

Timothy Allen



aunt's house in Cheltenham, where he played his newly acquired 78s on a wind-up gramophone until he saved up enough money to buy himself a Dansette. "That served me very well - I had it right through art college, until it finally melted having been left on for four days."

At 16, having taken his art A-level a year early, he headed for Cheltenham College of Art where fell into a "proto-hippie commune" with other aspirant painters. "It was squalid and really uncomfortable... but we were all in it together and you know what it's like at that age - you talk, talk, talk. Lots of painting was done but very little sleeping and hardly any washing... And none of us knew the first thing about cooking." There were no drugs ("we couldn't afford any") but one of the communards who worked in a mental hospital had access to exotic pills. "We tried out different types of Benzedrine - very seriously, making notes. We were

artists - none of this hedonistic bullshit!"

Sartre and Camus had permeated Miles's adolescence and, at Cheltenham, he became aware of the Beats. "In one of the cafés where we hung out, I read a copy of 'Bomb' by Gregory Corso." The address of City Lights, the celebrated San Francisco bookshop run by Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, was on the back and soon Miles was sending off for copies of intriguing-sounding books such as *On the Road* and *Howl*. "I was instantly a Beatnik, hitching around the country with Kerouac in my pocket." In Oxford, he befriended Michael Horowitz, the poet behind *New Departures*. "He was terribly well connected and it was through him that I started reading people like Samuel Beckett." Thus, after gaining his art teacher's diploma, "just in case", it was natural that, for his first job, he should gravitate toward Better Books.

As the Beatles split and the Sixties

ended, Indica closed. An essentially benevolent, anti-capitalist enterprise that became an enabling force for all that was alternative in London, it was ironically brought down, in part, by endless shoplifting. "Only the other day, some journalist confessed to me he'd nicked a book. I told him it's not too late to pay." Miles spent the next decade or so in transit between London and New York, working with Ginsberg, reporting the punk scene for *NME*, dealing in rare books, and living at the ever-cool Chelsea Hotel.

As to the current music scene, Miles pulls a face. "It's all product and I'm too old," he says, allowing that he's getting to know it a little better as 14-year-old Theo tunes in. (For such an alternative figure, he has firm views about parenting, insisting his son attend to his homework and get to bed on time.) Asked why there are still so few good books about rock'n'roll, he answers that it is still too

young an artform to attract serious writers. As to whom he admires, he cites Johnny Rogan, Greil Marcus ("though *Lipstick Traces* was too obscure"), Peter Guralnick and, surprisingly, the scandalous biographer Albert Goldman.

"He did a good job on Elvis and Lennon. I saw Lennon a lot and I thought Goldman's portrait was one of the more accurate ones - much better than all those that portrayed him as Mr World Peace. He *wasn't* like that.

"The problem with Albert was that he did too much pot, which distorted things, but he was an old-fashioned journalist who had to have everything corroborated by at least two sources." Of course, some of them may have had hazy recall...

*Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman's 'The Dylan Companion' and 'The Lennon Companion' are published by Da Capo*