

# Anarchist Cabaret

Ron Sakolsky

2003

a review of

*The Anarchist and the Devil Do Cabaret* by Norman Nawrocki, Black Rose Books, 2002, 192 pp., \$20

Earlier this year, while rummaging through my collection of oppositional music to find some anti-war material in order to counter Dubya's lies about the invasion and occupation of Iraq, I started my search by going back to the Gulf War of George I. One of the initial jewels to emerge from that pile of recordings was a 1991 cassette by Rhythm Activism, *War Is The Health of the State*.

That its message would still be fresh over a decade later is a tribute to the Empire's unrelenting oil wars and to the music itself. I remembered the band had been part of the 1986 anarchist Black Wedge Tour that Jean Smith of Mecca Normal had written about in a volume which I edited entitled *Sounding Off!*. Smith's article had peaked my interest, but I had to wait until band founder Norman Nawrocki's own book for a full blown account of life on the road during Rhythm Activism's 1998 agitprop tour of Europe.

However, the book is much more than an engaging chronicle of the twists and turns encountered by a "rebel news orchestra/rock and roll cabaret band." It is also a vehicle for a recurring series of what Nawrocki terms "urban fairy tales." These tales, floating in and out of the tour narrative, are brilliantly rendered in a style that is at turns poignant, haunting, whimsical, and philosophical.

For me, though, the heart of the book is Nawrocki's symbolic search for his anarchist musical ancestry. One persona in particular becomes the focus of this foray into ancestral origins, Nawrocki's uncle, Harry (another name for the Devil, of course). We meet Harry in this volume through his letters to Nawrocki's father, Franek. However, I decided, in keeping with the spirit of the book, to use my own poetic license as a reviewer to cobble together some excerpts from the letters printed in the text and place them in the context of other textual references and my own imagined correspondence between Harry and Norman himself, without Franek as the intermediary. The results appear in the following collaged conversation.

## Dear Norman,

My musical nephew, where are you? Each time you do a European tour, you promise your father you'll come and see me, but we still have never met. I admit that I am hard to find these days because of my wanderings. People look at me now as if I was just another homeless, hungry and forgotten beggar. Yet I fought the Nazis once as part of the Polish Resistance; not with the nationalists, but with the anarchists, including one Jewish partisan who, being a klezmer, was like me, a violinist. We were based in the woods outside Krakow. I told Hitler to go fuck himself, and then I said the same thing to the new Communist Party bosses and bureaucrats after the war, and now I say it to the free marketeers of global capitalism. My friends have always been musicians, gypsies, circus performers, puppet makers, and radicals of all stripes. And, of course, my constant drinking companion has been the Devil himself.

As I once told your father, there is a brotherhood of men and women, and then there are those who, drunk with power, want to eliminate all that is human. As long as we fight wars, and not the idea of War itself, we will never have peace on this earth. I have no peace. Death to the Fascists! Death to the Warmakers! Long live the bears and the cave people of the world!

Though I missed you when you toured with your anarchist cabaret band, many people have told me that you inquired in relation to my whereabouts along the way. While sadly we didn't meet in person, I'd like to think that my spirit has danced in the flames of your fiddle on more than one occasion.

Love,  
Harry

## **Dear Uncle Harry,**

At last a letter to me, and not my father, written in your own hand! People have told me all kinds of stories about you over the years. That you had lost your memory in a car accident or were imprisoned as a political dissident. Others swore you'd escaped from a mental institution or that you were on the run, or even murdered, as the result of a love triangle dating from your circus days.

Some said you'd drunk yourself to death on Polish vodka after losing part of your face in a Nazi booby trap during the war. As for me, I've always thought that, like the Devil, you inhabited my fiddle (on my best nights). Damn, Harry, I don't know if you'll ever get this letter, but, if you do, I just want to let you know that you have always been an inspiration, not only in musical terms, but also in regards to the passionate way you have lived your life.

I have always wanted to make music not only for dance concerts, but for occupying and taking over banks, city halls, factories and schools while dancing on the grave of apathy. Right now, I am on a North American tour with a series of what I call "Creative Resistance 101" workshops. They include: "Rebel Words 101," "Rebel Rhythms 101," "Rhythm Activism 101," "Radical Community Cabaret 101," "Humor for the Humorless Radical 101," and the "Art of Anarchism 101." I hope to show people how to use music, theatre, poetry, clowning, and art to create a culture of resistance.

Aside from Rhythm Activism, I am involved with a band called Bakunin's Bum. We recently did a CD entitled Fight To Win as a benefit for the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) here in Canada. It features the militant words of OCAP activists set to original music. Some of my collaborators on this CD are involved with the band Godspeed You Black Emperor! You might have heard that they recently got detained in Oklahoma by the FBI during the Iraq War for three hours of questioning as suspected terrorists while driving to Columbia, Missouri from a gig they'd played at Fort Worth. As a cultural terrorist myself, I can definitely relate to their situation.

Love and Respect,  
Norman

Review and imagined correspondence by Ron Sakolsky, Denman Island, April 2003

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