

X-blockhead ... Chas Jankel BY GEORGE KAY



Credit where credit's due, without the erstwhile songwriting, keyboards and arranging skills of Chas Jankel, Ian Dury and the Blockheads would still be trapped in their music hall ABC's. Check those first two albums and the early singles especially. Anyway, nearly three years back Jankel left the band to pursue his own ends although he still writes with Dury.

It's the end of February and Jankel is in LA for the Grammy Awards (recently screened here) as his song 'Ai No Corrida', taken from his first album, *Chas Jankel*, and adapted and released by Quincy Jones last year, has been nominated for, and actually won, a Grammy for Best R&B Arrangement of the year.

"He did a very good arrangement of it," explains Jankel, "and I'm pleased he had a hit with it as he drew the song out. I'm also in LA to capitalise on the success of 'Glad To Know You', a track from my new album, *Questionnaire*, which has been number one in *Billboard's* Disco Chart for four weeks. It's very encouraging as I got a lot of flak from the English press when I left Ian."

The organ motif through the song is very reminiscent of Booker T.

"Yeah. We both use Hammond organs. I didn't consciously imitate him it's just that we had a fine Hammond in the studio and it seemed the right instrument for the part."

More of Jankel's fine second album later but back to the Grammys. Surely that Hollywood tradition is the antithesis of what you tried to achieve with the Blockheads?

"Yeah, but it's not something I criticise or condone. It exists, it's a fat industry. It's a bit like school prizes and it encourages competition in that respect. When I write a song I write it instinctively — not with the Grammys in mind. But if they want to keep themselves amused like that then it doesn't really bother me."

What sort of music were you brought up on Chas?

"I'm 29 and I grew up listening to the things on the radio and the groups of the 60s. My own personal record collection leans towards R&B and black music in general and they're largely responsible for the shape of my music. Yet when I sit at the piano and I'm thinking of what to play next I tend to play in a jazz influenced way with classical leanings."

Does that mean the young Jankel underwent formal tuition?

"Some tutors did try but they didn't succeed. I had one female tutor who used to make me cry because I'd never practise, this was when I was 11 or 12. I could play about five Beatles' tunes but I was undisciplined and I actually got to about Grade 3 before I lost interest as I had much more fun creating my own music."

The Jankel-Dury partnership notched up some of the most pertinent songs of the late 70s. 'Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll', 'Wake Up and Make Love', 'Rhythm Stick' and 'Sweet Gene Vincent' stand as anthems. Was there a sense that you were on to something back then?

"We felt that we had something that was going to be very big. 'Sex and Drugs' seemed to epitomise it, a statement of the time put in a whimsical way. Lyrically Ian was reflecting the social setting and musically there was nobody doing the sort of music we were doing; that sort of hard rock with the soul leanings."

In August 1979 Jankel left the band. The decision to leave such a successful enterprise must've been difficult:

"Yeah. I was pulled backwards and forwards emotionally. People offered different advice and I felt pressured by the fact that I was successful and that the band was popular. I wasn't happy inside and I had to take the bull by the horns and try and find out what was in store for me if I went alone. I just wanted to leave and come out with my own identity. I haven't looked back and Ian and I still work together and I'm beginning to get a reaction to my own music."

The Blockheads must've suffered after you left?

"Funnily enough I went to see Ian perform just after I left. I sat in the audience and I thought they sounded better without me as there was more space and they sounded harder."

"There's always been a certain amount of turmoil and unhealthy friction in that band but I think they've a great future and they should come up with a very strong album this time round."

Jankel's second solo album, titled *Questionnaire* in America and the colonies but *Chasanova* in Britain, is the best *Blockheads'* album since *Do It Yourself*. Layering his music from an R&B base, songs like '109', 'Glad To Know You' and the reggae of 'Magic of Music' are fluent, assured and sophisticated. But vocally Jankel tends to lack identity and impact. Is he happy with the vocals on the album?

"No, not on all of it, but you can't reach perfection in a day. I like my vocal in places — on 'Glad To Know You', '109' and 'Magic of Music'. But I'm gonna improve with live performances and I have a future. At the moment I'm trying to form my own style."

Much of the album was co-written with Dury and on 'Johnny Funk' and the title track, Jankel's phrasing and delivery are dictated by the character of Dury's lyrics. Does he still write songs with Ian in mind?

"There's never been one way of writing a song together. Ian is a prolific writer and he has many manuscripts and type-written lyrics. Generally he doesn't write the melody. He waits till I look at his lyrics put some music to them and then we try to find a key in which we could sing it. But his lyrics put a song in a particular direction."

Why has the album been renamed *Questionnaire* in America? "A&M changed it in the States from *Chasanova* because they didn't think people would get it, (the pun that is)."

They must have very little faith in the rock'n'roll consumer: "Yeah, it is indicative of the very conservative attitude here, people are playing safe. I'm tired of the format things; if it's got an electric guitar then it's on AM. I think there should be more room for people like myself but it's very hard because of the strict radio programming. But things are changing. Human League are getting played on the radio and the more modern English sounds are breaking through."

Along with Talking Heads it could be argued that Jankel was instrumental in prodding the funk thang into current prominence. What do you think Chas?

"It would be pompous of me to say I have but in one article by Charlie Gillet he said I was responsible for funk in Britain. I don't know if he's right."

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Recorded live in Central Park, New York City, September 19, 1981

