

“Roll Over, Beethoven”

Chapter 6: Paris

For me Paris in April 1960 is where it all began, the “Sixties” I mean, although nobody then had any idea of what was going to happen in the decade to come. But historic, exotic Paris was certainly where you wanted to be that spring, not cold, spartan Stonyhurst or boring, genteel Sevenoaks or dull, dowdy London – several years away from starting to swing. The horse-chestnut trees flowered white and pink on the boulevards; and on the left bank, pavement cafés overflowed with long-haired girls dressed in black, scorning make-up except kohl eyeliner à la Juliette Greco, and bearded young men (beat poets? apprentice existentialist philosophers?) scribbled in *cahiers*, while the glamorous-looking African students (or were they visiting American jazz men or maybe GIs on furlough?) wore dark glasses even on cloudy days: cool dudes, spades in shades.

You certainly got the idea that bohemian left-bank Paris accepted black and brown people whereas the city as a whole certainly didn't. North Africans were a particular target. I remember a white girl, who said she was a Communist, talking about *sales arabes* – but then her father was a *flic* and there was a war on with a lot of brutality on both sides.

Brightly painted tarts walked up and down the rue St Denis and cute American girls in jeans and tee-shirts sold the *New York Herald Tribune** on the Champs Elysées trying to look like Jean Seberg in Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle*, which was the movie of the moment. There was jazz and cabaret singing in cellar clubs, much more of it than in London, and old American B-movies in poky cinemas where, way ahead of Britain, smoking was banned. Everywhere else (except in the Métro) the smell of Gauloises and Gitanes blended with freshly baked bread and espresso coffee, garlic, traffic fumes and more than a whiff of piss from the street pissoirs, which hadn't yet been removed in the name of hygiene, conformity and tourism.

*It became the *International Herald Tribune* in 1967.

However, on both sides of the channel 1960 was not a vintage year for pop music. As Nik Cohn noted in his classic account of rock 'n' roll*, the thrill had gone – “1960 was probably the worst year that pop had been through”. It was “the gap between two separate generations, the changeover”. But the film *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, shown in Paris as *Jazz à Newport*, included footage of the inimitable rock 'n' roller Chuck Berry as well as jazz greats like Thelonius Monk, Gerry Mulligan and Louis Armstrong. And *Orpheu Negro* by Marcel Camus featured a haunting bossa nova soundtrack which was a compensation.

**Awopbopalooobop Alopbamboom*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969

Johnny Hallyday released his first imitation-Elvis EP in 1960, featuring “J'suis mordu” (“I got stung”), but that was nothing more than a comical, almost parody, version – intended as *hommage* to Elvis if you like but nowhere near the real thing. French may be great for poetry, ballads, cabaret singing, even jazz, but the language of rock 'n' roll it ain't. One of the great French eccentricities is the veneration of Johnny H, unto and even after death.

But for *branché* British and Americans, the Paris of those days was a magnet. As Irma Kurtz, later the London *Cosmopolitan* agony aunt, put it in a memoir*, “I did not simply want to live in Paris when I started out from America, I wanted to be Parisian. In my mind to be Parisian meant coming as close as anyone could to perfection of intellect and art and experience and style and sex.”

**Dear London*, Fourth Estate, 1997

Another temporary Parisian was Tara Browne, an astonishingly precocious 15-year-old Irish boy who was an heir to the Guinness fortune and an Eddie Cochran fan and died a few years later in a Chelsea car crash. He was immortalised soon after death by the Beatles in the song “I read the news today, oh boy”, and later by his biographer Paul Howard, who used the same line for the title of his book, and not least by the poet Hugo Williams* who was part of his circle in Paris. I met Tara only once but his purple shirts, menthol cigarettes and total self-possession were unforgettable. Other posh young English names in Paris at that time besides Hugo himself included Clare Lane (daughter of Sir Allen of Penguin, which was about to publish the scandalous *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and sell millions of copies), who walked out with me once or twice, and pioneer hippy Sir Mark Palmer, who I learnt was a baronet when I sneaked a look at his passport. Most foreign students were enrolled on language courses, such as mine at the Institut Britannique and the one at the Alliance Française, but there were also finishing schools like Madame Anita’s for rich upwardly mobile English girls who were in Paris for poise and polish and were never allowed out without their white gloves.

**A Day in the Life*, Lennon-McCartney, 1967; *I read the News Today, Oh Boy*, Paul Howard, Picador, 2016; “Tara Browne (1945-66)”, Hugo Williams, *London Review of Books*, 8 November 2018

The menace in the Paris air was something of an extra thrill. The Algerian war of independence was still very much on, though the FLN had declared a ceasefire in their guerrilla campaign against the French police and only the occasional bomb went off in a café. But there were police everywhere and soldiers guarded public buildings, demanding your *papiers* at gunpoint if you walked past. In the following year the FLN went back to bombing, killing 11 policemen and injuring 17 between August and October 1961. After the Paris chief of police, Maurice Papon, imposed a curfew on all French Algerians, a peaceful demonstration in defiance of it was met by brutal police repression that has been called a massacre. For several weeks afterwards unidentified bodies were discovered along the banks of the Seine. The French government admitted in 1998 that 40 people had been killed; other estimates have ranged up to 200. (Many years later it emerged that Papon had collaborated with the German occupation in the 1940s. As the civil servant in charge of policing in Bordeaux he had sent more than 1600 Jews to Drancy in Paris from where they were deported to the death camps. In 1998 he was found guilty of crimes against humanity.)

In February 1962 another peaceful but banned demonstration – this time by the Communist CGT union against the right-wing “Algérie Française” terrorists of the OAS – was driven back by the police towards the Charonne Métro station, which had been closed for the day. As the police charge continued there was no escape for the people at the back; nine of them were crushed to death. At their funeral the hundreds of thousands of mourners also remembered the earlier killings.

But in the spring of 1960 attention in Paris, as elsewhere, was focussed on the aftermath of another police atrocity – in South Africa. At the township of Sharpeville 69 people had been killed and at least 180 injured on 21 March when the police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against the notorious pass laws which regulated the movement of Africans in urban areas. A state of emergency was introduced on 30 March; the ANC and PAC organisations were declared illegal on 8 April; and 18,000 strikers were arrested and detained. There were worldwide demonstrations against this repression.

When I went along to join a protest outside the South African embassy on the Quai d'Orsay, I saw the demonstrators corralled by police on the other side of the road. So I crossed to the pavement next to the embassy and walked towards it. At once I was stopped by a plainclothes policeman. "Move away," he said. I stood still. The policeman said: "In your country, when a policeman tells you to move, you move, n'est-ce pas?" And I said: "In my country the police don't behave like this" – a naïve remark I later used to quote to myself, and anybody else who would listen, on Committee of 100 (and other) demos where the British police were being a bit over-robust.

For me and my lucky companions everyday life consisted of French language classes in the morning at the Institut Britannique (which was near the Sorbonne and loosely attached to it), followed by lunch in a cheap restaurant and afternoons whiled away sitting in cafés or wandering along the Seine or through the Luxembourg gardens. For reading, besides Camus and Sartre you had Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan (of the four she was the easiest read, though Camus was the French writer I most admired). Fortunately, there wasn't any homework for the course, though there was an exam and a certificate at the end.

In the evening, another meal out, then the cinema or a jazz club or just hours in a café smoking Gauloises, talking, drinking the occasional drink rather than getting drunk English-style. There wasn't much public drunkenness on show in Paris, except by the *clochards*, homeless tramps who slept in the streets or under the bridges. But there was a big poster campaign in the Métro against excessive drinking: a pathetic-looking small boy was shown appealing to his father: "Papa, pense à moi! Ne bois pas!" And then the punchline: "Pas plus qu'un litre par jour." Not more than a litre of wine a day – rather more realistic than current "health guidelines", both French and British, and I've tried to follow this advice for the past 60-odd years. More or less.

If you wanted to extend the evening, you could go on to Les Halles, the fruit and vegetable market in the middle of Paris (now removed to the outskirts) where if you were still hungry or keen to do the right thing, as quoted in the guidebooks, you ordered *soupe à l'onion*. And on special occasions – somebody's birthday, say – it was a stiff walk uphill to Montmartre to see the dawn come up from the steps of the Sacré-Coeur, a huge white basilica with panoramic views over Paris.

How could 1960s students afford this hedonistic, apparently lavish, lifestyle, particularly eating out every day? Well, fortunately we weren't in England. Here from memory are a few basic facts. A (subsidised, obviously) student meal ticket cost, and changed hands for, one franc (there were 13 of those to the British pound); this bought three edible though not particularly gastronomic courses in a student restaurant; then at the Auberge (long gone) in the rue de l'Ecole de Médecine there was a set meal for 1fr.80 which consisted of two frankfurter sausages with macaroni, two pieces of bread and a plain yogurt; at the nearby Acropole (then as now Greek-owned and still worth a visit) I once had a three-course à la

carte meal for 3fr.60 (*filet de hareng, pommes de terre à l'huile; omelette nature; ananas au kirsch*). Then there were several self-service restaurants where meals including chicken, lobster (yes, lobster) and wine, were available at less than 10 francs.

But what impressed me most I think was the simple first course that often started a cheap restaurant meal. It might be *radis au beurre* or *oeuf dur mayonnaise* or *salade de tomates*. What was obvious was that people expected the radishes, eggs and tomatoes to actually taste of something; the dressing or garnish was an embellishment not a cover-up.

For me the only difficulty was that I'd been billeted on a family who lived north of Paris with a month's rent paid in advance. If I missed the last train to the suburbs from the Gare du Nord, there was no way back. Once, I stayed up in Paris for two successive nights, then took an early morning train to where I was staying. I slept for 24 hours (with meal breaks) and left again for Paris after the next day's breakfast. My hosts, M and Mme Henri Fesquet (he was religious correspondent for *Le Monde*), were very understanding and didn't complain when I said I'd leave at the end of the month.

In those days Paris students often lived in hotels, paying not very much for the cheapest rooms, always at the top of the building and usually equipped with washbasin and bidet but no shower (use of the hotel bathroom was extra). The room I found cost 8 new francs (or 12 old shillings in British money – 60p now) a night. It was in the Hôtel des Nations in the Rue des Ecoles, a few minutes from the Sorbonne and the Institut Britannique.

The Institut gave me my first experience of coeducation since pre-prep school. I found it a great improvement on life in a single-sex boarding school – it was a relief to spend time with girls as equals and friends without the stress of having to pursue them and chat them up. I spent more time with Teresa, Gillian and Mary than anybody else except Ian, who hitched down to the south of France with me later that summer. The girls were always complaining they were harassed in the street in a way they weren't used to England, so they liked having able-bodied escorts.

A year later in England Teresa's parents gave a big weekend party to which we were all invited. It was eventful, to say the least, since first of all I fell over carrying a girl in a white dress into a field for a snog, catching my face on some barbed wire and so changing the colour of her dress from pure white to patches of pink (I still have the scar above my upper lip). Then next day another ex-Parisian, Jamie, driving his mother's Jaguar, took a left-hand bend a bit too quickly and turned the car over one and a quarter times. Fortunately, the roof didn't cave in and the four of us came out unhurt through the shattered windscreen.

Nowadays, when teenagers are said to hop into bed with each other as a way of saying hello (having swiped right – or is it left?), it's probably difficult to imagine that in 1960 you could easily be 18, English and still a virgin. In Paris I had several girlfriends and some quite passionate evenings in clubs and cafés or down by the river – but not what you'd call sex. One reason for the delay was that at the beginning of my stay in Paris I was still a keen and observant Catholic. I kept on going to mass on Sundays and to confession, and I kept on telling people I was a Catholic until suddenly I found I wasn't one any more. God had gone. But his absence took some getting used to.

When the summer came, there was only one place to go – as in American expat novels and *nouvelle vague* films: south from Paris on the Route Nationale 7 to the Mediterranean, to

Marseille, Cannes, St Tropez, Nice – and only one way of getting there unless you owned a car or could easily afford the train fare. Hitch-hiking was the thing. Around this time Eric soon-to-be-an-Animal Burdon (as he recounts in his memoir*) found out that his number one hero, Ray Charles, was due to play the Antibes jazz festival in the south of France. From Newcastle Eric hitched down to Dover, then south from the Channel to the Mediterranean. But he arrived just too late to catch Ray's final performance, so he hitched back to Paris and finally caught up with him in a club. "I'll never forget the night I saw Ray Charles for the first time," he wrote. "The room went crazy...The whole room joined in the chant when Ray kicked into *What'd I Say*." Years later, when I had a feature to write on Ray Charles for *Radio Times*, I couldn't get to meet him but I managed to get a quote out of Eric (who was plugging his memoir at the time): "I heard him again two months ago," he said. "He was fantastic. I was as excited then as I was that first time."

**I used to be an Animal but I'm all right now*, Faber & Faber, 1986.

Hitching opened the door to anybody with imagination, wit, curiosity, who wanted to travel, whatever class they came from or aspired to join. If you were prepared to put up with some discomfort and accept the luck of the draw you could reasonably predict your arrival at the other end of France, Spain, Italy – even Greece – a few days later. It was democratic also: there was no firm convention about who paid for whom when you stopped for a meal or a drink. An affluent driver would automatically pay for the drinks; a truck driver might have his meal paid for.

The second world war had encouraged the development of hitching in Britain – in those days "we were all in it together" (except for the pacifists, the fascists and the spivs) and there wasn't much petrol. If you hitched wearing uniform so much the better for you. After the war came national service (uniform again) and after that, modest-looking tidy students with college scarves.

Of course some hitch-hikers got lifts more quickly than others. A girl by herself was unlikely to stay long at the roadside – but that was dangerous obviously, then as now. Two girls on the other hand made a good combination and they could always turn down a lift if it looked dodgy. And once on the ferry from Brindisi in Italy to Greece I met a threesome: three girls, including a stunning blonde, who had whizzed down the Italian peninsula together, taking lifts from single drivers – nobody else – confident they could handle anybody and anything.

But apart from single male hitchers the most common formula was a boy and a girl travelling together; this worked perfectly well – far better than two boys together. Even that could work up to a point on major routes as Ian and I found in early August 1960 when we set off from Paris one evening in search of Mediterranean sun. Alas, we got the time and the starting point wrong, had no lifts, walked all night and finally came upon a truck parked in a layby just as the world was starting to wake up.

The driver agreed to take us – and as things turned out I don't think he regretted it. When we stopped for breakfast in a *routiers* restaurant we had fried eggs and paid for his steak. But what came later was rather more important from his perspective. We had the perfect view, high up in the driver's cabin, when as we came down the hill into a village an elderly couple on a scooter suddenly appeared in the middle of the road from behind a parked car. Our driver swerved away violently, swinging the truck hard left – right across the road where it

concertina'd another parked car. On the way he'd hit the scooter. It was a glancing blow – but both driver and passenger died instantly.

When the police arrived Ian and I were interviewed and were able to say clearly what had happened – that the truck driver was paying full attention, wasn't speeding and had done his best to avoid hitting the scooter. We walked on after that in sober mood obviously, found other lifts and in due course reached Marseille.

I spent the first day lying in the sun for about six hours and the next 24 lying in a cheap hotel room recovering from sunburn, sunstroke or whatever. Not something to repeat. We carried on along the coast, sleeping out just below the citadel in St Tropez, in deck chairs underneath the concert pavilion in Cannes (though the water sprinklers came on at about 5am which was a very rude awakening) and in the public park in Nice. And there we met serious trouble. By this time there were four of us and two, I think, had their wallets taken one night while they were asleep. Mine was at the bottom of my sleeping bag and, fortunately for me, it stayed there. We responded in two ways. First we sent telegrams to our parents asking for money and second we bought flick-knives – legal then in France though not in Britain. We never used them – fortunately we were never attacked again. But some of the romance of the Côte d'Azur had gone.

One or two food memories stand out, though. To us then *salade niçoise* – that feast of tinned tuna, anchovies, black olives, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes, green beans, with ideally not too much lettuce – was a discovery: it hadn't yet become a cliché of Mediterranean holidays and London bistro suppers. And I'd never eaten pizza before I went to Nice but in this ex-Italian city (French only since 1860) slices of *pizza niçoise* were on sale everywhere, in boulangeries, cafés and market stalls, as simple street food – just a layer of tomato purée on bread dough with black olives and anchovy fillets. That is still pizza as far as I'm concerned. Add a beer or a glass of rosé and you have the perfect snack – you can keep your mushrooms, chorizo and pineapple.

On the way back to Paris I had one lift that was memorable as a sign of changing times. It was with an English family from the east end of London in a Dormobile van which looked pretty full when they stopped – but the children in the back squeezed up to make room for me. They were on their way home after a week in a campsite on the Mediterranean and said they'd had a good time. But to save money, and because they were a bit suspicious about French food, they'd brought their own. Supplies were running low, they explained, so when we stopped for lunch it was tinned sardines on Jacob's cream crackers with cups of tea brewed on a camping gas stove.

Before the summer vacation of 1962 I'd been doubly lucky. First, the Oxford Union standing committee had been invited to nominate two students to join a Nato youth summer school on an island near Toulon in the south of France – and since we weren't explicitly told that they had to be Nato supporters it was agreed that I was eligible. Second, I'd met an enterprising girl called Fanny who was organising a summer villa booking for a dozen or so people on the Costa Brava in Spain. Fortunately the dates fitted.

There was no competition for places on the Nato jaunt so another committee member and I got to go. It was quite a balanced selection since my colleague David Lanch was moderate right-wing Labour and generally pro-Nato, whereas I obviously wasn't. Our train fares were paid-for and the money came upfront – no need to pretend you were going to buy a ticket or

that you'd actually paid for one. So I hitched down to Le Lavandou on the Mediterranean coast for the ferry to Port-Cros. Port-Cros is one of a group of islands, the Iles d'Hyères, which include a much more famous neighbour, the Ile du Levant, where Europe's first village dedicated to nudism was founded by two doctors in 1931. Le Levant was just a kilometre away from Port-Cros and clearly visible from the beach.

The summer school sessions were morning and evening – and not too intense – with our afternoons free. It turned out that most of the participants were reasonably interested in politics but not particularly partisan. The other two Brits were even less Nato-orientated than David and me: their Cambridge tutor had been approached by somebody from Nato and had simply consulted and then recommended a couple of his students*. There was a delightful American girl called Marcia who walked out with me and talked about her fiancé back home rather than her country's global strategy.

*This informal method of recruitment is of course what gave the world the “Cambridge spies”, notably Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross.

At cabaret time I managed to perform a topical song I'd written six months before while I was in Oxford prison – in the relaxed semi-holiday atmosphere it seemed to go down quite well:

*Sing a song of Nato
A pocket full of bombs
A thousand million people
A thousand million tombs.*

*And when the war is over
And most of us are dead
At least we'll know that we've escaped
From all becoming red.*

*Salazar is counting
The Africans he's killed
In the name of freedom
As his allies willed.*

*And now the hungry peoples
Whose brothers we have slain
At Suez, in Cyprus
Will die in poisoned rain.*

*So sing for Yankee bases
And German troops in Wales
Fight for French Algeria
And Oxford City jail.*

*Bring out your rockets
Peace is a sin
For we must blow the world to bits
To save West Berlin.*

That was one highlight of the summer school, for me anyway. Another was an unofficial Oxbridge expedition to the Ile du Levant. It turned out that the Cambridge lads, while not being particularly political, had one necessary accomplishment: they were oarsmen. So when we decided to visit the nudist island we surreptitiously started looking for unattended rowing boats. We managed to find one with oars but then discovered as we set off that it also had a leak. Still, that gave me something to do and as the other two rowed, I baled.

When we tied up at the jetty on Le Levant we noticed that in the port nobody was completely naked. Most people wore ordinary beach clothes whereas the keen nudists were wearing a *minimum*, a tiny triangle of fabric instead of shorts, with nothing above the waist. But on the beach everybody was naked and here it was certainly easier psychologically to take your clothes off than it was to leave them on. I managed to report this observation in my final exams in answer to a question on the psychology of clothes though it's hardly surprising or original. I can't say that the visit made me a fan of the nudist way of life – I suppose I've been conditioned to see it as exhibitionist – but I did enjoy swimming in warm water with no clothes on. That is a sensual pleasure without any doubt (just one reservation: keep a good lookout for jellyfish and spider crabs).

The physical location of the summer school was its greatest plus – the vegetation was/is superb – and in the following year, 1963, the island of Port-Cros became the centre of one of France's national parks, so off limits for summer schools. As far as I know the youth event was never repeated and in 1966 France under de Gaulle withdrew from full membership of Nato.

From Le Lavandou I hitched west along the French coast towards Perpignan then down to Barcelona, passing the turning to the Catalan village of San* Feliu de Guizols on the way. I was early so I had a day or so to walk up and down Las Ramblas and round the port area. By this time I'd read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and I pictured the city as he described it – under working-class control with revolutionary songs and flags, particularly the red-and-black ones of the anarchists, and no tipping. Now in 1962 I was amazed at how cheap some of the restaurant meals were: these weren't tourist prices – but then in Barcelona in those days there didn't seem to be many tourists. Imagine that: in Barcelona, possibly the nearest thing now, in terms of the pestilence of tourism, to Venice. Once when I'd left the city centre and was wandering down a sidestreet a truck driver, seeing I was a foreigner, stopped and started talking to me in French.

*The (Castilian) name of the town then; it's now in Catalan called "Sant Feliu".

That became a noticeable pattern: in Catalonia locals who'd been abroad or learnt French at school or spoke it anyway were delighted if you spoke French (English hadn't yet become the foreigners' lingua franca in Spain) because, being Catalans and opposed to the regime, they didn't want to speak Castilian Spanish, the language of Franco. Reasonably enough they didn't expect outsiders to speak Catalan and they wanted to communicate, so French was the answer. By contrast, on the Atlantic side of Spain the Basques tended to be more reserved and enclosed, almost saying to foreigners: we've had to learn Spanish, which is difficult and annoying enough for us – don't expect us to speak English or French just to humour you.

After a few friendly exchanges the truck driver invited me to lunch at his family home with his wife and children. We didn't talk politics explicitly – in a police state as a rule you don't,

to strangers anyway – but I learnt that he definitely preferred the freedom of French life to the harsh reality of Franco's Spain, which didn't suit anybody except for tourists and the rich. The most obvious and offensive feature of Spain at this time was the swaggering goons of the *Guardia Civil* – they were everywhere, always in twos with their guns and distinctive tricorne headgear.

In San Feliu our rented house was well-placed near the market and the beach and included a sunbathers' roof. But ice for the icebox had to be collected every day and in the kitchen there were just two not very powerful gas rings – no grill and no oven. This was for the 10 people the owners specified and of course we were never going to keep to that. Strays kept turning up and our numbers varied between 12 and 15 or so with the visitors in sleeping bags in the living room and on the sun roof.

From the beginning the casual set-up looked like a recipe for chaos and disappointment food-and-drink wise. So with Fanny's agreement I appointed myself catering manager, in charge of the shopping and cooking, taking 400 pesetas (about £2.50) from everybody every week. The other men washed up and helped in the kitchen; the women did the housework. And I practised running a household.

Coming from England to Francoist Spain the most remarkable thing was the low price of wine, spirits and tobacco. I went to one of the local bodegas (wine shops) and tasted the wines which were of two types: heavy dark reds with a touch of sweetness; thin light-coloured rosés that were far too sharp. The obvious solution was to mix them for a drinkable table wine, and after an exhausting tasting I managed to find a blend that I thought was the right formula. I paid the deposit on a huge cask and two of us lugged it back to the house.

The cheap fizz meanwhile was incredibly cheap: the price of a single bottle of sparkling wine worked out at half-a-crown in old money so you could get eight bottles for £1. The cheapest brandy, in an unlabelled litre bottle, was the equivalent of 4 shillings (so five bottles for £1) and a packet of the cheapest cigarettes 3 pesetas – less than sixpence. Even imported booze like Italian vermouth was cheaper than it was in Italy (I once complained that we, or rather the girls, were spending rather a lot on Coca-Cola – why didn't they drink Martini on the rocks instead?).

As well as the main attraction – the beach, obviously – there were outings. Once some of us went to a bullfight which was dramatic and exciting but not much fun for the horses in the early stages: they had to stand there being buffeted and gored by the bull while their riders tried to weaken him by piercing him with their lances. I was pleased I went but have never felt the urge to go again: football, rugby and cricket are gladiatorial enough, never mind boxing.

Once we went out to dinner in one of the hotels that regularly hoovered up all the lobsters the local fishermen caught, so you couldn't buy them in the market, and ordered paella royale, which included half a small lobster, a quarter of a chicken and all the shellfish you could think of. Being very greedy I was the only one of the four of us to finish (but then I'd deliberately eaten nothing at lunch). And several times we went out to clubs which the French tended to dominate with the martial art of line dancing, notably the Madison. To this day the Madison, like the clowning of the late Johnny Hallyday, retains its allure for the French. At *thés dansants* in the Dordogne the local wrinklies can still be seen forming up in line to take a pace forward and then swivel left before making a complete turnaround, rather as Brits of a certain age favour a kind of slow-motion jive to anything with a beat.

Elsewhere that summer (1962) the trendy dance on both sides of the Atlantic was the twist. As Chubby Checker who popularised it with *The Twist* and *Let's Twist Again* explained, it's "like putting out a cigarette with both feet and coming out of a shower and wiping your bottom with a towel to the beat". The standout singles were Sam Cooke's *Twistin' the Night Away* and *Twist and Shout* by the Isley Brothers; their sound has lasted better than the novelty dance itself: you don't see much twisting nowadays.

In the autumn of 1962 the Beatles released their first single, *Love Me Do*. At Christ Church Thom Keyes, who was from Liverpool and said he knew the boys, waved the record about, played it and then tried to persuade Mark Lennox-Boyd (the younger brother of Christopher) to book the Beatles for the following summer's Commemoration Ball; £40 was the sum Thom quoted. Alas Mark was not convinced and said no. The Christ Church committee ended up booking the Searchers (Liverpool's second or third group) and paying them £400. The Magdalen Commem Ball committee showed better judgment later in 1963 when they booked the Rolling Stones to appear in the summer of 1964 at a fee of £100; the Stones had to interrupt their American tour and fly back to do the gig – so not much of an earner for them but excellent PR.

As well as driving fast cars – a black Triumph TR4 was one of his – Thom was something of an impresario. He organised chemmy (baccarat chemin-de-fer) parties for the bloodies of Christ Church while the rest of us made do with poker, listening, night after night, to *Kind of Blue*, the Miles Davis LP that revolutionised jazz and still seems as exciting now as it did in 1959 when it was made. After all-night parties and poker sessions there'd be breakfast at George's café in the covered market.

The Beatles came to Oxford in February 1963 and played the Carfax Assembly Rooms (now the HSBC bank); tickets were six shillings and the place was packed, though more by local youth than university students. Dancing was crowded and difficult but some of us managed it. This date came five days after the recording session for the Beatles' first LP, *Please Please me*, which was released in the following month. A few weeks later the Searchers came to Oxford and played the town hall. By now I was beginning to wake up to what was happening: I interviewed the drummer and leader Chris Curtis for *Isis* and of course asked him: why Liverpool? Curtis explained that as an Atlantic seaport it had more exposure to American records, particularly rhythm 'n' blues, that's to say black pop music. The Liverpool scene had been bubbling in clubs like the Cavern since 1956 and was ready to explode.

But what nobody could satisfactorily explain was why British pop music was overwhelmed so suddenly and completely in 1963. The Beatles were followed by the rest of the Liverpool sound-makers (Gerry and the Pacemakers, the Searchers, Cilla Black...) and then by other British r 'n' b bands like the Stones, the Animals and the Kinks. In July the Beatles included Chuck Berry's 1956 hit "Roll Over, Beethoven...and tell Tchaikovsky the News" on their second LP, *With the Beatles*. This was the symbolic moment when British youth culture asserted its dominance over "high" culture – when "the Sixties" started to become what our parents, conservatives (with a small c) and the establishment in general were frightened of.

And the Americans who'd started it all came over and toured again. With the Stones on their first British tour in the autumn of 1963 were the Everly Brothers, Bo Diddley – and the flamboyant, outrageous Little Richard. I'd bought his LP, *Here's Little Richard*, when I was 15 and remained a fan up until his death in May 2020. Granada TV had the wit to record a

special Little Richard concert in November which was shown in January 1964 – *It's Little Richard* with Sounds Incorporated and the Shirelles, available on Youtube and timeless.

Working for the *Daily Mail* in Manchester in 1964-5 I often got the pop gigs (this wasn't really a compliment – serious pop coverage was based in London), so on a Wednesday I might be sent down to the disused church now fitted out as a TV studio for *Top of the Pops* rehearsals in case something newsworthy happened or the newsdesk decided it wanted quotes from somebody. It hardly ever did. Fortunately the DJs didn't turn up until transmission day which was Thursday so I never had to be in the same room as the loathsome Jimmy Savile. People like the British bluesman Georgie Fame and the barefoot Sandie Shaw were more my cup of tea. I fancied Sandie and asked her out for a drink but she stood me up.

In April 1965 I managed to get hold of the *Mail's* single complimentary press ticket for Bob Dylan's packed concert in the Free Trade Hall where he sang solo and played acoustic guitar and harmonica. The audience, most of whom looked like sober students who'd come out for the evening in Manchester, where it nearly always rains, sensibly equipped with raincoats – serious young people certainly, not mods or rockers or Sixties trendies – offered polite applause after each intro, then retreated into rapt and respectful silence. A uniformed attendant I spoke to afterwards was visibly impressed. "I've never heard an audience so quiet," he said, "not even for the Hallé." Indeed it was a bit like being in church, a quiet, rural English one with plainsong.

I was always ambivalent about Dylan. He wrote some good – intriguing, exciting – stuff but his voice had an awful nasal twang. As my friend Charlie Gillett noted,* even in the early days Dylan sang in "a harsh, strident, tuneless voice, insisting that the words be listened to but rarely offering easy pleasure in the experience". As his career developed and he parted from his lover and soulmate Joan Baez, who really could sing, and abandoned radical politics, reverted to rock 'n' roll and found God, he became increasingly enigmatic – or difficult to like, you might say. But the one thing I always did admire about Dylan was his offhand, monosyllabic style at press conferences when reporters asked him their routine, idiotic and ignorant questions.

**The Sound of the City*, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, New York, 1970

That night Dylan began as usual on his 1965 tour with "The Times They Are a-Changin'" and ended with "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue". But his reign as the world's favourite folk singer wasn't all over just then. The symbolic end for his hardcore British fans came just a year later in the same venue when his second set inspired the shout of "Judas" from one of the folkies in the audience because they didn't approve of the loud, amplified backing band he'd recently adopted.

Was this fair? You may not know, unless you're familiar with Dylan's early life, that before he discovered Woody Guthrie and became a folk singer he was a normal teenager and a rock 'n' roll fan. At high school he was in bands that performed covers of Little Richard and Elvis Presley and in 1959 his yearbook reported: "Robert Zimmerman to join 'Little Richard'." So it was never really fair to throw the insult "Judas" at him since you could say he was merely passing through the folk scene, en route from rock 'n' roll to – what to call it? – mature thinking-man's "rock".

The reverence for Dylan the folk hero survived his various musical, political and lifestyle phases until he was, to general bemusement, awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2016 – an event that some people, particularly those who'd read his mediocre memoir *Chronicles*, compared to the award of the Nobel peace prize to Henry Kissinger in 1973, which the satirical songsmith Tom Lehrer called the moment when “political satire became obsolete”. The American novelist Philip Roth, passed over in Dylan's favour and invited to complain, merely said that next time the prize should obviously go to those other folkies Peter, Paul and Mary. Incidentally, James Brown was not the original “Mr Dynamite”. That was Alfred Nobel who invented dynamite (among other explosives) but was keen to sanitise his image. He financed the prizes that bear his name after reading a premature obituary that called him the merchant of death.

One of the perks of being a reporter was that a press card issued by the National Union of Journalists gave access to the Manchester clubs. For example, when Dusty Springfield came to Mister Smith's, you wanted to be there and I was. Maybe Elton John was over the top when he called Dusty “the greatest white singer there has ever been” but she could certainly sing soul with the black American greats like Martha and the Vandellas, as she did once on *Ready, Steady, Go!*. And at Mister Smith's she delivered a spine-tingling performance.

I don't remember ever going to the Twisted Wheel nightclub, where Northern Soul was about to be born, but I was present when the Tamla-Motown tour came to town. One of the greatest-ever stage shows, the 1965 UK Tamla tour was planned to promote their record label in Britain but it turned out to be premature: most white kids, particularly in the provinces, didn't seem to be ready for black pop music delivered by black artists (as opposed to white cover versions). Headlined by the Supremes, the tour line-up included Martha and the Vandellas, (Little) Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Four Tops and British guests Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames. Beat that as a soul spectacular.

But the event in the Odeon cinema where they played was an embarrassment. My report in the *Mail* read: “Last night only 300 seats out of 2,700 were filled for the first house. The second house was better – but more than two thirds of the seats were empty.” When I went backstage for a quote, Diana Ross was evidently upset. “It hurts me that people don't come. I cried today. I think the people who do come enjoy themselves. The others don't know what they're missing” – but there was little she or anybody could say or do about the fiasco, except bravely carry on to the next venue and hope for better luck.

The *Top of the Pops* weekly rehearsal used to appear in the *Mail* diary, a list of routine, predictable events, from the important to the trivial, that might make news so it was worth assigning a reporter to cover them. If they were based in Manchester so much the better since the reporter could be quickly withdrawn, if necessary, and reassigned to a more important story. But on a slow news day it made more sense for reporters to be out and about rather than sitting in the office reading the papers and working out their “exes” (expenses, considered by reporters the most important task of the week). Also, it was good PR for the paper if a reporter turned up to an unimportant event, even if there wasn't much chance of a story being published.

This work pattern was common to the popular papers but not to the heavies. The *Times* in those days didn't really exist north of Watford in terms of routine news gathering and the *Guardian*, even though it was a Manchester paper, lacked the resources of the *Mail*, so was forced to rely on a more skeletal diary: the local news stories they published tended to come

from agencies and freelances rather than staff reporters. Two things followed: if you met a *Guardian* reporter on a story you could be pretty sure there'd be a piece in their paper next day; alternatively, you might spend hours checking an agency story only for the news editor to decide it didn't stand up – but there it was in the *Guardian* next day just as the agency had sent it in, give or take the odd misprint.

If you were assigned to cover a Manchester dog show or similar, you'd write a report knowing that by the time the last edition (the one for Manchester-and-district readers) was printed it would have been replaced by something more urgent/relevant/topical. So did anybody ever set eyes on one of these local Manchester stories? Yes, often – the *Mail's* Irish readers. That's because the paper's first edition, often a bit light on news, had to go to press at about nine o'clock in the evening to catch the delivery trucks and then the night ferries across the Irish Sea to Belfast and Dublin. Logically, therefore, it was the Irish edition that was most likely to include a Manchester dog show story.

Later, in academe, I used to wonder sometimes how my media studies lecturer colleagues would account for this kind of anomaly (assuming they'd read the different editions often and thoroughly enough to discover it): who was conspiring against whom here and why – and how exactly was it an example of class, race or gender oppression? Could it be cock-up rather than conspiracy, perhaps?

In the nine months I worked at the *Mail* I was sent out on a variety of stories including a by-election at Altrincham and Sale, won by the Conservative chancellor-to-be, Anthony Barber, the Manchester airport extension inquiry, a house fire in which three children died, the Waterloo hare-coursing Cup, extinct now because the sport has been illegal since 2005, Liverpool's preparations for the 1965 football cup final, which they won, and the Severn bursting its banks in the Shrewsbury area.

Covering that one was fun. The photographer and I went to Manchester airport and got into a three-seater plane which felt, as it bounced along the runway, a bit like a small sports car that happened to have wings and so could take off. When we got to the floods, the pilot made several dives down towards the water, turning away at the last second to give the photographer the best angle, as a bomber pilot would. Whereas, sitting on the other side of the plane, I saw nothing I could make sense of until I got back to the office and could study the pix to write the captions.

My fellow trainees at the *Mail* were all men – as were all the other journalists in the Manchester office and all those on the *Daily Sketch* who shared our huge open-plan office in Deansgate. Elsewhere you might meet the occasional woman reporter – the *Express* had one, I think, and so did the *Sun*. And a year or so later according to Carole Lee, who was the first female reporter in the *Mail's* Manchester newsroom, her immediate boss introduced the second one to her with the patronising words: “Here's a playmate for you.”

This was the notorious Ken Donlan, the news editor, a *Mail* man for 25 years, who then briefly edited the *News of the World* and ended his career adjudicating disputes as the *Sun's* ombudsman. He was remembered by one *Mail* reporter as “a puce-faced, perpetually snarling parody of the stereotypical hard-bitten Hollywood city editor” and by another, after Donlan's departure for the London office, as “a megalomaniac...who had ruled by fear.” But you had to laugh when the opportunity presented itself – if you dared, that is. The story goes that one day

a reporter boldly said to him: “Good morning, Ken.” To which he replied: “If I want a weather forecast I will ring the Met Office.” Forced smiles all round.

The deputy news editor was Bill Dickson, who was as friendly as Donlan was obnoxious, and my graduate reporter colleagues included the amiable and able Brian MacArthur, who went on to launch the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and edit *Today*. He also presided over the “Hitler diaries that weren’t” scandal that embarrassed the *Sunday Times* and their authenticating expert, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, or Lord Dacre, as he became. Fr Rea SJ, one of my history masters at Stonyhurst, would have enjoyed the diaries affair; he’d always dismissed the brilliant Trevor-Roper, author of *The Last Days of Hitler*, as more of a journalist than a historian, but then Fr Rea was of the old school that thought the first world war was too recent to be history: it was really only “current affairs”.

There was a lot of drinking in those days, among *Mail* journalists as elsewhere. The reporter’s daily routine went like this: when you finished your shift you exited via the pub which conveniently was downstairs, part of the same Deansgate building. You bought a half-pint of bitter for any/all of the other reporters present. Then you were free to go. So if you were married or settled and happy with it, you could drink your half and say goodnight.

But for the rest of us the night was often far from over. The halves lined up in front of us on the bar. Reporters came and went. We drank the halves and reordered. If you thought you’d consumed too much liquid and couldn’t manage any more you changed to whisky – a small scotch, what the French call a “baby”. Then, when the pub closed (early in those days – 10h30?), you could move on to the press club, a dismal, dingy place which seemed to stay open as long as it needed to. On the way home you could pick up fish and chips (not so many hamburger joints in those days) before collapsing into bed.

On the more positive, healthy side, there was newspaper cricket with the other national titles. The matches were played mainly in the morning so we could go on to work the 3pm to 10pm shift. Ideally we hadn’t been out drinking the night before.

I can’t say I particularly enjoyed being a reporter in Manchester though I certainly learnt something about news and how to write copy that people would actually read. But I learnt nothing about feature writing or interviewing or subediting or newspaper law (and certainly no shorthand or even proper typing) because, although we were called, and paid as, trainees, there wasn’t any actual training. Later on after I left the *Mail* I learnt to write features, though more for magazines than newspapers, and sub copy, which I turned out to be quite good at. But I was never going to be a shit-hot tabloid reporter, certainly not a foot-in-the-door man, and after nine months the *Mail* let me go, saying they hoped I’d do better elsewhere; maybe I’d write books or something.

What they and I didn’t know – had no way of knowing then – was that an idealised version of the *Mail* style based on economy, precision, clarity was something that would stay with me and influence the rest of my career. Later on, as a subeditor, working on periodicals as diverse as *Decanter*, *Woman*, *Police Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Radio Times* and various colour supplements, it was the *Mail* and certainly not broadsheets like the *Guardian* that I found useful as a stylistic model. And this applied even more strongly to my role in the training of journalists. At the time, though, the most positive thing about getting the sack was that I could return to London – which in 1965 was the place to be.