

# THE QUALITY OF MERSEY

Ian Williams

ly in abeyance. One gets the feel of that in some of the accounts of designing paperbacks in America in the 1940s when a lot of progressive writers and artists and publishers combined to get the best of the new fiction to a working class readership at the cheapest possible prices and with the best of innovative design.

Of course there is no longer, if there ever was, a unified 'reading public', and today publishing is more constituency based - feminist, black, locally based - or commercially targetted: airport bookstall international espionage, railway bookstall romance. Penguin's, now part of Pearson pic, a multi-national publishing conglomerate, have become completely market-orientated. They also follow familiar extremes of salary levels in accordance with this new regime. Large sums of money have been paid in advances, and spent on promotion campaigns for novels of indifferent worth such as *The Far Pavilions* and the new Stephen King and Peter Straub horror novel *The Talisman*. They are following the logic of the retail revolution of the past decade in which producers now wish to own their own retail outlets. So Penguin are now planning a chain of Penguin bookshops throughout Britain, or shops-within-shops in large department stores. The new Penguin shop established in Liberty's in Regent Street is currently enjoying a turnover of £500 per square foot per week!

The book business is, in some respects at least, booming and by virtue of the enormous successes of titles such as *The F-Plan Diet* published in 1982 and Penguin's fastest selling book of all time, the King Penguin list of trade paperbacks is once again very impressive indeed. But it is doubtful if we shall see the same range of Penguin Specials again, nor the enormously diverse and speculative Penguin Poetry list, not the Education Specials either. So while everything in publishing at present seems to be doing very well - runs of 200,000 for the new SAS thriller, runs of 50,000 for the new Mills and Boon romance, runs of up to 20,000 for the new Faber collection of poems, and runs of up to 10,000 for the new feminist thriller - and with the trade format paperback firmly established as the dominant format in most paperback publishing now, my own feeling is, ironically, that everybody is waiting for something new to happen. Something like that bold experiment which was launched from the Woolworth's counters 50 years ago this month.

Is there a school of 'Liverpool Writers'? Do the Bleasdale's, Bainbridges, and Beatles have anything in common? Is it just accident of birth that connects Brookside and Eddy Braben, Morecambe and Wise's scriptwriter, with Carla Lane or Willy Russell. Do Alexei Sayle, Craig Charles, Adrian Henri, Brian Patten and Roger McGough share anything but the sound of an adenoidal cold?

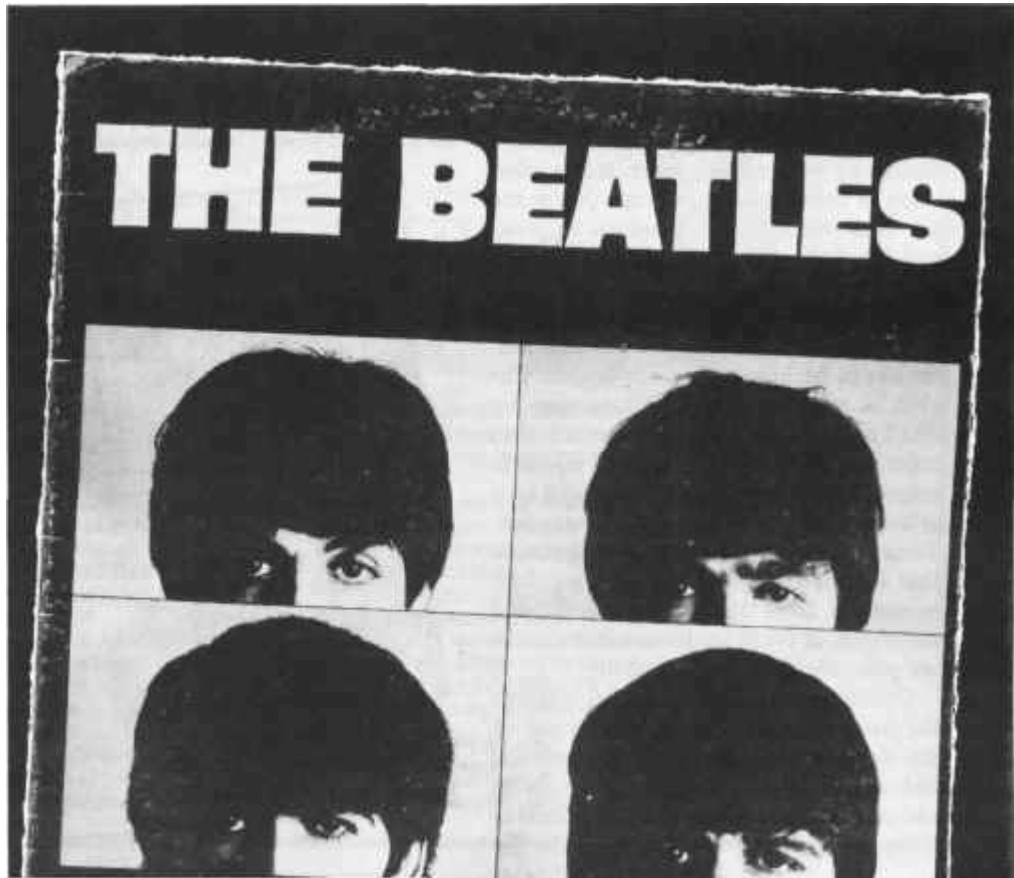
There are characteristics which distinguish Liverpool, its writers and performers, even the exiles, from other less culturally, if more financially, favoured centres. Liverpool's writers are sardonic, syndicalist and Scouse, if only for alliterative reasons. Incorporated in 'syndicalist' is a line of individualism ranging from Dickensian sentimentality to berserker anarchism, while the 'Scouse' has a deeper significance than just a place of birth.

Unemployment has been part of common Liverpool experience for a century. Even in boom times, in a port, casual labour can be out of work for weeks at a

time, and employment in such conditions breeds a casual attitude both to propriety and to property, in which Samuel Smiles' 'Self Help' transmutes to 'Help Yourself'.

Similarly, while the dominance of docks and shipping produced a centralised and dangerously dependent economy, port work itself, with its myriad of occupational divisions, produced a complex multi-layered caste system complicated by divisions between the various ethnic and religious groups. Liverpool was a major Welsh speaking city, Protestant and Catholic Irish, Scots, and even possibly some native English each had occupational and social categories. The effect was to produce an individualism bordering on anarchism, which remains even when the various groups simmered together to produce Scouse, possibly the country's only exclusively urban dialect confined as it is by Welsh on one side and Lancashire thee's and thou's on the other.

The erratic wheel of fortune helped breed the Liverpool sense of humour



which is perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of Liverpool writers. Frequently incomprehensible to the more stiff upper-lipped outsider, Liverpool black humour often isn't even intended to be funny. It is an anarchistic and sardonic way of trying to trim to size a frequently depressing world, a refusal to be beaten by economic depression, or Margaret Thatcher. Within hours of the Brighton bombing I heard 'Who's the fastest reader in the Tory Party? - Norman Tebbit, he got through three storeys in three seconds'. Tasteless, but then, so is what Norman and his mates have done to the city!

In addition to the two criteria of humour and anarchistic individualism, the third is the language: the vernacular spoken tradition. The Mersey Poets, Brian Patten, Roger McGough and Adrian Henri have broken records for the sale of poetry. They were the start of the whole idea of Liverpool Writers in any sense of a 'literary school' and it is no coincidence that this was in the 60s, the time of the Mersey Sound, and the Beatles, when lyric poetry returned with the modern lyre, the guitar. Perhaps for the first time an essentially working-class dialect became so nationally, indeed internationally, popular that it was possible to *write* with all the vigour and freshness of the spoken word, in a dialect, Scouse, that has an Irish fascination for word-play with an intonation of Welsh music.

Among modern languages English is alone in not having a particular regional dialect as its standard form, but a class argot of convoluted diphthongs. Show me the area which *speaks* standard English, and I'll show you a well-heeled suburban ghetto of affluence.

In Britain, to keep within established literary conventions, a working-class writer has to be bilingual, since written English is almost a different language for him/her. At school s/he is not just asked to learn another language, s/he is asked to forget, to denigrate, the language s/he uses at home if s/he wants to put pen to paper. The effect can be to produce a population that sounds like policemen reading their inventions from the dock, stilted, and unnatural, or the union bureaucrat mistaking polysyllability for profundity.

Connected by the seafarers plying across the Atlantic, Liverpool imbibed some of the demotic cultural traditions, musical and oral, black and white, of New York to add to its own Celtic traditions of refusal to recognise courts and court dialects. So

Liverpool's achievements have been in the field of the spoken word, of poetry readings, song lyrics and plays, harnessing the rhythm and vigour of ordinary speech. If you listen to early Beatles' interviews, they were practising a form of oral class warfare on their interviewers.

Deserters from the city like John Lennon and Alexei Sayle as well as those who stayed like Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell have wielded their dialect like a lethal weapon. Even a long time exile like Paul Kember, author of *Not Quite Jerusalem*, still admits his working class anti heroes in the play were 'inspired' in the cultural Black Hole of Kirkby. Many people like him leave Liverpool as economic exiles, but it is significant how the exiles resist any softening of their own dialect. It is an integral part of their art.

While the dialect is the same, the humour can be gentle or vicious, sometimes in the same author, and the political attitudes will be individualistic, and anti-establishment - anti *any* establishment that is. Almost all the writers and performers, although obviously political in their outlook, avoid entanglement with political organisations. Alan Bleasdale typifies it. Like most of the writers he won't have anything to do with organised politics. Despite the evident anger of the *Black Stuff* series, Bleasdale admits to a 'Dickensian' outlook; that part of the solution just

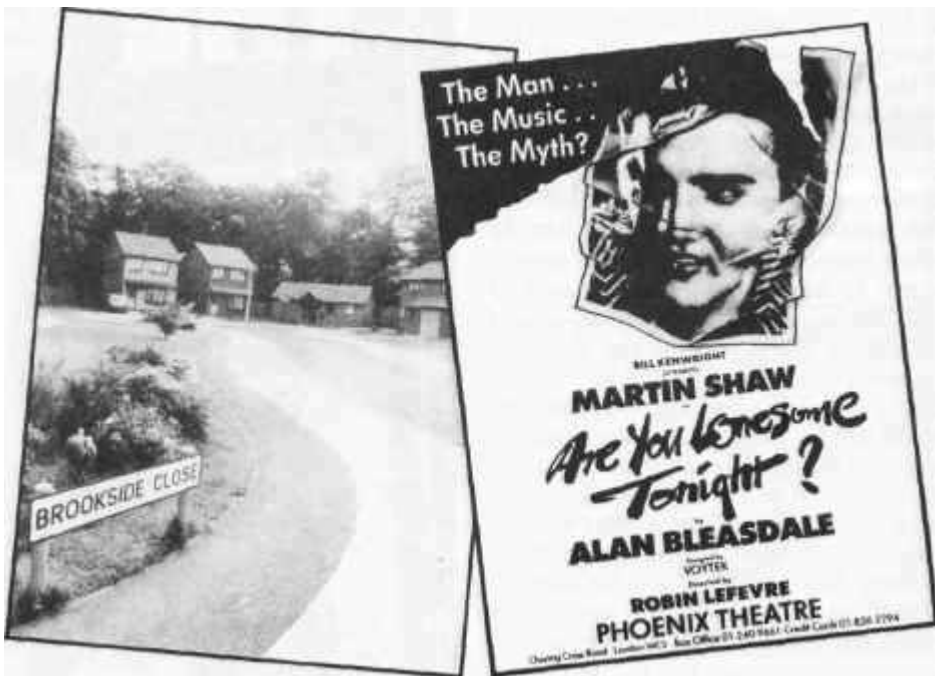
involves people being nice to each other. But while unfairness and injustice still raise his hackles, he says a playwright's first duty is to 'entertain and illuminate - and to slip in any message afterward.'

The continuity, the persistence, of his themes can be seen by comparing the *Black Stuff* scenes in the DHSS office, with those written over half a century ago about the board of guardians' office, by George Garret, stoker and ex-Wobblie member. It is a long way from Bleasdale's anger tempered with sentiment to the frenetic viciousness of Alexei Sayle, but they are on different ends of the same scale of disgust with the way things are, and like George Garret's tales, the heroes are the individuals, while the 'baddy' is the system, the authorities in abstract, whatever their political label.

Now that Friedmanite capitalism has converted that old evil of casual employment into an unemployment so hopelessly complete that it has become a profession handed down from generation to generation, people are trying to tongue and pen and play themselves out of their poverty the way that boxers used to slog theirs. People who are unemployed are expected to sit and twiddle their fingers in between waiting for the giro cheques, but writers' workshops and theatre groups are springing up, often alongside and entwined in the prolific and perpetually shifting music scene like the Scotty Road Writers 83 Workshop.

Subjects range from Greenham Com-

*From the Beatles to Brookside to Bleasdale:  
All part of Liverpool's cultural attractions*



mon to vignettes of working-class life from the past to the present, but it has now also given birth to 'Vauxy Theatre', 'The Theatre of the People', some members of which are in turn forming a music act . . . and all when the SS thinks they should sit and wait for the giro. Vauxy has taken the role once occupied by Unity, writing, producing and playing works ranging from agitprop on political fund ballots to knock-about farces and award-winning plays like *The Return of John McDaid* written by one of its few employed members, Eddy Bannon, a GMBATU official.

But perhaps the most novel development, which at the same time epitomises Liverpool, comes from what was until recently the most silent and un-noticed part of the community. The development of a distinct black identity in Liverpool (especially since the riots of 1981) is now beginning to show in the artistic field with groups, dancers like Delado - and poets. Eugene Lange and Levi Tafari with their Griot Workshop have evoked the oral traditions of Africa, but with West Indian rapping, and the accents, sharpness and topics of Liverpool, they are also very much part of the Liverpool tradition as

Levi demonstrated with his 'Conservative Blues' at Merseyside's People's Festival. 'Land of Hope and Glory, is becoming a horror story', he recited to enthusiastic crowds - who regardless of race, knew exactly whereof he spoke.

Since the boom years of the 50s and 60s mostly passed the city by, the black community centred in Liverpool 8 is not essentially an immigrant one. Eugene Lange typifies it, 'Pop was half-Negro half Cherokee Indian, (Mom was a Scouser whose father was / German . . .),' and both he and Levi Tafari take pride in Liverpool having possibly the oldest black community in Europe. They drew their inspiration in the 70s from black power, but as Eugene's ancestry demonstrates, Africa is a long way away. They now see themselves as a 'Creole' culture. 'We've been here as long as blacks have been in Jamaica, we've got a black identity, but we also have a Liverpool identity, and they're not contradictory'. 'This poetry is the bastardised slave-masters' tongue, taught to me when I was young', declaims Eugene.

When they first went on tour they were regarded as 'freaks', since black culture to

most of their audiences meant African or West Indian culture. But Eugene brings to gether the harshest of Liverpool's experiences:

. . . That all the oppressed have an equal place  
Whether Black, White, Brown, Red or Yellow  
face  
(Even Whites are Niggers in Niggerpool 8)  
The ghettos of the world are Third World states  
John Lennon said woman is the nigger of the world; I say  
*Liverpool is the Nigger of the UK!*

The development of a black culture in Liverpool, along with the essentially plebeian if not proletarian culture of the city, is an ironic reflection of the 'Venice of the North' which the old patrician merchants hoped to create with the wealth accumulated from cotton, slaves and child labour in the mills of Lancashire. (They even held benefits for the South during the American Civil War). Culture in Liverpool, at least to the extent that it is original, is the product of the non-affluent, the flotsam and jetsam of a receding empire and an industrial counter-revolution, giving them a self confidence, and even a language, to build art from the ruins.

## TRANSPORT POLICIES FOR LONDON

### Have your say

The GLC believes transport affects all of us in London. But transport planning has often failed to meet the needs of the vast majority of people. It has tended, for example, to concentrate on cars and roadbuilding at the expense of public transport - despite the fact that only 25% of Londoners have direct access to cars. It has paid too little attention to the needs of women and ethnic minority communities. With a limited amount of cash, choices have to be made. Do we build more roads? Do we have a better, cheaper public transport system? How do we make transport more accessible to people with disabilities? Or, even, should we be working towards a 'free fares' policy? We also have to look at how transport affects the Capital's environment.

Lorries are a good example. Do we allow them to use our roads without restriction? And what about the problems posed by the M25 and other major



roads in and around London? What about the severance of communities, the good and bad environmental effects, the impact they have on other modes of travel?

These and other issues are dealt with by the draft TPP - the GLC's Transport Policies and Programme. It looks into the medium and long term futures and suggests alternative policies.

It's important that you have your say in the making of these policies. The draft TPP is explained in a very full report, so we've also produced a brief summary. You can get either by writing to:

Greater London Council (TD/PM/PC), County Hall, London SE1 7PB or by phoning 01-633 8447.

**GLC**  
Working for London