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“We’re going to be thinking big tonight because we are big,” Exene Cervenka says at the beginning of her album with Lydia Lunch, *Rude Hieroglyphics*. Exene couldn’t have hit the nail on the head any harder. Over a period of 54 uninterrupted minutes, the twin godmothers of American punk manage to zero in on the unforgiving nature of the time that we live in without indulging in worn-out leftist hyperbole or the needless kinds of humorless infomercial tangents that tend to typify most political spoken word recordings. The thread that ties the entire record together is an overwhelming sense of moral outrage which Cervenka and Lunch artfully channel into their own seamlessly choreographed attacks on the pro-life movement, sexism, fundamentalism, alternative culture and the decline of the welfare state.

Released at a time when the counterculture which Cervenka and Lunch helped give birth to was at its commercial peak, *Rude Hieroglyphics* stands out. If we’re to believe that mainstream interest in punk destroys the politics that punk embodies, then the existence of a record like *Rude Hieroglyphics* doesn’t really make any sense. But it does because spoken word recordings are one of the few avenues still available to artists and thinkers to unambiguously disclose their thoughts and feelings about politics. The fact that many of the people who make such records also happen to play in punk bands is no accident, especially if they’re the kind of artist who puts their political concerns ahead of their artistic ones.

This is one of the main reasons why spoken word continues to exist as a genre, despite its lack of real commercial appeal. Many labels continue to issue spoken word records precisely because of their overt political content. Their inability to be fully co-opted by the mainstream music market implicitly allows certain kinds of indie labels a measure of political integrity which pop music just can’t give them. For example,



WORD UP, ROCK DOWN

rock ‘n’ roll can be bought and sold on the mass market as long as the riffs are memorable and the message ambiguous. That’s why you won’t see the kind of crossover of spoken word artists from indies to majors that you observe punk bands making so easily: Ambiguity simply isn’t the intention of most spoken word recordings.

In order to appreciate where records like *Rude Hieroglyphics* come from and why spoken word culture is one of the last reservoirs of punk’s original political integrity, we ought to take the time to look back, if only to remember that not everything is that easily ruined by commerce—or for that matter, capable of being “sold out.” After all, good politics always transcends bad economics, especially when it’s a product of people trying to find better ways to express themselves.

UTTERING PUNK’S SECOND SYLLABLES

The first official products of the punk spoken word renaissance were occasional neo-poetic rants sandwiched in between songs on hardcore records such as the instantly forgettable Henry Rollins-dictated poetry B-side of Black Flag’s 1983 LP *My War* and Jello Biafra’s largely forgotten critique of the new Republican police state, *The Witch Trials*.

Predating those tracks was the British anarcho-punks Crass and their 1979 spoken word 7”, *Reality Asylum*. Nothing better epitomized the way that spoken word was looked at that time: as a neo-musical endeavor. Like the later piece, *Witch Trials*, *Reality Asylum* was a monologue with musical backing; a tape collage played behind Eve Libertine’s belted-out diatribe about Christianity and sexism. Her delivery is shrill, but her voice is full, brimming with a kind of clarity and indignation that would have been obscured had the monologue been fashioned into a traditional song structure belted out over guitar, bass and drums.

While Crass were frequently derided as being archetypal 60s-style ideologues dressed in punk clothing, there's simply no denying the extent to which they could make old fashioned leftist ideas reach an entirely new audience. Their willingness to experiment with different kinds of musical forms other than straight rock 'n' roll set a precedent because it exploded traditional stereotypes of punk being a distinctly unintelligible blast of amplified defiance. What *Reality Asylum* signified was that for the first time those artists who considered themselves "punk," felt the political necessity to transcend traditional rock song arrangements. When you look at the overall body of Crass's work, despite the overall consistency of their political vision, nothing better projected the drama and lucidity by which they presented their politics than this heavily overstated track did, which ends with the seemingly cliched lines "Jesus died for his own sins, not mine."

Why did they do this? At that time, it was very common for people to associate punk with shock rock. This was very frustrating to many leftists, particularly those musicians and activists who saw punk, even when it was loud and abrasive, as the first potential cultural vehicle for radical politics since the late 60s. Incorporating spoken word into punk was a distinctly political act because it made punk more obviously political. If you look at it in contrast to the other ways in which bands of that generation sought to distinguish themselves from the depoliticized stereotypes of punk and new wave, what Crass did wasn't



Punk, Politics and The History of Spoken Word

Joel Schalit

all that unusual. Groups like The Clash (who Crass hated) began to experiment with dub, hip hop, ska and reggae very early on. For The Clash, such moves were just as political because they were trying to bridge the racial divide through music in order to create a symbolic cultural democracy. What distinguished Crass' work was that their concerns were more obviously politically expressive than more subtle experiments like fusing dub reggae into rock songs was.

Experiments like *Reality Asylum* worked, because they injected a measure of thoughtfulness into a genre that up until that point had lacked complex dialogue. The fact that the band got in a high profile tangle with the Thatcher government over their spoken word *Sheep Farming in The Falklands* flexi single three years later attests to how the band's artistic politics had a broad enough base of support to make spoken word experiments work and still retain an audience. This shouldn't go unaccounted for, particularly when many people in the music business continue to fear endorsing genres such as spoken word because of its supposed lack of a popular audience. What's at stake here is remembering that bands who manage to touch certain kinds of chords in their audiences can, under the right historical circumstances, get away with smashing genre stereotypes and still make a serious political difference. It should come as no surprise that an anarchist band with the right timing might do that either, just as Crass' proteges Chumbawamba did 15 years later with their tepid dance hit about working class alienation, *Tubthumper*.

BACK IN THE USSA

In a recent interview in *Rolling Stone*, Chumba's Alice Nutter told the magazine that it's impossible to explain Marx's theory of dialectics in a pop song, as though she were trying to dissuade people from thinking that rock music could save the world. As nihilistic as that logic may sound to many punk rockers who think music is the only way to start a revolution, the degree to which punk musicians continue to reach out to spoken word recordings as an alternative to traditional songwriting proves it as true. This has been the case for some time.

After Reagan was reelected in 1984, conservatives gained renewed confidence to expand their revolutionary cultural and economic program. Harder times always demand more thoughtful art: Enter spoken word. Much of the spoken word material which began to be issued in larger and larger quantities at that time by punk record labels such as Biafra's Alternative Tentacles, SST, and its subsidiary New Alliance, (run by writer Harvey Kubernick,) seemed to be a symptomatic response to the increasingly reactionary character of the era. The rise of spoken word recordings in the second half of the 80s paralleled the birth of hardcore five years earlier. Hardcore, for all its rhetoric, didn't really seem to do anything other than create a new pop genre—it seemed time to try something new.

That's why it should come as no surprise that many of the same people who initially sounded the emergency bells of the Reagan Revolution by playing hardcore were now employing spoken word with the same degree of urgency that they once sang songs like "TV Parry," and "Los Angeles." Exene Cervenka's now out of print split spoken word & poetry LP with Wanda Coleman, *Twin Sisters*, was a great case in point, as were Karen Finley's psychotic first record, *The Truth Is Hard To Swallow*, Lydia Lunch's aptly-titled *Hysterie* and dark, brooding *Oral Fixation* Henry Rollins' *Big Ugly Mouth* and *Long Walk On a Short Pier*, not to mention such priceless gems as his "Public Service Announcement," on 1988's *Henrietta Collins and the Wifebeating Childhaters* EP, where he ironically criticizes male superiority in an extremely hilarious and brutal fashion. "Ladies," he states, after verbally encouraging a woman to castrate him, "no one understands you like I do."

Chomsky's rise to prominence in the world of punk spoken word recordings is extremely significant, because it shows how much things have changed in terms of the kinds of political recording choices that the punk culture industry now deems appropriate for educational purposes in advancing a leftist political agenda.

What distinguished almost all of these works from the kind of example set by Crass' *Reality Asylum*, was that they weren't explicitly accessible political commentaries. Most of these recordings were either written in the form of Lydia Lunch's cautionary morality tales about sex, politics and power told in a first person voice, or dramatic, exaggerated impersonations of women consumed by fear and terror such as Karen Finley's early spoken word pieces. When seen in contrast to Henry Rollins' assuming frightening macho voices, you get a sense that the kind of political strategy adopted by eighties American punk spoken word artists was to attack power through role playing.

While spoken word artists like Rollins, Cervenka, Lunch and Finley broke from Crass's lead, The Dead Kennedy's Jello Biafra, along with other spoken word performers of the late eighties and early nineties followed tradition, recording political

lecture discs, such as Jello Biafra's seminal 1988 double LP, *No More Cocoons. No More Cocoons* documented Biafra's run-in with the authorities over the Dead Kennedy's *Frankenchrist* album. Quite unlike any record—spoken word or otherwise—of the time, Biafra carefully recounts to rapt college student audiences the events that lead up to his being charged with distributing pornography to minors. Along the way Biafra also manages to place the event in historical context, successfully extrapolating from his experience it's greater political meaning and what it has to say about the culture of the era. Listening to *No More Cocoons* 10 years later, it's almost hard to believe that anyone could find punk so threatening—and yet it was. Which is where *No More Cocoons* function as first-person document of both an event and an era shines through.

The only '90s parallel to *No More Cocoons* is Henry Rollins' audio companion to his Black Flag tour diaries, *Get In the Van.*, a highly amusing two tape recitation of his tour journal, published simultaneously by his publishing and record company 2.13.61, and—yipes—Time Warner books. Like Biafra's first spoken word record, Rollins' 1994 audio journal is a window onto a past that many punks now

wax nostalgic about, when hardcore seemed like a threat to the political establishment and being in a band touring around the world felt like an evangelical mission designed to enlighten people instead of entertain them. Whether in Europe or the United States, if a gig isn't interrupted by right-wing skinheads giving fascist salutes, it's busted by the cops or Rollins ends up stage diving onto some poor audience member. Not only do you get a sense that punk was once controversial, you also get a look at the early American scene as a very tightly knit and interconnected community that was aware of each other. Recordings such as *Get In The Van* are really important to listen to because they're personal histories of a distinctly leftist subculture which at a certain point in its development became highly conventional. The politics are there, but unlike *No More Cocoons*, they're cultural. They get expressed in terms of the way the bands Black Flag plays with respond to each other, not to mention how the outside world responds to Black Flag.

Like Biafra and Rollins, many of the early spoken word performers returned to working on music while continuing to periodically issue spoken word discs. Spoken word doesn't seem to have the kind of built-in burnout limitations that getting older and playing in loud rock bands does. In fact, it's quite the opposite. For people who consider themselves "punk," and want to keep on preaching the gospel, it's one of the only ways to remain active without retiring behind the desk of a record company or going off to graduate school.

DUTY-FREE NOW FOR THE FUTURE

The '90s saw a huge increase in spoken word releases, led by Kill Rock Stars records and their "Wordcore" series. In keeping with KRS' own ideological program, many of the artists featured in this series take a good many potshots at the heterosexual status quo on such records as KRS owner (and Punk Planet columnist) Slim Moon's own brilliant split with Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hannah, *Mean*, Peter Toliver's apocalyptic *Load*, and Juliana Luecking and Eva Beglarian's extremely funny 1994 queer sex documentary CD, *Dream Cum Down*. If anything symbolizes KRS' unique contribution to the genre, it is this record.

Featuring interviews with many luminaries (and their girlfriends) in the early '90s gay women's punk underground, the record does something quite remarkable because it contextualizes dialogue about traditionally taboo queer sexual activities within the sphere of punk rock music culture. It's almost as though you were being given a chance to look at how punk culture (when it's at it's best,) makes it safe to talk about one's own particular political orientations without risk of being censored. The presence of bands like Pansy Division playing in the background of many of these recordings helps emphasize that, because it shows how the freedom to speak openly is an ideal extension of the music.

As important and influential as the wordcore series has been, Kill Rock Stars approach to personal politics hasn't been frequently mirrored by other '90s spoken word artists. If current trends in spoken word recordings follow any path at all it's more like the consciousness raising one Biafra first followed with *No More Cocoons*, beginning with his very own *Die For Oil, Sucker* single, issued at the same time that *MRR* put out a split Noam Chomsky/Bad Religion single in the fall of 1990 to protest American preparations for war with Iraq. Biafra's anti-war diatribe, alongside that of Chomsky's represented a shift towards an even more direct and confrontational way of doing spoken word than had previously been done in the 1980s. The artistry and subtlety of many previous political spoken word recordings had buckled under the weight of the new wartime emergency, the first full-scale conflict of the post-Cold War era. While politically justifiable, such records have to be listened to as non-artistic political documents because they're explicitly about consciousness raising, not about entertainment.

Harder times always demand more thoughtful art: Enter spoken word

Noam Chomsky has been very prolific in this regard, issuing several lecture discs on AK Press Audio and Allied Records (for example, 1997's split double CD with Chumbawamba *For A Free Humanity: For Anarchy*) chronicling his own highly accessible analyses of the triumph of global capitalism over organized labor in the West. Chomsky's rise to prominence in the world of punk spoken word recordings is extremely significant, because it shows how much things have changed in terms of the kinds of political recording choices that the punk culture industry now deems appropriate for educational purposes in advancing a leftist political agenda. It's more acceptable to push a neo-academic, neo-Marxist line than it ever was before. It also means that people who consider themselves "punk" are, to a certain extent, becoming more radicalized and willing to take the time to listen to other people (including—significantly—people outside of the punk scene) tell them why they are even more uncomfortable with the status quo than they ever were before. This was inevitable.

Part of this has to do with punk becoming part of the cultural mainstream. In order to retain its radical politics as it became a more affluent economic force in an increasingly conservative world, punk's old oppositional conscience demanded that it find ways to distinguish itself from the industry that it unwittingly created. One of the best ways to do this is for labels to align themselves with leftist political movements such as organized labor, anti-racism, and environmentalism. In an old fashioned sense, this would

be a way of matching words with deeds, or to put it more bluntly, culture with politics. Nothing could really be more appropriate, particularly if you take into account the meaninglessness of punk factional fighting over who is complicit with the system and who is not. As Jello Biafra has reminded us again and again, there are much more important issues to contend with than whether Jawbreaker signed to a major label. The problem with such kinds of disputes is that they're disempowering, as Biafra suggests on the 1997 AK Press/Allied Records spoken word comp, *Less Rock, More Talk*. Another standout on the comp is "Fallen," a beautiful spoken word and music piece about history, politics and sex reminiscent of *Reality Asylum*, not so coincidentally written by former Crass member Penny Rimbaud.

A good case in point are Alternative Tentacles' two most recent spoken word releases: *Mumia Abu Jamal Spoken Word With Music By Man Is The Bastard*, an anthology of Mumia Abu Jamal recordings culled from his now legendary banned NPR broadcasts split with hardcore band Man Is The Bastard; and *Who Bombed Judi Bari?*, an extremely moving and highly informative documentary col-

lection of now deceased Earth First! activist Bari's own songs, speeches and lectures put together by fellow eco-folksinger and Redwood Summer organizer Daryl Cherney. Both records are accompanied by extremely dense, beautifully put together informational booklets featuring writings by Bari on ecology and socialism, and transcripts of Jamal's monologues, replete with contact information for their respective legal defence funds and related political organizations.

As dry and hyperbolic as all these spoken word records might sound in contrast to a Subhumans song about sexism like "Slave to My Dick," politically there is very little difference. Even if impatient college radio disc jockeys cannot find it within their own depoliticized, television-added imaginations to stop playing the latest garage punk anthem from Crypt Records and switch artistic gears for a minute or two, it is important for us to remember that there is more to punk rock than simply entertainment. If punk is really entrusted with the left's consciousness raising task, it couldn't be in a better position to do so because no one will ever stop wanting to try and explain at length why we ought to be uncomfortable with the status quo. If there is something to remain hopeful about—something which allows punk culture to maintain a distinct sense of its own political identity, spoken word could be it. ©

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