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TIME TO CURRIE FAVOUR

Ex-Del Amitri singer hopes second solo album *The Great War* receives the same critical acclaim as his first

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Justin Currie on how he nearly drowned in a bath while shooting the cover of new album *The Great War*

■ BY BILLY SLOAN

When Justin Currie talks about his offbeat approach to life as a pop singer you begin to wonder why he ever chose such a potentially hazardous vocation.

Hit records, he's had them. Sell-out gigs, he's played them. Fame and fortune, he's tasted both. But the Glasgow-born songwriter seems most proud of the fact he has not played the pop star game.

Justin, 45, manoeuvred his way through the celebrity minefield with his group Del Amitri to emerge unscathed. If there are any lasting scars they are not visible.

He said: "Pop stardom was much more enjoyable than I thought it would be. I thought it'd be a major hassle. I found the whole recognition thing easy and enjoyable."

"If you're recognised for something you do - in our case having a big hit with *Nothing Ever Happens* in 1990 - that's okay. We'd done something to feel proud of. I watched other Glasgow pop stars hide away when they became famous. I went to the same shops and pubs. People thought there's the guy from Del Amitri, he was around last week and he'll be around next week too."

Tomorrow, Justin releases his second solo album *The Great War* which features new single *A Man With Nothing To Do*. It's the follow-up to *What Is Love For?* in 2007 which drew a creative line in the sand after the demise of his band five years earlier.

The dark, brooding mood of *What Is Love For?* proved a cathartic experience but the singer knew he could not make the same album twice.

"On the first record I wanted to draw a clear line between Del Amitri and what I was doing on my own. As a result the songs were personal and quite dark," revealed Justin.

"It proved hard to make the live gigs work. The mood was sombre. It wasn't exactly a pop show. The subject matter tended to be down to the fact I was mourning the end of Del Amitri."

The *Great War* derives its title from a self-confessed struggle contained in Justin's new songs. Tracks such as *You'll Always Walk Alone* and *Fight To Be Human* show he's back at his vocal and lyrical peak.

He said: "I thought I'd make these songs a lot more first person. In Del Amitri, regardless of what I wrote I always felt I had to sing from the band's perspective."

"I've stripped a layer of skin off to do the solo thing which can be exposing. The theme of the album is family and marriage. I don't know if it's just an age thing. I like the romantic idea of marriage in the context of a song."

Justin received the best reviews of his career for *What Is Love For?* He hopes *The*



Great War will garner similar acclaim. He said: "In the band, we always said we'd rather sell records and be on radio than get rave reviews. But there is something really nice about a writer in San Francisco listening to your album and enthusing about it."

Justin takes a more traditional approach to music. For the cover artwork of *The Great War* he is submerged in a bath. He almost took dying for his art to dangerous new levels.

"I wanted some kind of portrait of me but in a twisted way. So it wasn't just a typical pop photograph, this is the singer, buy the record," said Justin.

"During the shoot I nearly drowned. It sounds pathetic but if I go swimming I don't put my head under the water. I've got a thing about getting water in my ears. I forgot to breathe out and the water went straight up my nose and into my lungs."

"I'm also slightly saddened by the fact 75 per cent of sales of my first album were downloads. I prefer actual records with the artwork. It's an important part of buying records for me. I remember when I was 13 years old gazing, in complete confusion, at all the crazy liner notes on my Bob Dylan albums. I still buy records so the visual presentation of music is important to me."

Inevitably, the shadow of Del Amitri still hangs over Justin's solo career, in a nice way. The band's iconic 1990 hit *Nothing Ever Happens*, a scathing indictment of the social inequality of Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s, put them on the map. Albums

such as *Change Everything* (1992), *Twisted* (1995) and best of compilation *Hatful Of Rain* (1998) cemented their status as one of the UK's most creative bands while single *Roll To Me* (1995) was a Top Ten hit in America.

The singer was determined not to allow himself to be swallowed up by the big pop machine. He said: "When *Nothing Ever Happens* hit the charts we did an in-store at HMV Records in Glasgow where 1000 hysterical fans were rammed into the shop."

"I thought, there are two ways we can play this. We can go with the hysteria or say 'hey, cut it out'. We chose the latter. We were in our mid-20s and way too old for that stuff. If we'd tried to be 'star-ish' we'd have fallen flat on our faces."

When *Roll To Me* earned huge royalties life still remained on an even keel.

Justin said: "The record company tried to treat me like some precious object which I found distasteful. If you're not careful you can become spoilt. I found myself having a few tantrums. People were treating me as if I was not a human but our band were level-headed so they'd say 'get a grip'."

"I ain't and I said we'd only ever buy ourselves a house if we could afford to buy it outright. We weren't in that position until the late 1990s. *Roll To Me* earned a surprising amount of money but we didn't want anything else. I don't think there's anything wrong in buying a Porsche - I just never wanted one. I'd rather cycle around Glasgow on my bike."

RISE TO FAME... Del Amitri topped the charts with *Nothing Ever Happens* in 1990. Justin has now released his second solo album *The Great War*. Right, Justin as he appears on the album's cover

I wanted some kind of portrait of me but in a twisted way

DYING FOR

We had Del of time..but there's no going back

The end of tour party was in full swing, drinks flowing, music blasting but singer Justin Currie and guitarist Iain Harvie were in no mood to join in.

The pair, founder members of Del Amitri, met in a quiet corner of Alaska nightclub in Glasgow and didn't say a word. They didn't have to - their looks said it all.

"That party was the most depressing event I've ever been involved in," recalled Justin, of the bash in 2002.

"Two hours earlier, Del Amitri had played their last show at Barrowland. For the final number, we turned the house lights off, all stripped to the waist and did a cover version of God Save The Queen by The Sex Pistols. It was the last thing we ever did together.

"No matter how many pints of beer we drank at the party we were still stone, cold sober by the end of the night. Everybody had a brilliant time, except us. We realised it was over."

The farewell gig brought to an end the Scottish rock band's 22-year career which included 1989 breakthrough album *Waking Hours*, featuring hit single *Nothing Ever Happens*. And for Justin it was not a minute too soon.

When the group's deal with A&M Records soured they released final album *Can You Do Me Good?* in 2002 on Mercury. But the writing was on the wall and they were dropped by the label.

"We became very frustrated. We made commercial records but the music we listened to was soul or left-field guitar bands," said Justin.

"We'd lost our way towards the end and tried to get modern, which is always a mistake. We had our first success with A&M Records in 1989 when the company was still owned by Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss.

"You'd meet them in the office. It was a great label with a real family atmosphere. Musically it was really diverse with The Police, Squeeze, Nils Lofgren, Joan Armatrading and Thrashing Doves - proper acts who could play and write songs. There was no manufactured pop.

"The label ended up owned by a French utility company which operated the Paris sewers. That said it all. It was ludicrous. We ended up alongside kids' pop acts like Bad Boys Inc. That wasn't what we were about."

While Justin is proud of Del Amitri, he has no desire to turn back the clock.

He said: "We're proud of the albums even though we never made that perfect record. I listen to the odd Del Amitri record and think it was pretty good.

"We talk about a reunion every few years but I don't want to do it for the money. To play a bunch of songs from 20 years ago would be a bit of nostalgia. I've no interest in nostalgia. I don't want to go see the reformed Buzzcocks because I saw the original band in 1979 and they were much better. So I've no interest in reliving my early 20s."

HIS ART