

## INTRODUCTION



### **Why? Why are you doing this?**

‘Do it for your mum! Do it for the Butthole Surfers!’ It was an unlikely clarion call. It was stranger still from a man of almost eighty. My father stood in the sitting room, his eyes welling with tears. He was overcome at the thought of these two great presences – his wife (my mother) and the Butthole Surfers, a Texan rock group best known for their massive drug intake, spectacular sense of anarchy and albums called things like *Rembrandt Pussyhorse*. It was a singular moment. It even made some kind of sense.

By 8 December 2003, the rock group British Sea Power had sold 27,182 copies of their debut album in Britain. The band were signed to Rough Trade Records; from Cumbria via East Sussex; self-proclaimed suppliers of ‘high-church amplified rock music’. My two youngest brothers Neil Hamilton Wilkinson and Jan (aka Yan) Scott Wilkinson were the band’s singers. I was the band’s manager. Our father – a former shipping clerk and Second World War anti-aircraft gunner from Sunderland – was, by some margin, the band’s most obsessive admirer.

Dad was an unpublished novelist with decades of unpublishing under his belt. As well as managing the band I was a music journalist who dreamed of producing the kind of writing you find in libraries rather than in the newsagent on the corner. British Sea Power brought us both a kind of proxy

glory. The band took us into the charts. They took us around the world – Dad vicariously, me literally. BSP played shows from the Scilly Isles to St Petersburg. Prince Charles, Nick Cave and Ronnie Corbett were all to hand. The great institutions expressed goodwill and admiration – David Bowie, Lou Reed, the National Maritime Museum. They say it’s all about the journey, not the arrival. If so, British Sea Power were the only band to be in. The appearance of material riches was delayed, perhaps forever.

This is a book about British Sea Power and about dreams of rock omnipotence. But perhaps more than that it’s a book about Dad. If you had five hours to spare, Dad would eagerly expend this time talking about the most pressing topic of the era – British Sea Power. He would happily stop a stranger in the street to tell them about the CD they really had to buy. The one by British Sea Power. Dad was unshakably certain that British Sea Power were the best, most important band in the world. The world didn’t necessarily agree. As Dad ardently invoked the Butthole Surfers, British Sea Power were touring British arenas. But touring British arenas as support act to The Strokes. This talented New York quintet were said to be leading a garage-rock revival. Their good looks, well-connected backgrounds and skilful ways with a tune made it a two-car garage. We were outside in the skip. Six months on from its release in June 2003, sales of British Sea Power’s debut LP remained modest – safely marooned within the five-figure bracket. The album was called *The Decline of British Sea Power*. Nonetheless, the latest record-company statement showed the band boldly busting six figures – six figures into the red. We were £106,777.35 in debt to Rough Trade Records and another £111,746.61 in debt to our music publishers, EMI Music.

The Strokes tour was a pleasure. We were playing to several thousand people each night and being well received. The British Sea Power stage set brought the toadstool-mystic allure of the forest to the stark arena interiors. The band’s stage backdrop consisted of a forest of oak branches and a

nice bit of silver birch – or whatever foliage we'd been able to prune at service stations en route to the show. Sticking some trees inside a concert hall was more novel and a lot cheaper than adding to rock's history of big phallo-brutalist stage mechanisms – Motörhead's Heinkel bomber, the Beastie Boys' big inflatable stage-prop penis, Iggy Pop's big inflatable non-stage-prop penis. The British Sea Power stage set also included a few plastic decoy birds – a peregrine falcon, an eagle owl, a couple of grey herons. They were creatively sourced from Percy's, a fishing-tackle shop in East Sussex. The crowd seemed to like it. When further wildlife appeared they screamed with delight.

A menacing, massive, ten-foot bear named Ursine Ultra would join BSP at the end of their set. This creature had previously been the property of Hammer Films. It had maybe figured alongside Oliver Reed in *The Curse of the Werewolf*. Or perhaps added a bit of inter-species hilarity to the naval comedy *Watch it Sailor!* The bear was now employed in the indie-rock milieu. Each night a member of the road crew or a passing friend had to climb inside the creature's cavernous, fabric-covered metal frame – and then thrash and maul the band as they attempted to play their closing number.

Some things had gone right for BSP. Their debut album had been almost universally celebrated in the press. 'British Sea Power's audacious debut is unlike anything else you'll hear,' roared *The Guardian*. *The Sunday Times* was unequivocal: 'British Sea Power are the best band in Britain.' In a review of Reading Festival, *Rolling Stone* had decided there was only one real attraction at the event: 'Fuck this puerile drivel, we're going to see British Sea Power...' But, despite the occasional optimistic signs, I often had severe doubts about my own role in this gangshow. I managed the band from the late 1990s until the end of 2005 (returning to help with the odd task in 2006.) I was bad, sometimes very bad indeed, at keeping on top of financial matters. Hence, perhaps, the BSP national debt. But, beyond that, things just weren't as I'd hoped they would be.

By this point, I'd imagined the band would have money pouring in, rather than be living on £800 a month. I'd pictured tidal waves of lucre. Funds were needed for benign social engineering and covert charitable donations. And the most astonishing entertainment spectacular of our times. This fantasy event was scripted to take place at Castle Valdštejn, outside Prague in the gorgeous forests of the Český Ráj, or 'Czech Paradise'. It would involve a headline performance from Iggy Pop, plus sets from Kate Bush, Little Richard and leading Freddie Mercury impersonator Gary Mullen. There would be a display from the gold-medal Russian Olympic gymnast Svetlana Khorkina – asymmetric bars, beam and floor – plus a lecture on ninth-century Scandinavian seafaring from the former Teardrop Explodes frontman Julian Cope. Iggy's headlining set would be presaged by a flypast from Team Iskry – an air-display formation consisting of gleaming red-and-white Cold War-era Polish jets, the retro-desirable Moog synthesisers of aviation. At the evening's conclusion a hot-air balloon would sail over, dropping bespoke BSP Kendal mint cake on handmade miniature silk parachutes. British Sea Power would also play and there would be hot dogs and as many fried onions as you could eat.

Finances would be a recurring concern throughout my management of BSP. Other tribulations were gathering in the distance. To see three of his children making even intermittent impact in the world of arts and letters had profoundly affected Dad. I was also a father myself. When the first BSP album was released my daughter was twelve. In the next few years geography and rock music would combine to present difficult choices between fatherhood and band management. But in the early years the juncture between family and rock would mostly bring only strange joy.

As Dad approached his eightieth birthday, he had become a fervent observer of independent rock music. He immersed himself in the records of anyone he saw as a potential peer or rival of British Sea Power. Apropos of nothing, I would find myself closely interrogated on the opening track on Nir-

vana's *In Utero* album, or the lyrics of the great American indie-rock cerebralists Pavement. Dad also read any relevant rock biography he could get his hands on: The Smiths, Nirvana, Nick Cave, the Manic Street Preachers, Joy Division, Syd Barrett. He was determined to understand the context BSP operated in. Dad was particularly taken with a book called *Our Band Could Be Your Life (Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981–1991)* by Michael Azerrad. As the title suggests, this book records the life and times of various left-field US groups, the likes of Sonic Youth, Black Flag and Mission Of Burma. Dad was amazed and delighted by the chapter on the Butthole Surfers.

The Butthole Surfers were the most extreme, most droolingly reckless of bands. They spent their early years touring the vast expanses of America in horrible conditions. They were seemingly permanently intoxicated, routinely wired on hallucinogens – and nestled, almost Russian-doll-style, into a single car. They'd customised a modest 1971 Chevy Nova so it could carry three people lying prone and two more sitting upright. Plus a dog. The people included the six-and-a-half feet of frontman Gibby Haynes. The dog was a female pitbull called 'Mark Farner of Grand Funk Railroad' – named after the singer from the meat-and-no-veg 1970s Michigan power trio. The car's exterior was decorated with barbed wire and toy dolls. 'How were we never stopped by the cops?' wonders Buttholes drummer Jeffrey 'King' Coffey today.

At times, the Buttholes would exist on the money earned from returned beer bottles. A succession of bass players joined then left the group. Invariably they'd been stretched beyond breaking point and departed the scene screaming incredulously: 'WHY? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?' The band's performance modes hit their heights when they reached Europe. On one occasion in Norway their frontman decided his mission for the evening would be to single-handedly drive every audience member from the auditorium. In Stavanger, in front of an audience of engineering students, the Buttholes started to play. Then they stopped. Haynes

started screaming and smashing bottles against the walls. He became a kind of rock fire alarm – shrieking away until every last audience member had left the room. When it was empty, the band started playing again. At this point one or two curious concert-goers would try to sneak back in. Cue further hectoring from Haynes. Exit audience. A little more Butthole Surfers. And so on. This was the kind of thing Dad was thinking of when he put his arm around my shoulders and, with concern and encouragement in his voice, rallied my spirits. ‘It’s a simple thing you’ve got to do,’ he said in his soothing Northeastern tones. ‘Do it for your mum! Do it for the Butthole Surfers! That’s what it’s all about!’

Dad took endless proxy pleasure from his sons’ fleeting forays into the limelight. But only the coldest heart would begrudge him this. Much of his own youth had passed in less blithesome circumstances. On his eighteenth birthday, Ronald Wilkinson had volunteered for World War Two. As soon as he could, on 22 June 1942, he’d signed up. The next few years took him from Sunderland to the Isle of Man, to India, to Java. He wouldn’t be home for good until 1947.

Dad’s wartime service brought a slightly atypical perspective to this band. He’d had his youngest sons late in life. Not many bands of BSP’s generation had a father who’d served in World War Two. Dad’s service included a spell sat in a field in southern England. Arrayed around an anti-aircraft gun with his friends Appleyard and Braddock, Dad would wait there, ready to send metal and fire up into the summer sky. While they were sat there, Dad and his pals would watch smoking aircraft come looming in. In wrenching fits and starts, these American bombers would do their best to reconnect with the earth – bouncing, smashing and grinding along a two-mile strip of concrete and iron. These planes were aflame due to the efforts of other young men across the sea. The other men sat around their own arrangements of gorgeously milled metalwork – mechanisms similar to those operated by Dad and his chums. Pretty much effortlessly, they sent steel, phosphorus and TNT high into the heavens.

Just thinking about how Dad's youth had been consumed by global conflict was an instant antidote to the frustrations and failures that came with rock management. Yes, it was annoying when the e-mail stopped working, or when the record company still hadn't received that demo CD after you'd sent it four times. But imagine for a minute the resourcefulness needed to communicate in another, different time. Take, for example, the ingenuity shown by the British secret agent 'Tommy' Forest Yeo-Thomas. Even when locked in a Gestapo prison, Tommy still managed to communicate with his fellow prisoners in adjacent cells. An inventive code had been arrived at. As a biography of Yeo-Thomas records, it 'consisted of masturbatory moans derived from one of the more revolting American dance songs'.

My two brothers wrote and sung the majority of British Sea Power's songs. As I write this Dad is eighty-six and has often seemed to be in the band as well. By the time BSP released their first album I was in my late thirties and the band were in their twenties. Dad was seventy-eight. He gave us our own variation on a contemporary generational trend – the endeavour and vitality increasingly shown by the elderly. But Dad wasn't interested in becoming yet another senior-citizen snowboarder. He wasn't just another grey panther ready to delight presenters on daytime TV by taking up cat burglary in his seventies. We looked on with surprise and amazement as Dad transformed himself into a connoisseur of indie-rock.

It's fair to say that BSP did their best to hold Dad's interest. The band's first three albums each sold 60,000 or more in Britain – and around 250,000 worldwide. From many perspectives, 60,000 is a lot of people. But in terms of rock omnipresence 60,000 sales is hardly anything. British Sea Power had other ways of making a mark. The band played at all kinds of places and with all kinds of people. They played in caves deep underground and on ships out at sea. They played on top of the Great Wall of China, on Arctic islands, at the Chelsea Flower Show and beside the diplodocus at London's Natural History Museum.

In terms of interesting fellow-travellers, BSP's high-water mark perhaps came when they were invited to play at the Centenary Gala for the late Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman, in 2006. BSP shared a bill with Ronnie Corbett, Nick Cave, Joanna Lumley, Dame Edna Everage and Mavis from *Coronation Street*. The guests of honour were Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. Beyond royalty and Ronnie Corbett, BSP also found themselves in intimate proximity to the most successful indie-rock acts of their era. An interesting and perhaps frustrating tradition developed. Bands would spend their early shows supporting or gravitating around BSP. Then they would hit the kind of mass success that dwarfed BSP's – number one albums, global supremacy, congress with Paris Hilton.

Back at home, Dad's mind was still full of the Butthole Surfers. He made a pot of tea and then carried it into the dining room, his voice full of passion and disbelief. His pitch and volume suggested someone warning pedestrians about a runaway car. 'This lot!' he shrilled, directing his ire towards various musical peers of BSP. 'British Sea Power make all those other shites look like they aren't even trying! The other lot, they're not even at the bloody races!' Then, pouring the tea, he became calmer, more thoughtful. 'The Butthole Surfers,' he sighed. 'Now there's a *real* band...'