

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Brian Howe has had a long career in the music business, resulting in several classic albums, but now it seems that might have all drawn to an end. The Portsmouth born singer-songwriter first came to prominence as lead vocalist on Ted Nugent's 1984 release 'Penetrator', before achieving serious recognition when he replaced the legendary Paul Rodgers in the reformed Bad Company, alongside original members Simon Kirke and Mick Ralphs. With Howe, the band had a more AOR approach than the bluesier Rodgers era, upsetting some die-hards but winning plenty of new fans. After 'Fame And Fortune', the band found their sound on 'Dangerous Age', and Howe's writing partnership with producer Terry Thomas spawned three top ten hits. The follow up album 'Holy Water' went platinum with another string of hits, but acrimony between Howe and stalwarts Kirke and Ralphs signalled trouble. After one more album 'Here Comes Trouble' and a live record 'What You Hear Is What You Get', Brian left Bad Company. 1997 saw him release an contemplative solo album 'Tangled In Blue' and all went quiet until he exploded back on the the scene with the magnificent 'Circus Bar' in 2010. Now he has a new EP out called 'Emotions' - but announced these songs would be the last recordings he would make. Delighted at the quality of the new EP, but disappointed with Brian's decision to leave it there, James Gaden got in touch with the vocalist to find out why...

your stuff early, then talk to you about it, it's fantastic. Then I buy the album anyway to support you. Why anybody would think "Oh, I'll just stick this on the internet so people can get it for nothing" is beyond me.

Yeah, right! It's so silly. Until they come up with another system for recording and storing music, it's gonna get worse. There is literally no point in me making another record now, other than from the artistic point of wanting to write songs. But I can do that anyway and let someone else get ripped off. I know how much I put into records and I know that I'm fussy. I spend more than I should do, and the public won't even realise it. They won't know what it takes to make a particular record, what I've done when I could have put out something inferior. I can't do it. I have to do the best I can, I'm a fuddy-duddy with that and I spend more than I should. I spent twice my advance Frontiers gave me to make 'Circus Bar'... in fact, I'm actually closer to three times the advance. So two thirds of the money for 'Circus Bar' came from my pocket. And yet, I have no chance of recouping it now, especially as people can, and will, download it for nothing.

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Was this all written with Brooks Paschal again?

Yeah, Brooks and I wrote everything. It's great working with him, he's so clever and so talented. It's a joy. I think we might write together again, but for other people... sorry, I don't want to move too quickly on to topic number two. It's just I'm a little bit disheartened. I know the music business has changed an awful lot and I know records don't sell the way they used to, but I still think an artist should be able to recoup their money. Unfortunately, with 'Circus Bar' in particular, I was shocked - two weeks before the record was out, it was on download sites. That can only mean it's come from journalists with promo copies, or from someone at the record label. There are no other sources. I can't see it being the label, putting it out on download sites stops them generating back their income further down the road, that's silly. I got disheartened with all that.

I can understand that, I had a similar tale from Joe Lynn Turner with his second Sunstorm project. He told me that his girlfriend found it on illegal download sites before the album had been released too. He came to the same conclusion that it is probably journalists with promos. If that is the case, I'd dearly love to beat the shit out of them. If I get an album in advance, from people like yourself or Joe, it's a privilege. I've been a fan of both of you for years, so to get the chance to hear

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Thomas, melodic acts like that, they also have heavier stuff like Primal Fear, Sebastian Bach... I thought 'Circus Bar' was a good fit. I do think if they could have fifteen bands like Journey they'd be delighted, but there aren't very many bands who can do what Journey do - not well, anyway!

No, you're right there - the thing with bands like Journey, I don't think they've moved on. I'm amazed at how many records have come out this year by bands who were big in the eighties or whatever, and the records sound the same. I think they sound dated! Maybe that's what people want? I don't think 'Circus Bar' sounds dated.

That was precisely the reason I voted 'Circus Bar' one of my top records of 2010. I thought it sounded fresh and contemporary, while still being you. It sounded like you had a new vitality and it didn't sound like an album where you had decided 'Hey everyone, this is what Bad Company would sound like if I was still with them!'

No, fuck that!

Right! But some bands, either through their own volition or on instruction from the label, say things like 'We are going back to our roots!' which means we'll re-hash what made us famous. Some manage to get away with it - the new stuff by Whitesnake and Mr Big, to me, works well in this day and age while retaining what made them popular in the first place. Others get it very wrong in my opinion. Some fans do love it though, because they don't want to move on either - personally I like an artist growing. I loved your Bad Company records, but I think 'Circus Bar' can stand right up alongside 'Holy Water' or 'Dangerous Age' and more than hold it's own.

It's very sad. I have never downloaded a song illegally, I always go to iTunes. I've got about 5,000 songs on my computer here that I've bought. That's a substantial amount of money, but I never felt I should rip the artists off instead. There's no logic, it's a false economy. Eventually, everyone will feel like I do, nobody will make any more records, then there will be no more music. Guess why?

Exactly, and I don't even think that people can claim albums are overpriced. Pretty much any new record is around eight to ten pounds. With 'Circus Bar' - there wasn't one song on there I didn't like, so I don't consider ten quid for 53 minutes of excellent music overpriced.

Yeah... I dunno, I don't think Frontiers pushed 'Circus Bar' all that hard either. I don't think it got that much promo, I'm not sure I suited Frontiers, for what they like to put out.

I thought you fitted quite well - their sort of umbrella title is 'melodic rock', but while they had Journey and do things with Joe Lynn Turner, Mickey

dealt with in Bad Company. This was the stuff he'd bring in to record. I was so right to hold my ground on that! As much as they hated me for it, I was so right! It took listening to his record to make me realise that - it took me back in time to those Bad Company sessions. That was the quality both he and Mick were bringing in. I'd say 'Guys, this isn't good enough...' and they'd bluster 'What do you mean, we've written hits!' Yeah, but these songs weren't hits, they were dirge! And of course, I'm the bad guy.

Anyway, my new one is out there, it's my last one... and it's selling quite well actually. It's on iTunes and Amazon and I get a graph every couple of days. 'I'm There' is a very popular song, according to iTunes.

I loved that one - it's the first one out of the blocks so it grabs your attention the quickest, but I liked the style of it. I thought that could have fitted on 'Circus Bar'.

Yeah, I guess it could - but we went out of our way to even change the format from what we did on 'Circus Bar'. We didn't want too many electric guitars - if you notice, it's mainly an acoustic track, but it's bolstered, of course, with some wallop. It's a nice song, it's well put together and it's kind of emotional, the words are apt I think, to how people feel when they're in love. As silly as it is, you just want to be with someone all the time. After a couple of months, obviously you hate each other... (laughs) But it's a nice sentiment!

The one downside of buying it from iTunes is I don't get any of the information of the packaging with it. So as a result, I have no idea who else played on this EP with you?

It's the same crew that did 'Circus Bar' - Brooks, myself, Luke Davids on keyboards, Miguel Gonzalez, who is my bass player... and that's it, just the four of us. The bulk of it was mainly just Brooks and I.

Whereabouts did you do it, do you have your own studio or live near one?

No, Brooks has a studio, we used that. Same place as where we did most of 'Circus Bar'. It's funny, it's not a high tech studio - it's got Pro-Tools and all that bullshit, but we used cheap mics, cheap effects and made a modern record. Bands these days can't afford to use high cost microphones and stuff, so we thought fuck it, we'll do the same. Use cheap mics, make a real warm sounding record. That's how it sounds to me, it sounds natural. It fell into place, it wasn't like we just... we spent time thinking about arrangements and what production values to add, but once we planned it, it pretty much made itself.

This will probably make you laugh, but you said about you being a bit old fashioned - as soon as you announced you had a new EP out on iTunes, I bought it, downloaded it, and the first thing I did was burn it to a CD and do some artwork for it to put in a case.

(Laughs) It's funny isn't it? There is something about that! There is - we are lacking something, I'm sure, eventually, there will be a new way of having music presented. A foolproof way. I can't imagine what it will be, but it has to happen, otherwise the music industry will die. It's on it's last legs now. Taylor Swift is selling records, Justin Bieber, who I wish a hideous death, he's selling records. I cannot abide him, I absolutely detest everything he stands for. I hope he dies in a fiery car crash - but that's just me! (laughs) Taylor Swift - she's amazing. Her songs, they are so mature and so well put together... she's not the world's greatest singer but she doesn't have to be, she's just a really talented,

Never mind.

Oh my God. Have you heard it?

I stumbled across it by complete accident online, and heard some clips from it. That was enough.

Oh my God. Simon, bless his heart, he's got a nice voice. But he's not a singer, he's not a songwriter, he's not a producer, he's not an arranger. He's a drummer! I listened to it a few times - and I was appalled. Absolutely appalled. But I know now, when I heard those songs, it took me back to the shit I

nice girl. Everyone I know who has worked with her or met her, they all say she is the nicest girl in the world. No falseness, no pretence, she's just plain nice. And that's nice to hear. People who have worked with her say that... she'll come out prior to shows and hang out with her crew. That's genuinely nice. I have nothing but respect for her, and I'd like to marry her. (laughs)

So, if this EP does turn out to be the last thing you record, it's not a bad thing to bow out on. I think these last two records are among the best things you've done.

Yeah, and they were easier to make! I don't wanna always bash people, but working with Mick and Simon in Bad Company was really difficult. I was fighting against them and their old fashioned views... and they resented I was a songwriter. They wanted to be the star songwriters... I wouldn't mind, all I wanted was just to be in the band and contribute songs! There was no bullshit. Was I difficult to work with? Probably. But that was because I was fighting with those fuckers about every decision to do with the band. They wanted to drag the band back into the seventies and I didn't want to go that way. So it was bickering and fighting all the way - but you know, you've seen what's happened since I left. They bring back Paul Rodgers, and their tour was a disaster. I heard that some of their shows with Paul have been playing to, in some cases, 20% houses! They thought bringing back Paul would make everything fine, but it didn't. You have to move forward, I'm not blowing my own trumpet but I think if they had stuck with me we could have moved forward and made some really great records. We'd have been a different Bad Company, but we were anyway, as soon as I ended up being the singer...

Yeah, it was a good different though. It didn't sound like Paul's Bad Company, but it was some really good stuff.

I listened back to some of the old Bad Company stuff, prior to my joining and it is fucking cool. Simon was playing with feel, some swagger, early on. Mick, as limited as he is with his four chords, he played with swagger. Paul was just amazing. Now I think they're almost a caricature of what they used to be.

I was sent the 'Live At Wembley' DVD and I watched it - they did a good job, Paul sounds excellent, but... there's Simon on drums, Mick on guitar, then Paul's bass player Lynn Sorensen, Paul's guitarist Howard Leese... to be honest, I watched the show, and with Howard Leese there, I wasn't really sure what Mick was there for.

I've got a little inside story about that - a friend of mine was at one of their rehearsals in Florida, before they did the 'Hard Rock' show, and he told me that Mick Ralphs had to be taught how to play his own songs again.

(Laughs) Like Ace Frehley when KISS reformed?

Yeah! Howard Leese was doing everything basically. Mick couldn't even remember what chords he'd used in his own songs! It's sad.

There will no doubt be people who will still want to bash your time in Bad Company - I personally liked all the line ups, yours, Paul's and Robert Hart's, but you only have to look how things have panned out. Paul's done well for himself, you've done fine by making your own records with your own sound. Poor old Robert got dragged in to make two very good records which sounded

like they were trying to be Paul-era records, and when that didn't work, he was out on his ear so they could get Paul back! Mick and Simon don't seem to have moved on at all from the first couple of Bad Company albums.

They're clueless, absolutely clueless. I don't wish them malice, despite them saying some things to me that were not very nice. They've eradicated all ten years of my time with the band, you go on their Bad Company site and there's no mention of me or the records we made. Weird! I think, if they really want to eradicate that time, they should return all the royalty cheques they received. Donate those to a good cause! They want to wash their hands so badly of that ten year period, it's only fitting that they should donate that money to a charity. (laughs)

They could put it towards the 'Assassination Of Justin Bieber' fund! Ooh, I'll chip in to that one myself!

(Laughs) That's why I did that interview with you about 'Holy Water' in Fireworks #47. I got some good feedback from that, some people told me they had revisited the album as a result and forgotten how good it was.

I'm glad I had chance to do that interview with you, I'm delighted with 'Circus Bar', I love the new EP and it's great to get more music from you, even if this is the last thing you do - if that's the case, it's a fitting swan song.

Yeah, I'm happy with it. But what is the point of going through the turmoil of writing, then recording and all that... I'll probably still write. In a perfect world, I'd like to find somebody who is young enough to still be regarded as valid, and write for them, but then again, will they sell records? Even if I did find such an artist, there's still the piracy issue. It costs money to make records, and people will then steal it. That's what it is, stealing, it's that simple. If you download something free on the internet, you're a thief. I don't know how to stop it, whether you can prosecute - it's the same as shoplifting, but they don't think of it like that because they do it from the comfort of their own house. And like you say, they justify it by claiming the artist won't miss the money. I wish I could use that logic to get a car!

Yeah, I want a Ferrari, so I'll just take one. They've sold loads of cars their time, they won't miss the one I steal.

Right, exactly! It's a sick way of thinking. But the record labels are at fault. They knew the digital age was coming, but they didn't

take any steps to put in any safeguards, they didn't do anything. Now, there has to be something new, something pirate-proof. Otherwise the entertainment world will come to a crunching halt. It's not just music, you can download movies, TV shows, you name it, it can all be obtained for nothing. Something has to give. As an aside, I read a very interesting article with Mick Jagger, who pointed out that in the history of music, musicians have only really been paid for their music from the mid-sixties. Before that, they were always ripped off, never got royalties, never got any cheques. So, pirating taken into account, you can probably say musicians have only really been paid for about thirty years. A pretty short amount of time to make money, in any career, right across the board. Luckily I can earn a living still playing live, but I have to say, that's only because I was in Bad Company. I don't think enough people know who Brian Howe is. I have relatives who don't even know who I am! (laughs) I can't go out as Brian Howe, I have to be former Bad Company singer Brian Howe. Thankfully,

for all the grief of being in that band, I'm very grateful. I'm proud of the records I did with them, proud of my solo records, I'm happy with that and I'll be happy with whatever I do, recording wise, next. It won't be me recording, you won't hear my dulcet tones anymore... unless something incredibly unique happens, or someone asks me to appear on their record. I wouldn't mind that. I was talking to Fiona a couple of weeks ago, she's got a new record out. She kept it pretty quiet, I talked to her not so long back and she never mentioned it. She spoke to me about maybe doing a duet for an overseas release - I've not heard back yet about that, but I've always been a fan of hers, I think she's a lovely girl. As for a Brian Howe album, nah, I don't think there are people waiting for a Brian Howe record! (laughs)

Some people are, but not enough to make it financially worth your while. What about a project? Like I mentioned Mickey Thomas and Joe Lynn Turner earlier, they've done albums where the label sets up the band and picks the songs, and the vocalist just has to give his voice to them. You've got a great voice, would that be something you would consider - a lot more cost effective if it was more like a session for you? Then you wouldn't have to worry about the writing, footing the production costs... there are fans who would miss your voice, me being one of them.

Well, don't get me wrong, I love Joe and I think he's a cool cat, but Joe does a lot of stuff, he appears on all sorts and there's no exclusivity. A lot of singers from the genre do a covers CD, which is not something I'd want to do, or appear on tribute albums. Why would someone as good as Joe Lynn Turner do tribute stuff? It doesn't work for me, I wouldn't want to do a record just for the sake of it. It has to mean something to me. It has to be better than what I've done before to interest me. I don't want to knock out songs someone has sent to me, I've never felt able to do it if it's not connecting with me. For me to ever record again, it would have to be because I thought I could make the best record I'd ever made. I don't foresee it, it would probably kill me, it would be so time intensive and it would have to be better than anything I'd put out before. That takes time and thought, planning and writing, and of course money. So no, I don't want something out unless it's like that, I've never been like that. I don't need to compete with anybody, I compete with my own insecurities, that's tough enough.

Nobody can say you haven't got integrity, you stay true to yourself and that has to be admired.

Yeah, some artists want to go to all the parties too... you won't find me at a rock and roll party. There are some guys who will attend the opening of a fucking envelope. I won't do that, I won't do that L.A. game, that New York game. Having to attend every fucking award and show... even when I was in line for a Billboard award, I didn't even fucking go! I don't care! It's one big fucking jolly up, everyone slaps each other on the back and then talk bad about them behind their back. I can't be fucking arsed, I'd rather be out in a boat fishing, or hanging out with my dogs, be with my girlfriend... no, I'm not chasing that illusion of fame and fortune, that's not me.

Fair enough. Well thank you Brian, entertaining as always. I hope your EP does well for you, it deserves to.

Yeah, make sure you plug it son, because that's gonna be it! (laughs)



We'll cover the positive stuff first - we had a thirteen year wait for 'Circus Bar' - when I spoke to you after that album came out, you promised us new recordings much more quickly. You've done just that, with your new EP 'Emotions'. I think it's great - it reminds me of the more introspective vibe of 'Tangled In Blue', with the song writing feel and style of 'Circus Bar'.

Yeah, it's a really true record. I know how I'd describe it, but I can't get too personal about it because it's a difficult situation. I've reunited with an old girlfriend of mine, the love of my life actually. I was thinking about writing some more after 'Circus Bar' and she contacted me, out of the blue, because of that record. We started talking, met up in Atlanta, and we've been together ever since. She was the inspiration behind all of these new songs, with the exception of 'Drinking' - that was about a friend of mine who sadly died. He always claimed that if he could have reunited with his first girlfriend, he would have stopped drinking. But no, that's the excuse people use, because you know you never are going to reunite. Sadly he died and I tried to write a song about how drunk people will lie to themselves, saying they drink because of this, because of that, because they hurt, you know? That's the only song not related to my girlfriend. Even 'Christmas', which I released as a single last year, just before last Christmas, I released that because it was a rush job and I didn't want to wait a whole year for her to hear it. I like it, it's a really good Christmas song, and I'm amazed at how Christmassy it feels, without having silly little jingle bells in it. It has a Christmas feel to it, which is hard to capture without the right sentiment.

So I'd done that one, then we have 'I'm There' which is obviously about this young