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Sex Pistols: Anarchy In The UK

Home

Making Anarchy

Mike Thorne Interview

Jubilee Boxed Set

Anarchy In The UK

There's no point in asking
You'll get no reply

Thorne's personal memoir about the making of *Anarchy* and the wild, unique social events surrounding it.

In 2002, it's now 26 years since London's 1976 summer of punk, a season with one of the most severe water shortages the city has ever experienced. The Sex Pistols were the flag-bearers for the new punk action, which quickly woke me up and provoked for my third childhood (the second was in the late sixties). Recently, things don't seem to have changed so quickly and as radically. Reach back 26 years from 1976 and you are not even hearing Bill Haley and the Comets' *Rock Around The Clock* and the invention of Teddy Boys. In the UK, post World-War Two food rationing would have been a recent memory: last year. Yet, for many in the year 2002, including those not even alive when they were provoking mayhem, the Sex Pistols and their related ideals are still a potent force. Eat your heart out, transient politicians.

In June 1976, I had been a starter A&R man at EMI Records, London for just a few months, joining after deciding on a more stimulating career pattern and jumping ship from editing *Studio Sound*. The record business was alien territory for me, even though I had worked in a top London rock/roll studio (De Lane Lea Music) and written/edited articles on pop and classical music and related technologies. Record companies had always seemed bright, bouncy places with intimidatingly beautiful receptionists doing their nails loudly and impenetrably. At least EMI employed military veterans as front-of-house security.

Reflecting the music of the early seventies, A&R had fallen into some unadventurous routines, which I tried to follow after looking around in a desperate newbie attempt to figure out how to fit in. The old boy network was cozily in place, and most hard work seemed to be lifting drinks at the Marquee club on Wardour Street (tired) or the Speakeasy on Margaret Street (well past the sell-by date, but open late and a collision zone between new and old rock/roll characters). I tried on the schmoozing routine for size for a few weeks. It didn't really fit, so I started following my innocent nose toward music that seemed to work.

Thus, I was lucky to be one of the tiny group of record people to stumble on punk rock in its earliest days. The revolution, which was not being televised, was at heart just as innocent as I was, people trying out what felt like brand new things and ideas without quite knowing where they were going. That's the intellectual retrospective, of course. A lot of it was just about being brats and having a provocatively good time, although that in itself was to become a novel manifesto.



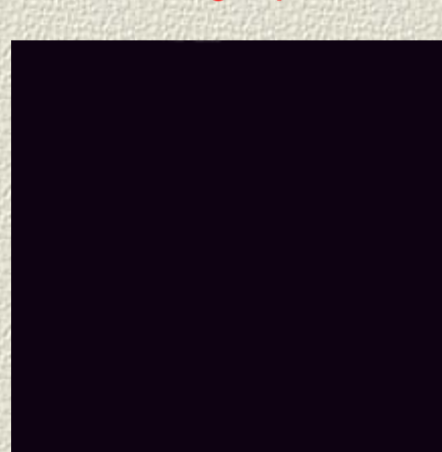
Although obsessed with music, I never listened to radio and rarely read the [music weekly magazine] comics (with the occasional, honorable exception of the then-articulate NME). So I hadn't even seen the front-cover *Melody Maker* picture of the Pistols, which had impressed the business but had not moved them towards appreciating the group's music and stance. But I was the one who picked up the phone to Malcolm McLaren, their manager, and went to the now-legendary 100 Club two-day 'festival' of punk rock. I arrived to see the Sex Pistols after checking out EMI act Giggles at the Marquee (managed by Tom Watson who would later guide the Pet Shop Boys: tiny world). Oddly, even though Giggles were an energetic (although rather contrived) pop band, their style of delivering simple, direct, non-sentimental songs was not too removed from the Pistols'. It takes hindsight to see the similarities.

If remembering correctly, I couldn't persuade any colleagues to stagger over to Oxford Street from the Marquee at the bottom of Wardour Street. At this distance, I can't remember the other groups' performances, even though they were from future luminaries I would get to know like the Damned and Siouxsie and the Banshees. But I do remember the Pistols as being immediate and challenging. They were on home ground, and the 100 Club would feature them nine times in 1976, only ending after the group became publicly too outrageous as the favorite demons of the tabloid press.

After taking a deep breath, I eventually gave my boss, Nick Mobbs, a copy of the demos, which had been recorded by their roadie Dave Goodman and were convincing musically even if not so good sonically. Nick didn't take much convincing. He was an inveterate hippie, culturally one of the prime targets for the new punks, (and at that time I had hair half-way down my back). But Nick had seen new, changing music emerge first-hand when founding Vertigo and then Harvest Records (the latter within EMI). He knew the symptoms. He knew new, and understood well that it didn't depend on hair style or past affiliation.

On the afternoon of September 27, we took the train to Doncaster: the Leeds Pullman, very pleasant. The group played at the Outlook Club, jammed to about one-quarter capacity, audience reaction varying between wild enthusiasm, tepid applause (mostly) and irritation at any interrupted lager consumption. But the group did their energetic thing, alternately working and (mostly) antagonizing the crowd. We enjoyed it, made brief, formal backstage introductions and agreed to meet back in London the following week.

Within a short time, Malcolm had succeeded in working the press and stirring up more than a little interest. There were only two record companies seriously interested in the group, however: ourselves and Polydor (whose A&R was led by Chris Parry, a perceptive A&R person who would later manage, among others, the Cure). Malcolm played the two off against each other brilliantly, ultimately forcing EMI's legal department to sit down uncharacteristically quickly and finalize the contract over a long afternoon. There was, as he pointed out, no earthly reason why contracts should take so long to be formalized, even though they always did. Malcolm made EMI feel as if they were just getting in under the wire ahead of Polydor. The deal was done, and the group's sessions at Lansdowne Studios the following weekend were promptly confirmed.



The original jacket for the UK release.

Unfortunately, they were not the Pistols' sessions. They were certainly not EMI's sessions. They were Polydor's sessions. Chris Parry treated me to one of the most outraged phone calls I have ever experienced. Not only had we snatched his group away from him, when he thought he had a done deal, we'd heisted his booked sessions as well. It was inevitable that we fell into innocent sniggering at such unbridled and unmoderated outrage. There you go. Much of it was thanks to my sailing through the competition blissfully ignorant of any appropriate etiquette. I should have done that more often, but then I got too sensitive.

I had asked Nick that I be the A&R man for the group, an easy deal since, although the others liked the attitude, they didn't altogether go for the music and found the scene a little intimidating. Dutifully off I went the next Sunday to Lansdowne Studios in west London, arriving mid-afternoon. Ever the obliging theatrical animal, when I showed up Mr Malcolm McLaren sprayed 'EMI'S HERE' with shaving cream on the control room window. (Later, I wondered who would carry such equipment in their briefcase on a normal workday.) I hadn't really thought of myself as Establishment, but it was nice to get noticed. Not much music would be captured on tape that afternoon.

Anarchy In The UK was to be their first single. Its sentiment is reflected in the record sleeve (above left). Since they had played it so many times on stage and in extreme circumstances, and since the arrangement seemed absolutely fine to me, I had assumed that recording would be a straightforward process and was comfortable that Dave Goodman, their sound engineer, handled the production process. What I found that day was lost and directionless, creating nothing but a big, expensive pile of two-inch tape in the corner. Dave had said to the band that it was great tactics, since we (the studio crew) could reuse it later. I thought it was rather an expensive way to acquire tape. I would have appreciated a finished stereo recording.

The drifting continued for several more session days, transferring to Wessex Studios, and then we had to stop. The session's participants were so lost that they couldn't get a handle on a three minute song that the group could originally play in their sleep. Malcolm called up a few days afterwards. He had been in touch with Chris Thomas, whose credits included Roxy Music (medium), John Cale (good) and Procul Harum and Badfinger (suspect).

Malcolm and I turned up at Chris' house in Ealing with the roughs-so-far, not to the delight of his Japanese then-wife Mika, of Tokyo's progressive Sadistic Mika Band (good), who showed very clearly that she wasn't delighted with yet another surprise disruption. Record producers, as I can confirm personally, have a very high divorce rate, thanks to an erratic life often way beyond their own control. Off we all went to Wessex Studios, which by coincidence was also Chris's haunt, where he listened to the multitracks. He took the job (he would have been silly not to), and said he preferred to re-record rather than deal with the story so far.

Bill Price, one of London's most established rock/roll engineers and a thoroughly grounded EMI alumnus, was hired and Chris worked efficiently and relatively quickly with him, mostly at Wessex but partly at Rampart Studios in Battersea (then owned by the Who). The sessions went smoothly, but were not without tension. A Rampart evening sticks particularly in mind, where I went down to hear progress, but was given it at afterburner volume (an old trick to fool naive record company types). Johnny Rotten was in brutal form, relentlessly torturing journalist Jane Suck, who might have been developing other ideas for evening entertainment with a bottle of Bulls Blood (red wine fash at the time) ready for action.

The end result was a more energetic and forceful version of the arrangement they had played live. The only awkward turn was when Chris Thomas instigated a curious, jitteringly meandering and unfocussed guitar solo to replace its rhythm break after the second chorus. In his words: "I just told him to go crazy". The choppy original was reinserted after my corporate objection and the crowds were happy again. Back to punk principles.

The sessions created quite an interest: why was such a raucous and apparently unpolished group getting such treatment? At one point, I turned round in Wessex Studio One control room to see Brian May and Queen framed in the doorway, looking very non-punk in a light brown fur coat. But he, like many who worked close to the band (Queen had been working at Wessex also) got the plot. There was a considerable ground swell of support for what the Pistols were doing. Eventually, the final mix was achieved at Wessex after a very late finish. I sat quietly in the back of the control room and eventually left with a copy of the master.

The weekly A&R presentation meeting was at 10.30am, not a punk rock time under the best of circumstances. I suppose I might have enjoyed the stunned expressions of the marketing department more if I'd had more sleep. I thought it was terrific. 'I'll put my shirt on this one.' I confidently pronounced, overlooking my own completely nonexistent track record from a position lying on the floor in a limp and smelly (if cool) Biba T shirt (the chairs were all taken when I was the last to arrive). My boss Nick liked it, though. Could have been a real horror show, but he saved me.



The release routines built up, with the usual radio and television shows arranged, along with the 'Anarchy Tour', the Pistols taking it in turns with the Clash, the Damned and Johnny Thunders' Heartbreakers to headline in a demonstration of cooperation and solidarity that would soon fall apart. T-shirts were made, posters printed. The big day came, and the first 5000 copies were issued in a special plain black bag (I scored two boxes to give away, and have just one battered copy left now, when I have learned to moderate generosity).

Everything was going smoothly, and I arranged with the group to meet one morning to discuss the next single, and booked the following Saturday afternoon to work with them on demos of candidates for the next single which had to be a little easier on the company's ears than Dave Goodman's originals. Then the real fun started. The meeting would start late. Several days late.

On my slow mental morning, I dragged myself into EMI's Manchester Square offices after walking slowly from the Bond Street tube (subway) station. There were always a few star-spotters hanging around, but I was dimly aware of having to step around more wide-eyed humanity than usual that day. I was still barely conscious as I dragged myself into my poky little office (being the new guy) and sat down to come around with a nice cup of tea. Faces at the door. Had I seen the TV last night and the papers today? No, and skimming the *Guardian*. No, not the *Daily Mirror*, certainly not in depth. So much for street credibility.

On family prime-time the previous evening, the pompous, self-important and (crucially) drunk Bill Grundy had interviewed the Pistols, who were a last-minute substitution for Queen (EMI label mates). Clearly, Grundy had been looking forward to the big-time establishment rockers (if only he knew) who would do their polite thing and play the game. The brief interview transcript was printed in full on the front page of the *Mirror*. It ended with Grundy making an apparently lecherous, incompetent pass at one of the small crowd of supporters that had gone down to the studios and taken full advantage of the hospitality suite, provoking a mutter. He challenged them to repeat it and say something outrageous. 'You dirty little fucker' were Steve Jones' immediate *bons mots*.

The nation went into outrage overdrive. Innocent times, a whole generation ago in 1976. To provide context, understand that the country had only just recovered from Kenneth Tynan saying 'fuck' as a cultural gesture on a late-night arts program in the early sixties (others have claimed to be the first to the broadcast filth, but he claimed the distinction). Big fucking deal, we think now.

The group arrived late for our meeting, out of breath. John had walked the length of Oxford Street from their rehearsal studio off Denmark Street in the West End, a bold move which he survived, although later he would be physically attacked (the rough old dance-hall thing was to go after the band to impress the mates and the girls). I asked Malcolm what he thought should be next. 'I don't know. It's out of control now.' Honest. The action was getting too robust even for punk's own Machiavelli. We fixed the time for the demos next Saturday, to be recorded in the cozy eight-track studio in the basement under the Manchester Square offices, and cleared off.



I arrived an hour before the session, since I was running it alone and needed setup time. Manchester Square seemed deserted. The security guard let me in, then lowered his voice and adopted a confidential stance. 'Orders from above. They told me to lock all the doors off the staircase [the very staircase where the Beatles had their first album cover shot taken]. No reflection on you, Mike.' Thanks, mate. Off to make sure that the setup was completed well in advance of them turning up. They were often irritable with each other, and I didn't want to give further excuse or to be seen wanting in what I had to do.

As it happened the session went along more than efficiently, although the verbal exchanges were as expected, and I left them edited in the final tape (they were excised later). 'Hold it!' (Glen) 'Hold it yourself.' (John) Always the happy family. It was also smooth technically, although I had a moment puzzling over something or other while the band were warming up in the studio. I was suddenly aware of a presence to my left. 'Everything OK, Mike?' Eyes darting around the perfectly ordinary and civilized session. 'Yes, er, thanks.' I have often wondered what we should have done to fulfill the expectations of 'them above'. Could have been another good contrived press story.

The results were predictably exciting, arriving seemingly effortlessly in four hours' recording. I didn't bother to lay in the backing vocals, since the point of each song was made. I didn't want to steal the thunder of the forthcoming master sessions by completing yet another recording of these songs, and (crucially) we all wanted to start work on our respective Saturday nights. That's a pity, since I heard later that they were bootlegged (with the cleaned up version of the bits between the tracks). *Pretty Vacant* was to be the next single.

Pretty Vacant, largely written by Glen Matlock was the most immediate of all their songs, a timeless, blank anthem that still sounded fresh when I did my own version of it (sung in 1998 by Kit Hain, who was by coincidence also signed to EMI in the Pistols' time). It was hard to get away from it. Walking into the EMI toilets, you'd always be struck by rows of stalls labeled 'VACANT', 'VACANT', 'VACANT'. There, the tune's starting up again.

The wheels really fell off for the tour. Even before the first gig was to have been played (under very different circumstances from their last time out), cancellations were growing. Vivid memories remain of an almost empty hall in Derby on an unseasonably warm afternoon. Holy except for the promoter, Dave Cork, who was showing his business quickly disintegrate and was right on the edge of falling apart. And then on to the empty room just outside the Midlands railway town, with group, manager and record company (me) huddled in one small room while the press literally banged on the door and relentlessly rang the phone. Increasingly large cash offers were made (consistently refused) by one journalist desperate to fill his Sunday paper's double-page spread that the editor had allocated without a reserve story.

Derby didn't hear music that night. The mayor and council had asked for a private performance so that they could judge whether to grant permission or not. Piss off. Malcolm was probably more politely elegant in his communications with them.

With the tension building, I had to follow the bandwagon to Leeds. So much for the birthday treat for my girlfriend Jo. ('Hi, er, I'm in Leeds.') Although permission had been debated at length in the mayor's chambers, the first gig of the tour had been given the go-ahead, and would be a resounding success. I vaguely remember the Pistols' performance, although it was the Damned who were the standouts that night. The day before, I had called EMI's general manager, Paul Watts, to report on the situation, and I suggested that it would be good for morale and a thoughtful gesture by the company if we picked up the tab for a nice relaxing dinner at the city hotel where we were all staying the night before the performance. Good idea, he said.



We were probably 24 around the table, which I had guaranteed to the hotel. There had been an incident earlier where Steve had naively consented to smash a plant-pot for a gentleman of the press, but we avoided the flash point that would give the hacks another shock/horror opportunity. Everyone settled down comfortably, some more than others as Jerry Nolan (the Heartbreakers' drummer) and Johnny Thunders repeated and repeated their orders for triple vodkas on the rocks. (British shots are very short, but also very expensive thanks to the tax, but these drinks were still substantial.)

The mood was great, upbeat and positive, and Malcolm and I had to implore everyone to hold it down only once every 15 minutes or so. But there was a queasy feeling in the stomach when the rolls started flying. At the back of the dining room, not far from the hovering gang of the press corps, were two Leeds city councilmen. The silent prayer that they wouldn't get struck on the head worked nicely, and I got religion for at least ten minutes. Gigs get canceled for less than that when local, often self-important dignitaries are involved.

The tour staggered through a few more gigs, not good for business on the road but terrific for record sales. The outrage started to percolate even further through, to 'them above'. And then up to the Chairman's office. EMI was a pillar of the establishment at that time, and the biggest chiefs might reasonably expect an eventual mention in the New Year Honors list and letters to add to the end of their name. But here were these noisy children causing outrage and singing sacrilegious songs about our nice Queen in the year before her lovely Silver Jubilee.

This would simply not do. Rumors started circulating that top management would ultimately drop them from the label, over the protests of the A&R and Marketing departments, all of whom were now unanimously enjoying the show as well as watching records pour out of the stores. Nick Mobbs had an evening meeting with the caricature of a stuffy Chairman, (Sir) John Read (absolutely no relation of the big-time music-artist manager). Nick wore his dark blue suit and a quiet tie, although the hair didn't quite cooperate. Vague questions were asked, and no judgment offered or even hinted at. Going through the motions, we thought.

The last time I saw the tour was in Cleethorpes, a blue collar seaside resort in Lincolnshire, on the east coast of middle England. I remember an express train from Kings Cross and then shivering through the change to a local on a bare platform with snow slanting sideways. It was appropriate that they played at the Winter Gardens, because the rain and sleet were even more raging than the sea was in the company of just one other misfit, a lonely traveling salesman. Although I was handling the company's most newsworthy group, I still hadn't been granted a company car. That night, the Pistols were anxious, but the Clash were outstanding. I had no reassurances to offer on behalf of Sir John. The hall was about half full, but cheerful and involved. The group were unsettled and apprehensive, even John, but I couldn't read the tea leaves in the cup at Manchester Square.

The year ended in a flurry of even worse weather. I was in the jolly Oxfordshire countryside producing my first major-label album at the Virgin Records' Manor Studios. One day, in a snowy day of courtesy, country rider Richard Branson delivered the afternoon tea to the studio. Shortly afterwards, the phone went. It was Nick, forewarning me that the announcement was about to go out that EMI Records was dropping the Sex Pistols. Those establishment decorations and old boy connections would be safe, and EMI's loss would be Richard's gain. The next single (after a spectacular ten-day pause at A&M Records during which punk rock proved too much for their delicate sensibilities) would be on Virgin Records. *God Save The Queen* would be nicely in time for the Jubilee.

— MT, revised March 31 2002