

Recalling Rock Against Racism

New book on the 1970s and 80s phenomenon launches in Glasgow and Edinburgh this weekend

7 Feb 2019 NEIL COOPER

WHEN 8,000 music fans turned up at Craigmillar Park in Edinburgh in August 1978 for Rock Against Racism and the Anti-nazi League's Edinburgh Carnival, many were expecting to see The Clash. The name of Joe Strummer and Mick Jones' iconic first wave punk band had been added to posters and flyers for the show, saying they had been "invited" to play, despite possibly never having been approached.

There is the story as well about the young Scottish activists who travelled from Aberdeen to the London Carnival in Victoria Park the same year, and were charged to guard the stage overnight lest their opponents attempt sabotage after dark. This wasn't a fanciful notion, as the activists duly had to see off a bunch of National

Front (NF) supporting skinheads intent on burning it down.

While neither of these stories make it into David Renton's new book on the era, they nevertheless go some way to illustrate both the enterprisingly maverick spirit of

the anti-racist movement of the time and its geographical reach. The publication of *Never Again! Rock Against Racism and the Anti-nazi League 1976-1982* comes at a time when the extreme right wing that Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-nazi League (ANL) were set up to oppose are on the march again.

In this sense, *Never Again!*, which is launched this weekend at events in Edinburgh and Glasgow, is an important means of taking stock, and follows barrister and activist Renton's 2007 book, *When We Touched the*

Sky: The Anti-nazi League 1977-1981. While both cover similar ground, a decade on, even Renton seems surprised by the differences in his new book. "When We Touched the

Sky was put out by an independent publisher who very sadly went bust," he says, "and because it hadn't had much publicity, I wanted to do something with it. For a while I thought I was going to be writing a second edition, but more and more stuff kept coming

out, and going through it, it's not until page 50 that there's anything from the old book in the new one."

RAR was founded in August 1976 following a drunken outburst by Eric Clapton during a concert in Birmingham, when he declared support for Conservative MP Enoch Powell, whose "rivers of blood" speech in 1968 had seen Powell rail against mass immigration. After making several disparaging remarks about people of colour, Clapton repeatedly shouted the NF slogan of "Keep

Britain White". In the audience of the Clapton gig were Red Saunders and other members of radical theatre troupe *Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (Cast)*, who wrote a letter to the then hugely influential music paper, *NME*. As well as berating Clapton, who apologised for his outburst last year, Saunders proposed forming RAR. After receiving hundreds of letters of support, numerous RAR groups sprang up. Arriving in the ferment of punk, youth culture was craving some kind of mass movement, and soon the familiar RAR star became ubiquitous accessories on the



A poster for the Edinburgh Carnival Against the Nazis that took place in Craigmillar Park in August 1978.

lapels of charity shop jackets and customised T-shirts. Despite this, Renton is critical of some of the initial burst of activity.

“There were two sides to punk,” he says. “On the one hand, there

were lovely things like black and white musicians playing together, but there was also a depoliticising of things. There were people who said a lot of punks were fascists, and there was a flirtation with images of fascism that you can’t ignore, and that helped shape the mood of nihilism and despair of the time.”

An RAR fanzine, *Temporary Hoarding*, ran for 15 issues, and featured era-defining work by Never Again! Rock Against Racism & the Anti-nazi League 1976–1982 by David Renton is published by Routledge Books, £16.99, and is

launched at Augustine United Church, Edinburgh, Friday, 7pm; STUC, Glasgow, Saturday, 2.30pm www.routledge.com photographer Syd Shelton. In 2017, Street Level Photoworks in Glasgow hosted an exhibition of Shelton's evocative images of bands, fans and activists. This was augmented by enlarged images from the Temporary Hoarding archive, as well as posters from Scottish RAR events. Some of the latter was taken from the collection of Paul Robertson, who in 2012 curated an exhibition of RAR and ANL posters at Summerhall in Edinburgh. This included some from Robertson's own collection, including a poster from the Edinburgh Carnival. Robertson, incidentally, was one of the young activists guarding the Victoria Park stage overnight back in 1978.

That year saw RAR become a major force, with the first Carnival attracting more than 100,000 people to a free concert featuring The Clash, Steel Pulse, Tom Robinson Band, X-ray Spex, Sham 69 singer Jimmy Pursey and Patrik Fitzgerald. Misty in Roots played on the back of a truck leading the six-mile march to the park. The second, in September, took place in Brixton, and featured Aswad, Elvis Costello and Stiff Little Fingers.

The Northern Carnival in Manchester was headlined by Buzzcocks, Steel Pulse and The Fall, while

smaller events included a Liverpool open-air concert witnessed by this writer, and featured alternative theatre companies Belt and Braces and The Sadista Sisters alongside local bands Ded Byrds, Kilikuri and 29th and Dearborn. The Craigmillar Park Edinburgh Carnival might not have had The Clash, but Aswad and local luminaries Scars, The Freeze, The Valves and The Deleted did appear.

Renton was a small child when all this was going on, but became aware of racist activity from an early age.

"At primary school, the desks were covered in swastikas," he says, "and there were people talking about 'Jewing each other', and people being racially abused. I remember that happening, but then it went away really quickly, and I never understood why."

This has influenced everything Renton has done since, both as a writer and activist. In his day job as a barrister, one of his highest-profile cases to date was representing construction worker Dave Smith, who successfully sued Carillion Ltd after it was discovered Smith and hundreds of others had been blacklisted. This era was documented by artist Lucy Parker in an exhibition and film seen at Rhubaba gallery in Edinburgh.

Today, organisations such as Love Music, Hate Racism (LMHR) have picked up the baton of RAR. While

LMHR continues to fly the flag through regular events, the days of massed carnivals appear to be long gone. Meanwhile, another pocket of resistance has just begun through AF Trax, a new sub label of iconic Glasgow club night Optimo founded by Keith Mcivor, aka JD Twitch, with the AF standing for Against Facism.

Forthcoming releases by live artist and DJ Guy Veale, aka Logtoad, Al Jerry and Hot Chip's Joe Goddard may sound different from the class of '78, but Mcivor has credited RAR as being the inspiration behind the label, and each release will feature a manifesto on the sleeve. While such a move is to be welcomed, Renton sees the main centre of activity moving beyond music.

"We need something with the same energy as RAR," he says, "but which isn't just copying it. But the racist cultural milieu isn't music any more. It's online."

Renton cites a group called Game Workers Unite, which promotes antiracism online. "They put out messages against racism," says Renton, "and work against the racist cultural milieu in a fantastic way. Just as RAR was really important for the few years it existed, what they are doing now is just as vital."