

Tony Forbes

It's a privilege to have known and worked with him

Eugene Byrne offers a personal appreciation of **Tony Forbes**, the Bristolian artist and musician who died recently

TONY Forbes, who died last month following a long illness, was one of those people who kept cropping up in unexpected places.

His life story ran like a thread though many of the things that make Bristol what it is today.

During the 1980s he was guitarist with one of the great Bristol musical might-have-beens, the Brilliant Corners, an accomplished and committed indie band.

The Corners were one of those bands that Bristol and every other town produces from time to time which have huge talent and which,



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Tony Forbes

given only slightly different circumstances and just a little luck, would have made the really big time.

As things stand, they almost made it. Their best-known single was probably *Brian Rix*, a reference to the famous farce actor. They later re-recorded it, with a video featuring Rix himself, all proceeds going to Mencap, the charity of which Rix was a patron. You can find it on YouTube.

As a member of the Corners, Tony was always billed as "Winston", the name by which his mates in Southmead knew him.

He said: "Growing up in the 1970s I was the only black kid in my class. I was either going to be Winston or Chalky. I preferred Winston."

To his oldest friends, he remained Winston. One of them related how his nine-year-old son was admiring one of Tony's drawings and asking his father if it was drawn by "Uncle

Winston." Tony was ferociously proud of his community, a 'Meader to his fingertips.

Southmead welcomed his family, he said, but this didn't mean he was not keenly aware of how unfair life could be to working-class black kids.

While the music he helped create will live on, it will be his art which ensures he will be remembered for as long as people are researching and writing about Bristol's history.

His key contribution was the painting he produced as a young man in 1999 for 'A Respectable Trade?' the landmark exhibition at Bristol City Museum & Gallery looking at Bristol's role in the transatlantic slave trade.

His picture, 'Sold Down the River' was a response to the 1996 Festival of the Sea which celebrated Bristol's maritime heritage but which notoriously made no reference to the slave trade.

As he saw it, he was held in chains by the complacency of the media, and the memory of Edward Colston while the well-to-do partied up in Clifton.

"When I look at Colston's statue I just think of dead children," he wrote. "I can handle the fact that the statue is there, but there's nothing to say he was a slave trader."

Tony could also give you some other telling insights into the making of modern Bristol.

As an aspiring artist, he was naturally fascinated by Bristol's growing graffiti scene as a youngster, and wanted to be part of it.

But then he learned that a single can of spray paint might cost as much as £3. In the 1980s this was the kind of money that middle-class kids could afford, but he and his Southmead mates could not.

While certain now well-known artists were risking arrest on charges of vandalism, their middle-class backgrounds at least ensured that they could afford the paint.

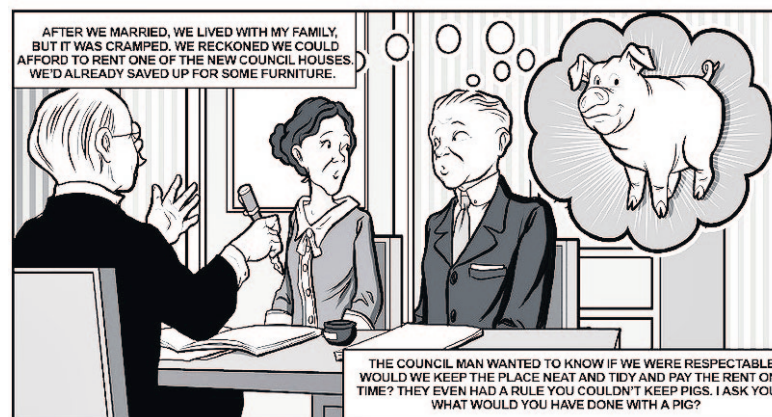
He should not, though, be merely remembered for his fights for justice. He also had a keen sense of humour which could go off on the most absurd flights of fancy. And like all good artists, he was a great observer.

More recently, Tony provided the cartoons for 'Homes for Heroes 100', the comic produced by the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership tracing a century of council housing in Bristol which I researched and wrote.

Tony was a delight to work with. He instinctively understood how to



Tony Forbes - 'I was the only black kid in my class. I was either going to be Winston or Chalky'. Right, 'Sold Down the River' by Tony Forbes, 1999 (Bristol Culture). One of Tony Forbes' illustrations from the 'Homes for Heroes' coming about a century of Bristol council housing



tell a story in cartoons and produced results far better and funnier than anything I'd envisaged.

His grasp of Bristol streets and people's costumes in years past was spot-on.

It was a terrible shame that his illness meant his contribution to

the comic was less than planned.

It has been well received, but would have been immortal if it had had less by me and more by him.

Tony was 54 when he died - nothing at all these days - and right up to his terminal diagnosis he was full of plans for the future. He would



talk about future artistic projects with the passion and enthusiasm of a teenage boy forming his first band. It was a privilege to have known him and worked with him.

■ Latimer's Diary will return next week