

I'M ASHAMED OF MY LEATHER

Claytown Trouper in shock confession! In a showdown with the most hated band in Bristol, Robin Askew uncovers the dirt the Bristol Journal missed.

"I was taking a piss at a Sandkings gig and this six-foot Brummie guy from the support band came up to me and said rather aggressively, 'You're in that Claytown Troupe aren't you?' Because I was just standing there I mumbled, 'Yes, well, I... ' at which he started off: 'Well you're fucking shite! I saw you on the Chart Show and you're just the fucking Cult!' I joked about being Ian Astbury and he got really irate, dragging me out to his mates shouting 'Look who I've got!' At this point I began to get a little worried..."

Christian Riou is lead singer in the Claytown Troupe, reluctant bearers of the 'Most Hated Band in Bristol' standard. Mention their name in local music circles and chances are the response will be a venomous, uncharitable one, which is as much a reflection on the pettiness of local musicians as it is on the Troupe's extraordinary good fortune.

Everyone knows the tale of how this pub band, best known at the time for their thoroughly mediocre blend of the worst air-punching stadium rock cliches, were suddenly snapped up by one of the world's most highly regarded record labels for a six-album development deal. Their contract was signed within hours of an Island Records talent scout having clapped eyes on them.

The most popular local prediction was that they'd be dropped within a year, once the company realised their terrible mistake. But one year on, the band's contract has been renewed in the wake of 20,000 sales of their debut LP 'Through the Veil' and the modest success of two singles, both of which scraped the lower reaches of the chart.

They wouldn't admit it, of course, but every local band with an ounce of ambition would sell their entire families into slavery to be in Claytown Troupe's position. Not that the band are simply innocent victims of a jealous backlash against the local boys who struck lucky. Many of their wounds are self-inflicted. They've acquired a reputation for feuding with other Bristolian outfits, they've frequently come across in music

press interviews as being arrogant and humourless, and - ludicrously - they've even tried to deny any resemblance between their own music and that of their mentors, The Cult.

In the latest edition of the local Red Guitar magazine, they went as far as to describe this very publication "a total pile of shit, fucking leftist fucking yuppie wankers" for publishing gently ego-deflating morsels of gossip about them.

This, then, is Claytown Troupe's Right to Reply, in which Christian (talkaholic) and bassist Paul Waterson (nods of agreement and occasional quips) will attempt to set the record straight. But first, let's hear the rest of Christian's anecdote.

"... He thought they'd attack me and, to be honest, I was really shitting myself. But they turned out to be really interested in the band. You see, this animosity is mainly a musicians' thing and they weren't musicians."

The fact that so many of his peers are keen to see Claytown Troupe fail is clearly something that perturbs him. "It's a horrible thought, isn't it? That really sickens me. But it's good in a way because it makes us want to work even harder to prove ourselves. I think it's also got something to do with the kind of music we're playing. When some bands fail people say it's a shame, but if we failed tomorrow they'd be saying 'Good riddance you bastards!' The thing is that the audiences at our gigs are really impressed by what we've done - especially around here. Those people last night were having a great time."

At a packed Bierkeller concert the night before our showdown, Claytown Troupe had given the kind of performance that silences sceptics at 200 paces. Their 101st and last gig of the year (including a stadium tour with The Cult) completed the evolution from dodgy post-Goth stodge merchants to potentially unbeatable, lean hard rockers. Material that sounded overwrought on record had finally been sparked into life during incessant touring and the potential which had previously only been evident to Island Records' sages was clear for all to see.



Christian enjoyed himself so much that he announced - untruthfully - to the 500-strong audience that Paul had just contracted his first dose of VD; a jest that didn't go down too well with Paul's mother who had turned up unexpectedly to cheer her son on.

This is hardly the sort of laddishness you'd expect from a band whose vast piles of press cuttings give the impression of an overly serious, po-faced bunch who make Morrissey seem like the life and soul of the party. Christian puts it down to inexperience. "We'd never actually done an interview until about six months ago. One minute we were sitting at home and the next we were chucked in at the deep end. We were all terrified

TROUSERS!



"Well, Venue's always been geared towards certain bands, that's well known, and there was a time when those bands were slagging us and using their friends' magazine to do it. I read that musicians' debate where old Gerald from the Blue Corners . . ." You mean Gerard from the Blue Aeroplanes? "Yeah, him. He was going on about how he'd sold more records than us, but we hadn't even released a record then. Now he's signed to a major label, which is exactly what he was slagging us for doing. But good luck to him. We don't want any more feuds with other bands."

Now they just want to get on with the "second phase" of their career, says Christian, who's well aware of the dangers ahead. The band's first single, 'Prayer', dealt with the plight of American Indians, a subject close to Christian's heart ("When people ask where we come from I always say the West Coast," he jokes) and a theme which has also proved popular with The Cult's Ian Astbury. The criticisms and unwanted comparisons in the press were as inevitable as they were obvious.

"Our attitude is that if we can say something positive we'll say it. This is going to be a difficult phase for us because we could do all these right-on interviews and say look what's happening to the ozone layer, look what's happening in Nicaragua. And then you think: oh God, I can't talk about that because I'm going to look a total prat."

One subject they all feel strongly about is the animal liberation movement. Vegetarians to a man, they've just contributed a track to a fund-raising compilation LP. Correct me if I'm wrong chaps, but isn't that a rather unsound length of cow-hide attached to Christian's sexy legs during every waking hour?

Paul buries his head in his hands, moaning, "I knew this was coming." Christian waffles half-heartedly about image and second-hand clothes before conceding reluctantly that he hasn't even managed to convince himself. "Er, we haven't really got an answer to that. It's quite embarrassing really." A short silence. The subject still hasn't changed, so Christian has another stab at it, concluding, "It's not something we're proud of but at least we're making the

effort."

After a short Spring tour, and promotion of another single from the 'Through the Veil' album, the Claytown boys troupe back into the studio to start work on their second LP, provisionally scheduled for an Autumn release. Perhaps in response to criticism of the first record, which wasn't quite as original as it might have been, they seem to be returning to their roots - even to the extent of recording a cover of Free's classic 'Heartbreaker' for a forthcoming Radio One session.

"That's the kind of stuff we've really been influenced by," says Christian reverentially. "But you can't go and play that or material by Bad Company, the Doors or Spirit and expect 17-year-olds to understand it. We're just trying to integrate those styles into our music and mention the names in interviews so maybe they'll go out and buy the original records too."

This feel for rock history has brought Claytown Troupe an audience which spans two generations, much to Christian's delight. "There are a lot of older people who were our age in the late sixties and early seventies who are, let's say, not into being normal. It's actually quite exciting to think you can also appeal to your fans' parents."

Like the followers of The Mission and New Model Army, there's a level of enthusiasm among Claytown Troupe's audience that borders on the fanatical, many of them following the band around the country from gig to gig. The fan club maintains a mailing list of 500 people and receives a new mound of mail every day. In return, supporters receive a professionally produced glossy magazine containing such invaluable information as the title of the first LP bought by guitarist Adrian 'Ben' Bennett ('Iron Butterfly Live') and reviews of every date on the last European tour.

But what inspires such devotion? "I think it's got something to do with the fact that we were all fans ourselves at one time," muses Christian. "You'd go and see a band and think, 'Wow, that must be a really incredible person up there!' But then you get older and realise they're just relatively normal people trying to do something exciting. It's not as though we're working in insurance. Maybe we will be one day . . ."



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for the first one. We just tried to be serious and pleasant. If someone asks a question, they get a straight answer. If people want Boys Own fun they can read Wonder Stuff interviews, but we're not really like that and there's no point pretending we are."

Christian also denies ever having made the comments about hating Bristol and all its musicians attributed to him in an interview he foolishly gave to the Bristol Journal. But what's this unpleasantness directed at Venue all about? At one point the band even instructed Island not to advertise their records in these pages. After a bit of goading, and a half-hearted denial that the band had ever spoken to Red Guitar, he complies.