

Sounds like the Seventies

The decade that taste forgot or one that taught us about ourselves? As a new BBC Wales programme takes celebrities back to the 1970s, Kirstie McCrum spoke to Noah Francis Johnson about his experiences in Cardiff's Tiger Bay

HOMES up and down the country are filled with photographs showing the 1970s as a decade given to terrible sartorial decisions and hair disasters. But this oft-styled "decade that taste forgot" was also at the centre of social change in Wales and across the United Kingdom.

A new four-part BBC Wales series, *Wales in the Seventies*, uses untold stories combined with evocative colour archive film to recreate the exciting atmosphere of a decade that transformed Wales beyond all recognition.

Alongside ordinary people with extraordinary and deeply moving stories, household names including Carol Vorderman, Mike Doyle, Rhys Mwyn, Caryl Parry Jones, Mici Plwm, Noah Francis Johnson and Gareth "Gaz Top" Jones tell it how it was.

Whether there was rebellion or acceptance, there are differing stories from all of the participants, holding a mirror up to issues in Wales which are sometimes difficult to accept.

Soul singer Noah Francis Johnson was born and raised in Tiger Bay, Cardiff, during the decade – and remembers change for the better amongst the threats of what might be.

"Tiger Bay is where the immigrants used to jump ship, so it's a place where you would see that real melting pot of cultures," he explains. "You had to fend for yourself a lot, but there was a great community spirit. It was the time when you could leave your doors unlocked."

Although in "the Bay" there was safety and comradeship, once Noah left the safety of the

neighbourhood there were dangers awaiting.

"My dad sent us to boxing at an early age for self-defence. We were three boys and my dad thought it was a great idea that we were able to defend ourselves just in case of trouble."

"There was a lot of fighting – at that time there was a lot of racism, so it was a good thing to have in your toolbox, to be able to defend yourself. There was a lot of ignorance going around at the time because of skin colour."

Although this was a decade when Wales developed a new pride and confidence, it was also one of struggle for many.

For Noah, being born in a mixed-race family made him a target in a time which was still blighted by racism.

"Living it was hard. As a child, you do not understand why somebody wants to fight with you because your skin is a different colour. My mum was white, dad was black, so we weren't even very dark, but we represented that, we were the 'black kids' in the area."

"Tiger Bay was our area, but as soon as you went under the bridge into Cardiff, that's when you experienced the racism – and we did, every day, in school, on TV, everywhere."

"We had programmes like *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Empire Road*. They were all about families fighting with each other because of their race, so the TV was encouraging it in those days."

"My mum was Welsh and my father was born in Wales, but his father was from Sierra Leone, West Africa. Mum was definitely a tiny white Welsh woman renegade. They had to fight for a lot."



➤ Noah Francis Johnson

"I remember my mum coming to school many times, just defending us, and she was once punched over a wall by the woman next door. I was a little boy watching it, I was a kid. It went to court, the whole thing."

"My grandfather and grandmother got married in Dublin, and a thousand people came to witness the wedding, but not because they were friends or anything, but because they couldn't believe black

people actually got married."

If it sounds like a struggle, Noah insists that his family home was full of affection which helped him and his brothers flourish.

"I was very happy in Tiger Bay. Being younger, that was my home and that was the way it was. I didn't know any different. For me, my mum and dad were very loving, the community was very loving – I have real fond memories of great times. There were street parties and all kinds of things."

"I was around a lot of boys who were rebelling against their parents, but when you have a family that all you get is love and positivity, you have nothing to rebel against. They filled the needs of a young man growing up and they gave me freedom to be who I was. There was nothing to rebel against."

The loves of Noah's parents were easily passed on to him, in particular a passion of his father's.

"Music was really important because my dad, who I idolised, was into music. If he'd been a plumber, I would have been the best plumber, but he was in music and he used to bring people back to the house all

the time. They'd come to the living room and sing and I joined in, learning about harmonies."

"I'd help him carry equipment to gigs and then he called me up onstage when I was about seven to do a song. I felt more and more love then and I realised that people treated me differently because of music."

Being well looked-after at home didn't mean school was a safe haven, though.

"I went to St Illtyd's College in Cardiff. It was a Jesuit-led school with 800 boys. "When you left the Bay, you left the safety of the hood. We had afros in those days and they were like a badge. They'd see the afro and know we were from the Bay."

"In the seventies, there was also National Front. It was a bit like a modern Ku Klux Klan, but the National Front made it cool to beat people of other races up. I remember going to school one time with running spike shoes on and my brother had a sword disguised in a cane."

"We did that for, I would say, a good two years because we didn't know what might happen. There was no escape – if you didn't go to school, they'd get you in the street. We needed those tools to defend ourselves because without them, we would have perished."

It was in his mid-teens that Noah's life path was altered forever, and he started to wonder about the wider world.

"I won a dance competition at 16 years of age and my prize was to go to New York. Although New York was also racist, it was different – the energy was different."

"It was incredible. It felt like somebody had just lifted the lid to my head. It gave me a whole different view. I realised it was a big world out there and many lessons came from that one trip. I was there for two weeks and stayed in the Plaza Hotel on Fifth Avenue. I was just this young kid!"

"I bought these rollerskates and went through Central Park – it just changed me. At that point, I realised I wanted to see this big world that was out there that I'd been missing. But it wasn't until then that I realised that."

Having seen the world around him, Noah's eyes were opened and the die was cast for a different future. He insists that some of the struggles, though, were a welcome addition as they taught him strength.

"The world turns the way it's going to turn and we all have our different upbringings – some of us are born in blessings, but no-one gets off easy, we've all got to go through something."

"What I like about starting at the bottom is that I had somewhere to go."

"When I look at a lot of artists, like Bob Marley, look where he came from. It's been a great way out for a lot of us because I was never an academic kind of boy, I was into the arts. But I know a lot of people in sports and music, we've been given great lives through it, so it was definitely a blessing."

Looking back at what was gained and lost, Noah definitely feels positively about the decade and what it gave him.

"I think there was a lot of freedom in the '70s. You could find your own way, there were so many brilliant bands out there, there was something for everyone to look up to. The decade was a great time."

"They say the '60s until the end of the '70s was the time to be around because of the freedom that everyone had. You had Zeppelin, James Brown, Motown, disco, punk – it was a great time for music. Now they're just reinventing those things."

With a new album set to come out entitled *Tiger Bay*, it's clear that Noah's inspiration is still coming from his roots.

"It happened naturally. I've been writing music and all of a sudden I wrote a key song when I was in Los Angeles. It's called *Tiger Bay*, and it's about when I used to get stopped and the aggression. It just summed up everything and then I decided

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There was a lot of fighting – at that time there was a lot of racism, so it was a good thing to have in your toolbox, to be able to defend yourself

to go deeper with this on this record.

"I explored those memories, I wanted to explore it and then put it away and move on. "The record is so real – it hurts in a moment and makes me smile in others. That's when I know I'm on to something really good."

And now the old neighbourhood has been changed beyond all recognition, Noah says it's not something to regret.

"It's just progress, it has to be that way. There are things about Tiger Bay that had to be changed, the housing was dilapidated."

"When I was born, my house wasn't the edge of the world, but I felt like I could see it from my bedroom window. I feel I've travelled the Earth since then, through dance, through music. I've been to Provence, I've been on Concorde, I've ridden on Arab racehorses – I've done a lot of things in my life which are incredible, people would put them on a bucket list."

"But once you've done those things, you get to a point where you realise it's really about yourself and the lessons you've learned on the way."

"The payoff, if there is one, is the enlightenment of finding out that life is all about love."

➤ Noah's single *Fire* is out today, with the album *Tiger Bay* to follow. *Wales in the Seventies: School's Out* is on Monday on BBC One Wales at 10.35pm



➤ Carol Vorderman

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➤ Gareth 'Gaz Top' Jones



➤ Gareth pictured in the 1970s