



Ginger Baker, Steve Vai... *Miles Davis*!? Strange bedfellows, sacked ingénus and ferocious avant-pop spew forth in the oddest chapter of **PiL**'s twisty tale.

As the 2011-vintage band toil over their first new record in 20 years, **John Lydon** helps lift the veil on his last masterpiece, the album they call *Album*. "It was a huge gamble," he tells **Keith Cameron**.

next!

JOHN LYDON WAS ALONGSIDE HIS WIFE NORA and a crate of beer when Mark Schulz arrived for the audition. "Next!" The stage at Pasadena's historic Perkins Palace theatre was empty, save for a single amplifier and drummer Martin Atkins, wearily regarding the line of potential bandmates who were hoping to impress the famous Englishman sat in semi-darkness near the back of the hall. "Next!"

Hire and fire: such was the mundane reality of Public Image Ltd in summer 1984, much as it had been the year before. 1983 saw Lydon and Atkins hastily recruiting a motley group of stalwarts from the New Jersey bar circuit – known colloquially as 'The Holiday Inn Band' – to replace the departed founder member Keith Levene and bassist Pete Jones for a contracted tour of Japan. Now they were sifting the cream and the dregs of the Los Angeles music community, for much the same reason. A week or so earlier, PiL thought they'd found a bassist: a guy called Flea. But Flea didn't want the gig. PiL could offer a steady wage and the prospect of tours in the US, Australia and Japan, but he had no intention of leaving his own band, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who had a debut album about to drop. Flea simply loved PiL and wanted to jam with his heroes. So the long-suffering Atkins got behind his kit once more and played along for another batch of contenders. Lydon, meanwhile, opened another beer. "Next!"

The bass berth would eventually go to Bret Helm, member of an avant-jazz fusion band and graduate of music from San Diego. Mark Schulz was going to try out on guitar. Holidaying in Los Angeles, the 20-year-old Canadian had seen an ad in the LA Weekly inviting musicians to Perkins Palace. It didn't specify what the auditions were for, but a clue lay in the stipulation: "If you love Public Image Ltd and hate heavy metal..." That's me, thought Schulz. He flew home to Vancouver, quit his job, picked up his guitar and moved into the Los Angeles YMCA. One week of intensive practice later, he aced the audition and became a member of Public Image Ltd. Six months later, as PiL returned from Japan, he moved into John Lydon's Venice Beach house and began writing songs for the next PiL album.

"There were moments when I was sitting there, working out a song and he's singing, and I could just feel, I'm in the presence of greatness here," says Schulz. Together with Lydon and another Perkins Palace recruit, 18-year-old guitarist/keyboardist Jebin Bruni,

Schulz wrote three songs: Fishing, Round and Bags. Another song, Ease, was written by Lydon with Bruni. Neither of these fresh-faced West Coast ingénus could foresee that in a few months' time they would be sacked from the band, as recording sessions began in New York for the album they were co-writing, far less imagine that their parts would be re-recorded by a session musicians' A-team: Bernie Worrell, Ryuichi Sakamoto and – most notably, given what that LA Weekly ad had said – Steve Vai, the heavy metal world's latest guitar prodigy. Nor could Martin Atkins have anticipated that after leaving PiL in spring 1985, his role on the new record would be shared by two of the greatest drummers of all time: Ginger Baker and Tony Williams.

To John Lydon, however, such wrinkles of fortune were the order of things. People left, but they always had: of the band's four founding members, drummer Jim Walker was gone in January 1979 after playing on debut album *First Edition*; bassist Jah Wobble quit following the band's 1980 US tour; and guitarist Keith Levene departed amid clouds of rancour in April 1983 during chaotic sessions for the band's fourth album. These three, plus later drummer Martin Atkins, had all contributed to PiL's signature records – but when it came to Public Image Ltd, only one person was irreplaceable.

JULY 18, 2011. JOHN LYDON RUMMAGES THROUGH the kitchen of a west London flat. "I don't know my way around here," he mutters, clutching a Corona. "John! Have you got a bottle opener?" From upstairs, his manager John 'Rambo' Stevens offers him a lighter. "Come on, hurry up!" Lydon chortles. "I'm working!"

For all his bonhomie, Lydon is tired. The previous evening PiL had played the final date of a European tour and tomorrow they're off to Steve Winwood's Cotswolds studio to resume work on a new PiL album, the first in almost 20 years. Active since late 2009, this latest band owes its origins to the PiL which took shape in New York during the autumn of 1985 and went on to make *Album*, the last great PiL record: once it became clear that plans for a live superstar session group were unworkable, Lydon turned his gaze back to Britain and his punk-era contemporaries, recruiting ex-Pop Group drummer Bruce Smith and former Damned guitarist Lu Edmonds, both of whom feature in the 2011-model PiL along with bassist Scott ➤

"I'm good at what
I do." John Lydon
in Paris, 1986.



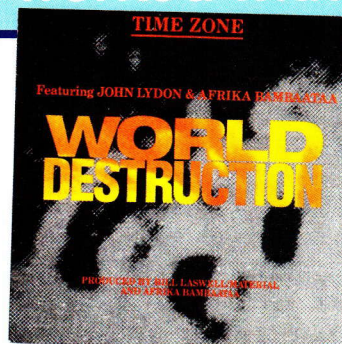


“Been through the ringer with PiL. Some 49 members I’ve worked with. Such is life!”

◀ Firth. The new album will be the first PiL recording since 1992’s lacklustre *That What Is Not*. Since then, Lydon has reunited the Sex Pistols for three cash-shovelling tours, released a solo album (1997’s *Psycho’s Path*) and cemented a position in the British popular psyche via appearances on *I’m A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!* and a series of advertisements for Country Life butter which he proudly admits paid for this reactivation of PiL: the self-styled limited company that won’t allow him to leave.

“Been through the ringer with PiL,” he says. “Some 49 members I’ve worked with. Some of them are really thankful, some of them are not. Such is life! What a wonderful experience, living outside of the shit-stem. It gets me into exciting creative modes and *Album* is definitely one of them. It was a huge gamble, going to New York with a band that just could not cut their chops. I thought they’d brave up to it...”

RENOWNED IN NEW YORK’S AVANT-GARDE CIRCLES as a pan-generic bass guru via his band Material and with a burgeoning reputation as a producer – his breakthrough came via Herbie Hancock’s 1983 hip hop crossover hit *Rockit* – Bill Laswell knew what he was getting into when he agreed to produce the fifth Public Image Ltd album. He first met Lydon, along with Keith Levene, in 1982, by which point PiL’s operational focus had moved from London to New York, and in October 1984 produced *World Destruction*, Lydon’s groundbreaking rock-rap collision



with Afrika Bambaataa released under the name Time Zone. “At one point I had met with Keith about playing in PiL,” says Laswell. “This was after Wobble had gone, they had done some things without a bass, and we talked about it but it didn’t really pan out. But John and I stayed in touch.”

On March 5, 1985, just back home in California after the Japanese tour with the Perkins Palace version of PiL, and enjoying considerable acclaim for Time Zone, Lydon was interviewed via telephone by the BBC’s Richard Skinner. He denied that PiL had split up (“Damn cheek!”) and said Bill Laswell would produce the next album. In the midst of writing and demoing in the basement at Lydon’s Venice Beach house, Bruni and Schulz were thrilled.

“Mark was living in the guest house,” says Bruni, “and I was for all intents and purposes staying there as well, sleeping on the couch. Mark and I did the music and John did the lyrics. I was thrilled [with Laswell as a producer], I thought *World Destruction* was a great track and it fitted with the style of music we were writing – a sort of dance/punk hybrid with weird avant-garde flourishes. And he suggested Ginger Baker on drums, which was bizarre enough to be interesting to me! So off we went to New York in August ’85.”

It’s typical of PiL that no one seems sure whether or not Lydon’s idea to recruit Ginger Baker was a joke (oddly, NME’s 1981 April Fool had been a news item ‘revealing’ this very same scenario). Beyond question, however, is the feat of detection required to make it happen: Bill Laswell had to go to Italy to find the legendary 46-year-old former Cream drummer, who was living near Pistoia in Tuscany.

“It took about a month,” says Laswell. “He was in a pretty desolate situation. No electricity. He lived on a mountain. He drove down to

The rocky road to *Album*, clockwise from left: John Lydon’s halo slips; PiL’s “Holiday Inn” line-up don’t get comfy (from left: Lou Bernardi, Tom Zvonchek, Arthur Stead, Joe Guida); Lydon relaxes with the amber nectar, 1984; Jebin Bruni and Mark Schulz plug in; Bruni and Lydon before the fall. Plus: the *World Destruction* 45 that first united Lydon and Bill Laswell.

"Laswell and Ginger Baker It was a lunatic asylum. Pointing at each other: 'That man's mad!'"



cassette

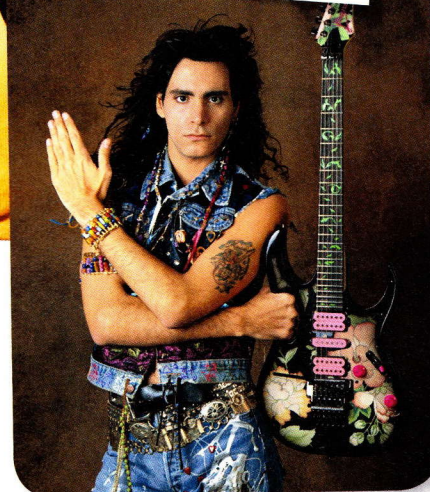
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album



**12 inch
Single**



A motley crew. Album's chalk'n'cheese studio wallahs, clockwise from top left: Ginger Baker, Bill Laswell, Bernie Worrell, Steve Vai, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Ornette Coleman, Tony Williams.

the village every day to go to a bar and the only way to reach him was to find somebody who would catch him going back and forth. We finally found him and I told him that I had a project in New York and that he should come. I didn't tell him what it was."

The day before Baker and the core PiL trio arrived at Manhattan's Power Station studios, Laswell recorded basic instrumental tracks for three songs: FFF, Rise and Home. The producer played bass, Laswell associate Nicky Skopelitis played guitar, while the drummer was Tony Williams, most famous for his work with Miles Davis but who had also played with Jack Bruce, Baker's erstwhile colleague in Cream. By laying down this "foundation" in Lydon's absence, Laswell was making a statement about how he envisioned the record being made. It didn't include "some excitable kids from the West Coast".

"John brought in his band, or whatever they were, but they really weren't too good," says Laswell. "We set them up in the room with Ginger Baker, but Ginger wasn't hearing what they were playing. I just wanted to get the foundation down. I knew that if it was powerful and good, [Lydon] wouldn't have any disagreement about it, and that turned out to be true," says Laswell. "There was a little moment, when I sent the band home — that was the only rift. It's always good to have a full-on argument with John, those are what kept the record going. Remember, it's the '80s: if you're a record producer the first thing you do is give a bunch of drugs to all your crew and then fire the band!"

"The band weren't up to it," says Lydon. "They were very young and it was great working with them but as soon as it came to the studio, they just lost it, they got nervous and cagey. Their contributions were all right but they couldn't handle the big studio with

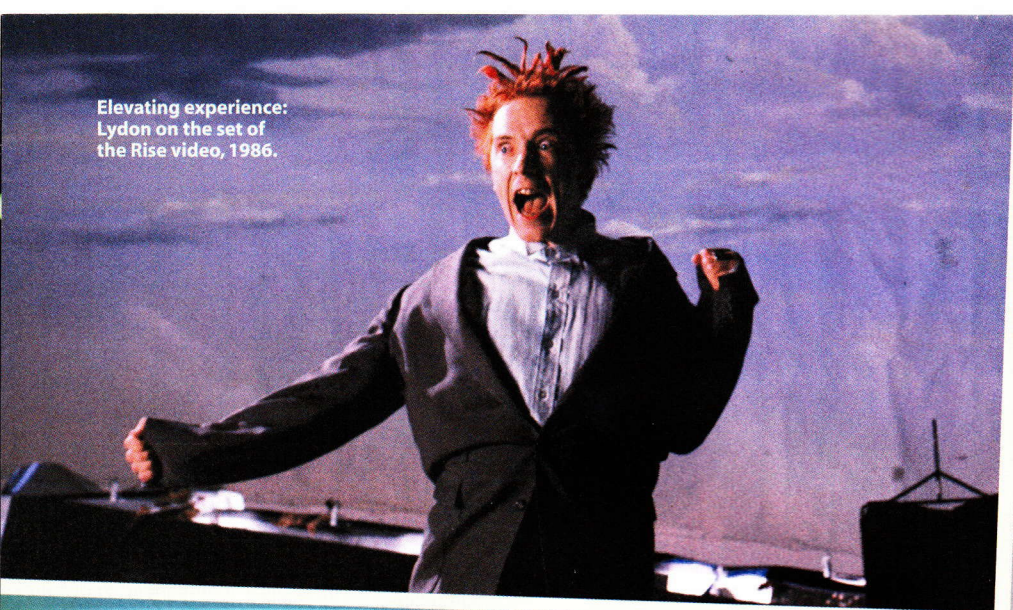
Laswell. I had to send them back."

For all his youth and inexperience, Mark Schulz quickly sensed what was going on. "I could just tell that Bill Laswell had a different vision. He basically wanted us to come in, lay down basic tracks and then go away — and not come back. Laswell was a pretty hot producer at the time, and John really wanted to have a hit record. He had some success with [1983's Top 10 single] This Is Not A Love Song and he wanted to make a big push to cross over into pop radio. He gave Laswell full control over that record. He went with Laswell's vision — and Laswell's vision was to put this supergroup together."

Lydon's initial reaction was close to panic: "Goddamn, what am I gonna do? I've got this record company obligation to record this damned thing, I've come to New York, the money's been laid out, Laswell's sitting in the studio..." Laswell opened his Rolodex and got on the phone. Having listened to Lydon's cassette demos, he had a musical blueprint in his mind that derived from the anti-rock techniques of PiL's early records — notably *Metal Box*, which took dub out of its usual reggae context — and which was shaped by the notion (flippant or otherwise) of using Ginger Baker, a rock drummer whose playing transcended genre, fusing jazz and African styles.

"We wanted to avoid any rock and blues clichés, as were prevalent in the whole punk system, but we wanted to keep it musical and powerful," says Laswell. "We wanted this tribal, primitive effect of repetition, which doesn't have a cultural or an ethnic ➤

Elevating experience:
Lydon on the set of
the *Rise* video, 1986.



“When you go out with Lydon it’s like **Jesus** is walking right down the street. All of the freaks come out.” **Steve Vai**

◀ reference, but certainly has a rawness to it: anti-corporate, anti-metal. Which I thought fit the delivery of John Lydon. Make PiL more musical, without taking it into virtuoso climes. Steve Vai is obviously a virtuoso guitar player, and with him I remember playing weird music before he would take a solo. I would play north African music or south African music or some weird Asian things and say, Listen to this and just be yourself.”

Steve Vai flew into the *Album* sessions (now moved to Electric Lady studios) fresh from touring with Alcatrazz, a metal band fronted by former Rainbow singer Graham Bonnet. Although the 25-year-old had previous when it came to collaboration with singular characters – having made his name playing “stunt guitar” for Frank Zappa – working with Laswell and Lydon would prove educational.

“Laswell said, ‘I’ve got this track and I just want you to play through it,’” says Vai. “I said OK, let’s take a listen. And he said, ‘Let’s not take a listen, you just play – and I’ll be back!’ So he leaves the room and the engineer hits record... So I played whatever I heard. When he gets back he says, ‘How did it go?’ I said, I actually think it went pretty good – want to take a listen? And he said, ‘No, let’s go on to the next song.’ Hahaha! But of course, I wasn’t sure what Lydon was gonna think. He came in on the last day, listened to it all and he just looked at me with that look of his and went: ‘That’s fuckin’ great man!’ And then we hung out the whole night. He’s an amazing guy. When you go out with Lydon and you’re walking through the Village, back in the ’80s – it’s like Jesus Christ is walking down the street. All the freaks come out.”

“Steve Vai!” laughs Lydon. “To this day, a great friend. But God, to try and get him to stop the *diddly-diddly-dee*, throw that technique out the window. He had never drunk in his whole life up to that point so Laswell’s brilliant idea was, Let’s go out and get pissed. So we did and Steve got fucking pissed and came back and kicked up a storm because he’d become loose, not so worried about it. I loved the end result of that.”

“I thought it was a healthy situation for Steve,” says Laswell. “No time for analysis or preparation. With great players you get great intuition, you should always obey that first impulse: that’s your music. The rest of it is just systems and technique.”

Amid the stellar cast requisitioned by Laswell to play on *Album*, the greatest intrigue surrounds Miles Davis, and the ‘fact’ that his contributions didn’t make the final cut. Today Lydon still maintains Davis showed up, “stood behind me and blew his fucking trumpet. We couldn’t use it. Would’ve been nice on another project.”

Laswell recalls otherwise. “I believe it could have been John Col-

trane as far as John knows, but in fact it was Ornette Coleman. He sat and listened. Ornette doesn’t really understand repetition too much, so he heard this huge rolling rhythm track, and was like, ‘The power is undeniable, you should get somebody to play something sharp.’ Meaning sharp in pitch, to cut through, the way he approaches his alto saxophone. Then I put up the vocal which was John just being John, and he said, ‘That’s it! You got it!’ I was very conscious to make sure that sound, that voice was the lead statement of this cacophony.”

Thanks to Laswell and Lydon’s unsentimental work ethics, the *Album* sessions were done in a month. A star-studded playback at the Power Station followed, where the idea of putting together a live version of the supergroup, featuring Baker, Laswell

and Vai, was mooted then dropped as too logistically fraught. Lydon hoots at the notion. “Impossible! It was a lunatic asylum. Laswell and Ginger Baker pointing at each other: ‘That man’s mad!’ And everybody thinks *I’m* mad! We didn’t know if it would work, but the first minute in the studio when I watched Ginger tuning his drums... well, quite literally smashing them to pieces, really. He broke everything! I was somewhat in awe and impressed that a lad like that would want to work with me.”

Today Ginger Baker lives in South Africa. At 72, what little he remembers of recording with PiL is positive. “It was released with no musicians’ credits on, so everybody thought Tony Williams was me and I was Tony Williams! I thought it was a pretty good album, actually. Quite an enjoyable experience. John Lydon? Nice bloke.”

FOR ALL THE STRIFE SURROUNDING ITS CREATION, *Album* rehabilitated John Lydon’s artistic reputation, which was near rock bottom following Levene’s departure and the farce of the Holiday Inn Band. It was a bold concept – make a commercial album with avant-garde undertones – thoroughly executed, and featured a modern rock classic in *Rise*, a permanent fixture in PiL setlists ever since. The fact that today Lydon is making a new album with two of the musicians who joined him during the *Album* era suggests personal bonds forged during that period were very strong. How strong is evident from the fact that in late 1988 Lydon and Laswell were reunited in New York for the 9 album sessions, and Laswell demanded once again that the band be dismissed in favour of star session players. This time Lydon refused to acquiesce.

For their part, the musicians Lydon cut adrift in 1985 bear no grudges and both forged strong careers. Jebin Bruni’s session credits include Marianne Faithfull, Aimee Mann and Robbie Williams, while Mark Schulz composes film soundtracks. As for the album he helped write but never made, Schulz is philosophical. “It’s not what I thought we were going to do,” he says. “I thought it was really over-produced and I didn’t like the heavy metal style guitar playing. But, it was pretty successful. I ended up getting some money for it over the years, so that made it better. It would have been nice if John had been a little more upfront – I was still living in his house when I found out he’d gone back to England and started a new band! Nora finally came home and said, ‘You should probably leave.’ And y’know, I haven’t seen him since.”

Bill Laswell still works with many artists as producer (he helmed *Rise Again*, the new Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry album) or label manager. He notes with interest that PiL are making a new album. “If John ever wants to do something...” he muses. “I think his whole thing is part of an evolution, it’s a style of music, sort of like Miles’s electric music, it could just keep evolving, it’s unfinished. He should keep going with it.”

John Lydon seems incapable of doing otherwise. “I loved *Album*,” he says, eyes ablaze. “Loved its ferocity. I knew I’d get that from Laswell. Fantastic. I ended up hating him for months after! Absolutely loathed him! Any mention of his name and I was angry. And I know he hated me for a long while. But he can’t deny I’m good at what I do.”

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