

Birmingham, U.K., Gaining Int'l Respect

Wide-Ranging West Midlands Acts Fight Stereotypes

This story was prepared by Dominic Pride and Jeff Clark-Meads in Birmingham, England, and Thom Duffy and Paul Sexton in London.



GREANEY

Like some fabled city of legend, Birmingham is a huge and important edifice that has long been lost to public gaze. Birmingham's problem, though, is that unlike Shangri-La or Atlantis, nobody is looking for it.

The U.K.'s second-largest city, with a million souls, Birmingham is the cen-

ter of a conurbation with a population of 4.6 million and was the powerhouse of the Industrial Revolution. It is the

birthplace of heavy metal and of a score of first-division acts in all forms of music, and is at the core of a fomentation of cutting-edge musical activity. Yet it rarely appears on the British music industry's radar.

The locals find it hard to understand why. They point to the region's track record—running from the Spencer

Davis Group to its solo star, Steve Winwood; the Move to the Moody Blues; Robert Plant to Jeff Lynne; Black Sabbath to Judas Priest; Slade



BROADCAST

to Ocean Colour Scene; Duran Duran to UB40—and wonder why Birmingham isn't on the same musical map as London, Liverpool, and Manchester.

When local heroes Ocean Colour
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BIRMINGHAM, U.K., GAINING INTERNATIONAL RESPECT

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Scene came back into the limelight last year, many in the city thought it would lead to the inevitable A&R stampede as labels "discovered" the next big thing. Yet it failed to ignite a renewed interest in the city as an A&R source, despite the overwhelming diversity of new acts in the region.

Even nationally known artists such as Goldie, from Wolverhampton, make little of the fact that they come from the region.

The problem lies partly in geography. Musically and culturally, London dominates the south of England; Liverpool and Manchester the north. Birmingham—"Brum" to its friends—lies in the exact center of the country, in the region known as the Midlands, and is too close to each of those bright lights for its own beacon to be seen.



OCEAN COLOUR SCENE

"Tell a London A&R man you want him to come to Brum to see a band and, as often as not, he won't even know how to get there," says one frustrated artist manager based in the city. "Down in London, they want what we've got to give them—which has been a lot, right from the days of the Rockin' Berries in the '60s—but they have no idea where we are or what we're about. Yet talk to them about Manchester, which is smaller than Brum and has done less over the years, and they fall over themselves to get there."

Birmingham also suffers from a poor image in popular culture. If a television comedy seeks to portray a character as stupid or unsophisticated, it does so by giving him a Birmingham—a "Brummie"—accent.

Trish Keenan, singer with local band Broadcast, says this portrayal has had an effect on the city's psyche. "Even on the advert for Duracell batteries, the toy with the batteries that runs out is a Brummie. It's definitely had a detrimental effect."

Broadcast started out playing local venues such as the Jug of Ale, which is in the King's Heath area where Keenan has lived for the last seven years. Many local musicians and artist types gravitate toward the Mosely and King's Heath districts because of the large student population there.

"I definitely believe in the individual character of cities rather than nations, and there's really a down tone in Birmingham. People here definitely under-

play themselves," she says. "There's definitely a lack of confidence, and almost a resignation and defeatism among musicians here."

This exists despite the preponderance of acts in Birmingham that are no worse than others who get deals.

The truth, though—as so often occurs when perception contradicts reality—is that Birmingham and the surrounding Black Country—so named because of the pervading color produced by the Industrial Revolution, which was kindled there—has made and is making a major contribution to British music through its songwriting creativity and its executive acumen. Even though the newer generation of bands there make little play of their roots, thereby deepening still further the invisibility of Birmingham's musi-



SAGOO

cal presence, the region's pedigree is established.

At the end of the 1960s, only Birmingham had the combination of social angst, heavy industry, and reckless fans that could spawn heavy metal. In the early '80s, as the region's manufacturing base imploded and racial riots raged in the streets, the West Midlands gave a voice to disaffected youth through the white reggae of UB40 and the British ska of the 2-Tone bands.

In 1997, Birmingham has no single voice, but it has the energy to sustain a variety of musical styles, some angry, others reflective. While indie rock is a mainstay of the scene, other bands are often influenced by reggae, soul, or music from the Indian subcontinent, reflecting the high proportion of residents whose families are of Caribbean or Asian origin.

A major player in the region now is one of the U.K.'s largest concert promoters, MCP—Midland Concert Promotions—which, in addition to regular shows at the U.K.'s biggest arenas, is also the company behind the renowned 17-year-old Monsters of Rock festival at nearby Donington Park. That fest has been graced by AC/DC, Kiss, Metallica, Guns N' Roses, and all the world's biggest names in metal and rock.

MCP has been based in the Black Country town of Walsall since its founding 20 years ago, and while the company has found it frustrating that many overseas managements return calls to Warsaw, it has never been tempted to move to London.

In addition to MCP, Walsall was also home to a hit British band of the early '90s, the Wonder Stuff, whose former lead singer, Miles Hunt, now combines being a VJ on MTV Europe with his new band, Polydor U.K.-signed Vent 414.

In the hope of helping break a new Wonder Stuff, MCP has recently assembled and released, via Pinnacle Distribution, a compilation of local unsigned bands titled "Heart Of Darkness" (see track listing, next page). MCP director Stuart Galbraith says, "The idea was just to profile the bands and their music. There is a strong musical base here. As a music market, it is the second strongest in the U.K. [after London]."

Singer/songwriter Micky Greaney, who has been working the Birmingham/Black Country pub and club cir-

cuit for two years, either with a 10-piece band or as a solo acoustic artist, says he is pleased by the lack of a theme in Birmingham's output. "I'm glad to say that there isn't a Birmingham sound," he says, "but there's definitely a songwriter scene, and people here tend to write in a similar vein."

Greaney, whose band incorporates unusual combinations of flugelhorn, exotic percussion, and oboes and whose voice is redolent of Jeff Buckley's, says the local creative community shares an enthusiasm to collaborate. "We've all jammed together," he says.

The success of Birmingham's Ocean Colour Scene was based on a platform of such community spirit and mutual support, something that does not exist in London.

Ocean Colour Scene, previously



SNEAKER PIMPS

signed to an ultimately fruitless deal with Fontana/Mercury Records, made a spectacular comeback in the U.K. last year (Billboard, July 20, 1996) with "Moseley Shoals," the MCA album named after the band's Birmingham recording studio. That album has had an unbroken run on the British charts since its release last April, selling 1 million copies.

Now, OCS and manager Chris Cradock are going to invest in their hometown's future. Cradock informs Billboard that the band has just confirmed a new production deal with MCA under which other artists will use Moseley Shoals during studio "downtime." The first two acts signed to the deal are two London-based veterans: R&B vocalist P.P. Arnold, once a member of the Ikettes and best known for her 1967 U.K. top 20 version of Cat Stevens' "The First Cut Is The Deepest," and trombonist Rico Rodriguez, fondly remembered as a member of early '80s ska-pop act the Specials. Cradock says that he has just secured Arnold publishing with PolyGram/Island and that she will be recording in early summer.

In between live commitments, Ocean Colour Scene itself is using Moseley Shoals for its follow-up album, which lead singer Simon Fowler says it hopes to release in time for the summer U.K. festivals.

During the band's lean years, in between its Fontana and MCA deals, it was never tempted to abandon its home base. "We had nowhere else to go," says Cradock, adding more seriously, "We're proud of Birmingham."

But MCP's Galbraith and others acknowledge that a shortage of club and small theater venues in Birmingham has severely hampered the development of new talent to follow in the footsteps of Ocean Colour Scene. Galbraith notes, for example, that the Birmingham Odeon once hosted acts before it was converted into a multi-screen cinema.

"Birmingham has its specific problems with a lack of venues," he says, noting that bands and audiences in the region have often focused instead on the nearby Black Country city of Wolverhampton, where venues such as the 2,000-capacity Wolverhampton Civic Hall host national tours.

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THE CUSTARD FACTORY

BIRMINGHAM, U.K., GAINING INTERNATIONAL RESPECT

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The good news, Galbraith reports, is that the London-based Break for the Border company, backer of the Shepherds Bush Empire in the capital, has received a license for a 1,700-capacity Birmingham Empire, with plans to open this fall.

Galbraith also reports that he is discussing plans for another possible venue with 1,000-plus capacity.

The venue shortage in Birmingham proper is also cited as a frustration by Steve Morris, editor of *Brum Beat* magazine, which has chronicled the Birmingham and Black Country music scene since 1981. "If you're talking clubs and theaters," says Morris, "there's no infrastructure for indie bands except what they promote themselves in the back rooms of bars."

At the pub and club level, the city has a surfeit of venues. The most famous are the Jug of Ale in King's Heath and the Flapper and Firkin in Birmingham City Centre. A famous venue in the '80s, the Railway Tavern is due to reopen this year with, locals hope, a return to the adventurous live-music policy that saw the likes of Duran Duran play its first gigs there. The Robin R&B club in Dudley, a town within the conurbation, also has an active live-music policy. Bands currently cutting their teeth on the circuit include Novak, Joyland, and Bufflehead.

Morris believes there is an ambivalence on the part of city officials toward supporting pop and rock venues that may run deep in the area's civic character, despite its rich pop tradition. "My observation is that Birmingham still has a huge hang-up with its Quaker past," says Morris.

"They've never put themselves out for rock'n'roll; there's no civic sense of this tradition," he adds, while citing the role the West Midlands can claim in the history of acts such as the Moody Blues, Jeff Lynne, and Duran Duran, among others.

UB40 remain local heroes, not least because they have stayed in the city and ploughed money back into it.

In the early '80s their populist reggae married Jamaican rhythms to sharp criticism of the British political establishment and especially the Conservative Party, which has governed the U.K. for the last 18 years. Even their name was a form of protest: It came from the form the unemployed would use to "sign on" for their benefit.

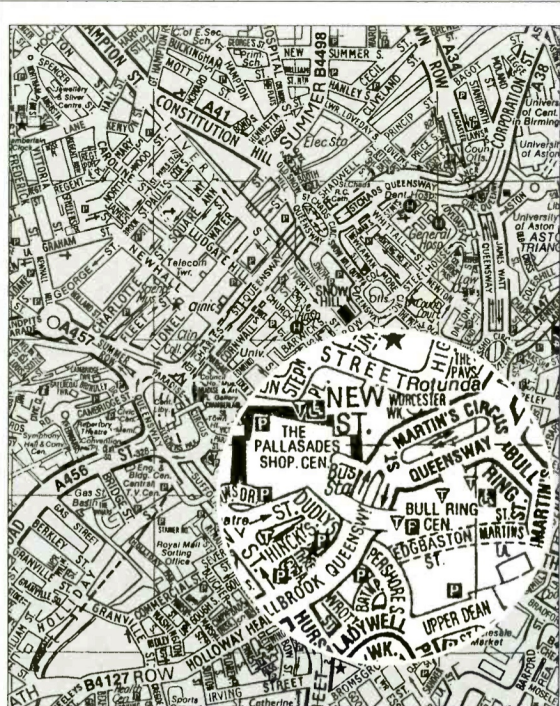
While the band's members are now often abroad pursuing their musical and business interests, they still own and run the DEP International studios in Digbeth, not far from the Custard Factory.

Established in 1984 and expanded in 1991, the band produces its albums and its solo projects there, such as Ali Campbell's 1995 album "Big Love." The complex, which boasts a 24-track and a 48-track room, is run as a commercial studio but also helps local bands by offering them unused studio time at cost price or for free.

Among the more recent acts the studio has hosted are RNT, a dance R&B combo, and Khalique, says studio manager Nick Phipps. Both are signed to London Records.

Campbell, UB40's singer, has also got his own label based in Birmingham, Kuff Records, which has signed the Specials, who in the early '80s were in the vanguard of the 2-Tone mod and ska revival that centered on the nearby town of Coventry.

Earl Falconer, UB40's bass player, has his own label, and there is also discussion about expanding the DEP International label to sign other acts as



In the heart of the Birmingham City Centre, highlighted above, are the Bull Ring Centre and the Pallasades—two complexes that are home to music merchants.

well as UB40.

"They're probably Birmingham's biggest export industry," says Morris of UB40 and Birmingham's view of popular music, "but you get this feeling that they're not quite well regarded."

Still, says Morris, original music does flourish in and around Birmingham. "There's never a week that we don't get a sack full of demos," he says. Among the notable acts he cites are Passion Star, Daytona, and Mudskipper, all recently signed to indie label deals.

"We run a magazine which ends up being largely about white rock," acknowledges Morris. "There is a very healthy Asian scene as well, but they plow their own parallel scene."

A leading name in the Asian scene is Billy Sagoo, signed to Columbia U.K. who has achieved two top 30 singles here in recent months with "Dil Cheez" and "Tum Bin Jiya." Sagoo is also moving toward being a crossover star and has achieved the ultimate in mainstream respectability by appearing on the U.K.'s highly popular National Lottery show.

Sagoo was born in India but came to Birmingham with his parents at 6 months old. "My father ran a music shop here selling both Western and Asian music, and still does," he says.

"Birmingham has become a mecca of Asian music in this country. The ball has swung away from London, which may have more Asian people, but there's a really strong multicultural bond here. I don't want to leave. I travel the world touring and recording sounds, and I go to India every fortnight [Sagoo is a VJ on "Club MTV Asia"]. Manchester and other places may carry the swing for clubs, but in terms of music, Birmingham is it."

The strength of the ethnic music market in Birmingham is also cited by Mike Parker, an assistant manager at the Virgin Megastore downtown, who

has been in music retailing in the region for 12 years with Virgin and Our Price. "It's very reggae and soul oriented," he says. "There's a large black and Asian community, and we sell a lot of singles in those genres."

LABEL ACTION

The region's achievement comes in the face of a less-than-encouraging national attitude toward Birmingham.

A sneering tone toward the city from London-based media—and a frustration that England is popularly divided into North and South rather than North, South, and Midlands—has produced a siege mentality.

Karl O'Connor, head of local label Downwards Records, notes, "Inferiority complex, paranoia, rage—you can pick your own adjectives—but that's what drives us, where we get our hunger."

Downwards specializes in a peculiarly Brummie version of raw hardcore, and O'Connor says, "You don't get more basic than Brum. This is absolute bedrock."

Other labels in Birmingham and the Black Country reflect similar straightforward philosophies.

Paul Birch is managing director of Revolver Recordings, a label specializing in alternative rock, which works with a staff of five from a converted house in Wolverhampton. The premises also house the label's own studios and residential facilities for bands recording there.

The company's A&R strategy couldn't be clearer, says Birch. "We are a guitar label." The label intends to double its output this year, increasing from 15 albums last year to three albums per month in 1997.

The company is based in Wolverhampton because of Birch's local ties, but he says, "the main reason we're here is cost. When we were FM

Revolver, we had 34 staff, which is not far short of being the size of a major. To do that in London would be unthinkable."

Even though the West Midlands has produced more than its fair share of rock acts, Birch does not feel that the label is there to exploit a local scene.

"We are not a regional company," insists Birch. "People never ask London labels whether they sign acts just from their part of London." Though it keeps an eye on what is happening in its own back yard as much as the rest of the country, Revolver has just one local act, the Wildflowers, on its roster.

Birch insists that having no London presence is an advantage in enabling the company to focus on its own activities. "Being outside the London A&R pack puts us ahead of the game. The bands that play there don't start off there."

However, Birmingham's relative proximity to London (compared with Glasgow, Liverpool, or Manchester) means that what it produces is overshadowed. "We're working in a region which is the same size as Chicago, with 4 million people," Birch says. "The Birmingham area is four times larger than Manchester, but that gets called the second city, which pisses people off no end here."

Ripe Recordings started life as part of the same group of companies that included Revolver Recordings. Its current owners, Jurgen Dramm and Andrew Steven, bought the company in 1995 with the aim of signing local and national talent for the international marketplace. Dramm is managing director of RCR/Ripe Recordings, which has four separate labels, covering dance, soul, funk, and drum'n'bass.

The company has signed several Birmingham acts; its first was jazz sax player Alvin Davis. On the current roster are Mau Mau, a nine-piece soul-funk act fronted by songwriter Michael Henry, and Mr. Blank, a foursome that has reworked Big Country's "In A Big Country." Despite finding acts locally, the label will soon be abandoning its regional base in favor of the capital.

"We're moving down to London later this year," says Dramm. "We've had problems recruiting staff here." Ripe will, however, keep open an A&R office in Birmingham.

Cleveland City is another nationally known label based in Wolverhampton. In the dance scene, it is known for licensing tracks from local, national, and international sources and breaking acts from the local area. On the pop front, it scored a national No. 1 single in 1994 with Tony DiBart's "The Real Thing."

Cleveland City runs several labels, including Cleveland City Blues, the pop-dance crossover label AJS, the harder-edged Consolidated, and a new, left-field electronic music label, Wave.

Cleveland City has developed a reputation for getting acts from a street and club level and taking them further. About half the acts on its roster are Midlands-based.

The label originated from a shop in Wolverhampton, Ruby Red Records, which Cleveland's owner, Mike Evans, still runs. Ruby Red opened 25 years ago, building up a steady trade from DJs hungry for imports. Originally, Ruby Red was putting out British Northern Soul tracks, and in the '80s it picked up on rave material.

Like many in the area, Evans does not court publicity and is far happier doing what he does than talking about it. Such an attitude produces concrete results. For an indie with a staff of

four, the label's performance is impressive. As well as a No. 1 single, Cleveland has had four other top 40 hits and claims 33 consecutive top 10 hits on the

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Birmingham Bands Get To The 'Heart'

BIRMINGHAM—One attempt to introduce Birmingham bands to a wider audience is the "Heart Of Darkness" CD.

"Heart Of Darkness" was compiled in conjunction with Birmingham-based music journalist Mark Freeth. "I'm constantly coming into contact with loads of [local] bands that are deserving of attention," he says. "The goal was to show there is something very vibrant happening in the West Midlands."

Freeth adds, "There's a lot of credibility. Some bands may have hitched a ride on [the success of] Ocean Colour Scene, but I would love people to recognize that we are not just spewing out Britpop."

On the evidence of "Heart Of Darkness," what Birmingham is producing is a mélange, reflecting the variety of cultures in this nonsense, post-industrial city and its more affluent, and more aesthetic, satellite towns.

The bands featured are very different, as a track listing shows:

Powderfinger, "Ioon"; Birmingham four-piece with strong punk and new wave influences.

Micky Greaney, "Annabelle"; melodic, gentle song with uncon-



ventional instruments.

Fibrestream, "If I Could": dark, brooding hard-edged rock.

Brothers Groove, "Games We Play": loping, funk-based rock.

Adrenalin Kick, "Deadpool": fast-moving, raging power-guitar rock.

Sugarfix, "She Said": gentle lo-fi indie pop.

The Blaggards, "The Only Ones": stop-start, buzzing British guitar-pop tune.

Box 'Em Dummies, "Snakes": Martin Stephenson-produced gentle blues-ballad vignette.

Twin Hazey, "Greetings": fuzz-box-inspired snarling rock.

Subaqua, "Zip": empty, eerie soundscapes.

Lemonilla, "Penelope Jayne": raucous, fun guitar-pop.

And Also The Trees, "Fighting In A Lighthouse": '50s-influenced guitar band with a Duane Eddy fixation and a dead ringer for Chris Isaak.

Hushblood, "Winter": building walls of guitar rock.

Escape To Planet Love, "Let Yourself Go Free": clean, tight pop reminiscent of '80s band the Associates.

Steambug, "Going Down": funky grooves.

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U.K. dance charts.

The label's spokesman, Mark Harper, says, "We know a lot of labels who sell 15,000-20,000 copies of a record without anyone in London hearing the track.

"People used to laugh at the fact that we were based in Wolverhampton. Being up here is a restriction in those terms, but a lot of major music scenes have come from outside London," he adds. "I'd say 50% of our acts come from within a 20-mile radius of here.

"Like most independents, we have a 'street' relationship with new artists, rather than discovering something after it has developed. We get our contacts from a variety of sources, such as DJs or people sending us tapes."

HEALTHY CLUB SCENE

Wolverhampton is very much the live entertainment center of the Birmingham/Black Country region. More than 20 bars and clubs have opened or re-opened in the last year, and an estimated 16,000 people come into the town on any Friday night from the surrounding area.

Birmingham, too, has a healthy club scene offering a diversity of music. However, whether by design or by outside pressure, it has not been publicly promoted in the manner that Manchester and Liverpool have in recent years.

Nonetheless, a party team from the city is now gaining national exposure: the Miss Money Penny crew, famous for organizing the Chuff Chuff club nights in the region and its Saturday night residence at Bond's Club in the city. Miss Money Penny is launching its own label and will be releasing a compilation, "Glamorous One," in April through Total/BMG.

Birmingham also boasts a local music-industry landmark, the Custard Factory. The former home of one of the city's more noted exports, Bird's Custard Powder, the erstwhile industrial premises in the city center now house Ocean Colour Scene's management company, Ripe Recordings, Chapter 22 Records, and Silk Recordings. Retailer Lost Records is also in the building.

Chapter 22 is active in local A&R, and two of its five acts are Birmingham-based. One of them, Low Art Thrill, goes through the Island Records affiliate Fruition. The other local act on the label, Bentley Rhythm Ace, is described by its leader, Michael Barry Whoosh, as "car-boot techno disco." The band's eponymous album will appear in April along with a single, "Birmingham—There Can Be Only One." The band is due to tour the U.S. next month.

WIDE-RANGING RADIO

As for media in Birmingham, local stations reflect the broad mix of tastes and attitudes in the city and the Black Country.

Neil Greenslade is music director of Choice 102.2 FM, a black music broadcaster in the same vein as its London namesake, though the Birmingham station is more mainstream, with dance and contemporary soul as the daytime mainstay. Greenslade describes the music policy as "on the edge but never over the edge."

Nighttime programming serves what would be minority interests in any other city. Yet in Birmingham, two hours of reggae, four hours of swing and hip-hop, and specialist *soca* and calypso programs find audiences

well beyond the black community.

"Garage is popular here, although it's not massive," says Greenslade. "With R&B crossing over into the mainstream in such a big way, it is difficult to separate regional from national trends."

The estimated black audience in Choice's area is 70,000, and "that's not enough to sustain a completely black station," says Greenslade.

Pirate radio is strong in Birmingham, with the leading pirate, PCRL, playing a mixture of styles, from drum'n'bass to *ragga*. Asian music is served by AM station Radio XL.

In the print sector, apart from Brum Beat, the main outlet is the regional newspapers.

MEDIA COVERAGE

Paul Cole is features editor of The Evening Mail, the daily evening paper run by The Birmingham Post and Mail. Owned by the Midlands Independent Newspapers Group, it has a morning equivalent, The Birmingham Post, and a Sunday title, The Mercury. Across the three titles, there is a substantial amount of music coverage.

The paper has pooled its resources with local independent radio station BRMB and each week produces a four-page pullout section, "Music Power," aimed at a predominantly teenage audience. The section has also led to a 32-page monthly supplement with the same title. The branding allows both parties to present concerts and shows under the same banner. "We can give exposure to up-and-coming bands we believe in," says Cole.

"This is very much indie pop territory," Cole adds. "Before Apache Indian broke, there was a big *bhangra* boom. Among the Indian community, there is a big market for film-star music, as you'd expect."

Cole also notes, though, that "Birmingham has suffered in the last five to six years by not having a medium-to large-sized venue."

The circuit since then has comprised mainly pub venues, with the next stop being the National Exhibition Centre, a 14,000-seat venue. Most of the big-name acts booked into the venue already have support acts organized at a national level, so local acts rarely get exposure to this audience.

"Lots of tours will bypass Birmingham Centre," says Cole. "They'll do Wolverhampton [20 miles away] and

think they've done Birmingham."

In the '60s and '70s, the Railway Tavern was one pub that was a breaking ground for local acts. The pub changed its name, but will reopen under its original moniker and may have live music.

The live circuit and media worlds are pooling their talents. BRMB, the local member of the U.K.'s Independent Local Radio network, recently brought on board Paul Flower, who worked with promoter MCP. Flower is the station's concerts and co-promotions manager and will be organizing a series of concerts for local acts March 20 and 21 at the city's Irish Centre. "It won't be broadcast," says Flower, "but it's part of getting our name involved with breaking local talent."

Flower says, "There's a definite problem with having a lack of a venue about 3,500-4,000 capacity. If we don't start developing acts from a lower level, there's nothing to inspire the local acts."

The region has its fair share of problems, not least the lack of venues and the negative attitude felt by many musicians. Yet in the past, the adversity that Birmingham and the Black Country has experienced led to a significant contribution to the nation's musical output.

With the wealth of influences from Jamaica, America, and Asia pouring into the city, it can only be a matter of time before at least one musical trend emerges from this melting pot, and who knows, Birmingham may after all get the recognition its residents feel it deserves.

One Birmingham-related act currently in the national spotlight is the Sneaker Pimps, who have recently toured in support of Blur and are now touring the U.S. in support of their single "6 Underground." While two of the members are from Hartlepool in the Northeast, singer Kelli Dayton is from the quiet Birmingham suburb of Bartley Green, and the band is perceived as a Birmingham act.

"Birmingham is a big place, but it's not massive," says Sagoo, enthusing about the community feeling among local musicians. "The rates are cheaper, you're only an hour and a half from London, and you can breathe more easily."

Assistance in preparing this story was provided by Paul Cole in Birmingham.