

An AMPLIFIED LIFE



A man of many ambitions, guitarist and singer-songwriter Simon Campbell doesn't believe in the quiet life. As he prepares to unleash his first solo album, *ThirtySix*, the helmsman of Simon Campbell and The Very Very Bad Men reveals his passions, dissects the Isle's music scene and explains to Liz Corlett why he loves being scared...

The first time we sit down to talk, Simon Campbell proudly shows off his latest baby: a 1956 Gretsch double-necked lap steel guitar, the physical embodiment of traditional country music.

It's a new purchase which he has yet to master but he is clearly as excited at the challenge as he is besotted with the instrument.

When we meet for the second time, a number of weeks later, Simon's plan to become the new Gram Parsons has

been shelved in favour of an electronica project. Kraftwerk are namechecked and the history of the theremin comes briefly under the spotlight.

His enthusiasms might swing with the weather vane but one point of consistency becomes apparent on only a brief acquaintance: if Simon Campbell wants to make something happen, it will happen.

Having first picked up a guitar at the age of 16, Simon went on to make his mark in several commercially

successful UK rock and blues outfits over a period of three decades, an often turbulent musical path running parallel to his evolving business career and home life.

In 2008, Simon relocated to the Isle of Man with his wife Angela and, through immersion in the local music scene, formed ferocious blues-rock trio The Very Very Bad Men, now widely-known on the Isle's gig circuit.

Now 53, an age at which more sedentary types are inclined to move down a gear, Simon is embarking on a brand new leg of his musical journey by releasing his first solo album, *ThirtySix*, a collection dedicated, neatly enough, to the first 36 years of the journey.

"I finished with my last serious band in the UK in 2000", says Simon, "I'd got bored of playing live but I still wrote and observed. A lot of the lyrics on *ThirtySix* had been gestating over a ten-year period."

Recorded at Gracieland Studios in Rochdale with a team of session musicians hand-picked from "amongst people I've known all my life", the songs on *ThirtySix* run from righteous, driving rockers to soulful, after-hours blues numbers. The influences are clear – Santana, Neil Young, Peter Green - but it's also an album which takes after its creator: a chameleon who wears his heart on his sleeve.

Simon, who lives on the seafront at Bay Ny Carrickey, holds back nothing in his praise for his Isle home. He has chosen Peel's Centenary Centre as the venue for the *ThirtySix* launch gig, which takes place on 26th March, explaining, "It's going to feature as many of the session musicians from the album as possible."

"It would probably have been more sensible to do the launch in the UK – certainly less expensive – but I love the Isle of Man. It's our home now, and I'm proud to call it so".

When he was still fairly new to the Isle, Simon saw AC/DC tribute band Little Bit O'Rosie in the Bay Hotel and was inspired to set the wheels in motion for his own group: "I made connections through the 'Manxbands' website and hooked up with Steve Rowe, who is one of the best bass players on the Island." With drummer Nick Collings on board, The Very Very Bad Men were up and running, plying original material by Simon cut with a couple of covers. Led Zeppelin typically turn up on the set list because "I love them, always have done. Jimmy Page is the riffmaster: he's where I learnt all that from".

Page is the closest Campbell has come to a tutor, confessing that he never learned to read music ("I'm used to winging it"). Passion bordering on obsession has been his closest ally - "if I start doing something, it takes over my life" - along with an almost bullish eagerness to put himself on the line: "I love collaborations. Working with people. I love being scared – that's why I can and will play with anyone".

With this attitude, it is unsurprising that the Salford Chemistry graduate reserves his greatest impatience for musicians who shy away from experimentation, staying instead within their own comfort zone. It's a particularly tender trap in a small, culturally isolated community like the Isle of Man, he believes. "In a lot of ways, the Isle is not a good creative environment. There's no cross-pollination, very little unorganised music and the bands mostly play covers.

"And there's a lack of proper critique which is destructive to a band's development; there's no spur to improve and progress". Just when I'm wondering whether or not Simon has a morning ferry lined up, he changes tack: "That said, the Isle of Man does have a wonderfully creative atmosphere, if people want to be inspired by it."



"And I applaud anyone who does original music on the Isle of Man. The likes of Uber Room, Grambo, Anna Goldsmith, Christy DeHaven, Truman Falls and Planes Over Paris, amongst others, who I think are excellent".

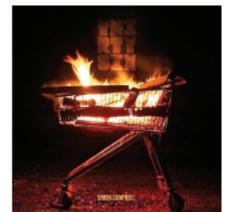
What advice would he give to young musicians on the Isle? "Get off it, for a start. I would say, learn your craft and just get out there; put your aspirations in the context of the wider world."

Having been 'out there' – an experience which included touring extensively in the UK and Europe and, in the late 80s, with the group Little Brother, accepting a £500,000 advance ("a lot of money back then") and a three-album deal from a major record company – Simon acknowledges that "only a very small percentage make it".

Would he like to have tasted more high profile success? "Oh yes, of course..." - he is quiet for a beat or two - "but then again, I feel sorry for the people who have major success then wander in the wilderness. There are more people killed by fame than drugs." I ask him whether he was ever in danger of coming undone, and he cheerfully admits, "Almost certainly. Without Angela, I'd be a drug-crazed wreck – or I'd be dead!".

Whatever black holes he might have missed by a whisker, Simon, in common with one of his heroes, Neil Young, comes across as one of life's survivors, kept vigorous by a creative restlessness and an insatiable curiosity for music new and old. While, of all his guitars, his "sentimental favourite" is the 1974 Gibson Flying 'V' his mum bought for him when he was 17, his musical saviours on a desert island would be Radiohead - "In Rainbows is my favourite album of all time. If I were stranded and had all the Radiohead albums, I'd be ok".

A strong survival instinct isn't the only trait he shares with Neil Young; there's the attitude too. When I ask him what his ambitions are for *ThirtySix*, he says, "To go out, play festivals and get a following who are really into their music....but at 53, quite frankly, I don't give a **** whether people like it or not. I just want to be remembered for music. For playing great things".



The *ThirtySix* album launch (featuring support from The Very Very Bad Men and Christy De Haven) takes place at Peel's Centenary Centre on 26th March 2011. For more information, visit www.simoncampbell.com