MAY ‘68:
The Explosion

> “France, compared to the rest of Europe and particularly the United Kingdom and Germany, was too French, too middle-of-the-road. There was no evolution, it was a controlled, very patriarchal society, not moving quickly to modernise... a very militarised, police state.
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> “The movement started at the university with the students, and the intelligentsia, plus the fringe of people like us (the artists). Then the working class came in, and 1968 became a snowballing process where all French were saying: ‘Enough is enough!’.
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> “And it changed everything.”
>
> *Roger Scaglia (Maajun)*

“The Year That Rocked the World” is the subtitle of Mark Kurlansky’s history of ‘68. It’s hard to find a better description for a year that saw such a succession of seismic events: the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Russian tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Robert Kennedy in the US, and a rash of student protests the world over.

In May of ‘68 all eyes turned to France when a series of student protests spilled over into the general public, fanning the embers of discontent into a wildfire of near revolution.

It all started with sex. Well, at least in part... For months students at the campus of Nanterre in the west of Paris had been campaigning against its antiquated rules (including a ban on male and female students visiting each other’s dormitories). The authorities’ attempts to suppress the protests only escalated them. This led to a series of overreactions that laid bare the authoritarian nature of not only the university system, but the whole of Gaullist society.

On 2 May Nanterre's dean, exasperated that his campus continued to be mired in protest, made the fateful decision to close it down. The next day, with the campus shut and expulsions threatened, the protest simply relocated to the Sorbonne in the heart of the Latin Quarter. The rector of the Sorbonne continued the spiral into chaos by calling in the police to clear the protesters away.

Scores of riot police entered the university, violently arresting around half of the 500 students who had been taking part in a peaceful sit-in. Bystanders, shocked by the heavy-handed response, attempted to intervene and were given the same treatment. Running street battles ensued. Thrown paving stones were countered with tear-gas and baton charges.

The residents of the Latin Quarter were stunned by the authorities' overreaction. As demonstrations around the Sorbonne grew in size and the police clamped down with ever-increasing force, support for the students grew in proportion.

A week of protests culminated in a major demonstration on Friday, 10 May. Tens of thousands gathered at Place Denfert-Rochereau. They demanded the release of all those arrested so far, the removal of police from the Sorbonne, and the reopening of the university. The demonstrators decided to march across the city to bring their protest to the television studios of the ORTF, on the Right Bank. On reaching the Seine they were greeted by a phalanx of CRS riot police blocking every bridge. Incensed and cornered, the order went out for the protesters to occupy the Latin Quarter. As night fell police reinforcements arrived, further hemming them in, and by 9pm barricades began to spring up in anticipation of a police charge to take back control of the area. The Night of the Barricades had begun.

Within hours more than 60 barricades had been constructed using anything to hand, including *pavés* dug from the street, cars, and uprooted trees. Sickened by the violence of the week-long police clampdown, the residents of the quarter offered the students help, bringing them food and drink (and later when the police attacked, providing them with shelter). At 2am the inevitable happened; the police stormed the barricades with tear gas and truncheon charges. Members of the public who came to the assistance of injured protesters were beaten indiscriminately. By daybreak the authorities were back in control of the Latin Quarter, leaving what resembled a war zone in

their wake. The final tally of the evening: 350 hospitalised, more than 1000 injured, and 468 arrested.

Public outrage exploded. The Night of the Barricades was the spark that ignited the tinderbox of French society. The savagery of the police response had exposed the darkness at the heart of de Gaulle’s France. In response the major trade unions called for a general strike and demonstration on Monday, 13 May. Over a million people took part in the march.

Then something totally unexpected happened: contrary to the unions’ order a huge number of workers simply didn’t return to work on Tuesday! Within days a spontaneous movement of wildcat strikes spread across France, and in a week the country was paralysed. At its peak 10 million workers (about 60 percent of the workforce) had joined the protest. Their demands were much broader than student freedom or pay increases. The minimum they would accept was the resignation of de Gaulle and his government, but there was talk of even more radical change: demands for a new *kind* of France, a democratic, socialist, *workers’* Republic. This was something that the powers-that-be, even the unions and the Communist Party (a major political force at the time, with around 20 percent of the vote), would fight tooth-and-nail.

With the Metro ground to a halt, shops shuttered, fuel supplies dwindling, and uncollected rubbish piling up, the streets had begun to buzz. Everyone had an opinion, and communication and debate were welcomed. The heightened atmosphere is captured in a contemporary account by an English academic caught up in the events:

“The great courtyard of the Sorbonne is crowded with people: students and workers, and some bourgeois, arguing, forming groups where people stand and discuss, dispute, bellow, disagree, create an atmosphere where one feels that they are awake! This goes on twenty-four hours a day...

“Walking out across the Place de la Sorbonne, you can see the same thing - groups, discussions, everywhere, perfect strangers joining arguments, exchanging views, in an atmosphere of charged excitement... The level of discussion is remarkably high, on the whole, and if you can imagine the sort of energy the French put into an argument between two drivers whose cars have collided, transferred to an argument about the organisation of the University,

the class struggle, the whole organisation of our society, the possibility of revolution: all this conducted by a free-floating crowd of literally thousands of people, in the Sorbonne, in the street, in the cafés - this all going on day and night - then you may get some idea of the Quartier Latin at the moment."

The government, the unions, and the Communist opposition struggled to get things back under their control. A series of crisis talks were held in an attempt to defuse the strike with the promise of better working conditions. On 27 May the Grenelle Agreement was presented to the union membership - offering a 10 percent hike in wages, a reduction in working hours, and a 35 percent increase to the minimum wage.

It was comprehensively rejected by the rank-and-file. As the workers refused their unions' pleas to return to work, it truly seemed that France was on the brink. The spirit of the 1789 Revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune had been rekindled.

In fact, on the morning of 29 May revolution looked so imminent that President de Gaulle fled the country. For six hours no-one in his government knew his location. More than a decade later it was revealed that he had flown to Germany to meet with one of his most loyal generals. Assured of the army's support, de Gaulle returned to Paris that evening. With his troops rallied (both figuratively and literally), he called a snap election the next day. His gambit worked. During the election campaign people fell back into their prescribed roles, and by the end of June the revolutionary moment had passed.

However French youth had experienced an exhilarating freedom they would never forget. In May it had seemed that not only was anything possible, it was sitting there for the taking. A whole generation was transformed.

Across the Channel, British musicians had been watching, and in August '68 both The Beatles and The Rolling Stones released songs inspired by the events of May. In 'Revolution' John Lennon proved to be ambivalent, while Mick Jagger openly celebrated the French students in 'Street Fighting Man'. Komintern's Michel Muzac notes that Jagger's support didn't go unnoticed, " 'Street Fighting Man' became symbolic in France, a kind of anthem for young rebels and protesters."

In a reflection written 50 years later, J.D. Beauvalet opined that

in France rock music had lagged behind the May events, rather than contributing to them: “No-one really amplified the hubbub like The Stones and The Beatles in England. Of course, there were exceptions, mainly from French *chanson*, such as Renaud, Evariste, and Dominique Grange. It’s as if May ‘68 was too serious a thing to involve pop culture, as if the insurgents saw rock as an imperialist invention to be kept at bay. It’s a shame, because the same slogans, set to the psychedelic or free-rock music that some tried to adopt (such as Patrick Vian’s group Red Noise), would have resonated to the flight of paving stones. While the youth were screaming ‘no! no!’ to the old world, the music was mostly ‘*yé-yé*’.”

While the musicians who would go on to populate the underground were forever marked by May ‘68, the established pop and *yé-yé* artists generally viewed it negatively. A number of them spoke to Alain Spireaux for the June ‘68 edition of *Noir & Blanc*: Eddy Mitchell complained about the cancellation of his concerts, France Gall chafed that the release of her latest disc had been affected (but was happy that things had at last “returned to normal”), while Sheila was just keen to put the whole thing behind her.

A very different attitude shines through when you speak to musicians from the French underground. Almost everyone views May ‘68 as a defining moment, something that would influence them for years to come. In many cases it was the catalyst steeling their determination to devote their lives to music.

Alain Roux *(Maajun)*:

> “Most of the musicians involved in the underground movement at the beginning of the ‘70s were around 20 years old in May ‘68. Obviously at that age, such an experience is formative and structuring. I was a political activist and in ‘68 I was a student in sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris, the right place *(laughs)*. I took part in the events of ‘68, and was wounded on the barricades. I was blind for three weeks, with tear gas directly in the eyes.”

Michel Peteau *(Cheval Fou/Nyl)*:

> “I was 14, living in Paris, it felt like I was seeing a world turn from black and white to colour. It was the demolition of an outmoded society. The feeling of freedom that floated in the air

spurred me on to quit my studies and inevitably head towards music."

Christian Tritsch *(Gong)*:

"For me, at the beginning, being a musician was a job like any other. I played behind Claude François alongside musicians like François Jeanneau, Mimi Lorenzini, and Rachid Houari. May '68 changed everything. We all left the roles we'd assumed before then. Rock and roll became the music of revolution. After May '68 I played with Jacques Thollot, Eddie Gaumont, and Barney Wilen."

Didier Malherbe *(Gong)*:

"I did participate in the events. I didn't throw *pavés* at the cops, but my friends and I were sticking posters on the walls, and taking part in actions. I participated without being violent. I was even caught by the cops one morning, arrested and put in a bus. We went to the Town Hall of the 14th Arrondissement. They threatened me, saying, 'We recognise you, we saw you running between barricades'. So I went to the chief cop, looked him in the eyes and said 'Look I'm very ill, and you'll have trouble if you keep me'. So he let me go."

Klaus Blasquiz *(Magma)*:

"In May I worked at the Beaux Arts. I even slept there, while constantly making silkscreen posters by hand. My clothes and shoes had traces of ink on them for ages. Sometimes I delivered bundles of posters on my bicycle. Public transport was on strike, so I lugged them around to the suburbs, to supply schools and universities far away from the Latin Quarter."

Dominique Lentin *(Dagon)*:

"I was 13 years old in May '68. At Lyceé Buffon in Paris we burned our report cards in the middle of the courtyard. My parents and my two older brothers all went to the demonstrations. I came back home around 7pm (it was too dangerous after that)... For me May '68 was part of a process that had started before and would continue after."

Cyrille Verdeaux *(Clearlight)*:

“I was in hospital for weeks recovering from the ‘migraine’ that some hate-filled CRS had given me with their rifle butts... apart from a musician and a protester, I don’t really see what I could have been.”

Patrick Fontaine *(Bananamoon/Ame Son/Cheval Fou/Nyl)*:

“The student riots paralysed the Latin Quarter where we were. Before going onto the street, we had to make sure that the CRS weren’t charging at groups of students. Garbage was piling up on the streets, transport was at a standstill, there was a shortage of petrol, but discussions took place on every subject, irrespective of generation. It was a new hope, we had to reinvent life.”

Olivier Zdrzalik *(Komintern)*:

“There was an incredible atmosphere! The barricades in the streets, the smoke, the tear gas and these extraordinary situations: everyone talking to each other from the youngest to the oldest... We thought that the world was about to topple over and that we’d be the ones to make it happen. What a feeling!”

Guigou Chevenier *(Etron Fou Leloublan)*:

“You have to understand that at the time, everybody (I mean most of the young people between 16 and 30 years) was absolutely sure that the revolution would be happening in the very near future! And of course this idea, this ‘utopia’ had a very big influence on the general atmosphere including art, and specifically on the music scene. In my opinion, the French musical underground scene was the most creative one in Europe between ‘68 and ‘75, and there is necessarily a historical connection with the political events in France in ‘68...”

Dominique Grimaud *(Camizole)*:

“May 1968 was a very intense moment, socially and politically. It is a symbolic and significant event in France. But changes in the way of thinking didn’t come suddenly, as if by magic,

> following a month of student protests, strikes, and factory occupations... In fact, the changes occurred little by little in French society over the years that followed this spring of revolt and protests."

As Grimaud points out, while May '68 had been a social and political explosion, musically it was the ignition of a slow fuse. The explosion would come at the end of the next year, with a new wave of highly-politicised bands such as Red Noise at the vanguard.