

Rebels Wanted

Nathaniel Handy speaks to some of the singers gearing up for a new project looking at the power of protest singing



James Fagan, David Boni

“We are getting towards the cleavages in the party alignment that we’ve had for the last 50 years,” says politics graduate and folk musician Greg Russell. “Whatever you think of the state of the Labour Party, opposition is increasingly becoming single issue.”

Yep, this sure is a hell of a time to decide to tour a new show about the history of protest song. But that’s exactly what Russell has decided to do, bringing together some of the finest talents from the world of British folk music for a new touring commission, which he’s called Shake the Chains.

Hot on the heels of the inauguration of President Trump, and with the Brexit question slowly pickling in the corridors of Whitehall, Russell heads to Stocks Barn in the Herefordshire countryside in early February for an intensive weekend of work with fellow musicians Nancy Kerr, Hannah Martin, Findlay Napier and Tim Yates.

The weekend will be the culmination of a creative process that is already months in the making, and will produce a show to be toured around England in February. Each date will feature a very special guest, each with a local flavour. “We’ve got Martin Simpson in Sheffield, Steve Knightley in Bristol, Peggy Seeger in London, Chris Wood at Snape Maltings near Aldeburgh and Boff Whalley in Derby,” reels off Russell, adding with a chuckle of disbelief, “I got the A team that I wanted.”

It certainly is a project that has taken flight from the seed of an idea in Russell’s dissertation for his degree in International Relations at the University of Exeter. “I studied the role that music can play in social change,” he explains. “One thing I looked at is whether social change comes out of music, or whether music is window dressing for social movements that already exist. It went well from an academic point of view, but this show is about the artistic side of it. It’s as much a love of music as a sadistic love of politics that drives what I do.”

The creative process of the Shake the Chains project began in earnest long before the weekend residency in Herefordshire, as Russell explains. “The five of us and our guests are all emailing and putting ideas into a Facebook group,” he reveals. “Everyone’s done a bit of singing into their iPhone. The musical process has already begun. The idea is that we will get to the residential with a load of ideas we’ve spoken about and put them together.”

The sheer breadth and depth of social commentary in folk music allows the participants the opportunity to delve into obscure and often little remembered avenues of both music and politics. “This morning I’ve been leafing through *Women Against Pit Closures* poetry,” says Russell. At the same time, Devon fiddler Hannah Martin has been researching broadsides about the Peterloo Massacre in 19th-century Manchester while Glaswegian singer-songwriter Findlay Napier has been trawling the treasure trove of Scotland’s Tobar an Dualchais. It’s an online resource of some 38,000 oral recordings from the 1930s onwards, mainly in Gaelic or Scots.

“I typed ‘political song’ into its search engine and it threw up a load of interviews, including one by my former tutor Anne Neilson at the RCS [Royal Conservatoire of Scotland] talking about the birth of political song in Scotland,” explains Napier. “She talks about ‘Freedom Come-All-Ye’ written by Hamish Henderson [in 1960] and how that was the first time she felt there was really a protest song that was ours. Not an American protest song that we’d changed, but real protest music for us, in Scots, about our issues.”

Main image:
Greg Russell;
right: Findlay
Napier and
Nancy Kerr

Napier’s passion draws attention to the most notable omission of the Shake the Chains tour – a Scottish date. How does he feel about playing a part in this protest song tour of England at a time when Scotland is increasingly another country, politically as well as culturally? “I feel my part in this project is to represent Scotland,” he says. “But I’m not gonna turn up painted blue, wearing a kilt, banging on about the Indy Ref. I wouldn’t like to be a cliché.”

Instead, Napier feels he can bring an important perspective from a nation that has had a lot to resist in its history. He draws a line from his tutors’ involvement in the anti-nuclear album *Ding Dong Dollar* (“trying to drive the American submarines out of Dunoon with the power of folk music”) and Henderson’s ‘Freedom Come-All-Ye’ in the early 60s – a kind of Scottish national consciousness revival anthem – to the Scottish hip-hop artists of today.

“I’ve come at hip-hop from a really strange direction,” Napier explains. “I’ve not really listened to any of the famous hip-hop artists, but I’ve listened to most of the folk that do hip-hop from Glasgow and Edinburgh.” He namechecks Glasgow rapper Loki and Dave Hook of the hip-hop band, Stanley Odd.

“I feel like they have taken the baton that folk music laid down for a bit while we got on with pretending to be country singers,” Napier observes acerbically. “That’s a controversial thing to say, but I have the horrible feeling that it’s maybe true. I include myself in that category. I’ve not really done much protest songwriting. I feel the hip-hop community is streets ahead in terms of pulling people up about their shit.”

If folk music doesn’t have the monopoly on protest song, stylistically just how wide should this tour go? Both Napier and Martin cite Rage Against the Machine as a formative influence on their political consciences. Martin also suggests reggae and more besides. “The Kurds have an enormous body of protest music – most of their music is protest music because it’s inherent in their history,” she says. “There are a lot of cultures you could say that about. I don’t think we’re drawing national boundaries on this.”

“Some of the biggest protesters have come from mainstream music,” Russell concedes. “Bruce Springsteen, for instance. You’d probably call him a rocker and yet he’s been massive at writing protest music and is always at the forefront of civil rights movements and progressive alliances. Rap music is inherently resisting. Perhaps none of us are going to be rapping, but we’re not going to dismiss something for not being folk music. Maybe we will be rapping... Maybe I’m doing someone down there. I’d love to see Findlay Napier do a rap.” ▶



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Yet Shake the Chains will inevitably be as much about the message as the medium. This is about protest, after all. So what are the big issues and how do the musicians feel they can be tackled? "Something that affects me personally as a West Country artist is second-home ownership," says Martin. "I grew up in Brixham, a small seaside town. Growing up, it was a street of young families. I was there two Christmases ago, and me and my mum were the only people in the street. There are whole areas that have been absolutely gutted by this. Steve Knightley is our guest for the Bristol show and one of my favourite songs of his is 'Country Life', which touches on that subject."

While there will be local anger about local issues, this tour is also taking place in the unavoidable aftermath of the Brexit vote – an issue that has divided the nation and may well divide audience members, too. Can such raw political wounds be approached yet?

"We've got to appreciate that there are other opinions out there," acknowledges Russell. "We shouldn't be arrogant or snooty about it. I think sometimes political music needs to get over itself. One of the things I found so fascinating about Brexit was that whether you define yourself as left wing, right wing or centrist, neither the left nor the right agrees among themselves about the European Union, let alone with each other. So it's not going to be a party political thing."

Perhaps the most potent way to cut through the anger and division that has characterised the country during the last year of the Brexit debate is through humour. "I started doing a bit of stand-up earlier this year," says Napier. "A lot of the older folk songs were packed full of humour and that's how they managed to get their message across without pissing people off. Nobody likes being preached to. I'm interested in writing a political song that isn't overtly political."

That oblique quality is something Russell sees in Chris Wood's music – the guest at their Suffolk gig. "Chris in a sense isn't a massively political songwriter, but all of his songs are about what's happening around him," he says. Martin agrees: "Many of Chris Wood's songs are protest songs, but I would say their subtlety and the way you have to



Duncan Simey

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SHAKE THE CHAINS



James Fagan

Bassist Tim Yates
 and Hannah
 Martin (below)

unpick them, and the way that they acknowledge that most arguments aren't purely black and white, is the thing that I really love about them."

This is a tack that Napier hopes might connect with people, avoiding what he sees as the dangers of the echo chamber. "Shouting into the echo chamber of social media doesn't do anything – it's a total fucking waste of time," he laments. "We're going to have to get out and sing some songs. Maybe that's shouting into another echo chamber, but it might change someone's mind."

Martin points out the pitfalls of the echo chamber that Napier is perhaps alluding to when she considers the audience for the Shake the Chains tour. "There is a slight danger that the very nature of the show will draw a certain group," she explains. "I think we all have to be careful of existing in our happy little bubbles where everyone agrees with us, because that's when things like Brexit and Trump happen, because you just don't think it's possible."

Echo chamber or not, this is sure to be a rousing event. Russell is clear that audiences can expect a smattering of what he terms the "greatest hits" of protest song. "There's a reason why everyone knows 'We Shall Overcome'," he says. "It's because it's such a bloody good song." Equally, Napier namechecks Bob Dylan's 'Masters of War'. An anthemic singalong to blow away the Brexit blues may be hard to resist.

"People coming to the shows will be looking for some kind of reaction, if not a confirmation of how they're feeling," Martin concedes. "I think probably we all want that really from protest song, the sense of coming together to resist, to protest. What is undeniable is the surge in insularity and racism that has come with the whole Brexit thing. Anything historical that we do, it will now have modern relevance and echoes. That's the beauty of folk music." ♦

+ **DATES** Shake the Chains tours the UK from February 23-27, see the Gig Guide for details
 + **ONLINE** www.shakethechains.com

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