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LADBROKE GROVE
FOR PORTOBELLO ROAD

GARAGELAND

No other area of London resonated louder and angrier than Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill and London West 10. From primal revolutionaries like the Pink Fairies through to the last gang in town, the Clash, the multicultural Rich Deakin and Kris Needs donned their battle

Grove, Notting Hill and London West 10. From primal revolutionaries like the neighbourhood was the scene of riots, soundsystems, and the birth of punk. fatigues to trace a rock 'n' roll revolution.

UNKNOWN BAND
PLAYING ON
PORTOBELLO GREEN,
WESTWAY. C.1971/72.
PHOTO FROM THE
COLLECTION OF
ANTHONY PERRY

GET INTO THE GROVE

Rich Deakin looks at the influence prime freak bands of the early 1970s, like Pink Fairies and Hawkwind, had on the trajectory of the evolving alternative music scene in the Ladbroke Grove area and the importance its own emerging punk scene had in paving the way for the subsequent musical and social tsunami that followed.

ALTHOUGH the Ladbroke Grove area of West London is generally regarded as being the epicentre of the late 1960s British hippy counterculture, it can also justifiably stake a claim to being one of the ground zero locations of the British punk explosion of the mid-1970s. Not only is this true in terms of the area's psychogeography, but also because of various musical influences emerging from the burgeoning countercultural ghetto and multicultural melting pot of Notting Hill and its surrounding environs, some years before The Clash became synonymous with the area and inextricably linked to one of its most iconic and potent landmarks – the Westway.

Following World War II, the Notting Hill district was characterised

by largely decaying housing, hastily converted into multi-occupation tenancies to exploit the post-war influx of West Indian immigration. But, by the mid-1960s, the area had become something of a bohemian enclave too, as writers, poets, artists and musicians began to exert their influence. The cheap, albeit somewhat dilapidated housing stock soon became an attractive option for increasing numbers of hippies and freaks flooding into the area, to create what was arguably London's equivalent of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury.

Similar to its American counterpart, the British countercultural scene, much of it originating from the heart of the Ladbroke Grove area, particularly from what was known as the London Free School, was responsible for creating its own means of alternative self-organisation. Underground newspapers such as International Times (IT) sprang up, food co-operatives, bust advisory centres like

Release, head shops, health food stores, communes, squatters' rights groups and claimants' unions all flourished in the Grove, where the bohemian counterculture and black communities coexisted together, although not always harmoniously. It's hardly surprising that over the years these different cultures would converge to produce such a richly diverse musical scene too.

Drawn towards England's new countercultural mecca, bands and artists like High Tide, Mighty Baby, Quintessence, Tyrannosaurus Rex, Steamhammer, and the Third Ear Band proliferated in the area, catering primarily for the growing hippy population. That's not to say there weren't black Notting Hill based musicians too, perhaps most notably Ginger Johnson & His African Messengers, Ram John Holder, Noir, and Mataya – but a local reggae scene didn't really emerge for a few years, until the development of sound systems and the further evolution of the Notting Hill carnival from the early 1970s onwards. But it's the more radical, or so-called community underground bands, that have become most synonymous with the Ladbroke Grove music scene of that era. Bands like the Pink Fairies, Hawkwind, and Edgar Broughton Band all resonated with a significant number of the UK punk movement's leading figures, including the likes of John Lydon, Captain Sensible, and perhaps more pertinently here, Brian James and Tony James.

Mick Farren started the ball rolling with his band the Social Deviants, later shortened to the Deviants. Musically there was no other band like them in the UK at that time. Whereas bands like Quin-

tessence, strongly influenced by Eastern mysticism, and Tyrannosaurus Rex with their Tolkienesque leanings, were the epitome of late '60s hippy ideals, The Deviants were the antithesis of the love and peace, flower power ethos so prevalent at the time. Between 1967 and 1969 they released three albums, 'Ptooff!', 'Disposable', and 'Deviants III', combining a schizophrenic musical cocktail of experimental sound collages, acoustic ballads, blistering blues workouts, psychedelic thunder, and teeth-grinding fuzz-freakouts.

Record companies had little time for a band as raucous and so obviously at odds with the prevailing musical mood of the time, so

DEVIANTS, EPPING FOREST, APRIL 1969



PHOTO BY ROBIN MORRISON

◀ the Deviants set about rewriting the traditional convention of making a record. The counterculture community had already proved it could produce and distribute its own newspapers, magazines and posters, so it was just a small leap of faith for Farren to extend this to making a record. For their first album 'Ptooff!', the usual distribution channels employed by the music industry were dispensed with and it was sold via mail order adverts in the underground press and in head shops. The Deviants are now often regarded as being godfathers of punk in their attitude, music and D.I.Y. ethos.

Farren was also heavily immersed in other areas of the London countercultural scene, such as UFO, which became the premier underground club, with its roots in All Saints Hall – a church hall off All Saints Road. The hall figured prominently in what is now often regarded as the first truly multicultural outdoors Notting Hill Carnival organised by Rhaune Laslett in 1966, when it hosted a series of social nights throughout the event. Pink Floyd played some of their earliest gigs there later that year.

Situated in the confines of the basement of an Irish dancehall called the Blarney Club in Tottenham Court Road, UFO was initially set up as a means of funding the Notting Hill Free School, before moving to the West End. As well as being a doorman at UFO, Mick Farren also regularly contributed to IT. Arguably, no one in Britain did more to promote music as a revolutionary medium than he did, and by the turn of the decade he had gained editorial control of IT, bringing with him a street-based culture of dope, sex, rock 'n' roll and revolution.

By this time, Swinging London had already reached its apogee, and the Summer of Love was fast fading to a winter of discontent as the new decade dawned. Optimism had given way to more disillusioned times, and a harder-edged cynicism was becoming more evident. Farren had been unceremoniously booted out of the Deviants in the autumn of 1969, and in February 1970 the other band members hooked up with John 'Twink' Alder, renaming themselves the Pink Fairies.

Over the next few years, the Pink Fairies performed at numerous festivals and benefit gigs, often playing for free, setting up on makeshift stages outside the perimeters of main events. The first notable happening of this kind was at the Bath festival of Blues and Progressive Music in June 1970, which is where Hawkwind enter the picture too. Using the name Group X, Hawkwind had played what is generally regarded to be their first gig at the aforementioned All Saints Hall in August 1969. Pink Fairies and Hawkwind were both based at the heart of the "freak" community in Ladbroke Grove, and over the next couple of years, often shared the same bill, with various members joining each other on stage to jam, sometimes for hours on end. Thus began the legend of Pinkwind.

PINKWIND GIG UNDER THE WESTWAY, JULY 1971.

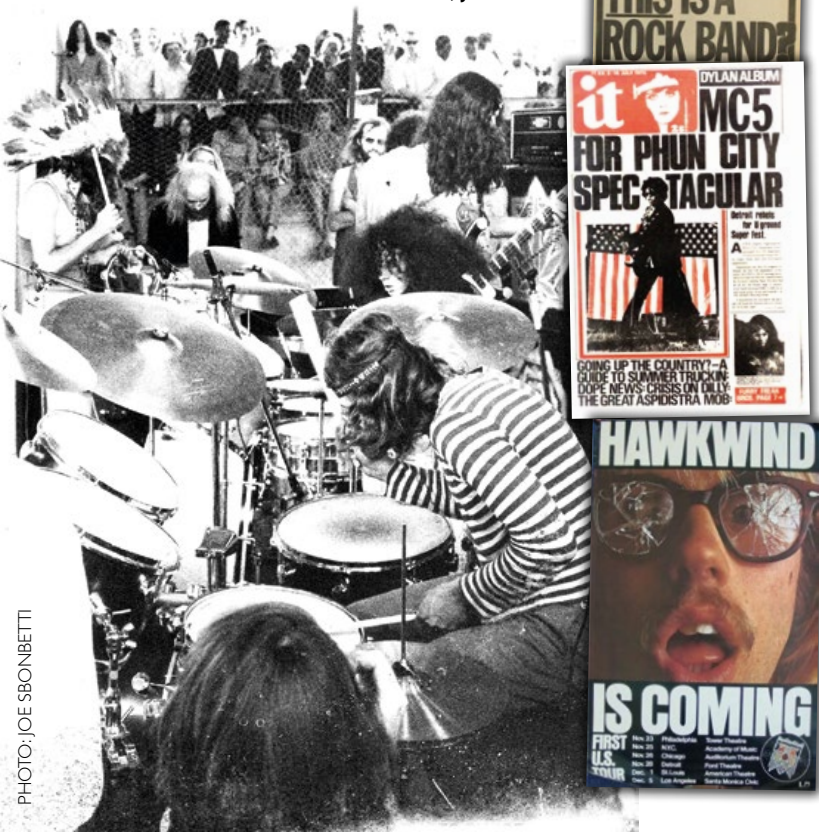


PHOTO: JOE SBOINBETTI

PINK FAIRIES, KENSINGTON MEMORIAL GARDEN, SPRING 1970.



PHOTO: PAUL WELCH

The following month, the Pink Fairies played at the legendary Phun City festival. Now generally assumed to be Britain's first free festival. Mick Farren was involved again and pulled off a major coup by securing the MC5 as headliners – it was the first time they played in the UK. The line-up also featured the Pink Fairies, two of its members stripped off naked on stage, and several other Ladbroke Grove based bands, such as the Edgar Broughton Band, Pretty Things, Steve Peregrin Took & Shagrat, Noir and Mighty Baby, to name a few. Phun City is also notable in that several future leading luminaries of the British punk scene attended. Talking in 2006, Mick Jones, founder member of The Clash, told John Robb, "We went to Phun City festival at Worthing to see the MC5, and the Pink Fairies played too. That was the first time MC5 had played. My overriding memory was falling into a ditch! That was a great festival" Talking in May 2024, original Damned guitarist Brian James remembers it was where he first saw the Pink Fairies too, "I'd seen them with the MC5, when they came over and did Phun City, and they hung about a bit, and they started doing gigs in Croydon, and all different places. I'd follow them around and I'd go and see them when they were playing here, there and everywhere".

Brian James stresses the importance of the Pink Fairies to him, "There were all these hippy bands gradually turning into progressive bands... basically going up their own arses... It was a fucking wasteland for rock 'n' roll until the Pink Fairies emerged out of the ashes of The Deviants." Of their debut single, he says, "I ordered it from my local record shop, and took it home, and I haven't stopped playing it since! 'The Snake' was a great song, but it was the b-side ['Do It!'] that did it for me, it was just like wow, in your face, it was great, great, great! It's one of the toughest singles you'll find anywhere!".

Living in Crawley, Brian was ideally situated to visit both the South coast and London, which he regularly visited at weekends, "I'd go up to Portobello Road and hang out around there, and buy the underground magazines like Oz, and International Times. And that was it really, I eventually ended up living around Portobello Road for gawd knows how long, from the days of London SS right through to the Lords [Of The New Church]".

Brian James attended the Isle of Wight festival a month later in August 1970. This festival has gone down in British counterculture legend, not only for the sheer size of it and a star-studded line-up including the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Doors, The Who, Joni Mitchell, Miles Davis, Moody Blues, Jethro Tull, and Rory Gallagher, but also because of events that occurred outside it.

Continuing the tradition of what began at Bath Festival earlier that summer, Hawkwind and Pink Fairies both did their bit again by protesting against the high admission charges, performing outside the perimeter of the main festival in a large inflatable tent 'Canvas City'. It's now gone down in Pinkwind lore as one of their most famous jams. Talking to John Robb in 2006, Brian James said, "The only band I was into in England was the Pink Fairies, who were sort of more rock 'n' roll. They wore leather jackets and didn't give a fuck. They would be bashing down fences at the Isle of Wight festival trying to get in free. I was in there and I left the main festival because I knew the Fairies had set up an alternative tent down the road. I was down there for the Fairies and Hawkwind and the Notting Hill lot".

Like Brian James, Tony James, later to be bassist of Generation X, also saw the Pink Fairies and Hawkwind at the Isle of Wight festival. Tony James was born not far from Notting Hill, in nearby Shepherd's Bush, but grew up in Twickenham.

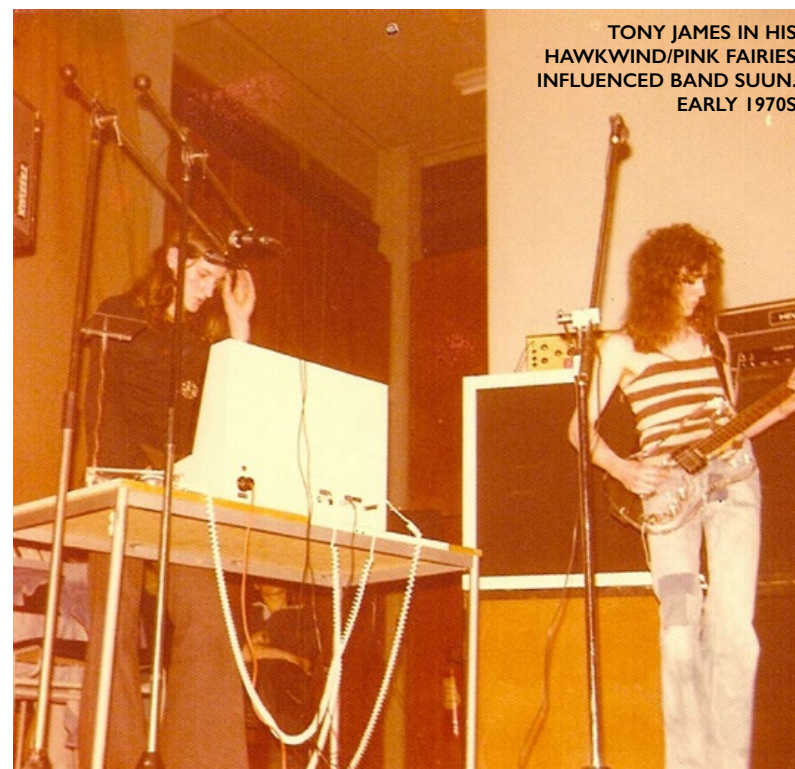
He recalls seeing Deep Purple at Eel Pie Island in June 1970, "That night was an epiphany, because I knew from that moment I wanted to be in a band, not someone who merely followed bands". The L'Auberge cafe, a squat on Grosvenor Road, and a derelict warehouse near Twickenham station were all extensions of that scene. Tony continues, "The Auberge terrified my parents as it was rumoured to be a den of drugs and anti-establishment ideas... My early school band, called Suun, rehearsed at the warehouse. We were a kind of Hawkwind/Pink Fairies mash-up, space rock band using a VCS synthesiser and also two drummers". By now Tony was regularly visiting the Grove too, "I would go to Portobello Road on a Saturday where Hawkwind would often play under the Westway, shaking my rapidly growing hair to 'Brainstorm' and 'Master Of The Universe'. We went to every free Pink Fairies gig we could find, I even saw them at The Isle of Wight Festival where they, of course, played for free outside. There was always that rush of anticipation when the Fairies opened with their cover of the Beatles 'Tomorrow Never Knows', or the shuddering electronic take-off of Hawkwind. It was a primal sound. But I also think it was because those two bands were about more than just music that drew me in".

Andy Colquhoun moved to the Ladbroke Grove area in the spring of 1970. Sharing a flat with John Manly (who he later played with in Ladbroke Grove bands, The Rockets and Warsaw Pakt), he recalls, "Much of our time was spent talking drugs. There were a lot of freaks everywhere and a lot of acid. I worked for Frendz newspaper at the office in Portobello Road for a while, it was a very loose collective of hippie journalists who needed newspaper distribution." He inevitably gravitated towards the local music scene, and discovered the Pink Fairies, joining their later incarnations in the 1980s and 2010s as guitarist. Like Tony James, Colquhoun also saw them play under the Westway, "I first saw the original line-up at a pub in North London, and later, when I moved to Lancaster Road, saw them under the Westway a couple of times. I thought they were a great acid rock band. All the sounds were there. A number would take off and keep the intensity going until the end".

The Pinkwind performances weren't just confined to a rural festival setting then. The most famous example of this arguably was when they set up their equipment under the arches of the recently constructed Westway motorway, near the site of what is now Portobello Green and proceeded to belt out a jamming session. The police were called and Russell Hunter allegedly had to be removed from his kit by the police whilst still in full flight!

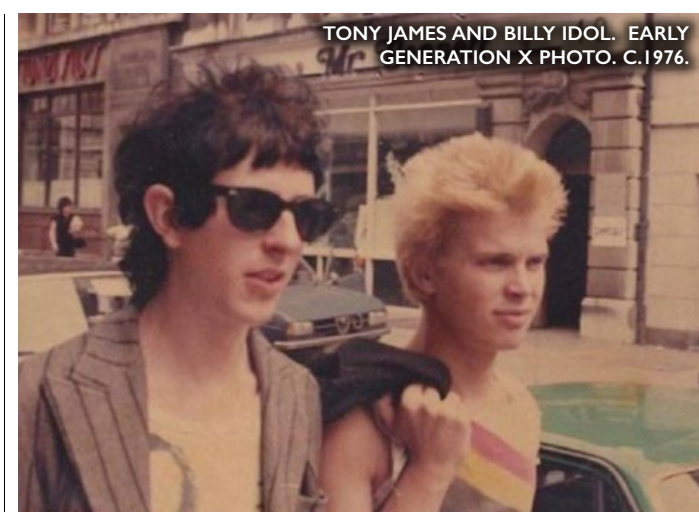
In July 1970, the newly completed Westway was opened and cut a swathe right through the heart of the neighbourhood bisecting two of the area's main thoroughfares, Ladbroke Grove and Portobello Road. In years to come the Westway would prove to be a powerful symbolic landscape – The Clash and their Sound Of The Westway tag being an example of its iconographical significance. However, the challenges faced by the broader community extended beyond

"The police were called and Russell Hunter had to be removed from his kit by the police whilst still in full flight."



TONY JAMES IN HIS HAWKWIND/PINK FAIRIES INFLUENCED BAND SUUN. EARLY 1970S

PHOTO: COURTESY TONY JAMES



TONY JAMES AND BILLY IDOL. EARLY GENERATION X PHOTO. C.1976.

PHOTO: COURTESY TONY JAMES

the environmental and geographical issues posed by the new motorway flyover.

The social malaise of the area and the dilapidated housing stock had been exacerbated by slum landlords, such as Peter Rachman, who took advantage of the Rent Act of 1957, decontrolling rents without providing security of tenure. The West Indian immigrant population had endured this situation for years, and by the early 1970s, the Ladbroke Grove area had experienced a notable rise in the number of hippies and freaks too. Simultaneously, police harassment in the neighbourhood escalated significantly. The Hell's Angels' Powis Square commune in Notting Hill faced frequent raids, and freak pads were regularly targeted by the local drugs squad. The area's black population was particularly discriminated against, with the 1971 Mangrove Nine case being the most infamous incident. On occasions like this the wider community would come together and bands would perform benefit gigs for all manner of causes, from the Mangrove Nine, the Angry Brigade, and to the increasingly beleaguered underground publications, among many others.

Far from passively accepting the looming monstrosity that overshadowed the neighbourhood, locals took matters into their own hands and utilised the motorway arches for their own means. The British White Panther Party (WPP) might initially have come about as being an excuse for a bit of rabble rousing at the Isle of Wight festival, courtesy of Mick Farren, but back on the Grove it adopted the manifesto of its American counterparts. On a practical level it also established neighbourhood councils, organised free food programmes and soup kitchens, and distributed blankets among the Grove hippies, not to mention providing inspiration for WPP chapters to spring up all over the country.

The Greasy Truckers was another Ladbroke Grove based neighbourhood collective who began running events under the Westway and on the waste ground known as Portobello Green. They also helped establish what became known as the Westway Theatre. Over the next few years, the Greasy Truckers put on various benefits and impromptu gigs in and around the Grove area, such as the Shepherd's Bush roundabout, and other underground enclaves, including the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm, Dingwalls in Camden, and Covent Garden.

In the summer of '72, the Pink Fairies underwent a significant personnel change when original guitarist Paul Rudolph left and was replaced by Larry Wallis. Although Wallis was steeped in the underground to some extent, his recruitment also signified a shift away from their more revolutionary roots towards reaching a broader audience. The Fairies' third album, 'Kings Of Oblivion', released in 1973, had a more commercial, heavy metal, glam feel about it, but mainstream popularity still eluded them. On the other hand, their old running mates Hawkwind went and scored themselves a top 10 singles chart hit with 'Silver Machine' in the summer of 1972, and riding high on the success of that would release what is now arguably regarded as their finest hour – their 1973 live album, 'Space Ritual'.

By now the underground scene had begun to go into decline. Persistent police harassment played a significant role in the underground counterculture's demise. High-profile obscenity trials, such as those involving Oz magazine in 1971 and Mick

◀ Farren's Nasty Tales comic in 1973, exemplified this shift. The underground press and community bands had previously thrived on mutual support, but that relationship was dissipating. Meanwhile, the country faced significant challenges, including miners' strikes, the three-day week, fuel shortages, rising inflation, and IRA bombings. The times had certainly changed, and glam rock emerged to provide a more colourful juxtaposition to the foreboding background of impending doom and gloom the country was otherwise facing. The likes of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Mott The Hoople, and Roxy Music proving to be favourites for the hipper, more discerning British teenager. Tony James recalls, "Suddenly the New York Dolls and Ziggy happened, and here was a new decadent scene that seemed so enticing and so fresh. The Compendium bookshop in Chalk Farm was the only connection where you could buy the American Rock Scene magazine – and dream! Those idealistic hippies by then felt rather tired".

If Brian James had little time for prog rock, he was equally disparaging of glam too, "I hated it all!" he now says. By then he was in a Stooges/ MC5 and Pink Fairies style band called Bastard, who even played at one of the Greasy Truckers' Westway events, as well as Trenstishoe festival in Devon with the Pink Fairies and Hawkwind in 1973. He continues, "I was lucky 'cos with my band Bastard, we had the chance to go over and live in Brussels for a while, so when all that was going on over here we were playing around Brussels and the people knew about bands like The Stooges and the MC5 over there – in this country it didn't seem like they gave a fuck about that!"

In 1974, the Pink Fairies decided to call it a day, but in February 1975 played a farewell show (it wouldn't be the last time!) at the Roundhouse, sharing the bill with Hawkwind. Although Hawkwind never replicated the dizzy heights of their singles chart success of 'Silver Machine', they released a series of well received albums between 1970 and '75 on Liberty/United Artists, the last of which was 'Warrior On The Edge Of Time' in May '75. It proved it was possible to maintain some degree of hip credibility within what remained of the dwindling counterculture. It was around the same time as this that Tony James first met Mick Jones at a Heavy Metal Kids gig at the Fulham Greyhound. Jones had previously been in a band called The Delinquents, but soon after he met James he was booted out of another band, Little Queenie. The pair soon became as thick as thieves and Tony would frequently visit Mick at his gran's 18th floor flat in the Wilmcote House tower block, overlooking the Westway and Ladbroke Grove area. It was here, in Mick's bedroom, that the pair would begin planning their next move – a new band called The London SS.

By now, pub rock had emerged onto the London music scene and Tony James recalls, "We would go to The Nashville [in West Kensington], The Brecknock in Camden Town and most importantly The Greyhound in the Fulham Palace Road, seeing the Feelgoods, The Winkies, Ducks Deluxe and more". Other pub rock venues in the locality included the Windsor Castle on Harrow Road, the Red Cow in Hammersmith, and The Elgin on Ladbroke Grove.



It was at The Elgin that a band called the 101ers started a residency in May 1975. The 101ers were a rockabilly influenced pub rock band fronted by one John 'Woody' Mellor, soon to reinvent himself as Joe Strummer. They were named after the number of their house, a squat at 101 WALTERTON ROAD in Maida Vale. It would only be a matter of time before his orbit would collide with that of Mick Jones.

A week after the 101ers residency began back on Ladbroke Grove, an incident occurred on Hawkwind's North American tour that would eventually change the face of rock music forever. The band's bassist Ian 'Lemmy' Kilmister was sacked after he was busted crossing the U.S. / Canada border in possession of amphetamine sulphate, initially mistaken for cocaine by the Canadian authorities. Ironically, he was replaced by former Pink Fairies guitarist, Paul Rudolph. Lemmy was picked up from Heathrow airport by his old pal Lucas Fox, who persuaded him to form a new band, which he did almost immediately on his return to the Grove. Developments took a further Pink Fairies related twist when Lemmy later recruited Larry Wallis – one of Rudolph's successors as guitarist in the Pink Fairies!

Those heady days of Saturday afternoon gigs on Portobello Green and under the Westway became a thing of the past when Acklam Hall was built to replace the Westway Theatre in 1975. Talking in 2005, Mick Farren recounted, "Acklam Hall was built in time for punk and reggae, which was the ultimate, long term, official response to what had started with the Pinkwind shows". But before punk really took root and exploded in the area over the next year or so, Glider, a band featuring a former and future Pink Fairies – Twink and Andy Colquhoun – was the first to play at Acklam Hall on 11th July 1975. This is contrary to popular belief that it opened with the 101ers headlining a benefit gig for the North Kensington Law Society on the 12th July.

On 13th July, the Pink Fairies played yet another farewell show at the Roundhouse, and Motörhead's first gig was just over a week later supporting Greenslade at the Roundhouse on 20th July – with Larry Wallis playing at both. Motörhead followed this with a short tour of their own that summer, before supporting Blue Öyster

"Lucas was burning himself out trying to keep up with Lemmy's own voracious appetite for speed"

Cult at the Hammersmith Odeon in October 1975. Apparently the headliners' stage crew sabotaged Motörhead's chances of having a decent sound, which in turn resulted in poor reviews from the press, to the extent they were even dubbed "the worst band in the world" by one critic!

The nascent, as then unnamed, punk scene was beginning to take shape in August 1975, when at a Deaf School gig at the Nashville, Mick Jones and Tony James had a chance encounter with Bernie Rhodes, an associate of Malcolm McLaren, who was managing a new band called the Sex Pistols. Suitably impressed with the pair, and they with him, Rhodes said he would manage their new band and they began auditioning people in the basement of the Paddington Kitchen in Praed Street. Towards the end of 1975, Brian James answered an ad in Melody Maker, and with all their shared musical interests it was a no-brainer for Brian, who left Bastard and returned from Brussels to live in Portobello Road.

Brian James remembers these times, "Bernie Rhodes took us to a party and the Pistols were playing there, and that was the first time I'd seen anybody else play a Stooges' song you know, 'No Fun', and it was like woah, good, and talking to them and stuff it was obvious they were coming from the same place, and I think maybe more so from the instigation of Malcolm, but they had attitude in spades. So the place where I was living and the Earl of Lonsdale on Portobello Road were the meeting points for the people who'd start hanging out on a Saturday".

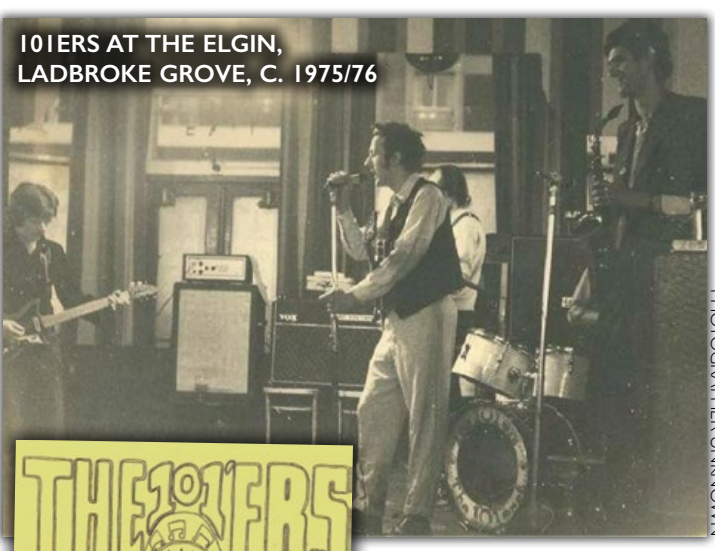
In the meantime, Motörhead started recording what was intended to be their debut album in September 1975. Undeterred by the initial negative reaction they garnered, they returned to Rockfield Studios in Wales between December 1975 and February 1976 to complete it. But, in his autobiography White Line Fever, Lemmy says things began to unravel when Lucas Fox began displaying symptoms of amphetamine psychosis, and was, in effect, burning himself out trying to keep up with Lemmy's own voracious appetite for speed. This hastened Fox's departure, and Larry Wallis was now dividing his time between Motörhead and the Pink Fairies, who had reformed on the back of the success of their recent reunion shows.

Throughout late 1975 the London SS proceeded to audition for other new members, which now reads like a veritable roll call of early key protagonists of the London punk scene, including Keith Levene, Matt Dangerfield, later of The Boys, Topper Headon and Terry Chimes, both of whom would later drum for The Clash at various times. Brian James recalls, "It was just like a little feeding ground, the whole London SS thing of meeting people. They'd be advertising for singers and drummers, because they didn't have a regular drummer at all"...or a singer for that matter! Another notable auditionee, and Grove area local, Paul Simonon also tried out on vocals but was discounted because he didn't have suitable "stage presence".

Frustrated by their seeming lack of progress in recruiting any suitable candidates, matters came to a head in early 1976 for Brian James, when Mick Jones and Tony James allegedly deemed another energetic young drummer called Chris Miller unsuitable due to sartorial differences, but not before he had been rechristened Rat Scabies! Brian now says, "I thought Rat was fucking great! He brought out things in my playing that I didn't even know were there, so Mick and Tony didn't like the way he looked, and all this sort of stuff. Fuck the way he looks, I just thought he's a great drummer, so we [Brian and Rat] decided to get a band together, and then Mick separated from Tony... I think at the request of Bernie Rhodes". This was the beginning of The Damned.

Tony James did indeed leave too, probably, as Brian intimates, with more than a little encouragement from Rhodes, and joined Chelsea – where he met Billy Idol. The pair of them would ultimately go on to form Generation X. Rhodes' divide and conquer tactics effectively instigated the beginning of The Clash as we know it, when earlier London SS try-outs, Keith Levene, Terry Chimes and Paul Simonon were drafted back in, with the latter now learning to play bass – ironically enough, on one given to him by the ousted Tony James!

The original incarnation of Motörhead lasted just six months before Lucas Fox left and was replaced by Phil Taylor. Three months later, struggling to juggle his commitments to both the Pink Fairies and Motörhead, not to mention the toll excessive use of speed was taking, Larry Wallis decided to quit Motörhead too, considering the Pink Fairies a more viable option going forward. He was succeeded by 'Fast' Eddie Clark to complete what is now regarded as the classic Motörhead line-up.



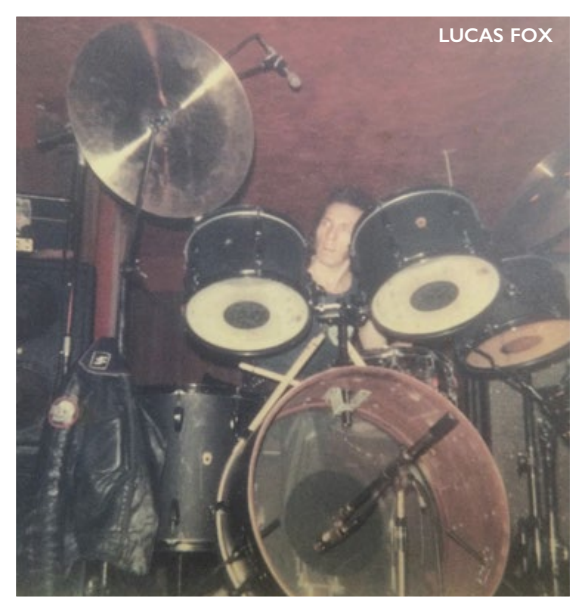
Something else monumental was stirring back on the Grove too, as the first line-up of The Clash really began to take shape.

In April 1976, the 101ers were supported by the Sex Pistols at the Nashville Rooms, where Joe Strummer is said to have undergone a damascene conversion after witnessing the Pistols for the first time. Grappling with his conscience, he no longer saw the validity in continuing with what was, what he now viewed, in some respects, as an outdated pub rock band. Accounts vary as to the exact location a few weeks later, either at Lisson Grove Labour Exchange or on Portobello Road, when Strummer was approached by Mick Jones and Paul Simonon with a proposition to join their band – Bernie Rhodes' vision of rivalling the Sex Pistols. He didn't take too long to make up his mind, before throwing his lot in with the fledgling Clash.

If the Sex Pistols, with Malcolm McLaren's shop Sex at the centre of their operations in Chelsea's King's Road, were at the forefront of the punk movement, then the emergent Ladbroke Grove punk scene, with Portobello Road at its heart, was equally important, and certainly not far behind – surely a case of parallel evolution if there ever was one!

The influence of those community bands like Pink Fairies and Hawkwind can't be underestimated either, but what was it Alan Ginsberg once said, paraphrasing Plato, about the mode of the music changing? The walls of the city weren't just about to shake, they were about to be rocked to its very foundations! Musically, 1976 was shaping up to be an explosive year of seismic proportions. The impetus was already there, it just needed the touchpaper to be lit, and when it was... well, the rest, as they say, is history!

Special thanks to Andy Colquhoun, Brian James and Tony James. ▶



MICK FARREN AT PINK FAIRIES GIG, PORTOBELLO GREEN, WESTWAY. C.1971/72

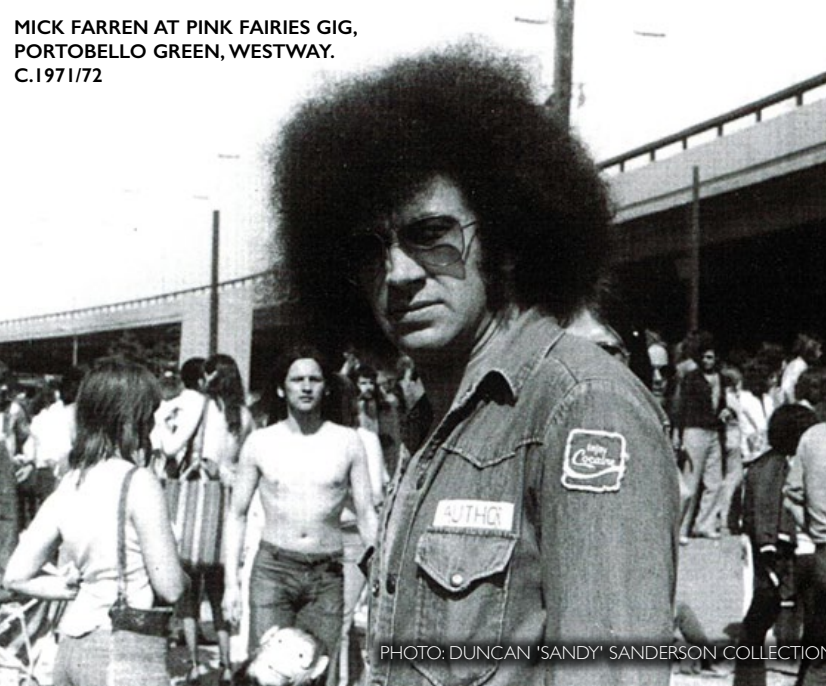


PHOTO: DUNCAN 'SANDY' SANDERSON COLLECTION

PHOTOS: PAUL APPERLEY

GROVE IS IN THE HEART

Kris Needs recounts his time with the holy trinity of The Clash, Motörhead and Killing Joke in a tale of attempted arson, meltdowns and murder.

BY 1968, the Ladbroke Grove area was exerting some kind of subliminal pull on this writer as it routinely popped up when reading about London's counterculture scene in the music papers and the underground press that thrived there. As an early teenage Stones nut gripped by the hippie rebellion that lay foundations for punk, this strange fascination was stoked by my first gig seeing local residents Tyrannosaurus Rex, Mick Farren haranguing on TV and Deviants albums, the early Hawkwind, Hendrix's final days in Landsdowne Crescent, 'Performance' film's house exterior in Powis Square and mystical progressive rockers Quintessence serenading Notting Hill Gate on an Island 45.

Predictably the Grove had to be the first place I checked out on my first solo trips to London in 1969. If the rundown streets didn't exude much immediate buzz on a grey weekday afternoon, it was still possible to feel something going on and deliciously naughty scoring a live Hendrix bootleg at one of the funky head shops off Portobello Road. In 1970, it was possible to catch a double Jimi bill at the Electric Cinema (where 15 years later I'd watch Neneh Cherry singing amidst the chaos of Rip Rig and Panic). Although there were elements of San Francisco's early Haight-Asbury scene, the Grove's hotbed of free-thinking bands and artists taking cultural boundaries (and drug consumption) to places they hadn't been before was more connected to New York's downtown revolutionary edge as spearheaded by the proto-punk Fugs, cemented when Allen Ginsberg appeared at the Royal Albert Hall poetry event widely regarded as the launch of the UK's counterculture.

My visits stepped up as punk started making its presence felt in 1976. Notting Hill nearly 50 years ago was something else again from today's high-rent affluence. Still carrying evidence of the previous decade's hurricane and flying its crucial Jamaican legacy ignited in previous decades against violent racism, the streets around main arteries Portobello Road and Ladbroke Grove were still rundown and squat-friendly. According to the Rotten Hill Gang's Gary McPherson, who started squatting round there around 1978 and has lived legally in Powis Square for over 30 years through the housing trust, "There were loads of squats round here, especially Colville Gardens in Powis Square. St Stephens Gardens just up the road from there was quite a derelict area as well."

Back in '76, I'd sometimes notice this cool looking black-haired kid who looked oddly familiar, compounded when I caught his eye when peering through the smoky window of Portobello's lifeblood

Mountain Grill Café immortalised two years earlier by Hawkwind. The night I saw The Clash for the first time that October blitzing my local Leighton Buzzard leisure centre, Mick Jones confirmed we'd already met in Mott The Hoople dressing rooms when we were both following the UK's own proto-punkers around the UK earlier that decade and were introduced by Ian Hunter. Sporting long hair, Kensington Market suede and platform boots, he was quiet but pleasant.

The last time I actually saw Mick was 43 years since those first Grove sightings when we bumped into each other as I was coming out of Ladbroke Grove tube in 2019. By then there had been countless encounters in various shapes and forms in the area he still calls home today. In 2024, Mick's almost like a last man standing from that time when the Grove was buzzing with artists, musicians and eccentrics, even in the early 2000s staging his Rock 'n' Roll Museum under the Westway, playing a seven-week residency at Inn on the Green with Carbon/Silicon and playing guitar with the Rotten Hill Gang.

Notting Hill figures highly in The Clash story, and mine too. From 1978, Zigzag, the magazine I edited between 1977-82, had its HQ on Talbot Road off Portobello Road. Regular visitors included Lemmy, who lived round the corner in a Colville Terraces basement, and Youth, who occupied local squats with Killing Joke before legally moving into a basement flat on the Grove with Jaz (where I would move in '82 after he buggered off to Iceland). During that time, Mick shared a mews flat off Portobello with Tony James before moving to Colville Houses on Powis Square. After years of squatting, Joe Strummer bought a house on Lancaster Road in '83. From the late 70s, The Clash, Motörhead and Killing Joke all rehearsed at nearby Ear Studios in Latimer Road's anarchic Frestonia republic. When acid house carried punk attitude into the '90s I recorded myself at a studio tucked under the Westway on Portobello where Mick dropped in to jam with Primal Scream one night. By then, this once funky enclave of London was gentrifying seriously with formerly dirt-cheap properties going through the roof, older residents getting squeezed out by rich woke-toting hipsters or professionals who'd seen that vapid Hugh Grant movie as the 21st century got in its stride. This left W11's beleaguered spirit maintained by the Rotten Hill Gang and Alan Clayton's Dirty Strangers, who are still Shepherds Bush and proud but once boasted late Grove legends drummer George Butler and keyboardist Scott Mulvey in their lineup. With Al MCing, six weekly Dissenters Gallery events at Inn On the Green under the Westway celebrated the "West London vibe", including Mick Jones sharing a stage with Detroit legend John Sinclair with the Dirty Strangers.

After that first Clash gig in October '76, I started catching the most exciting band I'd seen since Mott everywhere I could, more appreciating the relevance of Mick's long-time stamping ground after the band's first London headliner at the ICA as A Night of Pure Energy. Missing my last train home after the landmark scorcher where 'Mad' Jane Crockford gave Shane McGowan a playful ear nibble and Patti Smith got onstage, Mick offered to take me to the Shepherds Bush squat where his girlfriend Viv Albertine lived with Keith Levene and Sid Vicious. First, we had to drop by his nan Stella's flat on the 18th floor of Wilmcote House, a '60s tower block on the Warwick estate near Royal Oak tube where she had been rehoused in early '73. This was so I could swap my semi-flared jeans for a pair of Mick's narrower legged kecks to avoid potential attack from Sid.

Stella's flat was a cosy oasis within a colossal, already rotting shell; all piss-stained lifts and graffiti in the corridors. But Mick's bedroom was uncannily similar to how my own had been, with posters on the wall and records everywhere. Three years earlier, with Keith Richards and Mick Ronson motivating him to take up guitar as he discovered the New York Dolls, MC5 and Stooges, Mick bought his first guitar. As mentioned in 'Stay Free', "I then spent a year in my bedroom playing along to records," he told me. "That's how I learnt." Standing on the tiny balcony looking down on the yellow-lit Westway, he remembered, "This is where me and Joe wrote 'London's Burning'."

Offending strides changed, we walked fast to Davis Road in Shepherds Bush, where I met Keith Levene and ended up watching Sid playing bass along to 'Blitzkreig Bop' until Sunday morning. The Metropolitan line tube home passed the row of decaying concrete teeth that included Wilmcote House; one stop along from Westbourne Grove before Ladbroke Grove. The area now carried a different kind of resonance that stuck for life.

Starting at Hammersmith School of Art in '73, Mick took the preordained logical step of forming a band, the Delinquents including future members of the Boys and flash Jagger impersonator Kelvin Blacklock. Mick's self-confidence took a knock when loony genius producer Guy Stevens decided to replace him with a keyboard player. While the band fizzled, Mick acquired his beloved black Les Paul Junior and, after meeting bassist Tony James, the pair started their projected band the London SS, as recounted in the previous piece.

In late summer, Mick met veteran '60s youth culture hustler Bernie Rhodes, then running a Camden garage and working with Malcolm McLaren, who he knew from his mod days and was now co-running SEX on King's Road. Bernie had designed t-shirts and been involved starting the Pistols but was looking for his own group through which to funnel his grand visions and political messages. Despite relentless auditions, including Nick Headdon from Dover who decided to stay in his current band for now, the London SS had guitarist Brian James but still no permanent singer or drummer by late '75. They made one tape Mick played me at Wilmcote House that included high-energy covers of Jonathan Richman's 'Roadrunner', MC5's 'Ramblin' Rose' and the Strangeloves' 'Nighttime'. He had already written songs that would figure in early Clash set-lists, including 'Protex Blue' and 'I'm So Bored With You'. At one point, the trio gained Rat Scabies on drums, until Bernie's dominant nature proved too much for him and Brian, who left to form the Damned, leaving the London SS ceasing to exist in January '76 without playing a gig.

If Mick did his teenage rock 'n' roll apprenticeship as a Grove scene resident, Woody Mellor – the future Joe Strummer – arrived in London from Newport, Monmouthshire in 1974, settling in adjoining Maida Vale's extensive squatting community after old busking mate Tymon Dogg fixed him up with a room at 101 Walerton Road. Rehearsing in its basement Joe put together a band out of local "crazed squatters" that summer to play local pubs, becoming the 101'ers when they started their weekly Charlie Pigdog nights at Maida Vale's Chippenham pub that December, running through to April. May '75 saw Woody, now with future Slits drummer Paloma Romano from Spain (sister of 101'ers drummer Richard Nother's girlfriend Esperanza). He also married a South African girl called Pam for a hundred quid so he could buy the black Fender Telecaster he would wield for the rest of his life.

Still in May with eviction looming, the 101'ers were forced to relocate to St Luke's Road, one block over from Jamaican epicentre All Saints Road. Woody became Joe Strummer when the band started the Thursday night residency they'd hold for the rest of '75 at the Elgin on Ladbroke Grove, a quintessential rundown boozer opposite the tube station and near the Westway. The 101'ers also played benefits for local squatting associations before hitting the London pub circuit. Forced out of St Luke's Road that October, they found a house with rehearsal-friendly basement at nearby Orsett Terrace as they started to get noticed in the press.

Paul Simonon had grown up in Brixton after his parents split when he was eight and his mum moved there; a skinhead who hung out with black kids and was deeply into reggae when it entered its 70s golden age. Relocating to his artist dad's place in Notting Hill in his early teens, Paul's bedroom was in his father's art studio, encouraging the painting that grew to occupy his later life. "I'd walk past all these houses with West Indian music playing late at night and get pulled into parties when I should have been going home," he recalled. But, "Like most sons I wanted to do what my dad did." Leaving school in 1973, Paul was accepted at the Byam Shaw School Of Art in Holland Park, painting striking urban landscapes involving tower blocks and car dumps. Meeting Mick Jones on the street in late '75 led to auditioning for the London SS as singer. Not yet playing bass, he looked the part but Mick and Tony decided he "didn't have enough stage presence" after his version of 'Roadrunner'.



MICK JONES

PHOTO: LES CLARK

Nevertheless, Paul and Mick kept in touch and, in March '76, recognising his unrefined star quality, Jonesy suggested he learn guitar or bass so he could join the new band he was forming. Following an unsuccessful guitar lesson with Mick, Paul tried bass, like Sid just after him. Needing further motivation, Mick took Paul to see the 101'ers supported by Sex Pistols at the Nashville, which proved right up his street. Painting guide dots on the Fender copy borrowed from Tony James, Paul practiced by playing along to reggae records. It was an influence that would become vital to the band he joined that May, which happened to be the same month Joe gave in to Mick, Bernie and lead guitarist Keith Levene's persistent invitations to join their band.

With Mick, Joe and Paul all residing within the W10 and W11 postcodes, The Clash, as the band was finally christened, was always considered a Ladbroke Grove band, even if their HQ and practice room was at Bernie's Rehearsals Rehearsals arches HQ in the Camden train yards. The band took inspiration from what



PAUL SIMONON

PHOTO: LES CLARK

MICK JONES IN 1977



JOE AND TOPPER

PHOTOTES CLARK

was happening around them, including that August's Notting Hill Carnival when pressure cooker frustrations among the local black community at longstanding brutal police tactics erupted into rioting after the arrest of a pickpocket escalated into skirmishes, missile throwing and police vehicles set ablaze. The annual celebration of Caribbean culture that had started ten years before ended early as pubs were shut, roads sealed and Ladbroke Grove tube station shut down. This event was subsequently seen as the occasion when the UK's pressure valve blew on a par with American hotspots like Newark, Watts and Detroit.

Its main flashpoint was a few yards from the Elgin, Joe's old 101'ers stronghold. He and Paul found themselves caught up in the action. "We were there at the very first throw of the very first brick," he recalled. "Paul, Bernie and I were walking along when this conga line of policemen came through the crowd. Someone threw a brick at them and all hell broke loose, and I mean hell! The crowd parted and we were pushed onto this wire netting and nearly fell down this hole where they were doing these excavations under the motorway.

"I decided to set a car alight, and it was ludicrous, us standing around it with the wind blowing out the flame on this Swan Vesta... It's one thing to say, 'Let's burn the cars', but you try setting a car alight. It was just a comedy, some of it. It was just a hell of a day.

This was one time when people said, 'We've had enough and we're gonna say so now.' That's what gave rise to the song, 'White Riot', because we participated in the riot. I was aware all the time that it was a black people's riot... They had more of an axe to grind and they had to guts to do something physical about it."

Later that night, Joe and Paul underwent an attempted mugging but their pockets were already empty. The experience told them they could sympathise with, and even join in with, the black man's struggle but ultimately, "It wasn't really our story." Such experiences and the area where they lived stoked the image, attitude and lyrical preoccupations of the early Clash, inspiring their first album's cover version of Junior Murvin's carnival anthem 'Police and Thieves' and providing images for the LP's back cover and 'White Riot' tour stage backdrop. With Paul's reggae adolescence and further Carnival mainstays such as Prince Far-I's 'Under Heavy Manners' and Culture's 'Two Sevens Clash', this perpetual Grove soundtrack that boomed louder than punk in many quarters became an integral part of The Clash's musical makeup.

In April '78, The Clash, now with Topper on board, recorded basic tracks for their second album, Give 'Em Enough Rope' at Basing Street Studios off Portobello Road after their first night at Camden's Utopia studios with producer Sandy Pearlman had ended in mayhem when Paul upturned a plant pot to create a dirt-track for Topper's motorbike. Although rising global success, with 'London Calling' and 'Sandinista!' recorded in New York and elsewhere, cut back The Clash's local profile to hanging out after returning home, they gave the area a priceless Christmas present in 1979 when, advertised by a poster showing Mick sporting a red plastic nose, the band played a couple of secret gigs at Acklam Hall below the Westway. Later becoming Subterranea, it was one of the few actual local gig venues (I'd caught Joy Division there a couple of years earlier). The Clash's first show took place at five o'clock on Christmas Day to a sparse crowd. The second on Boxing Day was rammed as word got out. My late best mate and Vice Creems guitarist Colin Keinch went to both, lucky fucker, describing them as "very laid back" and "fuckin' brilliant!" The gigs provided a chance to test-drive 'London Calling'

material, plus the new 'Bank Robbing Song', as warm-ups for a joint Kampuchean benefit at Hammersmith Odeon on 27 December with Ian Dury and the Blockheads.

After previously using Vanilla in Pimlico as a pre-recording rehearsal space, The Clash started writing their fifth album in August '81 using the Rolling Stones Mobile at Ear Studios in the People's Hall on Olaf Street near Latimer Road. Set against a backdrop of makeshift art statements on old houses, the greasy spoon café, pub and nearby scrapyard, the importance of this cheap, basic rehearsal facility for the Ladbroke Grove scene before '90s gentrification drove out its artistic community cannot be overestimated. It also provides a link with two other bands I'm focussing on here - Motörhead and Killing Joke, who both found it the perfect spot to develop new material.

In the '70s and early '80s, the area around Latimer Road tube boasted a thriving squatting community that tried turning the neighbourhood into a republic called Frestonia (after Freston Road). That November I ran a Zigzag cover shot of The Clash standing outside the ramshackle Apocalypse Hotel's embodiment of west London's anarchic enclave. It's a bit hazy but I think I visited Motörhead, The Clash and Youth's post-Joke Brilliant developing new material at Ear at various points.

Ear was basic, funky and far from today's overpriced sterility, with knackered old fruit machines and jukeboxes shoved into corners. It suited these bands to be in the kind of no-man's land environment where Motörhead could refine their songwriting technique unhindered and write 'Overkill', the Joke worked up their early live set and The Clash ignited 'Combat Rock' (as shown by 'The People's Hall' bonus disc included in 2022's Combat Rock reissue that includes versions of 'This is Radio Clash', 'Sean Flynn', 'Know Your Rights' and 'Ghetto Defendant'). The seeds of The Clash's biggest selling album were sewn in this grimy little hall but the band would never enjoy such unity again.

This became glaringly apparent when the band played Aylesbury in July at a special Friars event at Stoke Mandeville Hospital's 3,000 capacity stadium as part of the Combat Rock tour. We ran a mini-bus

from outside the Fifth Column t-shirt shop at the top of Portobello Road where legendary former road manager Johnny Green worked alongside Scottish poet Jock Scott (Dread At The Controls shirts their big seller). The expedition saw a gaggle of lunatics get driven to Aylesbury by Johnny. Sadly, it was the worst (and last) time I saw The Clash, the bad mood exacerbated by dodgy sound,

inter-band tensions and the more neanderthal local punks' gobbing. Backstage was tense and divided, not helped by the surly new paramilitary road crew. We returned to the Grove on a bit of a downer.

By that time, Mick had started hanging out with his neighbour Gary McPherson. Born in Southampton, his mum worked on the boats, leaving Gary staying with his great aunt in Ladbroke Grove much of the time when he was growing up and she was away. After his aunt passed when he was 15, Gary stayed in the area on the late '70s squatting scene around Powis Square. Although Mick would find a trusted friend and future band colleague in Gary, their friendship hadn't actually got off to a flying start when they first met on The Clash's early 1980 16 Tons tour and he was roadying for a support band called Straitjacket. "There were a whole load of kids following The Clash about," recalls Gary. "Kids from Liverpool, Manchester, all over the place but they'd always let people in. They were always super friendly. Individually, each one of them made you feel welcome."

Luckily, The Clash's genial minder Ray Jordan had already taken Gary under his wing by the first time he met Mick backstage. "I



THE ROTTEN HILL GANG: L-R ANDRE SHAPPS, ANNIE B, FJOKRA, GARY MCPHERSON, MICK JONES

said, 'It must be great being in a band'. He said, 'Yeah, it is.' Then I said, 'You must get loads of girls.' Mick said, 'What sort of fucking question's that?' That's when Raymond come over and said, 'Oh don't worry about him, he's a grumpy cunt. Come over here'. I was a bit scared of Mick then but I used to go to football then and next time I saw him he said, 'Can I come with you?' I was quite surprised he was even into football. We used to get so much stick but what I loved about Mick was he wasn't scared. He wasn't a fighter, but he wasn't scared either. 'Fuck you, I do what I wanna do'; We used to go to Chelsea one week and Queens Park Rangers the next round about '81-82. He hadn't been fired from the band yet. He could sense something was wrong, but no one really knew what was going on."

Mick seemed positively bubbling with contentment just before Christmas '82 when we sat down for bacon and eggs in Mike's Café on Blenheim Crescent, another local hub for locally based bands. With Zigzag in ruins, I had started writing for and would end up editing twisted teenybopper magazine Flexipop!. My first cover feature was an exclusive interview with Mick. After Topper's sacking and discontent bubbling within the band's ranks, I felt slightly trepidatious but Mick seemed genuinely happy the group he'd started six years earlier was finally a massive success on both sides of the pond. It was a bit strange when Paul Simonon appeared at the cafe window with his dad and peered in. Mick waved but Paul didn't seem to see him and walked off. Or, as Mick put it, "He saw me and ran away!" I thought he was joking but given the precarious balance of relationships within the band, it was hard to be sure.

Taking three months off after that Christmas, The Clash reinforced their Ladbroke Grove roots as Joe finally found a permanent place to live when he bought the Lancaster Road house and moved in with girlfriend Gaby Salter. Determined to keep busy, he wrote and directed his own movie, resulting in the legendary Hell W10, which surfaced on The Essential Clash DVD after fans found a rough copy in a car boot sale. Set around the Westbourne Park-Portobello Road area, the film is like an old gangster movie with plot involving drugs, violence and dodgy deals, dialogue popping up on silent movie-style boards. Paul plays a street kid, Mick a zoot-suited hustler and Joe a policeman with a moustache, along with members of the band's circle in various roles; all against a soundtrack of late-period Clash, many tracks in instrumental form. It was the last visible project The Clash did together before Mick's shock sacking that August.

Speaking to him on the phone after it happened, he said "I've been sacked from my own band". Visiting Mick at his current abode in Pembridge Villas, I was struck by his good humour and optimism as he planned the band that would become Big Audio Dynamite. He was getting back to his old self, writing songs and recruiting musicians. On bass there was Leo Williams, who I'd managed when he was in punky reggae locals Basement 5 before they got poleaxed by another member's ego. Jon 'Boy' Lennard from Theatre of Hate briefly played sax and Topper Headon was on drums until his heroin addiction prevented any involvement beyond lost album 'The TRAC Tape' (from when the band was called Top Risk Action Company). Exploring a hybrid of fluid funk with jazzy overtones, titles included 'The Bottom Line' and 'Napoleon of Notting Hill' - an emotional ballad aimed at Joe as a way of Mick exorcising past demons in the fashion of John Lennon's Macca-lambasting 'How Do You Sleep'.

After frazzled nerves crystallised into senseless blindness and Topper then Mick got thrown out of The Clash, Mick saw a lot more of Gary as he put together Big Audio Dynamite. "That's when I got really involved with them," says Gary. "We used to play football every week down by the People's Hall on a bit of wasteland or play on the five-a-side pitches under the Westway. When my first band Pocket Rocket toured with the first BAD, Mick paid for our equipment and we signed to MCA."

The Grove figured strongly in B.A.D.'s imagery and influences; I remember a great early gig at Porchester Hall in nearby Queensway. On 1988's third album, 'Tighten Up Volume 88', Simmo supplied a cover painting of a blues dance outside Trellick Tower, the colossal high-rise at the top end of Harrow Road (where Zigzag writer Suspect O'Typewriter tragically fell to his death). By this time, I had moved to New York, returning in 1990 to find Mick had formed Big Audio Dynamite 2 after the original lineup imploded, with Gary McPherson on bass.

The gentrification was rampant by then, Gary recalling, "One of the first BAD 2 gigs was under the Westway in 1990 to help save an adventure playground up there. We hadn't released anything then. We only got asked to join the band because Mick was under contract to do a European tour and needed a band. We done it and his manager wanted him to carry on, so we did. Mick let me co-write first album 'The Globe' with him. It was the best-selling BAD record



MOTÖRHEAD

PHOTO: PAUL SLATTERY

ever and sold millions. I think 'The Globe' sold more than the first three albums put together."

Leaving BAD2 in 1996 after six years, Gary went to work with DJ Paul Oakenfold after meeting him on the world tour with U2 and Public Enemy. He cites the Grove's hiphop scene as so healthy then, US legends came to stay there. "All the American hiphop guys would come here. I've always been into hiphop DJing; the local Cash Crew were scratching and cutting, Afrika Bambaataa moved to Powis Square and Public Enemy played 'Fight The Power' at the Carnival under the Westway. After that we were all at a party and these black guys came in and robbed everyone; we weren't scared to go anywhere. This was after the first BAD. Mick and Joe were hanging out back then. Joe made everybody feel great. He was trying to get The Clash together again eight years after they'd fired Mick."

We'll get to Mick's subsequent 21st century activities but first join Grove scene veteran Lemmy adapting to the changes recounted earlier by Rich Deakin as, after being fired from Hawkwind, he formed Motörhead. After becoming close to the band in 1977, I was delighted to discover Lem living around the corner from the aforementioned Zigzag offices and would often pop by his basement lair after work. Let's not forget the pubs weren't open all day then so time had to be killed in various shapes and forms usually involving vodka and amphetamines before Lem commenced his nightly amble around Portobello Road's hostleries, the Portobello Gold a favourite (or Union Tavern on Great Western Road if he was visiting the management). Ultimately, any boozier with a fruit machine was open to a Lem invasion (including Zigzag's punk-era local the Walmer Castle on Ledbury Road).

Lemmy's basement was in a shabby house within staggering distance from Portobello. After weeks away on tour, he would return to the room's lowlit flag-bedecked walls; already like a rock 'n' roll museum with all its posters, photos, trophies, World War Two and Nazi memorabilia, books, skulls and records, plus the stuffed anteater in the corner that had been a gift from Mick Farren. "I like it here," explained Lemmy. "It's nice and shabby. It's a nice pit for me to crawl into. All I have to do is make sure the sheets get washed every three weeks and I'm fine. I've always lived like this."

The monster called Motörhead possessed Lemmy 24 hours a day, partly cos he rarely slept, and had done since the band was a swear word in the music industry. It was a great pleasure to visit Lemmy in this same blackened wall gaff during their late '70s rise to become one of the UK's biggest bands. At one point, times had been so hard band members had scoured Portobello Market for discarded vegetables to make stew. Even when 'Ace of Spades' was riding high, Lemmy remained here and didn't stop his daily routines unless he was on tour, although he had more to put in the fruit machines. One particular memory is standing on a deserted Portobello Road with Lemmy the Sunday morning after he'd laid waste to Port Vale football ground in summer '81 at the peak of Motörhead's success. Somehow, he'd got us back here and now he was waiting for the pubs to open. It took a grisly Angels-related murder in the flat upstairs to drive him into renting an actual house up Kensal Road which I visited in the mid-'80s.

If Lem's closeness to Notting Hill's original heartbeat is well documented, it should be added that when Fast Eddie Clarke was temporarily living in Cornwall with a rich girlfriend, his mushrooming

◀ musical chops and aspirations demanded he move back to London and he made straight for the Grove. “In November ’71 I went back to London and got a flat in Ladbroke Grove,” he told me. “I was 21 but I couldn’t get any playing together. I was just trying to myself set up so I could earn some money but I didn’t know how.”

Landing in the Notting Hill scene, Eddie met Mick Farren, then leader of the Deviants and writer who would become an early Motörhead associate. “I’d met Mick through a friend. We got this cottage for Christmas and Mick came down. When I eventually got busted for some bits and pieces, he turned round to me and said, ‘Look man, you should play your guitar; you’re good at it.’ Mick arranged an audition for some band. (Future Hawkwind guitarist) Huw Langton went down there as well; neither of us got the job.” Now Eddie had the motivation he ended up playing with former Hendrix associate Curtis Knight for nearly two years, which launched him on the road to Motörhead.

Although Eddie mostly lived in West Kensington during his Motörhead years, after he was unceremoniously cut loose from the band in 1983, he flew back from New York and made for his girlfriend’s place in Blenheim Crescent, over the road from his close mate Charlie Roberts, who lent him his Fender Stratocaster while he got back on his feet.

Deep into my five years editing Zigzag, I’d seen all the bands that mattered and countless more that didn’t. Then came Killing Joke. With Zigzag’s offices situated in the heart of Notting Hill, I’d become aware of the Joke early on, partly through Youth’s office visits. His ‘look’ was already developing through wearing a white tuxedo jacket until it got too grimy then, instead of discarding it, getting a new one and throwing it on top (plus biker jacket in cold weather). With his black spike-top, even he couldn’t deny the Sid resemblance. The Joke rehearsed at Ear Studios, sometimes at the same time as Motörhead and acknowledged their influence in channelling an immensely powerful sound. At a time when punk had fallen into its own retro-cliches, the Joke invoked a different kind of raw power, their torrential alchemical blast fuelled by the passion, friction and rage sparking between Jaz Coleman, Youth, Paul Ferguson and Geordie.

Paul had been playing drums in the Notting Hill-based Matt Stagger since 1978 when Jaz Coleman briefly joined on keyboards and the pair clicked. Born in Cheltenham, Jaz had studied piano and violin under the head of music for Cheltenham College until 1977 and sung in cathedral choirs. Deciding to form a band in October 1978, the pair placed Melody Maker ads that attracted guitarist Kevin ‘Geordie’ Walker and, in early ’79, Martin ‘Youth’ Glover. As Jaz would say, the band named itself Killing Joke after the cruel irony experienced by a doomed soldier in World War One who could only laugh at facing his pre-ordained death in the trenches. By that September, the Joke had settled in an Elgin Crescent squat, started their Malicious Damage record label and



"Youth ended up on King’s Road in his y-fronts dishing out money from the cash machine"



recorded debut EP, Turn To Red, released as a ten-inch boasting ‘Turn To Red’, ‘Nervous System’ and ‘Are You Receiving’. ‘Nervous System’ brandished a formidable new Ladbroke Grove-inflected post-punk hybrid built on Paul’s reggae-tinged rhythm, Youth’s gnu bollocks booming dub bass, Geordie’s coruscating guitar and Jaz’s incantatory testifying and harangues. Likewise, the intensely charged dubbed-out skank of ‘Turn To Red’ and rampaging ‘Are You Receiving’. Instantly supported by John Peel, the EP led to recording a session for his show (that included second single ‘Pssyche’ and ‘Wardance’), got picked up by Island Records and became Single of the Week in Melody Maker.

When the Joke started gigging on London’s club circuit in late ’79, I had to have theme in Zigzag but first stuck them on the bill at London’s Music Machine to celebrate the mag’s hundredth issue, along with their buddies Basement 5 and John Cooper Clarke. As ever introduced by Dave the fire-eater with his pentagram scattering the crowd stage front, the Joke careered through ‘Pssyche’, ‘Turn To Red’, ‘Tomorrow’s World’, ‘Change’, ‘Are You Receiving’ and ‘Wardance’ like one great elemental beast flinging open a Pandora’s Box of apocalyptic fury. In so many ways, Killing Joke were a cut above the lightweight mediocrity infesting the post-punk landscape. I saw them as modern baton-carriers of the Grove’s creative activist spirit as they unleashed their tumultuous noise rituals and rallying calls driven by the tensions between their four disparate personalities; Jaz the livewire firebrand, Geordie’s coolly extracted extreme noise devastation, Youth the punk-spawned dub bass monster infected by The Funk and Paul’s demonic tribal thunder.

I wanted to stick them on Zigzag’s cover to coincide with the debut album, which captured the ferocity of the gigs on ‘Wardance’, ‘The Wait’ and ‘Primitive’, minting future classics such as ‘Requiem’, ‘Complications’ and dub instrumental ‘Bloodsport’. Turning up at the comfortable first-floor Notting Hill squat dominated by Youth’s sound system that was far from the ratty image of rotten carpets and bare mattresses, the meeting started anything but chilled as instinctive press barriers went up, Jaz declaring “Anyone who was into us would have to be with us a week before they can really get any idea.” As for Youth, any remaining ice was broken by Chic’s transcendent ‘C’est Chic’ lying at the front of his albums. Over the next two hours, the Joke were, as I wrote then, “honest, direct, suspicious, funny, aggressive, living by reactions, living...”

In early 1981, Youth had his acid meltdown where he ended up on King’s Road in his y-fronts dishing out money from the cash machine. He was still fragile when recording second album, ‘What’s THIS For...!’ at the Townhouse on Ladbroke Grove where PiL had run riot. The album was trailed by ‘Follow The Leaders’ riding an electronic sequence and beat-box thwack that pointed at Youth’s love of the groundbreaking electronic disco mastermixes on New York’s black music radio stations that would propel his next moves. Always intense, the Joke were still way above the pack, next breaking their no-producer rule to record in Cologne with krautrock legend Conny Plank to forge ‘Revelations’, led by the towering ‘Empire Song’. Possibly my favourite Joke album, it seemed like every track was on fire in a dark foundry of hell with Youth now a master of the funk-lashed bottom end Godzilla stiffie bass. By then, the Joke were

kicking that bland post-punk period in the bollocks like a back-alley tin-can, brandishing phenomenal power mated with the Grove’s original rebel spirit. I got on very well with Youth.

It looked like the band’s time had come after February ’82’s triumphant Hammersmith Palais gig but who could’ve predicted what happened next? Turning up to watch them film two tracks off the new album for the Riverside TV show at the same-named Hammersmith studios, I found Youth, Geordie and Paul sitting at a beer garden-style table, looking pissed off as they pondered Jaz’s shock disappearance, which had surprised his girlfriend Jasmine so much she assumed it was with a woman and burnt all his clothes. Ever resourceful, the band constructed the scarecrow-like dummy that stood behind Jaz’s keyboard while Paul handled his vocals. It emerged Jaz had taken off to Iceland to escape the apocalypse he believed was imminent. Soon he would be joined by Geordie, the pair working with a band called Peyr in a project called Niceland, joined by Paul too after the drummer had originally formed a new band called Brilliant with Youth.

My 1982 had started under a cloud as Zigzag deteriorated and money that should’ve been paying writers was poured into converting the old cinema opposite the Motörhead offices on Great Western Road into the inevitably doomed Zigzag Club. After what Youth saw as a complex way of throwing him out of the Joke, I started visiting him at 72A Ladbroke Grove. One day when I called in, he was the only one there for once, doing some cooking. Chatting in the half-light, he asked if I fancied moving into Jaz’s old room. I didn’t have to think about it. Since the mid-’70s I’d dreamed of living in London, the Grove top of the list and the fun potential with Youth seemed limitless. Within a month I’d left Aylesbury and moved in.

Most nights we visited The Churchill pub on Kensington Church Street where they sold lethal Fullers ESB and John Le Mesurier of Dad’s Army fame would be sitting in a corner reading the paper. With Youth’s bass amp and speakers rigged up to the sound system in our front room, we soaked up New York black radio mastermix tapes; an epiphany that changed my life as we heard stirrings of the electronic revolution that rocked the world as the real new punk movement by the end of the decade. Just to walk a couple of blocks and be on Portobello Road, the place that had fascinated me so much as a teenager, or stroll round to Mick or Lemmy’s, or hop a bus to the best pub in London or the west end was paradise. For the first few weeks we had the utmost fun: going to gigs, pubs, crashing parties or hitting ligs I’d been invited to in my Zigzag capacity. Saturday afternoons on Portobello were always like a street party with stalls selling bootleg vinyl and houses throwing their doors open. Needless to say, 72A became a hub of uproarious behaviour. I often hung out with a street-sussed girl from New York called Gabby who would eventually form her own band called Luscious Jackson after watching her friends the Beastie Boys climb to stardom and notoriety. My 28th birthday party was carnage, visitors including Blue Peter’s Valerie Singleton turning up with Nico on her arm.

Youth set about forming a new group, initially with Paul Ferguson until he joined the other Jokers in Iceland. Youth wanted to create a band that could reproduce live the sonic experiments we were hammering on KISS FM tapes we press-ganged anyone visiting New York to record. Youth called the new group Brilliant cos it just seemed right. He acquired a weighty synth-bass and brought in second bass-player Stefan Holjweck, a relentless virtuoso and great maniac. There was a nice kid called Marcus Myers singing and playing guitar and eventually another drummer in the larger-than-life form of Andy Anderson, who’d just played in the Cure. I was roped in as tour manager. Brilliant released a 45 called ‘Push’ c/w the vitriolic ‘That’s What Good Friends Are For’. That Christmas we moved to Wandsworth, ending one of the most insanely magical stretches of my life, all happening on Ladbroke Grove!

The 21st century brought further rich fucker invasions to the old neighbourhood. Despite, as Alan Clayton points out, the Grove area not having a regular gig, music could still happen.

“The Dirty Strangers cut our teeth in Shepherds Bush,” he says. “That was our home ground but we played the Windsor Castle on Harrow Road at the top of Ladbroke Grove and Zigzag Club. There was never really any place to play on Ladbroke Grove itself so we had to go further afield. We came across the Lightning Raiders, who were a big Ladbroke Grove band. They took us under their wing and we supported them at the Venue in Victoria and different places and it went on from there. Subterranea was a bit too big for us so we’d just play The Pelican pub on Portobello (Now the bloody Portobello Organic Kitchen), round the corner from Scotty. It still wasn’t a club or anything, although the MauMau Bar and Elgin put bands on every now and again. George Butler joined us – he used



REDS, MICK JONES, DON LETTS AND GARY MCPHERSON

to drum with the Pink Fairies and Lightning Raiders. He actually lived on Ladbroke Grove.”

In 2002, Mick Jones took the changing face of the Grove and onset of the internet in the 21st century by the horns, forming Carbon/Silicon with Tony James. After initially releasing tracks on their website, the band put out albums including ‘Western Front’ and ‘The Last Post’. I can vouch they were great live as they took their future-sheened conscious rock ‘n’ roll around UK clubs. In January 2008, Carbon played their seven weekly Carbon Casino gigs at the Inn on the Green under the Westway. At the first one, Topper Headon joined Mick on a stage for the first time in years and played two songs. At the last event, the Alabama Three joined Jones and James to sing their theme from ‘The Sopranos’ ‘Wole Up This Morning’.

Support acts included Taurus Trekker, Pete Wylie, Glen Matlock, Joahn Cooper Clark, local outfit the Dirty Curtains and newly formed Rotten Hill Gang. “Carbon/Silicon were doing their residency under the Westway at Inn on The Green,” says Gary McPherson. “Mick was like, ‘Just start something!’ cos he knew I was working with this rapper from the area called Redskin. We were doing little gigs in bars and stuff, just me and him. Then Andre Shapps, Mick’s cousin, decided to play guitar. Carbon’s drummer sat in with us so we went from a DJ thing to full band at the Carbon shows. Mick ended up quitting Carbon and joined us.”

Mick loved the R.H.G.’s looseness and happily became part of the band at the gigs I saw around the Grove around that time, including the Tabernacle for Joe Strummer. They would support opening night of the next residency to hit the Inn on the Green when Track Records boss Ian Grant arranged for the Dirty Strangers to play six weekly Dissenters Gallery events there in 2010. This was around the time he introduced Al to John Sinclair, resulting in the Dirties’ ‘Lock and Key’ single for the Green Party and ‘Beatnik Youth’ album when Youth came on board. With Alan Clayton as compere, each week the Dirties were supported by different bands, including the Rotten Hill Gang, Brian James Gang and Zodiac Youth. Mick Jones was a regular presence, backing John Sinclair’s appearance with the Dirties.

Encouraged by the Westway trust until they got greedy and sold the space to a fashion house, Mick also opened his Rock ‘n’ Roll Library under the flyover, displaying his huge archive of magazines, Clash memorabilia and creating a space where bands could play (and himself).

The Rotten Hill Gang continued, starting their Rotten Hill TV podcasts (that included a gig that saw them joined by Mick and Ian Hunter in 2013). Sky wanted to get involved but Mick refused to work with Rupert Murdoch. R.H.G. splintered after recording an album in 2019 that was poleaxed by the pandemic, taking the band with it. The continuing gentrification has sparked Gary into reactivating the Rotten Hill Gang. “We’re still using the name Rotten Hill Gang but it’s me, Mallet (Hallett, drummer) and a few others. It’s the same idea, we’re just trying to make it more up to date. We wrote this song called ‘Being Cancelled’ about all the things that people get really angry about; you can’t say this, you can’t say that. The wokeness.

“The Grove was such a vibrant place but the area has lost its spark with gentrification. Overlooked bohemian has become rich bohemian. It’s still got its charm, but it’s lost its availability.”

As anyone remotely familiar with the area will know, small beginnings in Ladbroke Grove can lead to much bigger things. There many ghosts here waiting to be poked and still badly needed new horizons waiting to shine from artists still carrying that spirit. Time for another visit. **VJR**

