

No Image: A conversation about King Rocker between the Quietus, Stewart Lee, Michael Cumming and Robert Lloyd.

It looks like a music documentary. Look, there's a famous person [Stewart Lee] walking out of a train station telling viewers where they are and why it's important. Now they're telling us what is going on and why we're here. It feels like a music documentary. And King Rocker, Michael Cumming and Stewart Lee's film about Robert Lloyd and The Nightingales is one. It's also not. You'd expect a film by the director of Brass Eye and Toast of London, and the comedian behind some of the most brilliant stand-up ever to come from these shores to be funny and smart but the experience of King Rocker explodes those expectations. It's not hyperbole to say this is one of the best music documentaries of all time. Hilarious and brilliantly knowing about the form of music documentaries and caustic about the music industry and fame, at its moving heart it's a wonderful homage to and portrait of a true outsider artist and inspiring comeback story that in the already boiling maelstrom of 2021 feels profoundly necessary.

The film follows Stewart Lee and Robert Lloyd as they talk about Lloyd's life as front-man and creative driver of post-punk favourites The Prefects and latterly The Nightingales. Through a series of funny and insightful conversations as they hunt down a famous 1970s public art sculpture of King Kong that is central to both men's stories, the pair and assorted friends, acolytes and naysayers including the rest of the band and family members plus Frank Skinner, John Taylor (yep, of Duran Duran), Nigel Slater (!) and Robin Askwith (!! ) discuss the past, the ups, the downs and the hazy memories of it all. All the while, the filmmaking and the participants undercut the experience by constantly referring to the fact that it may all be bollocks and ensuring it never gets anywhere near the sterility that so many other rock docs end up drowning in.

The last 20 minutes bring the story blasting into the present with a call to arms, a strong reminder that there are still indie bands - in the sense of bands who do everything themselves, that are a unit that is self-sufficient - and it challenges the idiotic notion that bands like The Nightingales don't exist anymore. This is not a story about a band who disappeared in the early 80s and you should buy their records that have been reissued. This is a band that's doing it now and is continuing to do it. Or will be when they get to tour new album Four Against Fate, whenever that time comes. The Quietus has been tracking the progress of this film since interviewing Lee and Cumming at 2019's Sea Change festival where they screened a work in progress to raise awareness and funds for the film. Ahead of the film's premiere on Sky Arts, the Quietus caught up with the writer and director, this time with the added bonus of the film's (anti)star along for the ride, Robert Lloyd himself. And, in the spirit of the film the looseness of the conversation and the truth that they mostly interviewed themselves has been retained in the transcript. If only the laughter could be translated to the page.

The Quietus: Stewart and Michael, how important was it to make a film that captures the essence of what makes Rob and The Nightingales special to you?

Stewart Lee: There wasn't a point where we sat down and said "it'll have to have this particular kind of feel". But it became evident as we went along that it would. A lot of the jarring aspects of it that look like a stylistic choice ended up being, I think it's fair to say, partly to do with finding what the film was as we went along. What I would say in terms of what it looked like is; I watched lots of rockumentaries in the run up to it and my son kept looking in on them. When I said to him "what do all these films look like to you?", he said "they've all got really old men remembering things and then black and white stills". I thought we have to try to not have too much of that. If it does have a feel that suits the group, it's partly because Michael and I were both young people that were influenced by the sensibilities of that group and the culture it came from. Though we've not gone into music, a lot of what we find funny or interesting or stimulating is because of growing up listening to those records. What about you, Michael?

Michael Cumming: It was sort of homemade, because it was made in my home here, in this room, which is not how I normally work. I didn't have an editor and I didn't have a swanky Soho edit suite to go to and in a way that informed me because I could spend as much time as I wanted on it. Also, I don't make documentaries. Other than a few bits and pieces 20 odd years ago, I've never really done this before. So, it was just finding a way through it and finding a way that combined things that Stewart wanted to do and things that I wanted to do and jamming them together. The bits in it that I really like are the bits that slightly take the piss out of documentary making, and play with the idea that documentaries are real, because they're not, they're constructed. Those bits I like because I like that sort of thing. Obviously Stewart also uses a lot of those techniques in his stand up and so I think in a way, it was inevitably going to have that feel, but we didn't plan it to be that. Things happened that you would cut out in a normal documentary, but for us, I was always looking for those bits because I thought they were the bits that said something about documentaries as well as about the band.

tQ: Rob, did you have any response as the film was being made to how it was being made? Did it surprise you? Did you ever have reservations about it?

Robert Lloyd: At various points I had assorted reservations. But the bottom line is, I thought that Stewart and Michael had never done anything half arsed and shit before. So I figured that even when I thought it might not be going the way I wanted it to go I'd just trust them. They've always been good.

SL: We've never talked about it, but I'm not sure if Rob, when he first floated the idea of doing a documentary, realised how intrusive it would be and what it would feel like to find himself the hero of a 90 minute story that people would see. Rob, how comfortable do you feel about it now it's all done?

RL: The closer it gets to the general public seeing it the more worried I am about it I suppose. You were very good as the presenter bloke because we get on okay and you made me feel at ease about it. Oftentimes I would come home afterwards thinking "that was an odd day", because I'm, well, no one's used to having a camera pointed at them all the time are they? But as I say, I just decided that I would trust the pair of you, even when I was doubting why things were happening. And it's just now, when it's actually getting towards being seen by people when you think, "did I want a documentary made about me?" But it's too late now.

SL: That's one of the nice things about all this. We live in a culture where people are desperate for exposure and for a film to be made but man who doesn't seem to want any is very refreshing.

tQ: Could you talk about using conversations as the backbone of the film and whether you feel that's important culturally in terms of celebrating and also keeping alive outsider artist legacies?

MC: The conversation thing became apparent quite quickly. The interview that Stew and Rob did in Abdul's Cafe in Birmingham was the first thing that we shot, pretty much. We couldn't afford to have researchers looking into the story of it all so we thought that Stew and Rob could just sit down and talk and something might come from that. I don't think at the time we even really thought we would use very much of that interview but because it was the first and was quite a spontaneous chat it ended up being in it quite a lot. I thought at the time "well, we'll use this to see what comes out of it and maybe then we'll do some other interviews further down the line" and I also remember trying to work out from Stewart how much he actually wanted to be in the film himself. Because if he didn't want to be, if he wanted to be an off-camera presence, that's very different. But, as soon as we worked out that Rob and Stew together work really well, then I deliberately made sure that all the filming had two or three cameras on, so that we were never going to miss the spontaneity of conversation.

tQ: Did the conversation aspect make you feel more comfortable, Rob?

RL: It felt easy talking to Stewart because it's something I've done before. He wasn't a stranger, a presenter who's getting paid to ask you questions. He is someone that knew their stuff and was interested, so that helps. One thing that was really good for me was that I don't think there was any time where Michael said "can you do that again?" Or "can you say that again?" Correct me if I'm wrong, Michael, but I don't remember you ever said "oh, can you walk through that door again?" Or "can you say that sentence again?" and those kinds of things?

MC: Not really no because what I normally do is so much based on scripts, and takes, and cutting things together. I really like the idea of "you get what you get". Even with a lot of the things Stewart was doing to camera, I really just wanted him to do what he felt, because that's what he's brilliant at. You're not going to tell him to do it some other way.

RL: It took me a long time to ascertain that it was going on I suppose, but I liked the fact that it was made up as it went along.

SL: I watched it again the other night and I was very, very pleased with it, the further it gets away from having worked on it and looking at it cold. I noticed lots of funny little accidental things, like that chair you're sitting in now, Rob. If it's the one that you're interviewed in during the film, in the film there's a clothes horse behind it. And also, in the opening five seconds, behind me, a kid falls over and he's yanked really hard to his feet by his mum as I'm talking about being a child. There are lots of strange little accidents in it that if we'd had time and money we'd have had a go at again. We'd have noticed that there was a clothes horse behind you but it really looks like you've just sat down and started talking in that bit.

RL: I never thought anything of that but when Julie [Rob's wife] watched it, that was one of the things she honed in on "the least you could have done was move the fucking clothes horse"

MC: I agree with her.

RL: The kid falling over is a highlight. I know quite a few people who've picked up on that.

MC: I must have seen it thousands and thousands of times, but until Stew literally pointed it out with his finger on the screen I didn't even notice that kid falling over and now it's the best bit.

SL: In the very closing moments of filming Rob suddenly remembered that he'd had a shower with Robin Askwith. It seemed like we really should address that, but it was also in the closing acceleration towards the emotional highpoint of the film and it felt counterintuitive in some ways to spin off there. But then Robin Askwith of all people provided us with this amazing footage. His mate shot these exteriors of the sights of Malta and it just cut together into these really funny closing moments, that maybe helped to undercut what might otherwise have looked a bit sentimental.

tQ: There's a wonderful shot at the end where Stewart and Rob are reunited with the statue and Stewart, you duck out of the frame and Rob doesn't really know you've gone, and he just spends some time with the statue. It's where you step out the film having been such a presence in it to that point. I wondered, Michael, did you have a sense throughout that you needed to get the story to a place where Stewart's presence didn't overshadow it? Were you always conscious of what you needed to get the story to the point where it was going to be Rob's story at the end?

MC: No. The bit where Stew walks out of shot is just because he's very clever. And Rob's very clever. And they knew what they needed to do without me telling them what to do. Or it was fun to, I don't know whether it was spontaneous. I don't know whether both of them sort of knew what they had to do. I didn't make it happen. That's just what happened. It may have been that Rob knew that he had to walk off at that point in his head, because that's what was required of him, because Stuart walked the other way. It was a nice moment.

SL: I wondered, Rob, when we went up on the mountain, at the stone circle, without being prompted you had a real sense of providing content that would drive the story forward. Were you thinking that at the time, or did it just kind of come out? You gave us so much stuff there that would create loads of different ways through the story. I wonder if you are aware of doing that.

RL: It wasn't a contrived thing. There was nothing planned, not just at the stone circle but in any of the situations really. Almost from day one, which was in the curry house, I thought "oh God I probably come across like some sort of unctuous buffoon". And then I just thought, well, that's kind of what I am. It's like someone saying "can you photograph me from this side?" Like they've convinced themselves that they look good that way. Whereas, this is what I look like, this is what I sound like, this is what I do. And I just thought, well, I might as well embrace that, rather than try and put on a facade and try and be cool. You know, the kind of thing that Mark E. Smith or Nick Cave or the Gallagher Brothers would do because they have a persona to keep up. I just thought, fuck that.

MC: Your persona is meat and spinach at Abdul's cafe which you perfectly did live up to.

tQ: It's a film is made by smart and funny people, and the people in it are also smart as to why they're there and what they're doing there. The only person who seems to be in a different movie is John Taylor of Duran Duran...

MC: ...but how great that he's in this film?!

tQ: It's amazing, and it feels like you stopped him on the street and said "you're John Taylor!", which is brilliant...

RL: ...and Nigel Slater as well. I don't know what you told him to get him to be in it but he seems hurt, and has something he's wanted to get off his chest for some time.

MC: There's a weird coincidence with that as well as he's actually from Wolverhampton, by complete chance. He'd never heard of the band but he said he was from Wolverhampton, which I'd forgotten, and that's obviously where the band is based now and it's where I went to university, Wolverhampton, as well. We were talking about Wolverhampton, which I never thought I'd end up talking to Nigel Slater about.

SL: If you don't know who the Nightingales are, and you don't like the music, you might find yourself watching the film when it's on the telly and going "well then Nigel Slater came on and started saying how he lost his job to this bloke and then Robin Askwith said how he wasn't in the shower with him".

MC: It's nice to have a film where some of the people in it don't even know why they're in the film, because they're nothing to do with the story at all. People like Nigel Slater and Robin Askwith, they've never heard of The Nightingales yet they're in the film, which I really love.

RL: I think having those names on the poster is great. Leaving The Nightingales aside, what would that combination of Frank Skinner, Nigel Slater, Samira Ahmed, Robin Askwith ever be in?

SL: The Wimbledon Theatre Pantomime. Sorry. I'm aware that we're having a conversation with each other and you've not been asking your questions.

tQ: It's fine. It's really lovely. It's nice to watch you chat and you've answered most of the stuff I was going to ask anyway. One thing though. Rob, do you feel like the film captures what you do and why you do it, as an independent band, in the right way?

RL: I'm not sure. Originally, if I'm truthful about it, I thought the film was gonna be more about The Nightingales and less about Robert Lloyd but as we've all said it was ad libbed as we went along. One thing I would say is I that don't really care about other bands. I don't feel unified, part of the Indie Army or anything like that. It shows The Nightingales are an independent band and I don't mean that as in on an indie label though we've been that. We've never had a manager or a booking agent or a publisher or any of the traditional things, you know. We're friends with The Lovely Eggs and they just do their own thing. They just happen to be miles more popular. I know that independent bands can exist and do good work and remain free from all the bollocks. Whether the film shows that to be the case, I don't know. Our lack of success is part of the reason that the film exists I suppose. I don't know if you agree with that Stewart. I mean you more or less, say that kind of thing, how did this survive?

SL: I think what the last 20 minutes does show is people trying to make their work, which they feel is valuable, in the face of difficult circumstances. When the Chancellor says to artists and musicians 'retrain', most of those people are doing other jobs anyway and now they're being prevented from doing the things they do and of course, the irony under lockdown has been that people have been sat in their houses watching films and listening to music, their lives made tolerable by the very people that are now being cut loose. And also, add up the financial value. If you're going to look at it in Tory terms, of the whole sector of people that make things, it outweighs fishing for example, which is being kept alive because of some grudge Michael Gove has with his Dad. The film is a good story about people, and Rob in particular, and it did end up having to be on Rob because he is the through line of this story of 40 years. I don't think we've done what some of those films about artists who have been working 45 years do where the first eighty minutes is about the first three years and then there's a kaleidoscope summary of the rest. It gives equal weight to all parts of it and if it doesn't it's only because the footage wasn't available or no one would tell the truth about what had happened so we couldn't tell that story.

MC: I like the fact that it shows the way The Nightingales are now. They've got this world where each of the members have got the thing that they do. Fliss [Kitson - drummer] obviously takes on a lot of the organisational stuff and Andy [Andreas Schmid - bassist] produces and engineers the records.

RL: Even the people who aren't actually in the band a part of our distinct family. It's always the same people. Clara [Kebabian] who plays violin on Four Against Fate also played violin on Insult To Injury and plays violin when we go to America.

tQ: Can we talk about the locations of the conversations. This might be a stretch I admit, but, the pub is a particularly British working class establishment and they feature really prominently in the film. It's a time when these kinds of places and symbols have a pretty toxic association, Nigel Farage drinking his pint etc. I wondered, if you were consciously trying to reframe a particular type of experience, or have I as Rob says to Stewart at one point in the film, overthought that massively?

MC: The trouble with you Neil, is you tend to overthink things...

tQ: I know. Terrible critic

SL: Rob has written a lot about pubs. He's always in pubs. His office was a pub, which I thought was an office above a pub but he actually meant a pub, hilariously. And then, a lot of the ideas he gets are from overhearing people in pubs so they're very much from that culture and the world of the people they observe are from that culture. It was, again, a happy coincidence that all those locations tied together. One thing we did try to do deliberately was to show that where Rob was now in Wellington, in Shropshire, was not Metropolitan and was different to a London music scene, it was even different to a Manchester music scene. That's why it was nice to get up on the hills and show the distance, and to have the little shot of the way marker that says London 140 miles, and to show that it was a very different place.

RL: Also they were also the actual sites of things. The Eagle in Birmingham was where Vindaloo [Rob's record label] was based. The Ship in Wardour Street was where we fell out about the sitcom, and also where I met Jeff Barrett from Heavenly Records and we got the St. Etienne [music video] gig. The Virgin Mary in Hackney, which used to be called The Eagle, is where I lived and where my son came to visit me at weekends. They were the actual places where actual events took place.

MC: And The Railway in Wolverhampton is where you go to drink after rehearsals. But, then as a counter to that there's a couple of places that I expect Rob would never have gone in his life, like up to the stone circle. That was something Stewart wanted to do and I was thinking "why would we go to Stewart's stone circle?" and I think Rob was probably thinking "why the fuck is he dragging me up to this stone circle?" But, that was something Stew wanted to do and it was a great instinct because it was a brilliant way of seeing the story even if it felt very out of context.

SL: It was about monuments. Years ago Rob said he wanted this film made and I did try for five years before talking to Michael about. I went down various legal avenues but I realised there were too many restrictions on it or we just couldn't get it going. And then when we did come to make the film Rob sometimes seemed resistant to giving away the kind of information that is needed if there's a film being made about you. I thought going up to the stone circle would be a way of talking about memorials of things and what did he want the film to be and it came out very funny.

tQ: Why didn't you want to make the film about facts or straight biography? Why was it important to constantly remind the audience that these kinds of things are often myths?

RL: The basic facts are uninteresting, but that shows a certain measure of arrogance because that presumes that what we're doing...

MC: ...is interesting. Which as we now know, it isn't. But we thought it might be.

tQ: I saw the work in progress at the 2019 Sea Change festival, and the final film feels very different to what was presented there. Did that awareness period of sharing bits of the film with people lead to much changing in how you approached it?

MC: We did a couple of those sorts of fundraisers where Stew did some stand-up Work in Progress and I showed my Oxide Ghosts film [about Brass Eye] and then we showed a few clips of the film. That became how we financed it but it also gave us a chance to put bits in front of an audience like when Stewart tests out his material. You wouldn't normally make a documentary and then cut bits that didn't get a laugh but because it's Stew and I and we've worked in comedy a long time that did help inform it, you know, "okay

they get that, that works". The people that came to see those shows weren't actually Nightingales fans but we could tell they're engaging with a bit, so we'd keep that bit.

SL: It was really great seeing 700 people at Earth laughing at the cut where Marc Riley [6music] says something like "apparently Frank Skinner auditioned to be in the band, is that true?" and Rob goes "I don't know", then it cuts to Frank saying that he did. It got a huge laugh in the room and that was so gratifying. It meant that we were making a thing that was working. In terms of how it changed in the process, as we showed it in places and it was online that this film was happening, people started getting in touch saying "I've got this thing".

MC: That's true.

SL: Even in the last few days of making it, the photos of Rob with the Ramones were verified. From when he 17. And then we found Danny Fields [Ramones manager] at very short notice, to talk about it.

MC: I really love that we got Danny Fields. I had that book of Danny Fields' photos of the Ramones and I've got to admit I had no idea that it was Rob in them because he looks so different with hair and everything. In fact, I think even when I knew there was a connection I looked through it specifically to look at the photos and didn't realise it was Rob in them and then somebody sent us a picture and said "oh that's me and Robert".

The film was almost finished. We were nearly finished editing it and it was just a brilliant little moment of "we've got to do something with these pictures". Stewart made a call to somebody he knew at The Roundhouse asking if we could get in to film. It just happened by chance that Danny Fields was in London that week. He didn't want to be in the film. He said "I'll come and say hello to you but I don't want to be interviewed". And we thought, well maybe we'll persuade him and of course, he came on camera and did those little bits. I think in the normal machine of making something that's properly sorted out you'd never be able to do those things, quickly off the bat. That was literally just Stew and I together and in two days we turned around that little bit. I went down with the camera and Stew organised the location and it just felt really satisfying to have that little bit. You don't need 60 people to make it happen and it's a really good bit in the film.

RL: On a personal level, that's the guest appearance I'm most chuffed about. I didn't know they'd done that until I saw the finished film and when he appeared it was a gobsmacker for me really. I don't think it was a secret it was just such a last minute thing. Pretty much the last three things that were filmed were Robin Askwith, Danny Fields, Samira's Gales Doc stuff [a climactic sequence with the band performing the song of that name, a meta-narrative documenting the making of the film, with Samira Ahmed lip-synching Rob's vocals] and well, you've got to have all of those in haven't you?

MC: It's hard to now watch anything that doesn't have those three people in.

SL: I'm very grateful to Rob, again, as I was as a child when I was inspired by the group. It has been a strange year [the interview took place towards the end of 2020]. Obviously, we're alright in our house in London, but you spend time alone and you worry about what the point of everything is and what are you doing and where your career's going and all these sorts of things and I was noticing other comedians doing really mad desperate things, going on weird things on the internet or making announcements about how they were going to host quiz shows and stuff and then I remembered that I've been part of the team on this, which is one of the things I have been most pleased with that I've worked on. It's taken me 40 years to get back to dealing with the sort of material that I liked as an adolescent when my sensibilities were being formed. This is very much the sort of thing that if I'd stumbled across it on television when I was

14, 15 it would have made me want to be involved in making films or doing comedy, from seeing Ted [Chippington's] stuff or wanting to be in the orbit of this kind of group and be in that world. At a point where the whole world's gone silent culturally, one of the positive things coming out of it is being a part of that. It's been a really affirming thing to have been involved in and I am really, really proud to be associated with it and I can't wait for people to see it. I've also got that slight chip on my shoulder that drives me a lot of time, that I think it's much better than loads of things that got funded and supported and sadly, partly, why that might be the case is precisely because we were able to operate with a degree of freedom. You realise that if, by some miracle someone had wanted to invest in this properly, it might have been great in some ways but we would have been required to put in talking heads from all sorts of celebrities that had no relevance to it to try and get it over the line. As it is we've got this strange patchwork of commentary from these disparate people that really seems to suit it.

MC: Absolutely. The fact that it was entirely independent was important to me, having spent years in the machine of television and the constraints. The last couple of things I've done have been entirely independent. Even James [Nicholls - Fire Records] who helped us produce it isn't a producer, he runs a record label. He was doing it because he wanted to make it happen but he wasn't like a producer who comes along and says "well I really think you should have an interview with him". He facilitated it and now the film's done he's coming in to his own because he's off selling it to people, which is what I think a really good producer does. He let us do our thing and I'm going to find it hard to go back to doing things that aren't like that now.