

## Teddy Boys and the Rock'n'Roll Revival.

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During a period of about ten years between the tail end of the 1960s and that of the 1970s, youth culture had been hit by a wave of nostalgia. From the Beatles with their faux-Victorian bandleader costumes on the cover of the *Sgt Pepper* LP, to the 1930s stylings of groups like Fox and Sailor, to the fifties pastichery and revival, which can be seen in rock groups as diverse as Roxy Music and Mud. The revival of interest in the 1950s was particularly interesting, as not only was it the only one that revived a period of youth culture, but it also ushered in a (mostly brief) revival in the careers of many fifties stars.

This period also brought about the return of the Teddy Boys in the UK, who had been a peculiarly British cult, although other countries had similarly rebellious youth cults, such as *Les Blousons Noirs* in France. The cult of the Teddy Boy had actually preceded Rock'n'Roll in Britain by several years, and had started when a Saville Row tailor had decided to do a line in 'Edwardian' style suits for young, well-heeled gentlemen. The style was, however, hijacked by young working class men instead, which, like many cults since, had the blame for many of society's ills laid squarely at its feet.

The cult of the Teddy boy had all but died out at the turn of the sixties, being replaced by the Rocker, ostensibly a less image conscious version, but with the same hoodlum qualities, perceived or otherwise. By this time, Rock'n'Roll music was in decline, with many of its artists unable or unwilling to produce material due to all sorts of factors—from the religious conversion of Little Richard and the blackballing of Jerry Lee Lewis due to

his child bride (who was also his cousin), to the tragic deaths of many of the leading figures, principally Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran among other lesser names. By 1960, rock and roll was a pale shadow of itself, with such lightweight idols such as Fabian and Pat Boone hitting it big. And by 1963, the Beatles and their antecedents were seen as confirmation that the old wave of Rock'n'roll was all but dead, despite the fact that many of these acts were heavily influenced by the fifties groups.

By the end of the 1960s, however, there was a split in the world of rock which, crudely put, lay between 'singles' (or pop) artists and 'albums' (or rock) groups, the latter of whom tended to see their product as intellectual and artistic, as opposed to the more commercial, manufactured teenybop aesthetic of singles groups. Much of the original, more simplistic spirit of rock had been eroded in the 1960s, and towards the end of the decade, in both the UK and the States, there was a renewed interest in 'traditional' rock'n'roll both in its artists, its music and its style.

The pivotal point for this was perhaps the televised 1968 comeback of Elvis. Elvis' career had declined both commercially and artistically after he left the army in 1960, and he spent most of this decade mired in unlikely throwaway films (knocked out at an average of two a year), featuring lightweight soundtrack LPs which all in all provided a very flimsy 'product' for the market. The comeback special though, was regarded as a real return to form by rock aficionados, with Elvis rocking out in a way not seen since the fifties.

And it wasn't just Elvis. In the States, there were a series of concerts put together by the promoter Richard Nader, at prestigious venues such as at the Madison Square Gardens in New York. Nader seemed to be able to get a show from any of the surviving rockers, from Bill Haley to Little Richard, although the end product varied considerably. Jerry Lee Lewis enraged audiences by playing sets of country music instead of his hits, while Rick (formerly Ricky) Nelson used the experience of being expected to play nothing but his 'oldies' to write the song 'Garden Party,' which ended up being his first hit record in over a decade.

Of course, this renaissance was not to last, but by the following year, old-time rock had begun to come to people's attention again, And it was not just down to the original artists either. A case in point were the American group Sha Na Na, who were catapulted to fame after an appearance (only their seventh live performance) at the 1969 Woodstock festival, of all places. The group, with their choreographed routines, DA hairstyles and affectionate parodying of the music of the fifties were strikingly different to the rest of the bill of fare, although the music was secondary to the theatre of their act.

In the publication *the Story of Pop*, in a section considering the rock'n'roll revival , the writer identifies the trend for nostalgia that had peaked around the time of publication, stating that "It celebrated an inability to cope not only with changes in the sphere of music, but also with constantly insecure social and economic realities."<sup>1</sup> There certainly was plenty of that in the world at the time, with the Vietnam war polarising the American

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<sup>1</sup> *The Story of Pop*. London; BPC Publishing Ltd, 1974/5/6.  
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public, while the UK, grinding to a halt with strikes in just about every industry, was going through an entirely different set of difficulties. In either country though, this yearning for an escape back to a period of optimism, where the music was both “authentic” and not laden with intellectual pretension was perhaps understandable.

During the late sixties and early seventies, a number of old rockers had considerable hit records, with both new numbers (Chuck Berry’s *My Ding-a-ling*, which hit No. 1 on both sides of the Atlantic in 1972) and re-releases (Bill Haley and the Comets’ *Rock around the clock* reached the British top 20 in both 1968 and 1974), although any lasting success tended to be with new groups and their appropriation of rock’n’roll. In particular, many of the glam rock groups from the UK during this period, from Marc Bolan’s Chuck Berryisms to Alvin Stardust’s robot Gene Vincent act were deeply rooted in the ‘heritage’ of rock’n’roll. But such acts were not generally appreciated by fans of ‘proper’ rock’n’roll; Writing in *Pop Today*, Rosie Horide expresses surprise that the group Mud, debuting their soon-to-be No. 1 record *Tiger Feet* went down so well with the predominantly rocker audience.<sup>2</sup> Although some proper revival groups came about, the most prominent of whom were the Wild Angels, none of them scored any significant success on the pop charts, although gigs proved to be more popular.

Although fifties-styled clothing was not readily available in High Street stores, revivalists were catered for by small shops, who frequently sold goods through small adverts in music papers. Perhaps one of the best known is Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood’s shop at 430 King’s Road, Chelsea, which opened in 1971 as ‘Let it Rock.’

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<sup>2</sup> Petrie, Gavin [Ed]. *Pop Today*. London; Hamlyn, 1974. P. 108

The shop initially sold original fifties clothes, but Westwood soon started to produce new copies to sell. These were not exact copies; colours tended to be brighter than the fifties originals, and featured camp detailing like fake fur or lurex trim.

As a youth tribe, the new Teds in Britain were not far removed from the skinheads. Both movements were almost exclusively working class, and they were both known for racist behaviour and general aggression. But the teddy boys were far more flamboyant, from their gaudy suits to their authentically charged style of dancing. Even their choice of car was crucial-in the mid 1980s, a car magazine, commenting on the very American looking Ford Consul Capri of 1962, noted that many of the surviving vehicles had tears in the cushion of the drivers seat-attributed by the magazine as being caused by metal combs sticking out of the seat pockets of the driver's trousers.

Teddy boys were still around at the dawn of the punk age; indeed, contemporary pictures show that some punks adopted a certain amount of punk gear, with drainpipe jeans or trousers being notably popular (no flares!). Not that the two factions were united-Poly Styrene, the leader of the punk rock group X-Ray Spex had her market stall of kitsch trashed by a gang of teds. But by the end of the seventies, only the most dedicated of teds remained. The fifties had by then featured in several high-profile films and television shows, most notably *Grease* and *Happy Days*. Although these were American products, they both had a considerable impact in Britain too. By the 1980s, nostalgic perception of the 1950s was quite different to what it was in the previous decade. In the 80s, cod-1950s style was far more archetypally American, typified by the leather jacket/blue jeans/white

t-shirt look. Although the yearning for the past survived, any historical accuracy had been obliterated.