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Rock against racism: Remembering that gig that started it all

This weekend, Rock Against Racism and the Anti Nazi League's historic 1978 Carnival is celebrated in an anniversary gig. Here, some of those who organised or played at the original concert – and members of the audience – remember the event

Ben Naylor, Chris Mogan, Colin Brown, Charlotte Cripps • Friday 25 April 2008 00:00 BST

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Tom Robinson Headlined Rock Against Racism in 1978

Rock Against Racism had started as a grass-roots movement in late 1976, in reaction to the infamous remarks by Eric Clapton at a concert in Birmingham, when he told the audience that Enoch Powell was right and that there were too many "foreigners" in Britain.

This was a man who'd made a fortune playing black American blues music in the Sixties and then had a huge hit with Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff". It seemed so deeply hypocritical to turn around and say he didn't want black people to live in the same country as him.

The National Front were gaining electoral ground and becoming bolder in their attempts to intimidate immigrants with marches and violence. Blues and reggae fans like myself were appalled to see one of our heroes like Clapton pouring petrol on the flames.

So a group of music lovers wrote to the NME and Melody Maker denouncing Clapton's comments and calling for the formation of Rock Against Racism. "Who shot the Sheriff, Eric?" they asked. "It sure as hell wasn't you!"

From the outset, RAR was a grass-roots movement, avoiding stars and celebrities. It grew up around the same time as punk, drawing on much of the energy and angry mood of the times – and using similarly strong graphic images in its posters and magazines. It became a network of local supporters – and the London collective would send out kits to fans telling them how to put on their own gigs – and supporting them with posters and lists of band contacts. The bill would be unknown white punk bands and black reggae bands, with the reggae bands tending to headline as a matter of course.

A year later, with growing popularity and awareness, Rock Against Racism was able to team up with the Anti Nazi League to transform the anti-racist cause into a mass movement, by staging the momentous march and carnival in Victoria Park, in east London.

Roger Huddle

One of the original organisers of RAR in 1978

The carnival came about after a year of RAR gigs and concerts and the formation of the Anti Nazi League. We wanted to give people space to stand against the Nazis. It was not about individuals, but organisations helping to set it up. We played it by ear – there was nothing corporate about organising the first carnival. We had sympathetic stage builders and volunteer guards.

We wanted the carnival in the East End of London, the heart of the working class where the National Front were trying to build a following.

The concert was all about black and white unity, so it was important we had black and white people on stage together: Steel Pulse, Tom Robinson and some of The Clash. It took us about a month to organise the carnival – we wanted to do

something before the local elections of 1978 to push the National Front off the streets and off the electoral registers. We wanted to get rid of them.



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Mick Jones **The Clash**

They were saying: "How dare you play the Anti-Nazi League gig in a stormtrooper's outfit!" I was wearing a BBC commissioner's hat which we nicked when we did the TV show, black shirt and black trousers. And all of a sudden I'm in a stormtrooper's outfit. And they're saying to me: "You're disgusting."

Jerry Dammers **The Specials**

The Specials were involved early on playing at RAR gigs, even before we headlined the Leeds RAR concert in 1981. We were coming up as a band at the same time as RAR. The whole atmosphere was very anti-racist and that was reflected in our lyrics. Songs like "Doesn't Make It Alright" were influenced by V C the whole atmosphere of the time. Everybody was working together on a common cause.

I remember the Leeds concert well because, as we were coming in on the coach, the National Front had organised a march on the same day. It was a pretty scary sight; they looked very sinister with all their Union Jacks. It was chilling to see blatant fascist marching in Britain.

They don't march any more; that's one of the achievements of RAR. The trouble is, they are more insidious. They try to be more respectable but basically it's the same thing. At this time, RAR knocked them as they were gaining votes, and played a huge part in defeating them. They still work as a pressure group on the mainstream parties, who pretend to be against them, but are influenced by scaremongering, such as about immigration. I don't think immigration is an issue, but it's in the media the whole time.

Gurinder Chadha

Film-maker

Being in a shop [her parents' shop in south London] we were very vulnerable because the next person who walked in could beat you up. I was really into RAR. When I heard about the carnival, I was determined to go, but my parents said there was no way. The whole of the park was jumping up and down to The Clash. It was an incredibly emotional moment because, for the first time, I felt surrounded by people on my side. That was when I thought that something had changed in Britain for ever. Before RAR, there was no sense that it wasn't OK to be racist. But with RAR, we got to see that there were others willing to speak out against racism and talk about a different kind of Britain.

Geoff Martin

Organiser of RAR 30th anniversary show

I was a 15-year-old kid very much into The Clash when I went to RAR. It completely changed my outlook. From that moment, I got involved in RAR and became a political activist. The weather wasn't that great, a fairly cloudy late April day. I didn't know what to expect. It was a hell of a long march from Trafalgar Square to Hackney. I remember following a truck with a band on it called The Members. I was a big fan. I must have seen them play the same set six times, but it was brilliant.

For many like me, it was the first political event we had been to. I remember the imagery and the Anti-Nazi League arrows, the ANL lollipops. I was interested, but the big pull for me was getting to see The Clash for nothing. But from that I came away with a hell of a lot more than just Joe Strummer bashing out a few things. It's been with me ever since.

For a lot of us it's still a major reference point. We were the dispossessed suburban kids in a way, very much into punk rock and the politics came off the back of that. The immediate effect of RAR was to galvanise the anti-NF people to come out and make their presence felt. Looking back at it now, the NF were probably already in decline. Thatcher was about to lift the white working-class right-wing vote and I think she successfully did that by talking about "people being swamped by an alien culture". RAR and the ANL did was to successfully stop the organised racists in their tracks, but it had a wider cultural impact.

If you look at the history of multicultural London, that event in Victoria Park 30 years ago was a landmark. It's one of the reasons why today in inner London you have an acceptance of peace and harmony around a multicultural society. That's

have an acceptance of peace and harmony around a multicultural society. That's why the BNP and others have been forced out to the fringes, to the white-flight areas where they can still find a pool of white working-class resentment. In inner London, they are finished, to all intents and purposes.

Tony Benn **Politician**

I attended the original Anti-Nazi league demonstration in Hyde Park because I remember the fascists before the war. It was a huge meeting, a very big and impressive occasion because of the war connection. Fascism – the use of frightening people to get power – is one of the most common and extremely powerful forms of politics and music is a global language that speaks to everyone.

I attended various Rock Against Racism concerts to speak and I think they were extremely important. Anything that brings people together in this way has a positive effect. Before the war, people were attacking the Jews and the communists, then the trade unions and now it's immigrants. We started something which had a very profound effect. Wilson was furious with me because he didn't want racism brought into the election. When you get to my age, you realise every generation has to fight the same battles and I am pleased to be able to help in any way I can. Popular culture is a very important part of the fight against fascism and we need the broadest-based campaign possible. That's why I'll be at the Brixton Academy on 30 April. We must never let the racists win by default and making anti-fascism something people can enjoy helps enormously. You realise you're not on your own and that gives us the confidence to challenge the BNP.

Andy Gill **Gang of Four**

There were loads of RAR concerts around that time. We did endless performances. I think at the time Gang of Four were probably the most clearly identifiable with the ideals of Rock Against Racism. The central idea behind the Gang of Four is looking into yourself and those around you. What makes you and others tick? What is it that makes you have certain reactions to people of a different race or sexuality? It's not just about looking like a rock'n'roll rebel. There was no band that married the themes of Rock Against Racism so well.

I remember doing an RAR concert in Finsbury Park. Culture were the reggae band and The Jam did a support slot. They were a lot bigger than us, but it wasn't about the standard rock'n'roll posturing, it was more about people doing what they could to help. Everybody believed in the spirit of it as a way forward.

The idea meshed with our progressive left agenda. Our commitment was tested after we ended up agreeing to do so many benefits at one stage that we weren't earning anything. What was interesting was that, maybe for the first time, the organisers, artists and audience were all starting to embrace the idea that music and its consumption might have an intrinsically political aspect to it; that it might side with fairness and equality and stand against prejudice, division and hegemony of brain-dead Radio 1.

The concerts made a massive difference. If you think about the mid-Seventies, the National Front and the BNP made huge gains and there was this idea that black and white could never get on. What Rock Against Racism did was confront that head-on by having bands that wouldn't normally perform together. We showed we could live in an integrated society.

Caroline Coon

Artist

It was an awe-inspiring day. We outnumbered the fascists by 100 to one.

Jay Sean

Musician

I'm constantly struck by the racial side of things in music. People insist on calling me an Asian R&B artist, even though there's nothing Asian about my music. No one calls Eminem a white rapper, at least not any more. 50 Cent has a nice demographic. Go to his gigs and you'll see white boys and girls, black boys and girls and Asians and it's the music that brings them together. It's getting to be the same when I perform. I'm aware of the stereotypes about my culture: arranged marriages, terrorism, strict parents, and I like to show people that I do have girlfriends and I can have a drink.

Syd Shelton

Founder member of the first RAR carnival

Its time was right. For me, the music of the 1970s was The Eagles and "Hotel California", which had nothing whatsoever to do with the young people in the estates – and in the affluent areas, too. Along came this new music that was open to new ideas – people were doing it in their garages and their bedrooms. It was just so exciting and it was exactly at that time that RAR was formed.

Billy Bragg

Singer

Rock Against Racism was a watershed in the development of multiculturalism in this country, and from its celebratory concerts sprang Two Tone, Red Wedge and the world music scene. We fought the narrow-mindedness of the National Front by widening our cultural horizons.

Jimmy Pursey

Sham 69

I got up on stage and sang "White Riot" with The Clash at the RAR carnival in 1978. I was at the back with the amps and then joined them for that song. The atmosphere was supercharged with raw energy and real people trying to understand what was going on around them politically in a very depressing time.

The uplift of what we had was RAR and the formulation of an umbrella of culture. It was a beautiful sunny day and the people were mesmerised by being united as one. I'm singing "White Riot" again at the RAR 30th anniversary concert at Brixton Academy for Joe Strummer, who would have done the gig if he was alive.

Here we are 30 years later. Of course it achieved something. The survivors of the 1978 Carnival – I will be performing with Babyshambles; Paul Simonon will be performing with The Good, The Bad, and The Queen, and Mick Jones might be playing with Hard-Fi – will join forces again. We are still depressed by the Government, but we are not confused by our culture. Britain is a multi-cultural society and it always will be if I have anything to do with it.

Poko

Misty in Roots

Music can help to bring people together. When you saw a band like ours jamming with Tom Robinson or with Elvis Costello it showed that, if you love music we can all live together.

Poly Styrene

X-Ray Spex singer

It was a sea of thousands of people, heads and faces. I didn't march because I wasn't feeling well, but I managed to perform on stage. We sang the whole set, including "Germ Free Adolescence" and "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!"

Has RAR achieved anything? I think it has achieved a lot. I think racism isn't so blatant as it was in the Seventies, when it was socially acceptable to call people all kinds of names because of their different backgrounds. I can't speak for other

artists, but for me, RAR was something that made me think about other people's lives and struggles. At that time you only had to watch sitcoms to be aware [of racism] and I was attacked a couple of times as a child because I had an olive complexion. When I was at school the talk was of Paki bashing and queer bashing, so I was quite aware of racist skinhead talk.

The Good, the Bad & the Queen, Jerry Dammers, Jay Sean, Poly Styrene and many others will appear at the free Love Music Hate Racism Carnival, Victoria Park, London E9, 12pm-6pm on Sunday (www.lmhrcarnival.com); Tom Robinson, Alabama 3 and others play the Hope Not Hate 2008 concert at Brixton Academy, London SW9, on Tuesday 30 April (www.hopenothate.org.uk)

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