



999

BISH! BASH! BOSH!

(Cleopatra)

Ultimate high energy plan from the boys in the gang.

9/10

It seems 999 have always been around. Year after year, decade after decade, they have toured around the UK and beyond, consistently delivering live shows of fervent, cultured punk rock. All we've been missing from 999 in recent times is a new album.

The 15 tracks that have ended the hiatus prove that patience can be an almighty virtue; this is their best body of work since 1978. Nick Cash and Guy Days' knack of crafting fabulous energy laden catchy songs remains intact and, thanks to the chemistry within 999, they deliver them in spine tingling fashion. The dual guitar attack of Cash and Days coupled with the rhythms of Arturo Bassick's bass, ensure their signature sound remains throughout. Drummer Stoo Meadows, who has deputised during live shows for Pablo Labritain in recent times, makes his 999 album debut. They've picked well. He's faultless.

Bursts of adrenaline rip through 'Shoot', 'Addicted' and 'Statue', all aided by Guy's glorious riffs. They turn militaristic with 'I Hate It All' and 'Doctor Nick', and become magnificently atmospheric with 'Monkey', proving there's more to 999 than pure speed. A toughness underpins the whole album; 'Don't Wanna Know',

'Psycho Man' and 'Lifeline' rock hard while street attitude is brought to bear in 'Don't Start A Fight'.

Lyrical there's a lot going on throughout, from the autobiographical to the observational, all enhanced by Nick's menacing vocals. Contenders for all time punk classics, 'Crazy Tuesday World', 'My Dad Trashed My Submarine' and 'The Pit And The Pentagon' will have you wishing for the days of punk rock 45s. The environmentally aware 'Timebomb' stands apart and, with an exceptionally strong lead vocal and emotional melody, becomes a thing of beauty. All the aforementioned fabled 999 trademarks coalesce on the unforgettable 'The Midnight Express'. There isn't a duff song on the album, it's that simple.

999's ability to straddle both punk and rock accorded them a distinctive swagger, lifting them above the pack back in 1977. They've still got it. 'Bish! Bash! Bosh!' is one of the best punk rock albums of 2020. Will it be their last? Let's hope not, but whatever happens, 999's legacy is now assured.

Phil Singleton





EMERGENCY

They were there at the start of it all. Non conformist, utterly unique, overlooked and embraced in equal measure, 999 were the ultimate outsider band. They remain the embodiment of punk rock to this very day. With the release of 'Bish! Bash! Bosh!', their most thrilling album since 1978, Phil Singleton sits down with Nick Cash who shares personal stories and unseen photographs from those heady punk rock days.

THE origins of 999 can be traced all the way back to Nick's unconventional childhood in Malta, one that would shape his outlook on life. So how did Nick get into music and form a band in the first place? "I started by listening to a lot of records that were around at the time and I formed a band at school called The Pentagon," reflects Nick. "My dad served in the Air Force, he'd previously been in the Royal Navy, so we were stationed abroad. It was, can you believe it, back in the 1960s!! We thought it was a good name because of the problems there'd been with the American military and the Cuban Missile Crisis and because our parents were in the Forces, we wanted to knock it a little bit, take the mickey out of it and question it. We got a lot of work playing at the school dances and outside at various water polo clubs and hotels. In fact, I wrote a song about it called 'The Pit And The Pentagon' which is on our new album.

"We used to rent our own van and go out, I was 14 and 15 years old at the time, so it was quite a thing to do, to engage somebody to drive the van, lug your own gear - I never quite got out of doing that! As a result of The Pentagon I used to get odd jobs working with other Maltese bands. I played The Comino Hotel, on Comino Island between Gozo and Malta - Roger Moore was staying there - I'd go on in the middle of the set with the main band and play four or five songs, stuff like 'Satisfaction' and 'Wild Thing'. The people would love it, they didn't want ordinary dancing they wanted to be a bit hip and dance The Shake and The Twist. From that I found I really loved making people dance."

His early life as a child of the Forces impacted upon Nick in ways other than music: "I went to 26 schools and I didn't have time to build up a lot of relationships. I always felt like an outsider."

An artistic drive led to his relocation to the UK. "I wanted to go to art school, and my dad wanted to help so he sent me to a boarding school in Truro and when I got there, the same thing happened - I started to get involved in music," remembers Nick. "I once played with Roger Taylor, later of Queen, in his band The Reaction. From there I went to Salisbury College of Art for a year and then to Canterbury. I kept it going and did other bands and when I was at Canterbury College of Art formed Frosty Jodhpur who became C Stream at one point."

I wondered where his desire to engage and entertain came from? "I liked Eddie Cochran, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Elvis, Wilson Pickett," says Nick. "What I really liked about them was the way they performed, they really got to the people. The movements they made when they were playing their songs were spot on. It was like mime that went with the music. It was very important 'cos it was able to communicate to people on different levels while having the effect of working people up into a frenzy."

Surrounding himself with like-minded art school students gave Nick an education in life, not just academia. It left a lasting impression on Nick. "We played at the sit-ins at the University of Canterbury in the late '60s. Various bands would come and play like the Edgar Broughton Band and Egg. The places would be barricaded and they'd be in the lecture halls and I'd play music in there. It was a bit of a rebellion, they shut the Universities, and I thought it was a good idea to question things."

Canterbury resulted in a life changing convergence of ideas with none other than Ian Dury, as Nick is keen to point out. "At college, Ian was my teacher. We started Kilburn and the High Roads specifically for an end of term dance. I remember some of my lecturers telling me I couldn't do music because I was an artist. Another lecturer, John Williams, got up and said 'I've listened to the music, looked at the way they dress and the performance, and I can't tell any difference between what he's doing in his music and what he's doing in his art. It's all art and it's all a good thing'. I was very privileged and lucky to receive an education and at the time you got a free grant. It brought together people from all walks of life and helped to break down barriers. It was a hot bed of ideas and a revolution for music and art. Punk was born out of that, especially the visual aspect of it."

By the time art college ended, his musical career was already moving at some pace. "When I left in '72 Kilburn and the High Roads were starting to do gigs at The Tally Ho and The Kensington," says Nick. "We got on The Who's Quadrophenia Tour and got a deal with Pye Records, recording our debut LP 'Handsome' (1975). It was produced by Hugh Murphy and was a bit smooth for my liking. Chris Thomas had earlier produced a single with us called 'Rough Kids' (Dawn Records '74) which was good, an early punk song of disaffection that struck a different note."

The tour with The Who provided further rock and roll education. "We were invited by Pete Townshend himself, he'd seen us at the Speakeasy. I loved The Who from the early days. It was great to be behind the scenes and see some of the tricks they used to put across a show. When Pete Townshend jumped in the air and slid across the stage on his knees, he had knee pads under his trousers!"

As the rock and roll winds of change began to blow through the UK, Nick recalls the influence the Kilburns had on the birth of punk. "Pub rock was fading although loads of young punk musicians came to our shows, like John Lydon, Glen Matlock and Malcolm McLaren who we were involved with. We were doing a music hall show at The Screen on the Green - we had a set built of Tower Bridge - and Malcolm helped us design bespoke clothes for the show. I was at the later Sex Pistols show at The Screen on the Green, supported by The Clash - that was a good atmosphere."



Above: Nick's first band, The Pentagon

While Nick was surveying new musical horizons, the Kilburns suffered an acrimonious demise. "The album didn't do that good and we split up. Ian and I fell out big time. Years later, I was at an art gallery in the West End and in walked Ian and rather than have a confrontation, I shook his hand and said 'forget it, no hard feelings'. I'd done over a 1000 gigs with the Kilburns, we'd done a lot of work together."

Nick occupies a unique corner in punk's development; from being a punk rock influencer in the Kilburns to forming a punk band. Nick was keen to stress he wanted a clean break and a new challenge. "I was known as Keith Lucas but I didn't want to capitalise on the fact I'd worked with Ian Dury and Kilburn and the High Roads, so I chose the name Nick Cash. I took it from some bloke that ran a punk shop. I needed something quick. Nick Cash - steal money - I liked the sound of it. You wanted something more glamorous than your normal name."

So why hook up with a sibling for your next venture? "My brother Guy (Days) had been living abroad in Cyprus. When he returned we began playing and writing songs together, and he came down for the Kilburn album sessions at Pye Studios, Marble Arch, and gave me a couple of pointers on how to do the solo on 'The Roadette Song'. I was enjoying working with him more than the band, so the seeds were set. We wrote 'I'm Alive' and one called 'Sandwiches' which became 'My Street Stinks'!"

Decades later, the bond is still key to 999's longevity. Nick gathers his thoughts. "Guy has always been there, we're the only two to have played all the gigs. I can have incredible arguments with the bloke but we seem to get through it and keep going. The reason is we enjoy doing the music and we've gone places on stage together that really have hit the right spot, and with the audience at the time. It's an unforgettable thing really - we just connect. It's good to have that. We enjoyed working on 'Bish! Bash! Bosh!' together."

Below: Kilburn And The High Roads: Nick third left, Ian Dury second right. Left: On stage with Kilburn And The High Roads



Above: 999 at the Hope & Anchor in Islington

Beyond this solid core, Nick and Guy were determined to assemble an outfit with four distinct talents and personalities. An advert in the Melody Maker yielded spectacular results and Nick still enthuses about the addition of bassist Jon Watson and drummer Pablo Labritain. "Jon joined pre-Pablo. For his audition he walked all the way down the King's Road to Manos Studios carrying his bass, it didn't bother him. Straight away he looked a bit different. He was an amazing character, he looked tough, which came in really useful if there was any aggro at gigs. He'd talk to people and calm them down. He'd come from Manchester, from a rough scene. On occasions he helped save the day."

"At the height of punk, we went on stage at the Lafayette Club in Wolverhampton and the entire audience got out of hand from the off. They thought you went to see a punk band to take them on! En masse they charged the band. Jon quickly took off his bass and used it as a barrier to stop people getting at us. We managed to get back to the dressing room which fortunately had a very solid door, and we barricaded it and stopped people getting in. There were fights outside, they smashed our van up, the police were called. It was totally unnecessary, we always said we're only here for the music, we're not here to fight you. Same with spitting and throwing bottles, we didn't much like that either!"

"Jon looked like Klaus Kinski in 'For A Few Dollars More'. He was only a small guy but he wasn't frightened of anybody or anything. He could actually talk to these huge people, skinheads and god knows what, and get them to calm down and agree with him. He'd stand up to cops who'd come after you in America. If he saw someone with a knife he'd tell 'em to put it back in their pocket. He'd always stick up for our fans, the Southall Crew. He'd be there in the front, go in the crowd and sort out the problems. He got huge respect from people. He was almost legendary."

I mention to Nick that Jon's on stage style was also something to behold. Nick is quick to concur. "He was unbelievable, you could watch him all day. I was really sad to see him go. He came to see us in Swindon the year before last. It was great to have us all under one roof together probably for the last time. That line-up was a magic combination."

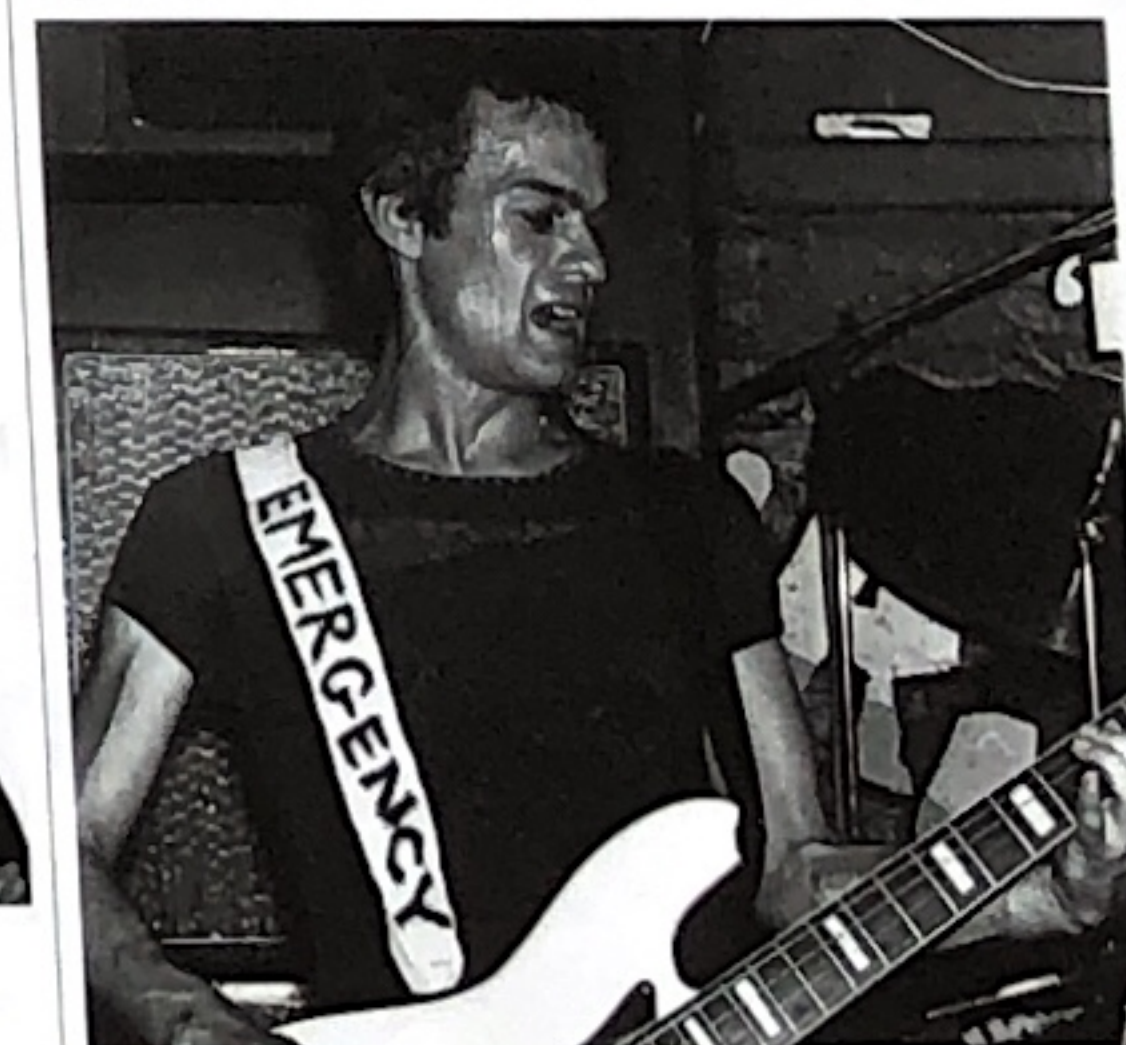
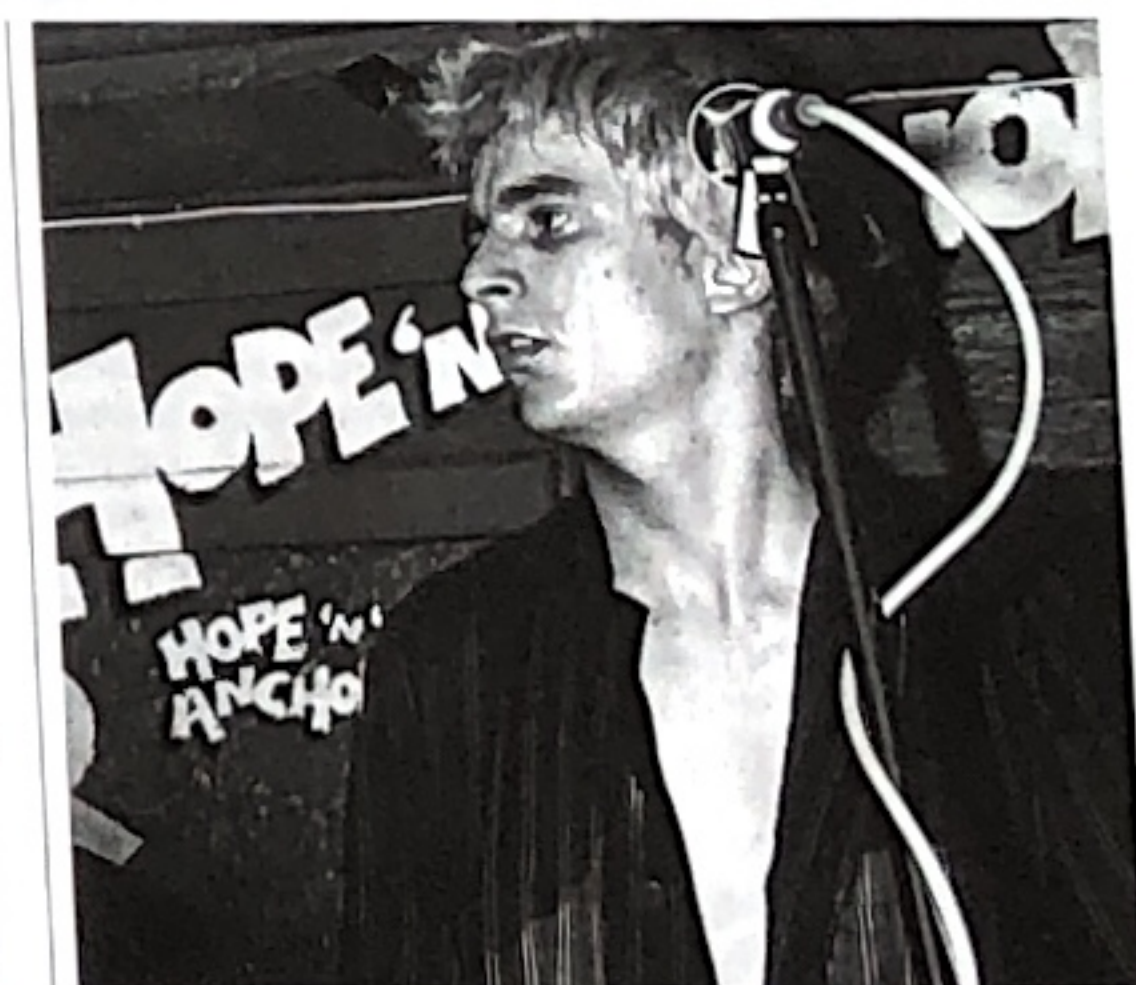
So why did Jon leave? "Punk rock was going through a difficult time, the new romantics had come along, and we just wanted to keep going," recalls Nick. "Jon took over the management of the band with a friend of his. He took us out to America and worked hard. We did the album 'Face To Face' (1985) and he did it how he wanted to do it; we tried to go again, it was a good

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Above: Pablo Labritain
Above right: Guy Days
Right: Jon Watson





Above: 999 with Danny Palmer (far right)

effort but it didn't work. Jon said 'I've had enough, that's it, I've tried this, I'm going'. He didn't want to remain our friend, he just had to make a clean cut. I can understand that, you gotta go and get on with your next thing. I was very upset the day he did go, it was a big blow in my life. Now I'm happy remembering how fucking amazing he was. He was totally unique."

Jon's bass duties were initially taken over by the enigmatic, moustachioed Danny Palmer, more Lee Van Cleef than Klaus Kinski. "Well, we did like spaghetti western music!" laughs Nick. "At the time he got stick for having a beard, moustache and long hair, but fashions come around and it's trendy now! He was a good lad. He'd been in a band with Pablo called Sussex. We needed someone quick when Jon left so he came and did it. He's a very good musician. He didn't last 'cos he didn't make one or two gigs. After the live album 'Lust, Power and Money' (1987) it wasn't going well and I met Arthur (Arturo Bassick) again who'd been on Albion Music like us and his band Pinpoint had supported us. He said he could help out, he had a van and could get us some gigs - he's very good at networking. Arthur is motivated, he does a lot and helps to keep it going. He's got a lot of energy, and as a result we've gone all over the world to places we hadn't been to the first couple of times around." Arturo has remained 999's bass lynch pin for three decades.

The final piece of the jigsaw came in the form of another one-off character. Nick is keen to retell his first meeting with their future drummer. "Pablo was dragged down by friend and photographer Steve White, he wasn't gonna come! He was the last

drummer we auditioned at Manos. He had a pin stripe suit on when he came down but offset it with shoes with fake diamond studs on. It took the piss out of the pin stripe business suit, it was a reactionary thing to wear, poking fun at the bowler hat brigade. He was an amazingly good drummer, and we got on with him straight away. We phoned him up the next day and offered him the job. He had the background with The Clash, he was their first drummer, he knew the ropes. He'd been to school with Joe Strummer but he never made a big thing of it, and didn't really talk about it until Strummer had died.

"He was an amazing character and quickly came to the forefront. We always thought drummers were in the background, but why should they be? To this day I don't know why he called himself Pablo Labritain, but it just works!"

Nick eagerly champions Pablo's infectious enthusiasm. "He started Labritain Records which we used for the 'I'm Alive' single. He's got a brilliant attitude, only the very best would do. He was uncompromising in tough situations but he had a very nice side to him. He was particularly good at talking to fans and when fans sent us letters, he was brilliant at writing back to them. He was an inspiration to all of the band. He had his finger on the pulse at all times. He is a good song writer, writing the lyrics to 'Chicane Destination' and 'Last Breath' on 'Death In Soho'."

With the line-up assembled by early December '76, the chemistry between them was crucial as the band were in the thick of the action from the turn of '77 as they struck out initially under the name The Dials.

"I wanted the band to start as a total challenge from new. Stand or fall. So we went out there and the first problem we faced was at our very first gig, 22nd January, at Northampton County Cricket Club. It was a huge hall. We were playing with Stretch who'd had a chart hit in '75. They had a big shiny PA system and we asked if we could use it. They said absolutely not. Fortunately, in the van I had two PA column 12" speakers. I said 'let's do what we can with our little bit of equipment'. The band all stood behind me, 'let's do it!' We walked out on stage and the place was rammed. We played our songs and the whole place erupted. It was just at the cusp of punk and the kids knew instinctively what to do. The band were spot on. From that moment on we said two things; never worry about the equipment and always think of your audience, give your all. That was part of the ethos of the band."

There were further gigs under the names Gene Carson's Fanatics and 48 Hours before they found what they were after. "The name 999 was late in coming," recalls Nick.

Experiences in the early days continued to shape the band's outlook and stance. "Another time at Winter Gardens, Penzance, we arrived, something had happened and it was cancelled but all the people were turning up," says Nick. "I had my amp so I went to the pub next door, and asked if we could use their back room to play something for those who'd turned up. He was only too pleased to get people in! We sat round this table, Pablo battered the hell out of it with his drum sticks and I played guitar and again it went down a storm!"

This brings to Nick's mind an incident the following year supporting The Stranglers which saw 999 get the shit end of the stick. It remains fixed firmly in his memory. "The worst we ever got treated was on a huge tour of Europe with The Stranglers in '78. We were playing the Opera House in Vienna. They had a PA and lights but there wasn't enough power for it all and they were worried the system would go down, so they didn't want us to use it. I said 'please let us play, we won't use the lights, just the smallest part of the equipment. There are people who've come to see us.' They said no, so we couldn't play. I had this small Pignose amp and my guitar. I jumped on a table in the foyer as the audience were coming out and said

'I'm sorry 999 didn't play, how about I do a few songs for you now!' It was the spirit of punk; they wouldn't let me leave and I had to do an encore! The following day there was a press conference and Hugh Cornwell was asked about what 999 had done and he admitted it was very good! There is justice out there! That is why 999 have survived over the years; every band member was always there. No hard feelings Stranglers."

As 1977 unfolded, the music press were busy championing their favourite punk bands,

primarily the Pistols, The Clash and The Damned, often to the detriment of other emerging groups who were unfairly tagged as bandwagon jumpers. As far as Nick is concerned, it wasn't the groups who were culpable. "We made a demo and sent that out but it got turned down, but as soon as punk exploded, the same record companies were jumping up and down trying to sign us. They wanted to jump on the bandwagon, not us."

So where did the initial interest within the industry come from? "Bernie Rhodes had some involvement with 999 but we didn't see eye to eye," recalls Nick. "He was very politically orientated and wanted you to perform in a certain way but we thought it was more important to be an individual band and be in control of our own destiny. Pablo had been managed by him in The Clash."

"I remember I got a telegram at The Nashville from Mickey Most at RAK Records, he said he loved the set and would like to talk about making a record. We didn't go down that route and turned him down, we didn't want to be part of his stable of artists. He was very controlling, he wanted to pick what to record and they used session musicians." Nick pauses for a moment with a glint in his eye. "If he sent me a telegram now I might give it a go and see what the fuck happens!"

Engaging the services of managers Dai Davies and Derek Savage ensured 999 kept themselves on the punk front line. "They leased The Nashville, The Red Cow, and the Hope and Anchor, and booked the bands they wanted, so we got the time slots we wanted," says Nick. "Dai Davies had been a publicist for Bowie, and he employed publicist Alan Edwards, who worked with us closely and things started to happen, including on the American side."

The proactive attitude from the band and their management put them in the thick of the action, delivering the goods at all the iconic London punk venues, including The Roxy. "Don Letts had a DJ booth at The Roxy, it was at the side of the stage down some steps," remembers Nick. "Jon was on that side of the stage playing away furiously, I looked around and he wasn't there! He'd fallen into the DJ booth, he'd completely disappeared from view but he didn't miss a note on his bass, he kept playing! Then his head popped up and the audience started cheering. That was great! I saw X-Ray Spex there, Chelsea, Siouxsie and the Banshees; The Roxy was the first place I saw those bands. X-Ray Spex were really incredible. It was a great atmosphere, gigs were packed. It was just what you expected and what you wanted. People took the trouble to get dressed up and go to them. Don Letts used to run Acme Attractions, a clothing shop in the King's Road. You'd go down, buy your gear from him and at night go to The Roxy and listen to him play his reggae music, and eventually end up on stage yourself. That's what it was like. My Roxy membership card still exists."

Other venues hold vivid memories. "I think it was at the Vortex, a young Jonathan Ross came dressed up as a police officer to our gig," smirks Nick. "There was a bit of a fracas outside, the police got called. They were terrified that these were subversive events. They arrested him for impersonating a police officer! It had to be explained to them, but they were worried enough to do that. That was funny! It was a great gig."

You must have got a fantastic reaction from the crowds? "We got a brilliant reaction. There were a lot of faces you recognised. A lot I'd seen at the Sex Pistols Notre Dame Hall gig, just off Leicester Square (15th November '76). That was a totally legendary gig. For me, that was the gig that really put punk on the map. It was an incredible event, and out of that came The Roxy and The Vortex. The whole fashion thing was happening. You thought, wow this is really exciting. You got the pogoing, people singing along with the songs, nothing was quite like it."

Which was your favourite venue to play? "For me, The Nashville was the place," confirms Nick. "One of the first gigs we played there was supporting The Jam. I remember we went down really well. Paul Weller's dad managed The Jam and he wouldn't let us do an encore 'cos there wasn't enough time. I remember when we were headlining there, someone opened a window in the toilets and a lot of people were coming in via the window. We used to get a lot more people in there than were allowed by the fire department! Shane McGowan was at a very early 999 gig at The Nashville, that's where he got his ear bitten!"

"I've got a particular fondness for the Hope and Anchor where we recorded the Front Row Festival album (various artists double LP). We had some really good shows there. The stage was very low and the audience would sometimes fall across the stage. I can remember Pablo had to learn his tricks very quickly, and he actually bought a chain from a hardware store and he used to nail



Above: 999 at the Hope & Anchor

all the kit to the floor to stop it falling over! We rapidly outgrew it. The management had bought a van for us, things were happening a lot quicker. We'd become big. We jumped from doing shows at the Hope and Anchor virtually overnight to selling out The Lyceum which was pretty amazing. I think some of the best shows we ever played were actually in The Lyceum, because of the number of people there. People who were there come up to me to this day and say how great it was. Prior to that I'd played The Lyceum with Kilburn and the High Roads, supporting The Who. In an incredibly short space of time I was now selling it out and headlining it with 999!"

Following the release of 'I'm Alive' on Labritain Records in August '77, United Artists snapped them up. Their passionate shows and connection with the fans fast earned them a dedicated following with the emerging Southall Crew at its centre. Yet a snobbish attitude within the press still continued. Someone told Nick recently that some people didn't like 999 because it was rumoured one of them was posh! "This had come about 'cos of the name Labritain," says Nick. "The Labritain record label had a regal look to it and we kidded the engineer Alan Winstanley that Pablo was 53rd in line to the throne! It was just a joke but this rumour spread!"

It may have been a falsehood, but Nick believes such misconceptions shouldn't even be relevant. "I don't think you should discriminate against anybody. In punk rock it really didn't matter what background you came from."

I mentioned that it was punk rock music, not a band's background, that drew me in, empowered me and gave me confidence as a youngster. "What you've said there is the most important thing," agreed Nick. "What punk did all around the world was open up possibilities for people. People got in touch with themselves, it gave them freedom of expression. The whole of my lyrics are based around that freedom. Punk has now had such an influence and become a part of our culture."

This is a subject that fires Nick up to this day. "Punk broke down barriers. Like the Buzzcocks in Manchester, they were very artistic. It was a completely different culture in Manchester to London, but people would swap ideas. It spread throughout the world and went everywhere and never looked back. It was like a wildfire. To be a part of that was one of the best things ever. Especially as I could see where it was going. It wasn't manufactured, it was done by the real spirit of the people."

One listen to 2020's 'Bish! Bash! Bosh!' confirms 999's beliefs remain intact to this day. **VLR**

'Bish! Bash! Bosh!' is out now on Cleopatra

Coming soon in part two: 999's classic debut album dissected, punk mayhem in the USA and more exclusive photos from the band's own archive.

"PUNK BROKE DOWN BARRIERS. IT WAS LIKE A WILDFIRE."

999

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