



# A Concise History of the British Mod Movement

by Melissa M. Casburn

Emerging from World War II, the youth of London found themselves in a period of traditional values, conformity and drabness. Struggling to escape the oppressiveness of morals, family obligations and strict discipline in schools and on the streets, a string of youth subcultures emerged as a way of rebellion and self-expression, beginning with the Bohemians, and continuing today with punks and skin-heads. Somewhere in the middle lie the Mods, an immeasurably large and widespread cult of fashion-worshipping working-class teens with money in their pockets and time on their hands.



The immediate predecessors of the Mods were the Teddy Boys or the Teds. In an attempt by the shop-owners of Saville Row to reincarnate the dandy look, Teddy Boys sported drape jackets with drainpipe trousers or jeans, the distinctive uniform. An extremely narcissistic group, the only violence that ever arose in relation to them was due to an over-reaction to insults about their mode of dress; one common insult being 'flash cunt'. The Teds cultivated a slick image, completed by a greasy, Bryl-creamed 'quiff', a Fonzie-style lock hanging down the center of the forehead.

The Teddy Boys, along with the Beatniks, broke fresh ground for bored youths in a grey and conformist world. By the late 1950s, however, the Teds had grown stale and predictable and youth was more than ready for a change.

Left, a Teddy Boy in London in the 1950s.

In 1958, a small group of tailor's sons in East London adopted a smooth and sophisticated look, a combination of Italian and French styles of the period. They had Italian suits with narrow lapels impeccably tailor-made for themselves, and wore them with pointed-collar shirts. The shoes of necessity were hand-made winkle-pickers, so named because of their extremely pointed toes which so closely resembled the pins used to pick the meat out of a type of snail called a periwinkle (Author's Note: Winkle-pickers are still made today. I own a pair in patent leather that I picked up in The Haight in 1987.) To top off the look, Mods wore their hair short and neat, following the lead of French film stars. Great pains were taken to get the hairstyle just right. Says one of the pioneers of the new look: "Most of us had terrific hair, French style, and you spent a lot of time on it. You had to use sugar water. What you would do was wash your hair, then get a bowl of hot water and

put sugar in it. Let the water cool and keep stirring it up and then plaster the water on your head and shape your hair. We used to leave it on all night. The longer you left it on, the better it was. If you had straight hair, you left it on for twenty-four hours. It was horrible stuff. But, if you had crinkly hair, you might have to leave it on for four days. With straight hair, it came out just the business.”

A group of London Mods in 1964.

Mods inherited the narcissistic and fastidious tendencies of the Teds regarding their appearance. Dressing for show was transformed into a religion as British youth demolished the notion of male clothing as merely a status indicator. Until this time, it had been a common stereotype that only homosexuals were interested in fashion. The Mods trampled on this idea as well. Clothing took precedence over all else, as this Mod explains: “We used to go to a lot of extremes. Once I didn’t go out because I put on my suit and my shoes were a little bit dirty so I got the polish out and --- disaster --- I looked



in the mirror and I’d splashed my shirt. So I got the hump and I didn’t go out that evening. I stayed in because my shirt wasn’t perfect. And I knew guys who’d get on a bus with a sheet of brown paper so they could put it on the seat so they didn’t get any dirt on their suit. And they’d sit bolt upright so they were not touching the back of the seat. We took it very seriously and you had to be immaculate, very dandyish.”

The interests of early Mods, who at this point were fairly small in number, were things that would maintain their ‘cool’ image, such as modern jazz music and Jaguar cars; however, relatively small salaries afforded them only motor scooters for transportation. The most popular models, Italian Vespas and Lambrettas, has a sleek, ‘cool’ shape and the advantage of being less oily than motor bikes; therefore, sparing much damage to silk suits. For extra protection and cleanliness, the Mods (or Modernists), took to wearing parks, all-weather cape coats with fur-lined hoods in regulation Army green, though some Mods would dye them colors to match their scooters. they began to frequent clubs, a favorite being *Le Kilt*, which was often filled with young French women whose ‘cool’ image they greatly admired.

By 1960, the Mods had attained minor cult status, but had not yet been discovered by the media, the movement having only a few thousand adherents who were scattered throughout London. Two key factors are believed to have been reasonable for transforming them into the massive army they would soon become: affluence and education.

As wages generally improved after the war, working-class families became much better off and were no longer relying on their children to help support the family, as had been tradition. Consequently, youth became financially independent, with a large disposable income and suddenly nowhere to spend it. This was especially true of inner-city youth.



Due to the baby boom after the war, Britain was also becoming an increasingly younger country, opening a brand new and lucrative market to cater to and exploit. In the early 1960s, almost forty per cent of the population was under twenty-five. New technology was also reducing the need for manpower, thus increasing the amount of free time. Because the older generations were conservative and fearful that pandering to the whims of the young would create an anti-social culture, the market was left wide open to young entrepreneurs who were more familiar with the wants and needs of their new customers.

The Education Act of 1944 elicited improvements in the quality of schooling, opening up new employment opportunities for youth. Many young people from lower classes could now attend colleges and universities due to more generous grants and these institutions spawned a new generation of artists, designers and musicians. Consequently, art schools were on the rise, helping students to evaluate and develop their own personal style.

A Mary Quant dress from 1964.

Driven forward by affluence and education, the Mod cult exploded onto the London scene around 1960, the first sign being the rapid rise of shops selling Mod clothing. One of the primary designers for the Mods was Mary Quant, whose black daisy logo can still be seen in alternative clothing stores today. She became the most successful designer and purveyor of the Mod look. Speaking of the rise in popularity of her designs, she inadvertently describes the movement itself: "At first we thought it was just the art student type that wanted to look like us and buy our clothes. But what we didn't realize at the time and didn't discover for some time was the fact that we were interpreting the mood of the whole generation, not just smart art students. The whole thing caught on in a much bigger way than we expected. We thought we were just working for people who lived in Chelsea, but the whole thing was actually what people wanted from all over."

John Stephen was another significant Mod designer, who was just twenty-one when he opened his first boutique, *His Clothes*, and began to revolutionize the men's clothing industry. Stephen watched and noticed what the Mods were wearing and what they wanted, and every new style on the streets appeared the next day in his shop. He kept it well-stocked with the latest trends, such as mohair or white suits, as well as basic, well-cut suits, jackets and trousers. Hipster trousers, worn previously only by homosexuals because of their supposedly effeminate colours, showed up first in Stephen's boutiques, which were rapidly expanding. Within a few years, he owned a total of seventy boutiques in London, the U.S. and various European cities. This abundance of ready-to-wear clothing in the Mod style helped to reduce prices and propel the fashions quickly around the country.

By this time, a new door was opening into the Mod world. Women, previously shunned by this male-dominant subculture, now began to enter the scene, though they remained a minority throughout the life of the cult, referred to by the male members as 'birds'.

King's Road, a fashion mecca comparable to Carnaby Street, sported Stephen's boutiques that catered primarily to teenage girls and young women, though the commercialized versions were more refined than what female Mods had been seen wearing in the street and in the clubs. Hemlines moved gradually up the leg, following current fashion. The miniskirt, a necessity in later Mod fashion, was to make London world famous. Flat shoes were in vogue, as were trousers and shirts or sweaters that match those of the girl's boyfriend. Androgyny prevailed and haircuts were short and neat. Mod females wore little makeup, staying basic with only brown eye shadow and false eyelashes, unlike their male counterparts who adorned themselves meticulously in eye shadow, eye pencil, lipstick and rouge.



Naturally, along with fashion came a necessary change in hair-styles and the newest trendsetter was Vidal Sasson with his introduction of the geometric cut. The simpler style complemented the clean lines of Mary Quant's clothing. Sasson's West End salon soon became a favorite of Mod women. Hair salons for men also began popping up in large numbers, eradicating the need for the early days of sugar and water.

*Ready, Steady, Go!* was introduced on TV in August 1963 and given a prime time slot to the delight of thousands of Mods who could now gain access to the latest styles, music and dance moves. Clubs were still increasing in popularity, aided by the newest rave, *La Discotheque*, the first venue to play records rather than feature live bands. Most Mods led an active social life,

attending clubs two to three nights a week on average. One Mod described his week: "Monday was Tottenham Royal, Tuesday the Lyceum, Wednesday the Scene or maybe stay in and wash your hair, Thursday Tottenham Royal again, then Friday night was *Ready, Steady, Go!* It got difficult to get in on that, so me and a friend used to get hold of an empty film can apiece and ride up and down the lift in the studios until it was time to go in, then we would just join the crowd. Then after, you'd go on to the Scene later. Saturday and Sunday was either a party or the Tottenham Royal, then the next week, you'd start again."

To keep up with this hectic schedule most Mods employed the help of amphetamines, legal at the time and referred to as *purple hearts* or *purpies*, *French Blues* or *black bombers*. *Getting blocked* was sometimes the only way to make it through the week.

Mods were generally working class apprentices, shop hands and office boys. It is speculated that their obsessive pursuit of pleasure was in some way a desperate attempt to escape the monotony and low status they had to tolerate in the workplace. This was their only way to achieve the material success promised by an affluent and consumer society. Because this was the first generation who did not remember the war, the Mods did not suffer guilt and anxiety over their extravagance.

The It Girl of the Moment was Twiggy (aka LesleyHornby, born in Neasden, a suburb of London). She was the first teenager to become a supermodel. Her impact was immediate and international. She was the first mass-merchandised model and is still one of the most recognized names in fashion.



There was a very general breakdown of cliques within the Mod culture, into three loosely defined groups: the mainstream Mods, the Scooter Boys, and the Hard Mods.

Mainstream Mods entertained most styles of the subculture from time to time, but generally dressed in Italian silk suits with narrow lapels. Colours ranged from grey and black to brown, red and green. Drainpipe trousers were cut above the ankle to reveal Italian tasseled loafers for basket-weave casuals, usually with pointed toes. Ties were always very thin and usually black, worn around the necks of button-down shirts. Turtlenecks were also popular in wool or cashmere, as were crew-neck and V-neck sweaters and polo knit shirts buttoned to the throat, with horizontal stripes being the preferred pattern. Hair was razor-short and often topped with a black bowler. Mods sported dark glasses, in keeping with the 'cool' image.

Scooter Boys opted for a more casual attire, wearing anoraks and Army parkas for warmth. Shrink-to-fit Levis were popular with the Mods, often in black. Like the mainstream Mods, Scooter Boys donned sweaters of wool or cashmere, but paired them up with plaid or checked trousers. They also outfitted their scooters, dressing them up with mirrors, head-lights and fog lamps around the handlebars.

Hard Mods, a group that gradually evolved into Skinheads, were aggressively working class males who wore mainly jeans and work boots. Doc Martens were and are a popular work boot due to their exceptional strength and fit.

For every action there must be an opposite and equal reaction, and that reaction was embodied in the *Rockers*. Driving motorcycles and dressed from head to toe in leather, studs and hair grease, the Rockers were the sworn enemies of the Mods. While *Mod* typically represented an effeminate phoniness, *Rocker* (stemming from *Rock and Roll*) meant dirty and crass. In 1964, the two groups came to a head in Whitsun during Great Britain's three-day Easter Bank Holiday. They held a major punch-up in the middle of the drab seaside resort Margate, resulting in seventy arrests. Many of those arrested stated that they had done it because they were bored. Seventy is surprisingly few, considering the thousands who attended, coming droves of scooters and motorbikes down the coast. If any youths had not been aware of the Mods before, there was no escaping their presence now.



Peter Noone of the band *Herman's Hermits*. In 1965 the members of the band dressed in the trim, tailored clothes that had been brought forward by the Mod movement.

By this time, the subculture had become a mass commercial phenomenon and by 1965, the working class rebels who had helped to create the original cult disapproved of it, could no longer identify with it, and were beginning to lose interest. Wealthy pop aristocrats opened their own clubs, feeding off of the popularity of the style, while the original Mods were left in their 9-to-5 jobs, feeling cheated and upstaged. They were also growing older, starting families and careers and establishing homes for themselves. As all fads do, the image gradually lost the limelight and was eclipsed by the hippies and the steadily growing drug culture of the late sixties.

The Mod scene has undergone a mentionable revival of late. It is common to see late-model Vespas and Lambrettas parked haphazardly on San Francisco sidewalks. I hear of scooter clubs in Berkeley, San Francisco and Santa Barbara. Retro clothing stores stock the fashions of sixties. In 2003 the couture Spring collections were notable for their

new interpretation of Mod fashions for men and women. It is part of the way of fashion, though, that these new times will be nothing to rival those which came before.



In 2004, we will see the presentation of the sixth *Mods and Rockers* film festival in Los Angeles. Each of the festivals has grown larger in size with more attendees wearing the clothing of the early 1960s, both vintage and reproduction.

Barry Evans and Judy Geeson in *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (1967), shown at the 2002 *Mods and Rockers* Film Festival. The film features music by the Spencer Davis Group and Stevie Winwood and Traffic. Shot entirely on location in London, the film perfectly captures the Swinging London scene of the mid 1960s.

## The Mod's Bookshelf

*The 60s: Mods and Hippies (20th Century Fashion)* by Kitty Powe-Temperley, Heinemann Educational Books, 2000.

*Boutique: A 60's Cultural Phenomenon* by Marnie Fogg, Mitchell Beazley Publishers, 2003.

*Everyday Fashions of the Sixties as Pictured in the Sears Catalogs* by JoAnne Olian (Editor), Dover Publications, 1999.

*London in the Sixties (Cities in the Sixties)* by George Perry (Editor), Pavilion Publishers, 2003.

*The Mini-Mod Sixties Book* by Samantha Bleikorn, Last Gasp of San Francisco Publishers, 2002.

*Mod, A Very British Phenomenon: Clean Living Under Difficult Circumstances* by Terry Rawlings, Introduction by Richard Barnes, Omnibus Press, 2000.

*Ready, Steady, Go!: The Smashing Rise and Giddy Fall of Swinging London* by Shawn Levy, Broadway Publishers, 2003.

*The Sharper Word: A Mod Reader* by Paolo Hewitt, Interlink Publishers Group, 2000.

*Stoned: A Memoir of London in the 1960s* by Andrew Loog Oldham, St. Martin's Press, 2002.

*The Swingin' Chicks of the Sixties* by Chris Stodder, Cedco Inc., 2000.