

# The Metropolitan Complex

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## Roundtable Discussion

**Fergus Kelly, Dennis McNulty, Garrett Phelan and Sarah Pierce.**

On Wednesday 27 April 2005, the following conversation took place in studio 27 of Temple Bar Gallery in Dublin. Sarah Pierce invited the participants to have an informal discussion. There was no audience present.

**Sarah Pierce** The starting point of this conversation is Dublin. I invited the three of you to participate partly because each of you were invested in a music scene in Dublin in the 80s. That said, there are exponential numbers of people who could be around this table; but apart from your experiences in music, you are all artists. You live and work here, which I suspect is important. In an abstract way, I am interested in connecting a past in Dublin to an art world that exists here now. So without sounding too much like an RTE special, what was Dublin like in the 80s?

**Garrett Phelan** Broad shoulder pads.

**Sarah Pierce** Oh yeah?

**Garrett Phelan** Big hair, shoulder pads and baggy trousers. Leather ties and tiny little knots.

**Sarah Pierce** And do you miss that Gary?

**Garrett Phelan** White socks. That's where I was at. I had a huge wave of hair over to my right-hand side and large gypsy earrings.

**Sarah Pierce** So you haven't changed much?

**Garrett Phelan** No.

**Sarah Pierce** One place we could start is by describing how and where you saw or listened to music.

**Dennis McNulty** On the radio. A lot.

**Fergus Kelly** John Peel being a major figure because, as everybody knows, he played a huge range of some very, very obscure things.

**Sarah Pierce** Was he a DJ?

**Fergus Kelly** He was a Radio 1 DJ.

**Dennis McNulty** BBC Radio 1.

**Fergus Kelly** He was unusual in that he had a Radio 1 slot for the kind of stuff that he was doing. I seem to remember starting to listen to him around 1979, thereabouts. He'd have the famous Peel Sessions; he'd have bands in like Gang of Four, Magazine and The Mekons, people like that...

**Garrett Phelan** That we used to draw the names of on our ecker books.

**Fergus Kelly** They used to do sessions in advance of the actual albums that were coming out six months later. So you would get to hear stuff ahead of time. There was nothing else comparable happening at the time, so for me as a teenager, I was hearing these new things. It was great for hearing contemporary punk and related post-punk. Then there was also this other off-beam stuff that you couldn't categorise, some of it was amazing, some of it was hilarious and some of it was absolutely appalling.

**Sarah Pierce** Would any of the bands ever come to Dublin?

**Fergus Kelly** Well that's the thing about Dublin. My own experience, my own memory of Dublin at the time, was the feeling of isolation, because we didn't get very many of the bands that would have played in the UK and elsewhere. There were occasional exceptions to that. I remember going to see John Cooper Clarke; he's a Manchester poet and a so-called punk poet. But none of the key bands for me like Wire, Gang of Four, Magazine, Public Image, they never played Dublin. So there was that feeling of isolation.

**Sarah Pierce** So how else did you actually get to hear stuff?

**Fergus Kelly** Besides Peel's show there was Advance Records up in Stephen's Green.

**Garrett Phelan** 'The Office'.

**Sarah Pierce** Was that its code name?

**Garrett Phelan** It was 'The Office'. It was run by this guy who had a Teddy Boy haircut, big old guy, ran 'The Office' or Advance Records as it was officially known, and that became an enclave for all the skinhead punk stuff and new wave stuff. It was one of two or three outlets for me, aside from the fact I inherited my brother's record collection, which was comprehensive. He was in one of the first punk bands in Dublin called The Letters. The only time I ever saw them was in a school prefab and they were all dressed up in bin bags and mirror shades.

**Sarah Pierce** So fashion was important.

**Garrett Phelan** There was Space Hopper boots, leather jackets and that whole malarkey. But the inheritance of the record collection was a major influence.

**Fergus Kelly** Same with me. My brother had an amazing collection.

**Garrett Phelan** That was our intro into the scene. The other influence was Big D Radio, a pirate radio station ran in Stephen's Green, beside the Green Cinema. That had Denis Murray, who was really good for listening to because he played mainly new wave and punk stuff and a bit of hard rock. Then there was another radio programme - the station that it was on used to be down in Capel Street - that used to run a programme called New Wave Rave. That was brilliant because it played everything; X-Ray Spex, all the stuff that you'd be hearing at around 1978. It was only for about a two-year period. The DJ used to interview and feature young Dublin new wave or punk rock bands.

**Sarah Pierce** In terms of distribution, was it mainly through independent record shops like Advance Records?

**Dennis McNulty** There weren't really any mainstream records shops in Ireland at that stage. Even places like Golden Discs were run more like tiny sellers.

**Garrett Phelan** At the time they were big for us.

**Fergus Kelly** This was well prior to HMV or Virgin occupying Irish soil.

**Dennis McNulty** But they weren't mainstream in the sense of the mainstream now. It was still some bloke and his mate.

**Garrett Phelan** Freebird Records would have been a huge shop for us, down on Grafton Street.

**Sarah Pierce** Were there a lot of local bands?

**Garrett Phelan** The band scene in Dublin was huge.

**Dennis McNulty** Even from the 70s.

**Garrett Phelan** Yeah, then you had bands like Soul Survivors and I remember the Crofton Airport Hotel had a venue on Sunday's that was really, really good.

**Dennis McNulty** It was a swimming pool.

**Sarah Pierce** I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

**Dennis McNulty** In was actually a swimming pool and the bands used to play in the pool; it was empty.

**Garrett Phelan** That's where The Rats did their first gig, I think.

**Dennis McNulty** I know someone who saw U2 play there as well.

**Fergus Kelly** I remember seeing U2 in the Dandelion Market and paying 50p. That was another key spot; it was just inside of where Stephen's Green Shopping Centre is now. It was a large market with various shops selling punk clothes and records, and there was this huge badge stall. I was big into badges at the time.

**Garrett Phelan** No Romance was the shop.

**Fergus Kelly** There was this chap too, who sold records out of the boot of his car for four quid a pop. You would meet up and bump into people there. There was a sense of community just in the sense of shared interests. Not even necessarily that we hung out, it was just here was a need that was being addressed. Between that and Freebird Records that sold second-hand and new LPS.

**Garrett Phelan** It's funny looking at zines from the 90s, because the punk that I remember from my brother's time would have been the official punk. He left school in 1977 - '76, '77, '78 was majorly punk. When I look at the fanzines of today, and I look at the very hardcore fanzines of the past 10 - 15 years as well, I see that later breed of punk. I don't associate that with what my brother was into or what I was witnessing.

**Sarah Pierce** What's the difference?

**Dennis McNulty** It's kind of punk and hardcore. A lot of those fanzines are more in the vein of, or influenced by, zines about UK and American hardcore which is like really fast punk.

**Fergus Kelly** It's also more heavily stylised musical form, whereas the original punk was a kick against prog and all that that represented with bands like Yes and Emerson Lake & Palmer, Genesis... The whole DIY aesthetic was crucial, you didn't need to spend years learning the guitar - play three chords and you've got a song. Or even, in the case of a monolithic masterpiece like 'Pink Flag' by Wire, one chord.

**Sarah Pierce** If I'm understanding what you mean by stylised, the shift into what came to signify 'punk' isn't what you would actually associate with punk.

**Fergus Kelly** It became stylised very quickly. By 1978 it was already a fashion.

**Dennis McNulty** I think the motivation with those fanzines is almost an attempt

to return to the anti-fashion DIY thing. They are about how to live a particular lifestyle, which is a hardcore lifestyle, anti-establishment. For me, punk doesn't have that much resonance because I lived outside of Dublin in the suburbs. I only started getting into these things in the mid 80s.

**Garrett Phelan** What age were you then? How old were you in '77?

**Dennis McNulty** I was seven in '77. We were living in Leixlip, which is just outside Dublin, but we only really got the British channels, more than RTE 1, when I was about seven or eight. I remember seeing punks on television for the first time and I was like, 'Oh my God, that looks so great.' It was just generic footage with a BBC voiceover, 'Here are the punk rockers', and the camera panning around. My father was like, 'If you ever look like that, I'll kill you.' And I made a mental note: 'Must investigate that at some point.'

**Garrett Phelan** Fergus and I went to the same school, and we used to go to the Institute of Higher Education for extra tuition on a Saturday morning to do extra class work to catch up...

**Fergus Kelly** Because we were academically challenged.

**Garrett Phelan** Extremely.

**Sarah Pierce** It was all that damn punk music.

**Garrett Phelan** It was. So we used to nod into Stephen's Green Dandelion Market.

**Fergus Kelly** It was part of the ritual.

**Garrett Phelan** We would go in and check out the badges and hang out for a bit. We were educated in North Great Georges Street, in Belvedere, so you were in the city centre all the time. I remember the miners' strike, and you would have to go through the guys with their buckets collecting, and there was the H-Block marches. There was an edge to it. Dublin at that point was very, very, very rundown, and there was a lot of social issues and economic issues going on at the time. It was a very depressing place to be. The New Wave Rave programme was on when you went home after school, which was quality music. You'd see the Buzzcocks on telly and you'd see The Damned. Or else you'd see Supersonic with Marc Bolan on it. Our TV, kid's TV at the time, had the best of music.

**Fergus Kelly** Do you remember that programme Revolver that was on? It used to have punk bands on it. And a revolving stage.

**Garrett Phelan** And the pop quiz, Jukebox Jury Pop Quiz. There was brilliant English TV coming in from UTV and HTV, which is all Welsh stations and Northern Irish TV stations. You got great access to great music. But I suppose the punk that I see today is much more politically constructed. They align themselves with a certain kind of group thinking.

**Sarah Pierce** Like anarchy?

**Garrett Phelan** Right. Anarchy at the time wasn't formed in such a constructed way, like today. Back then there was just a shift into being a teenager and people just blew up basically. It's like Richard Hell and the Voidoids, the Blank Generation album; that title really refers to that age group of people that now are between 42 and 44. They're identityless almost and that's authentic for me in terms of how I

view punk. Today punk is very different, heavily constructed. Black Flag is heavily constructed as far as I'm concerned, in a way that X-Ray Spex wasn't.

**Fergus Kelly** It was more ad hoc and shambolic really.

**Sarah Pierce** The association of punk as anti-establishment or anti-authority makes me curious about how that played out Dublin. If you think about punk in London as a direct reaction to the government or the monarchy, how did that play out in Dublin?

**Fergus Kelly** You're not that politicised as a teenager. To be honest, I can't remember how I felt most of the time. You were still in the soft bubble of the parental environment. Not really in the world, so to speak. Your biggest worry was passing the Leaving Cert. That just seemed like this insurmountable hurdle. It was a source of considerable anxiety. Some handled it better than others. It depended on your parents' attitude. In my case, fail the Leaving and you've no future. A ridiculous thing to say to a teenager, and such a pile of shit when you look back on it.

**Dennis McNulty** I think it played out economically. Living in a place like London, economy-wise it was pretty okay compared to Dublin where it was completely depressed.

**Garrett Phelan** Really bleak.

**Fergus Kelly** London in the late 70s was on the death throes of the old Labour Government, with strikes and parts of London becoming a health hazard with uncollected refuse piling up, dereliction, unemployment, drugs, violence... This was a key part of the punk/post-punk jigsaw. It wasn't all about bucking against the pomposity of stadium rock. Thatcher began her 11 year reign in 1979. It was pretty grim. In Ireland, Charlie Haughey assumed power at the same time, with his famous speech about tightening our belts during the recession. Meanwhile he was spending thousands on exclusive French shirts. This coincided with a big swing back to the right in the US with Reagan's election in 1980.

**Sarah Pierce** And still, economically it was worse in Dublin.

**Dennis McNulty** Yeah, for example, all that rhetoric that goes with punk rock like buying cheap guitars - and with rave music too, you know, 'Buy a cheap synthesiser and go off and make a track in your bedroom' - that reality didn't exist here because there was no second-hand market. People didn't have the stuff the first time. So you went trawling through the second-hand ads looking for equipment and there wasn't any there.

**Garrett Phelan** We used to go into Walton's at the end of Parnell Street, which was the only music shop open Saturday. The poor guys behind the counters would be going bananas because everybody would doing their 'Devo'- Mongoloid-like bass riff, but no one was buying anything.

**Sarah Pierce** Fergus, do you think DIY culture had a different meaning then? Did bands have a strategy, 'We are going to be our own producers and turn down the labels', or was DIY more a necessity?

**Fergus Kelly** It was a time, not just in Dublin but elsewhere, where there was a huge amount of innocence with regard to record contracts and so on. There was a lot

of naivety about producing. A lot of people got very badly ripped off.

**Garrett Phelan** Mulligan was a label here.

**Sarah Pierce** What is Mulligan?

**Garrett Phelan** Mulligan Records was the main label here. The Boomtown Rats were on Mulligan, and Looking after Number One and Mary of the 4th Form were released on it, I think. That was all during the period at the Crofton Airport Hotel. Then you had the Soul Survivors on that label, and possibly The Atrix and D.C. Nien, all these different Dublin bands.

**Sarah Pierce** Who were D.C. Nien?

**Garrett Phelan** D.C. Nien were great. The Atrix, they had a single 'The Moon Is Puce'. They were fuckin' great bands.

**Fergus Kelly** Let's not forget The Virgin Prunes. They were astonishing, a genre unto themselves.

**Dennis McNulty** I found a website last week where somebody is trying to create a database of Irish punk and new wave bands.

**Fergus Kelly** Is it historical?

**Dennis McNulty** It's all mid 70s to mid-to late- 80s. It's punk and new wave and includes stuff from Belfast. There's so much of it. I couldn't believe how much punk there was.

**Fergus Kelly** I've heard there's somebody who has a website specifically to do with the Ramones gig in Phibsboro. I was at that.

**Garrett Phelan** I remember you were at that.

**Fergus Kelly** It was one of these watershed moments, to actually go and see them, the Ramones, in what is now a furniture warehouse.

**Garrett Phelan** It was a cinema then, wasn't it?

**Fergus Kelly** It was a cinema, that's right.

**Garrett Phelan** And didn't The Epidemics support them?

**Fergus Kelly** No. I'll never forget who supported them. It was a band called The Snips, and the reason I have never forgotten it is because I have this graphic image of the lead singer, who was wearing this kind of quite large white smock, and by the end of their set it was completely bejewelled in gobs.

**Sarah Pierce** Gobs?

**Garrett Phelan** It was gob city.

**Fergus Kelly** That was one of the rather unpleasant aspects of punk.

**Garrett Phelan** Didn't he break down and cry on stage or something?

**Fergus Kelly** He was a bit dismayed by the end all right. There was no spitting on the Ramones, I can tell you. When they came out with the 'Gabba Gabba Hey' placard, that was just the best moment for me.

**Sarah Pierce** What age were you then?

**Fergus Kelly** That was 1978 - 79, so I would have been about 14 - 15. It was such a



thrill. I could only go because my brother and his friend were going. My brother's four years older than me. It was the same year I saw Lou Reed in the Stadium, which was a boxing ring up near the Mosque on the South Circular Road.

**Garrett Phelan** But you went to a Ramones gig up in Phibsboro in 1978. I mean that was a dangerous gig to go to. Cabra was bonkers then.

**Sarah Pierce** Do you mean violent?

**Garrett Phelan** It was bonkers. I would be shitting my pants going to some of these gigs. I was talking to a mate of mine who grew up very much within the music scene in Cork, and he never experienced the fear factor that you would experience in going to gigs here. Going to gigs here, you took your life into your hands. I remember you going to the Anti-Nowhere League in the TV Club. The Barracudas supported, who were all the punk heads at the time. The Golden Horde supported The Barracudas, then The Barracudas came out, and then the Anti-Nowhere League came out and played. The Golden Horde did their set, which was wonderful, and they got off unscathed. Then The Barracudas came on and they were just showered in spit. They actually stopped the gig. The manager came out and said, 'Look, we'd love to continue.' All the skinheads from Cabra were there and were saying, 'It's cool, we won't do it again.' They came back on again, and they spat all over them. This happened about three times, so it was getting out of hand. When the Anti-Nowhere League came out - this is really interesting - hardcore punk bands at that time never got the massive media coverage that you get today, so you didn't know what these guys looked like. They walked out on stage, you know, 'The Russians are coming', really hardcore stuff, and the lead singer looked like he was out of Twisted Sister. He had this huge blonde perm right down to his arse. Every skinhead in the place jumped up and beat the shit out of the band and they stole all the equipment, and went running down Harcourt Street with it. The irony of that is that the TV Club was sited beside the Harcourt Street Police Station, and the police just locked their doors and let them get on with it.

**Fergus Kelly** A lot of players were getting eye infections from getting gobbled in the face. There's famous shots of Siouxsie Sioux with an eye patch and everybody thinks it's a fashion statement, but she had a severe eye infection after getting gobbled on.

**Dennis McNulty** I heard the lead singer from Anthrax being interviewed on the radio on Sunday morning, and the guy who was interviewing him mentioned the fact that the last time they played here they got gobbled off stage. They threw a tantrum and walked off because people started spitting at them. That was in the mid 90s.

**Sarah Pierce** Are bands warned about spitting crowds when they come to play in Dublin?

**Dennis McNulty** Kids don't do it anymore.

**Garrett Phelan** No, they don't.

**Sarah Pierce** Kids today.

**Garrett Phelan** I know, what's with that?

**Sarah Pierce** So Dennis, living in the suburbs were you coming into Dublin to see bands?

**Dennis McNulty** I only started coming in

when I was 14 or 15, and in the beginning I only came in to see free things. I looked like an amoeba, I looked so young, so I could never ever blag my way into venues. Even when I was 25, I was still getting stopped going to places.

**Garrett Phelan** What's the first gig in Dublin that you came to?

**Dennis McNulty** Oh, it's really embarrassing...

**Sarah Pierce** Mine was Adam Ant, Portland Maine, 1984. It can't be that bad.

**Dennis McNulty** If only. I wish I'd seen Adam Ant. Blue in Heaven, The Stars of Heaven and Those Handsome Devils. Three Irish bands.

**Garrett Phelan** The Handsome Devils, there was a huge rockabilly scene.

**Dennis McNulty** And kind of psychobilly as well.

**Sarah Pierce** So rockabilly, punk...

**Garrett Phelan** Mods, new wavers, skinheads...

**Sarah Pierce** Was everyone against each other?

**Dennis McNulty** Pretty much.

**Garrett Phelan** There were regular reports that Sunday was a no-go area in Grafton Street.

**Fergus Kelly** That's right. People were kicking the living shit out of each other.

**Garrett Phelan** It was really violent. Cops called out. The Teddy Boys would all congregate outside Murray's Records on the top of Grafton Street and the skinheads and mods outside Advance Records in South King Street and eventually there would be carnage.

**Sarah Pierce** Demographically, could you have a mod and a punk rocker from the same family, or were the scenes delineated according to neighbourhood, or generation...?

**Garrett Phelan** The Cabra skinheads were notorious. Ballymun was always reggae. Mates and myself went to see Linton Kwesi Johnson and the place was full of Ballymunners.

**Dennis McNulty** Do you reckon that had anything to do with Bob Marley playing in Dalymount?

**Sarah Pierce** Dollymount?

**Dennis McNulty** Dalymount. The football pitch up in Phibsboro.

**Garrett Phelan** Bohs - Bohemian Football Club. Put that in.

**Dennis McNulty** A lot of working-class areas in Dublin were into reggae. When I was growing up, loads of people in my school were into UB40. Two or three of the craziest people in my school were really into Bob Marley.

**Fergus Kelly** That was a big part of Peel's output as well. He always played loads of dub. Wonderful, wonderful stuff. PiL's music was heavily influenced by dub. Dub had some great producers like Adrian Sherwood and Lee 'Scratch' Perry to name but a few.

**Dennis McNulty** There weren't that many Irish reggae bands. The only one I know is that one from Cork, Too Much for the White Man.

**Garrett Phelan** Oh, shit yeah.

**Sarah Pierce** Are they over and done with now?

**Dennis McNulty** Completely. On RTE television there was a programme called, Youngline. It was a clichéd youth programme in the worst possible way. The presenters were slightly older than they really should have been, and they were down with the lingo. There is some great footage of U2 playing on that programme. They had this kind of back projection and they look really new wave. Then on Saturday mornings there was a children's programme called Anything Goes. When it got to about 12 o'clock they would hand it over to this guy called Dave Heffernan, who was this local rock pundit and then he'd interview various local musicians.

**Garrett Phelan** Dave Fanning started out with Big D Radio and moved into an evening slot with his own show on RTE. Today it's disastrous, but at the time his programme was primo, quality listening for anybody who had a half interest in new wave.

**Fergus Kelly** I didn't really listen, but I know that he was playing current material.

**Dennis McNulty** I used to listen to Dave.

**Sarah Pierce** Were people's affiliations with different music based on these shows, or personal taste, or was it back to this idea of class identification with Bob Marley.

**Fergus Kelly** Personal taste really.

**Dennis McNulty** On reflection though, I reckon reggae has always been predominantly a working class thing in Dublin. Possibly an identification with Bob Marley's politics Sarah, like you say. UB40 who were really popular here were quite political when they started out too, calling themselves after the UK's unemployment benefit form. 'One in Ten' is about being unemployed and they still function as a collective.

**Garrett Phelan** I'm the youngest in my family and I was heavily influenced by my next brother. He was the punk, he was the rebel, he was my marker. I don't know what psychological term would describe it.

**Dennis McNulty** Hero worship.

**Garrett Phelan** He was my hero. What is interesting is that all the guys of that generation left in 1977-78. They all left Ireland. They had to get out and they were displaced, they were forcibly detached from the country.

**Sarah Pierce** Where did they go?

**Garrett Phelan** London. Berlin. Paris. Holland. So we ended up inheriting these amazingly good record collections. A lot of those guys didn't come back for 10-15 years because they hated Ireland when they left.

**Sarah Pierce** Were any women part of the scene?

**Garrett Phelan** Rarely. I went to The Fall gig in the Temple Bar Music Centre a few years back, and it was extraordinary because all these people from about 35 to 44 were all blokes, all with bags under their eyes, all alcohol and cigarettes; it

was all very Doctor Feel Good.

**Fergus Kelly** I had a similar experience when I went to see the Buzzcocks in Shepherds Bush Empire in London about two years ago. There were these really old punks, and they were still in the punk gear with the hair sticking up. Something really pathetic about dishevelled looking men in their late 40s wearing essentially teenage clothes.

**Garrett Phelan** But the gigs are always brilliant.

**Fergus Kelly** The gig was powerful.

**Dennis McNulty** I have a strong belief that bands should never reform.

**Garrett Phelan** You're right. But would you go and see Gang of Four again?

**Dennis McNulty** No.

**Fergus Kelly** I certainly would.

**Garrett Phelan** I totally would go and see them again. Gang of Four is probably more influential to stuff now because they were so politically motivated. The Entertainment album was fuckin' amazing for its time.

**Dennis McNulty** I think probably Crass would be the most important band in terms of today's identification with punk.

**Fergus Kelly** They're the most hardcore in terms of being politicised.

**Dennis McNulty** They really tried to set themselves up outside society. Two or three members of the band have a farm in the middle of England, and they run it as a kind of commune. Because deep down they were hippies really, as well as punks.

**Sarah Pierce** About hippies, were they part of the scene?

**Fergus Kelly** There were plenty of hippies in Dublin, who were hated by punks. 'Never trust a hippy', was their motto.

**Sarah Pierce** Note to reader: Gary just sneered.

**Dennis McNulty** Dr. Strangely Strange. There was loads of hippie stuff like that. My mate Paul knows loads about that scene.

**Garrett Phelan** Tim Goulding was or is a painter based in Allihies; his dad is Basil Goulding. Tim's a well-known Irish painter as well, and he played keyboards and did vocals for Dr. Strangely Strange. They were huge in Ireland.

**Dennis McNulty** Brush Shiels was in a band wasn't he, that was kind of hippie/rock? Skid Row.

**Fergus Kelly** My memory of the times is that if you were into punk, you couldn't be into metal or rock. There was a vague sense of shame if you were enjoying Tubular Bells and listening to the Gang of Four as well. It was incompatible.

**Sarah Pierce** What strikes me is that you all have this common frame of reference. I know Fergus and Gary grew up together, but the fact that Dennis knows the reference points just from being here. It must have something to do with what Fergus was saying earlier - this idea of being isolated - and what Gary was saying too, about Dublin being run down. When things happened here, whether it was your scene or not, you knew it was happening.

**Dennis McNulty** You just went because it was

the only thing for the foreseeable future. It wasn't like you had a choice.

**Garrett Phelan** A big thing was bunking the Trinity Ball. They used to run gigs in the cricket field near The Pavilion. Dave Fanning used to run this whole radio show and bands like Public Enemy used to play. I remember seeing The La's twice. Really major players headlined.

**Sarah Pierce** Isn't the Trinity Ball a formal debutante event?

**Garrett Phelan** It is but the gigs were great. So you had loads of gougers like me trying to jump the railings. The 'ents' officers were hugely important - the position was set up by the student unions for the different colleges. They decided what gigs went on around town.

**Fergus Kelly** It was the same in the UK. A lot of the punk bands would have their initial gigs in colleges. The first Sex Pistols gig was at St. Martin's School of Art.

**Garrett Phelan** I was always under the impression that Joy Division played the Buttery.

**Fergus Kelly** No, they never played there.

**Dennis McNulty** No.

**Garrett Phelan** Are you sure?

**Fergus Kelly** I would know because I was a huge fan.

**Garrett Phelan** But then New Order played the Buttery.

**Dennis McNulty** Possibly.

**Garrett Phelan** There's a definite gig in the Buttery at some point - by either the later members in New Order or Joy Division. So the Buttery at Trinity College was a major venue for people coming in.

**Fergus Kelly** Top Hat in Dun Laoghaire.

**Garrett Phelan** Phenomenal venue.

**Fergus Kelly** The Stranglers played in Top Hat.

**Garrett Phelan** St. Francis Xavier Hall was another.

**Sarah Pierce** There was a time then when more bands were being booked in from outside Dublin?

**Dennis McNulty** It was really independent though. It was people doing one-off gigs.

**Garrett Phelan** There was no MCD bollocks.

**Dennis McNulty** No. The big shift in terms of Dublin and gigs was U2 really. It was before U2 were famous and then after U2 were famous.

**Sarah Pierce** When U2 became famous, that's when people started to see that there was potential here for an audience?

**Fergus Kelly** It gave people confidence all around - audiences, bands. It was down to U2's success.

**Garrett Phelan** I think people were forming bands, but suddenly there was a point with U2, or with the Boomtown Rats actually, to be quite fair about it, that things changed. I remember when 'I don't like Mondays' got to number one. I was in Donabate caravan park. It was in 1979. I was only about 14,

and all the kids were looking up at the TV, we're all waiting for number one. The countdown got to number three and two, and eventually, 'God, we've done it.' The Irish have got a number one. We went fucking ape shit.

**Sarah Pierce** I was in Ontario and our music teacher filled weeks of time by having each of us bring in a different song everyday to present to the class. Everyone was bringing in things like Grease Lightning and Elton John, stuff like that. Then one day, this is so clear to me, Bobby Miller brought in a 45 of 'I don't like Mondays'. We were all mesmerized. I had no clue who the Boomtown Rats were or that they were Irish.

**Fergus Kelly** Remember this is pre-MTV, which didn't come until 1984.

**Dennis McNulty** MT-USA was RTE's version of MTV. They used to show videos for 4 or 5 hours on a Sunday afternoon. Cheap TV. They would regularly show the ZZ Top Eliminator trilogy, 'Owner of a Lonely Heart' by Yes, Pat Benetar, and Michael Jackson's Thriller singles, all that stuff. That had a pretty huge impact on everyone I grew up with. It was presented from New York every week by a guy called Vincent Hanley, Fab Vinnie, who was an RTE radio DJ. It seemed very glamorous to me at the time.

**Garrett Phelan** Before MTV, Top of the Pops gave us access. Thursday nights Top of the Pops.

**Fergus Kelly** The few English programmes... The Old Grey Whistle Test, of course; it was hugely important. PiL, Magazine, Gang Of Four, amongst others, appeared on it.

**Garrett Phelan** If your mother let you stay up that late. Battling with mother. This is all important - the fighting with the parents. The first album I brought home was Never Mind the Bollocks. My brother had hundreds of records, but I knew that was one that he didn't have and it was primo, it was the ultimate record, Never Mind the Bollocks. I remember going into Golden Discs on Talbot Street, buying that record, being mortified, and smuggling it home on the bus. Then getting off the bus, and coming into the house, 'Hello son', up the stairs to the bedroom, slot it in way down the back to the right of hundreds of records. And I left. Next I heard, 'Mr. Phelan, you can take that muck back in and get the money back.' I don't know how, to this day, my old man knew. I swapped it for The Cure's 17 Seconds. Right bollocks.

**Dennis McNulty** Not their finest moment really. Although it does have 'A forest' on it.

**Sarah Pierce** Did you start to notice bands were here on a regular basis?

**Fergus Kelly** It was far more occasional. Nothing like the way it is now.

**Dennis McNulty** I think there's a lot of music here now. You can go 20 different places in one night in Dublin now. But in the late 80s, early 90s, something major would come maybe once a month. You wouldn't see foreign bands regularly. Now there are foreign bands playing every night of the week.

**Garrett Phelan** And the venues are much bigger. If you go to see a reasonably good band now, you'll probably find them in the Olympia. There is no intimacy.

**Fergus Kelly** Like in the old dives.

**Garrett Phelan** The Gun Club played at the



TV Club, remember? I certainly miss seeing big bands like that in small venues. And feeling that level of danger as well.

**Dennis McNulty** When I was in college the ents officer in Trinity had struck up a relationship with the Hope Collective, which were a hardcore DIY collective who used to bring bands over, like American hardcore bands and European hardcore bands. Niall McGuirk was in a band called Not Our World and they used to play in Trinity all the time, along with loads of the Hope bands.

**Sarah Pierce** They were taking it upon themselves to bring people over?

**Dennis McNulty** They were the first serious attempt to do that regularly, in my recollection anyway.

**Sarah Pierce** And they were doing it non-commercially?

**Dennis McNulty** Oh yeah, totally. When we started doing electronic gigs with Ultramack, we basically robbed our philosophy from Hope, which was you put the gig on, you work your balls off to make sure that it works out, and then if you make any money, you put it into making another gig happen. Everybody in Hope worked for free as far as I know. They had a policy where even the people who were working on the gigs used to pay in.

**Garrett Phelan** Do you feel there is a necessity for punk now in the same way that we could attempt to imagine there was a need for the generation that produced punk? I always refer to contemporary punk, or the punk from 10 or 15 years ago, as geek punk. I don't get that punk. My generation missed the '76 - '78 period by three or four years; we were just onlookers. We were more new wavers in terms of the chronology.

**Sarah Pierce** You are wondering how a later generation identifies with punk when they weren't directly connected to it?

**Fergus Kelly** We had an awareness of punk, but we were coming in at the end of it.

**Garrett Phelan** The other stuff is post, post, post geek punk. I'm interested as to why today's 'Geek Punks' want to attach their identities to something that existed historically for them.

**Dennis McNulty** Stuff like that, that I would have been into, they would have considered themselves hardcore and not punk. It's just names, their naming structure. They come from the same root, but punk existed in a certain world at a certain time and then hardcore was a reaction to a very different world. A lot of it is post-apocalyptic, nuclear war, and all that shit, and a reaction to political stuff that happened in the UK and the US - Ronnie & Maggie...

**Sarah Pierce** Did the transition in to grunge happen here?

**Dennis McNulty** Big time.

**Sarah Pierce** For me, part of what came out of punk includes girl bands in the 90s like Bikini Kill, Amy Carter, and a whole Riot Grrl scene who were claiming a space - maybe because punk was so male dominated. Some of it came out of Olympia and was later marketed as 'grunge'.

**Dennis McNulty** They were near Seattle so it was easy to tar them with the same brush, but they had a very different ideology, if you want to call grunge an ideology.

**Garrett Phelan** Did you go to that Top Hat gig with Nirvana?

**Dennis McNulty** Yeah, it was incredible.

**Garrett Phelan** I was at that as well.

**Dennis McNulty** I really clearly remember them playing 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'.

**Garrett Phelan** Very few people in the audience for Nirvana. It's fair to say that Bleach certainly wasn't of note.

**Dennis McNulty** My mate had sent me Bleach over on a cassette from Canada. So I knew the songs and recognised them, but they hadn't released the new album yet.

**Sarah Pierce** What year was this?

**Dennis McNulty** It was '91.

**Garrett Phelan** At the Top Hat, all the Sonic Youth people were in their late 20s, early 30s going to that gig. If I'm correct, there was two kids fucking in the middle of the floor who got arrested by the police. Which was bonkers like. Then six months later I bought a ticket to Nirvana at the Point Depot, and there were all these 14-year-olds. All little teenyboppers singing along. I'd blow my head off too.

**Sarah Pierce** Speaking of fucking in the middle of the floor what was the drug scene?

**Fergus Kelly** Heroin.

**Garrett Phelan** In a very core group. It was a massive alcohol scene. But, particularly this blank generation, all the guys that would be 43, 44, 45 today, they were signing themselves into the Endocrine Unit up in James's Hospital. They would get paid £150 a week. I find that generation fascinating. They didn't give a blind fuck about anything or anybody, what they did or how they behaved. There was utter irreverence.

**Dennis McNulty** It's the original punk spirit. No future.

**Garrett Phelan** It was a state of mind as opposed to a construct or wanting to follow some creed. They just were what they were.

**Dennis McNulty** Nothing is ever that pure either. You can't really say that. Part of reason they were behaving like that was because they had been pumped full of that stuff by the media.

**Garrett Phelan** I ardently believe that they were what they were and they never became anything else. They were floating people. They floated through society. If you talk to most 43-, 44- 45-year-old fellas, and a lot of the women as well, they floated through. They are a confused bunch. They are a very interesting bunch, but they are a blank generation.

**Fergus Kelly** The same could probably be said of a lot of generations. 60s and 70s and 80s.

**Garrett Phelan** That bunch in particular, there's something interesting about them. There has never been any quintessential description of it. Except for Lipstick Traces which takes an academic approach to the Pistols and doesn't really succeed.

**Dennis McNulty** I think that the fundamental difference between the stuff I would have been aware of growing up and the stuff Gary & Fergus are talking about is that in the

late 80s and 90s the energy that was taken up with that self-destructive urge was turned around into something else - DIY, supporting the scene, and all that.

**Sarah Pierce** Gary, you mentioned Greil Marcus' book, which was a huge hit in the art world. This is an awkward segue way, but the three of you all happen to use sound in your art. Is there any direct relationship between what you experienced of a music scene as a teenager and your art practice now?

**Fergus Kelly** DIY and the spirit of experimentation for me anyway. Question everything. Take it apart and reassemble it in new forms. It continues to be a huge part of what I do today.

**Sarah Pierce** In terms of making work?

**Fergus Kelly** Sure, but also just the simple fact of working with found materials and constructing instruments from scrap metals and so forth. Doing stuff incredibly cheaply. I've come to computer technology down a very, very long road after working with a four-track for a long time and previously with cassette players. That aside, for me it's about forging a particular sound world created from things that I find. Part of that is recording environments as sound sources for studio manipulation. Studio-as-instrument.

**Sarah Pierce** I wonder if the crossover into what might be called the art world allows you to work with sound on your own terms.

**Dennis McNulty** I don't know about that.

**Sarah Pierce** Yeah, as I'm saying it I'm not sure either.

**Dennis McNulty** If you want to consider art and music separate worlds, and they aren't really separate, but they probably aren't as permeable as people would like to believe they are, I think it's important to try and actually do something that's outside both worlds even though in reality, that's probably not possible.

**Fergus Kelly** The most interesting stuff falls between the cracks really.

**Dennis McNulty** I try to find an audience of people who are from the art world or the music world or whatever world, and not be too particular about where they're coming from, but to snare people who might be interested in what I'm doing for whatever reason. Then I like to try to find out what that reason is if I can.

**Sarah Pierce** You told me that when you were in Brazil the people whom you felt were relating to your work would probably identify more with the music world than the art world.

**Dennis McNulty** It's problematic because the art world is really the visual art world, and if you're working with sound and dealing with the art world, you are generally dealing with people who are very visually educated but maybe haven't really considered sound before. Thinking about sound beyond music is frequently a new experience for a visual arts audience and this puts someone like me in a strange position. One way I tried to address that for Brazil was by doing the 'alpha60.info' website, which is me trying to introduce the concerns that someone working with sound might have to an audience that might not be familiar with that way of working.

**Fergus Kelly** Or they just don't have the background.

**Garrett Phelan** My use of sound has nothing to do with music in a direct sense. In '91 Mark McLoughlin and myself, set up a whole programme for inviting people within visual art who had an intention or who had an eagerness at that time to use sound within their work. I was pretty adamant that it wouldn't be seen as music. My intention, whether it succeeded or failed, was to simply view sound in its physical terms as a type of sculptural process with unexplored physical properties. Something other than tangible. The vocabulary was there for people to experience and use sound but they didn't apply it because it wasn't an acceptable process within the visual art world, certainly not in Ireland at that time. I wasn't about using sound in terms of performing for or to an audience. Using an audience through radio, and exploring the physical properties of sound and radio, and having the process ratified were my motivations.

**Sarah Pierce** Gary, in your practice, and tell if I'm completely misreading this, the choices that you make involve a DIY aesthetic in terms of using materials like spray paint and big speakers and MDF, and constructing spaces off-site.

**Garrett Phelan** Where Fergus is naturally DIY, I'm very much formed DIY. It's very considered. I'm looking for an aesthetic that has DIY because I feel that it is appropriate to adopt that look and feel. It's not a natural thing for me. I remember the very first time I experienced Fergus through sound; 1986 or thereabouts. I put it down as a very influential moment. Fergus was handed over this huge portion of a building, which was a convent or a Christian Brothers' school out in Dun Laoghaire College of Art. We hadn't seen each other in a couple of years, since either of us left school. I was off doing my arty farty stuff and working for an art gallery. We were just chatting, catching up, and he said, 'Do you want to come out to this place?' I went out and he had this whole huge space and it was decked out with hanging gasoline tanks and bed racks. And he had a big pile of drumsticks, and the two of us spent three hours just thrashing the place. It was fuckin' liberating for me in many respects. I wasn't viewing it as music. I think Fergus, you were very interested in creating patterns and drumming techniques. I was just smashing the place up. I could see the difference in our approach to what we were doing, and I have focused on this area. We have debated this issue very heavily during projects we have worked on together, about the fine line between creating music and using sound as a visual artist. I think it comes down to the intention of the person. If you're prepared to stand up in front of a crowd with a laptop or with readymade musical instrument type objects, airing or improvising music type noise compositions and it's performance-orientated, that's fine. I think if I was performing, I would be approaching it in a very different way. Kendell Geers uses a very aggressive approach to performance, using sound to unbearable levels. As performance I find that more interesting; that's what I have been interested in since I have worked with sound and radio. For me, it's about changing my physical position through sound. It's about a physical presence, it's about popping ears. I've blown my ears to bits. I've full-on tinnitus in both ears, but I did it, even though Mark McLoughlin was telling me not to go a certain distance with something, I would do that anyway. I was very interested in finding out my limitations and the technology's limitations; If I turned up something loud

enough would it make my ears bleed, would it blow the transmitter? That's a very different reason for doing something than actually composing with the intention of performing in front of a live audience. As someone working in the visual arts those physical properties and boundaries of the physics of sound interest me more than what it actually sounds like.

**Fergus Kelly** Just to go back to the earlier point about the visual arts and the vocabulary or lack there of, one issue is that very little is written about sound art and its history.

**Sarah Pierce** Some exhibitions actually limit the discourse to formal or technical innovations in the last decade instead of thinking about sound as a conceptual framework. This can also limit what people think of when they hear the term 'sound art'.

**Dennis McNulty** There are a few key texts, more written in the last five years.

**Sarah Pierce** Doesn't Trinity have a course now, an MA in Sound?

**Dennis McNulty** Music Technology. I did it five years ago. A really amazing experience.

**Garrett Phelan** Mark and I tried very hard to introduce an education platform into the radio station at Arthouse. The first station we did was in '94. We collated over 200 artists from all over the world who had that label, 'sound artist'.

**Dennis McNulty** It's actually incredible to read that list now.

**Garrett Phelan** We were in communication with and receiving work from top notch people. Our hope was that people could educate themselves by listening to our station. It was heavily publicised. In another project we used to bring artists in to Bowe Lane Recording Studios and give them a 48-track analogue system with full studio and say, 'Four days, the engineer is paid for. We're going to publish a CD at the end of it. Do what you want, and we'll produce it with you.' We thought people would be inspired by the level of technology that we made available to them at the time, but actually the project ended after the third CD; only a few people within the visual arts community outside the original group wanted to explore the area of sound; we couldn't find any more at the time, and those who were on the first project ended up using the process and technology that they were comfortable with, which is a good thing.

**Dennis McNulty** Gary has stumbled onto why DIY was the only option for people like me. Studios and engineers cost a lot of money and none of us had any. The only option was to 'seize the means of production'.

**Sarah Pierce** I've noticed it can be hard to get equipment here. I call suppliers and they make me feel like I'm nuts, or they describe how to get around it, or it's expensive. Perhaps this relates to your point Dennis, about equipment not being here the first time around.

**Dennis McNulty** In terms of trying to describe Ireland in the '80s, there was an Irish punk single by this band called Drunken Jury. One of their mates released it for them and he formed a label called, I Live in Hell Records. The logo was a map of Ireland.

**Fergus Kelly** So much of the city was

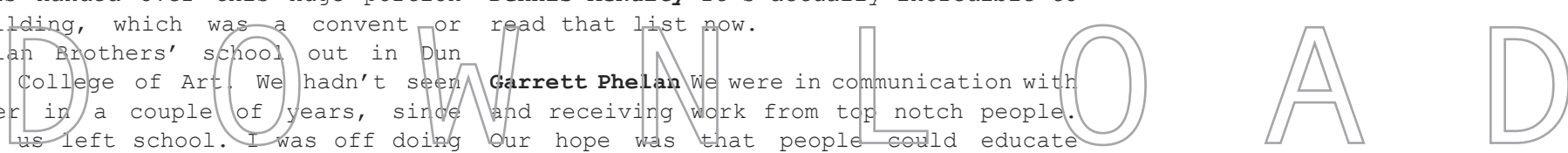
derelict. You would be amazed at how much open ground there was that's all been just hoovered up in the 90s with new developments.

**Sarah Pierce** Sometimes Gerard and I will be walking down the street and we'll pass these pockets, and he'll say, 'That's what Dublin looked like when I grew up.'

**Garrett Phelan** Its shitness made it great. What was fabulous about it was that I certainly had the motivation to do something, Fergus you certainly did, Dennis so did you, and that made it great. You had to fight against it slightly. I'm a Dub. It was good.

**Fergus Kelly** It was shit but good.

**Garrett Phelan** It was good shit.



# D O W N L O A D

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**The Metropolitan Complex** is a Dublin-based project by Sarah Pierce. It organizes a social practice around a range of activities such as exhibitions, talks and publications. These structures often open up to the personal and the incidental.

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**Ireland  
at Venice  
2005**

