

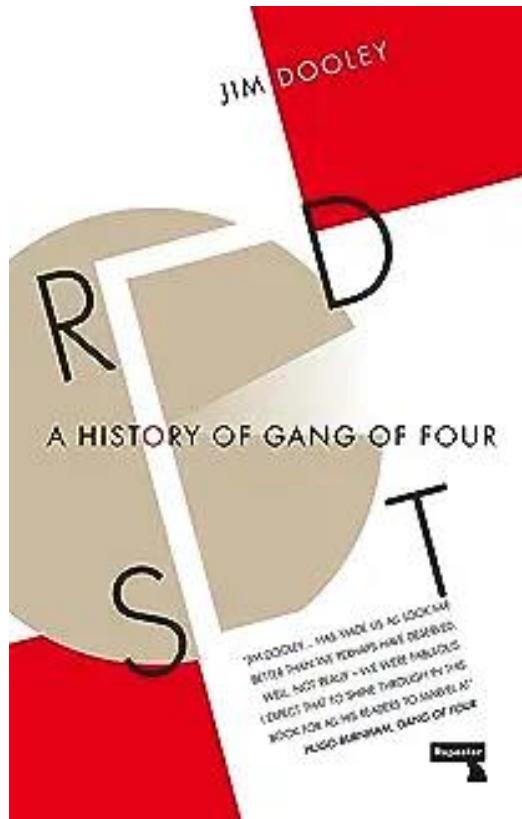
Red Set: A History of Gang of Four

Jim Dooley

London: Repeater Books, 2018

ISBN: 9-781912-248032

423 pp.



Gang of Four were a British post-punk band with a unique sound based on the democratic balancing of the four basic elements of drums, bass, guitar and voice. They rose to prominence with the 1979 album *Entertainment!* (which I played almost continuously on headphones as I revised for my O-levels the following year). The initial critical and popular acclaim was not matched by financial rewards and the group's subsequent progress – in albums from *Solid Gold* to *Shrinkwrapped* and then others with a new line-up – involved a musical and intellectual journey and a parallel course of trying to work out their relationship with their existing canon and whether that can be reused in ways that improve it in technical quality but also in a way that would make some money and support the band members as they pursue their various individual interests. Audiences who came to attend their legendarily high energy live performances were, after all, more than happy to witness recreations of old favourites, so why not new forms of old recordings? The fan automatically protests: the records are just that – records. They are records of how we were and what we were experiencing when we first or most intensively listened to them – if those were bad experiences, we would not still listen to the music. A live set, on the other hand, is an event, an occurrence, according to rock star philosopher Slavoj Zizek, which shatters ordinary life and re-frames the world. It should change and be mutable in the way that the permanent record should not.

This contradiction is one of many that characterize the work and career of Gang of Four (named, it is most likely – straight answers are avoided when there is a chance of achieving amusing ambivalence – after the political luminaries of the Maoist period who came to be charged with treasonous crimes during the Cultural Revolution). The contradictions are perhaps most fully expressed in vocalist John King's lyrics, which are often counter-pointed, call-and-response style, by guitarist Andy Gill and, occasionally, the other band members, Dave Allen on bass and Hugo Burnham on drums. The songs (and author Dooley generally does a good job in focusing on the better and more important ones) begin with the presentation of a persona who is stranded in a world not fully understood and then progress, by and large, to first person exposition with the same feeling. An early song, *Natural's Not in It*, which appears on *Entertainment!*, is identified as a key to understanding the dilemma the central figures inhabit: consumerist delights (e.g. recreational sex) are packaged and repackaged to “keep your interest” but there is still “no escape from society.” When did this become normal? We might wish to protest but we ourselves are complicit in this compromise: “Natural is not in it/Your relations are all power/We all have good intentions/But all with strings attached.” The songs on the album return to the idea of consumer as active protagonist in structuring the conditions of life. In *At Home He's a Tourist*, for example, the central figure (whose gender changes half way through the song) is clearly an agent in the production of the situation in which they are fundamentally alienated but which has been staged for their benefit. Attempts at transcendence or avoidance seem to be futile: “He fills his head with culture/He gives himself an ulcer.” A later song, from the album *Content*, *A Fruit Fly in the Beehive*, provides another way of looking at the same phenomenon. The fruit fly, *Drosophila*, is best known for its role as the recipient of scientific experimentation. It has, therefore, very limited agency over its own circular destiny. The bees, on the other hand, go out in the world to gather pollen and make honey – they sting anyone who gets in their way, they are the little kings of the air. Yet the bees themselves are drones, slaved to a queen whose visage they are unlikely ever to glimpse and subject to strictly regulated forms of behaviour that are neither spoken nor even written down but which are embedded in their own bodies and minds. Does even the queen have any real agency in this case or is she simply following the same rules as everyone else? Yet this all appears natural to those within the system.

It is notable that the band stopped including the lyrics after the first album so as not to privilege words above the music. After all, it is the music that is perhaps most notable on first listening to the band's work. As mentioned, the four parts are treated equally and this regularly means periods of silence from one part or another to give prominence to a new combination of the others. Burnham's drumming is deconstructed and without frills or paradiddles. A rhythm is established with works with Allen's increasingly funk-inflected bass and then Gill's guitar acts in response to that and to King's voice. Sometimes they work together in a form of harmony (they did not really do harmony until later when backing singers were introduced to the complement) and sometimes they seem to be in conflict with each other. Gill developed a choppy, edgy sound with a minimum of effects that is described as “angular,” “prowling,” “howling,” “menacing” and, most commonly, as being in a form of tension with the other band members. This effect is perhaps most notable in the live performances – Gang of Four maintained a relatively brief and stable set list for each set of dates but that gave some freedom to Gill, at least, to vary the timbre of performance of sections of songs as the mood struck. It is notable that the group would, at least in earlier times, plan the structure and lyrics of a song without even playing a single note. There is, then, tension inherent between structure and expression.

The early albums are followed by others which are less successful. The band is unlucky – they have two opportunities to appear on *Top of the Pops* and, thereby, greatly expand their presence and popularity but on both occasions their presence is denied. The first time, there is a row over the censoring of a single line in *At Home He's a Tourist* and the second time because the release of the somewhat satirical *I Love a Man in a Uniform* coincided with the invasion of the Falkland Islands. Arguments within the band continue and

Allen and Burnham leave. Individual projects and collaborations with a widening circle of other performers are pursued. Critical acclaim persists, more or less and loyal crowds are ready to attend concerts in many parts of the world but commercial success never seems to come very close. The book ends with the band in a state of semi-retirement, In events after the book is concluded, there are continued disputes over the legacy of the band: Gill has continued playing, recording and performing with an all-new line-up and wants the later parts of the band's oeuvre to accorded similar status as the earlier part – the others disagree. Then, in 2020, Gill died, most likely from complications caused by COVID-19 and that seems likely to be that.

Author Jim Dooley is primarily a journalist and has diligently collected a number of personal interviews with band members and others over the years and supplements these with copious secondary literature. Much of the material was new to me, especially those parts relating to the later parts of the band's career and, following the death of John Peel, they did not receive much air time. The story is told quite well, although the book is not without its flaws and the attempt to place the band in the context of the times is limited. Dooley is assiduous in gathering and deploying useful critical references, including the Situationists, Raymond Williams, Herbert Marcuse and, of course, Marx. He dispels the occasionally voiced claim that the band were communists or, at least, humourless ideologues. They are people who lit up the world and made it a better place in which to live.

*John Walsh, Krirk University*