

# STIFF

TEN o'clock in the morning, and it looks like it's gonna be a long, but far from lonely day. We're in a railway goods yard near Olympia, and about a hundred desperately ill looking people are standing around waiting for the Stiff Special to hit the tracks, and wing us all into Bristol for the first night of the marathon Be Stiff tour. It's a real nice train — they give you beer and dodgy rolls, and by the time we're off, an endless trail of people wandering about has begun, which won't end until we're actually in Bristol. There's a camera crew, apparently from the Whistle Test (I might be in the film, rolling a classic Red Rizia/Golden Virginia masterpiece, but it hasn't been on yet), a very French journalist, no, a very French journalist with the ability to detect the production of medication from several carriages away, and who, once having got the desirables in his hand, would suddenly find reasons to absent himself for what seemed to be interminable periods in another carriage . . . Max Bell was there too, and Pennie Smith and Dave Robinson, the proud father of the as yet unnamed member of the touring party, an infant of but nine weeks, the desperately worried looking Andy Murray, the tour manager, a 90 per cent unflappable dude known as Kelloggs, apparently because his real name's unpronounceable, and a few others. Oh yeah, there were lots of musicians there too . . .

In case you've been buried in a mausoleum since about June, this was the second Stiff Records package tour. Last year, an all star cast of Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe, Ian Dury, Dave Edmunds, Wreckless Eric and Larry Wallis, supported by a bunch of drummers, bass players and roadies among others, took the sound of Stiff around the country. It was quite successful, so the idea was that this time, with only Wreckless remaining as a veteran of last year (Dury wasn't available and Larry Wallis presumably preferred to play with Mick Farren, while Elvis, Nick and Dave are no longer Stiffpersons), that something similar would be a groove, and might also help to sell some records by the participating acts. These are, in no particular order, Rachel Sweet, Lene Lovich, Jona Lewie, Mickey Jupp and Wreckless. Nobody, you'll notice, really stands out in that lot, so each of the acts has a good deal of motivation to blow everyone else off sage, although in the nicest way, 'cos they're nearly all buddies. This was further complicated by the fact that The Records, the band formed by the great Will Birch and Johnny Wicks after the Kursaal Flyers Kamikazed, had been hired to back up Rachel Sweet, but were also going to do their own set. The prospect, as they

say, was intriguing . . .

The food at the hotel, however, was rather less than intriguing, although what that's got to do with it, I'm not sure . . . We got a taxi driver to take us to the gig, who said it'd take him four minutes exactly, which was good, because the show was due to start in five. He lied — it only took us two and a half minutes, although a pair of turkeys from one of the colour magazines ripped off the taxi we'd ordered and charged it, apparently, to my room. Never trust a straight journalist (or a hippie, if it comes to that). It seemed a bit empty when we got there, but The Records went on anyway, in front of the stage setup of three drum kits, numerous keyboards, amps and speaker stacks.

I'd seen the Records once before, at Dingwalls, and they were diabolical, a real white noise job. Now that's okay, and I'm in favour of loud music, but it all seems a bit silly if most of the audience don't have any idea what you're playing. Iggy was loud at the Rainbow, but that was okay, because you knew the words to his songs — if you don't know the material, you feel like the proverbial blind man in a minefield. You'll gather that I wasn't necessarily looking forward to The Records . . . But they turned in an excellent set, the total antithesis of what I'd heard before, and I can now genuinely say that I'm looking forward to their first single, "Starry Eyes", which might be out even before you read this, on Virgin Records. They only played half a dozen numbers on the tour, as time was of the essence with six acts on the bill, but certainly "Teenorama", Max Bell's fave, was also very good, and so of course was their magnificent version of "Rock'n'Roll Love Letter". Will told me they were thinking of leaving that off the album, and I told him he'd be stupid if he did — excellent song, despite the fact that it was written by a bloke who probably qualifies as a wimp (Tim Moore) and recorded by a bunch of turkeys before Will got hold of it. Johnny Wicks, who sings most of the lead vocals, was also considerably improved, and Phil Brown, who at Dingwalls I had disliked intensely due to his appalling posing, was far far better. Which leaves Huw Gower, a fair enough guitarist, who used to be in the Rabbits From Hell with John Perry from The Only Ones.

The Records went off, then came back on again after an exceedingly short interval with Rachel Sweet. The changeovers, before we go any further, were quite excellent — after you see this tour, you'll know that there's no excuse for half hour intervals at any concert. Rachel is a mini person, almost absurdly



LENE LOVICH

small, but with a raunchy voice at times which makes her unbelievably youthful looks almost appear in bad taste. Like someone said (I think) using her was almost criminal in that it was taking advantage of a child. But then Rachel's supposed to be 16, and sometimes she sings like someone considerably older, as in the ace "Truckstop Queen", a Will Birch song called "Pin A Medal On Mary" or Elvis' "Alison". Right now, Rachel seems just a little too unreal — but by the end of the tour, she may have come on a heap. It must be difficult when you have a lady travelling with you whose job it is to teach you your schoolwork every day . . .

Next was the incredible Lene Lovich, a very far out looking lady with long pigtails, a voice which occasionally yodelled, and a saxophone. She was backed by her bloke, the very bald Les Chappel, who played guitar, by Don Snow on keyboards, who spent a few unhappy weeks as a Vibrator but seems much happier now, and the rhythm section once from the Strutters and now from the Sinceros, Ron Francois on bass and Bobbi Irwin on drums. Now I don't think Lene's album comes close to the excellence of her live show, although without having seen her, the record sounds okay. But check out her live performances of "Tonight" by Nick Lowe, her single "Lucky Numbers", or "Writing On The Wall". Maybe the thing that worked best on stage was "I Say When", during which the entire band participates in a ludicrous gymnastic display to great applause — but this lady should soon be a star. She ended her set with a vicious rendition of "Be Stiff", which just about sums it up really.

Jona Lewie used to be John Lewis of Brett Marvin and the Thunderbolts and Terry Dactyl and the Dinosaurs, and he's a really nice bloke. He was backed by a rhythm section of Chris Paschalides on bass and Steve Sinclair on drums, with help from Lene, Rachel and the great Malcolm Morley, of whom more later. Jona himself played accordeon, various sorts of keyboards

# THE TRACKS

and guitar, and really is at a bit of a disadvantage on this tour. Although what he plays is great, his music isn't so easily accessible as any of the other acts on the bill, and at times he tended to lose the audience, who didn't feel like any kind of concentration in the intense heat. It was like he was maybe a bit too subtle — if he'd played a set of roaring 12 bars at up tempo, he'd have gone down a storm, but he's more ambitious than that, and some of his stuff was unfortunately lost in the shuffle. Still, I thought that "Sick And Tired", "The Baby She's On The Street" and "Hallelujah Europe" were ace.

Next was Wreckless, fortunately considerably improved since the last tour. Good band too with Eunon Brady from the Brats on guitar and being a piss artist, Malcolm Morley from Help Yourself and Man and all that on guitar and keyboards, John Brown on bass and Dave Otway (no relation) on drums, collectively The Firm. Nearly everything they did was good, but let's give a special nod to "Walking On The Surface Of The Moon", "Let's Go To The Pictures", "I Wish It Would Rain", "Off The Hook" (R. Stones), "The

Whole Wide World" and "Take The Cash". While young Mr. Goulden was onstage, the pogoing and gobbling started, but soon was forced into submission by the dry mouths and sweaty bodies of the 900 strong crowd, who were finding it difficult to breathe, let alone anything else. Wreckless reminded me of a latter day Chris Farlowe — but he was better.

At this point, some of the personalities on stage began to become visible — two members of Starry Eyed and Laughing, Martin Ace of Man, Liam Sternberg in a silly bondage jumper. Then Mickey Jupp and the Treatment came on. Previously they were known as the Oval Exiles — Pete Gosling on guitar, Nick or Vic Young on bass, Mac Poole on drums, and Dave Edmunds' favourite piano player, Geraint Watkins, who was excellent. The best songs Juppy played were "Old New Orleans", "Short List" and "Old Rock'n'Roller" but by this time, the show had been going for three and a half hours virtually non-stop, and everyone was looking and presumably feeling a little jaded, although this was the only act who played an encore as far as I remember. A bloody great gig . . .

Back to the hotel, to be entertained by Phil Brown and Eunon Brady leading a bunch of about seventy people driving the night porter mad with sandwich requests, and a whole heap of alcohol o.d.ing from nearly everyone. It was amazingly tiring, and when they shut the bar about three o'clock, I'll have to say I was pleased, although that didn't leave long enough for kip. Breakfast was that usually sombre occasion on the night after a gig, with those members of the party who scored looking like they were dying, while the still indefatigable Kelloggs scooted around the hotel picking up stragglers and getting them together for the coach to the station. Max, Penny, Liam and I plus two other ladies, one of whom Liam is going to make into a group with the unlikely and presumably inaccurate name of Mary and the Virgins, watched the Stiff train sink slowly in the West. They were off to Liverpool, we fortunately were headed for London. It was a groove — go and see the tour when it comes to your town. And my thanx to Dave Robinson and Co. for getting it together, and to Kelloggs for keeping it together. ZZZZZZ . . .

John Tobler



LENE LOVICH · WRECKLESS ERIC · JONA LEWIE · RACHEL SWEET · MICKEY JUPP -