

The Making Of...

Babylon's Burning

by The Ruts

A bassist's warm-up routine and a prescient lyric tapping into a mood of urban unrest gives a west London punk quartet their debut hit

AROUND the same time as The Ruts entered Air studio on Oxford Circus in April 1979 to record "Babylon's Burning" for Virgin, the group's home turf of Southall was rocked by violence following a march by the National Front. "Babylon's Burning" had been written a few months before the riots – which took the life of anti-fascist demonstrator Blair Peach – and now it seemed tremendously prescient. Reaching No 7 on the UK charts, the band appeared on *Top Of The Pops*, where rasping singer Malcolm Owen warned a teatime

audience about police brutality and social unrest, employing Rastafarian slang over a punkish drive. "Babylon was a much-used word in Rasta culture, referring to western decadence and it did seem, as far as us youth were concerned, that it was all burning," says drummer David Ruffy. "It was almost like the folk tradition, singing about what was going on."

Emerging from punk's second wave, The Ruts married the energy and spirit from '77 with the attitude and rhythms of reggae and left-wing politics. The band themselves were something of a fusion too, consisting of two pairs: drummer

KEY PLAYERS



John "Segs" Jennings
Bass



David Ruffy
Drums



Mick Glossop
Producer

Dave Ruffy and bass player John "Segs" Jennings from south-east London and the west London duo of Paul Fox on guitar and singer Malcolm Owen. They came together as The Ruts in 1977, playing benefit shows as part of a political conscious, omnivorous west London music scene.

"Babylon's Burning" was born from Jennings' bass riff but it was guided by Paul Fox's urgent guitar and Owen's vocal. Following the success of the single, the group mixed it again for their debut album, *The Crack*. This time, producer Mick Glossop added sound effects of clanging bells and wailing police siren, which gave the song additional urgency while confirming its ominous sense of impending social collapse. For The Ruts, this was a positive thing – from disorder a more harmonious world might emerge – and even if that vision hasn't quite come to pass, the song remains an essential anthem, with its themes becoming startlingly relevant a couple of times every decade.

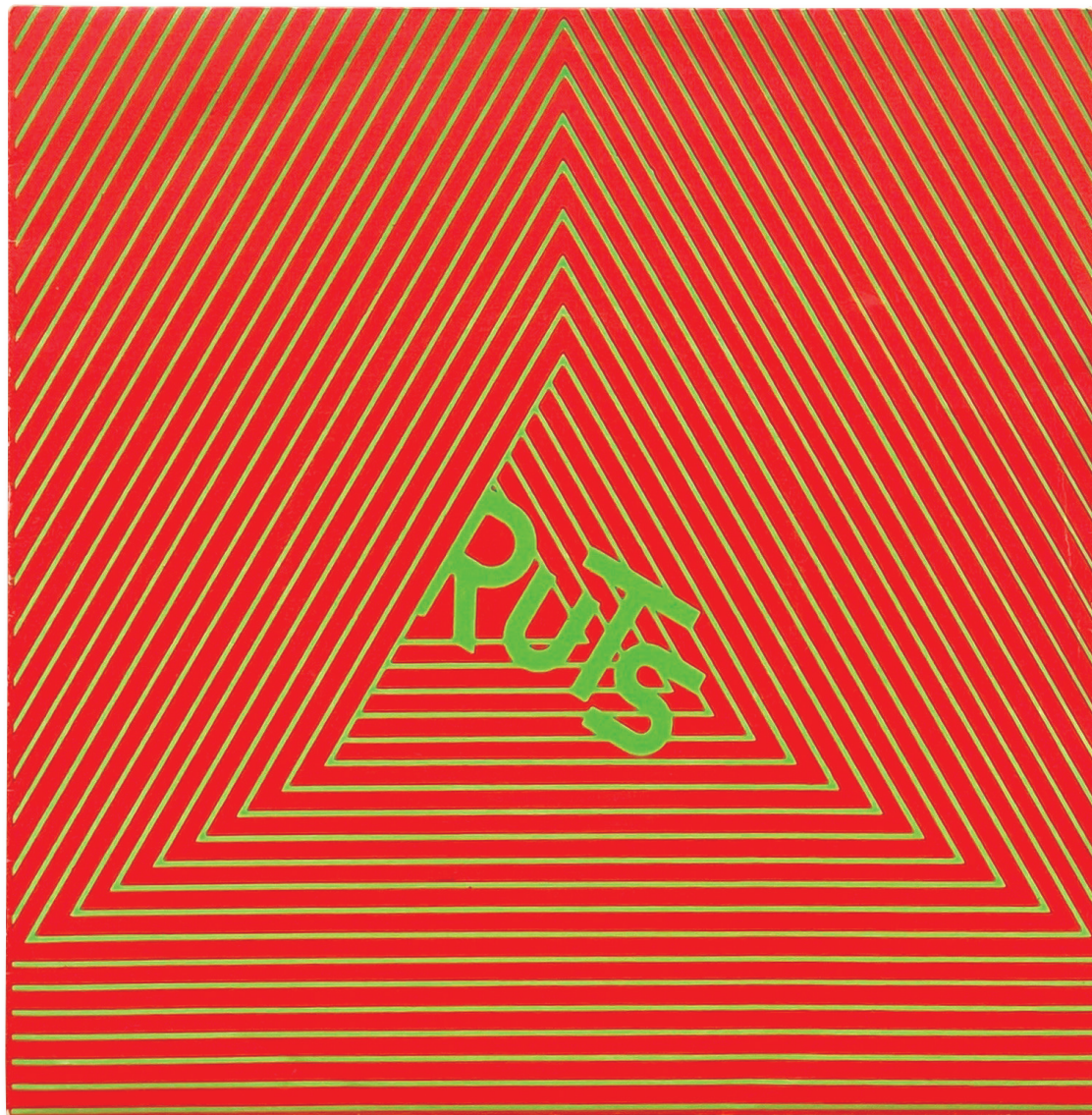
"It's still burning now and it's quite obvious that things will get much worse," says Segs Jennings. "In this country it's very rare that people take to the streets, but it would be good if they did. But if you wrote that song now? Well, you'd never get invited to play it on the telly." **PETER WATTS**

JOHN "SEGS" JENNINGS: It all started with that famous bass riff. I wasn't a great bass player – I didn't do scales because I couldn't. But I did this run as an annoying warm-up. We went to do some demos, I think in High Wycombe, and [guitarist Paul] Foxy seized on that "da-da-da-da-da" run and took it somewhere. Malcolm started singing "...with anxiety" and there you go. We were so fluid together, the four of us.

JULIO ANTUNES/IAN WALLMAN/INPHOTOGRAPHIC



The Ruts in 1979:
(c/wise from left) Dave Ruffy,
Segs, Malcolm Owen, Paul Fox



DAVERUFFY: I think I borrowed the beat from Stephen Morris. If you listen to that early Joy Division stuff there's that same sort of beat. Neither of us are trained, me and Stephen Morris, we are self-taught. I was inspired by that and then built on it.

JENNINGS: We used to jam all the time. We'd play in this squat in New Cross. Malcolm would go to the offy and get a slab of Red Stripe and bring some dope and we'd jam. It would usually start with the drum or bass, Foxy would add some guitar and Malcolm would open his lyric book and sing about whatever he was feeling at the time. It was an ideal band for that. The whole essence was we'd jam for hours and tape it all, then we'd listen back to hear the bits we liked.

RUFFY: "Babylon's Burning" has a lot of light and dark. There's real shade, so it goes down in the verses – it's still rocking but it's minimal, and then it comes up again. Dynamics are a great thing in rock music.

JENNINGS: It took us a while to get it right. All the nuances are probably down to Paul. We were tweaking it all the time, changing a bar here and there, for probably about six months after the initial writing. We were playing it live and rehearsing twice

"We liked the idea of making a great-sounding record, because we'd waited all our lives for this"

DAVERUFFY

a week. That's how it is with a good song: it takes a few hours to put the thing down but then you have to hone it and that's what makes it powerful.

RUFFY: It took a while to get the recording right too. We had the song and were quite excited by it. At one point we took it to Strawberry Studio owned by 10cc up in Stockport.

JENNINGS: The first one was at Underhill in Greenwich.

RUFFY: Yes, we tried it at Underhill and a few other places, but it was always a bit lumpy. The Strawberry version was really disappointing because we thought we could really come up with something there. We had a very good sound. We did some BBC sessions with John Peel and Kid Jensen and they were always really good because the sound of the band was good. If you could capture that, you had it. But when we went in the studio and tried to

make it sound like this or that, we just couldn't get it right. It was only when we met Mick Glossop that it really happened.

MICK GLOSSOP: I heard some demos to get a sense whether we could make a great-sounding record and it was all very positive. It was easy, as a project. They were great musicians and I liked the material. I'm sure I would have seen them live to get a sense of how they played. That was important with a band like that because when you see a band on stage you hear the absolute basics of what they are about. It's always a good insight into what is important about what they do and you carry that into the project.

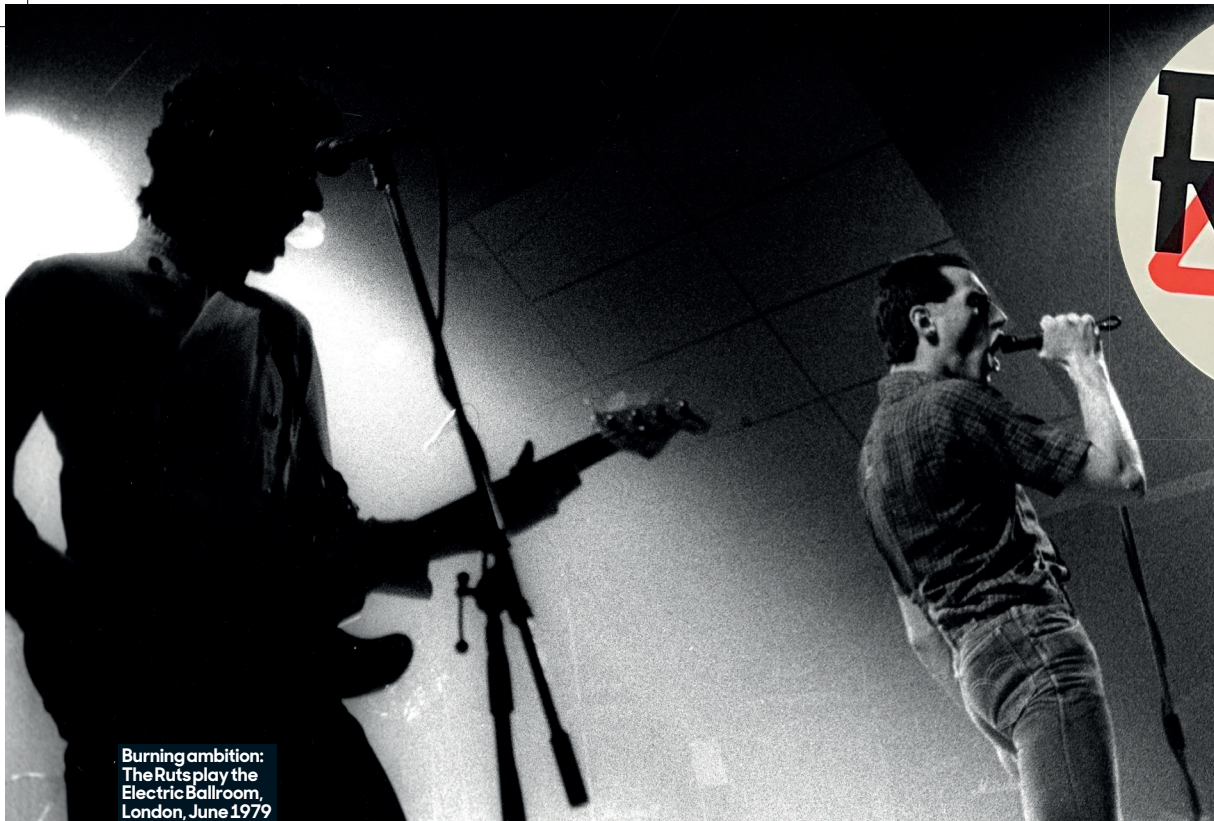
RUFFY: We were all heavily into music. Malcolm was a DJ and liked German rock and reggae. I ran a record shop, which is where I met Segs. We all liked soul and bluebeat.

Much as we were fired up by punk, we wanted to make a record that sounded great. We told Virgin we didn't want to work with somebody from the gutter and they found us Mick [Glossop], who had recorded with Zappa and Van Morrison. We liked the idea of making a great-sounding record, because we'd waited all our lives for this. Mick was a stickler, but we had so much fun and he brought out the best of everyone. He saw that we were a strong unit.

GLOSSOP: I liked the material, the attitude was great and they all played well. Malcolm had tremendous authority in his voice and Dave was a fantastic drummer. The song is very dynamic; there isn't any point where it really relaxes.

JENNINGS: Paul used a WEM Copycat for effects. He loved Jimi Hendrix and this was the closest he could get to sounding like Jimi. When we were playing "Babylon's Burning" we'd do big long dub jams around that echoing guitar line using the Copycat echo.

GLOSSOP: The one thing I feel I did that made a strong contribution to the record was getting Paul to double-track his parts. That gives you a bigger guitar sound and it



Burning ambition: The Ruts play the Electric Ballroom, London, June 1979



the same for Malcolm and Paul in west London. It was very multicultural. Misty In Roots were very supportive. Our first single was on their label, People Unite. I thought People Unite was a brilliant moniker. It's still our mantra now. **GLOSSOP:** They had black influences in their music. Although "Babylon's Burning" was a rock song, there are occasional phrases in Dave's drumming where he plays a particular hi-hat pattern. It's not a reggae groove but

"It was very tribal and people would come to the dressing room with stab wounds"

JOHN "SEGS" JENNINGS

pretty much always sounds great. The bassline is almost classical, a minor scale type of thing. Riffs were very much part of punk but this was more than a riff, it's a theme that goes over several bars. That was another essential part of the song. It stands out because of the power of that theme and then the first thing you hear is the title of the song – "Babylon's Burning" – which is there again in the chorus. That really hammers the point home.

RUFFY: We mixed it again when we did the album at the Townhouse. The single mix is different to the album. I think it is better. It doesn't have the effects but the single mix sounds a bit more vital. I don't dislike the album version, but the single has an extra edge of excitement. We did that whole album in three-and-a-half weeks, start to finish.

GLOSSOP: We might have done a different mix to make it sound more like the rest of the album. We would have done that for a consistency of sound. That's when we put in the effects. It is two different police sirens – the first one isn't a burglar alarm, it's the old bells you used to hear on a police car, then there's a more modern "nee-naw nee-naw" siren. That sounded great, then the band kicks in and there's loads of energy.

FACT FILE

Written by: David Ruffy, John Jennings, Malcolm Owen, Paul Fox

Personnel: Owen (vocals), Fox (guitar), Jennings (bass), Ruffy (drums)

Produced by: The Ruts and Mick Glossop

Recorded at: Air, London

Released: June 4, 1979

Charts: UK 7; US –

JENNINGS: We were listening to a lot of Jamaican stuff and that word, "Babylon", was everywhere – the zeitgeist we'd call it now. But the genius was the way Malcolm just sang "... with anxiety" over the top.

GLOSSOP: Malcolm's vocals were all very quick to record, one or two takes.

He was confident, he didn't need to be encouraged to get into the mood in any kind of method acting way. I don't remember having to coach any of them.

RUFFY: Malcolm wasn't really a singer, so we were so shocked when he first got on the mic. We didn't know where it came from. When you hear that vocal on its own it's so powerful and so dramatic.

JENNINGS: It was like a wake-up – this is what is going on. These days we try to write songs that provide some sort of answer, but then we felt we could just sing about what going on. We understood it because we came from these places and we could see it really was burning. I've just been to Notting Hill carnival and it was great, there's this nice vibe, then as it gets to closer to 7pm more and more police come out and it starts to get twitchy. That's the atmosphere of "Babylon's Burning". We'd experienced that buzz when we went to clubs in Southall. It could be very tribal and people would come to the dressing room with stab wounds. It could get pretty heavy. Babylon was burning.

RUFFY: The first band I'd played with was the Star-Keys, a black band that were run by the brother of Lucky Gordon, who was caught up in Profumo. We'd jam in Notting Hill and Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies would turn up. I made music with black people and listened to bluebeat and soul as well as rock records. It was

it's a flourish that indicates how that genre infused what they did. The politics appealed to me. It wasn't atypical of punk bands, a lot of them were political in some way or other, writing songs that expressed ideas about what was wrong with some aspect of society.

JENNINGS: We all thought naively that it was irreversible. It felt like human evolution and that the human race were coming together. There would be no problems in the world any more, black and white unite. Lest we forget, it wasn't just West Indians, it was Asians as well. We played with Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus. But sadly it did re-polarise.

RUFFY: Very occasionally you write a song and it becomes part of people's lives. That song doesn't really have a chorus – the hook is "with anxiety" – but that doesn't seem to matter, people love it and I still love playing it. If you are lucky enough to have a song people relate to, you play it because it's what people want to hear. But at the same time we are striving to write new music that is as good as that.

JENNINGS: Much as we are proud of our heritage, we continue to write new material. When we played our last show we did "Babylon's Burning" of course, as well as "In A Rut" and "Staring At The Rude Boys" and the others, but we also did three new songs that went down just as well. "Babylon's Burning" sets the bar for us. It's our most famous song and everything else we do has to be as good as that without ever repeating it. 🎧

*Ruts DC tour the UK in November and December; new album **Counterculture** is released on November 1*

TIME LINE

August 1977 The Ruts form and start playing shows around London, including several Rock Against Racism benefits

January 1979 After releasing their first single "In A Rut" on People Unite, they record some BBC sessions – including an

early version of "Babylon's Burning" – and are signed by Virgin
April 1979 They record their debut Virgin single,

"Babylon's Burning", at Air studio with Mick Glossop
June 1979 "Babylon's Burning" goes to No 7. It's remixed at The

Townhouse for *The Crack*
July 1980 Malcolm Owen dies of a heroin overdose. The Ruts continue as Ruts DC