

DOWN

Down. The very word conjures memories of cheap narcotics, half-empty venues, no money and dodgy roadies. My previous band Baby Glass called it a day in the autumn of 1993, but come December myself, Darren Millburn (drums) and Rob Gladman (bass) had got back together and started a “new” band. I still recall having our first rehearsal in the back room of the Hop Pole - it sticks in my mind not because we played like Gods (although I imagine we probably did), but simply because some stranger walked in mid-song, watched for a minute and then started carefully changing the settings on my amp before disappearing again, his mission complete. Presuming, that is, that his mission was to make my guitar sound even more fucking awful than it already did.



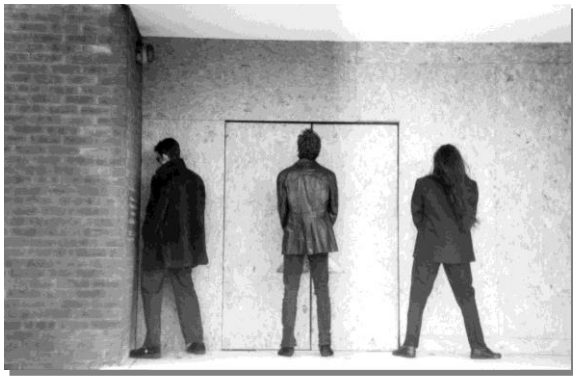
We did a few gigs early in 1994, all with different bass players. Rob left after the first gig - wise man - and Matthew Warner (former Baby Glass guitarist!) stepped in for the second show a week later. My flatmate Pete Rowe then joined us for the next show, at Rycote Wood Farmer's College in Thame. This made things a little tricky, as Pete was simply not of our calibre, musically. He was way too good, making Darren and myself look even worse than we actually were. Still, we did get a review of the gig in the Bucks Herald... “Phil made the error of making the odd dig at

his farming audience - this did not endear the band to the punters at all”. Indeed, but we thought we were pretty funny.

There was a reason for the numerous bass players, something along the lines of “fucking hell, just get anyone in to play bass that isn't Phil Swan”. It wasn't that we didn't like Phil - he was our best mate - it was just that we'd already kicked him out of Baby Glass for being a bit crap. But fate is inexorable, and once we resigned to this fact and finally gave him the job in the summer, things actually worked out quite nicely. Checking the historical documents in the Downeum now, it appears that this line-up, which I think of as the only proper Down line-up, was together for less than a year. It felt like a LOT longer.



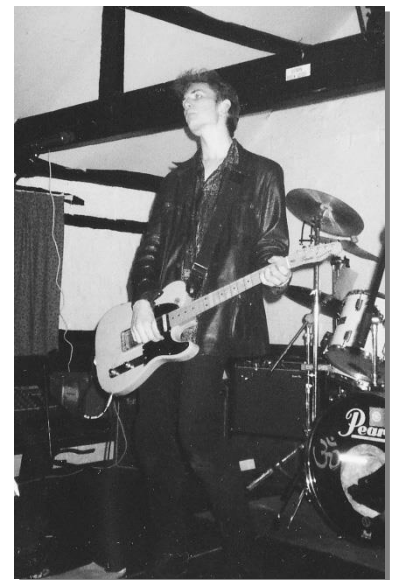
We didn't really settle on the “Down sound” (downd?) until Phil joined, when we settled into a comfy groove of raw, somewhat depressing punkish enthusiasm inspired by The Only Ones, The Heartbreakers and Pete Rowe's band Afro. Darren and I went to any number of Afro gigs, ostensibly to throw abuse at Pete and Reece, but really to rip off all their ideas and moves. Despite our musical shortcomings, we did put a lot of work into the dynamics of our arrangements and listening to them now I'm quite proud of most the songs. Although perhaps not all of them.



Darren and I were sharing a shitty, cold, run-down flat in Aylesbury's Jansel Square, The flat was above a newsagents, and when we moved in and connected the phone we started getting irate phone calls from people wanting to know where their newspaper was. I chiefly remember the constant struggle to keep enough credit in the electricity meter, and the heavy metal neighbours that kept us up all the time. Bastards. We even had a band cat, Gripper.

Despite living together, I'm pretty sure we never actually rehearsed in the flat. Apart from sitting alone in my room writing future Down classics, I don't think we even worked on the music there at all. Which, looking back, was probably a poor decision. What we did work hard at - really, really hard at - was smoking hash, watching Eastenders and Bottom, eating hash cakes, drinking beer, watching Goodnight Sweetheart, playing Playstation, smoking cones and getting discarded food out of the bin around the back of Budgens. And we got really good at it. Lesson to be learned.

Since the band had started, I'd had to endure the horrible reality of getting a proper job, with wages and everything. However after a while at work I managed to get the use of the Bearing Traders warehouse for rehearsals, free, pretty much whenever we wanted it. Which actually wasn't more than once a week, maximum (see above). But it was a massive upgrade from the Aylesbury Multicultural Centre and that bloody staircase. We could even store the PA there. I don't know what I thought at the time, but looking back this was an incredibly lucky situation for a band. Which we made the most of in the only way we knew how - by sitting at my desk playing golf on the computer and occasionally doing a bit of rehearsing. A rehearsal that didn't somehow incorporate a full 18 holes was not really a proper rehearsal. Later, in case we hadn't been lucky enough, we also started rehearsing for free at Route Signs, just around the corner, where Phil worked. They made road signs there, which had its plus points, but the acoustics were terrible. And they didn't have golf.



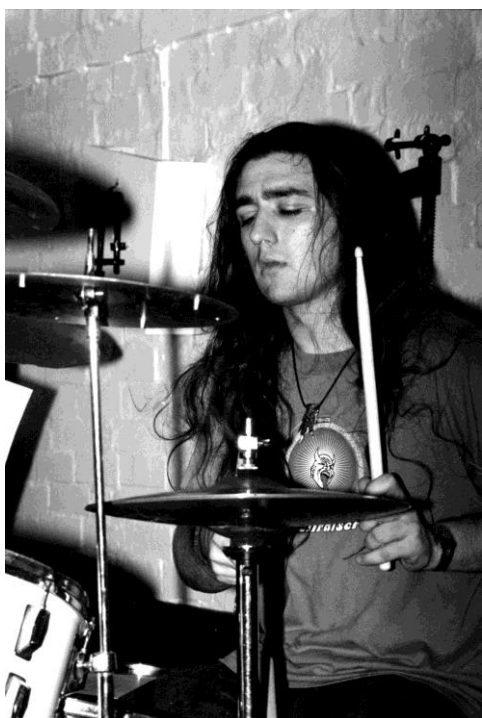
Another benefit of my job, was working with a chap named Paul Gallacher, a rockabilly guitarist with a mighty quiff who owned his own PA (a good one - ours was... not a good one) and a basic portable studio setup. As I write this, I'm realising that I used up most of my musical good luck while in Down and never even realised I had it at the time.



Anyway, Paul recorded a couple of live sessions (for free, of course!) in the Bearing Traders warehouse, which of course became the cleverly named cult classics Bearing Traders Sessions 1 and Bearing Traders Sessions 2. Pretty basic affairs, and you can hear the results on the CD. We used a 4 track tape machine and an 8 track mixer to enable a few more mics on the kit. If nothing else, they do sound like what we sounded like. The first session late in '94 captured 6 songs, then 8 more a few months later in '95.

Between September '94 and May '95, the three of us toured relentlessly, amassing no less than ten shows in this period. We did shows in Aylesbury, High Wycombe, Reading. Wow, that was it? Only three towns were graced with Down, and fittingly they are three pretty shitty towns. Going all the way to Reading was a particular adventure, although a note in the Downeum states that I was "hopelessly ill before the gig and spent an age in the bogs doing a seriously arse-aching big poo. Good gig though". We did our first headline show at Aylesbury's Buckingham Arms, which was notable for being the show when we started bringing Billy along with us. Probably not helping the cause, as we had no need for extra energy and certainly no need of performance unenhancing drugs. Quite the opposite in fact. Then again, that depends on what the cause was.

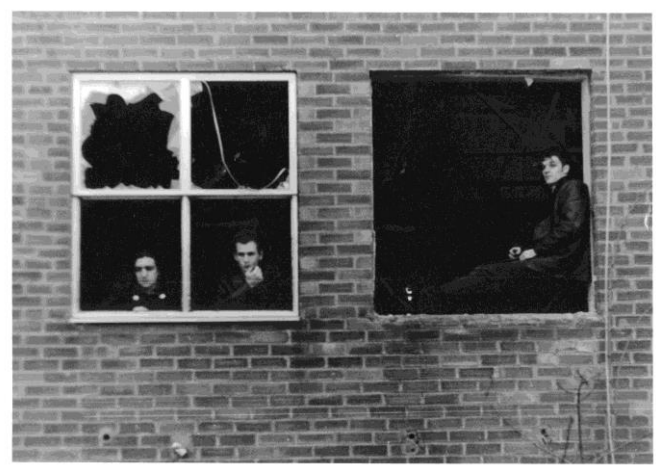
There was a fun show at the Hop Pole in Aylesbury in January '95, when we were faced with the terrifying prospect of playing two forty minute sets as the headline act had pulled out. That sounds like quite an easy ask really, but our usual set was thirty minutes, forty at a push. Also it meant that we couldn't leave until later, thus missing Rocky 3 on the telly that night. We coped remarkably well (well, we'd seen Rocky 3 before of course) and the second set featured Baby Glass favourite She's Gone Again and an extended version of This Town with a badly improvised break down in the middle. And of course one of the most famous guest appearances Aylesbury has ever known, when Afro singer Reece jumped (jumped, or reluctantly slunk?) up on stage to join us for a rendition of Afro's Chip Shop. It should have been so good - we knew the song and had played it many times at rehearsal. But for some reason, instead of just asking Reece to sing it, I gave him my guitar too, leaving me with nothing to do. So naturally I threw Phil off stage and played the bass myself. Two problems immediately presented themselves; firstly I had no idea how to play the bass line, and secondly Reece played the song properly rather than the sloppy approximation that we knew. And so it went. Still, we got paid forty quid for the show, a Down record. I found out years later from Reece that he'd actually been rather sick that night, so he had been really grateful for the impromptu invite to join us.



There was another couple of cracking gigs after this at The Hop Pole and at The Roundabout in High Wycombe. We were looking forward to another headline show at the Buckingham Arms, had been busy (really!) putting up posters and getting some articles in the Bucks Herald (like the NME, but cooler) and releasing our fanzine - Downzine if you will - "Trust Me I'm a Stomach", a genuine literary treasure filled with all the latest news and gossip from Down HQ. We were expecting a big crowd for the gig... and arrived at the venue to find that the band booker Roger had cancelled the show with them. Roger, being the cunt that he was, decided not to let us know, and we couldn't contact him because he'd bugged off to the football for the day and wasn't coming back. We arranged a free show at the end of March to make up for it, and it was well attended, but we played crap - or in Darren's words at the time, "It has been a nightmare to sort this one out and we played like complete shit - especially Phil Dean".

And so it began to fall apart. Phil Swan was getting increasingly involved in dodgy pyramid-selling scheme Amway (cleaning products and such, not actual pyramids - he'd had enough of those in Egypt) and missing rehearsals, but there was no telling him. Somewhat disheartened, we mulled over the possibility of replacing Phil, which we really didn't want to do. We did a couple more shows with Phil including an appearance at the White Horse in Wycombe to a bunch of heavy metal kids, memorable for trashing our gear not once but twice; firstly at the end of the set, and secondly when we didn't shut the van door properly and Darren's drums started tumbling out onto the A40 as we drove off. I don't recall the exact circumstances, but in the end we sat down and sacked Phil in June. Amicably enough I think, and in fairness to Phil, his prospects with Amway were still probably better than with Down.

So with Phil Swan demoted to roadie (a role he performed with some aplomb), we recruited ex-Sabre legend Barry Taylor on bass (he also went on to play with me in my next band The Debutantes). We'd known Barry for years, and he was a very solid bass player. Although he didn't own a bass or an amp. Luckily we knew a chap that did, so we borrowed Phil's bass gear (I have a vague recollection that at this time Phil and Barry were actually sharing a flat.) And then finally I achieved my lifelong dream of having a keyboard player in the band to add some Doors-



esque organ sounds to the mix. John DeSimone, who I'd known since school, agreed to join. Although he didn't own a keyboard or an amp. He was bloody good though. John won us over initially by playing the Flash Gordon theme and Ozzy Osbourne's Mr Crowley on a friend's piano. I have sadly no idea what happened to him, which is a shame as he was great company. We announced the new line up with a second and final edition of TMIAS, this time an 8-page bumper issue.

We only did two shows with Barry and John, one of which is featured in full on the DVD. The additional skills they brought to the songs really made a difference and I'm surprised now at how good we were beginning to sound. Relatively speaking. Again, from the Downeum - "Down may look like a skinny drug addict, a portly drug addict and two fat session musicians but finally they begin to sound pretty good". The second show, the "Gig in the Garden" in Aston Clinton's Bull's Head pub garden was an all-day event that we were scheduled to open early in the afternoon. Fittingly, it rained most of the morning, stopped long enough for us to load the gear in, set up and start playing, and then pissed it down again. It would be unfair to suggest we'd have had a mighty host of fans



dancing and singing if it weren't for the rain, but it did mean everyone bar our mate Max (the guy who filmed the gig) fucked off inside the nice dry pub. At least the stage had a roof, which meant that the hash cakes Darren handed out around the stage mid-set stayed dry, so it wasn't all bad. We played a brand new song Don't Forget Me, and we were going to play another new track called Same Old Story but - to my eternal chagrin - I dropped it from the set after everybody went inside, and as a result have no recording of what was my favourite Down song. But it was a memorable gig, which turned out to be our last.

John was never going to be a permanent addition to the band, Barry's commitment was only marginally better and Darren and I had pretty much had enough at this point. We had a couple more rehearsals and actually booked into a studio with plans to record a single, but a few weeks after the gig I split up with my girlfriend Karen, who I was with when I started the band and I think at that point I thought fuck it, and ended the band too. I can't really remember, possibly the pain of ending the band was so great that I have deleted the



events from my memory bank. Ironically Phil moved into the flat with us shortly after this. I think if we'd just had a break for a couple of months and stuck at it we'd have come back better and stronger, but in the end it would be another year before I attempted to get another band together (a short-lived unnamed project with Barry on bass, future Debutante Ian Studd on drums (another I worked with at Bearing Traders), guitarist Mark Adams and the late Carol Turner on piano).

Down's legacy lives on, and it's been really fun putting this package together twenty years after it began. Although when I started it was more like fifteen years. Of all my old bands Baby Glass sticks with me as my first proper band, The Debutantes because we were actually really good, and Down offers neither of those things. But I reckon I probably had more fun in this band than any other, and would like to have played more music with Darren. He was a much better drummer than I ever gave him credit for at the time, and Down were a much better band than we both thought at the time. If I ever move home to England, one of the first things I'll try and do is arrange a jam with Darren and Phil to give the old tunes another play. But only if there's nothing on telly.

Phil Dean, Melbourne 2014

