

The 'Under the Surface' Interview

Simon Rivers Oct '99

UTS: How did it all begin for you as a band and how long have you been doing it?

SR: I have always written songs from as early as I can remember, starting on an old tennis racket with my cousin Ged; I used to sing into my uncle Charlie's old reel to reel with my sister. The first song I can remember writing was called "11-a-side". No prizes for guessing what that was about. I must of been about 6 or 7 at the time. My appendix burst when I was about 7 and while recovering at home, I started doing puzzles and listened to David Bowie's Hunky Dory album continually. Which was my first realisation of what songwriting could be. The thing being the association between songwriting and puzzles, rendering all thought visible, good, bad and ugly. As for being in a band, we did an end of year mime at school in the 4th year as the Rezillo's doing 'Top of the Pops' and the following year, more or less the same people had learnt to play a bit and later became No Trains at the Bay (known to those in the band as NTB). By the way the spray painted logo for NTB has only recently been washed off the railway bridge at Hampton station. We only played a couple of friends parties, never recorded anything and moved into the garage recording hundreds of tracks, sometimes 10 a night, on a Sharp cassette recorder. This was when ghetto Blaster's first came out.

One of the tapes was called 'The Last Party' from which we took our name for the next 10 years. Answering your question I've been doing it all my life.

UTS: Talking about your new album firstly. You've put a lot of emphasis on the title track. What point are you trying to make with that song? It seems you are attacking meaningless over exposed British cultural icons, is that close to the hub of the matter?

SR: That song describes things from my life that were going on at the same time as the Benny Hill shows heyday. So it's more about my life than his or his wardrobe. My dad wasn't actually sacked from Tom Jones pool (he's told me to set the record straight) it was the firm he was working for. "It all gets twisted on reflection". The reason the album is called Benny Hills Wardrobe is that originally the track was going to be a single, but Richard at Vespertine held a gun at our heads for an album.

Incidentally, I spoke to Benny Hills' producer and told him about the song and without hearing it he said Benny would have loved it.

UTS: It has to be asked. Benny Hill manipulative sexist or harmless buffoon?

SR: Benny Hill worked on many levels and like all entertainment its up to the viewer to take from it what they want to. In my opinion he was both and sometimes very funny. Michael Jackson paid him a visit when he was ill in hospital, say no more.

UTS: "Weekend at your Parents" is my favourite track by far. What inspired that lyric?

SR: "Weekend" was one of those songs that seem to arrive fully formed, and appear in front of you without too much of a headache, very satisfying. When you find a partner you inherit their family too.

UTS: Do you think that sometimes people wish their parents didn't exist when they first start a relationship?

SR: Parents are a constant source of embarrassment and having had them and been one I should know, but also they can be the best things in the world if you're lucky.

UTS: That track, along with "Via Sex" seem to focus on the gritty awkward details of sexual relationships, you give the impression you think it's overrated. How do you feel about sex?

SR: I love it, I'm a right dirty old bastard and I'm flattered that people assume everyone in the songs is me. Actually I'm a bit of a slapper and a great shag.

UTS: "School Milk Teeth" seems like a bitter attack on the middle classes, am I right, has your own personal background inspired some of your lyrics?

SR: What me bitter? Nah. I attack the ridiculousness of all classes, especially evening ones.

UTS: "A Christmas Number 1" seems to be telling the tale of a dysfunctional family. Is this fiction meeting observation?

SR: Show me one functional family. It doesn't exist and if it did would you want to be part of it? When your as nosy as me you find out the truth is al-

ways stranger than fiction and sometimes I even find myself toning it down to make it more believable!

UTS: "No Sects Please" appears to be some form of satire on religion. How do you feel about religion?

SR: My feelings on religion are very confused. I've seen people take comfort in it but I've still to puzzle it out for me. Apparently God likes a joke as much as the Devil.

UTS: There seems to be a strand of cynicism in your songs. Where do you think that comes from?

SR: I'm 36, I've lived a life is one answer, the other answer being the cynicism is more with the listener. With me I'm just a cuddly grizzly bear on a cold day in the forest.

UTS: There seems to be a darkly humorous strand to your lyrics, someone you worked with felt this comes from a means of survival in your formative years living in a gritty part of London. Is there any truth in that assessment?

SR: Yes there is lot of humour in what I do and in how I live my life. My formative years were a mixture of horror and magic. Growing up is the hardest job in the world. There is an element of truth in your assessment; life's a duel, so choose your weapons.

UTS: I was quite taken with your contributions to the recent Piano Magic album, the track "Dark Secrets Look for Light" in particular. What is that about?

SR: The song tells a story, it's obvious. People look for their own meaning and that's more a reflection on the listener than the songster and who am I to spoil their fun?

UTS: Do you have eclectic tastes as a band? The new album seems to move through quite a few styles. There echoes to me of The Tindersticks, The Smiths, Bowie, Joy Division and Serge Gainsbourg. Are any of them an influence at all? Who do you cite as your musical inspirations?

SR: Yeah. We like all the above plus, for me, Sparks, Thin Lizzy, Slade, Kraftwerk, Gang of Four and currently I've been listening to Shack, Super Furies, Nectarine No. 9, the

best of John Cale, Vic Godard and the Clashes "London Calling" because they was on the telly the other week. Dan was a big Magazine fan; otherwise we shared similar tastes in most things, except I had a weakness for Genesis.

This interview is taken from the fanzine 'Under the Surface'. Questions conceived by Adrian Pannett.