

Dave Ruffy

Dave Ruffy's 'CV' reads like a 'who's who' of left field pop over the past 30 years. It includes the Ruts, Prefab Sprout, Aztec Camera, Waterboys, Sinead O'Connor and Kirsty MacColl. Primarily a drummer, Dave's credits also include song writing, production and Midi drum programming.

Dave is a teller of vivid stories; recreating dialogue in the present tense, mimicking voices and inflections, and frequently ending the reported conversation with a question to give extra resonance. He admits to digressing a lot, "just to give you extra background". The background begins with a head spinning journey back to a time when record retailers thrived and vinyl junkies weren't constantly answering the two inseparable questions, 'can you still get records/record players?'

In the early '70s, Dave was living in the East End of London with his wife and young daughter. He was playing music but unable to make a living from it. Initially, his wages came from a factory job followed by a stint as a messenger in the City. Dave spent so much of his spare time frequenting record shops that he ended up working for a small chain, James Asman's, which had stores in Camomile Street, Cannon Street and in New Row (off St Martins Lane).

"James Asman was a jazz critic so we saw a lot of jazz and classical. Also the journalists used to bring in their review copies so we had a big second hand thing too. I got a job in the basement on Camomile Street selling the second hand stuff, rock, prog. Later there was jazz funk and fusion. Being in the City, everyone was monthly salaried and you'd get vinyl junkies who would spend half of their pay on records. It was before the corporate rock thing, so it was our music; if someone liked something you'd say, 'Have you heard this?' and you'd play them something else they might like. I moved to Cannon Street and ran the upstairs, selling the pop stuff. It was just albums until punk rock began then we starting doing singles. I remember the Ramones coming out, I thought, 'Fuck, this is brilliant, it's like cartoon, 50s/60s minimalism.' We were very united with the customers but when punk came along it created a divide: 'what are you doing with this?' (Said in a whiny voice)"

Ruts

Dave continued to play music, drumming with a group called Hit & Run. Future Ruts bass player Segs (a friend made through the shop) became a roadie with the band. Paul Fox (guitar) and Gary Barnacle (sax) were also members. Malcolm Owen, "being a bit of a DJ", was on the sidelines.

"We started the Ruts while that was going on. I was the bass player originally. We were never really punk rockers. I was in my early 20s but as a movement it was the whole, 'yes you can do it' that inspired me to believe I could do it and change my life. It was like I was waiting for my opportunity... I was waiting for punk rock to happen... we wrote a few songs (later to be released as the Stepping Bondage demos). We did a Ruts performance at a Hit & Run gig in the Target pub, which is now McDonalds at the Target Roundabout. It was a rough old place, in Ruislip, out Hayes way."

“Like the Ramones separated my clients in the shop, punk separated Hit & Run. One view was, ‘we play proper music’. The other was ‘yes, it’s three chords but aren’t three chords good when you go back to the roots of rock ‘n’ roll?’ ”

Paul Mattocks was drumming with both bands but the time had come to choose sides. Paul stayed with Hit & Run. Dave, feeling that he was never going to be a bass player, switched to drums with the Ruts. The bass vacancy was filled by Segs. “I knew that Segs played a bit of guitar - he liked his funk and he was a great dancer with a good sense of rhythm - so we gave him a two pronged audition; the first one involved a case of beer, a bottle of blue label vodka, a ball of Afghan hash and a couple of grams of premium flake. ‘Let’s do a night together, get fucked up and see how we get on.’ The second day, we went to rehearsals and played; it was great. From the off we knew it was going to work.”

It was 1977 and the Ruts hit the ground running with demos and gigs. However, they didn’t break through until 1979 when they became one of the better and more enduring of the second wave of punk bands firing a consistent volley of singles including ‘In A Rut’, ‘Babylon’s Burning’ and ‘Something That I Said’. The way the band spent 1978 was vital to their development and crucial to the synchronicity of their breakthrough. Without an agent, gigs weren’t easy to come by; the band had to be resourceful. Malcolm was living in a squat in Hayes and got to know Chrissy Bolton, manager of reggae band Misty In Roots. “We all loved reggae, it was a great antidote. We’d be buying Tapper Zukie and U-Roy records. Misty were from Southall which was the next place from Hayes. As Segs was new to playing bass, Misty’s bass player, known simply as Bassy, was a big influence that would help him when the Ruts crossed into reggae territory with tracks like Jah War and Love in Vain. Both bands were looking for gigs so we did some together including some of the Rock Against Racism (RAR) ones. We became friends. We used to jam together. We played on the back of a van at the Victoria Park RAR gig in 1978; 3 white blokes and 17 black blokes.”

Like so many others, the Ruts opportunity came through the John Peel Show. ‘In A Rut’ was released in 1979 and immediately received Peel’s backing. It was an independent release on Misty’s own label, People Unite. “We made a thousand copies. Me and Segs were well into the idea of staying independent. I went to Rough Trade and Geoff Travis bought 500 off me for cash. ‘This is fucking brilliant, we could own our own material.’” It wasn’t to be. Paul and Malcolm wanted to sign with a major. This led to the “worst deal in the world” with Virgin, which offset the publishing income against the record deal advance. This was not common practice in the industry but offers a fine early example of Richard Branson’s mind-set. However, the deal gave the exposure needed to make a big impact with their first Virgin release, ‘Babylon’s Burning’. The week the single came out the Ruts went on tour supporting the Damned. “We went top 20, then top 10. They were blistering gigs: it was highly competitive, as you can imagine but it was all good natured; we’d be playing and the Damned would walk across the stage eating chips to try and undermine us. I used to go and play drums [for the Damned] while Rat [Scabies] sang Burglar. Great gigs; the atmosphere was so good. We were going round the country and meeting people who were moved by it.”

The cover for the band's album, 'The Crack', was a John Howard painting they commissioned. "He got a grand which was big money at the time. The original was 5' by 5'. He asked, 'who do you want in it?' We wanted a lot of characters and then it was up to him." Dave appears sitting on a couch with the rest of the band; he is reading a copy of Exchange and Mart. John Peel was amongst the cast and has a schoolgirl draped across him. "Peel was fine with it." Dave didn't really want Jimmy Pursey included. "I always thought he was a bit bogus but Malcolm wanted him in it. I wanted John Lydon. Somebody showed it to him, he just said, 'bunch of faggots'... we always liked Patrick Moore because he was a bit of an outsider. We did get permission and again, he was fine with it."

The Crack made number 16 in the album charts, there were a total of five Ruts singles and then it was all over ('West One' was released posthumously). On 16 July 1980, three months after John Peel had announced the death of Ian Curtis he explained that it was his sad duty to announce that Malcolm Owen had been found dead in the bath.

Malcolm's later life, particularly the last 6 months, were overshadowed by a heroin addiction. He had struggled with it and been clean for two weeks when he prepared what had probably been his usual dose. However, his body was no longer used to the drug and it proved to be a fatal overdose.

Laurel Aitken

Ironically, what had really seemed to motivate Malcolm to quit drugs was the band's refusal to work with him until he kicked the habit. Dave explained the band's exclusion of Malcolm: "'I'm not going to be dictated to by some fucking smack head', much as I loved him. We were very practical about it."

They used the time while Malcolm cleaned up to make a low key outing as Unitone, backing ska singer, Laurel Aitken. The tour was set up by Simon Potts, a friend of Dave's from the record shop days. He was now head of A&R at Arista, which had Laurel on their I-Spy label.

"Laurel was 60 odd. I 'tour managed' the gigs and he was a bit stropy. 'Where's my drink?' 'Laurel! This is me for fuck's sake. I've got to drum in a minute. I'll get you a drink but don't start playing the rock star with me.' "

The gigs were support to Secret Affair and offered a welcome break from watching Malcolm's decline, particularly as the audience didn't necessarily know who the band was. "For me it was good, it was like going back to my roots. We were out on tour, getting paid and playing to an audience."

Ruts DC

After Malcolm's death, the band stuck together. They were already close friends but the shared grief seemed to bind them together even more tightly. That suited Virgin who wanted to keep the band on the roster but insisted that the name still included 'Ruts'. The band agreed on Ruts DC.

Paul wanted to get someone else in to sing. Dave's view was they couldn't do that because Malcolm had been part of the chemistry. "You can't replace him with some 'Herbert' who doesn't understand what it is about. I'd rather not have anybody in if

they can't rise up to the mark; we kind of fell out about it. Paul really felt cut short by it. We all were but that's just the way it is."

Following on from a "little gig" at the Rainbow supporting the Who, Pete Townsend invited Ruts DC to join their tour in 1981. "It meant we could play to an audience who weren't our audience. We were sick of hearing about the songs we weren't doing and 'Malcolm's not here.' 'Well, Malcolm's fucking dead'."

"Really we should have called ourselves any other fucking thing... It was a compromise, which is alright in life but in art they're not good. It's got to be all the way. We were really messed up... Years later, I realised I was in denial. I was actually suffering and I was probably still mourning."

Ruts DC released the LPs 'Animal Now' and 'Rhythm Collision' before splitting. "Paul wanted to carry on doing the rock 'n' roll but I thought we'd been denied the opportunity. I'd have loved to carry on, I love that music."

Prefab Sprout

Dave became a 'touring person' and 'better at playing the drums.' He immediately moved to a more gentle vibe, working first with Prefab Sprout then with Aztec Camera. He realised how much he liked working with singer songwriters. "I think I got very good at it and a lot of singers like working with me because I listen to the songs and I play round the singer."

"I got on great with Paddy and Martin McAloon [Prefab Sprout]. I loved the gentleness and the depth of it. We did something at CBS in London, which ended up being a couple of B sides. They asked me if I fancied it but by then I was already committed to Roddy. That was it. I did a few gigs. We remained friends."

Aztec Camera

Dave's introduction to Aztec Camera came from a phone call. "Geoff Travis asked me if I'd be interested in meeting Roddy Frame. I went down to a rehearsal in Shepherd's Bush; the same room where the Ruts rehearsed for the first time. I met Roddy and Campbell Owen. They were lovely, very shy and very young. They had some great songs although they weren't very tight. We recorded 'Pillar To Post' after that and then the album ['Highland Hard Rain']."

Dave joined Aztec Camera when they were signed to Rough Trade. After the experience with Virgin, it wasn't surprising that he had misgivings when Roddy wanted to sign to WEA. Again, the deal brought commercial success and 'new opportunities'. When the band recorded 'Knife', Mark Knopfler was brought in to produce it.

"Demographically, I think Roddy thought this would take him to an older audience but I think it was completely shit. At the time it was Aztec Camera and the Smiths. The Smiths carried on going; we went mainstream and were left wondering, 'what are we doing?' Knopfler was so rude. He'd call Campbell 'Stanley' [Clarke] when he's not that kind of a 'super' player at all. He didn't understand anything about punk rock ethics of minimalism. He called Malcolm Ross 'Eric'! Knopfler said he was making music for kids but he wasn't! The first Aztec gigs I did, young guys would come

backstage in tears. It wasn't rock 'n' roll, it wasn't pop music, it was something different. Knopfler didn't get that. I've never really had this out with Roddy. He was a bit of a star by then and nobody was straight with him." Dave pauses before saying, "I was Roddy's mate but I also had the management in my ear."

Edwyn Collins

Aztec Camera broke up in 1986 although Dave and Roddy are now working together again, gigging and recording with Edwyn Collins. Edwyn suffered two cerebral haemorrhages in 2005 and has since made a remarkable recovery. Recent live performances have been emotionally charged and nothing short of heart warming. On stage, Roddy fronts the band, which takes some of the pressure off Edwyn who can no longer play guitar. "Roddy cuts great shapes at the front and he looks good. The girls like him and he's so accomplished as a musician; it just flows."

Dave is also working with Marc Almond who like Edwyn also suffered a near death experience (Marc's being the result of a motorbike crash). Knowing that Dave also worked with Kirsty MacColl shortly before her death, raises the question as to whether he takes a philosophical view of all of the death he has encountered?

Dave laughs as he responds, "The Death Clown! I do, yeah. My mum died when I was 7 and I think that held me in good stead. It is weird, the death thing, what with Malcolm and my dear friend Kirsty - who was fabulous. Kirsty, she'd come to me and say, 'Ruffy, have you got any songs? I want you to help me produce my record.' It ['Tropical Brainstorm'] was a big selling record. I get more royalties from that than anything else I've ever done. It's a great record, full of love and joy..." Wistfully, he concludes, "She went as well..." Dave's voice suddenly becomes louder and more emphatic, "It is hard but what's great at the moment with Edwyn and Marc is that they're both recovering. They're very different artists but they both have a sense that life is short; it's not a rehearsal and there's a reality in it. And life is short. I'm old. I'm 56. I love playing music - loving it - and I'm playing better than I've ever played in my life and I think we're making a little bit of a difference."