Manu Chao, the neighbourhood singer

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Manu Chao could be the most famous singer that many English speakers have never heard of. Yet he is to the alter-globalisation movement what Bob Dylan was to peace and civil rights in the 1960s. Oscar Reyes caught up with him by a campfire at Glastonbury, where he created a little 'neighbourhood of hope'

Contents

- Neighbourhood politics
- Music that sounds like the (…)
- Politik kills
- Nature's revenge
- Next station: hope

'I know I've got a responsibility, that maybe I can help people – I've got access to the mic, which a lot of people don't have. But I've also got responsibility in my neighbourhood, because I'm the singer of my neighbourhood. There's a guy who's the taxi driver and the guy who goes to the factory and I'm the singer.'

Sitting by a campfire backstage at Glastonbury, Manu Chao is just getting going. Fifteen minutes ago he was closing the festival on the Jazz World stage, to an audience of thousands. Now he's passing out beers and talking about politics, stressing that he cannot be a leader providing 'a voice for the voiceless', but can sometimes open up a space for political concerns that otherwise go unvoiced.

Manu Chao offsets his global celebrity with a disarming humility. He has played to 100,000 people on the Zocalo, the enormous main square in Mexico City, but still busks at bars in Barcelona – one of his adopted home cities. He frequently plays political gigs too, from the G8 in Genoa to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, and numerous others – often unannounced – to striking dockers or in prisons or at many other unexpected venues. If you want an analogy, then Manu Chao is to the alter-globalisation movement what Bob Dylan was to peace and civil rights in the 1960s. His albums sell millions of copies worldwide, but the English-language bias of most UK radio stations means that Manu Chao could be the most famous singer you've never heard of.

Neighbourhood politics

Manu Chao's political education went hand in hand with his musical awakening, but he can't be drawn on which of them is the stronger influence. 'First of all I'm Manu,' he says. 'Then music is a passion. And politics is part of me too.'

That politics began with his family history, which remains strongly etched onto his consciousness. His family fled Spain after his grandfather was sentenced to death by the Spanish dictator Franco, and he grew up in Paris, where he was born in 1961 to Galician and Basque parents. The sense of

responsibility to his neighbourhood, he says, is paramount. ‘That’s my culture, that’s my education. My mother gave me that education. My father and mother were activists, so from when I was a kid I know about that.’

But he has never seen that need to root action locally as reflecting any kind of parochialism. ‘What is interesting in neighbourhoods is that each one is a little representation of society, of the world,’ he says.

Having lived in Rio, in Mexico, in Barcelona, and spent much of his life without a settled home, how does he square this paradox of being constantly on the move with his strong sense of responsibility towards his locality? ‘I have a lot of neighbourhoods in my life,’ he says. ‘So I go from one to another, and I organise, I work and try to dynamise things.’

Music that sounds like the world

The easy movement from one neighbourhood to another is reflected in Manu Chao’s music too. The music industry, for its part, tends to pigeonhole Manu Chao as ‘world music’. But he is dismissive of that category, describing it as a ‘neo-colonial’ label for songs not sung in English. If they are not world music, though, Manu Chao’s songs are very much music that sounds like the world. He sings in French, Spanish, English, Portuguese and Italian. His albums are littered with samples and street sounds, and often feature non-professional musicians he has pulled in off the street.

The Clash and Bob Marley are the most obvious influences. The Clash’s Joe Strummer was known to be a fan (as is Robbie Williams, who collaborated with Lily Allen to cover the song ‘Bongo Bong’). The affinity with Bob Marley, meanwhile, saw him dedicate a song to ‘Mr Bobby’, an artist he celebrates for his simplicity and global reach. But that doesn’t fully capture the punk-ska eclecticism of Manu Chao’s music, or his seamless ability to blend these different styles into a distinctive sound.

That fusion of styles comes from a long time spent on the road, listening to the responses of his audiences and learning from the music to which they exposed him – in Latin America, especially.

When he first came to prominence with the band Mano Negra in the late 1980s, he was advised by his management to tour America. They meant the United States, but Mano Negra instead journeyed around South America by ship, playing gigs in port cities as they went. A year later, in 1993, Mano Negra returned to the continent, bought an old train and toured Colombia – playing to audiences of guerrillas, peasants and drug traffickers.

These experiences still influence his outlook today. ‘I got the chance to spend a lot of time [in Latin America], I love this continent, and I’m building my family there,’ he tells me. ‘It is an incredible school of life.’ But the pace and intensity of their travels took its toll on Mano Negra, and the band split up shortly after the tour ended.

Manu’s response was to go backpacking, recording most of his debut solo album, *Clandestino*, on a portable eight-track recorder as he went. Released in 1998, the album was a huge success, selling more than five million copies. His next album, *Proxima Estacion: Esperanza* (‘Next stop: hope’ – a reference to a metro announcement in Madrid), released in 2001, consolidated his place as one of the world’s most successful recording artists.

It then took another six years for Manu Chao to record his next studio album, *La Radiolina*, which came out to critical acclaim last autumn. Not that he hasn’t been busy with writing, political activism, touring and DJ-ing in the interim. In 2004, he did, in fact, return to the studio to produce

Dimanche À Bamako, an album by a blind, middle-aged Malian couple, Amadou and Mariam, which went on to sell half a million copies in its own right.

This passion for new musical encounters and travel, rather than concentrating on his recording career, speaks volumes for Manu Chao's sense of priorities. Listening from one album to the next, you find similar themes – and even whole backing tracks – return in different forms. In this sense, he is not so much a studio musician as he is a troubadour, evolving songs and sounds as he goes.

Politik kills

That sense of the importance of everyday encounters lies at the heart of Manu Chao's politics too. Asked what events most clearly influenced his political outlook, he says 'It's difficult for me to answer that. I think there's no ranking in activism. The important thing is the everyday.'

There is actually a vital consideration before engaging in politics, he continues: 'Before talking about activism, if everybody in this world acted with honesty, it would be a nice step. That's what I learnt from my grandfather – honesty. I bless him for that.' But honesty only takes you so far. 'The situation today is so problematic that honesty is not enough anymore. People have to do more.'

Manu Chao's sense of what it means to do more is as deeply political as it is suspicious of organised politics (or 'politik', as he dubs it on his latest single, 'Politik Kills'). He sees this sense of honesty, and 're-organising at the level of your person, your family and your neighbourhood', as standing in opposition to the kind of politik that needs 'ignorance' and 'lies'.

As Manu explains to me a vision of the world that is unremittingly bleak, yet somehow without being cynical, I imagine his discussion punctuated with that song's refrain: 'That's why, my friend, it's an evidence – politik is violence.'

'The big problem is money. The economic power is more powerful than the political. So we vote, but the politicians – they're all puppets,' he says, gesturing with his arms as he searches for the appropriate word. 'It is not a real democracy.'

He is equally scathing about the distorting influence of media ownership on democracy. 'In Europe,' he says, 'the first big problem was in Italy when Berlusconi took power for the first time, ten years ago. That was the proof that if you control the media, you're president. And after Berlusconi, I think with Sarkozy in France it was the same.

'So more and more people are not going to believe any more in democracy; and that's very dangerous. I feel like a democrat – I think it's the least worst way we've found to live all together. But the professional politicians have totally distorted the word and what it really means.'

His distaste for politicians is matched only by that he reserves for the influence of television. 'Television doesn't respect anything, so there are a lot of kids growing up respecting nothing. I think that's the most dangerous thing happening in society … and it is very important that there aren't another two or three generations coming like that, totally brainwashed by television, because its going to be terrible – all quick money, a lot of violence, everything must be easy, everything new, not a single work ethic.' Here too, if nothing changes, he thinks the result will be 'a lot of violence'.

Nature’s revenge

Asked if he sees any possibility of change, Manu says he does, but talks about the sources lying in fear rather than hope.

‘I think things are changing. It’s a kind of race between the craziness of the system and the sense of conservation of the human being. In the last couple of years, I saw that people are getting scared. They talk a lot about the change of the weather – shit, it’s raining in July. Full sun in December. Something is going wrong. And lots of people who aren’t politically conscious are starting to change.’

At this point, Manu – who has grown more agitated as our interview has progressed – rests his hand on my knee and takes on a look of greater intensity. ‘I’ll say something politically not very correct but I really believe it. I’m not afraid for nature. We’re doing a lot of harm to nature, it’s terrible. But nature, one day she’s going to get nervous and she’s going to … phoooosh!’

With that, he reaches back in a dramatic gesture that signals the end of civilisation. ‘And we’re all going to get out of this fucking planet in one minute!’

‘We’ll make a lot of problems for nature,’ he continues. ‘She’s going to take one million years to cure herself. One million years for nature is one day for us. When we attack nature we’re attacking ourselves. Nature is much more stronger than us … We’re not going to win this battle, she’s going to win.’

Next station: hope

That may sound an apocalyptic outlook, but it is not unremittingly so – since, despite his pessimism at global changes, he still draws hope that meaningful changes can grow out of what goes on at a neighbourhood level.

‘You cannot change the world, I cannot change the world. I cannot change my country maybe – if I know what my country is – but everybody can change his neighbourhood. I try. That’s a responsibility of everybody. I hope the solution is there. I don’t believe any more in one big revolution that’s going to change everything. I believe in thousands and thousands of little neighbourhood revolutions – that’s my hope.’

With other journalists circling, and a succession of well-wishers demanding attention and congratulating him on a great show, Manu Chao beats a retreat to catch up with his friends. Interview over.

Then something remarkable happens. Manu’s guitarist, who had been thrashing out punk chords on stage, has picked up an acoustic guitar and is strumming some familiar tunes. Manu returns and starts singing by the campfire. Songs of liberty and rebellion: the songs of Manu Chao.

A crowd slowly forms. Another band member starts assembling his trumpet, playing in accompaniment to ‘La Vida Tómbola’ (‘A Life of Chance’) – a song about the footballer Diego Maradona, first recorded for an Emir Kusterica film. The campfire burns on. At one point, a chorus of ‘Campiones, campiones, Ole ole ole’ rings out – a reference to Spain’s victory in that night’s European Cup final. Manu smiles broadly but noticeably doesn’t join in. As he put it earlier, ‘Maybe they can be very proud, I’m very happy for them, but its not going to change nothing.’

Someone gives Manu a hat, which he plays, instinctively, as a tambourine. His manager repeatedly tries to coax him onto the tour bus. He promises her that he'll go, then plays on – visibly enjoying himself. It is early in the morning already by the time the singing stops and he kisses friends goodbye.

I'd been thinking about how to square Manu's gloomy predictions about the world with the radiant hope that is embodied in his music, and about how that music has kept a party of strangers together for hours. 'You made yourself a neighbourhood here,' I say as we bid farewell. Manu's reply comes with an infectious smile: 'That's what we try to do.'

P.S.

* From Red Pepper Aug/Sept 2008 issue:

http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Manu-Ch...