

Glasgow: A History (Vol. I of VI)

The Tenementals

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The Tenementals are a Glasgow rock group. This record, released last autumn, is the band's debut. It is what was once called 'a concept album', a journey through Glasgow's radical history in song. And good songs they are too. The record starts with an overview, 'The Owl of Minerva', an aggressive musical flow of ideas. David Archibald's Glaswegian inflections have the enveloping fervour of a table-sharing stranger in a Glasgow pub; the band--Bob Anderson (drums), Simon Whittle (guitar) and Mark Ferrari (bass)--drive him on remorselessly. The songs that follow are equally energising but in different ways, shadowing a variety of historical moments and bringing in the rest of the band and their instruments (cellos, voice, keyboards, harp, theremin). The next track, 'A Passion Flower's Lament', is a sweet, swirling elegy, sung by Jen Cunnion as a homage to the Glaswegians who went to Spain to fight for the Republicans.

I could go on--Archibald and Whittle are fine songwriters, and this collection of their songs is a joy. But the IASPM Journal doesn't carry that sort of record review, and it is not what I am going to write. I want, rather, to consider *Glasgow: A History* as an academic publication. Archibald is Professor of Political Cinemas at Glasgow University and developed this project in research terms, as a way of addressing research questions. What if history had a soundtrack? How would we hear it? What music would best underscore or engage with Glaswegians' long experience of political conflict?

To address these questions academically is to take part in ongoing conversations. Discussions of music and politics have long been a feature of popular music studies, and I'll discuss The Tenementals' album here with reference to two issues: the protest song and the folk/rock continuum. The release of this album coincides with

the publication of a new academic study of protest songs, *Our Subversive Voice* (Street et al., 2025). The book's argument is summarised in the publisher's press release:

Whether accompanying a march, a sit-in, or a confrontation with police, songs and protest are inextricably linked. As a tool for political activism, the protest song spells out the issues at the heart of each cause. Over a surprisingly long history, it has been used to spread ideas, inspire political imagination, and motivate political action. The protest song is - and has always been - a form of political oratory as vital to political representation as it is to performance. (*McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025*).

Our Subversive Voice covers 500 years of English (though not Scottish or Glaswegian) political history and has a very broad definition of the protest song: "it is a mode of political communication that has been used to confront many systems of oppression across its many genres, from street ballads to art song, grime to hymns, and music hall to punk" (*McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025*). The book concludes that "song does more than accompany protest: it choreographs and communicates it" (*McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025*).

The Tenementals are not singing protest songs. They are not accompanying, choreographing or communicating protest; they are reflecting on it. If The Tenementals' tracks aren't protest songs, what are they? They are not reconstructing the sounds of conflicts past or celebrating the legacy of political singers. The Tenementals' music is determinedly rooted in a contemporary musical sensibility: indie rock. This leads us to the long debate about the relation of rock and folk. I'll approach this through another recent release, *A Complete Unknown*, the movie about Bob Dylan's arrival in 1960s New York. In dramatising the tension between Pete Seeger's folk collectivism and Dylan's rock individualism the film identifies Seeger as the conservative and Dylan as the radical. Both are seen singing protest songs but protest is being defined in different ways: Seeger's comfortable utopianism vs Dylan's unsettling urgency. At the same time, though, Seeger is presented as the nice guy: open and caring; Dylan as a complete shit: a self-absorbed opportunist. And Dylan, unlike the film version of Seeger, is shown to be commercially smart. His songs and imagery are popular, they sell! Dylan signs for a major record company that soon has a new marketing slogan: The Revolution is on CBS!

This is not the sort of revolution in which The Tenementals are interested, although their music does suggest that the classic rock song can express the optimism and hope for the future that we should take from past. Folk songs, by contrast, tend to be resigned, realistic about the inevitable failure of revolt. But, as The Tenementals also suggest, there's another question here: what's meant by locality? Does political song necessarily involve local expression, a kind of documentary realism? From this perspective political folk music can be defined very broadly: the local soundscape rather than the traditional ballad; brass bands, music hall, popular song and dance in all its forms. This is best exemplified currently in Britain by Sam Fender, whose songs are rooted in strong sense of the working-class experience---his family's experience--of the rise and fall of the shipbuilding, mining and steelmaking industries on Tyneside. Fender is obviously a rock musician--his

inspiration is Bruce Springsteen--but he places himself in the local music-making culture in the North East of England.

The Tenementals are not this kind of folk band (only one of their songs, 'Fossil Grove', has a Scots snap). They are not a working class, local, or documentary band, even if their songs document local working-class history. The historical struggles in which they are interested are not simply local; they involve struggle on a wider scale, against capitalism and colonialism in all their guises.

Glasgow A History had funding support from the Glasgow City Heritage Trust and one can indeed imagine these songs as history's soundtrack, making sense of pictures at an exhibition or a history walking trail. The record's concern is not so much what happened and why it should be remembered but how history feels, how the past can still resonate when performed like this, by a band that exemplifies the exuberation of collective action.

References

Bibliography

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025. *Our subversive voice: The history and politics of English protest songs, 1600–2020*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mqup.ca/our-subversive-voice-products-9780228023722.php>
Street, J., Cox Jensen, O., Finlayson, A., McShane, A. and Worley, M., 2025. *Our subversive voice: the history and politics of English protest songs, 1600–2020*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Videography

A Complete Unknown. 2024. [Film] Directed by James Mangold. USA: Searchlight Pictures