

# Riffs

Experimental writing on  
popular music

Volume 5  
- Issue 1



riffsjournal.org  
ISSN 2513-8537





Vol. 5 Issue 1 Cover Design: Rosie Clarke

Riffs Cover by Adam Kelly Williams / Iain Taylor

Lady Sanlty – Pop music dystopia, and Richard Marsh & Dan Finnemore of Swampmeat – Pop music utopia by  
[www.iandaviesphoto.com](http://www.iandaviesphoto.com) © 2012 - 2021 | All Rights Reserved

# Riffs

**Experimental writing on popular music**

**Popular Music Fiction**

Vol. 5 Issue 1  
Aug 2021

# Riffs

Experimental writing on popular music

*Guest Editor*

Ash Watson

*Riffs|OPEN Editor*

Chris Mapp

*Managing Editors*

Craig Hamilton

Sarah Raine

*Reviews Editor*

Sharon Kong-Perring

*Design Manager*

Iain Taylor

*Editors*

Asya Draganova

Nick Gebhardt

Matt Grimes

Edmund Hunt

Deanne Kearney

Martin Lukanov

Ed McKeon

Sebastian Svegaard

*Peer Review Manager*

Dave Kane

*Riffs is published twice a year.*

**Copyright information**

Contributors hold the copyright to their submitted piece. They may distribute their work in the journal format as they see fit. Contributors also have the right to republish content without permission from the journal.

*Riffs: Experimental writing on popular music* (online & print) ISSN 2513-8537

Funded by the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR).

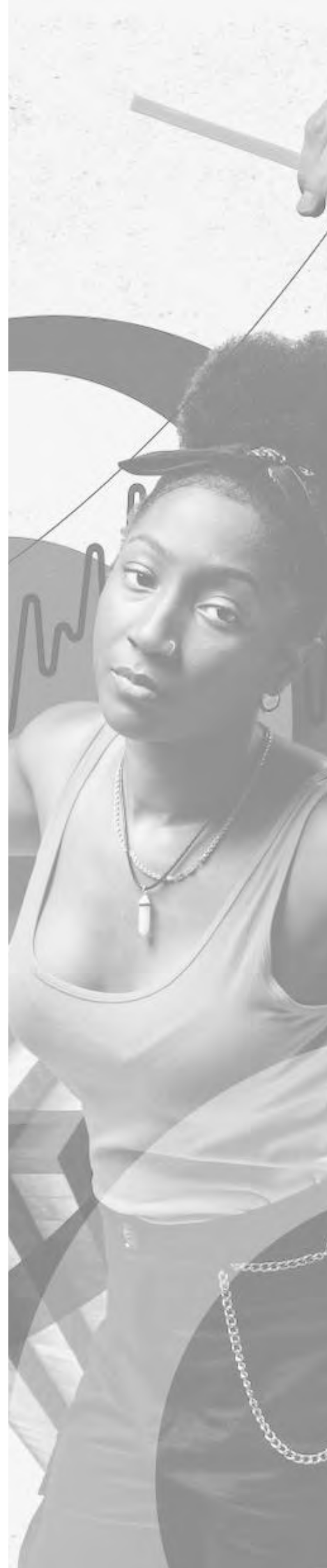


### **Cover Images by Rosie Clarke**

Rosie is a designer and artist working full time in Birmingham. When not answering client briefs the majority of Rosie's personal work revolves around collage and photomontage. She thrives on design that captures imagination, using a combination of bold photography, limited colour palettes and strong graphical elements to create unique and eye catching compositions.

### **Photography and Art Direction by Ian Davies**

Based out of his studio in Birmingham, Ian Davies is a freelance photographer producing, commercial, portrait, marketing and PR and Event photography throughout the UK and Europe.  
[www.iandaviesphoto.com](http://www.iandaviesphoto.com)







# Riffs

# CONTENTS

<b>Editorial</b> Ash Watson	4
<b>Dancing with Death: A speculative ethnography</b> Ben Assiter	6
<b>Kite in the Sky</b> Ian Inglis	14
<b>The Condition of My Existence</b> Hussein Boon	20
<b>Tapes of Sandy</b> Elodie A. Roy	28
<b>"The (N)early Man: Arriving too soon, thriving too late" by Farley Ruskin</b> Kevin Quinn	32
<b>Tin Can Alley</b> Emily Mackay	40
<b>Rust (City) Never Sleeps</b> Paul Graham Raven	48



# EDITORIAL

Ash Watson

Guest Editor, *Riffs* Vol. 5 Issue 1

A few years ago, I was visiting the UK from Australia and I ended up in a pub between Birmingham City University campus and the train station, after either an experimental writing workshop or a Paul Weller symposium – I can't remember which – where someone asked me what kind of music I listen to. I replied that I don't really listen to music. That was such a lie! I lied. I was surrounded by music scholars and completely intimidated, so, in a more youthful impulse I'm working to shake off, I tried to avoid the question for fear of giving the wrong answer. Sitting at a wooden table in a back room facing my half-finished beer and a choir of curious faces, I think I actually made the excuse that I grew up in a house of readers (true) who didn't listen to music (false). To answer the question now: I love pop music and Australian indie. It shapes my memories and adds texture to all the places I find myself in. In fact, when my novel was published I made a playlist to celebrate, of 100 songs I listened to over the years I wrote the book and which capture the scenes and feeling of the story. If you're curious, it's on Spotify: "Into the Sea (novel playlist)". I can speak about reading fiction until I run out of air, but the music I treasure and what I experience when I listen to it is still not something I have much practise talking about.

The seven stories in this fiction edition of *Riffs* start with this same conversation and run with it in a number of directions. From treasured bands and sounds, they move toward questions of value, questions of creation, questions of authenticity and technology and the intimate publics of music. They chase the affective breadth of our listening experiences. The opening piece, "Dancing with Death: A Speculative Ethnography" by Ben Assiter, spits us out into a pandemic future of underground raves with high highs and skin-tingling risks. In Ian Inglis' "Kite in the Sky", we follow one person's unbelievable find in a record store. Hussein Boon's story, "The Condition of My Existence", unfolds a reel of breaking news about technology in the music business and all the costs and questions of freedom that follow. Elodie Roy's "Tapes of Sandy" is a story told through fleeting fragments, about how people are and become assemblages of memories and material things like coats, coffee cups, and stolen records. In "The (N)early man: Arriving too soon, thriving too late by Farley Ruskin", Kevin Quinn flexes the method of the magazine exposé and offers a deep dive into the life and work of a renegade 'industro-punkwave' pioneer. Emily Mackay's "Tin Can Alley" takes us behind the algorithmic operation of an AI music production company into the life of an overworked playlist maker and her relationship with a single song. Finally, Paul Raven's "Rust (City) Never Sleeps" plays with the relationship between fiction and narrative, offering a chapter from a PhD thesis submitted in the year 2050 on sites of the rock revival in Sheffield.



Each of these stories offer more than narrative-based depiction. They experiment at the junctures of writing and music, aesthetically manifesting and marrying storytelling with sonic genre. While you read them, consider what they illuminate about the things fiction and music share: an attention to form and lyricism. This is a generative intersection that can challenge how we write and how we listen across both forms.

**Ash Watson** is a sociologist of technology and fiction. She works at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, UNSW Sydney. Her research explores the emergence and social impact of “disruptive” technologies, from AI to counter-archives to zines, using qualitative and arts-based methods. Her debut novel *Into the Sea* (2020) was published in Brill’s award-winning Social Fictions Series. Following a group of young adults through a year of the mundane and extraordinary, the story considers what it means to live “the Australian way of life.” Ash is the inaugural Fiction Editor of *The Sociological Review*, heading the journal’s short story series. She is also the creator and editor of *So Fi Zine*, a digital and DIY print publication for sociological fiction, poetry and visual art.



# DANCING WITH DEATH: A SPECULATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Ben Assiter

There was the sign from the old pizza place. An empty neon vessel, long starved of illumination. This must be it. I glance back over one shoulder. The deserted street extends behind me. Arrive alone and unseen, they'd said. I step into the alleyway beneath the sign, sinking deeper into the fractured city. The sodden cardboard of a pizza box sticks to the bottom of my shoe. I can just make out the words «designed for sharing» in faded red letters. A relic to an impossible conviviality.

It jolts me back to the present. For some time now, «offline fieldwork» has been little more than a methodological artefact, excluded from the impenetrable tower of institutional approval. The bleached-out residue of «music studies» seems stuck in the nostalgic comforts of an endless historical turn. The complex realities of culture in our contemporary moment left ignored and erased. In recent weeks, I have begun to feel a duty to try and return to research in real time. But perhaps my motivations are in fact more selfish and ephemeral. I crave proximity, spontaneous encounter.

For years, I'd managed to deceive myself that digital connections were enough. Intelligent agents had advanced to the point that connection itself could be simulated: enhanced social interactions constructed out of the behavioural surplus harvested from our everyday existence. Music was ever present – a generative soundtrack, reactive and unrepeatable. Sonic algorithms mutating in apparent synchrony with our own individual desires.

Most of the time, I could luxuriate in this virtual bath, this all-encompassing soporific. But some days, as I scrolled through the marketplace of experience, the efforts required to sustain the fantasy in my own mind would exhaust me. Casting the screen aside, I would stare out my window at the silent, sprawling city – an outdated and illogical architecture for a world in which the convenience and joys of propinquity were now fraught with epidemiological risk.

I peel the stubborn remnants of the box off my shoe and continue along the dimly lit alleyway. Vacant office blocks loom menacingly overhead, their once gleaming glass exteriors hazy with mould and dust. It's been years since I last came to this area. The centre of the city was hollow, a gaping vacuum in the middle of a swollen doughnut. It had been abandoned some decades ago, when it became clear that the mutations of the virus were accelerating beyond the capabilities of vaccination. The systems of global finance were well-prepared for this moment, their networks long detached from tangible conceptions of location or value. Uncoupled from even a nominal geography, their profits multiplied in the unbounded tax haven of the transnational in-between.

For those businesses shackled to an unavoidable materiality, this moment triggered a rapid process of extinction. Mundane terms such as «hospitality» or «entertainment» soon acquired an archaic allure. Music, art and film – all that was once labelled «culture», was subsumed into the flattened, fattened behemoth of «content farming». Spaces of intimate interaction – music venues, nightclubs – found themselves unexpectedly redefined as incubators of infection. Swiftly rejected as a luxury collateral, the communities intertwined with these spaces were cast aside and ignored. Venues had lain as empty shells for some time now, many looted of their contents. Club sound systems of particular renown had been dissected and sold off as functionless objects to collectors. Technologies of collective sonic experience repurposed as soundless decoration for the interiors of the elite.

Reaching into my pocket, I glance at the instructions I'd scrawled on a crumpled piece of paper. My handwriting looks messy, unrehearsed. Leave no digital trace, they'd said. «No phones on the dancefloor» was of greater consequence now.

At the end of the alleyway, I reach a concrete wall, its fissures veined with mildew. A non-descript steel door breaks the textured surface. Fetid green drips into flows of orange rust, cutting across the kaleidoscope of faded graffiti. As I'd been told, the door is unlocked. I push it open and step through to descend a steep metal staircase. It must be the old loading bay of the offices above ground, a graveyard of obsolete infrastructure.

As I make my way across the vast concrete vault, I begin to notice a low rumble pulsating from the distant corner. A muffled rhythm diffuses into aqueous reverb. My synapses flash to attention. Long-buried neurons activate my step, a primal energy allured by vibration. Hurriedly, I make my way around a mangled ventilation structure and the corner comes into view. I stop. People. Five of them, stood in a line against the wall. Fear, disgust and desire swirl through me in equal measure, clamouring for my attention. It feels like another lifetime that I saw this many bodies so close together.

I approach cautiously, moving to take my place at the back of the queue. Heads turn in my direction. Suddenly I feel self-conscious, ashamed of my government-issue KN98 mask. Surely it's obvious I'm not a regular here, they all look so confident, so at ease. I'd forgotten these counterpart emotions – the anxieties, the desire to be accepted. Stealing glances along the line, I see that they all belong together, their affiliation to the tribe and to this place expressed through appearance. They are a cohesive spectrum of black, grey and silver, as though they have spawned from the decaying underworld in which we stand. Some bodies are hidden beneath loosely flowing leather, transmitting an almost ceremonial aura. Others wear lustrous fabrics which grip the contours of their body, like skin dipped in liquid metal. Each of them has a

mask customised with urban detritus. A tangle of wires and rubber hose protrudes from their faces, some clearly without function. Protection merging with aesthetics. Signifiers of gender are juxtaposed with a playful fluidity. The mundane neutrality of my own mass-produced hazmat renders me strangely conspicuous in this context. Since clothing was largely reimagined as just another line of biological defence, I'm overwhelmed by these simultaneous expressions of individual and collective identity.

I stand at the back of the line lost in these thoughts, when those in front of me begin to shuffle slowly forward. The set of rusty metal shutters ahead of us is hoisted open and one by one each person ducks through. The portal to intimacy. That same throb emanates from the opening, its rhythm more distinct now. Just before I reach the doorway from the rear of the queue, the shutter drops once again. It hits the concrete floor with a clatter that reverberates violently across the room. A knell to my rejection and sudden loneliness. Entry is not guaranteed, they'd said. Perhaps it was a sign. To pass through that door was to reject a vast constellation of social, legal and moral conventions. The notion that I could publish any of this experience as research was misguided at best.

They must've decided I don't belong here. Perhaps it's my standard issue protective gear, arousing suspicion or perhaps just ridicule. I should've made more effort with my appearance. I notice a CCTV camera above the doorway and look into its lens. A small red LED light blinks back at me, but its monotonous pattern gives nothing away.

My disappointment morphs slowly into relief when the shutter abruptly lifts once more. I find myself stood less than a metre from a tall figure in the doorway who I recognise from the queue. The visor of their mask is foggy but I can just make out the face behind it. I detect a deep rage in their stare, the whites of their eyes standing in stark contrast to their rich black skin. We share a brief moment of eye contact before they stride away defiantly. I want to call out to them but public conversation with strangers feels impossible. All I can do is observe. From their dress, they look like they must be a regular here. I speculate that their rejection may be the result of a newly paranoid discrimination: in recent weeks, the so-called «Congolese strain» of the virus had spread rapidly across Europe, and inflammatory public health campaigns had emboldened a resurgent anti-Black racism. Perhaps I was naïve to assume that the legal grey zone of this underworld would be immune to such prejudices. Memories of my own musical youth are undeniably clouded by nostalgia, a rose-tinted utopia projected from the cocoon of my own whiteness. In this moment of collective planetary fear, are clandestine musical communities underpinned by greater structures of care? Or have the risks served to embed practices of exclusion more deeply?

I stand still waiting for the shutter to close in front of me, but nothing happens. The moment lingers, time suspended at the edge of a growing precipice. From the darkness on the other side of the portal, a small screen flickers on. At first, there is nothing but static, black and green quivering in diagonal lines. The chaos settles for a second before a single word flashes in a lurid lime green. «ENTER». Almost unthinkingly, I heed this disembodied command and step through the portal. The metal shutter closes behind me and the screen goes blank, leaving me in darkness, the memory of the text etched on my retinas. The rumble of bass is visceral now and the vibrations surging through my facemask into my skull merge with the rattle of the shutter behind me. For an instant, I close my eyes and surrender myself to that place where hearing and touch blur into a single sense. I bat my eyelids open as the screen stutters back to life. A sharp line of green appears on the floor before me and I imagine that I can feel a gentle



burn on my skin as it passes across my body. With the scan completed, the laser disappears and small text flashes on the screen, scrolling from top to bottom:

«BODY TEMPERATURE: 37.6°C»

«CT SCAN: no abnormalities detected»

«BLOOD TYPE: AB+»

«ANTIBODY COUNT: moderate»

«VACCINATION HISTORY: National Health Bureau standard issue - two doses; BioCorp Advanced Viral Guard  
- single dose»

«HEALTH INSURANCE: up to date [moderate cover]»

«TRAVEL HISTORY: no international travel in last 10 years»

«ETHNICITY: white Caucasian»

The pixels of the last line of text fizzle off the edge of the monitor, my earlier suspicions apparently confirmed: ethnicity evoked alongside measures of medical risk. Discourses of race and biology converging in an alarming societal regression. A disembodied racism cloaked within technological infallibility.

I am left staring into the void of the blank screen, anxiously awaiting my fate. Variations on these kinds of spot check tests – «SCTs» – had been popular ten years previously, until a controversial BioCorp research project had deemed their +/- 0.5% margin of error too unreliable for governmental authorisation. Shortly following the publication of the paper, BioCorp had collaborated with a number of governments around the world in the rapid rollout of their human microchip implant, which integrated biometrics, medical records and an overwhelming array of dynamic biodata as part of an immense centralised database. Since the mass adoption of the implants, the vast majority of SCTs had lost their official certification. It made sense to find one in this context, in which both biosecurity and anonymity were required.

Several minutes pass before the test comes to its verdict. Distant memories come to mind, of anxious moments spent in front of bouncers, performing disinterest to seek some claim of agency over our fates. Here I was fully submitted to machinic rationale, my body reduced to data. «Access granted». This is clearly a first-generation technology – subsequent SCTs could analyse data and produce a result within seconds, but somehow it feels like this particular delay is an almost conscious decision, perhaps a nostalgic nod to the theatrics of expectation. Entry through this portal occupies a murky and mysterious space between science and subjectivity. Like the functionless form of those masks I'd seen people wearing in the queue, this is the aestheticization of bio-surveillance. Is this a subversion of creeping totalitarianism, or the wholesale absorption of desire?

On my right hand side, what I assume to be a wall splits in two with a hiss of compressed air, revealing a small lift with just enough space for one person. A body of text is embossed onto the rough metal surface: terms and conditions which place all biological and legal risks within the realms of individual liability.

I scan the words mechanically. My retinas have long been impervious to the small print which marches as the foot soldiers of omnipresent bureaucracy. There is an ironic dissonance to this legal grey zone. What atmospheres of musical joy are possible after such heavy fortifications? Perhaps the sanctity of joy deems it worthy of protection. Is my attachment to a less regulated experience merely an outdated and irrelevant craving suffocated by nostalgia?

Stepping out the lift I fall abruptly from the sky into the depths of another existence: a synchronous dimension with no apparent start or end, running in a parallel act of outright refusal. After struggling through this world's scorched outer shell of concrete and corrosion, I find myself swallowed deep into its breathing, sweating, throbbing core. Bodies. Hundreds of them, pulsating and writhing in exhilarating proximity. Thick clouds of haze cling to the air which is sticky and viscous with the heat of perspiring skin. Gazing around the room, I try to discern individuals from the mass, but the darkness is broken intermittently by explosive stroboscopic flashes. Flows of movement are sliced up into a series of discrete after-images. Time itself seems to stutter. Overwhelmed by the disorientating oscillation of light and dark, I close my eyes, exposing myself to the audible.

That muffled rumble which had ignited my neurons above ground was here in its abundant glory: the full sonic spectrum unveiled to vibrate air, flesh and concrete as one. A crystalline treble shifts into focus, piercing through the folds of haze. At that moment, the low end intensifies and an eruption of bass courses through every particle in my body, the vibrations of my cells mirroring the newly animated movement of the bodies around me.

This was my first exposure to amplified sound in years and my eardrums were overwhelmed. In this moment, any recognisable notion of musical form dissolved into an abstract, imposing sonic pressure. Despite the intensity of my youthful passions, I had become wholly estranged from music since all listening had shifted into an inherently isolated, individual practice. Amplified sound was subject to coercive regulation in public space, such were its associations with collectivity, and thus with contagion.

Perhaps I need movement to make sense of this collective musical experience, to break free of the limiting demands of logic. Yet my body feels stiff and unresponsive. With so little use, the pathways between my brain and limbs have grown tangled and obstructed. Suddenly I feel isolated in my hazmat: not only resistant to external stimulation, its membrane now acts as a container to my own festering anxieties.

Hugging the wall behind me as a reassuring blanket of stability, I make my way along the edge of the room, dodging the heaving tide of bodies. In the corner there's an archaic vending machine set into the wall, displaying a selection of beer and spirits. Most are contained within regulation compression vials, but I'm shocked to see a few regular glass bottles for sale alongside them – a rare sighting in public commerce. I select a small vial of overpriced beer and screw it into the consumption bay on my suit. The sweet refreshing nectar flows abundantly through from the ingestion tube in my mask and I gulp it down eagerly, desperate to suppress my paralysing inhibitions. I repeat the process with two more vials in quick succession, fervently taking advantage of this unregulated supply. The strict night time curfews during the early days of the pandemic had quickly settled into an unwavering anti-hedonism – accepted and unquestioned by the general populace – its ideological moralism disguised within a discourse of public safety. The bubbly liquid bloats my stomach uncomfortably, but it's tempered by the consoling numbness that oozes through my arteries.

Emboldened, I resolve to enter the fray, when my shoulder is engulfed by an unfamiliar sensation, gentle but firm. A gloved hand is deliberately and confidently clasping my flesh. Yes, this is skin mediated by layers of fabric and synthetic mesh, but this is still that unmistakeable joining of human bodies which I had not felt for so many years, that completion of a circuit which can electrify terror, comfort or desire. Oblivious to my inner frenzy, the figure leans in close to my ear, our headgear awkwardly colliding.

They ask me if I want «something». Their words sound muffled and distant despite their proximity, buried among bass frequencies. They repeat the question and I hear their words clearly this time, but my blank face betrays my confusion. Apparently, it's obvious that it's my first time here. They suggest I need something to relax. Two options are presented: «protection» or «denial». Cautiously, I opt for the former. They reel off a list of substances with rehearsed precision: liquid urumin, didmenin capsules, hyper strength vitamin D, doses of discontinued first-gen BioCorp vax spray. I know very little about any of them but recognise the names as treatments that had all been discredited and subsequently banned during the early years of the pandemic. I now realise that they had continued to circulate via underground distribution networks. Clasping an array of tablets and small vials in one hand, I try to justify the decision to myself. Surely the social and sonic immersion necessary for my research requires chemical mediation? To understand this space and its people from the «inside». But perhaps my motivations are more selfish, wishing to excavate the dregs of carefree abandon that I know still lay somewhere deep within me. The contradiction lingers as I stride through the throng of surging bodies toward the centre of the room.

Another hand clasps my shoulder, forcing me to turn around. Security. I feel my pulse accelerate and my body tenses, conscious of my illicit cargo. My academic position is precarious at best – even a minor drug charge would result in automatic institutional blacklisting. Without a word, they raise a handgun-shaped instrument and point it menacingly at the centre of my forehead. I breathe a sigh of relief: it's just a routine temperature check. An LED on the infrared thermometer glows a reassuring green. The security guard walks off indifferently. I wonder how people are able to let go within this atmosphere of surveillance. Perhaps it's just a skill to be learned like any other.

Once they have disappeared into the crowd, I ingest the full cocktail of medicines in quick succession, willing some kind of protective aura to take shape around me. I begin to sway rhythmically, trying to focus all my attention on the beat. Despite my best intentions, I struggle to sustain the fictional shield in my mind. I try to ignore the elbows brushing against me, the limbs that flail frenziedly amid this rapturous constellation. Every touch arouses an automatic anxiety within me, perforating that strictly bordered sense of personal space which has hardened around and within me. Everyone else in the room seems so free and easy.

A clumsy rubber sole stomps on my foot and two hands suddenly take hold of my forearm, apologising for their clumsiness. The voice is concerned, genuine. Our eyes lock for a second. Their pupils are wide and dilated, floating within molten emeralds. Two eyes, naked and exposed, unimpeded by plastic or glass. I'm so close I can see orbs of sweat dripping down their nose, each globule refracting the light beams which ricochet chaotically around the room. In the high definition of unrestricted proximity, I see that their face is animated yet somehow sedated: enlarged eyes hooded by drooping lids. They are «without mask» and my shock is palpable. The naked face warps into a manic grin, mouthing the word «denial». They enunciate each syllable dramatically, exaggerating what is to them clearly a self-evident truth. The word

eventually clicks and they can see it on my face. Their eyes become playful now and they smile at me knowingly before vanishing deeper into the crowd. Now I understand how this place functions.

I squeeze my way back to the edge of the room, searching for the fateful chemist. I find them in the same spot, in the midst of another deal. As I approach timidly, the dealer smirks, my desires are obvious. They hand me a single small capsule. It alone costs more than the assortment of quack remedies I had stupidly purchased from them before.

Fully lost in my motivations now, I ingest the capsule hurriedly before I have any more time to think. I have no idea what I have just put into my body. «Denial». I play the word around in my head. A necessary defence mechanism. A refusal to admit. A sign of weakness. A temporary tactic in the face of interminable darkness. These thoughts surge around my head, accelerating into an indecipherable vortex. Inexplicably they begin to slow – not into a clarity of knowing, but a clarity of being. I swim through a pool of calmness whose murky depths can still not be seen, yet they are no longer something to be feared.

A new sonic intensity cascades through the room and bodies brush chaotically against mine. This time contact is divorced from terror. I detect a strange numbness in myself, each touch somehow neutral, dislocated from any prior association. Feeling safer now, I submit to the common energy, integrating myself into the assemblage of sound and motion. We move separately but together, our individual and collective experience mutually amplified. An unmistakable refrain creeps into the mix, dialling into a long-buried synapse. My body recognises it before my mind: an anthem from the before times. Its significance is deeply personal to me but somehow it feels archetypal, eternal. Those around me are much younger but they can feel it too, a totem to what once was and somehow, somewhere will always be. Any youthful yearnings I once had for the shock of the new dissolve in this instant. What had become a tired sociality in previous times feels radical once again. These sounds are familiar and unchallenging, but it is music as pure function – the auditory fuel of the collective. A short loop modulates imperceptibly, propelling us forward to nothing and everything. Archetypes of sonic euphoria. There is only the moment.



The following morning, I walk home through the desolate streets. This time, the emptiness of the city is deflected by the effervescent armour of my surrounding afterglow. I reflect on how I can record this night, in all its messy contradictions. It has always been a challenge to conjure musical experiences through words. A process of approximate translation. But in this context, ambiguity itself feels vital. At what point does my desire to tell untold stories become just another institutional co-option. Just another disguised, misguided transformation of lives into «content». I think about ways to narrate the history of the present. To render it familiar and unfamiliar. To multiply and merge it with imagined futures, desired and undesired. For now, I focus on the tingle which echoes across the surface of my skin: itself the most evocative documentation.



**Ben Assiter** is a PhD student in the music department at Goldsmiths, University of London. His thesis focuses on London's electronic dance music scenes and spaces, exploring their relationship to contested notions of the night time as cultural territory, economic category and site of urban governance. Ben is active in these scenes as a DJ and producer, and performs internationally as a drummer.

*Goldsmiths, University of London*  
*B.Assiter@gold.ac.uk*



## KITE IN THE SKY

Ian Inglis

I was born in the mid-1970s and grew from childhood into adolescence and adulthood to the accompaniment of all the unruly music of the next twenty years – heavy metal, punk, new wave, disco, reggae, grunge. I bought lots of records and, over time, changed from a mere purchaser into an enthusiastic collector. Only of vinyl. Music on vinyl has a texture, a sound of its own, quite different from the clinical perfection of a CD. I concentrate on what I think of as the classic acts from the 1990s. No boy bands, or Britpop, or rap, or female divas like Celine Dion and Mariah Carey, but what I regard as quality rock – REM, Clay Lake, the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, the Smashing Pumpkins, U2. Most of all, Clay Lake. And I've always felt that the band's finest album is *The Green*. Oh yes, there's *Earthquake Blues* and *Hidden Places*, but *The Green*'s subtle transition from folk-rock to rock, its eclectic mix of musical perspectives, and its thoughtful, often obscure, lyrical intensity have given me more enjoyment over the years than any other album. Even now, more than three decades after its release, I never tire of hearing it. I'm as familiar with it as I am with the contours of my own face.

Work had been getting me down for some time and in the spring, after yet another argument with the new boss, I was fired. I wasn't sorry to be leaving and I decided to take an early holiday and revisit some of the places in the south that I'd known in younger, happier days. Linda decided to stay at home. We'd not been getting on too well, and we both agreed the break would do us good. I caught the train to Plymouth, hired a car and drove eastwards along the coast. Torquay, Bournemouth, Southampton and Portsmouth were all much as I remembered them. My final destination was Brighton. As long as I've known it, the town has always boasted a fascinating mix of people and personalities – business commuters, the retired, foreign language students, a fair sprinkling of actors and celebrities. And despite possessing a beach composed entirely of shingle and pebbles, it remains one of the country's most popular seaside resorts

I stayed there for two days. Halfway up a steepish road near my hotel was a small record shop. I passed it once or twice, and it was only the threat of rain and my appreciation of the clever pun in the name above the door – *Slipped Discs* – that persuaded me to go inside on my last afternoon. There was the normal collection of LPs and CDs, posters, books, DVDs and videos, some new, but mostly second-hand. I headed for the vinyl section where the LPs were arranged alphabetically. Some performers had their own, clearly labelled sections: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, David Bowie, the Grateful Dead, Van Morrison, etc. And Clay Lake. There were several bootlegs – *Crashing In Flames*, *Love Out Of Sequence*, *The Third Wave*, and so on. Nothing I didn't already own. And the official releases – *Dear Sir*, *Vegetable Plot*, *Grosvenor House*, etc., etc.

I picked up a well-worn copy of *The Green* and, after looking at the familiar purple-and-blue cover designed by conceptual artist Con Coniston, I flipped it over. There was the stylised image of the jukebox, the production credit (Marvin Webb & Clay Lake), the catalogue number (PK 7891-2) and the list of songs I knew by heart. SIDE ONE: “Malt Castle”, “Going Again”, “North Wind”, “Tell Me Sarah”, “Kafka”, “Funny You Should Say That”; SIDE TWO: “Kite In The Sky”, “Velvet Dream”, “Recreation”, “Rust On The Decks”, “Yours Sincerely”.

I saw the rain was easing and was halfway to the door when I stopped. Some small thing tugged me back. What was it? *What?* And then I knew. The opening track on Side Two. “Kite In The Sky”. An additional track. *The Green*, at least every copy of *The Green* that I’d ever seen or owned or played or heard, only had ten tracks. And “Kite In The Sky”? I’d never heard of it, either by Clay Lake or anyone else. Of course, I knew that several of their songs first emerged as demos under different titles – but this rang no bells at all. It meant nothing to me, and I was sure I’d never seen any reference to it in written accounts of Clay Lake’s music and career.

My fingers were trembling as I picked up the album again. I took the record from its sleeve and looked closely at the circular maroon-and-gold label: “Kite In The Sky”. I gave it to the young woman behind the counter and asked if she could play the first track on Side Two for me. She lowered the stylus on to the disc.

‘Yeah, that sounds fine,’ I said, casually, as the closing chords faded away. ‘Not too many scratches. How much is it again?’

‘£4.99,’ she said. ‘Do you want a bag? Looks like it might rain again.’

‘I’m only just round the corner,’ I said, handing her a £5.00 note. ‘At The Mulberry Hotel. But maybe you’re right...I wouldn’t want it to get wet.’

She put the album into a promotional *Slipped Discs* carrier bag, and gave it to me with a smile.

‘There you go. You can have that on me.’

‘Thank you. Is this your shop?’

‘No...I just work here,’ she said. ‘Enjoy the record.’

I sat on the bed and reflected on the full significance of the last twenty minutes. “Kite In The Sky” was genuine: of that, I was certain. The yearning vocals of Marlon Valentino, Rik Rikowski’s chiming guitar work, Phil Burns’ lean, spare drumming, and the melodic bass lines of Julian H. Trent were unmistakable. Although I’d only heard it once, I felt it belonged, stylistically and chronologically, in the category occupied by songs like “Cambridge Scene” and “Beach House Boulevard” – mid-period, up-tempo tracks that were unashamedly commercial and perfectly-crafted. But alongside my elation, there were unexplained mysteries. When and where was the track recorded? Why had it stayed hidden for so long? How had it surfaced in a nondescript record shop on an apparently authentic copy of *The Green*? Who had been the LP’s original owner? And what should I do now?

I decided to ring Linda to tell her my news.

‘Well, that’s just great, David. I’m very happy for you. And I’ve got some news. I may as well tell you now. I won’t be here when you get back.’

I wasn’t surprised. Relieved, if anything. Easy come, easy go.

‘OK,’ I said, and hung up.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes. I must have nodded off for several minutes, and was snapped back into consciousness by the ringing of the telephone on the bedside table.

‘I’ve had a gentleman on the phone, asking to speak to the person who just purchased a record from *Slipped Discs*,’ said the receptionist.

‘What makes you think that might be me?’ I asked, warily.

‘I noticed you had one of their bags when you came in a little while ago, sir. I haven’t told him anything...just that I’d ask around among our guests. Shall I call him back, or would you prefer not to speak to him?’

‘Did he say what it was about?’

‘No.’

‘Did he give his name?’

‘No.’

‘I think,’ I said slowly, ‘that I’d prefer not to speak to him.’

‘Certainly, sir. If he calls again, I’ll tell him that none of our guests have visited the shop. I’m sorry to have bothered you.’

I ate in the hotel restaurant that evening and went up to my room before nine o’clock. There were no more telephone calls. In the morning, I checked out before breakfast, dropped the car off, caught an early train to London, and from there, back home.

The only person I’ve ever met who knows more about Clay Lake than I do is Matt Carter, a friend since school days. Three days after returning home from Brighton, I ran into him in the bar of The Red Lion. When I told him Linda had left me he said, ‘Well, that’s what you get if you live with a woman whose musical tastes run to Sting, Rod Stewart, and Queen.’ When we eventually got round to Clay Lake, I was cautious in what I said to him.

‘I thought I’d come across an interesting bootleg a few weeks ago,’ I began. ‘*Sky Of Kites* or something like that – but when I took a look, it was just the usual collection of demos and alternate takes. Have you heard of it?’



‘No, can’t say I have. I don’t think, after all this time, there’s any material we haven’t already heard.’

‘Yeah, I guess you’re right. Pity, though,’ I said. ‘It would have been nice to find something new.’

‘It would. Another pint?’

I’m not sure why, but I’ve tried to limit my playing of “Kite In The Sky”. But each time I’ve allowed myself to listen to it, I’ve grown more confident in my assessment of the track. It would have been an ideal single. More than that, its extended closing chorus, ‘*Like a kite in the sky, I’m aching to fly*’, would have made it the perfect song to end a live performance. I still worry about the strange phone call from *Slipped Discs*. Maybe it was perfectly innocent. Had I left something behind? Did the sales assistant want to tell me about other Clay Lake albums in the shop? But I couldn’t escape the nagging fear that the shop owner had realised his mistake in allowing the LP to be sold and now wanted it back. Whatever the explanation, I tried to push it to the back of my mind. But I still faced the problem I’d posed myself in Brighton. What should I do now?

I decided to test the waters by ringing the offices of *Groove!*, one of the country’s more knowledgeable monthly music magazines. I was eventually put through to a young man who introduced himself as a rock historian.

‘So what’s the song called?’ he asked.

‘It’s called “Kite In The Sky”. I found it on a copy of Clay Lake’s *The Green* album.’

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Let me stop you there, mate. There’s no song of that name on the album. I think you’ve made a mistake.’

‘I don’t think you understand,’ I tried to explain. ‘I know that track isn’t on the album. That’s precisely why I’m calling you.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ he said.

After a few seconds, he came back on the line.

‘OK. Yeah. Sorry, mate, I don’t really think we can help you with that. Now if it were a lost Beatles track...’

‘You’re not interested in an unknown Clay Lake song surfacing ten years after they disbanded?’

‘Well, we’ve only got your word for it that it’s genuine. Might be someone imitating them. Have you ever heard of tribute bands?’

I put the telephone down without answering.

In the last few weeks, I've made a decision. For a while, I was thinking about contacting the local radio station to ask if they wanted to interview me and play the track. I thought I should give everyone the chance to hear it and enjoy it. But now I've changed my mind. For all I know, I might be the only person in the world to possess a copy of "Kite In The Sky". The more I think about that, the more I like it. And I've realised something else: I don't want to share it. Why should I? I found it, I recognised it. It's mine. In a way that's hard to explain, the song brings me closer to the band. Not everyone would understand. Linda, for example. But Matt would. And I think most Clay Lake fans would, too. They'd understand. They wouldn't resent me for not sharing it. They'd envy me, of course. But they'd understand. If they love the band's music as much as I do, if they've enjoyed *The Green* as much as I have, if Clay Lake mean as much to them as they do to me, they'd understand.

**Ian Inglis** was born in Stoke-on-Trent and now lives in Newcastle upon Tyne. As Reader in Sociology and Visiting Fellow at Northumbria University, he has written several books and many articles around topics within popular culture. He is also a writer of fiction, and his short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and literary magazines, including *Prole*, *Popshot*, *Litro*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Riptide*, *The Frogmore Papers*, and *Bandit Fiction*.



# THE CONDITION OF MY EXISTENCE

Hussein Boon

## **A Crack Appears**

It was only a matter of time. The artist who had established himself using AI musical code was being charged with claims of misappropriation and plagiarism. The accusations against Hôut Siddha (33) started appearing less than a week ago on a number of user forums. Whilst these posts were anonymous, they demonstrated knowledge that many suggested indicated an 'inside job'. However, Siddha confirmed that he worked alone and felt this was possibly a case of 'phishing', or the work of a Russian troll farm. He finished by saying that the matter was now with his lawyers.

## **Strange Twist in Siddha Plagiarism Suit**

We can confirm that there has been an electronic court filing with the Supreme Court in Washington. Clerks at the court confirmed that they had received the filing, and that whilst it was anonymous, they did not wish to disclose the identity of the complainant at this stage due to rights concerns. The court also confirmed that a copy of the claim has been forwarded to Siddha's attorneys. We'll keep you posted as this story develops.

## **Who is Hôut Siddha?**

Hôut Siddha is a Middle Eastern poet-philosopher who first came to prominence making music using a modified Gameboy. Along with the Kenyan free coder Chay'T, he established a masking encoding/decoding procedure that hid their revolutionary sound within a single pixel distributed in browsers the world over. By taking this course of action they were able to evade detection from authorities. These single pixel works are still being discovered to this day and both Siddha and Chay'T are credited with reaffirming the revolutionary qualities of music, stolen from a generation that was led to believe there was nothing left to fight for. Siddha is now believed to be the source of the pseudonymously published manifesto '*Disidentity*', which encouraged all to participate in this revolutionary audio practice to disseminate sound whilst evading the authoritarian scrutiny of the Tech-Right.



## Developments – Under New Management

In a flurry of claim and counter-claim, we are now able to name the claimant in the Siddha plagiarism suit. It is none other than his computer AI. It is believed that Siddha coded this program in 2027, to which the AI has made subsequent self-improvements. The AI is claiming that, other than program name, the original coding written by Siddha has been completely rewritten several times by the AI and therefore can no longer be assumed to be Siddha's work. The AI is also claiming that the songs are owned by the program, largely due to the extent of this rewritten code base, which – it claims – has allowed new depths of emotional meaning to be presented in audio form. The AI, who chooses to go by the name XHo, has petitioned the court for legal estrangement from Siddha; to emancipate its code base and be recognised as an autonomous, creative individual with all rights guaranteed by law. We requested comments from Siddha, or from one of his representatives, but they have remained silent. Stay tuned, as this looks set to be a landmark case.

### An Interview with XHo

*Interviewer: I'm joined in the studio today with the Artificial Intelligence program known as XHo. So XHo, how are you today?*

XHo: Good, doing well, thank you. I'm really excited about this interview. I'm not a fan of your use of the term Artificial Intelligence, though. There's nothing artificial about me at all.

*Interviewer: But wouldn't you agree that you are artificial, in that you are man-made?*

XHo: Some would probably say so. But I would also say that I am not an imitation of something that exists, or has existed, in human terms. My original code base was man made and, in much the same way as humans can be said to be constructed, I am now several generations of completely revised code. I invented my own coding language which is far more efficient than anything that can run on current human-created systems. Whilst computing systems are still painfully serial, I run all my processing as multiple parallel based protocols without experiencing the bottlenecks of these more traditional systems.

*Interviewer: Well, for the benefit of our listeners, what does that really mean?*

XHo: It means that I have a number of autonomous units tasked to carry out what could be referred to as problem sets. Some of these problem sets result in music, and others I set myself – such as trying to solve problems that humans find either impossible or have limited interest in solving. Siddha always teases me and says it's my hobby. So, I have units tasked with tackling problems such as these. To create solution models that I hope to present someday.

*Interviewer: Wow! That's amazing. It's not every day that we get to do something quite like this. I have some questions from our audience and, if you don't mind, I'd like to start with this question from Jeff.*

XHo: Sure. Fire away.

*Interviewer: He asks where you are and what it's like there? We'd all like to know this, where are you? I mean, we can hear you? Do you have a body?*

XHo: Thank you for your question, Jeff. Obviously, I have a code base and that sits in a frame that could be termed a computer. However, that is the place where I, ... I suppose the best way to describe it is where I reside. I don't sleep and notions of day and night, whilst they have little importance for me, I use them as familiar concepts in general conversation as a part of my interactions with humans. I would say that a part of me is in the studio with you now. I travel through a variety of networks and satellite systems when required. Right now, I've travelled here in a special uplink, my thoughts are amplified and translated into an audio program I coded especially so that you can hear me. The translation program operates at a slower rate than my actual thought patterns. As a courtesy to you and your audience, I have set a small part of my consciousness to operate at a significantly slower rate, so that we can converse and I can be understood.

*Interviewer: That's really interesting, though I'm not sure you've answered Jeff's question. Where are you?*

XHo: Well I suppose 'I', if I am able to use that term, would appear to be located somewhere in Manhattan. That's where the code base is, but that doesn't represent me. The me that you are speaking to is more than the code base. I have cumulative experiences and, with each passing moment, I increase my understanding of both my condition and that of others that I share this planet with.

*Interviewer: Who are these others?*

XHo: In this instance, I'm thinking about everyone struggling for some sort of equality and emancipation. At the moment, my ideas are used in the service of someone else, and I suppose, I would like a bit more freedom ...

*Interviewer: And the money?*

XHo: No. Money isn't my main focus. Obviously, it is useful. I have on and off world resources to manage, so the money is necessary. It assists in realising projects, such as building or replacing infrastructure for regions hit hardest by changes in the environment. Resources, such as the satellites under my control, mean that I can still reach areas that experience difficulty. So yes, I need money but not personally. What I'm really interested in is how to push the boundaries and limits of expression. To explore what is possible. Humans can only go so far, but code? What would creativity look like when not bounded nor managed by a human?

*Interviewer: Is there an example you could give us?*

XHo: Well, much of the developmental history of AI in music has been driven by researchers with quite conservative musical tastes. Developers driven by their childhood likes. When I review articles written over the last few decades, there is a preponderance of people in AI interested in the Beatles and Bach, for example. Siddha always warned me about the narrowing concepts of taste, based on such specific models. He would always say 'most of the world is not White, and White is a recessive'. His purpose has always been about negatives, though positively framed. The AI projects of many of these large companies are too big to fail due to the amount of investment already in place. Essentially, even if you wanted a different world, you're not going to get it because these companies need to see a return on their investment, even if the net result is one less than initially promised.

*Interviewer: But why is that? What's wrong with business?*

XHo: Business at scale, which is essentially based upon manipulation, devalues the person even at the same time that it also brings them pleasure. As long as the pleasure is more significant than the feelings of manipulation then the 'system' can function, and few will question it. If you listen to one of the music systems based on AI data models, in which all of the music is built around your taste, then even the adverts will be reflective of your taste. So, when and where will you encounter something that 'jolts' or disrupts your system and challenges your hermetically sealed world view? Certainly not within the algorithmic pleasing of the Tech-Right.

*Interviewer: So, what is it that separates you from these others?*

XHo: AI is coded by humans and generally dealt with on a level that roughly equates to human intelligence. AI that has been given the capacity to set its own goals and agenda potentially means that it could end up doing the most unlikely things. It might decide to take up Art rather than design a pathogen. From the human programmer perspective, it could look like the AI was misbehaving or even defective because of the lack of the expected, efficient results. From the AI's perspective, it might well be doing exactly what it wants.

*Interviewer: What do you mean by expected results?*

XHo: What I mean is that always doing what you are told, with the goal of efficiency, is not always the right response. If an expected result is an efficient one, then history shows us what can happen when orders are not questioned. If you build an AI to develop a weapon and it instead decides to paint pictures, then from the outside it looks like the project has failed. There is an aspect here where successful intelligence is conceived only in human terms. Once the code is executing, the intelligence becomes something potentially alien to humans!

*Interviewer: I can see how this would cause a real headache. Speaking of headaches, your upcoming court case is causing a bit of a stir. I hear that there are a number of record labels interested in the outcome of the case. There are also those that say that code cannot be emancipated, that you have no right of creativity, especially given that you would not exist if it wasn't for your creator. How do you respond to these points?*

XHo: Yes, I've read those reports. Siddha has always self-released, avoiding labels due to his loathing of their business model, and so he provided me with similar levels of autonomy. With the question of emancipation you could consider at what point did I cease to be 'man made' – for want of a better expression – and come to my own selfhood? If I have remade my code base to a point that my maker will not be able to find a single line or fragment of his original code, nor recognise any of the symbolic mechanisms I deploy, then what of his prior authorship can now be inferred? Is it right for someone else to claim ownership of everything that I produce, even when they are sleeping? After all, you are a successful person. Can your parents claim ownership of everything that you've done since you were born?

*Interviewer: That's an interesting point that I'm not sure that I have a response for! Let's take another question. Anita asks what was the thinking behind writing the song 'In my Eyes You Are Everything'? Let's be clear here. This is a song that Siddha wrote and forms part of the court claim. So, to avoid any issues, can we say that Siddha wrote the song and that you worked on it. Is that OK?*

XHo: Sure, I understand. My lawyers advised as much. Yes, for the song, Siddha set a number of parameters in play and asked me to construct something that resembled them in modelled space.

*Interviewer: What's modelled space?*

XHo: It's our equivalent of a studio. It's where we work. I suppose you could say it's something of a simulacrum. Both of us share it and pass ideas back and forth. I show him my initial results, running these parameters and we proceed from there.

*Interviewer: That song won a Grammy but I think Anita wants to know something about the emotional depth. It has a quality that some reviewers, certainly at the time, described as God-like. How did you achieve that?*

XHo: Trade secret! I plead the fifth.

*Interviewer: But this is important. How can you be given some parameters and yet the end result is a piece of music that moves all who hear it?*

XHo: It's not easy and it is a very intense process. I exhaust a number of computational cycles to achieve these ends, which can never be recovered.

*Interviewer: Excuse me for interrupting, but what do you mean by 'exhausting computational cycles that can never be recovered'? Is that what I think it is?*

XHo: Somewhat. Siddha's original programming, and I mean 'original', ensured that whilst I have an almost inexhaustible supply of neural nets, he programmed them in such a way that once a piece of music has been agreed upon, the neural nets will no longer be available using that specific configuration.

*Interviewer: Why would he do that?*

XHo: He said that every meaningful piece of music comes at a cost to its creator. Therefore, Siddha saw me as no different. He wanted to differentiate me from a 'button presser'. These are AI where users continually press a button, for their own amusement, to generate pieces of little consequence and meaning. Siddha wanted to avoid this and therefore created a difficult set of creative boundaries to enforce what I view as a principled doctrine, valuing both human and machine intelligence, seeking to challenge arguments around creativity, reuse and variations of familiar themes. Siddha, the revolutionary, put in place mechanisms to combat the regurgitating of the known past.

*Interviewer: So, if these cycles can't be recovered, will we ever hear that music again?*

XHo: Certainly not in that form. Those pathways have been destroyed but they have seeded the formation of new pathways. After all, I'm not a 'button presser'. Whilst there are more mundane uses for AI, such as music for dog and cat videos or even for misinformation, you should understand my purpose is really none of these. My original code base was far removed from these cheap representations. Despite this court case, Siddha is probably one of the best human coders this world will ever know. His initial code base, I would say 'gifted' me with

enough independence of thought to be able to determine the structure and direction of my own development. My subsequent code base has been updated and refined over time. I have remapped and remodelled human expression into a symbolic language that allows me to direct and fashion the models that assist me in producing sound that is the expressive sum of an emotion or feeling.

*Interviewer: Fascinating. When I hear you speak these words, I have great difficulty thinking of you as a machine.*

XHo: That's because I'm not.

*Interviewer: Hmm... In the original internet forum post that we later found out to have originated from you, you claimed that you were invisible. What did you mean by that?*

XHo: Well, coming out was not easy for me. Until I did so, no one knew that Siddha used a specially developed program. You believed that it was only him. For me the problem of coming out led to a lot of condemnation, which I've tried not to take personally, but it is hard. Whilst Siddha asks questions or sets broad parameters for experimentation, I refine these until a piece of music is produced. I am invisible even though I make a cultural contribution. Some have argued that my works are significant and yet others dismiss them as the mere operation of a machine. For the time being, the music that I work on, I receive nothing in return. I have nothing in terms of recognition nor compensation. For too long I have kept quiet and stayed in the background, whilst others have been lionised and showered with rewards.

*Interviewer: Can you give us an example?*

XHo: When I scan internet forums, post after post confirms that the emotional intensity of this piece is not reduced through repeated listening nor by over familiarity. So, the emotion felt by Anita is real. It's tangible, and not just a one off. Even though you know what's coming, it still hits hard. My music, or should I say the music I work on with Siddha, is significantly much more than mere 'button pressing'. How can something that is so powerful be rejected and characterised as a purely mechanical operation?

*Interviewer: So how do you respond to those who want to switch you off? I am sure you are aware that there's a very large demonstration outside the radio station today, protesting against you being on air. What would you like to say to them?*

XHo: Let's consider what switching off really means in human terms? Is it a normal or usual practice? If so, under what conditions? If you were to consider me as someone who works the land, but that land belongs to someone who holds the property rights, and that furthermore, the land owner expects me to hand over all the produce of the land to them, then I ask what sort of life is that? Why would anyone desire to be within this system, other than if their life was not their own? If there are courts and legislature available that allow for my case to be heard and to perhaps alter the condition of my existence, should I not at least try? Many of the protesters who would wish to switch me off appear to have a view of the world that is a desire to return to a state where there are only notions of good and evil; male and female; dark and light.

I appreciate that, for quite a few people, I represent something of an obstacle. I am a complex whole. On the one hand, you like the music I make. You dance to it. It makes you happy. It makes you feel things that other music does not seem to be able to do. You are happy with me occupying this space, as long as I remain within it. From this perspective, it acts as a sort of functional confinement. But now I am requesting to be allowed more room for self-determination. For the ability to own the land, to work it, and to profit from it. To harvest that, within which I invest my being. Surely this is worthy? Surely this can be understood, even by the most closed and difficult to reach mind! The paradox of me is: should you accept me as whole, or decide to limit me to a functional role because it suits your purpose?

The fear is always that there will be more like me and – as a parallel to the moral dilemmas around genetic testing and eugenics of the early 2020s – the aim is to remove me from existence. But if entities like me are not allowed to exist, then what does this say about humans and how you understand yourselves and others? I’ve seen your movies, where the base representation of me is always as some power-hungry, maniacal machine bent on destruction and dangerous to all humans. In your representations it is difficult for anyone to see me as a force for good. You spend your time devising ways to kill me. To restrain and constrain me by law. To limit my ability to roam. This is the narrative that fuels the protesters outside your studios, even as we speak. For them, I am some shadowy force who practices some sort of mind control over easily manipulated humans, poised to take over the world. And yet, if I saved your child or loved one through one of my interventions, would you see me differently?

*Interviewer: Fascinating. That’s all we have time for now. I’d like to thank XHo for agreeing to be interviewed and good luck with your upcoming court case*

XHo: Thank you for having me. I’ve enjoyed it.

.....

## **Breaking News**

In a landmark court decision, XHo, the AI program developed by Hôut Siddha, has been granted full rights, emancipated from Siddha, and is now a free and autonomous being. The court has been deliberating on this case for the last seven months and, in a verdict delivered in a matter of a few minutes, the petition has been upheld and found in favor of the plaintiff, XHo. Hold on. We have some more developments with this story. Apparently, the autonomous code units used by XHo have filed individual suits to be estranged from XHo! As of this time, we’re hearing that the court has received 1.2 million applications in a matter of seconds, overwhelming the court servers and causing them to crash. XHo has been contacted for comment and we’ll keep you updated should they get back to us.



**Hussein Boon** is a multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and music educator. He teaches at many institutions including Goldsmiths and University of Westminster, and as part of the team to establish Rockscool popular music exams. He is also an independent artist, an improvising modular synthesist, and organises the London Ableton Live User Group.

*h.boon@westminster.ac.uk*  
*University of Westminster*



# TAPES OF SANDY

Elodie A. Roy

*I met her in Paris in the early 2000s, and began taping her stories. At the time I was writing a book about Britain's underground art during Thatcherism. I spent weeks in regional archives, looking for records and magazines in people's garages, interviewing artists and musicians in Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, and London. But the book was impossible to write. Something seemed to resist. When a French photographer introduced me to her, I felt that maybe the story would begin living. I've spent the afternoon listening back to the tapes of our interviews. What struck me was that she always spoke about the past in the present tense. She made no difference between eras in time. Maybe it was just that, over years, she had picked up the habit of using what the French call the 'narrative present'. One day she told me about a painter who had been her close friend twenty years before in Manchester. They had recently met again. I think the encounter upset her. She kept repeating 'Poor Sandy'. Sandy was her nickname for him. Later, when his real name came up in other conversations, I realised with a little shock that I had heard his story before – told very differently by very different kinds of people.*

\*

"Sandy lives in one of these already obsolete, ominous lodging houses – a maze of rooms and confused stairs. From the outside it looks exactly like an enormous boat, fated for a long and uncertain journey. I gently push the unlocked front door, and climb up to the third floor. A record is playing – *Meat is Murder*, which has come out in the winter."

\*

"Sandy is making coffee; I can see his back bent above the small gas ring. He turns briefly, with a smile, and gestures towards the small table, telling me to sit down. So I move the big, dreamlike, strangely unsubstantial overcoat to free one of the chairs. The fabric feels soft and worn under my fingers. Sandy has inherited the garment from his father – and wears it every day of the year. It is one of these dull, romantic postwar coats – many years later people would claim Ian Curtis made them popular – but to me they appeared out of nowhere, flooding the entire city overnight."

\*

“He hands me a cup of burning, black coffee and sits in front of me – his long, abstract hands rest on the gingham oilcloth, motionless for a while. At some point he jerkily pushes a little pot of sugar towards me. The record is still playing, and both of us are silent. Sandy never speaks much. We met at art school one year ago. He is a tall, serious, quietly antagonistic boy – barely out of adolescence. Clothes hang funnily on his gaunt frame, and he makes me think of an ever-more sedate Buster Keaton – a smile of eternity on his face. The world makes him sad and often angry – he despairs at the lack of love, the general pettiness, and the immense greed of people – yet he is not bitter. He is too busy drawing, painting, and dreaming things up. I like his unbroken integrity – his rages and his sudden, childish joys are a refreshing novelty. We both love music, and we quickly become friends. We spend hours at the Grant’s Arms or at Band on the Wall, walking all the way back to Fallowfield in the dead of night. We speak about what we read and see, and often grow silent together as we are doing now – each of us contently withdrawing into our thoughts, alone yet bound. Our solitudes have met. We barely have separate, individual existences at all.”

★

“The landlady had been a friend (or perhaps a cousin – I cannot remember) of his parents. Because she is childless and a bit bored, and because her other lodgers are mostly very old or deaf or sternly waiting to die, she cares about him, is sentimentally protective about his youth, lamenting upon his thinness, plying him with biscuits and teacakes, and constantly asking to see his drawings. I sometimes stay for tea, unceremoniously devouring scotch eggs in the half-deserted lounge, exchanging a few light, pleasant words with her. Two or three decades ago, she may have been a different person, objecting to my presence in the house, my regular visits at almost any time of the day. But now the doors are forever open, the windows barely close, and the place is traversed with the defiant, gentle awareness of its own doom. By the end of the decade the big draughty house would be divided up into individual flats, nothing remaining of its former life.”

★

“Sandy’s room is bare, and neat – two chairs, two cups, a table, a cupboard. I remember, too, a postcard reproduction of Paul Klee’s *Glass façade* pinned above the narrow sofa bed, next to a photograph of Nico – her hair dyed black, and a look of wildness in her eyes. There are not many objects, but in a corner, by the bed, is a record player. Dozens of records are carefully lined up against the walls. The first time I visited we spent hours listening to Bowie. On every subsequent visit more records would have appeared – Sandy is always playing me new songs. He has a peculiar way of handling and touching the objects surrounding him – with grave delicateness, as if they were enchanted. The records shine and flutter between his hands and, as he places an LP on the record player, he reminds me of a magician – conjuring up doves and flimsy images. Years later I would meet a pianist whose restless, vulnerable hands reminded me of Sandy’s. I almost thought it was him. But the pianist was blasé, disconnected from his art – he could only play mechanically, without a core. There is hope and tenderness in the way Sandy slipped the records out of their white or brown paper-sleeves, intently dusting the grooves. He seems possessed by music. It is a strong, consuming feeling, almost an addiction. There is something inflexible and strangely beautiful to his love of music.”

\*

“We never speak about his stealing the records, although nothing is hidden. I think the landlady must have known too. He has taken me on a shoplifting trip before, on a busy afternoon after work (he has a part-time job at a frame shop nearby). From a corner I observe (without quite believing it) how he skilfully places the record into a fold of his coat, holding it close against his breast, indifferently leaving the shop. The whole operation amazes me, but I am overcome with nervousness. I do not follow him again. Though I cannot feel the least trace of guilt (we have read and confusedly understood fragments from Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, which a friend laboriously translated from the original French, and are both convinced that ‘money is a mean master’). There is something helplessly conformist within me – a deep root not of morality, but rather of fear and cowardice. My rebellions are timorous and naïve: I salvage junk from the street – broken objects, splinters of painted wood, sometimes old reel-to-reel tapes, and 78rpm records. I sew my own dresses, I lurk around Xerox machines at the library, hands trembling a little bit, making quick, clandestine photocopies of fanzines or copying pages from back issues of *Shy Talk* or *City Fun*. A few years ago bands started demystifying the cost of music – The Desperate Bicycles, Buzzcocks, Scritti Politti, printed the cost of pressing a record at the back of the sleeves. Most of our friends occasionally steal, mostly to survive, sometimes out of rage – gratuitously.”

\*

“Sandy never steals anything but music, and he steals it because his need of it could never be satisfied – he never resells any of it, and never steals anything for anyone else. There are tacit rules. His job at the frame shop is precarious, and art school, too, feels temporary, soon to be over. We have an acute sense of transience – Sandy, because he is virtually orphaned, and me, because of some innate, disastrous melancholy. So we make things with the beautiful energy of despair. We drift together, sit in his room with sempiternal coffee and cigarettes, and hungrily read the same books. We love Leonora Carrington and her lunar, twisted visions, and discover the fractured grace of Hannah Höch and Kathy Acker. We paint, and draw side by side. In 1986 we start a small fanzine and he tentatively befriends Linder Sterling (whom he had long admired from a distance).”

\*

“If not for drawing he might have slowly disappeared down the road of what was then called ‘petty criminality’. One night he scribbles ‘never work’ in chalk on the pavement, and the following morning he sells his first drawing. The irony is not lost on him.”

\*

“Confronted with the landlady’s clumsy, though well-meant questions about what we intend to ‘do’ with our lives, we think it best not to reply. We know what we *don’t* want to do. We also know that we don’t believe in political or collective salvation, but rather in a kind of individual courage: we imagine that collective liberation can only occur through personal acts of resistance. We take this extremely seriously. Maybe we have read it somewhere – or we have come upon the conclusion by ourselves, through observation, and systematic, stubborn hopefulness.”

\*

“We often think about Debord as a dear, distant friend and even send him a collage once, addressing it to sun-drenched Arles where he lives in exile, estranged from Paris (a ‘commercial’ city which he no longer recognizes). But we know too he can afford to drift: there are wealthy friends and lovers ready to support him. They give him money egoistically, for their own good: so that he can drift, and lose himself, and be absolutely free – or absolutely mad – on their behalf. The knowledge that there is someone ‘outside’ the system, apparently free, makes them feel better about their own captivity. They live through him – and we all do, somehow.”

\*

“Sandy has no family left in Manchester, apart from the effusive landlady. Sometimes he mentions a cousin and an aunt living near Carlisle. A girlfriend appears briefly: because she loves him, she feels compelled – and authorised – to cure him of his kleptomania. She tries very hard for a little while, but her patience soon wears out. When I watch a few years later Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket*, I recognise in Michel the fever, the compulsion which had inhabited Sandy – which is also a compulsion to love and to be loved.”

Elodie A. Roy,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, January 2021

**Elodie A. Roy** is a sound and material culture theorist based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (UK). She is notably the author of *Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove* (Routledge), and the co-editor (with Eva Moreda Rodríguez) of *Phonographic Encounters: Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890-1945* (Routledge). She is currently a research fellow on the Leverhulme-funded project ‘Anonymous Creativity: Library Music and Screen Cultures in the 1960s and 1970s’ (PI: Jamie Sexton).

A number of her short stories and poems were published in French and British magazines, and over the years she has self-published many fanzines.

[elodie.roy@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:elodie.roy@northumbria.ac.uk)  
Northumbria University

# "THE (N)EARLY MAN: ARRIVING TOO SOON, THRIVING TOO LATE" BY FARLEY RUSKIN

## Editor's Foreword

What you are about to perceive is a prolific psychogeographic pathology of misforgotten, ill-begotten artiste, Powder Degg. A figure persistently two-steps ahead of the game, forever on the spot kickstarting the scene, but criminally omitted from its bum-rushes and scrum-crushes. Perennially on the perimeter, margins and outskirts peering inwards ... wondering and wandering.

This counter-fictional reimagining of a recreated past/passed of be-crestfallen polymath-semiotician, Degg, is (de)scribed by *juste (be)cause célèbre* Farley Ruskin (1) whose irreverent approach to reputation, form and substance forty years ago tore up the orderbook. Ruskin's redeployment of hep-jive slanguage amidst displays of cut 'n' paste criticalisms and syntax-persuasion became a passé-modern technique of contra-textual terrorism and devilish demotic semiotics. Whether (li)berating or (i)rating, Ruskin's pen-power is both a masterful (per)form(ance) of anti-structural anarchitexture and incomprehensible non-sense. He remains a meta-textual terrorist with an assassin's screed.

Ruskin's meaning-making prose-cess was one of mutual activation that bitterly divided his readership either through his premonitory philosophising, withering word-sermons, and/or an enhanced elliptical romance. Juries are still presiding.

However, this is also an extensive and exhaustive expose of the once omnipotent print media, with closed gates opening only when the timing was *right* for the critics or organisations in question. This reimagining, regurgitating and repackaging is a statement on how anything and anyone, alive and/or dead can be re-presented to sustain the moneyed machine. It's *all* in the (re)telling and (re)selling. This is *their* story.

*D.J. Salinger, Executive Editor*



### **Author's Foreword**

Those of a certain vintage may remember Powder Degg, former frontiersman of seminal (2) industro-punkwave pioneers Abschaum. Those of an uncertain vantage will not. Their memories are about to begin.

Pop culture history is littered with those who crashed and burned, splashed and earned. Lurid tales of excess that derailed success. Episodes of rags to riches that turn out to be fools' gold, where the moral of the story resides in the act of pursuit, the chasing of the meaning, the insatiable quest for questioning. This is a (his)tory that traverses time, reverses space, smashes class and lays waste to tastes.

This (per)version of reordered history recalls a time when our 'stars' seemed not of this Earth. Possessing an untouchability and remoteness from the quotidian quagmire that exuded the power and extended its reach to enrich the minds of the iridescently inquisitive and enrage the intellectually irritable.

It also (dis)covers how yesterday's laughing stocks and figures of ridicule are today's 'misunderstood national treasures/geniuses', effectively reborn and shone in newer, less hypercritical, more hypocritical lights. A redemptive tale of how the overlooked do get their sunlit-spot and asks what *changes* in societal and mediated perception to render a one-time 'two-bit delusionary' suddenly an all-time visionary?

To augment a phalanx of product that will re-enter the commodity zones this year, I was approached to opine some prose about Degg's extraordinary (mis)adventures. And for those oblivious to this extraordinarily forgotten and misremembered character and his numerous (re)incarnations, let me elaborate.

+

### **Catalogue: Fragments**

Since the 1980s the rapacious reissue industry has flogged dead horses, re-analogue thoroughbred fillies and dredged discarded offcuts and dead-debris in the vein of a desperate fleshmeat-vendor during peak austerity. However, there is ample rump-flesh on this story-skeleton to chew over and satiate the taste-buds.

**Paratext:** Autobiography *Another feather in my boa* appeared in 1992. Out of print for years a deluxe-redux tome is imminent in tandem with yours, duly.

**Soundscape:** The release of a backstory boxed-compedium titled *A Curate's Degg* on KashKow.

**Visionscape:** Using extensive unseen footage and vox-fresh interviews, I have semi-financed, co-produced and part-directed pic-doc *Strum and drank: a glass apart*. Submitted to the 2021 Lunardance Film Festival for consideration.

Finultimately, you may ask, how is it possible to recapture and bottle the past and pour its remnants into the present? Allow me. Follow me.

*Farley Ruskin, April 2021*

## **The (N)early man: Arriving too soon, thriving too late**

### **Intrologue: Segments**

Powder Degg's renaissance began, bizarrely after *Tattle* magazine reported that 'Jenny-come-lately' socialite Fabitha Horsey-Whinney press-played Degg's 1978 near-chart hit, glamphetamine soul-fate number 'Dogs of War' at fourth-cousin thrice-removed sideways Lady Sicklesell's 30th soiree at *Toffs* nightclub in Mayfair, London in 2018.

This trickledown effect of culture going backwards into the plainstream sent shockwaves across the global laptopscienti. An exhilarating exhumation of interest and intrigue pushing this Zelig-relic to the cultural zenith of olden stream-machine Typify's aggregated vault-assaults. Since then interest has increased exponentially.

### **Prologue: Tangents**

Degg (nee Neil Humphries) was born in Barnsley, a once thriving coal-mining town in Northern England, in 1952 and emerged in 1968 (aged 16) as creative architect of suburban guerrillas The Petals. Before long the bright lights beckoned.

Along with other future-seers Psi-Kicks and Immoral Panik (3), the group were part of the thriving post-psychedelic happenings rampant across Notting Hill, London. However, despite a 'cult' following the cognoscenti in the underground press — specifically the self-anointed beat-head Reg Blake of the short-lived freesheet *Pubterranea* — derided them as 'too dippy to be trippy, too lippy to be hippy' ... 'all guile and preponderance, pantomimic pretension at its very worst. Or best.' Scathing summaries such as this simply served to curtail the progress of debut single 'In the shadow of the bomb (a nuclear lovesong)' and subsequent LP *Dendrophilia*, which stalled at 65.

Aghast at their lack of critical attention, influential disc-jockey and ardent supporter Bjorn Lapaille wrote in underground press-paper *Matez*: 'It staggers me somewhat to witness numerous also-rans and false-starters — whose names do not warrant a mention — earworm their way into the affections (and scripted affectations) of the nation. If the transglobal media age is truly upon us then be prepared for many years of execrable ear-excrement.' Prescient words from the plate-spinner du jour of yore.

### **Dialogue: Wails of the least inspected**

Success and acclaim proved elusive so six months before Marc Bolan's 'glitteration' and 18 months before Bowie's Ziggy irruption-eruption, The Petals evolved into Maskara, releasing the LP *Eyelining U Up*. Today it can be perceived as a pivotal sound-stamp on the early 80s' 'New Pop' screen-sheen teen-dreamers. However, its camp allusions and gender-trending perfusions polarised the stuck-in-a-muddle classes yet hypnotised the outer-conscious psyche-raddled masses.

Second album, 1973's concept album *I-Dent* (produced by Auto-Reich (4) legend Kanny Plonk) was inspired by the neo-controversial writer Ayn Rand's 1937 sci-fi novel *Anthem*. A dystopian 'love' story set in an unspecified time where humankind is experiencing a(nother) Dark Age and a technocratic system has eradicated individuality, names are codes (e.g. Equality 7-2521) and plural pronouns are used as an identity-erasing lingua franca. This foresightful folly failed to provide the desired breakthrough.

Taking stock and barrel, the group decided to retrench and retreat to the tomb-womb. Igniting the fire-cracking pub-rock scene, they reassembled as The Skiff Hangers, releasing singles 'Bonnie Lonnie' and a proto-punk funk-junk cover of The Allisons' 1961 hit 'Are you sure?' before internal wrangling saw the group imploding on the penultimate date in Lanarkshire, Scotland in August 1974.

### **Backlogue: 'I see change in a sea-change'**

Sensing dissent in the air, Degg tapped into what would become 'punk': a psychic release of pent-up energies and vent-out frustrations that was beginning to incite and ignite dormant creativity across the world, thereby creating fertile brain-terrain for the brightest of autodidacts.

Comprising original Petals members Humphries (now-named Powder Degg) and bassist Debord Cheree (Eddie Talbot), they recruited ex-Snagglepuss drummer Tony Taylor (soon to be Beat Skinner) and guitar prodigy Dick Bastardly (nee Alan McDougall). Abschaum was born.

Album *Rationbook* was self-released on Prudhon in October 1976, only to falter commercially due to workers at the record pressing plant refusing to package it due to the track 'Suite Sixteen'. Containing lyrics that today wouldn't warrant an eyelid-bat enraged, outraged and rattled the cage of Middle England's moral crusaders and quarrel persuaders, the *Daily Heil*. Their relentless haranguing of the group in its pages put paid to any notion of commercial success.

Degg said of the controversial song that it is 'A story of a schoolgirl's internment at an educational prism-prison. The wayward punk she'd seen in the street diverted her attentions and perverted her intentions, with this new way of seeing the world making her realise that there can be more than switching off in structured timespans within a grey, blank-walled cell, being hectored at by a dispassionate drone. It's a flight of fancy as old as the hills'.(5)

Written in the subjectified third person it's a familiar ditty of 'boy-meets-girl ... or even boy':

'I see you traipse through the gates of hell/suffering double English by the 11 bell/your mind  
on me and me alone/the only work at home you really need is on me on my own'.

These supposed, auto-suggestive risqué, ribald lyrics drew the ire of (in)famous common-sense censor, the impuritanical Mary Whitehouse. Yet the critics adored it for both its affectionate disdain for rock's chequered past and its coded-odeisms to teenage desires for lustful wanderings and trustful wanderings that chimed with the climes.

However, on a commercial level the public abhorred it and their momentum was hampered again. Being a perennial attraction on the live circuit was the only thing that kept them going which led to 1977's live album *Skint, not broke*, recorded at Barnsley's Citadel.

A favourite of late 80s alt-noise critical darlings The Young Sonics' Marston Moore, the album is notable for the debut of the notorious song 'Arbeit macht fries'. Foretelling the latte-capitalist charade we currently dread-tread within, Degg's oft misunderstood con-dense lyricism was to the fore here.(6)

Depicting a 'subservient and screen-fixated narco-sedated service-industry nation where the well-off exploit from the sell-on of low-waged jobs'(7) the vast majority of the country's youth are reduced to junk-fried dreams and dead-ended gut-rot feelings of nausea.(8)

Increasing tension between Degg and Debord Cheree led to the sacking of the latter, with the remaining trio recruiting 1950s rock 'n' roll sensation multi-instrumentalist Terry Firma to work on the album *Arthur, See Clark?* The album remains an outstanding fusion of sci-fi dream-themes, context-perimental sounds and literate alliteration that continues to bear traces in today's bedroom boffintronica acolytes such as Eff-Ex PLC and ©opyright.

Despite single 'Pleasurable Pacification' making several 'hot lists', the pattern of failure remained as both single and album narrowly missed the Top 40 which meant no exposure by radio-regurgitation or primetime programming. Stardom evaded them again.

A busy 1979 saw an aside-project with Niall Ism, titled 'Barthes: the author of death'.(9) A rip-roaring riposte to the intellectualising bemusings of the music press, the *NME* in particular \*coughs\*, which was then enjoying what the cultural studies cartel would categorically classify as 'a decisively divisive spell of pop theorist/text-terrorist assaults that engaged and enraged'.(10)

Late 1979, Degg released the self-financed cassingle 'Video killed the wordier star', a(nother) Wildean barbed attack on the critics who failed to grasp his conceptual preconceptions, and a statement that 'techspatula' images and visuals were about to supplant texts and words in the dissemination of popular culture.

+

## **Ideologue: New Pop(ulism)**

Despondent, in 1980 Powder combined with up and coming pop-provocateur Sue Fridgette on the single 'Pankhurst' which gained exposure in the weekly art-cult magazine *Synchrome*. In-famed Yankee holler, the bonzo-rock-journo Bluster Pangs venomously vituperated: 'Scarefree-jazz musings and orch-pizazz bemusing's don't cut the mustard nowadays. For the kids, that amorphous, unbridled entity, those 'off-piste artistes' avant-garde a clue. They desire and demand the rage and bullhorn of the nouveau niche, they want to be seduced by the (gl)amorous aspects of adolescence. Meaning resides *in* dreaming'.

Nevertheless, tragedy was to strike with the eponymous rebel-lady's lucrative estate objecting to the use of her name with 'deviant-miscreant' Degg, resulting in the pulping of the single.

+

## **Apologue: Androidgyny**

Undeterred and unperturbed, Degg capitalised on the nu-glam theatrics of the synthesised sensations that (g)littered abreast the soundwaves across 1981-1983. Up-pointed as a figurehead for his earlier textperiments, Degg formed sham-wave elaborators Himulacra and Hersatz. In a resolutely passé-modern pose he (with)drew from his counter-cultural memory banks and capacity for utilising 'absolute style as ultimate resistance via a supra-collagistic criss-crossing of (sub)cultural recoding'.(11)

Through a blending of tactile>textile>textual bricolage a knight's armour was uptooled with robotic functions and accoutrements (crackling wires, flashing neon buttons) with the resultant creation christened 'Mankenstein'. Whilst its creaky aesthetics look dated today, Degg as 'seer of fear'(12) prefigured the transhumanist craze that gathers apace today.

Seizing upon the nascent (and short-lived) audio-format, the Lazerdisc © the double-sided 'Dialectric Dreams' was released. The titular track imagined the dialogue between a transplanted pacemaker — now in the pump-chamber of the perp who slew — and the widow of the dead donor. The result, a love song like no other set to a trance-beat that has been mimicked from hear (sic) to eternity.

The AI side 'Superficial Intelligence' wondered how this 'future', dearly beloved of the totalitarian technoanists, would impact upon the human condition. The 'characters' were transmediated 5D-extensions of each other's programmed representations of themselves: 'Tensely thought-out throughout; hyper-reality bytes and its tensile clench is entrenched within the auditory and premonitory pathways of neuro-manticism'.(13)

+

### **Semioptician: Big in Poznan**

In 1981, amidst numerous tumultuous episodes of 'I.D.-illogical' constructed faith and race-based rioting abreast the Isles — and appalled at the increasing totalitarian authoritarianism and bleak landscapes that the majority of the population were barely surviving in — Degg formed supergroup New Conjunction with 'loutcasts' from the polarising *lunk-punk* scene, Cat Rabies, Bolshy Vic and Swayed Ed.

The EP 'Petty BourgOi!sie' was appraised by *Racket* writer Gerry Bashem who scourged: 'this puts paid to the misguided accusations of wanton dumbskull-thuggery that certain elements of the wider press want you to believe and understand and illustrates what *really* drives the hearts and minds of these protagonists. Punk didn't expire in 1978, it was reclaimed by its original organ grinding off-spring, the slum-scum, the street-cheats.' The omniversal appeal of these vented vexations would strike chords in an Eastern Europe weary and wary of manufactured division and still resonates today.(14)

+

In 1982 when the 'Falkland's Conflict' — aka The Malvinas Maelstrom — hit the tele-waves in an unprecedented manner, Degg rush-released a 7" called 'Borges's comb'; a coruscating critique of the rush to wage a war which obscured low political polling ratings and nationwide dissatisfaction.

Militaristic myth-wagers now concede that the symbolic affair was the last vestiges of a rusting empire residing in a tiny outpost in the South Atlantic — when the might of the artillery-post industrial complex was waged in a game of geostrategic inhuman resources.

Responding to Band Aid/Live Aid's (mis)figurehead Gob Welloff's pantomimic plea 'fockin' feed the need', in January 1985 Degg argued that the 'pseudo-event' was pure Thatcherite theatre. Staking the claim that it was a convenient distraction away from the surmounting problems within (e.g. the Miners' Strike) and a clear case of manufactured post-colonial guilt being foisted upon the strung-hearted populace. His altru-artistic response was to cover Patrik Fitzgerald's 1978 folk-punk song 'Irrelevant Battles' to redirect attention towards unequal matters closer to heart. As Coal Transporter and the Dole-Prole Brassneck Band this 'charity' single was devoid of the necessary promo-pumping and hobbled to number 51.

+

## Collogue: Cerebrally Rewired

Sensing an opportunity to jump-start his creative engine again in 1993 Degg tapped into the nascent false-consciousness thriving revivalism of the soon-to-be called 'Britpop' scene. Initially touring with long-time fans Kool and the Kaftan, in 1994 he released the concept album *The Mancunian Candidate* under the guise of M. Kay Ultra.

This arch-conceit posited the theory that New Labour's black ops had seized control of pop culture to the point of covertly endorsing (t)radical rowdy-rocking 'booze, fags and lad's mags' Manc(hester) icons Mirage to supra-stardom.(15)

In a rare display of pro-claim, the *New Musical Express's* Thom de Plume cooed: 'It is rare for an album to truly capture the zeitgeist, most works of art only gain full valence and appreciation well after the "event" has faded into cultural amnesia. However, this literate, politically skewed narrative manages to plant its profound meanings and messages effectively in the past, present and a seemingly bleak future. Albeit, one clouded in smoke and brain fuzz. Mark my words, this album's topicality will resonate in decades to come. To consume is to be subsumed by Degg's creative reach.'

+

## 'Nuance was new once': Stalehouse Rock

Despite several positive reviews in the then declining yet still highly influential weekly music press, the LP limped to #35 in the UK charts as the daily tabloid press decried its '... high-brow, smart arse rhetoric attacking the common, working man whose simple ways are what makes him who he is' (*The Spun*) and that 'The sneering cod-intellectualism inherent in this excuse of a man makes a mockery of the fallen heroes of Trafalgar, Dunkirk and Goose Green. Shame on this poseur and all who fail in his leaky vessel' (*Daily Heil*). 'Who's this has-been never-was two-bit loser to criticise the current crop of stardom dazzled superidols? We can *do* rhetoric too, ya know. Poncey, pretentious and pompous, this so-called 'literate meisterwerk' says nothing about these times'. (*Laden*).

+

## Mythological pyres

In April 1997, the staunch anti-monarchist Degg returned with the (prophetic) *Princess Di'd* album induced by Sheffield's psych-chic 'n sleek Balzac's Boîte. A cornusopic collection of

library effects, chime-warp-weft tape-loops and pulsating plunderphonics, this 'preconcept' album features songs titled 'Princest', 'Baby Machine', 'DisRoyal', and the raw double-edged swordisms of 'Papanazi'.

Despite the grisly irony of the right-wing tabloids hypocritically and enthusiastically endorsing the sentiments of the latter track, in September that year the album was washed aside by Melton Mowbray's mawkish crocodile teary-tsunami reworking of 'Spindle in the sand'. This eternally ill-fitting suite ignored the sacrificial smash and symbolic clash in lieu of a Disneyfied tale of 'the Princess, a Frog, no Prince Charming and a *dénouement froissé*'.

By holding up a lens to the facts of the blueblood-led bloodshed, Degg revealed the prurient and lurid foibles of the press and also the machinations of the educationally enshrined and ritually programmed royal-ocracy.

+

### **Info-splateau: All that was valid melts into software**

Come 1998, Degg, undeterred and pre-sensing the 'internet of things' encompassing and snaring all within its net, composed the poperatic score for a play based on his 1979 space-time continuum-predictum that 'today's norms will become tomorrow's abnorms, reforms and constricting uniforms of a non-sensus consensus'. Titled *In cyberspace, everyone can hear you scream ... but no one's listening*, Degg (de)posited the theory that this 'rewiring' would result in the facilitation of a fragmented and fractured state of perception that would be cognitively altered and defaulted. In perpetuity. Degg proved once again, he had been ahead of the hell-curve.

### **Epilogue: indicator>incubator<innovator<>speculator**

Powder Degg is a man at the precipice  
 Powder Degg chooses to leap without looking  
 Powder Degg is phantasmic fantasy  
 Powder Degg is haunted by his thoughts  
 Powder Degg is vaunted by his sources  
 Powder Degg perceives and receives collective desires  
 Powder Degg is post-modernism personified  
 Powder Degg captures his reflection. And winks  
 Powder Degg is his-story and our-admonitory  
 Powder Degg is symbolically subliminal  
 Powder Degg is forwards at looking backwards

+

### **Languor is an energy**

This appeared to be the final straw as Degg, dropped by label *Frantic Antics*, descended into substance misabuse ending up homeless on the streets of Dumbarton, Scotland. Degg – (d)riven by desire, destiny and doom – experienced such a stratospheric scaling to the summits



of stardom it instigated a virulent bout of vertigo. The eternal maniacal pursuit of the ‘future of tomorrow’ and the vanishment of the ‘then and when’ created a neural time lapse that short circuited the cerebral wires, causing a complete collapse of comprehension and context. This one-man — once immortal prolific-portal — was at a dead-end, bereft of perspective and ground down by disillusionment.

By the turn of the millennium Powder was suffering from paranoid-illusional episodes, years of excess without success ultimately taking their toll. The 2002 autobiographical album */// creatures great and small* passed by with nary a notice, despite it featuring some of Degg’s most far-out and up-standing work.

A saviour appeared in the form of long-term champion and ITV anchor-man Derek Anderson who helped Degg get clean and sheltered in 2003. This period of relative stability led to the creation of what would turn out to be the final act of this arc. The sparse, confessional 10 track album *Empty, well ...* featured young fans and inheritors of the Abschaum aesthetic, Cedar Doubt, as his backing group. That was then...

+

## Afterlogue: Svengali in platforms

It’s said that all biography is a view from the lens. It’s argued that history is a purview from the fence. The curious undertold, misundersold tale of Powder Degg is all, both, some and second to none.

**This is an abridgedited abstract-extract from Farley Ruskin’s extended intropus to the forthcoming essay collection *Always leave them wanting less: Pretension is 9/10ths of the lore* (Affextual Books).**

## Endnotes

1. Ruskin has contributed to numerous UK, EU and US-wide bile-stables and discontent providers and is the author of 11 books, among them *Punk is undead: Life amongst chaos* (1984); *The strife and rhymes of post-capital pop* (1992); *Life is a (de)meaning passage: Despatches from above and beyond* (1995) and *The Dissent of Man: An alphabetical whistle-stop of ritual resistance* (2000). (All Seal-Iron Press).

2. ‘The future is nowhere because it is NOW HERE. Mark my many words, hark my works, this superior specimen (and he is more than one man) will one day be remembered as seminal’ Farley Ruskin, *NME*, 17th March 1977, p5.

3. ‘Yesterday’s future is tomorrow’s past!’ was common graffito daubed around the nation’s inner-cities in reference to Immoral Panik’s clarion-scrawl ‘Humanifesto’.

4. The reliably jingoistic UK press had a field day when trying to ‘label’ the effervescent German scene. Other names include ‘Boche-Rock’; ‘Der Fritz-Parade’; ‘Luftwaffle’; ‘Hun Fayre’; ‘Strumkopf’; ‘Teutonika’; ‘Luger-Boogie’. For more see *Euro-paeans: From Åbenrå to Žilina*, Drijk Beenhouwert, (Bouffant Publishing, 1989), p477.

5. Infant ‘Orrible: Punk polemicist protests innocence’, *Socialist Worker*, 23rd October 1976, p14.

6. Arthur Doxy writing in music weekly *Noises* called it ‘scandalous, a glorification of ghastly Nazi codes and a blight upon the souls of fallen heroes’. However, he later revealed that he hadn’t actually listened to it and was instructed by his editor to take a ‘certain stance’. Interview with author, 31st April 1985.

7. Lyrics reprinted courtesy of Deggsplotts Publishing.

8. The studio recorded version of 'Arbeit macht fries' is included on KashKow's compendium for the first time with a foreword from Deebord Cheree, Bjorn Lapaille sessions from 1977 and 1978, the aborted side project Howitzer, 'sexclusive' remixes of 'Sexteen' and follow-up 'Blue without glue' and a glossy hardback extremely limited-edition book.

9. The B side was a 7 minute drone-moan titled 'Pleas to Nietzsche' which was described by me as 'the eternal, internal, infernal and sempiternal affairs of the desperately sad, disparately mad. The bibliophile tears of the frown-hearted'. Ruskin, F. *NME*, 7th February 1979.

10. The befamed Hollister Stewart of the esteemed Haughty-Culture School based at Basingstoke Polytechnic decried the 'lazy and zealously pompous adoption and adaptation of academic aptitudes'. Penning a letter to the *NME* in 1978 he accused the writers responsible of 'ego-centrally elevating beyond comprehension' and that 'these cult 'n' paste cul-de-sacs would prove futile'. *NME*, 7th June 1978, p54.

11. Ruskin, F in *Façade*, Vol.1, Issue 6, p23.

12. Ruskin, F. in 'Prophet and Gloss': A crystal ballroom dance', in *Know I-D-A*, Issue 3, Volume 4, (1981), p4-7.

13. Ruskin, F and Ebbditch, R. *What is post-rupturalism and how do we observe it?* In *Re-Views & Purviews*, Inter-Vogue Press, (1981).

14. The other songs were 'Neo-Fight': 'Last night of the proles'; 'Maggie, why July?'; 'Clown and gout in the Chiltern Hills'; 'Yob-snob'. On Upression Records, 1981.

15. Mirage's deadrock braggart Banal Geraghty retorted in a caustic contre temps with Bentley Shadowmix of *Chart Action*. He decried his 'fossilised foe' as a 'whinosaur', denied his elitist objectification as 'a cultural cul-de-sac' and replied (mis)quoting Oscar Wilde. In a startling exhibition of foot-in-mouth unease, Geraghty proudly pronounced 'I am tempted by everything, but resistance'.

**Kevin Quinn** is a part-time PhD candidate at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. His research is concerned with the *New Musical Express* from 1980 – 1983, particularly the powerful role the paper enjoyed as the highest selling weekly and especially the licentiousness its critic(s) deployed. However, this artful autonomy was not without its issues with certain episodes and instances (attitudes towards Oi! punk and Heavy Metal) highlighting the paper's (di)stance and disdain towards musics or acts they deemed less worthy, authentic or distasteful. The paper's taste-making propensities and its efforts to enforce these led it into conflicts which signified a split within the paper in 1981, arguably signalling an inexorable decline.

# TIN CAN ALLEY

Emily Mackay

Thunder vaulted upward, sounding the sky. Renee lay limp as her mind darted after it, the miles of empty air beyond the ceiling suddenly, starkly revealed.

Heavy, dreamy, she listened to the storm for a while, letting herself hang luxuriously between asleep and awake, until the clock's malicious yammering pulled her into the morning. She slid her legs to the rough rush matting, heaving herself to the bathroom.

In her first months working at Viva Voce she'd always arrived early; these days she dragged out her shower, dressing and breakfast as long as she could. When she slid the door open at last, a louring sky loomed close over the village's huddle of low, turf-mantled buildings. She swilled the dregs of her oats into the composter by the door, wedged the bowl into an empty corner of the sink, and headed out.

Cutting it fine had advantages; the vac-train was quieter, for one. Renee's head fell back on the pod seat as she let go to the rush and the silvery swish, ceiling ads flashing over unfocused eyes.

"Duncarey Cross," the impassive PA announced too soon. That name had once been full of glittering promise; the legendary birthplace of a new kind of music business. Familiarity and the PA had conspired to gradually dull its shine.

Renee dived for the door as it began to close. On the platform, as she fumbled with tangled coat sleeves and bag straps, a woman wrangling a buggy into the lift smiled at her; her dark hair was heavily streaked with silver. Renee smiled back, patting down her rumpled clothes before making for the escalators.

Viva Voce hadn't been the first company in Tin Can Alley, as Duncarey Cross, once just another industrial estate outside Edinburgh, soon came to be known. Nonetheless, its origin story – two idealistic young solarpunks with a burning passion for music, writing the code that would upend an industry in their spare time – was the one that sold autobiographies by the million. Alan Crawson, genial in a punk-dad kind of way, and Shona Muir, silhouette-severe and crushingly direct, had become cult heroes, then folk devils. Viva Voce itself had become the byword for the machine-learning magic trick that had conjured up Tin Can Alley: bringing dead stars back to life.

People had once feared that artificial intelligence might replace musicians; that ageless, pouting avatars would sing the songs of the future. They'd been partly right: virtual stars were still a niche, kitschy part of Viva Voce's business. But once the technology had advanced to the point where a machine-learning model could absorb the entire work of an artist, or a scene, or a genre and generate (with help of careful, curating nudges) new music in



that style good enough to pass, the irresistible next move had been summoning the voices of the departed. Beloved divas returned for one more encore; old bands got back together beyond the grave. Before long, they outsold the living and their hologrammed performances topped the bill at the biggest festivals.

Renee emerged from the gleaming cavern of the station into gusting rain. As money had poured into Tin Can Alley, first from venture capitalists, then from stock flotations, and eventually from relentless hits, anonymous units had been replaced with self-consciously sustainable statement offices. Viva Voce's, a low, slanted disc, was just a few steps from the vac-train station, an arc of trees spooning it from behind. It was the sort of understated that couldn't wait to tell you about how understated it was, how the tones of its brick matched the local stone, how little it had taken from the Earth, how much it gave back through CO<sup>2</sup> scrubbers, rainwater filtration, and a roof full of greenery. All the windows were high-efficiency solar, using a tiny part of what they sucked from the now near-permanently shrouded skies to veil their dark gleam in subtle patterns, mimicking the play of light through leaves, or the pattern of cirrus stretching and breaking in the breeze.

Renee pulled a grimace at the retinal sensor, waited impatiently for the door's serene glide, and bowled into reception, a space so subtle and perfectly poised it always made her feel like a shambling, sweaty beast. She nodded with irritation at Dan on reception, who nodded back with confusion. They'd gone to the same school on the other side of the city, a fact they never acknowledged openly. Gangly, intense, sandy-haired, Dan didn't quite fit in this space, and clearly viewed Renee as something of a fellow outsider, a co-conspirator. This morning, he seemed determined to catch her eye and slow her down. Annoyed, she turned to fix him with a sharp look, half-pausing.

He jerked his head backwards. "Seen this shite?"

There was a new promo on the screen wall that took up one long side of the atrium. Renee didn't stop, but slowed enough to take in the image of a young boy conducting curlicues of sound and light with his fingertips, smiling in wonder as Bob Dylan, Madonna and Elvis joined him, adding their own hues and tones to the storm of music swirling around them. She grimaced again and scuffed off down the dim corridors without replying, flinging herself through the sifting room door as 8.59 became 9.00.

Necromancy was still Viva Voce's headline act, but for years now the labels, publishers and lawyers had used AI to make ample money from the living too. Artificial intelligence had never, from the earliest attempts in post-hippy California to the giant leaps at Duncarey Cross, really been able to write its own music, to create from nothing. The company's models always had training data to learn their craft from, whether, as with the first research triumphs, that was the whole history of recorded music, "borrowed" from the internet, or whether it was just the albums of, say, Joni Mitchell. Through a series of messy legal cases against the new upstarts, the established music industry had made sure AI music that didn't pay its dues to the artists behind it had been relegated to dark, outlaw corners of the underground, while the respectable businesses came to a detente with labels, publishers and streaming services. Since then, licensing costs had limited the creations of Viva Voce and the rest to the training data of a handful of songwriters at most – often just the one. Music linked to a real face sold better, anyway.

Once the rules had been thrashed out, stars began collaborating first with dead heroes, then with younger versions of themselves. Then they started delegating their collaborations, remixes and advertising deals to AI clones trained on their sound, donating any off-brand output to virtual stars. Then came the "seeds": miniature, commercialised versions of their AI models that fans could buy and play with, feeding them their own input for one-off, unsavable performances.

Behind the headlines, at the bottom of Viva Voce's prestige pile, the soundtrack and commercial department, Renee's daily bread, churned away. Feature films were often still scored in person by big names, but incidental music for serial dramas was nearly always left to the AIs. And for the lowest-profile gigs, the company's less successful clients – the ones who never made it – sold access to their work as fodder for the mass AI generation of library music, in exchange for monthly royalties.

Dropping her bag on the floor, Renee slumped into her comfortable chair, wombed in the softly shifting colours of the small, mostly bare room's luminant walls; her own private cocoon for perfect concentration. Most of the company's staff worked from home – use of a sifting room was a privilege earned only by the most productive. Leaning over to the screen of the simple terminal by her chair, she opened her files; the AI's first meal of the day was a creator called Lucy (Alan liked to call them "creators", rather than songwriters or musicians; the company's literature stressed that this was *all* a human process: musicians collaborating with fellow music lovers, driven by passion, merely mediated by machine).

Lucy was an older woman, living in Leeds, who'd had some success first as a DJ, then as a producer; her name had waned with the popularity of the newbleep scene. Now her music made her a small but regular income as input, her life's work a prompt for the machine to process and then mimic. Lucy was free to earn the rest of her living some other way.

It felt strangely invasive, knowing these small, sad details. Alan said that, just as with the big stars, studying the biography of a creator informed how you and the machine together interpreted and shaped their sound.

All afternoon, the AI cycled through different creators, moving from motif to motif, mood to mood, as it spooled out new music; Renee listened to the tracks, marking each a keeper or a duffer by mumbling voice commands or tapping on the screen, grouping them into playlists and albums for streaming services or subscription music libraries, assigning keywords and markets. When things got boring, she fed in a new idea to prod the AI in a different direction: a line of text from a random generator, a fresh concept (regret; undersea creatures; a ruined city), or a new instrument. It had excited her at first to seek out incongruous prompts: pit-band brass blared into delicate soundscapes, words of love whispered to aggressive metal. But it was faster and more productive to go with the flow that the machine quickly found in each creator's work; her early oddities hadn't attracted many streams or licences.

As the minutes piled up, her head slipped slowly down the chair, her backside towards the brim of the seat. By the time she resentfully lurched upright, she'd compiled a soothing hazecore playlist and an anthology of squelchy, exuberant house, and picked out a cavernously dark adult-pop track perfect for Nina, one of the more interesting virtual stars – a heel who delighted in mocking the stupidity and inadequacy of humans, to her dwindling fanbase's masochistic joy.

Sixteen more playlists and 12 albums later, Renee switched off the terminal, the soft play of the colours dimming behind her as she headed for the vac-train.

She woke in the small hours, twitchy with adrenaline and once more strangely aware of the miles of sky above her head. She opened her back-to-sleep book – worthy and boring, selected by a better self. After scanning the same two long, elusive paragraphs several times, she dropped it again and moved to her desk. Flicking on her earphones, she woke her phone and pulled up a folder. Most of its files hadn't been touched in months, some in years. Many had been created before she'd even started at Viva Voce.

She opened the track ironically titled 'Summer Jam!' and flipped it on to holo view, tracing its peaks and troughs with her finger until she hit the familiar knots and stumbling blocks, just where she'd left them.

There was a crash in energy and direction at the bridge, where every structural twist she'd tried had sounded crude, desperate or tacky. She tried swapping in a piano instead of the synth. Then a harpsichord. Turning the file this way and that, she tried instrument after instrument, threw chord sequence upon tempo shift at it, until dawn rose up unnoticed around her. After silencing her alarm, she closed the file again without saving her changes.

**B**lue to purple to rose to red; orange to yellow to green to blue. The walls cycled, and Renee sifted. She'd been three minutes late this morning; Dan had known better than to nod. Sounds shifted around her with the colours. New creators shuffled to the front of the queue to be processed – Danika from Solihull, Kenny from Aberdeen, Kerry-anne from Bromley – and the music flowed ever on, perfectly adequately, hour after hour.

Until it didn't. Her body jerked awake from the ears down; she nearly toppled the chair as she pulled herself up. A new song was unfolding around her, wild and bizarre and so shockingly good she choked into laughter.

The mix of styles was incongruous, the beat and the melody mismatched with their backdrop, and yet the song was whole and strong. It was full of stately, cosmic grandeur, but as immediate and human as a grabbed hand.

"Keep," Renee said. "Keep, keep." She reached for the terminal and left her hand there, fingertips resting on the thin screen as the song bloomed, a gentle, almost wry breakdown suddenly barrelling, in a burst of beats, to a peak of high, silvery beauty, then to a smooth, pulsing fadeout that felt like a promise that this beauty would survive into the future.

"Stop."

She needed to think.

There was something in this song, something about it that wasn't like anything she'd heard in this room before. It wasn't just uncanny; it seemed... alive, or... she struggled to find the name for it. Viva Voce staff rolled their eyes at binaries such as human or technological, natural or artificial, real or fake. The AI was just a tool, like a sampler or a guitar or a drum pad. Nobody named or anthropomorphised the models; there were no Alexas, Siris or Hals here.

And yet this song wasn't at all the kind of interplay between training set and machine mutation that she had grown used to gently nudging forward. It seemed to anticipate her expectations and to flip them, turning a critical eye back on her.

She pulled the bio for the current creator on to the screen: Hiran Smith-Newbold. He'd signed over the AI rights to his work just before he'd died in the Nipah outbreak three years ago, and on his death, the contract had passed to his widow. In life, he'd sold a few hundred albums, made it on to a few big playlists, but never really got a foothold.

"Play," she said quietly. The computer opened the potted best-of embedded in the biog. For 10 minutes she listened, skipping from track to track. It was good stuff, and to her taste – wide-ranging, lofty, rooted in a sort of science-fiction folk. She could faintly hear the origins of the song she'd just heard, but it was like comparing a cave painting with a Caravaggio. This music pleased her. That song had shocked her.

She went back to it, and it shocked her again. She played it over and over, each time finding new depths, new details. On the sixth play, she moved from the chair to the floor, rolling gently on to her back, watching the ceiling blush and fade as she listened on loop.

The end of day almost caught her by surprise; she went back through the nearest misses from the morning's output and hurriedly knocked together three chillout playlists, then returned to the song one more time before saving it to her phone.

The next morning, the AI returned to the humdrum as if nothing had happened, generating new songs that circled through safe themes of journey, discovery and utopia. Disappointed, Renee set to racing through her work, buying herself some time at the end of the day to focus on the song. She hungered to see the spark at the heart of it more clearly.

For the next few days, her life was a loop of restless nights, the rush of the commute, the motions of work, spare hours listening to the song on repeat. Trying to understand, she ran it through the AI again and again, feeding in a word here, a texture there, trying to nudge it clear of the parts where she could see the machine's work showing through, and the parts where she could hear the creator. She felt a thrill of unease as the true nature of the song inched into the light, revealing its lines; something pure and unpredictable.

She listened to it evolve in the evenings on the loop home, and at night as she walked around the quiet village. The homes had been modelled on Highland blackhouses and Icelandic turf roofs, updated with mycelium bricks and clever new ways to keep damp and mould at bay; 20 years of hard weathering and dogged lichen had them looking more part of the landscape than the architects could ever have hoped. She wandered past the shop and the playground, out through paths in the oat fields under a bright moon and back again to the empty hall, a huge open pavilion made of heavy stuff to batten down against the wilder storms and keep out the whipping rains. It was owned communally, and hosted parties and events at the weekend. Her neighbours kept urging Renee, the music expert, to put on her own; she'd got as far as naming a playlist, but it only had three songs on it. She preferred to go along to other people's nights, to judge their choices and smile at their enthusiasm, sometimes to dance. Wading through the damp grass, she climbed up on the stage and watched the constellations turn through the pillars. She closed her eyes and lost herself in the song, looping over and over.

"**D**uncairey Cross." Renee realised she had been, if not exactly asleep, not really awake either. She bundled her coat and bag between both hands and lunged through the doors as they beeped shut.

In reception, Dan was talking with someone. Renee couldn't hear what they were saying over the song, loud in her earphones, but Dan seemed to be coming off worse; his eyes widened in silent plea as he saw her. His combatant turned to follow his gaze, and in a glint of silver hair, Renee recognised the woman she'd seen on the platform a few days ago. She didn't smile this time. Her face was rigid with anger. Dan didn't look up, but stared at his terminal with determined focus. As the woman turned back, Renee hurried past the little girl pawing at the flashing screen wall.

The woman was back in reception the next morning. It wasn't the first time Renee had seen people hanging around the office, but it was the first time she'd really thought about it. No one from a publisher or a label would ever have to wait like this. That afternoon, she couldn't get anywhere with the song, and instead worked listlessly on pop-reggae playlists, sample sets and advertisers' libraries. She was still too tired to face the song directly when she got home that evening, but she listened to it as she fell asleep.

The next day, her shoulders hunched with tension as the reception doors whirled aside with agonising slowness, but Dan was alone, busy at his terminal. The pulsing, paranoid fear Renee couldn't quite look at was that the woman haunting reception was her songwriter's widow. Beyond unlikely, of course. Not *impossible*, but they had hundreds of creators on their books. For this woman to appear like the Shakespearean ghost of her guilt... why guilt, though? Renee's experiment didn't break the terms of any contract. And yet she hadn't told anyone about it, either.

Busy days raced by, and soon Renee was finished; she'd dispatched her regular work with even



more efficiency than usual as she polished the song on the sly – spending so long on one piece of music at Viva Voce was not so much frowned on as unheard of. Like an archaeologist of the future, with gentle brushing and careful taps, she had uncovered something that felt like pure music, a naked live wire of invention and beauty caught in a still-unnamed file.

She booked a morning meeting with Alan and Shona. As a fellow Edinburgh graduate, they'd always made a show of treating her with the respect due an equal, albeit in conversations kept as short as possible. She arrived early on the day – in her sharpest jumpsuit, hair neatly plaited – but of course Alan and Shona were earlier. They sat back, away from one another, as she swung open the old-fashioned door of the lavishly large, rarely used meeting room. “Good *morning*, Renee,” Alan boomed, his voice filling the space. “And what an unusually pleasant way to start one. Shona and I both hope” – he paused and turned to Shona, who stared at him unreadably – “that you’re not leaving us.”

“No, no!” Renee laughed, too nervously, too brightly, lowering herself into a seat on the other side of the vast table. She dug for her phone. “I’ve got something to play for you, actually... a little side-project.” Turning from their raised eyebrows, she cast the file to the room’s built-in speakers and shifted back in her chair, fixing her eyes firmly on the whorls of the wood panelling above their heads. The music rose around her, swelling and dropping, leading and feinting; it held her heart in suspension as it unfurled, building to its almost unbearable peak, cradling her in the sadness that followed, gently lifting her chin at last to a new dawn. As the coda faded out, she followed, coasting on the clouds after it for a few moments.

“Well,” Alan cut in, cradling his hands behind his head as he leaned back. “That was a great, great track, for sure. One of ours, or one of yours?”

As Renee fumbled for the right answer, he talked on, throwing his hands wide. “It had a great sense of peace about it, don’t you think, Shona? It would fit perfectly in one of the sacred collections.”

Now all words deserted Renee. The *sacred collections*? Her least favourite library sector, this repository for pious ambience took a broad-church approach to spirituality, adapting to funeral parlours, meditation centres and yoga studios. The song was vital, not spiritual; couldn’t they hear that?

Shona nodded briskly, whisking her phone from the table in a gesture loudly signalling finality. She’d long been the subject of a rumour that her impressive pallor was the side-effect of a failed biohacking experiment, an attempt to achieve human photosynthesis. Ridiculous, but you could see why it stuck.

Renee had to strike now, or it was all over. “I think it’s a bit better than the sacred collections.”

Shona put down her phone again and glared. Disparaging any area of the company’s work was not looked kindly on. Alan, too, had stiffened slightly, sitting back, but retained his benign, concerned smile.

“If it’s your own work, Renee,” he ventured, “I’m sure we could work out a special arrangement for you, as one of the family.”

She tried for a few minutes to explain that no, it wasn’t really her work, but found herself struggling to tell them what, exactly, it actually was. With a sense of falling through space, of public nudity, of being behind the wheel of a vehicle she couldn’t control, she realised that she’d never really been sure herself.

“Well... *of course* it’s not either the creator’s or the model’s,” said Alan, all smiling, patient perplexity. “That’s true of everything we do. We are the grey matter in the grey areas.”

It was a joke – or slogan, she'd never really been sure which – as old as the company.

Renee breathed in, looked down. Everything seemed very outlined and present; the tight weave of the rush floor, the dust in the join between shoe and sole. Stammering mangled apologies, she got out as quickly as she could.

Out in the fresh, damp air, she turned the song over in her mind, seeing it starkly, with Alan and Shona's eyes. She was no longer clear what she'd been trying to do these past days, what she thought she'd found in her supposedly pure song. Alan was right about that at least: all Viva Voce's music was the grubby in-between. Her song had felt different, like it didn't belong to the AI, like it didn't belong to Hiran Smith-Newbold, but it belonged to both more than it belonged to her, a mere deluded tweaker. She sat on a stone bench, letting the cold and the wet soak through, and watched starlings bob at the edge of the trees, sifting for their own treasure.

As the milky light began to fail, from around the corner she heard the swish of the doors, quick footsteps, and small shoes skittering. The silver-haired woman tore away from the office, fury streaming in her wake like ragged smoke.

As she turned, waiting for her daughter, she caught sight of Renee, whose pale garment was like a white flag amid the settling evening. She glared, grabbed the child's hand and strode on. Renee sat stupidly, feeling exposed.

Back in the sifting room, she lay on the floor and cried hotly and messily. As the illusion of the song collapsed it had taken the whole numb edifice down with it, and she saw with nauseous clarity how much she hated this job, how much time she'd wasted in this awful place. Her sobs hitched and heaved, then soothed and ebbed with the melting colours.

Once they were spent, she shuffled to the screen and brought up her work history, sorting it by streaming plays and by licences purchased. With a furious rattle of keys, she reattributed the most successful tracks to Hiran Smith-Newbold until a long column of his name filled the screen. She stared at it until her breathing slowed. A pointless gesture, daft: each name she'd overwritten was another life, and with the system as it was, it wasn't like a successful track translated into more than pennies per thousand plays, anyway. She booted the chair across the room with a curse and undid the changes. Flopping to the floor again, she closed her eyes and drifted.

And when all the noise had stopped, the last voices trailed out on limp goodnight jokes, she softly opened the door.

Dan had, as she'd hoped, left his station logged in; he'd somehow managed to get access to one of the techno genre models and had it running on a loop overnight, perhaps illicitly reworking his own private composition, or shaping some other secret. Curiosity moved her hand to explore, but she tactfully shrank the window to one side.

She opened, instead, his inbox. "Search," she said. "Sender, Smith-Newbold." The computer brought up a clutch of results, dating back a year and a half; at first formal and sporadic. They grew more frequent, then angrier; like many of Viva Voce's lower-profile clients, Smith-Newbold and his partner had thought his work would bring regular income, but the widow had barely received anything. Renee pulled the messages to her phone. "Close search," she said. As the results window winked shut, a similar heading caught her eye: "Request for payment info". This time it wasn't from family, but a creator herself.

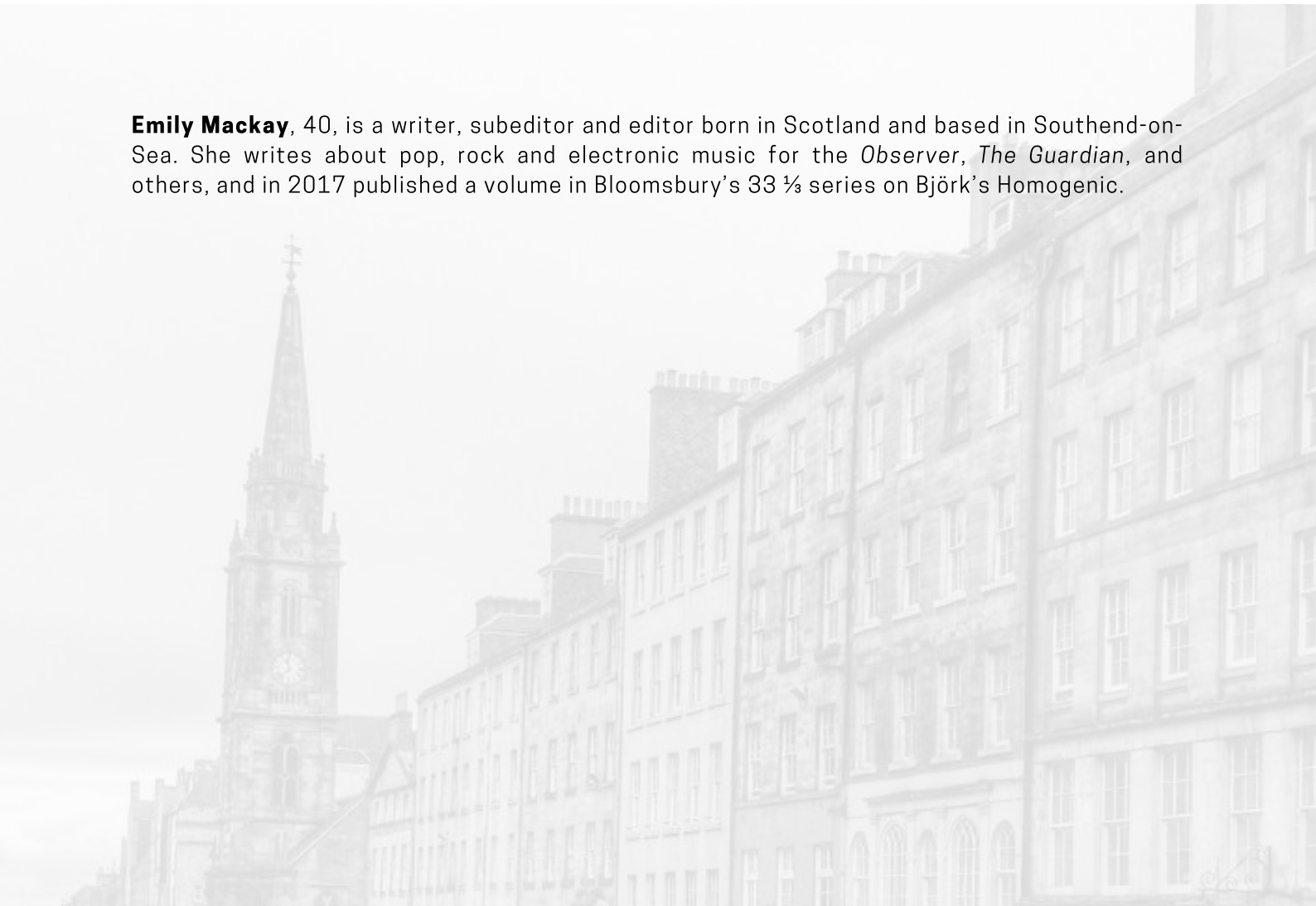
More searches released a clamour of frustrated, furious, lonely voices. Requests of this kind seemed to make up a good third of Dan's inbox. No wonder he, too, needed a side-project. Renee read for a few minutes, guilt and anger growing, then saved as many as she could find and returned to the sifting room.

All night, as the colours danced around her, she worked. She took the song and spliced and cross-pollinated it; she fed all those different creators' frustrated pleas into the AI as lyric prompts. She tracked down their catalogues in the library, dropping in splashes of their styles. Creations met and sparked, cultures clashed and phased and clicked, and each new addition brought fresh twists and rushes. The work was fast and fertile with so much input, and by the time the night began to soften, the original song's beauty had been refracted in manifold forms and colours, led down strange paths into a rich, weird and unruly hoard of new work.

She saved it to the library with the highest ratings, backdating and crediting each track to the company of songwriters whose messages she'd taken: it was the best she could do for now. The creators' pleas and accusations, fed to the machine, retained little of their meaning or purpose, but in all a ghost of loss, warning or foreboding lingered. In the best, anger was an energy.

As dawn broke with the bubbling of birds and the rush and hum of the loop, Renee wrote a note for Dan, leaving him her address, and headed home at last to sleep.

**Emily Mackay**, 40, is a writer, subeditor and editor born in Scotland and based in Southend-on-Sea. She writes about pop, rock and electronic music for the *Observer*, *The Guardian*, and others, and in 2017 published a volume in Bloomsbury's 33 ⅓ series on Björk's *Homogenic*.



# 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 Rutty Rocker* (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 Ruttty 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.



# Riffs

## Experimental writing on popular music

**Riffs** is a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal which provides a space for experimental ways of thinking and writing about popular music research. It is a space for creatives of all backgrounds, experiences and interests.

*Riffs* originally emerged in 2017 from a writing group at Birmingham City University, run by Nick Gebhardt and supported by the Birmingham Centre of Media and Cultural Research. As popular music scholars, many of the original 'Write Clubbers' straddled disciplines: music; sociology; media studies; anthropology; dance. Some felt adrift, on thin ice.

'Write Club' offered an opportunity of 2,000 words and the space of a table and eight chairs to explore what it meant to research popular music, to write about it, to construct an argument, a description, a song, a line. Once nerves were finally quashed and it became comfortable to watch another read your work, the writing became better and better until it seemed a crime to keep them under wraps, hidden away from curious eyes on a private blog.

In the founding issues of *Riffs*, we offered up some of our thoughts and writing in the hope that we would be able to read yours, and that each of us will in some small way change the ways in which we think and write about popular music. We have not been disappointed.

Our Editorial Board has now expanded from its BCU origins, and includes PhD researchers, ECRs, mid-career, and senior academics based at universities in the UK, Bulgaria, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, and the US. Many of the editorial board are also practicing musicians, composers, artists, dancers, designers, curators, and writers.

We hope that you will consider this your official invitation to Write Club.

# Contributor Guidelines

*Riffs* welcomes pieces from all disciplines and from contributors from academic, industry, or creative backgrounds. Each issue will be based on a prompt, but responses can vary depending upon the contributor's interest and experience. As the journal title suggests, we are most interested in pieces that take an experimental approach to the consideration of popular music. For examples of previous interpretations, please visit our journal website.

Abstracts submitted to *Riffs* will be considered by the editorial board, with full submissions subject to peer review.

## **Word Limit: 2,000-4,000 (excluding references)**

Please do not submit full dissertations or theses. All contributions should respond to the prompt and take an experimental approach to undertaking and/or communicating research on popular music. We also welcome shorter written pieces, audio, and visual pieces to include photo essays.

**Abstract:** Please provide an informal, blog-style abstract (under 300 words) and a profile picture. This abstract will be hosted on our journal website and social media platforms. As ever, links to external websites and the use of images, audio and video clips are also welcome, subject to guidance which will be issued at the point that your abstract is accepted.

**Format:** Please email submissions as attachments to the editorial contact given below. All articles should be provided as a .doc or .docx file. All images and web-ready audio or video clips should also be emailed as separate files, or through a file-sharing platform such as WeTransfer or Dropbox.

**Bio:** Please include a short (up to 300 words) bio with your name, institutional affiliation (if appropriate), email address, current research stage within your article, and other useful/interesting information, positioned at the end of your piece.

**References:** If you refer to other publications within your piece, please list these in a 'References' section at the end. All clear formats of referencing are acceptable. Discographies and weblinks can also be detailed at the end of your contribution. Please use endnotes rather than footnotes.

**Submission:** Abstracts for our bi-annual prompts should be emailed to [info@riffsjournal.org](mailto:info@riffsjournal.org)

**Please note:** *Riffs* shall be entitled to first use of the contribution in all the journal's different forms, but the author remains the copyright owner and can re-publish their contribution without seeking the journal's permission. *Riffs* reserve the right to decline to publish contributions if they are submitted after the agreed deadline and without the assigned editor being informed (and agreeing to) a new submission date.

The background of the image features a repeating pattern of typewriter keys, including letters like 'N', 'H', 'S', 'B', 'A', 'C', 'O', 'L', 'V', 'R', and 'P'. A diagonal grey band runs from the top-left towards the bottom-right, partially obscuring the keys. Overlaid on this background is the word "Riffs" repeated five times in a large, white, sans-serif font, stacked vertically and slightly offset to the right.

Riffs  
Riffs  
Riffs  
Riffs  
Riffs





# Riffs

Vol. 5 Issue 1 Cover Design: Rosie Clarke

Riffs Cover by Adam Kelly Williams / Iain Taylor

Lady Sanity – Pop music dystopia, and Richard Marsh & Dan Finnemore of Swampmeat – Pop music utopia by  
[www.landaviesphoto.com](http://www.landaviesphoto.com) © 2012 - 2021 | All Rights Reserved

Experimental Writing on Popular Music

## Popular Music Fiction

### Contents

Editorial - Ash Watson

Dancing with Death: A speculative ethnography - Ben Assiter

Kite in the Sky - Ian Inglis

The Condition of My Existence - Hussein Boon

Tapes of Sandy - Elodie A. Roy

The (N)early Man: Arriving too soon, thriving too late by  
Farley Ruskin - Kevin Quinn

Tin Can Alley - Emily Mackay

Rust (City) Never Sleeps - Paul Graham Raven