

HOW to be nangs *

* If you have to ask, you aren't, says MICHELE KIRSCH

If you've ever ridden on the top deck of a London bus after the end of a school day, you will have encountered the Scary Bitches — a gaggle of loud, lipsticked, hair-slicked, hoop earrings, blinging teenage girls shouting and laughing and having loads more fun than anybody else on the bus.

They scare the other passengers — meek, tired and irritated — and use a secret language punctuated with words such as "sket" and "nang" and "buff" and "predren", which mean whore, cool, good-looking and mate, in that order. I look at them longingly, because I know they are cool, they are the real "It" girls and I want to be 15 again, and beautiful and shouty and mixed-race, like the prettiest ones are, except I can't because I am a middle-aged white *Hausfrau*, well past it and, more importantly, past "It" — the art of being effortlessly cool. I can't get it or be it, but I can still hunt for it.

At Islington Green School, a mixed comprehensive in North London, I am in a room of 15 and 16-year-olds who are going to tell me what cool is and what cool is not. I am subscribing to the trickle-up theory of cool, which is that cool starts from the street and works its way up to the focus groups and marketing men and big brands.

I have brought along a copy of the *NME*, an enormously inappropriate and past-it ice-breaker, as it turns out. Nobody in this room knows who any of the people on the cover are, because they are not hip-hop and R&B stars, who are the cool ones, but "rock freaks" who are not cool at all. Somebody immediately zooms in on Billy Joe from Green Day. "He's wearing make-up, that's not cool — it's gay." Pete Doherty is dismissed as a "waste man" and the rest are dismissed as "Don't know 'im. If I don't know him, he can't be cool."

The first thing they tell me is that cool is



not a cool word any more, that they all say "nang", but even that is kind of old, and it is better to say "shabby", "gunny", "grinny". And when things are not cool they say "That's cold" or "I'm in despair", and when people are not cool they call them waste girls or waste boys. If they feel they have been disrespected they don't say "dissed" any more but say that they have been "boyed" as in looked down upon and called "boy". But not the girls. To slag them off you call them, as one girl reels off with great relish, "Oh, a sket, a waste girl, an apple, a what-up girl, a tramp, a ho."

Nahid, 16, says: "I am cool and I am a grade A student. I am a shepherd, not the sheep. Big up Bengalis..." Smoking is "sooo not cool". They all say this, but Nahid the most poetically: "If you want to be cool you have to live, and if you smoke you will be dead, and that is not cool, to be dead."

Mobile phones are cool, says one boy, only if you have lots of girls' numbers on them.

Surprisingly, the consensus is that the right gear, the right trainers, clothes, etc, is not as important as grown-ups think. "People don't care about that no more," says Rachel. "Cool is something that is unique, being different." She thinks the coolest job would be to be a lawyer, not for the big money but "because you get to defend people who need help". Other cool jobs are being a footballer, being your own boss and, this from the coolest-looking dude in the shop, "selling medicine".

Nobody thinks black is cooler than white ("That's racism man, innit?") but they do say it sounds dumb when black people use white slang or white people use black slang. The latter I know. But what is white slang? "Oh, all that *EastEnders* stuff like safe, sweet and mate. It sounds stupid."

In the playground afterwards, they talk sweetly about their husbands and wives. "Where has my husband got to?" They explain it is just messing around, they pretend to be married to each other. "Like boyfriend and girlfriend?" I ask, reasonably. They look horrified. "Eww. No! No!" It is blazingly clear to all, and to me, that I just don't get it.

A few weeks later I am in a coffee shop with 13-year-old Hazel Lee (pictured on our cover), a girl I have known since she was a toddler, who has effortlessly morphed into a walking emblem of street cool.

"Mayfair are the best cigarettes because they are like the best property on the Monopoly board," she says through a mouthful of croissant. "But they are also £2.07 compared to B&H which are £2.35." She adds hastily that she does not smoke herself, but "most cool people do".

Clothes are important, she says, with her crowd. "You can't wear trainers that aren't Nike or adidas or Academic. If you wear trainers with no name they are called space forces. And if you have like an old cheap mo-

Nangs? Nang? Nong? So long as it makes Dad despair, that's cool

Ah, bless them. Our children, unlike policemen, are getting older every day. Only 15 or 16 and already they exhibit the traits that will serve them so well as adults: an obsession with how they are perceived, an already fully developed homophobia a desperation to conform to the mores of their peers while simultaneously being somehow "different".

Any adult who tries to get to the bottom of his culture (or, worse, be a part of it) is missing the point, which is that we're not supposed to. There are few more ridiculous sights than that of a 50-year-old growling on the dancefloor to 10 Cent, Nelly or Myciel Jean when he'd be happier with Barry Manilow.

It's as if each of my brain after four decades is the 1960s Christiana afternoon

when my father, slumped in his post-prandial armchair but determined to defy his age and indulge the young people, ordered: "Put Ross's new LP on the record player." I tried to talk him out of it but he was unmovable. Bob Dylan, *The Times* *They Are A Changin'* Side 1, Track 1, *The Ballad of Hollis Brown* — in which the protagonist, a starving South Dakota farmer in the Depression, shoots dead his five children, his wife and himself (early Bob at his finest, I always think).

My dad looked at my mother in despair and declared: "There's something wrong with that boy."

Result: Then, as now, to be despised of by one's parents was to leap instantly several rings up the ladder of cool. Professor Sally Haslanger, of the department of linguistics and philosophy

bite phone, it's called a brick." But all that stuff takes money. How do you get the money? "You just do, or if you don't, it's OK if you make a joke about it, that you can't afford something."

The best music is called Bashment, "which is like house and ragga. Rock'n'roll is not good, it's for the posh kids. Rock people are like the goofy people in your class who you can ask for help to do your work," she asserts.

Can you do well in school without looking like a geek? "If you are going to do well or do the work you have to have an excuse, like to say, 'If they [the school] call my mum, she'll beat me.' It's OK if you say that."

Most drugs are not cool, crack is for waste boys, but weed is OK. Cool parents are ones who let you stay out till 3am and go to raves, so in that respect her own mum is not cool, and people who try to be cool but

'Mayfair are the best cigarettes because they are like the best property on the Monopoly board'

just aren't are called beggars. The coolest job would be, "to be an It Girl. Like Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton is cool because she's got one of those little dogs to carry and when the dog got too big she got rid of it to get a smaller one." Not Kate Moss? "Most people I know don't know about Kate Moss. She is, like, a Paris Hilton wannabe."

Twelve-year-old Jackson Gaines is old-fashioned cool; he is completely different from just about every other kid I know, but affable, as opposed to arrogant, with it. He goes to a fee-paying school, is off-the-scale clever, and musically gifted. He went on *Junior Mstermind* as a Beatles expert. He goes to White Stripes gigs with his dad. He is easy and unguarded around adults.

He says that defending what he thinks is cool, which is not what lots of other people his age think is cool, "is the story of my life! In my primary school, everyone said the Beatles were crap, and I said why do they hold six world records? They were the biggest band ever. Their music is amazing and they have inspired millions of people. Music has got to have some intelligence. It can't just be a beat and a bassline and someone rapping over it. I like people who take the time to write proper songs."

You could see how that sort of thing wouldn't go down too well in the playground, but Jackson toughed it out. He likes the White Stripes because "they are taking old blues, which is a bit forgotten, and bringing it to life in a more modern way that people can relate to. It's a cool idea and a good way to go about music."

He thinks it is important to distinguish be-

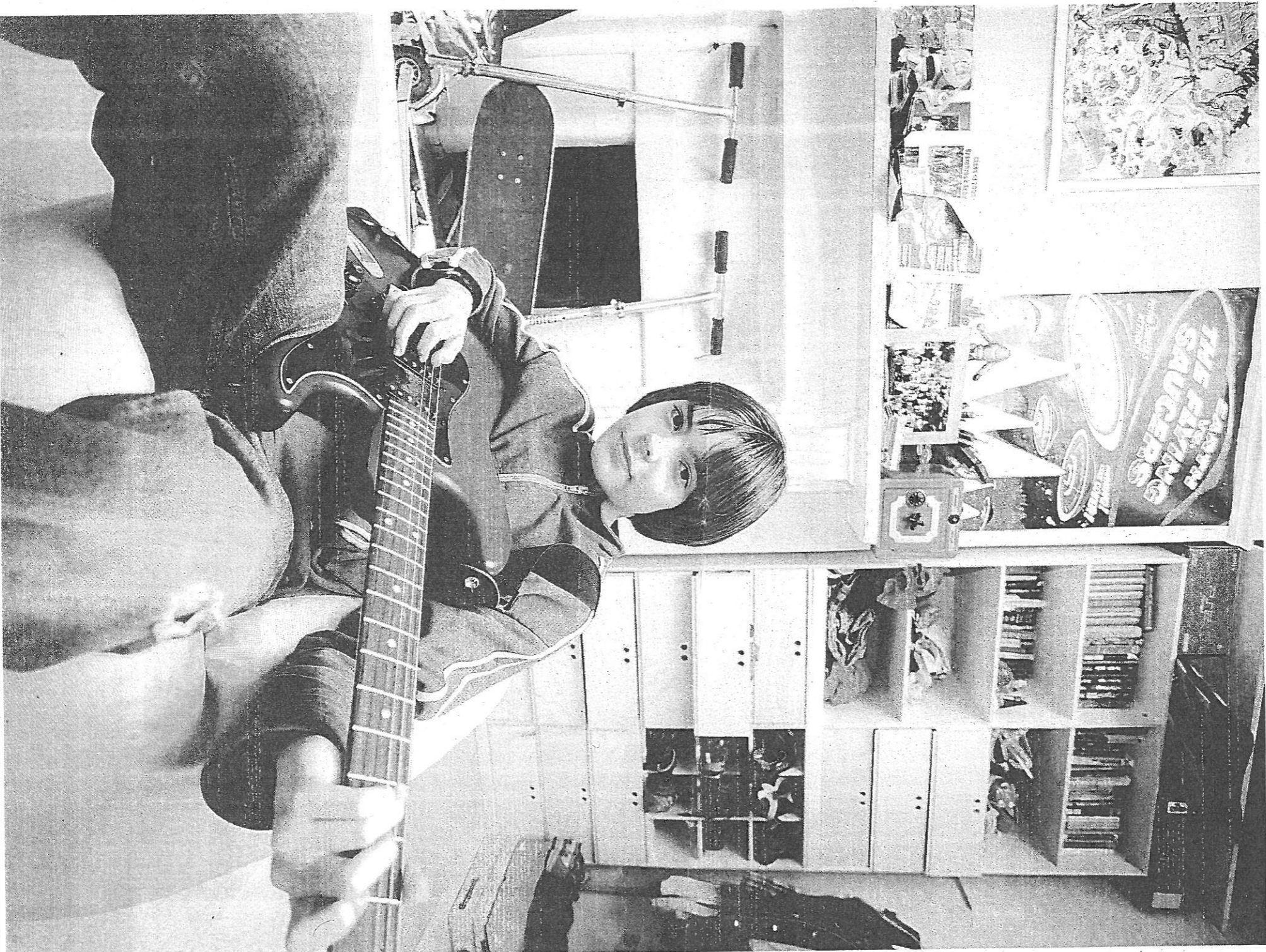
at MIT, says young people "want their coolness to shine through in their behaviour, dress etc, so that they will win approval by the in-group." She adds:

"There is no such property as 'coolness'... In fact, the application of the term 'cool' is determined wholly by the interests and concerns of the in-group."

So in their craving for peer approval, teenagers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, are not markedly different from those at Islington Green School in North London — except that cool, apparently, is no longer cool. So Nineties. The current term of approbation is nang. In the Eighties it was bad. In the Seventies, groovy. In the Sixties, swingin'. In the Fifties, hip — and, curiously, cool.

Plus ça change, innit?

ROSS ANDERSON



SOPHIE LASLETT

Jackson Caines, 12, of North London: "The popular kids are usually rich . . . but coolness is more about attitude and personality"

Making a competition in the know

1. Not Pete Doherty, who is a wasteman and can't sing; but 50 Cent, who is the king of bling
2. Not Australian soap operas, but *EastEnders*.
3. Not Harry Potter, because books aren't cool, but you can read anything by Malorie Blackman in private and you might be told off (which is good) for reading Benjamin Zephaniah's *Gangsta Rap* in school
4. Not those rocker skater-boy big black bags with diagonal straps but bags that say "Just Do It", and, among certain sets, bags with Winnie the Pooh logos.
5. No Crazy Frog ring tone, but *Grind With Me* by Pretty Ricky.
6. Not clapping, when clapping is called for, but making gunny fingers and going "Braap, braap" which is the new "Pow Pow".
7. Not Kate Moss, but Paris Hilton and her tiny dog.
8. Not rich, but not too poor to buy Academic sportswear, 50 Cent type bling, and Mayfair cigarettes.
9. Not McDonald's, but Nando's.
10. Not actually hating your mother, but pretending she beats you up.

tween cool people and cool stuff. "A cool person has a nice personality. The cool people are always popular, but cool things are original and new and interesting. But the cooler kids are more into what the majority of people think is cool at the time."

Smoking is not only not cool but "everybody knows that now, even the cool kids know it is stupid. Some kids joke about taking drugs but deep inside I think they joke because they would never do it really." Drinking is different. "Many kids look forward to turning 18 so they can drink." It gladdens my heart that they even pretend they are going to wait that long.

Do you need lots of money to be cool, to buy cool stuff? "You are teased if you are considered poor, but nobody is really poor in my school. The popular kids are usually rich and their families have new cars and they have the latest mobile phones, but I don't think that is so important. It is really more about attitude and personality."

But Jackson admits that looks are important too. "The popular boys in my school, they all have girlfriends. I think if an ugly kid tried to join the cool kids, the girlfriends would say, 'Who is this loser ugly kid and why is he trying to hang out with us?'" He thinks his parents have cool taste in music and films. He says he likes what they like and knows this is unusual. "I like film noir, *Double Indemnity*, *The Third Man*, Hitchcock. I am not into too fast and too furious. I really like *Casablanca*, special edition."

Can you have a posh accent and be cool? Here, a big sigh and then a vehement "It's impossible."