

Manchester 1979-1985

I was talking with a friend about Gods Gift and the situation around the time we started and how bleak Manchester was. It was badly affected politically by the disinterest and disdain the government had for places such as our homes. Both Steve and I were brought up in rough areas of Salford which is a major industrial city in its own right but seemingly forever in the shadow of its sprawling neighbour.

Manchester was almost cave-like somehow, like a giant tunnel of grim half-light. It seemed as if it was always dark and always raining. The buildings were either grey or shades of grey and that made it a very oppressive atmosphere to inhabit. I think a lot of people of our age reacted to this bleakness and responded accordingly. It was the time of Thatcher of course and there was the added horror of a quite horrendous Manchester chief of police called James Anderton, who was referred to, mockingly, as God's Cop. He disliked everything and anything that could make life remotely enjoyable and had a special hatred of homosexuals. I wouldn't lend any weight to his history but I would advise anybody to read about the things he said, whilst bearing in mind he was actually the Police Chief of our city and listened only to God. He hated any sort of difference in people and that didn't fit well with a very working-class city. Those years and the way we lived and were brought up made our stance very anti-authoritarian. I think that the coming together of these shoots of miserable city life and working 60 hours a week in a Victorian asylum were defining factors for the appearance of Gods Gift. Such an era, such a bleak city, such a miserable lack of self-determination festering in a gothic workplace, with its innate mental health horrors, it truly created some strange feelings and opinions for us.

Taking any kind of an attitude into such a workplace was always going to develop and, as youngsters in Manchester/Salford, we grew up to distrust any authority. We never trusted anything we were told. Never believed anything we were told and were educated into making our own mind up on absolutely everything that confronted us. I know Steve's parents were like that, as were my parents. In truth, everybody we knew was like that. Such beliefs, seen through the prism of mental illness, was perhaps the cornerstone of the group.

What a political landscape to start a group in! There was always an air of violence in Manchester at the time. Everywhere we felt that people were dissatisfied with everything and everybody. I think Thatcher's Britain only ever seemed to cater for the needs of her followers and had little or no regard for poor people, sick people or ordinary working people. It became such a volatile, but often very strange time; a time of miners' strikes and the virtual war between the miners and the police. The police were hated where we were from and were known as Thatcher's Army because they did the dirty work for Thatcher and her extreme policies. Most people I knew hated everything that the government stood for. Eventually, hostility and anger grew and there were riots in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and London all around the same time.

There was a general disenchantment with absolutely everything and, of course, Thatcher managed to get herself her war in the Falklands to escape further scrutiny, but in doing so I think she managed to create a gung-ho and nationalistic attitude amongst a lot of angry, bemused, poor people who thought that 'Maggie' was the new answer and she was standing up to an enemy we didn't really know we had. She chose to become Britannia and throw money at a war rather than look after the working people of the country. It saved her from being thrown out and she didn't care who she threw under the tanks. She was able to fool a lot of working-class people very quickly and it led a lot of people to the dark side of Tory policy and these same people, still believing in Thatcher, turned on the behaviour of the miners and the miners' unions, seeming to accept the brutal actions of the police at places like Orgreave. Ultimately, it was the end of the working class for me.

As a nurse I did strike later in the early 80s, but on the picket line we had miners from the local colliery. They were decent working men who were not being paid enough for working in hell. A small group of us would occasionally go down to the local colliery at Agecroft and sit, support and talk to the blokes sat there. They were as angry as we were because they knew who the enemy was. I knew who the enemy was and Gods Gift knew who the enemy was. I think possibly our anger at what was going on around us in Manchester was a uniting feature. It is often claimed that the Sex Pistols' gig at the Lesser Free Trade Hall was a catalyst for many of Manchester's groups. Everybody claimed to be there, but I wasn't there. Neither was Steve Edwards, Paul Leadbeater or Laura Plant, but Iain Grey was! He was one of the two lads with Ian Curtis. Also there were Barney Dickens/Sumner and Peter Hook who went to our school and the fact that they came up with such a nihilistic, alienated sound within Joy Division and they're from close by where we're from, lends a lot to any assertion that Manchester at this time was as responsible for creating the sound it threw at the world as were the people involved. To compound this assertion further there is a huge link with this disturbed urban era and the Fall. All of them were linked to Salford and Prestwich Hospital. I think the atmosphere in Manchester was rife for anger and rebellion and it is hugely political because there is an inherent hatred of the system and what it demands of its poorest members. There's a hatred of authority and an inability to bow to it. In our own way, we tried everything that we could to point out what we felt and experienced, whilst knowing that many people weren't interested, but that's just life. I think our left leaning stance was probably very similar to most bands in Manchester at the time. Many of whom were brought up in a similar way.

When the initial punk movement took its roots in Manchester, it was often unsafe to be seen going to the gigs. For some time, there were hordes of Teddy Boys waiting at bus stops, eager to fight the new freaks. There was a great sense of community within the movement initially. It made the city smaller, or perhaps we accepted inhabiting only a small corner? The venues like the Electric Circus and The Ranch, later Pips, the Beach Club, the Gallery and not a mention of the Factory-run places. It was a time when most people seemed to know each other either personally or on nodding terms. When the movement started, it seemed completely socialist in its outlook. It provoked the formation of the Anti Nazi League and most of the bigger groups clearly supported such aims. As time passed by, the media diluted it so that it became a fashion commodity, enjoyed by the wealthier types, who felt they were now living dangerously. I loved the Manchester groups for not going down that route. Joy Division, the Fall, the Buzzcocks and others. They retained the dour Manchester darkness and it is something to be proud of.

Being a small part of this shred of Manchester and Salford music will always be payment for the efforts GG put in. The political landscape of northern cities was in a state of change due to the lack of financial infrastructure afforded by a disinterested government. As I look around me today, it seems like nothing will ever change. Our little songs, of life within a system which we hated so much, is all that we have left. Thatcher destroyed lives and communities, she destroyed hope and replaced it with desperation, fear and hopelessness. Each time I hear one of the multitudes of Manchester songs, I am reminded of what a pivotal chance we missed as the same politics from different faces continue to squeeze the last life from the important people of the country. The working people!

*"Hates our country. No one likes me.
He tells no lies, he just defies.
Went to a school, became a fool,
He hates his life, he thinks of suicide."
Discipline*

**The story of Gods Gift
is really a story of friendship.**

When my friend and colleague, Steven Edwards, sadly passed away in April 2020, the desire to somehow mark his life with this album became a *raison d'être* for me. That view is rooted in a conversation we had more than 30 years ago. We were browsing old vinyl albums in Rare Records in Manchester. I was looking for Jimi Hendrix bootlegs and Steve was looking for Charlie Parker albums. He lifted an album up and said, "wouldn't it be fantastic if in 30 years, two blokes were looking at stuff like this and stumbled on one of our albums?" I never forgot the conversation and, despite releasing CDs, singles, cassettes and EPs, the album didn't materialise.

*"Despite the wisdom of powerful men
They still don't live this way.
Another lie, another vote.
There are no words to say."
Clamour Club*

Over many years the group's members chopped and changed but the glue that held us together was always friendship. New members were always people we already knew. I would never say members were vetted as musicians especially, rather it was whether they were 'like us'. That is probably why the majority of members of Gods Gift had links working at Prestwich Psychiatric Hospital. We understood each other and understood what we were doing. It is fair to say that around the time when we were playing, many people underestimated us. At a time when such a stance as ours was becoming increasingly 'arty', our stance was a complete commitment to our own cause. We believed that the noise we made was worthwhile and if we enjoyed it, there would be a small audience who would also enjoy it. It has taken many years to find that audience but we always knew they existed.

*"As the anaesthetic fades and tears fill your eyes,
You think of the people that let you down in your life.
George Best, Nico, Alex Higgins.
These are the heroes who take on our dreams."
Anaesthetic*

Our songs were never pretty and even those with any semblance of 'catchiness' were quite brutal in their language. The lyrical content was always of paramount importance to anything we ever did. If we found the right lyrics we would build a wall of noise around them. Could we actually play? Yes, we could but it was our determination to be greater than the sum of our parts which made the group stronger. Steven Edwards was an outstanding saxophone player but was happy to fit-in rather than show off. That was a key component of Gods Gift: fit-in don't show off!

*"I'm left out 'cos of my accent.
Living was no plan of mine."
Phone Call from the Future*

In 1975, in a semi-detached house in Salford, we listened to Horses by Patti Smith. I had bought it that day and told Steve how brilliant it was. We sat mesmerised. That wasn't the only album I'd bought that day and we both listened to my other purchase. A Velvet Underground import. It had The Gift and Run, Run, Run on it, amongst others. The same night we decided we wanted to make a band. I'd tinkered about on a cheap electric guitar bought from my mother's catalogue and a 10w amp and Steve had already started to learn to play the sax. He had a phase of jokingly calling himself, Llandudno Simpkins – The Electric Larynx. He dropped that of course. I used to write poetry but, as I found out later, I was writing lyrics. We tried some of the lyrics out and after a couple of false starts, with The Spasm and Exhibit B, the perseverance began to pay off.

*“Your religion was sent to help me,
But it always held me back.
Your religion was meant to save me,
Now hate’s a virtue I don’t lack.”*
Good and Evil

We recruited my friend Paul Leadbeater and encouraged him to buy a drumkit, and Steve’s friend Laura Plant, who played my old Framus bass guitar. We practised, never rehearsed, in the Newmarket Inn in Pendlebury, Salford. It was owned by Steve’s parents, Derek and Edna. They were very kind to us and very patient, fuelling our efforts with endless cider. The locals hailed us as the sound of the Turbines, a nod to the industry where many of them worked. Much of the start of the group is documented elsewhere on the Messthetics CD and the excellent history written by Justin Toland so this part can finish here.

“The gaps increase, until there are no gaps.”
These Days

At various times we were described as “Manchester’s most hated band” and “Manchester’s hippest band”. I think that was the fundamental asset of the group really. We were always loved or hated but it has taken a long time to find any semblance of acceptance. Years of getting gigs stopped by angry publicans or attacks from audiences wears a bit thin but it actually strengthened our resolve. After some notoriously violent nights (Dead Kennedys at the Mayflower) we used to regroup at the Newmarket, have a few drinks and laugh it off. Ultimately, this attitude aided our presence. We had faced everything on a stage and faced it continually on a daily basis at work in secure psychiatric environments. The stance was no pose and we were happy to take anybody on. That was the strength of our friendships and belief in what we were doing.

*“The clowns were dancing around the body of my closest friend.
Children spat and swore for no reason at the Ambulance men.
Vicars retreated back inside their churches as the Police arrived.”*
Phone Call from the Future

Not many photos exist of the group as we felt it unimportant and we weren’t that good looking anyway. My favourite one is a rarity of Steve, Roy, Iain and I stood in front of Agecroft Cooling Towers in Salford. Long since gone, it stands in homage to four giants.

“Life stinks... for ever.”
Plague of Dreams

Richard Boon was a beacon for the group. We all greatly respected him for the New Hormones label and the sheer magnificence of the Buzzcocks Spiral Scratch EP. He backed us with gigs and the release of vinyl and that was vitally important at the time for any local group that wasn’t cosied up with Tony Wilson and Factory. We knew Wilson liked our group but felt we were deliberately placed outside the loop of his/their control. It was difficult to get gigs in our home city because of this situation. They gave any group that asked to support the Factory set support slots. We were always rejected because we were out of their control. That, in effect, is how the debacle with the Dead Kennedys came about. Wilson blamed us for creating a riot. Richard Boon helped us.

*“Why care who you’re killing?
Why care when you’re never the victim.”*
Creeps In

The last recordings we made were in Moonraker Studios in Manchester. We had the studio overnight and recorded four songs. I left the studio at 5am and drove to work for 7am and a twelve hour shift. The final track was still being mixed and the lads at the studio played it to me over the telephone. The track is contained on this album. Almost apocalyptically it contained strings on a brand new tape. We never knew how, where or why but this is untampered with. Revelations is the track.

*“We torture our souls with impurity,
Our delusion is darkness.”*
Revelations

I’m not sure if the four songs we recorded were some sort of peak for us but we found it difficult to continue. We knew the tracks were ‘right’ but were worn out with the negativity we faced on a constant basis. Gigs were difficult to get. New Hormones had finished. Everything was about a new haircut or a stupid video of art school children looking puzzled into the mid distance. We all felt we’d had enough and it was important to remain friends. We all played in different groups for a while but it felt as though we were done with it all. Many years later we were approached to play again but Steve and I felt the same. Not a prayer! The world didn’t need old men shouting about how crap everything was. We’d done it as young men and that sufficed.

*“I saw the hate within his eyes.
I know the hate within his eyes.”*
Anthony Perkins

Justin Toland wrote a piece about Manchester’s great lost groups, which kindly focussed on Gods Gift. On the back of that, Chuck Warner of Messthetics did a retrospective CD for us. These both spiked interest and it has been a wonderful experience to receive mail, email, reviews and additions to playlists almost worldwide. I know that before Steve died we spoke about how it had all turned out and we were both satisfied that it was worth it. That gives me great pleasure.

*“You and your wife have shared mistrust all your lives,
Imagine her with your best friend and at it like knives.”*
Anaesthetic

Now for the title of the vinyl and the story behind it. On the very day that the Pope visited Heaton Park in Manchester we were playing at The Band on the Wall in town. Iain and Steve had spent the day drinking to avoid the visit of the Pope. Paul had been out and I was busy accidentally breaking my fingers at work. On the night, I foolishly mixed strong analgesics with cider in order to play, which worked to trump the state Iain and Steve were in. We had our friend Dale Hibbert on the mixing desk because he knew what we wanted and how to do it. When we took to the stage, Steve shouted “Turn all the fucking lights out, Dale” hence the doctored title. Iain announced that the Pope had started his address to the clamouring public with: “God’s Gift is Love”. Clearly an open goal for Iain, who took delight in starting the evening with: “In the words of the Holy Father... Gods Gift is Love.” Dale turned all the fucking lights out...

Thankfully, the vinyl album we both wished for has arrived. I feel happy to offer little pen pictures of each of these tracks.

*“Politics fan, hard-faced hard man,
He knows his facts, he answers back.”*
Discipline

Discipline: This version is not the previously released single version but the one taken from the final recordings. It is brasher and heavier and, in my humble opinion, superior. It represents the fragmentation of society and their assumed differences which really only shows we are all the same and looking for reason. Each verse was about a group member!

Jaqueline’s Admission: Is sort of a case study short story. Some of it happened but not all of it. The girl in question physically existed and she did much of what is written but it is a short story that relies on some imagination too.

Good and Evil: The words were written at a point when working in psychiatry was creating mental challenges for me. Nothing seemed real at times and I began to question everything that was happening. It’s fair to say that this is about mental survival. A great swathe of problems in psychiatry are linked to religion and that is the focus of the track.

Plague of Dreams: A really disturbing, haunting track sung by Iain. The horrors of not understanding life. “Life stinks” is the depth of human misery. The sax is so malevolent and the whole track is unnerving. This is another from the final recordings.

Anaesthetic: Completely anthemic and extols the humour and horror of the Northern drinking culture. Steve did a verbal barrage towards the end of the song. At the time we recorded this, we knew it was filled with some incredibly funny lines but time hasn’t served my memory well enough to remember them. Listen to it very loud.

Clamour Club: The song was to be released by New Hormones but the company ceased to exist. It was, apparently, much to Richard Boon’s regret. The lyrics came from a love of the film ‘Taxi Driver’ and the visit of the Pope to Heaton Park in Manchester, as witnessed from an adjacent pub by Steve and Iain.

Creeps In: A track for the Manchester Musicians Collective album, ‘Unzipping the Abstract’. We felt that most of the contributing bands would use their best tracks so we deliberately set about doing the opposite. It was recorded in the attic studio of the wonderful Frank Ewart. He set a timer and we played for three minutes. Steve had some lyrics but made a lot of it up and introduced us as the Students of Noise. It’s a pretty noisy track, held together by Paul’s metronomic drumming.

Anthony Perkins: Another track recorded live at the Derby Halls in Bury. It all came from a riff that we joked about because it sounded a bit like the Jaws riff. I’d watched ‘Psycho’ on television recently and it became a song about that film and a dangerous individual I’d encountered at work. Because we didn’t follow the obvious song progressions of verse, chorus, hook, etc., we punctuated it with loud noise as a type of chorus and then went back into the riff.

These Days: This was one of the first songs we ever managed to put together. It is really an obvious punk-like song with its timing but again we used noise as a chorus motif. The words are a bit bleak, as it was about people going missing in South America, but I guess most of our words were bleak in truth. Whether that is an upbringing in Salford permeating the psyche or we were just depressives, I’ve never really known. Recorded at Graveyard Studios.

Phone Call from the Future: This is one of my favourite Gods Gift songs. We seldom played it and I’m delighted that this recording still exists. It was a live recording at a practice at The Newmarket. As with most of our tracks there are no overdubs. The lyrics were written by Steve in answer to what he saw as my preoccupation with the absurdity of our lives. The opening verse is about me and was a source of amusement to Steve.

Revelations: The last ever recorded Gods Gift song and the best recording we ever made. Sad that we waited until the very end to do this. Maybe it was a bit mainstream by then? There are no overdubs on the track, it was a live take. As I’ve written elsewhere, the strings and voices appeared from nowhere. It did cause an element of mild terror to hear these strings and the choir from hell appear at 4am on a deserted industrial estate. I am personally proud of the use of feedback on this track which is about sanity being in the lap of the gods.

Stephen Murphy, July 2023
(Gods Gift’s co-founder & guitar player)