



Bitter Springs : Interview

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Of all the many independent bands in London, the Bitter Springs are one of the most durable and diverse.

First formed in 1996 in the south west suburb of Teddington out of the remnants of Last Party, who had self-released two albums, 'Porky's Range' (1986) and 'Love Handles', on their own Harvey Records label, the Bitter Springs have released albums on a rich variety of labels including 'From the Parish of Arthritis' (Dishy Records, 1997) 'Five Died Filming This Lazy Lark' (1998, Vespertine), 'Benny Hill's Wardrobe' (1999, Vespertine), 'The Best Bakers on the Island' (2000, Acualera) and 'The Suburban Crimes of Every Happiness' (2001, Dishy).

Although 'Benny Hill's Wardrobe' was a Mojo magazine Album of the Month, the Bitter Springs have always remained despite their longevity a cult act, attracting a fervent, but relatively small following. Impossible to define or to put in a category because of their constant genre-hopping, the Bitter Springs also have in their front man, the sharply socially conscious Simon Rivers an especially witty and erudite lyricist. They are a defiantly unique act.

Last year was a busy one for the band. As well as releasing their 8th album, the 18 song 'That Sentimental Slush', they also put out two EPs, the four song 'Poor Trace' and the five song 'Firm Family Favourites', both of which consisted of entirely new music. All three recordings have been released on the revitalized Harvey label.

With more material promised for this year, and all of the Bitter Springs' and much of the



Last Party back catalogue about to be made available for download for the first time through e music and itunes, Pennyblackmusic caught up with Simon Rivers, back for a second interview with us, to talk about recent happenings with his band.

PB : One of the really exciting things about the Bitter Springs is its diversity. As we described it at Pennyblackmusic , 'That Sentimental Slush' incorporates everything "from heart torn ballads to rollicking pub rock tunes, melancholic electro pieces to cod calypso numbers, and 60's Gallic-influenced duets to old-fashioned music hall songs as well as much else in between." It must be really difficult for journalists to pigeon hole you or slot you into a category. Do you think that in some ways has contributed to the band not being better known ?

SR : I think that everyone involved in the band appreciates many different types of music and personally I think you should always put square pegs in round holes, keep things interesting.

As for journalists pigeon-holing us I'm happy just to know that they've given us a listen. Most people, journalists or otherwise, who are familiar with a lot of our work seem to get what were doing ... but saying that we don't always know what we're doing ourselves until we've done it.

I've learned not to question or spend time worrying about methods but just get on with making the music and anything goes in Springs' world. But I get your point about us maybe being better known if we had one style or idea like maybe the Ramones or Kasbian or whoever but I'd prefer to operate without musical restrictions.

PB : Yet, having said that, you have gained many critical accolades and a lot of respect throughout much of the independent music industry. Massive success has often lead to many a good band's downfall. Why do you think you have achieved with both Bitter Springs and Last Party such longevity? Do you think that it might be because you have achieved enough success to keep things interesting , but never enough so that it has become self-destructive ?

SR : I agree with what you're saying, but in my paranoid moments I feel like we're being kept in our place so to speak because we are a very working class band. Our longevity could be in part due to our limited success. It hasn't been allowed to spoil us. We have the work ethic instilled in us. I was watching a documentary on musicians from California in the sixties and I was interested to see how many died along the way at such young ages and I wonder how we would have turned out given the same temptations and lack of precedents.

PB : Last Party's first gig allegedly was with the late, great Adrian Borland and the Sound



in 1985 at the London Marquee. Is that true ? Was that for the show which ended up on their 'In the Hothouse' live album ? What do you recall if anything about that experience ?

SR : Yes I think so; it was one of our first gigs. Our then drummer, Steve Infield, lived in a house with Graham Bailey, the bass player from the Sound, I think he might have been at school with Adrian Borland. That's how we got the gig but by the time we came to play it Steve had left and Neil Palmer, my best friend from school days, was drumming for us.

I believe it was the 'In the Hothouse' gig. It was the old Marquee, not the best venue in the world but we were dead chuffed to be playing in front of such a big crowd. I never really liked the Sound though. They never rang true for me, but I saw Adrian play a solo gig a few years later in Fulham and he was brilliant.

May I also add that the Stone Roses played their first London gig with Last Party at the Greyhound in the Fulham Palace Road, where we used to play regularly in the early days with such well matched bills as us and the Macc Lads, Twenty Flight Rockers, Dogs D'Amour' and many other rock legends.

PB : Bitter Springs have released albums on labels such as Acualera, Dishy and Vespertine in the past. Despite receiving interest for it from labels such Hit Back Records, home to Spearmint and the Free French, 'That Sentimental Slush' was released on your own label Harvey Records. Why did you decide to return to your roots and resurrect Harvey for 'That Sentimental Slush', and the two EPs, 'Poor Trace' and 'Firm Family Favourites' ?

SR : We have never had any serious interest from any big labels, one or two enquiries down the years, but no solid offers so we must thank all of the little labels - usually fans and especially Guy Sirman with Dishy Recordings and Richard O'Brien with Vespertine - without those two you would never have heard of us!

We released stuff in the early days on Harvey which is our own label (funded by a sponsored swim at one point) and the reason we resurrected it was because no one was interested in putting out 'That Sentimental Slush' but Darren at Cargo loved it and was happy for us to set up our own label again. It's a lot of hard work but it means I deal with anyone first hand so there is less time wasting and misunderstandings.

PB : 'That Sentimental Slush' has lyrics on subjects including modern architecture, the British tabloid press, our over dependence on technology and social class. You also throw as well in a couple of drinking songs for good measure. Do you tend to write about what is bothering you the most at the moment ? Are your lyrics written quickly, or are you one of those writers who tends to think for ages before committing yourself to paper ?



SR : No subject is ruled out and I get very angry if I can't get an idea down as soon as it occurs to me. When I was 8 I had a burst appendix and spent a couple of weeks on my own recovering and I listened to David Bowie's 'Hunky Dory' album non stop which was a huge influence. I have just been writing a song about a lifeboat man 5 minutes ago. You could write a triple LP a day from tabloid headlines alone and I use the computer to knock things into shape. At present I have 6 files with 50 songs in each.

PB : You've had a very prolific last year with both 'That Sentimental Slush' and the two EPs coming out. There were nearly 30 new songs collectively on them. Does songwriting get easier as you get older with you hitting the mark more often and thus the increase in the number of recordings, or are those songs the results of several years fruition and hard work ?

SR : Some songs have brewing away for years and there's been one or 2 lost LPs worth along the way, but whatever we do record gets put out eventually and now with Cargo and the rebirth of Harvey Records the future's looking good. We are in the process of having all the Bitter Springs back catalogue and some of the Last Party's made available as downloads.

PB : This year also looks to be fairly prolific, as there is the possibility of two new albums, one a succession of songs concerning one family, and another with Piano Magic's Glen Johnson producing. Could you say more about these ? Are they definitely going to happen ?

SR : Well, hopefully there will be another LP before we get on to those 2. It's called 'Lighten Up Volume 9 (The Worst Butchers on the Mainland)'- the volume 9 is a reference to the fact that it's album number 9 if you count the 2 Last Party LPs as well (and we are) and the worst butchers reference is to tie it in with the 'Best Bakers' LP we released on Acuarela because it's going to be made up of 7 or more new songs plus rarities from Last Party and Bitter Springs.

I've just mastered 'The Food Distributors', the song we couldn't fit on Last Party's 'Love Handles' LP and it's the first time I've heard it in 17 years and it sounds great. Of the new songs 'My Life as a Dog' is a cautionary tale about a man whose girlfriend leaves him after catching him in bed with their pet dog and of puppies that are born half human half hound. It's a true story obviously. We hope to get trumpet legend Terry Edwards to play on that one!

We have 20 or so songs for the family album that we have been working on but I don't know when that'll be done ...but it will

And late last year I got together with Glen Johnson of Piano Magic again to write some lyrics and sing on a wonderful song he had written called 'England's Always Better - it's



one the best things I've been involved in and I was privileged to perform it live with them at their 10th anniversary show in London in December . I think it's going to be on the next Piano Magic LP. I hope so and what I heard of it while I was at the studio sounded great.

That led to me and Glen discussing doing a whole LP together, 'The Bitter Magic of the Piano Springs'. That would make a good title and I hope we get around to it some time soon.

PB : The Bitter Springs has featured since the mid 90's yourself, Paul 'Wizard' Baker on keyboards and bassist Daniel Ashkenazy, who was also in Last Party, as mainstays. Who else is currently in the group ?

SR : Bitter Springs and Last Party are essentially the same thing and the four members of Last Party being myself Dan, Kim Ashford and Neil Palmer became Bitter Springs in the hope that journalists who had ignored the Last Party would give us another listen.

Paul 'Wizard' Baker and Paul 'Mini Bar' McGrath came in to play piano and accordion and when Neil left Paul took over on drums. He was a drummer as well.

Andy Gwatkin played violin for the 1st few LPs and he plays violin on one or two tracks on the 'Slush' LP but he has other commitments so we recruited Phil Martin on the violin who also plays guitar, and our newest member is Nick Brown who helped me put the 'Hugh Grant' track on 'Firm Family Favourites' together and now plays guitar live with us. You can only really leave Bitter Springs by death or written permission from your parents.

PB : The Bitter Springs spent some years working with Vic Godard as his backing band under Vic's original group moniker of the Subway Sect ? Do you still work with him in that ?

SR : Since I stalked Vic and pestered him into singing a duet with me, 'Boormans Son' on the 'Parish of Arthritis' LP, we have worked together on and off and we still do the occasional gig where we play as Subway Sect with him and us as the Springs. It's good fun but hard work and we prefer not to mix the two. He's a one off Mr Godard. That's for sure.

PB : You also the last time Pennyblackmusic spoke to you were working with him on his 'Blackpool' album, a sequence of songs from a musical which he had written with the author Irvine Welsh. Has that album now been recorded ? When is it due for release ?

SR : Yes we recorded about 8 songs with the world's most uncooperative engineer but they came out great with a little help from Motion's doctor of music Mike Coe - I'm sure it'll turn out to be another Vic's of great lost albums. He likes those. I think two of the



songs off it are on his MySpace site, 'Blackpool' itself and another song called 'Working Classes' (and that's me doing the lead vocal on it).

Oh yeah, one of the tracks on the 'Lighten Up Volume 9' LP is our version of 'Our Ghosts', a song from the 'Blackpool' sessions but with a new set of personalised lyrics by me.

PB : Former Last Party and early Bitter Springs drummer (and new Pennyblackmusic writer) Neil Palmer is currently working on a book about Last Party and the Bitter Springs, which will feature contributions among others from several band members as well as Vic Godard, the Kitchens of Distinction, Jim Bob from Carter USM and Everett True. How is that book developing and progressing ?

PB : I think Neil is developing into a great writer. He tells me the book is going well but slowly, but there is a lot to write about and I expect it is throwing up a few other things along the way that may prove more interesting to him than the story of Britain's hardest working band in show biz (ha ha). He has given me a set of questions but I'm finding it hard to remember the early days and I've lost my old scrap book but it shall be found. I think the longer it takes him the better it'll be.

But one thing Neil doing the book has shown me is that we've been doing this since leaving school at the end of the 70's and our story ain't over yet.

PB : Thank you.

The Bitter Springs will be playing the Pennyblackmusic Bands Night at the Spitz in London on 3rd March.