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INTERVIEW:: PIL's Jah Wobble and Keith Levene release "Yin & Yang" Featured

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Infamous bassist Jah Wobble sits down with Sparkplug Magazine's Billy Caldwell to give us the inside track on the new project he and Keith Levine have devised called Yin & Yang. A soul pounding collection of tunes that bring that old flair back from these two well known players. He was there from the start of the early days of the punk scene and throughout the ever changing landscape we call the music biz. A straight shooter and a man with focus, Jah Wobble will always be one of the best , the alternative world has seen.

Your new project Yin & Yang is a reunion between you and Levine. Filled with low end thumping bass with a very dub reggae feel to the rhythms. I was instantly drawn to the darker nature of the compositions. I loved the William S. Burroughs -esque feel of the spoken word, and the music goes without saying. Truly a great collections of songs. How did the reunion take place? Was heading to the studio always part of the equation?

Martin Atkins who joined PiL, not long before I left, had suggested that , on one of his sojourns to the UK, where he was appearing at 'unconvention', we get together and play. I was happy to give it a whirl. Martin asked me who I thought should join us and Keith's name popped into my head. I asked Martin if he knew how Keith was, if he was still on class A drugs, or had maybe finally embarked on getting clean. Martin wasn't sure but said he would make inquiries. (Ironically Martin didn't end up playing with us). Contact was made with Keith within a couple of weeks. I ended up meeting him on my old stamping ground, Bethnal Green in East London. Keith seemed together, he wasn't on class A's. Keith certainly isn't an 'in recovery' guy; I don't think he's squeaky clean, but he wasn't on smack. We had a little bash together in a rehearsal room up the road from the cafe that we met in, (Nico's by the tube station). The first thing I was thinking of was a new version of Metal Box, for live performance, and the second was to go and record a brand new album. I thought it would be best if we recorded the album in an almost casual fashion. That way there would be no needless pressure on Keith. And yes I thought the spoken word thing would suit it well. It's a heady brew is 'Yin&Yang'.

Levine had contributed to another recent project of yours as well, Psychic Life (Cherry Red Records) with Julie Campbell. Did that collaboration help move everything towards the current Yin & Yang project?

Yes I got him in on that because that was a project that was brewing up, as our initial plans to work together, were being made. Julie is a big fan of early PiL and was delighted to have Keith guest on Psychic Life. The track 'Phantasms Rise', in particular, was tailor made for Keith to stretch out and do his big chiming harmonics thing on.

You have also performed Metal Box in Dub with Levine, tell us the different approaches to each project?

Very different. With the new album we started with a blank canvas. Just went and played and wrote. It's where we happened to be on the days we did it. Whereas Metal Box is an existing piece of (iconic) music. For starters I thought that I could bring a drummer in who would play the drum parts better than they had ever been played before. I felt it would be good to deconstruct it just a tad, hence the Dub aspect. I also thought it would be great to bring a trumpet player (Sean Corby) in to give it a bit of 'an electric Miles' feel. Just after we finished Metal Box in 1979 I was introduced , by a bloke called Kenny Macdonald, who was the PiL 'Tailor, to Miles's 'Dark Magus'. It blew my mind. I felt it was not that far away from Metal Box. It was Dark, Primal, Instinctive Modal music. It wasn't chord based, it didn't have song structures. I had always thought that to merge the two similar styles of both albums would be interesting aesthetically. And it was.

There are plenty rumours about drunken brawls when you were younger during the early recording sessions of PiL, then more drunken adventures post-PiL, were you getting sick of the commercialization of the industry at that time?

I wasn't fond of the music industry, I'm still not, (even though it's at its nadir right now, a sort of glorified car boot sale). But I don't think I can blame the music business on my drunkenness and sometimes bad behaviour at that time.

I read you had taken a hiatus from music for a short time back then, working regular day jobs. What was

that like for you?

It was a great time. I had got into a serious mess with drink and drugs. I got clean and sober in October 1986. I was still working part time on my music but I needed to earn money because I had a family to look after. But it was all for the best in regard to me belatedly growing up and beginning to deal with life. So it was very good for me to get an extended 'hit' of reality. That period of doing music part time lasted nearly four years. I then got a major deal with my 'Invaders of the Heart' band.

I was expecting to see the great "Wobble" play on the 2009 PIL reunion tour, but you had bowed out of the shows, would you clue us in to the reason?

There were a number of factors. When John asked me he already had a drummer and a guitarist booked. It wasn't a case of let's meet up and decide the best way to do this. he had already decided everything. No offence to the drummer and guitarist he had lined up whatsoever, but I would have wanted to have chosen the drummer and guitarist myself. Bass players, in my humble opinion, have a better understanding, than lead singers in regard to this sort of stuff. They are better off to go shopping for new stage clothes or get their Barnet done or something, and leave people like me to handle the musical stuff. I mean for a start, not reforming it with Keith is a very big ask. Can you think of a guitarist who can get near to his style of play? I can't, certainly not in regard to the rock world anyway. I also didn't think the choice of venues was imaginative enough. It was the typical rock circuit thing. I think it would have been smarter to have represented PiL as the ultimate art house band and chosen venues utilising a bit of wit and taste. To my mind the clever thing would have been to concentrate on doing Metal Box, in a new way, with the founder members, (including Dennis Morris the photographer/designer), and then to have done new stuff, in a totally unique way, as revolutionary as Metal Box was. That would be the fun way to do it.

Lastly the business side of it was, as far as I was concerned, woeful. No share of merchandise and a pretty poor weekly wage. Really not the way you treat a founder member of a band, well not as far as I'm concerned anyway. But to be honest, knowing the various personalities involved, I always felt it would be a non starter, as far as me ever participating in it was concerned.

Are things good with you and Lydon still?

Well I received some pretty heavy lawyers letters from him at the beginning of my reunion with Keith. Eventually I got a my own heavyweight lawyer to sort the situation out in a fashion both succinct and forthright, We have heard nothing since. So I presume that means that everything is fine and dandy between us again. He recently said that there would always be a place in his heart for me, which was sweet. I have no axe to grind with him. We became mates when I was just 15 or so. It was, for me, a formative friendship. A pair of oddballs so we were. He introduced me to live music, (at the Sunday night Roundhouse gigs in Camden), and then within a few years, opened doors, along with McLaren for a whole generation of people. Regardless of how he is now that can't be denied. We made a couple of good, and to some people important records. So all's good.

After PIL, you and former PIL Drummer Jim Walker formed The Human Condition and toured 2 releases, then you had done some collaborating with Holger Czukay and Jaki Liebezeit of German noise artists CAN. Was it a freeing time for you in music after PIL?

Yes very much so. It had all got very tedious indeed towards the end of my tenure with PiL. I was very inspired and couldn't wait to get cracking working with new people. It was a bit of a purple patch for me. As well as 'The Human Condition', and Holger and Jaki, I did the 'Snakecharmer' album with Francois K and formed the proto type 'Invaders of the Heart' band. I was a busy boy.

The list of people you have collaborated with is beyond extensive, from Bernie Worrell to Massive Attack, what were some of the more memorable moments in those collaborations?

All my sessions with Bill Laswell were great fun. I especially like Nicky Skopaltis's 'Exstasis' album and 'Radio Axiom a Dub Transmission' album. Then again the biggest buzz was playing with Pharaoh Sanders on my 'Heaven and Earth' album. I recall an album with Rachid Taha, that I played bass on, produced by Steve Hilage that was very good. Hilage is a good producer.

Not only an accomplished bassist, you also do some writing for publications, and even released a book in 2009, *Memoirs of a Geezer: Music, Life, Mayhem* (Serpent's Tail books, London). Do you feel you will be writing more books? if so what do you have in mind?

Yes I plan to spend a lot of 2013 writing. Probably a play amongst other things. I want to be fully creative and stop worrying about logistical stuff to do with tours etc. Life is too short.

Will you and Mr. Levine be collaborating again on a future Yin & yang release? Are you planning on doing any US touring for this current release?

Well my initial plan was just to do a handful of shows and an album, which we have done. That feels good. We had some unfinished business and we took care of it. I feel it's best to leave it there.

You were there when it started, and have seen the progression through the years, what is your current view of the music scenes of the world? last words?

To be honest I am turned on more by the renaissance that has taken place in USA TV and the TV of some European countries over the last few years. Great narratives , great writing multi layered meanings and fantastic social commentary. It's almost reinventing the wheel; fiction that documents better than documentaries. . Against all odds TV has become the medium that makes most sense in and of this crazy post modern, late stage capitalist, samsaric world that we live in. Music, and its intelligent use is obviously a part of that renaissance, but it isn't the main thing any more. Right now, like the novel, 'the album' format seems a bit moribund. I still hear the odd tune that I like. It's just that 'the muse' seems to be hovering over the likes of HBO script writers rather than musicians right now. That's where innovative stuff seems to be happening. I'm not interested in the 'heritage' scene; old farts getting back together to try and earn money for their fast approaching old age, Re young acts good luck to them. I do hear some really good dubstep , R&B and grime hammering from my sons bedrooms on occasion. I sometimes "Shazam" it and then play it back a bit louder than them. I try to 'out teenage' them . There will always be good innovative music coming out somewhere on the globe. The dull liberal world music scene itself is pretty moribund. It became too over controlled and regulated by people with bad taste and selfish motivation as far as I'm concerned. Best avoided , in my estimation.

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Billy Sparkplug

Publisher and Editor in Chief of Sparkplug Magazine. Artist, photographer, musician, writer and father. old school skate punk with a true love of rock and roll, from punk to jazz, trip hop to dubstep, if its good, i'll like it. Trying to just make stuff, cause making stuff is cool.

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