

Tom's Jacket, Ragley Black;  
Oli's Tee, Thawn Burgundy/Multi  
by Oliver Spencer



PEOPLE

# GARY KEMP

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It's just shy of 10am and we're sitting up on the first floor of the Rebecca Hossack Gallery on Conway Street: me, Gary Kemp and Piper, his friendly miniature labradoodle. Gary has been coming to the gallery, just round the corner from his home, for many years. On this particular grey Monday morning in March, we're surrounded by the work of the artist Barbara Macfarlane. But we're chatting about fashion, not art, as Gary tells me how clothes have been an important part of his career, upbringing, and life. Designer Oliver Spencer joins us to dress him in a number of pieces from his latest collection, while Gary and I reminisce about Fitzrovia's past, moving back and forth between Victorian London and the seedier side of the neighbourhood during the New Romantic era, when he first discovered Warren Street, Fitzroy Square and the Post Office Tower. To cut a long story short: we're talking Spandau Ballet, music, fashion and Fitzrovia. Gary Kemp is a Fitzrovian whom enjoys the company of a guitar.

Born just up the road in Islington to working class parents, Gary was raised in a council house with his brother, and later fellow band member, Martin Kemp. As he was growing up and becoming a musician, place was everything. In his words: "You couldn't find your tribe unless you went out the door. Today, you can find it on your laptop. In those days you couldn't." For Gary's new wave band Spandau Ballet, the legendary clubs of Soho's yesteryear - Billy's, The Blitz Club and Le Beat Route - served as the colourful backdrop to the New Romantic era and helped propel them to massive popularity and lasting fame as one of the biggest British acts of the 1980's.







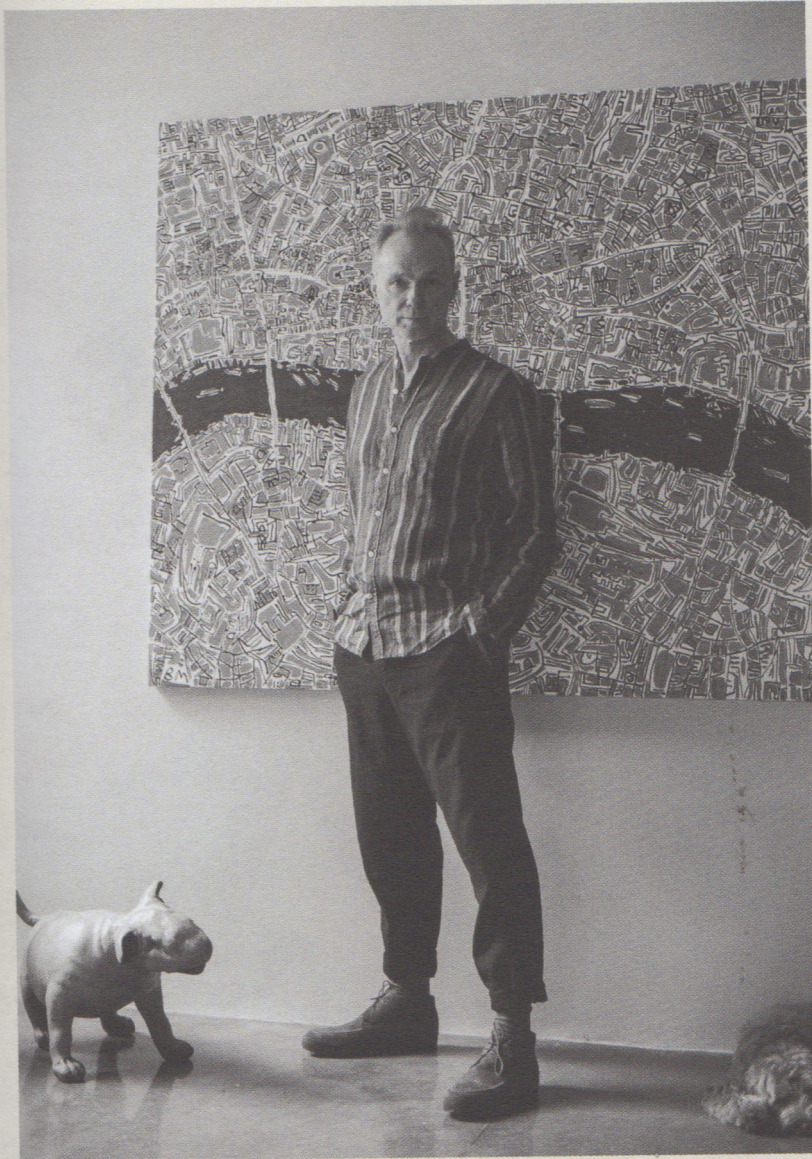
Kemp's relationship with music started at the age of 11, when his parents bought him a guitar from a shop on Holloway Road as a Christmas present. "I still can't work out to this day why my father thought it was a good idea," he says, "but for me, it was an immediate epiphany of wanting to write songs. I didn't want to play anybody else's songs, so instead I wrote my own. I think, in truth, I quite like being alone - I quite like the company of a guitar. When you're a creative person, you sort of make your own friends, whether it's a piece of art or a song."

Despite having started acting as a youngster, Gary now focused on a career in music, forming a band called The Gentry with school friends. His brother Martin was later to join the group as a bassist. After a friend of the band, DJ Robert Elms, saw a phrase scribbled on the wall of a nightclub lavatory during a visit to Berlin, The Gentry was renamed Spandau Ballet. Soon, they became a staple act of The Blitz Club in Soho, a hotbed of talent for new music and fashion, boasting an array of rising stars, from Boy George to Steve Strange.

Frequenting Soho during these early years of his career meant Gary soon discovered Fitzrovia: his first encounter with

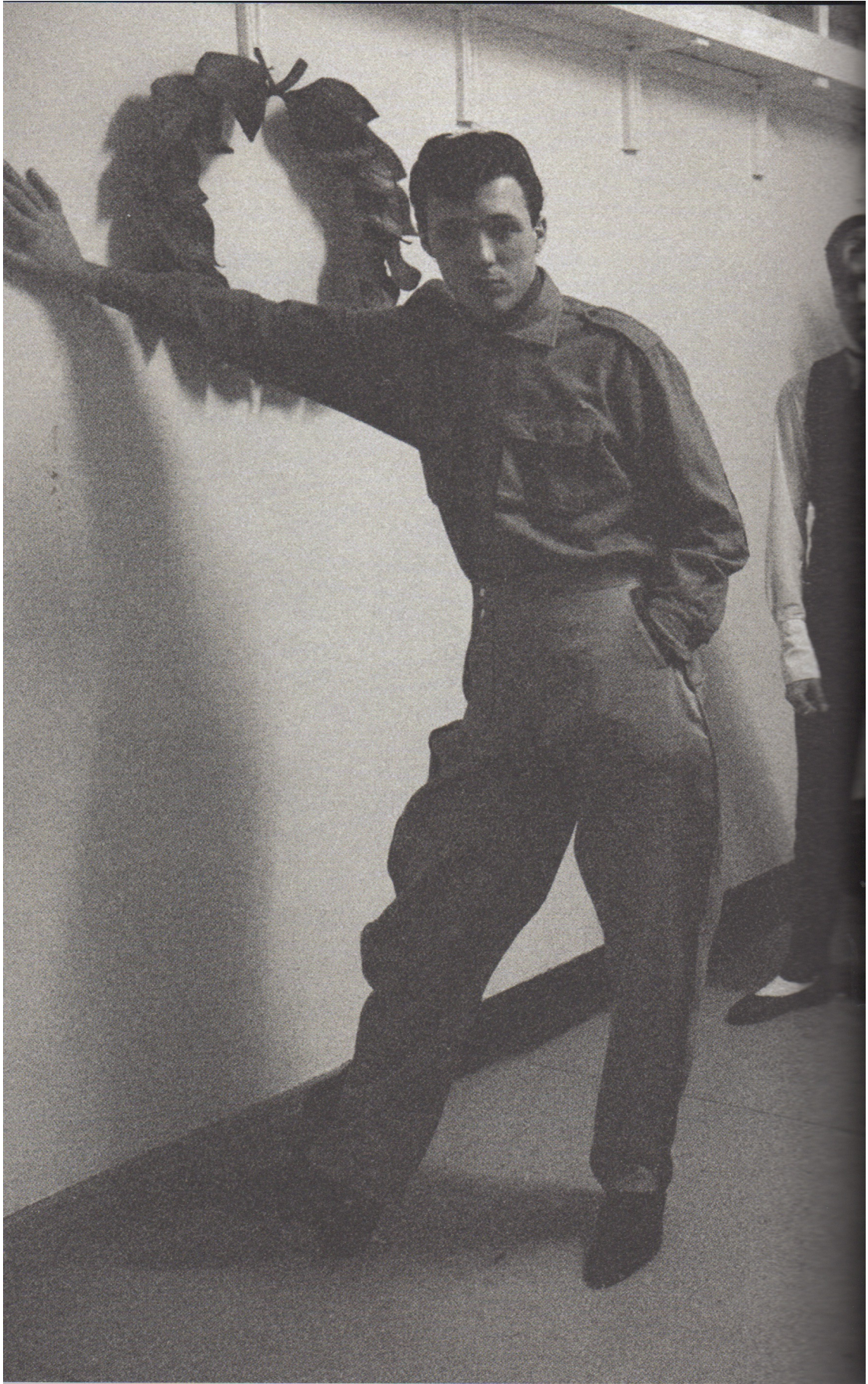
the area came in 1979, when he visited Boy George's squat on Warren Street for a photo-shoot after a gig in Soho. "At this time, Fitzrovia was quite a seedy area. The square was a slum, the centre of the used car trade. It wasn't residential, not in the way in which we know it today. Warren Street was where Boy George and his crowd lived. At the time it was the most famous squat in London, and we used to visit quite a lot. It was painted completely white inside, and they'd hung up lots of nets that would float around the place, with mattresses on the floor. It was full of the most interesting, cross-dressing, wild people. Costume designer Michele Clapton was there, stylist Kim Bowen, Steve Jones and Christos Tolera too; it was full of St Martins students, so it certainly wasn't a squalid place like you might imagine," he says. "The first time we went there was after we'd played at The Blitz that night for a photo session with the photographer Graham Smith. In those days, George - who wasn't called Boy George back then - was a cloakroom attendant at The Blitz Club on a Tuesday night; he'd famously steal everything from peoples' pockets. I remember him shouting down the bannisters 'I can sing better than your fucking singer', so I shouted back to him 'Get your own band then!' And of course he did," laughs Gary.



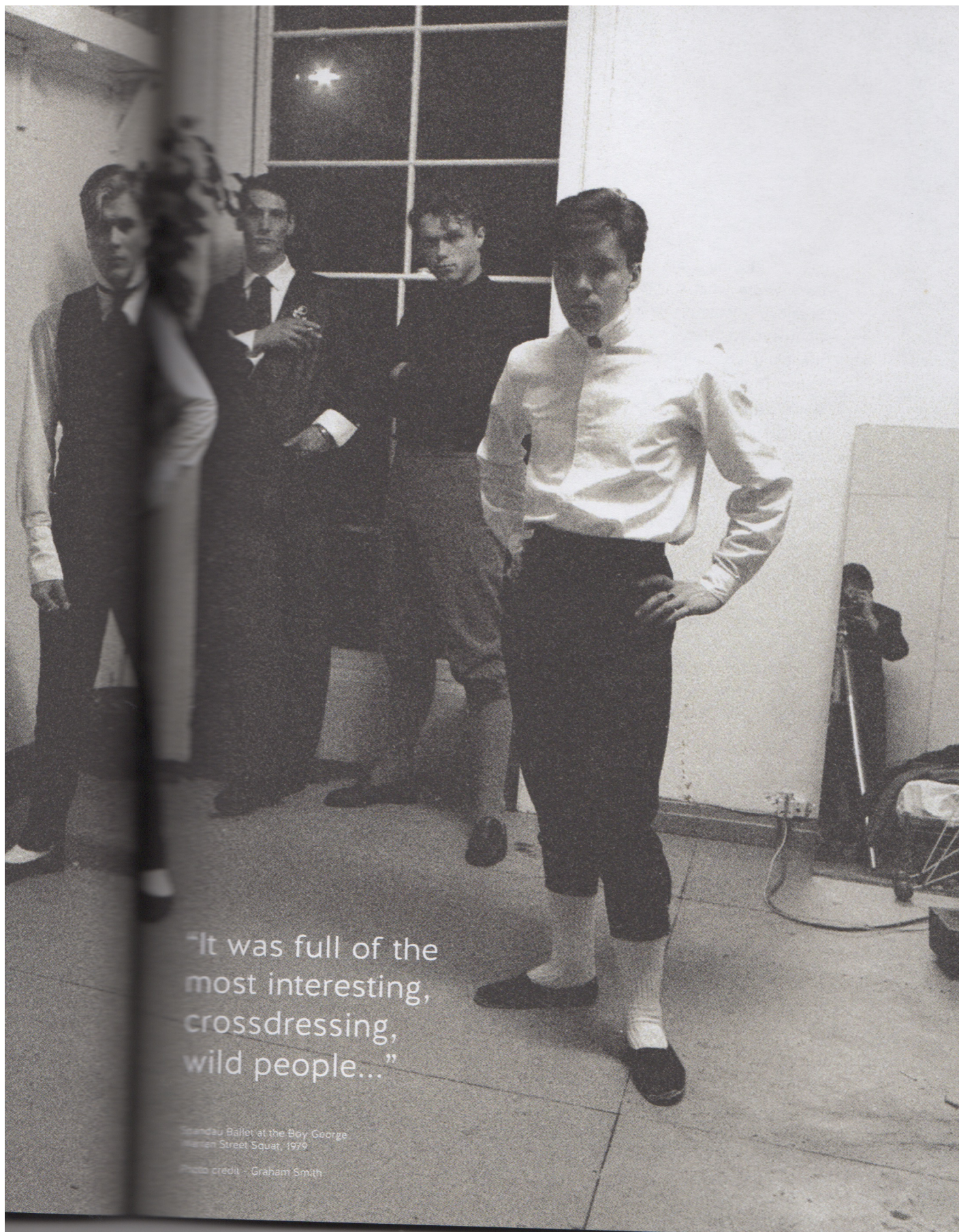


Grandad Shirt, Carlton Navy;  
Judo Pant, Indigo Rinse;  
Dalton Boot, Grey Suede  
by Oliver Spencer









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Scandal Ballet at the Boy George  
Warren Street Squat, 1979

Photo credit - Graham Smith



Buying a synthesiser, Gary wrote what in 1981 became Spandau Ballet's first album, *Journeys to Glory*, which led to the band becoming a household name. During the 1980s, Spandau Ballet's success went from strength to strength, with Kemp writing many of the band's early hits in his parents' council house. In 1990, the band split – the same year that both Gary and Martin Kemp appeared in lead roles in the film *The Krays*, with Gary starring as Ronnie Kray. Tensions between the former bandmates spiralled over the publishing rights to songs, with singer Tony Hadley, drummer John Keeble, and saxophone player Steve Norman taking legal action against Kemp.

At this time, he lived in Highgate. By the early 2000s, many friends and acquaintances were beginning to move either to the then up-and-coming Primrose Hill or Marylebone, but Gary had other plans. "Even at this time, Fitzrovia was still run down. It's always been this kind of no man's land between

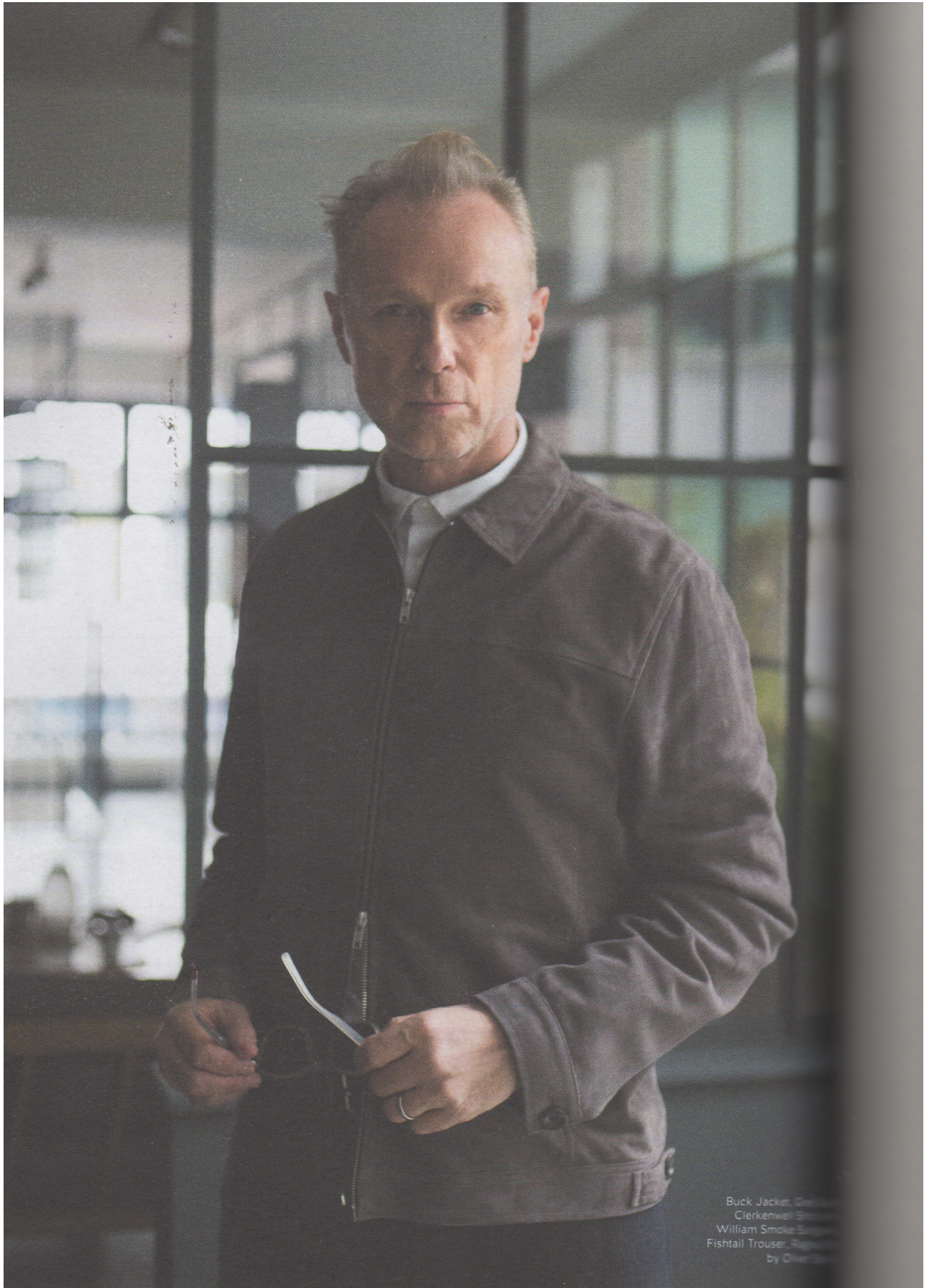
Soho and Regent's Park. It's always had a kind of roughness about it, and has only recently become a decidedly upmarket area," he says, "I like that Fitzrovia has a uniqueness about it. That's what's exciting about it; it's inviting and is creating its own social existence. I suppose, the truth is I'm quite fascinated with the history and the people of this place. I like the idea of walking around the area and sensing the ghosts that came before us: the Pre-Raphaelites, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf. A pet topic of mine is the furniture, architecture and art of 19th century London, especially the work of architect-designer E.W. Godwin, which I am an avid collector of," he says. Today, the area's still full of creatives. There's a very Downtown New York feel to the place now, that when I first moved here wasn't around. There's an artistic decadence about the area, which still lingers – it's the most artistically vibrant neighbourhood in London. Fitzrovia has continued to pass the artistic baton down to the new generations."





Jacket, Ragley Black;  
Tee, Thawn Burgundy/Multi;  
Trousers, Ragley Black;  
Shoes, Grey Suede  
by Spencer





Buck Jacket, Gilt  
Clerkenwell Street  
William Smoke Shop  
Fishtail Trousers, Rag & Bone  
by Oliver Bonacini



Gary moved to Fitzrovia about 15 years ago with his wife Lauren, having been drawn by the appeal of the area's Georgian streets and squares. "The architecture and space of Robert Adam's vision is embracing and wonderful. The square is like walking into St. Mark's Square after emerging from the back alleys of Venice: the space just opens – it's an embrace of oxygen. It's a real pleasure to have Fitzroy Square as the centre and crown-jewel of the area," says Gary. In 2009, Spandau Ballet reformed, with their reunion documented in *Soul Boys of the Western World* (2014), which Kemp co-produced. Following on from a nine-month world tour, relationships between band members are stronger than ever, and it looks as if there's more to come: Gary and his band-mates are now talking about recording a new album and continuing to play live in the near future. ■

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