



Ginger's Men

What's it like being famous? Simply Red bassist Tony Bowers laughs. "Same as it was before, except more people talk to you."

Mick Hucknall was on holiday, leaving his band to front up to the impersonal phone promotion process: promotion, because this month Simply Red are gracing these shores with three one-nighters.

One Red not coming is guitarist Sylvan Richardson, who left the band recently to "pursue separate ideals." Manchester guitarist Aziz Ibrahim quickly took his place, and the world tour continued.

Also from Manchester is drummer Chris Joyce. In a dry Mancunian accent he explained how he was in Durutti Column back in 1979, "when there was a bit more black influence." In 1983 he met Mick Hucknall and a year later, after Hucknall had fired the original rhythm section, he found himself in Simply Red:

"We see ourselves as pop, as in popular music, but we don't want to be categorised because we don't want to be limited. We're quite chameleon in that we can change what we do from jazz to reggae. We're all pretty much jazz freaks in the band but we've often been labelled as a soul band and I wouldn't agree with that, soulful

perhaps."

Does the rhythm section get to write much of the material?

"No, we don't do a lot there," says Joyce. "We worked on 'I Won't Feel Bad' from *Men and Women* but there could be a few more from us on the next album. Mick does most of the writing and through Stewart Levine, who produced *Picture Book* and was a good friend of Lamont Dozier, we got Lamont to come and see us in LA. He invited Mick to write a couple of songs with him and in an afternoon they came up with 'Suffer' and 'Infidelity' on *Men and Women*. And Mick is going to be working with him again this year."

Black and White

Bassist Tony Bowers was with Chris Joyce in the early Durutti Column, and after they left Vini Reilly to his own devices, they played with the Mothmen, unheard of here,

but respected in the UK.

Fame means cracking America?

Bowers: "Yeah, but just because we've had one hit there — 'Holding Back the Years' — doesn't mean to say we've broken it yet. The biggest market there is AOR [adult orientated rock] and we still have a lot of work to do there."

The very market-conscious *Men and Women* seemed to be aimed at AOR ...

"They had to go with what the market dictated," says Bowers. "Strangely enough 'Holding Back the Years' first happened on black radio and at the time I don't think they knew we were an interracial band. Our last single, 'The Right Thing,' didn't do very well there because the black stations thought it was too white and the white stations too black."

In Britain are you being compared with white blacks like Alison Moyet, Paul Young and company?

"Originally we were but at the moment I think we're an entity on our own as people know more about us. A couple of years ago we were even being compared to the Style Council. But Weller's version of soul music is very cabaret, and I don't mean that insultingly, it's just that he's picked a very smooth blend and to me it's not very moving or hard. Whereas we're very popular live because the show is 'well hard', as they say in Manchester."

Simply Business

A survivor from the early Simply Red lineup is trumpet and keyboard player Tim Skellett. He stayed on after three members were given X1,000 each then fired because Hucknall didn't want to carry any dead weight:

"They weren't that bad at all, it was just that they weren't going to get any better," says Skellett. "They were steady but they didn't have enough flair, and when you really mean business you can't start off with a weak link."

So even back in 1984 you were determined to make a career out of it?

"Absolutely, I left college to do it, I wasn't doing it for fun. We were serious about treating it as a business."

On hearing 'Holding Back the Years' and early Simply Red demos, Seymour Stein, head of Sire Records, reputedly offered Hucknall a million dollar deal. True?

"Yeah," says Skellett, "but whatever they offer you you've got to pay back anyway so it doesn't mean a thing. But it wasn't right at the time and so we held off until the right one came along, and that was Elektra UK."

Did the band do the usual routine of knocking out demos?

"No, we only made one demo and that was on a Walkman in a room with one little microphone and we didn't take that around to anybody. The record companies started coming to our concerts and we did a lot of small gigs in and around Manchester and at one gig we just about had every record company there. We avoided demos. The best thing is to get people to the concerts, not easy but productive if you're a good band."

With Mick Hucknall being such an obvious focal point, does the band feel part of the package?

Skellett: "We've had difficulties coming over as a package and with a front man like Mick it's difficult to present the band as a group of people as it always comes over as this red-haired singer, and we've just had to surrender to that as that's how people want to see it. Live we come over as a group and that's what is important."

Since the band places such weight on live performances, have they found the two studio albums disappointing reflections of the live sound?

"No," says Skellett. "But *Picture Book* was disappointing in the way it sounded. *Men and Women* is much closer to how we sound live — I can still listen to it and relatively enjoy it. We recorded it in a fairly live fashion. We obviously overdubbed, but a lot of the tracks were done in one take."

Master market soundsman Alex Sadkin produced *Men and Women*, giving it a glossy East Coast night-tech sound, but it was an improvement on Stewart Levine's watery *Picture Book*:

"Yeah, it was an anaemic sound, it was keyboard orientated," says Skellett. "The instruments didn't come through. On *Men and Women* you can hear everybody, everybody's got a little pocket."

So what is Simply Red? Skellett summarises:

"A group that crosses over several different musical styles and somehow wraps them into a sound." **George Kay**



PHOTO BY KERRY BROWN

No.9 With a Bullet

Shona Laing's home again, relaxing and writing songs after a hectic month in Australia promoting 'Glad I'm Not a Kennedy' and recording songs for a new album.

here, the *Genre* tracks may be replaced by more new material. The recordings in Sydney included sessions with a 22-piece orchestra. "Genre was pretty sparse, but a couple of tracks on the new album are enormous, almost audacious," says Laing.

A factor in the success of 'Not a Kennedy' was the video by Aucklander Kerry Brown, with its charming colour footage of JFK with his family. "Kerry rang the Boston library, told them what he wanted, and they sent it to him. It's different sort of footage to see of an American president. I think people expected the assassination, but we'd made a determined decision to steer clear of the ugly bits and make him look like a human being."

Laing's song 'Drive Baby Drive' is about to be released in Australia, but it's been held up because the "pay to play" video war has just broken out there. "I think a video war in Australia will do everybody a lot of good," says Laing. "There was something like 40 hours of music a week on — that's ridiculous, I couldn't watch half of it. They won't play as much now, so those they do play will actually start to be influential and start selling records again, which I don't think they were any longer. They are just ads after all."

Chris Bourke

While in Sydney Laing did some recording with Peter Wilson, the English producer (the Jam, Style Council) who had re-mixed 'Not a Kennedy.' An album is about to be released in Australia, with four tracks off *Genre*, plus six new ones;

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