Arts & Humanities

Invasion of the Mekons

An all-star panel deconstructs a legendary indie band.

By
Paul Hond
|
Winter 2014-15

Katherine Dieckmann (rhymes with Beekman), a filmmaker who teaches screenwriting at Columbia's School of the Arts, wanted to make a documentary about a band she loved. She'd shot videos of other, better-known bands. But this band was unusual: an angry, funny, puckish, Pogueish, roguish, cerebral, radical, inebriated, haphazard, genre-flouting anarcho-musico collective started by art students at the University of Leeds in the punk year of 1977. They called themselves the Mekons.

Improbably, the Mekons, named after the Venusian arch-villain of a British science-fiction comic, still exist (singer Sally Timms credits this longevity to a lack of commercial success), and convene now and again to write, cook, eat, drink, and make music. (There is no leader; all songs are generated collaboratively by the six members.) After twenty-six albums, they remain adored by critics and ignored by the masses. As such, they have become, to their devotees, a metaphor, a question, a punch line, a philosophy.

Dieckmann met the band in the early 1990s. She had her ideas about how to make a Mekons movie, and so did the Mekons.

"They were very insistent: 'We don't want to do talking heads, we don't want this to be normal, it should be a performance piece,'" Dieckmann says. "They had all these conceptual ideas about it, which twenty years later have fallen by the wayside. They became open to making a more conventional documentary, because actually that's the way to get people to pay attention to the band." In 2008, another filmmaker, Joe Angio, set out to shoot the Mekons. Angio heard about Dieckmann's early-'90s brush

with the band and contacted her. The two directors met and discussed the project. Dieckmann looked at Angio's rough cuts, gave him notes. She wanted to support the endeavor any way she could.

Now, on a fall-semester night, as Angio's *Revenge of the Mekons* played downtown at Film Forum, Dieckmann presided over a full house in the Davis Auditorium in Schapiro Hall. Seated with her onstage were some of the documentary's talking heads, whom Dieckmann had asked to make brief, Mekons-centered presentations. The panel included novelist Jonathan Franzen, critic Greil Marcus, director Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol, American Psycho*), artist Vito Acconci, and critic Luc Sante '76CC. Major firepower for any band, let alone one whose members have day jobs. Mekons singer and guitarist Jon Langford was onstage, too, in a husky brown suit, with a dusting of white hair and wide blue eyes that threw live-wire sparks.

Franzen, wearing a cracked leather jacket, collar upturned, spoke first, striking a blow for the Word. "I'm just going to read some lyrics I like, because you can't always hear 'em," he said dryly, drawing chuckles from the crowd. "Apart from their musical and visual-art gifts, the Mekons have literary gifts. From 'The Curse': *Call it intuition, call it luck / but we're right in all that we distrust.*" Silence. "That's a couplet," said Franzen. Laughter. "Possibly my favorite of all their songs, 'Darkness and Doubt': *The room was filled with flashing lights / they spoke in tongues, whrarwhrorl-wharr / Darkness and doubt / just follow me around.*" Franzen shared the caustic fatalism of "Hello Cruel World" and the adult poetry of "Dear Sausage," and finished with lines from "Sympathy for the Mekons," which began, "*Here's to a band that deals in the facts of life / in their ten short ugly years,"* and ended, *"I hold the sword, I hold the hammer / at the winter of the world / History has a stutter / It says w-w-w-watch out.*"

Marcus, our foremost rock linguist, said, "I have always felt that the cauldron that made the band was the years of Thatcherism and Reaganism in the 1980s" — it was the UK miners' strike of 1984-85 that pulled the then-inactive group back to the stage, to play in support of the strikers — "so I'm going to read something from a column from 1986, at the very height, or maybe the bottom, of Thatcherist and Reaganist supremacy, when that was the cloud I think the band was living under. Certainly I was." Marcus, in this *Artforum* essay, noted that the Mekons, like The Band before them, provided, through their adoption of folk traditions, an entry point through which the politically alienated could repatriate themselves. "The Mekons, as a small, unstable group of coworkers and friends, may be seeking community

through dramatization of what it means to feel like an exile in one's own country," Marcus read. "As a listener, as a fan (by 'one' I mean myself), one is exiled in one's own country not when one cannot understand the language, but when one cannot bring oneself to speak it." The unutterable tongue, for Marcus, was that of US militarism, a language that "can't develop beyond the syntax of a T-shirt slogan." The Mekons, he said, "are a reminder that there is something else. In a world ruled by a language one refuses to speak, they are a reminder that there are still people one might want to meet."

Luc Sante also found reverberation in the past, quoting his *Village Voice* piece from 1999. The Mekons, he read, "have brought poetry, sexiness, and panache to the theme of getting by and making do, an adult theme if there ever was one. Given that the prevailing myth these days concerns the effortless acquisition of insane wealth, with the corollary that anyone without money is dirt, those of us who *are* dirt, and are fated to remain that way, can appreciate having a pop group to call our own, as a kind of home team." (Jon Langford has long been based in Chicago, where his home team is the hapless Cubs.) "Even furthest down on their luck," Sante went on, "the Mekons have never broached self-pity; they've cursed and muttered and cracked jokes and philosophized, and done all these things rollicking and roaring. Their failure has come to look triumphant, and never more so than in the current climate of vile success."

When it was his turn, Langford, the rogue Buddha, got up, pulled an acoustic guitar from its case, sat back down, and said, "This song's about Leeds."

Katherine Dieckmann found the Mekons through rock criticism. A piece by Marcus, she thinks, or Robert Christgau. Whenever those guys wrote an intelligent, admiring review of an artist Dieckmann didn't know, she'd go buy the record and listen to it.

Maybe you knew someone like Dieckmann at school — the arty English major who was way into indie rock. She didn't just know the cool bands, she knew their record labels. She had their EPs. She went to shows, was on the guest list. She read obscure zines and film quarterlies, wrote columns for the school paper. She even worked at the radio station. She had a vocabulary of the underground that made you, so well-rounded, feel hopelessly square. Granted, she had been devouring this stuff since she was eleven. You could never catch up. And even if you could, you

didn’t have her ear or eye. But hang around her, and you’d learn things.

“The Mekons mean what they say and do what they say,” Dieckmann says of the band, twenty-five years after first hearing them. “There’s not a big window for hypocrisy there. They just do it, but not with a lot of bluster. They all have a really well thought out stance toward the uselessness of egotism. It has to do with their suspicion of power, which is genuine and warranted. At the same time, their suspicion of power has made them a much less visible band than they should be.”

After graduating from Vassar College in 1983, Dieckmann moved to New York and became the youngest full-time staffer on *The Village Voice*. At twenty-four, she was writing about film alongside J. Hoberman ’81SOA, David Edelstein, and Andrew Sarris ’51CC, ’88GSAS. She interviewed Godard, Wim Wenders. But she wanted something more. In 1986, she interviewed Michael Stipe of the band R.E.M. She and Stipe became close, and Stipe saw how frustrated Dieckmann was as a journalist. One day, Stipe asked Dieckmann to direct a video for his band. Dieckmann, whose directing experience was limited to a 16 mm short she’d made during a summer course at Cornell, was so stunned by the offer that it took her a week to say yes. She ended up directing the videos for “Stand” (1988) and “Shiny Happy People” (1991), exuberant dance-filled pieces shot in the edible colors of makeup kits and Jordan almonds. In 1989, at her ten-year Ithaca High School reunion, she ran into a writer named Will McRobb. The two would collaborate with another writer, Chris Viscardi, on the Nickelodeon kids’ show *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* (1993-96), a smart, sweet, rebellious, indie-rock-infused farce set in the suburb of Wellsville (“as good as television has ever been and great in ways few shows ever attempt,” wrote the *LA Times*) and filmed by Dieckmann in candied saturation: Play-Doh blues, safety-patrol oranges, Chemlawn greens, school-locker yellows, superhero reds. “The network never paid any attention to what we were doing, so we just did whatever we wanted,” Dieckmann says. “When I think about it, our approach was sort of Mekons-like.”

Around the same time, Dieckmann set out to make her Mekons documentary. Jefferson Holt, R.E.M.’s manager, put up money for her to shoot the band, which she did, in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. The project never came together, and Dieckmann, who has taught at Columbia for the past fifteen years, went on to make movies — *A Good Baby* (2000), *Diggers* (2006, starring Paul Rudd), and *Motherhood* (2009, starring Uma Thurman). But she never forgot the Mekons. She would have been happy to give her unused footage to Joe Angio, too, except that somewhere

along the way she'd lost it.

The big sound of Jon Langford's strumming guitar and brawling vocals filled the Davis Auditorium with a ditty containing spoonfuls of calypso, cowboy, and Celtic drinking song. One could almost hear the accordion and fiddle that so often bring spirits of English folk, American country, and zydeco to the Mekons' potluck brew.

Afterward, the panel discussed the current relevancy of the Mekons' political messages. Dieckmann said, "I always think about the lyric 'the abyss is close to home,' from 'The Sorcerer.' Every time I hear it, I think, 'Closer. Even closer now.'"

"I think that was taken from —" Langford paused, trying to place the source of the lyric, leading to a silence that Dieckmann broke by suggesting Langford use the microphone, a wireless and fickle thing. "I'm just thinking," Langford said. Marcus, seated next to Langford, tried to help. "The sentiment is 'everything that rises falls to Earth,'" he said, "but those aren't the words." Giggles in the audience, more silence onstage. "You know what," said Langford, "I'm a little lost. Move on, let me think about it some more." Franzen, enunciating clearly into a functioning mike, said, "This panel is beginning to replicate a Mekons show." Marcus's light bulb went on: "It's from *The Communist Manifesto*," he said to Langford. "It's Marshall Berman's book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*." To which Langford replied, "I introduced Marshall Berman ['61CC] to my mum once. She said, 'Why are you in town, then?' And he said, 'I'm promoting my new book: it's called *Adventures in Marxism*.' And my mother said" — Langford pinched his voice to the pitch of English politesse — "'Ooh, that's nice!'"

Days later, after the laughter and music had died down, Dieckmann reflected on the value of exposing younger people to *Revenge of the Mekons*.

"I think there are a lot of life lessons to be found in the documentary for anyone interested in the arts," she said. "The Mekons have a really dedicated and genuine approach to all that they do, and it comes from a compassionate, sincere place. What else does? Not much."

Katherine Dieckmann is an associate professor of film at Columbia's School of the Arts. Her fourth feature as a writer-director is Strange Weather*, starring Holly Hunter*

and shooting in 2015. Dieckmann has directed music videos for R.E.M., Wilco, Aimee Mann, and Vic Chesnutt.

Read more from ***Paul Hond***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Paul Hond***