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## Review of The Tenementals' album—*Glasgow: a history (vol. I of VI)*

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Can there be a “minor” pop or rock music in the way we understand and accept that there is a minor literature? And would such a music, like its literary counterpart, be able, in its awkwardnesses and its irregularities, to unlock new lines of flight from within the established norms of the form? In theorizing and describing minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari famously took Kafka for their paradigm, as a writer who came from outside a majority configuration of political and cultural power (a Czech Jew in the Habsburg Empire) who worked, nonetheless, in the majoritarian language—German—but undermined that standard position by his ability to “break forms, encourage ruptures and new sprouting” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 23). In their use of the word “minor,” Deleuze and Guattari claim that they designate “the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 18).

The band The Tenementals certainly seems to have chosen some minor paths to the stage and the recording studio. These largely middle-aged academics, who have a diverse and maverick range of previous experience of the rock or pop scene, have come together to endeavor to sing into being, to serenade, and to expose a leftist history of the city of Glasgow. The singing is done largely in the untempered Scottish accents of their home city (rather than in the pop/rock genre normative of Americanish or Anglo-British).

The engagement of the group with history is, for rock music, unusually deliberate, premeditated, committed, and often profound. Frontman David Archibald (professor of political cinemas at the University of Glasgow) has said in an interview that they are performing “transmedia history” and that their work asks of history: how is history produced, who produces it, and in what form? Ultimately, then, the question they submit in an oblique, musical, and public fashion is, “can historians make music” of their discipline (2024)? And can such a history speak (or sing) to both a popular and an academic audience? In answer, or by way of analogy to their method, Archibald points to the massively influential academic history of the Haitian Revolution, *Black Jacobins* by Caribbean writer C. L. R. James, and notes that as a history, the material in that book started life as a drama performed on stage in London (2024). That is to say, other forms of history than the scholarly volume published at an academic press are available, and might indeed speak to a broader and more representative demographic of the people—and disrupt the corraling of history—its knowledge, its forms and its communication—into the ivory tower.

In that exemplary sense, The Tenementals' work can be seen as belonging to several strands of traditional history bearing. In Scotland the folk tradition has an unbroken record

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in keeping in popular consciousness certain historical events, beliefs, and feelings. There is a whole canon of folk songs to this day about the 18th-century Jacobite Risings and about the 17th-century Covenanters. Equally, in a nonmusical tradition of transmission of folk history, we can also look to the work of radical historian and ex-People's Palace curator Elspeth King, who has long been investigating and documenting how history lives in ordinary people's lives through artifacts. Her work has in particular examined the survival of the history of the 13/14th-century people's hero William Wallace through a range of widely maintained and displayed household objects and ornaments (and ultimately through the film "Braveheart") (King, 2007).

If The Tenementals' concerns, however, are for a current-day radical folk and working-class history, then, again, they are on sound territory and have much tradition to call on. A more recent and indeed ongoing tradition that, like their own method, exploits multi-media formats is to be found not just in artists like The Proclaimers, but in a specific Glasgow folk tradition that draws on political events and history and character of the people, as seen in the work of Matt McGinn, Billy Connolly, and Janey Godley. This work and its performance spread across media from song, to poetry, recital, publication, audio recording, televisual, film, and currently social media.

In the purely rock/pop music field, too, there have always been artists who, despite the dominating hedonistic tone of much of the field, take a political stance and evoke histories and events often with a leftist/anarcho-libertarian take. We think here about The Clash, Bob Marley, Sex Pistols, about Billy Bragg, and indeed of the whole Punk/New Wave movement in the mid to late 1970s. The Tenementals definitely draw on this tradition alongside many others, and the variety of different genres of the pop song that they exploit—R&B, Spanish Troubadour, Punk monologue, the Waltz, and so on—is testament to their conscious loyalty and experimentation with the entire rock legacy. Yet this eclecticism is also evidence of not quite a hesitancy but, as Deleuze calls it, a "stammering" (Deleuze, 2002, p. 3), a breaking of a smooth majoritarian continuity in the language. As they draw on disparate sources and invoke different styles—the elite art-historical reference to "Pentimento" in a song about class and slavery; the citing of the rabble-rousing political speeches of 1970s young maverick Communist trade unionist leader Jimmy Reid; and in "Universal Alienation" the Corbusian "Machines" as a descriptor of the high-rise social housing—we're left with a consciously staccato delivery—as Deleuze again put it, an "assemblage of enunciation" (Deleuze, 2002, p. 3). Or as The Tenementals hail it themselves in the punk panegyric to the city "The Owl of Minerva,"

If the past is just one thing after another

Perhaps interruption is the true revolutionary act.

It is via this stammering, staccato breakup of the musically coherent and consistent, established way things are that The Tenementals have not only realized what are the possibilities of the critical in pop song—they have effected it. They use song in making apparent that kaleidoscopic, patchwork history of this city, and thus, they bring it alive. This performing of history can be at once educative—for those who need it—and confirmation—for those who desire it. It thus constitutes, in a uniquely pop music fashion, a simultaneous performance of a sermon and a communion.

For, Pop music proceeds, as most people are instinctively aware, in brief attack, always constative, in short bursts of lyric and melody. It transforms something known, everyday,

and historical into something new and exciting. That operation brings to mind Foucault's poetic and paradoxical description of the working of the critical in its relation to its object. In *L'ordre du discours*, he wrote that it is

... to say for the first time what has already been said; and to repeat endlessly what has never been said before. (Foucault, 1971, p. 27, author's translation)

The words "first time" and "endlessly" are key here. Popular music is not habitually considered a critical medium. It is generally thought of more as celebratory, joyous, inspirational, romantic or moving—even as a protest (viz. The Clash and punk in general). Yet it is possible to conceive of that definition by Foucault as applicable to popular music, too, at least in a formal sense. One need only bring to mind the number of songs heard with those three words "I love you" as a ritornello. In fact, we hear them everywhere, from Frank Sinatra to Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder to Billie Eilish. Think of the Beatles, *Michelle*—"I love you, I love you, I love you, that's all I want to say ... " In every song where we hear those three words, by each one of these singers and many, many more, they come at us again fresh, new, thrilling like we've never heard this before. Then the singers go on in chorus repeating again and again—each time a beat in the heart as new. And just so is The Tenementals' stammering performance, rocking through the history of Glasgow, a continuously interrupted history, which is endlessly renewed, and brings us all up sharp, to hear and see and know the thing that has been with us and that we have known all our lives, for the very first time.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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