



The Proclaimers: Looking for a clearer vision of an independent Scotland

# National Anthems

In a spectacularly successful year, Scots duo The Proclaimers captured the hearts and political instincts of their generation. Joan McCout interviewed them

'We are not a political band,' was Craig and Charlie Reid's oft-repeated exhortation to journalists at the beginning of the year. By the end of October they were on the streets of Govan with Jim Sillars, dishing out smiles and autographs and vowing not to pay the poll tax.

Hundreds of election leaflets carrying their photograph told voters: 'We want Jim Sillars to win here in Govan because we don't want to watch Scotland die.' Two days before the poll they could be heard blasting out their song *Cap In Hand* on an SNP party political broadcast. *We fight when they ask*





*us/We boast/then we cower/  
We beg/for a piece/of what's  
already ours . . .*

In the crisis which followed Sillars' elimination of a 19,000 Labour majority in the Glasgow constituency, Dr James D Young, the Scottish labour historian launched the Movement For A Socialist Scotland. 'The Proclaimers' grasp of the constitutional crisis is unsurpassed,' wrote Dr Young in a December article explaining his motives and quoting from another track on the twins' *Sunshine On Leith* album. *What do you do when democracy fails you?/What do you do when minority means you?*

The Auchtermuchty twins were among Labour's lost millions in the 1983 general election. Lost forever, they voted SNP and joined the party shortly afterwards. Scotland's most politically-effective pop group see music as an emotional, personal release, quite distinct from the committee rooms and sloganising of party politics. Yet it is precisely this distinction which makes them so effective. Charlie Reid sees nothing unusual in this: 'We think of ourselves as popular entertainers who happen to support the national liberation movement in Scotland.'

Did using their celebrity status to sell the politics feel uncomfortable? Charlie: 'No. But if we had not already been activists it might have made us feel uncomfortable. It was just a big version of things we've done before.' Craig: 'It certainly didn't have a negative effect - particularly since others like Pat Kane and Ricky from Deacon Blue backed it too. There's obviously a mood of change in Scotland, a change in political identity, which is coming out in these so-called celebrities supporting the SNP. I think in the end people will be forced to take sides: whether they want to preserve the Union or get out of it. We're doing it a bit ahead of other people, but eventually everyone from celebrity sportsmen to journalists will have to decide.'

Are they advocating some

kind of Scottish Red Wedge? Craig: 'Red Wedge didn't work because if you talk politics too much people get pissed off with it. Then again, Bragg and Weller were doing it on the back of the Labour Party, which is in decline. We'd be doing it on the back of the SNP and the nationalist movement, which is going up.' Charlie: 'Yes, if you're seen to be honestly campaigning for things that are achievable when the Labour Party is doing so little, it could be attractive to a lot of socialists. And most importantly the Scottish working class must take sides. I remember Tony Benn saying only women can free women, only blacks can free blacks. You can lend your support, but in the end it's down to the individuals themselves.'

English music critics who approve of The Proclaimers have called them 'the voice of the other Britain', extending their Scottishness to take in a new regionalism offering hope to the disenfranchised of Jarrow and Toxteth. Such interpretations downgrade Scottish national identity and encourage Scots to believe that 'breaking away' means selfishly abandoning their northern neighbours to the ravages of Thatcherism.

Charlie: 'We don't speak for anybody but ourselves. I think people on the Left who are committed to the Union would like to blur the issue by saying we've got similar problems to these areas. We have, economically. I'd love to see them governing themselves as well. But we cannot wait for them. Nobody, no matter where they are, Wales or Northern Ireland, can tell us we can't govern ourselves. But we're not nationalists, that's not why we joined the SNP. We joined because, as Scots, - we were sick of seeing our part of the world condemned to perpetual capitalist government. The way forward for socialism is for small nations to take the initiative. That's the first step.'

The whole issue of the national identity of Scotland causes a great deal of anguished analysis. Almost

half of the 'What's Left' event's opening debate in Glasgow was devoted to attempts to define Scottishness without descending into the sticky quagmire of sentimentality. Like many young people, The Proclaimers feel no such need to tussle with their own sense of themselves. In recent polls, 50% of 18-24 year-olds favoured all-out separation. Charlie: 'People know they are Scottish. I can't see why the unionist Left in Scotland recognise the cultural and political entity of Nicaragua, or black nationalism in South Africa, or justifiable struggle like the Palestinians and then equate the awareness of Scottish nationality with fascism.' Craig: 'We couldn't give a shit for Scottish culture because culture is not something that you *preserve*, it's something that you *do*. We have as much culture in Scotland now as we ever did. It's just different. Even something like a football chant you sing on the terraces is different from England. So are the council houses and the universities.'

Admirers have cast The Proclaimers as urban angels, avenging the cruel, kitsch joke played on their country by Scotch myth-makers of the past. Instead of a national culture, we had a whole set of national jokes: from Brigadoon to the White Heather Club, to the 'peak-under-his-kilt' seaside postcards. The twins are not in favour of throwing all of this historical baggage away - even if it is embarrassing. They see Scottish culture as something which has a global perspective - even at its most superficially parochial. Craig: 'Harry Lauder wasn't just aiming to be popular among 5m people. He was basically writing great music hall songs, westernised, even American mainstream music of the day - but in his own way with the stupid kilt, singing in his own accent. Harry Lauder is Scottish culture no matter what the snobs say.'

The Proclaimers' own cultural contribution is hardly home-grown. They draw their sound and a large chunk

of sentiment from across the Atlantic, particularly, but not exclusively, from that distant cousin of the Scots/Irish folk music: country and western. Songs like *Sean* and *Sunshine On Leith* feature country values as well as slide guitars. Family, community, work and religion are all important to The Proclaimers.

Charlie: 'Sam Cooke on his own is a bigger musical influence than all folk music. Folk is in your background, sure, like going into a pub in Muchty and hearing an accordion band. And blue grass music can be traced back to the bagpipes, so folk is an *indirect* influence.' Craig: 'Most of the stuff the old man played around the house when we were growing up was black - Dixieland jazz, R&B and soul.'

Drawing from the music of other cultures has in no way diminished The Proclaimers' reputation as integral artists making 'honest' music. This accolade has been awarded by the self-appointed guardians of musical authenticity. But what makes some kinds of music more real than others? Craig: 'It's a personal thing. It's not about musical forms and it's certainly not about whether you use a synthesizer or not.'

Authenticity, then, is not necessarily gained by delving far into your past. It is possible to borrow from other cultures and still be true to your own. There is a certain schizophrenia driving rock music in Scotland: a need to mimic Americana in order to compensate for the unrealised potential of the culture you left back home. Only The Proclaimers have realised the full potential of that culture, by dragging it into a marriage with blues, soul and country.

Craig: 'We *are* pretty schizophrenic on paper. We regard what we do as being every bit as American as Hue And Cry, Deacon Blue and Simple Minds. Maybe it's because, although we're not the best group in the world, we do express ourselves more clearly on our own terms. Maybe we have thicker skins than some others ...' •

## Striking A Vocal Chord

The rising tide of Scottish discontent - evident throughout 1988 - seemed to wash over the Govan by-election in November. Patrick Kane of Hue And Cry, gives a personal reflection on that historic moment



It's dangerous when Scots get together to talk. At the *MT* 'What's Left' event in Glasgow Tech, on the Saturday before the Govan by-election, I sat in on a panel discussing 'Scottish pop - who's in control?' By the end of an exhilarating 2.5-hour debate, all 50 or 60 of us had thrashed out what was virtually a programme for future Scottish cultural politics.

Dispersing into the afternoon, we were aware of the difficulty of putting all our glorious discourse on pop-cultural activism and post-Fordism in Scotland into practice: but the experience had been truly rewarding. We agreed that such serious speech among Scots about their conditions and possibilities should be continued and developed. If many more people felt as clear-headed and politically-capable as we did that day, then surely things would change?

A few days later, the dangers of letting Scottish citizens discuss their own

future, and then act upon it, was manifested at Govan. Initial Labour reactions towards the SNP's victory strove manfully to deny the seriousness, even the responsibility, of the voters and their intentions.

Donald Dewar, a man visibly at panic stations, brutally trivialised the disaster on tv as a 'flash flood result', irrational and motiveless as weather. Govanites were 'indulging in the luxury of a protest vote' before the next election, which almost made 'the Scottish question' sound like a street-corner proposition, or a pig-out on chocolate and burgers; the Scottish working class's desire running rampant and untrammelled again. What? They want effective political control *as well as* affordable mortgages and Spanish holidays? Too much, too much!

Incidentally, Dewar's imagery chillingly matches Rifkind's admonition of the Scottish middle classes at the last general election; their Labour vote was also a 'luxury', an indulgence which rested on knowing that the Tories would win anyway in England. For either man, the anti-Establishment vote - whether it's a Tory or Labour status quo - is interestingly figured as a matter of sensuality, appetite, a breaking-out of what EP Thompson has described as 'the poverty of desire' in political culture.

The possibility of an active, questioning, rationalising Scottish electorate obviously scares most of the local Labour apparatchiks rigid. The more mechanical the politico, the more unequivocal their condescension - towards both citizens and party activists.

John Maxton MP, availing himself of *The Scotsman's* 'Govan Debate' slot, characterised the notion of an anti-Thatcher electoral pact in Scotland with these considered words: 'If we all unite in Scotland and shout boo long enough then the wicked fairy will disappear in a puff of blue smoke.' Kinnock has similarly described the extremely pragmatic Scottish

nationalism expressed at Govan, as 'thinking with the blood'; the wavering-Labour, pro-Scottish, anti-Tory citizen is either a childish dolt or an incipient fascist. The ordinary ability to reason, calculate, test the truth-claims of the dominant ideology and find them wanting, is utterly refused.

With the findings of Labour's National Organising Committee report on Govan now in, another metaphor of incapacity has been smuggled into post-Govan discourse: the couch potato. The main reason for the party's defeat, according to director of organisation, Joyce Gould, was Bob Gillespie's poor showing on Scottish Television's last televised debate before voting day. Party HQ will now select a candidate, overruling the local activists if necessary, who is most capable of coping with the highly televisual atmosphere of mid-term by-elections: a telegenic, sound-biting glamour boy/girl whose 'confident tv personality' they hope will sway the viewing voter more effectively than the coherence (or incoherence) of verifiable political proposals.

Yet there exist media forms which treat Scottish citizens as more than easily-manipulable telly addicts. STV's explicitly-titled discussion programme, *Scottish Assembly*, certainly provides what Jean Baudrillard would call 'simulation' of public opinion: 100 Scots, market-researched by Mori to reflect the class, educational and economic patterns of Scottish society, who electronically vote three or four times a show on aspects of a main topic.

The results of the shows' polls have been broadly in line with others published - a fundamental desire for greater home rule, if not complete separation, with Labour's Assembly and the SNP's independence in Europe framing that consensus.

But the most fascinating aspect is the *spectacle* of opinion-forming that *Scottish*

*Assembly* provides.

Rather than television 'radiating oblivion, obliterating discussion and exterminating understanding of the context of events', as Baudrillard was quoted saying in the *Listener* recently, the sight and sound of recognisable people using every level of articulacy and address - from nostalgic ex-miners to pragmatic working mums, confident teachers to exploding teenagers, jaded party hacks to strident trans-political radicals - is energising and educational.

The fantasy and simulation of this piece of tv entertainment is that of real democratic involvement in the decision-making of one's own society - and a more subversive dream could not be imagined.

The specific danger of letting Scots indulge in free communicative action is perfectly illustrated in the stramash caused by *Scottish Assembly's* poll of its 1000 representative Scots before the 1987 general election.

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The tv *Assembly* members were fully informed of each party's manifesto, by three researchers whose private political orientations were Labour, Tory and SNP. When the result saw an atypical percentage increase for the SNP, the Labour Party raised cries of bias and infiltration.

Perhaps the incident reveals instead how perilous it is to allow the Scottish citizen to think and act in an undistorted, directly democratic environment. If knowledge is power, who knows what an educated, agitated and organised Scottish polity might want? After all, the current political arrangement is, as Neal Ascherson has said, simply 'a manner of speaking'. •