

# **Frank Crichlow**

Born 1932.

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# 1. Introduction



SS Columbie

Originally from Woodbrook, Port of Spain, Trinidad, Frank Crichlow arrived in England in June 1953 on the SS Columbie, among the first wave of post-war immigrants from the Caribbean. He lived in Paddington at first, working for British Rail, then formed the Starlight Four band in 1956. Margaret Busby writes in *The Guardian* that the band had a few television and radio appearances, which in 1959 gave Crichlow enough money to open the El Rio cafe in Notting Hill at 127 Westbourne Park Road. The cafe became a fashionable meeting place, with Christine Keeler and John Profumo as customers, and provided a safe place for black people to meet. Crichlow described it as a school or university for hustlers.

In 1968 he opened the Mangrove restaurant at 8 All Saints Road, Notting Hill, attracting both unwelcome police attention and celebrity visitors such as Diana Ross and the Supremes, Vanessa Redgrave, and Sammy Davis Jr. The restaurant was raided six times in the first year, though nothing was found. Crichlow, Darcus Howe, and several others marched on the police station in 1970 in protest against the constant police attention. Charged with incitement to riot, the Mangrove Nine, as they became known, were acquitted during a celebrated trial that lasted 55 days in 1971, and which involved Howe unsuccessfully demanding an all-black jury. Crichlow called the trial "a turning point for black people."

He went on to form the Mangrove Community Association to improve housing and services for ex-offenders, drug addicts, and alcoholics. He was also a central figure in the Notting Hill Carnival; his restaurant served for many years as the base from which activists, musicians and artists organised the event.

Despite being well known locally for his anti-drug stance—Heather Mills writes in *The Independent* that the local joke about him was that "his education is lacking: he's the only Trinidadian who doesn't know what a great draw of ganja is"—he was charged with drug offences in 1979, and subsequently cleared of the charges. In 1988 police used sledgehammers to break into the Mangrove, searching for drugs,

after hiding in a freight container outside the restaurant from where they launched the raid.[7] Charged with possession of heroin and cannabis, which he said the police had planted, Crichlow was defended by Gareth Peirce, Michael Mansfield, and Courtenay Griffiths, and was again acquitted, receiving £50,000 damages from the Metropolitan Police in 1992 for false imprisonment, battery and malicious prosecution.



Notting Hill Carnival.

Abner Cohen, writing in 1993, stated that although Crichlow was never a "leader" in any formal sense, never sought any important office, and was a "shy, diffident" person, he had nevertheless been "one of the most significant West Indian leaders in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. His role in the Notting Hill Carnival was paramount. What was astonishing about Crichlow was that he did not give up. During twenty turbulent years, he made the Mangrove into a potent symbol of black unity, defiance and resistance."

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## 2. Interview by Hassan Mahamdallie

This 1995 interview of Frank Crichlow (right) by Hassan Mahamdallie was archived in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Socialist Review website.



I've been in Notting Hill for quite a long time now, since the 1950s. I first came in contact with Notting Hill police station when I opened a cafe called the Rio in Westbourne Park. A lot of people used to go there.

But before that there was the 1950s, when I met a group of guys who stayed over after World War Two. I learnt a lot from them. They had nowhere to go and socialise - so what they'd do is play cards amongst themselves. They had a place in the West End where they used to go.

I learnt a lot from those guys who came here in World War Two. Webby - R S Webb - who used to run the Melting Pot, a club for ex-servicemen in Brixton, had a good insight into what to do.

It was the early days, and West Indians were still coming over. When they came over they had no means of contacting other West Indians - which was very important at the time. Some people who came used to stay with friends, but after they were here for a few days they wanted to go where they could meet people and socialise.

People used to find these places. There was a lot of socialising among West Indians in basement clubs. One of the most beautiful things about that was there were people from the different Caribbean islands. It was a sort of getting to know you time.

At that time nobody knew how important that socialising and getting to know you, and exchanging experiences of living, was. They were meeting racism when they went into a shop or tried to get places to stay. We used to make fun of it as a defence. That went on for quite a time in the 1950s.

Then in 1958 there was the race riot. The riot was frightening, because you had to Mosleyites and the Notting Hill Police against you. The police were protecting the racist rioters of course. During that time you had to run for your life.

The few West Indians who were streetwise, some of the guys who were brave enough, stood up to them. They were living here and they came from a background where they had a strong idea of what is right and what is wrong. They defended themselves.

That came and passed. Then just after the race riot I opened the Rio. It was a brave venture really. When I opened the Rio it was a big turning point. Then we started to get a lot of attention from Notting Hill police.

A lot of West Indians came to the Rio and it got very popular. We opened all night. It was a coffee bar and it was kind of bohemian. We had people like Colin MacInnes, the famous writer. The Christine Keeler and Profumo affair came out of that scene.

Local whites used it and a lot of musicians used to be there as well. When the West End clubs finished they used to come and have a coffee and a meal at the Rio. It was a West Indian scene but it had a lot of mixture. It created a tremendous atmosphere until we found we were getting a lot of attention from the police.

Notting Hill police started to get a bit "busy" - framing people. You could tell it was happening. People started to come in to the cafe and tell their experiences.

One chap said he was in a nearby road and two police rushed up to him and said, "We just saw you trying car doors". "You must be joking," he said. "No," they said, "We saw you trying car doors". They arrested him and he went to court and was found guilty. He still laughs when he talks about it. He still can't believe it. It didn't ruin him. But some people were freaked out by that and couldn't handle getting a conviction.

The police used the sus laws like that. It was quite common. You would be walking down the street and the next thing you would be in the police station being charged. A lot of black people got convictions that way. Some of them freaked out and they went back to the West Indies because of that.

What started to give the black community strength was places like the Rio. The Rio was a meeting place. People would work all week and at the weekend they would go to the cafes and meet and talk. It gave us the strength to keep going. But of course the Rio began to get attention from more and more police.

The basic reason was racism. A lot of officers in West London were fired up by people like [fascist leader] Oswald Mosley - the same thing is happening with the BNP now. White people who were in the race riots in 1958 and in their teens would then go and join the force and end up as police officers. There is no doubt in my mind about that. That is why I think Notting Hill has a heavy history between the black community and the police in the early days.

But black people began to get their act together and were challenging the system. As early as 1962-63 I knew there was a need to do something, but I hadn't a clue what. After all, black people were not used to being taken off the street and being told "I saw you do this" and "I saw you do that". They would go to court and the magistrate and the police would rattle off their cases.

There's good example of that from the early 1960s. They arrested a young man, got him in the station and then took him to Marylebone Court. He comes up from the cells and stands in the dock. The magistrate says, "So-and-so stand up. You are charged with so-and-so." And the black man looks around as if to say, "Are you

talking to me?" Not because he's stupid but because of the situation he's in. He's done nothing - so he thinks the magistrate can't be talking to him.

That says it all. That says it all.

I got hold of a solicitor called Stoller. He was good. He was a Jew and identified with what we were going through. I started to give him cases. He said to me that if I could get people together he would come and have a talk and tell us what to do if we got arrested - you mustn't say anything and the like.

By the 1970s people were fighting back. We took a stand against the police in the Mangrove 9 trial which came out of a demonstration against the police.

What started the demonstration were the raids on the Mangrove restaurant that I opened in 1969. In the first year we had seven raids. The police used to say they had information that there was cannabis in the club. We would say, "Where did you get that information from?" and they would say they didn't have to disclose their source - end of story.



The Mangrove Restaurant, owned by Frank Crichlow.

The significant thing about this was that they never found any drugs, because there was none. They used to raid the restaurant at half past ten or eleven - always on a Friday night when it was packed. They would search and everybody would leave their food, we couldn't ask them to pay. So what the police were doing was destroying the restaurant. They didn't want us to have too much respectability.

So the feeling was running high. What led to the first Mangrove trial was a demonstration. That was the first demonstration of its kind seen in London. It was held in August 1970. It was a very important demonstration.

It was sparked by all these raids. We called a demonstration and 500 people came out. We made speeches and marched off to the police station that was carrying out the raids.

We went to Notting Hill. R S Webb was outside the police station shouting. Then we said we were going over to Harrow Road police station. The police went in very heavy and about 26 people got arrested on small charges. Reggie Maudling was the home secretary at the time and he made a mistake. After the demonstration he said he wanted an enquiry into who had organised it. After he got the results he said "arrest the organisers" and nine of us were arrested.



The 1970 demonstration which led to the Mangrove 9 trial.

That day we nearly had a race riot. I was charged with affray, carrying an offensive weapon, threatening behaviour and inciting members of the public to riot. We were looking at a lot of jail

The trial was about a year later in 1971 and we won it. It was a massive trial, nearly 60 days in the Old Bailey. It was black power time and people were looking for something to identify with. We had telegrams from people all over the world. They were saying the nine people had stood up against the whole establishment. It was after the Mangrove 9 trial that they started introducing law centres.

We had a lot of support and we won it outright. The police were embarrassed - they saw that what they had done was bring a lot of black people together. A lot of youngsters identified with us and began to come out on the streets. The talk was that nobody was prepared for the offspring of the people who came over in the 1950s and 1960s. All of a sudden there were thousands of young men, and they're black and they have no jobs.

That trial was a turning point. A lot of political people who were asleep began to wake up. That was the start. I used to help a lot of people with their cases. I'm the kind of person who won't lie down. I organised a hell of a lot of demonstrations. One of our crowning glories was the Bristol trial. After the riots in Bristol in 1980 a lot of people had been arrested and they phoned me up and said, "Frank, can you come down to Bristol?"

We went down to Bristol, went to the community centre and started taking statements. That was the kind of organising we did. They got some wicked, wicked charges against them and they didn't know what the fuck to do. And the police were saying no bail. We said, "Why no bail?" and we got bail for them. There were 16 of them.

We were saying "this is a political trial" and when the trial started the year after, the plan by the system was to let them be found guilty quietly. So when the trial came up there was nothing in the press. So we said we had to make this political. I filled up a coach and we went down to Bristol for the start of the trial.

Everyone saw that they had support and all of them got off, and I was a wanted man again. I was arrested 50 times. I had three big trials - the Mangrove 9, the Mangrove 6 and the last Mangrove trial. I worked with two up and coming lawyers - Mike Mansfield and Gareth Peirce. The police hated me so much that when they arrested me they made lots of mistakes. They invented things - which they don't do very well. In the last trial in 1979 they had egg on their faces.

I don't see myself as a leader. I never saw myself that way. As I see it I stood up for my rights, and a lot of people identified with that. We fought and we shouted. We weren't going to put our tails between our legs.

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### 3. Tribute by Alex Bennett-Grant

*The following tribute to Frank Crichlow by Alex Bennett-Grant was achieved in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the medium.com website.*

Mangrove Founder, Frank Crichlow, changed my life in more ways than I knew.

“If you are a big tree, we are a small axe.” So goes a Jamaican proverb, famously popularized by Bob Marley.



The trial of the Mangrove 9 portrayed in Steve McQueen's Small Axe BBC TV series.

The first episode of Oscar Winning Director Steve McQueen's latest film series, Small Axe, is about the Mangrove 9.

The-up-and-coming BBC series looks to contain reminders that violent acts of racism in the UK are not far off ancient history. Racial histories are fragments of our lives today, even for those of us who unknowingly grew up amongst the legends of Race activism, like me.

I grew up in the kitchen of Mangrove founder Frank Crichlow, watching him prepare delicious West Indian meals, like Trinidadian Callaloo with pigs feet. Lucy and his kids were our extended family, their big house our play oasis on visits to West London. The Nottingham carnival stages they hosted were our first experiences with the full vibrancy of Caribbean and African culture. I thought Frank was kind and amazing for giving us all these experiences. They helped form our identity as young mixed raced kids grappling with who we were in a country that all but deleted our black history.

It was only later in life that the fragments of his story about the Mangrove and hard won (yet successful!) battles with the Met police became fully formed in my head. I was blown away seeing his death published in national newspapers and realizing that he was a legend in the London Afro-Caribbean community.

Thanks to people like Frank we lived a better life as Black and Mixed race kids in Britain growing up in the 90s. Our parents generation went through a lot, then did a lot to fight for space for us to grow up safe. They then tried their hardest to protect us from that history of racism in the UK. So much so that we often have to dig a lot

deeper for evidence of the abuses that happened in the streets, homes and hearts of black Britain.

Wikipedia says “Frank Gilbert Crichlow (13 July 1932—15 September 2010) was a British community activist and civil rights campaigner, who became known in 1960s London as a godfather of black radicalism. He was a central figure in the Notting Hill Carnival, his restaurant the Mangrove serving for many years as the base from which activists, musicians and artists organised the event, as well as becoming “the symbol of resistance to police persecution”.... Crichlow was one of the Mangrove Nine, a group of British black activists tried for inciting a riot at a protest, in 1970, against the police targeting of the Mangrove Restaurant, Notting Hill, in west London. Their trial lasted 55 days and involved various challenges by the Nine to the legitimacy of the judicial process. They were all acquitted of the most serious charges and the trial became the first judicial acknowledgement of behaviour motivated by racial hatred within the Metropolitan Police.”

I hope ‘Small Axe’ fills in the colour this story deserves. I for one will be watching, not to re-live it or remember, I was too young. I’ll be tuning in with wiser eyes and fresh perspective from today’s BLM battles. In 2020 the actions of the softly spoken gentle man that was Frank Crichlow are more relevant than ever.

Thank you Frank.

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