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Rotherham Shortlisted Town of Culture2028


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FERHAM FESTIVAL

Roma young people's music project





Ferham Festival is a long-established community event which takes place every summer in the park in Ferham, a diverse working-class neighbourhood close to Rotherham town centre. Alongside an artistic programme for the day selected by a community panel, in the months leading up to the 2024 festival FLUX engaged Rotherham-born artist Rian Treanor, to work with a group of Roma young people from Relentless Youth Club to create work to showcase at the festival.



Rian is a renowned electronic dance music and sound artist. As well as a highly successful recording career, he has a track record in designing straightforward interfaces for complex music technology to help people with no experience to engage in making electronic music. ***"In basic terms, you might have a controller with 4 dials, if you move dial 1 it changes the rhythmic pattern, if you change dial 2 it changes the sounds it's triggering, and so on."*** He describes his interactive practice in communities as a two-way process, a way in which his own creative work is ***"less of a closed loop, open to other influences, more challenging and more rewarding."***

Initially, Rian asked the Relentless members to send him their favourite songs. Amongst what they sent him was gypsy folk, some from 1960s and some contemporary gypsy music. This was more raw, electronic street music that young people were listening to. Immediately Rian found himself exposed to a whole new musical genre. Significantly, he saw clear connections into Rotherham's music scene when he was growing up. ***"This connection between hardcore gypsy music and hardcore music in Rotherham properly does align in a really genuine way."***

Over 7 sessions Rian worked with small groups and individuals at the club to make new music by cutting and mixing old and new gypsy folk music and the Uprising style from Rotherham; a new synthesis that really clicked with some of the young people and for him artistically.

He developed a new interface using a controller where 3 people could play at once using beats, samples of different music, and weird noises. It brought together Rotherham, Slovakian gypsy folk, and contemporary electronic music practice into something brand new.

"You perhaps wouldn't immediately think that this would be immediately successful with first generation migrant kids from Slovakia but when you get actual music that they're interested in and put it in and work with that as a starting point, it's a doorway to more complex stuff."

Ferham Festival 2024



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On the day the approach to performance remained flexible but the group had the headlining slot and would close the festival. Young people were excited about it: ***"I love the festival, I want to headline it!"***.

Rian created a technical set up where young people could perform one after another but the order, and who exactly would play on the day, wasn't set. In the end, 40 young people were onstage, all the members of the youth group and their family members were there.

It was a great moment. Comments from the young people: ***"Did you see me, miss?"***, ***"Can we do this all day next year?"***, ***"Is the stage staying up, we want to come back tomorrow"***, ***"I feel seen, thank you for including me"***, ***"The stage was so big, loved bringing my little sister on stage with me."*** And (about one of the FLUX workers, a Ferham local) ***"As if you get paid to do this, and you're from Ferham!"***

Going forward, there is a body of recorded material that Rian wants to make into a mixtape and release, with young people involved in the production process.



Numbers

7 workshop sessions

60 young people involved

1 live performance
(with 40 participants and festival audience of 2214)

Community context

In August 2024 right wing demonstrations and violence flared up across the UK. In Rotherham at Manvers an asylum seekers hotel was targeted by 700 far-right protesters. The police were temporarily overwhelmed, and a stairwell was set on fire with people trapped inside.

It was an extremely serious incident; the subsequent investigation has resulted in 90 people being charged so far and over 150 years' worth of jail sentences handed to those responsible. This created a really challenging context for running a multicultural community festival just 2 weeks later, both for local residents and workers and for the young people involved.

During the festival planning community panel members had said ***"It feels different this time - I am confident that we'll be heard. You understand what the festival means."*** After the events at Manvers their response was ***"Ferham puts our trust into FLUX, whatever decision you make we understand (to make changes to the festival) but we are not scared."***

FLUX was determined to go ahead, with some precautionary timing adjustments to reduce risk, and with the full support of partners and local police. In the run up to the festival FLUX workers on the ground had children asking for posters to hang in their own homes and windows ***"I want to be on the poster"***, ***"Can we come hang up the posters with you?"***





People's highlights included:

Local Mosque: "Well done, this is more than I thought was ever possible. It's great to see different cultures coming together."

Community Panel representative: "You did what we asked and more, can we do more? It is a great park that connects the whole community together."

Residents: (Pakistani woman) "I almost didn't come today, I was worried for me and my children after what happened in Manvers. I was getting WhatsApp of the Indian women performing (Sonia Sabri) and had to bring my girls, they look so pretty – I can't believe this is in Ferham."

(Muslim man): "I don't have the words, I could only dream of it looking this good."

Faith leader: "I'm sorry I didn't engage, I didn't know we could actually have the festival we've gotten today. I was protecting my community."

What we've learnt

The right artist is key to success. Here, the artist was local and was partially motivated by his own experience of growing up in Rotherham. He understood the communities and had grown up with community tensions. He had already had some experience of working with Roma young people and was able to design and run sessions that engaged them well. His skills and experience, ability to work with the intense energy of the group, and a flexible and responsive approach, underpinned the success of the project. He was able to both ***"stretch their awareness of what is possible and challenge them."***

The artist's approach to the project was closely aligned to his creative practice. It wasn't closely rehearsed or too strict and was more focused on working together and intuitively responding to each other; improvising live music, embodying the process rather than composing; and not having a set idea about the end result.





It was sometimes challenging to manage the group and the support of the church/youth club staff was essential. Working in small groups and 1-1 worked well, but also sometimes it was good to work with the whole group ***"to let the energy out, you might miss something exciting and dynamic if you didn't do that!".***

"The music is a real cultural connection point, the Rotherham music still handed down to kids now, the Roma kids are so musically talented. There's a real connection to be made between people through that music. In relation to what happened at Manvers and race issues in Rotherham, that could be a quite amazing connection, there's potential in there for sure. Music can really facilitate that integration in a way that people might enjoy and want to do".

Watch a film of the festival here



