**THE MANY SHIFTs, SPLITS AND LICKS OF MARTIN NEWELL. BUSIER AND BUSIER**

**A self-described “jangling man,” the English songwriter and poet Martin Newell is best known for fronting Cleaners from Venus, a band whose only constant has been Newell himself. HIs career is a never ending sprint on ward and upward. He produces an album quicker than the average musicians even gets the idea for a song. In his own words “ I started writing before I was 15, and I haven’t really stopped.” Perhaps this is because not unlike his career, his life has been anything but constitant. His early days was spent traveling from city to city , country to country with his stark military father. At a young age Newell found solace and consistency in music. 3 BANDS, 20 ALBUMS , A FEW BOOKS AND and A FULL FLEDged POETRY CAREER LATER (hyperlink out) CAREER NEWELL IS NOW 64 RESIDING IN THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE. His humour and output un-dampened by the test of time. I talked to Newell on the phone in August 2014, Newell’s speaks with a thick proper English accept guns a blaze at a thousand words a minute without hesitation unless breaking to jolly laughter.**

**Can you talk about your military upbringing?**

I was what we call a “barrack brat” and what you people call an “army brat." I lived in Singapore and Cyprus and I was just working out how much of the 60's I missed by being abroad. I missed about eight months of 1961, the whole of of 1965, two months of 1964, five months of 1966 and a tiny bit of the beginning of 1967.

**Did you like moving a lot?**

I just wanted to grow up in one small town. I felt cheated of a large chunk of my childhood and adolescence. The only constant for me throughout was music and literature, and I’ve clung to them like a man clings to a raft.

**What happened when you moved back to England?**

I looked like a square. That’s what all they used to call me, a square. “Don’t be a cube, rube”. Ha. I came home to England in 1966 with a sun tan, very short hair and some really stupid clothes. My dad was quite strict, he would take swipes at me and knock me on the deck. I had a desperate need to catch up, and I kept having to cut my hair. It was horrible.

**What was your experience like in different schools?**

I didn’t grow my hair until 1968 or something, so it was far too late, I was nearly 15. I went to 11 different schools so being the new boy was always a problem because it meant a struggle, and certainly in British army schools where the kids can be a bit brutish. You know, I had to fight, and I wasn’t very much good at that. There was always some other weirdos in the class, somebody strange or with a strange hobby, and I would find out who that was and go hang out with them.

**So were these unhappy or happy times?**

Much of my childhood might have been unhappy but it wasn’t constantly unhappy. There were some really good bits, because I was a dreamy and imaginative little kid. I was living in a really unimaginative world then, and still am, but I didn’t know that. I thought there was probably something wrong with me.

**How so?**

Maybe I was mad? I thought there was this otherness.

**Did that change at any point?**

Yeah. I fastened on to the one thing I thought I could do, which was to be some kind of a pop star. Once that idea took root in me it was pretty hard to shift. I saw *A Hard Day’s Night* by The Beatles, and I thought that’s what being a pop star would be like. I was 10 or 11 years old when I saw that. So that’s what I had to go and do, I had to be in a pop group, that was the kind of life I had to lead. It wasn’t anything to do with money; it had to do with music and lots of fun, and moving really fast the whole time. Getting in and out of trains and studios and it all just looked like tremendous fun. I realize when I read the stories about that period in [the Beatles] lifetimes, of course it wasn’t tremendous fun, it was actually probably really confusing, but bits of it must have been good.

**When did you pick up your first instrument?**

I played a guitar when I was 12, in Christmas 1965. That’s when the world started changing for me.

**Could you describe how?**

I’d finally found some talisman, some magic thing that would help to get me out of it. When my dad moved to his office in Singapore he had a tape recorder, with little three-inch reels. It had been the office tape recorder but they got a new one, so he brought it home and gave it to me. That was the beginning of recording. If we wanted to make a crowd-cheering tape, we had to clap and shout a lot, and then we had to do the same thing again while we recorded another layer on the other tape recorder. We found if we did it enough we built up a sound like loads of people cheering, and we could do sound effects and that was really exciting. Football and the standard things people do didn't interest me, I liked the idea of making things. Before that I was trying to build dens, tree houses and stuff like that. I was a very imaginative and hyperactive kid, and viewed from an adult's point of view I was probably a complete handful.

**Did you always have trouble with adult figures in your life?**

Quite a lot. I come from a 2nd generation of baby boomers. When you have a war, a huge conflagration, there’s a baby boom. It’s something we do as a human race. The first one happened during the war and the second happened in the early 50's. Suddenly, you have these bunch of kids between twelve and twenty in the 60's and they've got jobs and they've got money, and the economy has picked up in America and there’s technological advances, there’s electric guitars and record players and suddenly you’ve got this perfect storm. The people who fought the war often said to me, “We fought the war for your sort, and all you want to do is have long hair,” and I said back, “You fought to give us some freedom and when we took it and ran with it you hated us for it.” I just thought I didn’t have a lot of money to run around with, I suppose I turned into a rebel.

**Your way of fighting was to become a pop star.**

There’s this expression, fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity. Peace after the war didn't turn out exactly the way people expected.

**How did your parents react to all of these things?**

My mum was more proud of me and interested in what I was doing, because she came from a musical family. What I was trying to do was a bit in advance of what she knew; she couldn’t have helped me. The classic thing was, my dad would be very bad-tempered. He would finish training soldiers and come back from the job he hated, pour himself a big whiskey, romp around the place, and say, "Stop playing that bloody banjo." And my mom would say, “He’s composing.” And I’d hear him shout, "I don’t care if he’s bloody decomposing, he needs to stop playing that banjo." That was a grim joke but he didn’t think it was going anywhere.

**Did he try to dissuade you from playing music for a living?**

He sat me down one time—15, long hair and everything—and said, "What are you going to do with yourself?" And what I said was, “Save up some money and get an amplifier, and join a pop group.” And he said, “A pop group? You’re living in cloud-cuckoo land. What do you think you know, you’re one of millions. What makes you think you’ll do anything important?” I might as well have said to him, “Father, I want to put on a little dress and some ballet shoes and get a wand and put on a tiara, and go down to the docks where the rough sailors go and skip around and sing little songs.” That’s what he fucking heard.

**Did he come to your shows?**

He didn’t see me do a gig until two years before he died. And he said to my Mum, "Well I heard he was good, but I didn’t realize he was that good.” He never told me that. But I think he was proud of me because he was in the British Legion and he told everyone else what I was doing, but he never could bring himself to say to me, “Well, you’ve done it.” What I got from my dad was more a hard analytical quality to things, the ability to self-edit. He could write. He was very literate and introduced me to poetry. Like lots of soldiers he liked poetry, especially manly poetry.

**What happened when you started to rebel more, with the long hair and music?**

When I did start getting things the way I wanted, my dad stopped my allowance, which wasn’t very much anyway. I went and got a paper route, and then I started stealing film posters off train station walls. I got Clint Eastwood posters and Bridget Bardot posters that would fetch three shillings in school, so I found a technique of quickly peeling the edges off and, just when the train comes, peeling the whole thing off the wall and getting into the train when it started moving. I’d take them into school the next day to sell. I forged the headmaster’s signature on dinner tickets as well. This is grand larceny we’re talking about here.

**What were you listening to besides pop?**

I did listen to a bit of Bach, I seem to like baroque music, there was a thread of that. I’ll tell you what else I listened to, my mum was a bit of a singer herself, and she liked lots of Hollywood musicals and West-End musicals, and Broadway musicals and we had quite a few of those around. We had things like My Fair Lady and Sound of Music. A big one I liked was Carousel. My parents were fond of musical comedy as well, so I wasn’t just fed a diet of pop music. We didn’t have much classical music around, they weren’t classical music type of people.

**Do you think the musicals had any impact on how you wrote songs at any point?**

Musicals. Broadway musicals, I think they had an immense effect on me, because I had this way of writing a song, and I still put melodies in there and interesting changes and people in pop music sometimes find these changes very strange but these are the kind of things that go on in musicals. I didn’t listen to them intentionally; I picked them up by osmosis.

**For so many adolescents the appeal of rock—**

I was more of a pop fan than a rock fan, and I didn’t like what was called the rhythm and blues stuff. I was an unrepentant pop music fan.

**What do you think is the major difference between pop and rock?**

Pop has a bit of fun in it, a lightness of touch, and it isn’t afraid to make a fool of itself. It finishes in about three minutes, whereas rock occasionally imitates the classical, rock has a pomposity about it, a self-importance, an angst that I think some people use as a therapy exercise judging by some of it.

**So in your experience pop was therapeutic?**

I liked a lot of American bubblegum in 1968; “Gimme Gimme Good Loving,” “Yummy Yummy Yummy I got Love in my Tummy,” I thought they were big, I thought they were clever. There was other stuff that I thought was just a bit silly, I did also listen to Spirit, which I liked...I mean the thing about the Yanks, I mean you cherished Americans, cousins of ours, is that you make bloody good pop music. You do pop, you do it better than us. I mean, it sounds sophisticated. I mean, Bacharach, for instance. Or The Carpenters—we didn’t have anything like that.

**I read a lot of things saying you didn’t become quite the pop star you imagined yourself to be. Can you talk a bit about that?**I certainly didn't and it probably saved my life. When I was a kid I thought I’d turn out to be a poet or a writer. When you’re a teenager you get very blinkered, you think, “I'm gonna be a pop star, I’m gonna be a pop star” and you repeat this mantra to yourself and you don't know how you're gonna do it, and then you're in your mid 20s and you think “Am I?” I think it would have been a very bad thing if I got the sort of fame I thought I wanted.

**Why?**

It would have destroyed me or just debase what talent I had. I'm still going now, I still like what I do. I know people more famous than me and they're kinda burned out. They got very jaundiced against the business, jaundiced against their own creativity. I still wake up in the morning with “Wow, it’s late, let's make a track,” and I think I’m very lucky to always be able to do that. I mean it’s Wednesday, I have two more days to work on the album. No one can stop me, I don’t have to go to work, I have enough money coming in.

**I read somewhere you started writing songs around 14. What were those first songs like?**

I can probably still sing you a couple of my old songs, occasionally they come back to me. I found one I wrote when I was 18 called The Summer Tamarind. It was the last one I did for Cherry Red. I found the lyrics and I thought, this is actually quite good, so we burned it on the album. It was weird, recording something I had written when I was 18. I could remember right from when I was six making up little songs in my head, but not knowing how or why the tunes would come fully formed. I thought I was mad, then words started to form around the tunes, and that really alarmed me. I thought, no one must ever know I’m doing this, they’ll take me away or something. The kind of people I knew at the time, my parents’ generation, they probably would have done exactly that. I don’t know, I think it was written in me, like black pool is written into seaside rock. I kept diaries, I was always writing things.

D**o you remember your first experience playing with a band?**

I’d done gigs before where there are just some guys up on a stage, the lights blazing, and everyone's playing everything and it’s a mess, but this was a rehearsed band. The gig was at a girls' school, and I thought, "Wow, is this what its always like? Loads of girls trying to break down the door and get at you?" Of course that’s not what it’s like all the time, sometimes you're playing in a room with men looking at you like they want to kill you.

**Did you have the same excitement when you started playing with Plod and your later bands?**

I loved that first few months [of playing] toward the end of my teenage years. I was working and not being too much of a bad boy, I think I would have been just coming up to about 18. After that I slipped into a drug pit that lasted till I was nearly 20.

**Why do you think you slipped into it? Was there anything that initiated that?**

I don’t like to analyze these things too deeply, mostly we’re the architect of our own doom aren't we? I had a few disadvantages and I might have taken a couple of wrong turns, I should have been concentrating on playing in the band, and maybe not hanging around with the whole hippie movement. The whole thing was very inclusive, when you have the hippie movement and the punk movement, they both tended to drag in some genuine casualties and some genuine destructos. You ended up all thrown together in a teenage maelstrom, but you never really found out who was--it was hard to pick out the truly creative, good people from the people who were just pretending, or just being out there. Everyone was out of their head anyways, that happens in teenage years.

**Do you think success is received differently in England than in other countries?**

I don’t think it’s the same in America, not to the degree it is here. If you're good, people will tell you that you're not good, they will tell you that you're not as good as you think, because if you start to move at all, it emphasizes their own status; it shows that they're not moving, and that makes everyone very uncomfortable. In England you do not blow your own trumpet. People won't clap you on the back or shake your hand. Generally, any [success] causes rancor and resentment. It's taken me all the way to age 60 to learn that. It's a quality of mine that has always been a bit of a problem, this naiveté. I tend to believe in people, I tend to believe that people are what they say they are but they aren’t always.You might not be the most famous pop star, but you’d certainly stick out on the block.

**You could be the most famous gardener.**

I remember once I was cutting a hedge in between two professional gardeners, and these three Italian girls walk by and say to me, "Are you Martin Newell?" and I said, "Yes," and they produced these books and records and I had to wipe my hands of dirt and sign them, and someone says, "What's that about?" And I said, "I probably sold some records and books abroad again." For years I lived here and some people just thought I played in a little pop group that wasn’t doing very well, and they were right, but I think they didn’t realize that we were also quite well known. The English are like that, especially the ones my age. Now that it’s out because of the internet, so many people here are astonished.

**Do you have an advice for kids who want to follow a similar path in writing or playing in a band?**

Yes, I do. Go to college and become a plumber. And that house in the country that you promised your Mum and sisters, you'll be able to do that in four years, because everyone needs a plumber but nobody needs a poet or a pop star [laughs]. I wish I'd been a plumber. Your toilet's backed up, what are you going to do? Call the poet? You don’t call a comedian when the sewers are backing up. I'd say what my Mum said to me, and what I never believed: get a nice little job that you can make a little bit of money doing. Gardening is good, lawn dog I think you call it in America? Someone who goes and mows lawns and trims hedges. Be a lawn dog.