

Roberts, R. (2016), 'Celebrating the Late Career Work of Nobel Prize Winner Bob Dylan, When He Started Getting Obsessed With Death', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 October.
Available online: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-bob-dylan-nobel-late-albums-20161013-snap-story.html> (accessed 29 December 2017).

Said, E. W. (2007), *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, New York: Vintage Books.

'Slip Away' (2002), [Video] France: Arte TV Music Planet Special. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQrJE56oU7I> (accessed 22 February 2018).

Tagg, P. (2012), *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos*, Larchmont, NY: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press.

Memory, graffiti and The Libertines: A walk down 'Up the Bracket Alley'

Benjamin Halligan

I had wanted to visit 'Up the Bracket Alley' (see Figure 7.1) since it had become something of an unofficial heritage site. The 'alley' itself is an unremarkable concrete stretch between Grove Passage and Hare Row (see Figure 7.2), off Cambridge Heath Road in Bethnal Green in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets. The alley doesn't appear on all maps, is difficult to find and possibly even dangerous to visit. But nearby graffiti for 'Up the Bracket Alley' pointed me in the right direction. In fact, it's graffiti that has renamed this stretch, an alley that once serviced the garden exits of the houses that are now rundown shops, takeaways and fly-by-night small businesses.



Figure 7.1 Up the Bracket Alley in 2012.

By way of visitor information: our alley has one entrance, one exit, high walls either side, barbed wire across some of these walls, and is barely lit. The lone walker is easy to spot as he or she enters, easy to cut off either way, and presumably quickly relieved of their effects, with objections readily dispelled through utilization of the hard brick walls. There's a Victorian underpass in which to divide the spoils and nearby main roads are ideal for the getaway. If mugged before closing time, the nearest pub from which to seek assistance is The Hare, at 505 Cambridge Heath Road.

I made this trip and took these photographs in 2012 (see Figure 7.4). At that point, the idolized 'indie' rock group The Libertines were seemingly long over. The group had finally imploded around 2004 and, those eight years later, would have seemed in danger of being forgotten altogether as music and cultural scenes moved on. (The group was to reform in 2014.) Was the passion that they had aroused and orchestrated in their fans and followers, between 1997 and 2004, in danger of being forgotten too? Not entirely, it seems. 'Up the Bracket Alley' was where fans and followers had gone to write about a group that lived on in their memories, to memorialize that passion, or to demonstrate that they would not let these feelings go. Roger Sargent's 2011 documentary on The Libertines, *There Are No*



Figure 7.2 Grove Passage becomes Up the Bracket Alley.

Innocent Bystanders, includes a sequence in which Bârat visits the alley. He reads the inscriptions and suppresses seemingly powerful and conflicting emotions.

This alley was the location for the external shots of the 2002 promo video for the second single by The Libertines, 'Up the Bracket', directed by Gina Birch (formerly of The Raincoats). The video opens in Grove Passage/Hare Row with Carl Bârat, Pete Doherty, Gary Powell and John Hassell casually approaching and delivering the song while ribbing each other (see Figures 7.3 and 7.5). The video moves on to incorporate shots of the rusting gasworks on the old canal just around the corner as the group ambles by.



Figure 7.3 From 'Up the Bracket' (opening sequence, Grove Passage/Hare Row, 2002).



Figure 7.4 The location in April 2012.



Figure 7.5 From 'Up the Bracket' (opening sequence).

The Libertines' early career was brief and explosive. In the manner of punk, they seemed to suddenly up-end models of musical taste, fandom and stardom (and distribution and marketing). For a while, the London quartet were wildly popular and their popularity was founded, in part, via ideas of familiarity and access. They were disconcertingly available in the early days. They were prone to play in a friend's living room or on a carpark roof at a moment's notice. They moved through squats and pub-crawls and dives and drug dens. They swept their ragtag army of fans, associates and scenesters in their wake – often with the whole rabble pursued by paparazzi and police. Doherty recalled, seemingly of 2003, still 'doing little terrorist gigs, literally playing in crack houses around Kilburn – little dives, and a few half-decent clubs; didn't really make any money, but just getting these songs out' (quoted in Honniball 2008: 12). The chief 'interpreters' of The Libertines around this time – Hedi Slimane (2005), Anthony Thornton and Roger Sargent (2006), Fabio Paleari (2007) – understood that the fans were of central importance. A scene and a look, not stardom, came under their scrutiny. This included shabby rooms and crash pads, discarded clothes, beer and cigarette debris and ripped furniture. They made use of junk-shop oddities like old flags and army uniforms, while impromptu graffiti offered a liminal written record. All of this was interspersed with the singers and scrums of fans and formed part of their rendering of the group and its circles in *London Birth of a Cult* (Slimane 2005), *The Libertines: Bound Together* (Thornton and Sargent 2006) and *I Won't Give Up* (Paleari and Montgomery 2007). Interlopers with agendas sought to gain access to the centre (particularly at the point at which Doherty began a relationship with model Kate Moss) and, as with

documentary-maker Max Carlish for *Stalking Pete Doherty* (2005), found attempts rebuffed, even violently.

The music was the sound of this chaos. This is evident in their boisterous debut album, *Up the Bracket* (2002); a record produced by Mick Jones, formerly of The Clash. But the music rarely incorporated punk's rebarbative nature. Instead it was unapologetically romantic and sentimental. It looked to the 'doomed' First World War poets and London post-war bohemian culture for inspiration. Libertines graphics (posters and flyers, album and single covers, websites, tattoos) often incorporated faded British Empire detritus – particularly threadbare or partly shredded Union Jack flags that, as with Vivienne Westwood's and Alexander McQueen's occasional use of the same, seemed to hark back to the ending of the 'glory days' of British culture as a global exemplar. The back-and-forth dueting between the two bandleaders, Doherty and Bérat, added a frisson of intimate friendship and kinship among outcasts to the mix. Thus, Doherty makes for a case study for Hawkins's model of the 'British pop dandy' whose 'out-of-key phrasing and unhinged pitching work as an obvious marker of authenticity' (2009: 111) and offers a favourable comparison to more conventionally delivered (and conceptualized, produced and presented) popular singers of this time. Live, The Libertines veered between impassioned brilliance, cresting along on the collective emotions of the moment, and a near-inability to deliver their own music. In the latter case, the songs would effectively collapse, or fail to gel, or even be missed off altogether from the intended or misremembered or lost set list. Jones's recording of 'Skag & Bone Man' (seemingly live, in the studio; a B-side on the *I Get Along* EP) captures this. The song ends so prematurely, after one minute, that it prompts a bemused exchange to the effect that the group had forgotten to play a substantial part of it – 'We fucked it all up; we missed half the song out.' The physical and mental condition of the group members, or the karma of the moment, seemed to directly impact on The Libertines. The gigs, from a musical perspective at least, got progressively worse. A trend developed for audience members to smuggle in emergency marine flares and ignite them mid-song, filling the venue with smoke while the group played on and security scrambled to find and eject the culprits. Gigs tended to end unexpectedly (and frequently after enormously delayed starts) with police raids and roadblocks, or via electricity shut offs by exasperated venue owners, or equipment failure, or even with hospitalization of band members (see Thomsen 2003) or the partial destruction of the venue (see *NME* 2004). Sometimes it was a

mixture of all of these things. Such a carry-on lent itself to admiring word-of-mouth and mythologizing. (Although, as Berkers and Eckelaer (2014) argue, there is a strongly gendered dimension to such approval, with concern or condemnation more the response from the mainstream news media to female performers who are seen to act in the same ways.)

The scene was simultaneously announced and reflected in 'Up the Bracket'. The band messing around near the old gasworks like kids playing truant from school, and then back to someone's house for a party with assorted characters sitting around or joining in the fun (see Figure 7.6). The *mise-en-scène* is a thrift shop bric-a-brac collage that locates the music and scene in a sense of English identity and culture. These move through 1960s appropriations of military uniform (as with The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton; see Press 2017) via the Libertines' Beefeater jackets, 1970s Glam (a Marc Bolan album is briefly glimpsed) and a number of 1980s indie styles (in the shambolic delivery and so obviously flunked lip-syncing).

English Heritage sanctions and announces 'Official' heritage locations in the United Kingdom with an iron Blue Plaque; something of a contentious matter in relation to popular music in particular (see Roberts and Coen 2013). Unofficial mock-up Blue Plaques (often plastic stickers) can sometimes be found in shop windows indicating previous uses of the building that are of historic interest or minor curiosity. However, in 'Up the Bracket Alley', marker pens and spray paint democratize and collectivize such an impulse. They lock such unofficial heritage celebrations into memories and sharp personal responses. They offer an alternative to committee-approved civic acknowledgements and branding. The providers of graffiti also mimic the video, which incorporated (fresh) Libertines graffiti on the alley walls.



Figure 7.6 Concert/party in the living room, from 'Up the Bracket'.

The graffiti writers directly inscribe the lyrics onto the alley. The music of this area (Bethnal Green was a haunt of The Libertines) is now written 'onto' this area, and so returned to it (see Figures 7.7, 7.9, 7.10, 7.14, 7.15, 7.16 and 7.17). These working-class environs – shabby, yet in view of, albeit certainly not a part of, the Square Mile (glass skyscrapers, mass surveillance, headquarters and embassies, 'the Gherkin') were the essential canvas for The Libertines. In 2012, the ambience and weather and boozers and characters remained present and correct. Unlike Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, with its much graffitied and 'vandalized' Jim Morrison headstone, there is no relic here: just the site for memories of the group (see Figures 7.11, 7.13 and 7.18).

'Up the Bracket' itself begins with a startling yell. It is a shouted, incoherent, territorial declaration (even if only sonically, and to the annoyance of those disturbed from their sleep) of the fond ownership of a particular area. It is the sort of cry usually made up into the sky in the small hours from just such a backstreet. With this, The Libertines stake their claim to the stomping ground. The visitor implicitly agrees; they are, after all, now sightseeing this alley on the grounds of this association. Disturbances in the night are part of the experience of these particular streets. Sinclair (1998) reads the area almost entirely with respect to the legacy (psychic and psychogeographical) of the London gangsters the Kray twins. 'Up the Bracket' seems to allude to this brutal past, too. The 'two shadow men on the Vallance Road', wrong-footed by a 'fuck off' gesture ('you see these two cold fingers?') by the singer when he is asked by them for the whereabouts of the song's addressee ('your': presumably the listener), set about delivering a beating.

The territory, mythology and scene were underwritten for this imagined community by a pseudo-theology. The picaresque times of The Libertines were also the journey of the ship Albion. Were you onboard or not? One mark of absolute allegiance for a fan was a tattoo (as with Miriam; see Figure 7.8), or even to tattoo over the signatures, signs and slogans written on their bodies by The Libertines, thus creating permanence on the graffitied body. Doherty's own writings, published in *The Books of Albion* (2007), covered the period in a jarringly oblique manner. For those able to decipher the handwriting, his concern was more with the evolving emotional narrative (friends, parties, slights, flips) than the matter of gaining success with music releases or chart positions attained. This Albion sensibility conceded nothing to industry concerns. *The Books of Albion*, which consists of photographs of diary and scrapbook entries, begin in such a manner, too: 'A young man's journey over the last seven or eight years. In and out of consciousness, in and out of [HM Prison] Pentonville, in and out of several hearts, homes and hostels' (2007).

The first person I loved was a huge fan of Peter and Babyshambles so after it went down the drain between us I still loved Babyshambles but I couldn't listen to Peter's voice anymore. The only thing that stuck with me after that was my incredible admiration and love for Peter, for his songwriting and poetry, and his style in general. I just kinda got over The Libertines and Babyshambles when I was about 17, up until the new album came out [Anthems for Doomed Youth, 2015] and it was like falling in love again.

When success comes, it seems secondary to a heavily subjective and highly sentimental and occasionally idiosyncratic set of observations. Indeed, this was part of the problem for Doherty's handlers and colleagues. Acclaim did not temper or refine the liabilities of his old ways.

Figure 7.9 ‘I get along just singing my song people tell me I’m wrong ... FUCK ‘UM’ (lyric).

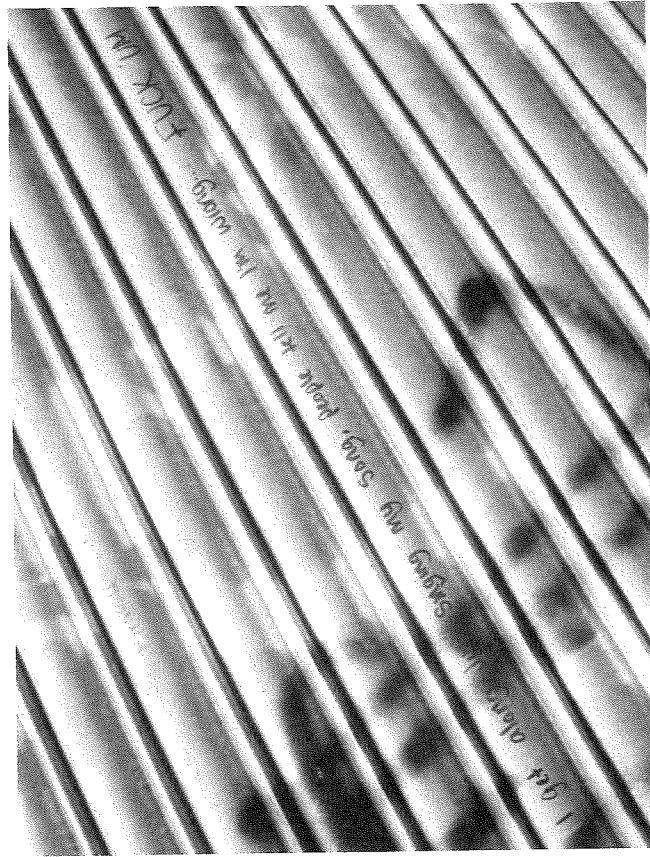


Figure 7.8 Miriam's tattoo adapts lyrics from 'Time for Heroes' by The Libertines (2003).



Figure 7.10 'The Arcadian dream will never fall through. X. 13/2/12; 'I lived my dreams today'; 'What became of the likely lads?' (lyrics).

So, invariably, the waters soon became too choppy for the good ship Albion. The album that followed their debut *Up The Bracket* (2002), *The Libertines* (2004), featured a cover picture of Bérat and Doherty, huddled together and tired and emotional. Both bare their Libertines tattoos from the 'freedom gig' in Chatham. This performance occurred only hours after Doherty's release from gaol for a stretch arising from his burglary of Bérat's flat. A flyer from the time (designed by Sophie Thunder; see Figure 7.12) embedded this setback into the unfolding story of the band itself. It even featured Doherty's prisoner number.

Incarceration was to become a feature of Doherty's time in the spotlight. The ambience of crime, hard drugs and violence enveloped the group and was to bring it crashing down. Both Doherty and Bérat established subsequent bands, post-Libertines. Doherty's Babysambles has since spent more than a decade alternatively squandering and realizing potentials. In so doing, they delivered at least one genuinely unique album (*Down in Albion*, 2005, also produced by Mick Jones) and live experiences like few others. A concert for a very modestly sized audience in the Shrewsbury Music Hall (1 October 2005) started late and lasted near two and half hours. It had a band that featured Doherty's Pentonville



Figure 7.11 'The Arcadian dream has fallen through, BUT the Albion sails on course ... THANK SO MUCH! Betina & Bienie. 7/8/2011'.

cellmate The General. The group were at times in the audience and at others the audience were up on stage. It culminated with Doherty's arrest shortly after the Drug Squad had raided the venue.



Figure 7.12 Sophie Thunder's design for the 2003 'Freedom Gig'.

In 2012, The Libertines were a memory. Those in the music industry who fêted The Libertines (the two leaders were, after all, white heterosexual boys with guitars) and were unable to cope with their erratic behaviour had turned to safer groups. (Heterosexual – although Doherty has spoken of his previous



Figure 7.13 'Pete Doherty is Innocent'.

career, imagined or otherwise, as a gay prostitute/amateur burglar (Ward 2005).) Such safer groups kept their habits private or actually turned up to play gigs. Or groups who did not weigh in so much, or at all, on affairs of state. Or groups who would not scare off potential advertisers, and who kept a distance from their constituents, too. Albion had retreated, and this alley had become the central node of a ramshackle heritage trail. Fans, seemingly from all over the world, would visit, graffiti the walls and metal shutters, and presumably take photographs, too. The messages are arresting. These are not the unimaginative scrawlings of the band's name or the fan's name, and who they are '4', but more considered responses and utterances (jostling with other strains of graffiti). The writers reproduce stretches of lyrics invariably loaded with emotional significance. They collectively curate something of a public archive concerning who The Libertines were and what they meant and continue to mean.

Formative cultural periods, even many years later, take on new guises and new roles and functions. The alley writing channels the lyrics and calls them back into existence, refusing to let the words go. In this respect, the words are not so much graffiti sloganeering but something more akin to the spiritualist trope

of automatic writing. Such writing is conducted in a trance-like state without control over the movement of the writing hand, as if 'possessed by discarnate personalities or being taken over by secondary personalities' (Stevenson 1978: 327). The words seem to have been communicated from those on the other side of the grave.

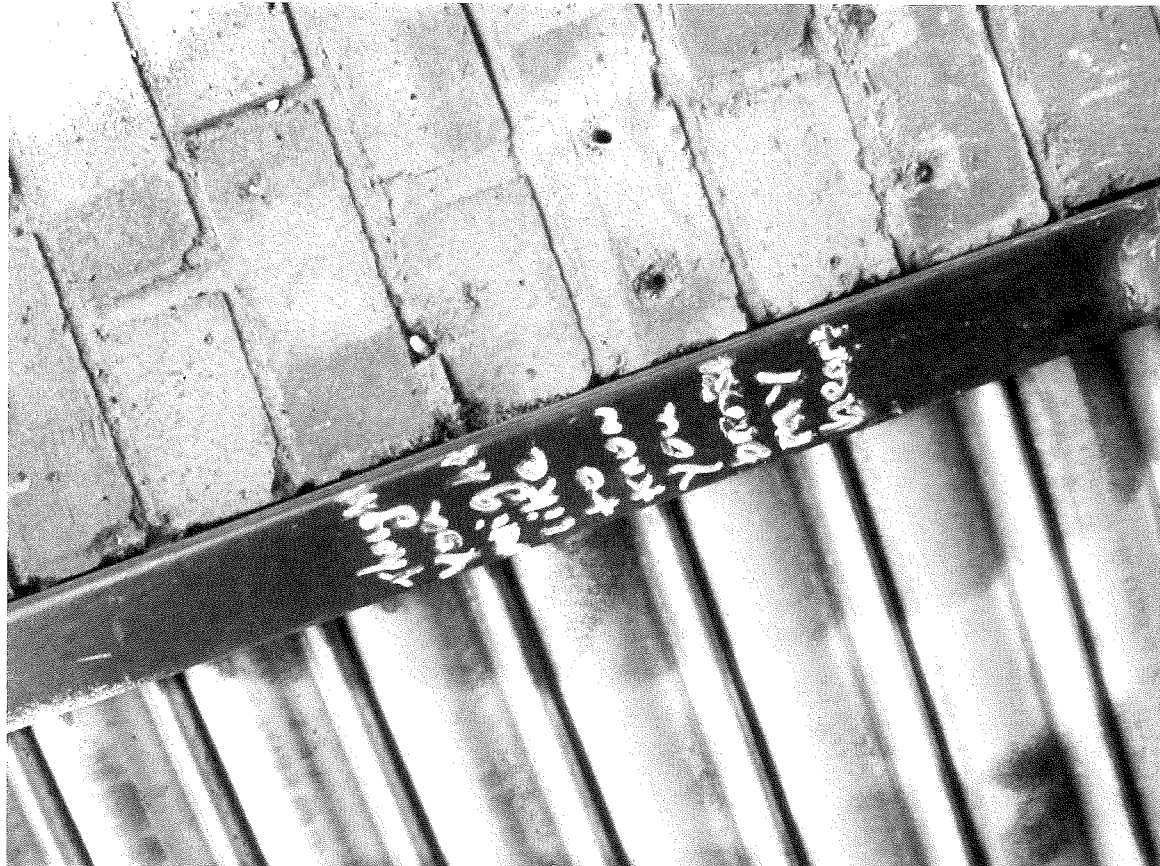


Figure 7.14 'Thought you might like to know you broke my heart' (lyric).

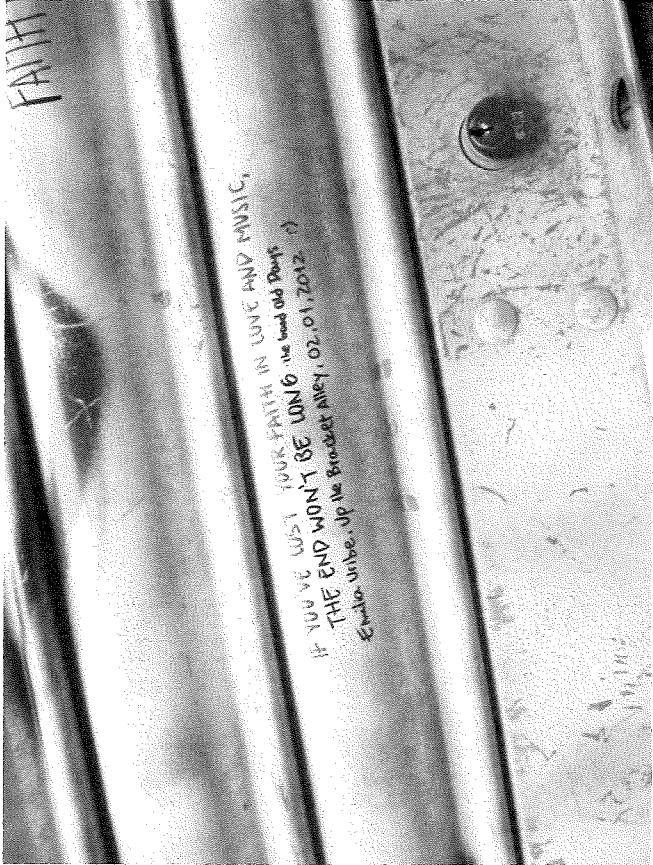


Figure 7.15 'If you've lost your faith in love and music, the end won't be long' (lyric).

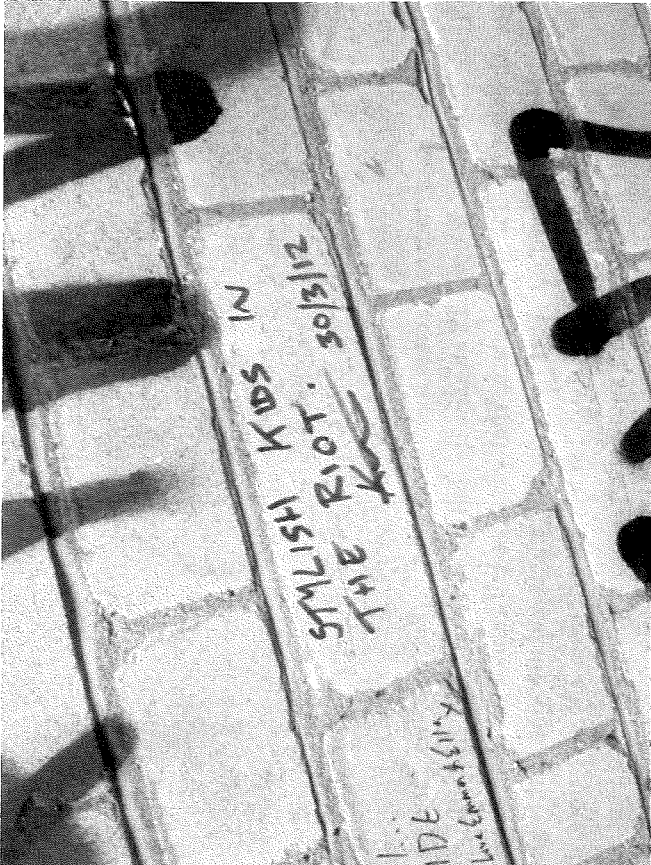


Figure 7.16 'Stylish kids in the riot' (lyric).



Figure 7.17 'I'm so clever but clever ain't wise' (lyric).

The alley becomes an imaginary meeting place for the group and their fans. It is a zone for the expression of collective memories. This isn't the kind of space that's created for group reformations and reunions, or committee-designated as heritage. And the determination of the alley as an autonomous zone for such expressions and for the persistence of fandom via small illegal acts must be considered to have been collectively made and maintained. The traces of the activities that distinguish an otherwise deeply unremarkable stretch of concrete are some way beyond the conceptions and practices of the nostalgia industry.

'Up the Bracket' ends with images of Doherty running away (see Figure 7.19). He moves down Grove Passage/Hare Row. There is a shot of a red graffiti'd 'Libertines' superimposed across them and the lyric, 'But we never get close / that's close enough now'. It's an obscure, but fitting, sentiment. The visitor is seeking communion with a place. They get close but cannot get close enough since time has moved on. After these considerations and my time in this spot, it seems an apt closing image to the old video: the exit from The Libertines, the ending of their music scene – a figure glimpsed in the alley, and no longer in reach. Doherty isn't here, and younger selves had, as of 2012, vanished, too. But this is the place of the meeting or overlapping of those disappearances.

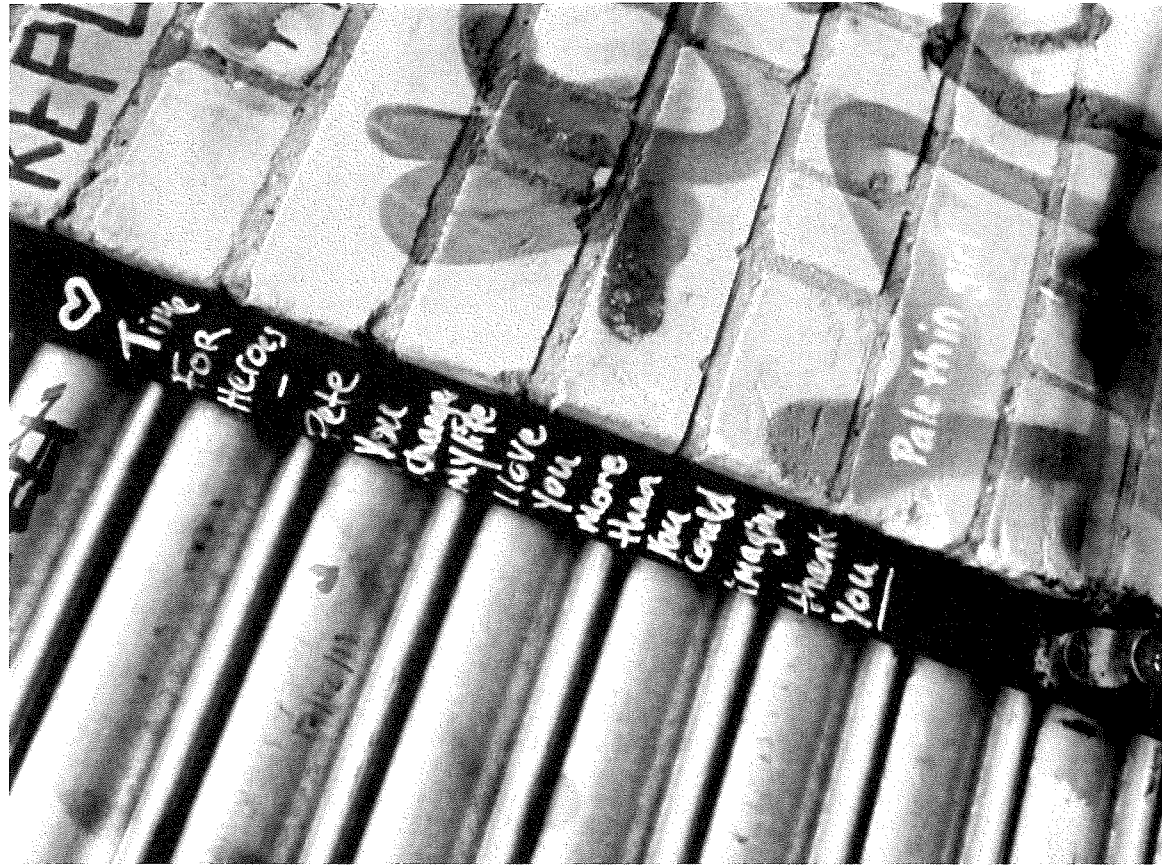


Figure 7.18 'Time for Heroes [song title] – Pete you changed my life I love you more than you could imagine thank you.'

What's left, then, is the writing. There's something persuasive and self-validating about the activity of graffitiing. This isn't a case of thoughts on an internet forum or social media, or blog or online reviews or journalism – or just championing the music. Everyone seems to engage in those, with little or

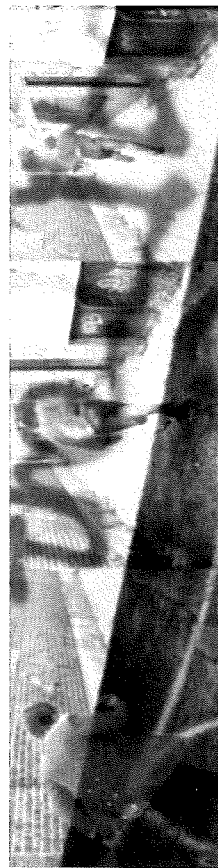


Figure 7.19 From 'Up the Bracket' (closing sequence).

no opposition. To take the time to graffiti requires preparation (materials: pens/spray cans) and planning (discretion: it is a time-limited activity). What should be written? Does the writing memorialize a cultural scene, and enshrine or inscribe one's own feelings onto one of its places of pilgrimage? Does it revive and enliven that scene, and allow for the demand that the scene persists nonetheless – carried forward by and for those who visit? Or any calibration or continuity of these elements? The activity of writing allows for a material and communal sense of leaving a bit of oneself there. Those who note their coming from other countries on the alley walls will return home knowing that, for a while at least, their inscriptions are part of the tapestry left behind in distant Bethnal Green. As they exit the alley, they would share with all contributors the sense that part of them remains. The alley is changed by their visit. These acts of writing, and the writing itself, validate the music and the scene. It evidences the ways in which they continue to exert meaning and supports a collective emotional payload. Even as the years go by.

References

- Babyshambles (2005), *Down in Albion*, LP: RTRADLP240.
- Berkers, P. and M. Eeckelaer (2014), 'Rock and Roll or Rock and Fall? Gendered Framing of the Rock and Roll Lifestyles of Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty in British Broadsheets', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23 (1): 3–17.
- Carlish, M. (2005), *Stalking Pete Doherty* (North One Television/Max Carlish; tx. Channel 4, 17 May).
- Doherty, P. (2007), *The Books of Albion: The Collected Writings of Peter Doherty*, London: Orion.
- Hawkins, S. (2009), *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

- Honniball, S. (2008), *Beg, Steel or Borrow: The Official Babyshambles Story*, London: Cassell.
- Libertines, The (2002), *Up the Bracket*, Rough Trade. LP: RTRADEL065.
- Libertines, The (2002), *Up the Bracket/Boys in the Band, 7"* single: RTRADES064.
- Libertines, The (2003), *I Get Along*, 12" EP: Rough Trade 2182300241.
- Libertines, The (2004), *The Libertines*, Rough Trade. LP: RTADLP166.
- NME [New Musical Express] (2004), 'Libertines Fans Riot at Secret Show' *New Musical Express*, 22 April. Available online: <http://www.nme.com/news/music/libertines-332-1359349> (accessed 20 January 2018).
- Paleari, F. and R. Montgomery (2007), *I Won't Give Up*, Bologna: Gradiche Damiani.
- Press, C. (2017), '50 Years After Sgt. Pepper, The Beatles' Military Jackets Continue to Inspire', *Fashionista*, 14 June. Available online: <https://fashionista.com/2017/06/sgt-pepper-beatles-suits-uniform-fashion> (accessed 3 January 2018).
- Roberts, L. and S. Cohen (2013), 'Unauthorising Popular Music Heritage: Outline of a Critical Framework', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20 (3): 241–61.
- Sargent, R. (2011), *There Are No Innocent Bystanders*, Pulse Films. DVD/Digital theatrical release.
- Sinclair, I. (1998), *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions into the Secret History of London*, London: Granta Books.
- Slimane, H. (2005), *London Birth of a Cult*, Göttingen: Steidl Verlag.
- Stevenson, I. (1978), 'Some Comments on Automatic Writing', *Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research*, 72 (4): 315–32.
- Thomsen, L. (2003), 'The Libertines: Freedom Gig, Tap 'n' Tin, Chatham, Kent', *The Independent*, 9 October. Available online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/the-libertines-freedom-gig-tapntin-chatham-kent-90641.html> (accessed 10 January 2018).
- Thornton, A. and R. Sargent (2006), *The Libertines: Bound Together*, London: Time Warner Books.
- Ward, V. (2005), 'The Beautiful and the Damned', *Vanity Fair*, December. Available online: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2005/12/moss200512> (accessed 14 January 2018).