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“What a different location it was then to how people perceive it now”, recalls Vivien Goldman. “It was really a shabby backwater, funky—not sleazy, but it certainly wasn’t chic. All those shops with old dears, fairly surly, of a kind that you don’t have any more. Where we were was the lowest point, and the lowest point is generally where the poor live—the richer people live on the hill. That was the grotty part, the borderline, where our house and Rough Trade were—the armpit of the area. There were so many dreads there, and people would come in wanting [reggae records], so there was market demand really. Because of where it was, on the Carnival route, and right at the heart of one of the biggest ex-pat West Indian communities And there was such a lot of great music at the time.”

Notting Hill was the area of London associated with Caribbean immigration since the 1940s and was one of London’s most racially mixed districts. Reggae and dub were the sounds most likely to be heard pumping out of open windows on a summer afternoon in Ladbrooke Grove; Travis was effectively opening a local shop for the rich mix of local people, his punky reggae music policy attracting both Rastas and white punks. He would buy stock from various local underground dealers and importers, often forced to listen to just seconds of each track and make a decision to purchase or reject on the spot. The ordeal-by-audio forced his ears to mature fast—the perfect training for A&R duties.

“There were these records, ‘prees’ [ie pre-releases], that used to come from Jamaica”, says Ana da Silva, who worked on the shop floor at the time, “and they used to have bits of sand on them. There were these guys that used to come in and listen to about two seconds of it: ‘Oh yeah, I want that one’, and two seconds of a different one: ‘No, I don’t want that one’. I could never understand how they could tell.”

“I just remember it being very chaotic”, recalls Ari Up, who would look in on the shop after her regular trip to Dub Vendor, a few streets away, before she became lead singer of The Slits. “A pile of records like a mountain, a mountainside. Piles and piles of records and shelves and everything thrown down on the ground and piles of papers and piles of scattered girls running around! That’s what I remember walking in that shop—total chaos. I don’t know how they sold records like that, they must have lost a lot of money. People coming in and stealing records”



Opposite: Original shop employee Pete Donne. Photograph courtesy of Rough Trade shop.

Above left: The shop soon became the epicentre of London’s punk scene. Photograph courtesy of Rough Trade shop.

Above right: Prolific bands such as The Ramones would frequent the premises. Photograph by Gerard Ruffin, courtesy of Rough Trade shop.

Travis’s experience on the kibbutz had made him a passionate believer in the power of the co-operative as an alternative to conventional business practice. “A kibbutz is a utopia, isn’t it?” affirms Goldman. “So he was trying to make a utopia there in the ghetto of Ladbrooke Grove.” Even though he was an owner of the company (along with his father, who contributed some of the start-up costs), no one remembers him acting like a normal ‘boss’. All employees received the same wage no matter what their job was, and all took part in the regular meetings, which turned into discussions about music and the relative musical and ideological values of records. “The idealism was very real”, confirms Goldman, “it wasn’t a put-on, it wasn’t pretentious or a façade. Geoff was giving it a go. He was very idealistic and he was a Marxist, and he wanted to shatter the paradigm. You could say it was an experiment, because nobody knew how it would turn out. Like they say in Jamaica, it was ‘trying a thing’.”

Rough Trade had some fledgling musicians working behind its counter. As well as Ana da Silva of The Raincoats, there were the two Godfrey brothers from the Midlands, nicknamed Nikki Sudden and Epic Soundtracks, who used to record DIY spacey punk tracks at their parents’ house under the name Swell Maps. Drop-in visits from touring artists such as The Ramones and Patti Smith, and The Sex Pistols’ Steve Jones, helped to cement the shop’s cachet as the go-to centre of the independent universe. The shop’s clientele signalled a market in transition: not hardcore punks, but not the Prog rock-centred white student audience of the early 70s either. In fact the customer base was hard to pin down, something between post-60s bohemia and ‘conscious punk’. “It wasn’t like what you imagine, punks, spiky hair kind of thing”, recalls da Silva. “It’s funny when you look at pictures of very early gigs at the Roxy, it was totally kind of student looking people in a way. A little bit scruffy it wasn’t the hardcore punks you sort of connect with that time.”

The Raincoats’ Ana da Silva working at Rough Trade, 1979. Photograph by Chris Ward (Sparks).

