

How the Free Trade Hall in Manchester played host to some of music's most famous events

For many years, the Free Trade Hall in Manchester was a focal point for public debate and cultural activity in the city. Built in the 1850's it has historically been seen as a symbol of free trade and the wealth that it helped to generate for Manchester during the Industrial Revolution. After heavy bombing during World War II, the building was reconstructed and eventually re-opened as a concert hall in 1951.

A number of legendary musical events have taken place at the Free Trade Hall. In May 1966, Bob Dylan played there, shortly after he "went electric" and at the height of the controversy over his perceived betrayal of his folk roots. It was here that he was famously branded a "Judas" by a member of the audience. A bootleg recording of that concert was officially released in 1998 as The "Royal Albert Hall" Concert - in reference to the incorrectly named bootleg that was heavily circulated before it was released.

On June 4th 1976, the Lesser Free Trade Hall - a smaller room upstairs from the main hall - was the venue for a concert by the Sex Pistols; a concert which has become legendary as a catalyst to the punk rock movement and New Wave. Around forty people attended the gig, although many more have since claimed to have been there. However, several key members of Manchester's future music scene were believed to be present, including Tony Wilson (journalist, owner of the Hacienda nightclub and Factory Records), Howard Deveto, Steve Diggle and Pete Shelly (of Manchester punks Buzzcocks), Peter Hook and Bernard Sumner (of Joy Division and later, New Order), Mick Hucknall (Simply Red), journalist Paul Morley, producer Martin Hannett and Morrissey, who later went on to form The Smiths.

Following the success of this gig, the Sex Pistols were invited to return. This second concert on July 20th 1976 was in many ways just as important as the first as it finally saw the concert debut of Buzzcocks, and was attended by many more people, including Ian Curtis (Joy Division), Johnny Marr (The Smiths) and Mark E Smith (The Fall).

In 1997, the building was sold by Manchester City Council to private developers – despite resistance from local groups such as the Manchester Civic Society, who viewed the idea as inappropriate given the historical significance of the building. After the initial planning application was refused by the Secretary of State, a second and drastically modified planning application was submitted and approved. The reconstructed building retains the original facade but has been otherwise completely rebuilt as the Radisson Edwardian Hotel, which is just one of many [hotels in Manchester](#).

Despite the loss of the Free Trade Hall, there remains a strong music scene in the city; with a number of large venues including the Manchester Evening News Arena, the Manchester Academy and Manchester Apollo; as well as smaller venues, which include the Roadhouse, the Bierkeller and the Night & Day Café.

The city also hosts the Manchester International Festival each year, which features a vast array of new music by both new and established international musicians, comedians, circus, dance and theatre acts - all of which help to attract thousands of visitors to the city's environs and results in the booking-out of hotels, hostels and guest houses in the city during the festival's run.

About the Author

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