

Consulting A Specialist

An Interview with
In a year of endless mediocrity, the re-emergence of the Specials has been good news for those who believe in content over style. Jerry Dammers, keyboards player, writer and general nucleus of the band, has, along with the likes of Costello and Weller, written some of the most perceptive and articulate songs to have come out of post-punk Britain.

Last month the Specials released *In The Studio*, their first album since 1980, and there was the small matter of their single, 'Nelson Mandela', which seemed to be camped in the No 1 spot in the NZ charts. July was a Special month, and Jerry Dammers was genuinely chuffed by the fact that the single had done so well over here:

"It's fantastic. It got to No 9 in Britain and it was so great that it was a hit in England at all as there's so much rubbish in the charts nowadays. It's not all rubbish musically, but lyrically it doesn't say anything and it doesn't attempt to say anything. It's just sixth form poetry and I can't listen to that. To me for music to mean something the lyrics should say something or relate to life."

Life After Terry

It was an early London morning in late July when Dammers took the call. The interview was actually scheduled for the week before but as it turned out he was in the studio with the band recording the B-side for their next single, 'What I Like Most About You Is Your Girlfriend':

"It's good to do B-sides because you don't have to get so hung up about it. It's a rap over a funk thing of Rhoda's and it's about not having any money. We did it in two days, and the song is a bit more throwaway than we usually do."

"I'm very hung up about our music having a lasting thing. I worry about it and maybe it would be better if there were a few things that were throwaway. But I would like to think that the albums would stand the test of time."

Maybe it was the time of the morning, but Dammers' dry Midland accent sounded weary. As it turned out, he had plenty to be weary about. The four years between albums hadn't all been roses:

"We've had loads of problems getting *In The Studio* together. Everything that could go wrong went wrong with people even walking out of the group."

"But the basic problem was that when the old Specials split up the music I was writing had got very sophisticated, but when we got the new band together they weren't as experienced and they didn't know what I wanted. We got 'Nelson Mandela' together because it was the right level for the band and it came together quickly."

"But this album has been one long nightmare but I thought it was best to see it through in the end rather than abandon it half way through."

Were you worried when Hall and co left that the Specials had lost that distinctive cynical edge?

"No, I don't really like that sarcastic, cynical sort of thing. I wanted to do something a bit more positive and that's why Mandela worked; even though it's on a sad subject it offers a very positive solution. Terry could never have sung that because he doesn't give a toss about Nelson Mandela."

Considering the band's current instability would you have liked to have kept Hall and co?

"I'm not so sure about Terry but if Lynval and Neville would've stayed I would've been more pleased. Fun Boy Three have split up and I don't think Terry really cared for Lynval's or Neville's careers or talents, he was just using them for his own career. If, when the Specials had split, he'd



had the courage to go solo and left the other two in the band then the Specials could've carried on. But getting an entirely new set of people meant it was a long time before we could get to fruition."

"I'm used to it as I know groups aren't built in a day as the original Specials were together two years before our first hit."

Talking about beginnings, was it your concern to say something intelligent that led to the formation of 2-Tone?

"Not really. It just seemed to develop that way as once you started making statements you couldn't back down or suddenly become commercial or crass or silly. You get drawn along. Like after 'Ghost Town', we've done three singles and they've all been fairly political ('War Crimes', 'Racist Friend' and 'Mandela') but I've never consciously decided to be political or whatever."

It must've taken a lot of guts to make an album as varied and unpredictable as *More Specials* after the success of the first?

"I don't know about guts. To me, albums should be experimental; I can't see the point in churning out an obvious album. It's much better to try new things and fail than to be boring."

The New Album

'War Crimes' should've been sufficient warning as to how much the Specials' vocal sound had changed since the departure of Hall. And yet *In The Studio* is still a bit of a surprise. Vocally, Stan Campbell shoulders the burden but Rhoda and even Dammers himself ('Girlfriend') front up to the mike.

As an album, *In The Studio* is largely a continuation of the breadth and eclecticism of *More Specials*. It's a fine album of often droll humour ('Girlfriend'), Kink-ish paranoia ('Housebound'), tension ('The Lonely Crowd'), politics ('Mandela' and 'War Crimes') and distraction ('Bright Lights'). Like its predecessor, it's not designed or made to appease the casual listener or those interested in the quick kick. Its durability lies in the closeknit complexity and sophistication of each song. But it's an album Dammers is glad to see the back of:

"I'm quite happy with it, but it became a weight around my neck and I couldn't stand to listen to anymore of it. I'm certainly happy with the musical ideas but it took too long to make and we lost spontaneity. On and off it took two years but it's certainly been an education as I know a lot more about making records now. You have to get all the right people and have everything rehearsed."

Examining some of the songs, and 'Bright Lights' seems to have the idea that people's attentions are being distracted from the important issues?

"Yeah, I moved down to London and it seemed that there was some punk and the Specials speaking for people on certain social problems like unemployment. Then suddenly that went out of fashion and everything went ultra silly and it was all just clothes, especially in London. And the song was about that and about how people outside London were being forgotten and how pop music didn't seem to care

second trial, sabotage.

In both trials Mandela conducted his own defence and skillfully used the courtroom as a platform to publicize the plight of South Africa's blacks. (Space prevents quotation from these famous speeches but they are readily accessible in NZ. Consult your local library or try, for example, Donald Wood's book *Biko* in Penguin paperback.)

Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. He has been on South Africa's Robben Island ever since and according to the white government's policy on political prisoners will not be allowed any remission of his sentence of life-plus-five-years. Or parole. Or amnesty. Ever. PT

'Are you so dumb that you cannot speak? I'm begging you Free Nelson Mandela'

Was it written consciously as a single?

about it."

An icy wind blows through the door
 You feel like you've been here before
 You tremble and you start to sweat
 The symptoms of withdrawal
 'Alcohol'. Personal experience?

"I suppose it is to a certain extent. I sort of gave up drinking a couple of years ago, and it's a warning of what it can do to a person. I had some inkling of what it can do because on tour you drank so much and at the end when you stopped you realised to what extent you could become dependent on it."

And so to 'Girlfriend' (I'm looking at her while I'm talking to you), which has a nice humorous lovebite to it:

"Yeah, it's my warped sense of humour but it's got that edge to it because it's also very true. It's not about any particular person, it's just human nature. And that's me singing on that by the way."

Who could mistake that falsetto?

"Yeah, that's the only way I can sing. I had a brick tied round my balls when I sang it." (laughs)

The Specials, like the Beat, have long been renowned for their strong anti-racist stand. 'Racist Friend' ('If you have a racist friend/Now is the time/For your friendship to end') is such a stand:

"I wrote that when I was really pissed off, the stand involved is not the initial reaction but when you realise someone's not gonna change, whatever you do or say, then you've got to make that stand. To me racism is like a mental illness and that song was difficult to write as it forces you into making a stand and if necessary losing friends for what you believe in. But in the long run you've got to do that."

Hello (Again) Terry

Reading over the lyrics to 'Housebound' is like stepping back into the domestic world of Ray Davies, the difference being Dammers' characters don't accept their fate. And his characters are larger than life:

"That song was about Terry Hall actually, but again it relates to a lot of people in England, old people in particular. ('Looking at the world through lace curtains') There must be millions of people who never go out, they just sit and watch TV all the time. They never leave the house or socialise. And Terry Hall has become one of those people."

Last year *RIU* did a phone interview with Hall where he said that what he really enjoyed in life was made quite explicit in the song 'We're Having All the Fun' from the Fun Boy Three's excellent album *Waiting*.

Terry's bit:

I live in a flat
 I like Manchester United
 I live with my girlfriend and my cat
 We're really happy
 I like watching television and wearing duffel-coats and moccasins.

The song was about maintaining a private life in the face of fame and recognition:

"On the new single he's got now the girlfriend has gone and so he's just left with the cat. But he's in a very difficult position and maybe I should be more sympathetic because being recognised everywhere you go is a great pressure and it can make you quite self-conscious to the stage where you can't say or do anything."

"I've experienced it a lot as well but I still think it's important to get out and about and not cut yourself off from the world."

Self-imposed isolation can't help Terry's songwriting potential?

"Well, Terry can write about the cat in his flat and that's all he can write about because that's his life."

"But 'Housebound' also relates to those people who feel that it's not safe to walk the streets at night so they don't go out and as a result it becomes less and less safe. It's important that people do go out even though there are muggings."

"In Coventry in the 60s on a Saturday night it was packed out and now there's nobody there at all and it's because of that sort of fear. And now it's quite frightening because there's nobody there. It's the easy way out, isn't it, just saying, 'Oh I can't be bothered to go and socialise'. That's not really a life is it?"

Are You So Deaf?

'Nelson Mandela' has become a household name in NZ, the name behind a song that is part exhilaration and part lament. It's rare that a song of that quality becomes so successful anywhere:

"Yeah, I couldn't believe its success in NZ, but I think there's always been a strong anti-apartheid movement over there. In England people were beginning to forget about apartheid as it hadn't been in the news and nothing's been done as usual. I know a song doesn't do anything, but at least it makes the public aware."

In *NME* Danny Baker criticised the song for being too slight and lightweight:

"Maybe the walking part of the bass line is not the most brilliant, maybe it is a bit lightweight and obvious, but apart from that I couldn't agree. I think the vocal performance made it so that it wasn't lightweight."

"It's a difficult subject to write on without being morose but the idea was to make it sound as if it was how it would be played if he was released. Yet at the same time it has that note of sadness because he's still in prison. It's hard to balance the happiness with the sadness, but I think we did it fairly well."

Was it written consciously as a single?

"I wrote it consciously as a pop song as a lot of the album wasn't pop music. With 'Nelson Mandela' I wanted to get through to as many people as possible without it becoming crass or anything. I wanted it to be heard, partly to educate people because a lot of people didn't know who he was."

Only The Piano Player?

A quick scan through the songwriting credits on the Specials' records gives you some idea as to whose band it is. Dammers writes something like three-quarters of the material which means he ends up with something like seventy-five per cent of the responsibility for the band's well-being, or otherwise. Is it a burden being the chief songwriter?

"It's very difficult. I could give an example, say 'Rat Race' which Roddy did on the first album and it was a hit but I thought the lyrics were a bit stupid. So there's always a juggling act to make sure that everybody in the band gets a look in in the songwriting but at the same time standards have got to be kept so that ideals don't stray too far away from what the band stands for."

"So there's always huge arguments in the band about that and it's a hard balance to work out, especially in this band more than the old one. There's no one else in this band writing lyrics so that's mainly fallen on my shoulders, which is a burden because the lyrics are the hardest."

What characterises a good Jerry Dammers' song?

"The song has to have a point to it. It doesn't have to be on a social issue but most of my songs seem to have a moral to the story. So for me a song is a way of working things out in your mind, like how to live or whatever. I think that's true of a lot of black music, that underneath it even if it's a love song, they seem to be making some sort of comment about a situation."

Have you tried to avoid the pop straight-jacketing of a band like Madness?

"Yeah, they've made some great records and some pretty dodgy ones that sound as if they've been just churned out to satisfy the market. You can get sucked into commercialism and end up like Duran Duran where the music has lost any meaning."

So what keeps a comfortably off songwriter like yourself interested in the world's injustices?

"I don't know. It's perfectly genuine. I couldn't tell you where it comes from but I do care about other people and I think they're important. It's funny really, but having earned a bit of money and everything doesn't seem to have altered that. I know a lot of people when they do earn some money they become so defensive of it and they become so conservative because 'I've earned this and I've a right blah blah blah'. Just like John Lydon has become now and when you read an interview with him it's 'there's nothing wrong with living in a big house and I don't feel guilty about it'. And they didn't even ask him the question."

The Faceless Vs The Frontmen

Dammers has kept a very low profile within the band. Few people could pick him on any of the Specials' album sleeves and on the Mandela clip he makes one gapped-tooth grin at the camera. When is he going to emerge from behind the stacks of speakers and face the music?

"I've been conscious of that but if we release 'Girlfriend' with me singing on it then it will be different. I've got to decide by tomorrow about that and it's a big decision as I don't want to be recognised. I value my own personal freedom and privacy and it's frightening to think that I could end up like Terry Hall or something."

"But on the other hand I think I've always hidden behind front men and I think they resent it in the end because I put my thing on to them. They start off being grateful but in the end they feel they're being stifled and they want to make it on their own, which is fair enough. But there's a tendency among singers and front people in general to get a bit above themselves."

Which brings us to vocalist Stan Campbell, whose desire to leave for a solo career has caused strife and punch-ups:

"Yeah, there's still a lot of problems with the band. Stan doesn't want to stay. It's the same old problem, it seems to have gone to his head and he seems to think he can pursue a solo career now."

"It's because I'm so soft — I don't get the people to sign contracts, I do it all on trust. It's a bit depressing. It's the music business, it boosts people's egos and they don't realise what's happening to them and they get this ridiculous idea that they're more important than all the people around them. No person in a group is any more important than any one person in the audience because it's all those one people that make them appear to be important. They only reflect the audience."

"If people want to use the Specials as a launching pad for their career then the best joke I can see is that the springboard will still be there after the pool has dried up."

A tough analogy?

"I've become hardened to it. I want the Specials to continue, the band and the ideals are more important than many of the people in it. That's the great thing about 'Mandela', we've proved that the Specials can go on and create good songs even with a total change of line-up."

Who's arguing?

George Kay



'Are you so blind that you cannot see?'

Normally it's only accorded to the Prime Minister... but a couple of Saturday nights back on TV prime-time, the same man was featuring on both channels at once. On TV1 Special AKA's hit monopolised *Ready To Roll* while on TV2 *Foreign Correspondent* was carrying a documentary on Nelson Mandela. Pure coincidence