

‘Actual cringe’: creative paradox in the west of Scotland

‘But... why would anyone listen to your ideas?’

My granny, 2017

Where are all the working-class artists? This question has been popping up across our media channels on a regular basis. There is no denying that we are facing a crippling lack of diversity in the UK arts scene, and plenty of commentators are eager to point out this gaping hole. Stuart Maconie explored the strange disappearance of working-class musicians from the charts:

In the arts generally – music, theatre, literature for sure – it is clear that cuts to benefits, the disappearance of the art school (where many a luminous layabout found room to bloom) and the harsh cost of further and higher education are pricing the working class out of careers in the arts and making it increasingly a playground for the comfortably off (Maconie, 2015)

Last year, the Labour Party published their ‘Acting Up’ report, which highlighted the lack of diversity in the performing arts, acknowledging that there is a ‘big C-shaped hole’. The report focuses on tackling inequality, by encouraging drama schools to scrap audition fees, promoting drama in state schools, and cracking down on ‘unpaid intern’ culture.

Echoing the report’s findings, Christopher Eccleston claimed that he is still at a disadvantage due to his working-class background. Thus, it appears that even commercial and critical success is not enough to shrug off the scourge of your pesky roots. Following her meteoric rise, poet Hollie McNish found herself at the centre of an age-old debate of what constitutes “real poetry”. In her response to a scathingly personal piece in the PR Review – in which McNish’s ‘ability to draw a crowd’ is compared to Donald Trump – McNish highlights that the author makes ‘assumptions about my (lack of) education, my love (or not) of language and my personality, as well as patronising and insulting a whole swarm of other writers’ (McNish, 2017). As usual, if you don’t speak proper, you must not be able to. Bunch a dafties.

Meanwhile, as this country plunges deeper and faster into the spiralling vortex of austerity, the arts are being rebranded as a luxury. Our libraries are being underfunded, or run by volunteers, or closed completely. State schools across Scotland are cutting access to free music lessons. Across the UK, music venues are facing closure from the threat of property development and regeneration. Paradoxically, while we acknowledge the gaping working-class void in the arts, the unrelenting tirade of Tory policies is washing away what little opportunity did exist for aspiring creatives.

I heard Darren McGarvey (aka Loki) speak in Edinburgh, about his polemic text *Poverty Safari*. It is fair to say that McGarvey is a divisive character in the Scottish arts scene, but there is no denying that he is a skilled orator and a captivating performer. That evening, he was enthralling. He spoke of the need to address the lack of working-class voices in cultural spaces, arguing that there may be a need for quotas in the Scottish arts sector. The room was hushed, as he delivered a powerful and emotional lecture. And yet, one of the first questions afterwards, from a cocksure young 'gentleman' in the front row, was: 'How did someone from your background acquire such an extensive vocabulary?' That is an actual quote, dear reader. It is questions like these that attempt to squeeze the unruly working-class back into their box. It is about reminding those from humble beginnings that they are not entitled to a platform, that their voice is being tolerated... for now.

After hearing McGarvey speak, and reading his book, I wanted to discuss and flesh out some of his ideas with my peers, bringing his name into conversation often. What struck me was the number of people who told me that they found him 'cringey'. Not that they did not relate to his art, or that they disagreed with his opinions, but that he made them cringe. No explanation, no expansion. He just made them cringe. Why is that? Is it because he is a white, Scottish man from Pollok who has the audacity to rap? Is it because he is taking up space in an environment that does not belong to him?

In the face of draconian cuts to arts and culture, I think we have a real problem when the existing working-class performers who manage to fight their way through, who have overcome a whole host of barriers, are then labelled in this way. The next time you hear a young person sing in their regional accent, why not take a second to acknowledge your response. Those of you from the west coast of Scotland, did it 'give you the fear'? Have you got 'a riddy'? Was it 'pure cringey'? Of course, you can dislike someone's art. You can find their expression distasteful, or lacking skill, or just a bit naff. But when you 'actual cringe' at someone from your own background, what does that say about your own culture and identity? In the west of Scotland, we use 'cringe' as a term of embarrassment or shame. Are we ashamed that someone like us is using their voice? That they are raising their head above the parapet, rather than cowering beneath.

Interestingly, 'to cringe' is defined as to 'bend one's head and body in fear or apprehension or in a servile manner' (OED). So, when you shudder at the sound of your own accent singing or reading poetry, if you have a hot flush when confronted with a working-class voice in a local talent show, you are diligently performing your role as subservient. Good for you. You understand, deep down, that all that culture shite isn't for people like you. Forget all the Marxist pish you spout after a few pints – you know your place!

Twitter is never a good platform to analyse human behaviour. At its worst, I think all will agree that it is a cesspit. However, in this case, it provides an intriguing microcosm for how some attack their own. Yes, the working-classes are relentlessly vilified by those higher up the food chain. But

what fascinates me is the rejection that comes from within the community. Make-up artist, Vanessa Murphy puts it far more eloquently and succinctly than I ever could:



Creatives, artists, business people: they are all fair-game for torrents of insults from their own community for daring to express themselves on Twitter. Not only do these people have to overcome wider socio-political issues, not only are the statistics against them, but they also face rejection and scorn from the communities that grew them. This negativity is often vocal, but it can also be heard through deafening silence and distancing.

In her essay 'An Open Invitation', Kit de Waal emphasises the importance of being 'invited to the party', for the working-classes to see themselves reflected in cultural spaces. She issues a call to arms, urging those in the industry 'who know what it's like to struggle at the bottom... to be outward facing and open-armed' (de Waal, 2017). This is a great step in the right direction. Yet, I can't help but feel unsatisfied. The cultural establishment could throw open its doors tomorrow, raining down scholarships and mentoring opportunities on those less-privileged, but that does not guarantee acceptance from the home crowd. In the west of Scotland, working-class creatives seem to be faced with a paralysing paradox: express yourself, get accepted into the cultural spheres, but also be ready for your own front door to be slammed in your riddled coupon.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/aug/10/class-crisis-arts-must-be-cracked-says-labour-report>

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<https://twitter.com/vanessamurphy/status/966060988490493952>