

Portobello — the road of rock and reggae

Bob Marley lived there. Hendrix died near by. Pink Floyd played in the church hall. **Will Hodgkinson** takes a tour with the author of a new history of W11

Notting Hill, 2014: a moneyed mecca of pillar-porched townhouses, expensive bistros and, with David Cameron, George Osborne and Michael Gove all living here or nearby, a stucco-fronted seat for the Tory inner circle. For the past 25 years — and even more so since the release of Richard Curtis's *Notting Hill* in 1999 — this area of west London, bounded by Notting Hill Gate to the south and Harrow Road to the north, has been a byword for comfortable bohemianism, of stylish living for the establishment. But it wasn't always that way.

Few of the tourists traipsing the length of Portobello Road in search of *Notting Hill* landmarks, like the blue door of the flat that Hugh Grant's William lived in (it's gone), the Travel Bookshop that William owned (it's closed down) and the market he strolled through (it's still there) could know that this was once a poverty-stricken enclave where the story of British underground music was played out. Marc Bolan, Bob Marley and the Clash lived here and Jimi Hendrix died here at the Samarkand Hotel on Lansdowne Crescent.

I've come to Talkhouse Coffee at 275 Portobello Road, to meet Julian Mash, whose book *Portobello Road: Lives of a Neighbourhood* documents the street's transformation from fertile danger zone to banker's paradise. "This used to be a place called the

Mountain Grill," says Mash as a man with a large beard concentrates on making £3 cups of coffee as though he is engaging in nuclear fission. "In the Seventies it was a greasy spoon where you would find a homeless guy nursing a cup of tea for two hours in one corner and a bunch of hippies in the other. It's symbolic of how things have changed."

Attracted by Portobello Road's countercultural history, Mash moved here in the early 2000s to play in an indie band, but on discovering music offered wages roughly in line with that of Jobseeker's Allowance, he got a job at the Travel Bookshop on Blenheim Crescent. After spending years repeating the words "No, it was filmed in a studio but this was the inspiration" to tourists on a daily basis, he decided to write the story of the street. Now he's taking me on a tour.

Underneath the Westway flyover, where the space-rock band Hawkwind once played free gigs (*Hall of the Mountain Grill*, their album of 1974, paid homage to their favourite caff), we pass a stall selling Victorian grenadier-style military jackets. "They became popular after [indie-rock band] the Libertines wore them in the late Nineties, but the first place to stock them was I Was Lord Kitchener's Valet at 293 Portobello Road," Mash says. "Mick Jagger wore one on *Ready Steady Go!* in 1966 and the following day they had queues round the block."

Jagger's connection to the area stretches beyond fashion. Just off Portobello Road is 25 Powis Square,



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where in the summer of 1968 the directors Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell shot *Performance*, starring Jagger as a reclusive rock star who gets mixed up with James Fox's gangster-in-hiding. Roeg, Cammell and Jagger were part of a fast Chelsea set and chose Notting Hill as the location

because it was where you went to slum it, to take drugs and to live an even wilder life than the one offered in the shadow of Sloane Square.

Now filled with flats and houses worth millions, Powis Square once epitomised both the deprivation of Notting Hill and its radical spirit. In the late Sixties its central garden was closed off by the council and filled with rubbish, but after two children playing in the road were run over and killed, the locals got militant. "They broke down the doors of the square and turned it into a playground, which it remains today," says Mash. "Powis Square was a place of cheap rents and



squatting, so you had a mix of the Caribbean community, who couldn't find homes to rent anywhere else, alongside longhairs and druggies."

From this disparate group came one of Notting Hill's strangest experiments. The London Free School was an idealistic action group set up to help the underprivileged, offering everything from advice on dealing with landlords to after-school clubs. It rarely amounted to more than a group of hippies sitting in a room and getting stoned, but its president, Rhaune Laslett, helped set up the Notting Hill Carnival in 1966, originally as a way of dissipating racial tensions. In the same year, Peter Jenner and Andrew King booked Pink Floyd, the R&B covers band they managed, for a series of benefits for the Free School at All Saints Church Hall in Powis Gardens. "Peter Jenner and Andrew King were sons of vicars, so they knew that church halls were cheap places to book," says Mash as we stand before the old people's home that was once

All Saints Church Hall. "Pink Floyd were the coolest band around and they were less than happy at playing a church hall, but those concerts transformed them. The light shows helped launch them as a psychedelic rock act and gave birth to 'the happening' [hippy-era performance]."

A key figure, albeit unknowingly, in shaping Notting Hill's musical and cultural landscape was Peter Rachman, the slum landlord who became so notorious that "Rachmanism" has become a synonym for tenant exploitation.

Rachman owned huge swathes of Notting Hill and until his death in 1962 he rented to the Afro-Caribbean immigrants that other landlords refused, exploiting their lack of rights mercilessly. But as Mash points out, "A lot of the Afro-Caribbean

Pink Floyd and, top, the Notting Hill Carnival. Below: Portobello historian Julian Mash. Left, from top: Mick Jagger filming *Performance* in John Lennon's Rolls-Royce and Damon Albarn and Blur with a Westway-themed backdrop

You had a mix of Caribbean people, longhairs and druggies

community liked Rachman because he would rent to them."

Everywhere we go the same story is underlined: that the music of Notting Hill involved the cross-pollination of Afro-Caribbean culture with white counterculture. On Ladbroke Grove Mash points out basements where the pioneering Caribbean DJs Count Suckle and Duke Vin held illegal shebeens from the late 1950s through to the 1970s. These would go on to have a huge influence on punk-era bands like the Clash. On All Saints Road is the site of the Mangrove restaurant, a meeting place for Trinidadian locals visited by everyone from Christine Keeler to Jimi Hendrix. We pass Sarm Studios on Basing Street, once owned by Chris Blackwell of Island Records, where the Rolling Stones and Marley recorded in the



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