Woke up this morning,   
somebody rewrote the past

The only time I met Adrian Henri was in 1982. He was the tutor on a writing course run by my H.E. College at a weird little arts centre in Cheshire. He was lazy, grumpy and disinterested; after a 30 minute briefing or writing exercise late each morning he would disappear to the village pub with his girlfriend Carol Ann Duffy (who had turned up after a couple of days), leaving us to get on with it, or find him in the pub where, if we persisted, we might (or might not) get an alcohol-fuelled individual tutorial about our work. He appeared to have no sense of humour, either, especially not for smartarse students who wrote pastiches of his poems for performance on the final night.

These pastiches were due to the subject of the poetry he had published: casual free verse odes to sex, lust, the charms of young girls, and girls in Liverpool (you get the idea). Whereas Roger McGough could make you laugh out loud with his social observation, Brian Patten's melancholic and romantic lyrical charm win you over, even on the page, and Adrian Mitchell inspire you to fight the revolution, Henri's poetry did nothing for me. Truth be told, it still doesn't.

But... (A big but) But now there seems to be some kind of re-assessment in the air, and it's not really about his poetry. Henri was also a painter, musician and performance artist. There's a big exhibition about him at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, which I haven't seen yet, and Ecstatic Peace Library have published an amazing full-colour oversize book about his work. I kind of knew he was part of The Liverpool Scene group (or band), and I have a collection by Grimms, another band that, like The Scaffold, came out of the Liverpool poetry scene, but I had no idea about the early performance art days of Henri & co., or that The Liverpool Scene were ever as 'big' as they were.

By big, I mean that they played the major music festivals of their day, and toured with the likes of Led Zeppelin. Proper rock tours with bands I've heard of, well everyone has heard of. By performance art, I mean dingy pub rooms and basements where happenings occurred: improvised art, taped sound effects, graffiti, poems read aloud, musical skronk, haphazard exhibitions, all in a cigarette and alcohol haze. It sounds great, and the Liverpool Scene's long track 'Made in the USA', a poem-cum-sound-collage-cum-social-critique shows that sometimes it was, and still is, great.

*Adrian Henri: I Want Everything to Happen*, the book, is beautifully produced, with lots of colour, photos and images. Everything from hippy-style flyers to ticket stubs and paintings are reproduced here, with a scattering of statements, reminiscences and reviews along with a few poems for good measure. The paintings are UK Pop Art, a slightly fey take on the slick USA version, with cereal boxes and washing powder cartons to the fore. There are some drawings and collages, and lots of photos of Henri looking groovy with Allen Ginsberg, striking poses with his band, and looking artistic next to his art. There's also an Adrian Henri timeline, which precedes an overlong and rather dull list of every gig the Liverpool Scene ever played, which is followed by a discography.

This is serious canonization, and Saint Adrian in stain glass will surely follow at the Poetry Church. Adrian Henri is now officially not only a poet, he is a rock star, a painter, an artist, an all-round renaissance man... a friend of the stars. Look, I don't wan to diss it all, the book is a lovely object, some of the albums and tunes turn out to be okay (you can find most of them on Youtube), but it's of its time and it's not really that great in the grand scheme of things. It's recycled Beat poetry reinvented in Liverpool for those who would go on to be hippies, and most of the music is a pastiche of rock'n'roll – however well done, it's that same old blues again. I think the world has moved on, and I know I have.

*City Poems & City Music: Adrian Henri and Friends* is on at The Whitechapel Gallery, London until 9 June 2019.

*Adrian Henri: I Want Everything to Happen*, ed. Catherine Marcangeli (Ecstatic Peace Library)

*Chips versus Poetry: 50 Years of the Mersey Sound* is afantastic documentary about the Liverpool Poets. It features a frighteningly young Brian Patten and fantastic scenes of the city. You can watch it at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyzKpKD-zhU