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# Sonic Heritage, Identity and Music-making in Sheffield, “Steel City”

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way pervasive influences within the built environment shape heritage and identity. With a focus on Sheffield, a northern English city strongly associated with a now largely defunct steel industry, the paper investigates how the city's industrial past, its location and social fabric have shaped music-making, creating a distinctive scene that has become central to the city's cultural identity. Using a combination of in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, Sheffield is presented from the mid-1970s as experiencing what can be referred to as a “sonic cycle” in which the city's musicians refer to the sound of the drop-hammer in the steel forges being a backdrop to their childhood and a clear influence as they began their musical careers, and how the “industrial music” scene which they created has in turn shaped a new heritage identity. The paper concludes by promoting the idea that music created by local musicians forms a vital part of Sheffield's character and is an essential ingredient for shaping alternative urban futures.

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Post-industrial; Sheffield; intangible heritage; sonic identity; landscape; Popular music; steel industry; electronic music

## Introduction

This paper examines some of the ways in which pervasive influences within the built environment shape heritage and identity (see also Wright and Schofield 2021). With its focus on Sheffield, a northern English city strongly associated with a now largely defunct steel industry, it investigates ways in which the city's character including its industrial heritage, location and social fabric have shaped music-making, creating a distinctive scene in the city that has become central to its cultural identity. This can be viewed as a complex iterative process (a “sonic cycle”) in which heritage is constantly becoming, never fixed (after e.g., Smith 2006). The term “scene” refers to a distinct music community or “sociability” (after Henning and Hyder 2015, 98) that usually also comprises a distinctive sound. As an example, bands and musicians from Sheffield refer to the sound of the drop-hammer in the city's steel forges forming a backdrop to their childhood, a clear influence as they began their musical careers. The Human League and Cabaret Voltaire are famous examples, with the bands reportedly building home-made synthesizers to replicate this specific distinctive industrial sound.

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Sheffield's music scene is a good example for investigating the complex social and political processes that shape and define heritage and identity, for three main reasons. First, unusually, musicians from Sheffield have tended to remain there rather than leave for larger English cities like London, Manchester and Birmingham, ensuring that the city's music scene has retained continuity while remaining strong and distinctive. Second, the city's community of musicians and producers is open to being the subject of research, not least as many key individuals in the Sheffield scene's formative stages now have connections either with the higher education or cultural sectors. And third, many of the places associated with Sheffield's music scene (notably rehearsal and recording spaces and venues) have either continued in use or have at least survived as buildings, thus developing a "cultural patina" allowing a tangible connection to be made with the scene's significant landmarks. The paper concludes by promoting the idea that music created by local musicians (including DJs who have also had an influence on the city's music scene) forms a vital part of its character and heritage, in the spirit of Hetherington (2013), providing color, rhythm and noise that form the essential ingredients for potential alternative urban futures.

Acknowledging other research projects that have investigated the complex relationships that connect identity, music-making, place and heritage (e.g., Cohen 2007; Istvandity, Baker, and Cantillon 2019; Lashua, Spracklen, and Wagg 2014) as well as previous work in Sheffield (e.g., Long's 2014 study of tourism and identity; Mallinder 2007, 2011) this research into Sheffield's music scene and the city's urban character has focused on two sources of information. The first of these comprises 24 extended questionnaires and interviews conducted with members of Sheffield's musical and creative communities in 2019. Together these sources view the city's music scene from within. The second source comprises a content analysis of the *New Musical Express* or NME from 1975 to 1978. This source illuminates how Sheffield was viewed from outside the city by the national music press as represented by arguably its leading publication at the time.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first outlines the research context for an in-depth study of Sheffield's music scene, before describing the methodology. The results of the study follow, focusing first on the questionnaires and interviews giving a perspective from 2019, and then the content analysis of the *New Musical Express* during the formative years 1975–1978. Finally, these sources are drawn together in some concluding remarks.

## Research Context

Connections between music and heritage have seen significant scholarly attention. Building on earlier research (e.g., Cohen 2007; Connell and Gibson 2003; Krims 2007; Leyshon, Matless, and Revill 1998), recent studies in popular music and heritage include research into: memories and the histories of popular music that embrace its multiple pasts (e.g., Cohen et al. 2015), the transformation of popular music into heritage (e.g., Istvandity, Baker, and Cantillon 2019), preservation and the archive (e.g., Baker 2015) and popular music and the city (e.g., Lashua, Spracklen, and Wagg 2014). A common theme of all of these diverse strands is the important principle that, ultimately, heritage concerns the relationships between people and place as opposed to places in and of themselves, emphasizing in other words their social value (e.g., Jones 2017; Lesh 2019). An example

is in the way places exert influence over cultural practices made and performed there, while practice in turn shapes the character of a place, contributing to heritage and identity. This observation aligns with the widely cited words of Leyshon, Matless, and Revill (1998, 424–425), that:

a richer sense of geography highlights the spatiality of music and the mutually generative relations of music and place. Space produces as space is produced. To consider the place of music is not to reduce music to its location, to ground it down into some geographical baseline, but to allow a purchase on the rich aesthetic, cultural, economic and political geographies of musical language.

As an example of the complexity of these relationships between people and place, the Detroit and Berlin electronic music scenes emerged in these two cities for very particular reasons. In Detroit (and see Sicko 2010 for in-depth analysis) these reasons included its status as a post-industrial city, the music reflecting the sounds and rhythms of its former industries. In Berlin, additional factors included the new political landscape that emerged with the end of the Cold War and a social landscape in which young people from across the recently divided city were reunited and together able to enjoy their new-found freedoms through music and dance (Schofield and Rellensmann 2015). In both Detroit and Berlin, the free availability of former industrial and political spaces created the perfect environment for this music to emerge, in both cases a very particular highly rhythmic, percussive and repetitive sound: techno. Given their industrial past, obvious parallels can be drawn with electronic music made in Sheffield and the industrial spaces available in the city for composition and performance.

The relationship between industrial music and the city is also evident in another genre and another English city. Weinstein's work on Birmingham's post-industrial heavy metal (2014, 38–39) begins by citing local band Black Sabbath's iconic "Iron Man" track (1970) and their drummer Bill Ward, crediting "sounds made by nearby metal factories for his hard and aggressive drumming style." Harrison (2010, 145) meanwhile described how in this same city, "two hundred years of continued industrial expansion meant that residential areas and schools were surrounded by factories, continually subjecting the city's children to the sounds of heavy industry."

Previous research, therefore, has revealed the interplay of cultural, economic, political and social factors combining to create both the opportunity and the inspiration for music-making. The opportunity is both physical (a place to rehearse or record) and social (a social network), the places acting as social hubs for particular communities. The inspiration is a combination of economic, political and geographic drivers (the repeated sound of a drop-hammer for example, or Thatcherite policies resulting in the demise of heavy industry). Whatever the contributory factors, the result is the emergence of cultural practices that shape identity and create, in Hetherington's (2013) terms, new urban futures.

One example of such a "new future" was the recognition and marketing of Liverpool's Beatles' heritage during the late 1990s and early 2000s, creating wider awareness and consequently the promotion of popular music heritage across the city (summarized in Cohen and Kronenburg 2018, describing the Liverpool Musical Landscapes project). As this project showed, in Liverpool the architecture, history, social landscape and culture combined to shape an urban identity comprising: local landscapes (the role of music in

the city's everyday life); global trends (in the development and global networking of provincial and post-industrial cities); material landscapes (the importance of material culture in conveying and communicating these narratives, through a combination of places and things); and lived landscapes (music's influence on how the city is lived and experienced).

The last of these categories has particular relevance to this paper, in three ways. First, lived landscapes recognize how music is not somehow separate from city life but integral to it. Important to Sheffield and other cities just as much as it is to Liverpool is the idea that multiple landscapes exist, highlighting the different and diverse ways a city is lived and experienced through music. Second, and especially important in the context of live performance, is the recognition of venues not in a hierarchical sense of rungs of a ladder or markers on the pathway to success, but as part of an ecosystem (e.g., Miller and Schofield 2016) with all venues serving as meeting points for the city's social networks as well as providing opportunities at all levels, whether for performers starting out or those more established in their musical careers. Third, music-making (like any form of cultural practice) is future-oriented. Musicians create new work. It might reference past influences but it will likely also follow an entirely new path thus contributing to a diversity of musical futures. These *living* landscapes (building on Cohen and Kronenburg's 2018 definition) are a vital part of the cultural landscape of any place, not least cities where the social networks run wider and deeper and the opportunities for creative practice (e.g., through council-led initiatives) exist in greater abundance.

## Methods

The Sheffield project comprised two distinct research methods. The first was a series of 24 in-depth questionnaires and interviews. While the questions were the same, the questionnaires were completed by email exchange while interviews were conducted in person, typically resulting in longer and more detailed responses. With one of the authors (Wright) having been closely involved with Sheffield's music scene since 1978 (Lilleker 2005, 225–227; Wright 2020), connections with key and influential actors in the scene were assured through a combination of direct personal connections and social networks. That said, the risks associated with “insider research” (in terms of the potential to give false shape to the results through the information provided to a known researcher) are acknowledged. Having completed and transcribed the interviews and questionnaires, the responses were collated, analyzed (e.g., highlighting key words, phrases and concepts/opinions) and arranged thematically (or “coded”) under four broad headings which form the basis of our discussion (under “Testimonies”, below). The list of interviewees appears in [Appendix 1](#) and the list of questions as [Appendix 2](#).

The second method involved content analysis, focused on identifying and assessing references (and crucially also the *lack* of references) to Sheffield's music scene in the weekly national music newspaper *New Musical Express* (hereafter NME), in the four years from 1975 through 1978. From an initial scan of this publication, and from reading Lilleker's (2005) “story of popular music in Sheffield 1973–1984”, this appeared to be a critical time and one in which the city's scene emerged before becoming widely known beyond city limits (although its experimental Jazz scene was widely known about through the 1960s). Specifically, 1976 seemed to be a turning point,

coinciding with the emergence of a DIY punk movement in the UK. As Lilleker (2005, 8) puts it:

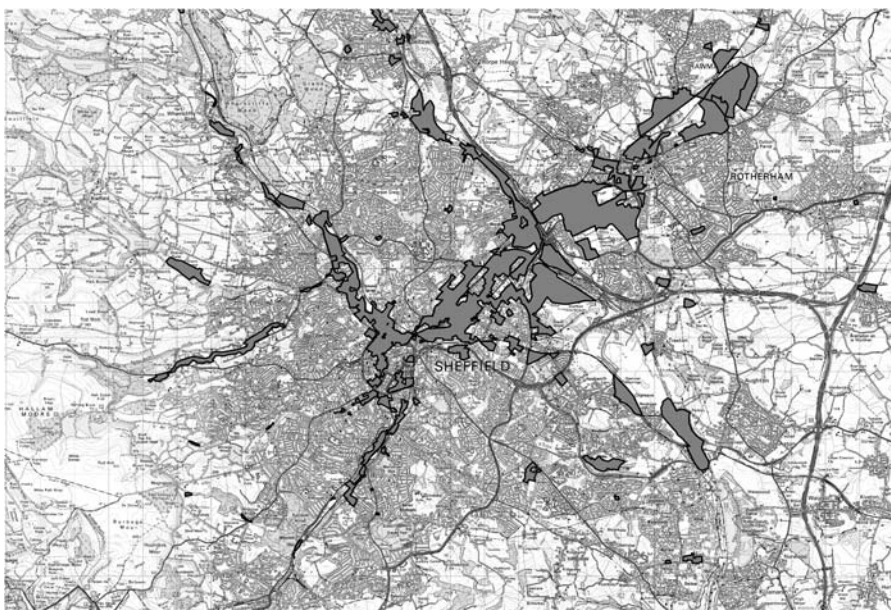
It wasn't until 1976, when the Ramones released their debut album, the Sex Pistols played at the Black Swan [Sheffield] and the Damned at the Top Rank in Sheffield, that people [outside Sheffield] began to realise there might just be something they were missing.

Of the three main music newspapers of the time (*Sounds*, *Melody Maker* and *NME*), *NME* was chosen for three reasons. First, its status. Formed in 1952, *NME* was the first British music paper to include a singles chart; it also later became the best-selling British music newspaper. Second was the style of journalism. During this period of the 1970s *NME* was particularly associated with “gonzo journalism”, a style that originates in an article about the Kentucky Derby by journalist and author Hunter S. Thompson (1970). Gonzo is an approach to journalism that focuses on personal experiences and emotions, as opposed to one determined by facts or quotations that can be verified by third parties. In gonzo journalism, the personality of a piece is what matters most (see Caron 1985 and Mosser 2012 for general applications, and Morrison 2014 and Jacke, James, and Montano 2014 for its specific application to music). This style of journalism was considered more likely to capture the authenticity of potentially skeptical London music journalists' attitudes to a provincial music scene. Finally, *NME* was closely associated with the emerging punk scene, for example through the writings of Julie Burchill, Paul Morley and Tony Parsons, for whom *NME* was a proving ground from which they went onto successful careers in journalism and promotion. While the punk scene (in the form of raucous guitar bands following in the wake of the Sex Pistols) was not taken up in Sheffield in the same way as elsewhere, bands like Cabaret Voltaire had already adopted the same DIY principles as characterized the punk movement, in this case making home-made music on home-made synthesizers. It is worth noting that Cabaret Voltaire had its origins in 1973, two years before the UK's punk “revolution”.

While these two data sources were selected to be complementary, the results are presented separately under the headings “Testimonials” (for the interviews) and “Content analysis” (for the documentary study of *NME*). This decision was made primarily in view of the very different perspectives the two methods provide – the first internal, and the second external. Presenting one method and its results before the other with some integration of the key findings in the Conclusion gives the clearest possible articulation of a complex social and sonic environment involving different genres across the city and over time.

## Sheffield

Built on seven hills, Sheffield is a post-industrial city in South Yorkshire in the north of England with a constant population of just over half a million people over the past century. It is now well-connected to the rest of the country with the M1 Motorway opening in 1968 to improve the journey to London 170 miles to the south, and with good rail links with London, Manchester, and Birmingham. Before the mid-1970s, Sheffield was the center of the UK's steel industry, its steel works providing a backcloth and soundtrack to the city (Figures 1 and 2). It is also a university town. Sheffield only recently became more of a tourist center although it has always provided a gateway to the Peak District National Park (to which one can walk from the city). In the 1970s and



**Figure 1.** Sheffield and its industrial landscape as it existed in 1985 (shaded) overlaid on the 2004 1:10,000 Ordnance Survey map, from the South Yorkshire Historic Environment Characterisation Project ([https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/syorks\\_hlc\\_2012/](https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/syorks_hlc_2012/)). While the map shows all industry at this time, steel and associated industries would account for a large proportion of the industrial activity shown. There is a clear concentration in the river valleys, especially the River Don. Data copyright © South Yorkshire Archaeology Service unless otherwise stated.



**Figure 2.** A preserved drop-hammer in the Brightside area of Sheffield. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drop\\_Forging\\_Hammer\\_in\\_Brightside\\_Sheffield\\_MG\\_2185.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drop_Forging_Hammer_in_Brightside_Sheffield_MG_2185.JPG)

1980s, as now, many of Sheffield's musicians tended to remain in the city, having formed a deep attachment to the place whether they were originally from the city or not (Phil Oakey of Sheffield band The Human League – personal communication). But historically, those who didn't live in Sheffield knew little of it, except through its two high-performing football teams and the Sheffield Steel cutlery on their dining tables. With the exception of an earlier experimental jazz scene, Sheffield was thus culturally isolated in the 1970s although with an increasingly rich counter-cultural scene. As Reed (2013, 67) suggests, "[T]aken together, the city's artistic isolation and [it's] teenagers' [cultural] cross-breeding and mutation seem[ed] a recipe for evolution."

From the 1970s, a new and distinctive scene emerged in the city (see Brabazon and Mallinder 2006; 2008). The reasoning behind this forms the subject of this paper which attempts to address questions frequently asked (but often not answered) by journalists, researchers and musicians alike: Why Sheffield? "Was it an absence of music history, with less to mimic or rival? Was it because there was nowhere to go, nowhere to play, so we simply made noises in old empty buildings for our own amusement" (Mallinder 2017, 47; see also Reynolds 2005; 85–102 and Reed 2013, 59–78). And how much can we read into Cabaret Voltaire choosing to title their 2002 "best of" compilation, *The Original Sound of Sheffield '78/'82*? Reed (2013, 63) suspects a double meaning: "Was Cabaret Voltaire's music merely the original instance of a style that came to be synonymous with Sheffield, or did they tap into and amplify an essential sonic specter of the city – its *original sound*?" (emphasis in original).

Stephen Mallinder (2007, 295) of influential Sheffield band Cabaret Voltaire summarizes the city's heritage character as follows:

Sheffield's form, as a northern industrial city, has been mythologized through function. The footprint of heavy industry has remained despite the encroachment of economic rationalization, which left behind its steel mills and factories as empty husks, a reminder of an earlier model of globalization and industrial hegemony. However, as a city it has redefined itself aurally, characterized through a bricolage of archaic industry and shiny technology, the city's rhythms have reverberated through popular music forms. A paradoxical fusion – the sounds of metal and soul, steel and electronica, industrial bleeps and lyrical mockery – popular culture wrapped in the tarnished glamour of self-deprecation: the noise of iron and irony. "Sheffield Steel" became not only a manufactured label for the city, but also a convenient brand, which encapsulated the reification of an urban sound that somehow embraced everything from the post-soul of Joe Cocker and heavy metal of Def Leppard to early techno of the Warp label.

The industrial influences are unquestionably strong. Jane Antcliff-Wilson of Sheffield band I'm So Hollow described the city as: "Industrial and austere – steeped in working class history. Imagination and vision were left to run wild in this bleak landscape" (cited in Ware 2019, 6). However, it is important to view this assertion of an industrial influence critically. It is not immediately obvious in Sheffield band Pulp's music, for example. As Jarvis Cocker (the band's singer and now also journalist and presenter) has said, "Just because it's from Sheffield, why does it have to sound like a steel factory?" (Wilde 1986). Interpreting this remark, Whitney (2019, 122) felt that the "driving, relentless industrial funk emerging from Sheffield at that time was clearly something Cocker felt compelled to kick against. Music could be a reaction against the determinism of place, a stubborn choice to pursue a different path." It is worth noting however the content

of an issue of *Electronic Sound* magazine (Dalton 2020) with its focus on Jarvis Cocker, which describes how he,

grew up in Sheffield with Cabaret Voltaire and The Human League ringing in his ears. He started out signed to a Warp offshoot label. He's made videos for Aphex Twin and Nightmares On Wax. And now, with a brilliant debut album from his new project JARV IS ... , the electronic evolution of Jarvis Cocker is complete. ... Jarvis Cocker may not seem an obvious choice of cover star for us, but once you hear the debut JARV IS ... album, *Beyond The Pale*, with its smart synths and a passing nod to krautrock on many of the tracks, the significance of his Sheffield heritage is clear.

## Testimonies

### Summary of Results

As outlined previously, the “testimonials” part of the project comprised 24 interviewees answering 21 questions about the Sheffield music scene, the city and its sonic heritage. Before presenting these findings under four thematic headings, a short quantitative summary of the results follows, recognizing that this acts merely as a summary, thus avoiding the problematic notion of conducting a quantitative analysis of qualitative research.

In terms of profile, the interviewees were mostly male (70.8%), over 50 years old (62.5%), living in Sheffield (62.5%, though only five were born there) and involved in the creative industry (62.5%). The majority (70.8%) were educated to at least degree level. While this profile of respondents may appear highly skewed (favoring older, well-educated men), one of the interviewees described as a “recent change” how the gender balance across the scene had now improved from one known to have been largely male-oriented (Nick Potter, Interview). Given this fact, we have confidence in suggesting that, while unquestionably skewed in terms of the overall population, our sample is broadly representative of the Sheffield music scene across much of our period of interest.

In responding to the question: “Is there a Sheffield scene?”, 75% of respondents said that there was (or had been), with some qualifying this by referring to “multiple scenes” or a scene that “ebbs and flows.” One of the three people responding “no” said it was more “an attitude.” When asked what words best described this scene, there were recurring phrases. Words like “innovative,” “cutting-edge,” “ground-breaking” and “inventive” were used eight times (by 33.3% of respondents), “industrial” was used five times, “eclectic” and “communal” or “home-grown” four times, and “electronic” three times.

A related question asked respondents whether they felt there was a Sheffield sound. Only half the respondents answered, seven (29.2%) saying “yes” and five (20.8%) “no,” one of them calling it a “myth”. When asked to describe this sound, responses included: “clonk and synthed factory sample”; “chewable, thick electronic noise, with early 00s bass wubs in the background”; “electronic, experimental”; “gritty, honest, uncompromising”; and “dush-dush-dush-dush-dush-dush! Bleep-bleep-bleep!”

Three related questions were asked: When did the scene emerge? Who were the main instigators? and What caused the Sheffield scene to emerge?. The first question gave no

clear answer although 15 respondents (62.5%) recognized the 1970s and early 1980s as the key period. While it is widely documented that Cabaret Voltaire emerged in 1973, only three respondents chose this date as a point of origin, this in spite of 50% of respondents listing the band as “instigators.” Eight respondents (33.3%) listed The Human League as instigators, while many other bands and performers had single or double mentions.

The question on causes produced a diversity of responses, including the availability of low-cost spaces (25% of respondents), industry (20.8%) and the politics of recession (16.7%). Other factors listed included the city’s radical history and external influences (such as Roxy Music in the early 1970s and the appearance of Kraftwerk and their concerts in the city later in the decade, see below). The overlap between some of these influences was articulated in one response, noting:

A distinct relationship between music and politics. What made it different in Sheffield was the electronica and the influence of industrialisation. Electronic music mirrors the steel industry because it is studio-based and involves burnishing, cutting, polishing, editing and it’s the same as the metal-making factory process. (Deborah Egan, Interview, 3 December 2019)

Another respondent described how:

[T]he tradition of small independent workshops servicing the steel industry (“Little Mesters”) perhaps could have led to a certain independence of spirit. Also, freedom of thought could have been influenced by the prevalence of Non-Conformist chapels in the area during the 18th, 19th and early 20th century. (Richard Barratt, Questionnaire, 22 September 2019)

The related questions: How long before the scene was known outside of Sheffield? and How long before London became aware? produced an interesting lack of consensus. For the first question, all suggestions appeared only once (and all in the range 1976/1977–2013), except 1978 which had three mentions (all of which referred to the first chart successes of Sheffield bands that year). On the second question, those who gave an opinion referred to the dates 1978–1981 with two exceptions, one giving 2014 as the date and one stating that “London still hasn’t noticed!” In terms of recognizing a defining moment, again there was no obvious consensus, although The Human League were mentioned six times (25% of respondents) and chart successes (which included The Human League) four times (16.7%).

Asked whether there had been any attempt to keep the Sheffield scene a secret, 11 (45.8%) respondents answered “no,” while the remainder pointed instead to a combination of “reluctance to self promote,” “pride” and there being “no rush to sell out.” Respondents were also asked if the scene had changed over the years. Ten respondents (41.7%) felt that it had, while others noted a combination of qualifiers, such as the fact the sound may have changed but that the “essence” had not.

In the final questions, people were asked to name five bands or artists that capture the Sheffield scene and five Sheffield places associated with it. Here there was consensus. Of the bands and artists, four names stood out with multiple mentions: Cabaret Voltaire (13 respondents), The Human League (11), Pulp (9) and Arctic Monkeys (8). After that Clock DVA and ABC had five mentions each, and then many others had single or double entries. For places, the response was clearer still. The Leadmill (15) and The Limit (14) stood out, followed by the Washington Pub (5), Hallamshire Hotel (4), Delicious Clam

(4), University of Sheffield (4) and Beehive (3). After that, 34 further places received single or double mentions, emphasizing how extensive the Sheffield scene is and was, and how these places can attract quite different and distinct communities.

Having presented quantitative data from the study, four thematic areas are now explored, the themes defined on the basis of the interviews and questionnaires conducted. The content of the following sections is based largely on the interviews and questionnaires, supplemented on occasion by published sources.

### ***An Industrial Past***

“Your social environment, you can’t escape that. You are a product of your environment and we had a very sonic one in Sheffield.” So recalls Winston Hazel, DJ, promoter and son of a steelworker (Interview, 1 September 2019). Hazel, along with Richard “DJ Parrot” Barratt has made a significant intergenerational contribution to Sheffield’s musical heritage opening up the eyes and ears of music-goers in the city.

When the drop hammers are slamming, that’s about 60 tons beating out red hot steel. There is a rhythm to that which then travels up the [Don] Valley and starts to bounce off everything that it hits. (Winston Hazel, Interview, 1 September 2019)

Hazel compares the pervasive imprint of this sonic signature, heard as a resident of the city’s Hyde Park Flats, to falling asleep subconsciously alert to the subsonic rhythm and beat he slept to as a child when his family lived above Sonny’s Blues club in Havelock Square, in the city’s Broomhall district, where many West Indian settlers lived.

I was going to sleep to rhythm and beat and sonic so I’m already alert to it. The other thing that goes with that is the smell; it was a very grimy city – toxic air and you get the smell of hot molten steel as well and all those things that you associate with a sound and vice versa and they never leave you. (Winston Hazel, Interview, 1 September 2019)

This womb-like gestation of the city’s urban rhythm is evidenced in social forums and ear-witness accounts of the low booming acousmatic sound undulating down the Don Valley throughout the night. People comment on its soothing qualities even though it would literally shake some people in their beds while offering a tethering reassurance of regional identity through auditory perception. This 24 hour metronomic pulse of heavy industry that vibrated from the Attercliffe region became what Martyn Ware, co-founder of commercially successful Sheffield bands The Human League and Heaven 17 has described as “the heartbeat of the city” (cited in Wood 2004).

Martin Lilleker, musical journalist and author who championed the local scene, recounts Sheffield band Cabaret Voltaire’s now legendary riotous gig at Sheffield University’s “Science For the People” disco in 1975. Their set included an audio loop of a drop-hammer. The performance ended in a violent scuffle as the audience attacked the band. The fact that the loop was crafted from a recording taken on a trip to Ostend Harbour gives an insight into their “musique concrete” ideology of processing sound from the built environment (Lilleker 2005, 23).

This identification with the city’s industrial past continues with artists and musicians such as warehouse agitator Liam O’Shea, who has recently taken residency in the city. Under the DJ name of Lo Shea he establishes a reconnection to the city’s manufacturing tradition, for example using the industrial sonic imagery captured in Sheffield’s

Forgemasters steel works to contextualize the sweaty dance floor beats with his 12" release *Steel City/Prang*. As the Managing Director of "No Bounds" festival, O'Shea's program explores the acoustic and aesthetic possibilities of the city's Kelham Island Industrial Museum where artists work with and alongside the preserved remnants of Sheffield's manufacturing equipment. It reaches out further to other locations across Attercliffe's industrial area such as Hope Works, a former gun factory. Here huge crowds converge to bounce and stomp until daylight on the dusty disused concrete floors acoustically ignited by the high quality sound systems that have become another celebrated and exported component of Sheffield's music scene. For over 10 years the Sensoria music and film festival has also reconnected sound and vision to available urban spaces. Fittingly, and notwithstanding the singer Jarvis Cocker's comment (above) about the need for Sheffield's music to always sound industrial, Pulp's farewell party was staged in 2002 at the Magna Science Adventure Centre, an imposing disused Steel Mill in the neighboring town of Rotherham.

In 2014 The Black Dog, one of the UK's most prolific techno acts, celebrated 25 years of their existence with *Sound Of Sheffield*, a series of four digital EP's of recordings such as *Dropforge Learning*, an example of their urban groove blueprint "aimed straight at the dance floor, using the sounds of the city to echo Sheffield's heritage in creating electronic music" (The Black Dog 2014). Their fascination with local culture is further evidenced by the title of their album *Tranklements*, a local slang term for "ornaments, trinkets; bits of things." The term appears in several local dialect glossaries, suggesting an expression of everyday regional materiality to musical identity (e.g., <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-tra1.htm> – accessed 10 January 2020, and see below for a further discussion of regional dialect in the city's music).

SONA is a Sheffield-based collective which fosters skills, creates space, generates networks, and forges collaboration to support and inspire women and children and enable them to explore sound and music technology. The collective consists of Lucy Cheeseman (live coder), Amy Beeston (acoustics specialist) and Deborah Egan (sound collector and beat-maker capturing and sculpting the rhythms inherent in industrial sound). A further example of industrial influence, their six-channel sound installation *Sonic Intrigues* for Sheffield Modern (November 2019), was exhibited at David Mellor's Round Building in nearby Hathersage which has a workshop employing a small specialist team of modern, highly-skilled "Mesters" using traditional hand-crafting techniques. The soundscape mirrored the extension of the factory process by transforming raw natural sound through different stages of the assembly cycle in the factory to reinforce industrial sound similar in feel to techno.

In summary, Sheffield's "Seven Hills" creates a natural amphitheater in which its sounds have reverberated in a continuum of sonic agitation. The everyday thunderous roar of industrialization created sonic symbols of power, authority, progress and signs of advancement and social structure all now reflected in the city's soundtracks and in its archive.

### ***The Dawn of a New Beat***

In the 1970s, Sheffield was a city decimated by the closure of its steel and coal industries creating an approaching void of rust and hanging dust. The city became a vacuum into

which a new urban rhythm rushed as boredom and unemployment fashioned artists and musicians who began to re-appropriate the factories and empty workshop spaces. These spaces formerly belonged to the “Little Mesters,” a close-knit network of self-employed craftspeople forming a manufacturing community producing the various complementary byproducts of the larger steel industry such as cutlery, tools, and precision instruments (and radar equipment during the Second World War).

Punk’s seismic impact ignited, in the words of Richard Barratt, “the urge for non-musicians to make music and art” (Questionnaire, 22 September 2019) as a new workforce for a new era. For this community of artisans of the pre-digital age the preferred tools were the now-affordable synthesizers, tape recorders, drum machines, and hand-made effects boxes creating a spluttering roar of electronic beats and treated voices that mirrored the repetition of an industrial production line. Music was assembled from recycled tape collages, sound bites, processed voice, and field recordings; a playful, provocative, plunderphonic production line, molding, buffing and intuitively designing a contemporary musical language. This is described by Sheffield band Clock DVA’s founder, Adi Newton in the sleeve notes to Do It Thissen’s (2019) 12” vinyl release of *Future Cartography* as follows:

everything leads us to believe the real, the unreal, the reels and the electronic – a territory that in its essence is revolutionary and non-conformist ... the industrial-music tape machines of foundries and tape machines of steel. All seems to appear contradictory for those early pioneers, tape loops and treatments and performers ... (2019)

The artists in these historic industrial workshops pooled resources taking as much pride in their craft as their former occupants had. It was a highly creative, competitive, but collaborative community embracing the positivity of a DIY attitude. The Atari ST (part of a mid-1980s generation of home computers) arrived later as an additional democratic enabler for electronic music, diverting the full production process from studio to bedroom.

From the analysis of the questionnaires (above), the undoubted and well-documented pioneers of this period were Cabaret Voltaire and The Human League. Both bands subverted the standard rock format by pointedly replacing live drums with a drum machine or a tape recorder. They also shifted audience perception from the performers by using a projected visual backdrop. Despite these similarities, the two groups seemed like two different stations transmitting on the same waveband.

Cabaret Voltaire, named after the inspirational Dadaist café headquarters in Zurich, were hugely influential. On first witnessing them performing live for a NowSoc gig at Sheffield University in 1978, Wright recalls it feeling like the musical equivalent of film noir exploiting that heterotopic space where tension resides in the darkness at the edges of the frame, along with suggestions of new possibilities. They were reaching for the higher ground looking beyond punk to their industrial counterparts in Dusseldorf, Detroit and Chicago – like a satellite absorbing and retransmitting a kaleidoscopic flurry of words, sounds, noise and twisted rhythms. It felt like the future (and it is notable that The Human League was originally called “The Future”). *Electronic Sound*’s Neil Mason described the fascinating origination of Cabaret Voltaire’s sound:

Like all scenes it’s most likely down to time, the place and the people involved. An almost perfect storm. Kids who had this industrial town in their blood, but who were emerging into a brave new world of technological advancement, of opportunity, of possibility. It was

like that day your family swapped the black and white TV for a colour one. (Questionnaire, 31 October 2019)

The Human League emerged from the inspiration of Meatwhistle, a local council-funded experimental theater group, to become one of the first purveyors of “synth pop.” Both bands alongside fellow experimental provocateurs Clock DVA were heavily influenced by Roxy Music, particularly Brian Eno. Stanley Kubrick’s film *Clockwork Orange* featuring Wendy Carlos’ futuristic, electronic compositional reworking of Beethoven was equally popular and many Sheffield bands including Heaven 17, Clock DVA, Moloko, and Durango 95 took their names (or look in Molodoy’s case, Lilleker 2005, 276), from the film. These bands had been meeting since 1973 in bedrooms and attics, incubating, experimenting and conceptualizing their ideas. It was now time to get out and hit the dance floor.

### **Forging New Audio Identities**

Sheffield is renowned for its club scene and secret parties that occur in the cellars of Victorian terraced houses and for the clandestine labyrinth of destinations around the city. These destinations include closed high street shops and abandoned warehouses as well as quarries and forests in the nearby Peak District National Park. Mallinder (2011, 148) recognizes the huge importance of club and dance culture to the city’s musical heritage, noting how, “the DJ began to operate as the most significant interface between producer and audience.”

As Deborah Egan (Interview, 3 December 2019) describes it:

What made it different in Sheffield was the advent of electronica and the influence of industrialisation and there is also a political correlation between the kind of music that was created and that foundation that was affiliated with Black American music. So, having established that affinity with rhythm and bassline and beat, when the electronica element stepped in there was a segue across into that dance based sensibility.

Detroit Techno pioneer Derrick May echoes this sentiment in noting that, “it’s the emptiness in the city that puts the wholeness into the music.” He describes the experience of sensory cultural deprivation as a catalyst: “We sort of took those other senses and enhanced them, and that’s how the music developed” (cited in Reynolds 2005, 12).

*Boing Boom Tschak*, the opening track from Kraftwerk’s 1986 album *Electric Café*, created an international musical language through rhythmically vocoded sounds. Meanwhile, a similar sonic vocabulary was being forged in Sheffield that would shake dance floors across the UK. Warp Records, their name taken from the first letters of their artistic declaration “We Are Reasonable People,” emerged counter-culturally as indie labels were declining against the national backdrop of Britpop. The label was the perfect coalescence of several local elements including, first, Fon Studios built from Chakk’s (an industrial funk band from Sheffield) £100,000 MCA record advance and, second, the creative genius of in-house producer Rob Gordon whose technical dexterity and molecular detail to sound and its relationship to space had produced an impressive string of hits. The label quickly established a strikingly distinct visual image through the highly innovative graphic communication of the Designers Republic led by Ian Anderson, a former band manager who redefined the aesthetics of pop culture on an international scale.

Reynolds (1998, 98) describes the Warp label as an “enduring hardcore archetype” as it was “both a label and a specialist record store with close ties to the crucial special clubs.”

These included the seminal “Jive Turkey” in the City Hall ballroom where the followers of DJs Winston and Parrot united in an irrepressibly flamboyant cultural cross-demographic of music, gender, race and fashion. The catalyst was the 12” white label *Track With No Name* (TWNN) that turned “acid house’s radical anonymity into baleful mystique” (Tuffrey 2014) through the combination of Winston Hazel, Rob Gordon and Sean Maher. Their chosen name, Forgemasters, adopted from Sheffield’s manufacturing company dating back to a blacksmith forge in the 1750s, also referenced their process of “forging” new music from samples of a Manu Dibangu track called *Abele Dance*. Hazel and Gordon, the sons of steelworkers, were stamping their ethnicity and a Jamaican “dubconsciousness” onto Sheffield’s musical heritage.

The name Forgemasters came about because we believed that we were forging music because we had taken someone else’s music and made music out of it – Manu Dibangu – we took that track, we sampled it ... And it just fitted its “Forgemasters”. We’re making wrought iron, we’re making steel ... and it’s something as a young black kid in Sheffield and Robert Gordon can vouch for this. It was a means of being able to assert our ideas in the city because our fathers were steelmakers as well. So, to make that track and come up with a name like Forgemasters was so poignant. *Black Steel* was the next one. So we were making statements by then. By the time we were making *Track With No Name* we were making a statement, you know about “This is our heritage” as well. (Interview with Winston Hazel, 1 September 2019)

Warp then furthered the Sheffield sound across UK dance floors with Richard Kirk and DJ Parrot’s 12” *Testone* followed by *Clonks Coming*, creating the phenomenon of “Bleep” music, characterized by the use of a pure sine wave – the default feature of digital samplers, creating what Reynolds (1998, 98) called, “the first uniquely British twist on house and techno.” Reynolds (2013) list of the “20 best bleep records ever made” featured nine Warp tracks with both *TWNN* and *Testone* in the top three. The style was advanced by the onomatopoeic “Klang” which originated in Bradford with the Unique 3 but also heavily attributed to Sheffield through Rob Gordon’s involvement.

DJs Winston and Parrot continued to pioneer the cultural legacy of the Sheffield club scene by refusing to conform to national trends. Anniss (2019, 56) recognizes this, noting that, “they were far happier having a thriving underground scene with its own distinctive vibe.” He also describes how they established their own unique party scene by returning to the city’s industrial heartland utilizing the disused warehouses of the Lower Don Valley where they created their own mighty bass-driven anthems, best summed up by Annis’s (2019) interview with Sheffield-born DJ Luke Cowdrey:

A basement, a red light and a feeling. Detroit records, Chicago records – rough, uncompromising, drum-machine driven house and techno. It was probably a lot more serious than what was going on elsewhere in many ways. Sheffield was very loyal to this sound and felt that the Balearic thing happening elsewhere was cheesy. It was pure energy. That was the sound and it became a unique thing in the same way that Detroit had a distinctive sound.

He later explains how easily Sheffield’s musicians could assimilate to the House sound of Chicago in the Ibiza clubs: It was part of our culture – a continuation of the weird appreciation of electronic music that’s been in the city’s DNA since Cabaret Voltaire and The Human League started in the 1970s (ibid., 52).

Sheffield’s club scene therefore left a huge imprint on the city’s musical identity, on its DNA.

## Sheffield's "DNA"

A thematic conceptualization of the city's "DNA" inevitably implies a natural, essentialized, biological, genetic make-up. While what exists in Sheffield is not biological or deterministic but politically, historically and socio-economically constructed, this is nonetheless how some musicians view and describe the defining characteristics resonating through every phase of Sheffield's musical identity: it's militant and non-conformist attitude coupled with a working-class industrious insouciance typified by some of Sheffield's best exports who have crafted anthemic songs defining different periods in the UK's musical history. These songs famously include *Common People* by Pulp, affectionately referred to as the "14-year-old overnight success" aided by the Warp offshoot label, Gift. Similarly, The Arctic Monkeys were spurned by big labels as they sang in dialect which was not considered marketable (and see Beal 2009 for a discussion of the band's insistent use of local accent and dialect). Yet their first single *I Bet You Look Good On the Dance Floor* on the Domino independent label has led to six chart topping albums.

"Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not," the defiant statement by Albert Finney in *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* (1960), a brazen cinematic depiction of northern working-class culture, became the title for the Arctic Monkeys' first album. In 2013 the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival premiered *The Big Melt*, a live soundtrack to British Film Institute (BFI) archive footage of Sheffield's steel-making history directed by Jarvis Cocker and Martin Wallace. In the booklet to *The Big Melt* DVD (Wallace and Cocker 2013) Cocker describes the iconic "V" sign by Billy Casper, the most enduring image in the Yorkshire-based film *Kes* (1973), as a refusal to conform. Significantly, the pivotal scene which crystallized Cocker's commitment to the project was the 1901 footage of a young factory worker who greets the camera's gaze with the same ultimate act of defiance, flicking a "V" sign while queueing outside a steelworks in nearby Rotherham to collect his wage (potentially the same steelworks where Pulp had their final performance!). For Cocker it represented, a defining moment in film history, the first person to give two fingers on film and later, in an interview for *the Guardian* newspaper, he described how, "it reminded me a bit of *Kes*, and then I thought that maybe it's not about steel, it's the attitude it made of people, the spirit."

The title *The Big Melt* can also be seen as a considered tribute to the word "steel" as an expressive descriptor – defined as hard and obdurate. In the soundtrack, the stringed interpretation of the Human League's first single, *Being Boiled* acts as a metaphor for the extreme temperatures that many had to work with in the furnaces. The Sheffield Brass Band's rendition of *Voodoo Ray*, A Guy Called Gerald's classic acid house track, also evokes the long-distant memory of brass bands which, along with the younger marching bands, once served as emblems of regional communities. *The Big Melt* is a metaphor for the mechanistic rhythm that has oscillated across the ages from workplace to dancefloor. It also corroborates a viewpoint expressed in the lyrics to Pulp's *The Last Day of the Miners Strike*, signaling the symbolic end of British socialism as well as large-scale industrial manufacturing workforces that defined and dominated towns and cities, showing how these situations can also present new possibilities and opportunities: "People marching, people shouting/people wearing pastel leather/The future's ours for the taking now/if we just stick together."

“The Peoples’ Republic of Sheffield” is name-checked by the Ecocentric Research Council’s rant against social injustice, “There’s a War Against People Going On,” one of many projects from the prolific genius of Adrian Flanagan and Dean Honer who have made Sheffield their adopted home. They form the frontline of the electronic legacy that harks back to the 1970s in what *Electronic Sound* magazine has described as “The Golden Age of the Future.” Their catalogue of projects strides mischievously across a wide and magical emporium of genres from the psychedelic disco of Moonlandingz to the latest collaboration with Leonore Wheatley as the International Teachers Of Pop, described by *the Guardian* as “invigorating synth pop” which claims: “When times are hard for Britain, Sheffield produces brilliant electronic pop groups. The Human League in the 80s, Moloko in the early 90s ... and now International Teachers Of Pop” (Rogers 2019).

### Summary

These testimonies provide an articulate and persuasive overview of the many and complex ways in which the city of Sheffield’s character is partly shaped by, and shapes, the music made there, representing what can be described as a sonic cycle in which the city’s heritage is always becoming (after various authors, but notably Smith 2006). Put simply, Sheffield’s is an industrial sound emanating from an industrial city and helping to create a new identity in spaces originally designed and built for the steel industry. But this is only the view from within. How does this compare to the way Sheffield was viewed from outside during the formative period of the mid to late 1970s, a time, as Hatherley (2011, 12) describes it: [when]

the money ran out when the steel industry restructured itself and sacked most of its workforce, and a council attempting “Socialism in One City” were squeezed of any funds. Its wildly overambitious Brutalist buildings, left in ruins or demolished altogether in the 1990s, provided – still provide – a landscape where there’s space to dream of what could have been, and to move from there to thinking of what could still be?

### Content Analysis: NME, 1975–1978

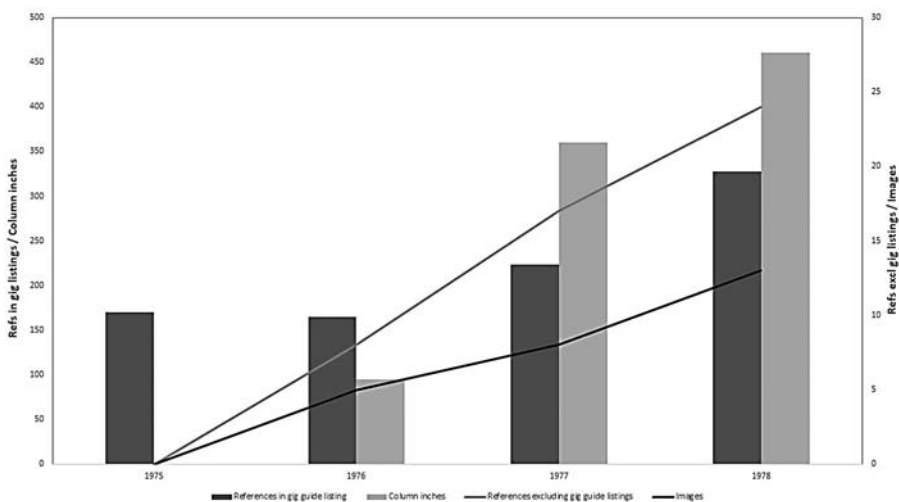
Having explored some views from within, of the origins and character of Sheffield’s music scene, the analysis now turns to a view of Sheffield from outside the city during the critical formative years of 1975–1978. For this, content analysis was made of the weekly popular music newspaper *New Musical Express* (usually referred to as NME), archived as a virtually complete run at the British Library, London. At this time, each newspaper usually extended to between 50 and 80 pages of articles, interviews, advertisements, gig listings, gig reviews, record reviews and the latest single and album charts. As stated earlier, the NME was a proving ground for people who went on to pursue successful careers in journalism. Practicing “gonzo journalism,” journalists on the NME also sought out the “next big thing” and were arguably the first to embrace and champion the punk movement, with articles in April/May 1975 for example covering Patti Smith, Iggy Pop and the Pink Fairies, paving the way for a seminal essay on the New York punk scene later that year. The advertisements that featured in the newspaper are not insignificant in this analysis. Some, for example, may have helped the “community of artisans of the pre-digital age”

(as described earlier) towards the emergence of an industrial electronic scene in Sheffield. For example, following a previous article about how to soundproof a room, an essay on 11 January 1975 explains how to make a home studio. In this context, popular electronics magazines were also known to have been influential at this time.

The analysis comprises a quantification of the references made to Sheffield in each weekly issue of NME over the four-year period 1975 through 1978. The study recorded: the number of references to Sheffield gigs in the weekly gig guide; references to Sheffield's music scene beyond these listings (and often comprising gig reviews in the city by local NME journalist Andy Gill); the number of images accompanying these references; and the number of "column inches" these articles and reviews occupy. The analysis also recorded whether coverage was positive, negative or neutral. However, given that much of the content was gig reviews of touring artists visiting the city, this was found to be more a reflection of the individual journalist's musical taste. In fact, nothing negative or neutral was said about the Sheffield scene *per se*, with all negative and neutral comments being reserved for some of the visiting artists who gigged there. The results of this analysis are summarized in Figure 3.

An obvious conclusion from the analysis, and with the exception of Sheffield's weekly appearance in the national gig listings, is the total lack of any references to Sheffield in this publication prior to the inclusion of some gig reviews from Sheffield venues, the first of which appears on 25 September 1976. This complete lack of reference was confirmed through a rapid scan of earlier issues of NME from 1971 to 1974. The first gig review by Andy Gill is of a Dr Feelgood concert, pub-rockers who blazed a trail for the punk scene and went on to a commercially successful career. It begins:

Here in Sheffield there's a local aphorism along the lines of, "Tha' works 'ard, so bloody well play hard". It fits. Most of the concerts here at the City Hall testify to that play hard bit. Afterall, sweetheart, this is Heavy Metal City, and the folks round here like their vinyl well done, not medium rare. ("Heavy Metal Land Welcomes Feelgoods", NME 25 September 1976, 35)



**Figure 3.** Data from the NME content analysis. NB "Column inches" does not include the 3-page article on Sheffield that appeared on 9 September 1978.

This first mention of Sheffield (as “Heavy Metal City”) follows the first mention of the Sex Pistols (also in the form of a gig review) on 21 February 1976, alongside major articles on the punk scene and on electronic music, and references to forthcoming Kraftwerk gigs in the city and the Yorkshire folk club scene (on 28 February 1976). In general, and alongside punk rock, electronic music received increasing attention during the period 1975–1976. A review of Kraftwerk’s new single *Comet Melody 2* appears in the issue of 23 August 1975, the reviewer describing it as “incredibly like the Tornadoes with a whole lot more gadgets.” With Cabaret Voltaire looking to Germany (and specifically Kraftwerk and Can) at this time for inspiration (Ware 2019, 6), references to Kraftwerk and their performances in Sheffield have particular relevance.

Some touring artists visited Sheffield in spite of the lack of attention paid to the city by the national music press. In March 1976, for example, Man then Eddie and the Hot Rods played at city venues on consecutive nights after Kraftwerk had played the city in October 1975. But this was the north and in an article about Northern Soul it is noted that, “up north they don’t like London journalists snooping about” (11 October 1975). Even in 1977 (on 25 June, in a gig review for local band The Extras) Sheffield was described as a “musical backwater.”

It was in 1977 that Sheffield first became more visible in the national music press, its profile growing largely as a result of more gig reviews by Andy Gill. Following eight reviews in 1976 (including the Dr Feelgood gig on 25 September) his 17 reviews in 1977 began with a Babe Ruth gig:

Typical of a Sheffield gig is the way in which the dancing section of the audience settles down cross-legged in front of the stage to greet the band with immobility. ... Also typical is the way in which the audience remains immobile till the band leaves the stage, whereupon feet are lept to and encores demanded. (NME 29 January 1977, 31)

Gill’s documentation of an emerging scene continues into 1978 with a review of a Cabaret Voltaire gig on 14 January. This reads more like a full article, the review comprising a history of the band, its influences and style. As Gill described it, “[t]hey are rather intriguing ... Interesting enough to command undivided attention for the entire duration of their set ... [Yet there was] no record company interest, despite their having a possible hit single in “Talkover” (Kraftwerk meet King Tubby, kind of).” A review of *Talkover* by Tony Parsons was published in NME on 4 November. He described it as, “Casual Kraftwerk bootlegged in the bath. Meaningful.” On 11 February, Gill described another local band supporting XTC and singing about, “the horrifying Kelvin, Hyde Park and Park Hill developments which blot the Sheffield skyline” (Figure 4). Reviewing a free concert in the city on 15 July, Gill refers to the fact

The Extras are on the foot of a long bill, and are the only local band: They do have the urge to experiment (a unifying factor of nearly all the Sheffield bands). But where are 2.3, Cabaret Voltaire and The Human League?

Along with the earlier review of Cabaret Voltaire, this review marks the start of a short sequence focused on local artists playing hometown gigs. On 29 July 1978, Gill discussed how the Now Society (NowSoc) have been putting on gigs and promoting local bands “for some time now” (in fact from a handwritten list supplied by a NowSoc member, we know that in 1977–1978 NowSoc staged 10 concerts, 5 discos and several concert trips). Gill



**Figure 4.** Sheffield's Park Hill flats, a city landmark since their completion in 1961. Image reproduced through Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0.

goes on to note a band called The Human League providing “experimental disco muzak for the humourous of heart” and compares them to Kraftwerk. This is followed the next week with a further review of Cabaret Voltaire (and another Sheffield band They Must be Russians in support). Although a positive review, Gill describes it as “interesting but never satisfying” while noting that Cabaret Voltaire may turn out to be one of the “most important new bands to achieve wider recognition this year.”

This all precedes publication of a longer in-depth article about the city's music scene (Gill 1978). The essay, “This Week's Leeds – Sheffield, Yorks” begins: “Until last year, Sheffield was undoubtedly the most musically inactive city in Britain.” The essay describes how the paucity of small venues was “criminal” and the prospects for bands outside the Working Men's Club circuit was “non-existent.” It goes on: “But just under the surface, waiting for that kick we all felt in 1977, was a hive of latent musical expression, spear-headed by the now legendary “Extras” and featuring waves old, new, odd and unwhole-some.” The article refers to the emergence of Cabaret Voltaire as key in this development and quotes The Human League's Phil Oakey in describing the Sheffield scene as being “amazing: There's an incredible number of bands.”

The appearance of this essay coincides with the start of what Mallinder (2017, 48) refers to as a “mini paradigm shift,” as “Sheffield began to witness its second generation, in part led by newcomers who had decided to come to the city to study, but in truth many wanted to plunge head first into this new musical mess.” Neil Mason, now Commissioning Editor of *Electronic Sound*, went to study in Sheffield because of the music (Interview, 31 October 2019).

In summary, content analysis has revealed four stages in the emergence of a Sheffield scene. First were trends and developments documented in the pages of NME that arguably gave inspiration to the city's musicians and would-be musicians (e.g., the growing influence of Kraftwerk, the DIY ethos of punk, making a home studio). Second, a local

music journalist (Andy Gill) started writing gig reviews for the NME which provided evidence that Sheffield was a worthwhile place for touring artists to visit, thus encouraging other artists to include it on their national tours. Third, Gill wrote gig reviews not only for bands and musicians visiting the city's venues, but increasingly for local bands playing hometown gigs, bands like Cabaret Voltaire, bringing them to national attention. Finally, these reviews of local artists together demonstrated the emergence of a local scene sufficient to merit a full essay in the NME which put Sheffield's distinctive electronic/industrial experimental DIY music scene firmly on the map.

By the end of 1978, the Sheffield scene had thus emerged as one clearly visible from outside the city about to rapidly gain international recognition. But even though this exposure was created through the pages of a national publication, it was a local journalist who penned the words. Even the outside view was internal, one might argue.

## Conclusion

This project characterizes a distinctive Sheffield music scene with origins in its heavy industrial past and the availability of small workshop facilities. In what can be referred to as a "sonic cycle," the city's distinctive scene has become a key part of its character, heritage and identity, all of which continue to shape music-making and creative endeavors across the city. As one respondent noted, the sounds may have changed since the mid-1970s, but the "essence" remains the same. This essence comprises at least four dimensions.

First, the DIY scene of the early 1970s has prevailed, fragmented but thriving like a series of electrolytes across the city producing small intense bursts of energy emanating from a close-knit and hard-working network of promoters. This fragmented landscape of creativity closely reflects that of the earlier "Mesters" who operated in workshop isolation, serving and supporting the city's wider steel industry.

Second is the existence of an increasingly diverse music scene but with common roots in the city's heavy industrial past. Currently, the city operates as an elaborate urban sonic tapestry comprising many strands, scenes and genres. These come together in the annual Tramlines festival, which began in 2009 as a vision of a "Metropolitan Glastonbury."

Third, in a more digital world, physical places still exist albeit with their locations now more commonly situated on the fringes of the city center and beyond, reaching these outer limits from earlier central locations like a slowly receding tide (a parallel with the shifting techno scene in Berlin, as described by Schofield and Rellensmann 2015). Yellow Arch Studios (at Neepsend in Sheffield, west of the center) is a case in point, offering local support as a facility for recording, rehearsal and performance and providing the studio of choice for local legend Richard Hawley. Meanwhile, central locations are under increasing threat. In his Questionnaire of 29 August 2019, Adam Morris laments the possibility of the crumbling Stag Works, a two-storey former cutlery works with courtyard near the city's Bramhall Lane, joining the recent proliferation of inner-city student accommodation.

Fourth, there is a return to the spirit of atonality and improvisation as electronic dance music finds new expression in live coding. Alex Maclean, often working alongside Lucy Cheeseman of SONA, is an enabler at the forefront of algorithmic dance music. He

enjoys making spaces for things to happen either on a local or on a global scale. As Jake Harries describes it, “[m]usic in Sheffield is always reinventing itself in surprising ways. Pushing boundaries, reinvention, playing with form, humour as fun or extreme seriousness” (Questionnaire, 5 September 2019).

These four dimensions, revealed and discussed through the 24 in-depth interviews described earlier, characterize the essence of a distinctive Sheffield scene that has evolved over nearly half a century, building on and drawing from earlier heavy industrial roots and its associated crafts and craftsmanship. Alongside this questionnaire and interview survey, and focused on the formative years 1975–1978, a content analysis of the leading music newspaper NME revealed the emergence of the scene, illustrating the stages through which it extended from local to national in a time before mass and social media, but where social networks were key (as detailed in Crossley 2015). Through the combination of questionnaires and interviews and the analysis of a key documentary source, this project has revealed Sheffield as a city proud of its manufacturing history and its musical heritage and how these two things have become closely related. It presents an example of what Hetherington (2013) refers to as the colors, the rhythms and the noises of the city, all vital ingredients in shaping a distinct character and potential alternative futures. As Hetherington states, ultimately the city is an archive and a noisy, fluid and problematic one at that. This study of Sheffield’s sonic identity presents one such aspect of that archive and highlights its vital importance to understanding the city’s recent past. However, as the evolution of Sheffield’s music scene has shown, understanding that relationship is as (if not more) important for shaping the city’s possible futures. “The future ends but it begins again,” as Adi Newton (2019) has said. In short, the two elements of this study have revealed how, as one industry faded from view another one appeared almost literally out of its ruins, new growth emerging from the cracks in the city’s decaying concrete.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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**Ron Wright** is a Senior Lecturer in Sound at Sheffield Hallam University. His research uses the idea of sound and space as an experimental narrative tool to explore real and imagined landscapes and environments. His practice includes sound design for screen, gallery and live performance. Ron has been involved with the Sheffield music scene since 1978, as a member of the band Hula, as a founder member of the Now Society (or NowSoc), and through working at Red Tape Studios, the UK's first municipal sound engineering training facility.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1 – List of interviewees and those who completed questionnaires, and their positions within the Sheffield music scene*

- (1) Ian M Trowell: Consumer, historian and writer. Completed PhD at Sheffield University. Currently writing a book on Industrial Music.
- (2) Alan Fisher: Musician, producer, engineer, studio owner, promoter and co-founder of Now Soc. Currently director at Compassogroup (an urban redevelopment company).
- (3) Diane Rodgers: Ran a record label and radio show and musician. Current bands: The Sleazoids and Mean Girls Club. Musical ventures (including comics) under the pseudonym MissyTassles.
- (4) Alan Deadman: Musician, DJ, presenter and producer on Sheffield Live Radio. Promoter at The JuJu Club, Dubcentral, Headcharge, Sharrow Festival, Tramlines Festival and The Fringe at Tramlines (Devonshire Green Stage). Founding Director of The Musical Works, a not-for-profit music education company.
- (5) Eve Wood: Director of music documentaries including “Made in Sheffield” and “The Beat Is The Law”.
- (6) Michael Somerset Ward: Wrote a No.1 hit for Take That and also wrote “Weak in the Presence of Beauty”. As a writer: radio play “Kafka Chic” which explored Sheffield’s musical history. Current band project: Mzylykypop on “Do It Thissen” label.
- (7) Paul Bower: Over 30 years at all levels in bands, working at labels and publishing (AWAL – Artists Without a Label). Also UN! recordings, distribution, studios and promotion.
- (8) Nick Potter: Founder and promoter of The Audacious Art Experiment, an early DIY Venue. Musician, in Blood Sport and various other bands. Also venue manager and works for Sensoria Festival. Currently runs University of Sheffield Concerts series.
- (9) Graham Moore: Education roles within Museum and Gallery sector. Children and Young People Coordinator, Sheffield Museums.
- (10) Dean Honer: Manager, producer and studio owner. As a musician, various collaborative projects including, with Adrian Flanagan: Moonlandlingz, The Eccentronic Research Council and The International Teachers of Pop.
- (11) Zoey Jones: Film-maker: has made two documentaries about Sheffield’s DIY scene. Recently completed an internship at Sensoria and managed her own DIY music event.
- (12) Roger Quail: Drummer with ClockDVA, The Box and Cabaret Voltaire before following a music business career. Currently A&R at Rubyworks Records.
- (13) Tim Strickland: Worked at Virgin shops in Coventry and Sheffield in the late 1970s, then: singer (briefly), DJ and “Gofer” for Two Tone records and related projects. Developed Red Tape Studios for Sheffield Council. Band manager with Comsat Angels. Developed the National Centre for Popular Music.
- (14) Adam Morris: Mostly management, sales marketing, promotions and distribution. Ran his own independent label. Not a musician, but a bedroom DJ.
- (15) John Downing: Sheffield music specialist/archivist and Sheffield music DJ. Record label owner (Do It Thissen). Record manufacturer (Lathe-cuts).
- (16) Kathryn Reaney: Researcher into the sociology of pop music, DIY culture and subcultural activity.
- (17) Jake Harries: Singer, composer and producer (Chakk/Heights of Abraham/Jake Harries). Co-partner/owner of Fon Recording Studio. Promoter/Venue Director of Access Space.
- (18) Mark Albrow: Member of “Hula”, an experimental audio-visual group. Music journalist. Developed visuals for events and venues.
- (19) Winston Hazel: DJ, promoter, originator at Jive Turkey, Kabal, and others venues. Member of Forgemasters. Producer/Remixer.
- (20) Richard Barratt: DJ. Producer of artists including All Seeing Eye, Funky Worm and Roisín Murphy. Collaboration with Richard Kirk as Sweet Exorcist (Warp Records). Current Crooked Man project on DFA label.

- (21) Neil Mason: Journalist and Commissioning Editor for Electronic Sound Magazine.
- (22) Deborah Egan: Musician, promoter, arts and music project coordinator. Founded and runs Dina artspace and cafe.
- (23) Alex Maclean: Researcher at the Deutsches Museum, Munich and collaborator with FoAM – Kernow. Creator of the TidalCycles live coding environment. Co-founder of algorithmic dance music promoters algorave.
- (24) Mike Jones: Songwriter, music educator and the trustee of a music charity.

## ***Appendix 2 – List of questions used in Questionnaires and Interviews with members of Sheffield’s music scene***

### **Personal details**

- (1) Age
- (2) Gender
- (3) Highest educational qualification
- (4) City of residence
- (5) Involvement with music/creative industry

### **The Sheffield scene**

- (1) Is there a distinct Sheffield music scene?
- (2) If Y, what words would you use to describe the Sheffield music scene?
- (3) When did it first emerge?
- (4) Who were the main instigators?
- (5) What caused it to emerge? Was there a driver, or multiple drivers?
- (6) How long did it take for the Sheffield scene to become known outside of Sheffield?
- (7) When did London first take notice?
- (8) Was there a defining moment, after which the Sheffield scene was more widely known?
- (9) Was there an attempt to keep the Sheffield scene local, as a closely guarded secret?
- (10) If so, why do you think that was?
- (11) Has the scene changed much over the years?

### **Sheffield sound?**

- (1) Is there a distinct Sheffield sound?
- (2) If Y, how would you describe that sound?
- (3) Does it have a particular origin?

### **Finally ...**

- (1) Name five bands/musicians (past and/or present) that capture the Sheffield scene?
- (2) Name five places (past and/or present) in the city that you most closely associate with the Sheffield music scene?