

# All Messed Up

William Clark

## All Dressed Up (the Sixties and the Counterculture) Jonathon Green

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Well he says it himself even in the introduction: "...the Sixties have joined those other recent decades over which the survivors, decades past their prime, are scrapping like mangy mongrels, each determining to impose their own, sometimes self-serving vision upon history."

And, to echo the unoriginality by quoting Ecclesiasties, he even provides a quick review:

"Whatever the phenomenon known as the Sixties may have been, and however much that era would turn out to change the world in general and Britain in particular, there was, as ever, not that much new under the sun."

This particular mangy mongrel, Jonathon Green's knowledge of "the 60s counter-culture" was mostly Oxford University, then a very brief time with the British version of *Rolling Stone* magazine in the 70s, (bankrolled by Mick Jagger and based in the luxurious setting of Hanover Square). When all that collapsed a few friends moved down to Portobello Road and started the whole process of making an underground magazine/smoking dope all over again. Then the magazine produced there collapsed, because the people behind it got more into making money out of listings magazines. Green actually stopped someone beating up Richard Branson and made minor contributions to *Oz* and *International Times (IT)* as they went into decline. He is thought of as representing the less political, more hedonistic end of hippydom.<sup>1</sup> This does not excuse his sarcastic dismissals of those who did actually try in their daily lives to counter what they took to be repressive aspects of mainstream culture.

When suggesting some antecedents of "the sixties," he demonstrates his class bias:

"For the Teds, less cerebral than those who followed them, it was a gut reaction to the denial of free choice. Unimpressed by education, unlikely to transcend the low-grade jobs for which they were destined, they sought release in the exploitation of their leisure time."

He also believes the Teds "expanded into the metropolis and thence to the provinces...they

were, ultimately, too prole, too mindlessly violent...inarticulate, lashing out at whatever they saw."

So the book is a familiar collection of snippets from other books including his previous one, *Days in the Life (Voices from the English Underground)*. Why it bothered with the "English Underground" when so many seminal figures (Alexander Trocchi, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Tom McGrath and so forth) were not English, one can attribute to the usual reasons.

Ideas are not limited by geographic space, but this book would be properly subtitled—the tiny bits of London counter culture. It is also difficult to say what exactly this adds to Green's previous book which featured a list of quotes from various middle-class chums, or indeed what it adds to the bibliography he cites at the end. Mr Green is also—according to the first page in this book—"England's leading lexicographer of slang". My opinion is he hasn't got a Scooby.<sup>2</sup>

Most people would be better writers if they were aware of their own bias. Should the 1968 'Night of the Barricades', with 9 million on strike and most factories occupied have been given as much attention as the invention of the trouser suit? Its all very well for Green to say this is a personal account but does that mean bias and distortions are allowed to come to the fore, is that objective history? Are not huge gaps in his knowledge revealed?

There are very phoney comparisons between the 'Angry Brigade' and the IRA:

"...and while the IRA campaigns that would soon be getting under way in the wake of the renewed 'Troubles' would be far more spectacular, this outbreak of what looked like a low intensity urban guerrilla war was disturbing enough."

I don't really understand that, but he immediately derides the Angry Brigade by saying they had a "Just William" level of melodrama. There is just no comparison between the two. The IRA are a highly disciplined and organised army which has held off the worst the UK armed forces and intelligence agencies has flung at them. To this day nobody seems to know who the Angry Brigade were or what they were up to.

There are also problems of reversal of perspective. During the 'Angry Brigade trial' we are told that the *Evening Standard* stated:

"The guerrillas are violent activists of a revolution comprising, workers, students, trade unionists, homosexuals, unemployed and women striving for liberation. They are all angry...Whenever you see a demonstration, whenever you see a queue for strike pay, every public library with a good stock of socialist literature...anywhere would be a good place to look. In short there are no telling where they are."

The Angry Brigade should have been using that as a press release—its better than anything they ever wrote. Green himself wanted to break into Fleet Street, but couldn't get in, whereas many of his friends now work in the upper echelons churning out much the same shite the papers will forever print.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the later passages (very little more than a re-hash of previously published writing) run out of steam or have no focus. Passages on King Mob show him—the greatest lexicographer in England—with no notion of where the name comes from (the mobile party); others with no notion of the nature and history of Nihilism, which is simply used as a pejorative term (he went to Oxford but he hasn't even read *The Devils*).

It is difficult not to see King Mob's exploits as outdone by contemporary comedy:

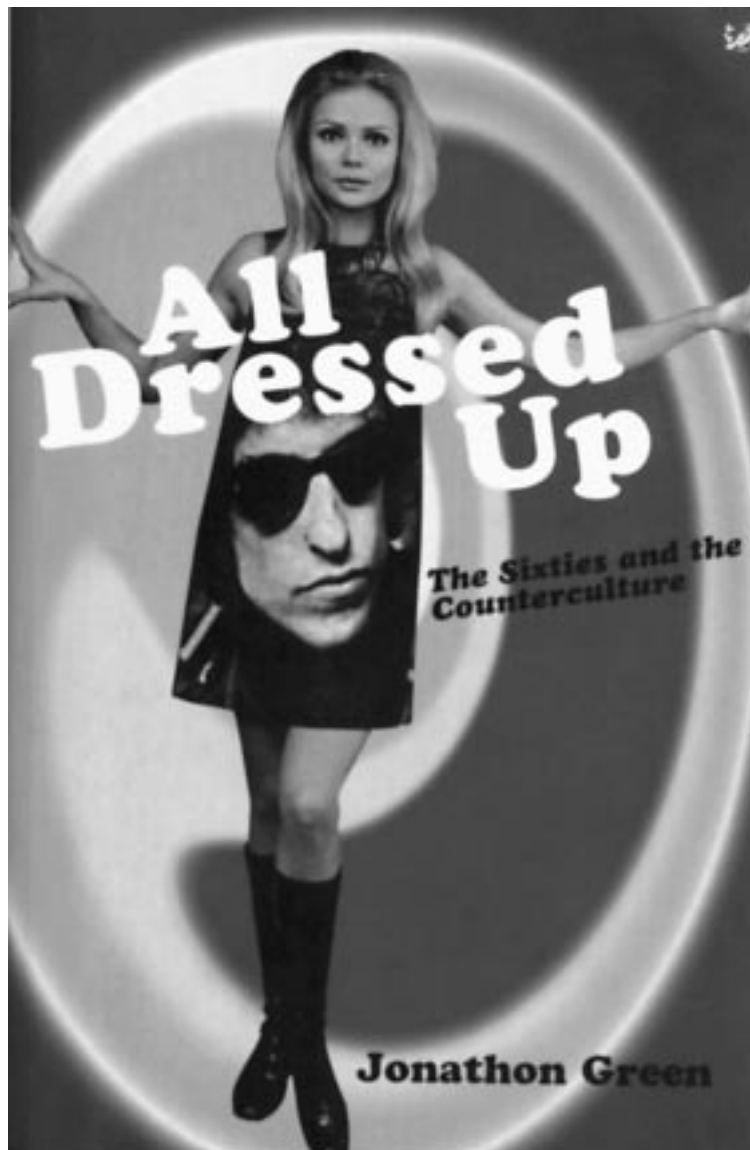
"...A waterfall in the picturesque lake district was to be dynamited and the slogan 'Peace in Vietnam' sprayed on the rubble; Wordsworth's house, a shrine for literary tourists, was to be blown up; in this case the caption would read 'Coleridge lives...'"

And now for something completely different.

He States on page 286 that after the police framed the Angry Brigade (AB):

"Within a very few years the police would be steam-rolling through the trials of a variety of alleged IRA bombers, using very similar tactics."

This and its extrapolation in the text is weak writing. If he had read (and not just cited) Tony Bunyan's "The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain" he would know that the Special Branch were originally named the Special Irish Branch. Trials of Irish political dissent have a long history. The state's perversion of the course of justice (where and when it was bothered with) with the fabrication of evidence in political trials did not stem from the 70s, but can be seen as a direct result of the creation of the Special Branch (the clampdown on Liberalism and the dawning of the secret state at the turn of the century). The



Special Political Branch was the other name they tried.<sup>4</sup>

“This is not a political trial” said the Judge in the AB trial and Green thinks he was fair. He could fucking well afford to be. At the end (250,000 words) of his summing up of the imaginary conspiracy he directed the jury:

“As long as you know what the agreement is, then you are a conspirator. You needn’t necessarily know your fellow conspirators, nor need you be always active in the conspiracy. All you need to know is the agreement. It can be effected by a wink or a nod without a word being exchanged. It need have no particular time limit, no particular form, no boundaries.”

One can imagine some stoned freak in the public gallery suddenly leaping up and shouting: “Yeah man—the dude in the wig’s right on—I wanna be a part of that shit—lets do it!” And the judge’s words could by extension be imagined to refer to implementation of the class system, the old boy network; and they are a great interpretation of the mood (what it was to be part of) of the counter-culture. But Green doesn’t pick up on any of this—guess why?

He has obviously put a lot of work into it—but there are just so many annoyances that its strength as a resource and reminder—in these days when people are falling over themselves to utterly comply with the dictates of the status quo—of ‘utopian thought’ is overshadowed. So many figures such as Arnold Wesker were (and probably still are) derided for what was utter common sense:

“Centre 42 will be a cultural hub which, by its approach and work, will destroy the mystique and snobbery associated with the arts. A place where artists are in control of their own means of expression and their own channels of distribution; where the highest standards of professional work will be maintained in an atmosphere of informality; where the artist is brought into closer contact with his audience enabling the public to see that artistic activity is a natural part of their daily lives.”

When was the last time you heard someone talking about de-mystifying the arts in a meaningful way? Due to reluctance and conservatism on the part of the art elite the project—which centred on the Roundhouse—did not fully come to fruition... how different things were in the 60s.

The place was used by *IT* for an “All-Night Rave Pop Op Costume Masque Drag Ball Et Al”, ten bob on the door. As with many figures he mentions (coupled here with no analysis of the event’s significance or spontaneity), Green indulges in comments which are poorly disguised jealousy. Jim Haynes, the organiser of the event is “some escapee from a Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland vehicle”, a put down which steps on the heart of the counter-culture.

His knowledge of art is thin, a weak point. The Young Contemporaries show of 1961 included such figures as R.B. Kitaj, Peter Phillips, Patrick Caulfield, Derek Boshier, David Hockney and Allen Jones. Green in an allusion to how reactionary the response to new work was cites one critic: “John Russell writing in 1969, who described Pop art as ‘classless commando...directed against the Establishment in general and the art-Establishment in particular...’” There is no source mentioned. This is a confused passage. Is Russell writing on the 61 exhibition, Pop art?

It is important to understand the hostility that progressive ideas will always receive from the poverty stricken imagination. These days we have whole bureaucracies devoted to perverting freedom of expression. If a press release arrived which said that the Arts Council of England were starting a committee of Pharisees and Sadducees would anyone notice anything?

With his account of Michael Abdul Malik (p.298)—who is now considered a disreputable conman<sup>5</sup>—he hides his personal involvement and transfers gullibility elsewhere to aid a process of demonisation:

“The underground press, in particular, was swamped with pro-Michael pieces. *Friends* offered a lengthy interview...with nary a doubting syllable.”

No mention anywhere in this book that he was one of two or three guys working on *Friends*. This is just very poor history. A bit dodgy, Johnboy. A big deal is made out of this contact and promotion of Malik—who is presented here as the first dishonest man he had ever met.

Now that Malik has been extremely dead for about 25 years he feels safe to go on at length about how ‘liberals’ (i.e. not him) were taken in by the big bogeyman Malik. Putting Colin McInnes to the fore he scores some points from a distance of 30 years or more. The passage on Malik gets progressively worse:

“Malik was a creature of the media”.

If Green was on *Friends* when they did the story then he was probably at the front of the queue boasting about his paper getting in on it first, until it all turned sour:

“Like every hustler he was an actor, relying heavily on the credulity of his audience...”

That kind of stuff cuts both ways. For Green ripping off Notting Hill dope dealers and frightening hippies who do underground mags are Malik’s big crime—he casually mentions he was hung for murder in Trinidad. Which makes him—to Green’s likening—just yet another lower class demon like those nasty Teddy Boys.

*Friends* office was on Portobello Road. At the time Green lived with Rosie Boycott (who later started *Spare Rib* and now edits one of the papers frequently cited here as an example of atrocious journalism) and he subsidised his income producing pornography<sup>6</sup>. One would have thought that porn would have been a bigger part of the book,

since it was a big part of the counter culture (then it wasn’t, then it was again in the mid 80s), there is not much left of *Oz* if you take away the bare bums. And Green would have as much inside knowledge of it that he has with the Underground Press.

#### Notes

1. I draw my remarks on him from “Underground (The London Alternative Press 1966 - 74), Nigel Fountain, Comedia, 1988”.
2. How one would achieve the status of “leading lexicographer” (note not even living lexicographer) beats me. Did they all battle it out in a mud wrestling ring and he knocked out Ambrose Bierce in a close-run final? The dictionary mind-set—encapsulation and elocution—in that language is an expression of consciousness—and certainly when written by one person, propel their makers towards a political orthodoxy, with its disguised proscriptions and prohibitions. Green has compiled some five dictionaries, one seems to be a dictionary of ‘jargon’, another is a ‘Dictionary of Dictionary makers. I suppose it passes the time.
3. He is quoted in Fountain’s book as saying: “my CV—had I had one—would have been completely meaningless ...as far as Fleet Street was concerned I’d never done anything. I was writing 20,000 words a week for *Friends* and it was great and it ruined me for ever, because it ruined me for editing.” [emphasis in the original].
4. There is no mention of *Time Out*’s relation to the Agitprop Collective and the whole area of investigative journalism which stems from the period. In both the USA and the UK, towards the end of the ‘60s and into the early ‘70s as the counter culture lost its earlier ‘coherence’, there was a noticeable move towards underground newspapers concerning themselves with the issues of particular communities, both geographically and interest wise. This had happened before, but with the increased fragmentation of the counter culture, local concerns took on a new importance. This can be seen more clearly with the rise of community presses, as collectives formed throughout the UK. Community presses engaged and mobilised around issues that affected their immediate community, within a broader web of national and opposition media. Beyond London numerous magazines/papers came into existence: such as *Mole Express*, *Rap*, *Grass Eye*, the *Liverpool Free Press*, the *Manchester Free Press*, *Grapevine*, *Mother Grumble*, *Inside Out*, the *Aberdeen Free Press* and the *Brighton Voice*. Even my old home town of Easterhouse had ‘*The Voice*’.
5. Many activists supported Malik when he went on trial. This is not in Green’s book but Darcus Howe stated in *Race Today* that Malik “was denounced by the revolutionary movement in Trinidad. He was lined up with government ministers and he was doing land deals with them.” “Two old members” of *IT* published a souvenir programme for his hanging.
6. Fountain page 191; “It left Green, and others, in the curious situation of having to hustle for money from skin mags. while his one-time partner Rosie Boycott worked for feminism and *Spare Rib*. Green hit the typewriter, anonymously, for its diametric opposite.” I don’t believe pornography is necessarily the opposite of feminism, but the situation does resemble BBC 2’s recent ‘Hippies’ programme.