

From The Beatles to The Zutons

Feature by Dany Louise

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Think of Liverpool and what words first come to mind? Football maybe, but probably also The Beatles, still inextricably linked with the city. It was their phenomenal success in the sixties that first blew Liverpool open to the world - as winning the Capital of Culture title is doing again.

Liverpool's musical history has periodically made it *the* coolest place in the country. But as Adrian Blackburn, vocalist with Indi band Clinic has said about the 2008 title: "hopefully, the city will encourage the arts more and not trade on the past as a quick fix for outside attention." There is a feeling that this has previously been done too much, and some commentators have pointed out that, in a way, The Beatles were *too* successful because when they moved to London they took Liverpool's infrastructure with them. Pete Fulwell, who founded the famous Eric's club in 1977, explains: "At the time we started Eric's, Liverpool was practically a desert. There was very little music infrastructure left post sixties - the management companies, agents and promoters had all moved down to London. Manchester was much more developed, ironically because they hadn't had the success that Liverpool had. At the same time, bands that came out of Liverpool were under the enormous Beatles shadow which could be very intimidating for them".

Eric's was on Matthew Street, opposite the site of the original Cavern Club, then derelict land after the Council had demolished the building in the early seventies. "We used to get Japanese tourists taking photos of this abandoned site, and sold them Cavern T shirts. In fact, the company we bought was called The Cavern Company. People thought we were mad when we changed the name to Eric's, but we were adamant that we didn't want the club to be a museum. We were going to look forward, not back."

Eric's quickly gained credibility on the national circuit, hosting all the great names of punk and new wave, including The Clash, The Ramones and Talking Heads, as well as emerging Liverpool bands such as The Teardrop Explodes and Echo and the Bunnymen. It paved the way for the early eighties success of bands like OMD, China Crisis and Half Man, Half Biscuit, but the club itself closed in 1980 after a drugs raid. "It was shattering," says Fulwell, "like a death. But from a cultural point of view, it had served its purpose by giving a platform to new artists and informing a

new audience". He moved onto other projects within the music industry, managing The Christians, Pete Wylie and Black, getting involved with the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (the so-called 'Paul McCartney Fame School') and now runs Musicbias, an agency offering business support to musicians. But there is a postscript to the Eric's story, one that illustrates our growing institutionalisation of culture. In 2005 the Museum of Liverpool Life put on an exhibit about the club, "and", says Fulwell "I was filled with this terrible sense of irony that we had ended up in a museum after all".

The eighties saw the advent of house music, paving the way for Cream, at one time rated the best dance club in the country. It drew thousands of students to Liverpool, who literally queued around the block several nights a week to get in, and spawned Creamfields, the enormous weekend rave on the site of the old Liverpool airport.

Since then, there has been another guitar band revival with Merseyside groups The Coral, Clinic, and the Libertines attracting national attention. In The Libertine's case this is not entirely due to their music, but Clinic has gained substantial credibility, while keeping their links with Merseyside via their choice of producers and studios. And of course, Merseyside band The Zutons have been riding high all year with their album Tired of Hanging Around.

Why the sudden interest in guitar bands? Rob Smith, Director of Wirral's International Guitar Festival thinks it is cyclical. "Technology impacted on the popularity of the guitar in terms of how fashionable it was, but really, guitars haven't ever gone away. I still think it's the one instrument that touches more people's lives than any other."

Smith started the International Guitar Festival eighteen years ago. "I was looking for something different that would set the Wirral apart. At the time, there wasn't a guitar festival at all in the UK, and so we began by creating something that would celebrate the guitar in all its range, diversity and styles".

Big name headline acts this year are E Street Band guitarist Nils Lofgren, returning for the third time, and Bill Wyman and his Rhythm Kings. Also on the bill are Chris Spedding, "the ultimate session guitarist who has played on everything for everyone", and B J Cole, who has played with Sting and Dave Gilmour. How has Smith persuaded such high pedigree musicians to appear? "Ever since the first year the players have been our biggest ambassadors. Three years ago we had Gregg Wright, Michael Jackson's guitarist, and he said it was the best place he'd ever played!

We present a world-class festival, with a world-class operation," Smith explains with justifiable pride.

The programme is exciting, eclectic, full of musician's musicians, with the biggest venue holding 1000 people and the smallest just 100. This is Birkenhead Priory dating back to 1150. "It's a really intimate venue," says Smith. "Musicians can do something different in it. Last year, B J Cole played classical music there with cellist Emily Burrage and it was fantastic".

Smith thinks it is a natural progression that "Merseyside continues to market itself as Pop City, given its musical history". Music remains the great communicator, broad enough to encompass the entire human emotional range, from despair to intense euphoria. It's a cliché but it's true: music affects us, on a deep punch-in-the-gut level. But talking about institutionalised culture, Rob Smith sums up the state of play succinctly: "Really, what we're trying to achieve is an inward investment in energy from the people, and on the back of that have outside agencies give us an inward investment of cash."