

Take no heroes - only inspiration: remembering the Redskins

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Colin Revolting recalls how he became a revolutionary in 1980s Britain, and the role in the process played by the music of the Redskins, a band who gained a notable amount of popularity in the 1980s for their blistering, punked-up version of unabashedly radical soul music.

If you type 'Neither Washington nor Moscow' into a search engine the first results that appear are not references to the slogan of the International Socialists and, later, Socialist Workers Party, but an album by the Redskins. The Redskins were formed by a couple of committed revolutionaries that loved music and saw it as a vehicle to popularise revolutionary politics. Touring extensively over a few of years, with a handful of dynamite songs and a unique, astonishing album, they helped to inspire a generation of young activists. They were also the catalyst for an anti-racist youth movement which prospered in Europe for a decade. The band fanned the flames for a few years but eventually burned out. The price they paid? Years of debt, stress, and possibly worse. But before they imploded they realised much of their potential.

I'd been drawn into activism as a teenager but had resisted the talking shops of leftwing meetings. I was one of the many teenagers whose world had been turned upside down by the rebellion of punk, and formed a punk band at school. Since that time I'd done badly at my A Levels, become bored with crap jobs, and tired of time on the dole. My big hope that being in a band would free me from a life of boredom was fading fast. At 21 life hadn't panned out as I'd wanted. As a friend observed at the time, I was, "ripe for religion". That wasn't about to happen to me.

I was not alone: 3.5 million people were unemployed. Like many I had gravitated towards the local music scene and a crowd of young people in bands who were either signing on, in casual jobs or attending college. That left us with endless time to plot, dream and, occasionally, rehearse. We were hoping to create a cultural life as an alternative to the deadly nine to five grind.

1981: Peasant Army

The Redskins were a different breed to the local bands I knew. They had focus, drive and a work ethic. This was largely down to Chris Dean, their singer and guitarist. I first met him before the band had even struck their first note, on the 1981 Right to Work Campaign (RTWC) march from Liverpool to Blackpool. No week-long RTWC march was complete without the crucial component of live culture. Punk and Reggae bands played on the back of moving lorries and at night-time gigs. I'd joined the annual RTWC marches in 1978 and 1980 and by the 1981 march I was with the Rock Against Racism (RAR) crew organising the evening entertainment. Volunteers from amongst the marchers stewarded the gigs. Two serious, skinny 18 or 19-year-old skinheads, Chris and Martin Hewes - their future bass player - were given the job of standing watch on one of the fire exits at Blackburn's King George's Hall. Chris was scribbling in a note-book. They were eager to talk about a band they were planning. Their previous group had been called No Swastikas, and the next would

probably be called Redskins. "Not The Redskins, as we are not the only Redskins," Chris explained.

They were named for skinheads in Sheffield who were leftwing and actively anti-racist and anti-fascist, unlike many of the skinheads in London that I've written about previously. Chris seemed quiet that first time we met, but it was only because he was busy writing a four-page diary of a Right To Work marcher. That was so impressive I wasn't sure I believed him. But sure enough 'The Road to Blackpool Pier' appeared in the following week's New Musical Express (NME) paper – the best-selling, coolest and most influential youth magazine of the 1970s and 1980s – under his dole-dodging moniker X Moore:

"Steep hills all the way to Blackburn, steep hills in the town. I get dragged off with a crew of red skins to do security at the Blitz/Mo-dettes RAR gig tonight. We do a tour of the fire exits in Blackburn's King George's Hall and come back to guard them after a meal in a cafe. The venue looks like the Hippodrome and smells like the Palladium – a RAR Oi! gig in plush surroundings. More contradictions. Sit around backstage most of the night so [the bands] are just a throbbing noise."

When I got home I flicked through my pile of recent NMEs and a handful of gig reviews credited to X Moore. When me and my mates were in the sixth form we had considered that, after being in a band, writing for the NME was the other thing was worth doing. We had run a fanzine for a year but when we didn't get 'discovered' by the NME we had given up.

Chris and me wrote a couple of postcards to each other after the march. He explained that they were moving to London to launch the band. We also talked on the phone. He was surprised I wasn't in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). I was surprised that he was so proud to be. Most of the people I knew through RAR and RTWC were independent socialists, feminists and ex-members of the SWP. He told me, "Stop sounding so miserable!" He came down to Woolwich, in south-east London, to see my band Dali's Car play. X Moore published a positive review in the NME:

"I'd like to introduce Dali's Car," says Colin and lets loose with some demented vocals before propping himself up on the mikestand, pushing back his specs with the microphone and warbling... The unemployed kids applaud and the band play Street Party, a quick pop tract on the summer's riots, "It's not gonna change society, it's just a working class street party." Dali's Car play a lot of benefit gigs but, 'zwept, the sound shakes up preconceptions about a benefit band, the song titles take you by surprise. Tesco Takeover settles it. 1234... Take over... Tesco's!"

Chris recognised we were mixing music and politics in the way he was intending to do with the Redskins. We were hardly alone in this: many of the biggest bands were doing so. Not just The Clash and The Jam, but Gang of Four, Dexys Midnight Runners, The Specials. In their rehearsal room the Redskins were cooking up a brew which took something from all of those bands. But the Redskins were to take things further than them. They took no prisoners.

*"We can talk of riots and petrol bombs and revolution all day long,
But if we fail to organise we'll waste our lives on protest songs."*

Unionise

1982: Lean On Me

*"The first thing that needs to be said
Is hate's all very well*

But hatred must be organised
If dreams are to be realised
And anger is no substitute
For disciplined rebellion
To unionise is to organise"

Unionise

My 23-year-old brother Stuart had set up Woolwich Right To Work Campaign (WRTWC) to bring together local youths who were fed up being unemployed but didn't care for the type of employment we were being offered. We organised a local march for Fares Fair, the campaign to make bus fares more affordable. I was driving a flat-back truck and we'd got Conflict, a well-known anarchist band who lived locally, to play on the back. We also asked the Redskins. Only about 50 or 60 young people turned up, we had problems getting the generator started and the police didn't arrest anyone: the march felt a bit flat. The year before a thousand schoolkids had swarmed into Woolwich for our march against unemployment and on the subsequent march four of our group were arrested by Special Branch cops, who were in town because of an IRA bomb had been found near the local army barracks.

The Redskins' Chris, Martin and drummer Nick King joined the march wearing black balaclavas. We didn't know why. Maybe it was because local skinheads were known to be fascists; we were always on edge because of the chance of attack by Nazi skins from nearby Welling or from the East End. At the end of the march we parked up on a grass verge in the sun and the bands played. It was an unspectacular debut for the Redskins but indicated what the band's approach would be - linking their music as closely as possible to political action. One lyric stood out through the dodgy PA system and growling generator. Chris goaded the anarchists, and wannabe rioters, amongst the small crowd, singing, "Do you want to change the world - or do you just want to throw petrol bombs at it?"

As Woolwich RTWC our plans to build a local youth group weren't amounting to much. We organised gigs and the march which turned into a mini-riot, then got caught up in a defence campaign for our arrested members, but hadn't built anything that was sustainable. People were moving on - one or two were drawn towards the local fascists. That was bad, but emphasised the need for a leftwing pole of attraction in the first place. Stuart had been fanatically active for the last couple of years but was losing patience and looking elsewhere. That summer he travelled to Papua New Guinea. Something about that experience affected Stuart. He later moved permanently Papua New Guinea.

The Redskins' official debut was in a grotty community hall near London Bridge at the end of the 1982 Right To Work protest. This time we marched around London for five days and The Jam did a secret gig for the marchers. The NME's rival music paper, Sounds, said, "Redskins bashed out fiery salvos of uncompromising protest [with a] harsh heavy sound that mirrors their harsh heavy politics", and called for, "more melody and less metal."

They may not have shown it that first night but Chris knew why music was important:

"Why is rock'n'roll exciting? Because it's got all sorts of different elements - uplifting music, rebellious spirit, sex, style, subversion... Political bands are a dirty word since the arse end of RAR, but that's because they missed the point of what makes great music. James Brown meant a million times more than they ever did. If people aren't listening to the music they certainly aren't listening to the words. A Town Called Malice, Ghost Town, The Lunatics Have Taken Over The Asylum - they were all great because they were popular and they had something to say. 'Course, the easiest way to

get a hit is to forget politics all together.”

In the name of Woolwich RTWC I released a collection of songs by leftwing bands called Militant Entertainment. The cassette tape opened with Kick Out the Tories by the Newtown Neurotics. This was the most exciting political rock music of the time. The Redskins said they weren't ready to be on the release but would go on to eclipse all the music on the tape – though it didn't happen overnight. Their first single was a tribute to Leon Trotsky called Lev Bronstein. “It was a disaster really,” Chris admitted later, “not accessible, not a good production. It was just the best song we had at the time”. They were prepared to admit mistakes.

Chris invited me to travel with the band for a gig in Brighton. He encouraged me to try my hand in mixing the sound but it was beyond me. Through talking to them I was beginning to notice that Chris and Martin had something I'd only felt a whiff of in the Woolwich RTWC. They were part of a political organisation with a newspaper and fellow members who could explain what was happening in the world.

My band had been grateful to have our single played on Radio 1 by legendary DJ John Peel but by the end of the year the Redskins were booked for what every new band dreamed of – recording a session for John Peel's show. Chris asked me to join them on backing vocals. I should have been flattered but I'd never been under any illusion that I could actually sing – I was a punk singer. After five years I felt like giving up on my band. My school friends who'd originally formed the band with me in sixth form had left over the years. One had tragically taken his own life. Instead of travelling to north London for an all day recording session I decided to hang out with my muso mates instead. Maybe Chris was right, I was feeling a bit miserable. Maybe I was happy enough in the small pond of the local music scene. The Redskins certainly weren't content to do the same.

The BBC had an agreement that they would pay Musician Union rates for all performers. So, although I didn't show up, the canny band listed me as a backing singer and duly claimed the fee for themselves. So John Peel read out my name! To this day on various websites there's a credit for Redskins' backing vocals to Colin Car – another alias to add to the list. More importantly the band used the BBC-Musicians' Union agreement to bring in saxophone and trumpet players, Steve Nichol and Lloyd Dwyer, to play on the session. It was the first time the three-piece had played with brass but together they would create the distinctive Redskins sound.

I decided to leave my band. Was I being pathetic or was I being realistic? Was the hope that life could be creative and exciting whilst earning a basic living just a ridiculous dream? Would I have to accept what many of my schoolfriends had done and get a sensible job in a bank, a shop or an office?

*“Someone once wrote
All the world's a stage
But the truth comes written somewhat different on my page
I know this script's fixed from the start
Cos ordinary men & women only get
Supporting parts”*

The Power Is Yours

I missed the Redskins' recording session but later that week I turned up for a socialist meeting. I'd gone to a handful of such meetings over the past five years. One memorable meeting was when an odd little old guy with mad hair and a 'funny accent' – Tony Cliff – spoke to a handful of school kids and very young unemployed. “When there is a revolution and we kill the Queen... No, she will have a

job driving a bus!", I remember him saying.

Most of the Woolwich RTWC crew were jobless and a couple were homeless – people knew things weren't working out for them. Explaining that things could be better was easy. The problem was getting people to collectively do something about it.

*"Your only weapon
Is those you work with
Your strength is their strength
Can't beat the rank and file"*

Go Get Organised

I'd been reading Socialist Worker newspaper over the previous year and went to a Socialist Workers Party meeting in Deptford. Going to Labour Party meetings was out of the question. My teenage years had been under the traitorous Wilson-Callaghan governments. Most Labour figures either ignored or condemned the street protests and campaigns that had drawn me and others into political activity. It was no accident that I chose an SWP meeting rather than any of the other left groups – all the campaigns I'd been involved in, opposing racism, the fascists and unemployment had been led by the SWP. I'd like to say I'd met a lot of SWP members in these campaigns but it wasn't the case. Most of the people I'd got to know weren't involved in the organised far left. The SWP were slightly removed from the campaigns in that whilst they participated they were also busy with their own meetings and selling papers. Yet it was precisely the decline of the campaigns I'd been involved in that pushed me to attend their meetings.

At the meetings someone would do a talk to start things off. The subject was often an historical example of when working class and oppressed people had got organised. The speaker talked like the Redskins sang:

*"And in another country workers rose again
1919, 1919 in Berlin
But they didn't learn the lessons
From the Russians that they should
Revolution, revolution drowned in blood"*

It Can Be Done

My question at each SWP meeting was along the lines, "You've explained what's wrong, so what are we going to do about it?" And I didn't mean at some undefined point in the future, I meant that week. They didn't always have an answer which satisfied me. After the meetings most 'comrades' went to the pub where a lot of politics was talked. I was surprised when members also asked me for a drink on a Saturday night – I thought the idea was to take the ideas of the meeting to the friends that I'd normally meet up with at the weekend.

The Jam disbanded at the end of 1982 and Chris commented in NME, "The Jam were fantastic because not only did they have hope, they also had an answer to some extent. You can do more than just do benefits – music can uplift working class kids and it can change attitudes. A band can act as a catalyst. From the moment you're born you're told what to do. But rock'n'roll gave kids a voice. Working class kids were suddenly being listened to – by other working class kids."

1983: Go Get Organised!

*"I ain't found what I'm looking for
But I've found somethings
And I'm going to change them"*

Keep On Keeping On

The Redskins released their second single, *Lean On Me*, on CNT, an independent label from their home county of Yorkshire. Many bands were enthusiastic about being on independent labels, free from the control of the major companies, but the Redskins saw this differently. Chris said, "Cult bands are really criminal, a real waste. If a band's got something to say they should use every platform they can rather than being deliberately inaccessible. I'd much rather our name be linked with The Jam - and all those hard brassy bands. Who wants to end up in a musical ghetto? What does that achieve?" This meant signing to a mainstream record label. They knew it was a gamble but they didn't do things by halves.

I decided to apply again for college. The SWP members I was getting to know clearly missed their time at college and hated the mundane jobs they'd been doing since. My A Level results had been poor - a D and an E - but I was told my five years of 'life experience' since school would count. At this point I was glad they would count for something as they had begun to feel like they amounted to little.

*"Memories of years gone by
Dashed hopes & a dream that died
Spirit pulled us through"*

Lean On Me

Though the event had been running all the years I had been politically active, I attended the summer Marxism festival organised by the SWP for the first time. It was a week of meetings, talks and discussions, films, comedians and bands. Almost every room, hall, cafe and bar in the University of London Union - now called Student Central - was packed with people engaged in that great mixture of talking politics and talking bollocks. Chris and Martin were there, with one of my personal heroes, radical cartoonist Ray Lowry, who was doing a feature article on the band for NME. The article encapsulated so much of what the Redskins were about, describing them as having, "one foot on the road to socialism and the other on rock's lost highway. Chris Dean is a Marxist with a rock'n'roll heart."

Chris: "The contradictions of our system will always throw up revolutionary sparks, revolutionary music, little bits of rebellious music. Punk did."

NME: "Has it ever done it before that?"

Chris: "Move On Up, Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud, saying get up, get ready, get involved. James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Sam Cooke... People Get Ready."

The Redskins' palette of influences had been enriched by their digging into musical history, particularly radical soul from the black power movement of the 1960s. Chris then went further back in history, and talked about the inspiring story of black communist Paul Robeson and how he stood

up to state persecution in the dark days of 1950s.

Chris: “If you are getting shit thrown at you I think it’s hard to go soft. When someone like Paul Robeson had his passport torn up [after travelling to USSR] and he was getting hammered by the US government, and there were race riots when he appeared at Peekskill N.Y. [where the concert attacked by KKK supporters], and so forth. Precisely because he had all this shit being thrown at him, he COULDN’T cop out. They withdrew his passport so he went to the border and sang to Canadian steelworkers who came down to the border to meet him. Previously he’d gone through Europe playing factories, he went to Australia and played a building site for construction workers; when [the authorities] hammered him and tried to keep him in his own country, he still managed to keep on pushing.”

But Chris didn’t say what happened to Paul Robeson after that. The level of persecution and state surveillance by the CIA and FBI took its toll on the singer. Robeson became depressed: in the USSR he tried to take his own life. He came to England and was treated with electroshock therapy. The great man was broken and lived out his final decades as a recluse.

NME: “Do you see the advent of socialism as inevitable?”

Chris: “No... the CRISIS is inevitable, the crisis of capitalism, but we might get beat.”

Chris then goes on in the way that many of us were thinking at the time: “There’s a good chance that in two or three years time, over here, an upsurge of workers militancy will bring a crisis... the ruling class in difficulties. We might come out of it with no arms and legs, completely wrecked and defeated. The confrontation’s inevitable but the outcome isn’t.”

The NME piece ended with the writer linking Chris’ political prediction to the band’s “volatile mix of supercharged dynamism and implacable principles rubbing up against today’s lame pop values. Oh brother, the confrontation’s sure inevitable but the outcome isn’t. Best to ’em.”

After six months of going to SWP meetings and selling papers most Saturdays in Deptford market I made a couple of decisions. The meetings, and talking to comrades, had answered a lot of my questions - including why, at the beginning of the year, my Dad had resigned from the SWP after 24 years’ membership. One of the student members was doing the media degree that I wanted to enrol on at Goldsmiths’ college. She went through what sort of experiences I should talk about at the interview and what not to mention. Her advice worked and I got a place for September. I signed an SWP membership form. I would remain a member for almost as many years as my Dad had been.

1983: Go Get Organised!

As a new band, the Redskins wanted to make a big impact and so they grabbed every gig they could, supporting bands from the Smiths to the Dead Kennedys. They were distinct from most other groups because they were so upfront with their politics. If the Clash expressed our alienation and a sense of hope, the Redskins took everything a step further. In songs and interviews they talked about revolutionary change.

Working people forced the bosses’ backs against the wall
First steps taken for a better life for all

-‘It Can Be Done!’

At Goldsmiths' College I started to make films, take photos and study how the media works. Chris invited me to the New Musical Express (NME) offices where he worked sub-editing and writing as X Moore. I'd dreamed about writing for NME, but the office was not like I'd imagined. It was more like the council offices I'd worked in – people leaning over typewriters and telephones. None of NME's star journalists were visible.

I got involved in organising Socialist Worker student meetings at college and asked if Chris would do a speak at one. He said he'd talk on the German revolution of 1918-23, having just read the book *Lost Revolution*. But the band started getting busier.

1984: Turnin' Loose Those Furious Flames

*I'm waiting on hold
For something to blow...*

– 'The Power Is Yours'

Chris wrote, "The problem with working class heroes is they take themselves too seriously."

1984 was a cold grey dawn. Orwell's dystopia had not arrived but, following Thatcher's Falklands victory and the Tory re-election, things were looking pretty grim – and not just "up north". The year started with a series of high-profile gigs featuring hot new bands at the ICA, London, and the Redskins played alongside Billy Bragg and others.

The band had a new song to play...

*Can't remember such a bitter time
The Boss says jump! The workers fall in line
I'm not down, but I'm feeling low
They whip us into line, with the threat of the dole*

– 'Keep On Keeping On!'

'Keep On Keeping On!' was to become the band's anthem for the battle that lay ahead that year.

Films at Work, a young group of revolutionary film-makers that I had hooked up with, were filming the gig and interviewed the band's audience including Billy Bragg. "It's Chris's lyrics. When Chris says it, I know," Billy explained enthusiastically. Chris was articulating the socialist politics that Billy was coming to, but unlike Bragg and others, the Redskins already had the radical songs and ideas.

For the video we were making, the band came round to the Films at Work flat so we could interview them. My diary shows it was the evening of 14 February – clearly we were committed revolutionaries.

The Redskins came to play at Goldsmiths' a week or so later. The band had a growing reputation but the main hall wasn't that full. Afterwards we were in a small student union room that they were using as a dressing room. Chris sat behind a desk at one end of the room whilst a handful of fans debated with him about politics. He was taking them, and himself, very seriously. It felt like Chris was growing into his new role, part rockstar, part political orator. I wondered how this would change him. In hindsight, I realise there was a similar dynamic to the weekly political meetings we

ran in that very room – and in the seminars in the nearby classrooms.

Suddenly word came to the dressing room that the local British Movement skins had broken into the building. Everyone flew out of the room in pursuit. The call turned out to be a false alarm but showed the sense of nervous, coiled readiness at which the band existed. How long could that last?

For the first time in 5 years I went to see the Clash and to my surprise the Redskins were supporting them. They looked little and a bit lost in the large venue, especially compared to the Clash with their six albums of songs and huge bank of 40 TVs on stage behind them. The emperors were still in their gilded tower but a small band of peasants were at the gates...

A week later Thatcher announced the closure of some coal pits and the miners walked out on strike. In the previous decade the Tory prime minister Ted Heath had asked, “Who runs the country – us or the miners?” He called a snap election declaring to voters, “This time the strife has got to stop. Only you can stop it. It is time for you to speak, with your vote.” The country voted the Tories out, broken by industrial struggle with the miners were at the centre.

This 1984 strike could be the one to beat back Thatcher. But, to do so, it would need levels of workers’ solidarity more like the 1970s. But the unions had been seriously weakened by the Labour government and its Social Contract. Supporting the miners, there were meetings, marches and picket lines, and many discussions to be had. Fundraising and propaganda benefit gigs were organised for the strikers – and that was where the Redskins came into their own.

In the first week of the strike they “turned a GLC anti-racist gig into an impromptu miners benefit and the result was the most inspiring thing I’ve seen for ages,” said Time Out magazine.

*The shop says yes
The boss says no
To hell with the ballot, boys
Go, go, go!*

- ‘Hold On!’

They played a huge free outdoor festival staged by the left-wing Greater London Council (GLC) – which Thatcher would abolish within a year or two. Jobs for Change Festival was specifically conceived to be a celebration and not a political protest.

The Redskins were on in the early afternoon. They dedicated songs to the striking miners and also to the “best dressed picket line in London”. Journalists at IPC magazines, including Chris’ workmates at NME, were in the middle of a two month strike.

There was a good gender mix in a crowd of largely ‘normal people’, left-leaning music fans, with a bunch of skins and punks up the front. The Redskins roared into their last song, ‘Lean On Me’. “We may argue right & wrong/But together we are strong...” It looked like the band had really arrived – a big festival which the band had focussed politically with their songs and talk of strikes. And then it all went boom.

Suddenly some of the skins at the front were clambering onto the stage, grabbing microphones. “Fuck off out of it!” shouted Chris as the skins started to chant “Sieg heil!” with Nazi salutes. “You sound like Margaret Thatcher, you sound like Margaret fucking Thatcher.” The Nazi skins were kicking the drum kit over, punching and pushing the band backwards.

In the face of a pack of fascists, the band and the roadies were barely in position to defend themselves. The crowd divided, fleeing from the fighting. It was a hit and run – the Nazi skins exited rapidly. Some of us chased after them but the young skins fled at top speed. The only Nazi in striking distance was a gorilla of a thug who growled, “Come on then...” None of the chasing few took him up on his offer, and then they were gone.

The sunny afternoon atmosphere had changed, and the tension had shot up. I was reminded of the advice from Rock Against Racism (RAR) days: “Don’t let the Nazis take the stage.” In RAR’s time the fascists had the followers to swarm through an audience but in 1984 they only had an attack squad of 30 or so.

A year later Chris reflected, “...when we got attacked at the GLC festival the situation was dangerous. All they had to do was to attack 3-4 gigs in a row, smash them up. Even if they did not win, even if we’d been prepared, the promoters wouldn’t do your shows any more. [The Nazis] wanted to finish us off. They could have last year but not now.”

The Tube had supplanted Top of the Pops as the supreme programme for music lovers, live music on TV, early on Friday evening was a great way to start the weekend. Eight months into the miners’ strike, the Redskins appeared on the programme. Chris announced, “On extra percussion, on tambourine, and on strike for 35 weeks, a Durham miner...” Norman Strike stepped up to the microphone to make a speech about the arrests and deaths of miners during the strike... But none of us watching on TV could hear what he was saying. What was happening? The microphone was either not working or turned off.

We talked about it in the pub that night at the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) branch drink, almost all the music fans were into the Redskins. We assumed it was censorship, but the band had still made their mark on mainstream TV – possibly even exposing media bias against the miners and ended with the cry, “Victory to the miners!”

We gotta keep on keeping on...
Stay out...Maybe 5 or even 6 months yeah
7, 8, 9, 10 and if it takes a year
We got to last a year

- ‘Keep On Keeping On!’

The gigs and benefits the band played for the miners were electric. I went to a big one in Stoke Newington Town Hall – the place was covered with Victory to the Miners posters, miners in hats covered in badges were rattling collection buckets and everyone was singing along to the choruses.

Stop strike – Unionise!
Fight back – Unionise!

- ‘Unionise!’

Fellow SWP member, redskin poet and journalist Steven Wells reviewed the gig in the NME. He began with The Clash in his sights: “Never has any group talked so fine and glorious a revolution. Never has any group failed to deliver so dramatically.” The Clash had helped us express our disdain for racism, hatred of authority and longing for a fulfilling future. He was more optimistic about the Redskins: “The hurdles and pitfalls that face The Redskins are numerous and obvious. Yet never has

any band been in a better position to avoid those dangers, to be able to communicate revolutionary ideas through the medium of accessible lyricism and fucking brilliant music.” Then he signs off with a personal note to Chris/X Moore, “Cock this up, X, and I’ll break your legs.” (To read the review today has a poignancy. Steven Wells died of cancer in 2009 and is writing about Chris who has not been seen publicly since the late 1980s.)

At the end of the year The Clash played a gig in London billed as Arthur Scargill’s Christmas Party. The Redskins weren’t on the bill but the NME’s review still noted: “The Clash play for close on two hours but there is little coherence or crispness to their set. Compared to, say, The Redskins scampering through ‘Unionise’ or ‘Lean On Me’ in Hammersmith only a week earlier, Strummer and company dilute much of their political force by their fanciful and romanticised imagery. And judging by the reception afforded the speech of a striking miner before The Clash’s set – gobbed at, splattered in beer and eventually subjected to the indignity of having his papers torn up by a marauding punk who had forced his way on stage – any political points being made by The Clash are lost on certain sections of their audience.”

Things were different at Redskins gigs. “You’d have stalls by the Miner support groups, Women Against Pit Closures would have a stall, Labour had stalls, the SWP had a stall, there were Socialist Worker sellers outside. The whole atmosphere was right and it worked, it was not an odd thing to do. You could do it now and it would seem like overkill,” Chris observed a year later.

At the end of 1984 Morrissey wrote about ‘Keep On Keeping On!’, “We should pray that the Redskins are canonised in 1985. Biblical lyrics.”

1985: Kick Over the Statues

The first act of freedom
All over the world
Is to topple the statues
Kick the bosses over

– ‘Kick Over the Statues’

The Redskins had become a rallying point for left-leaning rock fans and were now creating a wider audience, including in some surprising places. In 2012, Ed Vaizey, Tory MP and junior Culture Minister, who’d been a teenager in the mid-1980s, said that the Redskins were his favourite band and he “likes the passion and positive lyrics of SWP member X Moore”.

The miners’ strike ended in defeat. It was bitter for the mining communities and sent a message across the workers’ movement that striking does not necessarily lead to victory. The Tory government had taken their revenge for 1974, even making deals with other unions to do so. Before the end of the miners’ strike, the newspaper printers’ unions started their own strike which was also to last a year and to go down in history as a defeat. Workers were fighting, but losing.

Can’t remember such a bitter time
The Boss says jump! The workers fall in line
I’m not down, but I’m feeling low
They whip us into line
With the threat of the dole

| - 'Keep On Keeping On!'

'Keep On Keeping On!' felt even more true now than when it was written before the strikes.

"Loads of people have made rebellious music since time immemorial. It's only revolutionary in the hands of the audience." - Chris 1983

The Redskins knew that their music and ideas had the most resonance with the audience when it was aligned with people in struggle. Like the thousands who marched and campaigned in the UK against apartheid, the band were inspired by the militancy of South African workers.

| *The workers in Poland rose*
| & in Hungary too
| Somoza & Jose fell
| ... Azania coming soon!

| - 'Kick Over the Statues'

Azania was what the radical black anti-apartheid fighters wanted to name post-apartheid South Africa.

The record company refused to release the single 'Kick Over the Statues!' so the band stole the master tape and released it through an independent record company. They called on Films at Work to make a promo video which made visual links between the imperial history connecting UK with South Africa via street names and statues around London.

So, on a cold winter morning one Sunday in 1986, we filmed the video. The Films at Work people were now working in the TV industry and I was nearing the end of my Media degree. Just as I had found with the backstage side of bands and the inside of the music press, behind the cameras of the video business there was no glamour, just hard work and waiting around.

The [resulting video](#) was not broadcast at the time but in the last decade has been watched nearly 200,000 times on YouTube, whilst one of the band's other videos has 330,000 views - a testament to the enduring interest in their music.

The Redskins organised a Kick Over Apartheid! tour, where each night someone spoke on stage about the battle in South Africa. Meanwhile other musicians like Paul Weller and Billy Bragg, who had performed alongside the Redskins during the miners' strike, reached a different conclusion.

They said if we couldn't beat the Tories in the industrial struggle what about at the ballot box? They formed Red Wedge, a musician-led campaign to get young people to support Labour.

This left the Redskins and a handful of other bands isolated from the musical and political movement which had grown in support of the miners. In 'Red Wedge - the Great Debate' in the music press, Chris argued, "The Redskins have always done benefit gigs organised by the Labour Party - anti-racist gigs, anti-unemployment gigs... Red Wedge is different. Your first priority is to get a Labour government in power... I think Red Wedge can energise a sense of young people's potential power, but what's the point if all they elect is someone like Neil Kinnock?" Chris made many cutting references to Kinnock's Labour at gigs, including saying, "We've had to change the song '99 and a half won't do' to '9 and a half won't do'.

1986: Take No Heroes

*We spend our lives
Waitin' for
Someone other than ourselves
To make a move
We always do
We always blow it
I know, you know it but...
I keep on coming back because...
The power is yours*

- 'The Power is Yours'

Chris: "We want to be popular. It's not the wish to travel in limousines, it's not the wish to be recognized on the streets, but we want to be popular. It's like art should be popular but it should be dealing with the people who are aggressive, challenging and aware, wanting to change their lives, wanting to change history. It's no point just appealing, it's a matter of who and how. How you appeal and what effect it's gonna have. If you play stadiums to millions and people would just come there because they appreciate the noise, we'd be a bloody failure. If we play in front of 2,000 people and afterwards they want to talk to you about the politics, that's much better. I do not think we want to be stars but we want to be successful. We're aggressive about it, we must be."

A gig review in their final year shows what they had achieved. "The National Ballroom's packed, and an amazingly cosmopolitan gathering witnessed The Redskins perform with a sensibility, maturity, and control... of tempered aggression, always smouldering threateningly at the hands of brass or a dangerously funky rhythm. This evening's turnout should be proof that the Redskins determination in breaking through to the majority is going to pay off. Evidently their political directness has not been the turn-off once predicted." (Melody Maker 1986).

Another review noted, "The Redskins are, without doubt, the single most emotive and emotional band in town." (Sounds, 1986).

An' it just seems

*We can't get round to gettin' round to it
Sometimes it makes me ache...more than I can take...*

- 'The Power is Yours'

With active struggles on the decline, the band knew they had to cut it musically. They spent time in the studio working on their album, *Neither Washington Nor Moscow*. In confidence I was passed a demo copy by Chris - the music sounded blistering and the lyrics brilliant. Friends demanded copies and I was soon passing out cassettes cheekily titled "Neither Woking nor Memphis, But Imitation Soul" (Woking was the home of The Jam and Memphis of Elvis Presley).

Unsurprisingly the album divided the critics. Sounds magazine liked the music but railed against socialist politics. Melody Maker was won over, welcoming, "...this ferociously inspirational, desperately romantic, hot-headed, pig-headed, emotive and ultimately triumphant brand of

International Socialism. ...this classic piece of agitpop propaganda really hits home, doing more good for the SWP than any other comparatively stale form of recruitment and publicity could ever hope to achieve. ...to tremendous effect it makes the Redskins seem closer than ever to this sick nation's saving grace."

For many of us the album was an inspirational blast and has stayed alive for others to discover through CD re-releases, YouTube and Spotify.

In France, Italy and Germany that summer, the Redskins played in large arenas to big audiences some of which were broadcast live on TV, like the Place de la Bastille event. Being a revolutionary rock band was not stopping them reaching a mass audience.

It was in this time that a movement of left-wing skinheads and indie rock fans was born. The redskin movement appeared in France and gradually spread to other countries over the next ten years.

Whilst the Redskins were touring Europe and reaching their largest audiences I'd left college and began working with young people in youth centres and after school clubs. At a video and drama summer project, I was introduced to working with young people with learning disabilities using drama. I made a connection and have been happily working with young people like this ever since. My wish to make music is largely behind me but I work as creatively as I can, enabling others to be creative whenever possible. Even within the bureaucratic constraints of education under capitalism, it's been a mostly engaging, enlightening and rewarding experience. And I find time to be creative in other ways outside of work whenever I can.

Despite the predictions of jaded lefties and cynical music critics the Redskins never sold out. Having burned brightly for a short but thrilling few years they burnt out. What they left was the songs - a brilliant collection of soulful, impassioned pleas for the listener to cry as loudly and as angrily as themselves... "Bring it down!"

Spurn the lie
They use to justify
This insanity!
The inhumanity!
Of this insane thing

- 'Bring It Down'

Capitalism killed the band in the end. Not through some kind of cultural assassins but record company pressure for the band to recoup and repay the company's investments. To me it appears that being in a band signed to a record company is less like being employed as a wage slave and more like running a small business reliant on the patronage of a much bigger capitalist enterprise.

Chris in their final interview, 1986, said: "We are now a pop band and it has limitations. It is fantastically hard to be a revolutionary and a musician because in many ways the two things just simply contradict each other. Something we've said a long time is that the contradictions are becoming more and more acute. It may well come to a point where we have to give it up."

Martin in 2003: "The Redskins, at the end was in danger of becoming a contradiction. That is why I decided to leave the band. However, that should not detract from what we achieved. From my perspective, the band operated best when we were out doing benefit gigs and live performances. If we had stuck to that and not got caught up in 'the record industry' it is very possible we might have

still been together.”

Billy Bragg later admitted, “They were the true inheritors of the mantle of the Clash.”

After the band finished, Chris asked around about the theory of post-modernism – it was the first time I remember him searching to understand something rather than already understanding or rejecting it. He was planning his next musical project being called P-Mod.

The last time I saw Chris was in April 1989 at the tenth anniversary march for revolutionary socialist Blair Peach, who was murdered by the police whilst leaving an anti-fascist protest. Chris was almost as quiet as he’d been when I first met him scribbling in his notebook. He looked pretty much the same, though his Harrington jacket was now plain black and the determined spark in his eyes had dimmed. I’m not criticising him. All of us go up and down in our energy and enthusiasm – and when Chris was firing all four cylinders he was a powerful force. In fact it’s crucial that we are supportive of each other going through the difficult times, personal and political, and consider how they interrelate.

Chris told me he’d been living in Paris and was doing a bit of journalism. His passion was now film, the major art form of the 20th century, and the one that he argued the left had made the most impact on, citing the likes of Godard, Bertolucci and Eisenstein.

*No way I could explain
No one to explain it to anyway
But a tearful misery’s a sorry legacy
And this is not the time for sad obituaries*

– ‘Take No Heroes’

I haven’t seen Chris since then and despite the growing interest in the band over the decades, it seems that no-one else has either. Rumours abound. What is consistent in the stories is that he lives a quiet life with his mum in his home town of York. Whether this is by choice or not, it seems we’ll never know and that’s to be respected.

Leaving the last words to Chris and the Redskins...

The struggle is hard and the struggle is long

– ‘Lean On Me’

An’ I’m waiting on hold
For something to explode...

– ‘The Power Is Yours’

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P.S.

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