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Everybody hold on tight

This story originally appeared in Leeds magazine. Music writer and former punk, Lucy O'Brien recalls Leeds in the punk and post-punk years.



"It was fantastic to play on the same stage where the Who had once performed. It was a thrill. You feel like you're in a room of great history," says Gang of Four vocalist Jon King, about the time the band played Leeds Refectory in 1979.

Released in 1970, the Who's album Live at Leeds was the peak of the first golden era of live music at the largest venue in Leeds. It sold throughout the world and cemented the University's reputation as a key venue for top bands like the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and Roxy Music.

There was a dip in the mid-70s when rock music went through an unexciting period, before anarchic punk announced the second golden era in 1977. A generation of Leeds bands emerged from the University and the Poly, from the Gang of Four, the Mekons and Soft Cell to the Sisters of Mercy, Chumbawamba and the Wedding Present.

They've had a lasting musical influence, a fact underscored by two high-profile conferences on the post-punk era held at the University.

In September 2009, Philip Kiszely and Alice Bayliss brought together academics and performers to explore how post-punk is absorbed into the present and will project into the future. "Post-punk was an explosion of genre and style," says Philip. "The period is important musically because, for a short time at least, it seemed like anything was possible, and that the remarkable notion of real independence within the music industry might actually work."



All the Leeds post-punk musicians were inspired by the frenzied gigs they saw in Leeds. "I remember seeing the Anarchy in the UK tour at the Poly with the Clash and the Sex Pistols, thinking 'I can do that. Anyone can do that. Right, let's get a band together!'" recalls Kevin Lycett, one of the founding members of the Mekons.

A shambolic but high-energy punk band who emerged from the University's fine art department, the Mekons regularly let people get up on the stage with them, removing the barrier between artist and audience. "It was incoherent, tribal and emotional. There was a feeling of high excitement," enthuses Kevin. "I remember a band called the Worst. And they were. But it was fantastic!"

Live music drew David Gedge from the Wedding Present to the University. "I could see all the bands I read about in NME and Sounds. It was a very vibrant place. The first week I got there, the Ramones were playing the Freshers' Hop. It was great, a very surreal gig, with students fresh from home pogoing alongside six foot skinheads from the town."

Steve Henderson (Metallurgy 1975, MSc 1976, PhD 1980) was Ents Secretary at the time. He remembers that the Poly initially stole the march on the University, booking punk bands first. "I had nothing for the Freshers' Hop and thought, what on earth do I do? I got my copy of NME (as we all did) and looked up tour dates for the Ramones. I noticed their one day off was the Freshers' Hop. I rang their agent, a really cocky guy, who said, 'They need that day off.' I said, 'Oh right. Do they need the day off if I'm offering three and a half grand?' No, they don't."

When Steve booked the spirited Ramones, he set the tone for the year. "They came on and did an hour and a half set. Each song was three minutes long and like being shot with a pistol. There were townies staggering around sniffing glue. Three cars were turned upside down outside and set on fire. Poor freshers."

There followed a raft of raucous punk and new wave acts at the Union including the Clash, the Jam, the Stranglers and Siouxsie and the Banshees. At first there was resistance to Steve's booking policy. "All I got from the students was, 'Why don't you book student bands?' These punk bands are just for people from the town."

Then, many students were more comfortable with the less challenging tones of artists like John Martyn and Lindisfarne.

"There was a lot of folkie stuff at the Union," recalls broadcaster Liz Kershaw (Textiles 1978). "It was so quaint. People took their own cushions to gigs and sat cross-legged. Then around 1977, the lads with long greasy hair and Led Zeppelin albums under their arms decided to cut it all off and go spikey. I lived in Lupton Flats at the time, and became an amateur hairdresser. I also remember them changing their 30 inch flared jeans for the tightest drainpipes."

For her, going to see the Clash at the Poly in 1977 was a pivotal moment. "I was wearing a leopard skin coat and flip flops. It was wild. A girl with full punk hair, make-up, a basque and suspenders head-butted me and I had a black eye. That black eye became my trophy!"

Despite early opposition, Steve gradually convinced the University and the Union that new wave acts were worth booking. The tipping point was Ian Dury & the Blockheads in 1979. Although they were Number 1 in the charts with 'Hit Me with your Rhythm Stick', Henderson struggled to persuade the Union committee that Ian Dury was worth booking.

"I said, 'I've got two nights of Ian Dury.' The Deputy President said, 'How much is that going to cost?' 'Three and a half thousand.' 'That's unbelievable.' 'No, that's three and a half thousand each night.' He had a fit in the corner. 'Do you honestly think this will sell?' Everyone in the room burst out laughing."



Alumni recall the packed out Ian Dury concerts as the best gigs of the era. "It was hugely memorable for me because of the energy from the stage, especially from Mr Dury himself. A lesson in how to captivate an audience. And I can still feel that baseline in my chest," recalls Sue Rylance (French & Management 1982).

By 1980 the hippy influence had disappeared, and bands that first played Leeds as anarchic punks now returned as established stars. The Clash, for instance, played the Refectory that year as part of their 16 Tons tour and impressed Liz Kershaw's younger brother Andy, who was then an enthusiastic Ents steward, spending more time in the Union than on his politics degree.

"That was the greatest gig I ever saw in there. It was the last time they were all truly happy," he says. "They'd just released London Calling, the album where they fully bloomed as a band, allowing all their enthusiasms - reggae, R&B and country - to come through. They had big proper rock n' roll songs, and by that stage they could play as well."

Several months after that gig, Andy became Ents Secretary and booked a stream of sell-out bands, from 1980 to 82. Your writer arrived at the University in 1980, and watched Siouxsie Sioux, all black spikey hair and smokey eyes, doing her freewheeling metallic dance.

I also remember the Fall fronted by anti-hero Mark E. Smith, Iggy Pop, stripped to the waist pumping out the song 'The Passenger', and the Clash, doing an impromptu busk on the Union steps.

With a combination of determination and chutzpah (the same qualities that led him to Radio 1 and TV shows like Whistle Test), Andy brought the big tours to the Refectory. "I took my cue from Steve Henderson. He made a big impact, and the momentum carried it through. Plus the Refec was a 22,000 capacity venue. By default we were the equivalent of Newcastle City Hall or Manchester Apollo."

A remarkably diverse selection of music was on tap in Leeds. There was a healthy appetite for funk, with the Grand Funk Society and topline US artists like Bootsy Collins coming to play.

Reggae also drew big crowds: many students recall Bob Marley performing in 1976. "He performed two shows in the same day, and it was so hot it was 'raining' indoors. There was a great atmosphere," recalls Mark Sheard (Economics & Textiles 1978).

Reggae band Black Uhuru also created a stir. "That was the bloodiest concert I put on," remembers Andy. "People were trying to break in without paying and producing knives. There were fights and blood on the floor. The front door security men were throwing people out by the dozen. Thank God in those days we didn't live in a culture of guns."

There was also the high glam of Kid Creole & the Coconuts and his glittery theatrical backing singers, big bands like UB40 and Dire Straits, rockers like Motorhead and Saxon, and cute chart pop acts like Haircut 100.

Musically the city as a whole was very active, with the Music for the Masses society in the Union fostering local bands, and enough punters to fill new venues - the Fan Club, the Phonographique, the Warehouse - as well as the big acts at the Union. The late punk poet and writer Seething Wells would drink in the Tetley Bar, and a 16 year old James Brown (later to become the founder of Loaded magazine) came to the Union to sell his fanzines.

The buoyant music scene sat alongside dark undercurrents of tension, including the threat of the Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe. The situation came to the heart of the University in November 1980 when English student Jacqueline Hill was murdered.

"I lived in Harehills and the walk back at night was very frightening," recalls Emma Biggs (Fine Art 1980), a close friend of the Mekons. "Police did a whole series of interviews up and down our street, including some of the guys in our house." Until the Ripper was captured in the following January, there was effectively an after-dark curfew on women. The University funded a Women's Centre and a women's minibus service.

As a reaction to this climate of fear, Leeds radical feminism was forged. A Reclaim the Night march through the town centre ended with 300 women trying to storm an Iron Maiden concert in the Refectory. When the police made arrests, women blockaded their van, chanting "Men off the streets!" Andy, also a volunteer minibus driver, later told Leeds Student: "All you are doing is antagonising the men who want to help you".

Leeds Women's Action Group responded by saying: "We feel strongly that our actions were justified, and reflect the anger that women feel about male violence and intimidation."

But political tension went beyond the Ripper nightmare, a feeling that fed directly into the music of Leeds bands like the Gang of Four and Delta 5. "Leeds was an incredibly uncomfortable place," recalls Gang of Four guitarist Andy Gill. "In the late 70s it was an industrial city in decline. It attracted the activities of the BNP and the National Front, and crystallised a lot of ideologies that were forming and clashing at that time."

When they first started the Gang of Four played a small gig in 1977 in the Tartan Bar. Two years later they were headlining at the Refectory. "Our music wouldn't have sounded like it did if it hadn't kicked off in Leeds," says Gill, "That became our starting point - something we tested everything against."

The Gang of Four created "some of the most jarring social critiques committed to vinyl" according to Simon Warner, popular music expert in the school of Music, when looking back at post-punk.

Punk, says Simon, "was a moment in British music history which aimed to kick over the traces of the past. A younger generation of musicians like the Sex Pistols, the Clash coupled primal energy to a political drive to shake up the national scene."

Post-punk, however, was more arty and intellectual. "Some felt that post-punk was merely a sign that the industry had tamed the primitive anger of punk and found a way to market it on both sides of the Atlantic. But many of the groups who rode this next tide were not merely pawns of the rock business. There was still a fierce energy and often a subversive manifesto at work."

And, Simon confirms, Leeds bands were indeed part of a golden era of music. "While punk fizzled out relatively quickly, post-punk influenced later bands from Nirvana to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Franz Ferdinand and it tasted well into the next decade."

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