

# WEIGHING UP THE MIGHTY BABY: MARTIN STONE TALKS TO THE TERRASCOPE'S BRIAN HINTON



*e interviewed Martin Stone at the Bloomsbury flat of his friend Alex Brocci, whose Atlas Press translates obscure French surrealist texts into English. There has always been something otherworldly about Stone, and here he was — a slight figure in his trademark black beret fully at home in a room whose every crevice was crammed with rare books. The last of the true Bohemians.*

*As the wine and cigarettes flowed, he relaxed into the extraordinary history of a life devoted to music and his search for wisdom. Martin's artistic career has taken him from the early blues boom, through soul and free-wheeling psychedelia and back to basics. As we talked, he would excitedly find a song on the (unique) cassette of his forthcoming CD, warm and friendly music, embroidered with guitar breaks like sheet lightning.*

*Stone himself was on a lightning visit over from Paris, and tracking him down took on the nature of an Iain Sinclair novel: lots of false leads, near misses, strange coincidences. It seemed appropriate to walk up from Tottenham Court Road tube station to meet him, past Swedenborg's house and a Hawksmoor church. Our actual first meeting had been on film, for Channel 4's 'The Cardinal And The Corpse' in which Stone starred as a kind of wizard, sniffing out rare bibliographies, and I was typecast as some kind of weird scholar...*

*I was amazed then, as now, by the sharpness of Stone's memory, his wit, the depth of*

*his knowledge and his total lack of any kind of pretension or self-importance.*

*The words hereafter are Martin Stone's own.*

I was born in Wokingham in Surrey, and my mother's side of the family were Welsh. I used to go to this third-rate posh school (John Whitgifts) — I was a little swot and I got moved into the year above me with the 'big boys'. I noticed they were different somehow, they wore very pointy shoes with three buckles on the side and smoked cigarettes behind the tuck shop in the lunch break. I was playing Shadows tunes in my first group and getting beaten up at Young Conservatives dances at Dulwich when dreadful pill-popping oiks did a major gate-crash. My classmates were not impressed with this — they were exchanging Thelonious Monk EPs, Blue Note singles and wine-stained Samuel Beckett plays — I was this 'mod jerk'. I got in with them somehow and started going to folk clubs: Davey Graham, John Renbourn, girls with big jumpers and funny make-up, but I was also going down the 'Loc' every Monday. Monday night at the Locarno Ballroom, Streatham High Road: Tamla, bluebeat, Shirley & Lee and finally Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker and Bo Diddley. I didn't feel inferior at school any more, I could play 'Pretty Thing' and I owned a Telecaster. At this point I saw a black Les Paul at a junk shop in Peckham for £25.00. I asked my dad to lend me the money — he said, "You've already got one guitar, how many can you play at once?" I still miss that

Les Paul. My friends in the Shadows-type group The Swinging Pendulums didn't seem to want to go much further than the occasional Beatles of Searchers cover, so I started checking the Melody Maker classifieds in early '64 and turned up at an audition at a scout hall in Kennington. Somebody wanted an r'n'b guitarist and they got about a hundred. The group were dire beyond belief, but next in line to me was this amusing fellow called Philip Lithman, later Snakefinger and now of course sadly dead. He said, "OK, you're better than me but I bet you can't sing!", and I said "No". So we left the scout hut and formed Juniors Blues. Around this time I left school and went to work as a junior reporter at the Croydon Advertiser. It was hell. I wanted to be Muddy Waters and have all these "women standing in line"; instead I was covering the Women's Institute Donkey Derby for seven quid a week, and Juniors Blues had no gigs.

My apprenticeship in the folk and jazz clubs during school days had already set me down the road to dope depravity and I spent a lot of time in Atlantic Road, Brixton scoring weed and hash. At that time white boys who liked to smoke were quite rare on the ground and we were known generically in the West Indian scene as 'Oxford Johns'. Somehow, somebody revealed that this particular Oxford John played guitar and next I knew I was in a seven piece soul/bluebeat group — the only whitey — I don't imagine we were very good but I got a wonderful musical education from it. Also around this time I started

hanging around The Swing Shop, drummer Dave Kelly's legendary jazz emporium — a meeting place for all the beatniks and jazz and blues weirdos of South London. Dave Kelly worked there and his sister Jo-Ann was often there. I fell in love of course. I found a Crown album called 'Singing The Blues' by B.B. King and his orchestra. Orchestra? What is this crap? Blues isn't played by orchestras! That's Mantovani and Joe Loss! They played me about three seconds and I said OK, OK, I'll take it. I sat at home forever learning those solos note by note and I bought every B.B. King album. I bought Freddie King, Albert King, Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, T-bone Walker. I found out that if you tuned the Vox AC-30 up full and rested the neck of the Telecaster on top you got infinite sustain and weird harmonics. At some nowhere gig a big monster came up to me and said, "wanna join a real band? You're playing The Twisted Wheel in Manchester tomorrow night..." Goodbye Croydon Advertiser. That was The Rockhouse Band, a wonderful adventure. We backed a lot of my idols as they toured England, and I had a fellow blues fan there: Keith Tillman, one of my favourite bass players and an extremely eccentric person. It all came to tears though of course and Keith and I formed Stones Masonry, the first really authentic blues band I had. Chris Youldon on horrifying spine-chilling vocals, and no money.

So anyway, Keith and Chris and I are banging our heads against a wall trying to be the

most authentic blues band in Savoy Brown turned into a Britain when Harry Simmons, psychedelic group in actually Henry but later Harry, Charlottenlund. We got back to asked me to join Savoy Brown. England and told Harry that I'm skint so I say yes, Keith is his brother Kim (Simmons) disgusted and accuses me of and Bryce, the other straight selling out. I actually loved it member of the band, were out but it only lasted through the and we got Chris (Youlden) first album. We got a summer-long residency in more amplification to get the Charlottenlund, north of feedback. Copenhagen. We shared a house in the woods, a short We did a little tour of the West walk down to the gig every Country which was cut short night — LSD city! Harry the by being busted in Barnstaple manager's brother Kim and the by some terribly enthusiastic

he said, "no hard feelings lads, I've got a pub now - come and have a drink on me". We just happened to have a bottle of liquid LSD that we'd not put onto blotters and it just happened to fall into the 'winter warmer' (punch) he had on the bar. Hope you had fun! There was enough there to kill an army!

I seemed to have racked up a bit of credibility meanwhile, but didn't have a job. I'd been voted No. 3,000,000th best guitarist

dressing room door burst open and The Who march in. "Hello lads, great show!" I thought, "Oh my Lord, I must be famous now...", but actually we were too cleverdick for our own audience. Those poor little mods in their fur-trimmed Parkas were not expecting The Action to tell them the world was going to end when a rogue asteroid hit the Earth in a couple of weeks because we didn't love each other. Or they didn't want to hear a forty



singer Bryce (Portius) declined members of the local to take the stuff, but the rest constabulary: the first ever drug of us went out on 40 minute arrest in Devonshire history! psychedelic jams with tons of Harry sacked all the druggies feedback. Before all this immediately, got his brother happened I had been at my back in and went on to make a friend Pete Green's place and lot of money. The roadie and I he said, "Hey Martin, we've got got busted for about a millionth a problem. Listen to this!" and of a grain of marijuana. By the he played me a cassette of Jimi time we came to trial, the top Hendrix. "He just arrived in cop in charge of catching us London a week ago. We're in "vile criminals" had retired. trouble here!" I thought, "time After the case (thirty nicker fine to let loose..." and that's how each and a suspended sentence)

by 'Melody Maker'. I used to know Georgio Gomelsky, and he told me he had this group The Action who were re-thinking their music and wanted a guitarist. Wow! I could be a pop star! I really was quite daunted — they'd been in the hit parade for chris's sakes — I only played 12-bars. Weirdly though they liked me and I learned to play pop and I loved it. After a few gigs we were somewhere up North and the

minute version of John Coltrane's 'India'. They wanted 'Land Of A Thousand Dances', 'Baby You've Got It' etc. On reflection, maybe they were right.

Anyway, we recorded a lot of stuff, some with George Martin at AIR — what a genius. He said, "that solo would sound good recorded backwards." I said, "okay, let me go away for about two years and I'll work out how to do it backwards".

"No no," he replied, "it goes like this —" and he just went to the piano and played it note for note in reverse. A salutary experience.

Reggie King was a great pop singer and a great pop presence. I remember giving Rod Stewart a lift back to his mum's house in Holloway with him telling Reg how he was the best white-boy singer in the world; but he was already on his way out of The Action. I think the final crunch came on the way back to London from somewhere far away. We stopped in a motorway cafe, Reg decided he didn't want to eat with the plebs and tried to take his egg 'n' chips back to the van. The checkout girl said, "that's not allowed, you've got to eat it inside" and Reg brandished his white plastic knife in her face and said "I'm leaving, OK?". Next minute he was locked up and we had to wait until morning to bail him out. This was *not* cool — we were peace 'n' love hippies, and fucking tired to boot. Exit Reg. Where was he when punk happened?

Reg later made a solo album with Mighty Baby on a couple of tracks. Reg was one of *the* great singers. I don't really know what happened to him; he had an accident and fell down stairs, but as far as I know he's still alive. Mick Taylor was on some of the tracks as well. When Brian Jones left the Stones, they asked Alexis Korner to suggest people and mine was one of the names put forward. This got printed in The Evening Standard and everyone descended on my parents' place, because the only way they could reach me was through my Musicians' Union card, and that had my parents' address printed on it. All these journalists turned up at my parents' place and asked to speak to Martin Stone. "He doesn't live here" "Oh, do you know him?" "Yes, he's my son" "Where does he live" "Don't

know, what's all this about?" "Well, he's going to join The Rolling Stones...." — a few days later I phoned my mum and she said, "This can't be true, what a terrible story!". She thought it was the most shocking thing in the world, the most awful thing that had ever happened to me. Actually, it didn't happen — I never went to the audition. I did play with Brian, but it came to nought.

We [The Action] supported The Byrds at Middle Earth just when they were on the verge of going country. I remember Richard Thompson was backstage, mouth hanging open. I was hooked, I wanted to be a country and western musician. Fuck pop music! So we changed our name to Mighty Baby and eventually we turned country rock, although not really enough for my tastes. That single 'Devil's Whisper' was largely what I wanted to do, but that was at the end of Mighty Baby. I remember going to see the Flying Burrito Brothers, all of us, we all went to the Lyceum. Tiny amplifiers grouped in the middle of a huge stage, Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman whining away. I thought I'll never be Muddy Waters, but I bet I could whine like that if I really tried. Also we all turned Muslim, except for Bam King, and that killed Mighty Baby really. We couldn't just turn up at a gig where everyone's swigging Newcastle Brown. We weren't saying "You're going to Hell...." or anything; it just seemed like a world that was not relative to what we decided we were interested in, and so hence end of Mighty Baby.

I felt that Mighty Baby never really got it in the studio. We were essentially a live band, which is why we were called 'the English Grateful Dead'. That was the whole essence of it, if

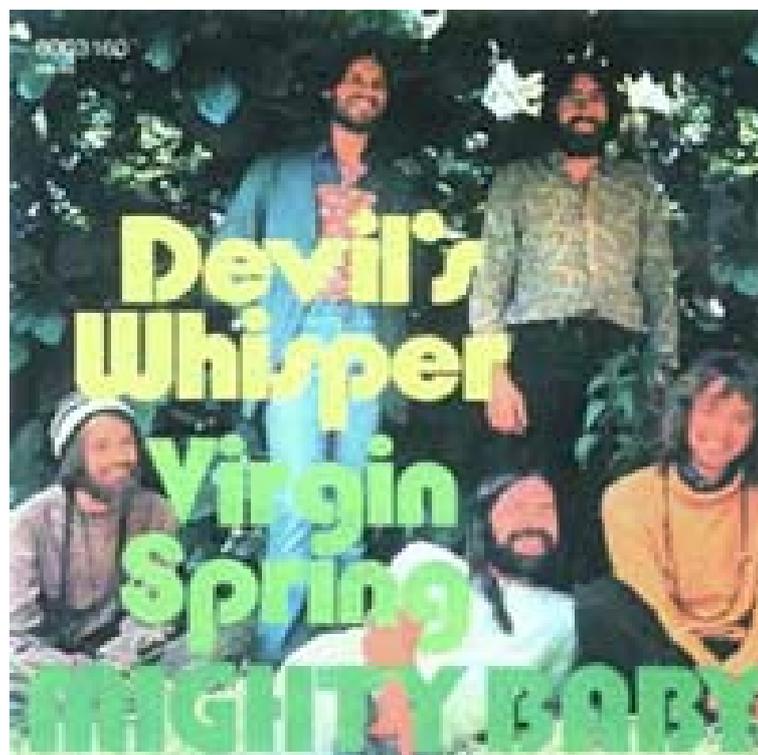


it happened on the night then we were brilliant, otherwise we were not so brilliant. It was erratic. Not to say we didn't rehearse or that things weren't worked out, but we did tend to go for the loose Grateful Dead style. Personally, I listened to a lot of the West Coast music. The guitarists who influenced though me were the blues players, and then when I discovered country music I listened to a lot of steel guitar players and tried to play their lines on an ordinary guitar. I loved Amos Garrett the first time I heard him. The best English guitarist is Jeff Beck, not only is he a great technician but he's got tremendous subtlety, humour and melody. Jimmy Page is alright. Richard Treece from Help Yourself is a great guitar player, although I haven't heard him for years and years. Richard Thompson's the only British guitarist I'm in awe of apart from Beck though; a great, great guitar player.

I suppose that 'Day Of The Soup' LP that's announced in the Bath Festival programme must've been the Glastonbury Fayre live thing. There's four and a half hours of that stuff which never got mixed down. It wasn't very well recorded, but that's what that was gonna be — a kind of distillation of some tremendously self-indulgent

stuff. [Sixteen minutes' worth of this, a number entitled 'A Blanket In My Muesli', appears on the 'Glastonbury Fayre' triple on Revelation].

We were very prolific. We lived together most of the time, most of the music was not me and most of the lyrics were me. Most of the melodies came from Bam and Ian and I wrote all the words. They have a kind of period charm. The songs that turned up on the CD release of the first Mighty Baby album were demos for a projected album, they were never meant to be released. Although I can listen to them now, we could've done them better. And of course Mox is on some of them. He was a figure around London, a wild Scotsman with enormously long hair who played harmonica. He liked us and we adopted him, took him on tour. He now lives in France, I see him from time to time. He's become a very fine singer and harmonica player. Guy Stevens: what can I say about Guy Stevens? A wonderful person! I think the best thing was when we turned up at the studio and Ian Whiteman has got this little case and Guy says "what's that then?", Ian said "it's a flute" and Guy said "I don't record flutes"! He was a rock 'n' roller, he did not



understand flutes or care about them or want to record them. I thought that was wonderful, not that I dislike flutes it must be said but I did understand his perspective on that, y'know? The last thing I heard of Ian Whiteman he was narrating a programme on BBC2 about some Muslim city. Bam of course never became a Muslim and I was the errant one who decided to leave it, but the other three members of Mighty Baby are still Muslims as far as I know. They made that Habibiyya LP ['If Man But Knew', Island Records HELP7, 1972], that was wonderful music, and I loved the things they did with Richard Thompson [a tour in '77], who was at the time a Muslim too of course.

Bam King: I'm a huge fan of Bam, it was basically Bam and Ian who sang in Mighty Baby. Bam has a very high, sweet voice — very high register, a beautiful voice and to my mind one of the best rhythm guitarists. It's a lead guitarist's dream to have a rhythm guitarist who has no ego. That's absolutely wonderful, y'know? [Bam King went on to the band

ACE, and was also briefly in a group with Reg King called Clat Thyger circa. 1972]

So anyway, Mighty Baby is knocked on the head by religion, I'm painting houses for a living and supporting a houseful of Sufis. Snakefinger (Phil Lithman) came back from California after his first stint with The Residents and moved into a house down the road from me with my brother Nigel. I started to sneak over there to have some fun, playing Tampa Red songs, Willie Nelson songs — dope smoking strictly not allowed. So one day, fed up with being a hypocrite, I say I'm quitting all this: let's start a group. That was the start of Chilli Willi and the Red Hot Peppers. At first we were very 'down home', Phil on cheap acoustic guitar. He never learned to buy a serious guitar actually, even when he was rich he bought a \$40 guitar! So he had a shit guitar and a clapped out violin and I was playing dobro and mandolin. I think our first gig was supporting Help Yourself, I can't remember where it was. Somewhere at the top of Fulham High Road. We're

doing an extremely chaotic and under-produced record for Revelation Records, who did the triple Glastonbury album — now worth a fucking fortune. The Brinsleys were on a couple of tracks, which gave it enough push to make us decide to go rock 'n' roll, so we recruited Pete Thomas and Paul Riley as a rhythm section and Diceman Bailey on every instrument and we were in business. The world's first crappy English western swing orchestra!

We got ourselves Jake Riviera as a roadie, and one night as we were leaving Southampton a police car overtakes us.

Jake throws a beer can bouncing off the police car's roof and the cops carry on as if nothing has happened. "Hey Jacko, d'you wanna be promoted to manager?" It was then that we started doing good — we didn't go straight to stadium level, or even ballroom level, but we played every pub in Britain a million times and the music press loved us. The second Chilli Willi album ['Bongos Over Balham'] was done in two parts. We got Mike Nesmith over as producer 'cause we were fans of his as a Monkee and his solo elpees. That was the studio stuff, and that was a difficult time for us all — including Mr. Nesmith I imagine. He turned out to be a fervent Christian Science believer, had a Bible on the mixing desk and was generally the most po-faced and humourless producer we'd ever encountered. We took Ronnie Lane's mobile down to Jake's girlfriend's farm in Cornwall and recorded in the cowshed. We had Ron Nevison, who worked on 'Pet Sounds', as engineer/producer with Jake overseeing. That was a lot more fun.

Jake's next plan was 'The Naughty Rhythms Tour', a reconstruction of the pop / r'n'b package tours of the 50s and 60s: Kokomo, Dr. Feelgood and us taking turns at headlining. It quickly became apparent that the Feelgoods ought to top every night; the Willies were too diverse, Kokomo were too disco and the Feelgoods were too good. We carried on for a bit after that, playing too many forgettable gigs, getting too tired and irritable and finally one stupid night we decided to break up. Along the way we did a few good things: played with Keith Richards and Friends for two nights at the Kilburn State, toured with T. Rex, got called the best group a few times in the papers and I even got voted equal seventh best guitarist in the world along with George Harrison in the Melody Maker poll. We also reformed for one gig in the mid 80s and at that point recorded two tracks, so there are two unreleased Chilli Willi tracks of a much later date: 'Streets of Baltimore' and a Doug Kershaw tune, 'Mama And Papa Had Love'.

After we broke up, Phil went back to America to be a Resident. They couldn't play, apart from Philip, but they were terribly nice people. They always had these eyeball heads on so no-one knew what they looked like, and when they came to England they went to stay with Philip's mum in Streatham. I met him down at the pub opposite Streatham Common with all these blokes who were actually The Residents (without the eyeballs). These legendary people: ordinary, ordinary blokes. Jake worked with the Feelgoods and then founded Stiff Records. Paul Bass joined Roogalator, Diceman invented the world's biggest magnet — well done Diceman! — and I became a rare book seller. Then I joined the Pink Fairies. I got

a phone call from Boss Goodman, their manager and an old friend. "Hello, Martin. We've just had an incredibly weird idea — don't say no right away, think about it for a few days. How'd you like to be a Pink Fairy?" One second's thought, and "When do we start?" I was so pleased to don the black leather jacket and shades! After that I had funny little playtime groups: Paul Bass, Billy Rankin (from the Brinsleys), Bob Hall, Chris Youlden. It was basically blues. We'd be playing off the back of being "ex-Chilli Willi" etc, we got fairly good gigs. I remember playing with the 101ers and met Joe Strummer, a bit later I got a call from him saying he was gonna kill the 101ers and start a new group, which became The Clash of course, and he asked me to join. So for a couple of months I became a 101er, until we ran out of gigs and The Clash were ready to go. After that I thought that's really it, now I'm gonna be a book dealer 'cause I'm a book collector and that's a compulsive occupation, just like playing guitar is.

*[In Iain Sinclair's first novel 'White Chappell — Scarlet Tracings', the character Nicholas Lane is a pseudonym for Martin Stone]:* I met Iain after I stopped being a rock 'n' roll musician and became a book dealer. I was living in Buckinghamshire, and after a while I turned up at a book market in Islington and the stall was next to Iain Sinclair's. We became great friends. Basically we were up against the world: not book dealers, but fake book dealers! We both had other things behind us, so we had a tremendous affinity. We had this mutual/mystical love of the East End of London, at that time rather unstructured, although Iain has now put some definition to it. We were both book dealers by default. I still deal in books — love it — you never lose it once you've

got it, it's something you can do forever.

I did a few things after that, a Johnny Copeland tour, Billy Boy Arnold, Albert Collins; then I went to France. I got very ill and went to France to escape illness. Let's just say I ended up with a busted book business, half a stomach, half a nose and an imperfect memory. I'm finished with cocaine now though.

So I go to France, and I should've thought that was the end, but I got a call from Larry Wallis and he said, "there's someone else living in France that you ought to get in touch with". It was Wreckless Eric. So I finally decided to call him, but I was very rusty, you gotta understand that, but I started to play with Eric and we made a Christmas record together and toured. So Eric basically brought me back into it. That stopped eventually, Eric had a tour of America and couldn't afford to take me with him, and I met this guy, a Louisiana white-boy blues man, and we found a beautiful violin player and formed Almost Presley. We had a French rhythm section. Then I started this group called The Tallahassie Rent Boys, I stole the rhythm section of Almost Presley and got Eric as the rhythm guitar player, we were doing that and then Eric had to go on tour for three months. So now I've got this new thing, I've become a singer and it's the best thing I've ever done in my life! We've been playing in Paris, very rarely, and have made an album in America. We're called The Homewreckers. Apparently there's some group in California called The Homewreckers who've hopefully broken up by now, in which case we'll be The Happy Homewreckers. In terms of writing and composing I've learned to be very much the businessman: I clock in at 10:00 o'clock in the morning

and try to turn that song into something that isn't crap. I think it's a terrifying experience being on stage, but much less terrifying than recording. I've never enjoyed that because it's so permanent. I go to jelly in the studio. Not this last time though, that was just wonderful. I'm happier with this record than anything I've ever done.

*Martin Stone was interviewed, rather more expertly than is evidenced from this rambling editing job, by Dr. BRIAN HINTON.*

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