



ROCK AGAINST RACISM AND PUNK. HOW MUSIC STOOD UP AGAINST RACISM IN THE ENGLAND OF THE 1970S

Ylenia Díaz Fernández

Universidad de Oviedo

The 1970s in England was a dark decade which brought discontent to a great part of the English society as inflation, unemployment and the oil crisis scourged the lower classes after the vanishment of post-war prosperity. Along with these examples of economic recession and crisis, England also witnessed the rise and success of the National Front, an extreme-right political party that sided with racism, xenophobia and white supremacy among other principles. Racism was soon to surface in the music industry with the arrival of punk and its use of swastikas and other representations of fascism, even if those fascist symbols were initially used mainly as a desire to shock the audience. The racial tensions in England in the mid-70s, however, were taking their toll and right-wing extremists found in punk a place where they could freely manifest their hatred for non-white individuals. Other artists in the music industry, such as David Bowie or Eric Clapton, also shared racist discourses, which caused the movement Rock Against Racism (RAR) to start up in England with the purpose of using music as a weapon against racism and to raise awareness of the racial problems that were taking place in England at the time.

The aim of this paper is to show how music in the England of the 1970s stood up against racism and the alarming increase of

National Front and racism by raising awareness of these problems among the masses, most specially among the younger generations. The paper will also focus on the way punk artists disassociated themselves from their fascist reputation (showing their support to RAR) and on the bonds that were established between the punk and reggae musical styles during this period in order to eliminate racism from the industry.

Keywords: England; 1970s; crisis; racism; fascism; xenophobia music; punk; Rock Against Racism; songs

1. Introduction

The 1970s was a hard decade for the British society as the country faced an economic recession that put an end to the prosperity of the 1960s which had allowed the English citizens to grow economically and to progress in different areas of social life (Turner 2013; Martín: 2014; Sandbrook, 2011 & 2012). Those who lived in the Swinging Sixties could witness the effects of the postwar economic boom: a low percentage of unemployment and inflation, an increase of car ownership, the rise of wages and a stable economy, etc. In all, Britain was not only succeeding economically but also culturally: England had won for the first and only time the FIFA World Cup, James Bond leaped to the big screen, British fashion boomed all over Europe and the British Invasion (the spread of British music all over the United States) movement was started. Nevertheless, that welfare was fading out as England entered the 1970s. If we were to describe the economic atmosphere of this period in the nation, stagflation (a combination of inflation, stagnation and high levels of unemployment) would be an appropriate term to illustrate the decline that the country was undergoing at the beginning of the decade. The consequences of the devaluation of the pound in 1967 started to emerge in the following years, when the inflation levels increased which each passing year (Pettinge 2017). 1973 was a turning point for England since the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries carried out an oil embargo for the countries that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Consequently, oil price rose severely causing great damage to the English economy. Along with these adversities came the bailout of the IMF in 1976, power cuts and several states of emergency, which only worsened the

situation. These are only a few examples of how the economy of England fell apart in the 1970s, a decade that culminated with the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79, in which the country was flooded by a wave of strikes.

2. England and the Racial Crisis

The problems of England in the 1970s, however, were not only related to the economy of the country. The English society itself was undergoing a racial crisis, a time when xenophobia, white supremacy and the rising success of extreme right-wing political parties emerged. In this paper, I aim at showing how music fought against racism and fascism in such a problematic period of the English history, and how musicians from different musical genres united with the purpose of raising awareness of the racial issue that was taking place at the time.

In 1967 the National Front was founded, a political party which consisted of the coalition of several far-right groups: the British National Party, the League of Empire Loyalists and the Racial Preservation Society. The party gained popular support significantly in the beginning of the 1970s as “an initial membership of 1500 rose to a peak of 17,500 by 1972” (Barberis et al. 2000, 187). The NF focused primarily on the issue of immigration following the increase in the number of immigrants who had arrived in the country in the previous decade, most of them coming from countries belonging to the Commonwealth. When it comes to its policy

the NF platform centred mainly on issues of immigration and racial identity. The Front’s manifesto for the October 1974 general election promised a ban on all non-white immigration into Britain and repatriation of ‘all coloured immigrants’. (Worley and Copsey 2016, 6).

Additionally, Idi Amin Dada, who was the president of Uganda at the time, ordered the expulsion of those Asian who were living in the country and had British passports. As he declared:

I am going to ask Britain to take over responsibility for all Asians in Uganda who are holding British passports, because they are sabotaging the economy of the country (Keatley 1972).

As a consequence, around 80,000 Asians were expelled from Uganda, of which 28,000 of them arrived in Great Britain. In addition to this, the financial crisis complicated the situation to the migrants who established themselves in the country, as they were targeted as the aggravators of the crisis by ‘stealing’ jobs from British citizens. (Turner 2013, 215). The NF highly benefited from this situation and kept gaining support from a part of the British population who began to increasingly fear and reject immigration.

But the National Front was not the only political party which flaunted a racist discourse in the Britain of the late 60’s and early 70’s. Other political figures also contributed to the rejection of immigration, such as Enoch Powell, a Tory minister who, in 1968, pronounced what is known now as the *Rivers of Blood* speech, in which he tackled the issue of immigration by strongly criticizing it. In that speech, Powell declared that

(...) it almost passes belief that at this moment 20 or 30 additional immigrant children are arriving from overseas in Wolverhampton alone every week - and that means 15 or 20 additional families a decade or two hence. [...] We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. (Telegraph Reporter, 2007).

This discourse is in line with Margaret Thatcher’s position, who claimed on a television interview in 1978 about immigration numbers that¹

(...) if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture (Thatcher 1978).

These are only a few examples of how mass immigration appeared to be one of the main concerns of the British society in the 1970s, when it was essentially seen as a problem. Furthermore, racism was not only perceived in the words of political parties and

¹ Thatcher was the leader of the Conservative Party at the time.

their representatives, but also materialized in the form of racial attacks which began to occur on the streets, such as the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976. Just like every year since 1966, the streets of Notting Hill were ready for the celebrations carried out by members of the West Indian and Black community. However, the police presence was considerably higher than in previous years. According to witnesses, a fight took place around 5pm and right after chaos started, the police and those who attended the celebration engaged in fights which included policemen beating up participants and the latter attacking police officers by throwing bricks and other objects. The riot resulted in more than 100 police officers having to be taken to hospital and “around 60 carnival-goers also needing hospital treatment after the clashes which led to the arrest of at least 66 people.” (BBC: On This Day, 1976)

3. Racism in Music

Against this backdrop, music and musical movements in Britain played a very important role, showing a striking commitment and compromise to keep racism and totalitarianism at bay. We must note, however, that music in the 1970s in Britain was not exactly a safe place for non-white individuals and that the industry contained remarkable examples of racist and fascists attitudes. To begin with, the 1970s brought the birth of one of the most controversial musical genres: punk, which is strongly connected with to the economic and social decline of England and with the decay of traditional values, so it is no surprise that we can find in punk musicians traces of far-right ideals. Consequently, the punk movement imported , among other aesthetic aspects- the symbology of extreme-right ideologies, such as swastikas and iron crosses, which were an integral part of the clothing of punks bands and punk fans.² However, despite the fact that some punk rockers shared far-right standards, the majority of them only used these symbols to shock their audiences and as criticism of the British society. The aim of punks was not to claim

² For instance, in one of the first appearances of the Sex Pistols in television (December 1st, 1976 at the *Today* show), one of the fans of the band could be seen sporting a Nazi armband.

racist ideologies, but to denounce the similitude of their situation with a fascist regime:

fascism had won the Second World War: that contemporary Britain was a welfare-state parody of fascism, where people had no freedom to make their own lives—where, worse, no one had the desire. (Marcus 1989, 118).

Nonetheless, the damage was done, and far-right followers found punk as a co-religionist musical genre which shared their ideals. As Matthew Morley (2017) notes

(...) these confrontational symbols were often utilized to provoke a reaction and juxtaposed deliberately to avoid easy assimilation. In doing so, however, punk could not prevent political meanings being projected back onto the emergent culture. Just as members of the far right saw punk's swastikas and iron crosses as evidence of the white youth becoming aware of their racial identity, so some on the left saw in punk a formative expression of socialist protest (...) accusations of fascism soon led bands such as the Clash to better define their stance, presenting themselves as 'anti-fascist, anti-violence, anti-racist, pro-creative' (10).

In 1974, David Bowie, who had already achieved a successful musical career in the UK, raised a strong controversy: in an interview for *Playboy* magazine, Bowie claimed that

Rock stars are fascists. Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars [...] He was no politician. He was a media artist. He used politics and theatrics and created this thing that governed and controlled the show for 12 years. The world will never see his like again. He staged a country. (Sorene 2014)

While he was in Stockholm, Bowie shared some thoughts on fascism: "As I see it, I am the only alternative for the premier in England. I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader. After all, fascism is really nationalism." (Buckley 2005: 250) and in 1976, the British music journal *New Musical Express* (NME) published an image of Bowie allegedly doing the Nazi salute in their cover, which was headlined with the words 'Heil and Farewell'.³ The music industry was therefore being flooded with evidence of the racial tensions present in the country. It was not, however, until Eric

³ Tony Stewart, *New Musical Express*, 8 May 1976.

Clapton's polemical comments in 1976 that a major change occurred in the history of the relations between music and racism in Britain, for that sparked the creation of the movement Rock Against Racism. During one of his performances, Clapton addressed Enoch Powell's *Rivers of Blood* speech and encouraged the audience to vote for Powell after having made derogatory comments about immigrants "Vote for Enoch, he's our man, he's on our side, he'll look after us. I want all of you here to vote for Enoch, support him, he's on our side. Enoch for Prime Minister! Throw the wogs out! Keep Britain white!" (Marzoni 2019).

After hearing Clapton's declarations, a letter was sent to *NME*, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*, the most successful music journals in the UK

When I read about Eric Clapton's Birmingham concert when he urged support for Enoch Powell, I nearly puked.

What's going on, Eric? You've got a touch of brain damage. So you're going to stand for MP and you think we're being colonised by black people. Come on... you've been taking too much of that Daily Express stuff, you know you can't handle it. Own up. Half your music is black. You're rock music's biggest colonist. You're a good musician but where would you be without the blues and R&B? You've got to fight the racist poison, otherwise you degenerate into the sewer with the rats and all the money men who ripped off rock culture with their chequebooks and plastic crap. Rock was and still can be a real progressive culture, not a package mail-order stick-on nightmare of mediocre garbage. We want to organise a rank-and-file movement against the racist poison in rock music –we urge support – all those interested please write to:

ROCK AGAINST RACISM,
Box M, 8 Cotton Gardens, London E2 8DN

P. S. 'Who shot the Sheriff', Eric? It sure as hell wasn't you!
Signed: Peter Bruno, Angela Follett, Red Saunders, Jo Wreford,
Dave Courts, Roger Huddle, Mike Stadler, etc.

And so, Rock Against Racism was created, its purpose being to organize concerts and carnivals that could bring together musicians and fans while raising awareness of the racial issue that was invading England. RAR's slogan "Reggae, soul, rock'n'roll, jazz, funk and punk" exemplifies the wide range of musical genres

that were present in the lineup of its concerts, where the movement gathered a broad audience from different ages and backgrounds, but with the common desire of defeating the far right-wing.⁴

4. Music Fights Racism

Rock Against Racism gained many adepts since its beginning, not only music fans but also political activists. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) played a fundamental role in the success of Rock Against Racism. Regarding the SWP, the party established strong links with the musical movement as some of its founding members belonged to the party RAR was provided, as Goodyer (2019) puts it, with

vital logistical support [...] in the shape of printing and office facilities, and this enabled the organization to establish itself during a period of rapid initial growth, but the party also supplied many of RAR's leading cadres, and through them, it exercised a significant level of influence over the movement's politics. (22)

The Anti-Nazi League was an organization originated one year after the creation of RAR, and it was closely linked to the SWP. The RAR and ANL connection gave way to one of the most successful RAR events to date. On 30th April 1978, both organizations set up a *Carnival Against the Nazis* which congregated a crowd of about 100,000 people. The carnival started in Trafalgar Square, where a large mass of people marched towards Victoria Park to culminate the event with a concert. During the rally, the crowd carried posters and banners claiming equality and condemning racism, as it is shown on the image (Figure 1). The gig was headlined by Tom Robinson Band, Steel Pulse, The Clash, X-Ray Spex and the punk poet Patrik Fitzgerald. It was important for RAR to include bands of different genres and with both black and white people, as Roger Huddle, one of the founders of RAR comments, "the concert was all about black and white unity, so it was important we had black and white people on stage together" (Naylor et al. 2008). He also mentions the importance of having

⁴ The movement was a complete success since more than 600 replies were sent to RAR within 14 days. (Goodyer 2019, 11).

organized events like the carnival in times where the National Front was gaining public support:

We wanted to give people space to stand against the Nazis [...] we wanted to do something before the local elections of 1978 to push the National Front off the streets and off the electoral registers. We wanted to get rid of them'. (Naylor et al. 2018)



Figure 1. The crowd of *Carnival Against the Nazis* rally carrying posters for equality

Rock Against Racism clearly achieved their goal of bringing to the public eye the issue of racism and the alarming increasing popularity of the National Front. Those who lived the movement in first person recall RAR as a turning point: “Rock Against Racism made it cool to be anti-racist” (Manzoor 2008) Gurinder Chadha, a film maker, remembers that during the Victoria Park concert

(...) was when I thought that something had changed in Britain for ever. Before RAR, there was no sense that it wasn't OK to be racist. But with RAR, we got to see that there were others willing to speak out against racism and talk about a different kind of Britain. (Naylor et al. 2018).

In relation to RAR's fight against the National Front, Jerry Dammers, from The Specials, said: “at this time, RAR knocked

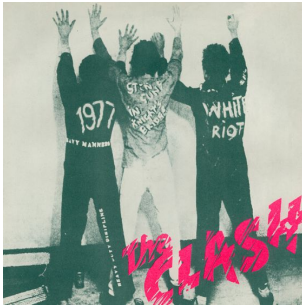
them as they were gaining votes, and played a huge part in defeating them.” (Naylor et al. 2018). Goodyer (2009) also remarks the importance of RAR marching demonstrations confronting NF rallies:

before RAR, the NF had staged intimidatory marches in areas with large immigrant communities, but once RAR began to demonstrate that they could put thousands on the street in opposition to them, the NF were forced to retreat. (Manzoor 2008).

Additionally, the NF’s initial success suffered a decline serious blow in the local elections of May 4 1978, just one week after the *Carnival Against the Nazis*, as the National Front “failed to secure any seats and its level of support fell” (Manzoor 2008)

It is worth pointing out that many RAR concerts were headlined by punk bands which had previously shown fascist or racist attitudes, thus giving punk the opportunity to demonstrate to the general public that the genre was not a display of far-right supporters. Punk bands had already written songs against racism but due to their bad reputation, those who were not into the genre were not aware of this fact. This can be observed in The Clash’s song “White Riot”, which was inspired by the Notting Hill riots, where Joe Strummer (singer), Paul Simonon (bass) and Bernie Rhodes (manager) from the band were arrested during the incident. They represented themselves in this attitude on the single cover (Figure 2). The song calls for a revolution of white individuals after having realized that the black community hadn’t been afraid of fighting for themselves during the riot. Nevertheless, the general public interpreted the song as a white supremacy hymn. As Simonon stated:

I remember there were a lot of places that wouldn’t let us play, all over the country, universities, and that was probably something that they read that we have a song called ‘White Riot’. They thought we were some sort of National Front group, whereas, really, the song was about white people getting up and doing it for themselves because their black neighbors were doing it for themselves, and so it was, the riots and whatever. So it was time for the white people to get on with their own situation, which I suppose was the beginning of the punk thing. (DVD, *Punk: Attitude*)



White riot, I want to riot
 White riot, a riot of our own
 Black man gotta lotta problems
 But they don't mind throwing a brick
 White people go to school
 Where they teach you how to be thick

The Clash "White Riot" (1977)
 Album: *The Clash*

Figure 2. The "White Riot" single cover where we can see members of The Clash representing their arrest during the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976.

Punk bands were not afraid of speaking their mind about the racial issue and musicians often commented on the current situation. When being asked about the National Front on an interview with RAR's fanzine *Temporary Hoarding*, Johnny Rotten, Sex Pistol's lead singer, said

I despise them. No one should have the right to tell anyone they can't live here because of the colour of their skin or their religion... How could anyone vote for something so ridiculously inhumane? (Manzoor 2008)

Moreover, bands released songs that carried anti-racist and anti-fascist messages as we can see in the examples below:

The National Front are fascists;
 We don't hate the Black kids
 The National Front are fascists;
 Ain't nothing wrong with the black kids, no way

The Pigs "National Front" (1977)
 Album: *1977*

The message of The Pigs' song is clear, they present the National Front as a fascist and racist party and sing in favor of racial equality.

In the following song, Tom Robinson makes a statement where he claims that nobody should remain indifferent towards the heated political situation and expresses his sympathy for the Left in a song with the goal of calling for awareness.

You better decide which side you're on
 This ship goes down before too long
 If Left is right then Right is Wrong
 You better decide which side you're on

Tom Robinson Band 'Better Decide Which Side You're On' (1978)
 Album: Power in the Darkness

5. Conclusions

To conclude, the 1970s in Britain was a decade that witnessed an economic and social crisis with more downs than ups. White supremacy and racism, encouraged by the political forces of the time, also appeared in the music industry, and this led to the creation of movements such as Rock Against Racism. We consider that RAR played a key role in England's fight against the emerging fascist forces and the racist standards. All the concerts and carnivals organized by RAR proved to the National Front that music was a powerful weapon that could bring together a large mass of people that was ready to confront them. RAR's impact is still remembered nowadays as it is reflected on the words of the ones who lived its creation back in 1976 until the dissolution of the organization six years later. In addition, RAR also gave punk music the opportunity to mitigate their right-wing reputation and to address and raise awareness among their listeners of the problems non-white individuals were facing in the England of the 1970s as punk bands and their lyrics sent out straightforward messages against the radical right. All in all, the music industry of the 1970s was able to recognize how the racial issue that was threatening the English society, had also started to invade the music scene, which reacted against these unacceptable attitudes in pursuit of shedding some light on the racial question on behalf of those who couldn't be heard. Hopefully, this research will contribute to shed some light on the importance of studying the relationship between music and politics for its analysis will provide us with a less known point of view of societies and cultures.

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