

We Gotta Get Out Of This Place: revisiting meanings in the rise of rhythm'n'blues in Christchurch 1964 - 1966

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Research into the Christchurch has been brought into sharp relief since the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. The quakes have taken away venues and buildings that housed a valuable history. As someone who has recently returned to Christchurch and who performed in the city in the '60s it is strange indeed to go back to place where there is nowhere to put your memories. It is poignant to see empty lots where once there were pubs, concert halls and clubs which were the backdrop to a colourful scene.

This paper is a look at cultural stratification in the city of Christchurch. In particular my focus is the moment in the post 60s, post Bill Hayley, when the city's hierarchical system of taste control was challenged by popular music. I will look at the conservative nature of the music culture of the city in the 1960s: geographically isolated from the global generators of popular culture; an entrenched music culture including the classical music community, a jazz scene and, in the rural hinterland, a big following for country and western music. I will examine these 3 dominant musical cultures and describe the emergence of an oppositional music subculture. How marginalised Christchurch youth, their ears pressed firmly to their crystal radio sets, were drawn to R'n'B - to The Animals, The Pretty Things and The Rolling Stones - driven by a craving for the exotic; by what Simon Frith calls an "urge to authenticity" . A town full of teenagers who believed that "everything real was happening somewhere else" (Frith, 1998:61).

Introduction

There is a current wave of nostalgia about the Beatles visit to New Zealand in 1964. (The Beatles played 2 shows at the Majestic Theatre and stayed at the Clarondon Hotel – both demolished since the quakes). I feel that in the story of Christchurch music the Beatles' story has been over valorised – I am a big fan of Elijah Wald's excellent but blasphemous book "How The Beatles Destroyed Rock and Roll". Wald suggests the Beatles are an aberration in the evolution of popular music interrupting the flow from swing bands to rock'n'roll and R'n'B. He's arguing as a champion of American popular music. And as a fan of Americana I absolutely agree with him.

However, to give them their due – The Beatles delivered a taste of subversion to the waiting youth of Christchurch. Their 22 minute set list for both shows included Chuck Berry's *Roll Over Beethoven*, Little Richard's *Long Tall Sally* and The Top Notes *Twist and Shout*. The review in *The Press* next day described them sounding like a “jet engine” - whinging that “at least jet engines mercifully stop”. Ironic since the sound of American jet engines was to be a key part of the Christchurch story in the 60s.

Immediately after the end of World War 2 and before the Beatles there was a thriving Christchurch music scene. As well as having a strong classical music community the city was well endowed with swing bands, big bands and combos playing across the city - a history well captured by Chris Bourke and others. Lyn Freeman's current RNZ documentary on the history of New Zealand Theatre describes a 1950's Christchurch which boasted the largest Australasian membership of Repertory Theatre. University theatre was healthy and experimental, under the watch of Ngaio Marsh. Couple this with the large audience for serious and light classical and the thriving gig scene The Beatles rolled a glitter grenade into a local, rich live performance culture in '64.

Undoubtedly one of the characters in this story is radio. There is no denying the 1960s popularity of the 3ZB Lever Hit parade which played pure pop hits from artists like Doris Day, Billy J Kramer the Searchers and The Ronnettes. A typical mid 1960s Sunday request session on 3YA might include Mantovani's *Elizabethan Serenade*, Percy Faith's version of *Theme from A Summer Place* the Inkspots singing *Whispering Grass*, Connie Francis singing *Every Body's Somebody's Fool* and would perhaps also include novelty songs like Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren's *Goodness Gracious Me*. It would also include Australasian folk songs like Slim Dusty's *The Pub With No Beer* or one of Ken Avery's songs like *The Dog Dosing Strip at Dunsandel* (which he recorded with The Night Caps) or perhaps *Tea at TeKuiti*. (Significantly for Cantabrians Ken Avery wrote under the name Ash Burton). These last two songs by Avery are often referred to as Kiwi folk songs. But the pianist on the *The Dosing Strip at Dunsandel* I think you will agree, sounds jazzy. Probably a jazz player employed to play on a this pop formatted song.

Add to this list some show tunes - from *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific* and *Sound of Music* and you can see that Christchurch youth were suffocating under wool-bales of light opera, novelty songs, schmaltzy pop and ersatz country music. It was inevitable that the arrival of the shock troops of RnB - likes of The Pretty Things and The Rolling Stones - would be greeted with great enthusiasm by local teenagers. The Pretty Things were thrown off an NAC flight after Viv Prince lit a crayfish on fire and Keith Richard's observation that Invercargill was the “arsehole of the world” reinforced for local youth that everything cool was happening on the other side of the planet.

When Eric Burdon screamed we *Gotta Get Outta This Place* across the airwaves in 1965 Christchurch teens punched the air – they knew exactly what he was talking about.

I was a young musician in Christchurch during the 1960s playing violin with the Christchurch Youth Orchestra. In 1966 I remember hearing The Animals' remake of

Screamin Jay Hawkins *I Put A Spell On You*. It was a game changer. Overnight I jettisoned a classical career exchanging the four strings of the violin for the four strings of the bass guitar and formed my first band, The House Of Lords. We practised for a couple of months in the club rooms at the Jellie Park Swimming Clubrooms and had our first gig at Saint Theresa's Hall Youth Club on a Friday night. I played that gig with a borrowed bass guitar playing through a RCA radio my father had adapted so it would take a ring tip and sleeve plug. Mahogany and fabric cabinet. 12 inch speaker. Distortion. This was the sound of the revolution.

Self-ethnography and the eye of the participant observer have broadly guided this paper however the overall critical framework is that of constructionism. Adorno refers to the process of constructionist methodology as "exact fantasy" suggesting we are inevitably involved in a process of self mediated romantic recollection when trawling memory.

Be that as it may I seem to clearly recall, at age sixteen, literally throwing my violin over the corner of our weather board house into the blue sky in suburban Upper Riccarton. I was fatigued by eight years of learning the discipline of classical repertoire one too many Paganini violin exercises.

The gesture of discarding the violin was a gesture of resistance – for me it was a metaphorical /metaphysical moment signalling a wider submerged narrative being acted out by Christchurch youth as they sought to overturn the cultural and social hegemony in Christchurch in the 1960s.

Christchurch As A Site For Gestures of Resistance

As the music of The Rolling Stones, The Pretty Things, The Animals, John Mayall and The Blues Breakers, Long John Baldry and The Beatles began to hit, the revolution went into hyperdrive. Cantabrian youth subculture began to relocate its taste.

Christchurch had and (to a degree still has) a tiered societal structure - a city with its roots in its English heritage; its founding fathers were descendants of the first four ships which disembarked the city's first English colonisers at the port of Lyttleton in 1840. Far from being a whaling or convict colony Christchurch was founded on a formal top-down social structure with the imposing architecture of the Anglican cathedral in Cathedral Square symbolically at its centre (Mitchell:1). This sense of order is further reflected in the original geometric urban (and later the suburban) design of Christchurch's topography and the tiered demography of socio-economic groups across the city.

(Of course it is more than poignant that the cathedral was levelled by the quakes. Having the cardboard Transitional Cathedral located now, three blocks away from Cathedral Square in Latimer Square, it almost feels like the city has changed its centre of gravity and begs many questions about cultural institutions surviving beyond liquefaction – a discussion beyond the scope of this paper - but a huge area for research particularly if one takes into account economic /creative class research by the likes of Richard Florida).

The centrally located University of Canterbury, established in 1873 as Canterbury University College (Thompson 277), had a tradition of conservatory styled tertiary music education and the churches, and particularly the Anglican church, exerted a strong influence on the cultural demeanour of the city. The Anglican cathedral had a long tradition of choirs going back to 1879 and this tradition had been kept alive into the 1950s at its associated school, Cathedral Grammar School. The cathedral still has a great choir.

Dislocated English culture was particularly evident in Christchurch, it also underpinned much of New Zealand's wider cultural outreach. Writing in 1976 social commentator Gordon McLauchlan reflected that "...the common people could feel secure in the faith that God was an image of an Englishman with an Oxford degree in the humanities who was a solid middle-order batsman for his country" (McLauchlan 9). (The view that cricket is the gentleman's game has taken a few hits in the last few weeks but I have no doubt that the muted click of leather on willow will resound across Christchurch parks again this summer).

The bedfellow of cultural stratification is the entrenchment of exclusiveness. In 1950s Christchurch the widespread cultural and political conservatism in the city meant that the emergence of and rhythm and blues would be oppositional - it would occur "against the grain." (Thornton 26).

The emergence of subversives set up another very real tension in households across the city: the polarisation of youth and their parents. The new music culture was regarded with fear by the older generations. In this social and cultural atmosphere of moral panic the new R'n'B music scene burgeoned in live performances at Youth Clubs and began to infiltrate commercial radio (albeit heavily mediated and state controlled).

At the same time the arrival of squadrons of Starlifter aircraft "all the way from the US of A" had Christchurch youth looking skyward and created a collective craving for the exotic.

The Urge To Authenticity

There were releases by local artists on Houhton Hughes' Canterbury label Music World, and on K Tel and Spin O Rama, mainly country and western. But these were perceived by both youth as having little merit musically and little relevance lyrically. Garner Wayne and the Saddle Pals and Brendan Dugan had huge audiences in the country but the Christchurch city hipsters just didn't relate. The music on these labels sounded insincere. I guess one could argue as Carl Wilson does in his excellent Book about Celine Dion A Journey to the End of Taste. that these artists were examples of authentic inauthenticity.

The new hip youth subculture, disenchanted with middle New Zealand and politicised by the visit of another cowboy in 1966, Lyndon Johnson, particularly despised the imitative repertoire of country and western: the white American diatonic harmonic style, the Americanised accents of vocalists, the overly sentimental lyrics, the dislocated narratives

and the derivative LP cover art (often airbrushed pictures of cowboys and horses). The sounds of bourgeois country music, the ersatz tasseled jackets and cowboy hats held no appeal for a new suburban youth audience searching for identity and authenticity. The kitschness of country and western music, the alienation of classical music coupled with the blandness of government controlled 1960s radio created both a disinterest and a mistrust of the dominant culture by Christchurch teenagers.

The new music had a back beat and cultural language that owed its appeal to the blues and the rise of black sensibility in music. Frith suggests that more than just a hunger for cultural empathy the global rising of 60s youth subculture saw the popular music culture as a rallying cry: “American sounds cross the sea to liberate not enslave us; the backbeat supplies the symbolic means of resistance to bourgeois hegemony” (Frith 1998, 47). The quest for identification with otherness, the craving for the exotic, the search for sincerity, the idea that everything real was happening elsewhere inexorably drove the newly Christchurch popular music audiences towards the vicarious authenticity of Afro-American and Anglo-American popular music in search of a culture which lionised musicians who were, in Frith’s words, “playing from the heart.” (47).

Another key to the rise of Christchurch’s new music scene in the mid-1960s was the establishment of the American Air Force Deep Freeze Base at Harewood, adjacent to the Christchurch International airport. In 1959 the Antarctic Treaty was signed between New Zealand and The USA and the air base, the last port of call for American servicemen en route to wintering over at McMurdo Sound, was established (Mitchell 7).

American servicemen brought recordings, musical equipment, (the first Fender guitars and amps) a new language and style. And marijuana. Local bands, including Max Merritt and the Meteors and Ray Columbus and The Invaders were invited to play at the Deep Freeze base social club – the Bird Dog Club. It was here that Max and Ray began to hear and play US rhythm and blues (7). The songs spread like wildfire across the city. Christchurch musicians were exposed to the black music sounds of Solomon Burke, Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Arthur Connelly, Wilson Pickett, James Brown and Ray Charles.

There was now a face-to-face conversation across cultures: vinyl recordings from the American base became the currency that quickened the Christchurch music scene. US Air Force personnel made their way to the centre of the city on weekend leave. The neo-gothic stone buildings around Cathedral Square, and the shadowy lanes connecting them, provided an atmospheric backdrop as they mixed with local audiences who attended the clubs nestled in the centre of the city.

The US Air Force band also played lunchtime concerts under the statue of Robert Falcon Scott on the banks of the Avon. (Again this statue is a victim of the quakes – and lies prone in the Canterbury Museum awaiting repair). Lunchtime crowds of Cantabrians were exposed to a fresh sound which included electric guitars and black vocalists and a repertoire which included soul and funk - a far cry from Colonel Boogie and the stoic

WW2 marches which were played by the 2NZIR regimental band in King Edward barracks across the other side of the river.

Afro-American music was absorbed into the set lists of local bands like Chants R& B who had a reputation for wild blues and were resident at the Hereford Street cellar club The King Bee (later renamed The Stage Door). Throughout the 1960s a number of Christchurch night club bands released covers of soul and blues songs. In 1966 The Chants R & B released a version of Otis Redding's *I've Been Loving You Too Long* and, in a mirroring of the British blues movement, also released a version of British bluesman John Mayall's *I'm Your Witch Doctor*.

Guitarless soul trio The Secrets, resident at The Plainsman on Lichfield Street for five years, released a cover version of a Sam Cook's *Soothe Me* in 1969 for Festival Records featuring a vox organ and the falsetto vocal of vocalist/ bassist Geoff Cavendar. For a period in the late 1960s the climactic end to The Secrets' performances was a rendition of Otis Redding's frenzied arrangement of *Try A Little Tenderness* (Christchurch Music. 2006. CD liner notes).

Conclusion

In the conservative social and cultural landscape of 1960s Christchurch, rhythm and blues provided a vehicle for the city's youth culture to challenge dominant taste groups for the first time. The opportunity to explore another reality was driven by music with a new soul: kids were drawn to new feelings of togetherness and identity and the search for the sincere. For some Christchurch musicians like Max Merritt and Ray Columbus, RnB was a ticket out of a highly conservative cultural environment. They spearheaded the Southern Invasion into Auckland and changed the direction of New Zealand popular music.

The new music was the soundtrack which underscored the turning of Christchurch youth against the city fathers and heralded the rise of Christchurch as a crucible of New Zealand popular music.

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