

THE STONE ROSES WAR AND PEACE

THE DEFINITIVE STORY. 70 NEW INTERVIEWS. 40 UNSEEN PHOTOS

Dave Roberts - A&R at FM Revolver / Heavy Metal Records

Unedited interview transcript

I lived in Macclesfield. I went to the University of Manchester. I was writing for Sounds. I got to know Paul Birch [the boss] at Heavy Metal Records, before it became FM Revolver. I'd reviewed some of his records and he said, Do you want an A&R job part-time and listen to this sack full of demo tapes. I was doing that a couple, of days a week and I ended working there full-time.

During that time I was still doing lots of reviews in Manchester and I got to know Gareth at the International. He would put me on the guest list for different bands I had to review. Then when I was doing FM Revolver, he rang one day and said, I'm managing this amazing band, The Stone Roses, they're selling out the International, big following here and then he was asking about the label and distribution.

I think somewhere in there he got us confused with Revolver which was based in Bristol, which was part of that whole Rough Trade / Cartel distribution network; a network of independent distributors/labels. I think he got me confused with that.

Anyway, I went to see the Roses and met them a couple of times and heard some demos, including Sally Cinnamon, which was amazing. I went to Paul [Birch] and said we should be branching out into different types of music. We set up this label identity, Black, and I went to Red Rhino [part of the Rough Trade / Cartel network] to do distribution via them because the Heavy Metal Records' stuff went through a major distributor and it didn't feel right the Roses stuff should be on there.

We did a contract with the Roses; it was to put out an EP initially. We took those demos, which were 8-track demos and, because we didn't really have budgets to go recording stuff and I thought they were great in their own right, we took them to a producer/engineer

I knew who had a little studio in Macclesfield called The Cottage. He took the 8-track demos and tried to brighten them up a bit with the band and that became the Sally Cinnamon single.

In the contract there was an option to record an album as well. I can't remember what the budget was but we had to pay a certain amount to pick up the option to go and record a first album.

We did a photo session at the old run down Belle Vue Greyhound stadium. We drove around in my car and we were discussing what kind of producers would you want to do your album. Ian particularly said, I think we should be using some kind of dance producer. We're not an indie band, we should be a dance band and we should be trying to bring in those kinds of elements. I was surprised because I pretty much perceived them as an indie guitar band at the time. He had that vision.

John did the artwork and delivered the artwork, the bubble-gum machine thing ... and we put it out and nothing happened at all. Piccadilly Records [in Manchester] sold the bulk of them but nowhere else cared. We didn't get any radio play, didn't get any reviews.

We didn't have budgets for PRs and pluggers, we generally did everything ourselves ... I had quite a few contacts and sent it to various people and tried to plug the NME with it. No one came back even acknowledging it, let alone saying they liked it. No one cared at all.

They carried on writing stuff. I went down to rehearsals; they were rehearsing in the International. I heard some new songs and went back to Paul and said, The new songs are great, what do you want to do and really because nothing had happened with the single at all, he said it doesn't make sense to carry on.

We didn't really make a decision about that. We didn't say no we're not doing it and the band didn't force our hand. Gareth didn't say are you going to do it? So there no definitive decision made and we waiting... sitting by the side-lines. Paul wasn't sure.

The gigs they were doing ...

I went to see them in Liverpool, this was after the single came out, there was about six people in the crowd. Five of them I'd invited, they became Scorpio Rising. It was all pretty low key at that point. Apart from in Manchester when they played the International every three or four months and they sold 1,000 tickets. It was always a

bit of a strange one that. We all lost contact and nothing was resolved.

Then about two years later one of the girls who worked in the office in Wolverhampton said she had seen them at JDs in Dudley over the weekend. She came in on Monday and said I saw The Stone Roses last night and they were absolutely fucking amazing ... they've got this weird dancing guy on stage and it was absolutely rammmed and they were going down a storm.

We had an option to pick up an album that we didn't say we weren't going to and we didn't pick it up either. In theory we were supposed to end that agreement contractually before they could go onto Silvertone. There was an argument, and Paul said maybe we should be taking Silvertone to court, and saying actually that was our option for the album and we didn't decline it. I don't know how much that would have stood up in court because two years had gone by where we hadn't said yes we want to do it. We decided it was probably more money than it was worth and we probably wouldn't get anywhere with it.

Then there was the whole issue of whether we had re-released Sally Cinnamon. The reality was because there was still stock in some warehouse; it had never actually been deleted. It was still available and then it started selling a little better on the back of their success with Silvertone.

We then decided we were going to push it a little bit and take advantage of their success. And we we shot a video in Manchester. I took this guy to Manchester - the whole Madchester thing was going off and I took him to places like Afflecks Palace, Piccadilly Gardens, sightseeing round Manchester and he edited it together to make the video. The video ended up going on The Chart Show on Saturday morning, which was a big programme, and the single started selling again ... scraped the Top 40. That was the bit the band took offence to, the fact that we were taking advantage of their success.

Their take was probably we'd never put anything behind it before and suddenly we were trying to cash in and that's when Silvertone used the copyright argument - trying to stop us using the video because contractually you can't make a video without the permission of the publishers... and that was our first court case. We were trying to defend the fact we could make a video, we didn't have access to the band and that's why the band wasn't in it. There was no reason why, as we had invested some money in it initially -

into trying to release this thing and not made any money back - why we shouldn't take this opportunity. We won the case ... we did still have the right to the track and the video. Zomba were the ones taking us to court.

Then the paint episode ...

On the afternoon it happened I was in the office and we got a call from the NME and they said, are The Stone Roses there yet? It got put through to me and I said, What are you talking about we haven't seen them for two or three years, they don't come in here. He said oh, right, I must be confused. So obviously somebody had tipped off the NME that this was going to happen. So I left the office, we had a base in London ... then I got a call from Paul, he was really upset, said you won't believe, his voice was shaking, The Stone Roses have been and they've poured paint all over the offices, all over my car and they were really aggressive.

At that point I said, Well maybe we can make something out of that too and our press officer, who was in our London office, said well this is obviously going to get out but maybe we should be trying to tell our side of the story before someone else does and we rang up The Sun. Just literally the reception number ... they were very excited and said don't speak to anyone else, we want to run this as an exclusive ... it snowballed from there. They sent someone up to Paul to do photos and an interview ... and then it appeared the next day as a major news story.

Then I got some weird calls over the next couple of weeks. I tried to speak to Gareth but it was all a bit threatening. You don't know who you're dealing with; that kind of stuff. Then I got phone calls on my mobile with no one speaking on the other end for about a month.

I left the company in about February/March 1990. Then, after Geffen signed, I had a call from Gareth at one point saying, I know there's a lot of water under the bridge, but would you testify in court... it was something to do with the band breaking contracts and would I say they'd broken our original contract and they had this history of breaking contracts. It was when they dumped Gareth and he was trying to then say this band serially break contracts. They did it with FM Revolver, with Silvertone, with me... I said I'm not sure how much of a leg we had to stand on with that original contract and I just don't want to get involved.

I think I'd managed through the whole process to not be painted as one of the bad guys and I didn't want to be involved in a situation where I had to take sides and I didn't think Gareth was the best bedfellow.

What kind of stuff did you cover for Sounds?

I started out doing rock stuff, reviewing lots of American rock imports, then that whole glam rock thing, Motley Crue, Hanoi Rocks... did a front cover on Twisted Sister... then into the whole post-punk Goth thing, Bauhaus, Sisters Of mercy, March Violets... Futurama Festivals, Dead Or Alive, Sex Gang Children, Southern Death Cult, Birthday Party. I started going to Hacienda for Bauhaus, Birthday Party... I had broad interests.

There was no advance to the band for Sally Cinnamon...

I think they were pretty desperate to get a record out because no one was interested in them. We just paid for those tracks to be remixed, that was the token advance, probably a few hundred quid. They weren't necessarily in a position to pick and choose.

At the time you were also involved with the Macc Lads?

I went to school with the singer and guitarist for the Macc Lads... and they were putting out stuff themselves and doing well and I said, Why don't we try and get better distribution and put it through FM Revolver... they kept their own identity and just used our system which at the time was pretty good... The Macc Lads selling out places like Nottingham Rock City.

So, you got the deal with Red Rhino distribution for Sally Cinnamon...

Red Rhino was based in York, a guy called Pete Thompson was running it, he's now the head of PIAS/Vital... I went to him and said we're starting this label and people knew us, so they were quite interested in something that was a different genre to what we'd done before. It was important to have independent distribution for our Black label. We tried to sign a few bands at the time to Black and none of them were successful, a band called Dream from Nottingham, then we did The Wild Flowers, Crazyhead... that whole scene came out of Birmingham, PWEI and Mighty Lemon Drops - I wanted to do something with them.

In that Sally Cinnamon period...

They had great songs and the chemistry between them was amazing. Reni's a great drummer and brought something special to it, John's a great guitarist and Ian's melodies - the song writing was just amazing. Those songs I was listening to in demos and in rehearsals subsequently became the bulk of the first album... the first album was still that indie jangly guitar thing, they just wrote better songs than anybody else, then it was the whole attitude thing, then it was the whole Madchester thing, then Fools Gold came subsequently.

Their attitude showed all the way though. That gig in Liverpool, there was only six people in the crowd, but Ian was a total star, he was quite confrontational live but in a really good way, not in a I don't wanna be here kind of way, in a come on we're here doing this, there's only six people in the crowd but give us something back... he was in your face, moving around, just an amazing charismatic front man.

Was it true that you agreed to take the band to FM Revolver so that you could get free entrance to the International for life?

That's nonsense. I was already going there. I was a journalist for Sounds and I would ring the International, Gareth usually, and say I've got to do a review of Iggy Pop tomorrow, can you put me on the door. And he'd say fine. This had happened. I started writing for Sounds in 1980. I started working for FM Revolver in 1983 and I carried on writing for Sounds until 1988. During those time, I'd do the same at Manchester Apollo, whenever I wanted to go see a gig, wanted to review something, I'd ring up the venue. I got to know a lot of people that way and I got to know Gareth that way.

He rang me at home and said, It's Gareth from the International, I've got this band you'd like and they're selling out the International. It was his big speech, which he's very good at... but I think I've heard that [free entry rumour] somewhere... it's nonsense. I was already going to things free at the International. I had a relationship with Gareth before that... it was never discussed.

I always wondered how they did it [selling out the International]. The rumour was about Gareth giving away tickets to try and make it look full. Liverpool's not far away and nobody was coming and that was after Sally came out... Gareth's a great PR person, that's his forte, he's a great blagger, hard to argue with... if I was a young band today I'd be quite pleased someone was managing to get 800 people in to a venue for me when I couldn't do that anywhere else.

*Was the contract with FM revolver for two singles and an album?
Did you start to record a second single after Sally?*

It might have been two singles and an album... it's bringing back a vague memory that we did pencil in some studio time for another single and I hate to say it but I think Paul didn't want to pay for it. He was umming and arring about whether he wanted to pay... and the band wanted a bit more money and I think at that point, contractually, there was supposed to be an small advance of something and I think it would have started to cost Paul money, whereas the first one, it wasn't too difficult to get the remixing done

at the Cottage and get the single out... when it came to paying for proper studio time ... and I think Gareth wanted a PA for them to rehearse with - there was something that was going to cost money and I'd had to go back to Paul to say, We can do this session but it's gonna cost this and it's gonna cost £500 or whatever, either an advance or something toward this PA or equipment... and at that point Paul started umming and arring. No-one cared about the first single he was not sure he wanted to spend £1,000 or whatever it was going to cost on doing another one.

I think that's wrong about us booking the studio and the band not turning up. I don't think there was commitment on either side. Maybe Gareth subtly was trying to get out of it [the contract], because maybe he was getting interest elsewhere, so it wouldn't have been in his interest to push us either if he thought he could get a better deal elsewhere.

Transcript of the Paul Birth interview to follow later.

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