

Cultural Stew – by Dany Louise

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When I was growing up in the claustrophobic, Express-reading confines of suburban North London, my Liverpool diet was an exciting mash of riots, militant tendencies, mass unemployment, and, after John Lennon was shot, The Beatles. In my naïve mind it conjured up a glamorous impression of a city filled to the brim with charismatic angry creatives, politically engaged in a citywide movement that was refusing to accept the status quo. Grass-roots rebellion against the state? Hallelujah! Proud workers reduced to welfare dependency, raging against the dying of the light? Well, what else should they do?

To me, it all seemed a reasonable human response to intolerable societal pressure against the individual self, and when, during the same period, I saw the 1970 film of the Woodstock festival, my internal landscape changed overnight.

These hippies were the tribe I wanted to belong to, and the closest facsimile in Britain that I was aware of inhabited the newly formed county of Merseyside. Unsurprisingly, several years later, this is where I settled.

These potent stereotypes derive partly from their contrast to the preceding cultural eras. Creativity and talent has always been here but it was The Beatles explosion in the sixties that blew Liverpool open to the world. Many hope that winning the Capital of Culture title will do so again, but as Adrian Blackburn, vocalist and muso with experimental Indi band Clinic points out “hopefully, the city will encourage the arts more and not trade on the past as a quick fix for outside attention.” An opinion many might share. Clinic has gained substantial credibility by creating a noteworthy visual and musical aesthetic, while keeping their links with Merseyside via their choice of producers and studios.

When I arrived, Liverpool was just starting its long journey towards the current renaissance, but there was still a grand poetic beauty in the physicality of Liverpool’s Northerness and a joyful exuberance in many thriving arts activities. The sadly missed Adrian Henri was a regular at exhibition openings, whether a big name at the Tate or Walker art galleries, or a student show in an abandoned industrial building. Roger McGough was, and still is, available for regular intimate readings in the Everyman bistro, and four theatres still put out a diverse range of high quality stage offerings, while mentoring emerging writers, actors and performers. The Dead Good Poets have

remained dead good. There is a constantly changing vibrant band scene, and – Pass it On! Liverpool retro guitar bands The Coral, The Libertines and Clinic are again dominating the national music scene.

The charismatic Rastafarian poet and urban griot Levi Tafari charmingly defines the effect of Liverpool's maritime past as a major portal and waystation to the world: "Liverpudlians are affectionately known as scousers, and scouse is a stew made of many ingredients."

He describes his own ingredients as "tri-cultural", having "African roots, Jamaican heritage and British experience". It is the more problematical aspects of his British experience that has been his inspiration. Growing up in Toxteth during the seventies, he felt "rejected as not being part of the fabric of society" simply because he was black.

Instances of police harassment were common, but rather than internalise and self destruct, he concentrated on "the powerful messages" of inspiring black role models such as James Brown ("Say it Loud!") and Bob Marley, as well as other performers such as Jean Binta Breeze and Benjamin Zephaniah. In an experience that typifies the city's disconcerting ability to give bounteously with one hand while strangling hope with the other, he remembers the Toxteth staging of the African Liberation celebration in 1976 as a formative experience. It is this ability to comprehend and believe beyond geographical limitations that have fed his successful career.

The counter-cultural intelligentsia that first attracted me remain an impressive voice - Noam Chomsky received a standing ovation from nearly 1000 people on his recent visit to the city. "We showed 'The Permanent Way' here", says Gemma Bodinetz, Artistic Director of the Everyman - Playhouse theatres, "and Max Stafford Clarke rang me specifically to say that the post-show discussion was the most intelligent, articulate, passionate and vociferous of anywhere in the country. It blew the cast's socks off!"

Gemma is half of the new power-duo at the helm of the Everyman-Playhouse Theatres, working alongside Chief Exec Deborah Aydon. Lured here from Hampstead Theatre, she cites "the high credentials of the Everyman as a centre for experimental and counter cultural theatre during the seventies" as a key attraction of the post, which she accepted before Liverpool's 2008 victory was announced. For her, the challenge is "to shine a spotlight on the huge reservoir of talent, and bring national creative forces – the top designers and directors – back to the city".

Winning the Capital of Culture title has revealed one of Britain's best-kept secrets to the rest of the nation – a kinder, greener city than many imagine and one that enables a decent quality of life,

allied with consistent and varied arts and cultural nourishment. But how has this cultural richness remained hidden for so long?

“We’ve looked to Europe rather than London,” says Geoff Molyneux, about himself and Pete Clarke, two of the city’s most established and well-respected Fine Artists, who studied under Maurice Cockerell and Sam Walsh. “Liverpool has always been better thought of abroad than it has in the UK, and I find there is a more interesting dialogue when I do work in Cologne or Basle or Gettysburg. When I go to London I feel like a visitor; when I go to Europe I feel like a guest.” The international exposure they have had has been valuable in cementing their already solid domestic reputations, but the Liverpool environment remains a key influence in their work, for Pete Clarke in particular: “At one stage, I was in a lot of shows nationally because I was seen to personify Liverpool”.

The changing climate of the last decade brought renowned filmmaker Alex Cox back to his roots, to live and work in 1998, when he formed Exterminating Angels Productions and made his first British film “Revenger’s Tragedy”. He recommends the city as “a good base of operations for an independent film company. It has artistic roots and great musicians, writers and actors.” His offices are in The Mediastation, Toxteth, a high tech film and media production centre, set up by Roger Appleton through Liverpool Community College. He can feel a new ambience in the area: “Thanks to many people’s work, Toxteth is being integrated into the City rather than treated as one of the unruly outlying areas. The arts community has been greatly strengthened by the arrival of the FACT Centre, There is also now a network of TV and film producers and directors, which suggests a stirring of solidarity, rather than isolation.”

Liverpool has always been a city with grit and edge, but will growing prosperity and recognition dull that sharpness? Lewis Biggs, director of the Biennial, believes it is Liverpool’s “connectedness and network across the world”, that will secure its future, allied to the entrepreneurial scouse character. “My experience is that they’re incredibly good business people, they work very hard, are very creative and very open to risk taking”.

We’ve already seen one of the most unforgettable images of the current period, an unconscious moment recording Liverpool on the cusp, its state sanctioned future in the balance. It is 8.10 on the morning of 4th June 2003, and the great and the good of the city are crammed into the Empire Theatre. There is a live video link to London networked among six cities, and it is seconds before the winner of the Capital of Culture competition is to be announced. The camera focuses on the Leader of the Council surrounded by a gaggle of politicians, all smiling nervously in unshakeable self-belief. Slightly behind the Leader but looming tall in the frame is the usually proud and ebullient Sir Bob Scott**, head bent, eyes closed, fists clenched with tension, looking as vulnerable

as a terrified boy, appearing to plead with the powers that be. His prayers are answered, Tessa Jowell pronounces, and redemption is bestowed upon the city.

It is a visually jolting document laden with 25 years of political and social baggage. At government level the slate has now been wiped clean. At long last, the gold currency of Liverpool culture and creativity is being nationally acknowledged. All that remains to ask is “what took you so long?”