

JAH WOBBLE

John Wardle took the name 'Jah Wobble' when Sex Pistol, Sid Vicious, proved incapable of pronouncing his name one evening. After launching his bass playing career with 'Public Image Limited' his musical output has since been prodigious. He talked to Fergus Byrne about many things.



'You're very aware that you've let people down profoundly yet again, and you kind of really feel you're losing control of your life and your sanity.'

John Wardle—aka Jah Wobble—apologises for appearing straight from the shower, he is running a tight schedule and has just finished a workout. Smooth headed and stocky with the air of a seasoned street fighter he sits down in a towelling robe looking more like a boxer just out of the ring than a musician about to lay down the bass lines for a jazz epic. But the feeling that a Vinny Jones character might suddenly speak with his fists soon fades when he starts chatting with an easy, friendly warmth. At 65 years old and looking forward to a pension, John Wardle is well past needing to prove anything. He presents a confident, self-deprecating and considered presentation of his life and what he may have learned along the way.

John says he's having a 'purple patch' at the moment: going on tour with his band, 'Invaders of the Heart', as well as a talking tour about his biography, *Memoirs of a Geezer*. A book he has just edited and republished—updating it and adding another 25 years to the story. Although he'd like to slow down, as someone who has gone from the upside of the music industry to driving a tube train to feed his family, he knows that when you are on a roll you just have to enjoy it.

He describes his current situation as not unlike being in an unmanned spacecraft where 'you spin into the gravitational pull of a planet and it chuck's you further on.' So he feels like this purple patch is chucking him on for years. 'But I can't slag it off' he says—his broad East End accent proving that although he now lives up North, he's still Stepney to the core. 'What you don't want to do is turn the work down' he says. 'It's been a long time coming to be fair.'

His career in the music industry as a bass guitarist and producer wasn't something that he had always dreamed of. In fact at one time he had aspirations to join the merchant marine, but as he says in his book, it turned out the career path he eventually chose was fitting. In that one way or another he was destined to 'go on the piss in foreign countries.'

But the bass guitar came from something much deeper. He was always 'fascinated and captivated by low frequencies' and describes how heavy bass had an essentially 'visceral' effect on him, putting him on a 'pulsating wave' that took him away from his head and 'thinking'.

John's early work in the music industry is well documented and often overshadowed by his association with John Lydon—aka Johnny Rotten. At one point when he and Lydon were studying at the Kingsway College of Further Education he was part of a group of friends that were known as the four Johns: John



Wardle, John Lydon, John Gray and Simon John Richie (who also went by the name of John Beverley but was nicknamed 'Sid', eventually becoming Sid Vicious). Other than John Gray there was obviously a bit of a trend to change names amongst this lot. John Wardle got the name Jah Wobble one evening when Sid Vicious was so out of it he was unable to pronounce Wardle's name and simply slurred what sounded like 'Jah Wobble'.

Wardle and Lydon considered themselves reprobates just biding their time at Kingsway and had an instant attraction through their interest in music. It helped that they were both fans of Hawkwind. Wardle saw Lydon as a bit of a big brother figure, and although Sid Vicious made him uncomfortable he tolerated him but tended to avoid him when possible.

When Lydon left the Sex Pistols he asked Wardle to join him in founding Public Image Limited (PiL). Wardle's insistent bass lines became one of the signature sounds of the band. After two albums, including the much acclaimed *Metal Box*, John Wardle, by now Jah Wobble, left the band to embark on what became a prolific and varied career as a recording artist, producer and collaborator.

Despite never being over enthusiastic about most of the punk bands, he admits that without punk, post punk bands like PiL wouldn't have happened and he probably 'wouldn't have gone on to play bass professionally.' Today, all talk about the Sex Pistols, PiL and the era that created a new musical direction for young British kids seems a very long time ago. Somewhat inevitably it leads to a conversation about how the industry has changed.

John remembers how back in the early days of his solo career you would spend time schmoozing people, going into town to drop into record labels, making yourself known and trying to 'get that record deal'. It was all about selling records. Going on the road and playing gigs was just a small part of the musician's job. Gigging was what John describes as a 'small part of the pie chart'. He remembers how, for some musicians, the chance to get out on the road was more for a bit of fun and to promote an album. That's now changed. 'Today it's all about the shows' he says. 'That complete reversal now is all about going out on the road. And everything's very self contained'

He recalls his experience with PiL as bad from a business perspective. It was only when he left that he started making 'proper money'. He remembers how he would pay up front to have a thousand singles, 12-inches or albums made, collect them on a Friday and start going around record shops trying to sell them. Half of them would be taken by a distribution company and the rest would go to various music outlets including to his mate 'Lynch' down at the Mega store' who would take 60 or 70 copies from

him. 'And at the end of the day, you would have sold out' he says. 'And so you made a bit of money.'

Today 'it's a different world'. He has his diary on his iPhone, his agent works through a portal and he has no management. Arranging gigs is much simpler. 'You don't have to make four phone calls like you used to'. He says the technologies make life easier in lots of respects. 'You can make a record now 25 times quicker.' And it's also much more forgiving. 'It's so quick and easy to make a decent sounding record yourself' he says. He recently played an album to a friend who enthusiastically asked where it was recorded and John answered 'Residential', muttering 'in the Cotswolds'. Although it sounded like he was talking about a recording studio 'residential' was actually code for 'made at home'.

But having said that, John is reticent about what advice he would give to budding musicians. Today, streaming services take the place of selling records and musicians rarely see any return. One of his children is a drummer who plays with him occasionally, and thinking about his son's future in the music industry he says: 'I really don't know what to say, except you don't give up. You just keep on going. And you keep prodding and probing because that's what you do. So you keep releasing stuff.' Despite social media and marketing gurus offering strategic advice about how to promote their music, John doesn't see the benefit in that. 'My advice now, certainly wouldn't be to think tactically' he explains. 'You might as well just do what your heart tells you. Enjoy what you're doing now.'

All the hard lessons that have been learned in his over 45 years in the industry may help guide his son and also maybe some of those others that aspire to a career in music, but the real life lessons that he can impart may, more importantly, help others to simply survive it. His early days navigating the industry, liberally sampling easily available drugs and alcohol left an indelible mark on his life, and he now proudly states that this year he has been sober for 37 years.

Memoirs of a Geezer details some of the early excesses in his life and career including drugs, alcohol and violence, and reading of his exploits it's often hard to believe he is still alive. But he does credit his debauched existence to helping him see a way through. 'I'm glad for every drink and drug I had' he tells me. 'It brought me to this point.' And this point is somewhere that has allowed him to help others.

Along with fellow band member John Klein, formerly of Siouxsie and the Banshees, he has set up an organisation called 'Tuned In' whose goal is to help combat some of the issues of loneliness. 'I remember in those early days of AA, loneliness was talked about a lot' he says. He describes the 'aching loneliness' when you come out of a 'jagg, as they used

to call it'. He alludes to Ray Milland's *Lost Weekend* about a weekend bender that the main character in the book recounts. John remembers 'This horrible feeling. You've been in blackout, you're not sure what's happened or what you've said to people. You're very aware that you've let people down profoundly yet again, and you kind of really feel you're losing control of your life and your sanity.'

He describes the feeling as a 'very lonely place' and says 'that loneliness is one of the things that—partly in addition to this feeling of separateness from everything—is one of the things that defines humankind.' So when he decided he wanted to do something good outside of his music, he first flirted with the idea of helping people with addiction but realised there was much more to addiction than the physical side.

'Tuned In' launched in 2019 and is a project which aims to combat some of the issues of loneliness in the London Borough of Merton. The initiative hosts sessions that share and develop musical skills and build knowledge, as well as helping individuals build social connections and friendship groups. They create an environment for people from all walks of life to come together and enjoy mutual support. The project targets men, particularly those in the age group 50+,

where loneliness is at its highest, but it is open and accessible to all.

John plays down the reasoning behind setting up 'Tuned In'. 'I think it's a common thing as you get older. "Let's just try and do something good." I think it's a pretty typical thing.' He began to see a lot of older men that were starting to be 'left to one side somehow'. He could see that often they were drinking too much and thinking that life had passed them by. 'And they're starting to decline' he says. But he now enjoys hanging out there as much as anything. He describes it as 'like a kind of club—which is the antidote to loneliness.'

Working at 'Tuned In', touring with long standing band members, talking about his book *Memoirs of a Geezer*, and playing the music that he enjoys could also be seen as his antidote to the memory of an era that might well have wiped him out—in the same way that it wiped out so many others.

Along with 'Invaders of the Heart' Jab Wobble is touring a Dub version of the iconic album Metal Box at the moment with a gig in the Lighthouse in Poole on May 15th, 2024. For tickets visit: <https://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk/>

