

In that fractured musical landscape of 1979–80, it took the Pretenders to provide the missing link between the iconography and idealism of big sixties guitar rock and the deconstructed nihilism of the punkish mid- and late seventies. They united mainstream FM rockers, self-conscious new wavers, and the pierced, tattooed toughs that still uneasily roamed the earth like vestigial body parts as the Me Generation tottered to an unsteady start.

What is probably most significant is that it took a single woman, born and raised in one of the grittier bowels of the American Midwest, who answered an urgent call to travel to the U.K. for her own rock & roll baptism. She'd been strangely spurred on after seeing a picture of Iggy Pop on the cover of *New Musical Express*. In plunging into those roiling, uncertain waters, she managed to unite British and American rock, which in that brief no man's land of time that separated the death of punk and the advent of MTV, were at their most polarized.

Although Chrissie Hynde consorted with the crème de la crème of U.K. punks almost as soon her black Cuban-heeled boots struck English soil in 1973, she believed – and more to the point, she was unafraid to say she believed – that musical history existed before the Sex Pistols spewed their

sedition on prime time British television and spearheaded what came to be referred to as rock's "Winter of Hate." Hynde didn't buy into that particular cultural revolution, despite having palled around with John Lydon and Sid Vicious and having worked behind the counter at Sex, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop on King's Road – one of the cradles of first-wave punk civilization. Instead, Hynde insisted, "I'm not a punk, I'm a musician." One whose roots and traditions stretched back at least to Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels as well as Iggy Pop.

Maybe you should blame her uncompromising aesthetic on that heady triumvirate of Marc Bolan, Jeff Beck, and Keith Richards, whom the teenage Hynde, already a self-taught baritone ukulele and harmonica player, worshiped from a makeshift altar in her teenage bedroom in America's rubber capitol, Akron, Ohio. Or, more important, perhaps it was her then rather revolutionary confession that she didn't want to be *with* Brian Jones but *be* him.

So with only a single suitcase, massive amounts of black eyeliner, and three albums (*White Light/White Heat*, *Raw Power*, and *Fun House*), Hynde took her first tentative steps into the British rock scene. Armed with the time-honored cre-



# The Pretenders

By *Jaán Uhelszki*

► The Pretenders: Chrissie Hynde, Martin Chambers, Pete Farndon, and James Honeyman-Scott (clockwise from top left), circa 1981







- ▶ Chrissie Hynde and her tattooed love boys: Guitarist Jimmy Honeyman-Scott, bassist Pete Farndon, and drummer Martin Chambers
- ▼ Live in London: Andy Hobson, Hynde, Chambers, Adam Seymour, 1999

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▲ Chambers, live in Santa Monica, on his birthday in September 1981

dentials of being a former art student – like many of her guitar heroes – she penned acerbic, opinionated reviews for the era’s leading British rock bible, *NME*, until she realized that she needed to be on the other side of the typewriter. She began rehearsing with a series of loose-knit bands, including a brief stint gigging in France. Forced to return to Ohio, she joined an R&B band called Jack Rabbit – which made perfect sense for a girl who got her first kiss onstage from Jackie Wilson.

McLaren attempted to lure her back to the U.K. with the promise of her heading up an all-male band called the Love Boys; the only catch was that Chrissie was to front the band as a boy. That didn’t appeal to her, nor did the offer of playing in Bernie Rhodes’s School Girls’ Underwear; in spite of these rather spurious offers, she returned to Britain in 1976 with a renewed vigor – but without a fixed plan for world domination. That was an unexpected benefit. “I had no ambition, I just had dreams,” explained Hynde, rather modestly. But

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Chrissie Hynde is nothing if not self-effacing and dismissive of her extraordinary talents – musical and otherwise.

Her dreams led her to work with Mick Jones, a few months before the formation of the Clash, and then to join and exit the Berk Brothers. She also briefly played with the provocatively dubbed Masters of the Backside, who later metamorphosed, without her, into the Damned. Finally, in 1978, she hooked up with Real Records’ Dave Hill, who believed enough in her songs that he encouraged her to form her own band rather than try to insert herself into any more untenable situations. Why? Because if anything, Chrissie Hynde was born knowing what she wanted and, more important, what she didn’t want. And once

she met bassist Pete Farndon, all prickly attitude and rockabilly hair, just back from a two-year Australian stint with a folk band, she knew she had the cornerstone for what would become the Pretenders – such an unlikely name for a band that is nothing if not authentic. It was cribbed from Buck Ram’s song



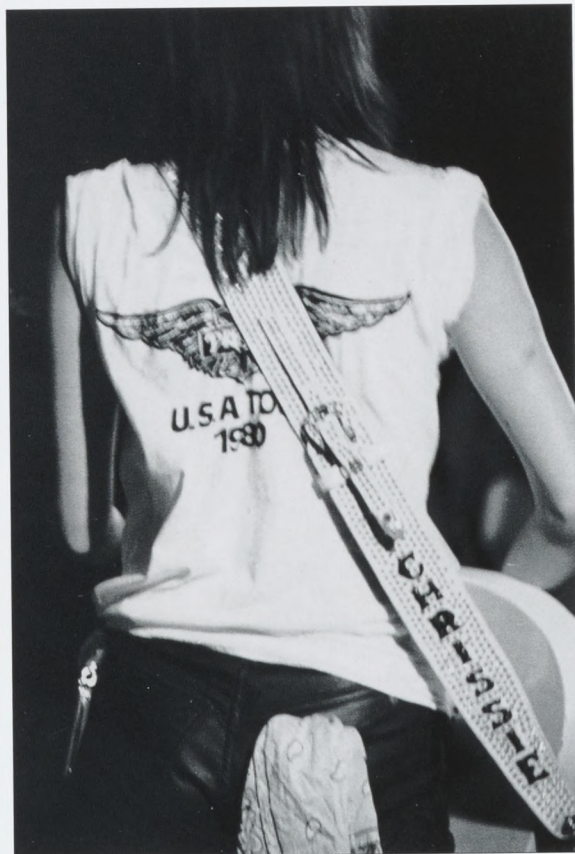




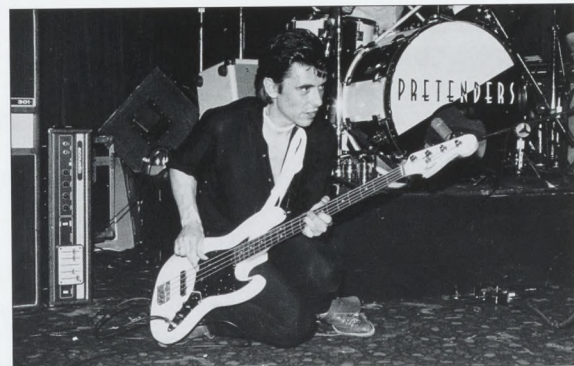
“The Great Pretender,” which a Hell’s Angels acquaintance would play surreptitiously when his nefarious cronies weren’t around. Hynde decided on the name when pressed to choose something in advance of the band’s first single. (She eschewed her earlier sobriquet of the Rhythm Method, believing that the contraceptive reference might inhibit radio play.)

After Farndon signed on, he recruited his hometown pal, the grandly named guitarist James Honeyman-Scott from Herefordshire – Mott the Hoople country, for the uninitiated – and began putting in long hours of practice with Hynde and drummer Gerry Mackelduff. The Pretenders’ debut single, “Stop Your Sobbing” b/w “The Wait,” produced by Nick Lowe, featured this lineup. But Mackelduff wasn’t long for the band and was handily replaced by another Herefordshire native, Martin Chambers, who worked as a day laborer in the roofing trade and drummed by night in a dance band that specialized in Glenn Miller hits, when he wasn’t gigging with Honeyman-Scott in the audaciously named Cheeks. Honeyman-Scott’s reverence for rock history, his sly reworking of Ron Wood and Keith Richards licks, and his unflinching melodic sense provided a perfect foil for Hynde’s cool-as-an-oyster demeanor and flint-edged song cycles of heartache,

▼ Hynde and a gal’s best friend – a Telecaster – live in Detroit during the Pretenders’ first U.S. tour, 1980



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▲ Pete Farndon, at an early Pretenders gig at the Palomino Club, 1981



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▲ Chambers and Farndon relax at the pinball machine, Detroit, 1980





▲ Chrissie Hynde takes the boys in the band back home to Ohio to perform outside Akron at the annual Blossom Music Festival, 1981

self-recriminations, and fugitive love songs.

An obscure 1964 Kinks tune, "Stop Your Sobbing," became a modest U.K. hit for the Pretenders upon its release in January 1979. Its followup, "Kid," produced by Chris Thomas, also did fairly well, and soon the band and Thomas were recording the group's first, self-titled album. Its first single, "Brass in Pocket," rocketed to Number One in the U.K., setting the stage for the band's January 1980 debut, *Pretenders*, to nab the top spot on the U.K. albums chart, then climb into the U.S. Top Ten. Pete Townshend proclaimed that the album was "like a drug" – and, to be honest, he should know.

The band toured with a demonic vengeance for the next eighteen months, selling out such venues as the 3,500-seat Santa Monica Civic Auditorium in less than two hours, signifying that the Pretenders myth was already gathering steam – further fostered by Hynde's conflagration with a Memphis bouncer that earned her an overnight stay in jail. In 1981, *Pretenders II* shot up the U.S. and U.K. charts with alacrity, but a cloud appeared on the horizon. Within four months, Chambers injured both his hands, forcing the band to cancel dates. Then the cloud turned into a gathering darkness, and in June 1982, tragedy struck. Farndon was ousted from the band because of his pervasive drug use, and two days later, Honeyman-Scott was found dead in his apartment from an overdose. Sadly, Farndon would follow Jimmy eight months later, expiring in his bath in April 1983.

It takes an almost otherworldly strength to come through so much pain, but Hynde and Chambers decided it would be a travesty not to continue the band that meant so much to them all. With former Rockpile guitarist Billy Bremner and Big Country bassist Tony Butler, they recorded



the elegiac single "Back on the Chain Gang," which they dedicated to Honeyman-Scott. A year later, Hynde and Chambers put a new band together with guitarist Robbie McIntosh and bassist Malcolm Foster, releasing the appropriately titled *Learning to Crawl*. Acknowledging the impermanence of life and love, the 1984 album features some of the Pretenders' most formidably inspired writing, including the sanguine and reflective "Middle of the Road" and the harrowing "Time the Avenger." Two years later, Chambers departed, leaving Hynde to record with a succession of musicians.

"I didn't talk to Martin for a few years because of the trauma of losing Pete and Jimmy," Hynde told Aussie journalist Mike Gee in 1999. "What I've done since they died is keep the spirit of the original Pretenders alive

and bring in players who were influenced by the original band and play to that spirit. But, yeah, I wish they were still alive and we were still together."

Chambers returned to the band in 1994 for the Pretenders' first album in four years, *The Last of the Independents*. With guitarist Adam Seymour and bassist Andy Hobson, the group scored the Top Forty hit "I'll Stand By You." In 1999, one of Hynde's early inspirations, Jeff Beck, guested on the track "Legalize Me," on *Viva El Amor!*

Over the twenty-five years since their exciting debut single, the Pretenders have upheld their early promise: They've preserved their fierce integrity, eccentric sense of rhythm, haughty eclecticism, austere sexuality, and propulsive rock & roll – still inhabiting that uncertain terrain between pleasure and pain, with a blunt honesty through it all. And you can't ask for more than that. ●

  
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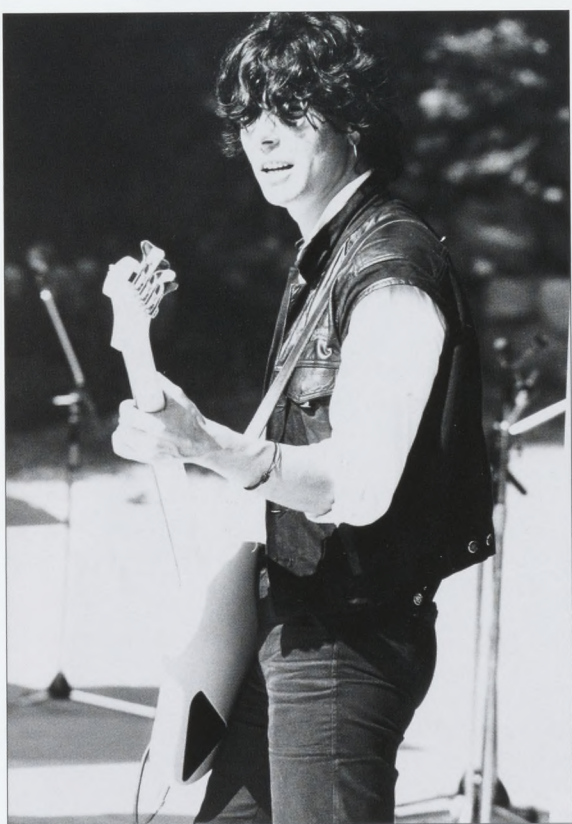


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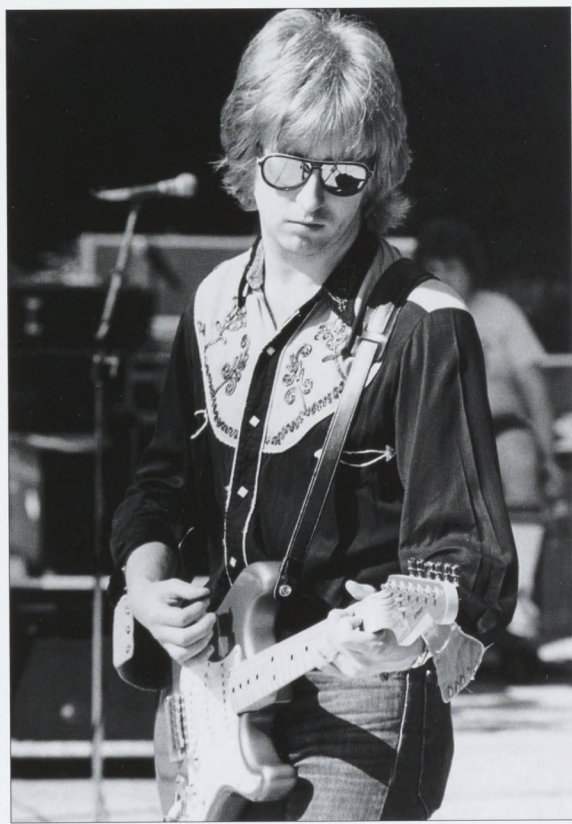
▲ Guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Chrissie Hynde and drummer Martin Chambers, the sole survivors of the original Pretenders, 1984

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▲ Pretenders bassist Pete Farndon (1953-1983)

ROBERT MATTHEU



▲ Pretenders guitarist Jimmy Honeyman-Scott (1957-1982)







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# From Writers to Rockers

*By Vivien Goldman*

the author, pictured below



*It is possible to slide between writing about rock & roll  
and making it. Muso scribes play it both ways*

**L**ondon, 1975. In the stockroom of a record company near Hyde Park, a lithe girl in a black leather miniskirt and tight torn T-shirt efficiently shuffled through shelves of albums, grabbing as many as she could carry without toppling over in her black patent stilettos. Way before the Pretenders, Chrissie Hynde was availing herself of the old perk of being the rock & roll journalist she briefly was: free albums you could sell to compensate for the pathetic pay. "Want some?" she offered generously and moved aside to let me take my pick. An utter novice, I was shy and didn't want to appear greedy. Although I'd only just met her, it was obvious that Chrissie's sassy smile could whisk her past security guards, even when she was waltzing out with the label's entire summer release schedule. Seeing her pluck albums like apples from a loaded branch, I made up my mind. Quickly, I started stuffing my satchel with vinyl.

◀ Recent Ohio transplant Chrissie Hynde with U.K. rock scribe Nick Kent

Chrissie's caustic journalistic comments had already caused quite a stir in the rock weekly *New Musical Express*, and not just because of her much discussed liaison with lanky Nick Kent, then the bad boy of British journalism – our own Keith Richards. Like his hard-rockin', hard-livin' guitar hero, Kent was unfailingly courteous and gentle-

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manly, even while swaying like a palm in a hurricane as he analyzed Little Feat's latest. With Chrissie at his side, they were a reigning rock power couple – but Chrissie treated that prospect with as much disdain as she did her music writing. (A shame, that, in a way – she writes *really* well.) No, glam romance and nights at the IBM "golf-ball" typewriter were both very secondary to her overriding obsession – leav-

ing behind crap bands like the Moors Murderers (with whom she posed in a black garbage bag) and getting together her own group.

They were going to call themselves the Rhythm Method but ultimately became the Pretenders, and as several platinum and gold discs prove, journalism's loss was pop music's big score. In all her years of superstardom, motherhood, and





▲ DJ Spooky, a.k.a Paul D. Miller, makes radical mixes and writings.

▼ Neil Tennant “before,” as rock journalist at ‘Smash Hits’ (left) and “after,” as one-half of the Pet Shop Boys (pictured here without shades)



social activism, the singer has seemingly never been tempted to turn scribe again – though I still hope for more crisp Chrissie prose.



Twenty-five years on, a plethora of media have made it more normal for people to shift between gigs. In our multi-tasking times, the membrane between artist and writer has eroded, or perhaps just become more elastic. Rock journalist Ira Kaplan doubles as part of the long-running indie success Yo La Tengo, and Madonna writes a kabalistic kid’s book. It’s chic to shape-shift. Perhaps the artist to swing both ways with most aplomb was Neil Tennant, who revolutionized pop crit with the unpretentious gloss of *Smash Hits* in the 1980s, then seamlessly drifted into megastardom with the Pet Shop Boys.

But it was punk’s “do it yourself” ethos that first set us free. Boundaries were there to be broken, and writers at *Sounds* and *New Musical Express* were always forming bands with no perceived breach of journalistic integrity. Charles Shaar Murray’s alter ego was Blast Furnace of the Heatwaves. Our charming art editor, Dave Fudger, and the late Giovanni Dadomo, with his rakish grin, founded the Snivel-

ling Shits. I recall one scurrilous little ditty about Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and his wife, designer Vivienne Westwood – something rather bizarre, involving closets and talcum powder, all rubbish, of course. Us muso scribes expected, and got, no favoritism. Punk journalist Julie Burchill once compared my singing to Joni Mitchell, and thought she was dissing me.

At my Hampstead high school, you could be arty, athletic, or academic, and no deviation was permitted. I was filed under bookworm. But in the zany anarchy of the punk scene, when peniless punks were known to crash on rock writers’ floors (like Chrissie did on mine, and what great laughs we had), interviewing and also knocking around with the Slits and the Raincoats emboldened me. I became a Fly-

ing Lizard, writing and singing on the first album by David Cunningham’s new-wave avant-electro collective, best known for our cover of the Barrett-Strong classic “Money,” which charted at Number Four in Britain. More musical adventures included singing reggae backup harmony for dub producer Adrian Sherwood and a disco mix I wrote, sang, and coproduced with John Lydon, the recently reissued

  
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“Launderette,” described by the *Village Voice* as “a disarming lil’ dub song about dating and washing.” But the laptop beckoned, and I didn’t stick with it.

Unlike another writer turned rocker, Patti Smith.

The comparative intellectualism of the New York punk scene, christened the Blank Generation by the Voidoids’ punk poet Richard Hell, nurtured by Andy Warhol, and prodded by David Byrne, set it apart from London’s laddish, pub-spawned breed. Before becoming the wild bard of her generation, Patti Smith contributed reviews to *Rolling Stone*, as did her guitarist, Lenny Kaye. Like his muse, who wrote the play *Cowboy Mouth* with Sam Shepard and has published several books of verse, Kaye never abandoned his literary bent. The erudite rocker’s most recent work is *You Call It Madness*. Also serving two mistresses is DJ Spooky, a.k.a. Paul D. Miller, whose mixes are as radical as his recent conceptual book, *Rhythm Science*, a Book of the Year selection in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper.

Nowadays, the same keys operate the construction of music and text. If you can flex a lesser used bit of your brain and work all your skills, the whole unit functions better. It had been years since I’d been in a studio when I was enlisted, quite by chance, to sing backup on SoulFeast producer Brian Bacchus’s remix of Roy Hargrove, “For Fun.” What a surprise when it was nominated last year for a Grammy! The subtext: Creative focus is crucial, but if you dump a muse, you lose. ●

◀ Pretender Chrissie Hynde put down the pen and picked up the guitar.



▲ Sam Shepard and literary pal Patti Smith, circa 1971

▼ Richard Hell scribbled verse and eventually wrote the novel ‘Go Now.’

