Outside The 'Box

In Public Image Ltd, John Lydon has assumed many guises, but has always struggled to transcend 1979’s post-punk masterwork, Metal Box. Has he finally cracked it? asks Andrew Perry. Illustration by Jason Holley.

Three tracks in, Deeper Water is key to its questing ethos: Lydon’s lyrics were inspired by boating off the Californian cost with wife Nora, and journeying into the maritime unknown with only GPS and a compass for guidance. Yet, as he fires off about “brilled bastard who... crash me to the rocks”, we’re actually being tossed around in a thinly veiled metaphor for the singer’s own creative mission. “I will not go down,” he intones with an urgent quaver, “I will not drown, I will head for deeper water.”

Against Smith and Firth’s on-chord-chugging rhythm, Edmonds spiritus ut extraordinaria strings sounds, most likely on his hot-wired Turkish saz. Initially, single depth-change tones, accelerating into a almost hurricane-like Middle Eastern strumming, which at 05:56 gives way to a grade A+ descending riff.

Edmonds, a sensitive ensemble player, is usually less grandstanding. While there are hints of pan-globalism, it’s often Lu who escorts tracks away from Anglo-American rock cliches, towards otherworldliness, most notably adding North African bazaar to One Drop’s Caribbean lift.

The album’s first half is accessible, radio-friendly, bar squalling Terra-Gate. Midway through, it takes a left turn with It Said That, a staggeringly off-beam assemblage of weird notes and angular changes, which lays the wind beneath the wings of abstraction. Make up variety erases a Religiousque poetic nonsensique (The Room I Am In); a clatteringdancable tribute to north London’s multi-ethnic soundscape (Lollipop Opera); and ultimately, the 10-minute, metronomic Out Of The Woods – Fodderstompf, with crescendos and racial/historical purpose.

As such, it’s a labyrinthine 64-minute journey, bound together by a group identity that gains in clarity with every listen. Lydon, on his return to the songwriting oche, digs deep, exploring his roots in post-war Finsbury Park. Second track One Drop, behind unison lines like “We come from chaos, you cannot change us,” is really about the difficulty of integrating, if you’re from an impoverished background.

Reggie Song, a pop belter, is One Drop’s optimistic doppelganger, celebrating Lydon’s escape at last year’s MOJO Honours List, whom he proclaims a “ladies man”, who, loving the Finsbury “hood, sees no reason for leaving the garden of Eden.” Yet for Lydon, life there was more conflicted. The Room I Am In recalls only the claustrophobia he felt, coming down off amphetamines after a weekend on the lash.

Most controversially, in Human he railed at how political leadership, class division and town planning have left his land “doomed to slide/Because I think England’s died.” Misty-eyed, he says: “I miss the roses... cotton dresses skipping across the lawn, happy faces when football was not a war, playing on bombsites, and oh, the days were long.” Lydon’s outbursts have drawn criticism: many feel he has no right, when he’s living a millionaire’s life in Los Angeles. Here, he shouts: “Because I’m human, I’ve just been thinking about getting it right.”

Many will argue that, from the author of Anarchy In The UK, this is lamentable middle-aged poutingness. Elsewhere, Fred Said That and Terra-Gate expand his repertoire of back-up’s dives into the TFF, etc, but overall, it’s simply a joy to hear Lydon in fine voice, getting stuck into stringy matters with his own unique, raw-nerve gusto, backed by a coolin’ band. Getting rid of the albatross job done.
“Frighteningly good fun…”

John Lydon talks to Andrew Perry.

This is PIL implies “better than any of the old PIL’s”...

“We’re in a friendly place. We’re not negating our history, and we’re not pretending that we come from absolutely nothing at all, with no relevance to anything prior. We could’ve called ourselves Utterly Unreasonably Ridiculous, or An Act Of Selfishness, but it isn’t about that, it’s about communicating with people.”

Did you go into recording with a bagful of tunes and lyrics prepared?

“We had problems before we started, because a lot of my material that I’d been writing for years was burnt in a fire (at his house in Fulham). That was stuff I’d written on my own, and I thought I’d sneak them in. I’d done my homework, but God had other plans. It was frighteningly good fun – we had to start literally from scratch.”

You’ve been playing together for three years, and the vibe is tight, supportive, pretty experimental…

“It’s the love of the brave. To take that extra step. Why resolve a thing with a bog-standard regular chorus when you can run for it, and let the lyric develop, or let the hookline or the bass flow? It’s a big adventure, music – people who narrow that down are the enemy.”

Lu Edmonds makes some amazing sounds with his Turkish saz?

“Me and Lu have a really special way of working with each other, goes back years (to late 80’s PIL). Many people don’t understand what PIL really is – it’s a shapeshifter – and who its true gems are. Lu knows how to put my voice in places that most humans just couldn’t conceive of, and I know that Lu can play things that no one has ever thought of. He’ll tell you, the guitar alone, it’s just not interesting enough.”

That’s a mighty riff of his on Deeper Water…

“That song’s about solving personal problems – you, the ocean being a cleansing thing, but also very dangerous. Lu’s got admirals in his family tree! But look at where he started – The Damned. I mean you wouldn’t’ve given a blest like that a chance, hahahaha! But he wouldn’t listen to the restraints, and the smug bureaucracy that pollutes the wonderful world of music. Lu’s been a slow growth, an evolving piece of art in himself. The boy’s genuine.”