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Document and Eyewitness:

An Intimate History of Rough Trade

Written by Neil Taylor

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DOCUMENT AND EYEWITNESS:

AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF

ROUGH TRADE

NEIL TAYLOR



Rough Trade emerged out of that marvellous, miasmic, and – in terms of pop culture – largely unexplored, period of the mid-1970s. It was in this age of inbetweenism that the early Rough Trade pioneers honed their ideals – which were anti-establishment, collectivist, communal-influenced, pro-feminist, egalitarian. The ideas of the late 1960s Underground, which influenced Rough Trade (and came before), were in remission, and the attitudes and postures of punk, which altered it (and came after), had yet to be developed.

Geoff Travis returned from travelling in America in the late autumn of 1975 and, after a false start in Kensal Rise, opened the Rough Trade shop at 202 Kensington Park Road in West London in February 1976, almost to the day that the Sex Pistols first appeared in the national music press.[1] Punk changed Rough Trade in much the same way that it changed the rest of the music business and it is likely that had punk not emerged, the shop might not have survived. The economy was in a lamentable state as Prime Minister Harold Wilson slipped out of office in March and a handed over control of the failing state to Jim Callaghan. Unemployment had reached the unprecedented and then-staggering figure of one million and not long after, fuelled possibly by the rigours of living through one of the hottest summers on record, the frustrations of certain sections of the community, particularly those in the inner cities, would manifest itself in a series of disturbances. The most prominent of these was the riot at the Notting Hill Carnival, the direct result of confrontational policing and a subject later immortalised in the Clash song 'White Riot'.

Almost three-and-a-half decades later, it is that early, frustrating, combustive and ultimately creative period which for some most defines Rough Trade. Indeed, as early as the start of the 1980s, Rough Trade already evoked a *notion*, an aspect of the late 1970s that was and remains instantly

1 . *NME*, 20/02/76.

recognisable. In any decade, only a handful of enterprises will go on to become such ciphers – in the 1970s, it was *Rough Trade*, *Sniffin' Glue*, Sex, Acme Attractions and Compendium which mirrored the status afforded Middle Earth, *International Times*, *Oz*, Granny Takes A Trip, Indica Books and the Arts Lab from the decade before.

Geoff Travis tribally describes himself as being 'between the cracks'. He wasn't a punk, he wasn't a hippy. And when Rough Trade opened, it could certainly not count itself amongst the tiny handful of originators for whom punk was already a living reality. The shop self-consciously resembled an end of the hippie-era emporium. There was a wagon wheel adorning the building, which allegedly drew Geoff Travis to the premises, and in the window hung the original swirly Rough Trade sign that had been designed and stencilled on plywood and hand cut using a fret saw by Geoff's original business partner Ken Davison, modelled somewhat on the work of Roger Dean.



There were some lugubrious potted plants and a table and chairs. There were new records and second-hand records (leftfield singer-songwriters such as Jackson Browne and Kevin Coyne shared space with arty mainstream bands like 10cc and Steely Dan and the usual heavyweights, a smattering of bootlegs and a lot of reggae. Crucially, there were also the early manifestations of both Geoff's taste and his trip to America in the form of a reasonably large amount of garage rock 'n' roll.) For a time, according to both Jo Slee and Steve Montgomery, two very early Rough Traders, they even had a rental section, hoping to capitalise on the fact that recordable tapes had recently become commercially available.

Reggae was the first type of music to distinguish Rough Trade and 1976 was a vintage year with extraordinary albums released by, amongst many others, The Abyssinians (*Satta Massagana*), Bunny Wailer (*Blackheart Man*), Augustus Pablo (*King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown*) and The Mighty Dia-

monds (*Right Time*), all of which Rough Trade stocked. Reggae was particularly important for a shop keen not to be seen as cultural interloper in an area dominated by a West Indian community.

Initially – at least after a month or two – there were two businesses operating from the premises. Front of house was the principal concern of the Rough Trade record shop but in the back there was the lesser-known Rough Trade Custom Leather (with its own post-hippie swirly sign designed by Jo). John Kemp had been Geoff's best friend at Cambridge University and ran the leather workshop in the shed out of the back of the shop along with his partner Jo Slee. They sold leather boxes and belts, hand-made shoes and sandals and clothing, which they had taught themselves to make the previous year in Amsterdam. John had salvaged materials for the shed from across the road when a row of Victorian dwellings – once the election offices of Fascist sympathiser Oswald Mosley – had been demolished.[1] It was rudimentary, exposed to the elements and lacked heating.

*

Geoff Travis had gone up to Churchill College, Cambridge in 1971 and met John Kemp, the son of an English nuclear physicist, on his first day. By their second year, they shared part of a sprawling rented house in Huntingdon Road and had met Jo Slee, who had answered an ad for a spare place in the house which she'd seen on the Grad Soc notice board. She was staying at Girton College with a friend, having run away from her husband in Cornwall. Although not a student – for a brief period she gained implausible employment measuring grass for the National Institute of Agricultural Botany – Jo Slee fell into the student life and went to concerts with Geoff and John.

After graduation in the summer of 1974, John and Jo went travelling, first to Amsterdam. By November they ended up in a house in the draft-dodgers region of downtown Toronto. Back in England, Geoff meanwhile had gone off to teacher-training college and was about to undergo a famous *Dice Man* moment when he decided, while waiting for the bus to take him to college, that if the bus didn't arrive in five minutes he would throw it all in and go and do something else. The bus duly failed to arrive.

Geoff Travis eventually wound up in Toronto at the house where John

2. Richard Scott, the creator of the Cartel, has said that his socialist aunt, Molly Empson, was responsible for the building of the old people's housing that now stands opposite 202 in her role as a senior civil servant in what was then the Ministry of Housing.

and Jo were living and it was there that he met Ken Davison. Ken was a music man, a guitarist and lover of photography, a wanderer who had spent large periods of time away from his native Newcastle and had acquired a worldy-wise air – he was that bit older – that settled easily on the other three. His great claim to fame was that he once knew, or had met or had played in a group with, Hilton Valentine from the Animals. This impressed Geoff.



Ken Davison (left), co-founder of Rough Trade, with Jo Slee and friends, Niagara Falls, 1975.

It was Geoff's plan to end up in San Francisco where he was to visit an old school friend, 'Big Al' Newman. 'Big Al' had been Geoff's school buddy and they often went together to see bands at venues such as the Marquee. Ken and Geoff got on well enough for Ken to decide to travel with Geoff at least part of the way to San Francisco before heading off there himself directly, and it was while on the road that Geoff started to plunder thrift shops for vinyl. As ever with Geoff, he acquired far more vinyl than he would ever be able to listen to, and so Ken suggested that the simplest solution would be to ship the stuff home and open a record shop. In a period when music was cooling its heels, there would be ample opportunity to listen to the records, relatively undisturbed by customers.

By the time Geoff and Ken returned to Toronto in the summer of 1975, the germ of the Rough Trade idea was starting to infect, but it was still not certain that it would be a record shop that would be opened. The four of them – Geoff, Ken, John and Jo – knew that they would do *something* together and they discussed the various options. Jo recalls the idea of a café/bookshop. This appealed to Geoff, who had been to visit Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore while in San Francisco and had admired the customer-friendly vibe, a vibe he would seek to emulate at Rough Trade,

where the table and chairs would encourage people to hang out without feeling pressured into buying. Back in Toronto, they went out to watch Carol Pope's rock band Rough Trade, a name that certainly stuck. At the end of the summer, with John's and Jo's visas long expired, they returned home.

Back in England, the first problem was where to live. In time-honoured fashion, the immediate solution that presented itself was squatting. By the mid-1970s, many tens of thousands of people squatted across Britain and – for most of them – squatting had largely become an exercise of necessity, due to unaffordable rents. In the 1960s, squatting had been radicalised, motivated by any number of causes and concerns: Gay Liberation, Black Power, Women's Lib, assorted political movements (Anarchist, Marxist, etc), Claimants Unions, and even the desire to set up radical community newspapers or food co-ops. The folk-devilic and romantic notion of Hell's Angels upturning their helmets at the Hyde Park Free Festivals to collect money for the squatters at the famous 144 Piccadilly squat, as had happened, had been supplanted by a grim reality.

Aside from some very detailed and site-specific accounts in underground magazines such as *International Times, Oz* and *Friends/Frendz*, and later in publications including the radical photography magazine *Camerawork* and the anti-racist fanzine *Temporary Hoarding*, information on squatting during the late 1960s and early 1970s is disjointed and there is only one, somewhat academic, unified account.[2] One of the few really good – albeit brief – portraits of squatting at this time was created by Twickenham Council, who were prescient enough to realise that the relatively large number of squatters in the borough had concerns that merited investigating.[3]

They found that people often squatted with the passive approval of the buildings' owners – as was the case with the building firm Bovis, who turned a blind eye (while it suited them) in the knowledge that property was less likely to fall into disrepair occupied than unoccupied. Squatters were victimized[4] yet they could be exemplary occupants, often paying their general and water rates. Squatters in the much-squatted Grosvenor Road in Twickenham in 1973, for instance, as well as tending vegetables and flowers and generally keeping their gardens neat, held a 'scrap art' exhibition, took

3. *The Squatters*, Ron Bailey (Penguin, 1973).

4. *Squatting in Central Twickenham – A Survey*, ed, Chris Whitehouse, 1973.

5. One of the more ruthless NIMBYs who pestered squatters in Twickenham was the Tory councillor George Tremlett, whose other occupation was writing pot-boiler biographies of rock stars.

communal meals and took an annual communal holiday at one of the major rock festivals. They set up a summer gala offering 'acoustic and electric music, video, Punch & Judy, a jumble sale, film, fringe theatre, free balloons, clowns and an art exhibition'. They even had their own postcard printed.



Geoff first squatted in Mile End with his girlfriend from Cambridge, Miriam. John and Jo found space in an enormous squat in Cornwall Terrace on Regent's Park, which was being run by Piers Corbyn, the self-styled 'king of the squats'. 'Always cold, always dark, always homeless, utterly grim,' is how Jo Slee describes her existence at this time. After the squat was broken into, while Jo was inside and John was away in Manchester, they moved quickly to another squat in Archway, which had the advantage of being near the flat where Geoff's sister, Jackie Rafferty, lived. They visited Jackie for the use of basic amenities, such as hot baths when they could stand the cold no longer, and often fell asleep on the rugs in the front room through exhaustion, but more usually gratefully accepted the free dinner she laid on for them and passed the night playing board games.

Geoff and Ken scoured West London for premises for a record shop, which Geoff had announced would be called Rough Trade, and initially thought they had found what they were looking for in Duddenhill Road, W10. John and Jo set about the back-breaking job of 'stripping ten layers of crap off the walls with a blowtorch'. They had barely finished their labours when a passing Polydor Records rep pointed out the hopelessness of the shop's position, which would attract virtually no 'passing trade'. After the meaning of the term was explained to them, they set about looking elsewhere.

When they discovered it, 202 Kensington Park Road was in so many ways ideal. Like much of what Rough Trade would come to represent, it was off-centre but not too off-centre, in the scene but detached from it, unassuming and self-sufficient.

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The topographic fabric of London, W11, in late-spring 1976, in places resembled a bomb site. The second issue of Jon Savage's *London's Outrage* fanzine, published ten months or so after, is a photographic record of the author having walked the area at the time to record its decay, and it brings home the bleakness and desperation – but also the beauty and the charm – of the area's desolation. Corrugated iron proliferated, spread like weed around the dilapidated housing stock, which was perfectly habitable save for the fact that years of council neglect had left it too expensive to repair. Pubs were boarded up and derelict. A rag-and-bone man[5], thought to be the inspiration for *Steptoe & Son* – the BBC studios at White City were close by – still had a yard in nearby Frestonia, which was itself subject to a marvellous *Passport to Pimlico* moment when it declared itself an independent free state[6]. Children roamed abandoned, flattened sites where the occasional unexploded bomb from World War II lurked. The locals were a mix of Jamaicans, working-class whites (many of whose families had suffered in the previous decades at the hands of notorious slum landlord Peter Rachman), bohemians, artists and musicians.

A 1977 guidebook to the area lays claim to the fact that 202 Kensington Park Road was 'the country's first Head shop' but this is so unlikely as to be arbitrarily dismissed, although a Head shop of sorts had occupied the premises at one time.[7] Ten years earlier the epicentre of the underground had shifted west from the King's Road to Portobello Road and when Rough Trade opened, hippie vibes still lingered. Local hipster outlets, such as I Was

6. Said to be Arthur Arnold, whose scrap-yard was on Latimer Road.

7. The Republic of Frestonia occupied about eight acres of West London. Cleared artisans' dwellings were occupied by squatters for a couple of years and on 30 October 1977 they held a plebiscite and unilaterally declared themselves independent from Britain. They asked the United Nations for a peace-keeping force 'in the event that the GLC should invade'.

8. Among the more colourful local characters were Ron and Gloria, who ran the Wavy Lane provisions shop a couple of doors down from Rough Trade. Gloria, a formidable woman whose 'medicine chest' of uppers and downers she frequently dispensed to Rough Trade staff in need, had told Steve Montgomery that the arrival of Rough Trade had been a welcome improvement on previous tenants who sold 'drug paraphernalia'.

Lord Kitchener's Valet and the equally marvellously named record shop The Magic Phonograph, had disappeared. However, the underground newspaper *International Times* still had a presence at 2 Blenheim Crescent (above what had once been the old Family Dog shop and which remains to this day the longest-running counterculture premises in England, currently occupied by Off The Floor Records), and also at 286 Portobello Road, where space was shared with Joly MacFie's badge-producing emporium Better Badges. This shop had serviced the hippie community and would go on to mass-produce punk badges and set up a punk fanzine printing service.

On the first day of trading, one of the first people through the Rough Trade doors, according to Jo Slee, was Steve Montgomery, who was squatting locally and filled in his days roaming the market. Steve would be the first in a long line of key people who, hanging around for a sufficiently long period, would eventually be offered a job at Rough Trade. There was an immediate rapport between him and Ken Davison (formed while Geoff was often out on buying sprees), whose insane passion for music (although allegedly not work) Steve could relate to. Ken's broadly left-wing politics, as well, chimed with Steve's, which were far more full-throttle. When, after a couple of months, Ken decided to pursue photography, he put Steve up as his replacement and Steve formally joined the fold.

Steve Montgomery is one of the most influential people to have worked at Rough Trade. His indefatigable spirit, relentless enthusiasm and dedication – not just to the music but also the way in which the music would be sold, in terms of ethics and politics – defined Rough Trade and remains part of the basis upon which 'Rough Trade' has been perceived ever since. He was the first and loudest to vocalise the politics he shared with Geoff (who was every bit as politically committed, probably even more so – but perhaps not as *loud*) and which gave Rough Trade a distinct persona. He was also self-effacing and committed to the cause, and later became a celebrity in the shop (if such a thing could be said to have existed) through authoring very wittily the mail order catalogues, prompting droves of bedroom-bound souls to venture to 202 Kensington Park Road in search of the anonymous person they were sure was their soul mate.

For a long time, Rough Trade was just Geoff and Steve (with Jo occasionally helping out). Geoff would take care of the music: Steve would organise the shop. Steve had notepaper printed up – dubbing them 'rock 'n' roll mechanics' – and took care of postal enquiries that started to grow as the stock mutated. Geoff had been writing to like-minded souls farther

afield and as a result they were starting to receive the prototype examples of the coming singles explosion – records from Pere Ubu's David Thomas (who was sending over Hearthan label releases from Cleveland), from Greg Shaw (who was supplying stock from his Who Put The Bomp? label), and from Terry Ork (who was shipping over copies of the Television single he had released on Ork, 'Little Johnny Jewel'). Legendary distributor Larry Debay, who had set up Bizarre Records in Praed Street – probably the UK's first independent record distributor – and made deliveries out of the voluminous trunk of his Mercedes coupé, was supplying material from the avant-garde French label Skydog, who had issued the two early Flamin' Groovies EPs, *Grease* and *More Grease*, both big shop sellers, as well as more 'legally vague' releases by Iggy Pop and the Velvet Underground.

In the very early months of the shop, Geoff trawled the pub rock scene – back to basics, *inbetweenism* – going on his own to supersize pubs such as the Hope & Anchor in Islington, the George Robey at Finsbury Park, the Red Bull at the Angel, the Bull and Gate at Kentish Town and the Dublin Castle in Camden, to see bands including Ducks Deluxe, Eggs Over Easy, Brinsley Schwarz (a particular pre-punk favourite), Chilli Willi and Kilburn & The High Roads.

What happened next is a well-told story. The Sex Pistols played the 100 Club for the first time in March: they appeared at the Screen on the Green (with The Clash and Buzzcocks) in August. In between these two dates, the pop-cultural world somehow got turned upside down. Patti Smith played the Roundhouse in May. The Ramones played the Roundhouse in June. Issue one of *Sniffin' Glue* appeared in July when the Damned also played the 100 Club, supporting the Sex Pistols. In September, Stiff Records released their first single, 'So It Goes' by Nick Lowe (although a couple of notable independent labels – Raw in Cambridge and Chiswick in West London – were well underway by then). It took some time for the consequences and effects of all of this to register and before it did Rough Trade ushered in the new by giving prominent space to the nascent but burgeoning fanzine scene.

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Rough Trade was the first shop in London to stock *Punk* magazine, which they bought direct from its publisher John Holmstrom in New York and sold from its first issue (which came out one month before the shop opened in February 1976). But it was the home-grown literature of the revolution

that they helped make famous. Between July 1976 and June 1983, when, to their eternal shame, the Rough Trade organisation officially stopped taking fanzines, they handled almost every fanzine produced in Britain (and many from abroad).

Fanzines were 'bulletins from the frontline', a 'call to arms', written 'from inside the musical movement', that didn't seek to critique the moment. Although the early examples tended to be London-based, as fanzines proliferated, they enabled Rough Trade to engage in the politics of decentralisation – something it would dramatically develop with the realisation of the Cartel, the independent distribution network tentatively begun in 1980 and formalised in 1982 – and enable people to hear voices (or, even better, rants) that would otherwise have gone unheard. They also furthered Rough Trade's love of community spirit.

Rough Trade would even help in the assembling of them – what Jon Savage calls the 'let's make a revolution out of loo roll' aspect. They encouraged potential buyers to sit at the table and chairs in 202 Kensington Park Road and browse the wares; and they encouraged fanzine editors to assemble their fanzines around the table as well.

Prior to the advent of the UK punk fanzine in July 1976, Britain hadn't lacked an alternative media in which discourses flowed unfettered by the restraints of establishment ownership. But by 1973, the more grand voices of the alternative press – *Oz* magazine, *International Times*, *Friends/Frendz* – were either obsolete or had gone missing. *Zigzag* marched cheerfully and obliviously on after that point but wouldn't offer much of a viable alternative voice until a staff mutiny forced it to take the punk line in 1977.







A number of thriving fanzines that existed between 1973 and 1977 (some went on longer and started earlier) fulfilled some of the services – they tended to lack the public-spiritedness and largely towed the music-business line – that the best punk fanzines would later provide. *Supersnazz*, *Bam Balaam*, *Fat Angel*, *Hot Wacks* and *Dark Star* all variously provided an alternative medium if not always an alternative voice. West Coast, prog and Krautrock, troubadour solo artists in the Tim Buckley mould, or maverick singer/songwriters such as Tom Waits and almost anything post-Velvets, were their favoured editorial subjects: but some looked back to snapshot periods, covering mods, freakbeat and other hard pop areas. These fanzines looked the same and they were assembled in the same way as those that came after.[8]

Because fanzines were free voices, uncensored, there was initially a variety of both voice and style. The earliest punk fanzines the shop stocked were Mark Perry's *Sniffin' Glue*, Tony D's *Ripped & Torn*, Sandy Robertson's *White Stuff*, Adrian Thrills' *48 Thrills* and Jon Savage's *London's Outrage*, which was the first fanzine to print the Rough Trade address as a point of contact on its cover.[9] Pretty soon the net was cast beyond these largely London-centric examples and trawled in regional fanzines such as the exceptional *Gun Rubber* from Sheffield. Other fanzines that sold well enough to be included in the early mail order catalogues included Shane MacGowan's *Bondage*, *Shews*, *Jolt*, *Situation Three*, and *Flicks*.

Being, as they initially were, largely a response to the live scene, early fanzines tended to lack any kind of political content. This infuriated Steve Montgomery, who detected a vehicle through which suppressed views might be expressed. He came close, allegedly, to being allowed to guest-edit 'a

9. Richard Boon, who set up New Hormones and worked for eight years at Rough Trade, first in production and then as editor of *The Catalogue*, produced, along with his friend Howard Trafford (later Devoto), the 'proto fanzine' *Bullsheet* while still at Leeds Grammar School. As well as boasting 'ten pages of news and info, rock n roll, black power, art, life and laughter', the first issue also extracted – for the first time in the UK – Bob Dylan's *Tarantula* and, for some reason, noted not just upcoming concerts but also events at Leeds Model Railway: ' . . . a private joke,' according to Richard.

10. Very important. Fanzine editors and later record DIY-ers invariably printed the Rough Trade address on their wares, actively encouraging what former journalist Vivien Goldman has called *les marginals* to do Rough Trade's A&Ring for it. After Daniel Miller had released his Normal single he claims to have become a record label by default. Having printed his address on the sleeve of the record, he was immediately swamped with demo tapes.

Maoist issue' of *Sniffin' Glue*, but it didn't go anywhere: later he would issue an edict saying that all fanzines to be featured in the mail order catalogues would be scrutinised for content and only those considered most suitable would make it onto the mail order list, although the terms weren't defined.

By the end of 1976, the effect of the so-called punk explosion was manifesting itself as more and more seven-inch singles were finding their way into Rough Trade, and the legendary Rough Trade wall was starting to take shape. Records released by Stiff, Chiswick, Raw, Private Stock, Sire and those sourced worldwide by Geoff, filled up this wall. Two independent records only available on import bookended Christmas 1976 and New Year 1977. 'X Offender' by Blondie and 'Love Goes – Building on Fire' by Talking Heads sold in their hundreds over the festive period at Rough Trade and signalled that the major-label dam really had well and truly been breached.

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In January 1977, when Buzzcocks released their DIY *Spiral Scratch* EP, a record primarily distributed by Rough Trade, it was the start of an era that would transform the Rough Trade shop from being merely a well-stocked provider into something far beyond that: it would become a nexus point for information. Like the record itself – full-spirited, ambitious, revolutionary and fiercely independent – Rough Trade would become impossible to ignore.

During the first half of 1977, the fruits of the revolution were abundant and the shop filled up with both records and, more importantly, customers. By late spring it became clear that Geoff Travis and Steve Montgomery couldn't cope with the demand. As well as the records sold through the shop, they had started a mail order business and were constantly fielding calls from other record shops looking to buy any overstocks.

Richard Scott joined Rough Trade in June 1977, brought in ostensibly to help develop reggae. In fact, he put himself to work on mail order. The former co-manager of reggae band Third World, Richard would go on to be the architect of the Cartel. One of the earliest things he is also responsible for was redesigning the Rough Trade letterhead. A previous logo had been created by Steve Montgomery as a rubber stamp for the shop's brown bags. Richard recreated the image at his kitchen table using his son's John Bull Number 3 printing kit for use on the letterheads. In its various distressed (or otherwise) states it remains today the most enduring symbol of the Rough Trade 'brand'.



Souped-up Rough Trade logo, taken from a mail order letter sent out on 7 June 1977 from 'Geoff Steve & Richard'.

An architect by training, Richard Scott had taught at the North East London Polytechnic, and prior to that had also spent time in Canada, at the height of the first summer of love, the psychedelic manifestations of which he cheerfully admits passed him by. He, too, had returned from his travels with armfuls of vinyl: in his case, classical recordings on the Nonesuch label and field recordings collated and released by Alan Lomax.

He had collected seven-inches since the mid-1950s and when he moved to London from Oxford, with his wife and two children in 1971, he discovered reggae by record-collecting in junk shops and playing his finds on a Wurlitzer jukebox bought many years before.

When he set about putting his architectural training into practice, he formed, along with a couple of fellow graduates, the Electric Gypsy Roadshow in 1971. This 'energy exploration' project looked into the future of cities, using Bristol as a model, with the intention of staging a festival – the Bristol Urban Microcosmic Propaganda Festival (BUMPF) – arranging a catalogue of 'comprehensive resources to help people', and 'an alternative control agency . . . to provide the possible mechanics whereby user requirement and choice become the major elements in environmental design'. Detailed in a spread in the underground newspaper *Frendz* in 1971, all of this echoes with his later work on the Cartel with Rough Trade.[10] A short time later, he set up the Last Museum, 'a museum of environments' in Allen Road, Hackney, before going off to manage Third World.

In some respects, 1977 became a year of expansion *and* consolidation for Rough Trade – expansion in the sense that the exponential growth in the singles market meant that every day, seemingly, there was a new band,

11. Anyone wishing to explore this further should look at the November 1971 issue of *Archigram* magazine, which has a brilliant and extensive essay on rock festivals as moving cities, including the IOW, Bath – 'the Hippie Ascot' – and Mick Farren's Phun City.

a new future-legend, a new box of singles (often arriving unsolicited) to deal with, and consolidation in as much as they had to start learning how to deal more professionally with what they were increasingly co-responsible for creating. By the end of 1977, staff numbers had doubled and by the end of 1978 they would have not just a shop but also a booking agency, a record label and a nascent distribution company.



Rough Trade released twelve singles in 1978 and they remain an extraordinary testimony to the A&R skills of both Geoff Travis and other Rough Trade staff. The records are deliciously eclectic, from the inaugural, metallic French punk of Métal Urbain's 'Paris Maquis' through to the suburban experimentalism of Swell Maps' 'Dresden Style'. Field recordings allegedly made at Heathrow (by File Under Pop) found a home among the dub reggae of Augustus Pablo, the Dada-esque interpolations of Cabaret Voltaire and the oddly normal eccentricity of the Monochrome Set. There were also at least three unequivocally classic releases in Subway Sect's 'Ambition', Electric Eels' 'Agitated' and Swell Maps' 'Read About Seymour'. There were two defining singles as well from Stiff Little Fingers, who would go on to provide Rough Trade, and the independent industry, with its first mainstream Top Twenty chart success in the following year.







By 1978, 202 Kensington Park Road had started to fill up in a way that Geoff Travis could probably never have imagined in spring 1976. The customers were only one contributing element – there was also a steady stream of major-label A&R men, surreptitiously sniffing around for a hint of the future or else blatantly begging to be guided in its direction; there was a constant flow of people picking up records and dropping them off, people bringing and taking away fanzines, and there were musicians, many of whom looked to Rough Trade for the most basic guidance. The shop, in conjunction with Scritti Politti, who would go on to be one of their major artists, produced a stapled aid in the form of *Making Your Own Record – A Temporary Guide*[11], which they sold over the counter and included in packages to other shops, distributing hundreds in the process and disseminating valuable information country-wide.

Back in 1977, the mainstream music press, like the mainstream record labels, had been slow to spot a trend and even slower to let go of it once it no longer merited attention. The endless 'punk round-up' articles would continue well into the start of the next decade[12], long after those with their fingers on the pulse-beat had lost interest. Staff at *Sounds* had nearly mutinied in November 1977 when asked by their editor to yet again come up with a new punk music round-up. Instead, what they produced was a two-issue special on electronic music, which jumped the gun on their competitors and brought to the attention of their reading public a whole gamut of seemingly punk-contrary music: Disco, The Residents, Throbbing Gristle, Devo, Kraftwerk, Siouxsie & The Banshees and much else.

12. Why it was 'temporary' isn't apparent.

13. The *NME* in 1983 had even come up with a variant, when the punk moniker was well and truly looking beyond revival, and ran a cover story on a 'genre' it effectively and – for a short period successfully – created, 'positive punk'. In essence, the 'movement' was later co-opted into goth.

If Rough Trade as an organisation became for a period the barometer – the dead weight for independent music – then 1978 was arguably its most important year. Alongside its own releases, Rough Trade distributed and/or sold an extraordinarily inventive range of music that could scarcely have been contemplated less than a year before. Music by The Residents, The Normal, Thomas Leer, Robert Rental, Throbbing Gristle and a number of other non-label proponents, as well as Rough Trade's own Cabaret Voltaire, was potentially more radical than anything created by the punk movement that had in a lot of cases inspired it. The future was whatever you imagined it to be. Progress took the shape of believing in something previously unbelievable.

The 4th May 1979 changed, of course, a lot of things. For some, the election of Margaret Thatcher, and the concomitant, vigorously encouraged age of selfishness it ushered in, marked the real end to the 1960s, to the values and ideologies upon which Rough Trade had largely been based. It is no accident that punk purists cite 1979 as the year when many of the ideas and aspirations that inspired independent music got emasculated in the muscular beliefs of some key players who recognised that here was a market ripe for exploitation. Marginal became marginalised.

Ironically, and with no such motivations, Rough Trade became that year the first independent label to have a Top Twenty record when it released its debut album, *Inflammable Material* by Stiff Little Fingers. This reached Number Fourteen in the charts (one place above Barry Manilow's *Greatest Hits*), and in the process sold 115,000 copies. The first of two Rough Trade package tours was arranged on the back of it and such was the impact of Rough Trade at the time that the *South Bank Show* filmed a programme about them.

Broadcast in March 1979, the Rough Trade *South Bank Show* remains a wonderfully fresh document, an almost halcyon depiction of a scene that would shortly become over-analysed and hackneyed. The very fact that the programme was made indicated that Rough Trade had reached a crossroads. Over the next few years it would go on to have what some see as its most enduring creative success. In so doing, it would also set itself some formidable challenges.