

3. Influence on Style and Communication Industries

'Once something goes mainstream, for me it is over'

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HOXTON, JULY 2008

'Fuck fuck fuck. I forgot... SO sorry. Shall we say 3pm? Do you want to pick me up at my office?'

Richard expresses his sincere apology for forgetting our mid-morning appointment, and after a bit of diary juggling we decide to meet later on that same day to enjoy the pleasant weather and the long, light early July evening. We have a drink outside the Hoxton Bar and Kitchen in Hoxton Square, east London, which is local for both of us. Richard is in charge of entertainment at this venue on Sunday evenings where the popularity of his club nights has led him to branch out into organising the after-parties for book or album launches and fashion shows, thus bringing a trendy crowd to the Hoxton Bar on other nights, too.

'Rich – on your bike. Get that sexy arse into Da Kitchen!' I courteously remind him, shortly before 6pm to be on the safe side. 'I am there already,' he replies.

Not only did I immediately forgive Rich for not remembering our rendez-vous (after all, he had been known not to turn up for a *Vogue* interview), I was actually grateful for his time. Despite being busy, he'd kindly agreed for us to have a proper sit-down when it suited me, as I wanted to pick his brains for this book.

Richard Mortimer is in demand: a man of the moment, a master of the zeitgeist. When I met him, he was fresh from the launch party for Jean Paul Gaultier's new perfume, *Ma Dame*, for which model Agyness Deyn was the face. Richard was the 'cool purveyor' for this high profile event. We have reached the stage in our crossover story where Hoxton had become the favourite pool for cool fishing. Richard's network was possibly the hottest. Bringing on the hipsters – a handpicked posse of around 40 à la mode London people to give Gaultier's event an edge – fell under his remit.

Just a few days before, Richard had kickstarted his new club night, *Ponystep*, at the Hoxton Bar, which would regularly take place on the last Sunday of...

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REACHING THE 'TIPPING POINT'

The Scene's Consolidation

Rewind for a moment. In our chronicle, 2006 was the year before the storm. Richard's club night Family had ceased to be while at its peak, leaving everyone waiting for the next thing. (This would be a club called BoomBox, the precursor to Ponystep.) At the same time, *Blow's Off-Schedule Fashion Guide* (*Superblow* for a few fashion seasons) became a new magazine called *Super Super*. Part of the same network of Hoxtonites, both the BoomBox tribe and the *Super Super* tribe would cause a big stir. Each tribe had its roots in the off-schedule fashion tradition and in seminal clubs such as Nag Nag Nag and (particularly) Kashpoint, which marked the incubation phase of the second-generation Hoxtonites. Each tribe took shape during the maturation period of the scene, between 2004 and 2006. The trend reached its peak in 2007, (just as Cool Britannia had ten years before).

In 2007, both the BoomBox and the *Super Super* kids hit the headlines big time. Although use of the word 'kids' suggested that there was a new youth culture out there (and that's certainly how the media spoke about this new phenomenon from east London), the tribes associated with BoomBox and *Super Super* (specifically the nu rave fad) were clearly a product of the second generation's subculture. Each set-up brought with it new individuals who went on to do their own clubs patronised by youngsters, which is how the scene spread from the nucleus and gained energy. However, the leaders of the tribes who formed the nucleus were still Generation X (in terms of mindset and age) or borderline Generation Y (in age, but adhering to the X mindset).

Let me put this in the historical context of subcultural evolution to make this point clear (as it is fundamental to the overall hypothesis of this book). If we look at punk in the late 1970s and the new romantics at the turn of the 1980s, the latter had been around during punk but were too young to 'officially' go to clubs and gigs. In that sense, new romantics didn't come out of nowhere but they evolved from punk, and were clearly inspired by it. However, they went on to form a distinctive subculture of their own with a new set of values (use of synths and self-conscious hype) and aesthetic sensibilities (music and look), which then crossed over to form a global trend. As such, they were a reaction to punk just

as punk had been a reaction to the overblown and corporate rock culture of the early-to-mid 1970s. When ravers came along, they were reacting to the new romantics, who had by then sold out (playing the star system and wallowing in 1980s excess by wearing designer suits, producing lush music videos, drinking champagne and dating supermodels – a new concept – who famously didn't get out of bed for less than £10,000). Ravers dressed down, became anonymous and bypassed elitist club door policies by moving to fields – until they too sold out, and along came the second-generation Hoxtonites seeking an alternative to the mega club and superstar DJ.

With the third-generation Hoxtonites, this reactive model doesn't apply. The third generation is part of the second generation's evolution and its formation coincided with the commercialisation phase of the second-generation scene. Exponents of the third generation were labelled as hip, for sure, but by the time they came onto the scene – as prominent individuals or collectively, under the umbrella of BoomBox or nu rave – the scene had lost its cutting edge. This does not make the individual perpetrators less hip. It is just that the third generation came about as the second-generation Hoxtonites' scene reached maturity. Like it or not, the scene had, by then, been discovered by the commercial world – albeit the more adventurous brands and agencies, who were ready for a new story. Things could not be kept underground for long.

More importantly, if the trajectory of hip happenings relied on the practitioners being the first to know, then the third generation did not bring about a new set of values. The third generation did not rebel against the second (why would they – they were the same scene). This means that third-generation Hoxtonites took for granted the 'street and chic' ideology of the second generation and they adopted its means of communication (events, collaborations, the hip circuit), and even operated in the same postcode. What happened, though, is that the third generation evolved into a new, cool package – a commercialised version of the second generation (and fully endorsed by it). The rise of the third-generation Hoxtonites was therefore the culmination of a trend rather than a whole new raw subculture with a new ethos that challenged all that the scene had previously patronised. It was the Hoxtonites' 'tipping point'.

The third generation's rise coincided with a market need for new ways of communicating the cool factor to the mainstream. The luxury brand sector needed an image refreshment to counter the detrimental reputation it had acquired thanks to the 'nouveau riche'. The cool youth sector was desperate for a

new 'street' thing. Dance culture, rap, graffiti and skateboarding had all reached the point of commercial overkill. Even manufactured pop starlet Avril Lavigne was singing about a 'skater boi' in the pop charts. Things could not get any more mainstream. Both sectors (luxury and youth) would resort to Hoxton as the one significant source of cool.

Younger and more commercially savvy than the second generation, the third generation was ready to oblige. Parallel to this, key characters from the second generation were turning to more commercial enterprises. In fact, the second generation would have a major influence by harbouring the third and managing its commercial success. There was no discontinuity between the two generations, let alone rupture. It was the same scene: the BoomBox strand ran direct from the 'Mandi clique' while the 'Michael clique' led to nu rave.

The rise of the third generation also coincided with a new technological development: the advent of Web 2.0. From then on, pressure on anything creative would be high, as the discovery of the latest thing happened faster. This, in turn, meant that if there were something new, there would be less time for it to develop. This is also a challenge that faces any future subculture. The second-generation Hoxtonites were perhaps the last true London subculture, as their incubation stage occurred before the advent of Web 2.0, and therefore away from the trend-spotter's gaze. By the time the third generation took shape, self-promotion became the norm. Scenes became platforms for showcasing individuals, rather than subcultural collectives. This is not to undermine the impact of the third generation, but it does raise some ideological issues, which I shall examine in the next chapter.

BoomBox

Described as 'the best weekly party in the world' by veteran London club reviewer Dave Swindells, BoomBox became a real sensation. Swindells' word is not to be taken lightly. When it comes to London's club history, this man has seen it all: from the extreme dress-up of Taboo that shaped trends in the second half of the 1980s to the extreme dress-down of Shoom, the seminal house club, which kickstarted the rave scene in the 1990s. BoomBox, in its own place and time, had a comparable influence on the next generation of clubs. BoomBox only lasted for about 18 months but its impact on the Hoxtonite scene was deep. From this nucleus, it caused a storm among the global opinion-forming network, as news of it gradually spread

outwards through hip's concentric circles. The aftershock of such a powerful and fashionable earthquake is often felt for longer than the actual club's life. Ephemera is the essence of a club like BoomBox – by the time everyone's heard about it, it's gone. The impact of BoomBox should therefore also be measured in terms of the opportunities it opened up for its instigators once it had been laid to rest. Even Ponystep would gain its kudos by virtue of being 'the new thing by the guys behind BoomBox'. Off the back of the sensation BoomBox caused within the edgy fashion community, even prestige brands such as Jean Paul Gaultier would want to be associated with the latest hype so as to be on trend among opinion formers.

So what was BoomBox? Ostensibly, it was simply the club night that followed Family. The difference was that by the time it became BoomBox, Richard knew much more about running a club and was developing a network based around his vision. Another important difference is timing. Unlike Family and its earlier incarnation, Golf Sale, BoomBox, when it arrived, came to epitomise the carefree creativity of London's fashion scene at a time when there was renewed interest in the city's extravagant style. As Richard said: 'Everyone wanted to be the first to come.' For all the aura of sophistication surrounding BoomBox, its main attraction was its simplicity: it was a social club in a bar on a Sunday night that drew the arty and fashionable local crowd, as opposed to those who scoured Shoreditch in search of indiscriminate entertainment (at least until word spread). 'Come and be fabulous' was its motto. By this time, a whole dressing-up Hoxtonite scene had sprung up – from the seeds sown by Kashpoint. (Whereas the Kashpoint crowd had been about DIY sartorial experimentation at its purest, almost bordering on performance art in some cases, the BoomBox dressers were a touch more sophisticated.)

By this point, there was another new wave of young designers directly inspired by the clubs and the off-schedule designers of the early noughties, who had paved the way. By the time the new guys hit the scene, fashion incubators and awards were already in place, the resources of which they benefited from early on in their careers (unlike their predecessors). There was a style known as the 'local designer look', Gareth Pugh being a prime example. The other dominant look was created out of the charity shop dump-bins. Occasionally, there was some nudity, such as bare breasts. This look had been around since Family. A local 'band' called No Bra, in existence ever since the early days of Kashpoint, springs to mind. No Bra was the brainchild of Suzanne, a singer and performance artist, who occasionally sported... no bra. I have also seen her happily wearing a moustache. Even though

wearing no bra never caught on in mainstream clubs, it was that kind of free spirit that made the underground experience unique. Other than extravagant clothes, there was a lot of make-up at BoomBox. Many punters made such an effort to paint their faces that they truly became works of art. However, there was not one single dress or make-up style that could be called the 'BoomBox look'. Rather, freaky dressing in general became its identity, coupled with uninhibited behaviour. Impromptu performances would often take place. All of this contributed to the thrill of being there.

The door policy at BoomBox was stringent. It was free to get in but the crew reserved the right to turn people away. If the queue outside got too long, the promoters prioritised friends within it, the regular clubbers who made an effort to dress up and people who could spread the word (obviously, you had to know who these were). It was vital to have the right 'door bitch'. 'Exclusivity keeps them wanting more' became the rule governing BoomBox. Of course, this is also where the dreaded 'Are you on the guest list?' would be asked. The question became synonymous with the absurd rules and regulations imposed by club security, which often got in the way of having a good time. Unfortunately, though, that is the nature of the game once the hype kicks in. On high-profile nights, the process of getting into a BoomBox-branded club could be frustrating. Outside special occasions, BoomBox started to draw 'people who read about it in magazines'. It was not a wannabe club to begin with, but became so owing to the fact that it...

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INFLUENCE ON THE STYLE INDUSTRY

In Search of the New Black

The style industry's cyclical search for 'the new black' began afresh when innovation ran dry. When fashion was in need of a new story, all eyes turned to London, the eccentric fashion capital neglected by fashion's big hitters during the first half of the noughties. By that time, London's underground scene had matured into a hub where radical ideas thrived. Here, prominent characters and more specific talent-incubators would emerge. With the ever-growing interest in the Hoxton scene, coupled with its constant growth, these platforms would transform radical underground styles and practices, once perceived as anti-establishment, into something more palatable for the mainstream fashion industry.

The underground influence is visible in the way both high-end and high street

fashion adopted underground idioms. In this context, there were two main strands of influence: on the one hand, the British Fashion Council focused resources on turning London's unique position as the most diverse and creative fashion city into a brand. On the other, the street influence was 'directional'. This meant that it shaped the overall trends found in mainstream fashion stores.

The BFC and London's 'Edgy' USP

The British Fashion Council (BFC) was established in 1983 as a non-profit organisation in charge of representing, promoting and otherwise supporting British fashion. This included the orchestration of the bi-annual London Fashion Week. Traditionally, London Fashion Week was predominantly a west London affair, associated with the world of high-end fashion. The East End had no 'high' fashion until the rise of the second-generation Hoxtonites (except, perhaps, for Alexander McQueen, an Eastender initially working in Hoxton Square). In the first half of the noughties, the style division between west and east London still operated, but the fashion establishment was growing curious about the eastern commotion.

The BFC has always been partial to new talent. As early as 1993, it set up a sponsorship scheme called New Gen (as mentioned earlier) intended to act as a launch pad for new designers. New Gen was awarded in the form of a cash sum to be used to fund a catwalk show at London Fashion Week, together with free usage of a central venue and a free stand at the London Fashion Week Exhibition, the main BFC-endorsed trade show. The fashion year always runs a season ahead: when the winter collections are about to appear in stores, next summer's outfits are appearing on the catwalk, and vice versa. A New Gen designer either got sponsorship for the catwalk show, the static exhibition or both. The New Gen sponsorship scheme was usually awarded for a few fashion seasons; an average of three but never exceeding four. New Gen winners from the 1990s who went on to enjoy international success included Antonio Berardi, Clements Ribeiro, Julien Macdonald, Matthew Williamson and, last but not least, Alexander McQueen, who received the New Gen award in 1993, its first year. Interestingly, McQueen only received support for the static exhibition rather than the catwalk show, which might have been part of the reason he chose to stage his own DIY off-schedule catwalk.

In 2000, it was the turn of Marjan Pejoski to receive New Gen. He pretty much stole the show straight from graduation with what 'eyewitnesses' remember

to this day as the most weird and wonderful display of extravagance. Marjan's catwalk show was more of a conceptual performance than a traditional fashion runway show. Björk's notorious egg-laying swan dress emerged from this early...

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INFLUENCE ON THE COMMUNICATION INDUSTRY

The 'Curated' Event and the 'Hip Circuit'

The interest of the mainstream communication industry in the underground scenes coincided with a crisis of innovation when it came to communicating the cool-factor. In a climate where brands had to pay increasingly more for increasingly less consumer attention, brand communication began to focus resources on getting free media coverage. This meant redirecting some investment from costly advertising and focusing instead on tactics that would get you press attention. With this in mind, brands (brand managers or their agencies) began to turn to underground events and to seek scenesters who'd provide the hip element to act as a press hook. Scenesters were getting a lot of press without even having to pay for a PR.

The scenesters' conquest of mainstream brands came about through their being solicited by established communication agencies to work as the cool arm on specific client briefs. Or else, they set up their own small communication agencies (usually somewhere between event management and PR), thus bypassing the middlemen and taking corporate budgets away from established communication agencies. Finally, some people from the scene were directly employed in brand marketing clientside (meaning they worked for the brand) on cool credentials alone. We have already seen how the Hoxtonites became purveyors of cool for image-building and how their influence was visible in the style industries. What remains to be seen is how the communication industry more generally adopted subcultural idioms, just as the guerrilla-style marketing once employed by scenesters became the cool marketing of the 1990s, and subsequently spread beyond the cool-brand sector.

The origins of the new cool communication were in the 'curated' underground event of the early noughties, which was a reaction to the branded mega club and superstar DJ (and their colossal fees). The underground scene began to adopt another kind of entertainment away from the mainstream's attention, whether it was dress-up clubs such as Kashpoint in London, or private parties such as

those organised by La Johnson in Paris, or indeed Cast Off's knitting parties and other themed events. Common to all these events was the way they acted as promotional platforms for new talent as well as networking webs for the similar-minded. These occasions attracted the non-conformists who rejected compartmentalisation within the established worlds of arts, crafts, fashion and the in-between industries. At the same time, the concentration of alpha trendsetters at those parties would in turn attract opinion formers. This is where the commercial value of such gatherings began to germinate.

Initially, the scenesters themselves solicited the interest of brands. This scene was not hostile to branding, but rather than indiscriminately seeking money at any cost, it was more a matter of trying to do things on your own terms. Essentially, you needed a brave and bold brand manager to become your partisan within the corporation. So, if you were Cast Off looking for a commercial partner, you wanted to work with someone who understood the spirit of Cast Off rather...