



Thursday 26 April
Music Industry Uncovered

Keynote Speech

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By Jeannette Lee & Don Letts

Colston Hall Bristol



Graeme Howell (introduction): Good morning and welcome to day two of South West Sound.

South West Sound is a really exciting partnership between ourselves at Colston Hall and Dartington Plus based down on the Dartington Complex. This is the second year that we have run the conference over two sites the whole thing winds up here later and moves lock stock and barrel down to the estate. It has been really exciting and I'd like to say to the Dartington team it has been great fun working with you again and hopefully we'll repeat the process.

I have the great pleasure of introducing Don Letts and Jeannette Lee. Don Letts is a legendary iconic figure within the British Music Industry. He is a filmmaker, musician, a DJ, an author and I was hoping to list some of his achievements but I just don't have time. Jeannette Lee is one of the co-owners of Rough Trade Records, one of the iconic record labels within the British Music Industry and a brief lists of bands that have been involved with this are The Smiths, Scritti Politti, the Libertines, The Strokes, it just goes on and on, but we are going to hear a lot more about that... Ladies and Gentlemen, Don Letts and Jeannette Lee.

[Applause]

Don Letts: I'm a little jet lagged, Jeannette's a little nervous, so if you've got any questions when we blank out feel free to offer them up.

They say behind every great man is a great woman; sometimes they are actually side by side if not toe to toe, and that's why we are hear today, to try and get closer to a woman who remains somewhat of an enigma in the record industry, largely through male dominance, but mostly because of her own modesty it has to be said.

Over the next 60 minutes I'll attempt to remedy the situation. Before we commence, I'd like to read the following from Geoff Travis of Rough Trade records. "I'm incredibly fortunate that Jeannette agreed to work as my partner at Rough Trade for so long. It is inconceivable that it could have been successful without her. Our relationship is a chemical balance of knowledge, musical opinion, character analysis and psychological judgements that enable us to deal with the mess of everyday problems and issues

that face us daily. She is the musical touchstone for whether something is good enough for us to work on or whether it upholds the tradition of the label, i.e. originality and the great thrill of Rock and Roll. Lennon had McCartney, Strummer had Jones, Morrissey had Mark, and Marvin Gaye had Jim Weston to work with. Me, I have Jeannette Lee.”

Please give a big hand for Jeannette.

[Applause]

Don: To kick off proceedings, I think it would be good for the audience to give a little background, I mean nothing comes out of a void, so if you could Jeannette, could you tell people a little bit about growing up, your school years, music coming into your life etc.

Jeannette: Ok. The reason they say the thing at the beginning there about me being an enigma, is just that I'm really shy and I don't like doing interviews (laughs) so that's where that comes from! Alright, so I grew up in the seventies in a really rough council estate in London. All the people that I grew up with, the other kids, either generally were getting into trouble with the police, going to prison or just becoming parents at a really early age. That didn't really interest me. So I spent all my time locked away in my bedroom with a record player. I won't say Dancette, it wasn't that long ago... locked in my bedroom listening to my parents' record collection really and then that progressed into me buying records at a really early age. I think that's really where I got all my musical knowledge, it stems from that early period where I listened to things over and over again to the point where I felt I was actually *in* the record. I understood where the songwriting was coming from and the way they put the song together and I think that early grounding has helped me do everything I've done since. In the seventies I went to a local comprehensive school and it was in the skinhead period, so the school was full of good looking stylish young skinheads really that were listening to Trojan and reggae the whole time. And at lunchtime we would have a party, a dance, in our house room and that's where I got my real love of reggae, that's where it started. I would sit there listening to great records and watching people looking incredibly sharp and stylish and doing their own thing. I think from there I developed a real love of black music and that was the grounding for me, that's where it all started.

Don: I remember you mentioning a particular white female artist that impressed you when you were young as well.

Jeannette: You mean when I was listening to my parent's record collection?

Don: Yes.

Jeannette: There was just a particular Dusty Springfield compilation that I got really hooked on at a young age that I really loved. Yeah. I think that had a big influence on me, that record.

Don: Ok. In the tradition of white working class youth gravitating towards black music for a spirit of rebellion, that I guess, was your first musical education?

Jeannette: Yes.

Don: Let's move things forward as we've got a lot of ground to cover. Teenage years; I'm guessing clubbing, or fashion; you know the music and teen years. What was the next step in your musical evolution?

Jeannette: Yeah clubbing. I would literally lock myself in my bedroom the whole time listening to records and just not hanging out with anyone else that lived around me! *[Laughs]*. So after that I suppose I started going out to lots of night clubs, dancing... in those days people just did go out and dance, nobody was taking drugs or anything, we were just out there listening to music and getting high on it really. Around that time, I went to a particular show at the Lyceum where I saw the Le Bell Play live, and that's where I met Ian. You can take the next bit! *[laughter]*

Don: Umm... so as she so rightly points out, teenage years, clubbing, fashion, dancing, Jeannette caught my eye... very easy on the eyes it has to be said, but more importantly what struck me was her attitude - she was a feisty little thing and that was attractive it has to be said. I guess from that moment on, we went through a period of trying to musically impress one another

Jeannette: Yes.

Don: And I remember going to a lot of weird gigs, what kind of things did we go and see?

Jeannette: When I think about it now, we went to see things like Weather Report, Todd Rundgren, Little Feat... really really serious 'head music' in some cases. And we'd be sitting there trying to get into it. I think we were quite enjoying it on a level but in that really formal setting, sitting there clapping and nodding your head in your case, it was quite hard work. I think it was quite hard work.

Don: I think what was interesting about it was that it wasn't really of our culture or our language. It wasn't really our soundtrack. I think that's fair to say isn't it?

Jeanette: Yes.

Don: We felt that there was definitely something missing. Maybe the only thing that started to fill that gap was the glam rock thing. Yes? No?

Jeannette: Yes, definitely. As a working class kid growing up at that time, it was all about music and fashion really. So the whole glam rock thing, you could understand it, but you could also identify with it because you wanted to look like that. You wanted to go out and be seen... like a peacock.

Don: And it was primarily English I guess.

Jeannette: Yes, you could relate to it.

Don: So the next thing really, is that you are out partying, eventually you've got to pay the rent or give your mum some money at least, so thinking about a job (we didn't think about careers in those days) but a job, did that come into the frame?

Jeannette: Well I suppose this is at the point where I was thinking about do I leave school, do I go into further education, what do I do?... and I guess that was the point where I met you and I had no idea what to do. I had no idea that my interest in music could be a job, in anyway. It never occurred to me that I could make a living out of doing what I liked doing, and listening to records all day. It would never have occurred to me. And at that point, you asked

me to come and work with you. If that hadn't happened, I could be a professor or something by now! You took me out of school...

Don: Right! I should probably chip in here. Around this time I had got a job on the Kings Road, Chelsea, working in a place called Acme Attractions, and back in those days shops were kind of like clubs and there were two particular shops that were happening in those days, Acme Attractions where we worked together (because I'd seen her, took a shine to her and rather than asking her out, I asked her to come and work in the shop) and the other shop was Vivienne and Malcolm's place, 'Sex', which was down the road. What was interesting about these places were that there were other people that were just as dissatisfied with the musical climate of the times, and it was a kind of gathering place for like minded people. So we are there looking for something... again we are talking about the mid seventies here, social, political climate not that good, I mean as Jon Rotten so eloquently put it a few years later, a general feeling of no future. Not only was there no future, we had no soundtrack, but that was about to change with the explosion of Punk Rock, which it has to be said, you jumped in feet first, I was kind of reticent. You should pick up here.

Jeannette: It was just incredibly exciting to me that these young bands were playing that seemed totally like my contemporaries, our contemporaries. They were interested in the same things we were interested in, they dressed in the same way that we dressed, and until that time I'd obviously listened to things like Bob Dylan and that, but the fact that they weren't love songs, they were about real issues that you felt could change something. It was a really exciting time, it was rebellious and you felt part of something that really was turning things around and moving things forward, and that was incredibly exciting.

Don: I guess the thing that really attracted us was the fact that unlike the bands that we'd been seeing earlier, the punk thing broke down that fourth wall that said 'you are the audience, we are the band and things will never change'... it was all inclusive, that was the most important part of it.

Jeannette: the DIY part of it, the difference between going to a punk gig and standing at the front and feeling the energy and excitement, to going to see Todd Rundgren at the Hammersmith Apollo (or whatever it was called at the time) and passively

clapping. Whereas you felt you were in, you were right in it, you were part of it. It was an amazing change. I think that really changed my life.

Don: It certainly helped me to reinvent myself as a film maker. I think one of the things about punk rock is that it wasn't just about the music, I mean it was often said that people would see the Clash or the Pistols, and the next day a hundred bands would spring up, which was partially true, but a lot of people went away from those shows feeling empowered and they took that attitude and it informed what ever they did. So I reinvented myself as a film maker. There were fashion designers, photographers, poets, reporters, all kinds of things sprung out of that.

I got the impression that you jumped into to it, because as she said earlier pre-punk, a lot of the working class youths were into black music, and as much as they loved it they realised it wasn't really of them, you know what I mean, it was somebody else's thing. I'm guessing that as the punk thing came along which was extensively (in fact, totally) white, it must have been a breath of fresh air. Could you elaborate on that?

Jeannette: Well it was totally white except for you.

Don: Oh yeah.

Jeannette: Yeah. It's true, as I said a minute ago, I felt completely included in that. I wasn't on the stage but I felt part of it. That opened up my mind to the possibilities of what you could do, and that you didn't actually need to be in the band to be part of it and make something happen.

Don: The other thing they talk about around the whole punk thing is about empowering women. Which it did, because before that women were cosmic dressing for male cock rockers, you know what I mean. As I'm saying that, I realise that you were already empowered without that cultural back up.

Jeannette: I must say that I never ever thought (I probably think about it more now than I did then) 'I am a woman it is going to be tough for me', I have to try harder, I have to be a certain way. I never ever thought like that, I just did whatever I wanted to do. I've been lucky, I've just been able to do what I wanted to do and

people have just naturally gravitated towards me and wanted me to contribute to what they've done. Quite often that has been the case.

Don: I beg to differ. Luck, no. I think the thing that attracted me to your character was this feisty opinionated person, it wasn't just opinion for the sake of opinion, it was grounded in some kind of musical knowledge.

Jeannette: That was the years in the bedroom with the records!

Don: They don't want to hear about our personal lives...

[Jeannette laughs]

Don: I tell you what was interesting about the shop, Punk Rock is just beginning to happen and people like John Lydon are coming into the shop, Joe Strummer, Sid Vicious, and they'd all be coming in to talk to you (because I'd be posing in the background with my dark glasses, it was like good cop bad cop). That's why they'd be talking to you.

Jeannette: Which was which?

Don: Why do you think they spoke to you, because you were just easy on the eyes?

Jeannette: Why do you think they spoke to me? Well everyone was scared of you! You had your dark glasses on which was really intimidating! I think they spoke to me because I was interested. I was interested in what they had to say, what they were trying to do, whereas you were being hostile and standoffish.

Don: She's playing down her role here, because it wasn't just that she was interested, she was interesting. Back in those days she was this empowered lady before that whole punk thing happened. She did have opinion, and you did have knowledge, but she wasn't a yes woman, she wasn't prepared to hang on the arm of some rocker or something. You had an opinion and you spoke the truth.

Jeannette: Well maybe I was part of the new type of women that were being born at that time, but I certainly didn't realise it at the time. I wasn't going around thinking 'I'm breaking the barriers

down for women'. I was just being myself. I came about at a time when I think maybe that was the first period (after the '60s and everything) that a certain type of women were beginning to feel equal.

Don: Or it could be the Napoleon complex!

Jeannette: I haven't grown since then, so...!

Don: I tell you who used to come into the shop a lot, was Sid, tell us about Sid coming in because that was really funny.

Jeannette: Well Sid was a very very sweet, kind hearted person. He was nothing like the character that you know as Sid Vicious. In fact I would say that Sid became that character because he was very shy and sweet, and that character that he invented as Sid Vicious was just a way of him getting through things. If he behaved the way he did when you were just having a conversation with him before he was actually in the Sex Pistols, there was no way that he could actually pull that off. He was a very sweet, floppy, kind hearted guy, and he used to come in and ask me for fashion tips! *[Laughs]*. I remember once he came in with a magazine, 'Honey' or 'Nineteen' or whatever the fashion magazines were at the time, and he came in and said "Here, Jeannette, how do I get my hair like that, what do I use to get my hair in a quiff like Brian Ferry". There were lots of things like that. And then when Sid got his role in Sex Pistols he went into character, I think he was a very sweet person, but when he went into character he was method acting, and he never got out of it.

Don: Methadone acting...

Jeannette: Yes. *[Laughs]*

[Laughter in the audience]

Don: And there were other females that were coming to the fore at that time. I mean the Slits.

Jeannette: the Slits were really really important in my life. We were all approximately the same age, Ari was much younger than everybody, she was fourteen, when she joined the Slits. I guess that was a moment that I realised that women were able to break

moulds and do something really different. They were really brave, and they were the only girl group on the scene at that time, and they did take all the boy groups on.

Don: And I guess the other person that did make a big mark on your life after Dusty Springfield, if I may be so bold, was Patti Smith.

Jeannette: Everybody loves Patti Smith don't they? Anyone with intelligence and a sense of people that are important culturally you know. We had a mutual friend, we still do, who used to send us bootlegs from America, Pete Doherty. He told us about Patti Smith before Patti Smith hit London. Information was harder to get hold of in those days, there wasn't any internet, you had to read about everything, you had to import the magazines from America, so Pete had told us about Patti, and seeing the photograph of her for the very first time was a bit mind blowing. What was she? She made no attempt to keep anybody happy, in any way. She just did her own thing right down the line and she gave everyone a run for their money.

Don: Hairy armpits...

Jeannette: If I had to choose any woman that had influenced me in my career, it would be her.

Don: What I'd like to say at this point as well is that when the punk thing exploded, I had my rebel sound track, I had my hardcore dub reggae thing going, and I was kind of king of my block at that particular time. When the punk thing first happened, I wasn't that into it, because it was stealing the attention. It has to be said that if it wasn't for you dragging me along to the first Pistols gig, I could have missed this whole thing, just through sheer male pride or something. I've got to say that I was this close to missing the whole thing.

Jeannette: Well it's nice of you to say that, but when you did get it, you made it your own, you certainly did.

Don: Yes that's true.

[Laughter]

Jeannette: Slow on the uptake!!

Don: Well to move this on, so we are in the shop and we are playing hardcore dub reggae, which got a lot of people into the shop in the first place.

Jeannette: Yeah it really did, people used to come down to hear it.

Don: Another thing that was interesting about our shop was that we had a cultural mix, that kind of signposted the way to the way multi-cultural London was heading. Vivienne and Malcolm's shop was a lot more... Euro-centric. In our shop you could buy a pair of trousers for 15 quid, in Vivienne and Malcolm's shop it was 50 quid, there was this really interesting multi-cultural mix going on.

Jeannette: We were a slightly down market version weren't we...

Don: Yeah...

Jeannette: Not a version really, but we were a little bit more down market... maybe it was more accessible.

Don: Yeah, you were definitely more user friendly. So, punk rock explodes, everybody is up in arms, there is nowhere for these people to air their wares so to speak, and the accountant of the shop opened a club called the Roxy.

Jeannette: That was a shock. That the accountant that just did the books at Acme Attractions came in one day, and said "Guess what, I'm going to start a club!". We said, "What do you mean? You don't listen to music do you?!"

Don: It was with Jeannette's encouragement, because they asked me to DJ and I had never DJ'd in my life, but they needed someone to play music, and this was so early in the punk rock days that there weren't any punk rock records to play. So, what am I going to do? I start playing what I love which is hardcore dub reggae, with Jeannette's encouragement I started to slip in things that we thought related to the punk scene.

Jeannette: If I remember rightly there were hardly any punk singles at the time.

Don: There weren't any!

Jeannette: Part of the whole reggae thing was that there weren't enough records to play, so you had to pad it out. We were playing what we were listening to in the shop, because that was music that we loved.

Don: Yes. She did encourage me to slip in things, like, Iggy Pop, The Dolls, MC5 and all that. But 80% of what we played was hardcore dub reggae. The reason I mention this is that I was standing at the side of the stage with Jeannette, we look back at punk with rose tinted glasses, but what we don't remember is that it was fucking rubbish.

Jeannette: I know there was a lot of shit. There really was a lot of absolute rubbish, but the attitude was good. The fact that people were trying to do something new and brave. I mean, people were just jumping up on stage and sometimes really embarrassing themselves, but not caring. That was great. That was a liberating thing to see.

Don: Something like Jonny Moped comes to mind. He was a character who was straight out of One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest or something. But like I said there was a forum there for people, that if they were brave enough and they had an idea, they could have a go. I think that was the important thing wasn't it?

Jeannette: Absolutely.

Don: Let's move on as we've a long way to go. Pistols are happening, where did you first see them?

Jeannette: I think I first saw them at The Hundred Club. I knew about them before because we were in Acme Attractions, but the main gathering place for the Sex Pistols was Sex, which was the shop just down the road. We weren't enemies, but we were contemporaries and we were quite competitive with one another I think... I know... So we knew about the Pistols because Malcolm had been in America with the New York Dolls, so we were always keeping abreast of that stuff. Whatever you think of Malcolm now, we always knew that we had to keep our eye on him. We were 16 years old and we knew that this guy was doing something, and Vivienne too, we knew they were going to turn up something

interesting, so we were doing our own thing but keeping our eye on them. It was like “Malcolm’s in America, Malcolm’s managing the New York Dolls’ and then suddenly he wasn’t any more, and everybody knew that something was going to happen. He orchestrated it, he’s very good at that sort of thing. We were on the edge of our seats waiting for something to happen. You were resisting, [to Don] I wasn’t resisting. And then it happened. We heard this band was about to start playing around and I was really really curious. I felt that I couldn’t afford to not go and check it out, I might be missing something great. You have that feeling sometimes and it doesn’t usually pay off, but this time it did.

Don: It was of the people, for the people, by the people. No longer were these white kids just throwing themselves into black culture...

Ok let’s move things along. Another interesting thing is that the whole punk thing didn’t really last long. I think the marker would be when they appeared on the Bill Grundy Show.

Jeannette: Yes. Until that moment it is an underground secret thing...

Don: The next day people think they know what punk is all about, all of a sudden it is all about mohawks and safety pins, and the core people moved on from then. The punk thing did become utterly ridiculous within 18 months.

Jeanette: Yes it was very short-lived.

Don: The Pistols go to America, they implode very quickly, and to escape the paparazzi, John Lydon invited me to Jamaica. I’d never been. The closest I’d been to Jamaica was singing ‘Harder They Come’, but I’m black so he thinks “I’ll take Don, it’ll make things easier”. Anyway, we were in Jamaica, and while we were there he gets this idea to form what would eventually become Public Image Limited. We go back to London, we [signals Jeannette] were still an item (so to speak) and you had kind of met John in the shop, but you became very friendly with him, and it has to be said that John took a shine to your character. Then began the ‘PiL period’ let’s call it. Jeannette, over to you.

Jeannette: Let’s get it out of the way, I’m not a musician, so John asked me to join Public Image, and I think he’d had a terrible

experience with management. He'd been working with Malcolm who put him in a really difficult position...orchestrated things that he thought were out of his control and he resented that bitterly. I think it was about safety for him really. Obviously he wanted a new band, but he didn't want to have a manager in the traditional sense. Obviously he needed a manager, someone had to communicate to the record company on a daily basis, he sure as hell wasn't going to do that, so he asked me to join the set up. I don't think we really knew what the boundaries were, he just wanted to be part of it, and I wanted to be part of it. I started off doing the back of the scenes managerial business, and that went really well and the record company constantly thanked me for having somebody that they could speak to.

Don: You as a friendly Jeannette once again.

Jeannette: Yes, the usual thing. That was really good. It developed we became really tight unit. John created this thing, that he wanted it to be seen as a group, end of story, whether you are taking a musical role or not, you are just as important as me (which is of course not true in his case).

Don: It seemed to me that he changed the concept of what a group could be, to actually accommodate your input.

Jeannette: Yes I think that's true, I do think that's true. From the outside you'd be forgiven for thinking that I might have been making a big fuss as being included, 'I'm a member of the group' but it really wasn't like that. That's what he wanted, he felt safe in that kind of environment.

Don: As I think about it I realise now that this opinionated, knowledgeable, truthful character that I'd met several years before, was something that was lacking from John's circle.

Jeannette: John didn't trust anybody.

Don: Not only did they not trust him, but very few people said no to John Lydon, except for this lady. She would look at his thing and say, no that's rubbish, you look fucking ridiculous... you know. I've got to say this as well because it is important, about this time someone else is grabbing Jeannette's attention and I was off in a huff, so I disappeared from the circle for a while, and she was in

this Public Image world – which I've got to tell you is bloody bizarre. I even realised at a distance. Tell them how extreme that mix was. It was living with the bloody Adam's Family, on drugs. You tell them because you were there.

Jeannette: The whole thing, like I said about the safety thing and John trying to create a world around himself, I think part of that was that you had to be in quite close proximity all the time. He wanted us to be all in the same space, and there was a lot of drug taking in those days; some people going up, some people going down, some people going sideways, endless nights of listening to records – usual stuff, listening to records endlessly, never going to sleep. Cooking up reasons that we *didn't* have to go and talk to the record company the next day... But a really really creative brilliant time, coming up with good ideas and new concepts. I was filming everything at the time, a lot of the sleeves I art directed, I did a lot of the internal A&R stuff with John. It is a bit of a pompous way to put it really, but we would discuss everything all the time, we would eliminate all the things that weren't up to scratch, and as you say, that was a big part of my job... I've always been a critic, I can't help it. I have my values in that way, and that helped John to think that he could go out into the world with a new set up.

Eventually people kept leaving. People were getting kicked out or leaving. Wobble made a twelve inch without telling anyone that he was doing it, he used some of the backing tracks to a PiL track or something, and that was bad, that wasn't allowed, he had broken the rules so he was out. Things like that kept happening, and the more that happened, John wanted to push me to the front. I'm not very comfortable being in the lime light, maybe you can tell, I'd rather be at the back.

Don: I remember particularly an uncomfortable moment you had on Top of the Pops.

Jeannette: Yes I was on Top of the Pops.

Don: You tell them.

Jeannette: Well they asked me to...

Don: Pretend to play basically.

Jeannette: Everyone was miming!! But anyway, they pushed me very much to the front and were putting me in all the photos and I think because of that, that caused a lot of confusion about what really was my role, coupled with the fact that I never do interviews. So that's the enigma thing, that people always wonder what it is that she actually did, did she do nothing? *[laughs]* There was a big role! There was a lot of work to do, it was a big thing to keep together, so yes, I did do something, I worked really hard. But because I wasn't playing in the band it really confused people.

Don: I've got to say I took a leaf out of her book several years later, I don't know if some of you are aware of a group called Big Audio Dynamite, but I was in a band and I couldn't play anything... I used to have coloured stickers on my keyboard to show me what to do, but from my point of view it was punk rock – a good idea attempted is better than a bad idea perfected, and in those days there were a lot of bad ideas out there, trust me.

Jeannette: Basically we were doing whatever we wanted to do weren't we, that was the point of it. I've been basing my whole life on that.

Don: If I remember rightly, you went to New York. What prompted the move to New York?

Jeannette: You reminded me, I had forgotten this; there was one particularly horrendous drug raid in the house that we all lived in, where I remember waking up in the middle of the night hearing loads of feet, like an army running along the floorboards above. John was in that room, I was upstairs and basically the police had come round, I don't know what they thought they were going to find, they thought there were drug dealers living there or something. People's personal little amounts of drugs is a different story, you don't need 15 police officers... they broke the door down! It was a really nasty raid and John came out of his room (there were ten police men on the stairs coming up, really scary) and he came out of his room with a sword (he would always collect weird things, he had a gravestone in his bedroom and a sword) and he came out with his sword and held it at the top of the stairs, and the police thought he was mental. Anyway, they raided the house, they turned the whole house upside down, they knocked the door down, they took John away to the police station in his

pyjamas if I remember rightly, or whatever John's version of pyjamas were, some Tudor pants... I don't know! They took him to the police station and he came back really shaken up from that, he'd had enough of it. He was pissed off that his space had been... absolutely...

Don: I remember this thing as you are saying it, that because he'd made God Save the Queen and there was an occasion where he was attacked by Teds with razorblades...

Jeannette: Yes, he'd gone through it, he really had gone through it. He had had enough and he wanted a change of scenery. I think it was his idea. I think he came to me and said (literally) "let's go and move to New York" and I was like "alright, why not", and I think about a week later we all got on a plane and went to live in New York. It was really good fun, it was just when Hip Hop was happening, and again you were there...

Don: I was there, yeah.

Jeannette: Everything that I've ever done, we've always just followed the same path. It's amazing isn't it!

Don: Yeah. We were in New York in '80, '81 I believe when the whole Hip Hop thing was taking off, and that was interesting, because from my experience that was like a black punk rock. Black music at the time didn't reflect the feeling on the street in the Bronx and Harlem, so kids had to do their own DIY thing, two turn tables and a microphone style, and we were there to witness that. If I remember rightly, you had enough and went back to England after a short while. Is that right?

Jeannette: I actually only came back for a couple of weeks, got involved with somebody, fell in love, got married, had kids.

Don: Hold up a second, I've got to qualify this. This somebody happened to be a son of this town, this city, Gareth Sager, anybody familiar with this name? Pop Group, a really great artist it has to be said.

Jeannette: I know, but it is ten past eleven and we haven't got to Rough Trade yet...

Don: Jesus Christ!

Jeannette: Can I just say that everything that we've just said right up to this moment, is all about acquiring musical knowledge that you can use in your career. You should be using this knowledge, you spend your whole life accumulating information, and sooner or later (if you've got a brain) you've got to say to yourself "I've got to do something with this, I'm not qualified for anything else!"

Don: She comes back, meets Gareth, has some kids, and then she gets a phone call from one Geoff Travis. Take us on from there.

Jeannette: It was actually when I was pregnant with my first child, I got a phone call from a mutual friend of mine and Geoff's called Roger Trilling, completely out of the blue. Trilling phones me up and says, I've been talking to Geoff Travis, he's really interested in working with you. He wants to know if you want to go and work with him at Rough Trade. I was like, "What! Where did that come from?!" A record company. I was partly flattered to get that phone call, and partly insulted, because I thought that at that point I was on the other side of the fence, I wouldn't work in a record company; I was on the artists side, that was what I was interested in. I get a call out of the blue and decide not to take that up, and I spend the next couple of years looking after my first born child. Eventually Geoff and I end up sitting next to one another at a mutual friend's birthday. We start talking about music that we are into, and this and that, and we really hit it off. Again he came and asked me to come and work with him at Rough Trade. I said "what do you want me to do? I've got no office skills, and what's more I'm not interested in getting any..." he said "no, no, don't worry. You don't need any, just come and do it with me, it will be great". His enthusiasm... he's the most enthusiastic, intelligent teenager that you could ever hope to meet.

Don: While we talk about his enthusiasm, could you briefly tell the people how he started Rough Trade, because I think it is the funniest story.

Jeannette: Ok. Geoff had trained to be a teacher and I think he was having a gap year or something. He was travelling across America and Canada and while he was travelling he was buying records. He was going to record fairs and buying up records

everywhere he went, hundreds and hundreds of records. Eventually somebody said to him, "what are you going to do with these records? How are you going to get them home?" and he said "I don't know" so someone said to him "why don't you start a record shop?" and he said "ok, that's a good idea, that gives me something to do with the records", so he shipped the records back and that's how the Rough Trade shop started. I think he shipped the records back and then he went back to the school to teach and he was really miserable and not enjoying it, and one day he was standing at the bus stop. He was getting really pissed off and looking at his watch and said if the next bus that comes isn't a 73, then I'm going to give it all up and go and try to make it in the music business, and it wasn't, and he did.

Don: And that's true. That's true.
Anyway, let's move this thing along. When did you two realise that you had some musical synchronicity?

Jeannette: What I realise now with hindsight, now I know Geoff as well as I do, is that he A&R'd me in the way that he would A&R a band. He just had a hunch that I was a good person to work with, and he sought me out, we'd never had a conversation, we knew of each other (I knew who he was, he knew who I was) we'd never hung out or anything, but he had a hunch that I'd be a good person to work with. All these years later, we've ended up being 50/50 partners, we've worked together for twenty years now. It's just so impressive that he did that. It is like the way that he approaches A&R, you just get a hunch about something and you go in for the kill.

Don: So over a meeting with him at Vivien Goldman's you realise that there is some kind of musical synchronicity, something about the Jesus and Mary Chain or something?

Jeannette: Well he asked me to come into his office and have a meeting with him to talk about whether we could work together. I really liked him, I was really impressed by him so I didn't want to say no, although I didn't really want a job. So I went in to meet him, and he played me some things that he was working on, and my first impression was that there was too much stuff, you are doing so much stuff. My background was just focusing on the thing, what ever the thing was. I went in and there were a huge amount of bands. One of the first things that he played me was

Jesus and Mary Chain which I could instantly relate to, and later found out that they were really big PiL fans, so there was something going on there. He really wanted me to work with him, I didn't know what I was going to do or how it was going to work, but it seemed like something that I couldn't turn down and that I should try.

Don: So at this point you are working for him. I believe that the next shift in that dynamic was to do with a group called the Sundays?

Jeannette: He asked me to come and work with him, I suppose he was asking me to be his assistant or something, but neither of us felt comfortable with that. He wasn't telling people that I was his assistant, I certainly wasn't telling people that I was his assistant, I wasn't comfortable with that and he wasn't comfortable, so it evolved really quickly into this role... I had this role that didn't have a name, that people couldn't pin point, same as PiL. It just evolved into this thing. And then we signed the Sunday's.

The Sunday's naturally started to gravitate towards me, at that point I started having the bands that were more like my bands (although we did it altogether) I had my people that I was working more closely with, and he had his people that he was working more closely with. That's how it evolved and that's kind of how it works to this day. We do it all 50/50. We do all the A&R together, we manage all the artists together. The golden rule about Rough Trade is that Geoff and I have to agree that something is worth signing. There is no way that I would dream of doing something that he didn't like, and he will tell you the same thing; although he is partial to trying to talk me into things that I don't necessarily like, more than I am to him.

Don: I believe that from this point to this very day, this couple, Mr and Mrs Rough Trade as I call them, these guys are out three or four days a week seeing bands perform, really getting in there at ground level before magazines are writing about them and major record companies are then trying to sign them up. It is a really important thing that you have your ear to the ground.

Anyway, the dynamic changes between you, and there is now a kind of equity. I believe that in the next few years you start signing

quite a few bands. The next major shift is that Rough Trade Distribution Company went down. Maybe you should elaborate.

Jeannette: Well without going into too much detail because it is really well documented, and it is something that you see all the time with companies. The company got really successful, it expanded too quickly, brought in a big computer system that they couldn't operate... it makes a difference when you are invoicing and stuff...

Don: ... and you don't know how to use the machines...

Jeanette: Anyway, for various reasons it imploded and it took a couple of labels down with it and one of the labels was Rough Trade.

Don: Rough Trade during this period lost a lot of it's assets including one of their signings, The Smiths. They also lost their name, and I think this would shift Geoff and Jeannette into this new position which is management.

Jeannette: Yeah. Well we were pretty burnt by the whole Rough Trade thing, it was a terrible experience. We had a great catalogue, we'd had a really great rostra until that point, we were flying high, and then the bottom went out of it.

Don: Tell us about the management thing then.

Jeannette: Well that's why it happened, because we were burnt by what had happened and at that moment we didn't really want to start from scratch with Rough Trade at that point. Geoff had been asking me for some time "should we start a management company?" and I always said no, because it is too much hard work.

Don: You already had some kids...

Jeannette: Yeah exactly, it is too much hard work, nannying people all day and I didn't really want to do that. Anyway, eventually of course we did. The first band that we managed was called The Cranberries. We tried to sign them to the label in the early days, they went a bit weird, but in the beginning they were really good. We tried to sign them to the label and they decided to sign to Island, but they came back a while later. They thought their

manager was really dodgy and they asked us if we'd help them out. We decided that we would, we liked them, we wanted to work with them and we couldn't sign them because they'd already signed, so we thought we'd try it out and started managing them. Within about 18 months they turned into an absolutely huge group in America, and that was a huge learning curve.

Don: After then didn't Pulp follow?

Jeannette: Really shortly afterwards John Best who was the PR for the Cranberries came to us and said, 'Pulp are a completely amazing band and they are in a real mess. You've done such a good job with the Cranberries, would you meet them?' So we did meet them. I was always slightly reluctant about new people, taking on more things, just because I want to do a good job so I don't want to take on too much to do, spread it around too much. Anyway, we went to see Pulp play and I just fell in love with Jarvis from the second I saw him. He was masterful, intelligent, handled the audience like a real pro, so we started managing Pulp. We still manage Jarvis now, that's been about 15 years.

Don: It is fair to say that because of the reputation that Rough Trade had built up, artists start coming to you to be managed.

Jeannette: Yes they do. I think that we can't take people on unless we absolutely love them, because it is a full time job management, and we've got the label to run. My philosophy is no to management, unless for some reason we absolutely have to do it. We've got a quite small rosta of people that we manage...

Don: Particularly cool though, you managed Spiritualized, Beth Orton, Scritti Politti, Bernard Butler, and probably a load more but we've just got to keep moving forward.

So if I've got my facts right there is a period of about eight years when they're managing acts and they also had this side label, Blanco Y Negro, which Geoff had going, so I think your attention was basically taken up by management...

Jeannette: We could still sign people to Blanco, so we still had an outlet for that, and the management company, although it was only supposed to be a little side product of what we were doing, it became really successful really fast. Luckily we had Blanco so we

could still do the A&R thing on that side, and we concentrated on the management because it went out of control. It was very successful very fast.

Don: This continues for about 8 years where the label Rough Trade actually does not exist...

Jeannette: We lost the name. The name went with all the assets.

Don: It was in 2000, Sanctuary Records comes into the picture and they decided that they wanted to resurrect Rough Trade?

Jeannette: Well Sanctuary has had a lot of trouble now which I'm sure people in this room know, but at that time they had a lot money to invest, they had made a lot of money from managing Iron Maiden. They had a lot of money, they wanted to expand and they didn't really know the area... Anyway to cut a long story short, Sanctuary put a lot of money into Rough Trade and we bought the name back and we started to run the label again.

Don: ... and they rose, Phoenix-like from the ashes...

Jeannette: Yes. We were lucky enough to make some really great signings really quickly. We signed the Strokes within two months of the label being up and running again. Really shortly after that we signed the Libertines and we got a large roster back really quickly. The label was back on its feet and we were doing better than ever.

Don: What about Arcade Fire... we could go on for a few more minutes can't we... Antony and the Johnsons, and one of my personal favourites, Serj Tankian is it?

Jeannette: Sophian

Don: Why can't he get a proper name? Anyway, great artists. It seems the spectre of major companies have always been hanging over your shoulder because it seems that Rough Trade is almost like a musical laboratory, a breeding ground for talent...

Jeannette: Yeah that's a drag that, I have to say. We have to get into a position where we are powerful enough and that we've got enough money to hang on to people long term. We have suffered

from that a bit. We did the first Arcade Fire record which was a great record...

Don: ... anyone familiar with Arcade Fire?

[Audience agree]

Don: Great, great group.

Jeannette: They've moved on to Universal now. Sometimes there is a feeling that the majors look on us as a breeding ground for them. Sort of look over to see if it is cooked yet and have it away as soon as they get a chance. So we are really concentrating on not being in that position any more, and doing longer term contracts and hanging on to our great signings.

Don: So how does the future look for Rough Trade? A constant battle of fighting off the major vultures?

Jeannette: It's looking good at the moment because we are just about to get new backing, and it is really exciting and we'll be in the best position we've been in (if it comes off) to date.

Don: Because we are right up against it, that is a very potted history of the life and times of this lady and of Rough Trade. Before I got offered this gig, I asked some of your artists to send me some questions which I hope you can deal with. I'd like to throw them at you very quickly and I'm anticipating that they are the kind of things that you guys are likely to ask, and if they are not, feel free to put your hands up.

Right... here is one from Richard Hawley: What is the most challenging project you've ever undertaken at Rough Trade?

Jeannette: That's easy, the Libertines.

[Audience laughs]

Don: Really, needs no explanation!

Um, has your experience in the music industry from a woman's point of view been a positive one.

Jeannette: Yes. I think it is tougher sometimes for women, I think you have to work a bit harder, but yes.

Don: Here is one from Ant from the Hours: What advice would you give a young Jeannette Lee type these days?

Jeannette: Um. Keep the fire burning, be passionate to the end.

Don: Ok, here is one from Julian of the Strokes: Do you ever hang out socially with Geoff?

Jeannette: It's all I do, I don't see anyone else! All I do is go to gigs with him!

Don. Here's one from Jackie McKewan of the 1990's: How much did those shoes cost?

[Laughing]

Don: Here is a sensible one... Does gender really have any bearing on how a person acts or is treated in the music business anymore?

Jeannette: I'd like to say no but I think it does a bit, like I said before, women in the music business suffer from people thinking that they are somebody's assistant, rather than being a person in a position of power, and I think that is a big bore, that women have to go about that.

Don: And another one from Mr 1990's: What do you look for in a band in terms of signing them?

Jeannette: Well, it is something that you can't put into words really, but I guess it is to be excited by it because it is original on some level, and there is genuine talent there.

Don: Here is one from Mark Hoborough, head of BBC music: What do you and Geoff argue about?

Jeannette: Music!

Don: Are you more of a manager than an A&R woman or are you both? (Again from Mark).

Jeannette: Definitely both, I've been concentrating on a new project in the last year with a female singer, a couple of years actually, and that has been A&R-ing right from the bottom, finding the songs, choosing the musicians, the whole thing and I've been really enjoying that, so definitely both.

Don: This is a loaded question... Antony Aggerty from Antony and the Johnsons: Have you ever signed a band that seemed to be swimming against the tide of current trends?

Jeannette: What like, Antony and the Johnsons? Well we signed Antony and the Johnsons and we had a lot of success with them because they went on to win the Mercury award, and they were definitely swimming against the tide.

Don: OK. This is from Jase Basemen of Spiritualised: How do you let it not wear you down and how do you keep smiling?

Jeannette: I enjoy it.

Don: This is from David Peschek, Guardian Music Critic: If your house was burning down and you could only save one pair of shoes, [everyone laughs] which pair would it be?

Jeannette: I've got a bad reputation as Imelda Marcos! It would be red patent...

[Break in recording to change tape]

[Question about signing black artists to the label]

Jeanette: Don't shame me... We both really love black music and the answer to that is that we want to sign some more black music, but the truth of the matter is that we move in certain circles and we are just not in the loop of it in the same way as we are with the more leftfield kind of stereotypical Rough Trade types. I think we are going to try and correct that because I think we both feel that it doesn't represent us well.

Don: I'm guessing, understanding the catalogue of Rough Trade, my people we sort of operate in these certain boxes of R&B, Hip Hop, Reggae and not a lot of us break out of that (not totally) but not a lot of people break out of those particular boxes. The only

person I know... for instance people like A.R. Kane, who are few and far between. I'm guessing that's one of the reasons why you don't have a lot of black artists.

Jeanette: Linton Kwesi Johnson... Horace Andy... you know we have historically had black artists, but you're right to say that we don't have any at the moment. Are you interested in making a record?

[Everyone laughs]

Don: What I'm saying is that there seems to be a lack of black artists that break out of the boxes we are in, so I can sort of understand why you don't.

Jeanette: Yeah, it's not for the sake of it that we are doing something weird, we just don't often come across it... we haven't come across anything good enough that we've felt that we had to do.

Don: Ok. Anybody got any questions?

Audience member: Yes I wondered if you could talk about the meeting between yourself and John Lydon and Bob Marley in Kingston. *[Question directed at Don Letts].*

Don: I tell you what, we'll save that for a moment. Any questions for Jeannette Lee, please?

Audience Member: There is a debate on Saturday about the future of the record industry – do artists need record companies. Now as you've re-established Rough Trade six years ago, what's your view of that? Where will the industry be 10 years from now?

Jeanette: Well I don't know where it is going to be 10 years from now, but the experience I have at the moment is that even if artists don't need record companies, a lot of artists like to have a record company. I think the way that we run Rough Trade is that it is very artist friendly and it's not like 'us and them' at all, we do it together. I find that a lot of the bands that we sign come to us because they want to be part of that music family for want of a better expression. I don't think that's going to go away. I think there'll be both. I think there will be people who want to do it on their own terms and

feel they don't need anyone, but there will be people that want to be part of a family of artists that they respect.

Audience member: How did you pick yourself back up after the collapse of Rough Trade?

Jeanette: Well we just carried on, we didn't stop. We put Rough Trade to the side for a while and just focused on the management company. We just worked really hard and in a slightly different area, until we felt strong enough to take on the fight again. I think the trick is to just keep going, the old 'get back on the bicycle' trick, just keep going and don't lose your moment and hopefully things will come good if you stick at it.

Don: One of the things that strikes me about you and John is that you are both still fans of music, it is not your job...

Jeannette: No it's not my job

Don: It's your life.

Jeannette: Yes.

Don: It's really commendable with all of the bullshit that you've had to put up with. All the ups and downs and everything.

Questions!

Audience member: What do you think about the BMI Apple dropping Digital Rights Management. Do you think Rough Trade will go the same way? What's your view on it?

Jeannette: I was really hoping that you weren't going to ask me that!

Graham Howell: Apple removing the Digital Rights management that keeps the tracks in copyright from iTunes.

Jeannette: Can we talk about that afterwards? I don't want to be broadcasting about it... I don't feel equipped.

Don: Anyone else?

Audience member: Have you any plans to reissue the Pop Group?

Jeannette: Do you know someone is reissuing the Pop Group, yes, someone is. They are constantly calling up to reissue.

Don: Great Bristol group.

Jeannette: Yes, we are talking about it and various other people are talking about it as well. I think Radar, Warner Brothers label, were talking about doing it.

Audience member: Have you ever been a fan of Black Ice?

Jeannette: Yes totally. Are you interested?

Don: At the back there.

Audience member: You've talked about getting caught up in the passion of punk. Do you think that passion is around at the moment?

Jeannette: We were talking about that earlier... not in the same way, no. I think maybe we are due for a big shake up, I don't really feel it is here yet.

Don: Overdue for it...

Jeannette: SURELY it is about to happen, but it is certainly not as passionate a time now and I think that is lacking. But usually, you get to a point where everything spins and something good comes out of it. I think we are due for that.

Audience member: Because of that lack of passion, do you find it harder to sign bands now than it was when you first started?

Jeannette: No, I don't really find it harder. Certain things have made it easy... If you keep your ear to the ground you hear something, you can get on the internet and find out about somebody in two seconds. No I don't think it is harder. It is not as obvious, you have to look a bit harder. You have to really ferret out the good things from the bad (or from the average). I don't think that many things are bad actually, that's one of the terrible

indictments of the moment, I think everything is average, nothing is terrible. You never hear anything and think 'that's terrible', you hear things and think, 'well that's ok, it's pretty good actually, but it is not amazing, it's not great'. I think people are more able to get themselves up to a certain level now.

Don: You've got to remember this is the lady who goes out and checks out the more interesting stuff, we hear the rubbish... she's just done the whole South X South West stuff, so she does miss out that crap that we hear.

Audience member: Being a bit of a dinosaur and having been through many of the things you've been talking about, given that the music industry's main record buying public is 13 year old girls (I don't think this has changed) it is still a very young audience, a lot of the music now, the trends and fashions that come around are recycling what has come before, and because you'll always have a new crop of young things that have never heard it before, the music industry doesn't really have an incentive to change. I just wonder if you see what appears to me an endless recycling of good decent stuff but nothing new... and there isn't... there is no need to change... You say that something is about to happen, but what would cause that change?

Jeannette: I think just a reaction to the blandness that is going on. Sooner or later people will get bored of blandness and they kick against it. I'd bet my house on that happening at some point, otherwise I'd have to give up and go home.

Don: I think what you're alluding to is the fact that things like the internet, affordable technologies, change the dynamic, but I don't think there is going to be an either or. There are going to be some people who want to be on MTV waving 'hello mum' and there are going to be people who have new values, who don't want that stuff, who will be able to put out their art, maybe settle for... I tell people that there are lots of figures below a million that I'll happily live with... I think you are right, there is this weird state of flux, but it is like the Hollywood movie system, there are going to be big Hollywood blockbusters and there is going to be independent cinemas, and you know what? I don't mind a bit of both.

Anybody else?

Audience member: Do you find it difficult to strike a balance between what's commercial and what is musically clever?

Jeannette: Yeah, I think you have to look at each project in its own light and you have to pitch it accordingly. Sometimes we'll do something that we love that we think isn't going to sell that many and we'll just pitch it, market it and do all the other bits and pieces to it at a level that isn't going to lose lots of money. I think you have to do things at lots of different levels. I think that's where independents are different to majors, often majors have a plan and do things at a certain level and that's how they do it. I think we are a lot more flexible than that, we make the rules up as we go along and act accordingly.

Don: You are not so market driven.

Ok. We're going to wrap it up, just two more questions.

Audience member: Are you aware of the Bristol music scene at all, and if you are, what interests you?

Jeannette: I'm aware of the Bristol music scene, but nothing is jumping to mind to be honest. I'll do a bit of research.

Don: You guys have got a serious musical heritage. You should never take your eyes off this town, ever.

Last question, make it a good one.

Audience member: Blues, Jazz, Rock and Roll, Teds, Mods, Disco, Punk... going through the years, what's next... since we hit the 21st Century we don't have genres anymore, we've had drum and bass... what's next, what is it now...

Don: It wouldn't be new if we knew what was next would it?

Jeannette: I think that's what we are saying, it's time for it to happen but fucked if I know what it is going to be. I'm waiting for it to happen and I'll be really excited when it does, but I can't invent a new category.

Don: Ok. I think I'm going to wrap it up. I don't know about you guys, but it has been a real privilege for me to know and grow with

this lady. I hope you have enjoyed and gained something from this. Jeannette, thank you very much.