

Chapter 1

The Clash and Fugazi: Punk Paths Toward Revolution

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Punk rock has always been about more than music. Born largely as a reaction to the self-indulgent excesses and perceived failure of the Sixties rock/revolution, punk offered a blistering critique of idealism sold out or gone bad. This stance was a double-edged sword. Punk's "ruthless criticism of everything existing" (Tucker 1978, 13) spared no one, and could slip towards nihilist extremes. As such, it made the idea of harnessing music for radical change an ever more perilous venture, where only angels or fools might dare to tread. Beneath noisy blasts of illusion-shattering negation, however, an unbending belief in the power of music to generate transformation still lurked. This sense of mission defined no band—punk or otherwise—more profoundly than The Clash. Dubbed "The Only Band That Matters" by record company PR, the moniker nonetheless accurately evoked the risk-taking heroic spirit the band sought to embody.

If the early Clash track "Hate And War" encapsulated the band's dismissal of the 1960s, they nonetheless borrowed freely from certain currents of that era. Indeed, their jagged, relentless music, close-cropped hair, quasi-military garb, and fierce sense of purpose suggested nothing less than a marriage of Detroit agit-rock legends MC5 with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. If their embrace by the punk underground proved short-lived as the band stretched towards broader horizons, The Clash never fully forsook that initial commitment or community.

Many bands rose in the wake of The Clash also willing to risk the ridicule that might come with marrying rock to the pursuit of revolution. Of this hardy breed, the DC punk juggernaut Fugazi was perhaps the most worthy of The Clash mantle. Fugazi would likely not have existed without The Clash before them, but in many ways they lived out the band's rhetoric in a much more consistently convincing manner. Joe Strummer would essentially acknowledge this in the last years of his life, offering them accolades on several occasions, even going so far to identify Fugazi as the single band who best exemplified "the spirit of punk" in a *Rolling Stone* interview in 2000 (Andersen and Jenkins 2003, 411).

The two bands both shone with a sense of defiant grandeur, and their sound often shared a similar anthemic roar, freely mixing dub and raw rock power. Nonetheless, their respective paths could hardly have been more different. Indeed, in certain ways The Clash provided an object lesson to Fugazi on what *not* to do. Tracing the divergent trajectories of The Clash and Fugazi can sketch the wide

parameters of possibility that punk facilitated. Together, they suggest both the power and pathos of seeking to promote revolution within a system of, by, and for multinational corporations, while utilizing an artistic form that many look to simply for entertainment.

The Clash: The Power of Revolutionary Contradiction

From the beginning, The Clash were a vibrant, fascinating—and often infuriating—mix of contradictions. No band was more associated with punk's "Year Zero" stance, blithely dismissing rock icons The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley in "1977," the b-side of their debut single, "White Riot." But if the songs warned of class war, suggesting that racial and generational differences be set aside for a more fundamental confrontation, this incendiary piece of art was made possible through the largesse of CBS Records, then one of the massive behemoths dominating the rock music industry.

"Punk died the day The Clash signed to CBS"—fiery punk scribe Mark Perry famously declaimed in his flagship fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* in 1977 (Echenberg and Perry 1996, 51). Proved demonstrably false by the decades that followed, Perry's words nonetheless suggested both the immense meaning and deep contradiction fixed from birth at the heart of The Clash: they wanted to be the biggest rock band in the world while somehow still remaining "death or glory" heralds of revolution. If their inability to live this paradox on a lasting basis would bring the band crashing to earth within a decade, it also could not erase the genuine idealism and undeniable vision that The Clash brought to their art.

Lead singer/lyricist Joe Strummer was not only the eldest member of the band, but also its soul. Rising out of the British squat scene, he was fascinated by American folk radical Woody Guthrie as well as the dwindling embers of late 1960s' revolt. Already active with a rising roots rock band, The 101ers—named after the ramshackle squat where the band mostly lived and practiced—Strummer was wrenched out of his backward gazing by a blistering Sex Pistols show in April 1976. Shortly thereafter, he was poached from The 101ers by guitarist Mick Jones and bassist Paul Simonon to front their nascent punk unit. This gifted pair had fallen under the spell of agitator/sometime-manager Bernie Rhodes who played a catalytic role in not only assembling the band, but in encouraging them to write about urgent sociopolitical issues.

If the Sex Pistols lit the fuse of the punk explosion, The Clash sought to guide the movement's subsequent momentum in a constructive direction, making the implicit affirmation behind "no future" rants more explicit and convincing. "We never came to destroy," Strummer noted to *Melody Maker* in 1978 (Jones 1978), adding years later in a punk retrospective, "We had hope in a sea of hopelessness" (Haimes 1995). After the collapse of 1960s' rock idealism, however, this was a tricky line to walk. Strummer captured the ambivalence well in a March 1977 interview with *Melody Maker* journalist Caroline Coon, later reprinted in her

landmark book, 1988: *The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*. Asked how potent a rock band can be in making political change, Strummer responded, "Completely useless! Rock doesn't change anything. But after saying that—and I'm just saying that because I want you to know that I haven't got any illusions about anything, right—having said that, I still want to try to change things" (Coon 1977, 74).

Although The Clash were careful never to accept a narrow ideological label, they stood on the revolutionary socialist Left, as Strummer acknowledged elsewhere. Given this anti-capitalist stance, Strummer admitted to Coon—who later would briefly manage the band—that, "signing that contract (with CBS) did bother me a lot" (Coon 1977, 79). However, despite their roots in the emergent punk underground, The Clash were not interested in being captured by a narrow subculture; no, world conquest was their aim. If the Top Ten beckoned, it was ostensibly in the hopes of bringing a message of radical change to the broadest possible segment of the population.

In retrospect, The Clash signing to a major label like CBS seems preordained. Simply put, capitalism would provide the avenue for reaching the masses that then, in principle, could be mobilized to overturn that same system and build something better. CBS, of course, had been home to Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, and other 1960s' countercultural heroes, and the label put out an ad in the tumultuous year of 1968 that promised "The Man Can't Bust Our Music" (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, xiv). Such stretches of rhetorical audacity seemed thinly disguised folderol then; by the mid-1970s, such pretensions sounded dubious indeed.

Not surprisingly, new bands arose, inspired by The Clash, yet as hostile to the band's compromises as punk had been to those of the hippie generation. Among them was anarchist trailblazer Crass. In 1978 Crass co-founder Penny Rimbaud acidly noted that "CBS promotes the Clash—but it ain't for revolution, it's just for cash" (MacKay 1996, 91). For his part, Strummer dismissed Crass as "a storm in a teacup," critiquing their DIY self-sufficiency as "self-defeating, 'cos you've got to be heard" (Classical Collection, *Penis Envy* 2010, back cover).

If some of this was self-serving, Strummer's words also offered a valuable corrective. Their third album, *London Calling*, pushed back against a version of punk that was growing ever narrower. As Strummer groused in 1979:

I don't want to see punk as another slavish image and everything is pre-planned and pre-thought out for you to slip into comfortably like mod or hippie music or Teddy Boy rock'n'roll. In '76 it was all individual. There was a common ground, it was punk, but everything was OK. Punk's now become 'he's shouting in Cockney making no attempt to sing from the heart and the guitarist is deliberately playing monotonously and they're all playing as fast as possible so this is punk' ... God help us, have we done all that to get here? (Andersen 1981, 4)

To Strummer, punk was a spirit, an attitude and approach to life, not a set of clothes, a haircut, or even a style of music (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 415).

If this was, once again, possibly convenient for the band's commercial aims, the critique rang true. Soon many of The Clash's hardcore underground punk critics would find themselves striving to transcend self-made straitjackets. In this way, the revolutionary political ambition of The Clash was matched with a parallel all-encompassing musical openness.

With *London Calling* the Clash began to stake its claim not only on underground insurgency, but also on the broader arena of mainstream rock'n'roll. In so doing, they abandoned their disavowal of pre-punk sounds for a fervent embrace of the many forms and faces of rebel music. While the album quickly rose into the American Top Twenty, the full measure of its success came ten years later when the record was honored as "The Album of the Eighties" by *Rolling Stone* (Gray 2010, 479). This global vision was made even clearer by the following triple album set *Sandinista*. This album sought to articulate—with wildly varying degrees of success—a world music that spanned jazz, salsa, reggae, funk, rap, folk, steel drum, disco, and rock tied together only by a common grass-roots focus and a radical political commitment. The latter was made obvious by the album's title, an approving nod to victorious Central American Marxist revolutionaries then bedeviling the Reagan Administration. The band itself created anguish for its corporate sponsors in certain ways. This began as early as 1977 with their third single "Complete Control" which lambasted record company machinations in savagely direct terms. Likewise, the band won few friends in the CBS boardrooms with their insistence on first putting out the double LP *London Calling* for the price of a single album, only to then up the wager with the three-for-the-price-of-one *Sandinista*. In the end, however, the band was playing the rock industry game, one arguably as fixed as any casino. In 2001, Strummer offered a sober assessment that The Clash had become "corporate revolutionaries," acknowledging that the band's success spread their message, but also made mountains of money for its corporate overlord, all at tremendous cost to their humanity:

(I was) professionally paid to be a rebel, which is truly insane. And it was only going to get worse. Say we'd gotten as big as U2 ... life would only be—"Photo shoot. Do the interview. Go to the video shoot. Go do another interview. Fly to Rio. Play the Asshole Stadium. Come back in a helicopter." And all the time you're supposed to try and write something real, or think real, or get through to real people—to "keep it real," as they say. Im-fucking-possible. (Mills 2001)

Seen from a 21st-century vantage point, CBS seems the victor over The Clash in practical political terms; far more corporate profit than revolution resulted from the uneasy marriage. Still, a fair observer would grant that the band wanted it both ways, to be stars and revolutionaries, much like the failed effort by protest folkie-gone-rocker Phil Ochs to revolutionize America by developing a hybrid of Elvis Presley and Che Guevara (Eliot 1989, 190).

Fortunately, The Clash had the artistic gifts to walk that fine line, at least for a time. Surely songs like "Clampdown," "Guns Of Brixton," "Lost In The

Supermarket," and "Death Or Glory" (from *London Calling*), or "The Magnificent Seven," "The Call Up," "Charlie Don't Surf," "The Equaliser," and "Washington Bullets" (from *Sandinista*) packed as much radical punch as any of their early work, albeit in more diverse and accessible musical forms. Articulating an internationalist anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-war vision amidst the dark days of Reagan and Thatcher, The Clash created tunes that could move millions of units in stores, but also move bodies into action in the streets.

Their mission to bring "revolution rock" to the mainstream seemed to be succeeding when the band broke through to Top Ten acclaim in 1982 with their fifth album *Combat Rock* and embarked on a stadium tour with none other than 1960s' icon The Who. Skeptics, however, pointed out that the songs—*London Calling*'s "Train In Vain" and *Combat Rock*'s "Should I Stay or Should I Go"—that brought the Clash mass acclaim were anything but insurrectionary calls to arms. If the third of their hit singles—"Rock The Casbah"—had more depth musically and lyrically, its liberatory message was undermined by the silliness of its companion MTV video. Moreover, it faced swift co-optation for reactionary ends, especially as radical Islam became the latest "free world" bogeyman, replacing Red Scare anti-communism. Strummer was said to have burst into tears years later upon hearing that the song's name was painted on American bombs used in the Persian Gulf War, thus becoming a tool of the militaristic imperialism the band had always opposed (Temple 2007).

This ugly turn suggested the dangers and limitations of revolution through consumption. But if The Clash's politics were becoming a bit muddled or watered down by 1983, personal affairs within the band were even dodgier. First, gifted drummer Topper Headon was ejected from the band because of his heroin addiction, and then co-founder and musical mainstay Mick Jones was kicked out due to rock star tendencies. Remaining originals Strummer and Simonon soldiered on with returned manager Rhodes, assembling a new Clash with relative newcomers: guitarists Nick Sheppard and Vince White, and drummer Pete Howard. Meanwhile, rumors of lawsuits over the band's name swirled and Clash bank accounts were frozen in the subsequent disputes with Jones (Lacey 1984, E3).

The rhetoric of this revamped Clash suggested that Strummer had been listening to his underground critics. The band disavowed their mainstream path and moved back towards raw rebel punk. For a time this leap seemed like it might succeed; the "revolution rock" banner flew boldly once again in new songs such as "The Dictator," "Are You Ready For War?," "North And South," "Three Card Trick," "Sex Mad Roar," and "This Is England." However, behind-the-scenes chaos and internal contradictions within the unit—exacerbated by Strummer's depression after the death of his father and his mother's subsequent terminal illness—crushed the promise of the moment. As a result, this latest Clash stab at cultural revolution flamed out prematurely not long after a risky but bracing "busking tour" in mid-1985. "We made all the rock band mistakes in the book," Strummer conceded ruefully later, "And maybe even invented a few of our own" (Letts 2000).

From London to Washington, DC

While this drama was playing out, the reverberations of The Clash's music and politics had been rippling out across the globe. In late 1978, an unlikely but ferocious new band rose from the African-American communities of Southeast, Washington, DC, and neighboring Prince George's County, Maryland. While dubbed Bad Brains—an obvious reference to NYC punks, The Ramones—this imposing all-black quartet drew much of its inspiration from one-time Clash manager Caroline Coon's seminal punk book, *1988*, and in particular its sections on The Clash.

A local 1979 feature on Bad Brains noted that the band had been energized by “the example of The Clash playing for free in disadvantaged areas of London,” an approach they had read about in *1988* and also in *Overthrow*, the newspaper of the 1960s' holdover Youth International Party, more commonly known as the Yippies, who were still active in DC and a few other locales (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 44). In part, this was a reference to one of the most successful mixing of music and politics in the punk-era UK: the Rock Against Racism campaign, instigated and influenced by members of the Socialist Workers Party, among others (Widgery 1986, 42). The Clash stood right at the nexus of rock and reggae that gave this movement its artistic force as well as its cachet in youth culture circles, bringing black, brown, and white together in a concerted, creative effort to turn back the then-rising tide of neo-fascism in Britain.

Together with other punk-related artists such as X-Ray Spex, Stiff Little Fingers, Tom Robinson Band, and The Specials, The Clash were early supporters of Rock Against Racism, and essentially headlined their largest and most celebrated event, the massive outdoor concert and rally at Victoria Park in 1978. While the unique conditions that generated the potency of this movement were not easily replicable outside of Britain, its example did help spur Clash fans such as Bad Brains into action. Given that Washington, DC, was partly built by slave labor and suffered decades of segregation and racial tension, Rock Against Racism seemed particularly relevant. When Bad Brains performed their own audacious Rock Against Racism concerts in the notorious Valley Green public housing complex in 1979 and 1980, they drew a committed knot of their mostly white fan base across DC's volatile racial dividing lines. Among those electrified by the music and audience at the first Valley Green show—and performing at the second via the band Teen Idles—was a white teenage punk named Ian MacKaye.

A long-haired skater kid into Ted Nugent and other hard rock luminaries, MacKaye had been initially exposed to the punk rebellion through listening to Georgetown University radio station WTGB. After experiencing punk live for the first time—a chaotic, mind-blowing performance by The Cramps at a February 3rd, 1979 benefit protesting the closing of WGTB—the 16-year-old MacKaye cut off his shoulder-length locks in preparation for his second show two weeks later: The Clash at Ontario Theatre on their first US tour. That evening served to cement his new path (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 34).

Shortly thereafter, MacKaye was bushwhacked by the staggering power of Bad Brains opening for British band The Damned. The energetic youngster was transfixed and transformed that day, as by subsequent Bad Brains' shows at the Valley Green complex and a ramshackle row house called Madams Organ that was an art-collective-turned-Yippie-commune. If MacKaye would absorb The Clash's burning sense of mission mostly secondhand through Bad Brains, he nonetheless exemplified the band's single-minded belief in rock music as a communal force for transformation—be it personal or political—with possibilities far transcending mere entertainment. This sense of purpose shone from his new band Minor Threat, which debuted in late 1980. While deeply influenced by the precision and velocity of Bad Brains, Minor Threat blazed its own trail as a progenitor not only of hardcore punk but also of anti-drug “straight edge.” With Minor Threat joining Bad Brains and others in igniting an unprecedented and massively influential scene—HarDCore, as it came to be known—Washington, DC, assumed an unfamiliar role. Long derided as a cultural wasteland where people imported art rather than created it, DC began to be seen as perhaps the single most significant cutting-edge punk underground in the USA, contending with much larger scenes such as New York and Los Angeles for influence.

But while NYC and LA—like London—were also entertainment industry strongholds, DC came to represent just the opposite: the embodiment of the DIY punk ideal. It was no accident that Crass co-conspirator John Loder made an alliance with Minor Threat and MacKaye's related Dischord independent record label in 1983. Indeed, while Minor Threat and Crass seemed nearly universes apart in subject matter, the shared spirit was palpable. As DC rock critic (and early punk) Mark Jenkins noted in 1992: “This second generation of bands took the rhetoric of early bands like The Clash and Sex Pistols seriously ... In some cases, far more seriously than the original bands themselves.”¹ As a result, a version of punk unimaginable without the vision of The Clash, but utterly at odds with its corporate compromises began to take root, flourish, and blossom, germinating similar scenes. While Minor Threat splintered in late 1983 thanks to musical and philosophical differences, MacKaye soon found himself jolted back into action by a galvanizing new band, Rites of Spring. Now branded the originator of “emo,” Rites of Spring sparked a rousing reinvention of the DC punk underground as part of what would be labeled “Revolution Summer.”

As the final version of The Clash slowly, sadly disintegrated over that summer of 1985, something new was rising across the Atlantic, something that shared that idealism, but sought to go beyond, to more consistently live the life punks were singing about in their songs. In part, Revolution Summer was simply a nudge between friends, gently pressing towards renewed action after the crash of HarDCore on the shoals of its own contradictions. At the same time, Revolution Summer became a bold expansion of the emotional, musical, and political commitments implicit in the original hardcore scene, a re-creation of punk, more

¹ Mark Jenkins, interview by Mark Anderson, Washington, DC, March 12, 1992.

artistically open, while still defiantly anti-commercial. This moment would spark another influential passel of DC bands and a long-lasting punk activist collective: **Positive Force DC**. Unlike outside politicians like the Yippies or the Revolutionary Communist Party, organizations that sought to harness punk for pre-existing agendas, Positive Force was an expression from within the scene.

Having felt exploited by outside groups, MacKaye sought more collaborative alliances. When his new band Embrace played its third show as a Positive Force benefit, the seeds were sown for a lasting partnership. I was able to witness this evolution firsthand, as a co-founder and organizer of Positive Force, first drawn into activism by the message and energy of punk, particularly The Clash.

Ironically, I had come to DC in 1984 not to pursue revolution, but for graduate studies and a lucrative career. I stood uncomfortably at the cusp of the lower echelons of the global political/economic elite, seeking to complete an odd decade-long transformation. Somehow I had gone from an alienated rural working-class punk to a college student/radical activist to an upwardly mobile “young urban professional” studying at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies on Embassy Row while working part-time on Capitol Hill.

The rhetoric of the revamped Clash crashed harshly against my mainstream trajectory, blunting its momentum. Strummer’s doubts about the cost of the band’s success resonated in personal terms, pointing me back towards the underground. This sense of failure-disguised-as-victory drove my role in co-founding Positive Force while still attending graduate school. In the process, I encountered the rising tide of Revolution Summer, and punk turned my life upside down/right side up for the second time. I found particular inspiration in Embrace, in Ian MacKaye’s conflicted, starkly personal anthems of recommitment and persistence. Tragically, Embrace self-destructed after less than a dozen performances. MacKaye retreated, weary but wiser, determined to make sure that his next effort would not share the internal contradictions that had brought untimely demise to both of his last bands. While MacKaye did not turn his back on the “straight edge” idea—which now had expanded past a simple anti-drug stance to include vegetarianism and animal rights—he wanted a militant band where all of the members were deadly serious about its music and its message, seeking to be widely heard while repudiating the corporate rock circus.

The entity that resulted was named Fugazi, after Vietnam-era GI slang signifying “a fucked up situation,” which, as MacKaye explained, “is kind of how I view the world” (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 242). Fugazi included not only MacKaye but also Guy Picciotto and Brendan Canty of the now-defunct Rites of Spring as well as Joe Lally, roadie for fellow Revolution Summer stalwart, Beefeater. Debuting at another Positive Force-organized benefit in September 1987, Fugazi would ultimately broadcast the Revolution Summer spirit to the world.

If The Clash were a band founded on fundamental contradictions, always close to splitting under pressure, Fugazi was more self-consciously aware of such dangers. If the band might appear, on paper, to be a punk “super group”—that dreaded 1960s’ rock Frankenstein—Fugazi was actually built from long-time

friends who shared a deep commitment to the open yet non-commercial DC ethic. Eager to mate music and explicit radical politics, the band fostered a partnership with Positive Force, creating a potent musical-political fusion rarely if ever seen.

MacKaye sang the phrase “words are not enough” over and over at the climax of Embrace’s Revolution Summer requiem “End of A Year.” Reflecting that dictum, Fugazi spoke with its actions. While their songs conveyed powerful messages, delivered with utter conviction amidst a riveting mash-up of dub, Detroit rock, and post-hardcore, Fugazi’s business stance was equally striking and uncompromised. Eschewing rock’s most mundane commercial concession—a manager—as well as its most lucrative sideline—merchandise—Fugazi put out its own records via Dischord and toured relentlessly, playing low-cost all-ages shows, as well as dozens of benefits. It was a model few outside observers believed could be sustained, yet it was.

By 1989, Fugazi was drawing massive crowds not only in DC but across the country and in Europe as well, attaining a level of popularity sufficient to attract the hungry eyes of the rock industry. Tellingly, the band’s success left them determined to do only benefits, protests, or free shows in the DC area, all done in collaboration with Positive Force. In September 1989, the band spurned an offer from CBS Records, the first of many major labels to court Fugazi. That same month, *The Washington City Paper* compared the Fugazi/Positive Force alliance with that of the MC5 and White Panther Party in the late 1960s (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 293). The political visions of Fugazi and Positive Force stood starkly at odds with the “long-haired dope-smoking rock and roll street-fucking total assault on (middle American) culture” advocated by those predecessors (Hale 2001). It was nonetheless taken as a compliment.

While confused media outlets like *The Washington Post* alternatively described Positive Force as Fugazi’s “street army” and the band as “the leading exponent of a musical movement called Positive Force,” the pairing was fortuitous for both entities, helping each to more fully accomplish their separate—if connected—aims (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 334). Surely The Clash might have been able to more convincingly and concretely express their political ideals if they had allied with such an organization, instead of being accused of simply dressing up the pursuit of rock stardom with revolutionary pretensions and rhetorical radicalism.

It might seem perhaps unfair to expect rigorous consistency from a rock band, but such were the expectations raised by the words and sound of “The Only Band That Matters.” Now Fugazi carried much the same weight as The Clash, yet somehow seemed to carry it more gracefully. Regularly channeling fuel to frontline organizations through dozens of benefits and protests, they did not seek to exit the underground, but to bring it along with them, stepping nimbly around record company offers as if they were landmines. Surely it helped that Fugazi was also free of the drug and management dramas that dogged The Clash. While all four members played crucial roles in the band, they also had a secret weapon in MacKaye, who had proven himself to be an exceedingly rare bird: a gifted artist with not only deep radical political conviction but also a canny, detail-

oriented business sense and diligent work ethic. As a result, the band dubbed "America's Clash" by no less an authority than Britain's *Sounds* magazine was able to sustain its unprecedented model for operation even as its popularity grew (Jenkins 1990, 21).

If anything, Fugazi became more steadfast in its approach, more willing to push the musical activism envelope. But while *The Washington City Paper* dubbed 1990 "the year of Fugazi," noting that the band had "taken the world by storm—and on their own terms" (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 301), the limitations as well as the strengths of music as a weapon for change would become obvious as Positive Force and Fugazi grappled with the reality of war in the Middle East.

Punk Protest vs. the Persian Gulf War

The drama began when MacKaye came to me in summer 1990 with the idea for a mid-winter outdoor concert in front of the White House to draw attention to the plight of the homeless. While I quickly secured the necessary permits for this musical protest to be held on 12 January 1991, international events overtook our plans. Iraq, a country armed by the US for war against Iran, invaded Kuwait; the US began to mass troops in neighboring Saudi Arabia. While none of us had sympathies for the ruthless dictator Saddam Hussein, the danger of regional war and the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians seemed frightening real. As fate would have it, our January date turned out to be the Saturday before the deadline President Bush had set for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

In response, the focus of our protest was expanded to make a direct anti-war statement, connecting extravagant military expenditures with inadequate domestic spending on programs to fight homelessness and poverty. Along with Fugazi's set, a rally and punk percussion protest were planned. An earlier Positive Force-organized drum-fest had helped to inspire a 24-hour-a-day anti-war percussion vigil, and we took great satisfaction when Bush complained to *The New York Times*, "those damned drums are keeping me up all night" (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 301). The day before the event, a heavy snowstorm hit the city. The next day, temperatures nudged into the low 40s and the snow melted, but it was cold and rainy. With the country preparing for war, police blanketed the White House area. Despite the weather and the inhospitable police presence, thousands of people showed up, clustering across the street from the White House. A red, white, and blue banner proclaiming "There Will Be Two Wars"—meaning one in the Persian Gulf, and one at home in opposition to the other—fluttered from wooden poles on a makeshift stage, suggesting the seriousness of our intent.

The percussive protesters generated a thunderous cacophony, beating on oil barrels, drums, tin cans, and kettles amidst ongoing frigid drizzle. Meanwhile, Fugazi's concert hung in the balance, since playing on an unprotected stage in the rain could expose musicians and crew to potential electrocution. At one point the precipitation stopped, only to begin again just as the band was ready to go.

Frustrated, the band and I huddled on the stage, trying to decide what to do. Finally, feeling the immense gravity of the political moment, MacKaye said simply, "Let's fucking do it!" All available hands scrambled to uncover the gear and prepare for the chancy performance.

As the portion of the crowd now crunched tightly by the stage cheered, MacKaye spoke:

Initially this was supposed to be a concert in the park, figuring that if people had to live out in the cold, we sure as fuck could come out and play for an hour and a half, do a little bit of a protest in support of the homeless groups who are working to give people shelter. In DC, there are thousands of people living on the streets. If you live here, you just start to walk by them after a while. It's inconceivable to me at least, that with the billions and billions of dollars that are being spent in the Middle East, that we can't spend more for the people who are dying in the streets here. (Fugazi 1991 live recording)

As the crowd applauded, MacKaye continued:

In effect, there is a tie between the homeless problem and the healthcare problems and everything else. As this country begins to fold up on itself economically, we throw ourselves into yet another war to divert people's attention from the problems here in America. Everything ties together; there is a connection. We are Fugazi from Washington, DC, thank you very much for coming out. (ibid.)

As the band slammed into their opening song, the percussion protest faded and many of the drummers joined the crowd by the stage.

The stage quickly became a source of concern. It was sturdy, but rested on three layers of milk crates; park regulations barred affixing the stage to the ground. As the crowd surged, the pressure began to force the stage slowly southward, toward Pennsylvania Avenue. Stage-divers also began to mount the stage, further stressing the structure. MacKaye asked the crowd not to stage-dive, encouraging them to instead "give us some help with the words." The band played a confrontational new song, "Reclamation," built on a titanic, rolling riff. The lyrics had been inspired by anti-abortion extremists, but lines like "These are our demands/We want control of our bodies" took another meaning in the shadow of war.

It was so chilly and wet that MacKaye later said his hands "felt like blocks of wood," but the band was hot, feeding off the adrenaline of the situation. As the stage continued to shift, appearing to begin to split apart at one point, the musicians adjusted their songs to reflect the political situation. Picciotto added a line exhorting the crowd to "take it out into the streets" to "Two Beats Off." MacKaye stopped to note the presence of Park Police filming the assembly "for a new MTV special, I guess" (ibid.). Picciotto hit the air-raid siren two-note opening of "KYEO"—"keep your eyes open"—revamped specifically for this show. The newly streamlined song led into "Long Division," with a mournful evocation of

fragmentation underscoring MacKaye's comment that "if George Bush wants one America, he better get out of the business of oil and war." By this point, the heat of the tightly packed audience had created a gigantic human smoke machine, sending thick clouds of steam over the stage (ibid.). Fugazi concluded with "Repeater" and "Burning Too." MacKaye prefaced the former by evoking DC's drug war, pleading that while "we seem to have become accustomed to the hundreds that have died here, I hope we can never become accustomed to the tens of thousands that might die in the Middle East." The crowd joined MacKaye in chanting the "1, 2, 3 ... repeater" chorus, as the song's desperate screech led to a lonely exhortation to "keep count." As MacKaye methodically recited "10,000 ... 20,000 ... 30,000 ... 40,000 ... 50,000 ... 60,000 ... 70,000 ... 80,000 ... 90,000 ..."—the potential body count in the conflagration about to erupt—the set rose to its heart-rending climax (ibid.).

Both Fugazi and Positive Force had sought to make their message clear, but without precipitating violent confrontation. Amazingly, in the end, nothing had gone wrong—with the police, the stage, or the rain. As armed agents watched from the top of the White House, Fugazi had played one of its greatest performances. Even though I was drenched to the bone, and so exhausted and ill that my voice was a hoarse whisper, I was exhilarated by the day, feeling a sense of immense power and determination. Some of this was illusory, to be sure; to echo one punk critique, we were offering protest songs in response to military aggression, a flimsy reed all-too-unlikely to stop the soldiers' guns. This was made painfully clear four days later when bombs began to rain on Baghdad, the most intense bombing in human history.

The American campaign moved quickly, smashing the Iraqi army in Kuwait and decimating large areas within Iraq itself. Despite the terrible cost in innocent Iraqi lives—158,000 by one US government estimate (Gellman 1992, A5)—Americans swiftly embraced the war. Known as "Desert Storm," the assault was viewed not only as a smashing success, but also as the harbinger of a new era in US foreign policy, opening the way for a return to American military adventurism. "Large Scale Victory Sweeps Away 'Vietnam Syndrome,'" read a banner headline on the front page of *The Washington Post* as the campaign wound down (Dionne 1991, A1). In June 1991, hundreds of thousands joined in a massive, costly National Victory Celebration on the National Mall.

It was a crushing defeat for anti-imperialist advocates. Indeed, the war virus even infected local punk scenes. At a Fugazi show at a club in Richmond, Virginia, Positive Force activists handing out anti-war fliers were physically intimidated and nearly ejected from the premises; only the band's intervention stopped the confrontation. When Fugazi played a benefit concert in Philadelphia, MacKaye noted that "a lot of people" were not happy that the gig supported conscientious objectors (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 304). At the same time, however, small victories could be savored. For example, Stephanie Atkinson, the first female soldier ever to become a war resister, credited Fugazi's music with giving her the courage to resist. Nor was Atkinson alone in this. Never before had music

played such a role in keeping my own spirits up, helping me—and no doubt many others—to escape slipping into utter despair amidst the ugly outbreak of war fever.

Fugazi's "KYEO" ended with the fervent vow, "We will not be beaten down." This became Positive Force's credo, even after having been steamrolled by the American politico-military machine; and our rapid-fire series of benefits, concerts, and service work over the next months made it real. Even if, as MacKaye noted at a Washington Free Clinic benefit in June 1991, the \$12 million reportedly spent on the Victory Celebration dwarfed the \$5,000 raised that night to provide free medical care, we were still seeking to build the America of our dreams with our actions.

Fugazi: Revolution by Example

As Fugazi and Positive Force continued to accelerate, spreading some bits of light in the postwar darkness, DC's reputation as a "new youth Mecca" also blossomed, drawing crucial new recruits to the cause. In late spring 1991, Bikini Kill, an electrifying female-powered band from Olympia, Washington, joined the exodus, touring with local heroes The Nation of Ulysses and linking up with their friends Bratmobile in the capital city.

Bikini Kill's rousing arrival generated a hothouse of creativity and collaboration. The insurgent female punks labeled the moment "Revolution (Summer) Girl Style Now," echoing one of the band's anthems and DC's own fabled punk past. Energized by the ecstatic response they had received since landing in the other Washington, Bikini Kill's charismatic lead singer Kathleen Hanna suggested that girls and women begin to hold meetings at the Positive Force House to build networks of support for musical projects, consciousness raising, and political organizing. In the process, the feminist punk uprising Riot Grrrl was sparked.

Named after recent riots in the punk-infested neighborhood of Mount Pleasant, Riot Grrrl built upon—and in some ways surpassed—the foundation constructed by allies Fugazi and Positive Force, challenging punk to live its rhetoric of empowerment in a consistent and inclusive way. The catalytic vision of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile—and the power of their examples—pushed past what all-male bands like The Clash or Fugazi could accomplish alone. Sadly, the bands, the scene, and, above all, the Riot Grrrl movement itself was soon entangled in a poisonous punk civil war sparked by the explosion of the American underground into the rock mainstream via Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." The anthem, released on the corporate label DGC and made ubiquitous by constant rotation of its "high school insurrection" video on MTV, simultaneously celebrated and critiqued the underground revolution. At the same time, punk—re-branded as "grunge"—became a popular yet often all-too-superficial consumer product.

Major strides had been made in developing an independent music network since The Clash signed to CBS in 1977; when major labels began to encroach on this territory, tremendous conflicts emerged within the scene about how to

respond. Some saw this shift as victorious breakthrough, while many viewed it as impending sell-out and defeat. Few were neutral in the conflict, and the punk community splintered under the pressure. In the midst of the free fire zone that American punk had become, Fugazi was able to pull off something unimaginable with its 1993 album *In On The Kill Taker*: simultaneously receiving raves in both the most popular diehard underground zine, *Maximum RocknRoll (MRR)*, and the rock-establishment-Bible, *Rolling Stone*. Strikingly, both reviews proffered The Clash's weighty title upon Fugazi: "The Only Band That Matters" (Andersen and Jenkins 2009, 392).

Staying true to the punk emphasis on lowering boundaries between audience and performer, the band chafed under this onslaught of adulation, striving to preserve their creative focus and human scale as people and as a band. Dead set on avoiding the role of pop messiahs, the band sometimes turned defensive or uncooperative, frustrating politicized supporters like *MRR*'s Tim Yohannon or *Washington City Paper*'s Mark Jenkins with abstract lyrics or a reluctance to explain themselves.

For example, in a 1993 interview with *The Washington Post*, singer-guitarist Picciotto noted that people "want us to supply some sort of message, but if I had wanted to express a message in that way, I would have been a politician. I'm not. I'm a musician. It is in the songs, for people to use or not use" (Brace 1993, G5). This eminently unassuming statement coexisted uneasily with fiery Fugazi performances such as that at a Positive Force and Riot Grrrl-organized protest at the US Supreme Court only a few months before. On that day, Picciotto let loose with an impassioned soliloquy encouraging their massive crowd to commit acts of civil disobedience fighting unjust laws—then launched into a blistering rendition of "Dear Justice Letter," mourning the recent loss of the Supreme Court's liberal lion William Brennan.

Nor was this a lone aberration. If Fugazi's songs railed eloquently against evils like militarism ("KYEO"), inner-city violence ("Repeater"), racism ("And The Same"), Native American genocide ("Smallpox Champion"), sexism ("Suggestion"), consumerism ("Merchandise"), corporate rule ("Five Corporations") apathy ("Turnover"), and environmental devastation ("Burning Too"), the band backed up their words with a cascade of Positive Force benefits and protest shows, performances that exploded, one by one, like a string of firecrackers.

The reverberations resonated outside the concert halls—mostly church basements, union halls, community centers—where hundreds of audience members were inspired to assist with Positive Force's other projects, serving meals at soup kitchens, delivering food to inner-city seniors, passing out condoms and safe needle kits to street sex workers and intravenous drug users, organizing protests and book discussion groups ... or simply beginning to do their own activism with other groups, even starting their own projects.

Clearly, then, Fugazi were more than simply musicians. If not, their definition of the proper role of the musician was far broader than most. For the average

band, a reluctance to speak out and articulate its message might be a convenient dodge. However, Fugazi's reticence seemed more a consistent application of its own radical anti-star principles, to demythologize themselves and thus hopefully empower their audience.

While clearly of the revolutionary Left, Fugazi was not eager to make broad rhetorical statements, or to assume a political leadership role, preferring their listeners to accept their own responsibility for self-directed action. MacKaye had once described this delicate balance as "revolution by example," and it accounted for the band's intense focus on hewing to its own path while often speaking primarily with its actions (Andersen 1991, 1). A quote from Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega Y Gasset was included in the cassette version of Fugazi's 1990 album *Repeater*, offering insight into this approach: "Revolution is not the uprising against preexisting order, but the setting up of a new order contradictory to the traditional one." In other words, if the lyrics of The Clash—indeed, the name of the band itself—called for confronting and overthrowing the old order, Fugazi's words sought to go deeper, to encourage the listener to begin building the new world right here, right now, in the shell of the old.

Of course, Strummer's critique of Crass could easily apply here. Fugazi's sales—while in the hundreds of thousands—were dwarfed by the millions attained by bands such as The Clash and Nirvana. Yet, perhaps even more than Crass, Fugazi blew past the narrow confines of the underground while refusing to give ground to rock "business as usual." In the process, they were helping raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for frontline organizations serving DC's hard-hit inner city, watering the grass roots of their home DC community, and nudging their audience towards concrete activism of their own. This achievement points toward a fundamental failing of The Clash in practical political terms. If the band was once described as "the Sound of the Westway"—a reference to a prominent highway that cut through their area of London—and became indelibly associated with the Notting Hill riots and the racially diverse (and often tense) district of Brixton, they rarely seemed to focus resources in a consistent way toward concrete projects. While the band certainly did benefits—including two at the Brixton Academy amidst the hard-fought British miners' strike of 1984–85, and an entire mini-tour in support of the Italian Communist Party—they never delivered on early promises to build a club or radio station to actualize their vision in a sustained, institutional way.

Influential American hardcore writer and activist Kent McClard scorched The Clash and Sex Pistols by name in his *No Answers* fanzine for failing to follow through on such commitments—just before going on to lionize Fugazi, Positive Force, and other DC artists as providing genuine follow-through (McClard 1990, 22). McClard was not alone in noticing these unpleasant gaps between rhetoric and reality. As Clash acolyte Billy Bragg noted in 2007 while publicizing his prisoner-support non-profit Jail Guitar Doors, this was "the failure" of The Clash: "You can talk, you can write, but do you actually do anything?" (Follos 2007).

Few could make the same critique of Fugazi, given its long, fruitful collaboration with Positive Force. The band's accomplishments brought grudging respect even from skeptics and erstwhile critics, generating responses both defensive and gracious. In MRR, members of popular Southern California punk band Bad Religion expressed the frustration of many bands about being held to Fugazi's exacting standards. Hyper-radical industrial outfit Consolidated constructed an entire track defending its business practices from fan complaints—many of them referencing a certain DC band—by repeatedly noting “We aren't Fugazi.” Meanwhile, Dave Grohl—Revolution Summer veteran now world-famous as the drummer of Nirvana—remarked that, in his estimation, Fugazi's accomplishments dwarfed their own.²

The depth of Joe Strummer's own regard for the band first became clear in an interview he did in 1999. The recent use of “Should I Stay or Should I Go” for a Levi's commercial came up, leading to a discussion of the intra-band legal battle sparked when Dead Kennedys lead singer Jello Biafra turned down a request for use of their classic “Holiday In Cambodia” for a commercial. When one of the interviewers cynically suggested that Biafra didn't agree simply because the price wasn't high enough, Strummer wryly responded, “They always said that, didn't they? Everybody's got their price ... But what about Fugazi?” (Johnson 1999, 74).

This was no idle query. Legendary punk/hip hop photographer Glen Friedman recounts a head-turning anecdote in his book *Keep Your Eyes Open*:

I witnessed the legendary music mogul Ahmet Ertegun coming backstage to try to get this ‘unsignable’ band to sign with him. He offered them ‘anything you want’ and said ‘the last time I did this was when I offered The Rolling Stones their own record label and \$10 million’. Fugazi politely declined and Ian (MacKaye) then changed the subject and continued to talk about their shared love of Washington DC. (Friedman 2007, 47)

Such tales led Strummer to remark, “Ian's the only one who ever did the punk thing right from day one and followed through on it all the way” (Cogan 2008, 177). As if to underline this point, Fugazi continued on its own label, managing themselves, and working with community allies such as Positive Force until the band quietly went on an extended—and probably permanent—hiatus in 2003 to focus on family concerns and other artistic pursuits. Their steady, unbowed persistence in their political/artistic vision presents a stark contrast to the drug, ego, and industry-fueled tempests that destroyed The Clash.

From Music into Action

But did this achievement, however inspiring for its consistency and sheer punk anti-corporate defiance, necessarily mean that Fugazi was more successful in fostering political change than The Clash? Such matters are of course terribly hard to measure. Part of the answer probably rests in the simple fact that many readers will not know about Fugazi, but will be quite familiar with The Clash. In this sense, the band's Faustian bargain with CBS finds some support. Had The Clash not invaded the mainstream so successfully, made its imperfect but impassioned imprint on mass consciousness, few might care about their politics now, nearly three decades after the band's demise. As Strummer himself noted, “We didn't know *what* was going on (in signing with CBS), but ... our defense would be that it helped make punk a worldwide concern” (SPIN 2001).

Moreover, many listeners—including this writer—were jolted into political action by their encounter with the band's music, ideas, and performances, though they were spread by corporate channels. Lives were changed forever, and through those lives, the world itself was changed. In addition, the very imperfection of The Clash, their many blunders and contradictions can make them appealingly human, easier to identify with, whereas Fugazi might seem impossible to emulate.

On the other hand, The Clash's politics now often seem submerged under the growing adulation of them as rock icons, as if they were simple entertainers not so different than The Beatles, Stones, or Elvis. To Fugazi's credit, few would place them in such company. Indeed, their resolute opposition to the star-making machinery guaranteed them both more anonymity as well as the authenticity to step past rock stardom to humbly, stubbornly herald a radically different way to organize our lives and our world. Given their insistence on preserving this human scale interaction, it is very possible that while they reached fewer people, the inspiration was more direct, deep, and lasting.

This last point is critical, for it points past capitalist consumption to potentially revolutionary creation. Although the calculus of how music can best serve to advance revolution remains to be fully explored, we should consider that it can access something deep in the human spirit, thus opening doors of radical possibility and communal power. Music's magic resides in its ability to be a force that reaches past the surface to the substance, somehow accessing and activating the untapped power of humanity.

But note that the process can never stop with simple *transmission*. No, as Ian MacKaye has argued, *reception* is equally essential, and even more so what comes after: *action*. As a manifesto from the Crass-inspired anarcho-punk band Chumbawamba proclaimed in 1984, “The music's not a threat, but action that music inspires can be a threat” (Sprouse 1990, 28). This complicates matters considerably, for how to weigh success versus failure will depend much on one's expectations. Fifteen years after the collapse of The Clash, Strummer somewhat sadly confessed:

² Dave Grohl, interview by Mark Anderson, Arlington, Virginia, June 16, 1992.

We never had any real power, other than in an abstract, poetic way. What I wrote on a piece of paper might influence someone somewhere down the line, and that's something I still take great care with. But it would've been nice to have the power to say, 'fifty thousand people down to the Houses of Parliament now!' ... Ultimately, it's the big money men who have the power. (McKenna 2000)

In contrast, Tom Morello of Rage Against The Machine—who also attained mass popularity through a CBS affiliate—argued that “I was confident that, given the right dice throw of historical circumstance, a rock band could have started a social revolution in the United States of America that would have changed the country irrevocably. I put no limit on what the potential impact of cultural force like that could have, I thought the sky was absolutely the limit” (Lynskey 2011, 504).

This is an extraordinarily high standard for which to strive, and begs all sorts of practical questions about how this vision could be realized. It is hardly surprising that Morello considers his band to have failed on this score, as surely The Clash and Fugazi did as well. What band, indeed, could ever claim to have accomplished this mission? Moreover, this runs the risk of looking for revolution in the wrong place. As Jeff Goldthorpe argued in “Intoxicated Culture: Punk Symbolism and Punk Protest,” “Post-Sixties youth subcultures (such as punk) have discovered the possibilities of solidarity and transformation in cultural arenas rather than political organizations.” But, as Goldthorpe notes, the resulting “ecstatic moments”—the sense of power I felt at the Fugazi White House protest, for example—inevitably pass, and the very real energy generated can easily dissipate if not channeled into concrete action and broader community building.

Goldthorpe then points toward one of the key lessons learned in my years in the punk rock wars:

Youth subcultures, defined by their marginality, do not offer any direct routes to the promised land. They will not, as in Sixties mythology, single-handedly lead a massive frontal assault against late capitalist order ... The peaceful, egalitarian, decentralized society we seek can only emerge from widespread alliances, extending far beyond the field of radical cultural politics. (Goldthorpe 1992, 62)



My wrangling with the implications of this broader vision spawned *All The Power: Revolution Without Illusion*, a book whose title tips a hat to The Clash while also challenging some of the assumptions upon which their art was founded. This critique is not intended as a dismissal, however, for as Goldthorpe notes, that field of radical cultural politics is where so many of us get our start as activists. In that sense, Morello's vision gains some ballast, for bands such as Rage Against the Machine—like The Clash and Fugazi—can surely serve as catalysts for revolutionary education and action.

While no member of Fugazi would likely have echoed Morello's revolution-through-rock ambitions publicly, they surely lived with a similar sense of purpose, and played their songs with equivalent fire. Crucially, however, Fugazi's manner

of operation—as suggested by MacKaye's *transmission/reception* theorem—quietly insisted that their audience must also find that fire, must take the lead as well, that revolution is something that has to be done *together*.

Perhaps this is a minor difference in emphasis, yet the nuance seems significant. Is our focus simply on the power of the band ... or of the audience as well? In the end, this turnabout in perspective was not far from Strummer's own deepest vision. During their 1984 miners' strike benefit, the singer paused before “We Are The Clash” to note that “when I say ‘we,’ I mean *we*,” gesturing emphatically at the audience (Clash 1984 live recording). The song's own metaphor expands on this: while a band can strike a match, it is up to their listeners to provide the gasoline. Only through this communion can we hope to transcend mere commodity exchange to ignite an explosion of radical possibility, illuminating a path toward that holiest of Grails, the elusive yet entrancing and essential dream of revolution.

This was a punk insight, a challenge designed to awaken conscience, gently pushing both power and responsibility back toward those who otherwise so easily could be trapped in rock spectacle, becoming simple consumers rather than the active co-creators that both transcendent concerts and social transformation so urgently require.

While The Clash was unable to fully live out this insight, partly due to their enervating entanglement in corporate rock Babylon, the truth of that understanding is undeniable ... which means that now the challenge is ours. What will we make of the possibilities, this potential power, and what is the best way to proceed?

Many bands—and their fans—will not wish to tarry with this deep challenge, preferring unencumbered commercial exchange to the arduous work and inevitable risk implicit in our analysis. Moreover, there is no easy resolution to this conundrum, this struggle to ascertain ultimate value, to draw a revolutionary lesson. Perhaps this is just as it should be, for if The Clash and Fugazi were to agree on one thing it is that neither would wish to provide a substitute for that most punk action of all: the utter urgency to *do it yourself, and to do it together*.

For me, this imperative is expressed daily, not only through Positive Force DC, which remains vital and active, but through We Are Family, an outreach, advocacy, and organizing network that works for and with low-income seniors in inner-city DC.

We Are Family is built on a foundation of senior leadership, with its creative grass-roots approach to service and justice work carrying echoes of lessons learned from The Clash and Fugazi. Reclaiming the banner of “family values” for progressive ends, bringing together vastly diverse communities, We Are Family seeks to realize a punk vision for transformation in a small but significant way. The music of both bands remains an enduring, often daily presence in my life; in addition, Ian MacKaye's quieter yet equally uncompromising post-Fugazi unit, The Evens, is a current supporter of We Are Family and co-conspirator with Positive Force.

It is surely true that the power of music on its own is limited. Still, any time someone tells me that music changes nothing, I laugh, for it has profoundly

changed me, and I—like any of us—can consequently help to change my world. As Joe Strummer said a few months before his death in December 2002:

I will always believe in punk rock, because it's about creating something for yourself. Lift your head up and see what is really going on in the political, social, and religious situations, try and see through all the smoke screens ... I'm always quite hopeful. I believe in human beings. Human beings won't let this happen. We won't all end up robots working for McGiant Corp or whatever. It can't happen.³

What this means is that, in the end, Strummer knew that it is not the “big money men” but *the people* who have the power. Bands can be companions; songs can be a spur to our rebel spirit, a reservoir of hope and determination. However, as the stories of The Clash and Fugazi suggest, in the end the power and the responsibility for transformation resides in our own hands, called to join together with those of many, many others.

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