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ISN'T IT TIME?

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In the shadow of star-spangled 70s AOR giants like Journey, the UK's contribution to transatlantic radio rock was limited to Foreigner and Fleetwood Mac. But there were pretenders to the crown, **The Babys** being the first among equals. Perambulating once again, Tim Jones is one of many adults rocked by Babys

T he Babys are the British band that briefly vied with US chart-topping AOR acts like Boston, Journey, Styx and Toto, and competed with other UK contenders such as 10cc and Sad Cafe. Fronted by

Lancastrian singer/bassist John Waite and, during their heyday, the home to future Journey/Styx man Jonathan Cain and Ricky Phillips. The Babys were formed by androgynous glam keyboardist/guitarist Michael John Siddons-Corby, aka Mike Corby. Alongside singer Waite, drummer Tony Brock and guitarist Wally Stocker, they signed to Chrysalis in 1976 for the then-biggest ever recording contract for a new band – \$1m. No pressure, then. Still, Corby had reportedly jammed with Jimmy Page and, on meeting producer/manager and Andrew Loog Oldham associate Adrian Millar in September 1974, signed up to form a new quartet that could vie with the big boys.

Among those auditioned were Mandrake Padlle Steamer bassist Paul Riordan, who promptly walked; drummer Luca Fox, who followed out for the nascent Motörhead, and singer/guitarist Gordon Hawtin (aka Gordos Rondelle), who recommended an acquaintance, ex-Graf Spee/Chalk Farm's John Waite. Schooled in jazz-rock with the band England, he'd relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, to play bass with The Boys. Tipped off that Corby was after a bassist, he returned to London in 1975 and met Corby and Hawtin in a Haversham pub, where he was welcomed into the fold. Next, Millar recruited Spontaneous Combustion/Strider drummer, Tony Brock, while Hawtin's departure allowed Waite to join the band – to become lead vocalist. Brock brought in Dream Police/Longdancer keyboardist Matthew Irving, though he left for Manfred Mann's Earth Band before rehearsals began in London's Tooley Street. The core players demoed 10 tracks, including Waite's first two writing efforts, *I Wear Your Ring* and *You'll Get Yours* (issued in 2006, and akin to Slade's Glam-rock). Jokingly, they dubbed the Babys, reflecting the mix of personalities that already had been through the revolving door. Corby himself threw in the towel early in 1976, before returning and by then, ex-boy Pegasus guitarist Walter 'Wally' Stocker had been recruited.

Combining Free's Paul Kossoff's minimalist approach with an electric doublet effect, he

created the stratified guitar lines integral to The Babys' signature sound.

The classic line-up was in place and penned some impressive tunes, filmed for a novel demo video – New York Dolls-esque masquerade, rouge and hard de rigueur, directed by TV's *Supervideo* show helm, Mike Mansfield. Ranging from The Raspberries-esque power-pop to Bad Company-like hard rock, their eponymous debut was recorded in Canada with Alice Cooper producer, Bob Ezrin. The band felt

"Isn't It Time" remains an infectious soul-rock anthem"

TONY BROCK / happy with or without me

John Waite's rendezvous with the UK, in 2010

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the result was overproduced, but it was issued in January 1977. It failed to make the US Top 100, despite the kinetic, Trevor Rabin-esque sing-along. If You've Got The Time, which made No 88.

Among the 10-tracker's other AOR cuts were the phased-drum opener, Looking For Love, the scintillating, radio-friendly Rodeo (think period UF0), and the hurtling, Bad Company-esque Read My Stars. Much of the remainder were soft-rock ballads, such as the reflective, piano-led Over And Over (featuring a lead vocal by Brock), though a cover of The Paris Sisters' 1961 hit, Sing How You Love Me, was Slik-like glam, and closer, the Mini-Korg-framed Dying Man, could've come from the Barclay James Harvest songbook. A UK tour with The Damned, therefore, was hardly the wisest move, but Chrysalis engineered positive US press coverage and they took up residence in true *Rock Of Ages* fashion in Hollywood. At that point, the label ditched Millar for Neil Young manager, Elliot Roberts, determined to recoup their investment and break the States.

As well as shows early in 1977, the band were ushered into Los Angeles' Record Plant to work alongside Led Zeppelin/The Who/Bad Company producer, Ron Nevin. Over three months, they cut the 10-song rockers'n'ballads *Broken Heart*, marked out by its stylised colour-tint artwork, based on Corby's concept of them as characters from *A Clockwork Orange*. Appearing in September, it was blessed with a grander sound thanks to Nevin's orchestration, plus female backing vocals, the Bad Company-like *And If You Could See Me Fly* nestling with burnished electro-acoustic opener, Wrong Or Right, the ecstatic title track, pleading Rescue Me and sweeping, melodramatic closer, A Piece Of The Action (permed by ex-Marmalade's Mike Japp). The heartfelt lament, The Golden Mile, and another laconic vocal, the US No 53, Silver Dreams, stand out, alongside Rock standard, the US No 13 (and UK No 45), Isn't It Time? A driving anthem hardy personified by Brian Wilson co-writer, ex-KGB's Ray Kennedy, it had been rejected by The Temptations but remains an infectious soul-rocker, boasting gospel backing and surging strings. It swept the album to US No 34 and topped the charts in Australia. Bonzai!

With A-league status apparently within

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"Rod called me but I'd just signed a record deal with The Babys"

What about the break-up?

John went off to do his thing, and I linked up with Rod (as did Stucker) before working with Air Supply. Humble Pie and Elton John. I was with Rod for 12 years and played with Jeff Beck, Tina Turner, Elton John, Roy Orbison. With Rod, we shared a dressing room – he was one of the boys. We had the biggest laugh, putting chickens and sheep in his bed. He was jumping up and down like a little girl once the chickens started flapping! Then I went

to Australia to produce Jimmy Barnes, who was the first person that AC/DC asked to fill in (before Ad Rose). Then Keith Urban, before he went country. When he hit in the States it was like, "what?" Then I started writing songs for US TV, like *Flipper* and *Baywatch*. I'd love to write soundtracks, as I sang a couple of songs and played piano with The Babys, and I've done 20-minute demos for TV pilots. I've just moved to Atlanta, where they make a lot of TV and films, and I'm building a new studio. I've just written a song with Joe Bonamassa, and we're going to produce the next The Babys album here. People can Pledge and come and record, so off we go.

Rod asked singer John Bisaha (ex-The Nameless) whether there had been a full consensus on the new collection's contents? "Yes. It's all the bits and a few new songs. We play two hours live, so it was just a case of recording the set. I joined in 2014, having done a lot of touring with The Babys, and I've got tapes from when I was a teenager, too, living round the corner from Greg Lake in Poole. We became friends, and Greg was my first producer in Spontaneous Combustion in 1972. Then I went to The Babys, with a Bonham-esque sound. I'd love to play with John Paul Jones, who was seven-eighths metaltron for *Head First*, and our new guitarist, Joey Sykes (ex-Meredith Brooks), is also a good writer, so we did new ones, such as I'll See You There – a great mix of old and new. I've got tapes from when I was a teenager, too, living round the corner from Greg Lake in Poole. We became friends, and Greg was my first producer in Spontaneous Combustion in 1972. 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