**4 Years Ahead Of His Time: Stewart Lee & Michael Cumming talk about King Rocker, Robert Lloyd and The Nightingales.**

My interview slot at the Sea Change festival, where I’m to talk to comedian Stewart Lee and director Michael Cumming Brass Eye, Toast of London about their new documentary King Rocker, a film about underappreciated Birmingham post punk survivors The Nightingales and their long/still standing leader Robert Lloyd, is pushed back an hour. That’s a common enough occurrence, but what’s odd is that the reason for the push back is so that Stewart and Michael can interview John Robb, for the film I am here to talk to them about. Yes, the film is not finished. Stewart and Michael have come to Dartington and Totnes, for the fourth edition of Sea Change, to present a work in progress of the film to audiences and drum up support to finish it. The film has been largely made possible by crowdfunding donations and as the interview below details, has been a journey of happenstance and discovery, rather than a cold and calculated effort.

The 25 minutes of footage screened at Sea Change is a delight. It’s funny, insightful, inventive and captures the essence of Lloyd as a person and performer, past and present. It was a real honour to talk to Lee and Cumming about the project and I can’t wait to see the finished film, especially after being privy to the rooftop interview with John Robb that will form part of it, directly after the shooting of which, this interview took place.

**Do you remember when The Nightingales came into your life?**

Stewart Lee: For me it was hearing them on John Peel. They were one of those bands he played so much that in the end you got it whether you were initially resistant or not. What about you?

Michael Cumming: Yes. John Peel. And, I was lucky to have a mate at school who had this compilation album that Cherry Red put out, Pillows & Prayers, and they had a song on there and we all honed in on our different things. My mate Lou was obsessed by The Nightingales.

**Why make a film about them? No one has ever really talked about them in the way they talk about Wire or Gang of Four**

SL: Only us. When Rob [Lloyd] said about making a film I thought “well I can't film it and who do I know that would want to do this?” Because you never meet anyone [who likes the band] .We [Stewart and Michael] had known each other on and off for a long time and then I found out that we both liked them…

MC:…I think we had a conversation about doing it, but maybe it was The Fall, and we both had a genuine interest in that. It's hard to say. One of the great things about The Nightingales, I think, is that often they've been the band that only you like and nobody else has heard of. So that's a good thing, but it's also obviously not great.

SL: It's probably quite a good thing for a film.

MC: Yeah

SL: You're not watching and thinking ‘’oh yeah, but then they went on to become famous, or then it didn't work out” because no one knows anything about it. So you watch the film clean I think.

**Is that who it is for then? Is that the purpose of the film?**

SL: It would be good if people had never heard of them and watched it.

MC: Hopefully it'll be interesting and people will come to it from Stewart's work or maybe from my work and go “well what's this?”

SL: It got laughs in the screening just now at the points where it's supposed to be funny from people, most of whom wouldn't know them. Comedy is a good Trojan horse for these things.

**You're not laughing at them but you're using comedy as a way to get into this strange story**

SL: We didn’t want to do what Rob said initially, which was to make it like Anvil [Anvil: The Story of Anvil, a 2008 documentary about an unsuccessful heavy metal band], with these losers and nothing works out for them and I thought well, that's one way of looking at it but actually you could say it has worked out for you because you’re still going after 40 years. Nick Saloman from the Bevis Frond, this psychedelic band, is always complaining that it hasn’t worked out and I think, you haven’t worked for 30 years and you tour Europe and you put all your own records out and you're not running at a loss. I don’t understand at what point it is considered to be a success. That to me means, compared to 99.9% of other bands, you've made it.

**I guess they saw their peers get put on T-shirts in Topshop and featured on film soundtracks so maybe there was a sense of we're not quite there yet**

MC: But it’s hard to sustain something like that, it's hard to keep a band going for all those years. Rob may have a casual demeanour but he's very on it and he works at it.

SL: We went round to his house and all the lyrics are organised in all these folders and he's got this library of books that obviously influence what he's doing and he's got a real system and he's kept everything.

MC: Yes, he's more organised than he appears

**The Anvil comparison suggests that he's got an idea about how he wants to do this film. He is clearly thinking about what it’s going to look like.**

MC: The difference is he doesn't sit there and go “why aren't I as successful as Gang of Four?”

SL: Well he did once.

MC: Maybe he did once

SL: We were at his house near Wellington in Shropshire and he started off down that track. And then he realised what he was doing and he went “Oh no. Why haven't I got a major record label deal? It's so unfair”. He realised he was about to start sounding like that and his own inner sense of self-parody kicked in. Then we had a really good laugh about it and I was making fun of him for it and going [adopts faux TV voiceover tone] “in his most revealing interview to date”. He realised that he was about to sound like one of those people, which means he probably doesn't sound like that very often. It was unusual

MC: It was unusual and that was in the context of him talking about when he had his solo deal with Virgin Records. It was supposed to be a two-album deal but then they didn't carry it on and he didn't get to do the second album. He recorded the demos though, and they were great. What set him off was the fact that, after that blow, for a while he just couldn't be bothered anymore. He just thought “I'll just be a postman”.

SL: He’s still got postman shoes. And he carries all the merch around in Royal Mail postal sacks…

MC: …and has an encyclopedic knowledge of East London streets...

SL:… and the people that were on his rounds. Some of them we’re trying to get in touch with. He used to deliver to Stuart Home and Julie Christie. We’ve been in touch with Julie Christie’s agent but I don't think she's interested in coming and talking about her old postman that she used to have a chat with…

MC: And Occasionally Gilbert & George apparently.

**This leads me on to the talking about the form the film is taking and how it’s grown and is growing. In some respects it feels to me like an Andrew Kötting film.**

SL: [to Michael] Do you know Andrew Kötting’s stuff?

MC: Not as well as I should.

SL: I know Andrew, I've been to stay with him in the Pyrenees…

**…and you were in Swandown.**

SL: Yeah, Swandown**.** What he does, that we’ve also done, though not in the same way, is that he starts with an idea and sometimes things happen and the film has to go in a different direction because of that…

**…and the making of the film is part of the film**

SL: Yeah, I hadn't thought of that because Andrew's films are more self consciously artistic and he will deliberately deteriorate film, he uses sound from different parts of the film in other areas of it. Sometimes it's not clear whether the film was a film in and of itself or a documentation of an event. I do love his films, but if this has come out like that it's just because we are working on no budget like him. And you're free enough to just go off on a dog's leg. Our biggest spend will be if we go to Malta to interview 1970s sex comedy star Robin Askwith.

MC**:** Almost from day one we said we don't really know what's going to happen. There's no point in researching this. In fact what we did first was we sat down with Rob in an Indian restaurant for two or three hours and filmed that conversation and then things started to grow from that. We can’t afford a researcher. We know a bit about it but no one really knows anything about it.

SL: When we were at this King Kong statue in the Lake District the other day, it was while looking at that, that he started talking about having a shower with Robin Askwith, which is a really good little story but it was never in the mix before. I can imagine it being a bit like the end of The Shawshank Redemption where Morgan Freeman walks along the beach to meet Andy, I'm not trying to tell Mike how to set the shot up, but Rob walking along a Maltese beach to meet Askwith and Askwith having some kind of advice about showbiz…

MC: …whereas I just thought we'd have them both naked in the shower. What was great about that is he said that to us while we were shooting at the Kong statue. On the way back to London on the train Stewart knocked up an email that could be sent to Robin Askwith. He sent it to me and I remembered that I knew a guy who'd recently interviewed him [Askwith], so I sent it via him and by Saturday morning, one day later, Robin Askwith replied and said “yeah, I'll be in your documentary”.

SL: James [Nicholls, label boss at Fire Records who are producing the film] wants to get it in for film festivals in the autumn so there is a cut off point to finishing it, which is good. Otherwise as you can imagine, every time he suddenly remembers something “oh yeah, I used to be in The Osmonds” you've got to go.

**A lot of this is mythmaking, which is so central to rock and roll, but it’s also from a different time. It’s different now. This was pre-internet. Is part of this project capturing stories…**

SL:…stories that can’t be confirmed yeah because they were never documented.

**No one came on Twitter right away and said it didn't happen. With the film you're creating this myth from all these little things which at the time and individually seem small, but put them all together and it’s a different picture.**

SL There's also very little footage of them from the 80s, which is good in a way because it stops it being a nostalgia fest. There's really only two bits, the [BBC] Arena footage and a bit of German telly footage that we found that's really good actually.

MC: Having said that, the fact that they were documented on Arena means that they were taken seriously at that point. That’s a great film. It's actually a film about John Peel but they devoted quite a lot of time to The Nightingales. Of that era there's not much else there, and there's not much after that really apart from the fantastic Razzmatazz [1980s TV music show] footage of Ted Chippington and Fuzzbox [all performing under the name Vindaloo Summer Special]…

SL:…On kid’s telly

MC: The clip is on YouTube and it's marvelous. Being interviewed by [David] Kid Jensen.

**How important is it for you to be formally inventive when making this film? So many music documentaries are the same, but your film seems to be capturing what’s interesting and inventive about the band by using your own forms of inventiveness**

SL: That's very kind of you. We were lucky that a couple of things happened in the early stages. The second day of filming we did was when The Nightingales went to 6Music and Marc Riley somehow included me in the conversation, which meant that I was able to be filmed talking about the fact that we were making this documentary.

MC: It wasn't a plan but we thought, they were playing 6Music, it would be great to interview Marc Riley because he knows a lot about the band. Then that became, well actually, why not mention it on the show, it's great publicity for the film. The fact then that the interview about the film is in the film, from that other things spring off.

SL: You can do this a lot, there are bits in interviews where you will say to the interviewee “all right, don't worry we can cut straight out of this into talking to Frank Skinner”, or something, so I suppose there’s a sort of improvisation happening.

MC: And that's very much Stewart’s thing that he does. And the sort of things I'm interested in, and have always been interested in, have done those sort of things so it’s obvious that it’s probably how it would go.

SL: It's also from watching loads of them [music documentaries] and thinking what you don’t want it to be. Rob was really keen early on for not it to be loads of old men remembering things. He wanted lots of different kinds of people talking, though he does keep suggesting more and more old men.

**Hence trying to get to Julie Christie**

SL: It’s probably better to have Julie Christie than a load of people who remember being at a pub in Birmingham in 1978 watching The Prefects [the precursor band to The Nightingales]. I watched a documentary about The Saints and it was full of archive clips. It was paid for by ABC [Australian Broadcaster], who probably own all that stuff. We've had certain restrictions forced on us because we don't have that kind of money. The Arena clip and those BBC clips [the film includes local news and documentary footage for context] tripled in price in the last 18 months because they've all been bought by Getty. I really want to get hold of even just a few seconds of the major label videos that Fuzzbox did, because they're so glamorous, but we just might not be able to.

**Birmingham features strongly and has been mentioned quite a lot, the film feels like it’s as much about place as anything else. A lot of the great music documentaries are rooted in place, they say ‘these people came from this place’**

SL: We had that in the back of our mind. When we went to Wellington, where Rob lives now, in Shropshire, There was a really old way marker on the road, you know saying London 120 miles or whatever, and that was a good thing to show, that it's different where he is now. You go up on the hills and he's removed from everything. And, we were just trying to get out with the ape [the aforementioned King Kong statue] and in different sorts of places. When trying to get a feel for Birmingham Rob did a really good walking tour and again that became funny because he was going “this used to be Barbarella’s and this used to be The Roxy or whatever it was called” and then in the end we were just standing by some dustbins…

MC: …it was starting to sound like what all the other documentaries do so we thought we better not do that

SL: So we were just looking in bins and stuff

MC: He was very good actually. He was really funny when he and Stewart did exactly the same line in about different 10 places about where legendary Barbarella’s where such great bands played, was

SL: And the viewer won't know which one of those places, if any, was the legendary Barbarella’s…

MC:…and who cares?

SL: Who gives a fuck? All those things with some old bloke standing outside some place that’s not there, it’s like Spinal Tap “Don’t look for it, it's not there anymore”. Rob’s not precious. He’s open to the idea of satirizing the idea of the rockumentary.

**And music documentaries normally are essentially a performance. You're not watching the real people, you are watching them presenting themselves in a certain way. In King Rocker, when it’s Stewart and Rob just talking in the café, it’s interesting because Rob isn’t like that, he’s not performing. Those are often the best parts of music documentaries, where you see someone surrounded by the artifice of the film and the cameras just being themselves and not engaging with it, even momentarily**

MC: Although, there was a lot of artifice there [in the café] and I think he was quite uncomfortable about it and we were all quite uncomfortable because we didn't know what it was going to be. That was our first day. We didn't know him, Stewart had met him a bit but I didn't really know him and we had to tread a little bit carefully

SL: There are other bits though where he's not guarded at all and I don't know if we can really use them because it’s incoherent in the way that people are when they are not thinking self consciously about presenting their story

**And that's where you are at the moment? Trying to work out what the final film is going to look like?**

MC: We’ve got a skeleton. We roughly know what the story is but what's great is that things can still come on board and shape it.

SL: It organized itself better than we realized it would when it became clear from talking to Rob that there is a period between about 1995 and 2001 where he was a bit adrift and we can't get much information about it from him. People allude to it rather darkly. What that's given to us is the bit [in biographical tales] that you have to come back from. It's the classic structure of any story and it gets us to this line-up of the band, where it feels like a victory because they're very good.

**I just saw some of their set here. They seem comfortable together, and tight, and like a band.**

MC: And they’re a band that doesn't stop for applause either, which is great. They just plough through it all.

SL: They're very good, but there's a period at the end of the last century, start of this century, where no one really knew where he was or what he was doing. We’ve still got to go to East London and film where he lived and what was going on. He writes songs that are clearly about that period. He's written a song called ‘Born and Bred in Birmingham’ which is clearly about a man hanging around pubs in London, being a professional Midlander, and acting up to a stereotype of a funny bloke not from London that means he gets free drinks off people, whilst at the same time hating what he's doing. He won't articulate that himself. Between what he does say and what's in the songs, you can piece it all together.

MC: He is smart enough to have realised that he was going to turn into a fuck up if he didn't pull himself together and so he did, whereas a lot of stories end before there.

**And it means the comeback is about survival. It’s not the traditional story of coming back to acclaim. It’s just, let’s keep doing it.**

MC: Yeah, that's it. And to keep going with young, fresh musicians who can inject something new into it, which it needs.

SL: A one point we were going to see if we could get them on the bill when The Buzzcocks were playing the Royal Albert Hall, they used to tour together really early on, so that we would have a film of them in a big place looking like a success. But actually, they're not. It hasn't really happened for them. And it would only have happened if we'd forced it to happen. Like when David Attenborough makes the animals do stuff.

**Did you go back to Wellington?**

SL: Rob lives in Wellington now, and I was born there. We tried a parodic thing. I went to what was then an orphanage, where I was born. A place for unmarried mothers. We did this thing, it might be an incidental thing…

MC:… it'll be in and people will cry when they see it. The way Stewart did it was to deliberately say, this is a point that has some poignancy…

SL:…A device. To create emotional content.

**Cry now everyone.**

SL: Yeah yeah. It was good fun though. It was quite therapeutic. I had to walk down the driveway to the place, like people do in documentaries, looking at it and thinking about my life…

MC:…and I made him cry on camera.

SL: So it was funny to do that, although I expect psychologically that indicates even further suppression of the trauma, to go there and ridicule it.

MC: But it is funny that you were born in the place where Rob’s ended up…

SL:… and I've not been there since.

**This is what made me think of Kötting as well, these tangents, coincidences, all tied to a type of memory, of England past**

SL: It’s Ian Sinclair as well as Kötting and they’ve ended up working together because Ian sees coincidences as jumping off points to create other kinds of stories and I suppose we were doing that to a point. I mean, the stuff about the man who made the King Kong statue being disinherited by Terry Nutkins is just funny, it just is.

MC: Even just the fact that we told that to Rob when we were at the statue, in a moment when we just happened to be filming. I’ve included it in the film.

SL: Have you?

MC: I've even included you going “I mean obviously we can't put in this in the film, but it'd be great if it did go in”. It is only 20 seconds, but, like when you said that today, people go “that's really weird”.

**In the film Rob says “you know, you're overanalyzing this stuff”. Is there a danger that you're trying to just tell everyone how important The Nightingales are and not just let the story and the music speak for itself?**

SL: Yeah but he blocks all that. And also, it creates a character for me doesn't it? Of being this fan, not in a contrived way, but bothering him almost, by asking him about things that he doesn't want to talk about, and seeing meaning where there isn't any. I think he finds me quite irritating sometimes.

MC: Also it's great to put in the bits that probably a more vain man than Stewart would have said “cut that out as I come over as being a bit of an idiot where says you overanalyze things”, but they're great bits to put in because they are moments of levity.

SL: We never got it on film but there’s this one song I really like, ‘Use Your Loaf’, usually about working in a bakery. I thought it was a really interesting metaphor, like the sausage machine in Pink Floyd, you work in the bakery and you have to do this and you have to do that and so I said it's all about the workplace and life in the 70s. And he said, “ I just worked in a bakery, that’s where I got it from. Again, that’s sort of in Spinal Tap isn't it, where Marty DiBergi [the filmmaker in the mockumentary, played by Rob Reiner] becomes more disillusioned with them as he goes along because they're not who he thought they were. He thought they were these Gods and they're just absolute idiots. You haven't got that with Rob at all. He is pretty much who I thought he was.

**That makes him more interesting and more human doesn't it, rather than just a persona. Niall McCann’s film Lost in France, about Chemikal Underground, talks about what was possible in the 80s, in particular the dole, squats, cheap rents in inner cities, This also seems really notable in your film, which seems to say it’s not just these types of people that are being lost but this way of being able to do things is also being lost.**

SL: We see where Rob lived in Birmingham, opposite the pub that was his office, they filmed the Fuzzbox videos in the garden of it. We also go to a place where he maintains he regularly slept when he didn't live anywhere, which was on the forecourt of Bristol Street Motors, a car dealership. He said if you slept under the car that was parked in the right hand corner at the back, the wind and rain wouldn't get in there, and there was a tap on the wall, which he maintains was good for using in the morning if you'd had a particularly messy wank. I think it was exaggerated. I think he was probably sofa surfing and occasionally just chose to sleep under a car rather than go home. But, you could sort of do that then. Now you couldn't, because there's a grill at the front of it.

MC: I think that comes over in the Arena documentary as well. There was a time when you could survive in that world.

SL: With stand up, the first five years my rent was 50 quid a week in a shared house. If you got a paid gig it was a door split, it was cash and you didn’t have to declare it so it was worth twice as much. Now the kids doing stand up do much more cynical, professional things much more quickly because they have to, because they can't spend a long time working out how to make something that doesn't work, work, because they've got to hit the ground running.

MC: And there were other things back then. I started as a director on the government enterprise allowance scheme, with Paul Whitehouse, the people from Viz, Alan McGee. It was a little break, it just gave you a bit of a breather. Those days have gone.