

British musician Terry Hall (1959-2022): “When you see injustice, all you can do is think: what can I do to help, what can I say about this, how can I make people aware of this?”

Paul Bond
22 December 2022

Few songs define the Thatcher era in Britain as effectively as *Ghost Town* (1981) by the Specials. Against a swirlingly sinister musical backdrop, it described a cultural and social decay—clubs closed, unemployment rife and “Government leaving the youth on the shelf,” with anger and alienation simmering into violence.

Out of this tension, to an almost fairground accompaniment, rises the voice of Terry Hall, who died Sunday aged 63 of pancreatic cancer, asking “Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town? We danced and sang, and the music played in a de boomtown.” Hall’s performance was intense and surprising.

The song’s portrait of Thatcherism was consolidated with a video filmed around the dockland landscape of East London, soon to be transformed into the yuppie banking quarter of rampant financial speculation.

All Terry Hall’s work was marked by the same intensity and seriousness, and he never lost that sense of needing to speak out about social injustice. “When you see injustice,” he said, “all you can do is think: what can I do to help, what can I say about this, how can I make people aware of this?”

His trademark dour wryness was offset by a keen pop sense, a dry wit and some surprising silliness—for their cover of Charles Aznavour’s “She,” Hall and Dave Stewart apparently stalk the songwriter, singing to him from behind a bush.

Hall was born in Coventry, where both parents worked in engineering, his father at a Rolls-Royce aeronautic plant and his mother in a Chrysler car factory. His reserve, which reflected a struggle with mental health issues, was instilled by an appalling childhood trauma. Aged 12, on a trip to France, he was abducted by a teacher and sexually abused by a paedophile gang for four days, before being “punched in the face and left on the roadside.”

He barely spoke about it at home, but the incident resulted in lifelong depression. Prescribed Valium at 13, he became addicted, dropping out of school a year later. “I didn’t do anything,” he said. “I just sat on my bed rocking for eight months.”

The effects dogged the rest of his life. He became dependent on

alcohol in the 1990s, and attempted suicide in 2004. Following this, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Having resisted medication for a long time, he was able to control his condition with anti-psychotics.

But he refused to let it destroy him, and music offered an escape route. It is a mark of his character that, as he put it, “The only way I could deal with the experience was to write about it in a song.”

“Well Fancy That” (1983) by Fun Boy Three (one of the groups Hall helped start) is an almost unlistenable straightforward and rational account of what happened (“You had a good time, Turned sex into crime, Well fancy that”) and its impact (“The hedge that you dragged me through Led to a nervous breakdown”).

The emergent punk scene provided possible musical outlets. One should make allowances for Hall’s wit, but he described his first band, Squad, as being “1-2-3-4 then make a noise for two minutes, and then stop and 1-2-3-4 again.” When Squad-supported local band the Automatics, however, Hall impressed bandleader and songwriter Jerry Dammers enough to be invited to join. This group became the Specials.

The Specials reflected the multiracial make-up of Coventry, building their sound from the Jamaican ska of the 1960s. It mixed brass-heavy rhythm and blues and jazz over offbeat rhythms. Dammers would later stretch this further with lounge music and other influences.

The band played covers of ska classics alongside their own songs. They were a ferociously exciting live act, with Hall a concentrated focus at their centre, something he learned from watching the Sex Pistols’ Johnny Rotten. Asked if he got any pleasure out of performing, he deadpanned “Absolutely none. That’s why I do it.”

The musical mix and the band’s membership were a defiant statement in the face of the rise of the fascist National Front. Hall said he did not believe music could change anything, as “all you can do is put your point across,” but he did that forcibly and consistently.

“There was a huge political statement being made with the

Specials,” he said. “You just had to look at a photo and you got it.” This had a broader political content that reflected an instinctual progressive sentiment among working class youth—anti-racist, hostile to Thatcherism, concerned at the threat of nuclear annihilation, alienation from official politics.

Hall said his political awakening came with the teenage realisation that local working men’s clubs operated a colour bar. Dammers’s lyrics were making the social and political concerns more explicit, tackling questions like teenage pregnancies and macho drinking culture. Their first hit, “Gangsters,” laid out the template: “Can’t fight corruption with con tricks, They use the law to commit crime, I dread to think what the future’ll bring, When we’re living in gangster times.”

Its success established the band, their label 2-Tone and a whole ska sound. They were working constantly, and Hall said later that “You couldn’t get any space.” Their gigs were passionate: when Dammers and Hall tried to break up fighting between fans and bouncers at a gig in 1980, they were arrested, charged with incitement to riot and fined £400 each.

Their anti-racism also made them targets for fascists, and guitarist Lynval Golding was badly injured in a racist attack. Despite all this, their second album *More Specials* (1980) showed the band pushing their musical experiments further without losing any of their social concerns.

This was followed by their greatest triumph, “Ghost Town.” Hall found its commercial success difficult to square with its content: “You are being told to celebrate this number one record that is about what is happening, the mess that we are in, and I felt very uncomfortable.”

Backstage at a TV recording of “Ghost Town,” Hall, Golding and singer Neville Staple announced they were leaving to form the Fun Boy Three. There is a tendency to attribute the expansion of the Specials’ musical content to Dammers, but the Fun Boy Three’s two albums—and Hall’s later work—indicate that the curiosity was shared.

The social concerns remained, and the “fun” was dark and ironical, with an initially more pared down sound. It also gave full rein to Hall’s pop richness and musical playfulness. A cover of the jazz standard “T’ain’t What You Do (It’s the Way That You Do It),” with Bananarama, was a logical progression from the Specials’ cover of “Enjoy Yourself.”

The second album, *Waiting* (1983), featured an expanded band and influences. It also included the love song “Our Lips Are Sealed,” co-written by Hall and the Go-Gos’ Jane Wiedlin. Both bands had hits with it, and the Fun Boy Three also recorded an Urdu version.

Hall pushed that pop sensibility further with later projects. With Colourfield he produced the gorgeous “Thinking of You,” while shorter-lived projects like Vegas and Terry, Blair and Anoushka were less successful. Even in his least substantial projects—he once described Terry, Blair and Anoushka as “completely taking the piss out of us and everyone else”—there is a fascination and focus on the technique and craft of music-making, as well as a love of collaboration.

His first solo album, *Home* (1994), was produced with long-term friends and associates Ian Broudie (of the Lightning Seeds) and

sometime Smiths guitarist Craig Gannon. The single “Chasing A Rainbow” (1995) involved Blur’s Damon Albarn—one of many artists to use Hall’s distinctive vocals over the years.

In 2003, Albarn’s record label issued *The Hour of Two Lights* by Hall and Mushtaq, an even more probing multicultural collaboration blending East European rhythms, hip-hop, Middle Eastern percussion and Arabic vocals. Its rich mix stands up well.

To his credit, Hall was never keen on going backwards. He described “every record” as “a little agenda. If I feel like I’ve achieved it then I stop it,” and long resisted suggestions of reforming the Specials. When he did, it was no nostalgia exercise, but an attempt to continue in the same vein.

But relationships remained fraught. Dammers’s involvement ended early, Staple and guitarist Roddy Radiation left, and drummer John Bradbury died in 2015. A core of Hall, Golding, and bassist Horace Panter was at the heart of two new albums. The same spirit and the same social concerns still motivated them, and the music was still eclectic.

“Vote for Me,” from *Encore* (2019), showed no let-up in Hall’s worldview:

You're all so drunk on money and power
Inside your Ivory tower
Teaching us not to be smart
Making laws that serve to protect you
But we will never forget that
You tore our families apart.

The arrival of the pandemic affected Hall badly. “I spent around three months trying to figure out what was going on. I couldn’t write a single word. I spent the time trying to figure out how not to die.” The result was a decision to record *Protest Songs* (2021), an album of covers.

It may not have been the highest of his achievements, but his output overall was painstaking and deliberate. “It can take years,” he said, “It isn’t a race.” The results always show a seriousness and a musicality that demands attention.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact