

Socialist musicians sing of troubles

by Stephen A. Noble
Winston Churchill once said that if you're not a socialist by the time you're 20 you have no soul, and if you're still a socialist by the time you're 30 you have no brains. Cynicism at its finest. Whether he was right or not, however, who knows, but if one looks at the state of Britain's youth today and much of the music they follow, it can be clearly seen that Mr. Churchill might just have had a point.

Over the past few years in Britain there has been a dramatic rise in the number of popular socialist musicians. Let's not kid ourselves and say that this is something brand new; they've always been there, but only in the last few years have they really come into the proverbial spotlight to enjoy serious attention and support from the record-buying public. People such as Billy Bragg, Paul Weller and The Style Council, The Men They Couldn't Hang, and The Housemartins, to name but a few. Undoubtedly, their greatest success was the formation of Red Wedge, a diverse movement of British entertainers devoted to the spread of socialist awareness. Before the election in June they were everywhere, trying to get the word across to the British "youth" that yes, they did have an option besides Mega-Monster Maggie.

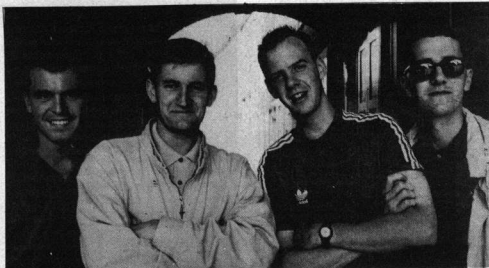
But what does all this mean, you ask. Well, it means that there are a lot of unhappy people who want a change. In some parts of Britain, the unemployment rate among young people exceeds 50% — STOP FOR A MOMENT, and THINK about that... There are parts of the country where young people just don't have any hope besides their weekly unemployment cheque. Things don't seem to be getting any better, and this is precisely what the rise in popularity of all these "socialist musicians" indicates.

The Housemartins are the epitome of the whole movement; they sing songs about normal working class people in normal everyday situations. There are no flashy photographs boasting of the latest trendy styles; there are no fancy gimmicks in the music or in the production — it's all very down to earth. This, perhaps, has been the essence of

the whole movement: to present good, lively music in an unpretentious manner. It's precisely this fact which allows them to get their ideas across to the greatest number of people: although the lyrics usually have a message, the music is always good in itself, which is the case with The Housemartins — you could be a staunch Tory and enjoy it too.

Even though a lot of the Red Wedge groups (the Housemartins included!) have done well as far as record sales are concerned,

one might well ask oneself whether they have any effect politically. Here, most people will point to the Tory election victory and say that it was all a waste of time. Beware of these idiots, however. It's a fact that in June's election there was a notable swing towards a Labour vote, especially in the worst off areas of Britain. How much of a role the vehement Red Wedge campaign played is debatable, but it would take an ever so well spoken gentleman in dashing blue suit and black



British band, The Housemartins — grinning.

Housemartins sing angry

The band is bravely striking out in several directions here, yet the entire effort is coherent and unified. Changes of pace, brass sections and stylistic deviations all add to the delight of the record, yet the band never compromises a hummable melody for the sake of experimentation. I cannot heap enough praise on P.D. Heaton and the boys for coming up with highly listenable tunes rich in both variety and texture.

review by Jonathan Wiseman

I knew the Housemartins would be stretched to the end of their creative tether to produce an album even comparable to their superb first effort. Well, *The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death* delivers the goods, and even if that power-pop edge immediately experienced with *London 0, Hull 4* is not as noticeably present, this disc is no less musically satisfying.

bowler to quite simply overlook the honest efforts of these working class people.

So if there's so much discontent among the British youth, why didn't the Labour party get in, you ask. Well, perhaps Mr. Churchill was right after all. When we're young and earning very little we listen to bands like The Housemartins, tap our feet and sing along with all our souls: the socialist lyrics make great sense. When we grow older, however, and are earning a respectable wage, the last thing we want is a government taking it all away in taxes, etcetera. The young bands still play, though we no longer sing along, but just tap our feet. Have we at last found our brains?

there is a sense of conviction in their lyrics which demands thought and commands respect.

Curiously, the Housemartins seem to embrace two apparently contradictory systems of belief. On the one hand, they are devout Marxists, yet they simultaneously propound traditional Christian dogma. It seems difficult at first to reconcile both revolutionary and religious fervour; however, the 'Martins are dualists of the highest order. Their metaphysics are Jesus-based while their survival in the socio-economically troubled English north is inspired by Marx. Interesting stuff!

The band sings about class disparity and exploitation, urban renewal, South Africa, the loss of faith and in the album's title track, perhaps the most biting diatribe against the British monarchy since "God Save the Queen" by the Pistols.

In "You Better be Doubtful", the lyrics are textbook socialism: Tailor, you better close another shop! No one wants your quality, make do with what you've got./ They'll let you survive./ they'll let you get by/ but knowing them they'll let you rot." The best song on the album is probably "Me and Farmer" which encapsulates both Christian and Marxist themes: "Farmer is a happy crook/ Jesus hates him everday/ Cause Jesus gave and farmer took."

Despite the band's earnest proselytizing, one has to admire them as fine musicians and compassionate human beings even if you are a conservative atheist. And in addition to all this, the band still retains a fine sense of humour. What a package!

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