

UNsung HEROES: ANDY BOWN

Interview by James Gaden

Although best known as the keyboard player with Status Quo since 1977, Andy Bown has actually put out a wealth of impressive material as a singer/songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, as well as performing with the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis and Pink Floyd. Fireworks invited Andy on a trip down memory lane.

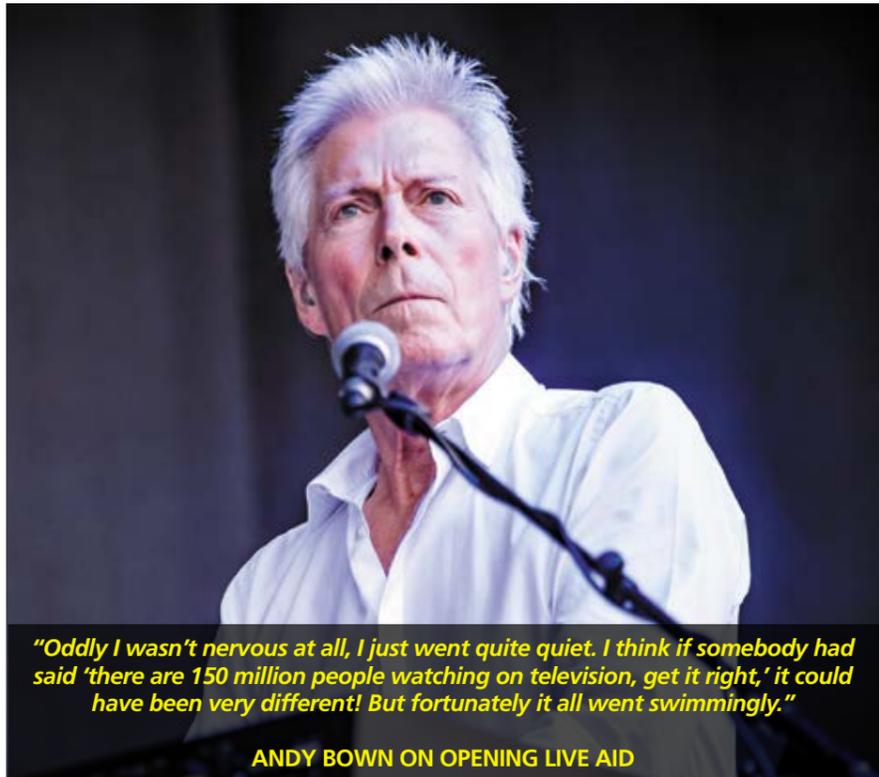
The interview begins with Bown answering the phone in London and announcing from the off that there is every chance he'll have to have questions repeated to him as he and phones don't really get on. It's natural to start with the keyboard player's introduction to music and like so many of his peers, Bown's began on the long road to becoming a professional musician at a very early age.

"I had piano lessons from the age of about 4, my mother was musical and played so I think she decided it would be good for me," he explains. "There was a lady who lived about two miles away from us, I used to walk to her house for lessons. She had bust her thumb up really badly on a dustbin lid, it was really messed up, just like a big ball of fat and gristle where we normally have a nail, so because of that she only charged half a crown for a forty minute lesson and my mother decided that was a good deal and signed me up! I got better and better and entered a few talent competitions. I did quite well – my reading was never good but I had a good feel and I often used to come first, second or third. I played and peaked in proficiency by the age of 10, by 11 I just stopped playing for a bit because it got swallowed up with going to secondary school."

It was a lack of academic achievement that proved one of the driving forces in Bown turning to music.

"I was always good at music and art but so bad at everything else. I came first in Music and Art... and 128th out of 129th at everything else! So I think it was really when I was about 16 that it became a bit more serious. I had a friend called Tony Chapman and he had a band, I used to help set up the drum kit and their bass player left, so Tony and the guitar player Steve, they taught me how to play bass in five days, enough to get away with it, and five days later I played my first gig as their bassist! I know that sounds impressive but it was simple stuff and by the end of it I had such appalling blisters. I liked it though and I got quite proficient on the bass. I wasn't practicing the keyboards much at all, just writing stupid songs on it for my own amusement. It wasn't until about four bands later, I was in this group and they had an organist and I thought 'This is just crap, absolute rubbish, I can do better than that!' So I had to get my poor old father to guarantee the HP on a Hammond L100, the small one, and I could say the rest is history... but I don't think it's quite that exciting!"

That first "proper" working band was The



Herd, formed in 1965, where Bown and Tony Chapman's group were augmented by a young Peter Frampton a year later.

"Tony and I met Peter when he was 16 or 17, we were quite old, I was 19 and Tony was middle aged, he was 22!" he laughs. "We had to guarantee Peter's parents, Kenneth and Peggy, that he would receive a certain amount a week, £11 I think it was, or he wouldn't be allowed to join, because it was quite a commitment. So we got together and there we go, the rest is history. People think we did a few records – the bottom line is we did several



Bown, pictured left, with The Herd

singles but we only made the one album. People keep bringing me releases saying 'This is Japanese' or 'This is Icelandic' or 'This one is Korean' but it's basically all the same material that just keeps getting rejigged."

From The Herd, Bown formed Judas Jump, a fleeting Psychedelic Pop/Rock act which put out a sole album named 'Scorch' in 1970, with Bown credited as the writer of the bulk of the material.

"Don Arden made me an offer I couldn't refuse really," Bown says matter-of-factly. "The group wasn't successful, we had a couple of very nice highlights but it was short-lived. However, I made more money in Judas Jump than I ever did in eight to ten years in The Herd - funny old business isn't it?"

Bown's next project saw him transition into television work with the chance to write and perform the theme tune, 'Tarot', for the fantasy children's television show 'Ace Of Wands', which ran from 1970 to 1972. Bown reveals that was more down to pure luck than any kind of masterplan on his part to launch himself as a solo artist.

"I had been writing with a friend of mine called Trevor Preston, he wrote a lot of the scripts for 'Ace Of Wands' and that was how I got into it. I didn't think anything of it at the

time, I just wrote some music to his lyrics, went into the studio and knocked it out. I had Henry Spinetti, from Judas Jump, play on it as he's always my drummer of choice and I played everything else. We just bashed it out in a couple of hours, as you did then. I didn't look upon it as being a pathway to a solo career, I didn't dwell on it, it was just 'Okay, I'll sing that' – like when I was in a band, I'd play this or sing that, it didn't really matter, as long as I was enjoying myself. That being said, a lot of that time was miserable, trying to make ends meet and coming back from Accrington at 11:30 on a night and the only thing open is a Chinese restaurant and you're a vegetarian... it's a messy business!"

The 'Tarot' theme did indeed open some doors for the musician however and in 1972 Bown issued his debut solo album 'Gone To My Head', which displayed his unique, quirky take on songwriting to impressive effect.

"I was quite excited about that. In hindsight, I think some of the songs are rubbish but I have heard other people tell me they really liked it. I don't say that fishing for compliments, it's just what I feel. The usual response I get from people whose opinion's I really respect is 'it's of it's time', but I can't really see that because I lived the album. I'm more about the actual material as opposed to when it was made. I actually listened to it about six months ago I think, because there is talk of perhaps re-releasing those old albums that never came out on CD, or making a compilation of the best songs, I don't know yet. Some of the completists might want everything. Mike Paxman, our producer for Quo, has done at least two of them for me, he's got some amazing equipment and he has tweaked it. He says they are sounding really good now, he can bring things out of them that you couldn't do back then. He's quite serious about making them available so we'll see what happens."

Bown continued doing work as a session player and one particular session would end up being life changing, when he was brought in to play some additional keyboards on 'Hello!', the sixth album by British rock legends Status Quo.

"We knew each other because we had the same office," he explains. "Their management was in The Marquee when I was with Billy Gaff, but I knew the band anyway, we would play gigs together, not many but I remember one with The Herd in an old cinema with Quo and loads of other bands. Francis [Rossi] remembers it vividly because we had a roadie and they were stood there with their jaws open because we had a guy setting our equipment up and they had to do it themselves. How posh were we – and look what happened to The Herd while Quo are still going strong!"

Bown would issue another solo album, 'Sweet William', that same year but by the time 1975 rolled around, he was summoned to



Judas Jump in 1970, Bown third from right

create another TV theme tune, this time called 'Supersonic', a music showcase programme put together by ITV.

"Yes, it was like 'Top Of The Pops', it was Mike Mansfield's show. Billy Gaff and Mike were pretty close but I don't recall the specifics of how it actually came about, it was more just a 'right place, right time' thing and I just went and knocked it out like usual. That being said, I do think it was a pretty good song. Most of it is 90% luck really. I'm glad people still like that song, and the same thing happened with 'Tarot' – believe it or not, I was told 'Tarot' is the last track played before REM go on stage when they were touring the States. Isn't that weird? I was really chuffed to hear that!"

1977 would see a major break in Bown's career where he ended up returning for another Status Quo session, tinkling the ivories on the intro to 'Rocking All Over The World' from the album of the same name. The song was a huge hit for the band and Bown would be invited back to contribute on 1978's 'If You Can't Stand The Heat' where he not only played keyboards, he co-wrote three songs including the hit 'Again And Again'.

He's proved that was no fluke by coming back a year later and co-writing the smash 'Whatever You Want' with Rick Parfitt, and by 1982 he was credited as a fully fledged member of the group. Way back in FW#43 when Alan Lancaster and John Coghlan were interviewed in this magazine, they stated that the addition of Bown's keyboards wasn't a unanimous choice, with Coghlan commenting "the older fans certainly preferred it without them and I did too. We were a raunchy Rock 'n' Roll band with raunchy guitars, so I didn't think we needed them. That's a bit unfair to Andy who does a really good job and does play guitar and harmonica onstage too, but I don't think we needed them."

Lancaster would add, "Yes, the keyboards and then the departure of John, that changed the sound. John didn't write much but his sound was integral to the arrangements."

Bown offers his own take on joining Quo full time.

"It was a bit strange, I wasn't nuts about the music if I'm honest, but I needed the money and I went into the sessions thinking 'This won't take long!'" he laughs. "It just sort of grew from there. It's kind of John to say I slotted in, but I think the real truth is Alan was usually the one who said no to me being

in photographs. Francis wanted keyboards, Alan had a very musical ear and I don't think he disliked the idea of keyboards, he liked different sounds, not just grinding guitars all the time, but he wasn't very keen on more people joining the band."

Despite not being fully invested in what Quo were doing musically, Bown's songwriting contributions have formed into a long list of impressive compositions over the years.

"That's because I learned to love it, I was listing Quo songs that I had written for my publisher the other week actually and there's over fifty now. On the albums I worked on, I thought 'Just Supposin' and 'Never Too Late' were things I was really happy with. 'If You Can't Stand The Heat' was a very enjoyable experience too because although I was still a hired gun at that point, I felt more involved. Actually, a couple of my solo songs became Quo tracks, we did 'Long Legged Linda' and then on the 'Ain't Complaining' album we did 'Another Shipwreck'. Francis always loved that song and while I don't think it sounds particularly Quo, it was interesting. Being interesting is important. Like the '1+9+8+2' record, that didn't sell particularly well and I thought sounded a bit thin for Quo, but we were making incremental changes to stay current. People would send us songs, and they still do, hoping we'll record them but often they would sound like a tribute band had written a song for Quo. What they miss is there is often a quirk in our material, there are corners to it, it's not all sanded down and polished. It harks back to Punk, from long before I joined, when a band might not have complete command of their instruments but did have plenty of belief."

As well as joining Quo full time, Bown still issued records under his own name, putting out 'Come Back Romance, All Is Forgiven' in 1977 and 'Good Advice' in 1978. When 1980 rolled around he was recruited by another high profile act, brought in as the bass player for the "surrogate band" for Pink Floyd's mammoth 'The Wall' tour.

"That was total luck once again," Bown laughs. "I got a call out of the blue and it was Pink Floyd's office. There was a gig going and I thought 'Oh, that sounds interesting.' What happened was Rick Wills, he used to be in a band with Dave Gilmour in the old days. Dave asked Rick to come and play bass but Rick was up to his neck in work as he was playing bass for Foreigner at the time. Rick said 'If you need a bit of bass, a bit of singing, a bit of everything, Andy Bown is your man'. Which was just terrific, so nice of him. I'm forever grateful to Rick for that because that was the best thing I've ever done, no question. The next thing I know I'm on a plane to Los Angeles to go and live with the family for three months over Christmas... and it wasn't until I got there, three days before rehearsals started, when the courier came with all the tapes I needed to listen to, that I discovered



Bown live with Status Quo, pictured with Rick Parfitt, Francis Rossi and John 'Rhino' Edwards

that it was called 'The Wall' and not 'The War'!" he chuckles. "I told you I was bad with telephones! As our manager Simon says, you couldn't write that!"

The keyboard player's experience of playing large scale shows would come in handy as he also had the daunting task of opening the huge global event Live Aid, with his introduction to the apt 'Rocking All Over The World' being the first notes played.

"Strangely, it wasn't nerve wracking," Bown recalls. "Not only did I have to play the first notes, I had to count it in because back then there was no click tracks and in-ear monitors. But oddly I wasn't nervous at all, I just went quite quiet. I think if somebody had said 'there are 150 million people watching on television, get it right' it could have been very different! But fortunately it all went swimmingly."

While Quo did split briefly, an updated version saw Rossi, Parfitt and Bown joined by a new rhythm section of John 'Rhino' Edwards and drummer Jeff Rich. This version would release albums for years to come, continuing to chalk up top forty hits, many of which, like 'Burning Bridges' 'Rock Til You Drop' and 'Sherri Don't Fail Me Now' featured Bown as a writer. He has contributed to every Quo album in both the playing and composition stakes ever since. He finally returned to his solo career in 2011 when he released 'Unfinished Business' and that has recently been reissued with new artwork and a bonus track.

"I supervised the re-jigging of the artwork and I'm pleased it's being reissued. Mike Paxman has been helping out again and I'm thrilled it's getting another go, because the first time it was never actually released in my book, it just sort of... escaped. I called it 'Unfinished Business' because it had been thirty odd years since my last one. I had a few songs hanging about but I basically was bullied into making it by Mike and my wife Veronica. As soon as I had agreed to their wishes, I wrote another half dozen songs. I go through great periods of fallow, I guess you'd call it. I have bursts of output, but

for me I have to have those quiet periods to absorb other things. Some people can write all the time but if I do that it's not all good. There is a new song called 'Dancing In The Rain', which I wrote in February or March this year... actually, knowing me, it was probably February *and* March, you can't rush these things! I can procrastinate for South West London, I'm very finicky with things and won't leave them alone! That's the thing with digital workstations, you can mess around forever, you can listen back and say 'Oh no, I completely fucked that up' and you can go right back to how it was, a much better way of working. Things have changed massively since I started, with people making very successful albums in bedrooms using just a laptop. Even then, it takes such a long time to do."

The definition of what a 'long time' is can vary so Bown expands upon the theme when pushed for specifics.

"My first recording session for 'Unfinished Business' was back in... I think September 2009, so I probably started work on it in February '09. Some of the songs had been in the back of my mind, hanging about. That's why I used the name 'Unfinished Business' - although it was mostly brand new - I was getting itchy feet. Initially I had an idea to record a basic track, maybe even at home, just for fun. I was going to put it on the internet in some way, I hadn't really decided. I had a chat with Mike because he not only produces, he also does Quo's website and a thousand other sites, he's really technical and clever. He said he'd come over and run through some ideas about what I wanted to do. He came and I gave him some of my ideas to listen to. After a couple of hours he said 'If you don't make an entire album out of this stuff, you are a complete cunt.' Obviously, I don't know if you can print that word - 'complete'!" he laughs. "I thought 'Oh. That's nice!' So I discussed the idea of a record with my wife and she kicked me up the arse and told me to do it. I said 'You've got no idea how much work this is,' because I've been there and done it, it's not just a case of recording

it, but she told me to get on with it. It took me about three years."

One of the songs that is well worth checking out is 'When The Lights Went On', which documents many of the impressive things Bown has experienced, from the aforementioned Live Aid opening, to encountering Chuck Berry, right up to performing alongside Jerry Lee Lewis.

"Yes, all of that song is true. There was a record he did called 'Jerry Lee Lewis Live In London'. It was a big blue double gatefold vinyl album. The world and his mate was guesting on it. All the credits are on the back cover, down the centre and it's done alphabetically so I think I was first or second. The same thing happened with 'The Wall' with Pink Floyd! So there were all sorts of people there and I had to play electric piano. I get there and it's set up right next to him at his piano. The instruments were touching each other! When I saw that, I was crapping myself! Eventually, he walked in and said 'Hey boy!' and that was about all he said to me. But that was one of the funniest things - during one song, I turned around and I couldn't believe it, right next to me he was playing a solo with his foot. Later on, we went into the control room to hear some playbacks and it sounded... like he was playing with his foot! It was dreadful! Just awful!" he chortles at the memory. "But it made for a great sight - this god, playing this crap!"

When it came to crafting 'Unfinished Business', while Bown penned all the songs alone and is a capable multi-instrumentalist, he wasn't shy about recruiting some skilled players to make the record, bringing in Henry Spinetti, Mick Rogers and Trevor Boulder.

"It wasn't a labour at all, it just flowed. There was an element of luck, or as I call it... I was told this a long time ago in the art business, a painting technique a friend of mine used was 'controlled accident'. You just make things go a little bit better if you're not quite in control of everything. I'd never played with Mick before, we'd done loads of gigs and shows with Manfred Mann's Earth Band, I knew him and admired his playing, so I earmarked him to play. Henry is my drummer, as I said. Well, mine and Eric Clapton's. Although I think that should be Eric's and mine! I've done hundreds of recordings with him and I've never once given him any indication or direction of what he should play, I just give him the speed and he plays it. Magic! No stress, it was very easy. The tracks were basically done in two sessions. Trevor Boulder, from Uriah Heep and of course The Spiders From Mars, played bass in the first session. He was great, once he gets the part, it stays with him, solid as a rock. For the second session it was Brad Lang. I had never met Brad before, he was recommended by Chris West, the engineer. His father was Don Lang, as in Don Lang And The Frantic Five, so that was good enough for me. Plus he played string bass as well,

which I used on one or two tracks, because that gives a very different sound. We recorded it at State Of The Ark Studios in Surrey - it's like a museum. It's got some really old guitars in, it's got fifties Fenders, really old amps and wacky equipment. The desk was used for 'Sgt Peppers', part of it was used for The Rolling Stones' 'Live In Paris' album, this stuff is really old but it all works perfectly, it's beautifully taken care of. That's how we got such an organic sound. There was no digital information going in there."

Bown also reveals that the collection of songs on offer were not Quo castoffs, rather a selection of songs he enjoyed.

"I did initially harbour a desire to try 'Keeping The Wolf Away' with Quo, I thought that would have worked in a 'Spirit In The Sky' vein, but that was about twenty years ago. That's the oldest song on the record and to be honest, I've not thought about it since then. So the answer, really, is no, none of them were written with Quo in mind. That was actually originally a B-side to a flop single I did called 'No Fool Like An Old Fool' many moons ago - I'm no good at years, but it was before I went grey! I just did exactly what I wanted to with this record - it's the first time I've ever done an album or single that I did for myself. It didn't have something else behind it, nobody telling me that 'oh, this has to be



Bown during a recording session for his 'Unfinished Business' solo album

commercial' or 'this might work for Quo'... I just did exactly what I wanted."

One thing that might surprise a listener new to Bown's solo work was how guitar orientated it is from a musician known for his keyboard playing.

"Well, for the last twenty five years, I've only ever written on guitar. I do play some guitar with Quo as you know, not a lot but I do play, so that's probably why the songs are guitar based. It's how I write and I play all the rhythm guitar. That's where I get the core part. A lot of the material is tongue firmly in cheek

and underlined by, I hope, a feel for the Blues, which I love and always have done."

Bown brings things up to date by expressing his satisfaction with the new Status Quo album 'Backbone', the first since the passing of Rick Parfitt, which was covered last issue. He finishes by commenting that he is looking forward to seeing his Unsung Heroes piece, joking, "It sounds better than a 'Where Are They Now' feature, doesn't it? Thanks for being so knowledgeable about my work and for never referring to me as Andy Brown!" he laughs.

5 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...

Andy Bown 'Come Back Romance All Is Forgiven' (1977)
Bown's third solo album was issued when he was getting more and more involved with Status Quo, but that didn't stop him delivering another strong set of songs, with 'Drowned In Texas' opening proceedings in fine style. The quirkiness is more than prevalent on the Funk drive of 'Nobody's Fool' and the bonkers 'I've Got God On The Phone'. However, 'Blood On The Keys' shows he can pen a serious, tender ballad anytime he wants.

The Herd 'All About The Herd' (1977)
The Herd boasted the likes of Bown, future Gillan drummer Mick Underwood, Peter Frampton and Rolling Stones alumni Tony Chapman in their ranks. With the bulk of their material penned by Bown and Frampton the group notched up several hit singles over their 1965-69 existence. All of them are included on this post-Herd collection, along with various other cuts, including 'Sweet William' which Bown would re-record in 1973 on his solo album of the same name.

Status Quo 'Quid Pro Quo' (2011)
While Bown had been writing songs for Quo since he joined, some of which were big hits, he was never more involved in a record than here. The veteran act's 29th effort saw the keyboard player assist in penning a third of the material. The album went top ten, with Bown co-writing the single 'Rock N' Roll N' You', the powerful 'Dust To Gold' and the foot tapper 'Any Way You Like It'. Also of note is the impressive Bown and Francis Rossi co-write 'Frozen Hero'.

Andy Bown 'Gone To My Head' (1972)
While all of Bown's solo efforts are enjoyable, his first one is a great introduction to his versatility and quirky lyrics. The catchy 'PS Get Lost' or amusing 'Oh James' are playful, 'Pale Shadow (Of His Former Self)' is truly infectious and the title track is a superb piano led effort. The melancholy interlude 'And If My Love Wants To Know' proves you never know what's coming next and the female backing vocals on the marvellous 'Etcetera, Etcetera' are a masterstroke.

Andy Bown 'Unfinished Business' (2019)
Originally released in 2011, the updated version of 'Unfinished Business' adds a new track 'Dancing In The Rain' next to some of Bown's most entertaining cuts. 'Ruby And Roy' is a great rocker, 'Tick My Box' is a wonderful Blues number with some lighthearted lyrics and 'Rubber Gloves' is a real standout. All of Bown's trademark humour is here, now meshed with, due to his long stint with Status Quo, much more guitar work than his previous 70s efforts.