
Opening Extract from...

Young Soul Rebels

A Personal History of Northern Soul

Written by Stuart Cosgrove

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BEECHAM'S PILLS
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YOUNG SOUL REBELS
A PERSONAL HISTORY OF NORTHERN SOUL

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

This book is about the rare soul scene across a lifetime. Inevitably it is a highly personal account and so cannot be the complete story of northern soul, if such a thing is possible. There have been books about northern soul before and there will be many more to come, but in writing Young Soul Rebels I have tried to take a different approach. There are four strands to the book: the overall story of the scene from its origins in 1965 to the present day; my own version of those years; the perspectives of the many ordinary and extraordinary people whose lives were changed by soul music; and finally a wider social history of the north of Britain in times of social change.

The recent success of my cult book *Detroit 67 – The Year That Changed Soul* has convinced me that readers yearn for ideas that connect soul music to the wider society. So I have written about things that ran parallel to the rare soul scene: amphetamine abuse, police raids on soul clubs, the north–south divide, the Yorkshire Ripper murders, unpredictable deaths, the miners' strike, the collapse of the industrial north, mental illness, and the rise of new technologies, which against all expectations have breathed new life into the northern scene.

Many people have helped me with their memories and they are credited within the book itself, but I want to single out three people who gave me encouragement and personify what the northern soul scene is about. Dave Molloy from Bolton is one of the northern soul scene's great minds, and he holds in his head a repository of knowledge and perspectives. I owe him many thanks. Maureen Walsh from Dewsbury helped me to connect the big social stories of the day to the scene, and was a touchstone for what really mattered in our young lives. Finally, thanks to my long-time friend Mike Mason who grew up with me in the same housing scheme in Scotland and has remained a great friend across many years and through numerous scrapes.

Thanks also to the editorial team who helped me to prepare this book for publication, especially Alison Rae from Polygon Books in Edinburgh, designers Mark Swan and Chris Hannah, and cover photographer Brian Cannon. Finally, thanks to my immediate family and the wider soul family who I have met on the way.

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1
THE AMPHETAMINE RUSH
1971

Independence is a heady draught, and if you drink it in your youth, it can have the same effect on the brain as young wine does. It does not matter that its taste is not always appealing. It is addictive and with each drink you want more.

Maya Angelou

Nothing will ever compare to the amphetamine rush of my young life and the night I was nearly buggered by my girlfriend's uncle in the Potteries. It was a lumpy bed, upstairs in a red-brick terraced house in Tunstall, near Stoke-on-Trent, a few streets away from a famous northern soul club called the Golden Torch. My

would-be molester was ancient, hopelessly drunk, and in a deep sleep. His vest stank of Woodbines, stale ale and the old ways, and he had the roughened hands of a seasoned foundryman. It was obvious from his determined grasp that he had stuck his rod in hotter things than me. I clung desperately to the edge of the mattress, wheezing with asthma, as his hands groped ever closer towards me. For a few uncomfortable hours I clung on, fearful for my anal membranes, but as the night ticked gradually by it became clear I was a shifting fantasy in his drunken dreams. Through the haze of drink and hard-ons, he thought I was Emma Peel from The Avengers.

When he awoke in the new light of the morning the old man was visibly disappointed. Far from being a sex siren in long leather boots, I was a stick-thin teenager from Scotland with atopic eczema and an insatiable appetite for the music of the American ghettos. Soul music had consumed my life, and I was on the first stumbling steps on a journey to forbidden places. Malcolm X had a phrase for it, 'by any means necessary', and not even the humiliation of being trapped in a creaking bed with a grunting drunk could deter me from northern soul and the first all-nighter I ever attended.

Saturday passed slowly as I browsed around local market stalls. Then night slowly fell and we walked through the backstreets of Stoke along cobbled terraces. The army of leather feet resonated like a drum solo, building percussion in our speeding heads and raising the adrenaline of anticipation. A swell of people hung by the door of what looked like a wartime cinema, and a blackout curtain seemed to have closed across the north of England. It was virtually impossible to make out faces or detail; everything was sound. A pounding noise escaped through the doorway and the wild screeching sound of saxophones pushed through the fire escapes, desperate for air. We paid at the ticket booth, but even in the foyer, an intense heat much like an industrial oven scorched through the thick aggressive air, and the noise was so pure, so fearless and so commanding, it dragged you inwards into a scrum of lurching bodies: hot, wet and demonic. This was in every respect the devil's music, and I had travelled hundreds of miles from home to sip with the deranged serpents that slithered so gracefully on the floor. There was no going back. No music later in life would ever touch its uniqueness, no rock concert could match its energy, and no rave could come close to its latent illegality. This was northern soul: the reason they invented youth.

Image description goes here. © Photographer name.

My early life had been troubled and economically deprived. But the gods had plucked me out of ordinary life and thrown me into the most extraordinary youth culture Britain has ever produced. I had grown up in a single-parent family in a council housing scheme in Scotland called Letham. My dad died when I was an infant and so the hope of suburbia or even an ordinary upbringing suddenly vanished. It scarred me then and it hurts me now. My dad was a giant in my life, a left-wing lorry driver who had travelled to Russia as a trade unionist and had met the famous spacemen Yuri Gagarin. The week before he died, in a gesture of man-to-boy kindness, he had sent me a postcard extolling the virtues of the Soviet space race, with Yuri Gagarin resplendent on the front. It was rare, the only one that anyone in my class had ever seen, and the stamp was authentic Soviet-era philately, with a rouble sign and two space dogs on the top left corner. Before the postcard arrived on my doorstep, he was dead, killed in a car crash on a road winding through the East of Scotland. The Cold War postcard took on a near religious significance in my life. I kept it tucked away in a drawer, too precious to put a pin through or leave on the kitchen table. In the terminology of northern soul, it was 'rare', a 'one-off', a 'fucking dobber', the only Soviet postcard anyone in Letham had ever seen. Kids crowded round me to look at the stamp. It featured a wee dog

Image description goes here. © Photographer name.

called Laika, a mongrel who had been plucked from the streets of Moscow by Soviet scientists and fired into space in Sputnik 2. I loved Laika like an emotionally needy child, not realising that within a few years I was about to be plucked from the streets like a stray mongrel and thrust into the intense heat of the Torch.

In the months after my dad's death, I took comfort in making lists on pages torn from a school notebook, a list of Soviet sputniks, space-age dogs, and cosmonauts: there was Gagarin, Titov and Popovitch, but the darling of them all was Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space. She looked like a stern schoolteacher with her head in a goldfish bowl but she helped prepare me for the journey to come. Compiling lists and recording obscure detail is part of the everyday autism of northern soul, and it was one I had begun to master early in life. Psychologists have spent decades trying to understand why people make lists. For me, one of the most credible is the so-called Zeigarnik Effect, which is what psychologists call our mind's tendency to get

fixated on tasks we have not done rather than those we have completed. It is a disorder that I was already trapped in: every new record I bought was swamped by the lists of those I had heard, those I needed to own, and a special few that were out of my reach, records so rare that only one or two existed in the world. But those glorious days were yet to come, and while I lived in a ghetto of sorts, a grim but likeable post-war housing scheme with windows that rattled like an old washing machine, it was not the ghettos I yearned for. Around the age of fifteen, as the rawest pain of my father's death had begun to heal, I became increasingly fixated with inner city America: the high-rise blocks on the Chicago Southside, the sparse prairie ghettos of Detroit, and the graffiti-strewn subway stations of New York. It was a love affair that was rich in discovery and one that would never end.

Northern soul is a scene founded on obscure music from the African-American society and works according to codes of behaviour that baffle outsiders. It is a world I have tried and failed to explain, but rather than confuse outsiders with minutiae it is best to point to images. One is a boy and the other is a girl; both are dancing, but by their movement and style they say everything about the scene. The boy is lost in the music, caught in a trance . . . His feet, sprinkled with talcum powder, navigate a wooden floor. He is looking skywards to the heavens and his hands are clasped to his chest in a near religious experience. The implication is clear: soul is more than a music, it is a spiritual calling and a route to all-night fanaticism. The girl is more controlled. She's staring into the distance, her cropped peroxide bob cut elegantly short. Her Fred Perry-style shirt is miraculously white, her bright red lips glow through the night, and her long heavy suffragette skirt angles down to the floor. It is a timeless style that could have been worn at Blackpool Mecca or on the pier at Cleethorpes in 1975, and it screams through studied coolness. Northern soul is all of that: it is the fanatical height of spiritual cool.

A favourite game on the northern soul scene is, what was the first record you ever bought? The answer determines when you joined the scene. Was it in the Mod days of the late sixties, at the high point of Wigan Casino, or in the latter days of an all-nighter in Stafford (brazenly called Top of the World). My answer was suitably vague. I had learned a lot from my older sister, a first generation mod, who collected R&B imports and 7-inch vinyl discs by old bluesmen like Jimmy Witherspoon, Howlin' Wolf and Rufus Thomas, names she lovingly wrote on the brown paper covers of her schoolbooks. I was too young back then to get those

cool cultural references and was so besotted by Scottish football that everything was seen through its smudged prism. I spent a baffled summer seeing the exotic names on my sister's schoolbooks – names like Wilson Pickett, Lee Dorsey and Otis Redding – assuming that they must have signed for Dundee United. Why else would they be written on a school jotter? When I was asked what my first record was, I cited 'The Boogaloo Party' by The Flamingos (US Philips, 1966), because I liked its exuberant title and its risky promise of ghetto fun. But deep inside me was a niggling act of contrition. As a Catholic lad who had been an altar boy and could still recite chunks of the Latin mass, it was not a wholly accurate account of my young life. To put it more crudely, it was a flagrant lie. The first record I ever bought, admittedly for my mum's birthday, was 'Dominique' by The Singing Nun. It was 1963, and I went into the Concorde, a record shop in Perth, to buy a record I knew fell tragically short of hipness. Rather than just take the thing and retreat in embarrassment, I stupidly asked to listen to it in one of the plywood record booths of the era. To my eternal shame I overheard two mouthy Mod girls in the next booth suppressing full-scale laughter at my choice. To this day, it is a record that makes me shiver with embarrassment, and I take only a small sliver of comfort from the fact that The Singing Nun ended up as a lesbian who failed to pay her taxes and committed suicide with an overdose of barbiturates. I can only hope that those mouthy Mods are now fat grannies from Muirton who smoke Embassy Regal and drink Diamond White behind the Asda Superstore.

My older sister was already going to clubs that played music on the fringes of northern soul – mostly modernist cafés and youth clubs. The first place was The Knack Bar, a small youth club hanging perilously on the banks of the River Tay, which flows majestically through Perth. The second was the infamous Ingle Neuk, an R&B haunt tucked away beneath old railway arches behind a garage forecourt. Like many of the big northern soul clubs of the sixties, it had emerged from a late night blues café called the Blues Workshop, an after-hours shebeen where musicians improvised into the early hours. 'Ingleneuk' is a Scottish term for a small inlet or corner, but the venue belied its cosy name and attracted rogues, bandits and pop pioneers, driven to hell on Lambretta scooters. It played imports and hosted R&B singers, and the local house band, The Vikings, became the nucleus of a much more famous seventies funk outfit, The Average White Band. Although it was a small town, Perth had talent. The first person I heard singing soul was a guy called Dave Amos, whose nickname Papa Stone conjured a delta bluesman plucking a

box guitar by a parched cotton field; in fact he lived on a bleak council scheme called Hunters, which festered by old railway yards and had never seen the sun. Dave sang as if he had been born in a Bourbon bar and specialised in great cover versions of Chuck Woods, Otis Redding and Wilson Pickett. At a dancehall in nearby Dundee, he was once told by The Vikings' manager Andy Lothian to 'lay off the ballads' because it would provoke the crowd. 'They just fight when it goes slow,' Amos was warned.

It still gives me a daft boyish thrill that it was guys from Tayside who would become the first white band to go to number one in the black American charts. On 22 February 1975, by which time I was a regular at Wigan Casino, The Average White Band's 'Pick Up The Pieces' (Atlantic, 1974) knocked Linda Ronstadt off her perch at the top of the Billboard 100. James Brown, the egocentric Godfather of Funk, was so hacked off with AWB's success he recorded an answer record under the mysterious name AABB – the Above Average Black Band. By then, the Ingleneuk had closed down, in part due to problems with noise and amphetamine abuse, and frustrated that I had been too young to get in, I went one day with my friend Mike Mason to track it down. After a few false starts we found it tucked away down a lane to the left of a junk-ridden garage. All that was left was an intimidating wooden door with a sliding rectangular peephole. This club was gone but so many of those things lay ahead: the furtive lanes, backstreet clubs, old forecourts, railway arches – the cherished habitat of underground soul clubs.

By my late teens I was a regular at the Letham Community Centre disco, a magnet for babes and psychopaths. Every Scottish housing scheme has characters like Francis 'Franco' Begbie from Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting, guys with an innate and intimidating capacity for random violence. Our local sociopaths were called The Mental Pack, skinheads and periodically suedeheads who wore the fashions of the day: Sta-Prest trousers, Monkey boots and Arthur Black shirts. I can name them with trepidation to this day: Snitcher Meechan, Johnny Burns and a terrifying guy with a Crombie coat and an exaggerated limp called Crooky. His real name was Jimmy Cruikshank and the limp was real, too. In a whispered exchange under the noise of sixties soul, a mate in the know told me that he had lost his leg due to frostbite, after escaping from Polmont in the midst of a snowstorm. Polmont was Scotland's terrifying youth offenders' institution, and the whispered detail only added to the climate of fear. Despite the constant worry of being 'dug up' –

local vernacular for being physically threatened – Letham Community Centre became my second home, and the place I first heard ska, Motown and Stax. What I didn't know back then was that this music was only the shimmering surface of the untold wealth of black America.

Hunting for soul in Perth was limited to a few racks of cheap albums next to the pick'n'mix in Woolworths. It was there, dodging the authoritarian 'floor walkers' who had been employed to stop shoplifting, that I first encountered style: Edwin Starr dressed as an FBI agent, The Temptations in matching pink suits, and The Four Tops shimmying at a garden party, on the cover of their Greatest Hits. I had yet to dig deeper and discover the hidden symbols of ghetto chic: Chuck Jackson's pinkie ring, Levi Stubbs' iridescent trousers and Holly Maxwell's peroxide afro. The real pleasures were yet to come.

By the age of sixteen, I was so deeply immersed in soul music that even my dire secondary school could not stifle the joy of life. Much as I had loved my primary school, which had looked after me during childhood bereavement, I loathed the suffocating rules of my secondary school. Fortunately, in the backroom of a failing pub called the Corinna, a small soul club had opened up and I fluttered to it like a moth to a bulb. This was the Perth City Soul Club, the first real soul club I ever attended. Even in its infancy, it was following the Hezbollah rituals that define the northern soul scene. One night, a DJ was brought in front of the committee charged with playing a Bowie record; he was given a stern warning and a second chance, but there was a noisy faction on the committee who wanted him hounded through the streets in sackcloth and then burned at the stake outside H Samuel. I was among that zealous throng and I have not mellowed since. For a child raised in the church by my mother and tutored in the ways of socialism by my late father, I had discovered a new overarching ideology: the fundamentalism of northern soul. That First Commandment has stayed with me throughout my life: there shall be no other music before soul.

Childhood asthma is a gift. For reasons best left to pharmaceutical science, Perth skinheads had discovered small brown pills called Do-Dos, a legal substance dispensed to people with mild asthma or bronchial infections. Unknown to the helpful counter staff at Boots in the High Street, Do-Dos contained ephedrine, a substance similar to amphetamine, and so could be used as fake speed. Every

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Saturday before the football, I was dispatched to the counter at Boots to get Do-Dos. They were then doled out in the Cutlog Vennel. Perth is an old medieval city and narrow alleyways called vennels cut through the town. When my family first arrived from Galway they lived in the Meal Vennel, an old slum where my dad had been born. These tiny lanes had once been the trade thoroughfares of the old town but had become a place to hide or to dodge the law. Do-Dos were my first naive and tentative exploration of the 'Mod drug' amphetamine – you got a wee buzz and your wheezing chest cleared up – but there would be better jube-jubes to come.

By eighteen years old I was a student in Hull and prone to pretension. The poster above my bed was a quote from Italian poet Cesare Pavese: 'We do not remember days, we remember moments.' My mission on leaving home was to

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relish those moments, gorge on experience and dig deeper into the genius of black America. The Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull was called 'the Liquorice Allsort', with its six layers of black-and-white floors stacked on top of each other. The librarian was England's most famous modern poet, Philip Larkin. You could sometimes spot him among the shelves: bald, speccy, and scurrying around in bookish disarray. I once scared him by appearing unexpectedly in the same aisle of books and he shied away like an agoraphobe who had been caught in the light. Larkin was a jazz buff and that proved to be critically important. With a huge academic budget and the power to buy what he wanted for his library, Larkin had dedicated the top floor to two subjects: theology and jazz. The rows of books were crammed with the origins of soul: books on slave songs, gospel, ragtime, jazz, ghetto poverty, the civil rights movement and R&B. Many were hardback tomes, some impenetrable to the casual reader, but I scoured the shelves tirelessly for three years, reading anything and everything about the music and the social conditions of black America. Larkin deserves my eternal respect. Famous for his line 'they fuck you up, your mum and dad', I was more taken when he drifted to jazz and blues as in the poem 'Reference Back':

> Oliver's 'Riverside Blues', it was. And now
> I shall, I suppose, always remember how
> The flock of notes those antique negroes blew
> Out of Chicago air into
> A huge remembering pre-electric horn
> The year after I was born

It was on Tuesday, 12 October 1971, that my northern soul voyage seriously began. The University Union ran a weekly disco and it was there that I met my mentor – an already seasoned northern soul girl called Pat Wall. Pat stood out from the crowd. She was distinctively dressed in what was known then as a Tonic suit and wore clumpy loafers adorned with leather tassels. Her hair was cropped on top, and feathered at the sides. Her accent was deep, friendly and unashamedly working-class. It was not quite love at first sight, more a moment of catatonic disbelief. Neither of us could quite believe the other actually existed: two suedeheads

jostled together in a sea of hairy students. We simply moved towards each other and started to talk. Pat was from Rochdale and was studying PE at a training college next door to the university, but we never really talked about subjects or seminars or essays; we plunged straight into soul. Meeting Pat Wall was a life-changing moment. She knew much more than me, she had better records, and access to the northern soul scene in ways I'd never imagined. It was a lesson in so many ways. Mentors were meant to be older and wiser men, but Pat Wall was a teenage girl, a few months younger than me and a fund of new knowledge. She spoke of places I'd never heard of and people I wanted to meet. Her front teeth were slightly crossed at the front, and she modestly covered them with her tongue as she spoke, partly shy and partly self-effacing, but it endeared me to her all the more. How could anyone this cool be modest?

Image description goes here. © Photographer name.

We agreed to meet again the next day, but even before we had parted on that first night, she had mentioned a Manchester club called the Twisted Wheel, which had just been closed by the police, and gave me an old C60 cassette tape that was like an initiation rite into a secret cult. In the inner sleeve, scribbled in smudged Biro, were the names of people I'd never heard of before – Alice Clark, Lenis Guess, Butch Baker – but would come to savour in years to come. Pat said that we should go to the Torch in Stoke and that she had an auntie there who would put us up. My mind was like a pinball machine, names rattling around like a steel ball.

She called the next day from a coin-box to say she had spoken to her auntie and it was fine for us to stay. Ominously she warned me that it was a cramped house and that I might have to sleep with her uncle.

We arrived on the Thursday well ahead of my debut visit to the Torch. It was pay day, and her uncle had gone straight from work to the pub. By midnight he was yet to return and I was alone in his bed already drifting off to sleep. The door crashed open, and a man thick of frame and clumsy with drink stood uneasily in the doorway. I could see his colossal shape rather than any detail, and pretended to be asleep. He slumped down next to me, trousers half off, shirt flung on the floor, and an old vest still hanging loosely over his chest. A haze of drunken snoring, louder than a tuba, rose in unison to the ceiling. Periodically he would roll over on top of me, sometimes dragging me into his arms and grabbing at my back. It was the longest night I ever spent, longer than any soul all-nighter. Half awake and on high alert, I drifted in and out of sleep, thinking only of my sphincter and the weekend ahead. It was the beginning of a great adventure and the first tentative steps in my life as a young soul rebel. I was going to one of the most famous all-nighters in the history of northern soul – The Golden Torch.