

In the air

# Chimes of Freedom

Ariel Wagner-Parker

I was a couple of years too young to appreciate what was happening during France's „Mai 68“. Instead I was a teenager in London during England's cultural revolution: the „Swinging Sixties“.

Sociologists galore have studied the events and attitudes that brought about the Sixties (c.1964-c.1972): a progressive government, relative affluence, „baby boomers“ coming of (teen)age, a general rebelling against the tight-lipped, tight-belted Fifties ... Fewer appear to have noticed that the Sixties planted the seeds of today's wide-reaching disconnection of popular culture from political life, its ultra sexualisation and obsession with the personal. (The Eighties would add the coarsening of public discourse, the polarisation of society according to income and the coming to power of egotism and greed.)

But this is hindsight, of course.

Back then, circa 1964, the black and white Fifties exploded seemingly overnight into the Technicolor Sixties and all the youth of England was on fire.

Boys in flowery shirts and flares, girls in mini-skirts and false eyelashes swaggered around the stage of Swinging London, self-conscious actors in a psychodrama of visi-

bility. Suddenly young people were not just seen and heard but the centre of attention. The costumes came from *Camaby Street* and *King's Road* and those who modelled, designed and photographed them were fêted as the new celebrities.

The songs were provided by the endless pop-groups that strutted and fretted their (often brief) hour upon the stage. Top of the bill, of course, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In 1963, the „Fab Four“ sang *She Loves You (yeah, yeah, yeah)* and fans worldwide screamed and swooned. Two years later, the grating Demon King of Rock pounded out *Satisfaction* and a generation found its voice.

The country was confident: not just music but the arts, theatre, fashion, all blossomed: in 1965, 7.000 people attended a poetry „happening“ at the *Albert Hall*, a new generation of directors and playwrights was revolutionising the theatre, Jacqueline Du Pré and Daniel Barenboim were „Mr and Mrs Music“, political satire flourished and the nation started openly laughing at the Establishment. And on 30 July 1966 English footballers won the *World Cup*.

While all this was going on, Harold Wilson's Labour government, in power since 1964, was putting through vital social and political changes that often get forgotten amid the beads and bells. A feeling of infinite potential was in the air.

On „Wilson's watch, capital punishment was abolished, homosexuality decriminalised, abortion liberalised, censorship abolished, divorce laws reformed and education democratised (the Open University was one innovation). Despite the populist image he cultivated (the Gannex raincoat, pipe and HP sauce), Wilson possessed moral authority: he refused to commit British troops to Vietnam, or to intervene militarily in Rhodesia after Ian Smith's UDI in November 1965 and he condemned the US bombing of Hanoi in June 1966. In 1967, he tried to realign Britain's future, applying to join the EEC (De Gaulle repeated his „Non!“) and setting the sun on the Empire by closing military bases „East of Suez“.

It was not all good news. The „Troubles“ broke out in Northern Ireland in the late 60s and on 20 April 1968, Enoch Powell made his infamous „Rivers of Blood“ speech. He was sacked by his party, but the

dockers went on strike in protest; and in a poll taken shortly afterwards, 74% agreed with his blatantly racist comments ...

Then on 17 March 1968 came the *Battle of Grosvenor Square*. An anti-Vietnam demonstration outside the US Embassy exploded into a violent clash with the police, with fighting, flying smoke bombs and stones, a mounted police charge, over 200 arrests and many injured on both sides.

Mick Jagger was there and it inspired his *Street Fighting Man*. John Lennon was meditating in India and responded to the violence „back home“ by writing *Revolution*.

And me? I hated the Sixties and loved them: hated the uniformity required to express revolt, the obligatory „look“, but loved the excitement and energy. The hope.

As a concession to hippydom, I padded the streets of London barefoot (if gingerly) in the WW1 „sharpshooter's“ red coat I'd bought in *Portobello Market*. Once, at a 14 bus-stop, a WW1 Veteran asked me, kindly enough, if I realised what it represented ...

Before discovering classical music, I preferred the Stones to the Beatles and Bob Dylan to both. *The Times* they were a'Changin' and I gazed upon the *Chimes of Freedom* flashing. We would destroy the bad old world and build a new good one ...

In 1966 I went to see Peter Hall's *Hamlet*, with David Warner playing the prince as a rebellious teenage student – and my future was decided. I began to lead parallel lives, reading *Purgatorio*, Thomas Mann, *Les Femmes Savantes*, Sartre and the rest for A-Levels and doing theatre in my free time.

In 1968, freedom was imminent, the small and the great: to finally embark on the life you'd dreamed of, to change the world irrevocably and for ever. I imagined a shining future where my revolutionary productions of Shakespeare and Sophocles would make sense at last of our muddled lives and make other humans gasp and sway in astonished recognition. I was looking metaphorically out to sea, inhaling great draughts of space; the sun tap-danced on the waves and my heart lifted and lightened.

When Soviet tanks mowed down the Prague Spring, I was in Devon, helping friends paint a stone cottage and waiting for exam results. Then we drove up to the *Edinburgh Festival* and spent the rest of the summer working for the *Manchester 69 Theatre Company*: Ibsen, and Hamlet again. The *Chimes of Freedom* flashed ever brighter.

\* \* \*

Yes, I know: that was then and now is now. Then we were young and now we are old(er) and have become more modest ...

... But if the *Chimes of Freedom* didn't somehow continue flashing, we would have given up long ago. Wouldn't we?



Harold Wilson, PM during the „Swinging Sixties“