

## Retrospectrum

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Twenty two years ago I wrote a song for a subculture that I thought had been wiped out of history.

The song was called "Hey Hey 16K", and it was about the experience of my generation of kids who got addicted to the ZX Spectrum in the 1980s. This was the first working class computer, just about affordable as a Christmas or birthday present, usually shared between siblings, and bought on the promise that it would be educational.

It definitely was an education, but not necessarily in the way the adverts promised. The ZX Spectrum was our introduction to games - not just to play, but also to write ourselves. You didn't need money or complicated equipment to get started, you could just type in a program from a magazine, or even write your own. Very soon there was an explosion of commercial games, usually written by people not much older than us, often working on their own in their bedrooms. All you needed was a ZX Spectrum, an idea, and a tape player to copy your game onto. This was punk, but without the approval of music paper taste makers.

Maybe that's why it seemed to get erased from cultural memory. Whenever I read about the youth movements of the 1980s it was always the tiny cultural elite who gathered in a few basements in London, never the vast unheralded mass of us sprawled around the nation, sat in our bedrooms with the windows closed, trying to get to the end of "Knight Lore."

By the time I released "Hey Hey 16K" as the first ever internet single\* in October 1999, many of those same kids were settled into professional basements of their own, nurturing the computer servers of the early internet. It was here that the song first came to (very limited) public attention, when it was featured in the IT newsletter "Need To Know", but it wasn't until a couple of years later that it really took off.

Rob Manual created a video using the now defunct Flash animation too and put it in his own weekly newsletter, b3ta. This was a time before YouTube, Facebook or Twitter had been invented, let alone Tik Tok, but it still managed to become one of the first ever viral videos, mostly on blogs and live journals. Within a week "Hey Hey 16K" had been downloaded by two million people and was the second most popular link on the whole web, which was a lot smaller back then.

Sadly for me this was also a time before iTunes, Spotify or any other way to make money out of online music, and so I never got to leave my job or blow a fortune on cocaine or sweets, but it did make my name known amongst the enthusiasts I'd sung about, and over the next couple of decades I would occasionally get invited to perform the song at conventions and other gatherings.

All of which is an explanation for how I found myself at Walsall FC's stadium last month for a celebration of the ZX Spectrum's 40th anniversary. It was an entirely appropriate venue for a group of (mostly) working class (mostly) men gathering to share an interest that was (mostly) ignored by the world outside. They were even dressed in appropriate merchandise, in this case faded t-shirts with ZX Spectrum lettering on rather than match kits from the club shop. There were stalls selling old tapes, a full programme of original programmers talking about the games they'd created, and right at the very end there was me, shouting my song at the thirty or so people who were still there.

To an outsider it might seem weird to travel for four hours from London to play one song in a League Two function room, but I had a lovely time. There's a stereotype of computer people as geeky,

socially challenged and awkward, and though there was a little bit of this around, for the most part everyone was friendly, enthusiastic, but also engaged with other parts of life. They weren't holding onto the past as something that could not be changed and ruled them now, like a Mod still sporting That Haircut despite the waning years and waxing hairline, but were there to appreciate it as something beautiful that had formed them.

It was a slightly different experience for some of the games creators who'd spoken. They were treated like heroes in that room, but it was all based on games that they'd made a lifetime ago. They were like one-hit wonders, forever applauded for that one song that people liked back in the previous century.

I knew exactly how that felt. I've written plenty of songs since "Hey Hey 16K" that I don't get invited to sing at League Two football grounds, but I always try to see it as an honour. Like the game creators, this was a time to appreciate the fact that we'd done something that spoke to other people like us and accept their thanks and, where possible, free drinks. It's a way to enjoy all the advantages of being a middle-aged rock star for one day in the West Midlands without having to go to all the bother of experimental soundtrack albums, cocaine habits or dodgy side-lines in painting.

It's also easier to enjoy because the subculture we were part of has been almost entirely accepted into the wider culture. The same parents who spent years telling us to stop playing "Manic Miner" and go out into the sunshine are now addicted to "Candy Crush" and fully understand what we were on about. We'd won, in the end, so does it really matter if people forgot where it began?

I don't think it does, 364 days of the year, but for one day in Walsall I'm very happy to bellow out a reminder.

\* it totally was.