

# A Briton Who Came To Manhattan

By PAUL GARDNER

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The New York Times (Tim Kantor)

Peter Whitehead, director of "Tonight Let's All Make Love in London"  
"The American arrogance is cracking because, for the first time, world opinion is against you."

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"Tonight let's all make love in London as if it were 2001 the years of thrilling god."  
—ALLEN GINSBERG.

WHEN Peter Whitehead arrived in New York this fall, he already knew the streets were not paved with gold. America to the young British filmmaker was a super-kinky country of middle-aged teenyboppers frugging away against a skyscraping backdrop of potential violence. Whitehead had visited New York once before, very briefly, shooting the Rolling Stones and what impressed him most vividly on that non-hallucinatory trip was the city's vaguely concealed aggression. He decided that someday, he didn't know exactly when, he'd return and put on film the reflections in a British eye.

Time passed and Peter Whitehead forgot his New York movie; he was making other movies, particularly a film about his own home town — London — which took up a year of his life, off and on, as he prowled the King's Road, Notting Hill Gate and Hyde Park preparing a "pop concerto" of the Swinging Scene. And then, here he was again, at the ripe old age of 30, stepping off a plane with a suitcase full of Carnaby couture, two cans of film, a camera that he valued more than his passport, and an introduction to a perky little girl from Lincoln Center, who had been waiting to escort into her town the only British director at this year's New York Film Festival.

For Whitehead, it might have been just another festival—press conferences, cocktail parties, film buff coffee klatches, a chance to watch some interesting items but, more often than not, ho-hum ones. Except that Whitehead's film, "Tonight Let's All Make Love in London," which included snippets of Vanessa Redgrave singing off-key at a protest rally and Julie Christie explaining her need for close relationships while fondling her golden locks, was a surprise hit. Eager to see a film with a title cribbed from Ginsberg, hippies and wilting flower children descended on Philharmonic Hall. The critics, not missing Whitehead's ironic comment, approved of his impressionistic documentary.

One evening he received a phone call from two distaff entrepreneurs who wanted to give him a farewell party. "Fine," Whitehead said, "I'll film it!" The farewell on a Fox sound-stage turned into an all-night bash for a couple of hundred grounded jet-setters and Peter was there shooting up the New York

version of the London scene. "I thought, 'Why don't I bloody well make my New York movie now?'" At midnight, the two party-givers—Iris Sawyer and Elinor Silberman — became co-producers. So Peter Whitehead never did pack his bags, because, in a curious way, he found gold on the streets of New York.

Up to Harlem, down to Battery Park, inside the Caffe Cino, on the Staten Island ferry; at the Electric Circus and the Picasso opening at the Museum of Modern Art; in taxis and subways and on the traffic islands in Times Square, Peter Whitehead and his assistant Anthony Stern, whom he cabled in London to Get Over Here Fast with extra equipment, photographing "Peter Whitehead by New York."

Toting his camera around town, Whitehead suggests the pop photographer played by David Hemmings in "Blow-Up." He has long hair, shades, rainbow-colored

not intended to be boringly objective.

Any worthy film has a definite signature—the director's—and Whitehead is exploring his love/hate relationship with New York. "The city is an aggression. Why, it's an experience to ride one of your subways. I have to stay emotionally on guard because I feel the city is trying to drain me. In London, I can be myself. In New York, I must fight to be myself."

True to British tradition, Whitehead is a hearty individualist who believes in doing everything at least twice—from taking drugs to trying marriage. Somewhere between studying the philosophy of science at Cambridge and filming Bobby Kennedy last week, he was married—and divorced—twice, and has two daughters. He recently became a father again and he calls the baby Harry. Both marriages and drugs influenced his career. "After one divorce, I sort of withdrew and wrote novels for a year, living on nothing. Perhaps I was being kept by some actress? Anyway, one day a documentary I'd made at the Slade School of Art actually was showing in the neighborhood. I thought, 'Maybe I am a filmmaker.'"

Turned-on again to films, Whitehead borrowed a camera and rushed off to the famous 1965 poetry reading at the Albert Hall, which 7,000 people crammed for four hours to hear Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and Corso. He called the results "Wholly Communion." Yes, he was definitely hooked. It was, in fact, during his "writing period" that Whitehead took mescaline, an experience he found cinematic, intensifying his visual impressions. "This was the turning point in my life," he recalls. "Here was the explanation of my predicament. It brought me back to pure perception. I understood so much about myself and what I wanted to do."

Whitehead feels the penchant for drugs today is completely natural and evolutionary. "We're so materially and sexually emancipated that we wonder, 'What's next?'" he said with a smile. But he regrets the American hippie habit of taking drugs simply to cop out. "Yet that's understandable. The American arrogance — and complacency — is cracking because, for the first time, world opinion is against you. Whenever a king or an emperor refused to listen to criticism, there was either collapse or revolution. So, it is a moment in American history. And the young people know this..."

He wasn't smiling any more.

### ALSO OPENING

**TONY ROME**—Frank Sinatra thriller. Tuesday, at the Astor; Wednesday, the Murray Hill.

### SHORT TAKE

**THE COMEDIANS**—Peter Glenville's film about Duvalier's Haiti "is no great shakes as a drama," but it does "make us apprehensive."

shirts and the casually with-it attitude of a mod emigré from a Chelsea pub. This personal style doesn't hurt any when he interviews Cassius Clay or Huntington Hartford. His lens catches sober occasions, such as protest demonstrations, and non-sober ones, such as a wedding reception. Of course, the reception wasn't the sort announced in society pages alongside a picture by Bachrach. Slightly high guests were celebrating the wedding of Shirley Clarke's daughter at the Filmmaker's Cinematheque, with psychedelic music by the Auto Salvage.

"When I was last here, there was a distinct gap between the smart set and the underground," Whitehead says, "but that no longer exists because it's suddenly become fashionable to be part of the underground. My God, one of these days the Fugs are going to be on the cover of Time."

But more than quick peeks of New Yorkers in their own environment, Whitehead wants his new film to convey a viewpoint—his. It is