

Mackenzie Theory

It's Monday morning, 2.30 am., and I'm just back from Toowoomba where I drove Bomber, Rob Mackenzie and Cleis, his wife who plays electric violin but is not from Desolation Row. Not yet.

They did a gig at the Tech. at Toowoomba, a vast campus sprawl just outside town. The hall was a double story place with no ceiling/floor inside, a vast cave from floor to roof, with a balcony running around three sides inside from which you could look down on the band, the people sitting in a mass on the floor or grouped upright swaying and bopping under the strobe lights battering derangement. From which also you could throw down a bag full of beer bottles, full ones; which someone did. For a long time the audience simply cleared a space while the beer made its own path across the floor. There was the merest hostile provincialism in the crowd.

Before we left Brisbane we were supposed to do an interview with Rob Mackenzie. Everyone was tired from the gig in the refec the night before and I knew as soon as I set up the decrepit old tape recorder that it was going to be impossible. We scrapped it and spent the time we had before leaving in securing a little grass from the suburban wilderness outside. Now, according to Bomber, I was to use the "pretty good tape-recorder in my head" to write up the article on Mackenzie Theory so Semper wouldn't have a hole in it.

Bomber and Rob rapped all the way up in the car and I listened. I suppose Cleis listened too. What the interview was intended to be about and what I was supposed write up as a result of the rap session was Mackenzie Theory's politics-musical philosophy, the revolutionary impetus that Bomber assured me was behind the sledge-hammer performance of the group. Well, I'd like to reach the conclusion Bomber wants me to reach but I can feel it going in another direction. C'est la vie!

Gig is a good word. Sort of formless. Not a dance, not a concert. Especially good when Harpo (the Lawrence Brown Theatrical Groupe) is on the bill as well. Bomber had warned me that Mackenzie Theory was the musical revolutionary cultural equivalent of Harpo's, only better.

When we got there I saw the latest Harpo production go on before Mackenzie Theory played. It was good. Heavy-handed, but good. Very engaging and grotesque, with good stagecraft. Street theatre type stuff with ghoulish capitalists, white skinned goddess, Richard Nixon doing an adaptation of the Day of Judgment speech from the Bible, etc. It went down very well with the audience, who I thought were a little hostile at first, or perhaps confused at the form of the evening. Anyway the show brought them around if they were (hostile), and thoroughly softened them up, in fact broke them up, with the strobe-light ending, the cathartic and simple climax in which Nixon and his minions get theirs.

Part of the effect was gained by bringing Mackenzie Theory's heavy sound into the climax. From there they kind of took over and the transition was smoothly done, Harpo giving place to the band. I could see how such dovetailing helped foster Bomber's illusion about Mackenzie Theory's political value. How much of that illusion was false I still didn't see.

And actually I don't think I'm attuned enough either to where the kids (audiences) are at, or to how a band's music could equal political theatre. Or if not equal that, at least, how it could operate as a revolutionizing agent. But there's the hole in Semper to consider, so I write on.

Of course, I have some vague notions of how certain music can change, revolutionize, one's preconception of "music" and that it does that by winning you over in spite of your feeling at first that it's not proper music. But is that the same thing as, or even a beginning toward changing one's (often unconscious) preconception of society, etc.?

There certainly, was something unique in Mackenzie Theory's performance. But how did it relate to the bits and pieces of philosophy - cum - music - cum - politics that Rob was able to communicate in the car?

One thing that's different, and differs in the right direction about Mackenzie Theory's theory of shows and performances, (and suddenly their very name begins to vibrate with a certain potential meaningfulness), is the assumption that certain non-musical events ought naturally to take place; for example, Rob depicted with rough strokes the following brief scenario he has in mind for a future gig: At a pre-arranged moment during the night 3 or 4 people run on the floor giving the audience free Peter's ice creams or

some other "fun" food that's really not fun but actually unhealthy. And the guy with the microphone starts explaining all the bad things about this shit they've just got for nothing. (It wasn't clear what role the band played in all this.) After he's really hammered the theme, the same people come out again, but this time with trash cans to see who now wants to throw away the ice creams or whatever they have.

Well obviously if that routine is serving any political end, if Mackenzie Theory's music and the revolution are coming together there, then they're being forced together rather than blended or coalesced into one cohesive thrust. No, it must be something more integral to the music that's revolutionary if it's anything at all.

The incredible volume and loudness, the sheer electrified power of their sound just about wipes out the possibility of vocals with coherent words and that even more confines them within their pure music, their sound. As a visual thing the performance largely centres on Rob. He moves and seems unified with the guitar so that throughout incredible gyrations and shimmies he doesn't foul up the music. At the same time he's continually switching and flicking at the knobs on the control unit of his amplifiers, making conductor-type signs to Cleis, Andy and Mike on violin, drums and rhythm guitar respectively. One is relieved, more even than surprised, to learn that he is a trained and qualified chiropractor, or was before the band went professional.

What is at least clear watching them is that they get into connection with the audience. I have this memory of Rob's long gold brown hair flinging through an arc of 360° from down his bare back up and over and down his face, synchronized with the rhythm and with a massive male in the crush of dancing bodies whose hair was the same length and color and moving in the same way in conscious answer. Having set up these conduits, the massive assault of the music charges along with ear-splitting force. One feels that somewhere, something is being broken down, some consciousness, some resistance is being destroyed or created. But what?

They obviously see themselves as at odds with the establishment, certainly the establishment of their own profession — the promoters and booking agents, the sinister Mafia-connected web of rip-off merchants that batten

on the music scene. Listening to their accounts of life in the scene, listening to Andy the drummer when he comes to sleep on our floor at 2 am. after driving back from Toowoomba, listening to Rob and Cleis in the roadhouse on the way back (where Rob ate his only meal of the day, the previous day, a horror of steak and peas and potato chips), knowing that somewhere out in that night their old beat-up van full of equipment was heading south with Mike and Roger, their roadies, aboard without enough sleep between them for a cat, you get the true picture of them as disorganized musicians, who suffer more often than would seem to be worthwhile at the hands of the unscrupulous and the outright crooked.

In the roadhouse I asked Cieis "Is your life always like this?" indicating the whole environment: nutritional, physical, spiritual, emotional, even aural - T-Rex and Johnny Farnham pouring out of the juke-box. Before she could answer Rob came in with "Yes, except there's usually not so many potatoes." The Queensland bonus.

When they make so little money after the costs of transport, travel, equipping themselves have been defrayed (Rob and Cleis are 2,500 dollars in debt) you wonder what drives them on. Partly, it's obvious, it's the life itself: the day to day and night to night excitement, the audiences, the frenzies, the new people, the adulation, the shared frenetic experiences in halls and auditoriums, the speed, the counter-cultural glow, the heady whiff of new-cut grass, the highs, and even the lows. But listening to them, especially Rob when he catches fire from Bomber's enthusiasm, you see that it's also (and this is incredible because one has not been conditioned to respect it by the media and the official culture) revolutionary zeal. Compared with Eldridge Cleaver's their revolutionary sphere may be circumscribed, and their zeal may only rarely be realized in actual effects on people's hearts and (even rarer) heads, but one can't help believing it's there.

That sounds so unlikely to my own ears, trained as they are in an alien universe of discourse from this music (to the extent they can be called trained at all,) that I feel a little hype-y even writing it down.

It's only now that I realize what I'm trying to do: explain in words the effect of the music on the people who hear it, and it's suddenly no wonder that

the only part of the job I can make any headway in is the non-musical embellishments.

Finally you just have to lay your opinion down humbly on the floor and back out. And my opinion is that Bomber is wrong about Mackenzie Theory's music, but right about the people in the group. They are revolutionary; but what their music is, apart from great to listen to, great to be inside of when that stroke's unhinging your mind, I can't say. And I don't believe anyone should. Music is music, words are words. Let us learn something at least from McLuhan.

Well, things are dirty and sweet. The sound of Children of the Revolution, the plaintive tone, the innocence and desperation of it, won't go out of my head. The dawn is beginning to show outside. I keep thinking of that T-Rex sound as I sat there "on the road" sucking one of those enormous frothy malted milks, surrounded by three of Mackenzie Theory, Bomber, (and the silent spooky hitch-hiker we'd picked up in the black country night, so chilly up there on the range, to give a lift back to Toowoomba and ended up transporting back to Brisbane because he'd come all the way up on the thumb just to catch the gig) sitting there in that fluorescent roadhouse trying to shake the bullshit, commercialised feeling of awe at being in such familiar proximity to these big pop stars who've got a track on the 3-disc Sunbury L.P. (which they would rather forget); I keep thinking how T-Rex's tone seemed so spot on for the predicament of these children of the Revolution, for all of us weary and wandering children of the past ten years, from Sprout(?) Plaza to the Great Court.

Fortunately a record came on the jukebox just at that point, about "the red-back on the toilet seat" and I got up to go to the john. When I came back everyone was dribbling out to the car and Andy was offering me a bite of his heart-shaped, chocolate-covered ice-cream on a stick. Not a trash can in sight. Fun food. I refused it because I'd just lit up a wine-dipped rum-flavoured, 12-cent Old Port cigar that I'd ripped off. Que sera sera.

In about an hour or two from now Bomber's going to get up and haul his ass out to the airport with Rob Mackenzie to do a debate in Sydney at N.S.W. University, a televised debate with a disc jockey and a promoter, that will eventually be shown on G.T.K. During the trip down they are going

to put the finishing touches to a routine they intend to do instead of making logical debating points on "Rock and Revolution". Bomber will put on a heavy DJ voice and declare: "I'm in this business not for the dough, not the money, but because (?) have The Business! (?) have the People in the Business." Reaching out, ripping you off! And in the background on guitar Rob will be backing him up: Dahn, dahn, da dah dahn, dahn, dahn.

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