

**Ian Sinclair's talk, *Fitting Pieces* book launch, Cafe Oto 14/4/2019.**

[In the mid-Sixties] My life changed thanks to Renchi, who I'd known in Dublin, as I'd known Ivan very well, who was a friend of Tom Baker, who also moved to Dalston. Tim Goulding had been a long-term friend of Renchi's, Tim Booth had illustrated magazines that I'd worked on... So that kind of nexus, I think is wonderfully described in this book, better than you'll see anywhere else. I've seen so many bogus accounts of what life was like in Dublin, either re-treading *The Ginger Man* or else this kind of vision of Northern Ireland, the Horse Protestants [the Anglo-Irish] as they used to call them, and this kind of actorly version of Dublin in which everybody was innocent, a perpetual party... And there was a real genuine countercultural 'thing' which involved music, literature, art... and Strangelies were a kernel, definitely at the centre of all that.

I'd only been to Dalston at that time, twice in my life. I was a film student in the Electric Avenue in Brixton in 1962 and I never really got beyond the Northern Line, I just worked on this trajectory up and down - I used to go deeper and darker into South London - and occasionally venture across the river and go on. And then a film by Joseph Losey called *The Criminal*, a really good film, was being shown in the cinema right across the road [from Cafe Oto]. So I had to venture to Dalston and it seemed another world, very attractive, very dark.

So later when I moved back from Dublin in 1966 to London, I did a walk with some friends from Highgate. We started with the ashes of Freud in Golders Green, then we saw Karl Marx's head in Highgate, then we drifted down, found the Regent's Canal and kept walking east till we arrived in this Arcadia, which was Victoria Park, and some splinter lodged in my consciousness that this was somewhere really important and significant. So when the invitation came from Renchi, who had rented a house in De Beauvoir Road, the tribes from Dublin came. And later, Albion Drive, where I live, was condemned - it was all going to be pulled down, the tower blocks were going to be coming in - and you could get in there very cheaply on the understanding you'd be gone in a couple of years. And it was in that period that Strangelies came over; they were largely staying at Renchi's house on the corner of Albion Square. He painted in an upstairs room looking over this wonderful garden with a mound at the bottom, a kind of miniature silvery hill, and then this school - and the noise of that school was like a pleasure beach - and the wilderness off to the left, from which infiltrators used to pour into this garden - so it was like a magical time, in a sense.

But I also now recognize that we were the virus. We were the undoing of the whole area, we were the front runners for the horrors that were to come. I'm guilty, but I've also lived through the guilt and I'm still here, working out my penance. Little films started to be made - Renchi actually filmed the group when they were recording and we did some filming with them around in Dalston and Ivan stayed often with us at different times and we went for walks... I've still got my major receptacle for failed work, it's a big wickerwork basket that I found on a walk with Ivan, somewhere near the Olympic Park. It had been chucked out of the train and I took it home and it's still there...

In the early 1970s (I'll cut this short) I started to publish. The very first book I did, the same time as these films, was called *Back Garden Poems* and the cover is by Renchi, it was a collaboration. I looked at it the other day and I saw that actually the whole area is beautifully mapped in a kind of primitive way - like one of those medieval maps, with the things that were important to us; this was the Dalston that the Strangelies came into.... There's a poem in there - its title was I think Prime Bang Up In Hackney or A Flight In The Balloon and underneath is it there's an epigram and it's from Tim Goulding: 'Love was just a bitter nail.' So Strangelies were in there right from the start. Equally, Tim Goulding provided these wonderful - you can see the cannabis leaf, obviously - psychedelic drawings for a book by American writer Tony Lowes and it's kind of a travel journal, jail journal in the East and Tim provided the artwork, and so there's a kind of a network here, and that's what the films we did that showed them were part of, and we were very much connected. The get-out at the end of this was this epic walk that Renchi did from Hackney. He took off and walked all the way to Swansea, got across to Ireland, walked out to Allihies and stayed with Tim and had this experience he called 'Schoolhouse Visions' and these drawings and these shamanic entities and energies that poured out of that, have been the haunting thing that's behind a lot of the walks and books I subsequently did - one with Renchi around the M25 and elsewhere.

You have to work occasionally, so I was teaching in Walthamstow in a monstrous, Soviet building, the Technical College. Afterwards I was driving back every day to Clapton - and, apart from the wonders of the Lea Bridge Road, which is something else, there's a chemist's shop, as I turned towards Hackney Downs, called 'FA Strange,' - Dr Strangely Strange. Every time I passed it I thought, wait a minute... FA Strange, this is a kind of apothecary's, this is Thomas De Quincy's apothecary. One day I'm going to go in and go up to the counter and say [*whispers*] 'Dr Strangely Strange.' And they're going to open a trapdoor - and this is a trans-dimensional portal... So I looked up the reviews of FA Strange and one said: 'This is the worst pharmacy in East London' - and the other one said: 'I've never been somewhere better. I was setting off for East Africa and they fitted me up exactly with what I wanted.' Take your pick!