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Schofield, Arthur John orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-7395 and Miller, Dan (2017) *The 'Toilet Circuit': Cultural Production, Fandom and Heritage in England's Small Music Venues*. *Heritage & Society*. pp. 137-167. ISSN: 2159-032X

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2017.1330936>

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The 'Toilet Circuit': Cultural Production, Fandom and Heritage in England's Small Music Venues

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ABSTRACT

In its broadest sense, the Toilet Circuit comprises smaller and independent music venues in the UK that launched many now famous artists and bands, alongside supporting many that are locally known, igniting or sustaining all-important local music scenes and their cultural production. Fuelled by alcohol, drugs and adrenalin, the turbulent atmosphere of Toilet Circuit venues offer escapism for disaffected youth within the seedy aesthetic environment evocative of a recalcitrant culture. These raucous grime-pits play a vital role in the ecology of Britain's music scene and broader cultural sector. Against a backdrop of closures, this paper seeks to explore the significance of these venues and their future, using three iconic examples in London, Leeds and Kent.

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC, HERITAGE AND THE CITY

'We are being robbed of our cultural heritage.' Headline of a *Time Out* magazine blogpost documenting the closure of legendary Soho (London, UK) club and music venue 'Madam JoJos', November 2014.

The musical heritage of Britain exists in a myriad of forms, claiming, 'a dominant role in voicing an essential national identity, history and experience' (Morra 2013, 11). Yet contemporary live music performance spaces appear to be undervalued (see Haslam 2015 for an overview) despite live music being integral to identity, lifestyle and culture and to a UK live music industry worth £789 million (UK Music, 2014). These venues are also under threat. A report by the Music Venue Trust (MVT 2015) has revealed independent music venues operating under significant pressures, financial and regulatory, closing down at a substantial rate. Against this background, and using three case studies comprising representative examples of venues on the so-called 'Toilet Circuit', this paper will explore the contested heritage of these venues and their role in the constructions of place, history and identity (Roberts and Cohen 2015, 233).

Popular music, its production, marketing and distribution, is largely closely aligned to a drive for nostalgia. For example, 'classic albums' (Baade and Aitken 2008; Weinstein 1998) and music magazines such as *Mojo* and *Classic Rock* have sought to establish and reconstruct an 'authentic' musical heritage (Whiteley 2005). Recent years have seen a rise in reunion tours, 'heritage acts' playing classic albums in full (Reinartz 2010) and tribute acts seeking to reconstruct the authentic. Music's commercialistic nostalgia (Chaney 2002; Grainge 2000, 27; Williams 1965) has woven personal memories and identities with consumable music developing a retrospective cultural consecration (Allen and Lincoln 2004; Schmutz 2005). Thus music is

ingrained, perhaps unhealthily, with connotations of time and place creating a kind of authorised (and arguably sanitized) heritage of popular music. More healthily perhaps, within contemporary music, many artists incorporate a hybridity of musical sources, evoking the heritage that they represent. Tim Jonze (2006) in the leading music magazine *NME* described Arctic Monkey's debut album as:

... a stripped-down punk rock record with every touchstone of Great British Music covered: The Britishness of The Kinks, the melodic nous of The Beatles, the sneer of Sex Pistols, the wit of The Smiths, the groove of The Stone Roses, the anthems of Oasis, the clatter of The Libertines...

Yet while welcome for the visibility they create, these dominant narratives threaten to erode vast tracts of musical production, performance and reception from popular memory (Bennett 2009; Bennett 2015, 20; Regev 2006, 2). As was once said:

*Because the music that they constantly play,
It says nothing to me about my life.*

Panic, The Smiths (1986)

Music is, 'a unique and distinctive mode through which people both realise and transcend their social existence' (Finnegan 1989, 339; see also Frith 1986, 272; Frith 1987, 149; Nuttall 2007). Much of the literature concerns the mnemonic power of music (eg. Bloustien et al 2008, xxii; Cohen 2013, 590; Frith 1986; Bennett 2006, 221; van Dijck 2009) as a tool for memory retrieval and the construction of self-identity (eg. DeNora 2000, 66; Forbes 2015, 143; Halbwachs 1992; Pickering and Keightley 2007) through, 'recapturing the aesthetic agency they possessed (or which possessed them) at that time' (DeNora 2006, 143; see also Bloustein et al 2008, xxiii; Kronenburg 2013, xii).

As Lewis observes, 'people look to specific music as symbolic anchors in regions, as signs of community, belonging and a shared past' (Lewis 1992b, 144; see also Bennett 2004, 4; Bennett 2009, 483; Burnett 1996, 1; Connell and Gibson 2003, 9; DeNora 2000; Shepherd 1991; Storr 1992). The UK's musical output has been described as a 'jigsaw state', with each region encompassing its own sound (Cohen et al 2015, 2). Scenes develop a musical association with place (Bennett 2004, 7; Duffett 2015; Lawrey 2015, 214) such as 'Madchester', and Compton with Urban Hip-Hop, thus providing cities with a position in the musical landscape (Hall 1989, 133; Cohen 2007, 92), and providing an essential ingredient in geographical identity formation (Straw 1991; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2005). Scenes have the potential to reassign values to a place (Lashua et al 2010, 106), being constructed through a spatially concentrated infrastructure (Lena 2012), and one that develops often from live performance (Bennett 2000; Auslander 2002, 21; Auslander 2006, 89; Henning and Hyder 2015, 102; Kronenburg 2013, 153). Scenes are thus built around the posthumous reputation of spaces (Henning and Hyder 2015, 102), and as Henning and Hyder (2015, 104) have argued, a 'defunct venue is significant in the narrative construction of local scenes' (see also Cohen 2013). To take two well-known examples, the Cavern Club, Liverpool and the Hacienda, Manchester both continue to frame the musical narratives and mythology of both

cities (Cohen 2013, 578), shaping their cultural landscapes and social geographies (Carrington and Wilson 2004, 65; Bennett 2000, 73). This creates a sense of 'performance geography' (Stanley-Niaah 2010; Ward 2015, 198; Bennett 2002), comprising places known exclusively for their musical imagery (Huefe 2003; Krim 2003; Hudson 2006, 626). Sites of popular music heritage have become places of 'modern secular pilgrimage' (Alderman 2002; Digance 2003, 144; Gibson and Connell 2005, 202–203). For example Grove Passage, London, used in The Libertines music video for *'Up the Bracket'*, is now adorned with fan-made graffiti. A zebra crossing in North London, a working men's club in Salford, or a footbridge overlooking a dual carriageway in Manchester, may seem incongruous. However, for fans of The Beatles, The Smiths, and Joy Division, these are almost mythical locations integral to their musical identity.

Amongst the countless ways in which we 'relocate' ourselves, music undoubtedly has a role to play. Urban anthropology (Bradley and Hall 2006; Gulick 1989) has sought to understand the way we experience music (Whiteley et al. 2005, 2), from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, both of which evoke and organise collective memories and present constructions of place (Stokes 1994, 3). Music plays an important role in the narrative of place (Arquette 2004, 160; Bennett 2004, 2; Connell and Gibson 2003, 15) providing a map of meaning (Cohen 1995; Fock 1999, 75; Graves-Brown 2010, 227). Herman et al (1998, 17) have said that, 'we each have our own maps of aural emplacement, those spatial stories and rhythms that position listeners in the social imaginary' (see also Graves-Brown 2010, 231).

'Modern music is an urban animal. Cities regularly birth music scenes, and artists often claim to be inspired by "the streets", or by their neighbourhood' (Wylie 2016). Place is, 'embedded in a recording, encapsulating the acoustic properties of a place, while the place of recording may affect the creative process of artists' (Graves-Brown 2010, 229). Cohen (1994, 444) describes the 'organic' development of scenes, reflecting the social, economic, political and material aspects of the particular place in which it is created (see also Henning and Hyder 2015, 100). Cities develop a, 'culture of innovation and experimentation' (Bell in Wylie 2016). For example, Berlin's techno scene within abandoned warehouses (Schofield and Rellensmann 2016), gang territorialisation and pirate radio culture sparking the grime scene in East London, or the Hulme Crescents in Manchester, in which Keeffe argues the ruin and neglect were important 'compost' to fertilise creative scenes for music to propagate and bloom, through a complex network of urban forces some physical, some social (Keeffe 2010, 145). With the example of Black Sabbath, Bennett further links the 'gritty and intense tone of the music with the industrial landscape from which it emerged' (Bennett 2008, 72; see also Weinstein 2014). That said, in an age of media representation, there may no longer be such as thing as a bounded local (Graves-Brown 2010, 228; Thornton 1995, 120-1), developments in media, communications and technology enabling sounds and styles to travel across local and national boundaries, influencing musical identities and inspiring the emergence of new hybrid styles (Cohen 2013, 584).

Literature on many aspects of music and heritage is thorough and extensive, yet

surprisingly research concerning live performance spaces remains tenuous and underexplored. For the remainder of this paper we therefore focus our attention on this particular but central aspect of music heritage with the example of venues of the so-called 'Toilet Circuit'. We begin with an outline of the methodology before assessing music circuits in general as context for examining three particular Toilet Circuit' venues. Together these examples cover the diverse range of venues that make up this particular circuit and the issues pertaining to their heritage values, and their future.

THE TOILET CIRCUIT

From grassroots venues to major stadiums, live music venues are integral to cultural identity. They, 'nurture talent, create communities and ferment innovation' (Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce 2015, 4). In the UK, the number of popular music venues is unquantifiable with potentially thousands of places varying in size, style and age. In every town, every city and in many rural locations, live music is regarded as an integral aspect of contemporary life, bringing communities together and giving artists a platform on which to perform. Attending a concert is an immersive and unique experience for both musicians and audience members, shaped by a range of elements that can benefit or impair the experience, transforming the space, internally or externally, into an identifiable 'place', the boundary of which is limited by the aural and visual experience of having being there. The mythical status of certain venues endows a continuing relevance for emerging acts who aim to play there, with particular music venues given identities that contribute to an international image for their host cities (Kronenburg 2013, 5).

Whilst smaller venues allow innovation to flourish, within larger venues the commercialistic element of popular music has taken over; gigs have become more formalised and generic. Crowd barriers, fragmented audience space and a separate raised stage disengage the performer from the audience, diminishing the immediacy and communicative power of live music performance.

This study comprises a broad but critical analysis of the significance of a set of smaller music venues which are amongst the least sustainable, most vulnerable yet culturally most significant in terms of promoting grass-roots musical performance on a local scale. Our argument is that cultural participation in the sense of music making forms an important component of local identity and place-attachment, for young people whose contributions to and views of cultural heritage often go unheard or misunderstood. By conducting this study of a small (yet representative) group of venues on the so-called Toilet Circuit, we draw attention to this forgotten and threatened heritage and assess its cultural significance.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This study relies on close examination of three specific venues, as a representative sample of the longer list defined in Table 2 below. Each of the venues on this longer list has played host to tours by a number of bands and performers who frequented Toilet Circuit venues before either fading into obscurity, or becoming better known and performing for larger crowds at stadia. Some of the band names will be familiar

to readers; some less so. Each case study involved interviews, historical and contextual research and internal investigation of the buildings included on these tours. Using a diversity of source materials including blogs, music websites and online encyclopaedia entries, as well as tour posters and online 'gigographies', the Toilet Circuit tours of the selected bands were metaphorically mapped, given geographical context, and key Toilet Circuit venues were thus identified. The criteria for defining Toilet Circuit venues are listed below, though it should be added that owners and managers of some Toilet Circuit venues dislike the label and deny they form part of the circuit, while others treat it as a 'badge of honour' and want to belong, even though they may not meet the criteria! To say the circuit is loosely defined by those most directly involved would be a fair assessment.

Interview participants were sourced through online research involving active contribution to forum pages and social media. Social media accounts linked to the case studies provided information on prior owners, former gig-goers and those who had memories of the venue. The interviews were semi-structured and targeted themes that related to the research objective of understanding the social significance and thus heritage values of these venues. While a degree of partiality must therefore be acknowledged, these themes are prominent within public discussions surrounding the live music sector, and within general discourse surrounding cultural spaces (see, for example, Behr et al 2014b). The semi-structured interview design allowed for discussion to be inductive and participant-driven, mitigating against potential bias in data collection.

In addition to interviews concerning the case study venues, members of four bands were interviewed. All of the bands had experience touring the circuit and provided an overview from that perspective. Representatives of organisations were also interviewed, clarifying their positions for supporting music venues, and to understand their own viewpoints of the heritage value of the Toilet Circuit combined with practical implications. The interviews and site visits took place in July and August 2015. The names and affiliations of all those interviewed appear in the Acknowledgements.

LIVE VENUES AND CIRCUITS

A circuit is a collection of similarly sized performance spaces that bands or artists tour in sequence (Laing 2010, 198), with musicians playing different circuits at particular stages of their careers, often also related to their specific genre (ibid.). As artists become more established, they typically follow a progression to circuits comprising larger venues, although when they become big they may occasionally revert to using smaller venues, playing intimate home-town gigs, for example.

The smallest venues operate with minimal support facilities, usually comprising little more than a PA system, lights and a stage area. A bar is essential as it provides important income to support ticket sales. As the size of the operation grows, a box office, control desks, dressing rooms, technical support rooms, loading dock, staff changing rooms, media facilities and VIP hospitality all become essential components of the space. At the top of the scale arenas and festivals become less about a specific *place* integral to the performance, as lighting, stage design and elaborate props

become mobile, creating bespoke structured environments for the event. To situate the Toilet Circuit within the wider live music scene, Table 1 presents the types of circuit in ascending order:

Circuit type	Example	Average size	Size categories from Mayor of London (2015, 36-7)
Pub/local art space	Bar Lane Studios, York	<150	Small
Toilet	See examples below	150-700	Small
Barfly	Cardiff Barfly	200	Small
University	Leeds Refectory	1000	Large
Academy	O2 Academy, Leeds	2300	Large
Lower Arena	O2 Apollo Manchester	3500	Large
Arena	O2 Arena Greenwich	20,000	Large
Festival	Glastonbury	>100,000	N/A

Table 1 – Examples of circuit types (source: author’s own)

DEFINING THE TOILET CIRCUIT

I have played in every toilet, but you still want to spoil it.

Muse, Muscle Museum (1999)

Exploring numerous online sources it was evident that diverse interpretations exist for the Toilet Circuit and that no ‘official’ term existed. In music vernacular, a ‘toilet venue’ has different meanings, the recurring threads being:

- ‘where the stage can just about accommodate a four-piece band’ (Harris 2013),
- their role within the local music scene,
- where successful musicians began their careers,
- the use of the public toilet as the artist’s dressing room,
- the dirty/seedy aesthetics, and/or
- the term derived from The Forum in Tunbridge Wells which used to be public toilets (see below).

This, to summarise, Toilet Circuit venues are defined by three core elements: historicism, distinguishable seedy aesthetics, and a compelling sense of community. Toilet Circuit venues are where globally successful bands started out, touring these venues heavily (Fig 1), cutting their teeth and establishing their initial fan base. Many artists never went beyond the local, and arguably this circuit is more significant for its contribution to the local scene, than to feeding new talent into national and international markets.

Venues peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s, coinciding with the rise of ‘Britpop’ and ‘Indie’ genres. Whilst the majority of venues comply to a modest capacity there are exceptions to this rule. For example, The Leadmill, Sheffield peaks at 900 capacity for

its main room.

Name of Venue	Location	Capacity	Open / Closed
Glow 303	Aberdeen	200	Closed
Moles	Bath	220	Open
Esquire's	Bedford	200	Open
The Angel	Bedford	300	Closed
Burberries	Birmingham	150	Closed
Fleece & Firkin	Bristol	400	Open but under threat
The Barfly	Cardiff	200	Closed
Victoria Inn	Derby	150	Open
Wherehouse	Derby	200	Closed
Whelans	Dublin	450	Open
J.B's	Dudley	200	Closed
King Tut's Wah Wah Hut	Glasgow	300	Open
Garage	Glasgow	600	Open
The Square	Harlow	250	Closed
Adelphi	Hull	200	Open
The Cockpit	Leeds	500	Closed
Duchess of York	Leeds	250	Closed
The Charlotte	Leicester	200	Closed
The Zanzibar	Liverpool	300	Open
Lomax	Liverpool	300	Closed
Mother Bar	London	150	Club
New Cross Inn	London	250	Open
Lock Tavern	London	150	Open
Dublin Castle	London	300	Open
The Bull & Gate	London	150	Closed
Roadhouse	Manchester	200	Closed
Cluny	Newcastle	300	Open
T.J's	Newport	350	Closed
The Waterfront	Norwich	700	Open
Rescue Rooms	Nottingham	450	Open
The Bodega	Nottingham	250	Open
The Zodiac	Oxford	400	Refurbished, now O2 Academy Oxford
Jericho	Oxford	180	Partially
Wedgwood Rooms	Portsmouth	450	Open
Pink ToothBrush	Rayleigh	200	Nightclub
Leadmill	Sheffield	700	Open
Joiners Arms	Southampton	150	Open
Chinnery's	Southend	300	Open
The Sugarmill	Stoke on Trent	400	Open

The Victoria	Swindon	200	Open
The Forum	Tunbridge Wells	250	Open
Cafe Nirvana	Wigan	500	Closed
Fibbers	York	450	Relocated

Table 2 –A selected list of Toilet Circuit venues in the UK- other venues may identify themselves with this particular circuit. Of the 43 venues listed here, 23 (53.5%) remain open as live music venues in their original location. Thus 20 (46.5%) do not.

CASE STUDIES

The three case studies outlined below were chosen: to be geographically diverse, to have distinctive heritage associations (such as designation as listed buildings), and to maintain a sample that showed the various contexts in which these venues are currently situated. Throughout, the discussion of case studies is punctuated by quotations from those most closely involved with the scene, and often with personal attachment to the venues described.

THE FORUM, TUNBRIDGE WELLS

Capacity: 250; Established: January 1993; Closed: N/A

Notable Acts: Muse, Coldplay, The Libertines, Mumford and Sons, The Vaccines, Green Day, Oasis, Foals

It ranged from depressing, lonely and incredibly cold, to being completely covered in sweat and hardly being able to move.

Matt Sharp, Guitarist in local band.

On top of a hill on Tunbridge Wells Common, the Forum is a bold feature within its landscape. (Fig. 2) The patch of grass outside, where the band Reef once played football, forms an integral part of The Forum's frill-free aesthetics. The original entrance is infilled with breeze-blocks. Upon entering the venue's new gated entrance, the tiny ticket booth is immediately on the right, wallpapered with ancient guest lists. The auditorium is relatively small yet facilitates clear viewpoints. Although the venue has a slightly raised stage, live performances frequently break down 'the fourth wall' with performers immersing themselves into the crowd and audience members narrowly missing the hit zone of flailing guitars. The bar is accessible directly from the main auditorium. The period urinals, first installed in 1939, remain at the far back of the building near the entrance. The venue's cramped dressing room comprises two sofas, a dartboard, amp and a decomposing square of carpet, apparently contributed by someone's granny (Fig. 3). The backroom is the most derelict part of the building, with the walls covered in graffiti left by previous musicians. The Forum is renowned for its inadequate insulation, a place where physical atmosphere is as raw as the aesthetics.

The Forum, Tunbridge Wells has a rich history, opening as a new music venue in January 1993 within a former toilet block and brass rubbing centre (and to repeat, for this reason, this venue may give its name to the Toilet Circuit!). The building was built in 1939 by the Borough Council to provide 'rest rooms and general conveniences' for locals and visitors enjoying the Common. The venue is an

important asset to the local community, set deep in 'middle (class) England', in Tunbridge Wells, a point owner Jason Dorman considers a positive aspect, 'as people can rebel here and really stand out' (cited in Clark 2012). The venue was voted 'Britain's Best Small Venue' by NME in 2012 (NME 2012).

The Forum operates on a shoestring, rarely making a profit. 'We probably flirt with closing every day,' says Dorman (in Lamont 2012). 'Nobody at the Forum is paid. Most people working here first came as gig-goers. If they hung around they'd be given stage security work (nominally stopping crowd invasions but really holding leads in to the aged stage monitors). If they still hung around they were invited closer into the fold' (Dorman in Lamont 2012). The handyman flies planes for Ryanair, 'currently on the Belgium to Morocco route, [but] then he comes back here and helps us fix the toilets using beer mats and gaffer tape' (Lamont 2012). The performers to have graced the stage are recalled in graffiti in the dressing room, or through anecdotes recalled by staff, like the one about Adele's tour bus getting stuck in the mud outside; or the one about the singer from Trash Talk backflipping off the merchandise table and upturning every drink on the bar (Lamont 2012).

People who turned up and complained about the fact that it was a little grubby, the fact that the toilets were in fairly grim knick, the fact that it was dark and dank and smelled of booze and fags, were missing the point and continue to.

Jeremy Pritchard, Bassist for Everything Everything

Sometimes it's the very quiet shows with just the band and a very few audience members where a connection happens. One such band was Six Finger Satellite from America. The hairs were up on the back of my neck for the whole set.

Jason Dorman, Owner

BULL & GATE, KENTISH TOWN

Capacity: 150; Established: Early 1980s; Closed: 4 May 2013

Notable acts: Coldplay, Manic Street Preachers, Keane, Nirvana, Blur, Bloc Party, Muse, The Libertines

Almost anyone could get a gig at the Bull & Gate. Even my band played there. We were shit. (Goldhanger 2013)

The Bull & Gate was a sectioned off area of a pub. Upon entering through the separate venue doors, there was a long corridor on the right hand side of which were the toilets, accessible also through the main pub. At the end of this walkway was the ticket booth (Fig. 4). Past this was an open drinking area, with chairs and tables. An archway led into the venue. The main auditorium was a long dark carpeted room, open plan with no internal structural barriers, with the mixing desk in the far back corner. The backstage area was cramped, only a small square room with toilets. The venue was enclosed, with little ventilation, aiding the sweaty and energetic gigs and meaning that prior to the smoking ban the room frequently had a 'wall of smoke'. The venue has since been cleared. The toilets are no longer on the west side of the building, the bar has been opened up and the venue room is now a separate dining area for the Bull & Gate gastropub.

The East London bastion of alternative rock and indie-pop for over 30 years and one of London's totemic venues (Hann 2011), the Bull & Gate closed its doors on Saturday 4 May 2013. As was said at the time, 'Since 1980 a small, slightly smelly, part of the Kentish Town Road has been a home-from-home for hundreds of young hopefuls seeking to make their way in the musical world' (ClubFandango 2013). In 1544, the 'Boulogne Gate Inn' opened in Kentish Town, being the first inn for visitors arriving into London from the North. During the Victorian era the building was a notable gin palace. The venue carried on as a public house until the early 1980s when it started hosting live music performances, with the venue thriving during the Britpop days of the 1990s (NME 2013). On 1 June 2010, promoters Club Fandango took over the Bull & Gate while in 2013 long-term landlords Pat and Margaret Lynskey sold the venue to the Young's chain and it was fully refurbished. The Bull & Gate hosted many significant gigs, with the venue renowned as a hub for labels looking for new talent. Coldplay performed a number of gigs there in 1999, including the five-song set that got them signed to a major label.

I went in there once during the afternoon, and it really does smell of the gorillas cage at London zoo. It's great and its kind of weird how venues create their own culture and there's something about the Bull and Gate (sic) means that its constantly creating new bands. Simon Williams, Panda Records. (ColdplayChronology 2008).

And, in a way, just as important as the bands were the punters. At its very best the Bull and Gate (sic) was a meeting point for the fraggle rockers, the indie shysters, the gothic dreamers, the popstarship troopers; it gave the loners a home and the hopeless a cause, because these people were part of Generation Vexed. (MacLeod 2013).

You could never tell what was coming, that was what made it so enjoyable at times. Muse played to a dozen people one night, The Libertines to forty on another. Some local group ripping off Pink Floyd would then pull in over 100 mates at the weekend. Andy Clarke, Promoter

I'll miss its excellent PA system (for a pub, it has powerful and crystalline sound). I'll miss the oddity that you can get to the live music room from the main bar by going through the gents' toilets. And, of course, I'll miss the chance to see bands in a venue that, however scrotty, has history. (Hann 2011).

Simon Williams of label Panda Records described the Bull & Gate as the 'absolute definition of the Toilet Circuit' (ColdplayChronology 2008). Other commenters reminisced of the ritualistic elements a visit to the Bull & Gate entailed, elements such as going to the shop next door and 'sneaking in cans of Red Stripe'. The building was Grade II listed in August 2005, being described as, '[A] fine Victorian pub in the Gin Palace tradition'. However, the contribution of the music venue to the building's significance is not recognised in the listing documentation.

One of the few ... old toilets to have a big stage, good sound, a cool heritage, wise promoters and still function as a decent pub. That said, I missed all the really good

gigs, and only went on the occasions that my own set of no-hopers trod the boards.

Facebook Comment

The Bull and Gate (sic) offered the chance for no-hopers like us to play with a great sound system. It was dark and grimey, so proper indie rock venue.

Facebook Comment

DUCHESS OF YORK, LEEDS

Capacity: 250; Established: 1985 (date not confirmed); Closed: 26 March 2000

Notable acts: Nirvana (25 October 1989), Pixies, Pulp, Coldplay, Radiohead, Manic Street Preachers, Blur

Sticky carpets. Awful lager. (Hann 2014)

Situated at 71 Vicar Lane, passers-by would now be completely unaware of the building's vibrant musical past. Currently a Hugo Boss shop, the venue closed on 26 March 2000 and was subsequently replaced by the current retail premises. Described as the 'hallowed pop shrine' (Simpson 2000) of the North, the venue was much loved for its patronage of emerging bands with Oasis infamously playing there in 1994 to no audience whatsoever (Simpson 2009). The venue still holds a strong communal resonance, with a dedicated Facebook page, 'I Miss The Duchess of York Leeds' with over 1200 members.

Upon entering the building, the bar was on the right, in front of the kitchen and stairs. On the immediate left was a small open section facilitating conversation, with another small snug on the opposite right-hand side. Opposite the bar were the toilets and the main stage at the far end of the building, obstructed by internal structural walls. The venue was, 'hot and sweaty, but with great energy' (Miranda McMullen, Band Manager), a factor of the internal layout, where the band was only visible from a section of the room. The building was not designed for live music, being an adaptation of an existing pub layout. Upstairs, the interior was open plan with walls adorned with archival tour posters and graffiti.

Known as the 'Robin Hood Pub' from the Second World War, the venue was allegedly blacklisted by the US military because of prostitution and drug trafficking. Towards the end of 1985, the name changed to the 'Marquee'. However after the threat of a lawsuit from the Marquee in London the venue became known as 'The Pub With No Name' for the majority of 1986. Renamed as The Duchess of York, the venue started hosting music from the mid to late 1980s and was at its height between 1988 and the late 1990s when dance/ rave culture was at the height of popularity. The venue held strictly to its pub opening hours, with bands performing at 7:30pm and headliners from 10pm. Bands played almost every night. The Duchess of York offered variety, regularity and quality of performers, as well as being a place where bands learned their trade.

Nirvana's performance at the venue has gained legendary status when singer Kurt Cobain crashed out in the upstairs dressing room after the gig and spent the night on

the sofa. The tatty sofa (Fig. 5) gained a prolonged life as it became customary for bands to sign it when playing the venue. Originally purchased for £6 the sofa was included in Sheffield's National Centre for Popular Music. Although the venue's capacity is reported to be 250, memories of the venue state as many as 500 being present on occasion. However towards its closure, the venue was mainly hosting tribute acts and Battle of the Bands competitions. The final gig at the Duchess of York was Chumbawumba, a band who had played the venue multiple times.

I'm really saddened that the Duchess is closing, because we couldn't get gigs anywhere else when we started out. We actually got signed by playing at the Duchess because it was one of the few venues where record companies would be prepared to come and see you.

Embrace singer Danny McNamara (Simpson 2000)

The Green Day gig was so full kids were trying to climb through the skylights at the front to get in....I even think one got stuck.

Miranda McMullen, Band Manager

The venue itself was like a creaking old ship, sometimes it would be like the Marie Celeste, other times we would be throwing people over the side.

John Keenan, Owner of Duchess of York

I saw nights when we actually ran out of beer! It was lunacy. 7 rows deep at the bar... we were ROCK-N-ROLL.

Commenter, (SecretLeeds.Com 2007)

CONSTRUCTING VALUES: CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

Historic England (whose functions came under the umbrella of English Heritage until 2015) promotes a values-based approach to analysing heritage significance, 'systematically and consistently' (Historic England n.d), a process made easier by categorising the differing values that people might ascribe to a place. Significance is then defined through an understanding of all values inherent in and ascribed to a site by the people associated with it (Gibson and Pendlebury 2009, 8). The four sets of values defined in English Heritage's (2008) 'Conservation Principles' document are:

- Aesthetic Value: the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.
- Evidential Value: the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.
- Communal Value: the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.
- Historical Value: the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present - it tends to be illustrative or associative.

These principles are used here as the foundation for analysis of the wider significance of Toilet Circuit venues.

AESTHETIC

As we have seen, the Toilet Circuit is characterised by its seedy and decrepit aesthetics. Existing within a disused public toilet, The Forum's architecture is reminiscent of its past, with renovations establishing a raw aesthetic image, notably old entrances and windows blockaded with breeze-blocks. Despite the unprepossessing exterior, The Forum sits like a castle on a hill, a robust symbol in a historic town, providing a dramatic focal point and visual disengagement to the surrounding landscape. Yet these venues belong in their setting, typically representing the grittiness of urban dilapidation and decaying fringe of the post-industrial city (Grazian 2013; Zukin 2010). The Toilet Circuit exteriors both inscribe meaning in and draw from their landscape settings, making a contribution to the area (English Heritage 2011, 11) and giving access to important cultural activity.

Every Toilet Circuit venue is symbolised by its distinctive, sleazy presence. The Toilet Circuit is not inaptly named, characterised by, 'noxious smells, poor sightlines, crappy sound and terrible beer' (Hann 2014). Regardless, the stylistic tone of the buildings is representative of the culture that thrives within them and provides an illustrative connection to their (slightly) deeper past. It is each venue's distinct and independent identity that, in aggregate, sustains this appeal (Behr et al 2014a, 7). The Duchess of York is remembered for its poor sight-lines, awkward wall divisions and ad-hoc electronics. At The Forum, the shabby interior has a remarkable quality of survival. The walls are constructed of breeze-blocks; open brickwork and graffitied walls are emblematic of a toilet venue; poor viewpoints, sweat soaked floor and 'medieval' toilet facilities are present. At The Charlotte, in Leicester, another closed venue, the stage now stands like ancient ruins, as a last remnant of some former place of pilgrimage, or worship (Fig. 6). The visual attributes render these venues distinctive, defining their character and significance. To immerse oneself within the authentic ambience of a crumbling and distressed room, adds to the resonance of experiencing the live music performed there (Forbes 2015, 148).

EVIDENTIAL

The evidential qualities are distinguished from their generic aesthetics and analysed in terms of their ability to communicate the transient nature of live music performance, and in this case that of a Toilet Circuit gig. The ambience of the interior evokes performance spaces of the recent past, a type of 'ersatz nostalgia' (Appadurai 1996, 78) where inherited memories can be 'enacted and embodied' (Roberts and Cohen 2014, 252). Through the fortuitous outcome of continual use, people can draw 'sensory stimulation' (English Heritage 2008, 7) from the building. The aesthetic of the Toilet Circuit owes itself to continual development and heavy use, echoing its past. Worn out flooring and dilapidated toilet facilities often constitute the character of these places, evidence for intoxicated gig-goers and a disaffected culture, adding to the 'residual spirit of the place' (Kiszely 2013, 28).

Of the case studies, The Forum provides a wealth of different evidential markers. Within the backstage area, graffiti covers the walls (Fig. 2), illustrating after-show activity and a punk ethos. Worn carpets in the auditorium symbolise differing stages of decay. Towards the rear of the auditorium, the carpet shows minimal signs of

wear. However in front of the stage, the carpet is ripped, worn and stained, indicative of mosh pits and riotous crowd behaviour.

Evidential value may be more difficult to establish for closed venues, given the ephemeral and unrecorded nature of activities undertaken there (but less so now with the proliferation of photographs, films and clips for dissemination on social media, each a statement of significance to the maker and sharer). For the Duchess of York, now a Hugo Boss shop, walking past or into the building of 71 Vicar Lane, it is difficult to understand its past use. Similarly for the Bull & Gate as, through modern interventions, the building's musical past has been erased. The core evidential aspect of the Duchess of York is the infamous leather moth-eaten 'Kurt Cobain Sofa' (Fig. 4). That said, the collective evidential value is beyond question, not least through, 'the alteration of the environment shaped by people responding to the surroundings they inherit' (English Heritage 2008, 19), vividly evoking the temper and texture of the cultures that thrived here.

COMMUNAL

Communal Value relates to places that are a, 'source of identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence' (English Heritage 2008, 16). For many young people Toilet Circuit venues were, and still are, the focus of social inclusivity because of their affordability, drinking culture, recreational drug use and lively connective atmosphere.

They play such an important part in the career of any band or artist. Pretty much every band you see will have played shit holes!

Little Comets

Cultural engagement with live music performance indicates communal value through 'social and cultural wellbeing' of its attendees supporting a 'strong, vibrant and healthy community' (NPPF 2012, 2). These buildings became an integral part of 'social cohesion and community identity' (Mason 2002, 12) and form part of recent cultural memory. There is a need to, 'celebrate and promote community activities and cultural diversity' (Gibson and Homan 2004, 68) where the venue is vital to the musical and cultural health of the city. The intangible heritage experienced at intimate music venues establishes itself in wider meaning within the townscape, reflecting the extent in which the 'polite consensus' of urban life is allowed to be disturbed (Homan 2008, 243). The distinctiveness of toilet venues within their modern cultural landscape lies in the everyday. However these, 'distinct regional experiences are signifiers also of a wider cultural milieu' (Homan 2008, 243).

I know so many people who have connected through the venue, both band, audience, promoters and technicians and there is a strong collective memory held with these people.

Miranda McMullen, Band Manager at the Duchess of York, Leeds

Music has become a lament for the city, a signifier of wider socio-cultural dialogue. The Toilet Circuit venue was a stage for local bands, where lyrics were inspired by their surroundings. Expressions of the landscape were then materialised into the

performed music. These venues are iconic within their communities. The Toilet Circuit provided local band nights and support slots for larger bands. The Duchess of York and the Bull & Gate hosted multiple bands each night, seven days a week. For local bands, Toilet Circuit venues became their first experience playing to a crowd. Toilet Circuit venues established their locality on the musical radar, establishing a nationwide recognition (Appadurai 1990; Bennett and Peterson 2004; O'Meara and Tretter 2013, 28), a national musical community situating their place within the world. The community attaches symbolic meaning to the local urban ecology through live music, envisioning civic pride. Thus music venues correlate to recent heritage agenda focusing on, 'quality of life, our identity and our sense of pride and national self esteem' (Clark 2006, 12).

Music venues are intrinsically linked to social interaction and escapism (Kiszely 2013, 33). The Toilet Circuit is a site where ritual performances were held (Forbes 2015; Leadbetter 1995, 101; Roberts and Cohen 2014, 252) creating, 'a sense of belonging to a specific music community' (Cohen 2005, 27; Toynbee 2000, 123). From the microscopic level of the mosh pit, to the entire crowd, a communal value is formed through collective taste, fan devotion, communal hysteria and an intimate, transcendent adrenaline-fuelled atmosphere (Behr et al 2014b, 9; Belfiore and Bennett 2007, 238). Vibrant DIY musical cultures (Gordon 2012; Kirschner 1998) are formed and enacted within the Toilet Circuit. The unregulated, hostile environment initiates informal community dynamics of concert spaces. The crowd becomes a singular public sphere, formed through sonic sociality (Brunner 2013, 263); concert spaces erode socially legible identity (Shank 2006, 115; Turner 1969), holding a heterogenous and unconnected crowd, albeit tenuously (Garcia 2013; Wergin 2013, 113). Audiences create shared cultural meanings (Grazian 2013, 128; Holt and Wergin 2013, 12) through symbolic interaction (Fonarow 1995; Fonarow 2006; Grazian 2013, 130; Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979). Ritualistic communication, through costume, drug use, underage drinking (Leadbetter 1995, 101) and mosh pits (Tsitsos 2006) formulates individuality and a collective ideology of rebellion (Tsitsos 2006, 123; Weinstein 2014, 41).

Music venues are not just locations of sociable gathering but these are places where, 'communities are formed, performance skills tested, and reputations earned' (Homan 2008, 243). Music venues are defined as a culture within themselves, unmediated by outside influences of society. Fandom is forged in the white heat of adolescence, where support for a band creates a distinctive personal identity, epitomising adolescent subcultures. Attending the concerts of these bands enables a tangible 'stage' to enact and perform this subcultural identity, providing a utopian playground for disaffected youth culture. These venues become established as places of attachment, acceptance and liberation, holding an integral emotional connection (Hewison and Holden 2006, 16) to the audience. These venues are sites of teenage rites of passage, characterising the Toilet Circuit as comprising, 'vibrant, exciting sites that represent a rejuvenated inner-city culture' (Homan 2008, 244).

For fans and musicians, venues are a, 'storehouse for social memories in an urban landscape' (Hayden 1997, 9). During concerts, audience members attempt to signify presence in an experience of unique activity in time and place (Holt and Wergin

2013, 5), through social media tagging, fan-recorded footage and tour merchandise. Through online communication gigs become part of an expanded virtual community (Holt 2011; Lange 2011, 25; Wergin 2013, 118). Through the interviews conducted for this study, people were reminiscent about who they went to see and with whom they attended gigs, their memories interlocked with the venues and their surrounding landscape. Concerts become, 'self-legitimising forms of focused gathering' (Roberts and Cohen 2014, 258) creating new articulations of place and points of gathering in public spaces, thus re-emphasising (or initiating) a vibrant public sphere (Gibson and Homan 2004, 81).

*I think any place for the public to congregate, to establish a sense of community, to share a pursuit is important. Music is an essential part of humanity, it's impossible to imagine any kind of society which didn't have music, and certainly collective experience of music and dance, even the most primitive tribes had these things.
Music venues allow that to happen.*

Steven Ansell, Blood Red Shoes

HISTORICAL

Whatever gig you're at, whether you're at the front or the back, whether it was a good or bad gig, you are still for that moment part of rock'n'roll history, because that moment is happening and it can't be repeated.

Steve Lamacq (Petridis 2005)

The historical value of the Toilet Circuit is characterised by two aspects: the historic value of the building, and the historic value of its intangible elements, in this case the musical performance. Many Toilet Circuit venues are rich in 'traditional' historical values, often built in areas of much earlier occupation, in historic buildings, and set sometimes within Conservation Areas. All of the venues however are rich in social history and they hold a significant place in the recent development of local music scenes and in the history of British music. Venues engage with their own historical values, for example at The Forum where old tour posters promote the venue's rich past to old and new audiences.

They don't have to be pretty they just have to feel right and often it's the history and dare I say it the "vibe" of a communal space that makes it what it is.

The Enemy

There was definitely a ragged glory to [performing in a small venue]. You felt you were treading the boards of heroes, because nearly everyone we loved had done the same thing.

Nicky Wire, Bass Player Manic Street Preachers (Harris 2013)

Venues in themselves are static. However, what comes into the venue (music, fashion, culture) and what goes out (memory), is dynamic. Within its short history, the Toilet Circuit has provided a stage for now world-famous bands and artists, forming part of the narrative of popular culture. This historical value remains integral to the bands that have graced its stages. The historical value of Toilet Circuit venues is that they have a history and, crucially, a sense that history could be made again,

becoming 'destination venues' for emerging bands who want to play venues where successful bands trod their rickety boards (McMahon 2010).

Music fans who'll often recall through rose tinted specs when they saw the big stadium group playing in a Toilet Circuit venue in front of the cliché one man and his dog scenario. We never let any dogs in, I'm sure The Robey in Finsbury Park did though.

Andy Clarke, Promoter at the Bull & Gate

DISCUSSION: DECONSTRUCTING HERITAGE VALUES

Toilet Circuit venues are where music genres were born and developed, fashion trends began, relationships formed. The Toilet Circuit represents the aspirations of youth culture, where 'the attitude of many young people was that you might as well pick up a guitar than take exams' (Cohen 1991, 3). Such venues are hedonistic destinations in the epicentre of ecstatic youth culture, providing escapism for underground, alternate cultures and scenes (Hoban 2004; Gendron 2006, 51-55). The closure of Toilet Circuit venues is threatening this important component of a diverse cultural landscape.

Garton-Smith (1999) has noted how people connect with one another more effectively through 'low culture' performances and interpretation. The Toilet Circuit evokes a sense of 'kitchen sink realism' (Huq 2006, 107), a relatable concept which transcends boundaries of gender, age and class. Attending gigs is something of a symbolic activity, ritualistic and performative (Roberts and Cohen 2014, 252) where intrinsic value is determined by an 'individual's experience of heritage intellectually, emotionally and spiritually' (Hewison and Holden 2006, 16). Social groups who do not have their own place geographically or in society (Stokes 1994; Toynbee and Dueck 2011), are united in their socially constructed heritage (Smith and Akagawa 2008, 293) thus presenting opportunities to widen public accessibility and cultural engagement (AHRC 2013; Hyslop 2013). However, as Reynold's (2011, 7) states, the conservation of popular music is presented with 'battle lines erased, everything wrapped up in a warm blanket of acceptance and appreciation', thus void of its wider communal values, unrepresentative of its collective significance.

Ultimately a gig at a Toilet Circuit venue is an ephemeral experience. Whilst the communal and aesthetic values can be articulated by users and participants, evidential value exists more in the fabric and the decor, in the material culture of venues that still exist. The historic value of the Toilet Circuit is rooted in the creation of some authentic link with the history of a particular person or place (Roberts and Cohen 2015, 232). Arguably, during its use therefore, communal and evidential values will predominate. Upon closure aesthetic and historic values may come to the fore - the value of the building essentially replacing the value of what went on within it, even though memories will often remain strong and nostalgia will grow. The Bull & Gate and the Duchess of York are both 'deceased' venues, the loss proving detrimental to their community, and providing clear evidence that a community is affected by such loss. Yet,

Who wants to sleep in a city that never wakes up? Blinded by Nostalgia.

Arctic Monkeys, Old Yellow Bricks (2007)

Reasons for the closures of Toilet Circuit venues are manifold, but a common concern is the increasingly hostile environment for many venues (Doward 2015). Of the 430 music venues that traded in London between 2007 and 2015, only 245 are still open. The Roadhouse in Manchester, the Point and the Barfly in Cardiff, the Picture House in Edinburgh, the Astoria, the Buffalo Bar and Madame Jojo's in London, are all venues that have been lost, many the victims of tough licensing laws, or noise complaints (Behr et al 2014a), aggressive development and an increase in property values. European nations have realised that, 'arts don't always come dressed in a tutu and carrying a violin' (Inglis 2014), offering financial support to their survival. In the UK, 'while the Arts Council dishes out £20m a year to London's Southbank Centre, TJ's in Newport gets not a penny' (Inglis 2014), TJ's being an example of venues with 'far less popular appeal' (Simpson 2000). A lack of funds means that venues are unable to protest noise complaints and adapt to rising property price rises, sufficient to close a club (Behr et al 2014a,1; Sherwin 2014). New initiatives, notably the Music Venue Trust and Independent Venue Week, are starting to provide a voice for this part of the overall ecology. These institutions aim to give a voice to independent venues, ensuring their continued operation. Mark Davyd of the Music Venue Trust dreams of the Trust being able to take over the mortgages of UK venues: a 'National Trust of music venues'.

They were the places we cut our teeth [but] without the oxygen they afford young bands, you can't expect Britain to be able to create great music like it has been doing.

Yannis Phillipakis, Foals (Savage 2016)

There's a year of playing empty rooms in the same venues - then suddenly something clicks.

Wolf Alice (Savage 2016)

A headline of the 2005 Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005) is the suggestion that, 'Heritage is not simply about the past; it is vitally about the present and the future' (Palmer 2009, 8). Whilst any survey resulting in the national listing of such venues would emphasise their cultural significance, it would do little to protect them from closure. Furthermore, as Crang (1994, 342) argues, conceptualising heritage as an object 'freezes the process through which users animate heritage... (leaving) the object in a static space from which temporality has been drained. There is no Heritage-qua-object 'out there': heritage exists only in the ways it is enacted'. Despite Henning and Hyder (2015, 104) stating that a, 'defunct venue is significant in the narrative construction of local scenes', the survival of the Toilet Circuit (as opposed necessarily to its venues) is fundamental for sustaining cultural production and elements of community through heritage at local scale.

CONCLUSION

The cultural value of music venues generally lies in what they do, rather than in the buildings themselves.

Jeremy Pritchard, Bassist for Everything Everything

A Church isn't the fabric of the building; it's the people in it. I think that's true of a lot of things, especially Toilet Venues. The people involved are what really matter and what they learn and do as a result of being at that place with other people.

Phil Avey, Promoter at Bull & Gate

A great small venue is something of an outlaw, an outsider, and I quite like the idea that they're not part of the "official" history of a place.

Steven Ansell, Blood Red Shoes

Without the spaces for new talent to discover itself and its audience, music in London will die a slow death, and the UK will lose a huge part of its culture. Something needs to be done to protect these spaces.

Frank Turner, Musician (Mayor of London 2015, 8)

Seedy environments are the bedrock of cultural production. Their survival is integral to the establishment of grassroots scenes, for bands to cut their teeth, to learn their craft and to get signed. Bands are still emerging through the Toilet Circuit and without them musical ingenuity will perish. Essentially the Circuit's value is maintained through its intangible heritage which needs to be sustained by venues. The Toilet Circuit needs to remain adaptable, to diversify into other musical realms such as emerging DJs, thus sustaining a vibrant scene (Smith and Gillett 2015, 21), created by the community and encouraging civic pride and a local identity (Crooke 2010, 17; Perkin 2010, 117; Wright 2014). Yet small music venues are not just incubators for bands – they also play a vital role in a healthy urban ecosystem (Pollock 2015). In 2015, the first 'Music Cities Conference' was held at the Great Escape Festival in Brighton. It addressed the wider impact venues play in the entire urban ecology. '[The scene] increases tourism. It increases city branding. It makes young people want to stay. If you have a healthy venue, you're going to have restaurants, minicab firms and bars. It enhances diversity – it doesn't matter where you're from or what sexual orientation you are, music is a communicator' (Pollock 2015; see also Mayor of London 2015).

So what happens if the dingy pubs and sweat-soaked clubs that used to be the lifeblood of the music industry continue to close? Toilet Circuit culture has a controversial, rebellious spirit through which the conservatism of traditional heritage practice contradicts the DIY scene (Gordon 2012; Kirschner 1998) and the 'punk ethos' of much music production and performance, at least at local scale. An 'Anti-Heritage' (Graves-Brown and Schofield 2011, 1399), where the spirit of the movement takes priority over heritage status, would recognise the heritage value as-praxis. However without a sustainable culture existent within these venues, there is nothing to stop venues being gutted and redeveloped. Toilet Circuit venues are indispensable, a unique cultural form whose loss would leave the UK worse off culturally, socially and economically (McMahon 2010). To maintain the dank and dirty sweatbox atmosphere, is to maintain and sustain the Toilet Circuit's cultural value. A pragmatic approach is needed, whether that be through recognition, organisational support or funding from the music industry (Beth 2014; Inglis 2014). Either way, a recognition of cultural significance of these places for society as a

whole is an important first step.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following for taking the time to participate in this project through interviews. From bands: Jeremy Pritchard (from Everything Everything), Little Comets, Steven Ansell (from Blood Red Shoes) and The Enemy. From organisations: James Ketchell (Director of Music Heritage, UK), Jonathan Todd (Head of Research at UK Music), Sybil Bell (Founder of Independent Music Week), Ellie Moore (Talent Programme Officer at Help Musicians UK G.5) and Beverley Whitrick (Music Venue Trust). At the Duchess of York: John Keenan (owner and promoter), Dave Simpson and Dan Ishikawa (regular gig-goers), Lis Coyle (audio engineer, 1992-98), Miranda McMullen (band manager) and Richard Makinson (musician/performer 1986-89). At the Bull & Gate: Phil Avey and Andy Clarke (promoters) and Mick Mercer (regular gig-goer and writer for Melody Maker and Zigzag). At The Forum: Jason Dorman (owner) and Matt Sharp (guitarist in a local band).

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Captions

Figure 1: Tour poster for the Arctic Monkeys, showing the list of Toilet Circuit venues on their 2005 Summer Tour

Copyright: RedPenguin

Available at: <http://www.redpenguin.net/images/arcticposter2005.jpg>

Figure 2: Exterior of The Forum, Tunbridge Wells

Copyright:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/The Forum, Tunbridge Wells - geograph.org.uk - 1738863.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/The_Forum,_Tunbridge_Wells_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1738863.jpg)

Figure 3: Backstage of The Forum, Tunbridge Wells

Copyright: TunbridgeWellsProject

Available at:

http://www.thetunbridgewellsproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/forum_hd.jpg

Figure 4: Ticket Checks at the Bull & Gate

Copyright: Phil Avey

Available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151347062813613&set=oa.417812018293826&type=1&theater>

Figure 5: The renowned Kurt Cobain Sofa, front left on the 2nd floor of the Duchess of York, Leeds.

Copyright: Guzelian

Available at:

Simpson, D (2000) 'Last Encores Please' Guardian (Print) Published: 09 February 2000

Figure 6: The Old Stage Ruins Of The Charlotte, Leicester

Copyright: Leicester Mercury

Available at:

<http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Gallery-Charlotte/story-20949149-detail/story.html#ixzz3HLsX9I7R>

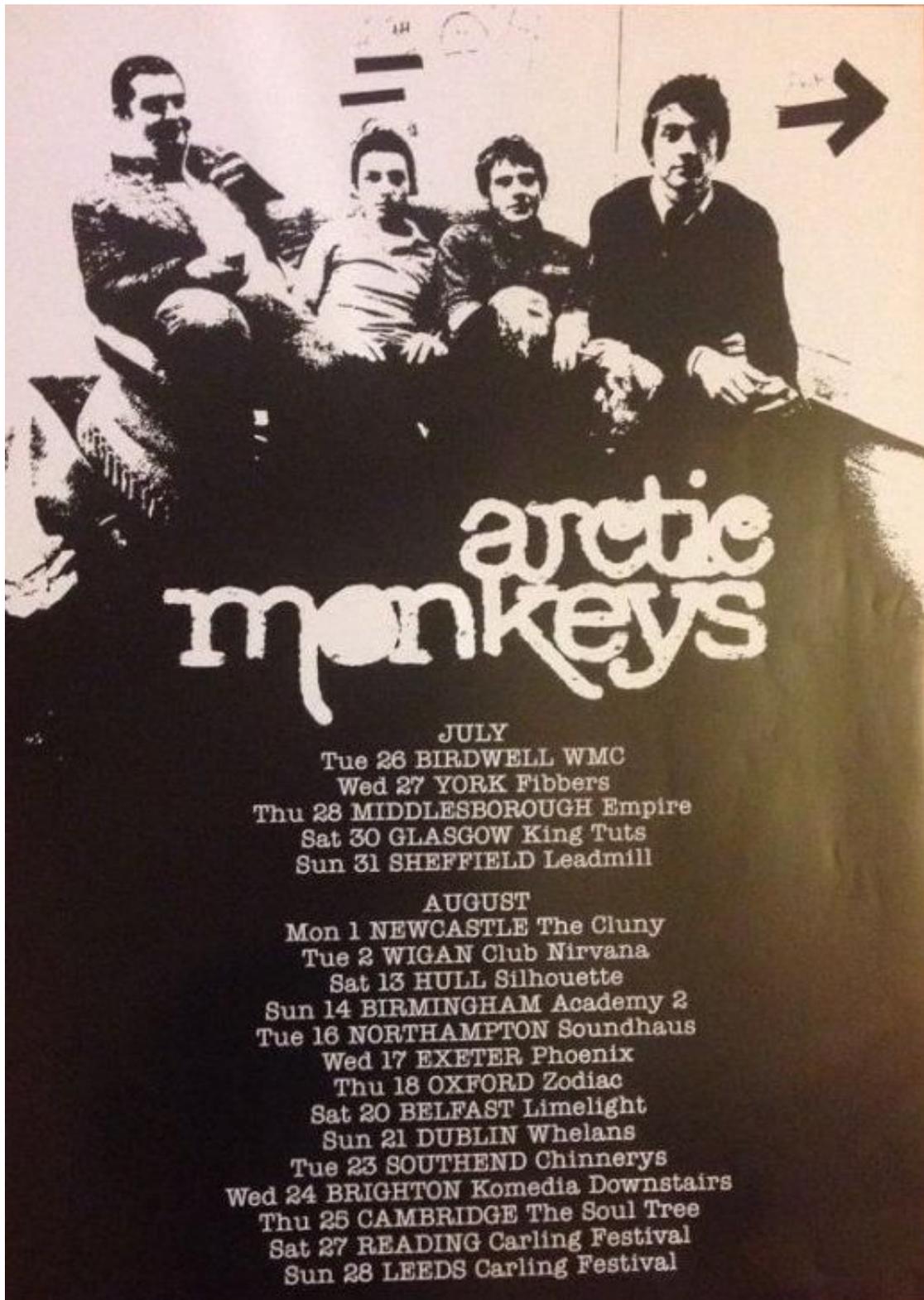


FIG 1



FIG 2



FIG 3



FIG 4

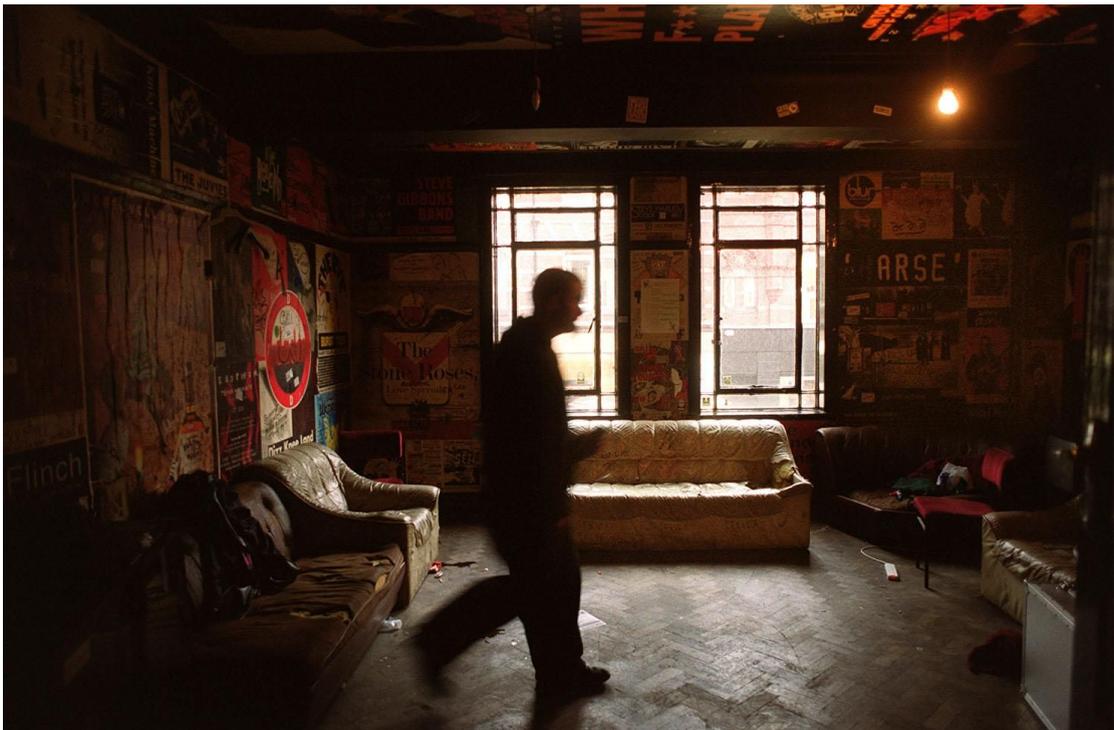


FIG 5



FIG 6