

PART-TIME PUNKS

I'd always kidded myself that it was punk that got me started.

It was certainly the answer I gave in interviews when I was asked about the beginnings of my musical career. I even had a box of punk singles upstairs that seemed to support my claim, and if, when I did the sums and realised I was only thirteen when many of them were released, it ever gave me pause for thought and made me wonder whether I'd actually bought some of them after the event, well, that wasn't anything I was going to own up to.

It's not that the punk version of my story is a complete lie; more that it's a compression of a story that begins just after punk. It's a simplification of a truth that's a little more complicated than journalists tend to like answers to their questions to be; an acknowledgement of the fact that, if they were confused by my liking for punk, it would hardly have made matters easier to start trying to draw fine distinctions between punk and its immediate aftermath, or to define the precise delineations of post-punk.

In terms of chronology, a year or two either way might have made all the difference. If I'd been born a couple of years earlier or later, I wouldn't have been thirteen when punk happened, and everything that followed it might have just passed me by. Maybe being thirteen when it all began was the reason for everything. If I'd been born a couple of years later, I might simply have been too young to have been attracted to something so ostensibly dangerous and threatening. A couple of years earlier, and I might have been a year too old to have been so completely taken in by what could have seemed a mere fad, a musical novelty aimed at impressionable, easily scared children and their easily scared parents.

As it was, in 1976 I was almost too young. But not quite.

I grew up in the suburbs, in Brookmans Park, a little satellite town about twenty miles north of London. It was once a proper village, and during the war had been considered just far enough from London to be safe for evacuees. And so for my parents it represented an idyllic escape from the blitzed London they had both grown up in. In the early 1950s they had left Kentish Town and headed out to safety, away from the bomb sites and the terraced streets now riven with sudden gaps, to a classic little semi on an unmade road, with potholes that my mum filled every morning with the sweepings from the coal fire.

By the 1960s when I was born, Brookmans Park was still clinging to its green-belt status, while gradually and unavoidably merging into the rest of the homogeneous sprawl that surrounded London. By the 1970s, once I had outgrown the innocent attractions of fields to play in, shops near enough to walk to and quiet roads to ride your bike on, it represented for me everything that was suffocating and inhibiting about small-town life. Near enough to London that you could almost see



it if you peered hard enough down the railway line, it was just far enough away to bear no resemblance, and like other modern suburbs it turned its back resolutely on all that the city seemed to offer or threaten, depending on your point of view.

But growing up in a place like Brookmans Park meant that I was hardly at the epicentre of punk when it began. I wasn't really there when it was all happening, so why is it that my memory has fixed that moment in my mind as being the starting point and the reason for everything that followed?

To show you just what I mean about having kidded myself that I was a true child of punk, I will share with you some of the home truths from my diary for 1976. Granted I was only thirteen, and the diary itself is clearly a work-in-progress – the handwriting, for instance, going through dramatic changes as I try out different styles, slanting to the left for a bit, or suddenly getting very, very tiny. There are scribbled love hearts, stickers, extra bits of paper taped in with now dried-out, yellowed Sellotape and so many asterisks and exclamation marks it's like trying to read Braille.

But even making allowances for my tender age, as a story of someone discovering, and falling for, pop music it doesn't get off to a very promising start. In 1976, the number of records I bought was – seven.

'Rock On' by David Essex

The Love Hangover LP by Diana Ross

'This Time I'll Be Sweeter' by Linda Lewis

The Beach Boys Greatest Hits

The Eagles Greatest Hits Vol. 1

'With Your Love' by Jefferson Starship

'I Want More' by Can

Now, I'd be happy to hear *any* of these records if you put one on right now, and I'm not ashamed of them at all. But they are none of them quintessential punk classics.

I can find only four other mentions of music all year:

16 Jan – I hear a record on the radio by Nilsson and I like it.

3 April – Brotherhood of Man win the Eurovision Song Contest.

22 June – I am happy that The Real Thing are number one.

29 Oct – I describe *Songs in the Key of Life* as 'brilliant'.

Here we are then: 1976, pop's Year Zero, the year punk gets started, and I think it's fair to say that I am completely untouched by it. In fact, pop music doesn't seem to impinge on my life much at all. What this diary mostly reveals is that I'm more interested in boys and what's on the telly. School features heavily, of course. And the weather. The twenty-second of June for instance, is notable for the fact that I get 85 per cent in my

music exam and the summer is turning very hot. This is marked by a little shining sun around the date, which appears every day for three solid weeks. 'Weather STILL boiling,' I keep recording, with ever-increasing numbers of exclamation marks. This is the famous heatwave summer of 1976. But of the other famous events of punk's inaugural year, well, there is simply no mention. In February the Sex Pistols played at St Albans art college, just down the road. But I was apparently too pre-occupied with the weather forecast to notice.

In November they released 'Anarchy In The UK', and then on 1 December appeared on the *Today* programme with Bill Grundy and made pop history by saying 'sod' and 'fucking rotter'.

But did I even see it? My diary makes no mention of it, concentrating instead on the fact that I 'watched *Superstars*. Washed hair and had a bath.'

In 1976, the truth is I was not even a part-time punk.

But opening up my diary for 1977 is something of a shock. Sellotaped to the inside front cover is a photo of Johnny Rotten, and on the facing page I have written 'Never mind the bollocks . . . here's my diary'. I must have cheated and stuck the photo in and written that slogan towards the end of the year, because the first half of 1977 reveals no evidence of any such sea change having taken place. In fact, I seem to be losing interest in music.

Records bought pre-June 1977: zero.

Then, suddenly, it happens. Something happens. Number of records bought from June 1977 to end of year – eight.

'In The City' by The Jam

'Lights Out' by Dr Feelgood

'All Around The World' by The Jam

'Something Better Change' by The Stranglers

My Aim Is True by Elvis Costello
 'Gary Gilmore's Eyes' by The Adverts
 'Grip' by The Stranglers
 'London Girls' by The Vibrators

Other mentions of music between June and December that year include:

- 14 July – on *TOTP* are The Commodores, Supertramp and the SEX PISTOLS, whose name I have surrounded with a sort of starry biro halo. I describe their appearance as being a 'film of them doing "Pretty Vacant". Phew!' (I have finally had my socks blown off.)
- 7 Aug – see Sex Pistols on *London Weekend Show* – they are 'absolutely brilliant'.
- 31 Aug – 'Charts are really chronic now apart from Jam, Stranglers, Adverts, Boomtown Rats and Mink DeVille' (Right, so really chronic, apart from being mostly fantastic.)
- 29 Sept – I'm listening to new wave on *Your Mother Wouldn't Like It*.
- 20 Nov – listening to punk records on Radio Luxembourg.
- 10 Dec – see The Clash on *So It Goes* ('fantastic, I luv 'em').

So at some point in June 1977, later than I had liked to remember, but not so late as to be totally embarrassing, I discovered punk, and it triggered in me a passion for pop music and a record-buying spree which was new and obsessive, and which carried on for years. Up until that point I had only half cared about music, but this moment marked the point when

I changed – not as many of my immediate elders changed, from people who liked Genesis into people who liked The Clash – from someone who had barely noticed pop music and didn't seem to care much either way, into someone who cared about very little else.

Mind you, I should also be honest and admit that at this stage my interest was still largely that of your average hormonally afflicted Bay City Rollers fan – i.e., I fancied them.

7 Aug – ‘Steve Jones – CCORR!!!’

6 Oct – ‘J. J. Burnel is so hunky!! Luv his jeans!!*????!!**

3 Nov – ‘David Bowie was on *TOTP*. Boy, he's so hunky’

1 Dec – ‘Bob Geldof is so gorgeous’

And so on, and so on . . .

At this point I was simply having fun with it all in a quite uncomplicated way, still just a fourteen-year-old pop fan. Sadly this phase didn't last long, and as it began to occur to me that liking punk was, or was supposed to be, somehow different to liking David Essex, things got more awkward, especially at home.

It goes without saying that the teenage years can be ‘difficult’, and that problems at school and with your parents are perhaps more the rule than the exception – but even given all this, the period of punk, and of punk's influence, was a particularly problematic time to be a teenager. Punk demanded a stance of such antagonism and rejection (a 1976 press handout from the Sex Pistols has them saying ‘We hate everything’) that it seemed impossible to carry on being civil to your parents while claiming to like The Stranglers. The two appeared to be utterly incompatible, to a degree that I'm not sure has ever been the case since, and certainly wasn't before. Bear in mind, too, that thirty-odd years ago the generation gap between

teenagers and parents was a lot wider than it is today. It has been steadily closing since, so that now it is almost a cliché to observe that many parents like the same records as their kids and happily go with them to Glastonbury.

Well, may I just say that it wasn't like that for me and my parents, whose musical tastes were rooted in the pre-rock cool of Sinatra and Glenn Miller, and extended into the present only as far as the unarguable musicality of someone like Stevie Wonder. They had used to enjoy listening to me play the piano, and had no objections to my David Cassidy collection, but by late 1977 they were reeling in shock at what had happened to me.

I wasn't supposed to have gone to the bad like this; it wasn't in the script at all. I was the youngest child in the family, and like all youngest children, exploited my position mercilessly. My brother Keith had been born in 1953. Then in 1960 came my sister Debbie, after which my mum was abruptly informed by the doctor at the end of her hospital bed that medical complications meant she would not be able to have any more children. Two years later, in defiance of this inept prediction, I was born, though I did my best to prove the doctor right by attempting to die as soon as I appeared. I had apparently mistimed my first breath and inhaled a lungful of amniotic fluid instead of air, and so had drowned before I was even born. The midwife who delivered me, in the front bedroom at home, had been on a training course only the week before, where she had learned for the first time how to perform neonatal resuscitation. Presented with her first opportunity to practise her new skills, she gave me the kiss of life and saved me, though I would spend some time in an incubator at the hospital with pneumonia. It would be eighteen months or so before the doctors were able to reassure my parents that my brain hadn't been damaged by that initial lack of oxygen.

All in all, it was the kind of arrival likely to confer upon any child a special status within the family. Throughout my childhood this had worked in my favour, but now, as I entered my teens, the level of attention and expectation that was focused on me was all of a sudden proving to be troublesome.

I had always been bright and done well at school, along with being something of a goody-goody. I was chatty, too, and indulged, so when I rebelled against school dinners as a picky primary-school child, I was allowed to walk home every day for lunch with my mum – a special private time of our own, where we'd sit in the kitchen and I'd regale her with tales of the morning's events and entertain her with impressions of all the teachers. If I wanted the same food every lunchtime – a crusty cheese roll – and if I wanted to eat Jacob's Cream Crackers for breakfast, well, that was all right. It was allowed. Mealtimes might be punctuated with cries from my mum of 'Tracey! Eat your peas!' but it wasn't really serious. It was just who I was. The fussy one, the youngest. I wasn't really a problem. I was an avid reader, which also marked me out as clever, and that was to be respected. I had my weekly piano lessons, and impressed everyone with my endless practising and my jolly Scott Joplin tunes. Within the cosy structure of the family I felt central, liked for who I was. Special.

But as I attempted to forge a new and adult persona for myself, using punk-rock singles as a kind of catalyst to bring into being, with a lot of unexpected heat and light, a person who was ME, really, truly ME, and not just a mini-version of my parents, the bond between us was stretched to breaking point. Having been chatty, I became sullen. Dinner-table conversation had always been light-hearted, never analytical, in our house and there was no tradition of friendly debate, so now if I disagreed with things my parents said there would be

a brief, terse exchange, the stakes would be raised within minutes, a sharp insult might be flung – ‘Fascist!’ ‘Ignorant!’ – and I would leave the room. Not a row as such, but an absence of friendly communication, which left me feeling unlistened to, my opinions worthless.

Instead of confrontation, I opted for secrecy. In a timid way I would make minor adjustments to my fashion style. On 10 September 1977 my diary records that I ‘changed my sloopy jeans into drainpipes. They’re really tight and straight!!! Look dead punky!!! Saw *Starsky and Hutch*.’ Then on 18 October I had my hair cut ‘all spiky at the front – looks punky’, though I have to admit I can’t find any photographic evidence to back this up, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if it only looked spiky up in my bedroom and was flattened down each time I went downstairs. Later, a proper confrontation would be triggered by a swearsy badge from Stiff Records, carefully hidden by me in my bedroom, and yet somehow ‘found’ by my mum. Her shock at my apparently casual reaction to something which was, to her, profoundly offensive left me wondering whether I truly had betrayed some kind of unspoken and universal value system, or whether she was overreacting.

As for the music emanating from my bedroom, it was beyond the pale. Nothing in life so far had prepared my parents for a daughter who suddenly loved ugly, swearing rock groups instead of Diana Ross. You can see their point, really.

When I was ten I thought my brother was God
He'd lie in bed, and turn out the light with a fishing
rod

I learned the names of all his football team
And I still remembered them when I was nineteen

Strange the things that I remember still –
Shouts from the playground, when I was home and ill
My sister taught me all that she learned there
When we grew up, we said, we'd share a flat
somewhere

When I was seventeen
London meant Oxford Street

Where I grew up there were no factories
There was a school, and shops, and some fields and
trees
And rows of houses one by one appeared
I was born in one, and lived there for eighteen years

Then when I was nineteen
I thought the Humber would be
The gateway from my little world
Into the real world

But there is no real world
We live side by side
And sometimes collide

When I was seventeen
London meant Oxford Street
It was a little world
I grew up in a little world

'Oxford Street', from *Idlewild*, 1988

GIG BUDDY

20 January 1978

‘TERRIBLE NEWS – the Sex Pistols have split up, torn up their contract, Malcolm’s quit and Sid’s in hospital with an OD . . . This is the end of punk, really.’

Whaaat? Hang on a minute there, I mean, it’s only just started for me! This is the problem with ‘movements’ in pop music – you’re forever trying to keep up. No sooner do you become a fully paid-up devotee of the latest craze than someone, a journalist usually, comes along and declares it’s dead. All over. I think my diary entry is probably just something I copied out of the *NME* and I’m sure it felt suitably apocalyptic to declare punk well and truly finished. Especially since hardly anyone I knew had even had time to get into it. And yet, did punk being dead make any major difference to my life? Not a bit of it. It had, as I say, only just started for me, and whatever you want to call it – post-punk if you like, new wave, whatever – it was taking me over.

*

The local record shops were still largely the bastion of greasy-haired, leather-jacketed Status Quo fans ('greebos', we called them), and even if they did stock the records I wanted – and usually they didn't – they were not appealing locations for a girl to hang out in. But in those days before internet shopping there was another way of accessing things that were unavailable locally, and so I started relying on the mail-order lists in the back of the *NME*, filling in tiny little order forms and mailing them with a postal order. Illicit-looking seven-inch brown cardboard envelopes would arrive at the door for me from Small Wonder Records. The Clash, X-Ray Spex and Patrik Fitzgerald singles arrived in this way, and seemed all the more precious for being so hard to come by.

If I was going to get out there and engage with this stuff, though, I needed allies. At school I made an effort to befriend the smattering of cool girls who wanted to go to gigs, and while I had reservations about how much I actually LIKED my new girl-gang, it was a typically pragmatic kind of teenage friendship: they were my friends because I needed them. There was Joanne, who I noticed had stuck some torn-out pictures of The Jam on the inside of her desk lid. There was Amanda, whose dad was a policeman and Denise, who dated Paul Young before he was pop star Paul Young. And Dee, who had unspecified problems at home, which led to our French teacher beginning every lesson by fixing her with a concerned gaze and gently asking, 'Are you *coping*, Dee?' We'd get dolled up in our skinniest trousers, outsized pale blue policeman shirts borrowed from Amanda, cheap stilettos and school blazers smothered with button badges, and someone's dad would drop us off outside Hemel Hempstead Pavilion, where, over the next few months, I saw Ian Dury, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Buzzcocks, Subway Sect and the Boomtown Rats. On one occasion we even managed to get

tickets to see The Jam recording an *In Concert* programme at the BBC studios in Regent Street. Afterwards I breathlessly noted in my diary that ‘Outside, Paul Weller and Rick Buckler walked right by me!!’

The school we attended was something of an anomaly, an ex-girls’ grammar which had recently gone comprehensive, which meant that although it was a single-sex school it was by no means posh. But, like most girls’ schools, it could be a scary place, with that intense, emotionally manipulative atmosphere that swirls around teenage girls. In the spirit of the times the gang I’d hooked up with could be bitchy in the extreme, and my allegiance to them demanded a shift in my behaviour at school. Up till now I’d always been well behaved, a bit of a swot in fact, but now I began to get into trouble more. My diary describes incidents of being sent out of lessons, or told off for ‘being insolent’. It was a continuation of the conflict at home – liking this new music seemed to demand that you behave badly.

I may have had qualms about whether or not these girls were true friends, but the alternative to hanging out with them was too awful to contemplate as I discovered when, in a momentary lapse of judgement, I agreed to go to the Knebworth Festival with a couple of boys from down the road. They had a car, and they were going anyway, and had some spare tickets, and . . . Oh, you know. It was a day out, after all. In the car the whole way there they insisted on singing along to a tape of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* by Genesis, while I scowled and made sarky comments. When we got there it turned out Peter Gabriel was on the bill, and they were beside themselves with excitement. Later on Frank Zappa played too, by which time I was more or less comatose with boredom. (Ironically, the day was billed as Not Another Boring Old Knebworth.) I only woke up at the end of the night when

The Tubes DROVE ONSTAGE IN A CAR! Now that's more like it, I thought.

In my heart I knew I needed to find a proper gig buddy – someone who wanted to go to the same gigs as me, but was outside the somewhat charmless circle of the girls at school. I wanted to be able to go out without having always to engage with the inevitable dramas and constantly shifting loyalties of the gang. As if by magic, the person I needed without even consciously realising it turned up in the unlikely form of the brother of a schoolfriend of my sister's. Huw was five years older than me. He wasn't at school like everyone else I knew, but was at art college studying to be a photographer. Old enough to have been following music since before punk, he had some perspective on it all, and was also literate and political. The girls at school didn't like him, were suspicious of him even, but that made it all the better. I found him interesting and good company, and for some reason he decided to take me under his wing. He'd been out to New York for a while in 1976 and had hung out with the band Suicide, and when they came over to support The Clash on tour, Huw went along with them and photographed the whole tour. In 1978, he started a local fanzine called *The Weekly Bugle* and, discovering my passion for bands, asked me to write something for it, and on this basis we went to gigs together, looking for things to review. We started out locally and spent a few evenings trawling round the pubs that had bands on – the Duke of Lancaster and the Horn of Plenty, but it was all hippy hangovers and pub-rock losers. We saw Paul Young with his group Streetband, and I succinctly described them in my diary as 'really boring', apparently not spotting any likelihood that he was destined for pop stardom.

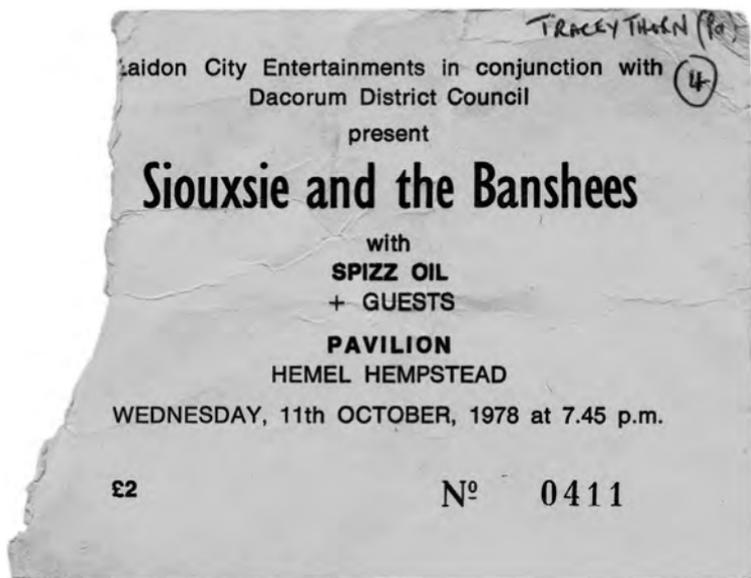
Because Huw had a car, we started driving up to London to see bands, and in their wisdom my parents had decided that

Huw was safe to be with, their logic being that the five-year age gap (he was twenty-one and I was sixteen) meant that he would look after me. (Huh?) There was some truth in this assumption, in that our relationship was never anything more than platonic and he never tried to get off with me.

Much more importantly, he offered me an entry into the world I was longing to be part of, or at least get close enough to look at – the world of London and bands and gigs. At the Music Machine in Camden, we saw Patrik Fitzgerald, who had come up with a kind of romantic/acoustic version of punk. It was unheard of at this time for anyone to pick up an acoustic guitar without expecting, and possibly deserving, to get beaten up, but somehow the very riskiness of what Patrik did made him seem truly punky. When Huw managed to get us backstage passes to interview him for the fanzine, I felt I was at the heart of urban hipsterdom – I might as well have been Julie Burchill interviewing the Pistols.

Over the next few months we went to an amazing series of gigs. When Siouxsie and the Banshees played at the Roundhouse, they were supported by Spizz Oil, who gave the loudest live performance I have ever witnessed, and which Huw, being something of an extremist when it came to things like volume, insisted we experience from near the stage, in front of the PA, where it was so hair-flatteningly loud that I was nearly sick. We saw The Human League at the Nashville, in the 'Being Boiled' days, when they were a very serious and theoretical concoction of post-punk electronica – the pop songs and the shop girls a long way off in an unimaginable future – and I swear that I stood next to David Bowie at the bar.

We went to the Lyceum a lot, usually to the Sunday gigs, where we'd lounge around on the greasy carpet upstairs, watching boys with mohicans slouching in and out of the



Girls' Boudoir (the ladies' loo). It's quite hard now to convey just how scuzzy and down-at-heel everywhere was during the 1970s. When you went to gigs at places like the Hope and Anchor or the Nashville, it really did feel like stepping into an alternative and entirely punk-designed universe. Maybe my impressions of this time were informed by being a nice suburban girl from a relatively middle-class home, but even so, in the decades before 'design' was a widely used word, or concept, it's salutary to remember the grubby grottness of it all. Sticky, floral carpets, damp dripping walls lined with stickers and posters, and behind the bar, beer on tap or spirits. I don't remember anyone ever having a glass of wine or a bottle of lager, and there was no such thing as an alcopop. Cocktails hadn't been invented. Everyone smoked, everywhere, all the time, and ate crisps and pies. Personal grooming came nowhere near the standards which are now considered the bare

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SUNDAY
JUNE

17

at 7.30 p.m.

Straight Music presents

THE CURE

ST JULY 7-30

Nº 238

This portion to be retained
[P.T.O.]

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SUNDAY
JULY

29

at 7.30 p.m.

Straight Music presents

The Pretenders

Nº 569

retained
[P.T.O.]

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SUNDAY
SEPTEMBER

7

at 6.30pm

Straight Music presents

Echo and the Bunnymen

Nº 1073

retained
(P.T.O.)

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8.00 p.m. (Normal Sessions)
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SUNDAY
MAY

27

at 7.30 p.m.

Straight Music presents

GANG OF FOUR

Nº 308

This portion to be retained
[P.T.O.]

LYCEUM BALLROOM
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8pm (Normal Sessions)
Telephone: 836 3715

SUNDAY
NOVEMBER

2

at 6.30p.m.

STRAIGHT MUSIC presents
BUZZCOCKS

Nº 1312

This portion to be retained
(P.T.O.)

minimum of what's acceptable. In other words, we were all a bit dirtier and smellier, as were the places we frequented.

The Lyceum was no exception, and despite having a sort of faded grandeur, it often felt like a decidedly dodgy place to be spending an evening. It also offered the most extraordinarily mixed line-ups: the UK Subs playing with The Fall, who got glasses chucked at them – presumably by UK Subs fans, who might have found The Fall a bit difficult and upsetting – or The Members playing with the Mekons. There was one night we went to where the billing was Delta 5, the Mekons, Gang of Four – plus The Specials. The Leeds University punk-funk politicos versus the heroes of 2 Tone in a meeting that makes no sense at all in the category-specific descriptions of the period, but which I promise you I saw. It was a memorable night.

I'd never taken much in the way of drugs before, my attempts to experiment having been limited to cough tablets called Do-Dos, which in sufficient quantity made you feel speedy; and also a small plastic bag of unidentified multi-coloured pills which my friend Katrina came to school wielding as a trophy following a backstage encounter with Velvet Underground survivor Nico. Not knowing what they were, she was reluctant to take them – my friend, that is, not Nico, who I don't think was renowned for her drugs squeamishness – so she sold them to me, and I thought the sensible thing to do would be to take them one at a time, so that any unexpected effect would not be too greatly magnified. For the next few nights I secretly took one each night at home, and I think they were probably barbiturates, as all that happened was I got a really good night's sleep.

But this evening, on the train up to town, I had taken some blues – speed in tablet form. At first I felt great, but as the evening wore on I began to wonder if I really liked this somewhat jaw-clenching experience. Was it my imagination, or did

Gang of Four sound even edgier and choppiier than usual? They seemed to be gripping their guitars as tightly as I was my drink. Were those Delta 5 girls shouting just a bit louder than was strictly necessary? And were The Specials' songs usually this bloody fast? Back at home, I sat up in bed most of the night staring straight ahead of me, counting every lost minute of sleep as the morning, when I would have to get up and dressed and off to school, loomed ever nearer, and my belief that strong stimulants were not for me became a firm and lasting conviction.

It's Sunday 30 April 1978. The Anti-Nazi League have organised a huge rally, kicking off with speakers in Trafalgar Square and marching from there to Victoria Park in Hackney, where several bands are due to perform. I have somehow persuaded my parents to allow me to go, so a group of us from school – Dee, Amanda, Kym and Shelley – are going up on the train. I'm wearing a dark blue men's suit jacket with badges up and down the lapels: TRB (Tom Robinson Band), Rock Against Racism and The Clash. Amanda is wearing her pink leopard-skin trousers, which I covet desperately. This is *sooo* exciting. We are going to see loads of bands we like AND stop the Nazis, all in one day. We go to Trafalgar Square first with everyone else and listen to some speeches, one of them by Tom Robinson. A steel band plays. Then we all start marching the five miles towards Hackney, a huge crowd, eighty thousand or so, though the figure will always be disputed by the organisers and police.

We get to the park. It's a very urban park, more tower blocks than trees. I've never seen a park like it before; it's a kind of punk park. We're just in time to hear the end of X-Ray Spex, and then see Patrik Fitzgerald. Before The Clash come on we try to get down nearer the front, but it's

difficult pushing through, and in the huge crowd I manage to lose the other girls. At first I think I'll spot them any minute, but as I try and shove my way forward we become irrevocably separated, and I begin to realise that I'm not going to find them. Suddenly I feel even younger than my fifteen years. I may have been going to gigs in London and experimenting with drugs, but this is only half of who I am. I'm not the cool girl at school, not at this moment, anyway. I'm like a very small child, peering through the grown-ups' legs, trying to find my mum and dad. All at once everyone else around me looks a lot older, and tougher, like proper Londoners. I'm only up from the suburbs for the day, and now I'm lost.

I decide to stick it out now I'm here, and stay at the front to watch The Clash. They're fantastic – I'm nearer than I've ever been before (or since) to Joe Strummer! – and I'm thrilled to be seeing them, but I'd enjoy it more if I wasn't basically feeling completely shit-scared. After The Clash finish, I make my way to the back of the crowd again. It's less oppressive here where it thins out, and I have another look around, but it's hopeless – there are so many people. I'm not sure what to do. Should I stay or should I go? I can't just give up, it seems so wimpy. So I stick it out for a bit longer, still half wondering if I might see someone I know, and only when I look at my watch and realise it's getting late and I need to get home by the promised time do I accept the fact that I'm going to have to find my way from Victoria Park back to Brookmans Park by myself.

Leaving the park, I tag along with the few stragglers who are heading off already – the show isn't over yet – and find myself walking towards Mile End tube station through an unfamiliar and scarily urban landscape. There's been a lot of talk before the rally today of possible violence from racist skinheads and the like, so I'm walking with my head down, eyes darting from

side to side, wishing I wasn't wearing a big pink Rock Against Racism badge. Can't stop and take it off, though – that would be pathetic. Others who've left the park at the same time as me seem to have peeled off in different directions, and I am now completely alone walking along Mile End Road, and while I'm loath to admit it, one of the reasons I feel so unsettled is that I am the only white person on the street. The shops are all Asian, as are the few people I pass, and I'm not sure how I look to them. Should they like me because I've just been to an anti-Nazi rally? Or do I look like a horrible little punk, of uncertain political views?

I get to the tube station, my tail between my legs. No one bothers me in any way, of course, and with the help of the Underground map that even a little suburbanite like me can follow, I make my way back to Highbury and Islington station, where I bump into Dee and Kym.

'Where were you? What happened?' they ask.

'Dunno, must have got lost. No, no, I'm fine. Yeah, it was great, wasn't it? Clash, yeah, brilliant!'

Can we just go home now, please?

You never knew the teenage me
And you wouldn't believe
The things you didn't see
Some pretty, some ugly
And the lovely mirrorball
Reflected back them all
Every triumph, every fight
Under disco light

C'mon, girl, it's all right
C'mon, girl, it's gonna be all right now

Well, I guess some boys adored me
But the one I loved ignored me
And caused me in the end
To murder my best friend
And though I got her letter
It never did get better
So I got out of my head
Then I joined a band instead

C'mon, girl
It's too late
C'mon, girl
It's too late now

Some good times I remember
My birthday that September
We lay down on the lawn
And counted until dawn
The stars that we lay under
And is he still I wonder
The fairest of them all
Mirror, mirrorball

C'mon, girl
It's too late
C'mon, girl
It's too late now
C'mon girl
Let it all go
C'mon, girl
It's too late now

It's gonna be all right
No, it's never gonna be all right
But it's too late now
Let it all go

'Mirrorball', from *Walking Wounded*, 1996