

Paloma Faith

The singer, songwriter and actress on the “beautiful riot” of **Hackney**

Growing up in Hackney, my best days were when a neighbour had the builders in. Fresh scaffolding came hand-in-hand with home renovation – to us kids, that meant a new climbing frame. “You playing out?” you’d hear, ricocheting off the partially boarded-up streets. That was an invitation to spend all day drifting from house to house, along with Stoke Newington’s tumbleweed of plastic bags and scrunched-up newspapers.

At the weekend, my parents would sneak me into our local jazz bar, a hazy joint called Vortex. It was my gateway to cabaret. The borough became my playground; I first took to the stage at The Old Blue Last in Shoreditch and launched a club night at The Hoxton Square Bar & Kitchen. Dalston was a cradle of underground music where my friends and I would dance all night to hip hop, R&B and basement, before being kicked out at dawn, sopping wet.

Now, I’m more likely to be found swirling cocktails at Fontaine’s or Ruby’s – my favourite bars on Stoke Newington Road – or roaming Hackney Marshes, buggy in tow. If you venture deep enough, you’ll hear just a whisper of city clamour above the trickling River Lea and neighing horses that dawdle through the meadows. Stay long enough, and you might even bump into one of the chefs from Clapton’s Crooked Billet pub, primping

their menu with whichever mushrooms, herbs and fruits they can find.

Over the years, I’ve lived in Leeds and West London (not my vibe), but a while back, I made the decision to raise my kids here in Hackney. I wanted to wean them on its spirit. The Hackney most people know is all hipster barber shops and art studios steam-powered by pricey coffee, but I still think of it as a calamitous but beautiful riot.

Its mishmash of textures and styles are what get me going; the jumble of Roman Road Market, the over-the-top art-deco lustre of the Rio Cinema and treasure-trove boutiques such as Pelicans & Parrots. The characters, too. Hang around Stoke Newington long enough and you’ll come face to face with the cockney cowboy, an eccentric, wispy-haired character who’s been patrolling the streets in a ten-gallon hat, spats and spurs for years.

The city may have hardened into a skyscraper-spiked sprawl, but Hackney’s retained its community feel. It’s one of those precious places where people of all classes, backgrounds and sexualities mix together, becoming richer for it. Neighbourly love is just what we do here, scaffolding or not.

Paloma Faith’s fifth studio album Infinite Things is out 13 November.

