

STIFF RECORDS PULL - OUT



WHAT'S STIFF?: THE DAVE ROBINSON INTERVIEW

Stiff Records label boss Dave Robinson is the kind of man an American would call a go-getter. In 1970 as manager of the band Brinsley Schwarz, he found himself in the Catch 22 of the London rock'n'roll scene: booking agencies were not interested in the band unless they had a record deal, record companies weren't interested unless you had an agency.

The bright idea was therefore conceived of putting the then totally unknown Brinsley Schwarz on the bill at New York's prestigious Fillmore Auditorium and flying 150 media people to the States to cover the event.

Robinson rang up Bill Graham, hard-nosed owner of the Fillmore. Graham suggested a tape of Schwarz be sent over from London to New York for his approval. The next day when Graham arrived at the Fillmore, Robinson was

waiting in his office. They got the job, tape unheard.

It's that kind of eye for a commercial chance and bravado bordering on insanity that prompted Dave Robinson and label co-founder Jake Riviera to start Stiff Records.

As Riviera put it at the time, "For far too long there has been a gap between the million quid advance and scuffling about in a cellar. There has to be a middle ground. I believe Stiff is it." Robinson recalls the beginning in a less purposeful light: "It was just pure blind luck. We stumbled into it."

Launched in August 1976 with borrowed capital of \$800, Stiff Records takes its name from a curious source. "We named it after an American term. A Stiff is a record that doesn't happen" says Robinson. A position, he adds,

they thought they could improve on.

The label quickly signed an array of artists who've subsequently proved to be of enormous musical importance — Nick Lowe, Elvis Costello and Ian Dury — as well as a number of others who proved to be less than pivotal to the future of rock'n'roll.

Stiff was immediately different from other record companies in several respects. Initially many of the acts were signed for one-off deals. They delivered one single and the contract expired. Robinson's explanation for this is simple: "Every band, or nearly every band, has got one number in them that could be a million seller. Most times after we released that single, they got signed by a major company. That's alright."

Stiff were also distinguished by their wacky advertising style. T shirts that read "If it's not a

Stiff, it's not worth a f**k". Records that carried Stiff slogans — "Undertakers to the Industry", "Where Money Makes Money" and on a greatest hits package the assurance that it "Contains No Hit Single Whatsoever." To Robinson these ploys were "... obvious. It's just to credit the guy who buys the record with a bit of intelligence. To appeal to him on a slightly intellectual level. I mean you take the major record companies — do you think the guy who's selling that stuff likes it? Does he hell. He's 45 or 50 and he has nothing but contempt for the people buying his records and his advertising shows it. Our advertising was just to attract attention.

"After all you can't make people buy records, all you can do is aim to make them interested enough to consider it."

But the factor that has ensured the success of Stiff has been Robinson's policy on talent. Stiff have always been prepared not only to take a chance on unconventional talent but also on singer/songwriters that Robinson, with his vast experience at the roots level of the rock scene, has been able to back with the best musicians.

For as Robinson notes: "Musicians are ten a penny. Pebbles on the beach. There's hundreds of them. But the man out front, the singer with the ideas is a rarity." And Robinson's eye for talent has, as he none too modestly admits, "been mostly proven right." In the last three months Stiff or ex-Stiff artists have held the number one single spot in Britain on three occasions.

Such a success rate and a fostering of the idea of a company built round the performer has meant that now the talent comes to Robinson. As he explains: "That was always the plan. Credibility is even more important than actual finance at the beginning of a venture like Stiff. It's got to the point where if a major record company hears Stiff is interested in an act, then they become interested. Acts come to me and I send them off to others and tell them 'Say Stiff sent you'. What do I care?"

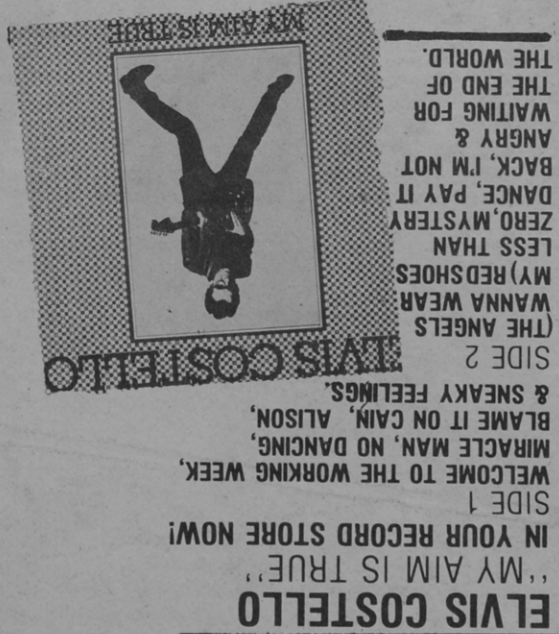
Credibility. So would Stiff sign anyone Dave Robinson didn't like? Robinson's reply is swift. "No ... well, if someone came to me with a song I knew was going to be a million seller that I didn't like, I'd take it. Of course I would. But ..." he adds sheepishly, "my conscience would bother me."

Alastair Dougal

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