



Paris Commune
Anthology Introduction

On a rainy day in 2001, I found myself leafing through books that I'd been assigned in college but had never read. One of these tomes contained an essay by Kristin Ross, a professor at NYU, about the culture of the Paris Commune of 1871. Ross described how near the end of the seventy-day revolt, the people who had driven the government out of the city threw an enormous concert in the Tuileries Palace, the former seat of Empire. At this concert, the great singer La Bordas sang her signature tune, *La Canaille*, the chorus of which goes "C'est La Canaille, et bien j'en suis," or "They are the lowest scum, and so am I." A few days later, the army from Versailles retook the city, and over the course of the infamous "Bloody Week" killed tens of thousands of people.

The image of this concert seemed like a show waiting to happen, though a crazy one, and the only person crazy enough to think it was a good idea, and, in the end, to push the project into fruition, was Steve Cosson. Steve and I began researching the Commune, and the more we read, an overabundance of material emerged. Two of the members of the Commune's government were songwriters—one of them, Jean-Baptiste Clément, wrote the Commune's anthem, "The Cherries of Spring," as well as a series of astonishing songs chronicling the violence of the Commune's fall; the other, Eugène Pottier, wrote the words to the *Internationale*, a song that would have a healthy future in the twentieth century, during the Commune. We gained a couple heroines, the Anarchist virgin Louise Michel and the glamorous Communist Elisabeth Dmitrieff, a villain, Adolphe Thiers, and laughed at the underground rantings of Père Duchêne.

The piece has been through more revisions than I think we ever expected when we started working in 2002, and we have been lucky that so many institutions have given us their generous support along the way.

In the end, what has drawn us to this material is the way in which the Commune is a moment in which all sorts of forces—culture, class, politics, performance, violence, economics, journalism—meet in a single moment and are clarified. The opportunity to bring to life the forgotten people who tried to give themselves, as one puts it, the power to control their own lives, has been unforgettable. At the end, as the actors Can-Can into the future, the fragments of the history of revolution and labor go on and on. And the question—how much are people willing to take before they can't take it anymore—still lingers in our post-revolutionary society.

—Steve Cosson