

EXCESSIVE FLASHPOINTS – An Inside Portrait of Ian Curtis and Joy Division

In the house of the hanged man ...what do you see?

If you stand on the threshold of 77 Barton Street and look inside the slight Victorian terraced house, you will see a small triangular room to the left of the stairs. This was called 'the blue room' and was Ian Curtis's private space – his writing place. This is where he wrote the lyrics, the lyrical poetry that became the voice of *Joy Division*. To the right of the stairs is the rest of the house – this was his wife Debbie's place and later, her and her infant daughter's place.

The house exists on a bend in the road. This means that 77 Barton Street is actually bent in two and the window of the blue room – Ian Curtis's view, actually faces a different direction to that of his wife and daughter. An isolated view – maybe this is symbolic; maybe this is real.

Ian Curtis was not your average young man. The working class lad that dropped out of grammar school – he essentially taught himself. His reading matter was well beyond anything that his friends, colleagues, band-mates were reading; witness: Nietzsche, Herman Hesse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Rimbaud, Poe to Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*), Anthony Burgess (*A Clockwork Orange*), William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard (*Crash, High-Rise, The Atrocity Exhibition*). So, amidst the dystopian fiction, deeply philosophical works; combined with an interest in art (Andy Warhol, Dada and Surrealism). It was a proper education.

Like most teenagers, he couldn't imagine himself at thirty. I know when I was that young, I felt the same way. It seemed an impossible age away. Now I'm over fifty and I can't imagine being that young again. If Ian Curtis was alive today, he wouldn't be a musician – I think he would be a fine, fine writer.

But when you're in your teens – it's music that grabs you first. It's much more real – much more visceral, more immediate and 'in yer face' – as they say in modern parlance. And so it was when the *Sex Pistols* turned up to gig in Manchester – not just once, but twice in the summer of 1977. I know there was the glam and pop of Bowie and Bolan before this, but it was actually the *Sex Pistols* that showed the inhabitants of Manchester that anyone could get up on stage and perform ... *anyone*. All you needed was three chords and determination.

So it was that *Stiff Kittens* was born ... which then transformed into *Warsaw* and then finally *Joy Division* – a band that was already walking away from the dying embers of Punk to carve

out their own identity. *Joy Division* have been described as 'an original of the species that was to become Goth' by no other than Bono of *U2* (themselves a fledgling punk band around this time); but there was no dark eye-liner and dressing all-in-black that the genre seemed to define with *Joy Division* – they walked their own path.

It's hard to define their sound. The music is certainly serious, you could call it *heavy rock* but it's not metal. There's more to it than that – but then certain songs like *Twenty Four Hours* do rock out in the traditional rock sense. It is the vocal and subject matter that is different; there is also a pace, a build-up and a coming down that is not present in other rock songs. It's their sensibility which sets them apart from other bands. Charles Shaar Murray described their sound as 'awful things carved out of black marble' – but like marble, there are patterns of pale beauty and melody laced throughout.

The name *Joy Division* was taken from a book – a lurid piece of holocaust fiction entitled *House of Dolls* by Ka – Tznetik (a pseudonym for Yehiel Feiner). It was written in the form of a diary and told about the section of a Nazi concentration camp where young women were forced into sexual slavery – not the Labour Division – but the *Joy Division*. By the time the group selected the name in 1978, this sensationalist memoir had sold millions. *Joy Division's* guitarist Bernard Sumner had been given a paperback copy.

Since they were essentially a 'rock band', Sumner's guitar sound is very important. It tended to give a discordant edge to a lot of *Joy Division's* music. At other times, it's tone was chiming or performing a perfect counterpoint melody, as in *Decades*. Everyone in *Joy Division* was a multi-instrumentalist which helped the band enormously.

Stephen Morris – the last member to join the band, is a talented drummer. He has a precise – even militaristic style, that suits the music and was evident even then. It goes well with his greatest ambition: that is to drum as well and as accurately as any drum-machine.

Peter Hook's bass-lines are the emotional pulse of *Joy Division*. It was an inspired move to bring them to the front and centre-stage of the music. It's what sets their music apart from everyone else's. Hook wrestles the sounds out of his bass like a rock-star; stiff-legged and bent over his instrument – not quietly strumming along in the background as most bassists do.

Something needs to be said at this stage about Ian Curtis's voice. It's deep, sonorous – almost a baritone; and it carries a depth, a weight missing from all his peers. It absolutely suits his lyrics – the two compliment each other perfectly. The weight of the voice gives the lyrics – about alienation, guilt, isolation and despair – a solidity, a maturity – a grandeur that

a lesser voice would never be able to reach. Voice and words inter-lock beautifully – giving both an authenticity – something borne of experience rather than just imagined.

The two people most responsible for the ‘look’ of Joy Division is designer Peter Saville and the photographer Anton Corbijn. Peter Saville’s cool, austere graphical style made each *Joy Division* record sleeve a collector’s item. Whereas Anton Corbijn’s stark black and white photography of the band led him to not only direct the music video of *Atmosphere* when it was re-released, but also to direct the movie of Ian Curtis’s life with *Joy Division* in the film *Control*.

Curtis was a closed-in person. What he projected on the outside was different from his internal climate. Curtis found it hard to reconcile his role as a husband and as a father with his role as the lead in a rock band. It certainly caused friction between him and his wife and there were people around the band that wanted this distance to be maintained. They didn’t want the lead of a rock band to be seen with a heavily pregnant wife – what sort of image would that send out? A family man is certainly not ‘*rock and roll*’. I think this disconnect is the growing chasm that his wife was talking about in the title of her first book on Curtis: *Touching from a Distance* – a title taken from the song lyric for *Transmission*.

Like a lot of people, Ian was a rage of inconsistencies. He went into things that he later wanted to back out of. In the song *Passover*, he sings – ‘*back out of my duties when all’s said and done, I know that I’ll lose every-time.*’ He wanted something – when he got it, he didn’t want it anymore. This kind of fruitless behavior can leave many a person feeling unfulfilled. As ready consumers in an empty, increasingly materialistic society – we are all destined to remain unsatisfied.

As writers, we sometimes write about what we’re drawn to – maybe this is where the alienation and guilt and despair come in. Maybe, as his wife suggests – Ian Curtis was, what we nowadays call *bi-polar*. Maybe it’s what’s all around us in our personal sphere – or maybe, even in the wider environment.

Someone once said of Ian Curtis: ‘*he could see the madness in our area*’. Maybe they were right. After all, this was late 70’s Manchester – with it’s dark satanic mills standing empty and alone. Sometimes this city has a dour, grey pessimism which forms the very weather plus a history that produced a society dispossessed and broken ... and of course, left behind. The ‘winter of discontent’ in 1979 also hit this post-industrial town and produced a general feeling of malcontent and despair – that things were going wrong and this feeling leached into the very music and lyrics that the band were producing. *Joy Division* could not have come from anywhere other than Manchester.

Like Curtis, Manchester is a closed-in taciturn city. Its inhabitants are not prone to talk about their feelings. So a certain isolation is there already. Combine that with the air of desperation that is already present ... just below the surface – a historical malcontent. *Joy Division* were the only band that were able to express that feeling, make it coherent and whole for the rest of the world.

By 1980 everything was coming to a head. The diagnosis of his epilepsy had occurred while his wife Debbie was pregnant with his child. Then there was his intrinsically, introspective nature. His imploding marriage – partially caused by his growing relationship with Annik Honoré – the girl he met while on tour in Europe, was becoming white hot. I believe, the disintegrating relationship with his wife, and the song *Love Will Tear Us Apart* about a relationship fracturing, are more than just coincidence.

All writers essentially write about themselves; and the stuff that's going on around us often bleeds into our work. It's what makes our work individual and of the time and place. Curtis was no different.

And sometimes we're actively drawn to what destroys us. A love triangle where no one wants to '*break the chain*' as Stevie Nicks eloquently puts it in Fleetwood Mac's awesome *The Chain* – (itself a testament to relationships crumbling) from the *Rumours* album – describes the situation perfectly.

With his epilepsy getting worse – very probably exacerbated with the late nights, flashing lights and alcohol and drugs of a life 'on the road'. Everything was getting worse, coming to a head – and the warning signs were being ignored.

As he sings in *Twenty-Four Hours* (a song written in his final year 1980) – '*excessive flashpoints, beyond all reach*' says it all. I think this was a description of his mental state at this time with his epilepsy firing off in his head, the medication – maybe even making him feel worse, and his relationships crumbling and the prospect of a tour to the USA coming up adding further pressure – those 'excessive flashpoints' were firing faster and faster. And they were putting him beyond our reach ... beyond anyone's reach, if true be told.

Like most people, on the outside it was a smile and 'sure, I'm coping' when it was clear inside that he was not. There was only one way this was going to go. Something desperate had to give. It's always the weakest link in the chain that goes ... and so it was with Ian Curtis.

On the evening of 17th May 1980 Ian Curtis wanted to be on his own. He had already moved out of the family home on Barton Street. However, he wanted to watch the noted German

film director Werner Herzog's movie *Strosek* that was playing on TV that night. Rather than subject his parents to a foreign language film, he decided to go back to Barton Street – knowing that the house would be empty. The film is about a newly released prisoner in Germany with mental health problems, who becomes a European émigré to the USA. Once there, he becomes so alienated by a foreign American culture that he succumbs to suicide.

The next morning Deborah Curtis found her husband's hanged body in the kitchen. There was a glass of whisky and a cigarette on the coffee table and Iggy Pop's *The Idiot* on the turntable.

Tony Wilson, the TV presenter and director of Factory Records – Joy Division's record company, described the final scene of the movie and the demise of his friend and artist:

"There's a dead man in the cable car and the chicken's still dancing."

And in the run-off grooves of Joy Division's final album 'Still' is scratched the legend:

"The chicken's still dancing."

***** THE END *****

© Kanthé 2017