

A Life in Pop

Hard as it may be to believe, Supergrass have now clocked up ten years as a venerable British musical institution. As they release a comprehensive 'Best of...' package and contemplate a second decade of perfect pop, Jonathan Wilson hears why the band feel they are only just beginning...

A decade is a long time. Ten years ago, John Major was still Prime Minister, England's national football team was so rubbish they didn't even make it to the 1994 World Cup, Guigsy and Bonehead were still in the burgeoning Oasis, no one had even heard of Britney Spears, and a freshly-if-somewhat-hairy-faced trio from Oxford were releasing their debut single.

A breathless, two-minutes-thirty tale about having your collar felt by the Old Bill while high on marijuana, that debut single, 'Caught By The Fuzz', introduced the world to the devil-may-care delights of Supergrass. Ten years later, they're still a delight, albeit a slightly older and wiser one. As singer Gaz Coombes says:

"A lot can happen in ten years. You can disappear, you can make shit albums, you can have huge drug problems. But I think we've done alright and we've got through some bad times."

Yep, ten years is a long time, especially in the fickle world of popular entertainment, so to reach such a milestone is indeed cause for celebration. And Supergrass are certainly celebrating. With a 'Best Of...' CD, *Supergrass Is 10*, in the shops, along with a two-disc DVD affair telling their story so far, the band have plenty to be excited about.

"I just think there's no better time to have a 'Best Of...' and turn a new page and get on with the next four albums," Coombes affirms. "It hasn't been laughs all the way, but you've got to have those bad times to give it a bit of reality. It's not all big money and girls and drugs."

"It was a bit of a feat for us to get to 10 years," confirms Danny Goffey, the band's effervescent drummer. "It's been a bit of a weird ride, but I think we're quite lucky in staying together and loving each other."

"It's quite a heavy business, quite intense, a lot of pressure," muses Coombes. "But it's always about music. As soon as you write a good song, none of it really matters – it's like, 'That was my purpose.'"

And that's Supergrass, really. One minute they're upbeat, the next they're more pensive –

knockabout singles like 'Pumping On Your Stereo' lining up alongside introspective songs like 'It's Not Me'. But in the end result, it's all good music. So, how does it feel to be looking back?

"It's like a natural anniversary," says Goffey. "We made this film showing what it's been like being in the band for the last ten years, but the record company said we should do a CD as well, so we thought we'd just get a load of stuff out there. There's a few tracks that we really love, like 'Wait For The Sun' and 'Time', that maybe people have forgotten."

"I think it's great that we've done it at this ten-year point, so we can do a huge kind of two-disc thing," agrees Coombes. "We've put a lot of work

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into this DVD. It's got our whole career on two discs – that's why it's pretty special for us."

There's a whole mess of archive Supergrass material crammed onto the discs, ranging from Gaz'n'Danny's pre-Grass days in The Jennifers, via early excursions abroad, up to the recent *Life On Other Planets* album. There's even a proper documentary – a *rockumentary*, if you will.

"Sometimes on DVDs you get behind-the-scenes footage and a documentary that's two minutes long or something. This one took three months to make and it's about an hour and 15 minutes long," Coombes points out. "It's been a lot of fun watching over the old footage. Slightly *Spinal Tap* in places, but that's just being in a band."

"It's a lot of our own footage, like our first American tour, when we were really naïve and wide-eyed," recalls Goffey. "It's generally that kind of vibe throughout. I cringe when I see it."

In typical Supergrass style, though, showbiz glitz and superficial slickness were never particularly high on the agenda.

"It's not too glamorous and jazzed up – it's quite

honest," laughs Goffey, before concluding: "We're acting like twats through most of it."

A SINGULAR ACT

Looking at the tracklisting for the CD, you're reminded of just how many great singles Supergrass have released over the years. With so much material to choose from, spanning four albums, how do the band members regard their musical legacy?

"I guess we're still quite proud of what we've done in the past and we don't want to ignore it," says Mickey Quinn, the band's fig-tree-loving bassist. "Although when people think of Supergrass, they usually drum up an image of us lying on a bed, flying around Portmeirion playing 'Alright'. Artistically, that's kind of a concern. It's like we've been wasting our time for the past eight years. It's just good that we've got the stuff there so we can put people right."

Full of contrasts, *Supergrass Is 10* acts almost as a

centrifugal musical force, primed to send the listener off in different directions track by track – from the raw distorted groove of 'Lose It' to the unhurried vibe of 'Time', the oft-forgotten AA side of 'Alright'. Ten years on, do these songs still thrill the band?

"'Going Out' and 'Alright' feel kind of dated for me," admits Quinn. "But there's stuff like 'Lose It', which came out at the same time as 'Alright', and that feels just as relevant today. 'Wait For The Sun' [the B-side of 'Lenny'] is possibly one of my favourite tracks – it was the first time we'd been in the studio without a producer. I think we had one day to record it and we only had the verse when we walked into the studio. We wrote the whole thing and mixed it, all the overdubs and everything, in one day."

Goffey picks out the recording of 'Lenny' and the unique contribution made by one Jazz Monk: "He was this really weird guy, but he was fucking amazing. We got him to play bongos on 'Lenny'. In the end, he was really good. If you notice halfway through the song, the bongo



beat he's doing reverses. It's quite boring, but it's quite mad, too."

Meanwhile, Rob Coombes – keyboard player, Gaz's older brother and the official fourth 'Grass – understandably recalls the sessions for the second album better, when he joined the band officially.

"I remember recording 'Going Out' very well," he says. "It was the first really intensive session I'd done. There was such a massive feeling of satisfaction to get something down and put it on record. 'Moving' is always a favourite of mine, too. I also love 'Caught By The Fuzz', even though it was written and recorded before I joined the band."

His brother is also a fan of 'Moving', describing it as "probably one of the best songs I've written with the band", although I think 'Run' [from *Life On Other Planets*] is better, because it has more depth. It's all about freshness as well. 'Kiss of Life' is my favourite live at the moment. It's still slightly unknown – the songs we've been playing for ten years, I think we play them really well every time and there's no room for improvement, but in 'Kiss Of Life' there is. That's really exciting."

Coombes Junior also heralds the second album as a watershed period for the young band: "In *It For The Money* was a really big moment, because it was our first go at producing our own record. I think 'Richard the III' was the first one we did on that session and it just came together straight away."

For a band with ten years' worth of songs stashed in its collective kitbag, none of the four seem interested in doing any laurel-resting. Far from it – get 'em onto the subject of new songs and you won't get a word in edgeways. Take the slightly strange, loping funk of 'Kiss Of Life', for instance, the new single being used to promote

Supergrass Is 10. Where did that come from?

"'Kiss Of Life' was completely different before we actually went into the studio," Coombes Senior reveals. "It was only when Mickey started playing this fast bassline and put the really funky rhythm track on that it started to get its own groove. Before that, it still had the same vocal line, but it didn't have the instant make-you-move-your-arse feeling that it's got now. We built up this incredible rhythm track with woodblock, adding little beats, until it had this very different feel."

His brother embellishes the tale: "I started playing the main hook on guitar and everybody started playing along, but it didn't have any focus at all. It almost got to the point where we didn't know what we were doing actually, and suddenly we got on this kind of Talking Heads-inspired percussion vibe, lots of triangle and shakers, and that really took it off to this funk style."

The unflappable Goffey concurs: "Yeah, we just suddenly thought, 'Fuck it, let's take out all these chords.' It was more of a rhythmical approach; we basically built the track up from percussion and drums, rather than playing it live off the floor."

FACING THE FUTURE

So, with new Supergrass songs apparently emerging from unscheduled funk percussion workouts, it sounds like there's no danger of the band running out of ideas just yet. "We all write, so if the vibe's good enough then we'll all get into it," says Goffey, simply.

"I've always been interested in getting really good sounds," Coombes says of the recording process. "Half of it's the song and the other half for me is creating the sounds and building on it. I

really enjoy that. And if you make any mistakes, you get brilliant sounds. I love that kind of unprofessional vibe."

So what sort of gear works its magic *chez* Coombes?

"Basically, I've got old amps and old guitars. I like miking them up in an interesting way and getting unorthodox sounds. I think for our next album we [might] want to engineer as well. I'm really interested in miking up the gear. I just feel that professional engineers will put the snare mic where they've always put it. I want to put it in the wrong place!"

The whole *Supergrass Is 10* project seems to be drawing a line under a lot of the old songs, with the band's focus firmly on the next album.

"You've just released all the stuff you've done before and people don't really want to hear that again," says Quinn. "The next album we do can be more leftfield and more adventurous. This is just an interruption to normal service for us."

Gaz concurs: "We're a young band and we've got new ideas. You just have to keep believing in the music and not get despondent that you're maybe last year's news. Which often we are and, fuck it, I don't mind if we are. It's as enjoyable as it's always been because the essence of it has never changed – the enjoyment of music. We're just really up for it. There's nothing else I want to do. Even if people download it off the fucking internet, as long as we can make the next record, I'm happy."

That's Supergrass in a nutshell. To quote the slightly tongue-in-cheek lyrics of 'Seen The Light', he's a "rock'n'roll singer in a rock'n'roll band". That's all... but that's plenty. The music is everything. Happy birthday, Supergrass.



Heaven and L

When Supergrass decided to slot an acoustic set into their 10th anniversary tour in May, Gaz's love for his Yamaha LA8 made the latest L-Series Handcrafted guitars from Yamaha the obvious choice. The tour will see him using a pair of brand new LLX6 electro-acoustics to cover the various different tunings required for the set. In fact, the L-Series guitars are so new the Supergrass tour will be the first time that anyone has used them in the UK. Yamaha's new L-Series Handcrafted Acoustic Guitars are available now, priced from £439-£2,499.