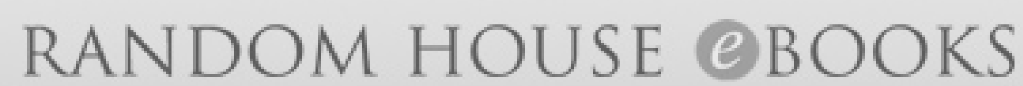

Simon Napier-Bell

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# About the Book

Money, sex and drugs. What more could you ask for, except perhaps a little music?

*Black Vinyl, White Powder* charts the amazing fifty-year history of the British music business in unparalleled scale and detail.

As a key player across the decades, Simon Napier-Bell – who discovered Marc Bolan and managed amongst others The Yardbirds and Wham! – uses his wealth of contacts and extraordinary personal experiences to tell the story of an industry that has become like no other.

Where bad behavior is not only tolerated but encouraged; where drugs are as important as talent; where aritsts are pushed to their physical and mental limits in the name of profit and ego.

Filled with the voices of hundreds of artists, managers, record company execs and producers, *Black Vinyl, White Powder* is the most entertaining and revealing history of English pop ever written.

*Also by Simon Napier-Bell*

You Don’t Have To Say You Love Me
(Ebury Press)

# BLACK VINYL WHITE POWDER

SIMON NAPIER-BELL

EBURY
PRESS

‘One of the most authoritative, intelligent, diligently researched, conscientiously indexed, and thoroughly unpretentious disquisitions on the history of the British pop scene yet written’

*Sunday Telegraph*

‘There is something of Oscar Wilde about Simon Napier-Bell, and it’s not just his name. A man of wealth and taste, capable of great works of art on occasion (‘You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me’ – I rest my case) yet bound by whim of iron to an underworld of crooks, charlatans and cheap, beautiful boys; that is, the music business… Many people have set out to write histories of the British popular music business, but only someone as scurrilous, suave and simply in there as Napier-Bell could bring to the job the extreme lack of gravitas that it takes to render such a tome nothing like a tepid, quiet-in-the-library bore and every bit as bittersweet, quicksilver and volatile as pop itself. The curator attitude to pop has brought many to grief before; it is the very lack of midnight oil burned, you sense, that makes this book so breathtakingly brilliant… It is this extremely rare ability to embrace what he loves even while holding it at arm’s length and calculating its worth to the nearest penny that makes Simon Napier-Bell such a giant amongst men and this book probably the greatest ever written about English Pop’

Julie Burchill, *Spectator*

‘The cold-print equivalent of a sparkling evening in the company of a world-class raconteur… in a welter of gossip, scams and statistics, Napier-Bell provides a one-stop-shop education in what the music business – as opposed to the

music itself – has always been about: get rich, get high, get laid'

Charles Shaar Murray, *Independent*

'Funny, entertaining and even shrewd'

*Sunday Times*

'Bitchy, glib, fun and shrewd… his honesty in writing such an engaging exposé of the business is to be cherished'

*Telegraph*

'Napier-Bell is a veteran of the music industry and this is his hilarious, insider history of the industry in Britain from the 1950s until now… honest but funny about life behind the scenes, the book cleverly weaves the story of its author's own transition from lowly roadie to big-shot manager into the story of the main events and movements in pop music… His preoccupation with trivia is what makes his book so compelling and informative. Napier-Bell knows that if you scratch the surface of pop music you will find more surface'

*Times Higher Educational Supplement*

'*Black Vinyl, White Powder* is a unique insider's guide to Britain's pop industry. For all its detail, it is Napier-Bell's jaunty prose and personal recollections that lift this book above any other comparable volume. Filled with both wit and sagacity, this should become every pop pundit's Bible'

*Attitude*

'I read it so fast I have to read it again'

Nicky Haslam, *Tatler*

‘Trotting out familiar tales of debauchery (Marianne Faithfull’s Mars bar, John Bonham’s coprophilia, Bowie’s 70s cocaine madness) with appropriate glee… there are some genuine insights into how things really work behind the scenes’

*Q*

‘An intelligently written book’

*Independent on Sunday*

‘An entertaining, gossipy history of the British pop business’

*Telegraph*

# A NOTE FOR THE READER

There are over 700 different people within the pages of *Black Vinyl White Powder*. To help you keep track of them you may occasionally find it useful to refer to the Cast of Characters at the back of the book.

# FOREWORD

This is a history of the British music business.

I didn't set out to write anything as grandiose as that – I simply went to see literary agent Julian Alexander to discuss writing a novel. He said it would be a good idea for me first to write a substantial book on my experiences in the music business, something more serious than my previous, rather flippant book, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. And he suggested a history of the British music industry.

To me that sounded like an impossible task, something a journalist or social historian should undertake. So instead, while I agreed that Julian could call it a history of the music business if he wanted to, I said I would write an insider's look at the business over the last forty years. I would divide the subject into categories – Management, Publishing, Sex, Drugs, Money etc., and that way, I wouldn't have to write it in chronological order. Neither would I have to base it on music or artists. For the truth is, my fascination with the music business has always been for the trivia, the gossip, the outrage and the surface gloss – the actual music has just been a backdrop, however diverting.

Julian liked the idea and asked me to write a forty-page presentation, which I did. Jake Lingwood at Ebury Press commissioned the book and we were in business.

I decided the best way to tackle the book was to make writing it as much fun as possible. I would spend three months having lunch with fifty or sixty old friends – managers, pop stars, A&R men – reminisce a bit and get things sorted out in my memory. I started with Harold

Pendleton, the creator of the Reading Festival and the owner of the Marquee Club. The result was a four-hour lunch during which we consumed five bottles of the best wine known to man. The next day I was unable to remember anything from our conversation that would contribute to a serious history of the music business (or even a flippant one), except perhaps the story of how Harold, having announced Dizzy Gillespie to 3,000 expectant jazz fans at the Royal Festival Hall, decided the best way back to his seat in the stalls was to jump over the orchestra pit in which he landed arse upwards to tumultuous applause.

For a while, I continued to enjoy myself eating lunch with old friends every day, but I soon came to realise that by using this less-than-scientific method of research the book could take five years to write and cost upwards of £50,000 on food and fine wine. So I stayed at home for a month and settled down to write a first chapter, basing it on the subject of drugs, which seemed to me an integral part of the music industry. I wrote it chronologically from the mid-fifties to the present day, inter-weaving stories about artists with information on the recreational substances they most enjoyed. I intended this first chapter to act as a reference point for everything that happened in the book thereafter. That way, nothing else would need to be written in chronological order. I could write the rest of the book from memory and I expected the whole job to take no longer than six months.

But, when they read the first chapter, both Julian and Jake said, 'That's it! That's how the book should be. Forget about your idea of dividing the industry into different subjects. Take this chapter and expand it into a full book!'

Once they'd said it, I realised they were right, of course. The more I looked at that first chapter, the more I realised that drugs and drug culture had been absolutely central to the development of the British music business. But as I

proceeded with the book, I also began to see that of almost equal importance was the influence of gay culture. In fact, in the British music business gay culture seemed to have played the same creative role as black culture had in the American music business. Examples of this were to be found everywhere – in the fifties with Larry Parnes's stable of homo-erotic rock 'n' roll stars, in the sixties with Mick Jagger's androgynous stage projection and the extraordinary prevalence of gay managers, in the seventies with Glam Rock and David Bowie's proud flaunting of his bisexuality, in the eighties with Boy George and the New Romantics, and in the nineties with Elton John and George Michael receiving very different rewards for having made one of the world's best-selling charity records together – for Elton, a knighthood – for George, arrest by the Los Angeles police.

But there was a problem. By having to write the book in chronological order, I soon realised I'd thrown away my chances of finishing it quickly. I was now stuck with researching everything that had happened in the music business during the last forty years. Instead of finishing the book in six months, it took me three years.

The only way to pack everything in was to focus on the most visible trends in each decade. Nowhere would I linger on people who'd made it big in the previous decade unless they were still hitting the headlines in the next one (except, perhaps, when I was writing about myself).

Nevertheless, it was still a daunting prospect. On several occasions I thought about quitting. To keep myself going I thought back to a slim Penguin paperback I once picked up at an airport – *A History of the World* by H.G. Wells. If Wells had squeezed 5,000 years into 300 pages, surely I could do the same with a mere forty years of pop music.

In doing so, I tried hard to put aside the usual clichéd perceptions of the industry and come up with something

fresh. But the more I wrote, the more it became clear that the popular view of the music industry is the right one, especially in relation to drugs. As if to confirm this, last year, with the book finished and me back in business as a manager, I found myself sitting with a group of record company executives. They were discussing the promotion of dance music in South East Asia and they pointed out that the strongest sales were coming from the countries that had the highest incidence of ecstasy usage – Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. One of the executives explained, ‘Because ecstasy’s a designer drug it’s mostly used by the middle-classes, so it tends to be the Chinese kids who introduce it into each territory. Consequently they turn out to be our target audience for dance music.’

To some people it might seem shocking that a group of serious middle-aged company executives should casually discuss the potential for record sales in terms of the popularity of an illegal drug. But if you look back at the history of the music industry you’ll see that’s how it’s always been – especially in Britain.

So here it is … money, sex and drugs. What more could you ask for, except perhaps a little music?

*Simon Napier-Bell*
*London, January 2001*

# PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

# 1956

IN 1956 I was 17. Big bands were still the main draw in Britain and I'd got myself a roadie's job with the Johnny Dankworth Orchestra. The Dankworth band was one of the top three big bands in the country and went from town to town playing in dance halls. There was Dankworth himself, two singers and 16 musicians, five of them jazz soloists. Fresh out of public school I was their posh bandboy, something of an amusement to them. I'd taken on the job because I intended eventually to earn my living as a jazz musician and wanted to be around other jazz musicians.

Before each show I had to unload the instruments from the bus and set them up on the stage. Afterwards I had to pack them away again. I was also expected to look after the musicians and get them anything they wanted – sandwiches, cigarettes, beer, or 'something special' to smoke. The Dankworth band was trendier than other big bands, it was more jazz-orientated, and where there were jazz musicians there was marijuana.

To provide the guys in the band with a smoke whenever they needed it, I kept in my pocket a chunk of hash, the hard brown resin of the female cannabis plant, much easier to carry around than a bag full of grass. The technique was to sit on the floor at the back of the bus, hack a small piece from my master chunk, wrap it in foil from a cigarette pack and heat the outside with a match. The dried hash crumbled easily onto a Rizzla cigarette paper and was

mixed with tobacco to be rolled into a joint, which in those days was called a reefer.

I was much better at making them than smoking them. I was a trumpet player, and if I was to succeed in my chosen career as a jazz musician smoking reefers was obviously essential. But the truth was, they set my throat on fire.

In the end it didn't matter. I discovered that the real fascination of being with the Dankworth band didn't come from hanging out with the band's half-dozen jazz musicians, it came from gossiping with all the others – regular musicians and singers whose main career was in popular music, not jazz. From them I learnt about the music business, a huge private club where everyone talked about everyone else as if they were all best friends. Whether someone was a star, the head of a record company, an agent or a manager – everyone else in the music business referred to them by their first names and knew everything there was to know about them. Deals, drugs, sex, health – problems at home or problems with money – where there was a story to be told there was always somebody ready to tell it.

My obsession with jazz faded, replaced by a fascination with the behind-the-scenes world of pop. It wasn't so much the music that interested me, it was what went on around it. If this was the music business, I was hooked. The flow of information was endless.

## CHAPTER TWO

# OH BOY!

THIS IS HOW Britain got started in the record business.

John Kennedy was a young adventurer from New Zealand who came to London and hung out at La Caverne, an illicit after-hours drinking club in Soho. Larry Parnes was the owner of a women's clothing shop in Essex and had a share in La Caverne. He also had an investment in the West End play *Women of the Streets* which John Kennedy offered to publicise for him. John told two of the actresses to stand outside the stage door during the interval and look like prostitutes. When a passing policeman arrested them, John got the story on the front page of every paper in England and the play became a smash.

Another regular at La Caverne was Lionel Bart who wrote comedy songs for the *Billy Cotton Band Show*, the Sunday lunchtime radio show that was a British institution in the fifties. The three men became good friends. They were in their mid-twenties and all of them fancied the same type of good-looking young guy.

Tommy Hicks was a cabin-boy on the ocean liner *Mauritania*. In September 1956 he took two weeks off from work to visit his sick mum in London. One evening – cocky, blond and just 19 – he was playing guitar in a Soho coffee-bar when Lionel Bart walked in.

Lionel was dazzled by Tommy and decided at once to form a group with him – the Cavemen. They played at the Two Is, a tiny basement coffee-shop that served cappuccino

and Coke. Lionel painted the walls black with two large eyes over the stage but he left the thinners out of the paint and people kept turning up with dry-cleaning bills.

Lionel talked about the group to John Kennedy and persuaded him to come and see them. John took an instant fancy to Tommy and came back the next night with Larry Parnes who was equally taken with the lad. Kennedy and Parnes knew nothing about pop music but they decided to manage Tommy and change his second name from Hicks to Steele. Kennedy phoned Hugh Mendl, a talent scout at Decca, and when Hugh saw Tommy perform he agreed to record him the next day.

The song they recorded started out as one of Lionel's comedy numbers. 'We were called the Cavemen,' Tommy explains.[1] 'We played country songs and comedy. Our theme song was "Rock With The Cavemen", and it was a joke, a spoof, the sort of thing Monty Python might have done.' But Kennedy pulled one of his stunts. He booked Tommy at a debutantes' ball and persuaded the girls to scream. The press were on hand to witness it and the next day Tommy hit the tabloids – 'Deb's delight' – 'Posh girls scream for cockney Tom.'

When 'Rock With The Cavemen' became a smash, Tommy Steele found himself dubbed 'Britain's Elvis'. This was far from the truth. Novelist Colin MacInnes called him 'a thoroughly English singer',[2] and TV producer Jack Good was puzzled by his strange stage costume, 'a pale-blue bellboy outfit'.[3] But what impressed Good was Tommy's sparkling personality and the fact that 'his eyes twinkled and his mouth was full of wonderful shining teeth'.[4]

British teenagers had a preference for American music but they wanted someone of their own age and nationality to sing it. Tommy's biggest hit wasn't a British song, it was 'Singing The Blues', a cover version of an American record. The US version got to No. 1 first, then Tommy's version replaced it.

To the press, Larry Parnes boasted 'Tommy Steele is a better performer than Elvis.'[5]

The kids weren't fooled. They knew Tommy was no match for Presley – his sex-appeal was nothing more than a sweet dumb grin. But they didn't care. They didn't love Tommy Steele because he was sexy, they loved him because he'd managed to do something never done before in the British music business. Be young!

Before the mid-fifties the British music industry had been under the control of a select group of people – the music-publishers. The biggest hits were from Broadway shows. Middle-aged people bought sheet-music to take home with the evening paper. For music-publishers it was a comfortable business and they thought it would go on forever.

Singers from the USA like Guy Mitchell and Johnnie Ray could pull huge audiences, but home-grown talent was something of a joke. Dickie Valentine, one of Britain's biggest artists, had an act that consisted of impressions of American stars. David Whitfield sang songs like 'The Book' and 'I Believe' and claimed to communicate directly with God as he did so. Frankie Vaughan performed wearing a top hat and looked like Victor Mature imitating Al Jolson. Ronnie Carroll looked like Victor Mature imitating Judy Garland.

Broadcasting in Britain was controlled by the BBC. There were only ten hours a week during which pop records were allowed to be played but there were endless programmes of live music. On these, different bands and singers would perform all the currently popular songs. Because of this, it was the *songs* not the singers that became popular.

Every hit song would be recorded by several singers. Wally Ridley was an A&R man at EMI, the person responsible for choosing the right song for the right artist.

‘Every month each record company had an A&R meeting to which they would invite all the publishers. At EMI, we sat around and chose the songs we wanted to record. Then the publishers went on to Decca where most of the best songs would get chosen again. If a song was really good it would end up with four versions – one by each company.’

*New Musical Express* published a weekly list of the Top Ten songs compiled from sales of sheet-music. These were sung live by different performers each week on a Friday evening radio show called *Hit Parade*. Alternatively, on Sunday evenings the Top Ten could be heard played from records on Radio Luxembourg, a programme with wavering reception from mainland Europe.

At that time, a recording artist’s income came from live performances; making records was just a way of getting better known. Frank Coachworth worked at Chappell’s, one of the biggest publishing companies. ‘Mostly, we got big American songs. Whenever we got a new one, we’d phone a few artists and they’d come rushing in and beg to be the first to record it. But when it came to recording, artists weren’t given much of a say in things.’

Lita Roza was proud of being a quality big-band singer. She was signed to Decca where her A&R man was Dick Rowe, later to become famous for turning down the Beatles. Among singers he worked with, Dick was well-known for his lack of sensitivity. One day he called Lita to say he had a new song for her. ‘He had an American hit by Patti Page that he wanted me to cover for the English market. When I got to the studio and heard the song, I said: “I’m not recording that rubbish.’”

Dick insisted that she sing it, so Lita sang it through just once, then told him: ‘I’m never going to sing that ever again.’

The song was ‘How Much Is That Doggie In The Window’. Lita’s once-sung version went to No. 1, the first time ever for a British female vocalist, but as promised, she

never sang the song again. Later she told the collective heads of Decca how upset she was about the way they treated their artists. ‘To try to calm me down they sent me a new Hoover.’

Whenever a song was played on the radio, or whenever a piece of sheet-music or record was sold, the publisher received a royalty. Individually these payments were minimal but collectively they amounted to millions. The big publishers, like Boosey & Hawkes or Keith Prowse, were content with slowly accumulating royalties of less than a penny a record and made their real income from printing and distributing sheet music. But the big four record companies –Decca, EMI, Philips and Pye – wanted quick profits. Their raw material was vinyl which was cheap. With a hit song pressed into it, vinyl could be sold at a mark-up of 20 times its original cost, but record sales had reached a ceiling. To sell larger quantities of them record companies needed new avenues of promotion.

At EMI, Wally Ridley made hit after hit, but he was aware that most people in the industry still thought of records as secondary to sheet-music. ‘Publishers saw records as just another way to boost sales of sheet-music. Artists thought of them as a way of making themselves better known. No-one saw them as the major focus of the music industry. This was because there were so few opportunities to hear records on the radio. I would produce a big hit record, but nearly every time I heard the song on the radio it would be someone performing it live.’

In 1955 the BBC finally agreed to introduce *Pick of the Pops*, a new programme which would play currently popular records, but it still wasn’t the Top Ten chart programme the record companies wanted. It was ten records chosen at random from the best-selling 25 and presented by Franklin Engleman, as old and square as they come.

Then, for the record companies, a miracle happened. Rock ’n’ roll arrived.

‘Rock Around The Clock’ wasn’t only a record and a movie, it was also a message. Across Britain, kids stood in the aisles at their local cinema and shouted choruses back at the screen.

‘See ya later alligator’, sang Bill Haley.

‘In a while crocodile’, the kids yelled back.

In 1956, most of these kids lived in houses without central heating, many with outdoor loos. Parents had no spare money. New clothes were bought when old ones wore out and having fun was reserved for special occasions like birthdays or Christmas.

At school, discipline took precedence over education. Billy Fury, who became a rock ’n’ roll star five years later, remembered being beaten by his teacher during the last minute of his last day at school. ‘He thrashed me six times on my hand.[6] With each stroke I laughed louder, until the bell rang as he brought down the cane for the sixth time. Then I was free. I hated school: it was like being in jail. Now I was being released, a free man. I went wild, running out of school shouting “I’m free, I’m free, I’m free.”’

When Bill Haley sung ‘Let’s rip it up, we’re gonna rip it up at the joint tonight’, it was the best thing kids had ever heard. Whether it meant ‘let’s have some fun’, or whether it was really a cry to ‘rip things up’, made little difference, it united the younger generation all over Britain.

The name rock ’n’ roll had been brewing for some time. In 1924, American blues singer Trixie Smith recorded ‘My Man Rocks Me With One Steady Roll’, and in 1934 there was a Hollywood movie that included a song called ‘Rock And Roll’. It was Alan Freed, an American DJ in the fifties, who changed the ‘and’ to an ‘n’ and started using the phrase to describe ‘rhythm & blues’ played by white

musicians rather than black. Then Bill Haley brought rock ’n’ roll to the attention of young Britons.

Haley had been a country & western singer. In 1954 he was asked to record ‘Rock Around The Clock’ but at the time it did nothing. A year later it was picked up by MGM and used for the title sequence of their movie *The Blackboard Jungle*. The film was about violence in the classroom and the subject matter brushed off on the song, giving it a sense of anarchy. American teenagers picked up on it; so did Columbia Pictures who cashed in on it with a low-budget movie of the same name. Six months later *Rock Around the Clock* took off around the world.

~

In Britain this coincided with the first ever explosion of youth-spending.

Kids had discovered fashion and were dressing in Edwardian style clothes – velvet-collared coats, tight-fitting trousers, suede shoes with thick spongy soles. These were ‘teddy boys’, and when they heard Bill Haley’s music, they adopted it as their own.

Ten years later, Tony Calder would be running Immediate Records, but in 1955 he was a 15-year-old teddy boy living with his family in Southampton. ‘I had a blue coat and black shoes with grey crepe soles. My grandparents used to work on the *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary*, so I knew everyone on the boats. I had this guy who bought me stuff back from New York. I had a shoe-lace tie in dark blue. The trousers were 12 inches to the bottoms, I remember that because they were 14 inches and I got my mother to take them in. And I had my hair in a duck’s arse with a quiff.’

In America, rock ’n’ roll was seen as white men singing black man’s music. The political right thought it was a Communist plot. The White Citizens Council of North

Alabama denounced rock ’n’ roll as part of a plot to undermine the morals of the nation. ‘It is sexualistic, unmoralistic and … brings people of both races together.’[7]

In Britain in the mid-fifties, there was no Communist paranoia and no racial tension. In teen parlance, anyone black was a spade and among hip young city-dwellers spades were welcome. Britain’s first post-war black star was Shirley Bassey, totally middle-of-the-road and totally over-the-top in her projection, but her blackness made her hip for teenagers.

When singer Kenny Lynch was four his family moved to the East End. ‘We were the only black family there. There was no racial prejudice. When I went to school, I was the only black boy in the classroom. It was more of a novelty than anything else, it made me feel like I was on-stage. It set me up for a career as an entertainer. By the time I was seven I was singing with a local dance band. That was the year the war ended.’

For Britons at the end of a long war, being black or white wasn’t the problem; the big divide was between young and old. Adults told their children ‘we fought the war for you’ and kids were sick to death of hearing about it. They searched for a new identity and found it in a new word.

‘Teenager’ came from the slogan ‘we are living in the *Teen Age*’, thought up by an American advertising agency in the early fifties. Young people liked being called teenagers, it made them feel like members of an exclusive club and helped them get away from the dreary world of their parents. Rock ’n’ roll helped even more, it was escapist and made things seem like they were changing. The odd thing was, Bill Haley, the person responsible for bringing it to them, was plump, in his mid-thirties, and with a kiss-curl more absurd than Hitler’s moustache. When Haley toured England and arrived by boat at Southampton docks, Tony Calder and his friends were waiting to greet

him dressed in their best teddy-boy gear. ‘He came off the boat and the minute we saw him, someone shouted, “Fucking hell, he’s old – he looks like my granddad.” So we left and went home. And we never played his records again – ever.’

In 1956, while I was on the road with the Johnny Dankworth Orchestra, a new craze erupted that stemmed the tide of rock ’n’ roll for a short while.

In the past trad jazz had been the only alternative to the sickly romantic pop of the day. Now with the explosion of rock ’n’ roll touring bands had to adapt. To try and compete, they began to allow their rhythm sections to play a part of the set alone with a singer. From this came an enormous new craze, skiffle.

Lonnie Donegan was the banjo player with Chris Barber’s band. ‘We went into the studio to make a band album.[8] Chris said he wanted to record some vocals. The engineer reluctantly said: “OK, you want to sing something, there’s the mike, the tape’s running, I’m going for a cup of tea.”’

At that session, Donegan sung an American folk song, ‘Rock Island Line’, and when Chris Barber’s album was completed the song was included. The record was released on Pye, the third of Britain’s big four record companies, and it became Britain’s first skiffle hit.

Donegan sung through his nose. When his record went to No. 1 Britain went adenoidal. Kids everywhere walked round the streets singing in nasal American accents accompanied by dustbin lids, tin pans, paper and combs. ‘Rock Island Line’ was even a hit in America where Donegan appeared on the *Perry Como Show* with guest-star actor Ronald Reagan.

The BBC liked skiffle; it was nicely middle-class. There were no electric guitars and it didn’t seem dangerous, so they gave it a programme of its own, *Saturday Skiffle Club*,

the first BBC radio programme aimed at the youth pop market.

Skiffle clubs sprang up in cellars below coffee shops, packed with sweating teenagers wearing jeans and roll-neck sweaters bought from Millets, an army surplus store which was where Lonnie Donegan had worked before he had his hit record.

Perhaps he shouldn't have left his job in such a hurry. His total income from recording 'Rock Island Line', the song that launched the skiffle boom, was his £3.50 session fee.

Shortly after skiffle started, America came up with a new rock 'n' roll singer, Elvis Presley, a teenager throbbing with sex. British kids immediately wanted one of their own. But what they got instead was Tommy Steele.

Tommy may have been a poor substitute for the real thing but when he took off every British record company wanted someone like him. Copycat rock 'n' roll stars sprang up all over the place. You pushed your arse into tight jeans, waved your credentials in the face of the audience, and became an instant front-man for the new generation. The search for rock 'n' roll stars became something of a cottage industry and leading it were Larry Parnes and Lionel Bart, both of whom had an instinctive feeling for the teenage boys that girls would fancy – the ones they fancied themselves.

Around that time, a friend of mine who knew Parnes told me about his flat. 'It's always full of boys – not Larry's singing stars, but other ones – boys who come to see him hoping to be chosen. If Larry likes the look of them, he gives them a clean white T-shirt and tells them to hang around. If a boy's wearing a black T-shirt, it means Larry's had him already and his friends can have a go if they want to. You ought to meet him. He might like you.'

I wasn't sure I wanted to be 'liked' by Larry Parnes but the chance to meet him was irresistible. We arranged to meet at a Chinese restaurant where he turned up with Lionel Bart. During most of the meal I was hardly spoken to, just stared at, but as he was paying the bill Larry asked, 'Can you sing?'

'No,' I told him, 'but I can play the trumpet, and I've been working as a bandboy for Johnny Dankworth.'

'Intriguing', he said. 'Perhaps we could meet later.'

I turned the offer down, but it was impossible not to be fascinated by Parnes and his aura of success.

Like most managers who followed him, Larry Parnes was something of a loner. His family background made it difficult for him to be open about his homosexuality so he was unable to have a permanent relationship, but as a pop manager he had the perfect excuse for surrounding himself with the type of young men he fancied. He found himself a comfortable niche and took full advantage of it. Behind the scenes he was authoritarian. He created his artists' image, controlled their private lives, tried to keep them away from drink and drugs, and made them go to bed before midnight (sometimes, it was rumoured, with himself).

Parnes was obsessed with giving his boys new names. It was as if by changing their names he could wipe out their past and make them his very own. When singer Clive Powell turned up, Parnes told him: 'You come from the same county as George Formby, and you're going to be famous.[9] You can be called Georgie Fame!' But when he wanted to change Joe Brown's name to Elmer Twitch, Joe refused point blank.

Parnes always liked to claim that his 'stable' of boys was one big happy family – Joe Brown, Dickie Pride, Tommy Bruce, Johnny Gentle, Duffy Power, Georgie Fame, Johnny Goode, Vince Eager – but he saw a class distinction between himself and his singers and exploited it. Joe Brown

worked for three years without a single night off. 'Some of the gigs were miles apart.[10] One night we did Bristol, the next night Torquay, and back up to Preston. Then it was in London by eight o'clock the next morning for *Saturday Club*. It was anywhere and everywhere for £15 per week. Three solid years and then my head went. I had a breakdown and got the shakes. My mother called the doctor, who said: "He's got to stop working". She phoned Larry Parnes, who said: "What d'you mean stop working. Has he broken a leg?" Within minutes he'd sent two Harley Street specialists to see me to make sure I wasn't swinging the lead. It was ridiculous – he gave me six days off, six bloody days after three years.'

Parnes's preference for boys from a working-class background fitted neatly with the outdated social etiquette of record companies. At that time George Martin worked at EMI's Abbey Road studios in Maida Vale producing records for the Parlophone label. 'In the studios, producers were expected to wear suits and ties, just as they did in the office. Engineers wore white coats to distinguish them as being of a lower class. Recording artists too were considered to be socially inferior – a bit like actors – not quite decent people – tolerated because they brought in money, but always expected to be of somewhat dubious character.'

Class distinction was deeply engrained in the record business. Companies were controlled and run by people from middle-class backgrounds, mostly from public schools, and artists were expected to come from the lower classes. For decades to come, disdain for artists within record companies would continue even though people on both sides of the fence had long stopped coming from different social backgrounds. At EMI these things started to change when a new chairman was appointed, Joseph Lockwood.

Lockwood saw at once that EMI was heading for ruin. The company had lost its licensing deals with the big

American companies CBS and RCA, and Lockwood's predecessor, Sir Ernest Fisk, had failed to recognise the value of the LP to classical music. As a result most of EMI's classical artists had left and gone to Decca.

Decca had spotted the potential of the LP and now dominated the classical music market. Its chairman was Sir Edward Lewis, a pompous autocrat who in 1929 had bought a small company called Duophone, then built it up impressively. But in the field of popular music Sir Edward was lost. For pop music he relied on the advice of Bill Townsley, his general manager, who in turn relied on Decca's two most important employees, Hugh Mendl, known as 'the company gent', and Dick Rowe, known as 'the company spiv'. If these two made a wrong move, Sir Edward Lewis would have no way of knowing until it was too late.

In contrast, EMI's new chairman had an instinctive understanding of the youth market. He'd realised that the sound of rock 'n' roll guitars could not be reproduced by sheet music alone. Rock 'n' roll struck fear into the hearts of music-publishers, but for record companies it was their future. George Martin found himself given a freer hand. 'When Joe Lockwood came in he changed things. He recognised where the money was coming from and did something about it. He instinctively realised that pop music was going to be more commercially important than classical music.'

Joe Lockwood's masterstroke was to buy Capitol Records in America for eight and a half million dollars. Two years later Capitol was generating sales of 35 million dollars a year and EMI was the owner of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peggy Lee, Nat King Cole, and later, the Beach Boys. But in some things, Lockwood was surprisingly old-fashioned. He ran the company like a public school – employees dressed correctly, had their names entered in a book if they came late, and were not allowed to play music