

# 'A Quiet Revolution' – An Overview of Current Community Music Initiatives in the UK

Dave Price

---

## Introduction

The UK government is currently conducting one of the largest social experiments in Britain since the Second World War. It receives little attention, but it is receiving very large funding allocations. It cannot easily be seen, since it is an example of what the government calls 'joined-up thinking' – a wide range of cross-departmental projects encompassing health, employment, education and culture. Nor can it easily be named - except to recognise the umbrella covering these initiatives as the 'quality of life' agenda - but it has some specific targets, among which are:

- Revitalising economically and socially disadvantaged communities in order to reduce crime, unemployment and ill-health;
- Raising levels of attendance in schools, and participation in higher education through study-support projects;
- Recognising that the industrial model of wealth creation of the previous century has to be replaced by small/medium-sized organisations which are built upon creativity and entrepreneurship.

For those working in community music, it has led to an exponential increase in projects being supported – but it has also meant that some of the early defining characteristics of community music are undergoing some significant changes, in order to remain inclusive and socially relevant. This paper seeks firstly, to identify the key social initiatives which have created the current environment; secondly, to speculate on some of the issues which now need to be addressed.

## The Importance of Dialogue

13 years ago I helped organize the inaugural community music conference in the UK. 'Making Connections' was emblematic of the early days of 'organised' community music – there was a tangible sense of discovery, very high energy levels, and a real sense of celebration that we were in the vanguard of what we saw then as a 'movement'. In 1989, community music often defined itself in oppositional terms. We didn't quite know what we were, but we were sure that we were *not* formalized education, nor were we anything to do with the dominant ideology. Indeed some of us (somewhat grandiosely, it must be admitted) saw ourselves as acting in open defiance of the Thatcher administration. Margaret Thatcher's famous quote that 'there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women', further served to galvanise our determined opposition. The Arts Council of Great Britain (as it was then) had no idea what community musicians stood for, but they knew we could be quite a noisy bunch, so they lumped us together with Early Music (!), and gave us £5,000 per year to form an association.

How things have changed. Today, that association, Sound Sense, has an annual turn-over in excess of £250,000. Community artists are regularly consulted by leading politicians and sit on the boards of multi-million pound arts and education projects. The terminology we lay claim to (the disadvantaged, access and entitlement, confidence-building, etc) has been appropriated by the men – and women - in suits and all the doors we used to bang on, are now wide open. It is a remarkable transformation, which has come about for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most significant being the willingness of the 1997-elected Labour Government to establish a dialogue with artists, educators and social scientists in addressing the malaise which has been 'credited' to the previous administration's long tenure – 'social exclusion'. The ideas which emerged from that dialogue, however, could never have been implemented without the impact of the National Lottery – first launched in 1994 and, following an initial phase of large capital building-based projects,

there came a realization that without support for grass-roots arts projects, there would be no-one using the shiny new buildings which symbolize the growth of the 'creative industries' in the UK.

### **The Seismic Societal Shift**

*“Cities balance on a cusp – decision-makers can repeat past policies in a climate of slow decline, or they can seek to reinvent their city as a vibrant hub of creativity, potential and improving quality of life. Undoubtedly, for the most part, old approaches do not work. We cannot solve 21<sup>st</sup> century problems with 19<sup>th</sup> century mindsets”*  
(Charles Landry, *The Creative City*)

Alongside the recognition that many people, particularly in inner-city Britain, felt excluded from the improved social conditions of the last 50 years, has come the acknowledgement that the economic drivers for wealth are no longer to be found in multi-national corporations. The issue of culture and creativity has never played a more central role in government thinking. Additionally, the devolution of powers and responsibilities to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales has meant that culture has become a key factor in establishing national identity in a not-quite-as-United-Kingdom. As a result, cities hitherto considered to be in terminal decline, are re-inventing themselves throughout Britain, through iconic cultural projects and the growth of small-medium sized enterprises.

*“The creative industries in the UK generate revenues of around £112.5 billion and employ some 1.3 million people. Exports contribute around £10.3 billion to the balance of trade, and the industries account for over 5% of GDP. In 1997-98, output grew by 16%, compared to under 6% for the economy as a whole.”*  
(*Creative Industries Mapping Document 2001 Dept for Culture, Media & Sport*)

These twin thrusts of 21<sup>st</sup> century thought – social inclusion and culture/creativity - have remained in sharp contrast to a continuing 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrial model of education in Britain, but there have been some encouraging signs that, even here, things are beginning to change.

The Creative Partnerships programme, launched in a pilot-phase this year, seeks to link up secondary schools with artists and creative organizations. The pilot locations are within 16 of the local authorities highest-ranked on social-deprivation indices. The National Foundation for Youth Music has an annual budget of £10m, specifically for community and education projects. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation has recently established multi-million pound music education projects involving community musicians in more formal education contexts. All these initiatives (and there are many more I could cite) represent a recognition that the current education system simply does not work, especially for most adolescents. There is now an eagerness to work with musicians and artists who can bring a fresh perspective to familiar problems.

### **From a Movement to an Industry in less than 10 years**

If community music were a publicly listed company, we'd all want shares. Precise figures are impossible to ascertain (funding sources range from the European Union, through the National Lottery, to Health, Housing, Crime Prevention), but it's not too fanciful to argue that annual turnover in the UK for community arts (i.e. not simply music) now exceeds £0.5 billion – that is on a par with the music industry or all of the other 'performance' disciplines combined. This has been a quiet revolution however, and we have to remind ourselves that we are on trial here: experiments of any kind, can be deemed a failure, particularly if we don't know what we're looking to prove. So the question of 'impact' becomes critical – for the work as a whole, no less than for that of the participants.

For the profession, this has meant:

- Community music now occurs in a widely divergent range of locations : primary, secondary formal education; prisons; youth service; hospitals; residential homes; supporting specific musical and artistic traditions;
- There is a more even geographical spread –away from London, with more projects going to the regions – though there is now an imbalance between youth projects (now predominant) and lifelong learning;
- Demand is now considerably outstripping supply. The net effect is highly variable quality of delivery and an urgent need to create a training infrastructure which can meet the wide range of practitioner needs;
- A lessening of the ‘social activism’ which once provided the theoretical under-pinning for many practitioners – community musicians are, arguably, now as much part of the formal sector as teachers, youth workers, and social workers. There is, however, an increasing absence of any kind of theoretical replacement model;
- Projects are much more realistically budgeted – but with increased funding, comes increased expectation and an emphasis upon ‘outcomes’;
- A consequential pressure to evaluate the work, but little empirical research to accompany it.

### **The ‘assimilation’ of community music**

In the summer of 2002 I was given an opportunity to speak at a gathering of community musicians, where I was able to draw upon the early ‘drivers’ for the community music movement in 1989. My argument challenged some of the orthodoxies of the time, e.g.:

- Orchestral outreach programmes were a good way of encouraging new audiences to attend concerts - but were often seen as a ‘bolt-on’ activity, the domain of marketing rather than artistic planning;
- The process-product debate was firmly on the side of process;
- Community musicians were usually resistant to the idea of working in schools because, ideologically, the formal education system could not accommodate the politics of CM techniques and approaches.

The combination of the above meant that community musicians were often seen as a ‘breed apart’, consciously removing themselves from mainstream performance and education contexts. Whether by accident or design, this enabled community musicians to develop quite distinctive practices. But by examining current attitudes to these three issues we can now see clear signs of a welcome assimilation of practice.

The well-established history of orchestral outreach in the UK has now proven beyond reasonable doubt that involvement in outreach and education work *is not* a way of creating concert-goers of the future – but that is not a reason for abandoning the work. Many orchestras now do highly innovative and creative work with young people since they have been freed from this additional burden, and it is seen to be important *for its own sake*. Interestingly, since the finances of many organisations are now precariously balanced, education work now sustains many companies, who would be forced to close if solely reliant upon performance subsidy and box office receipts. I am currently evaluating a project involving the Brodsky Quartet (an internationally renowned string quartet), a group of amateurs, and 10 education institutions (mainly schools), which, by directly taking songs created by children into a forthcoming concert tour, makes no concessions to the perceived lowering of standards in community-based work. The early results are deeply impressive.

Turning now to the process-product argument, there is a growing body of evidence which shows that an appropriately-scaled end performance not only enables young people to take greater satisfaction from the work, it also crystallises the learning process and increases motivation and self-critique. Of course process is important, but the hard-liners in UK community music of the late 80s frequently saw it as self-aggrandising and a sop to funders. Hopefully we now have

more defensible and rational reasons for a more even balance (maybe we can even stop worrying about it!).

The relationship between community musicians and formal education continues to cause concern, though for rather different reasons. Many musicians now rely upon schools-based work for a significant portion of their employment, and have become accustomed to the constraints of working in that environment. But it seems to me that a genuine sharing of skills (the curricular and pedagogic skills of the classroom teacher, and the creative and often inspiring approaches of good community music approaches) is as remote as ever. I believe there are a number of obstacles which will have to be overcome before we can truly see a new form of practice – one which brings the best of two worlds together – emerge:

- The culture of schools remains, to a large extent, closed, and reluctant to welcome 'outsiders';
- Pressure of examination results, and the straitjacket of a national curriculum, often make liberating and creative collaborations appear disruptive and distracting;
- Project proposals are often afraid to include sufficient planning and training time for both visiting musicians and teachers;
- Too many community musicians are still unwilling to develop approaches and methodologies which can support long-term and sustained learning, instead relying upon a familiar 'box of tricks'.

## **Conclusion**

I am acutely aware of the need, within international community music contexts, of the dangers of transplanting one set of social/cultural developments into another. But I would suggest that, at least within those countries which are experiencing shifts away from industrialization to a service-based future, the last 10 years in the UK, and especially the current social experiments, offer lessons which can be more widely shared.

I recently led a study of youth music-making, across formal and informal sectors in Scotland. It offered fascinating glimpses into the ways in which music is made, and at least one tantalizing vision of a thriving musical community. In the Shetland Islands, more than 1 in 3 young people regularly play music together. The reasons behind this remarkably high level of participation (the UK average is about 1 in 9) are complex. The funding necessary to make this happen was made possible through the discovery of oil in the 70s, but the most important factor may well be, that through their geographical remoteness, there is a far more integrated approach to providing opportunities than seen elsewhere. Schools, performing musicians, arts development officers and even private tutors all come together to share ideas and working methods. At the heart of this lies a requisite belief in the communality of music making – perhaps the role for future community musicians lies in bringing their influence to bear on established artistic and pedagogic structures in enabling new forms of practice to emerge?

## **Bibliography:**

[...] Creative Industries Mapping Document (Dept for Culture, Media & Sport, 2001)

Cope, 'Community-based traditional Fiddling as a basis for Increasing Participation in Instrument Playing', *Music Education Journal* vol. 1 no.1 (1999)

Deasy ed., *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (Washington DC: Arts Education Partnership, 2002).

Everitt, *Joining In: An Investigation Into Participatory Music* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1997).

Hall, *A Review of Musical Instrument Instruction in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1999)

Heath, 'Living The Arts Through Language and Learning: A Report on Community-Based Youth Organisations', *Americans for the Arts Monographs* (Washington DC and New York: Americans for the Arts, November 1998)

Landry, 'The Creative City: A Toolkit For urban Innovators' (Earthscan 2000)

Matarrasso, 'Northern Lights: The Social Impact of the Feisean (Gaelic Festivals), *The Social Impact of Arts Programmes* (Stroud: Comedia, 1996)

Robinson, *All our futures: creativity, culture and education* (London: Department of Education and Employment/Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1999).

Rogers, *Creating a Land with Music - the work, education and training of professional musicians in the 21st century* (London: Youth Music, 2002).