



[Ian Tilton](#) *in conversation* at [Contact](#)  
Reviewed by [Emma Short](#) May 2012

*lan* the shy lad at the back of the club, reading Kafka - head in a book; *lan* the photographer of legendary bands, thwarted dreams to a profession unplanned;

*lan*

the archivist documenting change;

*lan*

the advocate with an eye to re-arrange.

[Ian Tilton](#)'s iconic photographs of The Happy Mondays, The Stone Roses, Kurt Cobain, The Smiths, Axel Rose, the Hacienda and many more are currently being exhibited at Manchester's Contact theatre until September. However as if that wasn't treat enough, his recent 'in conversation' in the foyer at Contact was an intimate, personal & fascinating journey of one mans struggle through personal change, the importance of the visual arts documenting moments in time and the cultural reflections made possible by them. It was a reflection on the breeding ground for creativity and on a global level, the need to break down geographical and class boundaries & to support brothers and sisters from across the globe in their ambitions and lives.

Hosted by the Contact's enigmatic Artistic Director, Baba Israel, it's no coincidence that both the **Contacting the World** festivals held there since 2002 and the **One World** project in Oldham, which is close to Ian's heart both connect with other countries and cultures to encourage unity and understanding, lasting relationships and new ways of collaborating (

[www.contactingtheworld.org](http://www.contactingtheworld.org)

&

[www.ukunitarians.org.uk](http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk)

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### Ian's Story

At the age of 14 Ian went deaf, he has 5% capacity left in one ear and 20% in the other. The news at the age of 18 that this would prevent him from ever swimming again forced him to give up his place at Newcastle University where he was to study marine biology and left him at a crossroads, where he turned to his two next best loves – music and photography. He adored the sounds resonating through his body when he went to gigs, and after a course in Blackpool, he began taking photos of bands in the post punk scene utilising his practical experience behind the camera.

In describing his deafness during the conversation as an 'isolating disability' he does so tentatively, seemingly worried about the message this may convey initially. However, his emphasis on working within the limitations of a situation, whether it be his deafness at the core, or the financial position of struggling bands, or the plight of asylum seekers, the subsequent tales of sheer tenacity and optimism in the face of adversity were the overarching themes of the evening.

In context, Ian described how his confidence was knocked and how being able to talk and communicate with people became difficult; lip reading he says, after an hour or so, is thoroughly exhausting. After his last operation he made a promise to himself to take off armed with cameras, tent and tripod to explore the Lake District; nothing was going to stop him from living a normal life, and once he started to become recognised on the circuit - partly due to photos he took of his brother's band 'The Membranes' and 'Section 25' he got carried along on a wave of people asking him for photographs more and more. Before this, he smiles, 'I was sitting in clubs listening to music whilst reading Kafka and Camus, looking all deep and feeling really shy'.

### **'Madchester' and beyond**

In bringing the focus upon Manchester, Ian tells us how everything in the early 80's was happening in Hulme, in the centre where people were slumming it in the Crescent and how fantastic a scene it was! It was a rough place he recollects and in the arts it was difficult to earn a living so not expecting too much money was the best way to be. Whatever money did come along was best used to express yourself with and just create. In that sense the money was just a tool to get to the next part of the jigsaw 'not making money the master; the money will take care of itself'. One thing that really stood out about Manchester to Ian that he hasn't seen in other towns is that traditionally people were genuinely happy for those that did well and friends always pulled their mates up on the way - rare by all accounts.



Visual archiving

[Janice Graham Band](#)

Anyway back to Ian and those magnificent freeze frames of time. Another element to the creativity of the 80's is the culture and history that was captured on film – that which at the time may have been 'just a photo' or 'footage' now serves as a veritable window into the past and captures the very essence of what was and how things evolved – youth culture and its transition.

As there were very few people taking photos at the time of Factory Records and the Hacienda there's a great sense of honour from Ian that he was allowed to take what he did. They're a testament to Manchester's history – a great document, and as Ian points out, part of archiving

with longevity, capturing and maintaining history.



A wonderful example of this is when Ian talks us through one of his photos taken when the Hacienda went to Paris in 3 coach loads to see James at the Locomotive in 1990. In the photograph are groups of fans on the street, the guys on the left hand side, he points out represent The Smiths – they'd finished by then but the dock martins can be clearly seen in the photo. The woman in the centre has a sort of Lennon thing going on which is associated with psychedelia and the massive revival in 88, 89 & 90. So within the picture there's a definite transition happening. On the right hand side there's a guy wearing kickers and baggys – evidently symbolic of the Happy Mondays and he seems to be, in the shot, turning his back on the previous half decade! Ian goes on to explain that if he could pull out from the shot there's a guy looking straight at him clad in paisley with his whole life ahead of him, and that's where it stopped, at 1990. Beautiful!

To listen to Ian with his wealth of experience and wisdom was a true privilege. A man of endless patience, happy to give his time to people who want to know about anything and more. Ian alongside his photography with bands he has established relationships with works now as a counsellor, dedicates his time to several charities and gives workshops on photography. In the bar afterwards whilst raising awareness of the One World Charity in Oldham Ian raffles off one of his exquisite prints of Kurt sat on a wooden porch in a rocking chair – needless to say tickets

sold like hot cakes but I sadly didn't win.

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**Editor's note:** The Manchester Salon are revisiting the issue of broader involvement in the Arts, and the impact 'audience development' approaches by Art institutions is having on the quality of those Arts in '[Is there a new Renaissance in the Arts](#)', Monday 10 September.