

'Rip It Up' writer Duncan Campbell has just returned from an overseas excursion, which included a visit to London. While there he interviewed several persons

in the music industry. More interviews will appear in forthcoming issues. What follows is his first encounter, with music's *bete noir*, John Lydon.

JOHNNY LYDON

Monday, April 13. A lovely spring day in London. Sun shining, but the wind blows straight off the Russian steppes. Sitting amid the organised chaos that is the office of Virgin Records, off Portobello Rd.

International manager Lisa Anderson and pressperson Julie Bayliss are trying to sort out for me who is available and who isn't.

"Well, they're in Los Angeles now, just starting a tour. They live in Sheffield and never come to London. They hate the place. He's just rehearsing for a play he's appearing in. They're busy recording."

Things aren't looking too promising on the interview front. Tentatively, I ask about John Lydon.

"He's been hassled for so many interviews lately, he's fed up. We'll ask him, but we can't promise anything."

But luck, as it turns out, is with us. Half an hour later, in walks John Lydon, purely by chance. He agrees to talk, and we thank our stars.

Lydon looks pale and thin, ie: normal. He's tastefully attired in a blue boiler suit and is in good humour, exchanging banter with the office staff, who affectionately refer to him as 'Lotten', after an encounter with the Japanese media.

"I can hardly be open-minded. I think it's the best thing we've done so far, without a doubt."

John Lydon is an easy person to like, often brutally frank and a bit of a joker. He detests sham and pretension, and while his replies to questions may sometimes leave you dangling, he's certainly not an evasive or aggressive interviewee.

PiL's latest offering, *The Flowers Of Romance*, had just been released at the time of this interview.

Tell us about the new album, I suggest for openers.

"No," he replies.

All right then, don't, I respond, playing it his way.

"Well, what the hell can I say?" comes the retort, all in good fun we hasten to add. "It's just bloody great. It should be listened to, though, first. I can only say good things about it, can't I? I can hardly be open-minded. I think it's the best thing we've done so far, without a doubt."

"We've learned our studio technique now. We approached it ... not professionally, but we know what we want and we know how to get it," he grins in conscious self-parody. "We understand the workings much easier, and it was a very enjoyable album to make."

Flowers was made by Lydon, Keith Levene and Jeanette Lee, with Martin Atkins drumming on three tracks. With the departure of Jah Wobble, there's very little bass on the album. Levene plays it on one track, and Lydon bows it on



another. Jeanette is a long-standing PiL Corporation member, but Lydon is reluctant to talk about her contributions.

"She does the same as any of us. I hate working out the ins and outs of what each of us do technically, I think that's a bit silly. Because in PiL we all pride ourselves on being a bit multi-adaptable. I mean, if a situation needs something to be done immediately, any one of us can do it. As far as playing goes, we all just pick things up and bash them, there's no great technical musical ability involved, just whatever moves us, whatever is right, not what's technically proficient."

Percussion plays a major part in the making of *Flowers*. With the bass so seldom used, drums and percussion are required more to provide a rhythm. It's as unorthodox as anything we've come to expect from PiL, but it's surprisingly danceable.

"Nothing is worked out before we go into the studio,"

The discussion turns to PiL's approach to recording.

"Nothing is worked out before we go into the studio, it's made up on the spot," Lydon explains. "This makes it real good fun. If we don't particularly like something, we drop it immediately, we don't carry on with it. We have very little material that we don't use. We use just about everything."

Does that make for a slow recording process?

"No, it makes it very quick. This album took about three weeks. This time around, we started off with the drums. We took about two days to get a decent drum sound, using about 16 of the 24 tracks just for the drums. And once the drum sound was sorted out we just started from there, and did it song by song. We use very few instruments, we just use what we do use to the maximum potential. We just let them flow themselves, use the power of them."

One instrument PiL has been experimenting with is a synthesiser, largely built by Levene from various bits and pieces. The sound produced is not what you'd expect from such equipment.

"We don't want a mechanical, synthesised sound. We go more for sort of natural sound, and we use the synth very sparsely to imitate a natural sound that we couldn't get otherwise."

Guitar is also only a minor feature of *Flowers*, being used only on two tracks, one of them played backwards.

Lyrics evolve in much the same way.

"There's no set format. Some of the lyrics I'd already written before and just kept them, others I made up on the spot. Sometimes the lyrics were made to fit what we'd already recorded, and in other cases the words came first."

"There couldn't possibly be a format. If we approached things with a set way of doing it, it would take all the fun out of it. It would seem tedious, and I really wouldn't want to do it."

"They're either too over the top about us or too against."

So what were you after, musically, after the Pistols split?

"The way groups were approaching music was very limiting. There were traditions and formats that they were allowing themselves to be drawn into. We approached it totally opposite to that. There would be no limitations, there would be no set way of doing anything. No doors closed. And it's been very difficult." He draws the words out for emphasis.

"The prejudice you stir up in people, lazy people, can be very, very bitter."

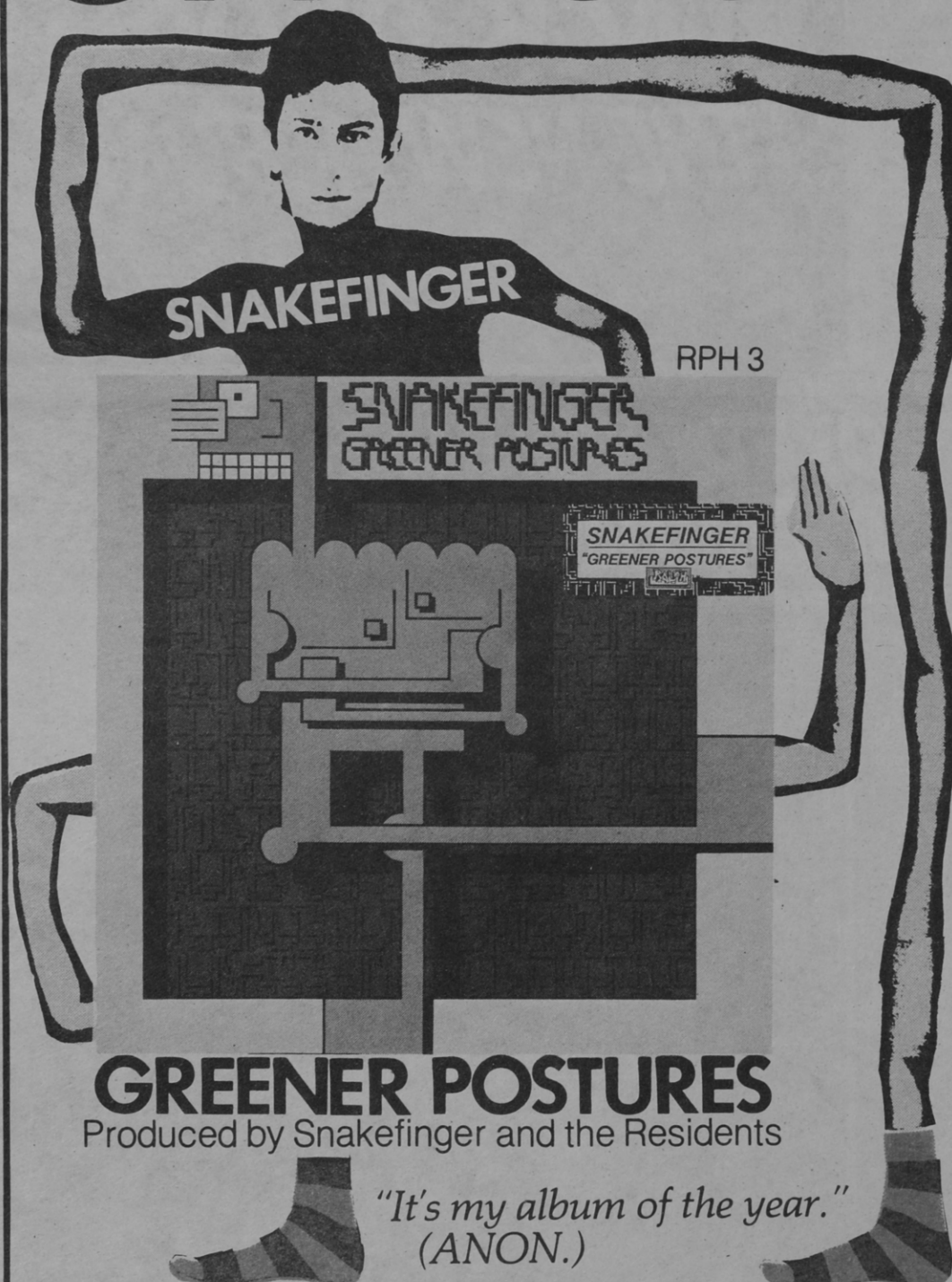
What sort of people are you talking about?

"Journalists, first and foremost. They like the rock n' roll format. Bands must have managers, they have to record at certain dates, they have to do tours, have to do this, have to do that, have to have a producer ... we just don't want to know all that, and we don't want to call ourselves a band either. We don't want to limit ourselves to just making music."

"To get journalists to understand that can be f**kin' difficult, because they need to categorise. Well, they do in England. That's the only way that they can approach anything. They have a standard way of dealing with music, and if you break away from that standardisation, you come up against some very, very nasty opposition."

And yet there are some sections of the British music press that have championed PiL extensively.

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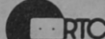
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