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Punk with a Melody

Former Sex Pistols bassist Glen Matlock will perform next Tuesday at the Westcott

By Josh Breeden

In February 1977, bassist Glen Matlock left the Sex Pistols and sealed his musical fate—the Sex Pistol who liked the Beatles, the Sex Pistol who yearned for melodic structure, “the Sex Pistol who grew up.”

Matlock performs next Tuesday, March 19, 8 p.m., at the Westcott Theater, 524 Westcott St. (Tickets are \$15 in advance, \$18 at the door.) It’s the fourth stop on Matlock’s “Acoustic Anarchy Tour,” a toned-down stroll through 1970s-era punk.

In 1974, Matlock, then an 18-year-old art student, started jamming with fellow teenage West Londoners Steve Jones, a sloppy, self-taught guitar player with a penchant for petty street crime, and Paul Cook, a burgeoning punk drummer. For months, the trio practiced 1960s blues-rock covers.

“They were nothing like what they became once I joined up,” wrote eventual Sex Pistols singer John Lydon in his punk history *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*. “They had no image. . . no purpose to it other than making really lousy Small Faces and imitation Who noises.”

Lydon joined the group in 1975 and transformed himself into the flamboyant nihilist Johnny Rotten. Accessories included green hair, torn clothes and a bad attitude that mirrored the mindset of the lost kids that roamed the dilapidated streets of 1970s London. The band had found an image. They were The Sex Pistols.

Under the direction of Malcolm McLaren, former New York Dolls manager and owner of London-based “anti-fashion” boutique SEX, the foursome became the United Kingdom’s most notorious punk band. EMI signed the Sex Pistols to a recording contract, and in December 1976, the group released its first single, “Anarchy in the U.K.,” which reached No. 38 on the English pop charts.

“I am the antichrist,” snarled Jonny Rotten during the opening moments of the track.

Parents, politicians, and promoters believed him. The single lasted one month before it was pulled. EMI canceled the band’s contract in January 1977. Glen Matlock left soon after and was replaced by Sid Vicious.

In October 1977, the band released their only full-length album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* (Virgin). Matlock co-wrote all of the songs on the album.

The bassist went on to form other bands (the Rich Kids, the Philistines,

the Flying Padovanis, the International Swingers) and to work with well-known artists such as Iggy Pop and Mick Jones of The Clash. Matlock’s reputation as a melody-maker made him incredibly valuable during the pop-infused post-punk era. Matlock was more than raw power; he was a nuanced, open-minded musician.

That nuance was due, in part, to Matlock’s musical upbringing. “During the ‘60s, I would listen to pirate radio,” says Matlock.

Pirate radio was private citizens illegally broadcasting popular rock music from vessels outside of British territorial waters, as government-sanctioned BBC stations refused to play the genre despite its growing popularity.

“I’d catch bands like The Who, The Kinks, the Small Faces, and The Yardbirds,” Matlock recalls. “There were some fantastic songwriters around that time. The best, for me, was Ray Davies. It was something that became very engrained in {me}.”

Matlock, now 56, finds inklings of that popular rock sensibility within Sex Pistols recordings, remnants of his personal contribution to the band.

“When I got involved with The Sex Pistols, they were very particular about what they liked,” he says. “But I think the backbone was pop sensibility.”

“Pretty Vacant,” the ninth track on *Never Mind the Bollocks*, is derivative of ABBA’s 1975 hit “S.O.S.” Matlock borrowed the song’s main riff after hearing it on a pub radio.

Over the past few years, Matlock has reconnected with a few of the legends he grew up with as a teenager. In 2010 and 2011, he played a set of reunion shows with his favorite band, the Faces.

“It was a dream come true,” he says. “I think I was the right guy for the job and we got along well.”

With a steady stream of jobs coming his way these days, it seems Matlock has reconciled the two competing narratives that make up his musical history; the anarchist and the conformist exist peacefully within one man. Either that, or he doesn’t really have time to consider the situation.

“I don’t wake up in the morning thinking, ‘I used to be in The Sex Pistols 35 years ago,’” says Matlock. “I just try to live in the present and write a good song every now and then.” □