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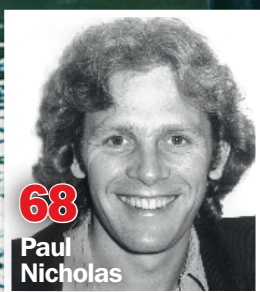


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PACKING A

Mentored by Clash manager Bernie Rhodes, **JoBoxers** emerged 40 years ago from the meeting of a charismatic black American frontman and an ambitious quartet of Bristol punks. Together they created a blend of 50s-infused, high-octane rock'n'soul that would storm the pop charts, if only for a brief period, with help from a Dexys-esque image and some viscerally vibrant pop anthems. Now the original line-up are back together, looking forward to their first shows in 35 years, hoping to rekindle some of the spirit of those early shows when, as they tell **Lois Wilson**, "The audience reaction was off the charts."



It's Spring 1980. The Clash are playing a 17-night residency at Bonds in New York. A group called Buzz & The Flyers are opening for them. Their frontman Buzz, aka Dig Wayne, is a striking presence: Hollywood handsome and wearing all-black rockabilly get-up, he's leaping about the stage, pulling all the right poses. After the performance Bernie Rhodes, The Clash's manager, approaches him backstage. "Come to London, I'll make you a star," he tells Wayne. "I thought, James Baldwin, Jimi Hendrix, Josephine Baker, all these amazing black creatives had gone to Europe and proved themselves, so why not

give it a shot?" Wayne tells *Record Collector*. "And Bernie was true to his word. He did make me a star, kind of."

Bursting onto the scene in 1982, JoBoxers, led by Dig Wayne, had a line-up completed by guitarist Rob Marche, keyboardist Dave Collard, bassist Chris Bostock and drummer Sean McLusky, all twentysomethings off the Bristol punk scene. They were a thrilling amalgam, mixing rockabilly, swing, northern soul, punk and new wave; aesthetically combining 50s noir and Marlon Brando *On The Waterfront* cool.

And 1983 was their pivotal year, witnessing a giddy rush of uplifting hit singles:

Boxerbeat, Just Got Lucky, Johnny Friendly, and an album, *Like Gangbusters*. Then it fizzled out and, after a second album, *Skin & Bone*, in '85, they split. "It was almost blink-and-you'll-miss-it," Wayne admits. "It was over so quick. And I did take it for granted. But we crammed a lot in. We were committed, rehearsing five or six hours a day, every day."

Dig Wayne grew up near Columbus, Ohio. Punk turned his head, then rock'n'roll, then rockabilly – singers such as Warren Smith, Hasil Adkins, Glen Glenn and Sonny Fisher. He moved to New York to try and make it, formed The Flyers and honed his craft at CBGBs and Max's Kansas City. Johnny Thunders was a fan and would get up onstage for a rendition of Chuck Berry's Round And Round unless the band saw him approaching first.

"You knew he'd want to play it and it was Thunders so you couldn't say no," says Wayne, "but he'd get up and, depending on the state he was in, he'd just go on and on and on... if we saw him we'd take a break and hope he'd have gone off somewhere before it was time for us to get back up again."

After taking up Bernie Rhodes on his offer to come to the UK, Wayne took a flight to London and, on arrival at the airport, was driven straight to The Clash's rehearsal space. "Bernie was there, he introduced me to Chris, Rob, Dave and Sean," he recalls. "There was chemistry from the start – we began writing songs and making plans."

Like Dig, the remaining Boxers had musical history. "When punk came along in '76, Bristol suddenly took off," says Chris Bostock. "My mates from school formed The Cortinas, signed to CBS and were putting out singles. There were fanzines and record labels starting up and I was going to see bands every week at the Bristol Locarno: The Clash, The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees. Punk was a real galvanising force. We all started groups. I was in The Stingrays and The X Certs, Sean was in The Stingrays then he and Rob were in Joe Public, Dave Collard was in Gardez Darkx, then there was Johnny Britton, a singer, and a bit of a Bristol face."

It was through Britton that the four got their first break and would eventually meet Wayne. "We heard Johnny Britton was being managed by Bernie Rhodes and was putting together a band up in London and I was like, I'm doing that with him," says Sean McLusky. "I'd been to art college but was working in this horrible DIY shop in the town centre selling paint, so it was 'stuff your pension plan' and get in the car. I went to pick up Chris and Rob and drove us up to London and I never went back. We backed Johnny on his single [1980's The One That Got Away on Bernie Rhodes' Oddball] while we were living in The Clash's old rehearsal studios in Camden, sleeping on the mattress upstairs and making demos with the eight-track on the ground floor. It was great."

Rhodes was also managing Vic Godard at the time, and he got the four to back Godard as the second incarnation of Subway Sect.



JoBoxers in New York, 1983 (l-r): Dig Wayne, Dave Collard, Rob Marche, Chris Bostock, Sean McLusky. Previous spread: preparing to take Manhattan, the same year

"WHAT BROUGHT US TOGETHER WAS A SENSE OF THE PAST, OUR APPRECIATION FOR WHAT HAD GONE BEFORE"

Together they hosted Club Left every Thursday night at the Whiskey A Go Go in Wardour Street, Soho with Britton as the DJ. "We dubbed what we were doing Cool Bop & Swing," says Bostock, "and the queue would go round the block. You'd have members of Heaven 17, The Clash, Human League all waiting to get in. Johnny Britton swears a pre-fame Prince and Madonna came on the same night, too."

Along with backing Vic Godard, with whom they recorded 1982's *Songs For Sale* on London Records, they also provided a backdrop for Lady Blue, Tom Cat and Bananarama, who made their live debut with the group. "We also took Club Left out on the road," notes Bostock, "like a 60s revue, but Vic soon got tired of it. He got married, started being late to shows then stopped turning up altogether. I remember we played Manchester Apollo, which was the climax of the tour, and he didn't show so we went on without him. We had to sing all his vocal lines. Despite this, we went down really well, but it was obvious it couldn't go on and we needed a new singer. We'd seen Buzz and The Flyers at Dingwalls, we'd been blown away by Dig and Bernie went to New York to get him."

"That's what Bernie was good at, seeing the potential," says McLusky. "He could see how things could fit together and how it would work with us and Dig. Once we were together, we put all our influences in a pot and mixed them up, and that was our sound: a bit of 60s soul, James Brown, rare funk, Georgie Fame, vocal jazz, swing. These were the things being played in the London clubs at the time and we were reflecting that."

"What brought us together was a sense of the past, our appreciation for what had gone before," says Wayne. "I was into James Cagney films, *The Dead End Kids*, Marlon Brando in *On The Waterfront*, and I was reading noir, Chester Himes, Mickey Spillane – it all fed into my songwriting and the band's image."

Dexys Midnight Runners provided the unifying thread. "When I started talking about what I envisaged, the band said, 'That sounds like Dexys,'" says Wayne. "I had no idea who they were but when I saw them, I thought, Wow, that's exactly it. We didn't copy them, but they were definitely an influence with the whole blue-collar, dock worker thing."

Reacting against the pomp of the new romantic movement, they bought their clobber from Flip on the Kings Road and in Covent Garden. Says McLusky, "It was basically US workwear, there was tons of it to choose from and you could get a whole outfit for a tenner."

By this time Club Left had moved from the Whisky A Go Go to Ronnie Scotts. Here they were spotted and signed by RCA. They made their first TV appearance on the BBC's *Oxford Road Show*, played their debut proper for an *NME* promotion at the ICA, then while supporting Madness on their *Rise & Fall* tour, hit No 3 with their debut single, the Collard, Wayne and Marche-penned Boxerbeat in February 1983.

"Rob came in with the riff to Boxerbeat and a bit of melody and I immediately thought, this is good," says Wayne of the song's genesis. "I took the song home on cassette and at that time everyone had an anthem, a signature tune, so I thought I'd write our one. We were very confident at the time because we had toured so much, we were really tight, and the audience reaction was off the chart. We were only kept off the top spot by David Bowie with Let's Dance and Duran Duran with Is There Something I Should Know, which isn't bad [laughs]."

"We knew Boxerbeat was going to be a hit," says Bostock. "In fact, we were a bit reticent to issue it as our first single because of that. We thought it was going to be our anthem, which it became, and we thought because of this maybe we should hold it back, a bit like Adam and the Ants and Ant Music; they waited until their sixth single to release that. We were also a bit worried about how to follow it up. We didn't want to be a one-hit wonder, but the record company heard it and said, 'That's the one.'"

"Producer Alan Schacklock suggested we go to the building site across the street from the recording studio to get some boards and we put them in the hallway right outside the recording studio," says Wayne. "We set them up in such a way that the five of us could stand on them and

they mic'd the board so we all jumped on these boards to get the stomping beat."

"We did *Top Of The Pops* for it and it felt like a big deal," McLusky recalls. "It was at the time when they rented loads of dancers and they were doing all these cheesy moves and there were lots of balloons everywhere, and it just felt great to be stood in the middle looking like a bunch of dockers."

Three months later, they followed it up with second single, *Just Got Lucky*. The song made No 7. "I was living in a room in Kensal Rise," remembers Bostock who wrote the song with Wayne. "It was quite rough, and I furnished it with furniture from skips and when Dig came over to the UK, he lived in the room next to me. I would write songs on this Spanish guitar I had and would then tape them on this cheap tape recorder. One of the ones I came up with early on was *Just Got Lucky*. I got it down on tape, me singing these nonsense lyrics, then went to my mum and dad's house in Broadstairs. They had a piano and I finished it there, gave the tape to Dig when I got back and he had the lyrics within half an hour. The next day we played it to the band in the rehearsal studio and we knew instantly it was going to be a single."

"I used to carry this notebook around with me everywhere," Wayne continues, "and I'd jot down little phrases I overheard while I was out. *Just Got Lucky*, I'd had that written down for years. We were sitting at the kitchen table and Chris had this riff and I think the first thing we came up with was the chorus to the song. It sounded great."

"In many ways it's the quintessential JoBoxers song," Bostock asserts. "It's got the choppy guitar and driving bass, a bit of Hammond, a bit of sax, and the whole northern soul thing to it."

Johnny Friendly provided their third single in August '83 – the title referring to the antagonist of the same name played by Lee J Cobb in *On The Waterfront* – and it just missed the Top 30. *Like Gangbusters*, their debut album, was issued in September 1983 and produced by Alan Shacklock. It peaked at No 18. "It was basically the best songs from our live set played live in the studio," Bostock explains. "Alan had a master's degree in music production, he'd also been in the band Babe Ruth in the 70s and he had so many brilliant ideas. He definitely got the best out of us. I think it was all completed in a couple of weeks."

Fourth single, *Jealous Love*, a cover of the Wilson Pickett song, followed in November '83 and failed to make the Top 40 despite them performing it on TV show *Loose Talk*. "That we never had a hit with it is still a disappointment but *Loose Talk* was one of the most exciting things we ever did," says Wayne, "because Diana Dors introduced us and I got her autograph afterwards. I had a 'do not disturb' sign from the hotel we were staying at on me and she signed that, and I still have it. It's one of my favourite mementoes."

On the back of the success of *Just Got Lucky* in the US the same month, the group

toured America – "on a greyhound bus previously owned by the Harlem globetrotters" says Bostock as an aside – then Australia and New Zealand, but the experience was marred by a fall-out with their record company and the loss of Rhodes as their manager. "By this time our A&R man had also left RCA," says Bostock. "We had to focus on business which none of us knew enough about, instead of the music which we loved."

"We needed a manager like U2's manager Paul McGuinness," adds Wayne, "someone who could hold it all together, navigate the difficulties and see the bigger picture. It was great RCA had released Boxerbeat as our first single but then it was 'what do we do now?' If they'd released Johnny Friendly first and we'd gone into the Top 30 with that then released *Just Got Lucky* and got into the Top 10 and then Boxerbeat and got into the Top 5, we would have built a platform. Instead, we did it the other way round and it looked like we weren't doing as well with each subsequent release."

A second album, *Skin & Bone*, was recorded at Hansa Studios in Berlin with Chris Kimsey and yielded the single *Is This Really The First Time (You've Been In Love)*, a genuine one-that-got-away moment. "By the time of *Skin & Bone* we were on a nosedive," says McLusky, "and we fell out with the label and the whole thing was put on hold. We even did part of a third album [called *Missing Link*] but I'd lost interest and it was time to knock it on the head and move on."

"Some of the songs on *Skin & Bone* are really good like *Don't Keep The Ladies Waiting*," says Wayne. "But I was a smartarse, I insulted the record company at a show one time, and they didn't like it. They came backstage afterwards and ended up putting an injunction on us for some reason. We couldn't do anything for 18 months. I remember thinking, 'I don't want to do this anymore,' and I said to Rob, 'My heart's not in this.'"

"We split with RCA," says Bostock, "and we were being looked after by Sandie Shaw's manager who shopped the third album around and got us a deal with Magnet. Three of us wanted to take the deal, two didn't and that was it." "Call it ego," says Wayne, "but it seemed like we were going backwards if we signed to a small independent. I said, 'I'm done here.' The rest of the band weren't happy I walked away but it was the right decision for me at the time."

Wayne issued a solo single, *Mastermind*, in 1987 on Polydor then turned to acting, performing in Louis Jordan's *Five Guys Named Moe* in the West End then starring in Hollywood films including 1995's *Judge Dredd* and high-profile TV series such as *ER*. In 2007 he made a blues album, *Shack Rouser*, with his group The Chisellers and reformed Buzz & The Flyers for a one-off in Las Vegas. He currently writes and performs his poetry and teaches method acting at the Lee Strasberg Institute. The rest of the band remained busy, too: Marche went on to form Earl Brutus in 1993; Collard joined The The, contributing to 1989's *Mind Bomb*, and 1993's *Dusk*, then toured with the reformed line-up through 2019; McLusky

launched such high-profile London clubs as The Brain, Love Ranch, Club UK and Sonic Mook, while Bostock, who had played on The Style Council's *Cafe Bleu* while still in JoBoxers, joined Dave Stewart in The Spiritual Cowboys, appearing on the *Dave Stewart & the Spiritual Cowboys* and *Honest* albums. He also currently performs in Vic Godard and the Subway Sect with McLusky and Britton and, after launching the official JoBoxers website, is the main instigator behind the group's reformation.

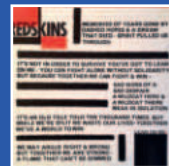
"We were exhausted when we split," he says, "and we never really ended the group properly, but it took a while for us to find the right moment to all come back together and then when we did, a pandemic came along! But we are all looking forward to the rescheduled dates and then who knows. We'll just have to wait and see." 

JoBoxers play a UK tour – their first live shows in 35 years – in June and July. New compilation Essential Boxerbeat is on Cooking Vinyl in June.

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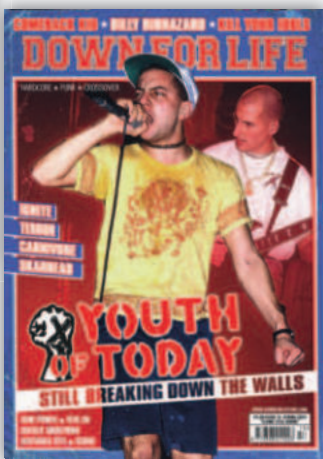


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