

“brassneck”

"what's it all about, mouthy ?"

ben owens - vocals, guitar
kat milner - vocals, violin
sid stovold - guitar
neil smith - bass, vocals
mark darrah – drums

“Four blokes and a posh bird from Farleigh Wallop”

Interviewed March 2009



Sid Stovold has a background set firmly in the world of fanzines, a bit like ourselves really, having run Pop Art fanzine among others and is a record collector without shame. Sid also tasted a slice of fame and infamy not to mention 2 Peel Sessions, as part of Inter, a band about whom it was apparently said:

"ahead of the nouveau teen-punk pack" – NME

"happy ending" - the best pop song in the last 30 years" - John Peel

"cheeky young whippersnappers!" - Gary Crowley

"the kings of the catchy cheesy chorus" - Melody Maker

"..highlights included a spiky, joking, flat-out pop set from Farnborough's Inter" - Steve Lamacq

When Inter broke up Sid spent time in a project called wherewithall but during an album building hiatus found he needed another outlet for his lyrics and so Brassneck was born, 4 blokes and a posh bird from Farleigh Wallop. We met on their tour bus en route to yet another gig in yet another town, no we didn't but I said I'd put that if they agreed to the interview:

Big Untidy: According to something I read somewhere Brassneck are committed to “the furtherance of popular music” – how do you think you're doing so far?

Ben - Not too bad. We're still finding our way but we're going in the right direction. We could do with a musical sat-nav though - sometimes we wander off track a little bit.

Neil - Since our first gig in January 08, popular music has been furthered by approximately 4.7 nautical miles. And the song writing and performance continues to advance apace. This time next year, Rodney...

Kat - Are we? Who on earth told you that? I was entirely convinced that the purpose of Brassneck was to make Ben cry. We'll have to cancel 'Pick on Ben day' and organise a 'furtherance of popular music' day instead. Damn it.

Mark - That's certainly the case, it's just that, so far, we've only found the music element, just about; we are working on the popular bit.

Sid - Pretty good, we're not going to be a fly-by-night band, there has to be some longevity in it so we're building things up slowly, bit by bit, it's going well so far.



Big Untidy: The band seems to have originally come together as a vehicle for Sid's lyrics?

Ben - Only in Sid's mind. The tunes are what's important!

Neil - Since we came together that vehicle has had a snazzy new paint job, been lowered, stretched and converted to run on nitrous oxide. Now, if only we could afford the insurance...

Kat - I thought he just came up with unfeasibly long song titles and then the rest of us made it up as we went along.

Mark - Words schmurds! No seriously, they are the genius of a disturbed man, we don't ask questions

Sid - Without the quality tunes from Ben and Neil they would just be ramblings written on scraps of paper. Having quality tunes with them is what makes us stand out in my opinion; all the great song writing duos had good wordsmiths and good tunesmiths together - Lennon/McCartney, Morrissey/Marr, Heaton/Rotheray, Difford/Tillbrook, Strummer/Jones etc

Big Untidy - What comes first then Sid, the tune or the words?

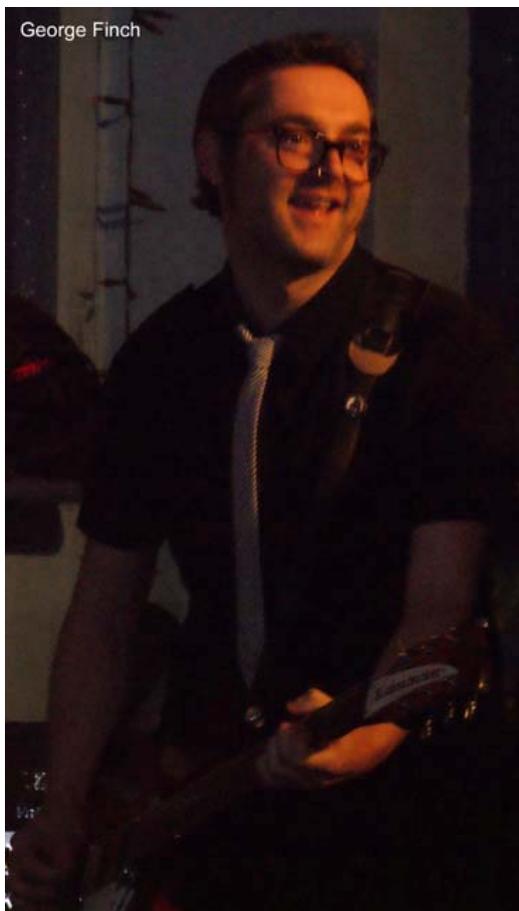
Sid - Well, we kinda write separately, I'm always writing words, Ben and Neil are always writing tunes. When we rehearse we just jam out new tunes and Ben puts melodies over the top of them with any lyrics that I happen to have lying around at that point in time.

Big Untidy- so what happens with the words once you're happy with them? Are you happy to stand back and watch the band play with the concept?

Sid – I'm happy just to stand back and let the guys bash out the tunes and arrangements. I can write tunes myself but they're very sporadic and I know that Ben and Neil can write amazing melodies and tunes so I'm just happy for them to get on with it.

Big Untidy – The lyrics are also quite personal; do you have no problems baring your soul for your band mates?

Sid - Yes, the words are quite personal to me but I don't have any problem baring my soul to the world, let alone my band mates. I'd like to think that people would hear my stuff and say "you know what, I feel like that too" or "yeah, that happens to me as well" so the words suddenly don't seem personal in that way



Big Untidy - Do you write blank verse? Some of your structures seem 'unusual' from a traditional lyric sense.

Sid - It just tends to pour out of me on occasions, sometimes it can be structured and rhyming, sometimes it's just prose. There's no real way of telling. It probably depends on how much I've had to drink!

Big Untidy – Were you writing previous to Brassneck?

Ben - Yes, but now he can do joined-up writing.

Kat - I'm sure he was, but if he told us about it then we weren't listening!

Mark - He never stops, we just can't keep up with him in writing songs that they fit to.

Sid – Yes, I was, but not being completely gifted in the musical department it's all I can really do. It's nice now to have the full understanding and backing from the rest of the band though, previously nobody took my work seriously.

Big Untidy- Do you write other than Brassneck lyrics

Sid – I have had some of my poetry published in books and I do occasionally do public recitals but right now anything I write gets thrown at Ben and Neil to see if they can use them for tunes. If they can't then they just sit in my folder at home. Ideally one day I'd like to publish them all in a book, but that's me living in dream world.

Big Untidy – Ben, Mark and Sid seem to have known each other from other bands – was this gigging bands or mates bands or what?

Ben - I was in Wicksteed. A rubbish band with some good tunes, crap lyrics and a devilishly handsome front man. I became friends with Sid through meeting him at gigs.

Neil - They were all in a short-lived boy band in the early 90s, 'Westzonelifeboy That'. Unfortunately they were shut down by environmental health officers following a disastrous collaboration with Elton John, a large tub of Swarfega and a rollmop herring. Litigation continues to this day.

Kat - I suspect they met round the back of Farleigh Wallop Town Hall after the auditions for the boy band preceding 'Westlifeboy That' but whenever one attempts to probe deeper into that particular tale they blush and run away with their hands over their bottoms. They were all unsuccessful at the auditions....

Mark - Hang on a minute you're both wrong, we were successful at those auditions, it's just that when me and Ben saw the rest of the boy-band we bailed and started our own projects.

Big Untidy – Sid, I've heard nice things about your earlier bands.

Sid – Ha ha, they were good days. I can look back at everything I've achieved playing in bands with real fondness. There's not too many people who play in bands can say they've had record deals, made a living from music for 3 years, toured Europe 3 times, recorded 2 John Peel Sessions and all the other fun stuff I've done previously. I just want to keep going. Music is my life.

Big Untidy - The suggestion that the three of you met Neil and Kat "on the internet" is intriguing – tell me more.

Ben - They advertised on musician sites. Neil had a photo of himself posing with his bass in front of his washing machine. It was a nice washing machine - very eco-friendly and efficient - that's what got him in the band. Kat didn't have a photo, but our choice was limited to her and a nutter woman who had lots of (scantily clad) pictures on her advert and obviously no musical talent at all. It was a close call.

Neil – We were downloaded by accident from a Russian file sharing website by Ben. He was under the impression he was getting the underground 'art' movie, 'Lady Katherine Does Farleigh Wallop'. When he discovered his mistake he thought he'd make the best of it by putting us in the band.

Kat - It was very squashy crawling down the cables. I'm truly thankful that Ben doesn't have wireless.

Mark - It all happened when I was on holiday, I came back and all of a sudden Sid & Ben had brought 2 musicians online at www.wearetheonlytalentedonesinthisband.com

Sid – Yeah, when looking around to complete the line-up I drummed it in to Ben and Mark that personality is one of the key elements, so when Neil sent the picture in front of the washing machine and Kat arrived for her audition in a nice pair of boots we knew they were right for the band.

Big Untidy – Well, I actually see your point cos ultimately you've got to be able to spend time with these people first and foremost.

Sid – Absolutely, we're very busy but we still have such fun whether it's recording, photo shoots, acoustic gigs, electric gigs. We're all completely on the same wavelength which is amazing. I'm sure we'd do more if we could; we even go out to watch other bands together.

Big Untidy – So, then, Farleigh Wallop – fact or fiction? Animal vegetable or mineral?

Ben - Utter fiction. I got tired of saying we were from Oakley, Farnborough, Aldershot and Slough. I just made it up at a gig one night and people seemed to find it funny - so we kept it. It's only a couple of miles from where I live but there's nothing there - not even a pub.

Neil - Mainly friction between animal and vegetable as in 'Lady Katherine Does Farleigh Wallop'.

Kat - Fact. Vegetable. I have no idea why.

Mark – Fact, yes really Fact.

Sid – It's in the Nether Wallop regions.

Big Untidy - What determined your "play anywhere that'll have us" policy?

Ben - We enjoy gigging and the out of the way country pubs, that cool bands avoid like the plague, are where you meet the nice and interesting people.



Big Untidy - And maybe the nice and interesting bands too?

Sid – For sure, I've always wanted to get little 'scenes' going where we play regular gigs with similar, like-minded bands and the only way we're meeting them is through gigging in far and wide different places. It's working too. Several other bands are becoming real friends now.

Neil - We're actually heavily influenced by 'The Goodies' and their philosophy, anything, anywhere, anytime. We'll shortly be investing in a 5-seat bicycle, called a 'quindem'. Or that might be a name for part of the female anatomy?

Kat - It follows on from Sid's approach to the laideees

Mark - I just come along for the fun of it, I used to be a roadie but now I've been demoted to the drummer.

Sid – Well, you know what they say, you'll never be a prophet in your home town.

Big Untidy - Has it been hard to get so many gigs?

Ben - No - Sid does it all.

Mark – That's Sid's talent as a promoter!

Neil - It's harder to get out of them.

Kat - Some are really small.

Sid – Not really, we got a pretty decent response to our first EP when we put it out and nowadays not a day goes by without us getting offered something or other thorough Myspace or something. We don't complain though, we like gigging, if we can do the gig we will, if we can't we have to politely decline.

Big Untidy - I know you've started recording the second EP, Remind me again what the schedule is for that?

Sid – we have another couple of recording sessions booked and then it should all be done. So, we'll press some CD's up and be ready to send them out and give them away at gigs by May sometime I would say.

Big Untidy - Did the look or image of the band come early in your gigging career?

Ben - Yes, we decided we needed to look like a band. It's what I wear for work with the addition of a skinny tie so it's not exactly much effort.

Big Untidy - Which do you prefer – look or image?

Neil - Personally, I prefer to look.

Kat - Sid is undeniably the only member of Brassneck with an 'image' the rest of us just have clothes.

Mark - I agree with Kat.

Sid – I think a band just has to look like a band, so people can relate to you in that way as well, "Oh, Brassneck, I like them, they always wear shirts and ties"

Big Untidy – I have a theory that programmes like X Factor and even the bright and shiny days of TOTP have led audiences to expect musicians to look like 'that' even in out the way country pubs unlike the good old days when a pair of trainers a t shirt and some jeans was enough.

Kat - They look like what on X Factor? I thought they all wore what they were told, and for girlies that's generally a very sparkly revealing top, and for boys anything deemed to be 'cool'. We aren't cool, and cover that up with our uniform, which I am exempt from wearing. I generally just wear a very short skirt in the hopes people will look at my legs instead of listening to my playing!

Big Untidy - How important are networking sites like twitter facebook and myspace?

Ben - I don't think they work as a way of getting fans - that only comes through gigs. Myspace in an excellent place for networking with other bands and promoters. Not sure that we get much from facebook. We've just started with Twitter so we'll have to wait and see.

Neil - We're new to Twitter but you can follow us at www.twitter.com/brassneckband

Kat - They're hours of fun. They do seriously get in the way of my course work though! Hang on, is there any danger my dissertation supervisor will read this? If there is then the delay in my work is still due to the trauma of my rabbit... He won't? Then my first answer.

Mark - Rabbit?



Sid – Those sites are very important; people can find out when you're playing at the click of a mouse etc, but it's still really gigging, getting out there and meeting people, striking up relationships, of sorts, that will gain us fans and friends.

Big Untidy - How do you then keep hold of those fans and friends? Do you collect e-mail addresses for mail outs and the like?

Kat- We send them monthly issues of the Farleigh Wallop Gazette. We advise caution if reading in public, frequent outbursts of hysterical laughter may cause accusations of insanity....

Big Untidy - The gig blog diary you post at those sites though is a neat idea – how did that come about?

Ben - It was something that Sid and I had been thinking about for a while when reminiscing about old gigs. After a particularly mental gig in Newbury we thought it would be good to get it all down for posterity – it's now part of our routine.

Neil - We like to give something back to our adoring public. A little glimpse into our superstar lifestyle to give them a moment's respite from their humdrum existence. We're kind and generous like that.

Kat - Neil wins. That is the best answer.

Mark – I've been in bands before but could I tell you about half the things we did? So as well as the fans it also lets us remember what the hell we did and who we met on the way.

Sid – As Ben said, we wanted to get down every thing that happens for posterity, being a regular gigging band we do encounter some disturbing things along the way and as Mark said you just forget all about them unless you put it down.

Big Untidy - Disturbing things at gigs? Elucidate please?

Kat- Well there have been too many to mention really, just go over to www.myspace.com/brassneckpop and all our blogs are there for your perusal.

Big Untidy - You describe Brassneck as "Quintessentially English" highlighting the ability to take the mickey out of yourselves as a key factor, what else is quintessentially English and are those same qualities also quintessentially Brassneck?

Ben - I have no idea - ask Sid. Is passing the buck quintessentially English?

Neil - Rich Tea biscuits, Earl Grey tea and dogging. Yes, these are also quintessentially Brassneck

Kat - We are English. Is that quintessential enough? Oh, and we spent the quiet time in between our recording duties doing the Times crossword. In a Bowler hat. Whilst saying What what? A lot. I think that covers it?

Mark - Hey, don't forget the 'Carry on!'

Big Untidy - Oh yeah - what's your favourite Carry On? Who would play who in Carry On Brassneck?

Sid - Carry On Abroad. Carry On Brassneck would be amazing wouldn't it? I can see it now. Charles Hawtrey as me, Jim Dale as Mark, Kenneth Williams as Neil, Sid James as Ben and Barbara Windsor as Kat. What do you mean half of them are dead?

Kat - My favourite carry on is a lovely brown bag, with padded straps. It is nice and spacious and fits in their silly little size checker at the departure gate perfectly. And it has pretty pink flowers. That's an odd question!!!

Sid - I think it's all quintessentially English around Brassneck; the ability to laugh at ourselves has to be the main one though.

Big Untidy - It's a strong and laudable quality for sure. Talking of "Quintessentially English" there's the merest trace of Ray Davies about your song "Sensitive but a bit of a wrong un" but even the merest trace is cause for further attention and you quote good English bands such as The Beautiful South, The Smiths, The Beatles, The Pretenders, and Squeeze as influences. What's your favourite track by each of them?

Ben - The Beautiful South - 'I'll Sail this Ship Alone', The Beatles, this changes everyday but I'll say 'Back In the USSR' today, The Pretenders - 'Brass in Pocket', Squeeze - 'Up the junction'.

Mark - Hmm probably could only say The Smiths "There is a light that never goes out" and The Beatles "Ticket to ride".

Sid - The Beautiful South - Let Love Speak Up Itself, The Smiths - These Things Take Time, The Beatles - In My Life, The Pretenders - 2000 Miles and Squeeze - Labelled With Love

Neil - These aren't my specific influences, so I'm going for five of my own quintessentially English influential tracks: XTC - Towers of London, Nick Drake - Pink Moon, Robert Wyatt - Shipbuilding, Ian Dury & The Blockheads - Wake Up And Make Love To Me, The Pink Floyd (Syd Barrett era) - Astronomy Domine. I was raised on The Beatles and 60s Motown. Since then I've gone through prog rock (early Genesis, Yes, Pink Floyd, King Crimson), the intelligent end of punk/new wave (XTC in particular are still a huge influence on me), various 'art' rock experimental things, Britpop and beyond. Still keeping my ears open to new things. There's so much, old and new to be discovered. Currently enthralled by the output of Sunderland band, Field Music and their various offshoots, and artists from The Fence Collective. And if you're talking about bass players, the biggest influences I'd cite would be: James Jamerson (Motown, Funk Brothers), late Beatles era Paul McCartney, John Entwistle (The Who), Norman Watt-Roy (The Blockheads), Bruce Thomas (The Attractions), Tony Levin (plays with Peter Gabriel and later King Crimson amongst others)

Kat - I quite like the Beatles, but as I don't write the tunes I don't think that counts. Who are Squeeze and why did they let Jools Holland out?

Big Untidy - So what's your musical influences and what do you listen to then?

Kat - I listen to all sorts really, but I do love the likes of Beth Orton, Tori Amos, Emmy the Great etc, but am also a big fan of noisy boy music... Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Offspring, Nirvana. I am not averse to a little folk rock in the Levellers and the Wonderstuff and the like.



Big Untidy - Is there any trace of folk music about Brassneck?

Kat - If there is it is entirely accidental. I'm nowhere near clever enough to play folk fiddle. That and I don't think I could take the innuendo of being a fiddler, however Ben is a bit of a fiddler....

Ben - We found some once but eliminated it straight away.

Neil - There has recently been some furtive passing around of Fairport Convention albums, but there's not much folk in Brassneck's music. Fol-de-rol and a hey nonny nonny.

Mark - It's just the violin assumption.

Big Untidy - To be fair it's kind of a trick question cos there's a constantly smouldering controversy that good pop music is folk music anyway and the fol de rol, stick yer finger in yer ear, mob can shove off and find a dusty museum to hide in.

Neil - OK, I admit it, I own three Fairport Convention albums I've been to the Cambridge Folk Festival. Twice! There's something to be had from almost all musical genres, and 'folk' covers a huge area. It would be daft to ignore it. And yeah, what 'is' folk anyway?

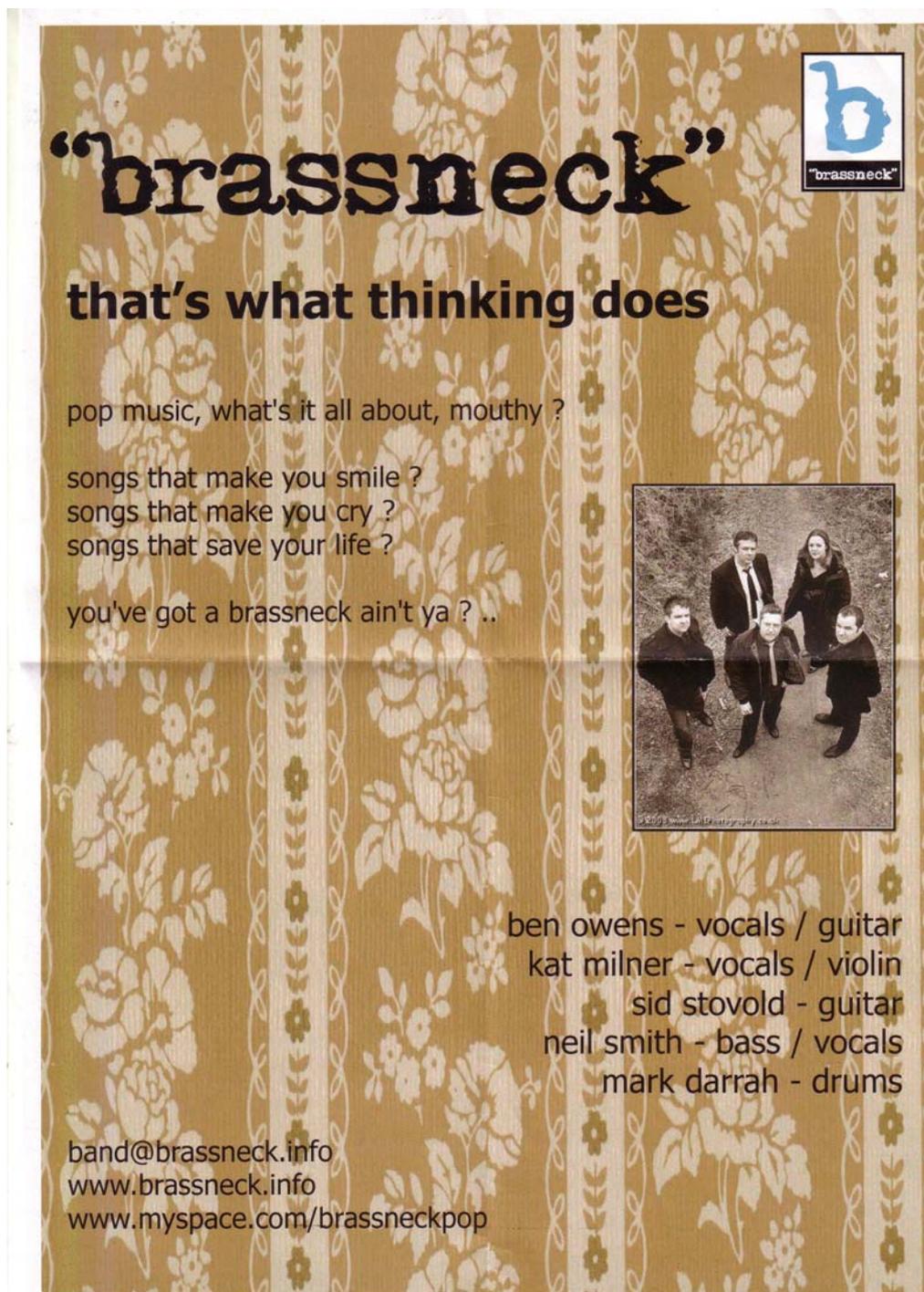
Kat - It really depends what your definition of folk is. If it's 'traditional' then I suspect the two aren't interchangeable. If, however, it's 'music of the people', then whatever is popular at the particular time is folk. Sadly, folk music is generally associated with the purist folk revival clubs, where one must play exactly the way it's always been played. In that context there is no way we have even a hint of folk in our music.

Big Untidy - So what next for Brassneck? Recording then more gigs then what? Is there a plan or are the fates allowed a say in things?

Sid - There isn't really a plan. Just to keep improving. Better songs, better recordings, I can't wait to get the new EP out there, better gigs. Just keep moving forward, that's it really. Everything else can happen as it happens. We just have to keep bettering ourselves and enjoying what we do.

www.brassneck.info

Thanks to George Finch for the additional photos, all taken at Big Untidy Night Out November 2008



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that’s what thinking does

pop music, what's it all about, mouthy ?
songs that make you smile ?
songs that make you cry ?
songs that save your life ?
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