

# Richard Dawson: Peasant

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Daniel Bromfield

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If nothing else, Richard Dawson's *Peasant* should serve as a sobering reminder that while the Muslim world was revolutionizing art and science well over a millennium ago, the Brits were still dragging their pigs to market through deep puddles of shit. This might just be the most compelling musical portrait of medieval unpleasantness since the Child ballads, and Dawson, an uncompromising and challenging songwriter, takes almost sadistic delight in painting a world where life is nasty, brutish, and short.

*Peasant* was inspired by Dawson's research into the post-Roman British kingdom of Bryneich, and it's easy to see why the songwriter was drawn to it. His best-known song, "The Vile Stuff," recounted the gradually escalating drunken shenanigans of a group of schoolboys, ending in most cases in catastrophe. Sickening details abounded: "*Matthew Mooney's hockle in my hair smells like menthol stubs.*" "*Blood, snot and curry coalesce in the corners of my nails.*" *Peasant* is even more drenched in bodily fluids and revolting odors.

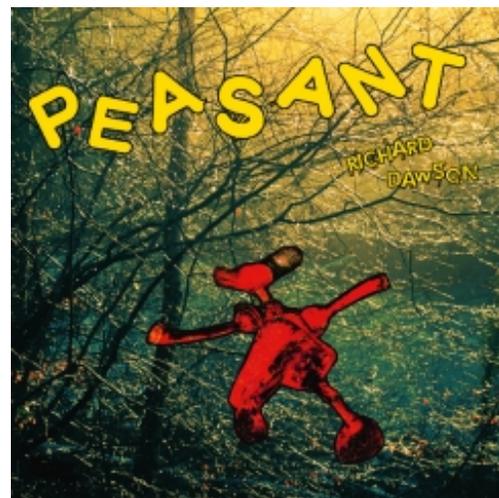
"*A dice of houses cast in clay and sheepdung,*" sets the scene on "Ogre," and within seconds Dawson's narrator is slaughtering a goose and downing its blood, which "*smells like a smithy.*" Later in the song there's a "*foul-smelling bloom,*" and on 11-minute finale "Masseuse," our narrator finds the breath of the monk that's torturing him so foul he can barely speak for fear of vomiting. This is one of a few instances where the narrator's modern mindset shines through. In a time when hygiene was unknown, it's unlikely anyone minded very much that they were surrounded by stomach-turning smells.

But *Peasant* isn't about realism, nor romanticism—it's about nothing but Dawson's delight at imagining this world, and just how awful things were for its inhabitants. Dawson humanizes his broad medieval clichés not for pathos but to show this cruel world through their eyes. "*I am tired, I am afraid,*" his "Soldier" groans, and what we feel isn't so much sympathy but an answer to a question that's always nagged at the back of our heads during the combat scenes in medieval movies: what are all these faceless soldiers really thinking? Are they fully human? Dawson invites us to share their headspace as they eke out a living in a world with no time for their individual concerns.

There are moments of genuine pathos, like when we learn the "Beggar" has sold his shoes to buy a chicken for his wife to enjoy in her last moments. There are also bits of fantasy escapism, like the Rumpelstiltskin-style parable of "Hob," where some kind of sorcerer saves a couple's child from death but returns down the road to take a grave payment. But mostly, *Peasant's* purpose is to give life to those tales of the past that seem too ugly to be true, at least to an audience unfamiliar with the extremes of utter poverty. We might have learned sometime in high school that the dyeing of wool was once done with urine; on "Weaver," Dawson shows us and makes us believe it.

He paints this world in vivid detail. Names that'd nestle comfortably alongside "here be dragons" abound: the Bog of Names, the Pool of Plenty, the Fortress of Long Wings. You can imagine Dawson conjuring up each of these places in his head as he writes about them, and it wouldn't have been a bad idea for him to include maps in the margins—though, seeing as he's building off a historical time and place, that might require more research than it's worth. You can picture the coldness of the weather, the dilapidation of the huts and the omnipresent sense of danger, whether from hostile invaders, diseases or forces beyond our power to explain. And, of course, the smell.

More than any other musical work, *Peasant* most reminded me of Roman Polanski's 1971 version of *Macbeth*. Like



*Peasant*, that film was a portrait of medieval Britannia that made no effort to romanticize its setting or to assign weighty meaning to Shakespeare's story. It also possessed a level of unpleasant detail that made watching it almost sickening. For instance, we witness a royal banquet, and a bear is dragged in to be harassed and eventually killed by hounds. Bear-baiting was a common pastime in those days, but we rarely see such a gruesome spectacle in our fantasy entertainment.

In a modern Hollywood, a committee likely would have canceled that upsetting scene. But in 1971, Hollywood let the whims of auteurs run wild, and artists like Polanski, Peckinpah, Altman and Scorsese were able to introduce the mainstream to artworks of great consequence that were often extremely disturbing. Music is easier to make and finance than films, so underground artists like Dawson can easily sacrifice sales for creative freedom so long as they have a day job. Indie-folk might not be as fashionable as it was at the beginning of the decade, but it's still a world that's friendly to works of terrific scope and uncompromising vision. Joanna Newsom's *Ys*. Sufjan Stevens' *Illinois*. Phil Elverum's *The Glow Pt. 2...* and, sure enough, *Peasant*.

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