‘Agitate, educate, organise’: Partisanship, popular music and the Northern Ireland conflict

**Introduction**

The spectre of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998) has come to cast - in the midst of ‘Brexit’ - a shadow over contemporary British political life. In this context, debates about the Irish border (a term that has accrued a quasi-mantric status in media discourses) have exposed an extraordinary degree of ignorance about Northern Ireland - and its troubled past - among British politicians, broadcasters and public (Boland 2017; McDonagh 2018; Nolan 2018). This nescience is, of course, nothing new. Even in the midst of the conflict, the issue was often ignored. Perhaps most strikingly, in the years between 1970 and 1994, Britain’s leading left-wing journal, the *New Left Review*, published not a single piece on the conflict. ‘It is difficult to overstate the significance of this fact’, Porter and O’Hearn have explained: ‘For a quarter of a century the British government conducted a nasty war on its own doorstep (which frequently spilled into the house). Yet throughout that war, the leading theoretical journal of the British Left either failed or refused to engage the issue’ (1995, p. 131).

An analogous elision was observed in the sphere of popular music. In 1987, Britain’s (then) leading music paper, the *New Musical Express* (henceforth, *NME*), noted that while popular musicians had shown ‘courage and integrity in tackling … the day’s Big Issues - apartheid, famine, nuclear war, the Falklands conflict’, they had, ‘on the subject of Northern Ireland’ (which was perceived by the paper as ‘the persistent thorn in the side of British politics’) been ‘strangely silent’ (Campbell 1987, p. 34). Perhaps in an effort to compensate for this silence, certain musicians occasionally addressed the conflict. However, their efforts were often proscribed. As John Street explains, censorship of popular music in Britain was practised ‘most blatantly in relation to Northern Ireland’, with ‘songs showing sympathy for the Republican cause’ being ‘routinely banned’ by British broadcasters (2012, p. 12). Despite this fact, there is relatively little scholarship on popular music’s address to the ‘Troubles’.1 Moreover, the modest field of work that has emerged - in both the popular and scholarly realms - has adhered to two broad paradigms: one which spotlights late-1970s Ulster punk, celebrating that scene for its anti-sectarianism (Heron 2015; McLoone 2004; O’Neill and Trelford 2003; Stewart 2014),2 and another that surveys vast swathes of popular-musical activity across wide periods of time, assembling inventories of songs that address the conflict, whilst issuing perfunctory comment on specific songs (Bailie 2018; Pietzonka 2013, pp. 137-78; Rolston 2001).

This article seeks to expand the current field by (first) addressing what transpired after the widely- documented - and much venerated - punk experiment, and (second) by offering closely-focused case-studies of synchronous invocations in a specific moment: the period between the IRA hunger strike of 1981 (a watershed event in the ‘Troubles’) and the British Government’s ‘broadcasting ban’ in 1988 (which - in effect - proscribed popular songs that engaged overtly with the conflict) (Miller 1995). This period witnessed a series of songs which eschewed the lyrical abstraction and political nonalignment that imbued the bulk of ‘Troubles’ songs, offering - instead - upfront and partisan views. The article addresses two such examples: That Petrol Emotion (henceforth TPE) and Easterhouse - both of whom espoused oppositional, and expressly pro-Republican, perspectives - assessing these projects through the prism of specific outputs: TPE’s ‘Big Decision’ single (1987) and Easterhouse’s *Inspiration* EP (1986).

In assessing these endeavours, the article draws on original interviews with the musicians, combining this with extensive archival research of print and audio/visual media. Rather than constricting my account to simple citation of song words (a method often exercised in the field), the article maps the making of popular-musical meanings across a suite of sites, including song words, vocal style and musical setting, as well as record sleeves, videos and interviews. The article explores the imperatives that inform popular-musical engagements with the ‘Troubles’, attending to the musicians’ discrete political views, whilst assessing the specific performance strategies - and rhetorical techniques - they deployed, and addressing the tensions this provoked between the musicians and the media and the music industry, as well as with audiences and, crucially, *within* the bands themselves. Before presenting my analysis, however, it is necessary to provide some immediate popular-musical, as well as social-political, context.

**Prologue: post-punk, politics and the hunger strike**

A curious conjunction of popular music and the Northern Ireland conflict occurred on the BBC television show, *Top of the Pops* (henceforth, *TOTP*) on 7 May 1981. During this episode, which was broadcast live, The Undertones - a band from Derry in Northern Ireland - performed their recently-released single, ‘It’s Going To Happen’ (1981), which that week had breached the UK Top 40. The song’s composition had been occasioned by the (then current) IRA hunger strike, which sought to restore Special Category status to paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland (Gorman and O’Neill 2017; McKittrick and McVea 2012, pp. 156-172). The strike’s leader, Bobby Sands, died on 5 May 1981 (after 66 days refusing food), with his funeral - two days later - attracting 100,000 mourners and worldwide media attention (Savage 2015, p. 242). By an extraordinary coincidence, then, The Undertones would perform a song that had been prompted by the hunger strike - on live, prime-time television - on the day of the first striker’s funeral.3

Admittedly, the song’s lyrics were somewhat oblique: its (initially) ‘polemical’ words had been reworked during the writing process, with only the chorus (‘It’s going to happen … ’til you change your mind’) remaining unchanged (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). If the latter subtly invoked, as Martin McLoone suggests, ‘the impasse over the hunger strikes’, offering ‘an appeal to Margaret Thatcher to change her mind’ (2004, p. 37), then a far more explicit gesture was staged by the band on the *TOTP* stage; for, during the broadcast, the band’s guitarist, Damian O’Neill (who had co-written the song) displayed an incongruous adornment: a black armband, in honour of Sands (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). Even amidst the show’s distracting televisual codes, such as ‘dry ice’, stage lights and split screens, O’Neill’s accessory was conspicuous; rather curiously, however, it seems - at the time - to have gone unremarked (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). Nevertheless, the gesture signalled a certain rupture in the prevailing popular-musical consensus; for while invocations of the conflict customarily eschewed partisanship, O’Neill’s black armband announced that The Undertones were (now) taking sides.

The Ulster punk scene (from which the band emerged) had self-consciously striven to anti-sectarianism in its ethos and orientation, and it has accordingly been celebrated for this stance (McLoone 2004; O’Neill and Trelford 2003). In key songs - such as Stiff Little Fingers’ (henceforth, SLF) ‘Alternative Ulster’ (1978) - and, more significantly, in the scene’s demographic makeup, punk in Northern Ireland pointed to what McLoone has called ‘an alternative cultural space’ beyond the ‘clutches’ not only of ‘the political mainstream’ but also of ‘the political opposition represented by republicanism and loyalism’ (2004, p. 36). In espousing punk’s animus towards the establishment and the parent culture (Hebdige 1979; Savage 1991), punk in Northern Ireland had to circumnavigate the complex (and contentious) contours of sectarianism - which had suffused Northern Irish life - positioning itself ‘against prejudice’ and nurturing a neutral (nonpartisan) space (Birch 1978, p. 34; Doherty 1977, p. 55).

This commendable quest had the concomitant effect, however, of circumscribing discourse on the conflict, for commentary was commonly constricted to censures of sectarianism *per se*, or admonishments of (state and paramilitary) violence in general. Proclaiming anything more ‘political’ was not only precarious, but also risked splintering the scene’s delicate subcultural consensus (Clerk 1982, p. 8). Thus, while bands such as SLF could viscerally evoke the conflict (in songs like ‘Suspect Device’ or ‘Wasted Life’ [1978]), they ‘never’, as one local musician explained, ‘actually said anything’ (Ó’Gormain cited in Taylor 1985, p. 6)

Such coyness was, of course, not confined to Ulster punk; for while it might have been ‘easier’, as Bill Rolston suggests, for musicians outside of Northern Ireland to ‘handle issues of state repression, armed struggle and so forth’ (2001, p. 64), popular-musical invocations of the conflict in general proffered - in Colin Graham’s words - ‘empty, well-meaning pity’ in place of ‘political engagement’ (2003, p. 33). Moreover, such endeavours were themselves somewhat rare. The reasons for this silence are complex. As Rolston explains, ‘in the British context, in particular, there is little incentive for popular music as a cultural expression to go against the stream of the common political views on the Irish conflict’; moreover, there are ‘rigid limits’, he suggests, ‘on what [musicians] can say and how it can be said’ (and thus ‘negative consequences for those who broke from the herd’) (2001, pp. 64-65). More generally, Rolston notes that ‘the politically articulate conflict in Ireland has not easily been incorporated into a genre which relates to more transitory, less articulate forms of rebellion’ (2001, p. 64). For all of these reasons, abstraction or equivocation - as well as quietism and evasion - marked popular music’s address to the conflict.

The hunger strike, though, served to puncture this practice, and - after The Undertones’ appearance on *TOTP -* other musicians engaged with the issue in upfront and partisan ways. Thus, in July 1981 (two months after the armband incident on *TOTP*), The Au Pairs, an English post-punk band, appeared on the BBC’s other main music-television show, *The Old Grey Whistle Test* (BBC2, 14 July 1981), performing a song entitled ‘Armagh’ (1981), which detailed the strip-searching of female Republican prisoners in that city’s jail, and which was dedicated - during the band’s shows - to the hunger strikers (Lock 1981, p. 13). In interviews, Lesley Woods, The Au Pairs’ singer/guitarist, proclaimed the band’s partisanship, announcing, in the *NME*: ‘we do support the IRA’ (Lock 1981, p. 13).

Such alignment had not been expressed by popular musicians since Paul McCartney and John Lennon had (independently) addressed the conflict in the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday in 1972, when British soldiers shot and killed 13 unarmed civilians during an anti-internment march in Derry (Walsh 2000). In this context, the former Beatles had signalled - via songs and interviews - their allegiance with Irish Republicans (Wickham 1972, p. 6), an endeavour that met with public criticism and, in McCartney’s case, a broadcasting ban. As Martin Cloonan explains, the ‘vetoing’ of such interventions, by institutions such as the BBC, ‘contributed to a stifling of debate on arguably the most important issue in British politics’ (1996, p. 116)

Whilst The Au Pairs faced objections from critics and fans (Hewitt 1984, p. 42; Lock 1981b, pp. 60-1; Martin 1981, pp. 38-9), their song escaped proscription. Moreover, other bands continued - during the hunger strike - to confront the conflict, albeit in more abstract, and nonaligned, ways. Most strikingly, Sting, singer and songwriter in English ‘new wave’ band, The Police, composed ‘Invisible Sun’ (1981), which issued an oblique exhortation - via invocations of Armalites, soldiers and prison cells - of optimism in the face of the (then) current crisis.4 ‘I actually wrote the song in Ireland’, Sting explained. ‘It was during the hunger strikes in Belfast. I wanted to write about that but I wanted to show some light at the end of the tunnel. I do think there has to be an “invisible sun”’ (Garbarini 2000).

Despite the song’s moderate sentiment, though, when it was released as a single in September 1981, the band’s promotional video - which featured black and white footage of Belfast, including scenes of soldiers and police vehicles - was banned by British broadcasters. The BBC claimed, in its statement on the ban, that while the song’s message of ‘anti-violence’ did ‘not favour any political or religious group’, the accompanying film ‘could be misinterpreted and said to convey meanings which are not present in the lyrics’ (cited in Anonymous 1981, p. 7). In response, The Police explained that they had striven, in the film, to offer ‘not a message but a statement of fact’, stressing their endeavours (in the editing process) to ensure it was ‘non-sectarian’ (Colbert 1981, p. 21).

Undeterred by the ban, The Police exhibited the film at their UK live shows in 1981 (Brown 1981, p. 9), deploying it as a back-projection during their performance of ‘Invisible Sun’ (Williams 1981, p. 13). Moreover, at the concluding show of their UK tour (in July 1982), they invited U2 singer Bono on stage for a shared rendition of the song. Significantly, U2 composed, over the next few months, their own response to the ‘Troubles’ - ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ (1983) - which became, and has remained, the most prominent popular-musical invocation of the Northern Ireland conflict. In common with ‘Invisible Sun’, its conception was occasioned in the context of the hunger strike. ‘Bobby Sands was dying’, Bono recalled, stating that at the band’s US shows ‘people were shouting his name at us’ (McCormick 2010, p. 161) whilst ‘throwing money’ on the stage (Miller 1984). U2, however, would insist, at the time of the strike, on not taking ‘sides’ (Hewitt 1981, p. 12) Matters came to a head for the band in March 1982, when U2 withdrew from an appearance at the St. Patrick’s Day parade in New York City after learning that Sands would be celebrated as the parade’s honorary Grand Marshall (Bowler and Dray 1993, p. 111). In this context, the band sought - on ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ - to signal antipathy to paramilitaries, as evidenced in the song’s (original) opening line: ‘Don’t talk to me about the rights of the IRA’ (Stokes 2002, p. 38).

Although the recorded version was somewhat more abstract, its lyrical sentiment remained intact.5 Reflecting on this point, Bono explained: ‘Some things are black and white - but the troubles in Northern Ireland are not. I know: I’m the son of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father’ (Miller 1984). Conflating the complex dynamics of the conflict with his own biographical experience, the singer strove, on ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, to ‘take the image of Northern Ireland out of the black and white and into the gray, where it truly belongs’ (Miller 1984). In this way, the song renewed the nonaligned view that had informed popular music prior to the interventions of The Au Pairs and The Undertones. More significantly, it re-contextualised the event that it claimed to invoke; for in its riposte to US supporters of the hunger strike, the song ostensibly took - as its stage - the occasion of Bloody Sunday but only to (in turn) reframe it in a Christian/mythic context, with the song contriving, in Bono’s words, to ‘make the connection between the blood of the crucifixion … and the blood of the victims in Derry on Bloody Sunday’ (Hewson 1988: 188).

Notwithstanding this extraordinary conjunction, U2 would stress, in live performance, the song’s nonpartisan stance, with Bono prefacing it with an emphatic caveat - ‘This song is *not* a rebel song … ’ - that strove to offset decodings that might discern, in the song, pro-Republican sentiments. It was perhaps not entirely successful in this respect, for the song provoked speculation that U2 were associated (in some way) with Irish Republicanism (Bowler and Dray 1993, p. 116; Smith 1988, p. 10). This misconstruing served to illustrate the tightly constricted discourse about the ‘Troubles’, in which any address to the conflict was seen as suspect. This was particularly the case in Britain, where, as Graham Dawson explains, ‘discussion of the Troubles’ was ‘closed down by the polarising ideological discourse of terrorism’ (Dawson 2007, xviii).

In any case, by the mid-1980s, ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ had become the most prevalent popular song about the ‘Troubles' (McLaughlin and McLoone 2012, pp. 178-80). Its hegemony would, moreover, endure: in 2010, the song was celebrated as one of the ‘top 20 political songs’ of all-time by the British political magazine, the *New Statesman.* In this list, ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ sat at No. 6, nestling between ‘La Marseillaise’ and ‘The Internationale’ (Anonymous 2010, p. 42).

The acts addressed in this article - TPE and Easterhouse - framed their efforts (at least in part) as a response to U2. Thus, Ivor Perry of Easterhouse exclaimed his objections to the ‘broad liberal-left’ view - expressed by U2 - ‘that we should have peace in Northern Ireland’, stressing that this was something ‘that everybody wants anyway’, but which was not possible ‘without fundamental change’. Easterhouse’s address to the ‘Troubles’ was, said Perry, ‘far more honed’ (Watson 1986, p. 14). Similarly, TPE conceived of their commentary on the conflict in contra-position to both the ‘barbed wire and bomb clichés’ (without political engagement) of SLF (Taylor 1985, p. 6) as well as the (then) more current, and certainly more conspicuous, sentiments staged by U2. TPE co-founder Réamann Ó’Gormain expressed his antipathy towards U2’s view in strikingly visceral terms. ‘When I see U2 waving a white flag ’n’ stuff like that’, he explained at the time of TPE’s ‘Big Decision’ (the song explored below), ‘I just wanna puke’. He went on: ‘what I hate most about U2 is the big claims they make on songs like [‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’] … claims that they “understand” … in my personal experience, people in Dublin are as ignorant about Northern Ireland as people over here [in Britain]’ (McRae 1987, p. 13). The songs addressed below, then, intervened not only on the actuality of the conflict, but also against prevailing popular-musical invocations of it.

**‘Music is not enough’: Easterhouse, *Inspiration* EP (1986)**

In Ben Vendetta’s novel *Wivenhoe Park* (2013), Drew, the central character - an American student in mid-1980s England - encounters Easterhouse in concert at a club in Colchester, describing the band as ‘hardcore socialists’, and noting their singer’s ‘rants about various political injustices’: ‘From what I can gather he’s pro-IRA [and] is disgusted by the British Labour Party’ (2013, p. 102). After the event, Drew observes the oddness of being ‘exposed to the “Irish Troubles” via a rock and roll band’, and elects ‘to learn more about Ireland and the IRA’ (2013, p. 108). Aside from its incision and insight, Vendetta’s fictive (re)figuring of Easterhouse also compensates for the conspicuous silence on the band in critical work on popular music and the Irish conflict.6 In May 1986, on the fifth anniversary of Bobby Sands’ death, the band issued an EP illustrated with an image of Sands, comprising songs commemorating the hunger strike (‘Inspiration’) and critiquing British conduct in Northern Ireland (‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’). The record was widely praised (and publicised) in the pages of the British music press (Halpin 1986, p. 37; Irwin 1986, p. 26; *NME* 10 May 1986, p. 8; *Sounds* 3 May 1986, p. 22) and was celebrated as ‘Single of the Week’ in *Sounds* (Henderson 1986, p. 20), one of Britain’s main weekly music papers. Meanwhile, an extract of ‘Inspiration’ was televised across the UK via *The Chart Show* (Channel Four, 16 May 1986), one of the country’s key music programmes, before ‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’ was converted into a music video by the high-profile auteur, Derek Jarman.7 In this context, critics envisioned that Easterhouse would attract an abundance of scholarly work. ‘Countless words will be written about Easterhouse’, exclaimed the *NME*, predicting a plethora of ‘academic and analytical approaches’ and ‘weighty articles’ on the band (Staunton 1986, p. 49). Such expectations stand, however, starkly at odds with the extensive absence of Easterhouse in scholarly and journalistic accounts of popular music.8

The band had surfaced in Manchester in 1982, and centred on siblings Andy Perry (vocalist and lyricist) and Ivor Perry (guitarist and songwriter).9 Taking their name from a (then) notorious Glasgow housing scheme, Easterhouse were aligned with the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), an allegiance they invoked via interviews and sleeve notes as well as live shows and song lyrics. In this context, they have come to be seen as a party-political ‘boy band’, assembled by the RCP for publicity purposes (Guthrie 2017; Turner 2010). In truth, however, it was only after Andy Perry became involved with his older brother Ivor’s extant (and ideologically ‘abstract’) ensemble that RCP ideas would infuse their oeuvre (Perry 2017). The singer had been highly active in the RCP in the early 1980s, attending meetings, rallies and study groups, and travelling with the party’s ‘spin-off’ organisation, the Irish Freedom Movement (IFM), to Belfast and Derry (Perry 2017). The RCP outlook that the singer brought to the band would serve, says Ivor Perry, as ‘a source of strength’ - and ‘a prop’ - affording Easterhouse an ethos and orientation that individuated them from other English ‘indie’ acts (Perry 2017).

The RCP emerged in the early 1980s (after a sequence of splits on the British far left), espousing a strongly anti-imperialist agenda (Fitzpatrick 2017, p. 225).10 A key concern was the Northern Ireland conflict, an issue on which much of the British left at the time were equivocal or evasive (Porter and O’Hearn 1995). However, while the ‘Irish War’ (as it was called in RCP discourses) preoccupied the party’s policies and publications, it was perceived - primarily - through the prism of class politics in Britain. As the IFM - a ‘wholly-owned subsidiary’, as Howe observed, of the RCP (1993, p. 6) - explained: ‘the *revolutionary significance*’ of the Northern Ireland conflict was that a British military/political defeat would serve to ‘weaken the British capitalist class to such an extent that it would fundamentally alter class relations in Britain’ (IFM 1983, pp. 8-9, original emphasis). Moreover, the party viewed Irish Republicanism as a model of revolutionary action for radical workers in Britain, arguing that the latter could not be ‘free’ whilst their Republican counterparts in Northern Ireland were subjected to (British) state repression. The RCP thus sought - under the auspices of its IFM offshoot - to coordinate a ‘solidarity’ campaign, encouraging British workers to endorse the ‘Irish War’ (Hume 1986, p. 5). In sharp contrast to the rest of the British left, then, the RCP gave ‘unconditional support to the struggle for Irish freedom, no matter what form that struggle takes’, clarifying: ‘We support it irrespective of whether the republican movement adopts electoral or military tactics’ (Freeman 1986, p. 62)

The immanence of Northern Ireland to the RCP enterprise inevitably shaped Easterhouse’s interest in the conflict. However, the issue had a longer, and more personal, provenance for the Perrys; for they had been raised in a ‘mixed’ (Catholic/Protestant) Irish household in England that was, says Ivor, ‘heavily conflicted’ (Perry 2017). In this context, the brothers recall incessant acrimonious exchanges on the ‘Troubles’ between their Unionist father (from Northern Ireland) and Nationalist mother (from the Republic) (Perry 2017; McIheney 1986b, p. 12). It has often been assumed that musicians of Irish descent invoke their origins for self-serving purposes (Rolston 2001, p. 53). Indeed, Roy Foster has claimed that ‘an assertion of Irish “roots”’ - for musicians of Irish descent in 1980s Britain - ‘conferred authenticity, rebelliousness and entitlement, as social critics as well as subversive musicians’ (Foster 2007, p. 149). It seems odd, then, that Easterhouse appeared to obscure this issue: in only one interview did it arise, and, there, its bearing on their standpoint was denied. ‘The basis of our position on Ireland’, averred Andy Perry, ‘is revolutionary communism’: ‘Whatever my emotional ties in Ireland through my parents, I see it fundamentally as a testing ground for revolutionary communism and the radical left. It’s not a romantic thing. It’s a situation that I have applied my principles to’ (McIlheney 1986b, p. 12).

Privileging class politics over ethnic allegiances, then, Perry portrayed Northern Ireland as a ‘testing ground’ - a point proclaimed in other Easterhouse interviews, as well as RCP publications (Smith 1986, p. 13) - implying that ‘Irish freedom’, as it was called in RCP accounts, was appreciated less as an end in itself, than as an impetus for unrest elsewhere. More strikingly, Perry positioned Sands (in interviews) as ‘a working class lad’ who opposed ‘the British state’ (McIlheney 1986b, p. 13), repurposing the hunger striker for the politics of class in Britain. Moreover, Perry proclaimed his wish to parallel what he saw as Sands’ project: ‘I have now got the British state in my sights and I want it to be taken to pieces. I want it for *my kind*, *my people*’ (McIlheney 1986b: 13, emphases added). Thus, if the Irish conflict was (re)conceived, in Easterhouse’s RCP-infused rhetoric, as a catalyst for class insurgency at home, and Sands was reconstituted as a ‘working class lad’ (de-emphasising his Irish-Republican context), then Perry would present himself - as of course he had every right to.- as emblematic of the British working class, demanding insurgency for his ‘kind’ and his ‘people’, by which he meant the local working class, not his family in Ireland. Despite the avowedly anti-imperialist ethos of the RCP, then, the issue of ‘Irish freedom’ was rhetorically deployed, in Easterhouse interviews, to address (class) concerns in Britain.

The band’s ideal audience was, exclaimed Perry, ‘workers who have intelligent, questioning minds’ (Smith 1986, p. 13). Once this vanguard was ‘activated’, it would proceed, said Perry, to ‘politicise the rest of the working-class’ (Smith 1986, p. 13). If Easterhouse served, in this endeavour, as an efficacious apparatus, then their songs would act as an affective means through which to achieve interpellation (Althusser 1971, pp. 160-5). ‘If music does link into you’, the singer explained, ‘it really does – it strikes at your core. If you can get that far into somebody and then start talking to them, you’ve got that person’ (Smith 1986, p. 13). It was imperative, in this context, that what Perry called ‘political song’ worked to ‘provoke’ the listener ‘to react *politically*’ (Smith 1986, p. 13, original emphasis), rather than (only) at the level of affect. This perhaps explains the inclusion of an extensive polemical essay on the ‘Troubles’ (authored by Andy Perry, but in the editorial style of the RCP weekly newspaper, *the next step*) on the sleeve of the *Inspiration* EP. Through the sleeve notes, the band sought, said Ivor Perry, to ‘get the sort of ideas across that you’d never normally get on the radio or in newspapers’ so that audiences ‘who wouldn’t normally hear these ideas, would at least read them and discuss them’ (Wilde 1987, p. 12). Interestingly, though, this effort to interject oppositional views into the public sphere was, by the band’s own lights, inadequate to the objective of ‘activation’, hence the unusual injunction that appeared on the label of the EP, advising listeners to ‘read “The Next Step”’. This inscription was preceded, moreover, with an incongruous caveat, cautioning that: ‘Music is not enough’. Thus, at the physical centre of the EP, Easterhouse invoked the inadequacies of song (*qua* song) in instigating change, acquiescing to the import of other media, and prioritising print as a pivotal platform in the process of politicisation.

The expressive arsenal employed by Easterhouse also encompassed, however, an expressly iconographic aspect; for the EP’s most arresting element was undoubtedly its startling artwork: a close-up of a widely-circulated photograph of Sands11 that constituted - in the visual economy of mid-1980s Britain - a profound semiotic reordering of his image, elevating an enemy of the state to the status of cover star. The band were keenly aware of its provocative charge: in 1985, Ivor Perry had been volunteering as a vendor of *the next step* in Manchester, and encountered aggression when selling an issue that featured (the same image of) Sands on the cover. ‘I spent three hours dodging verbal abuse and threats’, Perry recalls, ‘and then somebody just came up and spat in my face’ (Perry 2017).

Curiously, though, when this image (credited to, and sourced from, *the next step*) appeared on the *Inspiration* sleeve, it met with a different response; rather than sparking controversy, the EP was, says Ivor Perry, ‘completely ostracised’ (*Hit the North* 1991; Perry 2017). Rough Trade, the band’s record label, received no protests from music-industry partners (such as pressing plants or retail outlets) (Travis 2017).12 In the music press, meanwhile, a number of fans expressed their antipathy to the EP, though such objections were focused on the sleeve essay - which was entitled ‘Bobby Sands: A Working Class Hero’ - not the cover image. In a letter to the *NME*, one such reader explained:

‘I bought the new Easterhouse single “Inspiration” and very good it is too. I was disgusted, however, to see hunger strike victim Bobby Sands described on the cover as being a “working class hero”. I am proud to be working class but do not include such terrorist vermin of any organisation on my list of heroes and find it extremely presumptuous of anyone to assume so. Sands and his fellow hunger strikers were prepared to murder and maim innocent working-class people merely because they were the wrong religion’ (cited in O’Hagan (ed.) 1986, p. 50).13

An associated controversy surfaced within the band, pertaining less to the Sands cover than the choice of the record’s title track (and - by extension - the EP’s lead-off song). As Ivor Perry explains: ‘People wanted us to put “Nineteen Sixty Nine” on the A-side. It was considered far more commercial. And we were told by Rough Trade we were almost guaranteed certainly to have a No. 1 indie hit. And possibly hit the charts. There was a real feeling that we would have maybe put it in the lower reaches of the chart. It would have been our breakthrough … We had a big internal row because Andy said “I’m having Bobby Sands on there, and I’m picking this tune”. And he was very adamant about it, almost against the wishes of everyone else’ (Perry 2017). The singer’s insistence on the Sands sleeve meant, then, that Easterhouse’s song about the hunger strike (‘Inspiration’) was selected - for thematic reasons - as the EP’s title track and lead-off song, despite its slow pace and sombre tone. ‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’ was, instead, sequestered to the record’s reverse-side, even though it was considered by most of the band, and their associates, to have more appeal. It was, moreover, singled out by contemporaneous critics as the record’s ‘piece de resistance’ (Irwin 1986, p. 26). With this in mind, I will address it here.

The year cited by the song - dating the arrival of troops in Northern Ireland - had, of course, accrued a certain resonance in popular-music culture, with The Stooges’ nihilistic ‘1969’ (1969) resurfacing in the 1980s via The Sisters of Mercy’s goth-rock rendition (1983) before Bryan Adams restored fun to *la fin des années soixante* on ‘The Summer of ’69’ (1985). Released nine months later, ‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’ was Easterhouse’s own invocation of the summer of ’69 (the army had arrived in August), summoning, via Perry’s tender vocal, ‘the savage beat of soldiers’ feet/on streets of broken glass’, an image that would not have been out of place in ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’. Prefaced by a ringing C# minor chord - a key favoured, at the time, by Easterhouse associates The Smiths14 - the mid-paced, melancholic song serves to highlight Andy Perry’s ‘extraordinarily sensitive’ vocal (Irwin, 1986, p. 26). Pursuing a higher pitch than on ‘Inspiration’, Perry precisely enunciates images of injustice (‘hands stained/Red with blood/Of countless Irish lives’) and repression (‘H Block cells’).

As the song unfolds, however, it becomes clear that its animus is aimed less at British policy *per se* than at the conduct of Britain’s Labour Party on Northern Ireland. The band had argued in interviews that Labour had ‘brought the fuckin’ troops over’ and ‘introduced internment in Ireland’ (though the latter claim was untrue) (Smith 1986, p. 12).15 In the chorus of ‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’, then, Andy Perry chides - in a lower, and more spoken-sung, register than the verse - ‘Labour’s house-trained “socialists”’, who are seen to have sided, at the cusp of the conflict, with ‘king and crown’ (over the Catholic working class). In this sense, 1969 serves, in the logic of the song, less as a historical marker of Britain’s militarisation of Northern Ireland than as an ideologically symptomatic moment when ‘the truth’ - as it is termed in the song - emerged about Labour’s (imperialist) orientation. If U2 had, on ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, responded to the hunger strike by invoking Bloody Sunday but only to re-stage it via Christian imagery, then Easterhouse engaged in a similar act of displacement and projection; for here, the events of the early 1980s were addressed via an account of 1969 that, in turn, served as a springboard to assail British Labour.

If singling out Labour for censure in a song about the ‘Troubles’ seemed somewhat incongruous, this was especially so in 1986, that year that Red Wedge - an alliance of left-wing musicians led by Paul Weller and Billy Bragg - emerged to endorse Labour ahead of the 1987 General Election (Rachel 2016). In the context of this leftist chorus campaigning against Thatcherism, Easterhouse lambasted Labour.16 ‘Nineteen Sixty Nine’ staged more than mere critique, though; for its singer drew, in the song’s declamatory denouement, a ‘lesson’, proclaiming that while ‘we’ are ‘part of’ this ‘oppression’, ‘we cannot make ourselves free’ (thus invoking the anti-imperialist ethos of the RCP). This instruction was augmented, moreover, in the sleeve notes, which claimed that the ‘courage’ shown by Sands served as an ‘inspiration’ to class activists in Britain.

In this sense, the EP issued, as *the next step* observed, less ‘a moralistic appeal to British liberalism’ than ‘a call for solidarity with the Irish people’ (Simpson 1986, p. 9), and it was launched - fittingly - at a concert ‘on behalf of the Irish Freedom Movement’ (as the music press put it) in London (*NME* 3 May 1986, p. 32). In its review of the record, *the next step* expressed ‘hope’ that Easterhouse would, through the EP, ‘bring the inspiration of the Irish War to a wider audience’ (Simpson 1986, p. 9). It is clear, however, that it fell short of this aim. Three years after its release, Andy Perry would claim that the EP was met with: ‘Total silence’ (Ford 1989, p. 44). This was, though, not quite true, for it was welcomed in the music press. Indeed, it was only *NME* (the most politically-engaged music paper of the period) that took umbrage with the EP. Acknowledging that it comprised ‘class A1 protest music about Britain’s oppression of Ireland’, the paper criticised the band’s ‘smugness and aloofness’, suggesting that this rendered them ‘ineffective propagandists’ (Wells 1986, p. 15).

Whether or not this was correct, the record was - aside from the brief extract transmitted on *The Chart Show* - sidelined by broadcasters. Although it does not appear to have been formally proscribed, the band were informed that radio stations had declined to play it (Perry 2017). At *the next step*, this was seen as an act of *de facto* censorship, with the paper claiming that ‘controllers are not admitting to an official ban because the ensuing controversy would allow the Easterhouse wall of sound to undermine the BBC’s wall of silence on Ireland’ (Simpson 1986b, p. 10)

The EP’s fate serves as a useful contrast to that of The Undertones’ ‘It’s Going To Happen’; for if the hunger-strike theme that informed the latter was so oblique that it failed to register, then the same issue’s staging on the *Inspiration* EP could not have been more upfront, and yet it was sidelined (if not censored). This perhaps suggests that popular music’s address to politics is more likely to achieve efficacy when it operates between the upfront and the oblique. In any case, the *Inspiration* EP would signal the peak, and precipitate the demise, of the Easterhouse project. For Ivor Perry, the ‘dogmatic’ insistence shown by his ‘bloody-minded’ brother on including the Sands image had been ‘counter-productive’ in that the EP was, effectively, ignored (*Hit the North* 1991). More generally, the RCP view (that had initially served as ‘a source of strength’) had become, suggests Ivor Perry, ‘a straitjacket’ (Perry 2017). The dynamic between the band’s aesthetic and ideological drives - which always evinced, says Perry, a ‘weird fragility’ - had become ‘unbalanced’ (Perry 2017). At the band’s live shows, Andy Perry would increasingly assume the character of (what Ivor calls) a ‘political preacher’ and would ‘harangue an audience for fifteen minutes about Irish freedom’ (Perry 2017). Easterhouse’s account of the conflict was unarguably more elaborated than that offered by any contemporaneous act, and their stance was apparently sincere (McIlheney 1986b, p. 12). It would not, however, pierce the public sphere, and the spectre of defeat was quickly invoked, with *NME* announcing: ‘Easterhouse failed. It was that simple’ (Wilde 1987, p. 12). I will now consider one of the band’s contemporaries, TPE, who also advanced a Republican view, but with distinct ideological aims and via discrete aesthetic techniques.

**‘An alternative information service’: That Petrol Emotion, ‘Big Decision’ (1987)**

In April 2013, the celebrated Irish television writer, Arthur Mathews (co-creator of *Father Ted*), took to Twitter after attending a screening of the film *Good Vibrations* (2013), which dramatised the Belfast punk scene of the late 1970s. After sending a Tweet that praised the film, Mathews issued an unexpected addendum: ‘PS - Always thought it was a shame that “That Petrol Emotion” flew in the face of NI [Northern Ireland] punk spirit and were so nakedly sectarian’ (Mathews 2013). It was not the first time that this band had been characterised, in public discourse, as prejudiced. In 1987, at the height of the group’s success, TPE were described by Britain’s best-selling newspaper, *The Sun*, as ‘anti-British’ (Bushell 1987, p. 13). In that same year, a letter appeared in Britain’s leading music paper, the *NME*, claiming that TPE had sought to ‘brainwash’ listeners with their ‘bigoted politics’ (cited in Quantick and Leith (ed.) 1987, p. 50).

During the quarter of a century that passed between the aspersions printed in *The Sun* and *NME*, and the socially-networked smear circulated by Arthur Mathews, a plethora of (popular and scholarly) publications explored the intersection of politics and popular music, yet few of these made even passing reference to TPE, let alone explored their particular stance or strategy.17 This omission is at odds with the fact that TPE engaged with the Northern Ireland conflict - at a time when it constituted the most controversial topic in British politics - in an upfront and partisan way, splintering the quiescent consensus (in which commentary on the conflict was either abstract or non-aligned). If the band’s stance was seen as ‘sectarian’ or ‘bigoted’ (as alleged above), then this pointed to the constricted character of public discourse on the ‘Troubles’ at the time. The elision of TPE in accounts of politics and popular music has had the effect, moreover, of enabling such perceptions to persist and, indeed, permeate their public profile.

The band’s name served to evoke, they explained, the ‘anger and frustration’ of life in 1980s Derry (O’Hagan 1986, p. 45), the city in which they surfaced. Founded by John O’Neill (who had previously been guitarist and chief songwriter in The Undertones) and Raymond Gorman (a local disc-jockey and musician) in 1984, the pair were joined - after relocating to London - by two other Derry musicians: Damian O’Neill (younger brother of John, and formerly guitarist in The Undertones) on bass and Ciaran McLaughlin on drums, before Seattle-born Steve Mack became the band’s singer.

The band elected, at the outset, to engage overtly with the ‘Troubles’, and sought to address - specifically - the injustices that (they felt) had been experienced by the nationalist minority (Gorman and O’Neill 2017; O’Neill 2017). This standpoint - which was accented by the adoption of Irish-language names (Seán Ó’Néill, Réamann Ó’Gormain) - had been forged in the aftermath of the 1981 hunger strike: O’Neill had become ‘more politicised’, he suggests, in the midst of that event (*Across the Line* 2016), which had the effect, explains Gorman, of encouraging people ‘to take sides’ (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). Accordingly, though they saw TPE essentially as an aesthetic project - informed by experimental American ensembles such as Pere Ubu and Captain Beefheart - they would also operate as (what they called) an ‘alternative information service’ (O’Hagan 1986, p. 50), intervening in the Ulster crisis at the level of media, and voicing oppositional views (Stenning 1986, p. 17). In doing this, they spotlighted specific issues, rather than offering any totalising critique, drawing special attention to plastic bullets, strip-searching, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), and the (non-jury) Diplock courts. TPE thus became, as McLaughlin explains, ‘the only people’ in the popular-musical sphere ‘saying anything that was *specific…* we mentioned specifics: rubber bullets, Diplock courts … whereas all these other people were making sort of generalised, wooly [statements]’: “oh, isn’t it terrible …” … “wouldn’t it be great if …”, that kind of thing’ (McLaughlin 2017). In eschewing the abstraction and equivocation that had characterised popular-musical invocations of the conflict, the band were taking a not insignificant risk. Aside from the obvious commercial drawbacks, there were specific safety concerns. In this context, John O’Neill recalls: ‘The Loyalist death squads were at their height and you had to be careful … They could’ve turned up at a show and shot at one of us … It was in the back of my mind, now and again, when we played in Derry or Belfast, that there’s always a chance that some Loyalist guy might think “I’ll make a name for myself here”’ (O’Neill 2017).

Although TPE’s politics were often conflated with those of Sinn Féin (Wilde 1987, p. 38), a more approximate alignment - particularly at the level of public affiliation - was with the left-wing, London-based pressure group, the Labour Committee on Ireland (LCI). While the LCI pursued pro-Republican policies, it operated independently, notes Howe, of Sinn Féin (2016, p. 185), focusing its attention, as Natalie Reside relates, on two key points:

‘The first was a call for a United Ireland and the second was opposition to a wide range of civil rights abuses which continued in the North of Ireland. These included the oppressive use of strip searching of prisoners, the indiscriminate use of plastic bullets to discourage protest [and] the imposition of Diplock courts’ (2017, p. 34).

This agenda was, in effect, that of TPE, and the two initiatives - crucially - converged, with the LCI making its first foray into fund-raising via what its journal, *Labour and Ireland*, called ‘the entertainment scene’ under the aegis of a TPE concert (Anonymous 1985, p. 17). Further collaborations between the band and the LCI ensued, including a benefit show in London compered by Ken Livingstone, a key LCI figure (Anonymous 1987b, p. 26; Anonymous 1988, p. 19), that received coverage in the mainstream music press (Staunton 1987, p. 34). In turn, the LCI afforded space to TPE in the pages of *Labour and Ireland -* a journal not noted for its coverage of popular music - in the form of reviews and interviews (Stenning 1986, pp. 17, 19; Anonymous 1987-88, p. 22).

Oddly, this alliance went unacknowledged in accounts of the band. Indeed, TPE’s shows for the LCI were characterised, in the British music press, as in aid of ‘Irish Nationalists’ (Staunton 1987, p. 34), rather than a Labour-linked pressure group. It was assumed, then, that TPE’s politics were of a piece with those of Sinn Féin (Wilde 1987, p. 38), despite the fact that the band ‘wouldn’t’ (as Gorman puts its) perform any shows to support that party, or participate in interviews with *An Phoblacht*, its newspaper (Gorman and O’Neill 2017), which was, perhaps surprisingly, not averse to covering popular music (see, for instance, O’More 1984). TPE were, says Damian O’Neill, ‘very wary’ of *An Phoblacht* (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). Consequently, while certain members privately felt support for Sinn Féin, this was by no means unanimous, and would not become part of their public persona. Indeed, the band’s only overt invocation of Sinn Féin - a bibliographical citation of Gerry Adams, the (then) Sinn Féin leader, on the sleeve of ‘Genius Move’ (1987) - was the inadvertent outcome of an administrative error (McLaughlin 2017).18 Nevertheless, this would give succour to the view that TPE had endorsed Sinn Féin, and led to an alleged BBC ban (Gorman and O’Neill 2017; McLaughlin 2017).

While the band would not (publicly) align themselves with Sinn Féin, they would also (privately) refuse endorsements of militant Republicanism. In the immediate aftermath of the IRA’s appalling bomb attack on Enniskillen in November 1987 (which killed 11 people, and injured 63), the band happened to be on tour in the United States. This event famously provoked U2, who were also in the US, to issue an impassioned attack on Irish-American Republicanism, and the IRA, during a performance of ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ (Rolston 2001, p. 57). On the same day, TPE came face-to-face, at their concert venue, with Irish-Americans who expressed their support for the Enniskillen attack. ‘I was horrified’, recalls McLaughlin, ‘because Noraid turned up … and started telling us about how they thought it [the Enniskillen bomb] was great’.19 ‘We threw them out’, the drummer explains. ‘We were getting into this big, intense conversation with them … and we ended up ejecting them’ (McLaughlin 2017). This, perhaps, points to a fragile fault-line that the band traversed, for they would elsewhere seek to explain that the IRA had not emerged in a vacuum (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). However, this wish to contextualise the (re)emergence of militant Irish republicanism in the late 1960s evidently did not extend to endorsing current IRA actions.

Perhaps because of their partisan stance, the band were at pains to dissociate themselves from sectarianism. Thus, in interviews, they clarified their wish for a ‘non-sectarian’ united Ireland (Hunter 1987); indeed, Damian O’Neill explained that he would ‘leave the group’ if ‘the public thought [he] was anti-Protestant’ (Gardner 1986, p. 18) Stressing (with more than three decades hindsight) that TPE ‘were *never* sectarian’, McLaughlin suggests: ‘The only reason it could be perceived as such is that the injustice [in Northern Ireland] was wielded in a sectarian way from the set up of the Northern Ireland state until we were going in the eighties’ (McLaughlin 2017, original emphasis). By addressing the injustices experienced by the nationalist minority, TPE were apparently seen (by some) as offering succour to sectarianism. However, as Howe has explained, TPE’s ‘non-sectarianism’ was ‘beyond doubt’ (2000, p. 183).

In staging their perspective on the conflict, TPE conceived a clear stratagem, deploying sleeve notes and interviews (more than song lyrics) as the locus of their ‘alternative information service’. ‘We were very angry’, recalls Damian O’Neill: ‘But instead of doing sloganeering song lyrics, we just thought it was better to inform people’ (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). The sleeve notes sought, as McLaughlin explained, ‘to get across what’s happening [in Northern Ireland]’: ‘what we’re hoping is that people will read it and go away and think about it, or read some more. And then maybe their opinions will change’ (Hunter 1987). Presenting commentary on plastic bullets, strip searching, Diplock courts, and the PTA, the rhetorical register deployed in the notes (often drawn from reports by organisations such as Amnesty International) eschewed the emotive rhetoric that often infused popular-musical engagements with politics, issuing instead highly rational, evidence-based accounts. (In contrast to the affective armoury assumed by acts such as U2, then, TPE’s attack was informational).

This consigning of commentary to sleeve notes was a self-conscious strategy, on the band’s part, to safeguard their songs *qua* songs, thus sanctioning the use of subtlety or obliqueness in lyrics, whilst reducing the risk of polemic or preachiness, which they felt were the primary pitfall of political pop (Gardner 1986, p. 18; McRae 1987, p. 13; Wilkes 1987, pp. 24-25). The band members were acutely aware that the medium of song might not be commensurate to the task of confronting the conflict, and expressed doubts about music’s capacity to actuate change (Gardner 1986, p. 18; McRae 1987, p. 13). They were, moreover, unequivocal in their wish to be viewed - above all - as a creative endeavour, conceiving of their commentary on the conflict as an (urgent) ideological adjunct to their aesthetic output (Gorman and O’Neill 2017; O’Neill 2017).

Despite announcing, in interviews, that their intervention on Northern Ireland would be engaged primarily via sleeve notes and interviews, TPE were nevertheless chastised for (what critics called) their ‘lyrical vagueness’ (Wilkinson 1987, p. 24). A review of the band in *Melody Maker* thus declaimed that TPE ‘defy all … conceptions of them as provocative interpreters of the British occupation of Northern Ireland by lyrically evading the specifics of the issue’ (Smith 1986, p. 33). The band’s consignment of commentary to sleeve notes (and interviews) carried, then, a concomitant catch: being castigated for unclearness in what unquestionably constituted the creative crux of their oeuvre (i.e. their songs). I will now consider one such song, ‘Big Decision’, TPE’s most commercially successful single, as an index of their work.

In 2016, a short account of TPE appeared on the BBC Radio Ulster website, describing ‘Big Decision’ as ‘a song about plastic bullets and political stalemate in Northern Ireland’ (*Across the Line* 2016). Previously, Cloonan had portrayed ‘Big Decision’ - *en passant* - as an ‘anti-plastic bullets record’ (1996, pp. 117-118). This view of the song pertained to the fact that plastic bullets were cited in the song words, and evoked across its auxiliary media, such as its promotional video and picture sleeve. The most overt invocation came, however, at the visual level, via a grainy shot of one such bullet on the sleeve’s cover (alongside a note detailing the number of children killed by plastic bullets since the start of the ‘Troubles’). This armament was, in turn, evoked in the song’s promotional video, via Mack’s wielding of an imaginary firearm (directly at the camera), an action visually intercut with images of armed UK police.

The summoning of plastic bullets in the song words was perhaps more subtle, inciting empathy more than anger. This was, in part, an effect of Mack’s vocal style; for its gentle tone - and soft melodic contours - meant that the singer’s citation of ‘plastic bullets’ (particularly when set against the band’s distorted guitars and drum machines) passed almost unnoticed, while the proceeding image of ‘scum boot[ing] down the door’ (evoking police raids on people’s homes) garnered not so much shock as concern. As critics explained at the time, Mack sang the song ‘with a smile in his voice’, hence ‘Big Decision’ bequeathed ‘agitpop that works’ - as the *Observer* put it - rather than ‘a routine piece of breast-beating’ (Anonymous 1987, p. 21). The song’s convivial quality was, however, not constricted to Mack’s vocal character; for the band’s dance-infused percussion and insistent (B major) barre-chord, enlivened by a propulsive guitar hook, supplied an expressly upbeat musical frame.

The singer’s reference to plastic bullets (‘Plastic bullets chic headlines in store’) nevertheless requires some unpacking, not least because it was often misheard (as ‘shoot headlines in store’).20 Its writer, John O’Neill, observes that the lyric had, in the first instance, a poetic, more than a semantic, value: ‘It sounded good’, says the songwriter, and not ‘like a cliché’. However, he adds that it cited, at least for him, a certain local significance: ‘Nearly every home in the Bogside in Derry has a plastic bullet from the riots, especially in the 70s, when the British Army were just firing plastic bullets right, left and centre’. In this sense, the lyric referred, says O’Neill, to ‘a kind of a trophy thing … “I had this during the war” sort of thing’ that ‘devalues what it actually represents … People were actually maimed and killed by these things. It would be just seen as some kind of little adventure. That it wasn’t anything serious at all. So that’s sort of was what … I was trying to say’ (O’Neill 2017). In this sense, the lyric seemed directed, at least from O’Neill’s point of view, at certain sections of the nationalist community in Derry (and their *ad hoc* curation of the accoutrements of conflict)

Whether or not such resonances were registered in the song’s reception, it is clear that its citation of plastic bullets circulated (and achieved significance) in a semantic circuit beyond the song’s structural confines, echoing the sentiments of TPE’s sleeve notes, videos and interviews, with the cumulative effect of inveigling this issue into contemporary popular-cultural discourse. Certainly, ‘Big Decision’ provoked discussion of plastic bullets on high-profile media outlets, with band members elaborating on the issue on BBC Radio 1 (Gorman and O’Neill 2017), whilst glossy ‘teen’ magazines, such as *Smash Hit*s, circulated the song’s lyrics in their entirety (*Smash Hits* 1987b, p. 27); hence the words ‘plastic bullets’ appeared on the brightly-illustrated pages of Britain’s best-selling pop publication. If the band’s objective was to propel such issues to the forefront of popular culture, then they arguably succeeded in doing this.

While the title of ‘Big Decision’ served, for certain critics, as ‘a commentary on the British government and their tentative approach to Northern Ireland’ (Bailie 2018, p. 213), for the band it invoked the importance of partisan action (over apolitical passivity). As Mack explained shortly after the record’s release*:* ‘The whole point of the song is you’d rather sit on the edge than make a big decision’ (Wilkes 1987, p. 25). What this ‘decision’ might be, though, remained - within the semantic system of the song - somewhat obscure. Reflecting on its chorus (‘You’d rather sail the ocean/Than make a big decision’) three decades later, John O’Neill suggests that, during the period in which the song was composed, he ‘felt that there’d been enough trying to walk this fine line between the Unionist parties and the British, and trying to appease them, and hope that somehow that would work. That’s what I felt at the time: “you’ve got to finally get off your arses and become active in trying to really change things”. I suppose that’s what I was trying to say [in the song]’ (O’Neill 2017).

A more overt exhortation to action emerged in the song’s middle eight, which comprised a rudimentary rap by Ó’Gormain (‘What you gotta do in this day and age/You gotta agitate, educate and organise’) adapted from an early hip-hop track, ‘How We Gonna Make The Black Nation Rise?’ (1980), by Brother ‘D’ with Collective Effort (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). In its live rendition, the rap’s resonance was even more pronounced, with Ó’Gormain accenting its Irish inflection: ‘How we gonna make the Irish nation rise?/You gotta eliminate all British ties/You gotta agitate, educate and organise’.21 Similarly insurgent imagery appeared on the record’s packaging, with TPE presenting, on the sleeve and label of the ‘Big Decision’ single, a new graphic symbol - a painted sketch of a hand-held petrol bomb - that served as a potent visual index of the band’s name (Gorman and O’Neill 2017).

Despite its intimations of plastic bullets and petrol bombs, ‘Big Decision’ would penetrate the

playlist of the daytime schedule on BBC Radio 1. In this context, contemporaneous critics would claim that ‘the most subversive thing about That Petrol Emotion charting is not the call to agitate, educate and organise that raps out of transistors and across factory floors’, but rather that TPE had ‘manage[d] to charm Gary Davies [a popular daytime disc-jockey on BBC radio] into aiding and abetting them’ (Stud Brothers 1987, p. 10). The band were also invited to perform the song on the popular music-television show, *The Tube*, delivering a vigorous live rendition between features on Jean-Paul Gaultier and David Bowie (Channel 4, 27 March 1987). Perhaps even more surprisingly, the song was celebrated as ‘Single of the Week’ in *Smash Hits* (1987b, p. 63). Such success, as the *NME* observed at the time, seemed to ‘open up Petrol politics to an undiscovered audience’ (McRae 1987, p. 13).

In actuality, however, the record’s reach was circumscribed; for, despite contemporaneous claims (such as the one cited above) of the record ‘charting’, it in fact failed to breach the UK Top 40, which in effect constituted the mainstream chart. Entry into the latter would have precipitated significant media exposure, not least via an appearance on *Top of the Pops*, which at the time served as the key popular-musical portal through which to penetrate the public consciousness (Thornton 1995, p. 123). One of the show’s presenters, the (late) BBC DJ, John Peel, expressed bafflement that ‘Big Decision’ had not reached the mainstream chart. ‘Just having a look through the new Top 40 to see where that is’, explained Peel after the playing the track on his late-night radio show, ‘and it isn’t anywhere.It’s rather shocking’ (BBC Radio 1, 28 April 1987). Despite the warm reception extended to ‘Big Decision’, then, the single would stall at No. 43.

If the subtlety of the band’s approach (consigning commentary to sleeve notes rather than song lyrics) enabled them to bring their political views to the margins of the mainstream, then perhaps the fact that they had a clear - and, at the time, oppositional - stance on the Northern Ireland conflict meant that they were only able to take this so far (in other words, to the outskirts of the chart). The band members certainly felt that their political views hindered their commercial success, pointing to the comments of radio pluggers who claimed that broadcasters were wary of their politics (Gorman and O’Neill 2017).

Whether or not this is true, ‘Big Decision’ marked the (commercial) peak of the band’s career. Moreover, during the subsequent year, TPE reconsidered their approach, sensing that it had achieved little in the way of effect, other than hindering their success. In hindsight, there is a sense, among the band members, that their project failed, both commercially and politically (McLaughlin 2017). ‘We took the wrong approach early on’, suggests Gorman: ‘we were too kind of ferocious about it [the Northern Ireland conflict] in the early days. We should have been doing it gradually. And maybe waited … until our profile was at a certain sort of stage. And that’s when you start saying the really important things’ (Gorman and O’Neill 2017).

Contemporaneous critics, such as Simon Reynolds, proffered their own perspectives on (what they called) TPE’s ‘problem’. In Reynolds’ view, when politically-affiliated popular musicians become conjoined with ‘a coherent programme of demands and grievances’ - as was the case with TPE’s stance on the Northern Ireland conflict - then it was inevitable, he said, that the music (*qua* music) would ‘suffer a diminishment, however incendiary the issues at stake’. This, for Reynolds, was the ‘problem’ of TPE; for their wish ‘to promote resilience, solidarity and awareness’ had ‘the unavoidable effect of clenching their music [and] forestalling any real abandon’. By assuming the role of ‘spokesmen’, then, the band had constricted their persona and, as a consequence, appeared - according to Reynolds - as ‘*yeomen*’: ‘stouthearted, decent and true’ (1988, p. 23, original emphasis).

One of TPE’s (more) high-profile media engagements serves to illustrate this point. Recalling an invite to appear on MTV in the United States in 1987, McLaughlin explains:

 ‘They got us into this tattoo parlour in LA. It was all about Steve and Raymond getting tat toos. It was all like, “Oh, everybody’s having a great time. Isn’t it fun? What are you getting on your tattoo? …”. And John just said: “Right, we’re a serious band”. You could almost hear his voice shaking with rage at this kind of trivialisation of what we were. And then he started talking about “the war in Ireland”. Let’s just say it put a dampener on the efferves cence of the moment, the shallowness of it. But he was entirely serious. We all just shut up, because he was seen as being the leader of the band, and we all fell into rank behind him’ (McLaughlin 2017)22

This incident points not only to the intricacies of engaging with the Irish conflict in the popular-musical sphere, but also to the frictions that this might arouse *within* a particular band. There was, it transpires, an increasing lack of consensus in TPE with regards to the ‘Troubles’ (Gorman and O’Neill 2017) and in 1988 - the year after ‘Big Decision’ - the band began to withdraw from the issue, informing journalists and publicists that they no longer wished to discuss it (Gorman and O’Neill 2017). As it happens, the effects of the ‘broadcasting ban’, introduced in October 1988, would have made it difficult for them to have continued with their initial approach (Miller 1995). Nevertheless, critics continued to conceive of the band in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict (Wells 1990, p. 16). Ironically, then, while TPE had been impelled - at the outset of their project - by ‘a moral obligation’ to address the ‘Troubles’ at every opportunity (O’Hagan 1986, p. 45; Savage 1987, p. 20), this became, over time, a constricting prism through which the band were viewed, with the effect that their music (which for them, of course, was central) was considered secondarily. If TPE had inveigled oppositional views of the Northern Ireland conflict into popular discourses, they only achieved this at the expense of their own aesthetic endeavour (and commercial success).

**Coda**

In October 2018, the Irish-born, London-based writer Megan Nolan reflected on the ignorance that British politicians had displayed about Northern Ireland during the ‘Brexit’ debates (2018). Rather ironically, the month in which her article appeared marked the anniversary of several significant events in the ‘Troubles’: fifty years since the civil rights march that is seen as the start of the conflict (5 October 1968); thirty years after the ‘broadcasting ban’ that - amongst other things - forced broadcasters to substitute the voices of Sinn Féin MPs with those of actors on British television and radio (19 October 1988). Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was scant commemoration of such events in Britain’s public sphere. A modest number of media accounts would, however, emerge and - in these efforts - music assumed a meaningful role. In one, a BBC radio documentary on the 1988 Broadcasting Act, U2’s ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’ served as a sonic backdrop, acting as a musical mnemonic of the conflict (*Seriously … Being Gerry Adams* 2018). In another, a BBC television documentary exploring British soldiers’ experiences in Northern Ireland, The Undertones’ ‘It’s Going To Happen’ was sampled during the hunger strike segment, before TPE’s ‘Big Decision’ surfaced as the soundtrack for the closing credits (*Squaddies on the Frontline* 2018). The songs addressed in this article, then, continue to circulate in the contemporary mediascape, serving as sonic ciphers of the conflict.

In their immediate context, though, the songs explored here - particularly those of Easterhouse and TPE - were eclipsed by less partisan efforts. Indeed, in the aftermath of the ‘broadcasting ban’, songs that broached the ‘Troubles’ in more abstract (or equivocal) ways enjoyed significant commercial success, hence The Adventures’ ‘Broken Land’ (1988) - which became the most-played record on BBC Radio 1 in 1988 (Coleman 2009) - and Simple Minds’ ‘Belfast Child’ (1989), a UK No. 1 single that remained in the Top 40 for seven weeks. These high-profile efforts - alongside other concurrent songs (such as Prefab Sprout’s ‘Dublin’ ([1989]) - require their own conjunctural critique.

It is crucial, though, for popular-music studies to attend to interventions overlooked in popular accounts. Deploying print and audio/visual archives - within a specific historical frame - this article shows that (in the mid-1980s) TPE and Easterhouse were the most forthright acts to engage with the ‘Troubles’. Yet their interventions are overlooked in accounts of political song (Lynskey 2010) and in surveys of songs that address the Irish conflict (Maconie 2013: 130-37; Pietzonka 2012). Eschewing the inventorial approach (in which critics chronicle swathes of songs whilst offering perfunctory comment) that has pervaded work on popular music and the ‘Troubles’ (Bailie 2018; Pietzonka 2012; Rolston 2001), the article yields - through its closely-focused, case-study approach - a more nuanced insight into the practice of addressing the conflict. By considering the full range of sites deployed by musicians (and not simply song words), the study illumines the discrete means by which the interventions were staged. Original interviews with the musicians enable (reflective) insights into the creative and ethical impulses impelling their *oeuvres*.

The acts excavated here shared much in common. They were sincere in their views, and in their engagement with the issue. They took considerable risks, and expressed doubts about the efficacy of their endeavours. They drew on articulate frames (such as the LCI or RCP), albeit to different degrees (TPE converged with the LCI, Easterhouse coalesced with the RCP). They had different goals, from raising awareness (TPE) to activating change (Easterhouse). While TPE drew on lived experience, Easterhouse were more ideologically defined. There were fissures within each band, and their efforts were undone (at least in part) by asymmetries within their own projects, with politics serving not only to define - but also to derail - their creative outputs. Both bands are marked, moreover, by a sense of ‘failure’.

Perhaps more than anything, the acts explored here sought to engage the British public on an issue that had been sidelined. Reflecting on this point, Seán Ó’Néill of TPE explained (in 1985): ‘It’s a sad fact but people in England know more about South Africa than Northern Ireland. People know more about Nelson Mandela than Bobby Sands’ (Taylor 1985, p. 6) In this context, TPE sought, they said, ‘to change people’s ignorance of the situation’ (Hunter 1987). Analogous observations - as well as objectives - were outlined by Easterhouse (O’Toole 1986, p. 20). Contemporary debates about the Irish border in the context of ‘Brexit’ suggest, however, that such disinterest persists (Bolland 2017; McDonagh 2018; Nolan 2018). This aspect of the bands’ (respective) projects arguably remains, then, as salient now as it was in the midst of the ‘Troubles’.

**Endnotes**

1. There are no scholarly monographs, or edited collections, on popular-musical engagements with the ‘Troubles’, and only a handful of journal articles have addressed his topic. (Most of these are cited here). There is, however, a growing body of work on the production (and consumption) of Irish republican songs in other musical milieux and historical periods. See, for instance, Millar (2016; 2017; 2018) and Parfitt (2015; 2019).

2. A recent addition to this body of work - Worley (2017, pp. 233-38) - provides a brief but incisive account of punk in Northern Ireland.

3. It is often claimed that the *TOTP* performance took place on the day of Sands’ death (Bailie 2018, p. 153; Maconie 2013, p. 136). Sands died on 5 May 1981 (McKittrick and McVea 2012, p. 167). The episode of *TOTP* was broadcast live on 7 May 1981, the day of Sands’ funeral.

4. The song’s lyrics were printed in full in the contemporaneous music press. See, for example, *Smash Hits* (1 October-14 October 1981), p. 38.

5. An early critique of the song lyrics was offered by Bradby and Torode (1984).

6. There is no mention of Easterhouse in key accounts of popular music and the Northern Ireland conflict. See, for instance, Bailie (2018), Maconie (2013: 130-37), Pietzonka (2011), Rolston (2001).

7. A version of the video is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFpwEpbyTDU>

8. In accounts of ‘alternative’ or ‘independent’ music in mid-1980s Britain - the milieu in which Easterhouse operated - the band are overlooked. See, for example, Robb (2008) and Taylor (2017).

9. The author made every effort to arrange an interview with Andy Perry. In his absence, Ivor Perry speaks, in the article, for Easterhouse.

10. Despite being seen as ‘one of the most controversial outfits of the British left’ (Smith and Worley 2017, p. 8), there is barely any scholarship on the RCP (Smith and Worley 2017, p. 9). However, an activist’s account is offered by Fitzpatrick (2017).

11. For an account of this photograph, see Savage (2015, pp. 240-42).

12. This would often occur with records that engaged the ‘Troubles’. See, for example, Lock (1981, p. 13).

13. Similar letters appeared elsewhere in the music press. See, for instance, Mico (ed.) 1986, p. 30.

14. See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/live/2018/jun/11/johnny-marr-webchat-post-your-questions-now>.

15. The introduction of internment was authorised by the Conservative government in 1971 (McCleery 2015, pp. 14-52).

16. The RCP saw Labour’s ‘soft’ reformism as an obstruction to their aims (Fitzpatrick 2017). Prior to the release of the *Inspiration* EP, Easterhouse expressed their wish ‘to be lethal to the Labour Party, like rat poison’. ‘We want to smash all the crap Red Wedge stuff, too’, they explained (Henderson 1986, p. 21).

17. Many high-profile journalistic accounts of politics and popular music, including those which address songs informed by the ‘Troubles’, make no reference to TPE. See, for instance, Lynskey (2010) and Maconie (2013). Scholarly acknowledgements of the band have been largely confined to brief, passing references (comprising, at most, a single sentence) to their political stance, without any address to their songs or strategies. See, for instance, McLaughlin and McLoone (2012, p. 139), Redhead (1990, p. 14), and Rolston (2001, p. 59).

18. The sleeve of this single featured a citation from Liam Mellows (an Irish Republican who took part in the 1916 Easter Rising) stressing the importance of economic change in independent Ireland (‘A political revolution in Ireland without a coincidental economic revolution simply means a change of masters … ’). Prior to the printing of the sleeve, the band had supplied a copy of the quote (cited in a book by Gerry Adams) to their management to ensure its accurate reproduction on the record sleeve. However, during the process of printing, the bibliographic source was inadvertently included alongside Mellows’ words; hence, Adams’ name appeared (entirely unnecessarily) on the back of the sleeve (Gorman and O’Neill 2017).

19. Noraid (the Irish Northern Aid Committee) raised funds in the US for the IRA. For an account of this organisation, see Hanley (2004).

20. See, for example: <https://genius.com/That-petrol-emotion-big-decision-extended-version-lyrics>; [https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/4639918/That+Petrol+Emotion](https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/4639918/That%2BPetrol%2BEmotion); [https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/4639918/That+Petrol+Emotion](https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/4639918/That%2BPetrol%2BEmotion)

21. See That Petrol Emotion, *Seen and Unseen* (Virgin Vision VHS, 1988). This is a film of the band’s live show in London in October 1988.

22. Some of the incident is available to view here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3qv6ps7lJo>

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