

## **1/ What's new about the NYHed ? It seems you had a lot of activities those past months ?**

NY Hed Studio has been through a lot in the past year, including a major location change. We luckily found a new space two blocks away from our old one on the Lower East Side, despite the swirling maelstrom of New York City real estate drama. It's nearly impossible to survive as a business or even as a private citizen here without lots of money or tremendous good luck or both! We've always had a healthy dose of good fortune and we're trying to honor it by being busy, productive and creative. Life is very short! But it always seems as though when things are busiest the most gets done. Too much unscheduled time can actually cramp one's productivity, ironically. So even though we've been buried in recording projects for the last two years, these have also been some of our most creative months in terms of songwriting, genre challenging and general creative spirit. And since my wife Rocio has become more and more involved in the recording process both as my creative collaborator and as studio assistant, things have really been hopping. We've started writing and recording together some crazy music with drum machines, sound loops, Gainsbourg-esque "talk singing" under the name *Disturbios!* It's really been a gas to drop some of the stereotypes and habits that had formed around playing rock and roll guitar. There are plenty of different angles from which to approach the creepy skin-tingling vibe we all felt hearing our first Chuck Berry or Rolling Stones records. As we say in English, there is more than one way to skin a cat!

The location change has also given us the opportunity to build the studio recording space to suit its function. The ceilings of the new space are of an irregular nature which is great for getting rid of standing waves and unpleasant resonances. We're fixing the place up but are also trying to be careful to respect some of the Lower East Side vibe of the spot. The trick is knowing when to stop, I guess.

## **2/ Among the last releases, you recorded two great records : the last Dirtbombs and the Lala Brooks' one. How have you been involved in these projects ?**

Mick came in to the studio for his first Dirtbombs recording day with no songs written, no band and not even a guitar with him! I was wondering "hmmmm... How is this one gonna go?". But Mick does great work when all is said and done and I've learned to let him run with something even if it seems aimless. I'm never disappointed with the results. In this case, for the long-awaited Dirtbombs Bubblegum record, the songs were all written in the studio and Mick and I played almost all the instruments with a few exceptions. Patrick Pantano, the regular Dirtbombs drummer came in to play on a few tracks but most of the drums were played by Mick himself. We collaborated on a couple of songs but mostly it was just him sitting around, listening to Archies and Kasenetz and Katz productions and spinning these amazingly catchy pop tunes, all crammed through the natural Mick Collins blues punk filter. The album was really fun to record although Larry Hardy (owner of the label In The Red Records) who was paying for it all was a bit annoyed at how easygoing the recording process was. It ended up being a fairly expensive record by In The Red standards, but I do believe it's a classic, Mick's best work in a long time. When the pain of paying the bills recedes into the past, a great album will be left to stand as part of an admirable legacy.

For Lala Brooks' record, Mick was the producer with me as engineer. I had done an album with Mick like this before (Dave "Baby Cortez") for Norton Records and there had not been much preparation for the session. Dave, Mick and I wrote almost all the songs in the studio in the Booker T. and the MGs tradition. Since it was an instrumental album and since Dave Cortez is such a cool, accomplished musician, this worked out fine. But I was worried that Lala's album was going to require some forethought in order that we not end up floundering around in the studio without any material written. I remembered hearing a story about Dan Penn's first encounter with Aretha Franklin. When she arrived at the studio in Muscle Shoals to record, she was unknown to Penn, but when she sat down at the piano, hit a chord and started warming up her voice, Penn immediately recognized that he was in the presence of someone truly special and ran upstairs to write a song especially for her. He wrote *Do Right Woman!* I had loved the Crystals and had been taken by some footage I'd seen of them singing Da Doo Ron Ron on a '60s TV show and I thought Lala Brooks was incredibly cool and charismatic. I really wanted a crack at writing some songs for her so I put three or four together for her even before we met. I was quite excited that she seemed to like what I'd come up with but realized pretty fast that I was trying to write for the 15 year old girl from the Crystals instead of for the experienced, tough woman Lala had become having survived 40 intervening years of some pretty difficult living. She was game enough to sing the innocent ones but I also came up with a couple after meeting her that were tougher and reflected some of the bitterness she was justifiably feeling due to the unfair treatment she'd received all through her career and in her personal life. We chose a couple of DirtBombs covers for her to do as well as some Mod scene crowd pleasers and one or two more obscure numbers. Mick and I put the finishing touches on some of the original ones together and Lala wrote a really angry "Get out you Rat!" type of song by herself called *Mind Made Up*. We tracked it all pretty quickly with the great Sammy Baker (of Heavy Trash) on drums but the overdubbing and mixing took quite a while. Things kind of shut down for a spell because hurricane Sandy (a very large storm that hit New York City and other places) inundated the warehouse of Norton Records so things had to go on hold for a couple of months. A lot of us went to help out Norton by actually washing records as if they were dishes! *Toujours la vaisselle*. When Norton got back on its feet, Lala and I did many sessions together, just the two of us overdubbing vocals and refining. She is such an agreeable person to work with that these were always pleasant sessions that often were peppered with amazing stories of her days in the Crystals. The Who as her backup band, dinner with The Rolling Stones (developed into a food fight!), touring with Bobby Womack, Sam Cooke, James Brown, The Supremes, working with Phil Spector. She would (in a very humble and unassuming way) drop some precious bit of history into the conversation. I mixed the record by myself, running the tracks by Mick and Norton as they shaped up. I just saw her play the other night and got my hands on the vinyl album for the first time. I'm thrilled!

### **3/ What are the next projects involving your engineer activity ?**

Next up in the studio is a band called Daddy Long Legs, a Brooklyn crew that really understands the blues at a cellular level. The very handsome lead singer plays harmonica in the style of Little Walter (distorted, through a blown out tube amp) and they are the toast of town right now, opening for every cool band that visits New York City. I'm not sure yet, but I have a feeling that a Chess Records approach to capturing their sounds is going to be what's called for engineering-wise. Just good,

solid microphone placement and respect for the sound of the band playing in the room will probably end up being more useful than a bunch of mixing table studio tricks. We'll do the session on tape, naturally.

I know you asked what is coming up but I feel tempted to tell you about the last session that occurred in the old NY HED space before we shut down in preparation for our move: The great Alan Vega of Suicide came to record a backing vocal for a Gemma Ray record. Alan showed up on the appointed evening but sadly due to health problems (he had recently had a stroke) he was unable to make it down the stairs to the basement studio space. His wife was trying to convince him to try to manage the stairs anyway but Alan was adamant and quite upset about it. I tried to calm the situation and suggested that we keep Alan out on the street and I would run cabling for the 30 meters or so to the back room studio in the basement. We had him on headphones and a hand held microphone out on the street. It was so great! A real NYC moment, kind of a farewell to the NY of old. Alan did really well, aided by his wife Liz and my wife Rocio who kind of ran interference for him on the street where he was performing. I ran the tape machine from deep inside our underground cavern studio. It was really such a cool moment and one that I'll cherish for a long time! To top it off the session was called because a huge thunderstorm burst out and we had to race to cover the singer and the equipment that was out on the street. Perfect! Gemma is currently stripping his vocals in to her tracks in Berlin.

#### **4/ Do you know a lot of people in France are waiting for your next tour with SBB and HT ? What can you tell them ?**

Ah, well we'll be happy to see all the good people in France and in Europe in general. You know, it's impossible to get a good croissant with that amazing butter in the USA? One can get good french wine here but everyone makes such a big deal about it, patting themselves on the back constantly. I miss the nonchalance the the French have for the sensual things in life, man! But I also sense that la France is quickly becoming a country that understands rock and roll in a deeply felt way. One can see it by the original bands that have been emerging in the last ten years from France that have real spark and rawness that seemed to have been missing before that, except in the form of borrowed punk rock.

Ron from Speedball Baby (who has recently become my next door neighbor!) and I have been circling around making a new SBB album for a Spanish label called *Bang!* It'll probably be a collection of songs that were only available before this on 45 rpm singles and some new things we're writing. Last tour we brought Ivan Julian along as our bass player and it's pretty likely he'll be on this next album as well. Of course we'll be using the great Sam Baker from Heavy Trash on drums.

And speaking of Heavy Trash, Jon and I are set to finish off our album that is 90% done and waiting in the wings to be brought home and put to bed. Gonna go back to the studio this week! We'll be touring soon, hopefully this Spring.

## **5/ Considering you didn't tour for two or three years now did you miss the life on the road ?**

Yes, I do miss touring. I love playing in a band (especially a great band) every night, night after night, just getting tighter and better all the time. It's a long and honorable tradition, that of the small group of like minded musicians synching up on such a visceral level and developing a language for doing it on command. Part of the appeal for me is also purely habit since I have spent so much of my life in that bizarre activity. There are things about being on the road with only one real job to do all day that are pretty liberating. It's perfect for anyone who wants to get outside of themselves for whatever reason which is why so many misfits are drawn to that life. But those who do it enough have, at the end of the day, got to make some sort of peace with the loneliness and the fact of detachment from one's loved ones back home. It can be hard and I'm a bit nervous about doing it now that I have a family waiting at home. I miss my wife when I'm away and I love making lunch for my stepdaughter and taking her to school in the (early) mornings. I do believe there's a way to reconcile the life of the artist with a loving home life and I dearly want that. Every boy can be in a band. Can a man do it? That's the question I now have to answer.

## **6/ What is your opinion about the music industry nowadays ?**

The scary powerful dragon that was once the music industry has been slain or at least shrunk down to size. They did it to themselves! I don't think anyone mourns the philistinism or the greed of the people in that business that used artists and musicians as pawns to pile up more and more money. But there was a certain fun to the absolute decadence of all those wonderful idiots behaving badly, sometimes with panache. It's a bit sad to see those giants on their knees now. But the good news is that as always, there is a healthy underground of artists who do and will continue to do their work with or without the blessing of a record company or lots of money floating around. Long live art for its own sake !