

The Story of Factory Records

and its Withington Associations

Rabid Records

An important precursor to Factory, Rabid also had its headquarters in Withington – in a former grocery store at 20 Cotton Lane. It was founded in 1977 by music promoters Toshi Ryan and Lawrence Beedle and record producer Martin Hannett. Hannett had just started to make a name for himself by producing the EP 'Spinal Scratch' for a new punk band called Buzzcocks. All three had been members of Music Force, a socialist-structured musicians' collective which promoted local bands by organising gigs and arranging PA hire. An offshoot of this was a lucrative flyposting business – which provided the funds for the new label. True to its socialist roots, the label was democratic in its profit sharing.

Rabid put out mainly punk music (with some new wave). Its artistes included Slaughter and the Dogs, John Cooper Clarke, The Nosebleeds, Chris Sievey (better known as comedian Frank Sidebottom) and the label's only hit-maker, Jilted John. The latter's 1978 novelty song by the same name became known by the refrain "Gordon is a moron" and its creator, Graham Fellows, at the time a drama student at Manchester Polytechnic, went on to achieve fame as his comic alter ego, John Shuttleworth.

Tony Wilson ended up poaching Hannett as record producer for the newly formed Factory Records and Rabid went into a terminal decline from 1980 after an expensive tour for Chris Sievey's band, The Freshies ended in disaster when its anticipated hit 'I'm in love with the girl on the Manchester Virgin Megastore checkout desk' lost its chart ranking owing to a postal strike.



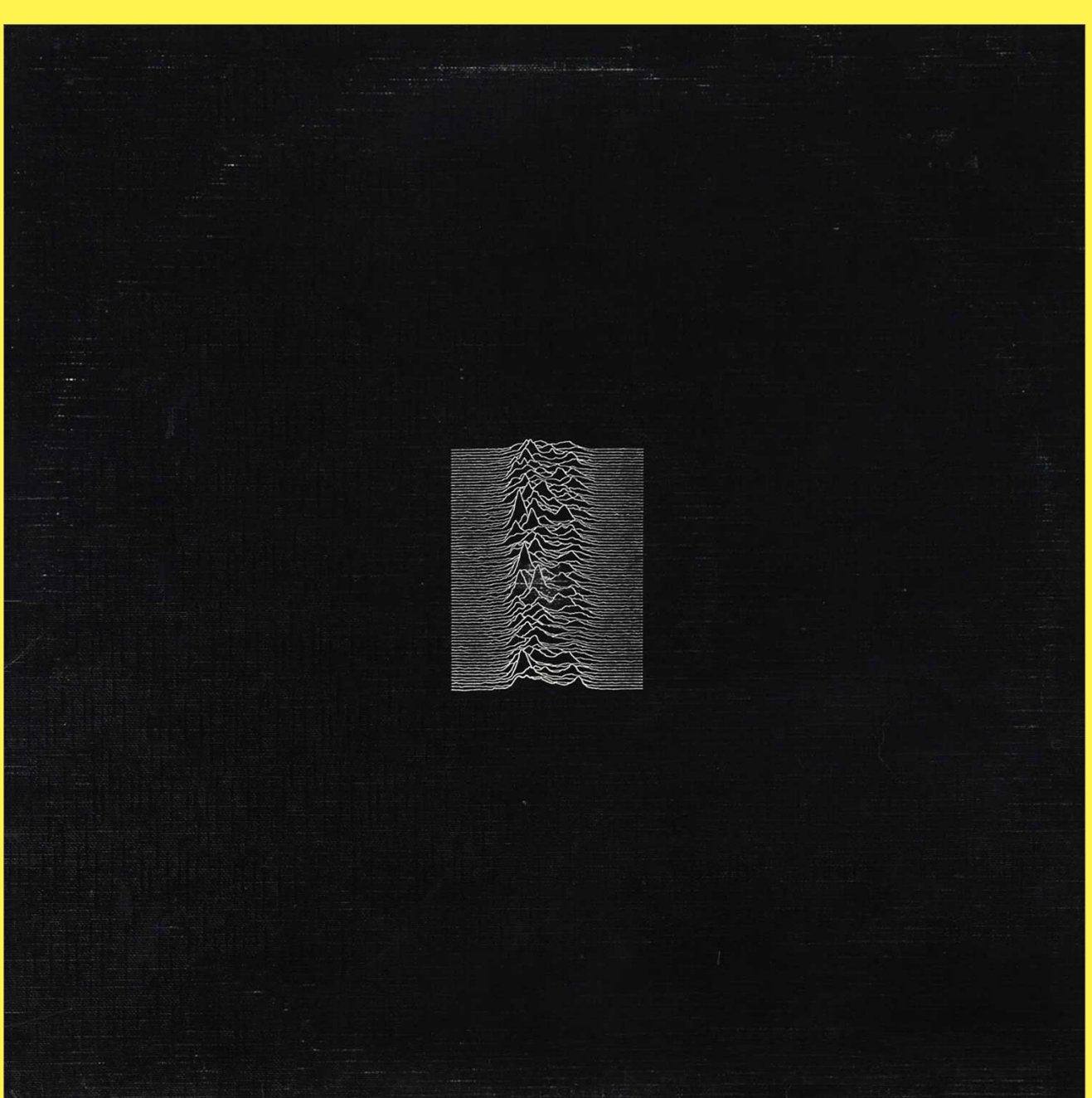
Back cover of Cairo's 'I Like Bluebeat' 7" single, Absurd Records, 1979

Rabid spawned 2 sub-labels, Razz and Absurd at the same M20 address. They were all known for their light hearted approach to music production. As Toshi Ryan put it "We were purely in it for the fun, the stupidity, having a laugh and a whack at major labels."



Vinyl Reilly and Bruce Mitchell of Factory's The Durutti Column, which was distinguished by Reilly's virtuosic guitar playing (Reilly had briefly been a member of Rabid's band, The Nosebleeds, as also was Morrissey)

The name of the band The Durutti Column derives from an anarchist military unit in the Spanish Civil War and also a Situationist cartoon strip that was based on it.



FACT 18: Front cover of Joy Division's debut album, 'Unknown Pleasures', 1979

This iconic and enigmatic design has an image of radio waves emitted by a dense rotating star known as a pulsar at its centre. The motif was chosen by the band and it was deemed "not cool" to include the usual info on the cover.



An influential Factory band, A Certain Ratio became known for pioneering a style of music known as 'punk funk'

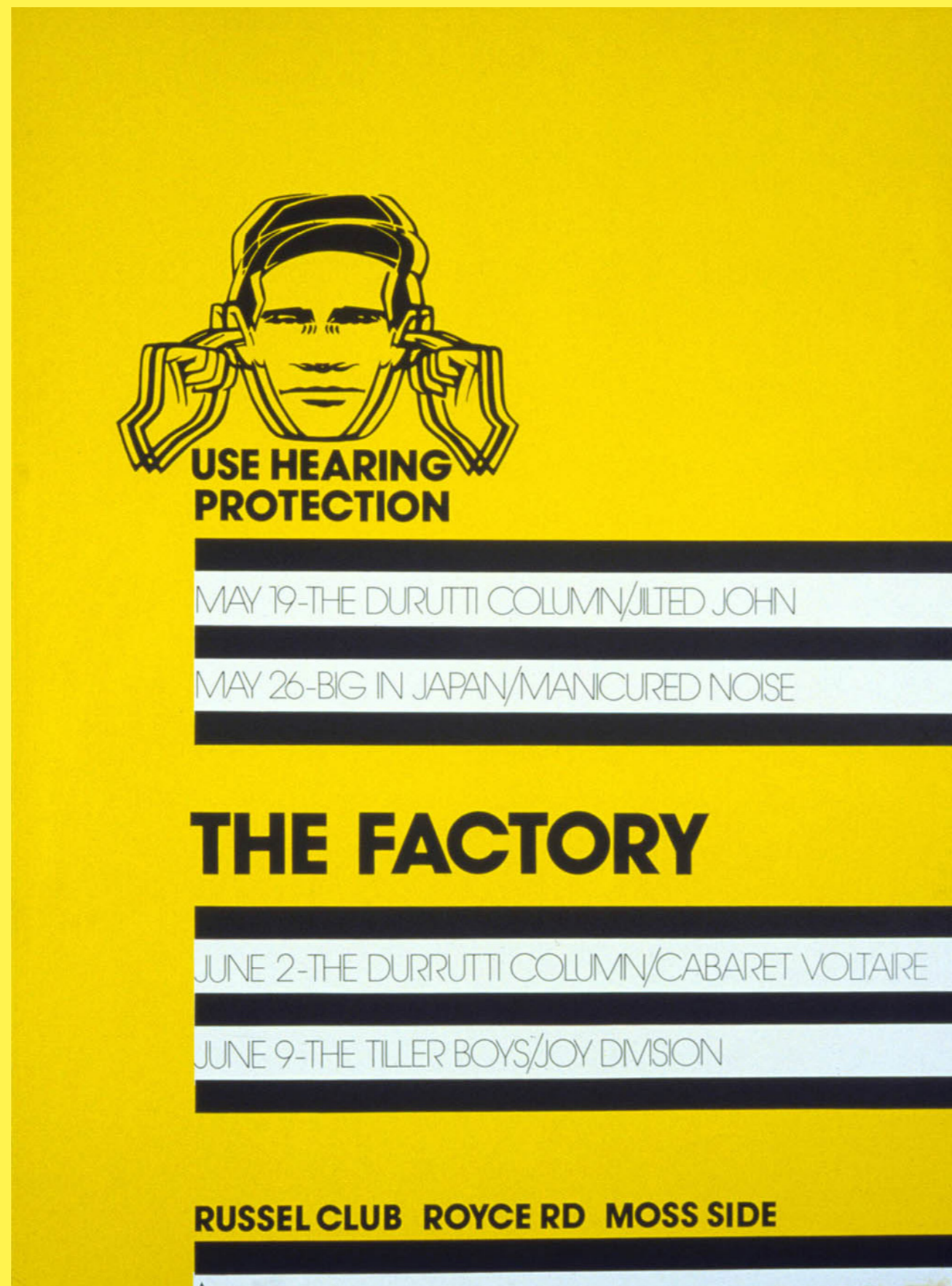


Toshi Ryan - co-founder of Rabid Records

Rob Gretton had initially tried to sign Joy Division to the label - but the socialist-minded Toshi turned them down on account of their use of Nazi iconography. Nevertheless Rabid ended up distributing the band's demo EP, 'An Ideal for Living'. Lawrence Beedle recalled "Rob turns up one day, and I agreed to sell the records for him through our network ... So he came round to Cotton Lane with about 1,000 of them in boxes and we distributed it."



Factory Records



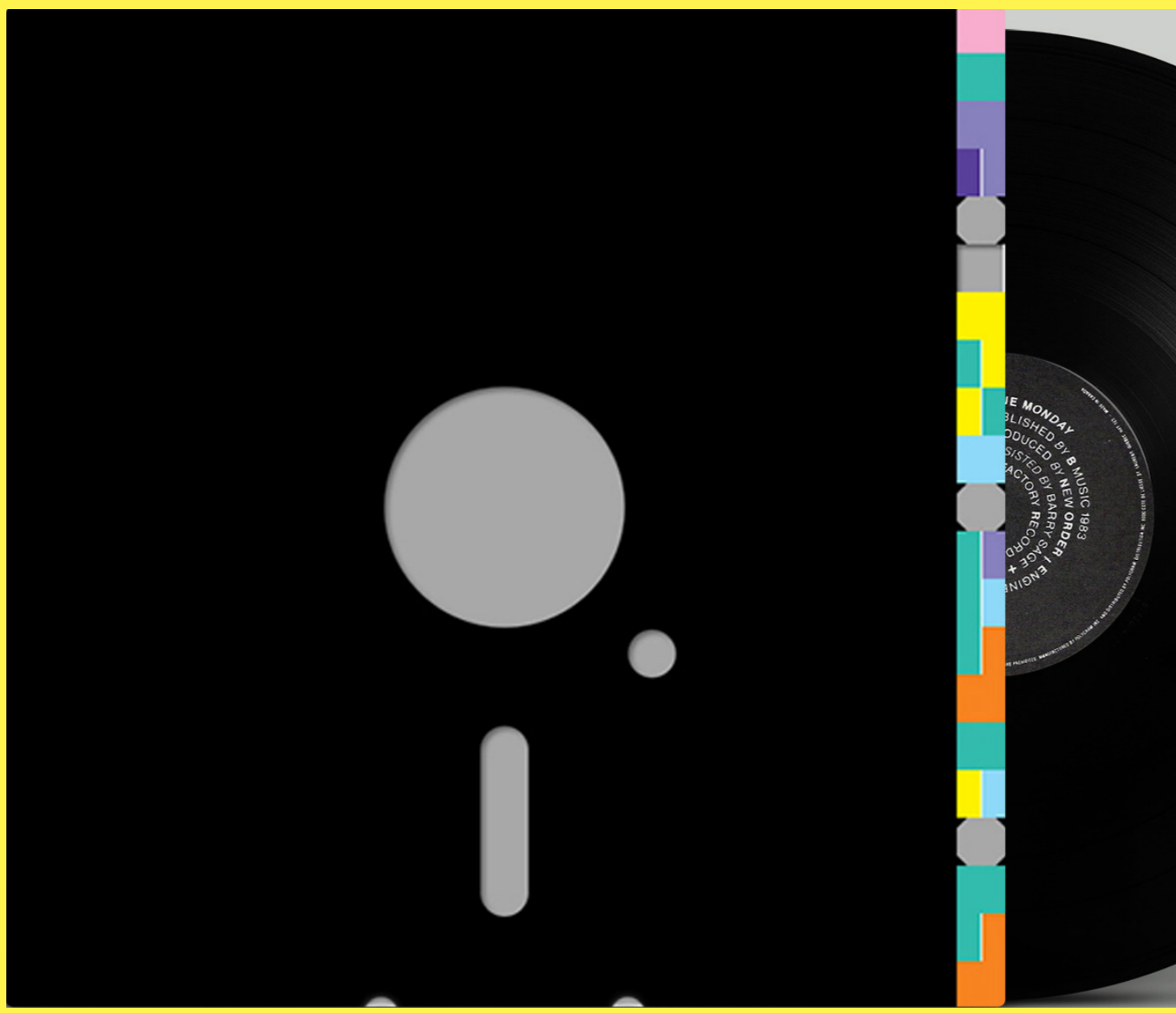
FACT 1: a 1978 gig poster for 'The Factory' at the Russell Club in Hulme

Peter Saville's very first design for Factory already shows the sleek industrial aesthetic that was to characterize the company's image.



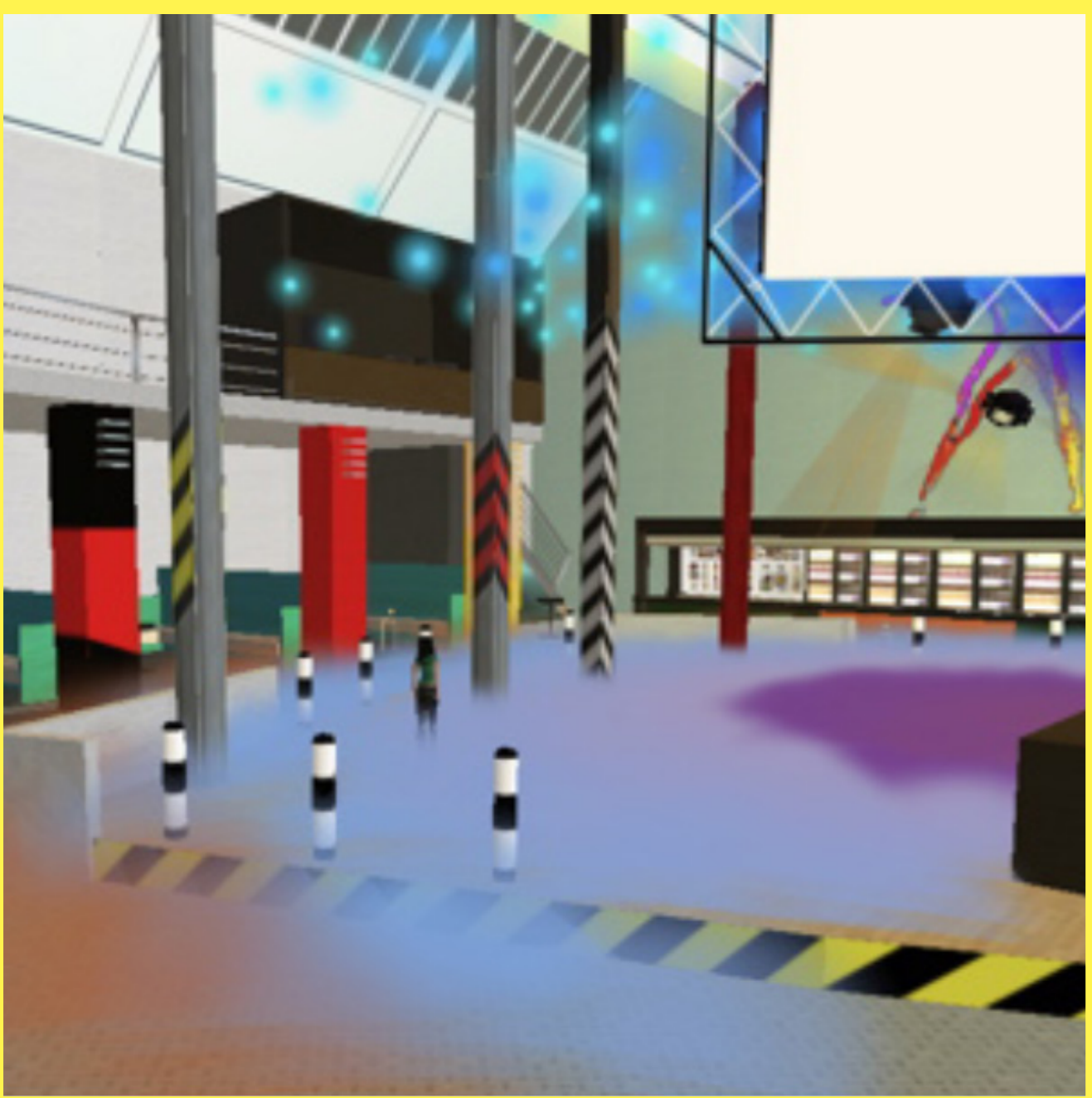
FACT 223: Front cover of New Order's 12" single, 'Fine Time', 1985

Based on a pop art painting by Richard Bernstein, the image of pills explicitly plays up the drug culture of the late 80s club scene and fits well with this acid house song.



FACT 78: Front cover of New Order's 12" single, 'Blue Monday', 1983

A 'synth-pop' song with a driving beat, this became the best selling 12" single ever released in the UK. Its famous cover imitates a computer floppy disc, with the strip of coloured blocks on the right being a coded representation of the record's details. The die-cut design was so expensive to produce that Factory lost money on the first run.

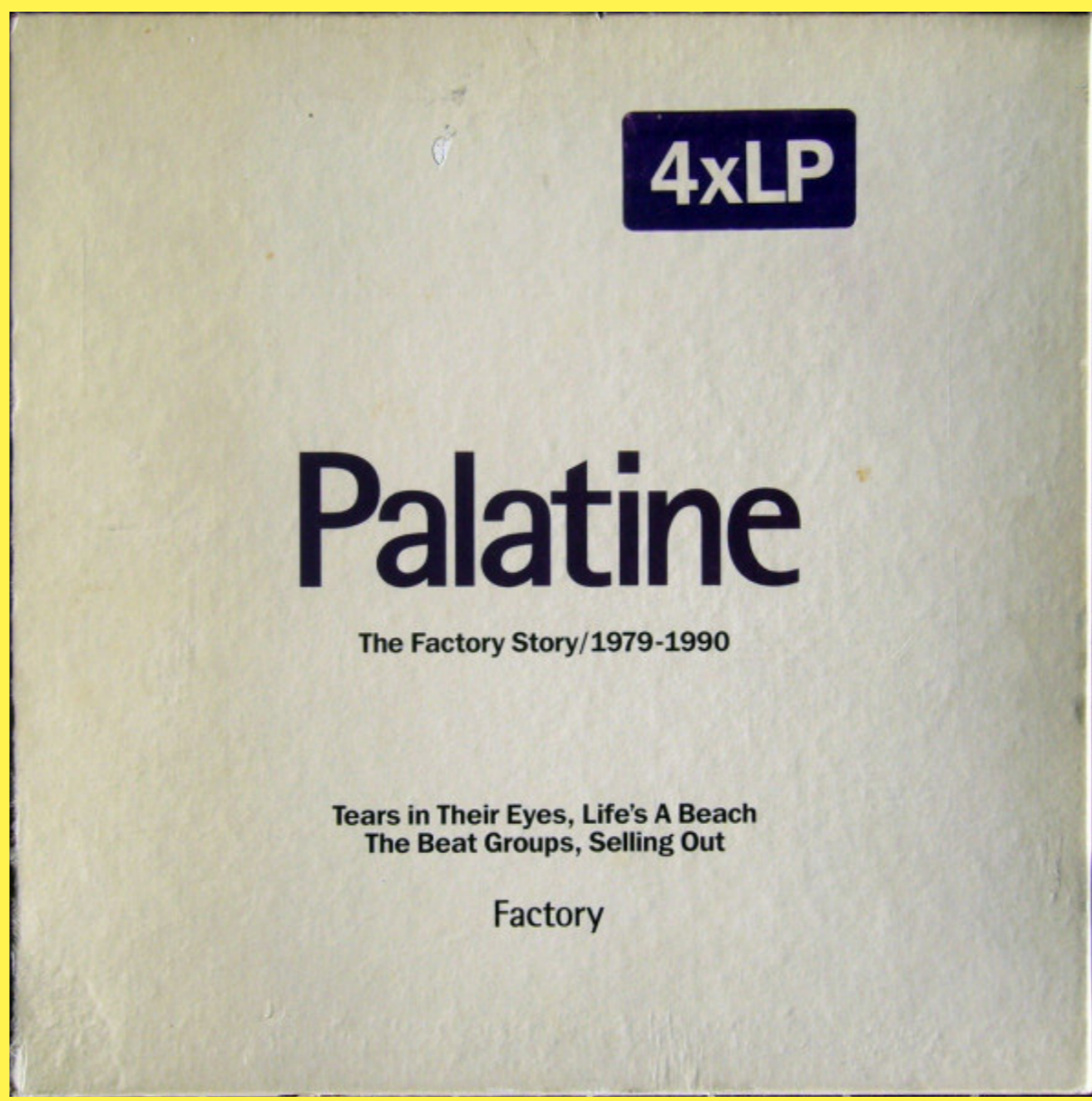


A recreation of FACT 51: The Hacienda nightclub in virtual reality world 'Second Life'

A new kind of super-club, the Hacienda embodied the sleek industrial look already associated with Factory. Its name derives from a quote from a Situationist essay: "The hacienda must be built", which apparently referred to a place which only exists in our dreams.



Happy Mondays were Factory's last hit-makers and came to epitomize rave culture.



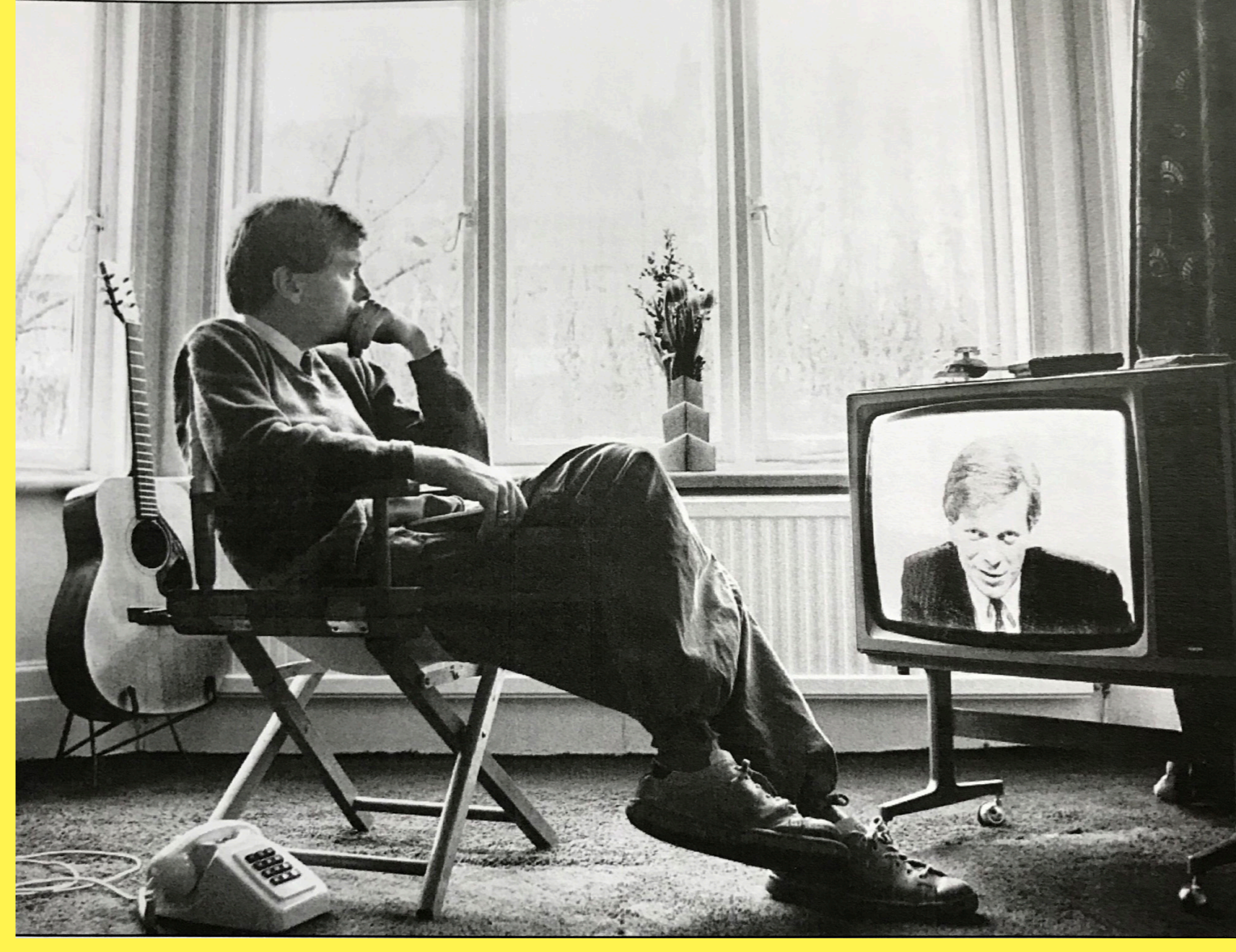
FACT 488: Palatine / The Factory Story 1979 - 1990, released in 1991, was a 4-disc anthology, the title of which pays tribute to the label's Withington roots.



FACT 242: Front cover of Happy Monday's EP, 'Madchester Rave On', 1989

With its bold pop art feel, this image by Central Station Design became the iconic logo for the Madchester scene.

"we made history, not money"



The man most closely associated with Factory and its driving force watching himself on TV. The photo appears to have been taken in the front room of his house on Old Broadway in Withington.

Tony Wilson

Known as 'Mr Manchester' for his championing and reinventing of his near native city (he was born in Salford), sadly Wilson died prematurely at the Christie Hospital in 2007 at the age of just 57.



A young Martin Hannett outside Rabid's premises - which still had a grocery store shopfront.

Martin Hannett

Credited as the 'creator of the Manchester sound', particularly for his work with Joy Division, Hannett was a pioneering producer with a remarkable sense of atmosphere and extraordinary skills at the mixing desk. He was an early adopter of digital effects, which he used to create wide spacious and multilayered audio. However not all bands appreciated his controlling approach.

He walked out as a director of Factory when he didn't get the expensive equipment he wanted and issued a lawsuit against the company: FAC 61. Although he later returned to successfully produce for Happy Mondays, his health was failing. He died tragically young at just 42, in 1991, following a long battle with drink and drug addiction.

Factory Records

Factory Records was an independent record label founded in Withington in 1978 by TV presenter Tony Wilson and actor Alan Erasmus - with its headquarters until 1990 being Erasmus's flat at 86 Palatine Road. It has achieved legendary status on account of its innovative music and its impact on both graphic and nightclub design, as well as for kickstarting the rave culture of the Madchester era and making a major contribution to the regeneration of the city centre.

It grew out of a regular live music night called 'The Factory' which showcased local bands at the Russell Club in Hulme. However it was not long before the decision was made to expand into record production and three new directors came on board. These were graphic design graduate, Peter Saville, Rabid's pioneering record producer, Martin Hannett and DJ Rob Gretton.

Gretton was managing a promising new band called Joy Division who soon signed to Factory, turning down a lucrative London deal in the process. The contract (allegedly written in Wilson's blood) stated "The musicians own everything, the company owns nothing. All our bands have the freedom to f*** o***." Thus began a unique business model in which not only were profits split 50/50 between the label and its artistes, but (more unusually) the latter retained all their own music rights.

Joy Division's music was rapidly transformed by Hannett's 'alchemy' of reverb and digital delay. The resulting rich and distinctive yet edgy sound has come to epitomize the early years of the label and was said to have a specifically 'northern' character. Other bands who signed to the label around this time included The Durutti Column, A Certain Ratio, Section 25 and – briefly – Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark.

However Factory was about more than simply putting out music. Wilson, a Cambridge graduate, took inspiration from the Situationist International – a mid 20th century anarchist art movement, which strove to revolutionise everyday life and break down the division between artists and consumers. Hence he envisioned the company as an engine for cultural change rather than a business. Meanwhile Saville set about creating a stylish new image for the enterprise which reinforced its arty credentials.

In typically quirky fashion, Factory assigned catalogue numbers to everything and anything associated with it – from records and posters to the company cat, a bill for dental surgery and even a lawsuit. FAC 1 was Saville's groundbreaking poster for 'The Factory' gig night in May 1978. Its stripped down industrial-style graphics were to set the tone for the label and still have a contemporary feel today.

In the spring of 1980 Factory was busy preparing for the upcoming release of Joy Division's first album, 'Unknown Pleasures' when tragedy struck. On the night before the band was due to fly to the USA, its lead singer, Ian Curtis, committed suicide. The remaining members reformed as New Order but Curtis's death cast a shadow over the group, which became fraught with division.

New Order ended up touring the USA later the same year and the trip proved an important catalyst in Factory's decision to create its own nightclub, inspired by those in New York that combined venue, disco and 'style lounge' in one. The Hacienda, which was co-owned by the band, opened in May 1982. Designed by Ben Kelly and housed in a former yacht showroom, its bare industrial looking interior was initially met with bemusement – and the club ran up massive debts. However in the mid 80s a new kind of electronic dance music known as house started to emerge on the underground scene. Originating in Chicago and other US cities, it was picked up on by the Hacienda DJs and ushered in a new era of rave culture, for which the club quickly became a mecca.

In 1985 Factory signed a new local band called Happy Mondays, who combined independent rock music with house, funk and psychedelia to create what became known as the Madchester sound. It was a moment of glory for the label and might have been expected to signal financial success. However, in typical Factory style, this was not to be. Clubbers preferred the drug ecstasy to alcohol – and drinks sales plummeted, whilst related gang crime rocketed. This led to problems with the authorities and a need for increased security as Madchester turned into 'Gunchester'.

In 1990 Factory moved its headquarters to new premises (complete with a swanky boardroom) which had it just bought in the city centre. But, with problems at the Hacienda and a looming property crash, the timing could not have been worse. Happy Mondays' success with their 'Pills 'n' Thrills and Bellyaches' album that year was not followed up. An all expenses paid trip to Barbados for the band to record new material descended into chaos and drug addiction. Unable to recover from its various losses, the company attempted to strike a rescue deal with London Records. However this foundered when it was discovered that the label didn't own the rights to any of its music and the company went into receivership in November 1992.

Wilson at least had no regrets. As he famously said, "we made history, not money".



86 Palatine Road. Factory was founded in the first floor flat on the left.

"One day, Tony, Alan Erasmus and I were sitting in Alan's flat – 86 Palatine Road in Manchester. Completely out of the blue, Tony suggested that we release a record. He said: 'Look, some of the bands that have played Factory nights, don't have a record deal yet. Why don't we make a record from the club?'"

"... No-one was paid. Everyone was there because they wanted to do something and nobody had any formal experience. No one knew what they were doing, so therefore no one presumed to tell anyone else how to do their job."

Peter Saville



36 Old Broadway. Tony Wilson lived here in the 1980s



28 Cotton Lane. The headquarters of Rabid Records

Toshi Ryan quote: 'Shadowplayers: The Rise and Fall of Factory Records' by James Nice, 2011
Peter Saville quote: 'Why Vinyl Matters' by Jennifer Otter Bickelmeier, 2017
Lawrence Beedle quote: 'Torn Apart: The Life of Ian Curtis' by Nick Middleton and Lindsay Rowley, 2009

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