

RETROSPECTIVE

LOOKING BACK ON CLASSIC ALBUMS WITH THE ONES WHO MADE THEM

This time, Retrospective takes a look back at one of the great classic rock bands, Bad Company. However, rather than cover the celebrated debut album (which everybody knows about) the decision was taken to cover the last platinum selling record the band released - 'Holy Water', featuring Brian Howe on lead vocals. When Howe joined the band in 1984, replacing Paul Rodgers, some fans were appalled at the change of sound which was accused of being more like Foreigner than classic Bad Company. Other people were more receptive - it even gained the band new fans who weren't raised on the Rodgers era. James Gaden was one such person, so he hooked up with Brian Howe to talk about the vocalist's stint in the band, the 'Holy Water' album in particular and future plans. On top of that, after reading sneering comment after comment on Brian's facebook page about a pop star the singer hates with a fiery passion, James couldn't resist throwing in a comment or two about Howe's nemesis... Justin Bieber.

We'll start with a bit of background - when you first joined Bad Company, for the 'Fame And Fortune' record, were you aware of how much you would have to be involved in the writing, or did you think you were just coming in as the singer? Because you were involved in the writing from day one.

I was told they needed a writer, so I knew from the get-go that I would be writing. What I didn't know was whether I was a good enough writer! (laughs) I didn't know if I had the calibre or the right style for that band. But I was required to write an awful lot of stuff on that first record, yeah.

You came into the band with a much smaller C.V. than the other guys - they'd all been around in the original Bad Company and been in big bands before that like Free, Moot The Hoople, King Crimson... before 'Fame And Fortune', the only thing you had really been recognised for was doing lead vocals for half of the 'Penetrator' album with Ted Nugent. You go from that to replacing Paul Rodgers in Bad Company... and 'Fame And Fortune' changed the band's style from the bluesy Rodgers era to a more commercial eighties sound. Was that because you decided that it would be futile to try and emulate Paul and you should do your thing, or did the band collectively feel it was time to change direction?

At that particular time, nobody really knew what they wanted to do. Mick Ralphs wanted us to be Mr Mister, Simon just wanted us to do anything really, as long as he could just play the same drum beat to every song, he was happy. I don't know - I wasn't really focussed on writing in one style, I was trying my hand at writing across a wide spectrum. Mick and I wrote a few of those songs together. I had one song, 'This Love' already finished, and I still think that's probably the best song on the record actually! (Laughs) I wrote that with an old pal of mine called Chris Fretwell, back in Portsmouth - long before I even joined Ted Nugent. So I knew I'd have to write, but the actual process was very fragmented, very undisciplined. Nobody knew what direction to take so we just wrote songs we wanted to write. It's nice to do that, but there has to be a direction.

Well that takes us toward where I wanted to go - 'Dangerous Age' was much better received than 'Fame And Fortune', it had more airplay for the singles, a better sound. By the time you get to the album I want to discuss, 'Holy Water', I think the success of that record can only be attributed to you and Terry Thomas. You only have to look at who wrote what on that album. There's hardly anything there by anyone else. Was the lack of input from Mick and Simon due to the fact that they still weren't sure what to do, or did you and Terry decide to drive the band forward yourselves?

It was really simple, I'll walk you through it. People don't believe it but it's absolutely true. Mick Ralphs, by nature, is incredibly lazy - incredibly lazy! We knew we had to write songs for a new record, so we would get together for 'Dangerous Age', organise a time, book a studio to thrash some things out... We'd get there and I'd say 'So Mick, how many songs have you got?' There'd be a silence before he'd reply 'None.' (laughs) I'd say 'Okay, well, you know we go into the studio in two weeks to

start the record, we need something...' He'd go 'Well, I'll have something...' Okay, right. So I called up our manager, Bud Prager, and I said 'Bud, if you don't do something, this band is over. There's no songs, we've been paid an advance, got a record deal and there's no songs. Can you find me someone to write with?' I had to explain how Mick didn't want to write, he wasn't writing, he had no songs, yet he wanted to be the main songwriter. Bud was surprised, and said that we'd have to let Mick write a minimum of six songs. He said he'd send a guy, called Terry Thomas, down to meet me and we would write three or four tracks to flesh out the album.

The first day Terry and I sat down together, we wrote a song. It was 'Dirty Boy' and we became very prolific - we did thirteen songs in about two weeks I think. We had enough for the album, but when we brought them in Mick said 'Oh, that's not fair.' I asked him how many songs he had, and he replied 'Two.' (laughs) So how isn't that fair? We knew we had to have some songs, we knew when we had to have them finished, so we worked hard to finish them. So Mick responds with 'This isn't fair, this is my band'. So I said 'Okay, it's your band, fine, but where are your songs?' So he decided that 'Well, I'll have to write a couple with Terry.' Oh God... That's where the real trouble started in the band. Mick thought we were trying to take over the band - we weren't, we were just working harder than he was. And he still didn't get the message! He still wouldn't write songs. He didn't like anything... he didn't like writing, didn't like recording, didn't like rehearsing - the whole thing became a chore, for Terry and I. Simon was oblivious to most of it - because Simon is oblivious to just about everything. But then he's a drummer! (laughs)

I couldn't decide at first which of your Bad Company records to talk to you about - I narrowed it down to 'Dangerous Age' or 'Holy Water'. Those two are excellent but I chose 'Holy Water' because that's the most successful and had some hit singles. I dug it out again before this interview, because I've owned it for years and years, and when I was reading the inlay booklet again I realised that nearly everything was credited to Howe/Thomas. There's very little input from Simon or Mick. I wondered if Mick had to have a token track on there, but you just answered that for me!

He did - he tried to pull a stunt too, on that album. It all started with 'Dangerous Age' - he refused to record 'No Smoke Without Fire'. He said he wasn't having that song on the album. The record label turned to him and said that it was definitely going on the album, because they thought it was going to be a hit. So he threw a hissy fit and quit the band. I think he was under the impression if he left, we'd come to a grinding halt. So he "quit" and the management said 'Okay, see you later'. (laughs) There was a lot of trouble and with 'Holy Water', he wasn't mad keen on recording 'If You Needed Somebody' either. In fact, when I think back to those sessions, I don't think Mick played that much guitar on any of those first three albums. He'd come in and do solos, but most of the guitar work was done by Terry Thomas.

I know that 'If You Needed Somebody' and the title track from 'Holy Water' are two songs that often get mentioned, but for me one of the ones that stood out was 'Boys Cry Tough'. I thought lyrically it was quite hard hitting - was it based on



a real event or a total work of fiction?

That's a freaky song - and I've found this is happening to me with increasing regularity. I'd just bought a house on the beach in Florida and Terry was over. We were writing and we had the basis of the track done, along with the basic melodic structure. But it just wasn't quite right, we couldn't get it. We were working on that one song, on and off, for two or three weeks. That's unlike Terry and I, usually we do a song a day. But this one, nothing sat right. After about three weeks, it just all came together. It was about this guy, heading south on 41, which is the road behind me which goes from Tampa to Miami. I started writing about a bar fight in this biker bar, the county line - I'm not American, I'm not familiar with all that stuff, but they came to me, I wrote them down, we did the demo for the vocal and it worked! About a month after the record came out, we were in Lehigh Acres. This guy, a biker, came up and he said to me 'How did you know about that?' I asked him what he was talking about and he just said again 'How did you know about that?' I said 'Be explicit, because I don't know what you're talking about!' He said 'The song, 'Boys Cry Tough'...' I still had no idea what he was on about, so he told me that a bar called The County Line had to be shut down after a guy was killed. I was stunned and basically, the bulk of the song, which was written with me having no knowledge of the event, came true! It was freaky. I don't even believe in all that bullshit like afterlife and that stuff, I don't get that, but like I say, this happens a lot when I'm writing, it's weird.

Well, in that case, what you want to do is write a song about Justin Bieber meeting a vile and horrendous death!

I'm already working on that one. (laughs) That's in the pipeline, don't worry about that!

Last time I spoke to you, you told me that there were a lot of dissenting voices because you weren't Paul Rodgers, it wasn't Bad Company blah blah blah... and you had the chance to join Foreigner, but you stayed with Bad Company because you wanted to get a platinum record and prove everybody wrong. When you were writing 'Holy Water', did you have a feeling when hearing that material that this was going to be the album that achieved that for you?

I'll be honest with you, 'Holy Water' was going to be my solo record. I'd already pretty much decided to leave because I was sick of the aggro I'd gotten from the boys over 'Dangerous Age'. They made life unbearable, they were just pricks. So I had just about all of those songs done, with Terry, with a view to putting it out as a solo album. But Derek Schulman from Atlantic Records came to my house and sat down with me. He talked me out of making a solo record, told me it was the wrong time because this version of Bad Company had broken through with 'Dangerous Age'. He backed me and said he knew Mick and Simon wanted to force me out of the band, but he encouraged me to stick with it. He told me that if I took this material and made it into a Bad Company record, they would back it and make sure it was a smash. He felt that would be much better for my career in the long term, so I agreed - much to the resentment from Mick and Simon, who wanted me gone so badly. But the record label wanted me there, so... otherwise, there would be no band anyway. You can't go through that thing of keep changing singers. It's very hard to replace the



voice of a band, it only works once in a blue moon.

With that in mind then, how did you get the gig for Bad Company in the first place? Was that more a management decision? By the sound of it, Mick and Simon were never happy with you as the singer, so how come you got the job?

Mick Jones from Foreigner was the man who put me up to the gig. And honestly, the first album, it was all hunky dory for 'Fame And Fortune'. But I quickly realised how lazy Mick was. I tried to get him to write with me - I knew the songs from that first album weren't THAT great - crikey, it's not rocket science to see that they weren't wonderful songs. We were at a rehearsal in London, so I asked him if he could come down to Portsmouth on the Saturday. I had some ideas, so I wanted him to come down into a studio with me and work on them. I offered to pay for the studio time and everything. I said that I wanted to work on some stuff with him because I felt we needed another three or four songs to chose from. 'Yeah, yeah, call me on Friday'. So I call him on Friday - I told him I had the studio booked, ready to go, was he going to come down tomorrow? 'Oh, I can't mate, I've got furniture being delivered'. Wow. That showed his commitment. I learned pretty quick that nothing was going to get done unless someone else did it.

I got a similar impression about Simon as well. With 'Holy Water', the one song which I never understood why it was there, was '100 Miles', stuck on right at the end.

He insisted. It was a joke. That song doesn't fit on the album... I don't think there's an album that it WOULD fit on, to be honest with you! (laughs) It doesn't fit, it was the Antichrist of everything we were trying to do in the band! Get rid of the keyboards, toughen things up a bit... then he comes in with this piece of tripe. Stupid.

For me, like you say, it's nothing like part of the record, so I always treat it like a bonus track, one of those ones from the sessions but not really part of the record. I always think of it like 'The drummer has to have one song on there'.

That's how it was! It was a sympathy song for Simon to keep him happy. It's a bit sad really! And that caused another problem, because it went to his head and suddenly he thought he was a singer, so now he wants one on every album! (laughs) Oh my goodness. I don't think we can handle this. It was a waste - of record space and studio time really. In my opinion! (Laughs) I'm not a nasty guy, but they did irritate me. When I think back to some of the things they pulled... not the nicest of people.

With you and Terry being so prolific, how did you go about writing? Were you the sort of guys how sit around with acoustic guitars?

I don't play guitar, so Terry and I sit in a room together with a rhythm machine, drum machine, something like that and hit it on a random beat. He'd then come up with a feel, I'd put down a melody line and start making up words for it... we'll know within a few seconds if we've got something or not. If we do, we work it up. If not, we drop it and move on to something else. Just jamming really. I still write like that now.

I noticed you recorded the album at Farm Studios in Little Chalfant where you had made

'Dangerous Age'. Do you have any specific memories of your sessions there?

It had a good snooker table.

(Laughs) Oh, okay! Full size one, was it?

(Laughs) Yep, full size - it was a residential place - actually, the whole time I was there, I hardly saw the other guys. It was just Terry and I. I think I saw Simon twice during the whole record. It was a ridiculous session. We had Simon come in to do drums, but Simon suffers from what we call 'red light fever'. When he sees the recording light go on, he falls apart. He doesn't keep meter very well, he's just not very good, he plays with no feel. So the trick is you tell him it's just a run through - then you record it anyway and hope to capture it! (laughs) So we'd do that. Often it still wasn't quite right. So Simon would go home and Terry would do stuff. Terry would even add tom-toms... and Simon never noticed! He came in the next day after Terry had been adding stuff and say 'Ohh, that sounds good dunnit?' He didn't even notice there were drums added! It was hilarious!

When I spoke to you about 'Circus Bar' back in issue #39, I told you I had a bootleg from the 'Holy Water' tour and I sent you it...

You did! From a radio broadcast - I quite enjoyed it actually, it wasn't bad was it?

No, it's cool - because Mick wasn't on that tour was he?

No, we had Geoff Whitehorn - great guitar player, very, very good. He's with Procul Harem now I think. We were a much better band on that tour. Mick pulled his stunt of 'I'm not doing the tour' thing, thinking it would put the kibosh on any gigs we had planned. Once again though, the management said 'See ya!' The band was SO much better with Geoff, until Mick decided to come back, which meant we had to get rid of Geoff. Oh God. (laughs)

I didn't realise that 'Holy Water' was meant to be a solo album, so that makes this question even more pertinent - looking back at it, many fans consider it a classic. Apart from the obvious Simon Kirke track, would there be anything you wish to change about the album or are you still happy with it?

I think the songs are really good, I think they still stand up. I think the recording process from back then has aged the record a bit. It's a bit too much awash with effect, repeats and reverbs. Some of the songs could have been tighter and drier. But for the age the album is now, it was a very good sounding record - back in the day. That's why I tend not to use effects on my stuff now. That's what dates music. Songs don't date, it's the effect. You hear a song with those horrible high pitched drums that go "doo doo doo!" you immediately know the period, late seventies or what have you. If you jump on the effect bandwagon, once that effect is out of fashion, your record is dated. Someone like Jackson Browne, who very seldomly uses effects, his records still sound fucking brilliant. Natural. That's what I try to do now.

To finish up, last time we spoke regarding 'Circus Bar', one of my albums of the year, you said that it wouldn't be thirteen years until your next record. Have you made a start on the follow

ALBUM DETAILS

1. **Holy Water** (Howe, Thomas)
2. **Walk Through Fire** (Howe, Thomas)
3. **Stranger, Stranger** (Howe, Kirke, Thomas)
4. **If You Needed Somebody** (Howe, Thomas)
5. **Fearless** (Howe, Thomas)
6. **Lay Your Love On Me** (Ralphs)
7. **Boys Cry Tough** (Howe, Thomas)
8. **With You In A Heartbeat** (Howe, Thomas)
9. **I Don't Care** (Howe, Thomas)
10. **Never Too Late** (Thomas, Ralphs)
11. **Dead Of Night** (Ralphs, Thomas)
12. **100 Miles** (Kirke)

BAND LINE UP

Brian Howe - vocals
Mick Ralphs - guitar
Simon Kirke - drums, acoustic guitar and vocals on '100 Miles'

Additional Musicians

Felix Krish - bass
Lea Hart - backing vocals
Tina Egan - backing vocals on track 4
Rick Smith - accordion on track 12
Terry Thomas - guitar, Hammond organ, percussion, backing vocals

Produced by Terry Thomas

Recorded at: Farmyard Studios, Little Chalfant.
Mixed at: CBS Rooftop Studios, London.

Released on Atco/Atlantic in 1990

up?

Yes I have, I've got five songs finished and I think it's MUCH better than 'Circus Bar'.

Really?

MUCH better. So five songs are finished, and I was going to put it out as an EP, but I think I'll wait and maybe release it as a full album. Who knows, maybe I'll put the five out, but it's very good. I'm really surprised to be honest. I wrote them all with Brooks Paschal again. There's some really strong stuff on there.

Has Brooks picked up where Terry Thomas left off as your writing partner now?

I suppose so. I've tried to get Terry to be involved but I dunno, he seems to not care for leaving London much any more. I don't know why he doesn't want to come and lay in the sun for a few weeks and do a bit of work, but there you go. I kept Rafe McKenna on board, who mixed all the Bad Company records, he still mixes for me, he did 'Circus Bar' and these five. With Terry it's hard to tell - maybe he's busy doing stuff, I don't know. But we talk.

Well I'll bring it to a close - thanks for that Brian, you have a good day and I hope it isn't spoiled by Justin Bieber.

I'm going to go and put his new CD on right now. And hang myself.

(Laughs) Hey, that's some good stuff he's been putting out!

Oh yeah, real good stuff. I'll see that little creep in a fucking rehab unit in three years time, I guarantee it!

I think people will have forgotten who he is by then!

I hope so! (laughs)