

A Personal Experience of Political Song

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Performer and teacher

Shout, shout, up with your song, Cry with the wind for the dawn is breaking
March, march, swing you along, Wide blows our banner and hope is waking!"
(March of the Women, written by Ethel Smyth in 1911& dedicated to the Women's
Social and Political Union, reprinted in *The Right to Vote an' A' That* Edinburgh 2009)

As the world careers into perpetual destruction fired by a greed for power and land leading to war, violence, hunger and pollution of the planet, people are marching across the world in horror and incredulity at the unimaginable suffering of Palestinians - as well as many Israelis of course. Every decade brings its own struggles, accompanied by strikes, demonstrations, rallies, protests, sit-ins, flash mobs, whatever. Over our lifetimes I, and countless others, have lost count of the number of demonstrations we have participated in to make our voices heard. We are used to hearing speaker after speaker (often male) blowing their own trumpets and making stirring speeches with which the majority of us agree. However, organisers of protests would do well to think seriously about ways in which to include music and song in marches and rallies. Why? What is the purpose of political song? I firmly believe in the necessity of political song as an integral part of public protest; to uplift and inspire the cause and, in so doing, enrich our culture. I'd like to think that younger musicians, as artists, feel strongly enough to acknowledge and support popular struggles through their music and song. I witnessed how cultural events flourished during the Scottish Independence campaign leading up to the Referendum in 2014, when the National Collective was active and bursting at the seams with young people entertaining us. Makes you think!

Songs of the people

My own experience of political song is very much anchored in family, local and community-based settings and, internationally, from the American labour movement and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Political song and folk song are emotionally and politically connected for me, though political lyrics are to be found in all genres of music. I need look no further than my family background to discover where my love and knowledge of political song originates. Paul Robeson, son of a slave, was a big hero to my parents, as a singer and outspoken

advocate for Black American emancipation. His 'Ol' Man River' and 'Joe Hill' were a powerful force to my young mind, growing up in the 1940s and 50s. My parents, both communists in the 1930s, met while learning Esperanto. Political chat between them was a daily occurrence and the *Daily Worker* our regular paper. I remember my father telling me of his first experience of industrial action as a young 19- year-old railwayman in the 1926 general strike; how it was sold out by the leaders of the TUC! Many years later I wrote a song about the '26 strike. Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the subsequent fight against fascism, the Spanish Civil War, Aneurin Bevan and the NHS and the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in America were all normal topics of conversation in our household.

My older brother, Jack, had introduced American folk music to the family and we lapped up the hard-hitting songs of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Leadbelly. The political songs of the early American Labour movement had a profound impact on me, shaping and inspiring my life thereafter. I'd begun listening to, and absorbing, Scottish folk music, but it was altogether different to that which I'd been listening to from the USA. Where were the politics? I wasn't yet that familiar with Ewan MacColl, Hamish Henderson, Leon Rosselson - all politically-motivated singers and songwriters. Serious stuff! Being in my teens I was, like many of my peers, also in love with Elvis Presley.

The 1960s

Already politically aware in the left-wing sense, and having joined the Young Communist League and my first trade union, I was propelled into political action by joining CND protests against nuclear weapons and the unwanted American submarine base just up the road in the Holy Loch. It was an exhilarating experience to march with my young comrades, chanting slogans against this American military base. What a cultural revelation it was to hear the songs of the Glasgow anti- Polaris singers: Scottish protest songs crammed with humour and political satire! They made an impressive contribution to the folk song revival, and their place in the political song movement shouldn't be under-estimated. The songs are now, rightly, an essential component of our Scottish musical heritage. The anti-Polaris singers, being left-wing, and better known as the Glesca Eskimos, had been writing humorous and satirical words to be sung to existing well known tunes and they stood by the lochside to meet the American warship Proteus as it came up the Clyde in 1961 carrying its weapons of death. Some of them

courageously took to the water in small boats and tried to board the submarines. Hamish Henderson wrote 'The Freedom Come All Ye' in 1961 for the protestors. Aye, Scotland had its own hard-hitting songs!

Boomerang

*“Ye a' ken how Gaitskell got shelled at Queen's Park
An' roasted an' salted as well
He cried the folks peanuts but aabody kens
The only nut there was his-sel'
Fir he thocht that Polaris could stey in the loch
An' Scotland would bow tae the yanks
An' back Adenauer an' the whole Nato shower
Wi' sodgers, bazookas an' tanks*

(chorus)

*Boomerang, boomerang
Juist send back whaur they belang
Alang wi' auld Adanauer, Kennedy's pal
Signor Fanfani and Charlie de Gaulle
For we dinnae want gifts that go bang
Juist try wan an' see if I'm wrang
The banners are wavin wha's next fur the shavin'?
So open the boom, boomerang!*

(verse & chorus from 'Boomerang' by Matt McGinn, *The Rebel Ceilidh Song Book*, Bo'ness 1965)

The 1970s

During the 70s I hadn't time for much else other than family, but my passion for political song never left me. My brother was now living in New Zealand but, before he went, he'd taught me a few chords on his guitar and - joy of joys - he left his long-playing records. We were in a position to buy a record player and buy some records ourselves. I remember buying Woody

Guthrie's 'Bound for Glory' and playing it to death! My children loved Pete Seeger's album of kids' songs especially 'Abi Yoyo' about a boy with a ukulele and giant. I got my first guitar when the kids were wee and started picking out chords to accompany myself. The first song I ever wrote was, predictably, about my thoughts on being a wife and mother!

The 1980s

The 1980s was a frenetic decade as I strove to combine work, trade union activism, music and family. My daughter and I went to Greenham Common women's peace camp in 1982 to show solidarity with the women living there who were opposed to the American air base. I came home armed with a booklet of songs which I'd later share and teach to others. I gradually began immersing myself in the Edinburgh folk scene and doing a few 'floor spots'. They were heady days, to be in the midst of all this live music with so many different performers from Scotland and beyond. The impact on me of Dick Gaughan's riveting performances was immediate and profound. This was political song in the raw and I loved it! There were so many other great singers and songwriters too, Brian McNeill, Alistair Hulett, folklorist, scholar, poet and songwriter Hamish Henderson. Jean Redpath, Christine Kydd and Janet Russell, were three of the few prominent women singers in Edinburgh. That is not to say there weren't many more, or that men were more talented than women! Women's rights have always been an issue dear to my feminist, socialist heart and in 1983 I was involved with 'Women Live', a weekend festival to provide a space for women performers. Way back then, the music industry was very male-dominated in terms of headline acts. Though things have changed for the better, women folk musicians still have to fight to get their fair share in that respect. As part of 'Women Live' I organised a voice workshop for women with Frankie Armstrong, in what was then the community room of the Edinburgh Film House, to which a large number of women came, and I formed a group called Women's Voices, performing songs and readings by and about women at the Storytelling Centre in the Royal Mile. I was at this time a UNISON (then, NALGO) trade union activist, shop steward, and vocal on women's equality.

The magnificent Miners' Strike of 1984/85 galvanised trade unionists and communities into taking action to support the miners in their struggle to stop pit closures. Thatcher and her sidekick, McGregor, were hellbent on destroying the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). One Friday night my partner and I found ourselves at a benefit concert in St Anne's Community

Centre in Edinburgh's Cowgate to raise money for the miners and their families. It had been organised by an outfit called Left Turns which, up to that point, I'd never heard of. It had been set up by Dick Gaughan, Mae Shaw and others as a direct response to Margaret Thatcher coming to power after the Tories won the 1983 general election. I knew in an instant I wanted to be part of this unashamedly left-wing music organisation. I'd not long started singing and writing political songs myself at various events organised by the Labour and trade union movement, the Peace movement and International Women's Day celebrations. Left Turns was an altogether unique organisation of musicians, activists, and others close to the Labour movement, organising fundraising events for people in struggle against oppressive dictatorships, and workers on strike. Its ethos was 'to promote socialism by broadening the nature of campaigning to include cultural activities and to offer support through organised or impromptu shows, rallies, demonstrations, picket lines, sit-ins etc wherever there is a direct struggle for workers' rights and socialism.' We were, as you can imagine, mega active throughout this period: organising benefit concerts in Edinburgh Trades Council social club, community centres and miners welfare clubs, pulling in performers like Dick, of course, Leon Rosselson, Roy Bailey, Billy Bragg and John Martyn. Left Turns continued putting on live music events to raise funds for left-wing causes for four years. The musicians and singers among us performed at many events, including Chile Solidarity, Nicaragua Support, Anti-Apartheid, the Lee Jeans women's strike, and anti-war events. We supported Chilean exiled group Inti Illimani in the Usher Hall and performed in Princes Street Gardens for the Anti-Apartheid movement. Left Turns final event was an exuberant, well-attended event in the Assembly Rooms to commemorate the life of Paul Robeson with a local reggae band, Dick Gaughan, Hamish Henderson and a specially recorded interview with Paul Robeson Jnr played live to the audience.

The 1990s

I kept on writing songs, singing and collaborating with local musicians. Olive and the Cushiedoos springs to mind - a band promoting peace. One of the songs that stands out from our performances is Country Joe MacDonald's 'Fixin' to Die Rag':

*One, two, three what are we fightin' for,
don't ask me I don't give a damn,*

*the next stop is Vietnam'.
And it's five, six, seven, open up the pearly gates,
Well aint no time to wonder why,
yippee we're all gonna die”*

In 1997 I was fortunate enough to go to South Africa as part of a taskforce group with SEAD (Scottish Education and Action for Development) on a reciprocal visit, after SEAD had hosted a group of black South Africans to Edinburgh. No, we didn't get to meet Nelson Mandela: he was much too busy! But we did link up with politicians, community activists and trade unionists. Singing was a natural part of the struggle against apartheid, and black South Africans have a habit of breaking into song at a moment's notice. I'd written a song to take with us called 'Mutual Solidarity' which I sang at a conference in Johannesburg, after which everyone sang Nkose Sikelele. I kid you not, I couldn't sing it for the tears runnin' doon ma face!

Come 1999 and the stirrings of the Anti-Poll Tax campaign in Scotland. The miners had all but been abandoned by the trade union movement and starved back to work by Thatcher. Now she proceeded in plotting how to further humiliate the working class. All the Edinburgh lefties put their energies into actively organising to defeat this hated tory-inspired tax. And energetic it was, with our phone tree, meetings and noisy gatherings to drive off the sheriff officers come to evict people for not paying the tax. I wrote a couple of songs to add to the mix, here's a snippet:

*Here's the poll tax snoopers saying you're the losers
Yes we want your money and we think it's very funny
That you Scottish half-wits pay this tax, it's crucial
It's the only way to keep the profits high
It's fairer by far than the old rating system
We'll all pay the same, don't complain, what's the difference
Castles, mansions, bed-sits, tenements and multy-storeys”*
(from Poll Tax Dodgers by Eileen Penman 1990, tune The Black Bear)

Adult Learning Project, Edinburgh

Leading up to all of this I was heavily involved with the Gorgie Dalry Adult Learning Project, or ALP as it is known. ALP was a very innovative community education project. Based in a working-class area near the centre of Edinburgh, it established learning groups which, by their very nature, were political: The Land Group, The Democracy Group, The Women's History Group, the Welcoming group for asylum-seekers. I've sung at several events organised by ALP. The two community workers at the time, Stan Reeves and Vernon Galloway, both musicians, then took the bold step of setting up the Scots Music in the Community project, organising tutors to teach instruments and Scots traditional song and, later on, Scottish step dance. I got thrown in at the deep end to teach Scots traditional song one night a week at the ALP 'shop' in Dalry Road. No need to have worried, people loved it and took delight in learning the songs, specially The Freedom Come All Ye, delving into the background and exploring the Scots tongue. I got in touch with Hamish Henderson and arranged for him to come and visit the class. This was a rare treat for the students who were enthralled by his craic and his songs. As time went on, I came up with the idea of teaching a women's class, so Women and Folksong came into being. It attracted a goodly number of women who were keen to learn songs about, for and by women.

Stairheid Gossip

Something in the chemistry of the class gelled, and six of us went on to form an acappella group called 'Stairheid Gossip' out of which came Karine Polwart, highly accomplished and much-loved Scottish musician, folksinger, songwriter, storyteller: a musician unafraid to support political causes including, most recently, Medical Aid for Palestinians. She moved on to fulfil her ambition of becoming a professional musician and Stairheid spent the next ten years or so gigging at folk festivals and folk clubs, producing two CDs along the way. Our repertoire always included songs with social comment or political message. Throughout all this activity I was singing at political and women's events such as International Women's Day, Abortion Rights campaign events, the Liverpool Dockers Strike. I found it hard to write non-political songs, or even songs that were softly political, though I'm acutely aware that songs need not be 'in your face' political. Be it a bothy ballad from Aberdeenshire, a slave song from the American cotton fields, or a lament for men going off to war, folksong and political song are stories telling about people's lives and struggles, loves, work, wars, women, men, drink and

they can be humorous, serious, sad, happy, emotional, historical or political.

Wildfire Women's Choir

I'd been inspired by Eurydice women's choir in Glasgow led by folk singer, the late Gordeanna McCulloch. They were a women's choir who sang for Labour Movement and women's events in Glasgow, and Gordeanna encouraged me to start a choir in Edinburgh. By this time I had built up a substantial repertoire so, after a bit of testing out, I founded Wildfire Women's Choir with the aim of singing songs of struggle and freedom, and songs that reflected women's lives. We sang mostly Scots, American and African songs, 'Bread and Roses', a song from the American textile strike of 1912, 'No Woman No Cry' by Bob Marley, 'Tae Dauntan Me' by Robert Burns, 'Eh'll no bide wi' ma granny nae mair', a Dundee song. An added bonus was the support and sisterhood that developed in the choir. Singing is a great way to de-stress and forget about your worries and anxieties, make new friendships. In 2003 Wildfire was honoured to be invited by Edinburgh's Lord Provost to sing at the 25th anniversary of Edinburgh Women's Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre. After nine years, and a few performances under our belt, I handed leadership of the choir over to others and today Wildfire is still going strong, led by the inimitable Penny Stone.

We are lucky in Edinburgh to be the base for 'Protest in Harmony', a political song choir started by Jane Schonfeldt in 2004 with whom I shared the teaching for a couple of years. Now a permanent fixture on the political song circuit, you will hear and see them with their colourful banner sing out at events and protests here and further afield, including the UK-wide Street Choirs festival. And Stan Reeves, long retired from ALP, persuaded musicians to get involved, developed the Aye Band for the purpose of marching on Scottish independence marches organised by the YES movement.

The pandemic and lockdown in 2021 was a grim experience for many people isolated at home. During this period, I set about writing some songs. 'The Ballad o' the Pandemic' was an attempt at recording the incompetent shenanigans of the government, as I saw it.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my introduction, I recently wrote a song for Palestine inspired by a phrase I heard

Jeremy Corbyn use at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, 'The Language of Peace'. Writing a song is a small action to take while Gaza is being bombed to oblivion but, for me, it is a way of expressing my anguish and horror at seeing such death and destruction waged by one country illegally occupying another.

Political song has been a hugely inspirational part of my adult life. I've performed for numerous political causes in halls, theatres, community centres, libraries, miners' welfare clubs, parks, too many to remember but including:

The Carrying Stream Festival (Edinburgh Folk Club's celebration of the life of Hamish Henderson)

Spanish Civil War book launch (*Homage to Caledonia* by Daniel Gray 2009)

Edinburgh's Radical Book Fair (The Eskimo Republic: Scots Political Song 2010)

Rebel Songs and Union Blues (devised by Ewan McVicar)

Radical Songs of Scotland 1715-2015 (with Stuart McHardy and John Greig 2015)

Raise Their Voices, Women's words from the First World War, with others

(produced by Martine Robertson 2018 & 2022)

Liverpool Dockers Strike (Liverpool, 1997)

The 1984/85 miners' strike

Various International Women's Day celebrations

So here I am, an octogenarian, the voice now somewhat croaky but still singing, and writing. On occasion you may find me 'gien it laldy' at a session in the Captain's Bar, Edinburgh! 'Carry It On' is the title of a book by Pete Seeger and a song written by Gil Turner. It was frequently sung by Mae Shaw at Left Turns events. So, I'll end by saying 'carry it on and get singing!'

There's a man by my side walkin' There's a voice inside me talkin'

There's a word that needs a-sayin', Carry it on, carry it on.

Eileen was recently inducted into the Scottish Traditional Music Hall of Fame 2023, for Services to Performance.