

EXIT THE DRAGON



TOPPER HEADON: physical graffiti

Jane Simon learns how Topper Headon clashed with heroin and survived to drum another day

WHEN TOPPER Headon was sacked by The Clash, a sour final chapter began. It ended six months later with the sacking of Mick Jones and by September The Clash were dead. Their last real single was 'Rock The Casbah' which featured Topper playing all instruments - he'd also written the track.

"I was talking to CBS, and every month they get a call from The Clash saying they're going into the studio to do their album next week - but they never get around to it."

Topper's own solo single, 'Drumming Man', was originally intended as a one-off - a kind of advertisement to say that Topper Headon is back in circulation and, more pointedly, off the junk. He was, in fact, the healthiest looking person I'd seen all week, and well up for talking about his tap-dancing lessons, learning to drive (hobbies to fill the gaps where the smack used to be), and his new band featuring Neil Hubbard, Mickey Gallagher and James Eller.

"The idea at first was that I was going to play with a lot of different people and just keep my name on the bass drum - like Cozy Powell or Carmine Appice," he explains. But Phonogram liked the two other instrumental tracks he gave them - 'Du Cane Road' and 'Hope For Donna', now seeing active service in the clubs - and by the time we met at Wessex Studios, he'd nearly finished his first LP.

He's called it 'Waking Up', and when you see song titles like 'Monkey On My Back' or 'Just Another Hit', the honesty is disarming. In the last two years there have been other projects - notably a band with Henry Padovani, Pete Farndon and Mickey Gallagher, but nothing ever amounted to anything until now because, as Topper says, "the bottom line was always that I was relying on heroin. If there was a rehearsal and I didn't have any, I couldn't play. It got to a point where I had to make a decision. Either I was gonna carry on being a junkie and being known as a casualty, or I was gonna try and do it again."

"People keep asking me if I'm going to be lending my name to the anti-heroin campaign, but I think the only way that me and Pete Townshend and Eric Clapton and people like that were able to get off it was because we had a lot of money and we could afford to go to these clinics for treatment - that's the only way you can do it."

Three weeks of electro-acupuncture (similar to Townshend's treatment), and Topper was back in action straight away.

"It's all gone really well, so there haven't been any stumbling blocks. But if 'Drumming Man' hadn't been taken by a record company, who knows?"

WHILE 'DRUMMING Man' isn't the sort of thing that springs immediately to mind when you think of an ex-Clash project (Mike Smith on Radio One remarked that it sounded like something the Young Generation used to dance to on TV), the connection with Gene Krupa who made the song famous in the Forties is more understandable.

"He went through the same problems as I did. He was a really well-known drummer, then he got busted for heroin, and in those days that was really terrible. He got brushed aside for two or three years, then he got his own band and made a comeback, so I relate

to him in a way. Plus the fact that he was the first real showman on the drums - he was playing real simple stuff, but he made it look really difficult."

On the break-up of The Clash, Topper is as confused as anybody.

"It's a long story... basically, Bernie Rhodes managed the group and after a couple of years we found out we were a quarter of a million pounds in debt to the record company. He had more money than the four of us put together and it went on and on, and it cost us 25 grand to get rid of him. Then we recorded 'London Calling' and within a year we were in the black and paying our own way. And then Joe left and said he'd only come back if Bernie was the manager again. So that was the first weird thing that happened."

"Then we were supposed to rehearse for a British and American tour, Joe disappeared and said he'd only come back if I was thrown out. We found out later that Bernie had known all along that Joe was in Paris, and they knew that if they'd said get rid of Topper, Paul and Mick would've said no. But Joe proved that we couldn't tour without him, so I had to go."

I notice Mick gets a thank you on your single.

"Yeah, he was the only one who stuck up for me - trying to make sure I was treated fairly. When he got sacked we worked together for a while, but he wanted to play synth guitar and I'm doing the exact opposite."

"But Mick's a very sincere guy. As for the other two... Paul hasn't got a thought in his head anyway, he just goes along with what's easiest. But Joe was gonna build studios for musicians, saying when we make money we'll do this and that to help struggling bands and stuff - and he won't even pay me what I'm owed. So I don't think he's very sincere."

THE ONLY thing Topper's new outfit plans to have in common with The Clash is the energy they hope to recreate on stage.

"There's no toughness or political overtones," he says. "I've always liked soul and the Sixties and brass, and I'm just trying to make it more contemporary. The Clash hit it when we were playing things like 'Magnificent Seven' and 'Lightning Strikes' and 'Spanish Bombs' - this isn't very far removed from that really."

"The only thing we're not sure of yet is the vocalist. I'm definitely singing two tracks on the album on my own. I haven't got a great voice, but the way I see it, if I can sing it, the punters can sing it as well. That's what was good about The Beatles - everyone could sing the songs. People might like Chaka Khan, but you can't sing her songs."

Before he'll have his photo taken, he goes inside for a shave. George Michael might be able to get away with two days growth, but not Topper Headon.

"Because I had such a bad reputation, I've now got to go completely the other way - I've got to be totally together, on time for every meeting. That's what I don't understand about Pete Townshend. He comes on TV talking about the dangers of heroin, and he looks dreadful - he hasn't shaved, his hair's all lanky. But Pete was really great to me."

"That's like another incentive. I've got a lot to prove, to my parents and a lot of friends who believed in me and tried to help me. And I want to do it for myself. I reached near enough as high as you could go with The Clash and I got booted out because I was untethered. This time I want to bow out on my own terms."