

'Brings to the surface a hidden cultural history
and a scene that reverberated around the world.'

Lanre Bakare

JOIN THE FUTURE

BLEEP TECHNO AND THE BIRTH
OF BRITISH BASS MUSIC

MATT ANNISS

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PART ONE: RHYTHM TAKES CONTROL

“We’re a creation of the city that we grew up in. Britain’s not like America – it’s not segregated in the same way.”

Richard Barratt, AKA DJ Parrot

1: CULTURE CLASH

POLITICS, CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY

“We’re made to look like we’re all drug pushers, criminals and pimps, and that’s not how it goes. That’s only a small minority of the population. The rest are decent, hard working people, or would be decent, hard working people if they could go and get a job, if the rest of the people in Leeds would give them a job.”

Unnamed interviewee, *Chapelton: One Year On*, TV documentary, 1987⁴

Behind Leeds train station is a high-profile waterfront development known as Granary Wharf. Accessed via the station’s futuristic back entrance and a series of passageways beneath railway viaducts known as “the dark tunnels”, the project is the epitome of 21st century urban redevelopment.

Back in the 1960s, ’70s and early ’80s, the area was a dilapidated, overgrown mess of abandoned wharf-side warehouses, failed businesses and once grand Victorian buildings that had seen better days. Today, the area is brimming with life. There are fashionable bars and restaurants galore, glass-fronted towers of luxury apartments, expensive chain hotels and smart office buildings hosting some of the biggest names in law and finance.

Take a 15-minute stroll up the hill, past the train station towards the city centre, and you’ll notice other similarly dashing developments such as the Victoria Quarter, a high-end shopping mall housed in the kind of building you’d expect to see in Dubai, rather than a former industrial powerhouse in northern England. Reminders of those times remain dotted around the

centre of Leeds, though, from a string of ornate Victorian shopping arcades and grand civic buildings, to converted industrial units and sizeable townhouses with still impressive facades.

Step off a train in the rival Yorkshire city of Sheffield, and you'd initially be equally as impressed. While the Steel City boasts less wealth than its near neighbour, it too has undergone considerable regeneration over the last three decades. The train station itself is an especially striking example – particularly now its grand Victorian pub has been painstakingly restored – but so too is the area surrounding the Victoria Quays canal basin (once home to Sheffield's second mainline railway station), the Peace Gardens and the oversized greenhouse that links it to the Millennium Gallery, the Winter Gardens. First-time visitors will also notice a swathe of eye-catching buildings owned and operated by the city's two universities, something almost as evident up the M1 in Leeds.

In some ways, it's as if the upheaval that marked the latter half of the 20th century, and in particular a 15-year period between 1975 and 1990, never happened. Yet stray a little further from the centre of either city or that of their near neighbour Bradford, and you'll find plenty of examples of urban poverty; not just in the increasing numbers of homeless people sheltering in shop doorways or under road bridges, but also in working-class suburbs that have seen better days. There, away from the prying eyes of tourists, shoppers and day-trippers, you'll find echoes of the crime, mass unemployment and lack of investment that characterised the cities' declines in the 1970s and '80s.

Visit Burngreave, Shirecliffe, Pitsmoor or the Manor in Sheffield, or Beeston, Hunslet, Bramley, Chapeltown or Harehills in Leeds, and you'll encounter significant levels of poverty and deprivation. The exact social makeup of these communities may have changed, with more recent immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe and Africa than South Asia and

the Caribbean, but the issues of poor housing, lack of investment and youth unemployment remain.

Some of these areas, and others in those cities and beyond, have still not recovered from the seismic events of the late '70s and '80s. There has been no economic miracle for Yorkshire's most deprived communities, just constant reminders of past glories and the continuing North-South divide⁵.

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The Yorkshire that bleep's pioneers grew up in during the late '70s and '80s was very different to the one that their parents and grandparents had grown accustomed to.

In the postwar period, Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield were no longer the industrial powerhouses they had been during the Victorian age, when they variously led the world in textile manufacture, steel production, engineering and tailoring, but their economies were still hugely vibrant. During the 1950s and '60s, all boasted full employment (or close to) and required immigrants from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan to bolster their workforce.

By the dawn of the 1970s, these immigrant communities were becoming a sizeable presence in the working-class neighbourhoods of Leeds, Bradford and, to a lesser extent, Sheffield⁶. While racial tensions remained high in some areas – and the National Front and associated fascist groups maintained a threatening presence in British cities throughout the decade – there was a growing, if sometimes grudging, acceptance of this changing social fabric.

In 1971, 50% of Sheffield's workforce was employed in manufacturing, with the state-owned British Steel Corporation being one of the city's biggest single employers. Over in Leeds, Hepworths and Burton owned

huge clothing factories. At one point, the Burton factory in Harehills had a workforce of 10,000⁷. Bradford, too, still had a strong manufacturing sector, despite the decline of its once famed “heavy woollen⁸” textile industry.

As the decade progressed, these core industries, on which the cities had built their identities and economic prosperity over the course of centuries, had fallen into decline. Britain no longer had an empire to which it could forcibly sell its wares, and the nation’s global domination of manufacturing and engineering was rapidly coming to an end.

The election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1979 accelerated this process, primarily by taking policy decisions that would not only have devastating consequences in Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield but also in many towns and cities in the Midlands, North East, Scotland and South Wales.

Sheffield felt the full force of Thatcher’s passion for privatisation and unregulated free-market economics more than its neighbours. From 1980 onwards, the “Steel City” became a focal point for an almighty clash of political cultures. On the left stood the staunchly socialist trade union movement, supported by the Labour-run City Council: on the right, the most ideologically driven Tory government to date².

The first great conflict occurred in 1980, with steelworkers striking for the first time in 50 years. During the 14-week strike, there were clashes between police and pickets outside Hadfield’s privately owned Hecla Steel Works; within a year, 1,900 of the mill’s 2,700 workforce had been made redundant. It was a similar story elsewhere in the city, with savage job cuts across the manufacturing sector. By the end of 1981, unemployment in Sheffield stood at 11.3%; within three years, it had risen to almost 16%.

The 1984-85 miners’ strike, which brought the coalfields of South and West Yorkshire to a standstill (as well as those in South Wales and Nottinghamshire), intensified ill feeling between Yorkshire’s working class

and the Conservative government. The most famous stand-off between miners and police, the so-called “Battle of Orgreave”, took place in the no-man’s land between Sheffield and Rotherham, while the National Union of Mineworkers based its strike headquarters in the Steel City.

The loss of the miners’ strike hit Yorkshire hard. In Leeds, a city that had long boasted an entrepreneurial spirit and affluent suburbs packed with naturally Conservative voters, the council quickly took steps to address the loss of its manufacturing base. Wisely, they focused on attracting new businesses in different sectors, most notably the growing financial services industry.

It was a different story down the M1 in Sheffield. There, the City Council, whose elected councillors often tended towards the “Militant” end of the Labour party spectrum and insisted on flying the red flag over the Town Hall annually on May Day¹⁰, continued to oppose government policy at every juncture.

Blazing “us and them” rows broke out over all sorts of subjects, most famously the decision to cap “rates”, the local tax that paid for council services¹¹. Sheffield had traditionally charged high “rates” to city taxpayers, using the money to subsidise low public transport fares and ensure good quality services for all.

Notably, this included investing in arts and culture, with the council funding the opening of two recording studios and rehearsal spaces, Red Tape in the city centre and the Darnall Music Factory. In addition, the council also paid to convert a former bus garage into a live venue and club space known as the Leadmill¹². These initiatives formed part of a drive to regenerate Sheffield’s flailing economy through arts and culture – an early attempt to promote the city as a bastion of the creative industries that would culminate in the establishment of the Cultural Industries Quarter¹³.

Gez Varley, later one of the founder members of LFO, once phoned

Leeds City Council to ask why his home city didn't have a Red Tape of its own. "They said they didn't because it wasn't a growth industry," he says. "This was 1988. The music industry was the third biggest industry in the country at that point and they didn't invest in it."

Spending ratepayers' money on recording studios and music venues was the kind of socialist utopianism that was wholly at odds with the 'small state, low tax' ideology of Thatcher's government (though, as we have seen, in the years since the Cultural Industries Quarter was established towns and cities as varied as Liverpool, Bristol and Great Yarmouth have also attempted, with varying degrees of success, to use arts and culture as a driver of economic regeneration).

As with previous conflicts between the Iron Lady and "the People's Republic of South Yorkshire", the left's favourite hate figure came out on top. By the end of the decade, Sheffield had lost 10 percent of all its jobs, including 35,000 in the manufacturing sector alone. It was a similar story across Yorkshire, with long-term unemployment the net result. In 1989, some 61,853 people had been unemployed for 12 months or longer, 10,000 of which were under 25.

Some token efforts were made to offer opportunities to young people in inner-city communities, with numerous schemes focused on unemployment hotspots such as Chapeltown and Harehills in Leeds. According to figures quoted in Yorkshire Television's 1987 documentary *Chapeltown: One Year On*, there were some 10,000 unemployed people in the area at the time; even more shockingly, just shy of a quarter of the area's dominant ethnic minority community was without work.

Money was offered up by the government (Chapeltown and Harehills sat in the then Conservative held Leeds North East constituency, whose MP until 1987 was former Education Secretary Sir Keith Joseph) to fund a special "jobs taskforce", running out of a shiny new Job Centre on

Chapelton Road¹⁴. There were also a number of training centres set up to teach unemployed youngsters, including the Tech North computer skills centre in Harehills (opened by a local councillor who would later push through licensing law changes to allow Leeds clubs to open later) and Side Step in the city centre. The latter would go on to play a key role in bringing together various future bleep pioneers.

Given these high unemployment figures and a lack of investment in alternative industries, it's perhaps understandable that many in the region felt a sense of isolation and anger. Some felt abandoned by the government, others as if they were under attack from a Tory party fixated with the get-rich-quick attitude of "entrepreneurialism".

It was not uncommon for some on the left – and that was a high proportion of voters in Yorkshire's cities, if not the leafy suburbs and adjacent rural areas – to accuse the government of punishing them for having the audacity to vote Labour. Even if you sit on the right of the political spectrum, there's little arguing that those in the North suffered more than most during the Thatcher years¹⁵.

Curiously, the curse of long-term unemployment may have inadvertently provided the perfect conditions for musical revolution to take place – not just in Yorkshire, but also elsewhere across Britain. Today, we're used to benefit claimants being punished if they fail to find work within a prescribed amount of time; back in the mid-to-late '80s, the government was nowhere near as harsh on those out of work. They tended to be left to their own devices, assuming they at least made a token effort to find work, and could therefore eke out an existence in any way they saw fit.

"During the '80s, the benefits system effectively allowed working class kids to be bohemian," says Richard Barratt, better known as Sheffield music scene veteran DJ Parrot. "In the past, bohemians had always been well-to-do, because to live and just make art all day, you had to have money coming

in from somewhere. For working class kids, that option had never been there before.”

Barratt points out that the benefits system had previously helped fuel the rise of DIY culture during the punk and post-punk eras, and played a part in allowing other subcultures, such as New Romantic in London, to flourish. Those with ideas and a desire to be creative could feed off the prevailing individualism and ‘get up and go’ ethos of society at large, even if they did strongly oppose Thatcherite ideology.

“You’d get football lads who wanted to be entrepreneurial, people who wanted to take up DJing or just dress in a certain way and sleep all day and go out all night,” Barratt says. “That provided so much oxygen and energy for making things, particularly music. It wouldn’t be allowed to happen like that now.”

It’s certainly true that the explosion in dance music and rave culture that happened in the latter half of the 1980s was partially fuelled by those who bought into Thatcherite ideals – or at the very least the “get up and go” attitude espoused by her followers. From former City boys promoting giant raves off the M25 to 20-somethings setting up record labels or distribution businesses, there was no shortage of closet Thatcherites amongst Britain’s rave generation.

Not that many in Yorkshire were that way inclined, at least openly. Aside from high levels of youth unemployment and widespread inner-city poverty, there were other issues for them to contend with.

As a result of their clashes with striking miners and steelworkers, confidence in the police was at an all-time low. Tensions were strained further by perceived (and in some cases, actual) racism within local police forces, an issue brought into sharp focus by the Chapeltown race riots of 1981 and 1987.

Chapeltown had a long history of clashes between the police and the local

black community, with widespread violence first erupting on bonfire night in 1975. The local action group, the Chapeltown Community Association, and the associated *Chapeltown News* magazine had spent years warning of possible trouble due to the heavy-handed tactics of West Yorkshire Police. In fact, in 1972, the United Caribbean Association, another local campaigning group, had set out their worries to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Race and Immigration.

‘Harassment, intimidation and wrongful arrest go on all the time in Chapeltown,’ they wrote. ‘Black teenagers returning from youth centres to their homes in groups are jostled by the police, and when the youths protest, police reinforcements with dogs are always ready just around corners... We believe that policemen have every black person under suspicion of some sort of crime and for that every black immigrant here in Leeds mistrusts the police, because we think that their attitudes are to start trouble, not prevent it.’¹⁶

By the 1980s, these issues had intensified, and it didn’t take much for tensions to boil over. The 1981 riot (one of a number up and down the country in predominantly black neighbourhoods such as Brixton in London, Toxteth in Liverpool and St Pauls in Bristol) was sparked by the particularly aggressive arrest of a black teenager, with the ensuing carnage worsened by looting and violence, nominally in support of Chapeltown’s black community, by white teenagers and young men from the nearby Gipton council estate.

Given this history, it was not that surprising when Chapeltown burned once more on the night of 22nd June 1987. Again, the clashes between police and local youths erupted as a result of the arrest and brutal beating of a black teenager.

Paul Edmeade, later to go on to be part of early Leeds hip-hop outfit Breaking the Illusion, remembers the aftermath. “I went to a school that

was just by Potternewton Park,” he says. “I remember we all ran down at break time to look at the damage [caused by the riot] because we’d heard it the night before. We all went down, and it was like, ‘We’ve smashed all our own shops up.’ We didn’t get it. But your bigger siblings were at the forefront of it and were talking about trouble with Babylon [the police] and why they did it.”

The mistrust between police and Britain’s black communities was not new, and in many ways was indicative of wider issues with racism in society. Although attitudes were changing, it was not uncommon for the sons and daughters of Caribbean immigrants to receive abuse from some of their white counterparts.

“I wouldn’t say that there was racism in Chapeltown, but in town there definitely was,” says Iration Steppas Soundsystem main man Mark Millington. “Down the road by the train station – Boar Lane – there were a lot of pubs, so for us guys to go to Bradford or Huddersfield by train, we had to find a way of going round them. If we went down Boar Lane, we’d have got called names and threatened.”

Club promoter Tony Hannan, who launched one of Leeds’ earliest dedicated acid house parties in the summer of 1988, has similar memories. “Leeds was a very rough city in the ’80s,” he says. “You got all the black kids hanging out at the Merrion Centre and all the white kids hanging out on Boar Lane near the train station, down that area. When those two groups met there were massive fights. There was a lot of racial tension in Leeds.”¹⁷

Yet despite these simmering tensions, race relations within the communities themselves were nowhere near as bad as they had once been. Although newly arrived immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh were sometimes treated to abuse from white neighbours, multiculturalism was slowly on the rise across the UK.

This was certainly the case when it came to younger members of inner-

city communities. In the mixed working class neighbourhoods of Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield, young people of all ethnic backgrounds freely mingled. They attended the same council-run schools, hung out together afterwards, and began to form friendships. Some were drawn together, too, by a shared passion for black American music. It was this, as much as their shared experience of economic hardship (and later dole culture) in the “forgotten North”, that would ultimately lead to the bleep and bass revolution.

This documentary is available to view online via the BFI Player:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-chapeltown-one-year-on-1987-online>. It was the sequel to an earlier documentary entitled *Task Force Chapeltown*, which can also be streamed for free:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-taskforce-chapeltown-1986-online>

Suffice to say, the ‘levelling up’ of the North promised by Prime Minister Boris Johnson during the 2019 General Election campaign, which took place while the first edition of this book was being printed, has still not materialised.

Initially, the Steel City took in fewer immigrants from Commonwealth countries than other comparable British cities. In his academic essay *Sheffield Is Not Sexy* (Nebula, 2007), Stephen Mallinder points out that the 1951 census shows that only 32 residents of the city were born in Jamaica. Today the number is higher, but there are more immigrants from the Indian sub-continent and in total Sheffield is home to far fewer people of Caribbean heritage than Birmingham, Manchester or Leeds.

The Full Monty – Montague Burton (BBC Leeds, 2008):

https://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/content/articles/2008/04/02/local_history_montague_burton_feature.shtml

The ‘Heavy Woollen District’ is a cluster of towns and villages in West Yorkshire including Dewsbury, Batley, Morley, Gildersome, Heckmondwike, Ossett and Mirfield. It was named in the 19th century when the area led the world in the production of wool cloth for clothing, including such specialities as “shoddy” and “mungo”. The name now lives on in the world of sport, with “Heavy Woollen” cricket and football leagues and the “Heavy Woollen Derby” between Rugby League sides Batley Bulldogs and Dewsbury Rams.

This has not aged well. As this updated edition was being prepared, short-lived Conservative Prime Minister, Liz Truss, announced a swathe of policies that even Margaret Thatcher would have thought too extreme.

More on the Sheffield political scene in the 1970s and ’80s can be found in John Cornwell’s entertaining, self-published compendium of council anecdotes, *Tomb of the Unknown Alderman and Other Tales From The Town Hall* (2006).

Prior to 1990, domestic ‘rates’ in England and Wales were charged on a sliding scale and based on nominal rental value. Local councils at different levels (from parish councils upwards) had a certain amount of flexibility in setting the rates they charged within their area of jurisdiction. The Conservatives briefly replaced it with the flat-rate Community Charge – better-known as the hated

“Poll Tax” – before backtracking and launching Council Tax instead. Since then, Council Tax rates have been based on estimated market valuations of property (whether or not that property is privately owned or rented).

As of October 2022, the Leadmill faces an uncertain future despite massive public support to save this historic and important cultural institution from the hands of developers.

For more information, see Stephen Mallinder’s *Sheffield is Not Sexy* (Nebula, 2007), and the Steel City-focused chapter of Jim Ottewill’s *Out of Space: How UK Cities Shaped Rave Culture* (Velocity Press, 2022, PP 93-124)

Task Force Chapeltown, Yorkshire Television, 1986. Watch online here:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-taskforce-chapletown-1986-online>

Other areas hit hard included then Labour Party strongholds in Scotland, the North East and South Wales.

Max Farrar: *Rioting or Protesting? Losing It or Finding It?*, in *Parallax* (Volume 18, Issue 2, Summer 2012: http://maxfarrar.org.uk/max-blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Rioting-or-Protesting_-final-14-Feb-2012-1.pdf)

Some members of Leeds United’s hooligan “firm”, the Service Crew, had ties with the National Front. It was apparently rare to see racism directed towards black members of the crowd at Elland Road, at least according to lifelong Leeds United fan Mark Millington.

2: THE DANCE

ALL-DAYERS, ELECTRO AND REGIONAL RIVALRY

“When I go to a club the most important thing is for me to get a sweat on.”

Marvin Ottley, elite dancer, quoted in *The Face*, 1989¹⁸

In the 1980s, Britain was a deeply divided country. Everywhere you looked, conflict was rife, from the government taking on trade unions, and protesting marchers clashing with police, to hooligans kicking off with rival supporters in pubs and football stadiums.

Given this backdrop, not to mention the lack of job prospects and prosperity in post-industrial towns and cities, it's unsurprising that many young people sought recreational release. Some found this in political protest, others by joining bands or following fashion. Many chose to join one of the many subcultural tribes surrounding musical movements, such as 2-Tone ska, goth or New Romantic.

For most of those later involved in the formative stages of the bleep and bass movement – not to mention many others who made their names during British dance music's creative boom at the turn of the '90s – the chosen release was dancing and their tribe, one of the many organised crews that were popping up. If you weren't dedicated enough to want to dance competitively, you could still represent your suburb, town or city by hopping on a coach, heading to a big event and dressing like your local peers.

“The dancers were kids who through the week were being racially abused – there was no education, they had shit job prospects, and everything was a pressure cooker just pushing them in,” says long-serving British electrofunk

DJ Greg Wilson. “When they went out to dance, they *were somebody*. Dancing was absolutely crucial to the wellbeing of the community and to your status within the community, particularly for the kids who pushed it further and were in a jazz-fusion crew or went into breakdancing later.”

Dancing had long been the pursuit of choice for those in northern working-class communities whose musical passions sat outside the mainstream. One route in was via the white-dominated Northern Soul scene of the '60s and '70s, which elevated obscure black American soul records – and the DJs that discovered them – to cult status.

In black communities, many grew up surrounded by music, from reggae, ska and rhythm and blues, to soul, funk and, in the latter half of the 1970s, disco. Many of those interviewed for this book talked about being encouraged to dance with relatives at home. Others described in detail attending family or community gatherings where strutting your stuff was par for the course, or having older siblings for whom dancing was a way of life.

“I grew up sharing a bedroom with an older brother who was the best dancer in Bradford,” says Kevin Harper, later to become a keen breakdancer and DJ. “He played all the latest music and I got to learn some of the moves. To this day people still stop him on the street and tell him that he’s a legend.”

If you didn’t have parents or siblings who could school you, then you needed to make extra effort to access the music you loved. As Winston Hazel suggests, being a fan of underground black dance music could be an exasperating experience: “I remember wondering when I was growing up why I couldn’t hear ‘our music’ – contemporary underground black music – on the radio or in clubs. I remember walking down the street with my portable stereo thinking to myself, ‘wouldn’t it be great if this music were playing out of all the shops on Fargate?’ When I told my mates at school I

was into funk, they said, ‘Don’t tha mean punk?’ I didn’t understand why people didn’t know the music I liked.”

Outside of specialist radio shows, youth clubs and certain low-key events held in community centres, the only place to hear the latest underground tunes at the turn of the ’80s was either to buy them from specialist record shops – assuming you had the disposable income to do so – or to make a pilgrimage to one of the few clubs dotted around the north that had a similar music policy.

Helpfully, thanks to the influence of the earlier Northern Soul scene, the North of England already had a network of clubs where black American music dominated, as well as a programme of Sunday and bank holiday “all-dayers” that attracted dancers from all over the country.

The roots of the all-dayer scene – up north, at least – can be traced back to the demise of legendary Northern Soul hotspot the Golden Torch in Stoke. Famous for hosting amphetamine-fired all-nighters that attracted up to 1,300 people at a time (despite boasting an official capacity of 500), “the Torch” had its licence revoked in 1973. In the years that followed, the number of Sunday all-dayers across the Midlands and the North increased dramatically.

“There were early all-dayers at both the Blackpool Mecca, mainly in the smaller Highland Room, and in Stoke,” says Colin Curtis, a pivotal figure who first found fame as one of the resident DJs at the Golden Torch. “I worked in Newcastle Under Lyme doing regular Thursdays and Sundays, which developed into all-dayers. The Mecca thing spread, because we ended up doing all-dayers at Cats Whiskers in Burnley and in Blackburn, Leeds and Bradford.”

These all-day parties, where alcohol was served for just a few short hours and closing time was called at 10.30pm, were frequently held in historic, pre-war “ballroom” complexes. Often, these would feature a grandiose main

hall where Northern Soul was played, and a smaller offshoot room focused on dancefloor jazz or what purists called ‘modern soul’.

“When I started, the biggest all-dayers were at the Palais in Nottingham and were run by the West Midlands Soul Club,” says Jonathan Woodliffe, a Northern Soul enthusiast who would later play a significant role in the development of the all-dayer scene as a DJ and venue booker. “The all-dayers there were fantastic. It was all Northern Soul – mostly 1960s, but some ’70s music, as by that time in 1975, there were obscure new releases being played on the Northern scene.”

Famously, the inclusion of ‘modern soul’ records – Philadelphia soul, jazz-funk and early disco, primarily – was a bone of contention on the Northern Soul scene. When Ian Levine and Colin Curtis started mixing up stomping 1960s scene staples with fresh black American dance records at their weekly Highland Room residency at the Blackpool Mecca, it caused a bitter split in the previously united scene.

“From ’73 onwards, the music changed in America and it really gave us a fantastic armoury of records to play,” Curtis says. “We’d decided that there were records that were as good, if not better, than the Northern Soul records we were playing at the time. Along was coming a new form of dancefloor music that we were very excited about.”

One man who bought into what Levine and Curtis were doing was Neil Rushton, a Midlands-based DJ and promoter who had previously trained as a newspaper journalist. When he started doing regular all-dayers at the Ritz, a historic old Mecca ballroom on Whitworth Street West in Manchester, Rushton very deliberately booked DJs from both the Highland Room and the more purist Wigan Casino. It was here, in a venue famed for its bouncy dancefloor, that the future direction of the British all-dayer scene would take shape.

“It wasn’t the place where the schisms [in the Northern Soul scene]

became apparent or developed – It was actually where everything met together,” Rushton told journalist and author Bill Brewster in 1999¹⁹. “When I had the opportunity to promote the Ritz, there were a lot of great new records around. I didn’t want it to be just the ’60s soul that I loved but I didn’t want it to be just the current stuff, either. The reason why it worked so well wasn’t because the battle lines were drawn, it was actually because it was the first place to combine it. We were the first venue to take the blinkers off.”

To begin with, not all of Rushton’s punters were ready for Ian Levine and Colin Curtis’s brave new world. “It all crystallised at those all-dayers,” Levine explained to Bill Brewster in 1999²⁰. “All the Blackpool crowd came because me and Colin played, and all the Wigan crowd came because Richard Searling DJ’ed. It was like two football crowds: Manchester City and Manchester United. All of these Wiganites with their singlets and baggy pants were shouting, ‘Fuck off! Get off! Play some stompers!’ It was all getting quite nasty.²¹”

Despite the early animosity, the Ritz all-dayers quickly became must-attend events for soul enthusiasts from across the country. By 1977, the growing dominance and appeal of modern soul and jazz-funk had forced other Northern Soul promoters to open second rooms to cater for those whose tastes extended further than solid gold 7” singles. At the Ritz, the number of died-in-the-wool Northern Soul dancers was beginning to be outnumbered by those with wider musical horizons.

“Eventually, you did have a situation where there would be people from Wigan pilled out of their heads from the night before, barbed out at the Ritz, and they’d be picking arguments,” Rushton told Bill Brewster. “But it was never as bad as at the Blackpool Mecca. At the Mecca you had a guy from Wolverhampton running a banner through the venue saying, ‘Ian Levine Must Go.’ There was never a fight at the Ritz all-dayers.”

It was the mixture of people and sounds that made the Ritz so important. “You had a clash of cultures, a clash of people’s opinions on music and a very interesting dancefloor would result from that,” Colin Curtis says. “You’d have traditional Northern soul dress versus Hawaiian shirts and plastic sandals. There was a definite visual change: the bowling shirt versus the Hawaiian shirt, if you will.”

Crucially, the racial makeup of the crowds was also changing. “By the time I left Blackpool Mecca I would say that on an average Saturday night in the Highland Room, there would be six black people,” Curtis says. “On an all-dayer, at that particular time, there would be a dozen. I went to Manchester and within six months I was playing to a 70% black crowd. That crowd started coming to venues like the Ritz and Rafters, so from ’78 onwards, the all-dayers had changed. The mixed-race attendance increased dramatically.”

The attendances at the Ritz, and other venues on the all-dayer circuit across the North and Midlands, such as Tiffany’s at the Merrion Centre in Leeds and the Hummingbird and Locano in Birmingham, were swelled not only by serious black dancers from the wider region but also those prepared to travel up from down south.

Many of those London-based dancers were, of course, regulars on the southern jazz-funk all-dayer circuit, which was dominated by the Chris Hill-founded ‘Funk Mafia’ collective of DJs and stretched from Bristol, and Weston-Super-Mare in the West, to Great Yarmouth in the East. The club where they cut their teeth, though, was called Crackers – a seedy, 200-capacity West End venue that had a reputation for attracting the capital city’s most expressive and talented dancers.

‘Mixing freestyle jazz moves and Soul Train-style steps such as The Bump, the dancers at Crackers were serious,’ wrote Stephen Titmus in a 2013 Red Bull Music Academy feature outlining the story of the 200-capacity

basement venue. ‘This was competitive. Battle dancing. Unless you had real moves, you couldn’t even get near the floor. For mere mortals, this meant much of the time was spent at the bar or near the back.’²²

Amongst the young upstarts aiming to topple London’s finest fusion dancers – Trevor Shakes, Richard Baker and IDJ amongst them – were future DJ heroes such as Carl Cox, Fabio, Paul ‘Trouble’ Anderson, Terry Farley, Norman Jay (quoted in Titmus’s piece comparing Crackers to legendary New York club the Paradise Garage) and Cleaveland Anderson. Jay and Anderson were part of the small but significant group of keen London dancers who regularly made the pilgrimage to Rushton’s Ritz all-dayers.

“The Ritz was really good – everyone would descend on Manchester,” Anderson told Bill Brewster in 1998²³. “On the back of that, all-dayers started popping up everywhere. Every week we were on the coach. One week it would be Manchester, the next, Birmingham, Nottingham or Leicester. There would always be some all-dayer to go to.”

Attending an all-dayer was a serious business for those involved, especially the dancers. It was a genuine lifestyle choice. “The preparation from one event to the next was over the whole week. It was all about what look you’d turn up in the next week,” says Winston Hazel, who attended his first all-dayer in the jazz-funk era. “It was all about ‘showing out’ for the girls and showing off the dance style to make it look more elaborate. You wore your clothes to enhance your dancing, and your personal clothes style matched your style of dancing. It was a really important element of all-dayers. It’s one of the things that drew people together, to see who would come with what next.”

The crowds at all-dayers were a mixture of enthusiastic youngsters obsessed with music and fashion, dedicated dancers, and those in professional jazz-dance and jazz-fusion crews. “The improvisation was

amazing, especially in the jazz room,” Hazel says. “The funk room featured improvised dance, but a lot of the dancing there was inclusive, so you’d get a lot of girls and guys dancing together. Then the battles would break out, which was basically jazz-fusion moves that got a little bit more eccentric each time you went.”

At the time, the North and Midlands boasted some of the most talented and dedicated jazz dance crews around. Representing Manchester were the Jazz Defektors, Foot Patrol and Fusion Beat, while Leeds sported the Elite Dancers and the Meanwood Posse. For a period, Nottingham’s Groove Merchants also featured significantly.

Each of these crews featured dancers who worked hard perfecting their individual style. Some favoured a ‘floorwork’, ‘footwork’ or ‘drilling’ style – characterised by speedy footsteps and minimal upper body movement – while others drew greater influence from mambo, swing, ballet or contemporary dance.

“This was at a time when all dancing was ‘upright’, essentially, except for spinning a bit, but not on your back or anything,” Hazel remembers. “You wouldn’t even comprehend someone spinning on their back or their head in this period. It was more style and pattern over style and fashion.”

The all-dayer scene was the natural stomping ground for these crews of semi-professional, jazz-inspired dancers. Having dazzled in their local clubs during the week, the Sunday all-dayer offered them the chance to take on all-comers in what Hazel describes as “respectful tribalism.”

“You had some crews like the Convicts, Brute Force and a few others who were, in terms of freestyle dancing, the funkier on the scene to my mind,” Hazel says. “I always looked up to them and thought, ‘wow’. These people would meet on the dancefloor ultimately and their styles were off the scale. The improvisation was amazing.”

These dancers were, by today’s standards, surprisingly clued-up musically.

They were also very demanding, preferring the latest sounds to those embraced by their older siblings and parents. Helpfully, in Colin Curtis and Nottingham's Jonathan Woodliffe (popularly known as DJ Jonathan), the northern all-dayer dancers had two of the most forward-thinking around.

"DJ Jonathan was brilliant," Kevin Harper says. "He always had the freshest records. When he went to play at all-dayers at Venn Street in Huddersfield, I'd always make sure I was there to hear the hottest records."

Woodliffe, who had graduated to DJing at all-dayers in the late 1970s, was slavishly dedicated to sourcing new records. "I was just interested in playing all the new records coming through," he says. "If something had come out that week, I'd have it. By the early '80s, through working at Rock City full-time, I had a lot of income. If I went to a record shop and spent £150 on records for the week, so be it. At that time, it was a lot of money. Colin Curtis was probably doing the same thing in Manchester."

Curtis, along with Manchester contemporary Hewan Clarke, could not only claim a big following on the all-dayer scene but also, as time progressed, a packed weekly session at a club called Berlin on King Street West. Here, the duo would alternate between more purist jazz for the footworkers and contemporary funk and soul. "This session became the focal point for the scene in the north," wrote Mark 'Snowboy' Cotgrove in his comprehensive history of jazz-dance in the UK, *From Jazz-Funk & Fusion to Acid Jazz*²⁴. "Hewan would start the evening off with jazz, and dancers would get there early to practise their moves – including Hewan, who was a rated dancer."

The nature of Curtis and Woodliffe's up-front record collections made them cult figures amongst the north's dancers. "What Jonathan Woodliffe and Colin Curtis did for the northern all-dayer scene was immense," Winston Hazel asserts. "There were other DJs who were equally good, but they were the DJs that the all-dayer crew followed. If Jonathan or Colin

played anywhere, people would travel. They had the funkier dancers wherever they played, all the new styles.”

• • •

By 1982, the newest, freshest musical style was New York electro, a sound built around heavy bass, killer drum machine grooves and sparse, almost minimalist production. To those brought up on more traditional forms of popular music, electro records sounded like they'd been beamed to earth from another dimension.

It's difficult to overstate the importance of electro, and the associated hip-hop culture, to what happened in British dance music over the following years and decades. It was a style of music that had been inspired, in part, by the exotic, Far Eastern futurism of Yellow Magic Orchestra, the post-krautrock electronic hypnotism of Kraftwerk, and the synthesised pop of British new wave (some of which, we shouldn't forget, was made in Sheffield). It also drew heavily on P-funk – itself an inspiration for many young, black Britons – and the next generation jazz-funk of Herbie Hancock.

More than anything, though, it was a New York phenomenon. It grew out of the block-party hip-hop scene in the Bronx, with all that entailed. There were DJs recycling drum breaks from disco, funk and rock records, hype men rapping over beats and “B-boys” and “B-girls” battling for dance supremacy.

There were arguably two records that sparked Britain's love affair with electro and hip-hop culture more than any others. Perhaps the most important, in terms of the spread of the sound at least, was Malcolm McLaren and the World's Famous Supreme Team's ‘Buffalo Gals’. While it may have been a novelty record, ‘Buffalo Gals’ introduced a generation of

Brits to scratching and breakdancing (courtesy of an eye-catching promo video featuring NYC's Rock Steady Crew) and climbed to number nine in the singles charts.

“I came from a reggae and ska ‘rudeboy’ background and was interested in soundsystems, but that changed in 1982 when ‘Buffalo Gals’ happened,” explains George ‘E.A.S.E’ Evelyn, later to produce a string of key early bleep records as part of Nightmares on Wax. “The explosion in breakdancing and scratching was a huge thing.”

McLaren famously got the idea for the song after attending a New York “block party” thrown by Afrika Bambaataa. If anything, it was Bambaataa’s ‘Planet Rock’ single, released the same year, that would go on to have a much greater influence. It was both devilishly simple and hugely far-sighted.

‘Planet Rock’ made extensive use of samples from Kraftwerk’s ‘Trans Europe Express’ and ‘Numbers’ but derived its power from the unflinching heaviness of its distinctive drum track. This was provided, as has been well documented, by Roland’s groundbreaking TR-808 Rhythm Composer.

The “808” first went on sale in 1980 and quickly grew in popularity thanks to its relatively affordable price tag (a snip at \$1,195, compared to the \$5,000 being demanded for the then industry-standard Linn LM-1 drum machine). The pre-installed percussion sounds varied in quality – think spacey cowbells, hissing cymbals and tinny handclaps – but included a kick-drum that was deep and relatively rich. With a bit of tweaking, the bass kick-drum could also be made to oscillate at impressively low frequencies, resulting in ludicrously heavy bass. This would become known in some circles as the “808 boom”. It was this “boom” that helped make early New York electro records, and similarly minded funk and boogie releases, sound like the heaviest, most “crucial” music on Earth.

That was certainly how many British teenagers felt about electro. In

hindsight, electro's appeal was not limited to the music itself – however futuristic and groundbreaking it may have been – and had a lot to do with the culture surrounding it. Put simply, there was something for everyone. There were trademark clothes and accessories to make you look the part and a musical culture that made the DJ – and in some cases, their mic-wielding MCs – the centre of attention.

Arguably most important of all, initially at least, was the accompanying breakdancing scene. Many who had cut their teeth throwing jazz-fusion shapes at all-dayers naturally embraced breakdancing, with its tricky-to-master freestyle moves, fashion-conscious dress sense and ingrained battle mentality.

By the summer of 1983, electro and breakdancing were beginning to dominate the northern all-dayer scene²⁵. The focal point of the scene was undoubtedly Nottingham's Rock City club, which boasted one of the heaviest and most impressive soundsystems in the UK.

“We had this brilliant sound system, this amazing lighting rig with a laser, and two giant video screens either side of the stage,” says Rock City resident DJ Jonathan Woodliffe. “The DJ console was just off the dancefloor with bassbins underneath it. There were also bassbins around the edge of the dancefloor and the rest of the system was flown [from the ceiling], pointing down on the dancefloor. Around the bars, you could hear it, but on the dancefloor it was really rib-rattlingly loud.”

Such a heavy system suited the booming 808 bass and punchy drum machine rhythms of electro. Since electro was becoming increasingly popular and he was already playing those records to appease the footworkers who turned up week in, week out, Woodliffe decided to push the sound more. To begin with, that meant playing more American electro-funk on Friday nights, but it wasn't long before the club's weekly Saturday afternoon 'kids disco' (an event where under-age teenagers were allowed in

and no alcohol was served) had morphed into the UK's most popular breakdancing event.

“We decided to do a hip-hop and electro session for under-18s that quickly turned into a really big event,” Woodliffe says. “We had this enormous, polished dancefloor that was perfect for breakdancing. Myself and another DJ called Master Scratch would play. I could do a bit of trickery on the decks at the time – not a lot, but Master Scratch was better. So he'd cut things up and play breaks he'd found and discovered. I was more interested in playing the newest records that were coming through from America.”

Rock City's Saturday afternoon electro sessions quickly began to draw in wannabe 'breakers' from far and wide. “I used to visit Rock City every other Saturday – Nottingham was the place to be²⁶,” says Pat Scott, who would make a regular pilgrimage over from Lincolnshire with friends Tim Garbutt (later to find fame with early '90s 'stadium house' act Utah Saints) and future *The Gadget Show* host Jason Bradbury. “No matter what age you were, you could go to Rock City on a Saturday afternoon, and it was free to get in. That's where the battles started to happen.”

Although Scott was not in a seriously competitive crew, plenty of others around the North and Midlands were. Each town had its own breakdancing crew, while major cities like Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford were often home to several. Sheffield, for example, had Steel City Breakers and Smac 19, Bradford the Solar City Rockers, and Leeds the Chapelton-based Connect Four.

“I was in Connect 4 juniors when I was 13,” laughs Paul Edmeade. “Connect Four was Joseph Mills, Junior Pattison, an old school rapper called Speedo and a guy called Longers. It was hard to get out to parties at that age, so there were a few older breakers like George Evelyn and Kevin Harper that I didn't meet until I started making music a few years later. I

was a lazy breaker and quite shy. I think that's why I took up DJing and learned how to scratch."

Relative youngsters like Edmeade had not come through the earlier jazz-funk all-dayer scene – in contrast to future northern house and techno luminaries such as Winston Hazel and Gerald Simpson, AKA A Guy Called Gerald – and were amongst the most enthusiastic electro disciples. It probably helped that electro was far easier to get into than some other underground styles of electronic dance music, thanks in no small part to the work of British music entrepreneur Morgan Khan.

He'd already exploited the potential for compilations of black American dance music with his *Street Sounds* series, which contained 12" versions of key contemporary funk, disco, soul and boogie hits, and could be picked up cheaply in high street chain stores such as Woolworths, HMV and Our Price. When Khan launched the *Street Sounds Electro* offshoot in 1983, the first volume – containing such essential classics as Newcleus's 'Jam On Revenge' and West Street Mob's 'Break Dance Electro Boogie', as well as a rather more forgotten tune inspired by *PacMan* – it simply flew off the shelves. More volumes quickly followed, and Britain's youth went breakdance crazy.

"Electro was marketed in such a way in this country that everybody could get to hear it," says Richard Barratt, AKA DJ Parrot. "It went beyond being a ghettoised type of music. There were breakdance crews, of course, but also kids in the schoolyard – white as well as black – were trying B-boying and rolling about on lino."

Where teenagers had previously hung around on street corners with no distinct purpose, spontaneous dance battles began to break out in shopping centres, parks and community halls. Accompanied by the obligatory portable cassette player or, if you could afford one, ghetto blaster, would-be 'breakers' would try out their moves at every opportunity. There were similar

scenes in cities across the globe, from Rome and Rio to Paris²⁷ and Tokyo.

It was through their love of electro and hip-hop culture that a significant number of bleep's pioneers – and many others who would later play a huge role in the emerging British house and techno movements – were first drawn into the wider music scene. LFO's Mark Bell and Gez Varley first met as rivals during a Saturday afternoon breakdance battle at the Merrion Shopping Centre, while Nightmares On Wax's George Evelyn and Kevin Harper were drawn together through their involvement in Bradford's Solar City Rockers crew.

“I think it was around 1983 when I went over to Bradford and met Kevin [Harper] for the first time,” says George Evelyn. “Although I was from Leeds, I was going there to join Solar City Rockers. After going to one of their practice sessions in a sports hall, which they'd hired for 50p, I ended up going back to Kevin's house. He was the first person I'd seen scratch live in front of my own eyes. He did it on his mum's hi-fi. I said, ‘you've got to teach me how to do that, man!’ We got pretty tight after that, through the way we were hungry for music and hungry for scratches. We were obsessed with finding out where the cuts on our records came from.”

It was a similar story down the road in Sheffield, where Steel City Breakers and Smac 19 had a fierce but friendly rivalry. Members of the latter could regularly be seen showcasing their moves in JD Sports, while it was not uncommon to see representatives of both crews going head-to-head on Fargate (close to the now long-gone “fountain down the road” that was immortalised in Pulp song ‘Disco 2000’).

Smac 19's reputation was so high that in 1985 they received a surprise invitation from Yorkshire Television to become judges on a new breakdancing competition that would become a regular feature on the weekly music programme, *Sounds Good*, alongside – somewhat bizarrely – Sheffield boxer Herrol ‘Bomber’ Graham.

The first televised heat featured Steel City crew Positive Force against Bradford's Solar City Rockers, minus members George Evelyn and Kevin Harper. "We were a few men down, so never stood a chance," Evelyn laughs. "I do remember watching it on television, though."

Smac 19's "unofficial spokesman" and crew DJ was Winston Hazel. "We were seen as the main South Yorkshire crew because we'd been doing it longer than most," he remembers. "During that competition, I was sat with the presenter, Martin Kelner, commentating on what was happening. It was very basic! It was at a time when breakdancing had stopped being outlawed by the media and was a bit more accepted as part of the changing youth culture of the time. We jumped at any opportunity to get on telly."

Solar City Rockers, Smac 19 and other Yorkshire crews regularly featured in organised breakdancing competitions at Rock City and over the Pennines in Manchester. The latter was home to the North's best-known breakdance crew, Broken Glass, whose 1984 single 'Style Of The Street' (produced by Greg Wilson, alongside members of Magazine and A Certain Ratio) was a key moment in the development of the UK electro scene.

Competition from inside and outside Yorkshire created a hardened "battle" mentality and (mostly) friendly rivalry between those involved. This rivalry would continue on the growing northern club scene and beyond over the years that followed.

The Face (UK edition), November 1989. The feature focuses on the "drillers" and "footworkers" who were active on Leeds club scene, citing links between dancers at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and two clubs in particular: Ricky's and the Warehouse.

Bill Brewster: *Interview: Neil Rushton*, DJ History Archive/Red Bull Music Academy (<http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/07/neil-rushton-interview>)

Bill Brewster: *Interview: Ian Levine*, DJ History Archive/Red Bull Music Academy (<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2016/01/ian-levine-interview>)

Kate Millstone's essay on Northern Soul in the influential book *The Clubcultures Reader* (Blackwell, 1997, PP134-149) contains the following passage (P140): 'As Colin Curtis finished his set, the floor would empty, only to be replaced by an entirely different set of dancers who were there to listen to the 1960s soul played by [Richard] Searling. This split was so intense that occasionally sixties fanatics would throw fresh fruit at DJs who seemed to be threatening the 'true' Northern

Soul scene.’

Stephen Titmus: *Nightclubbing: Crackers*, Red Bull Music Academy Daily, 2013:

<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2013/03/nightclubbing-crackers>

Bill Brewster: *Interview: Cleaveland Anderson*, DJ History Archive (courtesy of Red Bull Music Academy/Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton)

Mark Cotgrove: *From Jazz-Funk & Fusion to Acid Jazz: The History of the UK Jazz Dance Scene*, Straight No Chaser Publishing, 2009.

Further information on the northern all-dayer scene, and the companion scene down south, can be found in *Britain's First Dance Music Boom: The Soul All-Dayer Scene 1975-86*, an in-depth feature I wrote for Red Bull Music Academy Daily in 2017:

<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/07/all-dayer-feature>

For further information on the strength of Nottingham's electro/breakdance scene, and the people who populated it, see Sam Derby-Cooper, Claude Knight and Luke Scott's excellent documentary film, *NG83: When We Were B-Boys* (NG83 Productions, 2016). As of October 2022, this was available to buy or rent on streaming services including Amazon Prime.

Fittingly, the first ever breakdancing competition in the Olympics will be held at the Paris games of 2024.

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