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Exploring London’s Soho and the Flamingo Club with Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames

This chapter examines Clive Powell’s geographical and musical trajectory through a period that has been popularly perceived as a crossroads for English popular music between 1959 and 1964. His journey took him from a working-class, industrial Northern England to a perceptibly more cosmopolitan England that by 1964 was shaking to the beats of West Indian ska music, rock ‘n’ roll and African American rhythm and blues. In this period, London provided social spaces where the boundaries and conventions of class and ethnicity could be temporarily traversed. Popular music played an essential role in this process through the way in which it became embedded in coffee bars, dance halls and clubs. It was in such places where a different England was being imagined on record, stage and dance floor. Powell’s engagement with various aspects of the city’s youth culture presents a particular image of England that remained rooted in class yet was open to particular incursions into, and transformations of, particular social and cultural milieus.

Powell’s career presents a nexus through which aspects of a ‘new England’ were struggling to emerge. His musical journey across a multiplicity of locales and soundscapes connected him to West Indian migrants, homosexual impresarios, writers, gangsters, United States military personnel and a youth subculture that was influenced by the sounds of ‘black America’, the styles of Italy and the cinema of the French New Wave. London introduced Powell to the pre-rock ‘n’ roll culture of the capital’s entertainment business that had been built on the ‘variety show’ and its associated characters and sharp practices. The discovery of his talents at the Two I’s coffee bar led him to hit records and wider commercial success as a mainstream pop star. Yet it was Powell’s prominence in the burgeoning rhythm and blues scene that confirms his importance in symbolising the connections between class, race, sexuality and youth culture in post-war England.
Northern lads in London

Mike O’Neil caught a train from Leigh to London in 1958 and headed straight for the Two I’s coffee bar situated on Old Compton Street in Soho. This venue was a magnet for talent from across the country and became established as a place where careers could be forged and fortunes made. The Two I’s was run by Paul Lincoln and Ray Hunter, two Australian wrestlers who installed a jukebox and then extended into the basement to provide a stage for live performances. Here in this one small building was a microcosm of a popular music scene and youth culture that by the late 1950s had appeared on high streets across many of the major towns and cities of England. The Two I’s became a mecca for aspiring musicians from across the country seeking an authentic slice of metropolitan youth culture. Working-class men and women frequenting the clubs and coffee bars of Soho would cross paths with migrants, gangsters, homosexuals, prostitutes, pimps, showbiz impresarios, shysters, confidence tricksters, wealthy hedonists and corrupt public servants.

O’Neil was attracted by the music and glamour of London but also wanted to avoid his stint of national service in the armed forces. Unlike many other northern dreamers he had actually made the journey away from the parochialism that to them had been a feature of their lives in the English provinces. In the same year, another aspiring musician, Bruce Welch forged a similar trek from a coal mining community in County Durham and like O’Neil experienced a great sense of exhilaration and liberation. He was shocked by the contrast between the metropolis and North East England. Welch recalled that he ‘sometimes saw men kissing each other in secluded doorways in Old Compton Street...[and] there was a thriving rent boy business around Piccadilly’. In the coal mining towns of Lancashire and County Durham homosexuality remained very much in the closet. Yet here in London it was openly expressed, particularly on the streets of Soho and in the variety of coffee bars and clubs that formed the core of the city’s youth culture. Elements of the gay subculture of the capital meshed with aspects of youth culture and popular music providing personnel, style, musical genres and completing the matrix of class, race and sexuality that formed the foundation of English rock ‘n’ roll.

To the many of the northern working-class youths who headed to Soho sex seemed to be everywhere with prostitutes, strippers and transient couples heading in and out of cafés, flats and clubs. Soho was already established in the collective consciousness as a location for hedonism and transgression. In his sensationalist ‘indiscreet guide’ of the 1940s, Stanley Jackson depicted the district as being awash with music, drugs, criminality and sex: ‘You can’t move far in Soho at night without seeing the sluts in slacks, wartime hangovers...They all...chew gum and talk a ghastly blend of Brooklyn and Billingsgate’. A report in a tabloid newspaper from 1959 of the last night of an Elephant and Castle pub that was being closed to make way for