

The Blue Aeroplanes - Poetry And Dance In The Mind And The Ears

Back in the days of what was the explosive 'Woodstock' music scene of Bristol and the West Country, a vocalist emerged from the new genre, known as indie, in the shape Gerard Langley. Hardly, as you would first think, a name to be reckoned with in the glitzy world of music showbiz, but a fairly stable name even so. Along with his brother, who took up the position of drummer, they soon gathered together a collection of some of the most talented and composed musicians in the city area. In fact, they were, as they called themselves, The Blue Aeroplanes, known to have the biggest 'musician - participation' in, probably, modern music history. Although their commercial contribution to the world of music looks vaguely more successful than a Pop Idol winner, their gritty and uniquely timed anthems had far from been on the same level. Langley, the headman was known, in the fast growing indie scene for his deep, menacing and half spoken vocals and other than supporting a then, little known U.S band called, R.E.M, although the band had collaborated with Michelle Shocked on one track. It would appear that there seems to be a silent, yet, growing interest in this distant indie band who, tragically, graced only the bottom half of the Top 75 at any given time. It perhaps should be more the question of why didn't they ever make the grade? Well, that could be answered as simply as bad timing. Due to their haunting renditions of a familiar Smiths sound, they would have been noted as to be almost a decade out of date. I do believe that if they had been around a lot earlier, then their level of success would have vastly improved. That comatose style of backing vocal, at the time of, 'Jacket Hangs' was the tones of Rodney Allen, Alex Lee, John Langley and Andy McCreeth, was more along the lines of The Waterboys, which, is certainly no bad thing, but on listening back to Blue Aeroplanes tunes today, we find ourselves puzzled as to why they weren't better recognised. What we don't perhaps remember, is how much the talent odds were stacked against them. With a sound that was unique and so in tune with the outside world, it was also the backdrop of every other band at the time. Not to mention the members list grew to around thirty... It is also arguable that there were far less talented bands around the time of the mid Eighties to the early Nineties, who, simply didn't deserve to achieve the success that they did. Who really could have forgotten that rhythmic perfect of John Langley's drum backing and that non melodic, jangle effect on guitars from Lee and Allen? They fused together as a band and never failed to let their fan base down. They might have been predictable in their approach to their own expression of indie music, but at least that meant never having to cringe ferociously at surprising and embarrassing diversions. Their first notably successful album, 'Bop Art,' in April 1984, may have sounded more like a Gene Vincent take on an old Transvision Vamp album, but it was surprisingly fresh enough to create a lasting appeal on certain listeners who, it would seem, became the backbone of the circle of devoted fans today. Although, since their early days, when their influences swayed heavily towards Elvis Costello and The Velvet Underground, they have somehow taken what they had learnt from these artists and actually drawn up, by themselves, a sound that, truly, came from themselves. We wonder how it came to be that they had come and gone from so many record labels. Their career path has certainly trodden a steady route through all the alternative labels of that time. Finally, standing firm behind the legendary label that brought us Icicle Works and Gene Loves Jezebel - Beggars Banquet, they had driven the idea through following bands, that it was the way that stable, tight knitted bands worked to get the maximum coverage. Albums followed plus a couple of singles that failed to make any lasting notability with the regular record purchaser. 'Tolerance' in 1986 and 'Spitting Out Miracles' in 1986, after which, they enjoyed little in the way of pleasing positions from a string of EP's and one or two singles that followed. They did, however, change their attitude through this far from joyful period in their early career. Shifting from Art Rock and layered pieces to dirty, simple guitar rhythms and slapping drums, their move towards the indie scene seemed sensible and optimistic. Two singles followed through another label, Chrysalis, 'Jacket Hangs,' and '...And Stones,' first in February and second in May 1990. Both failed to cut into the Top 70. Albums trailed accordingly in the shape of 'Swagger,' (1990), 'Beatsongs,' (1991) and 'Life Model,' (1994). The middle of these, 'Beatsongs,' graced the Top 35, but failed to hang around longer than three weeks. They had, already, toured with R.E.M in 1989 by this time, who, were enjoying critical acclaim with their politically observed, 'Green,' the year before. They had achieved as much as they could in those early times. They appeared in such audience participating venues such as the Town And Country Club in Kentish Town, North London; a venue known for the closeness felt through band and crowd. It was a favourite for indie and up and coming bands. Regulars there had been Hard Rain, Then Jericho, Three And A Half Minutes, not to mention, unknown Scottish smilies, Wet Wet Wet. Some, who got to see the B.A's always commented on their live performances, noting them as born gig masters. After all, not all bands could boast their own Polish dancer in the shape of Wojtek Dmochowski. It has undoubtedly crossed the minds of some of you when we say we must still remark on the history of The Blue Aeroplanes when they seemed to have achieved so little. One is for sure, they have remained true to themselves - never faltering in any shape or form, always pleasing to the eye and enjoyable to listen to. They take you back in time to a place in music history where bands were made up of young people who actually played instruments. Any band of that time, composed, rehearsed and performed over and over again to get it right. They worked hard, sweated and were devoted to their craft. Unlike today when a band is only made up of people who can just about sing and who couldn't compose a tune and lyric if their lives depended on it. This, I think it why, we should still celebrate bands like The Blue Aeroplanes for their determination and continuous contribution to British music. Whether it was experimental with different musicians and arrangements of sounds laced together with synths and percussions or taking the dive into all that was the bitter, edginess of the birth of indie, they have gathered up the growing trends into their arms and come with their own style of sound. They came back with gusto in 2000 with the album, 'Cavaliers/Roundheads,' and now, just this year, 2006, we see the release of a long awaited, two CD set of a remaster of the 1990 album, 'Swagger,' probably their most rewarding and well received album of the Nineties. This re working contains 14 bonus tracks and goes, unmistakably as, 'Swagger Deluxe.' The B.A's are back, still standing strong and still eagerly eclipsing new sounds with traditional B.A rhythms and techniques. We feel as if we know them know, but exactly where, when, how and why the band formed originally and who gelled with who is not entirely known. Their initial birth seems to be a mystery, and perhaps only known by Bristol residents and those who knew them, so it is with this, that they remain intriguing and their records, desirable. These ordinary student, type guys, who are now in their forties, still capture a moment

in time when music was still exciting and new; when records were still bought in Woolies on vinyl and singles were only 45's for 45 pence. As far as The Blue Aeroplanes themselves go, all we know is that in Bristol and also in certain places of the Globe, this band still take a secret pride of place in the musical Hall of Fame. ©Michelle Duffy 2006

About the Author

Michelle is a freelance writer in the South of England and owner of the websites, <http://www.generationsounds.co.uk>, <http://nevermindthebloggers.bravehost.com> and their successful sister, 'Never Mind The Bloggers' at <http://paperback-writer29.tripod.com> She has been writing over the last year, for five major consumer websites across the world and is one of the only two music category advisors for one website in the U.K. Her websites promote young, amateur and professional bands/artists and their fan clubs whilst also reviewing them for local and world wide promotion. She has also recently launched the blogs; 'The Ramblings Of An Old Rocker,' 'Bohemian Waffle,' 'The Rhythm Rock And Blues Machine' and 'The Moped's Musings' and 'Generation Sound Suite.' She is currently working on two shops selling her music styled artwork and now sells on Ebay.

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