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Gifts of Unknown Things: Terry Bickers

Posted on November 25, 2015 November 25, 2015 by natwise1971

Whilst the pantheon of rock guitar heroes is well-established, the indie world has tended to not make so much noise about its own axe-wielders. Much of indie and alternative music's aesthetic has tended to resist the phallogocentric excesses of the guitar hero, eschewing the solo, the widdle and the shred, with post rock, shoegaze, no wave and riot grrrl taking distinct ideological stances against overblown displays of technical virtuosity, whether by design or happenstance. But indie music has, at least in the UK, produced a small number of guitarists feted for their skills such as Johnny Marr, Bernard Butler and Vinni Reilly. In the late 1980s and early 1990s another name figured regularly in discussions of who might take over Marr's mantle after the dissolution of The Smiths, Terry Bickers.

As Keef to Guy Chadwick's Mick in The House of Love, Bickers was quickly picked up by fans and music press alike as something special. Influenced heavily by dub, Bickers' guitar sound took Marr's trademark jangle and added layers of depth and feel. Whilst most of the guitarists mentioned above are notable for their textural approach to their instrument, Bickers understood the importance of space and ambience right from the get go. The House of Love's two trademark Creation singles, 'Christine' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXOgRvj76zI>) and 'Destroy the Heart' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nza7AlHV5I>) are notable for Bickers' hypnotic guitar playing. 'Christine' centres around a modulating two-note drone, pierced only by sparkles of guitar and majestic arpeggios towards its climax, already setting out the features of his sound.

Following a pretty acrimonious split with Chadwick in 1990 Terry resurfaced with Levitation, perhaps one of the most underrated British rock bands of all time. Alongside Christian (Bic) Hayes, Laurence O'Keefe, Robert White and David Francolini, Bickers produced some of the most meditatively beautiful and explosively propulsive music to come out the 1990s. Always a highly democratic unit, Levitation's commitment to pressing on from indie's increasingly restrictive sonic template produced a thematic but highly varied body of work. The first Coppelia EP sets the stall straight away with the short sharp hynogoc shock of 'Nadine' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pewst7PtmSU>) followed immediately by 'Smile' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl2G1lznvA4>), the song that almost single-handedly sums up the band. Its trancy beginnings develop slowly and rhythmically to an immense crescendo of spiralling guitars going off like fireworks from Bickers and Hayes whilst O'Keefe and Francolini work out their own dub influences in a powerful and sinewy fashion. Levitation hit their stride straight from the off, with perhaps their most beautiful piece of music being hidden on their debut album *Need For Not*. 'Arcs of Light and Dew' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U25sTr4FoDY>) has the polyrhythms, the pulsing bass, the angular swaying guitar mantras and those firework guitars, ever a feature, both flamingly reassuring and thrilling majestic. It's also a great example of Levitation's deep sense of humanity, a warmth and compassion that seeps through Bickers' lyrics...

Here and unique, the ordinary speaking hearts are made, without grief, without fear, without rage, at our feet, without grief, without....

Levitation sadly could never last long and Bickers announced that he was leaving the band in 1993 onstage at the Tufnell Dome in London, much to his band's relative surprise. After a short period signed to WEA, Bickers' post-Levitation project Cradle would release their only album *Baba Yaga* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E81aCX5BwFo>) on Ultimate in 1995. By then Bickers' reputation had dimmed, and *Baba Yaga* got largely indifferent reviews, yet it holds its head up to this day as a document of some of Terry's most exquisite playing and songwriting. Alongside more rocking tracks such as 'Second Nature' and 'In The Forest' sung by Bickers' partner Caroline Tree, pieces such as the mesmeric 'Gifts of Unknown Things' and the sublimely atmospheric 'Home' show Terry's fragile voice intertwining with layers of gently chiming guitars in the most emotive ways. The final track 'Chloe's Room' is a sixteen minute long rendition of Lewis Carroll's 'The Hunting of the Snark' intoned over Bickers' spectral chords and shards of sound. There's not very far you can go after that.

Since then Bickers' career has been subdued but varied. After the obscurity of Monkey 7 and some sporadic production work Bickers and Chadwick would reunite in 2003 to revive The House of Love. More recently Terry has been working with Pete Fijalkowski (ex-Adorable) as **Fij and Bickers** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bwGHpuA2Jg>). The acoustic sparseness of the songwriting here shows off Bickers' guitar playing to great effect, giving him the space to wring complex emotions from the simplest of guitar figures. Their 2014 album *Broken Heart Surgery* got excellent reviews and they are currently in the process of recording its follow-up. And finally Levitation's great lost second album *Meanwhile Gardens* (<http://levitationband.bandcamp.com>) got its release last month. Recorded just prior to Terry's departure from the band, *Meanwhile Gardens* only ever got a desultory release in Australia with Bickers' vocals replaced by Steve Ludwin. It wasn't the same. Now the album marks Levitation at the height of their powers, with Terry's vocals reinstated and a glossy new re-master that does justice to the band's power and fragility ('**Bodiless**' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ou4WTN20AE>) is a pretty representative example but the band cover a lot of ground throughout the album). I'm not holding my breath for a live reunion any time soon but it's nice to hear the story of such a promising act having a another chapter, when there was so much more that I wanted to know.

At the start of the year I invited Fij and Bickers to my university to talk about their careers and play some songs to my students. Pete Fij is an angel, a great songwriter and a generally lovely chap. But I couldn't keep my eyes off Terry's fingers as he played. Every note doing something pretty beautiful, never overly showy, always just right. History, I hope, will recognise him as one of the UK's great players and I'll never stop being moved and thrilled by his music.

During the Q&A session he mistakenly called me Justin. I forgave him.

Tags: [Cradle](#), [Levitation](#), [Music](#), [Popular Music](#), [Terry Bickers](#), [The House Of Love](#)
Categories: [Indie](#), [Music](#), [Popular Music](#), [Uncategorized](#)

2 thoughts on “Gifts of Unknown Things: Terry Bickers”

ACE says:

November 26, 2015 at 8:10 am

Lovely piece and a warranted tribute.

Never saw Lev live but did see Cradle and Monkey 7, whose obscurity was unwarranted. Here's to the Monkey 7 reissue in due course.

Believe Mr Bickers also played with Colenso Parade pre-HoL but I never heard enough of them to discern whether Mr Bickers' glorious style was in evidence on their works.

REPLY

NATWISE1971 says:

November 26, 2015 at 8:38 am

The Colenso Parade stuff is nice enough and yes, there's hints of what's to come.

REPLY

Nathan Wiseman-Trowse is Associate Professor in Popular Music at the University of Northampton. He is the author of *Nick Drake: Dreaming England* (Reaktion, 2013) and *Performing Class in British Popular Music* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Nathan has also published work on the Australian singer-songwriter Nick Cave, the writer / musician / artist Bill Drummond, the graphic novels of Alan Moore and the psychogeography of music journalism. Alongside his academic career, Nathan has engaged with a wide variety of facets of popular music. As part of Determination Inc. Nathan promoted club events around the East Midlands and DJ'd for many years across Northamptonshire. He has played guitar in many bands including The Druids, Coot, Harpier Cries, Electric Hairfeast, and Pretty Dead Girls, and currently records under the name Mantrahead, producing ambient guitar and nu-gaze music (www.soundcloud.com/mantrahead). He has also written for *Splinter* and *Twin Star Revolution* magazines and between 2006 and 2007 was Chairman of the Executive Board of The Roadmender, Northampton's premier live music venue. Nathan is a member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music and sat on the UK and Ireland Branch Executive Board between 2005 and 2008. He plays guitar reasonably and sitar less-so.

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