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MERC: GOING UNDERGROUND

Opened in Soho's legendary Carnaby Street in 1967, Merc is an institution to those who frequent its packed-to-the-rafters premises. As a one-stop shop for mods and skinheads, it is not only the home of exclusive Fred Perry polo shirts (cut to the original '60s narrow shape), rare Farahs, a million Ben Sherman shirts and the Merc Harrington jacket, but is also the natural habitat of some of London's most stylish young men and women, who use the store as a hangout, scooter club and meeting place.

Lee James has been a customer since 1983. "If I'm riding round on my Lambretta on a Saturday, I'll pop in for a chat and to see what's going on. Everyone knows each other here and we're all heavily into the scene."

The 'scene', though centred around clothing and, to an unashamed extent, posing, also consists of clubs, scooters,

ska, R&B and reggae. The shop itself is plastered with personal tributes from iconic musicians such as Paul Weller and the Small Faces, who respectfully ask Merc to "keep the faith".

Despite the tight sense of community at Merc, its overwhelming spirit of welcome towards outsiders is truly remarkable for a cult London boutique. Dedicated mods and skins mix with Japanese tourists and fashion trendies

Mods and skins mix with tourists in appreciation of the great gear on sale

in mutual appreciation for the fantastic gear on sale. You'll find no moronic neo-Naziism or aggressive gang mentality here. Merc is only interested in clothing and style, and as far as employee and committed mod Phil Meynell is concerned, "There's no division—anything alternative is to be respected,

whether it's skin, mod, goth or punk." The result is a healthy bond between all of Merc's resident sub-cultures, who even visit each other's clubs and gigs in respect for their close-associated history.

Despite a fanatical attention to the mod and skin heritage, Merc is by no means stuck in a timewarp, out of touch with the rest of fashion. Phil idolises the style leaders of bygone days but is keen to put

a new spin on things: "I'll wear my original Sta-pret with a pair of silver Prada trainers—that's what the original mods would be doing if they were around now, staying a step ahead. We call it Millennium Mod."

Nor are the in-house mods aggrieved by the widespread influence of their style

upon men's fashion as a whole: "We see these blokes doing the whole indie thing with their Fred Perrys, parkas and Clarks Originals, and we're glad that they like what we're doing and are coming round to our way of thinking, but wearing it in their own way. People like Supergrass and Ian Brown look great."

From a commercial point of view, Merc's manager Sas (the son of the original founder) is unconcerned about the mod look's moment in the sun and tries to ensure its longevity by keeping a distance from trends and fads. "To be honest, I'd rather it wasn't so trendy, but a core customer will always come here through word of mouth rather than fashion. And because, quite simply, no one else does what we do." It's obvious that this cornucopia of all things stylish will always keep the faith. **SH**

Merc is at 10 Carnaby Street, London W1. For a mail order catalogue tel: 020 7439 7750.

PHOTOS: JAKE WALTERS; FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THE CUSTOMERS AND STAFF OF MERC: LUDOVIC LEGOURRIERE, ANA SORIA, PHIL MEYNELL. ALL CLOTHES MODELS' OWN FROM A SELECTION AT MERC, VARIOUS SOHO TAILORS AND LEVI'S.