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Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul

The Northern Soul scene emerged in Britain during the late 1960s and 1970s and it is a cultural and music scene largely associated with the 1970s. Initially, American soul music arrived in Britain during the 1960s either through the work of leading African-American recording stars especially on the Motown or Stax label or as music made by lesser known artists which was sought after by collectors in Britain. From the late 1960s this was known as the 'rare soul' scene. These were recordings from artists who had been unsuccessful or had only made one or a couple of recordings or where on smaller and rarer US labels or where from mainstream soul artists, but were not commercially successful or were recorded before they had achieved fame. The soul underground was one of particular interest to the British 'Mods' ('Modernist') movement during the 1960s mainly in the major cities and especially in London.

From the late 1960s musical preferences and tastes changed and interest in 'rare soul' waned in favour of more contemporary music including contemporary sounds in soul music. However, mainly, but not exclusively, in northern England and the north Midlands interest in 'rare' 1960s soul records not only remained but flourished. The term 'Northern Soul' has been ascribed to Dave Godin. In 1970 Dave Godin, a leading soul record collector and promoter in London, noticed that many of his customers from these geographic areas of Britain were keen on obtaining 'rare' soul recordings with a specific sound and coined the phrase 'Northern' Soul which henceforth entered parlance to describe this style of music; dance; fashion and its followers.

Although Northern Soul followers came from all over Britain it was during the 1960s and 1970s that interest in rare and Northern Soul grew substantially in the north of England and North Midlands. Five principal venues were key to this growth: the Twisted Wheel club in Manchester during the 1960s and early 1970s; Blackpool Mecca (referred to as the 'Mecca') 1971-1977; the Golden Torch (later referred to as the 'Torch') in Stoke-on-Trent during the 1960s and early 1970s, up until its closure in 1973; most famously at the Wigan Casino Club (referred to as 'The Casino') 1973-1981 and more latterly at Cleethorpes Winter Gardens and Pier during the 1975-1977 period. The three years between 1973 and 1976 saw Northern Soul reach the height of its influence with clubs such as Wigan Casino regularly attracting over 1,500 participants for events while it has been estimated that in 1975 Northern Soul was attracting up to 100,000 followers per week at its various venues. (Hewitt, 2000, p.141)

Northern Soul was essentially music to dance to. Dancing developed from African-American and 'Mod' exuberant styles of the 1960s into frenetic and many cases highly athletic and acrobatic routines to usually fast up-tempo sounds. A central feature of Northern Soul was the 'all-nighter' (often Americanised to 'all-niter') an event which typically saw dancing from midnight to 8 am in the morning featuring a roster of DJs and also included record dealing for rare records. A pivotal aspect of Northern Soul was the primacy of the DJ as a collector and curator of these rare sounds. DJs on the scene assumed legendary status for their knowledge of 'rare soul' and their ability to identify and acquire these sounds mostly directly from the USA.

From the mid-1970s Northern Soul went into decline. Again, changing musical preferences and tastes and the ascendancy of contemporary versions of soul; spreading interest in Jazz-Funk and British-based soul and finally the Disco 'boom' of the 1970s saw Northern Soul eclipsed. Within the scene itself a serious schism developed between those DJs and followers who wished to embrace 'modern soul' and those who wished to maintain interest in sounds which largely dated from the mid-1960s. Another factor in this decline was the commercialisation of Northern Soul which accompanied its growing success driving away those who wanted to retain its rare and

underground roots. Finally, the scene was strongly associated with drug misuse mainly through the illegal consumption of amphetamine based drugs which allowed dancers to stay awake all night and perform high intensity acrobatic routines over many hours. While the extent of drug abuse on the scene has been disputed there is no doubt that it was used as a pretext by the police and local authorities to close venues – the Twisted Wheel and Torch among them, and this was certainly a consideration in the decision to close Wigan Casino, all accompanied by bad press publicity.

While the late 1970s saw interest in the scene move out of its traditional strongholds to spread to East Anglia; the areas around Cambridge and Peterborough and also the South West of England around Stroud and Yate near Bristol this, was not enough to arrest the decline and fragmentation of the scene with its two principal venues closing – Blackpool in 1977 and Wigan in 1981. Thereafter Northern Soul went through a low point during the 1980s, but saw a revival of interest from the 1990s and now attracts regular crowds from amongst its original followers and younger converts as well as a booming nostalgic interest. Attention to the scene has spread to other parts of the world and there is an active following, for example, in both Australia and Japan while it continues to attract much popular and media interest in Britain. Importantly, the scene has been identified as the most influential in shaping subsequent youth dance scenes. It has been described as ‘the ultimate dance music underground’ (Rushton, 2009) and its uniqueness has been acknowledged with the only other comparable scene in Europe being the Belgian ‘Popcorn’ or Belgian ‘Oldies’ Popcorn itself described as the ‘last underground scene in Europe’.(*Guardian*, 2014)

Academic interest in Northern Soul has remained limited and particularly limited amongst cultural and social historians. Aside from a few works and doctoral theses the majority of writing on the subject has been from participants, promoters and music journalists associated with the scene. Keith Gildart and I have been researching the history of Northern Soul for nearly two years for a forthcoming book through Manchester University Press entitled *Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul*. The majority of the research to-date has involved an evaluation of existing primary and secondary written sources, although we are now moving to a phase of research which involves gathering oral testimony.

There are several questions or lines of enquiry that have emerged in the course of the research to-date:

1. Northern Soul is concerned with the three ‘Rs’ – Rarity; Retrospection and Ritual. Rarity in the sense of recordings having to be obscure either by artist; label or a rare recording from a mainstream soul artist or all of the aforementioned. Retrospective in the sense that the scene constantly looks back on itself either in terms of recordings; artists; venues and significantly through its own self-development, for example, in the manner by which it arranged and eulogised anniversary ‘nites’ or venue ‘revival’ events. Ritualistic in the sense that behaviour followed well established and well understood (by its followers) characteristics and in the way it sought to worship particular artists or venues. For example, at Wigan Casino the same three records were always played at the end of an ‘all-niter’ in the correct sequence signalling the end of the night’s activities - known ‘as the three before eight’. Long closed venues which were often only open for a few years, or even months in the case of Bolton’s *Va Va Club*, are venerated in an almost religious manner.
2. Northern Soul was conducted at the margins both in the geographical sense in small towns and villages rather than – although by no means exclusively - major cities and in the cultural sense at the margins outside of major music and entertainment scenes and venues

3. Its followers were predominantly white 'working class' young men and youths, but does this denote that there was a distinctive class perspective about the scene?
4. It was asexual in the sense that unlike popular music and dance venues of the time the primary reason for attending was not necessarily in the hope of a sexual encounter. The main reason for attending was to hear the sound; to dance and deal in records. Group sense of belonging was much more important than sexual encounter
5. The Afro-Caribbean community in Britain mainly based in the larger towns and the major cities, largely eschewed Northern Soul in favour of more contemporary sounds; modern soul; jazz; jazz-funk and reggae
6. Was there something particularly 'northern' about Northern Soul in the cultural sense and sense of identity it engendered?
7. One observable feature of the spatial development of Northern Soul was that it developed hierarchies of venues based around specific geographical clusters, for example, on the Fylde coast around Blackpool Mecca; in the Potteries around Stoke on Trent during the early 1970s and around Cambridge and Peterborough during the late 1970s
8. In some senses the term 'Northern Soul' is a misnomer as it attracted fans from all over Britain to its venues. Similarly, there were parts of the north where Northern Soul did not evolve in any meaningful way - The North East of England - on Tyneside; Wearside and Teeside and significantly in Liverpool and the Merseyside area.
9. Was there anything specific to period of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain at a time frequently characterised by commentators as one of deep economic and political malaise which influenced the development of Northern Soul?
10. While Northern Soul often seems to have a timeless permanency about it was there anything transitional about the scene over time? For example, the sense of how 1960s followers perceived the scene and articulated a view of it was quite different from another generation ten years later

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