

Better than Radiohead

What makes everything worthwhile

I'm at The Zodiac in Oxford, UK, in 1992. As a music venue it's currently half-way between the dive it once was and the soulless corporate hub it'll become in a few years' time. Most of the audience is here to see a local band called On a Friday, who've recently changed their name to Radiohead, and tonight, as part of their set, they're recording a live video for their first single, 'Creep', which will go on to sell all around the world and, over the next few years, help to establish Radiohead as one of the world's most famous bands.

But like several others in the audience, I'm not really here to see Radiohead. I'm here to see The Daisies who are supporting them, and The Daisies – we all sense - are about to come onstage....

After seven exhausting, angry years I resigned my teaching post in a school and taught in a prison for a year while making my first forays into youth work, co-writing and directing rock musicals in the town where I'd been teaching, thereby getting to work with my ex-students but no longer having to teach them capital letters and full-stops. At the end of that year, I started a proper job elsewhere as a half-time youth worker and half-time school counsellor.

I was keen that the youth centre I found myself running should expand its creative repertoire beyond desultory discos, pool, darts and table tennis, and develop a culture that included music and drama and all sorts of other, more ambitious things.

The young people I was meeting for the first time hated me. They'd never done any of these other things. In between our nightly games of pool, darts and table tennis, I would mention the possibility of gigs, of plays, of girls-only groups. They hated me all the more.

Eventually a handful of young people admitted to being in a covers band, and so we arranged an evening that would be half live music from the covers band and half disco, with the disco coming after the band, so that – with a strict curfew in place - the audience had to endure the live band if they wanted still to be there for the disco.

Although at the time their hatred hurt, I understood that part of it was because they were scared, clinging to what they knew. The prospect of anyone being on stage in front of anyone else was scary - not something they could ever imagine themselves doing, however much I might encourage or cajole them. So I decided that I needed to put my money where my mouth was and get onstage and do something myself.

I can't sing. This was 1987, however, the DIY punk ethic was still alive, and I had to have the guts to do these things myself if I was ever going to encourage much less confident young people to risk going on stage themselves.

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The half-gig, half-disco evening happened the day after Margaret Thatcher's dreadful government had just been re-elected. With about eighty bemused young people watching, I stepped onstage after the covers band had finished and, with a drummer keeping time, tried to sing – unaccompanied – Eric Bogle's furious anti-war song, 'The Green Fields of France'.

They shouted. They laughed. They booed. They screamed at me to get off. A few stood silent and embarrassed, listening guiltily to what must have been a truly awful sound. Somehow I got through to the end, trying to compensate for my musical ugliness at least by *meaning* every word of the song I was singing. And I did mean it.

"Get off! You can't sing! We want the disco! You're shit!"

I'm sure I was shit, but that wasn't the point. The point was about people being brave enough to try something different and I guessed that, secretly, there would be a few young people in the audience who fancied themselves as musicians.

One of them turned out to be Jamie. I remember him as one of the cynics, smoking at the back of the darkened youth centre, probably shouting and sneering with his friends at the spectacle of a grown man with no musical ability trying to sing.

Over the next few years we did more and more music at the youth centre. We continued to run discos as well and gradually I began to understand how exciting and politically important a well-run disco can be, proving to young people that it's possible to come together and have fun *en masse* without anyone bullying anyone else or spoiling the event. But we also convened an increasing number of free-standing gigs with bands we brought in to play. We started a Youth Centre gig committee of young people, charged with booking and running the gigs. We bought a smoke-machine and lights. We bought our own PA system. And gradually more and more people started admitting to playing a bit of guitar or having a drum kit or being tentatively interested in singing. The gigs were packed.

I can't remember exactly how Jamie and his friends did it, but as others were doing, they formed a band and my job was to provide them with instruments and arrange places for them to practice. That band were unusual in that, unlike the other fledgling bands thrashing away in the Youth Centre, you didn't hear pointless guitar noise coming out of their practice room. If Jamie's band were working on a song, they played it over and over again, night after night, getting tighter and tighter musically and only adding vocals once the basics were secure.

Five years later, The Zodiac is darkened, full of smoke and excitement and three hundred people crammed in, gulping beer, enthusiastically greeting each other and straining to see the stage.

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I confess that some of the most exciting, uplifting experiences of my life have been at rock concerts with the sense of people coming together in support of the band, the catharsis of big guitar chords breaking into choruses, the excitement of recognizing the first bars of the next song with the audience willing the band along, wanting them to be wonderful.

The Daisies are finally on stage and they're wonderful, confident and tight, attacking their songs and pulling us together, making us feel that we share a purpose, bound together and driven by the music. When Radiohead come on later, they'll sound restrained and awkward, as if still looking for an identity. And in the middle of 'Creep' the singer will start coughing, thereby wasting the record company's investment in making the live video.

But for now I stand at the back of the crowd, watching Jamie and his friends on stage. The Daisies from the Youth Centre! A year from now, they'll go on to tour America in support of Supergrass, then tour Japan in their own right, and in the meantime their first album will come out: songs developed in the practice rooms of the Youth Centre, sitting round on benches, night after night, getting tighter and tighter.

I think back a few years and weep, knowing that it's been worthwhile.