

Autonomism Brought Out the Best in Me! Political Song writing in 1980s UK.

In 2022 I was honoured to have four songs I'd co-written included in the AHRC-funded project Our Subversive Voice (OSV). It was a strange experience to be recognised in this way, especially after such a very long time – I was, after all, a member of a band, Latin Quarter, once condemned by the NME as 'Good, but bad, they will never be important'.

Rather than bask in the OSV recognition and use it to assert the over-looked righteousness of my song writing, the experience of being included in their list and also in their climactic conference made me reflect on how the experience of writing 'political songs' whilst attempting to exist as an industrial product was always likely to end in tears. It was not our politics that were incoherent, we did not cohere as a commodity. My teaching of music industry continues to derive from this recognition.

What struck me about the thinking OSV encouraged in me was that my reflection on my song writing always stops at market failure and does not proceed beyond this to its origins. Those origins lie in the political organisation, Big Flame. Big Flame was a comparatively short-lived organisation (c. 1971-81). It was distinctive for the reason that it was not in the Bolshevik lineage that defined the UK Far Left: neither a splinter from the CPGB, nor a variant of ever-brittle Trotskyism. Big Flame's origins lay in Italian Autonomist Marxism.

While I am not a cipher of the theory of Autonomism, I sense that its 'inclusiveness' (for example, its refusal to confine the working class to their role in production) inspired my song writing. I wrote reflectively rather than polemically, but always to a point. I propose to unpack this claim as a contribution to the Queen's University conference on Politics in Music and Song.

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I was the lyricist for the band Latin Quarter. My co-writer, Steve Skaith goes on releasing albums and touring (mostly Germany). I wrote a great number of political songs from 1981 to 1996. The complexities and tensions of being in a band within the Music Industry worked against such expression. My research interests lie with the formation and figuration of symbolic products as industrial outcomes. As the awkwardness of expression signals, this is a long way from being politically engaged. While I have taught modules in Music and Politics and in Song writing and was Co-Investigator on the AHRC Song writing Studies Network, my responsibilities are as Programme Director for the MA in Music Industry Studies and the MA in Classical Music Industry at the University of Liverpool. My publications tend to reflect these responsibilities.

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