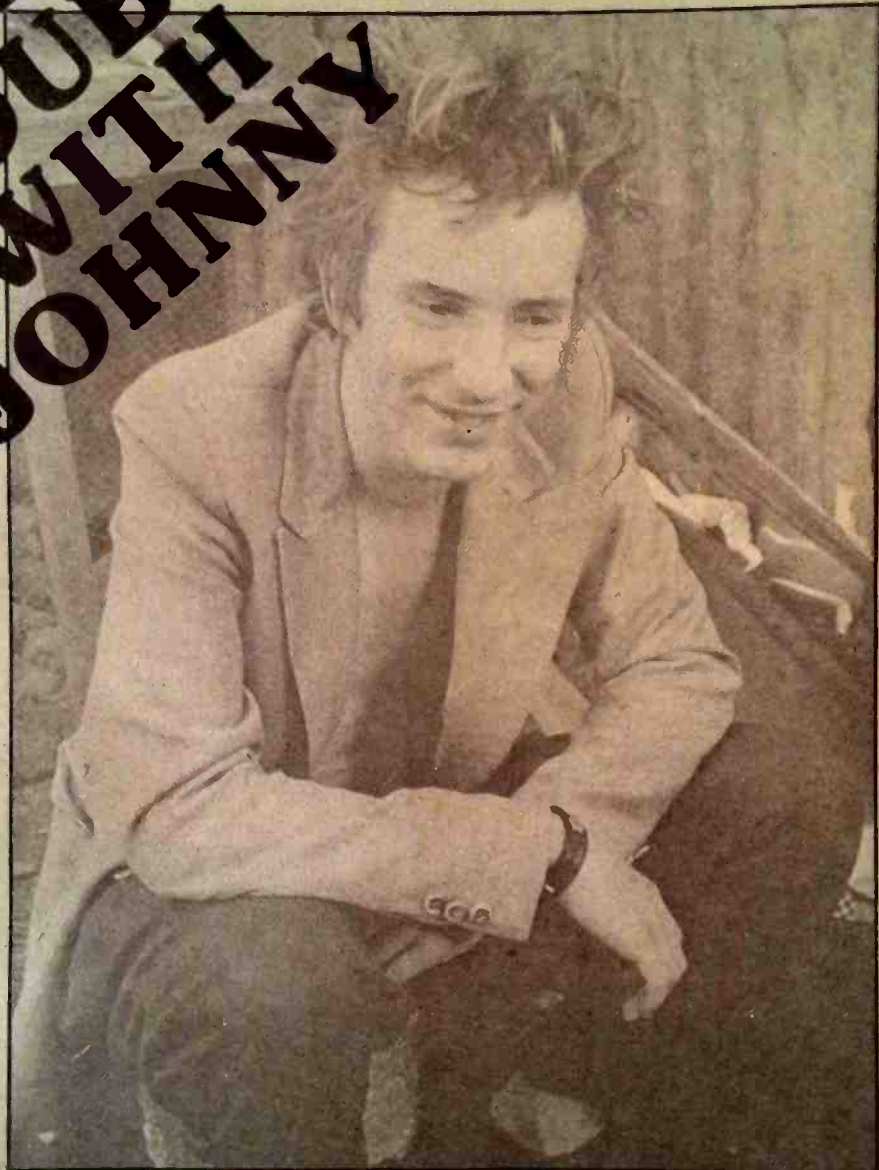


ANDREW COURTNEY had a film script to show to JOHNNY ROTTEN. After talking to the man of many voices, they agreed to meet. Here is what took place.

TROUBLE WITH JOHNNY



I DIALLED ON a Wednesday afternoon from Brixton to speak to an Outlaw. The call was answered and I spent 2p. The story began.

A: Can I speak to Johnny Rotten, please?
Voice: Who's that?
A: My name is Andy Courtney.
Voice: (Pause and silence). Never heard of yer. Who gave you this number?
A: (I give a fictitious name).
Voice: Who's she?
A: He looks a bit like McLaren.
Voice: Don't know him. Who are you in the world anyway?
A: Er, do I have to be Eric Clapton to ring this number? Who are you?
Voice: I'm John's friend and he's not here. What's your business?
A: I want to know if he's interested in appearing in a film I'm making.
Voice: Yeh, he might be. What's it about - I'll tell him.
A: It takes the piss out of the Pistols.
Voice: They need it taking.
A: Only they're called the Sad Phonies.
Voice: They weren't all money. (Razn-throat grunt). One of them believed in what was said.
A: Yeh - that's why I'm ringing Rotten instead of Steve Jones.
Voice: What's it called.
A: The Story Of Technicolour.
Voice: (Liverpool accent). Oh, psychedelic, like, is it?
A: Not quite - do you know when John will be back?
Voice: I don't know.
A: Do you think he'd be interested?
Voice: He might be.
A: Listen - I don't want to discuss this with you.
Voice: (Aggressive Glaswegian accent) I know your name. I've got your number.
A: Are you trying to intimidate me?
Voice: No, No.
A: Don't try to intimidate me pal. (Aggressive Liverpool accent). Who are you, anyway?
Voice: John Lydon.
A: (Surprised) You are?
Rotten: Yeh, it's me, what's the film about, Punk?
A: Sort of, but not entirely.
Rotten: No one's ever made a good pop movie. They're all crap.
A: I think you'd like this script. I know what's good.
Rotten: Oh, so you're an egomaniac too, eh. The phone asks for more money.
Rotten: Put another 2p in - I'm worth it.
A: No one gets any money.
Rotten: If you mention money I'll just put the phone down.
A: Do you want to see the script?
Rotten: Yeh.
A: What's your address?
Rotten: Hah - if you're so smart you should know.

A: I'm not gonna camp outside your front door. I'll mail it.
Rotten: You'll have to if you want me to read it. Can you meet me somewhere? Do you know Finsbury Park? (He names a pub). That's my local. I'll be in there tomorrow at eight.
By 8.20 pm Thursday I'd drunk four pints and Rotten was nowhere. I recognised a chum of Rotten's perched on a bar stool. Where she goes he will be.
You're Debbie aren't you? Is John coming? "Rotten is always late," said Debbie. She went to phone him. I visited the lav, read the walls. "The Sex Pistols are great", in fading black crayon. What a great place Britain was to dance in last year. The paint is flaking underneath though.
Back to bar. Sipping and sensurround sound. Rotten arrived at 8.45, justifying the rub - a - dub tag in one look.
Crepe brogue suedes, 20-inch parallel kecks, Canadian Ice Hockey shirt, four screwed-in front teeth, and unblemished complexion courtesy of Jamaican / LA sunshine. Even the beer tasted different.

I introduce myself, glancing at the nickel-chrome sheriff's badge, pinned on his blue mac. His kid brother hands him a pint of lager and Rotten says: "Let's sit here." He points to a table and seats.
His arms are stuffed in the pockets of his overcoat, which he doesn't unfasten. There isn't room in those pockets for the Meyer script. He stares into space, solving private riddles.
Why the telephone aggro? "I get all sorts of nuts ringing up. Didn't you know it was me?" The 15 different accents did arouse my suspicions. Why didn't he hang up? "They usually hang up when I start acting heavy, but you were persistent. I like that."
He read the script in three minutes and decided it was garbage. He refused to specify its faults, and when I asked him to co-write it with me he made no reply. Would he appear in it? He said he wouldn't. I asked why.
"Because I can't act." But he acts parallel kecks. A day I said, He did not reply. I dropped the subject. John's brothers and friends move into the pool room, we follow. John gives the nod to all and then sits down,

deciding not to play.
I ask him if he is as paranoid as Sid Vicious claims.
"No I'm not. I don't think there is an organised campaign going to harm me, but there are people on the streets who oppose what I have done. And they are prepared to fight to prove their point."
Throughout the evening, John's friends didn't attempt to join in the conversation, perhaps assuming it was business, and deciding that John prefers to deal with such matters in private.
I spoke to one of John's friends while Rotten was at the bar. He lives in the same block of council maisonettes as John's family. What was the neighbourhood reaction when the Sex Pistols took off?
"Everyone was amazed. They used to peep out their windows when he walked past and say: 'God - there's that lad with the green hair!'"
What was John like at 16?
"He was very quiet - always thinking."
Does he think Rotten deserved success?
"Definitely. He was doing something that no-one had ever done

before, and that took guts."
Rotten lights his ninth cigarette in 70 minutes. Punkotics:
"We were the only working class band ever."
What does he think of The Rich Kids? "It's a pantomime."
Tom Robinson? "Not much."
Iggy Pop? "I went backstage at the Rainbow, he's small, all he thinks about is the number of vitamin pills he's gotta take to stop his body shrivelling up."
David Bowie? "I won't be going to see him."
Patti Smith? "No chance."
Devo? "What a load of crap."
What's your favourite cut on the Pistols' album? "Problems - cos that's what that band were all about."
Who was responsible for the heartsmashing Pistols' sound? "It was the engineers. They did it all. That's why it took so long to get out the album. I'm gonna produce my next LP. I've watched them twiddling knobs in the studio for years. I know what sound I'm after, and I know how to get it. Easy."

A Bee Gees number is on the juke. "The production is great on this - very professional," Rotten enthuses. "I wish I had that drummer for my band."
Rotten admits that finding the right personnel is difficult. "I'm thinking about going up north for someone. They've got bands up there who are trying to be different. I like the Buzzcocks. There's a band called Big In Japan too, I like the name. And Yachts - have you seen them? London stinks. No-one's got ideas - and if they have, they're not using them."
I ask John his age. He drops his head between his legs in mock embarrassment before replying: "22 - I feel so old." Does Rotten think McLaren's success was a fluke? "No - I don't think so. I don't think he feels there is anyone he could work with capable of achieving the impact he wants to make."

What about the stories that Rotten and Clash bassman Paul Simonon were rehearsing in a studio? "That's rubbish. Paul's been coming to my flat on Sundays and teaching me to play guitar. That's all." Does Rotten intend to play guitar in his next band? "I've gotta learn how to play the guitar before I can write songs. I'm not gonna play one on stage. I used to hum tunes to Steve, and he'd pick out chords and riffs. I can't do that now."
Rotten says he still writes a song a day.
Is his relationship with Steve Jones as strained as reports suggest?
"We don't send each other flowers but I'm sorry we are not in the same band still. He's a good guy. A good laugh."
Does he miss Sid Vicious' protection?
"That's a joke. He's not hard. He's completely opposite. Do you know his waist measures 25 inches? And he's about a foot taller than me."

How did Rotten feel when Sid's liver collapsed at the end of the US tour?
"I felt really sorry for Sid. He's a good mate of mine." Paul Cooke? "He's just okay, y'know? If I was to ask him what he wanted to drink, the pub would be closed by the time he'd decided."
What was America like?
"Awful. The people there are really thick. Unbelievably crass. I hated it."
There were criticisms of your performances on the US tour. In fact, since Mike Mansfield's 'Pretty Vacant' film was screened on Top Of The Pops, people have accused you of intolerance.
"Well, that film was shot early in the morning and it was pretty hard getting worked up at that time of the day. I'd just got out of bed."
He asks if I thought the Sex Pistols break-up was faked. No, but I thought it a tragedy because there is no one to replace them.
At first Rotten seemed suspicious of such tricks, and perhaps sceptical of the value I placed on the role of the Sex Pistols in the music industry being inflated by fan-fervour. But, after a brief consideration he says: "Yeh, I suppose that's right."
Rotten keeps glancing around the room and seems to be losing interest. I ask him if he objects to my questioning.
"No, not at all. I'll speak to the Devil."
Has he any views on the world's political terrorists?
"They always hurt the wrong people. The innocent." "Has he any

political targets in mind?
 "Only Maggie Thatcher. I'd like to get her, stupid bitch."
 Did he ever fantasise about robbing banks when he was young?
 "Yeh," he smiles, "all the time."
 Rotten set himself up as a mediator when the Punk v Ted rumbles were raging, and he has played an ambassadorial role in the acceptance of Jamaican culture by giving Jah sounds his influential approval. Did he agree with Martin Webster's statement that the growth of Rastafarianism in British black communities was a futile search for identity?
 "If they believe, if they find strength in their beliefs, how can it be useless?"
 John's brother walks over and asks if we want refills. I say yes, and offer to pay, but John refuses, and produces a wad of notes from his trouser pocket worth about £20.
 Is Rotten on the dole? He shakes his head.
 "They won't give me anything cos I'm due royalties. How much I don't know yet, they're still trying to work it out."
 Does Richard Branson, boss of Virgin Records, pay his rent?
 "No. I own my flat. I made sure it was bought. Steve and Paul live in rented places."
 Will Rotten ever work again, I wonder. The temptation to sit back and spend royalties must be tremendous. At the moment his career is paralysed by legalities. Once the problems have been solved, Rotten will be free to form his own band. But comparisons will be made, and if Rotten doesn't get it right first time, he'll be slagged-off good-style. Is he afraid of failing?
 "Not at all. I've made millions of mistakes. For instance The Don Letts movie was a bummer."
 I suggest that it was a critical success.
 "If you're doing something it doesn't matter what anyone says cos you're doing something and they aren't."
 So, he wouldn't miss the limelight?
 "I think it would be a blessing in disguise."
 Enter John's mum and dad. His mother is a soft-spoken Irish woman in her early forties in a green two-piece, Dame Edna Everage specs, and Queen Mother hair-do. John's

Irish father is equally respectable in a blue anorak, fawn trousers, Burton tie, and woollen cardigan.
 What did they think of the Sex Pistols breaking up?
 "We haven't discussed it," says John.
John's mother appears proud that so many apparently intelligent people are interested in what her son has to say. John swore in her company once, but she did not seem shocked. Watching John's father, it seemed that he was equally proud of his other less famous sons, who were playing pool and chatting to some young ladies who'd arrived on the scene.
 The parents remained neutral, letting their children play uninterrupted. From time to time friends of the children talked to the couple in a polite, respectful way. Somehow, I couldn't quite see them treating their own parents as nicely, and noticing Rotten's expression on certain occasions, perhaps he couldn't quite believe it either. Johnny Rotten at play. On another night he might watch a band who fail to excite him, and at the same time, check out the audience, to see if they've caught up, left him behind, or simply forgotten. A man of the people has to make sure that the people don't trample all over him when a new guru opens his mouth. Perhaps this is why Rotten sticks to his roots.
 "McLaren was always saying I should try to mix in different circles, improve myself. He was always telling me to stop hanging round with my friends. He couldn't understand that I like being with them. That I am close to my family. He's a climber, he's trying to get somewhere else. I don't want to mix with anyone else. I like it here."
 Was Rotten always determined that success would not change him?
 "I made myself a promise at a very early age that if ever I became a success I would not forget — and I'm keeping it. I'll never change."
 Trying to persuade John to take a part in my movie I suggest he could gain revenge against McLaren, by contributing to a film that satirises the Sex Pistols, before McLaren gets the chance to eulogise them in the much-mooted RIP Sex Pistols film.

"I'm not interested. But, if you want to beat him to the punch you don't have to worry because he's doing nothing at the moment, absolutely nothing. There are so many things I can do at the moment. Everything that band stood for was my idea. If the others release albums mine will be the best."
 I ask his opinion on the following statement:
 "There were 10,000 gobshites in London and Rotten was one of them — the lucky one."
 "That's the way it was. Who wrote it?"
 I tell him I did, but add that no one else had his ideas and courage.
 "That's the difference — I took my chances."
 When the McLaren / Sex Pistols



relationship was in its infancy the band wrote songs on a moderately frequent basis. As the creative partnership disintegrated and concepts were exhausted, enthusiasm within the band declined, and the split was inevitable. The joke was that the LP would be out just as soon as Viv Westwood designed her new collection.
 Rotten is directionless, indecisive and uncreative without McLaren. He would never admit this, even if he were capable of such a realisation. In short, they disagree entirely without each other.
 John has this to say: "Half the clothes in the shop were designed on my ideas. I suggested they destroy T-shirts. The bondage suit was my idea but McLaren never gave me credit."

Glen Matlock has expressed similar sentiments. Bernard Rhodes quit Glitterbest because McLaren refused to acknowledge his contribution. Jordan discarded the scene, although Rotten says she was discarded.
 In a dark spot, on the stairs of a Liverpool club, I asked Jordan if it was true.
 "No, I left McLaren to manage the Ants."
 Is she a junkie, as Rotten said?
 "I was but I've reformed. I don't use junk any more."
 I spoke to Viv Westwood in her King's Road boutique when the Sex Pistols break-up was announced. She blamed Rotten.
 "They could have had so much publicity if they'd gone to South America but John wasn't interested."
 Publicity for the cause, or a cause for money?
 Rotten "She's unbelievably superficial. You should use a 65-year-old to play her part in the movie."
 Debbie chips in: "She makes enormous profits. She sells T-shirts for four quid and they only cost a quid to make. I was sacked."
 She doesn't explain the dismissal but her loyal friendship with John obviously didn't enamour her with Viv.
 John: "Do you know what they wanted us to do in Meyer's movie? Have it off in a telephone box. I mean — how twee can you get? They imagined we wanted it off with each other so they were going to arrange it for us."
 Says Debbie: "I was supposed to stand on a crate of beer."
 Is Rotten friendly with Debbie? Rotten pulls her onto his knee, and puts his arm around her shoulder in an exaggerated display of affection.
 "Oh, I guess the secret's out now Debbie darling. We'll have to tell him. We are getting married on Saturday at a register office. It's going to be a white wedding."
 The humour subsides.
 "Do you know that McLaren went to Warner Bros and told them he wanted to kick me out of the band? It was because I wanted £50,000 to do the movie and he wouldn't do it. They told him where to go," says John.
 "The night we broke up I was in a

run-down motel dive. Steve and Paul were swanking uptown in their own plush hotel suite. He told Steve I wanted a better hotel than the others, so Steve thought I was living in a palace, when he had the best place. Then there was that Biggs thing. I didn't want to go there. It was just another cheap stunt. I was sick of it. Publicity, publicity, all the time."
I asked Rotten if the ape-sounds on the 'Bodies' track were electronic. He jammed his jaws together and started sucking air to make a clichey Chimpanzee noise.
 "I'm the only one in the world who can do that."
 Does Rotten still do drugs? "Oh, yeh."
 Is he courting? "Leave 'orf willya."
 What about the rumours that he is homosexual? "Untrue."
 What does he think of Richard Branson? "He's okay."
 Did Rotten record in Jamaica?
 "No. I just got him (Branson) to sign about 15 bands. I hadn't heard of half of them. I just said these are good, and he'd sign them up. Now I won't have to pay a fortune for imported records, ha-ha."
 As an artist Rotten feels entitled to any reward society thinks he deserves in recognition of his talent. He does not want to make the rich scream, he wants everyone to be screaming rich. But, if he wishes to preserve his integrity and self-respect, financial security should not be his end aim. Once he gains artistic freedom he must not allow any distractions to be more than temporary, or he will lose his struggle to make the world a better place.
 McLaren said at the beginning: "This is not about music." So today kill music — tomorrow tell the truth. Without trying to canonise Rotten, it is a fact that he has made an immense social breakthrough in modern culture. He has ended ugliness. The English language can be used in a way without prejudice as has been finally proved. Rotten is on a protest march for the pathetic weak. His destiny can be glorious.
 Rotten is an atrocious liar, but deep inside him lives the truth, and from time to time it speaks. Listen.

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