

CHANGELINGS

SIMPLE MINDS HAVE TRIED ART ROCK, POSTPUNK, PROTO-ELECTRONIC, STADIUM ROCK AND POP, BUT THEY'VE NEVER BEFORE MADE AN ACOUSTIC ALBUM... UNTIL NOW. WE MEET FRONTMAN JIM KERR AND GUITARIST CHARLIE BURCHILL TO DISCUSS THEIR LATEST ADVENTURE...

PAUL LESTER



Stripping down classic-era Simple Minds material has been "a leap" for Kerr and Burchill

In 1966, Bob Dylan was interrupted onstage during his performance in Manchester by a heckler shouting "Judas!" Someone in the audience that night was less than impressed by the erstwhile acoustic musician's decision to Go Electric. Simple Minds could be about to experience their own "Judas!" moment as the Scottish band – known for their multi-layered productions and studio majesty – prepare to Go Acoustic. They have just made an album – titled, appropriately enough, *Acoustic* – that comprises tracks largely from their Eighties heyday, only minus their beloved trademark twinkling keyboards, electric guitars and crashing drums. It's a bit like Kraftwerk – or New Order, Human League, Yello or any number of *Classic Pop*'s favourites – suddenly deciding to record an "unplugged" album. It is an unexpected move, to say the least.

"We're about to find out, aren't we?" laughs Jim Kerr, assessing the likelihood of Simple Minds fans across the globe being horrified by their latest venture. "But you're right: people known as folkies going electric and people known for the big bombast, paring it down – it's as much of a leap."

"I like that," cackles guitarist Charlie Burchill, his accent broader even than Kerr's, when asked about the prospect of a "Judas!"-style hail of abuse. "It is a strange one for us – we never thought in a million years our music would work in an acoustic context."

They might be on uncertain musical ground, but the pair are back on home turf, in Glasgow, where the band formed in the late Seventies. Today, they are rehearsing for shows to accompany *Acoustic*, reworking their back catalogue, and music that dates back to the pair's teenage days, when they would map out songs in their respective parents' homes.

Indeed, the first Minds album, 1979's *Life In A Day*, was, recalls Burchill, "Pretty much written in my bedroom on an acoustic guitar".

Not many songs thereafter were composed acoustically, which makes *Acoustic* a "back to roots" affair for a band who didn't really have a "rootsy" phase in the first place. Still, the memories are strong of writing songs in Kerr's mum's kitchen.

"My mum worked in one of the first-ever Greggs [the baker], and I remember hammering through those songs and really getting into it as my mum turned up with a bag of leftover strawberry tarts," he reminisces. "When she heard *Chelsea Girl* [their second single], she said, 'That sounds good.' It was one of the first times any of our parents said anything."

The idea to do an acoustic album occurred after they appeared, in 2014, on Chris Evans' Radio 2 breakfast show. There, Kerr and Burchill, joined by

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Jim's brother Mark, performed *Honest Town* (from 2014's *Big Music*), a cover of The Doors' *Riders On The Storm*, *Alive & Kicking* and *Don't You [Forget About Me]*. The response was ecstatic, despite Kerr and Co's initial reluctance.

"We weren't that enthusiastic," admits Kerr. "But we finally bit the bullet. It was half-seven in the morning, and it was more of a busk, really, but the reaction from fans was outstanding."

Acoustic raises all sorts of intriguing questions about authenticity and artifice and what makes for a "real" song. For children of David Bowie – which is what most of the *Classic Pop* generation of stars are – Simple Minds make for unusual "folkies".

"It's funny you should say that," says Kerr of Bowie, "but a lot of his music was written on acoustic guitar. We knew that with *The Man Who Sold The World* and *Hunky Dory* but we didn't know it continued through later stuff like *Let's Dance*. Even on *Scary Monsters* and all those big rock tracks, there's an acoustic hammering away in the background. So in a strange way – and remember Bowie was a Dylan fan – it can all join up if you want it to. But certainly there's no getting away from the point you're making: that it's not an obvious move on our part."

There is a weird inclination to accept an acoustic song as more "genuine" and "sincere" – more emotionally resonant and direct – than one featuring multiple layers of sound. Does this concern them? Not really: Kerr cites Peter Gabriel as someone "from within our own realm", whose solo piano meditations in concert can provide "the most powerful moments". "You can hit an emotional core that is very different to the sonic bombast, which hits you physically," suggests Kerr.

Notwithstanding his love of Kraftwerk, Kerr grew up listening to a lot of raw, non-electronic music, from Dylan and Joni Mitchell to The Velvet Underground. He cites Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* as a prime example of a record by an artist known for sonic excess stripping things back. And yet with Springsteen there is an obvious connection between his acoustic songs and his more fully-arranged ones, probably due to a certain simplicity in their construction. Less so with Simple Minds, which led to certain problems...

"Because some of our songs are so layered and have four or five melodies going on at the same time, with *Acoustic* it was like, 'We can only go with one: which one?'" Kerr explains. "That occasionally brought out something in the song we knew was there but was buried. It didn't change the essence of the song; it just gave it something else."

The automatic assumption is that the post-New *Gold Dream* material, which saw a shift away from studio sorcery, will have lent itself most readily to the acoustic treatment. Not so.

"No," says Burchill when *Classic Pop* posits 1984's *Waterfront* as an obvious "acoustic-ready" composition. "That's the most complex! Plucking out the chords to that one was really quite difficult. Something like *Glittering Prize* probably works better acoustically – you can hear the song better."

Burchill contends that *Alive & Kicking* is the most conventionally well-structured composition in the Minds songbook. Which begs the question: is a complex song complex because of its actual construction or the layers added on in the studio? There is an abiding belief that a good song is something that can be rendered acoustically.



COLOURS FLY

CHARLIE BURCHILL AND THE ART OF POST-PUNK GUITAR

Burchill, John McGeoch, Will Sergeant, Keith Levene, The Edge and Bernard Sumner were the Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Jerry Garcia and Peter Green of post-punk, reinventing the electric guitar, with a whole slew of new sounds and effects. Who took the revolutionising furthest?

"That's a fantastic question," says Burchill, refusing to commit. "I think John McGeoch was amazing. The Edge, obviously. Will Sergeant, too – you mentioned them all. I'd be happy to be in the same company as all those guys."

Burchill took that effects-laden new guitar sound about as far as it could go on 1982's *New Gold Dream*. After that, there seemed to be a retreat back to Sixties jangle, via guitarists such as R.E.M.'s Peter Buck and The Smiths' Johnny Marr. Burchill is too modest and diplomatic to agree. "Johnny's almost a one-man-band: he plays chords, the melody... *How Soon Is Now?* is a great track, with really unorthodox chords."

Would Burchill concede that My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields was the last great guitar innovator? "Absolutely," he says, although he does admit to liking, more recently, American electronic/psych-rock duo MGMT. "I saw [Shields] recently on a guitar programme on the BBC, showing how he did it, with tons of reverb. He's quite mad; really hardcore."

POP-UP For Charlie Burchill, *Acoustic* was a particular instrumental challenge. "I had to synthesise together a few parts, and that made you focus on what's essential in a song"



"There is no 'pure music'. You've got to try stuff. If you change, you get it in the neck. If you don't, you get it in the neck"

JIM KERR

But why can't a "good song" be the sum of all the technological advances of the past 60 years brought to bear on a four-minute tune?

"It can," reassures Burchill. "I think we've got past that whole debate. Technology is more and more part of our lives and everybody realises it's great to have around. For us, it's pretty liberating. On this album, it was difficult to get the balance. We didn't want it to just be Simple Minds unplugged. So there are still weird sounds on it, and a lot of stuff going on. It just happens to be acoustic."

Certain Minds songs are so "electronic" it wouldn't have worked to do them acoustically – *I Travel*, say, or *Sweat In Bullet* – and yet there are tracks on *Acoustic* from their 1980-1982 golden age, when their music reached an apotheosis of artifice: *The American*, *Promised You A Miracle*, *Glittering Prize*, *New Gold Dream (81-82-83-84)*, *Someone Somewhere In Summertime*... and they do stand up in their new context. This is largely thanks to Burchill's skilful guitar work, which Kerr compares to Jimmy Page's folkier excursions with Led Zeppelin. But how "electric" is *Acoustic*?

"Well, essentially 'acoustic' in Simple Minds terms means no big Mel Gaynor drums and no piano or keyboards – and you could arguably say Simple Minds are known more for keyboards than anything," fudges Kerr. "There wasn't one electric guitar, although at times Charlie plays [acoustic] through various effects. We didn't want it to be bongos on the beach or campfire songs," he adds. "The magic started with Charlie – in some ways it's his best guitar album 'cos you can actually hear what he's doing! But it's more than just some folk-sounding record."

Surely the hardline 20-year-old Kerr, who was once in a punk band called Johnny & The Self-Abusers, would have recoiled from *Acoustic*? "You're absolutely right," he concedes. "I was brought up rejecting the music my dad liked – country, folk. I hated anything 'traditional'. He'd say, when we started, 'You want to get the old fiddle out.' I'd be like, 'Oh, f*** off!' 'Stick an accordion in!' 'What are you talking about?'"

Still, Kerr's old man got the last laugh when, in 1989, his son released a single, *Bellast Child*, featuring a penny whistle, a fiddle and an accordion – produced, no less, by Mr Technology, Trevor Horn.

"Listen, there is no 'pure music'," he says, reminding *Classic Pop* that Kraftwerk's self-titled first album was acoustic. "You can play music on anything. You've got to try stuff," he furthers. "If you change, you get it in the neck; if you don't change, you get it in the neck!"



Simple Minds in stripped-down form, 2016: "You're trying to be faithful to the melodies, and that's challenging"

Acoustic was recorded at a studio called The Gorbals, a former railway workers' social club near the high-rise estates of Glasgow's South Side where Kerr and Burchill started out. It was an emotional return. Simple Minds' best music, delivered by Kerr's powerful, piquant croon, might have been electronic, but it was never cold; it could be filed alongside Associates, Orange Juice and their other Eighties Scottish peers, under the rubric "soaring Celtic soul".

"You can't put your finger on it, but we both know what you mean," agrees Kerr. "It's an inner feeling, a special kind of lyric, with a certain optimism to it, while being deep. The music on *Acoustic* is very evocative – I get pictures, feel the climate..."

One of the things Burchill learned during *Acoustic* was that it is just as hard to do a so-called stripped-down record as it is a multilayered one. "Absolutely," he says. "To me, the whole project has been quite difficult – in a great way. It was so out of our comfort zone. We were constantly having to reassess every situation. Especially live, this is going to require a lot of effort to get it right."

Is it difficult because, if you remove gadgets and machinery, you expose the deficiencies of the players? "Not so much the deficiencies," says Burchill, "but you're trying to be faithful to the melodies in the songs, and that's challenging. You're really having to be very economical."

What did Kerr learn about his songwriting, making *Acoustic*? "I was amazed," he says. "Charlie and I were 20-21 when we wrote some of the songs at my mum's kitchen table. I remember writing *The American* on the eve of Reagan coming into power and everyone of our generation being so wary of changes in the world. And then we started this album with it, just as so much of the world is growing wary of Donald Trump coming to power. It certainly got me thinking as we zoomed back and forward in time."

What would the 21-year-old Kerr say about *Acoustic*? "I think he would relate to the darker stuff, *The American* and *Someone Somewhere* – the more brooding ones," he decides. And Charlie? "Would it have offended me? I think so, yeah, definitely," says Burchill by way of contrast.

So much for subjectivity. Objectively speaking, stripped as they are on *Acoustic* of their production carapace and attendant period signifiers, could an alien tell which Minds songs come from which eras?

"Good point – I wonder," Kerr muses. "And, say, if *The American* popped up now: would I want it? Would it make the grade? Has it stood the test of time?" He thinks for only a split second. "You bet it has! It's dynamite. But then, I might be biased."

Acoustic is out now on Caroline and reviewed on page 92 ■

When Jimmy Met Katie

On *Acoustic*'s rendition of *Promised You A Miracle*, the band are joined by fellow Scot KT Tunstall, who helps transform their breakthrough chart hit from 1982. "KT was great," says Jim Kerr. "She turned it on its head. She really set about it! She comes from a very different place but she's so passionate about all manner of music. She's a lot more playful than we expected. I knew she was good, but I didn't know she was great. As soon as I walked in [the studio], the guys were circled around her and she was all, 'No, I'll play bass' and, 'Do it like this'. No one else would have been able to get away with that."

Tunstall was seven years old when *Miracle* first came out, but she instantly insinuated her way into its spaces. She was originally a member of the Scottish Fence Collective, whose membership includes another Minds fan: founder Kenny Anderson, aka King Creosote, who inadvertently helped Kerr commit to the *Acoustic* project. "I kept changing my mind about it," says Kerr. "One night when I was driving home I switched on BBC Radio Scotland and someone was singing *The American*, played only on piano. I thought, this is great, and at the end they said it was King Creosote in session. I found out KT was part of that band, doing their favourite Eighties tracks. I thought, there's people doing acoustic versions of our tracks and we can't even work it out ourselves!"

