

## Surfing With Style On The Big New Wave

Moody, miserable and sneering like Billy Idol, the front man of The Boomtown Rats was the vastly opinionated and occasionally angry Bob Geldof. After forming his band in a small, sleepy town near Dublin, Ireland in 1975, he led the way for the era of meaningless new wave. With Johnny Fingers on keyboards, Simon Crowe on drums, Pete Briquette on bass, they were joined by Gerry Cott and Garry Roberts on guitars, they originally called themselves The Nightlife Thugs. Thankfully after reading Woody Guthrie's 'Bound For Glory,' they changed their title to the name of a gang mentioned in the story. The highlight of their relatively short career was with the release of this 1979 album, 'The Fine Art Of Surfing,' heralding the number one single, 'I Don't Like Mondays.' The late seventies saw the fusion of punk and something resembling senseless pop. Guitars were juddery and lacking in talent and the songs were fast and jumping with little tune and virtually no bass. The lyrics were meaningless and superficial but yet catchy enough for this strange genre to take off, albeit, rather briefly. New wave was a loosely based term for anyone who had a hit after the mid seventies other than disco or glam rock. Guys in suits and mop hair cuts, the image visualised new wave in television characters such as Mickey Pearce in Only Fools And Horses. The branch off new wave eventually was Ska which, fundamentally was the fusion of beat and reggae. It was new wave that was the fore runner of Ska but using Mersey beat's shallow themes and American pop rock. Bands rarely survived from this genre to thrive into anything else that followed. The best example of success was probably with bands like U2. Vocals were strained and tuneless and most leads sounded as though they were suffering from a cold. Short lived, it actually was quickly dated and many bands faded out just as quickly. It was Ska that seemed more survivable. Geldof took the right course of action. Perhaps realising immediately that the band were going to be short lived, he extended his morose identity into a political stance thus making him the ultimate missionary for all of humanity when the music failed. This album marked the end of their career although other albums followed in moderate fashion, they featured more middle of the road pop rock. The band split in 1984 and Geldof slipped quietly into the shadows of the music industry and into his obsessive involvement of saving the world from poverty. Since moving the entire band to a rented council house in Chessington, Surrey in 1976, they released four mediocre singles before having their first number one hit with 'Rat Trap' in October 1978. It was to be the very first introduction the listening public had to new wave. It was their only other number one. Geldof, already an ex MNE journalist, had enough to say about the state of the music industry, thus fuelling his ability to write hardy, strong minded songs. 'I Don't Like Mondays,' was based on the true story of a U.S girl, Brenda Spencer who went on a shooting spree killing two people and wounding another nine; a sort of Hungerford style rampage years before the British maniac. The day she embarked on her 'day out' was a Monday and in her pathetic defence, she gave the reason behind her mindless killing as 'I don't like Mondays..' Written by Geldof, the first track of the album is 'Someone's Looking At You,' and the gentle beginning has us thinking about another band entirely. Released as a single in January 1980, it reached number 4. It was an introduction to the great forces that were new wave. Geldof's vocals are squeaky and twisted in a Toyah Wilcox style. It is understandable when listening to the opening of this album that their influence was felt by Blondie, amongst others. Perhaps I am surprised as to how enjoyable this track is. With the same equalled quality to either of their number ones, we shouldn't be thinking any differently that any band lead by Geldof is going to be less than average. The same opening line also ends the track, a solitary, 'On a night like this, I deserve to get kissed at least once or twice' It has an immediate dance floor situation of an awkward teenage party. It was about getting ratted on Party Seven and smoking a fag between ten of you. All greasy hair and chequered jackets with shoulder pads that no one actually needed. The songs were about pretty girls in piggy tails and frilly dresses looking all sweet and innocent. We only have to remember how Debbie Harry used to dress, so the less said the better. Lovely thumping drums and stuttering 'S's, there's also a fairly rocked up guitar solo at the break and keyboards that sound more at home in a sermon. Very energetic and sets the theme for the rest of this punk induced album. Truly stomping stuff if anyone out there can remember The Stomp.(perhaps just me, then) 'Diamond Smiles' is a track based on keyboard, 'fun fair' chords. Get ready to clap on occasions in a Mick Jagger pose. Geldof uses his voice as an instrument in this track, he gives it an element of base and forever a feeling of force behind it. We wonder if he ever gave himself a headache after each recording. We can imagine him twisted and contorting his lanky body towards the microphone stand with fists clenched in a pleading pose. Personally I feel, Geldof was one of the last great characters of pop, and it was probably the last intrusive genre of music that allowed such characters to feel welcomed. Released as a single in November 1979, it failed to gain anything higher than a number 13 slot. 'Wind Chill Factor (Minus Zero)' is a strange opening to this diverse and exciting track. The intro reminds me of a Bowie/Ziggy track followed by 'Toni Basil' lyrics were she would squeal her vocals so they sounded irritating. There is something very Madness about this track, and it is easy to see the connection from new wave to Ska. Wind howls around our heads and the riff of a guitar comes in like a machine gun. Silly high pitched sounds from the band give it its punk theme, straight into a Ska B side, the backing vocals are distorted by the band taking on different voices. Electronic Max Headroom lyrics and OMD drum machine effects make this track hard to categorise. It changes every second up and down with its tempo. It's a shame that as this track excels in its musical content, the inspiring lyrics are lost in a sea of creative art. We strain our ears for something recognisable. I can hear the electronic sounds of New Order, or at least Joy Division. There is so much happening in this track, that it is literally a delight to listen to over and over again, ever discovering new sounds and noises. Records don't have this amount of personality anymore. Tracks became characters of their own, each so individual. We experience in this album, different versions of the same theme. Unlike any other new wave around at the time, we can listen to the unusualness and sheer uniqueness of each track. It is all new wave, but with so many angles, it is almost hard to keep up. In this track we hear not just music as how it should be; a fusion and collaboration of numerous instruments but interesting and fun lyrics. 'I took the tube train through the subway systems, I rode those tunnels like a six foot mole' one doesn't get to smile or chuckle at the words of a song anymore. The records of today have become depressing this was the last time music was fun and enjoyable. 'Having My Picture Taken,' is a classic example of such past records that if the subject was on something abstract, then it was accompanied by sound effects. This track is complete with photo booth sounds with clicks

and musical flashes of a standard SLR We now start to see a pattern in Boomtown records in the sense that they are themed from start to finish. Every second is there to be listened to, even the click and wise crack at the very end. A concept that is also lost in records of today as no one listens to a song from beginning to very end. We can appreciate The Boomtown Rats for such touching effects. It is these things that we probably remember when Geldof is stamping his political mark on the news, but the question is, does he? With a subject the opposite as The Beatles, 'I'm Only Sleeping,' this next track is a comfort to any one who suffers from insomnia. The weird lines of 'Sleep (Fingers Lullaby)' contain such sinister words as 'If I took enough of these red things, get some permanent sleep, blue things, what lullabies would you sing, white things' a giggle under the breath at lyrics such as these, and all of a sudden the world doesn't seem so much of a nasty place even a member is counting sheep at the close of this track. It is completed with spiralling piano and mesmerising, zombie lyrics, we wonder if anything they did was ever taken seriously. Perhaps, the slightly disturbing piece of the album is a mind shifting chant at the close of the first half of this album where someone is saying.. 'that's not funny' a few times over and a Punch and Judy sounding laugh happily plays away in the background.. I wonder if The Boomtown Rats were something further into the depths of new wave. Riding on a high plane, they amused themselves and the sales of their records was just a by product. With Madness, there seemed to be a strong sense of level headedness about them, like that nice boy who comes round and visits his Gran once a week. The idea of The Boomtown Rats coming round is that of making Gran a cup of tea before reaching for her purse It can be said that 'I Don't Like Mondays,' is about as sane as this album gets, bearing in mind, we now know the story behind this masterpiece of creative writing. The opening is a thunderous piece of piano that sets the scene of this hopeless tale of a 'little girl' who loses her grasp of normality. In my naivety, after all these years I firmly believed that this was just another teen song depicting the grey thoughts that drift through your mind when your young and that going to school is the worst thing that can happen to you and especially on a Monday morning that comes round too quickly. I was expecting the same amount of depth as 'Our House' by Madness, but with these theatrical opening bars with violin accompaniment, I guess that my original thoughts had been grossly misled. We what we hear is an abstract around of the story from a narrators point of view. The calls back and forth from lead to backing vocal become forceful while Geldof becomes fearful. With such lines as the opening, .. 'the silicone chip inside her head gets switched to overload, and nobody's gonna go to school today, she's gonna make them stay at home' You can see where I was coming from in my original synopsis. . When remembering the video that went with the single, It featured Geldof on his knees expressing such desperate emotion in his vocals and his twisting body whilst being surrounded by the other members depicting the cold manner of the authorities, not even making visual contact with the man on the floor. Now in our minds, we can see this track for what it is. We can appreciate the quality of the song writing that has gone into producing such a piece of history. The very unfortunate story behind this song was the lawsuit thrown at the band from the Spencer family for damages as they felt that the song was only opening up wounds and was not helping their daughters case..mmm, no comment.It was also re released in July 1984, but only reached number 38, not surprising with anything with a strong element of current affair controversy can get easily forgotten over the years and with this second re issue, it was clear to see that the idea of some kid not wanting to get up because it's Monday had regained its place as theme. With 'Nothing Happened Today,' we are probably not that shocked after the previous track and even less surprised when we are catapulted right back into mindless new wave again. At least we now know what The Boomtown Rats were capable of This track wastes no time in delivering its mind numbing them nothing happened today, okay, so its lines such as .. 'I'll do some washing, I might go shopping' that introduce us to the very primary ingredients to making the perfect new wave record. All you need is to surround yourself with a handful of students who can just about play their instruments and open up a copy of some local rag or switch on some daytime TV (be grateful, there was no such thing in the seventies!) and off you go One thing is amusing, around the middle of the track is a 'over the back fence' conversation between two old dears, well actually it sounds more like Terry Jones and Graham Chapman (Monty Python) ironically dressed as women. 'It looks very natural' everybody said, but then his wife said Toupee, isn't that a French word? And Harry said, Ole! That's a Spanish verb..' and the chatter continues but thankfully not for much longer, an amusing piece of ultra nothingness! The early musical equivalent of improvisation 'Keep It Up,' throws me straight back to the days of Blondie, and if for a second, Debbie had stepped up to the mic in this track, I would not have questioned my purchase of this album. Blondie made use of the 'fun fair' keyboard sound that was adopted by virtually all new wave bands, that's if they could afford a keyboard that could give them that same soundlet's face it, nearly all bands were flat broke in those that's, and even when they did hit the big time, they still sounded as though they were rehearsing from one of their mum's front room. Ah the beauty of new wave! It was a fascinating thing as it made kids buying these records the notion that they could grab a few mediocre instruments and give it ago themselves. In that respect, this genre inspired a lot of bands, some who we still have around today. Because it was tracks like these that sounded so simple, many bands when starting out, covered the big names as it was a sound that was so easy to copy. Geldof didn't have a voice as such but he did have opinions and it was this identity that spread over the whole band giving the band the character they needed to be listened to. Unfortunately, it is in these fairly dire tracks that we lose the words as we are too busy trying to concentrate on the mess we hear to be music. 'in her £2.00 coat she really thinks she's cloaked in mystery, she's acting like some character from Agatha Christie' or such lines as .. 'I can remember the carefully sharpened eyeballs' These lyrics are intelligently written and we feel disappointed with the music of today, where the majority is so awfully uninspiring that we yearn to hear colourful lyrics like the ones Geldof gave us so it could marginally make up for the lack of musical talent. Written by Geldof and Gerry Cott, I feel that Bob was probably better off writing alone. 'Nice n' Neat' is one of those examples of Bob writing alone. I feel that he allows his lyrics not to be cloaked too much in gyrating musical noise. With an accompaniment in the most important places of just a drum solo, his words stand out practically on stilts. A fast and furious track with heavy punk themes, it is far from the Sex Pistols, (please don't be put off here, not all punk was the Sex Pistols, it came in many forms..) It is very mainstream, watered down punk which was far more listenable and likable. It was the diversity of punk that gave us, eventually, new wave. Again, in this delightful piece of intricate acoustic playing at the opening to give it a Mediterranean feel,

we hear Geldof writing alone. This wonderful Spanish guitar takes us away gently and not against our will to another style of music that was sometimes adapted by other new wave artists. We remember Blondie using a strong reggae theme for 'The Tide Is High.' This is a pleasing track for Rat fans and new ones alike, it stands out against the rest on this album as it shows us that the Rats could actually play proper music. Occasional piano allows the track to swing. It is most danceable and reminds me a little of the B. A. Robertson records that followed shortly. An unusual piece of a music genre that at the other end of the scale we have the very forgettable, 'Je suis un rock star..' By the ever bewildering Bill Wyman. mmm, okay. Today, we know Bob Geldof for shouting a lot and slamming his fists on desks and generally making a political nonsense of himself, I guess, after listening to this album, you would say that nothing has changed. We do however, yawn when we see him now but yet he still needs to be admired for his courage, determination, steadfastness and superiority over politicians and other established members of society. 'Do They Know Its Christmas?' sold two million copies in the first two days of its release. A feat, that I'm afraid to say, the Rats would never have accomplished. So what would we prefer? The Rats still caught in the Rat Trap or Sir Bob forcing his Dublin accent down our throats and into our wallets? I have to admit, I loved one of his sides, but only marginally respected the other. He is though, the very example of the saying, 'squeaky doors get oiled' He will also be remembered for marrying Paula Yates, and then getting dumped by her. He might even be remembered for his ghostly solo career where he jumped into rock folk music in his ventures as an aging new wavist. 'This Is The World Calling' in October 1986 (Number 25) and 'The Great Song Of Indifference,' in June 1990 (Number 15.) For the exceptional songwriter, what do we remember him for? Two hits and Johnny Fingers known for wearing pyjamas. Perhaps it is better to be remembered as the sole spokesperson for the human race. Another recommended album; 'A Tonic For The Troops.' 1978, (re issued December 1983) All songs written by The Boomtown Rats. Produced by Mutt Lange Recorded at Phonogram Studios, Hilversum, Holland. ©michelle duffy 'sam1942' 2006..

## About the Author

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