

Busking behind the Barricades

Book review

Bill Blank

2017

a review of

A Busker's Adventure by David Rovics. Various e-book formats at davidrovics.com/

David Rovics hails from a long lineage of gifted topical American folk guitar singers originally birthed by Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Pete Seeger, with blazing torches passed on through its most notable stepchildren, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and, of course, Bob Dylan, at least before he “went electric” (as alarmingly noted in that 1965 first issue of the *Fifth Estate*).

As with many of these protest troubadours, Rovics’ consistent strength has been his poetic voice rather than his vocals. Combined with a relentless street-level anarchistic determination to continuously confront the politics of the day, his singing commentaries often surface long before such disquieting reports make any headlines.

With the possible exception of Brit folk-punker, Billy Bragg, no protest singer since the mid-1990s has logged in more causes and causeways armed only with guitar, backpack, and maybe enough change to make it to the next rally.

My own 15-year, mostly failed attempt at such musical notoriety, partially sustains my awe for the sheer volume of Rovics’ ever growing, usually free and readily available catalogue.

He posts YouTube videos often several times a week, sometimes now accompanying himself with an electric cello, while weekly fan list emails will often feature his latest song from the road or the barricades.

Touring the protest circuit has never been lucrative, and in the internet age, it seems even easier to fade into the digital cloud of overwhelming overload (or quit music for other artistic pursuits), yet Rovics continues unrelenting travels nationally and globally with his issue-driven songs.

A quick sample of this protest pedigree can be found with his popular remake of Woody Guthrie’s “Sacco and Vanzetti.” His subversive, “Who Would Jesus Bomb,” “We Are Everywhere” “The Riot Dog” and “They’re Building a Wall,” seem to be the most timelessly familiar, and even more timely in this age of fake news and fake presidential populism.

Somehow, Rovics (now the father of two as he relates on his website), has managed to keep writing, recording, protesting, and touring while maintaining a family unit which would seem like quite the interesting memoir if he ever found time to self-reflect and expand upon his modest 2013 first road chronicle, *Have Guitar, Will Travel*.

Instead, a baby parenting interlude found him writing and releasing his first “semi-autobiographical” novel, *A Busker’s Adventure*, featuring a politically-aware, highly skilled street musician named Casey from Boston (like Rovics), who visits Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Hamburg, skirmishing with police and finding love before driving some risky cargo from Florida to Colorado with an eye on revolutionary events in late 1980s El Salvador.

I (along with many anti-authoritarian, neo-Luddites) really hate e-books (currently the only available download form of this novel). My slight disappointment could be more with the sleep-inducing mind-wandering medium

than with the somewhat reserved prose. The novel does mythically close with a reversed failed revolution, a dose of grin-triggering hope for even the most cynical reader.

Still, those desiring more intimate, electrifying non-fiction, including Rovics' recent travel difficulties with certain borders in an elevated dissident status (especially New Zealand), will have to settle (for now) with his occasional journalistic insights in various periodicals and on-line self-publishing and his prolific mastery of the topical folk song.

His one minor flaw might be overextending himself from time to time into too many rough draft expressions of his perceptive power unless perhaps he knows more than we do, that our race against time will really run out if we don't change the world soon.

David Rovics will always be an inspiring musical force and truly talented comrade from our greater anti-authoritarian milieu.

Bill Blank's alter-ego writes plays and teaches high school Social Studies a mile north of the Detroit 8 Mile Road border, and has contributed numerous articles to the *Fifth Estate*.

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