
Politics in The Laggan's music

Brian Wilson

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POLITICS IN THE LAGGAN'S MUSIC



"MUSIC AND POLITICS," says Arthur Johnston, "are inextricably intertwined. Arthur practices what he preaches. He is lead singer in The Laggan, a Glasgow folk group, in demand whenever there is a Left-wing event in the city, or far beyond.

The group has been together for six years, and this week sees the release of their LP *I Am The Common Man*. It brings together some of the best, and most rousing, socialist songs from their repertoire.

The trade in Left-wing records is tiny in Britain, unlike some other countries. The Laggan release is unusual in another respect — it has been produced under the financial auspices of the Scottish Trades Union Congress. Instead of being sold in shops, it will be distributed through trade union branches and shop stewards' committees.

Billy Patton, of the Laggan, says: "We are singing the movement's own songs. So it seemed a reasonable idea to cut out the middle men and build our own record label. The rip-off potential in records is tremendous, and we didn't think it right that we should sing socialist songs so that some huckster could make a lot of money."

The STUC were delighted to become involved. One of their officials, Ena MacMillan, explained: "Two years ago, rising from a congress decision, an arts sub-committee was established with representatives of the trade unions involved in the entertainment business."

The Laggan record is the committee's third project. "Before this there was a full house of trade unionists at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow for a performance by Scottish Opera. Then there was a birthday celebration in Edinburgh for Hugh MacDiarmid."

The purpose of all this activity is to raise money for an "artist's fund", to assist young trade unionists with talent which might not otherwise see the light of day.

Already, the fund has paid for a shipyard worker to exhibit his sculpture in Czechoslovakia.

"If our record sells 2,000 copies at £2 each, then £2,000 will go to the artists' fund," says Billy Patton.

"We think we might set a precedent by working through the STUC. And we like to think that, by doing so, we are opening a few channels for other people, who might not get the chance otherwise to do what they are capable of."

The Laggan love the music they perform so well. Arthur Johnston, possessor of a fine, resonant voice well suited to the songs of working class militancy, said: "I feel that folk is the one form of music that puts forward the trials and tribulations of working people."

Billy said: "I don't know any Tory or Right-wing folk songs. The Scottish Nationalists use folk songs for their own ends, but there is nothing wrong with the songs. It's the interpretation that they put on them."

I Am The Common Man is not the first Laggan LP. Arthur recalled: "The National Geographic Society asked us to do a record of Scottish songs in a folk music of the world series. It sold 100,000 copies and we sold the rights for £50."

With experiences like that behind them, The Laggan are left with the distinct impression that they are never going to make a fortune from their music. Not that they want to — they are much happier with the prospect of "contributing something to the Labour movement".

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