

Phil King - Interview Part 1

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Phil King is a London-based musician, who is best known for being the bassist in both Lush and the Jesus and the Mary Chain.

King has also played bass for 80's post-punks the Servants, Felt and Biff Bang Pow! He was also the front man in the short-lived Apple Boutique, who released one single, 'Love Resistance' on Creation Records in 1987, and have just had a limited edition compilation 'Paraphernalia', which features the single, demos and live recordings, come out on the German label Vollwert Records.

In a two part interview, both parts of which we are running consecutively, we spoke to Phil King about his long musical career and various bands.

PB: I first saw you live back in 1986. But before that, when did you first get the rock 'n' roll disease? Was it through punk, or before that and what made you choose it as a career?

PK: I guess the first genre of music I can really remember being into was bubblegum. Music for kids. Ideal for me because, that's what I was. It was our music. Our older siblings I guess thought it far too trite and frivolous, and

preferred listening to their Beatles and their Stones. As good as that music was, having grown up with it, it just seemed ubiquitous. I was just too young at that age really to realise the sea change it had caused. I liked songs such as the Archies' 'Sugar Sugar', the theme tune to 'Scooby Doo', the Jackson Five's 'A.B.C.' and the 'Banana Splits' theme. Pretty much in fact any catchy late 60's, early 70's music associated with a children's TV series that was preferably American and of a cartoon nature, but having said that that the theme tune to 'Ace of Wands' by Andy Bown was pretty cool too.

I think you can probably say that I watched a lot of TV. I never switched the radio on until I was about 11. Then, bingo, I got it! Before that the radio was something that was enforced on us. My dad would switch on the news at 6 p.m. on Radio 4, and we would have to sit in silence and listen while we ate our dinner. From the time I got in from school to pretty much when I went to bed I would watch TV. Even then I would try and sneak down to watch old 1940's horror films with my Uncle Sean on a broken down old black and white TV set that were shown in the late evenings one night a week. I watched a lifetime's amount of television in the space of less than ten years. It probably explains why I watch so little now.

From bubblegum it was only a short hop to glam as all you needed to add was some tub thumping drums and handclaps and a smattering of "Heys!"

Interestingly enough, one of the first crossover bubblegum/glam records, 'Let Me Tell Ya', was recorded in 1969 only a stone throw's away from where I was growing up, in Morden by the park, at R.G. Jones studios. The artist, UK Jones, was even partly named after the studio. David Bowie had also been there, with the Lower Third and the Buzz, recording his first solo single, 'Rubber Band/The London Boys'. The Yardbirds and the Rolling Stones also recorded demos at RG Jones (they also rehearsed 'Beggars Banquet' at the studios). Other lesser known beat bands such as the Mike Stuart Span and the Bo Street Runners also made recordings there. The studio was one of the first four track studios (before even Abbey Road) in the UK.

It moved to Wimbledon in the early 70s. The Stooges would make some recordings at it around the time of 'Raw Power' (Lou Reed even briefly lived in the area) and the Jook also recorded their Bover Rocker classic, 'Aggravation Place' at the studios around the same time.

From glam to punk was more a process of subtraction. Just take away the handclaps and "Heys" and turn up the fuzz guitar. Like many others of my generation, this was when I first realised that maybe I could too learn how to play the guitar, and so I bought a second hand black Shaftesbury Les Paul copy for £30 in a music shop in Sutton in 1977 that I customised with some stickers of "cough" Gary Glitter, and a chrome number '1300' from an Austin Allegro that I found in the road. I still have the guitar. It's tucked down the side of my bed.

I also bought a practise amp from a jumble sale with no speaker in it that my Uncle Sean customised with one from a TV, and which because it was overdriven gave it the requisite buzz saw guitar sound. It would conk out every month or so, and he would then replace the speaker for me with one from another television set that had died, that he'd kept for spare parts in the front room of our house where he repaired TVs and radios.

Before punk I remember the 'NME' published a weekly pull out guitar tutor in the centre of the paper. All this seemed to do was actually scare me away from ever learning the guitar, as Robert Fripp talked about practising scales all day and every day and Steve Howe pulled faces as disfigured as the chord shapes he seemed to be making on one of his collection of very rare vintage guitars. The only thing I learnt from it was the notes of the guitar strings - E A D G B. Every Armpit Does Get Body (odour) Eventually.

As for choosing a career playing music - well, who wouldn't?

PB: I first saw you in the Servants, supporting Pink Military, Sonic Youth and the Jesus and Mary Chain and, to be honest, the Servants blew everyone off the stage at the time. How did you get involved with David Westlake's band?

PK: Why thank you, but now that I am playing with the Jesus and Mary Chain you are putting me in a very awkward position in being able to agree with your considered and very reasonable opinion!

My memories of that particular show is of me very naively showing my backstage pass to one of promoter John Curd's hairy and very scary biker security guys as I was leaving the backstage area, and him shouting at me "You fuckin' show it on the way in, you idiot!"

I don't remember Sonic Youth being much friendlier either. I saw Thurston Moore the night before at a sparsely

attended show they put on at Bay 63, which had previously been Acklam Hall (under the Westway) , and politely asked him backstage before the show, him standing by a pile of detuned guitars strewn in the corner, "What time are you sound checking tomorrow?" "How the fuck should I know?" was his bratty New York No Wave reply. I also smiled and said hello to Kim Gordon in the backstage corridor of the Hammersmith Palais show as she strode past in her tight slacks and high heeled boots, and she just totally snubbed me. I wonder if Glenn Branca would have been quite so rude?

Maybe it was for the best that I hadn't met Jim and William backstage at the time. They had come and checked us out playing a few weeks before at an old biker's pub around the back of Sadler's Wells called New Merlin's Cave, which had Merlins on the carpet, as far as the eye could see, like the trail of some monster's footprints. Jim and William did have the reputation of being unfriendly. Lawrence (Hayward-Ed) told me this after having supported them at The Hacienda with Felt. I put this to Jim recently and he replied very sagely, "Tell Lawrence not to take it personally as we were horrible to everybody."

Before we played our Servants set that night the same security guy I mentioned earlier told us that we went on as the doors opened and that we had 30 minutes, and if we played one minute longer that he would, I quote, "Fuckin' pull the plugs on you."As the first notes rang out, our view from high up on the stage was of semi-goths, stripey T-shirted and bowl-cutted indie kids and teenage Japanese girls sprinting across the empty sprung ballroom dancefloor to get to a prime position by the front of the stage. I do remember some shouts of "Velvet Underground!"(there was a "leather trousers!" too) during our set.

My elder brother and his wife and friends came to the show, and like us didn't realise that we were going to be on quite so early, so by the time they arrived we were long off the stage and the Jesus And Mary Chain were going full pelt. They had turned up wearing brightly coloured ski-jackets (the kind that were popularly worn by Elastica a decade later), and the bouncer on the door took one look at them and said, "I think you've come on the wrong night, mate."

As for joining the Servants, I seem to remember seeing an ad looking for a guitarist in the back of the 'NME' around 1984. I am trying to remember the groups it mentioned in the ad 'The Smiths, the Go-Betweens, Orange Juice' maybe? I remember there being a phone number and David's address in Hayes, Middlesex.

I was living at that time not too far away in St Margaret's, across the river from Richmond and near Twickenham. Just opposite Twickenham Film Studios to be exact. David had sent me a demo tape of some songs that included a rather primitive version of 'She's Always Hiding' with no bass on it. I was of course knocked out by it, and both the songwriting and John Mohan's guitar playing.

I was so excited by the tape I took it upon myself to drive over to his place one Friday evening in my 1964 two tone blue Humber Sceptre (which I funnily enough had bought from a young Teddy Boy in Hayes only a few years before who told me the town was nicknamed 'Doughnut City' because it had so many roundabouts), and when I got there his mum answered the door and said I should wait in the living room - where his dad was having his dinner - as David was having a bath.

David was of course rather surprised at my unannounced arrival but we got on very well, and arranged to meet up for a rehearsal in his bedroom with John Mohan the next week. We soon realised that we had one six string guitar too many, so I ended playing a black short scale Fender Musicmaster bass (there was also a Peavey combo bass amp there too) that had been left by their friend Ed who had tried - and failed - to master it. And that's how I started, and still play, bass.

PB: While you were in the band, you released two singles on Head Records, 'She's Always Hiding' and 'The Sun, A Small Star', as well as a 'Peel Session'. Why did the original line-up last only this long?

PK: I remember years later David telling me that I gave him an ultimatum after we'd spent about a year rehearsing in his bedroom - with a drum machine - and recording demos on a 4 track Portastudio, that either we started playing some gigs or I'd leave.

I have no memory of this but I guess the reason I said that, if I indeed did, was because I was so proud of the songs I just wanted everyone to hear them. Once we got a drummer (one of the earlier ones, Eamon Lynam, was nicknamed 'Neasden Riots', in the same way that the Clash's drummer Terry Chimes was called 'Tory Crimes' on the back of their first album, because he'd got into a bit of 'trouble' in the neighbourhood and was put under a strict curfew by the police), it all snowballed pretty quickly from our first show supporting the Television Personalities at the Pindar Of Wakefield in Kings Cross in July 1985 to our last performance supporting Felt (the 'Lawrence Takes

Acid' show) at Bay 63 around a year later.

We put out two singles (the second 'The Sun, A Small Star' sadly posthumously, as we'd split up by then), recorded a John Peel session, got a full page feature in the New Year's edition of the 1986 'NME' hailing us as the next big thing, appeared on their C86 cassette and played shows with amongst others the Jesus And Mary Chain, Felt, Primal Scream, the Go Betweens, the Pale Fountains and the Wedding Present. By the time we split up we'd only done twenty four gigs.

To use the snowball analogy, I guess it all gathered momentum a little too quickly for David, got out of control, crashed into a tree, and um, broke up. It was just a shame really as we had so many songs to record. Enough for a few albums. It was very cool that Cherry Red put out a CD and Captured Tracks a vinyl album of our material in the last few years. I understand that the Captured Tracks album is on its second pressing now. Great too that groups like Belle & Sebastian and more recently the Drums have said how much they liked the group.

PB: Was there anything before the Servants?

PK: Having bought my guitar and jumble sale amp and learnt the requisite three chords, I then formed a group with a few friends, Pete Wong and Ray Jordan. I also by that time had a bass. The first thing I learnt on it was 'Outdoor Miner' by Wire. I would years later play rhythm guitar on a version of this by Felt at a show in Germany - and Lush would record a version of the song (I didn't play on it though).

We bought an old drum kit from local acolytes of the Stooges, the Outsiders. They had played The Roxy, and Iggy Pop had even jumped up on stage with them there and sung 'Raw Power.' Julie Burchill thought they were rubbish - because they had long hair and still wore flares. We'd met the main man of the group Adrian Borland at a pub by Wimbledon Common that he hung out at called The Crooked Billet.

His enthusiasm was very infectious, and when we progressed from being a garage band - rehearsing in a friend's garage on the Phipp's Bridge Estate - and he changed the name of his group to the Sound he took us under his wings and let us play shows supporting them. We had also changed our name from the Secret Society to the Beautiful Losers. He then took us into the studio and produced three of our songs. In fact, the studio where we recorded the songs, Elephant in Wapping (originally in the Elephant and Castle, hence the name) was where we would later record 'The Sun, A Small Star.'

We also made some early Servants recording there, produced by Adrian, of 'She's Always Hiding' and 'Meredith', with Eamon 'Tory Crimes' Lynam on drums. These have yet to see the light of day. The label that the Sound were on paid for the recording session (Statik Records-Ed), and wanted to sign us to a five album deal for no money. We declined. The Beautiful Losers recordings finally came out on as a limited edition 3" CD a couple of years ago on a German label called Vollwert.

After the Beautiful Losers split in 1981, I then made one more recording before playing with the Servants. This was a song that I wrote with my then girlfriend Roxanne New about the Festival of Britain called 'Skylon'. Adrian heard a recording we did of it, and suggested we went into Elephant studios with him and bassist Graham 'Green' Bailey of the Sound and recorded it as a part of their electronic side project, Second Layer. Graham used his home made rhythm generator as a backing, he and Adrian played guitars, I an acoustic, and Roxanne sang and played some toy instruments - a xylophone popular with Tyrannosaurus Rex called the Pixiephone and a plastic keyboard/synthesizer called a Muson. This was finally released a few years ago as a bonus track on the reissue of Second Layer's album, 'World of Rubber.'

PB: And were you in anything in between the Servants and Apple Boutique?

PK: Yes, I played with Felt, Biff Bang Pow! and also the Hangman's Beautiful Daughters. My photographer girlfriend Sandy Fleming (She took cover photos for the Television Personalities' 'I Know Where Syd Barrett Lives', the Servants' 'The Sun, A Small Star' and Felt's 'Poem Of A River' amongst others) played guitar with the latter group, and Emily Brown, the singer, was Dan Treacy's girlfriend and helped organise his club at The Enterprise in Chalk Farm called The Room At The Top.

I was just helping out really as Alvin the original bassist left to form his own group the Looking Glass (who also released a record on Dan's Dreamworld label) and I stepped in. John Wills, the drummer from the Servants, also played on the early recordings. We ended up supporting the Television Personalities a lot, and even did a nearly two month tour round Europe with them.



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