

Fact, Fiction, Faction, Friction.

IS NORTHERN SOUL DYING ON ITS FEET?

BY IDRIS WALTERS

Sunday morning. Arriving in Nottingham: the West Midlands Soul Club was planning to celebrate an All-Dayer that afternoon. The best All-Dayer in the country, apparently; Soul kids from all over.

For instance: What is Northern Soul? How do you get into it? What are its folk heroes? What are its folk heroics? Who's into it? What does it sound like? Where is the dancing at? Who wears what and what do they run on? What is their act?

Is this some crazy recession phenomenon? Some cunning twist in the collective conscience? Some transmutation of the late Mod syndrome? Adolescence on ice? Background musak for some Living Youth Theatre?

Northern Soul? A misnomer come to rationalise thousands of provincial kids grooving to a particular brand of soul music, the kind that Tamla Motown were churning out during the late Sixties?

Or just a myth? With media consequences?

That night, there was a radio programme scheduled on the national net. It was to be called "Northern Soul; Fact or Fiction?"

As if it mattered. The sun still comes up.

Nottingham. You'd think 'I Shot The Sheriff' would be a big number up here?

In 1764 they had a Great Cheese Riot at the Goose Fair. Nottingham has a healthy history of radical reformist workers' politics: the Nottingham mob has been notoriously militant.

Most of the worker Movements — the Luddites and so on — passed this way to pick up reliable support.

But there are few monuments to prove it.

There are plenty of Friar Tuck restaurants, Little John bars and Robin Hood coffee joints.

Nottingham Castle sits on a granite plug in the surrounding limestone. And on the back of thousands of packets of cigarettes. Because between them Players and Boots — John and Jess — have a big stake in Nottingham's

future. Jess Boot, for instance, bought the university for the town.

Now it's full of wierdo's.

Northern Soul? Jess Boot and The Chemists? John Player and his Sons? Ned Ludd and the Luddites?

So. Arriving in Nottingham: with no food to be had anywhere, it being a Sunday lunchtime, and the fountain in the Broadmarsh shopping centre (the Berlin wall) out of action.

Nottingham has mainlined for the Great Decorative Tile Apocalypse. With its pedestrian subways, its city centre urban renewal cancer, with its textile industry taken over by immigrant populations, with D. H. Lawrence to its credit . . . and the best All-Dayer in the country . . . and, at the imminent Goose Fair, the best mushy peas anywhere in the world.

Lynne Osborne is sitting on the Council House steps. That's where everybody meets everybody else. Between the lions. Sitting there you can look over the square. Sitting there

you can be moved on by the police. Sitting there, you can watch Nottingham happen.

Any daughter, any sister, any town. Lynne signs her letters with "Keep The Faith." Lynne is a civil servant during the week. Lynne works in a newsagent on a Sunday morning. Lynne is into Northern Soul.

She'll be going to the All-Dayer at Mecca's Palais. But not until later, when it's livened up a bit.

Lynne got into Northern Soul about a year ago. Someone gave her a Northern Soul record — "The Joker" by Butch Baker — and she liked it, figured she'd like some more of it, so she started going to places where she could get it.

She checked out the dj's and "the sort of people who look like they might be into Northern Soul.

"If they're going to an All-Dayer, they sort of wear vests and carry ADIDAS bags — we call them Wigan bags, but that's just our name for them — or just big bags."

What you got in that bag hanging there?

"Just a change of clothes."

"When we first started going — a bit fanatical about it — we used to change, say, three or four times. But now we probably only change once or twice."

"The lads change a hell of a lot of times, they do really energetic dances."

"It gets hot."

So how do you spot a Northern Soul record if you didn't know you were listening to it?

"A lot of them are old. It depends where you hear them."

"If you hear them on the wireless,

the dj'll probably make a point of saying it's a Northern Soul record."

"There's a special programme on a Wednesday night in Nottingham called 'Soul Over Nottingham' and Radio Luxembourg have just started doing a thing on Friday nights."

"Soul is commercial. Northern Soul isn't. Northern Soul is more rare."

"A lot of records are pressed (bootlegged). You get, like, a rare single that you can pay anything up to £80 for — I think that's the most I've ever heard, somebody paying £80 for a record, somebody in Sheffield, one of the dj's possibly — and you just press it up."

"This record label, Black Magic, they'll press them up for you. And then it will probably sell for about 80p."

"The most I've ever paid for a single is £2.50. That was Cochine. That was a long while ago."

"But they don't play it very much these days, because, at these Northern Soul things, as soon as a record gets on general release, the dj's will probably stop playing it."

Lynne accepts the term 'Northern Soul' even though: "surprisingly enough, there are lots of Northern Soul Clubs down South."

"I think it's because it started off around Wigan and places like that. I mean, there was only about five towns for All-Nighters at one time one of them was Nottingham, actually."

An All-Nighter runs from 2.00am to 8.00am.

"They've had two in Nottingham recently. I mean they used to have one regularly about ten years ago, but that stopped — police, drugs, things like that — but they had the first All-Nighter for ages about two months ago."

"That was the West Midlands Soul Club which isn't all that popular here. It wasn't very good apparently. People were going to sleep and there wasn't that much dancing."

"But they had one about two weeks ago — East Midlands Soul Club — and that was supposed to be really good. People were dancing all the time, you know, good records and everything."

What do you run on?

"I'm not really an expert on . . ."

Is there a lot of dope around?

"Yes there is. I will admit that. I read somewhere that it was supposed to be 99% of the people who go to All-Dayers / All-Nighters are on drugs. But personally speaking I'd say about 50%."

"They take bars, blueys, things like that."

Who are the local folk heroes?

"You get the good dancers . . . You want name dropping do you?"

If you like.

" . . . the really good dancers, they've really gone now. About a year ago, or six months, you'd get really fanatical dancers like Andy Gotthard."

"Andy's a good dancer but he doesn't take it seriously. A lot of people take it really seriously but Andy sort of messes about."

"A lot of them mess about now, rather than take it seriously."

Is it a question of stamina or . . .

"It is really. It's more acrobatics than dancing; backflips, spins, things like that, you know. There's no specific dance to do."

"We have a dancing competition at every All-Dayer . . . I've been to about ten All-Dayers and at about eight of them it's been blokes who won it."

"Once there was a girl who won it. She was pretty good but personally I

think that Andy Gotthard should have won it. He came second."

"He wins most of them really."

What do you get for winning?

"About £25 for winning . . ."

Enough for a single?

"And you get about £15 for coming second and about £5 for coming third."

Nottingham has Selectadisc. Lynne calls it: "the second best record shop in England."

There are two more of them in competition (HMV and Rediffusion) but Selecta has a reputation going for it.

"It's very good. You can get any record . . . They'll put it on order for you."

They call it Selecta, for short.

They sprinkle dancefloors with talcum powder. The guys wear flat shoes.

"The lads always turn up in flat shoes. And most of the girls. You get the odd few that turn up in shoes that look like they've been erected, you know."

"Sometimes the floors are sticky, so you just get the talcum powder out."

You go to a lot of these Northern Soul discos and they'll have notices up, like, "No Talcum Powder", or one of the dj's will say, like, "Who is it that's putting talcum powder down . . . Will you please stop it", or else you'll get somebody going around, checking up."

It's supposed to ruin the floor, getting ground in, is how they see it. It's £1 to get into an All-Dayer / All-Nighter, £1.25 for non-members. Normally, you'd pay about 30p to get into The Palais, but they up it for the Northern Soul shows."

"I suppose it is a lot really. You can stay about eight hours." (All-Dayer). You can get Northern Soul every night in Nottingham, should you want it."

"Sometimes you get a bit fed up with it, so you start listening to others (types of music), but most people don't bother."

"You always go back to Northern Soul."

Live shows?

"We've had nearly everybody here. We've had George Macrea. We had Wigan's Ovation at the last All-Dayer actually. Everybody thinks they are a bit over-rated. Nobody rates them very high."

Lynne reads *Blues and Soul*.

"I had choice between the two, *Black Music and Blues and Soul*, and I chose *Blues and Soul*."

"It's good for putting down what's on locally, what's on in most places. They advertise every All-Dayer that's going in the country. That's why I get it. For the advertisements really."

When Lynne started into Northern Soul, she used to go to different towns, once or twice a month.

"To Leicester, Derby . . . They have an All-Dayer in Derby every month. It's not very good, but we used to go."

"We went to Blackpool once, on a special trip, to the Blackpool Mecca, Saturday night. That's very good."

Blackpool is the best place Lynne ever went to, but these days, she'd dig to make Cleethorpes.

"Cleethorpes All-Nighter — it doesn't sound fantastic, I know, but it is. Once a fortnight, and everybody goes — about 100 people from Nottingham go every time — come back and say how good it is."

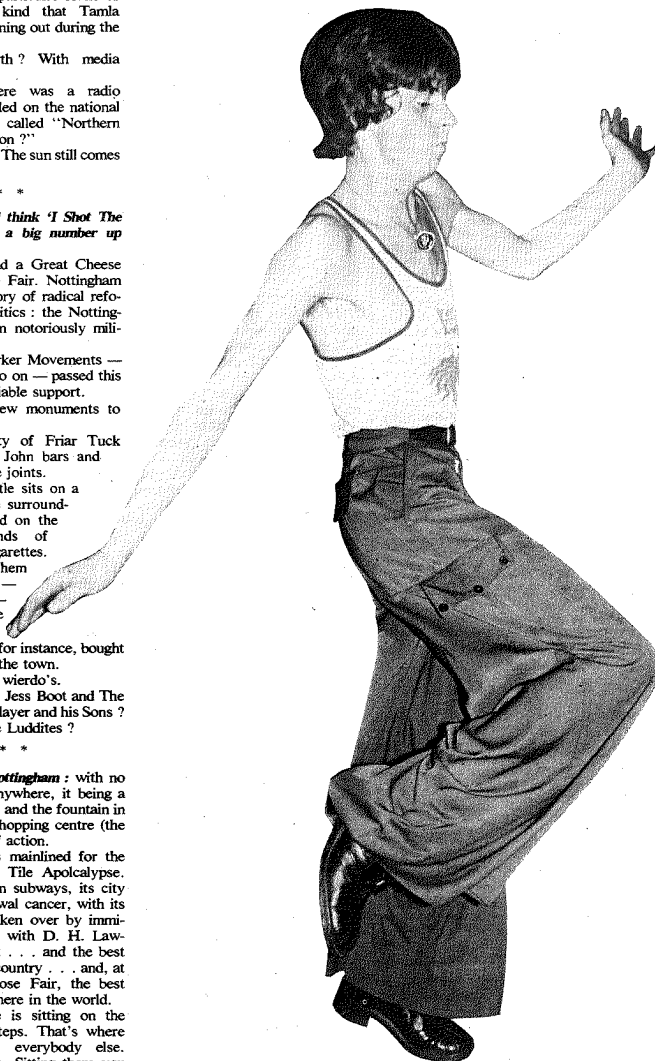
"The atmosphere is really good."

Lynne will be going to Cleethorpes, likely, yeah."

DJ's? What's their Act?

"It depends . . ."

"There's a few like Eddie Taylor,



they're out there for the laughs really. They'll play a popular record and, then, they'll have a stupid half-hour, to sort of make a break, and they'll put things like Batman on and Magic Roundabout, things like that.

"But at an All-Dayer, they take it very seriously. They just tell you what the record is."

An All-Dayer lasts from lunchtime, through the afternoon to about 11.00pm. The dancing competition goes down around 7.00pm.

Lynne and company don't plan on getting there till around 4.00pm because, "it doesn't liven up until teatime."

Why soul? Why Black soul? The Rolling Stones?

"I don't like progressive music at all. To me it's just a row. Because..."

"You talk to someone who likes progressive music and they'll say they listen to it just to listen to it."

"I like music to dance to, not to listen to."

A Mod thing?

"A Mod thing? Mods? What do you mean? Mods and rockers?..."

"Bit before my time."

"I know a lot of lads that are really dressing smart, into the smart thing, you know? But when they're going somewhere specifically to dance, they don't..."

Say that lot over there..." Lynne points out a bunch of Adidas bags moving across the square.

"Looks like they're going to the All-Dayer. They're not particularly smartly dressed are they? But if they weren't going there, they probably would be."

Whatever Northern Soul isn't, Lynne like reggae ("especially if it's about three or four years old"), but she is not into "commercial soul."

It's for a younger audience, she says.

You have to be 18 to get into an All-Dayer, because they have bars on conventional opening times.

But it's cool to be late, so go for a drink to The Fountain.

The Fountain is virtually next door to Selectadisc, just around the corner from the square and the Council House steps.

Turns out they have a few Northern Soul records on the jukebox (new, big, flashy, purple washlight, thin sound) and no food. Except crisps.

A lot of Lynne's friends come to The Fountain. She has to meet Kev later. Between the lions.

Back at the Council House steps, waiting on Kev:

Spotting types across the square — people into Northern Soul or not. A few teds have been showing up lately, it would appear, wierdo's, wino's, all sorts.

You get dead pigeons in the water-features sometimes.

Lynne points out probables on their way to the Palais. Probables with their Adidas bags, probables with their wide trousers with pockets down the side of the thigh, probables with their flat shoes and the rest, probables with or without their "soul birds."

Lynne points out Denny, one of this afternoon's dj's, crossing the square towards Selecta and The Fountain. With his box of records and his low profile.

Kev turns up to check things out. To find out when or if everyone is "going down." He mentions a big queue at The Palais.

Lynne "wouldn't be seen dead in a queue outside The Palais."

So, hanging out, passing the time of afternoon: Lynne caught 'Tommy' at the cinema. She thought it was a good film. She didn't like the music much, but she dug the film. Later she said that she liked Roger Daltrey because he "has a good body."

Kev elucidates on Nottingham Forest graffiti: "It used to be We Hate Pompey or We Hate Derby. Now it's just We Hate."

And Lynne comes up with the line of the decade: "Pot smoking's for wierdo's."

Big Dave wanders across the square, with his mate.

Now, Big Dave is a purist. He's a member and militant supporter of the East Midlands Soul Club. This afternoon's performance is a West Midlands number.

Big Dave's Act is his purism.

"Going down?"

No. Big Dave wouldn't be seen alive at the West Midlands. It's all rubbish, he says. Because the dj's are always trying to lay records on the audience whereas, at the East Midlands they only play oldies, the genuine article.

But apparently, Big Dave is never satisfied. He's always moaning about something or other. Lynne is a member of both clubs.

Kev splits to pick up his car. And his bag.

Anita turns up. She has to wait for Keith. They're both "going down."

Anita's got her bag.

Big Dave says that Northern Soul is five years old in Nottingham.

Kev pulls his ragged black mini into the kerb, confers with Lynne, pulls out again to park it. Lynne will meet him outside the Gas Board, which is hard by The Palais.

So, going down: Once, Lynne says, Kev got kicked in the face with an over-acrobatic backflip.

Kev's bag is a killer. White Adidas, covered in commemorative soul stickers — "Keep The Faith," "The Torch," things like that.

You pay your money and you get your card — a Mecca Social Club Membership Certificate. The number on it says there are 898,127 other members.

The dance floor is half-empty, the action quiet. The Sound System is really bad, it rattles, it can't handle too much treble. The bass does what it has to do. But only just. The dancing is sparse, and merely functional.

The guys — with their shoulders hung slightly back, they soul shuffle sideways, from the knees, along the talcum powder, and back again, high waists, short hair, T-shirts, bowling shirts, wide trousers, thin belts, terylene, flannel — are the best dancers.

This seems to be the Act: You have your bag with your changes, your talcum powder, your towel, your Polo mints, your Wrigley's. And you dance / socialise / dance / socialise / dance / socialise / change / dance / socialise.

Like that. You work up to the dancing competition, event of the evening.

Dj Kevin makes no impression. Lynne has never seen him before, has no idea who he is. His profile is so low if he stood sideways, you'd think he'd gone home. He's playing record after record of, to the stranger's ear, Motownish soul.

The dancing competition, it appears, depends on the gate. If it's big enough, there'll be one; if it isn't, there won't.

The girls wear Fifties mood rig — shirt-waisters, short sleeves, mid-calf skirtlengths. There is the odd born

loser, trying to look graceful dancing on six inch stacked platforms. Schoolboy hairdos.

But who's this? This styrofoam, lesser spotted Ann Margret, glossy type with the lips and the age.

It's the lady from Pye Disco Demand, here to PR Pye's nationwide dancing competition, here to check out what to compile the next compilation from, slumming in the market.

Pye are the leaders in the Exploit Northern Soul Act, For Legitimate Record Companies. They obviously have people working in the field (because they certainly aren't working with the kids).

Kev, Lynne and Anita do more hanging out than dancing. Standing round the pile of Adidas bags.

But Keith is constantly on the floor, Keith is a good dancer, dedicated at

it, elastic legs for it, hair blown specially for it.

A hustled interview with Denny, today's big dj:

Beneath the dancefloor, in a cafeteria, Northern Soul is the beat of feet, structure borne down a floor, constant and insistent. Gets to you.

Denny wears jeans and a leather jacket like the first provincial mods were wearing mid-Sixties, like the Parisien streetkids were wearing before that.

He seemed to down-rap the whole scene.

What is Northern Soul?

"Northern Soul, as such, doesn't exist. It's soul."

"Originally, the sound started with the Motown sounds, but now it's

almost funky, semi-funk sounds."

"It started off with rare records." Big Dave says this place is rubbish because the dj's are away (pushing new records?)

"Yeah. To a point. You stagnate if you stay with the old sounds. We get people writing to us and saying that the old sounds are better."

"Which is true. I think they are. But you can't play the old sounds forever. If people come up and ask me for an old record, they might as well stay at home and listen to it."

"I'm there to play records that you can't hear anywhere else."

"A dj's got to have bootlegs, white labels, emidiscs. You can't exist without them. Ian Levine was the last bastion of that business, but he's sold out now."

The scene in Nottingham?

"It used to be big, around '70. There used to be more people from Nottingham than anywhere else that used to go to the All-Nighters."

"But it's dropped off a bit. It's what you're brought up to really. They're (the kids) just looking for something different."

"A lot of them don't know what they're doing, what the records are, who they're by or anything."

"It's just a sound to them."

But...

"The crowds make a record popular. Normally you try and play a popular record if you're going to try to break a new sound because you know that's going to clear the floor anyway. They won't dance to a record they don't know, not here, not here."

"At Blackpool Mecca they will. But they've been brought up to it here. Perhaps that's our fault for playing the same ones all the time."

Today, Denny is just playing oldies.

"Pye has improved a lot since Dave Godin took over. The person they had before was just a joke. They ought to be shot for what they've done to Northern Soul."

"They ruined it to my point of view. Denny doesn't normally come to The Palais."

"Fridays I do the Brit at Trent Bridge, and then Saturdays an All-Nighter usually. Sundays I just doss around in the pub and in the week I'm usually working away."

Denny goes on to put down Ian Levine, The Blackpool Mecca, Tony Cummings, bootleg records.

He puts a ten year tag on Northern Soul and relates it firmly back to the Mod scenes in the sixties.

"That's where it started from. Down London they went on to progressive stuff and funky stuff."

"They used to have All-Nighters in Nottingham a long time ago — at The Dungeon, The Beachcomber, till they got shut down through drugs."

"The drug scene is nothing new, it's just that the drug squad is clamping down on it."

Denny also has a downer on dancing competitions.

"It's a farce really. People come here to enjoy themselves not to watch other people dancing for money. That's all it is, money and prestige."

"The only dancing competition that I enjoyed was at The Torch. A lad I knew won it. The dancing there was absolutely superb."

Now you get very few back-flops, few acrobats. This is a (Blackpool)



StreetLife

