

The Sunshine Underground interview

Kate Wellham

“Do you know the Sunshine Underground?”, I ask the barman, cursing my short-sightedness. “Yeah?”, he says resentfully, as though I've asked him whether he grew all of his beard himself. “Oh good, do you know where they are? I'm meant to be meeting them in here”. Now, like me, he's stumped, despite having served them already.

Like anyone who's been to any indie night in the past four years, I can sing 'Put You In Your Place' in my sleep but, as they're resolutely unshowy, I couldn't spot the perpetrators in a crowd. I used to like that about them, but right now it's quite inconvenient. Eventually, they have to come and find me instead.

Craig, with his Radio 4 voice, good posture and very nice manners, and Stuart - who is so laid back it's a good job there's a wall behind him – don't look like the jet-setting, dancefloor-igniting envy of Leeds music at all. They don't look like people who are stalked around Japan by rabid fans, who haven't needed day jobs for quite some time, and who have just returned from a two-year hiatus to find that they're still beloved enough to sell out all their comeback gigs, and probably an Academy tour besides. They look, in all honesty, like they're just grateful to be in the pub.

Perhaps it's because they've started reliving the shittiest jobs they've ever had, and are finding it hard to be anything other than grateful for the present.

It's not exactly image-enhancing stuff: “When I was about 16 one of my first jobs was in Burger King,” says frontman Craig. “The first thing I got asked to do was take the rubbish out and put it in a big skip, then when the bins got too full, they tried to make me jump in the bin and try and squash it down. I walked out on my first day.”

“Why?”, asks Stuart, not entirely seriously.

Not that Stuart, TSU's guitarist, was exactly James Bond in a former life either: “One of the first jobs I ever had was with Daley the bass player, we worked in a frozen food factory, but it was more what you had to put on - full overalls, wellies, hairnets - I had sideburns so it was a beard net - about five pairs of rubber gloves; we used to come out stinking of chicken tikka. It was just rancid.”

Then there were the cleaning jobs in a couple of Leeds nightspots that shall remain unnamed and best forgotten. Although these days they're fortunate enough to have left all that behind, they're still counting their blessings. “It makes a big difference,” says Stuart appreciatively. “As soon as you get up you can just think about your songs rather than having to get eight hours of something else out of the way first before you can come home and clear your head and then think about your tunes.”

"It's all character-building stuff though," says Craig. "I don't think we've lost any of that determination, it's just nice that you don't have to squash bins behind Burger King."

We're so spoilt in this city that it's easy to forget that this band aren't simply big in Leeds. In fact, at the same time as they're sat across the table from us in Nation Of Shopkeepers, sipping pints and looking like every other quietly stylish 20-something in Leeds doing a bit of Sunday drinking, they're simultaneously shooting their best Blue Steels at hundreds of thousands of people from a huge banner on the front page of MySpace Music, encouraging us all to listen to their new album 'Nobody's Coming To Save You'.

Characteristically beat-heavy and widescreen, TSU's tunes hit exactly the same spot in 2006 that made us all fall for The Music, and their foundations are solid – a unit, concerned with tunes and performance. The joyfully confrontational first single 'Put You In Your Place' was a shot in the arm, and follow up 'Commercial Breakdown' only proved that the supply was plentiful.

They've played The Other Stage at Glastonbury, toured the world on the back of 'Raise The Alarm' – Japan, Europe, America – and their sound has translated instantly wherever they are. To be immune to The Sunshine Underground requires so much self-discipline that it's difficult when sober and physically, *medically*, impossible when drunk, which is why they still rule the dancefloor and the festival, no matter how long they've been away.

Tales of their treatment in Japan are interesting, if a little scary. From fans waving boxes of Yorkshire Tea in the crowd, to hanging around in hotel lobbies to hand over presents of miniature plastic food. And more...

Stuart: "Me and Matt were out getting a bite to eat and we spotted that we were being followed, then we were paying for what we were buying, and this girl runs up behind us and gives us an envelope and disappears back into the crowd. We open it up and it's pictures of me and Matt from the last trip, and I've no doubt she was taking pictures of us that time before she gave us the envelope, so she's constantly giving us surveillance photos from the previous trip – me buying a jumper a year ago."

Craig: "What does that mean? Where does that end?"

Undeterred, they'll be back there at the end of February to collect their latest snaps.

Like so many other Leeds artists, they're migrants from elsewhere in the UK (rock n roll Shropshire, to be precise), but unusually for such a band, they actually moved to Leeds together, following drummer Matt's decision to up sticks and attend Leeds College of Music. Craig explains: "It was pretty much a month after we started getting together and writing songs, and he'd already planned to come to Leeds anyway, so he was up here for a year without us, but we just had a good thing going."

"We tried other drummers," says Stuart, "but it wasn't the same." Realising they'd found a winning team, they all uprooted to Leeds, and threw themselves into the scene at the time to begin what turned out to be a career of making music.

It could so easily have been some other city that both influenced and absorbed them, though, as Craig points out: "If he'd gone to uni in Manchester or Glasgow we could quite easily not have come to Leeds, but Leeds has been good to us, I've never looked back." Even the college course wasn't a hindrance: "It was basically the most nonsense course you've ever heard but it really worked for us. We had access to recording equipment, and as much time as possible."

A blag, of course, but one which LCM would be daft not to show off about now.

Their first gig as a band was at Carpe Diem, and their comrades at the time their first album, 'Raise The Alarm', came out in 2006 were bands like Forward Russia, This Et Al and Duels. Notably, only the latter are still together now.

It was arguably a huge gamble to take such a long break after that album, but it looks like they got away with it. What was the hold-up though?

Craig: "It seems like a long time when you look back. The first time we came out was 2006, but we were touring 'Raise The Alarm' until 2007, then we gave ourselves until 2008 to write. We tried to make an album quite quickly, but halfway through 2008 the album wasn't ready, and we thought 'well we could just go and make a record now or we could properly think about it, not just do the first ten songs we've written'. In the end, it was ten out of 50 or 60.

"It turned into a project that we didn't mind how long it took, it just had to be really good. A lot of bands can't do that, they get told 'you've got to have an album out now', but there's never been anyone telling us to do that. I think all the best stuff, the stuff that makes this album different to the last one happened in the last six months of writing."

The test run of comeback gigs last year were their first in 14 months, and all sold out, with fans receptive to the 80% new set.

It's a break they're insistent has paid off, and The Sunshine Underground of album two are, they say, more themselves than they've ever been. From co-producing the album, to thinking about videos, they are – says Craig – determined to take more control over everything this time around. "This time we knew from start to finish what we wanted it to sound like, and the first record we just entrusted in other people to read our minds almost, which is obviously impossible."

Featuring demo parts recorded, in some cases two years before the rest of the album, 'Nobody's Coming To Save You' is a labour of love that has literally taken all this time to create, unlike the difficult and rushed stereotypical second album. And just in case you were wondering how long we might have to wait for album three, don't worry, they've already started writing it.

