

## Everyday experiences of the city in memories of the Belfast punk scene

**Abstract:** This article draws on interviews with a number of people who took part in the punk scene in Belfast during the Troubles. In doing so it argues that the scene can be understood, in part, as an engagement with sectarianised space and segregation in the north of Ireland. It argues that reading the narratives of former punks for the felt and affective geographies of segregated and sectarianised space helps to give us a clearer sense of everyday life for young people during the war.

**Keywords:** Belfast, punk, the Troubles, sectarianism, segregation.

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### Introduction

The acclaimed 2013 film *Good Vibrations*, a biopic of the Northern Irish music promoter and record shop owner Terri Hooley, is the best-known representation of the punk scene in the province.<sup>1</sup> Concentrating on the idea that punk generated friendships and solidarities between young Protestants and young Catholics in the context of the Troubles and of the segregation of those two ethno-sectarian groups, the film is occasionally a little vague on the specifics of the conflict that serves as its backdrop. But as Caroline Magennis has argued, this vagueness does nothing to obviate its status as 'one of the most notable expressions of Northern Irish joy on screen,' an effervescent expression of diffuse teenage pleasures.<sup>2</sup>

One historical specificity that the film's narrative does rely on is segregation, or the physical, material and psychic separation of people from Protestant and Catholic communities. It is in the context of this segregation that the behaviour of the young punks is striking and unusual. They generally do not voice any specific politics within the narrative, with the simple fact of their proximity judged to be sufficiently vocal. This significant proximity is dramatised in several scenes throughout the film. In one sequence, Terri takes two Belfast bands (Rudi and the Outcasts) and some other young punks on the road in a battered van to play a few rural gigs. On their way back to the city, the van is stopped by an army patrol. A brief moment of tension – guns pointed at the

misted front window, a gaggle of incongruous-looking punks stumbling onto the road – is quickly deflated by the soldiers' obvious amusement at this unlikely sight. 'Where are you all *from* in Belfast?', asks the English commanding officer. Each punk, lined up with the backs of their heads to the camera and facing the van, responds in turn: 'East', 'South', 'West', 'South', and so on. 'You're telling me some of these fuckers are Protestant and some of them are Catholic? Have you ever considered setting up a political party?', the soldier asks Hooley, smiling before letting the group continue on their way.

The scene is helpful both as an introduction to the complicated geography of Northern Ireland during the Troubles and to the punk scene's intervention in that geography. It highlights the way in which certain parts of the city were associated with one or the other community; it also shows one of the ways that space was managed and marked out during the war, by the militarised mechanisms of the state, the army and the police. Finally, in highlighting the unusual proximities generated by the punk scene it gestures towards one of the ways in which punk sometimes disrupted the management of space in 1970s and 1980s Belfast. This article draws on a series of oral history interviews with former punks to analyse their memories of navigating, traversing and living in the city during the Troubles. In doing so, it adds to our understanding of the specific experiences and vulnerabilities of young people during the war, and to our understanding of the affective and felt geographies of conflict more broadly.

Punk, as a music scene and youth culture, emerged in the mid 1970s as a distinctive musical form - one that, very broadly, placed less emphasis on melody, skill and virtuosic playing and more on immediacy and energy, a dynamic captured nicely in Tony Moon's famous drawing in the punk zine *Sideburn #1* showing crude diagrams of three guitar chords with 'now form a band' written beneath them.<sup>3</sup> It also developed a specific style and iconography, which Matt Worley describes as 'cut-up Union Jacks, "blackmail" lettering, ripped clothing [...] [which] appeared to embody the rhetoric of decline and social dislocation that pervaded the media and political discourse of the time'.<sup>4</sup> As well as engaging with the history of everyday life and everyday geographies in the north of Ireland during the Troubles, this article is also an addition to an emerging historiography on British punk which seeks to understand it as 'as a formative space that has shaped the engagement of many with the world'.<sup>5</sup>

The article begins with a brief historical account of the production of space in Belfast, particularly following the partition of the North from the rest of the island in 1921, and then after the outbreak of the Troubles in 1967.

### **Belfast as a 'divided city' – segregation and sectarianised space**

Segregation, or the physical and material division of Protestants and Catholics, was already a feature of mid nineteenth century Belfast.<sup>6</sup> This was driven in part by employment patterns, or by people living near to where they were employed – particularly as many Protestant employers were unwilling to hire Catholics. Another factor was the persistence of rural community ties within the city, as internal migrants from the surrounding countryside retained family connections and concomitant religious ones.<sup>7</sup> It was also enforced by violence, the fear of violence and the cultural memory of violence, with anti-Catholic riots taking place throughout the nineteenth century, sometimes alongside broader political currents such as unionist and Protestant reaction against the Home Rule bills of 1886 and 1893 seeking a degree of independence for Ireland from the British state.<sup>8</sup> Political rather than confessional differences, then, were central to ethno-sectarian identity in this period, with Protestants much more likely to support the continued union with Britain and Catholics much more likely to support Home Rule or more radical forms of separatist politics.<sup>9</sup>

In 1920, during the febrile build-up to the eventual partition of the island in 1921, around 20,000 Catholics, a quarter of the city's Catholic residents, were forcibly expelled from their homes. Catholic workers as well as some Protestant trade unionists were also expelled from the shipyards, one of the largest and most visible industrial sites in Belfast and a central space for the expression of unionist hegemony. Some 500 Catholic businesses were destroyed by rioters, and political violence continued well into 1922, long after the end of the Irish War of Independence in 1921. This difficult period, Jim McDermott suggests, 'divided Belfast even more permanently on religious grounds,' in many cases reinforcing patterns that had already emerged in the nineteenth century as described above.<sup>10</sup>

After partition, residential, workplace and leisure segregation continued to be a feature of Northern Irish life, abetted and reinforced by the political makeup of the new state, which was organised around the maintenance of Protestant and unionist hegemony,

particularly in terms of electoral politics. The Unionist party governed the partitioned territory from 1921 until the collapse of the government and the imposition of direct rule from Britain in 1972.

The outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 both reinforced and reshaped dynamics of segregation and sectarianism. In Belfast, some 60,000 people or 12 per cent of the city's population were displaced from their homes between 1969 and 1973, either because of direct intimidation and violence or in anticipation of it; the vast majority of those displaced were Catholics living in majority-Protestant areas, with some Protestants living in majority-Catholic areas also forced to leave.<sup>11</sup> Displacement and forced movement in this period had profound legacies for the families affected, as Niall Gilmartin has recently argued; it also had major social and geographical consequences for the city, with segregation of working-class neighbourhoods continuing along the lines laid out in the nineteenth century and more and more areas becoming exclusively Protestant or Catholic.<sup>12</sup>

Segregation was also produced and maintained through urban redevelopment. Drawing on declassified planning documents, Tim Cunningham has argued that 'defensive planning' and the maintenance of division between Protestant and Catholic areas of the city was driven by state security agendas.<sup>13</sup> This influence was diffuse and wideranging. The eventual route taken by the Belfast Urban Motorway, for instance, which forcibly divides the west and north of the city from the centre, operated as what the military liaison group involved in its planning called a *cordon sanitaire*. Defensive planning was also evident in the centre of the city, where following a 1972 Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) bombing known as 'Bloody Friday' nine people died and 130 were injured by 22 bombs detonated across Belfast. This attack provided the impetus for state attempts to make the capital 'a laboratory for radical experiments on the fortification of urban space'.<sup>14</sup> A 'ring of steel' was developed, isolating the commercial centre of Belfast from the areas adjoining it via walls, gates, chicanes and guards, with shoppers and walkers searched by the police as they passed through this security network.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, violence from state and non-state actors was critical in the production of urban space. Loyalist and republican paramilitary groups became increasingly influential in the 1970s in the wake of heavy-handed British counterinsurgency tactics, and along with intimidation and surveillance from state forces, these organisations generated and

maintained forms of spatial division throughout Belfast through ‘informal’ policing tactics like shootings, ‘punishment’ beatings and other forms of violence.<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of this article’s account of the punk scene, there are three things to bear in mind about this quickly-sketched history of segregation and violence in Belfast. Firstly, that segregation shaped the city in manifold and complicated ways, although its effect were unevenly distributed across the city and especially evident in working-class areas; secondly, that the securitisation and policing of the city had further consequences in terms of how this geography affected the everyday lives of young people living there; and thirdly, that various forms of state and non-state violence were critical in the production of space in Belfast, from the nineteenth century through to the period of the 1970s and 1980s that this article covers.

### **Punk as a spatial intervention**

How does punk, as a scene and as a youth culture, relate to these issues of space and place? While its most celebrated bands are often associated with metropolitan settings – particularly with London and New York – many regional iterations, with their own dynamics and variations, had emerged by the mid-1970s.<sup>17</sup> In Northern Ireland, bars like the Trident in Bangor and the Viking in Belfast were attracting a punky crowd by 1976, and by 1977 bands such as Rudi and the Undertones were already playing gigs. Terri Hooley opened the Good Vibrations record store in the middle of 1977, and this became an important site for the nascent scene as well as eventually a record label that published music by a host of local bands. Early in 1978 venues like the Harp Bar and the Pound started booking punk bands to play, as did Queen’s University Belfast’s student union, then known as the McMordie Hall.<sup>18</sup> By the late 1970s, as happened elsewhere, punk started to fragment and break down; the anarchopunk scene in Belfast, organised in part around Giro’s and the Warzone Collective as a gig venue and social centre, is one of the parts of that fragmentation discussed here.

I conducted a series of interviews with former punks from 2015 to 2018, eventually leading to a book on punk in Northern Ireland published in 2022.<sup>19</sup> I was interested in what it was like to grow up in the North during the Troubles and how punk related to this, particularly in terms of sectarianism and segregation but also in terms of other structures such as class and gender. I was also interested in the affective and subjective

legacies of punk, or in other words, how interviewees felt that their (often fairly brief) engagements in the scene had influenced their lives afterwards and continued to do so in the present, particularly in the context of 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Although these initial questions did not explicitly deal with the space or with urban geography, I was quickly struck by how many of the conversations I had about punk involved talking about space, place and movement. In talking about what it had been like to be a young person taking part in a music scene, we also discussed memories of traversing the city, the occasional difficulties and anxieties involved in travelling from residential areas to the city centre, visiting specific shops and pubs strongly associated with the punk scene, and in general the danger and the excitement of a specific kind of adolescent mobility. The remainder of the article will draw on some of these memories to analyse their narratives of these spatial interventions.

To do so, I focus on interviewees' encounters with the spatial and material infrastructure of the punk scene - record shops, gig venues, and so on - and on how these infrastructures intersected and clashed with the persistent geography of the Troubles.<sup>20</sup> As the briefly-sketched historical context above suggests, intersections like these were inevitable given the profound consequences of the war on urban space and on everyday life. Thinking about the messy, complicated relations that the collisions between punk spaces and the war make visible, and about the way in which punks remember those collisions, can tell us something about the production of space in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s and how this production was influenced by the Troubles.

### **Encountering the infrastructure of punk**

One of the main drivers of punk, as with many youth cultures through history, was that it gave young people a means and a justification to temporarily escape the domestic sphere.<sup>21</sup> In the context of Northern Ireland this does not just mean the home but also the tightly-defined boundaries of certain neighbourhoods or even certain streets. Petesy Burns, for instance, who grew up in the majority-Catholic New Lodge area of north Belfast, narrated his initial encounters with punk as a way of moving outside of the 'self-contained' nature of life there in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Having found out about the Sex Pistols' 1977 single 'God Save the Queen' (not by hearing the actual music, but by reading in the paper that it would not be broadcasted on the radio because of its supposedly shocking content), Petesy decided to find out more about this excitingly-censored material.

And there was a record shop near to Carlyle Circus – about five minutes from where I lived – I was skint then anyhow, so I just went in by chance and there it was – the single, ‘God Save the Queen’, you know. Yeah, so, and that was it. And then from there I think just the more you got involved and the more bands you went to see – much there was a lot of record shops in the town centre so the likes of Caroline Music and then [I] eventually discovered Good Vibrations and places like that, there was quite a few independent record shops in the mid to late seventies in Belfast.<sup>23</sup>

Other interviewees also remembered the experience of going to record shops, and particularly Good Vibrations, as a critical point in their engagement with the scene and an opportunity to meet like-minded people. Good Vibrations, set up by Terri Hooley in the middle of 1977 in a formerly derelict building on Great Victoria Street, was initially part of a cooperative endeavour incorporating an anarchist-minded print shop, Just Books, organised by David Hyndman and a vegan healthfood shop called Sassafras. In his memoir, Terri, who was a little older than most of the punks and had been involved in the city’s 1960s counter-culture, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and other forms of hippy-inflected activism, remembered the building as it was then, ‘sandwiched between an antique shop with a big old cannon sitting outside on the pavement, and a shop which sold Lambeg drums’.<sup>24</sup> This is a compelling piece of staging on his part, synecdochalising the backwards-looking militarism and conservatism of the post-partition North through the cannon and the Lambeg drum, a large instrument associated with Orange and loyalist parades.<sup>25</sup> In terms of framing punk as an intervention in the spatial politics of Belfast, his memory of these older shops highlights the disruptive or unsettling role of the scene’s attempts to create different kinds of spaces within the wider geography of Unionist hegemony and sectarianisation. This sense of the emergent infrastructure of punk as disruptive was also expressed across my interviews with former participants.

Damien McCorry, for instance, told me:

Belfast was a very different place. The city centre was really dodgy at night. Nobody out, you know, and the punks kind of we had our own places where we went to play music but also to hang out. There was a place called Just Books, in Wine Tavern Street [...] and that was a real kind of – that was where we hung out instead of going to school (laughter). You know, basically, and I kid you not. That was the hangout of

choice when I should have been studying physics, chemistry or biology. It was great, it was run by anarchists.<sup>26</sup>

Like Petesy, Damien emphasises the insularity of the city, particularly the city centre at nighttime. The joke about hanging out at Just Books rather than studying is striking in foregrounding the pedagogic or worldmaking function of this kind of infrastructure, its capacity to open up people to different ways of living in the city. This pedagogic dimension was also apparent in Graeme Mullan's vivid description of visiting Good Vibrations as a teenager:

You go into Good Vibes and they had the singles, the punk singles up and imports [...] [you] started going in there because of second-hand records and you were seeing, excuse me, seeing the people, and then Big Time was out, and it was playing in the shop, what the fuck's that you know, Rudi, oh my god that's, ahh, brilliant, you know. And then you were starting to get into the local scene, the Outcasts – the Outcasts went to Methody as well although they were a couple of years above me. But I didn't know that at the time when I was there. You know you were just sort of learning these things as you went along.<sup>27</sup>

There is a nice sense here of the atmosphere of spaces like Good Vibrations and the unusual encounters and possibilities they made possible, and Graeme's remembered excitement comes through strongly in his description of hearing the local band Rudi's classic single Big Time for the first time.<sup>28</sup> His use of the second person – 'you go into Good Vibes [...]' – also foregrounds the felt and experiential aspects of being in these kinds of spaces, as an attempt to translate across time and generation some of that affect to me as a listener in the present. Getting involved in the local scene, or 'learning these things as you went along', in his phrase, through meeting people, buying and listening to records, becoming aware of Belfast bands and so on, was collectively facilitated through the punk infrastructure of Belfast.

The record shop Good Vibrations, partly because of Terri Hooley's relative visibility as a facilitator of the scene and partly because the film of the same name, mentioned above, has become a particularly prominent expression of the popular memory of punk in Belfast.<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, some of my interviewees were keen to puncture the myth somewhat and highlight less positive aspects of visiting the shop. John Callaghan said: 'At



that time, for all the image of big jovial Terri Hooley, he was a grumpy bastard ... he'd sieze half a dozen of youse, right you three out, you three out, you right at the back, keep going ... it was an ordeal sometimes!' <sup>30</sup> Claire Shannon expressed similar sentiments, telling me: 'There was Good Vibes the record shop where you could get the sort of music you wanted to listen to in but ... um ... it wasn't always the most pleasant experience (laughter)!' <sup>31</sup> Their gentle revisions to the more roseate image of friendliness and collectivity expressed by the other interviews are helpful in emphasising the messiness of scenes and spaces and the tendency of memory cultures to flatten out some of this messiness, particularly through their focus on individual narratives (like that of Terri Hooley) at the expense of collective ones.

But in general, interviewees stressed community-driven possibilities and connections. The historian David Wilkinson, in his work on post-punk in Manchester, argues that the 'prefigurative building of alternative institutions built on principles of shared ownership and democratic control [...] co-ops, left trades councils, women's and community centres, independent printing presses, radical bookshops' was fundamental to the development of the scene there, and to left-wing and radical politics more broadly in the 1970s and 1980s; record shops like Good Vibrations, Caroline Music and Rocky Mongo's and social spaces like Just Books had a similar centrality to the early years of the punk scene in Belfast, as would social centres like the A Centre and Giro's through into the 1980s. <sup>32</sup>

### **Concerts, venues, movement and violence**

Concerts and concert venues also became important sites for young punks in this period, as places to see bands, of course, but also as places to congregate and mingle. Interviewees remembered particularly exciting gigs – the Ramones' two concerts at the Ulster Hall were mentioned fondly by several people, for instance, as was the 1980 Punk and New Wave Festival at the Ulster Hall – but they also described more interstitial experiences alongside stories about bands and music. Travelling to and from gigs, and congregating with friends and other gig-goers before and afterwards, could be both exhilarating and frightening, allowing young people to explore the city in new ways but also potentially exposing them to violence and danger.

Two stories from Graeme Mullan expressed this dual dynamic of possibility and threat. First of all, he described attending the Harp Bar on Saturday afternoons.

Although later on when you were going to the Harp Bar, that was a wee bit – and again I felt underage going to that – [I've] since found out that there was people way younger than me - I remember going round and thinking, because there was, you could join the club, the punk club, but you had to get signed and stuff and I was going 'I'm underage, I can't do that in a bar'. Little did I know, Terri didn't care, the rest of the people didn't care. But we used to go down sometimes on a Saturday afternoon when they had a punk disco. I never saw any of the strippers but apparently they were down the stairs. And you'd go up these stairs into this dark room, you just saw there was faces that you knew about but you didn't know to talk to them, you know? But you never felt intimidated or anything because you were all there for the music. And again the whole thing about the Protestant-Catholic thing and punk breaking all that down, and music being the first interest.<sup>33</sup>

As with Graeme's memories of the Harp Bar, his account here is a striking description of what we might call an atmosphere, a term that has been expansively theorised by cultural geographers in the last decade or so.<sup>34</sup> Lindsey Dodd, in her work on the assemblage as a way of thinking about the 'open-ended messiness' of oral histories and oral history interviews, describes assemblages as the 'product of multiple relationships of diverse bodies – people, memories, places, objects, discourses, institutions – held in tension by affective forces'.<sup>35</sup> Atmospheres, like assemblages, are the jumbled product of multiple relations. What makes the concept particularly useful in relation to Graeme's narrative is its spatiality, its tendency to manifest in and through spaces and places.

The atmosphere that Graeme evokes here is one in which he can, despite his anxieties about being too young, step into a 'dark room' full of faces he knew but wasn't friendly with, without being intimidated. On the one hand he is describing a conventional narrative of adolescent adventure and sociality, in which he overcomes his worries to enter into an exciting space of possibility; on the other hand, the specific spatial and historical parameters of the North are a major part of what produces the atmosphere of the Harp Bar, as Graeme attests to at the end of the quote. His syntax and tone is interesting in this section, as he says: 'And again the whole thing about the Protestant-Catholic thing and punk breaking all that down, and music being the first interest.' This reads to me as slightly equivocal, with punk 'breaking down' the problems of sectarianised space and of segregation between Protestants and Catholics without totally

obviating the continued freight of religious identification; music might be the 'first interest' but that doesn't erase the ongoing presence of what Graeme neatly summarises as 'the Protestant-Catholic thing'.

This impression was developed further as his description of the bar continued.

GM: When you're getting introduced to people you sort of, again, Sean O'Neill ... [widens eyes] ... you would know what they were sort of thing. That was just part of it but it didn't matter. And then those ... [deep breath] ... I don't know whether punk really opened up the city centre as such but it certainly might have been a wee trickle in the dam. Cracked it open you know.<sup>36</sup>

Frank Burton, in his mid-1970s anthropological study of the Ardoyne area of Belfast, gives He says that 'telling', or figuring out whether an interlocutor is Protestant or Catholic based on verbal and non-verbal cues, 'furnishes an insight into the nature and depth of a riven society by illuminating the centrality of difference'.<sup>37</sup> What Graeme is alluding to here in the non-verbal moment which I transcribed as him widening his eyes is the persistence of this telling process even in the suspended, liberating atmosphere of the Harp – 'that was just part of it but it didn't matter', he says. This interestingly conflictual phrase and the fact that Graeme alludes to the 'telling' process without putting words onto it is suggestive of the partial nature of the punk scene's capacity to intervene in the geography of Belfast. What he is describing is not a utopian non-sectarian oasis but rather ephemeral and contested spaces that can hold some aspects of the Troubles at bay while remaining fundamentally enmeshed within them.

The continued presence of the war within and around the spaces of the scene was especially explicit in another story Graeme told me, almost immediately after this previous conversation. He described going to the Ulster Hall to see Siouxsie and the Banshees along with the local band the Outcasts, in a gig that started unusually late because of a problem with the English band's equipment.

By this stage it was now one o'clock at night [...] so I was left one o'clock at night in Belfast walking up Bedford Street towards Shaftesbury Square on to the Lisburn Road, and I had parked my wee moped at [my friend's] house – he lived up just past the city hospital – so I was walking up to there to pick up my bike to head on home, and these two guys were walking down the side of the street. And I mean there's

nobody else about, no cars, streets are quiet and you're sort of – you're wary. And I started speeding up a wee bit and they started crossing the road. So I sped up a wee bit more and they curved to meet me. So I said when they hit the white lines in the middle of the road, I'm taking off. And I ran and they tried to catch me, I just ran and ran and ran, I ran right the way up on to the Lisburn Road up past the Samaritans there, and stopped and looked around, there was nobody about and I was going thank god, absolutely wrecked you know, lactic acid building up, couldn't get a breath, walking along and the next thing I hear this dum-dum-dum-dum [indicating footsteps], looked round and they're running after me again [performatively deep breath to suggest how shocked he was, or perhaps how winded he was] and I had to take off again, I just, you know, and again it was just that fear – flight or fight and it was flight for me! I ran and they chased me all the way up to my mate's house, I got into the door and luckily his mum had left the door on the latch. So I turned round and closed it, went round the back, got onto my moped and wheeled it out, and they were waiting for me. So I just started up and tore out, then by the time I got home of course, I nearly wished they had of caught me cos my ma went through me for a shortcut.<sup>38</sup>

Coming on the heels of his story about the Harp, this was a highly dramatised and vividly performed anecdote. I use anecdote here in the sense of the oral historian Daniel James, who argues that they 'represent the relationship of the individual to dominant social models and attitudes [and] express in a synthesised form, on a local scale, the transgression or acceptance of hegemonic values'.<sup>39</sup> In the context of the geography of Troubles-era Belfast, this anecdote from Graeme works to reinforce the point that the spaces of the punk scene were contingent and partial. He emphasised this by suggesting that he later heard that a paramilitary gang called 'the Friendly Society' were known to threaten and beat up punks around the city; I have not been able to find any other reference to this, although other interviewees did suggest that occasionally being dressed in a punk-y way could expose you to forms of street violence, but the evocation of this kind of threat by Graeme seems to indicate something of the vulnerability that went along with the sense of freedom and possibility that punk could generate within the cityscape.

In a conversation we had a few years after our interview, when Graeme had seen a piece of writing based on our discussion in which I also quote this story, he revealed that a

subsequent conversation with the friend mentioned in the story (whose house he'd left his moped at) had changed his sense of the night's events. Apparently, his friend had in fact left the gig at the same time as him and they had both been chased along the Lisburn Road, rather than Graeme being the only one early and being chased alone.<sup>40</sup> This seems to me like a striking piece of 'meaningful misremembering,' in which the original version of the story works to highlight the feeling of fear and danger Graeme wanted to express, underlining his complicated sense of punk as both making certain kinds of new spatial expression possible while also generating certain kinds of risk in the existing spaces of Belfast.

Other interviewees described similar dynamics involving the security forces rather than the (potentially) paramilitary actors who frightened Graeme on his way back from the concert. Hector Heathwood talked about being stopped at 'p-checks' or police checks going in and out of the city, and how standing out in terms of how you were dressed made you more likely to be searched or hassled; he also noted that 'they always asked primary school 'cos that's how they could get your religion – so as long as your primary school started with 'Saint' anybody, you were down for a long wait'.<sup>41</sup> John Callaghan, who was unusual among the cohort of interviewees for being in his early teens during his involvement with the punk scene, told a story about hanging around after a gig, 'lovely summer's evening, about ten o'clock at night, about eight, nine, ten young punks, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen [years old] just wondering around the town like we owned the place'.<sup>42</sup>

Unbelievable swagger, and we just turned this corner, and there was two coppers coming out on patrol, you know, just wandering around ... "SS RUC! SS RUC!" ... without prejudice, just an automatic reaction ... and suddenly one of these guys we were with goes, fuck, that's my uncle! ... (laughter) and the copper goes, come here you wee bollix, drags him out and gives him a right talking to in the middle of the road, and myself and the other kids and the other copper we just pissed ourselves laughing – it was good clean innocent fun!<sup>43</sup>

Not all encounters with the police ended with such good humour, as the SS RUC chant that John alludes to might suggest.<sup>44</sup> And jokes like this in 'post-conflict' settings are complicated gambits, in that they can be ways to express difficult histories in what Lucy Newby would call 'hearable' ways, or ways that do not overturn the emotional atmosphere of the interview or transgress the public memory culture in which the

interview is being conducted.<sup>45</sup> There are layers to the story, here – it is funny partly because the teenage bravado of the youngsters is immediately punctured by the unexpected family connection with the policeman, partly because John (from a working-class Catholic background) would not have had many friends with uncles in the RUC, and finally it is also funny because it steps around the shadow of worse possibilities.<sup>46</sup> It also recalls the stop-and-search scene from *Good Vibrations* that opened the article, suggesting the potency of the image of cross-sectarian friendship in the cultural memory of the scene.

### **Punk spaces in the 1980s: Giros, the Warzone Collective and Jules**

Interviewees also discussed the ongoing development of punk infrastructure in the city well into the 1980s, in spite of the increasing fragmentation of the scene and of Thatcherite initiatives to ‘regenerate’ Belfast city centre. Petesy Burns, who as well as being a fan of the punk scene played in notable anarcho-punk band Stalag 17, was involved along with various comrades in setting up a group called the Warzone Collective who booked bands to play in Belfast and organised other events. After touring in Europe with another politically-minded Northern Irish band, Toxic Waste, the group decided to try and organise their own social centre, rehearsal space and venue, called ‘Giro’s’ after the popular name for unemployment benefit. Petesy said:

This is eighty-six, so I was twenty-four. We’d nothing but time on our hands. So we went in and just completely refurbished this place, got the ground floor ready and turned it into a practice room. And within a few months we had like two practice slots a day, four at weekends or six at weekends something like that, they were booked out solid within a couple of months with just bands generally coming to the place. And then the café opened, we had a screen printing workshop and stuff like that. And that happened within, we were in it about a year, less than a year before the café opened, and the café then was it. As soon as the café opened the place was established. People were coming – and not just punks – people were just coming to see what was going on.<sup>47</sup>

In the moment of the interview Petesy’s remembered pride – ‘we had nothing but time on our hands’ – at the resourcefulness and drive of his younger self and his friends was obvious here. This represents a slightly different form of spatial intervention than the

gigs and pubs described above, in that it entailed a more permanent attempt to create a shared space in the city, and indeed one that did not just implicate punks but attracted a wider range of people, as Petesy points out. However, there was a melancholic sense in the rest of his account that the increasingly corporate and gentrified landscape of contemporary Belfast meant a space like this would no longer be possible: 'We were all on the dole then and even towards the end of the Giros that I was involved with it was becoming really difficult for people to volunteer, to find the time to volunteer, because they were just being pressured into schemes and into you know, so I mean, it may not be sustainable to have the model we had,' he explained.<sup>48</sup>

Another interviewee, Claire Shannon, talked about an underground nightclub called Jules which probably fitted more into the category of post-punk, playing goth and industrial music as well as hosting occasional concerts. Her account recalls Graeme's description of the Harp Bar, in some ways, although the setting is notably different.

I remember the first night I went there. Was a ... I was you had to get up a lot of stairs so I got to the sort of top landing just before you went into the club and there was a little serving hatch or something and this guy just sorta crawled out of it in front of me, he was very gay, and he had a ribcage on ... and I think that was quite normal for the first time I went there, I was seventeen, and I was shocked but like pleasantly, I just thought this is mad, it's fantastic, you know, so I think it was my favourite venue but as I say it was a bit of a carry-on getting into it.<sup>49</sup>

Claire's sense of being 'shocked but like pleasantly' recalls Graeme's account of a step into the gloom of the Harp Bar being made easier by his awareness of a shared interest in punk music. But the mention of sexuality is notable here as a reminder that (in the very socially-conservative context of the North, where Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party had organised a 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign in response to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1977,) the punk scene also created moments of contingency and contact across the lines of sexual difference. This slightly different kind of spatial disruption was also apparent in Claire's continued description of the layout of Jules.<sup>50</sup> She talked about waiting in a long queue outside the door and having to sign in as a member.

And then there was a sorta off the dance floor there was a long corridor and the toilets - the toilets were quite exciting on their own. It wasn't ... well for me you

know being that young it was sort of male and female mixed, they didn't care which one you went into [makes a face and brief puff of breath, both I think intended to indicate the oddity of non-gendered bathrooms in 1980s Belfast] so I went into one of them one of the first time I was there and saw there were things along the wall that I thought were drinking fountains [laughter]. So I sorta went over to one of them thinking how does this work and then I saw some guy beside me and thought, oh, that's what that is [laughter].<sup>51</sup>

Again, this is a joke or a funny anecdote containing and expressing a history, although in Claire's case what it highlights is not sectarian division but the ongoing legacies of social conservatism in the North. Constructions of gender in the north of Ireland have been fundamentally shaped both by the consequences of war and by the pervasive influence of both Protestant and Catholic churches; in the context of a setting where 'the moral conservatism of the respective churches was mirrored in civil society and political ideology,' as Karen Lysaght and Rob Kitchin have argued, the punk scene can be understood as disrupting the gendering of spaces as well as their sectarianisation, a disruption that Claire captures nicely in her narrative about the enjoyable oddity of encountering a unisex bathroom in 1980s Belfast.<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Oral history, as Jenny Harding and John Gabriel have argued, can be used to 'demonstrate some of the complexities of attachment to place and dynamics between memory, place and emotion'.<sup>53</sup> This relationship seems to have a specific valence in the context of Northern Ireland after the Troubles, where segregation continues to be a potent factor in geography, education and leisure even in the context of a power-sharing political executive. Existing work by Lucy Newby, Anna Bryson, Sean O'Connell and various community groups and organisations has already shown the value of oral history work in thinking not just about the material histories of segregation but of the felt and affective geographies of segregated and sectarianised space.<sup>54</sup> Drawing on a series of interviews with former punks, this article has shown how a small group of people remembered their youthful attempts to transgress, move across and exist within some of the urban spaces of the Troubles, and the complex atmospheres of pleasure and fear these movements generated.



Beyond this specific history, I would suggest that engaging with oral history interviews like these can be helpful in thinking about the history and the past of 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. As Olwen Purdue argues in her illuminating analysis of public history work in the context of the Troubles 'deeper, more nuanced exploration of social issues and human cost' are emerging as a way of expanding the scope of memory politics and representations of the past in the North. Students studying public history at the new Centre for Public History at Queen's University Belfast are asked to consider, Purdue says: 'Is there a middle ground between a bland, neutral, largely ineffective representation of the Troubles, or else the very partisan, community-run representations of a single narrative?'<sup>55</sup>

One answer to this difficult question, which will continue to reverberate in work on the recent past in Northern Ireland, lies in reading oral history interviews for their internal tensions and oscillations, their polyvocality and their evocation of atmosphere, affects and moods. The interviews considered here do not present the punk scene as a magically non or un-sectarian space that could resolve the problems of wider society, or exist outside of them. They are marked by remembered fear and violence (as in Graeme's story about being chased after a gig) as well as by remembered solidarity and connection, and they are conscious of other social dynamics than that of sectarianism (as in Claire's story about Jules nightclub's surprising toilets). They offer a nuanced and messy sense of the punk, of youthful sociality and of everyday life in the North, and attending to this kind of messiness might help to resolve the dichotomy Purdue identifies between bland and ineffective narratives of the Troubles and partisan, mono-dimensional ones. In narrating the effects of the Troubles on their lives without reducing the specificities of those lives to a backdrop for the Troubles, the interviewees engaged with throughout the article point towards the possibility of social history work on Northern Ireland that works between those two poles.

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glen Leyburn, *Good Vibrations* (London: Universal Pictures UK, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Magennis, "'Bubbles of joy': Moments of Pleasure in Recent Northern Irish Culture', *Etudes irlandaises*, 42:1, 2017, p 165.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Worley, 'Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1976–84: "While the world was dying, did you wonder why?"', *History Workshop Journal* 79:1, 2015, pp76-106.

- <sup>4</sup> Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> David Wilkinson, Matthew Worley and John Street, "I wanna see some history": recent writing on British punk', *Contemporary European History* (26:2), 2017, p 411.
- <sup>6</sup> AC Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast, 1850-1950*, Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> Hepburn, 1996, p 123.
- <sup>8</sup> Sean Farrell, *Rituals and Riots: Sectarian Violence and Political Culture in Ulster, 1784-1886*, Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2014, p 244.
- <sup>9</sup> Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History, 1800-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> Jim McDermott, *Northern Divisions: The Old IRA and the Belfast Pogroms 1920-22*, Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2001, p 3.
- <sup>11</sup> John Darby, *Intimidation and the Control of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986.
- <sup>12</sup> Niall Gilmartin, "Ending the Silence': Addressing the Legacy of Displacement in Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'", *International Journal of Transitional Justice* (15:1), 2021.
- <sup>13</sup> Tim Cunningham, 'Changing Direction: Defensive Planning in a Post-Conflict City', *City* 18:4-5, 2014, p 459.
- <sup>14</sup> Jon Coaffee, *Terrorism, Risk and the Global City: Towards Urban Resilience*, London: Routledge, 2006, p 23.
- <sup>15</sup> Stephen Brown, 'Central Belfast's Security Segment: An Urban Phenomenon', *Area* 17:1, 1985.
- <sup>16</sup> Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- <sup>17</sup> Matthew Worley, "I Don't Care about London": Punk in Britain's Provinces, circa 1976-1984', in George McKay and Gina Arnold (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock*.
- <sup>18</sup> Ziggy, 'The Story So Far', *Alternative Ulster* (34) Belfast: Just Books, 1977, p 24
- <sup>19</sup> Fearghus Roulston, *Belfast punk and the Troubles: An oral history*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. I conducted 12 interviews in total, with a roughly even split between Protestants and Catholics but more men than women. With a handful of exceptions, all interviewees still lived in Northern Ireland at the time of the interview and that is where the interviews were conducted, either at their homes or at various places around the city.
- <sup>20</sup> Lauren Berlant, 'The commons: Infrastructure for troubling times', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34:3, 2016, pp393-419.
- <sup>21</sup> Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*, New York: Viking Press, 2007.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview with Petesy Burns, recorded by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Petesy Burns, 2016.
- <sup>24</sup> Terri Hooley and Richard Sullivan, *Hooleygan: Music, Mayhem, Good Vibrations*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2010, pp 52-53.
- <sup>25</sup> Synecdochising, or mobilising synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa) is a common discursive construction, often used when trying to describe or make sense of something as amorphous and omnipresent as an atmosphere or a culture. See for instance Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular', *Postcolonial Studies* 8:4 (2005), pp 475-486.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Damien McCorry, recorded by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Graeme Mullan, recorded by Fearghus Roulston, 2015.
- <sup>28</sup> Sean O'Neill and Guy Trelford (eds.), *It Makes You Want to Spit: The Definitive Guide to Punk in Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Reekus Music, 2003.
- <sup>29</sup> Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glen Leyburn, *Good Vibrations*, 2012.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with John Callaghan, conducted by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with Claire Shannon, conducted by Fearghus Roulston, 2017.
- <sup>32</sup> David Wilkinson, *Post-Punk, Politics and Pleasure in Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p37.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Graeme Mullan, 2015.
- <sup>34</sup> Ben Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society* 2:2 (2009), pp77-81.
- <sup>35</sup> Lindsey Dodd, 'The disappearing child: observations on oral history, archives and affects', *Oral History* 49:2, 2021, p46.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Graeme Mullan, 2015.
- <sup>37</sup> Frank Burton, *The Politics of Legitimacy: Struggles in a Belfast Community* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p 37.

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Graeme Mullan, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, p 178.

<sup>40</sup> Email communication between Graeme Mullan and Fearghus Roulston, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Hector Heathwood, conducted by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with John Callaghan, conducted by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with John Callaghan, conducted by Fearghus Roulston, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> The formulation 'SS RUC' – connecting the Northern Irish police force with the Schutzstaffel or SS, a paramilitary organization notorious as enforcers of the German National Socialist regime – was used in both republican and loyalist discourses critical of the role of the RUC. See, for instance, Pritchard, Tim, 'The RUC are not so bad', *The Guardian*, 31/5/200, accessed online here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/may/31/northernireland.comment1>, 15/8/22. Kristin Ross points out that the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*, or CRS, France's reserve police force, were subjected to chants of 'SS CRS' by students and workers during 1968. Ross, Kristin, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p 107.

<sup>45</sup> Lucy Newby, 'Troubled Generations? (De)Constructing Narratives of Youth Experience in the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Journal of War & Cultural Studies* 14:1, 2021, pp 6–24.

<sup>46</sup> Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla, 'Laughter in Oral Histories of Displacement: "One Goes on a Mission to Solve Their Problems"', *Oral History Review* 47:1, 2020, pp 73–92.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Petesy Burns, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Petesy Burns, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Claire Shannon, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Sean Brady, "'Save Ulster from Sodomy!' Homosexuality in Northern Ireland after 1967', *Cultural and Social History*, forthcoming.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Claire Shannon, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Rob Kitchin and Karen Lysaght, 'Sexual citizenship in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 11:1 (2004), pp 83-103.

<sup>53</sup> John Gabriel and Jenny Harding, 'Re-Imagining Islington', *Oral History* 48:2 (2020), p 55.

<sup>54</sup> Lucy Newby, 'Troubles Generations', 2021; Anna Bryson, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing': Researching Memory and Identity in Mid-Ulster, 1945-1969', *Oral History* 35:2 (2007); for an example of interesting community oral history work engaging with the problematic of segregation see *Reflected Lives: Intergenerational Oral Histories of Belfast's Peace Wall Communities* (Belfast: Belfast Interface Project, 2018).