

THE STARS THAT FAME FORGOT

Half Man Half Biscuit

The indie bards of daytime TV. They could've been contenders – if it weren't for Tranmere Rovers...

In 1986, as their debut album dominated the indie charts, Half Man Half Biscuit were invited onto Channel 4 music show *The Tube*. Unfortunately, on the Friday the Birkenhead quintet were scheduled to appear, their beloved Tranmere Rovers were playing at home. The band cancelled the show, but were still invited back a few weeks later – only for the vagaries of the Division Four fixture list to sway them again.

By October, having sold 150,000 copies of *Back In The DHSS* – an album that cost £40 to make – HMHB gave up pretending they gave a toss. “We never intended to be a pop group,” declared leader Nigel Blackwell.

Blackwell was a satirist of keen wit and intelligence who sounded, on *Back In The DHSS*, like the bastard son of Stanley Unwin and Mark E Smith. He was also a Wirral doleite addicted to daytime TV – hence songs like “99% Of Gargoyles Look Like Bob Todd”, “Venus In Flames”, and “Fuckin’ Ell, It’s Fred Titmus”.

John Peel called Blackwell and his band a “national treasure”, and once somewhat prematurely wished that “when I die, I want to be buried with them”. Fellow DJ Andy Kershaw called them “the most complete and authentic English band since The Clash”. And while the Gallagher brothers have been known to serenade strangers with entire verses of “The Trumpton Riots”, other fans include Jarvis Cocker, Julian Cope and Robbie Williams, whose “Knutsford City Limits” is something of a homage.

It’s not bad for a band with no ambition. “When I started learning to play the guitar and form tunes,” admits Blackwell today, “I didn’t have much worldly experience of unrequited love, broken-down relationships or an aching heart, so I felt a bit of a fraud even attempting to write lines of that ilk. What I did know about was football and television. So

that’s what I sang about, knowing that at least it might give some of my mates a laugh for five minutes.”

HMHB were hardly typical pop kids. Second single “Dickie Davies Eyes” was top of the indie singles chart when Blackwell broke up the band. “I always knew we’d carry on,” he says, “but by ‘splitting up’ I could concentrate on doing things in my own time and on my own terms again. There was no big bust-up as such.”

Five years later, in 1991, they returned with *McIntyre, Treadmore And Davitt*, featuring the classic “Everything’s AOR”: “She’s the main man in her office in the city/And she treats me like I’m just another lackey/But I can put a tennis racket up against my face/And pretend that I am Kendo Nagasaki.”

The music, and Blackwell’s songwriting, was now becoming fuller.

“Nigel progressed as he got older,” asserts Geoff Davies, head of the band’s label, Probe Plus. “The lyrics on later albums are almost the opposite of the simplistic early stuff. ‘Turned Up, Clocked On, Laid Off’ [from *This Leaden Pall*] is the closest Nigel gets to a socio-political statement. Then in the midst of this Thatcherite rant, he throws in some nonsense about Mickie Most.”

Blackwell’s reluctance to join the rock’n’roll circus meant a refusal to fly abroad, tour or have a written contract. Drink and drugs weren’t prerequisites either. HMHB gigs became rarities, with

The Biscuit, '86, with Nigel Blackwell, right



UNDER THE INFLUENCE...

“They’re a very English band in that there’s pathos disguised with wit and sarcasm. And bitterness, too. Nigel’s got a lot of hidden depth. He’s a genius, one of my favourite-ever songwriters”

Eliza Carthy



the band favouring one-off dates and arranging their schedule around the Tranmere fixture list. Releasing albums every two or three years, Blackwell and fellow original member Neil Crossley (bass), plus Ken Hancock (guitar) and drummer Carl Henry now deliver everything from chant-a-long folk, to country and rock’n’roll. With an 11th album imminent, Blackwell’s songs

remain uncommonly shrewd, funny and toxic. Julian Cope calls it “true English folk music... Vote Nigel Blackwell for Poet Laureate”.

But Blackwell remains wary of the music business. For him, the Probe Plus deal means “there’s no contract, it was all done on a verbal agreement years ago”. So did he ever hold up stadium rock as a model of how *not* to play the music game? “That would imply that we had an agenda, which we didn’t. But I shouldn’t imagine any CDs of ours are to be found within the racks of a committed Air Supply fan. Rock’n’roll it may not be, but bills have to be paid and season tickets bought and if this way works, then I’m not going to change it.”

And looking back over 20 years of wry lampoonery, from Ali Bongo to Bono. Kip Keino to Eno, is there anyone he wishes he hadn’t slighted? Surely Hattie Jacques was going too far?

“Yes, absolutely stupid that was. I could claim youthful exuberance, but Keats was dead at that age.”

ROB HUGHES

Half Man Half Biscuit’s new album, *CSI: Ambleside*, is out now on Probe Plus

Taking the Biscuit: the essential CDs



Back In The DHSS
1985

★★★★

Hail the new post-punk laureates of satirical mirth. Ten frenetic tunes on the varying merits of snooker referees, *Camberwick Green*, actress Nerys Hughes and comedian Bob Todd. Sleeve dedications include Peggy Mount and Jesus Christ, “right arm, over the wicket”.



McIntyre, Treadmore And Davitt
1991

★★★★★

Back from the TV lounge after five years, Nigel Blackwell’s scabrous songs now came with added depth and texture. Wonky ballads and toe-tappers reference Syd Barrett, rotten vinyl collections and Christian rockers Stryper. Includes “Outbreak Of Vitas Gerulaitis”.



Cammell Laird Social Club
2002

★★★★★

Arguably the Biscuit’s masterpiece, from melodic pop to folk to fizzing post-punk. Blackwell’s droll wordplay, bouts of tenderness and acute commentary on the tawdriness of modern British life mark him out as the alternative Ray Davies.



Achtung Bono
2005

★★★★★

Dedicated to John Peel, this

U2-bothering classic is part-tragedy, part-farce. “Joy Division Oven Gloves” is a riot, while “Shit Arm, Bad Tattoo”, according to Blackwell, has nothing to do with Pete Doherty. “Depressed Beyond Tablets” is one of the most moving things he’s written.