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SOUNDS OF THE CITY

A new audio trail brings Manchester's canals back to life.

Words John Robb Photographs Rebecca Lupton

I've run all over the world.

From freezing cold Berlin to LA's boiling beaches, from Cuba's El Malecon and laps of Moscow's Red Square to Tokyo's rockabilly parks and on Goa's stunning beaches, and oddly the canals in Manchester remain my favourite.

You get to run past life in its upfront grittiness – I've seen sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll down here. Couples getting it on, condoms on the floor, the whiff of dope, lurching drunks and shouting deadbeats and I've also seen bird spotters, tourists and school parties.

In the winter when your arms are red raw from the cold to the summer when the canal explodes into a poetry of green foliage (complete with the occasional graceful weeping willow) in the way that only England can, the waterway remains endlessly captivating.

For the special long run I do the City-United loop – the two opposite ends of Manchester in more ways than one.

The run starts at Manchester United's huge temple of football where you can loop the stadium dodging the expensive four-wheel drives that cruise pampered footballers past the tourists with their bags stuffed full of red merch'. You then head down to the canal which runs right by the stadium and on towards the city centre. Past the tram tracks that rise up in the air on concrete stilts, past the last few tiny bits of grimy industry of the scrap yards where you have to hold your breath.

Breathe out and pass the new flats with the geese clucking on the lawns, and then on through the booze battlefield and the staggering Saturday night dolly birds of Castlefield or the lazy

Sunday afternoons of barbeques at Dukes bar. Look left and check Beetham tower – Britain's tallest residential block – and continue along the long strait under the bridge beneath Deansgate and past the new Hacienda building with its potted history of the legendary venue carved into its metallic lower wall. Pick up speed and then pass under Oxford Road and onwards past my favourite section of big office blocks that give you a real sense of a powerful city and then surface along Canal Street with its bacchanalian party plus one. If you're feeling good take a diversion up Jutland Street, Manchester's steepest road, for gruelling sprints, and then back down past Piccadilly railway station where the newest and biggest tower block in the city is starting to grow.

Pick up speed and you are back underground dodging the rent boys that lurk on one treacherous stretch and on into the new canal basin and on to Chips – Urban Splash's most ambitious project yet – and you get a real sense of a city waking up and defying the recession and still rewriting its own history. Keep on going and you arrive at Man City's amazing new stadium, run round that avoiding the comings and goings of chairmen bringing money in and leaving just as fast, and then you are running back into Manchester city centre – which comes into view, powerful and cosmopolitan, a bold backdrop to aim for.

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“The Peterloo Massacre bloodied the streets a stones throw from the Rochdale Canal, and you can imagine Marx and Engels walking along the canal trying to make sense of this whole industrial revolution.”

I've spent years using the canals in Manchester.

Not just for running – they're the best shortcut in the city and give you a slice through the history of Manchester, telling you everything about what was once the world's most radical city – the first modern city. Recently I documented this for hearmanchester.com, a series of audio portraits along the canal with recorded stories and interviews that signpost the fascinating social, cultural, industrial and radical history of the city.

Everyone we interviewed said that the canals are the city's 'arteries' – so many times that we laughed about it in the end. But when you think about it that's exactly what they were. Walled in by huge warehouses, factories and mills, these were the main conduit of the murky industrial powerhouse of Manchester.

When you walk or cycle along there today you still get the faint echo of this industrial heritage. There are even a few ramshackle old mills crumbling away like rotten teeth on the canal banks, though many more have been converted to trendy offices and flats. Most were cleared away by the German bombers or the 60s developers but there is enough left for you to get the whiff of claustrophobia of what it must have been like to have worked in them.

Some say that Manchester has never been a beautiful city, but when the weak autumn sun sets in the late afternoon over Oxford Road the canal gives you a great, powerful vista to the red and grey streaked sky with the neon of the city glistening in the misty rain.

It's not just a concrete wasteland – nature is always there. I've seen weird giant spiders and their Hammer House of Horror webs under the bridges, bats flitting about, Canada geese that hiss and attack you when you are running, especially when they have their brood of fluffy yellow-feathered young waddling behind them. Herons are so plentiful standing stock still on the canal side, ready to strike or flying like lazy pterodactyls, that they have ceased to be anything worth mentioning. There are scores of swans so regal and astonishingly white that it looks like someone scrubs them clean every morning. There are families of clucking wildfowl and even, once, the electric burst of green of a kingfisher that flew down the canal past the posh bars on Deansgate Locks.

There are also plenty of rats scuttling along the banks, fat and furry, beautiful creatures, built perfectly to survive in whatever mess we make of their terrain.

The canals used to split off into a maze of waterways that have mostly been covered over, but in Castlefield they still remain as a defiant water park full of barges, a testament to the Victorian virtuosity that created an inland port 35 miles from the sea.

More Victorian virtuosity can be seen if they let you go down to the underground canal basin – almost a mile of subterranean canals deep below Deansgate where

workers used to ferry the goods in and out of the city centre back to Castlefield. It's hard to imagine the horses and the workers in this noisy twilight zone a hundred years ago.

The Victorians also built a huge winch system to bring train carriages up and down to the basin, to load and reload them – and standing by the huge concrete towers you marvel at the sheer daring of it all. The underground canal basin itself is now abandoned but in stunningly good condition. You hear the drip- drip- drip of water and you marvel again at this gloomy, damp cathedral to our industrial heritage.

Back on the surface you can still get a sense of radical Manchester within yards of the water – the suffragettes started a few hundred yards from the Rochdale Canal when they gatecrashed a meeting at the Free Trade Hall – the same venue where the Sex Pistols played about a century later and gave punk and, by proxy, the whole modern music scene to Manchester.

The Peterloo Massacre bloodied the streets a stones throw from the Rochdale Canal, and you can imagine Marx and Engels taking a break from drinking in the pubs of Little Ireland – now Oxford Road train station but then the grimeiest and most packed area of Manchester – and walking along the canal trying to work out how to make sense of this whole industrial revolution. Plotting how to improve the lives of the thousands suffering in the tenements. They thought that Manchester was ripe for their revolution. Instead Russia got there first and messed the whole thing up. On Canal Street, which parties 24/7 and where the 'C' is always removed from the road sign, you see Britain's biggest gay village. It's here that you can still see the marks worn into the canal wall by the towropes of the narrowboats.

All around us there is history. We rush past and think history is what happens somewhere else, but Manchester's history is perhaps the most interesting of them all. A city named after the Roman word for breasts because it was built on two small hills. A city that invented the industrial revolution and then tried to do something about the mess. This is a city that gave women the vote and re-invented vegetarianism as a modern concept in the 1870s, when it had more vegetarian restaurants than it has now.

Somehow, the canal has something to do with all of this. Without it as a conduit for



goods and ideas Manchester would never have moved so far, so fast. It was the first major transport link in a city that went on to have the world's first train station and railway.

We invented communism, computers and the whole modern, industrial city and being Northern we pretend that we didn't.

And all the time the canal meanders through it, half forgotten, but still the best slice of the city, telling the whole story in a quick walk.

John Robb is a punk singer, songwriter and musician, as well as a respected music journalist, TV pundit and author, who coined the term “Britpop” and was the first person to interview Nirvana. He is based in Manchester.

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