 he was a young columnist at *The Face*, a magazine that rejected the gritty political realism (and anarchic protest) of earlier writing in favour of a new culture. Sade and Paul Weller's outfit The Style Council were considered to be 'jazz' and Colin MacInnes was proclaimed as the UK equivalent of Kerouac. One thing that marked *The Face* apart from its contemporaries was its glossy appearance, colour spreads, articles on clothing and more attention to a 'lifestyle' approach. Compare that with James Birch and Barry Miles' guide to *International Times, Oz, Friends* and sundry other counter culture publications of the late '60s and early '70s recently produced by Rocket 88. Brilliantly illustrated – the book contains every cover of every magazine published between '66 and '74 – this is all very political stuff compared with the fare pushed by *The Face* a decade or so later. *IT* and *Oz* were definitely not targeted at discriminating young punters with money to spend.¹⁸

¹⁷ John Preston was managing director of Polydor records in 1984, later moving to a similar role at RCA. His wife, Roz Preston, was a policy adviser to Blair. See his *Times* obituary 29 November 2017.

¹⁸ Birch is a long-standing and influential gallery owner who exhibited many of the magazine covers in his gallery in late 2017. Seen en masse as works of art their impact was considerable. Miles was a seminal figure in the UK counter culture of the '60s, present at all of the major events.

It is hard not to think that the yawning gap in electoral participation by the young (so noticeable post-1997) was due to a combination of youth culture drifting into slick consumerism and political leaders – like Blair and Brown – not being prepared to do very much, unless they have the agreement of (perpetually) undecided voters. Despite repeated electoral endorsements, the Labour years continued with the Thatcher settlement: no investment in housing, huge debt levels for those wanting to go to university, lower than average investment in health care, poor unemployment benefits and no appreciable investment in the arts. And in foreign policy, Iraq. By 2010 the turn-out gap between the under 35s and the over 55s had widened to 20% producing David Cameron and Brexit (in the 2016 EU Referendum the gap was 17%). It follows that – since, say, 1990 at the latest – had UK politics been as concerned with the young as it has been with pensioners and undecided voters, we may not have had either Cameron or Brexit.

So, perhaps Red Wedge and its antecedents, stretching back to *IT* and *Oz* were right. We need a mass movement of youth-orientated rock stars, celebrities, academics and politicians enthusiastically campaigning for what is in the long-term interests of all of us. In years to come Glastonbury 2017, where Corbyn was greeted with adulation, might be looked back on as the launch pad for this. (Albeit this was a mismatch between a boundlessly optimistic and hopeful audience and a hard-line Eurosceptic.) But one lesson to be drawn by all parties from the Thatcher years and their continuation into Brexit must surely be that economic liberals can also be social liberals. Having a 'nicer' more 'tolerant' society can turn out to be pretty pointless if you don't have much money. Living in a country with gay marriage is insignificant if the other political battles are repeatedly lost.

Simon Mathews' *Psychedelic Celluloid: British Pop Music in Film and TV 1965-74* is published by Oldcastle Books.

<www.oldcastlebooks.co.uk>