

JAMES WHO?



James are still a bit of an enigma in this country. But sing the chorus to their hit song 'Sit Down' (you know the one — "oh sit down, oh sit down, sit down next to me . . .") and most people think they've heard of them — sort of.

James are hardly an overnight success though, they've been playing their slanted indie pop since the early 80s. Marred by ill-health and bad management decisions James were left in the pop world's gutter, until 'Sit Down' that is. Now with the release of *Seven*, their fifth album, and with a couple more hits behind them, James look set to rectify their 'anonymous' status overseas. So of course *Rip It Up* had to have the story and bass guitar player Jim Glennie was more than happy to tell it.

The band's name itself is a bit of a mystery, many say it comes from James Kirk, the guitar player with Orange Juice (an early 80s UK pop band). Others say they're named after Jim Glennie himself.

"In a way it was both really. Paul, our original guitarist, was a big Orange Juice fan and we toured with them. We were looking for a name that didn't give anybody any idea of who or what we were. We used to play on it quite a bit, if we were supporting a band and no-one knew who we were, Tim (the lead singer) would go on stage and recite a poem and people would go 'oh that's James, he reads poems'. Then he'd do a song with an acoustic and they'd go 'oh right, James plays the guitar as well'. Then the rest of the band would come on — basically just muckin' about with people's lack of knowledge.

"When we started the punk thing was dying and the new wave bands like Teardrop Explodes, Echo and the Bunnymen etcetera were seen as having these innovative names. So the name James was really a reaction against that as well."

Very similar to the reasons behind another Manchester band's name — the Smiths.

"Yeah, but we came up with it before we'd even heard of the Smiths."

Ten years is a hell of a long time to keep a band going. What drives you?

"Ginseng.
Bollocks."

"Yeah. It's not been easy, but the music's always been there for us though, that's really what fuels us through the hard times. We've always had a love of what we do and an arrogant self-belief that one day the rest of the world would see the light. You need to be arrogant in a way, because if there's any self doubt, when times are bad it's so easy to say 'let's call it a day'. I suppose because we've put in so many years now and so much effort, we're that bloody minded about making it work, it would take a hell of a lot to split us up as well."

The James sound has certainly progressed from the initial bare bones four-piece pop group. The biggest change came three years ago when three more members were added. With this expansion in

size came an expansion in sound and, judging from their success, they became infinitely more listenable. This big sound has also become what many would call, dare I say it, stadium rock. But I suppose Public Enemy are a stadium band, as are Electronic and the Cure . . .

"The change from a four piece into a seven immediately fleshed things out. We could never have got a big sound like that before. Now we've got keyboards, violins, trumpets — and you can get a massive sound behind you. Initially it was harder to create what we wanted, it was all a bit abstract because we couldn't really describe what we wanted. All we could say to them was 'Push it a bit more' or 'Go for it'. Luckily we found people with the same attitudes about what we were doing, who knew what was going on and knew when to play something or not — just by ear. 'Gold Mother' was a sort of teething ground for the band. The new album captures us as a seven piece — hence the title."

Tim was quoted as saying that after 'Sit Down' you had to try to de-epic your songs. Do you keep this in mind when you're creating?

"It's not really on our minds. 'Sit Down' became a big song for us obviously, problem was that it took on a life of its own and it felt like it was a bit out of our hands. Everybody wanted it at the concerts — it was almost as if we were obliged to play it, which was a position we'd never been in before. We certainly wouldn't construct a song thinking the crowd will like it."

What's the scene like in Manchester now 'Baggy's dead'?

"Well, all the flares are hanging back up in the wardrobe. It was a great time though. Musically we tried to keep out the way, so we didn't get lumped in with a fashion. We got grouped in with Joy Division and the Fall in the early days, then the Smiths, and with the baggy scene it was like, here we go again."

Many people feel it was the Smiths that kicked you into the limelight with the Meat Is Murder tour in '85 and Mozza calling you his favourite band.

"Yeah well we got loads and loads of press which helped us along. It was good and bad — but mostly good. But we didn't make the most of that first time around — because we messed up basically, we made some really bad decisions. It took us years to get going again. The press over here only want to know if you're going to be the next big thing. It's more 'check this band out they're going to be great' — which is where we were in '84. Once you lose that, even if you're producing great records, and playing great gigs, they treat you like you're part of the establishment. It's like — oh and by the way James played a great gig."

Do you see yourselves as

primarily a live band?

"The essence of what we do is live, it makes more sense of the

songs. And it sorts out your audience in a way, if people think we're a pop band they're usually surprised. It's important to us to be a good live band, plus you've also got the great light show behind you, you've got the support of a crowd getting behind you, the atmosphere."

For a lot of British bands these days in times of financial disaster, it's the T-shirts and merchandising that keeps them afloat — or keeps them eating. It's happened to Carter The Unstoppable Sex Machine, Ned's Atomic Dustbin et al. James have recently taken their merchandising one step further. You may remember their song 'How Was It For You?' Now they're selling James condoms at concerts — with the song title embossed on them.

"Yeah we do the James flavoured condoms now — they come in liquorice, strawberry and mint. Our manager Marteen came up with the idea, she designs the T-shirts and we've got watches and all sorts. You name it we've got 'em. Merchandising certainly helped us through some catastrophes, it's a bit

more fun now because we don't need it as much and we can be a bit more creative with stuff."

The production on *Seven* wasn't exactly orthodox either. The producers they wanted were either unobtainable or busy. Then someone suggested ex-Killing Joke bass player Youth.

"When we met him he was like this late-30s scruffy hippy with loads of crystals round his neck and a pair of sandals on, a right tosser — but we decided to take a gamble and give him a go. We arrived at Olympic in London and there's this huge studio — used to be a cinema or something. Youth had been there a couple of days setting up. When we went in he'd like draped the walls with Indian wall hangings, rugs on the floor, huge stone things with flower displays, and three-foot alter candles everywhere — no electric lights. There was loads of incense, an oil wheel and a strobe for the faster tracks. It was like walking into a temple, and there's Youth in the control room sitting cross legged with no shoes on. We thought it was

hilarious — but it worked, the vibe sort of broke the cold of the studio. There wasn't the usual feeling of 'don't make a mistake — it's costing us god knows how much an hour'. We just played and if it didn't work we tried again. It was very bizarre, but we definitely needed him for focus."

Do you enjoy making albums more these days because of your success?

"Well, success can work either way, it can give you this confidence to take more risks or it can put pressure to make you think 'Oh god, this album must sell as many as the last or we're in trouble'. I think it sort of helped with *Seven*, but then again we've always tried new stuff."

So what is success to James?

"Things are going really well for us now, things are building steadily around the world. But ultimately it comes down to being happy with the work you release and then being able to drive on past it next time."

JOHN TAITE

Your Broadcasting Fee helps NZ programmes and our people get a fair share of the air.

WHO

You did. Because your Broadcasting Fee helped make MC

HELPED WITH

OJ & Rhythm Slave's dynamic "Money Worries" clip, not to

MC OJ's MONEY

mention the 30 other music videos we'll help make this

WORRIES?

year. Isn't it great to get more New Zealand music on air.

**NZ
ON
AIR**
Iirangi TE.MDTU

For more information on music video funding contact Brendan Smyth on 0-4-382 9524.

AIR 0001