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Pop: The Mercurial Public Image Ltd. at Roseland

BY ROBERT PALMER

PUBLIC Image Ltd. has been conditioning its followers to expect the unexpected since the release of its first album almost five years ago. Fans and critics expected a punk-rock apotheosis from an alliance between John Lydon, formerly known as Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, and Keith Levene, a founder of the Clash.

Instead, they got "Public Image," an album of droning metallic chants and rhythms that sounded suspiciously like disco. The group refined this approach on its enormously influential second album, but Public Image Ltd. has continued to provide surprises. Most recently, the group

gave a live video performance at the Ritz that ended in a bottle-throwing melee.

Under the circumstances, the Public Image Ltd. show Tuesday at Roseland was as surprising as anything this wildly mercurial band has done. Mr. Lydon and Mr. Levene rehearsed with their drummer, Martin Atkins, and a new bassist, Peter Jones, and gave a straightforward, hourlong concert performance, heavily weighted with material from their first album.

Public Image Ltd.'s determination to avoid repeating themselves at all costs may have reached its inevitable dead end last year with the release of their third album, "Flowers of Romance." Called "the most uncommercial record ever made" by a music-trade publication, the album found Mr. Levene going to extreme lengths to avoid playing anything that

sounded like a melody or a chord on his guitar and the group as a whole attempting to prove that you don't need a bass player to make dance music.

This approach resulted in some provocative music, but it also ignored the participants' real strengths. When he has a solid bassist and drummer to work with and against, and when he isn't concerned with rewriting the rules of music from the ground up, Mr. Levene is a positively exhilarating guitarist. And although Mr. Lydon is effective and sometimes thrilling on records, no record has captured the intensity of his stage presence or the way he can light up an entire theater with his smile.

Public Image Ltd. certainly seemed to be having a good time at Roseland. The rhythm section provided so much energy that at one point the normally taciturn Mr. Levene actually began

pogoing up and down while wrenching great crashing torrents of sustained harmonics out of his guitar. Mr. Lydon threw himself into the songs — acting them out, stalking the stage and sometimes pausing to imitate the affected, "blank generation" lethargy of some of his fans. A few of the zealous closest to him pushed and shouted and attempted to storm the stage, but compared to the average punk-rock crowd in Los Angeles, this audience was decidedly well behaved.

Mr. Lydon has often talked about wanting to "destroy" rock-and-roll, but he really seems to belong in front of a rock band. And, for whatever reasons, Mr. Lydon and Mr. Levene seem to have decided that fronting a rock band as persuasive as Public Image Ltd. isn't such a bad thing after all.



PiL

Roseland, New York City

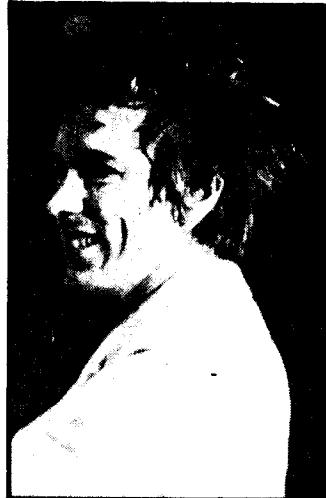
THE first thing I notice is that the bartenders are serving beer in paper cups. After last year's PiL brawl at the Ritz, where a plague of beer bottles rained down on the giant video screen protecting the group from an angry-turning-animal audience duped by their own expectations and provoked by John Lydon's acidic insults, Roseland certainly had their mirrored walls, hardwood dance floor, and 61-year-old tradition as a classy dance palace to consider.

As it is, the full house – a surprisingly passive mixture of Manhattan clubhounds, suburban brats, hippy intelligentsia, and the expected Mohawk-and-leather bizarros already two and three generations removed from Father Rotten – can barely get up enough ire to heckle the opening act. A NY punk satire troupe passing themselves off as Art (in fact their name), their guerrilla humour only amounts to bad aping of easy targets.

Any bunch of drunks with half a high school education could have come up with "New Wave Club", a childish swipe at night life clowning set to the tune of "Tainted Love". And for all their hubris and radical cheek the Clash are far above witless taunts like Art's overhaul of "Should I Stay Or Should I Go" (as "Should I Leave Because You Blow").

The crowd also does not appear to catch the irony of Richard Butler's sub-Rotten growl bouncing off the walls as the Psychedelic Furs' latest disc limps sadly out of the PA between sets. And when a few Mohawk's finally do assert themselves – breaking down the security barriers in front of the stage, doing battle with the promoter's goons at Lydon's feet – they miss the evening's capping irony. With typical perversity, PiL dash all expectations of an anarchic rout

Back on the PiL



and conceptual giggle. Instead they play a tight, determined, brutally driven show like they really mean it, m-a-n.

PiL certainly come out fighting. Bathed in the unsettling eerie glow of green and white lights bouncing off two tile walls hanging at the back and suspended over the stage, the PiL logo looking down on them like some all seeing eye, the rhythm trinity of Keith Levine, prodigal drummer Martin Atkins, and ex-Cowboys International bassist Peter Jones quickly accelerates into a metallic disco crunch apparently culled from the imminent LP, "The Commercial Zone".

Over a Levine guitar riff sounding suspiciously like an inverted "Start Me Up", his voice cloaked in dark malevolent echo, Lydon bellows "Hello-o-o-o-o, where are you?" in sinister whoops and cracked hollers amid the band's unified, no-waffling rumble. Very, very PiL,

yet also very, very catchy.

Roaring forward into the past PiL then blast straight into their theme song, the punks taking Levine's police siren guitar pluck in "Public Image" as the signal to storm the stage. Security responds in kind and the band plays on, their brittle thrash at once an encouragement of the punks' anachronistic enthusiasm and a savage put-down ("Do you still follow the same old schemes?").

Later, when the Roseland management yanks PiL off the stage after five numbers fearing total demolition of the premises, Lydon yells "They're trying to drag us off. It's up to you bunch of c-s."

To do what? Completely trash the joint in protest or stand back like the sheep Lydon always takes us for? Committed to a musical show, albeit powerful enough to blow the top of your head off (with all due respect to Wobble, Atkins and Jones make a real earthquake rhythm section), PiL play it a bit sheepish themselves.

Aside from the opener and a spontaneous funk blast in mid-stream, the night is strictly the best of PiL – a blistering "Annalisa", a heavy, heated "Death Disco", "Religion", "Attack", "Chant", the compound drum voodoo of "Under The House", from "Flowers Of Romance", even "Public Image" twice. (I was half expecting "Anarchy In The UK", but Art beat them to it).

Eventually PiL are allowed to play a full show, but it gives no indication of what they've been doing in NY over the past year; leave that I suppose to the new album. But the safety factor of familiar material and the concentrated vigour with which they play it suggests PiL feel the need to redeem themselves as an active, battling unit – not just a good idea – after the Ritz bottling.

Public Image – we got what we wanted, a little action and all the hits; they got what they needed, a reaffirmation of their own strength. Next stop: "The Commercial Zone". – DAVID FRICKE.

Sight and sounds

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New Wave as it should be

By Philip Elwood
Examiner music critic

THE NEW-WAVE QUARTET Public Image Limited, usually called "Pill" by its fans (a derivation from the group's PiL logo) debuted last night in the Galleria before a surprisingly sedate sold-out crowd of about a couple of thousand of the punk and near-punk faithful.

PIL is headed by singer John Lydon, the mesmerizing singer and lyricist who shocked the music scene a few years ago when he fronted the innovative Sex Pistols group, the seminal punk rock band.

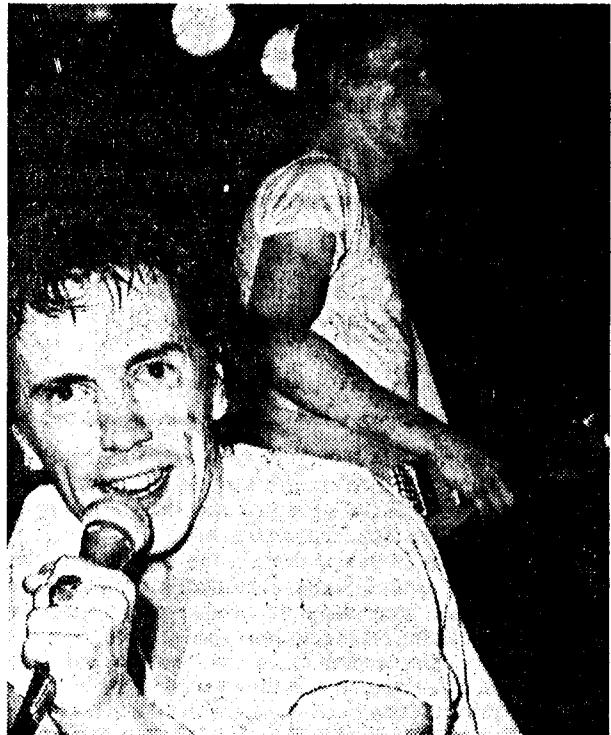
Lydon is unquestionably a musical revolutionary — and perhaps also (through his lyrics) a political and social insurgent, too. With the Sex Pistols, his outstanding talents were often lost in the musical bombast and riotous conditions which surrounded each performance.

Public Image Ltd. is the group name which Lydon has used since the Sex Pistols' breakup a few years ago — he has also recorded a number of discs with PiL.

Lydon at the Galleria last night was magnificent. His voice and lyrics, a shrill sound projecting streams of socially significant lyric stanzas, are often overwhelming. He has a touch of early 1930s German nuances — a Brechtian sound, for sure, and that biting, nasal vocal projection associated with the likes of Lotte Lenya, et al.

Lydon stalks the stage, playing to the mobs jammed in down front. His most familiar singing posture resembles a baseball catcher's stance — with mike in hand, Lydon crouches sidestage in the shadows and wails and moans his vocal lines.

But he also can just stand and belt out the lyrics, with PiL guitarist Keith Levene strolling back and forth immediately behind him — a wandering minstrel, indeed. Lydon, in fact, spends considerable time with his back to the audience, singing (it seems) only to drummer Martin Atkins and the roaming Levene. Levene frequently disposes of his guitar



PIL's John Lydon — a remarkable performer

and handles synthesizer chores.

Bassist Peter Jones, a relative newcomer to PiL, stands with feet firmly rooted to the stage, well behind the front-line pair of musical athletes.

The PiL sound, typically, is Lydon's shrill, strong voice (with such clean, expressive diction!) and quite good, if basic, rhythmic and harmonic charts in backup.

The words, and Lydon's astonishingly strong projection, are what make this band's show such a marvel.

It's noisy stuff and there is very little imagination either in harmonies or rhythms. But I could listen to Lydon for quite a long while; he's a remarkable performer.

The Galleria is a marvelous setting for such a band as PiL and for such an audience as they draw. Every punker was out in full-fasion last night — and so were a number of representatives (some musicians among them) who were trying to figure out what the hell Lydon was up to.

The Galleria has marvelous overhanging balconies (hallways, ramps, walkways, etc.) that enabled about half the crowd last night to stand up and look down on all the proceedings.

The main floor audience to a rather small degree got involved in pogo-dancing, bumping, bopping, and miscellaneous mayhem. Some leaped on stage, then flung themselves back into the crowd.

The sound diffusion in a place like the Galleria can never be close to perfect — too much glass, space, elevation, etc. But last night it was good enough to hear most of the lyrics.

For those who went anticipating a riot — sorry, it just wasn't in the cards.

Public Image Ltd. play again at the Elite Club (Geary & Fillmore) on Wednesday — they are worth hearing.

John Lydon's fans look for that rotten image

By Mikal Gilmore

Herald Examiner pop music critic

It has been an unusually good week for adherents to the avant-garde in Los Angeles: This last weekend, the Kool Jazz Festival kicked off its unexampled series of new improvisational and experimental music, while last night punk-jazz precursor James Chance finally made a long-pending West Coast debut at Hollywood's Club Lingerie.

The event that called out the largest and rowdiest crowd, however, was the appearance of the iconoclastic post-punk ensemble Public Image Ltd., at the Pasadena Convention Center Sunday and Monday nights. Public Image (or PiL, as they're officially abbreviated) was among the first British outfits to reject the strictures of hard-rock, primitivist song form in favor of a protean mash of minimalist melodies, open-ended, accidental structures and bass-heavy, imperative rhythms.

But the group is probably better known for its much-renowned vocalist, lyricist and co-founder, John Lydon (*ne* Johnny Rotten), who abandoned his infamous career with the Sex Pistols because he also hoped to abandon the myth and limitations of the punk aesthetic altogether. This maneuvering, of course, only served to make Lydon an even more mythic figure in punk, because he was suddenly its least accessible, most frustrating celebrity — one who refused to uphold the movement's sentiments, but also refused to disappear from the scene.

Consequently, when the punk audience goes to see PiL these days, they go largely to see Lydon — to experience him as a signifier of his past self, as somebody who gave their fledgling culture its most fearsome shot at apotheosis.

Invariably, these expectations make for tension and confusion at PiL's shows. At their 1980 Olympic Auditorium appearance, the city's emerging hard-core punk faction turned the floor scene into an incessant, fierce melee — in part, because they weren't getting the kind of primal, punk-mannered music out of Lydon and his band they had expected.



John Lydon

Sunday's show in Pasadena was comparatively calm, though it had the makings of turning worse. Ticket holders were forced to wait outside for an hour past the appointed starting time, and then were slowly, stupidly ushered single-file through one open door. Inside, the convention center had the appearance and acoustics of a cement air hangar, and the audience milled about in a voguish, sullen manner, largely uninterested in the percussion-and-rant workout of the Los Angeles-based opening act, Savage Republic.

By the time PiL finally ambled onstage, a good portion of the stage-front crowd seemed hellbent on distracting from the band's performance; indeed, upstaging it with performances of their own. Punk after punk clambered or vaulted onto the stage, some of them to ape around like motley fools, others to mime and emulate Lydon's own gangling moves, and yet others to try and seize the microphone for their own ravings. Lydon and the rest of the band — guitarist and co-founder Keith Levene, drummer Martin Atkins and bassist Pete Jones — regarded the interlopers with little interest until someone almost managed to topple a light fixture onto the crowd.

I don't mean to make too much of these interferences. They were maddeningly stupid and occasionally dangerous, though they also seem a manifestation of how this particular audience means to play out its roles. But invariably, they had the effect of doing a disservice to PiL's music, which, though it may be hard to discern in the shadow of Lydon's reputation, is frequently formidable stuff. In fact, I doubt if I've ever heard their inchoate style of music played with more muscle or emotion than on Sunday, with Levene, Jones and Atkins interlacing weighed rhythms and impulsive melodies into a tense webwork of cross-current patterns and motions, and with Lydon turning in a vehement, physically animative performance, by turns mirthful and malevolent.

But can music this dissonant and idiosyncratic ever truly come to displace the meaning the Sex Pistols once held for Lydon's audience? Probably not, though in the same way that the Pistols' extremism has now become a part of the rock parlance — making it possible for a group like the Clash to enjoy their current heartening Top 20 success — so, too, has PiL's influence been felt in the more pop-toned breakthrough of groups as diverse as U-2, Psychedelic Furs, and Joy Division/New Order. Ironically, it may be Lydon's fate to spend his career shaping and informing a musical culture that can never forget what he once was, and so can never accept him for the unconstrained adventurer he still aims to be.