

# MARCO on the BASS



Sunday, December 30, 2012

## The Story Behind Paul Simonon & His Famous Smashed Bass Guitar



*It's September 21st, 1979, at a Clash show at New York's Palladium, and Paul Simonon's bass has only seconds to live. "The show had gone quite well," says Simonon, "but for me inside, it just wasn't working well, so I suppose I took it out on the bass. If I was smart, I would have got the spare bass and used that one, because it wasn't as good as the one I smashed up."*

Paul Simonon of The Clash is the reason I initially stuck with the bass guitar despite initially knowing nothing about notes, scales or bass lines. As I fell more deeply in love with ska, reggae and punk music as a young and angry teenager, it was the knowledge that Simonon was a reggae fan, a rude boy and self taught musician that continued to inspire me. That and the iconic image of him smashing his beloved Fender Precision bass guitar sealed the deal. I wanted to be like him and I had to have the same guitar!

Who Is Marco On The Bass?



**e** Marco On The Bass

NYC, New York, United States

I heard ska and reggae music for the first time when I was 14 and it was

love at first listen. I loved the sound, the look and the energy. It changed my life. A little bit later I picked up a bass and taught myself to play and in 1988 started the first ska/reggae band from New Jersey called Bigger Thomas. We are still together 29 years later. Maybe you've heard of us? No worries if you haven't! We've released 4 albums and toured the U.S and Canada a few times. As a musician I've had the good luck to meet and play with most of my musical heroes. That allows me to give readers the inside scoop on all the bands they love. I also tell the stories of the many bands who helped popularize ska in the U.S. and the U.K. I pay special attention to the birth of American ska and the stories of the bands and musicians who were ahead of their time and never received the recognition they deserved. I recently helped to form two new musical projects -- Rude Boy George, a band that performs ska, reggae and rocksteady versions of 80's new wave songs and Heavensbee, an original studio project that makes dub pop.

[View my complete profile](#)

**Rude Boy George - Love & Dancing -- New Wave Goes Ska!**

I play bass in Rude Boy George -- a band the plays ska and reggae versions of 80's new wave classics. We've been releasing a song and video every other month during 2016 and 2017. The collection of songs is titled "Love and Dancing" and it is the second collection of 80's new wave tracks that Rude Boy George has recorded in a ska and reggae style. Check out a few of our videos including a new wave/reggae version of the Blondie classic "Atomic" and our versions of songs by Howard Jones, Bob Marley, Kim Wilde, Wang Chung,

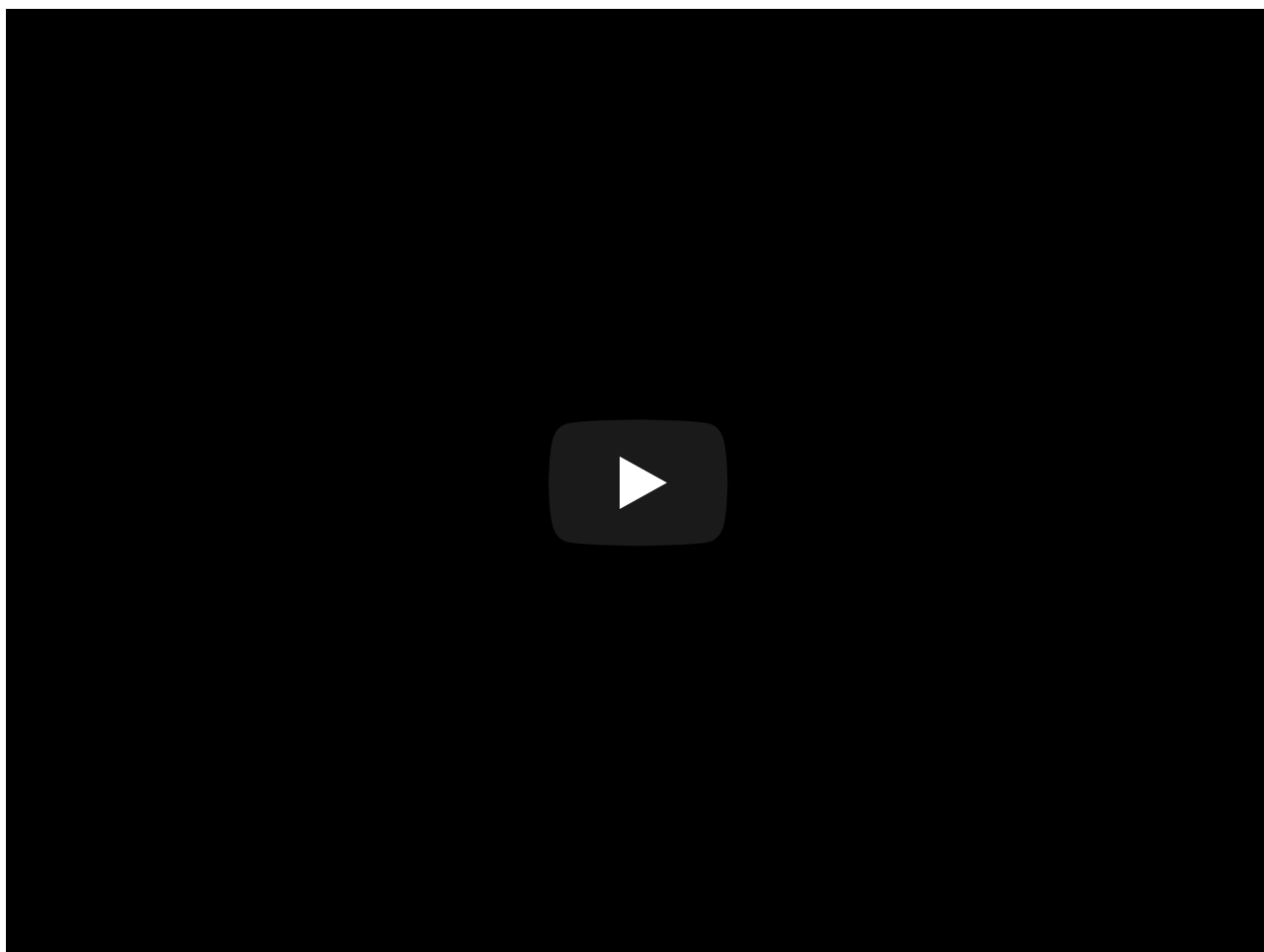
And so because of Simonon, I went out and bought my first cheap bass guitar at a nearby Sears with money I had saved from a dish washing job. It was Cherry red and white and weighed a ton. I remember taking it out of the flimsy cardboard case it came in and looking at it with a mix of desire and despair. I finally had the object of my affection but I had absolutely no idea what to do with it! I remember standing in front of a mirror with the guitar strapped low across my body like Simonon and plucking the strings. The sound was sharp and metallic and nothing like the fluid bass lines I heard on the 2-Tone, Clash and reggae records I played non-stop in my bedroom. My love affair with the bass flickered and threatened to go out permanently. But, I have Simonon to thank for not giving up and for eventually getting a black and white Fender Precision bass.

*"Paul Simonon-well, he'd have to be the driveshaft, because it was his aesthetic sense, his knowledge of painting, his use of sculpture (especially the slabs of Carreran marble that characterized his bass playing) and pliocene sensuality-that visualized the band's look and touch."*

- Lenny Kaye, *Americlash*, Fall 1991

Though known for his many inventive and innovative bass lines with The Clash, Simonon was self taught and did not read music but he brought so many intangibles to the band and to his bass playing. This was always an added inspiration to me, as I struggled to play. It took a while for Simonon to learn the four-string (at one point, he marked the notes off on his instrument's neck to know where to place his fingers), and after 9 months of intense practice he was ready to play on the band's first record. Although it was Strummer and Jones who penned the lion's share of the Clash's songs, Simonon's fluid, almost reggae-ish bass lines often provided the glue that held the band's best known breakneck compositions together.

Fender recently conducted an interview with The Only Band That Matters' bassist. In the interview Simonon talks about learning to play bass, his technique, how he got turned on to the Precision Bass, and the iconic "London Calling" album cover and what led to that historic moment when he "sort of smashed up" his beloved Precision Bass.



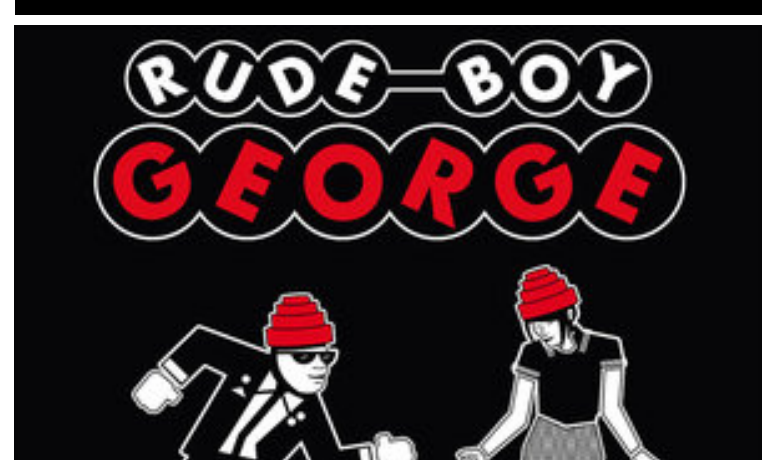
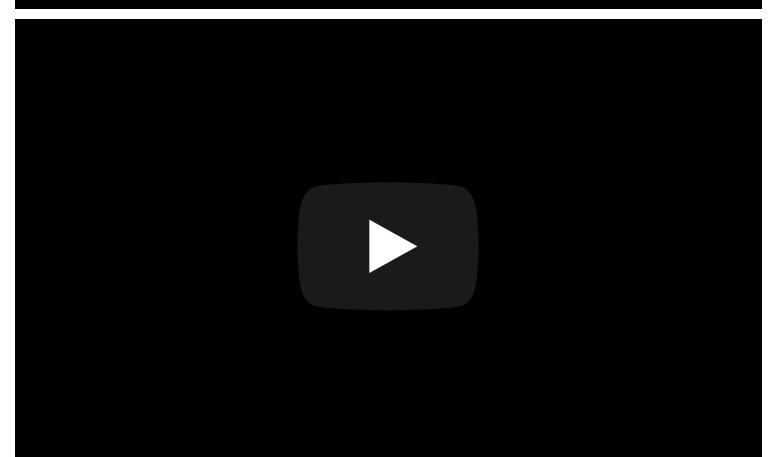
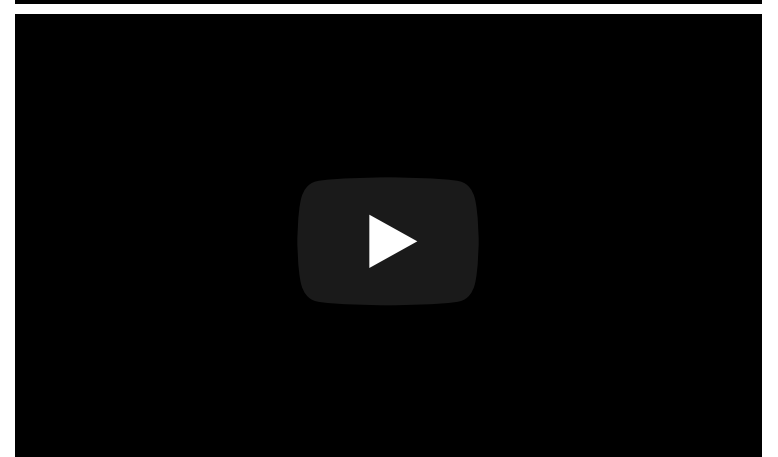
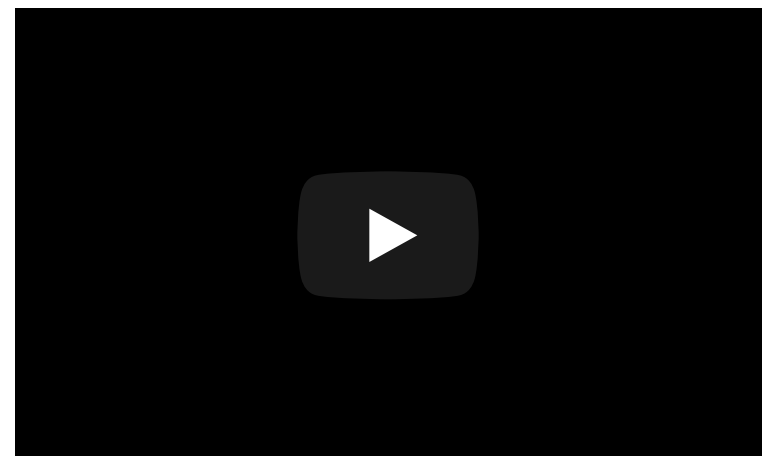
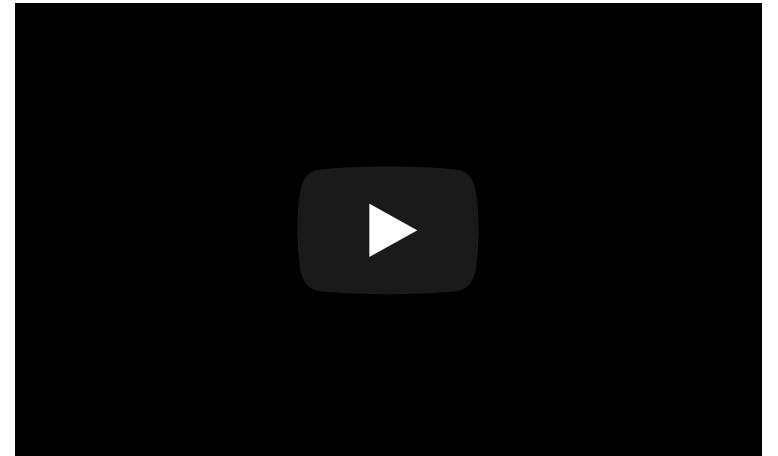
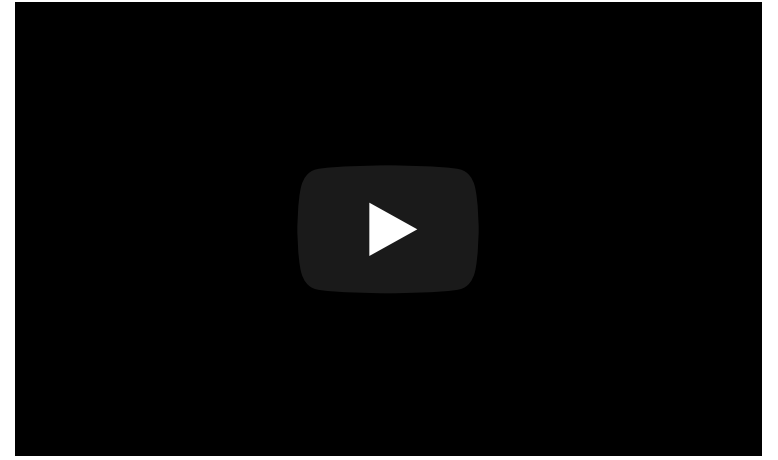
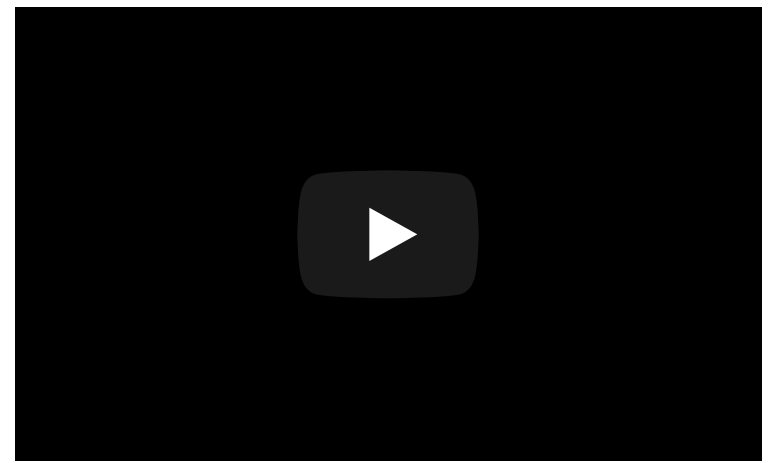
According to [Fender Bass Player](#):

*"Simonon started out playing a Rickenbacker but found it's sound too thin. He then quickly switched to a mid 70's Fender Precision Bass, which offered more bottom end and a stronger tone. He preferred using heavier model Precisions that he believed sounded better and could take all the abuse he dished out on them night after night. His P-Basses were usually white and he often adorned them with stickers, abstract paint jobs and roughed them up a bit to give them some individuality. He also reasoned that no one would want to steal his basses if they were bashed up and hand painted."*

*"He frequently swung the instrument around onstage, and after a two hour show would often have serious problems with his shoulder. Strung low by his knees, he normally played with a pick, sometimes using his fingers for reggae style tunes. His style evolved from simple root-fifth punk lines to a more complex and intricate style, incorporating rock, reggae, ska, pop, funk and other elements that set him apart from most other punk bassists of the day."*

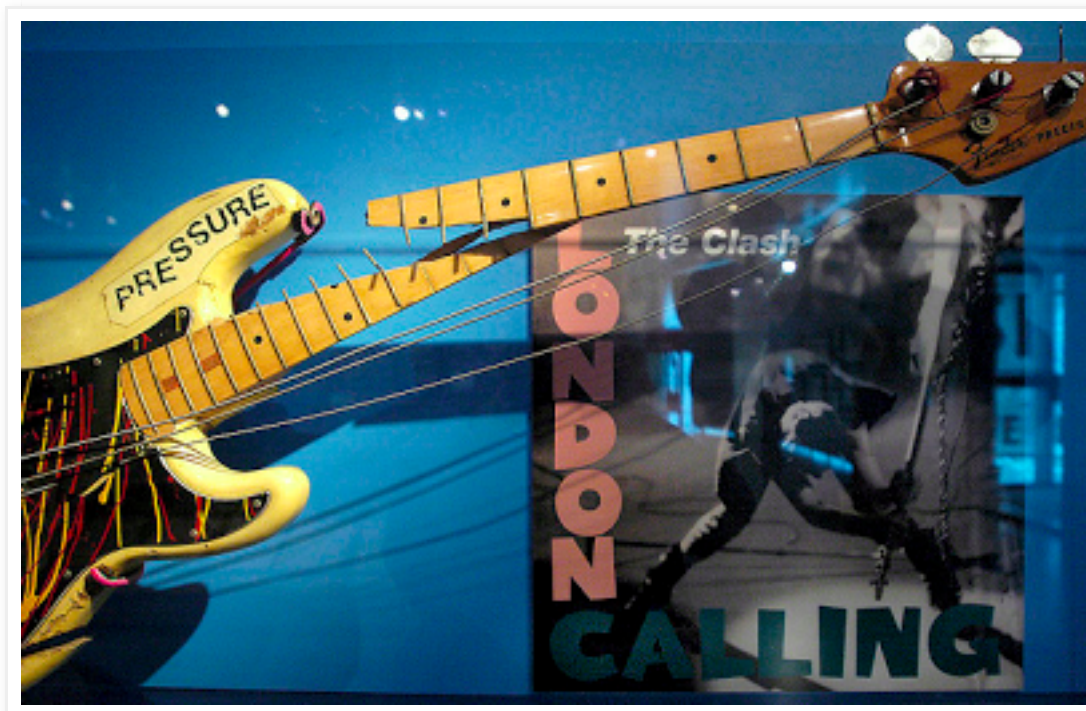
The Fender Precision bass immortalized on the cover of The Clash's "London Calling" album was a white early 70's model with a maple neck. Simonon had placed a skull and crossbones sticker on the body, done some drip painting on the pick guard and had handwritten the word "PRESSURE" on the top body horn. Although the body and neck of the bass were

The Cure and Soft Cell!

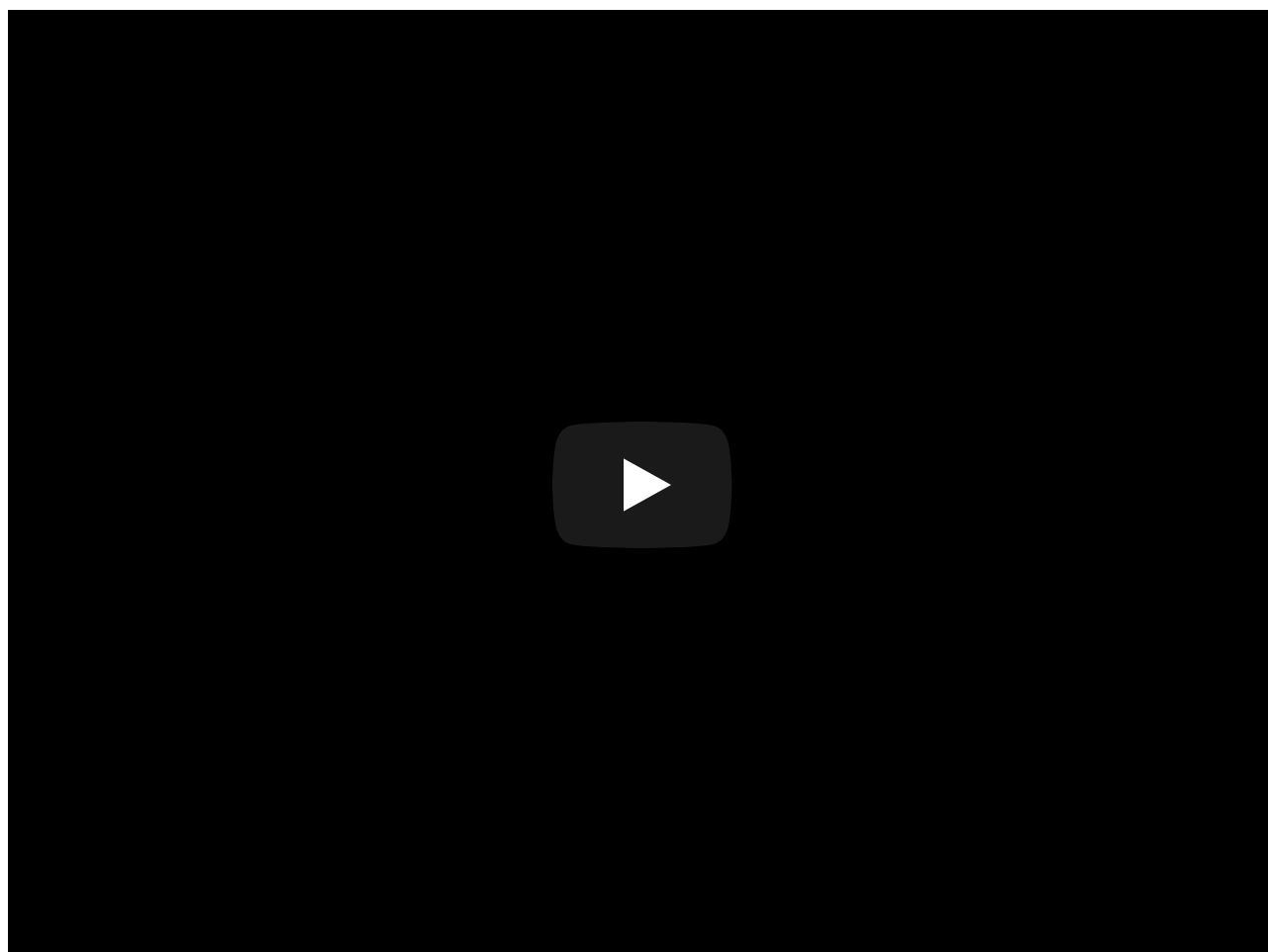




damaged beyond repair, the smashed remnants were deemed important enough to be displayed in the permanent collection of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.



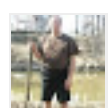
While there is no film or video of Simonon in the act of smashing his bass during the show at the Palladium here in New York City on September 21, 1979, an intrepid fan of the band has matched short film clips of the band performing "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.", "I Fought the Law", "Jail Guitar Doors", and "English Civil War" with audio from the show that night. They demonstrate the power and energy of the band at the height of their powers and the important role that Simonon played in their live show.



Posted by [Marco On The Bass](#) at 8:17 PM



## 7 comments:



[jeffen](#) said...

Great post - Simonon's an inspiration!

December 31, 2012 at 10:51 AM



[Angela Emory](#) said...

I wonder if Paul would be interested in meeting a chic 13 years younger than he????? I was in primary school when he did this guitar stunt, but I already owned all the Clash albums!!!!

August 21, 2013 at 11:22 PM

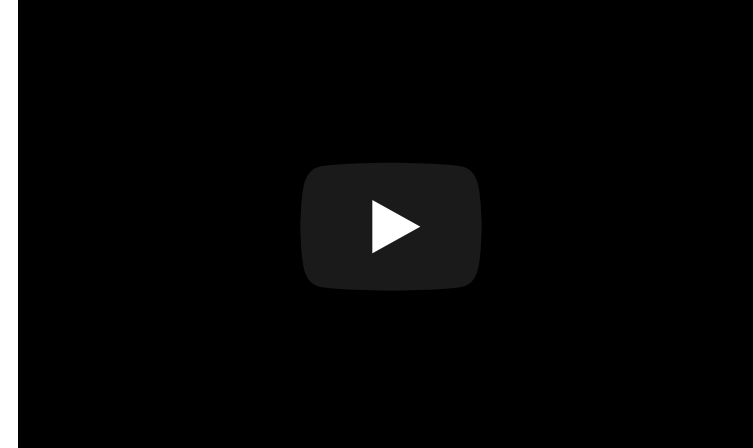


[Dave Marin](#) said...

*This comment has been removed by the author.*

October 4, 2014 at 2:57 PM

[Dave Marin](#) said...



"Love and Dancing" pays homage to the Human League who had a side project called [The League Unlimited Orchestra](#) and released a remix of their "Dare" album with that title in the early 80's. The album is available on [Bandcamp](#).

**Soul Mates**  
by Heavensbee

4. Time Is An Illusion 00:00 / 03:28

[download](#) [share](#)

### RUDE BOY GEORGE LIVE!

Want to see Marco On The Bass perform with Rude Boy George (ska, reggae and rocksteady versions of 80's new wave songs)? Below is a list of upcoming shows:

#### Rude Boy George

October 7, 2017  
[Mauch Chunk Opera House](#)  
Jim Thorpe, PA

October 28, 2017  
[SOB's](#)  
New York, NY

#### Heavensbee - Dub Pop

I recently formed dub pop trio [Heavensbee](#) with my Rude Boy George bandmates Roger Apollon Jr. and Megg Howe. Seeking to create songs that explored the darker side of personal relationships, we holed up for six months over the late winter and early spring of 2015 in a tiny rehearsal space in New York City, where we worked to hone our sound. We approached each song like writing a scene from a movie or play, discussing the characters relationships and motivations. The result was "Soul Mates!"

Check out the video for our debut single "Bombs Away"



The September 21st date makes for a great legend. After all it was the night of the WNEW-FM simulcast of the concert and, based on the London Calling album credits, the night of the Paul Simonon bass guitar smash at the end of White Riot - captured in an iconic photo taken by Pennie Smith. Only problem is that he smashed his guitar the night before - I witnessed it on the 20th, also at The Palladium, with my own eyes.

The guitar he smashed had the word PRESSURE stenciled on it (photos of the smashed bass are easily found online) and "Mydeathlok" YouTube videos shot 9/21 taken from an ABC "20/20" documentary on new wave/punk rock, CLEARLY shows Paul playing a bass WITHOUT the word "pressure" (because he smashed that one the night before). (It's harder to make out on a 2nd "drug stabbing time" video included here but I don't see the word pressure on Paul's guitar in that video either).

Joe's shirt determines the date of the photo. On the 21st Joe is wearing a solid BLUE shirt as the video above proves. EVERY PHOTO FOUND ONLINE (I.e. Getty Images) TAKEN ON SEPTEMBER 20th shows Joe wearing a pink/purple shirt with abstract white lines AND IMPORTANTLY, a BLACK BREAST POCKET. This same black pocket shirt is visible in Pennie Smith's own photographic contact sheet of the before and after moments surrounding the SMASH, which was included in the booklet that came with the 25th anniversary "legacy edition" reissue of London Calling.

Also, besides the photos and video that prove the date was September 20th, there is AUDIO (found on the guitars 101 bootlegs website) from 9/20 where you can actually hear the thumps of the guitar smash. And if you listen to the entire 9/20 show it is evident that that show was not nearly as good as the 9/21 "WNEW" show, and it was Paul's frustration with the performance and poor audience reaction, that caused him to smash his guitar. Finally, the WNEW DJ's (richard neer and Pam merly) make NO MENTION of seeing the smash in their post concert commentary on the 21st.

Maybe one day the album credits will be corrected.

[October 4, 2014 at 3:01 PM](#)



**Zippy T. said...**

I've been playing bass for 43 years, jazz and classically trained. In 1981 I played in a "modern" band and we played London Calling. I loved the power and simplicity of such a prominent bass line.

I've owned albums all my life but the London Calling cover with Joe in mid-swing with his P-bass (I still have my 76) is by far my favorite album cover.

[May 28, 2016 at 7:50 PM](#)



**AXR said...**

So you know the year of the bass destroyed really? I think so between 76'-77'-78'

[July 31, 2016 at 2:35 AM](#)



**William said...**

Excellent piece!

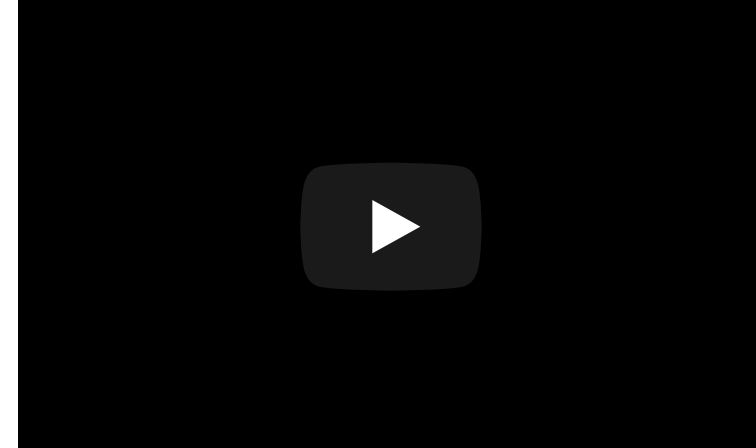
[February 10, 2017 at 11:43 AM](#)

[Post a Comment](#)

page: 2

Thursday, December 27, 2012

## Win tickets to see The Specials 2013 UK Tour courtesy of Fred Perry!



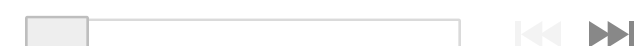
The songs we worked on take their inspiration from ska, dub reggae and Lover's Rock (The Specials, Lee Perry), 80's new wave (Depeche Mode, Human League, Fun Boy Three) and indie rock (Lana Del Ray, the xx). The album is available on CD in the U.K. on [Specialized Records](#) or can be streamed/downloaded on [Bandcamp](#).



**Ska In My Pocket: The Biggest & B...**

by Bigger Thomas

1. Ska In My Pocket 00:00 / 03:05

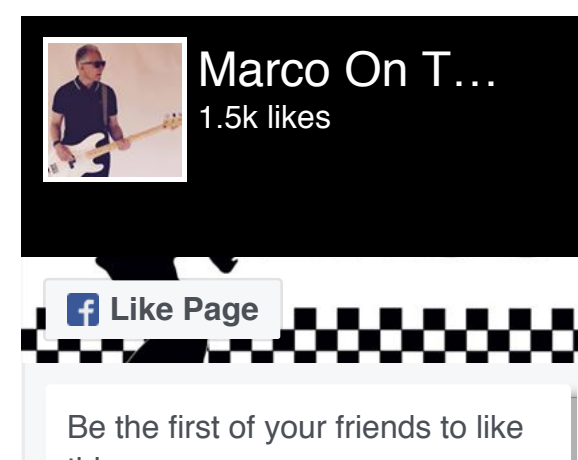


[buy](#) [share](#)



### Bigger Thomas Celebrating 29 Years in 2017!

Bigger Thomas is celebrating 29 years in 2017! Below is video from one of our earliest shows at the legendary City Gardens in Trenton, NJ in 1989 when we opened for Yellowman!



To celebrate our 25th anniversary back in 2013, we released "Ska In My Pocket: The Biggest & Bestest of Bigger Thomas" a digital only retrospective featuring twenty one of our favorite songs taken from the four albums and two demo tapes we released since forming the band in New Brunswick, NJ in 1988.

Its available for download on the [Bandcamp](#) link below. We hope you enjoy it!