

RUSS BESTLEY

London College of Communication

Still fighting the cuts: An interview with Mekons 77

Formed by a group of art students at the University of Leeds in 1977, the Mekons released their debut single, 'Never Been in a Riot', in February 1978 – the first release on Bob Last's seminal, independent, Fast Product label. Fast Product went on to release debut singles by Gang of Four and the Human League, among others, before both bands went on to achieve international acclaim via major labels (EMI and Virgin, respectively). As a rejoinder to the Clash's 'White Riot', 'Never Been in a Riot' offered an ironic reflection on punk's perceived radicalism: 'I've never been in a riot/Never been in a fight/How come for me everything/Turns out right'. There was a level of introspection at work here, a dry wit, and perhaps a truer reflection of the experiences of the majority of 'punks' outside the heroic rhetoric championed by some of the London music papers.

Meanwhile '32 Weeks', a track on the b-side of 'Never Been in a Riot', breaks down the cost of a range of basic goods, from a bottle of whiskey to a bed and a car, in terms of work hours (weeks, days and minutes), leading up to a spoof announcement of the weekly Premium Bond prize draw – neatly encapsulating the mirage of an easy escape from the toil of labour and a route to acquisition without the hard graft. The stark, amateur simplicity of the music is offset by the biting, satirical intensity of the lyrics, demonstrating that the Mekons were no ordinary punk band.

Their critically acclaimed second single 'Where Were You?' led to a contract with Virgin Records and the debut album *The Quality of Mercy is Not Strnen*. The album's title was taken from the axiom that if you give a monkey

a typewriter and an infinite amount of time, it would eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare; in this case the axiom was employed as a wry comment on the Mekons' own musical ability. The group fragmented in the early 1980s, with founder member Jon Langford relocating to Chicago, and a new line-up emerged, embracing folk and country with 'The English Dancing Master' EP and *Fear and Whiskey* album. The Mekons went on to become key players in the Alt Country scene. Summer 2017 saw the reformation of the original Mekons line-up, working in parallel to the current group under the pseudonym Mekons 77. Both bands performed at the Mekonville Festival in Suffolk, August 2017, along with numerous other spin-offs featuring members of the extended Mekons 'family'. The festival culminated in a Mekons vs Mekons finale, with both groups sharing the same stage.

The new Mekons 77 album, *It Is Twice Blessed*, is due for release in April 2018. To coincide with the release, the band are also reissuing their first two singles, 'Never Been in a Riot' and 'Where Were You?' through Viaduct records in San Francisco and conducting a mini tour of the United Kingdom.

Russ Bestley: *How did the Mekons start?*

Jon Langford: The Mekons was a bunch of art students who formed the band, probably sitting in a pub – prior to punk rock, none of us would really have ever thought of being in a band.

Mark White: Chaotically, as we did everything else. Don't forget also the close links with the Gang of Four. Both bands tackled similar themes in different ways, different forms. I suspect that there was some sort of Gang of Four plan, but the Mekons were not like that at all. I often felt that Jon and Andy (Go4) followed the line Michael Caine uses in *The Italian Job* (Collinson, 1969); 'this is a team effort, that means you all do exactly what I say'. The Mekons tended towards a 'this is a team effort, that means we will now say a lot before we do anything' approach. It was important to us that the decision-making, song writing and economic arrangements should follow the political or social constructions that we were trying to develop. To criticize monopoly capitalism by producing a another monopoly commodity (successful band) that featured a single figure standing above all others (lead singer) condemning patriarchy by a lofty male voice; to reproduce the hierarchy of the family onstage; to pay different levels of wages to equal members of the group; all that seemed unethical.

The important thing to remember about the Mekons is that there were a lot of us – a gang John Peel called it. I suppose now it would be called a crew. There were, usually, at least ten working communally. There was no distinction between who was onstage and who wasn't, no hierarchy between who sang or played guitar. 'No personalities emerge' was an early slogan, in opposition to the hero-led 'rock' we all loathed. With so many people, of course there will have been different motivations, but success was never one of them. The Mekons came out of the need to become engaged, to stand up and say: 'look at where we are now, is this where we want to be? What are *we* going to do about it?' Notice the plural term, there was no distinction between band and audience, at most gigs anyway there were more onstage than out front. There were no ambitions to be successful (luckily), to make a record or anything like that, we left that to the Gang of Four.

RB: *Was there a particular take on 'punk' in Leeds?*

MW: Leeds was an alarming place in 1976. It was economically deprived, dirty, run-down and extremely violent. There was an increasingly urgent need to participate, to become engaged in what was happening around us, in the deeply depressing and violent politics, in the lack of choice, in the total lack of employment opportunities, in the bleak futures for anyone young; to do *something*. We forget now how few opportunities there were then to make your voice heard. Computers, let alone social media, did not exist.

I'm not sure how much we knew about 'punk', in London or elsewhere; not much really, especially in the beginning. But there were certain key factors that were influential. Few of them had much to do with London, which always seemed to me anyway to have more to do with celebrity than music, politics or independence, which were some of the issues that mattered to us in Leeds. One factor that always gets missed it seems to me is the release of (Buzzcocks debut EP) 'Spiral Scratch', which came out at the beginning of 1977. It showed that you could do something on your own, away from power, big business and, importantly, away from London. Once the Mekons got going, we played gigs in Manchester often, and I'm sure it was that low key, communal and diverse approach, which enjoyed wit and a certain ironic intelligence, that we responded to.

What also appealed to me as the lyric writer was the way that Pete Shelley's songs were ungendered and defiantly without machismo. Although everything came out of long discussions, usually in the pub, lyrics tended to be by me, largely because everyone else was too busy trying to cope with the music side of things. Three-minute pop songs deal in generalities and banalities; multi-syllabled, closely argued text doesn't work. How can you make something out of that form which is relevant? We all liked the story telling part of song making, creating and presenting a personality for a brief glimpse into someone's way of looking ('Where Were You?', for example). I was taken with the Buzzcocks idea that by not gendering the song, you could get away from all the appalling sexism and macho strut that so characterized songs of the period and which we all hated. This was why most Mekons songs feature characters who are particularly feeble, or maybe that was just me. Any humour sprang from a lack of confidence that what we were doing would make any difference. My parents were committed and early members of CND, I was brought up on protest music and Ban The Bomb marches. It had always seemed to me that protest music preached to the converted, there is a smugness of the righteous that I wanted to avoid. I had no confidence that what I was doing would make any difference, I just knew it was worth trying.

JL: I think in the north of England and in the provinces, people took punk rock ideals much more at face value. In London it was kind of the next stage of rock 'n' roll, a career and fashion statement, whereas we thought of it as a licence to do whatever we wanted.

RB: *Mekons 77 – the original line-up of the band – have come back together to record a new album and play some gigs in the UK. You actually reformed in the summer of 2017 and played a few gigs, including the Rebellion Festival and the Mekons' own Mekonville Festival in Suffolk. How did the idea to get back together come about?*

Kevin Lycett: 40 years, that's pretty persuasive.



Figure 1: Mekons 77 in 2017, photograph courtesy: the Mekons.

JL: We all got back in touch because an advertising company in the USA approached us about using ‘Where Were You?’ in a commercial for the Honda Acura. It wasn’t for a great amount of money, it was just going to be used as some sort of in-house online thing, so I got in touch with everyone and nobody seemed to think it was a terrible sell out or compromise of our punk ideals to actually get paid for making that record after 38 years. But by the time I’d talked to everyone, Honda had got back to the advertising agency saying they wanted to show the commercial during the NBA finals on national TV [...] so we were talking about a substantially larger amount of money than I initially described, and thank God everybody was up for it. In the process of these discussions we realize that we had a 40th anniversary coming up, and maybe it might be fun to do something, seeing as how we were all still alive.

RB: *The Mekons actually never went away, going through various line-up changes before settling on a pretty consistent group of musicians in the early 1980s. That group is still very active, and features a number of members who are also in the reformed Mekons 77. How do you see the two versions of the group as different from one another?*

Andy Corrigan: Different but complimentary. I was a bit worried before Mekonville that the two versions of the band might not work together, and that people that like the current Mekons might not like the old version, but it was really cool, greater than the sum of the parts or something.

JL: After playing in New York City with Gang of Four on New Year’s Eve 1980, we really didn’t have a band. We had been fired by Virgin Records, and Tom and I had gone back to Art School. We became very interested in different kinds of music; traditional English folk, Cajun and even Country and Western, but the impetus for performing live again came during the Miners Strike 1984–85, when we wanted to get out there and make some money for the miners – Steve



Figure 2: *The Mekons* (1978), 'Never Been in a Riot', 7" single, Fast Product. Design by Bob Last.

Goulding and Lu Edmonds joined the band around this time, as well as Susie Honeyman, Rico Bell, Sally Timms and Dick Taylor. It wasn't the year zero punk primitivism anymore, it was a bigger project that saw us getting interested in (and seeing ourselves as part of) a wider historical context.

RB: *That transition, from the original Fast Product and Virgin Records period, then back out again to various independent labels, took several years, during which time the Mekons still managed to produce some fantastic music, from The Mekons Album, a collection of outtakes and experiments embracing electronics and experimental sounds, through the 'This Sporting Life' twelve-inch to 'The English Dancing Master' EP, with its embrace of folk styles. The social and political backdrop was perhaps also important here? The Thatcherite agenda was beginning to really bite, punk had virtually disappeared from the public gaze, and pop music was morphing into so many different strands.*

KL: During the 1980–84 period we underwent more of a transformation than a revolution. Dick Taylor (Pretty Things) and John Gill (Edward II and the Red Hot Polkas) were both active in the band and played pivotal roles in helping to shape the new sound, Dick giving us a rocking rocket that bore fruit later in *The Mekons Rock 'N' Roll*, and John weaving in both English country music and a little bit of reggae – both so crucial to the post-'84 Mekons sound. In fact John Gill was the one who first alerted us to English country music when we were recording our second album, *Devils, Rats and Piggies* (which he engineered). He told us one day that we were actually an English folk band. This didn't go down at all well until he explained what he meant. It influenced us deeply and has bled into many a rock critics 'insights' into our music. He was referring to traditional music played by ordinary people and recorded in the first half of the twentieth century. People like Walter and Daisy Bulwer. These were poor country people who played plain, simple music – music that was handed



Figure 3: *The Mekons* (1978), 'Where Were You?', 7" single, Fast Product. Design by the Mekons.

down by ear and over time had got a bit twisted by imperfect copying and none too skilful playing. They played functional music for their community to listen and dance to. This was like a great big light going on, as big as seeing the Pistols at Leeds Polytechnic, which was the flame that started the Mekons in the first place. This insight also prepared the ground for our engagement with American country music, giving us a way into it that eluded many others.

I used to think there was a steady evolution from the 1977 Mekons to the post-1984 Mekons, but experiencing the original band again now, I think they are quite different entities. Both equally valid and sharing many values, but actually pretty far apart from each other, especially aesthetically. I have particularly enjoyed how Andy and Mark are such superb front people with brilliant banter to match the best, by what a superb bass player Ros is, how well Tom and I work together as guitarists, and how Jon thumps the drums like a demented barrow of rabbits.

RB: *The Mekons have been held up as important contributors to the notion of punk 'do-it-yourself'. You signed to an independent label, Fast Product, before taking up a short-lived contract with Virgin Records, then returning to the independent fold soon after. Do you think the notion of independence and the autonomy that comes from 'doing-it-yourself' are still important?*

JL: There were lots of conflicting notions going on at the same time – yes, we were on a fledgling independent label with Fast Product, and excited by the notion of creating and owning our own entertainment, but we also had ideas about mass marketing and destroying the music business from the inside when we signed to Virgin Records in 1979. We didn't learn from our mistakes – in 1989 we went and signed with A&M Records in the USA, which was equally disastrous and disruptive to the band as the Virgin escapade. I think



Figure 4: *The Mekons* (c. 1979), photograph courtesy: *the Mekons*.

the Mekons have always made it up as they go along – we had a lot of reservations about the holier-than-thou attitude of some of the independent labels we encountered.

I remember that debate when we signed to Virgin. It was a serious mistake on our part, but not for any of the reasons tossed at us. We accepted the most modest advance imaginable in favour of keeping all artistic control, thus providing Virgin with no reason to actual promote us or sell our records – GENIUS! The independent music scene was basically Rough Trade at the time, and they wouldn't even distribute 'Never Been In A Riot' [...] They became more interested after 'Where Were You?' sold a big pile of records, but when we were fired by Virgin they wouldn't touch us with a bargepole. Over the years, the Mekons had some hideous experiences with majors and indies alike. The US was kinder to us – Touch & Go was a safe haven for us for fifteen years from 1993 onwards, and now we work with Bloodshot here in Chicago and have started our own Slow Things label to put out the new album.

KL: I think it's the wrong question, one that leads to a kind of roundheads/cavaliers dualistic debate that misses the pertinent question, which is how and where cultural activity can be effective. That said DIY is something I care deeply about. At its simplest it means bottom-up direct action, which is extremely healthy. I think it's a very sound model for any amount of activity. But it has its limits and I wouldn't really want a DIY NHS or public transport system.

RB: *I like your point about effective cultural production, Kevin. The notion of 'DIY' seems to have become mythologized to imply complete ownership and control of ALL means of production, but that was never the case in relation to punk, or pretty much any other subcultural production in the 1970s/early 1980s beyond perhaps a few of the print coops. The roundheads/cavaliers argument might be applied to the media-fuelled distinction between the new independent labels and the traditional music industry, but in practice those waters were pretty muddy. The notion of bottom-up*

direct action perhaps allows us to move away from a rigid ideological dogma and to allow some flexibility in our approach to creative cultural activity. Do you think that's a fair distinction, between the 'message' and the 'medium' or the means of distribution?

KL: Hmm, yes it's an old chestnut and I remember writing a pretty sharp letter on this theme to that bloke who owned Rough Trade records when he was disparaging about the Meeks signing to Virgin back in the late '70s. All that hair shirt shit really gets my goat, not because I have no time for DIY, as I said I think it can be a really healthy activity, but because as you so aptly put it, it muddies the waters. It was a preoccupation of mine from my student artistic days before the Mekons, when I wrote art pieces about how impossible it is in the capitalist world to place yourself outside of some pretty unsavoury compromises and situations – and that this is a chimera not worth pursuing. It infects all our thinking in really depressing ways and can often lead to people policing their own actions and not noticing that the actions that need policing are those of corporations and politicians, not individuals.

There is a lot to be said for DIY; it can be immensely fulfilling, it can enhance agency and engender nourishing relationships that you may not otherwise have. But without a sense of its limitations, and without a clear understanding of what drives the situation that you are rebelling about, it can end up simply serving those who gain power and wealth from the current issues you chafe against. As with most things – 'it's complicated'. There is no righteous path gained by internalizing oppression and exploitation and seeking then to be 'pure' and rid your life of its manifestations. You're just doing the bastards' work for them.



Figure 5: Mekons 77 (2018), It Is Twice Blessed, album, Slow Things. Design by the Mekons.

MW: Trying to step outside the circle is impossible and self-defeating – we were well aware of previous attempts to do so. The old alternative hippy circuit still existed, sort of, from alternative bookshops and newspapers that publicized us and odd venues and bands that we interacted and sometimes played with. One episode had really shown the futility of ‘the escape’ solution: a friend of ours had a commission to investigate alternative food communities. Andy had a vehicle and drove her around the Welsh borders. Tom and I went along for the ride. All we found were depressing examples of fey ineffectualism: over-worked and fed-up young women stuck with groups of feral ‘home educated’ children; would-be charismatic young men trying to recreate a peasant economy, living on mud and roots, dying crops proudly planted in spirals, that sort of thing; sadly nothing that you could describe as sustainable opposition.



Figure 6: Mekons 77 Tour Poster 2018. Design by Jon Langford.

To an extent working communally, allotting roles on a friendship basis, making our own record with Bob Last was guerrilla type action; the form of cultural production mattering as much as the content (McLuhan and all that). Thinking back to earlier attempts at radical cultural production, one of our inspirations for making it all ourselves was *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, a neglected source I think. But we weren't really trying to control *all* means of production, I don't think, we weren't 'escaping'. It was also out of necessity; there was no other way to go about it. In the South, we discovered afterwards, the usual route for a band was this: managers/A&R men would put together a package that they would then sell on to a record company. No one would come near us, and we would not have trusted any who did anyway. You cannot 'escape', you have to engage, and at least doing it yourself allows you to have some say over the terms of engagement.

JL: The old rehearsal room we shared with Gang of Four is now a fashionable alternative rock venue in the heart of a groovy downtown Leeds, but back in 1978 it was a horrible, dark, scary place. Murder, mayhem, rain – all in black and white. Next door was the Wharf Street Café, where they sold strangely inedible health food, and I recall some mild hostility to that wholefood hippy culture on our part. I think Mark's right, the mad extremes we went to, building and lugging our own PA and our attempts at some kind of punk rock commune with Gang of Four were out of absolute necessity. I remember us trying to get our huge home-made PA up the icy fire escape at the back of the Newport Stowaway and Dave Bowen the manager advising us in no uncertain terms to ditch the monster or we would all die!

RB: *In the late 1970s, you were associated with a form of provocative, intelligent, left-wing politics, alongside fellow travellers including the Gang of Four. In 1984/85 you were also very active in support of the Miners Strike, and were highly critical of the Thatcher government. Looking back, how effective do you think grassroots campaigns and activism were in 'fighting the cuts'?*

JL: We've always thought music and politics go together, and it would be some kind of cop-out not to keep addressing political and social issues. You win some you lose some, and it's all cyclical. Some campaigns were successful like Rock Against Racism in the late 1970s and early '80s, the work we did in the late '80s concerning AIDS awareness, and work I was involved in the USA opposing the death penalty, but these are the rare exceptions. I think there were larger forces at work when Reagan and Thatcher took power and we've most often been left fighting a noble rear-guard action – but what you gonna do? It's almost like a feudal society now compared to the 1970s when we formed, and trying to find ways to address and deal with this is part and parcel of my every day concerns.

MW: And of course, in the late '70s we knew all the Leeds sellers of *Socialist Worker* and whatever the IMG (International Marxist Group) called its paper that week, along with people from all the different Troops Out movements. Don't forget that continuous civil war in the North of Ireland made Britain a politicized, intolerant and repressive place. It always seemed to us that the Hard Left were entirely self-contained, only emerging for ritual forms of combat, but always predictable and always keen to maintain the paralytic political stasis that characterized the '70s, leading of course

to that appalling catharsis: Thatcherism. We were routinely dismissed by all the Hard Left paper sellers as ‘pretty boys making a noise, you won’t change anything’.

KL: Ask a water pistol what it can do against an atom bomb. However I think that keeping an alternative vision alive, sometimes over many years, is very important even when it’s almost impossible to have any direct effect. I meet many people now who take our stance as inspirational, and I have come to understand that whilst taking a stand can seem pointless (cf the Mekons), it’s so important as it can keep the light glowing through dark times that may be longer than you could ever anticipate, and eventually provide a model or inspiration when the time finally comes.

RB: *Do you see any parallels between the dark days of the late ‘70s and the political situation in the UK today?*

KL: Yes, today was forged in the election of Thatcher and Reagan. Far more than I understood or could anticipate at the time.

JL: The assault on consensus democracy and the brutal consolidation of wealth and power is entirely worse now – I can’t remember quite why we were so mad with James Callaghan.

RB: *Have you completed the recording of the new album now? Where was it recorded? Do any of the tracks revisit themes from the first album back in 1979? Was the writing and recording process much different to the way you worked back in the late ‘70s?*

JL: We recorded up at (Mekons vocalist) Andy Corrigan’s place in Suffolk. He has a bunch of pig sheds full of fantastic recording equipment; drums and amplifiers both ancient and modern. It was lovely to get together there for a week with the original members of the Mekons and bash around, drink, eat, talk and see what popped out. There was no real plan for what the album should sound like, other than it would be interesting if we all returned to our original roles and maybe the final product would be something that could have been some lost tapes from 1978 that we found in the attic [...] we tried to limit the palette.

KL: It’s been a delight to work with everyone again, if a bit odd. Vast swathes of time have passed since we were first together. Back then we were at the outset of our adult lives. Now we’ve got careers, homes and children under our belts, yet we’ve hardly talked about any of that. We immediately settled down as if those intervening years hadn’t happened, and we get on really well. I appreciate everyone’s roles and contributions even more than I did then, and can see more clearly what it is that makes our work so interesting.

I find the primitive nature of our work, and the way we take it to some pretty far extremes, hugely exhilarating. We respect and trust each other creatively, readily going with whatever we come up with. That’s not actually much different to how we worked back then, except I think now we really know how valuable and rare that is. We came together with no rehearsals, a bunch of musical fragments and reams of lyrics from Mark. From that, we wrote and recorded over a dozen songs in long cold days in a converted cattle shed in Suffolk. We totally trusted each other’s judgements and contributions, and I haven’t had such a buzz working with other people

creatively in many years. I really rate the results. I think we've made the Mekons album we didn't quite manage to make back then. Though, having listened to *The Quality of Mercy* a lot in preparing for this album, I've come to think much more highly of it than I did at the time. Back then it was disappointing; overproduced and directionless; now I think it's something of an overlooked classic.

RB: *You have a few gigs lined up to promote the album, including the 100 Club in London – an important venue in the history of UK punk. How do you think the 'punk' subculture has changed over 40 years?*

JL: Er [...] it changed really fast back in '78/'79 into another cul-de-sac and has since entirely fossilized, but I see the broader and more idealistic elements of punk rock thought still popping up all over the place. It was meant to be permanent revolution not some studded leather jacket mohawk fashion show – each to their own [...] We recently played the Rebellion Festival in Blackpool, and while we had a great time we clearly didn't fit in. Lu describes contemporary punks as the new Pearly Kings and Queens – they kind of remind me of Teddy Boys I saw when I was a kid – locked in a moment in history.

AC: Well there are still lots of punks, as we found out in Blackpool, but punk attitude seems to be alive and well in the various dance music sub cultures. Grime has broken out of the underground – that only took ten years – and niche genres like trap, jump up and other drum and bass derivatives have their fans. DJs, musicians, promoters and people that run sound systems who operate outside the mainstream and are totally 'punk' in attitude, but probably wouldn't say so.

KL: I see many parallels between the scene in the late '70s and today, which didn't seem there even a few years ago. But I think it's more to do with the prevailing economic and political situation than anything else, which is very similar to the one we faced but even worse. That inevitably generates similar responses. I feel very at ease in the current creative scene, more so than at any other time since the late '70s.

RB: *You recently issued a new recording, 'Still Waiting', an update on the theme of the classic 1978 single 'Where Were You?' Is that story of love and loss still important?*

MW: When we started talking about doing something together again, one characteristic we all agreed on was that we had wanted to be a pop band, unlikely though that may sound listening to some of it now. Pop songs are often aspirational, or actually about the failure of aspiration. You can't look at what is happening today and really think that punk changed the world all that much can you? Shuffled around a few clothes in a stylist's wardrobe maybe, added a few good songs to a playlist, but politically? Balance of power? Who owns Britain? All that? So, if we were going to write new stuff, it looked as though loss was going to figure somewhere. We're still waiting for exactly those changes we wanted then, as the new lyrics say: waiting for the money to trickle down, for the rich to pay their way, for the start of world peace, etc. And as Jon said, if we were looking back to 1977, what happened to Winnie, or the girl with yellow hair?

Mekons 77 information and tour dates: www.themekons.co.uk.

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E-mail: r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk

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