

# A DICTATOR IN HIS UNDERPANTS

To most climbers Johnny Dawes is a god. Well, now God's giving climbing lessons.

Jude Calvert Toulmin sneaks in at the back of a Johnny Masterclass. Photos by the author unless credited.

## I've known Johnny Dawes for years now. He's just a person, not a god at all.

However, to climb like an unearthly creature there has to be something in his make-up which makes him an extraordinary person. He is nothing if not larger than life. I'd heard about the courses he runs for climbers who want to learn something of his technique and partake of his unique inspirational wisdom, so I decided to go along to one of these "lessons" to see what it's all about.

I took along a 16-year-old climber called Matt Busher. Matt was blown away by the prospect of meeting his climbing hero and being taught by him.

Early on the Sunday morning Matt and I set off for Nether Edge to pick up Johnny. On the way down his road I failed to notice one of the speed bumps, the car took off into the air and we came screeching to a halt in front of Johnny, sat placidly on his garden wall in a beige boiler suit with cut-off legs.

"I thought, 'who's that mad woman tearing down the street?'" says Johnny. "then I realised it was you." Cute.

Prior to meeting the paying guests, Johnny fancied showing Matt a few tricks up at the deserted church in the Victorian General Cemetery.

We parked nearby and set off for the church building but Johnny stopped by a big stone entranceway right on the pavement and said, "We'll do it here! This is fine!" Matt put his rucksack down, I unpacked my camera gear, and Johnny started undressing. He took off his boiler suit leaving him in T-shirt and underpants. The traffic whizzed by.

"Bloody hot isn't it?" says Johnny, by way of explanation.

He then set in motion what would be the order of the day – Johnny does, pupil copies. Supposedly.

Johnny leapt up to a ledge on the stone entrance and stood there, perfectly poised, his hands still not having touched any surface. Then he jumped down and asked Matt to do the same. After ten minutes of this, with Johnny explaining to Matt how to see-saw his body around whilst balancing on a ledge, we headed off to the main church.

I started filming them. Once Johnny knew there was a camera on him the theories started erupting like bright hot molten lava.

"You're basically modelling the whole of your body based upon all four limbs so it's quite a convoluted movement if you broke it down."

"That float is miraculous you know. What you do is, if there's a wall like that," (holds hand on a vertical plane) "you take your body weight out and you chuck it in; for a while, you don't have any apparent ...em.....it's not overhanging so I call it 'slabification'. You go out, throw yourself in... effectively... the wall slabs back and then it overhangs again... same with holds as well, if I'm going into that hold, that jugifies it yeah, and makes it juggier than if I hit it normally... and every hold has got its own speed of jugification..."

Johnny drifts off and starts looking frustrated, pressing the palm of his hand on the stone wall in an agitated manner. "We need the right thing to describe it really... if we go to Broomsgrove Wall I can show you."

He paces around a bit..." and then after a while, once you're in synch and that part of you..."

He stops still, looking at the ground, a cloud of anger drifting rapidly across his face. He stands there looking angry and frustrated. Normally he teaches larger groups, this is just a warm-up with Matt prior to meeting his two paying clients.

But then a works van pulls up by the cemetery gates, and Scott from *Rocktalk* gets out and comes over and introduces himself. Now Johnny's got more of an audience he warms up a bit.

**"People generally like to try problems in a way that they look like they're doing well, they don't like to do it in a way that it's going to work. It's like skateboarding.**

You don't get good at skateboarding unless you... you've got to look a right wally for ages. And then you forget what a wally is. A wally isn't a wally."

Johnny leaps from one ledge to another. "Like that. Improvise. As soon as you can improvise, you can do on-sight climbing, d'ya know what I mean? Then you can do it blind, you can wear shoes. Basically you could spend a year on this problem, getting so good at this problem that you could do it in Brogues, and the moment you've got to do the movement would be... (*makes a chop-chop motion with his hands*) ... very fast... but you'd still be able to produce the small amount of grip to do the move."

After an hour or so, I gently remind Johnny that his clients will be waiting for us at *Coffee Revolution*, where we've arranged to meet them, so we head off there. There's no sign of any climbing types there, (suspiciously unusual for a Sunday morning) so we get a coffee and wait. Johnny

artistically fashions a roll-up. When two blokes come and introduce themselves as his clients, then sit down and join us, Johnny lights the roll-up. And there he sits, ostentatiously holding court whilst downing inhalants and coffee, the Machiavellian tortured genius that he is.

These blokes, Steve and Scott, are about to get on the Johnny Rollercoaster for a day. I wonder if they are prepared. We get to the Church, I place the dictaphone on a ledge near Johnny, and let the tape run.

"That's called spin-lapping. It's a skill – where you work out what you're trying to do... you're looking at ME!" he shouts "When you hit it, let yourself go soft. Your trying is expressed as solidity which it doesn't need to be in. Can't you stand up when you get up there? Stand – 'cause when you stand, you'll see how much in you've got to go. It's a way of absorbing the inward force – watch this – look at me!"

"When you go at it, feel yourself – you know you're solid up there. When you look at it you can just go... (runs and jumps onto a ledge of the church wall) "Know what I mean? You do it with your concentration! Do that! Make the problem look easier by walking around to give yourself..." Johnny drifts off and mutters to himself, in a very annoyed manner "You're forcing me to use some of these American techniques... like this OK?"

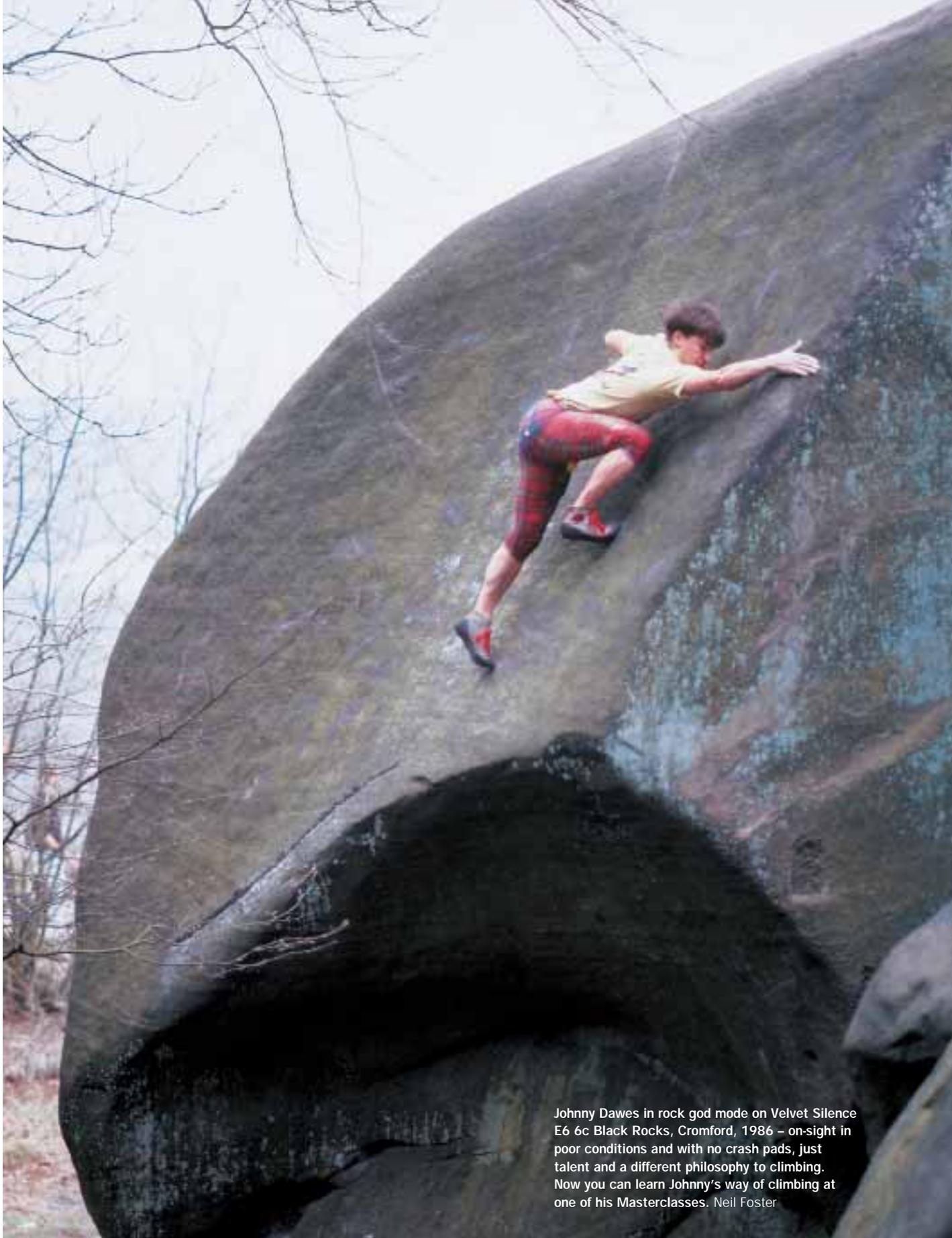
No Johnny, they're not forcing you to do anything, they're looking at you desperately trying to follow the 90 mph rapid-fire DawesTalk.

"When you're walking around I want you to give out a number of how nice it looks, how do-able it looks (points at various problems on the wall he's been showing them) That's 7, 8, 9.2... see what I mean? The floor is a big hold that could be calibrated... actually say the numbers as well – when you look at it, imagine the run-up into that position being easier... stand here... imagine trying it from here."

"You've just gotta stop trying it and just do the moves."

**"Let yourself float forward basically, just try and touch your nose right on the edge of the arete..."** you have to slow right down to make you concentrate."

"When you go up there – when you're finally in a standing position... slump down and stay in... you see you chose a 6 and you should have been on 9/2."



Johnny Dawes in rock god mode on Velvet Silence E6 6c Black Rocks, Cromford, 1986 – on-sight in poor conditions and with no crash pads, just talent and a different philosophy to climbing. Now you can learn Johnny's way of climbing at one of his Masterclasses. Neil Foster

"One thing you could do is completely copy me. If I go like this, really watch me do this, and then put your body in the same track, so I go... pa-woooosh!" (Johnny shows them a problem. They watch.)

Then he turns to me and demands:

"Are you going to do some filming? I've been

doing things the whole time."

"I've only got 60 minutes of film for the whole day. I've got all this on the dictaphone Johnny. The only reason I have brought a camera is, at your specification, as a recording instrument for the interview, not for use in a film. Don't worry, I'm covering this, it's OK."

"Not for ME it's not! I'll get another camerawoman!" he barks dismissively.

This must be what it's like to work with the film director Ken Russell, the mad, bad genius.

I smiled indulgently. "Right Johnny. Right."

"Seriously," he continues "I've done five problems today on first try – it's not a big deal but it



does have consequences."

Sorry, I thought today was a paid lesson for the benefit of your clients, I muse to myself. However, their climbing is improving

by the minute, so you can't knock it.

Johnny flies up another problem. "I really like this one... I did that one really well... and some of the stand-ups have like materialised."

Johnny, no one could ever deny you're great. Relax boy.

He turns to Matt, who's trying another problem, "You've got to do what I do. It's not gonna work otherwise. There might be another way, but try this way, it does work."

He turns to Scott and says **"Hope you don't mind my being bossy?" "Better than prating about," says Scott.** Johnny continues: "Go into the position... the whole position... there's a position for your centre of gravity and there's a shape as well... so climb into the position and find a position that you can spend five minutes in... in fact, try and spend two minutes like that."

"Shut your eyes... notice where it's taking you... adjust to that position."

"Just let all the wobbles in your body continue and then put your attention into the wobbles... he's changed his body... he's picking up more vibe now... looks stronger... don't you like that?" to Scott, just having attempted and failed again the move.

"Why don't you just go and get it? PREPARATION!" he barks.

"I don't like being shouted at," mumbles Scott.

"I KNEW you didn't!" shouts Johnny

triumphantly. Johnny does the problem. "There you go."

"Sorry," he says, as an aside to Scott.

"I'm only joking," offers Scott in conciliatory fashion, clearly not joking in the slightest.

"Something in you is holding back though, it is though isn't it? You're not totally... you're not really loose."

"It's because I think I'm crap that's all," says Scott, dejectedly.

"You think you're cracked?"

"Not cracked, CRAP!" says Scott.

"Crap? Just BE crap. Just make crap really good today! Make your crap really excellent today!" shouts Johnny, joyously.

Scott has another go and falls off.

"That's really good that. A really good failure! Seriously, there's something totally changed as well which you've not noticed, which is really interesting...." Pregnant pause before Johnny announces triumphantly, as if whisking out the contents of the Cluedo envelope...

"The position of the mat! The position of the mat's not in the same place any more... I've moved it! I've conned you like card sharps do!"

Then he adds innocently: "I didn't do it deliberately."

And we're off again, round another hair-pin bend on the rollercoaster.

"See my body?"

Johnny demonstrates jumping up onto the ledge and his final standing no-handed position looking as comfy as if he were slobbering around watching a vid with all the attendant vices.

"It's not like this, like you are... I'm amazed you're getting as much grip as you are out of your position actually... you're there... which is a lot harder, than being there... look how chilled I am... I can even... oh look, there's a little snail there..."

Wooooosh down that steep dip of the coaster...

"Get up in that nice cosy position. In the 24 HOUR position please! TWENTY FOUR HOURS I want you to stay there so it'd BETTER BE BLOODY COMFORTABLE!"

"Let yourself slowly come down... your right foot onto the floor, but leave your left foot on the wall please. Yeah, and it will give you the idea of where you want your foot to be the start of the move. GOOD! You DID it that time!"

"You do the right move... you can do it whilst being high!... you can put all the wobbles so they just wobble around the centre, yeah, and the idea then is to get rid of that wobble, then you're really there, but you can centre so it's in a ball of wobble and that ball is the technical standard, not the size of the fingerholds."

Then Johnny casually says, as an aside "Anytime you're in Sheffield and you don't know what to do, come and try this for half an hour, once there's nobody else around you'll start to do it the right way."

Now that IS a good piece of advice.

As soon as Johnny shouts "Come ON! Let's get some VIBE together because I'm PISSED OFF!" I think "time to go" and I reassuringly remind him in my best P.A purr that we've arranged to meet people at Burbage anyway.

"Oh! Right! Let's go then!"

He is the *enfant terrible*, really.

We arrive at the top of Burbage South and meet up with a few friends there, Graham Gedge and Ben Tye. Johnny continues teaching in the same vein but despite the bullying tactics from their mentor the lads are actually climbing better than before, springing no-handed from rock to rock like a flock of gazelles. OK they fail on several problems, but Johnny has somehow instilled an enthusiasm for failure into them, so that the failures

Scene: The Fox House car park. Dramatis personae: A motley cast of climbers. The play? A hybrid of Six Characters in Search of an Author and Waiting for Godot, entitled *Waiting for Johnny*.

We've all sent off our cheques and our questionnaires with answers to 'Your Favourite Route', 'Your Favourite Move' and 'What do you hope to learn from the session?' Now we await the maestro to cast and direct us. Our thoughts glide from the external question 'Where's Johnny?' to the internal question 'Why are we here?' Some have heard good things about his indoor wall workshops, others want to improve their

grade. Another reason we're here is just to climb alongside one of the heroes of British climbing. You're an artist: Wouldn't you want to see Picasso at work? You're a Grand Prix enthusiast: Wouldn't you love a day at the racetrack with Schumacher? I suspect another reason we're here is to compare the man with the myth. The myth is powerful: JD the Zen master of pure climbing – the Galahad rescuing us from the power-merchants crimping away at their fingerboards – the exemplar of Huizinga's 'primordial quality of play'. Time ticks on. Where's Johnny? My gaze shifts from the road's horizon to the sky and the trees. I half expect Johnny to parachute

in or leap from the treetops wearing a flying squirrel zip-up suit. But, no, he's not that eccentric. Here's Johnny. A shaven-head pops out of a wound-down car window and asks disarmingly, 'Been waiting long? Annoying, isn't it? Anyone fancy a cup of tea?' We follow the Pied Piper to Grindleford Café. Johnny stops his car and emerges holding a clipboard – 'My attempt at professionalism', he jokes. We kneel before a scrawled mandala. Johnny's providing an explanation at subliminal speed. Apparently the climber's consciousness should be like that of a leaf. The sense of self should disappear. I flippantly ask him if one should retain sufficient sense of self to claim

new routes. I think Johnny's already cast me in the role of sceptic. We walk to the café. I'm 'redeeming' myself by regaling JD with the weird Zen experience I had climbing alone at a local quarry; a loss of self-awareness and a feeling of total harmony with the rock. He seems interested in this, as though I've had a sighting of a fabled creature. Over a cup of tea, JD explains that he's had a heavy night, that he's not really in the mood for climbing, he'd rather be watching the Grand Prix qualifier, and that he's strained his shoulder attempting a one-handed ascent of Master's Edge. Then he's babbling away about his idea of a board game for

climbers (something about a pulsating planet, a character called Io, and a 3-D board). As he free associates, his hands and arms accompany his ideas with climbing gestures. We strain with rapt attention to distil and capture the coded wisdom. Now we're turning Grindleford Café into the set of West Side Story. First Johnny, then all of us, jump and pirouette against the café wall, leap across gaps, and hop on one leg (all under the bemused gazes of tourists and cyclists). First lesson (about balance, weight transfer and dynamic movement) over, we head for Lawrencefield. Thankfully, someone's brought a rope, because Johnny suggests we set up a top-rope on the

don't seem to drag them down so much and they are bouncing back for another try. Something in his idiosyncratic teaching method obviously works.

Unfortunately half an hour into the Burbage leg of the session, the heavens open into a thunderstorm and we have to shelter underneath an overhang below the crag. **Johnny tells me smugly that I am standing in the most likely place to get struck by lightning**, and goes on to prove this point by expounding another of his incomprehensible theories. Ben Tye is smirking to himself at which point I realise I am having the piss royally ripped out of me, an occurrence as familiar a part of my daily regime as brushing my teeth.

Me, Martin and Horse adjourn to the pub at this point and Ben puts a bouldering mat over his head to stop the rain and says he'd better get back as he told his wife he was "nipping out to do some last minute holiday shopping" and returning drenched with a rucksack and bouldering mat is going to kind of blow his cover.

Johnny takes his pupils to a bridge nearby where they do some more problems before getting rained off again. I have a look at the footage in the pub and marvel at the complexities of the cobweb of Johnny's mind. Cobwebs are miracles of nature – astonishing, functional, beautiful, but with a deadly purpose to them.

I'm looking at the footage...

"When there's not a general wish to do something, will is the ability to know an action and do that action and then when you're doing something that you really enjoy and you're there 'cause you wanna be, then THAT'S FATEFUL! So fate and will come together. When fate is willed and something that's willed is fated, your quality as a creature is very different."

(On proof reading this to Paul Mitchell, he

quips dryly "I think he's talking about death routes. Somehow I don't think your average punter would contemplate doing death routes.")

"If you do it the slow way, the slow way to do this is, when my body's going into that slab I'm slabifying the walls so I go slaaaab-if-ic-ation yeah?" Johnny jumps up and lands on a ledge, conducting the movement in seeming slow-motion.

"And the amount I'm saying it is how much pressure's on my foot... so if I go, try and do it slower, slaaaaaab-if-ication and then each time if I can feel the music before I move, that's what gonna happen, it means that a move like that is as safe as a static move, they're both known quantities, so you can start to use bounce, you can start to use continuity. So however strong you are, if a hold can't be hung off because of a lack of friction... if you can produce a dynamic going into it this way because you've come up a ramp you can hit a hold and use it... skateboarding's based upon that, motor racing's based upon that, all the spinning-a-ball sports all work on using one parameter that changes to affect another parameter... and climbing is just littered with those kinds of relationships, much more than any other sport I can think of."

I turn the camera off and shake my head in a kind of resigned and uncomprehending awe. Finally we head back to ours for a cup of tea and some toast.

Both Scott and Steve say they got a lot out of today, and that it was definitely worth doing. Matt says it has been incredible, and despite getting shouted at by a dictator in his underpants, continues to maintain that "Johnny's cool."

For 75 quid, it's cheap at the price. It's a day you'll never forget, that's for sure.

He is a right sod to be around though, no matter how fond of him I am. But at the end of the day,

when dancing with rock, this man really does exude magical powers.

He is singing, the rock is singing, humming to the same vibration. You go on one of his courses and you get to hear that song, like a nightingale's song, so arresting, so beautiful, so powerful and



so fleetingly transient, for one of these days, the bird will stop singing. Funny really, Johnny and I were sitting in the garden one evening during this past summer, talking about sportsmen, artists and musicians who, through their creativity, had dined at the table of the gods.

James Hunt, Jimi Hendrix, Van Gogh, Janis Joplin, Ilia Nastase, Neil Young, John McEnroe, Kurt Cobain. People who whilst being immersed in their chosen discipline, have hearts so broken wide open that they are a channel for an otherworldly creative purity, which leads to them performing in a manner which seems almost super-human. But this purity of heart does not spill over into the everyday, hence the often troubled lives these people lead.

Johnny Dawes is on this list, whether the world outside climbing has recognised it yet or not. ♦

You can enrol for one of Johnny's Masterclasses at [www.johnnydawes.com](http://www.johnnydawes.com)

Gingerbread Slab. The hot, midge-ridden afternoon passes in a series of exercises – the script for which JD seems to be writing as he goes along. Some of us are climbing one-handed, then no-handed up the slab; some are building precarious towers of pebbles; and others are attempting balancy boulder problems that Johnny has identified. In between, we're chatting to Johnny about his climbing experiences, and offering him food and drink. He's charming and enthusiastic, and concerned to know what we all want to do or learn. I ask him if he can show me how to dyno. Then Johnny's climbing the slab with no hands. Picture a giant rabbit hopping from one leg to

another, performing subtle switches of body weight, before failing on some outrageous no-hands dyno. We gasp and laugh at this bravura exhibition. One chap from another group of climbers asks with acerbic humour, 'And you're paying to watch him do this?' Drizzle descends in the late afternoon, we decamp to some blank wall that JD once top-roped. Johnny's buzzing with remembered excitement as he lists the sequence of moves and holds. The day ends in the early evening under the Embankment at Millstone. Johnny's pointing out routes and answering our questions, but I sense he's becoming restless. He's given of himself all day and now wants to

move on to new toys. For the first time I catch a glimpse of another aspect of the man; the playful, ebullient, mercurial spirit mutates into a more pensive, darker, restless persona. JD cades a roll-up from some acquaintances. Then we walk back to the car park and the curtain falls on our Climbing with Johnny Dawes workshop. I bid farewell to the others. As we say goodbye, our eyes and faces seem to say 'That was... interesting.' As I drive back, classical music soaring amidst the beauty of the Peak District, I reflect on what I'd learnt. I'd asked JD about what certain exercises were teaching us. He found the question rather mystifying, and simply asked in return, 'What do

YOU think it's teaching you?' As a teacher myself, I found the absence of structure, aims and objectives slightly disconcerting. JD wasn't the clearest expounder of his 'philosophy'. Or maybe it was his ideas that were fuzzy? Maybe geniuses don't make the best teachers? Perhaps they don't know how they do what they do, and therefore can't communicate it? Or are they reluctant to analyse their gift for fear it might desert them? And yet, everyone on the workshop had expanded his or her horizon of possibility; all had gained some new personal climbing wisdom. By observing JD in action – and by responding to his enthusiasm – we had deconstructed mental and physical barriers. We had learnt

to see our bodies and the rock afresh. As Carlyle wrote of Great Men, 'You will not grudge to wander in such a neighbourhood for a while.' Being in the company of a great climber unleashes some trapped potential within lesser climbers. So much so, that the next time I climbed I'd catch myself thinking – as I did some stylish move – "Johnny would have done it like that." To cap it all, I leapt like a circus acrobat onto a foothold on a blank slab, landed it, shifted my body position, balanced, and stood up. Now, Johnny would have been proud of that! Bugger never did show me how to dyno (with hands), though.

Marc Chrysanthou