



GLOBALIZATION

LONDON ROCKS



Alfred Marshall, one of the founders of modern economics, once said that steelmaking was “in the air” in Sheffield.

The same thing can be said about the forging of rock music in London. Rock is in the air in Marshall’s sense of an ecosystem: London offers everything from record companies to recording studios to video houses. Rock is also in the air in a more literal sense: live venues such as the venerable Brixton Academy or the storied Hammersmith Apollo and the new O2 Arena pump music into the atmosphere several times a week.

You can find “made in London” stamped all over your record collection just as you can find “made in Sheffield” on your cutlery. Joni Mitchell saluted a “Chelsea Morning” (and gave the Clintons a name for their daughter). The Stranglers celebrated “Another Camden Afternoon.” The Kinks serenaded a “Waterloo Sunset.” The Jam and the Pogues both addressed songs to a “London Girl.” The Clash titled their album about urban

alienation “London Calling.” The ska revival band Madness celebrated London life in “A Day on the Town” and Coldplay memorialized London’s dead in “Cemeteries of London.” The Beatles put a London crosswalk on the cover of “Abbey Road.” Pink Floyd put Battersea Power Station on the cover of “Animals.”

Why is London such a great center of rock music? Partly because it always has been. London rather than New York was the capital of the rock explosion of the 1960’s. It was a London band — the Rolling Stones — that first bottled the Mississippi blues for the white masses. It was a London band — the Who — that declared all-out war on the middle-aged (“hope I die before I get old”). London bands may have dreamed of invading America (which, after all, gave the world the blues and Elvis), but American bands dreamed of conquering London — and flocked to smoky dives in Soho and drug-fueled parties in Bohemia.➔

By Adrian Wooldridge



Many of the talents that made London the capital of the Swinging Sixties burned themselves out. Jimmy Hendrix was 27 when he died at one of those drug-fueled parties, and Who drummer Keith Moon made it only to age 32. But the London scene kept renewing itself. London provided a base for the greatest psychedelic band of the 1970's, Pink Floyd, and the greatest glam-rock star of the 1970's and 1980's, David Bowie. London was the cradle of the punk revolution: The Clash may have complained that "London's burning with boredom now," but teenagers in coxcombs and clothes held together by safety pins gravitated there from across the world. Later it was the launching pad of Coldplay and Radiohead. It is true that Coldplay's bland offerings might have found a home anywhere, but where could you find a talent like Amy Winehouse outside North London? And where could you find vowels like Adele's outside the Estuary?

Rock is so much a part of London's heritage that you can tour historic pop music sites just as you can take a double-decker bus to see the royal palaces. The daylong London rock tour takes you to the local Tin Pan Alley, where the Stones cut their first record, Apple headquarters (the record company that long pre-dated the computer company), Abbey Road, Paul's house, Ringo's house, Jimmy Page's house, the house where Amy Winehouse lived and died, and the world's first Hard Rock Café.

Other British cities have burned brightly for a while. Liverpool produced the Mersey Sound and the incomparable Beatles. Manchester produced Factory Records and the incandescent Joy Division. But the Beatles soon decamped to London and the four corners of the earth. Factory Records eventually imploded. Other global cities have had their luminous decades as well: The New York of the early 60's boasted Bob Dylan and other folk rockers. San Francisco in the late 1960's

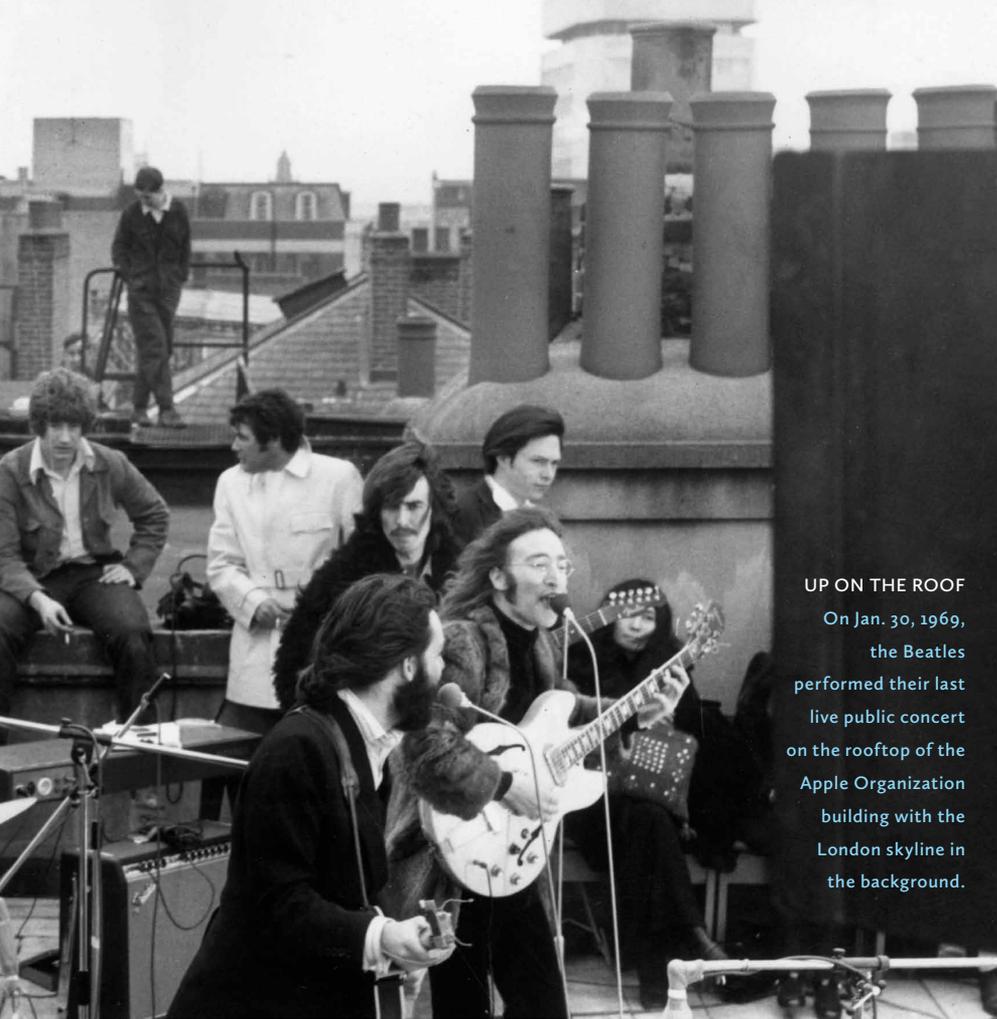


claimed the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. Stockholm produced Abba. Seattle spawned Nirvana and grunge. Detroit gave the rap world Eminem. But no other city — not even New York — has possessed London's breadth of styles or capacity for renewing itself. New York has gone through fallow phases. San Francisco and Seattle have only conquered niches. Stockholm took a decade to recuperate after giving birth to Abba. But London has endured.

London might not be the global capital of hip-hop, but it is a good No. 2 with Dizzee Rascal and Wiley. It might not be the *fons et origo* of dance music, but it has proved more enduring than Stockholm. It might not always be the hottest city in the world, but it always comes back with something new. People much younger than the author of this article claim that it is going through a particularly fertile period at the moment with underground genres such as U.K. garage, drum and bass, dubstep, 2-step and, most notably, grime. The

only rival to London is Los Angeles, but something about L.A.'s sun-baked rock comes across as lightweight compared with London's rain-soaked and angst-ridden repertoire.

London is a global capital of rock music partly because it is a global capital of "culture": from theater to music and from art to antiques, London boasts some of the world's best stages and bazaars. London has always monopolized the talents of an entire country. (America is much more sensible in scattering its talented people across a dozen great cities with a dozen different flavors.) Now it is sucking up the talents (and money) of huge swathes of the world from Russia to Eastern Europe to the Middle East. London is big and varied enough to provide a niche for everyone in the rock business. Megastars and moguls can live in mansions in Holland Park (as does Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Records). Struggling young bands can live in bed-sits in Brixton.



UP ON THE ROOF
On Jan. 30, 1969,
the Beatles
performed their last
live public concert
on the rooftop of the
Apple Organization
building with the
London skyline in
the background.

KEEP CALM AND MAKE MUSIC

London provides everything you need to make rock music: recording studios to lay down the music (and session musicians to make up for your band's deficiencies); record companies to distribute your products; video studios to provide visual candy; rock lawyers to negotiate your contracts and rock accountants to deal with the taxman; and live venues to help practice your craft or promote your latest album. The O2 Arena offers a state-of-the-art platform for the world's biggest bands while the pubs and dives of Soho and Camden are cheap venues for up-and-coming bands. And in every case London provides the grist of competition: If you fall out with one record company or get your wires

crossed with one rock accountant, you can always find another.

London has a secret ingredient that keeps the pot boiling: racial diversity. London is one of the most diverse cities in the world; about 30 percent of the city's 8 million people were born elsewhere. It is also one of the most integrated cities. In Notting Hill, Rastafarians rub shoulders with "trustafarians" (affluent young poseurs in dreadlocks), and in Brick Lane Muslims live in tenements once occupied by Jewish refugees. Many immigrant groups brought powerful musical traditions: Notting Hill started reverberating with the sound of reggae in the 1960's (and continues to celebrate West Indian music every year at the Notting Hill Carnival, despite

massive gentrification) while the East End celebrates the sounds of Bollywood. But these traditions have been enriched in the London melting pot. Dizzee Rascal produces hip-hop with a London accent. Tarkan, an Anglo-Turkish singer, and Eylem, a Turkish-Cypriot born in Chingford, mix traditional Turkish sounds with Western pop ("If you want a little Turkish delight I got some for you," runs Eylem's biggest hit. "Don't you know it's going to taste oh so right.") The genre known as grime combines hip-hop with Caribbean with a dash of punk. The East End produces traditional Indian music with an electronic beat.

London is currently seeing the biggest challenge to its pre-eminence since it established itself as a rock capital in the early 1960's. The challenge is coming not from New York or Seattle but from modern technology. Technology levels the playing field between geographical clusters just as it equalizes the differences between other agglomerations. A teenager with a Mac in Stockholm enjoys exactly the same reach as a teenager with a Mac in Stockwell: He or she can mix and record music and distribute it to the waiting world over the Internet. Technology also encourages volatility. Music fans can divert themselves with Bangladeshi *bangla* one moment and Swedish house the next. Is it possible for any city to create sustainable advantage in such an environment, particularly one that has some of the highest rents in the world?

But it would nevertheless be a mistake to bet against London: the great metropolis has something the Internet can never match — a conglomeration of people and a culture of creativity. The challenges to London's pre-eminence may be more fast and furious than ever before. They may also come from a much wider variety of places. But there is every reason to think that London will continue to endure. As Alfred Marshall said, "There's something in the air." R/F