

"Rip It Up?"
Yeah, it's named after the Little Richard song.
"It's also the name of an Orange Juice song."
A name bridges the generations. Lloyd Cole, leader of Glasgow's commotions, belongs to a more recent past, his roots don't reach past the early 70s, never mind extending into the evolutionary nostalgia of the mid 50s:
"Glam rock is probably my roots — T Rex, Bowie and Roxy Music. I find it very difficult to listen to a lot of that now but I still really like T Rex and the third Roxy Music album (*Stranded*) but early Bowie is hard to take because they weren't a good group. And I found most punk rock almost impossible to listen to."

Cole Storage

Cole, born and bred into the middle class in Derbyshire, spent time in London before moving to Glasgow with his parents:

"I was at London University but I was gonna leave because I made a right mess of it. I was trying to do Law and I didn't like it so I left."

And Glasgow?

"I liked it when I arrived there, now I find I'm a bit bored with it, especially having lived in London, and I've been to Amsterdam recently, so I find there's not much to do in Glasgow."

It was in Glasgow that he eventually formed the Commotions and signed a contract with Polydor. Yet with the Lou Reed timbre of *Rattlesnakes* they sounded as though they'd been weaned on Postcard:

"I don't think we're linked musically to any of the Postcard bands. I find it very difficult to understand how we can be like Lou Reed as our chord progressions and melodies are very unlike Lou Reed. The only thing that might be similar is that I've picked up a few phrasing ideas from him. And the Velvet Underground were an experimental group, we're just a straightforward pop group."

Cole's relaxed but insistent Derbyshire burr is persuasive. He's intelligent for an aspiring pop star, a position, he's claimed in past press reports, that he wants to occupy:

"For me, wanting to be a pop star was a very interesting thing to be. I've been almost a pop star now and I don't revel in it at all, in fact it's mainly unpleasant. You invariably want things you don't know about and when you do know you don't want them any more."

"I liked certain aspects of it, like being asked for my autograph and being recognised. I think that being ignored is the worst thing that could ever be. When you're being recognised you realise you're achieving something with the group and that's one of the yardsticks of success."

A lot of people would say that's what's wrong with pop music at the moment — too many entertainers put the quest for stardom first and the music, via market research and record company censorship, follows second.

"I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't want to be a pop star with a bad record. You can't answer people back if you haven't got anything to back you up. As far as I'm concerned we've got an LP that's just about flawless and that's the reason we have recognition. It's not because we're pretty or we wear a certain kind of clothes, it's because we've made a really good LP."

Is the music you've made pop music?

"I think it is, although we'd probably argue in the group about that."

As a comparison, the Waterboys' Mike Scott doesn't like his music to be thought of as pop.

"He's probably got the same loathing of the word 'pop' that I have of the word 'rock'. 'Rock' is a horrible thing to be labelled and if I'm not gonna insist on being called a pop group then people are gonna call us a rock group. Rock groups make me think of people like the Waterboys, which is everything I loathe. A rock lyric is generally self-important, whereas a pop lyric is more lightweight and therefore easier to digest. All Lou Reed's lyrics were pop lyrics. Rock conjures up groups like Television, who although they were one of my favourite groups, always felt inclined to do all of these long and incredibly boring songs and have these breaks in the songs where somebody stroked their own ego by do-

Cole Fire



ing a guitar solo. And I can't understand why people want to have their dirty laundry on show with their lyrics like Mike Scott does."

From your past statements it's plain that you don't like the larger-than-life heroisms of the Bun-nymen, Simple Minds, U2, etc?

"I don't mind the Bunnymen because they've got a sense of humour underneath it. These heroic bands, I personally find them a blot on the landscape. I've been doing interviews for a year now and I really am trying to find polite things to say about them because I'm sick of sounding like a bitch (slightly camp drawl)."

"I'd really like to find something to like in U2, but there isn't anything, the same with Simple Minds. Jim Kerr seems like a really nice man judging from interviews, but what horrible nasty music they. I've got nothing against Big Sounds, U2 aren't really a Big Sound are they? I find Big White Flags on stage just incredibly empty. I find the singing when it's emotional like Bono's very unconvincing. I don't think he's singing emotionally, he's just singing in a way he thinks he should sing."

In last month's *RIU* I used the old whisper-to-a-scream cliché to compare the Commotions' music to that of Simple Minds et al.

"I like that, I agree. I always believe in understatement as the most effective method, especially if you're trying to treat yourself as some kind of artist. If you shove something in somebody's face then they just don't see it."

Cole Blooded

Rattlesnakes crawls over your face; 10 insidious and ingratiating songs that slide into your subconscious unfelt, unseen, unforced. Quite an achievement for a first LP. The Commotions play by intuition, with a subtlety and colour that occasionally leaves Cole's vocals sounding a little wooden and removed from the content of the song. Or is that just me?

"That'll be just you; if that's happened I wouldn't be pleased as that was never our intention. The deciding factor on how loud the vocal went in the mix was how loud did it have to be to hear the words."

Try again. Since most of the songs are narrative there's a sense that you're narrating the lyrics over the top of the music without becoming an integral part of it. Consequently your phrasing isn't emotional enough to suit the songs.

"That's because I'm not a soul singer and I'm not an emotional singer. I'm writing about emotional things but I'm not singing them in a particularly emotional way. That's just the way I sing. I don't sing from my heart but I certainly consult my heart very much when I'm writing."

That's a very self-conscious approach.

"Yeah, true, but the reason I'm self-conscious is because I deplore those ridiculously unself-conscious people like the Waterboys. A lot of people have a natural approach to singing and they believe they should sing about what they feel emotionally and that's why a lot of music is very boring. It's also a reason why some music is very good, but a lot of singers should realise that they're not cut out to be emotional singers."

Cole is a close friend of Morrissey of the Smiths, both are technically bad singers. A fair

comparison?

"No, I think Morrissey is a very good singer. I don't think I'm very good, he's much better than me."

Morrissey tends to be monotonous, he kills the dynamics of the songs, and both of you benefit from two great bands.

"Maybe, but I think my singing's okay on '2cv' and there's no band there."

But on songs like 'Down On Mission St' the Commotions are nigh on peerless.

"I agree, but there's not much point in being a singer in a band if they aren't good. I think you should always assume that the band's gonna be good. Although I certainly think that any success we've had has got more to do with the band than it has to do with my lyrics."

Prior to the release of *Rattlesnakes*, Cole and the Commotions tested the water with 'Perfect Skin', somewhat cool and aloof:

"What I tried to do in 'Perfect Skin' is have a big rant about a basic life style and building up this character and the kind of cold, literary eye this character might have. The chorus is what undermines the character. The verse is very self-conscious and self-controlled, but when the chorus goes 'when she smiles that way' then even with all the self control in the world there are still things that you can't control. The song is like a foundation for any credibility I've got."

Rattlesnakes is littered with references to American symbols like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Arthur Lee and Grace Kelly. Why?

"I littered them because I like my songs to be specific and these people have specific connotations. 'Like a Grace Kelly car', I thought was a good way to describe a particular kind of car. I used Norman Mailer because he was primarily known for *The Naked and the Dead*, which was a book about the American way. Everything's there for a reason."

"While writing for the LP I was infatuated with America but I wasn't aware of that while I was writing, it just happened. I'm far more aware of it now because I tend to spot these things and I think 'I'd better not put that in because I'm sick of people talking about America in my songs.'"

Rattlesnakes also uses other American symbols like 'trains' and 'streets'.

"I honestly never thought of it that way. A lot of the songs are taken from American viewpoints and some of them are actually about America. 'Rattlesnakes' is about an American woman and 'Down On Mission St' is where the mission is in San Francisco and I was writing a song about a certain kind of religion so I thought 'Down On Mission St' was a nice title for it."

I took it to mean a certain kind of person.

"Yeah, that as well, I hope it works on both levels. It's about a certain person who can be religious or irreligious, that's apparent in 'are you tired of chasing all the women around'. I think America is the most interesting country in the world but when I get there maybe it will exorcise this infatuation out of me."

And the romanticism?

"The romance has already gone. It hadn't when I wrote a lot of *Rattlesnakes*. I saw Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* recently. It's brilliant, fantastic, it takes all the romanticism out of America in one fell swoop."

"I'll still continue to write about America because I think about it. It's like Manchester is very important to Morrissey and he continues to think about it all the time. And I come from somewhere near Manchester but I don't think about it very much. It would be awful for me to pretend I'm interested in my roots when I'm not."

Of all the Commotions' songs, 'Forest Fire' has drawn the most acclaim. Reasons?

"Probably the tune, the way it builds and I like the rhythm a lot. The lyrics are good and I think the images are very strong, they're all from the elements, therefore it has quite a strong cumulative effect as the images build up. And I think most of the people who have acclaimed it probably like a good guitar solo at the end, which is not the kind of thing we like. To be honest, that solo has made our career quite difficult in that everytime we record something now the record company wants a huge solo on it (laughs)."

Rattlesnakes closes with 'Are You Ready To Be Heartbroken', a little piece of understatement, a delicate warning easily overlooked:

"It's actually a picture of someone who's unselfconsciously happy, someone in love, and my sense of humour just described the position as being ready to be heartbroken. If you're totally and madly in love then the only thing you can be if you're not gonna be in love is heartbroken."

It's a really simple, straightforward song but people have read more into it than I meant."

Cole Porter

"I had this blind ambition that I wanted to be in a pop group and I wanted to be the singer. Then I had to learn to sing in a style which I could cope with. Basically, I've just turned my speaking voice into a singing voice."

Did you model yourself on anyone?

"I suppose I must've done. After I'd been singing a while I started to think about people like Tom Waits, who I really like as a non-singer. He pitches well and even after all that croaking he's still in tune. I see myself as a bit like that kind of singer, one who's telling stories but still telling them in tune and not spoiling the tune of the song."

In your unfinished degree you tackled English — has this helped your writing?

"It's helped me deliberate more about what I'm writing and raise my standards of what is acceptable in a pop song lyric because I think a lyric should be totally self-contained and should be treated the same way as a poem or short story."

Can you add anything new to the language of pop?

"Yeah, I think I already have done because I've brought an alternative to emotional pop songs. Lou Reed has written unemotional songs in a cynical way but I'm writing without cynicism. I'm writing about the kinds of things I'd write in short stories and I think that's relatively new, I don't see anybody else doing it. The reason it's new is because I'm writing this way because it's the only way I'm capable of singing it. So I'm tapering my writing for myself, I'm not doing it just to add to the wealth of literature."

So how can you add to or improve on an album as complete as *Rattlesnakes*?

"I don't know but we'll have to. The new songs we're recording at the moment don't sound like anything off *Rattlesnakes* except one and that was written at the time of *Rattlesnakes* but we never got around to recording it. All the new songs are a step forward, they may not be better but they're quite a lot different."

"I'm more aware of what I'm doing with my lyrics as I've read so much about what people get from them. So I may attempt to write a couple of songs with simple lyrics and without so many complicated images. In fact I've got one new song which basically just says 'I was happy but now I am lonely'. I've made a concerted effort to write simple songs and I'd like to work on the craft of songwriting."

"Plus some of our sounds are different. We're considering using pedal steel on some songs and I've been trying to get the T Rex rhythm guitar sound. Whatever happens it's not gonna have too many points to compare with *Rattlesnakes*."

Cole and the Commotions are based in Glasgow but at the time of this phone interview, Mid-February, they were in London recording four new songs before leaving for a seven week tour, three weeks in Germany and four in the States. Cole mutters something about life on the road being a "pretty horrendous" thought. Live work, though, must be a necessity?

"I don't agree, I'd rather not be doing it. I make my income primarily from songwriting so I'm a lot more secure than anybody else. America I'd like to see, as you know, but the German tour just seems like money grabbing to me as it's the third biggest market in the world. I don't want to do it but for this group to continue to exist we've just got to do things like this every now and then. For us to carry on and for us to come to London to record we have to have money of our own, not record company money."

"I don't want this group to have to do what it was told by somebody else and therefore we do a few of these tours and then we can call the shots quite happily."

Embers

Lloyd Cole, a mixture of confidence and modesty, a coherent conversationalist and the instigator behind an LP which, although flawed, has a rare class, character and imagination.

Lloyd Cole, a man who with sideburns and an extra 10 stone could pass for Elvis Presley. But he wouldn't want that.

"Send my love to everybody at *Rip It Up* magazine, what a marvellous name. It's the best I've ever heard."

Yeah, it's got that sense of irreverence.

"Yeah, I think irreverence is very important. I'd like to be seen as a heretic (laughs)."

George Kay



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