

David Bailey's shiny new retrospective is full of beautiful people striking beautiful poses in beautiful settings. But is this really how we lived three decades ago? Jonathon Green remembers things very differently

The Swinging Sixties? As if

English swings like a pendulum do, bobbing on bicycles two by two
Roger Miller, England Swings (1966)

Here we are again. There's Mick and Marianne, John and Paul, the Shrimp and Penny Tree Terry, Michael in "Harry Palmer" glasses, Cecil and Rudy, Ron and Reg, Hail, hail, the gang are indeed all here — and what a gang! Icons galore. Talented, natch, but talent needs channelling, exposure, and who better to take on the job than their peer, their groovy maestro, daily sex-god, genuine Cockney in a world of mock: David Bailey? Thirty years of assorted Bailey pictures are on offer at the Barbican's Birth Of The Cool show, but let's not be fooled. These cropped black-and-whites, these images that have become fixed in public memory, that have gone to make that memory, are dominated by a single, mythical name: Swinging London.

Let us dismiss one fantasy. Cool, this pictured world may be, but the only genuine birth comes in pictures of the arrival of the photographer's three children. Like most of the underpinnings of 20th-century popular culture, "cool" stems from black America. It was coined in the 1940s, and thence moved across the colour line, offering beatniks, hipsters, hippies and all their off-centre progeny a goal to which they might aspire. Bailey's icons were cool, and some remain

so, but did they create the concept? You're kidding.

But that is not the only fantasy. What is assembled here is most definitely a myth. A myth created in the media, feted and propagated by it, and then, as such things must be, fileted by overexposure. We demand the inaccessible smart: Bright Young People, Café Society, the Chelsea Set. Swinging London was the status version of that ideal. Its personae were more Catholic in their origins — many actually worked — but the overall picture remains: the usual gilded crew. The few, celebrating and celebrated, for their own and public pleasure.

The key word is "few". Bailey himself proclaimed the cast in 1965 in a collection of his pictures: *The Box Of Finups*. It really was a box — of captioned pictures — and its aim was to capture the "ephemeral glamour" of the era "on the wing". The pin-ups — "the people in England who today seem glamorous" — were typified as "isolated, invulnerable, lost" (the central adjective somewhat at odds with its bookends).

On the basis of this selection, the "New Aristocracy" consisted of two actors, eight pop stars, one pop artist, one interior decorator, four photographers, two pop group managers, one pop star's friend, one hairdresser, two photographer-designers, one ballet dancer, three models, one movie producer, one milliner, one disco manager, one dress designer, one adman and a pair of villains. These "lost" boys and girls were a pretty predictable lot: the top two Beatles, Jagger, Shrimpton, Lord

Snowdon, Michael Caine, Cecil Beaton, Rudolf Nureyev... For added notoriety, Bailey included the criminal Kray brothers: "An East End legend... to be with them is to enter the atmosphere of an early Bogart movie." Bailey too was an East End boy, the son of an East Ham tailor; respect, presumably, was due. (Reminiscing 30 years on, he claimed: "I scared them.")

Bailey was "in crowd" *par excellence*. In 1969 he brought out a successor volume, *Goodbye Baby And Amen*, in which the show-business journalist Peter Evans described him "using his camera... to probe the shadows, expose the lie and fix forever the transient truth". Sorry, but if that was what you wanted, then Don McCullin, the best-known newspaper photographer of the time, was a better bet.

Bailey was the biggest myth-maker of the lot, but Evans was right; he "caught the face of his own generation more accurately than any photographer". But it was hardly *all* that generation. Bernard Levin, in his sceptical memoir *The Pendulum Years* (1970), saw him as "virgil" recording the period for posterity and establishing just who was in or out: "photographers... along with the models they photographed, the designers whose clothes the models wore, the singers whose records they played... the managers of the models, the gigolos, the younger sons of the nerveless aristocracy among whom they moved, the hangers-on of all these, and the vast poumbra of pimps and agents and ten-percenters, whores and pedlars and play-

wrights and decorators, all the froth and scum that [...] bubbled and seethed in the stew of a society that was in the process of changing from what it no longer wanted to be into what it did not know whether it wanted to be or not."

Bailey, of course, was not alone in tapping the zeitgeist. *Time* magazine usually gets the credit for inventing "Swinging London", but its piece only appeared in April 1966. Entitled *You Can Walk Across It On The Grass*, it paid tribute to the city's parks, although some detected a sly reference to the growing popularity of cannabis. The job had already been done, paradoxically in the *Daily Telegraph*, 12 months earlier. Written by the urbane John Crosby, an American in London, it was headlined "London, the most exciting city in the world".

Crosby's idea of "swinging" was sometimes surprising, depending as it did on up-market night-club owners and various sections of the aristocracy, but he did note the confluence of the children of the old upper classes and the rampant proles, flexing their talented

mussels. Nor did he forget the new air of sexuality ("Young English girls take to sex as if it's candy and it's delicious"), or the growing belief that, as *Time* put it later, "in this century, every decade has had its city", and this time it was the Big L.

Nor was even Crosby the pioneer. The *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement, launched in 1962, offered "a sharp glance at the mood of Britain". The cover featured a girl in a grey flannel dress; the pictures were taken by Bailey, the girl was Shrimpton and the dress's designer Mary Quant. It also offered profiles of "people of the sixties" — among them Quant and her husband, painter Peter Blake, a footballer, a youthful industrialist and an LSE sociologist. Finally it asked, "What do you need to be of the sixties?" The answer: "under 30" and "in tune with your times".

Whoever the creator, the world took note. First came *Time*, whose piece was apparently based on its male editors' desire to feature as much mini-skirted thigh as possible, then *Fleet Street*, then the ever-enthusiastic *TV* crews. Jonathon Aitken's Young

Meteors (1967) threw a few young entrepreneurs into to the mix, but the overall ethos, as the title indicated, was as approved: "young", "vibrant", "now".

On it went, ever more sexy, ever more excitedly-promoted, feeding greedily upon itself — and nowhere more so than in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966). Ostensibly a morality tale, it attempted to portray glamorous vice as wicked but merely diminished the vice and upgraded the glamour. Few young men of the time were repelled by the sight of David Hemmings (largely accepted as the "Bailey" character) stripping his giggling nymphets before plunging with them into an orgy of backdrop paper. The "not party" — beautiful people stoned in a beautiful setting — was hardly the gateway to hell.

Out in the sticks, *Blow-Up* was *Swinging London* — and didn't it look good? Yes it did, but the draw-bridge was up — and when the peasants finally made it into the castle, they found it deserted, the founder swingers having long since moved on. All that remained was a Carnaby Street simulacrum, its consumers rendered tourists in their own land.

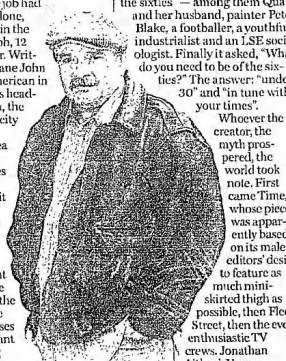
Looking back, one can see *Swinging London* as a mass delusion, a world of endlessly self-aggrandising mythologies. If there was novelty, it was not in the much acclaimed, but barely sup- portable "classlessness", but in the creation of a massively successful media myth, a mix of pop sociology and the propagandist's

chestnut: the big lie. Such mythologising was just about bearable within its own world, but elsewhere it jarred. Lauded as the grammar-school-educated new broom who would sweep away the fuddy-duddiness of traditional Conservatism, Edward Heath was at one point asked in apparent seriousness whether he realised he was the first Tory leader to boast that badge of modernity: wall-to-wall carpeting.

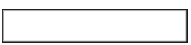
Nor was everything linked to the swinging Juggernaut. The best-selling single of 1966 came not from the Beatles or the Stones, but from the mawkish American Jim Reeves. Frank and Nancy Sinatra, Herb Alpert and Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick, and Tich all topped the *Fab Four*. In overall sales the Beatles were but ninth, ousted by such distinctly unswinging acts as Ken Dodd and Cliff Richard. The masses might gawp, but their real tastes remained predictable and grimly conventional.

Swinging London lasted perhaps two years. Elitist, style-obsessed, apolitical, it was destined not to survive. Two decades on, Margaret Thatcher, petty provincial consciousness incarnate, took revenge on the urban elitists. The GLC was dismantled, leaving England's capital city, alone in the Western world, bereft of unitary authority. No cohesion, no London. No London, no swinging.

David Bailey *Birth Of The Cool* is at the Barbican Art Gallery, London EC2 (0171-889 9233) till June 27. Jonathon Green's *All Dressed Up: The Swings And The Counterculture* will be published by Pimlico in July.



Bailey Green Guardian



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