



Ramones Forever

Larry Jaffee, *Shindig*, March 2010

Note: The interview with Joey and Dee Dee Ramone took place in July 1985 at their favourite East Village dive.

"The world knew in '76 we revolutionized rock 'n' roll" — Joey Ramone

THREE of the four original Ramones are now dead (Joey, 2001; Dee Dee, 2002; Johnny, 2004). Yet their music is more popular than ever, as evidenced by the steady stream of reissues of their back catalogue.

It's been 12 years since the Ramones played their last show after a 22-year career that set the bar for punk rock originality. Joey sadly died 11 months before the band's induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in March 2002.

Back in 1985, the band was still trying to figure out why they hadn't crossed over to wide commercial success. It wasn't for a lack of trying. Five years earlier, they even pulled Phil Spector out of retirement in search of a hit single that ultimately wasn't to be.

Commemorating the 30th anniversary of *Road to Ruin*, arguably their most commercial album containing the venerable anthem 'I Wanna Be Sedated', *Shindig* has unearthed a previously unpublished, 23-year-old interview with two of the bruddas.

The impetus for this July 1985 meeting with Joey and Dee Dee at their favourite East Village dive bar was the recent controversial release of a 12-inch single, 'Bonzo Goes to Bitburg', for UK indie Beggars Banquet.

The British music press speculated at the time that the record's biting indictment of Ronald Reagan for visiting an SS Nazi cemetery was too political for a US release. On this subject, both Joey and Dee Dee seemed somewhat coy about the censorship rumours.

Indeed, even Beggar Banquet's picture sleeve adorning Reagan's photo was short-lived, making the original 12-inch an even more valuable collectible.

A wide-ranging, two-hour conversation covered such topics as: how the Ramones enjoyed a much stronger following in Britain than America; why commercial success was elusive in the US; working with Phil Spector on *End of the Century*; how a real high school was blown up for the movie *Rock 'n' Roll High School*; how Dee Dee hoped the Ramones would tour with Motorhead but thought that it would never work because the punks would fight with the metal kids; their favourite singles and albums; how they chose cover versions; and Joey's reticence about being Jewish.

Dee Dee started the conversation (Joey joined us about 20 minutes later) discussing plans for a career retrospective celebrating the band's first decade together. It didn't emerge until June 1988 as *Ramones Mania*.

The band's celebrating its 10th anniversary.

No. It's sort of our 11th anniversary now, I think — yeah, it is. In '74 we started doing shows. It was a long time ago.

How has the band changed since then?

We still do the same type of songs, though. We're still the same way. We still have that energy. We just play those block chords and, all the down strokes.

At what point in your career did you realize that you guys really were making it? Was it the first album?

I guess we made it as soon as we started. We got recognised and we were written about and talked about. It happened pretty early on.

Wasn't Sid Vicious very influenced by your bass playing after hearing the Ramones records? Isn't that what made him pick up a bass?

Yeah, he used to go to Phil Lynott's (of Thin Lizzy) and teach him all of the first Ramones album.

Britain has always seemed to be a bigger supporter of the band.

Yeah, we just came back from there. That's where our 'Bonzo' song came out. It only came out in England. We have a good record company over there, too. Beggars Banquet are real good.

I heard the cover of 'Bonzo' was changed.

Yeah. They changed it. I think Reagan got upset with it or something.

Is that the same reason why it's not coming out here?

No. I don't care. It doesn't matter. We'll just do a new song. We just move onto somethin' new, you know? It's all right.

The *Village Voice* said last week in a review that it sounds almost as if you guys had to play 'Bonzo'.

We did play it really well. We've been playing good, especially with Richie, our new drummer.

What are some of your favourite records?

I like some of the early Animals records like *Animalism* and *Animalization*, and *Them Again* with Van Morrison. I like him a lot. I like the *Best of the Bobby Fuller Four*. He does a lot of good songs on that album. Sounds like Buddy Holly a lot. Also I like the Rolling Stones' *High Tides and Green Grass*. And, I like this album by a German group *Here Are The Boots*, they were around in 1965 or something. And their album just got reissued. It's a big smash in Germany. I like the first Jimi Hendrix album and the first Stooges album. And *The Best of Leslie Gore*. That's about it.

Is there anyone the entire band likes?

We all like Lou Reed. The whole band likes Motorhead. They're very good. It's heavy metal, but they're like a little bit like punk rock.

Do you ever see yourselves playing with them on the same bill?

Yeah, we've talked about it. Lemmy mixed one of our singles ('Bonzo' B-side, 'Go Home Ann').

How do you think the audiences would react to both bands playing together at the same show?

I don't know. If we did it in New York, I guess the heavy metal kids would fight with the punks. I guess we just can't do it. We just can't do it, you know? Kids are too naughty.

Does it bother you that the Ramones can't get radio airplay in the US?

Yeah. We just have a bad name and there's nothing that really can be done about it. I'm not even considering writing any more songs that are suitable for the radio. I just want a lot of screaming in the new songs I write.

(As we're talking 'Howling at the Moon (Sha-La-La)' comes on the bar's jukebox.)

You did consciously write and record songs for radio, then?

Of course. This one did. If they're not going to play ['Howling'], they're not going to play anything else. We don't care. What can you do? It's too late now. We're lucky we have [US label Sire]. You know, we're lucky we're even signed, I guess.

What's your memory of making the *Rock 'n' Roll High School*?

Well, it was a fun movie to make. We were lucky we got the part. They wanted to call it *Disco High School*, and they wanted to get a disco band because disco was real popular then. But the producer liked the Ramones, and he snuck us on the bill. [Producer] Roger Corman didn't even know. He thought it was going to be a disco movie. But instead, they made *Rock 'n' Roll High School*. And then it was too late to destroy it because it was already edited and everything, you know. I think it was quite successful.

Didn't they blow up the high school for real?

Yes, they really blew it up, too. It was really scary because they told us not to turn around and look. And, then when the explosion happened, it was so loud we were scared. We all turned around and looked at those flames. A school was in flames.

Did that ever happened at Forest Hills High School?

No. A lot of horrible things happened in Forest Hills High School, but I didn't really go for very long. I was a dropout. And I couldn't waste my time there [laughs].

All of you met there, though, right?

Yes, we did. None of us went there, though, for very long, you know.

(At this point Joey showed up, and Dee Dee left.)

Joey, how's the band these days compared to when you started?

I think it's the best we've ever been, you know? I wouldn't say that we've perfected it. Maybe we were a little naive back in those days. Now I feel very secure personally, and I feel better about everything? I just think we're real strong — the way we've progressed songwriting-wise and musically. We still have it, you know, but I just think we do it better now? There are ways of looking at things. When you see the old black and white footage of the Rolling Stones when Mick was 17 or something, you'd say, "Wow, well, that was amazing." But I mean it's different, though. We didn't lose it, you know, the way everybody else. Like I remember like The Who always saying they were going to make another *The Who Sell Out*. It was a great album I remember reading an interview with Pete Townshend and he was saying, "Well, the next album's gonna be another *Sell Out*." But they never could regress that far or recapture what they had that was so special. I feel we've maintained our credibility, our ideals and the stuff that makes us great, you know? I mean, the substance and the uniqueness and the beliefs — maybe vows in a — we took in the very beginning saying: "This is what we are, and this is what we stand for." We never lost that.

'Bonzo' is a great example of what you're talking about.

Yeah, I think so. It is a great record. It's one of those records I hear on the radio and I get all excited.

How did you decide to write the song?

Yeah, I was watching the news. When we first heard about [Reagan's] trip, it was really upsetting, you know? It was an outrage, him going to that SS cemetery. He sort of shit on everybody, you know?

Have you gotten a sense that Sire felt it was too political and that's why they're not putting it out in the United States?

Well, it will be comin' out. It was supposed to appear on this anniversary album, but now I don't know. It will be out probably on the next album.

What's the concept for the anniversary album?

Yeah, it's gonna be like the ultimate party record. There a lot of phases and stages of our career that was pre-MTV, pre-alternative radio. There's a whole new generation of kids that are just getting into rock 'n' roll for the first time and they're comin' to see us. Maybe it gives our songs a second chance — those songs that should have made it.

Is your audience expanding?

Yeah. Few bands have the fanatical following that we do. Our following's sort of like a great melting pot. We have our initial fans, and we have like a lotta metal fans now. They come to see us 'cause we're the real thing. And the heavy, hard-core contingent. And college kids. People who want the real thing.

Dee Dee was talking about how the whole band likes Motorhead.

I always liked metal like back in the '70s, before they were calling it metal and it was considered hard rock like Black Sabbath, Grand Funk and even Led Zeppelin. There were things that we got into that a lot of people didn't like the Stooges, the MC5, T-Rex and Alice Cooper. When I was living in Forest Hills, one day I went into a record store asked for a Gary Glitter album and I practically got laughed out of the store because maybe some connection with homosexual tendencies or some bullshit? You know what I mean? Because Forest Hills is a macho place and you don't ask for Gary Glitter records there. I mean it's Led Zeppelin all the way. This was '75 or so.

Who did you meet first in the Ramones?

I met Dee Dee first. He was sort of the one who sort of brought me into it. He liked the style that I had, and seen me perform with another band, Sniper. In that band is when I first started writing. In the interim before joining the Ramones, I was writing a lot of the songs that would appear later: 'Here Today, Gone Tomorrow' and 'I Don't Care' were some of the songs that I had written in '73. We had two albums' worth of material that we wanted to do when we were signed, and wanted to record them in the order they were written. I remember me and Dee Dee were sharin' a loft when we were broke he asked me to write some music for 'Glad to See You Go'. It was the first time we wrote together. Some songs were written together as a band, but the majority were written individually. Some songs we just kind of put together in rehearsals like 'We're A Happy Family', 'Teenage Lobotomy', and 'Pinhead'. In the early days of the band we wanted to project the band as a team, like a unity kind of a thing.

How did you come up with the name?

Dee Dee came up with the name. He was sort of going under the name Dee Dee Ramone. It was sort of a common bond, using the last name "Ramone." It was different. It also simplified it. By just using our first names, we became individuals in our own right.

It also made it easier to remember. It gave you character and personality.

And the band also had a recognisable emblem.

That was introduced by Arturo [Vega]. He's responsible for the art, t-shirts and [concert] lights.

I always liked the cover sleeves of *Rocket to Russia* and *Road to Ruin*, using John Holmstrom's comics of the band. I was wondering if you ever thought of putting together like a Ramonescomic book or even a cartoon for TV?

That's actually something that always annoyed me. I never liked the idea of being called a cartoon character. We're multi-dimensional people and we're serious. We like to have fun. But it always upset me being called a cartoon character. I remember like one day some guy on the radio did a radio interview and he referred to us as cartoon characters. I got really pissed off and he said, "Well, what I meant by that was you're unique personalities, like Iggy or Alice Cooper," you know what I mean?

Well, I guess 'Bonzo' shows that you are a serious band.

People I think are finally realising what we're all about. Stripped-down rock 'n' roll made it exciting again. [Before the Ramones] it was half-an-hour guitar solos and sludge and all the pretension. Rock became like a hodge-podge of different styles. It lost everything it originally stood for. The world knew in '76 that we revolutionized rock 'n' roll. Everybody tried to emulate us, which they say, is the highest form of flattery. The world changed for the better. When we went to England for the first time, there was nothing like us.

We were packin' in 400 to 500 people at CBGB's. But when we played London's Round House, we played for 3000 and everybody who was anybody was there. The next night we played to 1500 at Dingwall's and all these kids came to our sound check and told us that our record was out there six months before as an import. And they all said when they heard 'Blitzkreig Bop' it was sort of a call to arms, and everybody started their bands. When we left England, the first generation punk, the Sex Pistols, the Damned, The Clash, The Jam, was like the beginning of a very exciting time.

What is the first record you bought?

I remember buyin' Del Shannon's 'Runaway' and I remember like, ahm, what's... I remember like 'The Martian Hop' by the Ran-Dells (*1963 novelty one-hit wonder*) [laughs].

What are some of your favourite albums by other bands?

No Remorse by Motorhead, *Funhouse* by the Stooges, *A Quick One* by The Who, *Slider* by T-Rex, *Berlin* by Lou Reed. I always thought that was a masterpiece. It's kind of depressing. There was a time I listened to it every day. I remember listening to it on New Year's Eve. It was so great, but so depressing. Some albums you listen to too much that you just can't listen to 'em anymore. Also, an English album, Slade's *Smashes*.

Quiet Riot had a big hit with Slade's 'Cum on Feel the Noize', and Slade got back together as a result of it.

Yeah, except they really butchered the song. Americanized it. I was always thinking of the Ramones trying to cover that one. But that was a long time ago.

What about the Beatles?

As far as I'm concerned, the Beatles are the ultimate classic band. When you hear them, it sounds so great, whether it's their early stuff or later. Today big bands like Tears for Fears. Junk. Not to say that they're bad; they write good pop songs. But there's no substance. There's no guts. I remember growing up with the Beatles, the Kinks and The Who. That left you with something. People had something to say that maybe lightened your life, or with the Beatles, really changed your view and made you a better person.

How do you decide what songs you're going to cover?

We always look for obscure songs that were great and we felt we could sort of improve upon and do 'em in our own style, whereas a lotta people tend to take a great song and butcher it, you know? There are certain songs that should just be left because they're perfect, they're great, you know?

Why has commercial success eluded the Ramones?

I think we're too real for radio. They like to play safe stuff that's not going to upset anybody. It's very insulting. Once in a while you hear something good, but for the most part it's a joke. It always seemed to me anybody who really had something to say is always sort of sidelined. That you've gotta play their game. It wasn't this way in the '60s. That's when you could hear everything that was great. But when they learned how to make a buck on it and a profit, it's just big business, you know? You know, it's mediocrity and all that.

Are the Ramones better appreciated outside the US?

We just finished a real successful tour of Europe, major festivals. We played to 50,000 people and did a bunch of dates with U2. In England, in February we played sports arenas. Beggars Banquet,

our label there, are so supportive. I was totally impressed. They really know how to get behind an act. They're a hundred percent behind us with *Too Tough to Die*." Me and Dee Dee went over for three days, doing interviews from nine in the morning 'til the evening. All the major tabloids, radio stations, BBC and TV.

What does your family think about what you do for a living?

Now they're real happy. My mom's real proud. There was a time she wouldn't let any records in our house.

Does she ever go to your shows?

Yeah, she comes every so often, and now my father's a fan, too. Took him a while. There were years that we weren't as close as we are now, but now he's a big fan. He wears our t-shirts. He and his girlfriend have a house in East Hampton, and I went out there a couple of weeks ago to relax and he's wearin' the t-shirt on the beach. It was funny, but nice.

What was it like working with Phil Spector on *End of the Century*?

Phil is such a perfectionist. I admire Phil. He had a lot of idiosyncrasies. Things were slow. We're used to workin' fast. We're used to like getting the basic sound for like 12-13-14 songs in two days. This last album (*Too Tough to Die*) took us about a month to complete with the mix. That's how it should be. It should be spontaneous and capture the feel and excitement. That's where most bands go wrong. They'll work on an album for three years and then it'll still sound like shit. Phil was a one of a kind. He's been responsible for a lot of greatness, you know? He came out of retirement to work with us, and he really wanted to work with us bad. He felt that we were both pioneers in our own right. It was very important for him to produce us.

'Do You Remember Rock 'n' Roll Radio' is a great song. Proud of that one. I enjoyed doing the album with Phil.

The band also has worked with some other great producers.

Tom (*Erdelyi, original Ramones drummer*) and Ed (*Stasium*) are a real good team.

Do you think Tommy missed playing in the band?

Nah, he doesn't. Like Ed, he's doing really well now, but he's a workaholic. Tommy recently produced my brother's band, the Rattlers.

How about Graham Goldman's production of *Pleasant Dreams*?

I don't know. It didn't work out too well. He did teach us. You learn from everybody. The album should have sounded a lot more aggressive. I think the demos were much better than the album. Some of the songs were okay. It just lacked punch. Graham just is very stiff upper lip-like. He's done a lotta great things like writing those great Yardbirds songs, 'For Your Love' and 'Heart Full of Soul'. At the time, we actually wanted to produce ourselves, but the record company told us, "no way, your record will flop." It did any way [laughter]. Robert Fripp wanted to produce us, but we didn't really want to go with him.

What do you think would happen in that type of collaboration?

It would have been very conceptual.

Which is your favourite Ramones album?

We like 'em all. My favourites are *Too Tough To Die*, *Leave Home*, *Rocket to Russia*, *End of the Century*, and *Subterranean Jungle*.

Has Seymour Stein ever called you to say, "Joey, I'm upset about something the band did"?

No, not yet [laughter]. Sure, sometimes there might be different views. When we signed with Sire, we signed so we could have artistic freedom. We do what we want to do. We can submit the art material for album covers we want to submit, and nobody's gonna say this or that. Sire's the best label as far as I'm concerned, even though we're not as successful as we should be. They're one label that gives people a chance. Seymour knows what's good. Most record company people sit on their ass. Seymour is out in the field looking for great talent. If not here in the clubs, he's always in Europe. How often do you see like a company president in a Danceteria or CBGBs scoutin' out somebody. You don't see it anymore, if you ever did.

So you've done 11 years together and you all set for your second decade together?

Well, I'm in gear. Actually I'm havin' the best time I've ever had, you know? It's just, ah, very enjoyable, but, ahm, there've been times where there's been a lotta hostility, you know, within the band and stuff, but right now I think with the addition of [*drummer*] Richie, we're the best now. We have a really good relationship. We have a really good outlook and perspective on what we're doin' and what we're all about now. Everything is real good. It's just a good vibe.

Sire Records founder Seymour Stein comments: "The Ramones were in and out of my house, as well as my office, all the time. Closest relationship I ever had with a band. Can't believe that with

the exception of Tommy they are all gone. Isn't it wonderful however that after their long struggle for fame they are now bigger than ever. Not just in the U.S., but all over the world."

'Bonzo Goes To Bitburg'

The American punk pioneers never were more political than on 'Bonzo Goes to Bitburg', their 1985 anti-Reagan diatribe released by Beggars Banquet as a much sought-after 12-inch single.

If there's one Ramones song that sums up the vast political differences between Joey and Johnny Ramone while co-leading one of rock's most beloved punk bands, it's this.

While liberal left-winger Joey was the band's front man, singer and songwriter contributing a substantial amount to its repertoire, the Ramones were often perceived to be conservative right-winger Johnny's band. His rapid-fire guitar playing gave them a unique sound for the ages, and he handled most business matters, especially on the road.

'Bonzo' clocks in at three minutes 54 seconds — nearly double the length of most Ramones classics like 'Blitzkrieg Bop'.

The track was principally written by Joey (who shared songwriting credit with bassist Dee Dee Ramone and producer Jean Beauvoir) hammering then-US president Ronald Reagan for his May 1985 visit to a German SS cemetery. Recorded the next month, 'Bonzo' is a classic political record responding to a current event (e.g., Neil Young's 'Ohio').

Bonzo refers to the name of the chimp in the 1951 Ronald Reagan movie, *Bedtime for Bonzo*.

Short items in *Melody Maker* and *NME* speculated perhaps incorrectly that the reason why 'Bonzo' was a UK-only release from Beggars Banquet was because Warner, the parent company of Sire Records, which had been the band's recording home since 1976, didn't want to piss off the Reagan administration.

Beggars Banquet catalogue manager Steve Webbon remembers now that, "in the USA Sire were involved with the Warners corporate, so I'm sure there would have been reluctance to court controversy. I'm sure The Ramones would have liked it released in the US. Equally it was a stand-alone single at the time, with no album to promote, so Sire may have taken the decision on economical grounds."

Joey was perturbed when I enquired whether he might have been sensitive to Reagan's visit because he was Jewish, which I asked him to confirm and that his real name was Jeffrey Hyman.

"JEFF," he replied, "but I don't want to talk about this." A somewhat tense exchange ensued that could have very well ended the interview if I didn't comply with his wishes to change the subject.

"Yeah, but I'm not into religion. I don't want to talk about that. Well, I have convictions anyway, you know? I mean that's really a separate issue. And I'd rather not have it in there, if possible."

LJ: What?

JR: My name and my, you know, whatever, you know?

LJ: Okay. Well, I can probably get around it.

JR: Okay.

A week later, Joey calls me at home to reinforce that his real name and the religion of his birth not be revealed. I tell him that a freelance writer rarely has control over what an editor does, so I couldn't make any guarantees.

"I know where you live," he tells me, which I thought was kind of a ridiculous threat since at the time I lived on Long Island about 30 miles from Manhattan. *(His name and religion were not in the published version.)*

Joey was pretty accepting that the single wasn't going to be released by their US label: "Actually we recorded it for England. Rather than have Beggars Banquet put out another single from the [previous] album (*Too Tough To Die*), I thought why don't we do something new? We were working on some material, and then Dee Dee got involved with John Beauvoir. We all pulled it together. They don't put out singles any more in America without an album nowadays. You'd still like to have it out while it's still fresh."

A Sire staffer I spoke with at the time confirmed that 'Bonzo' wasn't released as a single for both "financial and political" reasons.

Joey was also aware that the 12-inch cover sleeve had been changed by Beggars Banquet, with Reagan's photo removed, although the cemetery remained. "Yeah, I've been hearin' somethin'," Joey said, "but I haven't spoken to anybody to really find out what's what."

Joey had also seen the British music paper clips reporting the US flap. "Well, they sent me a bunch of Xeroxes." He was pleased to learn from me that a record store on Long Island sold 150 copies of the import single. "That's great, yeah. Makes me happy."

Webbon estimates that 'Bonzo' went on to sell 10,000 units for Beggars Banquet.

Of the political nature of the record, Joey was completely unapologetic: "We signed [with Sire] so we could have artistic freedom. You know, we have the say. We can do what we want to do, and nobody's gonna say this or that. You wanna make people react. I want to make people think. I mean you wanna shake 'em up, you know?"

Asked whether the Ramones achieved that with 'Bonzo' and whether they were a political band, Joey responded "There's a lot of different sides to us. There've been times where there's been a lot of hostility within the band."

More than two decades later, I realise now that Joey might have been alluding to his strained relationship with Johnny, who insisted that the song's title be changed to 'My Brain Is Hanging Upside Down (Bonzo Goes to Bitburg)' when it was recorded again by the band in December and included on the band's next Sire studio album, *Animal Boy*, released in May 1986.

Although 'Bonzo Goes to Bitburg' took more than a year after its UK single debut to appear on an American album, studio and live versions have since shown up on several Ramones compilations, including *RamonesMania* (1988), *Loco Live* (1992), *Hey! Ho! Let's Go! Anthology*(1992), *The Chrysalis Years* (2002), *Weird Tales of the Ramones* (2005), as well as the multi-artist *CBGB Forever* (2007). And it was used in the 2003 movie *School of Rock*.

In the *End of the Century* documentary film, Johnny says he was "a Richard Nixon man in 1960." Of his differences with his liberal sparring partner Joey, Johnny comments, "It's a strong chemical imbalance. Opposites attract and all that crap."

When the Ramones were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in April 2002, Johnny in his acceptance speech said "God bless President Bush."

"Johnny was a staunch Republican," Sire Records founder Seymour Stein tells *Record Collector*. "He loved Ronald Reagan and the two Bushes. Nicolas Cage told me when he introduced Johnny to George W. Bush he was in heaven."

Johnny Ramone died 15 September 2004 from prostate cancer. Joey Ramone died 15 April 2001 of lymphoma. Dee Dee Ramone died of a heroin overdose 5 June 2002.

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