

PARTY MUSIC

Alliances between pop and politics are not new. The formation of Red Wedge, however, is distinctive in its close identification with the Labour party.

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THERE IS a long-established argument that pop and organised politics have little in common, and that each suffers by being linked. The most notorious moment of the Woodstock Festival, ultimate celebration of 1960s counter-culture, was when Pete Townshend of The Who knocked Abbey Hoffman off stage as he tried to make a political speech, and even now, after Live Aid has revealed the practical possibilities of an organised rock campaign, media cynics like Julie Burchill suggest that 'there's no safer way to castrate (sic) a political view than to express it to a throbbing back-beat'.

But such scepticism is matched by the increasingly dogged claims of those who insist on uniting pop and politics, who hear in that same back-beat the sound of a democratic populism.

Are they right? The best way to answer the question is to examine Red Wedge, the organisation of entertainers for the Labour party. In both its claims and its activities Red Wedge focuses the issues. Is pop just a distraction from the real struggle? Can politicians learn anything from rock stars?

Roots and branches

Red Wedge certainly seems to symbolise a new attitude among pop musicians to political parties. In 1974, the Musicians Union tried to recruit rock stars to Labour's electoral cause. They got two replies: Alan Price said he would help; Ray Davies of the Kinks (and now Red Wedge) said he was voting Tory. The attempt to recruit musicians through their union failed. In comparison, Red Wedge (launched at the end of last year) is a remarkable success. This time the musicians (who cover the pop world from Sade to The Smiths) were persuaded to join by the party, not the union, and the impresario was not a union official but a rock star, Billy Bragg. With Red Wedge, the party and musicians have worked together

from the start. The party put up the initial money for a tour and provided MPs to talk to the audience in the foyer; Billy Bragg brought together the performers.

Their motives for joining varied. Even now, Red Wedge seems to have no agreed political line except anti-Thatcherism and vaguely expressed support for the Labour party and for the need to involve young people in politics. The Redskins, the SWP's house band and supporters of many left benefits, refused to be involved, on the grounds that Red Wedge was simply geared to the support of a 'right wing' party leadership. Black musician Junior Giscombe ceded that while Labour was the best of the main political groups, 'if you asked me to get up on a stage and recruit for them, I would say no, because I still don't believe in a lot of the things that the Labour party are doing, especially for black kids'. He, like the rest of the Red Wedge touring troupe, seemed to be there to change the party as much as to support it - Paul Weller's stage rhetoric, in particular, had a distinctly militant flavour: 'we're going to take the party back into our hands!'

Involvement with a particular party is Red Wedge's most distinctive feature. There are many precedents for the pop-political alliance, most obviously Rock

with Red Wedge the musicians and the politicians are involved in messy questions of policy and strategy

Against Racism in the late 1970s, which drew on the power and commitment of punk and reggae in its attempt to build a political movement around a concert platform. The point of RAR, though, was not to change a party but to destroy one, the



National Front, and while the SWP was instrumental in sustaining it, RAR was not used as a way of mobilising support for the SWP. The successful emphasis was on local initiatives and grassroots organisation (something the highly centralised Red Wedge should note).

What really distinguishes Red Wedge from RAR, though, and what makes it such an important development, is the way it brings political judgements into play. Musicians are not simply supporting a single cause, they are involved in linking issues into a political programme. They are part of a process in which alliances are being forged as part of an electoral strategy.

These changes are a result of a number of different musical and political factors. Red Wedge traded on the well-established tradition within popular music for benefit performances and, in particular, many of Red Wedge's stars had given such support during the miners' strike, which had brought them into direct contact with the organised labour movement. Their involvement led to their increasing politicisation, not just in terms of the content of their songs, but also in terms of their actions, their understanding that supporting Labour (or, at least, opposing Thatcher) meant more than cash donations.



RED WEDGE: their concerts were intended to unite audiences in a common cause. Paul Weller, Jimmy Sommerville, Sarah-Jane Morris, Billy Bragg and Junior (above) are all well-known musicians with a particular stage approach. Keith Vaz (left) Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate/or Leicester is joined by musicians in his campaign. Billy Bragg (below): he persuaded the performers to join Red Wedge.



photom: Steve Barfoot



The changes in musicians' attitudes in the last few years are paralleled by wider shifts in cultural politics. 'Youth' has become an increasingly salient political constituency, both as a potential electorate and as the specific victim of government policies, while the 60s generation of activists has now reached an influential place in left organisations. The latter take for granted the political importance of both music and youth; they are attuned to ideas of cultural engagement, at odds with the forms and concerns of traditional political activity. The result of all these developments is that musicians are having to face new sorts of political questions, while politicians wrestle with new sorts of cultural questions, as they work together to write policies on tape levies or pirate radio, or independent labels or community music.

From rebellion to responsibility

There is something touching about the picture of pop stars like Billy Bragg, Paul Weller and Jerry Dammers attending endless committee meetings to discuss the nuts and bolts of Labour party arts policy or Anti-Apartheid's regional campaign. It's a picture in striking contrast to rock's traditional imagery of leather-clad rebellion and drugged bohemia and it is tempting to explain it by reference to the personalities involved - Bragg, Weller and Dammers are unusual stars. But Red Wedge has the active support of performers with no activist history, and it is important to understand the material factors lying behind the emergence of a general feeling of 'responsibility' among musicians. This feeling was displayed most dramatically in the Live Aid concerts but is a continuing presence in both Britain and the USA (where Live Aid was succeeded by Farm Aid and Artists Against Apartheid's 'Sun City').

The source of pop stars' new-found moralism lies, paradoxically, in the record industry's success in absorbing rock's youthful rebellion, in placing pop stars at the centre of a world-wide leisure industry. The technological developments of the last decade - the spread of cassette recording, the increasingly important cross-national presence of satellite broadcasting and cable tv - have made Anglo-American musicians a more significant source of multinational profit than ever before. The idea that rock is some sort of 'underground' entertainment is now clearly ridiculous.

Rock's incorporation into consumerism - from counter-culture and sub-culture to multi-media sales campaign - hasn't, then, diminished its political significance (as suggested by people who denounce musicians for 'selling out') but raised new

questions about musicians' responsibilities, and it was Bob Geldof's achievement to ask these questions in the most pertinent possible way, to counterpose pop's global success (Phil Collins's records to be heard in every African capital) to the appalling realities of the world economy.

The paradox of Live Aid was that while in the name of 'humanity' it seemed to depoliticise famine, in the same terms, in the name of 'humanity', it politicised mass music. Red Wedge can be seen as an effect of this new-found sense of responsibility in Britain. It is seen as a way of organising political activity, not just concerts, but workshops for would-be musicians and video-makers, and local groups to co-ordinate cultural activities and youth sup-

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port for Labour. Whether such plans work (and at present there is little happening at local level to justify the rhetoric) and whether full-time musicians can really be effective political organisers is another matter, but the point is that there is a substantive group of performers who believe they have a responsibility to try.

There's a last point to be made about this. The 'power' of musicians to influence their fans has not just attracted political interest from the Left. While Bob Geldof was mobilising this power to a noble end in Britain, the Parents Music Resource Centre was seeking to curtail it in the USA. The PMRC's moral crusade against rock is reminiscent of responses to rock'n'roll in the 1950s. These culminated in the payola hearings, the 'clean-up' of pop radio. The

PMRC has used similar tactics to 'clean up' rock lyrics and videos: a congressional sub-committee, a press campaign, a touring slide show of the 'Filthy 15' worst songs. This campaign reflects the new Right realisation that pop is powerful and must therefore be subjected to proper moral scrutiny and regulation.

We can expect similar campaigns in Britain and they suggest a situation in which rock musicians are, as a matter of course, regarded as a threat to conservatism. There is a paradox here.

Most pop musicians are, in practice (as the few public Conservatives in rock, like Police manager Miles Copeland, point out) small business people, who justify their success in terms of hard work and individual enterprise - their wealth is 'deserved'. Post Live Aid, though, to justify pop stardom in terms of getting as rich as possible seems immoral (just as 60s rebel poses now just seem self-centred). In this context to act responsibly means to display a social conscience, to reject capitalist motives of profit and self-interest. It's this general mood among musicians that Red Wedge organisers have been able to tap in recruiting their Labour party campaigners.

The Labour theory of pop value

Why has the Labour party opened itself to this pressure? At a trivial level the party has become aware of the need to adopt a new image. The appointment of Peter

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Mandelson, late of London Weekend Television, as the party's publicity officer is one example of the growing concern with presentation. 'The party's image has never been better', claimed Mandelson in *The Guardian* last November. 'It's very fashionable and a lot of that's to do with Neil appeal'. This new image is clearly associated with pop (see the revamped *New Socialist*). 'The Labour party is the fun party, the good time party, come and enjoy yourselves!' proclaimed the campaign van in the Brecon by-election. Kinnock's appearance in the Tracey Ullman video was just the beginning. He followed

it (as Norman Tebbit followed him) with an appearance at the British Phonographic Industry awards, and whereas Tebbit clearly represented the industry (a sign that the tape levy is now Tory approved) Kinnock placed himself with the musicians. It is tempting, then, to see Red Wedge as just another way to give Kinnock style. But Red Wedge's determination (and ability) to remain critical of the party suggests that the relationship is more complex.

At the Red Wedge tour press conferences in January, it was always stressed that Thatcherism has had a distinct impact on youth as youth. Policies on housing benefits, board and lodging, youth training, student grants, wage rates and education, have all affected young people directly. The result of mass school-leaver unemployment is that as 'teenager' as a consumer category has become less important (pre-teens and yuppies are the key markets now), youth as a political category, a specific interest group, has become more significant. There is an electoral argument here too - there will be 5m 18-24 year-olds on the electoral register by 1988. As Adam Lebor reported in the *New Statesman* last year: 'until 1979 Labour could be confident of winning more votes from the under-25s than any other party. But more (42%) voted Conservative in that year than Labour (41%). The trend continued in 1983 with 42% voting Conservative, 33% Labour and 23% Alliance'. Support has swung back since then but the youth vote is volatile and the party has become increasingly aware both of its failure to appeal to the young in any lasting way in the past and the need to grasp the youth vote now.

Even the attacks on the Militant tendency can be seen partly in this light. Militant's long-standing hold on the Labour party Young Socialists has prevented the party from establishing an effective youth section, and Red Wedge represents an alternative centrally-controlled approach to the young. Not that Red Wedge offers a simple solution to the Militant problem. At the local level, certainly, there is bound to be tension between Red Wedge's and Militant's claims on young socialists (already reflected in the contrast between the shambolic 'local' events and sell-out evening shows on the Red Wedge tour). The Red Wedge line on Militant (and Militant expulsions) has, so far, been confused by its wish to support the party, its determination to remain aloof from the party leadership, and its need to create a

new, non-Militant manipulated youth constituency.

Red Wedge fits too into broader trends - and tensions - within the party. GLC ideas are seeping slowly into mainstream Labour thought - not just its imaginative use of the media to press its cause, nor its ability to find common cause with young people (in a way Labour nationally has not), through the promotion of concerts

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and venues, but also its willingness to act as an umbrella for a variety of causes. With the abolition of the GLC, the opportunity exists for the Labour party to take on its role, but if it is to bring together formally the GLC constituency - youth, women, CND, anti-apartheid, gays, blacks, animal rights, etc - it has to find people to represent and link these groups. Red Wedge is one way. It brings together musicians who, albeit in vague and disparate forms, have been associated as benefit bands with these different causes. Their active support for the Labour party (The Communards representing gays, Junior Giscombe and Lorna Gee young blacks etc.) gives credibility to the Labour party interest in such 'minorities'.

Making a wedge

It is not clear, however, that Red Wedge can both represent Labour to 'youth' and various special interests to the Labour party. At the very least, there is a tension between directing arguments to the youth constituency whilst also trying to create a forum for a variety of single issue causes. Red Wedge has had little to say about sexual politics (Kinnock refers to 'Billy Bragg and the boys') - were it to take feminism more seriously on the stage or in the foyer, the question of who or what was being represented might be raised. Similarly, the Red Wedge 'line' on pirate radio, the application/use of a tape levy, marijuana legislation - on which there are a number of opinions among its constituencies - is much less clear than its support of CND or anti-apartheid, on which agreement does match the collective emotions of a pop show.

The Red Wedge pop tour depended on

musicians with proven popularity and a particular stage approach: there was an air of uplift, tinged with worthiness, to their music; it was intended to unite audiences in a common cause - there was no music to drive anyone away. But this use of musicians to give emotional support to politicians is only part of the cultural lesson to be learnt from socialist councils like the GLC and Sheffield, which have also been giving material support to musicians, using their resources to fund venues, studios and concerts, which may well be, in market terms, 'unpopular'. Such policies are not, that is, inspired by some simple propagandist goal on the lines of the Bolsheviks' use of massed worker choirs. Rather their intention is to provide musicians with employment and training, and to give audiences opportunities to hear unfamiliar music and new artists. Without such subsidy the cultural pluralism which parallels the political pluralism of the GLC 'coalition', could not exist, and the range of music (and musical opportunities) available would be a great deal smaller (as they will be in London now the GLC has gone).

Although Billy Bragg has stressed the need for the Labour party to continue the GLC's active cultural policy, no one has spoken of Red Wedge as a vehicle for introducing new sounds or breaking new artists. That is not its concern. It provides a platform for artists who have already established their musical and political credentials. From the Labour party's perspective, it may well be that the association of its message with rock and soul and reggae (rather than folk or brass bands or choirs) is a bold step, but from a pop fan's position (such are the vagaries of fashion) Red Wedge risks reproducing the same values of socialist romanticism and stoicism in its use of obviously 'committed' rock and soul and reggae. Do musicians like Gary Kemp of Spandau Ballet and Lloyd Cole of the Commotions believe, as they seemed to on the Red Wedge tour, that supporting the Labour party means playing acoustically, covering old Stones and Dylan songs? Is 60s soul still the only guarantee of collective uplift?

Electoral rock'n'roll

Red Wedge represents a new tactic for the national Labour party but in comparison with aspects of GLC and other municipal socialists' policies (their investment in cultural resources) there are limits to its radicalism. One of the important legacies of the GLC is the concept of 'culture industries', the political realisation that the arts aren't just a matter of moral uplift or

community identity but involve job opportunities, a chance for people to have material control of their culture, whether or not they satisfy the criteria of 'art' or 'creativity'. Red Wedge is beginning to feed such arguments into Labour's arts policies but, as an organisation, it has been constructed around the *electoral* needs of the party. While municipal socialist policies have tried to provide young people with new opportunities both to participate in music making and to hear a wide variety of sounds and styles, Red Wedge is concerned to bring out the socialist implications of the music young people already hear and to direct any resulting political interest into the Labour party.

This is not to deny Red Wedge's success or importance - the publicity and full

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houses are proof of that - or its performers' enterprise. They've shrugged off the notorious reluctance of musicians to organise; they've been prepared to discuss policies rather than states of mind and being, the usual concerns of rock thought. But if Red Wedge is a new form of mediation between the Labour party and young voters, via popular culture (which doesn't just mean music - there's also been a successful tour of Red Wedge comics) then so far the message seems to have travelled only one-way - it is easier to trace Red Wedge's impact on the Labour party than the Labour party's influence on youth. Red Wedge has, for example, already had an effect on Labour's manifesto plans, helped push cultural thought from Arts Council patronage to the implications of a Ministry of Communication, made senior politicians understand that there are pleasures in the *enterprise* of pop culture that Labour should be encouraging - by supporting an 'independent' recording sector, specialist promoters and so on.

What's less clear (and this may, indeed, be a drawback of the populist approach - giving young people what they want) is whether Red Wedge is politicising youth, providing anything more than the soundtrack to an advertising campaign. Its position is muddled on this, on the one hand claiming to represent youth, on the other

to educate them. Red Wedge's audiences themselves appeared to reject both models for a more familiar one - the Red Wedge stars were there to entertain them. *Smash Hits* quoted someone leaving a Red Wedge concert: 'We didn't really come here for the politics. They passed us by. I mean, I don't like things like racialism, but the only thing it really changed my mind about was The Smiths. I didn't used to think that much of them.'

Despite the current radical rock bandwagon (the youth market being pursued as diligently - and superficially - by political as by commercial interests) left politicians should remain, too, at least suspicious of pop. There are differences between the world according to the leisure industry and the world according to socialists; the market pursuit of the good lifestyle may be Utopian but it is not Utopian socialism. The Red Wedge argument is that there are contradictions *within* the pop industry too. It is not completely run by multinationals or would-be multinationals; there are important roles for independent and co-operative recording companies, for community music radio stations, for state-funded venues and studios. If nothing else, the Labour party is now better informed on such issues - we should no longer get knee-jerk Labour-folky distaste at the very idea of music as an industry. But electoral rhetoric about 'popular capitalism' - vote Labour and we'll put on a better show! - doesn't do much to advance *socialist* policy. The celebration of 'independent' labels and studios can come across as simply the Labour version of support for small businesses.

The striking absence of feminism from Red Wedge rhetoric reflects, similarly, the problems of a populist cultural approach. It is certainly important to campaign, like Red Wedge, for women's access to training in recording skills and to improve everyone's opportunities for a music-making career. But this policy evades the more basic question of whether rock isn't in itself the sound of white boys (an overwhelming impression at times during the Red Wedge show). It is for such reasons that it is as important to politicise pop (and pop audiences) as to give pop appeal to politics. To put it another way, the important question Red Wedge asks (and hasn't yet answered) is how to move from the recruitment of young consumers and voters to the empowerment of young producers and activists (and the nagging suspicion is that the Labour party leadership would prefer to keep people in a consuming and voting niche anyway).