

UNSUNG HEROES: ROBERT HART

Interview by James Gaden

The former Bad Company vocalist offers up some stories told, and untold...

Singer Robert Hart has enjoyed a long career in music, but the story starts with another Robert... a certain Mr. Palmer, who, after leaving the Power Station to continue his solo career, had a big break in the charts with the resulting album – a record graced by the likes of Tony Thompson on drums, Jeff Bova on keyboards and Eddie Martinez on guitar.

“Those guys were making ‘Riptide’ which had ‘Addicted To Love’ on,” Hart explains, referring to the album that took Palmer into the lofty heights of superstardom. “Chris Blackwell from Island Records put Bernard Edwards in charge of sorting out a band for the album and he put that group together, it sounded great and of course the album did really well. Robert was off doing his own thing and Island thought that it was a really good band, so they decided to get an unknown white singer from England to front it. And they got me! We were together about five years in total I think. We only made one record... well, actually, we made two records, the other was intended to be a soundtrack for the Whoopi Goldberg film ‘Burglar’, but only a couple of them were actually done by us: ‘New Way Of Living’ and ‘Bernie’s Groove’. Most of the songs on the soundtrack were written by us, but different artists recorded them. I sang on all the demos though. I’m still in touch with Eddie Martinez and Jeff Bova as it happens.”

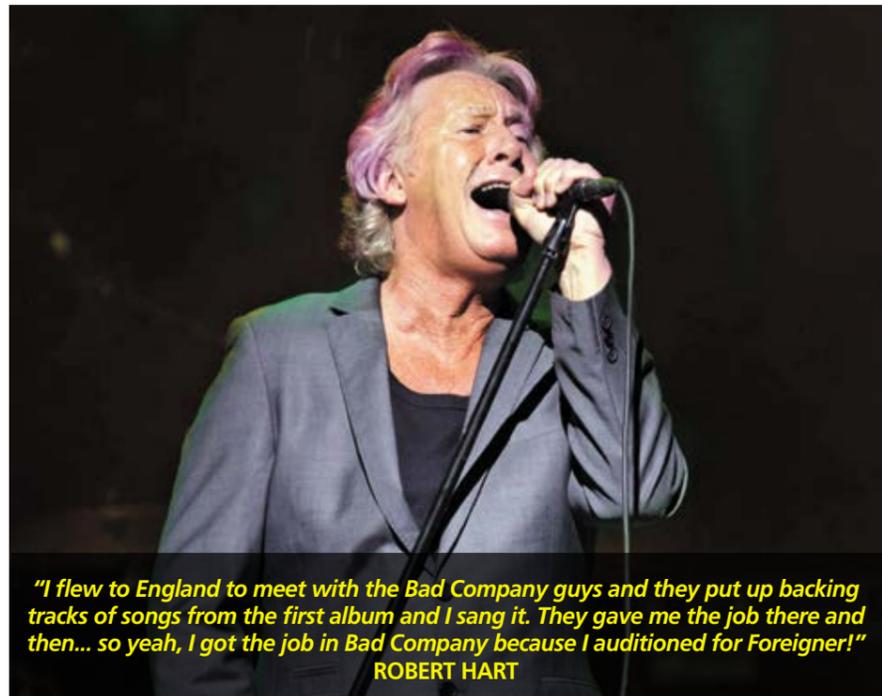
With an experienced band already in place, I enquire what sort of audition Hart had to attend in order to land the gig.

“It was the weirdest audition,” he says, chuckling at the memory. “I went to L.A. and Bernard gave me a backing track and said ‘Here you go, I’m going to go away for twenty minutes, you write some lyrics and a melody, I’ll come back and you sing it and we’ll see how we get on.’ He came back, and after about a minute of me singing he just said ‘Right, you’ve got the job!’ We had great fun making that record.”

While the audition to land his first professional job as a musician passed quickly, the run up to it was anything but, a typical story of trying and failing to get noticed in a tough business. But then, Hart had already had some experience of



Distance: Tony Thompson, Jeff Bova, Robert Hart, Bernard Edwards, Eddie Martinez



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ROBERT HART

that, as he was a professional footballer prior to turning his hand to music.

“I got signed by Leeds when I was about fifteen, sixteen, I was a right midfielder, played on the wing. Peter Lorimer was my hero. But I was so far into my music even then, after about three months I decided I’d rather do music than football, so I took a chance. I probably wouldn’t have done that well in football anyway, so I think I made the right choice. I still enjoy a kick about now, but back then I was in local bands and stuff, writing songs, sending them off and getting knocked back. Chris Blackwell was the first person to get in touch, he told me he really liked my songs and gave me a three year publishing deal. The plan was to get me a record deal, but then the chance came to put me together with Bernard and he took it. Oddly enough, right around the same time, Atlantic Records came in and offered me a deal to make a solo album, so it all come together in one lump really!”

That debut solo album was ‘Cries And Whispers’, a classy, yet more lightweight effort with Hart sounding confident and writing or co-writing most of his own material.

“I think it’s quite different to Distance, so I had two very different albums out in the same year,” Hart explains. “I was signed in America, and a lot of people actually thought I was an American artist. As such, I spent a lot of time over there and the idea was to try and write a soft Pop-Rock record. I enjoyed making that, I had two great producers on there, Gary Stevenson and Stewart Levine. I was really fortunate to have been able to work with them. I thought it was a good album.”

Living a dual life as a singer in a band and a

solo artist, I ask if the vocalist had a preference of one over the other.

“Do you know what, I liked it exactly the same. I really like being in a band because you’ve got all your mates around you, but I do also enjoy taking control for the solo stuff and being the old singer songwriter guy.”

Hart’s second effort, simply named ‘Robert Hart’, saw him move more into a Rock market. With some big name players coming on board and a writing partnership with established composer Russ Ballard forming, the vocalist’s second effort always struck me as going a bit under the radar, as there were some tracks on there which could easily have been hits with a better marketing campaign. Hart agrees.

“Yeah, I did that with help from Russ Ballard, which was great, and we had Chris Childs on bass, Zak Starkey on drums along with Jimmy Copley, who is with me now in Manfred Man’s Earth Band. I had a really great bunch of guys on that record. There were some really good songs on there, we made a couple of videos for it. ‘Angel’ did okay, it did quite well in Germany. For me, that’s always been a great market, German people do like their music, they like their Rock and they’re loyal, they stick with it.”

I ask if Hart got to tour his solo work much back in those days.

“I did, funnily enough. I put a band together and toured Germany a lot, a bit in Spain and I had a lot of dates in Portugal and Greece for some reason. I also had some dates in Britain and I had a residency in the old Marquee, I used to be in there every Wednesday night. That was a good thing to have under my belt. I did get

quite a few solo gigs done during that period.”

The hard work paid off, because the next stop in Robert’s career was fronting the legendary Bad Company, who had recently parted ways with Brian Howe. Howe had co-written most of the band’s hits since their reformation, but at the same time had given the band a more American, radio friendly style which upset some purists. Hart’s involvement did not come about in a very straightforward way.

“That was funny, I got a call and my Mum answered and took the message, told me there was some bloke called Mick Jones from Foreigner on the phone. I thought ‘Oh yeah, of course there is’ but it was! He and Rick Willis wanted to see me, they asked if I wanted to come over to New York the next day because they were getting rid of Lou Gramm, they wanted a new singer and they liked my albums! So I made out I knew all the Foreigner songs, which I didn’t, I learned a bunch of them on the plane, and I spent about three weeks with them. It just wasn’t me though, my style of singing is very Blues based, whereas Lou was very American, and he was absolutely brilliant. They worked with me for three weeks but it wasn’t right. They had the same management as Bad Company, which was Bud Prager, and he said that Bad Company had parted ways with Brian Howe so did I fancy jumping ship and auditioning for them instead? So I flew back to England to meet with the Bad Company guys and they put up backing tracks of songs from the first album and I sang it. They gave me the job there and then... so yeah, I got the job in Bad Company because I auditioned for Foreigner!” he laughs.

I point out that Bud Prager also suggested when Howe departed Bad Company, he might be suited to Foreigner, an anecdote that Hart is familiar with.

“I know, amazing isn’t it, Brian and I were following each other around!” he laughs. “I did a gig the other night with Manfred Mann’s Earth Band and Foreigner were there and I had a laugh with Mick Jones about it. It’s funny how it all works out. Bad Company was a much better fit for me because I was a huge fan of Paul Rodgers. Simon Kirke and Mick Ralphs were really looking to go back to that original sound, and we cut ‘Company Of Strangers’ which I think did manage to recapture that sound they were after. It was a purposeful move to go back to the basic Rock and Roll approach. We recorded it at The Manor, in Oxford. It was nice and we just produced it ourselves. I had a great time doing that album and playing in that original style that had made Bad Company’s name. Frankly, as much as I liked the original era, the Brian Howe era had some really good songs, I thought ‘Holy Water’ was great, with ‘If You Needed Somebody’ on there. I don’t know the ins and outs but I think Mick and Simon fell out with Brian, so they were happy to never play those songs again. I’d have been more than happy to, I liked them, but there we go. The boys are out on the road now, they’re still great.”

The follow up, ‘Stories Told And Untold’ saw the group re-work some of their older material



Bad Company 1995: Dave ‘Bucket’ Colwell, Rick Wills, Mick Ralphs, Robert Hart, Simon Kirke

and partner it up with some new tracks. The album is, in my opinion, a massively overlooked effort and I presume it wasn’t supported very well by the label.

“No, it wasn’t, and we spent a lot of time and money making that record,” Hart confirms. “We moved to Nashville and I actually ended up staying there for about five years after it, writing songs again for other people. I was with Barbara Orbison, Roy Orbison’s widow, I was signed to her publishing company. We were all there, except Mick, he didn’t want to fly so he did his parts in London. We had some great guests on there, Vince Gill, Alison Krauss, Timothy Schmidt, it was really good fun to do.”

To re-work classic songs like ‘Ready For Love’ and ‘Can’t Get Enough’ gave the band chance to breathe new life into them, and re-record some lesser known tracks like ‘Silver Blue And Gold’ and ‘Oh Atlanta’, the latter of which I felt eclipsed the original.

“I loved doing those, and that almost jazzy take of ‘Can’t Get Enough’, I really enjoyed that,” Hart smiles. “It was a real breath of fresh air to do it like that. We went to a studio and sat down, rearranged all the songs and it was really good fun, they came together very quickly.”

I know that Hart toured with Bad Company on the ‘Company Of Strangers’ tour because I have a couple of bootlegs from shows he performed, but I have never seen anything from a ‘Stories Told And Untold’ tour, so I enquire if there even was one.

“We did tour it, briefly,” the singer reveals. “We toured with Lynyrd Skynyrd, I remember playing ‘I Still Believe In You’ in Nashville, I think we did about thirty dates in all. The ‘Company Of Strangers’ tour was a really good tour, we did a lot of dates for that, it went on for a few months, we did some stuff that hadn’t been done for a long time like ‘Rock Steady’. That was the tour we first aired ‘Silver Blue And Gold’, that always went down really well which is why it was re-worked on ‘Stories...’ I wanted to do ‘Running With The Pack’ but we tried that a couple of times and it never felt quite right. I also wanted to try ‘Weep No More’ but we didn’t have a keyboard player for the tour, so that was another one we got to put on ‘Stories...’ Yeah, we had a good set-list on that ‘Company...’ tour. Ironically, the only one I had problems with, because I used to have to play piano on it, was the song ‘Bad

Company’! I wasn’t too happy with that, it was the only one I couldn’t really get to grips with!”

Once Bad Company elected to bring back original vocalist Paul Rodgers for a reunion, I ask how Hart made the transition from spending five years as a songwriter in Nashville, to frontman and chief songwriter for a new band, The Jones Gang.

“I stayed on there to concentrate on song writing, because I’d more or less given up the live gigs. I was doing that and then Boz Burrell, the original bass player for Bad Company, he phoned me up and told me Kenny Jones was putting a group together and wanted to know if I fancied doing it, playing some Bad Company stuff and some stuff from Kenny’s career. I came over and we formed The Jones Gang. We stuck around for about five years I think, and that’s an album I’m really proud of. We did a gig in Chelsea a few weeks back, and do you know what, it sold out. It’s only a small place but we filled it, did a bunch of stuff from the album and added some Bad Company songs and some stuff from The Who, that was good.”

The Jones Gang’s one and only album ‘Any Day Now’ is an absolute cracker, full of deluxe Classic Rock with Hart co-writing every track. With his ex-Bad Company colleague Rick Wills on bass, and guitars courtesy of another former colleague, Dave ‘Bucket’ Colwell, not to mention Gary Grainger and Ronnie Wood, there’s plenty to like, although not everyone agreed.

“When we started writing, we couldn’t get signed for love nor money!” Hart laughs at the recollection. “But then, somebody in America decided to take a punt on us and it ended up doing really well. We did have some good guests, we had Ronnie... in fact, we had The Faces because Ian McLagan is on there too. We played a bit in America and the single went down well.”

The single in question was ‘Angel’ from the Robert Hart album. The Jones Gang version wasn’t much different to the original, but was met with much more approval, reaching #1 on ACQB, #38 on Billboard’s Adult Contemporary Radio chart and #2 on Billboard’s Hot 100 Singles Sales Chart.

“I know! I covered my own song!” he laughs again. “It’s weird... the original version I cut did pretty well in Germany and a few spots in Europe, but nowhere else. When the Jones Gang did it, it

did really well in America on the Billboard, but we couldn't get it played here in England at all! Do you know why? Because it 'sounded too American'. Ludicrous isn't it?"

Despite the success, The Jones Gang were short lived as a recording unit and Hart would next find employment replacing Jon Lande in The Snakes, an outfit put together by ex-Whitesnake members Bernie Marsden and Micky Moody. Because of Hart's former job, the band were rebranded Company Of Snakes.

"Yep, with old Bernie Mars-Bar." Hart grins. "We've got Jon Linwood filling in for Manfred Mann's Earth Band at the moment because Jimmy Copley's not very well, and Jon was in the Company Of Snakes with me for a bit. Bernie, Micky Moody, that was a good band. It was fun, but it wasn't something I thought I could dedicate a lot of my time to. I wanted something more substantial, because Bernie was doing other things alongside it, Micky had stuff going on, so I was just a substitute until something else came along."

Hart never recorded an album with the Company Of Snakes. He left and was replaced by Stefan Berggren and it would be several years before Hart recorded again. The Bad Apples was the next vehicle, an album which many people are unaware of.

"That was put together by Jimmy Copley, for no other reason than to have a bit of fun really."



The Jones Gang: Gary Grainger, Robert Hart, Kenney Jones, Rick Wills

He'd done some work with Jeff Beck and it inspired him to put something together. Micky Moody came on board along with Mick Rodgers from the Earth Band and Ian Jennings. We made a record and it was basically live in the studio, essentially what you hear is what we did. We only got to play about three or four gigs sadly. Because Jimmy's not well at the moment, I'm not sure what the future holds for The Bad Apples."

The album is much more Blues orientated which was something Hart found appealing.

"It certainly was, I had great fun making it and we had a guest, Anthony Head, who was in 'Buffy The Vampire Slayer' and he plays the Prime Minister in 'Little Britain', he sang on a track with me and we had a great time. He was a friend of Jimmy's and he came down, he's a really good singer, he knows what he's doing. Jimmy

had played on something he'd been doing so he popped in to return the favour and did a great job."

That same year, Escape Music released the debut album from Diesel, made up of the pairing of Hart and FM guitarist Jim Kirkpatrick.

"Yep, good old Jim, in my book one of the finest guitar players in the country. He approached me, suggested an album together, I met with Khalil Turk from Escape Music and we set about making a record. Steve Overland does all the backing vocals on there and I had a really good experience making that. That had Jimmy Copley on drums again, Pat Davey on bass, that was it, just the four of us. It really rocks along, that record, and we're planning on doing another one, maybe starting in January. We made it in Stoke, very quickly, it only took about fourteen days, we got our heads down. Khalil is a lovely

man, he loves and supports music."

Hart's next challenge was a double concept album playing an Englishman who emigrates to America, falls in love with a Sioux tribeswoman, enlists in the army and takes part in the battle of Little Big Horn. It's a far cry from his usual work, but the singer gives, in my opinion, a career best performance on The Powwow Rock Orchestra's 'Everybody Powwow'. Hart handles the bulk of the vocals, although he is effectively countered by the crystal clear voice of Emma Pears.

"Oh, thank you," he says modestly. "Yeah, we've got most of the old crew on there, Bernie, Jimmy... I'd go up and do two or three tracks, Simon Webb, who put it together, is a very talented man. I'm really glad you liked it, we play it a lot before we go on stage with the Earth Band. The music works with the story really well, it's a really good sounding record with a mix of styles. I did that duet but I never met the girl, funnily enough, our parts were recorded separately. Our road manager from the Earth Band was involved in it and he told me about it, played me a couple of tracks and asked if I wanted to sing on it. Apparently I was only supposed to sing one or two, but then I ended up singing just about all of it! It was out of my comfort zone and I enjoyed that. Simon is from a Musical Theatre background and he was very aware with the kind of album it was, I needed to be singing in character, which I'd not really done before, so we took it very seriously. There's talk of doing another one, which would

be really good, and we'd like to do a night of it live somewhere. It would be a great stage show if that could be brought together, and there is talk of a second record."

Which brings us up to present day, where the singer is currently fronting Manfred Mann's Earth Band.

"Yes, I'm very happy in the Earth Band, I love doing it, we tour nearly every week and we've got a live album due out. It keeps me busy!"

With so much under his belt, I ask if Robert has any major achievements he's proud of, or regrets about his career.

"Having a number one with The Jones Gang

was the big one for me. Every week I'd get a call from the office telling me it had moved up a few places. I remember I was out in my car and it had broken down, I was getting hooked up to a tow truck and my wife phoned me and said 'Guess what, the record is at number one.' So I'm sat in an oily pick up truck, it wasn't very glamorous, but I was shouting and yelling and the pick up driver is looking at me wondering what the hell was wrong with me!" he laughs. "So that's a big deal, I enjoyed that. I've not got any big regrets. I would have liked to have stayed with Bad Company for a bit longer, but the original band came back together and I totally understood that, my time had run its course. I've had a pretty good run of it really, I can't moan!"



Manfred Mann's Earth Band: Mick Rogers, Robert Hart, Manfred Mann, Steve Kinch, Jimmy Copley

ESSENTIAL HART

11 albums which should be heard by any true fan of the artist's work...



Various Artists Burglar (1987)



Hart made his recording debut on the soundtrack for the Whoopi Goldberg movie, performing lead vocals on two tracks by Distance, 'New Way Of Living' and 'Bernie's Groove'. However, Hart co-wrote seven of the ten tracks with his Distance band mates, with the likes of Sly Stone and The Jackson's performing the other compositions. A typically entertaining 80s soundtrack.

Distance Under The One Sky (1989)



An attempt to build upon the formula started by the Power Station, Hart makes his full debut as both a key songwriter and a lead singer on a superb album of polished eighties Pop-Rock. Joined by Tony Thompson, Jeff Bova, Bernard Edwards and Eddie Martinez, the album is devoid of filler, with Rockers such as 'Give It Up' and 'Stand Up' nestling alongside commercial gems like 'Speech Of Angels' and 'No Way Out.'

Robert Hart Cries And Whispers (1989)



Issued the same year as the album by Distance, Hart's first solo effort was a more Pop orientated affair with some soulful cuts like 'White Lies And Promises' and 'A Little Love Is Overdue' juxtaposed with foot tappers like 'She's On The List', 'High On Love' and 'Dear Mary'. Lightweight and very eighties, but very enjoyable and worth a listen.

Robert Hart Robert Hart (1992)



Hart's second solo effort was a harder affair, bolstered by some star guests including Zak Starkey on drums and Thunder's Chris Childs on bass. Opener 'Heart And Soul', co-written with Russ Ballard, is superb, as is 'Running Man' and 'Ridin' On The Wind'. The exceptional ballad 'Angel' first appears here, as does a very strong cover of The Elvin Bishop Band's 'Fooled Around And Fell In Love'.

Bad Company Company Of Strangers (1995)



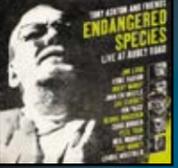
Brought in to replace Brian Howe and steer Bad Company back towards the original Blues laden Paul Rodgers sound, Hart does exactly that on this terrific album. Rockers like 'Clearwater Highway' and 'Gimme Gimme' have all the classic Bad Co. hallmarks, while the title track, 'Judas My Brother' and 'Abandoned And Alone' recreate the sound of their heyday while maintaining it's own identity.

Bad Company Stories Told And Untold (1996)



Bad Company relocated to Nashville and made an album of half originals, and half re-workings of their classics, with help from guests such as Alison Krauss and Vince Gill. The hits work very well, as do deeper album cuts like 'Oh Atlanta'. The originals are very strong too, with typical Rock fare like 'Love So Strong' and the more sweeping efforts such as 'Downpour In Cairo'. Extremely underrated.

Tony Ashton Endangered Species Live (2000)



Recorded live at Abbey Road with guests Paice, Ashton and Lord and the John Entwistle Band, this is the only official document of Hart's time fronting the Company Of Snakes. Five classic Whitesnake songs are performed, with Bernie Marsden singing 'Ain't Gonna Cry No More' before Hart deftly handles the likes of 'Walking In The Shadow Of The Blues', 'Ready And Willing' and 'Here I Go Again' with style.

Jones Gang Any Day Now (2005)



A super-group comprised of Hart, Kenney Jones and Rick Wills, with guest guitarists such as Ronnie Wood, Gary Grainger and Dave Colwell, this is a collection of superb Classic Rock. Hart's fingerprints are all over the writing credits, and the album contains a re-working of 'Angel' that was a major hit. Every track is a winner, from the cracking 'Red Hot' to The Who influenced 'Where Are You'.

The Bad Apples Played (2014)



Released digitally with little fanfare, The Bad Apples is another all-star group featuring Hart, Micky Moody, Jimmy Copley, Mick Rogers and Ian Jennings. A superb, Blues infused record, it includes some great originals like 'Chained To Love' and 'Love Gets In The Way', alongside standards like 'Hound Dog' and 'Shake Rattle And Roll'. Actor Anthony Head guests on 'Holy Cow' to great effect, and Manfred Mann also appears.

Diesel Into The Fire (2014)



A project based around the pairing of Hart and FM guitarist Jim Kirkpatrick, Diesel is an unashamed Rock record. Powerhouse efforts like 'Let's Take The Long Way Home' and 'Told You So' nestle against the Blues influenced 'So What Is Love', 'What You See Ain't What You Get' and the catchy 'Fortune Favours The Brave'. FM vocalist Steve Overland contributes his inimitable tones as a backing singer throughout the album.

The Powwow Rock Orchestra Everybody Powwow! (2015)



A double concept album about Thomas Christian, a miner who leaves England for America and is conscripted into the army and falls in love with Rosie, a girl from the Sioux tribe, this is not typical of Hart's work to date. However, his portrayal of Christian, and his vocals, are immense. The excellent songs performed by visionary Simon Webb, Bernie Marsden, Jimmy Copley and more, makes this a hidden gem of Hart's career.