

WEST- WARD HO!

In the second instalment of articles drawn from the upcoming book *Mersey: the river that changed the world*, Manchester music legend Antony Wilson immerses himself in the musical history of Liverpool.

Every phase of my life has been touched, sprinkled religiously perhaps, by the waters of the River Mersey. No surprise since I think of myself as a Lancashire lad, spurning the linguistic aberrations of some early seventies Whitehall civil servant, and as a Lancashire lad, it is this river which rises in the black-brown moors to the east and kisses the Irish sea in the west that flows right through my homeland.

I was born and spent my first five years above my Mum and Dad's tobacconist's shop on Salford's Regent Road. I look back to a fifties heyday when Regent Road was one of the great shopping streets of the North. And why? It could hardly be unconnected with the fact that less than half a mile away, just down Trafford Road, were the magnificent gates of the docks of the Port of Manchester, the designated terminus for the equally magnificent Manchester Ship Canal, built by Manchester men to combat the hegemony and high taxes enjoyed by the Port of Liverpool at the far end of that River Mersey.

Without the Mersey, there would, of course, have been no logical entrance for the great ships that went on to cross the fields around Warrington. Eastham, on the south side of the estuary, was indeed the entrance to Manchester, our Ostia. Salford, and in particular Cross Lane Corner where I was brought up, were the intentional and alternate universe to the great port of Liverpool.

Those tall stately African seamen I sold snuff and cigarettes to; I was told they were "Lascars". Knowing now that real Lascars were in fact men of smaller stature recruited from East India, although the word had come to be used to describe any foreign or African seaman serving on British ships under "lascar" agreements.



Age five it was off to the country and a pleasant new detached house on an estate perched on the side of Strines Road in Marple. It was the simplest thing for us kids on the estate to climb over a low wooden fence and head off down the steep sided, fern layered hillside, crossing a stone and iron railway bridge over the Hayfield railway line and then down an even steeper slope, encouraged by the sound of fast running water below, down, down to the Goyt.

There, just across a mossy stone bridge over the Goyt, was a muddy forest full of wonders. Beneath the ferns and trees, the remnants of old stone buildings would lie, wet, lichen covered, mossy and inviting to a curious bunch of pre-teens; and then great tunnels and unfathomable constructions of the same millstone grit. By the age of ten I had discovered that these were the ruins left behind by Samuel Oldknow, a gentleman who had founded his mill and even an orphanage on the banks of the Goyt; kindness or exploitation? Who knows; though history treats

him kindly: "He was the zealous promoter of every useful and benevolent measure calculated to aid the progress of general civilisation and local improvement."

I did my first piece of 'adult' work in my last year at primary school, doing a project on Oldknow and illustrating it with blurry black and white photos taken on my new Kodak Brownie 127.

Those ruins were our Chitchen Itza; just like the Mayan remains on the Yucatan, these cracked towers seemed to grow out of the jungle and at the same time seemed to be at the very point of being sucked back into it. Maybe it's the natural origins of the locally quarried stone from which these temples – to industry – were built but they seemed then as much part of nature as part of man.

And of course these discoveries on the banks of the Goyt were my first real encounter with the Industrial Revolution. Dampness is all. But for Samuel Oldknow it was more than the dampness that helped the weaving; it was the power of that water coming down off the Pennines. He re-routed the Goyt to feed the 'Wellington Wheel', which drove his spindles through an underground shaft. The underground stone-lined tunnels, from millponds to drive wheels, were the stuff of adventure and dreams for young kids like us.

And grist to the Victorian marketing boom, which renamed the biggest of the millponds as the "Roman Lakes" and later went from tourist attraction to fishing mecca.

My next step towards the sea, took me as surely to the port at the end of the line, as the Goyt, would rush on, merging with the Etherow just beyond Marple and then deep in the belly of Stockport, the Tame, going on to flow all the way to the sea. But it was only a short walk from the ruins of Samuel Oldknow's empire, to a friend's house on the banks of the Peak Forest Canal (of which, incidentally, our old boy Samuel was principal promoter and chairman of the committee which financed and directed its construction).

Liverpool at the dawn of the 60's – a fresh, vibrant youth culture based on the music of black America.

It was December 1963, and I can clearly remember the Hayes family front room and that twelve inch black and white object/trophy that seemed more important than that coming Christmas, more important than the death a few months back of the American President, more important than anything. And maybe it was. With its knowingly "art" sleeve, with its four moody head shots, it was, arguably, the first album.

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Yes there had been long playing records around for several years, there had been collections of singles and cover versions, but there hadn't been a thing called "an album"; the world, my world had changed, and it was this black and white thing that had come down the East Lincs Road via the road called Abbey, that embodied everything that was new and exciting in our lives.

Give Andrew Loog Oldham the credit for knowing the world had changed; he burst into the kitchen of the Chelsea flat where the Rolling Stones lived, waving this two tone icon in his hand; "Start writing songs lads." "But we've just got these great new Chuck Berry tracks, Andrew." "Screw that, start writing." He knew history when he saw it. And this album, with most of the songs self-penned by Lennon and McCartney, was going to change everything.



With The Beatles, their second long playing record, their – and the world's – first album, was history. The previous spring, in the school playground, we'd heard rumours that one of the sixth formers had a mate in Liverpool who was going to bring this new band over who'd just had a minor hit with a single called Love Me Do. Excitement rose as Please Please Me smashed into Number One. A visit from the Beatles. Too good to be true. It was. It never happened. But we were all in on the ground floor, poring over our transistors on a Sunday afternoon, so proud when She Loves You stayed at number one for a record number of weeks. As if it was us. But it was us. It was youth. It was our youth. It was the revolution. And it came out of the mouths and minds of these four young heroes from the other end of the A580. No longer was Liverpool the place to board the ferry to Douglas and the Isle of Man. It had become the centre of the world.

And the role of the port on the Mersey is mythically acknowledged as central to this great spark of creativity. Rock and roll was, is and always will be about influences flowing over and around each other and the constant and most vital influences are always Africa and Europe. By 1962, the epiphany kicked off in Memphis by Elvis Presley had waxed old and cold. Rock and roll had become East Coast high school pop; saccharine and empty. In Britain all you had was the low-cal Presley copies like Tommy Steele. But the undercurrent which inspired Elvis and his confreres, rhythm and blues, race music, was feeding the hearts and souls of a new British underground. And the steady drip of this raw, emotional, "new" music was travelling with the Gulf Stream, across the Atlantic.

I asked my friend Mike McCartney about the role of the port in the late 50's, when passenger liners still made regular crossings to New York. He described this culture of R&B aficionados, a British working class version of Normal Mailer's White Hipster, clutching their rare imported R&B recordings. He told me how Long John Baldry, a London blues singer, would make regular trips to see him and his brother and their mates and they'd all show off the latest sounds from the US, brought in for Baldry through the docks in the East End, while his new Liverpool chums would share their trophies acquired through those great docks on the banks of the Mersey.

When he explained this phenomena to me, a loud bell of memory went off in my head; "they were young sailors who knew exactly what the demand was back home for these rare pieces of plastic."

Liverpool at the dawn of the 60's, a fresh vibrant youth culture based on the music of black America; and the chance to be top dog when you walk down the home gangplank.

As Michael described these junior sea dogs, full of themselves 'cause "they'd heard these things before everybody else" I immediately thought of my first year at university and the Easter term of 1969. I knew people who knew people who were in the Oxford and Cambridge Drama Group, an occasional touring amalgam of the two universities' aspiring theatricals.

That Christmas they had taken Twelfth Night or some other Bill Shakespeare classic to New York. And there they had seen the movie, "Easy Rider". My God, they were the kings of the King's Parade. The hottest folk in East Anglia. They had seen the film of films. They could say things like "far out" and "do your own thing in your own time" and they knew how it should sound. For three months they were princes amongst men.

Just like those sailors returning to the Mersey Estuary, laden with priceless gifts, not of frankincense and myrrh but of shellac and vinyl. And Paul and John ate them up, digested them and regurgitated a music that would change the world.

This album was going to change everything.

If you think of those first singles, they were centred on pop, with the R&B influence lurking only in the inspirational background. In fact it wasn't until the fourth or fifth release, the Twist and Shout EP, that one got a real feel of the vibrant, shouty, blues background to this teen combo. But that must have been George Martin and EMI smoothing out the early records because many years later in the late 80's, a lovely old sound man at Granada called Gordon told me a story of how Johnny Hamp,

planning a mini-documentary on two groups, a brass band and a beat-bunch called the Beatles, had taken Gordon to the Cavern with a tape machine. The piece never happened and it was in a studio session six months later, festooned with Liverpool Echo headline cuttings, that the fab four made their debuts. But Gordon told me he still had the tape and would I like to hear it. Would I?

Next day we go to the music library and Gordon puts on the tape. Cacophonous, messy, unbelievably loud and violent, well, noise. Unbearably exciting. And it reminded me of only one thing. The sound of the Sex Pistols that first night in Manchester on June 4th 1976. Yes, it was that fucking amazing. I was shocked to the core. And delighted. As Mike said to me, "After Hamburg, they had really changed." Robert Johnston went to the crossroads; the Beatles had been to Germany. Maybe both had sold their souls to be able to play the blues. Whatever, it was a good deal.

Old men and women, don't think that the Beatles and the Sex Pistols are the last time this happens; I saw a trance-emo group from St Albans, called Enter Shikari, on the 26th of October 2006 and they sounded exactly as exciting as Gordon's tape and Malcolm's band – which shows the true power of the culture of the plantations that found its way to Liverpool.

And therein lies the sweet and bitter irony of cultural history, that again, without this great river and its great port, none of this happens. For without the 18th century's noxious trade in brutalised humanity, there would never have been the blues and without those flattened seventh notes, no rock and roll. No life. No Beatles. To quote the Fugs "Nothing, nihil, nada."

And yes, the Beatles were never as bluesy as their contemporaries, the Stones or the Animals or Georgie Fame from Leigh; but it was still the heartbeat of the revolution which they led from the front.

Ah yes, Liverpool and the slave trade. Or rather Liverpools. By the 1750s, after Liverpool had seen off the ports of Bristol and London and began to dominate the Atlantic triangular slave trade, there were two more Liverpools, one on the River St Paul in what is now Liberia and another to the north on Rio Pongas in modern Guinea. Both were slaving centres.

But it's somebody else's job to talk about these failures of humanity. Mine to recount the one truly remarkable by-product of those miserable journeys for so many of the people of West Africa. The creation of the music that has covered the globe for the last fifty years.

At first it was a bit of shock for we civilised westerners; "Why savages who have never developed a musical or other art should be supposed to have more refined aesthetic sensibilities than the peoples who have cultivated music for centuries passes my poor powers of understanding." H.E. Kriebel in 1914 used the word "poor" rhetorically. In fact he was entirely accurate – his understanding was worse than poor – and entirely misguided, as the civilised western folk who six years later were dancing to the West African Ashanti dance, or Charleston, could have told him.

Just like those sailors returning to the Mersey, laden with priceless gifts of shellac and vinyl.

The blues is only as old as slavery, or more particularly the end of slavery, for its profound development comes only with abolition and the movement of the American Negro into the world beyond the plantation. But it begins with the American work songs, which of course have their origins in West Africa. L. Jones, whose book "Blues People" I will now shamelessly steal from (well isn't that what Eric Clapton and Pete

litanies in those American fields. His sons and daughters and their children began to use America as a reference."

At the heart of this new American music was what was long misunderstood as primitive or the unskilled nature of the primitive (when will we ever learn?) seen as the strangeness and out of tune quality emanating from their "crude" instruments. Classical musicologists spoke of the "aberration" of the diatonic scale in African music. That geezer Kriebel quite beautifully describes the "tones which seem rebellious to the Negro's sense of intervallic propriety are the fourth and seventh of the diatonic major series." Ah, the flattened seventh, the augmented fourth. You naughty boys. It just didn't occur to these white supremacists, as we should justly call these blinkered art critics, that perhaps the Africans were not using a diatonic scale but an African scale, a scale that would seem ludicrous when analysed by standard western musicology. The flattened seventh, like the E-A-B7 chord sequence, are not the blues; they are just faltering efforts of one music culture to define the other in its own terms.

For example, it leaves out rhythm, and though the Negro slave had to pretty soon leave out rhythm himself – drums were forbidden as seen as provoking passion and revolt – quite rightly – the syncopated patterns that had been used for communication, so much more complex than the primitive Morse code we westerners had once imagined as the use of drums, were actually the phonetic reproduction of words themselves.

Add to this the counter calling of the work song and its development into the

rasp of the early Dylan) and finally add in emancipation.

As Jones points out; slavery didn't create the blues, emancipation did. For it was only when this culture came out of the field, when there was no point in singing about bales of cotton or catching fish in a long forgotten Africa. The slave diaspora spread to the cities and instead of writing songs for a work team to sing, it became songs for an individual to sing. It became personal. For all the incredible gifts of African tonality that changed popular culture in the West, the personal theme of the blues also lingers on monumentally.

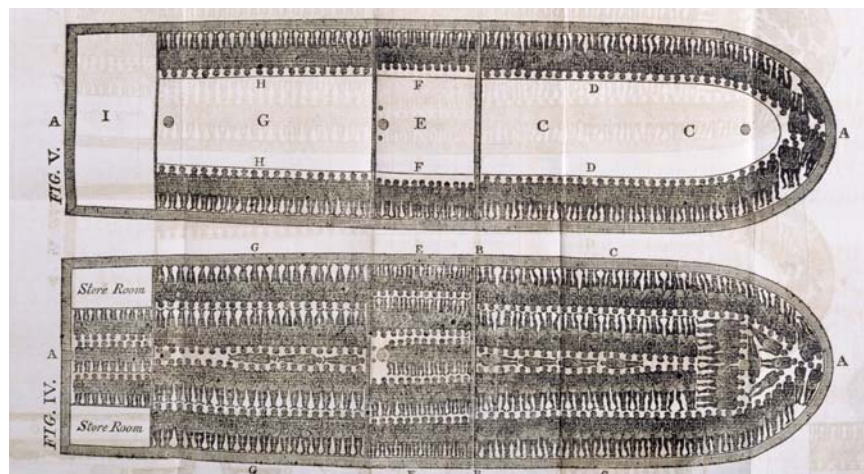
Oh, Lawd, I'm tired, uuh
 Oh, Lawd, I'm tired, uuh
 Oh, Lawd, I'm tired, uuh
 Oh, Lawd, I'm tired a dis mess

"So tired, tired of waiting, tired of waiting for you", wouldn't you say, Mr. Davies? But enough of plagiarising the Mr Jones who did "know what was happening" and let me refer to my beloved guitarist Vini Reilly, the renowned instrumentalist of the Manchester band, the Durutti Column, but also, to me, the source of profound mathematical insight into music (and music is maths and vice versa). He explained to me that "in our classical world, in a Perry Como song, the intervals are mathematically correct, they are logical and expected. But when you hear the blues notes, the augmented fourth, the flattened seventh, they are not logical, they are a shock. In simple terms they are wildness. You expect, deep down in your psyche, a note to go some place, but it goes somewhere else. You are surprised, you are shocked, and you are excited."

Vini went on to talk about Gershwin's desire to feed these different intervals into his work only to be frustrated by the solidity of a concert orchestra. Vini points out the role of the guitar where notes can be bent, and highlights the role of the bottleneck so beloved of BB King and all the white blues players; whether or not this was used because of fingers damaged by intense manual labour, certainly it makes the notes as fluid as the tonalities of their West African origins. He also told me about that other blues standard instrument, the harmonica, how the tines wear down quickly and notes begin to wander, again allowing this all-vital blending and distorting of melody. And then there's the chord structures that grow out of this non-diatonic system and inform the entire world of rock and roll.

And again Vini defines the unexpected nature of this non-European mathematics; "a sound, a feeling that is shocking, that is extreme, that is at heart rebellious." How appropriate, how inevitable, that the sound of an oedipal culture is defined by the rebellious mathematical progressions of the blues from Western Africa via the slave ships of the Mersey and the plantations of the Southern states.

And how strange that my story begins in the hills below the moors, on the banks of the Goyt, with my first taste of an Industrial Revolution, and takes me downstream to the Irish Sea and to the two great progenitors of the Industry of Revolution that has shaped my life and, thank God, continues to do so.



Townsend did for heaven's sake from the great blues guitarists) points to the music – songs – of the second generation of slaves: "The African slave had sung African chants and

repetition of the first three lines of the classic blues; add to this the rejection of "beautiful singing" and the preference for raucous, husky, natural tones (and here all I can think of is the almost unbearable