My Future Positively Glittered

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In the late 1970s, a young man's future...positively glittered before him...

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Those Landmark Years

For two years, I'd worshipped at the altar of those artists who had either immediately predated the age of Modernism of ca. 1880-1920, or been part of its Banquet Years, and beyond into the Golden Twenties, the AnnÃ©es folles and so on. However, in 1976, a gaudy new era started to influence the way I dressed and acted, and for much of that year, I dressed down in a workmanlike uniform of red windcheater, white tee-shirt and cuffed jeans as worn by Dean in â Rebel Without a Causeâ .

Dean had died a week to the day before I was born in late 1955, and the 20th anniversary of his death appeared to exert a strong influence on rising Pop stars such as John Miles and Slik's Midge Ure. Slik were one of the biggest bands in Britain in 1976, with an image straight out of â Rebelâ or a dozen lesser fifties delinquent movies. Sadly for them, though, and for many other bands who'd surfed the Glam Rock wave or emerged in its wake, they would be unjustly sidelined by the Punk uprising.

As entranced as I was the fifties, there were still time when I reverted to the old escapist dandy image I'd adopted in defiance of what I saw as the leaden drabness of post-Hippie Britain, while discovering Modernist giants such as Baudelaire, Wilde, Gide, and Cocteau for the first time.

One of these occasions came during the dying days of a famous long hot summer, when I wore top hat and tails and my fingernails painted bright red like some kind of hellish vision from Weimar Berlin to a party hosted by a friend from Brooklands. It was mid-September, and I know that to be a fact because I was supposed to have been at sea at the time on the minesweeper HMS Fittleton.

I think it was only a couple of days afterwards that Fittleton capsized and sank to the bottom of the North Sea following a tragic accident involving another larger ship, the frigate HMS Mermaid. It resulted in the loss of twelve men, most of whom I knew personally, given that only weeks earlier I'd spent a few days on Fittleton with more or less exactly the same crew.

She'd set sail from Shoreham in Sussex on the 11th of September 1976 with the intention of reaching the port of Hamburg on the 21st for a three day Official Visit, but never arrived. On the 20th, she took part in the NATO exercise "Teamwork" some 80 miles off the Dutch coast in the North Sea, after which she was ordered to undergo a Replenishment at Sea with the 2500 ton frigate HMS Mermaid. It was during this manoeuvre that the bow waves of the frigate inter-reacted with those of the sweeper to cause the two to collide.

For some reason I'd earlier decided to opt out of the trip by pleading sickness. It was a decision that came to haunt me, despite the fact that had I taken part in the RAS manoeuvre I'd almost certainly have been assigned to what is known as the Tiller Flat, as had been the case on many previous occasions during exercises of this kind. This would have put me below deck, making escape difficult, although far from impossible. In other words, I may or may not have survived the accident.

Of the twelve who didn't survive I knew three quite well, and they were all men of remarkable generosity of spirit and sweetness of disposition, what I'd call natural gentlemen, and it broke my heart to think of what happened to them. I so wanted to comfort my shipmates for their loss, to bond with them and be part of what

they were going through. I wanted to have survived like them. I went over it all again and again in my mind, until I drove myself almost insane with regret and grief. Once more I'd taken the easy way out, but this time it wouldn't be so easy for me to forget or explain away.

Looking back, I canâ t help thinking that 1977 was a far darker year than those that came before it, mainly perhaps because it was marked by the violent irruption into the British cultural mainstream of Punk. From its London axis, it spread like a raging plague throughout that landmark year, even infecting the most genteel suburbs with an extreme and often horrifying sartorial eccentricity, which, fused with a defiant DIY ethic and brutal back-to-basics Rock produced something utterly unique even by the standards of the time.

I was assaulted for the first time by the monstrous varieties of dress adopted by the early Punks while strolling along the Kings Road in what I think may have been January, and it would only be a matter of time before I too hoped to astound others the way they'd done me. However, for most of â 77, I dressed in a muted form which first took shape as a pair of cream brogue winklepickers, which I went on to supplement with black slip-ons with gold side buckles, mock- crocodile skin shoes with squared off toes, and a pair of black Chelsea boots, all perilously pointed.

My new look evolved by degrees at the endless series of parties I attended as one after the other of my old Pangbourne pals celebrated their 21st in houses and apartments in various corners of trendy West and Central London. Of all of these, I was perhaps closest with future oil magnate Chris, who was still finding his feet in Londonâ s most exalted social circles. These included a friend of Chrisâ from the north of England who forged cutting edge images for some of the most powerful trendsetters in Rock music. I joined them a couple of times at Maunkberrys in Jermyn Street; and apart from the Sombrero in High Street Ken, it was the classiest club my eyes had ever seen.

Being the suburban rube I was, I thought the style that dominated London's club land was somehow Punk-related, but I was way off the mark. It was the antithesis of the middle class hippie look that was still widespread throughout the UK, but deployed for posing, and dancing to the sweetest Soul music, not as a gesture of violent social dissent. It was partly the realm of the Soul Boys, whose love of black dance music was a legacy of the Mods and Skins that preceded them. While the Soul Boys were largely working class hard nuts from various dismal London suburbs, some Soul lovers were in fact not Soul Boys at all, so much as elegant trendies with a penchant for floppy college boy fringes, plaid shirts worn over white tee-shirts, straight leg jeans, and winklepickers.

The Soul Boys also favoured the wedge haircut, which could be worn with streaks of blond or red or even green, brightly-coloured peg-top trousers and winklepickers or plastic beach sandals. Speaking of the wedge, it was taken up at some point in the late 1970s by a faction of Liverpool football fans who'd developed a taste for European designer sportswear while travelling on the continent for away matches. Thence, the Casual subculture was spawned, and its passion for designer labels persists to this day among British working class youth in every small town and shopping mall throughout the land , although the Casuals themselves have long disappeared.

The Restless and the Riotous

By the summer, I was working as a sailing instructor in Palamos on Spain's Costa Brava, but I was idle and incompetent, and after a few months I got the sack. Yet, I chose to stay on in Palamos, parading around town by day, while spending most of my evenings at the Disco where I discovered Donna Summerâ s â Love Trilogyâ .

As much as I loved the party life of a Disco kid, what I wanted most of all was fame. I wanted the endless hedonism too, but enjoyed as a successful working actor like golden boys Peter Firth or Gerry Sundquist. The

problem was, I wasnâ t really cut out for the task. Granted, I had the pretty boy looks, but very few actors, or even musicians, become truly successful on the strength of looks alone, and this was especially true of the seventies, an age without MP3s or My Space or endless TV talent showcases.

I'd not yet appeared in a single play, except for a handful at Pangbourne, which included no less than three in drag. One of these had me standing onstage for a few brief minutes without uttering a single word. Another was as a maid in a one-act play by Shaw called "Passion, Poison and Petrifaction", which saw me clomping around in drag in studded military boots, while speaking in a hysterical high-pitched voice. I can remember bringing the house down with that one. I also played a society beauty engaged in some kind of illicit liaison with my close friend Roman, but the name of the play escapes me. My only male role was as an effeminate psychopath in a little known Agatha Christie one-acter called â The Ratsâ , and if the praise of the college nurse was anything to go by, it showed real promise. When all's said and done, though, I was hardly a National Youth Theatre wunderkind.

In terms of my other "talents", I'd written a few simple songs on the guitar, but I still couldnâ t play bar chords. I wasn't a natural born genius like my cousin Rod. My singing voice was good, though, and already quite versatile. As a would-be writer, I'd filled countless pages with endlessly corrected notes, but there was nothing tangible to show for it all. It could hardly be said then that my future positively glittered before me.

My final trip with the RNR came towards the end of the summer. Lofty Oâ Shea wasnâ t sailing with us, but I had other mates to raise Cain with, such as the aristocratic Damon Cates.

He was a tall redheaded young man of about 26 who looked a little like the youthful Edward Fox, with a trace perhaps of Old Etonian actor, Damian Lewis. Like me, he loved music and fashion and the Soul Boy and Punk Rock scenes - I think he was a regular at the Pantiles night club in Bagshot - and we hit it off from our very first meeting back at the President. He later confided in me about his early life which had been marked by one tragedy after the other, and his quiet and courteous manner masked a troubled inner life which he didn't like to flaunt any more than he did an ability to look after himself in any situation no matter how violent.

I can remember one night in a south coast bar when for some reason an inebriate sailor took a serious dislike to me and was clearly keen to do some serious damage to my pretty face, when Damon stood in and caused the sailor to back off. You overestimated his refinement at your peril. I can imagine though that there were those who wondered how he ended up serving as a rating, as they would have done me. I'm thinking especially of some of the young guys from the division that sailed in tandem with us that summer to the port of Ostend in Belgium.

There was a time when, as some of these hard young seamen were gathering in an Ostend street for a scrap with some locals who had offended them, Damon and I made it clear we had no intention of joining in. This prompted one of their number, a waiflike little sailor of about 16 or 17 to turn to us with a look of utter bewilderment on his beardless face and ask, "What's wrong with youse guys?", before joining his mates for the impending riot.

Damon just didn't see the point of fighting for the sake of it but he was no coward as I've already made quite clear. This secret inner strength would eventually see him being commissioned as an officer in the Royal Navy, which had been his destiny all along; but not mine. My time with the London Division, RNR came to an end in late 1977 with a surprisingly positive character report, which I was very grateful for. If military life had never been for me, it's a part of who I am, and my story would be all the poorer without it.

Even later in the summer I joined the former Merchant Navy College in Greenhithe, Kent, as a trainee Radio Officer.

I formed several close friendships there; but closest of all was with Jayant, a lovable hard nut with a thick London accent who'd been born into nearby Gravesend's large Asian community. Rough as he was, he was loyal and kind-hearted towards those he liked and trusted, and for a time we were pretty well inseparable. I used to endlessly nag about his attitude, not that there was anything wrong with it - he was one of the kindest guys I've ever known - but he had a habit of talking tough, which intimidated some people, including myself at times. As things turned out, I was the one who quit college first, even if he did follow me soon afterwards, which caused him to wonder why Iâ d taken the moral high ground in the first place. I couldn't answer.

It was through Jay I think that I started going to discos at Gravesend's Woodville Hall, subject of the versified piece below, which was based on an unfinished short story written in '78 or '79. Pretty well every week for a while, a gang of us from the college would head out to the Woodville Hall, where we were treated like visiting royalty by the - mainly white and Asian - kids, whose outlandish outfits stood out in such striking contrast to the industrial bleakness of their surroundings.

English suburban life in those days didn't include mobile phones or DVD players, personal computers or the world wide web, so was a fertile breeding ground for wild and eccentric youth cults such as Punk, New Romanticism, Goth et al. These last two were still in the future, but their seeds had been sown during the heyday of Punk, whose influence pervaded the Hall together with the Soul Boy look. The Woodville Hall Soul Boys knew how to dance like you wouldn't believe...anybody would think they were students of Jazz ballet or something, but they were just ordinary working class kids, who became superstars once they took to the dance floor.

The Woodville Hall Soul Boys

Soon after I'd paid

My sixty

0r seventy pence,

I found myself

In what I thought

Was a miniature London.

I saw girls

In chandelier earrings,

In stiletto heels,

Wearing evening

Dresses,

Which contrasted with

The bizarre

Hair colours

They favoured:

Jet black

0r bleach blonde,

With flashes of

Red, Purple

0r green.

Some wore large

Bow ties,

Others unceremoniously

Hanged

Their school ties

Round their

Necks.

Eye make-up

Was exaggerated.

The boys all had

Short hair,

Wore mohair sweaters,

Thin ties,

Baggy,

Peg-top trousers

And winklepicker shoes.

A band playing

Raw street rock

At a frantic speed

Came to a sudden,

Violent climax...

Melodic, rhythmic,

Highly danceable

Soul music

Was now beginning

To fill the hall,

With another group

0f short-haired youths...

Smoother, more elegant,

Less menacing

Than the previous ones.

These well-dressed

Street boys

Wore well-pressed pegs

0f red or blue...

They pirouetted

And posed...

Pirouetted and posed.

Farewell Gilded Youth

Soon after returning from the Merchant Navy College in December '77, I auditioned for a place on the three year drama course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in the City of London, which was really what I'd wanted to do in the first place.

Incredibly, as I'd already failed two earlier auditions for RADA, Guildhall accepted me for the course beginning in autumn 1978. I was exhilarated; but that didn't stop me sinking further into the nihilistic Punk lifestyle. Having been blown away by the hairstyle of one of a small gang of Punks I knew by sight from nights out in Dartford in late '77, I decided to imitate it a few weeks later. It was spiked in classic Punk style, with a kind of a halo of bright blond taking in the front of the head, both sides, and a strip at the nape of the neck. I've part of a photograph of myself wearing this style with a long Soul Boy fringe at the front, before I eventually had it cut into the spikes. By the spring of 1978, I'd shorn it all off, and I looked like a skinhead.

It was genuinely dangerous being a Punk in the late '70s, and you lived in constant fear of attack or abuse if you chose to dress like one. After all, Punk's culture of insolence and outrage was extreme even by the standards of previous British youth cults such as the Teds, the Rockers, the Mods, the Greasers, the Skins, the Suedeheads and the Smoothies.

Britain in those days was a country still dominated to some degree by pre-war moral values, which were Victorian in essence, and a cultural war was being fought for the soul of the nation. It could be said therefore that Punks were the avant-garde of the new Britain in a way that would be impossible today. This explains the incredible hostility Punks attracted from some members of the general public.

Close by to where I shared a house with my parents in the furthermost reaches of south west London where suburbia meets country I saw Hersham Punk band Sham '69 shortly before they became nationally famous. I already knew their lead singer Jimmy Pursey by sight; at least I think it was him I saw miming to Chris Spedding's "Motorbiking" at a Walton disco one night.

The gig took place in a poky hall above a pub in the centre of a large bleak industrial estate, itself surrounded by small drab council estates and endless rows of council houses. I was often there on a Sunday in the late 70s, usually with my brother and friends, but sometimes alone.

On one occasion I can recall, the usual Disco or Pop gave way to a violent Punk Rock anthem which saw the tiny dance space being invaded by deranged pogo-dancers as if theyâ d been summoned by some malignant deity. On another, a Ted revivalist, a follower of classic Rock and Roll who favoured flashy fifties-style clothing, tried to start some trouble with me in the toilet. At this point, Frankie, another Ted who'd befriended me about a year previously when I looked like an extra from a â 50s High School flick stepped in with the magical words: "He's a mate!" His intervention may have saved me from a hiding that night, because Teds had a loathing of Punks informed by their essential conservatism. To them, Punks probably seemed to have no respect for anything. There was a time Frankie almost imploringly me asked me whether I was really into "this Punk lark" or whatever he called it, and I assured him I wasn't. I may even have added that I still loved the fifties, which was actually the truth to an extent; but that wasnâ t the point. The fact is that I lied to him to look good in his eyes, which was a pretty low thing to do to a friend.

On New Years Eve, Jay and I went to a party in London's swanky West End. It was one of the last - perhaps even the very last - in a long series of celebrations I'd gone to throughout '77 mainly as a result of friends from Pangbourne reaching the landmark age of 21. It was also one of the last times I ever saw Jay.

Before arriving, Jay and I met up as arranged with Chris, my close friend from Pangbourne, and as soon as the introductions were over, Jay saw fit to impress us with a truly terrifying solo display of his lethal street fighting skills. "I'm suitably impressed", said Chris, and he looked it too, and he was hardly a wimp himself despite his upper class accent, but Jay was something else again.

We got on like a house on fire that insane night which at one point saw me pouring a full glass of beer over my head. What the beautiful dancer I'd spent most of the evening with thought of a nice guy like me doing a thing like that she didn't say. In the late '70s, I met so many people who might have done anything for me, and yet my one true passion appeared to be the creation of endless drunken scenes, and a party wasn't a party for me in those days unless I'd caused one, after which I simply moved on. I've got plenty of time to myself to reflect on it all now...and the sheer waste of youth, of life, of love makes me weep.

In the spring of 1978, I arrived in the city of Fuengirola on Spainâ s Costa del Sol, with the intention of helping set up a sailing school with a young Englishman whom my father had recently befriended.

It had all been prearranged between them, but as things turned out, the project came to nothing. However, I stayed on, living first in an apartment Adam had kindly set me up in, then in a little hotel in town, and finally, rent-free, with an American friend, Scarlett. She was one of a handful of US ex-pats living in Fuengirola alongside young people from Australia, Britain, Ireland, Germany, South America and other parts of the world.

It was a hedonistic atmosphere, and I wasted little time in becoming part of it. I spent my nights at the Tam Tam night club, where I set about establishing myself as Fuengirolaâ s very own Tony Maneroâ ¦in Punk Rock attire.

It was my first year as a Punk, in point of fact, and among the clothes I favoured were a black cap-sleeved wet-look tee-shirt, drainpipe jeans of black or green, worn with black studded belt, festooned with silver chain filched from a Spanish restroom, and kept in place by multiple safety pins, fluorescent pink teddy boy socks, and white shoes with black laces like the ones Iâ d seen on the cover of a 999 album. At one stage, I even wore a safety pin â disinfected by being dipped into a drink â in my left earlobe, but I removed this once my lug had started to pulsate.

After a few weeks, I became lead singer for the Tam Tam house band, and would typically wear so much make-up onstage that one occasion, the microphone became smeared in lipstick. I was always short of money, but I could order anything I wanted from the bar at the Tam Tam, and when I was flat broke, my close friend Laura bought me toasted cheese sandwiches to keep me going.

We spent very little time on the beach, but were often to be found at Lew Hoadâ s famous Campo de Tenis, that is, when I wasnâ t rehearsing with the band, and in the evening, I was often to be found at Lauraâ s parentsâ house, putting on the slap, and perhaps even painting my nails a gaudy shade of red, before heading along to the Tam Tam to do my gig.

However, some nights we preferred to get away from it all to another part of town, and I can still recall the thrill of being alone with her in the demi-light of the Disco, while the evening was still young, hopelessly unaware that such moments are rare even in youth, and get steadily rarer as life forges on. On one occasion as we were strolling through town by night, the legend that was racing champion James Hunt called out her name before emerging from the darkness. They exchanged a few words before Hunt vanished back into the night as suddenly as heâ d arrived. I could scarcely believe my eyes, but it was that magical a summer

However, I had to return to London to take my place at the Guildhall once it was over. After all, I was going to be a star, wasn't Iâ ¦

A year later, I was back, but not in Fuengirola, even though the guys from the band had so wanted me to reclaim my place as front manâ ¦Coco es el unico, as the sticks man once said about me. No, Iâ d chosen to go with my parents to La Ribera instead, and I felt a deep and overwhelming sense of exhaustion as I stretched out in the Costa Calida sun, but I don't recall being especially disappointed by the fact that only days earlier I'd been asked to leave the Guildhall, or rather strike out on my own as a performer. I was resigned to it, even though my dream of being a gilded youth at the Guildhall had barely lasted a year. It must have been the searing heat that made me feel so burned out.

Just before quitting Fuengirola the previous summer of '78, I'd been approached with an offer of singing in the Canary Islands, which I turned down for the sake of the Guildhall. Who knows where it might have led had I said yes instead, but then it would have been a crying shame to have missed out on the Guildhall, even though it all ended in tears. It would take an entire separate volume to list the incredible experiences that arose out of my time at that much lauded place of learning, of which my own dear dad Pat had been an alumnus before meâ ¦but Iâ ll be brief in recounting my own.

What I will say is that I was involved with a string of Rock and Pop bands, and that with one after the other of these I performed at the Folk Nights that were staged on a sporadic basis in the basement of the nearby Lauderdale Tower in the Barbican area of central London.

Through one of them, Rockets, I was talent-scouted as lead singer for a guitarist of genius who was hoping to form a band at the Guildhall, and clearly thought I'd cut it as a front man, but for some reason, the band was never formed. He went on to play and write for one of the world's leading Rock superstars, something he's been doing now since 1990.

At one point he briefly joined a Guildhall-based Jazz-Funk outfit with another then friend of mine. That band would go on to become one of the most successful Pop acts of the eighties, chalking up one hit after the other in a Britain in which Jazzy Dance music was favoured by flash boys in white socks and tasselled loafers. I was even invited to an early rehearsal, at a time when they might have done with a front man like meâ ¦but of course, I didnâ t go.

Through another of my groups, Narcissus, I found only disgrace and humiliation, not once but twice.

The first time we played together was just prior to the forming of the Rockets, and although it had been a disaster, due to my drunken upstaging of the other band members, at least I got a good gig out of it, thanks to the kindness of Crispian, our piano player. Furthermore, it was through the Rockets that I was offered the gig with Don. However, rather than wait for the call from him, I went on ahead and re-formed the Rockets with original members John on drums, and Simon on guitar, and it was a total fiasco.

I slapped on the make-up, and Simon and John followed suit, but being relatively untainted by personal vanity, the results were unsettling. Sweet-natured Simon painted his Botticellian features like an ancient pagan warrior, while gentle giant John saw fit to smother his with military-style camouflage. Not surprisingly, our set was accompanied by a riot of heckling which although far from malicious, ultimately provoked me to irritation, and I ended up tossing my plectrum into the audience with a sarcastic, "Here's to all my loving fans!", or something equally pathetic.

I can't help thinking that a petulant outburst did no end of harm to my reputation, because the chutzpah of the natural leader who demands and gets attention and respect through the sheer force of his personality was never among my gifts. Rather I was blessed with the seductive charm of the social climber for whom alpha status comes through the subtle exercise of exquisite manners. In this respect I was perhaps a little like Julien Sorel, anti-hero of Stendhal's "The Scarlet and the Black" who despite humble origins, succeeds in ascending to the very top of the social ladder, only to allow a single act of madness to destroy all his good work.

My final band was the '50s revivalist act Z Cars, which even won a small fan base for itself. We were Carl Cool, front man and chief songwriter with a tattoo painted onto his shoulder, Robert Fitzroy-Square, the geek with the Buddy Holly horn rims, Dave Dean the hard man of the band with the donâ t mess with me stare, and Little Ricky Ticky, the baby at only 18 who could have been a heart throb had things worked out for us, which they didnâ t.

Things went wrong for us when one of the key members quit, and we replaced him with a close friend, Rhys, who was a far better musician than any of us. With his help, we tried to deviate from our usual three-chord doo-wop or Rock with more complex songs, starting with a tightly arranged version of Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right Mama", complete with harmony backing vocals. Sadly though, we werenâ t up to the task, and disillusion swiftly set in. By this time, Iâ d left the Guildhall anyway, and it just wasnâ t the same.

There had been emotional scenes at my farewell party held in the depths of the Barbican Estate's Lauderdale Tower, and some had cried openly at the thought of my leaving. During the course of the night, a very dear

friend, Tamsin, told me to contact a London-based impresario and agent well-known for offering young actors their very first positions within the entertainment industry. Her own brother had received his first break through this flamboyant and warm-hearted man, and heâ d recently caused a stir in a major starring role on TV . I took her advice and sure enough, he offered me my very first paid acting job as Christian the Chorus Boy - doubling as Joey the Teddy Bear -complete with furry ursine costume - in a pantomime tour of â Sleeping Beautyâ .

A few weeks after this had culminated at the Buxton Opera House, I was tendered the small part of Mustardseed in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", to be directed by Richard Cottrell at the Bristol Old Vic, at which point, I could have been forgiven for believing that quitting the Guildhall had been the best thing I ever didâ ¦but ohâ ¦the indescribable bliss of having passed that auditionâ ¦

This is the alternative roman Ã clef version, so some names have been changed. Moreover, this was published not as dated, but on the 21st July, 2010.

1977 1978?

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