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Tragic but brave or just crips with chips? Songs and their lyrics in the Disability Arts Movement in Britain

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Abstract

Disability culture is a site within which social and positional identities are struggled for and dominant discourses rejected; in which mainstream representations of people with impairments – as victims of personal tragedy – are held to the light and revealed as hegemonic constructions within a disabling society. Drawing upon styles that range from jazz, blues and folk to reggae, performance poetry and punk, disabled singers and bands in the Disability Arts Movement in Britain have been central to the development of an affirmative disability discourse rooted in ideas of pride, anger and strength. Examining lyrics by Johnny Crescendo, Ian Stanton and the Fugertivs – performers emerging as part of this movement in the 1980s and 1990s – this article considers the dark humour which runs through much of this work. It is suggested that these lyrics' observational reflections on everyday experiences of being oppressed as disabled people have been overlooked within critical disability studies to date, but are important in developing an understanding of positive disability identity as a tool available to disabled people in order to make sense of, and express themselves within, the world in which they find themselves.

Introduction

You really should be grateful
For all we do for you
And be a quiet little crip
Without a chip. (Ian Stanton, 'Chip on yer Shoulder', 1995)

The movement is a jigsaw – each piece is vital for the true picture to emerge. (Campbell and Oliver 1996, p. 199)

The movement referred to here is the disabled people's movement, a new social movement emerging during the 1970s that politicised disabled people who began to make their voices heard by demanding inclusion as equals within a society from which they had been largely excluded. This movement has campaigned for rights and access in a number of separate but related ways. The work of coalitions identifying and raising issues of discrimination has been supported by the non-violent protests of the Direct Action Network (DAN); experience gained through the activities of the Independent Living campaign has given rise to critical insights which have underpinned the emergence of Disability Studies, a new academic

discipline which offers a distinctive critique on contemporary social organisation. This political and academic activity has been reflected at a cultural level by, and exists in a symbiotic relationship with, the Disability Arts Movement. The Disability Arts Movement emerged as disabled artists, working within a diverse range of art forms, started to resist mainstream disability discourses and to explore and develop their own life perspectives: to claim and reclaim power and control in their own lives. In this article I consider song lyrics by Johnny Crescendo (blues guitarist and singer/songwriter); Ian Stanton (folk guitarist and singer/songwriter); and the Fugertivs (punk band), each of whom has made an important and distinctive contribution to this movement. Blues is music born of oppression and which gives voice to the oppressed. Folk emerges from a rootedness and groundedness that is certain of its own values. Punk is the noise of the alienated, the disregarded and disrespected. Each of these forms is used to articulate anger at the established order. Furthermore, each has traditionally been associated with a rough and readiness. Polish is not the main thing. It is authenticity that counts, the spirit of what is being sung rather than how perfectly manufactured it sounds. This is about the oppressed making their own use of available popular cultural resources to make their voices heard (Strinati 2006).

My reasons for selecting these artists relate both to the forms of popular music they use to put their messages across and to the way in which each uses humour – often a dark, deeply ironic humour – to communicate. As Arthur Berger (2008) has observed, humour can be used as a force for resistance. It can be used as a way of dealing with aspects of everyday life that are uncomfortable and disempowering, and to subvert dominant discourses. Crescendo, Stanton and the Fugertivs use their songs to laugh at the meddling professionals, carers, and nosey strangers who so troublingly populate the world in which disabled people live.

The power of the music discussed here is also entwined with the community and grassroots locations in which it has been performed. Access is at the heart of disability arts, and in practical terms this has meant that gigs have usually taken place in small venues – arts centres, community centres, civic centres, sports centres, day centres, pubs, college bars, residential homes: most importantly, in any place where disabled people have been able to get to. This music speaks to disabled people about their lives and the things happening in their lives.

The Disabled People's Movement and Disability Arts

Though there is evidence of a longer radical tradition among groups of disabled people in Britain (Humphries and Gordon 1992), it is not until the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, in the radical activity of individuals like Paul Hunt and groups such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), that the self-organised, modern social movement of disabled people appears (Campbell and Oliver 1996). The key idea around which this movement was organised is the social model of disability, through which the meanings of the terms impairment and disability are redefined.

Impairment: lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

Disability: the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (UPIAS 1976)

Within this view, disability is shifted from being an individual problem and is understood as an unequal social relationship, as 'something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society ... disability is, therefore, a particular form of social oppression' (UPIAS 1976).

It has been argued (Swain, French and Cameron 2003, p. 24) that this relationship emerged during the industrialisation of society with the advent of the factory system as the dominant means of production. People with impairments became identified as unable to meet production norms and were removed and excluded from the social mainstream. Since then they have found themselves isolated and segregated in asylums, hospitals, communities, hostels, sheltered employment, special schools, day centres. Modern towns and cities have been built and developed – both in terms of physical access and in the way that public services have been planned and delivered – on the assumption that there is no requirement to take the needs of people with impairments into account because they are not expected to actively participate. People with impairments are, thus, disabled by the society in which they live. The social model definitions given here were later extended by the Disabled People's International to include people with sensory, emotional and intellectual impairments (Barnes 1994, p. 2).

This understanding of oppression echoes and draws from that of other identity-oriented social movements (the black civil rights movement; the women's movement; the gay rights movement):

Oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (Young 1990, p. 41)

In Britain, the late 1970s and 1980s saw rapid growth in the political activity of disabled people. This included the development of local coalitions which worked to influence the planning and delivery of public services; Centres for Independent Living which campaigned for financial structures to be established so that disabled people could take control over their everyday lives; and the establishment of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People which, among other roles, took a major hand in organising the campaign for full civil rights legislation which resulted in the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 (Campbell and Oliver 1995). Allan Sutherland has commented that:

I don't think disability arts would have been possible without disability politics coming first ... Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior ... Our politics have given us self-esteem. They have taught us, not simply to value ourselves, but to value ourselves as disabled people. (Sutherland 1989)

The Disability Arts Movement emerged from the mid-1980s onwards as disabled people began to develop their own voices and perspectives rooted in an understanding illuminated by the social model. According to Paddy Masefield,

Disability Arts are art forms, art works and arts productions created by disabled people to be shared with, and to inform other disabled people, by focusing on the truth of disability experience. (Masefield 2006, p. 22)

The 'truth' of which Masefield speaks here is a truth stripped of the distorting sentimentalisation and pathologisation that characterises mainstream representation

of disability. Through the organisation and development of cabarets, festivals, exhibitions, performances and workshops (Sutherland 2005), the Disability Arts Movement created social spaces in which disabled people could come together to share and explore with each other insights and perspectives on situations that had previously only been experienced individually. As Elspeth Morrison and Vic Finkelstein have argued:

Arts events can provide another accessible route for looking at the world in relation to disabled people ... Having someone on stage communicating ideas and feelings that an isolated disabled person never suspected were shared by others can be a turning point for many. (Morrison and Finkelstein 1997, p. 127)

In terms of discussions on popular culture (Storey 2005, p. 4), disability arts embody resistance to hegemonic pressures of incorporation and refusal by disabled people to identify themselves as dominant culture represents and seeks to recognise them. The shift this social, cultural and theoretical model facilitates is also a pragmatic process, as Lory Britt and David Heise have observed:

by modifying the frame from one of innate deviance to one of oppression, individuals may come to feel angry not only because the system is unjust but because they have been made to feel ashamed ... The activated feeling of anger propels stigmatised individuals into public space to behave collectively, and feelings of pride emerge. (Britt and Heise 2000, p. 257)

The humour expressed in disability arts lyrics is observational, often highlighting the absurdity that characterises expectations held by the non-disabled about disabled people or the offence generated by the non-disabled in their interactions with disabled people. An issue here is that, as Iris Young observes, 'while structural oppression involves relations among groups, these relations do not always fit the paradigm of conscious and intentional oppression of one group by another' (Young 1990, p. 41).

Disability oppression often takes the form of interference from either officious or well-meaning non-disabled people that is experienced as limiting and infantilising. It is not that these people think of themselves as oppressors but simply that, through their condescension, they are reinforcing oppressive social relations. Janet Read has talked of encounters with 'a strong whiff of charity' that are experienced by disabled people as difficult to manage:

where a stranger, or someone only slightly known, made an approach in public that was not actively intended to be hostile but was often experienced as inappropriate or undermining ... Sometimes it also seemed that being disabled automatically made you public property and gave you a public persona that was not always welcome. (Read 2000, p. 33)

It is because this is experienced by many disabled people as difficult to respond to that humour can provide an effective release. Statements can be expressed in the lines of a song that, while reminding disabled people of the humiliating situations in which they have been placed, can raise a laugh. Disability arts offer a different perspective, rooted in the social model, which suggests that these situations have not arisen because of who disabled people are as individuals, but because of other people's ignorance and because society is organised as it is. This offers hope that, through collective action and education, something can be done to bring about change. Furthermore, something funny will often remain in the mind in ways that lofty rhetoric will not (Branagan 2007).

The blues of Johnny Crescendo

In a description of why he wrote the song 'I Love My Body', blues singer and guitarist Johnny Crescendo (aka Direct Action Network organiser Alan Holdsworth) tells of how during his formative years he had neither mixed with other disabled people nor felt comfortable with his impairment.

If I was sitting down and a potential girlfriend came up to me I would dread the moment I had to stand up. I met some disabled people but they seemed to be saying thank you and God bless you all the time and I didn't want to do that. This continued until my early 30's when I started to come in contact with disabled people who said fuck you instead of bless you and fuck off instead of thank you. I'd always been political and when the penny dropped it was so easy to see how I had been oppressed. (Holdsworth 2004)

This twelve-bar blues song involves a reclamation and affirmation of self and identity. The strength in these lines is rooted in a rejection of cultural norms and an assertion of the right to be different.

I love my body – it's the only one I got
 I love my body – and that relationship means a lot
 My body's got what yours has
 But there's something else it's got
 My body's got self-dignity
 My body's got self-respect
 No one can take that away from me
 In this world or the next

In the late 1980s, while working in Chesterfield as a youth worker running a project for people with learning difficulties, Crescendo wrote the song 'Choices and Rights', which was later adopted as the anthem of the disabled people's movement. He joined the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People where 'people began to hear "Choices and Rights" and started booking me for gigs' (quoted in Campbell and Oliver 1996, p. 118).

I don't want your charity
 Or you to be paid to care for me
 I want choices and rights in my life
 We don't want your 'special schools'
 We gotta get out and teach the fools
 We've got choices and rights in our lives

While Crescendo's music and lyrics are mostly blunt and direct, using traditional blues and rhythm and blues sounds to accompany a clear and direct political message, his observational humour and direct language come through most clearly in his performance poetry. 'Disabled People aren't Allowed to Say "Fuck"' (Holdsworth 1989a, p. 9) was written after he had been booked to perform at a residential home but had been told to 'mind his language'.

Disabled people are allowed to say spastic, cripple, handicapped, mongoloid, difficult, tragic, but they're not allowed to say 'fuck'.

Here Crescendo contrasts the offensive and oppressive use of medical and emotional jargon that is routinely applied to frame the conditions and lives of disabled people with the offence that might be caused by the possibility of a disabled person swearing. So culturally entrenched is the stereotype of the disabled person as diminutive passive victim that the possibility that disabled people might utter this coarse word is considered appalling.

Disabled people are allowed to say Leslie Crowther, Jimmy Tarbuck, Terry Wogan, Bernard Manning, Cliff Richard, but they're not allowed to say 'fuck'.

Crescendo makes the point that, while disabled people might be expected to be able to list the names of all the celebrities who have given time to raise funds for charities purportedly supporting their interests, they are not allowed to express themselves in terms considered vulgar. Such a thing would be to express ingratitude and would represent a failure in 'coming to terms' with their conditions (Marks 1999). While some of the celebrities listed here have either died or dropped out of sight, their functional role has been filled by others. As Paul Taylor and Jan Harris (2008) suggest, celebrities are pretty much interchangeable.

Disabled people are allowed to say victim, brave, helpless, special, little, severely, chronically, profoundly, vegetable, but they're not allowed to say 'fuck'.

But they do.

Crescendo's final point is made by naming terms through which disabled people are encouraged by mainstream culture to recognise themselves. The discourse of 'specialness' provides a particularly seductive lexicon, suggesting that the needs of people with impairments are most appropriately met within segregated settings outwith the mainstream. Crescendo finishes, however, by drawing the listener back to reality.

The power of this piece is enhanced by the context in which it is performed. At an arts event attended by disabled people who have experienced countless restrictions upon what is considered acceptable to say *simply because they are disabled*, the very fact that a disabled person is on stage saying the word 'fuck' is funny, daring, challenging. At a deeper level there is an appreciation of the absurdity that disability oppression involves. The abuses of human rights which are considered justifiable in order to maintain a veneer of respectable normality are profound.

In 'Where d'ya Get that Leg?' (Holdsworth 1989b, pp. 6, 7) Crescendo reflects on the stupid, unwanted interference of the non-disabled:

I've known you now for how long is it?
And where d'ya get that leg?
Are you alright on the stairs?
And where d'ya get that leg?
Why d'you walk silly?
And where d'ya get that leg?
Have you got a willy?
And where d'ya get that leg?

The asinine nature of the interminable questions, remarks and comments about their impairments that disabled people have to put up with is illustrated here. What is experienced as objectifying intrusion when experienced all of a sudden, from out of nowhere, as one is going about minding one's own business, can be seen as ridiculous when turned into a performance piece. After coming out with a barrage of other similar questions, reflecting the relentless persistence with which disabled people are harried, Crescendo finishes – in a taboo-busting gesture of masculine aggression – by throwing some questions of his own back on the questioner:

Which leg are you talking about?
I don't know what you mean
It's a downpayment on a robot
It's a jockstrap for my dick

And where d'ya get your questions from
'Cos they really make me ... SICK!

The folk music of Ian Stanton

To hear him singing was a personal thrill and the experience was uplifting and amusing. Amusing because he was singing about how crap day centres were in front of a number of politicians, social workers, and the conference was held in a day centre. (Bagley 1998)

Ian Stanton was someone who instinctively enjoyed challenging non-disabled authority. While editor of *Coalition*, the journal of the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People, his musical career began in clubs around Oldham in the north-west of England and led to performances at day centres, disability arts gigs, Direct Action Network actions, Glastonbury Festival and Vancouver Folk Festival.

In the sleeve notes to Stanton's 1992 *Freewheelin'* cassette, Johnny Crescendo comments that Stanton 'has been described as "the Bob Dylan of the disability arts movement"'. But "old slaphead from Oldham", as we know him, is much better than that'. Folk singer Stanton's songs range from the emotional 'We've Got Each Other' and 'A Bloody Funny Way' to the rousing rights anthems 'Tragic but Brave' and 'Rollin' Thunder'. While his tunes range from cheery pub sing-alongs (good for encouraging audience participation) to melancholic ballads, it is in his lyrics that Stanton's comedy lies (Martin 2008). As with Crescendo, the admixture of anger at injustice with dry humour is a key tactic.

Adam Martin (2008) has stated that 'the structure of "Chip on yer shoulder" sounds like a joke being delivered: the verse is like a slow build-up in its pace, leaving the listener hanging on, whilst the chorus is the punch line in the way it is belted out'. In this song, Stanton pokes fun at various representatives of non-disabled petty officialdom, including cinema and railway staff. Drawing on personal experience of being an amputee and a wheelchair user, he sings of the experiences of being placed in uncomfortable and demeaning situations, which are both site-specific (cinema, train) but also resonate with wider questions of social mobility, access, pleasure for disabled people:

Going to the pictures
To see the late, late show
You're told that you're a fire risk
So the wheelchair has to go ...

Waiting on the platform
To board the 9.05
You travel with the livestock
Least it proves that you're alive ...

It is expected, Stanton observes, that disabled people will put up and shut up about the little humiliations they are expected to endure on a daily basis and just be thankful that they are permitted at all to be present in public spaces or on public transport. If, however, a disabled person does have the audacity to complain about the situation:

You can guarantee there'll always be
Somebody there who'll say ...

You've got a chip on your shoulder
Got a really bad attitude
Is it any wonder
That people treat you the way they do

You really should be grateful
 For all we do for you
 And be a quiet little cripple
 Without a chip.

What is reflected here is the oppressive situation in which, in everyday life, disabled people are identified in terms of stereotypes. Resisting categorisation in terms of one stereotype (passive, uncomplaining victim) simply leads to being identified in terms of another (bitter and twisted) (Swain and Cameron 1999). Finally, Stanton draws us back to the stranger who feels no awkwardness in asking personal questions:

I've never run a marathon
 I'd sooner drink and smoke
 But what's your opening question
 'You that t.v. wheelchair bloke?
 And how'd you get like that then?
 Was it some great tragedy?'
 'I was stuntman in Jaws II
 And I really earned my fee ...'

But I sit here and wonder
 What you hear and what you see
 Are you looking at my chair
 Or are you listening to me?

Disabled people are expected to keep up their happy smiles, to always be ready with the cheery riposte, the joke, to be able to laugh at themselves. In his concluding thoughts, Stanton questions the ability of the stranger to see beyond the stereotype. What makes this both funny and empowering for disabled audiences and listeners is the familiarity of the situation. To have to put up with being patronised and infantilised when the only challenging response that can be made leads to being patronised and stereotyped in another way is a frustrating experience. In 'Chip on yer Shoulder', Stanton provides the words with which to begin to understand these encounters in a different light. Dorothy E. Smith states that 'a critique is more than a negative statement. It is an attempt to define an alternative' (Smith 1987, p. 78). To be able to begin to understand these interactions in terms of absurd roles grounded within oppressive social relations offers a way of seeing how things might be otherwise.

In 'Remember Douglas Bader', Stanton draws attention to the way in which figures considered edifying role models are held up to disabled people as exemplars.

When I feel life's getting harder
 I remember Douglas Bader
 'Cos that's what my doctor said to do
 Overcome those negative feelings
 You will find yourself revealing
 Sides of you you never even knew
 And I will smile
 And nod and smile
 And I'll be happy all the while
 You might think that I'm a hero too ...

In this song, Stanton draws attention to the way in which, within contemporary mainstream culture, disability is represented as something to be both endured and overcome. The reference in the lyric by the medical doctor is to Group Captain Sir Douglas Bader (1910–1976), the 'famous W[orld] W[ar] 2 limbless fighter ace and leader' (Douglas Bader Foundation) who was presented as an inspiring caricature in

the 1956 film *Reach For The Sky*. As a figure to emulate, Bader is used here to illustrate the ways in which disabled people are repeatedly told that the main thing is attitude; that the problems they experience can be conquered simply by having the right frame of mind. The doctor in the song is dispensing the medical model, the idea that disability is something wrong with the bodies of disabled people that can be overcome with courage and determination.

In writing and performing these lyrics, Stanton draws attention to the ways in which stereotyping demeans disabled people. For those who feel that 'every bead of sweat' and 'every muscle strained' (Stanton) is a price worth paying in order to pass, to appear normal and non-disabled, what is also involved is an alienation from the self. The idea that disabled people can gain recognition and validation only by becoming what other people want them to be is identified by Stanton as part of disability oppression.

Stanton's lyrics reflect the time at which they were written. He died in 1998 and did not live to see many of the access improvements that have been made – for example, in cinemas and trains – over the past decade. But it is a fact that his songs inspired the movement that campaigned for legislation to force these improvements. While real inclusion as equals within the social mainstream is still a long way off for disabled people, the debt owed to Stanton remains.

The punk rock of the Fugertivs

The Fugertivs was a trash/punk band that emerged from the wreckage of a disability arts project run in Sunderland in north-east England by Tyneside Disability Arts (TDA) in the late 1990s. One of the project participants had been overheard in a shop singing lyrics from 'The No Hope ATC' (Sheader), a song musing on the bleak prospects involved in perennial attendance at an 'ATC' (Adult Training Centre).

I woke up this morning with a bad pain in my head
In came a care assistant who dragged me out of bed
They tell me it's for my own good that I must go for training
I've been training 27 years besides it's fucking raining
The bus is outside waiting, they're hanging round for me
To take me on a journey to the No Hope ATC ...

This matter was reported to the local authority and the disabled people involved in the project were told to have no further involvement with TDA (Sheader, quoted in McConnell 2005). The remaining project members carried on working together in North Tyneside. Karen Sheader, lead singer of the Fugertivs, recounts that:

the material we were producing fell into the hands of Sunderland Social Services Department. They were absolutely appalled ... That's how the Fugertivs got their name. We were fugitives from Sunderland Social Services. (quoted in McConnell 2005)

Retaining the original spelling of the band's name by lead guitarist Niall Raftery, who has dyslexia, the Fugertivs brought a 'new' sound to the disability arts scene which, according to Johnny Crescendo, had after a decade become 'sick of one man and his guitar' (McConnell 2005). Drawing heavily upon standard punk riffs but also purloining other styles, the Fugertivs played at disability arts gigs across the north of England, at the Independence Festivals in Manchester and Birmingham, and regularly at Direct Action Network demonstrations.

While the Fugertivs' sound was new (in disability arts terms), their song lyrics remained rooted in anger at disability oppression, even where ironically presented, as in the title of their 1999 CD, *Joyful Noise*. Adam Martin (2008) has stated that 'while the Fugertivs could perhaps be described as less technically gifted than Ian Stanton, their DIY sound goes hand-in-hand with the rebellious nature of their lyrics and themes'. The raucous 'Melissa' (Sheader), for example, offers a simple driving rhythm twinned with a direct message. This song involves an exchange between a disabled woman and her carers, sung in regional language. Melissa aches to be able to make decisions for herself but her carers have other ideas, and mock her ambitions to selfhood and life choices around sexual activity and independence:

Divvent [*Don't*] think ye can gan oot [*go out*]

At this time of night

Yer kna [*You know*] that it's really too late

Why, I divvent think ye're safe

Once ye're out of me sight

Even though you just turned 38 ...

You want to have sex

I don't know what you mean

People like you don't do that

I'm glad I'm not the one

Who'll be taking you on

Cos, let's face it, he must be a prat ...

So you think you can manage

To live on your own

Where on earth did you learn all this cheek?

You've got such a good home

Just try living alone

You'll be back by the end of the week ...

Voiced by Niall Raftery, Andrew Kerr and Mandy Metters, these statements are expressions of a care that is experienced by many disabled people as stifling and oppressive (Swain and French 1998). Simon Brisenden has commented that, when disabled people are forced to remain at home, dependent upon assistance, this 'exploits both the carer and the person receiving care. It ruins relationships between people and results in thwarted life opportunities on both sides of the caring equation' (quoted in Hasler 2004, p. 227). Over-protection is an issue familiar to disabled people. Dependency is created on both sides of the caring relationship and carers often find it very difficult to let go. When the Fugertivs bawl out the words and concerns of controlling carers, these are seen for what they are: fears which would rather stifle than set free. They are revealed as grotesque, as part of disabled people's oppression.

Through long campaigning, the Independent Living Movement has seen established direct payments systems through which local authorities are required to make available funds so that disabled people (assessed as eligible) can directly employ their own personal assistants and take control of their own lives (Mercer 2004). In the last verse of this song, Melissa (whose lines are sung by Karen Sheader) has managed to break free of the family home and is living as she wants to:

Six months have gone by

I can go out at night

And come back when I want to my place

Got a boy friend called Mike

And we shag when we like

So the rest of you get off my case

Yeah your over-protection
Is not what we need
Or your ridicule, whispers and stares
What we need is privacy
Freedom and trust
Which you'd give us if you really cared ...

Dependency is not the inevitable outcome of impairment, but is socially created. While *care* is a heavily loaded word, a real concern with social justice would address the environmental and cultural barriers which maintain that lack of privacy, freedom and trust.

In contrast to the solo voices of Crescendo and Stanton, the use by the Fugertivs of multiple vocalists works to create both a sense of tension and comedy effect. The voices of the parents/carers/interfering busybody in 'Melissa' and 'Bar-room Bollocks' are in north-eastern accents (almost to the extent of parody),

emphasising age difference between the two groups of antagonists. A more diluted accent suggests a younger generation. The use of call and response sets out exactly what is being argued against. (Martin 2008)

In 'Bar-room Bollocks' (Sheader), the Fugertivs re-visit that familiar presence around disabled people, the obnoxious stranger who feels free to pass comment, the regular who holds forth 'in an irritatingly public manner' (Miller and McHoul 1998). This song is narrated by three characters, the first (Karen Sheader) being a garrulous 'character' at the local pub, and the others (Niall Raftery and Mandy Metters) two disabled people who have had to listen to the regular's offensive ramblings:

I've got nowt against the poor handicapped
Some of them even drink beer
And I don't mind admitting I'll mix with them
Well, the odd time one wanders in here
I've been known to buy Jack a Newcastle Brown
He's blind and he uses a crutch
We always let him sit here next to us
Mind, nobody talks to him much ...

The unwanted sympathy and annoying condescension of the non-disabled towards disabled people on the understanding that impairment equals personal tragedy is voiced here. While disabled people have demanded, and are increasingly seeing, access to public spaces, what is suggested here is that they are more often met with patronising tolerance rather than with respectful acknowledgement as equals.

Now me sister's bairn was born spastic
Confined to an invalid chair
But it's marvellous what all them specialist schools
Can do for the poor kids like her
So don't make fun of the handicapped
Cos some of them have feelings too
It's not their fault that they're made like they are
Just be thankful it's not one of you

And I think they were sent for a bloody good cause
To make normal folk stop and think
There but for the grace of the good Lord go I
'Ere, does anyone want one more drink?

What makes these remarks insidious as part of an oppressive discourse on disability is that the regular apparently considers herself enlightened. There is no conscious

intention to be dismissive but by measuring impairment against the ideological standard of normality, she draws favour upon herself and those she identifies as her peers ('normal folk') at the expense of disabled people. This woman fails to recognise her own oppressed situation within late capitalism or, at least, finds it easier to bear so long as there are others she can identify as being 'worse off'. 'Bar-room Bollocks' draw attention to the ludicrous nature of such statements.

You reckon that you're our champion
 Defender of all poor crips
 Well, I just can't believe the crap that I've heard
 That comes pouring out of your lips
 You like to keep us where you think we belong
 With sentiment and prejudice
 Well, I hope that some tosspot talks shite about you
 Next time you go out on the piss.

In letting the regular know what they think of her, the two listeners express the anger of all disabled people who have found themselves, in everyday life, being subjected to little acts of degradation; being reminded, in chance encounters, glances, comments, that 'we need to know our place in the world' (Montgomery 2006). The song closes with a lengthy (one and a half minutes) repeated and then fading phrase:

Bollocks to you
 Bollocks to you
 Bollocks to you
 Bollocks to you ...

Conclusion: singing differently

Within the emerging academic discipline of Disability Studies it has been argued that there has been a tendency to overlook personal and individual experiences of disability and to focus upon the public experience of oppression in terms of physical and environmental barriers (Thomas 1999; Reeve 2004). While this has, no doubt, been down to positioning decisions made in order to establish the discipline's emerging reputation, there has been a cost to this. It has meant, for example, that reflection upon everyday experiences of being oppressed as disabled people – as illustrated in all the song lyrics discussed above – has received little attention on the basis that it is subjective. I would argue that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

John Fiske has noted that:

The recognition of social difference produces the need to *think differently*: thinking differently reproduces and confirms the sense of social difference. What is crucial here is that the thinking is different ... not divorced from social reality: thinking differently involves the subordinate in making their sense of their subordination, not in accepting the dominant sense of it or in making a sense with no relationship to domination. (Fiske 1995, p. 58; emphasis added)

One of the important things about disability arts is that it confronts the domination and oppression experienced by disabled people. It does not seek to evade or ignore this or pretend it is not there; neither does it seek to draw disabled people in to other cultural stuff that says nothing about the reality of being disabled. The lyrics of Johnny Crescendo, Ian Stanton and the Fugertivs go beyond merely reflecting this oppression: they detail it, they describe it, they take delight in holding it up to the

light and laughing at it. This involves not a denial of the reality of oppression, or a failure to take oppression seriously, but a way of thinking about it differently. In the face of their oppression, disabled people in the Disability Arts Movement have told us that they are proud to be who they are. In 'Tragic but Brave' (Stanton), Ian Stanton describes a disabled person struggling in the depths of self-denial, while watching the media reportage of a DAN-style action:

And she looks at the crowd on the TV news
With their wheelchairs, their sticks, and their guides
They are brandishing banners, they are pissing on pity
And they celebrate difference with pride
Something stirs inside ...

The 'thinking differently' of the disabled people's movement, and in this instance the *singing differently* of the Disability Arts Movement, is a thinking which *celebrates difference*. This thinking refuses to equate impairment with personal tragedy and asserts the rights of people with impairments to feel good about being who they are – in the face of oppression. This does not necessarily imply that some impairments do not involve pain or fatigue, for example, but it is to suggest that there is more to the lives of people with impairments than just this. Whereas the personal tragedy model provides a storyline through which impairment can only be experienced as a discreditable characteristic, the affirmative stance taken within the Disability Arts Movement offers a basis for an identity that is rooted in ideas of pride, anger and strength.

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Further reading

Allan Sutherland has compiled a comprehensive (if somewhat London-focused) chronology of Disability Arts covering the period 1977–2003. This can be found at <http://www.disabilityartsonline.org/site/chronology.allan>

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 'Planet of the Blind (reprise)' (Mathews/Sheader)
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