



Bitter Springs : Interview with Simon Rivers

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If you have heard of the band Last Party then you will probably also know Bitter Springs and the other way round. Last Party was formed in 1986 by Simon Rivers (vocals, guitars), Kim Ashford (keyboards), Daniel Askenazy (bass) and Steve Infield (drums). The band went through various line-up changes and then in 1996 decided to change their name to Bitter Springs.

The group has now done many, many gigs and has played shows with bands that have included, among others, the Stone Roses, the Macc Lads, Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine, the Kitchens Of Distinction and Slowdive.

The first Bitter Springs album 'From the Parish of Arthritis' came out in 1997 on Dishy Records. This was followed in 1998 by 'Five Died Filming This Lazy Lark' and then in 1999 by 'Benny Hills Wardrobe', both of which were released on Vespertine and the latter of which was very well received. Mojo made it the Album of the Month calling it 'Wonderful Stuff' and Melody Maker gave it 4 1/2 stars. Their next album, 'The Suburban Crimes of Every Happiness', which came out once more on Dishy in 2001, however, was almost immediately forgotten and became a lost album even though the quality of music was again very good. The Bitter Springs have also released a compilation album, 'Best Bakers on the Island', on the Spanish label Acualera, which merges together 4 Last Party tracks with some of their best Bitter Springs songs.

Somewhere in between that Simon Rivers met the much proclaimed Vic Godard and Bitter Springs joined the legend on the stage as his backing band, working with him under Vic's original group's moniker of the Subway Sect.



Bitter Springs are currently working on their 5th studio album. Pennyblackmusic was lucky enough to secure an interview with Simon Rivers and asked in more detail about the history of both Last Party and Bitter Springs.

PB: Could you tell me a bit more about how and when Last Party began and who was in the band at the beginning? Has the line-up changed since then?

SR: Before Last Party we started a band at school in Hampton Rectory secondary modern (1978) after miming to the Rezillo's 'Top of the Pops' at the school disco. We wanted to be a real band so we formed one and called ourselves No Trains At The Bay. We took the name from a book in the school library. I'd written songs since I was a tiny speck of whining fear and lies. I once pretended to my sister I'd written the Northern Soul classic 'Skiing in the Snow' and besides that I was the one with all the mouth so I became the singer..

We wrote our own songs from the start, but also we covered an Undertones tune and a Tom Robinson one. I was asked to leave school at 15 as none of the teachers saw any point in me taking exams (Me neither). So while my girlfriend Kim Ashford (keyboards), Daniel Askenazy (bass) and Neil Palmer (drums) stayed on I kept writing at home and on building sites and factories and wherever I worked in any spare moments I had and in some I didn't.

Neil left to work in a residential home for the physically and mentally hindered. Kim, Dan and me began recording on a one track tape player in my Dad's garage every week. We have about 20 C90 tapes full of songs from that time, one of which was called 'The Last Party', so when Steve Infield, a window cleaner, was cleaning the windows next door he heard me playing guitar and knocked on the window and said "You remind me of Lou Reed ! Do you need a drummer?" Hey Presto ! LAST PARTY were born.

PB: Why did you decide to change the name to Bitter Springs in 1996? You have seemed to be getting a lot more attention from people and press since you changed your name. Melody Maker were really favourable, while your album 'Benny Hill's Wardrobe' was the Album of the Month in Mojo. You also headlined a show for Careless Talk Costs Lives magazine in London. Do you think you can explain why Bitter Springs are more popular than Last Party?

SR: Last Party's first ever gig was at the London Marquee supporting THE SOUND. Steve didn't stay with us for long and Neil came back when we began making records in 1985. While recording in Crystal Palace Dave Goodman (engineer for the Sex Pistols) suggested we put an album out ourselves. We did 2 albums, 'Porky's Range' (1986) and "Love Handles' (1990), both of which came out on Harvey Records, 2 Peel sessions and about 8 singles and EPs and loads of gigs with all types of bands from the Stone Roses' London debut through to the Macc Lads and Carter The Unstoppable Sex Machine to the very wonderful Kitchens Of Distinction. Oh let's not forget Slowdive and the Chesterfields. We had some good reviews for our records and gigs.



Between us we had always had a varied and eclectic taste for music and the group's sound reflected this but it made it hard for journalists to pigeon hole us and we felt the better we became as a group the more we were ignored. We were ready to move on.

Neil suggested we change the name. Dan wasn't keen and nor was I at first but as I was the one who dealt with labels, gigs and press first hand I eventually agreed it could be a fresh start and, after a lengthy search Bitter Springs, was chosen. It is the name of an old Ealing film set in South Africa I think, but for me it also conjured up a very English feeling of cold seasons and not as is often assumed being bitter or spring water. Also bitter is a word my Dad as a bricklayer would often be heard to utter on freezing early morning starts when I would labour for him.

The band is the same whatever the name be it Last Party or Bitter Springs or White Spine which was one we rejected. Names are meaningless in the end. It's the band that makes the name but I must say that even after the name change reviews would begin ...the Bitter Springs formerly Last Party.

I must mention the personnel. New members came into the fold gradually as Bitter Springs began. Paul McGrath came into play accordion and now plays drums since Neil Palmer left (again) to become a photographer. Paul "The Wizard" Baker joined to play piano and keyboards and has done some great recording as engineer for the band. Andy Gwatkin plays violins and there is Ollie Cherer on melodica and trumpets and Jack Hayter on pedal steel. Most recently Phil is playing acoustic guitar live with us. Oh and I must mention Ben Davies who along with his mate Tim does our string arrangements (when we can afford them).

I couldn't really say why Bitter Springs are more popular than Last Party. I don't measure success in popularity anyway. A lot of groups and singers I like have sold bugger all. If I feel something's right I do it and for me that's my only barometer. I'll always follow my instincts and see things through to the BITTER (ha ha) END and that's what I'm doing with the springs. That's our strength and our weakness. The truth will win out as they say. You need strengths and weaknesses and a fire in your belly.

PB: How does it work in the band when you write new music and lyrics? Is that mainly your job or do you all write together?

SR: I write all the lyrics and the music comes from me or Dan or Wiz or whoever or wherever. I see a song in everything and every situation has potential. I've done it since I was a boy and I don't even have to think about it now. It comes natural. So natural in fact I have to force myself not to do it sometimes. My life is like one big long musical, but with no interval though.

I'm always on the look out for unusual ways of doing things. I met a woman while delivering letters (I'm a postman), Jan Griffith who usually sings old wartime songs and convinced her to do a duet with me before I'd even heard her sing and it's one of my favourite things we've ever done ('Flashing my Whip' from the 'Five Die Filming This Lazy Lark' LP).



Last week I heard 2 boys on a school piano doing a tune for an open evening so I wandered up and looked over the piano and pinched the chords. I also can't hear an instrumental without putting words to it Dan Goodwin (Kitchens of Distinction drummer) sent me a cassette of a tune he and Julian Swales (K.o.d guitarist) had recorded and I turned it into 'Under the Rainbow' ('Best Bakers' LP). That's how I did 2 songs for Piano Magic and 'Turn your Back' on Vic Godard's 'Sansend' LP. If I have written the music to a song I'll play it to the lads at rehearsals and they put their parts to it. I don't usually tell them what to play. I leave it up to them. I'm not precious about it as long as they play what I like.. ha ha once big labels and big egos get involved things get fucked up. I can't wait for someone to do a Springs cover version though.

PB: Your lyrics seem quite personal and almost like they are narrating a story. Are they based on what happens in your life?

SR: I like to make people laugh, scare and also to surprise them by reporting from my perspective on what I see going on around me or what I'm feeling. I am the person in the song every time and sometimes it is me and sometimes it's method singing' a la Randy Newman, Nick Cave, Bowie or it could be sometimes I am taking the piss at the ridiculousness of something. If you have something interesting to sing about you don't want J Lo, Celine Dion or Pavarotti style vocal acrobatics all over it, do you ? Just tell the story.

I take it all very seriously and meticulously research so certain details make sense and add up at closer inspection. But misinterpretation is a great art in itself so I love all that as well. That's why I shouldn't be saying too much about the mechanics of song writing ..there are no rules and I rule nothing out. I take it as a compliment that people think it's me in the songs but I would hope I'm not that fucked up. Actually the fucked up bits are me. The words have to make sense to me but not to anyone else. If I didn't know or believe the words to be true or I wasn't able to follow the logic then I wouldn't sing them... I don't really have to make anything up though, just do a little dramatic editing sometimes. Does that make sense?

PB: You are currently working on your next LP. You have over 20 tracks. What are the plans with this album? Do you know when you want to put it out and on which record label?

SR: We were hugely disappointed at the reception of 'Suburban Crimes'. I think it should have sold shit loads and probably would have done given publicity, airplay and the corporate finance behind it that a thousand and one lesser records have lavished on them on a daily basis. We put everything into that record and it nearly destroyed us.

When Mojo magazine. who had previously given us LP of the month with 'Benny Hills Wardrobe', didn't even review it. I sent them a letter a week later to ask if they would be featuring it in their lost classic/buried treasure feature because that's what it is-'a lost classic'. But personally it knocked me back bad and my confidence was severely dented. I'm just about over it now thoughor am I ?



The next album we've decided to take it as it comes and just keep recording as much as possible. We will have about 30 songs by early next year but we are self financed and that is also a factor. The ideas flood out, but the money to record them only trickles in.

A few labels seem keen with the tracks so far ready and Hit Back Records, home of Spearmint and the Free French in particular seem interested and I like the way they operate. I'm a very impatient person whose forced to be patient. But if it takes one year or five it will be the record we had to make. We are playing live more now so people can see us even if we don't have a record to promote.

PB: What do you think was your biggest inspiration for the forthcoming album?

SR: Rt's all in there . ageing and decay ...youth... death.. success.. failure ... life... loving... hate.. truths... lying... piss taking ...questions...answers... the struggle for expression ... sounds very cheerful stuff, doesn't it ?

PB: Do you have a favourite song that you know will appear on the new album and could you tell me what it's about?

SR: One song I know that will definitely be on it is 'Music It's A Young Mans Game'. I wrote it in response to a review of us as Subway Sect that said we were too old. We are in our infancy in creative and performing terms. Watch out if we ever grow up. Ha ha ! Don't ever speak to me or you'll be on the next album !

PB: You play with Vic Godard as the Subway Sect. How did that come about?

SR: By chance I noticed Vic was a postman too because I saw his picture in the post office magazine ('Jobsworth Weekly') so I contacted him and asked if he would like to duet with me on 'Boormans Son', a song I had written for the 1st Springs LP. He wasn't keen but by the time I'd persuaded him and got him in the studio it all made sense and sounded just like I'd imagined. He has a very original voice. I was a big fan of his 'What's the Matter, Boy ?' LP so it was a big thrill for me to have the man who wrote 'Make Me Sad' sing on one of my songs. We have helped each other out ever since

PB: What is happening with Vic Godard and the Subway Sect at the moment and are there any plans for the near future?

SR: We have been gigging as the Subway all year and the gigs have got better and better, but it is hard juggling the 2 bands and when we played a couple of times with both groups on the same bill it didn't really work for me. But I have thought maybe both bands could become one new band with 2 lyric writers. I should explain that all of Bitter Springs except for Andy Gwatkin (violin) play as the Sect along with Phil (violin) and Nick (guitar). We are hoping to record an LP called 'Blackpool' with lyrics by Irvine Welsh and music by Vic and the Springs.



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We have played 6 or 7 of the songs live and we are ready to record now. It's a musical in the traditional sense with songs such as .. the self explanatory singalong 'Handjobs'... the skiffle style title track and tearjerking ballads, 'Amy'S Theme' and the rather touching 'Only Our Ghost's', co-written with Vic's wife George.

I have myself written a personal version of 'Ghosts' which will surface as a Springs track at some point. We hope to get guest singers on the LP and also have a version of Vic singing the leads.

PB: You, personally, also work with other artists such as Piano Magic. How did that collaboration come about?

SR: Glen Jonson ? Yes he must have liked something about us. Oh yes 'Girl On A Mountain Bike' from our first LP. He sent me some music and only intended for me to do one song but there were two tunes on the tape and I wrote lyrics for both. 'Ugly Wife' and 'Crown Estate' (which appear on Piano Magic's 'Low Birth Weight' LP). 'Crown Estate' is one of my favourite things I've ever done. I'd like to do a whole LP with just me and him, but he's a big label boy now and wouldn't cross the road to wipe his arse on me if he ran out of toilet paper. Lovely bloke though.

PB: What is happening with Bitter Springs at the moment and what are your future plans? You seem to get a lot of attention from press and a lot of labels have released you as well.

SR: We have lots of new songs on the go. A sort of French cafe tune written by the wizard, 'City Of Glass' with lyrics inspired by the glaxo Kline building on the Great West Road in Brentford, sung by me and Kim Ashford. 'Available', a lounge type song taken from a drum machine pre set, and 'I Know It's Not What You Wanted', and an Andy Williams style northern soul stomper.

To name just three things going on, there's the 'Blackpool' album with Vic, the Springs LP to finish (to be titled 'The Latest Story Ever Sold') and the Springs play in London on December the 3rd at the Needles Cellar Club, 5-6 Clipstone Street, with support from Lazarus Effect and Stained Glass Heroes. The nearest tubes are Regents Park and Portland Street. It's a fiver to get in and a tenner to get out. Doors open at 8.

Also in December the Subway Sect play at the Idler Magazine's Xmas bash on December the 11th at a new club called I think Number 10 Golborne Road. Come along, we will be expecting you !

PB: Thank you.