

Troubador for Troubled Times: An Interview with Singer/Songwriter David Rovics

By Ken Klonsky

When I came to Vancouver from Toronto in 2006, I had never heard of David Rovics, his work or the man himself. Then I joined the Solidarity Notes Labour Choir, headed by talented musical director Earle Peach, and we began work on a first-rate Peach arrangement of a piece called “Drink of the Death Squads.” While it took the better part of a year for the choir to learn its rhythmic intricacies, the song’s political impact was immediate. The “drink” is Coca-Cola and the song refers to Colombia, where death squads killed union organizers (and still do) at an alarming clip. Like Rovics himself, the song is savagely satirical, politically intelligent, and deadly serious:

The baby drinks it in his bottle/ When the water ain't no good/ Even the dog drinks it/ But he don't know if he should;/ And even some folks say it's the nectar of the gods/ But Coke is the drink of the death squads.

This kind of writing has assured Rovics a place in the pantheon of great lyricists, like his models Jim Page (not to be confused with Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin), Leon Rosselson, Bruce Springsteen, James Keelaghan, and Robb Johnson, who, except for Springsteen, serve a limited audience of politically aware people. Some of his songs such as “Jenin” and “Death of Rachel Corrie” are heart-felt elegies. The power of the Corrie ballad is breathtaking:

And as your Caterpillar trucks/ Upon her body pressed/ With twenty tons of deadly force/ Crushed the bones within her chest/ Could you feel the contours of her face/ As you took her life away?/ Did you serve your country well/ On that cool spring day?

Rovics writes songs quickly, often after a major

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incident, as with “The Mavi Marmara”, which tells the story of the illegal boarding of a Gaza flotilla ship and the murder of several passengers by the Israeli army.

Rovics is actually an Easterner, having been born and bred in Connecticut, and moved to Portland, Oregon in 2007 to help raise his five-year-old daughter, Leila. His former partner moved to Portland to attend medical school; he sees Portland itself, with its free downtown public transit and proliferation of bicycles, as a model for future urban development. Although he still feels like an Easterner, he was also pleasantly surprised to find a vibrant music scene in Portland.

Moving west has not mellowed Rovics one iota. He continues to sing out against injustice, especially injustice toward the Palestinian people. Part of this focus comes from his agnostic Jewish father, who has always been an example of iconoclasm and moral courage to David. His father married “out of the faith” and eschewed both the faith itself and the proclivity of Jews in the 1950s to assimilate into the dominant capitalist culture. This second rebellion is reflected in Rovics’s lifestyle: spare and simple. The apartment he shares with his current partner, Reiko Maeda, is given over to child-centredness: his daughter’s artwork on the walls (in addition to political

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posters) and even a shower curtain with a map of the world. Rovics has also produced a CD of live-ly children's songs: *Har Har Har: Songs about Pirates, Penguins and Punk Rock Babies*. I spoke with him in his Portland apartment.

Klonsky: What and who were your earliest political influences?

Rovics: Probably my parents, but my first introduction to political activism was the anti-nuclear movement prevalent at Rowe Camp (in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts) where I went in 1979 at the age of twelve. The intensity of the movement at that time was a result of the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The Rowe Center is best known for its workshops in New Age spirituality, yoga and open-minded forums on politics. For me, however, at that early age, the camp had a profound influence. It was unmilitary, non-competitive, and emphasized cooperation and caring. Its politics and activities were politically radical, and would be seen as such even today. For example, to reduce gender bias and counteract homophobia, the camp held a "sex change day" where the girls dressed as boys and vice versa. We also went to a nude beach, but many of us found that a little weird.

In addition to the camp, my elementary education took place in a so-called learning community, not in the public system. The same ethic predominated: worldliness, caring for others, healthy relationships between males and females. In junior high and high school I decided to attend the public system, where I experienced an unfamiliar and disturbing world. I found myself in an environment of put-downs, academic competitiveness and rampant sexism where girls were objects of conquest.

Klonsky: Where did you find the courage to speak truth to power? Do you see yourself in a long line of Jewish progressives, or is Judaism irrelevant to what you do?

Rovics: I'm not sure if speaking out is so terribly courageous, at least not compared to those people who go out and put their bodies on the line. The Jewish influence was there. Certainly the message I took away from the Holocaust, and my grandmother's very regular references to it, was that we couldn't let this sort of thing happen again, that all people had a responsibility not to let that happen again.

Klonsky: Who were your earliest musical influences? Where do you see yourself in terms of musical tradition?

Rovics: It's been a long and circuitous process of discovery. My parents are both accomplished

classical musicians; I grew up playing the cello. My mom introduced me to the music of Pete Seeger, although I didn't appreciate him until much later. Someone gave me a Phil Ochs songbook and he became a huge influence. Utah Phillips At nineteen, I heard Jim Page busking at Pike Place market in Seattle. As a songwriter, he was the biggest influence beyond a doubt.

Klonsky: When did you begin to write songs in support of justice for Palestinians?

Rovics: In 1999 I did a tour of Israel organized by members of the Israeli folk music society for entirely English-speaking Jewish communities throughout the country. As well as being lots of fun, it was very disturbing. I met lots of nice people and saw great natural beauty (the Negev is incredible!) and the Dead Sea. Folks were receptive to all my material that wasn't about the Middle East. As soon as Arabs were mentioned in a sympathetic light, the reception was very bad. At the time, Israel itself, because of suicide bombings and the legacy of Holocaust survivors, was a traumatized society; dialogue was difficult even then.

Ten months after the tour, at the beginning of the second Palestinian Intifada, I wrote a song, "Children of Jerusalem," about a massacre of Palestinian children that took place when Ariel Sharon visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque. One of the lines in the song, *They're gunning down the children of Jerusalem*, produced a predictable result. I received loads of angry e-mails from people in Israel and, to some extent, from their supporters in the Jewish diaspora. A few days later, I started receiving a much bigger flood of e-mails from the Palestinian diaspora and their supporters around the world. I was hooked.

As a result of the song and the stance I was taking, my second tour of Israel was cancelled, ten concerts in all. Only one venue would have allowed me to play, and that was going to be at the house of Moshe Lansman, a psychiatrist who worked with childhood trauma victims on both sides.

Klonsky: You have been asked why you don't write songs about the victims of suicide bombings. Your song "Jenin" tells the story of a young Arab boy whose family has been destroyed, who straps on a bomb and blows himself up to kill Israelis. Aren't the suicide bombings that victimize innocent civilians also a result of Islamic fundamentalism?

Rovics: It's not as if I don't see both sides as victims of the conflict. The media does a good job of humanizing Israeli victims but fails to humanize Palestinians. Kids killed in pizzerias and at Bar Mitzvahs were also victims, but I felt no need to publicize their plight. The suicide bombers themselves were characterized in the media as religious

fanatics who believed they would go to heaven for blowing themselves up and taking Israeli lives. I would not justify these acts under any circumstances, but simply point out that the characterization of the bombers as fanatics is erroneous. A 2006 study of suicide bombers by Professor Robert Pape (*Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Bombers*) indicates that 95 per cent of them were motivated by personal loss, secular and political grievances, and, most often, military occupation, to strike back at their oppressors, and only 5 per cent were inspired by religious fanaticism. The mainstream media is not interested in such subtleties.

“Jenin” was based on the particular case of a 27-year-old Palestinian woman, a paralegal whose parents were murdered by the Israeli military.

Klonsky: How do you approach fanatical religious fundamentalism?

Rovics: Fundamentalists delude themselves in every religion. The Catholic Church was responsible for European anti-Semitism and extreme forms of intolerance against Jews. They were persecutors in the same vein as Adolf Hitler. Enlightened views about diversity in Europe are only decades old.

Evils have also been perpetrated by Islamic countries and individuals—the Armenian massacre by the Turks, to name just one. But Islamic tolerance is centuries old. Jews actually escaped to the Muslim world (the Ottoman Empire) to avoid reprisals from Europeans. Anti-Semitism is a European problem that the Arab world, especially the Palestinian people, is paying for. The Holocaust may have allowed Israel to become a state, but the Holocaust is not a justification for acts of war and cruelty by the Israeli government and military. Ironically, Palestinians are sometimes branded as Nazis by right-wing Israelis, but

the victimization of the Palestinian people is a reflection of the treatment of Jewish people by the Nazis. Humiliation, brutality, mass displacement, punishment of entire populations for the deeds of a few, and mass incarceration without due process are commonplace. As I wrote in “The Death of Rachel Corrie,” *Did her gaze remind you/That you’ve become what you despise?* Violent fundamentalism produces more violence and more recriminations. It’s a cycle that can and must be broken.

Klonsky: Phil Ochs, a Jewish songwriter whom you’ve said was a profound influence, became extremely depressed about the state of the world before his tragic suicide. What keeps you going in a positive direction?

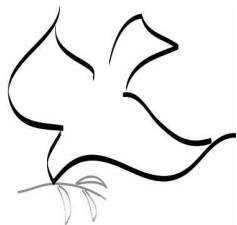
Rovics: I think it’s easy to get frustrated with things, especially having experienced a cultural and

political renaissance like the sixties and then seeing it crash and burn in the seventies. I’m sure that emotional problems, a tendency to see his glass as half empty, also hindered Phil. I think that having a generally sunny disposition keeps me going in a positive direction.

I think I have a really fun job. I get frustrated sometimes that I’m not rich and famous, but I try to let that go because it will eat me up otherwise. I just try to be happy that I’m making a living as a musician. Similarly, I could feel overwhelmed by the likely prospect of what climate change and unfettered capitalism are about to offer my daughter. I’d much rather focus on whatever small chance we have to turn this whole beast around and focus on the little things I can do to be part of that process.♦

See www.davidrovics.com for a full discography, lyrics, ideas and performances by Rovics. Full lyrics for his songs can be found online (*David Rovics songbook*).

**The message I took away
from my grandmother's
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**Rosh Hashonah Greetings
from the Montreal Outlook Collective,
with best wishes
for peace in the New Year.**

