

JET BOY



The Heartbreakers with Jerry Nolan second left

The definitive Heartbreakers and New York Dolls story is out now in a great book by Curt Weiss. Joe Whyte spoke to the author about **JERRY NOLAN and discovered a tale of heroin, New York and so much more.**

If Steve Jones's 'Lonely Boy' was your punk rock read of 2017, this is the one you'll want to dive into next. Curt Weiss's book, 'Stranded In the Jungle: Jerry Nolan's Wild-Ride' is out now and is as comprehensive an account of The Dolls, The Heartbreakers and punk rock before and after as you're likely to find.

The story of The New York Dolls, The 'breakers and the subsequent careers of the former members is pretty well known; what is less of a familiar tale is the life of Jerry Nolan, the beating heart of both bands and a man who epitomises all that was good and bad about New York City in all of its trashy, grubby glamour back in the seventies and onwards. The city is pretty homogenised and cleaned-up nowadays and doesn't have any of the danger or grit that once was all too evident and while that's probably a good thing for property developers, it has all but removed much of the rock and roll allure. ►



◀ Jerry Nolan probably would have a lot to say about his adopted city were he still with us but Curt Weiss has crafted a book that is up there with the half-dozen best accounts of punk rock and its aftershocks and as a testament to a man who, hugely flawed as he was, drove himself and the musicians he played with, to places they could only have imagined. Of course, he also drove people away with behaviour that was conceited at best and suicidal at worst. His story is always tied up with his fraternal band mate, Johnny Thunders and it's fair to say that each of their best work was made together.

Weiss kindly spoke to VLR about this labour of love and his own musical journey...

What was your own connection to Jerry Nolan and how did the book come to life?

"The connection to Jerry is covered in the book's afterword, but the shorter version is I just thought he was a great drummer and a fascinating person with a rich story to tell. I'd seen hundreds of bands by the time I really connected with Jerry in 1980. Watching him play was such a revelation. That stuck with me for years. And I'd heard stories about him from the other (Levi and The) Rockats, and friends and I just thought he was one of a kind. As time went on, I realized there'd been books and documentaries on the Dolls, Johnny and Arthur, and combined with my own love of Jerry's playing, my background as a drummer and my experience in TV, I figured I could do it. I didn't think anyone else was going to do it, so it was mine for the taking."

Tell us a little about your own musical journey?

"At four I saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show and wanted nothing less than to be a Beatle. After seeing 'HELP!' I realized that being Ringo was the most attainable. Guitar was too hard and too many fingers were involved. Drums were just primal. In time I got more obsessed with music and ended up at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Besides the Beatles, and just about every rock music genre between them and '76, I'd also studied some jazz in high school, which helped me get into Berklee. But I hated it with a passion (Berklee that is. I only hated jazz somewhat less passionately). Some friends started talking about Blondie and Patti Smith, and I saw that first edition of Punk magazine, the one with Lou Reed on the cover looking like Frankenstein, and in it was also a cartoonish interview with the Ramones. I was intrigued. Then, I saw Elvis Costello and The Attractions on my 18th birthday which sealed the deal. I tossed my ELP & Chick Corea records and was hooked on Punk, New Wave, and whatever else people called it at the time. I left Berklee within a few weeks. Coincidentally, I worked at a restaurant a few doors from the Rat: Boston's version of CBGB. I saw The Cramps and The Dictators there, San Francisco's Nuns, and loads of great Boston bands. At the same club that I saw Elvis C (the Paradise), I also saw The Ramones, Talking Heads, Mink Deville, and on and on. Then Blondie came to town, and the opener was David Johansen with Sylvain in his backing band. This was just about the time DJ's first solo album came out. They were fantastic but they also did some Dolls songs: 'Personality Crisis' and 'Looking For A Kiss'. Now I had to find those albums. They were out of print but you could still find them in used or cut-out bins. Now I understood why they were so great, despite passing them by the first time around.

"In a few months, I figured if Boston was great, New York must be off the charts. I moved back in with my parents in Queens and started making forays into Manhattan with friends where I connected with a slightly older but still very young lady who worked at the Soho News. It was the hipper, but struggling competitor to the Village Voice. She was a graphic artists, stylist, and model. I pestered her for about a year until I saw her on the cover of New York Magazine. It was a story about punk rock, and it had photos of her and Jerry. Turns out they were boyfriend and girlfriend. I kept pestering her and met Jerry and the singer of his new band, The Rockats, who lived on their living room couch. I was working at a record shop and ingratiated myself by permanently borrowing quite a few records for them. In time I saw Jerry play in the Rockats a half dozen or so times, and got fully immersed in that scene. By March of '81, when Jerry's replacement didn't work out, I became their drummer. I was 21. The Jazz training and the early rock and roll learned by being a Beatles fan paid off. I could play rockabilly pretty easily.

"That fell apart by the end of the summer of '82. Then I joined Beat Rodeo, which featured former Suicide ▶





Above: Jerry playing with Henri Paul and Billy Rath June 1983 at the Kungshall Gothenburg

◀ Commando Steve Almaas. They were like the first punk band out of Minneapolis. When that died I made a record and toured Europe with Elliott Murphy and former Modern Lover Ernie Brooks. After that I played with an old pal, George Usher, in House of Usher. We got a publishing deal and made a great indie record called 'Neptune'. But I turned 30 that year and what was fun at 21, was not so at 30. I quit rock and roll, went back to college, and moved to Seattle in '91. I soon fell into TV, and have been doing that ever since."

The book is very much "warts and all" and Jerry (as well as a good few other characters) come across as quite unpleasant at times. Was it a bit of a wrench not to soft-soap the story or do you feel it was important to be as accurate as possible?

"I recently learned a new word: hagiography. It means a biography that idealizes its subject. I really don't believe in sugar-coating stuff. I couldn't just write nice stuff about the people I liked and slam the people I didn't. I wanted it to be credible, and honest. I suspected it would upset some people so I needed to have the facts on my side, which is why I researched the hell out of it. Jerry's story is a cautionary tale. He had immense talent, and because of a number of things, mostly drugs, never tasted any sustained success. But the drugs were really a symptom of other issues: abandonment by a biological father and then a surrogate father. He also was unjustly stigmatized as an 'other', as he was always the new kid in school since his stepfather was in the military, and they moved around a few times. The earliest drafts of the book had a quote from an author named Sara Bird: 'When you grow up as a military kid, the major experience, and very often unacknowledged part of that experience, is loss. Constant loss.' That spoke to me as very much at the core of Jerry, but he covered all of that up in a façade of 'cool'."

You mentioned to me that you'd had some resistance from some of the internet's self-appointed "guardians of the Thunders/Dolls/Breakers memory". Can you tell me a bit about that?

"There were a group of people that were initially supportive until they got a sense of where the story was going. They wanted it to be the story of a noble hero. That's a myth, like George Washington and the cherry tree. Too often, the facts told me otherwise. Jerry could be caring, friendly, funny, mentoring, insightful and loyal to a fault. But, he also used people, first to become successful, and then to meet the needs of his addiction. He robbed several girlfriends. He took advantage of his ageing mother. He turned people onto heroin. He could be boorish, to put it mildly. Those things are explainable, but not really defensible. If a junkie robs you, it's understandable, but it's still inexcusable, and reasonable that you'd want to cut them out of your life to protect yourself. But he was such a wounded person by his upbringing. And then once he became an addict, at his core, I think he could no longer face himself. He really needed deep psychological counselling, and luckily, he did get some near the end of his life, but sadly too late. He had many loving, and caring girlfriends, including his ex-wife Charlotte. But they didn't have the ability, much less the professional training, to deal with someone as psychologically damaged as he was.

"In the book, I recount the episode that got him kicked out of

the Ugly Americans, a band he and Syl had in 1989. They were playing in front of a packed house and Jerry didn't like the drum kit he had to play. But it was more than that. It was a statement that he was not receiving his just rewards as a former Doll, and Heartbreaker, and it was some sort of straw that broke the camel's back. He ended up just having a melt down on stage, throwing the drums off the bandstand one by one.

"But another thing is the compartmentalization that goes with being a junkie. Some people are charmed and used but kept in the dark as to the addictions. Others are fully involved, as they're addicts too. Others are enablers or sycophants. But there's still a hierarchy: men versus women; junkies versus straights. And what I've done is lay it all out for everyone. Some, including those extremely close to him, are aghast that they were kept in the dark about whole portions of his life. Some take it as a healthy opportunity to re-assess their relationship with him. Others find it easier to lash out at me. People are denying they were interviewed, despite the fact that I not only recorded it, but we exchanged numerous e-mails and documents. They're slagging the book, although they didn't read it. I understand that the truth is unpleasant for some people. I'm sorry that people had to find out they were just another person for Jerry to use or lie to. I'm sorry that some people might realize they weren't as close to him as they thought. But my job wasn't to perpetuate myths. My job was to get at the truth. To some it was an inconvenient truth, as they have an investment in keeping things as they were. But crazy me: I always thought a book was supposed to enlighten you to something new."

You had a lot of help and encouragement from a lot of people (Nina Antonia etc) - can you tell me a little about that? Was it difficult to reach some people that were connected?

"It took time to gain people's trust. Syl wasn't on board until about 2013. I think that's when the reformed Dolls were put to bed, and he wanted to take control of his own story, and decided that by speaking to me about Jerry, he could also start to speak about himself. The same with Jerry's ex-wife Charlotte. It took her some time. I can understand that. I was a stranger to her and it's reasonable not to blindly trust an unknown person from the get-go. There's a lot of complexity and nuance to any intimate relationship, particularly one that lasted 8 years. They got divorced in the end, and sharing the details of that involves dredging up a lot of painful memories. I owed it to her to get it right, even if it was not necessarily what she, or anyone for that matter, thought it was going to be. Heck, I didn't know what it was going to be until it all revealed itself. It makes no sense to decide what a story will be before you've done the research. That's why juries have to hear all the evidence before issuing a verdict. "David Johansen didn't respond for a few years. Finally, I tried for what must have been the third time in 2012 or '13. Like Syl, I have the deepest respect for him as an artist. I said something to the effect of, 'I need to close the book on research soon, and it would be a shame to not get any input from someone who worked so closely with Jerry and shared an experience with him as lasting and impactful as the Dolls were.' He responded and said to send him a couple of questions. I think his answers are some of the most thoughtful of any in the book."

Below: with Tony James in June 1982



Obviously, a lot of the people from that scene are now gone- who do you wish you could have spoken to (Jerry excepted!)?

“There were 14 people I spoke to who are now gone, including Marty Thau, Billy Rath, and Lee Childers. But the two I would have most loved to speak to are the obvious ones: Arthur and Johnny. Johnny is more obvious because their relationship is the storied one. But based on the interviews with Arthur in the film ‘NY Doll’ and his own posthumously released book, I think there was a lot of deep reflection that he could have articulated about Jerry as a Doll, during the years of the Idols, the Sid Vicious experience, and that tour in ‘87 with Johnny, Jerry, and Barry Jones. Johnny and Jerry had a lot of bravado and ego to them. Arthur didn’t seem to. Sometimes the quietest ones have the most to say.”

Did you meet much resistance or myth-making from anyone along the way?

“Richard Hell only responded after several e-mails, and his was not the most pleasant of exchanges. Robert Christgau was a bit cantankerous. I hate cold calling people but someone secretly gave me Steve Jones’s phone number, so I called him out of the blue. To my surprise, he answered! He politely but firmly said ‘I’m not giving interviews at the moment.’ It was almost a relief. But I know they spent some time together at Tony James’s place in ‘82, and I would have liked to have his take on all of that. Willy DeVille’s representative said, ‘Willie does not wish to speak on this matter.’ Bette Midler (an ex of Jerry early on) never responded to multiple requests. I waited for hours for Mick Jones from the Clash at a gig in Seattle. All he could say was ‘I don’t remember’ to all my questions. Lydon/Rotten was going to speak with me. I spoke with John Rambo, his handler, manager, security, whatever his title or relationship is, guy. He was pleasant at first, then lectured me about how the NY scene meant nothing to the Pistols, and in the end, he threatened me with ‘litigation’.”

What do you see as the legacy of Jerry in particular and his bands in general?

“Jerry, like the Dolls and The Heartbreakers, was about the trend to come. He created a drum style that was the template for punk drumming. He influenced Clem Burke, Tommy Ramone, and Paul Cook. Jerry and his bands were always ahead of their time. Bowie saw it way back in ‘72, and you can hear it on ‘Aladdin Sane’. Plus, if ‘Rebel, Rebel’ isn’t the New York Dolls version 2.0, I don’t know what is. They were the great catalyst of the NY punk scene, as much as, if not more than, The Velvet. They were loved by the 1st wave, Anarchy Tour punk bands, The Pistols, Clash and The Damned. The core of the ‘80s American indie rock groups loved them as well as many in the UK indie rock scene like The Smiths. Portions of their style were used by American hair metal bands like Motley Crue and Twisted Sister, then Poison, and ultimately Guns N’ Roses. All of that makes the Dolls as influential from 72-91 as anyone, including The Beatles, The Stones, Dylan, Bowie, The Velvet, Ramones, or the Pistols. They’re all in the RNR Hall Of Fame. Jerry and his bands aren’t. Well, at least that left room for Journey... (laughs)”

What’s your favourite Jerry record and why? What, in your opinion, is the best version of ‘LAMF’?

“Favourite is tough. ‘Trash’ is so great, as is ‘Showdown’, ‘Baby Talk’ and ‘Get Off The Phone’. But maybe ‘Jet Boy’. The build-up of tension and the release of that tension are stupendous. I love his stutter-step fills just before the band crashes into each chorus. And matching Thunders’ airplane dive-bombs in the outro help create as jubilant a record as any. It’s an awe-inspiring performance.

“Best version of ‘LAMF’? Frankly, I think they’re all just different versions of ‘bad’. But there’s an alternative mix of ‘One Track Mind’ from Advision studios, dated Sept 10, 1977, called the ‘dry clean’ mix. I think that’s the best out of all of them. Jeez, you wonder what could have been if they’d have gotten Steve Lillywhite, Nick Lowe, or Glyn Johns. Plus, someone that Jerry could trust and could mentor him. Oh well: C’est La Vie.” **VLR**

‘Stranded In the Jungle: Jerry Nolan’s Wild Ride: A Tale Of Drugs, Fashion, The New York Dolls and Punk Rock’ is out now on Backbeat Books