

Paul Simonon

Painting and Biking in London and LA

Text by David Lancaster

Presented by John Martin Gallery (Booth 400)

Riding through Los Angeles on old Harleys in the early 1980s, Paul Simonon became part of a loose, moving fraternity of musicians and bikes. After the break-up of The Clash, Simonon and fellow musician Nigel Dixon travelled to the United States, bought vintage Harleys in El Paso, and rode west to California. For months they cruised around LA with friends including Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols—“like a long, leather motorcycle snake,” as Simonon recalls. While this American chapter is vivid, it was only an extension of a fascination formed much earlier, on the streets of London.

Simonon grew up in Paddington, West London, just minutes from the 59 Club, a legendary meeting place for rockers. As a child, he watched leather-clad riders roar through the neighborhood, their jackets worn like armor. The noise, speed, and confidence of these riders lodged in his imagination and became part of his visual education.

The Paddington of Simonon’s childhood was a semi-industrial area shaped by canals, railways, workshops, and pubs. It was a place where working lives, machines, and subcultures intersected. The 59 Club, run out of a church hall by the motorcycle-loving Father Graham Hullett, offered young riders community and belonging, and helped cement London’s distinctive biker culture. Its influence extended beyond riding, shaping style, music, and identity.

Painting and motorcycling came before music for Simonon. While studying art in central London, he became immersed in British bike culture, eventually riding classic Triumphs himself. By the mid-1970s, the rocker look he had grown up around – black leather jackets and denim – re-emerged through punk. Though tensions existed between older subcultures and punks, the connection was clear: both valued raw energy, defiance, and a stripped-back aesthetic.

Simonon’s artistic sensibility was central to The Clash, shaping the band’s visual identity as much as his bass playing shaped its sound. Yet painting remained a constant. A key influence was writer and biker Johnny Stuart, author of *Rockers!*, whose London home became a crossroads of musicians, riders, and classic bikes. Stuart’s deep knowledge of biker history reinforced Simonon’s respect for authenticity and craft.

Painted ten years ago, the five works shown at the LA Art Show are from Simonon's own collection and were featured in *Wot No Bike*, his 2014 exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. Drawing on motifs redolent of classical memento mori, Simonon evokes personality through still lifes of jackets, gloves, bikes, cigarettes, and helmets, at rest after the ride. These works reflect a lifelong engagement with biking culture, its objects, rituals, and endurance. As Simonon says, "A leather jacket never ages."

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