

On a very cold Friday evening in Newcastle on 20 Feb 1981, Stephen Joyce and I approached the fluorescent lit entrance and relative warmth of Spectro Arts Workshop. We were going to see Treatment Room play. In recent months, I had seen them twice and was brimming with good reports. I had just bought their first single 'Shapes' / 'Awayday' (sic) and we had listened to it endlessly. They were a Newcastle band but no ordinary 'local' band - we'd heard them on the John Peel show just the week before! This was an incredible distinction. It meant they were a band with a place in the national landscape of music. They were going places and we were really excited to be seeing them play and also to be doing our first ever interview for Eccentric Sleeve Notes. As we reached for the red painted door, the group's 'eye test' logo loomed large on a poster but appended to it was a handwritten note: "Sorry, tonight's gig is cancelled." We were devastated.

Over the weekend, I spoke to their singer, Chris. He apologised but didn't really say why the gig had been cancelled. He invited us round to his place during the day on the Monday - no problem for us as we were both 15 years old and it was half term!

Chris lived at 8 Rawling Road in Bensham in a typical upstairs Tyneside flat. He opened the glossy black door to a very dark stairway. We walked up and stared in wonder at the walls lined with pictures from fashion magazines (likely the influence of his then girlfriend, Christine, who also lived there) and pages chosen from the music papers. We'd never seen anything like this. It was glorious and just got better: at the top of the stairs was a cutting with the dates for the ill fated Sex Pistols Anarchy tour in 1976. Like the night we expected to see Treatment Room play, we were excited again! But again, we were to be heavily deflated. Before we had even sat down, Chris broke it to us: "The band's split up." We were deeply shocked. Chris played for time and made mugs of instant coffee in very fashionable red mugs. We both asked for our customary four sugars. He was concerned, "Four sugars? That's like drinking melted Mars Bars!"

We caught our breath and went ahead with the interview but didn't ever get round to writing it up as, by the time we were ready to publish our first issue, we ran an updated interview with Chris about his new band. The original tape, capturing the rawness of the Treatment Room split and their short history, lay forgotten for 28 years until I recently rediscovered it and set about transcribing it. The tape begins with my plaintive utterance of "why?"

"Basically, there was only me doing it full time. The other lads worked. The drummer and bass player didn't get on very well. It came to a head last Tuesday in Sunderland. There was an argument... It ends up that the band split. Permanent." His reply was almost nonchalant. Wasn't this a band that was going places? John Peel might well play their record again that very night! We were still in shock. We thought everything was going so well for the band: the single was being played by John Peel and we'd just read in a local fanzine that the group had "feelers in Leeds, London, Stoke". Weren't things happening for them?

"It's a different scene, you know. It's OK being up here and thinking, 'That's great; we'll just keep playing in pubs'. It was great when new wave started but if you want to get out of that then it becomes a hundred times more difficult. If you imagine that you've got to take a band down to Leeds; you need a transit for all the gear and 4-5

people you've got to have a lot of cash to do that and if you're pretty unheard of then you won't get paid enough. You can't ask to headline and expect to get a hundred quid. We didn't have any problems getting [local] gigs. Somebody would come back and say 'do you want to play such and such or support such and such?' We didn't often try to play out of the area but when we did it became very hard as we didn't have the right set up. You couldn't just pick up the phone and say, 'We're such and such an agency... We'd say we're a band from Newcastle.'
'Yeah, ring back in about 3 years.'

He didn't sound bitter but rather matter of fact as he explained more about why the band split: "One of the reasons we split is the bass player wouldn't turn up for rehearsals. We'd do a gig and we'd have never played the whole set before. We were on stage and it was like what will we do next? If we had rehearsed, we'd have been a much better band."

Chris was in his early 20s at the time and was intent on moving forward. He had already put together a new band and played us a tape of their first rehearsal when they played two songs he had written towards the end of Treatment Room. "This stuff here [the rehearsal tape is playing in the background], we did in four hours, right from scratch. I could go out and perform that lot just as well as I did anything with Treatment Room. We played 'Awayday' in the rehearsal. It sounded different... more layers."

We listened to a live tape of Treatment Room that was recorded at the Durham Domefest in 1980. "We hadn't rehearsed for 2 months before we did the gig. Various people got hold of the tapes. The recording is one of the best we had done even though it's just live." ['Ants & Aphids' was playing in the background.]

Chris told us at the time how important having a good manager was - the bands that have since emerged from Newcastle had strong management and so proved that to be true. A good example is Prefab Sprout who, ironically, played at the same Domefest gig: "I tried to get us a management deal about 6 months ago. I tried all the people that weren't successful - there are no managers up north who can really do the job. White Heat (a band recently seen on Tyne Tees Television's Check It Out) have just signed a deal with Virgin for a £40k advance. The guy that's managing them used to book all the bands for the Poly (a Friday night in the Students' Union at Newcastle Polytechnic was one of the region's few regular opportunities to see live music). I think he'll be a pretty good manager because everybody thinks he's a bit of a bastard."

['Bully Boys Bitch' was playing in the background.]

'Shapes' was released on the band's own Plug label, which is obviously a small operation so how would they get quantities of the single from Chris' flat in Bensham to record shops up and down the country so John Peel's listeners could buy it? "We're using the independent network that's set up for labels like us to distribute our own product but it's not as easy as you'd imagine. I rang five or six of the distributors including Rough Trade last week but they're busy with the NME cassette (The C81 NME / Rough Trade cassette offer was to prove to be a huge success and generated many more advance orders than anticipated). The distributors in Birmingham and Manchester had both just moved premises so they've got a backlog and told us to ring

back in two weeks time. They know John Peel is interested now but they don't want any more stock that they'll have to move around from one place to the next." Timing is everything and the opportunity to make the biggest possible impact with the single seemed to be slipping away.

I asked Chris if he was satisfied with the single. He said he was but added: "We could have gone further and been a lot better if we'd decided we were going to be a band and not do other things. I think we'd have had to get other members in the band because it was becoming harder for me to play and sing and do what I wanted to do. The stuff we did is dead basic - there's nothing difficult about it. There's nothing that makes it anything other than good new wave. Just another new wave band... I didn't want it to be but to get out of that we'd have needed other people in the band. The guitarist in Punching Holes, Tim Jones, was in Treatment Room for two month (sic). [Before that] he'd been in Neon for some 3 years and they were just barely getting a contract. He didn't really want to go through all that again. One of the things that stopped him joining is that we just didn't have the right approach at the time. We weren't taking it seriously at all then - it was before I was doing do it full time so he left."

The outlook must have been very different when the band formed in February 1979. Although Chris is from Hetton-le-Hole and Steve Oliver is from Seaham Harbour, they actually formed the band at Leeds Polytechnic. "The drummer, Brian Ward, joined about two months after we'd started. The drummer out of Neon was our first drummer. He just sat in with us and helped us play. If it wasn't for him we would never have got going... so perhaps he's to blame!" Chris played us their first ever demo that was recorded at Spectro Arts Workshop: "We had a tremendous number of songs - thirty odd. We dropped most of them - everything on this tape apart from this one." [We listened to 'Pill Box'.]

By the time the band gained its initial momentum, Chris was halfway through a course in architecture in Durham. He was more interested in focusing on the band so he left the course. The rest of the band continued with their jobs. "The bass player runs a motor bike shop." Having access to these premises - sound proofed and double glazed - solved the problem of where they could rehearse at the high volume the bass player liked. "The drummer works at Parsons in Heaton as a fitter."

Chris snapped himself back to the present: "I'm sorry we haven't done a farewell gig but it was just impossible... The real reason we didn't play on Friday was because on the way back [from the second of the Sunderland dates] the bass player said, 'I'm not looking forward to playing on Friday,' so that was it... There again, it's very sad."

Chris wanted to talk about the future, "It's going to be a while before you see me on stage. About four month (sic). That might sound like eons but it's going to take that long to get sorted. It will be something different to Treatment Room but it will be along those lines as that's where we're starting from. I'll be writing most of the songs. Hopefully, it's not going to be something that's just ordinary run of the mill new wave. It's going to involve a lot of work. Stuff like this [collage music was playing in the background - a lesser known arts genre that was the forerunner to sampling]: the bass player, Nick Ketteringham has done this. It's a piece about Neon. He's taken bits of phrases that they say on tape and spliced them all up, played them simultaneously and

using six tape recorders has mixed them together. If you didn't have anything to do with the band you'd get a picture of all of the members of the band, how stable they were mentally, who wrote all of the music, why the band went through what they did and what happened just before they split up. This is the first single they did [a snippet of a song comes through the mix]. This band were 'far out' at the time. They didn't have the right image, unfortunately. It came out at the same time as punk. I think it should have gone a lot further but it just got swamped."

Chris' thoughts turned to his new band, "The next band... we're not going to do many gigs but the gigs we do are going to be a whole night's entertainment. It'll be just us playing with films and all sorts of stuff. If this doesn't work, I'll probably have to go back to working but I've got great faith."

Chris summarised by saying, "I don't regret being in Treatment Room at all but as we went along it became apparent that we were just another new wave band. I don't think we were doing anything really good enough to get us recognition as a band that can write really original work." Clearly, Chris needed the right people around him and he was optimistic about the 'many talents' that existed in his new band. We found out later they were called The Fashionable Impure. That August, we got to see their first gig at Spectro. It was everything that Chris had said it would be. The five members played a dense music enriched by backing tapes and were visually striking as slide images were projected onto the stage (this was all very unusual at the time, particularly in Newcastle). I spoke to Chris immediately afterwards and gave him the door takings (Stephen and I had been willing volunteers to collect £1.25 from each punter as they came in). He looked like he'd put everything into the performance. He didn't say much but I'll never forget the big warm contented smile on his face. Excellent!

SIMON McKAY