

Still eking out a frugal existence at Dial House, an oasis of calm amid the bowers of Epping Forest, two ex-members of Crass, drummer Penny Rimbaud and visual agitator Gee Vaucher, have very little, yet want for very little. They remain living proof that, what many dismissed as an anarchist pipe dream (the notion of living as far removed from the taint of the system as humanly possible), can be a living, breathing reality.

From the outset Crass were never a 'band' in the traditional sense of the word, more an information network based around an ever-shifting collective of disparate individuals. They never sought to promote themselves as a marketable commodity, yet sold over a million records despite their efforts to the contrary.

"I think I can honestly say that we worked very hard on what we did, and we were very committed to what we did, but we never ever went out of our way to sell ourselves," says Penny. "And none of the things that we did were about trying to sell ourselves either. We didn't wear all black because it was a natty look! It was initially because it was a very anonymous thing; so although Steve Ignorant was clearly the frontman/singer, he never became isolated in the same way that generally happens with bands. That never happened with Crass, and that was partly because we all decided that we would, as much as possible, all look the same. It was a policy decision so that we couldn't be individualised, but eventually it became a practical necessity anyway, because everything around the place was black, and everything came out of the washing machine black. But we really didn't want to be definable in a rock'n'roll context.

"That's why the first Crass statement was Reality Asylum," he continues, referring to the 'blasphemous' spoken-word diatribe against stuffy religious superstition that was their first single. "I wrote that before any of the 'songs' we did, as a book in 1977. That was the first lyric we had. Steve couldn't make head nor tail of it, he thought it was shit but he got an atmosphere from it. He meandered off and came back with So What. And if you ever wanted to find out what Crass was about, that's it, right there in those two songs. On the one hand, Asylum was how I wrote, on the other So What was how Steve wrote, and that was the tension that was in Crass. Steve could condense my wordiness down into one or two hard statements, and that was something I learnt from him, and I wrote songs using a similar sort of writing style... but since then I've returned to my somewhat more obscure, often long-winded style of writing."

Most people associate Crass with searing socio-political commentary — each release wrapped in an informative poster booklet, and propelled by pseudo-militaristic drumming that added to the feel of fundamentalist propaganda — but anyone that cares to look beyond their serious hard-line stance will find some sly, often self-effacing, humour.

"Yes, it was only people that really knew us that were privy to the sort of games we endlessly played. We were very good at turning ideas upside down and back to front, I think that was one of our real skills. And that is what irony is often all about. We also had some very direct humour as well, that was often completely missed... the bit in Bloody Revolutions about Zyklon-B and North Sea gas, for example — bits like that were actually very funny, although the subjects were a bit horrible!

"People took it very seriously — the only ones who didn't were ourselves. Even when we were confronted with obscenity charges by the government, we didn't take that seriously, we were still taking the piss. I think because most of us were quite a bit older than your average punk band, we weren't about to be



intimidated by authority. We just laughed at them. When the director of public prosecutions started waffling on at us about something, we just realised that he was a bumbling old fool, we certainly weren't threatened by it. It might've meant we were going to have to go to jail, or pay out a lot of money in fines, but what did that matter? It was a lark in the most serious sense of the word."

And beyond the swathes of bleak feedback lurked some incredibly sophisticated musical compositions. Of course, there were countless punk bands with cockney singers swearing their heads off and playing

fuzzed-out guitars — but Crass managed to make it sound both unsettling and unique.

"We used strange time signatures and stuff. When we were setting the range of our songs, we didn't pull out an old blues reference, or rip off an old Clash song — our references were more like John Coltrane or Benjamin Britten. And anyone who knows that music, or anyone that knows free jazz, or anyone that knows modern classical music — if they listen to our music with that set of references, they'll hear what we were trying to achieve.

"Britten was the first place I often went to for some sort of melodic sequences, because I've always loved the way he put really strange notes together. A few of our songs were based directly around Britten's music. Generally speaking, not many people appreciated us as musicians back then — not that it was a disappointment for me or anything, but it's quite nice that people are discovering these facets of our material, as they are also discovering that we were actually human beings! It was what they wanted to make us; they wanted to think we were fucking humourless machines, because that was a good way to not have to deal with us.

"We never discussed the sonic side of things, it was just assumed. But I do sometimes wonder, for example, where rap might have been if it wasn't for us. Certainly some of the stuff that Steve wrote and I drummed to, like So What and Do They Owe Us A Living? are complete rap songs. Not just in the way that Steve sings, but also in the way I drum to them; I reflected his voice, so I was almost talking the same thing. Before then, my drumming was very jazz, but I'd play around the beats, doing cross-overs and stuff, playing off people. It was a very natural way to write for us, and that developed into the basis for how we