

McDermott's Two Hours versus Leveller's – Disorder

The new McDermott's Two Hours versus Leveller's album, **Disorder**, is released in mid-August on Hag records. The album will be available in all good record stores and through the Leveller's mailing list (www.levellers.co.uk).

To coincide, McDermott's have reformed as a semi-acoustic outfit. Original members Nick Burbridge, Matt Gurney and Ben Paley are joined by percussionist Dill Davies in the new line up. They launch the album at the Komedia, Brighton, on July 22nd. It is the first opportunity to hear the new material as well as old favourites - an evening not to be missed. The band feature as part of Attila the Stockbroker's Barnstormer. Tickets are £8/6conc and are available through the Komedia box office on 01273 647100. Doors open @ 8pm.

The band follows this with a series of festival appearances over the summer. Nick will also be supporting The Levs for several dates during their forthcoming acoustic tours.

Ben Burbridge (June 2004)

McDermott's Gigs:

July 22nd Komedia, Brighton (www.komedia.co.uk)

Aug 12th & 13th Nick and Ben @ Broadstairs Folk Week (www.broadstairsfolkweek.org.uk)

Aug 22nd Beautiful Days (www.beautifuldays.org)

Sept 3rd Solfest (www.solwayfestival.co.uk)

Sept 5th Wallingford Bunkfest (www.bunkfest.co.uk)

Sept 13th Nick & Ben @ The Greys, Brighton (www.thegreyspub.com)

DISORDER An Introduction of sorts by NB

Just when you thought you could come off the Seroxat there's another McDermotts vs Levellers album in the making. It aims to be look harder and flinch even less, stand toe to toe with an order that's patently become more corrupt and dangerous over the last year in the hands of liars and warmongers, but without any real sense it can be beaten in its own terms now, armed only with revolutionary faith. Yet it can surely be interrupted, objected to, the damage it does thrust at it in a way it can't ignore, even if that means having to fall to pieces in the process. Who remembers the Buddhist monk self-immolating on a Vietnam street corner? Disorder.

How the album's gone, and will go, in the studio maybe we'll come back to before it's released. They just want me to paint a picture of the songs involved, and hang it out here.

On Claws And Wings we grafted Tim O'Leary's tunes round the songs themselves. Now they've all come together, attacking the nutcase who walks round Queen's Park lake at night, just a stone's throw from the Metway.

I dedicated Dirty Davey to Carlo Giuliani, gunned down by Italian police at an anti-globalisation march in Genoa, when I sang it with The Levellers at Cambridge a couple of years ago. Black Sun is a song for him, cousin of Dirty Davey, based round a European-type reel over rock riffs. It follows Carlo from his squat down through the cobbled Genoan streets to the demonstration that degenerated into violence, and saw him shot from a Land Rover and then run over as he lay bleeding. If you've forgotten these images, look them up on the net; they defy belief. Yet the song ends with the kind of defiance that's meant to mark the album:

In the city of the heart the black sun sets

And a white moon of liberty cascades along the parapets

It's the light of conscience that redeems and regrets
An innocent young life destroyed, it will not forget
You cut him down...

I don't think the idea of a sense of sacrifice in the face of a corrupt order should be confused with some kinds of mental aberration. The sickness that splits the mind of a psychopath, for instance, seems to have nothing to do with a creative disorder; it is, in personal terms, a fascist state, where others are reduced to objects to satisfy a lust for complete control. Summer Song is like a Neil Young love-song, only the lyrics creep up on you, before you realise what's happening, and that you're trailing a child-hunter through the countryside. If it makes you cringe, then it's done its work, more potently than any string-filled paean to a hastily angelicised little girl. This man is no stranger, he smiles at you in the morning, he lives round the corner. If you aren't forced to try to understand what makes him what he is, you'll never recognise him. He's developed in a rigid structure of sexual and social dis-ease that's put him in this place, where others have been before, where he only thirsts for one kind of contact. But do you accept that as inevitable? Or do you challenge the structure in the hope that it loosens, even if only enough for him to quench his thirst some other way?

Lock him up and he'll escape,
Pin him down and he'll change shape
To stalk the one he means to take, trespass in her fears
He's the figure on the path, the man on the stairs
Again, today, he wasn't there
But she'll smell his breath, and feel him stare, before she disappears...

Such challenges that loosened all kinds of structures were so rife in the first half of the seventeenth century, when the original Levellers were at work, I keep coming back to that time, as a source of invigoration. Tod The Ranter is as much as cousin to Song Of A Leveller, as Black Sun to Davey.

There are craftsmen here, tanners and nailers,
Cobblers and tailors, weavers and carpenters
We have all we need and all we need we trade in kind
And there are travellers among us,
Poets and players, minstrels and jugglers
All the property we own lies in the open mind

The Ranters preached their own heretical Christian values, allied with a sense of sexual freedom and political subversion, a thirst to submit to life in the moment in all its beautiful and uncontrollable complexity, that represent exactly the kind of disorder I'm concerned with, not an end but a means, where the means means all. This song drives one rhythm over another, and makes them work together. It's what the album's about.

This is the moment undefined where we discover rings of chance
It is the garden unconfined where lovers sigh and children dance
Call it madness or sedition, quick and wild, we share and sow
Seeds of revolution in these fecund pastures grow...

But I like songs to work with a dialectic; it stops you ranting in the cheapest sense. So The Old Man's Retreat answers the ranter's energetic faith with an act of resignation.

Blind me, the old man cries, as another of his children dies
I will not look upon this land until her wounds are healed

Set over a sedate canon, the angry disaffection of a village elder, from any of those lands where internecine conflict is exploited by so-called superpowers to further their own ends, is sung as a vow to see, hear and do nothing but leave the battlefield for the mountains where he can rest in peace.

As flares and shells fall through the night
And taunt a people cursed to fight
The old man takes flight from rituals of fire

A lone figure on a distant track
His voice mute and his gaze black

In silence his heart cracks where summits vault and spire

But, like the monk in flames, this isn't quietism; when he yields and falls among the snows, a spring rises and flows down to heal the wounded land below. His sacrifice is as powerful a source of rejuvenation as any other.

The only series of events more charged with cant and hypocrisy than the charge into war is the kind of settlement that those with power manipulate those without into accepting as the inevitable consequence. So the Americans have brokered the Northern Ireland peace process, the British and Irish governments rub their hands greedily, "freedom fighters" turn career-politicians, and all those murdered or persuaded to murder, among their own people, are forgotten as everyone is herded towards their place in the United States of Europe.

Brothers and sisters, we're gathered here
To lay the ghosts of all these years
So forget the dead and staunch your tears
Mary's lying down her soldier

In other words, Party To The Process.

So the oul' da, father of the bride, and his crew come face to face with the khaki heroes at a shotgun wedding.

The bar's awash, the tables stacked
The groom's platoon has just attacked
Forget your counties, hand over the six-packs
Now Mary's lying down with her soldier

While the lovers fumble uncertainly under the sheets the reception downstairs turns from a fight with cricket bats and hurley-sticks to a maudlin chorus of farewell with snatches of I Vow To Thee and The Fields Of Athenrae indistinguishable. On top of the honeymoon suite a robin starts singing – is it dawn, or just the streetlights deceiving him? Only time will tell. But there's still a fire burning across the city, and the marches go on.

He's got years to have and to hold her
While she stares sadly over his shoulder
And bears his children as they grow older...

And into what culture, and with what sense of history? What will happen to the collective memories of such peoples when the global homogenisation led by the Americans has achieved its ends?

Drive a people through thirty years' war when a peaceful solution could have been found after the first civil rights marches in Derry, and then wash your hands of the past and consign them to the great order of the new Right.... Take a self-taught peasant poet like John Clare, put him in the hands of eighteenth century literary London, make him perform like a dancing bear, watch him lose his mind, then lock him up in an asylum, or leave him wandering the country roads trying to find his way home... The arrogance of those who play with others' lives can only be met with anger and disdain.

The Madness Of John Clare is a song about how an original creative mind, flourishing in an environment where it's nurtured, through a combination of personal fragility and the manipulative treatment of those always ready to exploit, disintegrates, yet keeps hold of its deepest gift, its continual quest for peace, and resolution.

Heal me, let the earth return solid beneath my feet
And set me on the long road north where man and angel meet
There I will rediscover the resolution of the land
Where all my dreams grow fertile I'll for my lover stand

John Clare never found his way back, in fact; it's another example of a battle lost, but the poems he left, the continual fascination with his story, and the compassion and esteem he is viewed with, set him apart from the bear-baiters who thought themselves so superior, and once again support the idea: it's not, perhaps, about winning, in the end, but about the style of resistance.

Just A Life's set on very different territory, but it takes on the same theme. It's a true story of a Brighton schoolboy (he went to Jonny Leveller's old school, as it happens) who made the ultimate act of self-abnegation in the face of pressures he didn't want to have to resist.

So you're a rebel in the mirror, a legend in your own bed
The master of ceremonies that take place in your own head
They talk to you of love but what you know is hate
A bitter communion where the host disintegrates

The song moves like a camera over a moonlit garden through a window onto a family photograph and through the past traces Sol's path to the ledge where, once he steps off, "then you fly or then you fall". It's meant to reach out to anyone like him hemmed in and leaned on until they crack, the tie on a "tug-of-war on a fairground in the rain", not as a moribund lament, but a fierce act of empathy that might help open a different path, to defy those who

make a myth of you now you can't make a man

Although they can't decide if you were Icarus or Peter Pan

And that might lead to a different kind of exit, who knows? The only thing that's certain is that, whatever they might want, there is no real accommodation with them, once they've been seen for what they are.

The track with the most pith is Fable From Aigge, where all this is played out in a simple ballad, taken from an Edward Bond fable, that I wrote for a stage-play.

The boat rocks, the tide lilts
We drift homeward as we came
And the child gives life to its father
Before it can speak his name

A poor man steals one of the island laird's sheep and gets hanged on the shore. When his wife sets out, with her small baby lying in the belly of the rowing boat, there seems little hope of saving him. But she cuts him down with his own knife, lays him in the boat with the child on his chest, and rows off again. The warmth of the baby brings him back to life, her kiss draws breath from him, and they return safely home.

Without any thought of confrontation, or victory, some kind of magic goes to work, there is escape and resurrection, they become the victors, and the free.

The laird rides over his barren land
The hangman fears the light of day
But my fisherman is a free man
At work on the glimmering bay

It's the sensual charge, and the life it produced, that lies at the heart of this fable. In two of the other songs on the album, Coupez-Pas Le Vin and The Dutiful Man As A Moth, the nature of that energy, and how it can atrophy, or be reinvented, gets looked into, with as much irony as possible, (the one laced to a Cajun tune, the other a Cuban dance) since it's so easy to make what is in effect simple into a kind of crusade, and then it seems only absurd.

It's pure and breathless when it's new
But you corrupt whatever's true
So let me propose a toast to you
Don't water the wine

Images of bottles, candles, hard kicks and tender heads stand against the sense of being physically alone, boxed in by fears. And how those fears creep in like a tide anyway, even between lovers as they lie together.

You drank long and he drank deep

She made you sigh, she made you weep

You got so drunk you fell asleep...

In Coupez-Pas le Vin a long partnership gets emptied of spontaneity and when 'the fire's gone out and the party's crashed' there's nothing to do but regret the lack of invention when it mattered.

The Dutiful Man has to go hunting for his pleasure. And even though he knows the potential damage it can cause he won't turn back:

His fear, his anger and his loneliness

Are lost as he lays his head between her breasts

And in the moment of escape he discovers what he's looking for, and gives it in return:

And when she lies smoking, humming and joking

Drumming her palms on the small of his back

It's more like the comfort of strangers

Than some kind of trade...

There's no moral or sentimental twist here – there seems as much possibility of discovering satisfaction and release in a marriage constantly readdressed as in the flight to another, who costs only what gets paid here and now. And as much a sense of regret dancing in the candleflame as trying forlornly to get drunk on bad wine. On the other hand, in their memories and the potential those memories have to be relived, they both offer the hope of a sensuality that can confound despair and defeat. It's another kind of disorder, where the self with all its structures gets surrendered. And that's what these songs are about.

They always seem to end up back on the streets. Bloody Sunday goes back to Ireland, for a simple ballad about what happened in Derry, January 1972, when thirteen unarmed men (later fourteen) died at the guns of the British Army, in the midst of the most tangible disorder, another shattered march for human rights.

In 1972 in the January gloom

Through Derry's streets we marched into the fire

We hadn't come to fight but to call for civil rights

For all the men they dragged behind the wire

We were many thousand strong, voices raised in song,

For our land, our freedom, our desire

It's taken all this time for those who govern this country to admit proper guilt for the actions taken then in their name. Now they have, should those who became their victims simply be forgotten? I don't believe so. Memory remains a vital weapon, like the consciousness of the sanctity of others' lives. These are the kind of tools to work with, digging under the edifice that casts its shadow over us.

Through the echo of the bomb, and the hooded killer's gun,

They cry still for anger and for shame

Nothing can be changed about that day. But it can be revisited. It can be recreated. In the devotion to a sense of fertile disorder it can form part of our motivation to resist.

I suppose what it comes to, again and again, as far as I'm concerned: what makes these songs and sets them over fiery dances and traditional laments doesn't choose to do it smilingly, or with a caper here and there. They come like messages from a beaten army that's gone underground and, while the formal battle's been lost, still vows to make the imposition of a corrupt order impossible. It might just be the sight of a lunatic in the midst of the crowd, but there are signs everywhere of its resistance. So it is in Johnny And the Jubilee. Set over a syncopated hornpipe, the story tells of a veteran come back from the Falklands, dreaming of his just rewards:

And he's leaning on the deck with a bandage round his head

He left an eye at Goose Green to keep watch on the dead

But he can see the green and pleasant land that lies ahead

Johnny's come back from the war

But Thatcher's paper tigers are waiting for him, the enemy within. And when they go down, the phoney circus comes to town, the ringmaster with his white teeth, the high-wire rigged to fall.

So he's waltzing in his bedsit with a beer can in his hand
He's swallowed all the promises of harmony throughout the land
It hurts to be divided, united he will stand
Johnny's been out to the polls

Wherever little Johnny England turns for some image of goodness and security, he gets deceived, even when he's laying flowers on the pavement where he's ended up sleeping, for his fairy princess;

But the man who would be king can't get his fingers on the throne
And his candle in the wind is just a box of broken bones
So he's riding on his mare now while the boys are getting stoned

Roll on the jubilee, the plastic flags and the tea-towels, fifty years of stray coins lost down the drain – Johnny's jubilee:

Wandering the crowds looking for his mind
Split shoes, matted hair, mumbling, half-blind

John Clare, Tod The Ranter and Tommy Gun, in an overcoat going down on his knees praying for a sign, the last image he can turn to before he faces the inevitable sense of disorder:

So Jesus appears with the holes in his feet
And he says, We can drive the devil off these streets
If we all sing Jerusalem, you'll find it on your hymn-sheets
Johnny and the Jubilee...

But, of course, it doesn't come, at least not the way he prays for. And yet, embodied in his own figure, subject of a song, with the whirl of a dance around him, and all the hypocrisy and malice of a corrupt order bearing down on him, there, right there, is a glimmer of the truth, a moment of magic, a sense of the absurd, and the release of so much energy coursing through his blood the old tramp will reel till dawn.

And the next day? The wait for another song, a new dance, the message from the army underground. It might not seem much to hope for. There may even have been more sense of light in the turmoil of Claws And Wings. Disorder is an album full of falling, burning, coruscating, into ashes. Not too good if you're talking hawk or lark. Just right, if you're talking phoenix...