MUSIC IN REVIEW

R. Clifton Spargo

The Yale Review, Volume 106, Number 2, April 2018, pp. 166-178 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tyr.2018.0075*

MUSIC IN REVIEW

R. CLIFTON SPARGO

Few singers so supremely talented have been so consistently maligned by critics as the Libertines' co-frontman, sometime Babyshamble, and solo artist, Peter Doherty. He has been accused of every variety of harm and self-indulgence, from dwelling in his lyrics on drug use, rehab, and relapses to aching after lost loves and flimsy antiquarian fantasies; he is reprimanded for being persistently unable to see beyond the strife of his own pained psyche — time and again his songs are described as sloppy, scruffy, careless, lazy. The notorious love-hate spats with his longtime best friend and co-frontman, Carl Barat, the descent into drug addiction and the frequent mess made of his personal life, the fervent chaos of Libertines shows — add to that Doherty's bad habit of sometimes not showing up for them — have long fired the charges of dysfunction and wasted potential. By now the accusations have come to tell us far more about the bourgeois norms and the impulse toward moralizing in music criticism than about the songs themselves. Happy to substitute gawking estimations of the heroin-troubled singer's biography for engagement with the music, too many listeners fail to read him right. It is perhaps not so much a deliberate effort to disparage Doherty's tastes and talent as a

real inability to recognize his aesthetic, indeed his entire approach to music.

The Libertines came crashing onto the British pop charts in 2002 with their *Up the Bracket* album, buoyed by a well-charting title track and the topical gem "Time for Heroes," about police brutality. Immediately they were at the epicenter of an indie music resurgence. Along with bands such as The Strokes and The White Stripes, and later the Arctic Monkeys, the Libertines were part of a movement that retrieved a soulful, urgently blues, part punk, part garage energy that had fans everywhere hailing the return of true rock 'n' roll. The Clash's Mick Jones produced their first album, and the 2004 follow-up as well, and the comparisons that followed were all but inevitable, even justified. The Libertines had the songs, the stage antics, the always live energy even in the studio, and the wide-ranging musical imagination to suit. The Clash's *London Calling* was the album that had messed up punk, ruined it, expanded it, throwing open the doors in 1979 to make an entire generation understand that blues, jazz, country, and reggae could be played punkishly, that great music is always about the intersections. No rock band in the two decades following met the challenge of that doors-thrown-open diversity with greater enthusiasm than The Libertines.

From the beginning this brash new band was unevenly punk, never as musically tight as its peers, the vocals one minute lilting, the next surging angrily, the guitars as edgy as Detroit garage but much looser. A splash of words sung too quickly to carry all the notes, then the slashing of a shrill guitar, suddenly the beat too seems to be rushing – a drunken, sloppy brimming of notes. Carl Barat's vocals fall sideways, Doherty's voice drifts into lush slurring, then floats upward; the guitars keep meeting and rejecting and rejoining. It's as if nothing wants to stay locked in 4/4 but the drive of the Hassall-Powell rhythm team keeps it on track, and the scattered guitars suddenly line up, and there's a gorgeous, wry harmonizing of the two vocal parts. Looseness is The Libertines' aesthetic. Any great Libertines song is always in danger of falling apart. Even in the studio releases the arrangements often have the uncanny feel of a demo, like something played in a living room. Mick Jones was the perfect producer for the sound: if the guitars slashed a little too carelessly, if there were some vagrant notes

along the way, he'd let it stand, so long as the take had the energetic chaos and movement that was the band's imprimatur.

Something about The Libertines' artistic looseness was more Doherty than Barat. The purity of Doherty's vocal climbs, amid the spray of rogue guitar and drums, spoke to an irresistible simplicity. Winding through the shamble of guitar and drums was that voice doing stuff that just doesn't belong in a punk song. It was the tension between Barat's harder, garage edge and Doherty's always affecting flailings that gave The Libertines their truly distinctive sound, making them *NME*'s Best New Band in 2003 and *NME*'s 2005 Best British Band a full year after they'd disbanded. The creative back-and-forth between Barat and Doherty in their songwriting and shared vocals had a dueling quality. That excitable unpredictability of two charged creative personalities whose Romantic idealisms tended at times toward a narcissism of two: they spent their time making up tales and songs about a ship called *Albion* sailing to mythic Arcadia. The friendship had been almost too close. "We were best mates, we loved each other," Doherty would say in a 2006 appearance on *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross* as he contemplated the split of the band; "we loved what we did, and we were fiercely proud of what we did, and we took it right to the end – or maybe not, I don't know." Which end, one might ask in retrospect. There were several. One also detects the space in Doherty always open to a reunion.

In the too early going Doherty developed a bad heroin and crack addiction, Barat fought depression and his own substance-abuse issues, and the band's tumultuous shows took on a quality of performed animosity. Somewhere in between the first and second album, with The Libertines firmly established as the It band of London, Doherty went to prison for burgling Barat's flat and walking off with, among other things, his laptop and guitar. Barat was there to greet his sometime alienated best friend when Doherty was sprung a month later, and they patched things up long enough to get back into the studio and improvise a détente that was oh so eager to fall apart again. The rumbling single "Can't Stand Me Now" is the perfect testament to their history: a raucous duet with the two frontmen trading singing parts like barbs, airing their grievances, mock-feuding for all the world to hear. The song is a metaphor for the fragile peace that presided over the

much ballyhooed second release everyone had been waiting for, which somehow delivered the goods, with tunes every bit as sharply dulcet and blustering as on the first album, having drawn much of their energy from the collaborative fury. That second Libertines' album debuted in the summer of 2004 at number 1 on the U.K. charts after the band had already broken up, Barat, Hassall, and Powell having tossed Doherty out.

It took better than a decade for the reunion. For most of that time it was not a reasonable expectation. On *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (2015) Barat and Doherty revived the back-and-forth feuding but with decided notes of forgiveness and play. In the intervening years each had separately made first-rate records, perhaps most notably *Waterloo to Anywhere* (2006) by Barat's Dirty Pretty Things, a record which debuted at number 3 on the U.K. charts and delivered a garage sound evocative of post-Clash Joe Strummer; and, on Doherty's end, the Babyshambles' *Shotter's Nation* (2007), one of three top-ten-charting records for the band, and an album which indulged all Doherty's vagabond tendencies: tumbling runs through melodies, splurges of guitar and rattling percussion, arrangements seemingly without aim. The reunion of Barat and Doherty was different, though; it was an event. The band headlined festivals across the United Kingdom in support of an album that was the rarest of rock 'n' roll phenomena — a reunion that wasn't simply a rehashing. There's nostalgia enough to go around on the album, but in sentiment more than in musical style. The two longtime collaborators confess their egotisms and sins, in a contest at times to see who can spit out the most vehement of mea culpas.

Through the years Doherty had been the one most easily stirred to woundedness, saying in a 2009 interview, the memory as fresh as the day it happened, "They kicked me out of my own band, for fuck's sake." He was also the one who issued the public mea culpa, a letter to the *Independent* in early 2014 in which he copped to the role his addiction had played in the band's demise, a move that effectively cleared the way for the reunion. The spirited self-accusations of Doherty and Barat alike are a major component of the album's energy, a kind of testimony in the negative to a creative friendship that had been dashed for a long while. "We thought that they were brothers / Then they half murdered each

other." As Doherty and Barat trip over new appreciations of time and mortality and what's been lost to them, an oddly subdued malaise imbues the third record, conveyed by songs that drift and wander toward nowhere as if it were a real place, though without much urgency to get there. The looking forward is hard to separate from the looking back.

The most revealing track on *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is "The Milkman's Horse," a sly ode to friendship. "What you done / Get out of my dreams, you scum," Doherty lilts dreamily, "They weren't meant for anyone – but me." These are dreams that have the quality of promises made to oneself but never kept. As the song drags soulfully, as though Doherty's stamina for dream-chasing is waning, he seems to fear he's given away too much of himself. By sharing a dream, dividing it, letting someone else own a portion of it, do you reach a place where you can no longer reclaim it as your own? Just as on "Can't Stand Me Now," he's banishing the friend who is too far inside his dream, and in the same breath asking his friend to prove himself worthy of the dream this time around. It's a divorce song, only in reverse. A broken friendship is every bit as dire as a broken marriage, but Doherty and Barat are working on it all these years later. Discovering his loneliness is also his friend's, he pipes, "It must be lonely being you, being me" – the bandmates sometimes known as "the lads" are nothing if not connoisseurs of their own regret. The mood of the album is reconciliation, but Barat and Doherty are too much themselves to think the future will be all forgiveness and kisses. They intuit reconciliation as a dance, even something of a game, and you feel Doherty and Barat again having fun on the record while the songs build on the charisma of their friendship. Buoyed by the energy of sharing the stage again, the two frontmen play off each other, trading parts and landing some old digs, of course, but this time with understanding, with a joking that doesn't seem a mask for resentment. Reconciliation is liberating; it opens something in each of them.

For Doherty, especially, the reunion presented an opportunity for reclaiming parts of himself. He was the one who'd taken the split as a personal affront, who bore the brunt of the public blame, who'd gently sounded the possibility of a reunion through the years. *Anthem for Doomed Youth* was a reclamation of friendship, and the songs spoke to that energy; they let the friend turned scum

turned someone he still loved back into his dream, and he was getting something of himself back in the bargain.

All this brings us to *Hamburg Demonstrations*, Doherty's second solo effort, released in December 2016. On this record more than on any previous collection of Doherty music – the three records with The Libertines, another three with Babyshambles, the previous solo record, the infinite B-sides – Doherty is experimenting with the jazzy looseness of his singing. The 2009 solo record *Grace / Wastelands* had leaned heavily on ballad, as Doherty himself emphasized in an *NME* radio interview, and the acoustic guitar of Blur's Graham Coxon helped anchor the songs and give the whole a roundedness unusual for Doherty. There were bits of quiet reggae, several tight folk jazz numbers, a modest skiffle feel throughout, all of it far neater than anything by Doherty before or since. The album's lovely single "Last of the English Roses" recalled the ballad stylings of the great seventies glam band Mott the Hoople, and along the way there were hats-off gestures to mod punkers The Jam, whose jazziness and heavy dosings of soul have exercised a larger influence on Doherty's stylings than most critics recognize. It was an altogether charming record, showing Doherty's range as a songwriter, and not at all hard to imagine as staged to applause at a topnotch jazz club. Some of the songs worked an unplugged yet punky vibe, even as the album proved to be an exercise in restraint.

On some basic level Doherty must have been seeking to rebut his libertine reputation and prove he wasn't some waster in the fashion of the female ex-flatmate – and uncomfortable doppelgänger – whose descent into druggie squalor and turning tricks he had mournfully savaged in the fantastic Libertines' rampage "What a Waster." But his own waster days and the tabloids that nosed into his everyday life digging up dirt (some of it rumor, some of it true) have helped inspire in many listeners an animosity that is often directed at the music itself. In a scoffing and not atypical piece, one *Pitchfork* reviewer said that following Doherty's career was inevitably exhausting, and there were really only two ways of understanding that exhaustion: "Either you're tired of the questionable appendage of 'genius' to 'smack-addled,' or you're tired of nearly everything Doherty's done since *Up the Bracket* being a vehicle for laments on how far off the grid he's

gone." It's a pitch-perfect blend of the snide and the moralistic, taking aim at Doherty's notoriety as a way of avoiding an encounter with the songwriting of a highly unusual artist.

Doherty's 2016 solo effort is a far riskier record, packed with songwriting intent on defying mainstream ideas about what a commercial record should sound like. *Hamburg Demonstrations* is a genre-defying montage, loaded with post-punk stylings, jazz aplenty, the Rolling Stones' idea of Nashville, Gibson guitars, bluegrass violin and quartet-styled strings, saloon piano, plucky stand-up bass, and lovely reggae beats. Always it gives the sense that the musical arrangements serve as an excuse to let the instrument of Doherty's voice range wherever it chooses, going forth into the unknown portions of song as if unaware of where it's headed or what it will do when it gets there. To challenge the predictable constraints of pop songs and defy the norms of commercialism seems to be Doherty's aim on this record: to explore song as pure emotion, as regret and revision, as languorous yet restless expression, a surprising openness to every next moment.

Hamburg Demonstrations offers fodder for the usual round of complaints, as the record taps familiar lovelorn, world-weary (if slightly more drug-free) themes, with many of the arrangements rough around the edges. In these songs, though, a welcome impersonality counterbalances the hurt and memory and persistent chase after healing, as Doherty drifts almost whimsically between the dire and redemptive, seeming unsure which way fate will turn him next. With its stripped arrangements and floaty sentiments, *Hamburg Demonstrations* comes across as an antidote to the fanfare of The Libertines' grand reunion. Of course, this idea is complicated by the fact that many of the songs were written years ago, some released online in demos – but here they are, revisited in surprising vocal stylings and new arrangements under the sway of Johann Scheerer's eclectic production, as if Doherty is singing them for the very first time. As a lament to lost privacies, both his and others', the album is steeped in regret for the bits of a soul that, once exposed, can never be fully recovered. "*Why*, the caged bird always sings" – so one lyric muses – "through the ages for the pleasure of the king?" Someone – the authorities, the public, those other ugly versions of self, perhaps the standard-bearers of music

industry commercialism — will always be claiming a song as property even before it finds true expression.

Glimpsing old feelings, old selves, and lost relationships, with doubts about their stageworthiness, these songs invite us into confidential spaces and the pure vulnerability of private sorrows and dreams, leaving us to wonder how close we ought to get. It's the same teasing voyeurism that informs so much lyric in history, that art which draws us inside intimate utterances, asking how much of ourselves we're willing to bare in return. Doherty's long habit of releasing demos of his songs before official tracks are available, sometimes before they exist, seems relevant here. After all, the demo is something that is not meant to be heard by the general public, a placeholder for an expression to come. A demo offers glimpses of the song still naked, not yet dressed up. On one track, "A Spy in the House of Love," Doherty preserves the demo vocal on the record, and at the end he breaks off abruptly, barking his producer's name, "Johann, Johann," expressing disgust with the take, "It's not happening, I was in the wrong place" — as though what we've just heard is frustrated aspiration rather than achievement. That remnant of unrealized perfectionism encapsulates song as Doherty pursues it. A Peter Doherty song is always live, imperfect, never quite yet the music he hears inside himself. Knowingly, his "Spy in the House of Love" begins with a clicking typewriter, as though he's composing right up to deadline, plucking words and scattered feelings from somewhere, the musical ideas still wildly incomplete.

The constant fretting on *Hamburg Demonstrations* over the line between private and public makes it hardly surprising to find Doherty's lovely plaint for his friend Amy Winehouse at the center of the record. If Winehouse is one of the great voices in twenty-first-century pop music, Doherty is her most worthy male rival. Their friendship is well known, sometimes maligned because of their shared smack habits and the grim fact that Winehouse's life ended in the overdose Doherty has so far avoided. What bonded the two singers, however, is rooted in musical vision, talent, and jazzy inclinations (Winehouse once asked him to collaborate on an EP that never got beyond the request), and only accidentally in their fellow-traveling drug addictions, rehabs, and aversion to celebrity. The 2015 single version of "Flags of the Old Regime"

features Doherty crooning over a chamber ensemble, propelled by a kettle drum and slightly weepy violins, as he sings to Amy and also for her – "I don't want to die anymore" – in tight solidarity with the fate that might also have been his. At the end of an ethereal vocal climb with an old-fashioned apotheosizing feel to it (think of Shelley, singing to the dead Keats), he arrives at bare tribute: "You have to stand up there in front of the whole world / When you don't feel them songs no more / Oh me, oh my, A-my, you won't be coming down tonight." That right there is the raw ache of the Amy who can't return to us, who can never try again the possibility in song. And it draws us much closer to the spirit of Winehouse haunted by a celebrity turned to notoriety – by private hurts of oedipal family drama and betrayed loves and the inability to kick her dependence on alcohol and drugs, not quite seeing the point anymore – than a predictable 2015 documentary film about her life ever could.

On *Hamburg Demonstrations* we get a different take on Doherty's song for Winehouse: more laconic, world-weary, driven by modest guitar and mournful lap-steel, with an old Rolling Stones–styled Nashville vibe. The vocal isn't as inspired, which is most likely the point: it gets nearer this way to the emptiness of her last days and the worry that music might not be a salvation. It's worth noting that there are some half-dozen videos floating around the internet of Doherty singing "Flags" to his own loose acoustic strum, a couple of indoor takes, including one at NME studios, and some outdoor takes, including one on a roadside beach in Bang Saray, Thailand, which finds a haphazard rhythm in the nearby crashing waves visible less than twenty feet behind the singer. It's as though he's proclaiming to the world, through these many slapdash renderings, that this is a song he's never going to get right. The modest version of the song on *Hamburg Demonstrations* (I cop to missing the pristine vocals of the 2015 single) is a compromise between polish and perpetual striving. Adhering presumably to that same aesthetic, the album offers two versions of the song "I Don't Love Anyone (But You're Not Just Anyone)," the first seeming to be a decidedly lackluster take on a song that even in the more finished version tests our tolerance for the lazy inside Doherty's languor.

Forever almost falling out of a melody, teasing us with the

worry that he's forgotten words, forgotten his place, that he might just slip into slurred silence, Doherty newly lifts and builds and rides the rippling quality of his voice, discovering multiple notes in single words, scatting his lyrics with a jazzy feel that's all about sound and breath and intonations found as if in the air itself. At times he's listening to things he just said, overhearing the immediate past of his own voice so as to delve inside recent notes to find new ones, to search for some not yet available value in the melody. Like Amy Winehouse, he's standing in front of the whole world, doing his best to feel the songs.

By turns jaunty and wistful, the album's opening track, "Kolly Kibber," resurrects a character from Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* who even in the novel is more sought-after legend than character. Jazzy vocals dance across the music with indeterminate pep, Doherty's airy soprano lifts dissolving into pristine breaths. In the middle of the song an eerie female chorale of sirens comes in singing "Kolly Kibber," as if calling the character to ruin by water, and from behind the siren song Doherty emerges, again bouncing with life, identifying with Kibber, freeing himself of the folly, "I don't want to die like Kolly Kibber," as if slipping from under the myth of his own self-destructive longings. In the sultry bluesy "Down for the Outing," with its creeping bass-line build, Doherty walks up the scale into witty laments for someone, possibly himself, who's held down flailing as he drowns to cries of "Ah, look, he's waving," and from there into futile apologies for interpersonal damages done to loved ones and the regret that locks us in prisons of mind. The tempo is sensual, the hold of the troubles unrelenting, even unforgiving, his mind held up as a mirror for so many other troubled minds, and not just any rhythm will relieve it.

Doherty is working hard in many of these songs to gain a view of himself through the eyes of others, and a view of others as seen through his own pains and sufferings. To that end, the irresistible "Birdcage," a duet with Suzie Martin, gives us a tale of lovers falling apart together. This duet might well be the best pure pop song of 2016, firm in its grasp on emotion, the musical parts neatly bound to story. Yet again there are competing versions circulating in the cyber-sphere, including a scorching old demo with stronger guitar and an aggressive rhythm, on which Doherty's and Martin's vocal parts never quite meet. The album version is much tighter, if

also more conventionally polished than most Doherty songs. His voice is lavish, ranging, witty: "I know that you said we could never be together / You're too pretty and I'm too clever." He bounces in staccato off Martin's straightforward pop soprano, and later wraps his harmonies sensually around her part. A falling apart is implicit in the harmony. The song grasps for redemption, imagines a love that might heal the sickness of celebrity or bring the secrets of simplicity but hasn't done so yet.

On the long listen, *Hamburg Demonstrations* leans time and again into the hopeful, that other side of regret, to conjure sympathies that bring new possibilities. Doherty extroverts himself into others' stories, puts his own history beside theirs, whether it's the imaginary character from the Graham Green novel, an ex who was too pretty for him, his dead friend Amy Winehouse, or, perhaps most surprisingly, the victims of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris. As a response to the brutal massacre at the Bataclan Theater, Doherty puts forward a Clash-inspired saloon blues that takes the piss out of martyrologies, Middle Eastern and Western alike.

"Hell to Pay at the Gates of Heaven" crashes into a saloon with the singer issuing a boisterous invitation – "Come on, boys, you gotta choose your weapon, J-45 or AK-47" – for all to join him in a plowshares-into-swords frolic. Choose between an iconic Gibson guitar favored by the likes of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, John Lennon, and Bob Dylan and the most infamous repeating rifle in the world. Go ahead, your call: start an army or start a band. In the over-the-top nostalgia of this rocking honky-tonk, music offers itself as the space within which we might save ourselves from religious and political fanaticisms. Doherty is only too aware of the weapons and the reality bearing down on his fantasy. In London, Moscow, Hamburg, Palestine, the recruits to new fanaticisms are hoping, praying in time. If only these would-be gunslingers could take a seat inside a musical hall – be it the Bataclan or an Old West saloon with an alter-Doherty onstage. If only they would surrender themselves to the charms of a jaunting piano, who knows what might happen? The real violence of that night at the Bataclan won't be easily banished. Even in this song, the terrorists have entered the theater, some band such as the Eagles of Death Metal is onstage, as Doherty intertwines apocalyptic terror and an entertainer's showtime nerves – "All board for Armageddon, when

the whole damn show comes tumbling down" – as if searching for the scenario in which music isn't apocalyptically eclipsed by lunatics with assault rifles. In that parallel world where music holds sway, the Armageddon boys lay down their weapons and sit for the show, and what comes tumbling down (in a catharsis of violent noise) is just another trashy honky-tonk blues number with a messy finale.

Songs can only go so far in redeeming what's lost, but Doherty sees the limits and pushes at them. Some are socially imposed, some historically unchangeable. In a 2009 radio interview with *NME,* Doherty was asked if, looking back on his previous five or six years, he would change anything if he could. Slow on the uptake, musing, perhaps intuiting the mystery he was to himself, he rejected the old cliché, "I wouldn't change a thing," even as he searched for his answer. "You have to learn from your mistakes," he started, "otherwise, what's the point of making them?" But he wasn't interested in justifying his mistakes and sordid doings and the habit he was far from kicking as a means toward some stronger self. "I'd change every single thing that I fucked up on," he said, after another minute, "and I'd try to do it right."

The most enthralling piece of music on *Hamburg Demonstrations* is a song about a second chance that never arrives. "The Whole World Is Our Playground" pairs a plucky banjo-driven melody with a sorrowful intimate scene never meant for the stage. We enter the space of two lovers; she dances with after-dark spryness, he lights smokes off her chimney spark, as the song barges in mid-scene to give us a glimpse of an intimacy that the singer is only now recognizing – "I knew I'd never see you naked again" – as drawing to its end. "The whole world is our playground," the banjo lifts, and Doherty sings the line three times – not "was," but rather "is," the intimacy somehow undying – as he invites her, in memory, to take the night by the hand and set it on fire again. This is memory as the last refuge of truth. Not mere fantasy, not mere past, the love is a real thing that happened which can't be revoked. Even as Doherty puzzles over the past, he's worrying his incurable habit of opening his soul to the wide world: "If I ever heard this song on the radio / I swear I'd go out of my mind / But I try not to think about you every minute or so." The love persists; the opportunity has fled. To hear his own song on the radio is to be

confronted, objectively, by that harsh truth of the loss and the mistakes that led to it. But song is also an answering myth, provisional; it has an element of grace in it as the singer conjures places where we might remake ourselves, revisit old potentials, and yet glimpse our futures past and to come. Isn't this Doherty's vision for every new song, every new performance, that act of listening inside the melody – altogether in the now – for a truth that has almost revealed itself? Someday we'll get it right.

Doherty is the antidote to the era of autotune, to all the fraudulent polish that is digitally generated and wholly generic. In his endless retakes, in vocals exemplified just as well by demos as by production, in his amateurish punk attitude steeped in jazzy virtuosity, he evokes impromptu sentiments that chase the longer arc of soulfulness. Any Doherty song is a gesture at what music might yield in its purest form but hasn't yet. On *Hamburg Demonstrations* he once again proves that, for all the lack of polish, his is the most dynamic and interesting voice in contemporary rock 'n' roll and probably in all of pop music. Every performance, even of a frequently sung tune, is an occasion for something that's never happened before and might never happen again, and if we're paying attention, if we're honestly listening, Doherty makes us attentive to that awakening, live quality that is the very reason for song.