

1966

AND ALL THAT

The Beatles, Swinging London, mini skirts and Mini cars - what a great time it was to be young. **Dennis Ellam** remembers a remarkable year

WHAT A wonderful year it was, to be young – or let's be more specific, to be young and British. Of all the so-called Swinging Sixties, there's surely no doubt which of them was the most colourful and creative and the one that brimmed over with sheer excitement at everything new. It has to be the year of 1966.

History will record this was a landmark year and that Britain was its focal point. Its reputation was sealed, that April, by a *Time* magazine cover story... 'London: The Swinging City', the headline ran.

Giddy with excitement, after four days touring the streets and checking the evidence, *Time* reported: "This spring, as never before in modern time, London is switched on. It swings; it is the scene. Ancient elegance and new opulence are all tangled up in a dazzling blur of op and pop."

"The city is alive with birds (girls) and Beatles, buzzing with mini cars and telly stars, pulsing with half a dozen veins of excitement."

Not that we needed to be told. We young Brits already knew we were in the right place at the perfect time.

The cultural and social upheaval that began in Britain with The Beatles was now, a couple of years later, reaching its zenith. Pop music and fashion were intertwined into a whole new form of culture, TV and cinema broke down old

boundaries, British inventions and British op-art design led the world – and to top all of that, England won the World Cup. As we used to say then, it was all a gas.

That may sound like the familiar refrain, 'how much better things were back in the olden days', but it's a fact that the legacies of Britain in 1966 are still around us today. Consider, for example, the Coachella festival happening this autumn in California, billed as the greatest-ever gathering of musical giants in all of history (if you don't count Woodstock, presumably).

As well as Bob Dylan and Neil Young, its line-up includes The Rolling Stones, The Who, Paul McCartney and Pink

Floyd's Roger Waters, and right away what do you notice? Two-thirds of the show are British. Some of the veterans who were making London swing, vintage 1966.

It wasn't just London, though. If only that intrepid investigator from *Time* had ventured out of the capital and into the wilds of the UK, they would have discovered that a revolution was sweeping all the land.

In the far-off Northern industrial town where I spent my teens, a place like countless others and a long way from the capital's pulse, we might not have had elite discotheques on our doorstep, or swished between trendy restaurants in our E-types, but it wasn't long into 1966 before



Michael Caine,
with Julie Foster,
in *Alfie*

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Right: The 'Swinging London' *Time* cover and, below, even Batman, craze of the moment in playgrounds up and down the land, could not escape the influence of British art and design

boutiques sprang up among the Burtons and C&As, stocked with fashions bussed up from Carnaby Street (albeit a couple of weeks late, by which time Carnaby Street itself had already moved on).

Pretty girls in mini skirts and Twiggy hairstyles brightened the cobbled landscape, and the daily soundtrack of our lives was changing.

Rubber Soul saw the year in, some would call it the last 'traditional' Beatles album, because by the summer they had moved on to *Revolver*, and experimental work such as the strings on *Eleanor Rigby* and the Indian instrumentations on *Love You To*.

The Rolling Stones kick-started the changes to come with an LP called *Aftermath* and the singles *Mother's Little Helper*, and *19th Nervous Breakdown*, daring to go where songwriters had never ventured before.

Aftermath? Maybe it was a fitting title. A grim era of post-war austerity and Cold War fear was receding, the grip of the old elite was loosening, it seemed as if the young were taking over.

By that mid-summer half a century ago,

"LONDON SWINGS; IT IS THE SCENE. ANCIENT ELEGANCE AND NEW OPULENCE ARE ALL TANGLED UP IN A DAZZLING BLUR OF OP AND POP"

the UK charts were teeming with the kind of music that still sounds vibrantly fresh. The Kinks served up wry social commentary in *Sunny Afternoon*, Chris Farlowe fused blues with soul in *Out Of Time*, Manfred Mann even dared to rework Dylan with *Just Like A Woman*, while The Small Faces, struttingly defiant, and The Who, smashing guitars and demolishing stages, delivered *All Or Nothing* and *Substitute*.

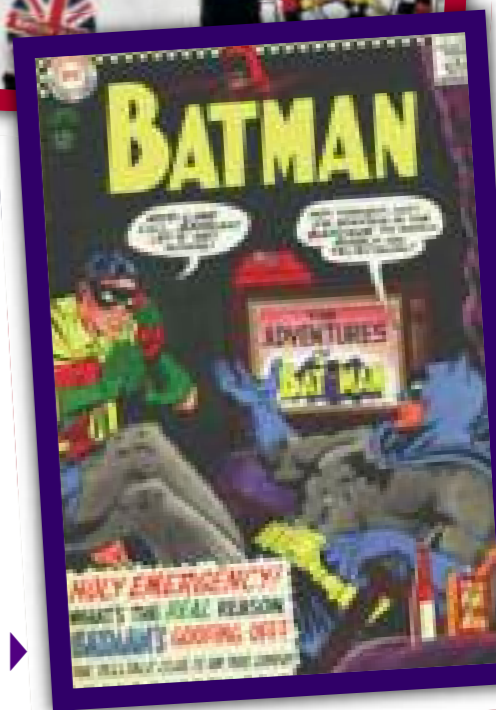
No other country, anywhere, was managing to keep pace with Britain.

By the time 1966 was ending here, it was



embracing the fire of *Hey Joe*, by Jimi Hendrix – an American whose genius was only discovered when he came to London – as well as the fey visions of *Sunshine Superman*, by Donovan, and a techni-coloured new concept known as psychedelia, personified by a newly emerging band still known as 'The' Pink Floyd. There's no doubt about the Floyd's relevance today: they have just been commemorated on a set of Royal Mail stamps!

And how were we able to follow this frantic revolution, as distant as we were



from Swinging London? We had the pirate radio stations to relay it.

Radio Caroline, north and south, Radio London, Radio City, Radio England, they infiltrated the airwaves with a jaunty defiance directed at an Establishment who didn't know how to silence them.

Dear Auntie BBC tried, in her starched, prim way, but in this new era of rebellion she could never compete with the outlaws on the high seas, Johnnie Walker, Emperor Rosko, Kenny Everett and the rest.

The generation before us had received their pop from Radio Luxembourg. But as long as Caroline and the rest were illegal, then the music acquired a special credibility among the young.

As for television, the newer, faster-thinking ITV was already leading the way and *Ready, Steady, Go!* was at the peak of its popularity, essential viewing on a Friday evening... "The weekend starts here!", remember?

It was compered from beneath a Mod fringe by Cathy McGowan, every teenage lad's fantasy, and the urbane Keith Fordyce, looking rather like a benign uncle who had popped in to make sure the kids were having a good time but behaving themselves. Everyone

who mattered performed on *Ready, Steady, Go!*, and while on *Top Of The Pops* they mimed, on RSG they were live and raw. I have a memory of Cathy, eyelashes a-flutter, talking to Mick Jagger, soberly dressed in a polo-neck sweater and pressed slacks, but still managing to look leery and disreputable. We would never have realised at the time, but it was one of the unique qualities of 1966 that remnants of the old still remained, even as the new burst around us.

So music charts that were being stormed by Beatles and Stones could still accommodate the likes of Petula Clark and Ken Dodd.

One minute we might be listening to the Spencer Davis Group and *Keep On Runnin'*, next up it might be Jim Reeves and *Distant Drums*, and no, we never thought it strange. *Criss Cross Quiz* was

"A GRIM ERA OF POST-WAR AUSTERITY AND COLD WAR FEAR WAS RECEDING, THE GRIP OF THE OLD ELITE WAS LOOSENING"

still on TV. So too was *Peyton Place*, but more daring programmes were gathering big audiences, such as the outrageous comedy *Til Death Us Do Part*, with its bigoted anti-hero Alf Garnett, brilliantly crafted and winning awards but far too close to the edge for today's sensibilities.

Then there were gritty dramas like *Cathy Come Home*, portraying a bleaker side of the Swinging Sixties, a parable of post-war deprivation that has never been bettered.

As for sex, that had been invented in 1963 – the poet Philip Larkin said so – and we are often told that by 1966 Britain was caught in a maelstrom of loose morals.

Mainly, though, such remarks come from commentators who weren't around at the time, who seem to have constructed a false memory. In the

The Who in all their pop-art finery



Dr Who's enemies The Daleks symbolised a deep-rooted ambivalence towards the technological revolution

cinema, Michael Caine as Alfie may have been following a trail of promiscuity, but by the end he had to face the consequences of his philandering. And the big movie being filmed that year, though it wasn't released until 1967, was *Blow Up*, starring David Hemmings as a trendy photographer, a portrait of Swinging London that earned an X-certificate just for daring to flash the top half of Vanessa Redgrave.

Even as we swung, we still possessed, rather touchingly I think, the capacity to be shocked.

The birth control pill had become available, but only from stern-faced GPs, cannabis was a pastime for the wealthy, and although there was talk of a fashionable new drug called LSD, mortals who lived outside the celebrity bubble never came within reach of the stuff.

The summer of love was still a year away. Hippies hadn't been hatched yet.

"How many long-legged mini-skirted maids can mix it in a Mini car?" the plummy voice-over burred on a Pathe newsreel of 15 girls squeezing into Swinging London's trendiest mode of transport, in order to set a new world record, would you believe.

Long-legged mini-skirted maids? Wherever they are now, they surely belong to another, simpler age.

Cigarettes were still advertised for their flavour, car makers boasted of such refinements as 'thick carpets, and warm or cold air at the touch of a switch' (the Hillman Super Minx, by the way). And

consider the old-fashioned charm of this page one report in the *Daily Express*:

"Golfer John Hall chewed thoughtfully on the end of a plastic tee as he studied a tricky six-yard putt. Eventually he hit the ball and it rolled straight into the hole. His opponent slapped him on the back in congratulation and John, of Freshwater, IoW, swallowed the tee."

And that's it, end of story – no outcries about health and safety, no squad of council inspectors arriving to shut down the golf course, no questions raised about the dangers of plastic golf tees, no legal action from Mr Hall claiming the club had failed to erect notices about the risk of putting one's tee in one's mouth while one putted. How naive our world was, still, in 1966.

Of course politicians then, as now, tried their utmost to meddle.

People were having fun? That meant that people must have found some money, from somewhere.

They were buying the first super-zoom

cinema cameras (29 and a half guineas by mail order, complete with projector, on seven-day approval), they were listening to those pop pirates on the first multi-band transistor radios (£10-19s-6d, or low deposit), they were investing in complete camping kits (tent, beds, sleeping bags, stove, everything you need for 39 guineas).

The response of Harold Wilson's government was to freeze wages, increase purchase tax to 27.5 per cent, tighten HP controls by raising the down-payment on new cars to 40 per cent, and slap a £50 limit on the amount of spending money that travellers could take abroad.

That fortnight in Spain, by the way, would cost around £40.

The year, like any other, inevitably had its dark moments.

The Aberfan disaster claimed the lives of 116 children and 28 adults, and left the nation grieving.

In Biafra, conflict and famine combined into the first globally televised catastrophe,

and in Vietnam an endless and hopeless war rumbled on, driving London to protest as well as swing – mid summer saw violent demonstrations outside the US embassy in Grosvenor Square.

But overall this was a year of excitement and discovery, with one hand touching the past while the other pushed open the doors to a vibrant future; a year of innovation and invention.

The hovercraft – remember that? As eccentric a British contraption as you could ever imagine, it first bumped and bounced across the Channel in the Spring of 1966.

Then the prototype of the Harrier jump jet took off, a gravity-defying symbol of British ingenuity.

Colour TV sets went into mass production and the BBC was already making the programmes to fit them. Meanwhile Laker Airways was launched by the irrepressible Freddie Laker, a pioneer of cheap travel and a working class hero at a time when Richard Branson was still at his public school.

Technology and daring enterprise appeared to move with the same dizzying speed as fashion and culture.

It seemed to us living through it that anything was possible, in this amazing 12-month span, that the next wave of music would be even more thrilling than the last, that the next burst of fashion and art would be even more dramatic.

Keith Richards put it wisely: "Young people are measuring opinion with new yardsticks," he told an interviewer that November, "and that must mean greater individual freedom of expression... pop music will have its part to play in all of this."

It had to pass, of course. *Ready, Steady Go!* was taken off air (too expensive), the radio pirates were sinking (the Marine Offences Bill), op-art gave way to flower power, Swinging London slowed down.

In came the new world of 1967, but while 1966 lasted, what a year it had been!

