



The Specials

"Ghost Town"

Ghost Town

06/1981

2 Tone

On "Ghost Town" by The Specials

Adam Sear

*Do you remember the good old days before the Ghost Town?
We danced and sang, and the music played in a de boom town...*

It's the summer of 1981, I'm eleven years old and I've never heard anything like it. An ominous intro, a chill wind howling through deserted city streets, those rising organ chords, that space-horror melody line. "Ghost Town," despite its steady tumble down the UK singles chart, was for a few balmy months the only record that mattered. Fitting really, the record having had its moment of glory, hung on, declining slowly, haunting the pop charts. This was the summer before I enrolled at my local secondary school, a "bog-standard" comprehensive, which had been a grammar school once a upon a time and still had weird pretensions to sporting and academic excellence.

To say that the country was in a bad way would be an understatement. Plus ça change, I guess.... Industry was in terminal decline; factories were closing by the day. IRA hunger strikers were dying on the Six O'Clock News and the previous few months had seen violent race riots across the nation. But the little market town I lived in was a safe bubble and seemed immune from the chaos I saw elsewhere in the world; well, so I thought. It wasn't the inner city and never would be, but my town and my family—like so many others—would eventually be hit by recession and unemployment. Still, it was good while it lasted, and I spent a happy summer building models with my Technical Lego and learning to program my Sinclair ZX81 computer. Pop music and fashion were not my world, not yet, and I had only a dim knowledge of the artists who sang out from the crackly medium-wave radio in my parents' kitchen. They were music fans, just in their early thirties, and they still bought records and watched Top of the Pops. Thanks to them, I'd grown up listening to Elvis and the Beatles and knew more about the previous generation's music than my own. Yet there was one single, one strange, shuffling, spooky song that followed me around that summer.

The Specials were a multi-racial band from the troubled and divided Midlands city of Coventry, and had long supported the organisation Rock Against Racism. Along with a number of other bands, including The Clash and Elvis Costello & The Attractions, its members were a unifying force for good in a country beset by prejudice and hatred. (Strangely, Elvis Costello had only recently been accused of racism following a drunken dispute while on tour in the U.S.—an incident that follows him to this day.) Living where I did, I didn't fully grasp what was happening in cities not all that far away. Raised by kind and thoughtful people, I didn't understand why anyone could hate others just because of their skin colour. I remember the jokes. The predictably racist, sexist, homophobic stock-in-trade of the 70s stand-up comedians. It was everywhere. Even my relatively enlightened family laughed at that kind of stuff. I guess it seemed harmless, but it wasn't of course.

It was natural that a band like The Specials would respond to the times in the way they did, but "Ghost Town" (written by Jerry Dammers) isn't just a topical political single, it's an enduring musical masterpiece. Like Dammers' later song, "Free Nelson Mandela"—

released in 1984—it's a single that passionately reflects the times, through words and music honed to perfection and built to last.

Two Tone—the genre given its name by the independent record label founded by Dammers—was part of the good time party soundtrack to my junior school years. Of course, the lyrical messages of the records had always been serious, but at that age I didn't care about the words, I just wanted to jump around with my friends in the school hall at our Friday night discos. Two Tone's exciting new fusion of ska and punk was irresistible on the dance floor, and for us it was just another part of a musical pick-and-mix that included Madness, Adam and the Ants, and dear old Shakin' Stevens. (Confession time: Shaky, the Welsh-wizard of rock'n'roll revivalism, was my favourite singer at the time. I was not even remotely one of the cool kids.)

Towards the end of junior school, something happened. The party vibe gave way to that howling wind and portentous brass... those skeletal drums, the almost hysterical (and not in a fun way) la-la-la-las... something wicked was coming. Maybe it had already arrived. We didn't know it then, but the Thatcher Years were about to hit full swing. (A little territorial dispute down in the South Atlantic would boost the Iron One's electoral stock the following year, and Elvis Costello would write "Shipbuilding," the first—and perhaps best—anti-war song of the decade.)

Do you remember the good old days before the Ghost Town?

I remember being struck by the sudden switch from minor to major, the listener instantly bathed in warm nostalgia for lost and better times. Those times probably never existed, certainly not in the 1970s, but the musical juxtaposition was powerful and suggested correctly that things were going very wrong. The single was released in June 1981; it spent three weeks at number one, and a total of ten weeks in the Top 40. Played incessantly on the radio, it crept into my not quite adolescent skull, lodged there like a warning.

It is September 1981. I'm walking along the tree-lined high street of my little market town; my first day at big school. My best mate Jonathan is with me. We don't talk much, I think we're both too scared. There is a chill wind blowing, held off by our too-big navy-blue blazers. Leaves are beginning to turn brown and fall. Rising organ chords fill my head, spiky drums, hysterical la-la-las. I feel nostalgia for a bygone world. (As if a kid of eleven has anything at all to reminisce about.) My tie feels like it is strangling me, and shiny new shoes are already rubbing at my heels. By the end of the day I'll be bleeding. It won't be the last time. It won't always be my heels that bleed.

"Ghost Town" had just tumbled out of the charts. It rose and fell. Now it's a thing of the past. Favourite records would come and go with dizzying frequency as my school years unfolded. My obsession with music was in front of me. Often it would be my only source of comfort, as I negotiated the traps and pitfalls of teenage life. "Tainted Love" by Soft Cell was the new number one single. It wasn't a song I understood at that age, but by the time I left school I would. Just as I'd know much more about the end of innocence, the dejection and violence depicted in "Ghost Town."