



Communal bonds: Muslims making Ramadan at the mosque in east London's Whitechapel

Ramadan And Reaffirmation

To many non-Muslims, fasting from sunrise to sunset during the lunar month of Ramadan (this year commencing at the end of April) is viewed with incomprehension tinged by a strong suspicion of masochism. Yet, as one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith, it serves both a personal and a communal function. The discipline of resisting the natural temptation of eating when hungry strengthens the will and forces an awareness of poverty on those sufficiently fortunate not to have to experience it otherwise. The fasting is often accompanied by prayer, usually communally in a mosque, and the giving of alms to the needy. Thus, it becomes an ex-

tended period, repeated annually, of reaffirming communal bonds.

In many Muslim countries the breaking of the fast at sunset also marks the start of festivities that go well into the night. In the older, more working-class parts of towns and cities, often near the mosques, the streets are lit with coloured hanging lights and children queue up for their turn on the swings, the big wheel, that seem to be a constant in the fairgrounds of every country. Children carrying lanterns go round the neighbourhood, knocking on doors and singing riddle songs. They are rewarded with sweets, biscuits or slices of cake. It is also often a time to remember absent family and friends through prayer and the visiting of the graves of the dear departed.

In Britain the Muslim com-

munity is fragmented by linguistic and regional origins. It is a community that is under threat from institutional racism, in the form of the immigration laws which strike at the extended family, the basic building block of the Muslim community. It is also subject to the usually less co-ordinated, though often more violent, racism of individuals or small politically motivated groups. Under such circumstances the more public, community bonding, aspect of Ramadan is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. The result is that for many of the young, growing up in Britain, fasting is a chore lacking in meaning and any sense of fun. It becomes largely a personal sacrifice stripped of its broader connotations, something it was never meant to become. •

Karim Alrawi

Grunts On The Way To Hell

Chris (Charlie Sheen) drops out of college and volunteers for Vietnam, full of middle-class idealism. With a backpack loaded down with books, he joins a platoon of 'grunts' (foot soldiers) and heads into hell itself under the guidance of the increasingly unhinged Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) and the terminally desperate Sergeant Elias (William Dafoe).

Platoon is based upon writer-



Unhinged: Tom Berenger

director Oliver Stone's first-hand experiences. The enemy - in this case, the 'gooks' - are present only as a shadowy threat, and the narrative point of view, presented from Chris's diary-like letters, invites us to fear them with the central character. There is also, in the two sergeants, a 'goodie' and a 'baddie', a common Hollywood device which serves to fudge the real issue of political blame.

Despite these weaknesses, which must be responsible in part for this 'political' movie's commercial success in the States, *Platoon* is a powerful and unnerving experience. Stone's assured grasp of handheld mayhem and complex set-pieces certainly helps a great deal. His style is free of the operatic indulgence which burdened *Apolcalypse Now* with the image of war as just a doped-out nightmare.

Stone's film finally triumphs in its depiction of the spirit of gung-ho, masculine aggression which war feeds on. Flung together in a hostile terrain, these men try to impress each other with booze, body-building, beer-can-chewing and the derring-do of bashing in 'gooks' heads. *Platoon* thus serves to put into sharper focus just what an utter heap of horse manure *Rambo* really is. •

Martin Sutton

Software's Hard Sell

Even by the inflated standards of the microcomputing industry, the hype surrounding the launch of Manuscript seems to be over the top. The new word processing (WP) programme from the US software house Lotus is not yet available for sale anywhere, at any price, but already first-wave marketing has somehow established the product's reputation. A glossy 16 sheet concertina flier inserted into February's *Byte* magazine is typical of the pre-release gimmickry.

The micro revolution has already transformed the face of WP. In the 1970s only large companies could afford word processing and the operators were a craft elite. Now the equipment is cheap and widespread and the skills to use it are commonplace.

Nobody doubts that Manuscript will be good. Micro-computer based WP programs are now well into their 'third generation' and *Marxism Today* readers who cunningly sat out the first two can now leapfrog directly into a more mature technology. Features which make the early 1980s programmes look crude, such as cut-and-paste copying, spelling checking, multi-windowing, the WYSIWYG editing (pronounced 'wis-ey-wig' - the awful acronym for 'what you see is what you get') have now become standard. Manuscript naturally boasts all of these and more: it has an 'outline processor' for structuring long documents, a means to integrate graphics with text, an indexer, and a 'revision highlighter'. But whether users will be helped or hindered by the extra bells and whistles remains to be seen. Processing power versus complexity of use is always the key trade-off in software.

The IBM PC software market in which Manuscript will compete is already awash with WP products. Manuscript like the brand leaders, is American: in WP, as elsewhere in software, the UK's recent track record is dismal. But the advantages of the technology are such that even some primitive UK systems have won converts. I'm writing this on an ageing combination of Wordwise with a BBC Micro. Any offers for an old typewriter? •
Tom Conlon



Slovene Stompers

Hitler Youth? No. Cultural subversives? Maybe. They are Laibach, a Yugoslav 'pop' group, successful on both sides of the Iron Curtain. 'In the East they stand and listen; in the West, they'd much rather dance'. They describe their appearances in the West, as 'a smarting intruder in the decaying entrails of a greedy animal'. For them the 'centre of action' has moved to the East, Leningrad and Belgrade especially.

Yet they are viewed with unease by the establishment. Laibach is the German name for the Slovene town of Ljubljana, reminiscent to some of the Nazi puppet regime of Slovenia. They reject political labels; their work deals with ideology without being ideologically sound.

They seek the status and influence pop(ular) success brings. Their latest single, 'One Vision' is by the British band Queen. Groaned in German to an unrelenting drum

beat, this former top 10 hit would now not sound out of place at a Nuremberg rally.

Unlike bands from the Western rock tradition, they are part of a wider cultural movement - the NSK (the New Slovene Cultural movement) which encompasses actors, painters, philosophers, architects and designers. Inspiration comes from a mutant mix of Western rock, Slovene tradition and European art movements.

Deafening music, impassive stares, shaved heads and films of Guernica and Dresden place performances on a Wagnerian scale. Ignore the empty pose of so many 'political' bands and catch something that genuinely disturbs and questions. •
Martin Pople

Laibach play the Queen Elizabeth Hall (April 1); Liverpool (Apr 2); Manchester (Apr 5) and Brighton (Apr 9). The LP *Opus Dei*, which includes their current single, is on Mute Records. Other members of NSK, theatre group Sisters of Scipion Nasice, play the London Coliseum in July and the Riverside Studios in August.

Jazz for Absolute Beginners

Intrigued by the so-called 'jazz revival'? Like to know more but bewildered by the choice? We asked Simon Booth, of the band Working Week and a jazz enthusiast, for a guide for absolute beginners.

Jazz has many styles and a rich global history, but to start at its beginnings with 'trad' jazz of the 1920s, try any of the masters of this style - pianist **Jelly Roll Morton** or trumpeter **Louis Armstrong**. **Bix Beiderbeck**, a gifted sax player, was the first white jazz musician.

Count Basie epitomises the later big band sound with its strict tempos and stunning orchestrations. His LP *E=MC²* is one of the best.

Be-bop transformed the jazz of the 1940s. It is angry militant music with a new sense of rhythm and harmony and its greatest exponent is **Charlie 'Bird' Parker**. Listen to his sax playing on the Savoy Recordings.

The **Miles Davis** LP, *Kind of Blue*, is an example of 'cool' jazz, with his superb trumpet playing. For the later 'avant garde' style, listen to any **John Coltrane** LP or the live recording of **Louis Moholo** and **Keith Tippett** on *Turn*.

Simon Booth's other favourites include *Ella Fitzgerald sings the Duke Ellington Songbook* with its wonderful range of classic songs and also **Billy Holiday** - jazz's most important vocalist. *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* by **Charlie Mingus** is an LP of pure emotion and has sleeve notes by his psychologist discussing whether he is mad!

Jazz performance depends on the interaction between the players and the atmosphere, the spontaneity of the moment. To understand this fully you must see jazz live. Catch the humour and eccentricity of the big band, Loose Tubes or the Jazz Warriors fronted by Britain's young hopeful, **Courtney Pine**. For a record with a great live atmosphere, try *Getz A Go Go*. It reeks of the late night existential, smokey club. The velvet tones of the sax match the cool of **Astrid Gilberto**, voice.

Don't expect to take to it all at once. Unlike pop, jazz is not disposable. Its success depends on the sincerity and commitment of the players. A love and understanding of jazz develops like a friendship which matures and blossoms over the years. •