

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The Boomtown Rats came burning out of Dublin in the late '70s, railing against the Irish establishment to the audible gasps of the nation's more conservative elements. With their remastered back catalogue having been recently reissued, Bob Geldof here looks back on a period of notoriety, controversy and personal angst, and also reflects on his ongoing efforts to highlight the issue of Fathers' Rights. Interview by Peter Murphy. Photography by Mark Harrison. Page 1/6 <prev **1** [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) next>

Bob Geldof's passport may list his occupation as musician, but whether he likes it or not, the history books will record a much more complex animal. Yes, there's Boomtown Rat Bob, Vegetarian Of Love Bob and Happy Club Bob, but there's also Modest Bob, Mouth Almighty Bob, Saint Bob, Live Aid Bob, Bob The Debt Relief Campaigner, Bob the Fathers' Rights Activist and Bob the post-punk Ted Hughes wearied by the Shakespearian drama that was the disintegration of his marriage to the late Paula Yates.

That said, the man's recorded body of work – from the Rats' eponymous debut to Sex, Age And Death – reflects that complexity. And if the straightest route to any songwriter's heart is through his work, Geldof rarely needs prompting when it comes to the wider implications of his songs.

The premise on which he's talking to Hot Press is to promote the re-release of The Boomtown Rats' back catalogue, six re-mastered albums on CD.

The Rats were a band who always got a raw deal from punk historians who failed to grasp that the sextet never claimed to represent some new Year Zero a la The Pistols and The Clash, but rather were a hoodlum rock 'n' roll outfit blooded in Irish pubs and ballrooms that somehow managed the feat of maturing into chart-afflicting pop chameleons. Despite their relative youth, the band were beholden to a long lineage: the kinetic energy of the 60s blues and R&B boomers, The Who, the observational pop of early Kinks and Stones, the lyricism

of Van and Dylan, the wired economy of Dr Feelgood, the joyous ire of Marley, the arty edge of Roxy and Bowie.

But they were also more than an identikit construct of cherry-picked pop bits. Listening back to the first album, what strikes the listener is how the early Rats would've been at ease in the Max's/Bowery scene populated by such disparate pre-punk poetic sprits as Patti Smith, Debbie 'n' Chris, Jim Carroll and Lou Reed, as well as elder patrons like Dylan and Bruce. As the ever astute Charles Shaar Murray points out in his liner notes to the band's debut, "Go back and check out photos and film clips of the early days of punk, and you find a broad church: a startling variety of look and sound which was only retrospectively flattened into the two-dimensional stereotype of leather jacket, mohican, bondage pants and ramalamadolequeue lyrics."

Later on, as New Wave opened out into a bewildering array of synth-pop aesthetes and white funk fashionistas, The Rats proved curious and opportunistic players on *The Fine Art Of Surfacing*, then strategically positioning themselves somewhere among the Ze acts and Two-Toned, zoot-suited mambo kings on *Mondo Bongo* and *V Deep*.

But no matter what threads they wore, Geldof's songs were always about something, be it the ghost town Dublin of early street symphonies like 'Joey's On The Street Again', the pre-Columbine psychodrama of 'I Don't Like Mondays', or the Fuck Off To All That of 'Banana Republic' and 'Never In A Million Years'.

The exhumation of these Rat droppings coincides with Geldof's Brits Lifetime Achievement Award. Ask the singer what the award means to him, and he'll say this:

"In terms of me insisting that all I've ever been is a player, that's it. Music is something I must do, business is something I need to do, and Africa is something I have to do. That's the way it breaks down in my life."

We catch up with him in a London hotel, numb in the rump from two days of press chores.

Interview any musician after they've gone through the trauma of re-mastering their back catalogue...

- I loved it! -

...and they'll usually talk about experiencing some sort of unexpected revelation or new perspective on the past. Anything like that happen to you?

Well, a sort of epiphany: I was in a great band. And it's very cool to be at 53 and realise that when you were a kid you were in a great band. Genuinely that's what I feel. I actually just blurted it out doing the Mojo thing yesterday, and I suddenly realised that that's actually true. Y'know, I knew some of the tracks were good, but obviously I'd forgotten lots of it, and the ones I thought, "Nyaaah" were far better retrospectively. And also what was nice was that some of them could come out today and be contemporaneous, so that timelessness is revelatory.

Page 1/6 <prev **1** [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) next>

'Mary Of The Fourth Form' from the first album is a jailbait Lolita song in the old bluesman mode, or maybe a brattier version of 'Cypress Avenue' by Van. One wonders if a 27-year old would get away with singing about a schoolgirl these days...

I would've been 24, 25, when I wrote that, but it was a sort of... the whole thing is a Van Morrison 'Gloria' thing meets John Lee Hooker, but it was about someone specific. It was about this girl and she was gorgeous and I wanted her and you extrapolate out from that. Would you get away with that now? No, but would John Lee Hooker or Muddy Waters get away with 'I'm A Man', coming out as a serious artist and singing those things as your debut? Would a 27-year-old get away with writing 'Teenage Kicks'? No. So they are of their moment in time.

The 'street' trilogy of 'Joey's On The Street Again', 'Rat Trap' and 'When The Night Comes' spans the first three albums. It seems like the guy in those songs was trying to escape from a stifling domestic environment, which is an interesting contrast with your current status as the head of a family of girls.

Those songs are about getting out; they're not about getting out of family. It wasn't about how family life was curtailing because I didn't know family life. My family life didn't exist because of conditions in our house (the death of Bob's mother at a young age), so I never wrote paean to the family, and that's probably why, subsequently, now I do

have family, I see how it works and how it can be of benefit rather than a constraint. And anyway, you'd want to be a fucking idiot if you didn't think family is a basic block you can use as your launch platform in effect.

So you don't hold with Larkin's famous line and the cult of the dysfunctional family?

They do fuck you up, your Mum and Dad, but that's the function of family perhaps. The point about being a parent is to say, "These are the values you should have." The point about being a teenager is kicking against those and saying, "I don't agree" and finding your way from those values. The failure of the Mum and Dad is either insisting on their values being inculcated in the kid and making them conform on the one hand, or alternatively having no values at all that are instructive.

Was it difficult for your girls to go through a natural period of rebellion given that you don't seem to fit either category?

I don't think the question applies to be honest because our family life has been so fucking... dramatic, if not tragic, that would be more the question you'd have to ask. I give them plenty to kick against me. I'll do the whole thing about, "Body piercings and studs are so naff and vulgar," and they'll say, "God you're so lame" and, "You haven't a clue" and all that sort of stuff.

The problem with music is it's a hard one for them, because generally I'll listen to anything and say, "That's not bad - what's that?" One of them likes The Strokes, The Thrills, The White Stripes, The Pistols, The Ramones, The Kinks, The Who, so she gets the linear line. The other one is far more broad church, so it'll be Eminem and Britney, both of whom she's obsessed with. The eldest one would be of her generation I guess, Nirvana, a lot of hip-hop, Counting Crows, either the song end of stuff or hip-hop. And the little one just likes any old bollocks.

As is her prerogative, being the youngest.

Yeah! (laughs)

The Fine Art Of Surfacing album was The Rats' commercial - if not artistic - peak, but a lot of the songs suggest you weren't in the healthiest state of mind at the time. 'Someone's Looking

At You' in particular seems to address a person wrestling with some sort of paranoid neurosis.

By The Fine Art Of Surfacing it was very heady heights. We were a massive fucking band; I mean people kind of forget that. There were hits fucking everywhere save America, big gigs, big records and it's getting to me a bit. And the template really is that song 'Wind Chill Factor'. "It's one of those days where I don't like myself/But I get along with me okay/I'll slip beneath these sheets and I'll shiver here a while/I find that happening more frequently these days".

Really I'm very upfront about things throughout this. That was what was going on, and it was a feeling of isolation within the band because I was writing all the songs and I'd no fuckin' wish to, because the strain was becoming really intense. I was keeping a big organisation going, I was keeping the guys and their dependents, the crew, their dependents, the office, big staff. But financially of course, you're better off, because you're writing the songs, so that does become an issue, even if it's not articulated. And also I kept thinking, "Where do we go from here?" Every step, the next step is failure, and I was freaking out.

So 'Someone's Looking At You', I was really doubting myself, the press were all saying, "He's a cunt, the songs are cuntish," and yet we were all selling fucking millions of records. I'm really doubting anything I think or believe in, and that record is fucking full of that. This art of surfacing, we're up there but how do you stay afloat? In 'Fall Down' (from Mondo Bongo) which is a song I like, it says, "I might storm and rage and thunder/Oh Christ but then later in the incinerator/Something inside seems to fall asunder/I need to scream every now and again/Try to understand it's only me/Not only cripples have a need for crutches/And if they ever take you away from me - fall down." And that's Paula.

It's hard not to think of Paula when listening to 'Diamond Smiles', a Spector-esque lament for a party girl who commits suicide. It must be quite a painful song to revisit.

Was it you who said to me before that that's bizarrely prescient? Some journalist wrote that. And I really did get freaked out – well not freaked out, but I just thought, "Fuckin' hell," because it is. And now when I fuckin' do it, that's all that's in my head. Yesterday doing interviews a guy brought it up and said, flatteringly, that probably his favourite couplet in rock is "The girl in the cake/Jumped out too soon by mistake". He was talking about Paula in that context. And possibly she was in my head as a model for the girl. The girl was real, it was just a tiny little story in the paper, but sad. But now revisiting it when I do it live – 'cos that and the song 'Dave' are the songs that are shouted out most frequently – it's really odd, even the little chorus, "She did it with grace/She did it with style/She did it all before she died/I remember Diamond Smiles." Yeah, I'm sad when I do it.

In your autobiography Is That It? you said that you often resort to workaholism as a means of combating depression.

My depressions aren't so much... depression's too heavy a word. I get very down and y'know, boredom is the key to it as I've said. It's a melancholic disposition, and once you're in there you get to all sorts of secret places, and that's best articulated through the record Sex, Age And Death. Certainly, I think being depressed is absolutely part of the human condition, it has to be, if there's joy there's its opposite, and it's something you ride if you possibly can.

Obviously manic depression is a whole other ballgame, but I would be loathe to take a prescription pill – though I do understand that without them people just cannot get through life, in which case people should definitely take them. But I think Prozac is a lethal drug, I've several friends who just haven't made it by taking Prozac. I genuinely believe that it was 'cos of the Prozac that they went over the top. But obviously for some people it works pretty well. But if somebody dies, if something happens to you, there is a normal process of depression, it is part of being human, and some people view it as a learning experience etc. So you go through it, and it's better to examine it than pretend it doesn't exist by taking a pill or something.

Do you think the disintegration of your marriage tainted your view of the institution?

I've never thought about it. That's what happens to me, I run into a situation and bingo, I start looking into what's happening to me and why does that happen. Alan from the band, the Vegetarians Of Love, he said, "You know what Geldof, when you die I'm going to pay a fucking stonemason to engrave on your headstone the single word, 'Why?'" It's like you asked me about the depression thing: you grope towards an understanding of whatever it is your going through, and it's not personal, there are forces in play around you, and you seek to understand them and that way you can go on.

Devil's advocate question: does the availability of divorce undermine the will to stick it out in a marriage?

Divorce is a by-product of the fact that maybe the nuclear unit is gone. Opportunistic law promotes divorce. I know this shit backwards I'm afraid, I'm part of Cambridge University's socio-legal family research group – there's a mouthful! It could be the nuclear family is changing, in which case we still haven't worked out what it's changing to. And part of that is, what is the point of having children if you don't have the privilege of bringing them up? The divorce laws are based on the older economic models, and they sort of take on board that women can't work 'cos they can't enter the workplace, and that's rubbish, especially as 51% of the workforce in Britain are women. 90% of the divorces are initiated by women. That is really odd. Why? What's going on? What's the great discontent at the heart of it?

So you go into all that, and frankly it's fascinating, but the law itself promotes divorce because it's opportunistic, and there are many, many, many studies, and I wrote an essay about it and took lots of quotes from named studies that I put at the back: if you're going into a divorce and you're going to end up with the kids, and as a result of getting the kids you get the house, and as a result of getting the kids and the house you're going to have to be supported, why wouldn't you? And it's nothing to do with gender. If the law was as skewed towards men as women, why wouldn't they do it? And they fucking do in fact. So it's got nothing to do with that, it's got to do with structural differences and you've got to just realign those structures.

The twin pincers of authority that you were railing about in the Rats era were church and state. More recently, a lot of Fathers' Rights advocates such as John Waters have suggested there was another influence on the culture – a form of radical feminism inherited from 1970s America, which exerted itself on family matters via such institutions as the Health Board,

shutting out fathers from the business of parenting. What's your take on that?

I'm not sure. I don't know the Irish situation, so anything I say please bear in mind it's to do with Britain. I mean John is just fantastic, so that is a given. There is a very solid lobby campaign here (in England), Women's Aid and that, who do have a lot of say in the agenda. But I think that fathers anyway, because of the economic structures, remove themselves largely from the family. Y'know, it was always a given that dad would come home at six and fuck off at half-seven. So that was the way the economy worked. That's relatively recent; obviously it's about a hundred years old, that sort of nine-to-five stuff. But as the economy began to change, so did the function of the family, the way it worked, and what's largely happened is politics haven't caught up with that, whereas John's right, it's still mired in some nonsensical '60s/'70s model.

So what has changed, how and why?

Essentially the change came, and correctly and properly so, when women finally achieved their biological and financial independence concomitantly. One without the other is meaningless, but together it allowed the freedom to reproduce whenever, and the financial independence if they did reproduce to be able to take care of themselves, and that completely altered the relationship with men, which, y'know, crudely can be put as being sex in exchange for security. That pertained hitherto. And once that cardinal relationship changed for the better, then it had to be renegotiated and the ones who are mainly affected by that of course are the children. And whereas women had to fight to find their way into the workforce, men are now fighting to reclaim their place in the family structure.

So what about fathers trying to negotiate the legal process?

Insidiously, I don't know about Ireland, but in England these courts are secret, you can't see reports about you, and there's always the underlying assumption that somehow men are brutes. They've got this big thing sticking out from between their legs that's uncontrollable. They're hairy, they've muscles and they're not able to do (parental duties) – complete shite. And if you think about the menu, think about your brothers, your mates, your boyfriends, your lovers, your uncles, your children, think about all those boys that you know – is that your experience of men? And if the answer to that is no, then what the fuck are you talking about?

There is not a single extant study that supports all the arguments against men being with their children. It's absolute bollocks. As I said on telly, morons can bring up a fuckin' child, in fact they do! I've never understood this How To Bring Up A Child stream of literature; it's fuckin' easy. Lots of patience, lots of love, that's it in effect. You fuckin' crack open the tin of beans, you do the bath, you read the bedtime story, you make sure they get to school with the homework done, on time and clean... they grow up! It's a load of bollocks, y'know?

How do you feel about Fathers For Justice dressing in superhero costumes and climbing public buildings in order to highlight their cause?

Men who are not given any voice in this because of the secret nature of the courts, what they're left with is dressing up ridiculously, but at least using humour to try and draw attention to their kids. They're drowning, not waving. That's what they're doing when they're climbing those cranes and dressing up because they are literally being rendered voiceless, so they're going to be noticed. And so long as they stay funny and legal, I'm supporting them. I refused to attend a Parliamentary Select Committee on the issue because they wouldn't hear Fathers For Justice. They can fuck off. Why do they think those guys do it? Simply because they are deprived of the voice of talking to a Parliamentary Select Committee. Fuckin' idiots. Not Fathers For Justice, the other twats. Anyway, go back to The Rats, 'cos that's what I'm supposed to be fucking talking about.

Well, it's interesting that a lot of the targets you took pot shots at in 'Banana Republic' still exist, it's just the names have changed. Substitute banks for churches and so on.

Well, I don't know, y'see. I'm asked about it and I decline to comment because as I've said often, I've got one of those time-lapse views of Ireland now. Y'know on an Attenborough nature programme, when you see a beautiful lily opening and closing in seconds, that's my view of Ireland. I come, snap, I go, so everything is sped up, and I'm not sure I understand the basis on which change happens anymore, so I shut the fuck up about it.

But the immediately apparent things about it are the new vulgarity which has replaced the clichéd welcoming. There's still hail-fellow-well-met, but there is a sort of overt racism, I noticed that. I don't want to be critical in that area because I think, "You're one of those cunts who

doesn't live there who comes back..." Johnny Rotten is the same, he comes back here (England) and makes these lame 1970s observations about contemporary Britain, and it's fuckin' embarrassing, he keeps making jokes about Thatcher and everyone's forgotten her. But where are the guys now that will take that view, who'll look at Ireland askance? I don't know; I hope they're there.

With a gun to your head, what's your favourite Rats record?

V Deep is the one that I love. Really, in the end, I just think, here's a band who know that the public won't accept them as The Boomtown Rats anymore. But nonetheless, the song 'He Watches It All', when I heard that I thought, "That's fuckin' cool." And 'Never In A Million Years' is that scream of fuck you. It marks its moment very well. I'm really astounded by the songs' complexity and the ability of these guys to play. The guys in the Rats played their fuckin' arses off. A lot of it was boredom. Once you've done 'I Don't Like Mondays' - "Oh that's what's a hit, is it? Okay, I can write fuckin' piano tunes 'til they're comin' out my hole." But The Rats didn't like anything that sounded like what we've done before. I played the original version of 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' to The Rats and they didn't really like it on the basis of we'd done something like it before.

... **continued** Page 6/6 [<prev](#) [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) **6** [next](#)>

But obviously I love the first album, 'cos here's this bunch of kids... when I listen to that I just think, "There is nothing gonna stop those crowd of guys. Nothing."

Were you wiser in those days?

Yeah. But I was so much older then. I'm younger than that now!

The re-mastered and repackaged versions of The Boomtown Rats' A Tonic For The Troops, The Fine Art Of Surfacing, Mondo Bongo, V Deep and In the Long Grass are all out now on Universal.

Peter Murphy