INTERVIEW

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**Post-Punk Poet: An interview with Dick Witts of The Passage**

**ABSTRACT**

Richard 'Dick' Witts is a professional musicologist music historian, and ex leader of 1980s band [the Passage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Passage_%28band%29). He was born in [Cleethorpes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleethorpes), [Lincolnshire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincolnshire), and studied at the [Royal Manchester College of Music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Manchester_College_of_Music) and briefly at [Manchester University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manchester_University). During this time he was a member of the [Hallé Orchestra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hall%C3%A9_Orchestra) as a percussionist. During the mid-1970s he wrote for the contemporary classical music magazine *Contact* and was also involved in starting the Manchester Musicians Collective. This led to contact with the growing punk scene and he formed The Passage, producing their recordings and singing on many of their releases. He presented the BBC television programme *Oxford Road Show* in the early 1980s and was also a reporter for [BBC Radio 3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Radio_3). During the late 1980s he became involved in arts administration roles. He subsequently wrote a critical history of the [Arts Council of Great Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arts_Council_of_Great_Britain) (1998), as well as books on Nico (1993) and The Velvet Underground (2006). Dick now lives in [Liverpool](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liverpool) and is Reader in Music and Sound, and Programme Leader for the Music, Sound, Enterprise programme. *The Passage. Post-Punk Poets* (2017), a collection of lyrics and visual material, was recently published by Eyewear Publishing.

**KEYWORDS**

Dick Witts

The Passage

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Manchester

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Back at the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, The Passage released four amazing albums on various indie labels, toured, played on the radio, and then quietly disbanded. Their songs discussed gender, love and sexuality (among other things) and also railed against the sexism and brutality of the police, particularly in the form of James Anderton, then Manchester's Chief Constable, in clever, pithy and intriguing songs. Despite critical acclaim they pretty much disappeared without trace until LTM re-issued the albums on CD, with the addition of bonus material and also an album of BBC recordings, in 2003. And now there's a beautiful, limited edition hardback of selected lyrics, photos and commentaries, including an afterword by Passage mainman and lyricist Dick Witts, who is now a music lecturer and researcher at Edge Hill University.

There's always a risk about presenting song lyrics as poetry, words isolated on the page away from the music, but judicious selection and presentation here escapes that trap. Although it says poets on the front, it's really an exercise in memorabilia, a tribute and a reminder of how great The Passage were. The lyrics are direct and precise, as political and questioning as Crass or any anarcho-punk band, but far more subtle and intriguing. There's a wit evident here too, which was sometimes lost on record, along with an occasional tenderness and concern.

What's particularly interesting is how these lyrics seem more relevant than ever now that Britain seems to be returning to the social disarray and poverty of 30 or 40 years ago. 'Dark Times' indeed:

 everything's fine wonderful dreams

 pills to swallow needles to clean

 the curtains are drawn day and night

 we don't want to watch any drama outside

 we hate it hate it hate it hate it all

 if you didn't know us you'd think it bizarre

 everyone charged up falling apart

 it's all so sticky so very queer and

 we can't work out what happening here

[...]

 we've got a little time, too little time

 but you know deep inside

 we're at the end of the line

 we're dancing through dark times

 (2017: 20-21)

Elsewhere the lyrics are denser: images and comments piling up like a car crash in 'Sunburn', mimicing Kurt Schwitters' abstract songs in 'bdr usa ddr jfk', cleverly voicing desire and lust in 'Carnal.

This is smart, self-aware writing that sometimes seems as disgusted with itself and the excesses of music, drugs and sex as critical of those with their own taboos, rules and self-righteous censoriousness. It is indeed, the evidence of a passage: through time, through the music industry, through youth culture, through to something else and beyond. Welcome to today's world, same as the one we thought we'd left behind. The time seemed ripe to interview the author of these powerful works.

**Rupert Loydell**: How's it feel becoming a post-punk poet after all these years? Without going into the 'can lyrics be poetry?' debate, what do you think about your texts in *The Passage. Post-Punk Poets* detached from the music they were originally part of? Did Eyewear or you initiate the book? Todd Swift's foreword suggests that he is a big fan and is also listed as one of the editors – presumably to do with selection and ordering?

**Richard Witts**: The book was the bold suggestion of Eyewear. When I write a song, I write down the lyric and the music (which is unusual; most songwriters develop the music directly through their instruments). Actually, I would write cues and patterns rather than the whole thing, and the lyrics without repetition. Then I’d learn them! I don’t expect the lyric to be seen by anyone; it is something to be heard. In print the lyrics look cold to me, like mortuary bodies on slabs. Eyewear has warmed them up with typography, images and colour (well, our favourite colours: black and white and red). As for selecting the songs and the order they go in, I’m hopeless at making that kind of choice, and would prefer to leave it to chance. Todd Swift and Alex Payne were my *i ching*.

**RL**: I was relistening to *Pindrop* (1980), the first Passage album, in preparation for this interview. It's much murkier sounding, and much stranger, than I remember. It sits uncomfortably with it's musical neighbours of the time, although one might draw slight comparisons with the brevity of Wire songs and the awkwardness of early Fall. Where did you think you were coming from (or going to) musically?

**RW**: It was a statement rendered on the materials I had – physical and mental. I’m glad it still sounds strange: if it’s not distinctive, why do it and why play it? At the time there were these little 4-track suburban studios run by young engineers setting themselves up after the decline of larger corporate studios in the early 1970s. The technical gear was analogue, and so the ‘murkiness’ is a consequence of this pre-digital world. Time was also an issue – being pushed by engineers to finish up before the next band came in.

**RL**: I was never very drawn towards the early punk of The Pistols et al, which just seemed like another version of rock, it was the second wave of musicians like XTC, Magazine, Wire, early Simple Minds, Cabaret Voltaire, The Pop Group, This Heat and the original Essential Logic that were more interesting. These bands seemed to allow themselves to plunder the past as it were, rather than simply reject it. Keyboards and saxophones were allowed back in to music too. As someone who was into progressive rock and being introduced to jazz and improvisation it made much more sense. I've seen you namecheck Van der Graaf Generator and other bands, and classical music. Do you feel similarly about music in retrospect?

**RW**: You might say that post-punk existed before punk. It was submerged during the punk days, and re-emerged touched by punk but not imbricated with it: short songs, out-of-tunefulness, insistence (a word I prefer to ‘repetition’) and so on. Van De Graf Generator is a good example of a band that was more innovatively influential than, say, The Sex Pistols (Johnny Rotten made this decision himself by turning himself into the wonderful PiL). Some of the groups you mention, such as the Cabs and This Heat, are those whose members I met before punk took charge. Patti Smith in New York was an influence to many, and responsible for the bohemian demeanour of post-punk: by the way, Patt-i Smith/ Mark E Smith.

**RL**: You've written about Nico and The Velvet Underground. Are they part of the musical continuum that fed into punk? John Cale was active as a producer at the end of the 1970s and the early 80s, releasing his terrific *Sabotage/Live* album in 1979, and the bleak *Music for a New Society* in 1982. Nico struggled to find a place to work, didn't she? I remember her being booed and canned off when she supported the Banshees. Are the Velvet Underground the precursors of punk that they are made out to be? (I prefer Television and Patti Smith myself.)

**RW**: The Velvets were certainly an influence on punk if you take into account the American punk scene of the early 1970s, the re-emerged Lou Reed especially, both as an awkward ‘personality’ and a fine songwriter. And 'White Light/White Heat' (1968) was something everyone could play, so helpful to building bands up and even forming them or auditioning in them. Nico, however, was locked into 1967, Jim Morrison who helped her to write songs, and a pioneer of ‘goth’.

**RL**: The same friend who took me to improvised and free jazz gigs at the London Musician Collective, was the first to play me Joy Division , and also Spherical Objects, who like The Passage were part of the Manchester Musicians Collective. This seems a very different entity to the LMC, in that it appears to have encompassed a wide range of musical activity, not just improvised music (although the LMC did accommodate the occasional experimental punk event). How did it work? You've debunked the idea of Manchester and the North as a grim eastern bloc city, so why did Manchester produce so many great bands?

**RW**: The LMC (of which I later became a trustee) was set up by free jazz and other improvising musicians and comes out of a different period and set of genres. The Manchester collective, set up as part of the residency of the wonderful electronics composer Trevor Wishart, came out of youngsters wanting to perform in the wake of punk. The Fall did their first set at a meeting, which were held on Monday nights in a basement, and subsequently at Band On The Wall – a talking shop opened the proceedings and then some bands would give a gig. We did have visits from London improvisers such as David Toop, John Surman, Lol Coxhill and Henry Cow, while Manchester’s modern jazz scene was itself very modest.

 There were burgeoning genre scenes in a number of cities - you’ve referred to the Cabs, who were in Sheffield, and I remember at the Russell club on Friday nights, a group would appear early on what seemed like every week with keyboards and a crude drum machine, and they’d be ignored until the club would quieten while they sang a cover of 'You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling'. They became The Human League, another Sheffield band – so it wasn’t as territorial as some assume.

 Manchester was a largish city, always wanting to prove itself, often as the ‘second city’ against Birmingham. It was promoted as England’s Chicago, but it never had a group like Liverpool had The Beatles, hence the campaign nowadays to promote Joy Division into that position. There has always been an interest in movements, of a somewhat self-conscious nature, and the ‘official’ history promotes bands that fit into certain categories (‘Madchester' is a notorious example). Internationally successful artists like Simply Red or James get excluded.

**RL**: And how did Object Music fit into all this? Was it an in-house record label? How did someone like New York's Tirez Tirez fit in? Why did The Passage move labels?

**RW**: I don’t know anything about Tirez-Tirez. Object was one guy, Steve Solamar, and his bother in Manchester who were ‘alternative’ entrepreneurs typical of the period. Steve had a flat in the notorious Hulme council estate. He wanted to raise some money for his (now her) sex change operation. Later Virgin offered a deal, and we went with that for two albums, then Cherry Red. LTM have now digitised these albums from these two labels, and Cherry Red put us on various compilations now and again.

**RL**: The Passage albums become both better produced and funkier as time goes on. (I say as time, goes on but *Pindrop*, *For All and None* (1981), *Degenerates* (1982) and *Enflame* (1983) were all issued in a four year period.) There were quite plausibly commercial singles released, and the band toured and got mainly good press coverage and radio airplay. But throughout there remains a political aggression, specifically towards James Anderton and the Manchester police force, and also a frank and belligerent focus on gender and sexuality. Did you want to be pop stars or just sell music? Didn't the subject matter preclude that possibility?

**RW**: I think the book shows – surprisingly – how consistent we were over five years. With a large label you can get better-resourced studios, but also it must be remembered that digital technology was developing in the early 1980s, and that explains the improvement in technical quality. We never had a producer ­– we had an engineer instead – but we should have done. That was a major mistake. However, I remember going to the BBC studio at the Langham to do a ‘Peel session’. There was all this new digital equipment in. It looked wonderful. But the producer admitted that none of the engineers on duty knew how to make it work properly. We bumbled about. Nevertheless, I think the Peel session versions of songs sound first rate. The kind of mash-up use of analogue and digital that went on at that time provides one of the signature sounds of post punk.

 As for ‘funky’, an interest in disco and reggae (Andy was very keen on reggae) developed more generally in the post punk scene. When we went to America and saw that people did actually dance to our music, on our return we wanted audiences to dance and we tried to make music you really could dance to. It was slightly ironic because on stage I was ‘locked in’ , stuck with my lips to the microphone and my hands to the three sets of keyboards.

**RL**: How does it feel looking back from academia to the music of the 80s? Was there a freedom perhaps precipitated by punk, even if it wasn't very 'revolutionary', musically or lyrically, itself? Did it create a situation where new music was getting made and distributed? And by different people? Or did it become commodified so quickly that it didn't matter or change anything in the long term?

**RW**: Well, it is possible to divide that period into three: 1976-83, 1983-8, and then with the prominence of rap into the 1990s. The first period – that of punk, post punk, disco, early Hip Hop and the emergence of goth – came about at a time of economic crisis, inflation and unemployment, where this crisis hit the major record companies and let the indies in for a while. Then, as the global market re-developed, pop in the form of Madonna and Duran Duran took over. So, there was this little window for post punk up to 1983.

**RL**: You've acknowledged the music press were quite supportive of The Passage, yet also spoken out about the pseudo-intellectualism of music journalists at the time. (Not to mention taking the mick out of them by juxtaposing review quotes in a booklet and press release that accompanied one of the albums – a document reproduced in the new book.) How does that square with academic research and writing which has adopted the voice of deconstruction, philosophy and sociology?

**RW**: I feel that it is the duty of academics to expose poor writing, trite opinions and the tendency of these writers to be lazy in their research. One of my areas of work is called Popular Music Studies (‘low theory’), and I must say that many writers in that area do not analyse and check their facts, but instead they indulgently promote music they heard in their teens, little more than masturbation. So you have bad journalists scribbling ‘the first page of history’ and lifeless academics writing the second page. In my essays I aim to explain quite why these people – not musicians – are working in this way. There are some fine writers, the chief of which is Simon Frith.

**RL**: And what about the fact that almost every 1980s band except The Passage have now reformed? Is it just our generation being nostalgic, a marketing opportunity, or was there something important going on that is only now being recognised as such? Or does it sit with the times we find ourselves in, with its echoes of Tory Britain under Thatcher?

**RW**: I would think to think it is in part because these musicians like to play and perform. Several of them will have families and so they benefit from an income, which for some can be better got now from playing and touring than from recording. As to re-forming, some time ago I saw a Manchester band do this at London’s ICA. it was embarrassing, luckily with a small (and bald) audience.

**RL**: I know from my own experiences as a university lecturer that we live in a culture where young people are brought up in a yes/no environment at school, often with a formulaic set of quotes or answers to answer exam questions. We spend a lot of time with our first years trying to break that attitude down, so that students can think for themselves and discuss and argue about their critical and creative responses. In broad terms I find them quite a conservative! Is it similar in music education? I know my friends who used to teach music at Dartington College of Arts often struggled to raise interest in, say, improvisation or contemporary classical music, to move away from the classical canon and a reliance on technique and the idea of virtuosity.

**RW**: I run a module titled Music Since 1945. Concerning the ‘serious’ music end of it, many students’ eyes brighten only when I play them Terry Riley and Steve Reich. Even Philip Glass some find ‘extreme’. A whole range of music, from Stockhausen to Haas, means nothing to them without explaining, inducing, pleading, urging and insisting that it is of value for them to engage with it. It’s hard work, as so many of them detest complexity, sophistication of thought, or discomfort. Still, they get an earload of it. What disappoints someone of my generation is that we have landed in a highly conservative landscape that has imperilled, if not quite yet destroyed, the social progress that our music was meant to contribute towards. Still, I hope that the naive enthusiasm I have retained somehow infects my students as an aural malaria.

**RL**: Music is more available than ever, and easier to make and distribute, yet it is harder to be successful as a musician, composer or recording artist. As a poet I know that something can have a cultural value that makes it still worth doing, yet little financial value. As a musician do you rail against that, as someone like Robert Fripp does, or do you accept it and find other ways to make a living, be that as a university lecturer, from band merchandise you sell on world tours, or issuing small runs of collectable CDs or cassettes through your website? How does that sit with your research about music policy in the UK?

**RW**: I have chosen writing and researching in an academic environment, rather than flogging badges and vinyl EPs, although there is a thin line between the two. The money to be made nowadays still comes mainly out of songwriting – look at all of these Swedish millionaires – and some producing. As for making a living, Adele and Ed Sheeran are hardly complaining. The music industry has not changed in the way many assume, but it *has* adapted. It has certainly reformulated methods – versions and remixes – and found ways to engage fruitfully with streaming, and so forth. Is there good music to be had, though? I think so, courtesy of songwriters like Frank Ocean and Laura Mvula, among others, and not just in their genres, but elsewhere: from Queen Zena and the Susstones at the queer punk end to Anna Meredith at the experimental, for example. There is hope for those of us who believe that some popular music can deliver critical messages to society.

 As to policy, my interest lies with government, local government and major institutions, rather than record companies and agents. I’ve just written the opening chapter of an academic book titled *Sounds Northern*, which will come out next year. I write an alternative history of the cities of Liverpool and Manchester, which are supposed to be musical rivals. I look at the way that local politicians exploit this ideological view in order to gain cultural value.

**RL**: Can you tell me about your involvement with Icebreaker? And any other musical or writing projects you re working on?

**RW**: Icebreaker is a wonderful band (or ‘ensemble’ when we’re in concert halls) of 12 top musicians who play post-minimal music, rather similar style to the American band/ensemble Bang On A Can. I get to do some of the pre-concert talks, and suggest repertory. As to what I’m working on: I’m still formulating songs and I’m writing a big book about the history of music policy at the BBC. An updated reissue of my Nico biography comes out next year, too.

**RL**: Thank you for your time.

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NOTE

The four Passage LPs were reissued on CD, with bonus and single tracks, along with an album of BBC Sessions by LTM, Norfolk, in 2003. LTM have also reissued many other albums from Object Music, including albums by Spherical Objects.

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