

SID VICIOUS AND NANCY SPUNGEN THE 'PISTOL' AND THE KNIFE

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Neon Leon with Sid's jacket

Neon Leon on Sid Vicious 'He Said He Was Going to Kill'

David Hershkovits and
Lesley Vinson

British punk rock musician Sid Vicious was arrested last week and charged with murder in the stabbing death of his girl friend and maybe-wife, Nancy Spungen, at the Chelsea Hotel on W. 23 St.

The police arrived about 11 a.m. Thursday after being summoned by a phone call from Vicious. The former member of the Sex Pistols rock group had registered at the hotel with Nancy in late August as Mr. and Mrs. John Ritchie — his real name.

Nancy's body lay face up in the bathroom, her head underneath the sink. She had been stabbed in the stomach and her black lace bra and panties were drenched in blood. The room was in disarray and police found several empty syringes.

On Friday the 13th bail was set at \$50,000 despite the objections of Assistant District Attorney Kenneth Schachter, who claimed that the defendant might flee because of the "strong likelihood of conviction."

During the hearing Malcolm McLaren, former Sex Pistols manager, arrived from

London to confer with the lawyers he had engaged to defend Sid. Describing the musician as "outrageous, a very passionate man," he nevertheless maintained Vicious was "definitely not guilty."

Cold Turkey at Rikers

While McLaren and friends worked over the weekend to raise bail, Sid was going cold turkey at Rikers Island prison. A severe reaction to abrupt withdrawal from methadone and heroin sent him to the prison hospital, where he was given some methadone, according to a source.

On Sunday Sid's 38-year-old mother, Mrs. Ann Beverly, arrived from London. When an English reporter asked for an interview he was told it would cost his paper 5000 pounds (roughly \$10,000).

The same day platinum-haired Nancy, 20, was buried in her hometown of Philadelphia at a private service conducted by a rabbi. "There were only one or two people in her life she could really relate to — Sid was one of them," her mother told reporters.

Monday, Sid Vicious was released on bail.

The last person known to have seen Sid and Nancy together is Neon Leon, a fast-

talking musician who fronted a mostly black punk band that often played at Max's Kansas City. He and his blond girlfriend, Kathy O'Rourke, lived down the hall from the couple. Both had known Nancy before she met Sid, knew of the couple's addiction to heroin, and of the sado-masochistic tone of their love affair.

At press time Leon was out of town, telling different friends different stories of where he was going — London, Philadelphia or Atlantic City.

What follows is based on an interview conducted with Neon Leon and Kathy O'Rourke at their Chelsea Hotel room the afternoon of the murder.

Neon Leon Talks

"Sid came in here and said, 'Look what I got. Now people can't beat me up anymore.'" He was brandishing a knife with a 5½-inch blade, said Leon. "Nancy bought it for him so he could defend himself from the beatings he was getting."

Beatings?

"Sid was famous for being obnoxious. People would come up to him. 'You're one of the Sex Pistols.' Boom! I stopped going out with them."

Leon's small room has a settled look. It is crammed, but neat — records along the wall, electric guitars in and out of cases, a king-size bed that takes up most of the room. More than a dozen hats hang on a wall with a painting of a hand holding a gun aimed at the viewer. A TV set in the corner hums softly throughout our conversation.

"He said he was going to kill somebody," said Neon, speaking rapidly and without hesitation. "But he always says he's gonna kill somebody. 'New York is making me violent. People are picking on me. All I want to do is be in a band. I'm gonna get me a weapon,'" Sid told him, he said.

Strung out on heroin, methadone and barbiturates, Sid was in a sorry state, according to Leon. "I have no more self-confidence. I'm ugly. I can't play bass," he told Leon, who couldn't believe what he was hearing. "The guy sat here and played almost like Jack Bruce [a well-know bass player]. Maybe this was easy suicide," he suggests.

"I'd rather die in jail than go to the methadone clinic [where he would get into fights]," Sid told him, said Leon, affecting a credible British accent.

It's a warm fall day, and though the room in the 11-story red-brick building has a balcony, the windows remain tightly

shut and the air heavy as Leon continues his story. Though Sid was tall and rail-thin — the image of the 98-pound weakling — that did not prevent him from getting into fights. A knife, he thought, might help. "Do you think they'll mess with me if I have this knife?" he asked Leon, who shuddered. "I can't back down from anyone, because I'm not afraid of anything," Sid told him, he said.

As Leon tells it, the events of the night of the murder went something like this:

'They Were Kind of Weird Last Night'

"Last night they were feeling kind of sick. They were kind of weird last night." In the early morning hours Sid and Nancy came to Leon's room carrying Sid's beloved leather jacket and the Sex Pistols clippings Nancy had collected. Sid told Leon: "I want you to keep this for me."

Sid was acting as though he felt they were in danger, according to Leon. He wanted to know about Rikers Island and the New York police. Sid sat on the bed, playing with the knife, holding it up to his face. After a while they left, but Nancy returned a few minutes later. Sid had left the knife on the bed and she wanted to get it.

Around 4:30 a.m., Leon said, he received a telephone call from Nancy, asking him to come to their room if he had any pot. "Knock real hard," she told him. They were high on Tuinals and it would be difficult to awaken them otherwise.

That was the last time he spoke to her, he said. Leon remembers hearing scuffling in the corridor and loud banging on his door between 6 and 7 a.m. Thinking it might be the police, or someone else he didn't want to talk to at that hour, he didn't answer.

Sid and Nancy were heavily into heroin and other drugs. After the break-up of the Sex Pistols earlier this year, Sid stayed on the fringes of the punk scene. He did two gigs at Max's, earning a couple of thousand dollars. On one occasion he collapsed and passed out upstairs between sets, and musical director Peter Crowley tried frantically to revive him. After unanimous pans by rock reviewers, Sid and Nancy became virtual recluses, holing up at the Chelsea and coming out only to go to Max's and to his methadone maintenance clinic on Lafayette Street.

"I feel bad because he was a good person," said Leon. "Misunderstood to high heaven. He was here and he was alone. Nancy was the only person who kept him going. He said she was the only real woman on the planet."



Nancy Spungen leaves the Chelsea for the last time



Vicious during his last gig at Max's, September 7

No One Is Innocent

Roy Trakin

*And now, the end is near,
And so I face the final curtain (ha-ha-ha-ha)*

Sid Vicious, "My Way"

Sid Vicious' rise to fame closely parallels the media's infatuation with the punk fad. Born November 5, 1957, Vicious was raised in an East London apartment complex and left school at the age of 15. A classmate of Johnny Rotten, Sidney often blamed the educational system for his alienation. "I went to a comprehensive school. I despised it. They taught me nothing — except that I knew when I left, there was nothing I wanted to learn from them." (*Daily Mirror*, interview, June 11, 1977, by Jack Lewis)

Ron Watts, who booked the Sex Pistols at his 100 Club in London the spring of '76, claims in Fred and Judy Vermorel's book *The Sex Pistols*, it was at those first shows that Sid Vicious, then a rabid fan, invented the "pogo" by "jumping up and down on the spot with excitement, bashing into people." From the start, the punk scene that began to surround the Sex Pistols provided Sidney with a sense of belonging, a self-identity he never had.

When the Pistols' original bass-player, pop fan Glen Matlock, was forced out of the band in March 1977, presumably because his middle-class background and commercial sensibilities clashed with singer Johnny Rotten's ever-expanding ego, Vicious became, at least image-wise, the logical replacement. The fact that Sid could barely play bass was not half as much of a liability as his addiction to heroin, which had him in and out of hospitals even as he rehearsed with the band for the first time. But Rotten liked him, and the Pistols' always tenuous future relied on giving the rapidly developing star what he wanted.

Nancy Spungen came from a well-heeled Main Line Philadelphia family. She was, to those who knew her, an intelligent, strong-willed but misguided girl who ran away from home and eventually drifted, about two years ago, to the nascent New Wave scene on the Bowery. A junkie even then, Spungen traveled to England with the Heartbreakers when they went to play on the famed "Anarchy in the U.K." tour in the summer of '77 with the Sex Pistols and the Clash. It was here that Nancy hooked onto Sid. He plunged into the depths of heroin addiction.

In the Vermorels' book, Vicious answers an interviewer's query about making money, "Anything you gain is just a load of hogwash anyway. What do you do with the money, for instance? I can think of *one thing* to do with the money. (He and his girlfriend laugh.) One thing. That's what I do with all my money. Every halfpenny of it." So Nancy handled all of Sid's finances, and what few friends they had here claim that, despite frequent violent fights, he always gave in to her and that she called the shots.

Became a Joke

For all of Sid Vicious' fame as a member of the Pistols, only two new songs were added to the group's repertoire after his arrival, "Holidays in the Sun" (the fourth and final single when Rotten was lead singer) and the malicious, anti-abortion, anti-sex diatribe of "Bodies." On the Pistols' final, ill-fated tour of the States this past winter, guitarist Steve Jones and drummer Paul Cook claim Sid's addiction eventually turned the performances into a joke.

Jones tells Nick Kent of the *New Musical Express* (August 19, 1978): "It was Sid who broke up the band — or at least it was him who provided the straw

that broke the camel's back on the American tour, 'cos of his habits. He thought he could do no wrong, be Jack the Lad, while all the time he was fuckin' up, playin' different songs from us. It became a nightmare in the end. Like the FBI — it was a known fact — were ready to plant him any second, they were just waiting — and he'd walk onstage with 'Gimme a Fix' scrawled on his chest at every gig."

The images from that tour remain fixed in the mind — Sid wielding his bass guitar like a club, his body a network of self-inflicted scratches and bruises, his nose bleeding from a collision with the head of an over-enthusiastic pogo-er as he smeared the dripping blood over his chest. The Pistols' meteoric rise and fall eventually concluded in a hail of beer cans at San Francisco's Winterland, and Vicious himself ended up in a Jamaica, Queens, hospital in a coma with an OD. The band scattered to the winds; Cook and Jones to South America to record "No One Is Innocent" with escaped Great Train Robber Ronald Biggs, and Rotten to the island of Jamaica via New York.

Manager and media manipulator Malcolm McLaren eventually released the Biggs 45, and Sid Vicious, backed by the Paris Philharmonic, "sang" the Paul Anka chestnut, "My Way," on the B-side. All this was supposedly the prelude to the last Sex Pistols' LP, the soundtrack to the movie *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, which was to include unreleased studio and live tracks of the original band as well as new Cook/Jones material. The film, which has become McLaren's consuming passion, is supposedly about the death of rock 'n' roll and scenes from the aborted Russ Meyer-Roger Ebert project as well as shooting done in South America with Biggs, Cook and Jones. In town this very moment after having raised \$50,000 bail for Vicious, the ex-Pistol manager is reportedly offering clips of the film to local networks, for showing on the nightly news. McLaren claims the footage he has of Vicious singing with the Paris Philharmonic could go a long way towards proving that Sid, whose interests he is presumably looking after, can be a contributing member of society. Hmmm.

The saga of Sid Vicious is far from over. I do not presume to judge his guilt or innocence. Rock 'n' roll will always have its fringe element, its undertones of self-destructive alienation which rise every so often to the surface. The media, and I don't exclude myself, encourages this rebellious role-playing, and then somberly, but oh-so-professionally sifts over the human wreckage, clucking its tongue and shaking its head. Someone said, "Murder is not a punk phenomenon," and indeed I agree. This is the story of an individual boy and his girlfriend upon whom life played a bitter trick. A great many people witnessed Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen methodically dig themselves a grave, and none did anything to stop them.



On the stage at Max's — Sid's feet and a packet of white powder



In custody last Thursday