

The Busker: Writing Occupy, Politics and Protest

Abstract

The protagonist of my second novel, *The Busker*, is a singer-songwriter who seeks to use the Occupy LSX movement as a way of promoting his protest songs. In this paper, I will examine the ways in which folk music allows singers to “say whatever needs to be said... at the time when it needs to be said” (Guthrie in Jackson, 2007:40) and how this character provided the frame to investigate the Occupy movement, which David Graeber describes as “changing the national debate to begin addressing issues of financial power, the corruption of the political process, and social inequality” (Graeber, 2013:141). By analysing the structures and themes of the novel, I aim to show how the narrative explores the contradictions, diversity of opinion and lasting impact of the Occupy movement on our society and our politics, whilst also exploring the potential pitfalls of appropriating a mass movement for individual gain.

Keywords

Contemporary; Fiction; Creative; Occupy; Protest; Music

Introduction

The tents around me are slumped and empty, but there’s a group of people gathered in a hollow over by the steps to St Paul’s. They sit on fold-away chairs and talk quietly among themselves. Above them a slung banner sags, so that I can only make out ‘Capitalism is...’ Maybe they’re running a caption competition – fill in the blank – with a guest spot on *Newsnight* for the winner. (Bell, 2014:68)

The above extract is from my second novel, *The Busker*, and shows the moment at which the protagonist, Rab Dillon, encounters Occupy London for the first time. This political movement acts as an important influence on the character and the narrative – both in terms of theme and structure – but at this stage in the novel Rab’s attitude is dismissive and aloof, perhaps even cynical, as he meets the activists.

The novel is set across three cities – Glasgow, London and Brighton – and concerns itself with the music industry, political activism, homelessness, squatting, and creative expression, as we will go on to examine. For the purposes of this paper, however, I’m going to focus on the way in which the narrative interacts with Occupy London and with the idea of the protest song.

The point of origin for this argument, though, is to be found in Iceland with a man named Hörður Torfason. He is the one Manuel Castells credits with starting the, so-called, ‘Kitchenware Revolution’ when, on the 11th October 2008, he positioned himself outside the Icelandic Parliament and “sang his anger” against the government and their handling of the financial crisis (Castells, 2012:34). He was, in essence, staging a one-man protest against the political class of the country, using song as his medium of expression.

This was the creative genesis for the novel, then, in that it was fascinating that this idea of a lone folk singer could still capture the public imagination in this way; following in the tradition of the likes of Woody Guthrie, in America, and Billy Bragg here in the UK. The key figure it evoked, though, was Bob Dylan, who is described by Anthony Decurtis as being the one who “made the image of a solo artist with a guitar and harmonica an indelible symbol of authenticity” (Decurtis, 2009:52). Using events like the riots in Oxford, Mississippi, after a black student called James Meredith was admitted to the University (*Oxford Town*, 1963), Dylan was synonymous with the concept of singer as protestor through the early Sixties, even if such a label sometimes sat uncomfortably with the artist himself (see Shumway, 2009: 110-122).

Occupy LSX received support from singers such as Jarvis Cocker (Cocker, 2012) and Mercury Prize nominee Kate Tempest (as well as the aforementioned Billy Bragg) but no central, iconic figure emerged. *The Busker*, then, takes as its premise the idea of a singer-songwriter moving from Glasgow to London to be just such a (unwanted) spokesperson, affording the narrative the opportunity to investigate the reasons for the lack of such a figure actually emerging from Occupy and to engage with the contemporary politics that the movement sought to protest about.

Characterisation

The main character of *The Busker* approaches the Occupy movement, in the first instance, from a position of self-interest, looking to further his own career. It is his manager who voices just how self-seeking the engagement with the camp at St Paul's Cathedral is, when he proposes that Rab visits:

'It's the perfect stage,' Pierce says. 'There are already all sorts of musicians, writers, and poets making use of it, y'know? Because there's the iconic building of St Paul's Cathedral then the tents all around – clustered around. It makes for the perfect photo opportunity.' (Bell, 2014: 66)

Rab and his manager here are representative of the widespread scepticism and cynicism about Occupy London, with many commentators and politicians decrying the movement for lacking a coherent and stable set of demands. Both Pierce and Rab are willing to exploit the movement for their own ends – viewing it as an empty signifier that they can 'make use of' and as 'the perfect photo opportunity'. They are as dismissive of the grievances of the protestors themselves as the Prime Minister David Cameron, who reacted to the camp by stating that such a form of protest was not "particularly constructive" (*Huffington Post*, 08/11/11), or the London Mayor Boris Johnson, who labelled the protestors as "fornicating hippies" (*The Guardian*, 28/11/11).

As the novel goes on, however, the myriad concerns of the movement begin to emerge. This is partly based on Rab's own experiences, as he falls on hard times and is forced into sleeping rough and busking for a living. He comes to realise that Occupy is not a grouping that can be boiled down to one issue or demand and that this is a *strength* rather than a weakness, in that they draw support from a wide cross-section of society upset with how political systems are run. As Noam Chomsky writes, "[if] you ask them what are their demands, they are reticent to answer and rightly so, because they are essentially crafting a point of view from many disparate sources" (Chomsky, 2012: 56).

The Occupy movement becomes what Manuel Castells calls "*a new form of space*" (Castells, 2012:168), both physical and imaginative, and, for this reason, the protestors that Rab encounters in the novel are reluctant to accept that he has written songs about them and resistant to the idea of him setting himself up as a form of 'spokesperson' who is marketed as

a protest singer emerging from Occupy. One of the activists, Flick, addresses this directly when she speaks to Rab on the steps of St Paul's:

‘... you can't gloss the differences. And you can't show up and presume to speak for all these different people with all these different agendas, making these grand statements while they struggle against eviction orders.’ (Bell, 2014:74)

As the narrative progresses, the protagonist begins to realise just what Occupy London is and how powerful it is as a force, both in terms of deepening his understanding of contemporary politics and in developing his own creativity. The novel moves towards confirming David Graeber's assertion that Occupy “succeeded brilliantly in changing the... debate to begin addressing issues of financial powers, the corruption of the political process, and social inequality” (Graeber, 2013:141). Note that Graeber doesn't claim any sort of material victory for the activists, but instead argues that they changed the frame of reference by which we discuss politics and, by association, the financial sector and social welfare. This is the same change that manifests itself in our singer-songwriter, Rab; he isn't materially better off, but he measures the growth of his artistic career on different terms than when he first arrived at St Paul's.

By the time *The Busker* approaches its conclusion, the main character of Rab has re-assessed his conception of how much influence music can have on society and the attitudes of people within it – of which, more below – and he also sees the relevance of the camp itself and the activists he met for his subsequent struggles with homelessness and sleeping rough:

It wasn't where my interest in politics was stirred, where I felt the full hardships of camping on concrete, or where I finally found out what it meant to be *engaged* with the world around me. But it was a seed. (Bell, 2014:272)

The Occupy movement, then, is presented in *The Busker* as providing a useful moment in contemporary politics which both the protagonist and society as a whole fails to fully appreciate at the time, but with a legacy that will grow and prove more valuable over time.

Influence of the ‘Protest Singer’

Alongside this engagement with Occupy London, the novel also references and echoes the cult of the ‘protest singer’, which I alluded to earlier in terms of the American tradition of

Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. Guthrie, here, is useful with regard to the artistic awakening of Rab referred to above, because he was unequivocal about what a folk song should be and how it should interact with political reality. This is from a letter he wrote to Alan Lomax, forgive the grammar and spelling:

A folk song is whats wrong and how to fix it or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is. (Guthrie in Jackson, 2007:25)

Here we have, then, a very clear definition of what a protest song in the folk tradition should look like and, crucially, what *purpose* it should fulfil. Again, this was of great use in crafting *The Busker*, particularly when viewed in conjunction with Bob Dylan, who followed Guthrie and viewed him as a hero as well as an artistic influence. By the time Dylan recorded ‘Another Side of Bob Dylan’ (1964), David Shumway argues, songs that offered “explicit commentary on current events, and those that took explicit political positions... were in conflict with the dominant conception of art. Artists spoke for themselves, *expressed themselves*” (Shumway, 2009:112). Dylan then, as has often been noted, moves away from the portrayal of his music as protest and towards the idea of singer as artist in “the same business as Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Igor Stravinsky” (ibid, 121). From here the many myths of the ‘betrayals’ of Dylan – whether it be in going electric or in turning to evangelical Christianity (see Jones, 2009) – emanate, in that he no longer conformed to the ‘symbol of authenticity’ discussed earlier by Anthony Decurtis, which was based on the Woody Guthrie model of a drifter with an acoustic guitar and a political message.

In *The Busker*, Rab has been signed, and marketed, as a singer of protest – tied to Occupy – but finds that both his own interpretation of what a singer-songwriter is and the way that he is viewed by others doesn’t allow for this conception. He isn’t able to produce what Bryan Garman terms “hurt songs” (Garman, 2000:91), in the Guthrie mode, which seek to articulate a communal pain and sense of injustice through traditional blues and folk ballad forms. The character struggles with this conflict between the artist as providing political commentary and the artist as providing personal catharsis – with the degree to which he is *required* to interact with the social context which surrounds him – and this leads to a moment of reflection about the album that he has written and released: ‘Maybe I was caught between two ideas with the album – the political and the personal. And, while one of them was meant to be all

conviction, the other was all doubt.’ (Bell, 2014:182) By the end of the novel, he is moving towards the identity, Garman argues, that Dylan adopted in the wake of being labelled a ‘protest singer’. That is, he is drawn towards stating the primacy of “the individual as a moral and creative force that could resist the injustices perpetrated by a morally bankrupt society” (Garman, 2000:160). In its own way, this also contains an anti-establishment message and perhaps even a note of protest, but it is predicated on a lone voice rather than a collective one. In short, by the close of the book, Rab is ready to express his own hurt, his own anger, but with a recognition that he cannot, perhaps should not, speak for society as a whole.

Structure

The structure of the novel also contains a nod towards the influences identified above. Earlier I quoted Noam Chomsky arguing that Occupy was an attempt to craft a ‘point of view from many disparate sources’ and that sense of flux, of fluidity, is present in the structure of the narrative as well as in the content. I have always been interested, in my critical-creative work, in examining the ways in which form can interact with or augment the content of the novel (see Bell, 2011) and I furthered this concern by adopting a three-part timeline for *The Busker*. The reader is given passages from Rab’s teenage years in Glasgow, his year as a signed artist in London, and his spell sleeping rough on the streets of Brighton. Crucially, though, the narrative gives these sections in reverse order (end-middle-beginning) and alternates between them. This creates an unsettling of any linear sequencing of the novel and, therefore, asks the reader to consider what is important in terms of the growth of the character and the context of Occupy rather than focusing on the narrower question of ‘what will happen next?’ The structure involves the reader in “the various processes and activities of inferring, construing, projecting, hypothesizing, imagining, anticipating, and so forth” that Barbara Herrnstein Smith talks of as arising from a nonlinear narrative (Smith, 2004: 109); thereby unsettling any notion of being led through the novel by the narrator and instead asking the reader to participate in sequencing the narrative events and garnering the significance of their inter-connections.

The three-part structure was also intended to echo the musical three-four time signature. That is, three quarter notes per measure. This ‘signature’ is continued through the novel for nine measures (i.e. the Brighton-London-Glasgow structure repeats) before resolving into what could be termed ‘common time’ with a final Brighton section. The final measure, therefore, is

based on a four-four time signature (Brighton-London-Glasgow-Brighton) and thus brings us back to the narrative present for the conclusion.

Interestingly, this three-four time signature is discussed at length in Bob Dylan's autobiography *Chronicles: Volume One*, and the singer even goes so far as to outline his (slightly opaque) philosophy as to why he prefers this structure for his songwriting:

Popular music is usually based on the number 2 and then filled in with fabric, colors, effects and technical wizardry to make a point. But the total effect is usually depressing and oppressive and a dead end which at the most can only last in a nostalgic way. If you're using an odd numerical system, things that strengthen a performance automatically begin to happen and make it memorable for the ages. (Dylan, 2004:159)

This is certainly not a detailed analysis or much more than a subjective judgement from Dylan, but it was of use for *The Busker* because the purpose of splitting the narrative into threes in this way was to open space for reflection and comparison between the sections, brought about as a result of the shifts in timeframe, rather than following a chronological order and a symmetrical structure. So, for instance, if we take the opening three chapters across the timeframes – one from Brighton, one from London, one from Glasgow – we have three separate allusions to Rab's dealings with women. It would be possible to categorise the first as nostalgic, the second as exploitative and the third as romantic, albeit with a slightly naïve manner:

- (1) It doesn't lull me to sleep as Maddie's voice used to (Bell, 2014:5)
- (2) ... I could write about the way that she clutched and clawed at my back, as if trying to break through the skin... (ibid, 14)
- (3) ... she's pretty, certainly, but thoughtful-looking with it. The kind of girl you'd notice in a bookshop rather than in a nightclub. (ibid, 18)

Here we have, then, the evolution of Rab's character given in reverse: he is sweet and nervous in the third quotation, but with a note of objectification emerging; then he becomes laddish and arrogant in the second, as he considers writing a song about his sexual 'conquest'; and he's a mix between morose and nostalgic in the first, as he remembers the comfort of his previous relationship. The movement from present to past (and then deeper into the past) allows me, as author, to show this change in his character in a way that invites

reflection and comparison across the timeframes. His sentimentality for the lost relationship is coloured by the experiences of shallow sexual encounters which, in turn, were predicated on his adolescent tendency to objectify women. In this way, the narrative structure allows an investigation into his character and the genesis of his approach towards relationships. This is replicated for Rab's experiences with the music industry, drink and drugs, sleeping rough, and the various other trials and tribulations that he goes through in Brighton; with his attitudes towards and his interaction with these different aspects of the narrative all being portrayed as emanating from his earlier experiences in Glasgow and London.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by the end of the novel the protagonist is more knowledgeable about Occupy London and about himself. The book is a 'bildungsroman', in the truest sense of the word, in that it is a 'novel of formation' that charts how the character develops as he engages with Occupy and the iconic figures of Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie. However, it doesn't propose any certainties or definitive lessons derived from Rab's experiences. He is no closer to being a 'spokesperson' for contemporary society but he is, perhaps, more in tune with Woody Guthrie's conception of how a folk singer operates. This quotation is taken from his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, in which he sets out a form of manifesto for what his music is and how it relates to his own sense of identity:

I'm blowing, and just as wild and whirling as you are, and lots of times I've been picked up, thrown down, and picked up; but my eyes has been my camera taking pictures of the world and my songs has been messages that I tried to scatter across the back sides and along the steps of the fire escapes and on the window sills and through the dark halls. (Guthrie, 2004:295)

The Busker, then, shows the progression (albeit in a nonlinear narrative sequence) of Rab from a self-interested singer-songwriter interested in the 'product' rather than the 'process' of creative expression to someone who, through his experiences of Occupy London and sleeping rough, arrives at the realisation that he actually has something to say. Rab makes explicit this engagement with his own creativity and references the impact of his past experiences on who he has become towards the end of the narrative:

And there's a practical purpose to all that struggle, all the shit you have to put up with along the way... those experiences give you something to say. When you sit down to write your songs, you have something to fucking say. (Bell, 2014:182)

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