

I'M COM'UN HOME IN THE MORN'UN

MPF Exhibition Text

by Richard Benson, Former Editor of The Face

Northern Soul is a music and a club subculture that first flourished in the north and midlands of England from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Its story really began with mods and their love of smooth, melodic black American soul music; when harder-edged funk became fashionable, the north and midlands retained their preference for the smoother sound, and began seeking out old, neglected examples. In clubs playing that music there gradually developed a regional scene characterised by the use of amphetamines, and solo dancing for men and women which became increasingly acrobatic. Clothes were chosen to suit that dancing: vest tops, loose trousers and skirts, and leather soled-shoes to facilitate elegant glides over dancefloors dusted with talc.

The scene stalled somewhat and went underground in the 1980s, but the following decade saw a renewed, and purposeful enthusiasm for indigenous and authentic British youth cultures, Northern Soul among them. In the early 1990s The Face magazine, where I was an editor, ran a story on the scene, and asked Elaine Constantine to photograph the 100 Club in London, which hosted a monthly night for the faithful.

Constantine, who grew up in Bury, North Manchester, had been on the scene in the 1980s and, curious to

see how it had evolved, accepted the commission. Initially, she says, she was struck by how different it seemed: the people in the hot, dark, low-ceilinged basement were older, the records rarer and less recognisable, the attitude on the dancefloor more serious, intense and fervent. It was an insiders' night. As she began to shoot the dancers, she could sense their irritation at the flash.

Known for an intuitive rapport with her subjects that is evident in her images, Constantine placated the 100 Club crowd by putting away her camera and starting to dance herself. As the music and moves brought back memories of her youth on the circuit, she says, she felt a gradual reconnection with the whole culture. A week later she was out at another Northern night, and from that point on she began documenting this most gymnastic of passions in earnest. She often waited until morning, when the lights came up, before starting to shoot.

The pictures here come from those nights in the 1990s, and show all the side-activities and paraphernalia associated with Northern Soul: not just the dancing but the record dealing, the holdalls with fresh clothes, the towels for wiping off sweat, the conversations about club nights, djs and records. The dancers are older than original Northern Soul crowds would have been, and a novice could be forgiven for asking why these fully-grown adults are throwing themselves around these dark dancefloors in such spectacular fashion?

The style of dancing has been attributed to various influences, from American soul artists who performed at British clubs, such as Jackie Wilson, to popular martial arts-based TV shows to the amphetamines. It's the most eye-catching aspect of the scene, and the exhilaration of taking part, or even just watching, is visible in the images here. However, for Constantine, the enduring appeal of Northern Soul goes beyond the dancing to the distinct spirit of the music. Classic tracks blend sadness, vulnerability, tenderness, and joy in ways that somehow demand a physical response: Northern Soul dancers mouth the lyrics as they dance more than people on other scenes do; their hand gestures relate to the lyrics as much as the rhythm; and many of the songs have a strange, melancholy-yet-euphoric yearning that seems captured in the spins and leaps and glissades out on the floor. Lots of the people in these photographs look as if the music has made them feel as if they could fly, and that's as good a way as any to start thinking about it.

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