



THE CAMERA IS OURS

# White Riot + discussion

During the opening sequence of Rubika Shah's exhilarating documentary *White Riot*, which charts the rise of the Rock Against Racism movement, a sequence of familiar, grainy footage plays. Groups of fascists are on the streets boasting about their violent hatred, political leaders spout far-right rhetoric on the TV, and the police target black and brown communities with unjust treatment and brutal violence. These eerily resonant scenes could be from 2020, but are in fact from the UK in the 1970s, when the country was experiencing a toxic tide of hatred against immigrant communities.

Using a mixture of archive material, animation and new interviews, Shah's feature debut tells the story of the formation of the grassroots cultural campaign. Rock Against Racism started in 1976, prompted by the racist outbursts of Eric Clapton, who RAR described as 'rock's biggest colonist', and the rise in political power of the National Front.

White Riot seeks to show us how the DIY, multiracial, community-led movement fought back against British fascism. To spread their antiracist message, Rock Against Racism published fanzines and organised gigs where black and white bands would share the stage. They called out hypocritical white musicians who espoused right-wing rhetoric while benefiting from the influence of black music.

Together with the Anti-Nazi League, in 1978 Rock Against Racism famously (as documented in the film) organised a carnival that saw 100,000 people march from Trafalgar Square to an open-air concert in Victoria Park, a hotspot for the National Front at the time. Bands like X-Ray Spex, Steel Pulse, Tom Robinson Band and The Clash all took to the stage.

'Our job was to peel away the Union Jack to reveal the swastika,' says the movement's co-founder Red Saunders in the film. As a self-declared punk myself, and a woman of colour, this speaks to my own devotion to this music. Since I was a teen, I've held on to the belief that punk is ultimately about resisting, fighting back against the elite, and supporting the marginalised minority in society. Given our current predicament, with racial tensions again at boiling point, are there lessons we could take from Rock Against Racism's approach? Do we need another riot?

At first, the narrative that *White Riot* presents is one centring around whiteness. Kate Webb, who ran the RAR office, said: 'Part of what RAR was doing was trying to think about racism as a white problem and the idea that we were all still living consciously or unconsciously with the legacy of colonialism.' Rock Against Racism identified whiteness as the problem, allowing for a deeper conversation on racism and its connections to British history to be held.

Of course, to anyone else who had to deal with racism on a daily basis, Rock Against Racism's epiphany felt somewhat late. As Pauline Black, frontwoman of ska punk band The Selecter, said: 'Rock Against Racism was white people finally waking up to the fact that "oh my god there's racism here". Please, black people were living it.'

Yet, as frustrating as it may have been to see white people suddenly recognise the prejudices faced by people of colour, the efforts of Rock Against Racism were a valuable step in tackling the racism of the time.

The outlook of RAR specifically targeted the youth who were already disaffected and drawn to the rhetoric of the National Front. It offered an almost simplistic vision of black and white people uniting through shared music culture. Although lacking in nuance (there were plenty of examples at the time of white artists and fans of black music who were unable to recognise the contradiction of loving black music and hating black people), there's a lot to take from the idea of incorporating music culture into an antiracist movement.

While the recent Black Lives Matter protests were taking place, the music industry attempted to recognise the role it could play by taking part in Blackout Tuesday, posting black squares on social media in solidarity. The move was widely mocked for being too passive, but elsewhere in the music world real change was happening. Spurred on by the wealth of antiracist material passed around on social media, musicians and fans of all backgrounds spoke out. Bands and fans demanded labels and promoters make their rosters more inclusive, the DIY database Black Bandcamp was created to make it easier to find artists to support, and many artists donated profits from live-stream fundraisers and Bandcamp Fridays to antiracist causes.

It's this grassroots sensibility at the heart of Rock Against Racism that Shah seems desperate to draw the viewers' attention to. This was a movement that could have been started by anyone, and everyone could be involved. Anyone could write to the Rock Against Racism headquarters and ask to join a local branch or start one in their town or city. The organisation also published a fanzine called *Temporary Hoarding* to spread their political outlook and share skills, giving readers step-by-step guides on how to organise a gig or start a campaign. Through DIY self-publishing, they were able to sidestep establishment media outlets to directly communicate with their audience.

*White Riot* left me with a sense of hope that I haven't felt for a long time. The barrage of bad news that follows us at every waking hour, and the dominance of racist rhetoric, can make us feel powerless. But if there's any one message to be taken from Shah's film, it's the belief that if a group of punks and reggae fans could unite to fight back against hatred in the 70s, anyone could do the same now.

**Stephanie Phillips, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 17 September 2020**

## **Director's statement**

I began making *White Riot* as I was curious about the rise of the far right in the late 1970s. I had heard snippets about this era from family, about the racism they faced as British-Asians. Feeling ignorant about our recent history, I embarked on a journey to find out more.

What I found is that amongst all the hatred of that era, a small counter-culture movement – Rock Against Racism – began in a print shop in East London. It was an outlet for young people to share their views. They believed in equality – and music, punk and graphics were their weapon.

In my work, I often explore identity and youth culture: everyday people trying to make sense of our place in the world. It is a common theme that drives me to tell stories. So much of today's politics mirrors that of the late 1970s.

*White Riot* is an inspiring story about youth culture making a difference.

## **Production notes**

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**WHITE RIOT**

*Director:* Rubika Shah

*Executive Producer:* Paul Ashton

*Produced by:* Ed Gibbs

*Written by:* Rubika Shah, Ed Gibbs

*Director of Photography:* Susanne Salavati

*Editor:* Rubika Shah

*Original Music:* Aisling Brouwer

*Sound Operator:* Dave Sohanpal

*Sound Editor:* Emma Butt

*With:*

Red Saunders

Dennis Bovell

Mykaell Riley

Joe Strummer

UK 2019

81 mins

**THE CAMERA IS OURS:****BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS****Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion**

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

**Cow**

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

**The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie**

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

**From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston**

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

**Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow**

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

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**SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS****Skate Kitchen**

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

**Divines**

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

**Jinn**

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

**37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)**

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

**Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)**

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

**Marie Antoinette**

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

**Somersault**

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

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**IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN****In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz)**

Tue 1 Mar 20:50; Mon 7 Mar 18:15

**Hamlet**

Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by Prof Judith Buchanan)

**Earth Spirit (Erdgeist)**

Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

**The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz)**

Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

**The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse)**

Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar 18:00

**Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)**

Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

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