

The Stranglers never forgave Hugh Cornwell



No one expected Hugh Cornwell to ever leave The Stranglers. But he did. A nearly disastrous move, because he was the driving force behind huge international hits like *No More Heroes*, *Golden Brown*, *Always the Sun* and *Skin Deep*. Moreover, his raw voice was the most distinctive feature of the band. Cornwell and the remaining Stranglers haven't been in touch since. 'Why should we?', Cornwell says. Now, almost thirty years later, both acts are gigging in Amsterdam. Cornwell kicks off in a modest concert hall of the Q-Factory. The remaining Stranglers are scheduled in the considerably bigger Melkweg. It's time to sit down with their former frontman.

Text: **Hester Aalberts** Photograph: **Henri Vial**

Hugh Cornwell is not in a great mood. Apart from the drizzly weather outside, he is quite disappointed there is no kettle in his room: he cannot make tea. Whilst he still grumbles on a bit, we look for a quiet place. That turns out to be rather difficult. 'I'm finding it hard to concentrate here.' His hearing is not what it used to be and I sense background buzz might disturb him a bit. After three failed attempts, he chooses a remote corner of the lobby.

Seventy

Cornwell is tall, lean and fit, but a little bit fragile too. Not surprising, considering his age: he turned seventy last August. Did he celebrate this memorable moment? He shifts his somewhat faded Superman cap. 'I don't like birthdays, so I never celebrate them. This year my sister invited me along with some family members. It was a nice opportunity to see each other again.'

The first half of his set tonight consists of his solo work only. After the break Strangler hits will follow. I want to know if the audience is drawn only to the famous legacy and I clumsily beat around the bush.

'What kind of audience I have? Well, uhm ... human', he answers, slightly annoyed. 'I find your question rather vague.' I rephrase: 'Do you expect mainly Stranglers fans or is there a considerable audience for your later work as well?' Relieved: 'Now, *that's* a question. Both. It is a quirky mix. Believe it or not, but a part of my audience has never heard of The Stranglers!'

Interesting villains

Like tonight's concert, Cornwell's latest album *Monster* is two-fold as well. 'The first ten tracks can be seen as a sort of tribute to villains that intrigue me, including Mugabe and Mussolini.' That needs a bit of explaining, because the track *La Grande Dame* is dedicated to his deceased mother. He leans a bit forward: 'My mother was also a villain of sorts. After all, she put the fear of God into us when we were very young.' She was quite dominant and strict. Not only to us, but also to herself. For example, she went swimming in the ponds of Hampstead Heath all the year round, even in midwinter in the freezing cold. This apparently is good for the immune system, because she reached the age of 98.'

Peaches sounded rather boring

The second part of his album, *Restoration*, consists entirely of acoustic Strangler songs. Did you feel vulnerable while recording in the studio with nothing but your voice and an acoustic guitar? 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely! It took even longer to record these songs than the *Monster*-tracks.'

Apart from the occasional hit, his choice of Stranglers material on *Restoration* is quite remarkable. Why did he, for instance, cast aside *Skin Deep* and *Peaches*, and pick less well known tracks as *Outside Tokyo* and *Don't Bring Harry* (just like *Golden Brown* a metaphor for heroin)? 'I noticed certain less obvious songs worked very well acoustically. *Peaches* quickly got a bit boring with just a guitar, while an acoustic version of *Outside Tokyo* turned out really well.'

Bring on the nubile!

Does Hugh have the same strict routine his mum had, with respect to physical exercise? 'I cycle every morning and recently I learned how to swim. Because I continue to do shows while getting older, I have to stay fit. Otherwise I will not be able to keep the stamina. I eat very healthy and don't do anything in excess. Moderation is what it's about.'

Moderation is what it's about? I can't help laughing, because I am sitting opposite a man who once drank excessively, tried all possible drugs, 'met' several women a day (*Bring on the Nubile!*) and even served a prison sentence.

He casually says: 'Nobody stays the same. Everything in life changes and you have to embrace that change.'

Does it matter who sings?

'Not everyone embraced all your changes though. The decision to leave The Stranglers, for example, still haunts you. Is it a burden you'd like to get rid of?' Cornwell: 'Well, I don't want to get rid of the songs. I contributed to them. I wrote them, so ...'

Is it uneasy that the remaining Stranglers still play 'his' songs? And with another lead singer? 'No,' he says with determination, 'They are really good songs. There are numerous cover bands living well by singing someone else's repertoire, so what's the difference? Queen for example. Mercury also had a very distinctive voice and yet they have a different singer now.' Somewhat excited: 'Music is big business! What difference does it make who sings the songs if you can get a lot of people coming to listen to them? Who cares? When you presume only I can sing those songs, that's aesthetics! Who cares! It's not to do with aesthetics anymore.'

He leans back and sighs. 'Maybe some people didn't listen to the words. Maybe they were more interested in the sound of the instruments. Who knows.'

We clearly disagree. For me, his characteristic voice is a crucial and indispensable part of the Strangler-sound. Maybe I am not as fond of changes as he is. 'So you are totally okay with The Stranglers singing...' He interrupts me: 'I *have* to be!' He laughs scornfully. 'I have to be, because I can't do anything about it. I've given up trying to do anything about it, because it's out of my control.' After a short pause he continues, 'Why try and change things you can't change? You are going to be very unhappy that way.'

After leaving the band, has there been any contact? Did he for example ever go and see them perform? 'Why would I want to go and see them? Why would they want to come and see me?' As a possible motive I suggest there might still be some friendship left? Hardly audible, he replies: 'No, that's not the case.'

People still do the same stupid things

We change the subject to books. His books. Cornwell has already written five of them, including an autobiography. His sixth book will be published somewhere in the next few weeks. He worked on it for almost seven years. What's it about? 'The story is set in the future. That made the writing process rather difficult, because anything can happen in the future. It is much easier to write a book in the present time or in the past, because then you have reference points, where I didn't have any. The book is my idea what it's going to be like in twenty, thirty years time. The world has changed quite a lot in some ways. But in other ways it hasn't changed at all.' He stresses these last two words. 'People are still people and they do exactly the same stupid things they do in the present time, but now in a framework of more evolved technology. They haven't stopped petrol and gas, for instance. That's still going on. Plastic is banned though. And there's a big, global clean-up going on.'

Another problem he foresees is obesity. 'The medical costs that this entails will become untenable in twenty years. In my future world people who exceed their established body mass standard will have to pay tax, big tax.' I interrupt: 'That's easy for you to say. You've never had an ounce of fat on your body!' He attributes this to his high metabolism.

'The underlying message of my book is that people, regardless of the technological progress they make, will never really change.'

‘Mexico and Spain are my writing places. They are the right places to write, if you like. In England I cannot detach enough, I guess, to get inspired. And I like to be by the sea. It has to do with the constant energy of the tides.’

They are all dead

Some musicians nowadays curate an occasional festival. They handpick the artists. Robert Smith, for instance, curated the Meltdown Festival last year. Would he ever consider doing such a thing? ‘Interesting! That could be fun!’ Which artists would he choose? He laughs out loud. ‘Probably all the people I’d pick are already dead!’ In a perfect world, in which everybody would still be alive, who would he choose? Without any hesitation: ‘I would definitely ask Joe Zawinul, the keyboard player from Weather Report! He was a genius. And of course Nat Adderley, the jazz cornet player. And I would love to have played bass with Charlie Mingus.’ He pauses for a second. ‘Maybe it would be too difficult for me to curate a festival, because I wouldn’t be able to make any descisions.’ Another catchy laugh.

Accompanied by drummer Windsor McGilvray and bassist Pat Hughes, Cornwell is going on a UK-tour next month. ‘We’re going to make some changes in the set list. We also did a tour in Britain last year and we want to come up with some new material. My earlier album *Beyond Elisian Fields* has been remastered by a producer with more acoustic skills. And of course we include more songs from *Monster*, because these are now known to the public.

I always need something to do

In addition to making albums and performing as well as writing books, Cornwell also produces podcasts and is currently working on a film. How does he manage to combine so many creative activities? ‘It relaxes me. If I am not in the studio or doing concerts, the best way for me to relax is doing something completely different. I used to read and listen to music. However, I don’t listen to music anymore and I no longer read books. I guess that’s to do with the fact I do those things myself. And besides, I like quiet. But I always have to be busy. Otherwise I get bored. I hate having nothing to do, because then I start getting depressed.’

Is depression a part of him. ‘Yeah.’ He thinks for a moment. ‘You know, in my book there is no more cancer and no one will die of hunger. Life is extremely easy for everyone. And do you know what the number one cause of death is? Suicide. People get depressed because they don’t have to worry about anything anymore. They are not useful and have too much time to think. Suicide has become the big killer in my future world.’

In case of war

Is the book a sign of his concern about what lies ahead for this planet? ‘Yes, you can say it like that.’ The problems he tackles in his book happen in about thirty years from now. Is he also concerned about a more acute problem: Brexit? ‘Not too much. I do think a referendum is pretty silly. After all, a government is democratically chosen, so why interfere with their decisions? But I’m not really worried. I am an artist, I have no family, no children and no one depends on me. Maybe the band, Pat and Windsor, but that’s not really the same. I do what I do, regardless of what happens. I throw as much shit against the wall as possible. Sometimes it sticks, sometimes it doesn’t. I will continue, even in case war breaks loose.’

Misogynism

That evening I attend his gig in the small concerthall of the Q-Factory. I was informed 170 tickets were sold. Rather inappropriate for an artist of his stature. But to use his words: who cares? Because I passionately chant along with my seventy-year-old hero who sings *Nice and Sleazy*, *Bring on the Nubiles* and *Peaches*: all songs, for which he was once labeled a misogynist. I couldn't care less and enjoy all the Strangler-songs sung by the right voice.

No More Heroes? I have to disagree!