



**popular music**  
*A Troubles Archive Essay*  
Stuart Bailie



**Cover Image: Victor Sloan - Market Street, Derry**

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

# About the Author

**Stuart Bailie** was on the staff of the NME (New Musical Express) from 1988 to 1996, rising to Assistant Editor in his last three years there. Since then, he has worked as a freelance journalist for Mojo, Uncut, Q, The Times, The Sunday Times and Hot Press. He has written sleevenotes for U2 and wrote the authorised story of Thin Lizzy, *The Ballad Of The Thin Man* in 1997.

He has been presenting a BBC Radio Ulster show each Friday evening since 1999. He has been Associate Producer of several BBC TV music programmes, including the story of Ulster rock and pop: 'So Hard To Beat' in 2007. He has also been the scriptwriter / researcher for a series of BBC Radio 2 documentaries on U2, Thin Lizzy and Elvis Costello. Stuart is now CEO of Oh Yeah, a dedicated music centre in Belfast.

## Popular Music

In September 1968 Van Morrison was in New York, recording a series of songs about life back in Belfast. This was his *Astral Weeks* album, one of his most important works. It was also a vivid snapshot of Northern Ireland just before the climate changed dramatically with the outbreak of the Troubles. In Morrison's sentimental picture, there were youthful voices, parties and high-spirits; flamboyant figures such as Madame George cruised the streets of Belfast as the post-war generation challenged social conventions.

The hippy ideals were already receding in America, but Belfast had experienced a belated Summer of Love and a blossoming social life. One of the participants, Terri Hooley recalls: "It's hard to believe, but there were 80 clubs in or around Belfast, where you could go to hear music. The town was buzzing. We were talking about freedom of thought, action and expression. On a Sunday night, you used to get 1,000 people at the City Hall, so they had to open up Donegall Square Methodist Church and let all the people in for coffee. They called it 'Heaven'!"<sup>1</sup>

Of course, not all of the city was experiencing this kind of release, and civil unrest was already an issue. In the increasingly grim years that followed, the music and the sentiments of the *Astral Weeks* album would become a kind of secret history to the baby boomers that had glimpsed some of these same possibilities – their very own Paradise Lost.

Around the same time, as the violence escalated in Belfast, a series of blues fans were trying to keep up a semblance of normality. Figures such as Dougie Knight and Terri Hooley, who managed the Belfast Blues Society, welcomed over a series of American blues and folk artists. Champion Jack Dupree visited several times, while Jesse Fuller, Memphis Slim and Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup also featured.

In the Autumn of 1968, Juke Boy Bonner, a guitarist and harmonica player from Belleville, Texas was due to play the War Memorial Building on Waring Street in Belfast, but the situation had become increasingly difficult and sporadic riots put the singer's trip from Aldergrove airport in jeopardy. However, he managed to arrive at the gig and his appearance was regarded as a small triumph. It was one of the last memorable gigs of the period, as the city centre closed down and live entertainment became a rare issue. "That was actually the end of the party for us," Hooley recalls. "It was the night we stopped partying. A lot of the people who went to places like The Jazz Club and the Maritime went back to their own ghettos and people lost contact with each other. And we were going into a horrific part of history in Northern Ireland."<sup>2</sup>

But Juke Boy Bonner didn't forget. In a session in London the following year, he recorded *Belfast Blues*, the story of his perilous booking, of his apprehensions and also of the fond welcome he had received. He mentioned the kiss on the cheek he had received from a woman in the audience and praised the smiling Irish eyes, noting that, "the women are sweet and kind and the men still act like men." This was one of the first songs about the Troubles, and perhaps the first instance of the locals being patronised in song. (They would receive much worse in the coming years). But that was a minor issue compared to events in Belfast city, such as the bombing of McGurk's bar in 1971 (15 dead) or the Abercorn restaurant bomb in 1972 (two dead, 130 wounded). Simple socialising became a risky business. Seventy three pubs and four clubs were destroyed in 1971 alone. Yes, Led Zeppelin did play the



Ulster Hall that year, giving a world premiere to the song *Stairway to Heaven*; but this was quite exceptional in an otherwise very depressed cultural scene.

In Belfast, a core group of artists and bohemians from the late Sixties who called themselves The Tribe had been politicised by the Cuban Missile Crisis and then by anti-Vietnam protests. Belfast's counter-culture had been informed by publications such as *Oz* and by poetry from The Liverpool Scene. But this energy started to dissipate and many of the active members of The Tribe moved to London, Dublin and New York. The remaining musicians centred on venues such as The Pound in Belfast, where the veteran Jim Armstrong was a regular draw and the old days were celebrated in lengthy versions of the Hendrix standard, *Hey Joe*.

Elsewhere, pop music was borrowing the rhetoric of revolution. Paul McCartney and Wings were banned by the BBC, ITV and Radio Luxembourg for the 1972 single *Give Ireland Back To The Irish*. The guitarist on the record, Henry McCullough from Portstewart, would later muse about McCartney's "cotton wool politics".

The subject matter was also a draw for John Lennon on his 1972 song *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, which castigated the "Anglo pigs and Scotties" in the wake of the killings in Derry that January. The previous year, Lennon had marched along Oxford Street in London carrying a banner that read, 'For The IRA Against British Imperialism'.<sup>3</sup> Around this time, Terri Hooley met the singer in the *Oz* magazine offices in London, and an unusual request was made: "John Lennon was completely off his rocker. One of his friends took us to a garage in London and showed us these boxes of rifles and wanted to know how we could get them back to Northern Ireland. I said, we're the boys, but we're not *those* kind of boys."<sup>4</sup>

The worsening situation in Northern Ireland provoked several songs from Irish artists. Van Morrison was working in Nevada when he read about a prayer vigil in San Francisco. The theme was peace in Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> This inspired the title track of his 1972 album, *St Dominic's Preview*. The lyrics contrast the excesses of the music industry with more pertinent issues elsewhere, and the mention of "flags and emblems" is an allusion to the 1954 Flags And Emblems Act in Northern Ireland.

Phil Coulter wrote from a Derry perspective in *The Town I Loved So Well*, a folk-influenced ballad that recounted in dismay the stacks of barbed wire encroaching on the skyline and the army keeping guard by the gasyard wall. It is perhaps remarkable that this was the period when Coulter was also writing pop hits for the Eurovision Song Contest and the Bay City Rollers, but the homage to his home town has weathered well.

The same might not be said about Clubsound and the song *Belfast Belfast*. Led by George Jones, the popular entertainers had witnessed the carnage at the Abercorn Bar in Belfast, but chose to present a humorous side to the city. The song is based on a calypso rhythm and features Arabian motifs, while the narrator tells of his journey from India to Gilnahirk in east Belfast. He's trying to make a living in the rag trade, and at one stage the idea of "bulletproof knickers" is discussed. The chorus line finds consolation in the welfare state: "if you're out of work, you can get the borough". Clubsound, like the impressionist James Young, found in the Troubles a base humour that some locals enjoyed.

However, an attack on the Miami Showband came as a shocking development. Prior to this, there had been talk of "legitimate targets" but everyone had supposed that musicians were exempt. On July 31, 1975, the Miami Showband were returning to Dublin after a performance at the Castle Ballroom in Banbridge, when they were pulled over to the side of the road near Newry by an apparent army checkpoint. Members of the Ulster Defence Regiment questioned the band members while two of their party attempted to plant and hide a bomb in the group's van.

This was actually a plot involving members of the Loyalist paramilitary organisation, the UVF. The intention was that the bomb would detonate on the Irish side of the border, making it look as though the band had been working for the IRA. However, the device exploded at the roadside, killing two soldiers. Their colleagues then began to strafe the Miami Showband with bullets. Three were killed: singer Fran O'Toole, guitarist Tony Geraghty and trumpeter Brian McCoy. In the newspaper parlance of the time, this was the day the music died.

Barry Devlin, bass player with Horslips, remembers touring Northern Ireland during this era: "It was a time of your life when you saw headlights behind you at three in the morning and you just never knew who they were .... Up until then there had been a belief that you didn't shoot the piano player and bands travelled happily on the basis that it wasn't personal, that the entertainer will always be alright. But that gave the lie to that. It was the end of an age of innocence."<sup>6</sup>

*New Musical Express* writer, Gavin Martin, gave the following pronouncement on the mid-Seventies music scene: "No-one really wanted to know about this place. Local record shops didn't supply returns for the national chart and the home-based promoters were solid businessmen, afraid to take risks. What it all meant was the Micks remained hicks from the sticks".<sup>7</sup>

While there were occasional visits from Irish acts like Horslips, Rory Gallagher and Thin Lizzy, international bands now rarely visited Northern Ireland. Instead, there were a series of appalling songs about the place, such as *Belfast* by Boney M, which layered some banal lyrics over a German disco beat. This particular period wasn't conducive to political statements. Many of the Sixties rockers were now tax exiles, singing about the good life in California, while musical forms such as glam and progressive rock were more concerned with escapism. But, in 1976, a new agenda called punk rock would arrive and, from the offset, it would be hugely pertinent to Northern Ireland.

The Sex Pistols released *Anarchy In The UK* in November 1976. It was a roaring condemnation of a nation's decline, containing the lines "Is this the UDA / Is this the IRA / I thought it was the UK". The song predicted a major conflagration, a breakdown in traditional standards. The band gained notoriety by swearing live on television, but their real menace was in the broad political ideology that informed the words.

Singer John Lydon had grown up in Finsbury Park in London, but his family roots were in Tuam, Galway. He later titled his autobiography *No Irish No Blacks No Dogs*, a reference to the notices that appeared in boarding houses during his youth. He was familiar with the rebel tradition and on the band's 1977 release *God Save The Queen*, he lambasted the monarch during her jubilee year as "a potential H Bomb". Sensitive ears in Northern Ireland were aware that Lydon also aspired his 'h', in the Irish Catholic manner.

The Sex Pistols artwork, designed by Jamie Reid, was also provocative. One illustration for *Anarchy In The UK* pictured a Union Jack, mutilated and held together with safety pins, while the sleeve for *God Save The Queen* covered Elizabeth's face with crudely chopped lettering, like a ransom note. This was especially outrageous in Northern Ireland where much of society remained fiercely loyal to the crown.

Outwardly, punk rock was about simple shock tactics. But the Sex Pistols' manager, Malcolm McLaren had been influenced by the Paris riots of 1968 and by political theories such as Situationism. The aim was to turn passive consumers into active participants, using dramatic events or out-of-context détournements. To an extent, the plan succeeded, as the band was subject to media hysteria and the records sold well.

Another London act, The Clash, sang about urban desolation, riots, prostitution and decay. A song called *Career Opportunities* acknowledged the impact of the Northern Irish situation in England: "I hate the civil servant rules, I won't open no letter bombs for you". The music was brutal, simple and short, another boon for a new generation of musicians who could now make statements with little technical skill. Self-expression, rather than a polished delivery, was all.

Punk in England and America was supported by fanzines, brashly photocopied missives that commented on the counter-culture. The message was one of do-it-yourself, an attitude that was furthered when a series of acts began to press their own records, rather than relying on the mainstream music industry. All of this was keenly received in Northern Ireland, as fanzines such as *Alternative Ulster*, *Private World* and *No Fun* began publishing. Bands were booking punk nights in bars and hotels under the masquerade of private parties as an alternate community took shape.

The catalytic event was a scheduled appearance of The Clash at the Ulster Hall in Belfast, October 22, 1977. There was an issue with insurance and the event was cancelled at the last moment. A fracas ensued outside as the young punks blocked Bedford Street and the Royal Ulster Constabulary became involved. Music writer Gavin Martin wrote that the event, "proved to be a watershed between the inertia of the old and the activity of the new ... by Ulster standards the disturbance was negligible, but it was of a type without precedent".<sup>8</sup>

The singer Jake Burns was in a period of transition, from his traditional rock background with the band Highway Star to the born-again punk sentiments of Stiff Little Fingers. Along with many others, the potential of this new mindset was brought abruptly home to him by that evening's events: "There were a lot of people milling around and causing a disturbance outside the Ulster Hall and what amazed me was not the fact that they were causing a disturbance – because after all it was Belfast – but the number of people that were there .... So I suddenly realised that it wasn't just the four of us; that there were a lot of people out there who actually were listening to this sort of stuff."<sup>9</sup>

By the spring of 1978, Stiff Little Fingers had released a single on their own Rigid Digits label. *Suspect Device* opened with the statement, "inflammable material is planted in my head, it's a suspect device that's left two thousand dead". This was Belfast and the Troubles reflected through the prism of punk, and related with righteous indignation. The message was simple: that extremists had exploited the energy of youth. Lines such as "it's time the bastards fell" and "why can't we take over" proposed a different approach to the tribal mindset. The flip side of the single, *Wasted Life* was clearly indebted to The Clash and was an even more pointed attack on the paramilitaries: "they ain't blonde haired and blue eyed, but they think that they're the master race".

The band's decision to write about the Troubles head-on polarised the punk scene. Some felt that Stiff Little Fingers were making capital out of the situation at home. In this very judgemental scene there was also mistrust towards the band's co-manager, Gordon Ogilvie, a *Daily Express* journalist who was involved in the songwriting process.

Jake Burns explains: "To hear The Clash singing about growing up in west London suddenly struck a huge chord with me. So when Gordon suggested writing songs about where we grew up I jumped on it because I thought, yes, this is exactly what we should be doing, and I think to that extent I was a bit concerned that it probably wouldn't have an audience outside of Northern Ireland. But at that time I didn't really much care because I felt that it merited actually singing about, because apart from this, what the hell else did I know about?"<sup>10</sup>

The Radio 1 DJ John Peel played the record frequently on his late-night show, which provoked interest in England and a tour with the Tom Robinson Band, another English act with political leanings. The band released a second single, *Alternative Ulster*, which sketched out the options for a teenage punk and called for an entirely new model, an "anti-security force".

Jake Burns again: "We were basically just four ordinary guys from Belfast trying to put across a point of view of what was actually happening over there without trying to take sides. I think that annoyed people because they desperately wanted us to take a side, then they could adopt us for whatever cause or ideology they wanted to and we just refused to do that; basically because that would have run counter to everything that we were trying to say in the first place".<sup>11</sup>

The band's debut album from 1979, *Inflammable Material* was the summation of this idea. The song *Barbed Wire Love* was a rewrite of Romeo And Juliet across the sectarian wasteland. *White Noise* was a catalogue of derogatory names, the weaponry of bigots and racists. They also covered a Bob Marley song, *Johnny Was*, and changed the location from Kingston to Belfast. The reasoning was that random violence in Jamaica was every bit as devastating as it was in Northern Ireland. The album proved highly popular, with an estimated 40,000 sales in the first week, and marked the beginning of alternative music as a viable industry. The SLF 'sound' became more refined thereafter, and tracks such as *Gotta Get Away* showed a disenchantment with their home town and a desire to expand musically.

"I think there was a tendency in the music papers to try to exaggerate us into something that we weren't really," says Burns. "I got sick to death of being quoted as the voice of the disenfranchised youth in Northern Ireland, whoever the hell they might have been."<sup>12</sup>

The success of Stiff Little Fingers actually made some of the other acts more wary of political themes. One of the formative Belfast bands was Rudi, highly influenced by American acts like The Ramones and The New York Dolls. At one stage, they considered *We Hate The Cops* as their first single, a response to the cancelled Clash gig, complete with the chant of "SS RUC". But this plan was shelved, and they led with *Big Time*, a jaundiced view of success and music industry hopefuls.

The Rudi release appeared on the Good Vibrations label, which operated out of a record shop on Belfast's Great Victoria Street. The Good Vibes shop, situated above a health food store and below a print workshop – the basic components of an alternative lifestyle – was headed by Terri Hooley, who quickly found a connection between punk and his Sixties experiences in the city's counter culture. Once again, there was enthralling music, angry sentiments and the potential for insurrection.

"The shop was a real meeting place," Hooley remembers. "It was like an oasis in the middle of this cultural wasteland. We hadn't a clue what we were doing really; I was just this mad, ex hippy. But the energy of punk gave me the chance to relive my youth again. There was a lot more honesty and truth about punk in Belfast .... And when there was nothing happening and the international press were gathered in the Europa Hotel, then they

would pick up on the Good Vibrations thing. So we got articles in Boston and New York. Plus the fact that friends from The Tribe were living in places like New York and Paris, so they were great at promoting the label.”<sup>13</sup>

Hooley’s label released some fine records, notably *Teenage Kicks* by Derry act, The Undertones. Some of the bands, such as Protex and The Xdreamists went on to sign for major record labels. But the biggest legacy of Good Vibes was that of empowerment. It showed the value of self-determination and the opportunity to make a noise that resonated in England and beyond. For some onlookers at home, this was contrary to the aims of the conflict.

“I used to get threatened all the time,” says Hooley. “Very serious threats from some quarters. And years later, I got apologies. There was the *Sense Of Ireland* festival [in London, 1980] when I had been told that my bands shouldn’t play because it didn’t represent what was happening in the north. But I said, we’re going. I said you can shoot me, but don’t shoot the bands. I was certainly afraid of these people, but there were many times I stood up to them. I’m a natural born coward, but I did it.”<sup>14</sup>

The Belfast punk scene was now focussed at the Harp Bar, on Hill Street; a rare place to meet outside of the segregated housing lines of the city. The era was impressively captured by film-maker John T. Davis in *Shellshock Rock*, released in 1979.

In Derry, the centre of activity was The Casbah, where The Undertones honed their wry pop songs. The success of *Teenage Kicks*, again championed by John Peel, led to a deal with the American label, Sire Records, and some confusion over how to market the band’s street credibility, as bassist Mickey Bradley explains: “I remember a record company advert, a radio advert which we managed to stop. It was a voiceover for the first LP. The voice said, ‘They fought their way from the war-torn streets of Derry.’ And we just laughed.”<sup>15</sup>

Instead, The Undertones used humour and affectionate songs about local characters. Later they would poke fun at their own tendencies by writing “More Songs About Chocolate And Girls”. “It did mark us out from the dour punk bands,” Bradley reckons. “Also, we were in a good position in that we came from a bona fide place where it was hard. It’s not like we came from the leafy suburbs of some English town. I’m from Creggan, Feargal’s from Rosemount and John and Damian are from the Bogside. So we didn’t have to tell people about it because it was fairly obvious.”<sup>16</sup>

The Undertones had planned an open air festival in Derry in the summer of 1979, booking The Clash and The Damned. However The Clash’s singer, Joe Strummer, received a letter, apparently from the Red Hand Commandos in Derry, which threatened to assassinate him if he set foot in Derry. The reason was that Strummer had endorsed the Troops Out movement in a *New Musical Express* feature.

“We were so naive,” Bradley remembers, “that we said, this concert’s in Shantallow, so the Red Hand Commandos will not come there. We realise now, it was a very parochial thing to say. But it wouldn’t wash with them. It brought home to Joe that it’s OK posing in the *NME* with an H Block T shirt, but when you come to Northern Ireland, people will take grave offence and may wish to injure you.”<sup>17</sup>

However, by the time of their third album, *Positive Touch*, Undertones’ songwriter John O’Neill was feeling pressured to reflect the Derry experience in his lyrics. *You’re Welcome* alluded to a prisoner’s release, while *Crisis Of Mine* was an admission of the fact that he might be saying more:

“I suppose we were conscious of getting reviewed about coming from the north of Ireland, but we weren’t writing songs about it,” says O’Neill. “I was trying to listen to more and more other forms of music and really getting into soul in a big way and discovering *What’s Goin’ On* by Marvin Gaye. Coming from Motown and being a pop singer, then writing this kind of socially aware type record. So as I was trying to become as good a song writer as possible, this was also going on in the back of my mind. Basically that’s what *Crisis Of Mine* was about; it was the crisis of trying to write a song about what’s going on around you but not being good enough to do it.”<sup>18</sup>

The band released *It’s Gonna Happen* during the Hunger Strikes in 1981, and guitarist Damien O’Neill wore a black armband on Top Of The Pops. However, the band’s bassist, Mickey Bradley, remains sceptical about the lyrical importance of the song: “People get a second hand version of that story. They think, oh, that’s the song about the hunger strikes. Sometimes life is too short to explain to people.”<sup>19</sup>

The Undertones split up in 1983, and when the O’Neill brothers re-surfaced with the band, That Petrol Emotion, the



political content was explicit in their music and on their record sleeves, as John O'Neill recalls:

"The political thing was definitely contrived in the sense that I didn't want to be identified with this boy next door thing. So the direct opposite to that was to be political. At that time you'd just had the Hunger Strike; things didn't look like they were going to improve any more. Thatcher had just got in for another term, so it seemed right to be in a band that kinda made statements about what was going on in Ireland and it wasn't necessarily sloganeering, it was human rights issues we were talking about, things like strip searching or plastic bullets; these were issues that needed to be commented on anyway."<sup>20</sup>

Belfast act Ruefrefx showed a literary bent on an early single, *One By One*, which referenced James Plunkett's *Strumpet City*. The band's most outspoken statement was *The Wild Colonial Boy*, an attack on IRA fund-raisers in America such as Noraid. The lyric imagines an inhabitant of Wisconsin who thinks he is being true to his distant Celtic legacy by donating money to 'the cause'. The cover of the record showed an Armalite rifle, neatly packaged for transport. The lyric wailed, "eat up all your TV dinners, open up your wallet wide... and let your green be seen". A similar theme was also aired on the Stiff Little Fingers song *Each Dollar A Bullet*. Ruefrefx later released *Political Wings*, a discourse on the Republicans' dual policy of 'Armalite and ballot box'.

"The band had virtually ground to a halt when I decided I'd have a crack at England," recounts Paul Burgess. "I'd written *Wild Colonial Boy* back in 1980, and always wanted to put it out as a single, so I talked the others into having one last shot at it before quitting.... We recorded *Wild Colonial Boy* off our own bat, with our own money, so we weren't going to compromise at all. We stuck the Armalite on the cover, put the lyrics on the back and didn't expect any BBC play because it was too hot to handle. It was going to be our last shot. This was the song we felt had to be done. For every reason. The totally unexpected interest aroused by *Wild Colonial Boy* resulted in Ruefrefx being touted as one of the UK's brightest young hopes."<sup>21</sup>

The visceral sound of punk was an ideal method to deliver such sentiments, but Belfast singer-songwriter Andy White had another approach. He favoured the word-slinging style of early Bob Dylan, loaded with irony, jarring images and Sixties-style 'truth attacks'. His 1985 debut, *Religious Persuasion*, recounted a street encounter, familiar to many, in which the accusers try to guess the stranger's cultural background:

"I asked them what they meant about religious bent  
They said 'that's the test'  
I said 'that's the test-ah-meant'".

His first album, *Rave On Andy White*, continued the theme in 1986, mangling the two opposing anthems on *The Soldier's Sash* and uncovering desolate vistas on *Reality Row*. His subsequent music became less savage and more personal, but he did deliver *The Guildford Four* in 1990, railing about the wrongful imprisonment of IRA suspects in England, who were ultimately freed from jail. Much later, he would write a Zen observation about the potential for a new future:

"Peace  
sounds like  
the sound of no helicopters".

During the last rumblings of punk, a few other bands made their statements. The Defects, from Belfast, released a track called *Brutality*, which imagined a trip to the RUC holding pen in Castlereagh, a controversial location. Ironically, two successive bass players from the Defects would actually join the RUC. Meantime The Outcasts released *Gangland Warfare*, a song bristling with cartoon aggression, namechecking the Harp Bar and a perilous journey home from the city centre.

But while punk was falling out of fashion, the ethos was channelled into a series of projects such as The Anarchy Centre and TheWarzone Centre (aka Giros). The latter featured a vegan cafe, a venue and a primitive recording studio where the underground could be nurtured.

Paul Brady made a more subtle approach on *The Island*, which compared the landscapes and the privations of the Lebanon and Northern Ireland: "Up here we sacrifice our children/To feed the worn-out dreams of yesterday/And teach them dying will lead us into glory." Brady also wrote a perceptive lyric called *Nothing but the Same Old Story*, which pictured the Irish abroad in England, taking on menial jobs while being regarded as a terrorist threat and

often taking solace in alcohol abuse.

By the end of the Eighties, prospects seemed immovable. A Belfast act, The Adventures, scored a chart hit in 1988 with *Broken Land*, which subverted the Bob Dylan line - "These times are not changing". Energy Orchard were also mournful on the 1990 release, *Belfast*. Brian Kennedy recorded *Four Green Fields*, the Tommy Makem song about nationalist aspirations. This was considered acceptable; but The Pogues' recording of *Birmingham Six* in 1988 received a UK broadcasting ban.

The Belfast DJ, David Holmes, was inspired to write an instrumental track after watching the film *In The Name Of The Father*. In his mind he pictured the experiences of Gerry Conlan, falsely imprisoned for the Guildford bombing. This in turn led to Holmes's involvement with the soundtrack to *Resurrection Man*, loosely based on the Shankill Butchers. In 2008, Holmes delivered the soundtrack to *Hunger*, a film about the hunger striker, Bobby Sands.

Local rock bands had grown largely silent on the political situation. There was a feeling of exhaustion, brought on by banal songs from outsiders: The Police with *Invisible Sun*, Spandau Ballet's *Through The Barricades* and Simple Minds' *Belfast Child*. The seam of compassion and liberal tub-thumping was almost used up, although U2 and The Cranberries still had some to offer.

But music still had an important part to play in underlining the peace process of the following decade. A lyric from Van Morrison's *Coney Island* was used by the Northern Ireland Office, posing the question, "wouldn't it be great if it was like this all of the time?" And when the vote in favour of the referendum was in doubt in 1998, a concert at Belfast's Waterfront Hall helped to sway the result. U2 combined with Downpatrick act, Ash, at the May 19 event, playing original music plus John Lennon's *Don't Let Me Down* and the soul standard *Stand By Me*. It was the first public occasion that political leaders John Hume and David Trimble shook hands, and immediately afterwards the singer Bono held their arms aloft like prizefighters.

During the making of the U2 film *Rattle And Hum* in 1987, Bono reacted angrily on stage to news of the Cenotaph bombing in Enniskillen. This same event prompted Neil Hannon from The Divine Comedy to write about what had happened in his home town: "When I was teaching myself to write songs in the Eighties, I was definitely under the tutelage of Sting and Bono and I came up with some truly awful political statements; you know, very simplistic. When the Enniskillen bomb went off I wrote a song and it was truly terrible. I called it *Remembrance Day* and it is too awful. You know it is very difficult to write things about the situation. It's very difficult to write pop songs about serious issues. So I generally don't."<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1998, Hannon was moved to release *Sunrise*, the closing track on the *Fin de Siecle* album. The song is about the political loading of place names in Northern Ireland and the impact of politically-motivated violence. But unlike many of his musical predecessors, Hannon was in a position to sign off with a degree of hope. "It was like walking on eggshells trying to write the lyrics for that song," he says. "And yet in many ways you kind of want to put people's backs up, not to bow to the kind of general political correctness of the north. And you know how you're meant to talk in hushed tones about various situations, and I just wanted to lay it on the line and say that you know pretty much nothing is worth being buried for."<sup>23</sup>

There's a footnote to the Troubles legacy in a song called *Boomtown*. The author is Bap Kennedy, former singer with Energy Orchard, and his 2007 lyric reveals an ambivalent approach to the so-called 'peace dividend'. Talk of violence and revolution has been replaced by the chatter of the bourgeoisie, grown complacent in the knowledge that their property prices are on the rise. Meantime there are kids standing outside the City Hall in Belfast, dressed in the designer threads of youth culture. "Don't know how lucky they are, they never heard a bomb," the singer intones. Bap sings with the voice of a disenfranchised veteran:

"I can't afford to live on a dead end street,  
Things are getting so bad I might join the police."

It is still the Belfast blues, but the circumstances have changed beyond measure. From Armalites to sky-high equity, from 'SS RUC' to career opportunities in the rebranded Northern Ireland Police Service. In between, there are nearly 40 years of trauma, artistic tension and a series of astonishing musical eruptions.

**Stuart Bailie**



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