

‘What you thought you have forgotten’: *The Mersey Sound* RevisitedÁngeles Jordán Soriano (ajs895@ual.es)¹

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Abstract

The Mersey Sound (1967) was the best-selling poetry anthology of the sixties in the UK. Apart from its commercial success, it is also an important document in terms of the study of working-class literary output in this decade. Despite this, its position within the British literary canon has often been neglected in academic realms. It is for this reason that the present article aims to offer an insight into the scholarly importance of this anthology through offering arguments for its re-evaluation. Moreover, in this research its current status will be explored, looking in particular at contemporary literary criticism of working-class mass culture and art. To this end, I will first discuss the main justifications for a reconsideration of the significance of the collection and describe its context and origins. This will be followed by an analysis of the content of the volume and its current relevance. Conclusions drawn from this will include possible reasons for its absence in many academic poetry guides and will also stress the need to recover and reappraise the anthology in future research on working-class British poetry.

Keywords: *The Mersey Sound*, British poetry, Liverpool, Beat poetry, working-class literature.

“Lo que creías haber olvidado”: una revisión de *The Mersey Sound***Resumen**

The Mersey Sound (1967) fue la antología poética más vendida de la década de los sesenta en el Reino Unido.

Esta obra no solo supuso un éxito comercial, sino que también se erige como un documento vital para el estudio de la producción literaria de la clase obrera a lo largo de esta década. Sin embargo, en el ámbito académico, su gran papel ha sido frecuentemente desvinculado del canon literario británico. Por esta razón, la intención de este artículo es la de presentar la importancia académica de esta antología y, a su vez, ofrecer motivos para su reevaluación. También se explorarán las causas de su estado actual teniendo en especial consideración la opinión de la crítica coetánea acerca del arte de la cultura de masas y de la clase obrera. Para llevar a cabo esto, comenzaré presentando en profundidad las principales razones para reexaminar la importancia de esta antología y describiré su contexto y génesis. Esto será sucedido por un análisis del contenido de esta obra y su relevancia en el contexto actual. Toda esta información será útil para sacar conclusiones, no solo con respecto a las posibles razones de su ausencia en numerosos volúmenes de poesía, sino que también servirá para reconsiderar la necesidad de recuperar y revalidar esta obra en futuros estudios sobre la poesía británica producida por la clase obrera.

Palabras clave: *The Mersey Sound*, poesía británica, Liverpool, poesía Beat, literatura de clase obrera.

1. Introduction

Liverpool had become a very popular place by the early sixties. Its fame was in great part due to the city's most successful band, The Beatles, whose first appearance in the US in 1962 brought with it a growing exposure of Liverpoolian culture to the world. Although The Beatles would indeed be the most prominent figures associated with Liverpool throughout the decade, in the same year that they conquered America the city was also experiencing the blooming of another revolution, in this case, poetic. The literary movement was known as Merseybeat² or Mersey Sound, and although it was never

intended to be ‘literary,’³ it proved to be a landmark in the literature of the sixties, after Penguin invited three Liverpool poets —Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten— to publish their work under the title *The Mersey Sound* in 1967. In a relatively short space of time, the volume enjoyed unprecedented success, eventually becoming the best-selling poetry anthology of the decade in the UK, according to Penguin’s own publicity.

In order to understand its success, it is important to consider what made this book relevant and different from other publications of the decade. Among the most prominent themes, readers can find the Americanisation of the British working class, paradoxically combined with the regional identity of the city of Liverpool, this in turn conditioned by its specific situation of isolation and its unique folklore. Moreover, other frequently occurring elements were contingent on the modernising effect of the swinging sixties in the country, especially those which challenged tradition; poems devoted to pacifism, sexuality or the evolution of the country towards modernity abound in the anthology. Since the target readership was the working class, these poems are characterised by their lack of complexity, which partly explains why *The Mersey Sound* has been defined by Morag Shiach as “often comic, frequently polemical and always accessible” (544).

Such an approach collides with some previous tendencies in British poetry, such as The Movement.⁴ Although these latter authors, who were closely associated with the British New Left, also wanted to make poetry simple and appealing to the average English citizen, they differed from the Mersey poets, and other genuine working-class authors, in their conception of “good” poetry, which for them favoured form over content. They were classicist in outlook, and the critics of The Movement often rejected some of their work which, albeit stemming from the working class, was too modernist and American-oriented, as I will discuss below.

Despite its negative reception in academic circles, the legacy of *The Mersey Sound* in British counterculture is undeniable, acknowledged by beatnik figures such as Allen Ginsberg and constituting the main source of inspiration for subsequent poets, such

as John Cooper Clarke. Besides, *The Mersey Sound*, along with other releases from the end of the decade like The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (1969), seem to have been key in the intellectual recognition of pop and working-class culture, which until then had been demonised, or considered banal and meaningless (Sinfield 287).

Despite all this, references to the anthology are scant, especially in scholarly discourse. For this reason, the present article seeks to offer an insight into these poems and to reevaluate this important poetic movement, the impact of which sometimes appears to have been forgotten, perhaps as a result of the negative criticism of contemporary critics. Additionally, a consideration of the poems will offer us a critical glimpse into the socio-political events of the decade, as well as the long-lasting relevance of the concerns of the poems in Britain today, especially concerning the working class.

2. Context and Origins

In order to begin dealing with *The Mersey Sound*, it is necessary to outline the origins and evolution of the movement which gave rise to the anthology. Several sources argue that it is difficult to establish the exact date of the beginning of the poetical Mersey Sound. However, there is a general agreement that its development was parallel to that of the musical Merseybeat, taking place, in this case, between 1962 and 1963. It was at this time that Adrian Henri⁵ (1932-2000), an art teacher from the area, began to organise artistic gatherings in the clubs and basements of Liverpool 8, then the trendiest and more bohemian area of the city (Hobson). At these events, which sought to emulate American happenings, he combined his surrealist live painting with music and poetry. It was only a matter of time before these meetings caught the attention of Roger McGough⁶ (1937-), a literature teacher at a local school, who, like Henri, was imbued in the Liverpoolian underground scene, in his case with his band of comedians, The Scaffold, formed by McGough himself, John Gorman, and Mike McGear, Paul McCartney's younger brother. With the intention of organising a poetic performance, Henri and McGough put an advert

in the local newspaper, which was answered by Brian Patten⁷ (1946-). He was a 15-year-old student, and a future journalist and writer who, like the other two artists, shared a desire to make art, especially poetry, that appealed to the Liverpoolian working class.

They were highly influenced by the American beat poets, not just in the use of the free-verse and the transgressive topics they shared, but also in that their poetry was performative and not intended to be written down in a conventional way, at least not until the point when Penguin asked for it. Indeed, this can be seen in the existence of different versions of the poems depending on the performance. It is true that some of them were written in manuscript form in order to be performed. However, as Catherine Marcangeli⁸ suggests, these looked more like scripts, since they contained a sort of draft with lyrics, performance indications, and even drawings (Hobson). Also in relation to the Beat connection, we should note that these poets gained such prominence in a short amount of time that, during the 1965 International Poetry Incarnation in London, they were visited and commended by Allen Ginsberg. Moreover, the following year, they were contacted by the publishers, who wanted to collect the trio's most popular poems as part of the Penguin Modern Poets series. This, then, was the birth of *The Mersey Sound* (1967).

The first edition of the anthology is divided into three sections, each featuring the work of one of the poets. It opens with 30 of Henri's poems, followed by those of McGough (24), and ends with those of Patten (26). Each section has been expanded in subsequent editions, and indeed we might mention here that *The Mersey Sound* has never been out of print since (Persoon & Watson 263); the most recent edition was released by Penguin to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the volume in 2017. Whilst Henri, McGough and Patten were part of the same movement, certain heterogeneity can also be observed in their contributions. In the case of Henri, we find the frequent use of more surrealist and visual poetry with abundant allusions to pop culture. Although these pop references are also present in the poems by Patten and McGough, in their case surrealism is often replaced by more explicit political commitment, albeit with humour. Further notable differences in their poems can also be highlighted; thus, most of McGough's poems, although still experimental in content, display a

more traditional structure, usually being consistent in terms of the number of stanzas and lines per stanza. On the other hand, free verse or prose poems occur more frequently in Patten and Henri's sections. Devices such as listing and the use of different fonts are also common, especially in the case of Henri.

With regard to the cover of the 1967 edition, this was very unusual in comparison to other poetry anthologies of the time. It was designed by Alan Spain, an art-designer for Penguin known for his modernist style and his collages which often exploited the contrast between black and white photographs and images in primary colours. In the case of *The Mersey Sound*, the most salient feature is the use of a striking red tone. The cover is a collage which displays a red skyline of the city of Liverpool and the name of the book in a psychedelic font common in the mid-sixties, all in vertical—another frequent feature of Spain's work. This collage also includes black and white pictures of a carousel and a woman screaming, something reminiscent of the city's Beatlemania. The cover thus emphasises the pop nature of the volume, in that these authors wanted to appeal to the same audience that enjoyed the musical and artistic British scene, rather than merely the literary one.

Indeed, crucial in the reception of the volume was its success among the working class. Marcangeli notes that:

setting up readings and performing weekly in front of an audience made them acutely aware of the need to be accessible, and entertaining, so poetry readings often had musical interludes or musical accompaniment—the Art College and a variety of pubs and music venues, as well as ad hoc performance spaces were only a short walk from each other, making such collaborations all the easier and spontaneous (Marcangeli 149).

In fact, the poets themselves have noted that it was very inspiring to see their success in managing to make poetry funny and interesting for the average customers of the city's pubs and clubs, often typically keen on football and drinking. The book, then, allowed them to achieve their goal of introducing poetry to everyone. Nevertheless,

this approach to the common citizen was used by critics to critique the volume. Patten recalls how they were called “the three-headed pantomime horse”, and Henri even laughs at this kind of harsh criticism, quoting from critics during his performances, for instance, “the fact that the people of Liverpool thought that their bad poetry is different from other bad poetry, does not make it so” [sic] (qtd. in Hobson). However, it is important to mention that, likewise, the Liverpool Poets also disliked academia since, as mentioned, “poets suddenly found themselves the spokesmen of a real community — a community which took its standards from the art schools rather than the universities” (Lucie-Smith 32). The poet Edward Lucie-Smith also notes how “the reason why the generally modernist inclination of English poetry in the sixties has tended to escape critical recognition has something to do with another phenomenon: the decentralization of the poetic community and the tendency for poets to reject the academic world and academic criticism” (31). Moreover, in the particular case of *The Mersey Sound*, other factors may have caused this negative criticism. In this aspect, it is important to take into consideration that the poetry of this volume was not originally intended to be read but performed. In fact, it was one the most praised features of these poets, as several scholars highlight that by performing their poetry, “the Liverpool Poets came to represent the democratic ethos of the 1960s, which would at least soften the strict class boundaries that define British society” (Persoons & Watson 287). Therefore, without the performative dimension, some of the elements which made these poems popular, such as the presence of spontaneity and lack of complexity, could be considered as a flaw for certain critics.

Yet, it was indeed a fact that the local population, including the working class, loved this poetry, as we can infer from its commercial success and the subsequent reissue of the anthology in 1970 with additional new poems. According to Sinfield, in the sixties the New Left became bewildered by the mixture, for them an incompatible one, of “commerce and rebelliousness” found in the new forms of art produced by working class. As part of their annoyance, some of the authors and critics who had fought against elitism less than a decade before had, paradoxically, become the new elite that was now disparaging the kind of art that they did not consider “good” enough (284-285). Sinfield expands on this idea by arguing that:

the conception of 'good' culture generated in welfare-capitalism, I have shown, took much from the residual leisure elite. Movement and Angry writers eschewed self-consciously artistic modes and presented 'down-to-earth' attitudes on class and sexuality, but their conception of 'good' culture was not very different - they adopted jazz as a protest but also as an art. The New Left actually revalidated 'good' culture and 'responsible' institutions. All this came into question as the rebellion of middle-class and higher-educated young people impatient with the reticence of their parents coincided, briefly and almost uniquely, with the rebellion of lower-class young people, built upon the rock-'n'-roll and skiffle subcultures. There were new kinds of employment in cultural production for the upper-middle-class young, and unaccustomed people invaded the old kinds. These young people had acquired the confidence not to compromise with 'good' culture but to challenge it with new modes [...] 'Art', 'literature' and 'poetry' looked like graffiti, advertisements, comics and pop songs, and the kind of attention usually given to 'good' culture was lavished on popular and commercial forms (283-284).

This sort of contradiction within the ideology of The Movement can be observed in several claims made by its writers. For instance, in 1964 Philip Larkin, a fundamental figure in The Movement, asserted in a BBC interview that his poetry was still considered by more elitist critics as "welfare-state subpoetry" which was still not good enough for their standards (1964), something very similar to what most of The Movement poets thought of works like *The Mersey Sound*.⁹

It is important to note that similar events were taking place during this period across the country, but with the greatest focus in London. The Poetry Incarnation in 1965 and the massive success of *Children of Albion* (1969) stand as proof that poetry was changing, and that these events constituted the beginning of a new Poetry Revival in the UK, as Juha Virtanen, expert in performative poetry, labels it (27-55). With regard to this, we might highlight the fact

that in his volume *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960-1980: Event and Effect* (2017), Virtanen omits *The Mersey Sound* from the movement, and indeed Liverpool's poetry scene is not even mentioned. Moreover, when Ginsberg's visit to the city is described, it is said to be merely related to the musical scene, with Virtanen not including Henri's meetings with the Beat poet and Ginsberg's praise to the three of them¹⁰. This is a curious and significant omission, especially in light of the aim of the present article to illustrate the lack of recognition of this anthology. Going back to Virtanen's arguments on this revival, we might consider his analysis of the venue for the Poetry Incarnation, since the fact that it was the Royal Albert Hall, a place where the most popular rock and pop bands had been playing days earlier, seemed to be a sign that poetry was closer than ever to the rock and pop music scene (35). Such an argument is indeed pertinent here, since it can also be applied to the origins of *The Mersey Sound*, as well as to the decision of the poets to perform in Liverpoolian pubs, sometimes even accompanied by musicians.

As previously noted, Sinfield argued that in the sixties the idea of "good" culture started to be compromised by the culture of the younger generations, most of them from working-class origins, which thanks to the welfare state had gained access to higher education. These generations, in turn, produced their own kind of cultural creations, greatly influenced by contemporary trends such as pop. As it had already happened with The Beatles and the subsequent working-class artists throughout the decade, the style of the Mersey poets was conditioned to a significant degree by two major factors: the Americanisation of British culture and the modernisation of the country during Harold Wilson's government, which coincided in time with the key years of the Merseybeat. As we have said, both the welfare state in post-war Britain, which granted education to a broader population of young citizens, and the government-led modernisations in the sixties, were crucial for the rise of new artists. Wilson's Labour government supported this through subsidies for artists and measures such as the abolishment of the Censorship Act. On the other hand, the BBC, under the leadership of Hugh Greene, known for "encouraging more liberal attitudes within the corporation", also promoted the cultural scene (Waymark 3). The historian Dominic

Sandbrook observes that in the sixties, the UK was the country with most art academies and art schools in the world, and these places were vital for the rise of British subcultures and the underground scene of the decade (Sandbrook 77). Besides, in such a scenario, where art was sponsored by the government, a larger variety of publications appeared which, under different conditions, might otherwise never have seen the light (Sinfield 27-39).

Returning to the American influences of this poetical movement, the Mersey Sound, despite being named after the city's river, provides a perfect symbiosis between the American beatnik movement and British culture, with special emphasis on the working class. Even the modernist techniques found in *The Mersey Sound* originally from the influence that American poets had on British modernism, which explains why The Movement was even more reluctant to accept this style, since the effects of Americanisation were in conflict with their political ideas (190).

The influence of American culture can also be observed in the praise for pop culture that can be found in the poems, which in this case might have differed from the antimaterialism found in beat poets such as Ginsberg. Although the recurrent use of irony in the Mersey poets might have hindered the intended aim of critiquing certain not-so-positive elements of American culture, such as consumerism, it is clear that they did not aim to be as explicitly critical as the American poets were, but rather to describe British society's reconfiguration towards American habits. With regard to this, it must be taken into account that during the sixties it was common among transgressive artists to take American mass culture and consumerism as an alternative to the British establishment (Sandbrook 73). Therefore, in their attempt to escape from the elitism of British traditions, working-class artists embraced American culture as if it represented freedom and the 'good' alternative. It is a complex issue to determine whether this was the case with the Mersey Poets, since the use of irony is recurrent in almost all their work. Nevertheless, in Stephen Wade's words, "the Liverpool Scene identify this community more easily with run-down urban areas in the US than with the culture-soaked cities in the UK, where university campuses and English departments manage poetry readings in polite outlets, mainly for 'cultured' people" (10).

Considering all these features, it is true that most of them could be applied to any working-class creation, for instance the poetry anthology *Children of Albion* (1969),¹¹ which, similarly to *The Mersey Sound*, was published by Penguin. So, why is *The Mersey Sound* different? Why was its role as a working-class publication in the British Poetry Revival eclipsed over time by *Children of Albion*? In the following section, I will approach these questions in order to underline its importance, offering an analysis of the collection and setting out the main reasons why the denial by academic writers of *The Mersey Sound*'s key role in the British Poetry Revival of the sixties could be problematic.

3. Content of the volume and current relevance

Although *Children of Albion* may offer a more pluralistic vision, in that it collects poets from all areas of Great Britain, *The Mersey Sound* is a vital document towards exploring the unique regional features of the poetry of Liverpool. With regard to these particular elements, some scholars argue that in the case of the Mersey poets, orality is not a feature taken from the beatnik poetry but something very common and particular to the folklore of Liverpool, as Stephen Wade argues in one of the few academic publications devoted to *The Mersey Sound* (8). In fact, although Andrew Duncan, when dealing with Liverpool poetry, claims that "it would be wiser to suggest the USA as the place where the mutation originated", he also argues that in north-western England, this tendency towards performative poetry had always been very strong, from the time of the first Scandinavian invasions. During this period, in order to narrate the deeds of heroes, orality took precedence over writing, while in the centre and south of the country, a more developed written style was more frequently seen (133).

Moreover, Wade also finds other features which distinguish *The Mersey Sound* from American poetry and which place it closer to a more British identity. For example, he establishes many parallelisms between some of the nineteenth-century Lake poets and the Mersey poets. Among these, he highlights spontaneity, the way that authors embrace the genuine English working class, not an elite audience, and above all, the inclusion of socio-political topics, similar to those

of poets such as Shelley. Although this political aim is also found in *The Movement*, the tendency with the latter to adhere strictly to classical structures undermines any sense of spontaneity. Such similarities of the Liverpool poets with elements from notable poems of established British literature, in this case, are set alongside references to modernity, and are probably intentional, as these poets were intimately familiar with the British tradition. Besides, this is also seen in the high number of allusions and paeans to well-known authors throughout the anthology. One frequent reference, as was also the case with the American Beat poets, is to William Blake. He is mentioned in Henri's poem, "Mrs Albion, you've got a Lovely Daughter" and according to Patten, this poem was inspired by an experience with Ginsberg. During his visit to Liverpool, while Henri was showing Ginsberg the most iconic landmarks of the city, the Beat poet was impressed by some graffiti, including the phrase "Billy Blake is fab" (Hobson). This anecdote also stands as an example of the particular symbiosis between the contemporaneous Beat poets, England in the swinging sixties, and the Romantics.

Moreover, other topics found in *The Mersey Sound* relate to anti-war themes, some of them on international issues, such as condemning Vietnam War, despite the fact that Wilson's government avoided participation by the UK. We might also recall that the British government was involved in a conflict with Rhodesia at the time the anthology was released, and indeed the anti-war tone of these poems is sometimes more general and seems to refer to other wars. In fact, some poems allude to memories of World War II from the poets' own childhoods, such as McGough's "A Square Dance" and Henri's "Great War Poems". There are also poems that reflect their fears about the possible consequences of the Cold War. In this respect, their intention is similar to that of the poets of *Children of Albion*, since most of them were closely involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It is worth mentioning that due to the surrealist style of some poems, references to previous wars and conflicts can be mixed, as in McGough's "Mother the Wardrobe is Full of Infantrymen" and Henri's "On the Late Late Massachers Stillbirths and Deformed Children a Smoother Lovelier Skin Job". The latter was inspired by John Milton's "Sonnet XVIII: On The Late Massacre In Piemont", and while it depicts a dystopian scene

resulting from Nuclear Armament, Henri employs irony and offers allusions to Hiroshima, to various politicians from around the world, and above all, to the consequences for the natural environment. These elements are combined with consumerist features and journalistic headlines:

The Triple Tyrant Macmillan Kennedy Watkinson
The West governments are satisfied as to the moral
necessity to resume Racing from Newmarket
EXTRA SPECIAL!
Atmospheric testing: A test card is shown
continuously from to a.m. until 15 minutes
before slayn by the bloody Piemontese
why pay higher fares?
There is always trouble when President Kennedy the
joyial gravel-voiced little sailor
defends glamorous Olive Oyl from contamination of
the atmosphere
EXTRA MONEY their moans
The Vales redoubled to the Hills
Another fire blazes in the city of London AND ALL
THAT JAZZ
Do you draw your curtains with a walkingstick?
The mutation was caused by a heavy dose of radiation
received
by the Mother at Hiroshima
This baby's eyes and nose had merged into
one misshapen feature in the middle of its
forehead, lost 6' from Hips
sufferers can now wear fashion stockings
Early may fly the Babylonian wo
followed by
TOMORROW'S WEATHER
The Epilogue
close down (Henri et al. 15-16).

Similarly, in McGough's "Mother the Wardrobe is Full of Infantrymen", the poet introduces the topics of war and nuclear conflict, combining them with humour and surrealist situations:

“mother there is a centurian tank in the parlour/ i did i asked the officer/ but he laughed saying ‘Queens regulations’/ (piano was out of tune anyway)/ mother polish your identity bracelet/ there is a mushroom cloud in the backgarden” (83).

Apart from the previous topics, the anthology has a generally transgressive tone towards tradition. As already noted, elements related to pop, sex, and how Liverpool was moving towards modernity are common. Among these, we might highlight Patten’s “Maud, 1965”, a poem intended to be a modern adaptation of Alfred Tennyson’s “Maud”. In this poem the speaker relocates the protagonist of the Victorian poem to the Swinging Sixties; Maud wears Mary Quant clothes and wanders “among the office blocks” and buses of a modern city (103-104). As in Henri’s poems, the coexistence of popular elements with canonical literary and artistic references here establishes “a web of references that made his work both complex and accessible” (Marcangeli 139). Such references to other poems and songs were not merely used to offer an analogy to the sixties lifestyle and leisure, but also to condemn other contemporary conflicts, such as war or issues related to racism and nationalism. There are several poems that question the meaning of patriotism, for instance, “I’m Dreaming of a White Smethwick”, added to the anthology in the 1970 edition. This poem alludes to the racist events that took place in Smethwick, combining them to the lyrics of the popular Christmas song in order to parody Enoch Powell’s infamous speech “Rivers of Blood” (1968):

I’m dreaming of a white Smethwick,
 One I didn’t want to know,
 Where they’ll have allwhite, allright children
 And the White and White Minstrel Show [...] I saw
 black father christmasses
 Burning in the snow,
 Protesting to the Opposition
 About what happened a while ago.
 The last blackbird’s been shot in Smethwick
 And the council’s doing allright,
 The M.P.’s in the Commons
 Making sure his words are white (Henri et al. 98).

As this example serves to illustrate, in *The Mersey Sound* political criticism is almost always coupled with the use of irony, wit and humour, creating a tone which, in this case, differs from the kind of tone found in the performative poetry of the International Poetry Incarnation, where poets tended to address political themes in a more indignant and directly challenging way, or through a solemn tone, as is the case in Adrian Mitchell's "To Whom It May Concern (Tell me Lies about Vietnam)".

Indeed, humour and regionalism were not only the distinctive mark of *The Mersey Sound* in comparison with other contemporary performative poetry, but also one of the reasons why they may have been misjudged and underrated. Being dismissed for too great a proximity to popular culture and for being associated with the local working class was not only a criticism present in the sixties but in the following decades too. Owen Jones notes that, if in the sixties "Old Labour" at least showed a desire to address and solve problems arising from class, after Thatcherism and the rise of "New Labour", the working class became a group mocked and blamed for their own condition, and indeed forgotten by left-wing politics as these turned to focus more on identity rather than class (7-9). In fact, he argues that "at the root of the demonization of working-class people is the legacy of a very British class war" (10). The underestimation of art and artists based on allusions to their class and expected audience remains present in contemporary criticism, which shows how working-class artists still have to fight to express their ideas and still face the same negative criticism, and sometimes prejudices, that *The Mersey Sound* encountered. As an example of such attitudes nowadays, we might take the case of artists such as Sleaford Mods, a working-class duo whose *sprechgesang* style in British pubs recalls the performative spirit of the Mersey Poets. They also share several features, with regard not only to style but to their working-class claims. Among these we might note themes that are present both in the sixties and in the current decade, such as racial tensions, the impending rise in nationalism — in the case of Sleaford Mods, especially alluding to Brexit— and the vindication of their working-class identity¹². Moreover, the most significant element in the style of both is the use of humour as the main means of conveying the message, something that has led to acclaim from a broader audience.

4. Conclusions

In view of the previous discussion, we can conclude that *The Mersey Sound* merits a reevaluation, this for several reasons, which will be summarized in what follows.

First, it is important to note that this volume displays unique features from the regional style of Liverpool which cannot be found in other kinds of poetry such as the *Children of Albion*. These particular features, which allow readers to glimpse the daily lives of working-class Liverpoolians, were the ones which had been highly criticized by other authors who nevertheless claimed to support the intellectualization of the lower classes, such as Michael Horovitz. This does not imply that all the poets of *Children of Albion* undervalued *The Mersey Sound*. In the case of Adrian Mitchell, whose performance at the International Poetry Incarnation was perhaps the most politically committed, was a close friend of the Mersey poets and was even mentioned in some of their poems. Yet the fact that *The Mersey Sound* was treated as regional, second-class poetry by some of those who claimed to belong to the same social class reveals a complex and elitist hierarchy that lurks beneath the labels low-middle class and working-class authors. The best way to illustrate this is to observe how authors of The Movement who had been neglected by the establishment in turn rejected the modernist style of works such as *Children of Albion* or *The Mersey Sound*, and similarly (and paradoxically) the poets of the former anthology claimed that the latter was too “pop”. In different ways, all these movements that rejected elitism in literature accused the following non-elite group of not writing “good” poetry. In this hierarchy, *The Mersey Sound* seems to have been judged for its pop elements, its regionalism, and the fact that it was performed to a genuine working-class audience in Liverpoolian pubs and common venues. This contrast was indeed a broad one in comparison to the performance of the poems of *Children of Albion* in London’s Royal Albert Hall. The proof that the style of *The Mersey Sound* was more appealing to the average English citizen is the fact that it remains the best-selling poetical anthology in the UK. For all these reasons, I am inclined to believe that *The Mersey Sound* stands as one of the most fitting examples of the state of working-class poetry in the sixties, as well as being one of the earliest examples of the revival of British performance poetry.

However, as noted above, the role of the Mersey Poets in the British Poetry Revival of the sixties has seldom been recognised in the literature. The canon continues to attribute great merit to *Children of Albion* whilst omitting the Liverpool poets, or mentioning them only vaguely, for instance, when Andrew Duncan argues that “the new poetry of the sixties did have origins partly in Liverpool and adjacent regions” (131). It is important to note that, although academic work has favoured *Children of Albion*, portraying it as fundamental in the British Performative Poetry Revival and continuing to allude to it as such in recent studies, in terms of accessibility it had been as neglected in some ways as *The Mersey Sound* has been in others. Thus, commercially speaking, *Children of Albion* is almost impossible to acquire these days since it is out of print, although some of its poems can be found separately in other sources; by contrast, the poetry produced by the authors of The Movement is widely available, and has even been translated into different languages. Once again, despite the alleged academic importance of the *Children of Albion* and the value and commercial success of *The Mersey Sound*, underground poetry fell into the shadow cast by a more elitist group.

I would also like to return to one specific feature of *The Mersey Sound* which was also a matter of criticism, its Liverpool-centred themes. For this reason, Henri, McGough and Patten are sometimes labelled the Liverpool Poets. This can be observed, for instance, in Persoons and Watson’s guide of poetry *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry 1900 to the Present* (2009). This is striking considering that, if we set aside its references to Liverpool, *The Mersey Sound* shares almost all its features with the Beat British Poetry as associated with *Children of Albion*. For this reason, we might note that the category “Liverpool Poets” might itself be double-edged. On the one hand, it emphasizes the unique and regional features of these three poets, elements which we might assume to be positive in light of Ginsberg’s preference for regionalism in Beat Poetry (Walker 47). Nonetheless, in view of the rejection of *The Mersey Sound* in academic studies and even by other working-class authors such as Michael Horowitz, the implications of naming Henri, McGough and Patten “Liverpool Poets” must be considered carefully, since this could serve as a means of underrating them, effectively detaching them from the Beat and underground poetry performed in London, despite the similarities

and their political commitment—although in their case, with more humour.

In fact, humour was one of the key elements that led to the success of these poems in their depiction of the working class. Although for some scholars this approach to the working class through humour was seen as a reason to underrate the radical content of the poems, this way of dealing with certain issues concerning class can still be observed in contemporary manifestations of working-class poetry, especially when dealing with similar topics, such as politics and class identity, as we have discussed above. This may show how the vindications of working-class artists and the struggle to deconstruct their “demonization” remains a battle to be fought.

Considering all these arguments, it seems that there are several factors which have contributed to the lack of academic interest in this particular volume outside Liverpool, and its almost non-existent global exposure. In the decades which followed the publication of *The Mersey Sound*, Henri, McGough and Patten continued with their own solo careers, enjoying considerable national impact. Hence, although vindicated over time, they are perhaps better known for their late publications. However, this should not obscure the importance of their origins and the value of the volume presented in this article. For this reason, it is important to celebrate the role of *The Mersey Sound* as a pioneering work in performative and working-class poetry in Britain, which challenged the elitism of contemporary poetry, even that of the underground, and above all, which showed itself to be the audience’s favourite, as the best-selling poetry anthology of all time in the UK.

Notes

¹ The research on this paper has been supported by Lindisfarne Research Group and the project CEI Patrimonio (University of Almería).

² *Mersey Beat* was also a musical magazine from Liverpool which covered the cultural scene of the same decade. For this reason, the name is also used to refer to the musical movement from the city prior to the British Invasion. Although the vast majority of the artistic

movements which took place in this area during those years were interrelated and often multidisciplinary, in order to offer a clearer analysis, I will differentiate the musical Mersey beat from the poetical one, which is the focus of the present study. In order to do so, I will refer henceforth to the Liverpool poets as *The Mersey Sound*, the title given to their poetry anthology.

³ Due to the multidisciplinary nature of this movement and its detachment from traditional literary groups, Stephen Wade labels it a “movement that was not conscious of being ‘literary’ at all” (ix).

⁴ Coined in 1954 by J. D. Scott, editor of *The Spectator*, the term The Movement refers to a group of writers who supported the use of traditional poetical rules and promoted Englishness in their poems, being “against cosmopolitan Modernisms identified as non-native” (Tuma and Dorward 287). In the fifties, their poetry was considered anti-establishment literature, since most of these authors belonged to the lower-middle class and sought to provide less elitist content. Apart from these features, they were a heterogeneous group, and in the sixties some writers moved towards different styles. The Movement authors were, for example, Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis and D. J. Enright, among others.

⁵ Although *The Mersey Sound* was the first major success of these artists, Henri, McGough and Patten had prolific careers after the publication of this volume and received several awards for their artistic contribution. It is important to note how Adrian Henri continued his promotion of poetry in the following years. He also created a poetry-and-rock band named Liverpool Scene which toured with acclaimed groups like Led Zeppelin. Moreover, in 1969 he took part in the Art Council Writers’ Tours to promote literature in rural areas.

⁶ McGough is also well-known for having written several children books, plays and programmes for the BBC. In 1985 he won a BAFTA for his script of the film *Kurt, Mungo, BP and Me*. He is currently collaborating in the BBC radio programme *Poetry Please*, where the poems requested by the audience are performed by a cast of acclaimed British actors.

⁷ The same year *The Mersey Sound* was released, Patten also published a solo collection of poems named *Little Johnny’s Confessions*. Moreover, he is currently very interested in the promotion of poetry among children, having published several children books and anthologies such as *The Puffin Book of Modern Children’s Verse* (2006).

⁸ Marcangeli is known for her recent research on the figure of Adrian Henri as ‘a total artist’. She has explored Henri’s multidisciplinary artistic career and, as his partner, she had edited and posthumously published some of his later works. Besides, in contrast to the scant attention paid to *The Mersey Sound* in the previous decades, in 2017 Marcangeli participated with McGough and Patten in the BBC documentary “Sex, Chips and Poetry: 50 years of the Mersey Sound” (2017), a homage to the 50th anniversary of the first publication of the volume. During the same year, the three of them took part in other anniversary events commissioned by the Liverpool City Council.

⁹ Paradoxically, the earliest positive comments McGough received on his poetry were from Larkin in the fifties when, as a student at Hull University, he coincided with Larkin, who read his poems. Nevertheless, this was before McGough discovered Rimbaud and the Beats, and his style at the time was more conventional (Wade 7).

¹⁰ Testimonial and visual documents of their meetings can be found in the interviews and images offered by Patten, McGough and their acquaintances for the BBC documentary “Sex, Chips and Poetry: 50 years of the Mersey Sound” (2017). Besides, as Luke Walker reveals, Ginsberg was probably more interested in these regional poets than in those of the International Poetry Incarnation, since he had previously accused the British Beat scene of “not taking advantage of the variety of regional tones and dialects available” (47).

¹¹ Edited by Michael Horovitz, it collects the poems read in the International Poetry Incarnation of 1965, the most multitudinous event of performative poetry of the decade. Both share topics such as Beat poetry and the influence of William Blake. Despite the fact that it includes the work of more than sixty poets, the diversity of Horovitz’s selection is often questioned, since just 7% of them were female authors, and the Mersey poets are excluded. According to Horovitz, these poets were too “pop”, instead of “bop”, the latter term, he claims, describing the poets of *Children of Albion* (qtd. in Walker 53). Again, this may be linked to the appropriation of jazz by New Left artists and their rejection of pop as a symbol of mass culture.

¹² Jason Williamson and Andrew Fearn, members of Sleaford Mods, were described in 2015 as “the new voice of Britain’s disaffected working class” due to their strong commitment to depicting the situation of this social group (Kutchinsky). Their later album, *Spare Ribs* (2021), had reached number 4 in the British music

charts by January 2021, being the most prominent example of a working-class-themed band in the top 10. Therefore, they also resemble the Mersey poets in terms of the commercial success they have enjoyed.

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