



## Thanks to Alex Ogg

**S**taa Marx were formed in 1976 from an earlier school band, Rumage, and featured Martin Sims (b/v), Pete Macer (g/v), Robin Parker (d) and Barry Sims (g/v). BARRY SIMS: "John Kent, our original rhythm guitarist, had gone to uni, so we pinched Pete Macer from another local band. Pete had a mate, Steve Goodheart, who had a van and thus became our manager. Not a lot of people know this, but certainly on the south coast, the look that was to become synonymous with punk - bondage gear, spiky hair, mohair jumpers etc - was associated, especially in Brighton, with clubs playing black, underground American dance music.

Martin and I were into this indie dance music scene, and we'd both been into Hendrix and Zeppelin, so our early stuff was sort of funky and rocky and we looked punky. For me, hearing the Sex Pistols for the first time was one of those defining moments, out of a tiny, tinny, trannie, this enormous sound exploded, and I knew I wanted to play music which felt that powerful and exciting."

"We started writing new songs about our own experiences and pretty much had to stop gigging as the new songs were so different from our old stuff - it sounded like two different bands. The Staa Marx sound we developed had the power of punk, but because we'd been playing for a couple of years, the sound was more melodic. We used strange chords and even did harmonies! We did feel part of the punk scene because we were totally into the whole thing; the sound, the look, the attitude.

One of the reasons we entered the Melody Maker Rock Contest was to get some reaction to our new stuff. By the first heat in Brighton we only had two new songs, but to our amazement we won the heat. The south-east area semi-final was at the Marquee in London, by which time we had four songs. I think we were pretty overawed by the whole thing. We were runners-up, but that still meant we would be in the final. We hired a coach to take all our mates up to the final at the Fairfield Hall in Croydon."

“We were shitting ourselves. It was the biggest place we’d ever played, to the largest audience, who of course were mainly supporters of other bands. The judges were Ian Anderson from Jethro Tull, Rick Parfitt from Status Quo, Maddie Prior from Steeleye Span and the editor of the Melody Maker. We were almost the last band on and I had glandular fever at the time and was burning up. We finally walked out onto that enormous stage with a stack of Marshall amps behind us to almost total silence. I think we all suddenly felt, no-one’s going to like us, we’re never going to win this, but we don’t caaaaaaaare. We just erupted with power, the place went wild and we blew all the other bands into oblivion. The judges all gave us 100%, apart from the Melody Maker editor, who gave us 99%, and suddenly we’d won. It was all handshakes, journalists and photographers - we had the whole front page of the Melody Maker that week, plus a big article inside.”

MARTIN SIMS: “We were a punk/pop hybrid, more like the Boomtown Rats than the Sex Pistols. Our stage shows bristled with raw energy and attitude, but because we’d all been playing since our early teens we were quite accomplished musicians. The lyrics were very much about everyday life and the state of society, and yet at the same time we were so tight musically, that the whole band could suddenly stop, do a three-part harmony, and then launch off again at 100 mph with buzzsaw guitars. It was a very powerful combination.”

BARRY SIMS: “By the time we won the Melody Maker Contest we only had about six songs, which influenced the decisions we subsequently made. We were offered a couple of days recording in Jethro Tull’s studio in Fulham and Rick Parfitt offered to get us signed up to Status Quo’s management. We took up the recording offer, which was a disaster; Ian Anderson loved us, but his producer, Robin Black, hated us, so the tape we made was awful. We turned down Rick Parfitt because we didn’t think we had enough material, or were ready - bad move. What we did get out of the competition was a load of Marshall gear, which was great, and to be the opening act at the Reading Festival in 77 - the first punk band to play there. It was quite an experience. We had a load of local cider in the van for after the gig, but it took so long to get to Reading and into the festival site that we drank most of it in the van. We stumbled out onto the stage in front of 100,000 people, pissed out of our tiny minds. Martin started us off well by calling the whole audience a bunch of smelly hippies, to which they cheerily responded by chucking hundreds of cans at us, quite a few still full of beer. To make matters worse, the sound engineer treated it like a sound check - with guitars and vocals going up and down, on and off. After our performance I apparently spent about an hour having an in-depth conversation at the artist’s bar with Phil Lynott from Thin Lizzy, which I don’t remember at all.”

“Things did get better. We knuckled down to writing and rehearsing and started doing loads and loads of gigs. We supported amongst others, Sham 69, X Ray Spex,

Boomtown Rats and the Tom Robinson Band and played all round the country for a couple of years. We did get offered a record deal with Magnet Records, but it was such a bad deal that we could have been at number one for weeks and still been drawing the dole. We also had interest from the guy who produced the first Wire album, but it came to nothing. The funny thing is that by the time we got the Cherry Red deal, the band was starting to fragment anyway, we were losing our direction and edge. Martin began to get into Elvis Costello and 'Crazy Weekend' wasn't really a Staa Marx song. 'Pleasant Valley Sunday' was much more the Staa Marx sound, even though it was a cover - I wanted it as the a-side. Peter and Robin were writing a lot more songs and we grew apart musically - I know it's an old cliché, but still true."

MARTIN SIMS: "I think all of us - in hindsight - would rather have had 'Pleasant Valley Sunday' as the a-side. But at the time 'powerpop' was being banded about as the next big thing, and it was considered that 'Crazy Weekend' had broader audience appeal, and therefore might have more commercial success. Of course that turned out to be wrong, since 'Pleasant Valley Sunday' picked up all the airplay here and the States. And I still think it sounds like a very powerful and catchy version of the song today. The reason why we covered a Monkees' hit in the first place is quite interesting. I'd really been into The Monkees TV show as a kid, and liked the fact that although they were entirely fabricated, they were also anarchic. In many ways The Monkees represented everything punk was against, they were pre-packaged, plastic and contrived, so the idea of doing a punk version of one of their hits was very appealing. On the other hand the lyrics - by Gerry Goffin and Carole King - are actually a scathing attack on urban alienation and consumerism, so they fit the whole punk ethic perfectly. So it was the idea of giving these lyrics real power and angst that appealed to us as a band."

"Being in a punk band in the 70s was a fairly riotous experience, since you never knew what was going to happen next. Sharing a dressing room with the transsexual Wayne County and the Electric Chairs at the Music Machine in Camden was quite an eye opener. As was watching Jimmy Pursey break a chair over the back of a BNP skinhead in the dressing room when we were supporting Sham 69 in Portsmouth. It was like being involved in a Western Saloon brawl."

Staa Marx split up in the summer of 1979. BARRY SIMS: "Martin and I wanted to go to London; Robin was getting married and didn't want to move. Pete didn't want to go to London either, so Martin and I moved up to town in late 79. We had a few abortive attempts at forming a new band, eventually working with drummer Simon Harper as a trio, The Ghosts. We wrote a whole load of new songs, our style was more new wave, new romantic, but still very rhythmic, though nowhere near as fast as Staa Marx. The Ghosts did a lot of gigs, mainly in and around London and we did quite a bit of recording, but never got a deal. The Ghosts carried on for most of the



“The Ghosts sort of ground to a halt in the late 80s. Martin got involved with radio production and set up his own company, Eardrum, which has been very successful and is still going strong. I got back involved with graphic design, which I had originally trained in. I hadn’t been doing much music for several years, but when I got back down south, I joined a covers band, just singing. Pete Macer stayed on in Bognor, working as a music technician at the college and playing in local bands, which he still does. Robin set up his own marketing company and also formed a band, switching from drums to playing guitar and singing, which gigged for several years.

Robin and Pete got involved with our old manager Steve Goodheart who had set up the Rox Organisation, which puts on a fantastic music and arts festival each year, as well as working with the local community on all sorts of art and music related projects. In 1999 Steve finally persuaded us to reform Staa Marx for a one-off 20th anniversary gig at the Rox Festival in Bognor. It took us ages to remember how to play the old songs, but I found my hands remembered better than my brain. Robin hadn’t played drums for years and I thought he was going to die at one point - the music was so energetic and fast, we certainly gave it our all.” Now he’s retrained himself as a flamenco guitarist. “Flamenco is punk rock on nylon-strung guitar!”

*Alex Ogg sent this in October 2011*