

Door man: Furlined's rock'n'roll polymath Neil Crossley



PIC: SEAN MALYON

When the Fur flies

It's been a long, winding and indeed esoteric road that's brought Neil Crossley to the louche but stately rock 'n' roll of Furlined. But is he more Lou Reed or Mick Jagger? asks Julian Owen.

It wasn't like this in the early days. Would-be pop stars were uniformly young, carefree party types who enjoyed trysting the night away with boys and/or girls, and wrote songs accordingly. It was all jolly exciting. And then, as time passed, the protagonists arrived at a crossroads: should they carry on reflecting their lives in song, and thus allude to the attendant levels of responsibility and potential for greater self-awareness that maturity brings; or should they enter suspended animation, insisting that they can't be tied down and sorry, girl, they gotta move on, somehow neglecting to mention that the thing they gotta move on to is a meeting called by their portfolio manager about investing stock in a really exciting business opportunity in Antigua? Essentially, would they follow Lou Reed or the Stones?

Happily – for it's infinitely the more engaging path – Furlined's Neil Crossley plumped for the former. Louchely be-suited, he fronts a band given to pristine, almost stately arrangements, but maintaining – and sometimes exposing – rocking fire in the belly. In reviewing a gig last year, we noted “the kind of songwriter measuring victory from a starting place of defeat”. This kind of thing, the opening line from ‘Telephone Box’: “It took a Pink Floyd record to give your sex life a feel of the epic”. Though penning a line like that indicates real self-assuredness, musical mythology cuts deep. In revealing how he came to work with long-time musical partner, cellist Tegan Everett, it moves him to self-deprecation:

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NEIL CROSSLEY

“We met at an antenatal group. Not very rock 'n' roll, really.”

This from a man whose life has been infinitely more ‘rock 'n' roll’ than most. At 20 he was bassist in Natural Scientist, “a bit of a white funk band – we'd bang a lot of stuff, really spiky. I think it stands up”. Posterity records their Peel Session was broadcast on 5 October 1981. “We initially went to Europe, then [manager, George Jackson] got us a residency in Bermuda for about six months, which was fantastic.” No kidding. A residency in Osaka, Japan came next, followed by a spell in the US. “We were signed to a deal in Silver Spring, Maryland, so I was living in Washington DC and then New York. They signed us on the basis of our songwriter, who we eventually chucked out – an incredibly talented guy, but such an obnoxious individual. When we arrived in America our manager hadn't told them, so it kind of went downhill from there really.”

From the bottom of the slope followed a climb via art college, a fashion degree and consequent spell back in New York (“Designing outsize women's leisure wear” made him “lose the ambition”), illustration, and journalism. Not writing about music at first, but “other things that interested me: arts features, quirky stuff, health, motoring, technology, current affairs. My first feature was about a friend of mine who goes around the world licking paintings.”

And, woven throughout, playing music, first with London-based outfits, later in North Devon with former Sounds journalist Chris Heath, and – for the last eight years – Furlined. Initially that was just him and Tegan, but halfway through a set in 2004 he disconsolately “realised we had another half-hour to go; I'd have longed for a snare drum to kick in.” Thus Graham Dalzell on bass and backing vocals (“a hell of a difference”), Greg White on drums (“very good at listening, when to play and when not to”), and the tools for adding light and shade to that similarly nuanced songwriting. “A degree of cynicism, a slight knowingness,” says Neil of his lyrics. “Also the slight grumpiness and

disaffection that being older can bring. But, within that, a confidence you get with age as well.”

Indeed. Any inference of world-weariness should be set against the untouchable kernel of optimism running throughout his songs. “I think that reflects [the band] as people,” he says. “I'm the songwriter, but they all bring stuff to the table. We're all equals.”

Shortly we'll see the release of ‘Win A Dream Wedding’, the follow-up to debut album ‘Love Comes In Canisters’. And, with it, the inevitable slog of promotion and vying for space amid “so many bloody records out there. I don't want to come across as negative, I'm just pragmatic. It takes so much to get your head above the parapet. The best we can get is a few champions – DJ, manager, publisher.”

Full-scale touring, for a band with parental responsibilities, holds less allure than it used to. Venue wonders whether aspirations change as well. “The ambition's still there, definitely. The first album suffered when we signed a distribution deal with Pinnacle: they went under a couple of months later and all the momentum was taken. My mother-in-law asked me ‘Does it matter, if what you've done you're happy with?’ It's an interesting question, 'cause you think ‘Why am I doing it?’ It ultimately leads to elements like vanity, needing someone to tell you ‘I like what you're doing’. I'd like the music to get to a broader audience, that's the main thing.”

FURLINED PLAY THE FOLK HOUSE, BRISTOL ON FRI 15 APR. FFI: WWW.MYSPACE.COM/FURLINED