



Artist: [Bitter Springs](#)
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Author: [John Clarkson](#)
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The Bitter Springs are one of Britain's great and most under-rated cult bands. First formed under their original moniker of Last Party in 1979 before changing name to the Bitter Springs in 1996 with the then same personnel, they have been through several different line-ups over the last four decades. Their sole original member is Simon Rivers, a postman from the West London suburb of Teddington and the band's vocalist, guitarist and singer-songwriter.

Rivers has released nine previous albums, two with Last Party, and seven with the Bitter Springs. These have come out on a variety of labels in the past including the Bristol-based label Dishy Records and the durable Madrid label Acuarela Discos. In recent years, however, and since their 2006 album 'That Sentimental Slush', he has self-released the Bitter Springs' albums through his own imprint Harvey Records, which he resurrected after last using it to release Last Party's albums, 'Porky's Range' (1986) and 'Love Handles' (1990).

'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains', which came out in October, follows on from the Bitter

Springs' 2013 double CD album, 'Everyone's Cup of Tea'. It is the first album that Rivers has recorded not to feature long-term bassist Daniel Ashkenazy, who has now parted company with the band, but sees the return to the line-up after an over twenty year absence of one-time Last Party keyboardist Kim Rivers (born Ashford), River's wife, who shares vocals on some of the songs with him.

'Cuttlefish and Love Remains' was recorded over a twenty month period in the Brixton-based recording studio One Cat, which is owned by Jon Clayton, who co-produced it with Rivers. While there have been since 'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' was recorded further membership changes, the Bitter Springs for this album consisted also of Paul 'Wizard' Baker (piano/organ/melodica/vocals), Paul McGrath (drums, accordion, vocals); Phil Martin (violin/guitar/vocals); Nick Brown (guitar) and Andy Deevey (guitar/bass). It also features - perhaps an indication of how well regarded the Bitter Springs are in cult circles - appearances from a dozen guest musicians including ex-Hefner member and solo artist Jack Hayter on pedal steel and Madness and Gallon Drunk saxophonist Terry Edwards. The Bitter Springs's music on 'Cuttlefish and Love Remains' weaves through a range of styles which includes elements of punk, folk, vaudeville, country and jazz.

Simon Rivers' lyrics have their usual often offbeat humour. 'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' is at one level a dark concept record about a dysfunctional family and the after shocks on its parents when their only son commits a violent crime. Pennyblackmusic are long-term fans of the Bitter Springs, and in this fourth interview with us Rivers explains that this was only part of the story.

PB: When we last interviewed you in early 2013 at the time of 'Everyone's Cup of Tea' you said that you planned to focus on 7" singles and downloads for a while. At what point did that focus change and did you decide to concentrate on making an album instead?

SR : Ha, yes, I remember now. That was the plan then (that day)...but singles were too expensive and I've probably said this before but we don't have much of a budget (Independence has a price), and it's best to spend it on recording then to release as economically as possible. In saying that though, 'Everyone's Cup of Tea' was very expensive and it has taken a long time to break even.

We released a couple of EPS a few years back, and in hindsight we should have recorded five more songs and made an album. I'd love to make lots of singles and have our whole back catalogue on vinyl and if we could afford it we would...triple albums I suppose they'd have to be ...but some of our covers would make great gatefolds...move over Genesis and Yes.

PB: 'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' was recorded relatively quickly and over a nineteen month period between May 2013 and December 2014 in comparison to the admittedly epic 'Everyone's Cup of Tea' which was recorded "over an eternity" and a seven year period. 'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' is at fourteen tracks not an especially short album. Why do you think that it came together so quickly?

SR: It was very quick by our standards...again most of our release times are financially bound e.g. when we can afford to record, and it's not always been easy to get the studio time when needed. 'Everyone's Cup of Tea' actually took longer because we tried to cut

costs on recording which threw up other problems and then Dan Ashkenazy (bass player, 1979 to 2011 –Ed) left the band which changed the shape of ‘Everyone’s Cup of Tea’ and I had to struggle to finish it myself...that’s why it became a double disc, so as to tell the whole story.

‘Cuttlefish’ is only really thirteen tracks because one is a reprise of ‘Poetry Emulsion’ (‘Po Reprise’) which makes it one of our shortest LPs...the reason it came together so quickly is probably due to the fact I was determined to start again after Dan’s departure...we actually had double the amount of songs for it, but when we started working at One Cat with Jonathon Clayton he took a look my notes after a few sessions and said , “Maybe we should finish this first batch now and record the others later?” which, on reflection, I’m glad we did as otherwise it wouldn’t be finished yet .

PB: The line-up of the Bitter Springs has been through various changes in recent years, and even since the recording of this album has changed again with Andrew Deevey switching from bass to guitar and Phil Martin leaving the band to move to Whitby. Who is actually in the Bitter Springs these days?

SR: Ideally the Springs Line up would never change. We’d just add new members. I’ve never asked anyone to leave, but I realise now that I’m a bit of a control freak without much control...but If I had my way it would still be me, Kim Rivers (keyboards, 1982-1994 -Ed), Daniel Ashkenazy and Neil Palmer (drummer, 1979-1981, 1984-1998)...but Paul McGrath, Paul “Wizard”) Baker and Nick Brown have become good friends and are pretty great for the Springs. Phil sadly joined Fields of the Nephilim and moved to Yorkshire (Not really, that’s a Whitby goth joke), but I think his violin playing on ‘Cuttlefish’ is the best he’s ever been and we don’t rule out a Phil return at some point, because eventually I’m sure he’ll miss Brentford so much he’ll have to come back....as I said no one can ever really leave the Springs.

Andrew Deevey joined to play bass on ‘Cuttlefish’, but he is really a guitarist and has other musical commitments so we have moved him on to guitar for live shows and brought in Mark Humphrey on bass. Then if Mark isn’t available we can put Andy back on bass. I wanted to make sure we were in a position not to have to turn anything down, either live or recording wise, because of personnel problems....a bit like a football team - you know you might not know who’s in the starting line up this week, but it’s going to be Bitter Springs AFC and I’m the manager and I’ll pick the best side available on that day...and if they don’t give a 110 % they’ll be dropped for the final...ha, ha, I got a bit carried away there.

PB: Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' also sees the welcome return to the fold of the former Kim Ashford, now Kim Rivers who shares much of the vocals with you and has rejoined the band for the first time since 1994 and Last Party days. Did she take much persuasion to rejoin the band?

SR: Yes, she’s a right diva. I can’t even get her to practice...I like to get Kim singing because she’s got no pretensions and like me she doesn’t think she’s a good singer and I hope that’s what makes us good together...It’s pretty great singing in a cool band with your wife and we’ve always made sure we do good things together...That song title is sort of based on what we aspire to in our relationship.

PB: 'Cuttlefish and Love's Remains' was recorded with "a fresh start in a new studio for a new line up." Why did you decide to go to One Cat to record this album? What do you think that recording at One Cat and working with your "young" co-producer Jon Clayton brought to this album?

SR: I'd been to One Cat to sing backing vocals on Vic Godard's 'We Come as Aliens' album and liked the way Jon Clayton worked...we had used the same studio and engineer for all the previous Springs albums (RMS / Andy Le Vien), which had been great but I felt it was well overdue that we work with someone else. It was all very refreshing getting a new perspective on us, but it got pretty tough towards the end as Jon had some personal problems and I was suffering health wise (lungs again) and was also prescribed anxiety tablets...but I'm always very anxious at the end stages of an album anyway, and as it was recorded over a relatively short period (for us) I think it has a more rounded sound.

PB: The album could be described as a semi-concept record in that several of the tracks are about a boy who commits a terrible crime and the after effects of this on him and his narcissistic, warring parents who have been so caught up in their own problems that they have ignored him. You use some very strong language to describe the parents on 'Our World Was Built on Broken Promises', but on the next track 'Something Good Together' you capture their absolute desolation and guilt at everything which has gone wrong with lines like "Let's do something good together/That's how we started out. "How much sympathy do you have for them as well? What about the son? Do you see them, both parents and son, as victims as well as perpetrators?

SR: Well, at the time of recording I'll pick which songs I think we should record and we'll work on them in rehearsal and at the studio. Some of the songs go back to when Dan was still with us, and some had been grouped together by me as part of a concept record I had imagined, where all the tracks would be about, and feature, the thoughts and actions of a father, mother and son family unit (much like my own), but over time the songs got split up... 'And Even Now' from the last album would have been part of it as well as 'The Odd Shower' and 'Everything You've Done' from the next LP...kind of one song would be a reaction to events in another song and so on. I even considered doing it in reverse like the classic Gaspar Noe film 'Irreversible'.

'Our World Was Built...' is in fact nothing to do with the family at all. It's my thoughts on violence and war...which I don't really like saying because I don't like spoiling things for a listener, but you asked so I won't lie . 'Something Good Together' as with a lot of this album is about relationships /friendships, and losing sight of things that matter so in the end this LP is really half a break up album (Me and Dan), and half concept album, and, as you have just so eloquently put, I guess we're all part victim, part perpetrator and that all of those seemingly insignificant small choices we make for temporary convenience can have such a huge negative impact later on in our lives.

PB: The middle track 'Cut All Fish' at one level seems like both a spoof of and homage in English to a particularly pretentious foreign film. Who is Kenny Wisdom all who provides the narration on it?

SR: It's not a spoof really, more of a Rivers style tribute poem I'd written inspired by cuttlefish ... I'd always wondered about cuttlefish from back when I was little seeing the bones in budgie cages and on beaches, I had always thought, "What an undignified way to

end up in a cage for a bird to sharpen its beak on.“ Nature pulls the plug, eh.... although, if think about it now, it’s a bit like organ donating with humans

I’ve Known Kenny Wisdom for a while now and have played a bit of guitar sometimes on his band the Long Decline’s albums, and Wizard has engineered a couple of them for him. I wanted to put a spoken word piece in the middle of the album as a sort of half point intermission, and, after seeing the Long Decline; live again around the time we were recording, I thought I’d ask Kenny to narrate it because he has a very original voice, plus it would give listeners a break from mine...I showed Jon the piano part and he played it and put the cello on, and then I added the random Greek radio snippets . I’ve always liked doing that kind of thing. ‘Shiver in Feb’ from our first record ‘From The Parish of Arthritis’ was in a similar vein.

PB: Yet as always with the Bitter Springs one feels that there is a lot more going on. What is the symbolism of the cuttlefish, so much so that you wanted to name the album after that? The chorus line of ‘Cut All Fish’ is "You don't shit eat where you eat." That could apply to both the parents and son. Was that line written with them in mind?

SR: Ha, ha, no, sayings like ‘you don’t shit where you eat’ I find brilliant, a poetic universal truth of sorts, which, as I think about it, is what I try to do myself - show a truth in a new or unnoticed before way. When I looked into cuttlefish I found out that anatomically their heads are placed below their bums ... and that’s why I used that old saying...The album was originally called ‘Cozy Guts, Cuttlefish and Love’s Remains’ but that’s another story.

PB: 'It's Yer Birthday' is absolutely hilarious. It catches all the anguish of middle age kicking in ("Look on the bright side/At least you're still alive.") and the growing awareness which comes with it of your own mortality, but at the end its repressed, angst-ridden central character decides to go out on the pull ("Watch out single ladies/Here I come.") Do you see it as a song for pessimism or defiant against-the-odds optimism

SR: That song would have been first on the family album if it had been done ‘irreversible’ style as it is way that the father ends up, alone and with an internal voice convincing him to carry on with his miserable existence...the resilience of the human spirit I see it every day....A bit like years ago before depression was taken seriously and people told you to just pull yourself together...but it’s got a lot of me in that song. It’s how I’ll probably end up if I outlive Kim...but it also contains my philosophy that you could put on my gravestone, if I were to have one, “Never were a one for whys,/Always more of a well why not.” It is that gallows optimism thing really

PB: The Bitter Springs are a great live band. Yet gigs remain a rarity. Why are they so occasional?

SR: We don’t have a manager as such, or an agent. It’s just me and I’m not very pushy these days and I’m not prepared to try and convince people of our worth anymore, so, apart from gigs that we arrange ourselves, we don’t get asked to play that often, which is a big shame because, as you so rightly say, we are a great live band so if anyone wants to get in touch etc etc.

But as luck would have it I’ve just confirmed three shows already for 2016, Brixton Windmill with the Band of Holy Joy and Asbo Derek on Saturday February 27th, the

Guitar Bar at Hotel Deux in Nottingham on Saturday April 9th with Mr Ford and Mr Gibbs and John Marriott, and Brighton's Green Door store on April 30th with Vic Godard and the Subway Sect

PB: What plans do you have for the immediate future and 2016?

SR: Apart from delivering Christmas to the good people of Hampton ... Springs wise it's always on to the next project. Fist up though Acuarrela are going to release a limited 7 inch single featuring 'Something Good Together' c/w 'Portrait of a Marriage' with great sleeve artwork from Inga Tillere from the Band Of Holy Joy, and we'll probably get over to Spain for a couple of shows to "not quite" coincide with that... we've already started recording at One Cat with Jon again, and hopefully the first fruits of this will be a download EP 'Loads of Love from The Bitter Springs' with three songs 'Love Rat', 'Words of Love' and 'Less Than Love'....we've got twenty songs we're working on for the next LP.

We're making a couple of videos, one of 'Some Muthas Do 'Ave Em' with Stan Watson who made the 'Cozzy Guts' film for us. It'll have a bit of acting as well as the song and Larry Dann who was in a couple of 'Carry On' films (and he played the desk sergeant in 'The Bill' for a number of years).

Also this Sunday Kim and I are doing a video for 'Not Now Mummy's Jogging Dear' in our garden shed that we've turned into a suburban beach hut (don't ask, and, oh, Wizard has recorded a new version of 'The Anonymous Touch' that we'll put up for download on the website soon.

PB: Thank you.

Main Photograph by Pete Tainsh
<http://pete-tainsh.tumblr.com/>