To Hell with Brevity!

By Bill Brown

In his Acknowledgements, Jon King – the author of *TO HELL WITH POVERTY! A Class Act: Inside the Gang of Four* (Brooklyn, NY: Akashic, 2025) – thanks "Steve Diggle for suggesting I write a memoir," which is something King hadn't considered doing before then – Steve Diggle being a member of the Buzzcocks, a band that, early on, took King's band Gang of Four under its wing. King doesn't say when Diggle's suggestion was made, but it must have been fairly recently: his *Autonomy: Portrait of a Buzzcock* was published on 29 October 2024 by Omnibus Press (London).

Generally speaking, an autobiography takes a long time to write, especially when, like King, its author wishes to start his narrative at the year of his birth and to devote a relatively large number of pages to his childhood and formative years (it takes King 100 pages, that is to say, almost one-third of his book's total pages, to finally get to his days at the University of Leeds, where Gang of Four would be founded, in 1976).

Born in 1955, King is now 70 years old. For the sake of comparison, let us note that Keith Richards' autobiography *Life* was published when its author was 67; it is 567 pages long. Pete Townshend's memoir *Who I Am* was published when he was 67; it is 544 pages long. Like Richards and Townshend, King has remained active in the decades since his heyday, but his book is only 326 pages long, that is to say, at least 200 pages shorter than the others.

And that's precisely the problem: *TO HELL WITH POVERTY!* stops rather suddenly in 1984, when the band broke up, ends on a very sad, dismissive note ("We won't find out for sure [...] but Andy and I were each ripped off by an estimated seven-figure sum – when a million dollars *was* a million dollars. Whatever."), and has *absolutely nothing* to say about the 41 years since then. Missing is any discussion of or even passing reference to the reunion of King and his band mate, guitarist Andy Gill (1987); the release of *Mall* (1991); the release of *Shrinkwrapped* (1995); the reformation of Gang of Four with all four original members (2004) and the release of hot new versions of the old material under the name *Return the Gift* (2005); the release of *Content* under the name Gang of Four by King and Gill (2011); the departure of King and the decision by Gill to continue recording and touring under the name Gang of Four, releasing three albums between 2015 and 2019; and the decision by King to take on the mantle of Gang of Four in 2021, one year after Gill's death.

What the fuck? Is King so embittered by his experiences with the music business that he is willing to let all that history – certainly enough to take up 200 pages – go without any mention whatsoever? No: it is obvious that he had an artificially imposed deadline and simply ran out of time. *TO HELL WITH POVERTY!* was published just three days before a group calling itself Gang of Four (perhaps that should be "Gang of Two + Two Others" since King and drummer Hugo Burnham are the only remaining original members), and playing all the old songs, started its "Long Goodbye" tour, after which Jon King will be officially retiring from the music business. And so this is the dirt behind the daydream: King's book is, it would appear, primarily intended to drum up interest in the tour. Without it, his book has no real purpose, no real reason to exist, at

least not at this time or in this particular form – unless, of course, King plans to write and publish a greatly expanded second edition of his book or produce a new volume that covers the years 1985 to 2025. I wouldn't hold your breath.

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Given the above, would I recommend that new or long-time fans of Gang of Four's music buy a copy of King's book? Yes, I would: despite its shortcomings, it has enough interesting material to warrant shelling out $29.95 (hardcover only). I'll limit myself here to highlighting two interconnected topics: the strong and enduring influence of the Situationist International (SI) and Dr. Feelgood (the band) on Gang of Four's music, lyrics, cover art and stage performances.

"It's 1968," King writes.

> Everything's gone tits up. War in Vietnam, revolution in France, race riots and cities on fire across the US, an amped-up threat of nuclear annihilation, proxy and colonial wars in Angola and Mozambique, the assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, military coups in Panama, Peru and Iraq, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia . . . what's not to like? [...]
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> Apocalyptic world events, Bob Dylan, unfair education system – *and the phone lock!*[1] – make me realize I'm a socialist. Things should be shared more fairly, it's not right that the rich live parasitical lives on the backs of the working classes, etc. My new political consciousness isn't that well thought through, it's a *feeling* rather than a coherent set of ideas, but I instinctively identify with people fighting the power. I'm obsessed with the revolutionary events in Paris where left-wing students allied with striking factory workers took to the streets and almost brought down the government, President de Gaulle even fleeing to West Germany for a bit, with pitched battles between demonstrators and tooled-up French riot cops with paving stones, petrol bombs and tear gas canisters hurtling through the air. It's very exciting; I wish I was older so I could join in. [...]
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> At school, sixth-form art-room boys, fresh from skiving off school to be battered by cops in the Grosvenor Square demo against the Vietnam War, chatter about a new[2] anarcho-art group called the Situationists who are making radical art among the barricades with posters and graffiti with lines that are both funny and deep: 'Demand the Impossible!'; 'Under the cobblestones, the beach!'; 'Boredom is always counter-revolutionary'; and write things like 'Down with a world in which the guarantee we won't die

[1] King's working-class parents finally got a telephone but "fitted a cylindrical lock into the dial, so I can't call anyone without asking for it to be unlocked!" (p. 64).

[2] The SI was founded in 1957, but it was only in 1966, with the scandal surrounding the publication of the pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life*, that the group became well known in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and elsewhere.

> of starvation has been bought with the guarantee that we'll die of boredom.'
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> I don't know what Raoul Vaneigem's on about,[3] nor anything about Marxism or anarchism, but love the scrawled alternative texts rewiring ads and comic strips, and the sexy contempt for the reactionary old guard who will only allow things to change so that nothing changes (pp. 64-66).

Almost 10 years later, when he was about to attend college, King was still taken with the Situationists. Apropos of Marcel Duchamp, who had "renamed the *Mona Lisa* by scrawling 'L.H.O.O.Q.' on a cheap print, and appropriating it as his own," he writes, "[Duchamp's artwork] informed conceptual art from then on and prefigured the 1960s Situationists. My kind of thing" (pp. 88-89).

While attending Leeds University, King writes, "I'm reading a lot of Marxist art criticism – Louis Althusser, Critical Theory, Theodor Adorno, etc., and want to make art that could escape a self-referential straitjacket, be about real life, and shake things up."

> We've had a year with a caretaker head of department with a practical specialism in methods and material – how to *do* things – so it's a thrill when our new professor turns out to be Tim Clark, a big dog in New Left art criticism who'd been a player in the Situationist movement.[4] I'm taken with his books on nineteenth-century art,[5] breakthrough texts that looked at Impressionist artists of that time through a socio-historical lens. He has a fresh perspective [...] (pp. 142-143).

A year or two later, after graduation, the members of Gang of Four signed a recording contract with EMI. "Since EMI had ceded absolute control of artwork to us – this was a crucial condition – I do the outer and Andy [Gill] the inner sleeve designs for *Entertainment!*" King writes.

> I don't want the sleeve to have any photographs of the band, because what we look like isn't important, although it surely is, but I want the cover to be a visual manifesto of what we're about. Heavily influenced by my love of comic strips and the Situationists' use of *détournement* – which the *Oxford English Dictionary* says means 'transforming artworks by creatively disfiguring them' – I add text around my hand-drawn image traced from the photo,[6] making the cowboy's face white and the 'Indian's'

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[3] A member of the SI, Vaneigem wrote the text for a pair of comic strips that announced the publication of *International situationniste* #11 in October 1967 and a book published in November 1967 that would be translated into English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. It is likely that King is referring to English translations of the former.

[4] Here King appends a footnote: "In 1996 Tony Wilson will ask me to join him and the Fall's Mark E. Smith on a panel at the UK's first ever symposium on Situationism at the Hacienda, Manchester: 'On the Legacy of Situationist Revolt.'"

[5] Published under the name T.J. Clark.

[6] A close-up photo from the promotional poster for a West German Western called *Winnetou: The Last Shot*. "It shows the actors Lex Barker (who plays the cowboy Winnetou) and Pierre

> red, having done this sort of thing at Leeds. It overtly references André Bertrand's Situationist comic-strip pamphlet *The Return of the Durutti Column*,[7] later creatively ripped off, and repurposed, by Factory Records. Situationism, Wikipedia says, 'expanded the Marxist critique of capitalism, particularly its tendency to replace authentic experience with 'individual expression by proxy' through the exchange and consumption of commodities.'
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> Situationism was good in the development of a revolutionary tactic to reinvest our cultural past and overtly use popular imagery to subvert it and make the familiar strange, rather than trying to *épater les bourgeoisie* – to scandalize the middle class. I riff on this thought on the *Entertainment!* and *Damaged Goods* sleeves" (pp. 187-188).

OK, so "Situationism"[8] was good (that is to say, useful) because of the tactic of *détournement*" and *détournement* can be applied to the graphic arts with great success. But can other things be *détourned*? Yes, of course. Note, for example, the very name of the band, which originally referred to a faction of Maoist politicians who were arrested, tried and convicted of perpetrating criminal acts during the so-called Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Or the title of their debut album, *Entertainment!* (note well the ironic exclamation mark), which – with its noisy, choppy and utterly abrasive guitar playing – is far from "entertaining" in the way that pop music is intended to be (as a matter of fact, "this heaven gives me migraine"). Or the stunning black and white photographs of the group that were taken in its early years.[9] Each member is not looking at the camera; doing so would signify an attachment to the present. No, with serious expressions on their faces, they are all looking up and away, at some unknown sight – the future, the glorious future. The echoes, the *détournement*, of Socialist-Realist portraits of young workers and revolutionaries in the 1930s is obvious.

And what about the songs, the music, the lyrics? Clearly they too can be produced through the use of *détournement*. But King doesn't mention or allude to it when he discusses "Anthrax," which "is the first song Andy and I write where we feel we've got where we want to be, away from genre straitjacket."

Brice (the 'Indian' Shatterhand) shaking hands," King writes. "The story, according to IMDb, is: 'After the Civil War, desperadoes led by a renegade named Rollins try to drive a wedge in the friendship between the whites and the Indians.' A sincere handshake like this can't ever have happened during the genocidal wars against Native Americans by Europeans but is a rich territory for a *dérive*" (pp. 186-187).

[7] Published in October 1966, to announce the forthcoming publication of *On the Poverty of Student Life*. Bertrand wasn't a member of the SI, but a student at the University of Strasbourg who was a big fan of Situationist ideas and actions. At the center of his work was a figure that Greil Marcus would later call "The Cowboy Philosopher."

[8] The Situationists themselves explicitly rejected the idea that their theories constituted some sort of fixed doctrine.

[9] Note that none of these photographs are reproduced in King's book, which limits itself to small reproductions that adorn the beginning of some of its chapters.

> I'm a fan of Jean-Luc Godard's movies that challenged formulaic Hollywood and French film storytelling and encouraged the viewer to construct their own narrative from often disparate elements, most notably in his late great film *Numéro Deux*, where he used split screen and off-screen commentaries to deny a single authorial voice.
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> This seems like a modern way to describe how we live; things can't always be decoded from a single point of view, and, among conflicting inputs, a story's sense changes depending on where you sit. […]
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> I write down the song plan: heavy, funky drums and bass throughout, two slabs of freewheeling improv guitar[10] alternating with vocal sections where I'll sing fixed words and Andy will ad lib, commenting on what we are doing or where we are or what equipment we have, or anything else that comes to mind. The only true rule is not to react to what I'm singing, so not a call-and-response number, which will make every performance different and not handcuff meanings (p. 215).

Though "Anthrax" is unique in the band's catalogue – no other song has two entirely different vocals going on at the same time – the principle of its construction (radical juxtaposition) is at work in the calls-and-responses in several of their songs, especially the two songs that kick off Side One of *Entertainment!*: "Ether," in which two voices argue with each other ("Trapped in heaven life style (locked in Long Kesh) / You're looking out for pleasure (H-block torture")[11] and "Natural's Not In It," in which a single voice argues with itself ("The body is good business / Sell out, maintain the interest / Remember Lot's wife /Renounce all sin and vice.")

To me, the most original, thrilling and utterly memorable juxtapositions took place when Gang of Four performed on stage, especially while bass player Dave Allen was still in the band. I saw them at the Second Chance (a small intimate club) in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on 30 June 1981. There was clearly an intentional difference between the behavior and demeanor of drummer Hugo Burnham and Dave Allen, on the one hand, and singer King and guitarist Gill, on the other. Much like John Entwistle of The Who, who remained motionless and apparently disinterested in the proceedings while the rest of the band members were in constant impassioned motion, Burnham and Allen stayed back, in the second line,[12] not drawing attention to themselves, just doing their respective jobs – the rhythm section at work. But King and Gill restlessly bounced around the stage like human "pinballs" (King's word), which was especially effective during the moments when a song's tension was temporarily released, making it look like some kind of explosion had taken place and King and Gill were attempting to flee for their lives.

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[10] That is to say, searing guitar feedback.

[11] See also "Why Theory?" a track on Gang of Four's second album, *Solid Gold*: "What we think changes how we act / So to change ideas / Changes how we act" answered by "Too much thinking makes me ill / I think I'll have another gin."

[12] Except for "It's Her Factory," on which Burnham stepped to the front of the stage to sing the lead (Gill replaced him on drums), and "He'd Send in the Army," on which Allen stepped up to sing the lead.

But there was also a great and clearly intentional difference between how King and Gill conducted themselves onstage. King writes:

> We owe a lot to Dr. Feelgood, who I see whenever I can, in love with the sound and the fury of their shows, Lee Brilleaux centre stage, a picture of debauched masculinity in a once-white suit stained with booze, ash and slop. [...] A waterfall of sweat runs down his face while he sings, the threat of violence and retribution always there, the air of a sociopathic double-glazing salesman who'd just got his cards.
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> At his side, Wilko Johnson's incredible, lurching about the stage like a human pinball, attacking his strings with fierce four-fingered flicks, stabbing with stiff arms his Telecaster like a pike, careening from one side of the stage to the other, glaring glass eyed with a thousand-yard stare from a face frozen white by the sulphate, his jaw grinding double time as the speed does its work. An awesome spectacle that in the early days we cloned as we worked on how to connect with crowds and own the stage.
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> Loving Lee's swag, I dig out oversized demob suits at jumble sales, the bigger the better, the stains and wear made by men back from the wars trying to make a life in a land unfit for heroes. Andy will forever channel Wilko, scampering stony faced from stage left to right, bashing the strings so hard blood's regularly spattered across the pickups, his nails split and ragged as if after torture (pp. 189-190).

King and Gill didn't merely "clone" or imitate Lee and Wilko: they exaggerated their counterparts' stage personae as much as possible. Especially King, whose signature dance moves – raising his arms over his head, flailing them around and thrusting his pelvis back and forth – were way over the top, far beyond anything Lee Brilleaux ever did. King looked like some down-on-his-luck, increasingly disillusioned traveling salesman who was desperately trying to show his potential clients just *how fucking much he loves his job* and *what a great deal* he was offering them on the cheap products he had in his case (there were no buyers) and ends up looking ridiculous. As King says, "the threat of violence and retribution [was] always there" – most notably in "He'd Send in the Army," on which King used a club to smack out a steady beat on a smashed-up microwave oven – as if this salesman could at any moment stop trying to impress his clients and slaughter them instead.

Gill's exaggerated imitation of Wilko Johnson was spot on. Take a look at Dr. Feelgood performing "She Does it Right" on British TV in 1975 (it's on YouTube) and you will see someone who looks an awful lot like Andy Gill: a thin, short-haired guitarist ceaselessly walking back and forth, back and forth, virtually expressionless, as he chops out the song's chords with his bare hand.

But onstage in Ann Arbor, Andy Gill did not look like he wanted to be onstage at all. In fact, with his eyes fixed somewhere behind the audience, he looked like he'd been coerced into playing; he's seemed aware that there was a guard up in a tower, watching his every move, his gun trained on Gill's forehead, ready to shoot him dead if he failed to perform as required. Thus the tremendous tension that is generated and maintained all through "He'd Send in the Army," but especially at the song's beginning and in its middle, a real black hole, with Gill apparently unwilling or unable to play the song's

chords, his right arm hesitating, sometimes not even hitting the strings at all, but striking at thin air.

Take a look at Gang of Four's unforgettable performance of this song in *Urgh: A Music War*, released in 1980 (it too is on YouTube). We see Gill's face clearly. Yes, he's got Wilko's thousand-yard stare, but, apparently despite his intention to remain expressionless, there is strong emotion evident in his face. His mouth is occasionally contorted. He looks scared or angry or possibly both – scared by the gun trained on him? Angry at being coerced into playing? Or perhaps angry at the patriarchal fascist in the song he's singing, the one who'd send in (or gladly join) the army in order to suppress a civil crisis? Or maybe angry at (or scared by) the fact that a mere song by a rock band, even one as excellent as Gang of Four, cannot defeat the "system" that is "well constructed"?

Dear Reader, I saw *Urgh* when it came out; I've watched the performance on YouTube a hundred times and I still can't divine what he (Gill's character) is going through, what he's feeling, what he's ultimately trying to get across. And so I keep coming back to it again and again and again.

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