

Sid Vicious

How He Lived



Rotten and Vicious during the Pistols' American tour: an obvious image move



Nancy Spungen with Sid at Max's: not-so-quiet desperation

Roy Trakin

*You know some people got no choice
And they can never find the voice
To talk with that they can even call their
own*

*So the first thing that they see that allows
them the right to be, why
They follow it . . .*

Y'know, it's called bad luck.

Lou Reed, "Street Hassle"

The inevitability of Sid Vicious' OD could not temper the surprise, but it did manage to turn the affair into a gruesome black comedy. Cruel jokes about Sid punking out and T-shirts with the legend, "She's dead . . . now, so am I!" abounded, though the laughter that followed was decidedly nervous. The new wave community registered shock, then depression and bemused resignation when news of Sid's death made the rounds early last Friday afternoon.

The final four months in 21-year-old Sid Vicious' *nee* John Ritchie's life must have seemed like one long, drug-induced nightmare, perhaps because it was. The still-mysterious circumstances surrounding the murder of his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, last Oct. 12 at the Chelsea Hotel, were only the beginning of Sid's winter of discontent. The wildly conflicting accounts of that evening cannot cover up the pathetic picture of Sid stumbling around in the bathroom, so drugged he was unaware of his girlfriend slowly bleeding to death under the sink. Sid may indeed have been just an unwitting victim, but he was also most definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time, something Vicious would increasingly be unable to avoid.

Sid was eventually released on a second-degree murder rap on \$50,000 bail, presumably raised by his manager, Malcolm McLaren, and his English record company, Virgin. Less than a week later, Oct. 22, in the midtown hotel room of his mum, 46-year-old Ann Beverly, Sid attempted for the first time to join his beloved Nancy by slashing his wrists with a shattered light bulb. After a brief stay at the Bellevue psychiatric ward, during which McLaren added to the show-biz atmosphere by retaining the flamboyant F. Lee Bailey for Sid's defense, the world's most unforgotten boy hit the streets once more, and trouble was not far behind.

At the celebrated Hurrah incident of Dec. 5, Vicious got embroiled in a fight with Todd Smith, singer Patti Smith's

brother, and ended up sending Todd to the hospital for stitches after slashing him with a broken beer bottle. Sid went, again, straight to jail, and spent Christmas and New Year's in detoxification on Rikers Island.

The decision to prosecute Sid for felonious assault was credited to Patti Smith, and it was a controversial move in the local community. According to Blondie guitarist Chris Stein, Lenny Kaye, of Patti's group, was at his house last Thursday night complaining about the flack the band was getting for pressing charges against Vicious. "Lenny told me they made the decision as a group," Stein added, "that they wanted to help Sid by getting him off the street before he hurt himself or someone else. Ironically, that very moment Lenny sat there telling me this, Sid was killing himself."

Although the death of Sid Vicious was not unexpected, there was a strange mixture of depression and awe felt by local musicians. Scott "Top Ten" Kempner of the Dictators expressed sympathy for Sid's not-so-quiet desperation. "Just pathetic," he mumbled. His colleague, Andy Shernoff, voiced the opposite reaction: "He now enters rock 'n' roll heaven." These were the two basic sentiments: on the one hand, tragedy; on the other, immortality. Many remarked, almost facetiously, "He's better off." Certainly it would seem anything's got to be better than the hell on earth of Sid's final months.

Still, despite the interviews where Vicious boasted he wouldn't live past 25, despite the botched suicide attempts, the unabated junkie mentality, the nihilism, despite everything going against him, I believe Sid wanted to live at the end. The final tragicomedy was that Sid's death was the result of a dumb mistake, "junkie greed." It seems like it could have been avoided. Which raises a bunch of pointed questions. If Sid was such a disturbed kid, why was he allowed out of jail in the first place? Who was supposed to take care of him, since he obviously was incapable of himself? Certainly his mother had no control over him. No one could control him. More seriously, where did Sid get the fatal dose? Who would dare supply Sid knowing the circumstances?

The Unsung Villain

The same day Sid Vicious shot himself up with too much smack for his detoxified, less-resistant body, a four-year-old boy was critically injured when he fell out a

window trying to fly like Superman. This was a week that claimed Nelson Rockefeller, too; the high and the low, and you'll excuse me if Sid Vicious' death saddens me more. It means the Seventies are finally over, even if there are still 11 months to go. Good riddance to a decade of death. What we have left is the realization that anyone can fall victim to believing in his own fantasies. With a little help from so-called "friends."

Malcolm McLaren, the one-time N.Y. Dolls manager, boutique owner and full-time media manipulator plucked John Simon Ritchie from the ranks of the unknown (or so he claims — Johnny Rotten has made the same claim), dubbed him Sid Vicious and made him the bass player of the Sex Pistols, replacing frustrated pop star Glen Matlock. This occurred shortly

before the release of the Pistols' one and only album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*. Until this time, Sid's main claim to fame was his invention of the pogo, which he did by jumping up and down in place to the Pistols' music with little regard for life and limb, his own or anyone else's. Vicious also hung out at Malcolm's Kings Road boutique and was one of the first fans of punk music.

With the choice of Sid to replace Matlock in the Pistols, McLaren was making an obvious image move. Despite Sid's inability to play bass competently, he fulfilled the public's notion of how a Sex Pistol should look and act. Since, quite obviously, Sid himself was responding as a fan to the Pistols, it was no surprise that

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'No Future' and Little Past

On his latest release from jail, a day before he died, Sid Vicious indicated to reporters he had written some songs while in prison and was anxious to record them. The night of his death, rumor has it that Sid was trying to form a band with two members of the Misfits, a local group. Those on the scene, though, know Sid had been trying to form a band since he came to New York but had proved incapable of such a task.

The future will see Vicious popping up on a great variety of posthumous products, including the soon-to-be-released film, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* and its accompanying soundtrack, both Malcolm McLaren projects. The film purportedly is a sensationalized account of the Sex Pistols' story, including a scene where Sid makes love to his beautiful hippie mum, played by Marianne Faithful. Originally the movie was dubbed *Who Killed Bambi?* and was to be directed by porn king Russ Meyer with a script by film critic Roger Ebert, author of *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. But the original backer, 20th Century Fox, pulled out, and Meyer soon followed, unable to cut through the Pistols' anarchic style. Sid is featured in the film riding a motorcycle and singing Eddie Cochran's "Somethin' Else," which will appear along with Sid's imitable version of "My Way" on the soundtrack LP. The "My Way" 45 remains the only Sid Vicious product available on the market and it is a classic. Sid appears on only two cuts from the

Sex Pistols' only LP: "Holidays in the Sun" and the anti-abortion diatribe, "Bodies."

In addition to the McLaren movie, Sid is featured in a harrowing interview in Lech Kowalski's upcoming study of the Pistols, *D.O.A.*, the film the late Tom Forcade, editor of *High Times*, was working on at the time of his suicide. In this interview with Sid and Nancy Spungen, conducted for the film by Chris Salewicz of England's *New Musical Express*, Vicious is constantly passing out and dropping cigaret ashes and coffee on the hapless Nancy, who berates him mercilessly. The following exchange, reprinted in this month's *Punk* magazine, is frighteningly prophetic:

Interviewer: It's been often expected that you're about to drop dead, right, you know? You know about people saying that about you, obviously you do.

Sid: Grunt.

Nancy: He ain't gonna drop dead, take it from me.

There is also the fabulous film clip of "My Way," with Sid fronting the Paris Philharmonic on the Paul Anka chestnut while firing a smoking pistol at an unseen audience. It is, in the words of Alan Suicide, "The greatest performance by a rocker since Iggy on the Sheep Meadow in 1969."

The legacy Sid Vicious leaves is small, but you can be assured his legend will loom large in rock history.

RT

How He Died



Police remove Sid's body from Robison's apartment on Bank St.

Michael Shore

63 Bank Street in the West Village. Friday, Feb. 2. It was cold, bitter cold, with a wind that chilled to the bone. A few dozen newsmen waited outside the first-floor apartment of Michelle Robison; they were waiting for the body of Sid Vicious to be wheeled out and taken to the morgue.

Across the street someone was playing the Sex Pistols' "I'm a Lazy Sod" through an open window. They might more appropriately have played Sid's version of "My Way." Sid, born John Simon Ritchie 21 years ago, catapulted to notoriety over a year ago when he took over as bassist with the Pistols. Throughout his brief time in the limelight, Sid did everything his way: outrageously. He lived on the edge between myth and reality, a fine line that was increasingly blurred by the media that had created him and hyped him in the first place.

Sid had an image as a denizen of the depths of punk decadence. So it came as a surprise when it was learned that he had enrolled in a methadone maintenance program to curb his heroin habit, even before his girlfriend Nancy Spungen's death last October. This may have contributed to State Supreme Court Judge James Leff freeing Vicious on \$10,000 bail on felonious assault charges pressed by Todd Smith, brother of rock singer Patti, after the two were involved in a fracas at Hurrah on Dec. 5, 1978. Also at that hearing, on Jan. 16, 1979, Leff dropped Vicious' previous bail requirements, which had included daily sign-ins with the police and the Lafayette St. Methadone Clinic, where he was in the methadone maintenance program.

After the Jan. 16 hearing, Sid had to sign in only three days a week with the police, and no longer had to appear at the Methadone clinic. Attorney James Merberg had established that Vicious had been detoxified for a week. He was out on parole Friday, Feb. 2, the day he was found dead by his mother, Mrs. Anne Beverly. Here's what happened the night before, according to what police were told by Mrs. Beverly and Michelle Robison, a 22-year-old unemployed actress who was Vicious' last female companion:

There was a party Thursday night at Michelle's three-room apartment, described by police as "cluttered but clean." The party was a gathering of friends to celebrate Sid's parole. Sid was drinking beer, and around midnight disap-

peared into the bedroom, where he took a dose of heroin. He passed out from the shot 30 minutes later, and was found by Michelle, his mother and other guests. He revived at about 1:15 a.m. and appeared coherent. The party dispersed at about 2 a.m., and Sid went to bed with Michelle about an hour later.

Mrs. Beverly stayed over at Michelle's that night, too, sleeping in the living room. According to an anonymous source who spoke with Mrs. Beverly two days after Vicious' death, she claims to have been awakened around 9 a.m. by the sound of Vicious coughing. Mrs. Beverly fell back asleep, reawakened sometime between 11 a.m. and noon, and entered the bedroom at noon to wake her son. She roused Michelle, but not Sid. He was dead of an apparent heroin overdose. In front of 63 Bank St. that freezing Friday afternoon, the talk among newsmen was that he had died in Michelle's arms.



Michelle Robison: "She was as fucked up as anybody"

While we waited I spoke with Joe Stevens, photographer for England's *New Musical Express* and a friend of Sid Vicious. "He was such a hell-bent cat," said Stevens, "that it's hard to say if it was suicide or accidental. I mean, I was there after he'd slashed his wrists after the Nancy thing, and he was saying, 'We had a pact, I want to join her,' and all that. And anyone with as much junk experience as Sid should've known what dose'd kill him and what'd get him high. I think that Todd Smith incident was most unfortunate, because they sent him back to Rikers and fucked up his detox program. They speeded it up inhumanly, you know, had him in with the other junkies after 30 days. Before that he'd been doing real well, at least from what I could see. He was steering clear of everything else besides methadone. He was supplementing his daily methadone drink with more methadone he scored off the street, which was a bit naughty I suppose, but otherwise he kept clean, which was great. For this to happen now is just such a tragedy. It's horrible. I'll tell you, I really hate junk. This makes three friends I've lost to it; they've all died young, and they're all missing a lot."

Sid's body was brought out at 5 p.m. His mother and Michelle Robison had been taken to the 6th Precinct stationhouse for questioning an hour earlier. There, reporters from NBC-TV, UPI, *Newsweek*, the *N.Y. Post* and the *Daily News*, as well as this paper, cooled their heels while Assistant District Attorneys Alan Sullivan and Ken Schachter conducted the questioning. At 6 p.m. two members of the Misfits punk rock band went in for questioning. At 7:00, Sgt. Richard Houseman told us that Mrs. Beverly had passed out after questioning. An ambulance arrived 40 minutes later to take her to Cabrini Health Center. Said one policeman, "I'm tellin' ya, if you're dyin' in this city, you're in big trouble."



Anne Beverly, Sid's mother

"Just take a look at Michelle's wrists sometime. I don't know how she got involved with Sid . . . Sid's mother took a liking to her, and sort of picked her out for him. Sid's mum was a bit confused and lonely, didn't know where to turn. . ."



Danielle Booth: "He wasn't brilliant, but he wasn't a moron either"

At 8:15 we were informed by Houseman that one of the D.A.s had just gone out the back way. We ran to catch him, but he made no comment. He wouldn't even say "no comment." He very nearly slammed his car door on the arm of the woman from NBC. Half an hour later we found out that Michelle Robison, the Misfits members and the other D.A. had also gone.

All this left us with a lot of unanswered questions. It also typified life surrounding Sid Vicious: mysterious, impenetrable, couched in speculation that frustrated fact-finders. Sid's death, like his life, seemed to be without rationale. Here was someone who had achieved cult adulation of an integrity comparable to that of such rock stars as Jimi Hendrix or Janis (though on a more limited scale), but whose musical accomplishments were fractional compared to a Hendrix or a Joplin. Vicious, after all, was not proficient — he was barely even competent — on bass guitar; his function was to live up to an image. He became an instant media celebrity, and he began to believe what was written about him.

His background is still cloudy, but it is generally known that his mother, who had been a hippie in the 1960s, dragged young Sid across Europe. All my attempts to reach her proved fruitless, and others I talked to couldn't give me much information.

Just as enigmatic is Michelle Robison, rumored to have been selected by Sid's mother to keep him company. Friends of Vicious I spoke to seem to have overwhelmingly negative opinions about Michelle Robison.

One source who wished to remain anonymous was at the party. He told me, "It wasn't really a party, it was just a gathering of friends. They weren't even Sid's friends, they were Michelle's. Sid didn't know anybody there. That was always happening, though: Sid needed dope and attention, and he was broke, so he'd hang out with anybody who could supply him with those things. But that girl Michelle, man, she was as fucked up as

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