

**The Big Issue 2007**  
**Talking terrifying teenagers**  
*By Neil Humphreys*

I'M still a young man. I read the right magazines, I can still touch my toes on a warm day without creaking and, in the name of comfort, I haven't yet resorted to wearing socks with sandals. Although, I tried it once for a laugh and, my god, it was comfortable. On a sticky, humid day, I transcended mere walking. I was floating. I threw the sandals to one side, terrified that I was becoming my grandfather.

I'm still a young man. Football matches continue to take precedence over nature programmes about the mating habits of ladybirds, music is played at maximum volume and I remain partial to movies with a little gratuitous violence and the occasional Halle Berry scene. I'm a Scorsese man. I'm not yet ready for all that warm-hearted Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* stuff.

I'm still a young man. I know that. But something has changed because when I was in the company of a horde of tenacious teenagers recently, I felt compelled to rip my arms off and stuff them in my ears to drown out the noise.

As the old joke goes, I love children. I went to school with hundreds of them. But I still love children. In their presence, I "goo" and "ga" in all the right places and genuinely enjoy being around them.

The modern teenager, on the other hand, particularly the Western Modern Teenager, is about as appealing as a nature programme on the mating habits of ladybirds. At least you can switch the ladybirds off.

On a recent bus journey, my daydreaming was shattered by a quick trip back to the Paleolithic era. Half a dozen Neanderthals staggered onto the bus. With their knuckles scraping along the floor, they risked scratching their ipods and mobile phones.

They communicated in loud grunts, incessant invective and gangsta rap. Their chosen language, when it was intelligible, was faux-American with a hint of Ali G's mock-Jamaican.

They were down with the hood. They were, like, so totally with it, yeah. They were seriously hard mother-fuckers. They were six white, middle-class teenagers from a respectable suburb.

Their mission: To antagonise their captive, but largely uninterested, audience on the bus. Their modus operandi: To singing tunelessly along with equally tuneless gangsta rappers, Ice-T, Lemon Tea, Ice Cube, Rubik's Cube and whatever else the misogynistic miscreants are called.

Being in the middle of a school day, it was obvious that they were playing truant. I'm no Sherlock Holmes. They were still wearing their school uniforms. (And as a footnote to rebellious teenagers here, it's very hard to be taken seriously as your 'hood's answer to 50 Cent when your uniform leaves you looking like an Enid Blyton character).

It was equally obvious that the sextet were playing truant when the brain cells were being handed out.

Their banal conversation was so devoid of wit, it bordered on the surreal. If you want to replicate the sensory experience of an acid trip, spend the evening in the company of bickering teenagers.

"It's your birthday ... It's your birthday... It's your birthday," one of the girls sang endlessly along with the rap song on her blaring mobile phone.

"Just shut up, yeah?" One of her hardcore companions bellowed.

"It's your birthday ... It's your birthday."

"Look, just fucking shut up, yeah, It's not even my birthday or anything."

"Yeah," said another group member. "It's none of our birthdays or nothing."

This wisecrack caused general hilarity among the group and encouraged the singer to explain why she was compelled to perform impromptu concerts on various modes of public transport.

"I don't give a fuck," she explained.

"Yeah, you're mental, you are. You're just mental. Wherever we go, you're just mental," said another Pink Lady. I didn't disagree with the diagnosis.

"Yeah, totally, I was on this bus right," said The Mental One. "And you won't fucking believe this one ... I was on a bus right, and I was singing really loudly right. You know that song that's called 'I shagged your boyfriend and my best friend's a total bitch'. And the bus driver says to me, 'you sound like you're in bedroom'. So you know what I says to him?"

And what she apparently said to him does indeed border on genius.

"I said to him, 'yeah mate. I do. And you know why? Cos my bedroom's got 28 wheels and 40 seats in it."

The girls laughed so much that I seriously expected puddles to form around their seats.

It was quite possibly the most tiresome journey of my life. By the time I'd reached my destination, the teenage terrors had performed at least five appalling rap tunes, proved that they were not virgins by detailing their sexual exploits in graphic detail and sprinkled their discussions with every swear word they knew. They knew quite a few.

They were young, loud and astonishingly tedious. At that moment, it was my birthday. I was 128 years old. Did the bus journey prematurely age me? Have I got older or have teenagers got younger? And surely, they have not all become so predictable and dull?

I'm no prude. Socio-economic geography makes that impossible.

I grew up in Dagenham, a working-class council estate just east of London that boasted a Ford motor plant, half a dozen England footballers and the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe.

From the age of 15, my every waking moment was dominated by sex and the fact that my life was utterly devoid of it. My dreams were a little better. I usually got to do it then. But I'd soon wake up and realise that I was never going to get it on with Princess Leia in the gold bikini. (Incidentally, I saw the actress Carrie Fisher on a Star Wars documentary recently. She is now a little plump and older than my mother. I will bear the psychological scars forever.)

But teenage conversations on public transport usually encompassed transfer speculation, relegation battles and, occasionally, our long-held ambition of an oral lesson with the French teacher with enormous breasts.

It was the usual hormonal nonsense. But we never sprayed the bus with invective, never discussed our sex lives openly (there was no sex life to discuss anyway), never got into futile arguments with bus drivers and always gave up our seats to the elderly.

The teenage world is lived through You Tube and cable TV now. My little brother grew up repeating Ali G's mammary talk. I grew up pretending to be The A-Team's B.A. Baracus. My brother went around singing "Ride The Punani". I used to go up to people and say "I pity the fool" and "I ain't getting on no plane".

The A-Team was undoubtedly cheesy. Like Knight Rider, Airwolf and The Incredible Hulk, the formulaic A-Team was hardly the most stimulating of programmes for the active teenage mind. But at least I wasn't fixated on "riding the punani".

I spent my teenage years idolising a muscle-bound, African-American with a Mohawk. I'd like to think that made me the man I am today.