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Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul

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# Keeping the Faith : A History of Northern Soul





# The Emergence, Decline and Revival of Northern Soul in the UK

- During the 1960s interest in rare soul music in the UK is largely confined to London and a few major cities amongst 'mods' (modernists)
- From the late 1960s into the early 1970s this interest declines in the south, but is retained and spreads in the north of England and north English Midlands and beyond to Scotland
- The Northern Soul scene becomes associated with several major clubs in these areas the first of which is the *Twisted Wheel* in Manchester; followed by the *Golden Torch* in Stoke-on-Trent ; *Blackpool Mecca* and importantly in 1973 *Wigan Casino Club*, which then becomes the principal venue at which Northern Soul is played at all-night dancing events
- The scene reaches its height during the mid-1970s with interest in the scene across the UK. Thereafter, it goes into sharp decline, although interest in Northern Soul spreads outside of its heartlands to other areas of England
- Northern Soul goes 'underground' again with only marginal following throughout the 1980s and early 1990s until a revival of interest in both an actual and nostalgic sense from the late 1990s



# A Question of Class

- In 1977 Tony Palmer, British film director and author, produced a film for Granada Television's *This England* documentary series about Northern Soul entitled *The Wigan Casino*
- The film caused some controversy at the time particularly with those on the scene. It divided opinion and still does as to whether it offered a true representation of this 'underground' movement
- One point most are agreed upon is that Palmer's film posited the Northern Soul scene very much in class terms. As the late David Sanjek wrote, Palmer's camera work offered up 'working class signifiers' right down to the dancers 'muscles, sweat and tattoos' ( Sanjek, 2012, p.232)
- This is 1977 when issues are more often couched in terms of class. However, Palmer was, and has been very clear since, that what he saw in Northern Soul were predominantly working class kids engaged in a 'underground' scene which they had for the most part developed themselves outside of any governing or commercial elite



# The Significance of Locality

- **Milestone – Northern Soul largely occurred at the ‘periphery’ both in the geographical sense in small towns and villages outside of major cities and in the cultural sense away from the main cultural centres and venues**
- **The development of the scene occurred within relatively confined geographical areas to the extent that many central figures in promoting Northern Soul and key DJs knew each other; grew up together or at least knew of each other**
- **One such area is North Staffordshire and South Cheshire around the ‘Potteries’ towns of Stoke-on-Trent, dubbed ‘soul on Trent’. There were many more across the north of England and English Midlands**
- **Those attracted to the scene were frequently introduced to it through attendance at local youth or similar meeting places for young people clubs where they initially listened to and danced to mainstream pop and rock, but became more interested in soul and later rare soul music.**
- **Many then progress to travelling together and attending the major Northern Soul venues particularly initially the *Twisted Wheel* club in Manchester, widely acknowledged as the progenitor club of the movement**
- **Although Northern Soul fans travelled long distances from all over the UK to major venues it became clear that as the scene developed there was a specific clustering of networks of intermediate and minor venues around the major venues to cater for Northern Soul fans in specific localities**

# Issues of Identity

- **A young scene not just in terms of fans, but also of those who innovated and spoke for the scene –DJs/record collectors/promoters**
- **Centrality of the DJ/record collector/promoter as key figures and leaders rather than artists**
- **Extremely strong bonds of loyalty between participants in the scene**
- **Retrospective; Ritualistic and concerned with Rarity**
- **Ascetic; Autonomous and underground**
- **Exclusive; Elitist and Cliquey**
- **Asexual**
- **Largely white and male, but open to females and other sexual orientations and ethnicities**
- **‘All –nighter’ dance event an important and unique feature. Non-alcoholic but largely dependant on illegal drugs to enhance dancing performance and stay awake all night**
- **Scene completely and exclusively absorbed by the sound of rare soul music and dance**



# The Coming Together of Class; Locality and Identity in the 1970s

- What we probably see in Northern Soul is what Keith Gildart refers to as the ‘meshing of class, locality and identity’
- Added to this is timing. The 1970s has, arguably, been seen by many commentators as the ‘Times of Troubles’ ( Marwick, pp.151-187). It was certainly a decade of economic and social malaise in many parts of the UK where a long period of industrial decline was reaching its nadir
- The development of Northern Soul is frequently seen against this backdrop in which ‘disenchanted white working class youths across northern England’ (Northern Soul: Living for the Weekend, 2014) in peripheral areas, both geographically and culturally, sought solace and escapism in rare soul music and fashion, and, of course, drugs
- Northern Soul venues and fans were located largely, though not exclusively, in heavy industrial or former heavy industrial towns and villages typically in cotton or woollen textiles, steel and coal mining areas and most either came from families in these localities or had jobs in these industries or had labouring jobs or routine occupations associated with them
- This takes us very much back to Palmer’s canvass of white working class teenagers and young men
- It is interesting that while the 1970s has often been seen as a rather bland decade in terms of music culture both Northern Soul and the punk movement – two very different genres - have been by seen by commentators as stand out beacons

# Northern Soul as an Imagined Community

- While paradoxically the rare soul scene in the UK began in London and the south of England it is in the English north and midlands where it was most famously enacted and experienced
- There is a question as to whether there was something particularly 'northern' about Northern Soul
- Northern Soul did not run the full length of northern England – importantly Merseyside and the North East of England did not share in the 'soul explosion' while there were many Northern Soul fans in the south of England
- However, certainly this appears to have been translated by Northern Soul fans into a set of shared assumptions, experiences and values about what 'northernness' constituted in terms of its culture, although it was more often implicit than explicitly expressed or stated
- Northern fans music, dancing and fashion was distinctive and different from the 'south' in the sense , that it not only eschewed mainstream rock and pop music it was also different in its following of soul music in that it focused on rarer and older sounds soul rather than the contemporary funkier and smoother soul sounds preferred in the south
- Northern Soul also developed distinctive musical preferences such as the 'oldies' scene - a scene within a scene - which promoted rare soul from the specific time period 1964-1966 played in specific Northern Soul antecedent clubs as well as a penchant for particular sounds with a fast stomping beat, termed 'stompers'
- During the late 1970s rivalries developed not only between Northern Soul DJs and promoters but also those in the south backed by armies of fans and followers
- The illegal drugs scene was different in the north in that dancers preferred amphetamine based drugs which allowed them to keep going though the night rather than psychedelic drugs preferred in the south
- There are valid reasons to suggest that Northern Soul fans saw themselves as 'an imagined community of northernness' distinctive from the south or an 'imagined south''





# Northern Soul :Historical Sources

- Secondary – mainly accounts of the scene from participants; personal recollections; music journalists. Limited attention from academics to-date
- TV, Radio and Film – coalescence of the Northern Soul narrative in documentary film during last 20 years
- Primary - A lack of primary sources – mainly specialist music magazines
  - *Blues and Soul*
  - *Black Music Review*
  - *Black Echoes*
- Oral Testimony - with limitations
  - DJs; Promoters; music journalists; record collectors; fans



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