

The Parallel Lines taking Blondie to Galway



By Kernan Andrews

IN 1978 Israeli forces invaded Lebanon in Operation Litani. In Zaire, rebels occupied the city of Kolwezi. Pope John Paul II became the first Polish pope in history and goals from Mario Kempes and Daniel Bertoni won the World Cup for Argentina. It was also the year a New York new wave band called Blondie released *Parallel Lines*.

Blondie - featuring the original members Debbi Harry, Chris Stein, Clem Burke, and Jimmy Destri - play the Big Top in the Fisheries Field on Thursday July 24 at 7.30pm as part of the Galway Arts Festival.

The band's Big Top show is part of their current world tour which celebrates the 30th anniversary of their classic album *Parallel Lines*. The album, originally released in 1978, turned Blondie into global superstars and contains many of the songs they are best known for - 'Heart Of Glass', 'Hanging On The Telephone', 'Sunday Girl', and 'One Way Or Another'.

Blondie drummer Clem Burke is on the band's tour bus in Kentucky when he calls me for the interview. He explains what will happen at the Galway show.

"We do the entire *Parallel Lines* album in sequence for the first part of the show and then we do other Blondie songs," he tells me. "It's a bit of a departure for us as some of the *Parallel Lines* songs would normally come later in a show but we enjoy starting off with a

bang with 'Hanging On The Telephone' and reviving other songs we haven't played in 20 years. It's good to have a different sort of set."

New York and CBGB

Blondie began life in mid 1970s New York when Debbi Harry and Chris Stein asked Clem Burke to join their new band - named after the shouts Harry would receive from bar customers and truckers.

"Being a drummer, you have to work with other people and I was on a mission to find my 'David Bowie' - a charismatic and talented front person and in Debbi Harry I had found my lead singer," says Clem. "I knew of Chris and Debbi when they were in The Stilettos and from Club 82 and Sweet Revenge on East 4th Street. I think they liked my shoes and I sensed I was among very talented people and I was proven correct."

New York was a hive of artistic activity in the 1970s. The first stirrings of rap were emerging from The Bronx, the no-wave film makers were starting, while in rock music The Patti Smith Group, Television, Ramones, Talking Heads, and Blondie quickly became part of the city's thriving New Wave scene, centred around Hilly Kristal's CBGB venue on the Lower East Side.

What made New York, and in particular the CBGB scene, so vital and innovative?

"New York is, and will always be a magnet of opportunity for the arts," says Clem. "It was also very inexpensive to live there. There were maybe only 100 people involved in the evolution of the CBGB scene, but it was a seminal musical movement.

"Hilly Kristal would let any band play there - the only thing is they had to be original. In the early days it was like a workshop and we could do whatever we wanted. You didn't have to be trendy. It was anything goes. Television might be on stage and the rest of us might be watching and we influenced each other - whether it was Richard Hell's torn T-shirt or Debbi's hairdo, it all got assimilated into the sound and we fed off each other."

Nonetheless there was rivalry among the groups in the scene.

"Certain people moved in certain circles," says Clem. "There was the Patti Smith/Television camp and there was the Blondie/Ramones/Johnny Thunders camp. Tom Verlaine wasn't a good friend of mine but Johnny Ramone was.

"There was a camaraderie but that was eclipsed as we went out into the world. We were into the Andy Warhol thing of mixing art and commerce. We were commercially driven but committed to being artistic and individual. We were a little more glamorous with Debbi and there was a feeling among some that we weren't as underground as we should be. Television didn't sell too many records but they were the best band to come out of the CBGB. These days when I see them they are friends of mine."

Although the CBGB is no more - it is now a fashion store - its legacy as the cradle of punk and new wave is indisputable. So what would it have been like to be there in its heyday? Clem sets the scene:

“At the entrance to CBGB there would be a lot of The Bowery homeless, guys begging for change and at the same time there would be Johnny Thunders and Andy Warhol and photographers. As you go in there was a pinball machine and it was very dark except for the neon signs, then running straight ahead was the stage and depending on who was on, it would be crowded or there could be 10 people.

“They had a fantastic jukebox and I remember hearing our first single ‘X-Offender’ being played on it. I thought it was great that someone spent 25¢ to play Blondie! It was an exciting time.”

However Clem points out that no one at CBGB ever considered themselves punks.

“There were no punk rockers at CBGB, it was bohemians!” he says. “That punk thing came later on. It was things like Patti Smith and the kind of clothes she wore and the sunglasses that gave birth to the punk style, but back then we were all bohemians.”

Parallel Lines

By 1978, Blondie had released the albums Blondie and Plastic Letters and were poised to take it all to a whole other level when they entered the studio to record what would become Parallel Lines.

“New members Frank Infante and Higel Harrison had just joined so it was the first album to be recorded with that line up - the ‘classic line up’ and so it was a new beginning,” says Clem. “Mike Chapman who produced The Sweet and Mud was producer. Robert Fripp came to play guitar on ‘Fade Away and Radiate’. It was an honour that such a great musician came to work with us.”

For Clem, Parallel Lines is Blondie’s best album and a work they remain “very proud of” to this day. However not everyone recognised the potential of its key track.

“Back in the days of vinyl,” says Clem, “you and the record company would put all the best songs towards the beginning of the album, but ‘Heart Of Glass’ was buried near the end!”

Blondie today

Blondie disbanded following The Hunter (1982) and Clem kept busy as a producer and working with Steve Jones (Sex Pistols), Pete Townshend, Iggy Pop, Joan Jett, Earl Slick, and Glen Matlock. Then in the late 1990s, the band re-formed and enjoyed an international smash hit with the Jimmy Destri penned ‘Maria’.

Since then the band have regrouped regularly to record new music and perform worldwide. What is the attraction of touring and being in Blondie after all these years?

“It’s home base for us, somewhere we know we can come back to,” says Clem. “The music is the legacy and it’s stood the test of time. It’s fun for us and it’s been good to us. We’re happy people still coming out to hear us and Ireland, Britain, Holland, and Germany are like a second home.

“We played Russia for the first time recently and we asked a journalist there if other American bands were here and he said they weren’t and besides Blondie were a European band! Coming from New York I suppose it’s not surprising. It’s such a melting pot and in the 1970s as well as now it is like living another country, not the US. It’s always good fun.”

For more information and tickets contact the Galway Arts Festival Box Office, 1-5 Merchants Road, on 091-566577. Online booking is also available through www.galwayartsfestival.com