

**Looking for a Brand New Beat:
Making the Case for Community Arts
by Mark Webster**

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When I was nine, the school music teacher made me stand up in front of my class mates and whistle a tune she first played on the piano. After the first four notes, she told me to sit down. She went on to the next one in line to find out if they were one of the gifted few allowed to join the school choir and receive special tuition. Sitting in my place, I obviously wasn't to be one of the few. As a result of this experience, I always believed that I was neither musically talented nor that I could sing in tune. My ability to sing had been destroyed at the outset by the very person whose job it was to nurture it.

At the age of twenty five, when I was the lead singer of a band and was writing my own songs, I would look back on this incident and reflect on its significance; concluding that the system, in one fell swoop, had tried to remove not only my right to sing and play music but it had denied me the opportunity to learn, and thus my right to participate in the activity that we broadly call 'culture'.

My school experience has a familiar ring to a lot of people. If not in the music class they may have had the same experience in (what was then quaintly called) poetry appreciation, or in painting or drawing. Alienation from the creative process often happens at an early age and is perpetuated by later experiences, leaving people with the feeling that Art is something that happens somewhere else, not in their lives, and is done by other, more talented people.

This state of affairs is not something peculiar to Britain. All western and northern industrialised countries have demonstrated this same tendency: to lodge the power to create and define the Arts (visual, performing and plastic) in the hands of an economic and cultural elite, producing arts institutions and an official culture that primarily reflects their own interests.

When I finally bought a guitar and taught myself to play and later to sing, it was

with the help and encouragement of friends and family and nothing to do with any organised institution. This is another common experience for many people. Despite the tendency to institutionalise, intellectualise and commercialise culture, many of us do actually develop an interest in the Arts and, against all adversity, do participate in all sorts of creative activities. We find that every community has its dancers, painters and poets; that people get together to sing, act, perform and to tell stories; that nearly everyone seems to have an Uncle John who has a pile of self written stories under his bed, or an Auntie Barbara who can sing a mean version of some Gilbert and Sullivan classic.

The Community Arts Movement grew up in this country in the 1970's because there were people who believed that these skills, talents and activities deserved to be valued, nurtured and developed. Despite the apparent mass availability of culture (magazines, TV, film, pop music, theatres) in the marketplace, its definition and creation was falling into the hands of fewer and fewer people, and the majority of creative activities were going on largely unnoticed and under-represented. It attempted to re-establish the link between people and culture, to stimulate and inspire new types of activity, and to value and promote latent or hidden skills and talents in communities. It developed into a wide spread and influential activity.

Community Arts takes as its starting point the view that everyone is creative and has something to contribute. It attempts to give people the tools to be active, confident participators and creators; to help communities discover, develop and use their ability to express themselves through creativity. In short, to give them a voice in the creation of culture.

From the beginning there have been very many models for the development of community arts. Community Arts is not defined by a form but by a process.

- Community Arts can be anything from a community festival to a book, from a video to a dance, from a mosaic to a mural, or even a combination of all these and more.
- Community arts activities are generally grouped together in the form of projects with an agreed outcome in mind which will usually involve some sort of product or performance made by a community group.
- Projects normally involve an artist or arts worker, professionals who make a living from sharing their skills with people.
- Since the scale of much of the work often necessitates the involvement of more than one worker and a considerable number of resources, teams have developed

made up of workers with complimentary skills.

- Projects do not simply spring out of mid-air, they need to be administered, coordinated and managed. As a result, the last ten or so years has also seen the rise of another group of people called Community Arts Development Workers, often in a local authority context. It is their job to see the potential for projects, to talk to people, to find money, to set up and manage projects and ultimately to identify potential new developments after projects have finished.

As the movement has grown, it has become increasingly professionalised. It appears to have lost some of its youthful idealism: so much so that many commentators argue that the original intentions of the movement have become so diluted, and the range of activities called Community Arts so diversified by the need to accept money from such a broad range of sources, that it now makes no sense to talk about community arts as a movement at all.

Community Arts is dead. Long live Community Arts

The accusation that Community Arts is dead comes from two sources. Firstly, those who think that the increasing involvement of development workers and coordinators along with the inclusion of all sorts of non arts-based agendas has robbed the Art from the Community Art, leaving it as a stale sort of low quality arts-based social work, creating inferior products and giving participants second class experiences. Secondly, those who believe that many 'mainstream' Arts organisations do so much to make their activities accessible that the need for a community arts movement has largely passed. As one Director of a medium scale theatre company once told me, 'Well, we are all community artists now.'

Part of the problem rests in the fact that The Movement has been reluctant to both shout about its successes or over-define its activities. This vacuum has enabled a lot of bandwagon jumping by those who want to lay claim to the concept. Another part of the problem lies in the fact that the core principals of Community Arts are that it should encourage greater access and participation in the Arts. Two principles which, on the surface at least, are easy to copy. As a result, orchestras now have community outreach programmes, theatres run community accessible workshops and Galleries and Museums have culturally specific programming. New developments have seen many non arts-based organisations adopting Community Arts methods as well. Town planners now use Community Arts to involve local communities in the development of new initiatives. In youth clubs, hospitals, day centres and community centres throughout the UK participative arts are being used to involve groups and communities in creative activity for all sorts of reasons.

Everyone is in on the act. And while every attempt to make the arts more accessible is to be generally welcomed, not all these developments serve to bring communities any closer to changing the cultural status quo. While it is true that a lot of what has gone on under the name of Community Arts has been of questionable quality, it is equally true that most attempts by none Community Arts-based organisations to introduce Community Arts methods have been done more to legitimise and justify the existence of their organisations rather than to bring people closer to the means to create culture.

I would argue that, far from being dead, there is a greater than ever need for Community Arts. While we have seen a huge increase in the number of groups applying for one off grants (from National Lottery sources), the number of organisations offering sustained support over a long period of time to Community Arts activity in communities has diminished. This tendency, if left unchecked, results in the situation where those who are best at shouting about their needs get the most resources and support. These inevitably will not be those who need it most, nor those who have the greatest commitment to the democratisation of culture.

Drowning not Waving

If we do not keep shouting about the need for Community Arts there is a real danger that it could disappear. The Community Arts movement has always argued that it exists to help communities find their voice. It now badly needs to find its own. While we need to be flexible enough to fit into the flavour of the month funding, we also have to remember what it is that is important about Community Arts and to start shouting about it ourselves.

Community Arts offers an alternative view - that the arts can be a broad-based activity available to everyone. Given a chance to make art collectively, in a way that is self affirming and democratic, people gain new skills and confidence. More than anything else, Community Arts is about change. It works at a local level with issues and themes that are relevant. Through being involved in Community Arts activities, people are empowered to find their own authentic voice, to express their aspirations and concerns creatively; to do nothing less than to create their own culture.

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