

## **Ian Smith RIP**

I was shocked and stunned to get some appalling news yesterday; a phone call from a mutual friend telling me that Ian Smith, former songwriter and singer with Birds With Ears, had committed suicide.

There are no details yet - I don't know when this happened or under what circumstances.

Part of the reason I'm so shocked was that, despite not having met up with Ian since about 1988. I can still remember his upbeat outlook on life, his humour and his overwhelming confidence.

What can have happened in his life to bring him to such a decision?

I first met Ian in late 1980, after he and his art students pals - collectively known as Birds With Ears - handed a demo tape to Rick and Julie Blair and they in turn played it to me. Julie said at the time, 'They're either insane or quite amazing.'

Suitably puzzled, Rick and Julie went to see them play live and emerged as fans.

After the Chefs moved to London and I had finished my time with them as their manager, I also got hooked on the disturbing-but-fun songs of Ian Smith and Billy Cowie.

The level of musicianship was awesome (these were young students) and the compositions had something odd about them, they were dark, atmospheric and very funny in places.

And so I became the manager of Birds With Ears.

They built up a big following in Brighton: the live shows were extraordinary affairs. The tall, imposing figure of Ian at stage front, ranting away, clad in his unique bird-shit jacket, as the band roared through their set night after night was quite an experience.

Eventually we got the green light to go to a 16-track studio (Alvic, in West Kensington) in London for a week and record an album for Attrix records.

And a memorable week it proved to be.

Every evening following the days toil we would reconvene at a pub near the studio where much booze was consumed and general merriment ensued, sing-songs around a piano. I felt I got quite close to the band during the week but especially to Ian, who shared my love of Monty Python, the Goons and above all Vivian Stanshall. I recall him making me laugh with bizarre anecdotes and manic face-pulling while we got a late tube train to Terry Newbury's house, where we were staying (Terry produced the album). I was in actual physical pain from these antics.

Ian was gifted in so many ways, at all sorts of levels...he could have been a fine actor, dancer, stage director or stand-up comedian.

He managed to change his vocals at will whilst recording, creating a hyper-squeaky falsetto for the track 'Masterfool' (that's all Ian, no pitch-bending was done); delivering 'Invitation' with a velvety but threatening croon; 'Danny Kaye' with a kind of early form

of rap; 'Wonky Bonks' with two different vocals (one spoken quietly, the other shouted) mixed together as one; 'Emotions' with a curiously scary, theatrical voiceover.

Those who were lucky enough to see the group live would surely never forget this remarkable performer, eyebrows raised quizzically, pupils distended behind his trademark Eric Morecombe spectacles, screaming surrealist nightmares over a powerful rock backing as, with arms aloft, he mimed hanging from - highly dangerous! - laser beams from the stage lighting.

Ex BWE co-singer and saxophonist Laurie Morris told me recently about an early gig where she was amazed to see Ian, standing beside her, pouring lighter fuel onto his bare hands and lighting it with a match as the group reached the climax of the fantastic 'Brilliant Tonight,' a song about a fire-obsessed arsonist. None of the band knew he had planned to do this. Of course, he burned his hands badly and it was never done again but it's an example of his total commitment to a kind of dark stagecraft, of his desire to push the envelope.

I shall always remember him as a talented singer, a gifted lyricist and, more than anything else, a lovely man.

*Stuart Jones, August 2014*