

Memphis Underground

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About the Author

Stewart Home has worked across a variety of media including performance, music, film, writing, installation and graphics. He is the author of the novels *Pure Mania*, *Defiant Pose*, *Red London*, *Blow Job*, *Cunt*, *69 Things To Do With A Dead Princess*, *Down & Out In Shoreditch & Hoxton*, *Tainted Love* and a number of other books.

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This PDF is a special preview of the complete novel.
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“Tho’ obscured, this is the form of the Angelic land.”

William Blake, *America*

“My life was a wandering. I never had a homeland. It was a matter of being constantly tossed about, without rest. Nowhere and never did I find a home.”

Johan Amos Comenius,
The Labyrinth Of The World

PART 1

INNER CITY BLUES

Is It In?

I don't start work until two in the afternoon. That is, when I've paid drudgery to do. Right now I'm grinding on Tuesday and Thursday. There isn't much demand for people in my line of work. I'm a freelance librarian. Although acquiring specialist skills can pay dividends in the job market, my big mistake was opting for the wrong type of information management. I should have gone into computers. I studied philosophy at London University and like my peers emerged with a singularly useless qualification. Most of those who graduated with me went on to work in information technology. My failure to accompany the majority of my class into employment where there was at least an outside possibility I might be promoted was utterly predictable since I'd only ever played at being middle-class. Put me back on a council estate like the ones I'd known as a boy and I'd almost revert to my original working class social type. My education half removed me from the proletariat and although I can now pass myself off as a bourgeois, whenever I do so I feel like I'm faking it although no one else seems to notice. Given my inability to properly assimilate to the social norms of the privately educated types I met at college, I guess I'm lucky to have regular work. Certainly my situation could be a lot worse. When I was sixteen an Oxford Street department store offered to gear me up in a red suit and white beard. Fortunately, I turned down this

golden opportunity to be trained in the rare art of operating a Santa Claus grotto. While the employment was regular, it only came up once a year.

I am most often known by my given name of John Johnson. I come from south London, and right now I'm based at the head office of Dreadnought Insurance, located conveniently close to The Barbican's Silk Street entrance. Silk Street used to be the south end of Whitecross Street, but companies on what had once been a road that was synonymous with poverty, successfully lobbied to have their end of the boulevard renamed. I'd imagine Silk was chosen for its not so austere legal connotations of taking silk. Personally, I prefer to think of it in terms of silky skin, and the way watching money buy influence is a form of pornography. I usually have a mooch through Whitecross Street before I clock on at Dreadnought Insurance. Thursday is my better day at the street market. On Monday and Tuesday trading is slow and not all the stall holders bother to put out their wares. There are three separate record and CD trading operations in Whitecross Street, spread over two market stalls and three indoor premises.

I wanted to get out of librarianship and into music futures, which is why I was busy catching up with the hits and misses of yesteryear. The population of the British Isles is ageing. Teenagers are in a real minority when it comes to laying out wedge on youth culture. Music in Whitecross Street was being sold to office workers who wanted something to lift them when they got home from a hard day in the city. We're not talking about company directors here, but people on 20K doing punishing clerical jobs. Some of those shopping in Whitecross Street were in their twenties but the bulk were in their thirties and forties. Despite the existence of glossy life-style monthlies for ageing hipsters such

as *Later*, I figured there was still a lot of potential for increased market penetration amongst those enjoying a premature second childhood. Disenfranchised punters enjoying a resurgent youth instead of mid-life crisis needed a champion, and I'd convinced myself I had the vision to sell them back their teenage obsessions. These were people who needed a dream but would only buy into one if it was offered at a bargain basement price—after all, most of them had mortgages to pay and kids to support. Since quality mattered, I'd have to shift a lot of units if my prices were to be competitive. What I needed was a lump sum to set up a slick merchandising operation. I figured my flatmate Captain Swanky was my most likely source for this.

I met Swanky in The Trader on Whitecross Street. The Captain worked, or rather didn't work, in his dad's degree mill. Students sent in cheques and got worthless diplomas by return post. The University Of Cripplegate operated out of a cramped and shabby office above a newsagent. For reasons I'd never been able to fathom, most of the space was taken up by row after row of recycled filing cabinets. The Captain's parents lived in Spain and since maintaining middle-class appearances meant that their child—who was unemployable—had to have a job, they'd provided him with one. Or rather, The Captain's parents had provided him with a position and a wage, they didn't actually expect their indolent youngest son to do any work. Swanky oversaw the day to day running of The University Of Cripplegate, which meant watching the legs of the two young secretaries who were paid a minimal wage to make sure the cheques got banked and diplomas sent out. The Captain was happy to ogle skirt from nine in the morning until the pub opened. He rarely returned to the office once he'd left for his lunch time meeting with

a barmaid who chatted to him if there was nothing else to do, which was just as well because in an inebriated state he'd have raised the already rather brisk turnover of staff in his father's lucrative business. Whenever anything out of the ordinary required sorting out at the University Of Cripplegate, Swanky's brother, who ran a stud farm, would come up from Hampshire to attend to it.

Having dragged him kicking and screaming from the bar of The Trader, I made Captain Swanky look at the music that was being sold in Whitecross Street, and then at the people who were buying it. The punters were fully-fledged adults, and I suggested to The Captain that if we could get through to them as well as the younger club crowd, then crossover into the mainstream was a virtual certainty. I wanted to set up a dot.com music merchandising operation. I had to explain to Swanky that capitalism works in cycles, that bust is followed by boom. He'd fallen for the lie that cyber-investments were dodgy. We spent some time chatting with a stall holder at the bottom of the market. Dave was in his forties and drove down to London from St. Albans with his stock five days a week. He was into everything as far as dance went, jazz funk through to house, but what utterly obsessed him was northern soul. He figured that rare groove recordings really meant something to people since they were still being listened to more than thirty years after they'd been made. Dave shifted a lot of garage but didn't think anybody would be interested in it in ten years time. He'd priced up his northern stock to start with. Normally he knocked recently acquired CDs out at a fiver, then shifted down in price if the product didn't walk. The boxes of northern soul compilations he'd picked up as bankrupt stock had gone out at eight knicker.

When things slowed down, he'd reduced this to a blue note. He hadn't had to duck beneath this benchmark to sell the lot.

"I love this stuff," Dave enthused. "I've got northern CDs all over the house, because maybe all I want to listen to on a compilation is one track. It's driving the missus crazy. That's why I've got to index all the tracks on my computer. That way I can find the songs I want on these compilations without having them strewn all over the place. It'll keep the missus happy and maybe she'll let me go to the Togetherness weekender in Stoke. A lot of the blokes I grew up with are divorced now, so they don't have to get permission to go out all night. My mate told me you won't see anyone under thirty-five at the northern soul revival clubs. It's all changed since we were young. We thought you had to get married and settle down. These days there's no reason why a bloke in his forties shouldn't stay out all night. That's why the northern scene hasn't died. People thought it was dead in the eighties but it has come back now. It's as strong as ever. My mates are going to all the revival events, the stuff up north and the all nighters at the 100 Club here in London. Now my daughter's teenage I don't see why I shouldn't be going along with them. Get a bit of my youth back. It's gotta be better than dancing to machine music."

Nostalgia ain't want it used to be, I informed Captain Swanky. Nostalgia, I reiterated, was the future. We just had to work it like there was no tomorrow. We had to buy up the rights to deleted records and then turn them into club hits. We had to get teenagers and their parents into the same sounds. We needed to learn our lessons from dance music crazes like Acid Jazz. We should aim to create peace, love and unity in the clubs—while making ourselves rich at the same time.

Then I corrected myself. Captain Swanky had money falling out of his *derrière*, so cash incentives meant nothing to him. The Captain's ruling passion was fame. How he was perceived by other people meant a lot to Swanky. He'd set himself the impossible task of making the perception of his peers match his own self-image. He was the Citizen Kane of Old Street. So I told him he'd be a street credible star if we worked the teenage and post-mortgage brigades into a frenzy of unity and love. The Captain was almost convinced, so I arranged to meet him at The Purple Haze later that evening. Swanky had invested in the club with the sole intention of reserving himself a deejay slot. After saying good-bye (or rather see you later), I left The Captain and made my way to Silk Street.

June Gregory was on reception as I wandered in to work. I asked her if she wanted to go to The Purple Haze after she knocked off. June didn't like rock music and suggested we go to a soul club instead. Unfortunately, I had to postpone any such arrangement until another night. I wanted The Captain's money, so I wasn't going to let him down. At least, not quite yet. Moments after taking my leave of June, I was at my work station with the pile of newspapers I was supposed to clip in front of me. The phone rang. I picked it up, and at first I thought there was no one on the other end of the line. Then I realised some joker had put sellotape over the part pressed to my ear. I tore the tape off. I'd been belled by my boss Michael Martin. He asked me for a summary of how the international standard book numbering system worked. On his way into work he'd been going through what Aleister Crowley had to say about books as talismans and it had occurred to him that a system of numerology based on ISBN numbers would be a very potent form of magick. Mar-

tin's interests were, to say the least, arcane. Although officially I was paid to track reports about financial matters and human disasters, I'd have been out of a job had it not been for Martin's life-long pursuit of the esoteric. Of course, Martin's wiccan activities were a source of much amusement behind his back. A wag in the office had recently used a computer graphics programme to mock up a picture of Martin and the comedian Tommy Cooper (dressed in nothing but a fez) performing sex magick at Stonehenge. The image had been anonymously e-mailed to everyone who worked for Dreadnought Insurance, including the boss.

As I explained the ins and outs of the international standard book numbering system to Martin, he became increasingly excited. From what I'd told him, he was sure he'd cracked a way of winning the National Lottery. Martin instructed me to look up the ISBNs of Crowley's books in various editions. I went to grab a pen from my drawer, but the joker who'd sellotaped the phone had evidently made off with my stash of biros too. I was reduced to cradling the telephone headset against my shoulder and imputing Martin's queries directly into my computer. As soon as I put the phone down, I got onto the internet and entered the name Aleister Crowley into a search engine. However, before I had a chance to look at any of the 666 results that came up, the phone went again. It was Colin from marketing. He wanted photocopies of all the recent clippings I had about home insurance deals offered to council and housing association tenants. This information was needed urgently, so I had to drop Crowley and dive into the stacks. Everything went smoothly until I tried to xerox the clippings. The person who'd sellotaped the phone and stolen my biros, had also interfered with the photocopier. They'd slapped their member onto

the machine and xeroxed it double-sided onto the one remaining ream of plain paper. Afterwards they'd put their rude copies back into the feed tray.

Colin, it must be said, had a sense of humour. Admittedly, it was one I didn't share. I like my humour dry, Colin preferred jokes that were sick. Therefore, I knew it wouldn't offend him if he got his press cuttings copied onto a xerox of someone's willy. Especially if, as I strongly suspected, it was his own middle-wicket. After all, it was Colin who'd introduced a number of the younger men in the firm to that ever popular game known as Cheapskate. The blokes would go out for a drink after work, and having armed themselves with Dutch courage, they'd compete to see who could have sex with a prostitute for the least money. Colin came into work one day claiming that the previous night he'd found a girl who needed the foil from a sweet wrapper to cook up her junk, and so he'd managed to do the business with her for thirty-six pence. Or rather, for a Yorkie. Having been caught shop-lifting from the nearest late-night store, the smack ho was banned from entering it. Colin had bought her the chocolate sweet wrapped in silver foil, and had his evil way for it. Arguments about whether this story was true raged around the office for weeks. Now that a few years had passed, it was the stuff of work place legend.

I knew I couldn't give Colin his photocopies on the spoiled paper. There was a strong probability he'd need to show the clippings to someone else. In any case, when montaged onto the priapic image with which the paper had been defaced, the cuttings were difficult to read. I buzzed Sandy in the stock room. She was out of copier paper and Everything Direct weren't making another delivery for days. She suggested I ask accounts

for a few hundred sheets of plain white, since they'd had her last five reams. I knew Sandy was trying to be helpful, but her advice pissed me off. The type of people who worked in accounts would have evicted a stricken toddler from an oxygen tent if their family was ten pence short on a credit repayment. When I'd started at Dreadnought my wages had been held back until some paperwork was sorted out. I was desperate for money but trying to get it out of accounts was like extracting teeth. Everything had to be done by the book or else they'd have the combined force of the tax man, the company directors, the shareholders and every con artist in London on their back. They did, however, suggest that I go to my bank manager and arrange an overdraft. Tight-fisted was too benign a term to describe accounts. There was no way I was going to get a few sheets of paper out of them.

Since I didn't have any money of my own to spend on paper (I'd left my wallet at home, or rather I hoped I'd left my wallet at home because it wasn't in my pocket), the easiest thing to do was pop over to the University Of Cripplegate. The secretaries knew I shared a flat with Captain Swanky, and I told them he'd asked me to go in and fetch him a ream of plain white. Unfortunately, I was seen leaving the Dreadnought building by both June Gregory and our janitor Winston Smith. June gave me a couple of quid to get her a sandwich, while Winston wanted a bottle of cider. That meant a detour via Safeway. The queue at the check out wasn't particularly long, but each of the five people in front of me paid by credit card. Added together what they spent didn't amount to twenty knicker. Plastic made them feel good, saved them the aggravation of ruining the hang of their clothes by weighting themselves down with spare change, while simultaneously as-

suaging their fears of being mugged. Those who asked for cash back had it counted out in ten pound notes. I suffered a further delay at the University Of Crip-legate. The secretaries had never had a chance to speak to me alone, and they hoped I might be able to resolve their long running speculations about Captain Swanky's sexuality. They were aware that The Captain ogled them, and were deeply puzzled by his inability to make an effective move. Since he was filthy rich, the dolly birds were prepared to overlook some of his more unsavoury qualities. The secretaries had noticed that Swanky spent a lot of time hanging out with a lipstick lesbian. They wanted to know if he was gay, latent or swung both ways. I tried offering them a simple explanation—brewer's droop—but it didn't wash. In the end, I made my getaway by saying The Captain was deejaying at The Purple Haze later that evening, and they'd have all their questions answered by checking out his act.

When I got back to the office, our Time and Motion specialist Ruth wanted to know what I'd been doing. It was nearly four o'clock and I didn't appear to have done any work. I explained that the photocopying paper had been spoiled and I'd had to go out to get more. Ruth insisted I give her a flash of the mysterious member that had caused me so much bother. She thought it a tad on the small size, and insisted on taking the ruined paper away with her. Fortunately Ruth had found the episode sufficiently amusing to overlook the time I'd spent out of the office. That is, on the condition I stayed late to catch up with my work. I checked my voice mail and there were fourteen messages all requiring immediate attention. I should have checked my email when I got in, but I was so behind with everything I decided to leave it until later. As it was, I was unable to get any-

thing done until after most of the staff had gone home. Ruth had passed the photocopied phallus around the office, and one visitor after another passed through my door to speculate on which plonker was responsible for my troubles.



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