

A History of the Relatives

by Mark Gresty

I hardly knew him, except as the bass player in Fan Club (I think), but I'd like to thank Paul Martin for the inspiration for this. (Visit two of Paul's other bands, Fan Club and Molesters). Since he wrote so eloquently - not to mention flatteringly - on the history of the Relatives (and myself), I thought I'd write a brief piece giving the inside dope on the early stages of the band.

As Paul says in his piece, it is one view only. I will try to be as impartial as I can, but bias and memory will affect it. If your great site is to mean anything as people's history, everyone should give their side of the story to get the full picture. Maybe Charlie and Rick can do pieces too. The Beginning.

When The Molesters dissolved in a mixture of indifference and acrimony in summer 1979, John Ellis (singer), Carol Reeves (singer) and I (bassist) agreed to start a new project. Punk/new wave's heyday was over - we could feel ourselves becoming dinosaurs, totally counter to the spirit of the times. You couldn't sustain outrage - it was childish to try. The future pointed to synths and an expanding sonic and lyrical palette. The Molesters had lacked dynamics and sonic variety.

The picking off of easy targets in songs was also passé. The new band was to be called Colour Climax. John and Carol had a keyboard and were writing melodies and words. They wanted to move in a Numanesque direction. I wasn't thrilled by the prospect but kept an open mind.

We needed a guitarist: I started going to gigs to scope the talent. Someone, probably Dick Damage, then a semi-permanent fixture in my flat, suggested we try Charlie McLenahan, then in Siren. I didn't know him or them but arranged to meet. I think Dick brought him round. We got on OK but were as different as we could be: straight and gay, young and older, Catholic and agnostic etc but there was a vibe. We both liked trios and were really into the Police and the Jam.

Our styles complemented each other. I took him to meet John and Carole and they were OK. He was a bit unnerved at seeing them in the bath and later when a wet Carole, still naked and dripping, came to stand by the keyboard to see what we were doing and play along. We chucked out the old songs and spent a few weeks trying to write new material but it wasn't going anywhere. We couldn't fit with what J and C wanted to do. I told Charlie I wasn't happy, one day as we walked home. I thought we could make a good band. I had never written complete songs but had co-written in the Molesters with John (probably one reason for the break up!), The End of Civilisation, Young & Rich, Miss USA, Modern Homes and a large part of PMW.

I had contributed lyric ideas for some of these and John had used them so I figured that Charlie and I could probably write songs together. He had after all written a lot of the music for Siren. He immediately agreed so we split from the others and started hanging out together to write. We didn't have a drummer but Charlie, ever the wide-boy, turned up one day with a big grin on his face and announced that we now had a great drummer. Who was I to doubt him? This was Rick. I was interested to learn his surname from Paul's excellent piece as I don't think I ever knew it!

He was a boat builder from Shoreham and had fibre-glassed the inside of his drum shells so they were louder. Understatement! They were a fucking explosion going off next to me. My ears

rang every night. He was very punchy and focused in his playing. I liked playing with Wayne in the Molesters but Rick's style was so heavy that I was free to go any place I liked musically. He had a great way of getting right inside the rhythm of a song, like great drummers like Dave Grohl. His kick drum did most of my job! If you played his rhythm you could hear the song. We settled on the name early on - I thought it important to have an identity. It was, of course, intended as an ironic statement on my ambivalence about families.

The Middle.

Charlie and I wrote quickly. We cannibalized songs we had done with John and Carole (Scandinavian Kids, Living At The Plaza), rejigged Siren songs (Siren's Wailing) and wrote new ones ferociously (The Machine Gun On The Corner, The Secret Police, Let's Rip Off The Black Man, Beat Of The Street, Send You Home, Modern Noise etc). The Molesters had been dark and slightly mondo pervo in both lyrics and music but we were much more serious.

I had just come out and it had sparked all my thinking in a left leaning direction, as Paul says - but I wasn't a member of anything political. Also I could never write about love. I thought pop songs should contain some serious content - though not all ours did, eg Bald Is Beautiful, a humorous comment on my tonsorial condition. Writing with Charlie was dead easy; he was a fertile source of interesting sounds, again, as Paul has said. He would get excited over a single chord - our songwriting often sprang from one chord which he had figured out and played to me. I was working - not as Paul said at American Express (he has confused me and the Molesters' guitarist) - illegally since I was signing on - part-time in a solicitor's office typing filing rolodex cards for a pittance. I used down time to type lyrics of songs. Sometimes I would take these straight to rehearsal with the others - we would write a song then and there.

When Paul says he couldn't play and sing bass parts and words simultaneously, he's right, it was difficult. Neither could I! But I had the advantage that I was learning each line as I was writing it and writing them in my own style. By the time the band knew each song, I could do both parts with ease - all we had to do was to get the dynamics right. I remember the nights we wrote Have You Seen My Friend, Organisation and Back On The Old Campsite (so difficult I never managed to learn to play and sing it at the same time - live I had to simplify it.) We knew absolutely we had written some great songs and couldn't wait to play them to people. It was completely fucking magic. Charlie and I walked home among the late-night human flotsam on Western Road like we were walking on air. I'll always remember. They are among my proudest moments.

Through September, October and November we practiced several times a week in the Vault. I think Charlie blagged our room there. He did a lot of things like that. He was great at getting things or finding things or people. The Vault was never a comfortable place to do anything being dirty, dusty and decrepit but it felt industrious: we felt part of something. Bands would surreptitiously check each other out while they were coming and going and if you had a great new song you would belt it out the best you could if you knew someone was listening.

In early December we played our first gig but I don't remember an exact date. It was at the Alhambra. I invited a lot of friends along, many of whom were not experienced gig goers. They all expected it to be loud and so were not fazed by the awesome volume. Many of the regulars were shocked at the sound, I recall, and the bar staff kept telling us to turn it down. The problem was Rick's drums were so loud we never had to amplify them.

They came through the vocal mikes anyway. Our problem was containing the drums so we could get the guitar and bass to an acceptable volume. After that, and every successive gig, my throat was shredded by the demands of singing over this huge noise. I liked the fact that we

played these catchy little songs, obviously written to be pop, at three-fold of pain volume! The Executives, who used to do our sound, once told us that a young heavy metal band with about 3 guitarists bragged that they were the loudest band in the area. They told them to come and see our little three piece as we were the loudest band they knew! The gig was a success so we felt elated. You never know what you can do until you step out from behind other's shadows.

The great thing was that right from the start the band worked. It felt right, like it was meant to be. You have to be a musician to know what that means or how good it feels. Charlie and I made a great team, often playing the various parts of a chord between us or just suggesting the chord by a combination of harmonies. Years later, I know a lot more about harmonic theory, I still cannot say what some of the chords were. Charlie would start with notes on his great black Telecaster – I'd find words which suggested a melody. The rhythm would come and each line took us some place else. Rick and I also worked well together as a rhythm section - his strength would free me to concentrate on singing or playing bass counter melodies. We would write things and then remove as much as we could. Sometimes there was just guitar and drums and they worked well together too. All the parts fitted together perfectly.

I loved that band. It is difficult to remember details now but I was so proud of what we did. We had an esprit de corps. Even though we were so very different, we respected each other. We didn't have a lot of fans we knew about but we knew we were respected by other musicians and we worked hard every gig. That band is still my yardstick for musical achievement and success. I was telling my current musical accomplice that we used to have a mantra that a successful gig was one where we were invited back even though they knew none of our songs.
The End.

We played around Brighton and the South Coast all through late 1979 and 1980 everywhere we could. The problem was that gigs didn't pay much, we were living hand to mouth and the problems of poverty were mounting up. I had had no full time job since leaving a low paid catering porter's job at the University to play full time with the Molesters. It was depressing. I had to boil up old strings to get some life into them. I had rent arrears and a bunch of violent junkies down-stairs. Life seemed to be spiraling out of control.

One of the problems was my ambivalence to trying an assault on London – though I never explained this at the time. I did not have the confidence to take us there. My fault - I think I failed the other two in this regard. I was not intended to take on the music business. Besides it was changing - I could see it coming. The New Wave was only accommodated via its dilution into power pop and what was to become new romanticism. Video was already a going concern – friends in the Space Monkeys were signed up by a company and told to lose 10 pounds in order to look good in videos. I was not videogenic – too old, too bald, too gay and not sexy enough. Only Rick had any goods in the looks department.

We recorded two demos, one in Telecom Studios in Portsmouth, crappy sounding, thin and brittle but clear (Zero Hour, Beat of the Street and Living in The 60s) and a much more interesting one in someone's front room in Brighton. I forget his name but he was a whiz and we had a great day. Stoked on spliff and house hospitality, we put down interesting versions of Organisation, Have You Seen My Friend, and Back On The Old Campsite. I still have all these. I had them cleaned up and transferred onto CD a few years ago. If anyone wants one, I am sure I could oblige in exchange for postal costs.... We probably sent these out to people but if we did we got no response. I felt uneasy about trading on past glories and using contacts like John Peel for a leg up. Hence, starting small time and locally.

We played around 20 gigs in our 8 months – I am guessing. It could be more or less. Maybe

Charlie or Rick could give a more accurate number. I was too busy enjoying it to keep count. I had done a training course in TEFL and had part time jobs in teaching but the prevailing ethos at the time was that you were no use to schools unless you had experience. That meant going to Southern Europe to ply your trade on hapless Spanish, Italians and Greeks. I had a contact in Greece so, having grown tired of being poor and the misery of living in Britain, I felt it was wrong to hold Charlie and Rick back. I told them I was leaving. I sold everything I had to buy a ticket to Greece, eventually landing in Athens with an address and about £20. I remember our last gig at the Alhambra. Rick was in a bad way, cut up literally and metaphorically over his girlfriend, Judy, having left him. (Hello, Judy, I still have the guitar round my neck!) It was chaotic and his drums were blood spattered at the end. We played ok and it felt very emotional. When it was over it felt like my world had fallen apart. The gig's chaos no doubt created this impression as much as anything else.

I spent 2 years in Greece where I got a new band together (Romance! – similarly ironic!) with some Greek guys playing some of the old songs and new ones I wrote there. When I returned I went back to Liverpool, felt too old to play in a band any more and got involved with gay politics and the social scene and running a small cooperative language school. In 1993 I went to work in Saudi Arabia and found a thriving musical scene – against all the odds. The first time I walked into one of the British bars in Saudi, it looked like a scene from LiveAid. I had never seen so much expensive gear at an amateur gig. I was gobsmacked. Then a 'band' came on: they were a talentless bunch of no hopers: all that money and gear, no ability and not a single thing worth saying. I thought how the Relatives struggled on with no money and our gear falling apart or borrowed and nearly cried.

Nowadays, I still play but have taken to playing guitar. I live in Oman and teach here. I play in the local Sheraton hotel and try to do a respectable job of playing fast and loose with other people's songs without seeming too spineless! Last year I got a great red Telecaster. Funny that.... The band is called TwoCan – we play predominantly jazz and rhythm and blues type stuff. Quiet but with integrity I like to think. It ain't Merv and the Magictones anyway! Damian, my guitarist, is a Goan guy who is really good though much more conventional than Charlie was!

As for the future, my lover is Sri Lankan so I shall be retiring there in 5 years if they let me stay here that long to save the money. I have already got a great drummer and guitarist lined up for when I start playing there.

Highlights of the old band? Well everything but playing a gig with Pete Townshend was a good one – again thanks to Charlie's ability to blag! The tapes were pretty good - I still listen to them and perform Organisation sometimes. It was a gas playing with the guys. I hope you are both OK and happy. In general it was great to be part of such a rich local scene. When you think of all those bands, so different, so full of character, no clones, someone shoulda supported it more actively. Nowadays they would. Think of Seattle. But the punk/new wave scene was barely tolerated back then. Anyway, as others have said, this is a great site and good on you for putting it together and maintaining it.

If anyone wants to contact me they can at markgresty@hotmail.com or at 00-968-99896676. I'd like to know what other people are doing.