

BAD CO

Simon Kirke talks to James Gaden

Exploding onto the scene in 1973 with their self titled debut album, Bad Company took the world by storm. Featuring Simon Kirke and Paul Rodgers from Free, Mott The Hoople's Mick Ralphs and King Crimson's Boz Burrell, the quartet were signed to Led Zeppelin's Swan Song label and scored a string of hits. When vocalist Rodgers departed in 1982, the band recruited a new singer, Brian Howe, and forged a new path of more radio friendly, Americanised AOR through the mid 80s to the mid 90s. While still successful, with several hit singles and a platinum album in the form of 'Holy Water', there was friction between Ralphs, Kirke and vocalist Howe. The singer departed, replaced by Robert Hart in 1994, for two records much more akin to the original Bad Company sound. The legendary Paul Rodgers returned to the fold in 1998 and the band have toured several times since. With a recent run of UK dates dubbed 'The Swan Song Tour', supported by Richie Sambora and Orianthi, Fireworks caught up with Bad Company's longest serving and original member Simon Kirke, to discuss life in the band and his new solo album entitled 'All Because Of You'.

Bad Company's drummer called prior to the final live date on a tour, which has seen rave reviews for the veterans. His enthusiasm for how well things were going was obvious from the second he started speaking.

"We're down in London at the moment, doing the 02 tonight. It's been amazing, just amazing. The audiences are a little more quiet over here in the UK, so you have to work a little harder, but that's a good thing. In America the audiences are more raucous but over here they tend to listen more, which is great."

Before we get any further, I tell Kirke that I had recently interviewed Robert Hart for the *Unsung Heroes* Fireworks feature, and when Hart heard I was going to be speaking to Kirke, he asked me to pass on his best wishes. I duly do just that and tell Kirke how I thought the two albums featuring Hart, 'Company Of Strangers' and 'Stories Told And Untold', were both, in my opinion, very underrated.

"Oh, he's with Manfred Mann now I hear," the drummer responds. "I haven't seen him for quite a few years. That's nice. Robert's a great guy and really good singer. We had the era with Brian Howe which I thought saw us go off the tracks a bit, musically. Robert was much more in the mold of the Paul Rodgers style of singing and we had a lot of fun making those two albums."

I explain that I enjoyed all the Bad Company line ups, and personally really liked the Brian Howe era. I thought the hiring of Hart was a deliberate move to go back towards the roots of the Bad Company Blues based sound, as oppose to the more Americanised Howe era.

"Yeah, well when you've been around for forty-odd years like Bad Company have, you're going to have some diversions along the way," Kirke responds. "The Brian Howe era, looking back, I don't think was a good decision, but there you go, you take the rough with the smooth. We made some really good music during that period, I just don't think it was really Bad Company as we know and love it, if you know what I mean."

I do indeed, and with Rodgers back in the fold along with original members Kirke and Mick Ralphs, Bad Company, now augmented by Howard Leese on guitar and Todd Ronning holding the bass position vacated by the deceased Burrell, is back to its best. However, with the tour being dubbed the 'Swan Song Tour', is this simply the beginning if the end?

"People have been asking us that and no, it is really a tip of the hat to the label Swan Song," Kirke explains. "We released our first five albums on that label so with what we play, it's more of a nod to those records, and a tip of the hat to Peter Grant (who managed both Bad Company and Led Zeppelin). Bad Company is going to be around for as long as we feel good doing it, and the way this tour has been going and the way we're feeling, we could be around for some time yet."

That is good news and with the array of good reports I've seen from the tour, I enquire if any of them are going to be recorded or filmed. Kirke isn't keen on the suggestion.

"I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. We released 'Live At Wembley' only a few years ago and I'm very wary of putting out too much stuff, especially live stuff. It's not out of the question that

we won't go back into the studio to make an album though. We've all got songs and Paul in particular has written a song called 'Troubleshooter' which is really, really good. I'd love to record that, but who knows, you can never tell."

The band has seen three different singers front the group, Ralphs has skipped tours, the bass position has been exchanged numerous times, but the one constant, ever present throughout every show and every album has been Kirke, an achievement he modestly jokes about.

"I know – for better or for worse. What can I say, I just can't say no!" he laughs. "For me, it's always been a question of keeping the band alive. Like I say, there are things I've regretted, and decisions I'm very pleased with. I stand by all of them, I'm a grown man, I take responsibility for all of my actions. The whole Brian Howe thing, in retrospect, was not a good career move, but it did keep the band name alive. I refused to give up the drum stool in this band though, that's just the way I am."

As someone who has all the Howe era records, I'm curious as to why Howe was brought into the group, if Kirke now views that as the wrong move.

"It's a long story, but to condense it, 1980 was a terrible year. Lennon was shot, John Bonham died, Led Zeppelin broke up, that meant the Swan Song label basically dissolved and ultimately Bad Company ceased to exist. Paul decided it was enough and wanted to pursue a solo career. He never said that he *never* wanted to come back, but after a year of so, we were left twiddling our thumbs somewhat. We had Boz, myself and Mick and Atlantic Records suggested finding a new

singer and continuing. So that's what we did, as far as I was concerned just because Paul didn't want to be involved that wasn't cause to break the band up. So we looked for a new singer, found Brian Howe, and continued for another seven years. There was some good music, but it wasn't Bad Company really. Now we've got the originals back together and now we have Mick back with us, because he missed the US dates, everyone is smiling again and we're a happy bunch of campers."

Another thing keeping Kirke happy is his latest solo album, 'All Because Of You', which is due out in February. I ask if he began writing with an album in mind or has just amassed some songs along the way.

"I've been playing guitar almost as long as I've been playing drums, and writing songs. This is actually my third solo album but my first two were more like a hobby. I hooked up with my present manager and he manages a band of relative youngsters from Chicago called The Empty Pockets. I'd sent him some songs to see what he thought of them and he was the first guy to come to me and say 'Do you know what, there's a lot of potential here'. He gave the tracks over to The Empty Pockets and that's a leap of faith really. Once you pass one of your songs on for someone to work on, it's out of your hands for a little bit. You get validation of the song, whether it's good or not. When I heard what they had done with them, a week later, I was knocked sideways. It was so good and so sympathetic to what I had in mind. Then I had to sing! I had to travel from New York where I live, to Chicago, I played some drums and I sang. I've always thought I had a decent voice, but nothing great. However these guys helped me tap a potential I didn't know I had, and 'All Because Of You' is the result."

Kirke singing is not new to fans like myself, as he contributed lead vocals on a couple of the Howe era Bad Company albums, performing '100 Miles' on 'Holy Water' and 'My Only One' on 'Here Comes Trouble'. On his new album though, he sounds much more assured and confident as a vocalist.

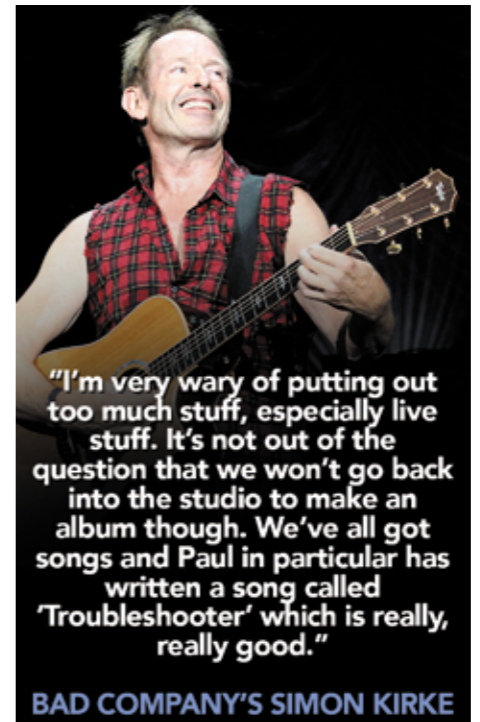
"I was more assured and confident, certainly," he agrees. "I've been taking vocal lessons from the lead singer of the band, Josh Soloman, because he's classically trained. We go into a back room behind the studio and do these amazingly complex and rather funny vocal exercises that, if you recorded them and put them on Youtube, it would have people in hysterics! But they worked, and I thought I sang pretty well, I'm very pleased."

The lyrics on several of the album's tracks appear to be personal and autobiographical, and Kirke confirms this.

"I don't shy away from my past, I've been in and out of rehab, I'm sober now, I don't drink anymore, and if I can help someone by imparting what I've been through, that's even better. To be an addict or an alcoholic doesn't carry the stigma anymore that it did in the sixties or seventies, and a lot of my contemporaries are in twelve step programs now, they make no bones about it. It's all out in the open. I write songs, sometimes you have dry periods, other times it just flows. The last couple of years I got divorced, which was quite

traumatic, I got a new girlfriend and that was a source for several of the songs, my relationship with Maria. There's a track on there called 'Maria', which features a string quartet, so I actually got to realise a couple of dreams on this record. I have a track with a Gospel choir, and I have one with a string quartet, which is something I've wanted to do ever since I heard The Beatles do 'Yesterday'. I didn't even meet them, Josh set it up and it came back to me. To hear one of my songs with a real string quartet on, it was just unbelievable. These guys, and The Empty Pockets, they're all so good, I played some drums, a little piano and some guitar, but the guys were all brilliant musicians so it wasn't necessary for me to do anything else."

While you can take the drummer out of Bad Company, it seems you can't take the Bad Company out of the drummer, as his new album also includes the brave decision to cover and re-work a stone cold classic, in the form of 'Feel Like Makin' Love'. Surely that was a challenge to do something new to such a well known song?



"No, it was actually one of the easiest! I was just noodling around in my flat on a ukulele and I just happened to play the chords for the verse and Maria said 'Wow, what's that?' She's younger than me and I told her it was an old Bad Company song, and she said 'It's fantastic, you should record it!' I said 'You can't do a Reggae version of 'Feel Like Making Love', that's heresy!' but because she's a generation younger than me, the fact the Bad Company had a huge hit with it forty years ago didn't bother her, she thought it sounded great as it was, so I gave it a go with The Empty Pockets. It was one of the first tracks we did and it had us all smiling and I decided to put it on the album. I sent it to Mick and Paul to get their blessing and they were both well pleased with it. So there you go, it has another incarnation!"

While it is clearly completely different to the original, it does fit in well with the rest of the material, dove-tailing with a lot of the original material, it doesn't stand out as an obligatory cover from his parent band.

"Thanks! I echo all of that, I can't really add to that!" Kirke responds. "Like I said, it was the first one we did so it set the style and because it was a cover it was an easy way to ease into the album. Then I had to bring in my own material and that's when it became trickier, but more rewarding, it felt like as each song was completed it was another chapter of a book. I'm so pleased with it."

One of the more left field tracks is 'Friends In The Woods' which concerns Robbie the Rabbit, Horace the Hedgehog, Oswald The Owl... I ask about the relevance of that song.

"I wrote that years ago, when my kids were toddlers!" laughs the drummer. "I have four kids and I wrote it for them, and now I play it for my grandkids. I never intended it to be on the album, but I played it one day in the studio and the band just loved it. They started harmonising, they thought it was fun and that's the whole thing about the album, it has facets and emotions, I didn't want it to be dirgy, so to have a tongue-in-cheek kids Country song, I love it. It's actually one of the most popular ones when I do solo shows."

As someone who is no stranger to touring with Bad Company, I ask if Kirke would like to do a full blown tour for his solo work, or if he is content just playing the occasional show here and there.

"I absolutely love doing solo shows," he responds. "Bad Company is a great band, I love playing drums and I have to say, this tour I've enjoyed so much, I've had a resurgence to play drums again. I've always had this other itch to scratch though, I like singing, I like stepping in front of my kit and singing, playing piano or guitar, and I will do some solo shows. Mick has his own Blues band so I'd like to go out with them, share the bill and then maybe do some stuff together at the end. That would be good. I have to do other things to satisfy myself musically and personally, but there will always be Bad Company."

It should be no surprise that Kirke has that creative streak, because despite the majority of classic Bad Company songs being written by Rodgers or Ralphs, Kirke's contribution should not be glossed over, as he has penned tracks such as 'Weep No More' and 'Anna', as well as co-writing well known cuts such as 'Honey Child' and the band's theme, 'Bad Company'.

"Well, that's nice to hear, thank you. I think as well, we each contribute a certain something to Bad Company. Led Zeppelin tried it without Bonzo, it didn't feel right. It's not even always the sound that's different, it can be something as subtle as a ripple effect when a different person is in the band. For example, when we played the American leg we had Rich Robinson from the Black Crowes playing guitar with us because Mick's health wouldn't allow him to tour there. Rich is a great guy, a really good guitar player, but it just didn't feel like the band I'm used to. It's all about chemistry."

Speaking of Mick's health, shortly after this interview was conducted, Ralphs suffered a stroke just days after the tour was completed. He is currently recovering and we wish him well.

Simon Kirke's album 'All Because Of You' will be released on 10th February 2017.