

# Cortinas KICKS

They should have been contenders....Shane Baldwin remembers the all-too brief rise and fall of The Cortinas

As Bristol's only major first wave punk band, The Cortinas are still revered among us cider-swilling yokels, but unlike many other bands of a similar type and stature, have been all but forgotten elsewhere. This is almost certainly because they were so short-lived. When they split in 1978, The Cortinas left a recorded legacy of just two classic singles, a wonderful Peel Session, a disappointing album and some old demos and live tapes.

Eschewing the usual merry-go-round of early personnel changes, when The Cortinas formed in 1975 the line-up was, and remained to the end, Jeremy Valentine (vocals), Nick Sheppard (guitar), Mike Fewings (guitar), Dexter Dalwood (bass) and Daniel Swan (drums).

They were all still at school, and Nick recalls their first gig at a church hall in Cotham, Bristol: "We would have played all covers - that would have been in '75 - Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, James Brown...all channelled through the 60s R&B groups and the 70s pub rock groups that did the same kind of covers".

Though very young, they picked up on the nascent punk scene very quickly - some members even caught the famous Ramones show at the Roundhouse in July 1976 - and quickly began to speed things up and write their own songs.

A chance meeting with Hugh Cornwell led to a support slot at The Roxy on 22 January 1977, which in turn brought them to the attention of Miles Copeland and Mark Perry, who were planning a new label, Step Forward. The Cortinas became the label's first signings, and Perry also got them onto the front cover of the April/May issue of *Sniffin' Glue*.

In June, the raucous single Fascist Dictator/Television Families (SF 1) appeared, bringing them to the attention of John Peel, and the band were invited to record a session for his show at Maida Vale in July.

Copeland was also managing the band, and as the single sold well, quickly negotiated a major label deal with CBS. Cannily, though, as part of the deal, The Cortinas would record one more single for Step Forward, in CBS' studios. Defiant Pose!

Independence (SF 6), released in December 1977, was another belter, so the band looked set fair for their debut album.

Unfortunately, CBS had learnt no lessons from The Clash, and seemed unsure what to do with their latest punk band. The resulting album, 1978's *True Romances*, suffered from poor production, but the whole situation was just too much for a provincial band whose members were still only 16 and 17 years old.

As Mike ruefully recalls: "When we signed to CBS and got the money - not a great deal of money I must add - it changed us, before we signed we had nothing to lose and played to please ourselves, after we signed, we were worried about not being re-signed, not selling records, not being liked, how to please the A&R man, not being fashionable, jealous of other bands etc etc etc. It was an exciting time to be young though".

By the time of the album's release (along with its accompanying single Heartache), the band had already split, only reforming for two gigs to promote it.

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The band members went on to have interesting careers. Nick played with the final line-up of The Clash. Dr Jeremy Valentine is a senior lecturer at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Mike stayed in music for a while playing with people like Stewart Copeland and Brian James. Daniel moved to San Francisco and played with The Sneetches, then worked with a local management company that handled Green Day. Dexter is a renowned artist whose paintings have been exhibited in Sydney, Beverly Hills, Liverpool and the Tate and Saatchi galleries in London. Last year he had an exhibition at the Tate, Cornwall.

Happily, interest in the band has been rekindled recently thanks to Mike Darby, owner of Sugar Shack Records, who launched the Bristol Archive subsidiary a couple of years ago. The label has released masses of rare deleted or previously unreleased material as download-only albums and singles, building, as the name suggests, a valuable archive of punk, post-punk and reggae acts from the Bristol area.

Bristol Archive put out two Cortinas

download-only sets, live album *For Fuck's Sake Plymouth*, and a collection of demos entitled *Please Don't Hit Me*, and Defiant Pose was included on the label's compilation CD *The Bristol Punk Explosion 1977-1983*.

Interest in The Cortinas was sufficiently high that the label recently released a 500-only vinyl album, *The Cortinas MK.1*. It comprised of all four Step Forward tracks, plus demo tracks recorded at GBH studio in Bristol, engineered by Andrew Peters and Steve Street, who also does all the Bristol Archive remastering. The first 100 copies came with an insert that included photos taken at the Fascist Dictator session by Daniel's brother Stephen. There was also a short run of about 100 CD copies, with hand-made imitation LP covers, complete with spine and inner paper covers.

And Anagram have now released *The Cortinas Punk Rock Anthology* CD, rounding up the Step Forward single tracks, the Peel Session and the whole *True Romances* album.

So what better time to talk to all five members of Bristol's premier punk band...

## JEREMY VALENTINE (vocals)

What were you listening to before punk?

The same as everyone else that started making punk rock. So basically, um, David Bowie, Roxy Music, Dr Feelgood, Velvet Underground, New York Dolls, Iggy Pop & The Stooges, and then just, you know, just old rock and roll stuff...jazz stuff, you know.

## So how did you end up as the singer?

Just vanity. And narcissism, basically, and painful insecurity, ha ha!

## Why were you so quick to pick up on punk, before anyone else in Bristol?

It was just coming up to a demographic, a space opened up and something had to fill it. Various things had been getting...sort of angrier, for all kinds of reasons. People were taking for granted a lot of things that were established historically, like the Welfare State, things like that, full employment. But we were just a bit bored with that...We just left school, whereas a lot of other people stayed on in school to do A-levels, and then went to University. Basically, it was a way of out of school without having to do a job or having to do any more exams or go to University.

There's a really good book, by a writer called Jonathan Coe, called *The Rotters' Club*, and it's about the summer of '76, in a suburb of Birmingham, Solihull or somewhere like that, and I'm reading it - it's very funny - and I'm thinking "Well this is my experience, this is exactly what happened to me". It's basically about being stuck in a dull, suburban school, living in the suburbs, and the heat, it was like a Kodak kind of glaze.

You were kind of shifted along by events and structures, and it's just desire, that's just basically what it is. Being 15, 16 years old, who would stop doing that and go and do British History A-Level or something?

## It was at the Roxy that you met Mark Perry and Miles Copeland wasn't it?

Miles Copeland was impressive because he was American. He was the first American we'd ever really met, and he was in the CIA or something like that, and he'd managed a load of boring 70s rock bands. He was like John Denver. Kind of like John Denver crossed with Arnold Schwarzenegger. He was good fun, and Mark Perry was a good bloke. They had that office, off

Oxford Street, Dryden Chambers. People used to hang out round there, people who've gone on to illustrious careers, like Danny Baker. The Miles Copeland stable of artistes was really fun.

## I know you're now a lecturer, what do you teach?

I teach Politics, Sociology, stuff like that. Also a lot about the media and show business.

## Why did you end up doing that?

You go to college and you do a degree, then you do another degree, and then all you can do is get a job working in a college or university. As long as you deliver what they want they leave you alone.

## Are you pleased to see it all reissued?

I did like one or two things on that live tape, I thought that was quite phenomenal.

## NICK SHEPPARD (guitar)

When and how did The Cortinas form?

Jer put the band together, he definitely had a vision of what he wanted, he was very hip - Dexter and Mike went to the same school as him. He found me via Mark Stewart of The Pop Group, who I went to school with, and I bought Dan in; we had played in a band together before, called Standard 10. We did stuff like Jean Genie (Bowie), Violence (Mott The Hoople), and other covers.

## Where and when were the Cortinas singles recorded?

The first single was done at Polydor studios in







covers of rock and roll or R'n'B songs from the 50s and 60s.

**What were you listening to before punk?**

Apart from 50s and 60s stuff, Dr Feelgood, Eddie And The Hot Rods, Legend, Kilburn and the Highroads, Iggy And The Stooges, New York Dolls, Roxy Music, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Velvet Underground, Modern Lovers, 101'ers, Roogalator, MC5, the *Nuggets* album.

**When and where was Fascist Dictator recorded?**

Polydor Studios on Oxford Street, Jimi Hendrix had recorded there which excited me, The Jam had just recorded there as well, the producer was obsessed with the snare drum sound and the engineer ate pistachio nuts all the time.

**Were you happy with it?**

I think it was an attempt to sound like a cross between The Ramones and The Stooges. It was our first real recording experience, we didn't know what we were doing and relied on Miles and Mark P for help. Mark was genuinely a nice bloke, not always easy to find in the music business.

**Why did you decide to change your image and sound for the album?**

When we got the advance from CBS we bought some decent equipment and some nice suits from Kensington Market. We didn't have a plan, we found songwriting very hard, we'd formed because we liked playing R'n'B but that wasn't fashionable any more, punk rock was starting to eat itself, power-pop was the next big thing (Adam and the Ants etc), I suppose we just ran out of ideas and steam.



**How did you come to join The Clash?**

I was playing in about five bands, and one day the drummer and bass player for one of them didn't turn up for rehearsal. A friend of my girlfriend worked for The Clash, and had told me they were auditioning, so because I was pissed off I rang her up. I went to an audition, which led to another, and got the job.

**I interviewed Joe Strummer in Bristol in 1989 on the Class War tour and he brought you into the conversation. He said that felt bad about how that period of the band was handled. I heard that you met up some time later. How did that go?**

It went really well. I think initially he was a bit wary, but once he realised I didn't have an agenda we had a great time. He stayed on in Perth after the tour finished, and we hung out - took the kids to the beach, went out for dinner, got drunk! It was nice to talk and for things to be cool, especially in light of what happened shortly after...

**MIKE FEWINGS (guitar)**

**The Cortinas were the first Bristol punk band – how did you come to pick up on it so quickly?**

We were in the right place at the right time, we looked different, played different music – mainly



**Are you happy to see the Bristol Archive and Cherry Red reissues?**

Yes, it's interesting for my kids to see what I did when I was young, helps me remember what it was like growing up and what it must be like for them.

**DEXTER DALWOOD (bass)**

**Step Forward pushed the boat out a bit with a colour cover and 12" version of Defiant Pose didn't they?**

Well the meeting with Hipgnosis, who designed the sleeve, was interesting for me, as I think it was Chris who was playing bass with Throbbing Gristle was also doing the artwork, which excited me.



**You got the front page of Sniffin' Glue – did you know Mark Perry well?**

I got to know Mark quite well, as I was going up and down to London, as I was seeing Soo Catwoman.

**When and why did you decide to split the band?**

I think it was the prospect of another tour with Chelsea that made us think we wanted a change. The initial amateur enthusiasm had run out of steam.

**What did you do between the band splitting and doing your BA?**

I worked for Miles at Faulty Products, selling 45s on the phone to small dealers over the country, hanging about Rough Trade and playing bass a bit with Barry Andrews after he had split from XTC. The scene was exciting and in a way that late '78/'79 period saw some of the best post punk music.

**Could you tell us about your career as an artist?**

I finally got out of the music business late '79 and then after a year or so applied to St Martins. After art school I did bits of teaching, and just kept painting, and had my first big break in '98 when my work started to receive attention, and then for the last decade or so I have survived on it, which is fantastic.

**Are you happy to see the Bristol Archive and Cherry Red reissues?**

Yes. Be interesting to see if there is another generation out there who are into it, or just old punks reliving their past.

**DANIEL SWAN (drums).**

**You were younger than the others weren't you?**

Yes. About a year younger than the others. Which is quite a difference when you are a teenager.



**What was your Dad's involvement?**

huge. The other parents were pretty cool also. Jeremy's Dad gave us our first place to rehearse. My Dad did a phenomenal amount to make things happen. He drove us to many of our gigs and then became our manager for as long as he could - he had a job teaching and was a father

of five. He did it until the middle of 1977 and then Miles Copeland and Kim Turner took over. My Dad absolutely loved and believed in the potential of The Cortinas. He had a good time also. It was a good time for him.

**What do you remember about playing the Roxy for the first time with The Stranglers?**

Quite a surreal scene. The owner Andy Czewowski came down and met us during sound check and was very friendly and welcoming. Lots of the crowd there looked like they were making it up as they went along. We got up and did our thing and held our own, in spite of how young we must have looked. I remember Jeremy dealing with the hecklers quite well.

I recall seeing members of some other other punk bands I had read about at the bar. I recognized them from their photos in the *NME*, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*. Joe Strummer pinned me to the wall to compliment me by saying that The Cortinas "Had guts."

We were on the road back to Bristol before The Stranglers had finished their show. We found out later that the box office was robbed later that night. The Roxy offered us three more gigs for Saturdays in the following months - which I think was due more to their needing to find punk bands to fill up the roster, there weren't enough in January, 1977.

**Did you sign to Step Forward straight away or were there other offers?**

We had an offer from Stiff Records also. I still have the offer letter from Jake Riviera. It's interesting to speculate what would have happened if we went with Stiff!

**What do you remember about the Peel Session?**

The soul band The Real Thing were recording next door. It was quite a big studio, set up for an orchestra. My diary shows it was recorded around the same period we played the Roundhouse with The Stranglers and headlined the Marquee. It would have also been just as I had finished my last year in school. The others were also deciding to put their second year of sixth form on hold. So June and July 1977 was a very enjoyable and liberating time for us. No school and lots of good things happening.

**How did you end up working with the likes of Green Day, Offspring and Rancid?**

The lawyer for The Sneetches also was the lawyer for Offspring and the manager for Green Day. I started working there just as Green Day had finished recording *Dookie* for Warner Brothers (their first major label recording) so nobody knew how things were going to go for them. I actually didn't mention anything to the guys in Green Day about being in The Cortinas. It was one of the managers who did so some months after I had been working there. Billy Joe Armstrong came into the office one day and said to me "Is that right you used to be in a punk band in England?" I don't think they had heard of The Cortinas, but they did ask to borrow my records.

**Are you happy to see the Bristol Archive and Cherry Red reissues?**

Delighted. It's about time. Looking forward to the robust royalty checks!☺

*Thanks to Mike Darby, Sam Giles, Mark Brennan, Daryl Smith, Jake & Louie Baldwin*

