

Ordinary Catastrophes

by

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B.E.S., York University, 2007

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Requirements for the Degree of
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Abstract

Ordinary Catastrophes is a concert experience enlivened by the superimposition of several conventions of contemporary theatre practice. Employing folk music's singer-songwriter tradition, the work tells the story of Clare O'Connor, a young leftist activist, writer and musician. After a period of grief and disillusionment she attempts to rebuild her relationships with her younger sisters and rediscover a sense of broader political opportunity by writing a memoir in song. The songs, lyrics and script were developed in collaboration with O'Connor, who is also the principal performer in the show. The culminating interdisciplinary performance is an attempt to enrich and extend my songwriting practice and to investigate the question of consequence in both artistic and activist pursuits. *Ordinary Catastrophes* features live music, sung and spoken text, narrative, character, movement, staging and lighting design.

Keywords: Songwriting; folk music; politics, memoir, theatre; performance

Dedicated to the memory of David Noble

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Preface

The author of this Project would like to reassure the reader that the Project Statement is substantially shorter in length than the accompanying appendix. The Master of Fine Arts degree undertaken at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, emphasizes artistic creation, which the Statement serves to describe, and the accompanying materials document. The appendix, undertaken as academic research during the tenure of this degree, serves to present the critical thought undergone prior to, and during, the creation of the artwork.

Defence Statement

Introduction

My Masters research, and the resulting performance *Ordinary Catastrophes*, was an opportunity for me to introduce complexity into my folk music practice, which is traditionally thought of as an uncomplicated form.

I am a singer-songwriter in the North American folk music tradition. For the last decade my art and research have been primarily focused how that tradition treats and considers the politics of social change. During the research, writing and production of two original full-length recordings, *Wartime Lovesong* (2009)¹ and *Ode to Joy* (2013)², I have developed a songwriting practice that attempts to articulate complex political ideas while preserving the emotional resonance of the folk song.

In my work, the politics I am interested in are the progressive Left's struggles for equality. While these movements are often composed of several smaller networks and thus difficult to define, they share commonalities. They are most often grassroots, anti-capitalist and concerned with social and environmental justice.

For the past year I worked in collaboration with activist, writer, and musician Clare O'Connor to create a memoir of the last decade of her life using the media of song. *Ordinary Catastrophes* tells the story of Clare's disillusionment with the Left following the collapse of several cherished political projects and the death of her father—himself a lauded Leftist intellectual. The resulting upheaval sees her moving from her

¹ *Wartime Lovesong*, 2009. Written by Corbin Murdoch and The Nautical Miles. Published by Jericho Beach Music. <http://corbinmurdoch.bandcamp.com/album/wartime-lovesong>

² *Ode to Joy*, 2014. Written and performed by The Nautical Miles. Self Published. <http://corbinmurdoch.bandcamp.com/album/ode-to-joy>

native Toronto to Los Angeles, where she is pursuing her musical ambitions and beginning to reshape her relationships with her two younger sisters.

The songs that were written to tell this story have been realized for the stage, pushing the boundaries of my practice by superimposing theatrical conventions overtop of a traditional concert performance. The concert experience has been suffused with narrative, character, spoken text, movement, conceptual staging and lighting design. The show features a four-piece band, three principal vocalists, three actors, as well as a lighting and projection design.

It was this interdisciplinary impulse that drove me to pursue my graduate studies. This research has been an attempt to enrich and enliven my practice by integrating theatre-making convention. It has revealed new opportunities and challenged me to reconcile the form and the content of the show. This process required a clear articulation of the work's central themes in a manner that my previous work has not. As *Ordinary Catastrophes* came together, the primary theme that emerged was the question of whether we can measure the consequence of our political and artistic engagement.

Folk Music

For me, the emotional resonance of folk music lies in the fact that though the stories in the songs are most often told from a first person perspective, the subjective truth implied by the singer's confessional voice can also be understood as revealing universal truths. Folk historian Samuel Forcucci's eight generalizations about folk music begin with the assertion that it "represents the musical expressions of the common people"³. This definition and the fact that folk music has been traditionally understood as a "popular music with antique roots and anonymous composers"⁴ means it is an art form which attempts to include and speak for both the artist and their audience. In this way, folk songs in the singer-songwriter tradition can be understood, through metonymy, as the archive of our culture's collective hopes, fears, experiences, and ambitions.

³ Forcucci, S. L. (1984). *A folk song history of America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁴ Cohen, Ronald D. *Folk Music: The Basics*. (2006) Routledge: New York and London.

I am also drawn to folk music aesthetically. North American folk music, "distinguishable by a special sound, a kind of 'simple' noise"⁵, is first and foremost a vocal tradition. Folk songs were shared through oral traditions, and are therefore highly singable⁶. Strong melodies, the deliberate use of repetition and rhyme, and simple structures that are easy to memorize, all remnants of folk music's oral tradition, remain hallmarks of great pop music today.

For the very same reasons that I am drawn to the form (the implicitly relatable nature of the music and that fact that folk songs are easy to learn, remember, and repeat), people have long sought to use folk songs to transmit political messaging. Throughout the folk revivals of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, these efforts were commonplace. The most famous example of this is the Almanac Singers, a collective of folk musicians based out of Greenwich Village in the early 1940s that included Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie⁷. In the same way that the form of these simple songs was used to easily pass melodies from one person to the next, these revivalists used it as a technology to circulate their progressive ideals.

The political messaging of the early folk music revivalists was extremely didactic and seems dated today. I believe that there still exists a knee-jerk aversion to music that purports to serve some political utility; however, the long association of folk music and the Left means that there is an implied politics in the music. Without having to work at articulating a specific position, by virtue of its historical alignment with grassroots movements, contemporary singer-songwriters are deemed political by association. The result is that nuanced and coherent political arguments are not advanced and the art form stagnates and suffocates on its own clichés.

Ordinary Catastrophes is an opportunity to work with someone who has dedicated herself to the politics of equality and justice, not by edifying or repeating a refrain, but by carefully and deliberately analyzing the positions taken by the Left and

⁵ Brand, O. (1962). *The ballad mongers*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls.

⁶ Forcucci, S. L. (1984). *A folk song history of America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

⁷ Lieberman, Robert. (1989) *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana.

scrutinizing the validity and consequence of those assertions. Through my collaboration with Clare, my lyrics were subjected to a higher level of scrutiny for the first time. It was no longer enough to be political by association. The politics expressed had to be clear, specific, and conversant with contemporary critical political theory.

Performance

Another area of my practice that I wanted to advance during my graduate studies was performance. Again, as a community of artists working in the singer-songwriter scene, I feel we are not challenging ourselves adequately in this area. Whereas the conventions of the concert experience have remained largely unchanged, especially in the performance of popular music, our colleagues in theatre, opera, and dance continue to innovate and challenge each other across disciplines.

I do not feel that this is simply a case of the grass being greener on the other side. In theatre and dance creation the entire three-dimensional thrust of the stage is considered and everything that happens upon it is the result of deliberate decisions made by a team of artists and designers. Not so in music, where the stage is simply a neutral platform upon which musicians can perform—an invisible technology.

There are notable exceptions, such as David Byrne, Laurie Anderson, and, more recently, St Vincent, who infuse their live shows with performance art. Portland singer-songwriter Holcombe Waller and Brooklyn band People Get Ready are both examples of contemporary artists actively working to hybridize the concert experience with the conventions of theatre and dance. Many precedents exist.

Conversely, I do not want to be dismissive of the traditional concert form. Nor do I mean to suggest that all singer-songwriters necessarily need to become theatre makers. There is certainly power in the authenticity of untrained and unrehearsed bodies on stage; however, I do maintain that we do ourselves a disservice not to consider the possibilities provided by the psychic space created by the stage, if only to eventually dismiss them.

And so, *Ordinary Catastrophes* became a way for me to point to the possibilities singer-songwriters have been provided by generations of theatre artists. Again, my interest was in creating a hybridized experience. I wanted to create a compelling theatrical experience and preserve the integrity of the drama on that register, but to superimpose it onto a traditional concert experience. The juxtaposition of the two became an important element of the work. My intention is to challenge others working in the singer-songwriter tradition to engage in the same kinds of interdisciplinary exchanges that occur in contemporary theatre, dance, and opera practice.

Expanding my practice in this way required that I consider the rich tradition of staged music. Opera and musical theatre have a long and storied history that I am only beginning to understand. Whereas definitions of opera can be very simplistic (“staged sung drama”⁸) they rarely capture the nuances of the tradition (which varies from country to country) or account for the distinction from musical theatre⁹. A useful, if incomplete, description of that distinction comes from the critic Anthony Tommasini, who, writing in the *New York Times*, claims that:

*Both genres seek to combine words and music in dynamic, felicitous and, to invoke that all-purpose term, artistic ways. But in opera, music is the driving force.*¹⁰

In opera, there is a “tendency to musically represent emotions and passions”¹¹. This is distinct from musical theatre, which is driven by narrative. In musical theatre the dialogue and lyrics move the narrative forward¹².

As a singer-songwriter, I can relate more readily to a text-based media. My practice is lyric-driven and the structure of popular music forms becomes the scaffold with which I construct those lyrics. The rigidity of the form (rhyme, syllabics, repetition) is

⁸ Williams, Bernard (2006). *On Opera*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London.

⁹ Gallo, Denise (2006). *Opera, The Basics*. Routledge: New York and London.

¹⁰ Tommasini, Anthony (2011). *Opera? Musical? Please respect the difference*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/theater/musical-or-opera-the-fine-line-that-divides-them.html>.

¹¹ Gallo, D (2006). *Opera, The Basics*. Routledge: New York and London.

¹² From conversation with my Senior Supervisor, David K MacIntyre.

an exciting compositional challenge for me and I rarely err from it for dramatic effect (for better or for worse). As such, my early characterizations of *Ordinary Catastrophes* as a folk-opera do not hold up to scrutiny.

But the work cannot be considered to be musical theatre either, for the songs were written first without having previously articulated the dramatic arc. It was the songs that informed the shape of the narrative and not vice versa. There are similarities between *Ordinary Catastrophes* and the musical theatre tradition of reinterpreting an artist's repertoire into the musical form. Countless artists, many of them singer-songwriters, have received this treatment, from Hank Williams to Tupac Shakur, Leonard Cohen to Abba. The difference is that all of these works began with theatre artists finding inspiration in popular song and using those songs as material with which to create theatre. Here I am finding inspiration in the theatre to elevate and enrich my songwriting practice.

In this way, the emergent tradition of Composed Theatre offers some useful touchstones for the work. Composed Theatre recognizes "the ongoing interest of composers...

*to approach the theatrical stage and its means of expression as musical material. They treat voice, gesture, movement, light, sound, image, design and other features of theatrical production according to musical principles and compositional techniques and apply musical thinking to performance as a whole.*¹³

An example of this style of musical thinking translated onto the stage is the Quebecois interdisciplinary performance ensemble L'Orchestre d'Hommes-Orchestre (LODHO). They begin with an existing oeuvre of songs and, using that set of songs as a launching pad, create fully realized theatrical experiences.

The main thread of this theatre, built from a mosaic of songs, is no longer chronological, but poetic. The story is no longer a guide, but a bank of

¹³ Rebstock, M. & Roesner, D., Eds. (2013). *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*. Intellect: Bristol and Chicago.

*images and symbols used in an orderly or disorderly fashion, transposed into the musical action.*¹⁴

Much of the work that is classified as Composed Theatre “de-emphasizes text, narrative and fictional character”¹⁵. *Ordinary Catastrophes* has an inherent chronology, a distinct narrative, and defined characters; however, Composed Theatre, such as the work of LODHO, has provided much of the inspiration for the staging of this work. I, too, wanted to capture the poetry of the images and symbols that are constellated within the lyrics. My intention was to use this bank of images to magnify the themes within the narrative and to allow it to occupy the entire physical and psychic space of the theatre.

Narrative

All of my past work has been drawn from my personal experience, even when those experiences have been fictionalized. In keeping with the singer-songwriter tradition, I have typically written from the first person singular. While this perspective was maintained in *Ordinary Catastrophes*, working with Clare divorced me from my own experience. This was limiting in a number of ways, but perhaps none more so than in the articulation of the narrative. As this was intended as a work of theatre, for the first time I had to consider character and narrative as central elements. *Ordinary Catastrophes* is designed as a memoir, and as such not only did it need to be dramatically compelling, but, for Clare, had to be a sincere representation of her lived experience. The challenge was that the story that emerged did not conform to the traditional narrative form.

Clare is a long-time activist who works tirelessly towards seemingly impossible goals: human emancipation and the destruction of the capitalist system. During our process, the theme that kept reoccurring was the question of political consequence. As an activist trying to accomplish goals that are insurmountable, how can you possibly know whether your work is having any measurable impact? Inevitably, the answer is that

¹⁴ From the program notes of L'Orchestre d'Hommes-Orchestre's 2014 performance of Cabaret Brise Jour presented by The Cultch.

¹⁵ Rebstock, M. & Roesner, D., Eds. (2013). *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*. Intellect: Bristol and Chicago.

you cannot. This realization does not provide a satisfactory resolution to Clare's personal conflict from the perspective of a traditional narrative.

Traditional narrative is reliant on the resolution of conflict, and while contemporary audiences no longer expect theatre to conform strictly to this form, there is an expectation that some type of transformation will occur. Clare is unsure of the political consequence of her activist and artistic pursuits at the beginning of the show, and is similarly unsure at the end. To suggest otherwise would be to sacrifice the truth of Clare's lived experience for the sake of the narrative.

The solution to this conundrum arose from the study of the critical political theory that Clare shared with me during the research phase of the project.

First, Rebecca Solnit's *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* provides a useful contradistinction between the activist and artistic experience. She writes that

*for artists of all stripes, the unknown, the idea or the form or the tale that has not yet arrived, is what must be found. It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from.*¹⁶

According to Solnit, artists must embrace the unknown and make every attempt to lose themselves to it. She reminds us that, "the things we want are transformative, and we don't know, or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation"¹⁷. Therefore, the question of consequence is resolved much differently by an artist. It is acceptable for an outcome to be unknown, as the unknown is the source of inspiration, rather than a source of anxiety.

For Clare, who is both an activist and an artist, transformation comes when she allows herself to recognize this distinction; however, it is not quite enough. While Clare is happy to embrace the unknown as a means of personal recovery from her grief and

¹⁶ Solnit, Rebecca (2014). *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Viking/Penguin: London.

¹⁷ Ibid

burnout, she is still conflicted. Personal transformation, in and of itself, cannot achieve the changes that activists long to see in the world.

For me, Biffo Berardi offers the next piece of the puzzle. In his essay *How to heal a depression*, he writes about recovery on both a personal and global scale.

*When dealing with a depression the problem is not to bring the depressed person back to his/her normality, to reintegrate behavior in the universal standards of normal social language. The goal is to ... give him/her the possibility to see other landscapes, and to change the focus, to open some new ways of imagination.*¹⁸

The goal of recovery, then, is not to return to where you were before. For activists the artistic process is not a means to heal so that they can simply return to the fight. Rather, the transformation should result in the ability to fight better, in ways previously unimagined. For Clare, that is the only way that she'll be able to start making progress towards her ultimate goals.

Conclusion

The inclusion of this contemporary political theory at the end of the show is not simply in service of the narrative. It is also helps answer an important question for me. The question of 'why'? Why is it important for me to push the boundaries of both my personal artistic practice and the culture within which I create and perform?

During the course of this research I was able to consider the activist experience and the artistic experience concurrently. Though the means are very different, I believe both groups are striving to affect cultural change. Whether personal or institutional, artists and activists labour to transform their world, incrementally, one action/performance at a time. While the consequence of these actions may be unclear, it is clear that we have not yet achieved what we are hoping for. The title of the work is in part a lament that catastrophe has become so commonplace.

¹⁸ Berardi, Franco "Biffo" (date unknown). *How to Heal a Depression*. 16 Beaver. <http://www.16beavergroup.org/bifo/bifo-how-to-heal-a-depression.pdf> (accessed June 2014).

Despite all odds, we are compelled to continue in our struggles. Since what has come before has not yet satisfied our desires, it is our impulse and our duty to try new things.

That is why I seek to add complexity to my songwriting. I want to shine a light on the lack of political astuteness and the inattention to the art of performance in the singer-songwriter tradition. As always, the success of the work and its consequence remain unclear, but I present *Ordinary Catastrophes* as a sincere attempt to point to the places where I feel my community is stagnating and to suggest new ways of moving forward.

I state above that it is my hope that these songs and the story they tell are compelling. For me, a work is compelling when an audience can recognize themselves within it and become invested. Whether or not one identifies with the politics expressed onstage, it is my hope that, like the tradition of folk song, Clare's story can come to represent a common experience shared by audience and artist alike.

Project Documentation

What follows is the script of Ordinary Catastrophes. It includes all text that is spoken and sung during the performance. All stage directions have been omitted. I have also submitted video documentation of the performance to provide a reference of the directorial, staging and design choices made during this production of the work. Please see attached video files.

Ordinary Catastrophes

THE PRINCIPALS:

Clare..... Female, early 30s, Alto
Mel..... Female, early 30s, Alto
Alice..... Female, early 20s, Alto

THE CHORUS:

The Lover..... Male, early 30s
The Comrade..... Female, mid 30s
The Mentor..... Male, early 30s

THE BAND:

Guitarist
Keyboard Player
Bassist
Drummer

SCENE 1: ELDEST DAUGHTER

CLARE [sung]: I have no memory
Of my family
Without my sisters
There beside me

We sang proudly for our father
I was leader, the eldest daughter

Eldest daughter, older sister
Daddy's little war-resister
I've worked hard, but never harder
For the esteem of my dear father

My dear father, smooth operator
A skilled and cunning troublemaker
My mother's protests met with refusal
Left us wanting for his approval

He was California bound
He was California bound
Still feel the sting of his absence now
He was California bound

SCENE 2: BRAND NEW CITY

CLARE: I'm writing a song about you.

In it I pretend we met at the Chapters bookstore picket, when the owners started funding mercenaries to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces. I *think* that was the same day we hopped the fence beside the low rail bridge at Dupont and Davenport—the time when I was afraid to climb that billboard beside the tracks and you said to me, “Why don't you just quit whining and focus on where to put your feet?”

Listen, I know you're skeptical about my reasons for doing music—that you feel it's a distraction from the real work. And the truth is that at this point I'm not sure what it's *for*.

Maybe you're right that I've been using convalescence as an excuse. My dad died almost three years ago. But grief has its own sense of time.

So I've decided to spend this year writing a record. It's shaping up to be a memoir about my twenties. I'm afraid that so far the songs sound like diary entries. Or, what I imagine diary entries sound like. For years I bought blank notebooks intending to write about my thoughts, but within a couple weeks they'd be full of meeting minutes and to-do lists.

The first sentence of my diary *these days* would be “What the fuck am I doing in Los Angeles”? People come here to get famous. I feel like I came here to hide.

Living in the same city as my sisters is consoling, though. I've spent so long affirming our differences that it's startling to discover how similar we are. They think music school's a good idea. Alice and her boyfriend even took me to my audition. I start next week. I'm nervous, but I think studying will make the record better.

My Dad once told me that he didn't understand the need for memoir. "If people want to know what I've done," he used to say, "look at the work."

CLARE [sung] The city is restless it shifts and it sighs
Sometimes I need someone to help me survive
The fear our resistance isn't what it should be
Is calmed by the promise that you see in me
The first time that we met
We were the last ones left
On the picket lines at Bay and Bloor

We snuck into a train yard
Climbed up on a billboard
Looking over Davenport

My mother always told me
There was nothing for me
In this city anymore

But perched above the traffic
In our winter jackets
You would prove my mother wrong

The tenements haunted, the back alleys prowled
They were built brick by brick with a masonry trowel
And in the same way a brand new city grew
Spreading out over top of one I already knew

The bar booths and the cafes
That became our mainstays
I had somehow missed before

Where the old guard and the new
Came to reconcile the two
By moving the goalposts once more

Anarchists debating
How we should be creating
The preconditions for class war

This became the backdrop
Stuck behind our laptops
'Til we were wonderin' what we do this for

Soon we created a new kind of love
One that I had not thought I was capable of
You revealed to me the best parts of myself
And refused to allow me to be anyone else

Some nights were eternal
Pages of our journal
Spread out on the bedroom floor

Working straight to deadline
Getting drunk on cheap wine
Once we couldn't work no more

My mother always told me
There was nothing for me
In this city anymore

But smoking at the station
After the demonstration
You would prove my mother wrong

The city is restless it shifts and it sighs
Sometimes I need someone to help me survive

SCENE 3: A LOVE WITHOUT LETTERS

LOVER: OK. The sexiest songs I can think of, as requested:

PJ Harvey- 'This Is Love'
Screamin' J Hawkins- I Put a Spell On You'
Portishead- 'Strangers'

Pretty much that entire Portishead record, actually.

But tell me, why are you asking? Is this business or pleasure? I know you're doing research for your songs, but I'd like to think that maybe there is a reason you reached out to me in particular. Like maybe you consider me to be something of an expert in this field.

Sorry to let your last email slow cook with no reply. It knocked my socks off. Made me realize I need to bring my A-game.

My silence wasn't an answer. It's just that the re-reads slay me. Anytime I even look at the sections I want to respond to I have to excuse myself from my desk. I can't type with only my left hand.

I also wanted to think about the "bigger picture" a bit more before I got back to you. I think it's possible you're distracting yourself with me. Setting up a life in LA sounds daunting. How tempting to instead immerse yourself in a virtual romance.

Don't get me wrong: I'm a very willing distraction—especially given your way with words—but only so long as I'm a healthy one.

Once you find your footing, I bet you'll be bored with all this pleasure seeking.

Until then, yes, keep sending me things. How many times am I allowed to read your last letter before it's inappropriate? [laughs] I keep wanting to escalate and send video. But who am I kidding: text is spectacular. Send more.

CLARE [sung]: The silver in the pixel
The ripple in the sheen
The dissolve of the trace left
By my fingers on the screen

The glitch pierces the surface
The glow distorts the dream
The unblinking eyes of lovers
The purr of our machines

What could we become in your untamed imagination?
Can you capture it in language?
Could you write it down for me?

Oh my lovers
Let's keep this fire burning
This flame is yours alone
I'll tend your fire with letters
A love without letters
Is a love I've never known

The blush left by the rapture
Your fingers across my skin
The sting left by the rupture
The warmth left by the sting

The rising of a breastbone
The spreading of a thigh
My lover is a lion
She lifts an amber eye

Can we still imagine our love as an act of liberation?
A conversation that demands the very best of me

Oh my lovers
Let's keep this fire burning
This flame is yours alone
I will tend your fire with letters
A love without letters
Is a love I've never known

When I imagine my lovers
It is dark and they are dreaming
Scattered 'cross a continent bathed in unending night

When I am lonely, despairing
I can recall the feeling
My touch becomes a solace before I return to the fight

SCENE 4: MIDDLE SISTER

CLARE [sung]: I have no memory
Of my family
Without my sisters
There beside me
There is power in what is whispered
The soothing song of my middle sister

Middle sister, 2nd arrival
My beloved, unwitting rival
She learned to side step my confrontation
Silent witness to separation

Separation, it landed heavy
Could feel it coming, but we weren't ready
I felt an anger that burned and blistered
Set me apart from my younger sisters

CLARE, MEL, ALICE [sung]:
They were California bound
They were California bound
A family scattered across the land
They were California bound

SCENE 5: QALANDIYA

CLARE: Music school. I'm learning a lot, but I'm bored with the conversations. I sound like an asshole, I know, but I'm convinced I'm getting stupider. My piano teacher occasionally slams US militarism, but other than that no one says much of consequence.

Not that there's anything wrong with being nineteen and just wanting to make music. But at almost thirty I'm the weird, kinda older communist who—having thought better of short-lived ambitions to unionize the instructors—now just talks constantly to the other students about queer sex. I tell myself it's subversive but it's probably more like regression. Last week I had sex with someone in a practice room. I'm basically in high school.

Sometimes I find myself missing those nights back in Toronto hacking through revisions of articles I didn't even agree with. Articles that I couldn't believe we were publishing. I miss the sober, strategic deliberation.

But, nostalgia aside, I admit that political songwriting is hard as fuck. Like political writing, the best of it uses some poignant detail to reveal the whole, but you can only fit so many details into a song before you run out of syllables or hit a wall with your rhyme scheme.

It's amazing how much effort we put in to our work when we know the audience is going to be so small. My dad used to talk about his "seven readers."

He also said it was the busiest people who always sent feedback. "Look at this," he laughed, showing me the endorsements for his last book, "barely a word otherwise, but nice ones from Chomsky and Vandana Shiva."

The latest song is about my trip to Palestine. Draft attached. Be ruthless.

CLARE (w/MEL, ALICE) [sung]: I left for Jerusalem
Never to return again
A fond farewell to all my friends
Vancouver via Bethlehem

Tendering withdrawals
From the architects of occupation
What's another word for a systemic segregation?

Outposts on a hill
The anchor points for separation
A colony that clings
To the upper hand of obfuscation

There's no words for what I saw
Caged in queue at Qalandiya

MENTOR: So, I listened to the draft of your song and read the lyrics. The song is really pretty, but it wouldn't be an honest assessment if I didn't subject it to the same scrutiny as any of your other political work. You did ask me to be ruthless.

My question is this: Do you really want to write a song about your experience in Palestine?

Remember how unremarkable your trip seemed to you when you got back? What does your personal account add to the conversation? You insist that people *don't* need to go over there in order to understand the politics.

Remember a decade ago when the anti-war movement was reluctant to talk about Palestine? Maybe back then there would have been an audience for this song. But that's

done. Palestine is almost *the* litmus test for morality in the 21st Century.

You've named this song Qalandiya and you sing about going through that checkpoint as if it were a revelation. I wouldn't say it to just anyone, but your shock sounds naïve. Horror that it is, Qalandiya is the most predictable checkpoint infrastructure in the West Bank, and you went there knowing exactly what to expect.

The story about your personal catalytic experience isn't useful. Not anymore.

Maybe you can find another angle. All of the songs you've sent me so far are in the first person. Maybe you should write about someone else. It doesn't all have to be about you, you know.

CLARE (w/MEL, ALICE) [sung]: A hole is cut into razor wire
A flame is set in a stack of tires
A streak of white cuts the inky black
An arc retraced as they hurl it back

You flew across an ocean to take a photograph
To reaffirm a truth that we just couldn't seem to grasp
But when you flew back home you found the argument had shifted
We seem to reinvent the wheel with each atrocity committed

I know you you're still haunted by things that you've seen
Ducking the bullets on the streets of Jenin
The first time you wondered if you'd make it home
When you put down your camera and picked up a stone

The cigarettes you smuggled from the European Union
To help convince your sources that you weren't in collusion
Ate olives in the sun, tried to avoid undue attention
Calculated risk, will it be death or just detention?

I know you you're still haunted by things that you saw
Caged in queue at Qalandiya
Tell me where do you feel most alone
Overseas, or back at home?

A hole is cut into razor wire
A flame is set in a stack of tires
A streak of white cuts the inky black
An arc retraced as they hurl it back

20 years ago I guess it would be Nicaragua
Shooting photos of insurgents from a rooftop in Managua
40 years ago I guess you'd be in Vietnam

Stonewalled by the proxies in the green zones of Saigon

I know you you're still haunted by things that you saw
In a Gaza City hospital
You don't have to tell me, just know that you can
I won't try to pretend that I understand

SCENE 6: TORONTO 2010

CLARE: I'm in full political reclusion. I knew the Toronto left so well by the time I moved. From what little I've seen LA isn't much different. Maybe that's an excuse for not contributing, but it's hard not to feel irked by the familiarity. Switch countries and cross a continent and the radicals still have the same habits: popularity contests, muffled side comments, insider language. At this point it's hard for me to connect with people who don't feel similarly removed from the scene, and, as a result, they're harder to find.

I have made one friend here who was in Toronto for the G20 protests. He told me he couldn't figure out our strategy. I told him we didn't have one.

The interaction made me decide to write a song about that convergence. I'm trying to be honest, although my diplomatic impulse means I've second-guessed every line. But the truth should hurt.

CLARE [sung]: Tired without complaint
Elbow deep in wheatpaste
Press statements and heartache
From thinkin' back a decade
To toppled summit fences
No one ever crossed
Our next moves an enigma
Unsure if we had lost

Kept me awake
With questions
Cutting banner cloth 'til four
Asking my take
On how this time
Would be different than before

Remember the reports
From Athens and Madrid
A flank of cops beat back
By a thousand unarmed kids
But Toronto 2010
This is how we fought
Each city gets a riot
This is the one mine got

You caught my eye
On Yonge Street
Undone like streets before.
Patrol car fire
The emblem
False calm at the storm's core

MEL, ALICE [sung]: Barricades of shield and boots
Sniper scopes trace out our route
Morning raids took seventeen
Called it a conspiracy

MEL, ALICE, CHORUS [sung/shouted]: Barricades of shield
and boots
Sniper scopes trace out our route
Morning raids took seventeen
Called it a conspiracy
(repeated)

CLARE [sung overtop]: Now five years later
Still feel the anger
A failure wasted
Never debated

The mass detentions
The infiltrations
Are we still spinning
That this is winning?

CLARE [sung]: And we recall
Each city
For how its people fight
Play back the tapes
And show me
Which parts we got right

SCENE 7: BREAKDOWN¹⁹

CLARE [sung]: If I seem a little jittery I can't restrain myself
I'm falling into fancy fragments - can't contain myself
Now I can stand austerity but it gets a little much
When there's all these livid things that you never get to touch
I'm gonna breakdown, yeah

¹⁹ *Breakdown* is a Buzzcocks song, originally released in 1973. Used and reprinted here by permission of the band.

I feel my brain like porridge coming out of me ears
and I was anticipating reverie
I've taken leave of my senses - and I'm in arrears
my legs buckle over - I'm living on my knees

Whatever makes me tick it takes away my concentration
Sets my hands a-trembling - gives me frustration
So I hear that two is company for me it's plenty trouble
though my double thoughts are clearer now that I am seeing
double
I'm gonna breakdown, yeah

ALICE: Hey sis.

Just writing to see how you're doing today. I can't believe it's been three years. I'm still unsure of how to feel or what to do on these anniversaries. I mean, now that you're here and we've been talking regularly about Dad, I feel like today carries less weight. But Helen and I both want to do *something*...so do you wanna go to the beach later and dip our feet in the ocean?

And, no, I don't think it was strange for you to send out your speech from the memorial. I'm glad you did. It made me remember a bunch from that day that I had forgotten about just because I was so focused on getting through it. Like what you said when you introduce that punk rock cover you sang. You said, "It's almost and entirely different song, beautiful in it's own way...but it wouldn't exist without that which came before."

Maybe you should include a punk rock cover on your record?

CLARE, ALICE [sung]: Oh mum can I grow out of what's too
big for me?
I'll give up that ghost before it gives up me
I wander loaded as a crowd - a nowhere wolf of pain
Living next to nothing - my nevermind remains
I'm gonna breakdown, yeah

CLARE [sung to ALICE]: I have no memory of my family
Without my sisters there beside me
The dimpled cheek where I first kissed her
Little song bird, baby sister

SCENE 8: IRON IN OUR BLOOD

MEL: So, I got your S.O.S. It was in the middle of a shift at the hospital so I couldn't write back. Now I'm wiped, but here are my thoughts. Mostly this is shit you already know.

Of course you're self-conscious about pursuing music, but no, it's not an indulgence. You have to get over that. I saw this Ira Glass thing online, something to the effect of,

when you're new at making art, you're gonna make bad stuff. Most people quit then. I know you're not gonna quit, and that you're just flailing. And, from one flailer to another, hold steady. Remember last month when I was questioning my whole nursing plan?

Doing new things is supposed to be humbling. When you told me why you were leaving Toronto, you said you'd become reckless. That all those things that now seem to be so common among activists our age – like having your collective implode, losing one too many campaigns, getting fired for your politics – had made diplomacy impossible.

As far as I'm concerned, what you're doing is good simply because it's generating a new kind of humility. You're realizing how little you know about what goes into making music, and at the same time, you're being reminded that, fucked as it is, the left is where your people are. I'm really not convinced that doing music means you've abandoned ship, but even if it does, I know you'll find your way back.

MEL [sung]: In the decades free of terror on the lip of the
Great Lakes

In a century that ended before a new one took its place

CLARE [sung]: We found each other early and fell into our
embrace

MEL [sung]: A body grown beside a body knows that body's
shape

C: Your hands upon my shoulders as familiar as my own
Digging with your fingers into muscle, flesh and bone

M: To isolate the pressure point and pierce it with a pin

C: The truths I leave to harden into knots beneath my skin

M: Pushed never to settle for what comes easily

Pushed never to turn away from what discomforts me

C: You were brave in all the ways I never had to be

M: Pushed to tear our trust apart to see if it would bleed

C: The jealousy that only we eldest daughters know

A cruelty that only your own sister can bestow

M: I led love to the lakeshore and lay it in the mud

C: Iron sharpens iron; there is iron in our blood

M: Your mother knows me as your sister and she treats me as
her child

It was she who wrote and warned me not to let our friendship
die

C: For we are working toward a love we do not fully
comprehend

C&M: We sang in the beginning, we will sing until the end

SCENE 9: STEEL SHARPENS STEEL

CLARE: Promise to remind me
There's a reason why
That we've set the bar
So impossibly high

A repertoire of failure
Battles lost, concessions won
Seems strange to look back now
And consider what we've done

MEL: I promise not to let you
Ever second-guess
Believe me when I tell you
That you deserve nothing less

Can we call it a resistance
If we're always in retreat?
Outsmarted and outnumbered
Outmaneuvered on the street

CLARE, ALICE, MEL:
I guess I'm getting older
I guess I'm getting older
I bet you're getting older too

ALICE:
Steel sharpens steel
Can it also thicken skin?
To admit that we're losing
Is to allow we can win

Let depression lead us
To the edges of our wounds
Curl ourselves like sisters
'Round the hollow in our wombs

CLARE, ALICE, MEL:
I guess I'm getting tired
I guess I'm losing patience
I bet you're losing patience too

I guess that I'm despairing
I know that I still want this
I hope that you still want it too

SCENE 10: THE FIX

COMRADE: Thanks for sending me the lyrics. It's all love. The song is great, and a welcome interruption to the rhythm of my isolated days. Spring tends, I think, to be a bit of a rut time for me, but, even so, I've been feeling unseasonably low. The difficulty in sorting things out on the political front has me losing ground to obligations and paralyzing or, to understate it drastically, weakening, my (in any case meager) social skills.

Still, your advice to make friends with angst rings true. And, in response to your panic about releasing these songs, I'm inclined to reiterate it.

Undisrupted serenity is for chumps. Good that comes without bad is almost always suspect. Any demonstration I've anchored that's gone well has been preceded by me worrying about how it's likely to go to shit, which indicates it's getting the sort of attention that'll ensure things go smoothly.

Regarding the persistent "but what is it for?" that weighs on us both: I endorse your commitment to an absolute political objective and agree that "winning" is and ought to be maintained as a specific objective, far distant from anything we've achieved so far. But with such high standards set for ourselves it's inevitable (and part of the work) to ache when we miss opportunities or feel undermined by basic constraints -- so long as we surround ourselves with people who remind us that we set those high standards for good reasons, and who give us hell when when we're seduced by half-measures. And, let's be honest: you only just turned 30, young'n. This doesn't have to be your definitive memoir.

All of which is to say: take this dip as an affirming sign you are living a serious life. Realize that the shitty parts don't detract from the whole -- they're lodged among its component parts, and if you don't give them their due, they'll take it anyway.

CLARE (with MEL, ALICE) [sung]: I was still finding the words
They were publishing your piece
I was still finding my courage
You were fighting the police
And I wanted so badly to do what you were able to
Easier to just fall in love with you

You wanted to retreat
To be shielded from view
All the people that you loved
Expected things from you
You felt you knew the part I wanted you to play
Easier to just turn and walk away

The panic when you meet someone who'll change you
The terror once you know you have to tell them
When you're already sure how they'll receive it
Yeah, you've always been able to take it or to leave it

I said it didn't hurt

That it was just a bruise
Still I tried to turn myself
Into something you could use
But my constant return to the rawness of the wound
Allowed me to admit this was about more than you

So I took every chance
And learned to follow through
Until others saw in me, what I had seen in you
I learned to think of love
As risk and gratitude
Had a been lying if I'd said, I didn't still want that with you

The panic when you meet someone who'll change you
The terror once you know you have to tell them
When you're already sure how they'll receive it
Yeah, you've always been able to take it or to leave it

Last summer
I took a lover
I saw my younger self in her
Told her the love she
Wanted from me
She should look to herself for
I never once told her a lie
She cried through our goodbye

So now you've hit some walls
Found the rules that you obey
To protect yourself from some, keep everyone away
There's a tension in your chest that reason won't undo
You find it's I who has something to teach you

Somehow we have held on to a friendship
Despite all the discomfort and the bullshit
By now there's no need to even say it
But you've always been able to take it or to leave it

SCENE 11: LITTLE SISTER

CLARE: Details. The night my father died we each took turns saying goodbye. He wasn't conscious so I sat beside him and let myself imagine what he wanted to say. The words sounded in my mind so immediately: Be courageous and sing.

I'm still not sure if it was "Be courageous and sing" or "Be courageous (comma) and sing." Maybe he did that on purpose.

CLARE [sung]: Baby sisters, children no longer
Growing wiser, growing stronger
Our father's bedside, that cruel December
I wondered which parts they remember

CLARE (with MEL and ALICE) [sung]:
We'll remember that night forever
Death had brought us back together
We sang a song we'd learned as children
And for our father, we sang as women

We are California bound
We are California bound
To spread some ash upon the sand
We are California bound

CLARE: Coud you hear that?

-END-

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Appendix A.

Folk Music as Politics: Alan Lomax, The Almanac Singers and the Folk Festival Experience

Clare O'Connor sent me an email on October 7th, the subject of which was: '*side reading*'. The body of the email read: "but do it. for distinction between "political" and "politics," and an elaboration of the limits of struggles at the register of representation."

It linked to a piece from *Jacobin* ('a magazine of culture and polemic') called *She Came to Riot* by Jennifer Pan.

In the piece, Pan calls out a revived interest in the Riot Grrl movement of the 1990s. Pan is suspicious that the aesthetics developed by female musicians, publishers, and artists as part of the overtly feminist cultural movement are now being championed by the likes of *New York* magazine, Marc Jacobs, and Refinery 29 solely for profit. For Pan, the renewed interest in Riot Grrl is a symptom of the obsession with the 90s currently influencing fashion trends and provides us with a much needed opportunity for us to "understand exactly how our nostalgia for riot grrrl's aesthetics operates within contemporary feminism," especially considering that "sexual assault and threats to reproductive rights loom as obviously as they did twenty years ago." (Pan, "She Came to Riot")

Clare sent me this article because we are writing a set of songs together. I have spent the last decade writing and recording folk songs with my band, The Nautical Miles, in Vancouver. Clare has spent the last decade sharpening her intellect and organizing on the front lines of Toronto's progressive left.

Friends since our undergraduate days, this summer we took a road trip across the Pacific Northwest. One afternoon as we were driving up the Olympic Peninsula she proclaimed that she wanted to sing her own songs, but that she simply wasn't able to write any. I told her I would happily write songs for her to sing, and try to teach her some of my tricks in the process. "But crap," I said, remembering. "I have to write my thesis first".

"Just make me your thesis," replied Clare. A collaboration was born.

Clare didn't want to write just any kind of song. She wanted to write political songs. Having spent years pursuing the loftiest of projects, human emancipation (and, indeed, these were her stakes), the project needed to be part of her politics. Clare's decision to take some time away from her activist pursuits to pursue her creative impulses needed to be somehow understood for its utility, even if that utility ended up being simply a regenerative respite.

And so, we spent a lot of time discussing the ways in which art and political practices can intersect, and the resulting problems and pitfalls. If an artwork has a political agenda and that agenda fails, can the artwork still be considered a success? What is the difference between political art and propaganda? Why does position taking in song inevitably sound didactic?

It was in the context of these conversations that Clare introduced to me the distinction between “political” and “politics” and sent me the Pan article so that I might unearth the disparity myself, as any good pedagogue would.

Here is what I discovered in my reading: while the content of Riot Grrl revivalism is decidedly *political* and it may be “good to see mainstream outlets embracing the opportunity to highlight explicitly feminist materials for a wider audience,” the repackaging and reproduction of the Riot Grrl material “sanitizes” their *politics*. Pan argues that the framing of Riot Grrl retrospectives through personal narratives results in a “narrowing the scope of feminist critique”. She writes,

Situating one’s politics within the story of self-transformation leads to neglect of structural critiques of inequality and oppression... Though a book of riot grrrl zines or even a summer spent at a Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls might inspire young women to pick up guitars and pens, without the financial resources to sustain these creative pursuits, fewer and fewer women will be afforded the opportunity to make art. (Pan, “She Came to Riot”)

Clare is not simply interested in writing songs that are political. Rather, she wants the songs to be part of the politics. She wants them to move beyond the confessional, personal narrative and use the music to create a serious political force. She wants to use the technology of song to reveal inequality and oppression and to lob structural critiques.

So, if an artwork has a political agenda and that agenda fails, can the artwork still be considered a success? Doesn’t matter, according to Clare. In response to that question she sent AK Thompson’s article “Making Friends with Failure”:

Failure is endemic to any project whose goal is as lofty as human emancipation. It cannot be ignored or appeased. It cannot be buried under good intentions or changed into its opposite by holding it up to the mirror of wishful thinking. What failure calls for most of all is honesty. And the truth should hurt. (Thompson, 16)

And so, I am left wondering if my chosen media, popular song, folk music, is up for the challenge. Can we make this music dangerous again? Has it ever been dangerous? If so, when? Let’s start at the beginning: 1996.

* * *

I remember my first folk music festival. I was 13 years old and I went with my friend Kepler. We both wore baggy jeans with torn out knees and shoulder length, unkempt hair as popularized by Kurt Cobain. Kepler’s father Randy paid for us to go. I remember stepping onto the festival grounds as though we were stepping into a dream.

As an East Side kid, I was a diehard defender of East Van’s claim to cultural superiority, and as a cocky adolescent I felt that I, through birthright, was an arbiter of artistic legitimacy. Never mind east of Main, for me cultural activity of any import was only extant east of Clark. Kitsalano had the beaches, fine, but the rest of it was a spiritless, carefully manicured Philistine.

And so it was a shock when, upon walking through the Main Gates of The Vancouver Folk Music Festival just off of 4th Ave in Kitsalano, I discovered what would become the centre of my artistic universe for the better part of the following decade. A promised land cradled in the palm of the much maligned West Side.

The Folk Festival seemed to exist as a leftist enclave. Topical slogans were brandished on t-shirts and buttons. People played hacky sack and helicopter-danced. Women walked around with their tops off. It was as if everyone from my neighbourhood (at least the ones that could afford the price of admission) had been lifted up and parachuted into Jericho Beach Park. It also appeared that they had been given permission to dress in a pastiche of culturally appropriating fashions.

Kepler and I skirted the perimeter of the festival grounds, before settling on the grass in front of Stage Three. Minutes later, a man with a guitar strapped around his neck sauntered onto the stage. He was wearing shorts and Birkenstocks, as though he were a college student just back from a sit-in. He checked his guitar with a few lazy strums and mumbled an introduction into the mic before launching into his first song:

"I got big balls. Big ol' balls. Balls as big as grapefruits. Balls as big as pumpkins..."
(Bern, 1997)

It continued in that vein for the whole song ("*...Big as the golden gate bridge...*"). The artist was Dan Bern, the song was *Tiger Woods*, and I knew right there and then what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a folk singer.

What I did not know was that Dan Bern's irreverence, dilettantism, humour, and nonchalance was a channeling OF Woody Guthrie by way of Bob Dylan. I also didn't know that this utopian enclave where the progressive fringe of the city was allowed to sully the shore Vancouver's West Side for three glorious days was not an anomaly, but a tradition that dated back to the 1930s when folk music festivals in their current incarnation first started peppering the North American landscape.

Let's start at the beginning (for real this time).

* * *

"A Folk Festival should encourage only the highest type of native material, traditionally learned and traditionally presented." (qtd, in Cohen "Folk Music", 58) Annabel Morris Buchanan wrote this in the 1937, at the height of her festival's popularity. Her White Top Folk Festival was the pride of Southwestern Virginia for the better part of the depression era. Despite the economic turmoil and the devastating effects of the dust bowl on millions of Americans, during the Great Depression musicians saw interest in their work expand and new markets open. Facilitated by the proliferation of radio, artists like Gene Autry, The Carter Family, and Bill and Charlie Monroe worked as "itinerant entertainer(s), moving from station to station, seeking sponsors and working a territory until it provided no further dividends." (Cohen "Folk Music", 57)

This expanded reach meant that once isolated markets were flooded with new artists and more and more musicians were competing for audiences' attention. Artists and folk music enthusiasts began carving out new opportunities for themselves, developing

touring circuits on concert stages, amateur shows, and, increasingly, folk festivals. One of the earliest Folk Festivals to establish itself as a mainstay was Bascom Lamar Lunsford's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Ashville, North Carolina. Founded in 1930, the festival ran under Lunsford's directorship into the 1970s. But, it was Buchanan's White Top Festival that was the first to offer an indication of how popular these events would become. (Cohen "Folk Music", 58)

"Held for the purpose of discovering, preserving, and carrying on the best native music, balladry, dances, traditions, and other arts and customs that belong to our race," the festival was inaugurated in 1931. In 1933 First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited and in 1934 the festival hosted 200 performers and 10,000 fans. (Cohen "Folk Music", 59)

From the beginning the Folk Music Festival experience was a carefully curated one. A very particular type of 'folk' was allowed to showcase at these festivals. Jean Thomas, a contemporary of Buchanan's and a fellow festival organizer, wrote that

only those mountain minstrels to whom the ballads had been handed down by word of mouth should participate. Only those untrained fiddlers and musicians who had learned their art from their forebears should take part. (qtd in Cohen "Folk Music", 57)

We can see how these early attempts to define folk music were done so in an effort to preserve a uniquely American tradition. According to folklorist Jane Becker, festival promoters of the period had a sanitizing effect on the culture and that they insisted on "weeding out the vulgar and the crude and presenting only those forms that upheld their middle-class standards of propriety and taste." (qtd in Cohen "Folk Music", 59) Songs of the chain-gang, hillbillies and hoboes were not welcome under this curatorial mandate. There was a penchant for revisionism that resulted in the erasure of an underclass and a disingenuous representation of authenticity. From the very beginning folk music in America had a politic, albeit not the one that we commonly associate with it today. (Cohen "Folk Music", 59)

* * *

Today folk music exists as a lazy catchall of sorts. When I am applying for touring support through the BC Arts Council or when a new acquaintance poses the requisite questions during small talk ("What kind of music do you play?"), Folk Music becomes a box to tick, an answer to give. Everyone thinks they know what it means.

Whereas in the heyday of the White Top Folk Festival it might have sufficed to sum it up as a "non-commercial people's music" (Cohen "Rainbow Quest", 9) or "a popular music... with antique roots and anonymous composers" (Cohen "Folk Music", 1) these definitions are problematized today. The best definition I have found comes from Billboard magazine in 1994 where folk is described as an "open-ended, sometimes stigmatizing... popular music genre heading." (qtd in Cohen "Rainbow Quest", ix) Still rather unsatisfactory. Something is still missing. Something about its simplicity, its connection to the past, its contradictions. Something that I felt as a 13 year old listening to Dan Bern singing about the enormity of his testicles. Something about folk music makes a claim to authenticity that remains seductive even today.

Early efforts to recognize, document and showcase an 'authentic' folk music was in part a reaction to the established tradition of folksong collection across the pond in Britain.

Folkloric collection and scholarship was resurgent in the early part of the 20th century “to preserve ‘traditional’ folk music and dance as a hedge against accelerating modernization” (Cohen “Rainbow Quest”, 9). American scholars were eager to stay abreast of the British and to prove that they too were the stewards of a rich traditional culture worthy of rigorous study and consideration. Yes, amazingly, academics created ‘folk music’.

This project was undertaken not with “the detachment of academics but with the zeal of proselytizers.” (Filene ,49). Appalachia, once thought to be “a haven for rubes and slackers”, became ground zero for these investigations. Folklorists, armed with their newfangled recording technology, set out into the boonies to discover the hidden cultural gems of coal country. “Eager to promote their version of America’s musical past, (folklorists) recognized early on the power of enlisting living vernacular musicians to aid their cause” (Filene, 49). Needing to legitimize their claims, soon it was not only the songs that were championed, but also the performers themselves (and rightfully so). These musicologist therefore required the development of a “web of criteria for determining what a ‘true’ folk singer looked and sounded like. “In short, they created a ‘cult of authenticity,’ a thicket of expectations and valuations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.” (Filene, 49)

Never willing to miss an opportunity to make a quick buck, record companies quickly stepped in to extract these carefully selected recordings and repackage them for consumption. At first it was thought that the only markets for these recordings were the communities from which they originated. Record executives operating as arbiters of authenticity surely had an effect on the diversity of those Appalachian communities. (Cohen “Rainbow Quest”, 11) That early market-driven influence is the first specter to problematize folk music’s claim to authenticity.

Soon it was discovered that larger markets existed for these recordings. City slickers and the educated elite had quite an appetite for ‘authentic experience’ fueled by nostalgia for “a seemingly lost, or at least disappearing, rural past”. City folk, “always on the look-out for new things and for broader cultural life”, bought records, tuned into broadcasts and paid the price of admission to witness these acts in person at Folk Festivals. Of course, they also began to emulate what they heard. (Cohen “Rainbow Quest”, 11)

In 1940, musicologist Charles Seeger (Pete’s father) observed that

...almost overnight, the constant, slow ages-old interchange of materials between city and country and between folk, popular and fine arts of music was vastly speeded up.... In the process, the songs themselves... began to change... Thus the ‘hill-billy’ and the ‘city-billy,’ though using the same musical materials, crossed paths while going in exactly opposite directions. (qtd in Cohen “Rainbow Quest”, 11).

This cross-pollination is another taint on folk music’s claim to authenticity. Or, wait, maybe I am thinking about this all wrong. Maybe that taint IS its authenticity. Perhaps folk music endures because it dissolves into the crowd as soon as you think you’ve seen its face. Maybe once it feels as though it has been captured in wax or paraded in front of a crowd of expectant cultural tourists it disappears into thin air, scattering the genealogy of its influences, which are left to recombine once more. Perhaps, once it is known to be

one thing, it can only continue to exist in the act of recombination with what is not yet known to be.

* * *

If I am beginning to sound too romantic for your taste, you'll have to forgive me. It is only because that is the tradition I come from. For example, Alan Lomax, by far the most famous and celebrated folklorist and song collector of the bunch, wrote that folksong is an art

...which lives upon the lips of the multitude and is transmitted by the grapevine, surviving sometimes for centuries because it reflects so well the deepest emotional convictions of the common man. This is a truly democratic art, painting a portrait of the people. (Cantwell, 105).

You see? Romantic, isn't it?

Compare this approach to Buchannan's and we can see a different politic emerging in Lomax's estimation of folk music. A truly democratic art is one that does not editorialize certain segments of the population out of the equation.

Lomax was insatiable in his pursuit for new songs, new sounds, new people and wanted to paint them into the picture. Although he never wrote about his politics "they were always present, overtly or covertly." (Cohen "Alan Lomax", 3) Indeed it is to Lomax that we can most easily trace the intertwining of folk music and politics that, even today, seem inexorably entangled.

I like to imagine Lomax as a character from a Terry Gilliam movie. A bumbling idiot savant, trekking across the frontier land in ill-fitting, anachronistic colonial attire with gizmos and gadgetry strapped awkwardly to his back; however, the more that I read about the man, the more my imaginings are revealed to be untrue (much to my disappointment).

In 1933, with support from The Library of Congress and other federal institutions invested in the documentation and preservation of American culture, John Lomax enlisted the help of his son Alan and set off on an expedition that was "part talent search, part sociological survey, and part safari." (Filene, 50). Built into the back seat of their Ford motorcar was a 350-pound 'portable' dictaphone recorder. The purpose of the journey was to seek out "self-contained, homogeneous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture." (Filene, 50). Under the guidance of his father, a musicologist of considerable repute, a teenage Alan Lomax toured remote plantations, ranches, lumber camps, and prisons, most of which were segregated at the time. On their first trip to a prison they met Huddie Ledbetter, or "Lead Belly", from whom they recorded hundreds of songs. Lead Belly legitimized their assertion that America's musical traditions were rich and very much alive. (Filene, 52)

Alan Lomax was transformed by that trip and the young Texan burst onto the folklore scene. "In the years between 1933 and 1950, he established himself as a collector, popularize, performer, writer, and folklore theoretician, as well as a behind-the-scenes political activist," writes folk historian Ed Khan. "Any number of these avenues would have been sufficient for a fruitful career, but Lomax chose to pursue them all." (qtd in Cohen "Alan Lomax, 7)

Lomax's politics are perhaps not overt, but they are ever-present, even in his early days of collecting folk songs. For Lomax the purpose of collecting songs was not to put a culture under glass. Rather than entering a African American prison or a logging camp with a predetermined idea of what kinds of songs ought to be preserved and carried forward, Lomax would sit with his 'informants' for hours, days even, and record their entire repertoire. Writes Khan:

As a result, Lomax recorded much topical material that has not stood the test of time...many of the songs lacked pedigree, which underscores the willingness of Lomax to include folksongs that were new or not yet considered folksongs. It took guts to publish this material because it did not conform to the academic standards of the time. (qtd in Cohen "Alan Lomax", 3)

And so Lomax's gaze began to shift from the past, through the present, and into the future. He was not interested in ossifying an idea of what America had been; rather, he recognized the power that existed in the transmission and transmutation of folk music. He was interested in it as a technology that could affect the future.

An incredibly ambitious man, Lomax began to imagine how he might create the "conditions for the long-sought 'great American novel' ... that would not be constrained within the pages of a book but would incorporate an entire tradition of singers and songs ultimately beyond literature." (Cantwell, 113). He began to take an interest not only in music that had been preserved in isolation from popular music, but how that music was being recombined with other traditions and imbued with new purpose, meaning and relevance.

And indeed a new generation of artists was doing just that. The collections of songs that were enshrined in vinyl during the 1930s became the "founding document of the American folk revival" (Marcus, 87). "The Anthology (of American Folk Music) was our bible," singer Dave Van Ronk wrote in 1991 of the Greenwich Village folk milieu in the mid-1950s. "We knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated." (qtd in Marcus, 87)

"Lomax's discovery of Woody Guthrie can be understood, then, as an aspect of his own self-discovery," writes historian Robert Cantwell. "Lomax saw in Guthrie a cultural destiny." (113)

* * *

*Woody Guthrie carves a sign into his guitar
"This machine kills fascists."
Ani DiFranco says,
"Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right"
I say, "Here's a monkey wrench
Bop me on the head long enough maybe I'll wake up for a second" (Bern, 1998)*

These are the lyrics from another Dan Bern song called *One Dance*. While the testicle song might have left an immediate impression on my 13 year old self, it was *One Dance*

that had a resounding impact. After he left the stage that day and I had lifted myself off of the grass and given my head a shake, I went immediately over to the CD tent on the other side of the festival grounds to purchase Dan Bern's album.

When I was thirteen the Internet was just beginning to bloom; however I was completely naïve to the access to media that it would soon afford me; nevertheless, my access to music seemed almost limitless; however, the CD tent at the Folk Fest offered something different. Here was a collection of discs that travelled with the artists from festival to festival. They would have been available via mail order or on rudimentary websites through fledging folk music distributors, but they would have been difficult to track down. This was a singular and shifting collection of music that appeared in my city but once a year. It is the closest thing I've ever known to the type of discovery described by Dave Van Ronk. The festival tent was my *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

That first year I bought Dan Bern's CD, but each year after that (and I did return every year), I would save up my allowance and later my paychecks so that I could come away from the Folk Fest with a half a dozen albums from the troubadours that were passing through my town.

It was through Dan Bern that I learned who Woody Guthrie was. I learned about Pete Seeger. Utah Phillips. Buffy Sainte Marie. I learned how Bob Dylan could be traced back to these mythical folk revivalists. I learned how to play the guitar and began writing my own tunes, mimicking the sounds I heard on the festival grounds and on the discs I brought home.

Lomax. Guthrie. Seeger. These figures loom large in my imagination, steeped in a sepia-toned nostalgia. A constellation of fetishized folk heroes. Guthrie's star burned brightest, at least in my mind. His famous catchphrase emblazoned onto the top of his guitar, Guthrie endures as the quintessential icon of a political folk music.

'This machine kills fascists.'

* * *

When Woody Guthrie arrived at Almanac House in Greenwich Village he was welcomed with open arms. The other residents of the house, Pete Seeger, Peter Hawes, Millard Lampell, and Bess Lomax (Alan's sister) were members of a band called the Almanac Singers. These were the very definition of the 'city-billies' that Pete's dad describes above. They were "a band of young radicals from whose rank any pure representative of the vast American middle-class was conspicuously absent". Dedicated to "defying in word, in song, and in the manner of their life the entire capitalist system," these were the sons and daughters of wealthy, well-educated parents wanting desperately to relate to the proletariat. (Cantwell, 121)

So when Woody Guthrie arrived there was a "leavening in the social mix at Almanac House." (Cantwell, 134) Whereas Seeger, Bess Lomax, and other Almanacs had enjoyed unprecedented access to academic collections of folk music, Guthrie's experience of folk music was a lived experience. Impoverished and orphaned from a

young age, Guthrie became a “hapless drifter”. Whereas Seeger’s understanding of the disparity between rich and poor was purely academic, Guthrie knew no buffer from poverty’s harsh reality. He was the key to the authenticity the craved, and he wanted to join their band. (Cantwell, 133)

Guthrie had already gained a celebrity status from his work on the radio, and he attracted a diverse set of characters to the Almanac House. Soon the house was overrun with bohemians, labour activists, and civil rights leaders. The roster of the Almanac Singers ebbed and flowed as waves of activists and sympathizers of all stripes circulated through Almanac HQ. Labour leader Sis Cunningham makes a brief appearance. Celebrated blues artists Sonny Terry and Leadbelly round out the bottom end of several mid-period Almanac recordings (Cantwell, 139). The Almanac Singers were a collective, sometimes splintering off into different groups and “answering different bookings simultaneously on a given night.” (Cantwell, 140) They wore street clothes when they performed and encouraged participation from the audience. They mashed together styles, co-authored songs, and supplanted topical verses into tradition songs, all with great enthusiasm. (Cantwell, 139-141) In short, they were the realization of Alan Lomax’s wildest dreams.

The Almanacs were a political organization as much as they were a cultural one. They aligned themselves with the Communist Party and the lyrics of their songs echoed the party line. They found a huge audience for their music. They would be regularly be asked to play at large political rallies, such as the Communist Party conventions at Madison Square Gardens (can you imagine a Communist Party rally at Madison Square today?!). (Lieberman, 52)

While there was some discomfort surrounding the appropriation of rural and African American folk music traditions by the Left, and some disingenuous reimagining of certain artists’ pedigrees (“Seeger’s Harvard years slipped into obscurity, and Lampell claimed to come from Kentucky” (Cantwell, 145)), more often the practice of remaking oneself according to this radical new image was championed. The only demand on the music was for it to be “personally transforming” (Cantwell, 120), and part of that transformation became changing your dress and manner of speech. There was a belief that “the young could make themselves into new persons, that they need not follow their parents’ footsteps”(Cantwell, 119).

And so, by virtue of the popularity and proliferation of The Almanac Singers and other artists like them a movement emerged from out of Greenwich Village and spread across the country. With renewed purpose, folk festivals once again sprouted up across the landscape. The Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife “strove to narrow the gulf between performer and audience” (Cantwell, 305). The Newport Folk Festival “provided for the eruption into daylight social space the hidden underground life of an emergent youth culture.” (Cantwell, 305) No longer were they meant to preserve a pure expression of American culture; rather, they were opportunities to inspire and instigate. The darlings of this nascent scene were The Almanac Singers.

* * *

Historian Robert Cantwell calls the folk revivals “the last romantic counterculture of our century” (114). Sitting at home now, revisiting my collection of Dan Bern CDs and reminiscing about my experiences at folk festivals, it is a counterculture that feels far distant.

A few years after my introduction to The Vancouver Folk Festival, after I had become a little more confident on the guitar, I joined a band. We were called Part of Their Plan, and we were a hardcore punk rock band. Aesthetically, we could not have been any different from the artists that had originally inspired me to take up the guitar and, admittedly, I never loved the music; however, it was exciting to me because it felt dangerous. I was seventeen years old, traveling up and down the West Coast of in a packed tour van, playing for other teenagers in crowded basements and gymnasiums. We turned out amps up as loud as they would go and shouted songs about racism, homophobia, and peak oil. In the late 90s, leading up to the Battle of Seattle, there was a tangible excitement around Anti-Globalization. Hardcore became my soundtrack for that period, during which my horizons were expanded by the rhizomatic DIY touring circuits that weaved across the Pacific Northwest. I was catching the tail end of a musical movement that, like the folk revival, consciously mixed music and politics.

Emerging in the 1980s out of American cities like Olympia and Washington, DC in the 1980s, American Hardcore was a youth-fueled movement centered around record labels dedicated to a DIY politic (Monem, 18). Labels like Dischord and K Records began documenting and disseminating the music being played by dissatisfied American youth and, just like the Lomaxes’ field recordings had done in the 30s and 40s, these sounds captured the imagination of a generation.

Participants in punk and hardcore didn’t only play in bands, but also produced self-published, photocopied magazines (zines) that became another medium for the politics represented in the music to be discussed and shared (Monem, 18) (particularly useful here given that the majority of punk lyrics are inaudible). Riot Grrl, the movement first discussed in this paper, emerged from this movement as a way to inject the male-dominated punk rock political arena with feminist and queer theories (Monem, 23). This was a musical movement wherein every action was a political one. It was about controlling the means of production and making sure that artists were being represented on their own terms. “It was ‘let’s get all these girls to learn how to play instruments and change everything and Riot Grrl came out of that’” (Monem, 23).

These musicians and activists paved the way. When I started my band the touring circuits were well established. Independent record labels were becoming more and more difficult to differentiate from the majors. Genres and subgenres were already well defined and things began to feel more and more like a rehearsal. As I said, I was catching the tail end of the movement. Part of Their Plan broke up in 2001, just as the collapse of the Twin Towers took the wind out of the sails of the Anti-Globalization movement and the Left tiptoed uneasily into the post-9/11 world.

* * *

The end of the Almanac Singers also came during a tumultuous political time. They faced a very particular crisis in the period between August 1939 and the Nazi invasion of

the Soviet Union in 1941. During the period of non-aggression between Russia and Germany “radical youth seesawed between pacifism and anti-fascism” (127). Having originally taken a strong stance against the war, The Communist Party’s reversed its position and came out in support ‘the people’s war’ (Lieberman, 54). “Our whole politics took a terrible shift from ‘the Yanks ain’t coming’ to ‘the Yanks *are* coming,” remembers Almanac member Lee Hays. “All of a sudden it became one war, instead of two, and there was some chance of beating fascism on its own ground, which everybody was for. But it sure knocked hell out of our repertoire.” (Lieberman, 54)

Ultimately, The Almanacs did not survive the turmoil. As America entered the war, the band fell out of the good graces of an increasingly paranoid American public. Cantwell writes:

The New York Papers, in a way that foreshadowed the fate of the folksong movement in the McCarthy period, stopped the Almanacs in their tracks by announcing that the celebrated young patriots had also “warbled for the Communists.” (130)

In Guthrie’s own words:

*I started out to sing a song
To the entire population;
But I ain’t a-doing a thing tonight
On account of this “new situation”* (qtd in Catwell, 129)

* * *

*Here’s a monkey wrench.
Bop me on the head long enough maybe I’ll wake up for a second.* (Bern, 1998)

That’s Dan Bern again. Expressing the impotency of political folk music today. Folk festivals still exist, but I wonder if they haven’t reverted back to their role of trying to capture and preserve what is already lost. Perhaps today’s folk festivals function in the same way as Annabel Morris Buchanan’s White Top Festival: creating a sanitized simulacra of a longed-for yesteryear. These yearly rituals are performed once a year, but they no longer aim to have a transformative effect on our culture. For one weekend Kitsalano is transformed into a progressive paradise, but once the gates come down and the port-a-potties are drained and hauled away the beachfront is once again colonized by morning joggers and volley ball players. The festival is a temporary “narcotic, through which the realization of the possibility of action substitutes for the action itself.” (Cantwell, 305)

Maybe that’s OK. Maybe I can enjoy the narcotic as a reminder of the richness of the tradition that I have inserted myself into. Maybe I need to look for folk music, the transformative kind that The Almanacs pursued so fervently, elsewhere.

If we are to accept that in the 1930s recording technology provided a suitable replacement for the oral transfer of culture and that the field recordings of the Lomaxes’ spawned a revival the effects of which we still enjoy today, then surely today folk music

is in a privileged position. I no longer have to go to the Record Tent to access the music of the artists that pass through my town. Anyone with access to the internet no has the majority of the music ever captured in the history of recording technology at their finger tips. Surely with the exponential development of those technologies folk music is combining and recombining in ways that Alan Lomax could never have dreamed.

A quick Wikipedia search for 'Folk Music Subgenres' yields the following results: anti-folk, country folk, electric folk, ethnic electronica, ethnoambient, folk metal, folk baroque, folk rock, freak folk, indie folk, neofolk, neo-Medieval folk... you get the idea.

And so, as I prepare to write a set of songs with Clare that are not just political but *politics*, I know that folk music is going to be just fine. It has withstood the abuse of academics and activists before, and will surely do so again. If it doesn't like what we end up creating it will surely just move along and find somewhere else to hang its hat for a while.

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Appendix B.

Video files

Description

Video Documentation by Michael Sider of performance of Ordinary Catastrophes, June 28th and 29th 2014, SFU Woodward, Studio D.

Featuring-

Clare O'Connor
Alice O'Connor
Melanie Spence

Aryo Khakpour The Lover
Lucy McNulty The Mentor
Matt Reznek The Comrade

Gord Grdina Guitar
Tyson Naylor Keyboard
Peter Mynett Bass
Skye Brooks Drums

Directed by: Corbin Murdoch
Lighting and Production Design: Kyla Gardiner
Stage Management: Rachel Duffy
Technical Director: Jaylene Pratt
Sound Technician: Jean Routhier
Projection Operator: Taylor Janzen
Lighting Operator: Joyce Mah

Filename

OrdinaryCatastrophes.mp4