Check it Out

*Bright Lights, 1974-1983*, After the Fire (6CD box set, Cherry Red)

The first time I saw After the Fire, in the mid 1970s it was a mistake. My mistake, I mean. I dragged a friend along to what I thought was another band's gig, having not quite got the name right. Thankfully, this gig at the black hole that was The Marquee back then was fantastic.

If I say progrock you may recoil in horror, but the Sex Pistols and co. were hardly headline news by then, and keyboards and big drum kits were still *de rigeur*. The gig opened with a fast-paced widdly-diddly instrumental that focussed on the keyboards, before we got a set of extended songs, friendly in-between-songs banter and a general sense of musical energy and fun.

My friends and I started to see the band more often as they worked the London circuit, playing The Marquee, The Music Machine, Fulham's Golden Lion, The Rock Garden and Dingwalls; and occasionally travelled further afield as they presented their music to the college circuit, which was how it was done back in those days. Sometimes we'd end up helping load gear after the gig. I still have nightmares about helping manhandle a Hammond organ and a mixing desk through the beer cellar hatch at The Hope and Anchor in Islington.

Although the band came close to being signed up by record companies several times, they ended up releasing the *Signs of Change* album on their own indie label in 1978, selling out four pressings via mail order and gig sales, attracting bigger and bigger audiences and more word-of-mouth acclaim.

But star-patched jeans and banks of keyboards were not things that rock bands were supposed to have after punk had arrived, and even the exuberant young bass player Nick Battle and demented drummer Ivor Twydell could not disguise the fact that the band's music was rooted in genres that punk claimed to hate and reject. (Although it is still unclear why Johnny Rotten owned a Pink Floyd t-shirt in the first place that he could deface.) And the band's self-confessed christianity didn't help, not because they preached or anything, but because back then faith and spirituality were off topic in a decade of nihilism, rejection, strikes and poverty. DJs at various venues would regularly heckle and disparage the band, lining up tracks like Black Widow’s ‘Come to the Sabbat’ (1970) and Black Sabbath songs to play before they arrived onstage.

Nick Battle deciding to leave (he immediately joined another London band, Writz, a much artier band with wacky vocals and onstage visuals) seemed to prompt a rethink for the band. They ditched just about every song (I think 'Psalm', the opening instrumental, and 'Signs of Change' both remained for a while) and wrote a whole new set of new wave (or power pop as journalist John Gill called it) songs and returned to live action as a trio only a few months later.

Gone were Peter Banks' Hammond and string synthesizer, in were some snazzy polyphonic synths on a new stand; front man Andy Piercy ditched the starred jeans and had bought a doubleneck bass/guitar combo; only Ivor Twydell remained the same, though his drum kit had shrunk and the music's tempo had increased. The trio version of After the Fire rocked but only a low-fi bootleg of them playing live remains. Although, Piercy says that it was 'exhilarating on stage for the sheer energy of carrying the music in such an exposed line-up' and that 'there was simply nowhere to hide and it felt like every part of every song totally relied on each of us at every moment', the band decided to recruit a guitarist to help add musical colour and backing vocals and allow Piercy to concentrate on his lead singing and bass playing, not guitar as well!

So, enter John Russell, who had previously worked with Banks in an earlier band, Narnia, and enter CBS, who signed the band. With the arrival of post-punk bands such as XTC, Simple Minds and Magazine on the music scene it was clear that not only were keyboards allowed again but that After the Fire were right on target with their new songs. Their singles 'One Rule for You' and 'Laser Love' both flirted with the UK charts, and in 1979 their album *Laser Love* was released. Whilst it didn't quite catch the live energy, and suffered from multiple producers, it was an original, quirky mainstream arrival.

They also played on BBC's *Live in Concert* and *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, as well as selling out The Rainbow at the end of the year. A triumphant year but there were problems behind the scenes: CBS had rejected the band's second album and insisted upon it being re-recorded, and in addition Twydell has resigned from the band's drum seat to – according to who you believed – become a buddhist, join the police force, recover from an onstage heart attack that no-one had witnessed, or become a rock star in his own right. (He did record a couple of solo albums.)

After a couple of short-lived drummers, Peter King, who had worked with Coventry band The Flys, was chosen for the band. He brought a crisp new dynamic to After the Fire's sound, which was present and correct on the final version of the band's second LP *80-F* (a bad pun on the band's abbreviated name) although it was somewhat hidden in the dense, slick overproduction by Mack who was probably best known at the time for his work with ELO. In hindsight it's hard to hear why the original version of the album couldn't have been polished up a bit and released as it was.

Anyway, following the album's release in October 1980, the band played live on The Peter Powell Show on Radio 1 and for *Rock Goes to College*, a gig broadcast in Spring 1981. The second half of that year was quiet on the live front – although they did perform for *BBC Radio 1 in Concert* with U2, a band you may have heard of – presumably because they were recording their third album, *Batteries Not Included*, again produced (this time more sympathetically) by Mack and released in March 1982.

There was no rest for the band in 1982. They did a European tour supporting ELO, then their own gigs in Germany and Spain, before supporting Queen in Europe and then Van Halen in America, with a few UK and US gigs in their own name. By the end of the year, Banks recalls (in the box set booklet) that the band were 'completely shattered and utterly broke financially. A realistic chance of a re-negotiated record deal fell through and we could see no way out of the hole we had landed in...'.

So, on the 3rd December 1982, onstage at London's Dominion Theatre, the band announced that they were breaking up. Fate, however had other ideas, and the track 'Der Kommisar' which the band had already recorded was climbing up the charts in several other countries. Piercy chose to carry on, rerecording some songs that were released in the USA as ATF and eventually getting a solo record contract that would come to naught (you can hear the unreleased album if you search hard online), although he did do lots of production work. CBS would try to cash in with a compilation album called *ATF*; Russell was in the short-lived band Press Any Key; whilst Banks and King would form Zipcodes, playing together until King's untimely death in 1987.

There have been compilation albums, illegal and legal reissues of *Signs of Change*, the latter including some earlier demos, and a low key release live album (*Radio Sessions 1979-1981*). There was a reformation of sorts for a while, as ATF2, which involved Banks and Russell but no new songs; and in 2005 Edsel released *Der Kommisar: The CBS Recordings*, a two CD compilation. But the recent announcement of a 6CD box set was a surprise. 'Does anyone need six CDs of After the Fire?' asked one of my friends when he heard the news.

The answer is yes, we do. Although there are only a few tracks here I haven't already got in my collection, it's good to have a complete gathering-up of official, semi-official, live and demo recordings. So here from the CBS vaults are some early demos of tracks that should have been on the *Laser Love* album instead of either never having been released or hidden away on the B-sides of singles. Here is part of the original unreleased version of *80-F*, and here are some live tracks only ever issued as a promotional EP, progrock demos, alternative versions, re-recordings, different mixes and remixes, and a couple of absolute gems: a live version of 'Psalm', taken (I think) from my 1978 bootleg tape recording and cleaned up, and an awkward and unsettling version of The Beatles' 'Help!' (here listed as 'Beatles Medley/Help!') which used to be a highlight of the band's early concerts.

Of course, the official releases are all here too. In retrospect, After the Fire live played a noisy, high speed new wave pop that never quite translated to record, although at times it came close. Clearly there was a desire for commercial success at play, courtesy CBS/Epic, Mack and some band members, but also room for a genuine place in the rock world, as evidenced by the positive response from Van Halen and their fans. If the sometimes questionable fashions the band at times adopted or the sustained interest in space travel as a metaphor reveals the music's age, the songs on show here are quirky, energetic and inventive, keyboard or guitar led music that can proudly hold its head up alongside its musical neighbours from the time. The bright lights might have eluded the band, but now we can all hear what we missed out on at the time.

Rupert Loydell

(1660 words)