

Not-So-Rotten John Lydon Takes Band to Moscow

By [Sergey Chernov](#)

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John Lydon is bringing his reformed postpunk band Public Image Limited to Russia, its first Moscow show. **Paul Heartfield**

In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union was in the throes of rapid transformations, and John Lydon suddenly found himself at the heart of that change.

A year before the fall of the Berlin Wall and three years before the Baltic states became independent, a mind-blowing set by Lydon's post-Sex Pistols band, Public Image Limited, or PiL, at the first Rock Summer festival at the Tallinn Song Grounds, drove a crowd of tens of thousands wild.

The set included the Pistols' "Holidays in the Sun," and for those who came from across the Soviet Union in 1988 to what was then known as the capital of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, it was a day to remember.

Western acts had already managed to slip into the Soviet Union, but PiL's explosive performance was nothing like Elton John's concert of mellow ballads in 1979 or UB40's laid-back reggae pop in 1986; PiL was a game changer. Not only was the band's appearance absolutely of the moment, but it was also a rare example of raw rock and roll that flabbergasted the audience with its immediacy — it was a breath of freedom and a truly historical moment.

On Sunday, 25 years later, PiL returned to perform at the revived Rock Summer festival at the Tallinn Song Grounds just as they did in 1988, and for the first time will play in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod.

Ahead of the tour, Lydon phoned from his home in Los Angeles.

Q: It's fantastic that you're coming back to Tallinn 25 years after performing there with PiL at the Rock Summer festival, which was a breakthrough moment in the history of the Soviet Union.

A: It was still the Soviet Union at that time and the festival changed a lot. It spurred an incredible music movement out of that whole area. Many bands came from that and used it well, used the situation well. And this is basically what we are trying to do in the interior of Russia. Because you're still very oppressed, musically. You know, you haven't found your own voice, Russia hasn't found its own voice.

I'd been there with the Pistols, I was very disappointed with what I'd seen on the television and listening to Russian bands. They all seemed to be imitating Western acts, rather than finding their own culture. Which is PiL's job really. That's how we view ourselves, it's to open your minds. And after a PiL concert, you've definitely got an open mind — you see the possibilities of music, and it not being limited to cliches.

Q: It was totally unexpected, because people, of course, knew The Sex Pistols, but...

A: They didn't expect what they'd got! Let me tell you, with Mr. Lydon — me, myself and I — I will always do the unexpected, because I'll not stay with what we term the norm, normality. I'm out to change, a complete change, and continuously. My set of values are exactly the same as they always have been, from childhood onwards; I will not tell a lie and I will tell the truth. And I do that through music and word. The two together, you can achieve amazing results.

And Public Image Limited is an amazing band, I think probably the most influential band that I've ever been in. I've had a lot of negative press in the West and I've had to fight a lot of serious, serious industry battles to keep PiL alive, because the change we offer means we don't support the 'sh**sdom.' We don't support charts, we don't support corporate thinking. We truly are the voice of independence.

We cannot be coopted, we cannot be corrupted.

Q: Is it true that you used your own money to restart PiL?

A: Oh, yes! Any money I raise independently goes into Public Image. And so, in a weird way, any of the nature programs I've done — and I've done quite a few now — are indirect fundings of Public Image Limited, yes. So our main sponsor is nature itself.

Q: It is very interesting that PiL sounds so different from the Sex Pistols, yet it is still one and the same songwriter.

A: Yes, in as much as the Sex Pistols sounded very different from anybody else. This is an ongoing process. We are not scared to explore new territory, musically and verbally.

Q: Does this somehow come from your background?

A: Well, my background is impoverished working class — disenfranchised. I am one of those poor kids that come from those horrible council flats, them high-rise grey buildings. So I have an empathy for hooliganism. I don't condone violence, but I understand where it comes from, because I come from the same place — disenfranchised. People there have no opportunities in life. What I've managed to do is make opportunities for my band.

Q: Does your music owe anything to the fact that environment was multiethnic?

A: It was multiracial, yes. In my neighborhood we don't believe in racial prejudice; you're either a good person or a bad person. It is simple as that. Although that's very complicated in the world we live in.

Q: It is very different from Russia, where cities are less culturally diverse.

A: Yes, but you still had the extremely poor. Communism never brought you equality. It brought the haves and the have nots. Well, I am firmly with the have nots, and I will never forget that, ever!

It is very important to my whole character that I understand I was born into the civilization — and we are talking about the whole world here — where I was told I have no opportunity. There was no room for me, as many of my good peoples out there have experienced. And yet we are the majority. But we are the minority in terms of opportunity.

Q: PiL's latest album, "This is PiL," sounds great, and it's the first PiL album in 20 years. What's the story there?

A: Well, because of the record contract I was under, I could not release or record or practice live for 20 years, until I paid back some of that money that they claimed I owed them. That was very, very soul-destroying at first, but then I turned that situation around and I found it to my benefit. I could approach this slowly but surely and claw my way back up — out of the dustbin or the trashcan that the record industry tried to put me in. I think I've done very well. I am very proud of this album, for my mind it's the best record album that I ever, ever made. Ever!

And during that period we've also formed our own record label, so we rely on nobody for nothing anymore. Except of course the general public, who we need to start paying attention. Realize that one of your own can do it, so can you! You don't all need to be sons and daughters of the ruling party. The world is ours! We have the numbers and we have the intelligence.

I am a true rebel, a complete rebel, in that I do not back down from what I say, and have been to jail for this.

Q: That must not have been very nice...

A: No, jail is not very nice, but I am! I stand by my deeds. I've done nothing to hurt anyone in my entire life. Yet my words are twisted in the Western media — by people in power that do not want change.

Q: Was it a serious situation when you were discussed in the Houses of Parliament for "God Save the Queen"?

A: Yeah, it carried the death penalty, the accusation. It was under the traitors and treasons act.

[They stopped] because they were fearful of the end results. And they were wrong and they knew it!

Q: You dedicated a whole concert to the imprisoned members of Pussy Riot last year. What do you think about them?

A: Although I don't agree with destroying other people's property, a church is for the people and you should be able to do whatever you want in it. And freedom of speech is our greatest gift, the one thing that us as a human race should never ever rescind on. So for me they're very brave girls. True warriors. I love 'em.

I hope they come out of this very well. I had to. Over my lifetime I've had so many false charges brought against me. It's amazing I've stayed out of prison for so long!

When the system is out to stop you, because it's scared of what you have to say, then you know the system is wrong. And Putin looks very nice on a white horse! We've seen the pictures here in the West.

Q: They are laughable!

A: He's a very dangerous man to be laughing at! It's very challenging, going to Russia, because there's that threat of police violence against us, constantly. We know we are listened in on, we know we are spied on and we know we are monitored. And if we were to go out anywhere socially, there's that challenge there.

Now I had that same challenging situation even all those years ago in Tallinn. The same thing; they will not leave us alone, the police follow us around. It's very uncomfortable, but from my point of view, I look at it as a badge of honor.

Q: Back in the Soviet Union, the only British newspaper available was the Morning Star, the British Communist party's paper, and they seemed to support punk. Once they had a great Sex Pistols photo.

A: Yeah, but that made the problems worse. I don't view myself as a communist or a capitalist; I despise both systems, because neither system appreciates the individual. And so when groups like that use your photo and use your name and your reputation, they can be prone to a lopsided opinion, which is usually wrong.

Q: Interestingly, the Soviet Communist press saw you as bourgeois culture.

A: Oh yes. I've been closer to communism, than any other form. But it's not for me the perfect system. I can understand an alliance, but I will never take totalitarian dictate. Because I do believe in one man, one vote but there has to be someone worth voting for. Now there's the problem.

Q: There should be someone. There are a lot of people.

A: There are a lot of people and a lot of them are corrupt, because Western politics is extremely corrupt. It's all wealthy businessmen. Every single person running for power in every country in the West is a corrupt businessman. Big business is corrupt by its very nature.

Q: You came to the Soviet Union when it was first opening up. Do you now find Russia closing down again?

A: I am finding this around the world, actually. The politics of every single nation I've been to are closing their doors on us and closing down. When I say "us," I mean people who think openly and freely. But there's one major exception to this, and that was China, who welcomes Public Image very, very much. And China is very, very strict, it has very strict laws about what you can and can't say. Now they analyzed every single word I've ever written in any song, and approved. So there is hope for China!

It was an astounding, interesting political move for them, really, to let us in. And we've seen no police, no military, no bother at all. They just let us do what we want, and that was wonderful. The people were great.

Q: But they banned the Rolling Stones from performing several songs.

A: I would too, because they are [expletive]! They just want your money, they don't come from nothing but money grabbing.

Q: What do you think about some artists' decision not to come to Russia because of its worsening human rights record?

A: Here's my message, and it's plain and simple. I don't come to Russia to tell you how you should run your lives. All that I can do is offer you an example of how I run my life. And from there on in, with that information, you can do what you want, alright? I don't come waving a big flag and telling you to stand in line. When I talk about freedom and individual, I am talking seriously. Every individual will decide for themselves. That is my brave new hope for the future. And whatever political problems you have in Russia, believe me, my friend, you are not alone. Those problems exist all over the world, and I know it. I can't live in Britain anymore, because of police harassment. So I do know, I understand. As I told you originally, I am one of the people, I am one of the disenfranchised. And the powers that be, and they be the government and of course religions DO NOT LIKE ME. And that is fine, because I DO NOT LIKE THEM.

For me, no human being is my enemy, it's not possible, because we're all on this planet together, there is only us. And there's more of us, than there is the power of an institution. And by "institution" I mean governments! It's a very good philosophy to put into your psyche,

because this is how you erode these institutions, these dictates. We don't need them any longer, let's start chipping them away.

Questions are the most wonderful things. Delivered quite innocently, over time, questions become more powerful than bombs and bullets. Because if those questions aren't properly answered, you can see the flaw in the design. And any kind of dictatorship from a government or institution is a major flaw.

And I don't roll over and just accept that. Many people just go, "Oh well, that's the way it is, what can you do." You could do everything! To maintain your sanity is the weapon against the systems. To maintain your individuality. To educate yourself by listening and observing and paying attention and reading every piece of information available. You'll become a much more bigger threat to them. And one that they cannot eliminate, because you're too highly exposed. It would draw too much attention.

And so here it goes. The worse things they've written about me over the years, the better they've made me look in the long run. And it's very, very difficult to deal with some of the accusations. You know, they're government-led but they come through the media, and they're poison, and they really affect my family, and my friends and my culture, all manner of bizarre accusations. But I am still here, I've shone through it.

Q: What do you think about street protests, like Occupy Wall Street?

A: Fantastic! I was amazed by it. And I loved it and appreciated it. It had no one purpose; it had many purposes. And it was leaderless. There were no leaders spinning this. It wasn't the one-directional thing. There were many causes and disagreements and arguments that came together in one very large bunch of people. I think what they did was brave and beautiful. No violence. And they've achieved a lot.

And also they've achieved a lot of ridicule and hate and spite in the media, but that to me just made their cause all the more important.

Q: It was strange how the press ignored them at first.

A: Yes, fantastic achievement. It tells you that what they're doing is hurting the system. And all they were doing was asking questions in plain simple dialogue, "Why is Wall Street corrupt?" just being just one of the many causes. "Why are there no jobs? Why are hospitals so run down? Why is the education system so rubbish?" These are valuable questions, and thank you, Wall Street movement.

Q: From the Sex Pistols, your songs were political and still there are people all the time saying that music and art should be non-political and that politics are boring. What's your answer?

A: Very political. I try to explain it to a very selfish, ignorant media that this is personal politics. These are songs about institutions and situations that had no time or place for me, and so they became my enemy. And that's personal. I am not one to stand up there and go, "This political party is better than that political party," for instance, because my opinion of all political parties is that they're all [expletive].

And none of them, when you analyze their true beliefs and fundamental principles, care

for any of us. It's all about power, and power utterly corrupts. "Our figureheads are not what they seem." That's a quote from "God Save the Queen."

Q: Is there any solution?

A: Yes! Open-mindedness. And don't be anybody's cannon fodder. And don't believe what you're told by any politician ever. Ever. Because they never, ever, tell you the whole truth. They will tell you everything but the truth.

Q: What did you find interesting or unusual about Russia, when you came here with the reformed Sex Pistols five years ago?

A: Again, the police force and the way they wrapped themselves around us was very intriguing. We were treated like aliens — alien species. But it didn't matter. I think the audiences understood.

But it's time to move on now. And punk is not a cliché, punk does not belong just to 1977, it's an ongoing thought process. Constantly evolving and exploring. And expanding.

Q: What do you think about the commercialization of punk, about punk becoming part of mainstream culture?

A: That's for the idiots. That's for those that didn't understand that punk is not just about clothing style, it's indeed about an entire lifestyle change and to be ready and open to change at all times. We must keep ahead of the "sh**sdom" and not to be incorporated into it. Punk isn't just rock-and-roll or pop or any of them categories; in fact, it has no category. It is define-less.

I've been acclaimed as "King of the Punks." I don't accept the title, but as King of the Punks I would say, "F*** rules. Rules are for fools." There's no manifesto of how you should look and think. Think for yourself, then you are a true punk. And that is the message that I'm continuously trying to get across. Once you start to think for yourself, that is punk.

And let me expand that a little further. Not just think for yourself. Once you can think for yourself, you start thinking about others, and you start caring about everybody and everything around you. Punk has a great generosity in its message that unfortunately got co-opted by a lot of what we call "power hungry sh** cu**s." Bands like Green Day are a mockery of the things I began. They are big money and they are bourgeois bastards.

Q: What about their anti-Bush protest album called "American Idiot"?

A: That's their name. That's exactly what they are — American idiots!

Q: How do you feel living in the United States, in Los Angeles?

A: I love the people, I hate the politics. And this is what I find anywhere I am, in any country, in any society on this planet. I love the people, I hate the politics. I have no political friends, none of them.

Q: Over the years, you admitted interesting and unlikely musical influences such as Peter

Hammill — can I ask you about that?

A: That's not an admission, I am very open about what I like. I like everything. Everything. I explore everything. In fact musically, as I am socially or personally, I am an explorer. Not a tourist — an explorer. And so I will deny myself nothing. I see any work done by anybody as a privilege to observe.

Q: Do you listen to any new music?

A: Not at the moment, because I am heavily involved in so much work. To run a record label, do these interviews, rehearse, prepare for a tour and set up the next recording, this is a full time job. But this is a labor of love. And so I am not paying much attention to them, but God bless I love every one of them — even the bad ones.

Q: Thank you very much!

A: OK. It would be good to get people to come and see PiL live. We will open your eyes, your ears, and your hearts and your minds. Those are no words done lightly; I mean it. I stand by that. That is how Public Image is.

Well, let's hope the revolution will be televised. We know who owns the television cameras. And that's a reference to Gil Scott-Heron, who was one of those very important things to me musically. Similar spirit, mind and heart and soul.

PiL perform on Tuesday, June 18, at Milo Concert Hall in Nizhny Novgorod and on Wednesday, June 19, at Izvestia Hall in Moscow, 5 Pushkin Square. Metro Pushkinskaya. Phone: 495-364-0505.

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