

cool in Britain



Jane Birkin and the Kray twins, Reggie and Ronnie

But perhaps, just as in the late Nineties, it was British rock stars who defined cool. It was not just The Beatles and the Rolling Stones who dominated the scene. Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, the American guitarist, were also shaped and created in London. There was Marianne Faithfull singing *As Tears Go By*; The Who, the ultimate Mod band; Van Morrison and his seminal albums *Astral Weeks* and *Moondance*; Pink

Floyd, Cream, the Yardbirds and the Animals.

Cool was originally a jazz word that had been in vogue with the beatniks in the Fifties and early Sixties. As London began to emerge from post-war austerity, jazz was the first weapon of youth, the first cool thing. Colin MacInnes, author of *Absolute Beginners*, wrote: "The great thing about the jazz world and all the kids that enter into it, is that no

one, not a soul, cares what your class is or what your race is, or your income, if you are a boy or a girl, or bent or versatile or what you are—so long as you are cool and dig the scene."

But in the Fifties, that scene was actually in America in the clubs along 57th Street in New York where the bow tie, the low-crotch trouser and the Dizzy Gillespie beret ruled. Jack Kerouac wrote, Lenny Bruce told jokes and Sgt Bilko

was considered hip. It was the Sixties, when Harold Wilson was embracing the white heat of technology, that cool moved into the mainstream and was embraced by a generation. And that generation of baby boomers made London swing. It was Old Labour which was in power when Britain became cool—what ever New Labour says.

●David Bailey, *Birth of Cool*, 15 April-27 June at Barbican Art Gallery, Tel: 0171 382 7105.

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