

Constructing a Third Space

Conditions surrounding how countercultural influences were translated in Limerick City, 1966–1973.



Figure 13

A selection of books from the period 1968–73 found in Limerick 2012–2015.

Make hybrids, and you make revolutions (Leary, 1988 p.106).

On March 12th 1973, the British psychedelic, 'acid rock,' band *Hawkwind* performed in Limerick's Savoy Theatre/Cinema. *Hawkwind* were profile ambassadors for London's counterculture who embodied the ethos of Hippy Modernism in music based around science fiction concepts. A brief note of their visit to Limerick can be found in a short piece on the history of the Savoy in the *Limerick Historical Journal*.

The Hawkwind show, which they called Space Ritual, was particularly notable for an elaborate lights display including strobe lighting. Also eye catching was the presence on stage of Stacia, the exotic dancer – this was not the kind of thing the young people of Limerick would have had too much exposure to in 1973! (Maguire, 2010 p.35).

Hawkwind were different to the standard rock groups then visiting Limerick in regards to how they presented their conceptual material as an event, a quasi- mystical experience, very suggestive of the countercultural desire for alternative environments. The group's reputation in promoting this mind set preceded them and their presence was a significant event for a cohort of Limerick Youth who saw them as outsiders, or 'space travellers.' The band promoted this bond by creating unique fan material promoting the idea of a separate universe that mirrored the ideal of the alternative society suggested by spaces such as Notting Hill.⁴⁰ Travelling as a small community they were received as theatrical ambassadors representing the ethos of these spaces.

The packaging of the record, *Space Ritual*, which was the basis of the Savoy

⁴⁰ The singer on the night was 'Lemmy' Kilminster who had a substantial solo career. His nickname being a reference to the BBC Radio series *Journey into Space* broadcast in the late 50s and 60s.

performance, was an elaborate art deco composition. The album cover offered six panels that when opened up displayed a mix of Edwardian erotica with scientific graphics (including a foetus floating amongst stars) amongst band photography. The album's designer, Barney Bubbles, extended the theme of the past and future merging for a psychedelic present in a publication that the band provided at the concerts. This magazine was to function as a type of primer and it is esoteric/hippy ethos drew from the design of the free press such as the *International Times*. This type of non-linear design signified the representations of systems of consciousness also found elsewhere in key countercultural texts such as the Whole Earth Catalogue. Such visuals encouraged the reader to 'decrypt ideology' (Castillo, 2015 p.99).

Bubbles referred to this document as a 'logbook' for the crew of the Hawkwind spaceship. According to Garry Healy, a member of the Limerick audience on the night, this logbook, signifying the essence of a journey or 'trip,' was placed on each seat of the Savoy for the audience. Healy also confirms that Stacia, Hawkwind's 6 foot 2 inch tall 'exotic dancer' was 'forced to keep her clothes on' (Healy, year p.).

The profile of Irish-born Stacia Blake, who interpreted the music of the group while dancing in body paint, was well remarked on in the media at the time but not in the context of an issue that would invite censorship as in Britain. Catholic Ireland operated under stricter guidelines and it is most likely the presence of Stacia would have been an issue for these Irish performances in 1973. Assurances would have needed to be given before the tour commenced that she would be appropriately clothed. The Limerick performance also featured what another audience member, the musician Ger Costelloe who attended as a 16 year old, described as 'a mime artist.' Costelloe says the overall event was 'jaw dropping' and 'very spacey' for someone his age (Costelloe and Healy, 2015 Facebook).⁴¹

In 1970, Richard Neville, the publisher of OZ magazine, stated that the 'Counterculture is the brainchild of the new technology. Light shows require sophisticated electronic equipment, from adjustable stroboscopes to multi-injector projectors finely synchronised with the rhythms of rock and roll. And just as rock depends on a group, so products of the new culture are symbiotic, they work better together' (Neville, 1970 p.).

In terms of an understated event that had a discernible influence in representing elements of the London counterculture for a local audience, the 1973 Hawkwind performance is significant for any exploration of how elements of the international counterculture were received in Limerick. The concert, in its ambitious use of performative elements that visualised the otherness of a countercultural society, tied into the intellectual process that some Limerick Youth were assembling through music and literature for themselves in the city. Another attendee at the Savoy, Greg O'Shaughnessy, states that the event had a small but committed turnout (the large space of the Savoy rendered some crowds that way). He mentions that the group's reputation as a troupe of 'acid heads' drew what represented the local acid/LSD population to the event that night. According to O'Shaughnessy acid use was not unknown in the city by this time.

In experiencing such an event in a city, monitored by the church state, Hawkwind's

41 Tender. May. *The Brotherhood of Eternal Love*. <http://www.druglibrary.net/schaffer/lsd/books/bel3.htm>

ritual gave committed fans substance that validated their local subcultural endeavours. Even in the slightly compromised form of a conventional rock concert the event transmitted a necessary *frisson* for the hippie modernists of Limerick who supported the potential of an alternate society. In *The Art of Looking Sideways* (2001), the author Alan Fletcher advocates an appreciation of space as a substance in itself and mentions the Japanese concept of negative space (Ma) which references the space one experiences between musical notes underlining the proposition that it is the interval between the notes that gives shape to the whole composition (Fletcher, 2001 p.370). An awareness of Ma can give substance to an exploration of the complex relationship between people and objects (De Kerckhove, 2005 p.157). The week after the Hawkwind event, its direct antithesis took place in the Savoy cinema. According to the *Limerick Leader* (March 20th, 1973) the public was invited to a talk organised by the scientific council for the Mid-West region on the topic of drugs. The talk was framed as a health concern and the context in that respect was politically neutral. Although open to the public, the issue of LSD use and its socio-political identity did not appear to be tabled for this presentation.

Figure 14
Limerick Leader March, 1973.



The interval between two events recorded in the space of the Savoy embody distinct generational boundaries for the period 1966–1973. One event is understated, but a significant marker in the under-recorded history of unconformist activity. The other is held in an undistinguished fashion in an Establishment archive. An ethnographic exploration of the two sides of this interval (even conceptualised as a historical record) should involve assigning a weight to both events for contrast, to fix points on an

alternative historical map. Such a consideration would allow outcomes which account for elements of the legacy of unconformist activity that is understated, unrecorded, and misrepresented even as unrespectable behaviour.

A focus on the conceptual measurement of the gap in the week of March 1973 allows information to be pulled together for an insight into how Limerick stood in regards to how the counterculture was translated for the city. An outline of the socio-political history of LSD is pertinent for setting context for an alternative historical map in relation to how the translation of the confrontational narrative that grew up surrounding its banning was being discussed in 1973. By then, the very letters LSD functioned as outsider shorthand for individuality and by default, anti-authoritarian protest.

In 1968, after LSD was declared illegal by the US congress and forced underground, its outlaw status began to generate a dialogue of protest delivered in speech, print and song. These documents of unconformity were curated by the counterculture and distributed by the free press in aid of the ideals of a counter society. Now, if the language of protest that is associated with the cultural legacy of LSD is retrospectively explored in this local context, it includes how conditions represented the ethos of the counterculture locally were processed in the period 1966–1973.

The American ethnobotanist and writer on psychedelic culture, Terence Kemp McKenna, speculated that the labelling of psychedelics as dangerous by the Establishment arose after 1966 when the American authorities saw individualism threatening a spectacle that needed to be maintained. In his book *The Archaic Revival* (1991) he speculated psychedelics were rendered illegal 'not because it troubles anyone that you have visions,' but because, 'there is something about them that casts doubts on the validity of reality.' McKenna observed that democratic and especially 'dominator' societies refused to accept them and branded them as a threat; the Establishment being of course a dominator society (McKenna, 1991).

There was still cultural currency in the transcendental language used by those who supported LSD and who recognised the failure of the utopia it was supposed to usher in. One could discern this language in the metaphorical directions taken by Hawkwind who would have supported the versions of transcendence that were still active in countercultural activity.

The potential for positioning archival work that supports evidence of alternative modernism (1966–1973) for inclusion in a contemporary history of Limerick remain. Elements for the period that reference unconformity can remain contentious particularly if archives based on the period support a benign or surface reading of the period (or a reading that regards the complexities of outsider histories as problematic and unsubstantiated). This expanded legacy contributes to a conceptual mapping of the city that embraces a fragmented timeline of unconformity based on the period 1966–1973. A critical juncture appears when it is possible to consider a moment when the space of the Savoy hosted two related events that were most likely unaware of each other. A repositioning of the Hawkwind event in tandem with the public meeting on LSD links both for a legacy of how Establishment structures overlapped with subcultural activity and how this activity represented alternative modernism in an Irish context.