STATE of PLAY

STATE *of* PLAY

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FIRE ENGINES

Still incendiary, 25 years on

SERGE GAINSBOURG

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THE NEEDS

SONS AND DAUGHTERS

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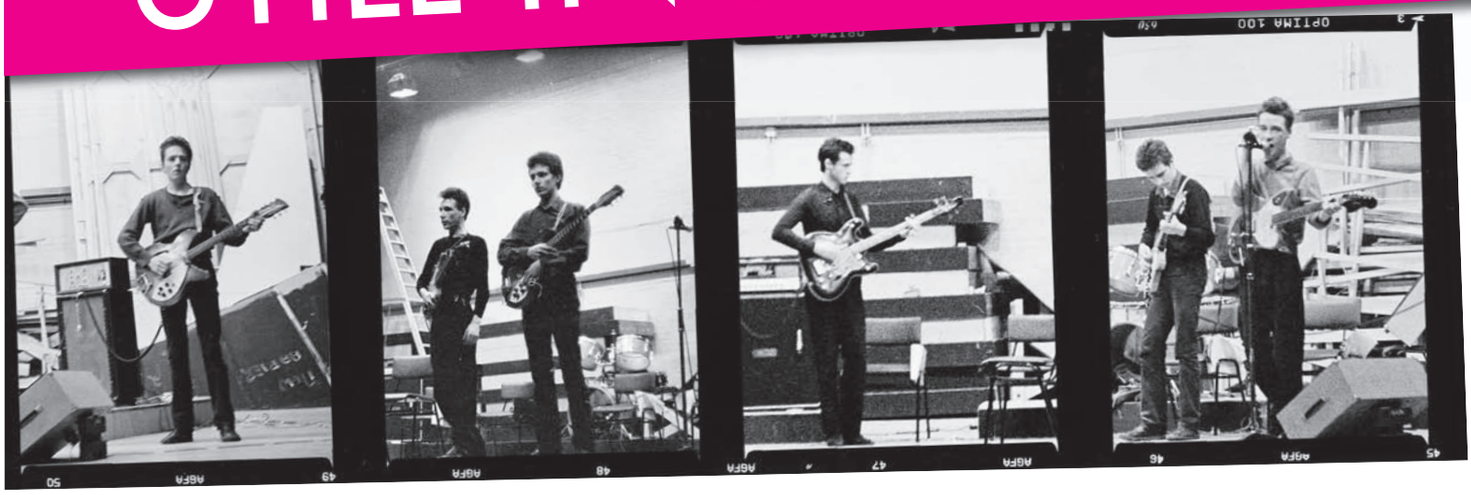
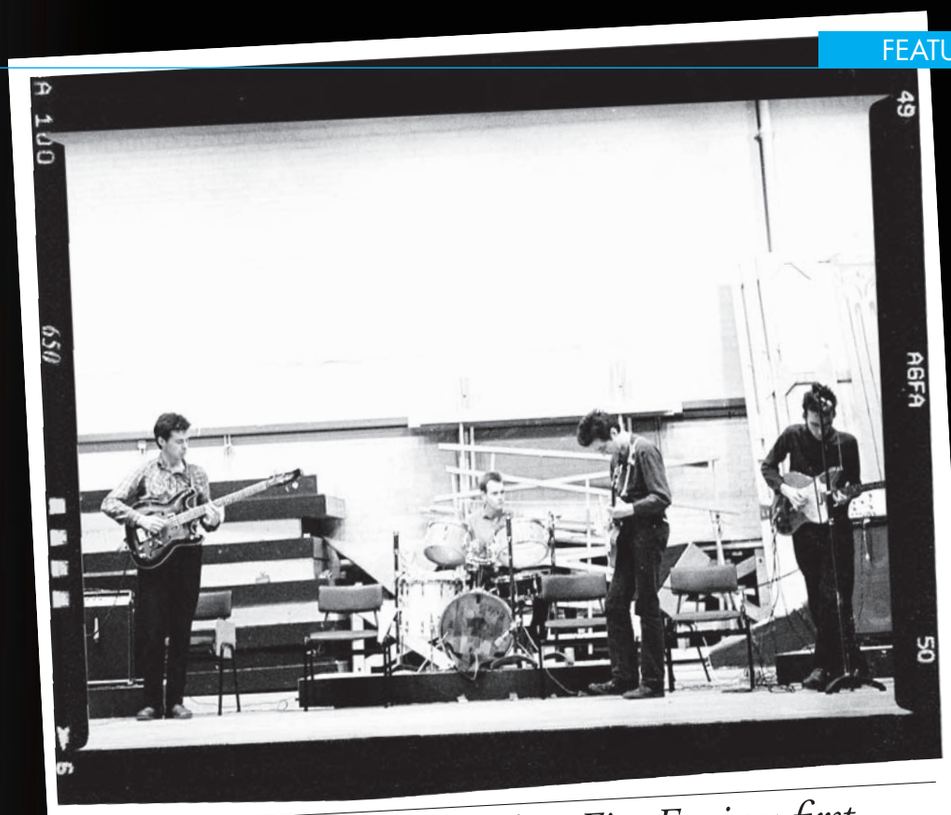
November/December 2005

DTKLAMF

Red was the new black in the 80s

STILL INCENDIARY,





***Innes Reekie** was there when Fire Engines first exploded onto the music scene in the early 1980s. With a resurgence of interest in them, new releases, and recent awe-inspiring gigs, he looks at their legacy*

25 YEARS ON

TH E D was wearing black, impenetrable 50s wraparound sunglasses, a ripped pink T-shirt with the word 'VOIDOID' scrawled in black marker pen across the chest, and ripped drainpipe Levis tucked into black German jackboots. Not that strange in itself, but he was standing in a bath clutching a large plastic flower, carrying on an in-depth conversation about William Burroughs and Brion Gysin with a pretty, slightly older girl, coyly sat on the toilet, who I recognised as being a violinist in the Scottish National Orchestra. He looked like a young Lou Reed circa the 'Banana' album.

of Edinburgh College of Art.

The first time we met was somewhat less remarkable. He was sleeping on the floor of the bedroom I then shared with Thursdays' guitarist Mike Barclay, due to being kicked out of his parents' home for jacking in his apprenticeship as a joiner to become a full-time punk rock musician. It was a lifestyle option in these days – or rather it wasn't. Short hair and drainpipe jeans automatically rendered you a legitimate target for every meathead on the streets of Scotland's capital, and standing onstage with a guitar, putting yourself in the direct line of fire, thinking at the time, "This is what it must have been like at Warhol's Factory in the Velvet Underground days." And in many ways it probably was. There were so many interesting, "arty", strangely sophisticated and plain downright strange characters who appeared to flit from room to room, sometimes never to be seen again, leaving only an "otherworldly" impression on myself, in the big city for the first time, having only just recently finished high school. Additionally, there was a full-sized Dalek in the front room – a Rezillos stage prop, I later learned. Bob Last and his partner Hillary >>

"WE PLAYED TO OUR STRENGTHS WHICH WERE MINIMAL, BUT SOMEHOW, AS A BAND, IT WORKED. WE NEVER PLAYED CHORDS AND RUSSELL DIDN'T USE CYMBALS OR HI-HATS. IT WAS VERY VIOLENT, ALTHOUGH NO-ONE GOT HURT. PURE AGGRESSION, ATTITUDE AND HATE WAS WHAT IT WAS. RUSSELL WOULD ALWAYS START THE SONGS, AND THE INTENSITY OF HIS ADRENALINE-RUSH DICTATED THE SPEED THE BAND WOULD PLAY THEM. THE ENERGY IN THESE DAYS WAS UNBELIEVABLE".

<< Morrison's flat had become a creative hub for the city's more discerning disenfranchised punk rock cognoscenti most weekends towards the end of 1978 and into 1979. It was here, in this Keir Street tenement, that the seeds for Edinburgh's contribution to the post-punk era germinated and finally came to full bloom.

Henderson first met Hillary Morrison at a Sex Pistols signing of *Never Mind the Bollocks* in Virgin Records, Frederick Street, Edinburgh, in early 1978. The one person they had in common was Robert King, frontman with Edinburgh's notorious punk/glam band of the time, Scars. Davy and he had initially met at an early Buzzcocks gig the previous year. Scars were something else – taut, nerve-shredding guitars sounding like something Siouxsie's Banshees might then attempt, but with a more commercial/glam rock bent, a tight as fuck rhythm section, and, in King, the most charismatic frontman in the city. Songs like "Horrorshow", "Adult/Ery" and "All About You" would eventually see them signed to Bob Last's nascent Fast Product label, and ultimately to Chrysalis/Pre Records. Henderson was taken aback to hear someone in Edinburgh was about to release records, as well as the fact King was actually in a gigging band with the promise of having a single released. His curiosity was piqued. This chance meeting was a catalyst, and became a vehicle for the multitude of unfulfilled ideas Henderson was then nurturing with a view to music making…or something.

Bob Last, however, had already begun building his empire. This tall, spiky haired, softly spoken architecture graduate (who always seemed to be dressed in an orange boilersuit festooned with silver gaffer tape, then working with The Rezillos) had a vision, very much in keeping with Richard Boon's New Hormones (Buzzcocks) and Tony Wilson's fledgling Factory (Warsaw/Joy Division) labels. The base for this was the tenement in Keir Street. The ideas flaunted by the Situationists were influential here, as was the intellectual process behind punk rock. The label ideology was based around disposability, conceptual packaging and Warhol's 15 minutes of fame – once done, rip it up and start again. Last seized the moment perfectly. Sensing that the three-chord, dumbass wonder of second-generation punk wannabes were in the throes of death, he perfectly pre-empted its more intelligent, literate, experimental and political successor – what we now know, for convenience's sake, as post-punk. His first release was single of the week in *NME*, The Mekons' "Never Been In A Riot" b/w "32 Weeks". It was basic, discordant and very obviously not produced – not in the way we know, anyhow. This was followed by 2.3's "All Time Low", The Human League's *Electronically Yours*' EP, and Gang of Four's "Damaged Goods". Last was setting himself incredibly high standards.

Neither Bob nor Hillary were seasoned pub-goers – you'd see them standing at the back at the occasional worthwhile gig. They'd spend time at Keir Street, formulating ideas, taking photographs, designing packaging, and ultimately planning. They appeared to welcome guests with attitude and vision – hence their home becoming in many ways a veritable post-punk creative workshop. The Human League's Phil and Adrian, and Gang of Four's Andy and Jon were frequent visitors, alongside regulars Simon Best, Tim Pearce and Alpin (Rezillos associates). The indigenous scene-players who circumnavigated Keir Street were few but fiercely competitive – band members frequently swapped allegiances at the drop of a hat. Those in contention were notably Scars, The Dirty Reds, The Flowers, Thursdays, and Henderson's first project with Angus Groovy (soon to be Fire Engines' manager and Codex Communications' head honcho), Talkovers, following a false start with Warm Jets.

"Every band in the land had their own little Factory – maaan, and there were a lot of little silver fucking wigs kickin' around as well. Bob had a background in architecture – he used to design sets for 1970s lefty theatre productions. He was probably the first proper artist we'd met. I mean he had method, always did his research, understood the concept of work, was politically motivated, and had respect for all kinds of intelligence. He turned us on to Duchamp, Brecht and Funkadelic… He was also probably solely responsible for our star ascending in the form of the extremely shitty Candyskin. Never mind – we've never looked back" – Davy Henderson on the Keir Street "Factory".

It was always dark in these days. It was kinda like a post-punk nuclear winter. I never remember the sun shining, and the mood of the music being made was a very accurate reflection of that – edgy, tough, desperate-sounding.

Any hope proffered came with a serrated edge – think Joy Division, PIL, Gang of Four, The Pop Group, The Fall. That was the soundtrack of our lives then. Those, and a certain New York City compilation called No Wave produced by Brian Eno, an album which was equally harsh, abrasive, and aggressively confrontational, featuring Mars, DNA, Teenage

Jesus and the Jerks, and, most crucially where we are concerned, James Chance's Contortions. Chance's mutant psycho-punk freeform jazz explorations were about to change the shape of the Sound of Young Scotland, just as Alan Horne was coining that very phrase to introduce his about to be launched Postcard label – a label which would additionally consolidate Scotland's status in the post-punk scheme of things.

The Dirty Reds, from Clermiston on Edinburgh's West Side, are the pivotal group in this tale, and here's where it gets confusing. Dirty Reds Mk 1 consisted of Tam Dean Burn, Russell Burn, Dave Carson and Andy Copeland. They promptly imploded and went on to form The Flowers with Hillary Morrison on vocals. Tam Dean Burn cited musical differences as the reason for his departure. The Dirty Reds Mk 2 entered the fray six months later – Davy Henderson on guitar, Russell Burn on drums, Graham Main on bass and, once more, Russell's older brother, Tam Dean Burn (currently a successful television actor and veteran of both Steven Berkoff and Irvine Welsh stage productions), on lead vocals. These were the "real" Dirty Reds – the one thing they all had in common was witnessing the infamous White Riot Tour gig at Edinburgh Playhouse in April 1977, and being so impressed that bands like Subway Sect and The Slits were making music that it ultimately altered the path their lives would take.

The Dirty Reds were noisy, abrasive and, as the name suggests, lyrically fairly extreme, with leftist and anarchist propaganda. Following around half a dozen riotous and confrontational shows, Dean Burn decided to concentrate full-time on drama college. The Dirty Reds were now without a vocalist. Henderson moved centre-stage, now on lead vocals and guitar, and was instrumental in bringing in the talented and versatile Murray Slade on extra guitar.

"We had a bad reputation around Edinburgh," Henderson recalls. "They thought we were beat-up fucks, but we were just going through our Burroughs experimental phase. We'd read *Junky* and sit up all night talking like we imagined Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac would." They split up in 1979. Out of the ashes of The Dirty Reds came what we know today as Fire Engines. Henderson points out, "You know how much is made of the fact that the 1967 European Cup-winning Celtic team all grew up within a 12-mile radius? Well, Fire Engines all grew up within 500 yards of each other."

Naming themselves after a Thirteenth Floor Elevators song covered by Television on the Eno-produced *Double Exposure* bootleg which was doing the rounds, Fire Engines' original sound was a frenetic mix of Television, Contortions, Richard Hell and "Foggy Notion" era Velvet Underground. Angus Groovy took on the managerial mantle and began setting up some live shows (with the equally Television-esque sounding TV Art, who were about to mutate into the angular, funky sounding Josef K) at various city centre venues, including Edinburgh College of Art. Fire Engines made their live debut at Leith Community Centre on 16 March 1980. Looking like Subway Sect's scruffier younger brothers, their sound was all lacerating guitars, primal Mo Tucker drumming, and Richard Hell/James Chance screams and yelps, with lyrics written adopting Burroughs' cut-up method. It was kinda unsettling, bravely new and utterly compelling to watch. The live sets lasted no longer than 20 minutes. Their short, sharp performance, bristling with electric energy, was nothing short of exhilarating. Many people, especially Bob Last, were taking notice.

"We played to our strengths, which were minimal, but somehow, as a band, it worked. We never played chords, and Russell didn't use cymbals or hi-hats. It was very violent, although no one got hurt. Pure aggression, attitude and hate was what it was. Russell would always start the songs, and the intensity of his adrenaline rush dictated the speed the band would play them. The energy in these days was unbelievable" – Davy Henderson on Fire Engines' live work ethic.

DIY culture was fast becoming de rigeur. Josef K had already released their debut single, "Chance Meeting" b/w "Romance", on their own Absoute Records label, and were about to release a follow-up, "Radio Drill Time", on Alan Horne's Postcard Records, home of the gloriously arch but camply twee Orange Juice. This Sound of Young Scotland had its foundations in Creedence Clearwater Revival meets Chic via The Velvet Underground – Josef K were representing the darker side emanating from Scotland's east coast. But the best was yet to come. Angus Groovy wasted no time in setting up Codex Communications for the first Fire Engines release.

Prior to recording, the introduction of the works of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band into their collective consciousness was to have an astounding effect on what was to become Fire Engines' discordant signature of sound. Of all the other leftfield post-punk visionaries who they embraced and absorbed, it was Beefheart who would have the most lasting impact. >>

ALEX KAPRANOS
Franz Ferdinand

What are your memories of hearing Fire Engines for the first time, and what impact did they have on you?
I was introduced to Fire Engines when my band, the Yummy Fur, covered their "Discord". When we were getting Franz Ferdinand together they were one of the bands that we would put on compilation tapes to give to each other – we'd drive to rehearsals listening to them, talking about how a good three-note riff was so much better than ten minutes of feedback or a dreary solo.

What influence did they have on what you did musically?
They gave us inspiration because they sounded like a pop group. They were unquestionably at the edge, challenging the accepted norm of what pop music was, but they were a still a pop group – genuine rebels who didn't care for convention, so much so that they stole convention and warped it for their own means.

Why are they still relevant today, 25 years later?
There was a sense of nihilistic fun with their music. It sounded like they could do anything. They were the true antithesis of the hated prog excess and its self-indulgent showing off. They played terse riffs that were rhythmic and repetitive, 15-minute sets instead of 15-minute solos. Their melodies were atonal, yet as catchy as a Phil Spector pop song. Everything was precise with no waste, yet sounded unpredictable.

<< "We loved The Slits, Buzzcocks, Subway Sect, The Fall, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Contortions, James White and the Blacks, The Velvet Underground, Television, The Pop Group, Public Image, Johnny Thunders… we loved Snatch… Girl singers and primitive drums turned us on – and boys who wanted to be girl singers with primitive drums… To me Mark E Smith is a soul singer – he's like the Mancunian Whitney Houston, only better. He can squeal – check out 'Rowche Rumble' – and he doesn't show off. We also were very in love with Captain Beefheart's *Clearspot*, and *Strictly Personal* was a real favourite to lick Star Wars stamps to… *Doc at the Radar Station* was the permanent soundtrack to our campaigns down south" – Davy Henderson on Fire Engines' heavenly jukebox.

Fire Engines decamped for the day to a studio over the River Forth in Fife. In eight hours they recorded their entire set, twice, for £46. On returning to Edinburgh friends were divided in opinion what tracks should be included on Codex Communications' debut release. Everyone (including members of Josef K), were unilaterally in agreement as to which track should, on no account, be considered as single material – "Get Up And Use Me".

Awkward to the last, "Get Up And Use Me" b/w "Everything's Roses" was released in the summer of 1980 and – in addition to alerting the attention of Postcard Records' Alan Horne and the ever-watchful Bob Last – *NME*'s Paul Morley gushingly awarded it Single of the Week, with *Sounds*' Dave McCulloch hot on his heels. Fire Engines' instinct, to go in the face of public sway, had been the correct one. And it wouldn't be the last time.

In many ways Fire Engines were more like a gang of teenage ruffians than a pop group, but there was still something exotic about them – a kind of tarnished glamour, if you will. Girls wanted to be with them, and boys – well, boys wanted to be them. There was something very Joe Orton about them, they were very "street", but also very literary, and intellectually sharp. Many a time I witnessed detractors being cut down to size in local bars with a razor-sharp acidic quip.

They were not at all like the majority of bands springing up in punk's wake, who were mostly monosyllabic, and fuelled by pointless, teenage, nonsensical bluster. Fire Engines were more of a closed unit, and yet, without having overtly art school pretensions themselves, those were the peer group with which they were most readily associated. Hanging out at art college dances and providing music for leftist theatrical productions was more their style, rather than basically getting pissed up with the pogo-tastic plastic punks in the city centre "new wave" bars. And to fuel this exotica, this almost Beat generation persona they had perhaps unwittingly created, came the rumours – rumours of depraved, all-night 'freakoid' parties, rumours of heroin, rumours of members of the band appearing in an overtly explicit Super 8 movie based on Jean Genet's *Querelle of Brest*. All unsubstantiated of course – all four members had girlfriends, and heroin didn't really go hand in hand with their frantic, relentless approach to music-making mayhem. But nonetheless the rumours added fuel to the fire of the myth which was already perpetuating around Fire Engines.

Postcard's Alan Horne was besotted by them, leading to their first gigs outside the Scottish capital, in Glasgow alongside Orange Juice and Josef K. Horne hoped that, by having them play alongside his Postcard bands, people would automatically assume Fire Engines were on his label too.

Among those in attendance at those early West of Scotland gigs were The Jesus And Mary Chain's Reid brothers, bassist/video-maker Douglas Hart, Primal Scream's Bobby Gillespie and Jim Beattie with their mate Alan McGee, and various others who would find themselves in fairly significant Scottish outfits over the coming years. Over the next decade Fire Engines' influence on many of those in attendance would become glaringly apparent. Horne was convinced he would net the Engines for Postcard, but it was Bob Last who would win out, signing them to his newly set up Fast Forward subsidiary Pop:Aural. Henderson's take on visuals, wordplay and packaging was far more in line with Last's idealism.

Their debut release for the label was *Lubricate Your Living Room*, an eight-track album of discordant, funky rhythmed, improvised pieces of music/muzak – no lyrics whatsoever discounting the screams and yelps on "Discord". Music to go out to, to put you in the mood for "action and fun" – this entire concept was Last's, albeit with Fire Engines playing the role of willing accomplice. *Lubricate* had more in common with the instrumental dub albums coming out of Kingston, Jamaica, and the extended instrumental disco mixes coming out of clubs like Danceteria in downtown Manhattan. It sounded like nothing else – Fire Engines were then occupying a completely different hemisphere to their contemporaries.

"It's not actual songs, it's just something else to do, it's not some big important thing. It's just a record, it's to be fucking played. It's not like this is our first LP and we mean this kind of thing. It's none of that. It's not our LP…it's an amalgamation between Pop:Aural and Codex

Communications using the Fire Engines, and it's just that, and it's brilliant" – Davy Henderson on *Lubricate Your Living Room* (*NME*, 1981).

The remainder of 1980 saw Fire Engines' star ascending in an explosion of rave record reviews, some frenzied Scottish gigs with U2, The Teardrop Explodes and The Fall, and finally their first UK dates supporting Josef K, who were additionally on the receiving end of a clutch of well-deserved music press plaudits.

"We're gonna do two 15-minute sets, half an hour between the two. We're playing with this band called U2 – not really heard them yet, but I'm no really bothered about them" – Davy Henderson onstage at Edinburgh Valentinos.

1981 started on a high note for Fire Engines. The first *NME* of the year carried a double-page spread by Paul Morley (thoughtfully included in the current Domino release), barely containing his excitement. It's possibly one of the best Morley pieces ever, perfectly capturing the adrenaline and excitement of a band on the verge of something more important and influential than even they could know.

On 3 January 1981 Morley wrote, "Onstage, they show off and show most other groups up. They go for 20 minutes – don't blink – and do more, cause more sensations, than rock groups do in two hours. Their communication, for now, is impetuous and insatiable, and they refuse to overestimate how far they can run before they lose their breath."

Events and favourable critical acclaim continued to accelerate at a rate which in many ways conversely marked the beginning of the end for the band. Guitarist Murray Slade ominously remarked at the time, "Suddenly we had to think ahead." Their "live for the moment" disposable pop ethic, which had undoubtedly been one of their key strengths, was being forced out by having to live up to outside expectations.

A superb John Peel session, capturing the band once more playing to their best abilities, was recorded, followed by a UK tour support with girl group The Mo-dettes promoting next single, "Candyskin", itself a radical departure from their Codex debut. Henderson's trademark shouts and screams were replaced by a more orthodox vocal melody, recalling prime-time Marc Bolan, and Keir Street regular Simon Best was employed to provide a string arrangement which did much to disguise any discordant guitar work still evident.

That said, it was by no means a conventional single, and remains possibly their best known work, peaking at number two in the *NME*'s independent chart. That said, it was Last's decision to release "Candyskin" as the A-side, whereas the B-side, "Meat Whiplash", was possibly the band's best song in respect of their trademark sound.

Third single "Big Gold Dream" (named after a Chester Himes Story from the "Harlem Cycle" collection) was released hot on its heels – their most commercial offering to date, and bearing far more resemblance to Henderson's next project, WIN, than anything previously heard by Fire Engines.

The only hint of the devilment of the past was the sleeve, depicting all four members lying bare-chested, glistening in baby-oil and covered in raw meat. Apparently Hillary Morrison, who photographed the session, and Bob Last, their newfound mentor, had both recently become vegetarian. The original idea of doing the shoot in a slaughterhouse, complete with offal and vats of blood, had been rejected outright, and the local Safeways butcher's counter was the compromise.

In many ways it was to be their last act of subversion. Henderson stated shortly after, "Around the time of the second John Peel session, we were shit... Our compass was a fake… We should've trusted our internal magnets… We should've trusted our inability."

Following a disastrous, amphetamine-fuelled gig at Glasgow Night Moves, Henderson decided to split up the band 18 short months after they burst into a sanitised independent pop arena and shook it up for all it was worth. The final gig was to be at Kitchenware Records boss Keith Armstrong's club in Newcastle, the Kitchen. They had finally run out of steam and, as with shooting stars burning twice as bright and all that jazz, it was hardly surprising.

"It was 31 December 1981… I've always deeply regretted the way it happened…that is the main reason for coming together again… also a trenchant loyalty to our disregarded, collective Codex consciousness… Happy were the rude days of Fire Engines, when application was an unknown hindrance" – Davy Henderson on the Fire Engines split.

Looking back, and seeing all the Burroughs, Corso and Gysin associations, one could be forgiven for thinking that this was a carefully and creatively manipulated outsider image they had chosen to portray, but in all honesty it was more probably just a reflection of four individuals shamelessly wearing their cultural and literary influences blatantly on the sleeves.

Perhaps it was so blatant that many missed it first time around, but with hindsight it is less than subtly there for all to see in all its >>

BOBBY GILLESPIE
Primal Scream

What are your memories of hearing Fire Engines for the first time, and what impact did they have on you?
I first heard "Get Up And Use Me", and it totally blew my head off, so I had to buy *Lubricate Your Living Room* as soon as it came out. I saw them playing with Orange Juice at Glasgow Mayfair, and I remember Davy Henderson wearing this red jumper – they looked like Subway Sect. Fifteen-minute set of pure energy, hadn't seen anything like it, it was totally mind-blowing. I saw them again a year later at Night Moves, and met them outside. They said they'd get us in for free if we helped carry in their gear. I carried a cymbal.

Were they an influence on what you did musically?
Put it this way – without Fire Engines, Primal Scream would never have existed, and neither would The Jesus And Mary Chain. Everything about them inspired us – the attitude, the energy, the spikiness, the 15-minute sets. "Candyskin" was a truly amazing single – it had a lot of heart, it was a really soulful record. It reminded me of something like "Hot Love" – Davy's voice was like Marc Bolan, in a way. I think Davy's a really soulful guy, and they were the most soulful band around at the time.

Are they still relevant today, 25 years later?
Great music is always relevant no matter when it was made. I think "Get Up And Use Me" is one of the most extreme records ever made – just pure excitement, mind-blowing, extreme, just like great sex. To me, it's up there with "Be Bop A Lula" by Gene Vincent, "Hot Love" by T-Rex and "Chinese Rocks" by Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers. Great music will last the test of time, and they made great music. I think it's really cool that Franz Ferdinand are namechecking hem at every opportunity – they need to be heard by more people.

<< ragged, Beatnik glory. Perhaps this explains their current re-appraisal. Were they light years ahead of their time, musically, attitude-wise, and perhaps even culturally? Have they finally fallen into step with what's currently going on? I don't think so. Fire Engines carved out their own niche all these years ago, and nobody has yet come close to replicating their glorious, nihilistic no-wave, sound of complete exhilarating abandon.

Their typically brief return in 2004-05 has seen them support Captain Beefheart's Magic Band on two occasions, and play as special guests to Franz Ferdinand in front of 5,000 people at Glasgow's SECC. Additionally they recorded a double A-side seven-inch single, given away free at the SECC, covering Franz's "Jaqueline" while Franz returned the favour by covering their "Get Up And Use Me". Perhaps most importantly, they have finally documented their earliest recorded days on the album *Codex Teenage Premonition*, released last month on Domino. Their excellent sold-out show at London's ICA was seemingly their last ever. Primal Scream's Andrew Innes said a week later, "That was one of the best things I've seen in years. They can't leave it at that – you can see they still really mean it, they've gotta do more shows". I can only agree.

"On 24 January 2004, we played with the Magic Band in Edinburgh. On 5 July we played with them again in Glasgow… The Franz Ferdinand show was our third in 23 years. We'd done all the preparation 'cause there's only so much you can do to prepare Fire Engines (eg iron your summer-print dress at the correct temperature).

"Inside, the building has an international airport, departure vibration. It makes you feel like checking-in, buying duty-free disposables and consuming them in a beautiful, timeless, pre-flight vacant state of mind. So it was with this vacant beauty, like Metallic KO Stooges, we walked among the nicely hostile, missile-throwing 5,000, with the great Prokofiev booming from the public announcement system. I recall, at approximately 8.17pm, saying 'Hello teenage Glasgow!' then surfing a heavy ocean wave of 'Boooooo!' 'Fuck off' and 'Penis! Penis!'

It was exhilarating, but I didn't realise the younger generation were so rude – we only wanted to be loved" – Davy Henderson on "that" Franz Ferdinand show.

So many of the facts remain amiss, being as they didn't exist long enough to fall fully under the scrutiny of the music press microscope during their brief lifespan. Now, 24 years after their original demise, Davy Henderson goes some way to giving today's readers a fuller understanding of what made Fire Engines what they were then and, to a large extent, still are to this day.

NOW SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF EDINBURGH, SUMMER 2005

How did Fire Engines arrive at their particular sound?

It all goes back to The Dirty Reds. When we chucked Tam out, or he left to do his acting – I can't quite remember, but I think I wanted to be the singer anyway. It wasn't divisive, but we had a vote, and Tam was involved in lots of other things at college anyway. I knew Murray from school, and was aware he could play guitar, and he was into jazz. Our thoughts on that were, "Yeah, that means you don't have to play bar chords." One of the rules of Fire Engines was there was no bar chords 'cause it was really hard work playing them for half an hour during a Dirty Reds set. So we thought Murray would fit the bill. He was in a band called Station Six at the time, but he agreed to join us. It was more practical for us to play that way, more than anything. In The Dirty Reds we wanted to do a Kinks cover version called "You Gotta Move", which is a really fast, hard, R'n'B riff, and it's quite Stooges as well, which semi-appealed to us. We had a gig at the art college, and we were desperately trying to get to grips with this song, but it was still too fast, we just couldn't master it. So we slowed it down on the turntable to 33rpm to see if we could work it out…or thought we could do a really slow version like Iggy's "Sister Midnight". We finally got it down to 16rpm, and that's the speed we ended up playing it. So that's an indication of just how rudimentary a facility we had on the electric guitar front.

In Fire Engines, I suppose there was an element of fear on our part, and we didn't want to spend too much time actually on stage, so it may have looked like we planned it that way, the reality was that Russell's adrenaline set the speed we played at. It was nothing to do with Dodos (asthma tablets which, if taken in enough quantity, gave you an amphetamine rush) – we used to use them to come down after being on stage. We also drank eyedrops to come down because of their 0.02 percent of ephedrine, but we never used them to get up in the first place.

You've often said Fire Engines utilised inability to their advantage.

It was more having confidence in your inability. It came from Velvet Underground interviews with Lou Reed and John Cale talking about using a non-drummer in Mo Tucker, who turned her kit upside down, and playing really short sets when it suited them. Rock music in general is pretty traditional, so it's not that hard to appear rebellious – well, maybe at the time, 'casuse everyone else was trying to be rebellious too. When I was in The Talkovers we used to play a song that had one note in it, and I remember playing it one night at Edinburgh Clouds, and we got an encore. We also supported The Rezillos one night in the Wig and Pen in Cockburn Street – our whole set lasted barely a minute. We played "98-99-100", then left the stage. They wanted more.

We were pretty young, too. Our first Fire Engines gig was the day after Russell's 17th birthday, which made me and Murray 18, and Graham possibly just 20, yet it's surprising just how cogent we actually were at that point. Sadly we weren't really aware of our strengths, and basically that's what hastened our demise. There is still this element of shock and surprise at how young we actually were. What we did then is so relevant to how I feel about music now. We did begin to become incredibly frustrated with our inabilities too. At the time we were listening to *Live at the Apollo* by James Brown from '64/'65, and that was a massive influence on us, but we were aware we could never achieve anything like that. But the broken down, white version of that was The Contortions, so we opted to try for something like that – that, and *Dragnet*-era Fall. There was an element to James Chance's sax playing that maybe he'd listened to Albert Ayler. If you listen to him, it's exactly the same as listening to *Trout Mask Replica* or various other Beefheart/Magic Band stuff. You think, "I can do that, it's really easy – it sounds like everything's just been emptied out of a bucket and chucked on the floor, and these people can't really play." But far from it – they rehearsed for nine months, then they deconstructed their sound. With us, we were already unconstructed, then we attempted to deconstruct that. We recognised that in the beginning, and it was in many ways our strength. After the first stage of Fire Engines it began to get frustrating, because we were listening to a lot of dub records, Sly and Robbie and Grace Jones. We'd go down to London to see James Brown and Grace Jones, and it became increasingly frustrating. Then there was Public Image. For John Lydon to come out of the Pistols and do that was a massive revolution, a Year Zero in many ways. The fact that they utilized the 12-inch single format, like three

12-inch discs for the Metal Box album – it was them who made that particular star rise. I think at that point we became aware of a lot of revolutionary things going on, around the same time we were feeling less confident in what we were doing. We'd definitely lost our way, and Bob was becoming increasingly successful with The Human League and Heaven 17, and we kinda thought that everything he touched turned to gold, without actually having to put the work in ourselves. In the end we were relying too much on his Midas touch.

How did the split come about exactly?
Well, that whole year was just crazy, and I think we lost our bearings. Towards the end of 1981 I had a conversation with Bob Last, and he made me an offer I couldn't refuse, which in retrospect I possibly should have. He was starting a publishing company, and he offered me a deal, but it didn't include Fire Engines. I think he thought we'd had our day. At the same time it was an offer which I could have refused – it wasn't his responsibility. >>

"THERE IS STILL THIS ELEMENT OF SHOCK AND SURPRISE AT HOW YOUNG WE ACTUALLY WERE. WHAT WE DID THEN IS SO RELEVANT TO HOW I FEEL ABOUT MUSIC NOW"

Giving it all at the last show ever

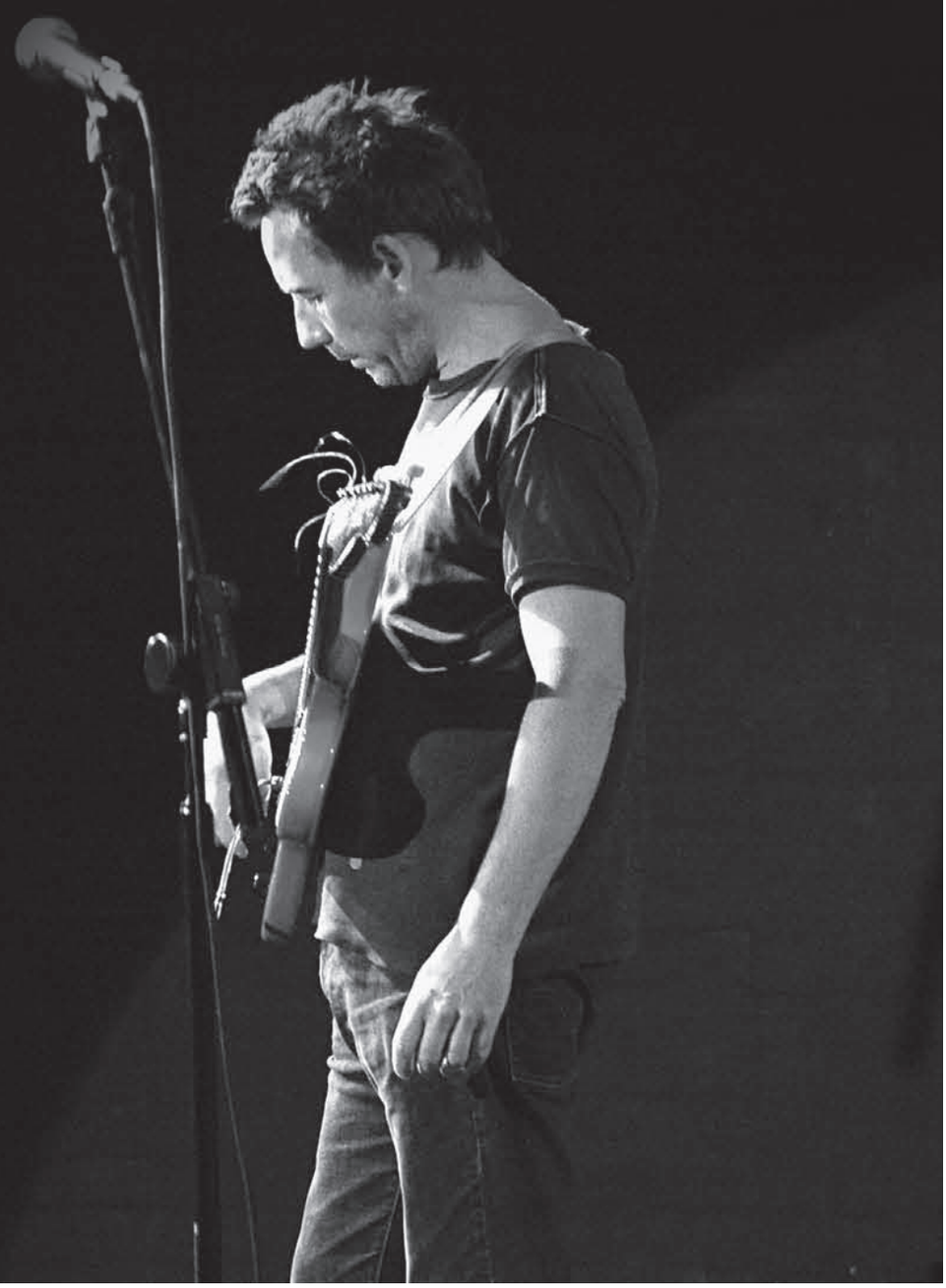
<< It would have been better if we had all regrouped and taken six months off, and we could have looked at things in a different light. There was a momentum building all the time, and that disposable mentality – right, that's that finished, let's move on to the next thing – something else needed to be injected to keep it all going. It's like that certain element of taking drugs – you get that instant hit, you want more, and I don't think we were intelligent enough to step off that and look at the bigger picture. It's hard to say things in retrospect, and again it should be easier to say things in retrospect, but we could have regrouped, got a plan together, and it might have moved on musically, but were kinda stuck. Four weeks at that time seemed a massive amount of time, so the abstract idea of taking six months out and holing up somewhere, and finally getting a deal, which I'm sure we could have, with pretty much any of the other major independents – but then again, if we'd had the confidence in our own inabilities we could have possibly started The Nectarine No 9 in 1984 if we'd followed it through. But if you remember, all around that time things were getting really traditional again – people wanted to get back into the charts. All these so-called leftfield bands, alternative bands, were looking for a big recording deal, and part of the game at that time was to face off the corporations and try and get a massive deal, and attempt to get onto *Top of the Pops* as a kind of laugh. Look at the shit that was coming out then, when we were splitting up. Culture Club – if you listen to their songs now it's disgusting, awful, it's a loada shit. Same time, The Human League were writing *Dare*, and they went enormous and became a respectable pop group, whereas up until *Travelogue* they were still worthy. Whereas if you look at Heaven 17, or BEF, they are directly responsible for us being stuck with the "simply the best" mentality – it was their fault Tina Turner's career was resurrected, and it all became very traditional and extremely conservative at that point. That mentality they, BEF, created, is a cancer on our society as we speak. OK, yeah, we covered "Fascist Groove Thing" on a Peel session. We liked the sentiment, but I still think it's the worst recording Fire Engines ever did. I hate it.

A major turning point was when we sacked our manager, Angus Groovy, and I suppose Bob Last was influential on that decision. The decision was made because we had been offered gigs in New York, and Angus at the time was managing us from yellow BT "Busby" phone boxes with a handful of two-pence pieces, and Bob didn't feel Angus was up to the job of managing a New York trip. So we sacked Angus, but then again it was ultimately our decision. That shouldn't have happened, and I think that's the point where we lost our way. Because I've always felt bad about it, the Domino release is a bit of Codex love returned with thanks, to paraphrase a certain Mr Bowie. In the end we split up before anything happened with regard to New York.

Is it weird to have all this renewed interest in Fire Engines?

I think we all find it pretty exciting, but there was a sealing on it. The ICA gig was the last one, but I think it's pretty important to have the opportunity to put out a document of the Fire Engines we knew, which I don't think the general public were ever really aware of recording-wise, certainly not through our releases on Pop:Aural – specifically *Lubricate Your Living Room*, which was really just an extended jamming session, which I must add we did willingly, but it was more Bob Last's concept of "wallpaper muzak". At the time I don't think we thought that we wouldn't make another album, so *Lubricate* was not a true representation of Fire Engines. It was not strictly what we were about, it was more Bob's idea of what we were for that release. *Codex Teenage Premonition* is Fire Engines before we were involved with Pop:Aural. The Domino release is basically archive material from our first recording session, and more representative of how we remember ourselves to be.

So how does this differ from Revola's Fond release in '92?



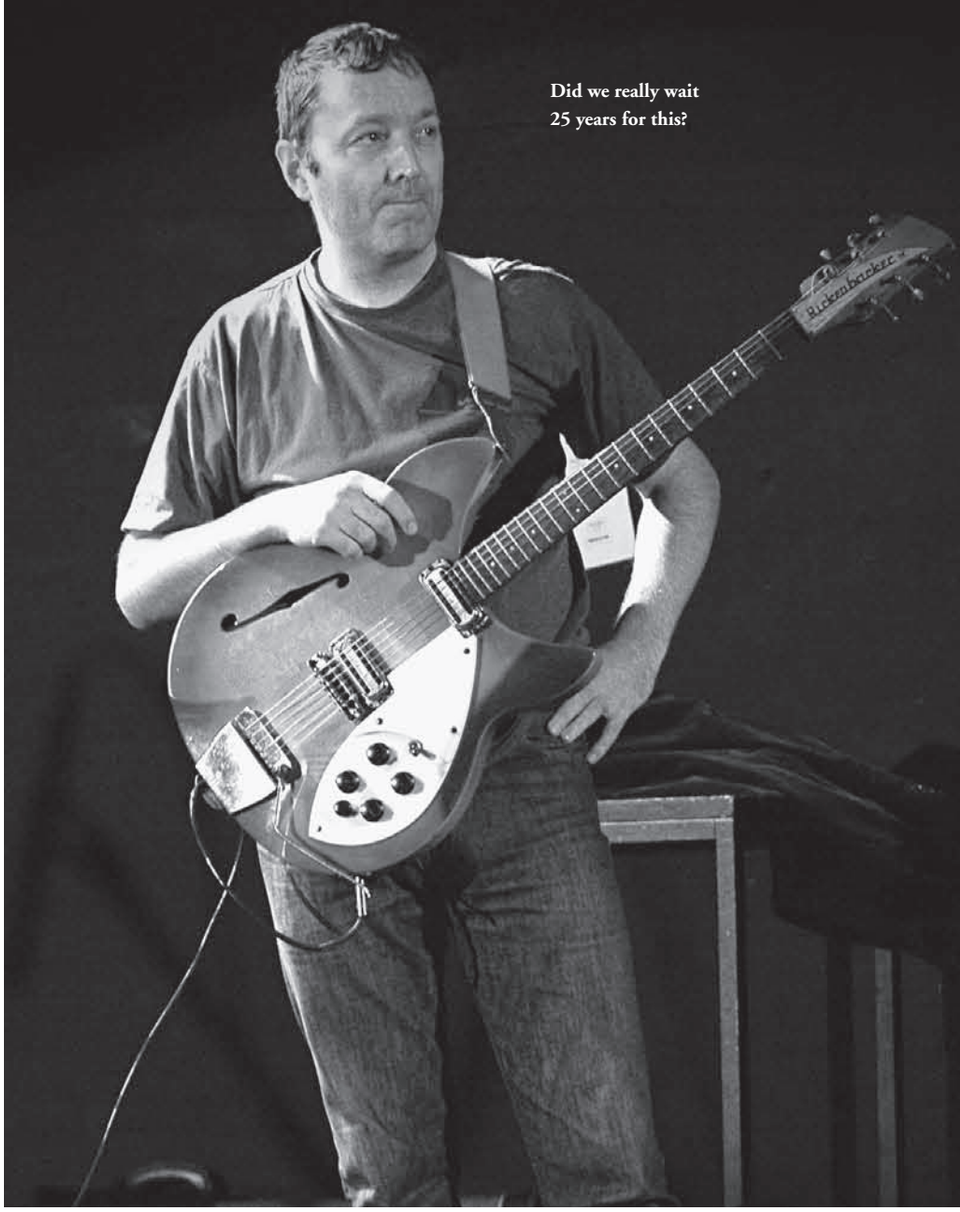
There are songs in the live set that have never been released in the format they are at the moment, and four on the album have never been heard in their original format before. Plus there's the first gig at Leith Community Centre, 16 March 1980. That was a very special moment for us, and it's great to be able to share that with our fans. *Fond* was basically *Lubricate Your Living Room*, a couple of singles and some Peel session tracks. It was still Pop:Aural's version of the Engines, which is all very good and well, and historically correct, but as far as the Codex gang is concerned it's nice to finally have some historical representation. This is a valid documentation of Fire Engines in 1980, and it's important for us that it's represented.

The whole idea of what you did was very much "of the moment". Is it strange to have it still around 24 years later?
For some strange reason it's still sort of vibrant, valid, current, and it actually sounds a lot better than I thought it would. In fact, I can't believe how good we really were. It's shockingly surprising – on listening to it I wished I was in that band and, funnily enough, I happen to be in that band. But then again, that maybe shows things haven't moved on that much. Or maybe people that were the same age as us at that time may now be in positions of power to put out music like that, whereas before it was a complete no-no.

How did the first reformation gig, with the Magic Band, come about?
We were getting hassled by promoters in Edinburgh for about two months asking us to get back together again 'cause the Magic Band were playing, obviously without Captain Beefheart. We hummed and hawed – we were extremely nervous about the prospect of it, 'cause there was no point in doing it if we couldn't have done it with an energy similar to the time we were together. And were we actually capable of playing the material? It was never really structured in any way, it was more elements of us jamming together, plus it was so fast – because of Russell's drumming, nothing to do with the amphetamines. So it was really daunting – plus to play with the Magic Band, who were, and still are, this mythological, massive influence who we have a massive respect for. They were someone we thought we could rip off in Fire Engines, but to actually play on the same stage as them… I mean, we would have been going to see them anyway, so it kinda spoilt the idea of a night out, the prospect of having to support them as well.
It took a lot of courage to actually make that decision, but I think we thought it would've been churlish not to, plus something we would possibly massively regret if we turned it down. The ethos of Fire Engines was never really about nostalgia. It was all about for the moment, disposability, so it seemed to be going against the ethic. But in a way I felt it important to do something like this, because of how responsible I felt for splitting the band up in the first place. I've always felt really guilty about the way it happened.

Then there was Franz Ferdinand…
Seemingly they were fans. I think they're >>

"THE ETHOS OF FIRE ENGINES WAS NEVER ABOUT NOSTALGIA. IT WAS ALL ABOUT FOR THE MOMENT, DISPOSABILITY, SO IT SEEMED TO BE GOING AGAINST THE ETHIC. BUT I FELT IT IMPORTANT TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS, BECAUSE OF HOW RESPONSIBLE I FELT FOR SPLITTING THE BAND UP IN THE FIRST PLACE."



Did we really wait 25 years for this?

Hawaiian shirts, Cuban cigars – are you sure this is the ICA?

"IT TOOK A LOT OF COURAGE AND ENERGY FOR THE FOUR OF US TO GO BACK INTO THE STUDIO AND SEE IF WE COULD PULL SOMETHING OFF"

<< really clever people, and they have a plan – they had an idea what the band was gonna be like, and inevitably you draw on your record collection, mix it all up, and I gather from what I read they were fans of Fire Engines, Josef K, whatever. To me it doesn't sound like it, I don't hear it. Paul Haig (Josef K) said it was a travesty that they're even allowed airplay cos they're out and out plagiarists, but he's one to talk – don't be ridiculous Paul, for goodness sake! Franz namecheck Josef K, but I don't think they sound anything like them.

When we played with the Magic Band again, in July, Franz Ferdinand were all there, but when we were approached it wasn't something we felt we had the energy to do, or commit ourselves to. Plus it's been said we were reforming, which we aren't – that sounds like something Duran Duran do, actively seeking gigs, etc, and writing new songs to make a career out of it. Anyway, in August last year some representative in the Franz camp got in touch with us to see if we'd do a one-off as special guest to Franz at a show in Glasgow at Christmas – like a secret gig, we thought – and if we'd like to record one of their songs as a double A-side seven-inch single, and they would respond in kind by covering one of ours. So all that was in keeping with our one-off, disposable ethic, and we didn't feel we were selling ourselves out by doing something like that. Again, it took a lot of courage and energy for the four of us to go back into Russell's recording studio and see if we could actually pull something off.

Also, we thought this one-off secret gig was gonna be a friends, fans and family thing – you know, a Christmas party like the ones they used to do at the Chateau or Optimo, or the art school. We assumed it would definitely be a club gig, maximum of 200 folk. Then we found out it was the SECC, which I've never been to and only heard bad reports about – like it's the worst place you can actually play a gig, especially for a garage band who've only ever played 15-minute sets. Then we heard it was the small room, so we thought, "That'll be OK, it will possibly be 1,000 folk maximum." We later discovered it was an airport hangar. It was really exciting, I must say, and we did as much preparation as we could.

Yeah, and the summer-print dress was part of that preparation?

Well, I'd worn the dress before at the Magic Band gigs, so this was the third time I'd worn it, and I was becoming bored of it. Initially, I thought, "We're supporting the Magic Band, and you gotta dress up a bit when you're dealing with myths," so I felt the dress was appropriate. The dress also has a great male lineage going back to at least Frank Zappa. The dress had a really beautiful print – definitely a 1965 summer print, it's got a definite Nancy Sinatra dimension to it. I didn't buy it specially – it was really important I was wearing my girlfriend's dress. The rest of the band never knew I was planning on wearing it. I just whipped it out, as you would do if you were in the Mothers of Invention, as we were tuning our guitars before going onstage.

What effect has all this had on your current band, The Nectarine No 9?

Well, I can definitely say The Nectarine No 9 have been massively influenced by Fire Engines, and on The Nectarine No 9's formation I think that was when I personally rediscovered faith in my inabilities, and my fellow gang members responded positively to that

So, finally, is another Fire Engines show completely out of the question?

Let's just say, if someone was to offer to fly us to New York on Concorde to support the original Richard Hell and the Voidoids line-up at Max's Kansas City, we wouldn't rule out the possibility.

Unfortunately, readers, we'll have to take that as a no. Max's no longer exists, the Voidoids' gifted guitarist Robert Quine is no longer with us, and Concorde is no longer in service – but you never know…