

# Robb Johnson

## A Singer/Songwriter You May Never Have Heard Of, But Should

David Rovics

2017

a review of

“A Reasonable History of Impossible Demands: The Damage to Date 1986–2013.” Robb Johnson, 92 songs on 5 CDs with 64-page booklet. PM Press, 2015, [pmpress.org](http://pmpress.org)

At a time when independent publishers and record labels are going out of business at a rapid rate, PM Press keeps on putting out books, pamphlets, videos, and various other things—including CDs.

One of their most recent releases is a 5-CD box set retrospective containing close to 100 songs by singer/songwriter, Robb Johnson, titled “A Reasonable History of Impossible Demands.”

If you are a Robb Johnson fan, you’d immediately recognize the box set’s title from one of Robb’s songs, the chorus of which echoes the Situationist slogan from the revolutionary May/June days of Paris 1968.

But, you have probably never heard of Robb Johnson unless you happen to have grown up on the fringes of the punk and/or folk music scene somewhere in England, Scotland or Wales, sometime between 1986 and the present.

Robb Johnson is the quintessential great songwriter you’ve never heard of. The one that proves the whole record industry is full of shit, among other industries.

Why was “Anarchy in Hackney” not on the Billboard charts? Why doesn’t “At the Siege of Madrid” appear in all the high school textbooks as a teaching aid for that lesson on the Spanish Civil War? (You know, that one.) Well, you know why.

But now, at least, Robb’s music will not only be known on the fringes of the British punk and folk scenes, but on the fringes of the anarchist scene in the US, as well. And, who knows what’s next.

To put Robb into some kind of warped, personal context, as a teenager I liked Bob Dylan a lot. I still do. But I just assumed the media hype I grew up with must be true, that Dylan was the best politically-oriented (at least for a few records) songwriter the English language managed to produce.

Then, at the age of 19, I hitch-hiked from San Francisco to Seattle, went to the Pike Place Market, and was completely blown away by a guy named Jim Page, who was busking there.

That was in the 1980s. It wasn’t until more than a decade later, on my first tour of England, that I discovered Robb.

It was one of those inevitable discoveries for a politically-oriented songwriter touring the folk clubs of England to make. Probably one in three people I stayed with, after attending my show, asked me if I had heard of Robb.

And, regularly subjected to Robb’s CDs as I was on that tour, I was happy to discover that this was far from an unpleasant experience. On the contrary, I was hooked. Like Jim Page, Robb writes at least as well as Dylan, but with more authentic emotion and much better politics.

Robb has documented his life and times from the 1980s to the present, always with chilling insight, often with humor, sometimes with an old-school punk band, oftentimes with just voice and guitar.

He is a master of the instrument, particularly with his intricate fingerstyle playing, reminiscent of other masters of the technique like Jim Page or Alistair Hulett.

In addition to songs about his times, from Thatcher's reign to Thatcher's death ("Ding Dong Thatch"), to the fall of the Soviet Union ("Breakfast In Chemnitz") to Blair and Cameron's foreign wars and the resistance to them ("I Am Not At War"), the box set includes a whole CD's worth of Robb's gorgeous songs about love, childhood ("Real Cool Purple Shirt"), and parenthood—some of which also manage to include World War I history in them, among other things ("When Harry Took Me To See Ypres").

Taken as a whole, you'll get an excellent primer on some of the more notable events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from this collection.

OK, now go look him up on You-Tube. But if you still have a CD player and you got an extra \$45, the full-on Robb Johnson binge via PM Press is way better.

David Rovics is a Portland, Oregon-based singer/songwriter and anarchist. His many songs and albums, and his current touring schedule for the U.S. and Europe are at [DavidRovics.com](http://DavidRovics.com).

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