

# Interview with Jah Wobble

## Interview for The Edinburgh Reporter – an interview with the bassist and singer who is coming to Edinburgh on 3 May.

*“I’m a Celt; the drones, the keening, the airs; it’s proper deep stuff for me”*

It’s a chilly but bright January day in West London where Jah Wobble has arranged for us to meet at Chelsea Arts Club.

The former Public Image Ltd bassist signs me in as it’s private members only, but the atmosphere inside is relaxed. Phones are prohibited which allows a different energy. Sitting in the corner of the club’s restaurant under a black flat cap Wobble, a passionate Spurs fan, is discussing current gaffer and ex-Celtic boss Ange Postecoglou. “He’s got that Aussie can do attitude, I’m just glad we didn’t get our arses tanned as we usually do.”

He’s referring to a 2-2 draw with Man United just a few days before. After some banter with the chef about beating Liverpool in September the conversation turns to a forthcoming Irish tour where he will perform PiL’s Metal Box (Rebuilt In Dub) with his band The Invaders of The Heart.

“It was a really primal record, we really captured something. With John (Lydon) the (Sex) Pistols had come and gone, I dabbled on bass and he invited me to join. I thought he’s my mate, I can trust him so that’ll do me. He brought in Keith Levine who was the best musician on that scene, a real proper player. We spent a lot of time in a squat just plugging away. I hit the ground running and made the most of the opportunity. I kept it simple, I wanted to make patterns and was already

thinking in a conceptual way about sound, textures and shapes”.

Wobble helped set the tone presenting his first bass-line to Lydon and Levine, it would soon take form as a debut single Public Image providing the band with a hit record in the U.K and Ireland in the summer of 1978. Public Image First Issue was an essential post-punk long-player but it was the band’s second album Metal Box released at the end of 1979 that has continued to grow in stature.

“John’s lyrics were spontaneous, in many ways more prose like Samuel Beckett. This is not a criticism but I don’t think John’s done anything like it since”. When PiL reformed in 2009 talks between Wobble and Lydon fell through, he would unite with Levine (who died in 2022) in 2012. “For a long time I wouldn’t touch it (Metal Box) with a bargepole but I went to America for some shows. I got a Fender P which I played on Metal Box and I began to muck about playing all the old lines. It was like a first love where I thought: “Why did I ever leave you?” I began to do a more far-reaching show with some of the Public Image stuff and then the offer came in from Cleopatra records asking me to consider restructuring and re-envisioning Metal Box for an album and I said: ‘Yes’.

“I’d already been thinking about string arrangements and dub affects, then we began to do it live.” Wobble will bring the tour to Ireland in early February beginning in his ancestral home of Cork. Born in 1958 as John Wardle was renamed Jah Wobble by Sid Vicious after he struggled to pronounce his name. An early version of reggae (bluebeat) and ska would have a potent influence on his style. “The Jah part was perfect of course because I was such a big reggae aficionado.”

Irish music was very much in his “core” and soon lead him to experiment with a range of styles. A shortwave radio also provided key cultural connections. “It’s deep in the core of my being, in that way I’m a Celt; the drones, the keening, the

airs it's proper deep stuff for me. In Africa the bass is like a low bodhrán, that's essentially Irish if you like. With the best music there's a universal connection, I remember listening to Egyptian musician Umm Kulthum on shortwave radio and feeling an emotional and spiritual connection. He describes the strong London-Irish community in which he was raised as "like another world now" and catching the "tale-end" of that life. "The family began to come over on the steam packet during the famine and there was another wave in the early 20th century.

Wobble's 2009 memoir *Confessions Of A Geezer* is about to be republished in a new expanded edition. A gifted raconteur the book offers a first hand experience of life leading up to punk, he writes entertainingly and emotionally about his early friendship with John Lydon, who describes as "an older brother type" who took him "under his wing".

Along with Sid Vicious (named Sid by Lydon) and John Grey they were part of a much mythologised group known as The Four Johns. "John (Lydon) is a huge figure in my life, he really helped me get going with music. I had lost some schooling and went to Kingsway College to get some O-levels after being expelled. When I met John he had been ill with meningitis and was making up for some lost schooling.

Like me he was also a John Joseph, there was Sid who was also a John and John Grey who was another John Joseph, the four of us would make a point of drinking in The Four Johns pub". The 65 year old stopped drinking in 1985 "best thing I ever did" and had a stint away from the industry working for the London Underground.

It wasn't long before his musical vocation called him back for particularly prolific period. In 1992 he was shortlisted for The Mercury Music Prize for *Rising Above Bedlam* but he would play on *Screamadelica*, the album that scooped the prize. Wobble also met his second wife, the Chinese harpist Zi Lan

Lio, during the early 90s. They would go on to work together at various points including 2009's Chinese Dub. He also performs in Tian Qiyi, alongside his two sons Charlie and John.

*Jah Wobble Will perform @Voodoo Rooms Edinburgh Friday 3 May*

*Dark Luminosity: Memoirs of a Geezer, The Expanded Edition is out on 7 March*



Photo Richard Purden



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