

For the RECORD

With Record Store Day around the corner, Mary-Jane Wiltsher celebrates Notting Hill's independent music retailers

Leaf through dog-eared snapshots of 70s Notting Hill and you are reminded of a shabbier landscape of bedsits and brawls, scarred by carnival riots and populated by young creatives with big ideas. This was the world that Rough Trade was born into, an independent record shop that arrived on Kensington Park Road in '76 and rode the crest of London's roaring punk and reggae wave with owner Geoff Travis at the helm. It would go on to become the best independent record store in Britain and a pioneer of a do-it-yourself attitude to music production and distribution that fuelled its offspring label, Rough Trade Records.

With Record Store Day on the horizon, I arrive at this music lover's mecca (now on Talbot Road, where it moved in '78 after leasing rows) to meet co-owner and manager Nigel House, one of the original shop workers who bought Rough Trade from Geoff in the early 80s. Wallpapered with record sleeves and posters, the shop's interior charts a thousand songs, gigs and careers, referencing bands quintessentially associated with Rough Trade's label history: Stiff Little Fingers, The Smiths, The Strakes, The Libertines. 'It was my first job,' says Nigel, dragging himself away from a regular, here to collect a rare EP shipped over from Japan. 'The area was a bit like east London is now, with big houses split into flats and loads of students, artists and musicians living here. There were always kids coming in – lots of punks. We have an older clientele here now, more bankers and advertisers, but our Brick Lane shop gets the young people.'

Such is the way Rough Trade's two sister shops cater to a split modern following: trendy twentysomethings to the east, corporate high flyers to the

West. But, as Nigel points out, 'just cause you're a banker, doesn't mean you don't like your music.'

Despite the changing clientele, Nigel is confident that Rough Trade's identity remains unchanged. 'We've always tried to be outside of the mainstream, to offer something alternative, though there's not enough politics in mainstream music for my taste these days. I wish there was a bit more fire, a bit more passion.'

At ground level, it's the ability to cross reference and make informed suggestions that Rough Trade prides itself on; the staff's vast back-catalogue memories are a welcome port in a recommended downloads storm. In the competition with digital music consumption, the human element and refreshing nerd-speak of record shops is their biggest weapon. The shop is a community hub – in the time I'm there, a steady stream of locals, tourists and friends come and go, requesting



Rough Trade's history can be traced back to Notting Hill

Photos by Joe Lord



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everything from obscure Bowie material to the new My Bloody Valentine album.

'Essentially, people still want to talk about music,' states Nigel. 'You still need that, and Amazon can't give you it. When it comes down to it, it's still about recommending music and gauging what people might like. Of course, things like Spotify can make that process easier, it's a two way thing. We always listen to what customers ask for. It's fairly intangible but there's nothing like having that gut feeling – that intuition. I think of us as being like a specialist cheese shop or a good local butcher. People want to come to places like this for that little bit extra.'

To encourage discovery, Rough Trade shelves by genre rather than alphabetically. 'You want people to uncover things,' explains Nigel. 'I was in HMV a while ago and they had The Pogues, Poison and the Pointer Sisters next to each other. That really highlighted to me that the alphabetical thing simply just doesn't work. Do you know Poison? They're this awful poodle soft-rock. And then you've got the Pointer Sisters who are pure disco.'

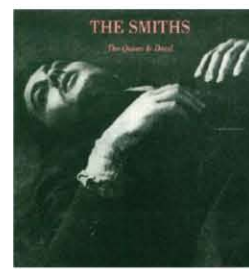
Nigel insists there's still complete eclecticism in what customers ask for, with an even vinyl to CD ratio. 'Vinyl sales went up 40% last year and I think they'll continue to rise,' he observes. 'It's a reaction to the digital world, the vinyl revival. Firstly, the sound is better, but it's also a way of telling people you don't just buy from Amazon or iTunes, you go to record shops for a bit of difference.'

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Gearing up for Record Store Day, Rough Trade has plenty of tricks up its well-worn industry sleeve. 'Lewis Watson will be playing outside, he's big in Radio 1, a bit of a singer-songwriter, and hopefully Edwyn Collins will be here too, he was in Orange Juice and is fantastic. We've also got this guy called Fimber Bravo, he plays steel drums and works with one of the members of Hot Chip. We try and make it fun.'

Positive by nature, Nigel is hopeful for the future. 'The internet can't give you everything. Our challenge is to make shops like ours exciting, to make people want to come to them. You want customers to be entertained.'

✦ Rough Trade will celebrate Record Store Day on 20 April at 130 Talbot Road, W11 1JA, 020 7229 8541; roughtrade.com



ROUGH TRADE'S EARLY HISTORY - KEY ALBUMS

Dr Alimantado – *Best Dressed Chicken in Town*, 1978
Stiff Little Fingers – *Inflammable Material*, 1979
Husker Du – *Zen Arcade*, 1984
The Smiths – *The Queen is Dead*, 1986

Ladbroke Grove's Mark Ronson is a Rough Trade fan



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SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL RECORD STORE



HONEST JON'S

A short stroll from Rough Trade – perhaps longer if weighed down by a host of special vinyl releases – is Honest Jon's. One of the capital's most famous record shops with a rich musical heritage dating back to '74, the walls are vividly papered with old blaxploitation posters. A global mix of soul, blues, jazz, folk and reggae form the backbone of the stock, with hip hop well accounted for and peripheral dance genres thrown in too, all efficiently catalogued. Run by Mark Ainley and Alan

Scholefield, who took on the shop from its original proprietors, the shop attracts music aficionados of all ages and runs a successful mail order business. Their record label of the same name, formed in 2002, is run in creative conjunction with Blur frontman Damon Albarn and has released compilation albums that explore the music of young black London, as well as collections of British folk, Afro-Cuban jazz from the Bronx and Jamaican dancehall. ✦ Honest Jon's, 278 Portobello Road, W10 5TE, 020 8969 9822; honestjons.com

SOUL AND DANCE EXCHANGE

Music and Video Exchange's jazzier sibling, Soul and Dance Exchange, accommodates all forms of contemporary dance and club music, catalogued according to sub genres and labels. They sell affordable second-hand LPs spanning soul, reggae and hip hop. Following a recent move, you can now find them upstairs from Music and Video Exchange. ✦ 38 Notting Hill Gate, W11 3HX, 020 7221 2793; mgshops.com



MUSIC AND VIDEO EXCHANGE

Part of Music and Goods Exchange Shops – one of the UK's long-standing chains of second-hand shops – Notting Hill's Music and Video Exchange strives to sustain its counter-culture aesthetic, packed to the rafters with rock, indie, pop, folk and rarities. Like Rough Trade, the music is arranged by genre to encourage a treasure hunter's attitude. Staff aim to give every record and CD a chance to sell, no matter how obscure or unpromising its appearance. Be sure to venture down to their bargain basement, chocked full with thousands of items that you can't find anywhere else as no regular stock is catalogued online.

✦ 38 Notting Hill Gate W11 3HX, 020 7243 8573; mgshops.com

