

**JIM KERR
THE IVOR NOVELLO ESSAYS
TRAVEL BROADENS THE MINDS**

Over their 30+ year career, Simple Minds have played to millions of fans around the world. They have topped the charts with *Don't You (Forget About Me)* and *Belfast Child* and five of their fifteen albums, and are about to release the sixteenth, *Graffiti Soul*, on Universal. Front man Jim Kerr reflects on three decades of music-making and what he has learnt about songwriting, publishing, licensing, politics, travelling and the changing landscape of the music industry.

"When Simple Minds started out, the be all and end all for us was to try and become a great live band that played internationally. I say that, not to belittle the records, but for us it was all about the live work. We grew up in Glasgow and were very lucky in the sense that a fellow in our class at school had an older brother who was head of security at the Glasgow Apollo. It was still called the Green's Playhouse. He would say 'come along at nine o'clock and you might find one of the back doors open'. In that way, we got to see so many live bands. So for us, records were vitally important of course, but people who could do it live were even more so. That was the beginning of our remit.

For a period, this approach seemed so old fashioned. The 'live' was supposed to support the record and we always thought no, the record was to support the 'live'. We were canny enough to know that, with records, almost everybody you can mention can go in and out of fashion. You're subject to all sorts of things, radio play, etc, but if you have a live audience, it's something concrete that sees you through feast and famine. **Indeed, not to take away from any of the people who worked hard on our behalf at the record companies because they did, but the marketing was all about the tour.** Now the old way has become *the way*.

We were very pushy, quite imaginative, restless, and full of desire. Back then, of course, it was different. I'm talking 1977, 1978. Things weren't de-centralised. It was all about London. I remember we used to hassle the odd stringers from *Sounds* and *Melody Maker* and *NME* who were based in Edinburgh, run along with the demo tapes and try and get them to see us live. We would hustle the local agents, the entertainment secretaries at the universities who were doing the booking, while playing every week and building up our own following. Eventually, promoters who were looking to sell another couple of hundred tickets would put us on as support. What was a wee bit unconventional is the fact we would get a very good reaction. At the same time, we were hitch-hiking up and down to London, dropping off demos

at record companies.

Bruce Findlay, who became our manager, came on about a year in. He had his own indie label which had a singles distribution deal with Arista but we were looking for more than that. He said 'well, let me see if I can help you get a record deal'. And lo and behold, we ended up signing with Arista, not only because Bruce had the deal there, although that was a great factor, but at the time we thought 'Arista's the label. They have Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed; this surely has to be our home'. I remember the great irony when we finally went in to sign the deal and looked up on the marble walls and there was a huge portrait of one artist and one artist only: Barry Manilow.

We got rather shocked when our first album *Life In A Day* was complete, the whole thing was peppier than we felt we really were. There's always two sides to Simple Minds, it can go on the flip of a coin, the art-rock side, and the poppy side. Kid Jensen was playing it on Radio One and Arista were liking it but we felt we were more the Velvet Underground than the Boomtown Rats. Joy Division and Magazine were coming out and we wanted to push that side of things, the real art-rock of the second album. Arista flipped and we continued that with the third.

There were so many trends back then, every three months, ska, mod, New Romantics. Record companies would just get out the chequebook and sign whoever was in *NME* that week. Arista saw a future in people like The Beat, the Stray Cats and Secret Affair, not so good. Gradually, their attention turned from us to them. Both Japan and we failed at Arista and Virgin stepped in and saw the potential.

It was frustrating at the time but I'm glad in the long run. In a way not getting success until our fourth or fifth album, which is inconceivable now, we were getting an opportunity to learn our trade. We were doing it bit by bit. We were out playing live so that, when success eventually did come, we were much more ready for it than if it had been an overnight kind of thing.

Bruce made us take notice of publishing. The first album was written mainly by Charlie **[Burchill, guitarist]** and me. We put the songs together prior to the other guys coming on board. The second album is where the others started to write. A lot of our songs were starting to come out of jams between three and four. In your early days, there's nothing else in your life so everyone's putting in the same amount of time and effort. When you're in a band, you look at the bigger picture. A song can come from someone's seed and somebody else completely develops it.

At the time, we thought *Don't You (Forget About Me)* was going to be just another track on a movie soundtrack and get us a bit of attention in America. It didn't dawn on us to ask for a credit. We liked Keith Forsey, who wrote and produced it. We put our spirit into it; we came up with the arrangement. At the end we got this feel going and I said 'I'll sing la la la la' and work on the

words tonight and come in tomorrow. The next morning, they called and said 'this works great, you don't need to come in'. It was one of those things. We'd never had a commercial track before, I finally understood, came face to face with the nature of the beast. As the weeks went past, we watched the song enter the Top 100, 50, 30, 10 and finally reach number one, the top of the *Billboard* chart.

Jimmy Iovine was mooted to produce our next album said 'you'd better have a killer to follow this'. *Alive And Kicking* went to number three in the US, without a movie. *Sanctify Yourself* and *All The Things She Said* from that album went Top 10. We did alright. But we were scared, we were young, we were frightened by the success. We didn't feel we merited it.

It's a great irony we didn't write our biggest hit but, on the other hand, with *Belfast Child*, we lucked out. The melody comes from a traditional song called *She Moved Through The Fair* but I didn't know it. Our bass player was playing the tune and I instantly started to write down words. **He left for the day**. I didn't have knowledge of the folk world. I thought it was our song. Thankfully, it's in the public domain.

My own people came from various parts of Ireland. It was always something on our agenda. Back then, the BBC banned songs that were about Ireland, McCartney with *Give Ireland Back To The Irish*, The Police had to disguise their song *Invisible Sun*. When you're a young man and someone tells you that you can't do something, it's a red rag to a bull. *Belfast Child* was inspired by the pictures coming out of Ireland at the time. That album, *Street Fighting Years*, was about the issues of the day. *Soul Crying Out* was based on the sort of cold-hearted leader Margaret Thatcher was, for instance. But there was always a rule; it had to have a great melody. *Mandela Day* has a great melody. Peter Gabriel wrote *Biko* about Steven Biko, it was a beautiful song, which we covered. They were the issues at the time.

It's not so easy for younger bands to do. The nature of politics and the way politics are presented is very different now. There was much more polarity in the world. I was brought up when The Berlin Wall, the Cold War, America, Russia, and apartheid all existed. You were right or left. It was all very black and white, whereas now the coffee I'm drinking, the T-shirt I'm wearing could be a political decision. So in a way politics are all around us now, young people are very aware of them. I might say that the targets were easier in our day.

But actually, the answer to the question is in two parts. It's all changed but the issues are still the same. It's still about have and have not, it's still about racism. The whole ecological thing is a much bigger deal now but, if you've written *Belfast Child*, where you're talking about the absurdity of war, do you need to write one about Kosovo? That's why we can play *Mandela Day* now and. as much as it's about Mandela, it's about Tibet, wherever there is prejudice or suppression.

I'm so glad we did it. I'm so glad we had the balls because you got criticism then. It can be a rather clumsy thing to do, try and take some huge issue and put into a three minute song. But I remember when Mandela was eventually released and came to London for the first time. There was a celebratory concert for him and he talked to about a dozen artists in the room. He said something that's stuck with me ever since. 'When we were in Robben Island, when there was no voice allowed, we could always feel and hear the voice of the artists, and it gave us great sustenance. I though 'wow!'. If Mandela says it, then that's good enough for me.

In Sicily, there's a small island not far from us called Lampedusa, and you frequently get boats full of people coming from Africa. I could see something coming out of the imagery there in terms of a song. You have to write what's in you and get it out and then you deal with that.

Street Fighting Years arguably cost us a career in America. We had two or three albums that had done well everywhere prior to *Once Upon A Time* but in America that was the one. The record company wanted a new album to follow it up, preferably 'Twice Upon a Time'. We not only waited a couple of years, but we came back with nine minute songs about Belfast, Mandela and stuff. They said 'No one in Texas wants to know about this'. The timing was all to cock.

Alive And Kicking has been great for us in terms of licensing. Every football programme in the world plays it. We also had a strange request from a fast food company to turn it into 'I Like Fried Chicken'. Unbelievable! And it was a lot of money. You've got to be joking! But, I'm not a puritan, when it works well, that stuff is great. Kronenbourg in Germany have been using *Belfast Child* for ten years, a great ad that's usually only shown during Champions League football. We like football, it's in our culture.

A couple of years ago, David Guetta, the French dance guy, wanted to use a sample of our song *Someone Somewhere In Summertime* for a new track, *The World Is Mine*. We agreed but we said you can't use it for adverts. A couple of months later, they came back. A big cosmetic company wanted to use his track for a worldwide shampoo campaign, again very, very lucrative. We said no. The sample is our opening bars of *Someone Somewhere In Summertime*; it was the opening song on our landmark album *New Gold Dream*. People grew up with that. I don't really think they want it to be on a shampoo as. If it was *spring water* . . . It has to be right. People say 'that song changed my life. We got married to that song'. You've got to watch it, you have to be careful.

Ads used to be the only way into Japan. In fact, it became a cool thing there. We also had an interesting situation in Scotland. Someone did a version of

Don't You for the milk marketing board, a really cheesy ad. My parents couldn't believe it wasn't me. Had we gone to court, it might have set a precedent before the Tom Waits sound-alike case. But it wasn't worth the bother because we didn't own the publishing. You have to get something that fits right, otherwise damage can be done. All those Moby ads would have been right.

A few years ago, we thought we could see things coming. It's easy to sit back and say everyone will just buy online, you just press a button and there it'll be. Ten years ago, we started building up our online community. It's been really good; we offer extras like Music downloads and presales for concerts information. As a punter, in the last two years, I have bought more music than I ever have through iTunes, from reading a review. Before I know it, I've got it, brilliant! Do I miss the old culture? I can't really say I do. I can get sentimental over it, that's a different thing. Ironically, our new album, *Graffiti Soul*, will be out as a vinyl double as well as a deluxe version, with a whole album of covers which started out as additional tracks for iTunes. They came out so well that eventually we've done a whole album called *In Search of the Lost Boys*.

Our publishing catalogue is coming back to us next year. We'll be looking for partners not only for administration but to actually work it. All the major publishing and record companies have this pitch now, we're artistic service companies. They all know that the old working model is gone and something new will have to step in.

Charlie and me, we say laughingly, but also with a certain amount of seriousness, we still feel we're on that journey. Simple Minds have always had this thing of movement, travel, transition. It was there in the beginning with *I Travel* and *Theme From Big Cities*, and it's there with *Moscow Underground* on the new album. It's wrapped up within our own lives. We're very mobile and it suits us, actually. I'm glad about, not only whatever experiences or successes we've had, but also that we *appreciated* them. I was amazed that certain people didn't. Travel, all that stuff, it fuels us, and it gives us great pictures to the songs.

I used to believe in this elusive thing they call 'the muse'. Some days, you could write three songs and then, for four months, you couldn't write anything. It's taken me the longest time to realise that it's not the muse; it's turning up and going to work every single day. You've got to write through the bad, the indifferent, the blocks . . . It doesn't matter the quality, quantity's the thing. It's not a muse, it's a muscle. Get up and go to work, try things out, work with as many people as possible. You might come up with something that's not right for you at the time, but seven years later it's in someone's movie. I'd recommend music if it's the only thing you want to

do in your life. I used to think it was 50/50 talent/desire. I would say it is 25% talent, 75% desire, the desire that keeps you going when it's not going well, when no one wants to know.

One of the things I'm most proud of is that people say to me what Simple Minds are you talking about? Is it the avant-garde, the pop, the ambient, the instrumental group, the political, the folk, or the stadium band? We've been on one hell of a journey. To play all those different styles but at the same time be quintessentially Simple Minds is an amazing thing. We've done not bad. Thirty years. Better to travel than arrive.

There's no manual for this game, really. There is a point where it becomes more than a career, more than a band. It's your life. And just like life, it's not always happening, and then you get periods that are just blissful and it is all going the way you want. What toll has it taken? It's been wonderful."

'Taken from /an excerpt from the Ivor Novello Essays published by The British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors in association with PRS for Music. The Ivor Novello Awards took place on Thursday 21st May. Further essays can be viewed at www.basca.org.uk