

Tony Wilson was the face of Madchester... but he may not have been at 'the gig that changed the world' / Image: Loco Steve via Flickr Regardless of whether Wilson was in the room that night or not, his influence at the dawn of Madchester remains undeniable. As Nolan points out, the presenter hosted another event a few weeks after the Pistols gig that might have played an even bigger role in launching the

"Three things actually happened in Manchester that summer," Nolan

"There was the first Sex Pistols gig in June, a second Sex Pistols gig in July, and then later in September [the band] appeared on So It Goes on

music scene that would reverberate around the world.

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Naturally, Wilson didn't like it. But 20 years since Nolan published I Swear *I Was There* (which has been lauded by fellow scene-setters Peter Hook and Paul Morley – two men who were at the gig) he's yet to be proven

wrong.

explains.

television. That performance was organised by Tony Wilson. Hundreds of thousands of people will have watched it. It could have even been more influential [than the Lesser Free Trade Hall shows]." ADVERTISEMENT Nonetheless, it's that first Sex Pistols gig on June 4 that still serves as the setting for the fable. Everyone still wants to be part of it; Wilson wasn't the only one. Indeed, over the past 45 years, hundreds insist they paid their 50p and watched history in the making that night. They swear they were there.

Ticket sales show that about 40 people were actually in attendance –

says it's more complicated than that.

and questionnaire for people to fill in.

"Plus – it's a flipping long time ago!"

which suggests the past four decades have been full of fibbing. But Nolan

"Remember, there were two Sex Pistols gigs that summer," he explains.

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"When we did the original documentary programme, we devised a test

"What we found out was that some people were at the second gig, but thought they were at the first. Some were at neither. But 99% of time

"Both the documentary and book are full of contradictory stories from people – that's the notion of memory. People misremember things.

Trade Hall

people were genuinely convinced they had been there.

Manchester Lesser Free

Friday 4th June 1076

THE SEX PISTOLS

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A ticket for entry to the Sex Pistols gig in 1976. Entry cost 50p.

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Originally published in 2001, Nolan's book was the first real piece of research-led work into the Sex Pistols gig – with much of the previous

literature being muddled, confused or lacking in clarity.

"Music writers from that period weren't necessarily massive fact-

So, I started [the book] as a brand new story and ignored what was

"I was already a journalist who just ended up writing about music – I approached it a bit like a court case or crime scene. I was focused on

Nolan spoke to everyone he could in an attempt to build the first truthful picture of the gig since it went through mythologisation. He interviewed everyone from gig organisers and performers to regular folks who'd just hopped on a bus from Denton after spotting an ad for the show in the

He even achieved what no one else had done before and successfully tracked down the supporting band who played before the Pistols that

"It was all done in the pub. Stories were just passed on by word of mouth.

checkers," Nolan states.

getting every single detail right."

Manchester Evening News.

times before," Nolan grins.

MANCHESTER.

SEX PISTOLS

evening – a Bolton group called Solstice.

written before.

"That's where the gold was; people who hadn't told the story a thousand

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Working as a young journalist in Altrincham in the 1980s, Nolan had got chatting to fellow writer called Pete Oldham – who claimed to have been at both Sex Pistols gigs. The hyperbolic status of these shows was already set in stone even then - and Oldham had to show off his ticket stubs to convince Nolan he'd actually gone. But the whole conversation raised the idea of creating a documentary – a piece of television that would determine who was actually there, and who wasn't. Later at Granada Studios Nolan began working on that very concept and was pulled away mid-production to produce a book to go alongside the TV programme. He was given nine weeks to write it – a rollercoaster-like process involving lots of late nights in which "he almost went mad" – but got it over the line. Holding his copy aloft was a proud moment, and when he spotted a display dedicated to the book in Waterstones it almost made him "pass out". **ADVERTISEMENT** 

David Nolan holding a copy of I Swear I Was There aloft in 2001 and again in 2021 The first edition of I Swear I Was There received a solitary review, calling it "tedious beyond belief". In 2006 it was re-released with a new cover and five-star acclaim across the board – including a description by GQ as "one

Nolan's been a published author ever since – with 15 books under his belt (including the riveting Manc Noir thrillers Black Moss and The Mermaid's Pool). But what makes I Swear I Was There quite so special is the fact that

"The whole thing would be recorded on people's phones and uploaded

"It's like the fly in Jurassic Park – perfectly preserved in amber. That's the

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"This kind of thing just won't happen again," Nolan explains.

of the greatest rock stories ever told".

it's still causing conversation today.

to social media.

beauty of it."

Tony being there.

an apology.

A promotional poster for the Sex Pistols show at Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester in 1976.

Nolan wasn't at the Free Trade Hall in June '76 (he was 12 at the time) –

but the famous gig still changed his life.

David Nolan's book 'I Swear I Was There' / Image: Amazon Every few years, some new information about that first Sex Pistols gig comes to light. A fresh anecdote. A forgotten image. A long-lost tiny relic. But still no definitive evidence that Wilson was in attendance. "There were 40-odd people in the audience that night... and Tony was incredibly famous," Nolan states. "For people not to notice he was there... I'm not sure. Pete Shelley from Buzzcocks who took the money on the door doesn't remember Tony being there. Howard Devoto who organised the gig doesn't remember

"But who knows. In another five years I could have found a photograph of Tony Wilson stood next to the Sex Pistols at the gig and I'll have to make

"Or we may never know. It's all part of the fun. That's the great thing

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David Nolan is hosting an official author evening titled 'Murder, music and

revcontent.

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