

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND



giro's place in belfast's cultural landscape

Words by Sharlene McGee

Giro's role as a cultural catalyst in Northern Irish life has been memorialised in the ANTI exhibition. Those readers of a somewhat more mature vintage will be well versed in Giro's mythology, be it the school-gym benches, or air of possibility that existed within its walls. What's more, despite being regarded by many as a relic of a pre-corporate Belfast, in a very Gandalf-styled resurrection, the venue is due to return shiny bright and with renewed vigour.

Petesey Burns, sole original member of Giro's to be involved in its imminent return, provides his own unique insights into the current celebrations of the city's alternate culture: "What's happening now is the reclaiming of a social history, something that people can feel proud of. People are starting to find their feet again." Indeed, the ANTI exhibition is in itself of its moment, expressing a common need to treasure the present as a result of the path taken to arrive here.

Giro's formed in the cultural wasteland that was Northern Ireland during the Troubles and is credited with safeguarding an alternative

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lifestyle during its 17-year term of stewardship from 1986 to 2003. Burns, a former guitarist for Stalag 17, reveals the altruistic aspirations that drove Warzone, the collective behind the venue. "Through empowering ourselves we can in return help to empower others". It may seem like a simple means to a lofty end but the Warzone Collective that generated the idea of Giro's is committed to social progress through direct contact with people whom you never would have known otherwise: "We want to create a space where people who are getting a hard time in this town can feel welcome."

Anarchist bookshop, Just Books, formerly of the Old Smithfield market from 1978 to 1994 was a base that propelled the Warzone Collective and eventually Giro's. "It gave a political element to the group with the idea of anarchism," states Burns. "We had heard of anarchy through The Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' and we thought it was all about wrecking places and being outrageous, but there was a lot more to it than that." Links with the bookshop prove to be ties that bind and Burns continues to extol the virtues of a self-educating class-consciousness.

"Just Books offer practical support, countering lies," he suggests, yet Burns sees the Warzone Collective as fulfilling a distinct role – "fighting bigotry through social networking". It is almost a Facebook with a civic consciousness. Eager to stress what marks them out as strikingly unique from their ideological wares peddling peers, Burns suggests that, "it's not politics with a small p, we have no vested interest. Our only aim is trying to open your eyes".

Burns reflects on the halcyon days when the urge to mobilise first

took him and his band mates. "We were a bunch of punks, unemployed people knocking about Belfast with very little to do in the early Eighties. It became less of a trendy thing and more of a cultural thing." Any movement that is in the cultural vanguard needs space to breathe and move in different directions, but that was never an option when operating within the Northern Ireland status quo: "You were always someone else's squibs, and punk audiences being what they were, a few would always get obstreperous and you'd be back on the streets again."

Along with Stalag 17, Toxic Waste was at the front line of the movement's mobilisation. "Just Books was cutting our teeth, giving us a profile and a base that would allow us to communicate with other scenes in different parts of the world." It was looking further a field and comparing what was going on in Belfast with other parts of Europe and that fuelled fire in the Warzone belly. Touring in Belgium, Holland, and Germany allowed access first-hand to the lifestyle of organised communal living, much of which benefited from government funding.

Tracing back to the inspiration for ideas alien in their contemporary setting, Burns draws comparisons with Vauréal in France, Coreggio in Italy and Czech Decin. Even then, what was clear to the intrepid explorers was that "adversity spurs creativity". When it comes to culture, the underdog trumps all other cards; whereas Italy and France were more politically stable, it was the Czechs, "our poorer partners", with a rough and ready attitude who were more exciting. "You didn't have a lot, but because of that you appreciated what you did have. Especially for these areas decimated by the Soviet Union, when your only voice has been silenced, it becomes even more important to stand up and say I'm not part of this, not me."

"DIY NOT EMI"

Burns believes that the DIY traditions that took such a firm hold of the city's imagination were dictated by necessity:

"If we didn't do it, no one else was going to do it for us; there was a distinct sense of being held at arms length."

Yet once they held their nerve, the movement gathered momentum and was soon yielding tangible results. "When you saw how easy it was, you just rounded up a few mates, put up posters and shared your gear." In spite of the collective's humble stock, the fruits of their labour would leave a lineage that was not limited to the metaphorical: "You ended up making friends with people you would never have met in a month of Sundays, going back to areas you'd have

GIRO'S HISTORY 101

1984: Warzone Collective founded by Belfast punk bands Stalag 17 and Toxic Waste.

1986: Giro's venue first comes into existence at 3-5 Donegall Lane, just around the corner from the Unemployment Centre. It comprised a vegetarian café, drop-in centre, practice and office space, venue and printing workshop.

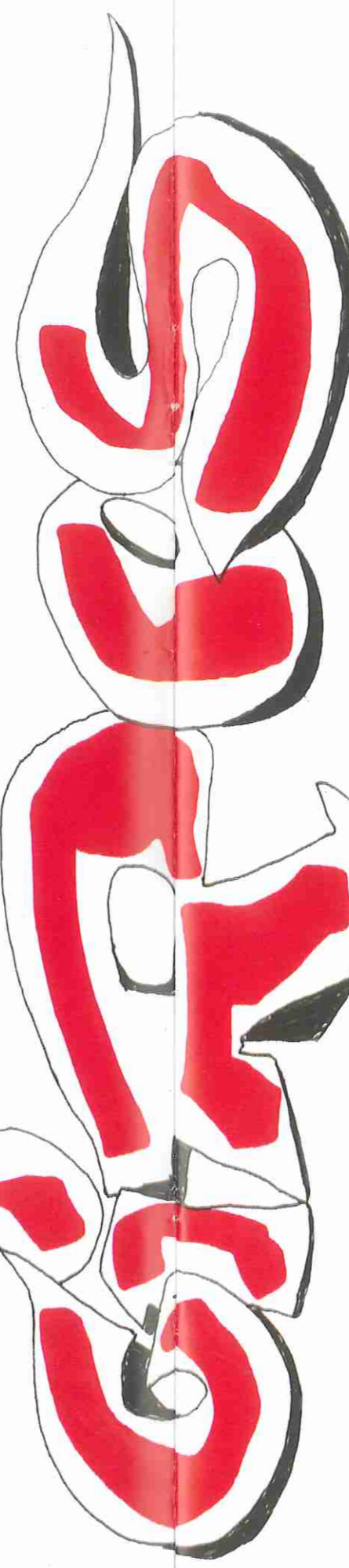
1996: While The Sex Pistols gig was banned by Belfast City Council due to the reputation of punk, Giro's continued to offer an alternative to commercial venues.

2003: Giro's closed its doors after 17 years and after playing host to the likes of Ramones, Green Day, NOFX, Bad Religion, Siouxsie and the Banshees and many others.

2007: There are tentative plans about resurrecting the Warzone Collective.

March 2009: Planning towards a new social centre commences.

June 2009: New premises are confirmed as 161-163 Victoria Street.



no call to be in and even marrying and having families across the divide."

Given its setting within a specific scene and time, how much contemporary relevance can the Warzone Collective possibly have? Plenty, says Burns. "Giro's in the mid-Eighties saw the worst sectarian violence in Belfast's grey days. Of course, there have been changes but, socially, things aren't that different. There's a bit more money in the town, a bit more opportunity, but it's the same old story for people trying to promote events and do something different." The freedom to break rules is a key issue for Burns: "You're either priced out of the market or you're at the mercy of bar-owners' whims and under the pressure of ludicrous conditions. Crucially, there is a massive gap between the commercial and the total amateur that just isn't being catered for. There still exists a demand for a separate space for those interested in the DIY culture."

Expanding upon the issue of Anarcho-punk's relevancy in a modern setting, Burns acknowledges the roots of the movement while remaining keen to emphasise the reinvention central to Giro's revival: "Anarcho-punk has flourished in so many different directions, anti-globalisation has come from that, without a doubt!" It'll be down to what people want to bring to it, really." Applying realpolitik to the needs of cross community interaction in Northern Ireland, Burns identifies the shared reality that resulted "There is a sense of ownership with Giro's. The people running it don't get paid. It's all voluntary. The idea was simple – we need it, so let's create it." The haven of familiar territory proved consequential for Larne natives Therapy? who cite Giro's as a significant formative influence: "We found a home playing at shows put on by the Warzone Anarchist Collective in Belfast, and as a result we ended up playing with everyone from thrash bands to dub artists to techno DJs".

SOME OF US LIKE OLIVES SOME OF US DON'T

For Burns, the central issue is choice; everyone can have a piece of the pie, and even choose what flavour their slice will be. "It needs to be flexible so that everyone's ideas can be accommodated. In all of Giro's' history there was never a set policy, it was always determined by the people who ran the place, and that's continued even in the potential for internet activism in the website's forum where ideas are posted and provoke feedback."

DECLARING WAR AGAINST WAR

Likening the social discontent to economic collapse, Burns believes that warnings of the excesses of the Eighties are unheeded today: "Giro's is more relevant with today's economic situation; the way people are getting hammered by the system and losing their jobs. It's not a dissimilar climate to what the Thatcher years brought. This thing is cyclical."

Yet there remains a glimmer of hope, demonstrating what can come of a forgotten seed among the rubble: "With very little funding, the

I WANT TO LIVE LIKE COMMUNE PEOPLE

With throwback hippy values such as co-housing, self-determination and sustainable living experiencing a revival, we take a backwards glance and examine the history of culture and cohabitation.

TACHELES, BERLIN

Housed in a building once deployed for SS central offices, Tacheles was self-appropriated by a collective at Germany's reunification. Denoting the Yiddish for "speaking plain", Tacheles grew out of the spirit of self-determination and freedom of speech under strict censorship of the time and quickly became the heart of Berlin counterculture. Rent was set at a symbolic deutsche mark for the resident artists of the squat in 1998. Free raves and 24 hour after parties were equally common currency. However, due to the gentrification of the surrounding area, the refuge could soon be extinct with a five star business hotel in the works.

FELA KUTI'S KALAKUTI REPUBLIC

Translating from Nigerian as "rascally", Kalakuti was a community that constituted a recording studio and a free health clinic. When Kuti declared it an autonomous space the country's military leaders became so incensed that they stormed the commune in 1977, setting the buildings alight and killing Kuti's mother – a feminist activist and the first Nigerian woman to drive a car – in the process. Kuti was jailed and in total, appeared in court 356 times and served three prison sentences

Warzone Collective thrived for 17 years based largely on mutual appreciation, self help and respect."

Carving a path for civic responsibility when greed and self-interest is universally rewarded is no mean feat. Burns maintains that the recent economic boom and bust that "exposed people with their noses in the troughs" simply signals the failure of popular aspirations that necessitate "stepping on other people's heads".

Echoing the trans mission statement of providing the means for a third cultural space in Northern Ireland, the Warzone Collective channels "a choice between sectarianism and being apolitical" into a material reality. Burns identifies ideology as an organic process and envisages his own role within the venture as a facilitator of discussion. "The polarity of the community is in your genes. But lines can't be fixed against any social interplay be it race, gender, or sexuality. They might be high walls of division, but what is important is the process of chipping away at them and realising that they really only constitute someone else's lies."

And what of the new incarnation of Giro's? Burns describes the recently rented premises, a red brick structure, airy with plenty of light. The building, formerly a bank, perhaps represents the collective's subconscious appropriation of dead financial institutions, just as its

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former incarnation addressed the social needs of the neglected and unemployed. Burns admits that there is something poetic in their proximity to the Victoria Square shopping centre, somewhere that is rapidly becoming Belfast's luxury commercial hub. "Places like the Victoria Centre pitch themselves solely to a certain class of people, and those who remain untouched find that package difficult to swallow, Giro's would see itself very much as the antithesis of that."

There is a talisman-like tall tree located just outside the door of the new premises that signals the Warzone Collective's green sensibilities. Links with the Fieskwater group, an organic free-holding farm in North Antrim are entwined into the history of Giro's with some members even electing to up sticks and join the community after staging Warzone Collective festivals. "They are themselves moving back towards the collective ethos and we hope that once the new Giro's gets going they will supply the café's produce, cross-fertilising, if you'll forgive the pun!"

In fact, Northern Irish culture remains an intricately woven tapestry whose intimate connections are revealed in the ANTI exhibition, so it's not a bad analogy at all.

1936 ANARCHIST SPANISH REVOLUTION

In the Anarchist industrial communes of Catalonia, three quarters of the economy was estimated to have been placed under workers' control. In more thoroughly Anarchist rural areas, particularly among agrarian collectives, money was eliminated and the communes were organised according to the tenet: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Abortion was legalised and a spirit of "free love" dominated where oppressive social codes had existed previously. Orwell in Homage to Catalonia writes: "In theory it was perfect equality, and even in practice it was not far from it."

THE PARIS COMMUNE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The extremes of ideology breed hypocrisy and can doom a revolution before it can even get going. After overthrowing the monarchy to the strains of Liberté, égalité, fraternité, Robespierre was simultaneously referred to as both "The Incorruptible" and "Blood-thirsty Dictator". The Reign of Terror that he marshalled can be read as a cautionary tale against the perils of the dogmatic zealot. There were claims that Robespierre couldn't even boil an egg, and the eccentricities of the Spartan utopia of his partner in crime, Louis de Saint-Just, outlined how a man could be placed in exile for not having any friends.