

Black Lives Matter – ACAB: Oi! Don't you know that's Cultural Appropriation?

Reading around the US news recently, at the BLM demonstrations (riots? Uprisings? Call them what you will) I noticed that among the slogans sprayed on to walls, next to the ubiquitous BLM was the letters ACAB.

I know ACAB, I thought. Sure enough there were also articles explaining to the US readership what ACAB means. It means All Coppers Are Bastards. In the US, BLM having culturally appropriated it they say 'Cops'. Some of the articles then say 'originally British, a story that it dates back to striking workers of the 1940s is probably apocryphal'.

I don't know about the 1940s as I don't go back that far, but it was certainly current in my childhood in the early 1960s. From an age when I was really too young to know what a bastard was.

There is apparently a piece of film of young men chanting it in 1958. I can myself date it definitely to 1965 when Great Train Robber Ronald Biggs made a spectacular escape from HM Prison Wandsworth, [over the wall and into a waiting removal van](#). Children in the playground sang

"Over the wall we go, All Coppers Are Bastards." Sometimes altered to nanas, to escape the wrath of their mothers.

As did David Bowie when he wrote a novelty comedy number about prison escapes generally with the chorus "Over the wall we go, all coppers are nanas, Over the wall we go, leave them a card saying Wish you were here/Happy New Year". His version was preserved as an acetate [and in this interview](#) during his residence at the Marquee Club in 1966.

The following year, 1967 he produced his friend Paul Nicholas (actor and singer who progressed more conventionally into musical theatre) who recorded it under the name Oscar (born Paul Oscar Beuselinck) again using the euphemism 'nanas' which means 'silly person'.

The BBC was very strait-laced then and wouldn't play anything with bad language although [more liberal](#). Read the comments attached to that Youtube upload. It was a minor chart entry. And I bet you thought The Laughing Gnome was a one-off experiment in novelty comedy numbers done in Bowie's childhood Cockney accent?



ACAB was (possibly still is) a very common prison tattoo, often done on the knuckles of each of the four fingers in such a way as to be visible as a fist. I saw it often when my Civil Service post took me around the Crown Court and prisons. Never in anger, I hasten to add.