

Club Smith - interview

Kate Wellham

"I started buying these Amazonian berries and Colon Cleanse. I had to stop the Colon Cleanse after two weeks because literally I'd be at work and suddenly I'd have to go and crap for about half an hour." As a demonstration of Club Smith's dedication to their art, there are more savoury examples to open with than frontman Sam Robson's short-lived pre-video health regime, but we've done it now. Sorry if you're reading this over lunch.

"That video was the best thing that ever happened to me," says Sam of the Peep Show style, first-person perspective boxing match that accompanies the fighting talk of single No Friend Of Mine. "I was about 15 stone last Christmas, and Danny North [NME photographer] took us out for a curry and told us the idea for the video which involved me being in front of the camera as a boxer, and Lee [Clark, bassist] with a camera on his head. I thought 'there's no way I'm going to shoot this video when I'm basically a fat bastard'. We were training two times a week, this really intense military style training, and I was doing exercise between that as well. I lost a stone in five weeks."

Drummer Vijay Mistry was one of the lucky ones: "Danny said 'there's no way I'm going to shoot this video with you pretending to know how to box, I need you to know how to box'. These guys went through three months of continuously hard training three or four times a week, and a week before the shoot me and Neil [Clark, keyboards] watched Rocky IV and kind of got the idea."

Sam: "The next video we decided not to even have us in it. Every time there's a music video I feel like I need to shit my pants."

Vijay: "About 15 minutes before you turned up, someone told a shitting story, and Sam went 'when Kate turns up, none of this' - ten minutes in and we're already talking about colon cleansing".

We were in need of a bit of balance though, because it's all quite uplifting and inspirational from this point on - almost to the point where you might not believe it. In fact, frequently throughout our chat, Sam will say something deep and meaningful, only to recoil at his own sincerity, apologise, wonder what we must think of him, and then try to rephrase his point in a way that sounds more casual ("on the precursor that I'm going to be a twat..."), but there's nothing casual about anything that Club Smith do.

We meet them not in the pub - as Vibrations tradition might dictate - but at Soundworks studio in Kirkstall, where they are deep into the recording of their first album with Will Jackson and James Kenosha, and tearing them away from it is a job wild horses wouldn't even begin to attempt. It's clearly an intense process but the band are keen to be as hospitable as possible, and give us a preview of a couple of songs. It's beautiful, substantial and emotionally taxing, and there have almost been tears at playback - it's a life away from how they began.

As party band The Hair (2004-2008), they opened a Pandora's Box of easy wins with their name on it to

find a receptive audience, a Radio One Maida Vale session, and national tour supports securing them firmly to the bandwagon they could potentially ride to commercial success. But, deciding it wouldn't ultimately fulfil them, they handed it all back graciously before starting from scratch with a project that would, leading them to where they are now. With a new addition in Vijay, doubts about their material, and 'the worst encore of all time' in York, by 2008 they didn't feel The Hair should continue.

"We did it at the one time a band wouldn't be expected to do it," explains Sam of their decision to call time on The Hair. "It was just after going on tour with the Kaiser Chiefs, which was the biggest thing we'd ever done, and at a time when the Kaiser Chiefs were probably the biggest band in the country."

The band are initially reluctant to talk about their previous incarnation, claiming it has little to do with Club Smith, but it does really. Considering how tough it is out there trying to balance financial stability and career trajectory with maintaining artistic credibility, any band can justify anything short of lap-dancing for Satan if it'll keep them in the limelight, so their decision was unusual.

"There were a lot of people saying 'this is absolutely ridiculous' [to quit]," says Vijay, "and we could have just carried on with it, but it didn't feel right. There was just such a huge mismatch between what we were writing by then and what we were still playing."

The mismatch was partly due to the band's naturally growing out of their old material, along with the departure of the original drummer a mere two weeks before their Maida Vale session (at which point James Kenosha stepped in for a while). But one major catalyst for change was a tragedy they couldn't have predicted.

"In 2008 my mum died really suddenly, it was literally within hours" explains Sam. "I don't mind talking about it now because she was like the best woman ever. With our family, my mum was always the one everyone talked to about everything, so it's been very hard, still, to adapt but we couldn't talk to each other about how we felt for quite a long time, so writing songs about it gives you a way of expressing yourself without burdening anyone."

As you might expect, Sam's loss impacted not only his personal life - leading to what he now thinks of as a misguided temporary career change into housing support to carry on his mum's memory - but it also impacted his ambitions and his music: "It's not like you get over it but it becomes easier and it becomes more of who you are after time. It made me realise that actually all the things that I wanted to do in the old band that I felt were important like playing to lots of people, being successful, having a bit of a status from it, weren't actually why I started playing guitar."

"I was in a band for so long it started to be more about whether we do well or not, and what's been quite nice about this shift in focus is now I would want us to do really well but in a lot of ways it feels like the job's done because we've put a lot of emotion down in this recording. I'm not going with the cliche that 'yeah I don't care whether we're playing to ten thousand people or ten people' because that's bullshit, every band says that."

Vijay: "Ok, I get to decide, you get to play to ten. Done."

Sam: "Could I not play to the ten thousand?"

Vijay: "Nope. You said you didn't mind, so you get to play to ten."

The reason Sam thinks it might sound like bullshit is because whilst we're familiar with uplifting tales of artists who've had their 'integrity or die' proclamations severely tested and proven solid - every success story claims to start this way - you just never meet a real one. And certainly not one who was yet to come

out the other side with a self-serving retrospective about not being totally insane after all. In this respect, Club Smith are a musical unicorn.

But Vijay still recalls advertising their first gig as Club Smith: "I remember being very aware that the size of the venue had gone down. I don't think there was any doubt that we'd done the right thing but it was just like starting again. I don't think the carry over from The Hair was as big as we hoped."

Not that it mattered who else came along, because they'd each found the only other three people they really needed. "We all balance each other out quite well," says Sam. "Lee and Neil are brothers, I'm sort of bordering emo 'sensitive', so all my songs sound quite sensitive."

Vijay: "Like Enya"

Sam continues, Enya-like: "Lee's quite into groove-based stuff, the way he plays bass he dominates the songs. I play quite basic guitar because I'm trying to sing and I'm not good enough to do both. And Neil's quite hip hop, twee sort of sounds, and then Vijay's quite groove-based."

"It's quite fun actually when they're trying to get me to change my drum beat," says Vijay, "because they'll go 'no if you could do BADABADINGBOW... no no BOW', 'what, BOW?' 'NO NOT BOW', 'What are you talking about?', 'Let me do it'. Lee's not bad, you're terrible, Sam".

With Sam writing all the lyrics (the only part of their songwriting process that isn't collaborative) Club Smith's first album is heavy with references to his mum, albeit veiled. "There are a few songs on this album that lyrically are about her. There's one called I Didn't Want To Show You That I Lost Faith, about when my gran died and my mum was really affected by it. My mum found that my gran had kept this book that she'd written in every month about things that she was thankful for, things that she was looking forward to, and things that she was hoping for. My mum tried to carry on her tradition, and I tried to do it but I didn't have the attention span, so the song is about my regrets about that. When we first had it it wasn't a very good song, but we were recording here and we ended up totally stripping it down and playing it on the piano and just making it up as we went along and it's become this big swirling, emotional centre point in the album.

"Then there's another one called Green Room which is one of the first songs we wrote as Club Smith, about nine months after my mum died, and that's about understanding grief. The whole idea of a Green Room is a metaphor for a period of grief where you don't really understand what's happened and you don't really understand whether your life is going to carry on as normal ever again."

Vijay seems genuinely interested to learn exactly what some of the lyrics mean. "It's good you've mentioned the Green Room because that was quite poignant in the Club Smith story; once we wrote that it almost formed the foundation," says Vijay. "What I really like about this album - and it's just really indicative of what we've done - there's not one song on that album pencilled by one person, all of them have been written by us all in the practise room. That definitely makes it feel like it's everybody's band."

