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 scheduled 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 swat them again.

By October, they'd sold 150,000 copies of Back In The DHSS - an album that cost £40 to make. 'We'd given them a lot. "We never intended to be a pop group," declared leader Nigel Blackwell. Blackwell was a satirist of keen wit and intelligence who, on Back In The DHSS, like the bastard son of Stanley Unwin and Mark E Smith. He was also a Wilral dolelinee addicted to daytime TV - hence the songs like "99% Of Gargoyles Look Like BobTodd", "Venus In Flames", and "Fucking Eh", it's fought for the Scouse, 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 DHSSrrs harshly called them "the most complete and authentic English band since The Clash". And while the Gallagher brothers have been known to rendezvous with strangers with entire verses of "The Troumpton Roots", other fans, including Jarvis Cocker, Julian Cope and Robbie Williams, whose "Knutsford City Limits" is a case of affection, it's not bad for a band with no ambition. "When we started learning to play the guitar and fortune 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 new 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 man in her office in the city and she treats me like I'm just another laddy. But if I 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 Leader Pail] is the closest Nigel gets to a socio-political statement. Then in the midst of this Thatcher-like 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 write a contract. Drink and drugs weren't prerequisites either. HMHB's gigbecame rarities, with the band favouring one-off dates and arranging their schedule around the Tranmere fixtures. 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 chart-a-long folk, to country and rock 'n' roll. With 11 albums in 11 years, HMHB's songs remain uncommonly shrewd and funny and toxic. Julian Cope calls it "true English folk music... as vile Nigel Blackwell for Post Laureate time."

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 of our songs are to be found within the ranks of a committed Cure Suppy fan. Rock 'n' roll it may be, but bills have to be paid and season tickets bought."

At the moment, then, I'm not going to change it. And looking back over 20 years of wry lampoonery, from A1 Bong to Bono, Kip Kello to Enzo, is there anyone he wishes he hadn't slighted? Surely none. Jacques was going too far? Yeah, absolutely stupid that was. Could claim youthful exuberance, but Keats was dead at that age."

Eliza Carthy

Taking the Biscuit: the essential CDs

Back In The DHSS

Half Man Half Biscuit

Back from the TV's Lounge after five years, Nigel Blackwell's scabrous songs now came with added depth and context. Witty ballads and toe-tappers reference Syd Barrett, rotten vinyl, collections and Christian rockers. "Outbreak Of Vital's Geriatric Society."

McIntyre, Treadmore And Davitt

Half Man Half Biscuit

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

Camnell Laird Social Club

Half Man Half Biscuit

Dedicated to John Peel, this U2-baiting classic is an apathy, 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 Tolland" is one of the most moving things he's written.

Achtung, Bono Vox

Half Man Half Biscuit

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