

Extract from *New Sound Melody* interview, 10th February 1991

Billy Fairhurst is in bullish mood. The warmth of the open fire in his local boozery provides stark contrast to the cold spring of 1987. Back then, Those Flamin' Heifers were darlings of the indie scene. John Peel favourites, they were tipped for greater-than-greatness and their debut 'Can't See Camouflage' led to a frenzy of major label courtship. Four years on, they've had a messy divorce with one label, seen another label go bust, and had not one but two band members in rehab. At the same time. Another addition to the long list of 'difficult second albums', 'Balderdash and Bladderwrack' has remained shelved. Until now.

"It's happened. It's all happened. And there's still stuff going to happen. What can I say?" Fairhurst slams down his half-empty glass with indignation. "But we've made a decent album. More than decent. There's no songwriter around to rival me at the moment."

A bold statement, which begs the question: so why is everyone slagging it off? Although I'm the one getting paid to do the interview, it seems one of the locals wants in on the act and beats me to asking it. Fortunately for him there's a few tables, a bar and a generously-built barman between us. Fairhurst glowers, sups his pint, and proceeds.

"Cos you've all gone soft," he drawls across the pub in that inimitable Mancunian way, before turning back to reposition my dictaphone. "The trouble is, right, nobody wants decent songs any more. Nobody can be bothered with the art of songwriting. What was the biggest hit last year? The Righteous Brothers, with a song from the Sixties. Kylie, Jason, *Craig McLachlan!* If I ever hear another Sock, Apron and Waterbasin song it'll be too soon. They don't care about the art. It's too much effort. They're just after money. Easy money. And don't get me started on Tina bloody Turner!"

It's an unfortunate fact of life that an Ivor Novello won't put food on the table, I suggest. "Well I'd rather starve and be credible. I couldn't live with myself, living in a mansion paid for by songs like 'Simply The Best'."

This seems an unlikely target, and after I have taken a quick sip of Dutch courage I correct him on the title. There's no 'simply', I mumble, edging closer to the door for a quick getaway should the need arise.

"Oh come *on!*" he explodes. "The whole thing's simple. Simple music for simple minded people. *You're simply the best, better than all the rest, better than anyone...* I mean, it's just ... banal! Banal, emotionless tosh. Anyone can write that - a kid in primary school could write that."

With hatches almost battened down, I poke the beehive further: what about John Cage's '3'44'? A kid in primary school could have written that, surely? Couldn't the same be said for Fontana's slashed canvass or Duchamp's urinal? Anybody could do that.

Fairhurst is having none of it, his face now set to explode. "You don't get it! That's art - nobody had thought to do that before, and that's what makes it so brilliant! Same as Dali ... Da Vinci invented helicopters before we had electricity. Van Gogh - look how creative he was! And Cage ... It's imagination! It's *total* imagination. So clever: every time you hear it, it sounds different. We can listen to it together and hear it differently. It's musical art in its highest form. These songwriters now though, churning out generic rubbish. That's not art. It's just lazy. A lazy cash-grab. Where's the imagination in Tina Turner? It's like a race to the bottom of the barrel."

That's a matter of opinion, surely? 'The Best' has sold more copies than the entirety of Fairhurst's entire back catalogue. "There's no accounting for taste," he sighs as he swirls the last half inch of ale around his glass. "Simple music for simple-minded people," he reiterates.

The arrival of another round of drinks brings a pause to the conversation. A couple of scallies walk past, perform a double-take, and then ask Billy Fairhurst when his new album is coming out. "Two weeks ago," he says, his tone more bitter than the beer in his glass. At a risk of invoking further ire with my choice of words, I ask how Fairhurst proposes to change the, erm, *status quo*? How can he get more people to listen to Those Flamin' Heifers than Tina Turner?

"Oh, I don't know ... " he sighs, swigs, and sighs again. "Maybe I'll just cut my ear off."

He'll definitely hear John Cage differently then.