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The Red Clydesiders - an interview with Alistair Hulett

Anthony Ashbolt

University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Alistair Hulett, a Glasgow native, is one of Scotland's finest folk performers and a committed socialist. During the 70s, 80s and much of the 90s he was based in Australia where he made a name for himself as a solo performer and for a period as a member of the highly acclaimed punk folk band Roaring Jack. From punk he moved back to the spirit and style of the folk revival of the 1960s. He is now based in Glasgow, where he performs solo and with Dave Swarbick, his collaborator on the CD Red Clydeside.

Keywords

socialists, folk singer, Scotland

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Interviewer: Anthony Ashbolt

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*See thon Arthur Henderson, heid bummer o' the working men
When war broke out he pressed his suit an' ran tae catch
the train
He signed a deal in London, nae mair strikes until the
fightin's done
In Glesga toon the word went roon', tak tent o' John Maclean
He said a bayonet, that's a weapon wi' a working man at
either end
Betray your country, not your class. Don't sign up for war my
friend
Don't sign up for war*

- AA: Let's talk about folk and the protest tradition, folk music in social protest. Obviously you've just done a CD, *Red Clydeside*, that has an historical framework, and yet the song that you sang today, that great anti-war song 'Don't Sign Up for War', has so much contemporary relevance. It could be about today. How do you see the role of folk music, both historically and today?
- AH: Well, the oldest political song that I know is a song called 'The Cutty Wren'. It's a very, very ancient song. It's a pre-Christian song. It's a religious song from before the time of Christianity but it was taken up by the peasants in 1381

in the Southeast of England when we had the peasants revolt led by Watt Tyler and John Ball. They took a song about the killing and eating of the king of the birds as a fertility god. They took that very, very ancient song and recast it with a new significance. Of course the significance here was that they were going to tear down the established feudal order and replace it with an egalitarian society, which was the goal of the peasants revolt. They wanted to get rid of the feudal hierarchy and that song became an illegal song. I don't think songs themselves can alter societies. It takes a movement to do that. It takes political engagement to do that. But songs have always been a part of those movements. They have always been the lifeblood and spirit of the movement. There's no political movement of the people that I can think of, that hasn't produced a wealth of songs and those songs are usually made illegal by the power structure that they're seeking to topple. So if they recognise that these songs have got power I think that's a confirmation that we are right in that hunch. That they do have a significance, that they do an effect. Joe Hill once said 'any movement that doesn't have songs ain't worth much'. And he was a great song maker himself as well as a political organiser and agitator.

AA: Some of his ashes were sent to Sydney.

AH: I didn't know that.

AA: They were sent to Sydney. But the police raided one of the IWW houses and burnt the ashes. So the story goes that Joe Hill was cremated a second time in Australia.

AH: Oh, how lovely

AH: The IWW was very big in Australia, was it?

AA: Around that time, yes.

AH: And then a bit later the Communist Party was a mass party here?

AA: Yes, to an extent, and it had a big role to play in the arts as well as the trade union movement.

AH: I think the links between the folk revival in its early days in both America and in the UK, as well as here ... the Communist Party, the Communist movement played a major role in helping the folk revival to become established.

AA: Well let's talk a little bit about that folk revival both in

America and England because the clear connection there is the one that links Pete Seeger with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, obviously.

AH: Yes.

AA: How important were Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger to the folk movement scene?

AH: Ewan's songs are still being sung. And Peggy still plays around on the folk scene. She just recently toured with Martin Carthy and Elisa Carthy, the daughter of Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson. I didn't catch any of the shows but I heard some rave reports, not only about them but also about Peggy as well. She has written some great songs too. But, Ewan's songs still continue to be sung. And his writings on folk music I don't think have ever been surpassed. His approach to the performance of traditional songs, particularly the ballads, what he has to say about using the Stanislavski method for performing traditional songs. I'm still digesting some of that and trying to make use of that information in my performances.

AA: What is so fantastically rich about that folk tradition is the way in which it merges all sorts of styles, including the political songs. But folk has got other dimensions also, hasn't it?

AH: Well I mean, folk music—it's easier to identify what it is not than to actually define what it is. It's a very elastic term. In its purest sense it means the songs which have been shaped and reshaped over a great many years through a process of oral transmission. But that only describes a certain type of folk song, what we call a traditional song. But within folk music we've also got the broadside ballads which instead of being handed on orally were actually put onto printed sheets. Many of them came originally from the oral tradition and went on to the printed sheet. This was a different sort of dissemination and those songs tended to be more fixed because you had the text, it was actually in print. So it was less likely to be altered than to be reshaped in performance than a song that you get orally. But there are many other forms of folk music that don't fit into either category. I am thinking of forms such as the blues, for instance, which began as a rural music form but as more and more rural workers went into the cities in the north, particularly Chicago, they took the blues from the south

up into the northern cities and electric instruments began to be used. It wasn't met with the howls of derision that came later when singer/songwriters such as Bob Dylan first went electric.

What I would say is that folk music takes many many different forms and the Communist movement embraced or saw the potential in folk music because folk music ... The only way that I can say what I really think folk music is ... it's the natural political and musical expression of the labouring classes and it is defined not by a style but it's defined by the class that makes it. It's our music. But that's not to say that our class creates it in isolation from all other classes. Of course it doesn't, because life isn't compartmentalised in that way. So there are elements of non-folk music coming to folk music and similarly you will get influences from folk music coming into bourgeois music as well. A lot of the classical composers were massively, massively influenced by the pop music of their region, particularly people like Bartok who was a folk song collector and a composer at the same time. You've got poets such as Burns who was massively, massively influenced by the narrative ballads. He was a folk song collector, as well as a poet and the influence of folk music in his poetry is enormous. So you can't say folk music is solely the spontaneous expression of the labouring classes because they don't exist in isolation ever. They are open to other influences, but for the most part that is what I would say folk music is. Because it's the music created by that class and because the commonality of our experience all over the world and all through time has been exploitation and oppression, all folk songs contain, if you know how to interpret them or to decode them, all folk songs are actually political songs.

AA: Even the traditional love ballad?

AH: Let's take a song like 'The Weaver and the Factory Maid'. It's a song from the northeast of England. It's an industrial song but from the very early stages of the industrial revolution. It's a love song. A weaver is in love with a factory girl. Now on the face of it you wouldn't say that was a particularly political song until you know that in 1764 the steam shuttle was invented by a weaver called James Hargraves. This kick starts the textile industry as an industrial phenomenon and the hand loom weavers

who were previously like an artisan aristocracy in the community, well respected, extremely affluent by the standards of everyone around them, singing songs 'if it wasn't for the weavers what would you do' ... massively optimistic songs being created by the weavers which reflect their position within their society. Suddenly they cannot compete with this new technology and they are driven into poverty and respond by going into the factories to smash the looms that are actually destroying their livelihood. In that context we have a song called the 'Weaver and the Factory Maid' ... Then you find the song spends most of its time ... not only is he describing how beautiful this young woman is, he then goes on to say that everyone around him is opposed to the relationship, including his father, they're all appalled that he's going with her. But it ends off 'where are the girls, I'll tell you plain, the girls have all gone to weave my steam, and if you find them you must all trudge to the mill in the early morn'. A political analysis of a new situation confronting them. So it's a love song that if you know how to decode it immediately it becomes a political song because life is political. And a lot of what I do is actually to take songs, which are not overtly political songs, but to use them as a window to look into what were the prevailing social conditions that gave rise to the song. And so often a song that appears on the surface to be a love song is actually also simultaneously a political song.

AA: Phil Ochs was once introduced by Pete Seeger at the Newport Folk Festival as a topical singer, almost implying that this was somehow different from folk singing. Do you see an important role for the so called topical song?

AH: Yeah. I tend with my own song writing to look to the past not because I want to look nostalgically at the past but because, if I want to make a political statement, to use a situation that is in a state of formation and transformation can catch you out because you can write the song and it's so topical that events develop and the song no longer has any meaning. Or the campaign that gave rise to it, the situation that gave rise to it alters and the song ceases to be relevant. So that's why *Red Clydeside* is my statement about the Gulf War that you are seeing right now, the anti-war movement that we are seeing right now. I went back to the First World War and wrote about the anti-war

movement there because it's fixed in time. We know what happened. We know its success and we know its failures and its mistakes, all the twists and turns and we can analyse and learn from them.

AA: So *Red Clydeside* in a sense grew out of your anger over the current war and you looked backed to history or did you already know the story?

AH: Well, I became interested in the story of Red Clydeside because I had two songs that I sang which were written by Hamish Henderson, one was called 'the John McLean March' and the other is a song called 'Freedom Come All Ye' which in the last verse makes a reference to McLean where Mclean meets with his friends in Springburn:

*Aa thae roses an geeans will turn tae blume
An a black laud frae yont Nyanga
Dings the fell gallows o the burghers doun.*

The other song 'McLean March' was a full song about this character called John McLean, and I knew a lot of people who sang both songs, myself included, but we didn't ... if you asked us who was this guy, we would say well he was a socialist who lived in the time of the First World War, went to jail because he was opposed to the war and we couldn't really tell you much more than that. And that would be the case for most of the people who have that song in their repertoire. And for me that wasn't quite good enough. And so I came across a book written by a woman called Nan Milton. It turns out that Nan is the daughter of John McLean and I read that book and became fascinated and I began to read other accounts of this time known as Red Clydeside and as I was researching I'd already decided I was going to do an album about it and I went to live in Glasgow, not solely in order to do that, I had other reasons for going home as well, but I felt it was something I could only really do in the city where it happened, to write with authority I had to go to the places where ... I had to go to the jail that he was locked up in. I had to go to George Square where, during the battle of George Square in 1919, the workers raised the red flag over the Gladstone monument—a highly significant gesture and the symbolism was not lost on the British ruling class at all because they responded by sending troops and tanks into Glasgow. And the whole city was placed under military rule for three weeks and the

local troops were confined to barracks for fear that they would go over to the side of the workers. So it was a pre-revolutionary situation that was existing in Glasgow, in a time when there were enormous upheavals taking place all over the world as the capitalist system struggled to recover from the trauma of the war. So I became really fascinated by it and at the same time the attack on the twin towers was responded to by the Americans deciding to go in and swat the Taliban. In order to show that you don't do that to Uncle Sam. It made no difference, it hadn't really anything to do with the Taliban.

AA: Or the Afghani people.

AH: Yes and they had been quite happy to live with the Taliban for ever so long. In fact they actually helped them get into power. An ass had to be kicked and it was a convenient ass for them to kick. McLean had said at the time of the First World War that it's the task of socialists to build class patriotism to convince workers not to slaughter each other for sordid world capitalism and what flashed through my head was it's a task now to convince workers not to participate in the slaughter of innocent men, women and children in Afghanistan, and in turn in Iraq for the sordid pursuit of oil profit. Mclean's message was still as current as it had been then and it was an illegal message. The Defence of the Realm Act made it illegal to say what McLean was saying. He was actually saying the government is evil and should be torn down in order to stop the war. And exactly the same thing was happening to people like George Galloway who came out and called Tony Blair, and those around him ... he said, they're a pack of wolves, and at one stage they wanted to do George Galloway for treason. And the whole attack on freedom of speech, particularly in America ... just recently I was speaking to some folk musicians who had been over to America and they had an anti-war sticker on the back of their car and they were tailgated by somebody.

AA: And the Clearwater channel banned all these rather innocent people—The Dixie Chicks and so on.

AH: Yes. Yes. So, I mean what was done to McLean was a lot more extreme. The stakes were higher. And, I mean nobody in their right mind thinks that the Dixie Chicks are actually out to try to engineer a socialist revolution. I mean, it's great that they have taken this anti-war stance

but I mean they are not John McLean. The stakes were much higher with McLean.

AA: Right. Well that's the thing about Red Clydeside, isn't it, the anti-war connection has immediate relevance today. There are a lot of people around, a lot of them associated with the capitalist media, of course, who say, of course, that any thought of socialism or Marxism, is dead. Historically, you say that's not the case because this wasn't just an anti-war movement, it was a socialist movement.

AH: What the Red Clydesiders were able to successfully argue to a large number of workers was they made the connection between the war and the capitalist system. That the war was produced by capitalism. That war is the inevitable result of capitalism. They were able to make that argument convincingly and compelling to such a degree and not only in Glasgow but at that time, 1916, you had the Easter Rising in Ireland; 1917, you had the Revolution in Russia; 1918, the German working class overthrows the Kaiser and this stopped the war. 1919, there is a massive revolutionary wave throughout Europe including in Glasgow. So Red Clydeside was not something that happened in isolation. It happened within the context of a massive, massive upheaval. Red Clydeside was the most significant manifestation of it in the UK. Since I've actually put this album out and I've been speaking about it, I've gone to places in England, and people say "but there was Red Coventry, there was Red Sheffield". Not quite on the scale of Red Clydeside admittedly, but workers everywhere were actually drawing the same conclusions as what Mclean was successfully able to propagate in Glasgow.

I think the events that we are seeing now ... what Marx had to say in the *Communist Manifesto* about what kind of society is produced by capitalism, is as true today as it was then and we will continue to have the famines and the wars and the pestilence, in the midst of plenty. Because the crisis of capitalism is not a crisis of scarcity. Every time there's recession it's not because there's not enough being produced. It's not a crisis of scarcity. It's a crisis of overproduction. And so the only way to counter that overproduction is to smash the means of production and start over again. Start rebuilding over again. Deliberately reintroducing scarcity in the midst of absolute plenty is a characteristic of capitalism.

- AA: You sound almost optimistic in the possibility of large-scale social change. And I asked John McCutcheon the same question, because he too sounded optimistic, and he said well the facts will always look like they are stacked up against you but you have to keep that sort of hope and optimism. Is that how you see it too?
- AH: Well, there's that but I think there is also, there has been a sea change. It's too early to know how on-going that shift is going to be but there are events like the World Social Forums taking place where the oppressed all over the world are meeting together to discuss how they are going to collectively resist that oppression. That's a highly significant new development. We haven't seen this before. I mean, when in history have the oppressed from all over the world held an international convention of the oppressed to discuss how to most successfully resist the corporations. This is the up side of globalisation—we're not only seeing globalised exploitation but we're seeing globalised resistance in its earliest stages. It's almost the case now that every time that the corporate masters meet to have their summit there is an alternative summit outside that's hammering on the door and a socialist would have to be excited by that.
- AA: Yes. What interests me about it certainly in the Australian context, and I think its true overseas as well, you often see the corporate leaders inside saying now we do have to take on some of the ideas of those people outside, so there's what Marcuse called repressive tolerance going on inside and outside they're getting their heads smashed in by police batons.
- AH: Yes, I know, but even just recently that has been happening right here in Australia, first of all in Redfern and then more recently in Macquarie Fields. Now in Redfern it was easier for them to dismiss it, they're just a bunch of hot headed young blacks but Macquarie Fields ... you have even got John Howard conceding it might have something to do with social disadvantage, which is a remarkable admission for Howard. I am not suggesting that he's going to have a change of heart or anything like that, but he is being forced to confront the facts—that you cannot continually kick people and not expect them to hit back. The hitting back might not take the most constructive forms at all times but we want to relate to that anger. We might hope

that it can be channelled more productively than just chucking stones at the police. And we want to organise it and focus it, try to give it a more positive direction. We want to fundamentally change society. Insurrection is what we want not riot.

AA: So what's the role of the labour movement as you see it? In Britain it supports Blair—how do you explain that?

AH: Not all of it does. There's a massive debate going on at the moment within the trade union movement—whole sections of the union movement are saying why are we giving money to this government when it seems to be solely out to try to kick our heads in, why are we continuing to bankroll it? And they're known as the 'Awkward squad'. But, whole swathes of the union movement are looking around for where they are going to put their financial backing. And they are talking about dis-affiliating from the Labour party. The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) is the fastest growing political party in Scotland. At the last election we got 6 party members elected to the Scottish parliament. I think that is a great result. That's a phenomenally good result. Especially when you know that all six ... if you were to ask them, what their political orientation is they would say Trotskyist. Six Trotskyists have just been elected to the Scottish parliament! And I'm asked if I see any grounds for optimism? Yes. Massive grounds for optimism.

AA: Even the Green vote in Australia is a left vote.

AH: It's a left vote, of course it is. And in Scotland the Greens and the SSP have been able to work together as a bloc within the Scottish parliament, really constructively and I think that's a way forward. I think a red-green alliance is essential because there's no point in a socialist society that destroys the planet that we live on. We need to be as concerned about the survival of the planet as we are with the well-being of the society that lives on it. But the emergence of the 'Awkward Squad' looking to give their political and financial affiliation away from the Labour Party over towards the SSP, and in England, the formation of a new party called 'Respect', which the Socialist Workers Party is playing a leading role in, again it's a socialist alliance ...

AA: On a darker note, the Sydney antiwar movement is so divided it has split into two groups which stage different protests.

- AH: Which is really tragic because it simply reinforces the perception, you know that crude characterisation, you know the only people we hate more than the Romans is the Peoples Front of Judea. You know, we are acting it out for all to see and it's a tragedy and I don't know what the basis for the split is. I've only just become aware of it. I bought Socialist Worker at the gig last night and there was an article saying stop the madness, let's get back together, you know immediately, and that appears to me to make perfect sense.
- AA: To return to music, could you tell us a little bit about the Glasgow Centre for Political Song at Glasgow Caledonian University?
- AH: I think it's a fantastic resource. It's actually the largest archive of its kind anywhere in the world. It's a repository of songs, predominantly left wing songs but not exclusively. In order to get the funding it cannot be seen to be a vehicle for political propaganda. You would need to have a pretty good explanation why you wanted to look at them, to go in and say I want to see the fascist songs from Nazi Germany. You would need to convince the curator that it wasn't because you thought that they should be sung again. They do have those songs but they're sort of kept in a different section. For the most part what you get, you get songs from the Spanish civil war, you get songs from the various strikes, anti-war movements, see a huge section from the CND days ... but one of the most interesting sites, and you can go to the website and see at least the song titles, is the songs that have been made since the beginning of the Iraq war. There's been a massive outpouring of songs. Quite astounding ... most of them are kind of parodies, songs like 'If you cannot find Osama bomb Iraq' to the tune of 'If You're Happy And You Know It Clap Your Hands'.

The archive contains songs which are produced commercially. It also contains songs which are just sent by people. Anything. And as a sort of time capsule resource, it's going to be invaluable. Because for anybody who wants ... just recently I got hold of a four CD collection of songs from the Depression. Now these are not folk songs, these were the pop songs of the day. Songs with titles like 'I'm In The Market For Love' and things like that. The economic situation was something that was so much in everybody's mind that it came into the pop songs of the day. The best

known song would of course be 'Buddy Can You Spare A Dime'. That would be the song everybody knows. As the Depression grew more grim, the songs got more grim and more cynical as well. There was one song, I can't remember the title but basically it takes the form of, it might be grim today but tomorrow is another day and the sky will be blue and good times are just around the corner. But the chorus is 'sucker'.

So their taking that kind of tried and true format of you know sort of, keep the home fires burning, there's a silver lining and all that. And completely turning it on its head just with that one word, 'sucker', at the end of the verse. And I was listening today, here at the folk festival, Chloe and Jason ...

AA: Chloe and Jason Roweth —their First World War songs (*The Riderless Horse*)?

AH: Yes, First World War songs, a massively important window into what ordinary people were feeling about the experience. Particularly from a relatively isolated society like Australia was. I mean certainly these young boys from the Australian outback towns were propelled into the Dardenelles armed to the teeth and chucked in there. You know, cope with this digger. And there was one song, it was just a little squib but it was brilliant. Basically it was saying—in this war where do we find the capitalist, where do we find the industrialist, where do we find the millionaires? Nowhere to be seen. Where do we find the workers? At the front. Workers, follow the example of your masters. Namely, get the hell out. This was really political analysis of the class nature of war ... McLean said that the bayonet is a weapon with a workingman at either end. It's only the working class who die and suffer in wars. It's not the ones who actually engineer the whole thing in the first place. Those sorts of ideas were coming out in the songs.

AA: I've written a lot about what I call the 'politics of forgetting' and how so much of contemporary society is involved in forgetting. The role of the mass media is, in part, spreading lies and propaganda and it seems to me in that context that the sort of historical reconstruction that you're doing, that others are doing, telling the stories of the past, is a really significant thing to do.

AH: I think it's really important that folk music functions as the memory of the class. And that it continues to fulfil that role. But what appears to happen again and again is the people who were the most ardent supporters of the system, within the working class, the most patriotic who were the first to sign up for the First World War, who sang the songs about things can only get better and the blue birds will return to Capistrano ... when these people realise how betrayed they have been, they are the most vehement activists involved in trying to pull it down and that came out in the songs from the First World War, it came out in the songs from the Depression and right now the folk that are the most angry about this recent illegal war, strangely enough, are not the socialists who expected it to be like that anyway, it's the people who really thought that there were weapons of mass destruction. And they're the ones who are really angry and they're the mass of the workers who were really hoodwinked. They really thought that if we didn't go in and smash Saddam Hussein, then he could get us in 45 minutes. And now it turns out that Tony Blair was lying about that. He had no evidence to support that what so ever. He made it up. He lied. And they're the people who are going to pull this disgusting system down. They're the people that are going to do it.

AA: And song will be there to assist.

AH: And they'll be singing like boxer birds.