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How The Clash and I took punk underground in 1970s Camden

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The Clash band memorabilia on display at the Black Market Clash pop-up exhibition and store in Soho to mark the release of the group's remastered collected works Sound System box set and new best of collection, Hits Back.

Barry 'The Baker' Auguste was the roadie for punk rockers The Clash. Here, he recalls the band's formative years in Chalk Farm.



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Camden Catacombs

Back in 1976, Camden Town was just another abandoned area of north London which, after years of neglect, had been left to the drunks and winos that littered the pavements of Chalk Farm Road. In the middle of it – within a filthy, dilapidated former British Rail goods yard – sat the practice rooms, Rehearsal Rehearsals.

I arrived there with my schoolmates, The Subway Sect, to help them after Malcolm McLaren had seen fit to call the rooms' owner (and manager of The Clash) Bernie Rhodes to arrange for some much-needed rehearsal time. However, it was with anything but relish that we first encountered the cold, dank and unpleasant rehearsal space.

Its crumbling, musty atmosphere reminded me of my grandmother's old coal cellar and the damp cold penetrated everything, even in that hot month of August. Rehearsals was a place you didn't feel you wanted to hang around any longer than you had to. Though attempts had been made to make it bearable, it was a bleak and depressing environment.

Paul Simonon hung around the rehearsal room more than anyone else back then and was the first member of The Clash to befriend us. One night he said conspiratorially: "Want to see something really cool?" He led us to the back of the rehearsal room behind the jukebox, through the drapes that served as sound-baffling, and down a gentle ramp to a huge, ancient door.

After some difficulty we managed to get it open and it slid slowly back to reveal an extensive labyrinth of pitch-black tunnels and passageways. The deathly frozen air hit us instantly as we entered what seemed at first to be some kind of sinister medieval dungeon, reeking with years of mouldy disuse. Excitement gripped us and I ran back to my car to get a torch.

Our first tentative exploration of the tunnels revealed a maze of derelict, mildewed archways and passages – some tentative to dead-ends and others leading to enormous cavernous areas, as large as any warehouse. Tramway tracks cross some of the tunnels and water ran down walls or dripped from crumbling Victorian brickwork and ceilings.

Once Paul Smith (The Subway's drummer) had managed to get Sebastian Conran's disused little yellow moped running, we explored further and deeper into the seemingly endless caverns with our torches and would play hide and seek down there for hours with Paul Simonon. The sound of the little moped's engine getting ever closer and closer in the darkness heightened the macabre excitement of the chase to a spine-chilling fever pitch.

Fear

The all-encompassing blackness, pierced only by our torches, hinted at ghastly silent terrors behind the commonest shapes or objects and challenged our corporeal senses to the point at which boundaries dissolved. I cannot convey the nightmare-sensation of those vast subterranean passages. The inexorable fear of running into something unknown and unpleasant waiting to pounce in the darkness like a Lovecraft fiction fed into our imaginations and kept us from delving too deep into the fathomless excavation.

Unknown to us, this warren of cold menacing passages and tunnels hadn't known warmth or light for almost 100 years. Back then, they had echoed to the sound of an altogether different horror.

The Camden Catacombs, as they have become known today, were once owned by British Railways. They were constructed in the 19th century as stables for horses and pit ponies that were used to shunt railway wagoons.

The tunnels run under the Euston mainline, under the goods depot at Primrose Hill, beneath Gilbey's Bonded Warehouse on the Regent's Canal and under Camden Lock Market. Their route can be discerned by the distinctive cast-iron grilles set at fixed distances into the road surface; originally the only source of light for the poor over-worked horses living their wretched lives in the darkness below.

Some sections were demolished during the redevelopment of the area while others belong to Camden Market who dissuade access. The 650 or so railway horses were stabled in Chalk Farm Road (now Stables Market), and a labyrinth of tunnels built from 1865 allowed them to travel underground from their stables to their work in Camden Town Goods Yard so they did not have to cross the tracks. The same network of tunnels was used by other heavy horses, such as shire horses of Gilbey's, the wine and liquor company that owned warehouses and goods sheds with access to the railway.

In our innocence, and unaware of the sinister nightmare that these cold, dank cellars must have borne witness to, we continued amusing ourselves in the tunnels until around the time of the 100 Club Punk Festival, when everything on the burgeoning punk rock scene started to get very serious.

I remember Joe Strummer came down there a few times but Mick Jones and Terry Chimes never did to my knowledge – mostly it was Paul and us who spent many frenzied hours in the network of pitch-dark caverns deep in the dark recesses behind Rehearsals.

Trendy

Just two years later, The Clash would part company with Rhodes and bid goodbye to the cold, damp rehearsal rooms (if only for five years). So too would the Subway Sect when Rhodes fired the whole band in autumn 1978 and kept Vic Godard as songwriter and singer.

It seems ironic that the Camden Town area has become so trendy with its markets and expensive high street mainly because of the presence of a punk rock band for so short a time when, in fact, the railway yard complex was built more than 100 years before.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that our own temporary and ephemeral use of the warehouse was but a floating, vain appearance – a moment, a twinkling of an eye in the long history of those dark, disused warehouses. And now we too have become part of their past.

Read more of Auguste's The Clash memories at www.thebaker77.wordpress.com