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THAT'S COOL, THAT'S TRASH:

A HISTORY OF THE FIRST PUNK ERA



? & the Mysterians
moments before being
crushed by punk vinyl from
outer space.

by Robot A. Hull

For fifteen years there has been an enigmatic force burrowing underground, pulling people by their roots down toward the core of white-hot rawness. Gripped by this power, one is doomed forever to stalk the earth in search of a primitive sound that remains as elusive as a bad photocopy of a ghost. One cannot read about this awesome omnipotence in the Holy Bible or the *Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll*, but the story of its impact is a remarkable tale indeed.

Hindsight labeled it "punk rock," a catch-all term endorsed by fans and collectors (and perhaps conceived in this very mag when it was just a struggling zine) that has come to represent an attitude, a lifestyle, and an aesthetic. By definition, of course, punk means "bunkum," "a hood," "someone inexperienced," or "inferior trash," but recently it has come to suggest hostility and nihilism. Today's concept of punk includes everybody from Elvis to Iggy under its umbrella, and demands stringent rules of order (eat burgers, drink, puke). Its pose is sanctioned and even standardized.

Yet the confusion surrounding the term "punk rock" is that, like "soul music," it symbolizes too much, describing an experience rather than a genre of music. Having evolved from the consciousness that haunted the bargain bins in the late 60's and early 70's, punk's conception offered a role to fulfill—a swagger that could somehow link the Trashmen with the heavy-metal yawn of the 70's. Fanzines

**The
Kingsmen's "Louie Louie"
is punk music incarnate, a
drunken brawl with
bodies and cymbals
crashing.**

proliferated (two named *Punk*—CREEM's Billy Altman fathered the first). Local bands began forming to emulate their mid-60's forefathers. Something called "punk" was causing a commotion—a real bustle in the Big Apple, from where it floated over to England where, in the wake of a tottering Pub-rock scene, the British punk movement of late-'76-'78 spat out pus like a festering boil.

But this is the story of "p--k" before it became "PuNk!!"—the story of a musical force, although somewhat peripheral to the entire History of Rock 'n' Roll, that still refuses to die even though it lived only three short years,

nurtured by the primeval noise of only three brusque chords.

☆☆☆

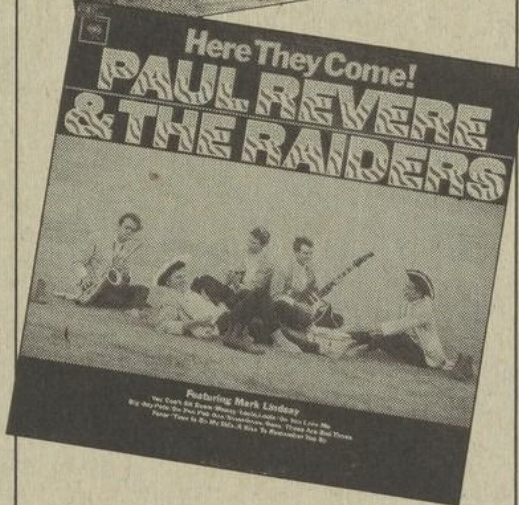
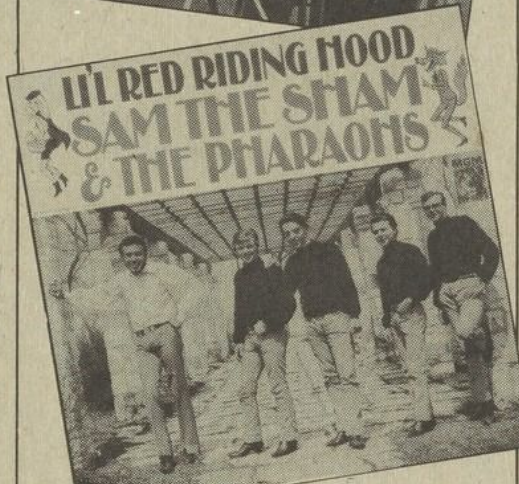
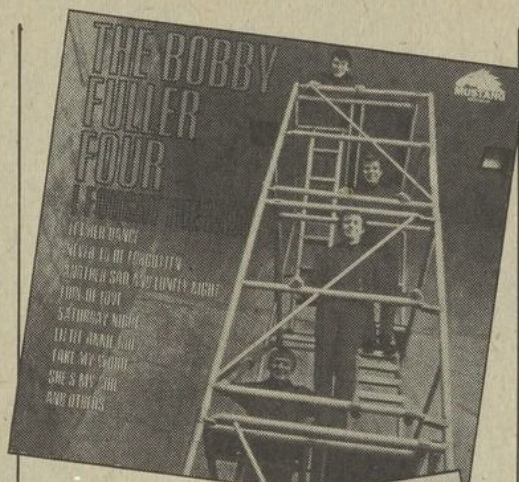
You may think it's funny
That I like this stuff
But once you've tried it
You can't get enough.—the Sonics,
"Strychnine"

During 1959-62 instrumental bands were providing the dance beat. Regional groups played at local dances, not really as performers but functioning mainly as animate jukeboxes. The Twist and other dance crazes were in full swing so thousands of instrumental bands were getting work, thereby keeping music from stagnating at a local level.

Home of the Ventures (the most significant band of the instrumental era—along with the Shadows from England), the Pacific Northwest, was burgeoning with these groups (the Frantics, the Dynamics, the Viceroy). Rocking the teen palaces of Tacoma, Wash., was a combo called the Wailers. This band hit with "Tall Cool One" in '59, released a superb LP, *The Fabulous Wailers* (as well as a sloppy one recorded live at a dance—*Fab Wailers At The Castle*), and eventually developed into punks in their own right ("Out Of Our Tree").

More important to this discussion, however, was a single on which the Wailers backed up a local vocalist, Rockin' Robin Roberts. Entitled "Louie Louie," it was a revival of Richard Berry's 1956 R&B tune but with a subtle difference—the original tempo was slowed down while the riff was emphasized, forming the structure of the song, repeating constantly the chord progression I-IV-V-IV-I.

Released in '61, this record never went beyond Tacoma. But early in '63, DJs in Portland started giving it airplay; suddenly Rockin' Roberts' "Louie Louie" was climbing the local charts. At this time two struggling bands working in Portland, the Kingsmen and Paul Revere and the Raiders, decided to advance their careers by recording close imitations of Roberts' regional hit.



The Sonics effectively battle a second alien disc attack by donning Robert Hall car coats.

Thus began a real Battle of the Bands in the summer of '63 (the basic chord progression of "Louie Louie" as ammunition), establishing the aggressive tradition of the punk ethos.

In terms of sales, the winning version was by the Kingsmen (purchased by Wand). The influence of this record should not be underestimated. The reason it may have saturated the national market was because of the rumor that the Kingsmen were singing dirty words (causing it to be "banned" in Indiana by the state's governor). Despite whatever teens imagined, the band was simply mumbling, an inarticulate mode of expression soon to become a distinguishing trait among punk bands.

The Kingsmen's "Louie Louie" is punk music incarnate, a drunken brawl with bodies and cymbals crashing. The record is so sloppy that, after the guitar break ("OK, let's give it to 'em—right now!"), the vocalist interrupts too early, nearly throwing everybody off the beat into a tumbling heap. In that the informality of chance supersedes the dictates of professionalism, this careless moment defines punk rock.

The other version of "Louie Louie" by the Raiders (bought by Columbia), with its dominant sax and R&B influence, was more in the style of the Northwest instrumental bands. The Raiders had already hit with "Like Longhair" in '61, so their approach was enmeshed with the Northwest Sound. After their "Louie Louie" got squelched by the Kingsmen's messy version, the Raiders continued recording dance

The confusion surrounding "punk rock" is that it symbolizes too much, describing an experience rather than a genre of music.

songs (that is, until "Steppin' Out" and "Just Like Me" topped the charts in '65 due to heavy promotion via *Where The Action Is*, proving they could be just as raucous as the Kingsmen). Clearly the Raiders had been set back by the spirit of punk stumbling into the mainstream.

Down in sunny California a different type of instrumental rock had developed as a response to the sensation of riding the ocean's waves. Introduced in '61, primarily through Dick Dale's "Let's Go Trippin'," surf music became a brief national fad, but its influence on local instrumental bands was immense. By '63, surfing groups were having

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garageland but refusing to stock things by bands calling themselves Raped. The tour has done very well. Stiff Little Fingers have given the label its first album hit with "Unflammable Material" and—lo—the pogo-ers have returned for them. I remember one Clash gig where a line of frantic pogo persons threatened to trample me underfoot. Very polite they were. Down they bounced in a line. As they reached me one said "Oops, sorry." And they bounced back. Robert Rental and the Normal; Essential Logic. Names straight out of the annals of punkdom proved that whatever the critics thought, punk is not really ready to be buried at all. Public Image have been keeping their audiences waiting for hours and then playing just over 30 minutes in a fairly shambolic way. It hasn't gone down well. Yet I can remember a time when audiences and critics didn't expect anything more. 🍌

HISTORY OF PUNK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

national hits—"Wipe Out"/"Surfer Joe" by the Surfaris, "Pipeline" by the Chantays, "Penetration" by the Pyramids, etc. Local dance bands began copying the reverberative sound of surf. Far away from the slap of the waves on the beach, the Astronauts from Boulder, Colorado, were perhaps the first to incorporate this new sound with any success (especially on *Surfin' With The Astronauts*). By their second LP, *Everything Is A-OK!*, a live one, the Astronauts were again playing punky dance music).

Credit for punk rock's reputation as garbage must go to a group of pseudo-surfers from the unlikely burg of Minneapolis—the imperishable Trashmen. In '63 their "Surfin' Bird," attached to the Rivingtons' '62 hit, "Papa-Oom-Mow-Mow," by its stuttering message which signified the genesis of punk's dumbness ("The Bird's The Word"), became a national chant, a slogan for the retarded. The liner notes on their LP explain the origin of this loony tune: " 'Surfin' Bird' was born at one of the hundreds of teen dances. The Trashmen were playing at a crammed, jammed local ballroom when they decided to try their own concept of the dance craze, 'The Bird.' The crowd listened, but only for a moment. Then they were dancing and rocking as never before."

Even the Northwest's Wailers had decided to ride the wild surf ("We're Goin' Surfin'"). Hoping to get national attention focused upon his band, Wailers' leader Kent Morrill had formed his own record company, Etiquette. He signed fellow Tacoma band, the Sonics, and unleashed a fireball.

In early '64, the British Invasion clobbered the U.S. with a furious wallop. The local dance bands that were sprouting across country, having already absorbed the tremelo and reverb of surf music, began assimilating Merseybeat into their styles. Possibly influenced by the early Kinks, the Sonics (still employing the wailing sax of Northwest raunch) were early champs of traditional punk. Vocalist Gerry Roslie sang like Little Richard with a frog in his throat, his hoarse screams interjected in wild spasms. If punk rock was music created on the ragged edge, then the Sonics were its exemplars.

The Sonics had a local hit with "The Witch" in '64 (a two-chord riff), but their next record, "Psycho," was more earth-shaking. With pounding drums as powerful as those of the DC5, "Psycho" exploded like the boom of an amplified cannon (the Sonics' second LP was even entitled *Boom*). "I'm goin' outa my head/Now I wish I was dead," shouted Roslie, ripping his larynx. Although this was their last semi-hit until they moved to the Jerden label and cut the Yardbird-influenced "You've Got Your Head On Backwards" ('66), the Sonics recorded several gritty classics—"He's Waitin'," "Boss Hoss," "Strychnine," "Shot Down," and "Cinderella"—all composed by G. Roslie in a rabid fit of genius. As Sonics-scholar Mark Shipper wrote in his astute essay, "Five Great Musicians!! Three Great Chords!!": "Whew! Now I ask you, what'd the Kingsmen ever do with the same three chords?"

Not only did the Sonics cut a shrieking version of Richard Berry's "Have Love Will Travel," but they also tackled his "Louie Louie," by now (thanks to the Kingsmen) the standard test of strength among thousands of aspiring punk bands. Through the Sonics, however, "Louie Louie" (in the best version ever) was transformed from an expression of bumbling ineptitude into a frantic testament to the solidarity of teen bands everywhere.

☆☆☆

All week long I been waitin' for a Saturday night

With the teen clubs rockin' and stompin' with all their might

I'm gonna throw away my books and all of my studies

So I can ride around with all my buddies. —the Bobby Fuller Four, "Saturday Night"

The abrupt rhythms of "Tex-Mex" (a desertic sound that originated from the triangle of Clovis-Lubbock-Amarillo, fostered by Buddy Holly, Buddy Knox, and the Fireballs) were a key influence in the spread of punk passion out of mammoth Texas. In '63, a hit by the Nightcaps (from Dallas), "Wine Wine

Wine," was fast becoming a standard for local dance bands. A streamlined version of Stick McGhee and His Buddies' "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee," this song emphasized a backbeat that competed with wild sax and savage vocals. But it wasn't until the Mexican-influenced dance songs of two other Texas bands, the Sir Douglas Quintet (San Antonio) and Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs (Dallas), climbed the charts during the summer of '65 that punk mania ignited across the Lone Star State.

Although the records probably were born from the beat introduced by the Nightcaps, "Wooly Bully" and "She's About A Mover" were actually charlatans' shams. Producer Huey Meaux wanted a band for his Tribe label that could deliver a punch to the encroaching British Invasion. Doug Sahn (who had been recording since age twelve—Little Doug Sahn, "A Real American Joe," Sarg 113) bugged Meaux enough so that his band, the Sir Douglas Quintet, was chosen and then promoted as "the first American group to have a hit with the very famous English sound" (Meaux's liner notes for *Best Of Sir Doug*). Even the cover on their Tribe LP shows the band posing in the dark like faceless shadows pretending to be one of the many unknown limey invaders. But Sahn's "She's About A Mover" couldn't escape its environment—its rhythms were more Mexican than Merseybeat. Later, Meaux would jump on the punk bandwagon, producing a Trashmen single on Tribe.

As for Sam the Sham (Domingo Samudio, of obvious descent), his whole act was a joke. With his Pharoahs, he toured local dance circuits in a hearse—each member dressed like a Middle Eastern Moron in turban and flowing robe. As a full-fledged member of the lunatic fringe, Sam had recorded a cover of Gene Simmons' "Haunted House" (Dingo 001) with a '64 Memphis beat. But he settled in the Dallas area, releasing the prankish "Wooly Bully," a brilliant parody of dance tunes. (For the complete story of Sam the Sham, fact and fiction, see my article, "Peacocks On Parade" in *CREEM*, Vol. 4, No. 10, '73.)

The insanity of Sam the Sham and the ersatz-Anglo sound of Sir Doug (particularly Augie Meyer's throbbing organ) infected a rash of teen bands hiding in clubs, garages, and closets all over Texas. The Five Americans (Dallas) used the organ's pulsations as the central sound on their records ("I See The Light," "Western Union," "Zip Code") in a rather gimmicky manner. Often classified as a band from Michigan, Question Mark and the Mysterians changed the simple organ chord into symbolic fibrillation on "96 Tears," a #1 national smash. (Rudy Martinez, alias

?, and his Mysterians were Texas Mexicans from Corpus Christi; "96 Tears" was initially released on a Texas label, Pa-Go-Go, and then purchased by Cameo after the band had moved to Michigan.)

But the greatest band utilizing Texas-style organ during the Garage Era was Kenny and the Kasuals. They had originally formed to play AM hits at a Dallas high school gym each morning before school (the idea was to wake up the students). Kenny's Kasuals were soon booked at sock hops and frat parties and eventually at Dallas' Studio Club, where the band perfected their craft of copying frantically other groups' material (the Kinks, Stones), a craft that can be heard on their simulated *Impact-Live* LP. Now a lost art form, reproducing hit songs live was once a way of paying tribute through mimicry, for by emulating a famous band one's own grunge became respectable dance club music. By proving that any dummy could perform, say, British Invasion music, garage bands became the democratic link between kids and their radios. In any conversation about basement bands, no name will invoke a longer period of respectful silence than that of Kenny and the Kasuals.

If mimicry was the motivation behind most punk bands, then two of punkdom's finest stylists were from Texas—Mouse & the Traps and the Bobby Fuller Four. Growing up in Tyler, Ronny Weiss (Mouse) must have worn out twenty copies of *Highway '61 Revisited* in '65 trying to re-create the quintessence of his mentor, Bob Dylan. Mouse's "A Public Execution" is better neo-Dylan than virtually any record released during the folk-rock epoch (including P.F. Sloan's stuff). (Footnote: Although Mouse will always be remembered as the Notorious Dylan Impersonator, Mouse & the Traps cut eighteen sides, and not all of them are conscious attempts to imitate Dylan. E.g., "I Satisfy" is a fuzz-killer from the Hot House of Sin.)

In a '66 issue of *Record Beat*, Bobby Fuller is quoted: "I certainly never intended to sound like Buddy Holly." What bullshit. Not only did Bobby Fuller (El Paso), with his brother Randy, duplicate Holly's homemade sound, but he also had his first hit with "I Fought the Law" written by Sonny Curtis (of the Crickets), followed by a version of Holly's "Love's Made A Fool Of You." Fuller was so mimetic that, like Holly, he even died unexpectedly in mid-career. Also like Holly, Bobby Fuller's legacy is astounding—"Let Her Dance," "Never To Be Forgotten," "Don't Ever Let Me Know," every record a marvelous example of studio expertise. In addition, the Bobby Fuller Four's second LP, *I Fought the Law*, remains the perfect companion to *The*

"Chirping" Crickets, both masterpieces of meticulous restraint.

Following in the footsteps of the deranged Samudio the Sham were the acid crazies that took over Texas ('66-'67) in a chemically-induced ravage (especially those recorded by the Houston-based International Artists). Although the story of bands like the 13th Floor Elevators and the Red Krayola belongs to the colorful history of psychedelia, they usually evolved (kindled by LSD and ART) from a punk tradition. For instance, the Elevators' Roky Erickson quit high school and joined the Spades, who recorded his "You're Gonna Miss Me" in a style less hallucinatory than the Elevators' later version. Prior to freaking out with the Familiar Ugly ("Hurricane Fighter Plane"), Mayo Thompson's Red Krayola was playing "Hey Joe" at dances and frat parties. Even a pure acid band like the Moving Sidewalks (their LP, *Flash*, satiated with purple psychedelics), an early version of ZZ Top, was capable of producing hard-boiled punk ("99th Floor").

Nevertheless, Texas punk gradually began surrendering to acid rock (eventually dissolving into the outright dementia of the Legendary Stardust Cowboy). Kenny and the Kasuals, the old Garage Kings themselves, bowed before the mesmerizing bloodshot eye and cut "Journey To Tyme." "Our band tried to make a record that everyone would call psychedelic—fuzz tones, the whole bit," Bobby Fuller once stated in an interview. "It's just another trend. The Hollywood strip has gone psychedelic crazy—the kids, the clubs, the whole effect of hallucination."

In the mid-60's, punk and psychedelic rock were dialectical forces (cocky rebels vs. hippies is a 70's fantasy) with a couple of elements distinctly in common—folk rock (pioneered by Dylan) and the fuzztone. During '65 and '66 in California, these two ingredients coalesced to create a revolutionary variety of punk. Whereas Mouse harmlessly echoed Dylan's sound, local bands with growling vocalists in Los Angeles adopted Dylan's protest stance, giving punk a tough acrimony that could trigger riots on Sunset Strip.

☆☆☆


*All I want is uh-just be free
Uh, live my life the way I wanna be
All I want is uh-just have fun
Uh, live my life like it just begun
But you're pushin' too hard
Pushin' too hard on me.*—the Seeds,
"Pushin' Too Hard"

Texas was not the only place where Mexican-American punk flourished—East L.A. had its share of Chicano groups as well. Although they were basically sloppy dance bands (the

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Romancers, Ronnie & the Pomona Casuals), some of them had national hits—the Premiers with “Farmer John,” both The Midnighters and Cannibal & the Headhunters with Chris Kenner’s “Land of 1000 Dances.” Yet not even the loose R&B-style dance music pouring out of clubs in the Chicano community could override the wave of frenzied fuzz sizzling from the guitars (and hearts) of wild youths crowding the clubs (and sidewalks) of the seething Strip. And amid this anarchy in L.A. were two of punk’s most celebrated and prolific progenitors—the Standells and the Seeds.

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DIRE STRAITS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

the combination of the rapid succession of notes and the familiarity bred of intense radio play whipped the audience into a frenzy that, by comparison, left some of Knopfler’s finer, more intricate playing that evening vastly unappreciated. I realized then that although he might not fill the superstar bill in terms of dress or demeanor, he was the newest guitar hero, the latest in the pantheon of rock demigods alongside Clapton, Beck and Page. People might like his singing—sort of a cross between Bob Dylan and Lou Reed—and they might find a haunting combination of poetic sentimentality and ironic intelligence in his lyrics, but the underlying reason for the success of the *Dire Straits* LP is simply that it offers more and better guitar playing than any rock offering in recent memory. The short fills which Knopfler improvises throughout his songs are played with as much care and detail as his leads, while the solos give the air of a jam despite being deceptively well organized and constructed. Although they are as basic and tight as Creedence Clearwater Revival, *Dire Straits* give the impression of swinging loosely from chorus to refrain, from song to song, as if following no particular design apart from their own spontaneous intention. Nothing appeals to American record buyers as much as the vision of a lone guitarist, pouring out his inspirations as they come, free to travel where the feeling moves him. Although it suggests a famous R. Crumb cartoon (hippie with guitar thinking to himself as he plays: “Wow! I’m really expressing myself!!!”), Knopfler fits this image admirably. He can only be described as comfortable behind his red Fender, playing with an ease that belies his

intensity. He may not be as flashy, but his persona is as closely intertwined with his guitar as any rocker since Hendrix.

☆☆☆

Now that they have made short work of establishing themselves, new challenges face the band, not the least of which will be to maintain their equilibrium as their success catches up with them. “We’re delighted with what’s happening,” understates Pick, “but we’re trying not to get caught up by it. None of us wants to get into that jet set, elitist, unaccessible type of thing. We’re trying to remain the same people. Everybody changes, but you try to maintain a sense of proportion and balance. The business can be faddish and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that the word permanent is obsolete. Our next album might not sell at all . . . although I think it will.” The second LP, to be titled *Communique*, shows several advances, especially in terms of technical sound (Jerry Wexler produced it in Muscle Shoals, Alabama), but does not deviate drastically from the pattern set on the debut. There may not be another hit single in the offing, but new songs like the quasi-reggae “Once Upon A Time In The West” or the rocking “Lady Writer” are every bit as alluring and kinetic as anything on the first disc, with Knopfler’s singing more self-assured and forceful. *Communique* is due out in May, but may be held up by Warners to allow *Dire Straits* to run its complete sales course.

The group has already mapped out plans for a summer tour, probably hitting larger venues than the clubs they visited in March. “It’s very comfortable right now playing in clubs,” Pick said at the time, “and we wonder whether two guitars, a bass and drums can get it across in some of those 7,000-seaters. Our music can be modest and timid at times and it can get lost in those big places. But we’ve done some very successful gigs of that size in Europe, so you just have to know when you get to that stage that it’s critical to have good lighting and P.A. systems and to play halls that aren’t too big and cold.” One of the few non-club dates the band played last time around, at the Tower Theatre in Philadelphia, gave every indication that they can make the transition into larger auditoriums as smoothly as they shift tempos at the end of “Lions,” one of the first album’s overlooked mood pieces.

I’ve never gotten any satisfactory explanation why Knopfler & Co. chose the name *Dire Straits*. However it came about, the moniker takes on an ironic edge now, in light of their quick and heady rise. They are swimming in friendly waters, it seems, wherever they go now (even London) and they’ve built their reputation from the

ground up, on solid rhythm, sinewy guitar lines, and Knopfler’s gruff yet personable voice. It would take a near catastrophe, even in this capricious business of music, to ever land them in dire straits again.

BAD COMPANY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

that formed your music in the first place? Kirke ponders: “Well, yes, I think it does push you away . . .” then changes his mind. “Well, no, because I don’t think we’re up with the really established bands who’ve been together for about ten years. If we were to start thinking that, we’d come a cropper. I’d put us somewhere between Foreigner and that top echelon.”

Kirke uses words like “inspiration,” “thrill,” “stimulus”; that the band keep forging on because although they’re established there’s always other “musical levels,” always competition . . . In that cowardly face-to-face way journalists have (oh yes they do), I fail to mention that *Desolation Angels* seems pretty lethargic and un-inspiring considering all the “recharging of batteries” that I am assured has gone on since the break. Maybe despite everything, Bad Company are really no more than a good club band—even if Wembley Arena audiences finally rushed the stage on opening night to bring Rodgers’ rock ‘n’ roll fantasy to life. Ah well.

They would, it appears, quite like to do a club tour now that I mention it: “Although,” says Kirke, “I don’t know about small clubs. You can’t live on a three-month residency at The Marquee.” Boz remarks that he certainly doesn’t want to go back to club dates, ethnic roots or not: “You can’t,” he says, presumably constantly in touch with his gastric juices, “live on an individual meat pie and a Coke—and that’s if you’re lucky.” It appears their one concession on this tour has been travelling to gigs in a transit van.

They deny they were nervous about playing home turf for the first time in four years, although Kirke insists that touring is the key to success and that he’s doubtful they could stop that and remain selling records in quantity. Boz says he wasn’t surprised the tickets sold so fast: “Even though everyone else was. It’s a good band, a good live band,” he insists. “The industry and the new wave may not recognize us, but none of the original fans have left us and the American stuff has filtered back and just added to that.”

Well, they didn’t get shouts for “Alright Now” or Mott The Hoople numbers this time around—and that must have pleased them. Bad Company will be back in America by the time you read this, back on the road in