

Chumbawamba's Long Musical Voyage

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There's that song, the one about getting knocked down and then getting back up again, but this British band's body of work is like an iceberg; the bulk of it is submerged below the surface, difficult to get a hold of.

Tubthumping became known to some purely as a drinking song. Which is fair enough, because, if nothing else, it didn't belong to an elite group of musicians — it belonged to people. People at football matches, people singing along to the radio as they drove, people at parties drinking too much whiskey and tripping over the kitchen chairs. People like me. And because it helped beggar the notion that Chumbawamba were boring zealots on a mission from Planet Anarchy.

—Boff Whalley, founding member of Chumbawamba

The End Result of Populist Fame

Being a shiftless claustrophobe, I often find myself at a party in a strange town with a bunch of people I don't know. I start taking deep draughts of garbage-can jungle juice concoction so I can get through the inevitable conversations where a stranger might ask what it is that I "do," what kind of bands I'm into, etc. Having no definitive answer for the first question, I focus on the latter, racking my brain to come up with bands

| Well . . . there is this one band . . .

But before I can finish saying "wamba," my new acquaintance is already doubled over laughing, pausing just long enough to wipe away the tears.

| Sorry, sorry. But aren't they that 'I get knocked down but I get up again' band?

There's that song, the one about getting knocked down and then getting back up again, but their body of work is like an iceberg; the bulk of it is submerged below the surface, difficult to get a hold of.

Wandering aimlessly into record stores across the country, I'm magnetically drawn towards the used CD bins, packed to the brim with scratched and unloved records. Thumbing my way through the alphabet, I happen on half a dozen used copies of the Chumbawamba record Tubthumper, unlistened to except for the one-hit wonder, sitting there gathering dust like some warning against anarchist overreach. Five million CDs — the copies that aren't in used bins are being used as coffee coasters. BEWARE! They seem to cry out silently, *Look at what we've become!*

The Steve Albini version of the Chumbawamba narrative is by now familiar — they were an awesome underground anarchist squatter punk band who sold out and became a one-hit wonder. They were

then quickly tossed away by the record company to make room for the next big thing. Another band came down the conveyor belt, thinking they're going to do it differently, and were exploited and used as well, and so on. Like this, bands and careers are made and broken, destined for the landfill.

But Chumbawamba's journey from squatters to pop stars illustrates a central paradox of music and subculture — what happens when we find ourselves having to play awkward undesirable roles? What happens when anarchists become successful? Crass laid out their qualms with their own success with the brilliant Eve Libertine-shouted lyric:

We didn't expect to find ourselves playing this part/we were concerned with IDEAS/not rock and roll.

Chumbawamba's story is a kind of allegory: what does a fully realized radical band do when they run up against the contradictions and limits of a conservative subculture? How do you propagandize for your beliefs when you stand to lose your credibility by using mainstream distribution and airwaves? Does the stale and now-gelatinized debate between "major" and "indie" mean anything when, with the Internet, a divide no longer exists? If you had the opportunity to support yourself, your family, and your local community with one hundred thousand dollars, would you allow your legacy to be reduced to a CGI dancing-baby two-minute pop song?

The Good Ship Lifestyle

"Lifestylism" is the practice of wrapping yourself in a blinkered, self-perfecting, ideologically-sound cocoon. The captain of The Good Ship Lifestyle rarely leaves his bedroom. He makes pronouncements on how other people should live but doesn't keep his own rules. His idea of politics is not to fight the Power but to fight the imagined enemies on his own side.

—*Tubthumper* liner notes[1997]

Birthered out of the evanescent post-punk racket of bands like Chimp Eats Banana and The Passion Killers, Chumbawamba formed in 1982. Chimp Eats Banana had been playing shows around the UK for quite a while, changing up their style at each gig — showing up at raucous peace punk shows and playing only toy instruments. The name Chumbawamba was a running joke with band members who competed to see who could tell the most ridiculous story about where it came from. One origin story comes from Boff Whalley's memoir, when Chimp Eats Banana were busking in Paris:

"Everything went well until the day a troupe of 12 smiling African drummers turned up next to us . . . They drowned out our weedy rock 'n' roll with booming beats and massed chants. And one of the chants went

Chum, chum-ba, wailah!

It just didn't sound right and written down it lost its rhythm. So we changed it to *Chumbawamba*. It meant nothing, signified nothing, and it didn't attach us to any preconceptions."

A more widely accepted story is that the name came from a dream Danbert Nobacon had about gender confusion. In his dream, he found the male and female public bathrooms labeled "Chumba" and "Wamba."

In the early eighties, Chumbawamba was a stalwart of cassette culture, releasing a string of great tapes with icy titles like: *History Luddite*, *Be Happy Despite it All*, and *Another Year of the Same Old Shit*. They found an abandoned house in Leeds and started squatting it. The South View House would be Chumbawamba HQ until the mid nineties. In 1982, they began their long career as pranksters, sending out a four-track recording of themselves posturing as an Oi band called Skin Disease for a comp called *Back to the Streets*. After their song “I’m Thick” came out (the only words in it being “I’m thick” repeated sixty-four times) they dressed up like skinheads to go to a London studio and meet with the producer. Later that year, the first released Chumbawamba track appeared on the classic Crass Records comp *Bullshit Detector 2*.

Chumbawamba’s early ideology was influenced in no small part by the pioneering British anarcho-punk band Crass. Their stitched-together ideological tapestry involved pacifism, veganism, squatting houses and organizing benefit concerts. Unlike the humorless, puritanical Crass, Chumbawamba approached politics satirically, mocking MPs and offensive British laws and clauses by name. From the inception, their ethical consistency was the launch pad from which they delivered their scathing attacks. They lived together in a squatted house, liberated animals on the weekends, wrote about local and national politics, and spent their days organizing community daycare services.

Today, many people, myself included, have an idealized picture of the bands early years. “Why couldn’t the perfect anarchist band last forever?” their critics seem to sigh. But sometimes the situations that seem the most perfect from the outside are those in the most dire need of change. It is paradoxical that the strength of Chumbawamba’s consistency is directly proportional to the amount of bile their former fans spewed against them when they signed a major label and turned in a different direction — if you look closely enough at the frames, you can almost see the love slowly turn to hate.

In 1984, as Crass Records and the peace punk scene they had been bottom-lining came to an end, groups and individuals splintered off into several different directions. The British Miners’ Strike, called in response to Thatcher union busting, was a decisive event in Chumbawamba’s political evolution. The group supported political bombings against South Africa’s corrupt racist leaders. This forced them to reexamine their pacifist stance. Diet and lifestyle became less important than solidarity with organized labor. The band recorded a three-track Miner’s benefit single, distributed pamphlets and food to worker’s families, and even started a theatre troupe to perform for the miner’s children. Boff describes the transition into a Popular Front belief system the group was undergoing in ’84:

... us living in the Armley squat began a process of unlearning some of the insular and anti-social ideas we’d picked up from an insular and anti-social political movement.

This was the first crack in what would soon become a fissure between Chumbawamba and the punk scene they were part of. No longer spouting the expected pacifist line, they were decried as “sell-outs.” Chumbawamba worked to incorporate themselves into their community in Leeds rather than to be punks standing apart from it. They chose to venture into uncomfortable situations with people who were different from them. As Chumbawamba became closer and closer with the miners, they distanced themselves from “the punks,” whom they increasingly viewed as petty, hardline, ineffective, and humorless.

In his book, Boff makes allusions to Chumbawamba growing frustrated with the punk scene’s “stamp-soaping” culture — their obsession with micro-managerial acts like saving change on postage or “scamming” rather than just participating in the economy like everyone else: Political action took a backseat to the romance of ripping off the system.

They were not alone in these sentiments. A Honeybane 7" [Crass Records] insert from the time says: "You say you're an anarchist but you're begging the system for help. You're standing the dole lines but you want to be independent."

Like some guilt-ridden Dr. Frankenstein, Crass lamented their major part in the creation of anarcho-punk. On the prophetic Crass album *Yes Sir, I Will*, Penny Rimbaud sings,

Punk has become another word for "got 10p to spare"

Crass went as far as to deconstruct their own success in one of the trademark Gee Vaucher posters, which read:

AN INSTITUTION IS A LENGTHENED SHADOW OF ONE PERSON

Crass sought to provide a cut-away view of their organization, in hopes of conveying their message of "We did this, and so can you." But these attempts to foment successors, to be the yeast of a broader movement, had little result — the new bands didn't want to start their own record labels, they just wanted to be on Crass Records. Crass had been too efficient at their task. Their polished media and aesthetic had become a desirable brand.

Like so many anarchists (David Graeber most recently), they were a reluctant vanguard, generating power but unwilling to take it; accidental leaders because of the high quality of their work. The more Crass attempted to shroud themselves in mystery and prevent a cult of personality, the more intrigued people became. In this way, they became another institution to accept or reject.

Chumbawamba described the influence of Crass:

The way they lived communally was to be an inspiration for our squatting South View House in Armley, obviously. But we were aware from the very start that our solidly Northern sensibilities didn't match what we saw as Crass's post-hippy, middle-class fondness for herbal tea and eastern philosophies . . . I reckon we could have sold ourselves as the Northern Crass, apart from our:

Inconsistency
Love of football
Ignorance
Drunkenness
Class politics
Sense of our own ridiculousness
Ability to throw a good party
Lack of restraint
Contradictions
Northern accents

Breaking Out of the Punk Ghetto

Revolution will be built on the spread of ideas and information, on reaching people, rather than on our habit of creating ghettos within which to stagnate. It's no use standing outside shouting. We have to start kicking down the doors!

—*Revolution 7"* liner notes [1985]

By 1985, Chumbawamba had saved up enough money to put out their first 7" single, *Revolution*. They were swiftly criticized by their fans for putting it out on vinyl instead of cassette. This was just a foreshadowing of the distant struggle they would have with their fans over the way they distributed their music. The *Revolution* Jesus H. Christ, 7" was a masterpiece, a labor of love — Chumbawamba even handwrote the lengthy liner notes that came with the records. They found themselves relieved when they realized that for the second pressing, they wouldn't have to do an Illuminated Manuscripts transcription, but could get the text photocopied at a printer.

The anarchist band began building coalitions with allies like the Socialist Workers Party and other left-wing groups. Members of Chumbawamba could be found playing Bingo in workingmen's clubs, or out on the picket lines, where they were spending as much time as they did on stage. The squatter lifestyle allowed them to create a scene all their own and fully devote themselves to the community they were championing. While many of their peers stagnated in the peace punk scene — Conflict would still be playing the same tired shows twenty years later — Chumbawamba found their vision growing organically. That vision became more and more clear: to take politics out of the punk scene and into people's lives. Their isolation from the scene made it so that they weren't influenced or distracted by the ambitions and goals of others.

The Underdog Bites Back

Dance beats and illegal warehouse parties were changing the face of British youth culture; Chumbawamba's love of a good time and hatred of authority fitted perfectly with dance music's DIY mentality. Chumbawamba also realized that a new decade required a different political approach. The band was bored with the politics of victimization, the 'big brother is gonna get you' line. Working on the premise that optimism breeds optimism, [the record] *Slap!* celebrated victories. Its three-minute pop songs were packed with tales of the underdog biting back.

—Alice Nutter, founding member of Chumbawamba

The Chumbawamba of the early eighties were aesthetically and audibly intimidating. There were usually ten people on stage with matching t-shirts and asymmetrical haircuts and blindfolds that could barely play their instruments. As with many other great political bands, the music was just the delivery method for the payload radical message.

By the late eighties and nineties they began to absorb the spreading influence of techno music and dance culture that was then creeping across Northern England. In 1990, Chumbawamba participated in the infamous Poll Tax riots. The Poll Tax was an extremely unpopular per-capita tax levied on all working adults in the UK to fund local municipalities. Implemented as part of Thatcher's "Conservative Manifesto," the logic of the tax was that poor voters would be deterred from voting for high-spending left-wing councils if they were obligated to pay a share of what the welfare state spent.

The Poll Tax was wildly inconsistent, differing drastically from borough to borough, and had a fixed-rate payment that turned out to be much higher than initially predicted. Anti-Poll Tax Unions formed across Britain and began to call for a mass non-payment of the tax. This refusal was met with increasingly draconian measures by Thatcher's government, which eventually culminated in violent riots in Trafalgar Square.

Seething community discontent against the poll tax in Northern England led to Thatcher's downfall.

Her successor, John Major, made it his first act of business to roll back the legislation. That same year, Chumbawamba recorded their album *Jesus H. Christ*, which was never to be released due to rabid (and intentional) copyright infringement — the first and last ten seconds were stolen from Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club, other titles and choruses were lifted from The Rolling Stones, ABBA, KC and the Sunshine Band, Wings, T-Rex and the Buzzcocks.

Taking cues from hip hop, *Jesus H. Christ* was essentially a cut-and-paste anarchist rewrite of rock n' roll history, with Chumbawamba performing their own versions of "Stairway to Heaven," "Money Money Money," "Silly Love Songs," and "Everybody's Happy Nowadays."

Boff said, "We were doing covers, giving them a new context, twisting them out of all recognition in order to fit our nasty, cynical game plan."

The album had to be scrapped and was rewritten as Shhh. The central thesis of *Jesus H. Christ* showed up in the lyrics of Shhh:

There's nothing that's new under heaven
There's nothing that hasn't been done
Pour me another double-cliché
You can't write a song that's never been sung

Reclaim the Streets and the Anti-Road Movement

British youth radicalism was changing from the stark, black and white world of peace punk to the Technicolor dream of illegal parties and Northern house. The acid-house parties thrown in the late eighties by Genesis 88 were attended by thousands of people. The media branded the DJ collective "public enemy number one" and imposed a stiff fine of 20,000 pounds and six months in prison for anyone caught throwing an illegal party. Its criminalization served to drive the party culture deeper underground, onto the abandoned roadways and fields of rural England. DJ sound system collectives like Spiral Tribe traveled across the UK throwing massive raves.

These events often ended in hostile clashes with the police. Techno parties were publicized by word of mouth and thrown in abandoned warehouses, forests, empty fields, even derelict quarries. Raves could go on anywhere from twelve hours to several days, forming a kind of temporary autonomous zone wherever they set up camp. The rave scene was intrinsically radicalized by their constant struggle for public space, and linked up with the Anti-Road movement and Reclaim the Streets movement to define the strange amorphous British anarchism of the nineties.

During a London Reclaim the Streets party in 1996, 6,000 people took over the M41 roadway. Environmental activists drilled holes in the freeway asphalt and planted trees. During the M11 roadlink protests, activists held illegal parties in the street and squatted houses slated for destruction to forestall the forward march of the wrecking-ball. Chumbawamba, already fed-up and embittered by their involvement in the rapidly shrinking punk ghetto, were drawn in by party culture. They rode the shifting musical tides — buying samplers, attending free parties, and experimenting with ecstasy. The excellent seven-inch *Smash Clause 28!/Fight the Alton Bill!* was their last noisy punk record before they moved into pop and techno.

The Criminal Justice Act sought and succeeded in quashing the various strains of British traveler culture by criminalizing them as "anti-social" — squatting, direct actions, hunt sabotage, and illegal parties were all targeted.

Liberation/Stagnation

We desperately wanted to move away from the post-punk ghetto we could see was already stagnating — a scene so obsessed with its do-it-yourself ethos that it was beginning to disappear up its own unwashed drainpipe trouser leg.

—Boff Whalley

In 1996, fate dealt Chumbawamba an ironic development in the form of a fax that appeared backstage at a gig. EMI Germany offered them 100,000 pounds to sign and release their next record, *Tubthumper*. Chumbawamba had just been told by their long-time independent label One Little Indian (run by Derek Birkett of Flux of Pink Indians) that he wasn't interested in releasing the *Tubthumper* record unless Chumbawamba reworked it to sound more "punk." Chumbawamba had been bashing EMI for nearly a decade — they had even gone as far as to smear an EMI building in blood. In 1989, they appeared on a record called FUCK EMI that decried EMI's involvement in arms manufacture and apartheid South Africa. Left with no other option, Chumbawamba took EMI's proposition seriously. A round table between the eight members about whether to release *Tubthumper* on EMI provides a through-the-keyhole glimpse of this process:

One:

I don't think it's a good idea. It stinks of opportunism and desperation. And we're not that desperate, d' you know what I mean? I don't think we should go for it. But I'm not completely convinced.

Two:

I'm in favour of signing. I think we have to, because we need to give ourselves a good kick up the arse. We have to change. Not just for us, to stop us getting tired of what we do, but because we're in danger of becoming trapped in a scene which hates change. And we'll be boring and we'll be bored.

Three:

The way I see it, we're in this band not just for entertainment, but to stir things up, get people talking. And I think this'll be a way of getting in people's faces and making some sort of impact.

Four:

I think we'll get crucified, to be honest. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. But I wasn't around when you were doing that anti-EMI stuff so at least I have an excuse!

Five:

I reckon we have to be practical about the money and what it means. We've tried unsuccessfully to go back and tour the States for like, six years or whatever. And we can't cos we still don't have the record label willing to put out our records there. This EMI deal will give us a chance to go to the USA, go to Japan, sell records in countries where we've never been able to sell records before. So I think we have to do it. And I don't want to go back to changing the beds and cleaning out the toilets at Wortley old folk's home.

Six:

I'm not convinced by the arguments about money. The money really doesn't matter to me, if it was just about that I think we'd find another way of getting the record out and playing gigs. The idea of change for change's sake appeals to me but there are countless other ways to change

Seven:

We have to sign. I don't give a shit what other people think. I understand the arguments against it, but I think we ought to stick our necks out and go for it instead of treading water.

Eight:

Well, signing to EMI worries me. It's what it symbolizes, isn't it? Pop culture's all about symbols, and us going with EMI is a bloody big symbol. It says, we've changed our minds, we've changed our ideas. I know it's not like that, but that's what it looks like, and that's what people will pick up on. So I don't want it. But I can see what you mean about us needing a kick up the arse. We do. And I fancy going to Japan, too.

Anarchists Sully Themselves in the System

And the company director spins the globe
Looks into an atlas of the world
A supermarket lifestyle for us all
A thousand nations under company control

—"Coca-Colonization" by Chumbawamba

Chumbawamba was blasted for signing EMI-Germany. Although the company was no longer involved with arms-manufacture, the decision stood as a huge symbol — people began to tell each other that Chumbawamba had "sold out" on independent culture and anarchism. Their decision was anything but haphazard. It was a calculated move to try to step up their propagandistic efforts and continue to sustain themselves as a band. They found their friends split on class lines about their success — those from working-class backgrounds applauded them, while others voiced sharp criticisms. Chumbawamba became overnight celebrity pop-stars. A band that had existed for almost twenty years became a one-hit wonder.

Although their anarchist message slowly diluted with each record, signing EMI didn't dampen Chumbawamba's militancy. In fact, they became more militant to make up for their ethical digression. Chumbawamba had already sanctified infamous cop-killer Harry Roberts in an informational zine that they passed out at shows for years. Now Alice Nutter was appearing in *News of the World* saying,

We like it when cops get killed. Nothing can change the fact that we like it when cops get killed. We mean that. You choose sides, don't you?

Just over a year later, Chumbawamba appeared on the Brit Awards and Danbert Nobacon poured a bucket of icy cold water over the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's head, before changing the lyrics of that evening's performance of "Tubthumping" to reflect their belief that New Labour had sold out striking dockworkers. The group was banned from German Television after Danbert Nobacon stripped naked and danced on stage during the Smashing Pumpkins set with the word "PUNK" scrawled across his chest.

Always the firebrand, Alice Nutter's appearance on "Politically Incorrect," saying that she didn't care if fans shoplifted their record caused Virgin Megastores to pull *Tubthumper* from the shelves and hide it behind the counter. When Virgin called the statement a "slap in the face," Nutter responded:

We don't have a problem with Virgin's actions. They can feel singled out and outraged if they want. But if we are going to talk about shoplifting, let's widen the debate and talk about why people steal, as opposed to just talking about Chumbawamba.

The band began to get request from all sides to use their songs in video games, commercials, and movies. But their most subversive use of corporate money was usurping \$100,000 dollars from GM to use song "Pass It Along" in a commercial. This money was immediately redistributed to groups like Indymedia and Corpwatch who used it to fund their anti-corporate activities.

Corpwatch who used it to fund their anti-corporate activities.

Two Paths for the Radical Punk Band

D: Can the bigger structure make room for the smaller structure you design?

Sylvia: If you measure it against anything else, then you will always be susceptible to the other structure. You have to first get a little place inside the larger structure and then make it your own. That's the problem if you want to stay separate completely, you can't. Because you will always end up measuring it against the larger structure."

—Closer to the Knives David Wojnarowicz

Chumbawamba knew Ian Mackaye from the early eighties, when he and Henry Rollins took a trip to England to engineer a record. They met again in the nineties when Chumbawamba played several shows with Mackaye's band, Fugazi, who they came to view as fellow-travelers. Boff records his impressions of Ian Mackaye in Footnote:

Pre-Fugazi there wasn't much to indicate Ian would go on to spearhead this committed and hugely popular band who'd set standards in the DIY ethic which would both inspire

and trouble millions of people . . . Ian's particular rock n' roll albatross was his invention of Straight Edge, a no-drinking philosophy which didn't translate well to eager young gangs of boys wanting hardcore music and hardcore moralism.

Fugazi took what could be considered to be the opposite tack to Chumbawamba. While Chumbawamba stayed malleable with their methods of distribution in order to best create the best spectacle, Fugazi plowed forward in determined silence, reflecting their belief through their actions — no t-shirts, no clubs, no setlist, \$5 shows.

Presumably Fugazi wanted their actions to speak for themselves, so they could focus on just “playing music.” This clear set of ethics helped circumvent Mackaye's natural preachiness, but he still became infamous for micromanaging crowds.

With Fugazi, the medium was the message. With Chumbawamba, it was the reverse — they were on a corporate label and got paid to travel the world, but they never strayed for the antagonistic, explicit anti-capitalist message in their song lyrics and public appearances.

The differences between Fugazi and Chumbawamba could be viewed as an allegory between the two different approaches to being a “political” band — speak with your words or speak with your lifestyle choices. Fugazi continued blazing a trail through the nineties selling thousands of records through their DIY apparatus Dischord. They became the American indie-rock version of Crass — but instead of fostering a scene of radical peace punk protégés, they mostly fostered a Northern Virginia scene of swoopy-haired indie-rock bands. The ideals that they had fought so hard for quickly became stuffy and dated, an old institution for their progeny to revolt against.

Chumbawamba never carried the moral heft that Fugazi did. Famous from *Minor Threat*, Fugazi had a monopoly on the market and could control the subculture tides. When Chumbawamba signed EMI in 1997, Ian Mackaye was so angry with their decision that he allegedly halted communication with them for several years.

It's hard to say, which group had a more profound impact on the self-described “anti-capitalist” punk scene. Fugazi's symbolic rejection of fame and the profit motive was certainly more popular within it though. Ironically though, some of the bands from the scene they had spent time mothering used their association with Fugazi as a stepping stone to become commercially successful. Fugazi hit a brick wall with their American-style, “less talk more rock” radicalism in the same way that Chumbawamba were consumed by their experience as celebrities, and began to criticize the music industry from an insidery perspective. Fugazi's shows were so accessible that they eventually became inaccessible. Eager attendees had to be turned away at the door because venues would always reach their capacity.

Alternately, Chumbawamba had brought the word “anarchy” into the household. The music industry, passed them off as dancing pranksters, conveniently tucking their history as a politically active band under the rug.

By the 2000s both Fugazi and Chumbawamba were on the downward slide into irrelevance. Fugazi dissolved, unable to feasibly support the weight of its reputation within the ethical box it had constructed for itself. Mackaye started the Evens, presumably to have another chance at recapturing the intimate DIY show environment that he had lost somewhere in the sardine-tin packed warehouses and Fort Renos of America. Chumbawamba was dumped by both EMI and Virgin and went acoustic lite-techno. Their decline only serves to emphasize the Peter Pan, blink-of-an-eye recognition that comes from being in a popular band. One day you're right there with the world, getting interviewed and inspiring thousands of people, the next you're a footnote. A symbol for

something that no one understands anymore.

Punching the Gift Horse in the Mouth

Once word got around anarchist circles that Chumbawamba had a hundred grand from a GM commercial and would dole it out to whatever half-baked cause, idea, scam, or political group you could come up, there was suddenly a mad rush to get in touch.

“There was some discussion about whether we should accept money from GM,” says Jay, an IndyMedia volunteer in Philadelphia from the time said. “Ultimately we decided that the donation was coming not from GM but from Chumbawamba, and that despite some of our finance working group members’ disagreements with some decisions Chumbawamba has made in the past, we were happy to accept their contribution.”

Other radical groups reacted with paralyzed arrogance over whether or not to accept the money Chumbawamba was offering them. To them Chumbawamba and their corporate money was a threat to their activist cred — did they want to be associated with this tainted symbol?

The more relevant issue that some were bringing up was: What does it matter where the money comes from when all money is dirty money? But lifestyle activists seem often more motivated by a desire to preserve their purity than a desire for real change.

Chumbawamba wrecked their purity in order to become a funnel to siphon corporate money into anti-corporate activities. Ultimately, selling the rights of their songs to be used in advertisements had few real repercussions other than angering their fans and diluting their “brand.” Chumbawamba effectively took advantage of the all-assimilating nature of corporate greed, — Chumbawamba had agitated in such a way that made their enemies want to invest in them. Subsequently, the activists accepted Chumbawamba’s money with a cowardly air of entitlement, the same entitlement that a previous generation of anarchists had when they accepted public welfare. And so the money trickled-down shamefully, with each biting the hand that came before.

Overachieving

Take it all back. All the palm-wringing, all the high-contrast either/or comparisons. All this speculative fiction, my own obsessive attempt at historical revisionism. While I deeply appreciate Chumbawamba’s fascinating high-bar experiment, I wonder if it was too powerful, too good. Like Crass, if your “brand” is too solid, you scare away competition. But I implore you, punk rockers: keep making scribbled Sharpie fliers, flimsy zines and torturous, unlistenable records. It is the least you can do to lower the bar for future generations, thus spawning even more of our cockroach progeny.

Crappier quality work often gives off the sense of “you can do this!” which spawns better progeny. Someone will find your photocopied opus crumpled up on a bathroom floor, and take notice of the shoddy craftsmanship and pointless, meandering storyline feel an urgent compulsion to go to Kinko’s and make their own. A creative community is fueled onward by this kind of good-natured one-upmanship.

Chumbawamba announced a couple of days ago that they’re breaking up after an amazing thirty year run as an anarchist collective. More importantly, this is a group of friends that spent thirty years living, working, and travelling the world together. There are plenty of cynics and hecklers to say, “Ha! I forgot they even existed!” or those that scoff about how it proves that anarchy doesn’t work, but how many of these lonely sad people can say that they’ve been part of a gang — they’ve lived and made art and made a living with the people they loved for three decades?

For quite a while now Chumbawamba have been a cultural reference point to mock (The I Get Knocked Down and I Get Up Again band!) or to reify and analyze at length, as I have done with this essay.

For so many bands of the peace punk era, and so many radical punk bands today, politics is treated like a lifestyle — a diet, something to boycott, a badge to be worn. So many people approach the world from a customer satisfaction perspective, as if life owed them something: Do you approve or disapprove? Was it comfortable? How was the service? It's like a thousand-page online survey that you can't stop filling out, where every question is "So how do you feeeeel."

Chumbawamba stopped focusing on their diets and started focusing on political action. They knew that real change wouldn't come from forming little ultra-radical tribes and cadres. They broke out of the punk ghetto and became normal people, spending time at workingman's clubs, at bars, at bus stops and day care centers. They brought their explicitly anarchist message onto the morning television programs and interviews and talked and performed on amphitheater stages in front of hundreds of thousands of people. They were loud, social, anti-capitalists, rising out of the flotsam-like contradiction of an anti-social social movement. Perhaps from their backgrounds and personalities they instinctively understood what so many anarchists still don't understand today — radicals need to become people rather than expecting people to become radicals.

Aaron Lake Smith

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P.S.

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