

Words and Deeds

Sound City Conference Review – Thursday, 21st May and Friday, 22nd May 2015

As I dip into the sessions on offer at the Conference, I pull out one theme: how can nascent musicians ‘make it’ in the 21st century, whether ‘it’ means fame, fortune or simply not having to work in a supermarket to fund their creativity?

The theme runs through Thursday Panel Sessions including Another Brick in the Public School Wall: The Rise of the Rock Toff, where Paula Stewart, Little Panther Management, informs us that one of her artists has been offered four record deals, but all are for only one single with the option of another (not as secure as the 9-5, is it?) and the BPI: Things of Great Beauty, where Julie Weir, Visible Noise, tells artists not to just ‘click and send’ an MP3 but to think about the whole package, and Wayne Clarke, 25th Hour Convenience Store, observes that, for him, an artist stands out if he’s still humming their song a week after hearing it; and it is particularly emphasised by Mark E. Smith In Conversation with John Robb, when Smith’s dispiriting response to an audience question on whether the Fall would make it today is: “The Fall wouldn’t make it through the front door today”.

Where do we go now and what do we do? Becky Ayres, COO at Sound City, provides some answers in the Rock Toff Panel: Sound City are currently working in Everton, where young people may not have the knowledge of or the confidence to access ‘the music biz’. Connecting with local communities is crucial in a society which, the Panel members agree, is becoming more polarised; however, there is also a requirement to teach emerging musicians not just to excel at their art but also how to make that art sustainable financially. Other possible answers arise as the Panel discuss the rise of the pernicious internship – really only accessible to people who can survive without pay – and the ‘pay to play’ mentality rife in the live scene: campaign for enforcement of minimum wage re internships, and give young musicians the confidence to turn down such gig offers. Stewart sums up the Panel’s advice: be creative, stick together, don’t fight. Great things come out of adversity and collaboration.

The BPI Panel focuses on how artists can rise above the ‘noise’: by creating content in addition to their music – using social media, online communities, comics, etc to develop a fanbase. Having access to fans’ email addresses, rather than just ‘likes’ or ‘followers’ is crucial, as is moving away from the number of sales – tickets, records – to knowing and connecting with buyers. But it has to be done in a genuine way, by being authentic, and by focusing on the hyper-local. Oh, and bands should build up a 360 package of live events, streaming, etc. Hard to do on your own? That’s why the Sound City Conference exists: to provide connections, help and advice.

Light relief to the seriousness of the state of music in the 21st century comes via the In Conversation medium, where Dave Haslam valiantly attempts to corral Mark E. Smith into answering some of his questions, straight after they’ve been asked and in the right order. Smith provides some insight into his life – no smartphone or computer, people to read reviews/books by ex-band members – but a large pinch of salt should probably be employed when processing this information. Somehow, they move onto the topic of DJs. Mr Haslam, DJ and writer, obviously has a vested interest in this topic, and it’s great fun to see the interplay between the two. On mentioning the Fall’s cover of Lost In Music (check it out – it’s ace: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTLzOp3uTYw>), Haslam muses: “We’re lost in music/Caught in a trap’ – is that the theme of the conference?” – perhaps it is one of them.

Let me turn your deeds into words

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John Robb has an easier In Conversation with Julian Cope, as the latter does the majority of the talking, seizing the mic and not letting it go for much of the session. Cope riffs on a number of topics – the guy really is a polymath – but the theme I take from it is of Liverpool as an enabler, our exotic city, where people can be free to be who they want to be. As a young man from Tamworth, Cope explains, seeing punks in Liverpool wearing the most ‘out there’ outfits, was the catalyst for his own exotic flowering. Robb echoes Cope’s words: “Punk rock – the space where people don’t tell you to fuck off.” And if I had one wish for emerging musicians in this city, it would be this: that we could still provide a space for them to bloom (without closing it down when filthy lucre comes calling).

On to Friday, and first up is a romp through music history with Danny Fields. A standout quote is his memorable description of first hearing Iggy and the Stooges: “The sound I’d been waiting to hear my whole life”. He observes that a song needs to grab him within the first ten seconds, otherwise “they lost me” – more good advice for musicians – although the statement about today’s music being “just waves of electricity” rather than having a physical, vinyl presence is, surely, some way from the truth. However, his chutzpah and a degree of serendipity have carried him far – but there’s more to the man than this, as evidenced by Yale University now having his archive, so he, his audio interviews and other material will live for “all eternity”.

Viv Albertine’s In Conversation with Dave Haslam starts with a memorable line: “On first hearing his [John Lennon’s] voice, I found the meaning of life in the grooves of a flat plastic disc”. Albertine’s focus on music as educator in the less connected 60s and 70s is telling, and I wonder what role music can provide now, in this hyper-connected world. She doesn’t dwell on this, instead outlining her vision for the Slits: “I wanted to create a gang of girls boys wanted to be, not wanted to fuck”, and painting a clear picture of life for punk women in that era – being spat at, beaten up, and frightened when out and about in garb such as Vivienne Westwood’s “deconstructed clothes”. More good advice for would-be musicians comes as she remembers what she and Sid Vicious used to say when watching a band: “If you can’t be better than or different to the Pistols, don’t be in a band”, adding wistfully that she wishes today’s bands would find and use the same musical barometers.

After lunch on the Piazza, watching the canal boats pass by, the promise of being scared stupid [insert joke] lures me into the Scary Sync! Panel, which focuses on how musicians can have their work taken up by a show. Advice includes: have a legitimate online presence, including song lyrics, have an instrumental and a vocal version of the tracks, make sure you own the master rights and the sync rights, tell the music supervisors who you sound like, and do your research on them. And if you have anything suitable for a new show called Zoo – ‘swampy Southern blues bar music’, perhaps – then CBS just might be interested.

See you next year – I’ll be on the front row.

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