

From DIY to UBI

The Political Horizons of a Gig Guide Pamphlet: 1999 – 2017 and beyond.

In 1999, at the age of eighteen, I moved from Matlock - a small town in the Derbyshire Dales - to the bright lights and gritty streets of Leeds. The move was prompted by a rumour from Yorkshire friends that Leeds had a great DIY (Do-It-Yourself) underground music scene. I didn't know exactly what that meant but as someone who had been playing in bands and organizing gigs in village halls, snooker clubs and the occasional pub it sounded both intriguingly exotic and invitingly familiar.

Some clarity around the DIY music scene came first for me in the form of a free gig-listing pamphlet called *Cops and Robbers* that I picked up from a record shop in Leeds:

All the gigs in this guide are organised in a D.I.Y way. That means that all the money made on the night goes to covering the band's costs and the promoters costs (room hire etc.). No one's out to make a profit. These gigs exist for the music, not for money or kudos.¹

The events listed were organized by non-professional musicians and hobbyist promoters in their free time. They took place in temporary spaces – usually the function rooms of pubs and working men's clubs – that would be hired out for the evening. According to *Cops and Robbers* the defining characteristic of a DIY gig was that it was 'not-for-profit'; that the event was run on an almost entirely voluntary basis with an entry fee priced as low as would allow the minimal costs of travel, equipment and room hire to be covered; typically around the £3 or £4 mark with concessions for the unwaged. It was all organised for fun – for love not money.

The precedents for this strand of fiercely independent musical activity can be traced back to the UK punk scene of the late 1970s with Dalston band *The Desperate Bicycles* disseminating a Do-It-Yourself approach to recording and releasing records.² This inspired the global anarchist and hardcore punk scenes of the 1980s and 1990s

that aimed to extend the practice of autonomy, independence and collectivisation into everyday life.³

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was substantial crossover between Leeds' DIY music, activist and squatting scenes.⁴ As such, *Cops and Robbers* acted for many, myself included, as a gateway to a more politicised perspective on the world and an introduction to Marxist, anarchist, Situationist, third wave feminist and other radical leftist literature and ideas. Through this lens the DIY approach was seen not just as a fairer, more inclusive and accessible way to organise a gig or event, but as a path towards a more just and sustainable society.⁵

Beyond its editorial selection and a few brief, often sardonic, introductory sentences however,⁶ *Cops and Robbers* did not communicate with a didactic or proselytizing voice. It was first and foremost a vessel of information, a guide for directing people to local events. Its open policy meant that throughout the 2000s it became part of a forum for a growing number of musical and artistic communities in Leeds that had varying and often conflicting interpretations of what DIY culture was, and the socio-political horizons against which it operated. These ranged from the radical – where the DIY community was thought of as a small scale utopian experiment in non-capitalist organizing demonstrating that *another world was possible*⁷ – to more conservative interpretations that saw the DIY approach merely as a necessary first stage to entering the culture industry.

By the mid-late 2000s in Leeds it felt to me that the neoliberal entrepreneurial version of DIY had begun to overshadow the radically aspiring roots of the ethos, with DIY mainstays like The Brudenell Social Club in Hyde Park becoming professional music venues and a growing number of self-identified independent and DIY bands from the area garnering mainstream attention and pursuing commercial success.⁸ Even the parallel communities in the visual arts – the 'artist-led' scene – had become more entwined with the institutional 'Art World' and, by extension, its role in cultural gentrification.⁹

As a recent art graduate on the search for cheaper rent and living costs I moved to nearby Bradford. Bradford, like Leeds, was a former centre of the industrial

revolution and once regarded as the Wool Capital of The World. Following industrial decline it fell harder and is commonly perceived as the less fortunate of the two cities; unable get back on its feet in the same way Leeds had achieved through reinvention and regeneration.¹⁰ Fortunately for seekers of grassroots and subaltern culture like myself, such ‘minor’ cities also tend to be a breeding ground for informal, alternative and autonomous practices, or ‘artistic dark matter’ as Gregory Sholette has described it.¹¹

Delving into this world I found that Bradford had a long and fascinating history of self-organized cultural and political activity that emerged from the cracks and void spaces created by uneven capitalist development. This includes the formation of the Independent Labour Party in Bradford in 1893; countercultural artists and tutors including Albert Hunt and Jeff Nuttall organising public interventions and alternative arts festivals in the 1970s and 80s; the founding of agitprop and street theatre companies including The Welfare State and The General Will; the Asian Youth Movement; the people-led Bradford Festival and Mela; the Women’s Peace Campaign at Menwith Hill; and the Claimants Union who set up what is now one of Europe’s longest-running autonomous social centres The 1 in 12 Club.¹²

The legacy of cross-pollination between art, activism and grassroots activity was still present in the underground arts and music events I experienced in Bradford in the early 2010s. They tended towards an open, collective use of resources with an emphasis on inclusion and participation across discipline and experience, and tended to attract smaller but more diverse audiences than parallel events in Leeds.¹³ Club nights, events, parties, exhibitions and activities took place in temporary and community spaces, making for a characterful, but often hard to find and therefore relatively small and fragile, scene.

I was given the opportunity, through my role as Fellow in Music at University of Bradford between 2012 and 2015, to shine a light on this underground activity with the hope of making it more visible and accessible to students. I did this through a music programme that included city-wide festivals joining up the wealth of underground activity,¹⁴ and by supporting a student-led society to get involved as active participants.¹⁵ I found, however, that increasing participation, broadening and

diversifying the DIY community was not as straightforward as simply creating or ‘signposting’ opportunities. It was clear that students and young people in Bradford were operating under very different circumstances to those I’d experienced in Leeds a decade earlier. Specifically, they had less time, less money and less entitlement to ‘take part’.

Of course this scenario, although perhaps more apparent, wasn’t unique to Bradford. The managed reduction in free time for all but the most privileged has been part of the political agenda of austerity that has been forcibly applied across the globe since the financial crash of 2008. In this sense, the overarching issue for radically aspiring DIY and self-organized activity today is not only how people might *use* existing time towards socially transformative ends, but also how that free time can be reclaimed or *created* for potential participants.

One proposed solution to this challenge is the implementation of Universal or Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). Like the DIY approach, Universal Basic Income is a deceptively simple, almost intuitive, concept. It is a cash payment made by the state to everyone, without any conditions, that would allow the recipient to cover the basic needs of shelter, food and clothing. It would guarantee the means of survival to every member of society no matter what their circumstance. Recipients of UBI would be able to choose, rather than be obliged, to engage in waged labour.¹⁶ Accordingly, it is a means by which to produce free time and make the communist dream of being a fisherman in the morning and a philosopher in the evening¹⁷ – or in DIY gig terms a performer one night and a promoter, sound engineer, fanzine maker, or audience member the next - a reality for all.

Pilot schemes have shown that basic income recipients are likely to use the newly gained free time they have engaging in productive community activities rather than self-serving or consumptive leisure.¹⁸ So, whilst it undoubtedly sits awkwardly with the DIY aspiration to autonomy from both market and state, UBI would be an effective floor from which a larger and more diverse range of people could participate in self-organized activity.

We can imagine, then, how a world in which Basic Income has been implemented would foster the proliferation and growth of DIY communities. Despite its advocates' assertion that it is 'an idea whose time has come'¹⁹ UBI is, however, still a far stretch from reality. I would like to consider, then, the role that existing DIY organisers/communities may play in both achieving and modelling this future. This requires us to think about UBI and DIY, not only as alternative organisational structures but as political demands for equality. To help explain this I'd like to briefly revisit some of the changes that have taken place in DIY culture over the last decade and the economic and socio-political backdrop against which these have taken place.

In 2014 the Institute for Precarious Consciousness theorised that each phase of capitalism has produced a 'reactive affect'. Under industrial capitalism this was misery, and in the Postfordist era it was boredom.²⁰ The DIY scene I encountered in the early 2000s through *Cops and Robbers* celebrated its fluidity, lack of rules, unpredictability and precariousness as radical traits. It was nomadic, ever-changing and emphasised productivity and participation through its injunction to 'get involved'. As a tactic for fighting the boredom of the Postfordist era this made sense, but as the Institute for Precarious Consciousness propose, is perhaps now a solution to a past problem:

In contemporary capitalism, the dominant reactive affect is anxiety... It has become the linchpin of subordination. What we now need is a machine for fighting anxiety, and this is something we do not yet have.²¹

I would suggest, however, that a road map for this anxiety-fighting machine can be found within the spaces of contemporary DIY culture, which have increasingly ameliorative agendas. Many of the gigs listed in *Cops and Robbers* in 2017 take place, not in temporary or hired spaces, but in venues set up by and for the DIY community. The archetype for many is the aforementioned 1in12 Club in Bradford, owned and run by its members for more than 30 years. But even in the increasingly commercialised and competitive environs of Leeds, the DIY community has managed to carve out its own space. Wharf Chambers Co-operative Club, for example, was formed in 2011 'to provide an inclusive and affordable space for music, art, film, politics and discussion that brings together people from communities across Leeds.'²²

Like other autonomous DIY spaces that have emerged across the UK in recent years,²³ Wharf Chambers employs a safer spaces agreement²⁴ and hosts a programme of events and activities that aim to provide a platform for under-represented and vulnerable groups, as well as educating its members and visitors about social and political injustices and what to do about it.²⁵ Emphasis has been placed on identifying and removing the barriers that have blocked participation and representation across gender, sexuality, race, ability and class.²⁶ This has not been at the expense of overlooking economic obstacles, with many door prices for events displayed with the caveat that ‘No One Will Be Turned Away Due to Lack Of Funds’.

If the pages of *Cops and Robbers* once pointed towards spaces in which desires for self-management, autonomy, and freedom were put into practice at a local level, they now guide us towards places where those desires have a more communitarian accent. Does this shift in emphasis from individual freedom to social solidarity, from Do-It-Yourself to Do-it-Together, open up the possibility for channelling and scaling up these desires at the political level?

I would suggest yes, and that the linking of DIY and UBI as twin political demands would have a double impact. Firstly, a strong body of support and advocacy could come from young people engaged in DIY culture who are looking for ‘big ideas’ or policies to organise around.²⁷ Furthermore, DIY culture itself offers multiple case studies in what people will actually do when given the luxury of free time. The answer being that, as well as entertain themselves and each other, people choose to build networks of solidarity, care and mutual aid. Read together, DIY and UBI make a compelling argument for a brighter future. Now is the moment to bring them on to the same page.

¹ *Cops and Robbers*, *Cops and Robbers: a free guide to d.i.y. gigs in Leeds*, (Leeds: self-published pamphlet, 1999), back cover.

² Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 30-31.

³ Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (Boston, New York, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2002) and Paul Chatterton and Stuart Hodgkinson, 'Why we need autonomous spaces in the fight against capitalism', The Trapeze Collective, eds., *Do It Yourself: A Handbook For Changing Our World* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 207.

⁴ Punk and DIY gigs took place in squatted venues such as 120 Rats in Meanwood and mutual support existed with 'temporary autonomous zone' creators Aspire.

⁵ For an overview of socially transformative currents in DIY activity see Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes and Kevin Van Meter, 'Do It Yourself ... and the Movement Beyond Capitalism', Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber, eds., *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations Collective Theorization* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007), 40 – 61.

⁶ 'It is reassuring to know that within a world based on greed and profit the most exciting things have nothing to do with these.' Archie, *Cops And Robbers Number 12* (Leeds: self published pamphlet, 2000), 2.

⁷ 'Another World is Possible' was a popular slogan for the anti-capitalist and 'alter-globalisation' social movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s documented in Notes From Nowhere, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003) and the official slogan of the World Social Forum formed in June 2001.

⁸ In 2005 *New Musical Express* ran a number of articles about a burgeoning 'New Yorkshire' scene including 'indie' bands from Leeds like *Kaiser Chiefs*, *Forward Russia!*, *Pigeon Detectives* and others.

⁹ In 2007 The Northern Art Prize was set up by Pippa Hale, a director of artist-led space Project Space Leeds which in turn was a partnership with property developer KW Linfoot PLC. In 2008 Leeds-based arts charity and studio providers East Street Arts partnered with Hammonds Associates to 'make large, and completely legal savings, for landlords' by providing artists access to empty commercial property: <http://www.hammondassociates.org/> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

¹⁰ Samira Shackle (2016), 'A city left behind: post-Brexit tensions simmer in Bradford', *New Statesman*, 11 August. Available online: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/08/city-left-behind-post-brexit-tensions-simmer-bradford> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

¹¹ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011)

¹² Documented in *Guided Goitside* radio play by Black Dogs (2014) and the exhibition *Subveillance; 50 Years of the University of Bradford from below* curated by Helen Kalinsky and held at Gallery II, University of Bradford, 2017

¹³ For example the *Hatch* multi-disciplinary nights at Bradford Playhouse, *No Hands* club night at The Polish Club, Edmund Street, and *Artfarmers' Open Mic* at The Beehive pub, Westgate.

¹⁴ *Bradford Threadfest* which ran from 2012 and *Recon Festival* which ran 2013 - 2015.

¹⁵ Bradford University Music Society (BUMS) and the associated Bradford Scratch Orchestra open improvisation ensemble.

¹⁶ For an overview of Basic Income see Guy Standing, *Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen* (London: Penguin Books, 2017) and about its relation to the diminishment of the work ethic: Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015) 123 – 127.

¹⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ed. C.J Arthur, *The German Ideology* (1846; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 54.

¹⁸ Sarath Davala, Rebnana Jhabvala, Soumya Kapoor Mehta and Guy Standing, *Basic Income: A Transformative Policy for India* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 200.

¹⁹ Howard Reed and Stewart Lansley, *Universal Basic Income: An idea whose time has come?* (London: Compass, 2016). Available online: <https://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/UniversalBasicIncomeByCompass-Spreads.pdf> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

²⁰ Institute for Precarious Consciousness, *We Are All Very Anxious: Six Theses on Anxiety and Why It is Effectively Preventing Militancy, and One Possible Strategy for Overcoming It* (2014). Available online: <https://crimethinc.com/zines/we-are-all-very-anxious> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wharf Chambers Club Collective, *Home*. Available online: <http://www.wharfchambers.org/> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

²³ Including Chunk in Leeds and DIY Space for London.

²⁴ Wharf Chambers Club Collective, *Safer spaces agreement*. Available online:

<http://www.wharfchambers.org/the-club/safer-spaces/> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

²⁵ Wharf Chambers Club Collective, *The Club*. Available online: <http://www.wharfchambers.org/> (accessed December 2nd 2017). See also Esme Louise Newman, *LGBTQ what?* (Leeds: Self published, 2012) distributed from the Wharf Chambers bar.

²⁶ Tayyab Amin (2017), 'DIY in 2017: How Leeds, Bristol and London's scenes are striving to survive', *FACT*, 15 June. Available online: <http://www.factmag.com/2017/06/15/uk-diy-venues/> (accessed December 2nd 2017).

²⁷ Demonstrated by the increase in turnout by those aged 18 – 24 in the UK general election in 2017. Josh Holder, Caelainn Barr and Niko Kommenda (2017), 'Young voters, class and turnout: how Britain voted in 2017', *The Guardian*, 20 June. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/ng-interactive/2017/jun/20/young-voters-class-and-turnout-how-britain-voted-in-2017> (accessed December 2nd 2017).