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# Keith Levene: The Un-Punk Rocker Speaks

By [Paul Barrel](#)

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“I’m not a big fan of punk rock,” said Keith Levene. “I don’t consider myself a punk ... maybe an angry hippie ... a hippie mutant.” That’s a big statement coming from a guy who was at ground zero when “punk rock” lit up London and then quickly spread like a virus to the rest of the world. Levene, an original member of the Clash and, later, a founding member of Public Image Limited (PiL) with John Lydon (nee Johnny Rotten) and bassist Jah Wobble, still has definite opinions on that time.

“I was only a kid, I was only 17 or 18 when the Pistols were around and the Clash was balls,” Levene intoned. “I walked away from the Clash because ... I don’t even consider them punk, I don’t know what they are. I think the Pistols were punk, and then you start getting all these expressions like ‘new wave’ ... it was a very inspiring time, very new time ... but I think the music that came off of that scene was just crap, just endless, endless, endless bollocks.”

An influential guitarist who suffers for his art, Levene has always focused on his craft and still seemingly takes umbrage with being lumped into that genre.

“For me, the really good bands were the bands before the punk rock thing ... bands like Yes and Pink Floyd and what have you ... even a chart band had more to offer than punk rock. The Police were really good, but were they considered punk? I don’t think so. Duran Duran is more my cup of tea than the friggin’ Rezillos ... nothing against the Rezillos, I’m just using a random punk band ... I can’t think of any punk bands, I just don’t like punk. The Damned were a rock band. The Damned had more in common with Led Zeppelin and AC/DC than they had with any punk rock. I think a lot of them were bandwagon jumpers and there wasn’t that much going on.”

The man has a storied past. Imagine being a teenaged innovator, a gifted guitarist, with a burgeoning music scene at your beck and call, and you’re charged with helping to form a band that changed the world.



“I met (Mick) Jones because I kind of made it onto the West London scene ... you had people like London SS and other people that ended up in very well-known bands,” said Levene. “Me and Mick Jones really liked one another, next thing we knew we wanted to get a band together. Next I knew Mick introduced me to Bernard Rhodes and we started discussing, not the Clash but an alternative band to the Sex Pistols. Then, we got Paul Simonon in the band, and then me and Bernard poached Joe Strummer out of the 101ers. This all happened over a three-month period in late 1975 or early 1976. The first thing that happened was they called it the Clash, at some point they coined that name and I wasn’t crazy about that. My interest waned after that. I really didn’t like the direction the band was going in, but I thought they’d be great as themselves.”

Levene remained long enough to garner a songwriting credit on the Clash’s self-titled debut (“What’s My Name”). Following his departure, Levene found himself more at home in an experimental group which showed promise and had the moniker Flowers of Romance, a band fronted by John Beverly (a.k.a. Sid Vicious). “You’re not going to really find much on them (Flowers of Romance),” he said. “At the time, we were just youngsters. Really, all we were doing was getting a band together, and we felt we were in the right scene. If a band was going to happen it was going to be our band. We were getting attention. We did some very famous rehearsals. But, before we got anywhere Malcolm (McLaren) wanted Sid for the Pistols, and I was like, ‘You know, this is the best thing that’s ever happened ... the Pistols ... you gotta do it, you gotta do it.’”

The band never played a concert.

“Sid was a front man in Flowers,” Levene continued, “he wasn’t playing bass. He went off to play bass for the Pistols and took his personality with him. He really was the Sex Pistols, that guy ... incarnate ... but he couldn’t say no to that one. He did say no ... he didn’t want to do it ... he was like, ‘No, Keith I ain’t gonna do it,’ and I’m going, ‘Sid, you gotta do it.’ If Sid wasn’t removed from the situation I think we might have become what PiL was trying to become.”



Bernard Rhodes, instigator and manager of The Clash, was fond of saying they were in “the hippest scene in London.” Levene concurs. “There was no doubt this was a really buzzy scene,” he said. “The scene was cascading as more and more bands were getting into it. And that was a good feeling. And anywhere you went it felt like something new was going on. There was definitely a lot of enthusiasm, but most bands didn’t take notice of the other bands. They supported the scene, but they wouldn’t support one another. Because, really, a kid, when you’re in a band, it’s like being on a football team ... you can have tunnel vision. If you’re on the Arsenal Football Team you’re not going to go, ‘Ah, Tottenham is really good today’ ... you’re going to talk about your team, and that’s the way it was with these bands.”

Those keeping score know what happened next ... the Pistols imploded on their only U.S. tour, and Johnny Rotten was left holding his shaving kit in San Francisco. He enlisted the help of Levene and old friend, one of the “Four Johns,” John Wardle (a.k.a. Jah Wobble) to form a new band ... PiL. They wasted no time. The Sex Pistols’ last show was in early January 1978, and the first PiL album came out in early December 1978, though it has never been released in the United States. That is, until this month when Light in the Attic records issues First Issue on CD, vinyl and in digital formats in the U.S. on June 18.

A lot of rumors have circulated over the years as to why First Issue was never released in the states. Levene cleared the air.

“Here’s the fact on that. One, it wasn’t released because it was being done commercial. It wasn’t released because Richard Branson, Virgin Records, bought the first album out on import in America, and Warners turned around and said, ‘Well, that’s not very nice, we’re not releasing it now.’ And that’s why Warners never released it. I don’t think they thought PiL was too commercial. They wanted the Sex Pistols Mach 2. But when they saw how it was working out, they jumped on board for Second Edition.”

Levene played with PiL for five years until, as has been reported, he acrimoniously left in 1983. He has not spoken to Lydon in 30 years.

“I did try to contact him a bit later that year ... maybe it was 18 months later ... I don’t know, it seemed really soon afterward,” Levene remembered. “I tried three times, and after he didn’t show up the third time I just left it, and I haven’t said word one to him. Anytime he’s done one of these awful PiL reforms he’s never even tried to contact me, even indirectly.”

However, Levene is excited that First Issue will see proper worldwide reissue and release in the United States.

“I find it really interesting and John didn’t say word one to me about it,” Levene questioned. “I had to find out the way everyone found out. Hopefully people will benefit from getting the record and be able to get it on vinyl again. I love the idea that somebody thought it was vibrant enough to release, because I really believe it. I believe that if somebody went through the decision tree of releasing the record now, they’ve done it because they thought this is the best of PiL and it’s a viable record now and it really pleases me.”

Levene is quick to point out that the June 18th PiL release date is the same date as the vinyl issue of his Search 4 Absolute Zero album. The official release is currently out on his website ([www.KeithLevene.com](http://www.KeithLevene.com)).

Levene remains an influential guitarist, most notably being name checked by U2’s The Edge.

“The Edge has always been the gold standard,” said Levene. “I think The Edge has done a lot with two notes. Maybe he liked my guitar playing, understood it and took an aspect of it. There’s no doubt the U2 sound comes off that. That’s fate. Yeah, after a while friends say hundreds of people ... hundreds of people ... ripped off your style and they start naming names. I can’t be bothered to name names. I know my guitar playing is really influential. It’s really unique, and I hope it remains that way. That’s all. This new stuff, I don’t think this new stuff you can rip it off, but you can definitely say, ‘Wow, that’s Keith Levene.’ I’m good enough to say that these days.”

And the new stuff is phenomenal, and it keeps coming. Levene has kept busy these past three decades, writing and recording and consistently releasing albums ... most recently with old bandmate Jah Wobble. In 2012 they convened to play shows, an E.P. resulted and, in December 2012, they released a full album called Ying & Yang.



But don’t call it a renewed partnership ...

“There’s not ... there isn’t one,” Levene said emphatically. “We got together ... I mean it’s a year ago now, and we did these, what we called ‘Metal Box in Dub’ shows, and we decided it would be a good idea to record and what have you. So we did. We made the EP, did a few more tunes.”

Upon digging, it turned out that there was a bit more to the story.

“To tell you the story, nothing was planned with that,” Levene opened up. “It was unfinished business with this whole Public Image scenario, one band member left after the other and it wasn’t a good feeling, you know? I’ve always been friends with Wobble and we’d worked together since PiL a few times. No problems. It kept coming up, ‘Oh, there’s a band going to come together’ ... John was doing PiL or what he thought was PiL, and he’d never invite me. Every now and then he’d ask Wobble and sort of insult him into the deal. Anyway, somehow it came up that maybe me, Martin Atkins and Wobble would do something and me and Wobble decided – no, not Martin Atkins – but definitely us, and that led to the Ying & Yang album. And then, because we were doing the shows, we got together and recorded with Marc Layton-Bennett, who was drumming for us, and you got Ying & Yang and Search 4 Absolute Zero.”

And don’t ask about touring behind the album.

“We don’t tour,” said Levene matter of factly. “We’ve never toured. I think if promoters came along and said, ‘We’d like you to do here, we’d like you to do there,’ we’d put an array of gigs together. It’s very, very difficult doing shows these days. We don’t like touring. Part of the Public Image ethos was we were anti-tours. The whole point of being in a band, for us, wasn’t to work for a record company and tour.”

Still there’s a connection these men have that has transcended time ... a natural rhythm.

“Yeah, no doubt,” Levene agreed. “Anytime me and Wobble do something together we never plan it, we never say, ‘Oh, I’m going to do this, I’m going to play in this key, I’m going to do that.’ We just look at each other. He starts playing. I start playing. Another thing about me and Wobble being in PiL together is we never did a set in our lives. The same thing with the ‘Metal Box in Dub’ shows – we never knew what we were going to play next.

“I call myself a real time composer these days. It’s not like I just get lucky and I jam ... I hate the expression ‘jamming.’ A lot of people who jam or improvise actually aren’t really improvising, they tend to just play chops that they know, when really they are just playing an array of stuff that is pre-recorded in their bodies, so to speak. With me, I don’t know how I’ve managed to do this; it’s really evolved since the early days with Wobble and Metal Box. I really don’t know what’s going to come next. It’s definitely sort of a niche you have to get into. I can’t always do it. It’s not a rule that I have to do it. But, I definitely do it more often than not. The best example of that at the moment is the actual tune, not the album, “Search 4 Absolute Zero.”

Keith Levene is a busy man, with a busy calendar. In addition to the June 18 releases of PiL’s First Issue and his own vinyl issue of Search 4 Absolute Zero, there’s an acoustic album called Second Rendition slated for release between September and November 2013. Then, down the road in 2014, there will be “2051,” a 40-minute movie with a separate album and 3D video release with shows and streaming events planned for Japan and America.

And then there’s the book.

“I hate autobiographies, because everyone who writes a book, they inevitably do it to make a load of money,” said Levene. “However, a sequence of events happened recently, and I’m writing the ‘Secrets of an Un-Punk Rocker’ – there will be teasers soon on KeithLevene.com.”

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