



As urban guitarist Jonnie Duff mounted his bicycle at eight thirty on Monday morning outside his South London flat close to the entrance of the Rotherhithe Tunnel, he knew he was ready to break out of his musical ghetto. At forty four, with twenty years of squatting and busking behind him, Jonnie had a credibility crisis. Sandy, his neighbour, number one fan and manager, said he looked crusty – too crusty, in fact, to be a wild and angry guitar hero for a new generation.

'Who's gonna wanna listen to songs like Watch Out Yuppie Here I Come?' Sandy had asked one day. 'Frankly, Jonnie, you're passé. You need to upgrade yourself. Make your bid for the big time before it's too late... Get real. Get yourself a record deal.'

'You wha?'' Jonnie had replied. 'A deal with one of them bastard yuppies? No way. I hate them an' they hate me.'

But, less than a week later, Jonnie got real. He'd looked in the mirror and had seen the crust Sandy had described, not to mention the nasal hair. Then he looked over his life, not too closely in case he disturbed the cobwebs. Yeah mate, he forced himself to say, you need an upgrade. So he skanked a fiver off Sandy and went round a producer he knew, actually his best mate Keef. Keef had an old four-track and never normally charged Jonnie.

'I wouldn't normally charge,' said Keef flicking cigarette ash from his fifth-floor council balcony. 'But in showbiz you have to pay your way. This is commercial rates now. Besides, I can't stand your sounds. All that guitar hero shite. I mean, it's well past its sell-by date.'

'Bollocks,' said Jonnie, handing over the fiver.

Pocketing his demo tape and the address of a producer that Sandy had given him — 'Don't blame me if I've got the street wrong,' she'd said — Jonnie freewheeled into the suffocating gloom of the tunnel. He was wearing a surgical facemask that Sandy had lent him against the pollution. According to her, it would also help with road rage:

'At least in that get up nobody's gonna hear you getting lippy,' she'd said.

Jonnie, who never ventured north of the river because that's where the government and the music business were located, had replied angrily:

'I know all about road rage. I'll give as fuckin' good as I fuckin' get.'

'No,' Sandy had warned, 'No don't...'

But it wasn't as if Jonnie Duff hadn't lived. He had the scars to prove it: the scars on his ego were the result of multiple ejections from DSS offices; the scars on his head were from serial stage-diving in the early days of punk. He knew his journey North would take all his effort, passion and street wisdom. Without closing his eyes, he could visualise his mortal enemies: ruthless salesmen in fleet cars, army pensioners with heart conditions who didn't have the energy to brake, stockbrokers on rollerblades, truant muggers on skateboards, righteous toff mothers in indestructible Volvos, matador pedestrians from Glasgow, squeegee assassins, gangsters in BMWs armed to the teeth behind tinted windows. Jonnie was ready for all of them. Being a lousy cyclist as well as a guitar hero, he had to be.

The yellow safety lights in the tunnel flashed by illuminating Jonnie's bony mug. Did this tiled sub-aquatic passage lead to or from the underworld? Was Rotherhithe his bosom or his prison cell? Passing motorists could tell Jonnie's tortured state of mind just by looking into his eyes. They were headlamps casting ugly shadows across his soul. From the opposite direction they gave him a wide berth, as wide as possible given the claustrophobic lanes and blind bends. But from behind, cars, trucks, buses and motorbikes steamed up and swerved past, farting sticky soot in his face and leaving Jonnie's eyes raw.

It seemed the harder he pedalled the more the traffic built up behind him. The wailing of klaxons and hooters filled what little air there was. Through unseen gritted teeth, Jonnie wailed back, and he rang his little bell. With a vengeance he pedalled on, two, three, four hundred feet into the tunnel above which slapped the oily Thames. Upgrading his life and crossing the river were not things he'd done before. Now he was doing both at once. The surgical mask strained and stretched as he screamed unheard expletives and political slogans of the most extreme kind. In short, he was getting lippy.

But, soon, the traffic subsided in the mysterious way that traffic does. Jonnie put it down to the hard-man vibes he was giving off. He felt he was giving them all a fucking good dose of real life. For a few brief seconds, he enjoyed the silence of his triumph.

Then he heard a high-pitched shriek of acceleration behind him. Glancing back, a sleek car was coming up fast, headlights on full beam. As it got closer, the hooting started. The tunnel reverberated. This was what Jonnie was psyched up for: a good scrap with a lone yuppie, the ultimate struggle between good and evil, between art and oppression, between South and North. The car seemed to hang back, as if to let Jonnie know it was just a matter of time. But that wasn't going to faze a guitar hero with a demo tape.

Then the car made its first move. It came up close, within feet of the rear wheel, its sleek black bonnet reflecting Jonnie's underfed anarchist arse. Jonnie maintained his speed, refusing to be intimidated. But the car inched closer, so close Jonnie could see the tyres out of the corner of his eye. The stakes were being raised. Adrenaline surged. The driver was clearly baiting Jonnie to lose control.

He wobbled dangerously. The car now flashed and hooted, creeping ever closer to the rear wheel. Jonnie responded with shocking gestures, of the sort easily understood whichever side of the river you happened to find yourself. But they seemed to have no effect. This game was for keeps. Sweating with exertion, the exhaust fumes giving him head palpitations, Jonnie finally tore off his surgical mask. And he let loose:

'YA SICK YUPPIE SHITEBAG W-NKAAAH...'

To no avail. The car kept coming, pressing him into the kerb. The driver, a suited corporate geezer who'd never had nasal hair issues, waved at him. As the gap between wheel and kerb narrowed, an electric window came down.

'Pull over,' commanded the driver, pulling up sharply and stopping.

Jonnie wrenched his bike onto the kerb and dismounted:

'Righ', you're gonna get a fat lip an' a busted schnozz,' he screamed through the open window. 'Come on yuppie let's have ya.'

'Hold on. I'm only trying to do you a favour...'

Jonnie stopped in his tracks. The clench drained from his people-powered fist. For there, in the yuppie's outstretched hand, was nothing other than Jonnie's demo tape.

'It dropped out back there, said the driver almost apologetically. Just trying to help...'

It really was the tape, battered but intact. Feeling the gaping hole in his empty pocket, Jonnie froze. His throat was all gluey with shame.

'Couldn't help sticking it in the deck,' said the yuppie. 'Lovely music...'

Lovely? thought Jonnie. His music was hardcore. It was angry. It was underground. Jesus. Anything but lovely.

'Well aren't you going to take it then?'

'Nah mate,' said Jonnie, 'not mine. Must be some mistake. Keep it yourself...'

'Oh, thanks,' said the driver, shrugging.

The window went up, and the car sped off towards the rich daylight north of the river. To Jonnie, it seemed the world had changed. Nothing was certain any more. His number one fan and his best mate thought he was all washed up. Yet it seemed geezers in suits loved his sounds. There was only one thing to do. He wheeled his bike around and headed for home, determined to fire his crusty manager then his crusty producer. After that he could get a proper demo tape done, one that would really impress his new fans.

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