

Carnaby Street Forever

Its 1961, or 62, and I'm sixteen or seventeen years old. From this distance I can't really be sure anymore. I'm in central London, not far from Oxford Circus. I have just turned into the narrow street that runs alongside of the London Palladium. I skirt my way around the Liberty's store and finally reach the place I'm looking for.

I head off down the street looking for the address that is in the magazine I have brought with me. The street is narrow and dingy and on both sides are rows of doors and small windows covered in dust, all of them apparently unused. No one else is in sight and with the complete absence of traffic I am left with a feeling that the whole area is deserted. For a moment, I'm convinced that I must have taken a wrong turning and am now lost.

At last, a shop window comes into view. It is the only window of its kind in the street and the contrast between the grime of the buildings and the colour and light of the window is irresistible. I step closer to the window searching among the clothes on display. Then I see it. What I was looking for. What I didn't know was that I had just sleepwalked the length of Carnaby Street and the shop with the wonderful window was *His Clothes*, the first Carnaby Street shop John Stephen had opened in 1958.

As arresting as the shop window had been, it was nothing to what greeted me when I went inside to buy the shirt. The first thing to hit me was the music banging out from loudspeakers situated in the ceiling. This imparted an excitement to the buying and selling happening taking place on the shop floor. The walls, ceiling and windows were decorated with sharp colours that dissolved the sort of spatial organisation found in conventional men's clothing stores. The 'selling floor' was more like a maze than the strictly linear displays that I was used to. It took me some time to realise that the young men who were standing in groups, grooving to the music were the shop assistants. They looked only a few years older than me and were obviously dressed in the clothes hanging on the racks. It was hard to distinguish who were selling and who were buying and this retail confusion spread a democratic feel to what was happening all around me. I managed to buy my shirt never realising that I had just visited a shop that would become a famous tourist haunt in

only a few years. Once more I realised I was in the right place at the right time but only thirty years later.

To understand why I was standing in front of a shop window, in the middle of London, on my own, we need to travel back a few months.

Mum, Dad and I lived in a town about thirty miles north of London. I attended the local, all boys, Grammar School and like many sixteen year olds my bedroom was the centre of my universe. (We grew up much more slowly in those days.) It was where I did my homework, played dreadful music, (Remember it was 1959-1960) and tried to think and feel myself into a future where I could be myself, whatever that might be. I had put some pictures on my bedroom walls but I can't remember what any of them were very clearly. Probably they were pictures of aircraft and sportsmen. One of the principal relationships I had with the outside world was a variation of train spotting. Along with a few friends we would climb on a bus that took us to Heathrow airport where we would write down the numbers of the aircraft we could see from one of the viewing platforms. Nothing that I wore on these outings was the result of my choosing. My bedroom offered sanctuary from a surfeit of family life, and it was only with the arrival of television that we reconvened as a group and sat together in the evening.

This routine of spending most of my waking life squirreled away in my bedroom did not last and at about the age of sixteen my life began to change. A space opened up that was neither part of school, or the family. The emergence of this independent territory meant that my clothes also started to change. For the first time I made decisions about what I would wear and these choices became an important part of this new sense of myself.

Essential for this newly minted freedom were the meetings that took place in a local coffee bar every Saturday morning. Moving out of my bedroom meant that the 'I' had become 'we'. There were about nine of us in the group. We were roughly the same age and all of us attended the Grammar school I mentioned earlier. We always sat at the same table that was located in a corner away from the main area that was constantly crossed by the two waitresses delivering dreadful coffee to the customers. I remember that this physical separation helped us to feel different from the people who drifted past us throughout the morning. There was a vague rule that we should try

to avoid talking about school, or making mention of parents. Unfortunately, our worldly experience was so limited that we rarely strayed from the tried and trusted topics of sport, films, clothes and girls. It was the first time clothes became a topic for group discussion, something to share, rather than something locked inside a solitary daydream.

Our Saturday meetings were a time when we were ‘off-duty’, a time when there was an opportunity to dress in ways different to the dress codes that ruled the rest of our lives. School uniforms and ‘sensible shoes’ just about summed it up. Looking back on those teenage years what strikes me now is the dreadful muddle that our clothes were in. One reason for the chaotic state of our dress was that it was the first time we were making independent decisions about what we wanted to wear. Untutored would be understating the confusion that ruled over our selections. There was an absence of fashion ‘guides’ for young males of our age, certainly nothing that matched the wealth of fashion ‘stuff’ available for girls. Our early attempts at fashion consisted mainly of pilfering fragments of dress from anywhere that appealed. The Teddy Boy look, indicated solely by an Elvis Presley hairstyle, was worn by those who aspired to a life of juvenile delinquency. There was a sort of golfing flamboyance sported by those who had part-time work at the golf course near our school. But, for the most part, these early attempts at fashion consisted of single garments worn with complete indifference towards whatever else we had on. There was little, or no, linking of these clothes by way of style, or a unified aesthetic. What fashion there was, was probably confined to the feelings of satisfaction that came with wearing *that* garment. But it stopped there.

Very occasionally what was really a form of sullen resentment translated into clothes would go on the offensive. One Monday morning a whole class came to school with their trousers hitched up to show off their socks. They were all wearing socks in luminous colours. Green, yellow, and pink. The authorities struck fast and hard. All brightly coloured sock wearers were made to roll their trousers up to the knee and wear them like that for the rest of the day. On Tuesday morning no luminous socks were to be seen.

Some fashion, of a kind, did seep in from the world beyond our group - as will become clear later - but the main influence on what we wore came through copying one another. This ‘copying’ was more the purchase of something that resembled the garment that was admired rather than a direct

copy. Maybe, even then, we had picked up the simple rule of fashion that one should not be found wearing an identical garment to another member of the group. (For some reason, this rule never seemed to apply to Levis when they arrived.) By and large, this rudimentary form of fashion involved the movement of a single item. One example of this ingroup copying involved shoes. I had always worn 'sensible' shoes, chosen and, of course, paid for by my parents. These shoes would have to be suitable for school, where there was a requirement that we wore black, leather, lace-ups. Suddenly, shoes that were a long way from those dictated by school began to appear on the feet of the group. I immediately wanted an equivalent pair. The ones that I eventually chose were the result of nothing more than a glance underneath the coffee bar table to see what everyone else was wearing. I ended up with some muddy green, suede, 'winkle pickers.' (Fifty years later the memory of them still leaves me cringing.) When I first wore them my shoes caused a brief ripple of admiration amongst the group but this attention was short-lived. Remember we did not have the vocabulary with which to engage in discussions about such matters as style, or the relative degrees of fashionableness carried by various items of dress. It was largely a case of 'I want those!'

One Saturday morning something happened that would have a profound effect on how we dressed and how we thought about clothes. We assembled in the coffee bar as usual only to find that 'our' table was occupied. There were about six of these usurpers-male and female. They were older than us, about nineteen and twenty. I think we all intuited that here was a group of people who lived permanently in the independent space that we could occupy for only a few hours every week. In retrospect they were probably students at the local College of Further Education. At the centre of this group was a male figure I couldn't stop looking at. It was obvious he held a great attraction for the young women he was seated with. When he got up to leave his whole outfit became visible. Long hair, beard, jeans, sandals and a distressed looking pullover that reached down to his knees. I think what may have been happening was that these were my first intimations of style even though at this early stage it was not clear to me how I, too, could have a style such as his. It was clear that wearing winkle pickers was just a beginning. Much more work on what I looked like was required before I would be able to reach the attractive disdain of our coffee bar 'usurper'. However dreadful he might look from the vantage point of the present, I suspect that I was having my first encounter not just with style but also with cool. Our fascination with the style of our coffee bar 'rivals' deepened when we began to go to the town jazz club.

For those towns and cities outside London there were three places where a provincial bohemia could flourish. There was the coffee bar, the pub, and the jazz club. (As yet we had not become adept at lying about our age, so the pub was out of bounds.) The latter was a key meeting place where the 'outsider' status of the clubbers could be demonstrated through their style of dancing and their dress. The club was not allowed to serve drink, which meant that we were admitted without having to lie about our age. It would meet once a week, starting at 7.00pm and finishing at about 10.00 pm. In those days anything that took place after dark was irresistible. The music played was called Trad Jazz, a style that was enjoying something of a national boom during the period we went to the club. The attraction of Trad Jazz was that it was considered to be more authentic than mainstream pop. This popularity was a source of much annoyance to the hardcore clubbers who were greatly concerned as to which of the bands that played at the weekly meetings had sold out the most. The clubbers had a style of dancing that allowed for plenty of wild 'moves' and seemed to be a long way from the more regimented patterns governing conventional dance styles. (In this they were greatly deluded. Not far away from the Club working class teenagers were jiving their way out of Britain's post-war austerity.) The male style of dressing we have already described. Female dress was not so codified as the clothes worn by the men. Wide skirts were just as common as pencil skirts while shoes with 'lowish' heels were favoured as more suitable for the kind of dancing that was the mode in the club.

This style of provincial bohemia had a considerable impact, not just on me, but also on the other members of our group. It acted like a recruiting poster and we all wanted to join up. The way we dressed in our off-duty intervals started to change. An isolated pair of suede winkle pickers stood no chance in the face of this collective look. Corduroy arrived, then Levis, finally our hair started to get longer. Of course, we couldn't appropriate the full 'bohemian' style, which would have been forbidden by school and home. Even as my hair grew longer vengeance was at hand. On one occasion a much feared maths teacher grabbed me by the hair and twisted it until the pain was hardly bearable. For the rest of my time at school he would call me The Hedgehog. Having beaten back the revolt of the Luminous Socks they now had to cope with the arrival of the Left Bank.

The Jazz Club had given me a ‘scene’ into which I could place the dress style of the young man I had been so fascinated with that day in the coffee bar. In the club the style could be seen dancing with women, taking part in conversations, and perhaps most importantly of all, dressing in a similar fashion to one another. The question now was ‘If the style was something shared amongst a group, would I be able to join?’ By the time I arrived in London two years later I was dressing in a version of the style of provincial bohemia minus the grungy pullover, the beard and (thank heavens) the sandals.

During this period of sartorial confusion a rather strange incident happened. The rest of this story is concerned with the encounter I had with a particular garment, one that was responsible for landing me in front of the window of *His Clothes* some months later.

Because we lived near London my father had a relatively easy commute to work. Occasionally, he would bring me books and magazines he thought I might enjoy. One evening he gave me a magazine called *About Town*. (Note- this was subsequently shortened to *Town*. Many years later I learned that it was the descendant of a trade magazine dealing with men’s fashion. *About Town* emerged from a 1960 takeover by the Cornmarket Group.) Strictly speaking it was a men’s magazine’ but it looked utterly different to any publication I had seen before. My father continued to bring it for me every month and, because it wasn’t available in our provincial town, this only made its arrival more precious. The *Town* in its name was certainly not the one I was living in. I must have read every edition of *About Town* and *Town* from 1961 to early 1963.

It’s hard to explain why this magazine had such a hold on me, but it did. The fashion photographs and the ads for such ‘things’ as cologne, watches, and in one issue even cigars all seemed to inhabit a similar world. This look was largely the result of the black and white photographs taken by Duffy, Donovan and a host of other new wave photographers. The strongest memory I have of the magazine is of black and white images, not colour. The fashion photographs were barely distinguishable from the images accompanying the essays; essays that long after the magazine had folded would be famous. Things, photojournalism, fashion photographs shared a common manner

of depiction and I suspect it was this that gave *Town* its style and it was this that I found so exciting.

Looking back on the monthly arrival of *Town*, I realize now that this was my second encounter with cool. In almost every aspect *Town* was cool. Between the pages of the magazine was a world, a scene, and a style. Its ideal reader could be someone like James Bond. Not because it was filled with ads for spy equipment but because there was something similar in the way their worlds carried themselves. Like the Jazz Club, the attraction that lay on every page led me to ask how I could join this sophisticated crowd. Unlike the Jazz Club, the world I was attracted to in *Town* remained indistinct, it was a feeling that lay somewhere in the area of having and satisfaction.

Town was a men's magazine but, unlike most publications designed for men, it claimed to be the only one not to rely on pin-ups to keep its circulation healthy. It did have photographs of fashionable female celebrities who were often pictured on the front covers, but they always remained fully clothed. Top-flight photographers took the pictures and, like so many aspects of the magazine, its total look of sophistication made the content and style of the rest of the men's magazine market seem outdated and crude. Uncool perhaps? These front covers had an immediate effect on my wall. Up went a picture of the actress Sarah Miles, who now occupied the centre of my picture gallery.



Sarah Miles
1962

I can't remember the exact edition of *Town* that carried the advert for the shirt but I can still remember the excitement I felt when I first saw it. It was a short-sleeved casual shirt made of a lightweight, aertex fabric. No buttons and worn outside of one's trousers. It had wide dark blue vertical stripes against a white background. I had seen nothing like it and in retrospect it was probably another aspect of my encounter with cool. But in this case it was the look of the magazine as a whole that provided the shirt with its attractive 'scene' rather than a 'real' crowd such as the one that assembled in the Jazz Club.

The image of the shirt refused to fade and so I decided to do something about it. The advert in which it had appeared was a photograph of a shop window with an address running along the bottom. I borrowed some money from my mother and caught the train to London. I had nothing to go on but the ad with the address and a very vague idea of where it might be. I got a tube to Oxford Circus and turned into the street that ran down by the side of the London Palladium.

Two hours later I was on the train going home with the shirt on my knee.