

A YEAR OR SO OF LIFE WITH FAN CLUB

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I'd seen Wrist Action and The Rage at the Top Rank Suite but it was not until the end of the summer of 1978 that I got to know some of the characters that made up the punk scene in Brighton. I first saw Fan Club at the Basket Makers. Smeggy and the Cheesy Bits were in support. That night, the Cheesy Bits consisted of Neville on bass guitar and Zoot (from the Piranhas) on drums. 'Rod was a mod with his little fishing rod' was one of the more memorable Smeggy numbers. I approached the charismatic vocalist/poet and suggested that I could complement the band with my Jedson guitar. Smeggy (Gary) told me that the Bits (he and Neville) were splitting up but that Nev wanted form a mod band. Within weeks, I'd bought a two-tone suit two sizes too small. Nev and I had rehearsed the Who's Can't Explain, the Kinks' Till the end of the day and one of my songs. We struggled through the set, supporting Fan Club and supported by their fans at the Alhambra.

When Fan Club found out that I had an electric piano (Hohner pianet), I was invited to add some chords to one of their songs at a gig in the Vault. I'd borrowed my brother's Watkins amp, a huge valve-infested piece of furniture that Pete Smith found highly amusing. He had a superb pale blue teardrop Vox guitar and an equally sought-after AC30 amp. To my surprise Fan Club then asked me to play bass. I explained that I didn't have a bass and hadn't played one before. No problem. Dave McDonald had a bass and we plugged it into the Watkins. Pete Smith demonstrated bass lines on the guitar, which I emulated, and we were soon ready with a set. The Watkins survived only a couple of gigs before catching fire during a rehearsal in the Vault.

The Piranhas played a regular spot on Saturdays at the Alhambra, usually supported by the Dodgems, who shared our Vault at the end of the main Crypt. We played at the Alhambra on Thursdays, usually supported by the Chefs, whose set included the brilliant Cutie, and Thrush and a haunting rendition of Femme Fatale. Just before we played, Mark would usually pump Death of a Clown by Dave Davies and the Kinks through the PA. Then we'd probably begin with Deptford Bike Dollies. All the numbers such as Avenue, Night caller, Moonbeam and Cops and Crooks were Smith or Smith/McDonald songs, Although we'd regularly jog through a version of the Spencer Davies Group's Keep on Running. There was also a rhythm and blues instrumental to give Dave's vocal chords a rest.

Friday night was a good night to test the temperature at the Windsor Castle pub, where members of the Chefs, Kemptown Rockers, Accents or Molesters might turn up together with a selection of other punks or mods, who had yet to form bands. Dick Damage was the quintessential punk with a set of ear-piercings that seemed to need medical attention. There was a tall intimidating punk on whom I first spotted an APL badge. I have no idea how large or long-lived was the Anti-Piranha League nor could I understand its point. One little faction thought Adam and the Ants were the new Sex Pistols and another took up the cause of Rockabilly, later sporting flat top haircuts. The mods, having acquired the clothes, were turning their attention to the purchase of scooters. Despite the egos, the bands themselves seemed to get on well enough and, whether or not they were all strictly punk bands, each had

produced at least one memorable song. After a bit of philosophising on the sofa, a few pints and roll-ups, and with Elvis Costello on the jukebox, it was time for one last go on the Asteroids machine.

The theft of equipment from the Dodgems and Fan Club vault was a disaster [see cutting]. Despite the benefit gigs and the kind loans of equipment, no guitar could replace Pete's Vox.

On the 28th April 1979, the Argus ran an article saying where, when and with whom the two bands were playing. As a result the Alhambra was packed that night. The sound check seemed fine and Better Looking did a fine set but Pete was unhappy with the guitar, so much so that he refused to play to the baying crowd. In an act of desperation, I persuaded the Better Looking guitarist to join Mark Passi and me on stage for a rendition of Lola which didn't survive the first few bars. The audience got their money back. I thought Pete was being ridiculous and so I quit, besides my final year exams were coming up.

Fan Club had already been booked to play the Art College just after my exams. I was back. The Accents and the Vandells were on the bill and the headline bands were the Modettes and Iganda. For the gig, Dave McD wore his pink and black suit, which can be seen for a microsecond in the café scene of Quadraphenia. None of us had rehearsed and I had to ask someone for a bass. Pete was obviously happy with his guitar and I was overjoyed with the bass that Dave Barnard lent me at the last minute. It was a shortish-necked Fender and it was also green, which matched the shirt and jeans I was wearing. The stage and the crowd were the largest with which I'd had to cope but we seemed to blast through the set like true professionals. The success of that gig convinced me to play another date at the Buccaneer. It was not a total disaster but I hashed up Moonbeam. I partly blame John Helmer for this because he was standing right in front of me clutching a pint and looking intense. With no bass to call my own I quit again.

Thinking of my career outside the performing arts, I even turned down the offer to tour the North of England with the Kemptown Rockers and instead went to London. My last job with Fan Club (unpaid as always) was to drive a van to some venue under the West Way in London. My last sight of Pete and Mark playing was in the February of 1980, by when I had returned to Brighton and taken a job with Co-op dairies. I watched them and Dave Turvey do a set in the Alhambra. It included a song about remembering the poor milkman out there so early in the morning, in the cold and the dark.