Songs from the Wood and Sounds of the Suburbs: A Folk, Rock and Punk Portrait of England, 1965–1977

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This article explores some of the ways in which England has been portrayed in the genre of folk, rock and punk music between 1965 and 1977. The article argues that changes in both the music and lyrics reflect the shift in England from what Eric Hobsbawm calls a post war 'Golden Age' to 'Crisis Decades'. These musical transitions are evident in increasingly strident instrumentation and lyrical content that becomes progressively more cynical. The article argues that in this way, English folk, rock and punk music has played a role in both reflecting and recreating the spirit of the age.

Introduction

'No future for England's dreaming' bawled the Sex Pistols in 1977, and perhaps they were right. The previous decade or so had seen England walk the increasingly stony path from the whimsical optimism of the swinging sixties to an altogether more cynical, disillusioned pessimism in the 1970s. Unemployment, the collapse of the industrial economy, a succession of seemingly impotent governments, and the oil crisis at home were all played out against a depressing global backdrop of the Vietnam war and international oil price hikes. In short, things were a mess, and the Sex Pistols, like many others, had something to say about it.

But it wasn't always like that.

In this article I shall explore some of the ways in which English rock and pop music between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s has portrayed England over time; from the pre-industrial age, through to the industrial city, and thence to the beginnings of the post-industrial era.

It would probably be fair to say that a list says as much about the person doing the choosing as it does about the items on it, so the reader deserves some explanation for what can never be a wholly objective exercise. I have chosen this period of music because during these twelve years or so English rock and pop music enjoyed a florescence that saw it mature as an art form and develop a style of its own that drew not only on the rock and roll and blues traditions of the United States, but also on English musical traditions and attitudes.

I have chosen England in particular because not only does it have its own myths and traditions, but it has also produced many great pop and rock artists: the Beatles; the Rolling Stones; the Who; Led Zeppelin; Elton John; the Clash; the Sex Pistols; and Radiohead to name a few. England also has its own folk tradition (often overshadowed by the Celtic folk music of Scotland and Ireland) and this English tradition includes Fairport Convention (as well as individual members such as Sandy Denny, Richard Thompson, Dave Swarbrick and Ashley Hutchings); Steeleye Span and Jethro Tull.

Unlike a great deal of the ephemera to come out of the world of rock and pop music, the work of the artists described in this article has, in this writer's view, stood the test of time, not only for its purely musical qualities, but also because the lyrics which, besides being thoughtful and perceptive, eloquently reflect their time. This is largely because the chosen subject matter is the world around them, rather than the more common topics of teenage love and heartbreak typical of many of their contemporaries in rock and pop. Each of the songs I have chosen encapsulates a particular facet of how the changes described above played themselves out in the context of the built environment, and when drawn together, the songs paint a musical portrait of England that is variously romantic, insightful, lewd, disgusted, regretful, hopeful, disillusioned, cynical, or affectionate. It is also remarkably complete: sometimes optimistic, sometimes pessimistic (and simultaneously both on occasion) puncturing certain myths, unafraid of nostalgia, but perfectly willing to peer closely into the dim reaches of England's darker side. It is also a portrait that offers valuable insights into the interdependencies between social processes and structures, and the urban and rural environments.

In 1961, Raymond Williams (1961) wrote that 'we lack a genuinely common experience, except in certain rare and dangerous moments of crisis'. There is a sense in which the songs described here, although they post-date Williams's observation, do nevertheless reflect a sense of dislocation and crisis, and a brief look at the historical context within which the songs may be framed will be useful. For as no art is created in isolation, so these songs were very much products of, and often responses to their times.

The period under consideration is quite short, covering as it does the dozen years from 1965 to 1977, but those twelve years saw a profound shift in mood from one of great optimism to an altogether uglier one that was both cynical and pessimistic. The origins of this change predate the period itself by several decades, but at their heart lie two things: firstly, the optimism of what Eric Hobsbawm (1994) has called the Golden Years following the Second World War, when England and Western society in general enjoyed a prolonged period of stable economic growth and food surpluses; secondly, there is the period following this Golden Age – Hobsbawm calls it the Crisis Decades – when the various economic, political and social crises of the early 1970s made it clear that the earlier optimism for the future had been profoundly misplaced.

If there is a key narrative thread, then, it is how, as time passed, the musical pictures became more aggressive, more cynical, and less forgiving of English culture and English politics. While the earlier songs show regret at the plight of the English city, they nonetheless remain generally positive in their representations of it. The later ones, however, show anger. Whimsy and nostalgia is replaced by belligerence. In part this reflects the image originally presented by sociologist Louis Wirth in his influential but much criticized 1938 essay *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (Gans, 1995; Wirth, 1938). Wirth portrayed an urban society that was weakly integrated, and which reflected a hankering after a (non-existent) pre-industrial rural idyll of honest toil in the fields as compared with the failed promises of modern life, a topic British band Blur also explored on their 1992 album *Modern Life is Rubbish* (Blur, 1992).

Putting aside Gans's criticism of Wirth's perspective (essentially, Gans argued that Wirth's perspective was overly focused on the inner city, and therefore incomplete), there can be little doubt that this shift to cynicism also reflects the decline in hope for hippie ideology in the early 1970s. In the late 1970s, as the Labour government failed to control the economy or the trade unions, as Britain's industrial base collapsed catastrophically, as unemployment soared, as inflation reached 25 per cent, and as these factors coalesced to devastating effect in the inner cities, this cynicism crystallized

musically in the form of punk rock. Punk bands favoured a simple formula of the three minute song and an instrumental line up comprising electric guitar(s), bass and drums, violently deployed to banish forever the overblown and pompous musical excesses of progressive rock bands such as Yes (whose complex, multi-layered compositions and arrangements could last for up to 25 minutes, and never really gets to the point), and with a directness that did not shy away from the harsh realities of life as they saw it.

The article starts with a brief look at 'The Invocation of "Olde Englande"' before moving 'Out of the Countryside into the City' for a gallery of musical portraits of urban England that vary from the warmly nostalgic to the bleakly chilling. A brief interlude for some vignettes of some colourful characters is followed by a return to the cynicism of punk rock, where no mercy is shown to England's failings. Lastly, there is a Conclusion.

The Invocation of 'Olde Englande'

Let me bring you all things refined:
galliards and lute songs served in chilling ale.
Greetings well met fellow, hail!
. . . Songs from the wood make you feel much better.

(Anderson, 1977)

With its evocation of galliards (a lively dance), lute songs and 'chilling ale' the eponymous title track to Jethro Tull's 1977 album *Songs from the Wood* is as good a place to start as any other. The imagery is of homely conviviality, fuelled with generous quantities of that archetypically English drink, ale – 'from the wood" is a reference to the tradition of drawing the ale straight from a wooden barrel. The photograph on the album sleeve serves to underpin the notion of 'merrie rural Englande': a woodcutter – or perhaps a poacher – squats warming his hands over a fire in the middle of woodland; two pheasants lie on the ground beside him, awaiting the pot, and his gun dog sits at his shoulder. The music is best described as heavy folk-rock: acoustic guitars, flutes, whistles, mandolin and lute combine with the standard rock instruments: electric guitars, electric bass and drums. The singing is by turns throaty and punchy. The whole effect is to paint an image of a hearty, leathery, ebullient England quite at odds with the cynicism to be found in the contemporary songs of punk rock.

English folk music – music 'of the people, by the people, for the people' (Humphries, 1996) – makes a good starting point, since it was a form of mass communication in the days before literacy was widespread. Folk songs were the means by which news could be passed from village to village, sung by itinerant minstrels at fairs, at executions and on market days. The folk tradition had its florescence in the years between the Restoration of the English monarchy under Charles II and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. The most popular songs were the broadside ballads, eighteenth-century equivalents of the modern tabloid press, which were printed and sold to an increasingly literate population. The landed gentry looked down upon folk music because it came from people who, in their view, had little or nothing to say (Humphries, 1996).

However, attitudes changed as musicologists began to perceive the cultural value of this music, and from the 1880s onwards, collectors of these songs became a familiar sight (they were often mistaken for tax collectors by dint of their dress and accent). The two most prominent collectors of English folk songs were Cecil Sharpe and Francis Child (Humphries, 1996), but in the first half of the twentieth century, the folk tunes collected by Sharpe, Child and others had more influence over the classical genre than over popular music. In the 1950s, under the influence of artists such as Ewan McColl in England, and Woody Guthrie in the United States, folk music began to reclaim some of its roots. By the early 1960s, a youthful Bob Dylan had reinvented folk music to reflect the times, in the process inventing a new genre

of pop musician, the singer-songwriter, and influencing, among others, the Beatles.

English folk-rock band Fairport Convention, themselves influenced by American group The Band (who had supported Dylan when he had made the controversial switch from acoustic to electric instruments) drew extensively on the traditional material collected by Sharpe and Child at the turn of the nineteenth century on their groundbreaking album *Liege & Lief* (Fairport Convention, 1969). This album married the folk and rock traditions to create a new genre, folk-rock, which sought to take the narrative-based folk tradition and situate it in a contemporary rock setting. They continued to do so after this album, and a notable example, recorded in 1977, is *The Eynsham Poacher*. Originally collected by Sharpe, this song tells the story of three young men from the Oxfordshire village of Eynsham who went out hunting for food on land belonging to the local lord, Lord Abingdon.

Three Eynsham laddies went out one day,
to Lord Abingdon's Manor they made their way.
They took their dogs to seek some game,
and soon to Wytham woods they came.
Chorus: Laddie-i-o, Laddie-i-o, fol-de-ro-ro-ro,
Laddie-i-o (twice)

(English Folk Dance Project, 2001)

This defiance by the rural working class of the local landed gentry adds to the image of England described in *Songs from the Wood*: here the protagonists are survivors, who escaped successfully from the game keeper, and 'had their hare and pheasant still!' (English Folk Dance Project, 2001). The tale itself is one of class conflict: here it is the aristocracy who are on the losing side; no surprise given that this is a folk tale. Oxfordshire itself is a county of golden limestone houses and villages, ornate mediaeval churches and lightly wooded, green rolling countryside: not far from the landscape of the rural idyll, even if it is now given over to modern farming techniques, but here we see the harsher side of rural life, albeit presented in a way that depicts the downtrodden rural classes as the heroes in an unequal struggle against the upper echelons of society who so despised both the people and their music. The tune of *The Eynsham Poacher* is an old morris dance tune which fairly romps along, propelled forward by electric guitars, electric violin and a rhythm section that owes more to the heavy rock band Led Zeppelin than the often unaccompanied originals collected by Cecil Sharpe, or the purely acoustic instruments associated with traditional folk music.

More pensive songs can be found too, written in the traditions of English folk music by modern songwriters. In the song *Fotheringay* (Denny, 1968), a lilting motif on the acoustic guitar is followed by other instruments: a second guitar; bass; and a third guitar motif, more intricate, before a clear female voice comes in with the song's melody. The song was written by Sandy Denny following a visit to the ruined Northamptonshire castle where Mary Queen of Scots was executed in 1587 (Humphries, 1996), and *Fotheringay* paints its gloomy subject – the impending death of the queen – in soft, interwoven guitar lines that echo the contrapuntal musical style of the sixteenth century. Denny's voice, clear and unmistakably English, lends the whole song an air of English pastoralism, far removed from the concerns of England in the late 1960s. And yet in many respects, the naïve romance of the song ties it as strongly to the callow optimism of the late 1960s, as it does to the sixteenth century.

How often she has gazed from castle windows o'er,
And watched the daylight passing within her captive wall,
With no-one to heed her call.

(Denny, 1968)

But the rural idyll recalled in these songs is also symptomatic of a profound mistrust of the changes that were then permeating British society. While the late 1960s certainly

carried a sense of optimism, they were also heavily tinged with an increasing cynicism as it became apparent that while capitalism may have thrived as an economic system in the 1960s, its social legacy was proving less benign (Hewison, 1986). The three songs just described offer sketches in music of different aspects of a gentler agrarian society that had either disappeared (as in *The Eynsham Poacher*) or that appeared to be disappearing (as in *Songs from the Wood*) in the harsh climate of modern economic necessity, as familiarity gave way to alienation.

The Kinks are The Village Green Preservation Society by the Kinks took this regret as its theme. At the heart of many English villages lies the village green (around which the village would have grown), a common area on which animals could graze, sometimes with a small pond, and where people could meet. The church, the blacksmith's forge, and the local inn would all overlook the green (they often still do), as would the homes of the villagers. It has thus taken on huge importance as a symbol of the English way of life. But it is also a symbol of a way of life that has largely died out, and while those who cling to it have had their share of mockery, it still has the power to recall gentler times, as this excerpt from the track *Village Green* shows. The singer recalls how after a brief dalliance by the 'old oak tree' with a girl called Daisy, he left the village to seek fame and fortune, but nonetheless, he cannot help looking over his shoulder at the past.

I miss the village green
And all the simple people.
I miss the village green.
The church, the clock, the steeple.

(Davies, 1968)

The album was followed by *Arthur (or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)* (Kinks, 1969), a portrait of the reminiscences of an English family on the point of emigrating to Australia. This mournful brace of albums was well-timed, capturing the *zeitgeist* as it balanced on the cusp between Hobsbawm's

Relics of rural England – Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire. (*Photo*: Nick Green)

Golden Age and Crisis Decades. Man had just landed on the moon, society was looking forward to a better and brighter future, and modernity appeared to have the upper hand. But times were changing fast, and in such circumstances, perhaps wistful nostalgia has a strong appeal. The Golden Age tipped over to crisis, however, in the student protests of 1968. Beginning in Paris, and spreading to Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Washington, Detroit, Los Angeles, they seemed to come out of nowhere, with only vaguely understood motives. They faded almost as quickly, but left a legacy of lingering dissatisfaction (Norman, 1984). Indeed, the movements of 1968 had taken everyone by surprise precisely because of the stability that preceded them (Hobsbawm, 1994).

Out of the Countryside into the City

So goodbye yellow brick road,
Where the dogs of society howl.
You can't plant me in your penthouse.
I'm going back to my plough.
(John and Taupin, 1973)

Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* may have revealed a hankering after the simpler things in life (like the narrator in the Kinks' *Village Green*), but in truth, England was, and had been for many decades, an urban society. Industrial society was two centuries

The Village Green – with Clock. (*Photo*: Nick Green)

old, and that itself was now nearing its end, while England's agricultural roots had long since been torn up in the service of industrial-scale factory farming, even if the 'green and pleasant land' immortalized in William's Blake's poem *Jerusalem* remained forever fixed in the national psyche.

England's history since the Industrial Revolution has thus been one of steady migration from the country to the city. But there were paradoxes that came with the move to the city in search of a better life, as Mumford (1938) has noted. While there were undoubtedly technical improvements, such as gas, running water and more recently electricity, the cities to which the country-dwellers came had seen few social improvements since the early eighteenth century. Indeed, basic amenities such as light and clean air, available in any village, were frequently lacking in the cities (Mumford, 1938).

It is this paradox, the conflict between the advantages that city living can bring, and the losses that come with leaving the countryside, that underpin many of the songs described in this section. This comes through most clearly in the bitter-sweet nature of the lyrics, and through the use of minor keys to tinge the melodies with sadness.

Thus if we return to the Kinks, we discover that the wistfulness to be found in *Village Green Preservation Society* can also be found in some of their earlier work. In 1967, two years before the closures of London's docks began, they released *Waterloo Sunset* (Davies, 1966), a simple and direct homage to the beauties of its eponymous subject matter, still a working river then, which also recalls Tintoretto's famous panorama of London from Waterloo Bridge. A simple melody in 4/4 time, it rolls on calmly like the River Thames, a straightforward guitar phrase propelling the song purposefully and confidently forward. The song is a simple vignette of everyday London life, a dusky picture of workers making their way home, and lovers meeting for their weekly rendezvous; Tintoretto's panorama brought up to date in the modern medium of pop music. At the heart of it all, as in Tintoretto's painting, the River Thames, and a vista – the Waterloo Sunset – that is its own paradise.

> Dirty old river, must you keep rolling, flowing into the night.
> People so busy, makes me feel dizzy, taxi light shines so bright.
> But I don't need no friends.
> As long as I gaze on waterloo sunset, I am in paradise.
>
> (Davies, 1966)

Although the heart of the city provides the subject matter for many of the songs described in this article, the suburbs have not been completely ignored. However, as we shall see below, for the most part they have not received flattering treatment. An exception is the Beatles' double A-side *Strawberry Fields Forever/Penny Lane* (Lennon and McCartney, 1967). It has been described by one commentator as essentially a portrait of 'Liverpool-on-a-sunny-hallucinogenic-afternoon' (Carr and Tyler, 1978, p. 62), and while it remains as one of the classic singles, it is also notable for the fact that it deals explicitly with suburbia, a topic that remains less common to this day. Of the two songs, Lennon's *Strawberry Fields Forever* is the more psychedelic, simply making use of the existence and childhood memories of Strawberry Fields as the basis for a song, and it is the music itself that makes it stand out: the first half of the song uses entirely electric instruments, the second half uses orchestral strings and, insofar as the Beatles were breaking new musical ground with almost every release at this time, the sound defined English psychedelia at the time.

But it is McCartney's *Penny Lane* that gets to the heart of an idealized English suburban way of life, safe from the dangers of the city itself, peopled by unthreatening characters who lend a feeling of steady continuity to a place via a sun-drenched series of vignettes of the comfortably familiar characters to be

found there. *Penny Lane* is different from *Strawberry Fields Forever* in both musical style and in terms of its content. The instrumentation includes not only the usual assortment of electric guitars, drums and so forth, but also flutes and trumpets, evoking the sound of a wind band, or a northern English brass band. The lyrics set out a series of vignettes that capture every day suburban Liverpool life: a barber; the rich banker mocked by mischievous children; the fireman, all living their lives 'beneath the blue suburban skies' of Penny Lane.

> On the corner is a banker with a motorcar, the
> little children laugh at him behind his back.
> And the banker never wears a mac in the
> pouring rain, very strange.
> Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes.
> There beneath the blue suburban skies, I sit . . .
> (Lennon and McCartney, 1967)

However, these are not quite literal descriptions of English suburbia: a fireman, proud of his fire engine and a royalist too; the hairdresser; and later in the song 'a pretty nurse is selling poppies from a tray' (a reference to the tradition of wearing a poppy each November to commemorate the British service personnel who have died in combat) paint a picture of a quintessentially English scene that people will still recognize. The view is that of the flâneur who strolls slowly through the streets, enjoying them for the spectacle that they offer, not buying, just looking and observing, taking delight in the small details that offer a window onto the people's inner selves. Like the folk songs described above, the outlook is still optimistic, although this may be less a reflection of the times themselves, and more a reflection of the fact that the Beatles were at their creative peak. That said, 1967 was an optimistic year, the year of the so-called 'Summer of Love' when the Beatles released *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

The gentle portraiture of *Penny Lane* was continued a decade later in *Baker Street* by Gerry Rafferty (1978), as he takes us on a stroll down the famous London thoroughfare. Originally laid out from 1755 by William Baker, it is now filled with shops and restaurants. Famous residents included Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes (Weinreb and Hibbert, 1988). But in Rafferty's song, the optimism that was so evident in the 1960s has given way to a world-weary cynicism. By now, the post-war Golden Age described by Hobsbawm was very obviously over: in the eleven years since *Penny Lane*, there had been the oil crisis; five changes of government; continuing and worsening impasse in the Vietnam War; and in the world of rock music the deaths of Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, John Bonham of Led Zepellin, Marc Bolan of T-Rex, Keith Moon of the Who, to name the best known (Hardy and Laing, 1990). The world, and rock music, had less cause for optimism than ever before. While Rafferty's Baker Street wearily echoes a cynicism more belligerently expressed in punk, Rafferty's narrator seems too tired to be angry: all that remains is bitter disappointment from a street that is simply a part of the 'city desert' that can only be forgotten by drinking:

> This city desert makes you feel so cold.
> It's got so many people but it's got no soul
> And it's taken you so long to find out you were
> wrong
> When you thought it held everything.
> (Rafferty, 1978)

You, the listener, are the person in question, but although the tune is gentle, the seemingly wealthy streets of urban England are revealed as a sham, a thin, glossy veneer that is peeled easily away to reveal the empty lives behind. The city is soulless we are told, and it sucks the very life out of you as you go about your everyday business. It is nothing more than a sink for broken dreams, Rafferty tells us; the streets, even the wealthy ones, are not paved with gold.

But most haunting of all, are the songs that paint a grimmer picture of the towns and

cities that grew with the coming of industry into grimy, misbegotten places described by Dickens in works such as *The Old Curiosity Shop*. These are songs about English towns whose lyrics peer closely down the alleys and walk us through the back streets of the townspeoples' lives, showing us only desolation and despair. The images evoked owe more to Edward Hopper's images of dystopia than Tintoretto's glorious urban landscapes, taking us to the places we prefer to ignore, and leaving no doubt in the mind of the listener that the glistening city has its dark side too. These towns and cities are the ones that Mumford (1938, p. 143) castigated as the 'insensate industrial town[s]' that were 'man-heaps, machine-warrens, not organs of human association' (Mumford, 1938, p. 148).

Most famous of these, perhaps, are songs by Ralph McTell and Ewan MacColl, both folk singers whose work has continued to influence new generations of songwriters. In *Dirty Old Town* (MacColl, 1950), a song about the northern town of Salford, MacColl sketches a stark picture of life in a rundown English industrial town at a time when the recovery from the Second World War was barely under way, and it was becoming clear that England had changed irrevocably due to the conflict. Salford itself had started life as a village on the banks of the River Irwell in Lancashire, and can trace its origins back to the Magna Carta. However it grew dramatically with the coming of industrialization, specializing in the dyeing and bleaching of cloth. With the construction of the Manchester Ship Canal and the docks in the late nineteeth century Salford became an industrial suburb of Manchester itself. It is this place that MacColl recalls in *Dirty Old Town*.

I met my love by the gas yard wall
Dreamed a dream by the old canal
Kissed my girl by the factory wall
Dirty old town, dirty old town

(MacColl, 1950)

Ralph McTell's *Streets of London* is a sad, simple song, in which he paints an unremittingly bleak picture of a city that shows no pity to its weaker inhabitants, ignoring them, leaving them to make what they can of their lives, and offering them only occasional solace in a deserted all night

London from the South Bank. (*Photo*: Nick Green)

café that serves simply to magnify the sense of loneliness.

Have you seen the old man in the closed-down market
Kicking up the paper with his worn out shoes?
In his eyes you see no pride, hand held loosely by his side
Yesterday's paper telling yesterday's news
(McTell, 1974)

Dirty old town – Bankside Power Station. (*Photo*: Nick Green)

After these songs, Waterloo Sunset, for all its inherent wistfulness, seems gloriously optimistic, but sad songs have the upper hand it seems when it comes to the English city. In *At the Chime of City Clock* (1970) Nick Drake, a folk musician from the same stable as Fairport Convention and rarely given to cheerfulness, focuses his attention on the loneliness of urban life, and on the sense of isolation that comes with it. The 'city clock' is the municipal time piece to be found (either on the town hall, on the church tower, or sometimes free-standing) at the centre of most English cities, towns, and villages and its chimes are a familiar sound in such places. But the song is bleak, and few folk or pop singers, it seems, see much to celebrate in urban life as the chorus makes clear.

And at the chime of the city clock put up your road block
Hang on to your crown.
For a stone in a tin can is wealth to the city man
Who leaves his armour down.
(Drake, 1970)

Throughout almost all of these songs there is an abiding sense of anomie, a notion that existence has to be guarded jealously or the city will steal it away. The cities are rarely nameless, even if unnamed: perhaps it should be no surprise that London crops up most commonly as the archetypal large and lonely city. It is after all the centre of the music industry, as well as the capital. More importantly, the contrast of the urban view of England with the suburban and rural view of England could barely be sharper, although in certain songs a sense of irony inevitably creeps in. But as shown by *The Bus Driver's Prayer* (Trad. arr Dury, 1992), which was released by Ian Dury in 1992, wit does have a part to play. It is an affectionate reinterpretation of the King James Bible version of the Lord's Prayer, and while, strictly, it falls outside our time period, it merits inclusion: it takes us on a slightly bizarre tour of London, with the occasional peek beyond the boundaries:

The Bus Driver's Prayer
Our Father,
Who art in Hendon
Harrow Road be Thy name
Thy Kingston come
Thy Wimbledon
In Erith as it is in Hendon.
Give us this day our Berkhampstead
And forgive us our Westminsters
As we forgive those who Westminster against us.
Lead us not into Temple Station
And deliver us from Ealing,
For thine is the Kingston

The Purley and the Crawley,
For Iver and Iver
Crouch End

(Trad. arr Dury, 1992)

We have seen that portraits of the city have tended to dwell on the seamier side of urban life: the loneliness and despair; the sense of isolation; the anomie brought on by solitude. These are the very cornerstones of Wirth's 'Urban Way of Life', but we should not lose sight of the fact that songs say as much about the singer as the subject. Indeed, other songs, those that deal purely with living in the city, sometimes take a different view, and next we shall briefly explore a topic at the heart of several notable songs: the weekend out on the town. In *I want to see the Bright Lights Tonight* (Thompson, 1974) the female narrator sings of her relief at getting to the end of the week, and of enjoying the possibilities of escape from the everyday mundaneness of working life, and the tedious emptiness of the nine to five job:

I'm so tired of working everyday
Now the weekend's come I'm gonna throw my troubles away
If you've got the cab fare mister you'll do alright.
I want to see the bright lights tonight

(Thompson, 1974)

Just to press home the point that the town is an English town (albeit un-named) Thompson includes in his arrangement a silver band, 'the English equivalent – as near as you can get – of an American horn section . . . something like the Salvation Army or that sort of sound' (Richard Thompson quoted in Humphries, 1996).

Although *Bright Lights* puts the female point of view (Linda sings), it also refers to 'boys all spoiling for a fight', a topic explored in *Saturday Night's Alright (for Fighting)* (John and Taupin, 1973). Here, the point of view is that of a young man, a 'juvenile product of the working class' who tells us of his plans for the evening:

It's getting late I haven't seen my date, so tell me when the boys get here.
It's seven o'clock and I wanna rock, want to get a belly full of beer.
. . . Saturday night's alright for fighting
Get a little action in.

(John and Taupin, 1973)

The music is straight rock music, lively, fast and loud, driven by John's energetic piano-playing. Progressive rock band Genesis adopt a very different style – an ornate mix of multiple keyboards, electric guitars, arrangements that are closer to orchestral than rock – for the organized violence described in *The Battle of Epping Forest* (Genesis, 1974). The subject matter of the song was derived from a newspaper report of rival gangs fighting over protection rights in London's East End, the home of well known gangsters such as the Krays, and itself a place with its own 'urban gangster' mythology.

Yes it's the battle of Epping Forest, right outside your door.
You ain't seen nothing like it.
No, you ain't seen nothing like it,
Not since the Civil War.

(Genesis, 1974)

These, then, are some of the people who inhabit urban and suburban England although the medium being rock and pop music, it is young people and their lifestyles who are the focus. Sometimes, the portraits are not at all pleasant. Ian Dury, an art teacher-turned-musician, was born in Billericay, Essex, a small town in a county on the fringes of East London, on the Thames Estuary. Dury used the 'cultural wastelands of post-war Essex' (Ian Dury Website, 2005) as inspiration for his unflattering portraits of two colourful Essex characters, *Billericay Dickie* (Dury and Nugent, 1977*a*), who tells us of the various affaires he has had with girls who live around the Thames Estuary, and *Plaistow Patricia* (Dury and Nugent, 1977*b*), a girl from Plaistow, East London, who developed an expensive drug habit, that she liked to indulge in the (much richer) West End.

Billericay Dickie (extract)
(chorus)
well, you ask Joyce and Vicki if candy-floss is sticky
I'm not a blinking thicky
I'm Billericay Dickie
and I'm doing very well
(Dury and Nugent, 1977*a*)

Plaistow Patricia (extract)
from the Mile End Road to the Matchstick Beacontree
pulling strokes and taking liberties
she liked it best when she went up west oh, oh
you can go to hell with your 'well, well, well' oh, oh
(Dury and Nugent, 1977*b*)

Ian Dury's music stands out from all of the other music described here because it combines the traditions of rock and roll with English music hall. The lyrics are lewd, but sharp, and the boisterous rhythms are driven by a large tightly rhythmical backing band, The Blockheads, that includes guitars, bass, drums and a horn section; the characters, or perhaps caricatures, are themselves sketched out with vigorous lyrical strokes.

Suburbs have been a hugely important part of the way in which towns and cities have grown, yet as mentioned above, they get scant mention in comparison to the city itself. Where they do get mentioned, it is usually (though not always, as we have seen above) in terms of the alienation and exclusion identified by Savage and Warde (1993). Savage and Warde argued that suburbanization actually exacerbated class formation and segregation by excluding people on low incomes, thus enabling the new residential areas to be exclusivey middle-class enclaves (Savage and Warde, 1993). However, suburbs were not exclusively middle class, and it is the working class suburbs that provide the focus for the songs described here.

Hersham in Surrey lies on the southern fringes of London, a suburb in the city. In the song *Hersham Boys* Sham 69, who themselves come from Hersham, explore the lifestyles of young men living on the city fringes – the bored inhabitants of suburbia who live urban lifestyles because they have no option.

Living each day outside the law
Trying not to do what we did before
Country slag with the Bow Bell voice
So close to the city we ain't got much choice
(Pursey and Parsons, 1979)

Fulcher and Scott (1999) argue that suburbanization also serves to reinforce gender distinctions, since the male breadwinner commutes to work leaving the housewife behind to deal with housework and child-rearing (Fulcher and Scott, 1999). This is referred to explicitly in one song by The Members who sing of the tedium of suburban life, from which punk rock is the only escape; it is *The Sound of the Suburbs* (Carroll and Tesco, 1978).

Same old boring Sunday morning, old men out washing their cars
Mum's in the kitchen cooking Sunday dinner,
. . . And Johnny's upstairs in his bedroom sitting in the dark annoying the neighbours with his punk rock electric guitar.
This is the sound . . . this is the sound of the suburbs
(Carroll and Tesco, 1978)

By now, disillusion has set in, and the whimsical glances at the past and the sad vignettes of the present evident in folk-rock have long since been replaced by belligerence and anger. The musical style is an uncompromising guitar, bass, drums line up, and the lyrics are minatory and menacing. A still more vicious song about suburbia is *Suburban Relapse* (Sioux and McKay, 1978), which, unlike *Penny Lane / Strawberry Fields Forever*, concentrates on the anomie and boredom of suburban life that can eventually make someone snap. Sung by the female lead singer of Siouxsie and the Banshees, we can reasonably assume that this is very much the woman's point of view: previous lines speak of finishing a chore ('I asked myself "what for"') and washing up the dishes.

Should I throw things at the neighbours, expose myself to strangers?
Kill myself or . . . you?
I think I must be crazy but my string snapped

I had a relapse . . . a suburban relapse
(Sioux and McKay, 1978)

The Disenchantment of Urban Life

By the mid 1970s, the optimistic glow of the late 1960s had all but dissipated. Notable for its political turbulence, 1974 saw two general elections after the Conservative government was brought down by strikes (its Labour successor met the same fate in 1979): the first election resulted in a minority Labour government, while in the second Labour scraped a knife-edge majority of four (Hewison, 1995). Unemployment topped the million mark in 1975, and that year Britain confirmed its 1973 commitment to join the Common Market in a referendum which nonetheless saw over 30 per cent of the electorate vote against joining. The post-war consensus which had survived more or less intact until the late 1960s broke down. The consequence was a 'crisis of national identity that was national, regional and social' (Hewison, 1995): the National Front rose in prominence, not least in response to Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in 1969, and the nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all established a firmer political foothold, much to the concern of the Labour government (Hewison, 1995).

In the end it was left to the owner of

South-east London suburb.
(*Photo*: Nick Green)

a King's Road clothes shop, Malcolm McClaren, to release the safety valve on the undercurrents of seething resentment. His creation of the Sex Pistols in 1975 was the beginning of punk, an aggressive, (self)-destructive backlash against everything that 'the Establishment' stood for. It was led by style: spiked hair, bondage gear, crude piercings. The music was aggressive, the lyrics brutal and often political. As Dick Hebdige observed, punk tangibly, visibly and volubly responded to and dramatized what was by then referred to as "Britain's decline" (Hewison, 1995).

The clarity of that response varied, and some bands were more articulate than others. Siouxsie and the Banshees' single *Hong Kong Garden* (Sioux *et al*., 1978), besides being based on a riff that made it a punk classic, was also a commentary on the then novel concept of the Chinese take away restaurant that was becoming increasingly common in English towns in the 1970s:

Junk floats on polluted water – an old custom to sell your daughter
Would you like number 23?
Leave your yens on the counter please.
Hong Kong Garden

(Sioux *et al*., 1978)

By far the most articulate and passionately political punk band was The Clash, who hailed from London, and whose songs combined control and energy to powerful effect. *The Guns of Brixton* (Strummer and Jones, 1980), while it echoes in some respects the anti-authoritarian stance of *The Eynsham Poacher*, is uncompromising in a way that the traditional folk song is not. Predating the 1981 Brixton race riots by two years, which were triggered by anger at the apparent racism of the police, the lyrics of *Guns of Brixton* are caustic, a straightforward call to arms rather than a tale of survival in hard times, and the 'they' of the song are presumably the police:

When they kick at your front door, how are you gonna come?
With your hands on your head, or on the trigger of your gun
. . . You can crush us, you can bruise us but you'll have to answer to . . .
Oh, the guns of Brixton

(Strummer and Jones, 1980)

The Brixton riot in April 1981 (there were two others in July of that year) was precipitated by a street search called 'Operation Swamp' which followed in the wake of a new 'stop and search' policy that appeared to discriminate against blacks (Fulcher and Scott, 1999) .

The Jam, yet another band who came from the London fringes, were also pre-occupied with urban living: their home town of Woking is a short train ride south of Hersham, home of Sham 69. Their first album was called simply *In the City* and, in songs such as *Bricks and Mortar*, they make explicit the connection between the built environment and social change that has only been hinted at in other songs. JCBs (building site machinery) and bulldozers are pursuing their own impenetrable logic that seems to have no relation to the problems that actually exist: never mind the homeless, here's a car park.

Bricks and mortar, reflecting social change,
Cracks in the pavement, reveal cravings for success
Why do we try to hide our past
By pulling down houses and build car parks?

(Weller, 1977)

Conclusions

We have seen how over the decade and a half or so from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s musical representations of England's rural and urban landscapes, lifestyles and histories shifted in the ways in which they have dealt with their subjects. This shift reflected wider changes in society that were felt not only in England, primarily the end of the post-war 'Golden Age' as it gave way to a period of seemingly continuous crisis in the 1970s. Thus whereas in the 1960s

there was a pervasive sense of optimism and hope in the music and lyrics, and in the ways in which even tough subject matter was handled, this gave way in the 1970s to more melancholy interpretations of urban life that focused on the anomie of living in the city. To be sure, folk-rock continued into the 1970s (and it continues still), but it has never really adopted the cynicism to be found in punk rock. Furthermore, contradictions exist in the musical representations, as they do in the city itself. So while the attraction of the bright lights as a means of escaping the everyday mundaneness of working life proves a popular topic, so does the notion that the city is a soulless place that treats its inhabitants with contempt. The call of the countryside never seems far away.

The context for this shift in mood and musical styles, which can only be called dramatic, was the decline of what Hobsbawm referred to as a Golden Age in the decades following the Second World War, and the beginning of what Hobsbawm referred to as the Crisis Decades. The period discussed here sits squarely on the cusp of those two very different periods. The changes in style can also be attributed to the fact that rock music was still novel, and still discovering and inventing new styles as artists pushed the boundaries. That they found ample material to help them do this doubtless contributed to the quality of the music, as well as helping drive its development. So in the 1960s, the generally positive *zeitgeist* was both reflected in and recreated through the optimistic rock and pop music of the time, such as *Penny Lane* or *Waterloo Sunset*. However, as the decade wore on, and then out, the mood became more pessimistic, and so too did the music, culminating in punk rock, which crystallized perfectly the disenchantment of a generation.

We also saw vignettes of some of the people who inhabit the suburbs, the people whose lifestyles are urban, but whose homes are on the edge of the city, and forced to look both ways at once to find out where they stand. They are never quite a part of the city, but forced nonetheless to participate because, as Sham 69 say in *Hersham Boys*, they are 'so close to the city, we ain't got no choice'. And like *Billericay Dickie* they make of life what they can, and do their best to enjoy it, even if the suburbs intensify differences in social class as much as the city does.

Lastly there was punk rock, unafraid to ask awkward questions about English society and politics. By the mid 1970s, progressive rock had had its day; the nation was (for many people, at least) in a mess – politically, socially, economically – and punk was one artistic response. Although it may have its true origins in the city, it was also a form of escape for the countless adolescents living in the suburbs: as The Members sang, it was truly *The Sound of the Suburbs*.

And that said, perhaps the last word should go to the Sex Pistols, the band that epitomizes punk rock more than any other. 1977 was the year of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee, and in her Jubilee week they reached the number one slot with their song *God Save the Queen*. That the only thing to celebrate in 1977 was the continuation of what many regarded as an offensive anachronism was unlikely to pass without comment. In fact, there seemed to be little cause for celebration at all, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that *God Save the Queen*'s original title had been *No Future*.

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