## Young soul rebels? Soul scenes in seventies Britain

David Buckingham

*This essay is part of a larger project, Growing Up Modern: Childhood, Youth and Popular Culture Since 1945. More information about the project, and illustrated versions of all the essays can be found at: https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/.*

One of my earliest and most formative musical experiences took place at the age of eight or nine. It must have been in 1963 that I happened to watch James Brown playing live on the commercial TV show *Ready Steady Go!* It wasn't just his rasping and pleading vocals that I found so compelling, or his astonishing dancing. I can still recall the moment where Brown seemed to break down in an apparent excess of soulful emotion, or perhaps physical exhaustion. He dropped to his knees, sweating profusely, as an assistant wrapped a cloak around him and ushered him off stage. Brown proceeded to throw off the cloak, grabbed the mic and returned to performing. Little did I know that this routine was a regular feature of Brown's act. For a lower-middle-class white boy in suburban Britain, it was a kind of revelation: it suggested that music could be something other than the bland, white mainstream pop that my parents seemed to like.

Soul music has stayed with me. While I grew up with Tamla-Motown, I was obviously much too young to be a mod; although by the time I arrived at my hippy teenage-hood, I was still listening to Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. I can't pretend that I was a dedicated seventies soul boy, but by the end of the decade (then in my mid-twenties) I was a regular listener to specialist soul music shows on the radio: bands like Maze, Cameo and Earth, Wind and Fire, as well as Brit-funk groups like Linx and Sade, are still in my vinyl collection.

In his influential book *Subculture*, published in 1979, Dick Hebdige argues that the history of youth subcultures in post-war Britain can be understood as a succession of responses to the growing presence of black immigrants. This is, he argues, 'a phantom history of race relations'. Hebdige makes a large claim, and it's possible to think of exceptions to his argument: it's hard to see much evidence of this in glam rock or the 'teenybopper' phenomenon of the 1970s, for example. Some responses – such as those of the teddy boys of the 1950s – seem to be primarily defensive reactions *against* immigration, rather than any more positive response to multiculturalism.

Nevertheless, one can certainly identify the influence of black music and fashion – and to some extent of black cultural politics – in the style of the beatniks, the mods and to some extent the hippies of the 1960s, even though in the UK these movements were largely confined to white youth. Crucially, however, the influence was largely from *American* – or what we would now call *African-American* – culture. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s, when Hebdige was writing, that we can see much direct influence deriving from immigrants to Britain – and then largely from the Caribbean, rather than from South Asia.

Like other academics in the field, Hebdige makes much of the association between punk (another almost exclusively white subculture) and the Rastafarian style of 'roots' reggae. Although I was never a punk, I can certainly recall apocalyptic gigs in the late 1970s by bands like Black Uhuru, Steel Pulse and Aswad, and I still listen to Burning Spear, Gregory Isaacs and a whole range of dub. However, in this essay I want to explore a rather different example of this relationship between black culture and white youth – namely the 'soul scenes' that flourished in the north of England, and somewhat later in the south, during the 1970s and early 1980s. Both scenes are important precursors of the 'rave' and dance club scenes that exploded in the late 1980s, and have remained a key location for contemporary youth culture.

Here again, the focus was very much on black *American* music, although it eventually led to the emergence of a distinctively *black British* style, in which elements of American soul merged with influences from Caribbean and African music. My emphasis here, however, is not so much on the music itself as on the ways it was used and consumed, primarily in the context of social dance. As I'll attempt to show, these soul scenes can indeed be understood as indications of an increasingly multicultural society, and (by extension) of globalization. However, they also reflect other social changes of the period, including the wider rejection of dominant cultural norms and values among white working-class youth.

The story of soul fans in Britain is often presented as one of 'young soul rebels': several films, books and record albums have all carried this title. Both fans and researchers have explained the affinity between white working-class British youth and black American soul music in terms of a shared experience of oppression and marginalization. In this sense, the issue is highly political – or at least it has been 'politicized' in a way that makes it impossible to see it as merely a matter of entertainment and enjoyment. For example, in his book *Black Culture, White Youth*, published in 1988, Simon Jones argues that black music was not just a source of pleasure for white youth, or a resource for social activities like dancing and socializing (and sex): it was also 'a carrier of oppositional attitudes and sensibilities, and of new, liberating possibilities and pleasures to young whites' (p. xxi). 'Time and again,' he argues, 'white youth have found in black music a more realistic and resonant account of their experience than established idioms of cultural expression could offer.' According to Jones, the growing appeal of such music in the 1950s and 1960s was a result of a broader failure on the part of the mainstream (white) cultural industries to engage with young people: 'the cultural needs and aspirations of many young whites in the early 1950s had gone largely unfulfilled by a mainstream entertainment industry unequipped to register the changing patterns of leisure consumption in post-war American society'. In the context, what he calls the 'loudness, excitement and spontaneity' of black music became a marker of generational identification, or generational difference, and even of rebellion: it seemed to embody the energy and expressiveness of youth in a way that other forms could not.

In the case of the UK, the fact that this was *American* music was also significant. Time and again, younger British audiences picked up on musical forms that were neglected – and indeed systematically marginalized – by the white-dominated music industry in the US. There is a long history here, which can be traced from the British beatniks' enthusiasm for traditional New Orleans jazz, through the blues boom of the early

1960s, and on to the 1970s soul scenes I will be discussing here. As Jones argues, it was partly because of its geographical distance from its point of origin that such music was able to play an oppositional role – perhaps because it also sidestepped the internal racial contradictions of British society at the time. In this respect, there is a significant difference between white British audiences' enthusiasm for American soul and for reggae (which is Jones's primary focus) – although the comparison between them is informative, as I hope to indicate.

From this perspective, then, white working-class audiences' enthusiasm for black music is as much – if not more – about class as it is about ethnicity. Black music is seen to express a sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement, and to offer a kind of escape or even resistance against social conditions that are primarily about class. I believe there is some truth in this, but I also want to point to some contradictions here. I'm not sure that class and ethnicity can or should be so easily equated, or that there is simply a transfer from one to the other. The British soul scenes I'll go on to describe are more diverse in both respects. And although white youth often look to black soul music for a form of authenticity, outside the commercial mainstream, its popularity in this context is also itself a manifestation of contemporary consumer culture.

By way of context, I'll begin with a brief account of the longer history, and then move on to consider the relationship between white youth and black Caribbean music, especially reggae. I'll distinguish between the different strands of reggae at this time, and look briefly at the hybrid form of two-tone, which emerged at the end of the 1970s in the context of an explicitly anti-racist politics. This is an area that Hebdige and other researchers have considered in some detail, and it reflects academics' preference for 'spectacular' and more obviously 'oppositional' youth subcultures. By contrast, the soul scenes I'll be considering – especially their manifestation in the south of England – have been much less widely discussed. In the following two sections of the essay, I'll look in turn at Northern Soul and then at what (for want of a better term) I'll call 'southern soul'.

As Simon Jones argues, this is not just a 'phantom history', as Hebdige calls it: it is also a substantive, material one. It is about specific encounters taking place in specific geographical locations and specific social settings (and as such, they are more appropriately defined as 'scenes' rather than 'subcultures'). It is primarily about dancing to recorded music – although home-grown live bands do emerge, especially in the case of reggae and the later 'southern soul' scene. It is also about the economic operations of the music business: about record companies, distributors and shops; about the management of leisure venues such as dance clubs; about the role of radio, magazines and other media; and particularly about the importance of disc jockeys, who are the vital intermediaries between the music and its audience.

## Some pre-history

The history of modern popular music – at least in the United States – could largely be understood as a matter of the encounter and exchange between 'black' and 'white' musical forms. Of course, there is a long discussion to be had about the definition of these terms. Can every kind of music performed by 'black' performers

be described as 'black music'? Can 'black music' only be created and performed by 'black' people? How, indeed, do we define who's 'black' and 'white' in the first place? Throughout the twentieth century (at least), black artists and composers created and performed an enormous diversity of different types of music – including classical music in the 'Western' tradition. 'Black' music itself encompasses a continuum from folk music to commercial popular music to various forms of art music (most obviously jazz), but the distinctions here are often far from clear. Meanwhile, white artists are regularly featured in the charts of 'R and B' and 'urban' (that is, black) music; and in the UK, they win awards for 'Music of Black Origin' – albeit controversially so. Jazz could be seen as a result of the encounter between the music of African slaves and white 'Western' harmony and instrumentation; rock-and-roll emerged from the encounter between black gospel and blues on the one hand and white folk or 'country' music on the other. This story is often told as one of white appropriation (of theft or plagiarism), and black resistance. But the detailed reality of this musical miscegenation is undoubtedly much more complex than that. As Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor have convincingly shown, the search for 'ethnic' authenticity has been a constant preoccupation throughout the history of modern popular music; but in most respects, this is both an illusory search and a mythical necessity.

The early history of black popular music in the UK illustrates this very clearly: it is very much a story of what the British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy calls 'the Black Atlantic'. By the mid-nineteenth century, black American (and occasionally African) musicians were regularly performing in London, not only in minstrel shows and music halls but also in upscale concert venues. Of course, such performers were bound to adjust to what they understood to be the expectations of white audiences, and the infrastructure of the industry was entirely white; but the music performed was nevertheless diverse. From the 1910s, ragtime and then jazz styles were quickly taken up by white performers – albeit with varying degrees of sincerity and conviction. In London in particular, African-American artists performed alongside non-American members of the black diaspora, including those from British colonies in the Caribbean and Africa, as well as local white musicians. In some contexts, more raucous or bluesy elements of the music were toned down in favour of styles drawn from light classical music; but even at this time, some critics were keen to identify and celebrate what they regarded as more 'authentic' examples.

In the early 1930s, several leading African-American jazz artists played in London (including Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins); but the Musicians Union soon prevented this, implementing a partial ban on foreign performers that lasted for over twenty years. The ending of the ban in 1956 brought a flood of visiting US musicians, although by this time British musicians had already discovered – and begun to create their own versions of – both bebop and 'traditional' New Orleans jazz. Meanwhile, there were several Caribbean performers making a living in London, not just playing American jazz and swing, but also forms of Caribbean folk music (most notably steel pan bands). Mass migration from the Caribbean, beginning in the late 1940s, brought many performers to London, most notably exponents of calypso; in some cases, their music was recorded in the UK and then sold back to the Caribbean. At the same time, some Caribbean musicians recorded with British disciples of traditional jazz, and some (such as Joe Harriott) became innovative exponents of modernism. By the end of the 1950s, white performers were achieving chart success with new forms such as skiffle, which were

partly derived from rhythm and blues. Meanwhile, black American forms were taken up by white youth subcultures: the teddy boys adopted rock-and-roll (performed by both black and white artists), and there were fierce conflicts between white enthusiasts for traditional and for modern jazz.

The detailed history of all this is fascinating, although it's beyond my scope here. Two broader points are important, however. Firstly, black popular music (or perhaps 'music of black origin') has maintained a continuing appeal for white audiences. This is partly about its physical qualities as dance music. However, black music has also been seen to have a direct emotional appeal that is allegedly lacking from mainstream 'white' music. Secondly, there has been an ongoing exchange and cross-fertilization between 'black' and 'white' music, to the point where it becomes difficult to claim that any particular example is somehow ethnically pure or authentic. The critical debate about black music – not only among specialist critics, but also among fans – is thus not simply about aesthetics: it is also inevitably about cultural politics.

## Dancing into the sixties

By the early 1960s, these trends were especially apparent not just in the cosmopolitan context of London, but also in other English cities such as Liverpool and Bristol, which had historically been a focus of the slave trade. The popularity of jazz faded rapidly with the demise of the trad jazz boom at the beginning of the decade, while modern jazz remained a preoccupation for a dwindling minority. However, black popular music and associated dance styles became increasingly influential, both for musicians and for audiences. There are several parallel and interwoven histories here that are difficult to separate out.

On the one hand, the link with the Caribbean – especially with Jamaica – underwent a significant change with the advent of more dance-oriented genres such as bluebeat and ska, which emerged in Jamaica in the wake of independence in 1962. Some of this music crossed over into the mainstream British pop market – most notably with Millie Small's 'My Boy Lollipop' (1964), which was recorded in the UK, and later in the decade with a string of hits for Desmond Dekker. Nevertheless, Jamaican music and style remained a fairly specialized enthusiasm at this point. The modernists, or 'mods', who emerged as a distinct youth subculture in the early 1960s, wore clothes that reflected elements of Jamaican 'rude boy' style, although their primary influence was from continental Europe. It was not until much later in the decade that Jamaican music began to be taken up by the first generation of skinheads, who emerged in the wake of the mods; and not until the 1970s that reggae more generally began to gain wider acceptance among white audiences.

Another less widely acknowledged influence at this time was Africa itself. By the late 1960s, visiting and ex-patriate African musicians in London were forming bands and achieving some measure of chart success – meaning that they were reaching white audiences. Few of these bands included any white musicians, although there was some cross-fertilisation with other black musical styles, most notably soul and jazz. This led to new hybrid forms which were then 'exported' back to the musicians'

home countries – most famously in the Nigerian style of 'Afrobeat', developed by Fela Kuti, who was a student at London's Trinity School of Music in the early 1960s.

However, it was black American rhythm and blues, and eventually soul, that was the most notable aspect of this phenomenon at the time. From the early 1960s, London clubs like the Flamingo were running all-night sessions featuring black American musicians – many of whom were visiting GIs – playing alongside whites and those from the Caribbean and Africa. Bands like Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames, Jimmy James and the Vagabonds, and Geno Washington's Ram Jam Band were wildly popular with an ethnically mixed clientele, although (with the exception of Fame) they had relatively little chart success. Notably, Fame himself was white (born in Lancashire), James was Jamaican, and Washington was a former GI. Meanwhile, following in the wake of the trad jazz boom, well-established British musicians such as Alexis Corner and John Mayall began playing American urban blues, and often backed visiting US artists.

Younger British bands of the time were more heavily influenced by black American pop: the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, among many others, recorded covers of Motown and other soul hits on their early albums. Indeed, it could be argued that the 'British invasion' of the US music charts in the 1960s was partly a matter of white British bands discovering and then selling back black American music to its country of origin (although that was obviously just part of the story). Meanwhile, the British musicians' 'discoveries' led some British fans to go in search of the originals: some older American blues artists were pleasantly surprised to find their British fans, at a point when many of them were struggling to make a living at home.

While some forms of soul – especially the more commercially-oriented sound of Motown – were popular with a mass audience, there was already a specialized market in more obscure forms of the music. The mods had their own soul-influenced bands like the Who and the Small Faces, but (like the blues enthusiasts) they also went in search of the more obscure American recordings, often available only as expensive imports. The scarcity of these records – or at least the difficulty of obtaining them on this side of the Atlantic – bestowed a powerful aura of exclusivity. As we'll see, the mods eventually splintered, but this pursuit of original American recordings and artists became significantly more intense in the Northern Soul scene of the following decade.

To some extent, it's possible here to separate out Caribbean, African and African-American musical styles, but the key point – at least in the context of the UK, and especially in London – is that these different forms of black popular music steadily cross-fertilised, both with each other and with 'white' (or 'whiter') forms of rock and pop. One might also separate out the contribution of producers and consumers of such music, but this is also difficult: it was not simply a question of black music playing to white audiences. Both audiences and performers themselves were ethnically diverse; and as the decade progressed, ethnically mixed British bands (most notably the pioneering North London group The Equals) began to emerge. Most of the leading white performers who were heavily influenced by 'black' music obviously began as fans: Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton, Eric Burdon, Tom Jones, Dusty Springfield, Van Morrison and many others from all parts of the UK have described how they began their musical careers by attempting to imitate recordings of black

American artists. (Ironically, in the more segregated context of the United States itself, much of this music would have been unheard by white audiences at the time.) Likewise, while there is a history of 'black' dance clubs in many of Britain's major cities, it's important to acknowledge that these tended to cater for a multicultural clientele, and played a range of different styles of black music.

Meanwhile, as the migrant population of some parts of the UK grew, young people were increasingly attending multi-cultural schools. It was some time before academic researchers began to pick up on the increasing influence of black (and especially African-Caribbean) youth styles and language on white youth, but this was already a significant factor by the late 1960s. Writing in the 1980s about his research in the highly multicultural context of inner city Birmingham, Simon Jones paints a vivid picture of how white youth adopted elements of black cultural styles – not just in their preference for music or particular dance styles, but also in their dress and appearance and their use of language. He describes how an early adolescent phase of infatuation and mimicry gave way to a more careful and situational – and less pretentious – approach as his subjects reached their later teens and twenties. As he suggests, this appropriation of black style can be seen to express not only opposition to racism, but also towards authority and forms of oppression much more generally; although it can also be fraught with difficulty, and often meets with suspicion from black peers.

Of course, there was considerable resistance to multiculturalism as well, including among young people. In the late 1950s, the teddy boys played a major role in provoking the 'race riots' that erupted in Notting Hill in West London; and by the end of the 1960s, the skinheads were becoming a significant source of recruitment for the right-wing racist groups that were beginning to emerge (the fascist National Front was formed in 1967). Yet even here, music played an ambivalent role: the teddy boys were dancing to rock-and-roll (itself a hybrid form), while the skinheads were followers of Jamaican music such as ska, and adopted elements of 'rude boy' fashion.

By the start of the 1970s, this cross-fertilisation of music and style had become increasingly complex. Youth styles were mutating, but the music itself had also significantly changed: different audiences and different dance and music scenes began to emerge. In the late 1960s, much of the music business shifted its attention towards the psychedelic or 'progressive' rock sounds of the counter-culture: while this was predominantly created by white groups, there were also some notable black performers such as Jimi Hendrix (who again was more popular in the UK than in his native America, and mainly performed with white musicians). This style also began to impact back on American soul, in the work of performers like Sly Stone and the Temptations; and by the early 1970s, soul was arguably dividing further, with the rougher-edged sounds of funk on the one hand, and the smoother, more luxuriously produced sounds of Philadelphia soul on the other. As we'll see, these changes became a particular point of contention for the followers of Northern Soul some years later.

These shifts are perhaps most apparent in the fragmentation of the mod style, which was arguably at its height between 1963 and 1966. This fragmentation was partly a matter of the time-honoured dynamics of youth culture: as elements of a style

become more widely known and adopted, it loses its exclusiveness and hence much of its appeal. As marketers picked up on mod fashion trends, some original enthusiasts were already beginning to move on. Meanwhile, mod bands like the Who and the Small Faces started to adopt some of the emerging psychedelic fashions and musical style of the hippies, sometimes with awkward and embarrassing effect. In the process, black American soul music came to be dismissed by some as too commercial – although as we shall see, this was a somewhat different story outside London. Some elements of mod mutated into the skinhead style of the late 1960s, and were also a key influence on the early Northern Soul scene; and, like many other youth subcultures, mod has been periodically revived and rediscovered ever since.

Like all histories of popular culture, the brief account I've offered here is undoubtedly contentious. Readers who lived through these developments (if there are any of us left) are almost certainly cursing at my omissions and oversimplifications: trust me, I am doing so myself. My aim thus far has primarily been to set the scene for my more detailed account of the 'soul scenes' of the 1970s. There are many dimensions of this history that might be drawn out; but my main concern here is with the enduring appeal of 'black' music – and particularly soul music – for young white audiences. It should be apparent by now that this issue begs other questions. Given the growing cross-fertilisation of musical styles, and the increasingly multicultural composition of audiences, the binary of 'black' and 'white' is to some extent inadequate – although there's no doubt that it remains highly significant in the scenes I go on to discuss.

## Whose roots? A parallel history

Before we arrive at seventies soul, there is another, parallel history that needs to be briefly considered. The soul scenes I'll be discussing were primarily focused on *American* recorded music. With a few important exceptions (such as The Equals, mentioned above), it wasn't until the end of the 1970s that a home-grown form of black British soul began to emerge. The parallel history I want to consider briefly here has been much more fully documented by historians and sociologists: it's about the role of African-Caribbean music, and its relationship with white audiences. Once again, I will need to be very economical with the detail.

As I have noted, reggae (and related styles such as ska, blue beat and rock steady) enjoyed only limited crossover success in the mainstream (white) UK pop market in the 1960s. It wasn't until the early 1970s, and in particular with the success of Bob Marley and the Wailers, that it became more widely popular in global markets, and especially in Britain. Yet at the same time, there were other forms of reggae that appealed to more specific audiences, both white and black.

Marley's wider success was partly a result of his being signed up by a white Caribbean producer, Chris Blackwell. In fact, Blackwell had also produced the first UK reggae hit, 'My Boy Lollipop', back in 1964. He played a key role in developing Marley's music for a white audience more accustomed to progressive rock: this extended to the production qualities, the use of guitar solos, and the packaging of Marley as an attractive, charismatic 'star'. Arguably, the overt political messages that

were evident in Marley's early music became gentler and more inclined towards 'feel-good' sloganising as his career progressed, although his Rastafarian righteousness provided a sufficient dose of black authenticity to appeal to a large white audience.

However, some of the music that followed in Marley's wake might initially have appeared less palatable to this crossover market. 'Roots' reggae was less compromising, both in its overtly political lyrics and its promotion of Rastafarianism, and in its use of experimental 'dub' techniques. While this music appealed primarily to some black audiences, it was also taken up in the latter half of the decade by white punks and by anti-racist political campaigners. Meanwhile, towards the end of the 1970s, a group of home-grown British reggae artists emerged, including bands like Steel Pulse, Misty and Aswad, and the 'dub poet' Linton Kwesi Johnson. All these acts spoke directly from the experience of first- and second-generation black Britons, and developed a form of reggae that was arguably rather different from the Jamaican original: some also enjoyed a measure of crossover success with white audiences.

Part of this appeal can be put down to the explicit anti-racist politics of the Rock Against Racism campaign. RAR was formed in 1976: it was a response to a more general rise in racist politics, but the immediate trigger that provoked it was a drunken outburst by the guitarist Eric Clapton at a live concert in Birmingham. Clapton urged the audience to vote for the racist Conservative politician Enoch Powell, who had famously predicted that there would be 'rivers of blood' in English cities if immigration was allowed to continue. After a diatribe about 'wogs' and 'coons', Clapton shouted the National Front slogan 'Keep Britain White'. The irony here was obvious: Clapton had built a career on playing black urban blues, and had only recently recorded a cover version of Marley's song 'I Shot the Sheriff', which had been more successful than the original. Clapton subsequently blamed the bottle, and denied some of the allegations, but it was not until 2018 that he fully apologized for his comments. Meanwhile, soon afterwards, David Bowie was photographed giving what appeared to be a Nazi salute while standing in his open-top Mercedes on his return from Germany. Bowie claimed that the image was misleading, but there was little doubt that his recent music, and some of his reported comments, reflected a growing interest in Hitler and his theories of the 'master race'. In the years that followed, Rock Against Racism organized an energetic programme of local gigs and much larger-scale carnivals and festivals; and its success was followed by the formation of a broader political group, the Anti-Nazi League. Both organisations played a vital role in opposing the rise of right-wing racism well into the 1980s.

These campaigns also coincided with the rise of punk rock. While punk was largely a preoccupation for white youth, many punks expressed enthusiasm for reggae – and not so much for the rock-friendly music of Marley as for the more militant forms of roots reggae and dub. A key figure in this crossover was the black British DJ and film-maker Don Letts, who mixed dub and reggae tunes with punk in his sets at punk clubs. Interestingly, Letts had never visited his parents' home of Jamaica until he went there on a trip with the punk star Johnny Rotten in the late 1970s. Although many of the pioneers of punk were far from working-class, this enthusiasm for reggae might be seen as a clear instance of the kind of infatuation Simon Jones described among

the white youth he studied in Birmingham in the early 1980s: roots reggae offered a way of expressing resistance to authority and oppression much more generally.

In terms of racism itself, however, the punks were arguably rather more ambivalent. Many sported Nazi symbols, perhaps primarily in order to shock the older generation, although they seemed to have little awareness of their wider significance. Despite in some cases proclaiming anti-racist views, some punk bands like Sham 69 also attracted a violent right-wing following; and in the late 1970s, this tendency was especially apparent among the skinhead followers of Oi music, a kind of spin-off from punk. The struggle to prevent outbreaks of racist chanting was a regular feature of punk gigs at this time. Rock Against Racism deliberately programmed mixed events, where punk bands would play on the same bill as reggae acts; and the climax of these gigs (and hence top billing) was often reserved for black bands, especially British reggae acts.

Nevertheless, roots reggae and the more commercial work of artists like Marley, Jimmy Cliff and Peter Tosh, was not the only form of reggae at this time. Particularly notable in the UK was the success of what became known as 'lovers' rock'. Despite the label, this music had little to do with rock: it was essentially a hybrid of reggae and smooth Philadelphia soul. Although some Jamaican artists (such as Alton Ellis) can be aligned with lovers' rock, the genre was largely created by second-generation black British artists, singers like Janet Kay and Carroll Thompson, and the producer Dennis Bovell. Lovers' rock can be seen as another key example of the 'Black Atlantic': it was a distinctively black British sound, although several of the songs were covers of American soul hits (which had always been a key part of reggae), and the music subsequently gained a wide following in Jamaica. Lovers' rock was romantic rather than politically righteous, and was especially (though not exclusively) targeted at a female audience; and it was largely ignored by white political activists and cultural critics, both at the time and since.

The success of reggae in the UK also depended upon a commercial infrastructure. While some of this – such as small local record shops, mobile sound systems and informal blues parties – was owned and controlled by black entrepreneurs, other aspects were not. Some of the key record labels releasing Jamaican music were owned by whites: Trojan Records, for example, was originally part of Chris Blackwell's Island group. Another key figure for British audiences was David Rodigan, a radio DJ who has hosted specialist reggae shows, first on local radio in London and eventually on national stations, since the 1970s. Rodigan has told about how he was initially rejected for his first job at the BBC on the grounds that he was white; and when he first played to Jamaican audiences, they found this disconcerting and hard to accept. However – like later white DJs, including hip-hop specialist Tim Westwood – Rodigan has achieved considerable status among black listeners. As we'll see, this issue recurs in the soul scenes, especially in the case of Northern Soul, where all the DJs were white, even if the artists whose music they were playing were almost exclusively black.

## The moment of two-tone

The ultimate fulfillment of this cultural crossover – and of the anti-racist politics of Rock Against Racism – arrived in the late 1970s in the form of the two-tone movement. Two-tone was led by a group of multi-racial bands that emerged from the declining industrial heartland of the English Midlands: the Specials and Selecter were from Coventry, while the Beat came from Birmingham. Only Madness, who arrived a little later and were by far the longest-lasting, came from London. As a form of music, two-tone merged the rough energy of punk with the off-beats and dub-wise sounds (and occasional vocal 'toasting') of ska and roots reggae. As I've noted, ska had enjoyed some popularity among the mods in the early 1960s, and among skinheads later in the decade; and to some extent two-tone could be seen as another ska revival.

However, two-tone was also much more explicitly political than earlier forms of ska, both in terms of the overt messages of some of the songs, and in terms of the contexts in which it was played. Jerry Dammers, the leader of the Specials and the founder of the independent label 2-Tone (on which all the bands were released) was also very active in the Rock Against Racism campaign, and two-tone bands were regular fixtures at RAR events. Even here, the bands attracted a marginal following among racist skinheads, which Dammers and others sometimes struggled to prevent. The marketing of two-tone also embodied this anti-racist aspiration, with the distinctive black-and-white illustrations of the record covers and regular use of a checkerboard design. Both black and white artists typically dressed in a Jamaican 'rude boy' style, with porkpie hats, tonic suits, loafers and checkered braces (for both men and women).

Two-tone was a short-lived moment. The Specials were formed in 1977 and effectively broke up in 1981, shortly after the success of their definitive chart-topping single 'Ghost Town', a gloomy yet defiant response to Thatcherism. Dammers continued with a new lineup as The Special AKA until 1984, releasing the Rock Against Racism anthem 'Free Nelson Mandela', although the two-tone concept had largely faded away by this time. The Specials ultimately collapsed under the pressure of achieving fame and money so quickly: Dammers' efforts to run the band and the record label as a non-racist, non-sexist collective proved difficult to sustain. Two-tone was by no means *only* political in its intent: it also produced some great dance music, and some notable songs of adolescent angst. However, the explicit politics of some of its key figures tied it to a particular campaign in a way that limited it to its time. Madness, the more fun-loving and less political of the bands (and the only one that was all white), went on to lasting pop success, but otherwise two-tone is now little more than a nostalgic memory: there is now a two-tone 'village' with a museum, café and gift shop in Coventry.

Two-tone appeared a few years after Dick Hebdige's original comments about the 'phantom history' of youth culture, although it represents one of its most obvious manifestations. In a sense, it is this very obviousness or self-consciousness that makes it less interesting from my point of view. The relationship between punk and reggae, and the early aspirations of two-tone, fit well with the story of youth culture as a matter of resistance to authority and the 'dominant ideology' (as we used to say

in the 1970s). By contrast, the two distinct 'soul scenes' that I will investigate in the following sections were much more ambivalent and complex – not least politically.

## Northern Soul: making a scene

In his definitive history of the origins of rock-and-roll, *Sound of the City*, published in 1970, the radio presenter and music writer Charlie Gillett observed:

> *There has been a tradition in Britain since the twenties, maintained by a substantial minority of people, of being interested in declining forms of Negro popular music. As a succession of stylistic trends in the United States rendered various styles virtually obsolete, a group of enthusiasts in Europe devoted themselves to perpetuating the music, by collecting records, by importing, if possible, the original performers to Europe to make a tour or even take up residence, and by playing the music themselves.*

With the exception of the latter point, Gillett might have been talking about Northern Soul, although the scene was barely in its infancy at the time, and had certainly not yet acquired its label.

As Gillett suggests, and as I have explained, there is a long history here, which can be traced though the British reception of jazz in its various forms, as well as blues and eventually reggae and soul. This tendency was also apparent among the original mods of the early 1960s. Mod was a hybrid style. In terms of fashion, it looked to Continental Europe, and specifically to Italy for its sharp suits and motor scooters; as well as taking elements of Jamaican 'rude boy' style. However, its music was drawn largely from urban America: it was funky 'soul jazz' and rhythm-and-blues, which eventually morphed into what we now know as soul (the term itself apparently originated in the early 1960s). And as soul began to appear in the mainstream pop charts, dedicated record collectors and mod DJs began to look for examples of the music that were more obscure and harder to obtain; and so the market in 'rare soul' was born.

In the second half of the sixties, as some mods moved on to become 'suedeheads' and skinheads, and others became hippies, the London club scene largely moved away from black American music towards progressive rock. The survival of interest in soul in the north of England – in what came to be known as Northern Soul – can partly be understood as a continuation or a reworking of mod, and as a working-class reaction against the middle-class 'hippification' of the music scene that was evident in London. These young people 'kept the faith' (to use a distinctive Northern Soul slogan), adopting a distinctive style that remained underground for many years.

The first Northern Soul club, Manchester's legendary Twisted Wheel, was originally a mod club. It opened in 1963. Its DJs played rare soul records that were not easy to obtain in the UK; and the club also hosted leading US soul performers like Ike and Tina Turner, Edwin Starr and Junior Walker. The club's marathon dance nights were partly fuelled by amphetamines, or 'speed' – and it was the trade in these drugs that led to a great deal of attention from the evangelical Chief of Police in Manchester, James Anderton, who eventually succeeded in getting the club closed down in 1971.

The history of Northern Soul is generally told as a succession of relatively short-lived clubs: the Twisted Wheel, the Torch in Tunstall (Stoke-on-Trent), the Blackpool Mecca and the Wigan Casino. These were mostly very large venues otherwise used for ballroom dancing, which could accommodate as many as 2000 people. Many of the soul sessions began in the early hours of the morning when the traditional clientele had gone home to bed, and lasted till morning. The clubs could not be licensed for alcohol at these times, but in any case other drugs were better suited to all-night dancing – and, as in Manchester, the police drug squad were in regular attendance, often undercover. Around these larger venues, there were many smaller ones, mostly (although not exclusively) in Northern towns like Bolton and Stafford; while some of the more popular clubs later in the decade were in seaside resorts like Cleethorpes and Morecambe. People travelled to the clubs by a variety of means: part of the success of the Wigan Casino, for example, has been attributed to its proximity to two railway stations, although fans were also making use of Britain's growing motorway network, with organized coach transport coming from very long distances.

The term 'Northern Soul' itself was a Southern invention, generally attributed to the London DJ and music journalist Dave Godin. According to some accounts, Godin realised that his London record shop was busy at the weekend with customers coming down from the North, asking for obscure early soul, generally with a faster tempo for dancing; others claim that he coined the term after playing a set at the Twisted Wheel in 1970. The locations are important: with the exception of Manchester, the clubs were mostly in peripheral smaller towns rather than metropolitan centres – and not in London or the more affluent suburbs of the south-east (as was the case with the 'southern soul' scene I'll go on to describe). Even so, the collective label 'Northern Soul' may suggest a greater coherence than is really appropriate.

Like other such scenes, Northern Soul developed its own infrastructure. While early collectors had to visit the US in person to search for records, there was a growing trade in imports, which were sold in specialist shops and in informal 'marketplaces' at the club nights themselves. As the scene grew, price inflation began to take hold; there are stories of particularly rare singles changing hands for as much as £15,000. Meanwhile, the music was played on the American Forces Network, and by the growing numbers of offshore pirate radio stations that developed in an attempt to evade the UK's restrictive broadcasting regulations. Specialist publications like Godin's *Blues and Soul* began to devote more space to the music, although they could not afford to be exclusive. Several of the clubs mounted performances by visiting US artists – many of whom were in semi-retirement, and were surprised to discover a mass of wildly enthusiastic British fans. However, it was the DJs, both in the clubs and on radio, who were essentially the stars – and there was a good deal of rivalry between them.

For several years, the Northern Soul scene operated with little attention from the mainstream media. However, by 1975, the growing popularity of the Wigan Casino and the Blackpool Mecca was beginning to draw the interest of record companies. Pye, a major subsidiary of Lew Grade's media company ATV, began a series of compilation albums under the title 'Disco Demand'; while DJs like the

entrepreneurial Ian Levine, who had been one of the first on the scene, put out their own compilations. While there had long been a trade in bootleg versions of rare records, some companies began re-making 'classic' tunes. To the dismay of many long-term enthusiasts, bands like Wigan's Ovation were hastily assembled to front these records; and some regarded the performance of 'Footsee' by an ad-hoc band called Wigan's Chosen Few on the BBC weekly chart show *Top of the Pops* in 1975 as the beginning of the end.

Meanwhile, the scene was also starting to fragment, not least as soul music itself was changing. Clubs like the Wigan Casino stayed largely with the original rare soul recordings of the 1960s and early 1970s – especially the aggressive 'stompers' that were good for collective dancing – but others, especially the Blackpool Mecca, mixed 'oldies' with more recent music, often with somewhat slower tempos ('shufflers', as some called them). DJs like Levine began to include some of the lush, somewhat jazzier soul tracks emerging from Philadelphia, which can retrospectively be seen as the beginning of disco music (it's interesting to note that in the 80s, Levine went on to become resident DJ at London's Heaven, the leading gay disco of the period). There was also a growing sense, as the seventies progressed, that the vein of rare soul discovered by the original collectors was becoming exhausted: it was becoming harder to unearth new (or at least previously unheard) records, and some felt that the quality was in decline. Rivalries between the clubs were partly about musical taste, but they were undoubtedly exacerbated by some obnoxious personalities – and by the fact that there was now some serious money to be made.

While many argued that the last night of the Wigan Casino in 1981 was effectively the end of the Northern Soul scene (it was closed by the town council, and subsequently burned down), a great many would dissent from this. Although some announced their 'retirement' from the scene at this point, many have since returned. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the scene is its longevity and continuity. It's not unique in this respect: there are many ageing punks and Goths who also manage to keep their own faith, and there are periodic revivals of other styles (mods, skinheads) that occasionally appear on the media radar. Today there is a small, 'retro' Northern Soul scene, made up partly of people in their fifties and sixties, albeit with some younger participants (many of whom seem to be their children). All-nighters continue, notably at Prestatyn on the North Wales coast, although the dancing is almost certainly less athletic than in the heyday of Wigan. Club nights are accompanied by compilation albums, YouTube and internet radio channels, Facebook groups and occasional live performances by sprightly US stars. Here again, the scene is supported by an infrastructure of specialist websites and publications that appear to be international in scope: perhaps predictably, there is a dedicated Northern Soul scene in Japan.

While some argue that all this is merely fond nostalgia, or a means of resisting the ageing process, others are keen for the scene to progress and be renewed; and the debate continues between the traditionalists, who only want to hear the 'oldies', and those who are open to newer sounds. As in other youth cultures, there is typically a struggle for power here. Some older fans are keen to impose the authority that derives from long-term involvement in the scene, and express concern about younger fans (and younger DJs) taking over; while others are more worried that the scene will simply die out if it is too exclusive.

## In search of homology

Like any youth cultural phenomenon, Northern Soul involved a distinctive combination of stylistic elements – or what academic researchers in this field sometimes call a 'homology', meaning a set of similar elements in a common structure. Thus, a particular style of music is generally combined with distinctive fashions (in clothing and accessories, hairstyles and bodily adornment), styles of dancing and other forms of physical expression, and frequently with the use of specific recreational drugs. This combination is also somehow seen to express something about the social position or experiences of the participants: style, as Dick Hebdige and others suggest, carries social meanings.

Northern Soul can certainly be aligned with a particular style of music, although it's not easy to define its distinctive characteristics. Until the scene became 'commercialised' and began to fragment in the latter half of the 1970s, Northern Soul was very much based on records first released in the period roughly between 1965 and 1970, made by black American artists (even cover versions by white artists would be frowned upon). As black rhythm and blues crossed over into the mainstream US charts and became 'soul', and as Motown began to fulfil its claim to be 'the sound of young America' (that is, to appeal to a large white audience), a great deal of potentially promising material was 'left in the vaults'. As we'll see, the rarity or obscurity of the recordings – and the exclusiveness of the selection – were important in themselves. The records sought out by collectors were mostly less commercially successful, for various reasons. Of course, enthusiasts maintained that this wasn't because of poor quality – on the contrary, it sometimes seemed as if neglect by the mainstream commercial industry was itself a *guarantee* of quality. These records were mostly released on small labels, which lacked effective distribution in the US, let alone internationally.

As such, this music could be fairly diverse, and it's hard to identify what makes it distinctive in terms of musical form or style. Outsiders might find it difficult to distinguish between most Northern Soul and mainstream Motown hits. Many of the tunes sound very familiar – it's just that we can't recall having heard them before. The songs follow a familiar chorus-verse-chorus structure; the tempo is generally upbeat, and the four-to-the-bar rhythm is very explicitly stated; and there are repeated 'hooks' that can easily be remembered. However, the tracks that feature on contemporary compilations and YouTube channels tend to combine a style of 'deep soul' (rough gritty vocals and horn sections more reminiscent of Stax than Motown) with a very emphatic 'stomping' dance beat. These songs often feature downbeat themes like betrayal, unfulfilled desire and despair, although this is by no means always the case. It should be said that the production values of these tracks can be poor, or at least less polished, reflecting the limitations of the studios in which they were made: unlike the crisp and multi-layered sound of Motown (which partly assured its effectiveness on transistor and car radios), these tunes can sometimes sound muddy and flat.

Along with the music, dancers at the Northern Soul clubs developed a particular dance style – although here again, the distinctiveness of this can be overstated. Much

has been made in documentaries and fictional films of the flamboyant athleticism of the dancing: there are frequent shots of dancers performing back-flips, high kicks, dives, hand-springs, splits and multiple spins. The style owes something to black performers like James Brown and Jackie Wilson, and it has some similarities with the early breakdancing that followed, although it's not clear that there was any influence here. Most – though by no means all – of the dancers featured in these films are male; and participants have frequently suggested that this athletic approach allowed male dancers to feel that dance was not a 'sissyish' activity. Indeed, it could be argued that there is an element of macho, masculine assertion about the style, although it would be mistaken to regard this as a primarily sexual display (indeed, participants in the scene have often argued that there was very little emphasis on 'copping off' with potential sexual partners, and it was rare for people to dance together in couples). There was an undeniable element of competitiveness here. There appears to have been a kind of hierarchy, where the more accomplished dancers were allowed to dance closer to the DJ's stage; although several participants were rather dismissive of the more formal dance competitions that came to be organized, for example at Wigan.

However, this emphasis on acrobatics is almost certainly overstated. Tim Wall, an academic who has long participated in the Northern Soul scene, argues that the style of dance was more complex than this. He suggests that the basic move was a kind of sideways glide; and this can be clearly seen in some of the available film of the time. The dance was about the individual looking cool and confident, but it was also a collective activity: it was about being part of the in-crowd, enjoying a kind of solidarity with the group (typically expressed in a unison clap at particular points in a song), and using the available space in a way that would respect others' freedom to move. Wall also shows in great detail how the dance typically fitted with the structure of the music, expressing the different parts of a given song and drawing out some of the meanings in the lyrics.

To some extent, there was a distinctive style of clothing associated with the scene, although again it would be wrong to see this as entirely exclusive or distinctive – unlike, for example, the more elaborate forms of punk or Goth fashion. In order to comply with licensing regulations, the clubs required participants to pay for membership; and this was also marked by the display of woven patches sown onto clothing or the athletic holdall bags in which many would carry their dancing outfits, as well as by badges and buttons. Styles of clothing changed over time, although perhaps the most distinctive item for men were the high-waisted baggy trousers, sometimes known as Spencer or Oxford bags. Tops could be sleeveless vests, US-style bowling shirts or Ben Sherman shirts (as worn by both mods and skinheads); and many men would dance topless. Women often danced in long, wide pleated skirts, similar to US-style dresses of the late 1950s. While some of this clothing was distinctive, much of it was also very functional in terms of dancing – and in this respect, there is an interesting contrast with the skin-tight sexy disco wear that was beginning to appear in clubs across the Atlantic at around the same time.

Equally functional in some respects was the use of recreational drugs. The scene inherited from the mods a preference for amphetamines or 'speed', in the form of pills (black bombers, greens, blues, clears, chalkies, dexys) as well as powder. As I've pointed out, the clubs were frequently patrolled and raided by police on these

grounds, and participants developed strategies to deal with this – not least by taking the stuff before they arrived. The topic was a frequent focus of local newspaper coverage; and while club managers attempted to play down the frequency of illegal drug use, drug squad officers estimated that more than three-quarters of those attending on any given night were likely to be 'speeding'. Part of the concern, at least in the early days, was that the desire for drugs was fuelling waves of burglaries of pharmacies.

Dancers needed such drugs simply in order to keep going at an all-night session – although the subsequent come-down would be difficult, and the drugs were undoubtedly addictive. However, as the criminologist (and participant) Andrew Wilson argues, these drugs also contributed to establishing a shared mindset or 'ethos' among the clubbers. The illicit circulation of drugs helped to create a sense of mutual obligation, but it also promoted a sense of collective euphoria and energy on the dance floor. The idea of 'homology' suggests that drugs can also play an important role in establishing the aesthetic style of particular youth subcultures (think of hippies and LSD, ravers and ecstasy), although for obvious reasons participants tend to play this down in the wider public debate.

## Soul subculture?

The 'homology' of elements I've identified here can easily be compared with those of other youth subcultures. Yet to what extent can Northern Soul be seen as a subculture? It was certainly *subterranean* or 'underground', in the sense of being hidden from wider public view for several years; and it was to some extent *subversive*, in that it might have seemed to embody a different set of values and priorities from those of the mainstream adult culture. However, I have tended to employ the word 'scene' rather than 'subculture' here. There has been some rather tiresome debate among youth culture scholars as to the validity of these (and other related) terms. I've tended to talk about 'scenes' partly because of the geographical locatedness of these phenomena, the fact that they involved large groups of people gathering together in specific settings for limited periods of time. In this respect, Northern Soul seems very different from much more dispersed phenomena like punk.

For some of its adherents, however, Northern Soul represents much more than this. In documentaries and memoirs, it is routinely described as a way of life, or a lifestyle. It is something that 'gets in your blood', a 'movement', even a kind of 'religion', with its own set of values. As I've noted, older participants in the current scene continue to talk about 'keeping the faith': they have an intense identification with the scene that has proven to be of enduring significance – and perhaps even the most important element in their lives, well beyond their teenage years. This is partly a matter of collective solidarity, of good times spent with like-minded people. However, as for many other committed 'subculturalists', it often seems to have a highly personal, almost mystical dimension.

In the case of Northern Soul, there is an insistence on authenticity and even purity that is crucial here – although again, it is far from unique in this respect. According to its followers, Northern Soul was 'real' music: it was imagined to be somehow

outside the capitalist music business, or at least to have been rejected by it on the grounds of its lack of commercial appeal. Unlike the crowd-pleasers at Motown, the soul singers who were favoured were somehow expressing 'real' emotions, rather than fake sentimentality: they were singing about genuine suffering and pain.

It's often claimed that this purity and authenticity – and the sense of solidarity among the participants – transcends social boundaries. Adherents of the Northern Soul scene sometimes maintain that it did, just as the ravers of the following decade tended to claim that 'club cultures' were inclusive and welcoming to all: everybody, it seemed, was equal on the dance floor. Yet was this in fact the case?

It's hard to deny that the Northern Soul scene was predominantly working-class, although it did attract some more middle-class followers as it gained more media coverage. Most of the participants who have written memoirs of the scene, or been interviewed in books and documentaries, were in manual or low-grade clerical jobs at the time. One common explanation that was offered here – for example, in Tony Palmer's 1977 TV documentary on the scene – was that the scene offered a kind of temporary escape from the grind of mundane unskilled and semi-skilled labour. Like other scenes before and since, it was about 'living for the weekend'.

Meanwhile, all the evidence I've seen would suggest that the scene was also very much male dominated. As we've seen, some people argued that the more athletic style of Northern Soul dance allowed young men to display a different, less aggressive style of masculinity. Some have suggested that the lack of emphasis on heterosexual coupling meant that gay participants could feel more comfortable, even if they were unlikely to be 'out' – although Northern Soul was a long way from disco in this respect. Nevertheless, all the leading DJs, record collectors, promoters and other 'experts' on the scene – and (more arguably) the large majority of the most celebrated dancers – were male.

The scene was also very predominantly white: this is acknowledged by most commentators, and I have noted very few instances of black dancers in all the footage I have seen. It's my impression that this is especially the case in the more traditional, 'oldies'-oriented end of the contemporary scene as well. In retrospective interviews, some black participants do attest to the welcoming atmosphere at venues like Wigan, but they were clearly in a small minority. At the same time, some of Andrew Wilson's interviewees – mostly long-term participants in the scene – did express casual racist views; and while these might have been unremarkable in the 1970s, this was less the case in the 1990s, when he conducted his research.

Northern Soul is by no means unique in these respects; but as with other youth scenes or subcultures such as punk or rave, there are reasons to question the claim that it was socially inclusive or open to all. On the contrary, I would argue that it is often the *exclusiveness* of a subculture or a scene that accounts for much of its appeal. Having specialist knowledge – knowing about things that others don't, or before others discover them – creates a sense of being part of an elite, a secret society. Being 'underground', and hidden from public visibility, represents a means of validation, and even self-glorification. Within the scene itself, measures are often adopted to prevent or police the involvement of newcomers or outsiders, by humiliating or excluding them. In the Northern Soul scene, for example, participants

on specialist online forums will distinguish between genuine 'soulies' and what they dismissively call 'handbaggers' (girls who dance around their handbags, apparently a sure sign of a lack of true commitment). Various tests and policing techniques are used to distinguish between the true cognoscenti and the ignorant outsiders, in displaying high-status knowledge or in social etiquette (for example on the dance floor).

As the scene becomes more accessible, it gains in popularity; and as it becomes less exclusive, it inevitably loses some of its appeal to those who are in the know, and who tend to dominate it. There is often a contradiction in the rhetoric here: on the one hand, the exponents of the scene claim that what they are doing is so good that everybody should share it; but on the other, they are keen to keep it to themselves, for fear that it will be somehow diluted or corrupted, or merely caricatured, as it comes to wider public awareness. They want other people to know, and yet they really don't.

This is, I would argue, a key aspect of the appeal of some forms of black music for white audiences. In the case of Northern Soul, it was very apparent as the scene became 'commercialised' (although of course it was always partly 'commercial'). As 'tourists' of various kinds began to appear at the Wigan Casino – curious outsiders, even university students – the original participants were dismayed; some stopped attending or moved on to even more hidden and exclusive venues. They feared that the original principles of the scene, its authenticity and purity, would be somehow distorted if more people became involved – although they might have been hard pushed to define what those principles were. Even worse, there were traitors within. As some at Wigan clung to its 'oldies' policy, DJs like Ian Levene were playing new material – jazz funk, smoother soul and early disco – at the rival Blackpool Mecca. There was a public campaign to oust Levene, which probably wasn't helped by a degree of arrogance on his part; but the fundamental conflict wasn't so much about individuals, or even taste in music – it was about the cultural identity and exclusiveness of the scene itself.

As I've implied, it would be hard to distinguish Northern Soul music simply on the basis of its formal or aesthetic characteristics, or even its 'danceability'. More important in many respects was its *rarity*. The difficulty of obtaining it gave it not just economic value, but also a kind of symbolic cultural value: rarity was a guarantee of quality and status, but also of a kind of authenticity. As records were bootlegged or re-released and crossed over into wider acceptance, their rarity – and hence their economic value – was likely to decline. Collectors and some DJs insisted on the importance of 'original' versions – and these days, of course, on 7-inch 45 rpm. singles: some clubs advertise an 'OVO' (original vinyl only) policy, and reject 'CRAP' (CDs, reissues and re-pressings). Cultural capital – that is, inside knowledge of the scene – establishes credibility and authority, and this is something long-term members will be reluctant to surrender, for example when faced with younger newcomers.

Of course, the Northern Soul scene is by no means unique in any of these respects. Nevertheless, we need to be cautious of claims that it embodied some kind of political subversion or rebelliousness. On the face of it, the whole phenomenon seems quite paradoxical: why should white working-class youth in the industrial

North of England in the mid-1970s develop an apparently obsessive devotion to obscure African-American soul music, mostly produced in the mid-to-late 1960s? As we've seen, some have suggested that there was an underlying political solidarity here – that the Northern Soul scene was a response to class oppression that found its equivalent in the racial oppression of black Americans several years previously. This is a claim that is made in one form or another by several commentators, including former participants in the scene like Stuart Cosgrove and Paul Mason. Yet for several reasons, I want to suggest that it is overstated.

Followers of Northern Soul frequently claimed that – unlike Motown, for example – their music was 'too black' to be accepted in the mainstream music industry. To some extent, this is true. As in the 'blues boom' of the early 1960s, African-American artists were brought over to perform in the UK at a time when segregation effectively persisted in their home country. Many of them were impoverished: as the singer Edwin Starr suggested, it was performances at Wigan and other venues that kept artists like him alive. It seems that for some fans, the more obscure an artist, the greater status they would have: having died prematurely and in poverty was a particular point in favour. The idea that Northern Soul fans were somehow rescuing such artists from penury sometimes permitted a kind of self-congratulation.

In this context, the suggestion that a given performer might in fact be white was likely to undermine the claim to authenticity. However, fans could be misled. There is a revealing story here, told by several sources, about a rare record that was discovered by one nameless collector and (as was often the case) given a fake label to disguise its real identity. The record became a hit on the Northern dancefloors, but it subsequently emerged that it was in fact a B-side recorded in the 1960s by the white British DJ and singer Tony Blackburn – who by then was working for the decidedly mainstream BBC Radio One and (horror of horrors) *Top of the Pops*. Blackburn was apparently invited to perform the song at a live appearance in Wigan, and the dancers refused to believe it was him: he was even asked to sign copies of the record using his fake name.

There may have been what Andrew Wilson terms a 'resonance' or a 'cultural similarity' between the class experiences of Northern Soul fans and those of the performers whose music they preferred. However, there was little sense that participants in the scene were particularly aware of any connections between soul music and the contemporary Black Power movement in the US. At least in terms of lyrics, most of the music that was popular on the Northern Soul scene was primarily about the vicissitudes of romance: there was little explicit politics, certainly by comparison with the overt messages of some contemporary funk and 'psychedelic soul' music of the time (James Brown or the Temptations, for example) – and this was music that most Northern Soul DJs and fans rejected in any case. As both Tim Wall and Andrew Wilson point out, there was little manifestation of 'Afrocentricity' or even interest in the black liberation struggle among Northern Soul fans. This is not to suggest that the parallels or 'resonances' were not important; but it does suggest that they were far from overt or obvious to those involved, and that we should beware of jumping to conclusions about their political significance.

## Representing Northern Soul

The brief account I've offered here would almost certainly offend many Northern Soul enthusiasts and specialists. Yet the history itself is quite contested. As I've suggested, there was a struggle for ownership of the scene that became particularly intense (and unpleasant) as the Wigan Casino hit its peak in the mid-1970s; and in more recent years, there have been tensions between long-term adherents and younger incomers. Some participants have a great deal invested – both personally and economically – in maintaining particular 'truths', or perhaps 'mythologies', about the scene.

Meanwhile, the last decade has seen a proliferation of material about Northern Soul, with the release of several books, documentaries and feature films, alongside compilation CDs, websites and social media. Northern Soul is no longer a hidden secret: indeed, it could arguably be seen as over-exposed. In the material I have seen, the same small group of former participants is frequently interviewed; the same small amount of available footage of exuberant dancers (much of it taken from Tony Palmer's 1977 documentary about Wigan Casino) is repeatedly recycled; and many of the same stories are told again and again. Some of this appears to serve the aim of 'talking up' the contemporary scene: Northern Soul, it is often claimed, is a scene that 'refuses to die', that is as thriving and popular as ever – despite a good deal of evidence to the contrary.

By contrast, at the height of the scene in the 1970s, many participants were dismayed both by its apparent commercialization, and by the rise in media attention. Palmer's half-hour film for Granada (a commercial channel) allegedly attracted twenty million viewers, which was very high even for that period, but adherents of the scene were mostly quite dismissive. In order to film the dancers, Palmer had to employ a considerable amount of lighting, which gives a rather misleading, almost dream-like impression of the dance floor. Scenes of the Casino are intercut with shots of the town, which largely portray it as grim and desolate: images of the present are mixed with historical material, showing undernourished children playing on waste ground, rag-and-bone carts and cobbled streets. A few Northern Soul tracks are included in the dance sequences, but considerable time is given to folk songs by the traditional singer Leon Rosselson, which seem to invite pity for the poor and dispossessed: 'nothing to do for the ugly ones,' one repeated lyric runs, 'the ones with nothing to sell'. Older people are interviewed reminiscing about the poverty of the past and the rigours of work in the satanic mills; while interviews with dancers emphasize how the scene is rebuilding a 'sense of belonging' and a 'community feel' that would otherwise have been lost. As Katie Milestone suggests, the film largely plays to patronizing stereotypes of 'backward Northernness'. It also imposes – from Palmer's metropolitan perspective – an interpretation of the scene as a kind of utopian response to the grimness of life 'up North' that lingers today.

Similar themes can be found in two recent fictional films about the scene. *Soul Boy* (directed by Shimmy Marcus, 2011) follows one teenage boy's induction into the scene as he pursues a dream girl who has taken his fancy. A second girl, the sensible but artistic girl-next-door (with whom, needless to say, he eventually gets together), teaches him the dance moves; and he gradually takes on the dress style (baggy

trousers, patches, vest, bowling shirt, leather coat), as well as getting marginally involved in dealing speed. The film is a fairly formulaic moral tale, in which everything unravels and then comes right at the end, and the various obstacles to romance are overcome. Nevertheless, there are some good observations of the scene, and some exciting dance sequences (which were later 'sampled' in various documentaries). Notably, the movie begins with a sequence that could almost be a parody of Tony Palmer's film; and the closing credits run alongside a montage of interviews with older fans reminiscing about the scene.

The second film, simply entitled *Northern Soul* (directed by Elaine Constantine, 2014) feels more authentic and convincing. The story of initiation and coming-of-age is very similar to that of *Soul Boy*, and the plot is equally creaky at times. The Northern Soul scene is shown in similar terms, as a kind of escape from a grim reality, and from the blandness of the mainstream popular culture of the time. However, the teenage hero gets into much deeper water, and the film makes more of the soul boys' rebelliousness and resistance to adult authority. The overall scene is shown in greater detail, with some interesting observations of the trade in recordings; and the film doesn't shy away from the characters' involvement with drugs. Again, there are some powerful dance sequences, but the soundtrack of this film is stronger and less predictable than in *Soul Boy*. The film appears to have been a long-term project for director Constantine, a photographer and a Northern Soul 'insider' who has also released a monograph documenting the scene. The film was partly crowd funded; and it seems to have gained an audience through word of mouth, despite having only a limited release. *Northern Soul* was nominated for a BAFTA and a London Critics Circle award, but it also seems to have gained wider approval within the Northern Soul community.

Both films clearly hark back to the heyday of Northern Soul, and both of them depend upon the appeal to older fans. It's hard to imagine there could be any further films – and especially any more documentaries – about the scene: by now, the story has become very repetitive, and there is only so much to tell. By contrast, the story of what I will call 'southern soul' has been much less comprehensively documented.

## Southern soul

As I've suggested, soul music fell somewhat out of favour among young white audiences in the south of England in the late 1960s. At least in the counter-culture of the time, the music was seen by many as too 'commercial', and hence as implicitly capitalistic. There were some soul dance nights in London in the early-to-mid 1970s, most notably at the 100 Club on Oxford Street – although significantly, they were often billed as 'Northern Soul'. In his excellent history of popular music in the capital, *Sounds Like London*, Lloyd Bradley resurrects some largely forgotten British soul performers of the early 1970s, including Root and Jenny Jackson, FBI and Cymande; and he also gives a central place to Eddy Grant, the leader of The Equals (a multi-racial band that had its first hits in the late 1960s) and subsequently a producer and entrepreneur. However, it was not until the late seventies that a new soul scene began to appear in the south – and perhaps significantly, it was more in the suburbs and outer fringes of the city than in central London itself.

I say 'perhaps' because the significance of geography here is not entirely clear. As we've seen, the term 'Northern Soul' was actually a southern invention, a label created by a DJ and journalist based in London, Dave Godin. Some adherents of Northern Soul went on to claim that there was a kind of affinity between the industrial working class of smaller towns in the North of England and the black working class of major US cities like Detroit and Chicago, where their favoured music was largely created – although, for the reasons I've outlined, there are some grounds for questioning this. I'm using the invented label 'southern soul' (in scare quotes) here primarily to differentiate it from Northern Soul: it refers to a dance scene that was largely confined to the south-east of England, rather than to music produced in the southern states of the USA. As we'll see, the social composition of 'southern soul' fans was rather different from their northern counterparts, although I don't believe that is simply a matter of geography.

The earliest glimmerings of the southern scene can be detected in the mid-1970s, just as Northern Soul was hitting its peak. Progressive rock was starting to lose momentum, not least with the onslaught of punk; although reggae was also on the rise. The 'southern soul' scene catered for a different audience, for whom none of these alternatives held much appeal. Rather than rarities from the 1960s, the scene mainly focused on contemporary soul, much of it with jazz and funk influences: this was mostly dance music, although at slower tempos and with a less overt beat than the 'stompers' of Northern Soul. Some of this music merged into what came to be called 'disco' in the later 1970s, although it was more diverse and less obviously commercial. Like Northern Soul, the scene remained under the general public radar for some time. Its growth depended upon the development of an infrastructure (clubs, promoters, record shops, distributors), specialist media (magazines, radio) and entrepreneurs (DJs and record industry executives, who were often the same people).

It's hard to identify a single starting point, but in the mid-1970s, a network of soul music nights and clubs began to develop around London and the south east, particularly in Essex and Kent. Key venues, among others, were Tiffany's in Purley, Flick's in Dartford, the Lacy Lady in Ilford, the Royalty in Southgate, and the Goldmine in Canvey Island. While the Royalty and the Lacy Lady were located in London suburbs (and on the tube line), the others were all further out of town; and the Goldmine, probably the largest, was on an island in the Thames estuary, almost 40 miles from central London. Most of these venues were comparatively plush, up-market nightclubs, as distinct from the cavernous and rather shabby ballrooms of the northern scene. Flick's, for example, featured a high-tech motorised lighting rig that would be lowered towards the dance floor at key moments. 1977 saw the first all-day dance marathon, at Reading, and Tiffany's mounted a second the following year. In 1979, the first 'National Soul Weekender' was held at a holiday camp in the East Coast resort of Caister – an event that subsequently became the scene's most important and lasting institution. Most of these clubs and events had a less exclusive music policy than was the case on the northern scene: older and contemporary soul would be played alongside jazz-funk, and even some lovers' rock and reggae, as well as more mainstream disco hits.

As with Northern Soul, DJs were the key figures – in this case, both in clubs and on radio. In 1976, the host of a phone-in show on the BBC London local radio station

named Robbie Vincent had persuaded his managers to let him present a two-hour weekly specialist contemporary soul show. Vincent was one of a group of DJs who became stars on the scene, and were affectionately known as the 'soul mafia': Chris Hill, Jeff Young, Greg Edwards and Froggy (Steve Howlett) among them. As was the case with Northern Soul, the venues also hosted live appearances, with visiting US artists appearing alongside home-grown British bands: Flicks, for example, featured favourites such as Maze, Odyssey and Patrice Rushen, among many others. Several of the DJs also worked in the Artists and Repertoire departments of record companies. Greg Edwards, for example, had come to the UK from America as an executive for the soul label Philadelphia International, and worked for CBS before moving on to host a weekly show on the BBC and then on Capital Radio, London's main commercial station. Meanwhile, specialist record shops also appeared, mostly located closer to the centre of the city, such as Solar in Brixton, Contempo and Soul City in London's West End, and Moondog in East Ham. Many records originally sold at inflated prices on import were eventually picked up for UK release – although, as with Northern Soul, there was considerable status attached to being ahead of the crowd.

A TV documentary made in 1980 for the London Weekend Television show *Twentieth Century Box* gives a rare insight into the scene at the time, and makes an interesting comparison with Tony Palmer's film on the Wigan Casino. The programme contains extensive footage of the Royalty in Southgate, showing the DJ Chris Hill characteristically whipping up the crowd. There are several similarities with Northern Soul. The fans are shown seeking out rare records from the US, and are clearly very knowledgeable about their favoured artists: they draw a clear distinction between rare soul and what they call 'disco boom' material that was becoming popular in the wider mass market. Like Northern Soul, this was clearly a mobile scene, with fans travelling from different parts of London and beyond: the programme introduces several self-defined 'tribes' (the Paddington Soul Patrol, the Brixton Front Line, the Funkmaster Generals from Ilford), some of whom wear what are effectively uniforms – although in general there is not a single preferred dress style. Once inside, the dancers behave almost like a football crowd, jumping up and down, waving banners, climbing on top of each other, and shouting out in response to the DJ. In a sequence at Caister, we see the fans in fancy dress, behaving with wild abandon as though at a carnival. There is little of the controlled expertise or individual competitiveness on display in films of Wigan Casino, although there is undoubted status attached to being a skilful dancer.

In interview, Chris Hill talks about the 'religious fervour' of the participants, and describes promoting soul music as a 'crusade'; and, as with Northern Soul, participants often felt a powerful sense of dedication and commitment. In general, however, this is a scene that appears to take itself less seriously than is the case with Northern Soul. This is certainly evident at Caister, where the element of hedonism and carnival comes to the fore. From its beginnings in 1979, the event quickly became a biannual gathering. After a rocky period in the later 1980s and early 1990s, it was reborn in 1994, and has continued ever since, with many of the same DJs, no longer at Caister but at venues nearby. There are numerous amateur videos of the event online, as well as a BBC documentary dating from 1998. The atmosphere seems close to that of a Club 18-30 holiday, or perhaps a 28-50 one. Participants are shown, not just dancing, but also in the 'tropical waterworld' and the on-site

restaurants, playing knockabout football and having loud chalet parties till dawn. Amphetamines are not notably in evidence, although alcohol certainly is – as (by implication) is a good deal of sexual action. Again, there are some striking contrasts here with Northern Soul (or at least with the ways that it is typically represented).

While the contemporary soul favoured on the southern scene was covered in specialist publications like *Blues and Soul* and *Black Echoes*, radio was a particularly important medium here. During the mid-1970s, in the days before disco, soul music was rarely played on BBC national radio – and Robbie Vincent was unusual in effectively being able to smuggle it on to a local BBC station. The advent of commercial radio had opened the window a little wider, with Greg Edwards' show on Capital. But in the later 1970s and 1980s, illegal pirate radio was a crucial vehicle for this kind of music, as well as for other more 'underground' styles. The two longest running soul stations were Radio Jackie, which began broadcasting in 1969, and spun off into JFM in the early 1980s; and Radio Invicta (with its slogan 'Soul over London'), which ran from 1970 to 1984. Others that appeared in the early 1980s included Horizon, Solar and Kiss FM, which eventually became a leading legal station. Many of these stations also served as training grounds for DJs who would go on to enjoy much wider success.

Access to the airwaves was highly restricted at this time: most of these stations broadcast via aerials illicitly installed at the top of tower blocks, and often had to move at short notice in order to stay one step ahead of the Post Office investigators, who could raid them and confiscate their equipment at any time. While some of the stations broadcast live, others used pre-recorded tapes. The signal was often weak and intermittent, and there was little advertising revenue to be found. Nevertheless, as the 1980s proceeded, the pirates became more commercially-minded and more professional in their operations. Following the 1984 Telecommunications Act, the government finally proposed to expand access to the airwaves, and several stations closed in the hope of being granted official licences – although the process proved slower and more frustrating than had been promised.

The club dance scene has obviously evolved in many ways since this time. The slump in fortunes of this 'southern soul' scene in the late 1980s was obviously partly to do with the rise of the rave scene. Younger DJs emerged, playing a wider mix of electronic dance music, including house and techno, from Europe as well as the USA; and by the late 1980s, the scene had begun to merge into the rave phenomenon. Some of the established DJs stuck with soul, as did their followers, and (as with Northern Soul), an element of revivalism began to appear. Four decades on, Caister and other similar events have continued, albeit with a somewhat older clientele and more luxurious facilities. There are numerous websites and curated playlists online, as well as a couple of online radio stations ('Mi-Soul' and 'Soul Connexion'), countless compilation CDs, and a 'Soul Survivors' magazine; and, of course, there is a Caister Facebook group. Even so, the definition of the scene still appears less strict and 'cultish' than Northern Soul: there are a great many all-day or all-night revival events, looking back to various 'golden ages' of the 1980s, 1990s and beyond, but the boundaries here are quite blurred.

## Homology, identity, politics

As with Northern Soul, it's genuinely difficult to identify the various elements that defined the 'southern soul' scene, or to construct a neat 'homology', as some subcultural analysts like to do. As I've suggested, the music itself was significantly more diverse than Northern Soul: rarity, and the exclusivity that accompanied it, was an issue here, but it was much less ferociously guarded and there was much less informal trading in obscure recordings. DJs like Robbie Vincent (my personal favourite, I admit) played a range that encompassed jazz funk, smooth Philadelphia-style soul and more mainstream disco, but with occasional forays into Latin and 'pure' funk. 'Fusion' was largely a positive term, not an accusation of betrayal. Herbie Hancock or Roy Ayers might segue into Alexander O'Neal, Tania Maria, Keni Burke or Maze – or even into better-known acts like Marvin Gaye or Earth, Wind and Fire. This was mostly dance music (although this was less the case on radio), but the tempo was often far from frantic.

Likewise, it would be possible to create a caricature of 'southern soul' fashions: wedge haircuts, piped jeans, white socks, deck shoes or plastic sandals, and brightly coloured shirts. But the style was more individualistic, and less closely policed, even when compared with that of Northern Soul. Likewise, I have not encountered any claims that drugs – aside from alcohol – played any significant role in the scene: it's conceivable that they might have done so away from the dance floor, but they were not a defining element, as speed definitely was in the northern scene.

In terms of social identity, this southern scene also appears less exclusive and less strictly disciplined than its northern counterpart. Even at its height in the early 1980s, the age range was broader; and as in the disco scene, there was a gay presence in some of the clubs. The scene was (and is) by no means exclusively working class. To some extent, it could be described as suburban rather than cosmopolitan, although this might be partly to do with where it mostly takes place. It's my impression that many of the participants were and are upwardly mobile working class, although such generalisations are risky; and this does have some kind of resonance with the music, which has little of the rough-edged, gritty urban funk of (at least some) Northern Soul.

Most crucially, however, this was also a much more obviously multi-racial scene, and it remains so – again, especially when compared with Northern Soul. This is not to suggest there was not racism, at least on the part of those who controlled the scene. Some of the black participants interviewed in Lloyd Bradley's history complain about the exclusive entry policies at some of the clubs, which seemed to operate a quota on black customers. There's some indication that the DJs themselves were unhappy about this, insofar as they were aware of it; but as with Northern Soul (and even to some extent with reggae), the fact remains that many of the key intermediaries were white. During the 1970s, Greg Edwards was the only leading black DJ on the scene (he was born in Grenada and raised in the US); although in the 1980s, several younger black DJs emerged, including Norman Jay and Trevor Nelson. Nevertheless, my impression – for which I have no demographic evidence – is that the participants in this scene were more ethnically diverse than in many others of the time.

This relates to another key aspect of the scene that distinguishes it from Northern Soul. This was not simply a scene for 'consumers' (record buyers or dancers) but also one that nourished producers – that is, home-grown performers and bands. By the end of the 1970s, several participants in the dance scene had formed their own bands; and most of them were black, often second generation immigrants. This was the age of what became known as 'Britfunk', with bands and performers like Light of the World, Linx, Imagination, Junior Giscombe, Hi Tension, Freez and (a little later) Incognito and the Brand New Heavies. Most of these bands hailed from the south east, although cites with larger African-Caribbean populations like Liverpool and Bristol also produced Britfunk bands of their own.

Some of these bands would be brought in to open for visiting US acts; although the difficult economics of live performance led them to concentrate more on recording. Initially, the music was not quite as polished as that being imported from the US, but it quickly became so. While most of the performers were of Caribbean heritage, it is hard to detect much Caribbean influence here: there may be a touch of Lovers' Rock, and an occasional lilt of reggae, but this is essentially Black British soul music, reflecting a wider diaspora. It is less 'righteous' than roots reggae, although a few of the lyrics are implicitly political; and its production values are as high as any of the material coming out of the US studios. Significantly, those who produced it were aiming unashamedly for the mainstream market and did not wish to be ghettoized into a 'black music' category: several were regularly featured on *Top of the Pops* and had successes in the pop charts. In this sense, as Robert Strachan suggests, Britfunk seemed to offer a broader and perhaps less reductive sense of black Britishness than forms such as reggae – and one that might have held more appeal for more upwardly mobile, second generation listeners.

Britfunk was another relatively short-lived moment, although it has arguably had a longer impact. To some extent, it fell victim to the institutionalized racism of the music business. Record companies were mostly more interested in white bands – and there were several in the early 1980s who were clearly influenced by soul and funk (and indeed reggae) of the period, such as Duran Duran, the Human League and Culture Club. In some instances, the companies hired white producers who didn't understand the music. Nevertheless, black artists gradually took back some control. By the late 1980s, the London DJ Jazzie B was running a successful multi-faceted empire involving music production, sound systems and a whole range of branded merchandise. Many of the original exponents of Britfunk are still around, and have nurtured a younger generation of black performers; and the changing technology of music production has also facilitated the emergence of a whole range of distinctively Black British styles, including jungle, dubstep, grime, and drill.

## Representing southern soul

As I've suggested, this 'southern soul' scene has largely passed under the radar of mainstream media attention. It has also largely escaped academic attention as well, for reasons I'll consider in my conclusion. There is nothing here to compare with the outpouring of documentaries and memoirs – and indeed the growing amount of academic writing – on Northern Soul that has appeared over the past decade or so.

One of the very few exceptions to this is a feature film I'll go on to discuss here: *Young Soul Rebels*, made in 1991 by the black British director Isaac Julien.

The film focuses primarily on two black teenage soul enthusiasts, who run their own pirate radio station. Chris is straight, while Caz is gay; and their various romantic and sexual encounters are woven in with a rather creaky investigation plot following the murder of gay friend. The film sets the soul scene against a wider backdrop of the youth culture of the time, including skinheads, Rastafarians and punks. Caz becomes involved with a white punk named Billibud (a rather obvious reference to Herman Melville), while Chris's girlfriend Tracey tries to help them get a show on a commercial radio station. The film culminates in a large-scale fight at what appears to be a Rock Against Racism carnival, as the identity of the white psycho-killer is revealed (although it hardly comes as a surprise).

*Young Soul Rebels* is an awkward hybrid, which seems even more awkward now than it did at the time. The film was made with major backing from the British Film Institute, on a budget of £1.2 million – significantly higher than any previous BFI-funded project. On release, the BFI also published a lavish illustrated book, *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel*, containing a copy of the script alongside contributions from director Julien and the film's producer, the academic and cultural theorist Colin MacCabe. Prior to *YSR*, Julien had been primarily known as a director of experimental *avant garde* films, through his involvement with the black film collective Sankofa. (He has since continued to create film and video, although his work these days is mostly exhibited in art galleries.) To say the least, therefore, the film arrived already endowed with a considerable amount of cultural baggage. Yet it was clearly an attempt to cross over from art film to mainstream entertainment; and this is something that it ultimately fails to manage. The film was critically slated at the time, partially though not entirely for justified reasons; although it went on to win the Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival – an award that reveals much more about the bizarre politics of film culture than about the actual quality of the film itself.

The film is certainly well intentioned, and Julien's comments on the soul scene do make a case for it to be taken much more seriously by mainstream observers than it was at the time. In an interview with the cultural theorist bell hooks, included in the accompanying book, he argues that this was a distinctively Black British phenomenon – although elsewhere, in the DVD notes, he acknowledges that it was an inter-racial scene. He also suggests that it offered a softer, more ambivalent form of black masculinity, as compared with the roots reggae scene, for example. Julien argues that in these respects, the scene offered 'a less fixed and more fluid space' that not only 'overturned notions of British culture', but also challenged the certainties of conventional left politics (as embodied, for example, in Rock Against Racism).

These are important arguments, but the problem with the film is that it seems to apply them in a very schematic, literal manner. Although there is some sharp observation of the various youth scenes and subcultures of the period, it sometimes seems as if the film is cramming in everything it can. This social observation fits awkwardly with the rather unconvincing murder plot. The dialogue is often clichéd, the characters are one-dimensional and some of the acting is quite wooden. The film laboriously spells out a series of lessons about race and class oppression, and about sexuality – nowhere more than in the closing scene, where the main characters

(male and female, straight and gay, black and white, working-class and middle-class) are shown cleaning records and then joining together in a kind of choreographed line dance. All in all, *Young Soul Rebels* offers a cautionary tale about the limitations of translating cultural theory into popular narrative cinema. Although the soundtrack still sounds good.

## Conclusion

The thread that has run through this essay has been the continuing enthusiasm for 'black' music on the part of 'white' audiences. The scare quotes are justified at this point, partly because this black/white distinction is much less than absolute. As I've argued, this is the case both in terms of the music itself, and in terms of the youth cultural 'scenes' that have grown up around it – even in places like the UK, which are a long way from its main point of origin. The history of popular music has increasingly been one of syncretism – of a mixing or hybridizing of cultures. Claims for purity or authenticity are key to the way musical cultures define and represent themselves, but they are difficult to sustain. The music I have been discussing is not exclusively or essentially 'black', any more than the people who follow it and use it are exclusively 'white'. This is the case in many other areas beyond those I've considered here.

Having said this, the two 'scenes' I have mainly focused on have been regarded very differently by critics and historians. While it may have been an 'underground' scene in its early years, Northern Soul has now been exhaustively documented. By contrast, the southern scene I have described has attracted little wider attention, although it was of comparable scale, and has proven to be equally long-lasting. In a passionate blog post from 2012, the fashion consultant Jason Jules argues that what he calls this 'Soul Boy' scene has been 'short-changed' and neglected. He points to its lasting influence in the worlds of fashion and music; and argues that 'the self-appointed arbiters of taste and youth culture history' have belittled and ignored it. There's some truth in this; but in making his claim, Jules paints himself into another corner, implying that the scene was predominantly black and working-class – which simply wasn't the case.

However, the argument here reveals a wider problem. Styles like two-tone and (to a large extent) Northern Soul seem to fit well with the dominant story that is told about youth culture, both by academics or critics and by many 'subculturalists' themselves. This is a fairly simplified political story – a story of youth culture as a matter of resistance to class and racial oppression. More recent accounts of youth culture have tended to question this story: when we look more closely, everything looks a bit more complicated and ambivalent. Yet a phenomenon like 'southern soul' clearly doesn't fit with this story at all: it crosses class and racial boundaries in ways that make it hard to accommodate in this rather vainglorious narrative of 'resistance'.

There is a broader conclusion that could be drawn from all this. The 'phantom history of race relations' to which Dick Hebdige referred in 1979 is certainly apparent in the examples I've described; but the claim itself needs to be adjusted. As I've shown, this is not just a 'phantom' history, but also a highly material one, which

is about economic processes as well as cultural ones. Perhaps more crucially, it is not best seen as a history of 'race relations' – a term that has passed from popular use, not least because it seems to rest on making absolute or exclusive distinctions on the grounds of 'race'. The diverse and changing relations between 'white' youth and 'black' music in this period do indeed reflect the increasing multiculturalism of modern Britain – although they don't always sit easily with narratives of multicultural harmony, or with optimistic claims that racism is gradually evaporating. However, this history also suggests that 'race' is by no means a fixed or natural category – a recognition that is not just a theoretical assertion, but something that is lived out and experienced in bodily form, not least on the dance floor.

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES


On the longer history of **black music in Britain**, I have drawn upon:

Lloyd Bradley (2013) *Sounds Like London: 100 Years of Black Music in the Capital* (London: Serpent's Tail)

Charlie Gillett (1970) *The Sound of the City* (London: Sphere)

Paul Oliver (ed.) (1990) *Black Music in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press)

Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (eds.) (2014) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

*Soul Britannia*, a BBC4 documentary: only the first of three appears to be currently available, at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adFVkFv6oGE

Relevant work in **Cultural Studies** to which I refer includes:

Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor (2007) *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (London: Faber)

Paul Gilroy (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso)

Dick Hebdige (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen)

Dick Hebdige (1987) *Cut n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London: Comedia)

Simon Jones (1988) *Black Culture, White Youth* (London: Macmillan)

In addition to Hebdige (1987) and Jones, **Two Tone** is well documented in Daniel Rachel's *Walls Come Tumbling Down* (London: Picador, 2016), a compilation oral

history of Rock Against Racism, Two Tone and the later Labour Party organization Red Wedge.

There are several memoirs written about **Northern Soul**, of which the most thoughtful is Stuart Cosgrove's *Young Soul Rebels* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2016). David Nowell's *The History of Northern Soul* (London: Portico, 2015) also contains a considerable amount of first-hand recollection from fans. There are also several fan websites and YouTube channels.

Among a great many recent documentaries about Northern Soul, I have found the following particularly useful:

*Keep on Burning*, director Joe Boy, A2B Media, 2012 (on DVD)

*Northern Soul: Keeping the Faith*, BBC Culture Show featuring economics journalist Paul Mason, 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMtaEASd2LI

*Northern Soul: Living for the Weekend* BBC4, 2014: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNAiKCWMv30

The *Way of the Crowd*, fan-produced documentary, 2004: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWJOB79ZprQ&list=PLMIkFLeFlik2z0xkPtsNCmZ-HeVaIgFzc

There's a YouTube playlist containing many more, mostly shorter clips at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMIkFLeFlik2z0xkPtsNCmZ-HeVaIgFzc

*Soul Source* is a large website with music, videos, news and discussions about soul broadly defined, but with a primary focus on Northern Soul: https://www.soul-source.co.uk/

Academic studies I have drawn upon here include:

Lucy Gibson (2014) 'Nostalgia, symbolic knowledge and generational conflict', presentation at Rare Records and Raucous Nights: Investigating Northern Soul, symposium at University of Salford, video at https://www.soul-source.co.uk/videos/view-271-nostalgia-symbolic-knowledge-and-generational-conflict/

Katie Milestone (1997) 'The love factory: the sites, practices and media relationships of Northern Soul', in S. Redhead, D. Wynne and J. O'Connor (eds.) *The Clubcultures Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell)

Tim Wall (2006) 'On the floor: the politics of dancing on the Northern Soul scene', *Popular Music* 25(3): 431-455

Andrew Wilson (2007) *Northern Soul: Music, Drugs and Subcultural Identity* (Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing)

Tony Palmer's ATV documentary *The Wigan Casino*, in the series *This England*, is available on DVD and on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbEuq54FcBg

The two fictional films I discuss, *Soul Boy* (directed by Shimmy Marcus, Ipso Facto Films, 2011) and *Northern Soul* (directed by Elian Constantine, Universal, 2014) are both available on DVD.

There is much less on the **'southern soul'** scene. Aside from Lloyd Bradley's book, I have also made use of:

Anthony Marks (1990) 'Young, gifted and black: Afro-American and Afro-Carribean music in Britain 1963-88', in Paul Oliver (ed.) *Black Music in Britain* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press)

Robert Strachan (2014) 'Britfunk: black British popular music, identity and the recording industry in the early 1990s', in J. Stratton and N. Zuberi (eds.) *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate)

I have also relied on a range of websites, videos and short articles, including:

AM/FM, website about the history of pirate radio in the UK:
http://www.amfm.org.uk/

Caister Soul site: http://www.caistersoul.co.uk/index.php

Emma Brooker (1996) 'Soul crazy after all these years', *The Independent*
https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/soul-crazy-after-all-these-years-1347214.html

Jason Jules (2012) 'Subjective thoughts on a neglected scene', Institute of Contemporary Arts, blog post:
http://www.ica.org.uk/20362/DANCESCHOOL/Subjective-Thoughts-On-A-Neglected-Scene.html

Lulu Levay (2002) 'Never too much', blog post:
https://lululevay.com/2012/03/15/never-too-much-18/

*Soul Survivors* online magazine: https://www.thesoulsurvivorsmagazine.co.uk/

*Soul Weekender*, 1998 BBC documentary about Caister:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2mHOA31CWE

*Superstar DJs: The Funk Mafia*, 2000 BBC documentary:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkQT8JVEPH0&list=PLw0z3TlPTgteD90N9mA-N6kaiP1b2D2r3

*Twentieth Century Box: Funk Music*, 1980 documentary for London Weekend Television: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkQT8JVEPH0&list=PLw0z3TlPTgteD90N9mA-N6kaiP1b2D2r3

*Youth Soul Rebels* is available on DVD from the British Film Institute. The BFI also publishes *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* by Isaac Julien and Colin MacCabe (1991).

David Buckingham
February 2019