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Chumbas chill out

Solidarity Federation

Spring 1998

Welcome to Chumbaworld! John Prescott may not wear his Chumbawamba T-shirts any more but their 15 year overnight success means some people are. While the gutter press try to make up their minds whether they are cuddly or dangerous, DA lets Alice Nutter of the band speak for herself when we caught up with them before a recent gig.

DA: Did you anticipate accusations of selling out by writing the song “The Good Ship Lifestyle” (on the recent album Tubthumping). Have you got that sort of reaction now you’re famous?

Alice: No, well the whole album (Tubthumping) was written before we signed to EMI anyway. Have you seen that pamphlet “The circled A and its parasites” ? We wrote it about that, and about some people’s puritanical take on the world. We wanted to say it isn’t OK to be like that, that we’ve got to live and fight in the real world.

DA: So you aren’t getting loads of hassle for going “mainstream”?

Alice: On the whole, people have been into it, because I think they know that if we weren’t on Top of The Pops, then they wouldn’t hear us at all. This time last year we didn’t have

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a record deal at all. Even before we'd signed to EMI and any of that stuff, I was going to political meetings and some people are funny because you're in a band. But if you recognise that you're part of a community — except that you have access to the media for two minutes of your life — that's how we see it. We know the people who do all the hard work get no fucking glory at all.

DA: The mainstream press seem to enjoy casting you as a “controversial” band but seem to pick up on things like references to drinking in lyrics rather than the political content of your music.

Alice: Did you hear that stuff last week about Virgin taking our records off the shelves? I did this crap TV debate in America which went out live across the country. I was the loony in the corner arguing against capitalism, and shoplifting came up. I said we wouldn't mind if people shoplifted our records from major chainstores. Their argument against it was that no-one needs to shoplift a record, it's not food, but why should just the rich have access to culture?

DA: Will Virgin put your records back on the shelves?

Alice: To be honest, I don't really care. People are throwing money at us, or are trying to. Nike offered between £1 and £3 million to do them a song for the world cup and we told them to tuck off. We don't need it. Not that we've got millions, but we'll do stuff if there's a point. We did an advert for Renault in Italy and gave the money to Italian anarchist radio stations. If there's a point to taking the money and getting into the mainstream, then we'll do it. But we're not going to take Nike's money. Even if you give £3 million away, you're still financing the sweatshops and that's a dilemma that you can't live with. So we got in touch with the anti-Nike group and said, “do you want a song for free?”

DA: How far do you think it's possible to use the press for yourselves, and how far do they think they're using you?

Alice: You can't control it, we're not on the same side. The Sun and the Mirror have got us in all the time but I wouldn't wipe my arse on them. I read the Mirror sometimes but I don't like it. We don't even try and control it because, depending on what they write, one minute it's about this band who say they like it when cops get killed, next minute we're cuddly anarchists.

DA: So it doesn't matter what you say?

Alice: No, but I do think that even if they cast you as a cartoon figure, there's loads of people out there that go "yeah I think that". They're using us, and to some extent we're using them. Now, whether it works or not, I don't know, but we've tried not using them and that definitely doesn't work.

DA: Is there any way of getting them to report less sensational stuff, like organising and longer term issues, any way of taking it further?

Alice: For a start even if we're talking about Chumbawamba, we point out that the reason we've existed all these years is because we've organised as an anarchist unit. We work as a democracy, everybody gets equal money, everybody gets a say in what goes on. There isn't a leader... And then you move it off and start talking about other forms of anarchist organising and how important community and grassroots politics are, and occasionally that goes in. And when it's live on TV, then it has to go in.

DA: So what do you think the media think anarchism is, and how far is it possible to influence this?

Alice: It's interesting because they always start off from the basis that anarchism is chaos. So part of our role at the moment, which has appeared in magazines like Q, is to say that anarchism is actually to be extremely organised in a responsible way. It's a social order where everybody starts off on an equal footing, without the blandness of state communism; without a leader at any point. To be an anarchist you have to be organised because you have to take on responsibility. So

I do think it is possible to use the media to change people's perceptions of anarchism.

DA: The whole idea of doing this, and having EMI as your boss etc... is quite ironic...

Alice: It's like the dockers thing. We did a benefit and we expected EMI to be lukewarm about it but they said "Brilliant! Publicity!" If you're suiting capitalism's ends, then they'll let you. But there'll come a point when we stop selling records and the relationship will change drastically and we're fully aware of that. What we're actually doing with all the money is to pay ourselves a living wage now, so that when we're not selling records we can still make artistic choices and carry on in some form and have money to do that.

DA: Are there other things you'd like do with Chumbawamba, like tour with a big band?

Alice: We got offered the Rolling Stones... We talked about it but decided that it would only be worth doing if we could do something that would get us dragged off stage. It wasn't really relevant, but we'd love to do U2!

DA: People put in years of political activity against massive odds... why do you think we do it?

Alice: Because it enhances our lives. It's not really a conscious choice, it's something you are. The best thing about touring isn't owt to do with all the media stuff. It's getting to meet strikers, and being in touch with the dockers and the anti-fascist people here tonight. I think politics should be an accepted part of everyday life, not a boring thing for a meeting in a pub once a week. I think there's a move to reform a workable anarchist movement that's not elitist or based solely on youth culture. It's got to reflect the world as it is.

DA: I'd say that's going on with the formation of the Solidarity Federation and the more recent stuff about Class War.

Alice: It's really difficult to think "this isn't working" and it's a really big move to say "right, we've got to knock it all down,

take what's good about what we've done but try to work in different ways". It's hard to do because people are resistant to change, even anarchists...