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Meet the Mekons: Popular Music, Art, and Cultural Critique

Peter Robert Brown

The article offers an overview and analysis of the work of the Mekons; however, instead of relating the history of the band, I explicate specific texts: the 1993 song "Too Personal" and the artwork for the album on which it appears, I ♥ Mekons. *My "readings" lead to explorations of the group's critique of late modernity, and I examine the Mekons' views of history, their criticisms of consumerism, their use of intertextuality, and their blending of art and popular culture. I argue that the band's public speech provides piercing commentaries on various aspects of life in the contemporary West.*

"Here's to a band that deals in the facts of life/In their ten short ugly years."[1] It was over a quarter century ago that Jon Langford sang these words in the allusively titled "Sympathy for the Mekons," a song on the 1987 album *The Mekons Honky Tonkin'*. By that time, the Mekons had undergone numerous personnel changes since their inception in 1977 when, in the wake of the Sex Pistols' chaotic emergence, a cluster of art students at the University of Leeds started a band named after the arch-enemy of science-fiction comic hero Dan Dare, and they were no longer playing the raw punk that marked their early gigs and singles but were delving into other musical genres, especially country, while still exploring the concerns that had been rudely injected into rock music and discourse by the British punk explosion of the late '70s.[2] Since then, the Mekons have continued to experiment musically, drawing on folk, reggae, house, zydeco, gospel, techno and other genres and have produced a remarkable body of intelligent and moving music that addresses some of the most pressing facts of life in the contemporary West while offering a thoughtful critique of late modernity. Though not widely popular, the band has been praised by notable rock critics Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, and Robert Christgau as well as by authors Jonathan Franzen, Lydia Millet, Howard Hampton, and Luc Sante; moreover, Joe Angio has released a feature-length documentary about the group.[3] Thus, the Mekons are canonical, but they have attracted little sustained academic attention. One of the goals of this article is to argue for their importance to popular music studies and to cultural criticism and theory.

Primarily musicians, the Mekons are also active in other cultural spheres. In addition to holding their own art exhibitions, they have collaborated with other artists and writers, Vito Acconci and Kathy Acker for example, and have published two books: the unclassifiable *United*, which accompanies a CD of the same name and is comprised of writings by and about the group as well as reproductions from their art show at the Polk Museum, and *Hello Cruel World*, a selection of lyrics and drawings.[4] The range of their concerns is evident from a list of some of the figures to whom they allude: William Shakespeare, Theodor Adorno, E. P. Thompson, Herman Melville, Dashiell Hammett, Walter Benjamin, Hank Williams, and Elvis Presley. They have also been influenced by numerous movements in 20th-century art and culture, including Dada, surrealism, the Situationist International, abstract expressionism, pop art, Art & Language, country, rock and roll, and punk.[5] Their music is stylistically diverse but is usually simple and accessible, though some songs and records are more experimental and challenging.

The Mekons' work can be understood as a kind of popular musical practice informed by high culture or vice versa, since they typically combine the two, but they also challenge distinctions between them. Like many modernist and postmodernist writers and artists, they often work with fragments. Lyrics are frequently comprised of bits of personal experience and observation juxtaposed with quotations from various cultural artifacts; exaggerating somewhat, Sante describes the Mekons as "deft literary magpies who leave no fingerprints" (138). Fragmentation is also a recurring lyrical subject, as their songs commonly depict fractured worlds, lives, selves. The comprehensibility of their lyrics varies; sometimes topics are clearly stated, while at other times they are formulated opaquely and suggestively. They write about numerous subjects including love, history, the culture industry, politics, consumerism, but as a whole their work participates in the "history of resistance" that they invoke in "Robin Hood" (1988). Although they have played benefits for progressive causes, most of their resistance occurs in the sphere of cultural production; they reject the separation of culture from politics but avoid any simple identification of the two.

Here, I examine the Mekons' critique of modern culture and society by offering analyses of several of their "texts," paying particular attention to the song "Too Personal" and the album on which it appears, *I ♥ Mekons* (1993). While not relying on a specific theoretical lens, I consider how the band, often in dialogue with theory, addresses various social and personal conditions of life in Western society. The paper is divided into three sections. The first provides a reading of "Too Personal" in relation to the group's views of history. In the second, I analyze the packaging and design of *I ♥ Mekons* in order to analyze the band's blending of high art and popular culture and their critique of this very distinction. The conclusion considers their work as public speech.

"And history catches up with us": The Mekons and History

"Too Personal" is a medium-paced song in 4/4 time with conventional rock instrumentation of guitar, bass, drums, and vocals. Comprised primarily of four chords, its structure is simple; there is no chorus, just two verses, though there is a moderately long introduction and an even longer fade-out, both accompanied by a high male vocal repeating a non-verbal melody that harmonically complements the instruments. The guitars are distorted, and the main baritone vocal is double-tracked, an effect that disappears at song's end. Tom Greenhalgh's delivery expresses no obvious passion but conveys unease and melancholy. Except for a period of electronic noise that follows the fade-out, "Too Personal" is musically accessible, even pretty; lyrically, it is more complicated.

In its first verse, the speaker (who does not seem to be the singer) describes his hesitations and timidity to an unspecified "you," an addressee common to love songs. Greenhalgh sings, "I cannot be too personal/'Cause it ain't going to make much sense," and the speaker admits that he is "veiled, protected, and dangerous" and that he or his heart is like a container whose "lid is closed tight." He seems to be explaining his equivocations, his "trying hard to mean too much," when he admits to his lover that he is afraid to reveal himself. Yet, he also suggests that this vulnerability is a strength, since his "secrets [are] sharp and clean/Like the edges of a blade/Designed to pierce the hardest heart." Although we are not told what is transpiring, we can infer that the song relates an interpersonal crisis, but the crisis is ambiguous; the words seem to be those of a man experiencing the fear of intimacy (to use the terms of popular psychology), yet he seems shrewdly aware of the power he might gain by disclosing his secrets—the last line of the verse is "I knew I'd got it made."[6]

Given both the complex relationships between music and emotion and the significance and value that contemporary Western culture places on romantic love, it may seem natural that so much popular music is concerned with romantic love and the problems we encounter pursuing it. Speaking metaphorically, popular music is one of the sites where individuals can explore and express their feelings about love; it can serve as a post-Romantic, confessional sphere where selfhood can be inspected and objectified and through which the personal can be made public. We see this particularly in the singer-songwriter tradition. Of course, many love songs are stylized and formulaic, their lyrics not expressing the emotions of a specific person. Even so, love songs allow listeners to identify with a singer's voice and a song's words such that a song speaks to, for, or about them. In theoretical terms, songs offer listeners "subject positions" that articulate desires, emotions, beliefs, and so on.

Although Greenhalgh does not seem to be singing in the confessional mode or describing an actual situation, the first verse of "Too Personal" participates in the discourses of love typical of popular music. But few love songs confront self-doubt and inhibition so bluntly or consider so honestly the interplay between intimacy

and power. Such subjects are common in love songs, but "Too Personal" presents them frankly, almost clinically. This makes the first verse intriguing, but it is the second that is critically compelling.

After presenting an image of children "who were never meant to be" walking "through an empty shopping street," Greenhalgh sings, "And history catches up with us/And punches me in the face." Seconds later, in the song's last lines, he adds, "[History] takes me aside and I receive/A small gift of knowledge/I'm still trying to understand." What occurs here is amazing, at least in a rock song: the speaker seems to be gaining awareness that what he has understood as merely personal—his emotions, his sexuality, perhaps his very identity—are the results of historical processes, even if those processes are opaque, their significance confusing.

The song does not tell a clear story, but it does contain a narrative trajectory, since the speaker's encounter with a personified history alters his understanding of himself and the world. We might interpret the metaphor of history hitting one in the face through another common trope, the return of the repressed (Freud).[7] In "Too Personal," history cannot be denied, and, once the speaker is forced to confront this fact, he seems to realize that he is involved in world historical narratives that disrupt his everyday life but might also help him understand it. The second verse provokes us to rethink the meaning of the song's title and first line; when the speaker says "I cannot be too personal," we might think that he is describing his reluctance or inability to reveal himself, but the end of the song suggests that his self-understanding has been too personal, too focused on the private at the expense of the historical, which includes the social and the political. The speaker seems to realize that his subjectivity has been formed by forces of which he was previously unaware and that the category of the personal is not hermetically sealed off from other processes.

This incipient historical consciousness is underscored and complicated by the song's production. For most of "Too Personal," Greenhalgh's voice is double-tracked and therefore arguably depersonalized in that it sounds as though he is being accompanied by others. Thus, there is some tension between the privacy of the lyric and the choral sound of the vocals, since the latter suggests that the speaker's personal problems are widely shared. But, with the last two lines, the effect disappears, and Greenhalgh's voice seems isolated, as though the speaker has been placed in a solitary existential predicament from which he must consider history's gift.

History and its interpretation, let alone historicity, are rarely addressed in rock music but are among the Mekons' recurrent themes. The group frequently voice sentiments akin to those found in classic texts of modernity: Stephen Dedalus's famous complaint in *Ulysses* that "[h]istory is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awake" (Joyce 28), for example, or Marx's statement at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that "[t]he tradition of all generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (10). The Mekons share this nightmarish view of history: "Thee Olde Trip to Jerusalem" (2002) draws on E.P.

Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast* and describes much history as brutal oppression—"The landlords and the rulers with their foot on your neck"—while exploring traditions of utopian millenarianism and their influence on British history and politics, whereas the speaker of "Heaven and Back" (1989) states that he is "handcuffed to history." "Too Personal" represents history as both malicious and benevolent; it assaults the speaker but gives him knowledge. In our society, the significance of history to our sense of who we are is often trivialized or unnoticed, especially in the intimate sphere, which we commonly accept as natural or given. Unlike the speakers of many love songs, who are in love but apparently outside history, the speaker of "Too Personal" has, by the end of the song, begun to see that history has shaped his intimate life, even if he does not yet understand how.

The Mekons take seriously the idea of history as class struggle and repeatedly stress capital's role in modernity, but it is not clear that they subscribe to a traditional Marxist philosophy of history. Like many contemporary thinkers, they acknowledge that the writing of history sometimes follows narrative conventions; for example, "Eve Future" (1994) states: "History says there always has to be a fall guy," suggesting that at least some historical narration casts individuals and groups in roles determined by inherited plot structures.[8] Likewise, "Arthur's Angel" (2011) asserts that official national history is often "just a story that's been sold." The Mekons are, then, critical of how some historical narratives are constructed and propagated. Furthermore, they seem skeptical of teleological philosophies of history, what Jean-François Lyotard famously called "metanarratives." In 1991's "Funeral," they address socialism, asking "How can something really be dead/When it hasn't even happened?" and thereby scorning then fashionable triumphalist claims about the inevitability of capitalism that reached their apotheosis a year later in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. Despite their mistrust of teleological history, the Mekons remain committed to socialism; in the full-length version, "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," they invoke a socialist future which, though not a telos of history, remains a goal for which people can struggle: "Hang on in there baby/Hang on in there child/We're gonna work it out sometime." It would, then, be hasty to identify them as thorough-going postmodernists (even though we could characterize their work as postmodern—I return to this below). Most importantly, perhaps, they do not espouse the anti-realism or anti-humanism of much postmodernist theory: their work is grounded on historical realism and on a kind of anarcho-socialist humanism.

The band's historical consciousness resembles that of Walter Benjamin, whom they cite in "Hashish Marseilles (Tony Byker reads Walter Benjamin)" (1990) and "Sorcerer" (1991). The ethical import of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" has been summarized by Jürgen Habermas:

> What Benjamin has in mind is the supremely profane insight that ethical universalism also has to take seriously the injustice that has already happened and that is seemingly irreversible; that there exists a solidarity of those born later with

> those who have preceded them, with all those whose bodily or personal integrity has been violated at the hands of other human beings; and that can only be engendered and made effective by remembering. (*Philosophical*, 14–15)

We see such "remembering" in songs such as "City of London" (2000), where the British financial center is described as "ten square miles of hurt," and in "Brutal" (1991), which begins by denouncing the corrosive relationships among drugs, war, colonialism, and capitalism in the Opium Wars: "The English love for China tea/ Brought deficit to the economy/What could we sell back?/Send in the army to deal some smack." "Amnesia" (1989) traces the roots of rock and roll to the transatlantic slave trade and attacks rock music's ideological significance in the Vietnam War; the song recalls Benjamin's well-known claim that there "is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256). Similar ethics motivate some of their covers of older songs, such as "The Trimdon Grange Explosion" (1987), a song written in 1882 whose sheet music was sold to raise money for the families of 74 men and boys who were killed in a mining disaster,[9] and "Sheffield Park" (1990), a 19th-century broadside ballad that depicts romantic betrayal. "Too Personal" does not directly address past injustices and pain, but embraces the possibility that history's gift of knowledge includes awareness of them; its "punch in the face" indicates the pain of beginning to remember.

As well as revisiting past sorrows and expressing solidarity with casualties of history, the Mekons also criticize the present and declare their support for those in danger of becoming tomorrow's victims. During the bitter and violent strike of 1984–85, they played gigs to raise money for British miners and addressed the latter's plight while celebrating their resistance and camaraderie in numerous songs, including 1985's "Abernant 1984/85" which articulates a miner's grief upon realizing that his pit will close and that he has no recourse: "Vengeance is not ours it belongs to those/Who seek to destroy us/How much more is there left to lose?" For many miners, defiant fatalities of Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberalism, feelings of anger, loss, and betrayal were overwhelming. Thatcher was the target of some of the Mekons' bitterest attacks; in 1989's "Empire of the Senseless," they cite her infamous remarks from an April 1978 television interview in which she stated that "people are really rather afraid that this country [the UK] might be rather swamped by people with a different culture" (Garnett 84).[10] At the time, many saw Thatcher's comments as legitimating the growing racism in Britain by cynically appealing to potential supporters of the neo-fascist National Front. "Empire of the Senseless," released after ten years of Thatcherism, alters her notorious words: "'*And you know, people are really rather afraid—afraid of...being swamped*'/Afraid of being swamped by selfishness and greed" (emphasis in original). Like other Mekons' lyrics, this can be understood as an example of what the Situationist International called *détournement*, an aesthetic and political practice that owes much to Marcel Duchamp's readymades, in that

an individual seizes some cultural artifact, removes it from its original context, and introduces it in another context, thereby simultaneously critiquing and altering its meaning and possibly provoking a critical response in those who encounter it (Debord and Wolman; Plant 86–89). In thus recontextualizing Thatcher's words, the Mekons suggest that, by 1989, the British public had come to fear the core values of Thatcherism that had been transforming their lives for a decade. The band has also moved beyond the UK to address topics such as capital punishment in the United States; "Last Night on Earth" (2000) bluntly declares that "the system is sick. The robber barons roam/Buying up the land beneath your feet/Putting kids in the ground." The band has engaged in direct action too by participating in campaigns to abolish the death penalty in the US.

In general, though, the Mekons' songs are less topical, avoiding blatant polemics and focusing instead on more pervasive conditions of modern life. As Marshall Berman argued decades ago, such a life, while filled with possibilities, is too often marked by alienation, melancholy, loneliness, and a sense of impotence, topics that we encounter in "Too Personal" and that pervade the Mekons' work as a whole. Greil Marcus once suggested that much punk and post-punk can be viewed as a continuation of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (*Lipstick* 72–73). This mischievous claim is surprisingly true of the Mekons, who refer to Adorno's collection of gloomy philosophical musings on the liner notes of *The Mekons Honky Tonkin'* (1987) and *So Good It Hurts* (1988). Indeed, the book's subtitle, *Reflections from Damaged Life*, could serve as a gloss on their lyrics, which frequently depict desperate personal situations, family crises, broken and betrayed friendships, shattered love relationships, as well as a more general malaise. Of course, the Mekons are not philosophers, and their lyrics do not display the theoretical erudition or Hegelian intricacies of Adorno's prose; still, their work is intellectually complex and subtle, and its overarching concern is life in a world too often characterized by "darkness and doubt" and in which it is "hard to be human," to cite two of their song titles.

They do not, however, present or encourage a depressed or resigned worldview, for, as Sante points out, they "have never broached self-pity. They've cursed and muttered and cracked jokes and philosophized, and done all these things rollicking and roaring" (141). Their live shows are typically riotous, joyous events at which they display their humor, a key characteristic of the Mekons not always obvious when reading their lyrics. Though frequently motivated by anger, they invoke cautious hope for the future. Their lyrics often express love, compassion, and empathy, and much of their music is beautiful. Underlying these multiple responses to contemporary life is an attitude summed up in "Hello Cruel World" (1986) in which Greenhalgh sings, "C'mon cruel world/Show me what you got." While the speaker of "Too Personal" does not openly challenge the world in this way, his attempts to understand history's "gift of knowledge" represent a struggle to become more than a passive object of history.

I ♥ Mekons: Popular Music, Art, and the Mekons

"Too Personal" is the penultimate song on *I ♥ Mekons*, the group's tenth studio album and their first on Quarterstick Records, a subsidiary of Chicago independent Touch and Go with whom the band worked until the label undertook restructuring in 2009 in response to economic pressures.[11] Released in 1993 but recorded slightly earlier, it is one of their more musically conventional records and is comprised largely of songs played and produced in a manner similar to much of the "alternative rock" of the early '90s. As its title might suggest, most of the songs are about love and sexuality. "Millionaire," the opener, compares sexual conquest to capital accumulation; Sally Timms sings, "I've lost count of my lovers/But I can count my money/Forever and forever" before singing the icily detached chorus, "I love a millionaire/I love a millionaire." Other songs concern unrequited and unspoken love, Valentine's Day, honeymoons, and sexual and romantic desire. "Dear Sausage" cites William Blake's "The Sick Rose" and suggests that desire in the West is distorted by capitalist norms that are taken as natural: "There's a mechanized greed/That dons the mask of nature."

The CD's packaging and artwork are as thoughtful and compelling as the lyrics. The front cover is comprised of nine close-up color photographs of the torsos of apparently nine unidentifiable individuals, each wearing a t-shirt that reads "I ♥ Mekons," a parody of Milton Glaser's famous 1977 logo I ♥ NY (Figure 1). Given the group's relative obscurity in 1993, there is much self-deprecating irony in the suggestion that legions of people would sport such shirts. But the cover also raises serious questions about the relationships between consumption and identity.

We often define aspects of ourselves through the consumption, enjoyment, and display of various commodities, whether they are functional artifacts (cars, washing machines, refrigerators) or textual artifacts (books, records, paintings).[12] When Glaser's rebus and its imitations are printed on mass-produced bumper stickers, t-shirts, and other items to be worn or shown, they enable individuals publicly to declare a subjective taste. Like love songs, they offer us subject positions. It might seem odd that a mass-produced commodity can be used to express a personal feeling, but we should not exaggerate this apparent paradox, as, doubtless, many people have strong feelings about the city and state of New York. Still, the I ♥ NY t-shirts are unsettling, for such a shirt might participate in some way in the constitution of the wearer's sense of self and how he or she wants to be perceived. Moreover, since the logo was originally part of an advertising campaign, people who wear t-shirts printed with it serve as embodied advertisements for the state and city of New York.[13]

Like other cultural critics, the Mekons often target consumerism. In "Authority" (1991), Greenhalgh sings, "I want to be...I want to be...I represent commodity" (ellipses in original). The phrasing suggests that the speaker does not know what he is or wants to be but recognizes that he is somehow incomplete, that he lacks being. Presumably, he "represents commodity" because his longing for fuller being

Figure 1 Parodic design: anonymity, identity, consumption, and community. © Quarterstick/Touch and Go QS19. Image courtesy of the Mekons.

is central to the desire that propels consumerism; in Zygmunt Bauman's words, under conditions of modernity, identity is fluid, and we sometimes believe that consumption offers us a means of achieving what Anthony Giddens calls ontological security. But in the modern West, consumption is possibly endless, so the speaker of "Authority" seeks a completeness that eludes him.[14] More poignantly, in "Club Mekon" (1989), Timms sings of alienation and disenchantment in a world where everything is for sale:

> When I was just seventeen
>
> Sex no longer held a mystery
>
> I saw it as a commodity
>
> To be bought and sold like rock 'n' roll.

The speaker's nonchalance is replaced by disgust, as she realizes that the world of commodified sex is one in which "the dead are worshipped" and declares, "This world belongs to them/Now they can keep it." Though critical of consumerism and commodity fetishism, the Mekons understand full well that, as producers of cultural commodities, they participate in such processes, and they comment on the uneasy relationships between rock music, capitalism, and consumerism on the 1989 album *"The Mekons Rock 'n' Roll"* (quotation marks in original). Its first song, the rockabilly-flavored "Memphis, Egypt," describes rock and roll as a product marketed to adolescents—"something to sell your labour for when hair sprouts out below"—but also figures it as a valued site of desire, "that secret place/Where we all want to go." As the Mekons sing about the ambiguities of rock and roll and their ambivalence towards it, they pound out a powerful rock song whose anthemic magnitude is slightly subverted by the gratuitous inclusion of a synthesizer, an instrument despised by many rock fans. While not as explicit as "Memphis, Egypt," the t-shirts on the cover of *I ♥ Mekons* acknowledge that the group and its music can be understood as commodities. But there are other possible meanings.

The people wearing the t-shirts are unidentifiable, and the photographs resemble Andy Warhol's "mass-produced" silk-screens; thus, the cover points to the complex interplay of mass production, anonymity, commodification, self-expression, art, and graphic design. But, given the loyalty and devotion of many Mekons fans, the shirts also point to popular music as a site of emotional investment, of affect. Because the Mekons are not well known, it is possible that, under certain conditions, the shirts could help to create what film genre theorist Rick Altman calls a "constellated community" of people who share certain cultural interests and preferences but are otherwise isolated from each other (161). Or perhaps the shirts comment on the ways in which we frequently seek to distinguish ourselves through the display of our taste, our cultural capital, to use Pierre Bourdieu's influential term: wearers of these shirts assert features of their identities by displaying their allegiance to a little known but critically acclaimed band that stands for certain musical, political, and ethical values including independence, experimentation, social justice, cultural critique, and so on. Through these lenses, we can interpret the front cover as a kind of ironic and self-reflexive commentary on graphic design's role in advertising and the relationships between art and design, culture and commerce. After all, record covers are meant to appeal to potential buyers, and the front cover of *I ♥ Mekons* is, among other things, an advertisement for the product "inside."[15]

Notably, the band's own logo does not appear on the cover. Since 1985, almost all their releases have featured the group's name in a lower-case bold font, usually Clarendon. While not ubiquitous in popular music, logos are common and, like bands' names, function as brands, as marks of identity and guarantees of quality, where quality can mean a certain sound, style, and even attitude. In contrast to the consistency of the logo, the Mekons' music varies from record to record. What is more, although the Mekons' line-up has been stable since the early 1990s, before

that personnel changed frequently, though Langford and Greenhalgh were and remain constants. The Mekons' logo, therefore, identifies an ongoing collective purpose as much as a specific group of people or a consistent musical style. Their logo is another example of the band's playfulness, for, unlike many logos, it is anonymous and nondescript, almost a parody of a logo, even if it is instantly recognizable to those familiar with it. With *I ♥ Mekon*, the band's logo has been replaced by an imitation of another, one that alludes to rock music as a commodity.

The back cover presents us with a blurry, blue-and-white photograph of a crowd taken from the stage of a rock concert with most of the members of the audience giving the finger to the photographer (Figure 2). Apparently, the picture was taken by Jon Langford who, at a 1991 show in Central Park, asked the 2,000 or so people there to flip him the bird (George). Again, the image presents numerous interpretive options. It might comment on the front cover: if the front depicts expressions of love for the Mekons, the back suggests hostility towards the band. The design as a whole thus evokes the conflicting emotions to which love can give rise. We might see the gesture as anti-authoritarian, a moment of carnivalesque reverie in which the audience challenges the power of those onstage, but, if we know that Langford

Figure 2 Aggression and celebration, power and liberation.
© Quarterstick/Touch and Go QS19. Image courtesy of the Mekons.

solicited the act, this view lacks plausibility. Alternatively, we could argue that the photograph points to the interplay of submission and domination and of license and surrender that is an essential feature of rock and roll and, therefore, that the picture points to rock music's promise of liberation and its authoritarian potential. However we interpret the image, we see that it is playing with notions of power and authority as well as those of self-expression, solidarity, aggression, and celebration.

The record's insert is equally suggestive. Lyrics and credits are printed as handwritten letters and postcards sent from different locations and signed with various signatures, including the Knave of Hearts and Aphrodite. These are laid out over a collage of images and text taken from adult magazines and comprised of personal ads and advertisements for phone sex services. We could argue that the expressions of love in the letters and cards emerge from a background of loneliness and isolation and that this is graphically rendered by the composition of the lyric sheet. Or perhaps the failure of love leads to the desperation implied by the advertisements. All but three of the letters and cards are addressed to Sophie Bourbon, the (fictional?) backer of Sin Records, the Mekons' label on which they released several records in the 1980s (and revived in 2011) and whose name and logo parody those of Sam Phillips's Sun Records, the original home of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and other early rock and roll and country musicians.[16] The lyrics to "Dear Sausage" are addressed that way, while those of "Too Personal" are addressed to the Mekons and signed "Sophie." This indicates a shift in perspective; perhaps its lyrics comment on all the other songs and insinuate that they are too personal and do not sufficiently consider the importance of history. The credits are also signed "Sophie" but are addressed "Dear Punter," suggesting that buyers of and listeners to the CD are gamblers, customers—perhaps johns—or victims of a con, maybe all three. Musicians, engineers, and assistants are described in erotic and romantic terms: "Sarah 'Casanova' Corina [is] caressing the bass," and Langford is referred to as "Don Juan Langford." The Mekons frequently have fun with credits, often altering their names to suit themes addressed on a given record.

Most of the Mekons' albums contain lyric sheets, the majority of which encourage listeners to become active readers and critical interpreters. Because the lyrics and credits of *I ♥ Mekons* are presented as love letters, they direct attention to the play of privacy and publicness in popular music, but they also explore listeners' involvement in that play. On the one hand, by reading love letters addressed to Sophie, we invade her privacy and participate in a form of voyeurism, all the while knowing that the letters are fictional, a fact underscored by some of the names with which they are signed. On the other hand, the letters are comprised of the lyrics of songs released to the record-buying public, so their content, like that of the majority of love songs, is not private at all. Listeners might identify with the subject positions articulated in individual songs on the album, but the insert destabilizes while not entirely negating those subject positions. The lyric sheet provides us with broader discursive contexts in which to interpret the lyrics, and these draw attention to the usually unstated conventions of love songs. Moreover, because listeners

are addressed by the credits, they are incorporated textually within the discourse of love, eroticism, and desire articulated in the lyrics and artwork, even though they retain a critical distance from that discourse. Under certain conditions, it is possible that the insert might provoke something like a Brechtian alienation effect, but this is unlikely for those listeners familiar with the band's playful self-reflexivity and demystification.

Artwork and original songs are credited to the Mekons collectively, and this is so with almost all their records, lyrics, books, and art.[17] Insisting on shared credit is fairly uncommon in rock music, a sphere prone to egotism and competition. In bucking this tendency, the Mekons make explicit the cooperative nature of much popular musical production, for, although there are many auteurs in popular music, most rock bands create music as a group, even if particular members write lyrics or compose melodies and chord progressions.[18] In crediting their work to "the Mekons," the band expresses its democratic and egalitarian ideals: individual members retain their identities but become free and equal parts of a transpersonal, collective subject.

While packaging has long been important in popular music, the Mekons' artwork often addresses topics largely ignored in rock circles. As with their lyrics, their records' titles and artwork frequently rely on various kinds of intertextuality. In some cases, the band alludes or refers to other works: the titles of several albums cite Shakespeare; the covers of two feature paintings by Caspar David Friedrich; and the lyric sheets for *The Mekons Honky Tonkin'* (1987), *So Good it Hurts* (1988), and *Natural* (2007) include references to sources or quotations from diverse texts. In other cases, the covers and inserts form compact works of experimental art. With *Journey to the End of Night* (2000) and *Me* (1998), lyrics and images are supplemented by brief prose pieces written by the Mekons and their collaborators, and these complement or complicate the lyrics, often both. Perhaps their most audacious album cover is for *Rock 'n' Roll*. Quoting Art & Language's *Portrait of V.I. Lenin with Cap, in the Style of Jackson Pollock III*, the front cover consists of a painting called "Portrait of Elvis in the Style of Jackson Pollock #7." The painting both seriously and ironically casts Elvis Presley and rock and roll as icons with the same historical significance as Lenin and Bolshevism. It also appropriates Art & Language's appropriation of abstract expressionism and brings together modernism and postmodernism, popular culture and high art, entertainment and politics, propaganda and packaging. (A slightly different version of the painting appears in *United*, and its title is even more suggestive: "Portrait of Elvis in the Style of Jackson Pollock #8—meanwhile the Kaluli of New Guinea skillfully conceal their depression from Western anthropologists.")

The sophisticated deployment of intertextuality is one of the ways by which the Mekons combine high and popular culture, a blending that has two simultaneous effects: high culture is re-contextualized—to some extent critiqued and profaned—and transformed into and redistributed as popular culture, part of everyday life;[19] at the same time, the music on the record is brought into the sphere of art. The

Mekons do not present themselves as rarefied artists whose work is above popular culture; rather, like some avant-gardists, they question common notions of art, including its separation from everyday life.[20] Many of their lyrics, covers, and inserts can be understood in Barthesian terms as "*scriptible*" or "writerly" texts whose indeterminate or "open" meanings necessitate active "co-writing" by readers (Barthes 3–4). In light of Barthes' suggestion that "writerly" texts are aesthetically and politically superior to "readerly" ones—which allow for passive, conservative "consumption"—it is tempting to claim that the Mekons offer listeners an alternative to easily consumed popular music of the mainstream.

Such a claim, though irresistible, is problematic for two reasons. First, the majority of their music is not formally radical, and critics who stress the "ideology of form" could argue that the Mekons' reliance upon established musical forms undercuts their critical intentions. While I do not doubt that musical forms and styles, as well as other features of performances and recordings, carry cultural and ideological content and meanings, I stress that most songs are musical *and* literary entities: most songs have lyrics. It is always possible to focus on the Mekons' often hummable music and ignore their lyrics, but this does not mean that musical form has suppressed, contained, or even compromised the critical lyrical content. The Mekons do not typically challenge their listeners in the same way as more obviously experimental or confrontational musicians; rather, they explore possibilities within existing forms. Second, to insist that the Mekons create "writerly" texts risks re-inscribing the art/popular culture distinction within popular music itself. Perhaps this is inevitable—perhaps this article relies on the distinction—but there are aspects of the Mekons' practice that resist it. By covering songs created and performed by others, they underscore a salient fact about popular music, namely, that apparently closed texts can be opened through reinterpretation and re-contextualization. For instance, their 1986 version of Hank Williams's "Alone and Forsaken" reworks the country classic in a style reminiscent of "The Black Angel's Death Song" by the Velvet Underground, arguably the most influential avant-garde rock bands of the 1960s. Reinterpreting the song and juxtaposing it with their own material, they make it part of their own aesthetic and critical discourse and show that it was never closed in the first place. More radically, the Mekons suggest that musicians like Williams were artists, even though they neither identified themselves nor were generally received as such. The Mekons work with a broad notion of art that challenges traditional distinctions between art and popular culture and questions the separation of art from everyday life.

It might seem dated, even quaint, to do so, but we can identify their work as postmodern due to its combining of high and popular culture, its multi-generic, multimedia, and hybrid character, its self-reflexivity, and its extensive blending of discourses. If we endorse the idea that Western society has entered a postmodern period, we might be encouraged to view the Mekons as both symptom and response to life under such conditions, particularly to the circulation of discourses, images, and commodities that is said to characterize postmodern and

post-industrial society. The Mekons are *bricoleur*s who work with the cultural materials available to them, and, in this, they resemble not only many modernist and postmodernist artists and writers but also many cultural theorists. In fact, the Mekons often employ cultural theory but do not seem to subscribe to a specific theoretical account of contemporary life; rather, they use theory as they use other cultural artifacts, to make piercing comments on modern life. Like many postmodern theorists, the Mekons reject grand theory and totalizing discourses and celebrate difference and multiplicity, but underlying their work is a commitment to universal human equality and dignity. If, as Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib suggest, these are modern, even modernist, ethical and political values, the Mekons' work remains within Western modernity. Indeed, that they are particularly drawn to thinkers like Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno underscores the fact that, even if certain aspects of their work conform to postmodern aesthetics, its ethical and political underpinnings differ from those of much postmodern theory.

I do not believe that it matters whether we call the Mekons modernists, postmodernists, or neither; they are pop intellectuals who engage with and speak back to art and theory. They are not the first rock band to do so; in *Art into Pop*, Simon Frith and Howard Horne document the relationships between art school and British popular music, including punk and post-punk; other authors have traced the influence of the French Situationists and other artists and theorists on punk rock, especially the Sex Pistols and their collaborators.[21] But art and theory are particularly important to the Mekons.[22] As art students at the University of Leeds, the group's original members were immersed in studio practice and critical theory, and, although they were poor students, they spent many hours critically discussing music and politics (Langford 23). At that time—the time of punk's emergence—the chair of the Department of Fine Arts was art historian and former member of the Situationist International T. J. Clark, and one of the instructors was Terry Atkinson, a founder of Art & Language. That Atkinson has been a significant influence on the Mekons is demonstrated by their many references to him and to Art & Language; equally significant, Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* appears in the bibliography of *United*. As Atkinson has pointed out, theory was central to the fine arts program at Leeds, and students were encouraged to think critically about art in general and their own practice in particular (61–64).[23]

In discussing the Mekons' origins in art school, I am trying to place the group within a context that helps to explain some of their thematic and aesthetic concerns rather than seeking to legitimate them by invoking their institutional pedigree or credentials. The latter risks academicizing them and belittling less obviously intellectual popular music, and this goes against the Mekons' populism, particularly their commitments to amateurism and the do-it-yourself ethic that they have retained from their beginnings in punk. Still, the band's institutional training and bookish leanings are central to their work and practice, since members of the group continue to examine and play with ideas and issues they first encountered in

academe while remaining faithful to punk's values of musical simplicity and accessibility, though not to its actual styles. This creates a tension in much of their work between their music, which mostly conforms to various popular musical genres, and their lyrics and album art, which frequently allude to highbrow culture. The Mekons make no attempt to resolve this tension but use it productively, participating in multiple, sometimes conflicting cultural traditions. It is this very friction that contributes to the singular force of their work.

The group presents us with complex, multifaceted cultural artifacts that draw on the visual and plastic arts, literature, popular culture, and critical theory and that examine and question aspects of late modern society and culture. The analyses presented above are meant to demonstrate the band's ability to produce aesthetically and intellectually vital work that combines entertainment with art and critique by treating popular music as a medium capable of supporting sophisticated ideas and sentiments. In addressing topics often ignored in rock music, the Mekons expand the range of rock music discourse, just as they increase the discursive reach of art and cultural theory.

Conclusion: The Success and Failure of the Mekons

"No one buys our records," exaggerated Sally Timms in a 2011 interview (Bienstock). The Mekons occupy a marginal position in the world of popular music, and discussions about them often stress their relative obscurity, sometimes celebrating their rejection of the cult of success that is such a large part of contemporary culture, sometimes praising their determined persistence in spite of repeated failures, but almost always expressing disappointment that the band is so little known. It is tempting to regard their work as an unsuccessful popular music/art project that, at best, reaches loyal fans, already appreciative critics, and occasional fellow travelers. But such a judgment rests on a questionable notion of success, one that defines it in terms of record sales and popularity. Alternatively, one might view the Mekons' marginality as a kind of success; we could argue that obscurity is preferable to acceptance if the latter involves overlooking or taming the critical content of their work.[24] On this view, the Mekons' lack of widespread recognition speaks to their integrity, their refusal to compromise or "sell out," and to various failures of a "mainstream" culture that is incapable of recognizing the band's significance. There is much to such an account, but it tends to equate popularity with mediocrity, an equation that, while sometimes accurate, cannot be sustained, given the history of popular music and the incredible musicians who have achieved mass acceptance. There are many reasons why the Mekons have not achieved conventional success, but I want to shift the terms of the discussion and consider the Mekons as participants in public discourse.[25]

Whatever else they are, the Mekons are a rock band; they are entertainers and cultural producers whose primary works—records and live performances—are available to members of the public to be consumed or enjoyed in their leisure.

Listening to records generally occurs in private life, often as part of other activities and practices. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that record listening is merely a private activity. Above, I invoked Rick Altman's notion of a "constellated community" of spatially separated people who share certain popular cultural interests. The Mekons' listeners are clearly a constellated community, although, with the advent of the internet, the web, and social media, it might make more sense to speak of an on-line community. Moreover, the Mekons frequently address matters of general public concern, and it is likely that their listeners share at least some attitudes and opinions with both the band and each other. I propose that we view the Mekons' audience as a counterpublic in Michael Warner's sense: "A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one" (119). Here, the most obviously relevant dominant publics are those of art, popular music, and entertainment, but just as significant are the publics that marginalize the kinds of cultural, social, and political topics the Mekons repeatedly confront: alienation, social injustice, history, and so on. I do not want to exaggerate the political importance of a counterpublic comprised of record listeners but to stress the interplay of public and private that can occur through engagement with the Mekons' records.

Concerts are a different matter in that they are quasi-public events that can be understood as both inside and outside everyday life. Attending concerts can form part of one's regular leisure activities, like going to the movies, to the pub, or to sporting events, or they can be special occasions charged with strong emotions and even a sense of spiritual transcendence, experiences that might not be available to concertgoers in their daily lives. Like live theatre, rock concerts are performative and often involve choreography and ritual, but they can also be spontaneous, even chaotic. They can be interpreted as utopian and carnivalesque occasions that briefly reveal possibilities of a richer communal life, or they can be viewed as a kind of social narcotic that eases the pain of living. Of course, they are also economic events and for many years were among the dominant ways by which rock musicians promoted their records. In attending a live performance, concertgoers form a temporary but spatially unified and concrete community. Presumably, audience members are unified also by their enjoyment of the performers' music and admiration for them and what they represent. Again, we can view the audience of a Mekons concert as a counterpublic, though in this case audience members are probably more aware of themselves as such, not only because of the shared space they occupy but also because of the collective singing of songs as well as the often humorous banter between band and audience.

My suggestion that the Mekons' listeners form a counterpublic is tentative, since it is based on information gleaned from websites, reviews, and similar materials rather than on interviews with fans and concertgoers.[26] Still, I want to insist that the band provides its listeners with metaphorical and literal spaces in which they can come together to explore subjects not generally addressed in rock music or the

culture at large. These spaces can foster senses of both belonging and mutual recognition, since they are sites in which the like-minded can meet and collectively express their displeasure with the status quo while simultaneously experiencing the pleasures associated with rock music. I am not saying that the Mekons furnish their listeners with sanctuary from the cruel world, nor am I, in Marcuse's sense, "affirming culture"—the Mekons' music—as a "mental and spiritual world" that occupies "an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization" (95). As I have stressed, the Mekons consistently deal with everyday life and its difficulties, so, rather than removing listeners from the world or inviting them somehow to transcend it, the band presents fragments of the world to listeners and encourages them to participate in the interpretation and critique of the world and to imagine the possibilities of a changed one. That people find pleasure and joy in listening to the Mekons' records and attending their concerts does not imply a retreat from reality. In fact, given the Mekons' awareness of their unpopularity, we could argue that they and their supporters not only acknowledge but celebrate their marginality; even so, they also convey their longing for something else, a more just social order, for instance. It might be tempting to identify the Mekons as a cult band, in which case it might seem like hyperbole or mere wishful thinking to claim that their audience constitutes a counterpublic. And could we not characterize their fans as forming an eccentric and closed club of initiates? Perhaps, but insofar as the Mekons continue to release records, perform live concerts, give interviews, and support progressive causes, they continue to address the public and to confront topics central to modern life.

I hope to have shown why the band should be of interest to scholars of popular music and to cultural critics and theorists. The Mekons' work and practice offer ongoing critical reflections on the production of popular music within a capitalist culture, and they do not exempt themselves from their critique; as they acknowledge in "Memphis, Egypt," they were "born inside the belly of rock 'n' roll." They do not, then, fall into the distanced and ironic cynicism that Slavoj Žižek identifies as ideology (27–30). The scope of their work encompasses much more than popular music. While it would be an exaggeration to classify the Mekons as theorists, their work is deeply informed by cultural theory and addresses some of the same features of modern life that concern cultural theorists. I have made no attempt here to theorize the Mekons, since they do a fine job of that themselves. For the Mekons, theory and practice are aspects of a single creative and critical process, and their works are records of that process.

Throughout this discussion, I have offered possible ways of interpreting specific texts, just as I have stressed the group's exploration of possibilities within popular music and art. One of the ways of understanding the Mekons and their work is to view them as presenting possibilities to their listeners, not only cultural possibilities but also political ones. In "Funeral," they admit that their belief in socialism might seem outdated, given the then recent collapse of communism; Langford

sings, "This is my testimony a dinosaur's confession," but the song insists that gleeful announcements about the death of socialism are premature, that "this funeral is for the wrong corpse." The group expresses similar sentiments in "TINA" (2000), which takes its title from the acronym for "there is no alternative," a Thatcherite slogan that originally signified belief in the necessity of monetarism (Evans 50) and came to refer to faith in the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism. The band rejects this faith, as Langford sings, "But I can still dream of things/That have never been/But someday will be." As with so many of the Mekons' lyrics, these lines are ambiguous: they might suggest that discussions of alternatives to the status quo have been driven out of public discourse and relegated to the private world of dreams, yet the words are public speech and indicate that there are at least some individuals who do not accept that current social reality is "carved in stone."

In raising vague utopian hopes, the group participates in a social and cultural discourse about the good, not because they articulate a substantive notion of the good life but because their criticisms of modern society and culture, their exploration of the absurdities and contradictions of our lives, their condemnation of the cruelties of capitalism and oppression are motivated by ethical as well as political concerns. This does not imply a retreat from the public world of politics into the private sphere of ethics; after all, ethics often underlie the desire for political change. The Mekons constantly explore such desires, and they do so through some of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and playful music in the history of popular music.

The Mekons will never gain wide acceptance, and I am not certain how we might, in the end, think about their effectiveness as social critics, artists, or musicians; this depends on how we define "effectiveness," and this is always troublesome when discussing cultural production. Like many of their admirers, I lament the fact that the group is not better known, but I do not believe that their obscurity should be considered a failure. Even if the Mekons reach relatively few people, their recordings exist and remain available to new listeners; put differently, their perspectives on life in late modernity remain part of the cultural discourse that attempts to make sense of our lives. In the same interview cited above, Langford expressed his hope but also his doubt that the band is participating in a public conversation about the state of contemporary society. In attempting to be part of this conversation, the Mekons still deal in the facts of life.

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Notes

[1] Lyrics from the Mekons' songs, published by Low Noise Music, are reproduced with the kind permission of the Mekons.

[2] For some discussion of Dan Dare, see Tatarsky. The Leeds scene is discussed by Frith and Horne, ch. 4, and by Reynolds, ch. 4. See also Atkinson; Nehring "The Mekons." The Gang of Four is the most famous group to emerge from Leeds; see Hoover and Stokes; Lester. For punk, see Hebdige; Heylin; Laing; Marcus, *Lipstick*; Marcus, *Ranters*; Nehring, *Flowers*; Nehring, *Popular*; Rombes; Sabin; Savage; Spicer; Stacy Thompson.

[3] See Marcus, "Mekons"; Marcus, "Return." Franzen commented on the band in an interview with the BBC; this can be read at "BBC." The other authors are listed in the bibliography. The rock critics I've named belong to the generation who came of age in the 1960s. The Mekons have been praised by younger critics including writers for AllMusic.com and Pitchfork Media.

[4] *United* is, in part, a catalogue but also contains selections from "Living in Sin," the Mekons' "novel in progress," as well as essays, letters, and excerpts from the band's lyrics.

[5] For comments on rock and art, see Frith and Horne; Nehring, *Flowers*; Nehring, "Situationist." Marcus, in *Lipstick*, considers punk's debts to Situationism.

[6] Other interpretations are possible. Perhaps the speaker is stressing the privacy of his disclosures; i.e. he is being extremely personal. It is also possible that the group is addressing record listeners and acknowledging the limits of musical communication.

[7] The song invites a psychoanalytic reading, since the lyrics refer to "a mast of pain." The Mekons allude to Freud elsewhere; see, for example, their song "Dora" (1988) and the textual apparatus that accompanies "Living in Sin."

[8] Hayden White is, perhaps, the most influential theorist to have argued that the writing of history often relies on other kinds of narratives that circulate within a culture. For a succinct statement of his views, see "Value."

[9] In their "notes" to the lyrics on the insert of *The Mekons Honky Tonkin'*, the band mistakenly claims that the number of victims was 300. They also covered the song on their second LP, *Devils, Rats and Piggies: A Special Message from Godzilla*.

[10] The title "Empire of the Senseless" is shared with a 1988 novel by Kathy Acker. The Mekons made an album with Acker in 1996: *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

[11] The Mekons "signed" with Quarterstick after their troubled involvement with Loud Records, a short-lived subsidiary of industry giant Warner Bros. For a history of the band's adventures in the music industry, see Christgau; Friskics-Warren, ch. 7; Nickson.

[12] The distinction between functional and textual commodities is from Gendron, "Theodor." It is slippery, since many functional commodities are or can be treated as textual commodities.

[13] Of course, the rebus can be used to communicate other sentiments; in the weeks and months after the attacks on the World Trade Center, people wore such shirts to express solidarity with the citizens of New York City.

[14] It is possible that the Mekons were reading Baudrillard's *Simulations* at the time; the speaker of "Authority" describes himself as a "simulacrum," and in "100% Song," the last song on the same record, Jon Langford sings, "This is a simulation of a song."

[15] Many punk, post-punk, and new wave groups drew attention to the marketing of popular music. One of the most cogent examples can be found on the cover of the 1978 XTC record *Go 2*, which consists of printed text that begins, "This is a RECORD COVER. This writing is the DESIGN upon the record cover."

[16] The name Sophie Bourbon recalls the European royal house of Bourbon. Liner notes credited to Sophie appear on the Mekons' LPs released on Sin Records. She is also a character in "Living in Sin." As well, she is the speaker's lover in "Only Darkness has the Power" (1989), and the subject of "Sophie" (1987). Finally, *United* contains a series of letters between Sophie and her daughter, Anne Bourbon-Levinsky.

[17] Individual members of the group, Jon Langford and Rico Bell (Eric Bellis), have established themselves as artists and exhibit under their own names.

[18] Of course, others are involved in the production of recorded popular music, including producers, engineers, and, in some cases, record company representatives, A&R executives, for example.
[19] Here, I am drawing on both de Certeau and Bakhtin.
[20] For a detailed and sophisticated discussion of this theme in both the avant-garde and punk, see Nehring, *Flowers*.
[21] For discussions of punk and Situationism, see Marcus, *Lipstick*; Nehring, *Flowers*; Nehring, "Situationist." Gendron discusses the avant-garde and New York popular music in *Between*.
[22] This is true of other groups that came out Leeds University, Delta 5 and the much more famous Gang of Four. See Frith and Horne; Reynolds. For the Gang of Four, see Lester.
[23] For further discussion on the Mekons at art school, see Atkinson; Nehring's interview with John Langford in "The Mekons."
[24] We can find such a view in the foreword to the Mekons' *Hello Cruel World*. The foreword is credited to Colin Stewart, a figure who wrote liner notes for the band and contributed to *United*. Apparently, "Colin Stewart" is an alias of Jon Langford.
[25] As will become clear, my discussion here draws on Michael Warner. See also Habermas, *Structural*; the essays in Calhoun.
[26] Excellent websites on the Mekons are http://www.mekons-blog.de/ and http://www.mekons.de/mekonhom.htm. The latter has an incredible amount of material.

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