

Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund: Research in Detroit

Throughout this brief report I am going to outline the research I conducted and activities I engaged in during my stay in Detroit. Firstly, I will state my intentions for travelling to Detroit. Then I will discuss the activities I participated in to fulfil these aims; finally I will state the overall costs of the trip.

It may seem absurd to want to travel to Detroit, considering the notorious reputation it has acquired following the demise of Henry Ford's motor industry. The media projects a worldwide image of hopelessness and urban decay. However, when exploring Detroit on a deeper level, a progressive strong community is found within the supposed industrial rubble. The primary purpose of this trip was based around my interest in techno music; as Detroit is the birthplace of techno, visiting this city was vital for my research. My initial concept has changed drastically from a post-race stance to a post-colonial stance due to the prominence of race within Detroit, therefore it is clear that my trip had a significant impact upon my overall view of techno. Another factor which influenced my travel to Detroit was the material available at the University of Michigan; the literature available at this university relating to techno music is far greater than the texts available in Manchester.

On June 19th 2014 I began my journey to Detroit, Michigan. My nerves were unsteady and my stomach felt weak as I anticipated my arrival at America's most dangerous city.¹ Before arriving in Detroit, my flight destination was Philadelphia, as my connecting flight to Detroit was leaving from this city. I was struck by the culture shock immediately when proceeding through US immigration control; due to my intended destination, I was subjected to an array of intense questions before being sent to 'secondary inspection'. I had to explain my research in reasonable depth to security, they appeared bewildered when told I was researching techno music in Detroit. This further justified my intent to research this area.

¹The Huffington Post, 'Most Dangerous Cities in America', (2014). Accessed on 30/10/2014:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/19/most-dangerous-cities-in-america-2013_n_4816774.html.

When I finally arrived at my accommodation, 375 W. Grand Blvd in south-west Detroit, I was greeted by the neighbour of the individual I was staying with. The man kindly helped carry my luggage up the stairs before introducing himself as Stephen. He has lived in Detroit his entire life, 48 years, and offered to be my tour guide during my stay. Prior to my visit to Detroit I had never personally met anyone who had experienced prison, gang crime and shootings; this encounter certainly broadened my perspective.



In the first few days of my stay, I was finding my feet and coming to terms with my surroundings. During these days I visited the Motown Museum, although unrelated to the genre I planned to study, a prominent techno label based in Detroit was inspired by the efforts of Berry Gordy. This techno label, Underground Resistance, were inspired by Gordy's intention to manage black artists and prevent their

talent
becoming a
target of
exploitation
by white
managers.



After my visit to the Motown museum, Stephen offered to accompany myself when exploring Detroit. I was fortunate enough to be driven around Detroit by a native, without this opportunity it is very unlikely that I would have seen many of the poorer areas of Detroit. During this brief tour the poverty in Detroit became ever more prominent; building after building appeared to be completely destroyed or derelict.





Less than a year prior to my visit the city was declared bankrupt, therefore this was not wholly shocking. However, the community spirit which lived on along side the evident urban decay took me by surprise. The constant negative portrayal of Detroit within the media led myself to create an image of Detroit which was not remotely accurate. The notorious 'Cass Corridor', once well known for drugs dealings and gun crime, has reinvented itself. This area of Midtown is now bustling with content consumers rather than violent gangs. During my wander around this area, I was greeted with smiles and 'how do you do's' upon my entrance into every shop. Many individuals were very keen to spark conversation with me when I told them I lived in Manchester and that I came from Sheffield, as both cities, particularly Sheffield, have suffered from industrial decline.

The following evening I was invited to a rooftop party at the Hilton hotel as my Airbnb host had friends from work who were attending. The party was hosted due to the yearly firework display that occurs in Windsor, the Canadian city across the river, on this evening. The food was fantastic, the music was fitting and the general feeling was cheerful. This event also gave the me the opportunity to have an amazing view over Detroit.



On the Sunday of this weekend I finally started on attending events relating to my research. A small local techno orientated day time event, titled 'Tec-Troit', was taking place Downtown in Harmonie Park. This gave myself a chance to observe the demographics of the individuals whom attend techno events in Detroit, they appeared to be somewhat different to its European counterpart. Dance offs and card games were occurring along side the pounding grooves; this is something which I had never witnessed before at any techno event in Europe! During my observations I befriended a man named Jordan whom introduced myself to a member of the 'Detroit Techno Militia', this individual told me he'd been playing

records since the 1980's and was heavily involved in promoting Detroit based artists. The following week I continued to meet up with Jordan as he accompanied me to techno events and shared similar interests in the music. However, our knowledge of artists differed greatly which further highlighted the



divide between Detroit techno and European techno.



In the second week of my stay I visited the Eastern Market with my Airbnb host. Kendal was volunteering at a stall there so it was crucial that we arrived early; luckily I was still a little jet lagged so 6am felt more like 11am! There were a variety of stalls selling everything from flowers to maple syrup lollies and kale crisps. Surrounding the Eastern Market there was an abundance of street art which I

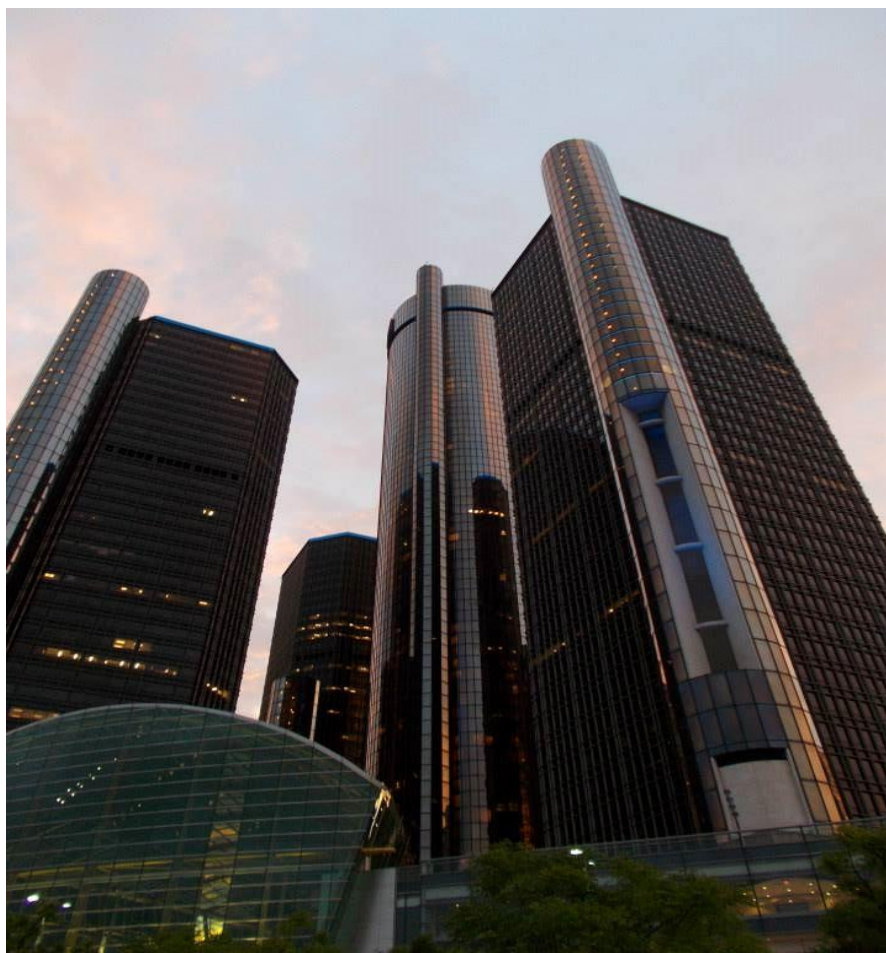


was keen to explore and observe.



After my trip to the Eastern Market, I met up with Stephen and took a stroll around Downtown Detroit in the early evening. On this stroll I discovered a lot about Stephen's life and what it was like growing up in Detroit during a period of such drastic economical change. He highlighted the rate of breakdowns in the nuclear family, and how this is near to none existent in Detroit. Furthermore, after engaging in an extensive conversation with him in relation to society, I realised how prominent and

necessary religion was in suffering communities. This experience changed my perspective upon the significance of religion within society.



Due to the flat landscape of Detroit and the little availability of public transport, a large amount of the populous ride bikes as a primary method of transport. From this popularity, an event named 'critical mass' emerged. This occurs once a month, the meeting point is at Wayne State University where a large collective of individuals meet up to cycle around the city. Many of the roads are closed off which gives people who are new to the city a fantastic and safe way to explore.



In the final days of my stay in Detroit I managed arrange a visit to the recording studio of Underground Resistance. This record label is considered to be a techno pioneer; regarded as the second wave of Detroit artists, the likes of Jeff Mills and Mike Banks are highly respected within this genre. I was fortunate enough to have a thorough conversation with Mike Banks about the origins of techno and what the music meant to him. This was an enlightening experience which has enriched my research and gave direction to my initial idea.

I continued to pursue with my research and arranged to meet the music librarian at the University of Michigan; the librarian was incredibly helpful and directed myself towards the resources that would be of use. This allowed me to access to materials that would have otherwise been out of reach, the resources I encountered were of significant benefit to my research so far.

On my final evening in Detroit I attended my first ever baseball game, the Detroit Tigers are a major league baseball team. The stadium was over-overwhelmingly large compared to the football stadiums I have visited before. Another factor that I was surprised by was the sharing of stands by home and away

fans.



Overall, this trip was extremely enlightening due to the completely differing perspectives it offered. I would like to thank the Zochonis award for granting myself the money to part-fund this trip; without this award it is unlikely I would have had the opportunity to visit Detroit. From this trip I have not only made good friends in Detroit, but I have also found confidence in myself through travelling alone in a place perceived as particularly dangerous. Furthermore, now I am aware of the brilliance of Detroit, I can recommend others to explore it themselves rather than creating negative assumptions based upon what they hear and read from secondary sources.

Expenditure

Flights: £666

Accommodation: £358

Visa: £66

Food/General living costs: £250

Total: £1,340

Financial Support from Zochonis travel award: £400

