

Revolution Revolt BPM



John Lydon is the original agitator, still looking to pick a fight.



JOHN LYDON SITS IN THE WHITE-CARPETED LIVING ROOM OF HIS RANCH-STYLE HOUSE IN MALIBU, CALIFORNIA. HE'S HOSTING AN IMPROMPTU, POST-SHOOT LISTENING PARTY FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHER TERRY RICHARDSON AND HIS CREW.

What the World Needs Now..., the new studio album from Public Image Ltd – the post-punk band Lydon founded in 1978 after the original Sex Pistols disbanded – plays from a stereo rack that stands between a large-screen television and a pair of French doors hung with stained glass medallions depicting a tropical fish and a pair of dolphins. The space is largely decorated in blush tones, with feathery dried floral arrangements, large paintings of open pink roses, and Arsenal FC memorabilia. Lydon is sitting on a salmon-coloured couch wearing significant yellow-on-yellow: an “absolutely dirt cheap” bright yellow nylon utility shirt that is unbuttoned to his sternum, and mustard yellow Issey Miyake hyper-pleated trousers. His spiked hair is blonde and he drinks bottles of yellowish Corona beer. A clear, fluorescent green plastic lighter that he uses to light Marlboro Red cigarettes completes an outstanding colour story. It's an everyday look for the 59-year-old North London native who is still sometimes referred to as Johnny Rotten, his stage name when he was the frontman for the Pistols, or as he refers to them, “the best boy band ever”. “I'd wear this on a stage just as quickly as I would running down to the beach,” Lydon says. “I'd go straight into the sea and not have a problem.” The album is everything one might want from Public Image Ltd, from droning guitar to techno, to pronouncements like “Success is bollocks”; it even ends with Lydon singing a grand, “Fuck off”. Meanwhile, Lydon's house is so overwhelmingly lovely that its gentle normalcy seems almost transgressive. There is no pretence or art-direction-as-status-symbol posturing – it's the opposite of a design palace. “It's a home,” Lydon says, now seated at a kitchen table set with dishware in the shape of poppy flowers. “I don't

want to live on the third floor of a fashionable hotel. I've got to be practical. We make stains. I've got to go shark diving.” This last aside refers to the yellow-and-black-striped bumblebee wetsuit that is slung over two nearby chairs, which he wore while shark diving on the 2004 Channel 5 nature special John Lydon's *Shark Attack*. He and his wife Nora Forster raised their grandchildren here, the twin sons of her late daughter Ariane, also known as Ari Up, the lead singer of the punk band The Slits. “Everything we do is about kids,” he explains. “I'm one of those people who don't mind children in the studio or on airplanes or anything at all. If they're making noise I can incorporate that. I find it very rewarding. It's the future. Wow, God, I love it.” Considering Lydon's lifelong outspokenness against nonsense, it is surprising that he lives in Los Angeles, let alone in a gated community in Malibu, but the city has been his primary residence for three decades. “I know what you're going to say, but understand that when I first came here whatever you're going to say didn't exist,” he says, interrupting what I was going to say about the fair representation of the area by its reality show ambassadors of privilege. “This was a hippy paradise. It was vibrant, beautiful, fantastic. I'm up at five, six a.m. Most of us run to the beach to see how big the waves are.” He points to a mixed-media painting of the Pacific Ocean that he made, which hangs on the wall behind him. “That's my California right there. It's vital, vibrant, fuzzy, delicious and confused – but it's bright. There are no dark areas in it,” he says. “I live in Malibu where there are multibillionaires left, right and centre. But we came out here fairly early and managed to avoid a lot of that. It's the new wealth that's threatening us around here.” “One of the most impressive things I've found about Californians,” Lydon continues, “is that they don't understand the concept of age. People here bungee jump at 86. That's the kind of world I want to belong to. Because it's brave. It's an enjoyment of life that goes beyond the sensibilities of politics or religion. Quite fantastic. It's a creative universe, California, in a real mellow way that's not quite personified by the Beach

Boys.” However, Lydon does not do Pilates. “The first time I saw that I thought people were practising to be pirates!” he says and laughs. “What's that? I've got bad eyesight, so I miss the occasional letter in a word, particularly on the TV adverts. Oh, Pilates Malibu. What? Fucking pirates?” One might think he would want to sign up for something called Pirates Malibu. “I don't know,” he says gruffly, making exaggerated eye contact and then pausing for comedic effect. “I'm not Adam and the Ants.” As one of the world's great contrarians, Lydon enjoys happy rounds of mouthing off to the press and provocative professional choices, like unapologetically signing on for the 2004 season of the jungle-based reality show *I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!*; starring in a 2008 Country Life butter commercial; and joining a recent North American arena tour of *Jesus Christ Superstar* opposite Michelle Williams of Destiny's Child, Brandon Boyd of Incubus, and JC Chasez of 'N Sync (that was cancelled shortly before opening). He receives pushback for all of it, for better or for worse, as critics continue to hold him accountable for his actions according to the countercultural politics that defined his youth. To that Lydon says: “The manual of punk was written after I began and that manual is incorrect.” He invokes the line he borrowed from the comedian Kenneth Williams and delivered in the 1980 Sex Pistols mockumentary *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*: “Infamy, they've all got it in for me.” “I'm just reminded what this is all about,” he says. “There must be a sense of comedy in it. If you can't parody yourself or have a laugh, then you're really in the wrong industry. For my mind, most pop stars are in the wrong industry.” Artistically, Lydon creates what can be described as ‘oppositional beauty’ that antagonises as it idealises. Public Image Ltd's 1986 anti-apartheid anthem *Rise* is a perfect example, with its uplifting guitar melody and Lydon's fantastic vocals – that are too menacing for some listeners – delivering the heroic refrain, “Anger is an energy.” “I've always thought everything I've ever done musically has been looking on the bright side.”

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Lydon is one of the best-dressed men in the world with a personal style that is discordant while being infinitely elegant. He speaks about clothing eloquently and with great affection, and has a remarkable ability to recall details of garments he wore decades ago. His retelling of the origin story of his signature 80s power-suiting is holographic. “Oh, yes! The padded shoulder! Fantastic,” he begins. “I found this amazingly hilarious store on Oxford Street that made these suits that no one would ever wear. They were very, very Joan Collins high-powered but then kind of slim-fitting with these splits in them so that they expanded. The trousers were very, very pegged – wide at the hips and very narrow at the ankle – with no pleats at all. They were just balloons. It was a brilliantly interesting silhouette. And so I went into this store big-time. I loved it. At the same time, I started putting plastic extensions in my hair. This was pre-weave. It looked like fireworks, really, and was very difficult to wire into your skull. You’d have to super glue. And if they ever fell off you’d have a bald patch.” The result appeared as if a maniac jumped into a bond trader’s suit with the bond trader still in it, wrestled him down and then, victorious, popped his wild-eyed Technicolour head out of the top. “It was a good fun period, because I had to deal with the repression of people telling me what a punk should look like. And that’s a consistent problem in my life. I’ve always had people telling me what they think I should do.”

Fast forward to 1996 when the first Sex Pistols reunion tour landed in Australia. “I couldn’t think what the fuck I was going to wear next. I went to their store and it was the most insane outfit – a see-through tight-fitting shirt with a waistcoat and hot pants,” he says and laughs. “That’s how Johnny Rotten went on a stage. I thought, ‘This is a cheeky fucking number’.” He continues, “I could go onstage dressed as Pinocchio and it would

work because I’m brave enough to follow it through. It takes quite a lot to run on in them little hot pants. I loved them. It was naughty. Naughty fucking shit.” Lydon describes the early Sex Pistols gig when he realised the extremes to which he could style himself. “I had nothing to wear, so I wore a wedding dress and a green wig and all I got was, ‘Oh, ‘ello John.’ Mr Rotten knew he had freedom of movement for the rest of his fucking life. That was the moment,” he says. “So you do what you want. And you must do what you want. Otherwise you’re not yourself. You’re subdued.” But fashion is not essential for channeling Lydon’s special intensity. “I don’t need to dress wacko. I am – by nature,” he says. “It’s the eyes that tell all. And the rest don’t matter. It’s a glorious sense of achievement I have in that. It’s true. Done it. Been there. Nobody’s ever come to me and gone, ‘Oh, you’re wearing the wrong gear.’” He could make Tommy Hilfiger work. “I know I could make that look saucy and audacious,” he says.

Lydon names Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake as his top three all-time favourite designers – they even merit an acknowledgment in his second memoir *Anger is an Energy: My Life Uncensored*, published earlier this year. “And Kenzo, too,” he adds. “They used to make a really tasty suit.” But it’s Miyake that Lydon can discuss for hours. “I’ve got everything he’s ever made. I just love it. I understand everything he creates. A lot of it I can’t wear very well, but I have to buy it anyway because I have to support what I think is very intelligent brainpower,” he says. “And yet, I’ve never had the opportunity to talk to him. And I really don’t think I want to. I like it from a distance. Because it just might turn out to be like, say, Neil Young.” He pauses for comedic effect. “Hey hey, my oh my.”

Occasionally, Lydon is forced to retire garments. “There was this Comme des Garçons suit. I loved this suit. It was fantastic! It was a mixture of stripes and black panelling and buckles,” he recalls. “I wore it on a video for *Open Up* with Leftfield [in 1995] and then two weeks later I’m wearing the same suit and I run into one of the Jackson brothers and he’s wearing it!

It didn’t have the same effect on him! It was one of my most favourite suits and I stopped wearing it because I hated the way he represented the shape of it.” More than anything, Lydon loves clothes that he can dance in. “I’ve always been Dancefloor Johnny, all of my life. The pogo, what they now call the punk dance, came from us dancing at disco clubs,” he says, and then begins reciting a tailored version of Sister Sledge lyrics. “We. Are. Family. All my brothers, sisters and anarchy.” When it’s noted that Lydon still seems to love this sentiment, he flashes a peace sign. “It’s peace or peace off depending on which way you want to look at it,” he says and grins. So he is a hippie realist then? “Nah. Come on, I’m a clubber. I’m a club kid,” he responds. “You know I know them all. I grew up with these fellas. All of them. Even the ones that got locked up.”

After a lifetime of navigating and defining street style, Lydon has concluded that its primary function is simple. “You do these things always to get girls’ attention. It really is the driving force,” he explains. “By the time you are 11, 12, 13 you’re clued in and so you try to advance on that. You can either go with the flow at that point or you can go beyond the flow. Now going beyond the flow, well, that can leave you isolated and lonely in the dating department, but you get the better results, being the more hardcore girls that you really want to connect with.”

“So that’s what fashion is, a peacock display of manhood. But now, it’s even more than that because we know as a species we’re not just male/female, we’re many things as well! Right? This wasn’t considered then. It could be plausible to look back on what I was doing and say, ‘That’s very gay of you to wear those colours, John.’ Yes! Of course it was,” he says and laughs. “But that’s what made it better for all of my gay friends. You know what I mean? You know how tough it was for us around Finsbury Park to wear pink? Pink was the colour then and that became very brave! And then it became very dull. And then there is a new pink and the cycle continues.”