

Scene changes

As Britpop survivors Ocean Colour Scene prepare to hit the road again, **Piers Ford** talks to lead singer Simon Fowler about poverty, fame, excess and, of course, music



Ocean Colour Scene are a tonic for anyone who bemoans the dearth of genuine troubadours in today's auto-tuned, manufactured pop world. After 15 years together, the band has more than earned its rock and roll survivor stripes. Its history contains all of the cliché's standard ingredients: fractious record company politics, critical and financial peaks and troughs, departures, arrivals, tabloid interference and fickle music fashions.

Throughout, the group has stayed true to its roots, drawing on an eclectic mixture of musical influences and the lyrics of lead singer Simon Fowler to tell proper vibrant stories that reflect real lives and places rather than mushy all-purpose emotions. Now, with a new album – splendidly called *The Hyperactive Workout for the Flying Squad* – and a national tour with several stops in East Anglia, Ocean Colour Scene has delivered another robust measure of what it does best.

"You don't form a band to release records," says Simon. "You don't really think that far ahead. You form it so you can play with your friends, in front of your other friends, at the pub. And gradually, if you do well, you play in a club. Then it carries on. A bi-product of that is you get a deal and make records. But playing live is always the first thing that we thought of. Obviously you always hope that you'll appeal to new people because it would indicate you're selling a good deal of copies of the record! But

BLUES

THE OCEAN COLOUR SCENE



there's never a lot of planning behind the album itself. We just kind of do what we do and eventually it comes out as it is."

In this case, 'as it is' is a rich tapestry of textures. The first single, *For My Name*, is a stomping guitar-driven anthem that evokes Spector's wall of sound and, in Simon's distinctive voice-rising from gritty and slightly hoarse to searing drama at full throttle—a hint of Roy Orbison. Simon points out that the real tribute to Orbison comes on *I Love You*, inspired by his mother's second favourite singer after Al Martino. "I thought it would be interesting to cross him with Velvet Underground." This *Day Should Last Forever* is a joyous slice of folk-rock with a classy contribution from the exciting Scottish violinist John McCusker, who guests on several tracks. And *Another Time to Stay* is a poignant ballad of considerable beauty that showcases Simon's vocal versatility. *Waving Not Drowning*, a neat subversion of Stevie Smith's grimly humorous poem, features Jools Holland and Ocean Colour Scene's long-time champion Paul Weller.

"In a loose way that song's about us, a declaration of intent that sort of came out of losing Damon (Minchella, the band's original bass player who quit in 2003)," says Simon. "I guess we are survivors now. But we were the big new thing in 1990!" That was the year Ocean Colour Scene, formed from the amalgamation of two Birmingham bands, The Boys and The Fanatics, released its first single on an independent label subsequently bought by Phonogram, which proceeded to release the group's material on Fontana.



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But sudden immersion in the rock and roll lifestyle and delays to the first album resulting from production disagreements had them stalling in the starting gates. "Then Nirvana happened," Simon continues in his Brummie deadpan, "and we were on Enterprise Allowance, living in flats with holes in the windows in Moseley (the Birmingham suburb that would later inspire the band's signature album, *Moseley Shovels*). I used to wake up with frost on the duvet, seriously."

He wouldn't have had it any other way. "We had good fun at the studio every day, just arranging songs and learning how to be a band. But it was Paul Weller who really inspired us." By 1993 the band was in dispute with Phonogram and prevented from performing live while legal war was being waged. Plunged into debt and on the dole, the only creative outlet available was song writing. Paul Weller invited guitarist Steve Cradock to play on one of his singles and Simon was asked to sing on Weller's second solo album, *Wildwood*. Then they went on tour with Weller.

Steve's earnings during this time kept the band afloat, paying for studio sessions during which they recorded the material Simon had written the night before. The resulting demo tape caught the attention of Noel Gallagher who asked Ocean Colour Scene to support Oasis on its autumn tour in 1995. Industry interest in the band renewed, they were signed by MCA and the following year enjoyed tremendous chart success with *The Riverboat Song*, *You've Got It Bad* and *The Day We Caught the Train*, all songs that continue to ignite their gigs today.

"I'd been playing *The Day We Caught the Train* at the Albert Hall, supporting Paul in 1993," Simon recalls. "So by the time Ocean Colour Scene played there in our own right in 1997, we knew where the dressing room was! I think that gave us a lot of confidence and we hit the ground running. We were pop stars for eighteen months."

While their fan base stayed solid and true, helping to maintain Ocean Colour Scene's status as one of the great modern live outfits, another low period of record company disillusionment and distractions followed the success of the late 1990s. Simon found himself fielding red-top intrusion-never before had a tabloid 'outing' been so effectively stymied by the 'so-what?' attitude of its target-and, as the boy band phenomenon took hold of the charts, album sales took a tumble. MCA steered the guys down the Greatest Hits route then dropped them.

The Hyperactive Workout For the Flying Squad (a title culled from a highfalutin jazz commentary overheard on Radio 3) is the group's fifth studio album in total, and its



authentic rock and roll Britpop credentials, but Simon is pretty resistant to musical compartments. He senses a swing back to rock in the business but laments the fact that the

new wave of contenders don't live the lifestyle as full-bloodedly as Ocean Colour Scene did in their heyday.

"It's changed," he says. "In the late 1990s there was much more of a rock and roll ethos, not just with the bands but with the people who worked at the record labels. You could never get into that much trouble because they were twice as bad! But I suspect these



Band substance: (l-r) Andy Bennett, Dan Sealey, Simon Fowler, Steve Cradock and Oscar Harrison

second for Sanctuary, which also put out a live album in 2004. The group-Simon, Steve and drummer Oscar Harrison-spent five weeks recording it at a studio in the Scottish highlands. Simon says it only took him a couple of hours to come up with the premise: "Just making it up as I went along. Once you've got the basis, the bits you like work pretty much as they are. Then you fiddle with the words. I just went over to Sanctuary's studios on the Goldhawk Road in London, sat in a room and banged it around for a couple of weeks. Then it was up to Scotland and that was it apart from one or two overdubs we did back down here."

In its time, the group has been called all kinds of things from a mod band, to an R&B outfit, to a Dadrock icon. This last refers to its

new bands are very well behaved." As Ocean Colour Scene hits the road once more-now, joined by bassist Dan Sealey and guitarist Andy Bennett-Franz Ferdinand and Keane might want to take notes. Most of all, though, live music fans are in for a treat. **ae**

Ocean Colour Scene play at Cambridge Corn Exchange (01223 357851) on Sunday 3rd April, Norwich UEA (01603 508050) on Wednesday 20th April and Southend Cliffs Pavilion (01702 351155) on Thursday 21st April. Tickets for each gig are priced £20.