

Crackerjack **Music**

STEVE HARNELL crosses swords with John Lydon to talk about the upcoming visit of the reactivated Public Image Ltd, and why Green Day will never be on the iconic punk figurehead's Christmas card list



Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" asks Johnny Rotten at the end of the Sex Pistols' gig at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco. It's January 14, 1978, and the singer has seen the seminal punk band and totemic figures of disenfranchised youth fall apart at the seams during a notorious and fractious US tour.



John's ready to go Public again

name of John Lydon and recruited old school friend Jah Wobble to form a new experimental outfit, Public Image Ltd. A one-time member of The Clash, Keith Levene, joined as guitarist while Jim Walker took over drumming duties. Over the next 14 years, Public Image Ltd (or PiL for short) released a string of influential albums, including the seminal *Metal Box*, reconvening in various new line-ups as members came and went. Lydon has remained the only constant. But with PiL left in mothballs since 1992, John made the surprise announcement last year that the band would reform for live shows. Critically acclaimed gigs followed in London and the US. Now Lydon has announced a new UK tour which hits the O2 Academy Bristol on Tuesday, July 20. Speaking from his Californian home, John is on great form and buoyed up by the positive reaction to the new tour. "We've done extremely well so I'm very pleased because an awful lot of effort has gone into it," he tells me. "It's all been without any record company support - we're independently financed, that is, by me. It's a definite struggle to make ends meet, but it's worth it. It's enjoyable and nobody goes home unhappy. "Through working with the promoters, we've managed to fit in some more shows in England at about half the price it was in December. The idea is that we'll get ourselves into a touring mode as a band again. That's very, very hard to do because of the finances. We're working hard at it and hopefully by the end of the year we'll be in the position of being able to record new material.

"But that will only come after I've sorted out a record company for us. When I look at the current labels, their complete lack of empathy with us is underwhelming to say the least. PiL are considered one of the most influential bands of the post-punk era, but record companies still seem reluctant to put their hands in their pockets and sign them up once more. "Well, 'influential' is a very serious word in our case," explains John. "We've sold enough albums to warrant further copies to be available in stores but there seems to be some kind of negative influence going on. "There always has been. There was a kind of resentment against us right from the start because Public Image Ltd wasn't like the Sex Pistols. "So we had to battle against everything. But you know, this is me - I smile in the face of adversity. What else can you do? I'm not one for self-pity. I've faced life-challenging illnesses. I'm a fighter. "I am one for writing damn good songs though and I love doing what I'm doing. Nothing will stop that. "The things I do in PiL have definitely influenced the wonderful world of music. That's all well and good. Everyone acknowledges that, except the record labels. And oddly enough, they've signed many of the bands that wouldn't really exist without PiL. I suppose it's a case of first come, last served! "You can't imagine the difficulties that PiL faced on every single album. The label would raise new barriers and new nonsenses. It became ridiculous. Even the first PiL album was held back. It was a big incident at the time. They have done their utmost to be stupid. "And then later on I had to read in the music papers that new songs weren't as good as on *Metal Box*. People are talking sh*t when they talk to me like that. Songs like *Rise and Disappointed* are really good."

After forming PiL in 1978, Lydon faced huge criticism for diverting from the uncomplicated rock'n'roll of the Pistols. "I never wanted to be different for my friends. The label would say: 'we can't sell that. These people are all unknowns.' If they just had a little trust in me then they would have found they were onto an earner! "Initially, Richard Branson wanted me to take some time off and reform with [Sex Pistols' bandmates] Steve Jones and Paul Cook in a group called *The Professionals*. It was awful. It would have been two steps backwards for me at that time. "I'd done the first PiL album and was well on the way to getting *Metal Box* together and realised that the label just wasn't grasping what I was doing. "PiL's most influential release was the aforementioned *Metal Box*, a ghostly collection of experimental sounds and freeform song structures. "Yes, it was all about throwing clichés away," Lydon explains. "However, sometimes I do like to go back to the pop format - I love to write a good pop song because pop does cover areas in the emotional ranges that are quite valid. But I don't like being limited to it. "I won't pander to public taste. I want something that lasts. My body and mind is the Sex Pistols but my heart and soul is PiL. "I call myself a folk musician nowadays for want of a better term. With PiL, I always said that we had no category. Don't even bother trying to put one on us. "But it's hardly Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger, though, is it, John...? "Well, I don't know about those names but it really is. I'm writing from the heart about things I know about. The thoughts are genuine, there are no fake emotions here. The situations I am describing are real and therefore that's folk music. It's timeless. "There's a great element of accident with songwriting but actually accidents only happen to the skilled. I learnt my art. I even tried singing lessons but I soon had enough of that. Three lessons in and I realised that the teachers were actually holding me back. "I sing in my own style because I'm singing about my life. Therefore that's the perfect voice. "Anyone that thinks differently is talking sh*t to me. "It's unfortunate that we had to be different. I'm not a deliberate rebel for no bloody good reason. "What was that great lyric by Tom Petty 'a rebel without a clue'. I hate Tom Petty but I loved the coining of that phrase." "The reunion shows of PiL have been prompted by the death of Lydon's father. The frontman feels that singing will help him

John Lydon

of doing that with them was impossible so I had to create PiL. I set that up with great difficulties from the label. I then flooded it with

work through this emotional trauma. "Yes, that's true, and here I am being asked about Malcolm McLaren by other people. It's dreadful. They just want to talk about a manager from the past as if my real life is of no interest. "I had serious trouble with my dad over the years. But my God, I lost my best friend. So much was left unclear. "I leave myself open to having the p*ss taken, but I wish people would see the other side of me. "If anybody wants to know anything about me then listen to the PiL songs. Plus, with the Pistols I was straight off the street when I went into songwriting. I think I did rather well actually! What do people want? I came fully loaded to the mad hatter's tea party! "Another word that keeps cropping up in the live reviews of the new PiL shows is 'challenging'. "Well it's only challenging if you don't know anything about yourself or the world of music. If you're expecting it to be like some fabulously current indie band then you're going to be disappointed. "We're ahead of cliché-ism and fashion statements. It's a special event. You shouldn't expect us to sound like the record either. The studio versions are just an indication of future possibilities." "If the Pistols came with their own McLaren-generated manifesto, was PiL purely a musical proposition? "A lot of the early punk ideology was about telling it like it is. All of that is still there with PiL. "I have a serious sense of values which I won't compromise and that gets me into all kinds of serious trouble with record labels and lawyers etc. If I'm smirked at for that then that's too bad. "I want to make a difference in the world. And a good one at that. There are far too many people out there who are only about taking money out of your wallet. Green Day are a classic example of that. That is completely manufactured and an insult to anything I first initiated

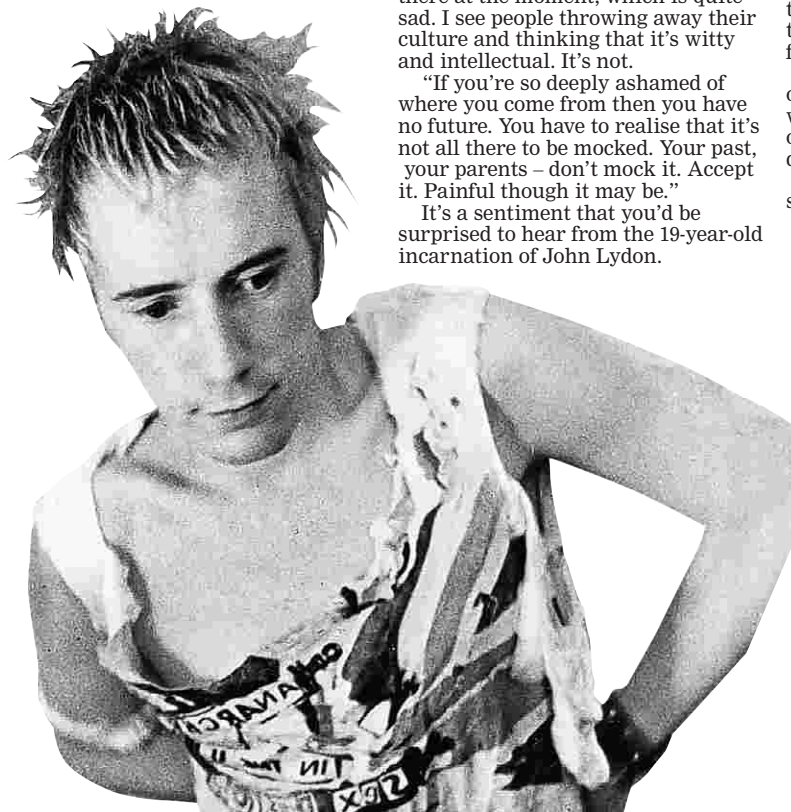
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Above, the final Sex Pistols live show at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco in January 1978; right, joining John Lydon in the new line-up of Public Image Ltd are Lu Edmonds, Bruce Smith and Scott Firth



Lydon's never been too far away from controversy over the last 30 years. He's been criticised for appearing on *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* - "I did it for charity! Bloody hell, boo hiss, what a sell-out!" he protests in mock exasperation. "Tell that to the orphanages and the animals that needed care and attention." He's also taken some stick for appearing in *Country Life* butter adverts. Lydon's keen to point out though that he's used the money to put PiL back on the road. "It worked out that way. They gave me an opportunity to mess about with the scripts and had respect for me. They believed that I could pull it off and I did. We made some highly entertaining commercials. And it's a British product. Frankly, it's the most anarchic thing you could think of. What's wrong with promoting British products?" Despite being a long-time resident of California, Lydon claims he's lost none of his Britishness and is a firm believer in hanging on to your roots. "I'm not running around saying 'look at me! I'm British, wahey!' The fact of the matter is that I'm more British than half of the sods there at the moment, which is quite sad. I see people throwing away their culture and thinking that it's witty and intellectual. It's not. "If you're so deeply ashamed of where you come from then you have no future. You have to realise that it's not all there to be mocked. Your past, your parents - don't mock it. Accept it. Painful though it may be." It's a sentiment that you'd be surprised to hear from the 19-year-old incarnation of John Lydon.



"I don't think it is. I didn't write *God Save The Queen* because I wanted to destroy England. Quite the opposite. It was to get rid of that idiotic regime that was just living off its laurels and daydreaming about a false empire. That had to go, but that didn't mean you gave up being British. "While I'm still paying tax for those people I've got every right to comment. It's called freedom of speech." "It's clear that reactivating PiL has given John a whole new lease of life. "I love it. In the 30 years that I've been around this is probably the most enjoyable it's ever been on stage. I'm still nervous as hell before I go on but feel absolutely wonderful when I'm there. "Singing-wise this is probably the best I've ever been. There's no alcohol involved, apart from my brandy throat wash. I have a bucket, otherwise it would be a slop-fest. It's the best throat gargle you can get. "I still have problems from the illnesses I had from childhood like the meningitis. I get sinus infections. When I sing, an awful lot of phlegm and snot comes up and I have to clear it out of my system. "People never believed me about the spitting back in the Seventies - they would just say I was a filthy foul-mouthed punk. "The *Daily Mirror* led the charge on that type of nonsense and people wanted to believe it. Whether I spat or not who cares - just ask yourself, did the song mean anything?" Although no new material has surfaced from the Sex Pistols



The Sex Pistols in 1977 with an EMI poster after leaving the record company

reunions over the past decade-and-a-half, Lydon hopes that he can produce fresh songs for PiL over the next year. "With the Pistols, it was a celebration of my ancestry, of my heritage. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's a joyous event. That's what gave me my start and I'm extremely grateful for that. "Once I get out of PiL mode then I might be able to go back and write new songs for the Pistols. But it's a different frame of mind and approach. Both are right but they are from different angles. It's very hard to explain, but it's all emotional. "When I come to grips with it, you shall hear the rewards, or the horror, of it all. It's an internal problem that I have to resolve. It's not that I can't write, but I don't know how to pick up the pieces from where I left off with the Pistols. But there's been some faces removed from the band's history now which might make it easier for me. "I can't just go off and write a song then present it to them with a 'here you go boys'. That would just be too rude. "I have played Pistols songs in the middle of PiL sets because I'm proud of it. There's no mockery in there at all. For me, it's all part and parcel of me, therefore absolutely to be shared. "It's absurd for people to decompartmentalise me. Do that to me when I'm 80 - I've got 30 years left yet at least." **Public Image Ltd play the O2 Academy Bristol, on Tuesday, July 20. Tickets are priced £25 adv and available by ringing 0844 847 2000.**