

Along with the Associates, Glasgow's Simple Minds are the leading exponents of the Bowie-Ferry style in music manifesto. It's a hard road to walk as it's fraught with accusations of pretension and pomposity from the more traditional observers of rock'n'roll. A lot of it is overblown and over-groomed (Ultravox and that whole passé new romantic bag) but the best has a newness and a true aura of importance and ambition that relates to the times without being self-consciously moderne.

Simple Minds are a band with substance and sanity. And imagination. They sprang from Scotland in 1979 with *Life In A Day*, a derivative album of serious intent and since then their output has become increasingly impressive and individual. Their fifth album, *New Gold Dream*, is out this month and it was just after the recording of it in mid-August that I spoke to vocalist Jim Kerr.

*New Gold Dream* is subtitled 81-82-83-84. Why?

"Because we felt that this is the start of a second period to take us through the next couple of years and we wanted to signify this."

Kerr's soft-spoken Glasgow accent sounds a little tired but he and the band are content with the finished product:

"We're more than happy, we feel it's much stronger than anything we've done before. The accent's much more melodic. I don't think the whole thing's as lightweight as 'Promised You A Miracle'. There are a few in that vein but even the more heavy songs have very strong melodies as I think before we were sometimes a bit too subtle with the melodies."

'Promised You A Miracle', which is on the new album, looks like lifting the prizes for the year's most accomplished single; it has soul and sweat and a tune that swirls. Is it Simple Minds' first soul song?

"Yeah, someone said that it sounded like Bowie's *Young Americans* period. I can't consciously remember planning it out but when we were doing 'Miracle' I thought we better toughen up because the drums weren't crashing and the vocal wasn't as deep as usual. It hasn't got our usual characteristics. But then I thought, hang on, because it's sad if we're saying that this is us already tied up in a box at the age of 23. So we relaxed and did things naturally and 'Miracle' is the first song in that direction."

"The only planning we did for this album was that we wanted ten songs with melodies so strong that it's going to make them obviously attractive on the surface. And hopefully the technique, the production and the words will supply the interest below the surface."

Go back three years and we encounter *Life In A Day*, modest, copyist beginnings. I read, somewhere, that Simple Minds are ashamed of that album and would like to disown it:

"No, that isn't true. I think we're one of the few bands that's really honest about the work we've done and what we're trying to say is that nothing of us shone through on that album and it just came out as us imitating other bands. I wouldn't disown it as to get where we are just now we feel we had to go through all those roads anyway. It's just like the sort of embarrassment you feel when you look at an old photo, but it's still you."

The second Simple Minds' effort *Real to Real Cacophony*, was a different story. It remains unreleased here but we can glean sufficient evidence of its power from this year's *Celebration* compilation. What happened to the band's attitude between the first and second albums?

"At that time in Britain there didn't seem to be room for a band like us. It was all mod and ska and punk was still in vogue, so the journalists said that there wouldn't be any future for bands like us, Ultravox and Japan. But we felt that our time had to come and one of our reactions was to retreat and do what we wanted to do instead of being too keen to impress. Because of that we went back to a basic foundation, a sound that was us. *Real to Real*, that was the period, the strength we have now really began then."

It must've been a struggle finding some sort of recognition.

"Yeah, it was, because at that time it seemed a real closed shop and most people were into nostalgia. It was really depressing for me as I never liked the mod and ska thing."

The Simple Minds' influences are apparent. On *Empires and Dance* Kraftwerk loomed large:

"Yeah, definitely, and other non rock'n'roll people who were doing atmospherics, like Can. And others like Peter Gabriel, Robert Fripp and early Roxy Music — they were all a big driving force."

Style and presentation are widely used by Simple Minds as a means of evoking images and emotions. Fair comment?

"That's a really good way to put it. Although we've got a totally new sound on the new album I feel that phrase you've just coined also applies again. We want to evoke feelings and emotions but in a modern sense."

Your attitude to live work?

"Playing live has become a drug. The whole tour thing has been an education and walking on stage for me is getting easier than walking down the street because I look forward to it so much. It's equally important for us to get across live as it is

# style and evocation



## a n i n t e r v i e w w i t h s i m p l e m i n d s' j i m k e r r

on record. Mike, our keyboard player and Charlie, our guitarist, do a good job of being able to capture every studio effect live."

The constant touring must've honed the band into a fine unit?

"Yeah, and we're aware, in the last year especially, of the high expectations of us. We're looked on as one of the top new bands in the world and that's demanding. It's the same as making records — everything is getting harder to make instead of easier because the standard is getting harder each time. And I tend to get much more credit than I deserve because I'm willing to do the press. The other guys in the band are every bit as important as me and they really deserve the attention now."

One person who's consistently backed Simple Minds is NME's Paul Morley. For the last three years his faith in the band has been dogmatic and you've got to admit that this faith has been vindicated. But how close is the band to Morley?

"I think Morley is one of the few great Englishmen around, but apart from the pieces he's done over the years telling the non-believers that our day would come we don't know him that well as we're from Glasgow and he's in London. He's managed to coin our feelings well for us and put them into print and if there's a British scene at all I think Morley is one of the prime motivators in all fields. Some of the things he's done in the past five years are as important as any band."

Simple Minds' music, although it is accessible, isn't market orientated in its treatment of themes and sounds. There is an ethereal almost cerebral quality in much of their past music, and moods of disquiet and optimism:

"I'd like to think that there's been light and dark sides in our music. In Britain there's a new accent on love songs and the word love gets used a lot. I think there's many more things to be afraid of in life than just a broken heart. There's a lot of quiet things and a lot of darkness. I like to show light and dark no matter how ethereal it is as long as it comes across with some sort of beauty as opposed to ugliness or harshness."

Atmospherics played an important part in evoking the continental feel of *Empires and Dance*:

"Yeah, we spent a year in Europe and every city we went to there were riots and a feeling of decadence. When I write stories for the songs I use certain scenarios and they show the atmospheres we came across in Europe."

The title *Empires and Dance* I've always taken to be an allusion to the escapist attitude of dancing your problems away while empires crumble:

"That's a great way of putting it. In the night clubs there people were partying away to disco and soul music with pretty inane lyrics and I thought it would be great for people to dance away their problems to songs with lyrics that spoke about their condition and their present. I just thought that they didn't have to dance to clichéd, black American sayings as you could dance much more to your own problems and admit to them."

Literally Simple Minds walk that fine line between getting people to think, provoke discussion and what many people call pretension. Is the band aware of that line?

"Yeah, I'm very aware of it. Pretension is a funny word for a start. In Britain a couple of years ago they'd call someone like us pretentious and you'd get someone like Graham Parker or Elvis Costello who weren't called pretentious but to me they

were just English guys singing with American accents and we were the ones that were meant to be pretending. Just what we were supposed to be pretending I don't know. It's a case of instead of writing about hotel rooms and that whole clichéd life on the road thing we just get much more into the people and the atmosphere of the cities and places we come across. And I just know that by doing that we could hardly be pretending."

It seems that anything that deviates too much from American R&B and rock'n'roll beginnings is deemed pretentious:

"That's very true. Growing up in a place like Glasgow I couldn't identify with any of that rock language, songs about 'ma baby'. I could much more identify with the atmosphere from pictures, stories and poems. The first few bands who tried to do what we're doing tried to be too precious and that's no good as people see you as arty prats and they were too arty for their own good in their attempts not to be rock'n'roll. It's best to do what comes natural."

Simple Minds' songs seem to be a mixture of observation and personal involvement?

"Yeah, they're a bit of both. Quite often I feel like a reporter and each day I'm writing little lines down in a book and amongst those I put my own thoughts. In recording I match the atmosphere of the music to the atmosphere of the words I have. In Australia last year we did some long drives. We drove from Brisbane to Sydney and I found that staring out the window became a trance-like state. I just started to think about things and then I wrote them down. That's the way I've been working for two years."

Did that journey give rise to 'In Trance As Mission'?

"No that was written about all those American highways. I wanted to take the repetition and loneliness of a highway and because you're travelling you've got no roots, no bearings — you just keep going and all you've got is your own thoughts."

What about 'Sweat In Bullet'?

"That was a song about ambition, about a person whose career comes first and greed and power takes control of him. They're fairly common themes but I just present them in my own way and this leads a lot of people to see abstract stuff in them and I'm glad when that happens as I wouldn't like to report on common themes in a common way."

In some quarters the fourth Simple Minds' album *Sons and Fascination*, was greeted with a lukewarm reception. Was the band disappointed with the reaction?

"No we still make music primarily for ourselves and when other people like it then it makes us feel good. In times of criticism or neglect we just get into ourselves. When *Real to Real* came out there wasn't much said about it but now there's so much respect for it and people are just getting into it now. I dunno what it is at the moment in music, maybe it's fashion, but anything that has content is deemed as boring before having the chance to be listened to as a lot of people are of the opinion that everything said in rock has been said. But that's not true."

On *Sons and Fascination* it was as if the band had rediscovered the power and purpose of rhythm and yet it was still an extension and consolidation of the aura of *Empires and Dance*. Was that the intention?

"It wasn't our intention when we went into the studio because in most things we do there's not too much planning — it's mainly intuition and we build things up in the studio as we go along. After *Sons and Fascination* was done I felt it was the end of a period for us but I couldn't really say why as I had no idea of what the next period would be. There's a connection between *Sons and Fascination* and *Empires and Dance*, one portrays Europe and the other portrays America. I feel there's a fugitive character in those albums constantly on the run. I'd love to see those albums tied together in a gatefold sleeve, that's the way they deserve to be."

The closing track of *Sons and Fascination*, 'Seeing Out The Angels', is one of the band's most moving songs and very reminiscent of early Roxy Music:

"Yeah, it's Roxy Music's *For Your Pleasure* period, it has an ethereal feel that Roxy used a lot in their early period. It has a haunting melody. It's an incredibly sad song in some ways but there is a glimmer of light even in the darkest moments. That song was the end of something that began with 'I Travel'."

The interview has gone full circle, we're back to the Simple Minds, their present and their attitude to the Associates, another formidable crew:

"I'm glad you asked about the Associates because of all the other bands they're about the only ones we feel connected with. McKenzie and Rankine came down to the studio when we were doing the album and they stayed about a week. We just sat up at night till about daylight just talking and talking. I feel spiritually close to McKenzie. For me the immediate future of interesting music no longer lies in the hands of the Bowies, Ferrys or Byrnes but more in the hands of the McKenzies."

And the Kerrs.

George Kay