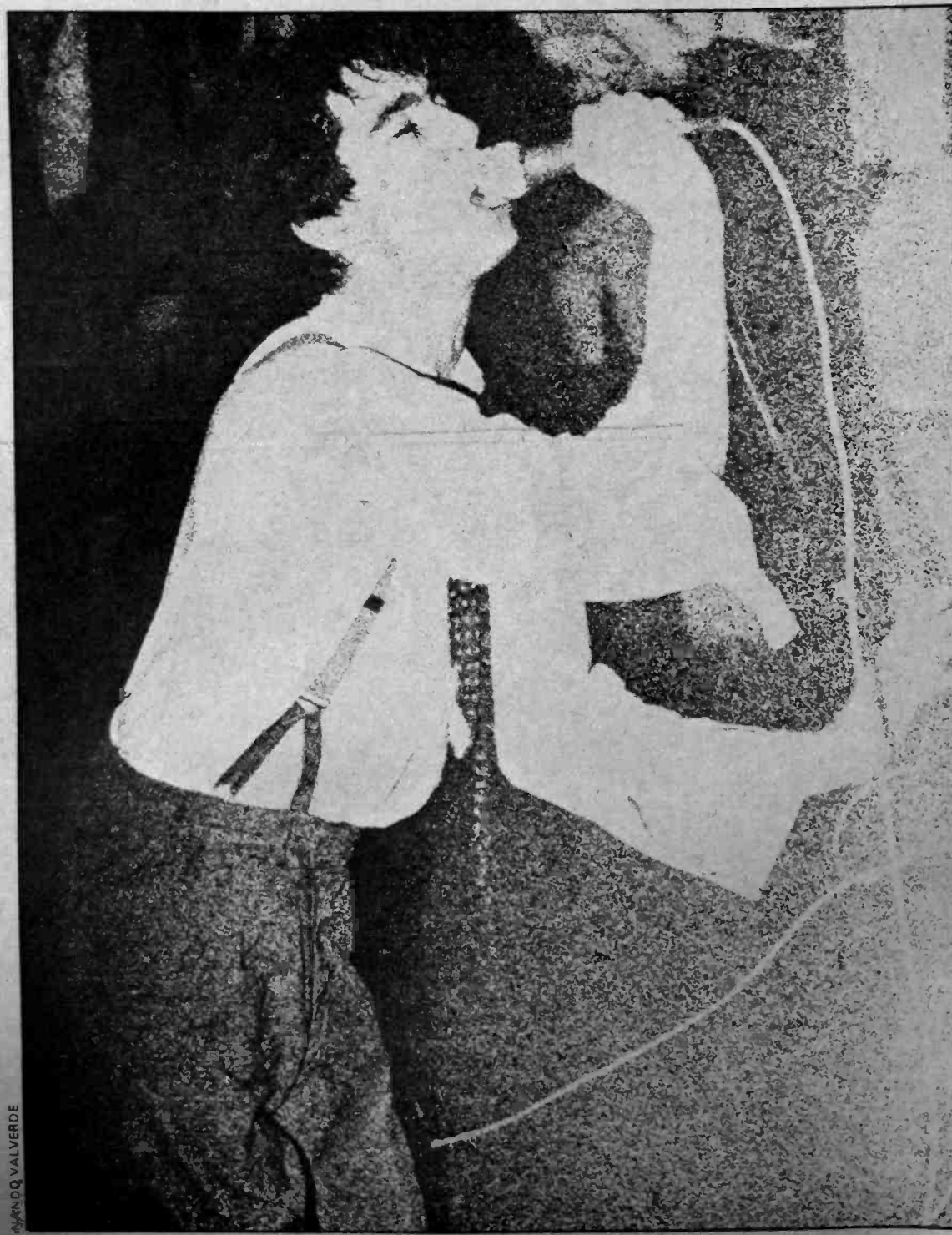


PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Jimmy Pursey wants to leave rock 'n' roll as he joined it. He wants to remain a person and that's what he told SHEILA PROPHET



LADIES AND gentlemen - Jimmy Pursey, Star of stage and screen. Angel with a dirty - well, slightly grubby - face. Ear - bender extraordinaire. And - sincere human being.

Sorry about the Hughie Green bit, but you see, I'm impressed by Mister Pursey.

OK, I'll be honest. Up till a couple of months ago, I'd never thought much of Sham 69. In that smug little filing cabinet we journalists carry in our head, I had them neatly written off: just another punk band. No staying power. I was wrong.

Three events came along to change my mind. Event number one: the Sham 69 album 'Tell Us The Truth', and that gloriously chaotic live side. Any band that can get a hardened bunch of skinheads singing 'Knees Up Mother Brown' just has to be something special.

Event number two: the single, 'Angels With Dirty Faces'. Or more specifically, the card that came with it. Cagney on the cover (hence Jimmy's gangster pose) and a specially composed poem inside. 'OK, you dirty rats, if you don't like this masterpiece you're just a bunch of prats'. What elan, what panache, what a bloody cheek!

Event number three: the Anti - Nazi League Carnival. A jaded set by the Clash. Depressing evidence that the band are losing the fight. Then suddenly - help is at hand. Pursey, onstage with them, guiding them through 'White Riot'. Showing them how he does it: how it should be done: how, if they remember, they used to do it.

The crowd go wild. No doubt about it, this man is a hero. To be investigated, definitely.

Encounter number one with Jimmy is in the BBC bar ("If my mum could see my now!") after his first, exultant appearance on 'Top Of The Pops'. He's letting off steam, taking up the challenge of a striptease with some unexpectedly rowdy BBC employees on a booze up. Off come the shoes, socks, jacket, shirt, before the doorman ends the proceedings by politely informing us that "This is not a night club," and the strippers reluctantly get dressed again.

With no other way of expending all that pent - up energy and tension, Jimmy settles down to talk. And talk. And talk.

We get involved in a lengthy discussion about the pros and cons of appearing on 'Top Of The Pops', but the problem is, Jimmy talks so much, and so fast, that, without a tape recorder, it's just impossible to keep up. The flowing alcohol does nothing to help the situation, and finally, as we stumble out into the Shepherd's Bush night, we agree to continue the discussion at a later date.

So two days later, in a seedy hotel room in Wembley, an hour before his show at the Harlesden Roxy, Jimmy is ready to start over again. He's seen himself on telly, he's well pleased with the results: "I was worried, I thought it might be a load of rubbish. But they kept everything in. And they let me sing it live. That was important, because I could pretend it was a live gig, I could get into it."

One thing I clearly remember from Wednesday night is that



JUSTIN THOMAS

somewhere in the argument, the Clash received a good solid slagging from Jimmy, for, amongst other things, deciding not to appear on 'Top Of The Pops' you're letting down the kids. 'The kids never see you these days; you never play gigs any more.' I mean, we're playing all the time.

"So I said, 'You won't go on 'Top Of The Pops' because you say it's part of the establishment — come on, CBS is part of the establishment.

"I said, 'I don't want you to go down, because it's only the Spex, the Clash, Tom Robinson and us that are keeping it alive. We've all got one foot in the graveyard, and as soon as one group goes down we've have a whole leg in it. So I've got to keep at them — and I will keep at them until they bloody realise what they was in it for in the beginning. To do it for the people that've come to see them. To go on 'Top Of The Pops'.

"I had a go at Tom Robinson at 'Top Of The Pops'. I said 'Look Tom, as far as I'm concerned, it's only you and me still playing I don't want you to be a bullshitter. I'm saying it to your face because I want you to understand I will have goes at people, because it struts 'em up and makes 'em remember.' I like people to have a go at me. The skinheads come down and gee me up, and that's a great, it brings me back to the level I started on.

"So I said to Tom, 'Don't let us down, let's hang in there, it's for the kids. You know what I mean?' And he turned round and said, 'Yeah, don't worry. I'm with you.'

Monument

"Cos it frightens me. I don't want to be a monument. I want to be a part of something big, not a tiny minority. That's why I say, 'If the kids are united they will never be divided.' If the punk movement had all stuck together and believed the same thing, it would have been something to believe in, but because it went from there to there to there" — he gestures expansively with his hands — "all the kids went, 'Eh? What's going on? Who do you believe in?'

"The Buzzcocks — Peter Shelley said the other week that punk is dead. That's only cos he wants it dead cos he's moved onto something else. Someone who says that should never have been in a punk band in the beginning. Punk's given him his bread and butter.

"Look, punk put me where I am, the kids put me where I am. I don't ever slag punk down, I don't ever slag the kids down. They're the two things that put me where I am now. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here now. I wouldn't be doing a gig tonight."

Whew. Pause for breath. See what I mean about Jimmy's vocal abilities? Jimmy couldn't just talk the hindlegs of a donkey, he'd have the forelegs, the head and the tail dropping off alongside them.

However, we do seem to have digressed from the original point about the Clash. If Jimmy does feel that they've let the kids down (and I agree with him), why did he get up and sing with them at the Carnival?

"Because I love 'White Riot'. I got up there to put a bit of life into them, to say, 'Look, this is what it should be like.' They was all laid back, Keith Richard stuff" — he strums an imaginary guitar — "the kids don't want that. When we're playing and a string busts, we say f--- the string

and carry on. When we played the Roundhouse, the strings kept going, but we carried on, and the kids were going 'Yeah'. So the music wasn't very good, but we wasn't interested in that. We just wanted to get everybody excited and have a good time. Cos that's what rock and roll is about.

"The Clash should go out there and say, 'Look, I know what you think of us.' They could say, 'Look people! — us about, we believe some of the things people told us to do, and we're sorry, you know, but give us a break and we'll prove we're still honest.' But they don't do that!

"That's why I don't live in London. You get full of bullshit. If you lived in London it would be down the Speakeasy every night, mixing with Bob Geldof and all that crap. I don't want to be part of that, I live at home, and when I go out in the street, people meet me and say, 'Hi Jimmy, how's it going?' not 'Hi Jimmy, you're a big rock star now.'

"I'll tell you what — I'm an embarrassment to all of them. A f--- embarrassment. And I'll tell you why — I do the things they set out to do, but didn't. I associate with the audience. So now I'm doing it, they'd like to push me under the carpet."

"Another break in the spiel. Time to collect our thoughts, to gaze at the tiny television Jimmy has procured for the band ('only 40 quid!') time for reminiscences about his days working in the dog kennels, time for gossip about the group's future plans.

Jimmy, it seems, is to appear on 'Good Afternoon' with Mavis Nicholson, an afternoon telly chat show, on a programme devoted to the Anti-Nazi League. Sounds slightly bizarre to me, but Jimmy likes the idea: "It gets you through to people who wouldn't normally see you, and that's good."

This brings us inevitably to the subject of politics, and though Jimmy is adamant that he doesn't want to "get into a very political situation," he does have plenty to say on the subject of the National Front — most of which has been said before, many times, so I won't repeat it here. The only difference, really, is that while you or I might say it to each other, Jimmy — in common with the other 'political' groups — will get up onstage and say it to the world.

So, on to the future of Sham 69, and Jimmy says grandly, "Really, I'm trying to make the ultimate band — the band that come nearest to, say, the Who. A band who could sing 'My Generation' and then turn round and do 'Boris The Spider' — a completely different type of song, but one which still said something.

"But the Who got further away from the kids, and I don't believe they're enjoying what they're doing now, because they're not doing anything. I don't ever want to get in the situation where I'm not enjoying myself.

"I said once that if I had a number one record I'd get out of it. Then I thought, 'That's exactly what they want me to do.' If I had a number one and got out, I'd be doing exactly what I set out to destroy. People who dissociate themselves from the audience. If I had a number one record, and I could prove to the kids that I could still go out into the audience, and go 'Hello Joe, how ya doing?' I'd have won. Having a number one record and proving you don't have to be a big star. I would

be hard, but someone has to do it, and I want to be the one.

"I never want to change. Look — you're the press, I'm Jimmy Pursey. When I go, I want you to write, 'That was Jimmy Pursey. There was a bloke'. I want to come out of rock and roll the same way I come in — Jimmy Pursey."

Downfall

Naive words, of course — words that sum up both Jimmy's greatest asset and, I fear, his potential downfall. For better or worse, Jimmy is talking for the kids on the street. His views are black and white, right and wrong, almost childlike. No pretensions. None of the sophistication that has protected Tom Robinson, gained him acceptance from the most unlikely sources.

So he's vulnerable. There are huge inconsistencies, glaring contradictions. Easy to pick them out. What he says probably doesn't look too good in print, simply because it is so naive, so easy to pull apart.

But naive and childish as he is, Jimmy deserves to be supported, not destroyed. Because, for me at least, his arguments are justified by their conviction. Like I said, this bloke is SINCERE.

Later, as Sham 69 arrive at the Roxy for the gig, a large and rather fearsome skinhead runs up to their van. A couple of the group, recognising the guy, groan, but Jimmy sticks his head out of the window, concern on every feature.

"Hey matey," he says, "ain't cha got a ticket?"

He fishes in his jacket pocket and produces a single unused ticket. In return, matey pushes a crumpled piece of paper into his hand.

"I wrote you a poem, Jimmy," he says proudly.

Jimmy unfolds the paper and slowly reads out the verse, a painfully written anthem to 'Kids On The Street'.

"We've been on the streets since we was boys
Broken bottles was our only toys
We threw some stones and we tossed some bricks

Kids like us they said made them sick

We was proud and we could be rough
But on the streets yer gotta be tough
Things come and things may change
But kids on the street will always be the same"

He turns to me, his voice rising with emotion. "See?" he says. "That's the real thing. The real McCoy."

Message

Jimmy on his song writing: "When I write, I write for Joe Bloggs, the thickest bloke out, because if he understands it, everyone understands it. That's the way I work."

Of course, there are people who will choose not to understand Jimmy Pursey's songs. But it seems that, to the people he's aiming at, the people who really matter to him, his message is coming across loud and clear.