

Northern Soul Scene Project

Nick Porter (NP) interviewed by Jason Mitchell (JM) on 25th March 2020

- NP: Absolutely no idea, but...
- JM: Let's see. So basically there's a...there's two...there's two pieces of paper. Did you manage to have a look at those?
- NP: No, as I say, I did send you another email, and when you re-sent me the email there was no attachments with it. So...
- JM: Oh, I forwarded it to you. It might've...so basically the first one is the...is the Oral History Project recording agreement.
- NP: Right.
- JM: And then there's the Participation Agreement.
- NP: Okay.
- JM: And...and they are just basically two documents that [*coughs*] excuse me, say, you know, "Are you happy for us to do an interview?" And then once we've done the interview, it's kind of saying, "Are you happy that...that the interview will go into the archive at Peterborough," and that once it goes into the archive it, kind of, um, it's...
- NP: It's your property, not mine, sort of thing.
- JM: Yeah, yeah, that type of thing.
- NP: Yeah, okay, that's fair enough. It's standard, sort of, data protection and stuff like that, is it?
- JM: Yeah, that's perfect. And all we're asking people to do is, sort of, if they get a chance at some point to, um, maybe sign those and just scan them or forward them to Kate.
- NP: Yep, sure, okay.
- JM: That's perfect.
- NP: As I say, if you send me the original email rather than the thread, 'cause I got the whole thread but there was no attachments on that.
- JM: Oh, right, okay, will do. Yeah, absolutely.
- NP: I don't know how I carelessly deleted the original one you sent me, but...
- JM: Don't worry, I do it all the time. My other favourite is emailing people, and...and... it...leaving it in a draft.
- NP: Yeah. Oh, yes.
- JM: That's my famous one. So I'm just going to...it's the 25th of March today, 2020. My name's Jason Mitchell, and I'm interviewing - and your first name is?
- NP: Nick. N I C K.
- JM: And could you...is...is that your full name?

NP: Nick Porter.

JM: And so, yeah, could you just spell that for me, both parts?

NP: Okay, yeah. So, N I C K, P O R T E R.

JM: Perfect. That's great. And it's a telephone interview and it's for the Northern Soul Project in Peterborough. Nick, where were you born?

NP: I come from Hitchin, bit further down the A1, so...

JM: Okay. And if you don't mind, when were you born?

NP: Er, 1961.

JM: Okay.

NP: Do you want my actual date?

JM: No, it's just kind of...so we kind of...when you say something, you know an age, we get the context of when and where it was. And were you...have you been known by any other previous names?

NP: No.

JM: Okay. That's just useful for us because sometimes someone will mention a nickname of someone in the Northern Soul scene and it's like a cross reference.

NP: Uuuuummmm, de dum, de dum, no, I don't think there'd've been anything like that.

JM: Okay.

NP: Not in those days, no.

JM: Okay, that's perfect. So I'm gonna start with just a very, sort of, open question about...tell me a bit about your experience with Northern Soul.

NP: Um, well essentially it was, sort of, part of my late teens, early 20s. I, sort of, first heard of it – I wasn't one of the originals back from the early days, back when, sort of, Wigan Casino and all the other famous venues. My sort of involvement with it started with the mod revival, which was the late '70s – '78, '79. Um, and there was scooters and various things like that. But there was quite an active group of actual bona fide Northern Soulers even before the mod revival thing started based in Letchworth, which is where I happened to work at the time. And it just so happened that where I worked in Sainsbury's in those days, in Letchworth town centre, just round the corner from the pub where these guys used to go. Um, and so it was just, sort of, a question of getting chat...well, not a question, it was a matter of getting chatting with those guys, um, who they were, sort of, into the mod revival thing as well, but they'd actually been going to Northern Soul venues before that started. So they were very, very knowledgeable. And I gradually got interested in the scene, pretty much via them. These fellas, sort of, came along a little bit later, um, 1980, 1981, um, that's about two or three years after we first got interested, um, because it was, um, probably...well, the biggest all-nighter of...there was an all-nighter in particular we were interested in. There was one in Bedford but then the venue closed down. So Peterborough was, sort of, the next...next one we started going to. So that's how...it was a gradual

evolvment. It didn't, sort of, happen overnight. Um, once the mod revival thing died down, then we carried on with the soul stuff after that.

JM: So...

NP: Sorry, go on.

JM: Would you have called yourself a mod to start off with?

NP: Oh, yes, absolutely, no doubt about it. I still subscribe to various mod pages, and I wouldn't say I live a moddy lifestyle anymore. I don't have any more scooters, although I'm thinking of buying another one. But yes, the mod thing definitely came first for me, um, whereas it didn't for some people, the soul thing came first for some people.

JM: And you had a...what scooter did you have, just while we're here?

NP: Oh I 'ad various ones, I 'ad four or five over the course of, er...they were all Lambrettas – I never liked Vespas. I thought they were rather unstable and not as good looking – didn't like the lines quite as much as Lambrettas. But I had various Lambrettas, four or five different ones. One got pinched, one got...two got written off. Erm [*chuckles*] crazy days that they were, and all the stupid things we used to get up to, so...'course they were ten a penny then, you buy them for 25, 30 quid, whereas these days they're worth thousands.

JM: Yeah.

[5:12.8]

NP: So it was very easy to replace them if anything happened because there were loads still knocking about from the '60s and early '70s, so...

JM: And...and when you say the transformation from that to...to Northern Soul, have you got...can you remember a bit more detail about that, I mean, in...in relation to...you heard it where, someone told you about it?

NP: Yeah. Um, it was just a question of hanging with these guys, sort of, a group of four or five of them, in Letchworth they were based. And they sort of got into the mod thing, I think, more as an offshoot of the soul thing rather than...for most of us it was the other way round - and they were a bit older than us, as well. I mean, one of the guys has been, um, sort of the leader, if you like, there was sort of like a...probably not a very good word to use, but sort of the one that everybody knew, was sort of four or five years older than I am. Um, so bearing in mind we're, sort of, late teens – sort of 18, 19 - you tend to look up to guys who are a bit older and have got a bit more money. You know, it seems like a rite of passage sort of thing. And so when we moved on to the soul scene, erm, sort of becoming part of that peer group, erm...I mean that sort of youth culture really hasn't changed much over the years, I think there's still that...you...you look up to the, sort of, slightly older members of the gang, if you like. Um, they're...they're your mentors, the people you look up to, and so we sort of gradually found it through them, if that's the sort of detail you're interested in. The social history side I find interesting, actually.

JM: Mmmm.

NP: And so Peterborough, as I say, was...it was...it was very, very well known. I mean, there were two or three venues at Peterborough, there was The Wirrina as well as The Fleet in Fletton.

Um, I never actually went to The Wirrina, but we used to go to The Fleet on a very, very regular basis.

JM: Yeah. And what was...what was...for you, describe the difference between the style of the music and what it, sort of, felt like and meant to you.

NP: I'd always liked soul music, even when I was a kid. Um, but one of the...um, sort of, Motown I'd always liked, um, and the later soul stuff, some of the '70s disco stuff, which was, sort of, when I was growing up in the mid '60s...sorry, mid '70s – '75, '76, '77 - before the punk thing came along, er, when that was still very fashionable, disco. And I'd always liked that but I never actually knew of the specific genre of Northern Soul until such time as it, sort of, gradually crept into my consciousness through the...the mod revival thing and speaking to these other guys. And the thing with, particularly with Northern Soul, it, sort of, it was a bit of a cliché, the actual...the actual term "Northern Soul" because it covers an enormous spectrum of music, I mean there's all sorts of jazz influences.

JM: Yeah.

NP: R&B, um, you know, some of them even sound quite rocky, so it's not, you know, it's not just Motown. It's one of the sort of questions that people ask, you know, "Isn't that just Motown?" Well, no, it's not. Um, because a lot of records which, um, you know, you wouldn't think necessarily were anything like Motown do, sort of, get included, and of course the scene itself actually evolved as it was going along because it was...because it was...it evolved in the late '60s in the north, but there was...there was a club in Bletsoe, near Bedford, which was...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...every bit as original at the time, and actually pre-dated a lot of the northern ones. So that...that, sort of, soul camaraderie, soul aficionados sort of thing, had been around for a long time. But it evolved, um, quite a bit and something...started including other influences. So by the time we got along to it in the late '70s it was pretty well established, but it wasn't the same as it had been right at the very beginning, um, and, I say, it was still evolving, Wigan Casino was still going when I first got into it, although I never actually got there myself. They closed, probably about a year after I got into it. It's one of those things that I always intended to do but never got round to, innit. It's on me bucket list, if such things as bucket lists existed in those days, but... So that's...that's how, sort of, my interest in it came along. It was a gradual thing. So, yeah, I suppose you could combine a, sort of, a rite of passage from, sort of, late teens into adulthood, um, looking up to my peer group. And I loved the music as well, because I've always liked that sort of music, but then this one was like an extra dimension. And then, of course, you get into the collecting side of things as well.

JM: So do you collect?

NP: Er, still...I did for a long time. Then I had a lot of my collection pinched, which was, unfortunately, a very common occurrence...

JM: Really?

NP: ...um in the...well, sort of 'bout '83, something like that, '83. And when that happened, um, I'd just met my first wife then, as well, so the combination of the two – 'cause she wasn't

interested in it – so I sold up my original collection, or what was left of it, to a guy who's still very much on the scene now. But then, it was almost by chance I got back into again two or three years ago, er, three...two or three...so I do actually collect again now, I started collecting again. Unfortunately prices are considerably higher now.

[10:17.9]

JM: Yeah. *[Laughs]*.

NP: You used to be able to buy stuff, well, you'd pay a few bob for it, you know, 25, 30 pounds was a pretty average price, or even more, you know, an expensive record then whereas now they're in the thousands, because obviously over the course of another 40...30 or 40 years, they get rarer, they get scratched, they get trodden on, they go into collections, and so they're a lot harder to find now. So it's a very expensive business, very expensive indeed. But in those days it was quite good fun, because a lot...there was a lot more original stuff still around.

JM: Mmmm.

NP: It was much easier to find. 'Course there was no such thing as the internet then.

JM: Yeah.

NP: So you had to rely on going to venues to actually find the stuff. Um, there was record shops and mail order, of course, but obviously that's cumbersome and quite risky, so...one of the good things about going to an all-nighter or something...or something like that, or just an all-dayer, or...anyway, just a, sort of, a function was there would always be a lot of record dealers. That tends not to happen so much these days. Um, you occasionally get one, but - or two - but nothing like *[coughs]* excuse me, nothing like it used to be. D'you mind... can you just bear with me a sec - all this talking, I'm getting a very dry throat. I'm just...hopefully my signal won't break up. I'm just nipping downstairs to the kitchen to get a quick drink.

JM: No, no, go for it. Absolutely.

NP: I hope...I hope this is interesting, and the sort of thing you're looking for, anyway.

JM: No, no, it's absolutely...yeah, it's perfect. Thank you.

NP: Okay. No problem. Um, okay, hang on, bear with me one second, I'm just gonna put the phone down, so...

JM: Alright, no worries.

NP: Ten seconds. *[Long pause, with coughing in the background]*. Sorry about that, that's better.

JM: S'alright.

NP: Okay, so, right, that's the background.

JM: So tell me about a night at The Fleet, or some experiences at The Fleet.

NP: Um, well it was run by a guy called Ken Cox, as I remember. Um, and when I started going it had been going...let me think, how long...it must've been going two or three years by the time I got there 'cause I still, until relatively recently – I'm not sure what I've done with them

- had badges for the, um, fourth and fifth anniversary. Cloth badges are one of the things that you used to collect and stick 'em on your soul bag.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

NP: Um, so what we used to do was, [*clears throat*] me and a couple of other guys used to meet regularly, um, used to come up in my battered old Triumph Herald, 'cause I'd not long passed my test either then, so I usually used to drive. Um, so we'd get to the pub, of course, but no drinking, strictly – none whatsoever. And there was nowhere near as many, um, non-alcohol...non-alcoholic drinks as there are these days, so it was maybe...it was orange and lemonade, or blackcurrant and lemonade, and things like that. And, of course, the pubs closed earlier in those days, so...excuse me, I was sipping a drink as we talked.

JM: No, no, no, go for it.

NP: So we'd sort of, um, I can't remember what time the all...all-nighters started, but we usually set off about 10 o'clock from Letchworth, which is on the A1 so just drive straight up the A1 and then turn off right, er head into Fletton and get in somewhere about 11, half 11 something like that, as I remember. Um, and like the first per...port of call was always the record dealers, for us, er, you'd go and see if there's anything you wanted.

JM: Yeah.

NP: You nearly always took a bag with a change of clothes, 'cause it would get...got incredibly sweaty in The Fleet. Um, it does...did in most venues I ever went to, but The Fleet was no exception. So you'd take yer little soul bag with yer...yer patches on, and so on and so forth, um, change of shirt, talcum powder of course - that was an absolute necessity, one to keep you dry and also 'cause, in those days, nobody was too fussy about having talcum powder on the floor, it was much better for dancing. So...and your essentials, and, of course, there was somewhere you could put yer records, if you bought any, although you had to keep an eye on it, 'cause as I said there were some thieving bastards around. There still are, unfortunately. A guy who's a regular at The Fleet, one of the DJs – a guy called Kev Draper – um, he had about half a million pounds worth of records stolen.

JM: Really?

NP: Yeah. I mean, he was a serious, serious guy. He'd been going quite some time, even when I got into it, and he's still going now. Um, but, yeah, he had a fabulous collection but he had a load of it stolen. Much, much better collection than I had. He was one of the real original guys. He still goes to the States regularly, um, picking up stuff. He's got a lot of contacts. There's a lot of people on the scene who are still on the scene now who've been going right since the very early days, since...since... It's very much a, sort of, a rehash of your youth/old person sort of scene now. If you look at photos from the original days, everybody was quite young, and if you look at photos these days or see stuff on YouTube or Facebook, or something like that, everybody's in their 50s and 60s.

JM: Yeah.

[15:13.9]

NP: It's not a young person's scene. I mean, there is, sort of, some nod to toward...towards trying to get young people interested but it's... it's definitely, a sort, of an oldies scene, for oldies listening to oldies, you know.

JM: No there's no revival, in terms of the youth...youth, kind of [coughs] scene?

NP: No, no, there doesn't seem to be, I mean...it depends where you go, actually. Um, certainly around here, Peterborough, when we go up to The Braza and the one at the [asking someone in background] what's that other club we go to, not the Braza – is it The Post Office Club or something? [Muffled voice in background] Yeah. [Muffled voice in background] It's the Postal Workers Social Club, or something. That's a good one. Er, [Muffled voice in background] yeah, The Right Track, that's right, that's what it's called, The Right Track. Erm, which is, yeah, I think it's at The Postal...I've only been there a couple of times recently, but...but no, there's no, sort of, erm, youth involvement, not really anyway. Some of the DJs...there's one or two up and coming DJs are in their 30s, which is quite nice. But in terms of, sort of, kids coming, teenagers, no, absolutely not. Not round here, but we went to one in Teddington, funnily enough, last year or the year before and there was a real good turnout of kids. I was genuinely surprised how many youngsters were there. And all having a really good time as well, I was...yeah, it was a really, really good atmosphere, it was absolutely packed. And there was a lot more young people at that one than any other one I've seen since I got back into it four or five years ago, or whenever it was - two or three years ago, four... - anyway, recently, in the last few years. So perhaps in London it's slightly different, I don't know if this...I haven't been to The Hundred Club for a while, and that used to have quite a good turnout.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Mix of ages as well. So...but no, certainly not round here, it's very much a sort of oldies thing now, and a lot of the old DJs, the original ones, are still going. And...who can be a bit snooty 'cause they don't...they don't like interlopers or people coming up - they don't like people like me, funnily enough, who sort of got out of the scene and then come back into it – there's a certain...erm, not everybody is like that, but there is a certain, "Oh, well, we kept the scene going while it all went quiet," sort of thing, through the '90s, when it became very unfashionable, and it wasn't particularly well... most dos weren't particularly well attended. Whereas at the moment, it's really, really...it's a very strong scene indeed at the moment and there's a lot of very good dos and very well attended.

JM: So, just to...just to go back to The Fleet, in terms of, like, you would get there, you'd...erm, the records would come out – you'd do that first of all. [Unclear – both speaking at same time]. And so I take it, were you...you were a dancer, you were a person who liked to dance, and...

NP: Very much so, yes.

JM: Yeah.

NP: I haven't mentioned the other obvious thing which is well associated with the Northern Soul scene, of course, which is the drug side of things.

JM: Yeah.

NP: We'd also try and seek out something to keep us going all night as well. I'm sure you'll 'ave heard this.

JM: Oh, yeah, no, yeah, yeah.

NP: So, youth culture doesn't change that much, maybe the drug of choice, but...slightly different these days, but certainly we would...because obviously you couldn't drink, as I said, so...and there's only so many orange and lemonades or blackcurrant and lemonades you can stand before you start feeling sick, so...

JM: Yeah.

NP: It was water and a few pills keep you going all night. And you would keep going all night as well, I mean it was, you know, people didn't doze off, you would be awake all night 'til eight o'clock, which is usually when it finished. So yeah, you...you'd try and find some gear as well, if you didn't already know somebody before you set off, so, that was the other side of things. You'd turn up, you'd do some records, you'd 'ave a look round, 'ave a couple of dances to warm up, depending on what it was...it was playing, because the style of DJ-ing was very different as well. These days you have oldies nights, what they call "Across the board nights" but in those days, in the early '80s, it was pretty much all oldies, what we call "oldies" – sort of '60s stuff, um, late '60s stuff - whereas there were one or two very, sort of, radical DJs, um, just popping up - there's a guy called Soul Sam who played a lot of very much more up tempo, funky sort of stuff. And they were nearly as new...there was, sort of, almost, um, it was almost like the clash between Remainers and Brexiteers, so you had yer newies fans and yer oldies fans and never the twain shall meet. And there'd be certain DJs, if they were on, you know, you'd think," Oh yeah," you'd go to the bar and 'ave a sit down, or...

JM: Yeah.

NP: Um, you simply...simply didn't like the, sort of, style of music they played. Um, so...but - I'm trying to think who the resident was – there was, er, there was a guy called Brian Ray, and there was, er, Tony...he's now the late Tony Clayton, who was known as the Rocking Vicar, who actually was a priest, um, and I heard – and this is total conjecture – he was defrocked for being a rather naughty priest as well. [Chuckles] But he...he was...he was one of the residents, you know, if you've heard the term "Resident DJ"...

JM: Yeah, yeah.

[20:18.2]

NP: ...who were basically the guys who ran the place...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...er, along with the...the aforementioned Ken Cox. So there was Brian Ray, Tony Clayton, and they had a couple of guest DJs, er, there was a guy called Mick Smith who lives in Stotfold, who was also one of the real, real originals who would go across to the States and bring stuff back. Um, and it varied from week to week. In my mind's eye and my memory, casting it back, we...we went every week, but I'm sure we didn't.

JM: Yeah.

NP: I can't remember how often it went, er, it's a long time ago now, nearly 30, 40 years, so...tch, tch, tch. I don't think we could have gone every week, quite frankly, we would've just burned ourselves out. But we certainly went very, very regularly. Um, and of course, as I say, the social history side of it was interesting because they were still building the A1 in those days, the A1 outside Peterborough. So it was a lot harder to get to, you couldn't just whizz up, and

then you, sort of, had to go through all the road works and so on and so forth. So basically you spent the night dancing, and that was it, depending on who was playing and what they were playing, um, gradually get more and more knackered and try and stay awake, and not doze off driving home. The pills wore off, so...which they did inevitably, so...

JM: Yeah.

NP: So that was it, it was basically just turn up, listen to music, the craic, it was sweaty, it was intense. Like any of those sorts of things, it was incredibly atmospheric. I really liked The Fleet. I've never been back there, although they...they still run it there. But I...I do intend going next time they have one. It's one of those things where I always seem to be doing something else.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Um, but yeah, yeah, The Fleet, I mean, I loved The Fleet, and it was real, real seminal part of my...my transition into young manhood as it were, because it was where I went with my mates, we just had an absolute blast. But there was no, sort of, um...it wasn't a rite of passage in that we were never out there looking for girls or things like that.

JM: Yeah.

NP: It was purely just the music and the dancing, that's what we went for. It wasn't a, you know, hook-up joint or anything like that, that side of it just did not exist. Didn't happen at all.

JM: Just...

NP: Not like...not like going to the pub on the pull or something, or going clubbing and on the pull. You strictly went there for the music and the dancing, and that was it. It was...it was social in that sense, but not...I mean, girls went, and we went with girls, but not for that reason. It was about the music, that's what mattered.

JM: And what was it...

NP: And still does, actually.

JM: And what was it about the dancing that made it, um, that sort of – I'm not gonna...addictive? I don't know if that's the right word or, I mean, I forget the other bits and pieces, but...but you're not the first person that has, sort of, really said it was the dancing that has...

NP: Yeah. It's...because it's that type of music and because it's, sort of, in...perhaps in time with your...your natural bodily rhythm, your circadian rhythm, I'm not quite sure, but there's something about it, it's not just listening to...it really does - especially if you're in a rather euphoric state due to various substances - it really is a total body experience. So if you've never experienced it I find it very hard to describe. Um, my missus comes along to soul dos and always says she has a nice time, but I'm never quite sure she's got what it actually feels like to be on the floor and just feel at one with the tune going right through you. It's, sort of, like the total sensory experience, it's not just...it's not just hearing, it's not just listening to it. Um, it really does go right through your system, and it's quite an amazing feeling. And if you've [coughs] if you've got a good DJ who plays what...you know, a really good set, and they just play record after record after record, which...and build it up - which a good DJ will do - and by the time you get to the end of it you're just wrung out emotionally, physically, by the end of the night, and you...you are, it's just like...you are wrung out, there's no doubt

about it. It's...it's the most amazing feeling, and I'm glad somebody has said that - it's not just me, because that's exactly what it is. If you ever look at some photos, you see people just, you know, with their eyes closed in an absolute state of euphoric bliss just really, really soaking up the atmosphere and just letting it run through you. And some of those records still do that to me to this day, you know, I think...even if I play them at home, you just sort of...I think, "Ahhh," just drift off and think back. Which is why I think so many people who were around in those days are still so incredibly nostalgic for it because it is an amazing feeling, there's no doubt about it.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Excuse me, I've had to have a sip of water. I'm gonna have to go and get a refill, I'm getting through this.

JM: No, no, that's...

NP: I'm jabbering away like a loon here, I'm just getting through this cup of water. Can you just bear with me?

JM: Yeah, yeah. Go for it.

[24:53.2]

[Long pause – 90 seconds]

NP: Hello again. Right, yes.

JM: Good. Um, and so what about other places you went to in Peterborough?

NP: Um, to be honest with you The Fleet was the only one I did go to. As I say, I never went to The Werrina, which was the other, um, well-know one – and that was actually a stadium, I believe, so...

JM: Yeah.

NP: But I never actually went there. The Fleet was the only one I went to.

JM: And was it the only one you went to in terms of all the things you did, and, so...? Did you go to any of the clu... 'cause you mentioned clubs, um, nearer where you lived.

NP: Oh, sure, yeah, I've been...been to lots of other places. The Fleet was the only one in Peterborough, but yeah, yeah, loads of other places all over the country. Um, the nearest one to Peterborough was St. Ives, which did an all-dayer.

JM: Yeah.

NP: The – coo, what was that called, can't remember what the place was called. That was a good one as well, but you could drink at that one, so that was...so we used to go to that, 'cause obviously [coughs] being a club even...even when orders, er, when pub hours were considerably shorter, you could actually drink all whole day at that one, so that was...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...that was a bit different. Yeah, where else did we go? As I say, I never got to Wigan, but one or two other places a bit further north. And The Hundred Club in Oxford Street was also a particularly good one because, although that's known as a jazz venue they used to do a very,

very good all-nighter there - and still do actually, that's been going a long time, that one. Um, it's become more or less popular, but at the moment that's pretty popular as well. So yeah, I mean, it's...it's still a country-wide thing.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Yeah, I've had people say Northern Soul it's, you know, it's a northern thing purely, but it definitely isn't, it's...that particular genre of music is...and it's still evolving, people are still finding records now. You still get stuff coming out of the vaults which've been locked away for donkey's years. Motown did a series of "From the vaults of Motown" albums, four or five in the last few years, all these amazing tracks which nobody's ever heard before, because they didn't think it was quite right for release at the time so they got stuffed away, and then all of a sudden they see a bit of a market so out it comes again.

JM: Yeah. And you, sort of, talk about your, sort of...your...your coming back into it. What...what provoked you to...to...to pick it up again?

NP: Well, that was accidental, as a matter of fact. Um, we just happened to...where we are now, we're in Sandy, quite near Bedford, quite...eight miles from Bedford. *[Calls out to someone in background]* How did we get going to that first one, the Stewartby one? That was just...that was just, sort of, to go and 'ave a look, didn't we? Oh, that's right, yeah, we'd been to one in Letchworth at Princeton Hall, erm, which...no, I can't.

JM: You said...

NP: That's right, I think it was...I think it was a Facebook thing, actually, I just...we'd been to some random do in Princeton Hall in Letchworth which was run by a guy who used to come to our club. That's right, I haven't even told you about our little club. We used to run...actually had our own little club in Letchworth as well.

JM: Oh right. Called?

NP: Um, it was in the youth centre. It was called the 123 Club, which was...that was quite well regarded. That was a good little club for three or four years. Um, anyway, but we...how we got back into it, to answer your original question, was we went to this one at Princeton and then there was a gap of another couple of years, and then I just - out of curiosity, I think, probably more than anything else - just had a look on Facebook to see if there was any, sort of, Northern Soul groups or pages, not expecting, to be honest with you, to find a great deal. And there's absolutely shed loads, much to my amazement.

JM: Mmmm.

NP: Um, and we found out about this do at a place called Stewartby, which is just the other side of Bedford from us, so 25 minute, half an hour drive maximum - really not far at all. And we went along to that, and oh dear oh dear, it was like, you know...you know, people say how smells are evocative?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

NP: Going back to that and just listening to all these tunes again, oh wow, I mean it was just...it was a wonderful, wonderful revelation that really took you back, er, to my youth and all the fantastic times I'd had then. Um, pretty much since then we've been back into it...my missus didn't know it at all - she'd never even heard of Northern Soul, as it were - but she's got

into it as well now, so it's...so, yeah, it was...it wasn't anything I actually intended to do, it wasn't a conscious decision, it just sort of happened. But I'm very glad I did, 'cause it's been great fun since.

JM: But you express it as, you know, you're...it's almost like, um, you express it, "Oh wow," and it was...was it...did you literally stop still and...and...when you went?

[30:05.6]

NP: Oh, well, after a couple of pints I should think I probably did.

JM: No.

NP: It was just, um, when I actually sold all my collection I saved two records, I saved my two favourite tunes...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...which I still had. And that was all I'd had all these donkey's years and all the various places I'd moved to and everything else, but they'd always stayed with me. And going back to that one venue, er...er...just...yeah, I said to you earlier on about, you know, "What's it feel like the, dancing and the so on and so forth," it was instantly like being back at that again, even though we don't take drugs and things any more – that's rather frowned upon now, 'specially 'cause everybody's a bit too old for that sort of malarkey these days. Still one or two do, but the vast majority of people don't, 'cause you can drink now, of course. Although people don't get drunk, but you...yeah, you don't need it these days, and it's not good for you anyway. Um, but nonetheless, the actual sort of euphoric feeling just listening to those tunes and thinking, "Ah, yeah, I remember that," and, "Wow, yeah," so like a scent it's very, very evocative, and it takes you back to some rather good times. There were some bad times as well, some of the stupid things we got up to, as I said.

JM: Like?

NP: Pardon?

JM: Like what?

NP: Oh, like falling off scooters, or going on scooter rallies and camping out in tents, and in various places we shouldn't have, you know. We did a scooter rally to Brighton once, for example, where we...where we turned up expecting to find lots of other scooterists, and it was just chock full of motorcyclists. It was rather hairy.

JM: Ooh.

NP: Like...like the scene out of *Quadrophenia*. So we...there was four or five of us, and we hopped out. And all we had between us as a one-man tent, so we had to squeeze into this wretched thing. It was the only way...we didn't... we couldn't afford B&B and things like that. And, anyway, we'd sort of pitched up in this wood, 'cause we thought it'd be the best place to hide from these bikers, and when we woke up in the morning we were right on the edge of a quarry. How we didn't fall over...over the edge of it in the middle of the night I have no idea. It's one of those things that you laugh about afterwards, but it was actually extremely dangerous. Those sorts of crazy things, you know, just sort of like teenage scrapes basically.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Um, just, er, just...say, stuff like that, just sleeping out randomly or just picking up or sleeping on somebody's floor, just daft things, I think.

JM: Yeah.

NP: How I never got killed on my scooter I shall never know. I had several accidents, fell off it a number of times.

JM: Yeah. So tell me a bit about your 123 Club. Did you DJ there?

NP: Yes, I did, and I still do DJ, actually.

JM: Oh.

NP: I've just started to get back into that again. Um, yes, er, there's me and a...me and a friend who's...who...who's now a drugged-up hippy living in Wales, rather sadly, um, we started it, um...um, and it was in a youth club called The Leys in Letchworth, and he had a very useful brother who was an electronics engineer, so he actually built our disco unit for us. So we had that. Yeah, yeah, we DJ'd there. I never DJ'd at The Fleet, sadly - I was a bit too junior, sadly, 'cause you had the established guys on. It was, as it is now, quite a hard scene to break into DJ-wise. People guard their...their little bits of turf, um, that's still very much true today.

JM: Yeah, because I was hearing...someone told me a great story about people playing records and not giving the correct label of the record.

NP: That's correct, yeah, cover-ups, yep, that's absolutely true.

JM: Cover-ups.

NP: If you...if you discovered a new record, say...as I was saying to you earlier, in the days when people were still discovering a lot, you jealously guarded it, so people would cut out a label and stick it on top so you couldn't see what the original label was. Or some people went far more aggressively and just completely obliterated the label with felt pen or something like that, um, would give it a false title, or just not announce what it was. And, you know, it was part of the fun trying to discover what the hell these things were, 'cause there'd be one, maybe two, copies in the entire country, until somebody else went out to the States and found one, or some...one turned up in a random box or something like that. So yeah, yeah. Oh, yes, people still...people very, very jealously guarded their...their discoveries. Um, if you discovered something that was quite a feather in your cap.

JM: So the DJ-ing happened separately. So you...you did...you went to the club, did you? When did the DJ-ing start to happen?

NP: I say, because it was such a closed shop, and still is, erm, people just started doing their own thing.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Because we...I didn't have a particularly good collection when we started. Um, but you just do your own thing, start your own club. That was just for a bit of fun, um, more than anything, although it really did take off for a couple of years, and it was still going long after I packed up, really, after I'd sold my collection it went on for a number of years afterwards. And that aforementioned The Princeton, that was an offshoot from it - it went from The 123 Club and...and turned into The 6Ts Club. Crass name.

JM: Yeah.

NP: Load o' rubbish. Could've thought of something more original, but The 6Ts Mafia. But...so yeah, it went on for a long time. Erm...er, but no, we...we just started that just for a bit of fun, so yeah, we DJ'd there, 'cause it was our do. That's one of the nice things about running your own do, you can DJ as much as you like then.

[35:07.7]

JM: Yeah.

NP: You can get a guest in, whatever else, but if you're running a do, you can DJ. Nobody else can stop you. But people do guard their jealous little niches, their...their turf, and there are very few what I'd call really national standards or nationally well-known DJs, and they tend to do a circuit and get reasonably well paid for it as well – um, yeah, a couple hundred quid a night for an hour session is pretty good.

JM: Yeah.

NP: But then they've got the records because the ones that have been going all these years have still got their original collections. And, as you've probably heard from other people, you know, some of these things are worth thousands, 'cause they're just so rare. You can buy cheap ones, there's no doubt about it, even the original ones – some are cheap, just because they go out of fashion or there's plenty of copies about, or something like that. But yes, the really, really rare ones are what the top DJs, even now...that's...that's why they're employed, simply because they've got records that nobody else has.

JM: Yeah.

NP: And people...people like to hear them, you know. It's almost like bringing something along on the Antiques Roadshow, something like, "Aha," you see the collector's eyes light up, or the expert's eyes light up. When you hear a record you think, "Wow, I haven't heard that." You know, it's pretty amazing. So, that's all part and parcel of the fun.

JM: Yeah. Um, so what would your...what would your...can you, sort of...what was Northern Soul meant to you?

NP: Originally it was a rites of passage thing, no doubt about it, I mean it's...like anything else, any other youth culture, I think - which is what it was. Um, it was a real joyride for me 'cause I just loved the music anyway, so it was absolutely ideal. But it was, as I say, it was the rites of passage, I think, as much as anything else. Erm, these days it was almost like an affectionate look back...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...um, to what that rite of passage was, obviously as I say it was the best part of 40 years ago now, um, but now you just like the music for its own sake, I'm just...I love listening to it and I like...I still put some stuff on Facebook. With all this Coronavirus crap going on we've just started a little Facebook page where we take it in turns to DJ live on Facebook.

JM: Oh nice, oh wow.

NP: Live video using a live video link, which is very frowned upon by what we call "The Soul Police" 'cause they don't like that sort of thing, but haha. It's really...really rather childish,

but... It's just for fun, just for our own amusement, you know, it sort of keeps...keeps the link going, the social link between people that like it.

JM: Yeah. And, I see...your job of work, I mean, was...did they...did your...did people at work...did you have, like, two social groups - one was the Northern Soul group and one was your...

NP: Um, no, funnily enough they...they did tend to overlap, um, because where I worked, as I say, was right next door this pub, which is where we first, sort of, met the group that we hung around with. And two or three of the guys I worked with were regulars in that pub anyway, so they really did overlap actually, from my work point of view. The pub and the shop couldn't have been...well, it was Sainsbury's where I was working.

JM: Yeah.

NP: They literally were next door to each other, so no, no, I didn't...there wasn't really any separate thing for me, the two very much overlapped, actually, very much indeed. And yeah, yeah, I can't put it any better than that, there really was a big overlap.

JM: Mmmm. And you would say, overall, that it was...it was an accepting group of people, or – 'cause you did...you mentioned a little bit about the stealing of the records - and you know, I have had a couple of people talk about Wigan, saying that it's a little bit painted with rose tinted glasses because actually it was quite a...it was quite full on there and...and, you know, there were some fairly interesting characters.

NP: Oh yes.

JM: And I presume...it's...it's...but you don't get that sense when people have talked about the Wirrina and...and...and the Peterborough scene and the...the Soul...the Soul Cellar I've also heard about in Peterborough.

NP: Yeah. I've heard of that, I never went to that either.

JM: You get the sense that...

NP: I'll tell you honestly, I never ever saw a fight at an all-nighter at The Fleet or even...even anything vaguely threatening. That just didn't happen - probably because everybody was, as I say, completely off their tits on drugs and in a very good mood indeed. Whereas somewhere like Wigan, which was one of the seedier parts of Greater Manchester, and still is, I never actually went there but a friend of mine did, the...the guy...the aforementioned guy I set up The 123 Club with, and he went to it just before he...just before it closed, and he said it was really, really hairy.

[40:00.9]

Manchester had a bit of a reputation for boot boys in those days, mods and skinheads. You have to remember that youth was much more tribal than it is now. A lot more...yeah, you get yer youth tribes, yer goths and things like that, but there's not the, sort of, violent inter-tribal rivalries there was in those days - mods, skinheads, erm, rockers, whatever else. I mean, that was far more prevalent. And in the north it was definitely the boot boys, and my mate said when he came back it was really, really scary, you know. Anybody in baggies, which was the soul uniform in those days, was basically getting a bit of a pasting from the boot boys, which is probably one of the reasons Wigan closed down. So yes, it's sort of held up, as you say, as the paragon of Northern Soul and the thing that everybody talks about. Mostly, I have to

say, I, certainly from my experience, by - I won't say people who weren't there, but a lot of people say they went who didn't. I know that for a fact, because, yeah, they're just not old enough for a start. Um, and it's held as a sort of apotheosis, the shrine of Northern Soul, which it was, I should imagine, for three or four years when it was at...at its peak, and I've read a fair bit about it, people I've met - never actually gone myself. But yes, it was extremely seedy. But by contrast, in answer to your question, Peterborough was never like that. It was a very accepting scene indeed. I never ever felt threatened there. Um, it was just a really, really good night where everybody was singing from the same hymn sheet, to use a rather corny pun. Um, [unclear] that music was based on gospel. Um, so yeah, it was a very, very accepting scene in Peterborough, and I think pretty much everywhere I went to in the south, which is Bedford, Peterborough, St. Ives – all that sort of circuit of the soul venues in this area, you know, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, it was very, very friendly. Very friendly indeed. Um, no malice, no...as I say, I never, ever saw a fight, never. Perhaps because there was no drink, perhaps because there was no rivalry over girls – all the usual reasons...

JM: Yeah.

NP: ...that people give for a punch up on a Saturday night. But, just...those...those reasons weren't there. Um, everybody was just there for the craic, have a good dance, drop a few pills, feel good, and go home on Sunday morning feeling absolutely washed out because they'd had a really good night.

JM: Yeah.

NP: So yeah, it was a very, very positive thing. It was never seedy. I mean I can't speak for some of the other famous venues like Stoke or something like that. As I understand it, they weren't as bad, but Wigan did have a reputation for being extremely [unclear].

JM: That's good. That's...that's fantastic, Nick. I'm just looking, yeah, 'cause I've got about 42 minutes there, and if I do too...if the...if I go on for too long the...the gentleman who's trying to transcribe these and draw stuff from them, he...

NP: I'm sorry, I jabber terribly.

JM: No, no, no, it's perfect, it's really good. I'll just sort of tell you...I'm just going to stop the recording now.

[42:58.4]