

The Observer Pop and rock

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The Clash... and clashes with yardies: the man behind Brixton Academy

Tim Lewis

In 1982 Simon Parkes bought a rundown cinema in south London for £1 and for a glorious decade brought music's biggest names to the Brixton Academy. Here he remembers gigs with the Clash, egg and chips with Eric Clapton and hosting the country's first-ever legal raves

Read an extract from Simon Parkes's memoir about the chaos at the venue in the wake of Kurt Cobain's death

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Fri 24 Jan 2014 18:00 CET

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Simon Parkes, right, with colleague Johnny Lawes after a gig at Brixton Academy.

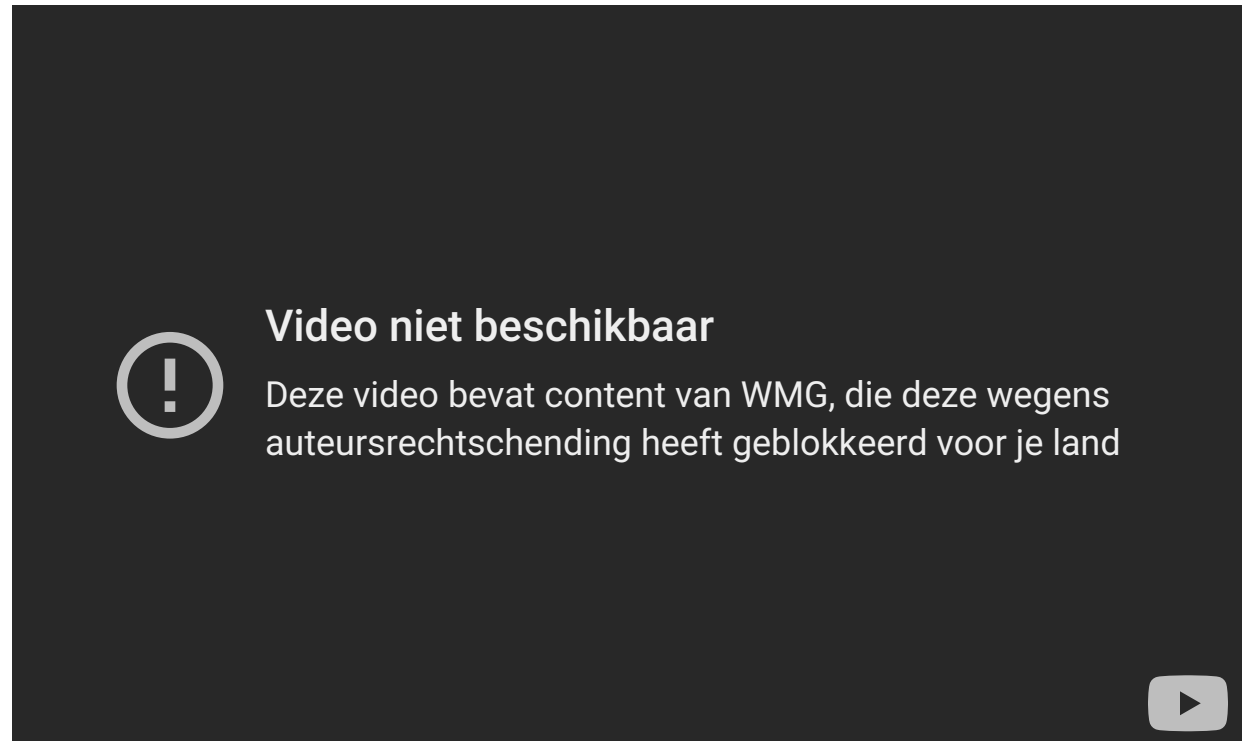
Like most deals that sound too good to be true, it was: in 1982, a 23-year-old music fan named Simon Parkes bought a south London landmark - then called the Brixton Astoria - for £1. "If you wrote down a list of the pros and the cons, there weren't many pros," says Parkes, three decades on. "In fact the only one was that it was an atmospheric venue with great acoustics and backstage facilities."

The cons, meanwhile, were extensive. First was the neighbourhood: only a year earlier, on "Bloody Saturday", the Brixton riots had resulted in hundreds of injuries to police and locals, widespread looting and streets of burned-out cars and buildings. The Astoria was a stone's throw away. Once the biggest cinema in Britain - with a main auditorium scented with lavender and decorated to resemble Venice at night - it was now damp and mouldy, practically derelict. Anyone who took on the lease would be responsible for repairs to the building, which would cost millions.

None of this fazed Parkes. "I was naive in a lot of ways," he admits, "but I did not at any time question that this venue would become successful." And he was right: within two years, the concert hall - now renamed the Brixton Academy - had hosted gigs by the Clash and "a leftfield Irish band with a decent cult following" called U2. By the time Parkes sold up in the mid-90s, for £2.5m, he had somehow managed to entice the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Avid Bowie and a fledgling Radiohead down to SW9.

Parkes, who these days has the same sort of craggy handsomeness as Paddy Ashdown, knew a little of Brixton's reputation when he bought the Astoria, but not much. "My only knowledge was driving a horsebox through there," he explains. "Me and my brothers were quite serious showjumpers and we used to do it five times a year from where we lived in Lincolnshire down to Hickstead. As we went through Brixton, the HGV driver would say to us, 'Lock your doors, boys.'"

It's not a very rock'n'roll start to the story, and Parkes is in many respects an unlikely impresario. His family owned Boston Deep Sea Fisheries - the world's largest privately owned fishing fleet - and Parkes was sent to Gordonstoun school in Scotland, where he sat next to Prince Andrew. "I saw him the other day, actually," he says. "He's the patron of my kids' school and he came to open a boarding house. Bit weird that: 35 years later, it was 'Parkesy!'"



Some of the most entertaining moments in Parkes's memoir, Live at the Brixton Academy, come from the incongruity of the genial toff kid landing among the Yardie gangs of south London. An early offer from two large Jamaicans for help with protection at the venue was met with Parkes asking the men to drop off their CVs at the office. They were so bemused that they never returned. When Brixton was embroiled in another riot in 1985, Parkes stood guard at the front door in top hat and tails, having just come from a wedding in Belgravia.

But there is clearly more to Parkes than family money and an old-school tie. His mother took the morning-sickness drug thalidomide when she was pregnant with him and he was born without half his left arm. Even still - or perhaps as a result - an early nickname was "Scrapper" because he was constantly getting into fights. During the time he owned the Academy, Parkes was stabbed, tear-gassed, held at gunpoint and received death threats from the fascist group Combat 18. At one point, he had to check in every night with the police and wear an alarm round his neck.

"I did set it off pissed one night," says Parkes, "and the police were round my house armed before I could ring to tell them it was a false alarm. It was a little bit hairy from about 1985 to 1988 when I had a few run-ins with local guys. I'd wear a Kevlar [bulletproof] vest everywhere, even if I went to get a sandwich at M&S."

A significant part of the success of the Brixton Academy has to be down to Parkes's catholic musical tastes. When the only acts that would play there were reggae and dancehall, that's who he booked. He offered low rates for rock bands to use the venue as a rehearsal space believing - correctly as it turned out - that they would see the potential for playing a grand old room with a capacity of 5,000 and the second-largest theatrical stage in the country. He hosted club nights, including the notorious Alternative Miss World and Westworld gatherings, and then in 1989 the UK's first legal raves.

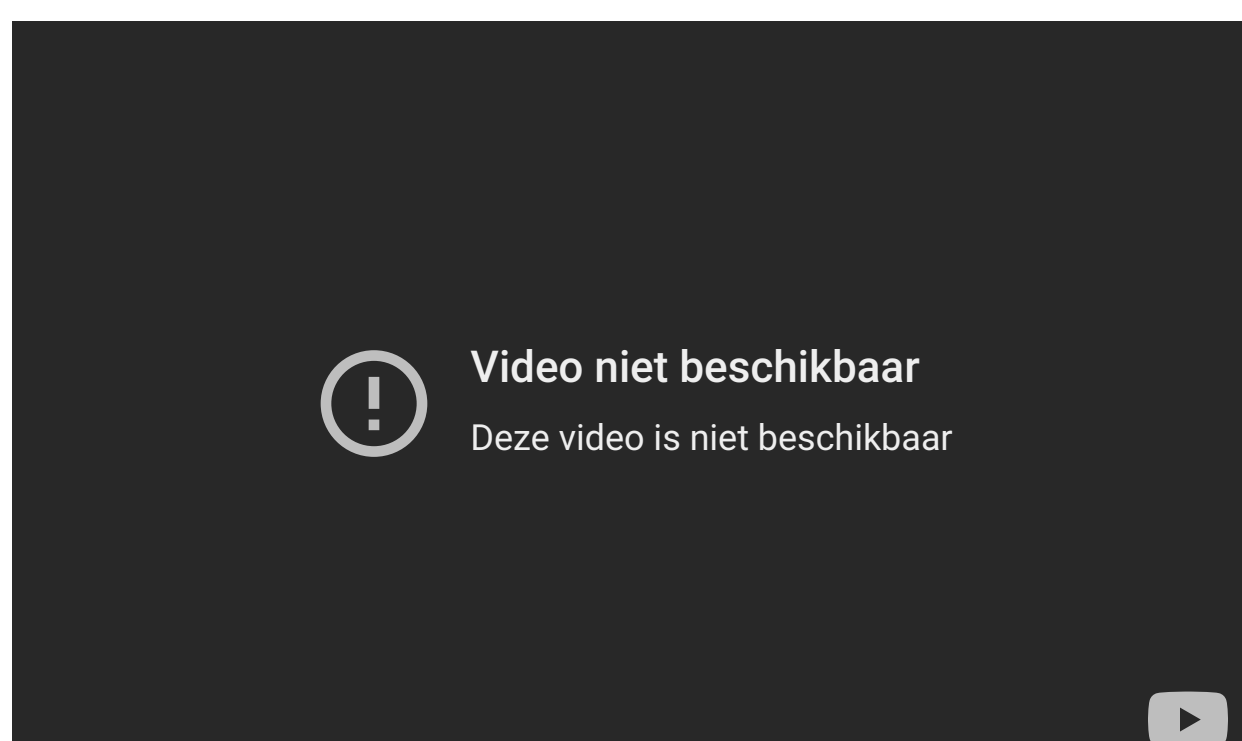
"The most memorable moment for me was the opening number of the Clash [in March 1984], which was a big breakthrough for the Academy," says Parkes. "They played London Calling, and watching 5,000 people go absolutely mental gave me this feeling in my stomach that was somewhere between the adrenaline of a near car crash and your first kiss from a really hot girl you fancy."

"I used to sit in my study at school with posters of the Rolling Stones, Hendrix, Santana on the wall and play air guitar with a tennis racket or a hockey stick," he continues. "Then a few years later I'm making a fool of myself in front of Robert Plant, and Eric Clapton is rehearsing at the Academy. These people were like gods."



The big names, Parkes discovered, were rarely any trouble to deal with. Clapton, who rehearsed at the Brixton Academy three weeks every year for a period, would arrive in a Ferrari but every lunchtime he would walk across the road for egg and chips at a greasy spoon known locally as Poison Pete's. Before Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr Dre played in 1993 they sent ahead a three-letter catering rider: "KFC". (Grace Jones, naturally, was an exception to this rule: she insisted on Cristal champagne, then decided she wanted a different vintage and refused to go onstage until the mistake was rectified.)

"The biggest pains are the new bands, the poppy world, because they actually believe that everybody loves them," says Parkes. "I did some work with MTV and bands like Sive and Another Level, these poor kids with their managers and sycophantic people around them. But they are just another cereal in the supermarket and the minute they're not popular, they're gone. Not many of them last the distance."



The changing music scene was one reason that Parkes looked to sell the Brixton Academy in the mid-90s. More than that he was worn out: he was closing in on 40, and was fed up working 80 hours a week, 48 weeks a year. He tried to move into festivals but his attempt - In Bloom in Essex, 1994 - was stymied by the death of Kurt Cobain (Nirvana had been booked as the headline act).

"We were doing more and more raves at the Academy, going through to 6am," Parkes recalls. "You get very tired and if you're not taking ecstasy like everyone else it's pretty fucking dull."

Parkes occasionally goes to gigs now, but with booking fees, and expensive drinks in plastic cups, the experience has lost some of its lustre. "It's less a wild ride into the unknown, and more a flight on easyJet," he writes in Live at the Brixton Academy. It is certainly another world from the early 90s, when he filled the auditorium with dodgem cars and a carousel where the riders cleared the back wall by two inches; on another night, artists moved through the room riding motorbikes and, too, using chainsaws.

Brixton has changed dramatically, and Parkes never lived in the area when he owned the Academy because he assumed it would be an open invitation to burgle his house while he was working at gigs. But soon after he sold the venue, he moved nearby and he has watched, with some bemusement, as organic food shops and yoga studios have sprung up in SW9. "You can ask anyone in the local community how important the Academy was in moving Brixton upwards," he says. "We were bringing in half a million people a year who wouldn't come to the neighbourhood for any other reason."

Parkes's next project is turning his book into a film. "Who would play me?" he asks. "There's been lots of jokes, but I've no idea. The soundtrack would be amazing though."

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