

# 12. urban music

It's no exaggeration to say that London is one of the greatest musical cities on earth. Its buildings, streets, squares and parks have been celebrated by the capital's songsmiths for as long as there have been people living along the Thames, but it's only in the era of recorded music that these tunes have entered the national – and international – consciousness. Though many of the greatest songs to come out of London – *Itchycoo Park*, *Up the Junction*, *White Riot* or, erm, *The Wombling Song* – are about life in its suburbs, the city has produced just as many artists who have turned their attention to Zone One. This journey takes you around some of the sites and landmarks that inspired those tunes and, thanks to London being such a rich creative source for generations of songwriters, past many a street sign that will inadvertently get you whistling a familiar tune.



**Start point:** Warwick Avenue tube

**End point:** Green Park tube

**Duration:** 3 hours

● Leave **Warwick Avenue tube** through the Clifton Gardens exit (which is on the right just after the ticket barriers) and walk up the steps. It is beneath the entrance sign here that Welsh singer-songwriter Duffy breaks up with her lover in her 2008 hit *Warwick Avenue*. The song, unfortunately, doesn't reflect a real incident. The name of the tube station simply appealed to Duffy – who had recently relocated from Gwynedd to London – after she got off at the wrong Bakerloo Line stop.

● Walk back a few metres and turn right into Clifton Gardens, then catch the eastbound **6** from the **Warwick Avenue Station** stop. The bus passes through Maida Vale and Little Venice before going under **the Westway** – on which a couple lose their way in Blur's *For Tomorrow* – and down Edgware Road. The traffic island next to the cinema at the bottom of this road is where the **Tyburn Tree gallows** once stood, and it was around this spot that London's first commercial songwriters made their money. Ballad sellers would flock here on hanging days to hawk songsheets – often purporting to be the condemned criminal's last words – to a crowd eager for souvenirs of the execution.

● After heading along Oxford Street and down Regent Street – passing the alley on the left that leads to **Carnaby Street**, headquarters of 'the Carnebetian army' in The Kinks' *Dedicated Follower of Fashion* – the bus reaches **Piccadilly Circus**. This area makes its most famous appearance in the World War I singalong *It's a Long Way To Tipperary*, popularised when soldiers across Europe would belt out the chorus of 'Goodbye Piccadilly, farewell Leicester Square' to keep up their

trench-weary spirit. Morrissey's 1990 single *Piccadilly Palare* takes a different slant – the former Smiths frontman focused on the district's 19th-century notoriety as a haunt of male prostitutes.

● Get off the bus at the **Trafalgar Square** stop, then walk back a couple of metres and catch the southbound **3** from the **Trafalgar Square/Charing Cross Station** stop. The bus goes down Whitehall and through Parliament Square before crossing Lambeth Bridge and heading along Lambeth Road. Look to the right for **Lambeth Walk** – the street once known for the Cockney street market that inspired the 1937 song *The Lambeth Walk*. This tune and the dance that accompanies it, which feature in the musical *Me And My Girl*, were so well-known in the late 1930s and early 1940s that leading German Nazis made speeches condemning its 'animalistic hopping'. British leaders were much more accepting. King George VI and Queen Elizabeth attended a performance of the song in the late 1930s, and both shouted out the 'Oil!' at the end of each chorus.

● The 3 continues through Kennington into **Brixton** – setting for The Clash's 1979 song *The Guns of Brixton*, which outlines the issues in this predominantly black district that led to the 1980s anti-police riots. Get off the bus at the **Brixton Station** bus stop, continue on foot for a short distance and turn left into **Electric Avenue**. This street saw frontline action in the 1981 Brixton riots; and Eddy Grant's British reggae classic *Electric Avenue*, released a year later, spells out why the locals felt it was necessary to take to the streets.

● Cross Brixton Road and catch the northbound **59** from the identically named **Brixton Station** stop on the other side. This heads back up through Kennington and

Lambeth before crossing **Waterloo Bridge** – scene of possibly the greatest London song of all time. It is over here that lovers Terry and Julie, watched by Ray Davies' slightly sinister narrator, walk in The Kinks' 1967 *Waterloo Sunset*, a beautiful meditation on love, loneliness and the River Thames that has become the city's unofficial national anthem. Bizarrely – considering the band hailed from the north London suburb of Muswell Hill – the song was originally called 'Liverpool Sunset' and was written about the River Mersey. Davies changed the lyrics at the last minute when he recalled watching the sun set over Waterloo Bridge as a child recuperating from illness in St Thomas' Hospital.

- Get off the bus at **Lancaster Place** and catch the northbound **176** from the same stop. This bus immediately turns left onto **the Strand** – subject of the 1908 music-hall song *Let's All Go Down The Strand*, much lampooned for its refrain of 'have a banana' – before turning up St Martin's Lane and Charing Cross Road. The former home of **Central St Martin's College of Art & Design** is located at 102 Charing Cross Road, on the left next to the Montagu Pyke pub. It was a meeting here in 1988 between fine art and film student Jarvis Cocker and a well-to-do Greek girl intrigued by his Sheffield accent that inspired one of the finest pop-music couplets ever – 'She came from Greece, she had a thirst for knowledge/She studied sculpture at St Martin's College' from Pulp's 1995 song *Common People*.

- Get off the bus at the **Denmark Street** stop, walk back down Charing Cross Road and turn right into Old Compton Street. You are now in **Soho** – one of the most musically celebrated areas in London. This tight network of narrow streets, home to hundreds of bars, clubs and restaurants, has inspired everything from The Pogues' *A Rainy Night in Soho* and Bert Jansch and John Renbourn's *Soho* to Warren Zevon's *Werewolves of London*. Continue walking along Old Compton Street then turn right into Frith Street. You will immediately pass **Bar Italia** – the post-club coffee bar 'where all the ragged people' go in the 1995 Pulp song of the same name – before walking up to **Soho Square**. This small green space is the subject of Kirsty MacColl's song of rejection *Soho Square*. And, following the singer's untimely death in 2000, a bench engraved with the lyrics from this song – 'One day I'll be waiting there/No empty bench in Soho Square' – was installed in the park as a memorial.

- Walk around Soho Square and up Soho Street, then cross Oxford Street and turn right. Catch the northbound **10**, **73** or **390** from the **Tottenham Court Road Station** stop, immediately passing the tube station namechecked in Underworld's 1995 dance anthem *Born Slippy*. As the bus heads up Tottenham Court Road, look out for **Goodge Street tube** on the left. It is here, on the Northern Line's 'firefly platform', that Donovan set his 1966 countercultural classic *Sunny Goodge Street* – later covered by Marianne Faithfull. Get off the bus at the **Euston Station** stop. The railway terminus in front of you, which serves Britain's northwest, features in The Smiths' song *London*, the fear-tinged tale of a boy leaving his girlfriend and family behind in Manchester for a new life in the capital.

- Bear right as you exit the small bus station, cross Euston Road and take a short ride on the westbound **30** from the **Euston Station** stop on the other side. Get off the bus at the **York Street** stop – which, despite its name, is situated on **Baker Street**. As well as being the fictional home to Sherlock Holmes, this road's other major claim to fame is the 1978 Gerry Rafferty hit *Baker Street* – which sold more than four million copies across the world. The song's world-weary tone was the result of the acrimonious break-up of Rafferty's former band Stealer's Wheel, when the singer was forced to travel regularly from his Glasgow home to lawyers' meetings in London. His sanctuary at this time was a friend's flat on Baker Street where he could escape the bitter legal dispute with his record label and ex-bandmates, and concentrate on simply playing music.

- Cross the road and walk along Bickenhall Street to Gloucester Place. Go over to the other side and turn left, then catch the northbound **274** from the **Marylebone Road** bus stop. This bus curls around the outside edge of Regent's Park before passing **Primrose Hill** on the left. It was on this mound that Paul McCartney was walking in 1967 when a spectral man appeared out of the fog and then mysteriously melted away. McCartney was understandably disturbed by this experience; and the Beatle went home to write *The Fool On The Hill*, which appeared on the band's *Magical Mystery Tour* EP. The parkland has also inspired many other tunes – most notably *Primrose Hill* by John and Beverley Martyn (sampled by Fatboy Slim for his track *NW3*) and the identically named song by Loudon Wainwright III, about being homeless amid this picturesque greenery. Billy Bragg's *Upfield* channels the spirit of 18th-century poet William Blake, who believed he saw angels on this hillside.

- Continue on the 274 into Camden and get off at the **Camden Town/Camden Road** stop. Cross over the road, bear right and catch the southbound **C2** from the **Camden Street** stop. This bus heads back into central London around the opposite side of Regent's Park, and goes along Regent Street before turning right into the upmarket district of **Mayfair** – 'even trees are wealthy here,' noted Nick Drake – and around **Berkeley Square**. It is this leafy green space that provides the backdrop to the two lovers in the 1939 classic *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square*. Recorded by everyone from Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole to Rod Stewart and Harry Connick Jr, the song has become one of popular music's great standards. Though it's as British as teacups and Victoria sponge, it was actually co-written by an Englishman and an American in the Var region of France.

- Continue on the C2 to the **Green Park Station** stop, which is situated in front of the tube station.