Voices of Hope

Nina Thaddeus

Arriving in Brighton from India with me in 1952, my mother recalled, "On the bus to Poole Valley I caught a glimpse of the Royal Pavilion with its domes and minarets. My heart skipped because it reminded me of home."
My father had arrived months earlier and tried to find accommodation in London but was greeted with ignorance and discrimination. Looking today at international artists who have performed at the Dome, it is hard to imagine that until the 1960s the UK had an established colour bar which openly discriminated against Black and Asian people in pubs, housing and the workplace as well as the performing arts.

I was amazed to learn that early Black American jazz pioneers, the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, played at the Dome in 1921. Orchestra member Evelyn Dove went on to make history in 1937 as the first black singer to feature on BBC Radio.

Paul Robeson, a Black American singer loved the world over for his glorious bass baritone voice, performed at the Dome in 1936. His popularity in the UK meant he often toured, yet due to his political activism he was banned from performing in the US, and in 1956 his passport was confiscated. Despite this, Robeson sang to a packed audience in St Pancras Town Hall on Sunday 26th May 1957. Though he was in New York, the new Atlantic telephone cable to London carried his rich deep voice singing songs of freedom and hope in the face of the US government's restrictions on his freedom of movement.

Though I was a small child at the time I know my parents would have heard that news with delight. I have no idea when I was introduced to the sound of Paul Robeson's voice but feel I have heard it the whole of my life – like the voice and songs of Ella Fitzgerald, the legendary Black American jazz singer who my grandmother and mother both loved and danced to in 1940s India, and who performed at Brighton Dome on numerous occasions. On her return to the US from her 1963 European tour – which included the Dome –In an interview with Fred Robbins a New York Radio host, Ella said,

> *Maybe I'm stepping out of line, but I have to say it, because it's in my heart. It makes you feel so bad to think we can't go down through certain parts of the [American] South and give a concert like we do overseas and have everybody just come to hear the music and enjoy the music because of the prejudice thing that's going on.*

I like to imagine she was thinking of her concert in Brighton when she said those words.

Duke Ellington and Nina Simone, American civil rights activists as well as world-famous Black jazz musicians, also performed at the Dome. Simone once said, "It's an artist's duty to reflect the times in which we live". I have no doubt Ellington and Simone would have used this platform to advocate as voices for equality.

As the Jazz Blues era waned and pop music had its heyday the Dome booked the then current chart acts as well as continuing its electic programme of modern and classical music. This was my time.
As a young teenager in the 1960s I fell in love with the music of Black America – Motown, Soul and the sound of Rhythm and Blues – which reached a young global audience when songs by Black blues artists were covered by White musicians like Elvis, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

The Dome hosted Motown and Gospel influenced acts such as the Four Tops and, in 1957 and 1964, Rosetta Tharpe – 'Godmother of Rock and Roll' – appeared. In the 1960s, as a woman incorporating the electric

guitar into her blend of spiritual blues, she gained a following among young musicians like Bob Dylan, Keith Richards and a very young Jimi Hendrix who was strongly influenced by her guitar distortion technique which he went on to master.

In 1967 Hendrix himself topped the bill at the Dome and I was there. The line up that night was amazing. Seven well known bands including Pink Floyd supported the Jimi Hendrix Experience, a trio who had been playing together for less than a year and already had four chart hits. Hendrix was establishing himself as one of the greatest guitarists of his generation.

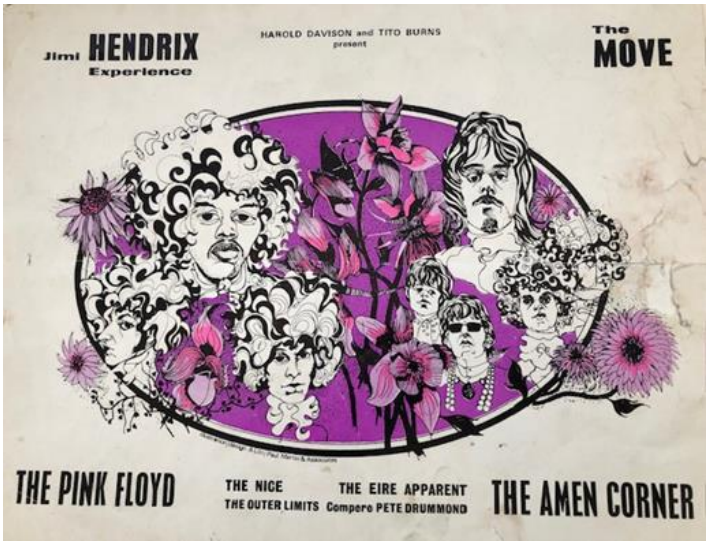

The Dome, Brighton
Saturday, December 2nd, 1967
at 8.40 p.m.
Harold Davison & Tito Burns
present
Jimi Hendrix Experience
&
The Move
ROW
A 32
STALLS CIRCLE 10/6
Tickets not accepted for exchange or resale
TO BE RETAINED BY TICKET HOLDER

I was fifteen and had seen bands at the Town Hall, youth clubs and local bandstands, and knew this was different: Jimi Hendrix in a real concert hall.

My friend Jenny and I saw the show advertised in the evening newspaper and immediately filled in the application form, bought a postal order for less than a pound and sent it to the Box Office. Tickets for the 6.15pm performance arrived by return of post.

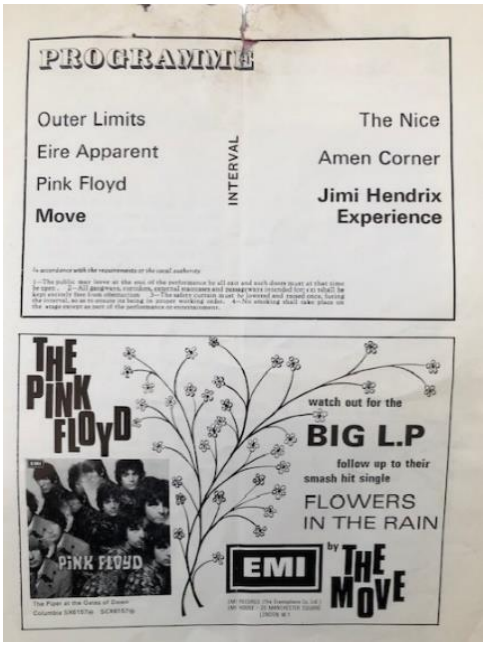
For months we planned what we would wear, what bus to catch and excitedly speculated on every aspect of the forthcoming show and venue. A new youth counterculture had emerged following the momentous 1967 San Francisco Summer of Love and as we joined the queue outside the Dome that night wearing flared trousers, colourful bell sleeve blouses (with probably a lot of beads) we were thrilled to feel a part of it, surrounded by cool young hippy types, many in fur coats wearing badges declaring messages of hope, peace and love.

At that time the entrance to the concert hall was at the side of the building next to the museum – no bar, pre-show snacks or security checks. The doors opened, tickets were shown and we excitedly bought our programmes, rushing to our seats in the stalls. I knew we were in for an unforgettable evening.



A photo of my programme cover and inside cover bought on the 2nd December 1967 at the Dome. To save costs the promotors printed a generic tour programme.

The first acts played two songs each. Anticipation built up as each act got more stage time. The Move, five rebellious young men from Birmingham famous for their outrageous stage antics and anti-government rhetoric, got the audience buzzing and some girls screaming. Pink Floyd entranced with their light show, politically provocative lyrics and melodic sounds. Between each act the heavy red curtains swished open and closed. The compère chatted while roadies changed the stage layout, wheeling on and off guitar racks and drumkits.



Then the lights dimmed for the seventh time that evening and into the spotlights appeared bassist Noel Reading and drummer Mitch Mitchell, followed by the distinctive sound of Hendrix's guitar. As he walked on to the stage the crowd went crazy but with full respect to Hendrix, we quickly fell silent, mesmerised by this beautiful 22-year-old man. This was a time of mono recording, so the sound of over forty speakers in the Dome Concert Hall blasting out Hendrix's distorted chords and feedback was first startling, then hypnotic.

He was astounding to look at. Wearing a red velvet suit and multiple scarfs, his wild hair swept off his face, he played with his teeth and performed on his back to the roar of the crowd. For forty minutes he played his hits including Hey Joe, Purple Haze, The Wind Cries Mary and a powerful cover of Wild Thing, boosting his guitar riffs with a wah wah peddle.

Fifty-six years on, I still feel the impact of that night and can safely say Jimi Hendrix was one of the greatest live acts I have ever seen. I never bought any of his records, knowing the mono experience would never match the live one.

Six months later aged 16 I was back at the Dome. I had left school and was working full time. In Mod gear, wearing mini skirt, maxi coat and boots, I momentarily joined the in-crowd as I went to see Scott Walker, a young handsome 25-year-old White American singer.

I fully expected to scream my heart out and hear Scott's greatest hits from his time with the Walker Brothers. Instead, this brooding young man introduced the audience to the intimate sound of modern Chanson music as Scott covered the songs of Jacques Brel and sang of life in the streets and bars of Amsterdam and Paris. This was a new music genre for me and one that I have loved ever since for its passionate storytelling and raw emotion.

Scott Walker wanted to be taken seriously. At one point he stopped his performance and asked the young audience to sit down and listen or he would walk off. Once satisfied, he picked up his guitar and as he sang the opening line to If You Go Away, my heart simply melted. These haunting words of love, loss, and hope, have stayed with me ever since:

If you go away on this summer day
Then you might as well take the sun away
All the birds that flew in the summer sky
When our love was new and our hearts were high …..

But if you stay I'll make you a day
Like no day has been or will be again
We'll sail on the sun, we'll ride on the rain…….

Over the last five decades the Dome has helped shape my eclectic musical tastes. Reflecting on my teenage years it is clear just how much music became a vehicle of self-expression, a voice of youthful protest and passion which strongly influenced my sense of self and belonging.

Music continues to be integral to my identity. In 2024 I already have tickets booked at the Dome for the Gypsy Kings and Nitin Sawhney, acts with musical roots in multiple cultures.

Sawhney has performed numerous times at the Dome. His work is influenced by classical Indian, flamenco and African rhythms and explores themes such as multiculturalism, politics and belonging. He strongly believes, as I do, that music is a universal language that speaks to everyone straight from the heart.

In March 2024, eighty-eight years after Paul Robeson, Nitin Sawhney will perform songs of freedom and hope from his new album, of which he says

> *the only opinion that counts in defining who you are is your own.*
> Identity*, the album, is a love letter to who we all are.*

Sawhney's performance will be fitting for this iconic building with its divisive colonial history. In a time when issues of belonging and identity are more polarised than ever, we continue to need voices of hope that influence all.