

# **“An Evening of Pleasure Rather Than Business”**

## **Songs, Subversion and Radical Sub-Culture in the 1790s**

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### **I.**

Politics and music are not usually two subjects discussed together. They are, in fact, generally considered topics that are mutually exclusive: the one – politics – being the clichéd bane of dinner-table conversation; the other, a common accompaniment to many convivial occasions. This exclusiveness has been followed, to a large extent, into the academy by historians. Much scholarly attention has been dedicated to the history of politics as well as to music during the period covered by this article (cf., for instance, Dickinson 1994; Johnstone & Fiske 1990). However, this flourishing has taken place largely within, rather than across, the two strains of the discipline (cf. Leppert 1988). This lack of historical attention to the overlap between politics and music underestimates the value of this interface as a key for unlocking the ways in which political and musical culture were entwined. Indeed, the two cultures have long been closely linked. Music has been widely used by governments as part of the dominant discourse of the state, a tool of hegemonic control and propaganda. John Street (1986, 2003) has shown how music was deployed by the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the Nazi regime during the Second World War, and more recently by the British political parties during the 2001 election campaign as means of political leverage. These are just a few examples of the role played by music as “a necessary adjunct of contemporary political communication” (Street 2003: 114). Governments have utilised the popular culture appeal of music to help construct their rhetorical power and to influence the people: “From Plato to the Frankfurt School and beyond, the case has been made for regarding music (especially popular music) as a source of power.” (*Ibid.*: 116)

Yet, if music can be seen as a means for manipulating and buttressing the political power of the establishment, then an extension of this is the suggestion that music can also be the source of anti-power. According to Street, the “potential of music to promote approved causes is linked to its potential to fuel rebellion” (*ibid.*: 117). Music and songs have an extended tradition of being used to articulate political resistance and popular opposition. As a contested space of cultural practice, music has often formed a dynamic part of counter-cultures that helped to shape, sustain and animate popular political action. Sociologists and cultural theorists, for instance, have identified in contemporary popular music certain sub-cultures of counter-hegemonic dissent (cf. Hebdige 1979; Willis 1990). In Britain,

songs have a long history, stretching from at least the early eighteenth century through to the twentieth century, as an “expression in the idiom of the people” (quoted in Palmer 1974: 8). In 1712, a government minister was said to have read large quantities of ballads as well as books “to discover the drift of public opinion before embarking on any new policy” (Anon. 1712: n.pag.). Some twenty years later, George II legislated against Jacobite balladry as a way of controlling insurgent popular opposition to authority (cf. Gillies 1991). Such censorship was recognition of the evocative and empowering nature of music. This potency was harnessed by radicals of the 1790s, who produced a rich and vibrant sub-culture of songs that were powerfully subversive. In an age of counter-revolution, British Jacobins turned to music as one means of radical articulation and cultural resistance that was difficult to prosecute. This article will explore the role of music in popular politics during the decade following the outbreak of the French Revolution, to reveal songs as a counter-discourse that worked to reverse the governance of authority and gave expression to ideas of liberty, equality and rights.

## II.

Radicals were not alone in exploiting music for its political dimensions during the 1790s. The British establishment turned to music as a means of state propaganda that upheld the institution of monarchy during the eighteenth century (cf. Colley 1992: 43–48). The words of “God Save the King” were first sung in public in 1745 and by the late eighteenth century it was approaching the status of a national anthem (cf. Belosillo 1984; Scholes 1954). The song had assumed a special place in British culture. It gave expression to Protestant patriotism as well as the notion of the divine right to rule and, following the outbreak of war against France in 1793, it metaphorically enlisted God on the side of Britain:

God save our noble King,  
 God save great George our King,  
 God save the King.  
 Send him victorious,  
 Happy and glorious,  
 Long to reign over us,  
 God save the King.  
 O Lord our God arise,  
 Scatter his enemies,  
 And make them fall:  
 Confound their politicks,  
 Frustrate their knavish tricks.  
 On him our hopes are fix'd,  
 O save us all.  
 (Colley 1992: 43–44)

By the 1790s, "God Save the King" was a routine part of British polite culture, being sung as a loyalist gesture at formal public functions and theatre performances. It was also modified by conservatives to provide the song with punchy contemporary relevance, denouncing their political opponents and acclaiming the status quo. "A New Loyal Song", set to the tune of "God Save the King" and printed as a broadside, attacked the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine: "Let that reformer *Paine*/ Know his vile arts are vain/ Britain is free/ Confound *his* politics/ Frustrate *his* knavish tricks/ With equal laws we mix/ *True liberty*." (Anon. 1793a) The success of the *Rights of Man* (1791–92; Paine 1992), which advocated political rights for all men and disclaimed all forms of hereditary government, made Paine a popular target for loyalist songsters in this period. "The Reformer of England. A New Song", to the tune of "The Roast Beef of Old England", encouraged Britons to "unite in applause/ To the men who stand forth for our rights and our laws [...]. Then up with the cause of Old England/ And down with the Tricks of Tom Paine." (Anon. 1793g) Even a seemingly laudable song called "Mighty Tom Paine" was written as a lampoon: "now he'd destroy our good Constitution/ And cause in this country a great Revolution/ And get what he could while we're all in confusion/ O such are the joys of the Rights of Man." (Anon. 1793d)

While Paine was a common target, he was not alone in being demonised in conservative melodies. Many loyalist songs played at a sweeping connection between French Jacobinism and British radicalism, with the aim of raising popular panics about moral and political security and the threat of the so-called 'French disease' to the health of the British constitution. A song called "Church and King" denounced the French Revolutionaries: "Go, democratic demons, go!/ In France your horrid banquet keep!/ Feast on degraded *prelates* woe/ And drink the tears that *monarchs* weep!". (Anon. 1793b) It went on to affirm that "Old British sense and British fire/ Shall guard that freedom we possess/ Tho' Price may write, and Paine conspire/ Secure shall be our happiness" (*ibid.*). Even more alarmist was *The Antigallican Songster* (Anon. 1793e, 1793f), a collection of eighteen loyalist songs produced as two separate sixteen-page pamphlets. The cover included a graphic contrast between English liberty, with its religion, morality, lawfulness and economic prosperity; and French liberty, which was vilified for its massacres, poverty and atheism (cf. Bindman 1989: 118, 120). It included songs like "The Frenchman's

THE  
ANTIGALLICAN SONGSTER.

NUMBER II.

THE CONTRAST.



Religion, Morality, Loyalty, Obedience to the Laws, Independence, Personal Security, Justice, Inheritance, Protection, Property, Industry, National Prosperity, Happiness.

Atheism, Perjury, Rebellion, Treason, Anarchy, Murder, Equality, Madness, Cruelty, Injustice, Treachery, Ingratitude, Idleness, Famine, National and private Ruin, Misery.

WHICH IS BEST?

LONDON:  
PRINTED FOR J. DOWDES, 240, NEAR TEMPLE-BAR, STRAND.

1793.

Attempt to Milch John Bull", "True British Patriotism", and "A New Song" to the tune of "Hearts of Oak" that declared: "The French most perfidious we ever have found/ Old England they hate, and would fain pull her down/ Our glory they envy – our happiness too/ And would change *our old gold* for *their tinsel* so new." (Anon. 1973e: 3) This was a compelling expression of melodic propaganda, designed to evoke an emotional response and aimed at instructing people in their political behaviour. In much the same way, Hannah More's song "The Riot", to the tune of "A Cobler there was", was deliberately instructive and pacifying: "What a whimsy to think we shall mend our spare diet/ By breeding disturbance, by murder and riot!" (More 2002: 125) The moral of loyalist songs was clear: defend the status quo and maintain personal security, financial well-being, religious integrity, legal independence, and political freedom.

### III.

Conservative songs were, as such, a powerful weapon in the armoury of loyalists during the 1790s. However, radicals were able to produce their own counter-culture aimed at reversing the dominant discursive force of loyalist music. They staged their own counter-rituals in response to conservative song culture, playing out the interaction that Thompson identified "in which rulers and crowd needed each other, performed theatre and counter-theatre" (Thompson 1974: 396). Renditions of "God Save the King" at theatres were popular targets for reformers. Charles Pigott, the radical satirist, defined 'theatre' in his *Political Dictionary* (2004: 148) as "the common sewer for the most beastly and most depraved sentiments of loyalty [...]. It is in these places that a most impious, and blasphemous song is sung, during which time the obedient People are compelled, by force of arms, to stand up, uncovered, as if they were in church." While Colley (cf. 1992: 337) has identified pseudo-patriotism among Regency radicals who played "God Save the King" at their rallies, their colleagues from the 1790s were brasher in their disregard for the loyalist song, subverting the lyrics through their own performances. Some refused to stand or remove their hats when the tune was played in the theatre (cf. Curtis 1794). Others interjected to cause disruption as exemplified at a theatre in Edinburgh in 1794 when a play about Charles I was performed:

The play began when some furious Aristocrats, wanting no doubt, to try the disposition of the people, called out for the tune of God save the king. The tune was just beginning, when an universal hiss, mixed with lamentable murmurs, pervaded all over the house; and the sons of the fiddle were obliged to desist.  
(Howell & Howell 1809–1826, vol. 24: 82)

In public spaces outside the theatre, radicals also found opportunities to contemptuously mock "God Save the King". One incident occurred in May 1794 when Joseph Burks, William Worship, and William Metcalfe, a government spy, were returning

home after a divisional meeting of the London Corresponding Society (LCS), a radical metropolitan reform group. As the three men walked along Cheapside they came across a musical party playing "God Save the King". The trio joined the group with the aim of deranging the loyalist instrumentalists. As Metcalfe reported to the Treasury Solicitor: "Burks and Worship several times call'd out God save the Rights of the People, God save the rights of Man, they [the musical party] Damn'd the Rights of Man and continued singing God save the King". (Quoted in Thale 1983: 169) The game was not over, however, for Burks and Worship, who continued heckling the loyalists to the end of Cheapside.

This counter-ritual practice in response to "God Save the King" found textual and musical expression in a series of radical parodies of the song, as British reformers appropriated discourse from polite society to inform their own subversive subculture. Produced under titles like "God Save the Rights of Man" and "God Save Great Jolter Head", radical versions of "God Save the King" were distinctly anti-monarchical and brazenly pro-French (cf. Barrell 1998: 12, 32 n. 5). Radicals made use of the familiar tune of "God Save the King" to give their own songs a level of popular appeal and even an element of legitimacy. The radical pressman, Thomas Spence, for instance, produced "Hark! How the Trumpet's Sound" in the mid-1790s to the tune of "God Save the King". Spence's song, "to be Sung at the End of Oppression, or the Commencement of the political Millennium", "Tells all the poor oppress'd/ No more they shall be cess'd/ Nor Landlords more molest/ Their Property" and goes on to rejoice "How hath th' oppressor ceas'd/ And all the world releas'd/ From Misery!" (Spence 1982: 98)

Songs like this were deliberately didactic. Their lyrics intended to be politically instructive, but often they must have been virtually impossible to sing. The catalogue of radical songs from the 1790s is full of compositions that would have presented serious learning hurdles to the illiterate and semi-literate members of the radical fraternity. "Libertas Dei Gratia! Or The Proclamation of Liberty! A Song" (Anon. 1793c) and "News from Toulon; or, the Men of Gotham's Expedition" (cf. Thelwall 1837: 445–446), for instance, were perhaps more often read as text than sung as political hymns. Other melodies, like "A Sheep-Shearing Song" (cf. *ibid.*: 447–449), would have been more easily learnt because of their whimsical and entertaining lyrical composition and standard rhyming pattern: "But cease ye fleecing *senators*/ Your country to undo/ Or know we British *sans-culottes*/ Hereafter may fleece you/ For well we know if tamely thus/ We yield our wool like drones/ Ye will not only fleece our backs/ But, gad! You'll pick our bones." (*Ibid.*: 449)

Whether radical ballads were difficult or easy to learn was not a distinction drawn by authorities: either way they were considered a means of popular political discourse that needed to be closely monitored. As a form of verbal communication, radical songs could be a malleable means of expression that conveyed anti-establishment sentiments to the less literate. In textual form, songs could find a wider distribution, often printed and sold more cheaply than the writings of radical

pamphleteers like Paine (cf. Thale 1983: 203). Understandably, the reports of government spies frequently updated the Treasury Solicitors and Home Office on performances of radical music. The meetings of the LCS, for instance, were routinely punctuated by renditions of songs that caught the attention of loyalist informers. On 11 March 1794, a meeting of Division 29 of the LCS at Robins Coffee House in Shire Lane was attended by the spy John Taylor who noted that “[s]ome very violent Persons [were] present who gave toasts and sung Songs of a very treasonable tendency” (quoted in *ibid.*: 122). Three weeks later, William Metcalfe – the government spy who was to disrupt a street rendition of “God Save the King” the following month while traipsing along Cheapside with fellow LCS members – told of how a divisional meeting “concluded with the Singing of several most Seditious Songs” (quoted in *ibid.*: 127). One of the songs began: “Come my Sons of true Liberty, let us agree/ To form an Alliance firm honest and free/ Lets join hand in hand, as Reason upholds/ Her bright Torch to Friendship. Ah! let us be bold”. (*Ibid.*) Such expressions of solidarity were serious and important discourses that encouraged structural connections within the radical community and aroused the fears of authorities.

For an increasingly Francophobe British government, the bonding and revolutionary capacity of songs were evident in France during this period. Music played an important role in the French Revolution, carrying political messages, raising enthusiasm, and articulating popular feelings (cf. Cuccia 1999; Mason 1989, 1996). Songs like “Ça ira, Réveil du peuple”, “Marseillaise” and the “Carmagnole” were sung in the streets, parks, theatres and cafés of Paris, “reflecting and affecting”, as Laura Mason points out, “the changing political currents of the Revolution” (Mason 1991: 172). As the singing of these songs in France developed a distinctly revolutionary capacity and representational value of the masses triumphing over the *ancien régime*, British radicals imported them and made their own adaptations. “Ça ira” was sung before performances at the King’s Theatre, Haymarket, when the company of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Whig theatre manager, took up a temporary home there during 1792, prompting a warning from the Lord Chamberlain (cf. The National Archives 1792). Two years later, in May 1794, at an anniversary dinner of the Society for Constitutional Information, a moderate metropolitan reform group, “Ça ira” and the “Carmagnole” were performed before an audience of 400 guests (cf. The National Archives 1794).

#### IV.

The assimilation of French Revolutionary music into British radical song culture was a reflection of the broader integration of Revolutionary symbolism and support into popular political discourse in Britain during the 1790s. *The Patriot’s Calendar* (Lawrence 1794), for example, was a sort of Jacobin anthology that included the words to “Marseillaise”, “Ça ira”, “Carmagnole” and “Chant Civique”. In the *Moral*

and *Political Magazine* of the London Corresponding Society, a ballad "On the French Revolution" declared: "Albion, enraptur'd, hears/ Responsive, tells the spheres/ Frenchmen are free!/ Britons with Franks combine/ In harmony divine/ To deck the illustrious shrine/ Of Liberty." (Quoted in Davis 2002, vol. 3: 182) With such sentiments, it is not surprising that British radicals were often fond of mimicking their French brethren, adopting similar corporeal identities and dialogical forms. They would sometimes wear their hair cropped and unpowdered in the French style, use the title 'citizen' as a salutation, and date their correspondence in the Revolutionary manner. Maurice Margarot, one of the leading figures of the British radical movement in the early 1790s, was said to have a physical appearance like a *sans culotte*, described by Lord Cockburn as "a dark little creature [...] something like one's idea of a puny Frenchman, a most impudent and provoking body" (Cockburn 1888, vol. 2: 25). Similarly, Thomas Hardy, founder of the LCS, was said to have a Frenchified appearance: "a tall thin man [...] his manners low and vulgar; and in dress and habit quite a *Sans Culotte*" (Anon. 1794: 2).

Although Cockburn thought that the adaptation of Revolutionary deportment and discourse into British radical culture was "a ridiculous aping of French forms and phraseology" (Cockburn 1856: 80), the integration of French music was part of a serious counter-ritual practice of the 1790s. Songs became an important means of radical articulation and resistance during the 1790s, which helped animate and sustain the reform movement. Singing was an integral and significant part of radical sub-culture, a communicative action of political expression and cultural resistance. Part of the explanation for the importance of songs and singing within the radical movement may be found in the work of psychologists, who argue that vocal music is popular because it combines an "intimate combination of speech and music, two of the most specific, high-level skills of human beings" (Besson *et al.* 1998: 494). Singing evokes feelings and images, emotional responses to the words and tunes. When combined with political lyrics, songs are a rich and potent form of propaganda and British radicals of the 1790s tapped into this basic psychological response.

Moving beyond psychoanalytical approaches, we can find further insight into the importance of songs within radical sub-culture in the historical context of the 1790s and the repression of popular political discourse during this period. As the Revolution in France progressed to increasingly bloody stages and war raged against a backdrop of domestic unrest in Britain, the 1790s witnessed a widespread and definite public panic about internal security and political stability. The British government responded with a systematic campaign of legal repression against radicalism on home soil, which has been debated by historians as a 'reign of terror' (cf. Emsley 1985; Harling 2001). Political trials increased dramatically during the 1790s, as a culture of litigation swept the country (cf. Emsley 1981; Lobban 1990). Supported by repressive legislation, militant loyalist groups, and a network of spies and informers, the government's anti-radicalism campaign suppressed many of the avenues for political expression. Thirteen repressive measures were enacted be-

tween 1792 and 1800 aimed at quelling the rising tide of radicalism. For Thompson, this was evidence of a government prepared to “dispense with the rule of law, dismantle their elaborate constitutional structures, countermand their own rhetoric and exercise power by force” (Thompson 1977: 269). Speeches, meetings and political writings were closely monitored and, as these conventional sites of popular discourse came under increasing surveillance, radicals were forced to develop an alternative and multifarious interpretation and utilisation of political space in response to their delimited outlets. Adaptive concepts of political space saw Newgate prison, for instance, become a site of radical counter-culture following the outbreak of the French Revolution (cf. Davis *et al.* 2005a). Similarly, this fluid conception of politics turned trials into forums of radical self-assertion and articulation (cf. Epstein 2003: 59–82; Davis 2005b).

Radical resistance also developed a repertoire of tactics designed to avoid prosecution. Satirical writings, radical coinage, theatrical performances, and caricatures were some of the strategies developed to promote and sustain the reform movement (cf. Wood 1994; Gilmartin 1996). Radical songs were part of this broader multi-media onslaught against the establishment. As popular forms of political discourse aimed at awakening democratic spirit among the people, songs were an effective means of communicating narratives of political rights and equality among the people. They were, as such, subversive yet entertaining and difficult to prosecute. Songs were an important response to the government’s campaign against radical communication: like reading aloud, songs and singing made political ideas available to a wide audience, a means of discourse that could be responded to and received by almost all.

As a means of communication, singing encouraged a sense of community among British radicals. Social scientists have discussed the way in which marginal communities are built through written and verbal discourse (cf. Herbst 1994: 20–26), and songs were convergence of these two practices. Through their renditions of democratic songs and their collective voices, reformers of the 1790s were able to create an alternative linguistic space of unity and fraternity. As Herbst points out: “One of the most important ways that people build community is through symbolic action and the creation of rituals.” (*Ibid.*: 24) For British radicals, their songs were part of this ‘symbolic action’ and ‘ritual’ that encouraged and fostered bonding among the group. Music helped produce a sense of collectivity: “By expressing common experiences, music helps create and solidify a fund of shared memories and a sense of ‘who we are’.” (Mattern 1998: 19) In this way, radical songs gave British reformers a sense of structure and identity, a way of building community spirit within the democratic ranks while facing and challenging the opposition of the political mainstream. A sense of solidarity also helped mobilise members, energise those facing prosecution, and legitimise the reform cause.

By providing a means of cohesion, songs in some way helped to bring together the ‘fragmented’ nature of the reform movement during this period. We can talk in terms of a radical community that was based around a culture of conviviality and



sociability (cf. McCalman 1988). British democrats lived within a sociable milieu of clubs, debating societies, coffee houses and taverns. It was an egalitarian world of conversation and communication, centred on public spaces that encouraged sociability and civility. It was in this tavern environment that radical song culture was nurtured. The alliance of singing and alcohol seems a natural one: in the smoky parlours of the local alehouses, drink lubricated the voices of radicals and fuelled their extroversion, while songs uplifted their spirits. One government spy, who attended a LCS meeting at the Falcon tavern in June 1794, reported that he thought it "to be an Evening of pleasure rather than business" on the grounds that "many very Treasonable Songs were sung" (quoted in Thale 1983: 187). This was the essence of plebeian sociability and the heart of radical sub-culture during the 1790s. Radicalism was a distinctly performative culture at this time (cf. Karr 2002) and singing played into this theatricality. Radical song culture had the power to raise disaffection through an artful alignment of entertainment and politics, yet remain beyond the reach of prosecution.

While we may think of this tavern world of radicalism as a public sphere, it was not the 'ideal' discursive space that Habermas defined, where citizens "confer in an unrestricted fashion" (Habermas 1974: 49). Reform meetings were deeply infiltrated by spies, and the actions and words of protagonists faithfully recorded for official files. Private discourses in public spaces were also being monitored by informers and could lead to prosecution, as several London radicals discovered during the mid-1790s (cf. Barrell 2004; Epstein 2002). Even signs proclaiming taverns as off limits to British Jacobins were hung on the doors of some alehouses. The spaces of urban sociability, where songs were routinely recited, were not always ideal sites for democratic expression. In this way, we can usefully conceptualise the milieu of radicalism in terms of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser 1992: 123). These counterpublics are "parallel discursive arenas" where oppressed groups "invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (*ibid.*). Radicals of the 1790s, through songs as well as other media, were able to create a vibrant parallel public sphere, an alternative dialogical space that warrants the label of a sub-culture.

As a marginal social and political group, radicals were victimised as rabble-rousers and faced increasingly delimited outlets for voicing their opinions. The government took halting steps towards disempowering them through legislative and judicial authority, in a campaign that attempted to restrict and ultimately to remove democratic ideas from public discourse. Yet, in the face of mounting prosecutorial efforts by the state and a robust loyalist propaganda campaign, radicals were able to create an evocative and empowering political space of their own. A lively and enduring radical song culture emerged as part of that alternative space that was powerfully subversive and extolled ideas of reform, popular rights and civil equality. Music and its vocal performance became a way of political expression, a form of dialogue and performance that attempted to reverse the dominance of mainstream political rhetoric. Radical songs were an entertaining attempt at overthrow-

ing the dominant hegemony of the state, challenging the control of discursive space and the politics of language. It was a sort of battle over symbolic power, a ritual dual played out to the beat of music.

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