

22. rock around the block

New York may have more attitude, Paris strikes more of a pose and Rio is better at moving its hips, but when it comes to rock and pop, London has all the best tunes. The city has been immortalised in song by generations of musicians and inspired countless young wannabes to pick up an instrument in the hope of becoming a star. It has always had its ear to the ground when it comes to fresh sounds and ideas, and its cafés and clubs have given birth to numerous scenes, from the wartime jazz of Soho and the folk revival of the Sixties to punk, 1980s dance music, Britpop and beyond. As for the bus you're sitting on, well, it's an essential part of the city's musical life: sitting top deck after a late-night gig is a rite of passage for every music lover. Even the squeaky clean Cliff Richard wouldn't be where he is today without the red double-decker, which rumbled across the big screen in 1963's *Summer Holiday*.



Start point: Westbourne Park tube
End point: Highbury & Islington tube
Duration: 3.5 hours

● Come out of the tube station, turn right and cross over the road to catch the southbound **328** from the **Westbourne Park Station** stop. After the bus stops at St Stephen's Gardens on Chepstow Road, it passes **Talbot Road** – where Geoff Travis set up his independent **Rough Trade** shop and record label in 1978, home to punky reggae bands and, later, The Smiths – on the right. **Stiff Records**, which fostered Elvis Costello, The Damned, The Pogues and Ian Dury, had its headquarters on Alexander Street, at the other end of Talbot Road. This once down-at-heel area has enjoyed a bohemian reputation since the 1950s, when West Indian émigrés moved here; by the 1960s it was a counterculture melting pot: Mick Jagger's trippy 1968 film *Performance* was partly filmed in a stucco-fronted house on the corner of Talbot Road and Powys Square. And at 103 Talbot Road is The Globe, a Caribbean basement café that has dished up rice and peas to Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix and Van Morrison.

● One of the area's most flamboyant musical landmarks is the Notting Hill Carnival, whose floats and feather-and-sequin-covered dancers parade down Chepstow Road each August Bank Holiday. Held in Notting Hill since 1965, it now attracts around a million people and a certain amount of notoriety: a disturbance during the 1976 Carnival inspired Joe Strummer to write The Clash's *White Riot*. Walk the streets of Notting Hill in the mid-1970s and you would have heard a soundtrack of Junior Murvin, The Upsetters, Max Romeo and Big Youth; reggae's basslines reverberated through the music of the 1970s and had a major influence on punk bands such as The Clash, who responded with songs such as *White Man in Hammersmith Palais* and *Guns of Brixton*.

● As the bus rolls down Pembridge Road and past numerous souvenir shops, see how many T-shirts you can see bearing the Rolling Stones' iconic 'lips and tongue' image, first used on the *Sticky Fingers* album. You'll then turn left onto **Notting Hill Gate**, where a youthful Richard Branson opened his third Virgin Records shop at number 130 (now a Holland & Barrett,

just visible to the right as the bus turns onto Notting Hill Gate). Customers were given scatter cushions and free veggie food; in 1972 the Virgin Records label was founded in an upstairs office. First signing? Mike Oldfield. Branson bought him a set of tubular bells for £20.

● After turning off Kensington High Street, the 328 passes **Logan Place** on the right before it reaches Earl's Court. Queen frontman Freddie Mercury had his home at number 1, the Garden Lodge, and he died here in 1991. The green door is covered with graffiti from fans who make a pilgrimage here. Out of sight, further up the High Street, was Kensington Market, closed in 2000, where every band and singer worth their salt, from The Kinks and Roxy Music to Robbie Williams, would go for fashion inspiration; in the mid-1970s, you might have bought some vintage clothes from Freddie Mercury and Roger Taylor, who ran a stall there.

● When the bus crosses Old Brompton Road, look out for **The Troubadour Club** to the right on the far side. This original 1950s coffee house was a major player in the folk revival of the 1960s: Paul Simon, Sandy Denny, Davey Graham and Bert Jansch all played here, as well as Bob Dylan, who appeared under the name Blind Boy Grunt. If you fancy stopping here for lunch, order a bowl of the herb-and-tomato pasta, which has been on the menu for half a century and has sustained countless singer-songwriters.

● Get off the bus at the **Hobury Street/World's End** stop. Continue walking up King's Road, pausing at number 430 on the left – which is where Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood ran a cutting-edge fashion boutique which, by 1974, was named **SEX** in large pink letters (with the tagline 'Rubber wear for the office'). In 1980, Westwood renamed the shop World's End, the name it bears today. The huge clock built into its façade is set to spin backwards, counting down to the end of the world. It was here that all four members of the Sex Pistols would hang out, although it was at number 354, in a pub called the Roebuck (now a private-hire venue) that John Lydon was formally introduced to the others and auditioned by singing along to Alice Cooper's (*I'm Eighteen* on the jukebox.

● Catch the eastbound **22** from the **Beaufort Street** stop on King's Road and take it all the way to the **Hyde Park Corner Station** stop. If it's sunny, you may want to stretch your legs in **Hyde Park**, London's largest and, since 1968, the setting for numerous outdoor performances. Pink Floyd started it all during the Midsummer High Weekend in June 1968, when the opening bars of *Let There Be More Light* ushered in an era of free concerts. The most famous was the Rolling Stones' in 1969, which took place two days after Brian Jones' death. The band played to an estimated 250,000 people; Mick Jagger recited Shelley in tribute to his late guitarist and released dozens of white butterflies into the air – a gesture repeated (with doves) 36 years later by U2 at the Live 8 charity concert.

● Catch the eastbound **14** from the same stop. As this heads up Shaftesbury Avenue from Piccadilly Circus, you should have time to look right down Wardour Street. The blue O'Neill's pub on the right occupies a building that in the 1960s housed a basement jazz and R&B joint called the **Flamingo Club**, in which Georgie Fame had a residency and where Hendrix and the Who jammed on stage. Upstairs was the **Whisky A Go Go** club – later known as the WAG club – which in the 1980s saw Sade and The Pogues playing some of their first gigs, and hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash make his UK debut on the wheels of steel.

● On the other side of Wardour Street (to the left) is where the **Marquee Club** was located at number 90 – the building still has a musical connection, as Cuban bands often play at downstairs restaurant Floridita. This famous club hosted early gigs by The Who, Led Zeppelin, The Jimi Hendrix Experience and Pink Floyd in the late 1960s and early 1970s. If you get off the bus, look for the blue plaque honouring Keith Moon. Thanks to performances by Def Leppard and Iron Maiden, it was at the forefront of the new wave of heavy metal in the early 1980s, and was famous for its 'secret' gigs – Prince, the Jam, Genesis and Metallica all played here under pseudonyms.

● The bus then almost immediately passes the end of Dean Street – home to nightclub and New Romantic epicentre **Billy's** – on the left. It then passes Frith Street (where world-famous jazz venue **Ronnie Scott's** has been located since 1965, and where Jimi Hendrix played his last live gig) and Greek Street, where folk club **Les Cousins** – haunt of John Martyn, Bert Jansch, Al Stewart and all the major figures of the 1960s folk revival – was situated at number 49. Both roads can be seen on the left.

● The bus then turns up Charing Cross Road, passing **Denmark Street** on the right. Known as England's Tin Pan Alley, this is the city's ultimate music street. 'Just open your ears and follow your nose, 'cos the street is shaken' from the tapping of toes', according to a song by The Kinks. *Melody Maker* was first published here in 1926 (at number 19), followed by the *NME* (at number 5) in 1952 (which produced the first singles and album chart). Look out for the Regent Sounds Studio sign at number 4 (now a guitar shop): this is where The Rolling Stones recorded their first album in 1964, and where both Hendrix and Donovan made their first recordings. David Bowie used to live in a camper van that he parked on the street here in order to be close to the studio, and drank tea at number 9, the Mod-friendly Giaconda Café, where he met his first backing band, the Lower 3rd. Bob Marley bought his first guitar on Denmark Street, and the Sex Pistols lived above the shop at number 6 while Elton John wrote *Your Song* at number 20 – where he worked as an office boy in 1970. These days, you can buy everything from guitar strings and banjos to synths and amps, but the only place you can hear live music is the tiny **12 Bar Club**, which has seen intimate gigs by Martha Wainwright, the Libertines and Jeff Buckley. Get off the bus at the **Tottenham Court**

Road Station stop, walk back to the junction and turn right into Oxford Street.

● Cross the road and catch the westbound **7** from the **Oxford Street/Soho Street** stop. Look out for the **100 Club** (at 100 Oxford Street) on the right. During World War II, this was a jazz venue that attracted jitterbugging American GIs and musicians such as Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. Three decades later, it reverberated to a different sound, when it was a mecca for punk fans – on 20 September 1976 it hosted the famous 100 Club Punk Special, which helped launch the careers of the Sex Pistols, The Clash, Buzzcocks, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Stranglers. It was due to close in 2010 but, thanks to a charity gig by Paul McCartney, raised enough funds to continue. At the other end of Oxford Street, the tiny alleyway opposite Selfridges leads to **Balderton Street**, where auditions for The Spice Girls were held at number 16 in 1994 – the five girls all replied to an advert in *The Stage*, which asked: 'RU 18–23 with the ability to sing/dance? RU streetwise, outgoing, ambitious and dedicated?' If you really, really want, get off the bus at the **Marble Arch Station** stop.

● Cross Oxford Street, turn right and then left up Portman Street. Catch the northbound **274** from the **Portman Street/Selfridges** stop. As it goes down Gloucester Place, you may want to hum the saxophone solo from Gerry Rafferty's *Baker Street*, which runs parallel. The bus passes the pastel-coloured houses of **Primrose Hill**, which is the sort of place where rich rock stars buy homes – and into **Camden Town**, which is the sort of place future rock stars begin their careers.

● On Regent's Park Road the bus passes alongside **Cecil Sharp House**, home of the English Folk and Dance Society and a library of traditional music plundered by numerous folk singers and bands. Camden has had a rock 'n' roll swagger since the 1970s – the uniform is skinny jeans and leather jacket, the drink of choice lager. Look out for **The Dublin Castle** pub on the left at 94 Parkway (where Madness used to hang out in the 1980s, and where Blur and the Arctic Monkeys have plugged in their amps). Further down is **The Good Mixer**, epicentre of the mid-1990s Britpop scene. As you cross Camden High Street, look to the left for the **Electric Ballroom**, which opened in 1978; it's where bands such as Joy Division, The Smiths and Public Enemy have been recorded on countless bootleg tapes. As the 274 goes down Agar Grove and crosses Murray Street, you're within a few yards of **Camden Square**, where Amy Winehouse died at number 30 in 2011. Get off the bus at the **Angel Islington/City Road** terminus.

● Walk back to the City Road/Upper Street junction and turn right. Cross at the traffic lights outside Angel tube and turn right, then catch the northbound **4, 19, 30** or **43** from the **Angel Station** bus stop. Take this all the way up Upper Street to the stop opposite **Islington Town Hall** – where Paul McCartney and Linda Eastman got hitched, as well as Liam Gallagher and Patsy Kensit – then continue walking up Upper Street for a celebratory pint in **The Hope & Anchor** (on the left). This Victorian-era boozier lays claim to being the most famous rock pub in the country: its live shows helped coin the phrase 'pub rock' in the early 1970s, when bands such as Ian Dury's Kilburn and the High Roads played; later bills featured virtually every punk, ska and new-wave act you could name. You can see the pub in its heyday in the video to *One Step Beyond* by Madness. It's a lot smarter than it was then, but bands still play in the upstairs room – come here in the evening and you might be lucky enough to see the rock stars of the future.