PAUL FARMER

AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1

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Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

4. Street Theatre and Cabaret

A39 continued the street theatre practice that Miracle Theatre had based on mine and Sue's street repertoire. But with A39, far more confident and confrontational–and louder!– in the face of the shopping public, street theatre was more integrated and central to what we did and had a definitive effect on our developing performance style. We created and continually refined an original street set, and used the same material and attitude to also develop a cabaret act.

It was important that every aspect of the work enacted our prime purpose. So now we performed political songs, often with acoustic guitars in our assorted styles: Mark jazzy, and me very loud even though unamplified, through a drone-based punk-folk style I had developed (often to remarkably little enthusiasm from the organisers) in upcountry folk clubs. I broke a lot of strings, which I would repair and use again.

Mark put his style to good use from the very first in his song *U.S. Marines*, which began:

> Have you ever been to Laos, watched the setting sun
> With a Singapore queen?

It was complex material for street performance, and an excellent indication of just how ambitious we needed to be, constantly placing demands on ourselves to find the ways practically to express facets of things we needed to say. Without communication there was no point to us. We could never be 'just' entertainment—McGrath's contract was binding on both sides.

We also used acapella singing, with harmony and syncopation influenced by Bristol's 'Mr Sprat's Twenty-First Century Popular Motets', who we had seen performing at Elephant Fayre and at Ashton Park when we were touring with Miracle; or accompanied by Ringo, my drum machine. After years of practice, I could hold Ringo in one hand

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and switch between rhythm patterns with my thumb without looking. It was amplified through a battery-powered practice amp. This was an unusual sound in the streets in the mid-1980s, and also served to underpin some really daft dancing.

So we had *The Stockbroker Rap*, not quite as much a cliché then as that sort of thing would later become, performed wearing cardboard bowler hats. Less expected was *CND and the Greens*. Over a doo-wop backing of 'Ban that bomb–ooh', after verses and chorus revealing this was a comment on the Greenham Airbase anti-Cruise missile protests, now of hallowed memory, this finished:

> We tied ribbons to the fences
> Saying 'Heseltine's a silly sausage!'
> Then we climbed in our Morris Traveller
> And went home to our cottage
> Went to sleep, we all have lovely dreams
> I'm CND, these are my friends the Greens.

Material like this used to cause some confusion—surely we were attacking those who should have been our allies? But we wanted to make things quite clear: we were not liberals; we were not interested in single-issue campaigns that inferred a wish to correct a particular blemish on the face of Capitalist society. For us, its violence, injustices, and inequalities were expressions of an unacceptable essence. As a member of an audience on the political cabaret circuit in London would say to us a few months later: 'The others pretend it's all simple, but you don't do that.'

We also had some more avant-garde performance pieces. The *Political Alphabet*, Mark's idea, was twenty-six elements of movement with vocal sound effects, each denoting a political concept or event beginning with each successive letter. After running them all bafflingly fast as a sequence, we would go through them one by one, and hence got to deliver several minutes of pure socialist propaganda, keeping it funny and entertaining. In cabaret we would get the audience to shout out guesses at what each item was, and this was very effective in getting people involved and interacting. We encouraged mockery. The A39 that would turn up to perform plays were serious chaps, but our street theatre and cabaret were full of punk irony and insolence.

One of the skills I had picked up while living in East Anglia (alongside the ability to drive a bus) was the Morris dance *Shepherd's Hey*. We now adapted this as *The Policemen's Morris*. Sue would play the tune on a bucolic recorder while Mark and I—with bells attached, and dressed in plastic police riot helmets and carrying shields and truncheons in a joke-shop version of the gear the police had used to attack the miners—did the dance. During the 'B' part of the tune, when proper Morris dancers would knock their sticks together, we would knock truncheons together; then formally and rhythmically beat each other senseless to the ground. We made no comment on this satire on events on the picket lines outside Britain's pits. Everybody got it. It was funny; it was the needle.[1]

Altogether, our performance group of three (Lucy would bottle, i.e. work the crowd for money) was powerful and brash. The drum machine rhythms were a crowd-gatherer. The big performance styles necessary in the street fed into our indoor style of play performance and gave it a particular quality of personal engagement, each with our own public persona and an unusually extended range of performance dynamics. The composition of these short performance pieces was freeing, allowing lots of different kinds of experiments in possibilities of form and content, like the short abstract pieces of writing I had discovered to be so much to my taste at Truro Writers' Workshop. And we found new ways to express engagement: as our cabaret practice developed, we found ourselves performing often on the same bill as The Thundering Typhoons—a brilliant punk-folk group of travellers living on Rusudgeon Common, between Helston and Penzance (see Fig. 29). When their community was evicted, I wrote an acapella song called *Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Hee, the Property Owning Democracy* that A39 would perform for the next twenty years:

> Property is power and there's none to spare
> Where's your piece of paper saying you can live there?
> Now play the game, you've got to quit the scene
> Because you've been evicted by legal means.

1 You can see a proper stick version of *Shepherd's Hey*, without the violence, performed by the Knightlow Morris Men at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT8NuoN2fvg

Our earnings through street performances were vitally necessary. We had no money and no financial support. No one in the world of funding would answer the phone to us, even if we'd had a phone. The only people we came into contact with in such circles saw A39 as at best an inconvenient irrelevance, at worst a threat to a carefully rationalised *status quo*. We had arrived as a result of factors beyond the realm of art and our cause defined us, who we were, and what any of us could be—describers of another world, socialists.

And we were not easy to know, brusque working-class contrarians. When it came to staging our show, we rejected what we perceived as the Thatcherite privileging of production values—shiny lights, shiny things, shiny people. Our props came from the joke shop. We would hitchhike to Camborne or Penzance for a particularly plangent tatty piece of plastic. Our costumes came from charity shops, the shiniest suit trousers and waistcoats and cloth caps and braces, sensible shirts. We actively embraced clichéd portrayals of the timeless worker as a homage to our own precarious tradition, part of constructing a performative identity by inventing and discovering an aesthetic every day in every action.

We had no van, just Lucy's green Renault 12 after my old Saab 96, Emerald, was abandoned to the breakers of United Downs, so our staging needed to be transportable in or on a car. Mark designed three screens with thin wooden frames stiffened with a diagonal, covered and coloured with bed sheets, assembled using coach bolts, wing nuts, and drawing pins. When hinged together, by angling the side frames slightly forward the assembly was self-standing and stable—a backdrop behind which we could change costumes and hide our props and musical instruments: a guitar, a melodica, a mandolin, and a tambourine. Otherwise, everything was created in full public view, no illusions.

We were working towards our first performance of *One & All!* at the Crypt Centre when, historically and heartbreakingly—and inconveniently—on the third of March 1985, the great Miners' Strike ended.

The miners went back to work without a deal: as Thatcher wanted, as MacGregor wanted, as all those of bad faith and bad hearts wanted. Thatcher's PR man Tim Bell said that they wanted the miners to go back

'With their tails between their legs'.[2] All those who kept their true views beneath the cloak of hypocrisy wanted their sneers to be decorated with the word defeat.

The winter had been hard. NUM photographer Martin Jenkinson's photos[3] show miners and their families digging up lumps of discarded coal between railway tracks and from the snowy, dirty deserts of slag heaps and wastelands, to bring some ironic warmth to the homes of those who had once dug tons of it daily. Some children were killed at this scavenging when the bank they had undermined fell on them. And always there was the slow pox of the individual crises as once-proud striker turned to shame-filled scab, to be bussed to the pithead by the contemptible and contemptuous paramilitary police. Some couldn't stand it and would return to the strike, but overall the drift had become inexorable.

The miners marched back to work beneath their banners and behind their brass bands, both of which would in their different ways soon be consigned to the class of the historical, in an impression of victory that brought no spoils. There were some holdouts, notably in Scotland and in Kent, to demand the reinstatement of miners sacked during the strike for some alleged misdemeanour, but this stand too would be denied. In the smug arrogance of Tory victory, even those found not guilty in a court would be sentenced to sustaining unemployment by Thatcher and MacGregor in places where there was no other work.

And soon the closures would begin, and would continue till there was all but nothing left to close—an industry killed to pursue a mad, sick politics that has now played out over decades into the chaos always implicit in Thatcher's most famous assertion: '[W]ho is society? There is no such thing! Only individual men and women, and there are families…'.[4] Her true legacy is now clear: a country without values in which everything has been market-tested to destruction; the communities once occupied by miners and their families without work, without any kind

2 Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London: Constable 2009), p. 220.

3 See Mark Metcalf, Martin Jenkinson, and Mark Harvey, *The Miners' Strike* (*Images of the Past*) (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books 2014).

4 Margaret Thatcher, interview for the magazine *Woman's Own* (23 September 1987). Transcription at the Margaret Thatcher foundation, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689

of bond, ragged and rotted away. Places once strong and self-educated, the seats of class consciousness and the autodidact, attained the full array of the implicit products of Thatcherism, Majorism, and Blairism: unemployment and drug addiction; closed shops and broken hearts; without mining, without pride, and with no reason for themselves.

Closing this industry to destroy the collective voice of the miners cost Britain half the profits of the North Sea gas and oil field, and burned wastefully through its products in order to negate King Coal; while Norway used such profits for a sovereign wealth fund.[5] Pioneering investigation of the potential for clean coal power—at which the British industry, with the commitment of the miners, led the world—was closed and flattened along with all the rest.[6] The transition to low pay, low security, low-skilled 'service' industries has seen the UK's steel works, factories, and pitheads levelled, capped, and concrete-rafted to support shopping malls and heritage sites. Through the attack on Britain's extraction and manufacturing industries by its own government, from a position of industrial power and self-reliance Britain has mutated into a museum of itself that nobody should be bothered to visit.

> 'I've often been asked the question: had the miners any alternative in 1984? Yes, they had. The miners could have capitulated. Scargill, Heathfield and McGahey could have said: "There you are, walk over the top of us." You had an alternative in 1984–I'm proud you did not take it. Be proud that you defended the interests of the British people.' Mick McGahey, speech at Mayfield Labour Club, Dalkeith, Midlothian 11 March 1994.[7]

We agreed. And we felt the burning need for revenge and to avenge; and we carried on working towards the debut.

5 Becket & Hencke, p. 256.
6 Seumas Milne, 'Preface', in *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners*, 4th edn (London: Verso 2014); Becket & Hencke, p. 255.
7 Quoted by Milne, p. 352.