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UNDERPASS MASTERS



"I thought we'd just fall apart": Subway Sect in rehearsal circa 1976

Although they emerged from the same scene, and had similar inspirations, as punk's first wave, **SUBWAY SECT** were a different proposition – so much so that their discomfort in such company meant a debut album they recorded never saw the light of day in its original form. Leader **VIC GODARD** eventually re-emerged with a new incarnation of the group in time to be greeted by a growing post-punk audience more amenable to their artful, 'We oppose all rock'n'roll' sound, before taking another handbrake turn into swing-influenced retro lounge-pop to seal Godard's status as one of British music's perennial non-conformists. **ROB HUGHES** traces their lovably uneven path.

The 100 Club Punk Festival was a chaotic gathering of tribes. Held in late September 1976, at a London venue more associated with jazz and blues, the two-day event sought to crown the emergent punk movement with an orgy of noise and mayhem. Opening night meant the Sex Pistols and The Clash. Siouxsie & The Banshees blagged their way onto the bill at the last minute, despite having no songs to speak of. "Let's just make a noise," reasoned their drummer, Sid Vicious.

One group, however, was less enthused by the prospect of being involved. Subway Sect – who'd never played live before and liked it that way – had been cajoled by Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren into being the first band to appear at the festival, ostensibly to fatten the numbers. "We were a group of friends, but that's about it," explains frontman and chief songwriter Vic Godard. "We didn't have any instrumental capabilities. The only one of us who owned an instrument was Rob Symmons, our guitarist. And he was very limited. I had a harmonica."

So inexperienced were the teenage quartet that Steve Jones and Glen Matlock had to tune their guitars for them. "We had no idea what we were doing," recalls Symmons. "It was packed that night and I couldn't believe we were actually on the stage. The Pistols were particularly supportive. Johnny Rotten was very nice. He said, 'Don't worry about The Clash, they're a load of shit.'"

Aside from a few spotty get-togethers, Subway Sect's only prior experience of playing with one another was an intense bout of rehearsals (hurriedly organised by McLaren) a week earlier. "I was scared to death at the 100 Club," admits bassist Paul Myers. "I thought we'd just fall apart, but we managed to get through four numbers. I felt euphoric afterwards, because it was such a stressful situation. It seemed like a triumph."

Punk and a lack of musical ability weren't necessarily incompatible. Yet even among their peers, Subway Sect were different. Their trebly sound was more aligned to The Velvet Underground or The Modern Lovers than the bastardised rock'n'roll of the Pistols and The Clash. They were ramshackle yet strangely melodic. Godard's bookish lyrics, informed by New Wave cinema and French literature, dealt in theories and ideas rather than regular pop matter.

Up onstage, the band were expressionless, dressed in varying shades of grey, with Godard slouched over his microphone and

Symmons holding his Fender Mustang high on his chest. It was all very un-rock, and deliberately so. "Lots of other groups saw The Clash and just sort of copied them," explains the guitarist, "but we didn't want to jump on or follow anybody. We just wanted to be ourselves."

Subway Sect's initial run was over by 1978, after a succession of shows, two fabulous singles and an aborted album that's still subject to prickly debate. And while a fresh version of the band would emerge at the turn of the 80s, establishing Godard as one of the era's most spectacular non-conformists, their primary directive was unequivocal.

"We were so sick of hearing 'professional' music," declares Symmons: "It sounds really naïve now, but we genuinely believed that this was the end of rock'n'roll."

Godard and Symmons bonded at grammar school in Richmond during the early 70s. The former was born Vic Napper but

"IT WAS PACKED AND I COULDN'T BELIEVE WE WERE ON THE SAME STAGE. THE PISTOLS WERE PARTICULARLY SUPPORTIVE"

adopted his surname from a key influence. "Vic and I were both really into French films by Jean-Luc Godard and Truffaut," Symmons explains. Godard's interest was further deepened by curriculum studies on Camus, Voltaire and Sartre.

Symmons had grown up listening to The Yardbirds and The Who. Marc Bolan, whose parents lived in the flat downstairs, would occasionally come over and demonstrate a few guitar licks: "I remember him showing me Honey Don't, the old Carl Perkins tune. He was very much into rockabilly at the time."

A major Bowie fan, Godard had attended both Ziggy Stardust's last stand at the Hammersmith Odeon and *The 1980 Floor Show* (the 1973 stage production televised for the US market). But music was very much secondary to film and literature at that point. "Rob and I would record Molière plays into a cassette player in my

bedroom, before we had anything musical going on," says Godard. Things changed when they discovered a new breed of New York artists – Richard Hell, Television, Patti Smith, Talking Heads – through the pages of *Melody Maker* and *NME*.

"It was the song titles, the ripped clothes, the short hair," Symmons recalls. "And, in many cases, their not being able to play. We were interested in the idea of forming a group along those lines."

The real catalyst, however, was witnessing The Sex Pistols. Godard and Symmons were regulars at Pistols gigs from early '76 onwards. "It was like nothing I'd ever seen before," says Godard. "The Pistols had a raucous theatricality. And the charisma of Johnny Rotten was something else."

The pair were so enthusiastic that they persuaded reluctant schoolmate Myers – a committed soul boy – to come along to a Pistols gig at the Nashville Rooms. "It was a small crowd, maybe less than 50 people," Myers remembers. "I wasn't expecting to even *like* the Pistols, but they were just so

raw. It was almost like a Damascene conversion. Vic and Rob were already messing about with a few songs, so by the time we got back to the bus stop, we had this embryonic idea for a group."

At Pistols shows, the threesome would hang out with the likes of The Clash and The Damned. When asked if they had a band, they lied and answered in the affirmative. 'Subway Sect' was hastily dreamt up as a name. Symmons even scrawled it on his T-shirt. People began to take note. Shortly afterwards, McLaren approached him at a Ramones gig at the Roundhouse: "Malcolm saw my shirt and went, 'Oh, so *you're* the Subway Sect. Do you want to play at this festival I'm doing?'"

Myers' friend, drummer Paul Packham (aka Smith), completed their line-up at the 100 Club. But with the Pistols requiring more and more of his time, McLaren handed over Subway Sect to Bernie Rhodes, manager of The Clash. "He reminded me of Napoleon," says Myers. "This full-on small person, about five foot nothing. We were quite intimidated,

because he'd grown up around the Faces and those kinds of people, so he knew his way around the music business. And we were just naïve kids from Barnes."

By May '77, with new drummer Mark Laff (soon to join Generation X) and only a handful of gigs under their belt, Subway Sect were packed off on the *White Riot Tour*, alongside The Clash, Buzzcocks, The Slits and The



Jam. Symmons recalls that, to begin with, "We were so bad that we asked to be taken off it".

Rhodes ignored the request. And while audiences were often nonplussed by Subway Sect's blank image and scratchily melodic songs – "I can actually remember people with fingers in their ears," says Symmons – not everyone felt the same. Among those in attendance at the Edinburgh Playhouse show were a 17-year-old Edwyn Collins [see panel] and soon-to-be Fire Engines Davy Henderson and Russell Burn. For them, Subway Sect's distinct approach offered a way out of punk and into something less dogmatic. Not for nothing did Godard sing: "We oppose all rock'n'roll."

"We were never into that fast, loud, rocky guitar sound," says Godard. "To us, I suppose punk was the sound of *Nuggets* and 60s American groups like The Seeds. And I've always been imbued with a love of melody from old Broadway songs and jazzy stuff that my mum and dad listened to when I was growing up."

The *White Riot Tour* made Subway Sect tight. They became even better when Bob Ward took over as drummer for that October's John Peel session. By then, Godard had well over a dozen songs, including the majestic Nobodys [sic] Scared, which became the band's debut single – issued on Rhodes' own Braik label – in March 1978.

Spirits were high when the band entered London's Gooseberry Studios to record an LP shortly afterwards. But with tracks duly completed, the album never

materialised. "There was delay after delay," remembers Myers. "Then Rob and I were sacked [by Rhodes]." Symmons has a different take. "Bernie was never in a position to do that; we were a group of friends," he says. "It was Vic who'd secretly decided to leave us."

"Quite frankly, I thought Vic's behaviour was really shoddy," says Myers, reflecting on Subway Sect's initial break-up. "And I did say that to his face. I can imagine that Bernie sold him this idea that he could go far, but we were holding him back. That's an assumption, but I think that's probably what happened. And Vic went along with it." Adds Symmons: "That was the cruellest thing for me. Vic could've easily just said, 'No, I'm staying with my mates.'"

Myers has no idea what happened to the 'lost' album, though he suspects Rhodes might have it, "because Bernie was right on the money".



Sect's appeal – Subway Sect circa 1977, around the time they joined *The White Riot Tour* (l-r): Paul Myers, Rob Symmons, Mark Laff, Vic Godard (back to camera)



Godard thinks the master tapes somehow disappeared, or maybe just certain songs had been mixed (only a handful of session tunes have appeared in the years since). In late '78, the only immediate evidence

records. They were a revelation to me."

His most pressing task, however, was an album. Billed as Vic Godard & Subway Sect, 1980's *What's The Matter, Boy?* invested various songs from the band's

previous iteration with skiffly grooves and rickety old-school rock'n'roll. Ex-Clash drummer Terry Chimes and his brother Paul acted as rhythm section, with the Black Arabs doing the rest.

It was a minor masterpiece, but no one bought it. In

keeping with a pattern that would come to define his artistic endeavours, Godard sounded like a man out of time. "It was all Bernard's idea," he says. "I didn't want to do it at all, because those songs had been kicking around for ages. I was trying to dramatically change them into something they weren't."

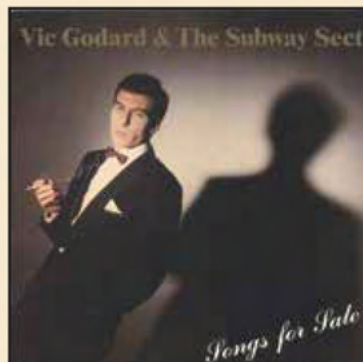
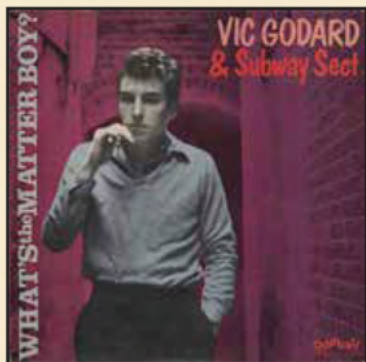
The aftermath saw the formation of a more radical Subway Sect. Bristol players Rob Marche, Sean McLusky, Dave Collard and Chris Bostock had originally been

recruited by Rhodes to back rockabilly singer Johnny Britton. When Britton opted to pursue a modelling career, Godard was invited to step in: "When we first started, we did a bit of Northern soul – I had songs like *Stop That Girl* and *Holiday Hymn* – then the tracks gradually began to swing. I was starting to write in the

'TO US, PUNK WAS THE SOUND OF NUGGETS AND 60s AMERICAN GROUPS. AND I ALWAYS HAD A LOVE OF MELODY'

was a thrillingly revamped *Ambition*, released as a single, with *Different Story* as its B-side.

Godard had already moved on by then. "Bernard said he was starting a record label and wanted me to be the songwriter," he explains. "He wanted loads of groups on the label, people like Dexys, The Specials and the Black Arabs. The first songs I wrote were for the Black Arabs. That's around the time I got into Northern soul, because Myers had lent me all these





Is Vic there? Godard in various guises (clockwise from top left): left of picture with Clash roadie Barry 'The Baker' Auguste, Paul Simonon and Joe Strummer, 1976; outside Club Left in Subway Sect's radically different guise, 1981; the same year; onstage in 1977

style of the Great American Songbook. Synthesizers and drum machines had taken over the whole planet and I sort of went back the other way."

Already partial to vintage jazz and swing, the latest Subway Sect quickly took to Godard's new approach. "We worked up a set that included Cole Porter's Anything Goes and Jule Styne's Just In Time, performed in a sleazy burlesque way," recalls bassist Bostock. "It all sounded really fresh. Certainly, no one was doing anything like it at the time."

In live settings, Godard adapted sartorially, too, dressing like a 40s matinee idol in bowtie and tux. The band followed suit. Bostock remembers a turning point in February '81, opening for The Spizzles at the Lyceum: "The place was teeming with hardcore punks fully expecting a punk Subway Sect. But as the set progressed with one swinging song after another, they realised that wasn't going to happen. It ended with all the punks doing the conga, having the time of their lives and giving us endless encores!"

That summer, Subway Sect found themselves on the road with improbable touring partners Bauhaus and The Birthday Party. Notes Bostock: "Vic later said that 'wearing our tuxedos and smiles in a sea of gothic black leather and mascara was the most satisfying rebellion I've ever been a part of.'"

Subway Sect accidentally found themselves heading up an unlikely new subculture.

They became house band at Club Left, a new weekly venture set up by Godard and the ever-enterprising Rhodes at the Whisky-A-Go-Go in Soho. Promising a night of "Cool Bop & Swing", with DJ Johnny Britton mining his vast collection of beatnik jazz records, the place hosted various up-and-coming artists. Regulars included a young George Michael.

"Bananarama started out taking the money on the door, then made their first live appearance at the club," remembers Godard. "And before they were famous, we had Madonna and Prince down there on the same night. They didn't know who each other was. Anyone visiting London from America was told to go to either Club Left or the Blitz. But whereas the New Romantics were into sort of futuristic music, we were like anything pre-1960, including the clothes. It was polar opposites."

Club Left ran for roughly a year. Shortly after it was succeeded by The Wag in April 1982, Godard and Subway Sect released the swinging *Songs For Sale*. But, as Bostock points out: "Vic was clearly losing interest in performing. We were on a big UK tour with Altered Images and he started missing shows."

As the recently married singer withdrew from Subway Sect, his bandmates teamed up with American

singer Dig Wayne (another ex-Club Left performer) as JoBoxers. Godard returned after a while with solo effort *T.R.O.U.B.L.E.* – recorded with members of Working Week and featuring Stop That Girl, arguably his greatest song – but its release was delayed by various issues, some of them financial.

"That was a total disaster," he rues now. "It had all these great musicians on it, but I was totally out of my head on heroin at the time. I was not at my best. I don't mean the songs, just the performance." By the time it came out in 1986, the capricious Godard had given it all up and become a postman.

It took the untimely death of a New York guitar icon to eventually coax Godard back. In April 1991, he read about Johnny Thunders' demise and penned a tribute to the former Heartbreaker. It was the catalyst for what became *The End Of The Surey People*. Produced by superfan Edwyn Collins, who'd previously covered Holiday Hymn with Orange Juice, the album was issued on the revived Postcard label in 1993.

Collins also afforded Godard use of his studio to revisit *T.R.O.U.B.L.E.* The resulting *In T.R.O.U.B.L.E. Again* [1998] "was what the original would've sounded like if we'd have had enough money to finish the actual mixing. And if I'd had my act together a bit more." Godard would later apply a similar process to old Subway Sect material.

In 2007, for instance, he returned to their unreleased debut and gave the songs fresh arrangements as *1978 Now*. "I was getting really annoyed by people talking about that lost album that never came out," he explains. "Mark Laff was back in the group by then, so I thought we could actually do it. We did the whole list of songs that





Cult favourites: (clockwise from above) the early 80s lineup in Picadilly Circus (Godard centre of pic); Chris Bostock onstage at Club Left; Vic Godard in 1999. Inset bottom of page: Chris Bostock with Mick Jones, who produced the band's most recent album, 2021's *Moments Like These*

would've been on the first album."

Even more satisfying was 2014's Northern soul-infused *1979 Now!*, another batch of era-specific songs with a new Subway Sect that included Myers, ex-Pistol Paul Cook and Collins as co-producer. "That was much more of a professional thing," says Godard. "Those songs had nagged away at me over the years. Everything does if it's not good, so I was just glad to get them out the way."

"Back in the day, I remember playing those numbers at the Music Machine," says Myers. "I always thought it was a tragedy they were never recorded, because they sounded fantastic. Then Vic suddenly calls me over 30 years later and says, 'I'm thinking of doing an album with all the Northern soul songs.' I couldn't think of anything better. I loved every minute. You can tell we're all having a good time. It brought back a lot of memories."

1979 Now! was a career highlight for Myers.



Other ex-members have differing views on the band's optimum era. For Symmons, who now plays alongside Rob Green as The Fallen Leaves, "Subway Sect finished in '78. Young teenagers dream of being in a group, but it never happens to most people. We played the 100 Club and the *White Riot Tour* and released a 45. It's a fantastic achievement to do that from nothing, so I'm still really proud of it."

Godard and Bostock, meanwhile, helped tie together various strands of the Subway Sect tale by reviving the Club Left line-up – performing *Songs For Sale* in its entirety – at the 100 Club in November 2014. The show was a sell-out. Alongside McLusky and Britton, Bostock is also part of the core band that made Subway Sect's most recent album, 2021's *Moments Like*

"SUBWAY SECT FINISHED IN '78 (FOR ME). BUT I'M STILL PROUD OF IT" – ROB SYMMONS

These. It was produced by another old ally, ex-Clash man Mick Jones. Most recently, Bostock has been involved with Godard in preparing an expanded reissue of *Songs For Sale*.

Whichever way you cut it, it's been quite the adventure. Especially for a frontman with no ambitions.

"I never wanted to be in a band at all," asserts Godard, who has a new solo album – *Goodbye Blackpool, Hello Broadway* – due this year. "In fact, I've never planned ahead. An interviewer from *Melody Maker* once told me: 'Your career trajectory seems to be on an upward course at the moment.' I just said, 'It's not my fault!'" **MC**

Goodbye Blackpool, Hello Broadway will be released later this year.



HYMN TO HIM

EDWYN COLLINS on Subway Sect

"Subway Sect were fantastic. I was 17 when I first saw them at Edinburgh Playhouse [7 May 1977]. It was *The White Riot Tour*: The Clash, The Jam, Subway Sect, The Slits. An amazing night. I remember Bruce Foxton, The Jam's bass player, letting me carry his gear in. At the time I was in the Nu-Sonics [which later morphed into Orange Juice] and learning to play guitar. Steven Daly was the singer and I played a Vox Phantom. He was with me at the Playhouse, and James Kirk, too. The two bands I liked the most were Subway Sect and The Slits. Neither of them could really play at all. I thought, 'Wow! Anyone can do it!'"

There was something different about Vic Godard – the way he sang and how he wore his tie across his chest, with a white shirt and black trousers. And Subway Sect had real tunes, even though they couldn't really play. Did that gig influence Postcard? I think so. The ethos was similar. We covered Holiday Hymn for John Peel. It's just such a great song. At the time, Vic didn't know me at all. But in the *NME* he called Orange Juice a bunch of weirdos!

I was really nervous when I first met him, because he was an absolute hero of mine. The first thing we did was Johnny Thunders [produced by Collins in 1992 for the Rough Trade Singles Club series]. Then Geoff Travis lost interest, so we went ahead with *The End Of The Surrey People* album. I think it's a fantastic record. We recorded it at my flat in Kensal Green on a Tascam eight-track. Paul Cook played on it, too. I'd never met him before, either. He was very protective of Vic, so he wasn't quite sure about Grace [Maxwell, Collins' partner] and me at first. But it was the start of a real friendship with both of them. After that, Vic and Paul appeared on *Gorgeous George* [Collins' 1994 solo album. Godard sings backing vocals on A Girl Like You]. Last October, they both joined me onstage at the Royal Festival Hall. It's amazing to think I ended up working with him after being so in awe of him as a teenager."