

**LOOK BACK IN ANGER****QX Magazine: Chris Barber**[www.chrisbarber.eu](http://www.chrisbarber.eu)**LOOK BACK in ANGer**

THE FILTH AND THE FURY is a new film, which reveals the lost history of The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock.

**ANARCHY IN THE UK**

Punk Rock took-off during the long, hot summer of 76: the Sex Pistols headline the Punk Rock Festival at the 100 Club, supported by their rambunctious and dedicated, Bromley (fan) contingent. Lead vocalist is 17-year-old Johnny Rotten (John Lydon), backed by Steve Jones, Paul Cook, and Glen Matlock – soon to be replaced by a new lead guitarist, Sid Vicious. Other performers include Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Clash, the Damned, and Vibrators.

Clothes designer: Vivienne Westwood, kitted-out punk rockers, on the King's Road. An anarchic new fashion was developing, based on an irreverent collage of personalised trash-aesthetic, Pop Art, and fetish/bondage gear from Soho – sartorial DIY! Punks fought NF fascists in decaying, urban streets. Derek Jarman's film, JUBILEE (78), starred Adam Ant; young Mark Almond became a Siouxsie groupie. Pete Shelley sings with the Buzzcocks, one of a plethora of punk groups aired by John Peel's sessions. The Damned released the first punk album, followed by the Clash with the first great one. Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons wax polemical in NME (New Musical Express), while creative, street-wise youths cut-up, collage and Xerox their own fanzines (like Sniffing Glue). Mark Smith began hiring – and firing, members of the Fall singing, *“Can't remember who I sacked, just stupid faces looking back ... I have seen the madness in my area...”* The Blank Generation comes of age, with No Future, in England's Dreaming.

Managed by Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols sign to EMI, releasing Anarchy in the UK and appearing on Bill Grundy's *Today* TV programme. Taunted and insulted by drunken Grundy, Rotten swears profusely into camera, shocking housewives and pompous pensioners. The tabloids have a field day, vehemently bombasting the band with sensational, vitriolic headlines. Deluged by complaints from the public and record-pressers, EMI terminate the band's contract with a grand pay-off. After briefly signing to A&M Records, McLaren negotiates another pay-off. At live venues around the country, the Pistols fail to turn-up or are pulled-off amidst chaos and protest.

Finally, the Sex Pistols sign-up with Richard Branson's Virgin Records. It's 1977 and Britain celebrates the Queen's Silver Jubilee with dreary street parties, dumb flag waving and stupid hats. Pistols release their second single, God Save the Queen. Despite being banned by the BBC, it reaches number one in the pop chart. The band organises and plays on a Thames boat party, but the police accost it and arrest the Sex Pistols.

Two more singles follow – Pretty Vacant and Holiday in the Sun. All the singles are included on their only album - Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols. In 1978, the Pistols fly to the US, on-tour. Their reception is mixed; Punk was fundamentally alien to American culture and could only be grasped as a pop/fashion.

Yet shock, outrage and violence beset the eight-show tour: fights breakout between performers and audience, Vicious outrages spectators in Texas by slashing himself and bleeding. Worse problems are brewing inside the band: McLaren isn't paying them, Vicious has a heroin habit; Rotten and McLaren aren't getting along; nor are Rotten and Vicious (once close buddies). At their final gig in San Francisco, Rotten announces, *“Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?”* and pisses-off. Jones and Cook fly to Brazil, to record with Ronnie Biggs: the exiled Great Train Robber. Sid Vicious records a solo cover version of (Sinatra's) My Way and bids farewell. October 78, nine months after the band split-up, Vicious is arrested in his room at New York's Chelsea Hotel and charged with murder. The corpse of his hooker-junkie girlfriend Nancy Spungen, is discovered, slashed-up, under the bathroom sink. McLaren bails Sid for \$50,000, but the guitarist dies from a heroin overdose on 2nd February 1979.

Punk was a spontaneous and diffused mass subculture, which radically challenged the status quo. It was not just another youth fashion – hence the puny success of attempts to revive it. In its day, it overturned the prevalent domination of the corporate controlled, pop music and culture industry. People were encouraged to doubt everything, think for themselves, and challenge every manifestation of institutional authority - a triumph for ordinary people. For once, people refused to do as they were told!

## THE FILTH AND THE FURY

*“The Sex Pistols story as it really was. It's the bands chance to set the record straight. ... People have exaggerated and blown up The Sex Pistols into something they never were. ... The truth is far more shocking and far more interesting.”* – John Lydon (Johnny Rotten)

THE FILTH AND THE FURY is a new documentary feature film, consisting of raw and previously unreleased material, and recent interviews. It charts the story of the Sex Pistols – perhaps the most important rock group ever, and the Punk phenomenon; against the backdrop of 1970s, strife-ridden England – divided by class conflict, hypocrisy and authoritarian anachronism. Its title comes from a pejorative Daily Mirror headline, from 1976, heralding the media's campaign against Punk.

So why venture to the cinema, for a documentary, made of old film stock, about a rock group who broke-up twenty-five years ago? These days, a documentary-film must be outstanding to get cinema distribution. FILTH is an absorbing movie, with tight, associational editing. Mixed mediums are carefully juxtaposed - super-8, video, and transfer to 35mm celluloid. It feels contemporary and immediate, while encapsulating you in 1970s periodicity. Most of the material has never been publicly shown before, remarkable considering the cult interest in obscure Punk footage. This also presents a new perspective, on what was considered a closed subject.

Twenty-five years after Punk exploded into British culture, much of its intelligent, anarchic radicalism has been forgotten, but is perhaps as necessary in today's synthetic and homogenised order. As a previously untold version of past events, depicting both negative and positive aspects, with candid honesty and humour, one feels an imbalance has at last been redressed; a cutting-edge retelling of a *truly* great story, for a new generation.

In 1975, the film's director Julian Temple happened upon a rehearsal by the recently formed Sex Pistols. He was so impressed that he dropped-out of film school to follow the group, documenting the rise and demise of the most notorious punk band, with video and super-8 cameras. His unique archive included performances, interviews and events, as they happened. Some of the material was utilised in THE GREAT ROCK 'N' ROLL SWINDLE (1980), which concentrated on McLaren's version of the story. Despite Temple's efforts to bring Surrealist form to SWINDLE (homage to Luis Bunnuel) it was competent, but ultimately prosaic and pretentious. Eric Gardner – Lyden's manager, referred to it as, *“Completely Malcolm McLaren's slanted egocentric vision.”* The band had no say in the production. Only after Lydon sued McLaren in 1987, were the reams of unreleased footage rediscovered. Concentrating on the Pistols' alternative version of events, THE FILTH AND THE FURY tells a different story, for the first time.

The film's message is provocative and challenging. While avoiding nostalgia and mawkishness, it suggests that in today's world of packaged lifestyles and designer conformity, the rage and indignation associated with Punk is needed more than ever:

*“A film of The Sex Pistols is relevant today because it's very important that people – young people especially – know their own history and should challenge what they are told and not simply accept things at face value, something I believe is happening more and more often.”* - Julien Temple, Director.

Those of us, who were teenagers at the time, are reminded that for a brief period the air of England breathed pure with a sense of righteous anger, creative spontaneity and infinite possibility.

**Chris Barber**