

Party time: music, booze and fast food provide a late night buzz in the streets of Camden Town.

DOWN TOWN

Camden Town, London:
Black and white and
many shades of grey

Photos: Belvin Corriette
Words: Tony Sutton

ColdType



Above: The Roundhouse, an old railway engine shed, has been one of London's main music venues since the early 1960s

1. THE GIG

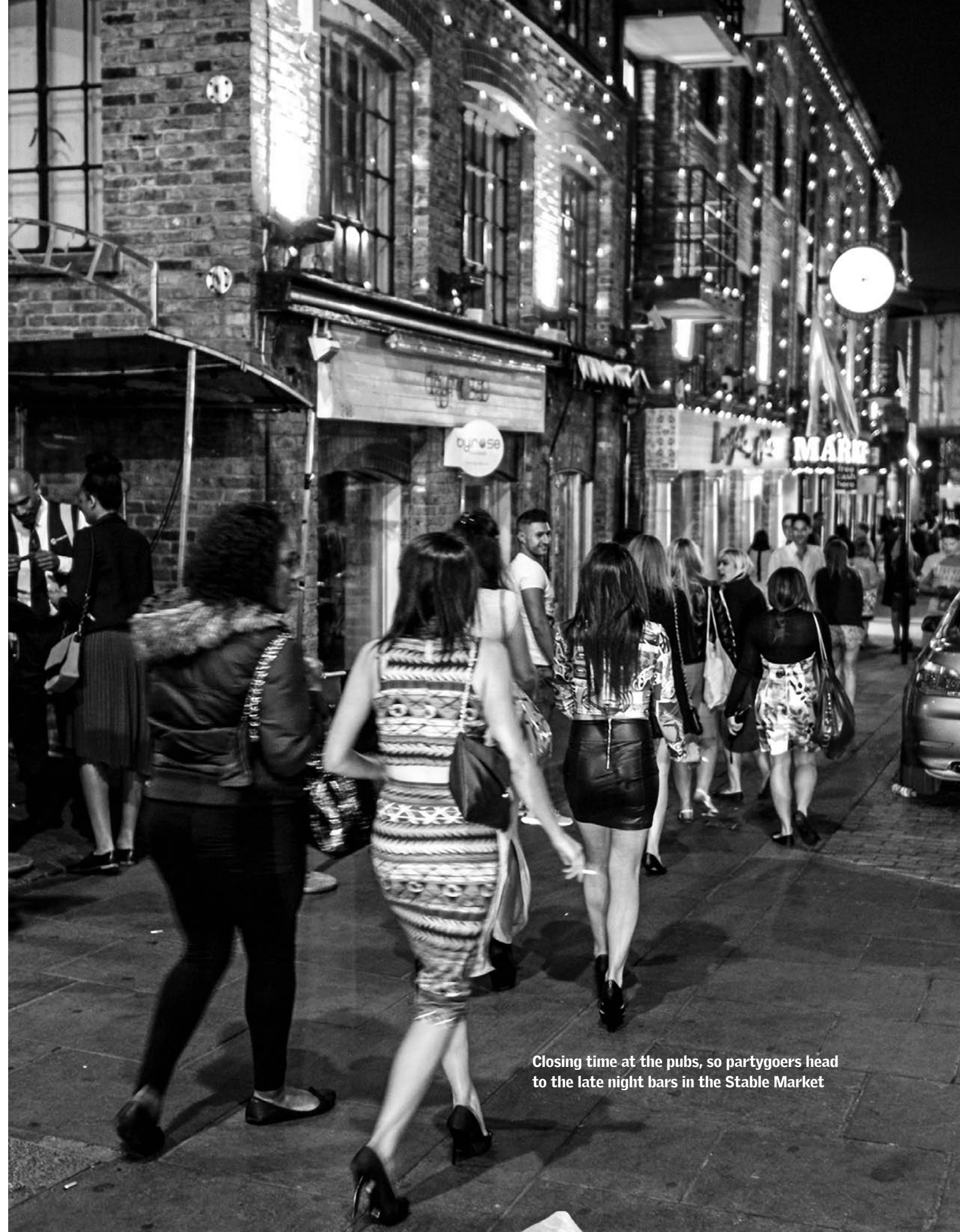
Belvin Corriette's photographs of London's Camden Town are marching across the computer screen. My mind is fully engaged, stimulated by long-dormant memories. Some are as clear and intense as the photographs I'm looking at, while others are muted, in converging shades of grey, undecided whether to emerge from the long sleep of time. Then, a picture of the Roundhouse, Camden's most famous music venue, flits across the screen and I'm transported back 40 years to the night I got free passes to a rock concert . . .

I'M IN MY TWENTIES, NEWLY ARRIVED IN LON-

don, assistant editor at a Fleet Street magazine. So new, in fact, that I have no permanent accommodation – my family is 150 miles away, my bed a sleeping bag in the office.

Second week in town. I'm invited to a gig by Afro-rock band Osibisa: two press passes, unlimited free booze and an interview with the band afterwards. At the Roundhouse. Tonight. Woo-hoo! Now, where the hell is the Roundhouse? Paul will know. An ex-colleague at a Northern daily paper, he's now a trainee BBC radio newsreader and my only pal in the Big City.

We meet at a pub close to my office and sink a couple of pints before heading for the subway, exiting at the far end of Camden High



Closing time at the pubs, so partygoers head to the late night bars in the Stable Market



The Electric Ballroom, a mainstay of Camden nightlife for 73 years, having hosted music hierarchy such as U2, The Clash, Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Smiths and Blur



Street, a mile or so from our destination. “How, man, all those boozers on the way. We’ve still got a couple of hours before Osibisa go on stage,” cries Paul. “Let’s have fun!”

Numerous pubs, untallied empty glasses later, my coherence is submerged in an alcohol-fueled haze. Paul’s faring no better, refined BBC accent rapidly fading, betraying working class Geordie roots

So, how were Osibisa? Don’t ask. We neither see nor hear them. In fact, we don’t get past the Roundhouse entrance. A very large doorman blocks our way, even though – as Paul noisily reminds him several times – we’re journalists in the line of duty and need to be treated with the utmost respect. “You’re not, and you don’t,” he corrects, “You’re drunk. Now fuck off!” A sobering glance at two large fist ends the discussion. We heed his advice.

Back on the street, I wonder, “Now what should we do?”



Top: Camden has bars and clubs to suit all needs. However, the one common link is the need for cash

Above: It’s 2am and the first of the night owls head home



Above: The relaxed laws around Camden mean that as much socialising happens on the streets outside establishments as on the inside

“No sweat,” slurs Paul. “I have a friend from the Beeb who lives round the corner. We’ll drop by and say hi. You’ll love him.”

The rain pours. Ten minutes later, now half-drowned as well as half-drunk, we arrive at Charles’s place.

Our host turns out to be an aging actor. Tall, heavy-set, with a face that media hacks once lazily described as ‘lived-in’, Charles’s made his name, a decade earlier, playing hard-assed thugs in cop dramas. So his greeting – a high-pitched squeal of delight, followed by very tight hugs and hearty toweling down for “my boys” – seems strangely out of character. Thus welcomed, we’re installed side by side on a large overstuffed sofa, plied with the finest cooking sherry and subjected to increasingly-sordid tales of escapades inside and outside the BBC.

Midnight arrives. A distant clock strikes. We



He fought the law and the law won . . . the police always have enough of a presence among the revellers to ensure that nothing too bad happens

Right: Lunchtime at the Stable Market where local residents and workers come together as one



Right: Another band breaks into song by the canal, fully equipped with drums, amplifiers and microphones



Buck Street market is a predominately clothing focused market aimed at young rockers and likes to see itself as *the* Camden market



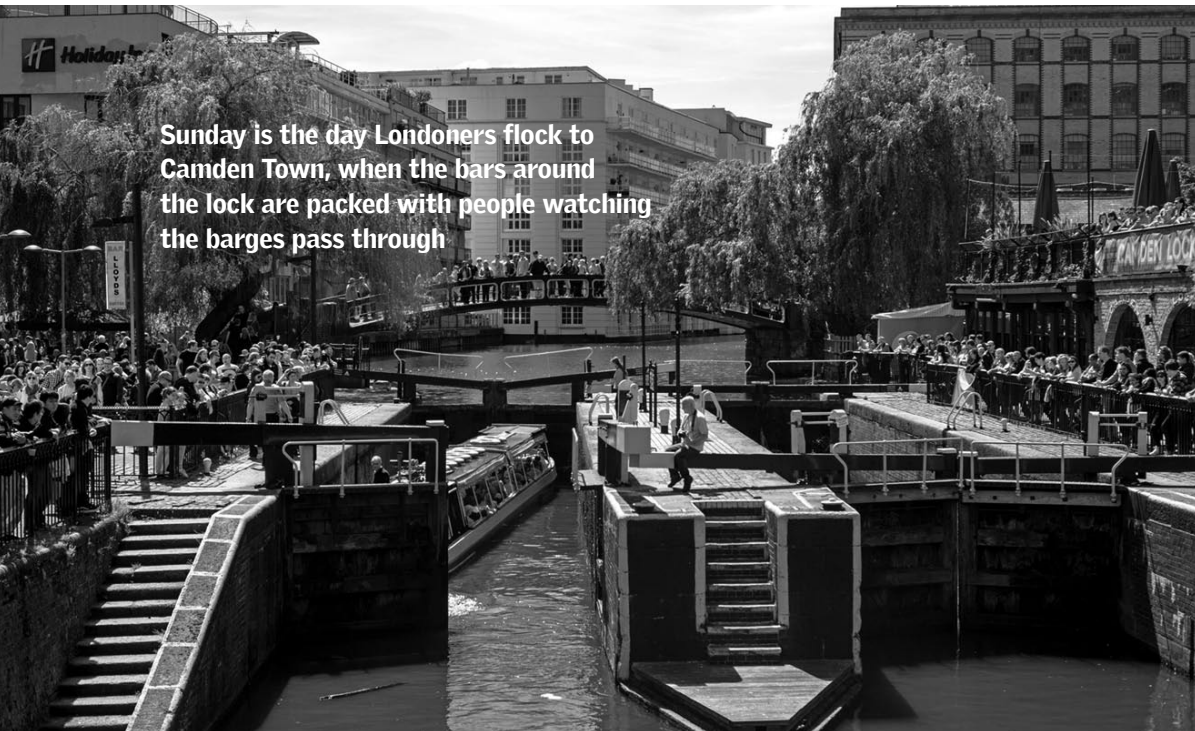
shift. Time to leave. “Don’t go, boys, the night is still young.” Our host nips into a bedroom, emerging moments later triumphantly wielding a giant spliff. “This weed is the best. I got it from (*he names the rock hero of the hour*). Let’s party!”

“Er, sorry. Early start in the morning,” counters Paul, as he bolts for the door. Charles turns to me, “Well, My Boy, you have no home to return to, and I just know you’ll enjoy sleeping in a *real* bed.” His beefy hand is now firmly affixed to my thigh, his body a barrier to the room’s single exit. Hmm, shouldn’t have told him of my primitive sleeping arrangements.

“Oh God, what now?” I implore any watching deity, as I scan the room for an escape route. Then, remembering I’m now a Fleet Street hack, I follow the first law of my profession. Twisting from Charles’s advances, I *make my excuses and leave*, catching up with Paul, who is now halfway down the street hailing a cab.

“Happens all the time,” he laughs as we clamber aboard. “I love Charles; he’s a harmless, lonely old coot. Funny thing, though, the young girls and their mothers saw him on TV

Above: What do you want to eat? Camden’s markets have hundreds of food stalls from which to choose



Sunday is the day Londoners flock to Camden Town, when the bars around the lock are packed with people watching the barges pass through

and fell in love. Poor things. Now, let's find another pint."

2. THE CHICKEN

The images continue their silent journey across the screen. Camden Lock. The High Street. The restaurants. And the markets, which make Camden the third-most visited part of England's capital. I spot the entrance to the Stable Market. More memories flood my mind...

THE YEARS ZOOM BY. PAUL LEAVES THE BBC and heads back north. After a year in London, I've trekked south with my family to Africa, returning to England on regular vacations. Camden is always one of our first stops. Jools and the kids love the markets and the shops, while I bask in the anarchic, anti-capitalist feel of the area: the noise; crammed stalls; tiny untidy shops, divided by flimsy barriers, inside half-

guttured buildings; dank tunnels; exotic curios; pirate records; secondhand books; consumer goods of doubtful origin (ie nicked); dreadlocks; tattoo shops; incense hardly masking the sweet smell of ganja; the spicy tang of West Indian, Chinese, North African foods. An oasis of the counterculture.

I blame the anarchic surroundings for the more offbeat purchases, especially the old ventriloquist's dummy: a grotesque red and yellow rubber chicken, head and grinning beak protruding from a huge round body, with spindly legs and wrinkled feet. Son Oliver sprays his hair red to match the plumage of his new pal and they are inseparable for a month. A traveling freakshow, they sit side by side in cars, trains, buses and on the plane home, where, three days later, the chicken's head falls off and it's binned.

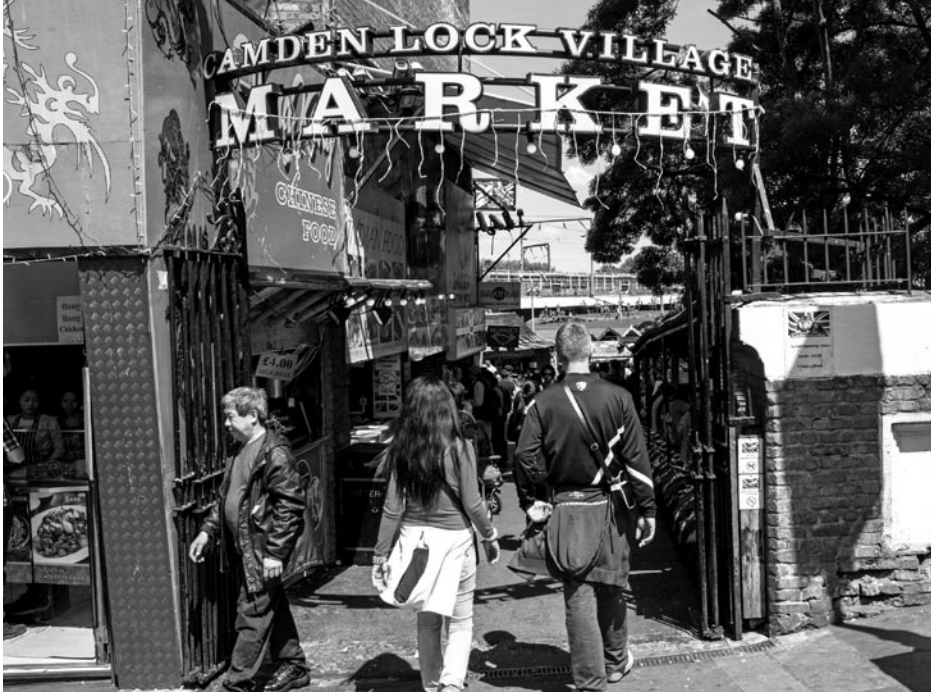
Then there's the bright red tee-shirt with a huge yellow Communist Party hammer and



Another busker entertains the thousands of tourists visiting the home of bohemian London



Gaudily-decorated shops give the street a vibrancy and energy unmatched by conventional city centres



sickle displayed across the front that I wear for three defiant weeks around my true-blue Tory hometown. Jools disposes of it, despite my bleating opposition, before we negotiate the notoriously humourless, stridently Red-hating customs officials at Johannesburg's airport. "Deportation might be a feather in your cap," she scolds, "but I'd rather not be sent home on the next plane."

3. THE TATTOOS

More photographs. I pause at a shot of the High Street market and a mishmash of memories collide . . .

THE FASHION STALLS: WHERE JOOLS AND daughter Vicky linger far too long, driving me and Oliver to the sidestreet arcades, where he buys a pirate, almost-unlistenable, live double-LP of Guns 'n' Roses that he plays once, moans and then sells to me. We also buy Bruce

Above: Camden Lock Market has been renovated, the haphazard anarchy replaced with 500 'attractive, independent shop units,' according to the area's web site, after a fire in 2009 destroyed a large section of the site.



Above: new face of the Stables Market, where business sell their wares in the arch of the former horse hospital

Springsteen music tapes, lefty books and papers that preach revolution in the name of democracy . . .

The tattoo shop: where Oliver gets his marks of passage to teendom – first Mickey Mouse, then a Megadeath logo. His sister declines, declaring tattoos ugly – one of her shoulders is now decorated with a giant multi-coloured octopus with tentacles halfway down her back, symbol of changing times, dreams and priorities.

The secondhand shacks: Where else could you find a “genuine, unique, slightly damaged” Dalek (*ex-ter-min-ate, ex-ter-min-ate*) from the BBC's cult Dr Who TV series, standing dustily in a corner awaiting a punter with £150 to spare? The cash was in my hand but Jools, ever-sensible, wondered how her moronic husband was planning to get it to Canada, and



Crowds pour across the road at Camden Lock on a Sunday morning. The markets have long been one of London's top attractions



“Where will the bloody thing go when it gets there.” Discussion over, she removed the cash from my hand and plopped it into her purse.

And the buskers, the lights, the people milling around garish shops, the vibrance that international mega-corporations can't match with their bland, market-researched sameness ...

4. THE END

The slide show stops. Newly-exercised memories return from whence they came. Replaced by darker intrusions ...

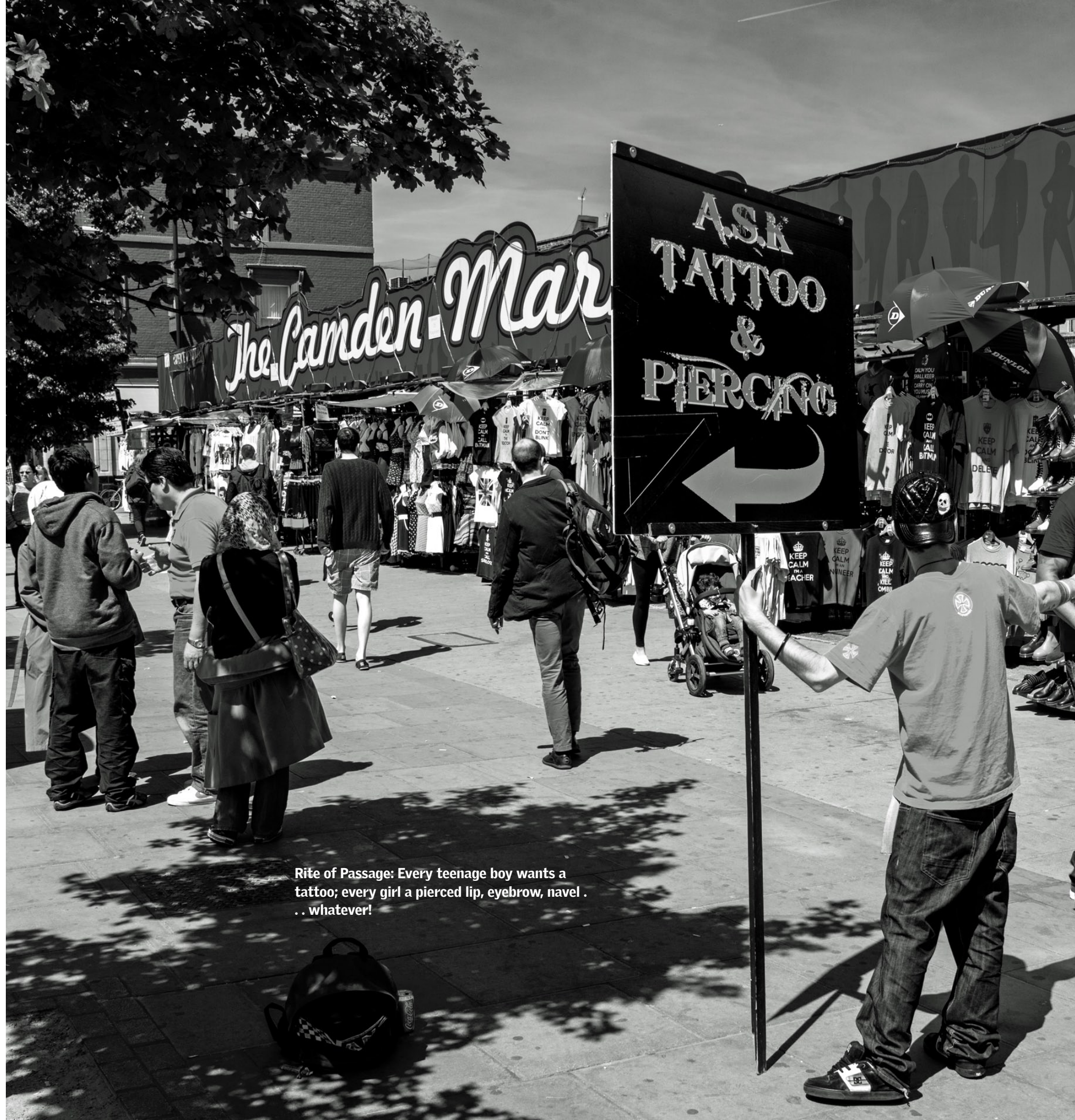
NOW I'M BACK IN THE PRESENT, AWAY FROM memories of long-distant past. Thinking of the future. Is it possible that Camden Town could ever again become a cultural outpost, a throw-back to an age before society was ravaged by lack of jobs, bankrupted by institutional fraud,

debased by impossible-to-pay mortgages, soiled by unrelenting credit card debt, and traumatised by the neo-liberal rule of our corporate masters.

Is it possible to rediscover values that prevailed when the word *Orwellian* was a fictionalised warning of what might happen if we weren't careful, rather than the political reality we fell into when we were too busy to notice?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Camden is changing as we watch. The messy, intense, personal spaces, part of a unique identity, are slowly being erased and transformed into neat, sanitised patches of 'civilised' conformity.

Yes, the corporations are winning the battle, but the war is not yet over. Hopefully, we'll find – in Corriette's images in 10 or 20 years' time – a better ending, one that acknowledges the value of life well lived. And understands that shopping is not the pinnacle of human attainment. **CT**



Rite of Passage: Every teenage boy wants a tattoo; every girl a pierced lip, eyebrow, navel . . . whatever!

Love, lager, leaflets and litter . . . Crowds congregate outside the entrance to Camden Town subway station



THE PHOTOGRAPHER

London-born **Belvin Corriette** (above) quit his job as head of finance at a large organisation "to pick up my camera and photograph my city the way I see it; not a tourist's view, but the true beauty, scenery and greenery of one of the world's true cosmopolitan cities. London is, however, short of seascapes so I escape the city to photograph the scenic beach and lake areas of the UK and the world."

His web site is <http://image-view.co.uk>

THE WRITER

Tony Sutton has been a journalist and editor in England, Scotland, South Africa, the USA and Canada. A publishing consultant with clients in North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, he is the editor of ColdType.

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