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Coal, Cotton and Rock ’n’ Roll in North West England

This chapter examines the experiences of working-class youth in the northern industrial towns of Leigh and Wigan. It highlights the continuities and ruptures in popular culture and Clive Powell’s place within an industrial milieu in which rock ’n’ roll music played a particular role in both affirming and challenging working-class identities. Here is an image of England that still contained features of the Victorian economy and the social structure it created. Through an exploration of social spaces that were defined by particular soundscapes it explores the role that popular music played in complementing a ‘structure of feeling’ that connected young men and women to a sense of class, locality and the possibilities of change. The musical journey traversed by Powell and his peers in the coal and cotton industries of North West England sheds light on the complex relationship between class, youth and popular music in the 1950s.

Powell’s background and early career is a point of connection between an ‘old England’ that Hoggart reconstructed in the Uses of Literacy (1957) and a much mythologised ‘new England’ depicted by MacInnes in his novel Absolute Beginners (1959). MacInnes had noted a change on the streets of London where ‘it did look as if some conspiracy was afoot to slay the elder brethren’ and the kids were ‘spending fortunes on the songs of the Top Twenty’. For northern working-class youth in the 1950s, England was a country of coal mines, cotton mills, smoky pubs and working mens’ clubs. Yet the sounds, imagery and style of MacInnes’ London began to have some resonance amongst teenagers in Leigh and Wigan and they embraced the coffee bar and jukebox culture that Hoggart had felt was detrimental to their cultural development.

In becoming Georgie Fame in 1959, Powell provided the link between Victorian music hall, the inter-war variety show and the development of a vibrant and challenging popular music that was consumed by working-class youth as a source of enjoyment and as a weapon in attempting to transcend the confining strictures of class, locality, ethnicity, and existing notions of national identity. Powell’s geographical and musicological trajectory
provides an insight into working-class youth culture and popular music in the industrial north. His career sheds light on the less celebrated foundations of English rock 'n' roll and the experiences of working-class youth through their creation and consumption of popular music. Powell’s world was shaped by the cotton mill, the coal mine and a specifically northern working-class culture. Popular music would provide Powell with a means of escape, but he would retain a sense of local and regional identity throughout his subsequent career.

**Work, class and popular culture in a northern town**

In the 1950s the streets of Leigh and Wigan were still populated by working men and women whose lives were shaped by the factory whistle, the whip of the cable from the colliery head-gear and the culture associated with these particular employment sectors. The lives of young working-class boys and girls were punctuated by the beginning and end of shifts and adults leaving and coming back home each day from the pits and cotton mills. Breakfast, dinner and tea would be accompanied by gossip, banter and tales of workplace peril, conflict and humour. Leigh was also a town that was ‘deep red’ in politics and steeped in the culture of the Labour Party and industrial trade unionism. The first Labour MP, Harry Twist, a local coal miner and trade union official was elected in 1922, and the seat remained socialist for the rest of the century.

The 1940s represented the last great period of British cotton production. According to Singleton, in ‘the summer of 1952, 33 per cent of spinning operatives and 22 per cent of weaving operatives in Lancashire were either unemployed or on short time...But demand picked up in 1953, and more or less full employment was restored’. However, from 1954 onwards foreign competition rapidly diluted Lancashire’s export and domestic market. To Fowler, the ‘crucial year was 1958, which saw more cotton cloth imported into Britain than was exported, for the first time since the industrial revolution’. Leigh was particularly hard hit with a ‘63 per cent fall in capacity between 1950 and 1962’. Yet in the early 1960s, there were still visible signs of the importance of cotton to the local economy. Moreover, although some mills had closed they had not been demolished and stood as reminders of an industrial culture that had drawn on the labour of thousands of young men and women since the industrial revolution. In his contemporary description of cotton towns the journalist Geoffrey Moorhouse claimed that you could ‘still see women gossiping on street corners...you can still see middle-aged men in mufflers and cloth caps’.

As with the cotton industry, the fortunes of the Lancashire coalfield faced a similar fate. The industry had been contracting since the Second World War; 77 collieries were nationalised, but a wave of closures in the 1960s significantly reduced the number of miners. However, in 1955, there were still...