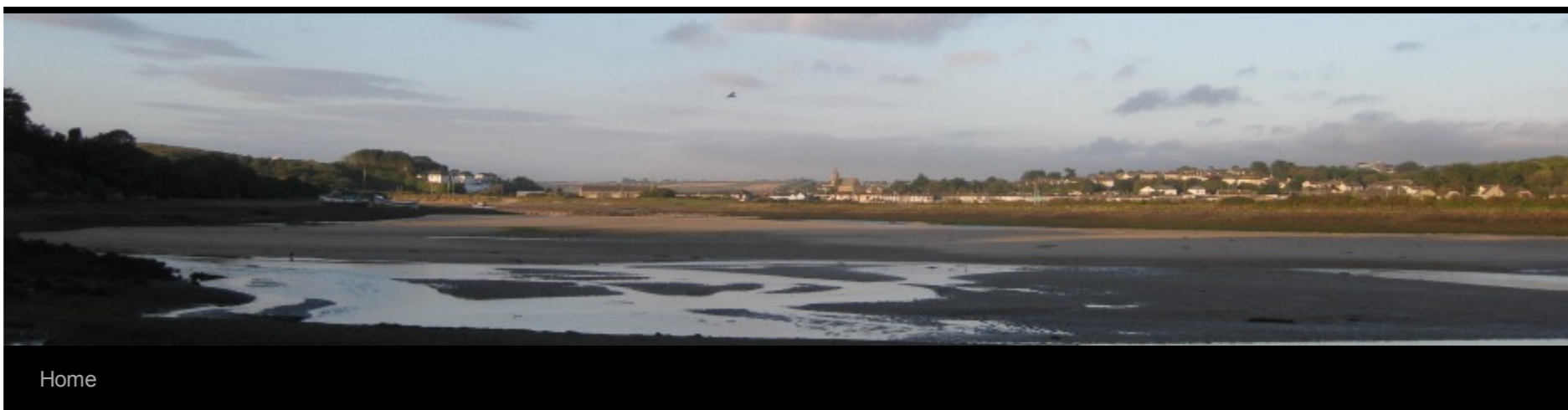


In which freelance writer Malcolm Wyatt jealously guards his own corner of web hyperspace, featuring interviews, reviews and rants involving big names from across the world of music, comedy, literature, film, TV, the arts, and sport.



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— Our first year with Tom — part one of the handsome dog's tale Still winning Hearts and Minds — in conversation with Carl Hunter —

Sex Pistols / The Clash, The Black Swan, Sheffield, July 4th, 1976 – an extract from This Day in Music's Guide to The Clash

Posted on July 4, 2019



'Things went wrong during the evening, and Mick had to come over and tune my guitar, but it didn't bother me. I just wanted to jump around, but Mick wanted it to be in tune.' (Paul Simonon, The Clash: Strummer, Jones, Simonon, Headon, 2008)

If it seems odd that two rival bands, not least with the perceived needle between Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and Clash manager Bernie Rhodes, should set out on a 300-plus mile round-trip to South Yorkshire for a one-off concert, it's worth noting the feeling within the UK punk rock scene and the idea of creating a revolutionary force within the industry that couldn't be denied. As Strummer put it in Westway to the World, 'You had to be in league with each other. There were so many enemies.'

Known locally as the Mucky Duck, later becoming The Boardwalk (gone by 2010), The Black Swan, Snig Hill, Sheffield, was a regular stop-off point for London pub-rockers like Brinsley Schwarz, Ducks Deluxe and Dr Feelgood – before punk took off, and played host to a Sex Pistols/Clash show during the long, hot summer of '76, in the process Mick Jones beating fellow ex-London SS bandmate Brian James to the stage with The Damned by two days, supporting the same headliners at the 100 Club. The Clash's live debut – the first of an estimated 600 or so gigs – was to be their only appearance that month, Rhodes' idea by all accounts. There were probably only a handful of people present, although eye-witnesses reported a sizeable crowd amid that summer's sweltering drought conditions. On the same day that America celebrated the bicentennial of its revolution against the British, tensions were already building in both band camps, and that night a disaffected Keith Levene reckons he approached the singer known as Johnny Rotten with a view to joining forces if the Pistols broke up, something they would do within a couple of years when Lydon launched Public Image Ltd.

Jones told John Robb's Louder Than War website, 'We went in the back of a removal truck, with the gear piled next to us. We all sat in the back. It had a gate on the back, open like an old army truck. It was quite hairy! The gig was in the back room of a pub. There were 50 people there. A couple of punks. It was interesting. Wherever you went, you could see a couple of them in the early times, then you'd see more all the time. They would tell their friends. It was a big thing. Very often people got it completely wrong, but in a way, you couldn't get it wrong. It wasn't formed. We were just starting to find out what it could be. When you're young and you think about it after in the post-match analysis. By the time everyone has sussed it, it was already over.'

'We were dressed in black and white. A couple of us had ties on. Black and white shirts with suity bits. It was punky style. Not good suits. A bit ripped, tight, slightly different. We would dress fairly straight and well behaved in a way. Maybe a little rip here, splash of colour here, a couple of pin-type things. Not safety pins. The look was still formulating. There was a bit of paint dribbled here and there. It had come off when we had to paint the rehearsal room. We got the paint from the car-spray place just over the road. Bernie was involved in garages. He used to go down there and get spray. We started spray-painting all the amps pink, and as we were painting everything we were getting covered in paint.'

'I guess that was our first look. Also, Glen (Matlock) has a claim to do this as well, because he had a pair of trousers that were paint-splattered, a la Pollock. So, he should take a bit of credit for it. The style thing came naturally through Paul. We were all into the style, especially Paul and I. Joe not so much, but we would always encourage each other.'

Paul Simonon, in The Clash: Strummer, Jones, Simonon, Headon, said, 'It was the first time I ever played on stage. The night before it felt frightening but once we were on the way I began larking about. I tied one of Keith's shoes to a piece of string and hung it out of the back of the van. The door had to be open anyway so we could breathe. There we were, sitting with all the amps and luggage, with a plimsole bouncing around behind us, all the cars behind us slowing down to avoid it. But the moment we walked out on stage it was like I was in my own living room. I felt really comfortable.'

On Westway to the World, the band mention Simonon messing up the intro of instrumental, 'Listen', due to nerves, leading to an on-stage crack-up, his bandmates unsure where to come in. And Strummer, using the microphone he'd made that death-defying climb to liberate from the English National Opera House two years earlier, gave an account to Jon Savage for England's Dreaming, saying, 'It was a Sunday, but 200 people turned up. They were very receptive.'



Keith Levene added, 'I remember John (Lydon) sitting miles away from the rest of the band members, looking miserable. And there's me sitting in another corner away from all my band members, looking miserable. I walk over to Lydon and talk to him. We knew each other, but don't know each other because we're the rival bands. We're both in the same scene but knew we were the best bands on the scene at the time. I said, 'I'm out of here after this gig'. Turns out I was a few gigs later, after The Roundhouse show. 'Do you want to get a band together if the Pistols ever end? Though it doesn't look like it at the moment. It looks like you could be the next Beatles. But if it ever changes. And there's no way I'm going to be in a band with Steve Jones.'

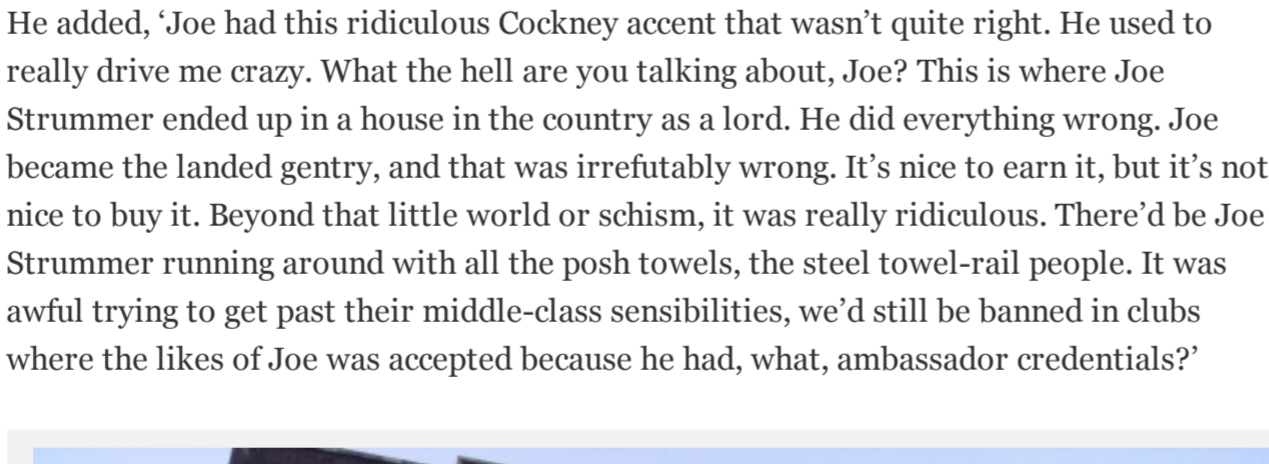
They played around a dozen songs, including the 101'ers 'Rabies (From the Dogs of Love)' and Mick Jones' 'Ooh, Baby, Ooh (It's Not Over)', neither featuring again. A fortnight later, a review followed in the NME, a letter from Reg Cliff – speculation suggesting it was written by someone in the band's immediate circle to drum up publicity – saying, 'I went to see the Sex Pistols and Clash (formerly 101'ers) for the first time. I was very, very disappointed. Both bands were crap. It's enough to turn you on to Demis Roussos. Clash were just a cacophonous brigade of noise. The bass guitarist had no idea how to play the instrument and even had to get another member of the band to tune it for him. They tried to play early '60s r'n'b and failed dismally. Dr Feelgood are not one of my favourite bands but I know they could have wiped the floor with Clash.' Yet he added, 'The Sex Pistols were even worse.'

Lydon had his own take on the gig in 1993's Rotten: The Autobiography, saying, 'Strummer and the rest of them had a horrible attitude at that gig. Keith Levene was in the band and was the only one who could actually hold a decent conversation with us. Malcolm and Bernie were competing, so Bernie was revving this band to take a very anti-Pistols stance – as if they were the real kings of punk. I've never liked The Clash. They weren't good songwriters. They'd run out of steam halfway through their gigs, because they would go so mad at the beginning. The Sex Pistols learned dynamics on stage. I credit Paul for that. He could break the tempo down. Strummer would start everything off and from there on in it was just full-on speed. That's not good enough, because you're not saying anything just by being fast. You can't dance to it, and you can hardly listen to it. It's unpleasant after half an hour.'

'To me The Clash looked and sounded like they were yelling at themselves about nothing in particular – a few trendy slogans stolen here and there from Karl Marx. The Clash introduced the competitive element that dragged everything down a little. It was never about that for us. We never saw ourselves as being in a punk movement. We saw ourselves as just the Pistols. What the rest of them were up to was neither here nor there. Quite frankly, they weren't there in the beginning. They laid none of the groundwork. They just came in and sat on our coat-tails.'

While mellowing in certain respects, Lydon still had little praise for The Clash speaking to Barry Cain in 2007, for Sulphate 77, saying, 'I always thought The Clash were a rip-off of Bernie Rhodes vs Malcolm McLaren and nothing to do with the bands. I loved The Clash as people, and always will. Just wonderful people. But it didn't mean I had to like their music. It was political sloganeering. I thought it was wrong for them. Mick Jones was someone I knew anyway from The Roundhouse. He was one of the kids who used to bunk in. Mick was Jimmy Page. He actually tried out to be the Sex Pistols' guitarist. Mick Jones was always around. I remember turning up at The Roundhouse when Osibisa were playing and Mick Jones got in because he was part of the Osibisa crowd. I thought, how the hell did he do that?'

He added, 'Joe had this ridiculous Cockney accent that wasn't quite right. He used to really drive me crazy. What the hell are you talking about, Joe? This is where Joe Strummer ended up in a house in the country as a lord. He did everything wrong. Joe became the landed gentry, and that was irrefutably wrong. It's nice to earn it, but it's not nice to buy it. Beyond that little world or schism, it was really ridiculous. There'd be Joe Strummer running around with all the post towels, the steel towel-rail people. It was awful trying to get past their middle-class sensibilities, we'd still be banned in clubs where the likes of Joe was accepted because he had, what, ambassador credentials?'



Mucky Duck: The Black Swan in Sheffield, four decades after The Clash made their live debut there, supporting the Sex Pistols (Photos: Malcolm Wyatt)

This is an extract from This Day in Music's Guide to The Clash, published by This Day in Music Books in late 2018. For more details, head to this feature here. There are still copies of This Day in Music's Guide to The Clash out there, and if you'd like to buy a personalised and signed edition at £12 plus p&p, just send me a note via this WriteWyattUK page link on Facebook or through a private message on this website. You can also buy direct via Amazon.

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