THE JAM

INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD LOWE

Virgin MODERN ICONS

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'I ain't rock 'n' roll. It's boring. Rock 'n' rc

Paul Weller

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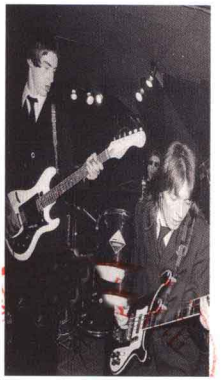

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Richard Lowe was a music and lifestyle journalist before leaving *Smash Hits* magazine, where he was Editor between 1989 and 1991. Since leaving *Smash Hits* he has been writing for a variety of magazines including *Q*, *Mojo* and *Select*.

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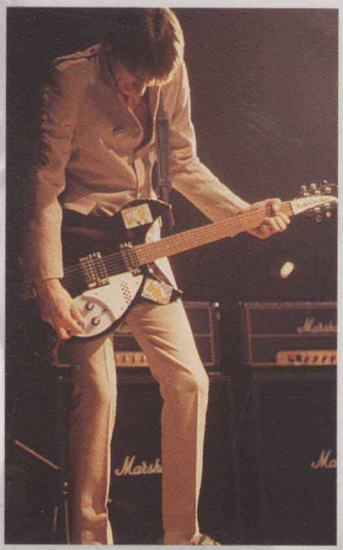
INTRODUCTION

The best pop music comes in hit singles, seven inch slabs of vinyl that play at 45 rpm and race to the top of the charts. The best pop music speaks volumes – even if it's indirectly – of the time and place in which it was made. The best pop groups are well-dressed, glamorous, stars; they have energy, passion and heart. And the best pop groups quit while they're ahead, go out with a bang, never fade away.

By all these criteria The Jam were the best. In five years, they released sixteen singles, all of them hits, most of them perfect. They played them on *Top Of The Pops,* decked out in their immaculate Mod finery, with a fury and fire that put the rest to shame. They said everything that needed to be said about growing up in Britain in the late Seventies – every teenage neurosis addressed, every statue kicked over. And they bowed out at the top, with an unstoppable number one single, the biggest band in the country, when their leader was still only 23. They were perfect. The holy trinity. Paul, Bruce and Rick . . . . The Jam.

Their origins were inauspicious. They were from Woking, a sleepy, dreary Surrey commuter-town famed only for having the biggest cemetery in Europe. And they were your typical schoolboy band of the time – a shifting line-up knocking out ham-fisted covers of 'Roll Over Beethoven' and 'Johnny B. Goode' in the school music room, scratching around for



opportunities to play to bored drinkers in the local working men's clubs.

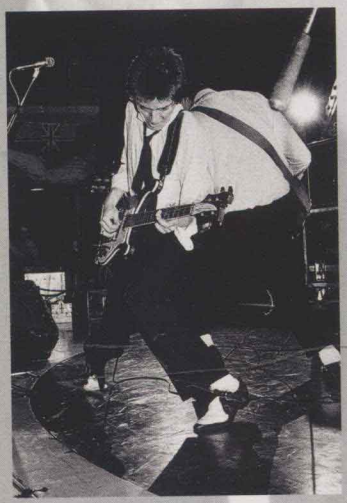
The difference between The Jam, and the hundred, thousands of similar schoolboy dabblers, was Paul Weller. Focused, fanatical, devoted – with a blind faith in his ultimate success that at that stage was entirely unfounded – he was consumed by twin passions, music and clothes, to the exclusion of everything else. He's not changed much since.

He was the school's sharpest dresser, a Suedehead with the full wardrobe of Ben Shermans, Sta-prest, Harringtons, brogues. He was also the most curious, most obsessive, music fan, a Beatles fanatic and a young devotee of the Northern Soul nights held at Woking Football Club and nearby Bisley Pavilion. Some time in 1974 he stumbled across a song – on his little sister's soundtrack album of the David Essex film *Stardust* – that blew him away. One listen to The Who's 'My Generation', that adrenalin-rush anthem of teenage arrogance and frustration and Weller was hooked. He was a Mod.

With the single-minded dedication characteristic of him to this day he explored every aspect of this long-gone Sixties youth cult. It didn't so much transform his tastes as crystallise them, bringing

everything into sharp focus. Suddenly there was a smart, aggressive alternative to the shallow glam rock that was the staple of the era. He devoured the mod musical heritage – The Who, The Small Faces, The Creation, The Kinks, The Action, Tamla Motown, Sixties soul – and set about moulding the group in the image of what he now saw as his direct forbears. He bought a Lambretta, a parka, the full uniform. In 1975 he must have stuck out like a sore thumb. Within five years a significant proportion of the teenage population of Britain would be trailing in his wake, sporting Fred Perries, bowling shoes and three-button tunic suits.

By this time The Jam had a settled line-up – Weller on guitar and vocals, Bruce Foxton on bass, Rick Buckler on drums – and were keen to make their way onto the London club circuit. It was here they came across Dr Feelgood, one of the mainstays of the then flourishing London pub-rock circuit, a slew of bands, who, in reaction to the pomp, pretensions and excess of 'progressive' rock, had re-activated good-time, no frills R'n'B. The Feelgoods were rough, raucous and frenetic, and their guitarist Wilko Johnson played with a fierce energy and skill that deeply impressed Weller.



These two profound influences transformed The Jam. They acquired their trademark mod crops, black suits and white shirts, Weller and Foxton bought matching red Rickenbacker guitars in homage to Pete Townshend and the fire of their playing set them apart from the tame, tepid acts who were their peers on the Surrey club circuit. They were ready for London. And they were ready for punk rock.

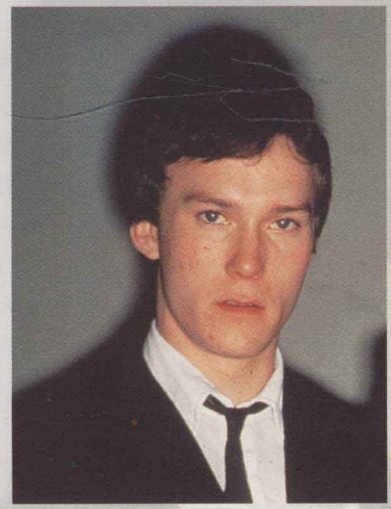
The blossoming of The Jam into a tight, cohesive, visually striking group with its own (albeit heavily derivative) sound coincided neatly with the punk rock explosion that detonated in London in 1976. For The Jam it was the final piece of the jigsaw: a scene of young bands playing to young audiences that they could be a part of, and an ideological movement that they could instantly adopt and adapt. The Clash's set was essentially a bleak commentary on contemporary urban life and a seething tirade of invective against those responsible for it – the teachers, the politicians, the police. Suddenly mewling love songs, no matter how furiously bashed out, weren't good enough.

The punk rock scene itself instantly inspired Weller's first great song, the soon-to-be abbreviated 'In The City There's A Thousand Things I Want To Say To You', and the Clash influence was transparent on other new (and rather ropier) additions to The Jam's set ('Brick And Mortar', 'Time For Truth'). Another, 'Sounds From The Street', was Weller's declaration of kinship with punk but hinted at the uneasy, mutually suspicious, relationship between The Jam and the punk scene, which might simply see the three Woking boys as frauds.

While punk rock derived its credibility from being the angry voice of the young working-class 'kids from the street', its origins were rather more complicated. The Sex Pistols, were, at least in the beginning, an art school prank, moulded and masterminded by a Kings Road fashion fop, Malcolm McLaren. The Clash were fronted by a man who, as well as being longer in the tooth than was appropriate for punk's primary propagandist, was both ex-public school and ex-pub rock. The Stranglers and The Vibrators were again pub-rock stalwarts who re-invented themselves overnight when they saw which way the wind was blowing.

Yet The Jam – genuinely young, genuinely working-class – and the punk cognoscenti were uneasy bedfellows. They were fast and furious enough for some, but too conservative, too rooted in the past in both dress and sound, for others. Weller took umbrage at this partial rejection and deliberately got up the noses of those he saw as phoney. The Jam stuck resolutely to their Mod dress code and spoke unapologetically of their love for the Beatles (a punk heresy). And Weller offended punk's political correctness by making tactless remarks about his intention to vote Conservative and laying benefit gigs in celebration of the Queen's Jubilee year. He later admitted that he wanted the trendies to hate The Jam – and he succeeded.

Weller's chirpy and contrary nature, his refusal to go with the flow, would become an important part of his appeal. Even when The Jam were the biggest band in Britain, with that rare combination of commercial clout and critical acclaim, he was still the misfit,



sniping from the sidelines at the fallibilities of his contemporaries. And in his first real masterpiece, 'Away From The Numbers', the highlight of The Jam's debut album 'In The City', he cast himself in this role. While the rest of the album adhered strictly to the punk rock template – loud, ragged Mod pop noise played at breakneck speed – 'Away From The Numbers' strayed from the formula. Originally conceived as a surf-styled song (vestiges of its Beach Boys influence remain in the cooing harmonies of the middle eight), it was an anthem for the wild-hearted outsider, a precise, powerful articulation of the individualist teenager's horror of suffocating conformity. While his punk rock contemporaries may have been making all the noise with their scattergun sloganeering, Weller was proving himself to have the sniper's sharpness and cunning. He just needed the single bullet. Straight to the heart.

'Away From The Numbers' was also a harbinger of things to come. A deep streak of romanticism and a penchant for maudlin introspection would characterise Weller's work from then until now, but it sat uneasily with the punk rock purists by now at the helm of the

music press. The backlash came swiftly for The Jam. Amidst the crashing powerchords of the follow-up single 'All Around The World', Weller expressed his contempt for punk rock ideology, and spelled out this hostility even more clearly in interviews.

Not surprisingly, when The Jam released their hurriedly written and recorded second album, 'This Is The Modern World', the vultures were swift to pounce. Although it had its moments – 'The Modern World', Weller's snarling put-down to any teacher, rock critic or anyone who had ever put him down, set to a riff pinched from The Who's 'Pictures Of Lily'; the two moody ballads 'Life From A Window' and 'I Need You' – it wasn't up to scratch.

And suddenly The Jam were in disarray. Critically savaged, commercially wanting (the Bruce Foxton-penned single 'News Of The World' had failed to match the chart position of its predecessors) and with Weller distracted by an obsessive, tempestuous relationship with his new girlfriend Gill Price, they set to work on their third LP. The set of songs they eventually came up with were rubbished and rejected by their producer Chris Parry. Weller admitted his ideas had dried up. But the rejection hit him hard and spurred him into action. His search for a new direction took him back to his heroes, in particular Pete Townshend and Ray Davies. Behind both writers' best songs was the same technique: the use of stories and characters to make social observations. After The Jam had swiftly whipped off a version of The Kinks's 'David Watts', a commercial stalling operation, Weller set to work.