

PLAYBOY LIFE HAS NO REWARDS

Mick Hucknall was as famous for his hedonistic lifestyle — and fiery temper — as he was for topping the charts with Simply Red

He reflects on the demons that drove him to the brink — and the love that saved him. Interview by *Rob McGibbon*. Portrait by *Dean Chalkley*



The cartoon-sized diamond in Mick Hucknall's tooth sparkles as he laughs lightly. He is known for being prickly and unnecessarily blunt, but today he's relaxed and open. Physically speaking, he cuts quite an image. The diamond tooth, the gangly frame, grey shreds of a goatee set against an unlikely orange tangle of Medusa curls. Then there's the penetrating eyes and the sense of simmering volatility. Give him a sword and a fur cloak and he'd look at home in an episode of *Game of Thrones*. Yet the voice is gentle, full of soft Rs.

"Life is good," he says, clutching his vape. "I lead a relaxed and quiet life. To be honest, I just feel lucky to still be here. I'm in a high-casualty business." He's not exaggerating.

Hucknall's band, Simply Red, is releasing *Blue Eyed Soul*, its first new album in four years. He says the songs tumbled out over the past 18 months as a refuge from the hell of Brexit and politics generally.

"People seem to be reaching a point of explosion and I was just using the music to say, God, get me out of here, I don't wanna talk about it, or think about it. It is an awful time. I feel like we are in the abyss."

Hucknall knows a thing or two about the abyss. His mother, Maureen, walked out when he was three, leaving his father to bring him up alone in their little semi in Denton, east Manchester. Hucknall's childhood was constantly edged with difficulty. "We were on the breadline. I was near the bottom of the barrel," he says. Wary of this cocky child with the unconventional home life, some parents would tell their kids to stay away from him. "They would say, 'Don't play with him, he's not normal. He's trouble... he's troubled.' I was only seven or eight when I heard that."

The pain continued at grammar school, where Hucknall was bullied mercilessly because of his red hair. His strict teachers weren't much kinder. He finally found freedom studying art at Manchester Polytechnic and solace in music. The second song he wrote, aged 17, was *Holding Back the Years*, which was released by his first serious band, the Frantic Elevators, but flopped without trace.

I hand Hucknall a small, immaculately preserved black-and-white flyer that I unearthed many years ago while writing a book about him. It's for one of Simply Red's earliest gigs at the Tropicana nightclub in Manchester in November 1984. This was the gig that ultimately got them a record deal.

Their debut album, *Picture Book*, followed a year later. A revised version of *Holding Back the Years* eventually went to No 1 in America and No 2 in the UK. Hucknall was now famous and had the keys to the candy store. The poor kid from Denton locked himself inside and devoured everything with ravenous delight for the



FAMILY AFFAIR From top: as a child, with his father, Reg; with his wife, Gabriella, 2017

next 15 years. Numerous other albums followed, including the freight train that was *Stars* in 1991. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Mick was rarely without an attractive model or actress on his arm, most notably Helena Christensen and Catherine Zeta-Jones. He has always maintained a certain gentlemanly discretion about those times, but the headlines following an interview he gave in 2010 were impossible to ignore. They declared that he'd slept with 3,000 women in a few years and that he wanted to apologise to all of them. This, he says, was taken wildly out of context.

"It is just not what I said," he says with stoic resignation. "I had said, 'In the crazy days, it was screaming girls everywhere and it felt like you were sleeping with three women a day.' It wasn't *literally* that. Later in the interview, I said I had blown about four or five really good relationships. I felt

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sorry about that. In fact, I want to apologise to those girls. One section of the interview was conflated with another and it went out of control. I couldn't say anything without making it worse."

So what are the real numbers, I ask, shamelessly. "I have no idea," he says flatly. "I don't put chips on the bedposts. I haven't a clue, and have never thought about calculating. Anybody who knows me knows that I do not treat or talk about women like that, not even among friends in pubs."

I wonder if the #MeToo movement worried him, the thought that one of his past encounters might come back to bite him? "I have always believed in a woman's choice. It is basically up to them. I don't force myself on anybody. I don't impose. It is a two-way street and the interaction has to go two ways. I have never been concerned by that at all because I just don't play that game. I am not built that way."

Does he miss those crazy days? "God, no! You're joking. I don't miss it one bit."

How bad did it get? "I was really unhappy from about 1996 to 1999. I don't know if I was depressed, but that was the worst time of my life since school. I was really close to losing the plot and I just pulled myself back. I realised I couldn't go on like this, rolling out of nightclubs at 4am every morning, week on week, basically wandering around like a playboy. I would have burnt out.

"It's fun for a while, then it gets boring and is just emptiness, with no rewards. There is no substance to it. You are on a treadmill of excess — of sex, drugs and rock 'n'roll. For me, it was just basically a lot of alcohol. You either decide to stay on it and go out with a bang, or you decide to find something else that is more enriching."

He says he has an innate discipline instilled in him by his dad that kept him from going under. Did he do drugs as well as alcohol? "Much like every other musician, I have tried everything." Heroin? "Yep, years ago. I was living with an addict after I graduated. I was only there for 2½ weeks and I tried it. Smoked it. I felt woozy and threw up. It wasn't for me."

Cocaine? "Yeah. I have been around it all my working life, but it was not my thing. Cocaine, to me, is one of the most pointless drugs of all time. It just makes you feel like wood." He re-enacts the effects by sitting bolt upright, eyes and nostrils bulging, as if he's been jabbed with a cattle prod. "I just go completely numb and every time I tried it I'd think, 'Why did you do this? Ugh.'"

I'm keen to know if there was a Damascene moment that pushed him off the treadmill. Obviously I'm hoping for a suitably debauched anecdote, one that can make us all tut. He ponders and then lights on millennium night, when he performed two shows — firstly at Greenwich for a global TV audience in the hundreds of millions, and then for the Queen and the great and the good at the Dome. ➤➤➤

“We were allowed to party in rooms reserved for the Queen,” he recalls. “After that night, I remember thinking, ‘You have the potential to maintain a respectable career, or go down the tubes, fizzle out and end up lonely and unhappy, what’s it going to be?’ I thought, ‘Get it together, dude.’ It was the end of an era, the time was right, and slowly I started to emerge out of that to find a new future.”

When most rock stars make a change, they go into rehab, but Mick started by rejigging his “frivolous” dental jewellery. The ruby that had been his emblem for 15 years was replaced with the diamond on show today. He obligingly lifts his upper lip when I ask for a closer look.

The new future came in the shape of an old flame — Gabriella Wesberry. They had dated before in the mid-1990s, but the pressures of the pop star life had been too great and the relationship had fallen apart. They began seeing each other again in 2002, moved in together soon after and eventually married in 2010.

He uses words such as “fantastic” and “amazing” when talking about his wife. I have met her fleetingly twice and she seems lovely. Full of good humour and warmth. Basically, she saved him. “A whole new world began,” he remembers. “Instead of a destructive future, it became positive and productive, based on happiness.”

Their daughter, Romy True, was born in 2007. She’s 12 now and has inherited her dad’s shock of red locks and is showing a flair for art. Home is a sprawling house by a golf course in Surrey. It has its own small lake, some land and a recording studio. They have a dog, a coton de Tuléar bitch called Pip.

Some eyebrows were raised when Hucknall initially announced he was hanging up his partying boots. He recalls George Michael having a pop. “I read somewhere that he said, ‘Oh, he’s gone off and done this family thing.’ I remember feeling very sad for him because I thought, ‘And you’re not. Where are you going with this?’ I always got on really well with him, he was a very talented guy, so it was so sad to see the decline.”

Having a child was such a seismic event for Hucknall that he shut the door on the music business after Romy arrived. “I wanted to be there in the way that my dad was there for me every day,” he says. “He was Superman and did everything. I have been there for Romy on a daily basis and I feel wonderfully rewarded that I have been able to experience watching this kid grow and develop.”

Hucknall’s father, Reg, lived long enough to see his son enjoy family happiness, but died suddenly from a heart attack in 2009. Hucknall was devastated. “I adored my father. The commitment that this guy gave to me was absolutely extraordinary. I have never forgotten it and I admire him



WILD THING From top: meeting the Princess of Wales with George Michael, 1993; in Los Angeles, 1987; on stage in Chicago, 1986

enormously. His ashes are in the lake at the front of the house. My dad loved fishing, so the idea of him being in water really appealed. He is omnipresent and I see him every day. I also had a diamond made out of some of the ashes. I kiss it every now and again.”

Mick is not even sure if his mother is still alive. In 1998 he flew to visit her in Dallas, where she lived at the time, after she had contacted him out of the blue. What was it

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like meeting her again? “Pretty much like talking to a complete stranger,” he says indifferently. “I didn’t really get that much out of it and I didn’t see any future in it because I didn’t want to hurt my dad. Imagine bringing this person into your life. He’d be like, ‘Oh thanks, great. So yer mum’s back is she?’ He didn’t say that, but I knew it was hurting him and I just thought it is not worth it. You reward the person that’s been good to you.”

I challenge Mick about his notorious irascibility. He accepts he can be tough and puts much of it down to his upbringing, which was largely devoid of polite niceties. He was used to people being mean, so he learnt to bite back twice as hard. “I can be fiery,” he admits. “I am very passionate, but I don’t think of myself as arrogant. I don’t think I am superior to anybody else. One of the characteristics I don’t like is false modesty, when people feign, ‘Who, me?’ I do my job and I am good at what I do.”

Hucknall will be 60 next June. He likes spending his days quietly at home, having a rant on Twitter — mainly swearing about the Tories and Labour — walking the dog, then cooking dinner and opening a bottle of fine wine from his cellar. He regularly posts his tippie — often a stellar label from the 1980s or 1990s — and super-rich meal on Instagram. I say I worry about his boozing and diet, but he protests. “I’m a moderate drinker and a bottle lasts me a couple of days. I’ll have half a bottle a night, max. I’m also dry and vegetarian two days a week.”

How does he feel about being an ageing rocker? “It is what it is. I’m just glad that I am around to celebrate it. My biggest joy is that I can still sing, that I have not lost my voice. A lot of singers lose it, whether through cocaine or tobacco. I actually don’t talk much, so it gets rested a lot.”

We talk some more about the new album and Mick draws my attention to the track Complete Love. He tells me that it was inspired by a lyric from Nat King Cole’s Nature Boy: “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.” Hucknall explains: “I realise now, thanks to my family, that I really know that I have been loved.” He repeats it slowly with emphasis, as if to anchor the sentiment: “That I have been loved. It’s a great feeling for me personally. It makes you feel you have a treasure inside you.

“My father was old school and didn’t show much emotion, so I didn’t really have that connection in an intimate, affectionate way.” Is he really saying this is the first time he has felt loved? “Yeah,” he says with finality. That’s quite something coming from a man who has been adored by so many for so long ■

Simply Red’s new album, Blue Eyed Soul, is out on November 8. The band will tour the UK in October 2020. Visit simplyred.com