

For the few who may not have heard of them, Birkenhead band Half Man Half Biscuit came to prominence in 1985 with the issue of their first album, Back In The D.H.S.S. Their pithy songs and witty, intelligent lyrics brought them a large fan-base, but their place in the hearts of all Tranmere fans was ensured when national newspapers announced that they had turned down a chance to perform live on Channel 4's cult music program The Tube because Tranmere were playing at home that night.

But did it actually happen like that? And are they still following Rovers? We asked HMHB songwriter and main man Nigel Blackwell if we could interview him. He said yes, and this is the result!

Nigel, if you ask Tranmere fans to name a celebrity who is a REAL Rovers fan, yours is usually the first (and often the only) name mentioned. What are your earliest memories of going to Prenton Park, and what was the first big match you remember?

Well I'd certainly balk at the term 'celebrity' but I would agree that I've possibly been to more games than Glenda Jackson - fine actress though she is.

I'm rather lucky/unlucky (delete where applicable) in that both my Father and Grandfather followed Rovers - my Dad still does in fact (still traveling from North Wales for each home game) and so from an early age I was often dragged along to Prenton Park, as punishment no doubt for having committed some sort of misdemeanor around the house. I'd sometimes end up at local away matches - I recall standing outside a pub in Skelmersdale with a lemonade and a bag of crisps in 1971(?) - we won 4-1 I think - Jimmy Hinch on form - and not long after I remember our Ford Anglia (navy blue FKC 175C) giving up the ghost en route to Holly Park; I think we ended up walking to witness the dispatch of South Liverpool courtesy of, if memory serves correctly, Malcolm Moore and Eddie Flood.

The first really big game of course would be the Stoke City match and a wholly enjoyable day it was too. 24,000+, difficult to comprehend today, that.

You must be REALLY fed up with this one, so let's get it out of the way quickly. Your own personal albatross, the legend that HMHB turned down the chance to appear on the Tube as it clashed with a Friday night home game... is it true? What really happened?

Ah, the Tube. It was all quite simple. The producers of the show asked us to appear and at first we were delighted but then realized that there was a home game on that particular evening (S****horpe) and as two of the band (myself and Neil Crossley, who's still here) were regulars we politely declined the offer.

Yes, they did in fact volunteer to fly us back for the second half via helicopter but that would have just been criminally ostentatious. We'd more or less forgotten the request by the next set of lights but then I was at home when the phone rang and my Mother shouted up the stairs that the Daily Mirror wanted a word. Channel 4 themselves had contacted them and told them of the incident and although yes, it did get the group some sort of exposure, it felt at times slightly patronizing in that had it been a bigger club involved the piece wouldn't have been as 'newsworthy'. The people at the Tube were good about it and didn't mind at all (they considered it refreshing apparently!) but I never did like the fact that the media couldn't seem to get its head around the fact that supporting your local football team is in no way freakish or absurd.

If I was from Salford I'd have done the same only it would have been Manchester United of course and it wouldn't have been the same - and that is my point. WHY wouldn't it be the same?

Anyway, we won the match (quite an occasion in those days) thanks to Dougie Anderson if I recall clearly. Neil and I were somewhat relieved at this as it vindicated our decision thoroughly and prevented the rest of the band from kicking our heads in. They of

course were whores who wanted to be on the telly!

I'd guess that the Tube incident must have been round about the time of former owner Bruce Osterman. Were you at the Exeter match, when a 1-0 win kept us in the Football League?

That Exeter game was HORRIBLE. Even their pale yellow shorts were horrible - did they not borrow them from us due to some sort of colour clash? The most distressing thing from my point of view was that I don't think they'd won away from home all season and that usually meant only one thing for a team visiting Prenton Park at that time (the 'Fortress' tag somehow didn't fit in 1987). It was just a massive relief really at the end and I simply went home straight after and basked in the safety of it all. That was definitely the worst time following the club in that there was no way we were bouncing back - it could well have been curtains I reckon had we been relegated.

Following on from that, what are your low points of being a Tranmere fan over the years... and what were the highs?

The low point was probably a match against Colchester (Nigel Adkins debut possibly?) when rumour was rife that it could well be the last game and the buckets were being brought around the ground for us to drop our dole into - the Villa semi and play-off/Wembley defeats are a stroll in the park to deal with after having gone through that.

High points? - From a personal point of view I fondly look back on beating the 'away fan ban' at Torquay two years running although I have to say that the Arsenal, Everton and Southampton games are pleasantly brought to mind. And others - Stoke, Newcastle (6-6 and 4-3) and Bradford in 1976 when we were promoted. We'd been to Edgeley Park just beforehand and won 2-0 I think (first instance of scarf outside car window on the way home!) and if I'm not mistaken avoiding defeat against the Bantams would've seen us on our way. A 3-3 draw followed (I can still hear Joe Cooke's thunderous drive late on rocketing onto the upright)- crowd on the pitch at the end plus the collapse of dugout (no-one sitting in it though!). Fantastic.

You haven't mentioned the Wembley Cup Final in 2000!

Wembley 2000 for me wasn't in any way memorable I'm afraid. It was a competition that was much ignored at the time (and probably still is), and beyond the two sets of supporters you'd be hard pressed to find anyone else remotely interested in us against Leicester City on Car-Boot day. I also opted for the cheapo seat at the front and was surrounded by mums and tots with jester hats and allegiances to other clubs (if at all) so I was glad to get home in the end. Somehow, it wasn't as exciting as 'getting asked the time' outside Darlington train station!

Getting asked the time? Why was that exciting?

Getting asked the time was basically a way of rival fans finding out if you were indeed an away supporter and therefore available for attack although to be honest I recall once (don't think it was at Darlo though this time) when the lad I was with replied to this enquiry with a superb "It's five o'clock - couldn't you have estimated that seeing as the game's not long been finished..." - and with my oppo being more than capable anyway, had the ruse been pursued it would have only ended in tears for the stunned ne'er do well.

Do you remember the mid-80's game where one of our older supporters attacked the Bournemouth 'keeper?

Oh yes, I thought it was hilarious, and somewhat childish that he was turfed out of the ground - after all, Kenny Allen didn't seem to mind. RIP Charlie Lindsay.

We all have our favourite players (and ones we wish had never come near the club!). Who would you pick out as the ones you really enjoyed watching, and who was the best?

Favourite players? Usually, one tends to get doggedly nostalgic where this subject is concerned and certainly, I could reel off names such as Paul Crossley, Bobby Tynan, Dick Johnson, Ronnie Moore and more recently Jims Harvey and Steel but if I'm being totally honest I can't say I've enjoyed

watching a player more than Jason Koumas.
A CLASS ACT in my book.

As for the best player, I know the likes of Aldridge, Nevin, Worthington and Muir would be (and probably should be) mentioned here but I still go for Koumas in that those other players were without doubt blessed with their own characteristic talents but Koumas for me simply stuck out like a sore thumb at Prenton Park - head and shoulders above anyone else on the pitch usually. I remember him single-handedly tearing Cardiff apart in the FA Cup amongst other matches.

My dad of course would say ABE ROSENTHAL and he'd say it with capital letters.

I've been asked by another fan to find out what your opinion is of Ronnie Moore and Steve Peplow as players and John King, John Aldridge and Brian Little as managers.

Moore as a player - phenomenally good, especially the season (75/76 it would be I reckon) that he just seemed to score a hat trick every week and four every fortnight - Newport 5-1 away springs immediately to mind. By the way, I realise that retaining all this in my head without the aid of a Rothmans is perhaps a somewhat tragic reflection of my life!

Steve Peplow - the very name will always bring a wry smile to people's faces and remarks on how his kit always remained spotless whatever the state of the pitch!

Johnny King (and I always think it should be 'Johnny' rather than 'John' but there you go) will be fondly remembered always as his spells in charge are linked to promotions that I've witnessed. (We'll gloss over the relegation - leastways I think he was at the helm when we went down around 1979?)

Aldo as manager - preferred him as a player to be honest but that's not to say he wasn't any good as boss. I believe he was but was unfortunate in that one of those troughs that a club like us intermittently experiences came along while he was in the hot seat. There are simply times when your players don't happen to be as talented as the last lot. Not

much you can do about it short of having a superb scouting system and 'big name' status whereby you can persuade people to sign for the club on kudos alone. Never forget those cup matches under his tenure though!

Brian Little - again, we're in one of those downward trends at present which clubs like ours suffer (same as everyone else in fact) and sometimes the fortunes can be changed by the sudden discovery of a talent plying his trade at the Plymyard or Birkenhead Park of a Sunday morning (Kingy knew this) so ultimately, the manager is often in the lap of the Gods and only fate will determine whether or not he will be fondly recalled in later years.

I take the stance that whatever division this club happens to be in doesn't decide if I'm going to support them or not - that is the behaviour of a spoilt child. I can honestly say I don't concern myself too much about who is in charge (boardroom or team manager) as it is the Institution that I follow so over the years heads roll and Chairmen step down but it never particularly interests me. I simply go through the turnstile, watch the game and go home. It was ever thus.

I will NEVER get on a player's back as that NEVER makes him perform better (quite the opposite in fact). Let's say for instance David Raven turns out to be hopeless - fingers crossed he doesn't of course - well how could anyone bring themselves to lambaste someone who is probably acting out one of his adolescent fantasies (after the Vorderman one of course) by playing for the team he supported as a youngster! he can already do no wrong in my book. Encouragement is such a powerful weapon.

Moving away from football... it's more than 20 years since HMHB first formed. Are you in touch with any of the original line-up?

In touch - not amazingly but get on with them all nonetheless.

Was music a big part of your life when growing up? Which bands did you like, and which ones (if any) influenced your music and songwriting?

Influences musically? Where do you start! If I mention the Watersons, Wagner and the

Alternative TV album 'The Image Has Cracked'! EVERYTHING influences me.

If you were a music journalist how would you describe the HMHB sound?

I wouldn't attempt to 'describe' HMHB as such as that would appear wholly pompous I reckon - unless I said that their output resembles a series of complaining letters to the council backed up by some very rudimentary chord structuring.

Which is your favourite HMHB album, and why?

I don't have one I'm afraid - I don't really 'write' albums as a conceptual whole. HMHB simply release whatever bunch of tunes they have knocking around at a given time. I couldn't in fact, instantly tell you what song was off which album. Sorry.

How would you describe the changes in HMHB music over the years?

We've not particularly improved our diminished sevenths that's for sure - we have possibly changed from twenty years ago in that these days we have unlimited access to a banjo if we need one.

You're renowned for your lyrics and their humour (I doubt if anyone else has mentioned Milk of Magnesia in a pop song, let alone rhymed it!). Are you drawn to comedy or do you just dislike being too serious about anything?

I'm not 'drawn to comedy' as such - something either makes me laugh or it doesn't - same as everyone else I suppose. 'Lenny' from the Simpsons makes me laugh, Patrick Kielty doesn't.

Have you ever wanted to ditch the humour and do a really serious, depressing Leonard Cohen-type song?

Leonard Cohen is magnificent- you couldn't hope to consciously 'make like he'. Has to be said here of course, that I don't always set out particularly to 'be funny' (that would in fact be both desperate and horrendous) - I simply spout off about things that I see and stick a few rudimentary chords behind it - nothing clever about that in reality. Look upon me as

the Roy Walker of Pop if you like ("Say what y'see")

Are there any songs in particular that you're proud of, that you look back on and think, "Yep, I really got it right there..."

Proud? I'm proud about those consecutive manoeuvres at Plainmoor more than anything musical I may have done.

One of your most famous songs (All I Want For Christmas Is A Dukla Prague Away Kit) mentions Subbuteo. Was that a part of your childhood?

I was never a massive fan of Subbuteo - Striker was my bag. Press the heads down to shoot - slightly back and down for chip shots - I was rather good at it if I may allow myself. Subbuteo had too many preparatory drawbacks for me, though its attention to detail can't fail to be admired. Do they have gormless stewards these days I wonder...?

What's your method with lyrics? Do you write about a particular subject from scratch, or do you keep a note of good phrases and expressions and work them into suitable songs?

Don't have a method of writing I'm afraid - does anyone? I can only refer back to Roy Walker here.

Your last CD, Achtung Bono, was released in 2005 (on Probe, everyone, so go and buy it...). Have you had any thoughts about the next record, or is it a year off to relax and enjoy life?

Could well be a Golf Opera aimed chiefly at the US market - Scott Verplank to guest possibly. Fingers crossed.

You've always been with Probe records, I believe. But I heard that you nearly signed for a bigger company once. What happened? And is the big time something you've actively avoided?

We've never actually had a record deal in our lives - it's just a Gentlemen's agreement sort of thing with Probe Plus. I'm not militantly independent in any way, contrary to some opinion, it just so happens that this is the sketch that suits us best.

Yes, I suppose there has been interest from other labels but to be honest, as long as I have money for my season ticket and the mortgage I'm not one for worshipping at the foot of Mammon and so any 'big money offers' have tended to fall on deaf ears. That 'big money' of course, will always come out of your record sales before you see any of it and even then, you're probably going to get only a small piece of pie whereas with Probe Plus, that pie is cut in half. It's only one bloke working from his home by the way - a Colossal Empire it ain't.

As far as I know, you've always lived in Birkenhead. Do you think you'll ever be tempted to move, or is it Birkenhead for life?

Yeah, I'll always live around here. I've never actually been in an aeroplane - I like exploring Wirral so the rest of the world can hang on until I've walked every bridleway on our Peninsula. Actually, I think I may well have possibly done this.

One thing you share with Tranmere is that you've both been described by the geographically challenged as being from Liverpool. How do you feel about that? Happy to be lumped in with the Scousers or fiercely Wirral?

Being called 'Scousers' is purely geographical ignorance - if I know the difference between Kentish man and Man of Kent and Geordies and Mackems for instance then there really is no excuse for lazy journalists (whose job it often is to know these things) to label us thus. Liverpool is a superb place and I'm there probably once a week and if we were from Crosby say, then I could perhaps just about understand the tag (even though Crosby itself is a town in its own right), but Birkenhead is a fairly large place as it is (142,000 people?) and so there is never an excuse for this error. Doesn't bother me as such. I don't get annoyed - it's simply RANK BAD FORM on the part of the journalist.

Life has changed a lot in the 20+ years since Back in the DHSS was released. (Pavements used to be for walking on, now apparently they're for parking on.) What changes particularly annoy you, and which ones do you like?

You've hit the nail on the head perfectly there! Parking on pavements.

That is exactly how Nazi Germany started! Litter dropping should also be punished severely - and I do mean SEVERELY.

Also - make kids walk to school again - it's how we learned our social skills. Oh, and cube more Mini-Motos! too noisy for a start before we get on to any law-breaking agenda. And can I watch..?

And instruct Bus Drivers to 'cheer up for Christ's sake'.

Having said that, there is still just about (and I do mean JUST ABOUT) a basic underlying decency to society I reckon.

How about the local music scene these days... do you follow it at all? Any bands you really like?

Local bands - obviously The Coral are wonderful (and why isn't James Skelly's voice lauded more - it's superb). I've never met them but I think I could take you to every single location on the 'Dreaming of You' video. About time we had some more from them. I also like at present a band called 'Roughs With Sticks' who hail from Caldby.

You played a local gig in Liverpool last year after a gap of seven years! was there any particular reason for the gap?

No, there was no reason particularly for such a delay - we don't do many gigs full stop so we'd not realised ourselves that it had been seven years.

Do you have a favourite venue to play?

My personal favourite is probably The Boardwalk in Sheffield.

Lurching back to football, how do you feel about the current Tranmere team? Are you seething with resentment at the 0-0 draws, are you just pleased they're still in existence, or would you rather maintain a diplomatic silence?

The current side - I've seen worse! (Steve Bullock anybody?) Could do with more creativity in midfield of course (Jason McAteer can often supply this but he's cursed with that Hamstring). We miss Iain Hume, who would create his own chances a lot of

the time. It's Peaks and Troughs though isn't it... sometimes we'll be a struggling outfit and sometimes we'll have salad days - it's the nature of the beast. The very EXISTENCE of the club is paramount and as long as that remains then I can take us being in whatever division we happen to find ourselves in at the time.

The actual match-going experience doesn't really alter much (if at all) if we're playing Tottenham or Rochdale as far as I'm concerned (no disrespect intended to the latter there by the way). You meet up with the same people, go the same pub, and go to the same chip shop after. It's as much a social thing as anything. Of course you want them to succeed but when it's not quite happening, like at present I suppose, it's still ALWAYS an occasion to look forward too, and going back again to the Eighties for a moment, the team can be so atrocious at times as to find humour within - albeit Gallows Humour. When a bad patch descends upon the players I try to set it against the scale of Human Suffering. Ultimately, I just support them like a stupidly faithful donkey I guess!

So which Division do you think we'll be in next season?

I don't know but that's the beauty of it all - if we go down we get to go to Chester and Wrexham maybe as opposed to Colchester and Swindon so it's not a problem for me.

Gazes skywards and remembers those halcyon days when Chester were without doubt our main rivals and hundreds (no, thousands!) would be on the platforms of Central and Rock Ferry stations!

How do you feel about the current state of football in general?

I could moan about a thousand things (no really, I could) but it's still the greatest game isn't it....

Finally, and sliding headlong into fantasy, if you had three wishes, one for Tranmere, one for yourself and one for the world, what would you wish for?

Three Wishes eh.... For TRFC - guaranteed football at Prenton Park would be more than enough...

For me - To swim with tuna

For the World - A Cure for Restless Leg Syndrome would be good. But apparently they're about to announce a cure for RLS in Denmark (terrific race, the Danes) so I better change my wish for the world in general and this quote by Charles Sumner should deal with it:

"Give me the money that has been spent in war, and I will clothe every man, woman and child in an attire of which Kings and Queens would be proud. I will build a schoolhouse in every valley over the whole Earth. I will crown every hillside with a place of worship consecrated to the gospel of peace."

You could even replace the word 'War' with 'Cup Final Catering'...

Nigel, thank you.