

## Songs as Historical Sources – Margaret Thatcher

At Parallel Histories we believe in expanding the range of what is traditionally considered a historical source, and I think you will agree that students will enjoy the change of pace of examining a song and music video rather than a dry text. At times it may feel like an English lesson more than a history lesson, but by bringing in a bit of historical context, a few lines from a song can illustrate more than an entire newspaper article.

Below are some of the most striking examples that can be used in the classroom. Believe it or not, these are just the tip of the iceberg – there are many, many more songs that discuss her influence and describe life in Britain at the time, as well as a large number that simply call for her death! (For some examples that avoid swearing, see [Margaret on the Guillotine](#) and [Tramp the Dirt Down](#)):

### Racist violence and racist policing

The theme of racial violence recurs time and time again in popular music under Thatcher. For the best accounts of life under Thatcher for Britain's black community, **Lynton Kwesi Johnson** is an excellent source. One of the best British poets of his generation, Johnson chronicled the black experience during Thatcher's reign.

[It dread inna Ingran](#) mentions the arrest of George Lindo in Bradford in 1978. Lindo was arrested and jailed for robbery in Bradford, despite there being strong alibis and no evidence against him. His community in Bradford campaigned to have him freed: *Dem frame up George Lindo up in Bradford town, But de Bradford blaks dem a rally round*. Johnson calls on minority communities to stand firm in England against Thatcher and her racism: *Maggi Tatcha on di go/Wid a racist show/But a she haffi go...African/Asian/West Indian/An' Black British/Stan firm inna Ingran*.

[Five nights of bleeding](#) describes the Brixton riots, night by night and how the police took violent action against the protesters *Night number three, over the river...Outside the rebels were freezin' cold/Babylonian tyrants descended...So with a flick of the wris', a jab and a stab/The song of hate was sounded...And two policemen wounded/Righteous, righteous war*

**Sinead O'Connor's** [Black boys on mopeds](#) references the 1983 shooting of Colin Roach by policemen who believed that the vehicle was stolen, noting that this type of violence contrasts with England's image of itself: *"England's not the mythical land of Madame George and roses/It's the home of police who kill black boys on mopeds"*. O'Connor goes on to add important historical context and accuses Thatcher of hypocrisy in expressing shock at the Chinese state using the army against its citizens in Tiananmen Square: *"Margaret Thatcher on TV/Shocked by the deaths that took place in Beijing/It seems strange that she should be offended/The same orders are given by her"*. You can see how this comparison could work well in Parallel Histories' debating structure – you could counter this comparison by arguing that it is unlikely a song like this would be allowed to be released in Communist China – demonstrating that it is a needlessly provocative comparison.

A deceptively upbeat ska tune '[Stand Down Margaret](#)' by **The Beat** also highlights the idea that Thatcherism was a false promise, or at least was false for many people. It calls for Thatcher to step down because her supposed bright future is a lie: *"I see no joy, I see only sorrow/I see no chance of*

*your bright new tomorrow/so stand down Margaret/stand down please...Our lives seem petty in your cold grey hands/Would you give a second thought?/Would you ever give a damn?/I doubt it, Stand down Margaret."*

The role of ska music in racial politics was complex – it developed out of the cultural mix of London, specifically the Jamaican music of the Black community, epitomised by bands like The Specials who had black and white members. However, the genre became popular among white supremacist skinheads, thus complicating its reputation. Most bands pushed back against racism, by explicitly addressing racial issues – **The Specials'** ['Doesn't make it alright'](#) comments that *"Just because you're a black boy/Just because you're a white/It doesn't mean you've got to hate him/It doesn't mean you've got to fight"*. **Madness'** ['Embarrassment'](#) describes the experience of a young girl being rejected by her family for having a child with a black man. This song could be used as a way of presenting the racist attitudes that were relatively common in Britain at the time.

The racial politics of ska music was captured in the award-winning [2008 film 'This is England'](#), which happens to share its title with [a song by The Clash](#). The song brands the police as racists (*Hey, British boots go kick Bengali in the head/Police sit watching*) and unjust (*This is England/We can chain you to the rail/This is England/We can kill you in a jail*), but it also provides a much broader overview of Thatcher's policies, mentioning the decline of the British car industry (*Black shadow of the Vincent/Falls on a Triumph line*) and the Falklands war (*South Atlantic wind blows/Ice from a dying creed/I see no glory*).

## **Deindustrialisation and Unemployment**

Many bands were also concerned with capturing the reality of mass unemployment and often linked this to riots and violence. This is summarised most succinctly in [Ghost Town](#) by **The Specials**:

*This town is coming like a ghost town/All the clubs have been closed down.../Bands won't play no more/Too much fighting on the dance floor/ Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town?... music played in a de boomtown/ Why must the youth fight against themselves?/ Government leaving the youth on the shelf/This place is coming like a ghost town/No job to be found in this country/Can't go on no more/The people getting angry.*

Punk bands had been singing about unemployment since before Thatcher came to power, see the **The Clash's** ['Career Opportunities'](#). This continued under Thatcher, see **Newtown Neurotics'** ['Kick out the Tories'](#) (*Lets kick out the Tories/the rulers of this land/for they are the enemies/of the British working man...while that b\*\*\*\*\* is in unemployment grows/and it shows, in hospitals, factories/and the schools that they've closed... they just abuse their power/both black and white are being screwed/Don't believe everything that you read in the press.*) Note the issue of race being brought up yet again, this time as a plea for people to direct their anger at the government, not against each other.

Regarding the impact of the decline of heavy industry in Britain, [Abernant 1984-1985](#) by **The Mekons** evokes the impact of the closure of a coal mine on a small Welsh community: *Only*

*seventeen when he went down the mine/And it's a year that he's been out on the line...You'd think it'd have been fifty years/Since the place was closed...How much more is there left to lose?* **The Proclaimers' [Letter from America](#)** lists places in Scotland to compare the closure of heavy industry in Scotland under Thatcher (*Bathgate no more, Linwood no more*) with the infamous Highland Clearances of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century that caused many Scots to emigrate to America.

In including songs from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it is also worth discussing why so many songs aimed at Thatcher refer to 'England' rather than 'Britain'. This could help a discussion with students of why Thatcher's reputation is so different in different regions of the UK.

For a quick introduction to the culture of the unions and strikes, there are few better sources than **Billy Bragg**. Bragg explicitly aligned himself with striking workers and became a protest singer for the Thatcher era. He captures the feeling of polarisation between strikers and the authorities, and between those workers who chose to break the strike in [Which Side are you on?, There is Power in a Union](#), and [Never Cross a Picket Line](#) (*I want to live in a Brand New Britain/never cross a picket line/Where workers rights are enshrined and written*). Bragg also directly addressed Thatcher's supporters after she left power and vowed to renationalise the industries that she had privatised in [Thatcherites](#).

### **Falklands War**

**Robert Wyatt's [Shipbuilding](#)** brings the Falklands War into the debate about deindustrialisation. It questions whether the economic boost that the war brought to the traditional industry of shipbuilding in places like Belfast, Glasgow, Liverpool and Newcastle made up for young men from these areas risking their lives in the Falklands: *Is it worth it?/A new winter coat and shoes for the wife...soon we'll be shipbuilding...The boy said 'Dad...I'll be home by Christmas*.

**A strong language warning** is necessary for **Crass' [How does it feel? \(to be the mother of a thousand dead?\)](#)**, which as you can guess from the title is fiercely anti-war. It is not easy listen, either in terms of the music or the lyrics. Crass were not a mainstream band, but this song could be used as an example of just how passionately a minority of people in the UK hated both Thatcher and the Falklands War: *Iron Lady with your stone heart/So eager that the lesson be taught/That you inflicted, you determined, you created, you ordered/It was your decision to have those young boys slaughtered*. Notably, Conservative MP Tim Eggar [tried to prosecute Crass under the Obscene Publications Act, while letters of support came in](#) from the Labour Party.

**Dire Straits' [Brothers in Arms](#)** meanwhile is not political, but nevertheless laments the loss of life in the Falklands War: *You did not desert me/My brothers in arms... We're fools to make war*. It was [re-released in 2020](#) to raise money for veterans from the war and has become popular at military funerals.

## Homophobia

**Boy George**, not known as a political artist, provides one of the most succinct summaries of the challenges facing the LGBTQ+ community in [No Clause 28](#), which banned the 'promotion' of homosexuality in the classroom. The song starts with a Thatcher impersonator declaring that "the aim of this government is to make everyone as miserable as possible" – giving you an idea of how Thatcher was perceived by some as a hectoring, nanny-like figure. It then goes on to link explain Clause 28, doubt Thatcher's claimed justification for it, criticise her policies on the Aids crisis of 1980s, and then to attack her record on crime and the NHS:

*Won't you be elated/To tamper with our pride/They say to celebrate it/Is social suicide...No Clause 28/No Clause 28...Don't need this legislation...Just to show pornography the door...  
They talk about AIDS they call it a curse...You know you won't cure it with TV campaigns/Or telling those mothers what to put in their veins...I'm telling you suckers start using your heads/By putting the money in hospital beds/You're clamping our cars the streets are a mess/Look what you've done to the NHS*

## Northern Ireland and the IRA

Northern Irish punk band **Stiff Little Fingers**, who had both Catholic and Protestant members, dedicated many of their songs to the idea of breaking out of the sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland. One of their most famous songs [Alternative Ulster](#) portray society that is divided and militarised - *You got the army on the street/And the R-U-C dog of repression/Is barking at your feet*. But it focusses equally on Northern Ireland's poor economic state – "*There's nothing for us in Belfast/The Pound's old, and that's a pity...We ain't got nothing but they don't really care*" before calling for change *Grab it and change it, it's yours/Get an Alternative Ulster... Alter your native Ulster/Alter your native land*. So, this song can act as a way of breaking out of viewing Northern Ireland under Thatcher solely through the lens of The Troubles. While sectarian divisions were one of the defining features of life there, the song suggests that for some young people the economic situation was equally important.

Stiff Little Fingers also parodied Thatcher's supporters in [Fly the Flag](#), noting how Thatcher managed to link patriotism with privatisation and consumerism: *Gimme the British way, honest and true... Gimme a nation where people are free...Free to screw you before you screw me...Gimme-gimme-gimme-gimme-gimme-gimme... Gimme a Britain that's got back the Great/A race of winners not cramped by the State/And only the helpless get left at the gate*".

Meanwhile, Thatcher uncompromising policies on the IRA drew reactions from British and Irish musicians. **The Pogues'** (who were led by a Kent-born Irishman, Shane MacGowan) [Streets of Sorrow/The Birmingham Six](#) used an incident that occurred before Thatcher was Prime Minister, the arrests of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four – Irishmen who were wrongly accused of perpetrating bombings – to protest her policies in Northern Ireland.

Explaining the arrests of the ten men, McGowan wrote that *There were six men in Birmingham, in Guildford, there's four/That were picked up and tortured and framed by the law/And the filth got promotion, but they're still doing time/For being Irish in the wrong place and at the wrong time*. He

goes on to reference the infamous Her Majesty's Prison Maze in Northern Ireland where IRA members and paramilitaries were held, and the British government's anti-terrorism laws that allowed the authorities to keep people in custody for seven days without being charged: *In Ireland, they'll put you away in the Maze/In England, they'll keep you for seven long days*. Finally, he ties these earlier arrests to Thatcher's current policies by mentioning a the 1987 Loughgall ambush, in which British SAS forces killed 8 IRA members: *While over in Ireland, eight more men lie dead/Kicked down and shot in the back of the head*.

### **Why so negative?**

These songs are overwhelmingly negative in their portrayal of Margaret Thatcher. But this can lead to good debates in the classroom. Why exactly were musicians so critical of Thatcher? Where did Thatcher's support come from, and why? Are the musicians' points valid? Perhaps not. Many of these songs connect aspects of policy like privatization, policing and the Falklands War in a way that could be considered incoherent, just a list of things that the author did not like.

Furthermore, it worth exploring how the sentiments expressed in the songs match or do not match with modern perceptions of Thatcher. Why were her economic policies so maligned in music when they made the country richer? Are the songs' refrains of increased violence and racism accurate? Or were they highlighting a long-standing problem just because they did not like Thatcher herself?

Either way, analysing a song as starter activity for a particular aspect of Thatcher's legacy can be nice way into the complicated legacy of the twentieth century's longest-serving prime minister.