

JAH WOBBLE

Hurled out of the desolate streets of Stepney at 18 and into the nascent Public Image Ltd. (PIL), Jah Wobble was fundamental in shaping the virulent nihilism of punk into sonic and melodic extremes that evoked everything from dub reggae to Stockhausen. In Lydon, who was always more of a theorist than he dared admit, Wobble found the perfect early foil. It was PIL's avant garde experiments on *Metal Box* that ushered in a credibility to punk's more frivolous tendencies. "Miles and miles ahead - follow with care" was how the NME described those new sounds.

Wobble was the first musician of that era to be taken seriously by the older music press, rapidly earning the reputation of a wilful auteur. This was all the more stunning when it was revealed that he had only just picked up a bass, lent to him by Sid Vicious a few months before joining PIL. "Wobble's antics are notorious yet now he has found himself in a position to channel his manic energy into formulating some of the most awesome and original bass lines in modern music", wrote Vivien Goldman in the *Melody Maker*.

Slumped in an armchair on the *Old Grey Whistle Test*, whilst propelling the band with rock steady rhythms and a highly unusual flair for melody, Wobble cut a surprising and enigmatic figure at a time when listeners were growing tired of punk's obsessions with confrontation.

In those days Wobble created around himself an aura of menace and unpredictability perfectly counterpointed by PIL's claustrophobic drones - Keith Levine's circling tortured guitar arpeggios and John Lydon's naked grope at a more direct and unhindered form of expression. Wobble's reputation as a Stepney tearaway always seemed to contrast dramatically with his rapid and breathtaking musical command. Yet even more surprisingly his slicked back, Italian film star, spoof image on the cover of the first PIL album transported him into the unlikely realm of conventional sex symbol.

When Wobble left PIL in 1980, the heart of the band was ripped out. The group staggered on through the eighties but what once was a progressive, dangerous and exciting unit seemed to become a hollow vessel. It was only then that Wobble's value was fully recognized, since he had always espoused what the public perceived as being the original objectives of the band: "Talking about 'giving the kids what they want' is just meaningless. They want what they can get - what's advertised. We're not saying take anything - like us or hate us", he remarked to the NME in early 1980.

Rather than capitalizing on his burgeoning reputation, Wobble threw himself into a bewildering and myriad range of projects, working with everyone from German experimental rock group Can's Holger Czukay and Jaki Leiezeit to The Edge. His albums *Betrayal* and *Snakecharmer* created a new and fervent audience amongst the rock cognoscenti for his groundbreaking and exceptionally adventurous sounds which cut a stunningly stark contrast with the plastic prefabricated pop that saturated the airwaves in the early eighties. "His sound is very danceable yet to say the least, extraordinary. This is a great example of exceptionally creative music that can stand on its own feet without the aid of fancy clothes" enthused *The Guardian*.

As reviews from the time testify, Wobble was light years ahead of his contemporaries in his exploration of new and interesting sounds. His embracing of Eastern and World influences predated Peter Gabriel and other's excursions into those areas by well over five years. Furthermore Wobble never used these disparate sounds as mere cultural window dressing - everything on his albums was filtered through his punk contemporaries, Jah Wobble vanished. Only keen-eyed London commuters would have known of his whereabouts, since in perhaps one of the most inexplicable moves of his career, he started working in the twilight world of London Underground. Perhaps it was a yearning for the clock on/clock off life so

absent in the music industry - a world where artistic expression and constant self assessment were irrelevant indulgences.

Somewhere however, on the constant station to station late night runs, the uncomfortable truth dawned that ignoring and abusing his talent was an alarmingly efficient way to ruin his life. He suddenly emerged from the subway tunnels with a group called The Invaders of the Heart and the album Without Judgement. "The return of Jah Wobble, the gunslinger with the fastest meanest bass on the block, is a welcome one. He's back with a vengeance!" raved Sounds.

The Daily Telegraph pithily observed "Amid this catalogue of decline and decay in modern music, Jah Wobble shines like a beacon of integrity and hope".

He rapidly followed this re-interest with the massively acclaimed Bomb 12 ("A bass monster of foundation-juddering proportions" - Melody Maker) which resulted in a deal with Warner Bros. and the album: Rising Above Bedlam. This record garnered even more plaudits than any of his previous work. "The music is majestic, with a band every inch PIL's equal" wrote Andy Gill in The Independent, whilst Rolling Stone succinctly responded that Rising Above Bedlam was an exceptional work. "This is one of the most exciting release of the year". The album was shortlisted for the Mercury Music Prize.

The song 'Visions of You', which The Daily Telegraph claimed "would be a hit if there was any taste in the world" was performed with Sinéad O'Connor and catapulted Jah Wobble into the singles charts - its simple but insinuating groove proved irresistible to mainstream audiences. Long time fans were amused to see him performing 'Visions of You' everywhere from Radio One to Children's TV, culminating in an extraordinary appearance on The Word. the Invaders' sound and personnel expanded accordingly, quickly earning a fervent live audience. They proceeded to tour the world, even taking in such unusual venues as an oil tanker off a Japanese island.

Wobble signed a new deal with Island Records and immediately started preparing his follow up: Take Me To God. It was to be an even more ambitious effort than Rising - 17 tracks of more eclectic instrumentation and encompassing a breathtaking range of performers (Baaba Maal, Dolores O'Riordan, Natasha Atlas, Gavin Friday, Najma Akhtar and Chaka Demus and Pliers to name a few). "The theme of spirituality has rarely been more perfectly realized on a pop record. This gorgeously imaginative album isn't like anything else you'll have heard" was how The Guardian greeted Take Me To God, whose sales quickly surpassed Rising.

The Invader's riveting appearances at many of the major music festivals further expanded his mainstream audiences. The Times explained: "This is an extraordinarily potent mix. Few cockneys ever rock the casbah; even fewer play music so capable of knocking on the gates of heaven". Suddenly Wobble found himself one of the most in demand musicians on the block with outside projects becoming accordingly more diverse and curious - Bjork, Ginger Baker, The Orb, Massive attack, Primal Scream and The Shamen. The album Spinner, a collaboration with Brian Eno, was described by Q as "a delight which reveals deeper pleasures, simultaneously soothing and involving".

Heaven and Earth followed Spinner, and is largely an instrumental album, produced by Bill Laswell, with Natasha Atlas (vocals), Pharoah Sanders (saxophone), Bernie Worrell (keyboards) and Nicky Skopelitis (guitar). This album charts a course into new and exciting musical territories - underpinned as always by his ever present liquid sub-sonic bass rumble - and pronounced by Laswell as "the best thing Wobble has ever recorded".

In a career that now spans nineteen years, Wobble has always managed to surprise, confound and delight his core audience. His musical direction has never followed the dictates of record biz marketing men, nor has he lost the simple performers need to please his audience. As he tellingly commented to the NME back in 1978, "I've always been confident in what I do, yet at the same time I've always had a fear of rejection". This duality is perhaps the key to his continued creativity and invention.