



Big Mac

An interview with Ian McCulloch.

“We’ve come to pay respects to Kurt Cobain. We’ve come to worship at the altar of grunge,” jokes Ian McCulloch from Seattle. He’s actually on tour with his new band, Electrafixion, which sees him reunited with his old Bunnymen writing partner, guitarist Will Sergeant. They’re trying to crack America, something Echo and the Bunnymen didn’t manage.

“We never cracked it, but we got pretty big,” explains McCulloch in his best scouse accent. “We were playing to 10,000 people in most cities. We were never stadium, but we never wanted to be stadium rockers, and our last album did 40,000 here, which is pretty good, considering alternative music hadn’t broken through on the radio.

“Typically, with the Bunnymen, just as we finished alternative radio went through the roof. We were biggish, and crackin’ it is such a weird concept anyway — is it selling one million, two million, five million records? But we’ll crack it big this time.”

Along with the likes of Hüsker Dü, REM and the Smiths, Echo and the Bunnymen were one of the few things that saved the 80s from being a total rock ‘n’ roll wasteland.

“It was terrible,” McCulloch agrees. “At the time people were saying: ‘It’s not a great decade,’ but I never saw that because I was in the Bunnymen, and I thought just with having us it was the best decade in the world. I felt we justified the 80s being there. But looking back, it was shit. I saw recently on TV some advert for compilations, and *The Sounds of the 80s* had Banzai and Wang Chung, all manner of crap.

“There was nothin’ shaking. People would say U2, but it was so pompous, and even if they wrote the best songs in the

world, Bono’s such a knobber that you couldn’t take it seriously. The way he did everything was so overblown and unfunny. Yeah, the 80s was frightening, the way people looked. In the 70s people looked better than that.”

By the late 80s Echo and the Bunnymen had petered out, with Sergeant and McCulloch at each other’s throats. Mac left and released a couple of solo albums, the first of which, *Candleland*, had some poignant, soul searching in response to personal tragedy.

“I love *Candleland*, a great record I made for me and friends and fans that cared about me as a person rather than a rock role model. Weird things happened to me just prior to writing *Candleland*; my dad had died, the Bunnymen died, it was a heavy period. But I wasn’t down, I just felt aglow with emotions I hadn’t felt for a long time. It was a great time in a way, in as much as I lost me dad, I felt he was around me.”

Electrafixion’s debut album, *Burned*, couldn’t be further from *Candleland*. Its 11 songs barely let up, with Sergeant and McCulloch in a born again mood that may be too one dimensionally aggressive to have the psychedelic majesty and mystery of a *Crocodiles*, but its almost psychotic vitality is hard to resist.

“That was the whole thing of getting back with Will — we knew we could feed off each other, and it would be ringing with vitality and say to people: ‘We never got old, we were never like those other bands, we were the Bunnymen and there’s no reason we can’t make an exciting rock record at 36.’ Neil Young seems to get away with it without people questioning it too much. I think it’s got more obvious vibrancy than any of the Bunnymen stuff. We wanted to come out blazin’.”

Johnny Marr is co-credited with a couple of songs on the album, the result of a collaboration with McCulloch that goes back a couple of years.

“That was arranged through a mutual friend at the beginning of 93. Johnny and I had met a few times in 80s, and he’d said to the boss of my record company that I was the best singer at least in Britain, and possibly the world.

“So, he was interested in producing my next record, and then it evolved into co-writing, producing and playing on it. It was a prolific time as well, as we were churning stuff out, and most of the things we did worked, and it gave me my confidence back. Johnny kept saying: ‘You’re a star,’ and that might be shallow, but it’s good to hear all that shite.”

But the tapes of the McCulloch-Marr collaboration were stolen...

“From a courier van in transit from Manchester to Liverpool,” adds McCulloch. “It was all shrouded in mystery and intrigue. And these were great songs. A lot of people didn’t believe we did anything, but ‘Lowdown’ and ‘Too Far Gone’ on *Burned* showed there were songs Johnny and I had written.”

Surely the tapes will turn up as a boot-leg?

“Yeah, but it was all fishy, and between you and me, and because you’re in New Zealand, I don’t think they were stolen, but that’s the official word.”

Now McCulloch’s back writing with Sergeant, his life has turned full circle. Are you difficult to work with?

“We both can be, but since we started Electrafixion it’s been easier. I used to be difficult for him to work with, not when it came to the work, but I’d be late, or I’d be too much in control for Will. In the past he thought I was directing too much, but I’ve

always felt you have to have someone deciding which are the best bits of music to go with.

“I’m good at getting Will to play guitar, and deciding what’s fantastic and what’s best to go with it. We’ve got a good working relationship now, as there’s no fear of anyone outdoing each other. We’re there for the cause of the band, so there’s no: ‘He’s coming up with more than me, so I won’t like his next three.’ So it’s much healthier, it gets things done.”

So, it’s good being back in a band environment?

“I love it, it’s what I’m all about, being a leader of men. Like going into battle, it’s great. I feel I’ve got something that gives the whole thing focus and direction. I love the fact we’re in a band together and people look to me to get things going and lead it.”

Electrafixion’s *Burned*, then, is McCulloch’s band resurrection devoid of the Bunnymen’s psychedelic salad. It’s a tour of what’s been going on in his head these last five years, and that is?

“Aah, I suppose, alcohol and drugs, and that can confuse you and leave you asking: ‘Who’s been sleeping in my head?’, ‘cause I know for sure it wasn’t me.’ Confusion, and coming to terms with still not knowing who the sod I am. I know who I am when I’m on stage, but when the Bunnymen finished, part of me felt I had to find out my true normal self off stage. Maybe I thought too hard about it, as all through the solo period I didn’t feel like a star. I’ve felt like a star since I was 13, and I feel like a star again, I feel content.

“Someone asked me: ‘What’s it like being a rock star?’, and I said: ‘If anything, I’m a star.’ A star is a weird word, but I feel I’m glowing again.”

GEORGE KAY