

TEENAGE KICKS

MICHAEL BRADLEY

MY LIFE
AS AN
UNDERTONE



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One

I really have to write this down before I forget most of it. I mean, just last Wednesday John O'Neill couldn't believe that I had no recollection of the time Special Branch officers came in to the Gaumont Theatre in Southampton to take him away during a soundcheck. It was 1980. He went quietly, which is not a word usually associated with The Undertones' soundchecks.

John came back just as quietly, without any charges or publicity or, it seemed, much annoyance. Maybe that's why I can't remember it. He didn't make a big deal out of it.

We didn't make a big deal about anything – appearances on *Top Of The Pops*, tours of the USA with The Clash, faking our drummer's death, or wrongful arrests of the man who wrote John Peel's all-time favourite record.

There wasn't much fuss either about the way I joined The Undertones. It was August 1974 and I'd been hanging round with Vincent O'Neill, his brother John, and their friend Billy Doherty. I was just turning 15 and was on a camping holiday with them in Bundoran, a seaside resort in Donegal, when they asked me to join their band. I knew they had a band but also knew there was no sign of anyone actually picking up instruments to play together. It was theoretical at this stage.

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I had met Vinny at St Peter's High School in Creggan. He impressed me with his enthusiasm and knowledge of pop music. He was the first person to tell me that the new singles chart was counted down on the Johnny Walker show on Radio 1 each Tuesday lunchtime. I'd always assumed it was revealed for the first time on Thursday night's *Top Of The Pops*. Within weeks Vinny had me walking and talking about what was likely to be number one as we went home for our dinner. (We had dinner at lunchtime. We had tea at dinner time. Sometimes we had dinner at dinner time.)

I'd get into our house in Creggan Broadway at about half past twelve, get the details of the new chart and would be at the top of Eastway at one o'clock waiting to meet Vinny again. I'd see him making his way up the hill, sometimes with Eamon Duffy, who, being a year younger and a foot shorter, would be trotting alongside as Vinny pounded on.

On the way back to school we would go through the new entries and the Top 5 the way some people talk about football or horse racing. Would The Glitter Band's 'Just For You' make it the whole way to number one? What about 'Seasons In The Sun'? Does 'The Six Teens' mark the beginning of a slow artistic and commercial decline for The Sweet? (That last question wasn't really asked. But it's worth a discussion 40 years later.)

I used to volunteer opinions about the records but if Vinny or anyone else at St Peter's disagreed I'd be more than happy to change those same opinions. I didn't like the new direction Mud were taking with 'Lonely This Christmas' which pre-dated the Elvis impressions industry by about five years. But if Vinny or Kieran Quigg or Christopher Tierney liked it, then I discovered that maybe it wasn't too bad after all.

I have kept this ability to change with the prevailing winds of opinion to this very day.

Maybe that wasn't a bad thing when it came to making records, or decisions, with The Undertones. I could always be relied on to be in the middle, to see both sides, to recognise merit in many

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things. Which is another way of saying I was like that character in the *Fast Show* who tried to take part in the “Pick your all time England football team” pub discussion and always agreed with the last person talking. Who bears the impression of the last person sitting on them. Or maybe it isn’t. I don’t know, what do you think?

I’ll give you an example.

The day Ronald Reagan was shot we were having a band meeting in Feargal Sharkey’s living room. One had nothing to do with the other but surely you can remember where you were on March 22, 1981?

We had gathered in our singer’s home to discuss our drummer. Billy Doherty had decided he wanted to leave the band but then changed his mind the next day. This was more than the usual declaration of unhappiness that most of us had gone through, which would be quietly forgotten about after a day or two. Billy had actually arranged for a lawyer to draw up whatever legal documents were needed for drummers leaving punk bands. The lawyer had those documents in his briefcase alongside a record contract from EMI which would get us an advance of £175,000. Billy signed the deal, then signed himself out of the band at that same meeting in the Post House Hotel at Heathrow. We had flown in from Derry especially to sign the deal and flew back home straight afterwards. All of us except Billy, who disappeared for the day into the wilds of London.

The next morning, I was having a lie-in when my mother woke me.

“Billy Doherty’s at the front door.”

I got up, got dressed, went down and, sure enough, she was right.

I’m not sure why we describe someone’s expression as ‘sheepish’ when they’re actually being brave enough to admit they’re wrong. But I’ll use it in this case. Billy was sheepish as he said that he wanted back in the band. I didn’t invite him in. Not because I was angry (I wasn’t) but because he wanted to go and I wanted my breakfast.

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As he had signed away the deeds to his drumming stool, he needed us to agree to allow him back in. But Feargal and Damian (on lead guitar) didn't want him back.

A lot of things had happened over the previous two years, which seemed much more important then than they do now. It probably sounds really callous and cold hearted for two friends to even contemplate excluding one of their group from the one thing he loved doing. But I (the one who sees both sides, who changes his opinions with the blowing wind, remember?) knew why they were doing it. They felt that sometimes he was more trouble than he was worth – when I get round to telling you some of the things that had happened, you might even be on their side. Thankfully The Undertones weren't a TV reality show, or Billy could have been voted out by the viewers.

On the other side of the argument was John O'Neill, the main songwriter and the leader of the band. I wonder if 'leader' is the right word? We weren't Alexander's Ragtime Band and John wasn't standing in front waving a baton, but he was Damian's older brother and, to the rest of us, he definitely carried the most authority. He carried it uncomfortably, though.

John wanted Billy back in the band.

Billy had made a mistake. Who hasn't? We shouldn't be so lousy, he started the band, he was always keen for us to do things, and so on. That was the tenor of the meeting. I don't remember any discussion about his drumming ability. It wasn't about that.

So it was two to one against Billy being allowed back in our gang. The casting vote was mine.

We must have spent five or six hours kicking this argument around the room, while Billy was at home, presumably feeling a bit foolish. I could have saved us some time by being a bit more decisive, but I felt sorry for Billy. While at the same time agreeing with Damian and Feargal that maybe he'd brought it all on himself.

By the end of the night, after we'd stopped to watch the news about Reagan, I'd finally come down on John's side and it was two for and two against. And that meant Billy was back in.

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It was Billy that asked me if I wanted to join the band in that tent in Bundoran.

“Do you want to be in the band?”

“Alright.”

“OK. Do you want more beans?”

Not exactly Lennon and McCartney at Woolton Fete but it was good enough for me.

John, Billy and Vinny had already started talking about the songs this band of theirs would play. At this stage it was Billy on drums (or bongos, as that was all he had at the time), John on one guitar and Vinny on another guitar. In 1974 he was still called Vincent and not only by his mother. Damian, being a year and a half younger than Vincent, wasn't with us. He wasn't even talked to by the rest of us at this stage. He was just the wee brother.

I think I was asked to join because they felt awkward talking about this thing, this *band*, that they had and that I wasn't part of. Did they feel sorry that I was being excluded? I could play a couple of chords on guitar at the time, as could we all. I could even tune it.

I didn't have a decent guitar though. I had learned at St Peter's, where a teacher called Paul Elder held classes after school. He taught about half a dozen of us the basic chords on a Monday afternoon. Vincent and I sat there and learned 'The Banks Of The Ohio' (G, D and C). My sister Philomena bought me a Spanish guitar. It wasn't Spanish in the musical sense but it was made of wood and it had a paper picture of a flamenco dancer attached which definitely made it sound better. I carried it to school in a plastic sack that items from Freeman's catalogue were delivered in. My mother had the catalogue from which she'd order things down through the years. You paid up for them each week, which was useful when there are 11 children in the family.

The arrival of the new Freeman's catalogue was one of the highlights of my year. It was sent in a big cardboard envelope every six months and the younger half of our house descended on it like a plague of locusts. Locusts who liked toys. The winter catalogue was always better, as it had pages and pages of toys compared to the more

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clothing-oriented summer edition. Presumably for Santa to fall back on in the event of an elves strike.

Freeman's also sold musical instruments. I remember John ordering a black electric guitar from my mother's catalogue, paying back something like £3.50 a week. It was shaped like a Gibson Les Paul. I'm not sure it sounded like a Les Paul, or played like a Les Paul, but it didn't cost as much as an actual certified Les Paul. He only has three more payments to make and it's his to keep. It wasn't the first musical instrument my mother had supplied for the band, either. I was lucky enough to get a mandolin for Christmas in 1974. It was a semi acoustic model from Paddy Rice's record shop in Carlisle Road in Derry. It cost £35, money which she earned from cleaning a local community centre. At this stage we were intending to be a folk-ish kind of band. Something like Lindisfarne or 'Ooh La La' era Faces. I had the mandolin, John and Vincent had the guitars, and Billy had bongos. I really don't know how or why we arrived at this musical style. We weren't especially huge fans of either band, any more than we were of The Beatles. I think it might have been because of the cost. We already had acoustic guitars (and a mandolin) and if we didn't buy electric guitars then we wouldn't also have to buy amplifiers or a full drum kit.

As it turned out, we never got round to playing on stage with this non-electric line-up. Our one performance was in O'Neill's back room, what they called the kitchen, in Beechwood Avenue. The eldest of the family, Jim, had some friends round one afternoon and I think they wanted to hear this band that John and Vincent were starting. Jim was at university in Manchester and was back on holiday, the very older brother. He even had a beard, which to my mind placed him in the generation before us. He's three years older than John. We had been trying to learn 'Ooh La La' by The Faces for a few weeks now and, even though we had never actually got through the whole song while trying to learn it, we sat on the chairs in the kitchen and started. It was as awful as you would imagine it to be. I can't even remember who sang. None of us had really thought about getting a singer, so I presume it was one of us. It might even

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have been me. All I remember is wanting it to be over as soon as possible.

So that was the state of the band in early 1975. No songs, no equipment and, most importantly, no singer. But Billy had an idea about where he'd get one of those.

Two

Feargal Sharkey was a second cousin of Billy's. He still is, of course. Feargal's aunt was Billy's Granny Sharkey.

I first remember him from the Feis in 1968, when I was in Primary Four at the Christian Brothers school. The Feis, or Feis Doire Colmcille, to give it its full title, is a traditional Irish and classical music, dance and culture competition held every Easter in Derry. Our school entered choirs and solo singers regularly. Each class would have their own choir in the competition. Ours did, anyway. You didn't have to be particularly good to be picked, either. I mean, I was in the Solo Boys competition the year Feargal won it. Correction, *one* of the years Feargal won it. He was a year older than me (we have the same birthday) and I remember seeing him get the marks and the cup. The Sharkeys were what's called A Big Feis Family. Feargal's mother, Sybil, was one of the organisers. His sister Ursula is still involved in the administration, processing the hundreds of competitors who descend on the Guildhall each Easter week. In later years I used to tell Feargal that it was only because his mother ran it that he won all the cups but of course it wasn't true.

Apparently an adjudicator was once moved to tears by Feargal's performance at the Feis. I heard that from a man called James

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McCafferty, one of the old school of musicians in Derry who'd given Feargal singing lessons in preparation for the competition.

"Of course he'd have been moved to tears for a different reason if he'd heard him singing with no shirt on years later," added James. (James knew about rock'n'roll singers. He once had a children's choir which was on the *Ed Sullivan Show* the same night as Elvis Presley. "A very nice young man," was James's verdict.)

The next time I met Feargal we were both picked to appear on a stage with Vanessa Redgrave. It was January 1973, the first anniversary of Bloody Sunday. The principal of St Peter's, Brother Terence Monds (it was another Christian Brothers school), selected me, Feargal and Seamus McAllister to read parts from a poem called 'Butchers Dozen' by Thomas Kinsella. It was to be part of the Civil Rights Association's official commemoration, on the back of a lorry near the site of the shootings. The week before we were taken out of class to rehearse the poem with Brother Monds in his office.

On Sunday morning, January 28, we assembled at the Creggan home of Bridget Bond, one of the leading lights in the CRA in Derry. Also there was the greatest actress of her generation. To be honest, I recognised the name Vanessa Redgrave but being 13 I wouldn't have been able to get in to see many of her films. She was very kind, very cool and very tall. She also wore an Afghan coat. She took the three of us out into the back garden of the prefab bungalow that morning and we did a run through of the poem. We were well rehearsed. And she was a much better reader than Brother Monds.

When we finished the read through she took out a cigarette and lit it. She offered us one but we all declined. Afterwards Feargal wasn't happy with Seamus and me as he only refused the cigarette because we did. That's what he told us anyway. He was 14.

I also remember Feargal a year or so afterwards when he turned up at St Peter's wearing a suit. We didn't wear suits. We didn't have a school uniform, but most of us wore the green cotton parka with a hood, which was lined with red quilting and edged with rabbit fur. Feargal wasn't wearing the parka this time. Instead he wore a suit made of Prince of Wales check cloth in deep red tones.

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The word spread quickly round the school that it was sent to him from a relative in America. I don't know if he had to wear it because it was a present, or if he wore it just because he wanted to.

On the way home, he was 20 yards in front of me walking down Iniscarn Road. For most of the way home there was another boy, slightly smaller, who was almost in the middle of the road, walking alongside Feargal, giving him an awful lot of verbal abuse about the suit. I'm surprised Feargal didn't just thump him. He would have had the right (and the punch) to do so. But he just looked straight ahead and walked at his usual fast pace the whole way home. Actually, I didn't see him the whole way home as I lived nearer the school and only saw him as far as our house. And this book is about my memories of what happened. But I have to assume he didn't kill the boy later.

Feargal had the same attitude when he was famous, when the same kind of attention was paid to him by certain people in Derry. When the rest of the band were getting slagged off by some of the hard men in the months following our first appearance on *Top Of The Pops*, we hid our heads under parka hoods, fully extended in the snorkel fashion, and walked a bit faster. Feargal had an almost disdainful attitude to his detractors. He just kept on walking, the way he did when his red checked suit was getting him dog's abuse at St Peters. It was an act of bare headed bravery more than arrogance.

When we were talking about getting someone into the band to sing, we didn't have a shortlist of candidates. Billy was in Feargal's class at St Peter's and our bongo player would occasionally tell John, Vincent and me that Sharkey would be a great singer for our band. According to Feargal, Billy told him that we had proper equipment (amplifiers and drums and microphones and all that) and we were just waiting for a singer to complete the whole project.

If he was disappointed when he came to O'Neill's house, he managed to hide it.

You would have thought that the arrival of a singer would spur us into some kind of action. Well, it did and it didn't. Musically, we were still a few months away from playing even one complete song. We had stopped trying to learn any more

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from the Lindisfarne songbook and were thinking more along the lines of rock'n'roll. Only thinking, because we were still operating without electricity.

But that was about to change. Billy and John finally decided that we needed amplifiers, electric guitars and a drum kit. We had no money, of course. We had no way of getting money. But there was a music shop in Raphoe, just across the border in Donegal, which accepted Provident cheques. Provident is still one of the most expensive ways of borrowing money. It's aimed at what are now called 'low income' families. They weren't called that in Derry in 1975 as almost everybody was low income. For a weekly payment of £10, we could get £500 to spend in Reynolds of Raphoe. Interest rate of 150% p.a. And we didn't even get a PA.

For £500, we could get a bass guitar of no known brand, a Selmer bass combo amplifier, a Shin-ei guitar amplifier and a drum kit.

So John and Damian's father, Louis, agreed to act as guarantor for the loan. One weekday afternoon in October 1975 John and Billy and Feargal got a lift to Raphoe with Feargal's brother Jimmy. They came back with £500 worth of gear and £500 worth of debt. I couldn't go as I was at school. Not that I was asked. Of course, there would have been no room in the car either.

Remember, we had yet to play *any* kind of show, never mind one that paid us money.

So every Friday we each gave in £2 to O'Neill's house for Mr O'Neill to pay the Provident man.

I took my unbranded bass guitar and Selmer amplifier home and kept it in my bedroom. This was the cause of much interest, although we were used to musical instruments being stored in our house. My father played button keyed accordion in Charlie Kelly's Ceili Band from the 1940s to the 1960s. I remember a double bass being left in our front hall in Creggan for weeks at a time. (It may have been only a day or two but you know how my memory is working here.) I don't think I was the only one who would pluck the odd string when passing it. I couldn't reach the neck so I was kind of limited in the tunes I could play. Limited to none, really.

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Anyone who plays bass guitar will know that it is not really an instrument that can be played on its own. Certainly not if you're still learning it. But that didn't stop the occasional request to 'play something' when a family member came to look at this amplifier. It was about the size of a chest of drawers, and as I was in the smallest bedroom – about eight foot square – it was obvious it couldn't stay. There was no point anyway. We weren't going to practise in our house. We were always going to practise in O'Neill's.

O'Neill's house at 22 Beechwood Avenue was the centre of my teenage universe. Almost every evening I would walk down our street, turn right past the pensioners' bungalows and go down the steep hill of Beechwood Avenue, overlooking the Bogside. I would then spend the next three hours sitting in The Kitchen watching television with the rest of the O'Neill family and Billy and Feargal. The Kitchen wasn't a kitchen where the sink and cooker was. They were in the scullery. I don't know why they called the small back room The Kitchen but I knew not to ask.

I don't know how Mr and Mrs O'Neill had the patience. It wasn't a big house. The kitchen had a small sofa, two armchairs and a couple of stools, all squeezed in front of a gas fire, with the TV in the corner. The two armchairs, of a sixties design which had wooden arms, were side by side facing the TV. Prime spots, usually occupied by Vincent and Damian. Being brothers, they often fought, and sometimes fought while sitting beside each other in these chairs. Not wanting to miss the TV, they developed the skill of the sideways scrap, a quick burst of flailing arms and fists. It meant you could hit your brother while still watching *Cannon* on TV.

My usual spot was on a stool just behind the sofa, with Billy beside me.

It never occurred to either of us that we were intruding in the daily life of the O'Neills. We made tea when it was our turn, ate their toast, and nothing was ever said. Apart from the odd occasion when Patsy Duffy would come in. Patsy was a friend of Mr O'Neill, who also fixed his car. (The O'Neills had a series of cars, which always needed fixing. Still, they had a car.)

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When Patsy came in, he'd always say:

“Full house tonight, Louis?”

To which Mr O'Neill would say:

“Aye, it's like a bloody youth club.”

Except it was better, of course.

We'd sit and watch TV and drink tea and eat toast and be 16.

Then, at some undetermined stage in the evening John or Vinny would say “Will we go in the room?”

This meant the front room. This was where the talk about music and the band and records would happen. There was a small bay window, where a glass topped, wrought iron table stood with a Fidelity record player on top.

Every time I hear certain records – ‘In The City’ by The Jam, *Strange Days* by The Doors or the *White* album – I think of that record player and that room.

It wasn't as if we didn't have a record player in our house. My sister Bernadette bought a stereo (from Freeman's catalogue, of course) and we all had use of it.

But it was a different experience listening to music with friends who talked about how great that music was. Forty years later I can still remember Billy talking about *Strange Days*.

Not in any great analytical way – just “That's class, that”.

And when Vincent bought The Jam's first single on a Saturday in the spring of 1977, then played it for me when I got down to their house, I thought that was ‘class’ as well.

Nearly every night I would flick through the LPs which John had propped up along the walls of the bay window. Probably not the best place to file them if you had worries about keeping them pristine and perfectly unwrapped. The Flying Burrito Brothers, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Steely Dan. John had good taste for a 17-year-old in 1974. Taste acquired through reading *NME* every week and listening to John Peel.

Of course, there were some records lying against the bay window which are definitely of their place and time, and maybe not as highly regarded 40 years later as the artists would have hoped.

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Home? Greenslade? Fred Frith?

The name Fred Frith still gets a laugh among the band today. The cover showed him standing in a field wearing the weirdest shaped trousers. Weird even for a man standing in a field. Don't ask me what the music was like. I never got past the cover.

It was asking a bit much, even of a family with the patience of the O'Neills, to set up our drums and amplifiers in their front room – the good room, like most houses. After a few weeks in John's small back bedroom, we finally set everything up in Vinny and Damian's bedroom. The same bedroom that later acquired the name The Pit. It wasn't quite as bad as it sounds, although on occasion you would find the remains of an apple that Damian had left under the bed the week before. Storage solutions weren't exactly a big part of life in Derry. If you reached under to remove that apple stump, you ran the risk of touching an old pair of Vinny's socks instead.

The Pit was actually an attic bedroom, so there was at least some distance for the noise to travel before it got too loud for the TV downstairs. But there was no way of getting round the fact that a drum kit and two amplifiers make a lot of loud noise, and not a noise that would be recognisable as an actual song. So to preserve family life in the O'Neill household, we looked for somewhere else to practise in. And Feargal had the place.

When we met Feargal, he was about to embark on a career as an aerial installer with Radio Rentals. This would later come in handy when he earned the trust of the boss and got the keys to a Ford Escort van. He was also a scout leader in the 3rd Derry Scouts Group, part of the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland. I say scout 'leader', but he seemed to be second in command to a man called Mickey Fahy, who was in charge of a small group of 10-year-olds from Creggan. Mickey would have been in his fifties, and in a certain light bore a resemblance to Private Duane Doberman, from Sgt Bilko's Motor Pool.

The only other thing I know, and this is via Feargal, is that when they made toast in the Fahy house, they only toasted one side of

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the bread. As that was the same method used in our house, I knew Mickey was a good man.

The scouts were based in a hall at the bottom of my street, in what used to be St Mary's Boys' Club. Creggan was a big housing estate built in the late forties on farm land, and the original farm house was used as a parochial house for the local priests. Behind it was a small stone barn and a low wooden hut. After the boys club moved to a new centre, the scouts had use of both buildings. And so did the (as yet un-named) Undertones.

We moved our gear into the upstairs of the barn one Sunday afternoon, and started the first practice. It was freezing and cold hands aren't helpful when you're trying to pick out the guitar chords for 'Jumpin' Jack Flash'.

But progress was made during that winter of 1975 (sounds like a military campaign, doesn't it?) and early in the New Year, we had word that we were going to be playing whatever songs we knew in front of an audience. An audience of boy scouts. Feargal's troop. Before that, though, we had our first major drama. In fact we had two major dramas within a matter of weeks. We lost an amplifier and we lost a guitar player.

The amplifier was the Shin-Ei which was part of the Great Raphoe Purchase. Someone broke into the scout hall and took it away. They didn't do any damage to anything else – drums were left untouched – so maybe it was a struggling musician who needed it more than we did. About as likely as it being Keith Richards himself who burgled the barn and took the amp away to stop his songs being mangled.

We put it down to the wee shites that are part of the International Brotherhood of Wee Shites that steal things all around the world.

"Whatever happened to the Shin-ei?" is another part of band folklore. By the way, if you know anything about it we would still like it back.

We do know who was responsible for the loss of our guitar player. Vincent's own mother, who told him that with his O-Levels coming up he would need to start concentrating on his school work and not on playing guitar.

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He told me this as we were coming home from school one dinner time. He kind of embarrassingly broke the news walking down Iniscarn Road.

“Ehm, I cannae be in the band any more ... me ma says I have to start studying for me O-Levels.”

This was about 50 yards from where I usually left him to go home, so there was near silence the rest of the journey as it sunk in to me. I was so angry, you would have thought it was me that was getting thrown out. Wait till the rest of the band hear about this, I thought. There’s no way Vincent can’t be in the band, no way at all. We’ll persuade Mrs O’Neill to allow him to go on with the guitar *and* do his O-Levels.

That night down at Beechwood Avenue, the revolution failed to take off. John didn’t seem to be that bothered. I suppose as it was his mother’s decision, there wasn’t a lot he could do about it. Billy didn’t say much either – he probably never even told *his* mother and father that he was in a band – while Feargal, just in through the door, didn’t care one way or the other. I remember I did a bit of blustering and grumping with the rest of the band but that was about all. I huffed for about two days as well. A completely pointless and childish tactic that always makes me feel better about not being able to actually do something to change any given situation.

After the huff had subsided, we were left with the problem of getting a guitar player.

The real problem was that we didn’t actually know any.

Derry had plenty of showbands at the time but I couldn’t imagine any of them wanting to play with four school boys who barely knew three songs. Of course, we wouldn’t have wanted them anyway.

There was also a circuit of bands that played cover versions of rock songs but we didn’t know them and we didn’t want to know them. We’d later meet them and discover that most of them were really ‘dead on’, to use the Derry expression for all-round soundness of character. Even at that stage of the band, at the ages of 16 and 17, we instinctively saw ourselves as being in a different situation from other bands in the town. It was more shyness than arrogance, though.

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I would never talk about the band outside that small circle of John, Vincent, Billy and Feargal. I would almost deny that I could even play the guitar if I was ever asked. (OK, I was rarely asked and, yes, it was debatable whether I could actually play it. Get your wisecracks in early.)

When we did get around to playing regularly, I would dread anyone asking the question “what kind of music do you play?”

In our house one night, a man who’d come to give my father a lift to one of his playing engagements asked that question when he saw an amplifier in the front room. To fill the silence caused by the not so forthcoming answer, he volunteered “Heavy?”

I kind of nodded and shook my head at the same time and squirmed out the door.

The cliché about learning to play the guitar to improve your chances with girls never entered our heads. We never talked about it anyway – we never really went out to the usual dances, discos, hops, whatever you want to call them. We spent the years from 1974 to 1976 in the front room at Beechwood Avenue. Unhealthy, I know. We really should have got out more. Or at least opened the window from time to time.

When I said we didn’t know any guitar players, that’s not quite accurate. We knew one through another of Billy’s family connections. He has a cousin on his mother’s side called Austin Barrett. A great name, a great fella and a future Moondog. That was ahead of him, though. In late 1975, Austin played drums in a band along with, spookily enough, two brothers. Eamon and Martin Fegan specialised in Status Quo songs. I think they knew three of them altogether, including ‘Paper Plane’.

We asked Martin (or was it Eamon?) to come up to the scout hall one Sunday and play along with us. He arrived with his own amp, which was fortunate for us, as we were still one short, and we attempted to play along with him. It didn’t work. I can’t remember the discussion after he left the scout hall but we spoke no more of it.

In other stories about bands, there’s usually a member recruited who saw a note stuck up in a record shop or on a school noticeboard.

My Life as an Undertone

They usually include the phrase ‘must be into New York Dolls, Stooges, Velvets...’ and end with the words ‘no time wasters’.

I have to say that the time wasters would have been us, at the rate we were going.

There wasn’t really anywhere we could put up a note like that in Derry. No other musicians, no other scene, existed for us. Not in our wee world, which centred around O’Neill’s front room. And, of course, that’s where we found our replacement for Vinny.