

# The Daily Telegraph

3 May 2007

## Putting five strangers on the road to Glastonbury

*Lucy Davies on a protest-song competition that will give a band of teenagers the chance of a lifetime*

I'm sitting on one of a set of sagging, mismatched sofas that wouldn't look out of place in an old people's home. This velveteen and moquette assortment, however, belongs to the recording studios famed for spawning Babyshambles and the Libertines. They're so exclusive that I've arrived late, having lost my way trying to find them in the maze of streets of east London.

Waves of *Sweet Home Alabama* are sluicing through the peeling paint of the ceiling above me. The beat is insistent, rousing. As I climb the narrow stairwell up to the studios, the tight, stylish and superbly melodic sound is making everyone around me grin. How else to react to the wonder of five teenagers in a room, who have never played together before, and only began rehearsing Lynard Skynyrd's 1974 hit 10 minutes ago?

I'm here to watch 13 aspiring rock gods audition for Build a Band, a competition run by the Arts Council charity Youth Music offering teenagers the chance to play on stage at Glastonbury. The group – some nervous, some so self-assured as to beggar belief – have already been sifted from roughly 300 applicants who submitted songs for consideration, but today they will be reduced to five.

Chosen for their musical aptitude and "ability to articulate a clear interest in protest", the winners will perform as a group for the first time on the first day of the festival, after spending two hours a day writing and practising their own modern-day protest song. They will be mentored and coached by Billy Bragg, young troubadour Get Cape Wear Cape Fly, and Jerry Dammers, the founder of the Specials, before eventually playing on the Left Field stage on Sunday evening, in between Get Cape and Bragg's sets.

You might at this point be wondering about the wisdom of putting adolescent rhetoric on stage. But Kevin the Teenager it ain't. Leafing through the entries, I am struck by their eloquence and lucidity. "It can be hard

to tell whether pharmaceutical companies really care about our welfare or just about the money they are making... It's frankly staggering how many people die because someone is afraid to say 'I was wrong'... planetary destruction is mankind's selfish pursuit of superficial satisfaction... War is such a tragic waste of life. Less fighting, more talking."

Autism, dyslexia, the failing education system, the separation of church and state in American politics, binge drinking, the nanny state, Somme heroes – the list of subjects goes on.

These are potent and highly literate voices. It's a treat to encounter such a genuinely fiery group, who are choosing to plough a furrow miles from the teenage cliché of lethargy and alcopops. Many of the auditionees list Tracey Chapman as an inspiration. It's clear from some of the other names – Hendrix, Courtney Pine, Led Zeppelin, Rick Wakeman, Roger Waters, Deep Purple and so on – that having the whole of musical history available at the click of a mouse has closed the musical generation gap.

For these youngsters, there are no first-hand memories of Red Wedge, Rock against Racism, or even Band Aid. But from talking to them, it is clear that all believe wholeheartedly in the potential of music to exhilarate and energise.

The combination of music and the Glastonbury crowd is bound, then, to provide the most intoxicating element of all: the feeling of being at one with one's fellow man, even if they're wearing waterproof nylon and sat on plastic picnic blankets.

● To meet the five winners, go to [telegraph.co.uk/r2q](http://telegraph.co.uk/r2q). Over the next seven weeks, Telegraph Online will be following them as they prepare for Glastonbury. We'll have video footage of the auditions, interviews, fact files and diaries for each of the five winners, who will also answer questions emailed to them via [r2q@telegraph.co.uk](mailto:r2q@telegraph.co.uk). We'll also be with them at Glastonbury itself, filming the rehearsals and performance.

