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Talking with Prometheus

Cockburn, a Canadian musician, appeals to many through the medium of his music. He writes songs in poetic form, much like Bob Dylan and John Lennon, in order to draw the listener into the lyrical content.

A good deal of Cockburn's material expresses concern with political issues, especially the political state of Nicaragua. The interview, however, covers many different topics, including religion, artistic responsibility, revolution and its role in the '60s and '70s, and his role in the music industry.

Professor Zuidervaart of the Philosophy Department travelled with a group of Calvin students to Toronto. Nine students from Calvin and three from the Institute for Christian Studies participated in the one-month analysis of Marxism and its role in the arts and literature. This group included the following students: Sarita Baker, Paul DeJong, Gary DeLang, Dennis Epplert, Judy Rhebergen, Jeanne Rikkers, David Smilde, Phil Stapert, Rachel VerBurg, Priscilla Reimes, Fran Wong, and Henry Luttikhuizen.

The interim was structured in such a way that students received a good deal of free time. Each morning the group met for three hours. The afternoons were set aside for exploration of the city, excursions to museums, art galleries, and films, concerts, and other cultural events.

The morning sessions usually included discussion of assigned reading material. The discussions were intense and challenging, yet enjoyable. Bruce Cockburn attended one of these sessions, and his conversation with the group follows.

DeLang: What sort of people in music have influenced you or do you like?

Cockburn: I don't really like the work of that many people in the pop music scene, or in any scene for that matter. I guess I'm kind of fussy. Generally speaking, I like the pop music that has strong lyrical content. Chrissie Hynde, for instance, is somebody whose work I like a lot. The people who were an influence on me initially were John Lennon, Bob Dylan—again, people who had some substance to their lyrics. They were, in fact, the people who led the way in showing that

you could actually use a pop song to say something. Before them there wasn't much of that. There was the whole bit of what has been called folk music—all the way through Pete Seeger who influenced Bob Dylan. Dylan, of course, had an influence on the rock scene in his early days.

As for classical music I don't know enough about it to know whom I prefer. I like a lot of Renaissance music that I've heard—Bartok, Sibelius, some of the more modern things—but I'm not very up-to-date on what's going on currently.

DeLang: You said that you are mainly attracted to lyrical content in music but who has influenced you musically?

Cockburn: Musically, the influences are more—well, they come from everywhere really, least of all the classical area. I like ethnic music from all over the place, blues (that's a big one), country blues (from the Southern states) which I first learned to play on finger-style guitar, rock and roll (Buddy Holly, the Ventures—in those days nobody really thought about lyrics, they were just there to carry a tune). Early rock and roll is what got me interested in music in the first place. It's hard to pin down any one important influence other than the sort of basic ones. The guitar style I use is very much derived from the blues guitar styles of several people, mainly from the 1920s. But whenever I hear anything I like, it sort of incorporates itself into that momentum too.

Reimes: How entangled is the medium with the message? How much do the form and content relate to each other?

Cockburn: It'd be pretty hard to separate them, but the relationship varies from context to context. For example, the relationship in an album situation is different from that in a live situation, and different again from a theoretical situation where we're talking about it like this or I'm talking to a journalist. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about this really. There are certain things I want to get said and I get a certain impulse to write a song. Then you want to make it sound good after that. So my way of looking at it is pretty much a pragmatic one—how do I get these words out musically, or how do I support them musically and bring out what I want to bring out? Then, how do we record that so people are moved by it and I am moved by it?

DeLang: Who are you working with right now?



Cockburn: At the moment I'm not really working. We've got one show coming up in March, which is a benefit here in town. Other than that I'm not going to work until next September or October, and then I'll be working solo, actually, for the first time in a long time. Five or six years with the band—I need a break from it, mostly because it's tiring trying to keep track of where all these people are going on the road and what they're all doing.

DeLang: There is also a lot more involved monetarily with a rock band and going on the road, isn't there? What led you to do that about five or six years ago? Money influences?

Cockburn: Definitely there is more involved. But money was not really involved. I'll make more money going solo than with the band—which I don't have any particular objection to—but that's not the reason for doing it. I'm making a living as it is.

But the band for me is different. The medium of rock music for me is a very viable one. I'm getting fed up with it because there is so much of it around, and you can never get away from it. I

hear somebody like Billy Bragg come along who does basically just solo stuff, but, although he has weak points about what he does, it's really refreshing to hear someone do something with just a guitar, whether it's electric or not. I guess I'm going through the same sort of thing now that led me to form a band in the first place, which was that I was tired of my own company on stage and I wanted to get some input from somewhere else. I've had enough of that for a while.

DeLang: Obviously that means a change in style. Will this change your music lyrically as well?

Cockburn: I don't know, because I haven't written any songs lately.

Baker: You were saying that all of the rock music out there bothers you. Do you see this pluralism as a problem?

Cockburn: I wonder. Because rock music has the ear of so many people it can be an effective medium for getting information out, or for swinging people's feelings, at least temporarily. It's also the "opiate of the masses" in a way that the church has never been successful in being. It's this sort of large-scale palliate that is impressed

on us to some extent. It's not just rock music either, but it's everything that's on the radio all the time, from Barry Manilow, to the stuff that comes out of Nashville, to whatever else. In the same way, you can have a rock band—like Run DMC—that is extremely revolutionary in their attitude but has a sort of dual function of rabble rousers on the one hand and social drug on the other. And that's a tricky balance. I think you have to take it one step at a time if you're involved in it as I am. You say "Do I really want my song on the radio in between the other ones that are on? Is it going to mean anything to anybody? Then you usually decide to take the chance that it will, because there is nothing to be gained by maintaining silence. But you have to have your wits about you to maintain any level of meaning in what you are doing, and to do that I have to step back from it every now and then to see where I actually am. The more you get embroiled in the political arena, too, the more you tend to lose the perspective of things, because you adopt a certain cause, for instance. You have to shake off the rhetoric that goes with that cause. In my case it is the Central American issue I have become associated with, and I'm very clear where I stand on that. But at the same time I have to keep my eyes open for any factors that might come along and change that stance. Therefore, I cannot get caught up in all the revolutionary rhetoric or the rhetoric of imperialism and all the "isms" generally. When you start talking about "isms" you start losing sight of the truth. That doesn't have very much to do with being surrounded by rock music but it seems to be part of that same picture. Rock music is a medium the same way that newspapers and television are media, and it has its political ramifications as do those other media whether the people practicing them know that or not. Obviously, anytime I come out with a song called "Call It Democracy" it is very conspicuously political in its tone, but so is any song by any black musician that doesn't address the issue of "blackness," for instance, because it's playing into the status quo. That may not be a particularly evil thing at that moment, but it has that overtone.

VerBurg: Do new events trigger songs, and can they change your ideas of things? Do you have a basic foundation for your beliefs?

Cockburn: I have a basic foundation in my Christian beliefs, but, in terms of a particular issue, I've changed my mind a couple of times over the years. If there are songs that express that change, they show up. There's a song on one of my older albums called "Gavin's Woodpile," in which I say something to the effect that there really aren't any

political solutions. I firmly believed that at the time and in a certain way I still do, because whatever we accomplish with politics is going to be less than perfect. But at that time I didn't recognize any value to conscious political action, and I certainly didn't recognize the unconscious political action that we're carrying on all of the time. It wasn't until I went to Central America and saw what politics really meant in a direct way that I changed. Growing up in this country, the political scene, like the rest of the Canadian scene, has an overriding blandness that tends to make you take it for granted. You can vote for the NDP or you can vote for the conservatives, but in the end the quality of life doesn't seem to change much. It goes on much as it did before when the Liberals were in. That's not true across the board, but generally it is, compared to the situation of the people in Guatemala, or Nicaragua, or Honduras, or just about anywhere else outside the developed world. Those are people who are faced with politics on a day-to-day basis, and on a life-and-death basis. People got killed in Guatemala for wearing glasses because it might mean that they could read, which is a threat to the status quo. We're not faced with that. But we also better not take what we have for granted, because it may not always be this way. There's nothing that says that this country can't degenerate the way Chile has. That was especially brought home to me going there because Chile looks different from Central America. It's got high-rise buildings and a subway system in Santiago. It looks like a modern European city, until you get to the outskirts and there are concentric rings of more or less developed squatter communities which are always subjected to harassment by the military and police. The innermost ring represents the settlers who have been there the longest. They have houses that look like houses, and maybe electricity and running water. Further from the center of the city there are communities of people who live in houses that are made of sewn-together old clothes, and cardboard and bits of tin and lumber, and whatever they scrounge. There communities of several thousand people—three thousand families in one that I was in—without running water and no electricity, and the houses are closer together than you are to me. They tap into hydro lines, and there's a piece of baling wire coming down to someone's house that runs a lightbulb. They've dug up the storm sewer to get water, or the water line in one case, and there is a group of people lined up to get water with sawed-off gasoline cans. That's politics. Those people used to have a democratic government, and the present government is

perhaps the only military government Chile has ever had. It could happen here. So, philosophy aside, there is a pragmatic point to this. I don't really take back what I said in "Gavin's Woodpile," but it's modified by those experiences I see that there is a need, to word it as cornily as possible, to accept one's civic responsibility. Without that, some asshole's going to come along and start telling us what to do, and we won't be able to do anything about.

Luttikhuizen: What made you select Central America instead of other areas of oppression or poverty?

Cockburn: That was circumstantial. I was given a book of poems by Ernesto Cardenal, who is currently the Minister of Culture in Nicaragua. Those poems were very much a historical document of the recent history of Central

Do you think U2's work is significant in terms of addressing political concerns?

America. I got very interested in the bits about the Nicaraguan revolution because it didn't conform to my stereotype of what a public revolution was. There wasn't a blood bath following the triumph, and that sort of thing. And there didn't seem to be the usual sort of charismatic, fist-shaking, caudillo-type leader. I was actually interested in going to Nicaragua out of curiosity but after several months of idly casting around I hadn't succeeded in finding a way to go there other than as a tourist, which I didn't want to do because I wanted to have some kind of inside contact. Ofsan came along and asked me if I would like to go for them, so I jumped at the chance. Once I'd been there I was involved.

Rikkers: There is a lot of music that comes out on college radio that never gets heard, because people don't listen to lyrics that have a message unless they're by somebody who has already established himself. John Cougar Mellencamp can sing songs about farmers because he's already established himself as a good rocker. In the States, you have to wait so long to hear something that has something to say.

Cockburn: Yeah, it's boring. That's always going to be true I think. There's something in Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* that says that the masses are never going to want to move unless somebody drives them to it. I think that's a given.

There's a certain inertia that systems of society are always set up to enhance, the pop music system being no exception. The whole system is based on dealing with a manipulable public. It's like the fashion industry. Whatever somebody dictates as being "groovy" this year is what they can convince everybody to buy. That's the way most people like it, because they don't want to think about it. They've got enough trouble in their lives already, without having to deal with those things that they consider peripheral. The trick is to convince them that of course it's not peripheral at all.

Rhebergen: Do you feel that your music has made some sort of difference?

Cockburn: In a small way I think it has. I base that on letters that I get from people. There are three or four people who have written me letters saying they were inspired to go to Nicaragua on work brigades and stuff from hearing the songs, which makes them feel pretty good, because at that point you know there's actually contact. There are a lot of other people who have written saying that they were affected one way or another by this stuff. But it's obviously a very small scale thing. That's where the one-on-one comes into it. In a way you throw all this stuff out into a big scene, but the real effect of it is always going to be one-to-one. The greater the number of people exposed to it, the greater the possibilities for that one-on-one experience. In the end that's what happens. I don't really write the songs to try to convince people of anything. I write the songs because I am moved. After the fact I say, "Yeah, I want people to hear this," because I know that I saw and felt, and I think other people, if they were in that position, would have seen and felt the same thing. So I want to show them what that was, but I can't start out to write a song from that point of view because it becomes a piece of propaganda. I manipulate it too much myself and editorialize, instead of just showing what I saw.

Rhebergen: So you're hoping in a certain way that you're affecting someone?

Cockburn: In a cautious way I'm hopeful.

DeJong: I'm interested in the evolution of your natural progression or a conscious change?

Cockburn: Yeah, I guess so. It's kind of a reflex or involuntary impulse. The initial impetus to change was that I was tired of what I was doing. I think the first thing that got me interested was discovering reggae music, which is very much a rhythm-oriented music and rhythm in a way that's pretty hard to do by myself. You can sort of approximate it. I got interested in getting some of that into my music, and I was just exploring things I hadn't explored before. I had explored a

lot of approaches to music that could be done in a solitary way, but I hadn't really, since my days in a rock band, paid much attention to what you could do with a group of musicians, whether the result was jazz or some kind of collective folk music, rock or whatever. When the punk movement came along it sort of revitalized rock for me, because all of a sudden it wasn't disco anymore and again there were lyrics that were saying something. There was an intensity about it and a sort of fist-shaking rawness that was exciting. I wanted to feel some of that excitement about my own stuff too. So that got me heading in those directions and then once you start of course you realize there's the possibility that these songs might get played on the radio more than the old songs did. Then you start looking at it when you're making an album. You say "which one of these songs could be a single?" Then you have to start watching out, because you can kill it by giving too much of that kind of attention to it.

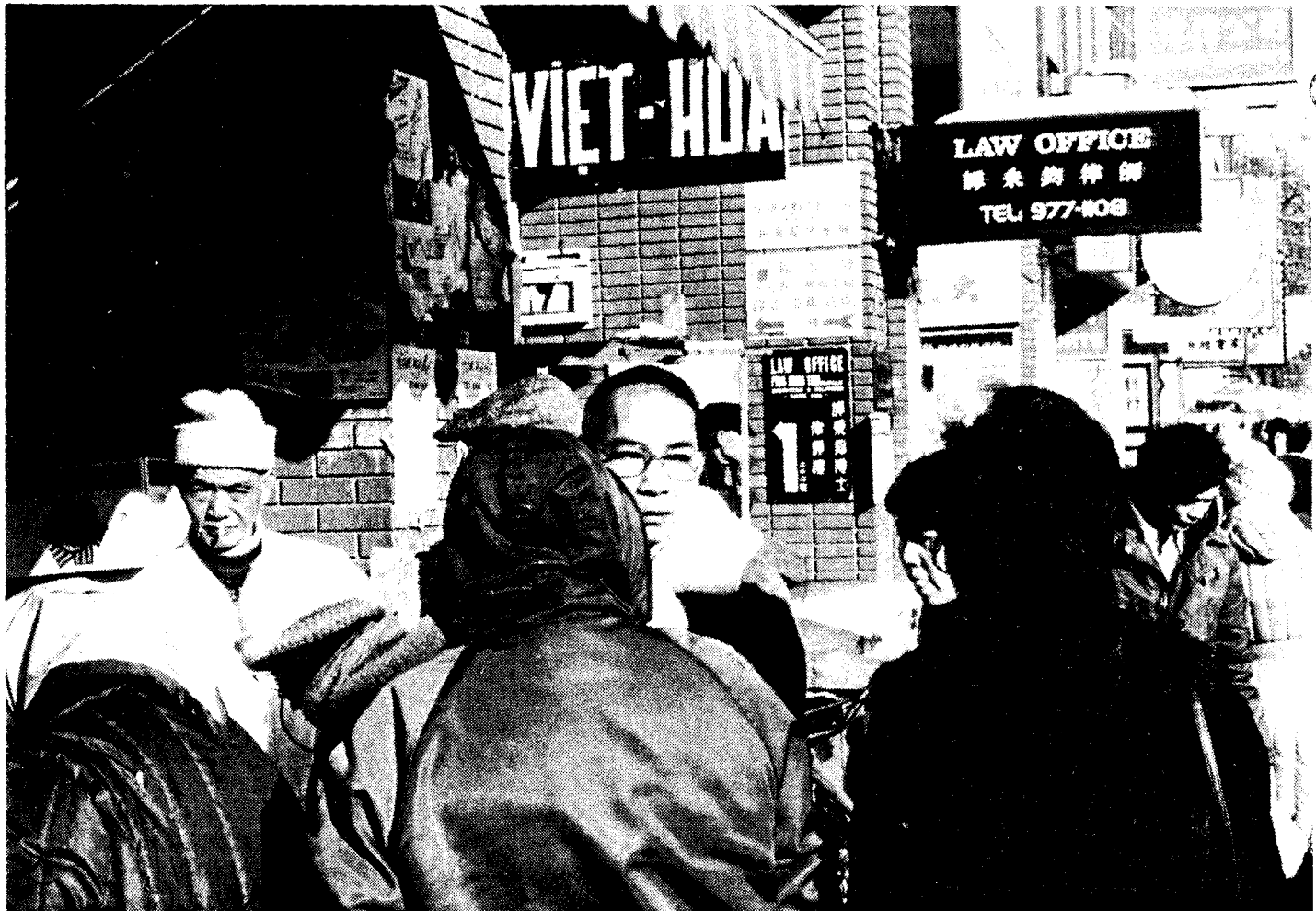
VerBurg: Do you see a lot of political movies like *Salvador* for example?

Cockburn: I haven't seen *Salvador*, but I saw *Missing*. Yeah, I guess I go to a fair number of

those kinds of movies for the same reason that I like the kind of music I do—because I want to go see a movie that is about something. I don't go to very many comedies.

Luttikhuisen: So "realism" means a lot to you? That is, if you go to see something in the visual arts it will be something you can relate to politically.

Cockburn: Not necessarily. That's different for me. Although I like a lot of stuff that I can relate to in a direct way, there's a lot of less representational art that I really like too. The same with music. As soon as you eliminate the lyrics in music you have a much more abstract political element. In some cases you have political element that's not discernable at all. Sibelius, for instance, had a political, or was perceived as performing a political act, when he played symphonies with titles that had elements of Finnish nationalism. But the actual music doesn't say anything about anything; it just exists. The same is true of painting and so on. It doesn't matter so much whether the art has a particular message or not. This is where the form and content thing gets hard to pin down, because it may be more valid



even if it doesn't have a particular message.

Luttikhuisen: Would you say you're more concerned with the artistic process than the product?

Cockburn: I'd say the fun lies in the artistic process, but I'm concerned about the product.

Smilde: It seems like rebellious music serves as an inculturation tool for acceptance into the status quo which had the appearance of rebellion. What will it take to have a widespread rebellion or integrity in music again? Will it take another war?

Cockburn: In this culture it's hard to say what that will be. I don't think, for instance, it's a question of the integrity in the music as much as it's a question of the social function of the music and how it's used. The sensibility of the New Wave movement—if you can call it a movement—definitely plays into the status quo because it's blantly cynical and materialistic, and that's what the status quo is all about. In the early days of rock and roll there was an element of rebellion. It was more conscious in the '60s and it was maybe more of a focus for the widespread sentiments that were around. But in the end it wasn't any more of a rebellion than the guys in their yellow shirts that Trotsky talks about in *Literature and Revolution*. That's the reason why so many people sort of swung so far away from it and you had this right-wing backlash that developed throughout the '70s. I think people approached revolutionary change in an extremely naive way. It was all peace and love without any sort of planning and brainwork. It was what he (Trotsky) was talking about in the two pages I read. It was very much a bourgeois revolution to the extent that it was a revolution at all. I mean who was out there in the streets? It was all the children of middle-class parents. The working-class was all over there in uniform being blown away. The same thing is happening now. The same thing happened with rock 'n roll when it first started. It wasn't a conscious rebellion. Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly and those guys didn't sit down and say, "Hey, we're revolutionaries," they're saying "Hey, I want to make some money, this is how I can do it, and this is what I like to do." So they weren't revolutionaries at all. Youth culture was born in that era. You know, the post-war thing. All of a sudden there was a big market that discovered its buying power and it was going to make use of that, so you had rock 'n roll. But again, it was the same kind of rebellion—it's not really rebellion against the status quo, but a rebellion in favor of it almost. We want to have our version of the status quo, you know. We want to have the same thing you guys have, "you guys" being in that case their parents, which is cars and property and the right to do what we want to do.

Of course that's an illusion but that's the way it looks when you're a teenager I guess.

Smilde: It seems the era of the late '60s was kind of a rebellion against the establishment, but I don't know that much about it since I'm not from that era. It seems like the rebellion now isn't really that way.

Cockburn: The '60s were very attractive because they had the appearance of rebellion. At the time I didn't think of it as rebellion. I don't think anybody really did. It was more of a giving up. It was like "the world is screwed up and we don't want anything to do with it." It wasn't an activist type of situation at all. Once you had a war with people getting killed, the sensibilities that started with the Beat generation diffused to a lot of people and became the hippie phenomenon. Then you had something that was more socially conscious or more motivated to try to change things, but for most people involved in it, it was never very clear or very directed. People didn't or couldn't say anything about it except that "we all have to love each other," which is basically true. Except what does that mean? Or "You've got to drop out of the system." Of course that's a very subversive thing to do and it was effective in a certain way. But it was only effective until that movement realized its buying power. Then all of a sudden it was "You should go to San Francisco and wear a bunch of flowers in your hair." More than anything else I've summed up the death of the hippie movement as anything meaningful. There used to be a club in Montreal that I played at that was next door to a restaurant that was a Mafioso hangout. The mobsters are always sitting in there, and whenever someone who looked like a hippie came in one of them would go over and play that song on the jukebox. They never said anything or harassed anyone, but that always happened. It was like "OK, we know where you're coming from." And that, sadly, was true.

Baker: Do you ever feel like you're compelled by the masses to fulfill a certain need or to be a certain way?

Cockburn: Yes. There's a sort of give and take there. I don't think any person can move the masses either. I think that's a role that history decides with hindsight. But it comes down to a question of responsibility. People buy what I do, and I'm obliged to produce what I consider to be quality stuff. I'm also obliged if I go out of my way to say things to people. Then I have to be answerable for what I say. I see it in those terms more than in a generalized social sense. There's some kind of hole there that the last couple of albums has filled in the States, for example,

whereas the earlier albums didn't or were not needed. That kind of need was very evident on the tour that we did with the release of *Stealing Fire* in the States, which was right around the last election. And there were a lot of intense feelings, especially among the people who were coming to the shows, because they were people who were not Reagan supporters. They felt, it seemed, that they had no voice. There's no alternative voice in the States. There's no voice of the left anywhere, or even the middle really. Here were all these people—most of them student-age—who had given up hope in a way, because the Reagan machine seemed like such a steamroller. They were coming to the shows and hearing things that they wanted said, and there was no one who was saying that. There was a really intense emotional feeling in those shows, and it was quite exciting, and I think there was a lot to give and take there. It was evident to me that we were fulfilling a social function there, because we were actually in a position to hearten those people to some degree. You can't ever access how that works or what the degree is, but it was there.

DeLang: Do you feel hopeful as a musician in Canada because there are opportunities for taking chances that aren't found in America?

Cockburn: In a way that's two different questions. Yes, the Canadian scene is more open in certain ways. The American scene, as it is in Canada, is not all one scene. It's regionalized to some extent. You go through New England—especially the rural areas in New Hampshire and Maine—where there's a strongly-entrenched, so-called "counter-culture" scene which has arisen in the Northwest and various other spots around the country. In those scenes there's an audience for me, for instance, that's a little harder to generate than in a city like Miami. You have to be careful when talking about scenes on a national basis. Obviously the industry operates on a national basis and doesn't regard those regional factors very much. It seems to be quite successful in taking that approach. The Canadian music industry is really weird, because it's owned by the American music industry, except for a few small, independent record companies, one of which happens to be mine. I think there's an openness about getting started here perhaps. At least there was when I first came on the scene (I don't know if it's still true), because Canada was sort of discovering itself as a cultural entity and that process is still going on. In the States, the industry is more entrenched. Once you rise above a certain point in the hierarchy of things you run into a stone wall which is not there in the States. The record companies here—and I'm still talking

about getting started—can't do anything on their own. They have to ask somebody in LA or New York what to do, and they're not interested in doing anything on their own either. The president of the record companies here are all Americans who are stationed here. That has a tremendous effect on what you can accomplish here. Growing up in this country is a very different prospect. To whatever extent the music rises out of people's experience here. I think you have a greater degree of openness here than you do in the States. We don't grow up saluting the flag. We don't grow up using the term "un-Canadian." There's a whole sensibility in the States that doesn't exist in this country.

DeLang: I'm Canadian, and I've heard the term "un-Canadian" a few times.

Cockburn: That's something that's come along recently. That sensibility is here a lot more deliberately with this government than it's ever been before. It's a very blatant trend to adopt the trappings of the Presidential system in this country. Mulroney wants his picture in all the immigration offices, just like Reagan. There's all this bullshit that these gookies are buying into the success, or what they think of as the success, of the United States. "If we Canadians do all the things the Americans do, then we'll be rich and powerful like them." Of course, that's garbage, because we're not in that position at all. We don't have that kind of money, or that kind of population, or that kind of historical place in things. That sensibility is there, so I'm not surprised that the terms are starting to change, too. In terms of music, you're coming from a different place. I think Canadians grow up in general, even though there is massive ignorance here as well, a little more open to the rest of the world than kids in the United States do. I think we get more international news in the newspapers and on TV. It comes from a different perspective, too, even though it's all from the American wire services. It's presented in our context. So we have a certain objectivity about things that is harder to achieve in the States. But at the same time, we lack the sort of aggressive drive that comes from being told, "You're the best, and you can just go ahead and do whatever the hell you want." Even though that's not really true for most people in the United States they grow up thinking it is. In a way that means things are possible, because you can think of them. In terms of musicians I don't know how that affects what anybody does or who makes it or who doesn't. Obviously, there's more money to be made in the States. The systems are in place to be more powerful and to be more of an influence. Influence in a certain way I mean.

Lionel Richie can influence people to do anything he chooses to influence them to do, as long as it's not anything that's not part of the system. Michael Jackson can get people to drink soft-drinks. That kind of potential for influence is there. I guess I'm fulfilling the same kind of function in a certain way, because people think I can influence others about certain political issues. The Steelworkers' union wants to interview me for their magazine, because they think I can somehow enhance their image.

Zuidervaart: Do you think if you had sought your first recording contract from A & A or one of the other big companies that dominated the scene in the late '60s and early '70s, would that have significantly shaded the kind of music you did?

Cockburn: Yes. I would have had to modify what I was doing to a great degree to get accepted by a major record company, unless I happened to get lucky and there was a man in the right place at the right time for me. Those things happen. Dylan got a recording contract coming out of the Folk Movement. He was a novelty, and there was already a trend that way. Holes appear every now and then, if you happen to be lucky enough to slide through. I found a hole like that with Bob Marley and Island Records. Island Records started as a guy with a pushcart in London selling records on the street, and then it became a record company. He got lucky with writing music, and Bob Marley became a tremendous influence because Chris Blackwell got lucky. So we all did. Without that key-chain circumstance we wouldn't have heard Bob Marley. So there are gaps, and there are gaps that nobody can really control. Record companies go around periodically tearing their hair out trying to figure what the next thing will be. It's obvious sales are dropping off and people are bored with whatever is happening. They try this and they try that, and then those windows appear when you come along at one of those moments. Of course whatever doesn't sell is culled quickly, so a lot of people only get to make one album if it doesn't sell a lot. My situation was a very good one for me because it was the first record for a small record company, and the guy who runs the record company is also my manager. He is a very aggressive and astute individual who can get people to do what he wants them to do.

Reimes: In spite of all the breaks that history has given you, you several times voiced a sense of responsibility to invest what's been given to you. Are you able to say that or are you conscious of that?

Cockburn: Yes. I think that goes with being an artist generally. I think there is a certain moral

responsibility to tell the truth, first of all, as far as you can discern it, and to be accountable for what you do. I don't subscribe to the view that art has no moral connection, but that's a hard thing to pin down. I wouldn't want to be the one, and I would resist anyone who would try to make a moral code for artists to go by. Nevertheless, there is a moral responsibility there. For instance, I have a responsibility not to write or promote songs that encourage people to use heroin, to take a simple example, because it's personally, spiritually, and socially destructive. I don't want to be responsible for that, for destroying someone's life. There's an artistic responsibility, and on top of that, because I am a Christian, I accept a certain set of moral standards that go with that. I think in general, that doesn't add very much to what I would think about artistic responsibility. It doesn't always look "proper," unfortunately. The responsibility to tell the truth means you'll end up irritating a lot of people a lot of the time.

Epplett: This question depends on your knowledge of a certain group. Do you think U2's work is significant in terms of addressing political concerns?

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"—isms," you start losing
sight of the truth.*

Cockburn: I'm not sure that I have enough knowledge about them. I know their albums, what I hear on the radio, and what I hear about them, so I have some sense of how they are perceived. What they represent in Ireland may be totally different from what they represent in North America. In fact, I would be very surprised if that were not the case. In North America I don't think they represent very much that has anything to do with anything. On the positive side, they make good music and they come from a spiritually and politically acceptable space. On the negative side, I don't think there are enough people in North America that have any idea of what they are talking about except in the Christian community, as far as that type of lyric goes. Politically speaking, none of us know what it's really like living in Ireland to have that. Even though they're not from Northern Ireland, to be looking at the stuff that's happening—it's so close and so horrible. Any statement about that at all, no matter how soft a statement, becomes intense

in that kind of situation, I suspect. Here it's not so intense. I think people see them as having a political and spiritual stance, but in a way it works against their ability to influence people because it's perceived as a nebulous one. They are somehow okay and they are somehow right, but we don't really have to think too hard about how they are right or how they are okay. For something to be politically meaningful in a conscious way, people have to know what you are saying and what it's about. You have to hit them in the face with it in most cases. Most of us are not that willing to do a lot of digging to find out what's behind something.

DeJong: Was it your marketing man who put your song "Maybe the Poet" on *Miami Vice*, or did you okay that?

Cockburn: Well, I didn't resist it. I was aware of it beforehand. I thought it was amusing, first of all. The show is stupid, but a lot of people watch it. I hadn't anticipated them cutting up the song the way they did, but in the end that didn't hurt anything really. The whole thing was so ridiculous. For those who didn't see it, the song talks about the role of poets in society and how they are kept from exercising that role. It has a groovy, Afro beat to it. *Miami Vice* used it in a show about a poet from an unspecified Latin American country, presumably El Salvador, who had been tortured by security police and reduced to wheelchair status. He was coming to Miami to lecture at the University, and the "Vice" squad was assigned to protect his life. He was also going through a severe case of writer's block, which the "Miami Vice" squad was able to counsel him about. He was also the subject of an assassination plot. He was almost broader than you can imagine a stereotype to be. He was a cross between the public image of Dylan Thomas as a drunk and Papell Noruda as a great artist. The guy was so ridiculous, and it was embarrassing, in a way, to see the song in that context. It said nothing about nothing in the end. The only thing it did was implicate the CIA in the attempt to kill this guy, which was actually a pretty progressive thing for "Miami Vice" to do. Subsequently they have done things in that direction that are even more blatant, using that medium, too, to get through to people.

DeJong: I thought it was a good thing in that context. I think there is a good chance that some teenager, at least, was influenced by the song.

Cockburn: Yes. It's a case of trying to get through the swamp without getting muddy. You have to take certain risks to get to the public at all, and that's risk that it'll be tainted beyond all recognition by the time it actually gets out to everybody.

Certain people believe that whatever is good will ultimately show through. I'm not so convinced, but sometimes it happens.

Stapert: When you compose a song do you think of the music itself as part of the language that supports the lyrics, or is the music something that is neutral?

Cockburn: I think the music, at least ideally, is an important part of the picture. In some ways that's hard to define, because you can't say that a certain type of music carries a certain type of baggage for the people who hear it. No doubt it carries some. So a certain set of lyrics can work a lot better presented in a reggae context than they will in a Renaissance art song or a rock and roll song. Other kinds of lyrics will work better with a heavier or more aggressive rhythm behind them. It's hard to say exactly why that happens.

They also wanted to put a sticker on it: "Warning, this album contains materials on it that would offend Republicans."

Wong: Was part of your attention to reggae a result of that kind of music traditionally having social and political content?

Cockburn: That's part of it. It has it already built into it. It's grown up around that conveying of messages. It's very easy to put different messages with that music.

Reimes: Do you have a certain method of working, or is the artistic process very spontaneous for you?

Cockburn: It tends to be less spontaneous and more work as I get older, partly because there is a body of work where I have already said certain things. So I have to struggle a little harder to find things to say or ways of saying things that aren't just repeating myself. I keep a notebook and I write ideas for lyrics as I get them, and in that sense there's an element of spontaneity. Rarely, (but sometimes) a whole song will come out at once or almost all at once. I have an idea and it just happens. Most of the time it takes the accumulation of a body of imagery or some catch phrases or some kind of sparking point. When you get enough of that, a song gets generated. Then it's a question of looking for music that

supports it. I am told that I'm not typical in that sense. Most people write music, and then try to find lyrics to fit it. I don't have any idea how that works, or what's involved for them. The act of writing gets less frequent and more demanding as time goes on to the point where it's hardly moving at all. At this point I don't know what to compare it to. In the early stages of something growing, you can see it grow quickly, and later on growth is going on but it's much less obvious.

DeLang: Have you gone through writer's block before?

Cockburn: Yes, I've had that periodically. You have to sort of kick yourself in the ass every once in a while. I think that's probably true no matter what line of work you're in, and it's certainly true on a personal level aside from work. It seems especially true when you're trying to do something "creative." Periodically you have to have your own little cultural revolution. You have to shake yourself free from all the accumulated assumptions, and some people accomplish that by drugs, a new sex partner, or a number of other ways. I've never really figured out how to do that. I just grab at whatever comes along to see if it works.

Rikkers: Is it frustrating for a lot of artists (who don't have the weight to throw around and who want to do something to maintain their integrity) to know that they won't necessarily pull in the big bucks when they try to convey a message?

Cockburn: Yes, it's a tricky thing. What do you do when you are someone who doesn't have an audience? I had an audience before I was a Christian, so I didn't have to deal with getting an audience even though I was a Christian. I had a Christian audience before I said anything that people recognized as political. So when I started doing that I didn't have to come to grips with getting recognized as being too political for someone to handle. I was innocuous in people's eyes when I appeared on the scene. I think if I started out now with the things I am saying, I would have a lot harder time getting any kind of media or industry acceptance.

Rikkers: Do you think the industry in the States, as it works with American audiences, is less willing to try something or do something controversial? Is it the same in British music?

Cockburn: Britain is a weird thing. In the States they'll try anything; they can afford to take chances. There are periods when they are less willing to and other periods where it opens up. Nevertheless, American record companies don't care what you say on records, as long as you can sell it. They get uptight if the word "fuck" appears

in a song, like in "Call It Democracy." We went through this ridiculous discussion with MCA in the States about highlighting the word "fuck" in yellow ink on the back which they did against our will. Then they changed it on the next issue of the album, and we were told the lyrics would be on the back but not the yellow highlighting. It's so self-defeating and ridiculous anyway, because of the whole thing with the Washington wives and the attempt to get a campaign against excesses—as they thought of them—in rock music. They all wanted to play it safe, and be able to say their bases were covered. I know that they personally didn't care one way or another. They wanted to be able to send the album into the radio station and have the radio people, who in some cases act as a self-appointed conscience for the nation in terms of rock music because they don't want to get sued, play it. They also wanted to put a sticker on it and everything that said something like, "Warning, this album contains materials on it that would offend Republicans." That would get it on the front racks of record stores.

Epplatt: As an artist who addresses social and political concerns, do you feel that you are not accepted by some people in the Christian church?

Cockburn: Oh yes. I guess I've always been on the fringe of the church in the sense that I didn't grow up in it. I mostly went to an Anglican church when I was going to church more than I do now, because once I had gone a few times I knew what was happening. Also, I came to Christianity through C.S. Lewis and other Anglicans, so I sort of knew what I was getting into. I tried for a while to be a Fundamentalist without much success. There are certain people who think that I have lost it or am lost, because I take the side of a bunch of "commies" in Central America or maybe I use language that's not sanctioned in my songs. Or maybe it's because I have a girlfriend to whom I'm not married or whatever people know or think they know about me. There's always going to be somebody who gets outraged easily, but in the end that doesn't really matter. I could never be a card-carrying communist for the same reason. I would always be doing something that would irritate the Party.

DeLang: How are you viewed in Quebec? What is the music scene like there?

Cockburn: I don't think people in Quebec are particularly impressed with my attempts to write in French, but they did like the fact that we put translations on albums—especially a few years ago when the language issue was a lot hotter than it is now. It gave us an opportunity to tour in more of Quebec than just Montreal. The Quebec music scene is hard to sustain because the

audience is so limited in size. They're very loyal but eventually they get bored. There are just so many musicians who can work in such a small scene. Right now I think it is in a state of decay because the artists are performing in English. There is not enough money to support them singing in French. That will change again. There's bound to be another backlash. It's been allowed to slide and things haven't really changed. Quebec still has to fight no matter how many concessions it gets from the Federal Government. Culturally, it is still an underdog and always will be in North America, because by itself it's not that big. East of Quebec it's a whole other thing with all those Newfoundlanders out there. The pop music that happens in Newfoundland has a strong element of folk music in it. They listen to the same records we do, but the bands out there that I've heard all have some element of folk music about them mixed with rock in varying degrees.

Luttikhuizen: How do you feel about pop music sung in English hitting nations where English is not the primary language?

Cockburn: It's sort of paradoxical. On the one hand, it's another aspect of colonialism. On the other hand, it's a lot of other things too—dance music that doesn't mean anything more than that. People throughout the developed world—Western world, I guess I should say—are used to listening to English language pop music. In Italy, people learn their English by trying to decipher English records. That's good in a way, because it means they aren't bothered by going out and listening to an English artist, whereas we would have a very hard time trying to motivate ourselves to go out and hear an Italian rock band, because we wouldn't know what was going on. They at least think that they know what's going on. They don't always. That's the down side of it. They hear a few words and think they know what the song is about, but they don't unless they can sit down with the lyrics and read them. They really don't always have a clue, which is a weird thing to work with. The first tour in Italy that we did was like that. In most cases the shows were organized by the local Communist Party or Communist radio stations. They were embarrassed about all the God stuff in the songs, being a bunch of godless materialists, they chose to portray me as an environmentalist. Nobody could say different because they thought, "This guy is really into nature." They just didn't want to know they need the Soviet Union at this point; it's their bread and butter in certain areas of the economy anyway. There are a lot of Marxists who think the

Soviet system must be good since it professes to Marxist, too. Maybe East Germany is an even better example because it's more blatant there. We did "Maybe the Poet" in this big festival in East Berlin, which was called "The International Festival of Political Song" and had an audience of maybe 100,000 people. They were all in the Communist Youth Movement, because if they weren't they would have had a very hard time getting tickets to go to this thing. That's the way the society is set up. We had a translator who was making comments before the songs. We did the song and I said, "The thing we have to keep in mind, and I'm sure you know(because they do know) is that they don't like the Russians in East Germany at all personally. They can't philosophically disagree though, at least overtly." I made this little statement of the fact that East and West are not so different: "In the West we subdue our poets economically and write them off in various ways. In the East we put them in insane asylums and silence them in more physical ways." The translator did a lot of swallowing and gulping, and left a lot out. Each person reading those lyrics has to go through the same thing on their own and make the judgment.

Luttikhuizen: How do you feel if an audience doesn't understand your lyrics, or if the majority of people you are singing to don't?

Cockburn: Is a different thing. People try to understand in Germany, where they are more familiar with English. They can usually follow to some extent if they can hear them. The sound thing becomes real important then. There the shows are just an ad for the album: "Okay, go out and buy the album. You can find out what we're really saying." The first time you hear a song in any language, even if you speak the language, you never get all the words anyway. So they buy the albums with translations in German and all that, and they figure out exactly what is being said. The same thing happens in Japan.

Reimes: So your albums are available with translations?

Cockburn: Yes, in those countries.

Reimes: Even in the East?

Cockburn: They come out in East Germany, and I think that's the only one. That's because it's the only country that the album company in West Germany can reach. That's our major European contact. There was some talk of getting one or more of them out in Russia, but I don't think that has materialized. There are bootlegs floating around in the Eastern bloc. In fact somebody a few years ago sent me a picture of one of my albums being held up in front of the Kremlin by someone who appeared to be Russian. I know

that the albums are in Central America. Somebody wrote me recounting an episode in El Salvador where they met somebody who had been down there as part of some type of church delegation. They hadn't really gotten to see anything except what the officials wanted them to see. They could see all around them how horrible everything was, but couldn't really get to it. The guy was quite disappointed. He ended up sitting in a restaurant the day before he left El Salvador. There was only one other guy in the restaurant and he was Salvadorian. They got to talking, and it turned out he was a musician. He knew American musicians, and this guy asked him if he'd ever heard of me. His voice dropped, and he said, "Yes, he's really great, but we can't get his albums here." So this guy said he would send him one. The Salvadorian said, "Okay, but don't send it in its own cover. Send it in a Rolling Stones cover, otherwise I'll get killed." You hear stuff like that, and you know that it's there and getting to someone. I'd like to have the albums out in the East, because whenever the albums are out and they do anything, I get a chance to tour and see what's going on.

Smilde: Could you share some of your views, experiences, and perspectives on Central America?

Cockburn: Nicaragua is a very beautiful country, first of all. It's physically beautiful and climatologically beautiful—it has everything that a country should have, in a way. From the early colonial days until a few years ago, it was consistently and ruthlessly exploited. As in other exploited countries, people don't always like that. There are always those people who make a living from that situation, and there are those who support those people—the workers in the factories, for example, and the middle-class kids who go to college and get exposed to philosophical and political ideas, and experiences from other countries. Eventually those sentiments culminate in a revolution like the way they are now. It's a revolution that has taken the form of a socialist revolution. It's been spearheaded by the Sandinistas, most of whom declare themselves Marxists. It's a revolution that would have happened. It would have found some other rhetoric if Marxist rhetoric hadn't been there to support it or to focus it. The need for revolution was there, and really there, too, like it was in France. In fact, that's a fairly workable way to think about it too, in terms of the French Revolution. The same would be true if it happens in all the other countries in Latin America as it is bound to do. You just can't keep that many people that long without something exploding. That's the basic picture. On top of that you have

everybody's invested interest being expressed. What we get in North American newspapers and television is very distorted. It's distorted in favor of the Republican point of view even in Canada, because we get all our news from the same wire services. It has been manipulated to a great degree, as we are finding out from the elements of the Iran-Contra affair which are dribbled out to us. It is an interesting strategy that's being used there, and in a way it's a good introduction to media manipulation. The White House has this concept of "staying ahead of the curve" whereby they know that all this bad news is going to come out. So they release it themselves, but they release one little point at a time. That means that it

I don't subscribe to the view that art has no moral connection, but I wouldn't want to be the one, and I will resist anyone who would try to make a moral code for artists to go by.

appears on page nine instead of getting headlines. So most of the people who read the newspaper will never see it, and those who do see it are influenced subliminally to think that it's of lesser importance than a lot of other things that are going on. In the meantime, we're getting all these revelations that are just as much an exposure of an institutionalized system of deceit as the Watergate thing was in the '60s. All through the '60s people were saying, "The CIA is spying on students" and "My phone is being tapped" and all this stuff. I always thought it was just paranoia and probably drug-induced. In the end it wasn't that way at all. Everyone's conspiracy theory turned out to be right. There's no reason to believe that's not the case right now. I know from my own experiences and contacts with people that almost anything you can think of as going on is going on. We're just seeing the tip of the iceberg with these revelations that are coming out. So it's important when you're looking at El Salvador and Nicaragua particularly, to bear in mind that no matter how objective you're trying to be, you have been conditioned by some very subtle deliberate attempts to make sure that you are conditioned that way. That's true for me and for all of us. Basically, the Sandinistas represent the

aspirations of the Nicaraguan people. They definitely do. There's no question about that, no matter how much people bitch about specific programs or the lack thereof in Nicaragua. They voted them in in a fair election. They like the fact that they are in now. You can go to parts of the country like anywhere else where there is less support or there is more support. What that means to me is that it is a country that has elected its government and has every right to govern itself the way it sees fit. We should allow it to do so, encourage it to do so, and support its attempts to do that. In the end, the thing that scares the Reaganites and people of that ilk about Nicaragua is that it's a case in point. If it succeeds, all the other countries can point at Nicaragua and say, "They did it. We can do it too," and they will.

The Salvadorian said, "Okay, but don't send it in its own cover. Send it in a Rolling Stones cover, otherwise I'll get killed."

They will anyway. That's where the Republican/right wing point-of-view falls down. It's that those revolutions are going to happen anyway and the sooner we in the developed world get off our asses, support them, and try to encourage positive social change, the less bloody, disastrous, and catastrophic those revolutions will be. The longer we wait the worse it will be, just like South Africa. Nobody has acted until now, and it's hard to imagine any outcome to the events in South Africa that's not just going to be a horror show.

Smilde: It seems the irony of the situation is that in our interfering we are causing the thing we don't want. We didn't want a "Little Russia" in Nicaragua so we are trying to conquer the Marxist faction there, but we are pushing them toward Russia.

Cockburn: Of course. The understanding that I have of it is a horrible one. I'm not sure that this is right, but this is how I perceive it. I think that the policy that we go by as Canadians and Americans is so cynical. They know very well that there is no danger of Nicaragua becoming a Soviet satellite, but they're losing money. So they will make it a Soviet satellite so they can say they have to

destroy it because it's a Soviet satellite. Then they'll be able to make money again. I think that's what it's all about. I don't think it has anything at the bottom to do with who controls what part of the world, except as a source of income. I'm sure the people who make the policy cloak the problem in rhetoric for themselves. They make themselves feel better by pretending that the world is threatened by communism.

Smilde: Is that an indication of the imperialism of multinationals who need the resources of Nicaragua to exploit?

Cockburn: Yes. Calling them multinationals is sort of dangerous. There is a danger in being able to put a name on these things, because you can't conceive of "a multinational." What is it? How do you picture it in your head, and how do you fight it? I find it better to think of the people as individuals, because then I can conceive of someone making these choices. Then the rest of us are in some way or another allowing them to do that. It's a strange thing. We're all afraid and grow up afraid of all kinds of stuff, so it's easy to buy into it. We've always had them, but in this age we have the fears that go with the great peculiarities of the age—technology, the massification of the age, and so on. Because you can't put a face on technology and you can't put a face on being swallowed in some huge collectivity, you want to attach it to something. Then you immediately become vulnerable to manipulation by people who have something to gain. It's particularly evident in the Christian community, where it's easy to say, "Communists don't believe in God. Communists are expansionists in their Russian manifestation at least." Therefore, you are threatened personally by the existence of communism, so any manifestation of communism has to be rooted out for the protection of God. Now God doesn't need us to protect Him, I don't think, but half of the Christian world thinks He does. I've had arguments with people on that very point. It's okay that the Guatemalan government kills a million of its citizens, because we have to keep godless communism out. I've had a Christian look me right in the eye and say that very thing: "How can this guy call himself a Christian? How can he talk about love on one hand and do this on the other?" It's because he's afraid, and because someone gave him a convenient place to put that fear.

—Photography by David Smilde,