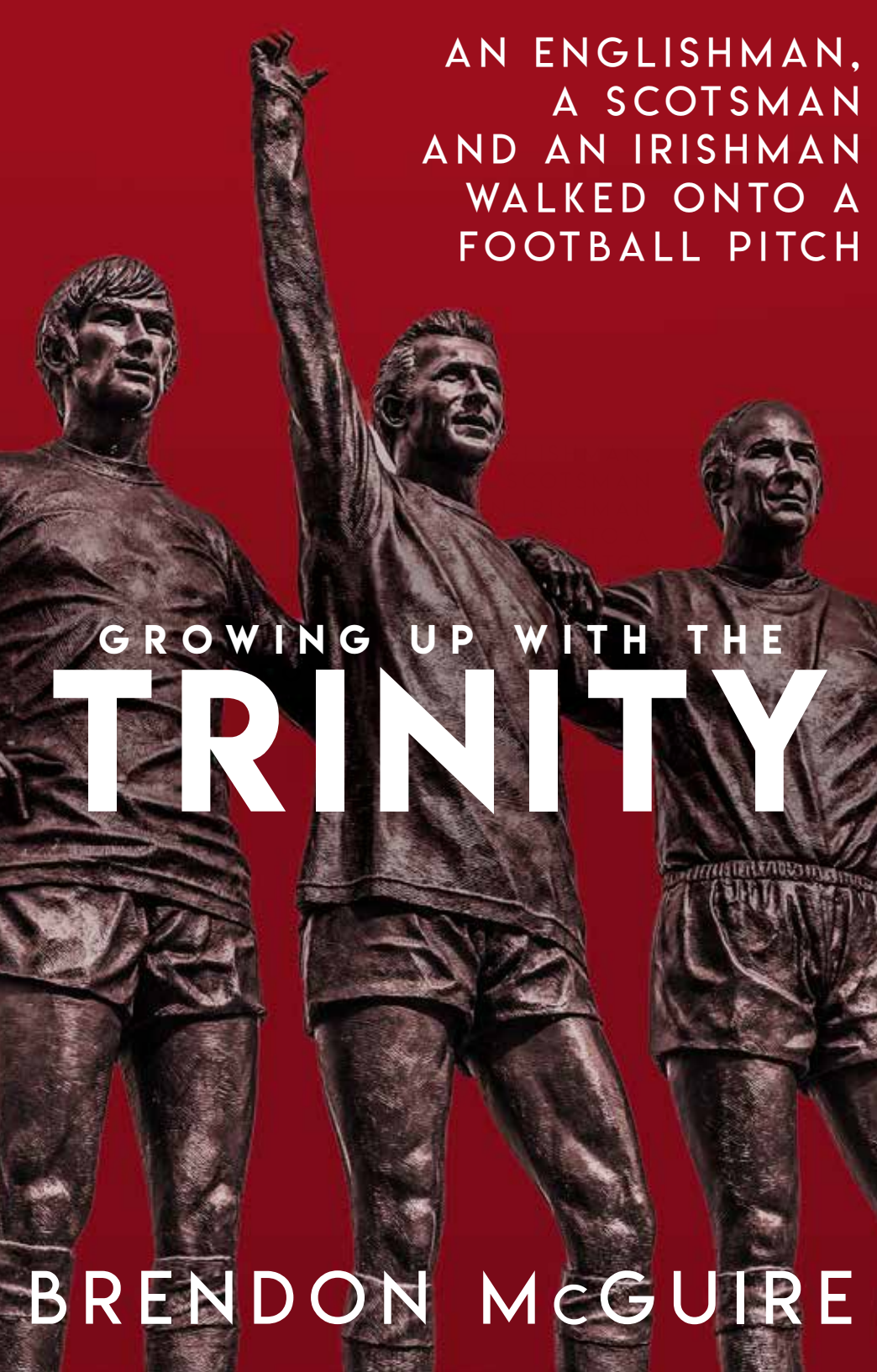
AN ENGLISHMAN, A SCOTSMAN AND AN IRISHMAN WALKED ONTO A FOOTBALL PITCH



GROWING UP WITH THE

TRINITY

BRENDON McGUIRE

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The North – Brilliant!

I HAD one of those wonderfully rich, 1960s Manchester childhoods that many children these days might only dream about. We were not constricted by parental fears about 'playing out' and disappeared for hours on end, coming home only at dinner time, tea time and bedtime. Dinner time was 12 o'clock and tea time was 5 o'clock … every day. We jumped across rivers, climbed tall trees, rode homemade go-carts down steep hills, kept numerous pets, built dens inside bonfires (not recommended), raided other gangs' bonfires, ate organic food before we knew it was called organic (and the price inflated) and played football every day. A 15-a-side, informal game lasting three hours was not unusual. The term 'screen time' had yet to be invented.

We always used a certain style of plastic football, known as a Frido. Here there were two types, with different price points. The superior Frido A had large dimples that you couldn't resist running your hand over. Something about the intoxicating smell of this shiny, white plastic ball tells me it would fail environmental tests these days. The Frido B was cheaper and lighter, enabling a swerve without even trying and of which

Ronaldo would have been proud. The trouble with it was that it swerved every time and passing in a straight line was impossible.

If one particular lad called Gary was playing, his presence was always welcome because he owned a leather football, a case-ball, which was referred to as a 'casey'. This set him apart from the rest of us who could only afford plastic. Sometimes I would call for Gary simply because he had a casey. He was no great friend. 'Is Gary coming out to play?' I would ask his mum politely. If the answer was 'No', and Gary had a bad cold or was doing his homework, I always felt like saying, 'Well, is his casey coming out to play then?' Such a prized possession was wasted on a boy like Gary, who gave in to colds and bothered with homework when he could have been out kicking a ball around. I didn't do the football-sticker book stuff either. My idea of football was to play the game myself and watch Manchester United, not collect cards featuring players' faces from packets of sweet cigarettes. (What was that piece of confectionary ever about?)

Each day we thumped a ball against the dark red, metal gates of the local mill. The gates were about 14ft wide by 7ft high. If you skied a shot, the culprit's challenge was to climb over the gates and retrieve the ball without being savaged by the mill's two resident, completely evil, Alsatian guard dogs. Of course, as soon as someone went over the gates and landed, the other kids would start barking and making a racket so the dogs would come out and chase the trespasser. When the dogs did appear, the unlucky intruder desperately scrambled up the gates to escape, with everyone else convulsed with laughter. It certainly made you focus on hitting the target, but I cannot see any football academy using the practice these days.

As kids, we did some other more dangerous things too, which always prompted my grandfather to issue stern warnings about impending doom, saying things like, 'If you

do that, you'll know about it!' Then there was, 'You haven't got the sense you were born with!' Finally, there was the ultimate threat, 'It'll take your eye out!' Thankfully 'it' never did. If falling asleep at the dinner table after double maths (who wouldn't?), he would put his teaspoon into his pint mug of hot tea and touch it on the back of my hand. It always woke me up and he chuckled loudly. As a soldier who fought at Ypres (which he always pronounced as 'Wipers') and had a bullet put through his knee, I don't think he viewed it as the biggest jolt a body might take. It made me laugh too … after the initial shock.

Then there was my dad. My dad was a character. A character's character. I loved my dad, but if they had awarded international caps for whisky-drinking, he would have represented Ireland long before his 18th birthday, and later they would probably have retired the shirt. That was the problem.

I was football mad, but he didn't take me to a single match, probably because back in the 1960s, kick-off times were always at 3pm on a Saturday, which was way too close to pub closing times. In fact, he never took me anywhere, save for a four-day trip to Blackpool where he turned up on day three, much to the amazement of my mother and displeasure of my grandfather. I am told there was another family holiday to Llandudno (of which I have no recollection) when my dad insisted on driving my grandad's little Morris 1000 to the top of Great Orme. My grandfather advised that the car would not make it up the steep incline. He was right. The ensuing argument was shared with most of Snowdonia. My grandfather, Arthur, was a no-nonsense, teetotal Lancastrian who had worked his way up in the local cotton mill to become a much-respected foreman. My father, Eddie, was a freewheeling, Irish plasterer who liked to drink, gamble and tell tall stories, usually in that order. It was a family relationship that was never going to end well.

But looking back now, with my father long passed, I choose to see only the good times and the laughter. We know now that alcohol dependency is a problem that changes personality, and so it was with my dad. Without booze, he was a kind, gentle giant with a good heart and engaging sense of the ridiculous. With it, he was someone whose drunken rages terrified me as a child. But I can now separate the father from the drink: the latter did what it did, but the father did his best to look after his family, working in the tough building industry of the time when unemployment was just around every corner. He may not have ever taken me to a match or played any games with me, or at least that I can remember, and he occasionally frightened me, but I still loved him, then and now.

My dad's education ended abruptly at the age of ten: unsurprisingly, since he had flung the slate on which he was writing (this was rural Ireland in the early 1900s) at the head of a Catholic Brother teacher in a strictly religious school in County Mayo. By 1916 he was marching to Dublin to take part in the Easter Uprising with nothing more than fiery, romantic rhetoric in his heart and a sandwich and spare pair of socks in his pockets. By the 1920s (the historical accuracy is sketchy, as was everything in my dad's life story), he was aboard the Liverpool ferry planning to make his fortune in England. This Irish Diaspora led to my family being scattered east and west throughout most of the 20th century, with numerous relations now in many parts of the UK and US. Then, as now, the pathway of young Irish men and women continues, often not noticed among the many other immigrants who have moved to these soils, complete with their dreams, needs and aspirations.

From Liverpool we think that he moved to the Midlands, spending time in Birmingham, before finishing up in Coventry during the Second World War years. He often told the story of how, as a fireman, he left his engine and mate onboard to

answer a call of nature. When he returned, the vehicle and friend had been blown to pieces. Was he telling another tall story? I shall never know. My mother's take on the accuracy of my dad's stories amounts to a brusque one-liner: 'If you cut everything in half that he ever told you, that's about right.' Continuing his colourful life journey, my dad somehow ended up in Manchester. Since most of his stories were exaggerated, usually helped along by half a bottle of Bell's, his pathway to the city was never authenticated by a proven route or timeline. Why he always drank Scotch whisky and not Irish is another contradiction that I have often pondered, although it was probably as simple as Bell's being much cheaper at the time.

What was clear, though, was that by the late 1940s my father had reached Manchester, living somewhere in the poorer part of the city near Strangeways prison, in a cultural environment that still advertised its boarding houses with signs that read: 'No Irish, no blacks, no dogs'. He made friends with other outsiders. Thus, the two most loved 'aunties' of my youth (beyond my immediate kin) were Aunty Lena, a short, gregarious German woman who had married a British serviceman during the war and lived in Oldham, and Aunty Minnie, whose Jewish family worked the markets in the Cheetham Hill area of the city and who made wonderful Kosher fishcakes. My father lodged there when he first arrived in the city. Peter Kay sums up the habit of northern kids having aunts and uncles with no blood ties when he jokes that to acquire such a 'relative' all you had to do was borrow that person's Black & Decker drill. Thus, my dad did plastering jobs on the cheap for Lena and Minnie and they automatically became my 'aunties'. I was sent next door to borrow a cup of sugar (which never ever got paid back, let me tell you) and suddenly neighbour Sybil became Aunty Sybil.

Looking back now though, I wonder what life must have been like when my Aunty Lena came over to Oldham in the

late 40s, to live among families who had lost loved ones in the war a few years earlier. Her German accent must have stood out so strongly as she queued for meat in the butcher's shop, or vegetables at the local market. To her credit, and that of the townsfolk, when she died in the 1980s her funeral was overwhelmed by local people who had come to know and love her. How was it for my Aunty Minnie at a time when Antisemitism was rife and family hardship and hunger was the norm? Minnie and Shulem, her husband, were both very small in stature but had kind, warm personalities that made them grow as human beings. And what had been my father's experience when he came to England and eventually ended up in Manchester? Like so many years in his life, there are things now I shall never know anything about. What I can recall as a child, though, was wondering what it was he was running from. He never talked about the past. To me, his life began and ended in Manchester, and yet there were secrets I felt he alone knew.

The past troubled my dad. I see him now, sitting in his armchair, sucking edgily on a cigarette and dressed in his bib and brace white overalls, which look spotless from a distance but which are spattered with plaster. It is 6.20am and soon he will get up and walk to the bus stop for the 6.30 bus. 'I'm going, Sheila,' he calls as he leaves, flicking the cigarette into the coal fire, not turning to look at either my brother Gerry or me. He doesn't kiss Mum, or ruffle my hair, or say any farewells to us, and yet he is okay, my dad. He has issues. I don't know what they are, but I can feel them, I can feel them even though I am just seven years old.

My father had given way on insisting that my brother, Gerry, and I should be raised as Catholics, primarily because the local Catholic school was sited on a dangerous main road that my mother did not want us to cross. However, my father was so lapsed as a believer that I don't imagine there would

have been much of a disagreement over the arrangement. We did both attend Anglican confirmation classes as kids, but on the day of the ceremony, while I was confirmed, my brother would not attend as he had a hole in his shoe, which he knew would be seen when he knelt at the altar. That's how it was. Wherever money was, my family wasn't.

What was of far more importance to my dad than religion, though, was that we should inherit some of his Irishness, such as the wearing of shamrock on St Patrick's Day. It made me feel proud to wear it, knowing that it said a little about my family roots, but in another sense, when you are the only kid in high school with a little green leaf pinned to your blazer it was a bit unnerving too. When he was drunk, my father would rant about Eamon de Valera: at the time I knew not whether Eamon de Valera was a person, place or plant. All I sensed was that it was a very Irish thing and that my father had enormous respect for him/it. Some boys I knew grew up with fathers passing on nostalgic football stories, about 'Wor' Jackie Milburn, Duncan Edwards or Tom Finney: for me it was Eamon de Valera, or sometimes Michael Collins too. The only footballer I think my dad knew anything about was Johnny Carey, Gentleman John as he was known, the wonderfully talented United skipper of Busby's first, great 1948 team. Naturally, he was Irish otherwise my dad would have had no interest in him whatsoever.

Of all my father's tall stories, though, the one which was true was that he eventually met my mother in 1950, when he came to plaster the local library in Middleton, Manchester, where she worked. As he did the plastering on a small extension to the rear of the building, she heard the strains of 'Danny Boy' drifting into her office, delivered in a soft, southern Irish accent. The truth about his trade was one of the few things about my dad that was never in doubt. Dad was a plasterer and a damn fine one, having served a seven-year

apprenticeship, as was the norm in those days. Tall, youthful in appearance, handsome and with a powerful motorbike propped against the library wall, he soon charmed a 20-year-old, never-been-kissed librarian. He told her he was 37. She believed him. He was 47. They married quickly. My brother Gerry arrived a year later in 1951, and I was born in 1953: a special year for a football man.

In 1953 England were handed a football lesson by Hungary in a 6-3 humiliation at Wembley, altering how we perceived our global worth in our national game. In the FA Cup, there was the so-called Matthews Final too, when Stanley Matthews outplayed the Bolton defence in a memorable Blackpool comeback to win the game 4-3. Some years previously, Stan's father, on his deathbed, made Stan promise two things: to look after his mother and to make sure he won an FA Cup winner's medal.

Of course, even for the great Stan Matthews he knew the task was huge and by no means certain. How Stan must have had tears in his eyes as his teammates held him aloft after the game and he proudly clutched his winner's medal. For Stan Matthews, the father/son connection was a hugely powerful driver in terms of enjoyment and participation in the game throughout his career.

Such father/son relationships are, quite understandably, much vaunted in football biographies and autobiographies, involving stories concerning both playing and watching. In terms of the professional footballer being an influence on his children, the relationship is expertly discussed in works by both Imlach (*My Father and Other Working Class Football Heroes*) and Shindler (*Fathers, Sons and Football*). Elsewhere, as a poignant commentary on how a son can have a disconnect with his father on any subject other than watching football, Duncan Hamilton's *The Footballer Who Could Fly* describes it beautifully. Of his relationship with his father, Hamilton says,

'Without football we'd have had nothing to say to each other. The game pushed us into one another's orbit.'

My own story is different to all of these, though. My father didn't lead me into playing the game or watching it as a supporter. It just did not happen. From the age of nine to twelve years old, I was taken to watch Manchester United play by my mother. Did she want to do that at the time? I suspect not. It meant a long journey, taking connecting buses and paying money we did not have. More at home in front of a piano or writing desk, she had certainly never watched a game of football before, that much is certain. Did she come to enjoy watching the Trinity-inspired Manchester United team of the 1960s? Hugely. That much is also known.

My mum is now 89 years old. Having lived in the same family home for 67 years, she moved into a residential care home in March 2018 following a fall. As a child, she was a bright, grammar school girl who went on to become an accomplished writer, having many poems and stories published. She earned money from writing articles, which often kept the wolf from the family door. Amongst her many other jobs taken to make ends meet, she was a driving instructor. Unexpectedly, she also became a devoted Stretford Ender in the 1960s, and it was her devotion to parental duty that started my lifetime addiction to the beautiful game.

Football to aspire, football to escape, football to release aggression, football to touch the soul; truly, the working man's ballet. In the seminal text *The Football Man*, Hopcroft neatly defines the role of football in society when he says, 'It is inherent in the people. It is built into the urban psyche.' So it was for me. I quickly learned to always read a paper from back to front. Football first, and then the pestilence, war and famine. Life may have been a funny old game, but football was serious.

Growing up in Middleton, north Manchester, in the 1960s meant one question mattered more than most: who do you

support, United or City? My mother decided the outcome of this fundamentally important football dilemma in our house, at the end of the 1962/63 season, by tossing a sixpenny piece. My brother won the toss, and for reasons I have never been able to fathom, he chose Manchester City as his team. She gave him a blue-and-white scarf and a team picture for the bedroom wall. I was left with United.

Left with United? Who was I kidding? I was delighted. City had been relegated to the Second Division in a nail-biting finale, while United had amassed three points more than the Blues to survive another year in the top division. The Reds had also just won the FA Cup. Categorically, Gerry should have chosen United, but he said 'City', who still played at a clapped-out Maine Road stadium. The most amusing part of visits there were the streetwise kids who offered to 'Look after your car, missis?' (threatened might be a more accurate term) as my mum parked up in the wonderfully atmospheric, scruffy side streets that encircled the ground. Desiring to still have all four wheels on our old Bedford van as we were leaving, my mother always paid the ransom in full and we hid our scarves in her bag until we were inside the stadium.

During one derby, I recall a bottle flying just over our heads and landing on the back of someone else's. Blood gushed from the wound, as concerned fans sought to get the man to the St John's first aid staff, who patrolled the cinder-track perimeter to the pitch, in their navy-blue tunics with shiny brass buttons. Higher in the Kippax Street stand from where the bottle had been thrown, other United fans pushed their way up the shallow steps to seek retribution for the act. Such violence was frightening and totally unacceptable at a sports event. A different coloured scarf or hat was all that was needed to trigger such incidents. But to everyone else of sound mind and good humour, United v City games still meant everything. The anticipation of excitement, dazzling players

on both teams, intense rivalry, blood-curdling tackles and a whiff of danger; a heady cocktail. United were my beginning, middle and end, and derby matches meant being enveloped inside one glorious, all-consuming golden moment. As the years began to pass, I came to realise that Manchester had not one but two great teams: Manchester United and Manchester United Reserves. With such tribalism, my football pathway was sketched out before me.

By the time of the Reds' first European triumph on a beautiful, balmy May evening in 1968, my brother was experiencing a Jim Bowen, *Bullseye* moment, 'Well Gerry, you chose City but let's look at what you could have won with United in the 60s: the FA Cup, two league titles, the European Cup and Youth Cup thrown in for good measure.' There was, too, the thrill of watching Best, Law and Charlton perform week in, week out. The old joke in Manchester pubs at the time of United's trophy gathering was that when City eventually won the league title in 1968, their manager, Joe Mercer, called at Old Trafford to collect the cup from Matt Busby (United having won it the season before). Matt showed Joe the stairs to the trophy room and up he went. Matt stayed at his desk puffing his pipe. A couple of hours later, a curious Matt heard Joe's footsteps coming down the stairs, whereupon he appeared and asked, 'Matt, which one is it exactly?' the room being swamped with silverware.

As the Reds rebuilt after the Munich air disaster in 1958 and the trophies started to pile up, Manchester as a city was trying to emerge from its dark, industrial past. However, in the early 60s, the city centre was certainly not the buzzy, good-looking place it has since become. Whilst the magnificent Town Hall, Central Library, Free Trade Hall and Corn Exchange stood as fine monuments to Cottonopolis, it was also still possible to see the occasional dead dog or broken pram washed up on the banks of the River Irwell. This diseased waterway flowed,

hesitatingly, over the driftwood and past the back of posh Deansgate on its journey to the Mersey. The shop buildings and banks were still largely covered in sooty deposits from the cotton mills, which were breathing still but heading for life support in an economically ravaged north-west. A government sell-out drained them of the last gasp of air.

My grandfather, feeling privileged to have more than a little inside track on why his own mill had to close in 1965, would often repeat what the mill owner told him: 'Arthur, they just made me an offer that was too good to refuse.' And so, the vast Accrington-brick, Baytree Mill, where my grandad had spent all his working life, spun its last piece of cloth and the huge, well-oiled machines were shipped off to India in giant crates, to be replaced by .... well, nothing. These fine buildings then stood still for more than 30 years like rotting dinosaurs, existing mainly as target practice for disaffected youths with air rifles and stones. The fact that town planners have since brought flat dwellers back into the city centre to occupy many of these historic buildings says much about the enterprise and grit of Manchester people. The irony behind the fact that we now buy back our cotton from India in the form of T-shirts and tops, often produced in legalised sweatshops, perhaps says rather more about wider, government policy.

But even during recession, Manchester was still a wonderful place to live. It was friendly, oh so northern and I would not have wanted to spend my teenage years anywhere else in the world. The music, the football, the humour, everything about the city filled my senses. However, not everyone in my family always shared my love of the region. Around this time, my wife, Cathy, a Sussex girl with impeccable Home Counties diction, stood at a bus stop in Rochdale and was astonished that she felt obliged to divulge her whole life story to a total stranger as she waited for the number 17. I tried to explain that such inquisitive behaviour passed for friendliness in these

parts, but she would have none of it and called it outright nosiness.

What really reinforced her doubts about ever venturing north of Milton Keynes again, though, was when she later called at our local hardware shop seeking a new tea-towel holder. She desired one of those quintessentially 1960s kitsch, dinky devices where you pushed the top of the towel into a small round base and four flimsy pieces of plastic grabbed it like a Rottweiler's teeth. Having never heard of such a trendy piece of kitchenware, our wonderfully broad, local shopkeeper replied (in all seriousness): 'Nay, 'ave nor 'eard o' that. I 'ave a six-inch nail though. Will that do?' Gasping for breath, she summoned me to fill up the Beetle and point it in any southerly direction. Had I given in to this pressure, we would have passed my favourite road sign, near an undistinguished entry to the M1, for traffic heading the opposite way: 'The North' it says. Underneath this, an exiled Mancunian has added the word, 'Brilliant!' Quite.

But who would want to live in the south anyway? In Manchester we had George Best, Denis Law and Bobby Charlton. We had The Hollies, Herman's Hermits, Freddie and The Dreamers, Wayne Fontana and The Mindbenders, and the Twisted Wheel; the centre of the world was Manchester and the city was on fast forward. From the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 to Hitler's missiles in 1940, from the IRA bomb in 1996 through to the Arena atrocity in 2017, the city would always take whatever adversity was thrown at it and bounce back with love, pride and defiance. It's what Manchester does, and the United team of the 1960s absolutely symbolised that never-say-die spirit.