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'You Make Me Sick': An interview with Puss Johnson and Steve Eagles of Satan's Cats

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Formed in Evesham, Worcestershire, in January 1977, Satan's Rats released three superb but commercially unsuccessful singles in a period of a little more than eighteen months before splitting up. Guitarist Steve Eagles, drummer Olly Harrison and bassist Dave Sparrow then teamed up with Wendy Wu (Wendy Yates) to form the Photos, a new wave group that achieved a major label record deal and went on to a measure of chart success in the early 1980s.

Satan's Rats exemplified many of the core attributes of the first wave of provincial punk rock in the United Kingdom that sprang up in the wake of a media storm about the outrageous new subculture (Ogg 2006, Bestley 2012). Like many of their counterparts sharing similar origins and aesthetic sensibilities – Cyanide, Suburban Studs, the Jerks, the Cortinas, Leyton Buzzards, Killjoys, the Depressions, the Drones – Satan's Rats played short, fast, high energy melodic songs with strong hooks and direct lyrical messages. The group's trio of classic punk singles – 'In My Love for You' (1977), 'Year Of The Rats' (1978a) and 'You Make Me Sick' (1978b) – were to become highly collectable among punk fans over the following four decades, eventually being re-released by specialist reissue label Overground in the late 1980s and again in the 2010s.

Fig.1: Satan's Cats, 2022. Left to right: Dave Sparrow, Steve Eagles, Puss Johnson, Olly Harrison. Courtesy of Satans Cat's.

A four-decade hiatus came to an end in the summer of 2022, when Eagles, Harrison and Sparrow got together once again and brought in a guest vocalist, Puss Johnson of contemporary garage punk group Pussycat and the Dirty Johnsons, to re-record four original Satan's Rats songs along with a cover of Thin Lizzy's 1973 single 'The Rocker' under the moniker Satan's Cats. Released on their own independent label, Salamander Records, the resulting five track CD EP sounds urgent, fresh and contemporary, while retaining echoes of the late 1970s punk heritage of the Satan's Rats original recordings. 'Façade', the b-side of debut single 'In My Love For You' (1977), packs an impressive powerpop punch, while Puss Johnson reinvents 'Sex Object', a song that was originally released on a bonus studio outtakes disc with the debut Photos album, as a vitriolic anthem against sexism and misogyny.

Fig.2: Satan's Cats (2022), *Satan's Cats*, CDEP, Evesham: Salamander Records.

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Russ Bestley: The original Satan's Rats formed in Evesham, Worcestershire, in January 1977. I think you, Steve, were the one consistent presence throughout the relatively short life of the band, alongside singer Paul Rencher? Had you played in bands before that time? And was the formation of the Rats a deliberate response to the punk explosion (in which case you were pretty quick on the uptake)?

Steve Eagles: Well Russ, before the Rats were formed, I think I knew what I was doing on the guitar, probably a bit more so than many punk guitar players in the early days. I started young (aged 11) in 1969, learning almost exclusively Johnny Cash songs. I then played in a youth club band when I was about 14 or 15, playing the hits of the day (the Faces, Slade, the Who etc.). Then, just to increase my musical knowledge, I contacted a local music impresario who taught me to read music and gave me a job playing in his 26-piece Derek Bruce Big Band. We would play twice a week at Cheltenham Town Hall and the money was good enough for me to buy a decent guitar, a John Birch, bought from his workshop underneath the Rubery flyover in Brum.

By the time I was 18 it was 1976 and I was doing A levels at Evesham College. I hooked up with my old mate Paul Rencher and every Thursday we would get in the library and read the music papers from cover to cover. One week we read about the Pistols and the Damned... the Jam, Clash and Stranglers followed... and it seemed to get us proper fired up! I told Paul that I was going to form a band and that he just had to be the singer. Of course, he said that he couldn't sing but I just told him it didn't matter, and could our first rehearsal be in his dad's pub? A couple of weeks later 'New Rose' was out and it was on the jukebox in the Oddfellows Arms, and we had it on repeat so we could learn the chords... and we had a band, Sharpie on bass and Clint Driftwood on drums. Yes, we were quick on the uptake.

RB: Was there a punk scene in Evesham? Or did it feel relatively distant from the media-styled 'centres' of punk in London and Manchester? If so, did that lead to any unique interpretations of the 'punk' template?

Round Evesham way there was what you might call a rural punk scene and it seemed to happen overnight. For example, because there was nowhere for us to play, we hired village halls and put our own gigs on. The night of our first one, apart from about twenty bikers, loads of youths pogoed in, all dressed up in ripped t-shirts, or drainpipe trousers and skinny ties. I was flabbergasted to see kids from school that I hadn't seen in years embrace the new youth culture. Mad really, but I suppose throughout the '70s there was a new youth culture every five minutes. No one had access to Kings Road style togs, so it was a DIY look, wear anything basically as long as it was different... and a haircut was essential.

Of course, there was an element of jeopardy for anyone affiliating themselves with the punk movement. There were a few Teds about but not so many round our way, it was the disco boys with their wide flapping trousers that were the real danger. They just hated us, and a typical confrontation would go something like, "You're a punk aren't you? Well, I fuckin' 'ate punks and

we're gonna KICK YOUR FUCKIN' EAD IN!". Every threatening word uttered in the rural Evesham accent which seemed popular at the time with local dickheads.

Fig.3: Satan's Rats signing to DJM Records, 1977. Courtesy of Olly Harrison.

RB: Satan's Rats signed to DJM Records – set up by Beatles' publisher Dick James and, famously, the home of Elton John. DJM didn't really seem to know how to market 'punk' bands, though they also signed Rikki and the Last Days of Earth and the Fruit Eating Bears (who got as far as appearing on television with a prospective UK entry to the Eurovision Song Contest). Did you have any influence, or choice, in negotiations with the label? Was it purely a singles contract, or were you signed up to make an album?

SE: DJM offered us a singles deal and an advance of £6,000. We knew they'd be shit, we only had to look at our label mates Rikki and the Last Days of Earth, but they were the only game in town so we signed the deal. I think our managers got a local solicitor to look at the contract who probably told us it was terrible, but we went ahead anyway, we just wanted to record something.

By now we had Olly Harrison on drums and Roy Wilkes on bass and we were a good solid unit, but no sooner had we set up and played a song through we had Rikki – who had been appointed by the label as our producer – saying, "Hmmm, I think we need to hire a session drummer in"... "No you fucking won't", we said. The two-day session was difficult. We did come out with four finished tracks which formed our first two singles, but we couldn't help thinking that we had an amateur in charge.

Fig.4: Satan's Rats feature, *Pink*, 19 November 1977. Courtesy of Olly Harrison.

Fig.5: *Evesham Journal* article following a Satan's Rats gig at Long Lartin Prison, Evesham, Worcestershire, May 1978. Courtesy of Olly Harrison.

RB: The b-side to the second single, 'Year of the Rats', was a song called 'Louise'. The band re-recorded the song with legendary producer Vic Maile, who had previously worked with the Who, Motörhead, Brinsley Schwarz, Hawkwind and Dr. Feelgood among others, though it was again relegated to the b-side in favour of the perhaps punkier title 'You Make Me Sick'. Was Maile brought in to try to get that elusive commercial breakthrough?

SE: At the time, we didn't quite realise how legendary Vic Maile was, we just knew him as the guy who produces Dr. Feelgood and that seemed cool enough. I guess he was brought in to increase our chances of a hit single. Vic came to see us play at a local haunt called Tracey's in Redditch. We were chatting with him as we broke the gear down after the show. He said he liked 'You Make Me Sick', but could we change the words to something "less political" and he also liked 'Louise'. We said, "we've already released that one Vic", and his reply was, "I *really* like 'Louise'". So, 'Louise' it was and a lyric writing session at the next rehearsal.

We drove the van down to a studio in Watford to do the recording. Vic was a genius in comparison to Rikki and so everything was cool, we learnt a lot from that session. We were very respectful towards Vic and the funniest thing was as he was seeing us off, we all got out of the

van to shake his hand in gratitude but the look on his face was pure terror because he thought we were going to beat him up. No Vic, you were great!

RB: Within two years, Satan's Rats had split up, though three members of the band went on to work with a new vocalist, Wendy Wu, in the Photos. Did you see that as a drastic change in direction, or a natural continuation of the music you had been writing and recording throughout the life of the group?

SE: Our three single deal with DJM had run out and they had resorted to sending us demos of pop songs that even bands like Mud wouldn't touch. Then Paul left and it was a chance to start again. Dave Sparrow was now bassist and the unit sounded even tighter. Since the singles had been released, we'd made home demos of new songs and we seemed to be moving away from a punk thrash into a period of trying new things.

I was beginning to feel more confident about song writing and I felt I'd learnt enough in the two years that the Rats had been around to be able to knock together some quality pop songs. I was also mad on Dusty Springfield at the time and wondered if those type of '60s songs could fit into a punk/new wave setting. So, I fantasised about us having a female singer and luckily, I didn't have to push too hard because Olly and Dave were up for the idea too.

In the music press we learned of the break-up of Big In Japan and we thought Jayne Casey would be fantastic for us. We didn't really think it through, because Jayne was so obviously more experimental and left field than what our intentions were... but we drove up to Liverpool anyway, hung around Probe records until she appeared, went back to her place where she made us tea and cake while she went into another room to listen to our demos. She liked the songs but said she had just formed a new band, Pink Military Stand Alone. She said we should go later to Liverpool Eric's with her, and she'd introduce us to a potential singer. The potential singer was a guy dressed in a cowboy outfit; we chatted with him for a bit, but we really wanted a female singer. The "cowboy", I remember, was obviously gay (and we failed to remember his name) so years later it occurred to me that maybe it was Holly Johnson! Jayne was very sweet.

On the drive back from Liverpool someone suggested a young woman from Barbarellas that we had dubbed "Fishnet", because that was the sort of thing she wore, and she shone because she was loud and was always causing a rumpus. We found out that her name was Wendy, that she lived with her mum in Worcester, and she was up for an audition. The audition went well. We thought her voice had intimations of Patti Smith and she could hold a tune... Wendy was in!

Fig.6: The Photos at the Marquee, London, 13 July 1980: Olly Harrison and Wendy Wu. Courtesy of Steve Eagles.

RB: Puss – how aware were you of the history and music of Satan's Rats before teaming up to form Satan's Cats? You had already made a mark on the punk scene with your own band, Pussycat and the Dirty Johnsons over the past twelve years. That band continues to gig prolifically, so what was the appeal of recording with a different group of musicians?

Puss Johnson: I only really became aware of Satan's Rats when I started seeing Olly 12 years ago. It just seemed like a fun idea to record some tracks with the Rats when Olly mentioned

doing it. I've played with numerous bands and musicians of all ages and genres over the course of my 24-year musical career, it's something I very much enjoy doing and is my preferred method of connecting with people, so it wasn't something out of the ordinary for me to play with musicians outside of PATDJs. I've played with Olly before as he spent a year depping on drums with Pussycat and the Dirty Johnsons when our drummer sustained an injury and needed to recover from surgery.

RB: How did your own journey into punk come about?

PJ: I grew up and still live in Basingstoke, a conservative town with small town syndrome, so although there *was* a music scene it was a mishmash and not very imaginative for the most part. My dad was into old blues, jazz and 1950s rock'n'roll, and mum used to play music requests on BBC radio in the 1960s in between nursing, after she was sent to Brighton to escape the revolution in Zanzibar. Growing up, my eldest brother was a scooter boy/mod and played lead guitar in a few cover bands. I used to spend a lot of time in his room, breathing in second hand pot smoke and listening to the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Paul Weller, the Who, the Beatles etc. along with a lot of 1960s funk music, R&B and psychedelic rock. He was instrumental in me receiving my first guitar and pushing me to learn to play it.

My other elder brothers, twins, were very into hip hop and dance music – I won a talent contest at Butlins at around the age of 10 for breakdancing! So, I had quite a varied set of influences growing up and I still consider myself to be very eclectic in what I enjoy listening to. I do get ribbed by my band for some of the more leftfield, avant-garde, or as they might put it 'unlistenable' music I contribute to the tour van playlist sometimes. I started to teach myself to play guitar and write songs around at the age of 15, and at around 17 I was regularly performing at local pub open mic nights (quirky folk-rock acoustic type songs), which is where I was spotted by the Johnsons at the age of 20. I auditioned with them and took to the punk rock style instantly. I could also be heard over the loud noises they were making so I guess I passed the test. Obviously, I'd heard of the generic punk bands like the Pistols but I wasn't fanatical about the music despite everyone calling me a punk because of the way I dressed. The band introduced me to music by the Stooges, the Cramps and the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and I was sold on punk rock.

RB: The choice of songs on your debut EP is interesting. Along with two of the original singles, 'You Make Me Sick' and 'Year of the Rats', you recorded the song that appeared on the b-side of the debut single, 'Facade', an old song that never got past the demo stage, 'Sex Object' and a cover version of the Thin Lizzy classic 'The Rocker'. What was the thinking behind this choice of songs?

SE: The first Satan's Cats rehearsal took place in Basingstoke. We revisited seven or eight Satan's Rats tunes and on Olly's hunch, 'The Rocker' by Thin Lizzy. Those that sounded the most immediate we went with. Another consideration was whether the lyric content would be compatible with the modern era and did Puss want to sing them? Or could Puss change them to suit her point of view? 'Sex Object' being an obvious case.

PJ: We did change some of the lyrics to update the songs a bit and flipped the perspective on 'Sex Object'. It was also necessary to change the key as the original songs were a bit too low for my range to sing comfortably. After we did that, I think it all came together effortlessly, it was

fun and the guys are great musicians. Reworking 'The Rocker' was very amusing as the protagonist in the song is obviously a massive twat. We were joking around in the studio singing 'I'm a Tosser!'. Our version is very ironic, I really enjoyed singing that song.

RB: Is the 'punk' scene now very different from the late 1970s?

SE: From my viewpoint the punk scene in the '70s was completely different from today. Back then, society was different, the political landscape was different (although we seem to be regressing with every new phase of Toryism) and youth culture was different. To be honest, since punk ceased to be a youth movement at the end of the '70s and since the Photos finally split up, I've personally had little interest in punk music per se. I think I kept up with the Ramones until they finally bit the dust but by then I'd hung up my leather jacket and moved on (I did keep it of course!).

PJ: I don't know much about the modern punk scene (I'm 41). From what I can tell, the most interesting and exciting punk music is coming from women, bipoc and the queer scene. Also, with the younger crowd the emphasis seems to be of being supportive toward other bands. I think the mentality of band rivalry is kind of amusing and old hat to younger musicians. It's not cool to act like an arsehole anymore, which I'm glad of as it's something I could never stand.

Fig.7: Satan's Cats, 2022. Courtesy of Olly Harrison and Satans Cat's.

RB: Are female musicians in punk widely accepted, simply a common and unremarkable part of the scene? Or are they treated differently by promoters, producers and audiences?

PJ: It is still difficult to be a woman in any music scene. We still face a ridiculous amount of 'everyday' misogyny, from the sound tech to trying to sell stuff on the merch table. Being patronised, objectified, groped and even being stalked (cyber and IRL) is more common than you might like to think! Mainly by men over 40. Sexism so prevalent that you just suck it up and get on with it otherwise you'd be in a constant state of rage. We *are* all in a constant state of rage, under the surface. It is getting better though... albeit frustratingly slowly!

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