

Occupy Music

An examination of the role of music at the St. Paul's Cathedral Occupy camp, from the perspective of a community musician

Preamble

'It would be no exaggeration if I said that music alone can be the means by which the souls of races, nations and families, which are today so apart, may one day be united. The musician's lesson in life is therefore a great one. Music is not expressed through language, but through beauty of rhythm and tone which reach far beyond language. The more the musician is conscious of his mission in life, the greater service he can render to humanity.'

Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*

'Here we are at Finsbury Square. It's a lovely Sunday afternoon, and some people are off to do a pop-up Occupy... There's a trailer with a speaker on it, and they're gonna go and make some noise, and take some noise and some levity into the City of London, and they're gonna congregate around that noise, and that noise is gonna carry energy and empower them with energy, and be something around which they can... meld, if you like, and also bring a bit of good vibrations to where they're going.'

These are the opening words of my interview with performance poet Pete the Temp at Finsbury Square, the last remaining Occupy 'encampment' in London, on a blustery March Sunday in 2012. Seeing this small group of politicised Sunday strollers was a reminder that while the 'iconic' camp at St. Paul's was gone, the Occupy movement was still out and about, wanting to make positive change, and wanting to use music as a tool to bring about that change.

Having said that, this essay will use the lifespan of the St. Paul's camp – October 15th 2011 to February 28th 2012 - as a capsule of time to have a look at what sort of music has been made at Occupy in London. It will also explore who has been making it, and why: does it reflect the diversity of the Occupiers? Is it fundamentally a means to lift the spirits of campers, or was reaching out to passers-by the aim? And if Occupy is at its core an examination of ways to erode and devolve power, and to encourage participation from everyone, from the most to the least empowered, why has so much of that music been more of 'a soliloquy' than an invitation to be part of a chorus?

'A singing movement is a winning movement'

In his introduction to the 1939 songbook *Labor Songs*, John L Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers of America, wrote: 'A singing army is a winning army.' More recently, Pete Seeger, a pivotal figure in the development of politicised music-making in the US, altered that statement a little by saying 'a singing movement is a winning movement'. Music, particularly if it is participatory, and even more particularly if it is sung, has very real potential to infuse a person with a feeling of inner strength, and a strong bond with those he or she is making sound with, not to mention a closer connection to the issue that might underpin that movement. There is considerable evidence amassing that singing, especially with others, has a positive impact on the singer in a variety of ways, both physical and emotional. (A new organisation has been created specifically to examine these issues: AIRS, or Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing(1), based in Canada but with global connections. Another example of this scientific examination of singing is *Choral singing and psychological wellbeing*, a research paper based on findings from English choirs in which 'a high degree of consensus emerged on the positive effects of choral singing, but substantial variations were also found.'(2))

However, if that singing is carried out with the intention of creating some sort of positive external change, like, for example, alleviating the suffering of others, or protecting a threatened piece of the natural world, could it be that the positive personal transformation might be even greater?

It may also be worth reflecting on the fact that the 'golden age' (if it can be possible to describe such a hard-fought struggle thus) of singing for change was the US Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s. In his book *33 Revolutions per Minute*, Dorian Lynskey writes of the frustration felt by some in the black community towards the overly respectful, infuriatingly *patient* attitude embodied by the song 'We Shall Overcome'(3). In April 1964, Malcolm X told his audience "Anytime you live in the twentieth century, 1964, and you're walking around here singing 'We Shall Overcome', the government has failed us. This is part of what's wrong with you - you do too much singing. Today it's time to stop singing and start swinging. You can't sing up on freedom, but you can swing up on some freedom."

However, with 1989's 'Fight the Power', Public Enemy's Chuck D struck a compromise, or was perhaps making a strategic suggestion, when he said

'Music hitting your heart cause I know you got soul (Brothers and sisters)

Listen if you're missing y'all

Swinging while I'm singing

Giving whatcha getting'(4)

There was occasionally an appetite for 'We Shall Overcome' at St. Paul's, most often from veterans of 1960s or 1970s struggles, but it struck me that if the crowd had to choose between Chuck D and Pete Seeger, (and no one is I hope suggesting that we are only allowed one), they would go for the former. Or they might even be greedy and humbly request a duet, which would certainly be worth the price of admission.

The film *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*(5) looks at the role of music (and movement) in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Its protagonists assert with extraordinary passion that freedom songs were at the absolute heart of that struggle, and that victory would not have been possible without them. Is it possible that since singing songs like this was so embedded in black South African culture, that to leave them behind for the sake of a political ideal would have meant excising a pivotal part of oneself, and that excision might have been too high a price to pay for freedom?

Perhaps similarly, in the 1990s, the central tactic – and philosophy – of the direct action group Reclaim the Streets (RTS)(6), whose critique spread from the ravages of car culture to the need to practice 'post-capitalism', (or at least confront it), was the street party. Undergirded by the oft-quoted US anarchist Emma Goldman's claim that 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!', these parties did see bands perform live at their edges, but central above all was the sound system, often appearing out of nowhere like a revolutionary rabbit from a police-defying hat. Rave culture was pretty much at its height, and thousands of people were willing to risk running through a police line to reach the holy land of a reclaimed road, transformed into a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ[7]) and studded with Home Secretary-baiting repetitive beats. It could be that dancing, like singing, is innately good for humans to indulge in, even more beneficial if carried out in company, but incomparable if carried out in a gathering with disobedience to a willfully exploitative and destructive system at its heart.

In *Techno Millennium - Dance, ecology and future primitives*, Graham St. John outlines theories that place 'psychedelicised mass trance dances as the viable 'antidote' to the egotism at the heart of the West's ecological vandalism.'(8) While this claim might come across now as

somewhat inflated, there is still something extraordinarily transgressive and innovative in the way Reclaim the Streets events melded rave culture's seeking after euphoric physical and to some extent spiritual release to a clear-eyed analysis that was nevertheless incandescent with rage. RTS took its love of Situationist theory, and its equally passionate love for the dancefloor (be it in warehouse, field or club), and, fired by desire to express its disobedience, arrived on the street, ready to dance, and ready to resist police encroachment into its TAZ.

October 15th 2011, 'Occupy the Stock Exchange'

Flashing forward to October 15th 2011, in an atmosphere not unlike the build-up to an illegal street party-to-be, there are an indeterminate number of people attempting to wander nonchalantly towards St. Paul's Cathedral, drawn by a comparatively new and powerfully enticing entreaty to 'Occupy'. The pre-announced intention from the anonymous callers of this event is to "occupy the London Stock Exchange (LSX), and be prepared to stay", following the example of the Tahrir Square occupiers, Spain's indignados, or the brave Americans who are currently occupying Wall Street.

The atmosphere is good, and while there is little going on rhythmically, there is a fusillade of terrific placards, with slogans such as 'We are the real currency', and, of course, 'We are the 99%'. No one seems to know if there is a masterplan – if there will be a magical 'piece de resistance' which makes the taking of LSX relatively easy, or if we will have to make do with who and what we have around us, and push our way in. A small sound system appears on the steps of the Cathedral. The bright spark who has brought it along makes the (in my view) serious mistake of instituting a series of speeches, when what we really need is the injection of energy that music brings, (unless the speaker is – and this is comparatively rare in England – a rabble-rousing firebrand; and such a rare indigenous breed as this might find it hard to set fire to a crowd of predominantly English listeners, possibly due to a combination of mistrust of demagoguery and good old-fashioned *Brief Encounter*-esque emotional repression.)

Norman Mailer speaks of a similar mistake in his 1968 book *The Armies of the Night*, which looks forensically at the 1967 March on the Pentagon in Washington DC. At the outset, speaker after speaker climbs the improvised podium to speak of his feelings towards US involvement in the Vietnam war, when what the crowd really wants to do is *get moving*, to march towards its anger and its fear, and face what the rest of the day has to offer.

Back on the steps of St. Paul's, after an invisible signal, or a sense of impatience reaching a tipping point, we begin to move towards LSX. At the arch leading to the privately-owned Paternoster Square, onto which LSX looks, we meet a line of police on horses, through which we could push, but the will isn't with us, and all we have instead is a series of heckles thrown at the seemingly impervious officers. It's my strong sense that the right song sung at this point by enough people – or perhaps a few minutes of the Rhythms of Resistance samba band(9) would have given us the impetus to make it through the line. Instead, we begin making our way, a little disconsolately it strikes me, around the block in the unlikely hope of finding a way through that is defended more weakly. As we walk, there are some shouts of 'Shame on you!' directed towards the police, but little else that is audible above the hubbub of movement, traffic and possibly also an overhead helicopter. As someone who has struggled for quite a while to rally a musical presence at events like this, I am heading swiftly towards a low ebb.

As is now well documented, having not found a secret unguarded door into the square, finally we return to our starting point and pause for a breather and a 'General Assembly' to decide our next move. This turns out to have been the perfect place to pitch camp after all, which we duly do, notwithstanding plenty of burly discouragement from the combined strength of the

Metropolitan and City police forces.

That General Assembly revealed something very interesting: that people may not want to sing (or are at least too shy to do so), but they do nevertheless want to participate with their voices. Hence the 'mic check', or human microphone, phenomenon, where the main speaker breaks his or her speech into phrases small enough to be repeated by the crowd. Wikipedia suggests that 'The human microphone was first used in the anti-nuclear protests in the United States and later in the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference of 1999 protest activity.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Ostensibly designed to amplify everyone's words, (as well as to circumvent laws on amplification of sound during protests, and maybe even – inadvertently? - to cut some carbon), this system actually means the words are often lost in a garble of multiple repetitions. It might be more efficient for there to be solo voices situated in various parts of the crowd, relaying the speech more intelligibly, but that would defeat what is I think is the actual but underlying purpose. Pete the Temp puts it this way: 'this call and response, this ancient west African choral tradition, is very useful in protest scenarios, 'cos it's like 'Bang - bang' - you're ping-ponging out the ball, you're bouncing it back, you're eliciting the response: "Are you here?" "I am here", "Are you here?" "I'm here".

('Mic check' is also extremely effective as a means of infiltrating public space, as in 'Occupy London Mic Check for N30 Strike': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daccclwQp0g>, where Liverpool Street Station becomes the stage for some unforeseen rush hour invisible theatre. This is the only time I've seen it used in this noteworthy way, perhaps the main drawback being the need in this case for the speaker to shout his compelling message; how much more insidious and heart-infiltrating might it have been if he had been mic'ed for real, and been able to whisper his radical invocation sotto voce in the manner of Leonard Cohen?)

When our earnest discourse at the Finsbury Square camp is interrupted with "Mic check! Mic check!" coming through the mobile PA system, Pete says 'Audience participation is at the core of the discourse of Occupy. You know, it starts with a mic check...' 'There's something inherently pluralistic about the human mic,' writes Richard Kim in the progressive US publication *The Nation*, going on to point out that it is an egalitarian instrument,' as 'it exudes solidarity over ego.'⁽¹¹⁾ From these observations, it occurs to me that with a relatively small leap of faith, it might be possible to create some beautiful improvisations with a 'singing mic check' workshop. The ensuing chaos might be a source of some unifying hilarity, which might then lead to a more powerful, primal collective experience. However, the experience of running a prototype in class at Goldsmiths showed me that I would have to work much harder to ensure the participation of those for whom improvisation, not to mention singing of any kind, is something they shy away from if at all possible.

I ask Pete if, as well as the way he gently undercuts and makes fun of the group dynamic, Peoples' Front of Judaea-style, there is a particular intonation needed. Is he casting a spell? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNCK784bfas&feature=relmfu>



'Absolutely, yeah. I mean, that's why we do it, isn't it? That's why we're performing artists, because we like captivating people and taking their attention and speaking words quickly at them and singing sounds at them, and manipulating them to move their body, and that's like, wow, that's meditation, that's zen, that's addictive, that's a potent energy to harness - a big group of people...'

It might be significant – and refreshingly honest - that he focuses in on the personal motivation to use call and response tactics with the crowd.

'Ah yeah, we all have egos don't we? Who doesn't? I know I do! But we can harness that ego and put it in the context of the macro-ego, weave all those egos together, and galvanise them over a single issue, and tie our identity to the identity of something bigger than ourselves, which is what music is, which is what being in a movement is about, which is what an ideology is about. So it's a coming together, a knitting together, and music is a great way to galvanise that, you know, get everybody to focus even for a few minutes around a shared sentiment. That might be a poem about a certain subject, or out might be a song with just a line that everybody likes to sing or just a bassline that you wanna take home with you!'

I suggest that he has developed a talent and a skill, which is designed to be observed and appreciated by the audience, and yet his performance is clearly about – and thrives on - collaboration. The key to the Occupy movement is horizontality, and what it's like to be in a collective and share the decision-making process in a really groundbreaking way. However, we also often suspend that horizontality as an audience, and it's nice to, and it's fine, but it does beg some serious questions: can an Occupy performer, or a community music practitioner, completely devolve power to the audience or group, without things unravelling dramatically? And if not, is that a problem politically? To me, there is a real problem in our society with leaders, but that doesn't mean that leadership itself is innately dangerous. In fact, it is crucial in our organising and our interaction, as long as positions of leadership don't ossify. And a successful interactive musical experience would ideally create a greater feeling of fluidity in leadership, empowering the powerless to take power, and the powerful to let it pass through their hands without an ensuing catastrophic loss of respect.

Pete: 'I think some of the best audiences are Occupy audiences... These gigs never pay, but they're the best audiences you could hope for... they're as fully engaged as you can get as an audience, 'cos they're Occupiers. It's all DIY. They're hands on involved, and they're taking part. They're involved daily in collective decision-making and consensus-building projects, whether that's building a tent or overcoming a problem in the camp, or whether it's skipping food together. Everyone's pulling together, nobody can be isolated, no one can be a passive observer - people here, for their very survival, are part of a thriving community. And that in performance context means if you're going to elicit some energy from them, Bang! You're gonna get it straight back, and they're gonna get involved, and they're not gonna be self-conscious about making their voice heard or making their opinions heard... or heckling, which is good. It's a good thing to have, though sometimes to be honest, heckling at Occupy can be a bit too much.'

We then speak of Phoenix, a very experienced activist, with over 20 years of political occupations and squatting under his belt, who knows very well that when his crew takes a building, he needs to get a cabaret up and running straightaway, and keep it running regularly, so as to keep spirits up through the tough times of uncertainty and sometime rampant randomness. Cabaret played a key role in the life of the Bank of Ideas, a large office building owned by disreputable investment bank UBS, and squatted by Occupy as winter set in, which was abuzz every day with meetings, workshops and impromptu jam sessions.

I played at a few of these Friday night affairs, which were a lovely mix of political or satirical music, impassioned spoken word and fun-for-its-own-sake traditional cabaret acts.



*Cabaret at the Bank of Ideas,
(photo by dhyandeva)*

It would be a dangerous programming policy for Occupy to insist that all music and entertainment to be politicised in some way – after all, simply being present and performing at

Occupy is supportive in itself. (Which means that not having any political material isn't enough of a reason not to show up and do a turn, I feel).

Choir leader Sarah Jewell, who pulled together a massive 'Sing Up St. Paul's' concert on December 21st, and who gradually found herself more and more immersed in the inspirational but also often knotted life of the camp and the wider Occupy process, said:

'Occupy is the least musical movement I have ever come across, and that is partly to do with its horizontality. It's spread across a huge umbrella of interests, many of them very intellectual, and you have a lot of what I would call the policymakers, the process observers who are very concerned with conceptual thinking, of creating a new paradigm, of rejecting traditions...which is not the healthiest ground for creating music.'

It seems very possible in these times to poison yourself with a surfeit of seriousness. This primarily intellectual approach, the amount and intensity of discourse about the system's ills, and possible ways to remedy those ills, not to mention the everyday trials of camp life, made for quite a burden. Although it was possibly too rare an occurrence, that burden was shaken off now and then with some no nonsense, check-your-brain-at-the-door, (or even 'free your ass and your mind will follow'[12]), dancing and laughing.

'Music is hardly just sound that is passively listened to,' writes Robin Balliger, 'but a sonic force that acts on bodies and minds and creates its own life rhythms; rhythms that power recognises and tries to dominate through a relentless domination of societal noise. But, because of its unique qualities music can be employed as a powerful counter-hegemonic device that goes beyond thought to being. Music as socially organised use-value is a threat to the individuated, consumption-oriented desiring machine of advanced capitalism.'(13) Capitalism has done a pretty job of commodifying the joy and release that can be innate in music, partly by imprisoning it on dancefloors, sandwiching it between advertisements or by imprinting a logo on the forehead of the artist. It's not clear to me that Occupy has embraced what I (ironically) think is our need to go 'beyond thought to being', but if it did, and allied that instinctive physicality to its formidable intellectual analysis, it could start to become a more irresistible force for change.

The band The Severed Limb did their bit for joyous release with their St. Paul's performance:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alwMdc-S3No>



To me, the song's key line 'Riding on the slow train with my baby in the heart of summertime' is made even more delicious by it being sandwiched between, say, another hard-fought battle to protect the consensus decision-making process, and a small group getting to grips with the actual meaning of quantitative easing.

Rap as soliloquy?

Sarah Jewell described the music she encountered at St. Paul's:

'There were various bands that came down, but they were very similar in nature. They were either sort of urban, hip hop, quite hard, quite full-on, often very good. Or they were rock out indie grungers. But there was very little harmony, community, raising of spirits - it was more commenting on capitalism. Nothing wrong with that, but it's hard to join in with that stuff.'

At this point I equated rap to a gladiatorial contest, where syllables are your weapons, often to dazzling and hypnotic effect, but sometimes also where verbal dexterity and speed can win out over emotional engagement or even intelligibility.

'It's a soliloquy', said Sarah. This seems absolutely on the money, as often rap is like an actor removing herself from the narrative, walking to the front of the stage and suddenly sharing her innermost feelings with the audience. To me, this is where 'protest music' of any kind has the potential to really connect with the listener: in the interaction between the personal and the universal, or the political. To stalk only the realm of the general can work, but it requires great skill. To qualify that, it strikes me that much Occupy music (and conversation) was concerned with the setting out of the problem without enough wit, subtlety or soul...without a desire to take us somewhere beyond the enormous brick wall of the status quo that looms up so menacingly in front of us.

The rapper SGB is a 16 year old from Southend with an extraordinarily wise head on his shoulders, whose performance here

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y2_ezT2LKU&feature=related

could easily be described as a soliloquy:

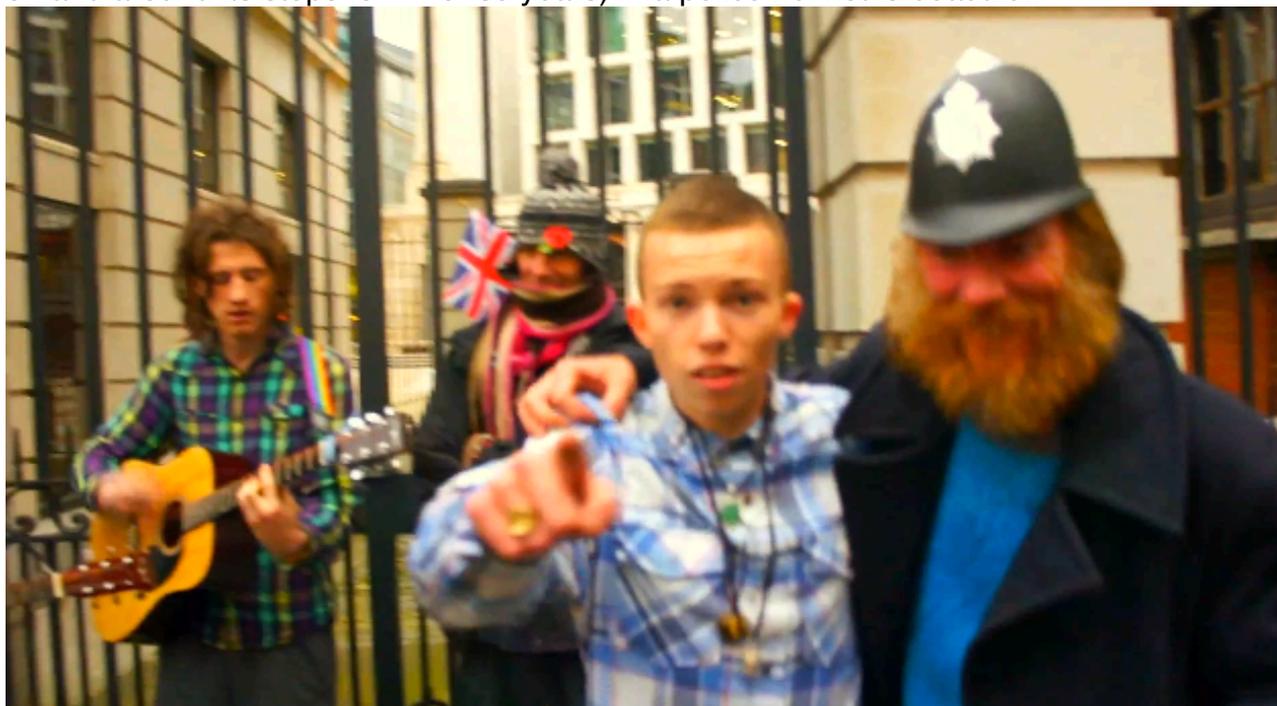
'I'm tryin' to live my life as righteous as I can,
I can justify my actions, you ain't lived the life I have
But it's made me who I am: a passionate young man
And when I look back on the past will I see footprints in the sand?'



On the other hand, another performance to a crowd has him cast more as a showman, performing at the side of the cathedral on what looks to be a busy Saturday afternoon, with a fascinating cross-section of tourists, locals and Occupiers all in attendance:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSKijW-uDME&feature=related>

The moment with Jimmy (also known as the 'Lord of St. Paul's', on account of his having lived on and around its steps for 11 or so years) in a police helmet is beautiful.



He is backed by two acoustic guitars and a djembe; this cross-fertilisation of folk and rap was a common sight at Occupy. (The one 'livestream' I was part of was a completely thrilling mix of guitarists, singers and rappers, each of us challenging the other to ever-wilder acts of improvisation.) Back on Saturday afternoon, SGB is fizzing with righteous adrenalin, and when he gets to the line 'Stand out from the crowd even if it's by yourself!', he tries to get the audience to send it back to him, with some but not complete success. Then it's almost as if he feels the need to go for something more basic and familiar to elicit the response he wants, so he goes for the now demo-familiar 'Whose streets?' Our streets!' This does the job, as the crowd fires it back with almost too much energy: the performance is temporarily toppled by it, not least because it completely throws the timing of the musicians.

So in his keenness to make his performance more collective, (and closer to the spirit of community music, perhaps), the quality suffers. That for me contains echoes of the fundamental discussion within community music circles about whether we should concern ourselves with 'quality' or even 'art', as long as the participants appear to be having an enriching experience. In the context of Occupy, most of the music that attempted to achieve some level of communality struggled to be as effective as other parts of the same performance.

All the signs seem to be sending me back to a long-dreamt of project: to have a large, powerful choir singing in 3 parts or more, alongside a crack rhythm section of a stripped down samba band and tightly-drilled horn section with a couple of trombones holding down the bass. For a variety of reasons, that has only occasionally, temporarily, come to pass, most effectively at previous Climate Camps.



The picture shows our rendition of 'Oily Gaga', a rewrite of the good Lady's 'Poker Face', complete with exquisitely choreographed dance moves, this version highlighting the shocking climate crimes of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

The 12 Volt sound system, bringer of bass

I speak to Andy, whose 12 Volt sound system amplified countless musical acts, as well as General Assemblies and speakers, throughout the lifespan of the St. Paul's Camp. (He managed to stay for most of 3 months, until 'the wind shafted my tent', and a nearby squatted flat promised warmth and hot water.) The presence of this system, complete with its homemade and surprisingly powerful bass bin, changed the musical face of the occupation as it meant bands could play with their rhythm sections, not just the occasional earnest gentleman with his acoustic guitar.

When I asked about highlights, he singled out the performance by Solo Banton and YT on October 29th: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZCMeepZvmg>

'It's quite annoying really', he says, "cos they came down 10 minutes before a GA, and they wouldn't let us put the GA back. "The GA's gotta happen at 7." So they only did, like, two or three tracks.' But the footage shows that those tracks had a good crowd completely connected to what was being said, (not to mention the dubwise backing, showing off 12 Volt's bass bins to impressive effect.) One half of the duo, YT, toasts:

'Everything we try to do they want to knock it down
That's why them city burnin' to the ground
So wake up out of your sleep and slumber
Revolutionary – we enough in number
'Cos some of them don't know what is the minute or the hour
It's the people versus the power'

(It might be worth being reminded that this performance took place less than two months after the English riots.)

Rap vs. folk – an inaccurate antagonism?

Lowkey is an English rapper of Iraqi descent whose video for 'Obama Nation' is heading for 2 million viewings as of April 2012. His performance of 'They Call Me a Terrorist' at St. Paul's was in front of probably less than 100 people: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYUjRptpGx8>

Before getting stuck into the meat of the song, Lowkey invokes the maybe hokey but in this context quite subversive cliché of getting the crowd to wave their hands from side to side. Doing that gives the audience a gentle slope into participation, or at least some degree of empathy with the protagonist of the song, who is someone with dark skin who is tired of being mistaken (accidentally or manipulatively) for a terrorist:

'They're calling me a terrorist
Like they don't know who the terror is
When they put it on me, I tell them this
I'm all about peace and love'



Most of the audience in the foreground seen by the camera are enthusiastic observers, while many behind them are hanging out or watching from the comfort or safety of the steps. The real stars are the few diehard fans in front of the pallet stage who give the song a real intensity when they join in with the chorus and most of the verses too. They look to be of Asian descent, and seem full of joy at what feels like their anthem being performed in this inspirational public place, by a performer who has written something aggressive, humorous, political and lyrical with which they closely identify.

Dorian Lynskey recounts how inside the 'Battle in Seattle' in 1999, when an extraordinary and unexpected coalition of tactics shut down a key meeting of the World Trade Organisation, 'activist Andrew Boyd realised "that the wild yet focused energies in the streets could never be resolved into a folk song – we were now part of the Hip-Hop Nation. The rhythms of the chants were more percussive. The energy was fierce and playful."'(14) As someone who still uses an acoustic guitar in the street, that quote flashed up in front of me not a little accusingly when I watched footage of Billy Bragg at St. Paul's on the November 30th day of action against the coalition government's austerity crackdown:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pd3lz4a1QgY>



Bragg has a winning - and often very funny - sense of the ironies and limitations of making punk-infused folk music in a 21st century where rap is the language of the street, and often of protest. Folk and rap can often be, or at least try to be, extremely serious, as far as I can see. I think both could be made more effective if they were also a little more playful, at least from time to time. In between songs, Bragg's asides often have a very light touch, but the songs themselves seem anchored with lead weights, particularly 'The Internationale', which, like 'We Shall Overcome', is almost impossible to carry impactfully with one voice. And this crowd, while seeming to have a thirst for this admirably heartfelt but, on this showing, clay-booted troubadour have no desire to join him in song. Or if they do, they are from a generation where instant recall of the lyrics is long-passed.

Having said that, 'Which Side Are You On?', dating from 1931 but with fresh lyrics namechecking Occupations in London and New York, is blessed with a one-line chorus that is stark and simple, and which succeeds in bringing the crowd on board the song-as-ship.

To counter the critique, or leaven the gloom, of the last paragraphs, watching Peggy Seeger helped by Leon Rosselson, who have both been doing this sort of thing for 50 years or more, sing 'Sit Down' on the same day at St. Paul's, is absolutely lovely, and much lighter on its feet: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXKffKdMDBG>



You get the impression that the words have been written at the kitchen table that morning, in the style of Woody Guthrie's 'newspaper' songs, (as was Bragg's 'Which Side' rewrite), designed to deal with the absolute moment. It might be tough to ask a crowd to join you in verses penned that very morning, but if the chorus is reassuringly familiar, that's where the participation can really kick in. Like Lowkey and Bragg, Seeger doesn't worry about teaching that crowd what to sing, let alone how to sing it. There seems to be too much urgency for that, (partly brought on by the times we live in, but also perhaps by the fact that there might be several more performers to squeeze in before either a GA is about to start, or the time when the cathedral has requested that amplified music not interfere with its own version of song and ritual.)

The *Sing Up St. Paul's* concert

By far the most collective musical endeavour at St. Paul's was the *Sing Up St. Paul's* concert on December 21st, where about 450 singers from a wide variety of backgrounds came together to sing a programme of often spiritual but only occasionally religious music.

The build-up to this event included a smaller singing visit made by members of Sarah's choir (Songlines), of which I am also a member. This began at 6pm one evening in the more uproarious and irreverent quarter of the camp, the tea tent, where we sang a couple of songs, but I had the distinct impression the tea takers would be just a little happier with silence than our slightly well-meaning sounding repertoire. We didn't make a great attempt to get people to join with us, but when we reached the kitchen marquee, and began to sing the South African freedom song 'Asikatale', the line 'We do not care if we go to prison – it is for freedom we are fighting now!' definitely touched a nerve (in a good way). We did our best to inject it with as much conviction (if you'll excuse the pun) as possible, given we were a predominantly white, middle class group, most of which would probably harbour deep misgivings about doing anything that was even vaguely imprisonable.

Then, as she became more deeply embroiled in the legal fight to oppose eviction, Sarah had the idea of a massive concert to show support for the camp. 'It was to show the camp that while there were 120 people living there, there were thousands in the city who were impressed with their bravery and their resilience,' she says. 'It was a gesture of solidarity - it wasn't intended to show off Occupy, it was intended to show public support *for* Occupy.'

To prepare for that, a Sunday afternoon rehearsal was called, to be held in a squatted office building just behind the 'Bank of Ideas'. Over 100 people turned up to run through the repertoire, with about 5 of us acting as Sarah's choral 'lieutenants'. Many of those attending were veterans from 1970s and onwards progressive political campaigns, and all thrilled to be able to bring their love of singing to a movement they were extremely excited by. I had a sense that some hadn't felt able at this point to get involved in Occupy, as it hadn't seemed 'theirs'. So the rehearsal was full of good humour and excitement, not only because of Sarah's ability to fire up a group while also putting it at its ease.



The concert itself was possibly a victim of its own success, as there were so many people ranged across the steps of the cathedral that conducting them must have been extraordinarily difficult. The absence of any amplification meant that there felt as if there was at least a second of delay between one end of the choir and the other. The metaphor of an oil tanker kept floating in front of me, standing as I was in the middle, with a loud voice and closer familiarity with the material than most, attempting to help steer the songs along.

Even so, it created an atmosphere of conviviality and warmth, which was just what was needed on the winter solstice. 'It was hugely powerful for the people listening. The Campers felt genuinely lifted up, and supported', remembers Sarah.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTVlo0Sm7sk&feature=related>



This clip begins with a rendition of a rewritten version of 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', complete with accusatory fingers collectively pointed at LSX to the choir's right. However, I think the high point of the footage is Sarah's impassioned piece of mic-checkery:

'Take back your political power!
Take back your buying power!
Take back your spiritual power!
Take back your voting power!
Take back the power of your voice in unity!'

Sarah is someone who writes extraordinary music, and who has very high musical standards, but outside Occupy she devotes herself to a community choir which is made up of some exquisite singers, but which doesn't always do justice to what she writes. Returning to that conundrum about quality vs. community (if it isn't too crass to bill it that way), she appears to inhabit, a little frustratedly at times, a crossover space in her musical life that values comradely spirit as much as achieving great beauty or intensity in art.

'I almost feel that in order to get Occupy singing, I'll have to write for Occupy,' since 'they don't know their historical ballads', she says, with her tongue in her cheek. It will be fascinating to see what she creates from the extraordinarily fertile ground that Occupy inhabits. Both she and Pete the Temp are convinced – as am I - that there is the potential to use the collaborative spirit of the movement to create music that is moving, and lasting.

One of the most popular songs of this movement, (and other recent incarnations) is 'The World Turned Upside Down', by Leon Rosselson(15), which recounts the fate, and points to the legacy, of The Diggers, who made a stand and occupied the land back in 1649. It would be wonderful to think that a piece of music written today could reverberate through the future, with a collaborative spirit at its heart, and a powerful physicality propelling it forward.

Notes:

1.) Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing: <http://www.airspace.ca>

2.) *Choral singing and psychological wellbeing: Findings from English choirs in a cross-national survey using the WHOQOL-BREF*, published in International Symposium in Performance Studies, 2007:

<http://newcastle.edu.au/Resources/Research%20Centres/ArtsHealth/Choral-singing-and-psychological-wellbeing.pdf>

3.) 'We are not afraid', Chapter 3 of *33 Revolutions per Minute*, Dorian Lynskey, (Faber, 2010)

4.) Lyrics from Public Enemy's *Fight the Power*, released from the album *Fear of a Black Planet* in 1989. Additional background taken from "Fight the Power"; Public Enemy's explosive 1989 hit single brought hip-hop to the mainstream -- and brought revolutionary anger back to pop. By Laura K. Warrell: http://www.salon.com/2002/06/03/fight_the_power/

5.) *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, documentary, released 2002:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amandla!:_A_Revolution_in_Four-Part_Harmony

6.) Reclaim the Streets: <http://rts.gn.apc.org>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reclaim_the_Streets

7.) Robin Balliger's evaluation of Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) has many echoes of both a Reclaim the Streets action, and of the St. Paul's camp, although admittedly the anarchists were only one of several mostly cooperative threads there:

'Hakim Bey's theory of TAZ begins with a critique of revolution from two main positions. He argues that the current period is one in which a "vast undertaking would be futile martyrdom" and, coming from an anarchist tradition, he distrusts revolution because of its historical tendency to reinstitute authoritarianism in a different guise. He contrasts revolution with uprising, focusing on this activity as a kind of "free enclave", as festival, and a temporary or limited Refusal in which to withdraw from the area of "simulation". Bey views the TAZ as both a strategy and "condition for life." He states, "The TAZ is thus a perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies. And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that 'anarchist dream' of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now." Ultimately the TAZ is a space beyond the gaze of power and the State.'

Sounds of Resistance - Robin Balliger, in *Sounding Off – Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution*, ed. Ron Sakolsky & Fred Ho, (Autonomedia, 1996)

8.) *Techno Millennium - Dance, ecology and future primitives* by Graham St. John, in *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed. Graham St. John, (Routledge, 2003).

9.) Rhythms of Resistance samba band: www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk

10.) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_microphone

11.) <http://www.thenation.com/blog/163767/we-are-all-human-microphones-now>

12.) 'free your ass and your mind will follow' is an inversion of the 1970 Funkadelic album title 'Free Your Mind...and Your Ass Will Follow';
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Your_Mind..._and_Your_Ass_Will_Follow

13.) *Sounds of Resistance* - Robin Balliger, in *Sounding Off – Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution*, ed. Ron Sakolsky & Fred Ho, (Autonomedia, 1996)

14.) *33 Revolutions per Minute*, Dorian Lynskey, pp. 639-640

15.) 'The World Turned Upside Down' sung by its composer:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=594JpY2ahFg>
and a (definitive?) version by Dick Gaughan:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8mi2MmiQGE&feature=related>

Bibliography:

33 Revolutions per Minute, Dorian Lynskey, (Faber, 2010)

The Mysticism of Sound and Music, Hazrat Inayat Khan, (Shambhala, 1996)

Sounding Off – Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution, ed. Ron Sakolsky & Fred Ho, (Autonomedia, 1996)

Class Act – The Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl by Ben Harker (Pluto Press, 2007)

The Armies of the Night – Norman Mailer (New American Library, 1968)

Acting in Concert: Music, Community and Political Action – Mark Mattern, (Rutgers University Press, 1998)

Appendix 1 -

Occupy performances of note that I wasn't able to mention in the essay:

* Freestyle rap Occupy London (occupylsx) 'I'm not afraid':

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=586SBXEyY5o>

* Soweto Kinch @Occupy:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6ysTxFVWF8>

* Occupy London. "...meet me at St. Pauls" - including 'Thriller' dance moves, Buddhist monks chanting, 'One Day Like This' round the old piano, and Kate Tempest:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8ELRz8KBNQ>

United Vibration: <http://vimeo.com/35130660>



SGB - Live Acoustic Session @St.Pauls **WhenWordsFailMusicSpeaks OUT SOON**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSKijW-uDME&feature=related>

UKS.TV | EXCLUSIVE - SGB @ OCCUPY LSX (Clued Up Rapper)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y2_ezT2LKU&feature=related

#OccupyLSX | Rap Freestyle @ St Paul's Cathedral 15/10/11 ft. Ed Greens:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8vYPQW2z7o>

Late Night Hip Hop at Occupy London:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O329S9Hqjpk&feature=related>

Singers at Occupy London; (no ifs no buts, no public sector cuts)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRxCfssZDAE&feature=related>

Soweto Kinch @Occupy:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6ysTxFVWF8>

Freestyle rap Occupy London (occupylsx) 'I'm not afraid'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=586SBXEyY5o>

Reggae band "Only Joe" play at OccupyLondon 23rd Nov 2011:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEv3jWQacNc>

Lovely performance from The Severed Limb at Occupy London:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alwMdc-S3No>

Will Varley - They Wonder Why We Binge Drink - Live at Occupy London:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y4hLQd4jf0>

Will And The People Occupy London St Pauls 2011 LIVE:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQUjSZu1NpA>

Riz Mc: 911 blues / sour times NYE Occupy London

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFzdt21O00k>

Anarchistwood perform for Occupy London on Christmas Eve:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRgPWlf93k4&feature=related>

Occupy London. "...meet me at St. Pauls":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8ELRz8KBNQ>

ED COX AT OCCUPY LONDON CAMP, SAINT PAUL'S CATHEDRAL. 27TH JANUARY 2012
(gypsy clowning):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oF5tO5cboo>

Occupy London: The musical (6 Day Riot):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YadQVuduP2U>

No One's Slave, No One's Master - Occupy London - Theo Simon

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNzge4QhCXU>