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The Lapsed Clubber Audio Map: Reflections on Pioneering Digital Archives

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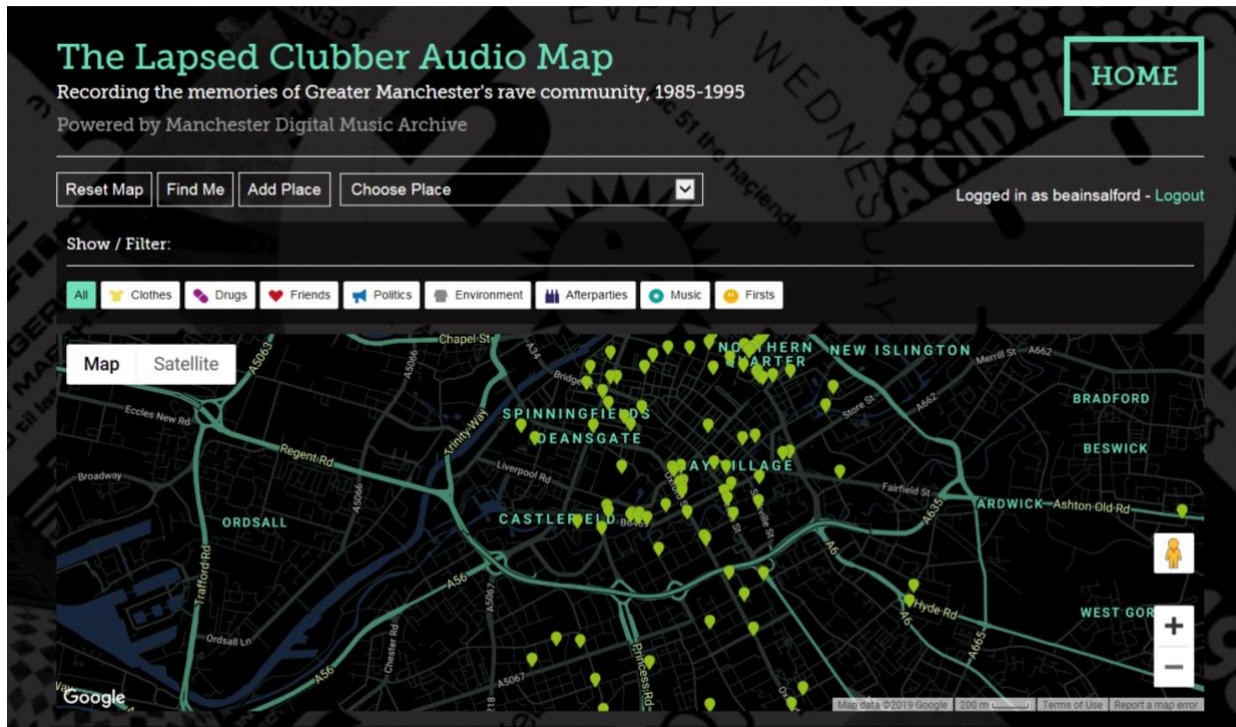
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Whenever people talk about music in Manchester, it's the same stories that you hear: the Sex Pistols gig at the Lesser Free Trade Hall, dancing at the Hacienda, a Happy Mondays gig with Bez dancing all night. But Manchester's musical history has much more depth and breadth, which will be confirmed by anybody who has an interest in the city's music. However, it is sometimes difficult to make the lesser known stories heard, especially if they somehow challenge a popular narrative. The narrative of rave is told along the lines of music, dance, and, most importantly, drugs. The way in which the rave scene was portrayed by the media had a significant impact on this common perception of the ravers and their participation in such events. The moral panics from the late 1980s until the mid 1990s portrayed rave culture as a drug culture. The public debate that took place at that time focused on public health and harm reduction, which led to the introduction of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, commonly referred to as the Rave Bill. This piece of legislation criminalised raves and people's participation in and organisation of them. As a result, raves disappeared from the public eye. And yet it is impossible to think that a whole youth culture disappeared as well. A whole generation of young people was made to understand that their participation in raves was illegal and immoral, but being part of the raving community, experiencing a new style of music, meeting new people – all of these experiences built the foundations of memories that have rarely been captured. Because of the stigmatisation of the rave scene, ravers were denied the opportunity to create and articulate meaning through participating in electronic dance music events. We wanted to find a way in which it was possible to capture the memories related to rave culture. For the pilot project, we decided to focus on the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester (City of Manchester, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, Wigan, City of Salford and Trafford), and to limit the period to 1985-95.

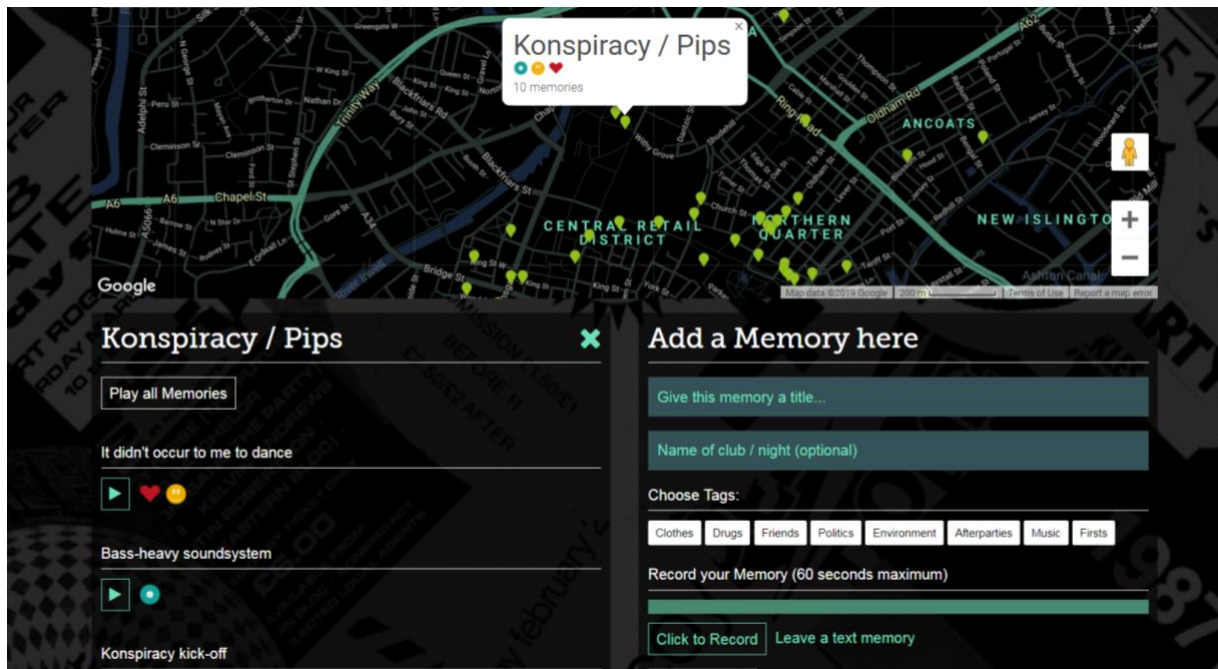
Through social media, especially a Facebook group [The Lapsed Clubber Project](#), we established contact with many older ravers. We wanted to find out whether there was a desire to articulate some of the thoughts and feelings that people had about their participation in Manchester's rave culture. Based on a very positive response, we started discussing possible ways in which we might collect and archive those thoughts in an accessible and meaningful way. [The Lapsed Clubber Audio Map](#) is the result.

Memories



The Lapsed Clubber Audio Map is a place for members of Greater Manchester's original rave community to preserve and share their spoken word memories of clubbing and its culture during the *first decade* of rave, 1985-1995. Its interface allows users to record their voices directly into a desktop computer or laptop and pin 60-second sound clips onto a map of Greater Manchester at the exact spots where the events they are describing originally happened. Users can also use some software-compatible smartphones to do this, and they are also able to leave their memories as written text.

To prevent spam and misuse, we first ask users to register an account with the map hosts, Manchester Digital Music Archive. Our moderators can see users' email addresses, but members of the public cannot. Once an anonymous profile has been created, people are free to leave their memories. However, we have restricted the duration of a memory to one minute. Although long form oral histories have become very popular as a form of preserving heritage, and narratives about people's lives can be very deep, we wanted the map to be entertaining and give an idea of the breadth of raving experiences. So, in order to be able to browse several memories at a time, we kept them short. Despite this, people will be surprised how long a minute can feel!



If people want to listen to recordings, they can click on individual memories as they hover, or they can listen in a more directed way by filtering the memories, either by venue or by tags. They do not need to create a profile.

There is a real breadth to the memories that have been left so far. Graham Massey, of 808 State, for example, remembers seeing Chicago House Review at the International 2:

I'm not quite sure what we we're expecting, but it was all done to a backing track. They were just miming to their tunes and doing one-armed press ups in this sort of...suspicious knitwear that was all shot through with silver. It looked like it was from Stolen From Ivor. It was just a severely disappointing, non-glamorous show! And I decided I didn't really like house music at that point! Then Acid House happened and I thought: I'm into this!

Another contributor makes reference to the infamous Kitchen. Although not officially a nightclub, it was an important venue for many first-generation ravers in Greater Manchester. Amidst the modernist crescents of Hulme, it was largely off-limits and beyond the interests of Greater Manchester Police. An organically promoted place for parties, DJ sets and a post-club opportunity to keep dancing, The Kitchen (and other Hulme squats) reportedly hosted now internationally famous DJs, all in the knocked-through, two-flat, top floor venue.

The Kitchen was the club that really launched the Manchester late night scene, it took place in two flats knocked into one, on the top floor of the block behind the old Russell club. The Kitchen was the real reason to go out, not the Hacienda (that was the warm up), open from 2am until the drugs wore off with resident DJs the JAM MCs.

Many memories make reference to particular venues, but the memories also convey something of the mood of the city and the time, its fashion, its music, its feel. Konspiracy, for example, was located beneath the old Corn Exchange, now populated exclusively by restaurants. Konspiracy hosted DJ sets by Sasha and early gigs by 808 State, amongst numerous others on sweaty, supercharged nights of acid house tunes and dancing.

Giacomo Puppo, a visitor from Italy in 1990 (submitted to [Manchester Digital Music Archive](#)) said:

Ten years after the death of Ian Curtis, together with my friend, I came to Manchester. At night searching for the Hacienda, for us a new wave monument, we found Conspiracy. WHAT A SHOCK! It was like another place, like Mars. Me and my friend the only white boys in the club, dressed with jeans and white Superga trainers, while the black boys and girls were dressed with large pants, unseen in Italy. The music, the smell of weed smoke, the people dancing. An unforgettable night.

Not all of the memories are funny. Some express intense emotions, others describe horrible incidents related to Manchester's drug culture, gangs or bouncers. Yet others tell stories of bonding, or finding a home and a family in the rave scene. We would like to think of the map as a digital archive that allows us to capture the mood of a generation, one that works only when considered in its entirety.

Technical Aspects

The map combines two technologies that are freely accessible: Google Maps and [WebRTC](#). Google Maps can be seen as the foundation of the map. Locations can be pinned, and information about the location can be added. Adding audio memories, however, is the novel addition. Although people can continue to add words to the locations, we have found a way in which audio memories can be captured: through WebRTC. WebRTC is an HTML5 standard that was developed to enable Real Time Communication (RTC) between browsers without an additional plug-in. In the past, users had to download additional software, or pre-record and then upload audio files. With WebRTC the browser can access the microphone on their device (laptop or phone), and use JavaScript Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to stream. Although this standard was first implemented in May 2011, it was not fully released as a stable release until 2017. It is not yet supported by all browsers, but it works well using Chrome for desktop/laptop and Safari will fully support it by version 11.

Lessons Learnt

The Lapsed Clubber Audio Map is pilot project in many ways, not least because WebRTC only started to be adopted by the latest browsers as we were creating and developing the map over a period of eighteen months. For that reason, we focused on the development of the map for desktop rather than for small screens. Developing a map for desktop/laptop, however, has implications for the way in which people engage with it. Although people might be used to recording themselves on their mobile phones, a desktop might feel too intrusive and result in lower engagement with the map. Also, we are asking people to contribute memories that are linked to a specific period in their lives. Those memories do not emerge suddenly but are often activated through various triggers. Whenever such triggers occur, the person is much more likely to have access to a mobile phone than a desktop or laptop computer. Digital archives such as the Lapsed Clubber Audio Map rely on the assumption that members of the public will be interested in generating content for them, but it can sometimes be hard to persuade potential users to make a contribution to a brand new, standalone heritage website, rather than sharing their memories on the social media platforms they use daily, such as Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat. Whilst each venue within the Lapsed Clubber Audio Map generates its own URL and is shareable via social media, in the future, user-generated digital archives will need to look at how sharing content can work

in the opposite direction. We need to look for ways in which content shared in the first instance to social media can be then archived within another site.

With the Lapsed Clubber Audio Map, we hoped that people would feel safe and comfortable recording their memories anonymously. We were faced with two opposing facts. Our target audience is middle-aged, and the selfie culture that we live in is one that, at best, has been adopted rather than created by our own, younger, cohort. As much as some middle-aged people embrace aspects of its exhibitionistic culture, others appear too shy to record their memories – shy because they are not used to recording themselves and their voices, and shy because they do not consider their memories to be important enough. Particular members of the raving community, who we know could have made a significant contribution to the project, did not at first see their input as being of value. Many ravers felt that their memories were too mundane to be worth featuring on the map. But it is exactly those memories that we were looking for.

With more resources, it might have been possible to nurture these individuals and encourage a greater level of active participation. For others, notably those who embrace social media and who have worked to establish a public persona, the gratification that comes from sharing content is not felt when contributing to our anonymised map. Social media work by increasing reach through the generation of content and connection to other people by following someone or by commenting on posts. These networks are built through public representation. The anonymity of the Lapsed Clubber Audio Map might partly have worked against us. In fact, some contributors asked us after uploading their memories, how they would be able to find them in order to share those on social media. We will have to think carefully about how responses can be generated and gratification be achieved for contributors.

Co-production was central to the project's delivery. It aimed to give the raving community the opportunity actively to shape how its heritage is recorded and interpreted, mirroring the prevailing cooperative, egalitarian and DIY spirit within the wider raving community between 1985 and 1995. Volunteers and other members of the raving community were given opportunities for sharing, discussing and developing content, and shaping the project. However, despite the best efforts of the project team, it proved difficult to translate the evident enthusiasm for the project amongst the self-identified Manchester raving community into active participation. The Lapsed Clubber Project Facebook page has at time of writing 686 members. The discussion page remains lively and there is clear support for the project and its activities, but there has not been the level of active engagement that was hoped for. This could be for various reasons, such as the timetabling and/or location of project events, or the lack of clearly defined volunteer roles within the project.

In comparison with face-to-face interaction, people seem to be hesitant to upload their memories onto a computer. At the same time, they are more than happy to share their memories in conversation (interviews) or at informal gatherings (pinning parties). It seems that in times of virtual realities, online personae and social media friends, people prefer *the real thing* - a person to communicate with face to face. And yet, public events appear to deter people from leaving personal memories. This might be linked to the shyness we have mentioned. It might also show us how crucial it is for a project like ours that the atmosphere is right. If we are asking people to leave memories that reveal a less public part of their lives or that may be damaging to their professional persona, we need to make them feel safe and comfortable. For this reason, we are continuing to organise *pinning parties*. These are run in a person's home and allow groups of friends to share their joint memories. In our experience, this form of gathering lowers inhibitions and enables people to talk about experiences and practices that are related to the rave era.

Opportunities and Risks

The entertainment derived from listening to the map's memories is, arguably, greater than that which comes from recording a memory. We imagined browsing and recording would go hand in hand, but this is not always the case. Seeing browsing and recording as two separate processes could inform future development of the map. We are giving thought to a discrete downloadable recording app which would operate away from the map browsing experience. Much more user testing would be necessary to determine whether this approach has value. If possible, we would like to spend more energy on finding out what people liked, did not like and got stuck on when using the map. This way we could feel more confident about budgeting and direction of travel.

Heritage Lottery Fund, who funded this project, stipulate that digital outputs have to be available online and visible for a minimum of five years. WebRTC is an HTML5 standard, and although it might not be around forever, it is unlikely to go within five years. It is a technology that has only just been fully adopted, and we are optimistic that it will be explored in all its aspects in the coming years. Although extremely unlikely, even Google Maps could one day be pulled, similar to Google+ or Google Glass. Using such products and services can be risky.

Legacy

This pilot project on the rave scene in Manchester set out to collect memories related to rave culture. It was our aim to give a previously stigmatised community the opportunity to reclaim their memories and assign meaning to it. In addition, the Lapsed Clubber Audio Map is an attempt at creating a collective voice, one that is able to position itself in Britain's history of youth culture and subculture specifically and in British culture in general. Destigmatising rave culture is a difficult task given the moral panics that influenced parents, policy makers and politicians. As recreational drug use is no longer seen as an exclusive practice of ravers and clubbers but one that pervades all of society, the discussion of rave culture and its legacy is changing. Through the map, we hope to show how participation in rave events had an impact on people's lives beyond the weekend and beyond their youth. It broadened their horizons, brought them in contact with people they would not have socialised with normally, made them explore their sexuality and identity.

When analysing the memories from the map, it needs to be borne in mind that they are subjective and do not necessarily reflect reality. This is particularly the case when considering how much time has lapsed between the actual events taking place and people reporting on them. Accurate memory recall becomes more difficult as time goes on. And yet, the map is not an attempt to tell the *true* story of acid house in Greater Manchester. In fact, *the* story can never be told, as the single narrative that is so often used to try and situate rave culture in subcultural context, as part of a protest movement, or as an example of a neoliberal development, does not hold. As the map proves, we cannot talk about the evolution of rave culture as the development of a homogeneous scene. Ravers as much as scholars have challenged the notion that the rave scene was governed exclusively by the PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) ethos. The fact that we cannot agree on the terminology to describe this particular culture is sign of a certain level of complexity that is yet to be captured wholly. 'Acid house', 'raves', 'warehouse parties', 'techno' and 'electronic dance music' are all terms that aim to define and explain a development that is neither one-directional nor chronological. Memories, regardless of their truth, help us to understand the

complexity of a music scene. Moreover, as a collective *voice*, they gather momentum to challenge common (mis)conceptions about the history of rave culture.

Future Plans

As we have observed, people seem to be reluctant to leave memories when they are by themselves and not in conversation with a *real* person. This means that we need to continue to provide opportunities for people to contribute their memories. For now, we continue to organise pinning parties. Nurturing ravers into leaving their memories on the map is an ongoing process and will, we hope, result in many more memories being recorded.

We know that other major browsers will soon start to support WebRTC so that we can invite people to upload their memories through their phones or other mobile devices. We believe that it will make participation in the project easier. Using WebRTC in connection with a mapping project is a novel way of engaging the public and democratising heritage. Based on this model, other maps can be created. Those maps can cover other cities and regions, or countries. They can also include other time periods, musical genres, in fact, any other form of heritage. The content can be varied as well. Opportunities are endless.

In a next project, we hope to extend the period covered and the geographical reach. After considering marketing and promotion as well as a social media strategy, perhaps, one day, we will be able to cover the history of electronic music in the whole of the UK.