Traces from Walking in Air
Commons, Cutty Wrens and Caves

Back in 2023, when this iteration of Walking in Air was originally scheduled, I wrote some notes which developed into an essay, around the Common as the site of the peasant's revolt, music, protest, the pandemic and the idea of the outside, within the context of the invasion of Gaza. The day before we undertook the walk, two years later, I'd done some research on expanding this as a topic of investigation via the song 'The Cutty Wren', associated with the old folk tradition of the symbolic killing of the May King, or the so-called King of the Birds, the wren, but also, according to legend, with the desired killing of King Richard II during the Peasant's Revolt and the dividing up of his body amongst the poor. I'd intended to follow the traces of this history on the common, via the mound where John Ball reputedly preached, and the local Wat Tyler Road, which runs along the side of the common, up from Lewisham Hill. On the Common itself, and after the conversation beforehand about the area's local history, the walk took a different direction.

Below are, first the essay from December 2023, then my preparatory notes on 'The Cutty Wren', and finally, my notes from walking the common, both from May 2025.

I. Commons/Common Revisited

The composer Alan Bush was born in Dulwich in December 1900: a leafy London suburb, its name, meaning "marshy meadow where dill grows", that of non-urban place, that at the time was gradually becoming incorporated into the capital, thanks to expanding railway connections, growing housing, and the general trend of middle-class prosperity. Along the way, the joined and contradictory intersections of the public and the private, art and education, enclosure and open land. "*1805: An Act allowed Dulwich College to enclose and develop 130 acres of common land. 1817: Dulwich Picture Gallery is opened and becomes the first public art gallery in Britain in continuous use*."[1]

Set for a solid upper-middle-class career as a concert pianist and composer, Alan Bush went to study music and philosophy at Humboldt Universität Berlin in the late 1920s. In Berlin, he became aware of the rise of Fascism, encountering Brecht and Eisler, the debates around serialism and *Gebrauchsmusik,* about music's direction and function. Newly politicized, on his return to London, he became involved in workers' music movements and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). In the post war years, he ultimately developed a style that might be described as musical socialist realism, of the kind mandated by the Zhdanov decrees of 1948: melodic, relying on folk material in the 'national style'.

From the '50s on, Bush worked on a number of operas which take as their themes moments of popular revolt: miners' strikes, the US labour hero Joe Hill, an anti-colonial uprising in Guyana. Bush's opera *Wat Tyler* (1950) concerns the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, and includes a scene at the peasants' camp in Blackheath Common. The opera takes as one of its motifs the song 'The Cutty Wren', its lyrics linked to pagan rituals of sacrifice in which the slaughter of the wren, the "king of the birds" at the end of the year, just after the Winter Solstice, or to the Peasant's Revolt—the wren as the young king Richard, to be killed and fed to the poor.

In an article on Bush's music, his friend, composer-pianist Ronald Stevenson discusses Bush's setting of the famous sermon supposedly preached by the radical cleric John Ball to the rebels at Blackheath: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?" Writing of the relation of melody to speech in Bush's music, Stevenson suggests that "the melodic line is more like an accurately realized sound graph of an actual speech than a melody of such".[2] Song gestures beyond itself. A few decades later, in a more determinedly avant-garde context, the singer Phil Minton gave a memorable performance of the original song in which he yodels away from the melody mid-way with improvisatory glee: song and ritual containing within themselves a violence ritualistic, emancipatory,

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[1] 'A Timeline History of Dulwich', *South London Guide.co.uk*: http://www.southlondonguide.co.uk/dulwichvillage/history.htm

[2] Ronald Stevenson, 'Alan Bush: Committed Composer', *The Music Review*, Vol.25, No.4 (1964), reprinted in *Song is Gold Pavilions: Ronald Stevenson on Music* (SUN MeDIA Stellenbasch, 2009), pp.42-64 (p.57).

ambivalent.[3] There's a relation, and sometimes a tension here between language and music, abstraction and specificity, melody as regular pattern and noise—or what gets called noise—as something that exceeds pattern. Speech becomes song becomes speech becomes noise, the ambiguous lyrics of killing, cooking, eating and distributing wavering between myth and historical specificity.

Stevenson notes that when the song appears in the end of the first Act of Bush's opera, each verse is repeated in a higher key, "this rising line itself a symbol of the Peasants' revolt". The song begins in the background, as instrumental accompaniment to a separate duet, and ends as collective refrain. This intersection of foreground and background, of individuals and collectives, is characteristic of the opera's formal structure as a whole. Stevenson calls Wat Tyler a "ballad opera", in which arias, duets, choruses and the like exist as separate forms but within an overall structure—in that sense, its compartmentalisation departs from the Wagnerian Romanticism of the total work, flowing in one endless melody, one giant sigh, towards a more defined social function. What it does borrow, however, is Wagnerian leitmotif to afford melodic continuity and psychologization, and also, suggests Stevenson, the Brechtian idea of the *gestiche Sprach*: a gesture or 'gestic' language, a gestural music, or, in Stevenson's words, "speech so concentrated that its very rhythms compel the actor or singer into gesture. Gesture, but not gesticulation". A gesture you can see, or hear, inviting reflection on the rhetoric it encapsulates, on the forms it references, while maintaining an absolute confidence in its own operations: a kind of declamatory sharing, what Stevenson calls terse music for a terse text (the libretto by Bush's wife and long-term collaborator, Nancy Bush). That combination of pomp and terseness perhaps reflects something of the state of the British far left during this post-war period, adjacent to the welfare state, critical of it, unsure of its place. It's a moment that, in what can feel like the near-total decimation of the British left today, assumes itself a kind of strangeness, like a history seen through the filters of some sort of analogue broadcast, caught on the comforting yet estranging buzz of airwaves far away.

The description above is taken entirely from my reading of Stevenson's reading of the work, for no recording of the work exists, at least in publicly-accessible form, and Stevenson's article contains no examples from the scores, as it does for other pieces like Bush's *Men of Blackmoor*.[4] The music remains a guess, a ghost of a description. Terseness, concentration, melody, history, a work unheard. At stake in Stevenson's analysis is the relation of single voice, of aria, to chorus--Bush's homophonic choral settings. We might think too, walking on Blackheath now, of the relation of solo walker to crowd, of the past few years of social distancing, the internalised musics and speech of times of separation, words taken away on the wind.

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All this means that I can't say that I "heard" Bush's opera when I walk about the heath, though I do have some other aspects of his characteristic melodic style that come through my head from time to time from the other, generally instrumental, recorded works, a melodic quality characterised by a kind of sturdy ambivalence, with something lyrically expansive at its core surrounded by—or perhaps inseparable from—a kind of outer shell.

In the pandemic, three years ago now, I walked up fairly frequently from Lewisham to this same space, looking at the common, at this mound.[5] Walking at this time seemed to trace lines that both circle in on themselves, trapped in a maze of regulations, statistics, anxieties, clamped-down possibilities, and that tried to extend some sort of line of flight: floating, leaking, disappearing, the vanishing point always

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[3] Phil Minton and Veryan Weston, 'The Cutty Wren' (2010 film by Helen Petts): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyJ3m-vmVN0 Weston and Minton first recorded the song on *Ways Past* (ITM Records, 1992) and also perform the song, accompanied by the Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna, on *Ways for an Orchestra* (I Dischi di Angelica, 2019). See below.

[4] The sole exception is a recording of the aria 'Wrong is the road that I have taken', the lament of Wat Tyler's wife Margaret following his death, sung by Joan Hammond, and reportedly taken from a 1956 BBC broadcast of the opera. At the time of writing, this excerpt could be found on *Youtube*, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtplAtRv69A.

[5] Traces of these walks appear in the book *Present Continuous* (Pamenar Press, 2022), especially in the text 'He was roaring around like a bullet'.

in sight. Some conceit, some index of a possibility reduced, made small. The remaining traces of Bush's opera, the notice-board by the mound, the oblique naming of a minor road after Wat Tyler, all these are sideways glimpses: a trace of historical memory, not one given the status of a monument, but rather, a short essay, a small notice-board, something to the side of the official monuments of Crown and Church and country. The mound that barely now even rises as a mound, the pond that fills with water only when it rains; the scraggly, flattened land round the common, its enclosure by the houses of the wealthy, overlaid with the anxieties of the pandemic and its policing. Memory that solidifies but also evanesces, moisture on air, melting snow.

The common is the ghost of a public for whom today it is only partially intended, though, even today, it's the site of the fair or circus, occasionally even an activist camp. Wandering here in a time of plague, the park and the common appeared as vestige of a public space—but technically, this "common land" is owned by the crown, and administered by the council. During the early stages of Covid, the police moved people on when they sat on benches, the cops hovering on their bikes or motorbikes or vehicles blasting out announcements over tinny tannoys, localised totalitarianism in the name of the care the government itself voided. And this just a small index of a power that otherwise too often be rendered invisible, part of some presumed social contract.

Does the experience of that time still inhere, or is it something that today we wish to leave behind? It was, of course, experienced differentially, with different levels of being directly affected, of trauma, whether experienced as a kind of pause for reflection or a point when everything crashed on in. The emptied-out interlude reveals the real atomisation and alienation of a society based on division, separation, the erosion and erasure of safety nets. The cops suddenly visible in some parkgoers' lives are in an all-too-daily presence—and a far more mendacious one—in the lives of many others who are their near-neighbours, overshadowed by Lewisham's gigantic police station, its horses and stables and riot vans, its sorties out into, and as the ground of, what we call social life.

And so then to ask, beyond the frame of the pandemic: who has access to the space, what the limited freedoms of the concept of the (pleasure) park, the common, the green space of relatively fresh air breathed in, of grass and foliage and earth, despite the cars that drive through its centre: all this, when across in other parts of London and the UK pollution or mould coats lungs, covers walls, leads to children's deaths.[6]

Disease, burial, occlusion. The metaphor of miasma, what's carried on the air and beneath the ground on and in which we walk. A Black Death plague pit is rumoured buried beneath the heath: this, it's supposed, the reason for the heath's name. Thirty years before the Peasants Revolt, the Black Death caused catastrophic losses across Europe. This too, is part of its background. The peasants marched up from Kent to London, the old route into the city now incorporated into it, a common that is not a common, a border that is not a border. The city wall is no longer there, but the border as concept is ever more internalised as the ground of national being, in the UK and across Europe, as the rhetoric and policy of an irrational hatred of migration that—like a distorted version of the key changes that signal

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[6] I'm referring here to the death of Awaab Ishak, a two-year old boy who, in December 2020, died of a respiratory condition caused by exposure to toxic black mould in social housing in Rochdale. Likewise, a study has shown a high rate of deaths from respiratory conditions relating to pollution levels across London boroughs, with the highest rate in Tower Hamlets (138 deaths), the second highest in Greenwich, and the seventh-highest in Lewisham (92 deaths). (Zygimantas Mascinskas, 'Tower Hamlets has worst record in London for deaths linked to pollution claims charity', *East London Times*, March 30, 2023: https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2023/03/tower-hamlets-has-worst-record-in-london-for-deaths-linked-to-pollution-claims-charity/) "Imperial College London, globally renowned experts in air quality research, have looked at the health burden of air pollution in London. Their research found that in 2019, toxic air contributed to the premature deaths of around 4,000 Londoners. This includes deaths from all causes, including respiratory, lung cancer and cardiovascular diseases. Like smoking, air pollution is seen as a contributory factor, so is rarely listed on death certificates. However, in a global first, in December 2020, Coroner Phillip Barlow ruled that a 9-year-old girl from Lewisham, South London died in 2013 as a direct result of air pollution, stating air pollution made a "material contribution to her death". The British Heart Foundation also found that living in many areas of London increases the risk of an early death by the equivalent of smoking 150 cigarettes a year." 'Programmes and Strategies: ULEZ Frequently Aksed Questions', *London.gov.uk*, 2025: https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/pollution-and-air-quality/ultra-low-emission-zone-ulez-london/ulez-frequently-asked-questions/what-evidence-air-pollution-leads-around-4000-premature-deaths

the call to rebellious unity in Bush's setting of 'The Cutty Wren'—reaches new pitches, new heights, cruel, false and desperate images of national belonging and national exclusion.

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Alan Bush was, in a sense, both an insider and outsider, his life spent with a comfortable teaching career at the Royal Academy of Music and an inheritance from his parents, living in the suburban town of Radlett. But his operas rarely got into British opera houses. Writing a music predicated on what, following Zhdanov's prescriptions, he termed 'national style'—supposedly the proper basis for internationalism—his operas were, ironically enough, rarely performed in the UK, but abroad in socialist countries, with East Germany in particular a particular destination. His workers' choirs performed on war sites, amidst the Bombing of the Blitz, on peace tours in Europe, outside the networks of sanctioned establishment in sincere attempts at internationalist belonging beyond the ever-trumpeted borders of the nation, its denial of difference, its fear of outsiders. Silent, black-and-white footage captures him leading a worker's choir in a performance to inaugurate a memorial to the victims of the Lidice massacre, on the site of the massacre itself. More music unheard, gone on the wind.

Playing music outdoors has often in today's society been seen as anti-social; outdoor what you can hear—noise 'pollution'—versus what you can't; sitting down on the grass of Blackheath Common, collapsed in the pandemic, lying back to watch the sky and then looking over and seeing someone in the distance playing what looked like a shakuhachi but was too far away to see properly let alone hear. Every time a car goes past blasting the deep bass note of Trap the world turns in rhythm, overturns, the bones of the dead under Blackheath, the trees of the field, if these dry bones should walk.

One summer in Eddie Prévost's workshop, Tony Hardie-Bick put contact mics outside the window and the sounds of the passing world came into the space at a time when Covid made us all the more aware of keeping the windows open, of circulating air—a litany of familiar sounds like the notes or phrases in music—police sirens, ice cream vans, groups of kids. At Emmanuelle's the following summer, a film layered projection on projection on the subject of light, then ended with live video feeding from the garden: focused unfocused slow-moving shots of plants, film as the art of looking, bringing the outside in; a way of looking at the living world rather than freezing it. All the layers in the film and the improvisations beforehand, Stevie Wishart's hurdy-gurdy and Maureen Wolloshin's oboe layering up technique and the technical to beautifully finesse what once was wild, wavering in pitch, glissing all over the shop. The performance inside, but with an ear and an eye to the outside, the open door or window.

I think of this, and of other improvisations where the players have opened the door and the way that changes the space; or various instances of playing outdoors, Artur Vidal in the Walthamstow marshes some years ago, walking into the woods with his saxophone held aloft until he disappeared but the sound remained, hanging in the air like the slow-vanishing light of sunset; the field and its role in recent composition, and the way that relates to the garden and the park and the path, its beautiful errancy, vagrancy, trespass, refusing bounded wall and fence and hedge in common attention. So often the eye has sought to own—the landowners' prospect, the landscape—but wildly on the edge, by the mound or elsewhere, might we all converge on the same thing and together communize our attention, make it communal, held in common?

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What, though, does this really mean? How far can going for a walk, walking in or surrounded by air take you? What does it matter about Alan Bush's opera, or playing music outside, all these memories and histories? What were the stakes of walking in the pandemic and now? In the summer, someone told me about going on a government-funded soundwalk in Leipzig alongside a group of other experimental musicians: the group stopped next to a spot where a homeless man had set up a resting point, all the participants consciously or unconsciously looking away to aestheticize the scene around. It matters where and who you are, what you are choosing or not choosing to pay attention to.

Originally this iteration of Walking in Air was scheduled to take place in June 2023, but it was put forward again to December. Biting air, lack of light. During that time, much mental space and much of the space of walking has been occupied with protests against the invasion of Gaza, against the mass

bombing, the deaths of children, the horrible complicity and silence of the Global North's regimes. The waxing and waning crowds have been out each weekend on the streets, in Germany, in the UK, in the warmer stages of early autumn, and then, last week, a sudden European chill and the arrival of snow. Today we may choose to walk the common; in Gaza, for increasing numbers of months, people have been remorselessly and relentlessly forced to walk, forced to flee, from one bombed house to another, from one town to another, on roads and in towns where no route and no place is safe.

Perhaps, as it feels at the lowest moments, there is nothing we can do to influence our governments to choose other than the route of alternately shamed or trumpeted complicity they have chosen for two months, but we have to choose to believe others; to choose to believe that there is or must be a value for us continuing to walk out there on the streets. For this has been one of the largest public protests movements in the UK that I can remember for the past few years; walking, together, in symbol and solidarity, raising our voices, keeping that presence against whatever would refuse to believe that we can walk in common, that we can keep in our mind that geographically distant conflict in whose historical legacies Britain is so complicit; walking in air, from solo to chorus, refusing to look away, in whatever commons for that moment we together can make.

—December 2023

II. Notes on 'The Cutty Wren'

—"We'll give it all to the poor, said John the Red Nose".

Wikipedia tells me that the origins of the song are disputed. One theory has that it refers to the human sacrifice of the Year King, for which a wren was later substituted as 'King of the Birds'. Traditionally, this ceremony took place on what later became Boxing Day, a few days after the Winter Solstice. On 'Wren Day', the wren was hunted, displayed on top of a pole decorated with holly, ivy and ribbons, and then paraded around the neighbourhood by 'wren boys' wearing masks, singing songs, and collecting donations, before a funeral was performed for the bird. Such traditions took place in numerous locations, though 'cutty', a word for 'small' or 'short' is a word from Northern England and the Scottish Lowlands, suggesting that the song originates from there, although there are also versions with variant words from other locations such as the Orkney Islands (the song also made it to the United States, where it is known as 'Billy Barlow'). Whatever the exact origin, there is often a radical edge to the versions of the song and the tradition it references: in Ireland, for example, there is reputedly a tradition that the wren was hunted because it had snitched on Irish resistance forces to Cromwell's Army. So whether it arises from Pagan beliefs or popular resistance to national oppression, this idea of killing and burying the king so that the collective might be renewed is ripe for radical interpretation.

In his performance of the song with pianist Veryan Weston, Phil Minton places the song in the context of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt and suggests that the Cutty Wren were, in fact, mercenary policemen "who the peasants fought and occasionally killed. And because they were starving...sometimes ate." As Minton jokes this, then, is a song about eating policemen.[7] Though this interpretation appears to be unique to Minton's performance, the song's association with the Peasant's Revolt is more widely shared. It appears to originate with folk song collector A.L. Lloyd in his 1944 book *The Singing Englishman*. Without providing no direct evidence for his claim, Lloyd argues that the sacrificed king in the lyrics refers to Richard II in the context of the 1381 Revolt. This interpretation was more recently popularized by Chumbawamba's 1992 album *English Rebel Songs 1381-1914*, on which it is the oldest piece, although the song is not officially recorded until several centuries later. (Chumbawamba's liner notes link opposition to Margaret Thatcher's infamous introduction of the Poll Tax six hundred years later, successfully overturned by mass resistance.)[8]

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[7] Minton and Weston, Op. Cit.

[8] A.L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman: An Introduction to Folksong* (Workers' Music Association, 1944); Chumbawamba, *English Rebel Songs 1381-1914* (Agit-Prop Records/MUTT, 1988). Lloyd's book is currently out of print, but the relevant portion of the text is available online at https://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/tse1.htm

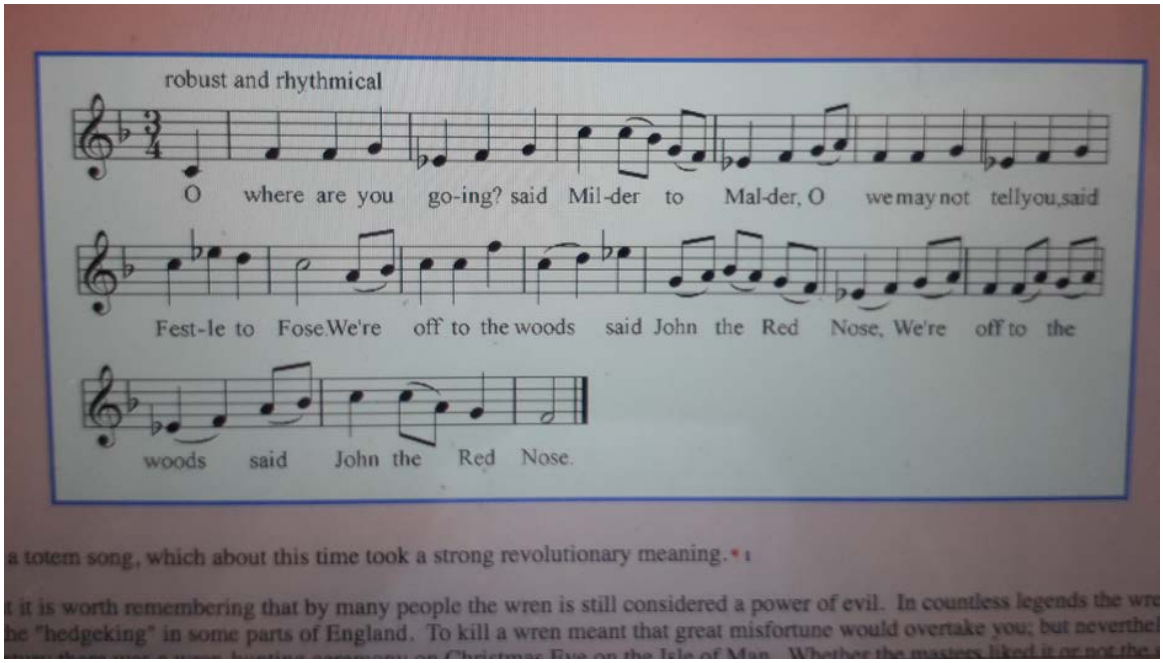
In Lloyd's interpretation, this may be a "rebel song", but it is not simply one of rage or gleeful defiance, but of what he sees as a "deep melancholy" of English folk songs borrowed from Medieval English church modes, a reaction to the sorrows of an era of Baronial oppression and the defeat of the Revolt, in which the Black Death wiped out one in two people in London. Lloyd further suggests that meetings of peasants and rebel leaders organising against their labour conditions were sometimes labelled pagan gatherings or witches' sabbaths by those in power: secret political meetings both disguised and fed by ritual and dancing with older pagan roots—suggestive, perhaps, of the persecution of witches as part of a process of primitive accumulation famously argued by Silvia Federici. Either way, as today, oppression and plague, sorrow and defiance stand in close proximity.

Interpretations such as those of Lloyd may seem necessarily speculative, based on wish or conjecture, but, to an extent, they also militate against false notions of 'authenticity' which can spring up around the idea of folk song. For 'folk' is always a constructed category, the result of 19th century classificatory processes sometimes connected in a dubious way to the idea of national peoples, national characteristics. Collective composition, vernacular transmission, one which promiscuously spreads and improvises across numerous locations with the movement of peoples—as, for instance, in the Wren's transposition to the US as 'Billy Barlow'—becomes localized, nationalized. Lloyd researched folk songs in the British Museum while unemployed during the Depression of the 1930s, collaborated with Ralph Vaughan-Williams on a book of those songs, sang a sea shanty in John Huston's adaptation of Moby Dick. In the post-war period, such research fitted well with the Communist Party of Great Britain's emphasis on national culture—itself the result of Stalinist emphases on building "socialism in one country". *The Singing Englishman* was published by the Workers' Music Association, of which Alan Bush was president, and in 1946, Lloyd and Bush collaborated on a pageant of folk songs the former had selected. For his part, Bush moved away from the modernist emphasis of his earlier music to the inclusion of folk songs and work with English modes: this the background to his use of 'The Cutty Wren' in his opera of English class struggle.

From what we can read of the opera, Bush uses the song within it a kind of object, a *leitmotif* used within the score, the way folk song collectors went around listening and writing things down, taking something orally a transmitted and putting it to paper, fixing as written tradition what was always in flux. Including the song, Bush tries to give a collective context and history to his music, yet the opera remains within the framework of the individual composer, the context of pageantry and nationalism, the reaction against what's perceived as the creeping Americanization of popular culture leading to a kind of staid presentation of what is in fact just as much an invented category as the authenticity would claim.

Likewise, despite their success as an anarcho-punk and pop band in tune with modern sounds, Chumbawamba's version presents 'The Cutty Wren' and the other songs on their record of *English Rebel Songs* in an unadorned *a capella* version, a signal of apparent authenticity which belies the liner note's claim to contemporary relevance. In emphasizing a historical tradition, a historical continuum—a version of English history as that of continual class struggle, rather than a genteel parade of monarchs, aristocrats, and contented, singing workers—the performance also risks leaving that song in the past, again a static object. Not the least of such problems is the fact that this construction of "folk" fixes an idea of a racially homogenous "England" or "Britain", one which does not encompass the actual contemporary culture of the contemporary world, and that, in today's climate, erupts into newer forms of nationalism. A counter-nationalism from below, if fixed in a fantasy of an "authentic", distant past, risks repeating precisely that which it seeks to challenge or eschew. Not that this means that the song needs to be rejected outright.

Take the moment in Phil Minton's version in which Minton erupts into wordless free improvisation, the joyous babble and howl threatening to depart from the song's tonal base. To me, it seems that what this moment does is to insist that a song such as this is not a fixed object, but is and could and should be the subject of improvisation and change, of a rebel wildness that exceeds national definitions and that cannot be tamed.



—May 2025

III. Walking in Air, 26.05.2025

“I wanted out of the past so I ate the air,
it took me further into air”.
—Peter Gizzi

Carol talks about the use of the mound as a spot for radical gatherings: Peasants’ revolts, the Chartists, the Suffragettes. People travel to the mound and the sound travels from it. Reportedly, you could hear the repentant crying of the Methodist crowds from two miles away.

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Or other crowds. C goes on to tell us the refugees from Palatine Germany who in the 1700s were housed in tents on the Common. Crowds would gather to gawk or jeer, many deported, considered as ‘economic migrants’ rather than religious refugees worthy of asylum. How little the spectacle, the rhetoric, has changed.

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I start off walking round the mound, see the holes, the bushes, burnt twigs, traces of what looks like toilet paper and human waste, record the sounds: planes passing overheard, kids playing, traffic, no speeches, no cries. But might some noise from history bleed through?

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Blackheath as a place of apocrypha: site of a Black Death plague pit—in fact, the earth is naturally dark-brown to black, the rumour perhaps arising from the moment Henry VIII pushed people away from away from the next-door Royal Greenwich park to so-called "Pest Houses" where those with communicable diseases were quarantined, the other side of the hill—a Bermuda triangle of disappearances by a local church—a highwayman, a flock of birds. But perhaps through these fictive layers a kind of vernacular of people's history can be traced: aspirations, dreams, traumas, fears.

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Air is already contaminated, Emmanuelle notes as we walk over to the Common, thinking about the discourse of air, breathing, open and closed spaces during the pandemic. The air seems so clean under the hugeness and richness of the sky's layered greys, but an A-road goes through the middle: we breathe in the petrol even as we speak. And in covid when the planes, today ubiquitous, stopped, and traffic reduced, all and all you heard and seemed to breathe was birdsong, the air was charged with the virus. As today the deaths from pollution, from inadequate housing or health provision continue.

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Blackheath is not named after the plague pit but after the colour of its earth, C says. And though at first it seems brown, ochre-ish, after the brief spots of rain that fall as we start to walk, the earth starts to blacken, the smell of an emergent petrichor in the air as I pass the sign to Wat Tyler Road, covered in lichen.

I get preoccupied with the idea of holes, ravines, passages, caves, as C tells us about caverns, sand mines for building works of gravel, transported to Versailles, and the Iranian refugee who lived in a hole covered with a tarp on the mount for decades, refusing offers to be housed in Lewisham, and was eventually evicted when the government placed surface-to-air missiles on the Common for the 2012 Olympics.

From the preacher to the refugee, the common as a vast burial ground, the pond with no source which empties and fills according to the patterns of the rain, in this dry late spring revealing pebbles and reeds, the glacial furrows; what seems flat, C says, was in fact pockmarked with mines and Blitz bomb damage (planes would unload there as it was on the route back to the continent and any bombs unused in their missions would weigh the planes down): only later was it filled in, smoothed out. Flatness is perhaps always deceptive: the earth and the air curve up and down, side to side, and we move with them, propelled or resisted, stumble or leap, adjust without thinking.

I walk down Wat Tyler Road, it stars to rain and I take shelter in the 'ravine', the tree-covered former gravel pit where people hide out to do whatever it is. Maybe it's a cruising ground. But no one's here today, no one human at least, the area overgrown, the ground muddy. I make a recording of the air: wind, leaves, rain, and as I come up out of the pit the sun blazes out over blue skies.

A sign reading 'no children playing', somewhere between description and command. Sirens.

To descend and emerge from the pit, the refugee's hole, the cave, Orphic, miasma. Where the ghosts rise up.

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The composer Antoine Beuger, a former Walking In Air participant, told me he'd started walking backwards, inspired by Benjamin's writing on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Blown away from the smashed bits of revolts that we're blown away from on the storm of technocapitalist progress, the

juggernaut, fragments whistling by or up from the earth, we glean and gather as we pass. E talked about foraging in Thornton Heath, the sense that this activity had been carried out in much the same manner for hundreds, thousands of years. To repeat, to preserve, from below.

The pebbles on the pond I thought were gravel scattered externally in fact come up directly from the earth itself, glacial deposits millions of years old, C says, their edges smoothed, as the mound too is flattened and the common filled in, this reduction a mark of loss—of memory, of radical history; how what floats up or what we dredge or dig up from the past marks a violence. The dead of the peasants' revolt said to be buried under the mound.

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Planes fly overhead, I look at holes below. Look up, the hugeness of the sky, the air, a potential commons, what Julian Spahr calls "this connection of everyone with lungs". Airspace is territory, but the sky, the birds, have no nationality. (Yet even the birds peck at each other's heads, the bald crow we see by the pond, all its feathers hacked off its head.)

I forget when I started, in rain, sunbathe. 'The Cutty wren' I wanted to consider fades away into the overlapping sounds of birds, planes, cars, sirens. How is sound layered? In historical strata like the earth; stacked horizontally like letters or leaves? Or neither earth nor writing but more properly air, it leaves no object, though I record it on my phone and in this writing to accompany it.

By the pit, at the bottom of the slope, Wat Tyler Road turns left to St Austell Road—a reference to the Cornish rebellion of Jack Cade, perhaps, massacred here, author of the first manifesto in history, C says, delivered to the king. The manifesto indicates not just a literary movement, as we tend to think of it today, but a political one, a movement from centre to peripheries, by those speaking another language, resisting national subjugation and incorporation, the rebels coming up by foot from Kent and Cornwall, both now locations of the current right-wing border paranoia.

The naturalist Gilbert White insisted that swallows don't migrate, C says, till his brother told him he saw them flying over Gibraltar, where he was stationed in the army. The nation resists the idea of movement for a false idea of rooted dwelling which yet it constantly uproots, moves on—the man in the hole on the mound moved on for missiles on the common, the homeless person I saw getting moved on by four cops at Lewisham Shopping Centre opposite the copshop on the way here. We walk back down, or round, or in a circle. Freedom of movement, freedom to move, forced to move, on, across, and the deposits, the violence, the border under all the ground, every sea, the extracted coltan from the earth beneath powering the phone or the electric car or bus, the electric burning, extracted by exploited workers, that 'cleans' the air. Our rulers make the world's life conditional on death: it's all a necropolis, the palace of culture on the bones of the dead. Here, now, with the wind whispering its air into the ear, it's so quiet, and I'm so very far, at the bottom of the page, from where I started. You stand up on the mound to speak and fall down the hole, the earth's mouth or ear. *"No ear, no Door".*

Do people sleep under the trees?

*

I start walking backwards, retracing the route, and, by the cadet training centre, some soldiers get out of a coach.

The earth is not flat, however much we try to flatten or smooth it over, smother it, smooth it out, to bury over and reduce and overlook, to block the flow of air. Walking backwards reveals the indentations, the grooves, the stumbling points the holes. In film it's a trick effect for the reversal of time, in music a stand in for evil, backwards masking as the signifier for Satanic or subliminal messages, eerie effects in the Lynchian Black Lodge. Because to reverse time is to access other dimensions, portal to other voices, and if the flow can be broken, the dead can speak to us—it's a whimsical fancy, and I'm getting dizzy by now—and this body backwards might paradoxically propel us into a future not imagined otherwise: the tiger's leap, the constellation, the break.

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