**Film review**

***We Are The League (How Deep Do You Want It?)*, Dir. George Hencken, Los Angeles: Cleopatra Entertainment 2018**

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With a world premiere at Genesis Cinema, Whitechapel, London in November 2018, part of the eclectically brilliant Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival – *We Are The League (How Deep Do You Want It?)* – was marketed as ‘a deep and meaningful feature length documentary about (officially) one of the most offensive bands of all time, the Anti-Nowhere League’,[[1]](#endnote-1) though in reality the film tells the story of much more than a punk group from a provincial town in the south of England, UK. In the Q&A session following the premiere screening, director George Hencken stated that she saw the film as an exploration of ‘male vulnerability’, and that sense of a darker, more reflective narrative underpinning the outrageous exploits of a group of young men, who stumbled upon a level of success well beyond even their own fantasies, permeates the film. This approach might come as a surprise to both fans and critics (of which there are many) of the band, but it does provide something of a plot twist that not only holds the film together but also offers a meaningful story to even unfamiliar viewers.

Figure 1: Anti-Nowhere League badge. Courtesy Russ WYD archive, Portsmouth.

The film opens with an aerial shot of the town that spawned the Anti-Nowhere League and continues to define them, Royal Tunbridge Wells in Kent. In some ways this is a story of a place (both specifically and generically) as much as it is the story of a punk band, reflecting the wider context of the provincial punk experience that was to become increasingly important as punk and post-punk scenes evolved and matured across the United Kingdom (Bestley 2013; Harvey 2013). Indeed, as Martin James noted in his critique of the growth of a local punk scene in the Buckinghamshire town of High Wycombe (2018), provincial towns with a geographical proximity to London and other major UK cities faced something of a double-edged sword, with early adopters travelling into the metropolis to take part in a centralized punk subculture often to the detriment of a more local identity. In turn, this can lead (as in the case of High Wycombe and Tunbridge Wells) to a heightened sense of local identity for the next generation of punk participants – what James describes as the third wave of ‘transivity’ (2018: 342).

Tunbridge Wells already had some tangential claim to punk ‘fame’ through a number of pub rock, proto-punk and early punk pioneers having a connection with the town. Pub rockers Brinsley Schwarz, featuring future Damned/Stiff Records producer Nick Lowe, originated in Tunbridge Wells, while Clash frontman Joe Strummer and various members of Nine Nine Nine frequented the town in the early 1970s. Rick Brown, an early collaborator with Mark Perry for *Sniffin’ Glue* fanzine, also lived locally, as did a young Simon Ritchie, who attended Sandown Court secondary school prior to relocating to London, changing his name to Sid Vicious and gaining international notoriety through joining the Sex Pistols at the peak of their fame.

This pre-punk history is not mentioned in the film, though the social and cultural context that is included does provide some insight into the lives and motivations of bored teenagers living in Tunbridge Wells in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Long associated with prosperity as a commuter town within reach of the city and immortalized in *Private Eye* through the stereotypical ‘disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ caricature, the ‘nowheres’ that the Anti-Nowhere League set out to challenge were at the centre of the town’s culture and embedded in local systems of authority. In much the same way that the dark heart of suburbia behind picket fences and net curtains was illuminated by the Bromley Contingent and the Sex Pistols in the United Kingdom or Dead Kennedys in the United States, the early ‘League’ were arch-satirists and provocateurs (Bestley 2013).

**Figure 2:** Anti-Nowhere League *c.* 1982 – PJ, Magoo, Winston, Animal. Photograph courtesy Anti-Nowhere League and Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival, London.

Interviews with members of the band help to set the scene. Singer Animal (Nick Culmer) is at the centre of the narrative, largely because he is the sole consistent member of the group over the past 38 years, but the back-stories and reflections of guitarist Magoo (Chris Exall), bassist Winston (Clive Blake) and drummer PJ (Djahanshah Aghssa, an Iranian exile nicknamed Persian John) offer a far more rounded portrayal of the group’s development. Promotional material for the film tends towards hyperbole:

*We Are The League (How Deep Do You Want It?)* tells the full uncensored story, in the frank and unapologetic words of the original members, of how a biker, a skinhead, a grammar school boy and a Persian exile with no respect for anything, no discernible musical talent and no ambition nevertheless surfed the second wave of punk out of the Garden of England, all the way around the world – and back again. (2018)

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**Figure 3:** Anti-Nowhere League lead vocalist Animal, 1980. Photograph courtesy Anti-Nowhere League and Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival, London.

While that is a reasonable summary of the band’s trajectory, as Hencken suggests, a more reflective vibe also permeates the film. Singer Nick Culmer talks at length about growing up on a local council estate in the late 1960s, largely ignored by his estranged parents and encountering bullying due to his pronounced lisp. He went on to find closer bonds through a local motorcycle gang, the Chosen Few, and spent his teenage years as part of the biker fraternity. Bassist Clive Blake was sent to a young offenders’ institution at the age of eleven, spending two years in detention before linking up with Culmer at the strict, disciplinarian Huntley’s secondary modern school. Meanwhile, guitarist Chris Exall attended the Skinners’ grammar school across the road, dreaming of becoming a rock star and desperate to get a group together – an ambition only heightened further by seeing the Damned play live in London. Drummer PJ had come to the UK with his parents as exiles from the changing regime in their home country Iran following the revolution and rise to power of the Ayatollah in 1979.

**Figure 4:** Anti-Nowhere League early line up – Animal, Magoo, Bones, Winston. Photograph courtesy Anti-Nowhere League and Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival, London.

Following a few gigs in church halls and community centres, original bassist Chris Elvy and drummer Bones quit the band, to be replaced by Winston and PJ. With an increased sense of momentum, the Anti-Nowhere League began to achieve local notoriety and set out to try to secure higher-profile gigs further afield. The unusual tactic of bribing members of the Damned to give them a support slot surprisingly worked out in practice, and they started to make a bigger impact nationally. Promoter John Curd decided to take them on, establishing the WXYZ record label and releasing their debut single, a cover of Ralph McTell’s ‘Streets of London’ in November 1981, backed by ‘So What’, a self-authored attack on the small-mindedness of the band’s neighbours and associates in Tunbridge Wells. The latter was to lead to a decisive shift in the band’s fortunes when the record was seized by the Obscene Publications Squad and the label faced obscenity charges due to the song’s salacious lyrics. Notoriety – and punk fame – followed, with chart placings for the ensuing singles ‘I Hate […] People’ and ‘Woman’ and even an aborted attempt to perform on BBC flagship pop programme *Top of the Pops* (1964-2006). The story of this decisive period in the band’s development is well-detailed in the film, with insightful and amusing interviews with band members and Curd, at times directly contradicting one another in their accounts. In fact, both the members of the League and their former manager come across well in the film, and any dispute between the two parties is treated with an ironic smile rather than any overt bitterness, at least on camera.

Damned drummer Rat Scabies offers an interpretation of the League’s appeal from the perspective of an already established punk group who by that time were in commercial decline, reflecting on their outrageous antics and lack of musical expertise. Perhaps more could have been said about the ‘second wave’ punk explosion of the early 1980s, where a younger generation of punks took up the reigns to revitalize (or destroy, depending on your point of view) the subculture. The Anti-Nowhere League certainly were not unique in this respect, though they did manage to develop a style that set them apart from their peers, largely through the very distinct individual characters involved. The press release for the film neatly captures this part of the band’s image, noting, ‘[…] they didn’t change the face of rock ’n’ roll but they sure pissed a lot of people off along the way’.

It would have been nice to hear from other commentators from that scene – such as the UK Subs, who were by that time an established punk force and accompanied the League on their first transatlantic trip to the US. The other groups in their immediate circle who shared bills at early gigs (the Exploited, the Defects, Discharge, Vice Squad, Anti Pasti, Chron Gen) could also have perhaps added more context to the story, as could Captain Sensible of the Damned, as much an inspiration and catalyst for the band’s irreverent image and troublemaking antics as Scabies.

Given the centrality of Tunbridge Wells to the evolving narrative, it would also have been nice to hear other voices from the town – from both within and outside the punk scene. The Anti-Nowhere League were to become local heroes to some, anti-heroes to others and perhaps an embarrassment to some of the more conservative elements they originally set out to oppose. Some of those perspectives might have given a fuller picture of the band’s local impact and legacy, though as with all these things, time constraints will always play a key part. On that point, it should also be noted that the film editing is outstanding here, giving the film a sense of continuity and pace that keeps the viewer engaged throughout.

By coincidence more than by design, Stewart Copeland – then drummer with chart-topping New Wave group the Police – decided to try his hand at documentary filmmaking in the early 1980s and filmed the League’s first headlining tour, resulting in a rockumentary entitled *So What!* (1982), a commercial flop that closed after one screening in New York. Some rushes and outtake reels survive, and footage of early performances at the Lyceum in London and other venues help to give unfamiliar viewers an insight into their developing stagecraft and style. Ironically, interviewed retrospectively for *We Are The League*, Copeland ruminates sadly on the way the band and their entourage refused to act up in front of the camera while offstage.

**Figure 5:** Anti-Nowhere League main line-up – Magoo, Animal, Winston, PJ. Photograph courtesy Anti-Nowhere League and Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival, London.

The film then traces the League’s ascent to the front pages of the music papers and into the charts through their recording of a live album in Yugoslavia (another brilliant and timely idea from John Curd) to their ill-fated third album, *The Perfect Crime* (1987), where the impact of too much money and too many drugs brought them crashing down to earth in a haze of hairspray, keyboards and designer outfits. The Anti-Nowhere League split in 1989, with a final climactic gig at a local community hall in Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, just down the road from where they had grown up as kids.

From there, the story gets even stranger. In 1991, rock supergroup Metallica decided to cover ‘So What’ and invited Culmer to perform it with them live at Wembley, his first foray onto the stage after several years spent in semi-settled retirement. Revitalized by the experience, Culmer reformed the League with Winston and Magoo, though touring and recording schedules were to eventually take their toll on a group of people with other commitments to work and family. Following another split in the late 1990s, Culmer continued with a rotating line-up of musicians, building a passionate and dedicated following around the world. The Anti-Nowhere League remain a fairly ‘underground’ phenomenon, but their reach and impact afford them a high-profile place on the contemporary UK punk scene.

**Figure 6:** Anti-Nowhere League calling card. Courtesy Anti-Nowhere League and Doc ’n’ Roll Film Festival, London.

Controversy did not fully go away, though it is unfortunate that perhaps the changing nature of the social context of the punk subculture itself led to the League being viewed as a little out of step with the times. One song from the mid 1990s, ‘The Day the World Turned Gay’, became retrospectively viewed as ‘problematic’ by a number of activists with social media reach, leading to protests at gigs and PR problems for the band. This issue is touched upon towards the end of the film, though Culmer’s position as author of the song and spokesman for the band remains broadly consistent – they set out to shock and cause offence, and still see no need to tread carefully around their targets, and the song lampoons a stereotype in exactly the same way as earlier songs such as ‘So What’, ‘Animal’, ‘Woman’ and ‘I Hate […] People’ took ironic aim at their intended targets. Live footage of recent gigs demonstrates their continuing appeal to different generations, while the singer’s reflections on his dual characters – as Nick Culmer, family man and businessman and as ‘Animal the outrageous’ punk rocker – offer the viewer an insight into his world that is seldom if ever explored.

At its centre, this film does go some way to reflect the director’s original ambition: it hints at the impact of childhood experience on adults in later life, in particular that first post-war generation whose parents were so greatly affected by their own ordeals growing up and who passed on some of that embodied trauma to their children. It may come as a surprise to the band’s critics, but there is a tenderness to this story, a fragility to the main characters that derives from early experience, and a sense of bonding between participants that should make perfect sense to provincial punks, and the baby boom generation more widely, in its enduring familiarity.

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Note

1. The Anti-Nowhere League were charged under obscenity laws for the lyrics to a song on the b-side of their debut single, ‘So What’. After being prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act 1959, police seized and destroyed all copies of the record from distributors and the record label. The band continued to court controversy with offensive lyrics and provocative statements throughout their career. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)