

soundings issue 14 Spring 2000

Singing politics, owning names

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*The political song movement is alive and well
in Britain ...*

There is a thriving tradition of political song in Britain. Apart from the many individual political singer/songwriters like Sandra Kerr or Leon Rosselson, there are more than a dozen local choirs singing at political events, at benefits, on demonstrations and pickets, or busking on the *streets*. They write their own songs, and sing each other's, and are always responding to a changing political scene with fresh words and tunes. There has been a marked growth among them lately of small women's *a capella* groups singing a feminist repertoire.

Political choirs meet at the national street music festival which passes from city to city, year by year. And *Raise Your Banners*, the annual festival of political song, is another moment to hear many of these choirs - as well as a programme of popular performers from this and other countries - and to attend workshops.

The two of us belong to Raised Voices, one of several London-based choirs.¹ We wrote the song 'What's in a Name?' to respond to our dilemma in a particular political moment. Raised Voices have many songs of liberation and solidarity in our repertoire, from the Sandinista Anthem to A Gi Ya Mozambique. But it's not every moment that they sound the right note.





National movements themselves emphasise different themes and acquire different significance at different times.

For instance, all those songs celebrating the green island of Ireland - the blood in her cornfields, the death of her martyrs - jar a little just now with the direction of moves in Northern Ireland. This is not to deny past oppression or present inequality. It's rather to listen to those many women and men living in Northern Ireland, nationalists among them, who are trying to find a new language in which to reach 'the Other' and explore the possibility of peace.

So this is a different kind of solidarity and liberation song. We sing it in solidarity with people who are trying to liberate themselves from the grip of those power elites that are reifying national identities, manipulating history, digging trenches between us and profiting from war.

One word in the song needs explanation - our use of the term 'Goy' in the last verse. Meaning 'non-Jew', it is the only one of the six 'names' in the song that's never proudly claimed by a group, but is only used by its Other. Used in the main pejoratively, signifying contempt for the Goyim, it is loaded with the pain of centuries of Jewish persecution. For that reason some Jews have said they feel uncomfortable singing the verse.

But the name Jew is also at times uncomfortable for non-Jews to speak, because in Goy-speech it likewise has often been heavy with negative meaning. Authorially, as a Jew and a non-Jew, we want this phrase the way we have written it. The line could have read 'Arab and Jew'. But that would have suggested that the problem lies with all those inimical groups out there. It's us too. And the song, after all, pins hope to the possibility of giving old names new meanings.

1. *Raised Voices* is a London-based political choir of women and men. We run as a co-operative, with no single leader. We don't audition, and are open to singers of all abilities. New members are always welcome. Contact Mick 0171 249 5139 or Marion 0171 561 1990, or see our website at <http://www.raised-voices.org.uk>

Soundings

What's in a name

I think that the time could be near
When what's in a name
Doesn't mean quite the same
When the need to belong
Is no longer so strong
When the rage at the past
Has diminished at last.
But you can't see it from here.

I think that the time could be near
When the lies that we hear
And the scale of our fear
With the anger it feeds
And our murderous needs
Will have shifted their shape
So we find an escape.
But you can't see it from here.

When primordial claims
To exclusive domains
On the maps that we draw
Don't convince any more.
The gods are displaced
And the borders effaced ...

I think that the time could be near

Singing politics, owning names

When these names they abuse
We can take or refuse
Being Turk, being Kurd
Being Croat or Serb
Being Goy, being Jew
Has become something new
But you can't see it from here.

See of whom we're the tools.
See who names
See who rules
I can almost see it from here
Almost from here.

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Music: Shereen Benjamin

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