

Strange fruit!

'One man's reply to another man's attempt to rewrite history in terms of his own personal experience', or, 'Aw, c'mon T.C., tell it like it really is!'

"THE BRITISH Soul Scene — One man's view of the growth of soul music appreciation in Great Britain" is the title of Tony Cummings' latest attempt to rewrite history in terms of his own personal experience.

The whole article is such a warped view, that one simply has to answer it if only to redress its special pleading, biased logic, and personal prejudice. It is when articles such as this go unchallenged that history becomes permanently distorted.

I am not sure if it was Stalin, Hitler or Goebbels who said "If you are going to tell a lie make sure it's a big one", but whichever of these three monsters it was, they knew that the more complex the lie, the more complex becomes the answering of it, and no matter how well it is answered, people will generally tend to think there's a grain of truth in it.

And indeed, much truth there undoubtedly is in Cummings' article, and all authoritarian dictators know that it is better and simpler to tell as much truth as one can, and that it is the larding over with hints, suggestions and distortions that achieves the desired ends.

Racist propaganda always thrives on this technique and is invariably employed by racists of every hue. What Cummings has done in this article is to interview several people (many of whom just happen to be personal friends as well), and has used their comments (interspersed with his own) to bolster up his own dogma, or to settle scores with people whom he has excommunicated from his elitist clique.

In addition, Cummings' own execrating snobbery and odd brand of inverted racism, as well as a total absence of any self-criticism, reveals a lack of objectivity and perspective, not to mention, plain common-sense! So let's attempt to straighten the piece out, and inject a little human warmth into it as we go...

● "West Molesey is one of those anonymous expanses of suburbia where a middle class vision of the good life has turned the pretty Surrey countryside into endless rows of identikit housing and lifestyles... Each Sunday it's the turn of the young. Three hundred teenagers don their Miss Selfridges and Austin Reeds..."

The young (who have no control whatsoever over their environment) have always tended to want to look their smartest and sharpest when they mix together. Black Americans do exactly the same thing on Saturday nights, but since the accompanying photo shows Cummings' own attire to be nearer Millets' Radical-Chic Bargain Rail than Yves St. Laurent, he obviously has no idea just how pricey things are in Selfridges and Austin Reeds.

Since neither Cummings or myself are still young, such snobbery shows why things like the generation gap exist. We must not forget the follies of our own youth, or criticise a scene which our own advancing years precludes us from belonging to, and the housing crisis in Britain is really too acute to keep the Surrey countryside looking pretty for the odd occasion when Cummings has a mind to go and look at it.

● "Guy Stevens called that stuff 'new-wave R&B'. But then the word 'soul' came in. Looking back a lot of what we were into was as much ego as musical appreciation. We looked upon ourselves as the ultra-hip. We were the

ones who had records on American labels." (Dave McAleer, a former record executive).

Yes, that smug aura of the ultra-hip smoothies always got up my nose, which was precisely why a few of us worked so hard to rescue R&B and Soul from the elitist clutches of such ego-trippers, and this odious attitude of mind was pretty much shared by many of the Cummings clique.

The cult for American labels actually came quite some while after the time McAleer is talking about, because at that time, it was a sign of being hip to have the records on UK labels, for this showed you'd been sharp and wise enough to buy them when they were new. Imports showed lack of foresight and awareness.

Actually, at that time, MCPS were doing all they could to stop US manufactured records from entering Britain. Transat (the only place in London where Soul imports could be found) were hauled into court and finally driven out of business by MCPS harassment. Cummings should know all this as well as I do considering that he worked for MCPS for several years.

The term "new-wave R&B" was never used in the States, nor was it invented by Guy Stevens. 'Soul' came into use simply because it came into favour in the States, and we had no choice but to follow on.

● "London's soul fans were by '65 finding other ways to assert a peculiarly British trait in their attitudes to black American music. The Motown thing led to the Mod Era."

The Mod Era stemmed from the success and influence of "Ready, Steady, Go", the tarting up of Carnaby Street, new found affluence, and the natural desire of a new younger generation to assert themselves rather than follow in the footsteps of the previous one.

They'd have latched onto any convenient musical genre that was new and which they could claim as their 'own', but it was Vicki Wickham and the pirate radio stations who were making sure they heard the sounds they thought they'd discovered unaided!

You might just as well argue that Motown was responsible for a swing away from plain Y-fronts to multi-coloured briefs at about that time!

● "The mod thing really took off in the North and Midlands in '66." (Les Cockell — 'a doyen of the Northern disco scene').

Which just goes to show how long it took for the media to brainwash the rest of the country into accepting what was essentially a London-based fad.

By 1966, many of the sounds which at that time were yet to become Northern 'classics' were already several years old, but the increasing ease with which imports were then beginning to drift into the country made it easier for guys like Cockell to catch up on what they'd missed when it was new.

● "By '69 the deejays were getting more expert. They'd 'Discover' sounds... It dawned on the Northern deejays that they didn't have to rely on what was happening in the British pop scene, or what was breaking on the American soul scene". (Ian Levine)

Which is why it ill-becomes Levine to slag off those Northern deejays who, in 1977, still hold precisely the same attitude as he himself stubbornly held until 1975.

Five years ago I took what was then



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the only known copy of Lydia Marcelle's monster to the Mecca, and Levine himself said it would never take off in the North. Cockell said the same about 'Nothing Worse Than Being Alone' by the Ad Libs before that... I have never said that the Northern scene doesn't change. Such comments seem invariably to come from those most actively involved in it.

● "By the '70s Sly was hitting... Soul music had diversified sufficiently to stop people criticising it for all sounding the same". (Dave McAleer)

If Soul music sounded all the same in those days it was not the fault of Soul music, but because the BBC and most record companies operated an ultra-conservative policy which ensured that only those records which were similar to established hits got played or issued. A Catch-22 situation that is currently enjoying a revival.

Nor does McAleer's statement explain why at that time so many reissued oldies were becoming hits for the first time in this country (and remember, Sly's "Dance To The Music" only clicked second time around). Even so, no amount of pleading on my part could persuade McAleer the record executive to issue Zerber R. Hicks' "Lights Out", which would have shown just how diverse Soul music can be!

Since Cummings, McAleer and many of their gang were adamant in their refusal to accept the introduction of strings into black music, it ill becomes them now to lecture today's young by pretending they are the avant-garde of black music awareness.

● "Discotheques had been a brief fad on the US scene during the early '60s twist craze... But the discotheque lived on in Europe". (Dave McAleer)

Which is small wonder considering discotheques had been invented in Europe! (The word is French in origin as evidenced by the pronunciation of it by Chubby Checker on "At The Discotheque" where he used the gallic "discotay" rather than the anglicised "discotek").

Given similar access to live performances, and radio, no doubt there would have been less demand for them in Europe too.

● "If you went and interviewed six dozen disco deejays..." (Chris Hill)

Since Hill denies ever having made any such quotation to Cummings, then this fact must also cast some doubts about the credibility of some of the other quotes made in this article.

● "...the mind anesthetizing outpourings of Blackburn and Saville".

Let it never be forgotten that Tony Blackburn, and he alone, was responsible for breaking Gene Chandler's "Nothing Can Stop Me" when reissued on Soul City, and was the guy who also had the grace to apologise on air for slagging off Jean Stanback's "I Still Love You" when he first played it.

We weaken our cause by denigrating the tastes of others. After all, I've yet to hear Cummings champion Offenbach or Mahler.

● "John Green (Radio Hallam) is by American standards a deejaying non-starter, pedestrian and lacking a radio persona".

Apart from the fact that John Green's programme has been off the air for at least six months, he could hardly develop a "radio persona" when the whole concept of 'Soul Shotgun' was continuous records without deejay chat or announcements.

Green never announced a record or even read out the titles at the end of the show. He let the music speak for him, 100%

● "Each Sunday this guy called Mike Raven had an R&B show. It was all pretty stilted, he was more into country blues than Motown... the show was an anachronism from the beginning. Like R&B was redundant as a name and Mike played far too many old blues records when he should have been playing contemporary black music". (Dave McAleer)

Mike Raven's R&B show on Radio 390 became so popular that it was broadcast seven nights a week. Mike Raven was so fair-minded that he religiously played every new Soul single that was issued in Britain.

He was responsible for breaking Wilson Pickett's "In The Midnight Hour" and many others. At the BBC he was forbidden to include any imports in his show, and when some sharp operator sues the BBC for playing and broadcasting a copyrighted song without clearance or permission, no doubt they'll clamp down on imports again.

If he included a lot of country blues, this was simply due to the fact that lots were being issued at that time by British companies. Raven was so sincerely dedicated to the cause of Soul music that he desperately tried to hold together the "R&B Music Association" when inside fifth columnists were trying to wreck and emasculate it.

Intended as a vehicle through which grass-roots opinion could be expressed, the ad-hoc governing committee (which included McAleer, Cummings, Richardson) became deeply divided simply because it was proposed that committee membership be based on a free election amongst the general membership. So alarmed were they at the prospect of yielding power, that they preferred to let the association flounder and sink.

No wonder phrases like "keep the

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entire piece, because the truth is, in real faith" are anathema to them!

● "Andy Peebles...someone who indulges in the ultimate hypocrisy of attacking 'Black Music' in 'Blues & Soul' while shouting his praises at 'Black Music' Road Shows"...And Andy Peebles HAS used his intimate friendship with a 'Blues & Soul' columnist to destroy much of his credibility...It's easy to criticise... Andy Peebles for his sycophantic relationship with Dave Godin". Hiring Andy Peebles to host a road show does not include the purchase of his mind too. So long as he didn't slag off 'Black Music' whilst earning his fee from them, he's perfectly at liberty to express any opinion he likes elsewhere.

Cummings is a fine one to talk about credibility when, having slagged off every Northern Soul record issued, he then used his own intimate friendship with Ian Levine to ensure that nearly all his productions got favourable reviews, and all releases on the Right On! label were systematically crucified, and that his own covert stab at stardom on the Rockers label under the name of Sam Blackie was only laughingly owned up to after I'd exposed his deception.

Similarly whilst at Pye, McAleer put a tune penned by his friend Jon Philibert on a flip-side. What many members of the public don't realise is that royalties on hit records are split 50-50 right down the middle between the A and B side, and so this is a good way of collecting a lot of dough from off the back of a hit A side.

Last year I made all of three appearances on Andy Peebles' show. Outside of this we never met once. We

are (sadly) both far too busy and distanced to become intimate friends, but we do both have a lot of respect for one another which is why it is so easy for us to be friendly when we are together.

What most people won't know of course is the fact that when Cummings had a couple of books published some time back, he constantly pleaded with Peebles to be allowed on his show to plug them. At that time, 'sycophantic' was more Cummings' speed than it has ever been Peebles' towards me, and to write that is pure bitchiness and sour grapes.

Besides, Cummings should know I never allow people to be sycophantic towards me.

● "One thing I found really weird was some of the things happening on the Andy Peebles show. Andy had this guy on show he talked about this thing called the Northern Soul Scene. Now I know a bit about that thing, I went to the Wigan Casino one weekend. But this guy came on with some weird, elitist bullshit which was incomprehensible to me and I guess to anyone else who wasn't a fanatic. It destroyed the pacing of the show" (Chuck Howard — "a visiting American black deejay")

Chuck, old chap, if you really exist, you'll need more than one weekend visit to the Casino to know more than just a "bit" about the Northern Soul Scene!

Did you expect British radio (particularly a Manchester-based station) NOT to relate to British social customs? The UK Soul scene is not just a docile satellite of the American Soul scene, and such imperialistic notions that you voice really are quite embarrassing and hardly conducive to Anglo-American harmony!

What was the purpose of your visit to Britain Chuck — to colonise? "Soul Train" is not broadcast for the benefit of visiting deejays, but for people who live and work in and around the Manchester area.

Come to that Chuck, what are your views on a lad from Plymouth going to the States to produce a history of Soul music?

● "The role of 'Shout' is documentation...amassing information for serious devotees of black music". (Clive Richardson)

Great, if that's where your head's at, but why then does Cummings refer to similar types of activity in the North as "parochial" (a word he seems only recently to have discovered the meaning of considering the number of times he's used it in this article), "insular", "idiosyncratic" and "didactic"?

"Shout" is all of these things, and good luck to it for so being, but when he later goes on to inform us that a discography on James Brown is complete "even down to the JB record released by Colgate-Palmolive" I begin to wonder just how "idiosyncratic" or "serious" you can get!

● "Like in America they don't have rock or pop papers as such" (Dave McAleer) Which will, I'm sure, come as a surprise to the publishers and staff of "Rolling Stone". But if America has built up different social habits, it is partly because musical awareness is so inbuilt there that nearly all general magazines give some coverage to reviewing LPs.

● "There's a room for specialist 'black music only' magazines, even though in this country 75 per cent of the people buying black records are white". (Dave McAleer)

This 'statistic' is of course pure guesswork on McAleer's behalf, and I challenge him to verify this statement with proof. But, considering that non-white people comprise only 2 per cent of the entire population of Great Britain I personally would doubt that they account for even 15 per cent of all sales on black records, let alone 25 per cent!

However, if McAleer feels (as earlier quoted) that Mike Raven's R&B show was an anachronism, surely in view of the statistic he now quotes he'll concede that to launch a magazine in the 70s with the name "Black Music" was an even greater one. It seems plain to me that it is they who have this big 'thing' about race — not us.

● "Down in Plymouth, this article's author started a fanzine (called 'Soul')...the Fame/Goldwax Appreciation Society Magazine (run by Dave McAleer).

Whilst the "societies" in which I was involved are called "looney", (which, in a glorious sort of way that would forever elude Cummings' understanding, they indeed were!) why knock present day fanzines like "Soul Time" when on their own admittance they themselves went precisely the same route in their youth?

And isn't the truth simply that half these duplicated magazines only came into being as a means of wheedling free "review" records out of the record companies?

● "A well known record industry figure who wishes to remain anonymous knowing only too well Godin's love of the vitriol-dipped pen says this:— 'Dave Godin is the very quintessence of the old style soul fan. The voice of the looney minority who'll never be satisfied... Today he's the spokesman for all those who still can't see soul has WON the big battle!'"

...If I got my kicks that way, I might just get a bit of a rush contemplating this 'well known industry figure' quaking so in his shoes that he has to hide behind a veil on anonymity!

If this mysterious Mr. X exists (which I doubt) he must know there are NO secrets in this gossipy, talkative business, and sooner or later I'm bound to find out who he is. But please don't be alarmed, because when have I ever slagged off product because I've had words with someone involved with getting it out? Which is more than Cummings can say!

However, I further forgive you on the

grounds of invincible ignorance because you obviously are talking piffle. Don't ask me, ask Parliament, Jean Plum, the Stairsteps, L.T.D., Norman Connors, Rufus, and countless others who have talent to spare, but whose records sell only in the hundreds instead of the thousands.

People with convictions invariably seem looney to those who have none...and what's so cute about being "satisfied" anyhow? (In passing it is ironic to note that the very attitude this "person" accuses me of having is eloquently expressed by the cartoon cover on this particular edition of "Black Music"....)

● "In a less strong position is "Black Echoes"...amateurish layout, printing errors...stilted writing...one of the few consistently interesting features...is Clive Richardson's..."

Keeping the faith for Cummings is patting his gang members on the head. 'Black Echoes' are perfectly capable of defending themselves from these unfair charges, but isn't it strange how, in the three years during which Cummings was editor of 'Black Music' he threw so few assignments Richardson's way?

Just let me say (a) 'Black Echoes' has at least two writers whom I wish we had on B&S, (b) let a thousand flowers bloom, and (c) coming from the editor of a black music magazine that doesn't even review singles (the very life blood of the soul scene), I think his position was weakest of all because of this.

● "Like I feel Heatwave possess a little original talent...when you consider that...Biddu...is considered a top British soul producer you get really depressed. British soul has still to get far more originality if it is to stop being a plastic imitation of the real stuff". (David Miles — "a veteran session musician")

Heatwave have just about more original talent than any other group I can think of resident in the UK. Biddu never has claimed to be a Soul producer, and is in no way responsible if the media choose to dub him that.

So far as I'm concerned, I'm doubtful if British Soul ever could be anything other than derivative, simply because Soul is not an indiginous musical genre.

● "The kids who go to soul shows today...have got a far healthier attitude to black music than most of the older fans. They're into black music not to collect like matchbox labels, nor to wrap 'keep the faith' philosphies around, but to listen to and enjoy".

And at last Cummings has caught up with the very gospel that I've been preaching these many long years!

But, as a reformed obsessive himself (Cummings used to spend hours religiously taping every Soul and R&B record he could get his hands on — Alan Lewis once wittily quipped that Cummings would get a life sentence if MCPS were ever to catch up with him!), why knock those who do actually enjoy collecting records as a hobby? It's an innocent and harmless enough pursuit.

Why seek to regiment all of us into one live-style, with one attitude, with one Fuehrer? No way mate! It's just not on.

We all have our dotty aberrations. I enjoy collecting Royal Doulton Lambeth china manufactured between 1928 and 1930 — how esoteric can you get? But on the other hand, just because I also happen to have been born in Lambeth doesn't confer any special 'insights' or advantages in the matter!

● "As 'Home of the Blues' John Abbey had launched it (B&S) as a duplicated publication in '66...today (it is) flourishing...Low production costs and built in support from other more profitable areas of Contempo's will ensure that it continues."

Which, breath-takingly enough, is the only name check that John Abbey gets in this entire article! And which makes me more mad than anything else in the

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terms John Abbey has done more for Soul music in Britain than all the other people mentioned in this article (myself included) put together.

He has done so much for Soul that take away his contributions, and the history of Soul would be totally altered so far as Britain's concerned. Through thick and thin, Abbey has brought us hundreds and hundreds of records that otherwise would never have seen the light of day here. He has conducted countless interviews with artists, and brought to these shores many live acts we'd never otherwise have ever seen.

How can Cummings chortle on about "credibility" when he himself is so mean-spirited as to not acknowledge this plain fact? Or is it simply green-eyed jealousy?

All these High Priests I've noticed share one thing in common — they never once put their money where their mouth is. So OK, "Soul City" went bankrupt, but better to be a 'failed shop-keeper' than a failed nothing!

Those who over the years have earned Cummings' displeasure can never do ANYTHING right again! And what "built in support" from his own profitable activities does Cummings put

back into the Soul scene? Or McAleer? Or any of them?

John Abbey is far too naturally modest to boast of his own achievements and contributions to the British Soul Scene, but Cummings knows of them just as much as I do.

● "After all wasn't it the British Soul Scene rather than the IPC group who had given me employment these last three years?"

And to think I'm criticised for purple and romantic prose! No, old sport, those lovely grey and buff cheques were from IPC's account. The British Soul Scene can barely afford its rent at times, and after a hectic weekend it hasn't enough to open a current account...

WHY, I WONDER, does Cummings appear to resent and be incapable of relating soul in terms that are meaningful in the common fabric of British social activity?

Does it really matter that we weren't born either American or black? Can't imagination make up for what Nature has apparently deprived you of? Why be such a snob (and only a class-conscious snob would, in 1977, report London speech without the 'h's at the beginning

of certain words)?

And what divine right makes us in any way superior or apart from the record collector, the disco goer, or for that matter, the randy bird puller?

"Think like me. Think like me" is a constant echo I hear all the time I read anything Tony Cummings writes (and it is not without significance in my view that I have never read anything he has ever written on any subject other than American music), whereas the only "message" I have for my readers is "think for yourselves".

It is this fundamental difference which has caused so much grit to exist between us these many years. And collective amnesia might be expedient for those interviewed to cover up that which they'd rather forget about it in 1977, but it doesn't mean to say it never happened.

Soul music isn't a religion, but good art. And good art is worth fighting for, and if I write with a tinge of sadness it is simply because I see so many of my contemporaries grow weary of the battle, do deals, sell-out and forget the abstract values that soul once represented to all of us who were involved in it.

"O yea of little faith"...