

Stuart Fletcher Interview - 11th February 2019

Matt Mead interviews Seahorses bassist STUART FLETCHER.



Can you tell me a bit about your upbringing ?

Well I was born in York in '76, the Summer of Love I believe. I think Bohemian Rhapsody was number 1 so not a bad year all in all. They knocked down the hospital I was born in shortly after, which I like to think was in a weird kind of Omen way. My father was a drummer in a local rock band but had to quit in order to raise me. He had one fill which was just the classic "roll round all the toms in order" so I probably did him a favour. He used to play me lots of Quo – Pictures of Matchstick Men and 12 Gold Bars I remember. York has always had a decent music scene and a lot of the pubs then would let 13/14 year olds play if they were decent enough, so I used to play in all the local bars. You wouldn't get away with that now.

When did you start to play the bass ?

I started playing violin when I was 6, and at that time schools used to provide the instruments for you to practice on. During the transition to secondary school, they could no longer afford to provide instruments to students so my dad got me a bass. His reasoning was that violins were very expensive and the cheaper alternative of a bass “also had 4 strings”. I think secretly though he wanted to relive his band days by encouraging me down that path.

I joined my first band Double Vision at 11, with my dad managing us. We actually did pretty well with an audition on the TV show “Going Live” and came second in a music competition called Musician Style 89 sponsored by the music therapy charity, Nordoff Robbins. The final was at a massive venue where they filmed Hitman & Her with Pete Waterman and Michaela Strachan and we won £1,500 worth of gear. Think we recorded 4 demo tapes which I still have somewhere.

What was the first music you can remember hearing ?

Unfortunately, I think it was hymns at my junior school. I have nothing against any religious music but hearing a load of monotone children murdering choral music probably puts most people off music for life.

What was the first serious music you remember hearing ?

Aside from the Beatles and the Stones of course, as they should be staples in everyone’s music diet, I used to spend a lot of my youth at my friend Rob’s house. He was the guitarist in Double Vision and we still play music together now. We listened to a lot of 60s and 70s soul and funk with bands like The Meters and The Crusaders, eventually I got on to James Jamerson and Paul Jackson (Herbie Hancock/Headhunters). Two of my biggest influences.

I did listen to some 80s music at the time such as Welcome to the Pleasuredome by Frankie Goes to Hollywood. The title track is not easy to play when you are 12 years old (or any age for that matter !). Also that Trevor Horn production – wow.

Who influenced you to play the bass ?

Aside from the aforementioned McCartney, Jamerson and Jackson, my biggest influence has to be Flea. I learned every track on Blood Sugar Sex Magik when that came out. I’m not ashamed at all to hear his style in my own playing, especially my more melodic stuff. I was also influenced by the drummers Buddy Rich and Steve Gadd in terms of the rhythms I use

but I listen to so much great music I think I absorb the bits I like and discard the rest. I really struggle when people ask me to name my top ten albums etc. as it's impossible to judge. I think I'd struggle with just a top ten in genres !

Were you in any bands before The Seahorses ?

I joined in 1996 so by that time I'd been playing solidly for around 9 years with 200-odd gigs at least under my belt. Two of my favourites were a 7-piece psychedelia band I joined when I was 15/16 doing Steely Dan, Stranglers, Jefferson Airplane, Edie Brickell, Santana – a real eclectic mix. The drummer was into some weird shit like Aleister Crowley the English occultist and we all smoked lots of weed. The other was an instrumental funk band called Hectic (basically Vulfpeck with solo sax). I think we were way ahead of our time. We had a residency every Monday night – it was supposed to be an open mic but no one ever dared get up so we just played for 3 hours every week and the place was always rammed.

How did you join The Seahorses ?

I'd been asked to dep for a local blues band due to their regular bass player suffering from tendonitis. The guitarist Miles Gilderdale (Acoustic Alchemy) came round to my house on the day of the gig and we ran through the set for a couple of hours before heading off to play. It was the day John Squire left the Roses and he didn't want to be in Manchester. His tech lived in York and they came to the gig. After the show John approached me and asked if I wanted to join his band. I had no idea who he was but I was a bit of a band whore so said yes. It was only after he left that people were coming up to me asking if I knew who that was..

Were you a fan of The Stone Roses before joining ?

I really liked the track Love Spreads but didn't have any albums. When John arranged to come round to my house, I borrowed Second Coming from Alan Leach (Shed Seven's drummer) as he lived at the bottom of my street, just so I could have it in my collection. Incidentally, Shed's singer Rick Witter bought me the Roses' first album because he was so appalled that I didn't own it. Also, while we're on the subject of Shed Seven, Paul Banks (guitar) kindly put me up in his house for 6 months when a rogue landlord sold his house and kicked me out without warning. We started a band with Maxi from Audioweb who later went on to play drums with Ian Brown. Looking back, I think the Shed's lads were more excited about me playing with John than I was. Ha ha.

What were the early days of The Seahorses like ?

The early days were great. It was just myself, John and Chris Helme and there was a real sense of excitement and a lot of writing going on. We were staying in these beautiful cottages in the Lake District with new equipment set up in the living rooms and 4-track recorders in each room. Our first drummer (of many) was a lad called Mark McNeill who was an amazing player – think I have the very first album demos on a cassette somewhere. Unfortunately, despite sending him to rehab several times, the drugs won in the end and John had to make a decision to not proceed with him. Sadly he had to go as he couldn't remember anything we rehearsed.

Did you have to keep it a secret that you had joined a band with John Squire ?

We were invited to Knebworth in 1996 to see John play with Oasis. Chris and I had been told not to mention anything about the band. We were then left in the VIP tent backstage where all the beer was free. Being from York, we then proceeded to drink as much as we possibly could and ended up with so much bottled beer, we traded some for cigs on Radio 1's tour bus off our faces. I think they were slightly confused who we were but we had all the right passes so it freaked them out not knowing and thankfully we managed to not spill the beans.

What was it like rehearsing with John Squire in the early days ?

John was not into jamming at all although he did sometimes sit in. He would record us endlessly and go up to his room. He would take the bits he liked and write parts to it and put structure in then we'd work on it again the next day. Rehearsals were also very stop-start sometimes as John would often be trying new guitars or amps out. He loved the idea of working with Leslie cabs but they were like massive cabinets and a right arse to carry. He eventually got these ones that were the size of an amp head but because it was John he had about three or four and they were always cranked up.

Was there any of the Roses crew that hung around the band at the time ?

Was there any that wasn't ? I think everyone involved was someone that knew John.

Did John have all of the songs ready for the debut album ?

Not at all. I think he had four or five initial ideas when he first approached me. Chris wrote as many as John during those early rehearsals and John's were constantly being updated and reworked. I would write some sections to finish songs off such as the chords in the solo of Round the Universe or the outro for Love Is The Law or the string parts and bass melody in Standing On Your Head. He would also lyric and key test in his room with Chris, basically getting Chris to sing the lines, and he would check if he liked them or needed to change them. In other words, they were gradually written over the course of two or three months with contributions from all of us.

Were you ever able to spend time with John as a friend ?

I don't think John had friends in any traditional sense, he certainly wouldn't have classed me as one. I respected him a great deal but he is difficult to have any sort of conversation with. He's really not the "hanging out" type.

I had my 21st birthday on the flight to LA to record Do It Yourself and John gave me the shoehorn you got free on Virgin airways as my birthday present, not even wrapped! I'm sure he found that amusing in his own way. I think you have to know him to appreciate his wry sense of humour. I'm pretty sure I only got the job because I didn't care who he was. When we auditioned drummers, he would instantly reject any that had Roses posters on the walls – not because of resentment of his former band but he had this belief that you were on a level and couldn't work with people in awe of other musicians. You're the star and you need to act like one. I learned that the hard way when I once asked Beck for his autograph. John tore me a new one ! I did find that slightly hypocritical at the time as he clearly referenced Pollock in his art and Page in his music.

Was there any element of jamming together as a band or was there a strict regime of playing ?

I do have recordings of us jamming where John would sit in and solo for a bit until he got bored, then he'd just leave us to it.

Did you have any songs that you offered to the band at the time ?

I wrote the first track on the album (I Want You To Know) but it wasn't really my strong point at the time. I'm very good at arranging or finishing other people's songs or providing riffs which people write songs around. Probably why a lot of bass players become decent producers. There was a song I wrote with a tapping bass line which John really wanted to

use but we never got the chance to do anything with it. It was eventually called Crime and Chris Helme ended up finishing it off when we formed The Yards in 2002.

What was it like being on the road with The Seahorses ?

Very up and down. I loved the touring and performing and still very much do, but it can be very draining mentally and physically. As the baby of the band, John used to take a lot of his frustrations out on me. I think in one way he didn't want me to go off the rails like Andy Watts did so would constantly have a go at me about putting on weight or showboating on stage. I didn't get it at the time as I just thought he was a crank but looking back I think he was trying to keep it professional. As a result I ended up spending most of time with the support acts like Mansun and The Doves etc. In one way I met a lot of cool people. In a weird twist of fate, when I met Alex from Hurricane#1 for the first time, he said I'd met him previously on TFI Friday and he remembered me because I was the only one from the band who came and spoke to them.

Do you have any favourite memories of being on the road ?

What goes on tour, stays on tour ! Lots of great memories from touring. I freaked Charlie Watts out backstage once when we were supporting The Rolling Stones. I went to a Terrorvision aftershow and drank an entire bottle of tequila straight down, then said "What ? It makes me happy." You do some stupid stuff on tour but you have to get me drunk first to hear all my rock and roll stories !

How did Glastonbury go down ? The footage shows singer Chris Helme's nerves seemingly getting the better of him, being unable to sing Love Is The Law.

That was nothing to do with nerves. That was straight onto a cold, muddy wet stage with no soundcheck and John's guitar so phenomenally loud on stage that Chris had no chance of pitching to anything. We didn't have in ear monitors or backing tracks which are so often used now, so it was pot luck what you got in your wedge. John very rarely plays any root chords as he's constantly riffing and that just sounds like mush on those stages in the wind at those levels. I think most vocalists in those circumstances would sympathise with Chris on that one. However, his first Top Of The Pops appearance, staring at the ceiling and a hint of sheep in his voice, that was nerves.

We had a lot of problems with monitor engineers in an almost Spinal Tap way. One we lost to food poisoning in Spain. Another got so pissed with us in Japan we couldn't wake him up for the flight so had to leave him. I think we had 5 or 6 in less than 2 months. Following this,

Chris had some moulded ear plugs made that filtered certain frequencies out. He didn't have any problems after that.

What happened with the 2nd album ?

We'd finished the year on a high with a tour of Japan, a tour of Europe supporting Oasis and then our own UK tour finishing with two sold out nights at Glasgow Barrowlands. Chris and I had become very close with the then drummer Mal Scott and I don't think John liked that. He felt Mal was very safe and wanted someone more technical for the new material. That hit us quite hard I think as it started a bit of them and us when we should really have been a unit and discussed those sort of decisions together. I think at this point it also became very clear John wanted to monopolise the writing of the songs on the album as that's where the money is, rather than just all working together. This started some kind of competition between Chris and John with both writing separately and rejecting each other's songs, rather than before where they would work together to develop them. I could tell John had become frustrated with the whole thing as I was having to write four or five bass lines for every song, as he just wasn't happy with anything. I've listened to some of the alternative versions and I don't think there's anything wrong with anyone's playing. Just weak songs and we were massively overcritical of everything.

Of course that's just my opinion as you never know what goes on in John's head. He's very hard to read and you wouldn't ever get him to open up truthfully in interviews as he's too good at thought out, rehearsed responses. Who knows, we might see his memoirs one day and I'll be as shocked as anyone. I'm still good friends with Chris and continue to record and perform with him. Even then, our memory and opinions can sometimes differ as we both saw and thought different things at the time.

Were you all happy whilst you were recording the album ?

I watched Chris turn a Larrivee guitar into matchsticks during that session, so I would say probably not. I think I'd given up by this point, which only added to John's annoyance with the whole thing. "Difficult second album" is a well-known phrase for a reason.

Why didn't it get released ?

It was never finished. We only got as far as demoing really and then a bootleg came out after we'd split.

When did the band start to separate ?

John had written a song called Tomb Raid after the Playstation game. Although he did toy with the lyrics (On a Night Train and Cocaine as alternatives) he eventually settled on Tomb Raid. Chris saw himself as a serious songwriter and didn't want to sing lyrics John had just thrown together about Lara Croft. Chris discussed this with John and John said he should be able to sing a telephone directory with feeling. Chris disagreed.

Was there an official ending to the band ?

We sat down and had a meeting and differences couldn't be resolved so that was that. Apart from my guitar which I refused to hand over, all my gear was sold out from under me to pay off debts which I later learned never existed. Thankfully it was the only thing I was left with in the end. I actually had more equipment when I joined the band than when I left, as they sold all my amps. I remember Chris telling me he walked past a music shop in Doncaster and then walked out minutes later with his own amp ! As John was the only member of the band signed to Geffen, we never knew if he had any debt when we separated or we'd recouped, as Chris and I have never seen any sales figures or band accounts then or to this day.

What did you do immediately after The Seahorses ?

I ended up doing a session on TFI Friday with Shaun Ryder and Russell Watson playing a cover of Barcelona. Paul Banks and I both played on that session and shared a room down in London. Paul Ryder was unavailable at the time to do the Happy Mondays gigs lined up afterwards, so I was asked to step in. I ended up doing all the Oasis supports in the UK in 2000 for the Be Here Now tour, and Glastonbury mainstage with Bowie. I ended up walking off with Bowie's lighter after that gig, off my face.

They are great guys and I loved every minute of that tour, what I can remember anyway. Kinky Afro was one of my fave tunes as a kid.

Following this I went on to tour America with Saint Etienne which was a massive culture shock after the Mondays. I feel sorry for my initial behaviour on that tour as I was probably still on a come down from the Mondays. I remember there was a vegan backing singer so no cooked food or meat on the riders and a devout Christian who went to church every Sunday. I don't think it could have been any more different. I had a lot of fun on that tour though and the band and crew were all really lovely, especially Sarah and Pete. The drummer (John Miller) ended up playing in The Yards with me and Chris Helme and the guitarist on the tour (James) was playing for Kylie Minogue so we got to go to her shows too. I did a Christmas show at Shepherd's Bush Empire to round off the year with them.

Following Saint Etienne, I mainly did odd bits of session work such as The Calling at the Smash Hits poll winners party and a show in France and touring with The Yards, formed by myself and Chris. We didn't do too badly, having a song on Hollyoaks and supporting Arthur Lee's Love and The Brian Jonestown Massacre to name a few. We had some decent festival appearances – Kendal Calling, Canterbury Fayre and some licensing deals in the UK and Japan.

In between recording and touring I was forced to get a "proper job" just to pay my mortgage, as most musicians have to these days. I used to use up all my holiday time pretty quickly with gigs and always ended up having to pay for additional days off for recording sessions. I played with Rick Witter in The Dukes for an album and tour while Shed Seven were deciding if they were continuing or folding and did various other recording and live projects.

What have you been up to in recent years ?

I think the last time I checked I've appeared on something like 18 or 19 albums. I've ended up doing a lot of prog gigs in the last few years – I'm not sure how that happened but I've been working out in Miami with an artist Dave Kerzner on two projects – his own solo albums and a co-write with Heather Findlay called Mantra Vega. Heather knew me from York and I've ended up doing a fair bit of touring with her as a soloist and played on her last release, I Am Snow. I had the pleasure of working with John Mitchell (It Bites/Frost) on the Heather stuff which led to another album recording down at his studio in Reading.

Dave has his fingers in a lot of pies and works with many well-known artists such as Durga McBroom from Pink Floyd amongst others and I've been lucky to have the privilege of performing with them.

During this time I was also touring and recording with my local bands Halo Blind and We Could Be Astronauts. The former playing the Isle of Wight festival and featuring Chris Farrell who was the guitarist in The Yards and the latter performing for the BBC at T in the Park. Both having small amounts of success in their own way, but completely different bands.

We recorded two of Chris Helme's solo albums – The Rookery (which I think Louder Than War reviewed favourably at the time) and his new one, as yet untitled. Chris is currently mixing it hopefully for a release this year. I also have a couple of gigs coming up with him towards the end of this year.

Are you playing in a band now ?

Think I'm currently in 7 bands full-time and still doing dep/session work on top of that. 3 covers bands which pay my bills and played Latitude festival last year with my mate Boss Caine.

I'm currently recording an album with the dance producer Headstrong on his Luna Velvet project. The songs feature members of The Waterboys and it should be released sometime this year.

Van Der Neer is my souly blues band and we are currently working with Audio Technica, promoting their products. Our debut album came out last year.

I play in a blues psyche band called Triangle Triangle Triangle. Currently supporting Irish folkers The Rumjacks and working on new material following some line-up changes.

Are things a lot different working in Hurricane#1 to the workings of The Seahorses ?

Absolutely. For starters I'm 20 years more experienced than before. One thing I really owe John Squire for is that he taught me what it takes to perform at that level and how to act as a professional.

Secondly, the lads actually respect me and so far have been treating me like royalty. I find this really bizarre as I don't even get that from my local bands.

I think we'll have a lot of fun on the Embrace tour and they really are a cracking bunch. Our initial rehearsals have gone well and I think I've brought some new enthusiasm with me (and massive fat aggressive bass) which I think Alex has not had for a while. The new guitarist Jon is a really great player and the drummer Chris makes me laugh a lot as well as having that great Ringo feel. I was also blown away by how great Alex's voice is sounding at the moment after all he's been through. He can certainly hammer it out over a full kit and backline. I think anyone coming to the shows will get a real shock as to how in your face it is. Wet indie music it definitely is not !

The manager Stu – no relation – has been working really hard on securing a label for the new release this year and he seems to just be out there all the time, loving music and promoting the band. He recently got us an endorsement with a swanky clothing company in London who have been ace with us. Check out his website here: <https://relcolondon.com>

He's booked a mini tour for April and May and a Japanese tour in September and just keeps getting more and more offers daily.

Do you think your bass playing had improved since The Seahorses ?

It's improved a great deal. Do It Yourself sometimes makes me cringe in places as to how I would approach that album now. My fingers move much faster and 20 years of playing a massive spectrum of different music with some great players, has really moved me along. I listen back to some recordings now and can't believe it's me playing. I still have a long way to go when I see some of those prog guys doing amazing things with 6 string basses. Not that it's my thing but I wish I'd spent some time learning scales to make me a better player. I hear melody in my head and recreate it with my fingers and ears. It comes down to feel in the end though and knowing when to go for it and when not to.

What are your plans for the future ?

I've recently become a professional musician again so making enough to cover my bills and still have money for food is my main priority at the moment. Also, I've never learned how to drive. I'm finding this a massive drain so want to try and pass my test this year.

Lastly, what's on your turntable at present ?

Aside from Hurricane#1 as I'm making sure I'm spot on for the forthcoming shows, I've recently got into Greta Van Fleet so that has been getting some play. I've also got the hots for Grace Slick – Jefferson Airplane era. I listen to music every day and try to listen to new bands as much as possible, signed artists and local acts alike.