

A photograph of three people in a city street. On the left, a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and brown tie wears dark sunglasses and holds a large red flag. In the center, another man in a dark suit and dark sunglasses looks upwards. In the foreground, a woman with long, curly brown hair wears a dark suit, a blue and white striped tie, and bright yellow sunglasses. The background shows a brick wall on the left and a city street with other pedestrians on the right.

PAUL FARMER

# AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE  
VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1



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©2023 Paul Farmer. @2023 Rebecca Hillman (Preface). @2023 Mark Kilburn 'Plays' section



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Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985

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## 6. A39 International

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This tour was to be radically different to our everlasting barnstorming round Cornwall. Now we would be moving country to country, city to city—this was a big deal. Such wanderings were more unusual in these days, at least for people like us. For example, apart from my times in Cornwall and one night spent camping in Wales, I had left England only once in my life and that was a day trip from Felixstowe to Bruges on a temporary passport you could buy from the Post Office. Now we all had proper passports and we set off from Cornwall in Lucy's battered Renault 12, the four of us packed inside with our clothes, costumes, instruments, two tents and camping gear. It was pretty crowded, and those in the back had to share with various bags. Only Lucy and I had driving licences.

On the A303, still fifty miles west of London, there was a loud bang from the engine. It wasn't serious. The core of a spark plug had blown out and put an inside-out dent on the bonnet. I had to walk into Amersham to get a new plug in the dead quiet of its provincial Saturday afternoon. We seemed a long way from getting anywhere. There were so many ways for this adventure to go wrong, a heavy load for my mechanical skills and carrier bag of tools.

We took the ferry from Dover to Ostend and spent our first foreign night illicitly camping in a midge-bitten copse in a flat nowhere on the road to Brussels. We roamed southwards and eastwards day by day, through Germany, then Austria towards the hard border where western capitalism confronted Eastern Bloc and what it termed 'Actually Existing Socialism'. We progressed and performed city by city, and each night we camped in the resting places of the Autobahns.

Our usual street act was augmented with pastiche instrumentals for international purposes, like *Quando Quando* and *Egyptian Reggae*, performed on an odd assortment of instruments. In Brussels, the waiters

emerged from a Turkish restaurant to dance in the street. In Bonn we busked the late-night crowd leaving a performance by Dog Troep, a heavily state-supported company from Amsterdam paid well for this performance by the German regional authorities. We existed in a different twilight world of performance, literally picking up coins discarded by official culture. We busked Munich and Salzburg and Vienna. When we could, we would cook on a gas stove in the space between our tents—in the shadows of a ‘Rastplatz’ created to be passed by hundred-miles-an-hour Mercedes but the nearest thing to stability for isolated Brits. We quickly adapted to a rootless life, grabbing necessities amongst its contingencies, suppressing our needs for certainty until the concept of security slipped all but entirely away. We had become travellers, as had so many of our kind before, at home most in movement between places that until now had been just exotic names, ideas of elsewhere. It seems hard after that to regain rootedness, even though that was a core idea in our work in terms of place and culture. For now, we had discovered the primeval framing of human consciousness, the eternal circulations and migrations of the hunter-gatherer before humanity settled to earth in the First Disruption and began to get on with really doing some damage. Any particular place seemed no more than random; even the memory of Cornwall, just a slice through time. The traveller finds huge significance in brief experience of people and places before they skat and move on, forever reneging on their duty to contribute to the lives and lifetimes they smell and touch. This was a profound experience.

The nominal terminus on our journey away was Budapest on the far side of the Iron Curtain. This was not because we had any illusions about the nature of the Soviet satellite system, or any romantic attachment to it—but whatever it was we wanted to see it for ourselves. Eventually we approached the floodlights of the Austrian-Hungarian border at Hegyeshalom, with considerable trepidation; but we had the right visas in our passports and passed through without problems. We drove through pitch black miles across the Central European Plain. ‘So,’ we said, ‘This is communism....’ (It wasn’t. A39 was consistent in its practice of facetiousness as artform, even in the privacy of our own car.)

There was almost no traffic on this highway. Every so often, a blaze of light would appear on a far horizon. As we eventually neared and passed, it would reveal itself to be a stall, lit like a palace in proud display of huge vegetables luxuriating in the light in astounding colours

and numbers, the pride of the countryside. The Hungarians know how to value their produce.

We stayed some time in Budapest—radically different to any city we had seen before, like a better Vienna completely devoid of advertising. At first we stayed in industrial Pest in one of the brutalist apartment blocks so derided in the west, near a workers canteen and an immense government stationery shop. Then we moved to luxurious Buda on the other bank of the Danube. We didn't busk in the street because neither did anyone else and we had no idea what the reaction to that would be, and no safe way to find out (Vienna had been bad enough: we had been forcibly informed that we could only perform after 5pm and *as long as none of us moved!*). But we were booked to perform in a technical college and we put together a show that was a strange amalgam of *One & All!* and the street theatre act. After performing every day in a huge variety of circumstances we were by now extremely adaptable and sharp and all but telepathic. Nevertheless I, for one, found this show a bit baffling, though the audience was loud and enthusiastic. We were invited to parties in the old brown apartment blocks that dated from the heights of Austro-Hungarian arrogance. Led Zeppelin was played very loud and people argued vehemently, so a splendid time was had by all and people got very, very drunk. Contrary to all the insinuations of western propaganda, politics was the obsessive topic of conversation, with universal disdain for the Hungarian government. Rather than being repressed, these people were more engaged than the British.

In our flat in Pest were some British records, including Roy Bailey and Leon Rosselson's magnificent *If I Knew Who the Enemy Was*. The opening song on the LP has always fascinated me. Apart from anything else, *Barney's Epic Homer* is a very catchy folk-pop song, and Rosselson's and Bailey's very different voices intertwine wonderfully. But the nature of the way the song expresses its political message was inspirational. For example, the hapless Barney's teachers dismiss him for 'living in a kipper-coloured dream'. Kipper-coloured! Why? It doesn't matter, I'm already laughing with satisfaction at the sound of it and the alliteration, but also at the inclusion of such a random image *just because they can!* And Barney's subsequent dispiriting career is 'turning little piggies into plastic-packaged sausages to sell in the Heliport canteen.' Just listen to the rhythm of that. But even more importantly, it is so brilliantly, bizarrely specific! Don't they sell them anywhere else? Why is there

such a notable taste for sausages amongst those engaged with rotorcraft aviation? It doesn't matter, I don't care, I love it anew every time—it gives me immense *pleasure*. The song squarely identifies the necessary qualities of a worthwhile revolution as liberation, creativity, and love, and that for me sustains as the appropriate checklist.

With the inspiration of material like this to hand, we began working on new material for our act. There was also a copy of *Songs of Alex Glasgow Two*, and we developed a version of Alex's *Turning the Clock Back* as a crowd-gathering kick-off. I wrote a rock'n'roll song about Murdoch's *Sun* called *Clever Man* and a song with a mechanical rhythm, with actions, called *I Am A Factory*; Vulgar Marxism set to music. Using the mixed-up languages of the traveller, Sue—with the perspective on our home nation that can only come from a thousand miles of hard road—wrote *Nous Sommes Les Anglais*:

Nous sommes les Anglais, no parler Francais,  
We like beer and chips and getting up late on Sunday  
Our illustrious Leader is a nasty bleeder  
She talks out of her arse and she looks like the back of a donkey.

—illustrating highly effectively that when the dialectic seems insufficient, there's always abuse; and also lots of 'la-la-las':

La la la la la, la la la la laaaah  
Lah-la la, la la la la laah.

This was the influence of Rory Macleod, who Sue and I had come across playing late one night in the rain at Elephant Fayre. He was drenched, and by the end half his guitar strings hung broken, but a crowd of about twenty of us wouldn't let him stop. Part of Rory's glory is that when his brilliant political, personal, or romantic lyrics end, he wordlessly continues to sing out emotion and joy, and sometimes anger, using the vocable. In the hands of A39, this technique created an impression of us gleefully dancing on the graves of our home country's imperial history and dreams of glory.

The inclusion of oddity in creation would continue throughout this iteration of A39, and within months we would be performing *Leon Brittan does not ask forgiveness*, a sparse Ringo-based Eisler-type song about the Westland Affair and the Miners' Strike; and on the main stage at a music

festival hammering a pile of oil drums with heavy sticks while chanting the string of anti-imperialist insults that constituted *Reagan-Nixon Man*.

When the time came to turn our wheels west, Lucy's car began to demonstrate the strain of so many years and miles: the starter motor ceased to start the motor. Not even the standard encouragement with a hammer would motivate it. I could fix this for a tenner in Cornwall, but the chances of attaining parts and repair on this side of a global historical divide seemed beyond our diplomatic and economic resources and we resigned ourselves to a thousand miles of bump starts. It was going to be a long road home.

The first point of crisis came predictably when we reached the hard iron border at Hegyeshalom. Again, it was dark. The autumn was turning mid-European, with cold and pointed rain slanting through the yellow lights of frontiers here at the heaviest armed historical confrontation of all time, a standing conference of contempt that an officious young lieutenant in the Hungarian border force decided to visit on us. To his obvious frustration we made a pitiful icon for the bourgeois west in our battered and scratched-up non-starter of a car, a semiotic subversion that seemed to him to deserve punishment. So he sent our car backwards and forwards, here and there on a tour of the doors of transnational officialdom. Each bureaucratically inspired movement was three person-powered across wet and oil-slicked concrete; each time we surprised the engine into life the lieutenant insisted we turned it off again.

The inevitable tailback included a coachload of Rapid Vienna football supporters returning from a match in Tatabánya, who disembarked and joined our backwards and forwards pushing in a pretence of being too frightened to refuse us; not that we'd asked for help and not that we had the power to refuse it. Even the sight of the guns of the border troops could not get them back on their coach. In the wake of the Heysel Stadium disaster earlier that year and consequent fear and contempt for the British across Europe, the saluting and mock-cowering Austrian football crowd turned the whole episode into a comedy act with implicitly threatening overtones, and the lieutenant finally decided to wave us all on our way. So we were redeemed by international solidarity between football fans: Vienna, Villa, Charlton, and Palace.

We made our way west and north with no particular enthusiasm to attain the object of the journey or for any particular place on its arcs, the

inevitable mindset of everlasting travel reducing all possibility of home to the shell we are condemned to inhabit on the day we are born. Those that travel aimlessly are not holidaymakers. To roam comes to seem an inevitable blessing/curse that has been waiting to claim us all our lives.

As the year and the evening grows late, cities darken and evacuate. In Salzburg, performing to an all but empty shopping street, we were engaged by a passing nightclub owner to perform in his establishment in the small hours of the morning. We would also be fed, and the drinks were free. Through a stroke of logistical madness, the liquid aspect of the fee arrived first and kept coming. It was now more than twenty-four hours since our last meal. This was not unusual: in these days before the Euro, we often found ourselves in one country with currency only for another, or just without the opportunity to cook. Soon it was apparent this performance was not going to happen, and that the many empty glasses on the table in our curtained alcove were harbingers of an impending contractual dispute.

I quietly slipped out to fetch the car that had been thoughtfully parked above a steep downhill; but less thoughtfully it was in my absence (I had been roaming the tramways for gas for our cooking stove), and the only clue I had to the car's whereabouts was a description of the nature of the gradient. I roamed the hillier suburbs seeking a green Renault on a substantial slope and miraculously found it. I drove to a dramatic tickover outside the club entrance and the others made their escape. We fled into the night west towards the Tyrol.

The next evening, in a cold mountain downpour, we found Innsbruck city centre deserted except for a gang of would-be punks who surrounded us to paw at our instruments and demand cigarettes and money. They quickly withdrew in the face of our impressive repertoire of Anglo-Saxon and stood grumbling about us on the far side of the central square. The Heyssel factor definitely helped, but evening Innsbruck left us exactly in the mood to deal with this. We didn't even have to raise our voices. Ever hungrier, we camped at the foot of a huge escarpment, then moved on to cross another border, then another, another, another, back to Ostend and crossed the Straits of Dover in a Storm Force Ten. Less than eighteen months later, the *Herald of Free Enterprise* would sink here in these same conditions and kill nearly two hundred people.

We returned to Cornwall thinking we would get to work on a new touring play; an intention we found ourselves forced to postpone.





Fig. 17. Our customary accommodation on international tour, a 'Rastplatz' on a European autobahn. In the background, left to right: Mark Kilburn, Sue Farmer, Lucy Kempton. The tent in the foreground is the one Sue and I shared. It was also the tent I lived in when I first arrived in Cornwall and for several months with Miracle Theatre. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).

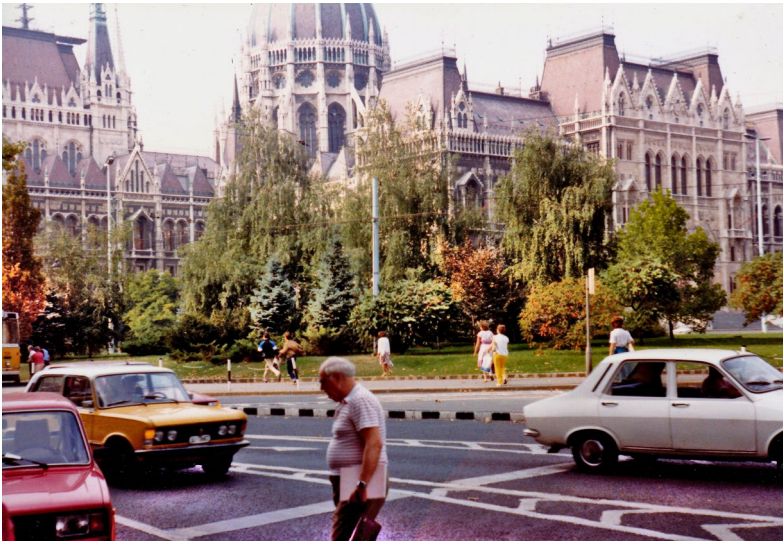


Fig. 18. Hungarian parliament building with Ladas and Dacia, Budapest, 1984. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).



Fig. 19. The view from our borrowed apartment in Pest. Here we put together our Hungarian show and reworked our street theatre act for the return journey. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).



Fig. 20. Brewing up at the top of an Alpine pass, 1984. We couldn't afford to use the tunnels. Left to right: Sue Farmer, Lucy Kempton, and Mark Kilburn. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).