

“You have no right to rule us”

***Horror*: The Mekons denounce imperialism and defend refugees**

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Who but the Mekons would open their latest album with a reggae song about Oliver Cromwell? The veteran British band has been blending musical styles and pointing to the reverberations of the past in the present for nearly five decades. *Horror*, their new release, indicts British imperialism, warns of preparations for war and sympathetically depicts the plight of refugees. It sounds a welcome protest against exploitation and injustice, although this sentiment is mingled with the band’s chronic and damaging pessimism.

Jon Langford, Tom Greenhalgh and other art students at the University of Leeds founded the Mekons in 1976. The band took its name from the Mekon, a superintelligent being from Venus who was the archenemy of British comic book hero Dan Dare. The Mekons’ circle of friends included the musicians who went on to found the bands Gang of Four and Delta 5.

These groups were part of the first wave of British punk bands, the best known of which are the Sex Pistols and the Clash. They were hostile to the social and political establishment and rejected what they viewed as the bland pop music and progressive rock of the time. The punks’ political and cultural opposition found expression in the principle that anyone could form a band and write songs. Some groups, like the Mekons and Gang of Four, were drawn toward Marxism, but were also influenced by the middle class New Left and anti-Marxist Frankfurt School. Langford has called himself “a working-class socialist.”

Punk emerged in the United Kingdom, as it did in the US, against a backdrop of political crisis and economic decay. Workers and youths in the UK faced rampant inflation, deindustrialization and rising unemployment. Successive Labour Party governments (1964-1970) had cut public spending, broken strikes and collaborated with the unions to keep wages down. In the US, pronounced industrial decline had also set in. Richard Nixon was forced to resign the presidency in 1974 amid social convulsions, American

imperialism suffered an ignominious defeat in Vietnam and dictatorships in Portugal, Spain and Greece fell. The ruling class, however, was regrouping for a social and political counteroffensive.

The Mekons announced themselves with the single “Never Been in a Riot” (1978), a dig at the Clash’s “White Riot” (1977). Its rushed tempo and crude musicianship captured punk’s irreverence, energy and sense of possibility. After releasing two albums, the band fell dormant in 1982.

Energized by the British coal miners’ strike of 1984, Langford and Greenhalgh (both singers and guitarists) revived the Mekons with new members Sally Timms (vocals), Susie Honeyman (violin), Lu Edmonds (bouzouki, etc.), Rico Bell (accordion) and Steve Goulding (drums). The band began incorporating country, folk and reggae influences into its music while retaining its do-it-yourself aesthetic and leftist politics. The musicians write songs jointly, not individually, and make decisions by consensus. This lineup has remained stable and released notable albums such as *Fear and Whiskey* (1985), *The Mekons Rock ‘n Roll* (1989), *The Curse of the Mekons* (1991) and *OOOH!* (2002). Though recorded in 2022, *Horror* was not released until this year.

The easy rolling reggae of “The Western Design” opens the album. The song is named after the expedition against Spain’s West Indian colonies that Cromwell oversaw from 1654 to 1660. His largely untrained troops failed to conquer Hispaniola, but managed to seize Jamaica, “a slave-operated imperial profit generator,” Greenhalgh sings. “The Western Design: a giant Frankenstein. / Four hundred years of stealing and killing.” The band mixes humor into its polemic with incongruous country-style violin and passing references to songs by reggae groups the Wailers and Culture.

The protest becomes aggressive on the post-punk, syncopated “War Economy.” “On behalf of the future, I ask you leave the past alone,” sings Greenhalgh. This demand evokes ruling-class attempts to rewrite history (e.g., through

the rehabilitation of fascists and the vilification of the American Revolutionaries) to maintain its power. Greenhalgh goes on to sing pointed slogans to an ad hoc melody. “You have no right to rule us,” he warns, as Langford shouts in the background. “Physical coercion will not achieve dominance.” The process generating these attacks is “supernatural financialization.” Honeyman saws away at her violin as though playing a Bernard Herrmann film score. The song is a bracing, well-aimed burst of anger and opposition.

On the similarly fast rock song “Mudcrawlers,” Langford and Timms, singing an octave apart from each other, describe the desperate attempts of poor Irish, in the 19th century, to “flee the famine in coal and potato bins.” The depredations of British imperialism drove many Irish to escape however they could. To reach America, many hid on ships as though they were “ballast, cargo, contraband.” This history is still with us; “In the foundations of new buildings, / The bones of Irish families still lie,” Langford and Timms sing.

The theme of refugees recurs on “Sanctuary.” Anchored by a piano and accented with an echoey melodica, this waltz features a major-key melody that recalls folk songs. In falsetto and in unison, Timms and Honeyman sing of a long journey to “somewhere that we might belong.” The lyrics suggest the dangerous flight of Latin American migrants into the US, where they hope for refuge. An image of “Jesus on a chain-link fence hanging in the sun” suggests the many poor souls who died on their way through “rusty iron with cactus blooms in the wilderness.” Despite the images of death, the song includes a hopeful note: “At the end of the road, we stumble on sanctuary.”

But other songs on the album express the “left” pessimism that has been an unfortunate hallmark of the Mekons’ music since the 1980s. A notable example is “Fallen Leaves,” a vision of a climate-change-fueled apocalypse. “The dry earth cracks, and shadows grow, / A dying sun sinks down,” sings Bell in a strained voice. Hushed keyboards and slide-guitar arpeggios provide somber accompaniment, and an image of “winding sheets draped across the trees” suggests irretrievable loss.

Though apparently addressed to an ex-lover, “A Horse Has Escaped” takes on broader connotations in the context of the topical songs. “Now the barn is on fire, and a horse has escaped,” intones Timms in *Sprechgesang*. “We left the gate wide open, now it’s over before it’s begun. / There’s nothing to do, it’s already too late,” she adds, over a synthesizer arpeggio and slow electronic drums.

The album ends with the phantasmagoric “Before the Ice Age,” which combines images of deterioration and death with scenes of capitalist exploitation. “My surplus value

stolen by a Victorian vampire sucking out my cold, cold heart,” breathes Timms in another recitative. “My data stripped and whipped and sold in chains by officious machines.” Harvested organs grow legs and flee. A torturer sings, and a policeman swings his truncheon. The images are as bleak as they are striking. “I go back to sleep, I go back to sleep,” Timms sighs, as though giving up the fight.

Horror encapsulates the Mekons’ music and outlook. Among the strengths of these songs are their colorful arrangements and stylistic variety. The band’s collaborative approach to songwriting and recording, as well as their shared political and aesthetic sympathies, bring unity to what might otherwise have become a musical hodgepodge. No less commendable, and perhaps more notable, are the band’s consistent engagement with historical and social questions and its oppositional, generally left-wing politics. Their music is tonic amid a rising tide of reaction.

Yet *Horror* shows that the Mekons’ pugnacity is still coupled with glumness. Over the years, the band has gained (and perhaps cultivated) the image of overmatched underdogs fighting a valiant but hopeless fight for freedom and equality. Though Langford professes himself a socialist, he and his bandmates lack Marxism’s scientifically grounded optimism and insight into the social process. These university students started out when supposedly left-wing professors were promoting Frankfurt School demoralization.

Even if we wish that the Mekons would take courage and inspiration from the resurgence of major industrial and political struggles and protests, we shouldn’t overlook the significance of their opposition to ruling class reaction. What other first-wave British punk band has had as long or as principled a career?



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