

# U.K. SUBS



PHOTO: RICK LENNICK

by Boz

The mighty U.K. Subs played Finders back in January. They kicked ass! The audience kicked ass! Everyone kicked ass that night... One of the best shows I've ever seen down here. The Subs did tons of songs, many of which I was unfamiliar with. The newer songs were just as good as their old hits like "Tomorrow's Girls," "CID," and "Party in Paris." Their stage presence came off as being really sincere and convincing, and Charlie Harper even did a quick stage dive. Great fun! The following interview was conducted before the show in two segments. The first half was done with Alvin Gibbs (bass guitarist), while the second half was done with Charlie Harper (lead singer, in case you didn't already know). Denise Wysocki helped out with the questions here. Erick Watkins was also around. All of the Subs were very helpful and friendly...

Key: A-(Alvin), C-(Charlie), D-(Denise), and SR-(me).



# PART ONE: Alvin Gibbs

SR: When did you first get involved with the band?—I know you weren't involved originally.

A: I got into the band just under 3 years ago. I'd been playing with Kim in a band called The Brains, which was Brian James' band. Basically, how I got into the Subs was that Kim got the sack from Brian for political reasons... as opposed to the fact he wasn't playing well, or stuff like that. I sort of stood up to Brian and Kim said to me, "It's really good, you standing up for me, I think we should get out of the Brains anyway cause they're a bad band..." Then about 2 weeks later I got a phone call at about 3 A.M. It was Nicky Garratt saying "...we just sacked our drummer and bass player and we've got a replacement drummer, but we need a bass player—are you interested?" I said Yeah! and lo and behold, I managed to get a gig.

SR: Do you guys like being labeled a punk band?

A: I don't really like labels myself, but I mean sometimes they're useful. Basically we're a punk band because that's our background.

SR: Since you've obviously been around since the old days of punk, how have the audiences changed?

A: In the very early days, I was interested from the word go. I mean, I went out and bought "New Rose" the moment it came out... It was very exciting cause it was a brand new movement and it was like the old order was being disposed of, and a new order was coming about. New stars were emerging and people who were nobodies a few weeks before were becoming stars. There was a lot of opportunity to get in a band and play because the punk thing eradicated the idea of having to be a particularly capable musician.

As long as you had the right attitude you could be in a band—that's what it was all about. Also, people were very adventurous. The bands that were around were not very similar; the bands were very diverse. I mean, the Buzzcocks were as different from the Clash as the Clash were from the Sex Pistols... It was the same attitude but the music was very diverse. Whereas, nowadays it seems that punk bands in Britain and the United States have sort of rounded out and become very similar and sort of samely... they've become like sheep, all sort of follow the leader.

SR: Would you say the punk bands of today have become just like the old order that the original punks replaced?

A: Very much so. It's become stale. It was very enthusiastic and exciting in the early days, whereas now if you go to a punk gig there's overtones of a kind of...

a ritual to it... people going through the motions... it's pretty down.

SR: How do we get away from that?

A: I think it's much more important for people to try to do something of their own and to bring a character to their performance, rather than to be just another punk band. There are so many bands that want to be the Exploited in Britain. It's just unbelievable! It's changing a bit now, but a year ago it was even worse. People weren't prepared to try to add a different dimension to their music. They were just copyists. Unfortunately, it became some kind of inverted snobbery: If you didn't have the certain requirements, then you weren't really punk. If you weren't wearing Doc Martins and a leather jacket with GBH written on it, then you weren't really a punk—and that was crazy actually.

SR: When I was in London the thing that I really noticed was how fashion-conscious the punks are over there.

A: That's right. They seem to be more interested in looking around and seeing what other people are wearing. The whole thing about punk is attitude... the whole thing is an attitude. It's an attitude that's not just prevalent in punk music, but all good music... like the Who in their early days... a kind of edge, an aggressive artistic aggression, if you know what I mean. Aggressive not in a stupid, thick moronic way. But aggressive in a kind of style way, and that was very true in the early punk bands.

SR: What about oi bands?

A: That's an invention of a British journalist, Gary Bushell. It doesn't mean anything to me, it's just adding more labels to an increasing number of labels. Oi bands, it's just so thick and stupid. I mean, just the connotation "oi bands" ... it doesn't sound too intelligent... it's just thick shit.

SR: What about the "Keep On Running" single, the sleeve seemed to catch some people off guard?

A: Well, the reason behind that was because it became quite expected of us to project a certain image, and to talk about certain things. We thought "Keep On Running" is a good song and we'll see if people accept it as a good song, and we thought we'd go the whole way and put a photo on the front that's classy. That's not what's expected of us and we went ahead and did it... It was really funny you know, everybody was going "Oh, you are trying to be Duran Duran" but it was obvious from the music we weren't. It was great! The more people that came up and were thrown by it, the more pleased I was.

# PART TWO: Charlie Harper

SR: How much longer will the Subs continue?

C: One or two years. We've been going on for 5 years... but after 2 years, I'll be about 40.

SR: So how old are you then?

C: I'm 38.

SR: Is it true you're also a hairdresser?

C: I used to be.

SR: Was that right before the Subs started?

C: Yeah.

SR: How have the audiences changed through the years?

C: Not alot, except for when we first started we used to do alot of pubs and clubs, so the audiences were older and by now the audiences are alot younger, which is another... see, we're getting very old and the audiences are getting very young...

SR: Do you find England more fashion-conscious than America or vice versa?

C: Yes, England is. You have mohicans. In England, you get yourself in such a state where the straight world won't touch you. You have blue mohicans, pink and green hair and stuff... whereas you don't get a job unless it's in the music industry or something like that.

SR: What other differences have you noticed between the two as far as the bands, music, kids, and attitudes?

C: Actually, it's a little bit more honest over here where there's a big thing about how you don't need any fashion, it is a state of mind, and that is first and foremost, which is pretty good.

D: Have you been to the west coast?



C: Yeah.  
D: Seen any bands over there?  
C: Yeah, there's quite a few bands. Most of them are pretty good. What I did notice is like from the last time I came over I saw only one or two decent bands, the Effigies were one. This time the bands that played with us were pretty good. You've got some pretty good bands over here.  
SR: Any favorites that you enjoyed playing with here?  
C: Battalion of Saints, Toxic Reasons... there were quite a few.  
SR: Which English bands do you enjoy playing with?  
C: Ummm... a group called Rubella Ballet, which is a girl band. Let's see... there's a few... ummm, you know... I've been over here so long I've almost forgotten almost everything about England.  
SR: What's going on with the Urban Dogs?  
C: When we get back... this tour has been extended for another 2 weeks just like to make the tour pay... that might coincide with the Urban Dogs album coming out, and I know for a fact we're not all going back to England... Alvin's staying out here cause he married a girl from San Francisco and... well, there will probably be a European tour for the U.K. Subs. As long as the U.K. Subs are working; it's when they're not working that I get distracted by things like the Urban Dogs.  
SR: Is that a sideline thing you do for fun?  
C: Exactly.  
SR: So what are most of your songs about?  
C: I can be talking to someone in a bar, talking about a sensitive subject, and if it's interesting I can make a whole song about it. It could be something someone says or something flashes through my head... It can be anything.  
D: But lyrically do you write more from imagination or from personal experience?  
C: Much more from personal experience.  
SR: Do you and Nicky write most of the songs?  
C: We do, but Alvin's been writing some of the stuff.  
SR: Would you say punk rock is more than just entertainment or not?  
C: Yeah, that's the good thing about it. It's not only entertainment. It's a way of life. It's an attitude to life... an attitude towards social behavior. There's a million things you can get out of punk rock.  
D: Well don't you think a lot of the British bands have a political message and try to shove it down your throat and keep repeating it as a theme in their songs?  
C: Sure. We have done that at one time, like Nicky turned around to me and said, "Can't you write anything else except anti-police songs?" I'm comfortable writing anti-police songs (laughs) because when you're in trouble with the police it becomes a part of your life and I keep saying that next time I'm stopped I'm going to do a vicious anti-police song... you just feel hateful...  
D: Do they really hassle you personally, like when they recognize you?  
C: No. When I'm recognized they're great to me. It's just that when I'm not recognized I'm just another punk.  
D: Well, don't you feel that's an unfair attitude?  
C: Yeah, it's very unfair.  
SR: How are the cops over there since they don't have guns?  
C: I'll tell you, when we were in L.A. a cop car pulls up and there's one cop in the car, right, and we were going back to our gig. The cop gets out of his car and there's these punks, and he goes over to this Mexican and he frisks him like... now if that was in London, he'd have trouble being on his own like that with so many people in the street. Over here, because he's got a gun I suppose he's safe. It just bewildered me. And then I thought: He's got his gun...  
D: But do you think the police use more physical violence, like night sticks and thing?  
SR: I've heard that over there if you get arrested they can really rough you up heavy.  
C: It does happen, but it's rare... it's pretty rare.  
SR: What about the riots in Brixton?  
C: They used Brixton as like an exercise, like the Falklands, sort of a military exercise to see how good we were.  
SR: Changing the subject... umm... it seems that a lot of the British bands have like one disco records, or a dance

record, whatever. Will the Subs do a disco mix 12" of...  
D: You mean like the Subs on 45?  
C: Well... you were there at the sound check, weren't you? We do lots of stupid things - one of our stupid things is like a disco thing and I've done this rap thing... we just do things like that for our own amusement, but whether or not we get serious enough to record something like that is another thing... We used to do silly covers, like "She's Not There."  
SR: "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" was great! (Note: They did this during their sound check)  
C: Yeah! (laughs). I wish I had known the words.  
SR: So aren't you into R & B alot?  
C: I am personally.  
SR: I've noticed that influence on alot of your records, more so than alot of other punk bands.  
C: If you look on the records and see anything with just Harper alone, it will be R & B influenced. I can't help it...  
D: Who are your R & B influences?  
C: Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Little Walter, Howling Wolf, Chicago... Chuck Berry's one of the best writers ever.  
D: What about Lou Reed?  
C: Oh yeah, yeah. Lou Reed, Stooges, New York Dolls... that's what brought me into punk rock.  
SR: What are your favorite audiences to play to? Are London audiences your favorite?  
C: Yeah, they are. Playing in your home, your home turf, is great. But it's also great to get away from it... It's much more exciting to come here when you don't know what to expect from night to night, where in England you almost know what to expect from club to club. Almost the same as Europe... where we know what we'll get in certain towns... There's a great scene in America all around. Things are really buzzing here, things are just like they were a few years ago in England. There's alot of energy here, and it's energy which is building... I mean, in England it's become almost sterile... it's come to its peak and it's ahh... and there's an attitude in England where you've seen it all... I don't know...  
SR: One big difference between England and over here is that in England you have the big music press, all the weeklies. What do you think of the press over there?  
C: In general, it's pretty good.  
SR: Do you think too many people tend to follow it like a bible?  
C: On one level they do. For instance, as soon as there's a big buzz around a band... I mean, for instance, I'm a Sounds man, right? I buy Sounds religiously. If I got





money to buy a paper I'll buy a Sounds, right? If I happen to get a little windfall and I've got a few bucks that week I'll buy Sounds and Melody Maker, or I'll look at the front. NME people are like the students—people who read all sorts of serious political information in the music—they take it very seriously. They've all got their own audience. A lot of the Melody Maker people will hate the NME. Sounds is basically got more new wave or punk or what's happening on the ground level. They people who buy Sounds spend a lot of their time down at the clubs. Having said that as soon as they all come together and get into a certain band, whether it's like Rose Tattoo, for instance... and then they play the big places, and... so you've got to be a success with everything, you've got to have everybody buzzing around, you know what I mean? Otherwise you just make it to a certain level and that's about it.

SR: What about all the cliques over there? "I'm a punk, this is what I'm into and I don't care about anything else" kind of attitude.

C: Right there is too much of that, but I go to places where that doesn't happen. There are places where you get all sorts. The thing is, these places are late night places and they're expensive to get into. These sort of places... it's like the night scene, or whatever you want to call it... They accept anyone. You'll get like the stray cats, you'll get bikers, skinheads, and everyone mixes together and gets along fine. That's the sort of circle I hang around in. I've really got no time for these cliques, I think they're a complete waste of time, almost a totally negative sort of thing, they're all working apart from each other when they should be working together.

SR: When I was in England I was really surprised that most of the kids over there were really unfamiliar with what's happening over here. It seems that the only bands they were really familiar with were the Dead Kennedys, Black Flag, and the Cramps. Why do you think that is?

C: Ummm... yeah, because there's hardly any sort of... well now and again a British paper will do a big centerfold

"This is L.A.", "This is Washington," "This is San Francisco"... say they do the San Francisco scene and we see all these bands like X, and we look at them and go "Fuck! They're a bunch of hippies...fuck L.A., fuck San Francisco. We're not into that shit. They look like a bunch of dicks." That's the attitude the kids will have. They don't really know what's going down. The thing is as you were saying before, the fashion thing doesn't matter. You just go out in T-shirts and jeans here where in England if you did that, no matter how good a band would play, they wouldn't identify with them... The punks who do go to the clubs are very dressy in an anti-dressy way, old leather and chains... and if any band gets up and the kids think they can get a job looking like that or a band like Black Flag, they're acceptable, my dad would invite them into his house like that and they can't identify with that sort of band.

SR: What was weird when I went to this punk anarchist gig over there with all these bands like Rudimentary Peni, Conflict, Flux, the Subhumans was that most of the kids in the audience were in uniform, all the gear—the works, while the bands themselves were...

C: Pretty conservative.

SR: Pretty conservative, exactly.

C: Cause bands like that have got a very strong social emotional attitude. I think the more radical a band... for instance, skinhead bands would come up to me for instance, like I wrote this song—well, this hasn't happened—but say for instance in this song they say we should kill the Jews in England, or do what Hitler had done or whatever... so they say I can't do that, and I say "If you really believe that, then do it." You only make it by being completely over the top. Now if they do that they can have everyone down on them like a ton of bricks. They'll have to take the consequences for it, but you've got to be heavy to get anywhere to be noticed, which is a shame... I think punk, or any sort of music should express itself whether it's good or bad cause people have got these feelings, they're hiding them, at least they'll learn about them... That's just an example.

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