

- INTERVIEW -

Boots Riley on music/media/politics for the 21st century

Rosemary Overell

Introduction

Boots Riley is a hip-hop artist, activist and, most recently, a screenwriter and filmmaker. He has made music with The Coup since 1991. As an MC, Riley has done solo work and featured on albums by Atari Teenage Riot (2011), Ursus Minor (2005; 2011) and Muja Messiah. Alongside Tom Morello (Rage Against the Machine; Audioslave) Riley formed The Street Sweeper Social Club in 2006. He is a committed socialist and has been involved in diverse struggles in Oakland, California and globally for decades. Riley was a part of the Occupy Oakland movement and, most recently, has done a speaking tour, hosted by Podemos, in Spain. The Coup's most recent album *Sorry To Bother You* was released in 2012. *Sorry To Bother You* ties in with a screenplay of the same name that Riley wrote for *McSweeney's* in 2014. The script is now in pre-production for a 2017 release and explores the exploitative world of telemarketing, the importance of strike action and what happens if a breed of 'super workers' (half-horse, half-human 'equisapiens') were created.

Riley toured Aotearoa in 2014, supported by Radio One Dunedin; The Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago and the Otago Branch of the Tertiary Education Union. Not only did Riley play gigs, but he presented a keynote address on 'Hip Hop and Class Struggle' at the *music/media/politics* symposium organised by The Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago.

In the following interview, conducted a year after Riley's visit to Aotearoa, Riley reflects on the experience as well as the productive tensions between being a media producer, as well as an activist-critic. He discusses his motivation for making a movie and the critical potential of cinema, and reflects on the barbs made throughout *Sorry To Bother You* about viral videos, reality television and white privilege. Riley also shares his experiences of Podemos and the limitations of legislated reform compared to direct action by workers.

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Fig. 1: Photomontage of Boots Riley at Otago University by Peter McIntosh (*Otago Daily Times*, 2014)

Interview

Rosemary Overell: *What was your motivation when writing Sorry To Bother You?*

Boots Riley: I went to film school many years ago. I was at film school when we got our first record deal and so I quit film school to do that. So it's always been something that I wanted to do. I directed the video for 'Me and Jesus the Pimp in a '79 Granada Last Night' (The Coup 1998).

I think after doing stuff with Street Sweeper Social Club I was a little disoriented artistically and needed to do something to focus my creativity around. I needed one big project. And in a way that's how I have always made music. My creativity rallies around one concept. So, I decided to make a film that I would then create all the other elements around it. I want various ways of interaction, various ways of creating.

That's partly why last year we did *The Coup's Shadowbox* [tour], which was multidisciplinary in the way it surrounded the audience. There were multiple stages, multiple bands and artists – sometimes collaborating together, but doing different things – so that the audience didn't know which way to look, sometimes. It incorporated theatre. Sometimes we took a line from the song and expanded on that. So, for instance, in 'You Are Not A Riot' (The Coup 2012) there's a line where I say: 'You are a sitcom / based on a torture chamber' and then that expanded into a sitcom—based on a torture chamber. That was done on a side stage—with a canned laughter track of someone being tortured. We also had Guantanamo Bay Go-Go Dancers and puppets and a marching band—all these sorts of things, just to play with space.

RO: *Sorry to Bother You [the screenplay] engages with televisual media in quite a critical, but amusing, way—with the viral video of the main character, Cassius, being hit by a flying coke can, but also with the fictional reality TV programme I Got The Shit Kicked Out of Me. What do you think about the intersection between media and politics—how televisual, and other media, might play into maintaining a capitalist status quo?*

BR: Well it makes everything acceptable, right?

You see it all the time. I mean, I'm thinking about just recently it came out—this new video of a cop in North Charleston, South Carolina shooting Walter Scott in the back, while he ran away. It's very clear that the cop was in the wrong—to the point where even the right-wingers aren't chiming in because it's so clear.

But what does that do when it's being played over and over?

Without a movement that can actually change the way our system works, it ends up serving just as a warning to people to listen to the police. Yes—it gets everyone infuriated. Everyone understands it as injustice. But, it's divorced from a way to actually change the situation. So, it ends up enforcing the ideas of who's in power and what latitude you have in dealing with it: 'now don't even run away from the police, because there might not be somebody with a video camera'.

I mean—just to be clear—I think everything is political. Everything has an 'effect'. But I mean, the idea is out there that video democratises everything, the idea that knowledge—people having knowledge of their world and are analysing their world a little bit more correctly—necessarily means 'power'. But the real thing is that you have to have organisation that can effect that change. And that organisation has to have certain tools in its tool-belt and one of those has to be the ability to stop industry, to be able to shut down industry. We are not going to be able to do that through viral videos. You *can* use them to spread the message that something should happen, but it has to be organised for it to really happen.

So if I see a video that shows me how to drive from London to Delhi, it doesn't matter that I don't have a car and that I'm nowhere near Europe in the first place. These pieces

of information only work to our benefit if they are moving us toward getting us involved in an organisation—whatever that means (and that could be yet to be figure out)—that allows us to organise around where our power and leverage is.

So—separated from that—it gives us the illusion that we are in a free society, that we know about all of these things that are happening—that because the information is able to get to us we think: ‘oh it’s not like the book *1984*’, because we *know* everything that is happening. We’ve made information the endpoint. What that really says is that exposing the information allows the system to work correctly and it gives us this hope in the system. Then, we think, if it doesn’t work correctly we just need to expose it and other parts of the system will fix it—because people will get so embarrassed that they will fix parts of the system.

RO: *This comes up in the screenplay where the main character, Cash, thinks that he can fix the system by announcing all this corruption and exploitation on I Got the Shit Kicked Out of Me—this reality TV show—and he calls on the audience to petition their Senators. But, of course, all he ends up doing is getting the shit kicked out of him—no one cares. It doesn’t make any difference. Is this a broader critique of reformist left politics?*

BR: Well, it is—of a certain kind of reform. I’m not against reforms. I’m against reforms that don’t aim to build an actual movement or organisation. So, I mean, a strike is a reform. Getting a cop fired for killing someone is a reform. But the question is how do we get wage hikes? Do we get them through legislation? Which then makes people feel like all they have to do is sit back and wait for the right politician to propose the right thing. Or do we get them through strikes? Which causes people to actually interact, and work together, and have a network which they can continue to use for other changes. So the last one is a reform that actually builds—with the right analysis and right call to actions—can become revolutionary. So it is a critique of that idea that by just exposing the truth that ‘the truth shall set you free’. That’s a definition of freedom that is not the one that I am going for! I mean, is freedom just the idea of knowing what is happening around us? Freedom is the ability to change what is happening around us if we don’t like. To change not just where we are walking to or what we say but to have an effect on the things that are around us.

RO: *Some of the recent activism you have been involved with was in Spain. Certainly in your keynote at the music/media/politics symposium last year you talked about getting unionised or organised to strike. Can you tell us a little bit about your visit with striking Coca-Cola workers in Spain?*

BR: Yeah. I did a series of speaking engagements and conversations and debates with some of the members of Podemos in different areas of Spain. When I was in Madrid in October, someone came up and said ‘we have this strike going on with Coca-Cola, come and visit us’. So I went and visited them and they asked me to support them. This became a back-and-forth that went over a few months. And when I went back there for our tour in March I said that, in support of the striking Coca-Cola workers, we are not

going to allow Coca-Cola to be served at our shows. Just to back it up—these Coca-Cola workers have been very militant. They have taken over the factories; stopped Coca-Cola from taking the equipment out and they actually won their battle in court—that says they should be reinstated. But Coca-Cola is rich enough to thumb their nose at the state and say ‘we are not doing that’. So those the workers have been there and they’ve actually even fought the police even though they have the legal right to be there. Also, they aren’t getting supported by the other Coca-Cola factory workers around Spain.

So, it was important to me to help them publicise what was going on. So I said that and we kind of had a ‘drink your whisky straight’ tour and it worked for some publicity, but there just really needs to be some solidarity striking going on. Then they’d win. Then everyone would win!

I think this is something that people are coming into consciousness with—the idea of solidarity strikes. They are illegal in most places. But, they are illegal because they *work*. If they become common practice, it makes negotiating so much easier for the average, everyday worker. So that was a really good situation there—I mean I won’t say it was a *good* situation. But it was a good situation for me to see these folks fighting in this way—their resolve.

RO: *Can you speak a little bit about Podemos? What was your experience like with them in Spain?*

BR: Okay—I have to say that there are language barriers—I understand some Spanish, but mainly I was relying on translations. When I went around to their events and we spoke—usually what I was saying would be the more radical of ideas of how to build a movement—more radical than the folks who were going to run as the Podemos party. Podemos grew out of the ‘15-M’ movement in Spain, which was kind of like ‘Occupy’. They’re much less radical than Syriza. It seems like what they are putting forward is very similar to what many Socialist politicians in the US might put forward—not really looking for new ways of handling things. It’s just basically saying ‘we will be less corrupt’. So, it’s not building a movement.

I think the reason that there is a call for it is that people want something that actually has teeth in it. And, simply marching on the street by itself—people see it as not being effective. And the truth is, it’s not. But the idea that the way for it to be more effective is just to have elected politicians is not revolutionary.

So what I was putting forward is that—even if folks wanted to go into the electoral arena—they have to have the ability to shut down industry in order to make it happen. And I think also—the difference with Syriza is that they come out of many movements. They didn’t just decide to get people together and run. They are a movement that has the support of the people and that comes out of many radicals doing things—with the ability to have strikes. Syriza has its shortcomings, obviously, with their power. But Podemos seems to be putting themselves in a precarious situation of claiming to be

pretty radical but actually not being that radical in what they are proposing and their method.

Though, I will say that their members usually would end up agreeing with what I was saying. It's just that that platform hadn't been put forward. Which goes to another general thing that I am always hitting on—that the people are usually more radical than we give them credit for being. Especially when you are creating an organisation and you are trying to show that people have power, there is no reason to hedge your bets as much as it seems like Podemos are doing.

***RO:** I was wondering if you could comment on the context of the screenplay Sorry To Bother You—which is set in a phone call centre. These are precarious workers. They are people who are casualised and have terrible conditions. This seems to be a growing number of people all over the world—this precarious population of workers. Is there a different way of organising that we need to think about as far as precarious workers go—compared to the traditional working class?*

BR: I think some of these things you just have to figure out while you're organising people. But I will say this: shortly after Occupy Oakland, we put forward an initiative to create a fast food workers union—a dozen of us or so. We went out and fliered at these fast food places. What we were putting forward is 'look—we want to organise a fast food workers' union and to protect people as we start it. If anyone gets fired for joining it or promoting it we will shut down that McDonalds or Burger King or KFC or whatever. We will shut them down—until that person gets their job back'.

So, we passed out these fliers at these places and all the workers were overwhelmingly excited. I mean—so much so that the managers (who hadn't yet been told by their bosses what side of the fence they're supposed to be on) would sometimes be like: 'this is exactly what we need!'. I'm sure now they've been told what's going on. But, the point is the workers were like 'Hell yeah! We know Occupy Oakland can shut some shit down!' So it was supported because they thought it could win, and the reason that they thought it could win was because we were talking about shutting a place down—people coming out from outside and helping them do that—having solidarity strikes. So, I think with precarious workers it means that you have to be more militant.

Interestingly enough, a lot of the radicals involved in Occupy Oakland thought of that as a reformist move—and we didn't get support and it kind of just died out. Then it got picked up by some of the bigger unions and that's what you see now. Unfortunately, what it looks like those bigger unions are using those struggles to do is to not actually organise a union, but use them to bring to light the wages and then get a minimum wage increase legislated—without actually having to form a union and do actions. The point is the union in the first place.

It's that you want to form an organisation that is a fighting organisation. Many of these unions are not radical—they're not trying to build a revolution.

If you're trying to build a revolution, that necessitates you building organisations that are militant in tactic and radical in scope.

You will break laws. You cannot organise fast food without having solidarity strikes which are illegal.

RO: *I've got a few more questions about the screenplay. Another running gag in it is Cassius 'passing' as white by doing a 'white voice' and this gets him a promotion to this obscene, absurd space of wealth—a premiere version of the call centre. Can you comment a bit more—especially for those outside the American context—about the class privilege of white Americans in the contemporary context? Or, what that gag is commenting on—the idea of doing the 'white voice'.*

BR: Well it's commenting on a few things. It's saying—in the script it literally says—that there is no 'white voice'. It's the voice that (even white) people *think* they are supposed to have.

What it's supposed to represent in the film is 'someone who doesn't get fired' they only get 'laid off' and things are easy for them. That's how privilege is used—in the sense that everyone is in the working class, but if you have someone who is on a lower rung than you, you feel like you have no need to fight. If they put this idea of the 'Other' who is lazy—who is stupid and savage and that that is why they are poor.

If you are poor yourself, it makes you think that it's not the system—it seems obvious that *you* are exhibiting some of these traits and that you just need to get over yourself. It's a way to have people not see problems as systematic. That's how identity works. So, he [Cassius] finds a magical way to make his voice sound like it's overdubbed by a white actor. The people around him hear it as overdubbed. In the film, Wyatt Cenac is playing the lead—Cassius—and David Cross will be playing his white voice.

It's commenting on the different strata inside the working class and how they exist to give people this semblance that buying into the system is worth it. It gives them this idea that they have more stake in the system.

So, Cassius uses that idea to instil confidence in the people that he is talking to on the phones. So he's accepted into a strata of telemarketers where many of them are using the 'white voice'—even though they might be considered white themselves in certain situations.

RO: *Though the script has magical realist elements, it's also got elements of realism—uncanny parallels in 'real life'. Can you tell us a little bit about what inspired the setting and the mysterious 'Worry Free' corporation where you can buy this complete lifestyle of dormitory living, working in this place which ends up, of course, producing these 'equisapien' half-horse, half-humans. What inspired these motifs and settings in the script?*

BR: Well I used to do telemarketing and I was really good at it unfortunately! I was able to come in on a Monday and work for a day and make enough to not come back for another two weeks. The place where I worked coincidentally two other rappers used to work there too—Lyrics Born and Gift of Gab. They used to hire anybody. The only person that the guy didn't hire was this student who used to walk around Berkeley and he would never take off his football helmet. And, well, he wouldn't take off his helmet. That was the only reason they wouldn't hire him – because he couldn't put the phone to his face.

A lot of these things in the script—the equipsapiens for example—are an obvious metaphor for what this system is turning us into. We are working all the time—even when we are walking down the street. So, the equisapiens are these ultimately efficient workforce that [the boss character] Steve Lift is creating. So a lot of these things have also happened to me in certain ways.

The 'Worry Free' dormitories—I think these are things that people would sign up for right now. It might seem like the answer! I also needed a way in the script for telemarketers to sell slave-labour—so it was good to be able to have it neatly packaged in this 'Worry Free' company.

Sometimes artistic inspiration comes from wanting to create this ridiculous world and it starts with 'okay—what would be a really ridiculous thing to sell?' Something that people would think was awful—and slave labour and weapons of mass destruction fit that.

RO: I guess if you could also just speak a bit more generally about the intersection between music and politics which, I know, is something you're probably asked about all the time, but if you could just tell us why you make music—in terms of your radical politics. Why is making music important?

BR: It's hard for me to know why I make music. I think that—well, before I became an organiser I already wanted to be in music and I loved music and television. I was frustrated as a teenage organiser in movements that nobody knew existed, and felt that—even as a listener—the music that existed purposely stayed away from certain thoughts—certain contexts.

I felt that a way to have better art was to make something that felt more whole and that it was a way to talk to people in a more personal and intimate way. So those were the two needs that I was trying to answer.

Like I said, I started out going to film school. But, ultimately, also doing music. Music was just the thing that I was more able to do with less budget—because at that time, when I was first going to film school, there wasn't digital film. That was not a thing. So, it was going to be expensive to make a movie—and how many people were actually going to see it?

So, I started making music—we put out a tape—and people were able to hear it all over the place. So that was a way for it to work. But I think art is communication. We are always trying to communicate and we are always trying to find better ways to communicate. Obviously it's not as dry as that. If you're just being mechanical about it you are probably not going to make good art. You have to—I mean art is often communicating more than just prose. Not that certain prose isn't art!

But we are looking for new ways to communicate these things and these ideas. They are not just stuck to the slogans that we already know – or to the bullet points that we have already heard. They have something more—something more human to them—something more detailed. I think, with music and film, I can get to that. Then I can make the *main* argument—which is that people ought to get involved with life! That's what motivates me.

RO: *Well, it's been one year since you visited Aotearoa New Zealand—can you reflect a little bit on the experience of your visit? What was it like—in terms of crowds—but also you were very generous with your time with local unions and left-wing activists in the Mana Party, and the International Socialists—can you tell us a little of your reflections on your time here last year?*

BR: Well, okay—my general reflection is that everyone was very warm. I didn't know what to expect! It was very good.

Meeting with the Mana Party and the socialist groups that work with them and some anarchists too—it was clear that, maybe because of how geographically small it is, I got the sense that people felt that they had more ability to change what is going on.

For example a sense that these decisions—this work I'm going to do over the next year—will actually change how the near future will be. That was a powerful feeling to be around. I go around the world and there's pockets of this happening. Even in those Podemos talks I was doing. The reason for it is that people are feeling like they can do something. That it is possible. I definitely got that feeling in Aotearoa—so it was invigorating.

RO: *Well, it was definitely a major highlight for all of us on the left to host you—not just your keynote at the music/media/politics symposium, but also the live show as well. Thanks for your time—we are stoked to be able to talk to you!*

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