

THE capital of COOL

It was an age of flower power, political awakening and sexual liberation – and London was at the centre of it all. **Kathryn Conway** explores how the Sixties changed the capital



Mary Quant and Vidal Sassoon in 1964

Piccadilly Circus in the 1960s



TIME magazine might have been a little late to the party when it christened London 'The Swinging City' in 1966, but it was a phrase that would come to define the Sixties.

As Britain shook off post-war austerity, the capital became the epicentre of a scene that would see youthful creativity rise up against the conservative establishment and dominate the decade in a haze of hedonistic, psychedelic glory. Indeed, from the mods and rockers to the hippies and (often controversial) skinheads, it was youth subculture that ensured that Swinging London set the social, political and cultural agenda for the rest of the world. 'It was the girls on the King's Road who invented the mini,' designer Mary Quant once said of her now iconic thigh-length skirts.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

Mary Quant is rather understating her own contribution, of course. As part of the 'Chelsea Set' (a radical group of designers, artists, photographers, musicians and socialites who lived, worked and partied in the royal borough), she revolutionised fashion and the way people shopped for it. People copied her angular bob (cut by Vidal Sassoon) and when she and her husband Alexander Plunket Greene opened Bazaar, a boutique on the King's Road, in 1955, people hadn't seen anything like it before.

This fact is neatly encapsulated in a new exhibition at the Fashion and Textile Museum that is opening this month. *Swinging London: A Lifestyle Revolution* (from 8 Feb) provides a window on the groundbreaking work of not only Quant, but also Terence Conran and Laura and Bernard Ashley. Quant's simple yet irreverent ensembles sit alongside Conran's first designs for Habitat (the contemporary homeware store he founded in 1964, which is now located on Tottenham Court Road), in individual sets that evoke the freedom of spirit of the time.

'Terence Conran was instrumental in bringing continental style to a rather stodgy Britain,' says Geoffrey Rayner, co-curator of the exhibition. Fellow curator Richard Chamberlain adds: 'Quant virtually invented

the modern boutique. Shopping for clothes became a far more fun and inclusive experience, as opposed to the somewhat stuffy and traditional way women had bought clothes in the past. Racks of off-the-peg mini-dresses sold in a stylish 'mod' environment with music playing was just not how it was done before.'

Deborah Woolf, who is the owner of an eponymous vintage boutique in Marylebone (24 Church Street) that is well worth a visit for anyone with a passion for Sixties and Seventies fashion, agrees, saying: 'It was the era of the boutique, particularly in London, and this set the fashion revolution alight.' Indeed, after Bazaar, the King's Road and its surrounding streets became populated with hip ▶



Mary Quant with models in 1967

MARY QUANT AND MODELS © PA PRINTS; MARY QUANT AND VIDAL SASSOON © RONALD DUMONT/STRINGER/GETTY; PICCADILLY CIRCUS © ISTOCK

boutiques such as Biba, Granny Takes a Trip and Mr Freedom. In turn, they became celebrity hangouts and ensured the area achieved cult status among screaming teens keen to bump into their idols. The cultural revolution wasn't just confined to Chelsea however.

WHERE FASHION AND MUSIC COLLIDE

In Soho, Carnaby Street became a mecca for London's mods who made pilgrimages to the numerous boutiques owned by 'the King of Carnaby Street', John Stephen. Today, Carnaby remains a much-loved shopping destination and it's still possible to find the mod spirit

at Lambretta (29 Carnaby Street), The Face (1 Marlborough Court) and Sherry's (63 Broadwick Street). And with the mods came music, specifically bands such as the Small Faces and The Who. As Woolf points out: 'It is difficult to separate music, particularly in London, from the culture of fashion during this period. Apart from Elvis, who was seen as rather radical, rock 'n' roll was considered staid and commercial by the Sixties. People were embracing a different sound and, with the arrival of Pink Floyd and The Beatles at Abbey Road Studios, London was where it was at.'

Sat behind the mixing desk as the Fab Four were recording *The Beatles (White Album)* was engineer and producer Ken Scott. He remembers a band who were keen to push the boundaries and were experimental in their approach. 'They always wanted something different, so that pushed us [recording engineers] to expand our horizons and to try new things,' he says.

Abbey Road Studios only occasionally runs tours, but you can visit its shop and recreate the cover of the *Abbey Road* album on the hallowed zebra crossing nearby.

The London Beatles Store, near Baker Street, also sells memorabilia. Look out for the Blue Plaque at 94 Baker Street, which was once the band's Apple Boutique clothing store.

Die-hard fans may want to check out the original lyrics to songs such as *In My Life* and



Abbey Road Studios Shop



Abbey Road's zebra crossing

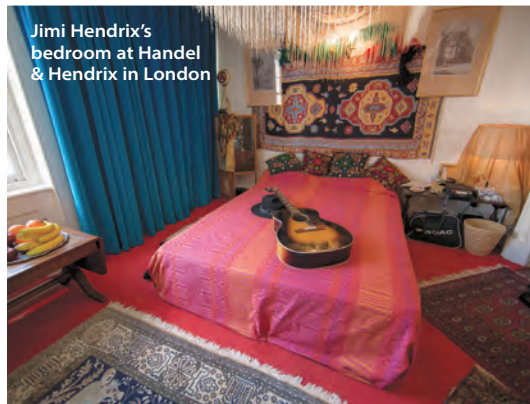


Carnaby Street

T-shirt from Abbey Road Studios Shop

Strawberry Fields Forever held at The British Library, or view The Beatles' memorabilia displayed in The Vault at the Hard Rock Café on Old Park Lane. There are myriad tours you can do, too. Among the best are the Beatles & More walks run by Richard Porter in conjunction with London Walks.

While Beatlemania raged around the world, the soundscape was challenged once again with the arrival of Jimi Hendrix in London in 1966. Teaming up with acoustic engineer Roger Mayer, Hendrix and his band – The Jimi Hendrix Experience – took the electric guitar to new heights with their own brand of psychedelic rock. You can appreciate their prowess when the Handel & Hendrix in London museum hosts a party dedicated to the legendary performances given by The Jimi Hendrix Experience at the Royal Albert Hall in February 1969. During a Friday Late (8 Feb), the very flat in which Hendrix lived while in the city will host DJs, film projections and live music. There will also be an opportunity to explore areas that are usually



Jimi Hendrix's bedroom at Handel & Hendrix in London

closed to the public. Guided tours, meanwhile, take place every Friday between 3pm and 4.30pm.

Lovers of Sixties sounds should also check out *Rip It Up – The 60s*, a musical extravaganza at the Garrick Theatre (from 7 Feb). Promising to take a journey through the decade via song, dance and acrobatics, the songs of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Who will be brought to life like never before. Proof, if any was needed, of the lasting impact this transformative decade has had. London is still swinging. www.ftmlondon.org; www.handelhendrix.org www.vam.ac.uk ■



V&A promotion for *Mary Quant*

Rip It Up – The 60s

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