

This is a top class interview from Gareth Holder from Aband called The Shapes . I'll admit I knew bugger all about them but The Shapes story is a story that was repeated all around the country as a result of people seeing the Sex Pistols. People went out and formed bands thousands of them literally and made music. The Shapes were a bit more successful than most . We all know ad nauseum the story of the Clash/Sex Pistols and Siouxsie. here is a story of a band in a minor league but a story that's just as interesting. [The Shapes was formed by me and the singer Seymour \(real name Ben\) in early 1977.](#) We had known each other for a number of years, having gone to the same school and hung with the same people. We were pretty much unaware of the whole punk thing until we went to agitate at Lanchester Polytechnic in the students union there in 1976. For the princely sum of 50p, we saw two bands, The Sex Pistols and The Clash. We even bootlegged the sets on tape. The crowd, such as it was, hated every second of it, but we loved it. It was just raw and dangerous. We promptly cut our hair, burned our record collection and hid ourselves off to London to Neal Street, and hung out at the Roxy for a glorious, if dirty period. We saw all the bands before the Bill Grundy thing, and before anyone had heard of punk other than those in the scene. I remember the Damned, Adverts, Nipple Erectors, Generation X, Johnny Moped, X Ray Spex, Models, etc. Then it was all gone and punk exploded onto the national scene. By this time, we had started The Shapes, and went through a million line up changes before we settled on the line up that had it's success. I'll answer all those little questions in the interview bit though.

Interview questions. Bear in mind some of the questions/answers may be used for other pages so don't worry if it seems I am asking questions for no reason to do with the band or such like.

## 2) What was the punk scene like in Leamington ?

Completely non-existent until we started it. Then there was a little coterie of bands that followed along. Amongst them were Flackoff, who released a single on our Sofa Records label, The Defendants , who copped an NME single of the week, (whose bass player joined the new version of the Specials), and Screens, who were like a British Devo. We formed the core of the bands that actually made records and toured.

## 3) How did people react to you, the clothes you wore etc. ?

Well, in a provincial town like Leamington, not too well. What was passable in London, was downright dangerous in Leamington Spa. Ben was cornered in a Chinese takeaway by a bunch of drunks, and damn near killed. He was in hospital for quite a time. I got beat up and lost teeth as well. In those days, you really did take your life in your hands being the first in your town. That was time of the Teds vs Punks nonsense too. It was really easy to pick up a good hiding just for going out. I had spiky green hair, ripped T's, drainpipes, Doc M's. The whole nine yards. Trouble was, for the longest time, it was only me and Ben, and the bass player from Flackoff that was like that. 4) How did you come to form a band ?

Pretty much, we got fired up by the whole London thing. I had been in bands before, and was already a bass player. I was determined to start a punk band. Ben had never been in a band before, but he had the front to be the singer and he loved the attention. We started getting others involved, but it wasn't easy. Everyone else just wasn't as committed to the punk thing as we were. They were almost frightened to do the job. They would turn up to gigs in flares and bomber jackets with their "punk" clothes in a bag. Me and Ben would just turn up, play and leave. There were a lot of bands like that in '77. A couple of punks, and then some twerp with long hair and a beard somewhere. Finally, we got signed to EMI, and it was a disaster. They wanted us to front for some other band of hippies, and me and Ben refused. The others wanted to do it, so we took the opportunity to ditch them and ran off with the name. We started our own label, Sofa Records, and held out for the right people to join us, which they did. Then we recorded the first single and it all took off from there.

## 5) How would you describe your music ?

At first, we ran through every cliché in the book, but slowly, we started developing a style. We couldn't be serious if our lives depended on it, and we found that we had a knack for writing catchy punk/pop with silly themes. We were compared to The Rezillos more than once, although our sound was more frenetic and buzzsaw than theirs. It was a fair thing though, we were in the same vein as them.

## 6) How did you arrive at your name the Shapes ?

You know, I have no idea. I think it was because Ben called himself Wreck Tangle for a while. Mind you, I spent my time in The Shapes as Brian Helicopter, so I can't really complain about him.

## 7) How did you get your deal ? and where did you see yourself going ?

Well, as I said, we got signed by EMI. They had no fucking idea of what to do with us. They tried to get us to front a song written by some old fart that they thought was punk. It was a joke of a thing called "My Hero". They even got us to record a song written by them called "Truck Drivin' Man" I'm fucking serious. I just couldn't handle it and walked out. Ben followed on. Without us, there was no Shapes, as the others just thought the EMI thing was wonderful. They ended up working with Wishbone Ash or something, so I rest my case. We owned the name though, and decided to start over. We got taught a few valuable lessons there about the business, and part of the reasons that we never got as far as we could have, was that we never could trust major companies again. As to where we were going, we really didn't have a plan, we just wanted to play as much as possible and see what happened. We did hook up with Good Vibrations for our second single though.

8) How did it end ? It never really did. We just stopped playing. Punk took a different turn with bands like the Exploited and Discharge, and Two Tone was the new thing. We didn't fit in any more, as we were definitely old school punks. The work dried up, and we just decided to call it a day. Even after 20 years, we still see each other and go for drinks when I'm back in the UK.

9) best Shapes song and why ? I like Business Calls myself. It's classic Shapes. It was recorded first on a John Peel session, and it's a classic G, C, D, E punk refrain, played way too fast with an attack that borders suspiciously on the heavy metal, like all good punk did, with Ben's daft lyric on it. Blastoff, our second single is something that doesn't happen today, that is, going into a studio and pretty much improvising a song and leaving it there, warts and all. It's a little slice of 8 track anarchy. As for our time as a four piece, I'd say Let's Go (to Planet Skaro). I love 'em all really. 10) best moment in the shapes ? Hearing our single on Radio One for the first time in the company of all the bands I admired, then John Peel saying, "That was really great, we need to get The Shapes in for a session". I just sat on my bed stunned. We'd been knocked back so many times, and here we were getting recognition for the first time. 20 years on, I still get a chill thinking about it. 11) Any moments of hilarity / disasters ? Always. We were a fucking disaster area. There were so many times we self destructed on stage it wasn't true. Always fun for the audience though. I remember Ben stage diving at the Marquee, and getting carried over the heads of the crowd out the door and into the street, where the doorman wouldn't let him back in. We continued to play the intro to the song until he paid and rejoined us. In Belfast, we got chased in to burger bar, and had to lock ourselves in until the head of Virgin in Ireland rescued us. One the way to one gig, the car caught fire. Tim the guitarist refused to get out on the grounds that as we didn't believe him earlier when he said he could smell burning, he was going to sit right there to teach us all a lesson. He was a bit like was was Tim. Still my closest friend after 20 years. There's just too many to count really. We were always doing some incredibly stupid or dangerous thing for a laugh. We were just country idiots really. [About the times](#) 1) We read a lot about the Roxy club being this and that. If you can give us a picture of what it was like to actually play down there, .....the crowd, the clothes, atmosphere, gob, abuse etc. Other punky places ? The Roxy was a funny old place. Lots of posers as I seem to remember. Starry eyed provincial wannabes like us, and the elite. A lot of kids in between come to check it out. Long hair, flares, but with a dog collar on to show that they were trying to fit in. In the beginning, it was a riot of competing bands and styles. You had the Bromley mob, who were quite close, but quite stuck up, and the yob element who caused trouble. There wasn't too much gobbing in the start, but that got going later by the yob element. I hated that bit about playing. The Roxy itself was quite small, low ceilings, sticky floor, falling apart. A true underground club. When The Adverts were playing, The Damned would be propping up the bar. When Generation X were playing, (in fact they were the first band to play the Roxy), we'd all be throwing shit at them, because even then, Billy Idol was a wanker. Once the punk thing took off, the Roxy was doomed. It couldn't really cope with crowds, and the owner didn't want to keep the lease. For a shining moment though, before the hype, it was a magic, filthy place. The place where the seed took root. The whole movement spread out from there once it closed. 2) What sort of clubs did you frequent ? Anywhere where a band played. Apart from places like the Roxy, there weren't really any places like it elsewhere. You went to a club on "punk" night. There was a whole network of clubs in the UK that were at the front of the movement, and who weren't afraid to book a punk band. Clubs like The Boogie House in Norwich, Sandpipers in Nottingham, Erics in Liverpool, Mr Georges in Coventry ( where I saw the Pistols again with Sid doing a secret gig), the Hacienda in Manchester, Nuneaton 77 club ( a great club where the band had to walk through the crowd to get to the stage). I went anywhere and everywhere a punk band played. I saw them all. How I got home was anyone's guess. Hitch, doss, walk, hide in the bogs in a train to avoid paying. I'm too old for that now though. 3) What were the bands like attitude wise that you supported / headlined ? Some good, some bad, some fucking abysmal. We always treated our supports like mates. We remember how much of a difference that made to us when we were supporting bands. The worst was The Cure. They treated us like shit. Would let us use a dressing room, turned the lights out when we played etc. I remember our drummer clocking Lol Tolhurst because he was being a shit. I was worried at the time, but now I wish I'd hit him too. The Photos were very good to us. Always treated us well. It think it was because they were from Evesham, which is close to, and not unlike Leamington Spa. Another bunch of Midlands tossers really, just like us. The Fall were really miserable, which really isn't surprising. The guitarist took the piss out of our guitarist's Marshall amp. Halfway through their set, his blew up, and he had to come and ask to borrow it. As we had nicked all their beer, we felt we had to agree. The Damned were fun, although I never cared for Algy Ward myself. Bit of a fat git really. The Mekons were so right on it hurt to talk to them sometimes, but they were genuine nice people. The Angelic Upstarts were nice blokes too when you got to know them. Mensi was quite the polite gentleman. 999 were all about 100 years old. Spizz made me laugh. His mum used to run him to gigs and pick him up afterwards. Our guitarist hit him. This is beginning to sound like we were always duffing up bands, but that's the only two I remember. Who else ? Talk Talk were complete bastards. We even supported 14 piece disco sensation Gonzalez. What were we thinking ? We would play anywhere. That last gig won the London Evening Standard award for the worst pairing of bands seen on a London stage in 1979.

4) Do you remember much of the Killjoys ? Quite a bit really. If I had known what a ponce Kevin Rowland was going to turn into, I would have thumped him too. (see how we were?) They were great. The guitarist wore a priest's outfit I remember. Gil was really good fun too. I still have my Killjoys single. It's one of my favourites. I remember it well, because it was The Shapes first ever gig. The bill was ; Spizz, The Shapes, The Killjoys and The Models. All for 50p. Like I said, it was magic in them days. Sorry to sound like an old fart.

You mentioned the Punk pecking order. Where were the Shapes in this ? Oh, way fucking down. We weren't from London, we weren't posers, and the more arty side of all completely passed us by. We didn't put on airs and graces. We turned up, plugged in in what we wore, played. Then climbed off stage to hit the bar. We really were a bunch of Midlands tossers, completely unpretentious. It was this that actually helped us in a way, because we were easy to connect to. We weren't showbiz at all. Nobody ever looked at the Shapes and thought "Brecht", or "Weimar" like they did with the Banshees. They tended to think "Tossers", and "Arseholes". I mean, we were just caught up in the whole thing. We were just happy to play. We used to do some blistering gigs too, that were always on the point of imploding. They often did too , inspectacular fashion. A bit like the Damned in a way, without the Croydon accents. As for the name. Everybody was The this or The that. We had been through a bunch of names, all of them dumb punk names. The Shapes came from Ben at a time I didn't have the energy to argue with him about it. It was more accepted due to the fact that he was prepared to do all the artwork for stuff, so I, being a lazy sod, let him.

The Vortex was a dump. Mind you, so was the Roxy, but I never really liked the Vortex. It just didn't have the atmosphere. It seem to remember more aggro at the Vortex. The Roxy could get wild, but I don't recall any of the huge bust ups like sometimes happened at the Vortex. Of course, thanks to the likes of Sham 69 and Co not making a stand against violence and rightwing involvement until it was way too late, there was a time when going to \*any\* gig could result in violence. It was the violence at gigs that was one of the things that killed off the old punk. When the Pistols played and there was a ruck, it was usually outside casuals or teds or some other mob that had come to "sort out the punks", and we stuck together in the face of it. Then it started with skins and glue bag casualties starting fights amongst the punks at the gigs, and the movement, such as it was, started to fracture and eat itself. I remember refusing to play at one gig whilst on stage, because of abuse fight going on. I remember saying, "excuse me gentlemen, but is our playing interrupting your fighting ?". I just thought "fuck it", I'm here as an aunt sally just to provide a soundtrack for these morons. I know a lot of other bands that felt the same. I fucking hated OI music, and the bands that did nothing to stop the violence at gigs. That idiot Pursey had his head so far up his arse it wasn't true. He just didn't want to deal with it. He'd be singing "If the Kids are United" and the whole fucking place would be a war zone while he was doing it. Maybe I'm being a bit unfair to him, but they could really have done more to control the situation in my view. I got to the point where I would just drop the bass and walk off, with a "call me when you're finished" attitude. Tim the guitarist would sometimes just dive right in on top and start sorting them the fuck out. HE had less patience with it all than I did. As for the Bromley contingent. I always thought they were a bunch of middle class art school types. Quite stuck up really. I knew this as basically, that's what we all were. The disaffected fans of Roxy Music and David Bowie. Little William Broad was a big tosser even then, before he started calling himself Billy Idol. We used to call him the punk Cliff Richard, because that's what we thought he looked like. I liked Bob Andrews and Mark Laff though. Mark especially was quite nuts. I ended up living in a house where Bob had the room next door, and Brian James lived upstairs. I mean, we didn't hate them or anything, but even in those days, there was an "elite" in the punk circles, and The Shapes weren't in it. Sting sometimes recounts a story about how Dave Vanian snubbed him at the Roxy. I guess he has the last laugh, but I'll bet you Vanian would still snub him today. I would too, and my mum used to look after his kids. I remember the Pistols as not having much in common with each other, other than the band. Cook and Jones were the two wide boy types. Cook was OK, but Jones never struck me as being the nicest of blokes. Matlock left no impression on me at all, and Rotten was just a little intense and hostile. I remember having a drink with him in early 77. I seem to remember, and hespent most of the time burning his forearms with a cigarette. It was either him or one of The Clash's hangers on. It all gets a bit fuzzy after a while. Funny what comes back to you as you remember. I met as many bands in motorway service area as I did at gigs. In the middle of the night, you'd all see each other on the way home from gigs. I remember being at Toddington at about 2:00 a.m. with just The Shapes, Fashion, and Stiff Little Fingers in the cafe.