

A Dodgy History



by Stuart Jones

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As a Brighton schoolboy in the 1950s Gary Turner was head chorister and soloist at St Peters, Brighton Parish church, also attending The Royal School of Church Music at Addington Palace (near Croydon) before the first of three musical seductions – skiffle – claimed him for its own and in his mid-teens he played a tea-chest bass with other like-minded mates around town. By the time art school beckoned, (early 1960s) he moved on to jazz, performing at local events playing his own hand-made instrument vaguely based on a euphonium. This bizarre musical sculpture was the first of a series of such inventions.

As the decade glided into the era of crushed velvet, mind-expanding substances and all things flower, Gary attended a seminal gig on Brighton pier by the Syd Barrett-led Pink Floyd (1967) - the second of those crucial musical seductions. Chatting to the band after the gig, Syd handed a sugar lump to Gary who began tripping for the first time. This inspired him to join a group himself, which after a few years and line-up changes resulted in High Time, with Dave Owen on guitar. Favouring the West Coast sound from the states, High Time were the vehicle for Gary's next innovative idea, an electric violin created by grafting the neck of a guitar onto the body of a violin.

Meanwhile in London, Doug Potter had also toyed with skiffle, finding his way on rudimentary guitar in various line-ups, invariably led by his twin brother. In the early sixties Doug was a big fan of bands such as the High Numbers, Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. He began concentrating properly on the guitar when moving to Sussex University in Brighton during autumn 1965 before eventually returning to the capitol in the late sixties, when, inspired by the music of Roland Kirk, he invested in a saxophone.

In 1972 Doug moved back to Brighton, got a daytime job and continued to play music at parties and other social functions until 1976, when following a chat with friends at work one day he was introduced to Gary Turner through their mutual pal Dave Owen, who worked alongside Doug. Dave

and Gary's band, High Time, had split up around this period, aided and abetted by Gary's third and most incendiary of those musical seductions mentioned earlier: seeing the Sex Pistols. In the glum aftermath of a divorce, Doug Potter felt it was time to get something going, musically, and stamp an indelible impression on the world. He and Gary got on well immediately, and although Doug had tentatively written a few songs at this stage, they played covers, mostly Lou Reed songs.

They were joined on drums by Gary's pal from art school Charlie Zuber, a talented artist who now worked at Sussex University, and gigged locally as Jetslag, rehearsing in Gary's sculpture studio in Brighton. Charlie Zuber had always wanted to be in a band, but apart from mucking about with school friends, Jetslag was his first gigging group. His influences musically were such gifted sticksmen as Charlie Watts and Ian Dury and the Blockheads' Charlie Charles. With Charlie as his first name, Mr Zuber could surely do no wrong.

The band's name was briefly changed to just the Slags, under which a handful of live dates went ahead, but something was amiss: Dave hated punk and wanted to do his own material, which was still heavily West Coast inspired and unsuitable for 1977.

The other three were forced to give him the heave-ho, after which Doug suggested the name the Dodgems, "it was a self-deprecating thing really, we weren't very good to begin with, so I thought of the opposite thing to groups who were named after flashy, vast motors, the Cadillacs, the Fabulous Thunderbirds and so on. Also we lived in Brighton so of course the fun fair, end-of-the-pier type thing was relevant too."

The newly christened Dodgems were now a three-piece, rehearsing in the Vault under the Resource Centre in Brighton alongside other seminal local punk outfits such as Smeggy and the Cheesy Bits, Nicky and the Dots and the Piranhas, who they became friendly with. Gary and Doug ditched the cover versions and began writing more direct material.

When in conversation with Rick Blair, who worked at the Resource Centre,

they heard of his plans to put together a self-funded compilation album of the best Brighton punk bands, based in the Vault, on his own label Attrix Records. Rick invited the Dodgems to take part and in late 1978 they recorded four tracks at the Paul Milo Studios in Brighton – basically a front room with mattresses on the walls for sound proofing.

Two songs were featured on the ‘Vaultage 78’ LP, Charlie Zuber’s hilarious ‘I Don’t Care’ and Doug’s witty, creepy classic, ‘Lord Lucan is Missing.’ When John Peel played this track to death on his globally popular radio show, the group knew they had to get a keyboard player to flesh out the sound and duly advertised in the local paper and following a good deal of auditioning they acquired Paul Birchall.

The group recorded five tracks in Archipelago Studios in London during April 1979 from which Attrix released ‘Science Fiction’ and ‘Hard Shoulder’ as a single towards the end of the year. The Dodgems made many memorable live appearances, some supporting the Piranhas and UK Subs at the Top Rank Suite.

Then came an offer for a one-off single for a new independent label in London called Criminal Records. They wanted the band to re-record ‘Lucan,’ which they duly did, the session produced by the infamous Jonathan King, no less. This was a considerable success, hitting number two in the NME independent charts in July 1980. The Dodgems continued with a series of recording sessions between May and November 1980 at studios in Luton, Sussex and London.

At this point Charlie Zuber had a golden opportunity to emigrate to Fiji and a job with excellent prospects and he decided this was a better choice than the insecurities of life with a punk band in the UK. But before anything further could be done with any of the recordings they had amassed towards the end of 1980, Criminal Records, true to their name, went bankrupt and the group were left high and dry, splitting up during 1981 and going their separate ways as punk became post-punk and then transformed into the bland pap of New Romanticism.

Twenty-seven years later, whilst looking through a pile of master tapes at the Brighton home of Attrix Records co-founder Julie Blair in order to root out unissued tracks for downloadable mp3s for the superb Punk Brighton website, I stumbled across the original tape of the Archipelago session and realised there were a number of unheard out-takes that could be prepared for release.

Via email I contacted Doug Potter, who sent me CDR's of all the material. On listening I discovered the tracks to be sublime new-wave pop, liberally sprinkled with fantastic melodies, glistening guitars and witty lyrics and there was enough for a comprehensive compilation album. Discussions with the group (again via email) resulted in the agreement that I would remaster everything, which was a long process, but a labour of love. You are now holding the result in your hands.

In retrospect, the music on this disc proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Dodgems, as a studio band, could more than hold their own with the Piranhas and the Chefs as one of the major Brighton new wave acts.

Stuart Jones, Brighton, England, July 2008.