



The Clash's bass smasher and style icon on reggae roots, punk violence, jail in Greenland and his quirky new album. But why do we never see him at award ceremonies? "I don't want a pat on the back," insists Paul Simonon.

Interview by PAT GILBERT • Portrait by TOM OLDHAM

ON A SUNNY FEBRUARY AFTERNOON, PAUL Gustave Simonon opens the door of his home in Paddington, shooing away his two dogs Snoop and Peanut. With a firm handshake and trademark Terry-Thomas grin, the bass player ushers MOJO into his lair, a modest three-floor mews house that doubles as his painting studio and rehearsal room. Art books and pictures line the walls, but apart from three guitars – including his battered Clash-era Fender Precision with 'PAUL' carved into its body – there's little to suggest he's the survivor of the world's pre-eminent international punk group.

Simonon's disdain for the trappings of success almost borders on the ascetic: he doesn't own a TV, or a car, though he does ride a black Triumph Bonneville motorbike, which squats outside the front door. "The trouble is you can only go 20 miles an hour around here," he grumbles. "It's unnerving when people are jogging past you while you're riding along."

Born in December 1955 to a librarian mother and a half-Belgian ex-soldier "who had a million different jobs," Simonon was raised mostly in Brixton and Ladbrooke Grove, two locales that exposed him at an early age to the emerging black British culture that The Clash would so enthusiastically seize upon. A love for his London has heavily coloured his life and work – not just with his signature punk-reggae song, The Guns Of Brixton, but also his moody oil paintings (most recently scenes from Tyburnia, influ-

enced in part by Walter Sickert) and millennial, music hall-flavoured project with Damon Albarn, The Good, The Bad & The Queen.

Today, the dashing style icon, still visually striking at 67 in fedora and pin-stripes, is here to promote *Can We Do Tomorrow Another Day?*, a delightful album of Latin-meets-reggae music made with Galen Ayers, the singer-songwriter daughter of Soft Machine's Kevin Ayers. Throughout our 90-minute conversation, punctuated by a visit from his new female collaborator, Simonon is wry and humorous, with the vibe of a mischievous schoolboy who also holds serious and trenchant views.

References to politics and history pepper our summit, culminating in Simonon's tale – delivered in distinctive, croaky south London tones – of his participation in a Greenpeace action in 2011, which involved boarding an oil rig at sea and spending a month banged up in a Greenland jail.

"This is what me and Joe Strummer used to do," he says of our interview set-up on two facing sofas, with Peanut in between. "We'd lie there and drink red wine all night, talking and playing music. One night I came home from seeing Anthony Newley in Scrooge with a signed CD of the show. Joe said, 'Come on, let's play it!' I loved Joe..."

Whose idea was it to team up as Galen and Paul and make the *Can We Do Tomorrow Another Day?* album?

I was over in Mallorca on and off during lockdown, painting and writing songs, and was going to make a record with some local guys. One was ➤

Tom Oldham (2)

WE'RE NOT WORTHY

Manics' Nicky Wire on the height of low-end cool.



"He's The Clash's visual centre and a massively important cog in the chain of musicality. On *Lost In The Supermarket*, *Lover's Rock* etc, Paul's got real Motown capability, so fluid, never in the way. As soon as I saw him I thought, 'This is the man I've always loved: the one who can't be tamed.'"



Artikel Ansicht

◀ a gardener, another a filmmaker... Back in the UK, a friend said Galen was staying with him. I said, "I know Galen..." It was interesting because she was brought up in Mallorca, so we knew some of the same friends and places. Galen speaks perfect Spanish – well, Mallorquí. It was perfect. I'd been listening to a lot of yé-yé girls 45s and wanted to have another European language on the record, not just me hollering away.

Yours and Galen's characters on the album are quite amusing and playful. There's definitely a Nancy & Lee vibe on the track I've Never Had A Good Time... In Paris.

Galen had nowhere to stay, so I said, "I can turn the middle floor here into a place for you." As there's no television here, we'd sit round the table, chat and come up with songs. We ended up bantering as if we were a couple, so that aspect of the album is completely natural. Simon Tong [TGTBTQ guitarist, who plays on the album] said it's a bit like Bernard Cribbins and Brigitte Bardot singing together. I was like, "Oh, thanks..." (laughs)

You had a very unsettled upbringing. Aged 10, you were transplanted from a rented flat in Brixton to Siena in Tuscany. Did that experience instil a love of all things Mediterranean?

In a way – six months in Siena, six months in Roma. What happened was, around 1964 my parents separated. And it was devastating. My stepfather moved in and we didn't really get on... I missed my father too much, I was too much of a daddy's boy, I guess. Then my stepfather won a scholarship to study music in Italy. Me and my brother would end up going to the cinema to see spaghetti westerns or scrumping for apples. Roma was very different, lots of scallywags running around. We'd spend a lot of days in the [Protestant Cemetery], playing with Keats and Shelley...

So was that where your love of spaghetti

western soundtracks came from?

Yes. My musical education came from that and the reggae and ska I heard growing up in Brixton. A lot also came from my dad – François Hardy and the soundtrack to Black Orpheus, which is Brazilian music. He had a bit of everything: classical, The Beatles, The Kinks.

There's a picture of you as a kid looking cool in an American Civil War Union Army cap. Where did your sense of style come from?

My dad, who was a keen painter, was from a military background. Before bed, it was inspection time, as if you were on parade. You would never cross my dad. But though he was terrifying, in the same breath he'd tell you, "The height of men's clothing in Europe was during the Napoleonic Wars..." He'd lied about his age and signed up to the Royal Fusiliers and was eventually posted to Kenya, where he began to question a lot of things – like having to burn down villages, looking for Mau Mau leaders. Style-wise, there were also the Windrush guys in Brixton, who looked like cowboys in films. They would sit out on the corner of Somerleyton Road, with a hat and an orange suit – you'd never see an orange suit in London at that time...

You became a bit of a handful in your teens and went to live with your father in Ladbroke Grove. What was it like back then?

Pretty rough. You needed to know street tactics to survive. I had got into the skinhead thing and was getting involved in a lot of 'light mischief', you might say, hopping off school a lot. I'd sneak back home at my mum's and watch black-and-white films like Brighton Rock and then all the cooking programmes. That's where I learned how to cook (laughs). It was a tougher regime at my dad's; I slept in the room where he used to paint. At one point there was no art teacher at our school, Isaac Newton, because it was so run down, so we had to go to Ladbroke Girls School, which was brilliant! A great art teacher,

Miss Andros, helped me get into art college [the Byam Shaw in Notting Hill Gate] with a scholarship.

Nick Kent wrote that in the mid-'70s you were employed as a David Bowie decoy. Is that true?

(Laughs) Really? It sounds like a good job! I think he's taking the piss. I did have dyed orange hair, which was spiky and short. It was good timing because of punk. When I first met Johnny Rotten we had almost the same haircut. Didn't they call the punks "The bastard sons of David Bowie"?

Did you like Bowie? The main pre-punk musical influences you talk about most are reggae ones.

I liked Bowie a lot. When I was living with Mick Jones in the squat in Acton with Viv Albertine, there was the album on Deram, with Please Mr Gravedigger and Little Bombardier, which I played to death. It sounded like Anthony Newley, who I knew from Ed Stewpot's kids radio show. But I was more into Alex Harvey than Bowie, and later Kilburn And The High Roads and Dr. Feelgood. Also, I'd hang out at Ted Carroll's place [Rock On] on Golborne Road. There were always these giant Teddy Boys there listening to records, so that's probably where I first heard Brand New Cadillac.

The Clash story starts near here, in Praed Street, where in late 1976 you accompanied a friend to an audition for Mick Jones's group The London SS.

Yeah, they asked me to sing [Jonathan Richman's] Roadrunner and [The Standells'] Barracuda: "I'm a young barracuda, don't mess with me..." or whatever. I couldn't relate to that at all, and I'd never heard of Jonathan Richman. I was later told that [manager] Bernie Rhodes said, "Mick, get rid of your group and start a band with that bloke that just left." We started hanging out and Mick taught me to play bass.

Courtesy Paul Simonon, © Steve Moirani/Greenpeace, Seren Solliker/Starbird, Adrian Booy/urbanimages.tv (3), Getty, Photo by Sheila Rock/Shutterstock (2), Dan Donovon

A LIFE IN PICTURES

The right profile: Paul down the years.

1 Young gun of Brixton: style icon Paul Simonon, aged 10, in his Union Army cap.

2 A riot of their own: The Clash (from left) Joe Strummer, Mick Jones and Simonon, near the Roundhouse, Camden, London, 1978.

3 Bass face: Paul gives it some on-stage at London's Rainbow, 1977.

4 Westway to the world: The Clash (from left) Strummer, Topper Headon, Simonon, Jones in '78.

5 Call the cops: John Lydon and Paul shred a copy of the NME during the video shoot for Big Audio Dynamite's Medicine Show, 1986.

6 Cuban heels: Havana 3AM (from left) Simonon, Nigel Dixon, Travis Williams and Gary Myrick, France, 1990.

7 Merrie men: The Good, The Bad & The Queen (from left) Simon Tong, Simonon, Damon Albarn and Tony Allen, 2018.

8 All at sea: Greenpeace activist Paul (far right) off the Greenland coast, 2011.

9 With new musical partner Galen Ayers, 2023.

10 "I suppose I was the practical joker in the band": Paul, London, 1979.



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Artikel Ansicht

I would play along with reggae records, and *The Ramones* when it came out. Me and Sid Vicious both used to play along with that. It's good for the engine – (mimes picking furiously) “der-der-der-der...”

You and Bernard Rhodes oversaw The Clash's T-shirts, clothes, artwork. Did he see something in you that perhaps you didn't see yourself?

I think he thought I had a good look. And also that I didn't come with any luggage; I was a nobody that had just come in from the desert, as it were. Without Bernie or Mick, I wouldn't have got to where I am now. I suppose I was also the practical joker in the band. Joe? He was like an elder brother, really. I never had an argument with Joe in the whole of The Clash. I had rows with Mick.

That time in summer 1977, with *The Clash* coming out and the *White Riot* tour, what was it like being caught up in the whirlwind of punk energy and violence?

It was exhilarating, it kept you on your toes, but it was always like that in London. I remember walking up Shaftesbury Avenue one day and a Teddy Boy strode over and said his wife had a miscarriage because she'd been beaten up by some punks. It was just an excuse for a fight.

You once quipped in the early days of *The Clash* that you didn't know who the current Prime Minister was. Yet you seemed very politically informed in a BBC2 interview in spring 1978 about the rise of the National Front.

Put it this way, my dad was a member of the Communist Party. He taught me about Wat Tyler and people like that. So I was quite savvy. When – as I like to think of it – Stalin was indoors watching TV, I was outside delivering Commu-

nist Party pamphlets for him to the local community. Reggae music was influential with its lyrics. When Burning Spear and Big Youth came out, it became much more about black power, the black struggle. That was big at the parties I went to as a teenager.

With your first and most well-known Clash song, *The Guns Of Brixton*, you've said that you saw Joe and Mick were getting songwriting royalties, and wanted in on the act. Were there earlier Simonon songs?

Well, I had always tried to write songs. But how

“[Joining *The Clash*,] I didn't come with any luggage; I was a nobody that had just come in from the desert.”

could you compete with Strummer-Jones? When we were in Vanilla Studios working on material for *London Calling*, I came up with the bass line and the others joined in, and it developed from there. The lyrics... there was a real suspicion in Ladbroke Grove that your flat would be raided. The SPG, the 'sus' laws, that paranoia permeated the area. And *The Harder They Come* was a big influence, the film and the book.

Jimmy Cliff covered *Guns Of Brixton*...

I know, what a twist. He did a great version. The version I really like is the Nouvelle Vague one. What a great voice [French singer Camille Dalmais].

What was the highlight of *The Clash* for you?

Going to Jamaica, for the first time [in April 1980]. Being in Studio One, where all these great records were made, it was amazing, and we were dead lucky having Mikey Dread around, though we all had to pile into his Renault and skedaddle when we heard some gunmen were on their way to the studio, after money. He introduced me to all these people, like [singer] Edi Fitzroy... We went to Prince Buster's shop, which was a bit dusty by this period. It made a full connection to my growing up and background.

The picture of you smashing your Fender Precision is one of the most iconic in music. What does it represent to you?

I dunno... you can read a lot into it. But I certainly didn't smash it up to impress my girlfriend, as someone once said. I lost my temper as it was a seated venue, and you had this thing with the bouncers telling everyone to sit down. So it was a bit of a subdued atmosphere and the sound was a bit shit, so I just thought, “Fuck it.”

For you, where would be a fitting place for its remnants?

It's on loan to the Museum Of London, so as far as I'm concerned it can stay with them. It always reminds of some fragment from the cross or something.

Topper Headon was fired in 1982, Mick followed in 1983... were you zen about *The Clash's* intra-band turbulence?

I don't know how to put it politely... (Pause) Mick had his way of doing things. He liked to be in his hotel watching TV and he loved having room service – and I don't blame him. It was probably like it was for him at home with his nan, who'd cook his dinner while he watched TV. For me and Joe, we'd like to go out and ➤



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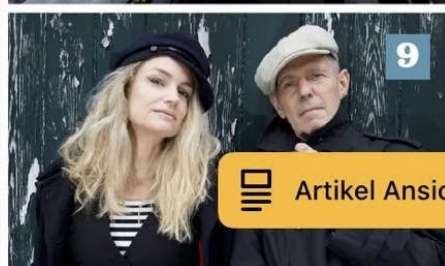
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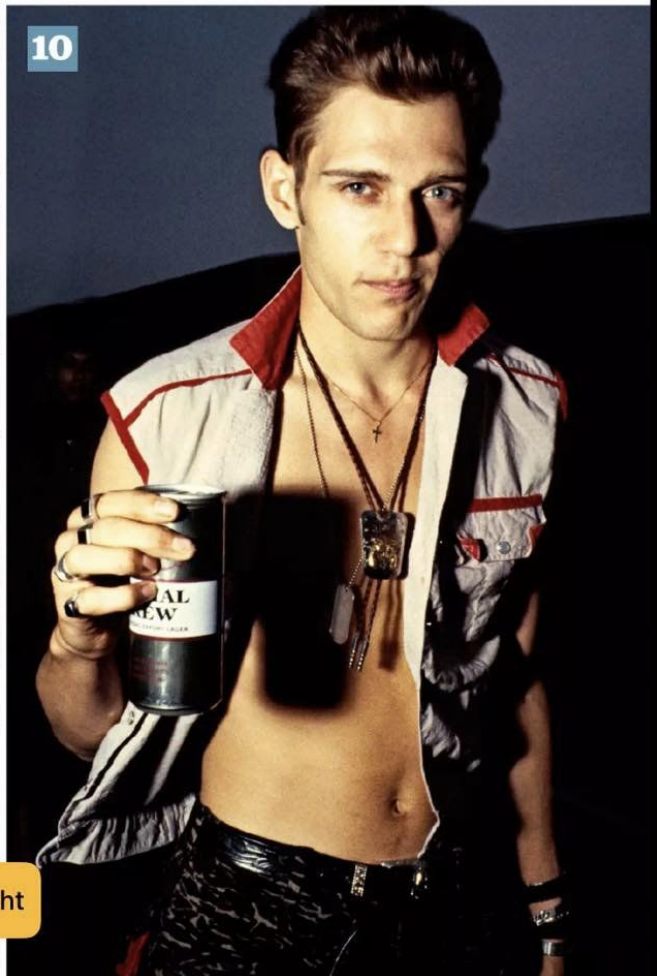
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Paul's boutique: Simonon selects another disc, Paddington, London, February 21, 2023.

“Mick [Jones] said, ‘You’ll get a million pounds.’ I said, ‘I don’t want a fucking million pounds.’”

◀ explore the town. And Mick did get grumpy. That famous line from Strummer that Mick was “like Elizabeth Taylor in a filthy mood”. After six or seven years we’d had enough of it. We looked at each other and said, “OK, then, shall we cut our right arm off?” Because Mick was so impatient.

How had the atmosphere in the group changed?

We were 27 by then or whatever, we were grown men. I was losing patience with Mick and he was probably pissed off with me too. I didn’t feel good about it. But I’m not going to apologise because he became a brat. But then, maybe we were all about to become brats. We were so mollycoddled by then, people running around after us all the time on tour. We were getting too pampered. So it was a good way of getting un-pampered.

What do you think of the five-piece Clash Mk II today?

The best thing was the busking tour [in May 1985]. It was as exciting as the White Riot tour. But it took on another agenda that was led by Bernie and Kosmo [Vinyl, band aide]. With [Cut The Crap], they suggested I go back to painting in New York, maybe as a ruse to get me out of

the studio so Joe could finish the album. I said to Joe, “We’ve never had an argument, so I’ll let you finish the record how you want.” But then when I got back from New York, Joe had left the sessions and Bernie had taken over. I didn’t hear from Joe for a good few weeks. Then my dad had a serious car accident, which killed his wife. He ended up in hospital with a cage holding his head together. Then The Clash ended.

You went to El Paso in 1987 to get ideas for your next band, Havana 3AM. Why there?

I went with Nigel Dixon of Whirlwind. Bernie said go somewhere to get something together. So we spun a globe and stuck a finger out and it landed on El Paso. It could have been Bombay! That would have been interesting... Me and Nigel bought a couple of second-hand Harleys and lived there for a couple of months, riding round in our leathers, drinking beer. It was like being in a western. Bernie came to visit us and he found it quite tough. We went into a bar and there was a pool-cue fight going on behind us. He left the next day.

During this period you ended up playing on Bob Dylan’s Down In The Groove. Not perhaps a move people expected...

I knew Bob Dylan was a fan of The Clash

shows. I turned up with Steve Jones, and Bob said, “Here’s a song,” so I figured out a bass line, then he said, “Here’s another song,” then, “Here’s another,” by which time I’d forgotten the first one. It was bloody hard work. We didn’t think we’d be there long and had arranged to meet up with some other motorcyclists at the studio. We looked up and there were 30 blokes in leather jackets in the control room, with the engineer looking slightly nervous.

Steve Jones and John Lydon settled in LA. Did you not fancy a life over there?

I missed London too much. I missed the seasons, the culture, the rain, the gasometer on the canal.

Nigel Dixon was diagnosed with cancer, which effectively ended Havana 3AM after just one self-titled album in 1991.

He told me, “I’ve got six months to live.” He had malignant melanoma. When he died, I went in with a friend and we dressed him up in a leather jacket, washed his hair and combed it back into a quiff. After he was cremated, the jar rattled with all the studs and the buckles in it, which was kind of nice. Yeah... it was over for me, really, musically.

Tom Odham



There were always rumours of a Clash re-formation in the early '90s. What actually happened?

There was talk between me, Joe, Mick and Mick's manager, Gary Kurfirst, who was looking after Mick in B.A.D. But it didn't happen for lots of reasons. Like what? I was getting pissed off with Mick. I said, "I don't want to do it." Mick said, "Why not? You'll get a million pounds." That pissed me off even more. So I said, "I don't want a fucking million pounds." I think he was a bit shocked that I wasn't keen on the idea. And I don't think Joe would have really wanted to do it either. For me The Clash story was over. Joe and I really liked Lawrence Of Arabia, and I liked T.E. Lawrence's book, The Mint [where Lawrence shuns fame for an anonymous life as an 'erk' in the RAF].

You went back to painting full-time...

Yes, and my sons were born, Louis and Claude. They'd be with me in my studio when I was working. Which was fun. Especially when one of your paintbrushes would fly past you like an arrow, because your bigger paintbrush had been made into a bow with a bit of string.

When The Clash were due to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003, there was more talk of a reunion...

They wanted us to play on the stage at the ceremony. I said, "I'm not doing that." So Joe said, "OK, maybe we'll get Mani to do it." I said, "OK, go on then..." I had no interest in

those kind of awards things. I don't want a pat on the back.

Strummer died suddenly at Christmas 2002, before the reunion issue could be resolved. You spoke at Joe's funeral - was that hard?

Yes. (Pause) Some time before that, we met up at the Earl Percy pub in Ladbrooke Grove one night, and Joe said he had something really important to tell me. The gravitas of the way he said it, in retrospect I wonder if it was something about his heart. I know when you sign a record contract you take a medical. Maybe he discovered something? He could have died at one or 90. It happened to be 50. (Sighs) Bullseye.

How did Damon Albarn manage to draw you back into music with The Good, The Bad & The Queen in 2006?

I met Damon through Chrissie Hynde upstairs at the Earl Percy. Joe had just got married [in 1995]. She instigated a group hug with Joe, me and

Damon. I saw him around occasionally, as he lived in the area. Then he was in Africa doing a project with Tony Allen but it wasn't working, so he came back to London and my name came up. Before long we were hanging out a lot, talking about the history of the area, Tyburn, there were a lot of London references. We discovered a shared love for English musical hall and that shaped the project.

You were described as "creative director" - the clothes, the look, the atmosphere, painting the backdrop with St Paul's ablaze...

I was just totally absorbed by the project and the sentiment of the record. Simon Tong is my favourite guitarist in the world, Tony Allen was brilliant. I love Walter Sickert. Those titles like "Off To The Pub..." He painted music hall scenes, so that all fitted.

Damon then invited you and Mick to play in the Plastic Beach-era Gorillaz. How was that?

It was nice being with Mick again, and there was no pressure on us, really, as it was under Damon and Jamie [Hewlett]'s banner. We met all these characters, Lou Reed, De La Soul, Bobby Womack.

In 2011, you were involved in a Greenpeace action that involved boarding an oil rig after weeks at sea on a boat. Was that an extension of your politics in The Clash?

My friend Frank [Hewetson] has worked for Greenpeace for years and talked about getting me involved. But he said, "As you have no skill as such you'll have to help cook and clean the toilets." I was below deck from early in the morning until eight at night every day for weeks. At one point, we thought the Danish navy were going to storm the ship. When we boarded the oil rig, they called the police in Greenland, who arrived by helicopter and took us to prison. When we got there everyone was going nuts, banging on the cell doors with tin cups. "Fuck off Greenpeace!" We were put in a separate wing with some locals and this bloke came over and said, "I want to fight you." I thought, "Why doesn't he pick on Frank, he's bigger than me?" But it came to nothing.

You'd been in jail cells during The Clash era. Was several weeks in prison different?

I took on the duties of cooking for everyone, did some painting in my cell, read John Steinbeck books. Towards the end I felt like escaping - I figured I could climb down the gap between the walls and make it to a fishing village. But Frank said, "No, you can't go. You haven't done anything wrong."

Then you went back to painting and plotting TGTBTQ's second album, 2018's Merrie Land...

Yeah, Damon said, "We'd better make an album but we need a producer." I said, "I have someone in mind..." - and that was Tony Visconti. Because of the way Damon was singing, it reminded me of Bowie and his Anthony Newley thing. Tony was brilliant, he helps you make the album you want, rather than put his imprint on it. And now he's produced the Galen & Paul record.

After all your adventures, any regrets?

(Thinks) OK, in Teesside on the White Riot tour I'd had too much to drink beforehand, and when I hit the first note on-stage I fell over backwards into my amplifier. Joe thought it was funny; Mick didn't. Then the crowd parted like the Red Sea and clashed in this big battle. So thankfully nobody noticed... M

Can We Do Tomorrow Another Day?, by Galen & Paul, is released on May 19 by Sony Music.

FOUR STRINGS GOOD

Three reasons to hail Paul Simonon, by Pat Gilbert.

THE TIMELESS MASTERPIECE

The Clash

★★★★★

London Calling

(CBS, 1979)



Pennie Smith's dramatic bass-smashing cover image fed into the mythology already growing around its subject as a motorbike-booted punk James Dean. But the album's sleeve also drew attention to Simonon's increasing musical centrality to The Clash, as he began to develop his own bass lines, leaning heavily on reggae, ska and rockabilly passions - most powerfully on his own spaghetti western-roots reggae mash-up, The Guns Of Brixton.

THE REGGAEBILLY ONE-OFF

Havana 3AM

★★★

Havana 3AM

(IRS, 1991)



Overlooked today as on its release, Simonon's sole album with his Pérez Prado-referencing post-Clash outfit was true to his school: mucho rockabilly twanging (courtesy of ex-Whirlwind frontman Nigel Dixon), jerky-reggae beats and moody Western saloon-bar machismo. But one-dimensional it's not, with imaginative arrangements and the ageless Reach The Rock and tumbleweed instrumental Hey Amigo hitting the bullseye. Worth another spin.

THE VISION OF ENGLANDE

The Good, The Bad & The Queen

★★★★★

Merrie Land

(STUDIO 13, 2018)



TGTBTQ's self-titled debut from 2007 established the themes of Albarn and Simonon's pet project: modern, fusionist London seen through the distorted prism of olde worlde music hall. But the Wicca-invoking, Brexit-lamenting Merrie Land was even better: weirder, more complex, more reggae-ish, with Simonon pushing Albarn to up the quotient of seasick picture palace Wurlitzer. "one of my favou