

## RUST (CITY) NEVER SLEEPS

Paul Graham Raven

Excerpted from: **Rubabah, A., (2050)**, *Rust (City) never sleeps? Roots of rock revival in Sheffield and surroundings, 2000–2050*. [doctoral thesis]

**Chapter 8—“The facade was everything”: rock and resistance in the early faraday houses**

### Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I describe the prevailing cultural dynamic of English rock music clubs, with reference to the existing theoretical and empirical literature. To reiterate briefly: the hegemonic reproductive environment of rock music—a generic metacategory which has, at least from an outsider’s perspective, largely reabsorbed a once-significant taxonomy of subgeneric forms, the proliferation of which is argued to have peaked some time in the 2010s (see e.g. Reynolds, 2039)—is the mutual or cooperative club, of which most large English towns have at least one, with some larger urban polities (Sheffield included) supporting more than one. These establishments tend to rely on a format of events based around weekly and monthly “sessions”, often with a subgeneric or historico-periodical thematic, in which a “house band” of predominantly local performers plays long sets of cover versions drawn from the canon of “classics”—a canon whose base is surprisingly consistent across the country (for a statistical analysis see Bayes & Pearson, 2048), but which includes local variations, strongly influenced by the musical history of the locale.

More plainly: most venues have their own micro-canon of favourites, originating in bands or artists who emerged from the location in question, or share some other historical link therewith. As recent scholarship has emphasised, this reproductive environment is strongly reminiscent of that which pertained to “contemporary” jazz and Americana in the 2010s: a dedicated audience with a significant but non-dominant demographic bulge in the 40-60 y.o. cohort; small member-centric “club” venues; and a “star system” based on touring soloists noted for their innovative interpretations of canonical “standards”, performed with locally-sourced “house bands”.

In this chapter, I begin to introduce data acquired during eighteen months of critical ethnographic immersion at one such club/venue, namely *The Ruddy Rucker* (TRR hereafter), a Sheffield institution of nearly a quarter-century’s standing. Detailed analysis will be executed in later chapters, with reference to the research questions (see Chapter 3) central to this thesis, namely: what were the sociopolitical, infrastructural, and aesthetic-ethical drivers behind this reconfiguration of rock music’s reproductive environment?



The material below is drawn from an extended interview with the current (at time of writing) chair and booking officer of TRR, recorded in the club office after a moderately well-attended Saturday night show in which the house band, absent any touring soloists, played three sets of songs heavily slanted toward Sheffield artists of the last seventy years. The informants, who agreed to be identified fully in this research, are as follows:

- **I1:** Heather (“Hev”) Heeley (she/they), 47 y.o.; “Sheffield born and raised”. Bookings officer, TRR.
- **I2:** Graeme (“Grae”) P Crowe (he/him), 72 y.o.; born Portsmouth, resident in Sheffield from “around 2012”. Elected chair, TRR.

The interview material is divided into sections and lightly framed in order to connect to subsequent analysis, but has been left as close to the raw transcribed discussion as possible. To reiterate a methodological point (see Chapter 4), the intense subjectivity and partiality of the following accounts is an advantage in the context of the focus of this thesis: extant scholarship claims to have settled its top-down account of the so-called “rockist revanche” (cf. Freeley, 2047), but the question of how this generational transformation was understood by those who were on its frontlines—particularly Sheffield-resident participants, whose radicalism and closeness to the “Youthquake” politics of the Thirties has been overlooked and/or dismissed by the dominant literature—has largely been left unexamined. The following transcriptions, it is hoped, will address that elision, and in doing so both deepen and critique the prevailing narrative of the “revanche”.

### Transcript A

*Here Hev describes the culture of the early (i.e. Twenties) “faraday house” scene in Sheffield, identifying cultural disenfranchisement and post-pandemic urban decline as a driving force, with the much-vaunted anti-tech privacy ethic a secondary consideration.*

**Hev:** It wasn’t that no one cared. We used to get boomer locals phoning us in to the pigs on principle. We knew that for a fact, because sometimes the pigs would get sent round on nights we weren’t even running shows! Some of them were real pricks about it, particularly the older ones. But once the suburbs started hiring their own rentacops, the city pigs got defunded so fast they wouldn’t waste their time on clubs and ‘easies. Some needed a bit of persuasion, of course, but it was always cheaper than a lawyer would’ve been... some of the younger cops were members of their own local faradays, so they had a certain sympathy, I s’pose.

**R:** *How did the faraday house movement start?*

**Hev:** I think it just kinda caught on, like ideas sometimes do when the time is right for ‘em. Now, Pete—he started the Ruddy Rocker in the early Thirties, right? Pete used to claim that faradays were a Sheffield invention, that the first one was The Coffin, which was in a knackered little factory just down Arundel Street, three minutes from here... we used to go there in the Brexit years. Horrible tiny room, concrete floor, shit graff, a knackered PA. Beers sold out of the back of vans outside, where the cameras couldn’t see... Pete’d say it was a Sheffield thing because of the steel, right? The chicken-wire? Some faradays would just plaster layers of the stuff over the interior walls to block signals from outside, until nanotube paints got cheap. But that was bollocks, The Coffin never had the chicken-wire... never needed it, really. Rebar in the concrete, couldn’t get a signal in there if you wanted one.

But it was the first place in Sheff where they'd take your phones off you on entry. It wasn't about privacy at first, or not personal privacy; it was because no one wanted footage of the shows online that could be used as evidence. The Coffin had no licence, would never have got one. It only got left alone because the pandemic had made the area a ghost-town. No one around to complain, no one respectable walking around after dark. The biggest threat was the tweeds (1), really, though there was enough antifa squatting the former student towers and coming to the shows that the fash rarely came out to play.

**R:** *So the privacy ethic came later, then?*

**Hev:** I guess, but that was the younger generation after us who started framing it that way. Especially once things started getting formalised a bit in the Thirties. For us, it was just survival. A necessity.

*[Grae interjects here with a comparison to the “straight-edge hardcore” scenes of the late C20th, whose culture similarly started as a structural necessity before becoming formalised into an ethos—see e.g. Mackaye, 2027. Hev acknowledges the similarities, but qualifies them:]*

**Hev:** Like that, but also totally *not* like that! The early faradays were a loooooong way from straightedge... some were super-dark, to be honest. The fentanyl joints rarely lasted long, for obvious reasons... but crank was cheap and popular, crank and booze, and hydroponic weed grown out on the estates. Too much needleplay, really. People shooting crank all over the place, and shooters could be... [tails off] It wasn't all idealism and consciousness raising, is what I mean. Not at first. It was just kids with no future getting fucked up. Wasn't much else to do.

The mutualist stuff came before the privacy thing, really, because you'd only have to be up and running a few weeks before the grifters, junkies and tweeds started showing up. So you needed security, a list of people who would play it cool, or at least the right sort of not-cool. They were clubs, really, just with zero budget and no licence... Old Pete used to call them “non-workingmen's clubs”, another of his little jokes, but the lasses wouldn't have any of that shit! Then Novara did that big investigative piece in, what, '28? That's how the name “faraday house” got popular... but mostly as a joke, because it sounded more like a Millennial music genre than a social movement. [laughs] Sorry, Grae!

## **Transcript B**

Next, **Hev** obfuscates somewhat regarding the relation of the faraday scene to the desperation of the “Boring Twenties” and the proto-politics of what would become the Youthquake. It bears noting that this part of the interview was occasionally fraught, which can in part be blamed on my own positionality as ethnographer (see discussion in Chapter 15), but is valuable for its illustration of the entwinement of enduring nostalgia and frustrated radicalism in Youthquake activists, previously observed and discussed by Stenbrott (2047).

**R:** *The faraday houses were a proving ground for the Youthquake movement of the Thirties, it's said. When did that start in Sheffield?*

**Grae:** [sighs quietly]

**Hev:** See, again, these names get put on things after the fact.

**Grae:** Hev, you don't have—

**Hev:** Nah, it'll be reyt, Grae. But look, duck: "faraday houses lead to Youthquake", the newsfeeds at the time peddled that sort of simplistic explanation, because it was preferable to addressing the structural issues. Sure, people talked revolution in the faradays, here and elsewhere. They also talked about music, got off with people, got wasted. A lot more of that than revolution talk, too! They were just where we went. They were all we had. So sure, Youthquake at the faradays, OK, if you like. But if you ask me, the 'quake started in the Twenties.

**Grae:** Or in 2008. Or in 2017.

*[Hev became quite intense at this point, and I apologised for any offence caused by the line of enquiry. Hev waved it away:]*

**Hev:** Not upset, duck, honest. Just frustrated, is all. Still seems like yesterday, but it also seems like so much has been forgotten already. And never the bits you wish you *could* forget, neither.

**R:** *What do you wish you could forget?*

**Hev:** Pray you never know, duck. If the 'quake was for anything, it was so you wouldn't have to know what the Twenties were like for us.

**R:** *Do you have any regrets about your involvement?*

**Hev:** Only that it was necessary. And it was necessary. Maybe your folks told you otherwise—no offence, like, but given your accent, I'm guessing they might have. Well, they've the right to that opinion, and I dunno what they went through. But the 'quake wasn't some insurrection; we voted out a corrupt gerontocracy, and then we pushed for laws to make sure it stayed gone. So my other regret is that those laws started being weakened almost before they were passed.

### **Transcript C**

*In this segment, Grae discusses the phenomenon of tribute and covers bands in the Nineties and Noughties, which he sees as a precedent for, or a foreshadowing of, the contemporary culture of standards on the English rock scene.*

**Grae:** Back then tribute bands were the lowest of the low, if you asked an aspiring musician—though some of them would likely be playing in one as a sideline, or in a “wedding band”, y’know, covering sets of classics for functions. Tribute bands reliably got the boomers out and spending at the bar... back when I worked at The Wedge (2) up to around 2004, most of us staff were musos or artists, and we’d bitch about the schedule going over to tribute acts in December through January, and over the summers. We saw them as sell-outs—these forty-somethings pretending to be the Beatles, the Roses, whoever. In hindsight, we should have seen them as pioneers.

They were dreadful shows to work, particularly the ska nights—full of ageing men who thought having once owned a Clash album and a pair of Doc Martens made them punks for life, despite their running a building firm and employing Polish workers off the books. [laughs] Awful people to serve, drunk and coked up, out for that one shin-dig per year with the wife and the workmates. But as [venue manager] never tired of pointing out, December’s tribute shows would underwrite the quiet months, the local band showcases, all that.

I never joined a wedding band—and it’s because I wasn’t good enough, rather than some point of principle. It’s easy to get along with minimal skills when you’re young, because your idea of what the next big thing should be is shaped by what you’re capable of... and when a style is still fresh, the marks of skill haven’t yet been codified, right? Style over substance, innit. But if you’re playing songs that audience know note for note, and you get it wrong, they’ll fuckin’ let you know! [laughs]

Shit, I remember seeing big-name bands back then, and sometimes the singer would mix up the lyrics, or just plain forget them, or the band would come in two bars early on a chorus... and you’d forgive them, because the magic was as much about being in their presence as it was about the music. But a tribute band? Sure, some of them would put a spin on the material... I remember The Bog-Rolling Stones (3) would really ham up their impersonations of the “real” musicians, which gave it an irony I liked. They’d also get more and more pissed as the set progressed! But even within that spin, they had to be tight as fuck, totally on it. And they always were, too. We’d announce their Christmas shows in August and they’d sell out in two days.

## **Transcript D**

*Here **Hev** and **Grae** discuss the pandemic-accelerated decline of economic and logistical viability for touring rock bands, and the comparative ease of entry to more highly-mediated marketplaces of performance for performers and audiences alike.*

**R:** *Can I ask about touring acts in the Twenties and Thirties?*

**Grae:** Well, yeah—only there weren’t any!

**R:** *None at all?*

**Grae:** Well, *some*, obviously – but the price of seeing an act with a brand strong enough to get people out of the house meant it was mostly dinosaurs doing the stadiums, anywhere big enough to fit the virus testing and security set-ups. The newer pop acts, the ones with

sense—or with good management, more likely—had already diversified by then. They didn't need to tour: for a soloist, a rapper or a pop singer, the VR options that came out of the first pandemic were enough for an audience that couldn't afford to go to live shows, even if there were venues that could afford to put them on. But for bands, for anyone with a backline bigger than a laptop and an SM58, there was the cost of travel, the collapse of the old infrastructure of venues and promoters... and you just can't fake a live rock show, you know? When I was Hev's age, to say that was to be a whine-osaur, the height of rockism... maybe it still is. But I think it's true, all the same. That's why [rock] survived, in a way.

*[This led to a discussion of the turn away from the production of original material and toward the reinterpretation of “standards”, which the informants connected to not just the winner-takes-all dynamics of media platforms—discussed further in Transcript E below—but also to the enforced localism and regionalism of restricted mobility:]*

**Grae:** You gotta understand that in the Twenties, touring as a live act was effectively impossible, right? And that's just domestic touring—forget anything international, that was proper fucked. *[Here followed a detailed discussion of the difficulty of owning or hiring transportation for anyone without independent financial means, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 12.]* Just one more barrier to access, wasn't it? After dozens of others stacked up over the years. All through the Teens we bitched about the capture of music, especially indie and rock, by kids of privilege, but the Twenties cemented that in. Unless you were moneyed, you couldn't even get started with touring—and all the little venues had gone under during the first pandemic, and with them the networks of small-beer promoters. If you aspired to play, you'd have to look for local opportunities, and respond to local audiences. People were tired of newness.

*[Other infrastructural shortfalls—such as a lack of rehearsal spaces, urban noise ordinances etc.—are mentioned, though it bears noting that both informants noted the comparative advantage of Sheffield in this regard, with its persistent legacy of disused industrial property continuing well into the Teens and Twenties. Grae then demonstrated the “brightsiding” attitude, identified by Flowers et al. (2042) as common to the faraday house movement:]*

**Grae:** It was an ugly, difficult time, the Twenties. But it came with a gift in its pocket, or that's how I like to look at it. See, rock and roll was by this point very obviously not a route to fame and big money. It never was, really, but for a lucky few, but now there was no fooling yourself. And that meant folk who might once have started a band for the sake of fame and sexual attention could just go straight to becoming an influenza.

**R:** *I'm sorry, what?*

**Grae:** Heh—that's what we started calling them. Influencers—social media, y'know, selling stuff online, the creative self as brand? Not a new idea, even then, and hell knows rock and roll played that game plenty at times. But by then it was a thing, a separate thing... like, the novelty of the medium meant that you didn't actually have

to be famous for anything, other than your being able to use it in a way that was clickworthy, right? Music, like other forms of performance, became just another marketing tool for successful brands, a loss-leader for capturing the eyeballs. Management finally triumphed over art... or it became the art, I suppose you could say, to see it from their side of the fence.

But yeah, we called them influenzas, because they seemed almost as devastating as the first pandemic had been... more so, really. Like they were its artistic expression, its cultural vector of infection. That they still called it “going viral” seemed...

**Hev:** Fucking tasteless? [laughs]

**Grae:** Aye, reyt!

## **Transcript E**

*In this final section of the interview, the formation of the ethics and aesthetics of the nascent rock club format are discussed, in a manner which suggests a dialectical countermovement to the hegemony of spectacular digital multimedia formats, at the level of both form and content: a focus on analogue or “artisanal” skills—perhaps as a re-concretisation of the “authenticity aesthetic” of early-C21st “hipsterdom”—but also an explicitly stated ideological opposition to the end-game expression of neoliberal austerity.*

**Hev:** Us youth, the early Twenties, we’ve spent two years stuck in shitty house-shares or bedsits or our parents’ places, being told we have to make sacrifices for the future, take care of the olds, all that shit. And when the restrictions are lifted, Bozo’s Brexit is in full swing, the fucking fash are everywhere, all the pubs and clubs are gone... and everyone—almost everyone—*just carried on like before*, pretending that everything was fine. And the socnets were just heaving with these shiny cunts and their plastic green-screen lives, and we had *nothing*: no future, no present, nothing. We made the sacrifice, and the gerontocracy just tucked it in their back pockets, chucked us under the chin, and told us to run off and find jobs that didn’t exist. Some people fell for the influenza dream...

**Grae:** A lot of it was basically pyramid scams. Using fame to sell the dream of achieving your own fame as an escape.

**Hev:** Aye, reyt. Point is, duck, music as an industry, it were fuckin’ *hideous*. And so we fucked it right off, didn’t we? No fame, no glamour, no networks. Just art.

**Grae:** And drink, and drugs.

**Hev:** Yeah, that too. Just like your generation, eh Grae?

**Grae:** [laughs] Guilty as charged, yeah.

**R:** *So were faraday houses full of covers bands from the start?*

**Grae:** Not at all. Crustpunk, blackened metal, art-noise, drone... anything loud, ugly, unpolished and unpredictable. Music to blot out the world. Ugly music, for an ugly time.

**Hev:** It was an *angry* time!

**Grae:** It was that, aye. But it often happened so as the youth in those bands, they'd be practising a lot at home, learning way beyond what they needed for their usual repertoire. Because there was so little else to do... and the only reason to play at all was because you cared about the craft, you know?

**R:** *Wasn't that a bit elitist, in a way? A backlash against the assumed ease of digital composition and production?*

**Hev:** That's been said, and it's true in a way, I 'spose. But all art is elitist in that sense, innit? You hear something, and you think "I could do better", or "that'd be great if it did *this* instead", or "I'm bored of hearing *that*, I want to hear something different". We used to argue a lot about this at the time, actually, because there was this residual id-pol (4) flinch where it was assumed that if you said "I don't like X", what you meant was "X is shit and everyone involved in it should die in a fire". But it was like, no, c'mon, not liking something doesn't mean I'm writing it off entirely, doesn't mean I think it's easy, doesn't mean I'm prejudiced against people who do like it.

Sure, there were definitely people who thought like that; the tweeds, f'rex, hated pop for its blackness, which is why they ended up with that weird little fash-folk scene of theirs [...] But look, there was a guy who played guitar in one of the bands at The Coffin who made decent side money producing beats for all sorts of people: rappers, brands, even the council's content office. He was good at it, too. No one thought any the less of him for it. What mattered was what you did on the scene. What you did *off* the scene was your own lookout. So long as you weren't running with the tweeds, obvs...

*[There followed a discussion of the cultural premium on manual/analogue instrument skills over digital composition and production, and its counter-hegemonic origins in pre-pandemic social media:]*

**Hev:** That was the one upside of the socials, as we saw it. In the fringes of the big platforms like YouTube you'd be able to find people just quietly teaching advanced musicianship, theory, technique, deconstructing the classics. All we had was time and bandwidth, remember! So you could just lose yourself in that. My guess is that attention turned to rock because it was so far out of the mainstream, it had that unattainability that Grae was talking about [*see Transcript D above*]... like, you could teach yourself Ableton or whatever, make yourself into a pop singer or a rapper, but then you'd have no excuse for failure other than the odds, right?

**Grae:** That market was easy to enter, and impossible to win.

**Hev:** Aye, reyt. And we didn't care for competition. The olds said it was because we were lazy, but really it was just everything we hated. Competition was the capitalist way—like Bozo's league tables all through the Twenties, pitting cities against one another for basic funding. And fuck that, right? It's cruel and stupid, it's wasteful. We wanted something more collaborative, something without the profit motive, something without fame.



**R:** *Isn't there a contradiction, though, in making art or music and claiming not to want fame?*

**Hev:** Nah, that's confusing fame with recognition, with respect. Recognition comes from peers, from comrades. Respect is based on the efforts and passions of the person who respects you. Fame's just brand recognition—being the one name out of hundreds that got the promotional support to dominate the platforms. Fame is global, but respect is local, right?

And that's where the club scene was born, if you ask me—from that local experience of watching your mates master something, make it their own, pick up tunes with history and resonance and take them somewhere new and magical, reinterpret them. Like I say, it meant you couldn't excuse failure by an appeal to bad luck, because luck wasn't in the equation—only the work, the practice. And with rock in particular you told yourself nah, the reason we don't make any money doing this is because there's no money to make, no venues to play, and so on. We chose not to play the game.

We were given no future, so we kinda colonised the past—took back the music that the boomers had invented, and made something new out of it, turned the ideology of it upside down. Like cultural squatting, I suppose. Occupying the abandoned... taking back something unloved, because you felt unloved yourself.

**Grae:** You never talked about it in those terms back then...

**Hev:** Did we fuck! The facade was everything, back then, even between friends. But that's how it was, nonetheless.

## Summary

While clearly and inevitably partial (in both senses of the term), coloured by personal perspectives and framed with a certain nostalgia, this interview opens an explicitly political and sociotechnical perspective on the evolution of contemporary English rock clubs, and on the Sheffield scene in particular, that has thus far been overlooked or under-examined: hence my decision to position it as my first chapter of data, and thus as a lens through which the other interviews and participant observation material might be brought into focus. In the following chapters, I use critical ethnographic narration to evoke the material and sensory experience of working and playing at TRR [...]

## Footnotes

1. "Tweeds": derogatory name for radical nationalist street-gangs of the Twenties, so-called for their affectation of clothes associated with a clichéd conception of the landed gentry.
2. "The Wedge": affectionate nickname for The Wedgewood Rooms, a 400-capacity venue in Southsea, Portsmouth, still operating today.
3. "The Bog-Rolling Stones": renowned Rolling Stones tribute band, believed to have been active between approx. 1992 and 2020.
4. "Id-pol": shorthand for "identity politics", a term which by the Twenties signified something barely resembling its theoretical origins, and became a focus of opposition for the post-Fisherist political theory of the emerging Youthquake movement.

###

This story is dedicated to the staff of the Rutland Arms, Sheffield, 2017-2020 (for keeping the beers coming during the writing of a doctoral thesis), and to the staff of the Wedgewood Rooms, Portsmouth, 1994-2011 (for comradeship and good times on both sides of the bar and the box-office window). Support your local venue! You'll miss it when it's gone. – PGR

**Paul Graham Raven** is (at time of writing) a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Lund University, where he researches the narrative rhetorics of sociotechnical and climate imaginaries, and as such manages to pass off weird projects (such as the creation of tourist guidebooks to imaginary cities) as serious academic work. His doctoral thesis proposed a novel model of sociotechnical change based on social practice theory, and a narrative prototyping methodology for infrastructure foresight.

Paul is also an author and critic of science fiction, an occasional journalist and essayist, a collaborator with designers and artists, and a (gratefully) lapsed consulting critical futurist – all of which activities unexpectedly resulted from deciding to write his way out of the wreckage of an unsuccessful attempt at a career in music in the late 1990s. He currently lives in Malmö with a cat, some guitars, and sufficient books to constitute an insurance-invalidating fire hazard.

