



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDRA WRIGHT

# The Mancunian Affair

## (In Search of Johnny Clarke)

For no particular reason, I opened my eyes. Immediately, I wanted to close them again.

There was something disquieting about the sight which met my sleep-encrusted gaze. This was my room, my bed, my copy of *Roger Shepherd Sings Max Bygraves* dormant on the turntable of my stereo, my Oscar Wilde decorative lampshade ... all mine. But something was wrong.

I couldn't recall going to bed. How long had I been there? The previous night (nights?) might as well have belonged to somebody else for all the conception I had of it. I was rootless, dispossessed from my immediate past. I sat up in bed, trying, with a growing sense of agitation, to place my life in a chronological context. After half an hour of fruitless contemplation, I knew only one thing. The answer was not to be found within me. It would have to be looked for and I would not rest until I found it.

I swung my feet over and down onto my cat Rimbaud, who screeched and flailed out with a deadly claw which fortunately glanced harmlessly off a toenail.

Outside, the hallucinations roared past as they always did in the morning. Damn this living on

a main thoroughfare. Every night after the pubs closed it was the pink elephants lurching noisily down the road and in the mornings, streams of minor neuroses and paranoias on their way to work. Every now and then a huge articulated mass hysteria would creep past, flanked by minor delusions of grandeur with their lights flashing. At least I had offstreet parking for my own visions.

I rummaged among the pile of clothes on my floor, selecting the day's garments. My satorial identity has always been somewhat nebulous but I felt my smoke-grey tab-collar shirt and Ray Columbus autographed brothel creepers suited my mood of the day.

I switched on the radio in my split-level kitchen and there was a strange voice speaking. I was electrified. I *knew* that something in this Mancunian drawl held the secret to the puzzle in which I had found myself. The voice belonged to a man called John Cooper Clarke. A poet, they said. I bent closer to the battered Sony from which sprang his words.

"When I first started working in nightclubs my name was Frank Sumatra. I like people who are

called after countries - Irving Berlin. In fact, there's a geezer, a crook, in Manchester, called Jackie Barcelona ... straight up. And there's this pal of mine in London, who actually died a month ago, 'is name's Dicky Geneva.

"I don't know whether you ever got the *Psychle Sluts* EP over 'ere but at that time I signed to Rabid Records and I was quarter of a garage band called the Curious Yellows and we recorded that record originally as the Curious Yellows. Then I started to get a bit of a reputation as a poet and it became just John Cooper Clarke.

"I'm reforming the Curious Yellows because I'm really sick of synthesisers. The Curious Yellows were a very guitar-orientated unit. We've done one gig, actually, at the Futurama Festival last month. We were the only band there who weren't trying to sound like Siouxsie and the Banshees.

"It's not quite the original Curious Yellows but there's Eric Goldstone, who was with the Blue Orchids and with the Fall for a while after the Curious Yellows broke up. And we've got this French girl called Barbara who's an acrobat and fire eater by profession. But she plays

keyboards as well.

"I play guitar meself. I play on all my records. I've got a 1961 Fender Stratocaster, Candy Apple Pink. And *pre-CBS*. You buy a Stratocaster these days and you've got to go and have it repaired before you can even play it.

"There was three of us going through one amplifier - none of those miserable bastards would lend us an amplifier. And people were saying things like 'If you do gigs like that you won't have a career'. But we got a cassette and I thought it sounded fucking great myself. People are spoilt, they want a production all the time.

"We're trying to keep the personnel down to a minimum. I've been out with big, sprawling orchestras before and it looks awful on stage. Unless you all wear the same suits it looks rubbish.

"But we look pretty good, 'cause Eric's a good-looking guy and Barbara's really beautiful. And I'm, er ... not so bad ..."

At that moment a screeching siren broke into the broadcast - news flash. Mick Jagger was dead, murdered. I supposed that meant the Rolling Stones' New Zealand tour would be postponed again. It was, however, time to go.

Tossing a couple of raw chunks of TVP at Rimbaud, I headed down the stairs that led to my flat. As my foot touched the ground floor something gave and I fell back on to the staircase with a painful yet bruising thud. Rubbing my head weakly, I looked down at the cause of my shattered equilibrium. There lay, kicked across the floor, a tattered paperback copy of *I, The Jury*. Picking up, in turn, myself and the book, I looked at the back cover. "The best-known novel of one of the kings of crime fiction," it read. Those words, the cover illustration, the book's very weight in my hand, all seemed to signal the same sort of covert electricity that I had felt on hearing the words of the mysterious John Cooper Clarke, the poet, over the radio.

Clutching the book, I set out for the city's seething heart. For once, I knew where I was headed - The Palais de Books. A converted public toilet, used for some time as a convent, the Palais was set up by Bodge O'Leary, a man who had up till then made his living out of being somewhat overweight. It was the best bookshop in the country.

My reasons? I sensed that if one Mickey Spillane novel could act as a piece to the bizarre jigsaw puzzle my psyche had become then his entire bibliography might, just might, be pieced together to present some answers. And if I could find those books anywhere, it would be the Palais.

As my footfalls rang sharply on the green and white checked linoleum of the Palais' entrance hall I could sense something was up. In one corner of the huge store was a crowd of people assembled in a vague queue. Some were talking excitedly, others were silent but they all clutched books. Could these books be the Mickey Spillane novels I sought?

Elbowing a small child out of the way, I peered through the crowd to see what the cause of the excitement was. What I saw I could not have anticipated in my wildest dreams.

Behind a pair of sunglasses there stood a man signing the inside covers of the books that people handed to him. He was thin, painfully so, and his hair was thick and dishevelled, as if it had tried to make good its escape up and away from its owner but had been foiled by gravity and sunk back into semi-tumescence. But the thing that really set him apart from the crowd was his attire. A narrow blue suit hugged his contours as if it was organic and had grown with him since birth. He wore a narrow black tie and a white shirt. Could this be Mickey Spillane? I asked the man standing next to me. He looked at me quizzically.

"No, that's John Cooper Clarke. The poet."

John Cooper Clarke! The poet! For the second time that day I had heard that name. I could see this mysterious matchstick man's lips moving as he signed books. I craned forward to hear his words:

"I think there's a large proportion of the audience wanna

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

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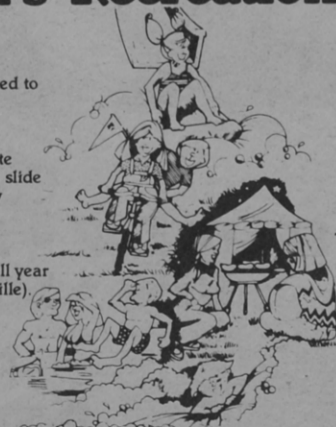
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