

Declan Jones

My Life as a Trainee Rock Star



artillerybrand.com

As someone clever once said (and if they didn't they really should have) *'If I knew where I would end up I would have started from a different place'*. Given that I ended up as a writer/producer in the world of television, where I probably should have started was as a wide-eyed student in one of the country's film and media courses - learning the difference between a grip and a key grip and the grim consequences of 'crossing the line'... but I didn't.

I didn't because my twenties were spent travelling the world in a leather coat and silver-tipped boots on a career trajectory I was confident would culminate in wealth, fame and the occasional visit to rehab. As bass player in Irish rock band *Blue In Heaven* and later *The Blue Angels* my days were spent in rehearsal or recording studios, and my nights in concert halls and nightclubs.

While others of my vintage were starting their steady climb up the corporate ladder or sucking up information in lecture theatres I was perfecting my onstage 'thousand mile stare' and ability to sleep while sitting upright in a van. Over ten years I met some extraordinary people and had some amazing experiences e.g. sharing a 'smoke' with Timothy Leary, getting my bass sound with (Joy Division producer) Martin Hannett, seeing my picture in Rolling Stone magazine, having David Bowie play as our support act (yup!), being served booze by Nick Cave in a West Berlin shebeen etc. I heard the chimes at midnight more often than I should and protected my eardrums less often than was prudent, but by the end, when I was ready to hang up my leather pants and bid it all goodbye, could I honestly say I regretted my decision to roll the dice and follow my dream? Not for a second. I did what I feel every right-minded young person should strive to do with their twenties... *I wasted them.*



I suppose it was Punk that really made the idea of being in a band urgent and achievable. In my teens I didn't necessarily want to be a *musician* but I desperately wanted to be in a band. Pre-Punk there were many obstacles to achieving this dream (particularly the years of tedious practice involved in mastering a musical instrument) but Punk changed all that. Overt musical proficiency was frowned on. Solos were out, attitude was in and so – after a great deal of listening to John Peel and cursory exploration of our instruments – we were off. We were a band and we were to be absolutely huge.

After a year or so playing on the Dublin pub circuit and a series of low-fi demos we decided it was time to take a chance. After somehow getting one of our muddy recordings to U2's Edge we staked out a venue where they were rehearsing, before awkwardly talking a (slightly rattled) Edge into producing our 'proper' demo tape. Looking back I still marvel at our chutzpah and his wonderful generosity, but it also seems like the Dublin of those days was more of a village where pretty much anyone was accessible. In the subsequent recording session The Edge managed to magically crystallise everything that was unique and good in our sound into just three songs which gifted us a powerful new sonic calling card. Before long we were boarding the boat and train to London, where – after some months living on the dole in Kilburn – we landed a record contract with Island Records: pretty much the coolest label on the planet.

Okay, so far I've dropped a lot of names without sharing much in the way of practical advice (unless '*get The Edge to produce your demo tape*' counts as such) and I feel I probably should.



In a career that saw our band record two albums for Island (one of which won the then equivalent of the Meteor Awards) before being dropped, and another for Solid records before being dropped I suppose much of what I learned would fall into the 'what NOT to do' file.

For example: Don't postpone the discussion on the division of publishing rights 'till later' (trust me on this). Don't sign up for a support tour of primarily gay US clubs with a modernist English dance outfit if you are a raw rock band (as you are quite likely to get kicked off the tour unceremoniously in Minneapolis in the middle of the night). Don't allow your lead singer to partake of authentic Owsley acid the day before your industry showcase in LA, and don't let him drink a bottle of whiskey hours before another showcase in London. On the positive side: always agree to recording your albums in Compass Point the Bahamas (particularly in winter), do wear shades whenever possible (you're allowed!), and make sure to savour every surreal moment and unexpected opportunity that's thrown your way.

I've been jotting down these nostalgic thoughts in the midst of a global pandemic, something which has given many of us cause to reflect on our lives, and looking back on my own salad days as a trainee rock star I'm struck by how much that time has influenced my later life and work. In terms of my subsequent career, what I missed out on in terms of film school theory and technique I made up for through developing a genuine love of show business and some understanding of what makes audiences tick. I also learned a very healthy scepticism for those 'in charge' (Q: *How many A&R execs does it take to change a light-bulb?* A: *I dunno what do YOU think?*).



At the risk of sounding twee: I think my time in the band taught me that it was actually possible to become what you wanted to be (or at least a version of it) and I'm surprised to note how much the Punk philosophy has informed my personal and professional behavior since then. My first impulse is always the same: don't faff around, get to the point and keep it real.

And of course... ***no solos.***



.....
***Declan Jones** is a former musician who has been working in film, TV and the media for the last twenty five years as a writer and producer during which time his work has been nominated for and received many awards. Currently Head of Development at production company **indiepics**, the father of three says he 'keeps his friends close and his enemies closer still' – a tactic which he admits has led to some quite awkward taxi rides.*
.....

© Declan Jones 2020

Chops was conceived by Eoghan Nolan.

Designed and typeset by Gerry McCloskey

© Eoghan Nolan & Gerry McCloskey 2020

© Artillery Brand 2020

© Brand Artillery 2020

© Chops 2020

No part of this PDF may be reproduced without the written permission of both the author and Chops, the publisher.

If you know someone who would like a copy, please encourage them to download their own, free of charge, from artillerybrand.com

NB: There is no connection between Chops and Triumph motorcycles and use of a form of the Triumph logo is a homage only, our salute to a great brand. Respect.



artillerybrand.com