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BOXER BEAT



JOBXERS L-R: ROB MARCHE, DAVE COLLARD,
DIG WAYNE, SEAN McLUSKEY, CHRIS BOSTOCK

Reunited and heading out on the road this June and July, Sean McLusky of JOBOXERS talks pop star fallouts, Bernie Rhodes and Club Left with Will Simpson.



“It was such a brief moment in popular culture,” JoBoxers drummer Sean McLusky says wistfully, “but for the few people who were into it at the time I’m sure they have fond memories - if they are still with us.”

Few? Surely anyone who was a teenager in 1983 still has his band’s biggest hit, ‘Boxer Beat’, bouncing somewhere round their head? JoBoxers’ success may have been fleeting, but whilst they failed to deliver a knockout blow, they sure as hell left their mark.

The dramatis personae of their story include around one group of punk veterans, one energetic expat frontman and a manager who had already had a hand in the creation of at least three of that era’s greatest bands. The manager was Bernard Rhodes who in 1981 had returned to steer The Clash to what was arguably their greatest triumph: their mid year Bonds residency which broke the band in the States. Infamously, the combination of the venue overselling tickets and the New York City Fire Department enforcing a reduced capacity ensured that the initial run of shows stretched out from a week to 17 days. More support acts were booked, one of which was NY rockabilly group Buzz and The Flyers whose frontman was one Dig ‘Buzz’ Wayne.

“Bernie Rhodes saw the band,” he remembers. “He didn’t like the band but he liked me. He said ‘why don’t you come to England’. The Stray Cats had a reputation for playing rockabilly and everyone was talking about them. At the time my ego couldn’t take the fact that everyone was talking about the Stray Cats instead of us. So I said ‘sure I’m done with rockabilly anyway, because the Stray Cats have already sorta done it’. He said ‘I’ll get you a record contract. We’ll get some musicians so you can start a band and all your dreams will come true’.

“So I broke up with my girlfriend, sold all my furniture. I came to London and he introduced me to the guys who were going to launch this with me. They took me to this club where they were playing that night - it was a Thursday.”

That club was Club Left. This was Rhodes and Vic Godard’s attempt to place themselves on a distant shore of cool, far beyond second generation punk’s limited horizon. By this point the original Subway Sect were long gone and Godard had recruited a new band which could play the more jazz-influenced sound he was seeking. Situated at Soho’s Whisky A Go Go (which was soon to be abbreviated to the WAGG and would go on to become a byword for mid ‘80s cool) the club’s motto was ‘cool, bop and swing’ - jazz, rockabilly and skiffle; anything retro that harked back to the ‘40s and ‘50s. Subway Sect were the house band, backed by various singers: “Apart from Vic, we had Lady Blue and others; Bananarama did their first ever gig with us at Club Left,” bassist Chris Bostock recalls. “It was all sorts of things from the past like the Rat Pack - people like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin. It was quite beatnik.”

By the time Wayne turned up in 1982, the relationship between Godard and the rest of Subway Sect was already deteriorating. “We’d been signed to Island as Subway Sect and had taken Club Left on a tour around the UK. Towards the end of it Vic was getting really tired. He stopped showing up to concerts. One time we did this huge gig at the Manchester Apollo and we had to go on without him. So we maxed out all the backing vocals and turned them into chants and we found out that it actually went down just as well without him. But we still needed a singer so we asked Bernard to go and find someone really good.”

The new band and singer immediately clicked: “He (Dig) was into all the same things as us. We just incorporated more soul and funk into it because he could perform it and we could play it. Very quickly we evolved out of the cool bop and swing into more of a funky soul thing. We were locked in a rehearsal room together and basically came up with that first album.”

Clearly this was a new band and so a new name and a fresh look was required. “We were definitely influenced by Dexys,” admits Wayne today. “They had done that dockers, donkey jacket kind of thing on their first album. So we took a little bit of that and I guess the ‘Marlon Brando On The Waterfront’ look. We kind of pieced it together. ▶

◀ Somebody came in in a flat cap and we were all like 'oh they look good. Let's wear those' so some people got them. I don't remember how the short pants came about - somebody rolled up their pants and it just stuck. The black boots with white laces...if you look at old photos of boxers they have black boots with white laces. So we put them in our Doctor Martens and pulled our socks over the top like boxers from the '40s and '50s used to."

"We wanted the name to be 'something-boxers'. We went through a lot of permutations - London Boxers, Capital City Boxers... Then we landed on Joe Boxers - cos a lot of boxers had the name Joe - and thought 'let's take out the 'e' and turn it into one word, which was the biggest mistake we ever made because to this day people still mis-spell it. They either spell it as JoeBoxers or write it as two separate words."

The new group hit the ground running, touring throughout the second half of 1982 and quickly picking up a reputation as a incendiary live act. It didn't take long for the labels to start circling. "Jack Steven, the A&R from RCA came to our rehearsal, wanted to talk to us and hear us play," remembers Wayne. "So we played 'Just Got Lucky' and he immediately said 'that's a hit'. Right then and there. He said 'I'm going to talk to my people' and one thing led to another and they signed us. We were chuffed but we weren't at all surprised. We knew we were good."

There was never any doubt that 'Boxer Beat' would be their first single. Instantly recognisable and incredibly catchy, it thumped its way into the charts, quite literally: "When we were recording 'Boxer Beat' we got hold of some planks of wood that we could stand on, put them down in the studio and jumped on them, like a big 'bomp bomp' to get that thumping beat," says Wayne. "That's why it's so thunderous because we were jumping on these planks of wood in our Doc Martens. Just the drums wasn't enough so we had to really beef it up."

LEFT HAND PATH

Other Club Left alumni...

BANANARAMA

The beginnings of the most successful UK female act of the 1980s couldn't have been more punk: Paul Cook offered them a place to live above the Sex Pistols' Denmark Street rehearsal rooms where many of his old band's classics had been written. They started off providing live backing vocals for everyone from The Professionals to Department S to Shane MacGowan's Nipple Erectors. Their first full gig was at Club Left with Subway Sect as backing band.

BLUE RONDO A LA TURK

Formed by Chris Sullivan whose stated goal for the band was to 'bring back showbiz', this jazz/samba/funk collective found coals to Newcastle-style success when their 'Me And Mr Sanchez' single spent three months at Number One in Brazil. Things didn't go quite as well on home turf - they released one album, 'Chewing The Fat', before breaking up in 1982. Guitarist Mark Reilly went on to form Matt Bianco and eventually produce Dig Wayne's solo single. Sullivan, meanwhile, ended up running The Wag Club himself during the late 80s and 90s.

ANNE PIGALLE

One of the many singers that Subway Sect backed at Club Left, Parisian vocalist Pigalle recorded a version of the Cole Porter standard Love For Sale as one off single with Adrian Sherwood before Trevor Horn's ZTT label snapped her up. Her only album for them, 1985's 'Everything Could Be So Perfect', is something of a neglected classic; recommended for torch song lovers and Francophiles alike.

SADE

Sade Adu was a regular face at Club Left when still a fashion student and backing vocalist for the funk band Pride. She went on to form her own self titled outfit and their debut album, 1984's 'Diamond Life', ended up shifting some 10 million copies.

WORKING WEEK

Though they formed after Club Left finished, this London world/ jazz ensemble very much supped from the same musical waters. They reached the lower end of the charts with 'Venceremos (We Will Win)', a tribute to Chilean protest singer Victor Jara that featured Robert Wyatt and Tracey Thorn on vocals. They later collaborated with Vic Godard on an album, 'T.R.O.U.B.L.E.', the singer's last album before he retired (albeit briefly) from music to become a postman in the mid '80s.

'Boxer Beat' reached Number Three in April 1983 and so began JoBoxers year of pop fame. "It was everything I imagined it to be," the singer recalls. "You know, you hit the clubs, you're let right in. You don't have to wait in line. You go into a shop and people say hello. You get to be on TV. You get to go on Top of the Pops. All the girls like you. You didn't have to go up to a girl and say 'my name is so and so' and have that awkward introduction. They knew who you were immediately, so it was great."

"We were still living in squats during all this. It happened so quick that we didn't have time to get used to it. I remember one time on an upper deck of

a bus going to Edgware Road or somewhere and this little kid with his mom sitting in the seat ahead of me looks at me intently and says 'Boxer Beat! Boxer Beat!' All because he'd seen me on TV a few weeks before."

As the face of the band Wayne had a couple of run ins with other inhabit-

ants of London's pop goldfish bowl. "We said a lot of stuff that was stupid and we offended a lot of people because we had this image of kinda bad boys. One of us slagged Bananarama off in one of the magazines. It seemed harmless and funny at the time until I was at the Wag Club one night and saw Siobhan. She came up to me and said 'Hi Dig, how you doing?' I went 'Hey Siobhan' as if I had forgotten all about it. Then she said 'Why did you say that about us in that magazine? It was really hurtful'. 'I don't know. Because I'm an asshole...?'"

"Another time we slagged off Kajagoogoo. They were the antithesis of us with their pretty hair and beads. Then a few weeks later I was walking by myself down by the Roundhouse in Camden and I can feel some people approaching me. I didn't think much about it, but as I got much closer I was like 'it's Kajagoogoo! Oh shit I'm going to get beat up by Kajagoogoo!' That would have been humiliating. Luckily, I just put my head down and kept walking and they didn't recognise me."

But JoBoxers' life in the fast lane didn't last long. Even with a video that featured a Frank Bruno cameo, third single 'Johnny Friendly' could only splutter to Number 35 that August and the album, when it came out in the autumn, received, shall we say, mixed reviews (Julie Burchill gave it a terrible kicking in the NME). 'Like Gangbusters' reached Number 18 before falling away.

Instead the band focused on America where 'Just Got Lucky' had gone Top 40. But after a seven week tour where they played nearly every state, they returned to find the A&R man that had signed them had left the company. "That was the death of it really," says Bostock. "They had new people taking his place that weren't interested in us any more. We tried to wriggle out of that contract but RCA put an injunction on us which meant we couldn't record or do anything for 18 months."

Management - or rather lack of it - was also a problem. By now, Bernard Rhodes was busy re-constituting the post-Mick Jones Clash and didn't have any time to spare. "Once he got us signed he kind of disappeared," says Wayne. "He checked in every once in a while. But we needed somebody to do the day to day stuff. So we found someone, and I mean he was a good guy - I liked him a lot - but he wasn't a very good manager because he had no experience. So while we made decisions, they were made without any real foresight and it hurt us."

"Our first record went to Number Three and the positions just went downhill from there. To get any momentum to get ourselves back, it would have taken a real svengali manager to say 'Okay this is what you guys need to do'. We needed somebody to come in and take a big hold of the whole situation and make it happen in a way that gave us credibility, recognised our musicianship and appreciated just how good we were as a band."

It wasn't until early 1985 that another single, 'Is This Really The First Time', emerged, by which time the band had been all but forgotten about. When it failed to even reach the top 75, the accompanying second album, 'Skin And Bone', was shelved.

"It was hugely deflating," remembers Bostock. "We had been working so hard as well. What we did was go straight back in the studio and Rob (Marche) our lead guitarist took the money and went off and recorded a third album. We've still got the tapes and are thinking about releasing it all at some point."

By this point Wayne had had enough and excused himself. He briefly tried his hand at a solo career. "Polydor offered me a single deal - they weren't convinced enough to offer me an album deal. So I did this single, 'Mastermind'. Mark Reilly from Matt Bianco produced. I heard it on the radio a couple of times, but it didn't go anywhere and I just got fed up with the whole thing. By that time everything had gone sour for me and I thought 'Why am I trying to flog this dead horse?'"

Instead he turned his hand to acting, learned his craft at the Lee Strasberg Institute and bagged a role in the West End musical Five Guys Named Moe. At the end of the show's run in 1995 he relocated back to the US, moving to Los Angeles where in between acting jobs, he published poetry and worked as a wardrobe stylist.

The others eventually found their respective niches. Rob Marche would form dada glamsters Earl Brutus in the early '90s. Keyboard player Dave Col-



PHOTO: STEVE RAPPORT

lard joined The The. Chris Bostock joined Sandie Shaw's band, then Spear Of Destiny for their 1988 album 'The Price You Pay' and eventually wound up playing with Dave Stewart in his Spiritual Cowboys. Meanwhile Sean McLusky became a promoter and impresario; the epitome of the music biz mover and shaker. His most notable successes have been mid '90s house emporium Club UK and the Sonic Mook Experiment club/compilation series, which was central to the early Noughties garage rock revival.

The idea of a JoBoxers reunion had been in the air for some time, but as is often the way one member acted as catalyst. "Chris is the heart of the band," says Wayne. "He's the one who for years and years pressed me to get back together. I didn't want to do it, I wasn't ready to do it. I didn't want to sing those songs any more. The whole thing left a bad taste in my mouth."

So what has changed? "It's just time," he reflects. "Eventually a day came when I thought 'Yeah that could be fun'. Plus if I don't do it now I don't think I'll be able to do it in another 4 or 5 years! We're not getting any younger. I thought 'maybe I should do it now' and see how it goes."

"For me, I think the pandemic really crystalised it," says McLusky. "I was

always a bit off hand about it. But then I thought it would be a nice idea to reappraise what we did - it was an individual moment and we did some good work and it's nice to look at it again and meet those guys again. I don't think anyone is planning to do any new albums on the back of it."

The gigs, which are scheduled for June, have already been postponed once due to Covid and whilst everyone says they are looking forward to it, Wayne insists that they won't be reviving the fashions of 1983.

"We're not going to come out in short pants, flat caps and braces. That would be ridiculous. We're going to do it as the men we are now, just playing those songs. Hopefully some will perhaps have a different arrangement and it will be something new. We're not trying to recreate what we did."

"But the moment I'm looking forward to is getting to the rehearsal studio and seeing everybody again and thinking 'Okay, this could work!' None of us know if it's going to work until we actually do it, although," he adds, "I'm pretty sure it will..." **VLR**

*'Essential Boxerbeat' is out June 24th on Cooking Vinyl
JoBoxers tour the UK in June and July*