

systems. Single parents—standard-bearers of the so-called underclass in many accounts—are not necessarily cut adrift, but often live with relatives close by. Nor are their children stigmatised. It is significant, for example, that the Catholic clergy baptise children born out of wedlock, recognising the very real economic and social pressures which encourage young people to remain unmarried.

Kirkby may be suffering from growing impoverishment, but Kirkby people are also known for their generosity. This shows itself, for example, in the long-standing tradition of factory and pub collections for charitable causes. Perhaps one of the most notable is the Kirkby Kidney Fund which, as far as I am aware, is the only voluntarily-funded dialysis unit in the country. And that in one of the lowest income areas. Phil Cooke highlighted the way mining communities pulled together during the miners' strike. In the north west, and indeed in the country, Kirkby provided some of the largest collections for miners and their families.

Because people have experience of unemployment, directly or through family and neighbours, the economic divide does not easily translate into a social divide. The employed people we spoke to could identify, all too easily, with the plight of the unemployed; consequently unemployment does not carry the stigma it retains in other areas. One important reflection of this is the involvement of the unemployed themselves in the local initiatives already mentioned.

The recent growth of local-authority sponsored housing cooperatives provides a good example. All of the schemes involve unemployed people. In one, three quarters of the participants are unemployed. Another is run by a group of single mothers. In another, the founding members have included in their plans additional housing for elderly and disabled people to be recruited from outside the founding group.

The last ten years have seen the development of a

network of unemployed and community resource centres on Merseyside, funded in part by contributions from workers across the region to the "One Fund for All" campaign. It is generally agreed that the most developed of these centres is at Kirkby. Staffed by local people, it is particularly effective as a go-between for people intimidated by the welfare bureaucracy. It estimates that it has been responsible for £1 million take-up of benefit which would otherwise have been unclaimed. More controversially, it provides support for workers involved in industrial disputes.

It is also the home of a recent initiative, precariously funded, aimed at preventing young unemployed people falling into drug abuse. Kirkby is not a "drug-infested estate," but people are aware of the dangers and are attempting to do something about the problem. Kirkby Artskills, which develops the artistic skills of young people, encouragingly involves older people in its work.

It would be wrong to underestimate the difficult circumstances surrounding these initiatives. All are bedevilled by uncertainty about funding. The unemployed centre has become embroiled in broader political disputes which have brought local activists in conflict with the local and national Labour Party. The fact that they have survived so far, however, is surely a testimony to their strong community roots.

There are signs, then, of the embryonic social networks referred to by Phil Cooke; of a collective response to adversity which gives the lie to any simple labelling of the area as some new "underclass." The response also offers lessons for other areas similarly afflicted by economic restructuring, and for the nation as a whole. A national programme of regional economic and social reconstruction is needed which can nurture and build on the localities' strengths. Otherwise, the immediate future looks bleak as the "place merchants" get to work in the areas benefiting from current patterns of economic restructuring. ■

AMANDA MITCHISON

# Style on the Mersey

**When Prince Charles and his entourage arrive in Liverpool next week for the opening of the Tate of the North, how will they find the indigenous art of the city?**

Like the worst type of domestic cat, Victor Gunion's barber shop is soft, brown and hairy underfoot and lurks on a dark landing. Except for a squeeze tube of luminous green setting gel, the shop is an old-fashioned gents' hairdresser, with unbreakable combs, piles of paper handkerchiefs, a jar of something resembling old stock and a tottering dentist's chair of the kind found in third world shoe-shine shops.

For Victor, the wheel of fashion has turned full circle—he is one of the few Gunions to have survived long hair and unisex salons. Deservedly so, for

Victor is cheap (£1.50-£1.60), quick (ten minutes plus the queue), deft and has a nice manner. No questions about girlfriends, just the odd warning about sunburn tide-marks, then a quick squirt from a plant sprayer, a cut and shave, another squirt, a ruffle on top and he sends them off: "Be good now, thank you sir."

The queue of youths on the landing sometimes reaches down to the street. They go in with short hair and come out with perhaps a day's growth round the ears, and a little lawn on top. "They just can't get it short enough. There was one lad only in



on Saturday and he came back on Monday, wanting it right down to the wood."

"Any changes in style in the last four years?"

"Just shorter. Some of the girls want it, like, incredibly short."

Many of Victor's customers are "scals" (originally an abbreviation of scallywag)—members of a lean, beery, dope-smoking, teenage subset with a taste for Everton, late seventies hard rock and perhaps a bit of petty crime. In 1982-84 when the phenomenon first hit Liverpool, the scal was wearing trainers, a sports shop anorak—usually a zipless variety—and had hair that was short, although not extravagantly so. Now the term is applied more loosely, and while the hair is shorter (or for some girls piled-up high) and the anoraks have been replaced by designer logo sweatshirts, the scals still retain their essential quality—an aggressive sort of ordinariness and conformity, which lashes out against the creative and individualistic character of Liverpoolians.

Yet street fashion is still more upfront in Liverpool than almost anywhere in Britain. Compared with even five years ago, there are fewer pink spandex trousers and *enfant du paradis* face packs, but within a certain youth uniform, Liverpoolians will go further than anyone else, pile their hair higher, wear their minis shorter . . . I saw a couple of girls in Bold Street dressed in stacks, ten-inch gladiatorial belts and *broderie anglaise* knickerbockers that hung down below flouncey minis. The clothes were just standard fashion store (Liverpool shops provide little variety), plus outlandish acces-

sories. The effect was incongruous and flamboyant, but the style was hardly innovative.

No major new fashions come out of Liverpool. The arts college has a very inventive printed textiles department which uses the ideas of Russian constructivism and a historical, fine art approach to remarkable effect. But although the design students may be influenced by the heady irreverence of Liverpool, there are no Vivienne Westwoods taking their inspiration from street clothes or getting young scousers into designer street chic. Sheila Harrison, one of the very few local designers to stay and sell her clothes in the city, doesn't look to Bold Street for her ideas: "They have more style in Manchester. Here they are not interested in everyday things like a nice coat. They want clothes to dress up in for an occasion. That's why we've ended up with a shop full of suits."

Dressing up is taking over from music as the main outlet for teenage aspirations to stardom. According to Jayne Casey, music and dance director at the Bluecoat Arts Centre: "Today a lot of the kids who are the 'happening kids' have got into fashion rather than joining bands. A lot of the lads are into dancing and performance which was considered puny ten years ago."

This coincides with a decline in the live gig in Liverpool—many rock bands touring Britain will miss out the city, considering it not to be worthwhile financially. According to Casey, rock concerts with tickets over £2.50 are very unlikely to get a good turnout.

The landing stage pierhead by Andy Teebay, at the Open Eye Gallery.

Roger Hill, a pink-haired presenter on Merseyside Radio, says: "Three or four years ago when the State Ballroom opened—one of those places that serves Budweiser beer in bottles out of the fridge—I noticed people weren't wanting venues where you stand in discomfort in the dark, watching some band play, and trying not to spill your drink. Now they go to night spots with good views where you go to see yourself being seen."

Consequently, the bands coming out of Liverpool are often not well known within the city before they become national names and are pulled south to the big production companies and pop designers. Unlike the early eighties psychedelic-ish bands Echo and the Bunnymen and Teardrop Explodes, recent successes such as The Christians and Thomas Lang have not trodden the old local band circuit.

But the sheer quantity of live music in Liverpool is increasing. Hundreds of simple four or five piece basic guitar and drum bands are springing up in local pubs and clubs. They mostly range from the country and western small timer to the Bunnymen clone and the Mersey beat imitator. Their songs tell of love and getting out of Merseyside. Many belong to what Hill calls "Liverpool rock's sensitive male teenage angst—coming home, putting your records on and looking at your posters."

Geoff Davies, co-manager of the local independent record company Probe, is less pessimistic: "Over the last two to three years, Liverpool has been beginning to get away from that blandness. Things have started to get more interesting: as well as pop/rock there is modern folk and country, lots of odd, eccentric, off-beat stuff."

Davies's most successful recent discovery has been Half Man Half Biscuit, a group of fanatical Tranmere Rovers football club supporters who came to the fore in 1986, and have since broken up. Their themes were boredom and daytime television—with references ranging from obscure foreign football teams to past *Blue Peter* presenters. The Half Man Half Biscuit zaniness is characteristic of Liverpool: "If you ever wondered how you get triangles from a cow./You need butter, milk, cheese and an equilateral chainsaw . . ."

Recently, Davies has brought out an album by the Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus, which plays peculiar and frightening music combining Christian messages, synthesiser, Gregorian chanting and pounding rhythm. In contrast, Probe's Cyclic Amp produce, in the words of Davies, "as horrible a sound as you can imagine, the subject matter is pretty gruesome. Some of it could make you physically ill . . . all about dead cops in the gutter." The idea behind Cyclic Amp is to use music to demonstrate the oppressiveness and violence of everyday life. It does just that.

Another Probe product is *Wine Bars and Werewolves* by Jegsy Dodd and the Sons of Harry Cross. The album is named after a song about an unwitting scouser who goes down to the pub ("I changed me grunds in case I got knocked down") and finds after closing time: "I stared at my hand and got a terrible fright./There was hairs on me fingers and pubes on me thumb/A blow wave on me back and dreadlocks on me bum/Hair everywhere, an afro on me head/A beard like zz top and sidies like a ted."

This is the same very dry, fantastical humour common in Liverpool ("Oh hey, lad, when God give you teeth, he spoilt a good arse"—Alan Bleasdale. "He's like sitting on your finger"—Chris Bernard in *Letter to Brezhnev*. "Two chip-shop proprietors were today accused of selling human ears fried in batter. One of them said, 'We believe there is room

“The lack of planned integration of the Albert Docks with the city leaves the project isolated culturally and geographically.”

for innovation in the trade'."—Adrian Henri.)

According to David Evans of the Department of Continuing Education at Liverpool University: "The passion of people is great in Liverpool. Through great days and bad the working class has always been ripped off—that breeds a mordant scepticism." This in part accounts for the success of the Merseyside writers' workshop movement which has 20 workshops and over 500 members in the region. The group, set up with the aim of encouraging working class people to express themselves, has spawned the playwrights Jimmy McGovern, a script-writer on *Brookside*, and Jim Hitchmough, author of *Watching an LWT sit. com.* about a goofy bird-watcher on Merseyside.

The average writing coming out of the workshops is of a high standard. The poems and stories deal with the experience of poverty and deprivation in Liverpool—some two thirds of the writers are unemployed—but there is little sentimentality or heart-



Images from the Open Eye Gallery: above, the miracle healers crusade at Aintree from the Faith in the City exhibition, by David Williams; below, "George," triptych from the Disability, Self-image, Self-portrait exhibition; facing page, the Apostolic Church, Liverpool 8 by David Williams, from the Faith in the City exhibition.

on-the-sleeve stuff. The Liverpudlians are saved by their wit.

The writing groups have been publishing booklets of their work. In *From the Heart of Liverpool 8*, Olive Rodgers evokes the hopelessness of an ageing "battery housewife" whose only mark left on life is "The sweat stained armpit of a cotton frock." Meanwhile, in W. S. Gilbert-fashion, a poet calling himself "DLE" writes *The Radical's Complaint to his Wife*: "Though I loved you to distraction/You refused to join my faction . . ."

The Scottie Road Writers' booklet entitled *They're Coming Back, Don't Cry, Suck a Lemon*, includes Ray McKeon's account of how, contrary to popular belief, Toulouse Lautrec began life as "Tooloose," a Liverpudlian coalhumper who lost his



feet in an accident and wore hobnailed knee caps. McKeon's poem comes within a long Liverpoolian tradition of enhancing the city's cosmopolitan flavour by finding links—fictional or otherwise—between Liverpool and the world. The claims (in descending order of seriousness) include: a council project to twin Liverpool with New Orleans, Jung's dream of the "pool of life," the "Liverpool/Leningrad connection" based on the fact that the cities possess similarly shaped harbours, and the rumour that Hitler's uncle might just have stayed in the Adelphi hotel.

Evans believes: "Just to add to Adrian Henri's phrase that if you stand on the steps of the Adelphi and throw a stone you are bound to hit a poet—it's true that if you don't hit a poet, you'll hit a would-be playwright." Liverpool Lunchtime Theatre was set up with the intention of putting on new works by local dramatists, who claim that even with 28 registered theatre companies in the city, there are insufficient outlets for new work. It has been swamped with manuscripts but has suffered cash problems and complains that audiences are small.

Yet amid all this activity, what is happening to ethnic minority arts in Liverpool? Its most visible manifestation is the work of Leroy Cooper who writes giant graffiti opposing heroin dealing in Toxteth and has sprayed the street signs of Liverpool 8 red, gold and green. (He was absolved in court on a technicality.)

But aside from Leroy, a handful of writers' groups, and a new theatre company called Catalyst, there seem to be few creative outlets for artists in the black community. Delado, an African dance group of great promise, has temporarily disappeared to sort out a crisis in morale and management.

Until recently, black arts have been seriously neglected and under-resourced in Liverpool. The council has set up a black arts working party and Merseyside Arts (after a report the organisation commissioned on current black art produced devastating, wide ranging criticism of the organisation) has overhauled its funding policies and is now debating whether to establish a black arts community centre.

Liverpool's black population may be situated in a ghetto, but they come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and do not form a unified community. As a result of centuries of neglect and racism, the black population has turned in upon itself, becoming deeply divided, mistrustful and aggressive to outsiders. Funders are wary of approaching ethnic minority organisations and the absence of a unified black forum has discouraged local artists. During the last four years there have been fights between different local groups wanting to control the city's carnival. Who in this case does a potential funder approach?

Vivek Malhotra of the Africa Arts Collective says: "(Black) people are doing work on an individual level. When we were first setting up, people would come in and say 'Would you publish my poems?' But they never came back again." Levi Tafari, a dubpoet who has moved into playwriting this year, believes that while there is great artistic potential among black Liverpoolians, lack of opportunity has stopped many people from becoming involved in the arts.

When Prince Charles opens the Tate of the North next week, he will not be directly furthering the cause of grass roots—let alone black—art in the city. The gallery, converted at a cost of £9.7 million, is to be strictly international in flavour and is not designed as a community resource. It comes as part of the Merseyside Development Corporation's high profile Albert Docks scheme. In *Arts in Inner Cities*,

a report commissioned by the Ministry of Arts, and subsequently shelved, Paul Collard of the British Film Institute writes of the Albert Docks: "The lack of planned integration with the city leaves the project isolated culturally and geographically. The heavy security is intimidating, and security guards twice stopped me to ask me my business . . . The tourist facilities are directly aimed at the wealthy visitor, and although the company boasts of the high number of Liverpoolians who visit the site, it is worth noticing that the prime reason given for visiting by those Liverpoolians is that they had brought out-of-town relatives or friends."

The report also goes some way to explaining why Liverpool's rich artistic tradition has failed to bring the city substantial economic benefit. Collard lists the "dazzling array" of authorities to which local arts organisations are accountable. This makes the integration of arts and leisure provisions "virtually impossible" in Liverpool.



The report also cites the example of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, a high energy, designer rock band from Liverpool. "It is estimated that in their first year of success, sales of their records and ancillary products generated £200 million in revenue income. Not a single pound of this revenue went into Liverpool. Merseyside does not currently possess the infrastructure capable of exploiting the talents of its musicians."

It is ironically appropriate that seven years on from the closure of the Tate and Lyle refinery in the city—and the loss of some 1,500 jobs—Liverpool should be compensated with an offshoot of the old boss's gallery and an exhibition of surrealists. The gift (not of course to be managed by the council) exemplifies the government's attitude to the cocky, anarchic, self-aggrandising, hotbed of a city. In Hill's words, Liverpool will always be seen by central government as "the eccentric nephew who is good at card tricks but always seems to roll in drunk."

The port that Herman Melville compared to the great wall of China is now gone. Gone also are its merchant seamen clutching rhythm and blues records and illicit green parrots. Gone are the glorious sixties of Brian Patten, Roger McGough and the performance artists who threw themselves out of four-storey windows into skips full of custard. The great Chicago of England is grinding to a halt. But it is a successful loser. True to its Irish roots, Liverpool may lose the battles against Her Majesty's government, but she wins all the good songs. ■

"Dem feel seh yuh will be inspired by de birds and de trees de flowers and de bees, But when I walk through de park I man step inna dog shit, I man get stung by bees which is brutality and when I step out a de park I man step pon another type of shit, political, which is de ghetto, I also get stung by de system with discrimination and de class structure."  
Levi Tafari