



Billy Bragg recalls setting up Red Wedge, November 1985

The first time I had met most of the musicians in this picture was at the time of the miners' strike the previous year. I didn't really hang out with a lot of rock stars, but I met people like Paul Weller and Jimmy Somerville doing gigs in support of the miners. When the strike ended, a lot of us felt we should carry on and try to defeat the Conservatives at the next general election.

I had become aware of Neil Kinnock long before. In 1978, when I was 20, I saw him speak in Trafalgar Square at the start of the Carnival Against the Nazis march (it ended with a Rock Against Racism gig in Victoria Park, east London). I have always had a lot of respect for Neil. That rally and march was the first thing of a political nature I had ever taken part in. A few months before, I had been working as a messenger for a merchant bank in the City, and I was the only person there who seemed to have strong anti-racist sentiments. Everyone else seemed rather xenophobic.

That Rock Against Racism gig was a real example of how rock could be used to motivate young people to participate in politics, and a huge lesson for Red Wedge. The important thing about Red Wedge was that we always kept ourselves just one step removed from Labour Party control. It helped our credibility. The party could make suggestions to us, but in the end, we had what they wanted – an ability to reach young people – which gave us a certain amount of power. They would say, 'Don't go and talk to Derek Hatton.' We went and did a gig in Liverpool. 'Don't associate yourselves with Ken Livingstone.' We did a gig at the GLC, and he was involved in the whole thing. We had an office at the Labour Party headquarters (Peter Mandelson, who had the neighbouring office, was always peering around the door) and they would invite other people from the arts to sit in on our meetings. Once, the fashion PR Lynne Franks was there when we were discussing the name, which comes from a piece of revolutionary Russian Constructivist art by El Lissitzky, entitled *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. She said, 'You don't want to use the word

'red'. People will think you're socialists.' There was a terrible silence, with tumbleweed blowing through, before I said, 'Lynne, we *are* socialists.'

When we were trying to put the tour together there were some towns where the local Labour Party said, 'Don't bother coming here, we don't have any young people.' They just didn't really want anyone under 30 joining the party. The first tour started in January 1986, then we did about three or four more, including a comedy tour. We were out there agitating right up to the 1987 election. The atmosphere on the road was great. It was like one of those old soul revues, with all the bands travelling around on a bus. People were seeing the Style Council, the Smiths, Madness, Prefab Sprout, the Communards, all in one show. My only regret was that I never filmed the shows.

The music press was supportive, it made sense to use *NME* and *Melody Maker* to thrash out these ideas. The whole British media was much more ideologically charged back then. *NME* put Kinnock on the cover.

The night of the '87 election we were all at the Mean Fiddler in Harlesden and as we waited the evening got sadder and sadder. In the morning I walked all the way home to Acton in the bright June sunlight, feeling sorry for myself. (Ten years later, on the night of the 1997 election, I again had a gig at the Mean Fiddler. I was determined to exorcise the disappointment of that night in '87, and watching Michael Portillo lose his seat made up for it.)

You can't keep something like Red Wedge going outside an election year; political music is nothing without context, so it petered out. My position with regard to Labour hasn't really changed since the days of Red Wedge, because the line with Red Wedge was that we would support them when we could and criticise them when we had to. Obviously there is a lot I disagree with now, particularly about the war in Iraq. I have to fight my cynicism all the time, but to stay engaged is the most important thing. **Interview by Naomi West** *'The Progressive Patriot'* by Billy Bragg (Transworld, £17.99) is out now