

flourish

Flourish Magazine is a joint venture between integrative cancer care charity Yes to Life and creative health charity Artlift and funded by Arts Council England, aiming to explore the benefits of an integrative and creative approach to living with cancer.

The magazine is created with the support of a steering group that includes people living with cancer and partners Macmillan, Macmillan Next Steps and Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust.

It features a range of creative responses, expert information and interviews in each themed edition that offer support and represent the diversity of the cancer community.

Artlift

artlift.org

Artlift is a Gloucestershire based specialist creative health charity co-producing projects and courses for people living with mental health challenges, long-term chronic pain and/or who are living with or moving on from cancer.

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Yes to Life

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Yes to Life is the UK's integrative cancer care charity, which empowers people with cancer to make informed decisions about their care options. For well over a decade, we have provided evidence-based information to those in need.

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Thanks to Jason Conway, Editor of Steel Jackdaw for his support and to The Cancer Hive for the inspiration.

The Balance Issue

Hello and welcome to the fourth issue of Flourish Magazine, a magazine by and for the cancer community from integrative cancer care charity Yes to Life and creative health charity Artlift, who are based in Gloucestershire.

This issue's theme is the ever-important, but ever-elusive, 'Balance'. The content featured in each issue of the magazine is received via an open call (see the inside of the back cover for how to submit to our next issue) and I always love seeing how the theme is interpreted by our contributors. The incredible artwork, photography, craft, essays and creative writing in this issue do a better job than I ever could of showing that balance means something different to all of us, and perhaps is not something we can ever fully grasp.

Balancing the personal and the professional, the mind and the body, the head and the heart – it's a challenge for us all – but throw a cancer diagnosis into the mix and it becomes an even bigger feat. When we're going through treatment, supporting someone with cancer, or coping with grief – is balance still possible?

The submissions in this issue show the ways in which creativity, nature, community and movement help to balance us, but also demonstrate how part of finding balance is allowing things to get a little unbalanced, to accept the inevitable tilt of the scales, even if just for a moment.

We always aim to show the breadth, diversity and truth of the cancer experience, meaning that some of the content we've featured is dark and challenging in tone. We have provided content warnings throughout, so that readers can choose what they feel able to engage with.

In this issue we were fortunate to run a creative workshop with women who have experienced cancer from different communities in the South West through health organisations Sirona and CAAFI. The workshop and accompanying resources are featured in a pull-out, so that we can offer translated versions of this feature and our resources to these communities, many of whom do not speak English as a first language.

If you have a moment, we'd love it if you could tell us what you thought of the magazine in our short survey by scanning the QR code on the back cover. Thank you for reading!

Natalie Beech
Editor-in-Chief

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Joss James

the end of the session, most of the women had shared their stories openly and it felt like they had long been waiting for a space to talk.

"We can share here as well as be creative" one participant said. "Our hands are busy

working and our mouths are sharing stories and connecting to each other."

The workshop showed the power of creativity in bringing us together. Creating together connects us and provides an opportunity to

voice fears and emotions, meet others going through the same struggles, have vulnerable conversations and embark upon a creative healing journey.

5 MYTHS ABOUT CANCER BUSTED

MYTH: You are alone with cancer

TRUTH If you are unsure about how to get tested for cancer, how to deal with a diagnosis, or you need support in accessing cancer services – there is plenty of free help to hand. CAAFI and Health Links can answer questions you have about cancer and your treatment, come along to appointments to advocate, interpret or translate, or even come to you in your home.

MYTH: Cancer is a death sentence

TRUTH Cancer is an incredibly common disease, with 1 in 2 people in the UK developing cancer in their lifetime. When caught early, survival rates are vastly increased. This is why it is essential to attend the NHS's free cancer

screening services when you are invited to. If you are concerned you may have cancer, it's vital to get tested. Organisations like CAAFI and Health Links can assist you with this.

MYTH: Smear tests impact your ability to have children, and you need to be sexually active to require one

TRUTH Smear tests are crucial for women aged 25 and over in preventing and diagnosing cervical cancer. The NHS will contact you directly about getting a screening, first starting 6 months before you turn 25, then every 3 years between 25 and 49, and every 5 years between 50 to 64. It is vital to attend these, as early detection of cancer increases chances of survival exponentially. For breast cancer, almost all survive when detected

at the earliest stage, compared to 3 in 10 surviving when diagnosed at the latest stage.

MYTH: Chemotherapy is the only treatment for cancer

TRUTH Your healthcare professional may suggest other treatments, such as radiotherapy, immunotherapy or hormone therapy (amongst many others) tailored to you. Many other factors play a part in overcoming cancer, such as diet, exercise and mental wellbeing. Spending time with loved ones, eating healthy food and moving your body go a long way in improving our immune system and ability to heal.

MYTH: You always have to come to a hospital or healthcare centre to get screened for cancer

TRUTH Not all cancers require you to go to a healthcare centre for testing. For example, bowel screening tests are now available via the NHS to do at home and can be sent back in the post.

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The Connections Issue

Hello and welcome to the second issue of Flourish Magazine, a magazine by and for the cancer community from integrative cancer care charity Yes to Life and creative health charity Artlift, who are based in Gloucestershire.

In this issue we explore the theme of 'Connections', inspired by Yes to Life's September 'Finding a Deeper Connection' conference, looking at how we connect to ourselves, our communities, our bodies, our minds and our environment in the face of cancer.

For each issue of the magazine we run an open call for submissions from people with lived experience of cancer around our theme and – much like our first edition – we received an incredibly creative and inspiring range of responses. From meditation to Morris dancing, the submissions we chose show the true scope of the cancer experience and highlight the importance of connection in our lives.

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can isolate us at exactly the moment we need to connect. The weight of the word 'cancer' and its implications might feel like a heavy load to impart,

encouraging us to remove ourselves from our usual activities or try to manage on our own. Yet if this issue is anything to go by – making connections is as vital as eating, sleeping and breathing.

You'll see how creative projects and support groups can empower us to find friends, joy and expression through cancer treatment and recovery, how community work can provide an essential lifeline for cancer patients, and how connecting with our minds, bodies and nature can bring us peace and improve our overall wellbeing. At the back of the magazine you'll also find a list of resources, which includes support for those going through cancer. Let this issue be a rallying cry – you are absolutely not alone!

We aim to show a diverse range of responses to the cancer experience and as such have included submissions with dark and challenging themes, all of which come with content warnings.

Make sure you also check out our online content, such as music and blog posts, released weekly on the Artlift and Yes to Life websites. If you have a moment, please take our short survey on the magazine by scanning the QR code on the back cover. Thank you for reading!

Natalie Beech
Editor-in-Chief

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Nina Moore



The power of community in saving lives

An interview with Hash Norat
By Natalie Beech

Hash Norat has become somewhat of a local legend in Gloucestershire, so much so that he was chosen to become the Mock Mayor for Gloucester in 2021, a non-political position still involving much mayoral work – opening events, awarding prizes and generally representing and supporting the community.

The role is the result of his community and charity work, which covers so much it's hard to imagine how he has the hours in the day. Hash rose to Gloucestershire notoriety through his volunteer-led organisation Gloucester Feed the Hungry, which provides everything from meals to clothes to free haircuts. Alongside this, he's done extensive work in the cancer space raising awareness of the illness among Black and Asian communities. The cause is close to home after Hash lost his younger sister to breast

cancer at just 39 years old, followed by two more of his sisters being diagnosed with the disease.

"When visiting one of my sisters, I'd asked if she'd been for a mammogram recently. She said, 'Any letter that comes through the letterbox with NHS on it, I literally put it in the bin.' I'm like, 'What?!' And she's coming on to 64, I'm the youngest in the family now. I said 'Why?' and she said, 'I'm always petrified, what if? What if something's not right?' I said, 'No, no, no, just because you may find yourself with an illness, doesn't mean you can't be fixed.'"

Hash started to work with Gloucestershire Royal Hospital and their Macmillan Cancer Hub due to his community connections, in an effort to improve the accessibility of these services. He quickly realised there were obvious barriers preventing people from Black and Asian

communities seeking help for cancer symptoms.

"I looked around the Macmillan Hub and I could not see one leaflet – and there were hundreds and hundreds of different leaflets – where the face on the front of that leaflet was anything other than a white male or female.

"Since then, in two years' time, the most amazing few things have happened. Leaflets have changed, we've had leaflets done in Bengali, Gujarati, Urdu, and about six months ago we did a range of videos in different languages that can be shared on social media. One of the biggest changes I've seen is that we now also have a Muslim woman working at the Macmillan Hub, which is a life changer, isn't it?"

The videos have been shared widely, reaching beyond the UK to countries such as South Africa, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Poland, India, Pakistan, America and more. More locally, GRH and Macmillan set up an event at Gloucester venue and halal coffee shop The Friendship Cafe in July this year, where hospital staff offered informal conversations about cancer. Advertised across social media, it was a huge success with many in attendance, showing the lasting impact of Hash's efforts.

"We can improve the support systems in place drastically. Drastically. I'm

just doing my little bit. The main area of Barton where I'm the Mock Mayor, there's over 80 languages spoken in that area, so it's not just about the Black and Asian communities."

One solution Hash is proposing is community champions; people that have been through cancer supporting those recently diagnosed or undergoing treatment and raising awareness among their local communities.

"We need to have people within boroughs, wherever you are, going into schools, businesses, hospitals, sitting in on meetings and ensuring that the wider community knows of the support structure that's out there.

"And have people who have gone through cancer and lived to tell the tale buddy up to someone who's just been diagnosed with cancer. I believe that would be a life changer. They could be the person to pick that person up and take them to their appointment, or be with them through their treatment. It's all about the support network isn't it? Ensuring that people don't feel their life is over, that there is help out there."

Exploring his idea of community champions, Hash recently put out a social media post asking who would be interested in befriending someone ill in hospital, resulting in hundreds of responses.

"That tells me there's people out there who want



to help."

Much of Hash's work is a battle against helplessness, both in caring for those who feel helpless, but also in showing that there is something each of us can do to help, that taking action does make a difference. Hash works day to day as a Production Technology Leader at Unilever (which he somehow also manages the time for) and started his charity work simply because he saw the need for it. Through this desire alone, he has achieved incredible things. So if you're thinking of helping out or volunteering your time, Hash has this advice for you:

"I would say to anyone wanting to go down the route of some of the little bits we've done, just do it. There's nothing more important."

You can see more about Hash Norat's work on Gloucester Feed the Hungry's Facebook Page. Discover Gloucestershire Royal Hospital and Macmillan Hub's services in our Resources page at the back of the magazine.



Not sure what to say? Put it in a letter

An interview with From Me to You Letters co-founder Brian Greenley
By Natalie Beech

From Me to You Letters was set up in 2017 by recovered cancer patient Brian Greenley and his friend Alison Hitchcock, with the hope of inspiring people to write letters to friends and family members with cancer. In just five years this has grown into a truly international community of

5,000 letter writers, who've penned an astounding 25,000 letters between them, sent anonymously to people with cancer across the UK.

Brian and Alison first met at a yoga retreat six months before Brian was diagnosed with Stage 3 bowel cancer in 2010. They'd kept in

touch since, meeting for the occasional drink, but knew each other so little that when Brian got his diagnosis he was in two minds as to whether to tell Alison at all.

"I ended up telling her and the interesting reply I got back was, I'm going to write letters to you to cheer you up. I think she did it because

she didn't know what else to say... Two weeks later, a handwritten letter arrived on my doormat from Alison, and it did cheer me up, it was funny."

That was the first of over 100 letters Alison wrote to Brian during his treatment. Exhausted and struggling to find anything he wanted to talk about, Brian never wrote back, and yet the letters came regardless. He quickly realised this offered him the pleasure of company without the burden of needing to give anything in return.

"I would always make sure to take a couple of unopened letters to take with me to treatment. It was like having her with me, without having to actually take her. I never wanted anybody to have to sit in that room with the blue chair and watch me being unwell. I would feel that I'd have to entertain them, it was like an added responsibility that I really didn't want."

Alison wrote to Brian between his diagnosis in 2010 and him finally getting the all-clear in 2013. With Brian well again, Alison stopped writing. It was years until their experience came up again, when an opportunity to discuss their letter-fuelled friendship on BBC Radio 4's Listening Project arose in 2016.

Fascinated by their story, the programme's producer encouraged them to do something more with the idea. Both were at a loose

end as to what, until a neighbour of Alison's told her he wanted to follow her lead by writing letters to an overseas friend with cancer. Alison helped him get started, and from that conversation Alison and Brian set up From Me to You, initially a charity to encourage and inspire people to write to family members and friends with cancer.

Interest grew and grew, until they realised that there were many people without anyone in their lives with cancer that still wanted to pen letters. They came up with their Donate a Letter campaign, where anyone, anywhere in the world can write an anonymous letter to someone with cancer. With a community of 5,000 letter writers this has become a sizeable undertaking, with a team of volunteers reading, packaging and sending the letters out, supported by donations to the charity.

So, what is it about their idea that's inspired this army of scribblers? What makes letter writing special?

"There is something around putting pen to paper in an environment where we're very much focused on mobile phones, texting and email. In a letter you have more space. You can make it your own creative experience, and because it's anonymous, you don't get any feedback about it. It allows you to be free to do whatever you want to."

For many, the difficulty

of not knowing what to say or how to help someone with a cancer diagnosis can mean they do nothing at all. As Brian explains, this often leaves people with cancer isolated and wondering why.

"My view is that it's not okay to do nothing, it's just not okay, because the person who has cancer won't know what's happening. They're isolated and yet, life goes on around them."

From Me to You has created a space where it's easy to do something. For anyone keen to join their ranks, From Me to You host free online workshops to help people get going, as well as sending new letter writers a starter pack with hints and tips, the backstory of the charity, and even a little piece of stationery.

"What we tend to say to people is keep it simple, you know, don't over engineer it. Often the simple things are the nicest things. So if you're a cancer patient and you're in hospital or in your hospice, you're looking out your window and you can't see very much, and someone writes to you about what's happening in their garden, you know, the daffodils are out, or there's a real smell of fresh cut grass, that can immediately transport somebody to somewhere else."

Head to frommetoyouletters.co.uk to find out more, donate or sign up as a letter writer.

What is the integrative approach and how can it support you?

An interview with founder of integrative cancer care charity Yes to Life, Robin Daly

By Natalie Beech



For the majority of people who receive a cancer diagnosis in the UK, three treatment options are presented: chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, or some combination of all three. Beyond this, advice on how things like nutrition, exercise and holistic therapies might support you is limited or non-existent.

Robin Daly, founder of Yes to Life, has been on a mission to change this. His interest in integrative care began back in the 1980s, when his daughter was

diagnosed with cancer at just nine years old.

"It was a total bombshell that just crashed into our family, completely out of the blue," Robin says. "Starting from there, we supported her through cancer three times, the last when she was 22. In between, we experienced a lot of hospitals, doctors and cancer care of all types."

By the third time Robin's daughter was diagnosed with cancer, the internet had arrived – as he describes it – "with a vengeance".

Robin and his family were desperate to do whatever they could to help their daughter and so began researching online, wading through endless blogs and articles claiming to offer cures and solutions.

"It's a minefield, actually," Robin explains. "And you have to find your way through all of this information, to try and make sense of it. You have to learn about cancer, which is one of the most complex areas ever. You have to try to find out who on earth is doing

what, and then, is it a hoax? Or is it for real? Can you get it here? Can you afford it?"

What if there was an organisation you could trust to help you make sense of the information out there? This question sparked the idea for Yes to Life, which Robin and his daughter came up with together before she died aged 23, after being diagnosed with cancer for the third time. They decided to create something positive out of their tragedy, using the knowledge they'd accumulated over the years and money donated towards her care, to start Yes to Life in 2005.

More than 15 years later, Yes to Life has grown into a charity that offers a wealth of resources, from their free helpline to their podcast, workshops, support groups, conferences and life directory, which features a list of providers and therapists around the world. A quick definition of the integrative approach on their website describes it as 'the judicious combining of conventional treatments such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, with lifestyle and complementary therapies, to broaden patient choice, increase patient engagement, improve quality of life and extend survival.'

"Integrative' wasn't really a word that was around when we started this, it was like two warring factions:

one was conventional medicine and the other was alternative medicine. Gradually, the idea of integrative medicine has been introduced, which is actually that it's not one or the other, it's what's going to help most and how could they work together to my advantage?"

The integrative approach has at its core the idea that there is 'no size fits all' when it comes to cancer, not only because of our own unique and intricate genetic profiles and history, but in terms of what each person is comfortable with. It goes beyond the physical by looking at how cancer patients can support themselves mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

"It means giving patients genuine choice and enabling them to find the kind of support they need at any given time."

An obvious barrier to engaging with integrative care is money. As integrative care is not available through the NHS, supporting your cancer treatment with say, a nutritionist, can feel like an unaffordable luxury for many. A big part of Yes to Life's work is offering free resources for anyone to engage with, to help people understand how they can support themselves beyond what's being offered by their oncologist. And in fact, the concept is being supported by more and more oncologists. Yes to Life's podcast is

hosted by both Robin and Senior NHS Oncologist Dr Penny Kechagioglou, and the charity's talks and conferences have seen leading oncologists speak to the benefits of an integrative approach.

Putting aside any opinions on specific therapies or unconventional treatments, there seems to be widespread agreement that simply having a deeper understanding of your condition and how you can help yourself offers cancer patients a degree of control in the face of a disease than can make you feel utterly out of control. It can be as simple as changing your diet, doing gentle exercise or self-care – the beauty of the integrative approach is that it's up to you to decide what's best for you.

"My first piece of advice is that you don't have to do everything on day one. Don't allow the fact that there's so much out there to completely stop you in your tracks. All you need is a little bit of help and support to find the most important things, the things that are most important to you, not what somebody else tells you is the most important. You get started on one or two of those things, keep an open mind, and learn as you go."

Discover more about the integrative approach to cancer and Yes to Life at yestolife.org.uk

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The Nourish issue

Hello and welcome to the first ever issue of Flourish Magazine, a brand new magazine by and for the cancer community from integrative cancer care charity Yes to Life and creative health charity Artlift, who are based in Gloucestershire.

This issue's theme is 'Nourish', exploring how we find nourishment whilst living with and beyond cancer. When I began work on the magazine, it was clear to me that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to cancer and that it was important the content of the magazine reflected this. A cancer diagnosis is a life changing moment for all involved, its impact rippling beyond the person receiving it to our friends, family and colleagues, but how we feel and respond to it will be different for each individual. Whether it's a support group, a massage, exercise, food or a creative activity like art or writing, cancer in all its bleakness can offer the opportunity to discover how best to nourish ourselves through difficult times.

Through an open call for submissions on this theme, we painstakingly whittled them down to this final selection, which features everything from the hilarious to the heartbreaking, because of course, how we experience cancer is as complex and unique as we are.

Some of the pieces are therefore challenging and we felt it was important not to shy away from this, but have provided content warnings so that readers can choose what they feel able to engage with.

We are also featuring additional content online, such as film and blog posts, released weekly on the Artlift and Yes to Life websites – make sure you head there to check it out.

At the back of the magazine is the open call for our next issue, which is on the theme of 'Connections'. Our submissions are open to all regardless of background or experience and we encourage you to submit. It was an honour to put this magazine together and I hope you find its content as inspiring, thought-provoking and nourishing as I did. We'd love to hear your feedback – you can complete a quick survey telling us what you thought by scanning the QR code on the back of the magazine.

Thank you for reading!

Natalie Beech
Editor-in-Chief

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INSOMNIA: A LESSON IN FAILURE

By Natalie Beech

My insomnia began just over a year ago, originally due to a job whose endless demands and small pay cheque left me demoralised and anxious. One night, after a particularly long day in which despite 10 hours work, I still hadn't managed to meet my deadline, I tried and failed to sleep. I tossed and turned until 6am. I spent about half of the night staring at the ceiling, an hour or two listening to podcasts, an hour frantically trying to contact anyone who might still be awake, and the final hour sobbing into my pillow. The sobbing was the only thing that worked; having exhausted myself, I finally slept.

I quit the job, but the insomnia remained. New stressful situations arose and I lost sleep over these too, the odd night became more than the odd night, and I began losing sleep even when I had no reason to. I remember the creeping realisation in these early days that, perhaps, now I was an insomniac. It felt terminal. In the past I'd heard about insomnia and thought how lucky I was to have always slept so well, baffled at how anyone could manage to not sleep. Sleep, sleep, delicious sleep. The thing so many are unable to stop from happening. The thing that is so loved by lazy teenagers, snoring babies, or tired parents. I had naively assumed insomnia was not my problem and I'd felt sorry for those who suffered from it.

I started to think of Fight Club constantly; haunted by images of Edward Norton saying "Everything is a copy, of a copy, of a copy..." Insomnia, for me, has been like fighting an opponent who carefully watches your every move and swiftly learns how to counter it. In the early days, I thought it was about work. No work stress equalled sleep, and for a few weeks that was true, until it wasn't. Then I thought I could sleep if I wasn't alone, so I started staying with my partner more. For a while, this worked too, until it didn't. He snored beside me while I raged internally, jealously, unreasonably. Why do you get to sleep? Why are you rubbing it in my face? Don't you care about my feelings? I wished I could pay someone just to stay awake with me, just to be with me. There is nothing lonelier than the feeling that everyone can sleep but you, that you are alone and no one can help you.

I bought a number of sleep aids, some natural, some chemical, and employed them depending on the severity of the situation. First came the chamomile tea, then the herbal tablets. Sometimes food or a glass of milk would help, but if not then I tried the over the counter 'high-strength' sleep aids. These rarely had any effect, and after many months a kind friend of mine gave me strips of their Quetiapine, an antidepressant which knocks you out in half a tablet, though the truth is sometimes even these are not enough.

During my bouts of insomnia my mood shifted as, like a prisoner who realises they're not getting out, I started to accept my new reality. Fight Club became a source of comfort instead of horror. I related to the strange, blurry reality he described. "Everything is a copy, of a copy, of a copy..." Continued sleep deprivation is not that far off being stoned, and sometimes it even gave me a feeling of peace. My brain was basically operating at half the capacity, and sometimes I found relief in this. I dragged my cement legs to the park and sat quietly on a bench to stare at the birds. I didn't have the energy to talk, to listen, to read. I noticed falling leaves and rippling water and dappled sunlight in the trees. I was no longer irritated by the sounds of screaming babies with their worn out parents, because now we were allies. They, like me, were no friend to sleep.

More than seven months in from that first night, my insomnia hit its absolute peak. Prior to this I'd have a few bad nights, but my sleep would return to normal in a number of days. When I moved to a new city and took on a new, full-time job, insomnia finally took full reign over my life. For three months I barely slept, managing just two or three hours of sleep a night. Going from a freelance life, where I'd had the freedom to start work at midday if I really needed to, now I was expected to go into an office, or join a 9am Zoom call, even if I'd had two hours' sleep and my eyelids had swollen to twice their size.

The problem with insomnia is that, despite its debilitating impact, it still feels as if it is your responsibility. The phrase "go to sleep" is trotted out by parents tucking their hyper kids in at 8pm, and they are expected to obey. It is seen as an action to be taken, a choice to be made. And so, insomnia becomes a personal failure. Unlike a serious illness, injury or grief, insomnia did not seem to be a valid reason to take time off work or call in sick. After all, there were parents of young children on my team who spoke about their lack of sleep like a badge of honour, boasting of who'd had the least and was here anyway, powering through.

Occasionally, when I knew I looked so tired that I needed to provide an explanation, I downplayed my lack of sleep by finding other reasons for it; this felt more acceptable than simply saying that I was simply unable to sleep. I would never have used the word 'insomnia'. Plus, even if I'd felt able to tell my colleagues, what would they have said? To friends and family who knew, they offered the only advice there was to give. "Have you tried herbal tea?", "Maybe try listening to something?", "Do you read before bed?" Whilst well intentioned, there is nothing an insomniac has not tried, and this advice quickly feels patronising, as if it just hadn't occurred to you to try a relaxing bath before bed.

The impact of sleep deprivation (commonly used as a method of torture) is well-documented, and does not make you feel any better. Poor sleep puts you at a much greater risk of depression and psychotic episodes, as well as chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. Yippee.

After months of very little sleep, I became increasingly depressed. Anger rose up in me each night, so much that I'd have to find ways of containing it. Whilst my partner slept, I wrote my worst thoughts in a ragey little notebook, scrawling out lines of hatred I'd be ashamed to see the light of day. I couldn't bear the injustice of it, the lack of control over it all. I'd contacted my GP but received little help. I felt that no one cared or could help me. By this point I'd joined an online programme for insomniacs called Sleepio and was dutifully following its video guidance. I watched each week as a small animated Scottish man with a pet dog explained that in order to sleep, I had to take part in 'sleep restriction', which included getting up if I couldn't sleep for more than 15 minutes, not going to sleep until very late, and waking up early. This was supposed to increase my appetite for sleep and restore a positive association with my bed. Sleep restriction meant getting in and out of bed all night (a testament to the love of my partner, who patiently put up with this), an exercise in accepting defeat, over and over again. I hated this stupid little man and his fucking dog and having to do any of it. Why couldn't I just go to sleep like I used to? Why did I have to do any of this? Why was I having to fight for something that's supposed to come naturally?

Herein lies the insomniac's riddle; sleep cannot be won in a fight. The brilliance of Fight Club in its portrayal of insomnia is that it shows us how Tyler is the embodiment of all that could be achieved if only our narrator could sleep. At night his alter ego comes alive and achieves what he cannot in the day: sexual prowess, victory, popularity - all of the things stripped away by wakeful nights. In Fight Club, the anger caused by insomnia is given a space to be enacted, to become useful in some way. In his song Lullaby for my Insomniac, written for his sleep-challenged girlfriend Jameela Jamil, James Blake puts it perfectly:

SLEEP HAPPENS TO YOU

IT'S NOT A FAILURE IF YOU CAN'T

IN ANY CASE, YOU WILL AT SOME POINT

FALL

There is an existential joke in insomnia. The key to falling asleep is learning not to try. And have you tried not to try? A conundrum ensues! Perhaps a better way to put it is that the key to falling asleep is truly accepting you're not going to. Sleep will only come when you surrender completely, when you accept it is not an action to be taken, it is not a goal to be achieved. In a capitalist world of production, of making things happen, the concept of inaction as the only solution is hard to fathom.

I hated reading things like this when I first experienced insomnia. I wanted a solution, not a detailed explanation of the hopelessness I was supposedly doomed to face. I wanted to fight, because in so many narratives surrounding illness or hardship, we are told to fight. We see inspiring cancer patients talking of fighting their illness and overcoming it. Whilst I understand the motivating purpose of these stories, what does this say about those of us who do not overcome? Are we to conclude that they just didn't fight hard enough?

I have learned to see insomnia, more than an exercise in letting go, as an exercise in self-love. If no sleep is inevitable, if I accept the next day I will be puffy-eyed and mad, then what? Who am I when I am not perfect or presentable or productive? Stripped of my drive, my ability, do I still have value? What becomes of those of us who cannot fight, who cannot overcome? Insomnia is an exercise in finding value in existence alone, in loving yourself just for being alive, for being awake.

I have by no means won my fight with insomnia, because it cannot be won through a fight. I still experience it, although I believe I am beyond the worst. The only difference now is that sometimes, and only sometimes, I manage to care less. I write this after a night of about six hours sleep which, believe it or not, is enough. There will still be joy in my day, amongst the yawns. This piece is not intended to be a WebMD article, but if you have insomnia: take the herbal supplements, drink the chamomile tea and follow the sleep programmes. But if all else fails - in any case, you will at some point, fall. I promise.

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Illustration by Alice Colvin-Cousley
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My Folk, Their Lore

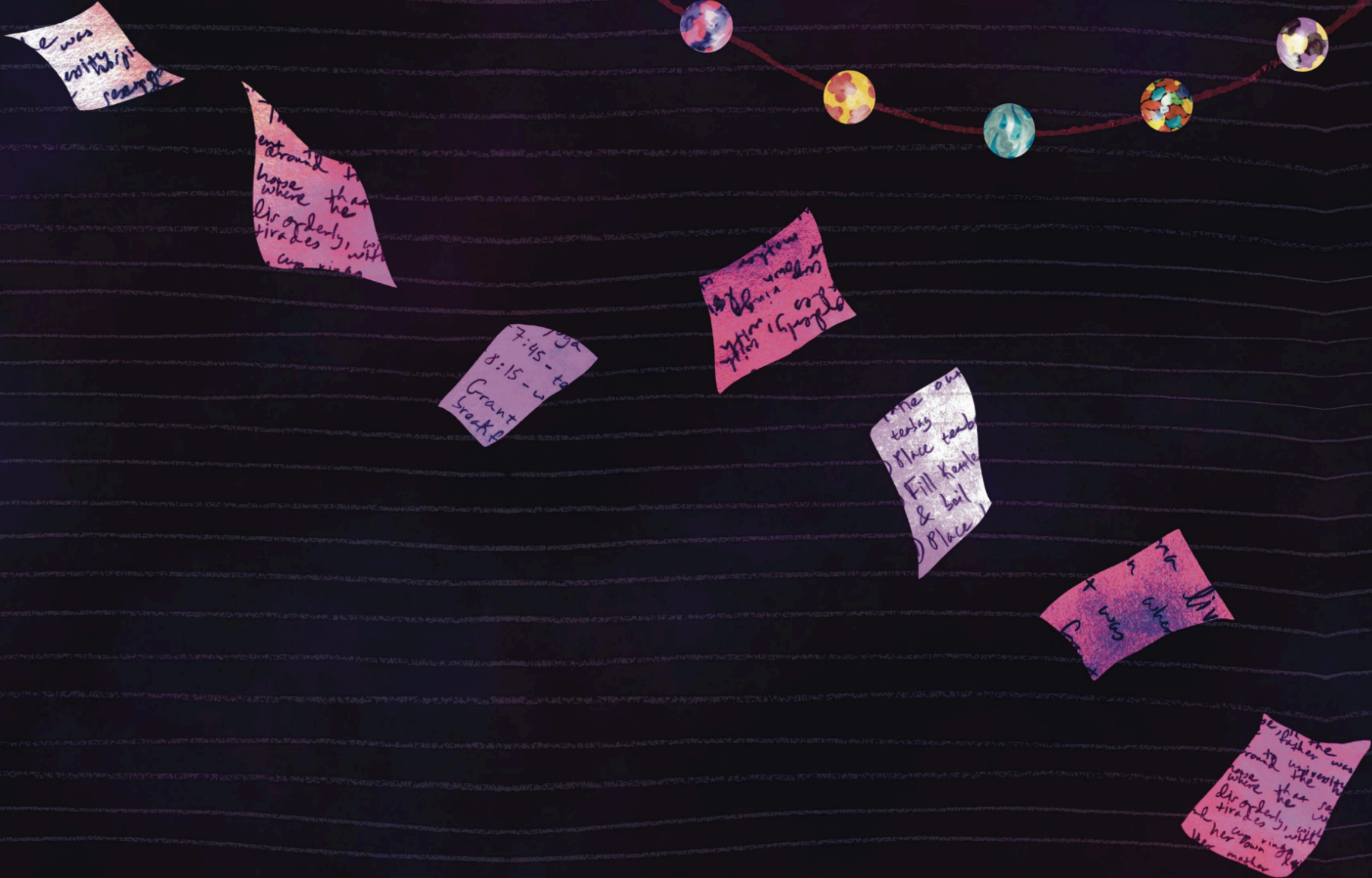
By: Natalie Beech

A family is folklore
Nothing more
Nothing less

Each year the story is told
And though I tell you
You've told me
You'll tell it again

I am your favourite page
Once turned, so softly
I am ragged now
All smudges and lines

No matter
No fear
For I am nothing
If not memorised.



Sausage pasta 'till I die

by Natalie Beech

and told me he didn't "eat that stuff," his eyes roaming my soft, pasta-fed body as if to say "clearly you eat too much of it." I obviously never saw him again.

In the winter of 2018 I was in Paris on a solo trip when I met a Marseillaise (who had been in Paris for nearly 20 years but insisted that I recognize he is from somewhere else). He wooed me using books and museums, which is an almost comically sure way to catch my attention. When I finally went to his place for the night, I stopped by the Franprix by my metro station and picked up some orecchiette, spicy sausage and spinach. He watched me cook in his tiny kitchen, studying my every move, then he asked me if I'd ever seen the movie "Heartburn." I had not, so he found it for us while I plated our midnight orecchiette. There, in a small bed of a book-lined apartment somewhere in Montmartre, I watched Meryl Streep cook an effortless carbonara that she and Jack Nicholson eat in bed, right from the skillet. It's a quiet, vulnerable and deeply relatable scene that told me more about myself than the actual plot of the film.

The Marseillaise was the first man to ask me why I felt the need to cook in these moments, and because his question was not accusatory I explained how I settled on this ritual a long time ago, as a way to find myself on solid footing. We talked about the soothing nature of making something, and the comfort of pasta. Then he asked me why being with men required such a soothing ritual. That's when I knew that I had finally found the man who would not leave me somewhere new without a map.

A carbonara is predictable. You know exactly how many minutes the pasta needs. You can tell if your sauce has gone too far and is going to become scrambled eggs. You know the precise moment your guanciale is cooked to perfection. If you know the rules, there is little - if any - mystery or confusion.

Before we get into why sausage pasta is the best meal to grace this earth, let me offer a quick caveat. I am not much of a chef, I would go as far as to say that I don't really like cooking. I like eating, and cooking is a means to an end in this respect. Anything involving a lot of time, difficult techniques, or fancy ingredients from a fancy shop, as Shania wisely said, don't-impressa-me-much. I'm hungry. I like my food with haste.

Perhaps this explains why sausage pasta is my first, my last, my everything. I return to it week after week, and it works for literally every occasion. Friends round? Sausage pasta will help. Period starting? Sausage pasta will help. Struggling to live under capitalism? Sausage pasta will help. Existential crisis? You get the idea.

This article is less of an article than a love letter, and the whole thing is going to be thoroughly biased, without a hint of objectivity. I want to impart the magic of sausage pasta on everyone, and I will not tolerate you not enjoying it. Would it be my last meal? Yes, a thousand times, yes.

To give you an overview, and a brief history of the dish, sausage pasta involves:

1. *Dried penne*
2. *Linda McCartney vegetarian sausages*
3. *Shop-bought tomato and mascarpone sauce*
4. *Fried onions*
5. *Fried garlic*
6. *A mountain of mature, grated cheddar*

And that's it. Maybe some black pepper if you're feeling spicy, or spinach if you're feeling healthy, but anything else and you're a philistine. This life-changing recipe came circa 1999 when I was seven years old, although this is an estimate, no one in my family can really recall when the phenomenon emerged, not even my mother, it's the humble creator. Preparing it goes like this:

1. *Caramelise - not fry - the onions and garlic*
2. *Grill - not bake - the sausages*
3. *Boil the pasta with a pinch of salt*
4. *Add the sauce to the onions and garlic*
5. *Chop the sausages with scissors (yep)**
6. *Drain the pasta*
7. *Mix it all together*
8. *Serve it in a bowl*
9. *Cover with an obscene amount of cheddar*



*Before you scoff at this, have you ever tried cutting a pizza with scissors? 100% better than any pizza cutter on the market. You're welcome.

The process of making sausage pasta is so ingrained in my psyche I could do it in my sleep. I'm fairly sure I have in my dreams. Despite about 10% of its cooking process being from scratch, I feel that it somehow belongs to me. I hear other people apparently make other types of sausage pasta, but honestly, I don't want to know about it. My boyfriend (a very good cook) once remarked that sausage pasta is "not authentic" followed by an explanation of other "authentic" Italian dishes involving sausages, and I - rightfully - didn't speak to him for two days.

It's hard to understand where the obsession began. As much as I've tried to unpack the legacy story of sausage pasta with my mum, who imparted this great gift, she can't remember why she decided to chop bits of sausage into pasta with a pair of scissors. Maybe it came to her in a dream. Maybe God spoke to her. Maybe we were defrosting the freezer and the sausages needed eating. Whatever it was, I'm grateful.

The only answer I've been offered is "your brother was always very hungry", which refers to the fact that my teenage brother used to eat whole packets of malt loaf after dinner, followed by bowls of cereal. Sausage pasta was always made in vast quantities, I'm talking a few kilos, and offered from a huge, red bowl in the middle of our table, with multiple portions encouraged. To feel full of sausage pasta is to feel happiness, and it is impossible to experience it without feeling full - because it tastes so good, you will eat too much of it.

Is it possible that my enjoyment of sausage pasta is more about the feeling of family, I hear you say? The warmth of tradition? The feeling of togetherness? That I'm so protective over it because I am protective over them? Definitely not. It's about sausages, pasta and cheese. You try it and tell me you don't want to eat it every week. And if you don't, then you're categorically wrong, and I never want to speak to you ever again.

“...my comedy is like a horrible vulture feeding of the carcass of human misery, so I’m laughing.”



Stewart Lee is, ironically, one of the biggest comedians working in the UK today. Despite years of stand-up based around the fact he felt he wasn't as popular as he should be, his wry persona, deadbeat delivery and general disdain for the audience has seen him offer a refreshing kind of stand up; one that progresses the medium, rather than striving for imitation.

Lee brings his new show *Content Provider* to De Montfort Hall this February as part of the comedy festival, headlining for two nights at one of the city's largest venues. It seems that the audience he berates for not understanding his comedy may be finally getting the joke. "I am very lucky that an open-minded, clever, tolerant, inquisitive and loyal audience have stayed with me, and self-seeded themselves, for decades now," Lee explains. "But, on the other hand, I always come back with new shows that develop on what they have come to expect, and I never short change them."

Content Provider is also a book by the same name, a collection of the best of Lee's newspaper columns over the past five years. In much the same way as his stand-up, Lee pushed the barriers of what a column is supposed to be. "Having accepted the jobs, I tried to discharge them to the best of my abilities, whilst at the same time trying to bend the rules and push the fringes of the 'funny column' genre where possible."

For those who have read his *Observer* pieces, his articles have covered wildly varying topics, from advising Corbyn to take advice from Putin, to a piece purporting to be about the Olympic legacy, only to be mainly about a decomposing cat. The absurdity of his comedy has become increasingly popular, as is much of what was previously deemed 'alternative comedy', meaning it has begun to move into the mainstream. Yet much of his work has been met with intense hatred, with big Lee-bashers including the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, something he revels in by posting their reviews on his website and even using them to advertise his books.

Lee's strength lies here; his seeming disregard for anything that might offend him. When the audience doesn't laugh, he explains why they should. When there is a bad review, he uses it as marketing material. "I may pretend to hate doing stand-up," he says, "But I really do my best." His persona's cynicism and superiority is the result of meticulous craft, and those who don't respond to his work are often missing the point entirely.

Content Provider is in very much the same vein as most of Lee's work to date, examining what we know about being a column writer and dismantling it. "A decade or so ago I got a bewildering text asking me if, in the light of attending the Kilkenny Comedy Festival, I had any 'content' which I would be willing to 'provide' to local 'content providers'." This was my first encounter with the phrase, and I came to understand that they were asking me if I had any text or film or audio, which I could give to mobile phones or websites," Lee explains. "We like to imagine we are artists, us writers, but it is funny to see what you do described as if it is just filler to put onto gizmos, which I suppose, increasingly, it is."

Described as an attempt to "understand modern Britain", *Content Provider* in its live form will inevitably have to incorporate Brexit. Little more than a month after the vote that divided the country, the Edinburgh Festival began and comedians had to adapt to the new, untrodden landscape of a post-Brexit Britain.

"People that I had routines about had been instantly forgotten," Lee explains. "As it is, it's evolved into something that sort of addresses that issue - what kind of content do I provide to an unstable divided society?"

The society comedians were reflecting before had changed drastically, and so in turn did their shows. Lee was clearly in the Remain camp, something reflected in his columns leading up to the vote, but how does he - rather than his persona - feel about the reality of Brexit now it's happening?

"Anecdotally, racism is on the rise. Austerity is, it's official, going to be prolonged and worsened. There will be no cross-continental plan, that includes us, for the Syrian refugee crisis or climate change and environmental pollution. It may be that people will get what they wanted out of Brexit in the end, and feel like the sacrifices have been worth it. But for now there are a tense few years ahead. That said, my comedy is like a horrible

vulture feeding off the carcass of human misery, so I'm laughing."

Fortunately, so is everyone else. Lee sold out both his stand-up show and book festival talk this year in Edinburgh, and has become an increasingly iconic figure in comedy. And so naturally, his return to Leicester's Comedy Festival is hotly anticipated. "My first ever paid out-of-London gig was Leicester Poly with Jerry Sadowitz in 1990. I remember the hotel room had little soaps and shampoos that you could take away with you. I had never seen anything like it." Who said Leicester wasn't a luxury destination, eh? We also have the pleasure of being credited as the place in which he met his wife, fellow comedian Bridget Christie, in 2005. Yet, there's one thing missing this year.

"Leicester has changed in 26 years. I miss the German progressive rock shop, Ultima Thule, by the station, which is online now, and was run by two identical twin brothers who really knew their stuff."

Europe's longest comedy festival this year will see Lee share the stage with other big names including Jimmy Carr, Susan Calman, Dane Baptiste and his former comedy partner Richard Herring. Sadly, it doesn't look like a Lee and Herring reunion is on the cards.

"We would need to rehearse properly for ages, and there is no time or financial incentive to do that, and also the basic relationship of the double act doesn't make sense for two men of nearly 50, predicated as it is on an essentially adolescent relationship. That said, I think it might be funny to do it in our 80s."

Well, at least we can keep it in our diaries for the 2040s. And, if he is right, Stewart Lee will no doubt prove to be as popular then as he is now. "I'm lucky that my stage persona makes more sense, rather than less, as I get older." If this is a hint at a move towards grumpy old man territory, then it is a humble remark. Lee is in a league of his own, brilliantly breaking down audience expectations of comedy and outwitting us at every turn. But of course, what we think isn't the point anyway. "People can come if they want but it is what it is and it's not my fault if they don't like it."

Stewart Lee: *Content Provider* will be on 8th & 9th February at De Montfort Hall.

STEWART LEE CONTENT PROVIDER

Words: Natalie Beech

RICHARD HERRING

Words: Natalie Beech

In a move that seems very in keeping with the '10 Best [insert here]' articles of our time, Richard Herring's new show will give us a live run of his best stand-up performances for this year's comedy festival in his new show, 'The Best'.

For someone who has been on the circuit for almost two decades now, going about choosing the best of his shows is no easy task. "It's really difficult. I performed all 12 of my shows over six weekends at the Leicester Square Theatre last year and so that gave me a reminder of some routines that I had forgotten about," Herring explains. "I am focusing more on the older shows though, as I guess that material will be less familiar."

He's a regular at Leicester's Comedy Festival, describing it as "newer and more spunky than some of the more established festivals." It's clear that Edinburgh still takes the title as the comedian's Mecca, but with rising prices and increasing competition, Leicester's Comedy Festival is offering an increasingly authentic experience and a platform to both national and emerging acts. "The younger comedians have to work so hard to get anywhere these days and are consequently fucking excellent," Herring says. "Go and see one of them. Pick a name you don't recognise and go."

This year, his show will revisit shows such as 'What is Love, Anyway?' and 'The Twelve Tasks of Hercules Terrace', a show based around his own mid-life crisis. But despite years on the circuit, many will know the comedian from his Metro newspaper column and his Leicester Square Theatre Podcast, which has featured high-profile guests including Louis Theroux, David Mitchell and Sarah Millican, just to name a few. If he had to pick the best of his guests, who would it be?

"Again very difficult, he says. "But I think my

favourite might have been Sara Pascoe, who has one of the sharpest comedy minds I have ever encountered, but is also passionate and interesting when being serious." Dream guest? "I am filled with envy that Adam Buxton got to interview Michael Palin, who is my all-time comedy hero."

Herring's stand-up has always pushed the boundaries of comfortable, never shying away from diving head first into heavy topics. His work has explored everything from Nazis to the meaning of life, Jesus to genitals. So inevitably, 'The Best' will revisit these topics. And if that doesn't sell it to you - well, you probably just won't enjoy it. "If you don't enjoy this show then it's fair to say that I am probably not for you. It will only take a couple of hours to find out whether you ever have to see me again. What an opportunity!"

Herring has been prolific over the past 12 years, creating one show a year and scooping up multiple awards for his work. He won the Chortle Internet Award for four years in a row, with 'As it Occurs to Me' winning the award 2011-2012, and his Leicester Square Theatre podcast winning 2013-2014.

But 'The Best' won't just be his former routines back to back. He explains, "It's pretty much all old material, though there is a mini theme developing of what 'the best' means and if it's a useful and meaningful concept or just a piece of subjective nonsense."

Although he describes it as an attempt to achieve "wall-to-wall laughs", his own subjectivity on what 'the best' of his work is will no doubt show us which shows he believes to have shaped and defined his eminent career. In this respect, 'The Best' will certainly prove to be more than just the sum of the funniest parts.

"They are all a part of me and equally important in making me the comedian and man I am today."

Richard Herring will be performing at The Cookie Comedy Club @ o2 Academy on 8th February as part of the Leicester Comedy Festival.



Words: Natalie Beech

RYAN GANDER: NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM



The subject of looking couldn't be more relevant. Today we are looked at more than ever, privacy is at its lowest and visibility is at its highest.

CCTV cameras line the streets and our internet activity is monitored; and by looking at our digital lives, you could easily conclude that we actively pursue being looked at. Selfies are so popular they are now in the dictionary; our location can be pinpointed and listed on our Facebook profile; our ever-changing moods documented in a series of tweets.

In art, this is hardly a novel idea, particularly in regards to examining our increasingly digital lives. Yet, less considered is the topic of how objects feel about all this looking. In the context of the art world, how do works of art feel about being held up for examination? And how would we feel if they were looking back?

This February internationally renowned artist Ryan Gander will bring *Night in the Museum: Ryan Gander curates the Arts Council Collection* to Attenborough Arts Centre between 25th February and 21st May; presenting over 30 works by artists including Roger Hiorns, Henry Moore, Lynn Chadwick, Richard Deacon and Wolfgang Tillmans. Gander made the selection from the Arts Council Collection of nearly 8,000 works of British art in a range of media, the majority of which were acquired from young and emerging UK-based artists over the past 70 years.

Aside from the opportunity to see some of the world's artistic masterpieces, Gander has reframed how we view them. Recently awarded an OBE, the artist is known for his playfulness and diversity of style, and his approach to curating is no different.

"Looking at art' is definitely an important part of the exhibition," Visual Arts Officer at Attenborough Arts Centre, Sam West, explains. "In particular the looking back and forward within the history of art, and the way museum collections collapse these types of divisions."

He presents the sculptures in NITM so that they gaze at pieces featuring the colour blue – an important colour in Gander's own work - representing for him the abstract ideas often found in modern and contemporary art.

"The overall concept 'Night in the Museum' is very imaginative. I think the creativity with which the artworks have been paired together is the most exciting aspect of it for me personally," West says.

This act of pairing is in a sense a new artwork in itself. Here you can find Henry Moore's sculpture *Head of a King* (1952-53) taking in



Patrick Caulfield's *Dining Recess* (1972), or more contemporary artist Kerry Stewart's *Untitled* (Lucy) (1996) observing Garth Evans' *Blue No. 30* (1964). Gander brings the artwork to life, enabling them to be as much of a participant in looking as we are.

"There is something about switching the roles of the spectator and the spectacle that is fascinating," Gander explains. "When I look at sculptures of the human figure I am frequently left thinking of all the things that they've seen: the visitors to the museum, school children and art students attempting to earnestly recreate them in pastels and charcoal, the other artworks that surround them, artists and technicians installing, their maker perhaps, discreetly calling in on them with proud eyes. This is the world of the silent onlooker."

The intimate curation involved in pairing artworks in this way permits us to draw new connections between artists and styles, allowing us to view the pieces as individual entities, separate from their makers. Gander's genius comes by presenting us with a new way to see the artists we thought we knew so well.

The exhibition will also include one of Gander's own works, *'As old as time itself, slept alone'*, one of eight new works commissioned by Arts Council Collection, in 2016, to celebrate its 70th Anniversary. Modelled on Edgar Degas' ballerina sculptures, Gander places his sculpture in front of a large blue cube – something he considers to be a caricature-like representation of modern art.

"Gander's practice priorities inventiveness, curiosity, playfulness and humour, West says. "I think this rubs off on visitors, in that sense his work is very infectious."

As a city, Leicester does have a strong artistic foundation; DMU has highly regarded Fine Arts degree courses; Phoenix, Two Queens Gallery and the Summer Arts Trail have done exceptional work in bringing both local and international artists to the city, but Leicester is yet to achieve much of a national reputation for its visual arts. But having such a major exhibition at AAC shows the centre's ambition to progress visual arts in the city and the Midlands as a whole, proving they have big plans for its new, £1.5 million gallery.

"We were approached by Arts Council Collection senior curator Natalie Rudd prior to the new galleries, which opened in November 2016," West recalls. "We were very excited by the concept and quality of the work; the opportunity

to bring this exhibition to Leicester was one we couldn't turn down."

Gander is also a wheelchair user, but rarely focuses on his disability in his work. The Art *Nobody Knows* (2011) was the only piece in which he brutally examines it, portraying a model of himself lying on the ground next to a wheelchair – as if he has just fallen out of it.

Gander will no doubt act as an inspiration for other disabled artists – but his efforts to make art accessible go beyond this role. By turning our traditional gallery experience on its head, encouraging us to bring a sense of humour to our interpretation of art, all the while enthusing his own art with a comedic sensibility, Gander makes his work and ethos accessible to all. In this respect,

AAC – which prides itself on accessibility - is a perfect venue to showcase his ideas.

Jill Constantine, Head of the Arts Council Collection, says: "He has deployed that same imaginative approach to curate this show which is not only visually stunning and will be enjoyed by the many visitors who will see it in different venues across the country, but will also introduce us to new ways of looking at contemporary art."

Attenborough Arts Centre will be hosting a programme of events surrounding this exhibition, including drop-in family workshops, guided tours and a panel discussion with artists and curators, as well as a responsive performance to the exhibition by local dance artist Lewys Holt.

"Gander has already messed with traditional gallery visitor pathways and viewpoints by putting statues already where they might have stood. As a performer I'm looking at what a mobile human figure can lend to this spatial dynamic," Holt says. "Getting in the way of people, maintaining certain distances and gazes with audiences and artworks alike. I'm also getting a fancy costume made by Jade Webb, an MA fashion student at De Montfort University."

Running until the spring, it is encouraging to see that AAC haven't eschewed the involvement of the local arts scene in light of such an esteemed artist's arrival. The benefit of a touring exhibition is in bringing art to different communities, but with AAC's involvement we also see the community brought to the art. In much the same way as Gander has paired artworks, this exhibition will pair art worlds, offering us an experience that is entirely new and authentic to its environment.



ISY SUTTIE

and her search for The Actual One.



WORDS: NATALIE BEECH

Isy Suttie's career has been one of perpetual box-ticking. The musician-cum-comedian-cum-actress-cum-author's rise to fame has seen her master almost every aspect of show business, yet her book *The Actual One* shows her struggle to master growing up.

"The book is about a moment I had in my late twenties when I felt very suddenly that all my mates wanted different things from me. I felt like they were all growing up without me."

The gradual approach of adulthood in a stereotypical sense – finding 'the one', getting married, having children, settling down – was something Suttie actively avoided. Instead, she took a road less travelled. A road that involved doing sambuca on a rope swing, riding a table down a ski slope and a genderless hamster called Paul.

These stories have made up *The Actual One*, a book tour/show that looks to be a lot more exciting than your average reading and signing in Waterstones. Suttie describes creating the show: "I start with a song or a story that seems central to the theme of the show and just expand from that, previewing with copious notes and ditching lots of stuff. But this show was different as I already had the book, so I picked the bits of the book I thought would work best on stage and expanded them."

Suttie has been on the comedy scene for over a decade now, but her role as Dobby on *Peep Show* put her into the spotlight in a way she hadn't experienced before. The iconic

character captured audiences, becoming instantly recognisable to comedy fans, but such a part can be hard to break away from. Suttie, however, brushes this off with little alarm.

"Because I've always done a mix of stuff I don't tend to think about how I'm perceived too much, as I'm always onto the next thing. It was such a brilliant, iconic show to be involved in."

Lesser-known is her professional work as a musician, something which has always fed into her shows, including a score written for *Marat/Sade* at Arcola Theatre in 2001.

Her range of talents has meant she's never short of creativity, and having a baby with partner and fellow comedian Elis James hasn't slowed her down. *The Actual One* had a run at the esteemed Soho Theatre over August, a move that sees her shying away from the Fringe this year and staying closer to home. Is she warming up to 'adulthood'? Has *The Actual One* been her coming-of-age story?

"Not really, because I'm going to write a second book so I only concentrated on a few years and there's no 'happy ending' where I meet Elis and get pregnant and so on. I didn't want it to be that sort of book."

Instead the book celebrates female friendship and the ambiguity of your twenties, offering an honest take on the quest for 'the one', the pressures to find them and the difficulty of doing so. Her recent podcasts *The Things We Do For Love* and *Love Letters* also explore this on-going theme of love, and more specifically our mistakes and thwarted attempts to achieve it.

"Relationships can bring out the best and worst in people – often both simultaneously."

"I have always felt drawn to it, I suppose because relationships can bring out the best and worst in people – often both simultaneously – so you are often looking at people's traits by examining their relationships."

The Actual One is coming to *The Cookie* this September, not a far-stretch from the comedian's hometown of Matlock in Derby, a place she still feels a deep connection to.

"I can't imagine having grown up anywhere else. Growing up in a small town made me get to know local characters, which has definitely influenced my writing."

Returning to Leicester offers Suttie more than just a good comedy audience: "Leicester is great – we used to go out in Leicester and Derby when I was growing up, and the audiences are always lovely."

Finally, would she ever consider moving back?

"Possibly, but I've ended up with a Welsh guy so I'd have to persuade him!"

Isy brings *The Actual One* to *The Cookie* on 22nd September.



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

We talk to Curve's Artistic Director Nikolai Foster about new production *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the power of regional theatre and how he plans to champion new work.

You can't fault Curve for having ambition. Since Artistic Director Nikolai Foster took the reigns, audiences have been treated to productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Our Country's Good*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and of course, *Richard III*. This year the theatre continues to give us its spin on the greats with its first production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, hailed as one of best comedies in the English language.

The costume drama has been revisited hundreds of times, proving to be a timeless story that keeps audiences returning. Yet many of Foster's productions, such as his mafia-esque *Richard III*, have matched traditional plays with modern issues.

The play puts women centre-stage, the women holding the key to many of the men's desires, rather than the other way around.

"He was clearly satirising the ridiculous hypocrisy of a world which is run by men, where these women are, in many ways and in society at that time, second class citizens to men. Of course, what he does in his play is make women the driving force."

The set is to be a box of mirrors, reflecting the drama to both the audience and characters on stage, elevating the importance of image and status in the world of high society, both then and now. In terms of costume, nothing but the highest of fashion would suffice for Wilde's cunning cast: "We are looking at high-fashion, things like Dolce & Gabbana and Matthew Williams, as it looks like it could be 1890s or it could be now."

In somewhat of a similarity to the aspirational characters of Wilde's classic, the cast of this production are a mixture of professional and community actors, something that has proved to be a strength for Curve.

This is particularly true of actor Sharan Phull, who plays Cecily. Starting out as an usher at Curve, she went on to act in several of Curve's community productions, which eventually led her to landing a role on the West End in *Bend it Like Beckham*.

"To do all this back at Curve is really surreal and so special," Phull explains. "It's full of great people making inclusive and important work and I can't wait to share it!"

Foster echoes this, explaining how regional theatres are as important and forward thinking as those in the capital.

"There is this sense that anything in London is good, and anything outside of London is all right, but not quite hitting the mark compared to London theatres."

"I think everyone in the regions is doing incredible work, and the stronger we stand together, the more vibrantly our voices are heard."

The play is a good example of this as it's a co-production with Birmingham Rep, meaning the show will run in both theatres. The collaboration will certainly make both venues strong contenders to those in London.

Of course, there is always room for improvement, and this is certainly on Curve's trajectory. "I'd like to continue flying the flag for new work, whether that's new musicals or new plays or new dance."

"The more we can build trust with our audiences the more we can get them to invest in new work."

With this in mind, what Curve does next is an open book. Foster is reluctant to give the game away, but offers a glimpse of what's to come.

"There is a leading contemporary British playwright whose play was on at National Theatre a couple of years ago, and I am hoping we will be able to present the regional premiere of their play."

"There is also a playwright much closer to home that I am a great admirer of and who was responsible for getting me interested in theatre in the first place, so we're hoping to present one of their plays."

Finally, as a director who's done his fair share of work all over the UK, what does he think makes Leicester's theatre scene unique?

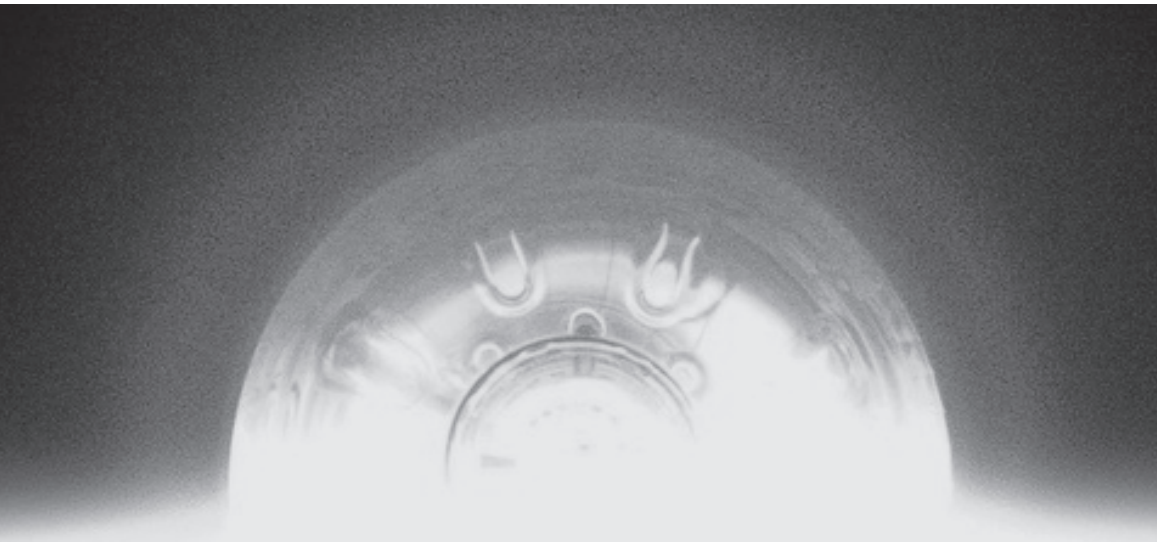
"The diversity of venues," Foster says confidently. "Everybody sort of works collaboratively or harmoniously and the cultural mix is far stronger for it, because everyone has got their own offering. That's what makes the city so exciting and so alive."

***The Importance of Being Earnest* Runs from the 6th to the 29th October at Curve.**

"The stronger we stand together, the more vibrantly our voices are heard."

LEILA HOUSTON

**A LOCAL VOICE
CONVERSATION SERIES IIII
COLLECTIVE SCULPTURE**

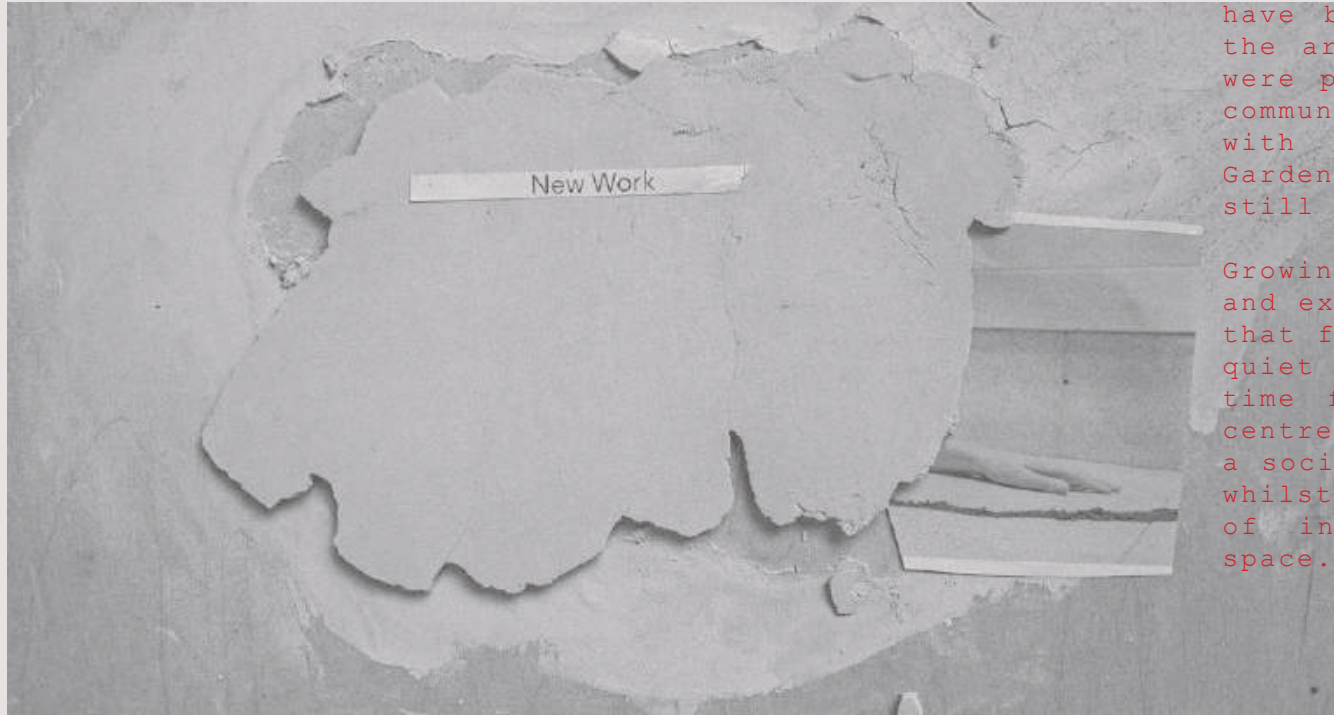


Leila Houston (London, 1977) is a visual artist whose work has often explored the social, political and historical aspects of a place and the impact we have on our environments.

Working predominantly with video, sound and structure, much of her artwork has cultivated immersive atmospheres for the spectator, often inviting them to take part or contribute to the work.

Houston uses site-responsive installations to investigate the connections between the external atmosphere and the internal sensation within places, providing reflections on the language of architecture and the associations we draw through memory and the senses.

Houston grew up in North Kensington Community Centre, London, which was run by her parents for 11 years between 1977 and 1988. Purpose-built in 1936, the large building was later demolished, thought to have been due to regeneration in the area. New housing and streets were paved in its place, with the community centre later replaced with the much smaller Dalgarno Gardens Community Centre, which is still open today.



Growing up in a place of discussion and exchange, the impact of spaces that foster both communication and quiet reflection has been a long-time fascination of Leila's. The centre gave those that came both a social platform for development, whilst also allowing them a degree of individual ownership of the space.

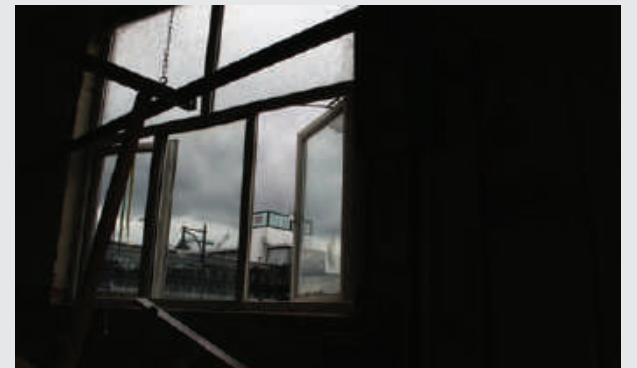
COMMUNITY



When the building was empty I would wander down the long corridors, finding little hidden spaces of my own at the back of the stage or in the recording studios.

They were particularly haunting and atmospheric, perhaps due to my memory of how busy it could be, and the old Victorian school-like structure of the place. It gave me a space to daydream and get lost in.

Leila Houston

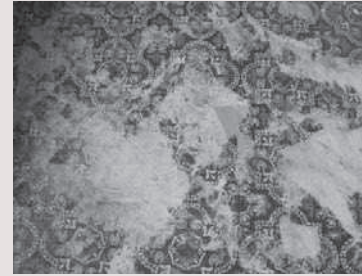
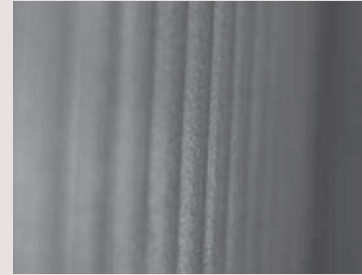


Along with other local children at the centre, Houston was given the opportunity to take risks growing up in the centre. Taken out of their comfort zone, young people were offered trips including days out rock-climbing or abseiling, or even camping in France.



Community centres and youth clubs offer young people a familiar yet constructive environment to experience new things and new people. These hands-on, 'life' experiences mean the chance to build confidence and explore identity that is essential for development, in a time rife with racism, class divides and political chaos.

In today's financial climate, many communal spaces are being forced to either relocate or close down completely. Without community, youth or arts centres, these opportunities are dwindling - affecting the underprivileged in our society the most.



Places for community may be decreasing in the infrastructure of our towns and cities; but they are growing rapidly online. Despite increased forums for discussion and debate, our digital platforms come with a swathe of obstacles. The rise of fake news, unstable politics and even more unstable politicians are often warped even further by the platforms we are using, becoming far removed from human empathy.



'A Local Voice' is in part a search for the genuineness of face-to-face interaction, a reestablishment of compassion and a step away from the strident individualism encouraged online. It is in part an exploration of why these gatherings are important, and what is at the heart of them. It is in part an attempt to understand space and its impact upon us, and our impact upon it. It is a platform for many voices. It is an ongoing expedition, a journey down a sprawling path with no single destination.

A LOCAL VOICE



Over two days, local and national people came together with people from Leicester to take part in an installation and create a collaborative sculpture with Houston at Two Queens Gallery's Project Space. People were from all ages and backgrounds, and many had no art experience at all.

I was in London after visiting the Tate Modern, looking at a block of flats that have been built in the area, which all have huge glass windows looking out over the city.

They'd been complaining that a part of the Tate Modern was looking into their apartments. Yet, they had bought glass apartments, the design of which was part of the aesthetic the Tate Modern had created in the area.

In one of these glass windows was a line of grass. I couldn't tell if it was real or fake. It got me wondering about the idea of authenticity and genuineness again. Here were people who had bought into the world the Tate had in part created, but they didn't want it in its totality. They wanted it on a superficial level.

It got me thinking again about what makes a space, the genuineness and authenticity found in a place and how we protect this in the face of fakery. I wanted to bring that into this project, and that inspired this activity.

Leila Houston





your eyes or hands
the person using
camera which you'd
prefer

Participants were asked to take part in various activities.

TWO TRUTHS AND ONE LIE

Film eyes or hands and tell the person on the camera two truths and one lie.

MEMO CARDS

Leave a message or a picture to your past self or if you'd rather a visitor who will be coming tomorrow (or both). Create as many as you like using the materials provided and the cable ties to attach to the postcard stand.

THE OLD TV

At the old television there is clear, sticky plastic. Create an appropriate colour / shape / text that you'd like to leave on the TV.

THERE IS GRASS IN THE ROOM

Please put in order (remember the other group will change it so it will be temporary).

FLOATING NEWSPAPER

From the installation, find a title or headline of your personal choice at the bottom of one of the strips. Tear off and create something out of clay (positioned under carrier bags). After doing this, attach it (morph) to someone else's handmade clay sculpture and position / attach to the wood.

Leave a message /
for your past self



After the Two Truths and One Lie activity, an atmosphere of elation and playfulness, if perhaps a little awkwardness, filled the room - as people discussed their lies, truths, how they told them and how they felt about doing it.

For a moment we are mistaken, we think the tasks are the thing, but everything is the thing. We have just been filming ourselves and we chat after and yet we are still being recorded and the project is about exchange. Exchange is the work. It's really interesting.

You can tell the work has been thought about and there is reason behind it, however it allowed space for us to create our own work and put our own ideas onto it.

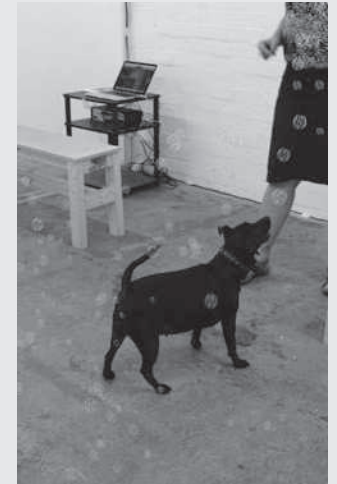
Musician and participant
David Dhonau



DENNY

Participants knew they were being recorded throughout the event, resulting in an element of self-awareness. Leila cultivated aspects of the project to relax people as a result, including and most importantly, Denny the dog.

Filmed beforehand alone in the empty space, Denny had a radio mic on her throughout each day, allowing her footsteps and interactions with the group to be recorded.



When people talked to the dog they forgot they were being recorded, and there was something genuine in that.

Leila Houston



An expansive collaboration between Leila Houston, participants and musicians, the final work was exhibited at LCB Depot in August 2017.

Taking the echoes of thumps, crashes, steps and conversation recorded over two days (clay models collaboratively sculpted, activities, videos and recordings), Leila collaborated with musicians to develop a responsive sound work to be played between five speakers and created a further installation.

Taking the marks and memories made in a space and moving them to another, this work is concerned predominantly with our experience of place. Once removed from their original settings, how does the new space receive the echoes of the original one? How does it change or adopt them? How does the new place foster new experience?

This renewal of place pulls us back to Leila's original inspiration: the community centre where she grew up. Knocked down and rebuilt, spaces can be temporal, ever changing, whether they are old or young - much as the people who inhabit them do.



I feel very, very proud of myself for taking part. I can't wait to tell my carer what I've done and if Leila ever has another one I'd like to take part in it again.

Participant Eddie Malcolm

COLLABORATIVE SCULPTURE

One of the most important things actually comes back to the value of sitting drinking tea and eating biscuits prior to the tasks, which was something I decided to do on the Sunday, whereas on the Saturday we did it at the end. The basic, age-old act of sharing food made a huge difference to how at ease people were.

Leila Houston

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Credits

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melfletcher.com

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BECOMING THE CHAMPION: JON

Jon 1st is a worldwide scratch DJ champion. He is also super well-behaved and totally humble. Natalie Beech talks to him about how the new world of DJing doesn't need the party.

We meet Jon First in a pub in Leicester, and looking at him you wouldn't guess he was the World Online Scratch DJ Champion. He orders water at the bar, speaks quietly and politely shakes hands with us. Not quite the bad boy deck-jockey I had imagined.

"I'm not much of a party person. I don't drink and I don't do any drugs or anything like that. For me doing gigs is just about playing music and vibing off people."

In 2013 Jon First (or Jon 1st - his DJ alias) created a video performance which took the DMC Championships by storm. Not only is Jon the Online Champion, he's the third best live DMC champion in the world too. "I think that'll come and nuzzle at me in a year or so, saying, 'You never won that, go back and do it.'"

Watching Jon's videos is seeing pure, unadulterated skill. With fingers that move in a blur it's as much of a physical performance as a musical one. "It's muscle memory," he shows us his hands. "It's similar to games like Street Fighter. You learn how to do a special move, a succession of button presses or a combination of things. When you first start it's tricky. It seems awkward. Then after a while you get it and two or three weeks later you can do it fast without thinking."

In many ways this metaphor sums up how the world of DJing has changed. The eggheaded party guy that headliner clubs in Ibiza has been replaced by the hard-working music specialist. The technicality and skill of scratching has become an art in itself, and one that needs intense practice, dedication and concentration.

"You've always had those people who are really into gear, and they have more of an interest in how things work, than you have the other side of it, where it's all about vibes and musical ideas. Most people try to strike a nice balance between the two."

This perfect balance is what Jon has been striving for since he started DJing. He spent three months practicing


four to eight hours a day for the championships. "I started doing scratching ten years ago when I was 15, I was practicing mainly at weekends. When I finished sixth form I did a course studying Music Production. I had a lot of free time, and when I should have been focusing on my music production skills I was just scratching all day."

Yet it isn't a completely isolated practice. The rise of the internet has seen a huge progression in what Jon calls a "musical sport". Message-boards, forums and sites like SoundCloud have allowed a worldwide community to share and discuss scratching techniques, mixes and music. "People would talk about new mixes, videos, battles and ideas. I know people who were maybe a bit younger than me, who are now playing all over the world. Back then they were just having a chat with people and practising every night."

The result has been a finer and more competitive art, but exposure online opens you up to as much negativity as it does praise. "It's scier on the internet. It's there for the world to see rather than just the people at a gig, you really have to push yourself." In a domain that has so many voices, how do you get yours heard? "Start contacting people whose music you've featured just to say 'I've started playing your stuff, here's my mix. If you like it I'd love to hear your feedback'," says Jon. "Eventually you are going to find people who are really into what you do, no matter how niche it is."

This is exactly what Jon did, and it resulted in him hearing back from huge names in the industry, such as DJ Marky and DJ Craze. For Jon, networking is a tool to express his work and improve. "Anything I shared with friends I wanted to be better than the last time. I wanted to do something undiluted and exactly how I wanted it to be. So there was no influence from making sure everyone was dancing, or the bar was making enough money."

What's his advice for newcomers with the urge to scratch? "Start off with the basics and really learn them. Every time you learn a new technique, stop trying to learn further new techniques for a while and really try to master the ones you know."

It's the age old rule that the work is nothing without the talent, but the talent is nothing without the work. 
Want Jon's tips on scratch DJing? Turn to page 124

1ST



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Want Jon's tips of scratch DJ-ing? Turn to page 124

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COUNTER CULTURE ISN'T OVER

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REMEMBERING ZION



Celebrating lifelong friendship, sleeping in Berlin Squats and playing at Glastonbury for the first time - reggae band **By the Rivers** are super-psyched to be making it big. Natalie Beech captures their energy over a pint in Leicester

BY
NATALIE BEECH



WR

The Rivers meet me in a pub in Leicester, and despite looking a little weary they're happier than ever. They've just released their debut album, and they're back from a show with the legendary ska band Madness. "It was amazing," says lead singer Sam. "It was a really good event, packed out."

Why was it that they wanted to make reggae music in the first place? What made them see past that stigma? "I've always thought with reggae, there's so much to work with. You've got a lot of space to play with rhythms and that's something I've always liked experimenting with," Nile says. "It's a genre you can't ignore - when you hear a post-punk band, you can't ignore it when you hear a post-punk band."

Similarly, their take on the genre has given them something new. A group of young white English boys are developing into one of the biggest new reggae bands in the UK, something that challenges the stigma in itself.

It's the musical side of reggae that we're talking about. A lot of reggae lyrics are based on the fight of the Rastafarian religion against oppression and we don't really have any of that. It's purely the music that we want to get into," says Sam.

"I mean, we're English boys. We're not going to do a Rasta accent or anything like that," laughs Jordan. "People think you've got to be Rastafarian and have dreadlocks and smoke weed." By the Rivers' lyrics are political, but they avoid taking any obvious stance. Their songs are arguably protest songs that champion individualism, with lyrics like "Don't be governed by political parties" but they don't align themselves with any particular doctrine.

"I guess there are a few political messages, but they're not really about politics," Nile says. "It's just enjoy yourself!"

The band has been hailed as "the new Specials" by *Natalie Gelfand* (guitarist and vocalist of the Specials) himself, and are reminiscent in both sound and in their take-up of genre. Their debut album has touches of jazz and Hawaiian steel guitar, and aside from the obvious reggae and ska influences, I ask what music had influenced the record.

"I'm quite into my rock music," says Nile. "I've always really liked Thin Lizzy and The Flamingos - stuff like that. All types of music. The Smiths have well into Paul Simon and Motown."

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It's the musical side of reggae that we're talking about. A lot of reggae lyrics are based on the fight of the Rastafarian religion against oppression and we don't really have any of that. It's purely the music that we want to get into," says Sam.

"I mean, we're English boys. We're not going to do a Rasta accent or anything like that," laughs Jordan. "People think you've got to be Rastafarian and have dreadlocks and smoke weed." By the Rivers' lyrics are political, but they avoid taking any obvious stance. Their songs are arguably protest songs that champion individualism, with lyrics like "Don't be governed by political parties" but they don't align themselves with any particular doctrine.

"I guess there are a few political messages, but they're not really about politics," Nile says. "It's just enjoy yourself!"

The band has been hailed as "the new Specials" by *Natalie Gelfand* (guitarist and vocalist of the Specials) himself, and are reminiscent in both sound and in their take-up of genre. Their debut album has touches of jazz and Hawaiian steel guitar, and aside from the obvious reggae and ska influences, I ask what music had influenced the record.

"I'm quite into my rock music," says Nile. "I've always really liked Thin Lizzy and The Flamingos - stuff like that. All types of music. The Smiths have well into Paul Simon and Motown."

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the Rivers meet me in a pub in Leicester, and despite looking a little weary they're happier than ever. They've just released their debut album, and have mesh back from a show with the legendary ska band Madness. "It was amazing," says Jordan, "it was a really good event, packed out. We didn't expect that response; we ended up getting an encore."

They're refreshingly wide-eyed and excited. I get the impression they're still in a state of bewilderment about what they've achieved. Locally they're known for their live performances, which their hometown album launch show a year ago all out. Since their formation in 2010, they've headed a UK tour supporting The Specials, as well as playing with the likes of The Buzzcocks and Fun Lovin' Criminals. With the release of their self-titled debut album in May, 2013 has seen the band take their own headline shows, starting with a tour in Europe.

"You get to go to places that you wouldn't as a tourist. When we were in Berlin we stayed in what was basically a squat," Sam laughs. I add that that doesn't sound so great. "It was actually really good!" Jordan replies. "They took charge of the house, and because they've been there for about ten years they own it now and have done it up nicely. They've got a bar with a stage."

"How does Europe compare to the UK? "People in Europe are really receptive. They watch intently, but I love playing England really," Nile smiles. "I love festivals, that's one of our main things."

Reggae and ska are arguably niche genres; the platform for the music being largely underground since the 60s, and rarely entering the charts. Yet for a new band. By the Rivers' debut album has had rave reviews over the web and landed them a slot at Glastonbury BBC Introducing Stage this year. I ask if they agree that reggae is making a comeback, and if they're pioneering a new wave of young reggae and ska bands.

"There's always been a big underground reggae scene, but it's starting to break through now and people are latching on to it," says Sam. "I don't think it will be long until it becomes bigger."

"There's a stigma around reggae; people don't understand what it is. They just hear about this

stereotype, and they see the bad side of reggae," Matt adds. "It's the same with a lot of genres; you just see the mainstream, which isn't necessarily as good."

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Similarly, their take on the genre has given it something new. A group of young, white English boys are developing into one of the biggest new reggae bands in the UK, something that confronts the stigma in itself.

"It's the musical side of reggae that we're taking, a lot of reggae lyrics are based on the fight of the Rasta religion against oppression and we don't really have any of that. It's purely the music that we want to get into," says Sam.

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"I guess there are a few political messages, but then it's mainly putting across positivity," Nile says. "Just enjoy yourself!"

The band has been hailed as "the new Specials" by Lynval Golding (guitarist and vocalist of The Specials) himself, and are reminiscent in both sound and in their shake-up of genre. Their debut album has touches of jazz and Hawaiian steel guitar, and aside from the obvious reggae and ska influences, I ask what music had influenced the record.

"I'm quite into my rock music," says Nile. "I've always really liked Thin Lizzy and Foo Fighters - stuff like that. All types of music. (To Sam) You're well into Paul Simon and Motown."

"Yeah, I think if you heard what we play in the van, we do definitely listen to reggae and play reggae, but we listen to so many other things," Sam agrees. "I think reggae's just what happens when we all get together and write tunes. (To Nile and Jordan) These guys had songs already, and newer songs naturally seem to go down that road."

Nile and Jordan were the founding members of the band, but since then Matt, Sam and brass players Will Todd and Leo May have got on board. How did they all meet? "I've known Jord since he was a baby... unfortunately," Nile laughs. "No I'm joking, we all met through music really. Me and Matt met at college. Sam was in a few Leicester bands before it was from the music circuit in Leicester."

The brass players used to play together in Leicester Big Band," Matt recalls. "We knew the sax player from some other musician friends of ours. It just all came together nicely in the end."

The band has done long tours together, and throughout this year have gigs coming up most weekends. Their tour with The Specials was the first UK tour they had done on that scale, and the legendary 80s band are renowned for their party antics. I wonder if by the Rivers got a taste of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

"In terms of parties and girls, there are obviously moments I guess..." Jordan grins. "But you travel a lot, and with gigs you turn up, get out the van, play, pack up your gear and then get traveling again. Most of the time we haven't got the time to party!"

Not even an argument or two? I suggest hearing some tour tales could be great material for a by the Rivers biography in ten years. To my slight disappointment, it's all peace and love with the boys. On tour, it's the kind of time when you get closer as a band, you find out more about each other. All the jokes on tour and stuff, it just brings you closer."

Fresh from a festival-filled summer, with their first ever slot at Glastonbury a momentous success. Finally, I ask, what are their pipe dreams for the future? "I'd like to see reggae actually come up into the charts for more people to hear again," Matt answers. "But ideally headlining Glastonbury Pyramid Stage! That would be my ultimate goal in life. I'd have peaked."