

Bohemian rhapsody

Soho's bohos return in a stage event celebrating the district's raffish heyday, writes **Paul Willetts**

Mention Soho and you'll inevitably conjure up a gallery of vivid images. For the elderly, it's redolent of a vanished world of seedy basement jazz clubs, afternoon drinking dives, aromatic delicatessens, arty pubs, and French prostitutes accosting passers-by from upstairs windows. For the middle-aged, it's inextricably associated with the neon-lit sex shops, peep shows, and blue-movie fleapits that colonised those same narrow streets in the 1960s and 1970s. For the young, it's synonymous with gay bars, chic restaurants and well-groomed media smoothies, attracted by the area's fashionable aura.

Soho's much-mythologised heyday as the English equivalent of the Left Bank in Paris or Greenwich Village in New York lasted from the early 1920s to the late 1950s. During that period, visitors to this easy-going, cosmopolitan enclave, where eccentricity and unconventional behaviour flourished, could mingle with its colourful cast of painters, writers, actors, musicians, bookies and small-time crooks.

Regulars included the painters Augustus John and Francis Bacon, the Satanist Aleister Crowley, Dylan Thomas, the self-styled horse-racing tipster

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Zulu Prince Monolulu, the jazz singer George Melly and the gay exhibitionist Quentin Crisp. Yet none led a more flamboyant or racketsy existence than the writer Julian Maclaren-Ross (1912-64), author of the classic, soon-to-be-reissued *Memoirs of the Forties*, which has done more than any other book to define the district's raffish allure.

Dressed in an outlandish costume evocative of both a Hollywood gangster and an 1890s dandy, his pale suit augmented by a carnation in his buttonhole, a brightly patterned tie, a malacca cane, and dark, American aviator-style sunglasses, Maclaren-Ross was invariably to be found at the bar of the Wheatsheaf on Rathbone Place.

Nowadays this falls beyond the informal northern perimeter of Soho, marked by Oxford Street. From the late 1930s until the end of the following decade, however, the Wheatsheaf was the headquarters of the bohemian set that convened in what was known as North Soho. Besides producing intermittently brilliant work which earned him the admiration of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, Maclaren-Ross endured drug addiction, alcoholism, insanity, homelessness, imprisonment and poverty, his problems compounded by an obsession with George Orwell's glamorous widow.

Small wonder, then, that he has been adopted as the patron saint of the recently founded Sohemian Society (www.sohemians.com), dedicated to celebrating Soho's louche past. Its founders, Marc Glendening and Ian Farrow, host a programme of events, appealing to an audience that ranges from nostalgic twenty-somethings to ravaged veterans of the scene. The latest of these events provides a chance to hear George Melly's reminiscences, which promise to be as garish as his colourful suits. With its atmosphere of hard-drinking bonhomie, the Sohemian Society offers its devotees a taste of a lost era.

An Audience with George Melly, followed by a screening of *Love is the Devil*, the Francis Bacon biopic, is being staged on Thursday, 7.30pm, at the Everyman Cinema, Hampstead High Street, Hampstead, London NW3. Tickets £15. Call 0870 0664777