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How did Joy Division express mental health through Closer, leading to New Order?

Introduction

Within this essay, I will be discussing and analysing the mental health and personal struggles of Ian Curtis in how they relate to his lyrics, vocals and the overall effect on the writing process of the album Closer, also how the proceeding tragedy led to the creation of band, New Order. Closer is full of shrouded cries of agony and pain from the lead vocalist, the events of his life run parallel to the themes of the songs within the album. I will also be discussing the impact that Curtis's death had on the remaining band members and how they carried on despite odds being against them, also how it affected them mentally and how their style changed to adapt to more of the pop scene.

Context and background

Joy Division were a band based in Macclesfield, Manchester. Comprising of Vocalist, Ian Curtis, Bassist, Peter Hook, Guitarist, Bernard Sumner and Drummer, Stephen Morris. The first music they ever released was an EP called Warsaw, named after David Bowie's album, Warszawa.

In the time pre-Joy Division, Curtis was working at a job where he would help mentally challenged people find jobs. Alongside this, he was married at the age of 19 and had a daughter with his wife. The attitude that was felt by the couple was said by Deborah Curtis:

“Prior to the band’s formation, frontman Ian Curtis was practically a kid, It was 1975 and he was 19 years old and lived anything but a Rockstar life working for the government and was married. His wife Deborah Woodruff described their pre-joy division years as “boring and a depressing existence that was somewhat offset by her husband’s musical dreams revealing

Our existence had become boring and the fact that we both hated our jobs didn’t help I became very depressed and sometimes I was unable to stifle the tears on the long bus journey home and we had mistakenly saddled ourselves with a mortgage and stability we weren’t ready for and we were still only 19 years old and Ian’s ideas of a musical career didn’t really seem that extravagant at all so that really gave us something to look forward to” she’d say.” D Curtis. Touching from a distance. 1995.

After this, they released the Ideal for living EP, this did not directly gain them any traction with any labels. In fact, the EP was received as average and mild:

“In a retrospective review, David Cleary of [AllMusic](#) wrote that “[the] sound quality and production values on this release are extremely primitive”, while describing the release as “a mildly interesting, if not great EP”. He also noted that with the re-release of “Warsaw” and “Leaders of Men” on the rarity’s album [Substance](#) (the other two were originally only included on CD and cassette versions of the album), the need for diehard Joy Division fans to obtain this EP had notably decreased.” An Ideal for Living. Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/An_Ideal_for_Living

On June 15th 1979, their critically acclaimed album – Unknown Pleasures – was released under Factory records, it was recorded in Strawberry studios with producer Martin Hannett. The album reviewed a mixed reception but was overall viewed favourably.

Ian Curtis and Mental Health

Closer was Joy Division's second and last album, released in 1980, after the success of their 1979 album "Unknown Pleasures" The album contains 9 tracks, each one has its own character and yet at the same time, they all have an underlying melancholy to them.

The context is important for discussing the creation of this album, the frontman, Ian Curtis, was going through an affair with a Belgian journalist, Annik Honore, his wife was planning a divorce and his ever growing and worsening depression from his epilepsy was affecting his mood. There was even a suicide attempt made by Curtis when after a night of drinking at a pub, he swallowed a large portion of his epilepsy medication and had to have his stomach pumped, it is said by Peter Hook, the bassist.

"We recorded the album in March. He made his first suicide attempt in April, so it was pretty close. Ian was working well with our producer, Martin Hannett, who insisted on working through the night – Ian liked the peace and quiet. But it was fraught. We didn't have much money; we weren't eating properly and couldn't afford to drink. We played three nights at the Moonlight club in West Hampstead and supported the Stranglers at the Rainbow – four gigs in three days. Ian's illness was getting worse and we didn't help him, through ignorance really. But also, Ian was his own worst enemy – he never wanted to upset you, so he'd tell you what you wanted to hear. So, we never knew what he was suffering or thinking." P Hook. The Guardian. Tue 14 Jun 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/14/joy-division-ian-curtis-suicide>

The song, "The Eternal", has seemed to have been surrounded by controversy due to its lyrics, initially, the guitarist, Bernard Sumner, stated that Curtis wrote the song about a boy

with down syndrome, who he would see playing out in the garden over the years, growing older physically but not mentally, but others have speculated online that this was a cry for help disguised within a narrative.

Passover seems to have more of a blunt approach, with the lyrics discussing “Losing every time” and “This is a crisis I knew had to come, destroying the balance I’d kept”. This reflects his attitude to his personal situations, feeling like he’d lost control of everything he was trying to keep intact.

Curtis worked with the band's producer, Martin Hannett, alone when the band was not there, usually in the middle of the night, the studio was dark and cold, whether this was a preference by Ian to get him into the mindset of recording or if it was a choice made by Hannet due to his heroine dependency and need for darker and more enclosed areas can be debated. Other than when he was recording his vocals, Curtis would listen to the band jam out ideas and say if a specific line worked that could be added to or made into a song, this is how the riff for the song Love Will Tear Us Apart came from, Peter hook playing the line on bass and Curtis basing his vocal off of it.

The song 24 hours has quite a direct message, the song itself sounds like the sonic personification of anger rising to the surface, the intro bass and drums burst into a face paced melody with the guitar screaming overhead, Ian’s vocal sounds slightly strained throughout, I feel that this is one of the best reflections of his attitude to the things that were going on around him. At the end of the verses two and four, the lines “Destiny unfolded, I watched it slip away” and “Looked beyond the day at hand, there’s nothing there at all” It sounds as though he is about to burst into tears and scream, the fact that these two lines at the end of the verses are bellowed with more force than the others suggest to me that these are lines that have some of the most impact on Curtis.

Isolation is the most energetic of the album, but still, the melancholic attitude still persists, in the second verse, Curtis seems to self-introspect, speaking directly to his mother and apologizing for not being able to keep a hold of his situation.

“Mother, I tried please believe me

I'm doing the best that I can

I'm ashamed of the things I've been put through

I'm ashamed of the person I am” I Curtis, Closer, March 1980, Factory records.

Heart and soul is a slow driving, groove track with an almost funk bassline, and offbeat delayed drums. What is interesting about this song is these lyrics:

“You take my place in the showdown,

I'll observe with a pitiful eye,

I'll humbly ask for forgiveness,

A request well beyond you and I” I Curtis, Closer, March 1980, Factory records.

Joy Division played a gig at the Derby Hall which Ian was only able to perform two of the songs, as this was the night after his second suicide attempt with his medication, he was in no position to perform. The band thus went on with the vocalist of Crispy Ambulance to do the set, with Curtis performing two songs at the end, when Ian was watching the band play without him, he stated that it was almost like they were their own band, playing without him.

Wilson's first wife, Lindsay Reade, says: “[Curtis] told me... he just saw them going on and on and on without him. He wasn't afraid of it, at all. It was like he knew what was going to happen.” New Statesman. 18 Nov 2020.

On May 18th, 1980, Ian Curtis committed suicide by hanging himself in the kitchen of his house, it was something that seemed both an inevitability and yet completely unexpected by everyone around him. What is more is that the night this happened was the night before Joy

Division were going to America to start a 2-week tour, the band stated that Curtis was excited about going to America, but Genesis P Orridge, member of Throbbing Gristle and friend of Curtis, stated he detested America and American culture.

A conundrum occurred, Deborah Curtis stated that in a note left by Ian, it was written that he after he came back from America, he wanted to reconcile with his wife and become a normal family with her and their daughter again, there was no mention of suicide. Although, in the past, Curtis had said to his wife that I didn't see himself living past his twenties.

“Deborah has also claimed that Curtis had confided in her on several occasions that he held no desire to live past his early twenties” Ian Curtis. Wikipedia.

“According to Lindsay Reade, Curtis had informed her shortly before his death of his belief that, with his epilepsy, he could no longer perform live with the band. In addition, he had claimed that with the impending release of Closer, he believed the band had hit an artistic pinnacle.^[40] Wilson later said that it was likely that Curtis saw his act of suicide as somewhat altruistic.” Ian Curtis. Wikipedia.

New Order

The world of music within Manchester was shook by this death, it was announced on the local news and got wide news coverage within Mancunian culture. Even today, tributes to Curtis are still made today in Graffiti, Art, Music and writings.

The band did not seem to know how to handle what had just happened, a mixture of anger, sadness and confusion clouded the atmosphere and direction of the band. Stephen Morris, the drummer, was the only one to attend Curtis's funeral, a mixture of guilt and shame persisted with both Sumner and Hook, they had stated this throughout the years.

The remaining members of Joy Division, Stephen Morris, Peter Hook and Bernard Sumner, were all affected with by the death of Curtis, after this, with the help of their manager, Rob Gretton, Formed the band New Order with an additional member, Gillian Gilbert. It seems that this was done out of necessity, since Joy Division had hit this metaphorical brick wall, they wanted to pick up the pieces and try to conserve the momentum.

The band decided to carry on despite what had just happened, meeting regularly and recruiting a new member, Gillian Gilbert, who added an extra layer of guitar and synth sounds. The numbness of feeling was felt throughout the entirety of the label. Tony Wilson admitted to seeing in hindsight how negligent they were in the leadup to Curtis's death.

The sound of New Order was a gradual juxtaposition to that of Joy Division, the songs that were written and demoed towards the end of Joy Division's run (Ceremony, In A Lonely Place, Leave Me Alone) were recorded professionally and placed onto New Order's future albums.

These three songs still held the remnant, gloomy flame of Ian Curtis's aesthetic, although alongside this, songs such as Dreams Never End, Age of Consent and Blue Monday gave rise to a more positive, upbeat and pop centred feel that was intertwined with the futuristic style that the 80s were headed with bands such as Kraftwerk, ABBA and The Cure.

The overall new image of the band was popular with the public, e.g., their song Blue Monday is still the most bought 12-inch record in music history. The band continued the trends of electronic infused post-punk, but they had not completely forgotten their roots, the song Dreams Never End's first half is extremely reminiscent of a Joy Division song, before exploding into Peter Hook's driving bassline, this almost seems like an unconscious crossing of the void between Joy Division's end and New Order's start. Songs like Procession still

also carry the original style of the band, albeit with a more groove and surrealistic aspect added to it.

Since Joy Division were already interested in electronics and utilizing synthesizers, (Ian Curtis being particularly influenced by the German band Kraftwerk) e.g. The usage of a Moog as the top line of the song – Love Will Tear Us Apart, they made their way into New Order's process of working, with Stephen Morris and Bernard Sumner even building their own synthesizers, with Sumners being used as a clav sound on Blue Monday. The blips and whirrs of their synth use seems to match up with the drumming to give the sections of specific songs quite an energetic nature, alongside the emotional lyricism, more relaxed backbeats and prominent, major scale sounding basslines, are vastly different from the attitude of Joy Division.

Conclusion

Whether Curtis would have enjoyed this new direction of the band will forever be unknown, but New Order has never shied away from playing their old classics at live shows as well as New Order's track lists, The group have done countless interviews about the effect that Ian Curtis, in both life and death, had on them, expressing either funny stories, trivia or times of extreme emotional distress, it is clear that this one man led an innovation within not just the Manchester music scene, but also globally, with bands around the world stating Joy Division as their influence, such as American band alt/post punk band Interpol, British alternative rock band Radiohead and Even rappers like Shotty Horror.

From the early days until modern times, tributes to Curtis live on throughout the world, e.g., a graffiti slogan stating 'IAN CURTIS LIVES' was drawn large scale on a wall:

“Wellington's most tenacious graffiti has resisted three decades of official attempts to remove it.

The Ian Curtis wall in Wallace St, Mt Cook, is a tribute to the lead singer of gloomy Manchester post-punk band Joy Division. Plagued by depression, Curtis committed suicide in May 1980, aged 23.

Just months later the phrase "Ian Curtis lives" appeared on Wallace St. Over time it was changed to "Ian Curtis RIP", and the dates of his birth and death added.” A O'Neil 05:00, Stuff.co.nz. May 01 2015. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/68148425/wellingtons-ian-curtis-wall-resists-decades-of-repainting>

The legacy of Ian Curtis has gone on to be both admired and shrouded in mystery, this is because everything that has been talked about has either come directly from those who knew him, or the result of speculation made by fans, according to Peter Hook, Curtis was not the macabre, moody dark poet that he is often depicted as in photos and videos, rather he was a person that could have a laugh with the rest of the band and was also excited to discuss future plans and make other members of the band feel better while they were feeling down about the career and direction of their music.

He seems to be an enigma, whether the characteristics of his ledged were as prevalent as the seeming normalcy of his true character, it is clear that this was a man that under intense pressure, was still able to transform his torment into something sonically and surrealistically relevant.

Curtis often hid his mental health below the guise of an everyday bloke, insisting that everyone was ok and doing well before looking after himself, is it possible that this man tried to project his care about those around him because he understood how much of a deterrent that mental health was in the general scope of life? Or, is it more the case of someone using the pressure and prevalence of depression, epilepsy and a failing homelife, along with the

growing cacophony of his rising star? We will never know, but the fact that there is the mythos of a dark character versus that of a person wanting to create art as a release from the turmoil of his life may show us that the idea of the tortured artist is just a romanticized version of a misunderstood person making sense of the world around them within their unique perspective, actively trying to surpass adversity and suppression.

With the other members of the band reeling after the impact of Curtis's death, they seemed to jump heavily straight back into work, this is especially prevalent by the fact that they went to rehearse the weekend after the funeral, this is a suggestion that death does not just affect the one that is deceased, but the ones around them, it seems that this wanting to get on with it was a coping mechanism by the band for failing to realize the worsening effects of mental health. This can be a sign of the times possibly, where mental health was not as well understood, or letting the stardom and driving work ethic overlook the suffering of their friend.

Maybe the positive sounding hooks and riffs of New Order was meant to represent a response to the darkness of the events before, there are two New Order songs dedicated to Curtis, one titled 'Elegy', a 17-minute track and 'Here to stay'. Other than this, the two bands almost seem like two twins that were raised in different households, one on the industrial streets of Manchester, breathing in the soot and the bitterness of the people that lived within the area, and the other seeing a glimmer of hope, living the life of gilts and glamour but still retaining the sentiment and reminiscing memories of the other.

Mental health is an important aspect in life in terms of regulation and keeping a balance. Although it is satisfying to create a narrative and characterize those in the creative sphere, but it is also important to remember that these people are still people, in terms of Ian Curtis, he is regarded as a tragic figure whose music speaks to those who are also in desperate situations, but in this, fans who fall into the hive mind mythos may have their judgment clouded by

theories, conspiracies and false assumptions about him, without thinking about what was really happening behind the ledger, a man who was tortured by a condition that was not well understood, I feel that if these creatives are given more of the human element in terms of representation, people will be able to step back and take a more objective look at the person instead of the image.

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