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GET OFF YOUR ARSE: ‘Singing Newspapers’ and Political Choirs in the UK

Abstract

Although the UK has a centuries-old history of subversive singing, since the election of a Conservative-led government in 2010 and imposition of austerity-based economic and social policies, the number of choirs with a political philosophy and mission has grown. The website CampaignChoirs lists around thirty political choirs committed to a left-wing, green or anarchist agenda, which is reflected in the music and related actions. This paper takes as its case study the Leeds-based Commoners Choir and considers how its musical decisions enable it to communicate protest politics. Using critical discourse analysis, this study adds to the dialogue on musical discourse by focusing on the speech acts contained within the lyrics; the social impact of the Commoners’ performances; and the use of dialect to root the works within a distinctly northern culture. It concludes that careful consideration of discourse can demonstrate a more measurable authenticity in an artistic act of protest.

Keywords: choir, singing, protest, discourse, Leon Rosselson, Commoners Choir, Boff Whalley, critical discourse

1. Introduction

Since 2010, when the UK coalition government introduced austerity-based economic and social policies, one artistic response has been the growth in the number of choirs with a distinctly political philosophy.¹

There is already a body of existing research on the cultural and social capital provided by the act of singing in a choir (such as Jeanotte 2003 or Eastis 1998).² Much has also been written about the therapeutic benefits of communal singing, for example, by Launay (2015) and Eastis (1998).³ This research analyses the songs and performances of a choir to reveal how they articulate political discourses. It analyses the speech acts contained within the lyrics; the creative and political decisions behind the distribution of the Commoners’ performances; and

¹ Campaign Choirs. n.d. Accessed August 6, 2018. <http://campaignchoirs.org.uk/>.

² For example, Jeannotte, M. M. Sharon. 2003. “Singing Alone? The contribution of cultural capital to social cohesion and sustainable communities”. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 9 (1): 35-49. DOI: [10.1080/1028663032000089507](https://doi.org/10.1080/1028663032000089507); Eastis, Carla M. 1998. “Organizational Diversity and the production of Social Capital: One of these groups is not like the other”. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 42 (1). DOI: [10.1177/0002764298042001006](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764298042001006)

³ For example, Launay, Jacques. 2015. “Choir singing improves health, happiness – and is the perfect ice-breaker”. *The Conversation* October 28, 2015. DOI: [10.1098/rsos.150221](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.150221); Eastis, Carla M. 1998, 66 – 67.

the use of dialect to root the works within a distinctly northern culture. It asks whether the lexical and musical decisions of the case study create an authentic act of political protest and cultural activism.

The Leeds-based Commoners Choir describes itself as a “singing newspaper”, responding to and commenting on local, national and international events. This paper examines the choir’s performances, both live and recorded, to uncover what discourses their performances articulate and how this is done. It felt essential to draw upon existing multimodal discourse analysis to explore a range of possible meanings, demonstrated via not only the music but related artwork, gestures, discussions, and even choices of events, venues and songs which have meaning potential. Political intention and impact can be analysed via a focus on the speech acts contained within the lyrics; their social implications and any impacts of the Commoners’ performances; the impact of the folk-punk fusion genre and the emphasis on a “northern” culture.

2. Methodology

This paper recognises that popular music’s political subversive potential is an area that has been ripe for research (see Way 2017, which acknowledges the benefits of a multimodal approach to musical outputs, going beyond the lyrics to examine the impacts of sounds and images).⁴ Therefore, the approach began with Critical Discourse Analysis, (such as that developed by Fairclough 2003, 2006), which considers language (spoken and text) as a form of social practice and which focuses on how societal power relations are established and reinforced via language use.⁵ Critical Discourse Studies are a useful framework because they focus on the discursive reproduction of power and inequality, but researchers have begun to acknowledge the connections between language, context and social action. Consideration of the speech acts alone, therefore, did not allow a deeper interrogation of aspects of the choir’s performances, such as political choices of activity and venue, uniform, etc. “The study of language *per se* is extended to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, gesture, action, music and sound” (Aleyshinskaya 2013, following O’Halloran 2011).⁶ This is reinforced by Way’s (2017) detailed multimodal analyses of pop

⁴ Way, Lyndon.C.S. and McKerrell, Simon. 2017. *Music as Multimodal Discourse, Semiotics, Power and Protest*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁵ Fairclough, Norman. 2003. *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge; Fairclough, Norman. 2006. *Language and globalization*. London: Routledge.

⁶ Aleshinskaya, Evgeniya. 2013. “Key Components of Musical Discourse Analysis”. *Research in Language*, 2013, 11(4). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/rela-2013-0007>

performances and videos. It felt therefore reductive not to employ a multimodal approach to an analysis of the choir's work, considering the distribution of its works in particular.⁷

Commoners Choir was selected as a case study from the increasing numbers of campaigning choirs in the UK. (See Yin 2014, on the use of the case study to explore "how" questions).⁸ This is not to suggest the findings on Commoners Choir can be generalised across the population of political choirs. The primary focus is to offer "thick description" to create insight into their politicised action and reveal authenticity, which "inserts history into experience, [...] establishes the significance of an experience [...] for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard" (Denzin 1989).⁹

The choir is not the only campaigning choir to compose its own material, though it has not yet fallen into the "militant particularism" identified among some street choirs by the Campaigning Choirs Writing Collective (2018): for example, Red Leicester's localised focus is on the geopolitical immigration and refugee issues; Protest in Harmony's is defined by the campaign to replace Trident.¹⁰

A general consideration of the choir's *oeuvre* revealed a number of potential choices for closer study and analysis using a CDS framework. Song/clip selection was made on the basis of how language is employed to deliver a message of protest or subversion; how chosen sounds are deployed to reinforce this; and the additional discourse offered by the related live or recorded performance. Tracks chosen for closer analysis are 'True North' (2018), 'Get Off Your Arse' (2016), 'The People's Armada' (2016) and 'Get Back on Your Bus' (2017), the latter written as part of a series of songs to be made available for protest marches. These were selected on the basis that they are widely available, have received "likes" and comments on YouTube and deliver what can be shown to be a clearly subversive message. The analysis will necessitate a short historical contextualisation to enable a clearer understanding of the discourses articulated in the songs (lyrics and music) and their performances; the lyrics, sounds and visual aspects are viewed as semiotic resources. Lyrics are analysed using Machin (2010), from the more basic consideration of "the social values that underlie the song" (Machin 2010, 78) and "the cultural values about identities and behaviours that lie

⁷ Way, Lyndon C.S. and McKerrell, Simon. 2017.

⁸ Yin, Robert K. 2014. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage.

⁹ Denzin, Norman K. 1989. *Interpretive interactionism*. 83. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

¹⁰ Campaigning Choirs Writing Collective. 2018. *Singing for Our Lives*. Bristol: HammerOn Press

deeper in a song” (Machin 2010, 81).¹¹ Analysis of sound uses van Leeuwen’s (2012) key musical signifiers to consider melody, rhythm and social interactions.¹² The analysis therefore aims to identify discourse in songs, their recordings and distribution, by which establishment and power is challenged and subverted.

With regard to musical discourse, genre can be understood as a type of text (discursive genre) and a type of music (musical genre) (Aleshinskaya (2013, 3).¹³ Discursive genres are particular ways of communicating, using language associated with a particular social activity (Fairclough 2006), and they act as means of organising and formalising social interaction in the sphere of contemporary musical art. To illustrate the Commoners Choir musical discourse, materials were drawn from a primary semi-structured interview with Boff Whalley during August 2018; online and archive interviews already in the public domain; sound recordings of the Commoners Choir on CD, vinyl and “live” via YouTube; video recordings of live performances on <http://www.youtube.com>. Aleshinskaya (2013, 5) describes musical discourse as an “ellipse” with stages of “life”, including its creation, distribution, and perception.¹⁴

The “creation of the musical product” in the case of the Commoners Choir comprises rehearsals, studio sessions, and the shooting of related video. The “distribution of the musical product” includes live performances, TV, radio and online broadcasts of performances, musical interviews and press releases. The “perception and evaluation of the musical product” stage embraces musical reviews, general online forums and social media chats. The notion of “social context” is necessarily wide, but is of particular interest here as it asks Fairclough’s key question: “What are people doing discursively?” (Fairclough 2003, 72).¹⁵

3. A radical history

Although it may be assumed that the UK’s history of subversive political singing dates back many centuries, there is little in the way of documentary evidence further back than the seventeenth century. The Levellers and Diggers movements were known to have their own songs, but little of record survived (see sites such as “English Diggers”).¹⁶ Some protest

¹¹ Machin, David. 2010. *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound and Text*. 78 – 81. London: Sage.

¹² Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2012. “The critical analysis of musical discourse”. *Critical Discourse Studies*. 9 (4): 319 – 328.

¹³ Aleshinskaya, Evgeniya. 2013

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fairclough, Norman. 2003.

¹⁶ Song and English Diggers n.d. Accessed August 20, 2018. http://www.diggers.org/english_diggers.htm.

songs survive from the eighteenth and nineteenth century eras – including the ballad ‘The Triumph of General Ludd’ (1850) and other worker-led anthems relating to industry and its practices (for example, ‘The Black-leg Miner’, nineteenth century, date imprecise, or ‘The Factory Bell’, circa 1830s).¹⁷

The folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s revived many of these historic songs of protest. A legacy of the peace movements also includes individual songs from the Aldermaston Marches of the 1950s and the Greenham Common protests (1980s - 2000). The anarchist band Chumbawamba recorded several versions of traditional English protest songs in 1988 (re-released 2003).¹⁸ The former Chumbawamba member Boff Whalley is the founder of Commoners Choir and some of these areas of interest remain in its newer works.

The notion of the “protest song” is often associated with a lone singer, so the revival of the protest choir is of academic interest. In part, the overall rise in interest in choir participation has been attributed, such as by Robin Osterley, formerly of Making Music, to reality TV programmes, such as *X Factor* (ITV), or more directly, *The Choir* (BBC 2).¹⁹ This article, however, restricts its interest to those choirs known as “campaigning choirs”. According to Reimer and Mason (2016), many of these affirm their socialist or labour movement roots in their names, such as Birmingham Clarion Singers and the Nottingham Clarion Choir, which reference the *Clarion* socialist newspaper of nineteenth-century Manchester.²⁰ The growing movement of such street choirs and the oral histories of participants is documented in the collection *Singing for our Lives* (2018) by the Campaigning Choirs Writing Collective.²¹

The Leeds-based Commoners Choir was formed in 2015. Boff Whalley’s former band Chumbawamba was principally known for its anarchism (as well as for one big hit, ‘Tubthumping’ from 1997 and throwing a bucket of iced water over the then deputy prime

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Chumbawamba. 1988. English Rebel Songs 1381 – 1984. Agit-Prop Records/ MUTT.

¹⁹ The Voice project n.d. Accessed August 6, 2018. <http://www.thevoiceproject.eu/index.php?id=712>; The Gresham Lecture July 8, 2015. <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-benefits-of-singing-in-a-choir>.

²⁰ Reimer, Lotte and Mason, Kevin. 2016. “Raised Voices: the campaigning choir movement”. *Red Pepper*. <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/raised-voices-the-campaigning-choirs-movement/>.

²¹ Campaigning Choirs Writing Collective. 2018.

minister John Prescott).²² Before any rehearsals had taken place, the choir's founder members created a manifesto which includes the following lines (choir's own capitalisation):

WE'LL SING ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND US, ABOUT
INEQUALITY AND UNFAIRNESS, AND ABOUT THE THINGS THAT
NEED CHANGING. [...] WE'LL BE EXPLICITLY POLITICAL AND
COMMITTED TO WHAT WE SING ABOUT.²³

According to Whalley, in an interview for this article, manifestos are not only artistic acts, but they mark a "definite break", "with their claims to new forms of art and politics they have the feeling of bravery and courage".

"The aims of the choir were to [...] use what we created to make explicit comments on the world around us. To find a common radical voice that wasn't tied to political parties or single-issues, and to have a laugh (that's an important part of politics and propaganda that often gets overlooked)."²⁴

For instance, the choir practices begin with a proposed set of lyrics and music, but these are adapted and changed by the members during the sessions. This process is unending – even since the release of a CD of choir songs, the way these same songs are performed is in a constant process of modification, sometimes relating to the place of communication and sometimes in response to new political events (for example, a song entitled 'Me Too', written in response to events such as the 2018 UK gender pay gap scandal and the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations, became one only performed by female members of the choir after a discussion about the appropriateness of it being sung by men). There is a policy of inclusivity, never turning any potential member away, regardless of ability. Songs are never given a written musical score, as this may exclude those who cannot read music.

The protest song has already been analysed for its limitations, including by Simon Cross, (Cross 2017), in his discussion on the work of Leon Rosselson.²⁵ He cites Denselow (1989), as saying that although "music is the most cynical of all art forms and naturally lends itself to

²² Rodrigues, Jason. September 24, 2014. "John Prescott gets soaked at the Brit Awards". <https://www.theguardian.com/the-guardian/from-the-archive-blog/2014/sep/24/john-prescott-brit-awards-chumbawamba-1988>.

²³ Whalley, Boff. 2015. Commoners Choir website. <http://www.commonerschoir.com/manifesto.php>.

²⁴ Whalley, Boff. 11 August 2018. Interview by Barbara Henderson.

²⁵ Cross, Simon. 2017. "The enduring culture and limits of political song". *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4 (1). DOI: <https://www.cogentoa.com/article/10.1080/23311983.2017.1371102>.

rebellion, there is no evidence it leads the masses into political action”.²⁶ Although rooted in critical discourse studies, this article suggests the Commoners Choir goes beyond the protest song to produce not only political comment but also small-scale, measurable benefits as a result of its artistic actions.

3.1 ‘Get Off Your Arse’

An inaugural session of the choir created the song which takes its title from Johnny Rotten’s shout of “Get off your arse”, which preceded the Sex Pistols’ first TV performance of “Anarchy in the UK” (*So It Goes*, Granada TV, 1976).²⁷ Whalley (2016) describes this as “a sort of melodic call-to-arms” and one year after the formation of the choir claims, “From that tentative minute-long song has grown a huge and unruly full-throated yell.”²⁸ The song ‘get Off Your Arse’ (1) embodies a typical Commoners Choir combination of tightly melodic, harmonised music with a provocative lyric, which has become something of a hallmark. The aim is not, though, entirely to shock, as perhaps it was for Rotten. As with most of the songs, the call to action has a sense of purpose. The lyrics are simple and repetitive. They begin with a monotone repetition of the word “Get” (32 times), in performance getting louder, followed by the lines “Get off your arse/And do something good for the world/Get off your knees/and stand up, let’s take back the world.” Echoing Rotten, the discourse schema is that the audience needs to be less passive and to take direct action. The phrase “take back” is a recurring one in Commoners’ lyrics, reflecting a discourse that certain less advantaged groups have had benefits and rights taken from them by an uncaring and self-driven ruling class – it can be identified in other songs too.²⁹ The use of the mildly offensive word “arse” in (1) aims to jolt an audience into paying attention – or perhaps make them laugh – before delivering a serious message. In terms of melody, the refrain “Get off your arse” begins with an assertive, dotted rhythm (“Get-get-get”) with precise timing, but rises in pitch, creating an ascending melody that seeks to energise, to rally people behind a cause. This ascension builds to a climax at the end of the song. ‘Get Off Your Arse’ (1) is usually used as an opener to Commoners’ performances and sets a clear revolutionary tone, leaving audience members in no doubt as to the political nature of the forthcoming discourse.

²⁶ Denselow, Robin. 1989. *When the music’s over: The story of political pop*. London: Faber.

²⁷ BBC. n.d. [Site archived]. Accessed August 8, 2018.

²⁸ Whalley, Boff. 2016. “Crass, me and Gareth Malone”. <http://boffwhalley.com/blog.php>

²⁹ Such as ‘Take Back the Commons’, ‘Robin Hood in Reverse’ and others.

3.2 More Than a Mouthful

When considering whether Commoners Choir discourse has a political impact beyond the music and lyrics, an examination of the distribution of the musical product is essential. During the More than a Mouthful tour (2018) the choir wrote songs specially in response to statistics released by Leeds City Council regarding food poverty.³⁰ In a short “tour” of Leeds community centres, the choir performed as member (and chef) Josh Sutton cooked a curry for the audience to share, using ingredients from the Real Junk Food Project, which utilises food products that would otherwise go to waste. Admission was a donation of a tin or packet for the local food bank. It was, according to the Commoners’ website, “primary barter economics” with a specific and measurable social impact. One song performed at the concerts for the first time was ‘Come on in From the Cold’ (2) which relates the true story of a local school during March 2018’s wintry weather, when schools and much of the city were shut down. At one Seacroft (Leeds, UK) school, the staff who were able to travel opened the building and cooked a meal for local children to come and eat. According to member Allan Clifford: “They de-commodified the commodity and gave it away because it was needed. They supercharged their community and asked nothing because that was needed.” (Clifford 2017).³¹ The lexical choices in (2) create a discourse of hardship, battled by a determined and resilient set of workers:

(2) Well the cooks and the teachers

Refuse to give up

Come on in from the cold

And they’ve cooked up a meal

From whatever they’ve got

Come on in from the cold

Chorus:

³⁰ Leeds City council. 2018. Leeds Council Poverty Fact Book. <http://www.leedsgrowthstrategy.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Poverty-Fact-Book-2018.pdf>

³¹ Clifford, Allan. 2017. “A moment that changed me: joining a radical choir”. *The Guardian*. September 1, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/01/chumbawamba-radical-choir-commoners-political-activism>

So take off your raincoat and pull up a chair

Shake off your hunger, there's food going spare

Whatever we've got is whatever we'll share...

The discourse schema behind the story celebrates the resilience and sense of community of the northern working classes, a theme explored more significantly in 'The People's Armada' (3) (2016), written in response to severe floods in parts of Leeds and Hebden Bridge. It is sung to a traditional sea shanty tune, enhancing "recognisability". The lyrics begin with the male voices singing "Pull together", with its double meaning of nautical terminology and the common interpretation of people helping each other. In the sound acts in (3), the "low" voices are joined next by the "middle" and then "high" voices in the choir, to build to a louder, assertive refrain. Use of pronouns in this song distinguish, in a populist manner, between "them" and "us":

(3) *We're* wading in the valleys

They're sitting high and dry

They get their picture in the papers

We get the same old lies [...]

We're piling up the sandbags

They're digging up the peat bogs

We're bailing out the basement

While *they're* bailing out the banks

The discourse schema in (3) can be clearly seen as: "There is a them and us. 'They' are an uncaring government mismanaging the environment, while those in areas like the north suffer the consequences. But 'we', the people, are helping each other and are calling for change." It presupposes that those affected will make a connection between actions of landowners, such as the deliberate flooding of valleys for grouse shooting or the devastation of the peat bogs, and the subsequent impact on the environment that led to flooding of people's homes and businesses. Lines like: "There's a global thermostat/In the hands of the ruling class/But there's a forecast for change/ Blowing in on the breeze" (3) connote this potential, but unspecified, mood for protest.

Although this is often performed live, no specific visuals have been created to accompany its presence on YouTube. On the YouTube link, the song is preceded by an audio BBC news report about how grouse moors are managed for shooting, to reinforce the discourse that it is this specific land management activity that exacerbated the winter floods in parts of Yorkshire.

After the musical shanty-style of the main body of the song, chosen for familiarity and the potential for audience participation, the choir drop into a gentle, low volume rendition of Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land', recontextualising the US geographical references for UK ones: "From Falmouth Harbour to the Shetland Islands/ From Snowdon's mountains to the North Sea waters". It transposes "This land was made *for* you and me" to "This land was made *by* you and me," to create a discourse that celebrates the industriousness of the northern working class. This verse is repeated at full volume, to suggest growing awareness and raising consciousness and pride.

3.3 Tuneful protesting

Negm (2014, 1) points out that classic studies in critical discourse analysis focus principally on language as a context for power and domination³². See Fairclough (1994, 50) for example, and Chaika (1994, 4).³³ For Wodak, however:

"CDA aims to investigate critically social inequalities as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use (or in discourse)" (2001, 2).³⁴

Since July 2017, Commoners Choir has been writing one protest song per month and posting them on their website for open, communal use. Founding member Mark Whyatt (2018) explains:

"People don't tend to sing on protests here in Britain [...] We're demanding change using worn-out old cliches ("*What do we want? A tune!*")".³⁵

³² Negm, Mohamed Said. 2014. "Resisting Power in Discourse". *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 192: June 2015, 284 – 289 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.041>

³³ Fairclough, Norman. 2003; Fairclough, Norman. 2006. Cited in Aleshinskaya, Evgeniya. 2013. 2; Chaika, Elaine. 1994. (New ed.) *Language: The Social Mirror*. Boston, Ma: Heinie and Heinie Pub.

³⁴ Wodak, Ruth. 2001. "The Discourse-historical Approach" in Wodak, Ruth and Meyer, Michael (Eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. 63 – 84. London: Sage

³⁵ Whyatt, Mark. 2018. Commoners Choir. <http://www.commonerschoir.com/writing.php>

The series is in particular response to an article by Leon Rosselson (2017) discussing the power of protest songs in civil rights movements across the world, but “the silence at the heart of the UK labour movement”.³⁶

A lexical theme of the Protest collection is to take and reclaim familiar phrases, some of which originated in political statements from politicians and groups of a different persuasion. For example, Song No 6 in the collection is entitled ‘Get Back on Your Bus and Go Home’ (4) - a phrase that has been deployed in an anti-immigration, often overtly racist context, but here the aim is to subvert it, using recontextualization to produce new meanings:³⁷

(4) All the good people gather around

Banded all together on common ground

We don’t want nazis in our town

Get back on your bus and go home

The discourse schema is that those who discriminate against other ethnicities are outnumbered by those who welcome a multi-cultural society. The subversion of the “get back/go home” phrases echo Bakhtin’s theory of “otherness”, whereby the main unit of meaning is formed through a speaker’s relation to others’ words and expressions, and the lived cultural world (Bakhtin 1986).³⁸ Without an audience’s shared prior knowledge of these phrases, the recontextualising - and subversion - in the lyrics and music would have less impact.

The accompanying video to (4) on the choir website employs footage of anti-fascists massing to oppose Oswald Mosley at Trafalgar Square in 1962 and a news segment showing English Defence League supporters being chased out of Tower Hamlets after a demonstration in 2011 – the discourse here being that the UK has a history of rejecting fascism.³⁹

³⁶ Rosselson, Leon. 2017. ‘The Power of Song’ <https://medium.com/@rosselson/the-power-of-song-2aa90e6a5a7d>

³⁷ Reisigl, Martin and Wodak, Ruth. 2001. *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*. London: Routledge and Reisigl, Martin and Wodak, Ruth (2009). “The discourse-historical approach (DHA)”. *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Ruth Wodak; Michael Meyer (eds). 87-121. London: Sage (2nd revised edition), 2009.

³⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press

³⁹ Commoners Choir. 2018. ‘Get Back on Your Bus’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZjhxCRLBYI>

The protest songs were released on 13th July 2018, to coincide with President Trump’s visit to the UK. The line “Get back on your *plane* and fly home”, however, is sometimes omitted at events where refugees or an immigrant audience may be present, to avoid any misinterpretation that the lyrics are aimed at them, rather than at the US President. In the protest songs and the reclaiming of key familiar tunes and phrases, the Commoners Choir attempt to re-utilise the devices of power, including repetition and evaluation; power is no longer monopolised by one dominant participant in discourse. Discourse becomes a context for power to be questioned, challenged and resisted.

To remain with Bakhtin (1986, 91), the lyrics also use pronouns to demonstrate "Addressivity" and "Answerability" (they are often addressed *to someone* – “Get off *Your* Arse”, “Go where *you’re* forbidden to go”, “This land is *your* land”, “Hey Theresa” (May) etc).⁴⁰

Whyatt, writing on the Commoners Choir website, explained why this linking of musicality and some kind of form on the notion of protest had a positive impact on a 2017 protest march:

“A group of us in the Commoners Choir struck up some of our own songs. [...] People gathered and walked with us, learned the gist of the songs and joined in. It was what we suspected – there’s an inclusive sense of welcome in a melody. Melody (and, let’s be brave, harmony) [...] can carry anger as well as any chant.”⁴¹

3.4 True North

Commoners Choir is based in Leeds, with its members from the Yorkshire area. Again, “northernness” has always been a concern for Whalley: “Politically, in England, “Northern” is always a part of it. There’s a definite poverty line you can draw [geographically]” (2009).⁴² The choir’s geography is celebrated in several of its song lyrics, the discourse being that the north is a beautiful, proud area with hardworking people –but that it is overlooked by successive centralised governments. This prevailing discourse is illustrated in the eight-

⁴⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1986 *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press

⁴¹ Whyatt, Mark. 2018. Commoners Choir. <http://www.commonerschoir.com/writing.php>

⁴² Whalley, Boff. 2016. “Crass, me and Gareth Malone”. <http://boffwhalley.com/blog.php>

minute-long song ‘True North’ (5), written as part of the 2018 Great Exhibition of the North. A story of successful activism is linked to its performance. When the work was in its early stages, following a meeting with the GET organisers, Whalley discovered the defence company BAE Systems was an event sponsor. The choir agreed that they had to pull out of the event, on principle. They were not the only artists to pull out: so too did Nadine Shah and other acts, as a number of news outlets reported.⁴³ The boycotts prompted BAE Systems to withdraw its sponsorship and the event was put back on the calendar and hailed as a victory for protest. Three northern UK choirs rehearsed the song separately before coming together to perform it outside The Sage, Gateshead, on the first day of the exhibition in June 2018.

The lyrics to (5) were the result of Whalley asking choir members for their thoughts and feelings about the nebulous concept of “the north” and creating verses that celebrate the region, its landscape, history and language. The discourse schema is that there is sense of “otherness” often felt by those who live in what is loosely termed “the north” of the UK, but that this as a cause for pride as well as anger.

(5) Here’s the hands that wrote the stories

Here’s the arms that mined the coal

And here’s a thousand government ministers

Who gave us bugger all.

As two-thirds of the choir repeat the refrain “Bugger all”, the remaining singers list aspects of history, geography and culture linked to the region. The discourse is that the north has produced some of the UK’s greatest inventors and artists and that its landscape is beautiful, but that this has all been without recognition or support from successive governments.

This song also employs lyrics that exploit the northern dialect, using words like “ofcumdens” (incomers) which may not be understood outside of West Yorkshire. The discourse schema in (5) connotes a rebellious pride in “otherness”, indicating that being northern is special, and that northerners do not wish to adopt standard RP:

(5) The grit where flattened a’s begin

And BBC pro-nun-ci-ation ends

⁴³ BBC News. March 2, 2018. “Great Exhibition of the North: two acts quit in protest at sponsors BAE”. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-43258311>

Aleshinskaya (2013, 435) points out how Ibrahim distinguishes Black Stylized English (BSE), with its ritual expressions habitually and recurrently performed in hip hop. These rituals are more “an expression of politics, moments of identification, and desire than they are of language or of mastering the language *per se*.” (Ibrahim (1999, 349 - 69).⁴⁴ The use of dialect words, therefore, and an insistence on a Northern pronunciation (“Bugger” to be pronounced with an “uh” sound rather than a more mellifluous “ah” sound, for example) is a similar expression of identification with and pride in a “northernness”.

The tune is a slow, melodious one, reminiscent of the folk tune ‘The Carnival is Over’, with jauntier, more upbeat insertions when discussing the beauty of the northern landscape. The masculine opening – literally, with the voices of the all-male Infant Hercules choir – creates an assertive beginning. The ascending melody of the chorus, “The needle points to north/ True North”, in which the note rises on the word “North”, raises energy, and again uses the melody to rally an audience. This is enhanced by an initially unrehearsed gesture by choir members of pointing upwards on the word “North”, which began informally but became part of the performance and a “call to action” in which the audience participates.

Of the performance, choir member Sally Harrop says:

“I didn’t feel English. I felt Northern. I didn’t think my country was proud of me, of my neighbours, or of things that my northern ancestors had achieved; in fact they actively tried to ignore us [...] So this [...] said everything I couldn’t in one easy bite-sized, beautiful way. [...] The song was in our bones now, in our beings, and would stay with us forever. Inescapable. Just like our Northernness.”⁴⁵

A common audience response during the performances on the day – and later, at showings of the short documentary film about the making of the song – was that it made them cry. The combination of the ballad-style tune, the discourse schema of pride, unbroken by political injustice or neglect, and the combined voices of three large choirs in performance, touched emotions in the audience, reminding them of the possibilities of protest (van Leeuwen 2012, 319 – 328).⁴⁶

4. Performances

⁴⁴ Aleshinskaya, Evgeniya. 2013.

⁴⁵ Harrop, Sally. 2018. Commoners Choir. <http://www.commonerschoir.com/writing.php>

⁴⁶ Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2012. “The critical analysis of musical discourse”. *Critical Discourse Studies*. 9(4): 319 – 328 DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17405904.2012.713204>

As well as verbal language, musical discourse is characterised by an intensive use of nonverbal elements (McKerrell and Way 2017).⁴⁷ Commoners Choir members wear a uniform of black clothes with pin-on patches bearing the choir logo of an inverted crown, to connote a declaration of pride in their “common-ness” and “same-ness”. For performances, certain movements are introduced to enhance the music and lyrics - for example, the gesture of “mopping” which accompanies the line “Boris Johnson’s head upon a stick” and the flashcards containing the final word of each line for the ‘Jeremy Hunt Rhyming Song’, which neatly avoids the obvious. The aim is to introduce humour to a subversive message. In discussing Tom Lehrer, Lizz Winstead, creator of *The Daily Show*, says: “Done right, social criticism set to a catchy tune makes politics easier to digest. You add a layer of humour and you break down two barriers: One, singing a song over and over leads to repetition of a message, and two, humour creates likeability. The more polarizing the issue, no matter what you say, you will have people who think you should not use humour.”⁴⁸ Space forbids further analysis of the social actors and performance elements here, but further research would be fruitful.

5. Conclusion

Musical and lexical discourse is complex, multi-perspective and multidimensional. Way (2017) points out that debate about popular music and politics has produced no real consensus⁴⁹ and that even when popular music is political, it tends to be highly populist rather than about specific issues.⁵⁰ The consideration of the Commoners Choir discourse as a whole - images, gesture, action, music and sound - allows for a more holistic and more firmly contextualised consideration of the choir’s output. It reaches the optimistic conclusion that the discourse about specific political issues and the emphasis on direct impact of each event suggests a greater authenticity that may otherwise be experienced.

While it is a commonality between many street or campaigning choirs to write original material comprising protest songs, and to make ethically-motivated choices about where to perform, therefore, the ethos behind Commoners Choir seems to be to take the politics of “care” a stage further by ensuring there is an impact beyond the musical performances.

⁴⁷ Way, Lyndon C.S. and McKerrell, Simon. 2017.

⁴⁸ Smith, Ben and Badejo, Anita. 2014. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/tom-lehrer>

⁴⁹ Way, Lyndon.C.S. and McKerrell, Simon. 2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Some social impacts can be measured: the withdrawal of BAE Systems from the Great North Exhibition, following the choir's boycott of the event; feeding the audiences and collecting food for local food banks. Some impacts are more qualitative and harder to measure, such as the uptake of the protest songs and increased sense of camaraderie during marches. But the choir is only two years old. The choir has now agreed to move away from performances where the choir was only required to "turn up and sing", towards events which always create some kind of legacy.

Walley (2018) explains the necessity of this:

"We don't want the Choir to be just a sort of lefty pamphlet with tunes, it has to have more bite than that. The politics I'm attracted to [are from] a history of mavericks and nonconformists who historically scrapped and worked for progressive change [...]and that's what, in a small way, Commoners is trying to do."⁵¹

A small way, perhaps. But given the careful ethos and discourse apparent in the Commoners Choir and its material, it can be evidenced that it is not only fulfilling its claim to be a "singing newspaper", but that it goes beyond the journalistic remit of retelling current events to create something that is more than the sum of its parts.

⁵¹ Whalley, Boff. 11 August 2018. Interview by Barbara Henderson.

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About the author: Dr Barbara Henderson (PhD, FHEA) is a former newspaper and BBC journalist, now teaching journalism at Leeds Beckett University. She is also a traditionally published fiction writer for adults and children and has a part-time role as programme leader in Creative Writing for the Open College of the Arts.

Contact details: 180 Main Street, Spittal, Berwick upon Tweed, Northumberland, TD15 1RD, UK.

Email: b.a.henderson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Twitter: [@berwickbabs](https://twitter.com/berwickbabs) [@leedshacks](https://twitter.com/leedshacks)